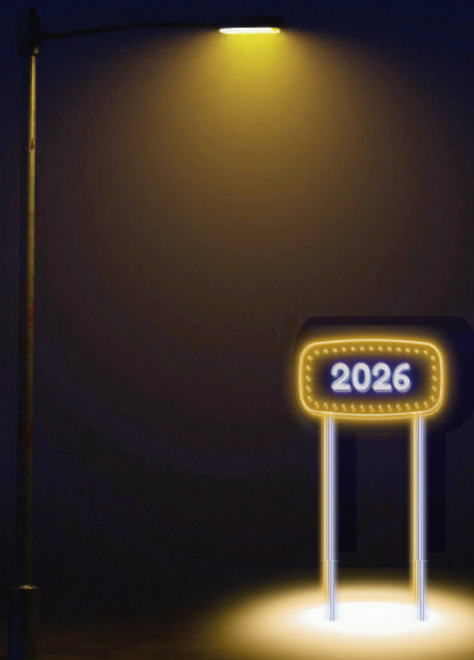


north texas review





North Texas Review 2026

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a final letter from the editor

Dear Reader,

So many of us are suspended in time, waiting for what's to come, dreaming for our big awakening. At least, I am—and I find myself stuck in this limbo, this endless, eerie liminal space. It's cloaked in the quietest of blues, and it is somehow just me in there.

And it is somehow just you in there.

In this edition of the *North Texas Review*, all of our ley lines finally connect. Together we sit in these pages, suspended for all time. Writers, artists, musicians of NTR: when you come across this journal again, decades in the future, coated in dust from a long-untouched shelf—you will find yourself back here with us. Young, unchanging, waiting at the edge of the deep blue abyss with an insatiable thirst for more. And I welcome you.

It was an honor to design this journal with the beautiful Genesis Juarez, with whom this was created through shared stress, stuffed crust pizza, and late-night laughter in an empty English building. I want to give the most bittersweet of *thank-you's* to Cheryl Breedlove and her team at UNT Printing Distribution & Solutions, who has brought this journal out of our minds and into our material world with me for four years now. I thank the NTR staff of 2023, 2024, 2025, and, finally, 2026—I have seen each and every one of you come and go as I remained. I remember you all, and the true friendship we built; all that we created together. I thank, from the bottom of my blue heart, Lauren Kalstad, for the hell of a ride it's been. Together we come, and together we go.

Above all, I want to thank everyone who stood by NTR as she grew these last four years, figured out all the kinks and smoothed out her wrinkles—learning new challenges and conquering more hardships every year. NTR is not just this journal, and not just this staff. It is all of you—reading this with me, right here and right now.

Keep reading, keep creating, keep doing what's hard. It's what makes all of this worth it.

One last time, and all my best,

A handwritten signature in white ink that reads "Nafesa Mohid". The signature is fluid and cursive, with a small star-like mark above the letter 'd'.

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**editor in chief,
design director**
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managing editor
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emma bayles
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luka lekic*

publicity director
shelby wells

editorial assistant
mizneh alam

events committee
*kennedy baird-thomas
lejhin mason*

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foundations prize

Each year, the North Texas Review seeks out the voices of emerging writers, musicians, and visual storytellers, just beginning to find their footing in the fine arts. The Foundations Prize began as a collaboration with UNT's First-Year Writing Department as a way to celebrate new literary voices.

Last year, we expanded that vision to include beginner music and visual arts students, to honor the many forms of art and creativity that the students of UNT embody.

In the following pages, you'll find the winning works—pieces that remind us of the beauty in beginnings, of raw talent taking shape, of dream and passion just starting to carve its path. We hope this prize serves as both a celebration and an invitation to create, to take risks, and to believe the truth of your own artistic voice.



finn collins
afterglow

winner of the 2026 Art Foundations Prize

spring

evan moses wesly

BALLERINAS drag their feet on the ground, stomping and jerking their bodies to the pulsing beat of the orchestra. Unlike a floating swan or a phoenix, to them the earth was sacred. It is what humanity was brought from, and to what it would return. Finally the time came for the sacrifice, and the chosen one was to dance herself to death so that spring could return and life would begin anew.

Stravinsky wrote in his score of *The Rite of Spring*, “There is music whenever there is rhythm, as there is life wherever a pulse beats.” Like everything in nature that knows its purpose in its time, I felt something beating deep within me that was clawing to break free. Some animals follow the earth’s hum, the sound that leads a herd of bison to water and a flock of birds to their homes. But for me, my soul nested itself in art.

For as long as I could remember, art has always held a special place in my life. When I was around four, I remember getting a chalkboard drawing set as a gift, and everyday I would fill it up with sketches of whatever was on my mind. It just felt so good to have no restrictions, no rules of what to draw, almost like it was instinctual. I would sit under a bright white tube light on a cold and hard marble floor—sketching these drawings of tall, elongated women— with dresses that would drape down long enough to swallow their feet.

When I moved to the States in the first grade, I was so happy to see that Art was a class in school you went to once every week, rather than once every couple months. The teachers also didn’t yell at you and let you explore your creativity instead of just giving you a coloring page with a connect the dots puzzle. Just being in that art room felt healing for me, like a mother that coos her baby to sleep. My drawing started to take a new shape— from drawing portraits of fashion models into dragons and dinosaurs. From then on, I started to dive more into drawing my own characters and writing comics with my friends. The only regret I have is when I abandoned my creativity.

When I started middle school, I decided I would stop drawing, so I let go of all my dreams of becoming an artist because I cited my weird art as the reason I was bullied and made fun of in elementary school. So I threw it away; for years I didn’t touch it, to the point where

1st place winner of the 2026 Writing Foundations Prize

drawing and art became foreign. It wasn’t a part of me anymore, and yet every time I would see a work of student art being displayed in school, it would poke me and choke a piece of my heart.

In my Junior year of high school, I decided it was time to reclaim the voice I had once lost years ago. I was tired of running to a desert for water when there was a river right next to my home. I put fashion design as one of my classes that semester, and from the time I walked into that class, I felt what could be only described as a spasm of creativity. There was so much that I had held back, and for it all to come spewing out— my eyes, my head— my body felt like it was breathing oxygen for the first time! I became so obsessed with every detail that went into refining something I made with my two hands. I signed up for graphic design classes in school, and later went on to win prizes at design competitions.

I really thought I had lost its hum—I couldn’t even hear its heartbeat anymore—but the beauty of us humans is that no matter how far we run from our purpose, it is never too far gone that we can’t return. In nature, everything grows, and everything dies—but everything does return in its time. For me, my purpose was to find my creative voice again, and to learn to speak a language I had once forgotten.

I can never get back the years I missed, and all the things that could have been if only I hadn’t abandoned the thing I held so close to my heart. Death will come, but so will the resurrection, and when winter comes, so will spring, and life will once again begin anew.

echoes of my cry

charvi chintada

*2nd place winner of the
2026 Writing Foundations Prize*

I WOKE UP to the sound of crying. It wasn’t surprising to hear crying in the house that week; grief hung over all of us like a thick fog, but this time it felt oddly piercing. It was a cry of pain. My grandmother’s mourning

drilled into my head, forcing me out of bed. I threw the blanket off, stepped on the cold tile floor, and walked into the hallway. As usual, my father would be waiting for me to wake up.

But today, the hallway was eerily empty, and the crying was echoing from the other bedroom. It was too sharp—different from the sounds I was used to. I stepped across the tiles, as the bedroom suddenly felt like it was miles away. I whispered to myself, *He has to be here. He hasn't left yet.* Eyes darted towards me as I took a step inside, my eyes fixing on...him. My father lay there, drained of all the life he had ever carried, his body made skin and bones by the cancer that had slowly eaten at him. My mother was in the room too, sitting silently by his side.

My knees grew weak. My hands shook and tears streamed down my face. My sobs caught in my throat, each one getting louder than the last. My head was spinning so much that my eyes couldn't focus on what I was looking at. Everything was dawning on me: how still he was, the silence around him, the continuous crying in the room, his cold hands, and the strong smell of medications mixed with turmeric spread over his neck and chest. I didn't know if I could hold him, but part of me wanted to believe that if I held him tight enough, he might just come back. Just maybe he would wake up. I pressed my hands to his arms, then his chest. I tried to pull him towards me, my tears soaking his clothes. My voice choked out in whimpers, not accepting the fact that he wouldn't come back. My eyes shifted to my mom, looking at her for permission. "Can I kiss him?" I whispered to her, my voice still shaking. She nodded slightly. I leaned over and gently kissed him on the forehead. His skin felt ice cold, like fragile glass, as if I might shatter if I touched too hard. He looked so peaceful; the pain he had endured for so long was finally gone. I wanted to hold onto him, make him look at me again, but nothing had worked.

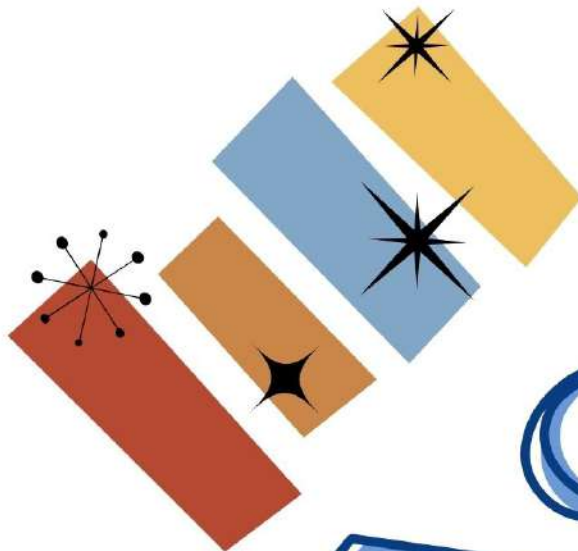
We prepared for the journey to his hometown, which was a five-hour drive from our house in Hyderabad. My father had always said he wanted his funeral to be there. The day was hot and dry. I was given a small cup of milk but I could barely drink it. I tried, swallowing painfully, my throat felt dry and prickly from crying. The ambulance waited for us outside with the ice box in front of me that had my father's body.

As we drove to the village, the heat from the sun hit the ambulance windows, making the air hard to breathe. I told my mother that I was starting to feel a bit dizzy. She kept me sitting up and conscious. I held onto her hand tightly,

while the ache growing in my chest felt worse with every bump on the road. When we finally stopped, the air outside hit me like a wall, the heat taking over me. I tried to reach out to hold onto something as my vision started to blur. I went unconscious and hit the ground, feeling nothing but dry air and an empty feeling in my chest. Grief sat heavy and unmoving in that ambulance, like the morning heat that suffocated my breath.

I woke up lying on a mat, forced to watch as my father's body was taken through rituals. It felt wrong to watch. *Nothing could've ever prepared me for this.* As the elder men of my family picked up the body to take to the lakeshore, something inside me shattered like glass. I fell to the ground, holding onto my uncle, my hands gripping his kurta, my nails digging into his leg. I was yelling and begging, but no sound was coming out of my mouth. All I wanted to do was to go with my father. I was flailing my arms around trying to stop them. I bawled and let my tears soak the hem of my dress. The further they took him, the more I felt like I was being stabbed in the chest. I wanted to run after him and hold him again. I wanted to feel the warmth of my father's hug one last time. My body shook as my cries became louder and louder, echoing in the village. My mother held me back; her arms felt firm but gentle, and I was pressed up against her chest. I cried into her shoulder as my mouth fell open in helpless sobs, as if screaming would bring him back to me.

Death was something I never understood at that age. I knew it meant something, but not what it would put on me for the coming years. I imagine how my life would be if my father were still with me, or how proud he would be of me when I achieve something I've always dreamed of, or how he would cheer me on when I accept an award. To this day, I carry the memories of that journey, and its unbearable weight along with me, more vividly than any other. How the hours blurred together as time refused to pause for our mourning. I think about my mother's silence and realize that it wasn't her strength, but a grief so strong that there was no space for her cries. I remember the longing to be close to my father for the last time. Even though our memories together are not long-lived, he still lives with me in every quiet morning, in the echoes of my cry; he is the heartbeat that beats along with mine every day.



ACT ONE



“I want to keep living, now, in a way that may have seemed distant when I was 18 and getting my license the first time. Knowing what I know now, I want to take it back. I’m going to go forward knowing all of me intends to keep living.”

—

*daphne mantle,
body bureaucracy*

my gift to you

rhianna lewis

University of Denver – Denver, CO

The walls of my childhood bedroom were covered in possibilities:
Astronaut, doctor, ballerina, actress, gymnast, fighter, mathematician, chef, lawyer.
I brushed my hair in a mirror that sang only my praises and never my flaws, the
Reflection cradling the image of a young girl who would grow up to be
Everything her mother was not gifted the time to become.
Instead of a bucket list, I'll remake a life.

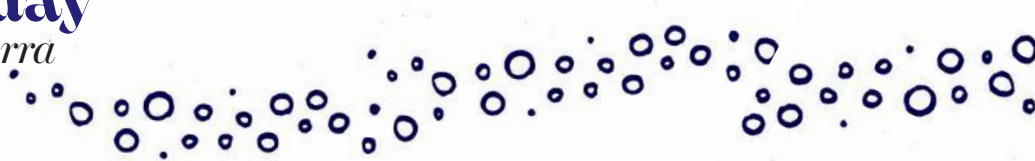
Perhaps the sleepless nights and early mornings will eventually mean nothing,
Won't add up to much more than precious years spent outrunning the clock.
But for now, they mean the opening of doors others can't see and worlds
That most people only know as dreams. Moments of technicolor replay in my memory
so bright, I wonder sometimes if I've turned up the saturation too high to keep her alive.
But then I feel the magic in me, which was magic from her, and I color anew.

In place of a mother, I turned to the mirror and asked who I was supposed to be.
She looked back at me and whispered
Everything.



easter day

mckenna parra



caminadas al autobús

jasmin benitez carbajal

prefería sentir los golpes del sol,
que las mordidas del invierno
pero de vez en cuando sería bien
si pudiera también sentir el viento
después de un día largo,
con un atardecer rosado;
de color de guayaba cortada a la mitad

la imagen podría ser algo espectacular:



on girlhood, m.a.s.h, and moms

camille valencia

IN PRIMARY school, my friends and I would lay on our bellies in my childhood bedroom. The walls were painted Pepto Bismol pink. We drank it in with each gulp for air, breaking up fits of laughter. We thrashed around on the coarse beige carpet, leaving little rashes across our stomachs. We couldn't help but writhe around. Something about friends in a childhood bedroom, or the Pepto walls, or the air being diverted to laughing, depriving our brain. It was intoxicating.

We would pass around whatever edition of Seventeen we could get our hands on. This was the time of reading teen magazines, giggling about celebrities dating lives, and ripping through the pages to find any blank space. In the margins we'd sry at our lives through games of M.A.S.H. securing our futures by landing on Mansion or making plan Bs after landing on Shack.

As adults, me and my best friend play M.A.S.H. We didn't get to see each other in girlhood, but we make up for it in our 20's. Sitting on her orange velvet couch huddled under a H.E.B tortilla shaped throw blanket, we roll around laughing at the nonsensical choices we put.

I've made a habit of taking Excedrin before hanging out with her or before emerging from my room to sit with my two roommates. I know that the stupid shit we say will make me laugh so hard my stomach will cramp, my head will throb, and, at some point, cause us to laugh ourselves off the couch, shifting onto the rough outdoor carpet in our living room. Inflicted with a joy akin to hysterics.

I am 5 years in the past, 16, and begging to leave my house. I am 8 years in the past, 13, and prepping a bag of clothes, money, and snacks to run away with. I am ___ wishing I wasn't, wishing I was older. I am here, 21, begging to let me go back, begging to let me stay there. Wrapped in the past.

In my 20's, I became my mom's best friend. Actually, that's not true. If I'm being honest with myself, I changed titles, from daughter to mom's best friend, a while ago. Somewhere

around 16, in the wreckage of her divorce, our relationship shifted. Before I became my mom's best friend, I was stuck in a year long stint as my mom's mother. Being your mom's daughter then, suddenly, being your mom's mother looked like driving her home. She was blackout drunk, too drunk to drive. At least that's how it looked to me. 15 years old, licenseless, learners permit tucked in the pocket of my Levi's. My sister in the back seat holding up Mama so she doesn't choke on her own vomit. Or the drool that's pooling in her mouth. Or the drink that she's still nursing.

I like being my mom's best friend, it means listening to her talk about boys over the phone, laying down, stomach to mattress, knees bent, feet kicking in the air. The specific boy is her current boyfriend, Rasheid. Rasheid's okay.

I met him 8 months ago at a party, a month after her breakup with Marijuana Marcus, 1 ½ years after my stepdad Justin, 3 ½ years after Conspiracy Theory Sam, 4 years after Joe California, and 5 years after a divorce from dad, the end to a 20-year marriage.

Mama wants to see how this one will play out, how he'll be different. He is a story meant to play out. He is a story I've already seen play out. He is as good as gone in my book. I don't use games of M.A.S.H to peer into their future.

The party we met at was something out of a teenage dream. Walls of liquor, trays lined with Jello shots, and anywhere from 15 to 40 people drifting around a hazy room. The party host yelling to "Take it outside!" when guests stumble from the porch, with pipes lit, to pop a squat on his Living Spaces sectional. Perfect place for teenage shenanigans and mother-daughter bonding.

Rasheid pulled me aside, as Mama drunkenly danced, shaking ass (her words). In hand, a solo cup full of burgundy wine sloshing out the sides. He pulled me from the action to tell me how neecrvous he was to meet me, and that he waaaanted me to like him, already a few Franzias in. He picked up one of the many glass, probably from Amazon, pipes scattered around the back porch. The party host had left them for attendees to smoke while they grazed. Instead, I watched him pathetically attempt to light the bowl until he pleaded for help.

Mama came over after we'd gotten started, shuffling the pipe back and forth and to others on the porch. She looked at me shocked, stifling a laugh, "A mom shouldn't have to see her LittleMillieMama become a pot head?! Smoking the Devils Lettuce?!"

"A daughter shouldn't have to watch her mom 'shake ass' at a party," I jested back. "Besides, we are looking at a normal mother-daughter relationship in the rear-view mirror."

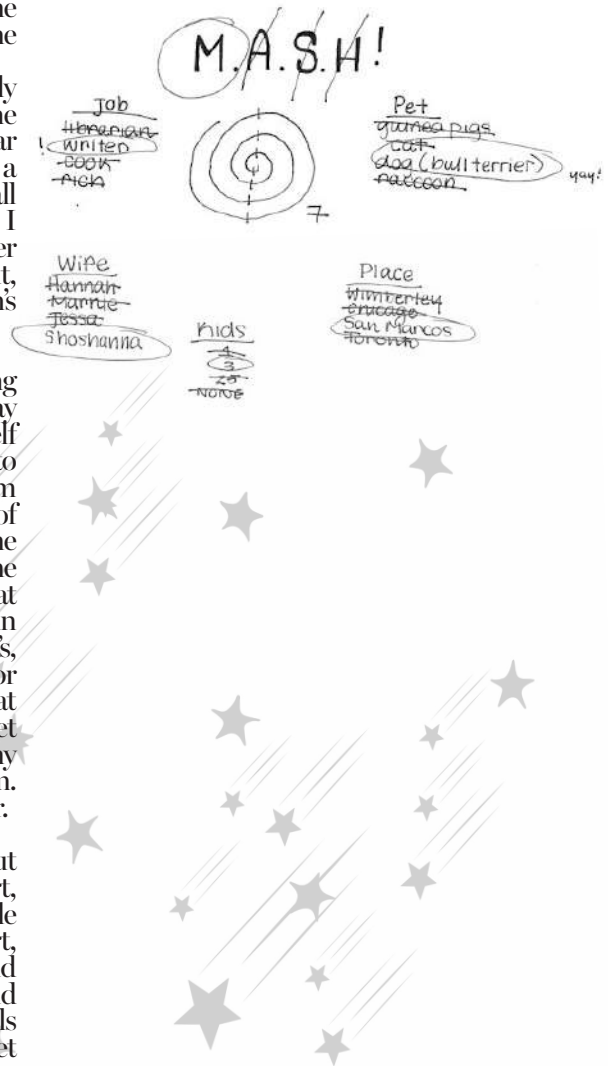
I wanted to add how Rasheid should know how to use a lighter, but I refrained. Only after I stood swaying in the front yard, after my sister picked us up, after Rasheid had gotten on the road, did I chuckle, stoned and sprawled on the bed me and Mama shared.

We had mutated into something truly unrecognizable. How could I be just "the daughter" when she was nowhere near being just "the mom"? LittleMillieMama, a childhood nickname that falls short, too small to encapsulate the years and years since. If I can abandon being that, how could I hold her responsible to being a mom? If I'm an adult, can I still be a daughter? If I'm not my mom's best friend, then who's friend am I?

I tell my therapist I feel like I am losing my friends, that they must be pulling away from me. Or maybe I am distancing myself from them. Or maybe I have fallen back into my "preemptive grief" of losing them. I am 5 years in the future mourning the loss of my college life, my friends. I am 1 year in the future watching them laugh far ahead of me at a terminal, boarding a plane to a life that I have no business being in. I am 20 years in the future—in my 40's I've forgotten my 20's, no more carpet burned tummies, no need for Excedrin, living in the future we guessed at with games of M.A.S.H. In my fuzzy blanket I have forgotten this hasn't happened. In my spiral I resolve it is easier not to go with them. It is easier to mourn them now. Yes, it is easier.

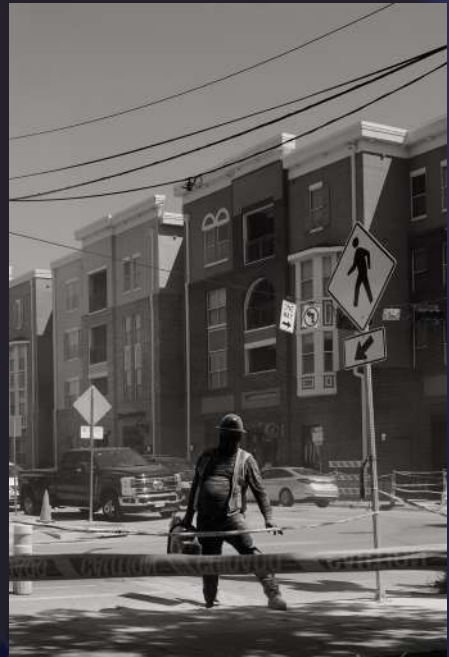
In my 20's I have enough love to spill out every moment of my life. It rips me apart, pulling at my seams, until I'm indistinguishable from them, from my loves. It shreds me apart, spirals me, shifts me. I think about my love, and I think of laughter born nausea. I spin around and around my room, eyes swirling to walls lined with every note, receipt, picture, ticket stub, my own museum of ephemera. I curl up in a bed that I no longer share with my mom. The walls may be lined with pages of love, but they aren't Pepto Bismol pink, clutching them and fingering the pages, I cry out for the me that

isn't here. The Girlhood. The Pseudo Adult. The LittleMillieMama. I mourn the me's that are too fuzzy and wish I still believed in pieces of paper, games of M.A.S.H, to tell me what to grieve next.



the denton i noticed

isaiah maddox





what i look for in a friend

sylvia polansky

Mount Holyoke College – South Hadley, CT

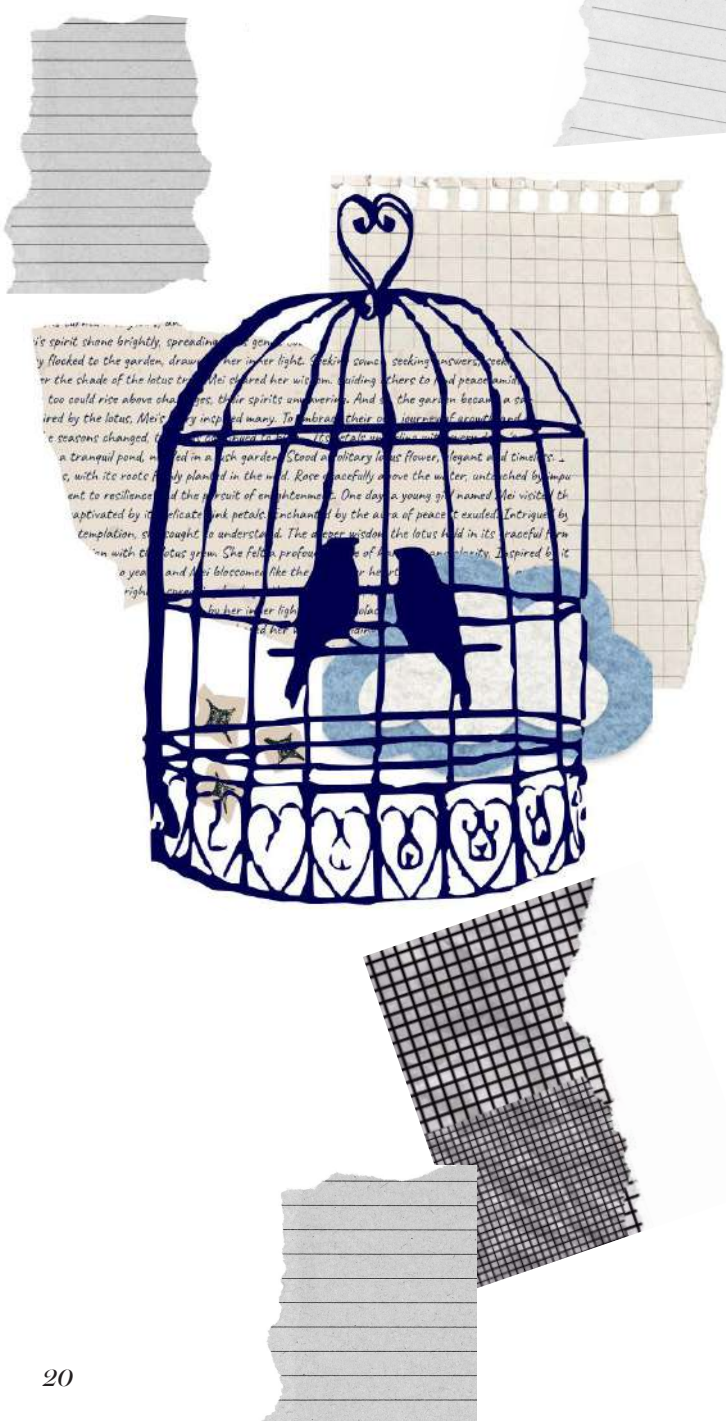
When I found you,
you were face up. You were real
wide open. I liked you that way, like
a cracked egg on a sidewalk. I got right
down there with you

Our hands in the dirt, buried like old
Seeds. Leftover shavings.
I believed you when
You told me not to worry so much.

But the window I am looking through now
is clear. There is
your pressed hand, your escaping glance.
'There is your forehead against the glass,
the one we both looked out
yesterday. Do you remember?

I traced stars in your palm,
a familiar etch a-sketch.

It's funny how
You and I were the exact same dimensions
when we died.



paper flowers

brendan matocha



I AM OFTEN a nauseous person and have been for the majority of my adult life. If I feel particularly sick, I make an excuse to visit a copier in a hidden, dusty corner of my company's office. There, I lie down on a little plastic table, and as I listen to the hum of the machine, I work to remember my middling years of college, now nearly nine years ago. I remember Dr. Kaplan's class. The hundreds of origami flowers I had folded over the course of that semester. Aaron, my best friend in the world—the inertia is his march toward Riley's apartment that night as he stormed down Larky Street like a determined comet barreling toward earth.

There's a small bin in that dusty room that I pull close to my chest as I remember the way I stumbled after him in the cold.

Larky was a weird street. Oak trees failed miserably to form a rustling green roof over the road. Frito bags and beer bottles bunched up against the skeletal groins of bushes. A Victorian mansion left to rot; a squatter's shack carefully pruned. Aaron and I had a one-story rental close to our campus. It was a miserable, dusty old place, but the floors were shining golden imperfection, and its attic was creepier than either of us had ever seen, so when Aaron and I graduated high school, we signed a lease to rent it for four hundred dollars a month, each. I've no idea why. The cushy Texas suburb we'd grown up in was only a half-hour drive away.

On the holidays, Aaron spent his meager valet paycheck on cheap vodka and filled the house with his friends and co-workers. We hosted our best party in late November of our sophomore year. I was anxious about something—an essay, probably—and in the early evening, I had decided to eat an edible that was too strong for me, which marked the night as the first time I had been violently high. Aaron's functions had always seemed to me akin to rituals that simulate the exact archetypal image of a house party, but that night I wandered through the crowded rooms like they were the high halls of a golden palace, plastic red cups our bejeweled chalices. At one point, a beautiful but vaguely pathetic-looking girl in torn stockings spilled beer onto our floor and cried. Three boys pulled their shirts over

their heads and caravanned through the kitchen, hounding me repeatedly to do the same. Once, I found myself frozen in a darkened corner, hypnotized by a shy couple who sat on our couch. For nearly half an hour, I was content to observe their enigmatic whisperings, their shared smile as they ran their fingers through each other's hair. Every cloistered conversation had become a tableau, every laugh a note in the jazz we played on our cheap speakers. And in the center of it all stood Aaron, wildly drunk, his voice rough from passionate shouts, while Riley Stern, his girlfriend of three years and the funniest person I have ever known, held him by his shoulders and swayed him back and forth, then said something I couldn't hear, but still made everyone erupt into laughter.

"What's that?" I asked them, suddenly nervous. "What did you say?"

I remember seeing dozens of eyes.

"I said you look like you're on a field study when you're high," Riley replied. Chuckles and voices branched off into a dozen directions.

"I should have eaten," I had said, but I don't think anyone heard me. "I should have eaten."

As the night dragged on, the crowd relaxed into little pods of strange conversation. Plastic garbage began filling every surface of the house. As Aaron's friends grew drunker, I rapidly became myself again, until I was swiping away empty cups into a plastic bag.

On my way outside, I nearly stepped over a group of students who cuddled on our hallway floor.

"Yo," one said as he caught my ankle. "We found these. Are you mad?"

"No," I said.

Then I saw what he held up to me: a small origami rose. Everyone in the pile had taken at least one from my room. Some of them held their flowers carefully, staring at them in a sort of awe. Others had already crushed them in their palms.

The boy squinted. "Brother. Are you okay? You seem tense..."

"It's fine," I said. "I've been making them for a class that I'm taking with Riley. They don't mean anything."

At this, a girl suddenly emerged from the bottom of the pile in a gasp. Her head swayed back and forth as if on a swivel while she looked at me. "Don't say that to yourself! They're like your children... We really, really like them." Her

red eyes glazed over with genuine gratitude.

I hesitated. "Thank you."

"Thank YOU, for making them," she continued. "You've done a beautiful thing. One day... one day they'll lead you to a beautiful life." She wiped away a tear with the back of her soft hand.

"What the hell are you yapping about...?" someone murmured. Then the whole pile began laughing uncontrollably, convulsing like some strange, mangled body.

"Do you all—have—trash?" I stammered. But their laughter had itself become a joke. It self-perpetuated. I stood there and stared at the crumpling flowers in their hands.

Then I stepped out into the darkened night. As I reached our dumpster, I heard it—a muffled giggle, mouths smacking together. In our sideyard, barely obscured by bushes, I caught a glimpse of Aaron's lion-mane hair. Riley's smaller body pinned him to an oak tree.

"What if Ada freaks out on us?" Aaron breathed.

"Who is *Ada*?" she replied.

They both laughed so hard they had to stop making out. *I'm still very high*, I thought.

"She's the lonely Polish lady who lives right—there." He reached around the tree and pointed to our neighbor's house.

Riley seemed to consider something. Slowly, deliberately, she said: "Anyone who's that lonely can watch. I don't give a fuck. About anything." And then she jumped on him. They inhaled each other again and kept going.

I didn't watch them, but with my back to the dumpster, I sank to the ground and listened, not knowing exactly why. I located the most featureless surface I could see—the starless sky—and used it as a canvas to visualize the moment. It's what I did to understand difficult lectures.

Sex isn't real, I thought. *Not really real. I'm very high*.

At about noon the next day, Riley stumbled bleary-eyed into the living room to see me frantically mopping the uneven floors, trying to scrub away any semblance of what had happened the night before. She gave me an odd smile and looked at me sideways with her arms folded across her chest.

"Good show last night, hm?" is what she said.

I was filled with a sense that I was being tested, that she was trying to make a particular determination about me. That she expected an answer—some key facet or revealing truth within me that would clarify to her some course of action. It occurs to me only now that I might

have been as much of a mystery to her as she was to me. Or I was to myself.

I said nothing. I had nothing to say.

She shrugged, then reached for the mop. The moment had passed. Silently, she helped me clean the house before walking to her apartment on Allagi Avenue, one block downhill.

Folding an origami flower is really quite simple. You fold the paper in half, and then fold it in half again, slightly differently, and then again a little differently, and then maybe into quarters and on and on until eventually you have produced from your slip of paper an abstraction of a rose.

"Move deliberately," Dr. Kaplan would say at the start of that semester. "View yourself as you craft. Are you wasting movements?"

It was a philosophy of art class. Dr. Kaplan was our professor, and he was a good one, pretentious and passionate. Riley and I sat in the back of the musty room as his dark eyes scanned for the listless students whom he'd call upon suddenly to answer a question. He taught us about aesthetics. He asked us whether art was beauty or art was pleasure, and expected us to answer one way or the other. He made allusions to Greek myths—told us his favorite story, about the titan Kronos eating his children only to be usurped by them later, saying it reminded him of lazy students who cheat themselves out of digging deep and thinking for themselves. I didn't understand the connection, but it was engaging.

Our first assignment, months before our November party and before Dr. Kaplan had even reviewed the syllabus, was to fold one of these paper flowers. He said he believed in a "hands-on" approach to teaching. At first, I found this admirable, but he expected us to present him with another one of these flowers every time we entered his lecture hall.

"By week five, you should be able to craft one without the use of a tutorial," he told us. "By week ten, you should craft the piece in less than two minutes. One-third of your final exam—" he smiled mercilessly—"is to fold one in sixty seconds, in front of me, alone." He glanced around the room, noticed my widened eyes. "Don't worry. Crafting something of aesthetic beauty is an act of love."

I hated the flowers. I hated making them. I had become an adult and thought I could detach myself from the childish fear of disappointing a teacher, but I couldn't. I hated how awful I was at lining the edges of the paper together, how my hands shook over my desk

as I thought about the inevitable glance he'd give me when I presented my crumpled mess. The grin he'd flash at Riley when she'd open her hands to reveal a perfect rose.

By snowless December, my room was a paper garden. The multiple-choice section of our exam had passed, and probably two hundred flowers lined my floor and desk, all imperfect and all folded in far over one minute. I was embarrassed by how much it meant to me. I had always been a straight-A student, had always been able with effort to comprehend material, and I could hardly handle the thought of losing all of that in an inexplicable test of paper-folding in a class on philosophy. The night before our final exam, I had folded over thirty of them before Aaron barged into my room and begged me to join him in buying liquor for our Christmas party.

"You're wasting paper," he told me. "You'll be fine in the moment."

"How could you possibly know that?"

He blew the half-folded flower off my hand, which I immediately retrieved. "Riley could practically do it in three tries," I continued. "It's like origami was injected into her brain at birth."

He glanced around my paper-littered room, then gave me a half-frown, half-smile. "You are thinking too hard about this," he said slowly.

I gently pushed him out the door. "Tomorrow," I said. "We'll go tomorrow, when I come back."

But the flowers kept me awake that night. The shortest time I had managed was sixty-two seconds, and it barely even resembled a rose.

Through my bedframe, I could feel Aaron shuffle across the floor on the other side of the house. I felt him pace back and forth, as he sometimes did in his restlessness, until the vibration slowed and stopped, and my mind slowed and stopped along with it.

It's been a very long time, but I remember a lot of things about that morning.

I remember waking up an hour early with a fluttering heart.

I remember the chill on my face as I trekked across a deserted campus, the sleek empty hallway leading to Dr. Kaplan's office, my classmate who passed by me and wished me good luck, and told me to wait while Riley folded her flower inside. The panic attack I narrowly avoided with deep breaths while I waited by the door. How I grew impatient and peeked in.

His body shoved up against hers. Her back

against the top of a darkened oak desk. Her paper flower crumpled in their interlocked fingers.

Sex isn't real. Not really real.

I remember after, too. I remember Riley's grin and thumbs-up five minutes later when she swung open the door and passed me by. The brief widening in Dr. Kaplan's eyes as he told me he had forgotten he had one more student. A relief and unsettling dismay at the realization that they hadn't suspected anyone had seen them.

How I calmly folded the flower in thirty-six seconds with no mistakes, and how, when he smiled at me, I wanted to tighten my palm until the paper molded into the crevices between my fingers. His awkward pat on my back as I left.

I don't know whether the fog that blanketed Larky Street that morning was real or something my memory constructed. Aaron was grinning in our doorway when I noticed I had walked all the way home.

He led me along the aisles of a run-down liquor store near campus that we knew never ID'd its customers. I felt like I was skimming across my own consciousness, that I was barely there.

"I don't know what to get Riley for Christmas," he said. He twisted a bottle of cheap bourbon in his hands.

"Yeah?" I needed something to look at, so I studied a pack of edibles behind a plastic screen. I hated alcohol, but since the November party, I hadn't had any desire to be high, either.

"Yeah. I want it to be special. We started dating on Christmas. It makes it easy to remember."

I forced myself to toss him a smile. "I remember."

He had a distant look. For a moment, I thought he was staring at the cashier before I saw that his eyes were fixed on the hazy bloom of Christmas lights in the square outside. His thumb ran over the neck of the bottle, tenderly caressing it, as if he needed somewhere to put all his love, something to please when Riley wasn't there. "I think I'll marry her on a Christmas."

"Yeah?"

"Yeah."

A pause, and then he shuddered and rolled his shoulders as if released from a spell. He turned to me and smiled politely, as he always did when he felt my relative absence in a conversation, because he was a good friend.

"What about you? How are you..." He hesitated. "Have you met anyone cool?"

"Not really."

"Yeah?"

“Yeah.”

I saw him hit the thought of potential awkwardness between us, saw him hurdle right over it in a way I never could. “Well, it takes effort, but I think you should put yourself out there,” he said kindly. “You miss a hundred percent of the shots you take.”

“Don’t take,” I said automatically. He laughed, then bought the two bottles of bourbon.

On our walk home, he said I looked pale and asked me if I was alright. When I told him I was, he continued the previous conversation as if it hadn’t ended.

“I want you to be happy, I guess,” he said finally.

I glanced up to see Ada’s strange home, old but well-kept, the yellowed grass cut cleanly at the edges.

And so I told him there.

I remember his puzzled expression. How he told me I must have been mistaken, how he went on about the rest of the day like I hadn’t said a thing, but how I knew he believed me because he didn’t eat anything for lunch, or dinner, and didn’t call her.

It came in a broken sob I overheard from my room. I remember how he stalked back and forth through the kitchen, wailing with his hands folded on his head, my heart racing as I realized he had been pushed beyond sadness. That he was made incomprehensible to himself, that something he had understood implicitly when he’d decided to love someone wholly was now gibberish, as nonsensical as it had always seemed to me. That we were now the same, because neither of us knew what to do.

The way he said “I have to see her,” over and over again while I consoled him. The moment I knew he couldn’t stop himself from seeking her out.

How his bare feet slapped against the porch, and then against the rough asphalt road. His arms swung side to side almost jauntily before shoving his hand against his face to wipe tears away. I slipped my ratty shoes on and rushed out, yellow light spilling onto our deck because I had left the door open—something I had never done, ever in my life. His mumbblings had grown louder when I pushed ahead of him to face him as we marched.

“Aaron,” I said. His name had already been stale and meaningless for half an hour by then. “Aaron. Eat first. Eat, then decide what to do.”

I knew that wouldn’t work. I felt him retching the words out as soon as they hit his ears, and he whined a deep, miserable note,

then pushed further downhill toward Allagi Avenue. I thought that there must be some correct words in the correct order, some secret note to sing that would resonate in him and give him pause. Nothing came. The road shuddered. I didn’t know what would happen if he reached her apartment at the end of the block. Anything could have happened. Maybe he’d find his next partner on the way there, or some terrible accident would occur before us, or I could’ve finally learned what love was. I don’t know why, but the end of the block meant endless possibility, a life that’s effortful and crafted and masterfully folded, made beautiful and daring, some inexpressible thing that Aaron lost and I never had—not then, certainly not now.

Something, I thought. Do something.

We had almost reached the intersection when I stuffed my hand into my pocket, pulled out my origami flower, and threw it into my mouth. And that worked.

He stopped and glared at me. I think he almost laughed.

The flower became a crush of bitter folds between my teeth, and then a dissolved mush on my tongue. *This is good*, I thought, and swallowed it. The threat would be digested. I’d disperse it throughout my body, render it harmless. Let the moment pass, let it fade into obscurity. Maybe it’d fall so far down into me it’d disappear.

Yes, down. Swallow it down, keep the thing contained, and one day, I’ll die.

Maybe Aaron saw he could do the same. He sat down in the center of the street and wailed. I heard a window slam open. Ada’s shrill voice rang out.

“*Shut the fuck up!*” she cried. “*If I cannot rest, what the hell have I lived eighty years for?*”

“I’m sorry,” I replied. “You’re right. It will not happen again.”

After that, I took him home. My room still brimmed with paper flowers. It took time, but I ate every single one.

Such are the things I remember as I puke into the bin by the copier. It’s often like this. I graduated nearly a decade ago, and now it feels like the people I knew then exist only as material to ponder while enduring short, monotonous workweeks. I certainly have no one else to think about.

The copier finishes. I try to reach out to the stack of pages beside me, to feel the warmth of one between my fingers. I fold the paper in half. I have forgotten the second step.

side hugs and side glances
inside the mind-body-plane
margaret ude

Texas Woman's University – Denton, TX



ginger candy (an elegy for bà cố)

tryna nguyen

Because I ran too fast, I scraped and fell
Onto my knees, and you could not make out
The English babble I was spouting.
You ran so far from what you knew
Just for me, now unable to comprehend
The words we use to speak.
Yet you tend to my wounds always,
With love and never-ending ginger candy,
Wrapped in yellow, white, and blue packaging.
For years we watched each other grow older,
I learn to walk while your legs wisdom to rest.
But I knew when I called for you, “Bà Cố!”¹
So long the path, you hobbled to me still,
“Cố sao không, bé?”² I ask for ginger candy.

Fourteen and grief do not mesh well.
Sick and banished to bed, forbidden to see
The God who blessed you with everything.
No way to live, and that you knew. Lulled into sleep
So peacefully, how kind he was to you.
Last time we spoke, your words were slow,
As if knowing I might not understand why
Or what the sounds from your ghostly lips endured.
No longer lively and proud, but kind forever.
“Nhớ chăm sóc sức khỏe.”³
It felt like the Reaper was laughing,
Pointing at us with his scythe
Threateningly, you use the rest of your strength
To hand me a piece of ginger candy.

Our foreheads wrapped in yellow and white,⁴
All I feel is blue. The stringent taste of ginger
Lingers (when they speak) of you.
I can't cry or mourn and instead I am left
Confused by the words they speak so fast.
Is this how you felt in your last years?
In a country you had to survive in?
With kin who could not understand you?
You must've known it was no way to live.
All I have left of you is ginger candy.

1 Great Grandma.

2 “Are you okay, child?”

3 “Remember to take care of your health.”

4 When Vietnamese people go through a time of mourning, they adorn yellow and white headbands as a symbol of respect, purity, and grief. Those with a closer familial relationship, like a great grandchild, wear yellow, while extended family and other close friends/acquaintances wear white.

my uncle, steve

mallory guilstorf

The blinds remained shut,
Sunlight peeking through the cracks,
His table littered with cigarette butts
And his carpet bleeding ash.

While I wiped the sweat from my hair
As I was fixed under summer heat,
I'd see him grinning in his chair,
Which was always his favorite seat.

It was older than me by years,
And it smelled just like his smoke;
There, he would nap after a beer
Until hours later when he woke.

It was stained and certainly dirty
After so many seasons of use;
Somehow, it stood sturdy,
Though the bolts were somewhat loose.

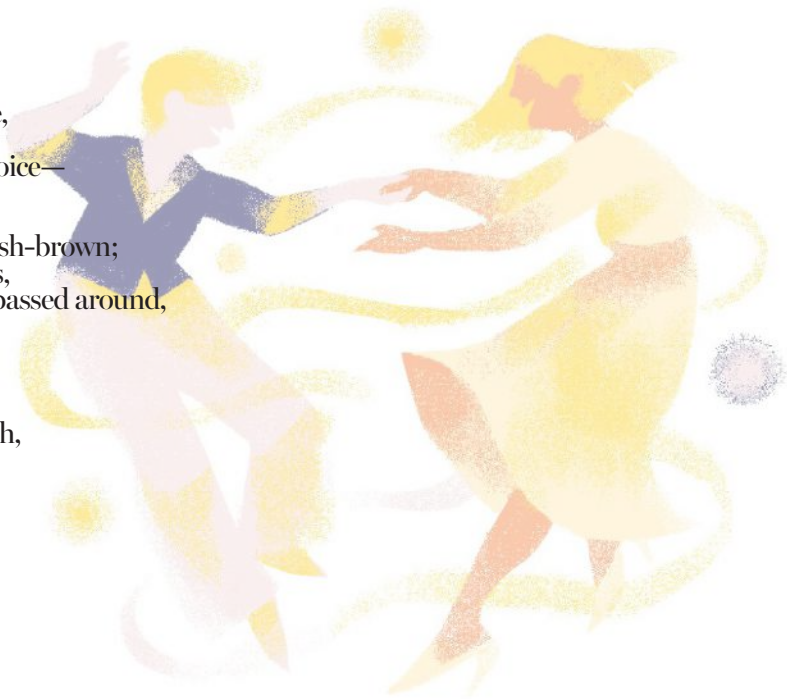
The place on the couch I always sought
Was perched right next to my mom
While Steve stayed sitting in his favorite spot
In his chair where he belonged.

He doesn't sit there anymore,
And I know he won't be waiting;
If I open his front door,
He won't welcome me by waving.

I'm scared I might forget his voice,
His snoring, and his laughter.
It hurts even though I have no choice—
I can't see him again hereafter.

His chair is still here, a dark reddish-brown;
My mom sits on it while she reads,
And many of his old things were passed around,
But his chair is all I need.

I cry when I sink into its warmth,
Because I know that he is gone;
But in that chair so on and so forth,
I'm certain he lives on.



body bureaucracy

daphne mantle

RE:RE:RE:RE:RE:Online DMV Not Accepting My License Renewal?

To: local.dmv@gov

From: sickandtired@your.edu

CC: For The Last Fucking Time

Dear DMV,

It has been troubling me that in order to renew my license, I was unable to take myself off the organ donor list. As per your last email this is likely to be because of the fact all renewals have been entirely online for the past six months. The system is broken. But, in the vain effort of someone who has since been pronounced Very Sick since the last time we have navigated this bureaucratic cesspit together, I will endear to you a list of reasons from head to toe why you may reconsider mounting barriers in my path.

Let us start with how I am sick. I'm not really, currently. It is a waiting game as all chronic conditions 'are' or 'are not' based on markers in the blood. I do not eat wheat now: I am not sick now. My blood pressure remains just a little low; I am not sick now. My Covid tests are all negative; I am not sick now. To be sick is to not be a person. To have been sick, is to be listened to. Sometimes. So I am not sick.

When people hear that I have been sick, they instantly want to dig into how and why. As if I should know 'how' and 'why'. Genetics! Society! A late flu shot! As if a free show is contained in my misery, scavenged from wiggling fingers that write gossip for likes. As if there are no easier ways to sail the seven seas and find free drama. But I was raised on gallows humor that makes my heart too happy to oblige.

Doctor's Note:

1. *I ask my bones be buried in the backyard with all our past pets, but roasted under the open sky so they might be warm as I had hoped for all my life. The house is 65 degrees Fahrenheit and so am I. I wear wool socks and thick skirts down to my ankles in spring.*
 - This low blood pressure thing really blows.
2. Her skin is also no good. Never mind the maternal history of psoriasis, lupus, etc; the skin of her upper arms is riddled with permanent goose bumps. As a child she was given a cream that smelled of fermented wheat grass and prescribed to rub the skin until it was red and bled. That did not work.
 - *At least the face is so sweet and plump I am mistaken at least ten years younger than I am—*. But a face will not save a life.
3. Here is the wrinkle where the brain fog is housed. It rises when she sits down too long without taking Methyl Folate. (P/N: *Vitamin Deficient until I became an adult with my own doctor who believed me, who would guess?*) To every teacher that has expected this shell to respond instantly, she wishes you to build a house here— Feel the weightless draw and quarter of the mind as eyes well up with tears.
 - *I should know this—* Your brain will scream. *I should also be able to just*

stand up and walk to the kitchen and feed myself, but I cannot remember what deciding is—

4. The eyes are brown with significant near-sighted astigmatism present since squinting at the white board in 4th grade. It appeared miraculously in front of Mrs. C on a Thursday morning. Perhaps the golden sunburst in her eyes was a sign of what was to be. Apollo's pursuit takes one more thing from his laurel's flight. Her face is transformed by their presence, a sweet visage molded into bookish, or cool, or trendy. This disability is a pair of red heart shaped glasses that slip down her nose on foggy mornings just enough to remind her that she can see no further than an elbow reliably.
5. *If you listen closely, my heart murmur continues on. It whispers in rituals that 'keep you safe' as you drive down a highway at night in the passenger side. It leads the screamo band of my organs with a mere sip of Monster Energy tasting of pixie stix mania. A murmur whose source was known the day I was born, just not to me. Such things would just be a worry, or so I was told by those who raised me when I turned 18 and the doctor asked how long it had been thumping off beat and I realized I had no idea.*
 - *It did explain things. The track finish line I would be carried over by friends, certainly. The anxiety that something was wrong as my vision would fade when standing up even more so.*
6. *As for blame, to Dr. Yay I begrudge this frogging of the yarn that made up the nerves on the right side of my ribcage crawling all the way up and over to the wrist of my writing hand. May it follow you to the grave just like your recommendation to buy a book on anxiety with your amazon shop link when I came to you in tears after months of gluten eating at my nerves will follow me to mine— To say nothing of the small intestine, kidneys, liver, etc. I hope all the patients you defrauded into buying vitamins that did nothing from your practice that didn't take insurance are able to force their suffering onto you as you turn the pages of a headstone brochure. My mother's fatty liver especially, and my gluten intolerance as a footnote waiting there just when you think it's over.*
 - *Remember as I stood in the kitchen, house empty, pain radiating up the right side of my body. Both hands white-knuckle gripped on the edge of the deep country sink as sunlight streamed through the muddled glass. I had only gotten out of bed because I knew the dogs would be hungry. I had been hungry for days. To fall backwards in a faint would be to brain myself on the island of blonde wood and white paint. It was then I knew that if I did not start cooking for myself, taking out all the foods that were eating me alive, I would be found here with hungry dogs. I would rather they eat me than starve. I would rather eat than be eaten. Each twitch as I moved was decay of my nerves. The knife in my hand carved broccoli stems the same way its weight sliced through my arm. I ate chicken and broccoli that night, seasoned plainly with salt and black pepper. The pain did not retreat. Not yet.*
7. Your lungs are the real story. Inspecting each tube reveals the many ills that have plagued this body. Bronchitis, Mono, Pneumonia, Covid 19, each Cold and Flu. They are maintained precisely at 30% humidity and no less. She even claims to like more humidity than a crested gecko. (*That's 80%, if you didn't know.*) When asked if she would consider moving somewhere even more humid, she considered it fondly. (*The coast is too far away, and my hair would frizz into a cloud, but the closer I've edged the more alive I've felt.*) Even here, these lungs' breathing capacity is 40% more than the average person getting allergy testing. The ribs surrounding are built as bellows.
 - *My small body was built to scream obscenities at baseball games across the mound as my Grunkle had done. American, through and through.*
8. The spine itself is twined to the side, tilting her neck just slightly misaligned. The

back muscles twist out of shape to accommodate. Fingers marched up this back in middle school, nudging her to touch toes in the fluorescent light twice.

- *Against all advice, my health was deemed a wash again.*

9. And here is an appendix, perfectly intact. For all that the digestive system has rebelled this organ has never ruptured. A blessing on a body so afraid to visit the hospital. (*Memories of the twice I've been for myself float inside it. A squirrel bite and a hallway corner to the back of the head and so distant now. Red on the blue blanket printed with teddy bears a little too yellow to be grizzly. I do not blame that squirrel, or my older brother.*) A little girl full of fighting spirit for the days ahead got too rowdy, too close.

- But you don't need a second appendix. No one does.

10. If you look here on the muscle of the inner thigh, the endometriosis scarring crawls all the way up and over the uterus in question. It was diagnosed through the absence of other diseases alone. The cure of birth control was not helpful for this issue as the pain remained, the chest swelled, and the eyes perceived numerous spiders floating through the air. Exercise, unfortunately, has held it in stasis.

- *I cherish each step taken without bone deep pain.*

In short: Dude, you don't want my organs. Let me off the list.

Warm Regards,
The Body & The Will

P.S. They may not be considered "good enough" for the momentous task of saving another's life, but they've kept me going through all ten complications. I want to keep living, now, in a way that may have seemed distant when I was 18 and getting my license the first time. When you renew my license it will have the same crooked bow smile and half-dyed hair from back then. Knowing what I know now, I want to take it back. I'm going to go forward knowing all of me intends to keep living. ***I want my organs.***

☞ | ☺ | Narrow | Size | **Bold** | *Italics* | Underline | Text Color | Align | Lists

Send | Attach Files | 🔗 Insert Link | Insert Image | Insert Signature

my mama yours
grant leigh

Occidental College – Los Angeles, CA



i decided to go to the park today

karson doxey

ANNA & I WALK across a bridge & we feel our pale skins soaking in the daylight & we stop to watch the water beneath it swim blissfully & I try imagining every animal or insect that has slurped & sipped & swam & swallowed within this wild stream & I wonder if any other person who has also stopped in this exact spot was washed over by the blue tranquility & if they too grabbed their phone from their back pocket to record it, then I close my eyes, dreaming of my body lying in the aquatic, becoming enclosed by overgrown greens & cobblestones, amidst the blue lilies & algae that brush against my skin & it feels as though I'm Odette & I desire to stay a swan & I think *this has to be the paradise that my grandmother's Jehovah's Witness Bible group talks about*, but now Anna & I sit in a coffee shop with headphones smothering our ears—our favorite artists are Mitski, Stevie, Lana & our cars linger with our raspy voices from lyrics that we let dwell in our hearts—Anna ordered us iced lattes with Irish Cream & strawberry syrup & it's become a favorite too, something that I ordered our first time visiting this place, back when the Earth had rolled into the melancholic fall, where oak & maple trees are swept away by Mother's breath & the Sun slumbers early, when the rush of raw air doesn't drop until November for Texas—the sky is painted with grey, while the white clouds are drenched with woe—I remember the barista's confusion as the words Irish Cream & strawberry syrup swirled together & it probably plunged into his ear & overwhelmed his canal & flooded his brain before telling me that I wouldn't like it, then my face twisted, so he told me he could make a sample for me & I watched as he swished the liquid into a small cup & I took it like a shot of Tito's, which slid down my throat like ice, the bitterness hit my tongue, before becoming washed away by the sweetness of the strawberry & I thought *there must be something poetic inside this cup*, but now Earth is rousing into spring; it plants us into the ground, rebirthing our bones as green runs back up to the surface & the sky is returning with Mother's baby, Blue, & the Sun is returning to its favorite planet & another returning idea: sometimes I convince myself that my hair is tinted with brown, leaving only streaks of blonde that once inhabited my head, but this idea quickly evaporates when the Sun beams down, electrifying every streak of my hair back to gold & I'm no longer able to (*truthfully*) persuade myself of this thought, & as I watch the stream it reminds me of last night, when a storm soaked my apartment & the sky was vexed—it whirled all the birds and trees together in a scare—striking the ground with warning & it pounded against my windows & trembled within my limbs, as if it were threatening me personally, like something you'd read from a 19th century Gothic novel & when it awoke me several times, I hid my face beneath my pink comforter, hoping for camouflage & concealment from the wrath outside, but then the morning after (this morning), I was welcomed by the Sun again & it illuminated my room & spun me around with joy & so I decided to go to the park today, where Anna & I watched the blue swim beneath us while we peered over a bridge.



for someone who has never been in love

ryleigh mccoey

For someone who has never been in Love,

I am very good at making everything about Love. I worship it like a deity, I dissect it like a specimen, I spin it around in my head—a mental microwave—I pick up the rock of Love and look underneath to watch all the little Love-bugs scurry away and back into the dirt. I whine for Love like a dog being denied a piece of chocolate—like maybe I wasn't born with a system that could metabolize it, and the universe knows this, so it keeps it just out of my reach.

For someone who has never been in Love,

All my favorite stories are soulmate stories: tales of red thread and a certain ineffability. I've cut my teeth on characters' confessions, built my idea of a healthy relationship on the backs of fictional ones. I imagine that when it hits me, I will know it: it will be grand, rain-soaked, everlasting. I've spent every year since the third grade connecting the dots of Love, wanting-reviling-needing-fearing a soulmate or the idea of one, all while holding on to the imaginary moral superiority of being alone on purpose, like it's a skill I'm excelling at.
(You can't break my heart if you can't reach it!) (You can't fire me, I quit!)

For someone who has never been in Love—

—what happens when you've never been in Love?

As it turns out, it comes spilling out of you anyway. I've never been in Love in a marketable way, but I keep falling in love with strangers on the street. It's not romance, not capital-L *Love*, but I think it comes from the same place. It wells up, crashes over me, a wave of something like wonder or unbearable fondness. On the days when I stay quiet, keep my mouth shut, I can hear it better. My other senses are heightened. My eyes are open. I see.

I fall in love with the way she clips her hair up, dark coils escaping where they can; with the way he laughs hawkishly at something on the phone that I can't hear, will never hear; the glimpse of chipped purple polish as they talk with their hands; the way her socks match her shirt; the color-coded notes written neatly in dry-erase marker and abandoned; the maple leaf someone used as a bookmark.

I fall in love with the reminders that these people have lives outside of mine, and it's not the type of love they have a holiday for, but it's the love of a child being told she's allowed to have Cinnamon Toast Crunch for dinner—you can *do* that? It's new every time, a discovery, a Subversion.

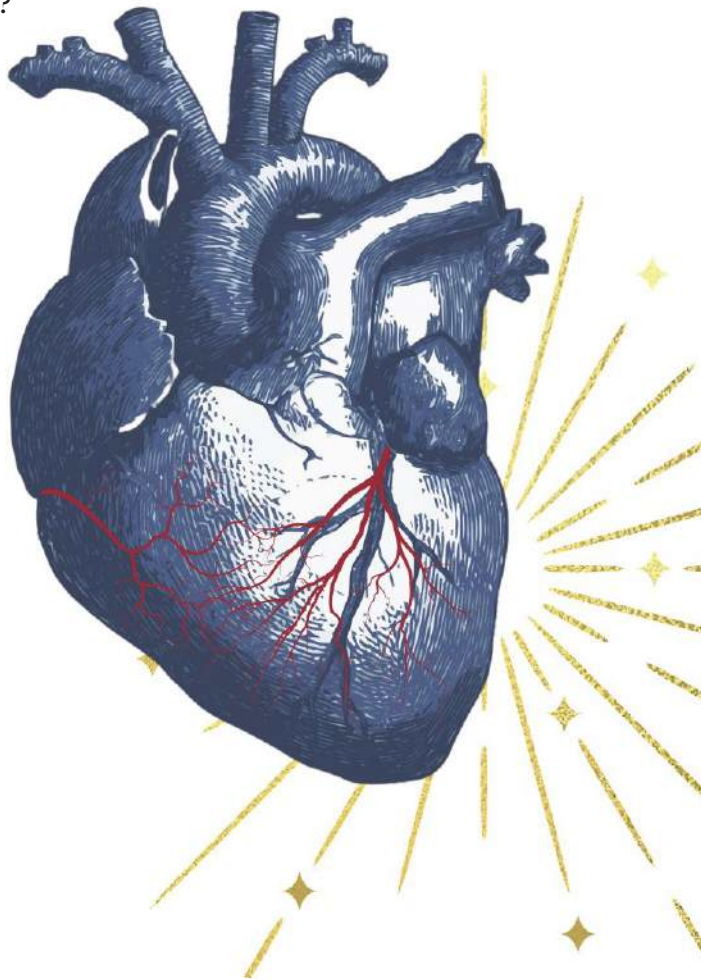
If I stay quiet long enough, I start to become more heart than human. I keep quiet and keep falling and then the levees are breaking—someone holds the door open for me and instead of *thank you*, I almost say, *I love you*.

the purpose of the heart (to beat; to love)

paige young

There is not—will never be—enough proof of the gods’
living love, our human creation thought to be impossible.
It was forged in the hands that I once got to hold. Your blood
is made of love, my darling, for that is what you are.

My sullied carnage barely beats through me anymore.
Fine threads of gold (that have puppeteered me through these veins)
now knot and block the part of me worthy of death. There is a glow
at the thin skin of your wrists. My corruption is a contaminant.
In the quiet, though, there is a miraculous, simultaneous beat of hearts
between your dirtied hands and my septic gash. A strong belief
that after bruising purgatory, there is something else for us.
There is more than eternity alone.
Proof is not the word, but did gods need proof?
Perhaps we are less proof and more reason.



sweetened agony

emma fleckenstein

I savour traces of your name once more,
The monosyllabic prayer of want.
In deep devotion, I must now implore
That you return to me, or cease this haunt.
Your sugared memory invites recall:
The violet blooms across my tender neck,
All heights of bliss and grief that did befall,
In losing you, I crumbled into wreck!
The void you leave behind consumes my mind,
The space bereft now of your kindest heart—
No substitution for that joy I'd find,
Other mirth dulls before chancing to start.
 No heart beside could bear itself so true,
 In sweetened agony, I wait for you!

eyes like pisces

emma nielson



monterosso, puoi insegnarmi come essere?

monterosso, can you teach me how to be?

lexie glenn

I've seen this place in the movies—
lemon trees stretching through animated sky
their red flowers as cherries on top.

Hills greener than I've ever seen
spill onto sunrise reveries below.
No summer cicadas sing in this land, no;

this place is still in time and space.
I study the habits of the waves
because they never fail to meet the shore.

You walk through an alleyway
as the light leaks through the trees,
framing the perfect photo.

Your future husband will surely be jealous
that I saw you in this light.
Apollo kisses our cheeks
alight with the sparks of two years gone.

Missed calls from my mother, but
Salud again, orange bitters bubbling a song.
Your dad is in the hospital again, but
Ciao, come paghiamo? (they don't understand)
I'll never feel the same again, but
Dive in, get your hair wet.

You aren't sure if he'll be at your graduation, but
"You can't wear those sneakers to the club."
Head in my hands, this isn't how it's supposed to go, but
Lemon bliss fades onto my tongue

I'll never forget what a Brazilian couple said to us:
"The birds sing the same song in my country as they do here."
Silent remedies hide in eight eyes.
I know there's wisdom in this place.
I would sift a beach of sand to find it

hang up

alex briggs



YESTERDAY, my mom called, and I hung up halfway through her story. She was talking about how this girl on my high school volleyball team, now a woman married to the guy she was seeing way back when I knew her, was moving back to town. All of a sudden I found myself looking down at my phone's floral wallpaper. My thumb moved before I even knew it. I don't know why. I didn't have any reason to do it. Of course, I gave her a reason about twenty minutes later when I called her back. I said that Landon threw up, and, in my surprise, I accidentally hit the end call button.

"Oh, poor booger!" she said, and I could hear her stop her kitchen drawer rummaging for a second. "Well, now. I won't hold you up."

"Yeah, I better—"

"Yes, yes. Tell him I hope he gets well soon!"

"I will. Love you, mom."

"Love you bunches, baby. Bye-bye, now."

"Bye."

"Bye-bye."

After I hung up the second time, I sat there on the sofa for a minute alone in the silence, wondering if it was a good idea to go into Landon's room and tell him what I'd just done. Not for security really, although maybe that was part of it. Just out of principle. I had promised Landon when he was about three years old that, just like I expected him to be honest with me, I would be honest with him. About everything. So far I've been pretty consistent. He knows Santa Claus and the Tooth Fairy aren't real, grandpa is dead, that the right word is *penis*, and his father is in a place called Miami.

So I was thinking, should I go into his room, sit down on one of the colored dots on his little rug where he's busy punching plastic trains together, tap on his shoulder until he looks up at me, and tell him? *Mommy lied to Grandma just now. I told her you were sick even though that's not true, and that was wrong.*

I'm sorry? Should I apologize to him? What if he asks me if I'm going to call Grandma back and confess myself? Well, he wouldn't say 'confess.' He'd say, 'use your brave words' because that's what I say to him when he tries to get away with a lie. 'Landon,' I say, cocking my head a little, putting a question in my voice but never raising it like my parents did. 'Landon, can you use your brave words?' And Landon, sweet boy, has always stuck his hands into his

pockets or covered his mouth and said, 'Yes. I can be brave.'

I think it was the idea of calling my mom for the third time that day just to say, "Mom, I can be brave" that made me decide not to tell Landon about any of it. Because to call her and say that would be a definite lie.

Landon is five years old. He's a February baby because I had sex nine months before (which Landon doesn't know yet since he simply hasn't asked me in those terms) on Jason's birthday. Jason is Landon's father; he *was* my boyfriend of three years. Once he tried to propose, but I turned him down because I don't believe in marriage anymore. When I delivered Landon, he was there. When I asked what he thought about the name 'Landon' instead of perpetually calling him *Junior* or *Punk* like we had throughout the pregnancy, Jason went pale. He got this look of dread in his eyes, and, in hindsight, I think that's probably when he decided he wasn't going to stick around for very much longer. He waited, graciously, until I was moved into the new apartment before informing me he would not be there to contribute his half of the rent—his half of the parenthood either—and off he went back to Miami where his sister lives.

My mother wasn't happy, but she had too much love to write me and Landon off. You know, the day I told her I was pregnant, she sat me down and had a big talk about commitment and responsibility. And I, sitting at the kitchen table, looked up from the wooden slats on the wall above the stove where she hangs her painted spoons. I said, "Mom. You don't have to worry. I'm keeping the baby."

And she, standing with her hip against the grey countertop speckled with what we now both call baby-puke green, said, "Of course you are. I'm talking about marriage. He's going to marry you, isn't he?"

But after Landon was born and I told her about Jason, she was the one sitting down. She was on my short, brown sofa in that first apartment, and I was standing, leaning against the TV. She had Landon sleeping on her thighs, pressed together like both halves of a hotdog bun. All she did was nod at me, smooth his strawberry blonde hair, and murmur, "It'll be alright. We can handle one little booger."

My dad didn't get an opinion on the

situation. Even if Dad was still alive, I'm sure he would have died the first time I brought Jason home. Jason is—*was*, maybe. I've no idea—a mechanic and not the kind my dad knew back in his 1970s daydreams. Those guys, tweaking all their station wagons and big old cop cars, wearing oily, white flannels with wide collars and sleeves rolled up to their elbows. No, Jason was the kind who worked shirtless to show off his big, black sleeves. Dragons and tigers and Chinese characters and one little double heart on his wrist that he said was for *Nickie and Junior*, though I called them Nickie and *Lacey's* hearts for the longest time before we knew the gender. I loved those stupid tattoos. I used to sit there tracing the outlines with my fingers until he'd finally tell me to lay off. *Babe*, he'd say, *you keep touching 'em, you're gonna make the ink fade faster. Why don't you just go get your own?*

That was brave. Getting a tattoo, I mean. It was brave of me to walk into the shop, hand in hand with Jason, and keep a straight face while looking at all the autographed guitars and graffiti art on the walls, breathing in the deep scent of rubber and blood and cinnamon altogether. The girl at the front was lighting a candle when we walked in. She had this pinstriping up her neck like a hot rod, I thought. I almost said it to her. "Very cool. You look like a hot rod." But I knew Jason would have laughed, and I always got that funny flip in my stomach when his nose wrinkled and his dark eyes squinted. It was the look he wore when I donned a backless, red dress to dinner.

Same look he wore when he started a fight in the parking lot of our favorite bar.

Sorry. That makes him sound like a criminal. He wasn't. And it wasn't that thing either where the fragile, battered woman says, "He just gets angry sometimes" because I've seen that, and, believe me, we weren't it.

Whatever. It was brave of me to go and get my first and only tattoo. It's on my left bicep. I wear tank tops in the summer to show it off and all the moms from Landon's kindergarten ask me questions. It's a half-butterfly, half-human design I drew back in art school, sort of styled after Basquiat. I'm no Basquiat, but my tattoo artist said it was *wicked*, and she's the reason I decided to finally get a nose ring—not a septum like hers, just a small bead on the side. That was brave too.

Giving birth was really brave. I kept thinking in between contractions how I totally could have gone for the wrist placement like Jason's if only he hadn't talked me into the bicep because *nothing* was worse than this.

But I know bravery isn't just doing something painful. That's a part of it, sure, but it's got to be a whole lot more. If it was just that, I'd have called my mom back yesterday and confessed.

—
Today, I went to the grocery store when I got off work before I picked up Landon from kindergarten. I had to spend all this time looking for the right brand of chicken nuggets because Landon won't eat anything else. I thought I might be out of luck, just surfing the endless aisles of frozen foods with my squeaky shopping cart, still in my pencil skirt and flats. I don't believe in heels anymore.

Can a child starve even if he technically has access to food? These are the kinds of questions I start asking myself when I think about Landon at the dinner table, pushing his plate away, rolling around in his seat, t-shirt folding into his sweaty neck, screaming and crying and finally quieting for the promise of one of my Good Listener rewards. And all that fuss just because the chicken nuggets are wrong. They look the same. To my tongue, they taste the same, but I think the texture's off. I try to be respectful about that because if there's one thing everybody knows a parent is capable of, it's instilling eating disorders. My dad sure did. I can remember standing there with my backpack on, ready to run out the door to catch the bus, and he'd say, "You need to eat breakfast. Your pants are going to fall off your butt, sugar." And Mom would laugh, knowing full well she taught me how to stuff my bra, tear tracks flecked with bits of black mascara still drying on my face.

I think I spent several years looking for somebody who'd compliment my body for what it was, and I know it isn't very feminist of me to admit, but I sort of miss the looks guys used to give me in clubs and bars, those few guys who are really into skinny girls. Obviously, I'm thinking about Jason. We met at the bar. It was kind of like a movie. *All I Wanna Do* came on right as I walked up to the bartender to get me and my girl friend a couple shots. While I waited, he turned to me right in time and recited the opening bit. He said, "All I want to do is have a little fun before I die."

It's a brave first line, so I said, "Oh, yeah? Are you a big Sheryl Crow fan?" because I wasn't drunk yet, but he was, so he giggled—he was a giggler—and rolled his eyes. "So what if I am?"

"So what if you are?" He was wearing a black muscle shirt which I thought was kind of tacky at the time and then really sexy about

a week later. His hair was thick and brown, tucked behind his ears with two thorny, metal rings hanging from each lobe, and he was grinning. His eyes were so green.

"Can I buy you a drink?" His head lolled, and I didn't know yet that that was a sober habit too.

"I just ordered one," I said and leaned on the bar a little more so he could properly appreciate how long my legs looked in my five-inch heels.

He appreciated. His slow eyes were still parading back up to my face when he swallowed hard and said, "Well, can I buy you another one?"

You know, he used to hook his fingers in my pant loops. He'd just walk around like that. Touching me all the time. I remember getting so nervous when I started getting bigger with Landon. But he said all the right things, that I was glowing, and I think he actually meant it. He used to talk about going on trips together as a family when Landon got to be a little older. We were all going to lounge around his favorite beaches from back home. *I'll show junior how to beat up all the guys leering at his hot mom. He'll need tons of practice for all the times I'm not around. Call it father-son bonding.*

He was always kind of like that. Making comments that were sort of Old World. But maybe that's just all men. My dad, of course, was worse about that. I hate to even think of the things he would have said to Landon. I definitely would have cut him out of our life by now, and where would that have gotten me? Mom would have tried to reach out to me when she could, but she would have chosen him in the end. And, frankly, I don't know how I could have handled Landon's infancy if she hadn't dropped in from week to week to watch him while I worked overtime or went to the grocery store.

I've never told anyone before but sometimes, back in those days, I would go to the store but only so I could slip into a grimy, gray bathroom stall and change into my favorite dress. Black and short with red tassels. Then, I'd head out to the bar where I'd just watch the drunk men mull around. I'm still sick from all those shirley temples.

That felt brave. Mom could have smelled the bar on me, even though I came home in my normal clothes. She could have easily heard the lie in my voice when I said I had to go to three different stores to find the right chicken nuggets for the 'little booger,' as she calls him no matter how much I tell her not to. If bravery isn't doing painful things, is it just doing the

outrageous things you want to do without fearing the consequences?

If that's what bravery is, then I guess I was brave to hang up on her yesterday. I scoured the supermarket until I found the right chicken nugget brand. It was in the wrong section, and there was only one left. It's a purple box with fat, cartoonish lettering, and I have never had the heart to look very hard at the shrunken ingredients label on the back. I guess that's pretty terrible. Staring at the box, holding the freezer door open with my hip, I let the cold air out into the aisle. The voices around me seemed to grow very loud, so I just stood there, wondering how many more years I have with Landon before he starts hiding things from me. And how many more years before he finally gets away with it?

Perhaps I'm just not fit to talk about bravery. I think about this as I drive up to Landon's kindergarten. It was really hard to find one with programs that lined up with my work schedule, and I couldn't ask my mom for her help scouting one out because she always recommended Christian kindergartens even though she knows I don't believe in God anymore. She's always doing stuff like that. Teaching Landon Bible stories behind my back and telling him things that start with *when we get to Heaven*, which I just find too archaic these days to even reason with. Whenever she does that, I wait until she leaves. Then, I tell Landon that what she said is all just make believe, and I make sure to have him repeat it back to me before he goes off to play in his room or fiddle around with his little tablet in its green, rubber case. I caved and bought it for him last Christmas.

Is bravery standing up for what you think is right? The ability to resist caving? If so, all of the other moms at Landon's kindergarten have nerves of steel. The few times I've been able to arrange playdates for Landon, at the playground or the pool or something, Landon winds up having fun, but—and maybe this isn't fair to Landon to even say—he hesitates more than the other kids. I don't think he's being bullied. If anything, the girls and boys in his class try to involve him. But sometimes, from afar, I see him standing there while they talk, arms crossed, frowning. Sometimes, he throws his hands up and the other kids go wide-eyed for a second, and I know he just had another meltdown.

When that happens, I usually let it work itself out, but the other moms give me this look like their kid has never had a meltdown before,

like they don't even know what it is. But I know their kids have had meltdowns, probably just as much as Landon does. I know that, if their kids haven't, it's just because they whack them on the butt, scream at them, give all the nasty things they grew up getting.

But at least they never cave. At least, their kids don't have to be pulled aside sometimes, crying and kicking, while their moms say, "Can you use your feeling words?" over and over until they get a single sobbed, "I wanna go home."

I'm walking up to the front of the school now, staring out at the sea of minivans, at the gathering of mothers in grey cardigans and designer jeans, new jogging sets with black sunglasses on top of platinum blonde waves. And there's me in my button-up blouse, name tag still attached. Working at a bank is bad enough. Being *dressed* like I work at a bank in front of all these moms is worse.

"Nickie, do you work?" the moms like to ask at the jungle gyms and pools while our kids run around on their playdates. *Do you work?* Like it's a fun choice I've made to be a career woman.

"Yes, I'm a bank teller," I say, nodding at them as they stare out blankly at the children. Of course, it's sort of an unavoidable discussion because they're always having to accommodate my busy schedule.

"Oh, wow." And then they glance at me for just a second, flashing a mouth of straight, white teeth. "How's that?"

I lie. *It's fine.* Sometimes, I stretch. *It's good!*

Last time this topic came up with one of the moms, a PTA member, she got all excited when I said it. "Well, you know," she said, suddenly rifling through her big purse. She pulled out a folder with a flyer in it and stuck it in my hands before I could protest. "There's going to be a Career Day next Thursday, and the little girls always love it when a *mother* comes in to present." She told me more about the schedule, pointing out each word on the sheet with a large, round finger, her chunky bracelets jingling. I just sat there staring down at the colorful flyer: cartoonish lettering on the top like a banner, silly illustrations of children in different work uniforms lining the sides, the rest of the information in thin, red lettering down the page like an urgent memo. *Who is this for? Children? Their moms? Definitely not dads.*

Out of nowhere, I got this vivid image in my head of the PTA member beside me in her flowy, leopard-print mumu, grabbing her doctor-policeman-financier husband by the elbow and dragging him kicking and

screaming out the door. Her bracelets would be clinking and her huge breasts would be heaving with each exhausted breath. And all the while her little Tommy or Susan—I forget which one's hers—is just standing there, hands behind their back and nose up high like a tiny butler.

I laughed. She stopped talking and looked up at me. Nervous smile. "Sorry?" I caved and covered my mouth to stop laughing, then thought better of it. Let her see me laugh at her. "I appreciate the invitation, but I'm not going to be able to take a day off of work to come talk to the kids."

Her face went red. In fact, she sort of scoffed. "Well, it doesn't have to be you. That was just a suggestion. If Landon has anyone else in his life he'd like to present to the class? Almost all the other children are bringing somebody. Maybe your husband?" She got quieter but still said it, like we were spies. "Or boyfriend?"

I furrowed my eyebrows and cocked my head, squinting my eyes in a way that, altogether, probably made me look a little like Jason. I said as loud as I could without outdoing the children's half-screaming, half-singing, "I don't have a husband or a boyfriend. And even if I did, you must be aware that someone in my position might have to choose between sending their boyfriend to come talk to kindergarteners and buying that week's groceries?"

A couple of other moms on our blue playground bench looked over in surprise. The PTA mom was staring at me in shock, red lips hanging open a little before she quickly gave her apology and clarification just as loudly as I'd given my two cents.

That was brave. That was being morally unflinching, wasn't it? The problem is that, the whole time I was saying it, my hand was fist and unfist, shaking out of her view. For some reason, I had been thinking about the fight in the bar parking lot. The noise Jason's fist made when it collided with that guy's stomach and then his face. The way his voice raised to a shriek as I pulled him back to the car and drove us out of there. The other woman leaving her bloody boyfriend behind to come dent up the trunk of my car and chase us a couple feet while we sped away. I had been thinking about how much I wanted to push that PTA lady down into the wood chips and give her the kind of old-fashioned schoolyard beating I never had enough reason to give back when I was in school.

But I'd been too scared.

Walking up to the kindergarten pick-up with the rest of these moms, wearing their curated displays—she's nonchalant, she's fun-

loving, she's a homemaker—I realize that I should stop thinking bravery is being morally unflinching because that word 'morally' is too charged. My mother has never called what I want 'moral.' My father certainly wouldn't if he were here. No, right now, I want bravery to mean that mixture of pain and outrageous fun that Jason captured. That I used to capture when I was with him.

That girl would have dropped everything to *make sure* she was wearing a leather jacket and a strappy, club dress to morning drop-off, just to catch the moms staring. She would have gone to Career Day just to introduce herself to their husbands and show off her skinny waist and her long legs. "Hi, I'm Nickie." She would purr it. "I went to art school," she would say and anything else that would make them curious enough to send her a barroom grin in front of their cardigan, Etsy-sidegig housewives. Or maybe she would have just brought her boyfriend to Career Day and let all the sons flock to him and all the daughters giggle because they don't know yet what it feels like to meet a man like him.

Then I see Landon come bounding out of the double doors with his class and his kindergarten teacher. The wind is in my ears and swaying through my loose, red ponytail. I am not wearing one of those old dresses in the back of my closet. I am not flirting with one of his classmates' fathers. I am his single mother—*I'm a mother. What am I thinking?*—and my son is standing there. He's shuffling in his little, blue tennis shoes and trying his best to wait patiently for his teacher to dismiss him so he can come bounding over to me, his oversized, empty backpack bouncing against the back of his dinosaur shorts. And he'll call me Mommy and tell me all the things he did that day like it's all that matters in the world.

Why can't it be? Why does he have to trudge over to his mom after Career Day, eyes down, and ask her on the quiet car ride home where *her* husband is? Why do I have to fear that Landon will ask me someday if I still love Jason? If he will ask me to use my brave words to do it? Why do I have to feel that pain when I stare at Landon as his teacher calls the moms up, and instead I hear his father's voice, talking about fixing cars with his son, playing on the beach as a family, holding his Junior? This fear. I am filled with such fear walking up to take Landon's hand and lead him out to the car, as if the nurses are handing him to me for the first time.

He waves at me, big cheesy grin on his face, and he lolls his head to the side to see me

better around his teacher. Before I get up to the front of the line, I have the sudden urge to call my mom again. I want to wait until I hear her stop rifling through a drawer or talking about someone she wishes was her daughter. I want to bombard her with these questions, fully intending to hang up before she tries to give me one of her canned answers.

I will ask her how I'm supposed to explain a world like ours to a five year old. How do I discuss the importance of school and work, even though they're hard? How do I express that his Grandma treats him differently than she treated me? Or the way time falls around you faster and faster the older you get, but it's just what scientists call 'relative'? When do I address the Irish Potato famine, the French Revolution, the Taliban? How do I admit that sometimes I still think it's nice to dream of Heaven and God's definite answers? How do I make the argument that animals and people are intrinsically valuable, even if they can't speak your language? And what really is speech and art and love? What is bullying? What is gossip? How do I define 'deadbeat' without putting that word in his precious head? Is that lying if I shield him from that word? When he's fifteen, fourteen, screaming that word at the wall, screaming, 'My dad is a deadbeat,' is it my responsibility as his mother—my right as his mother—to tell him to shut up?

pecan leaves

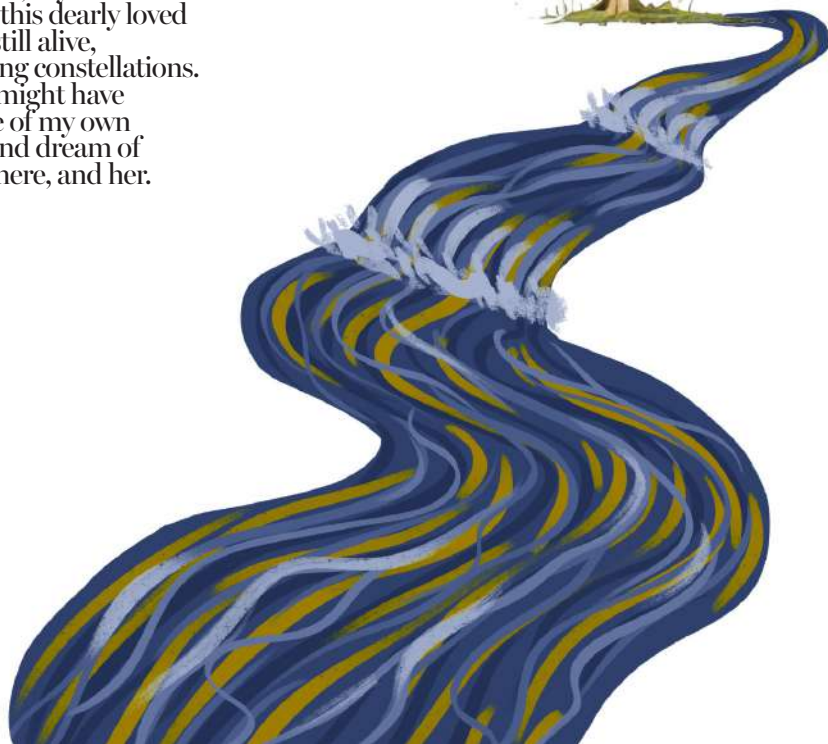
amelia abney

I look into the long lacy leaves
That flow like water from the heights
Of the pecan tree and dapple the
Central Texas sunlight into something sweet.
When the south wind caresses, I see them
Dance like arboreal ballerinas, or twinkling stars,
Or just pecan leaves— the most lovely
Things in this backyard world.

Many a time I have slipped through the
Sliding door and found a bough
Bending to embrace me, as I
Escaped the blasting news, and the
Things I saw slowly disappearing
From the woman who loved the tree as much as I.
Now she herself is disappearing, leaving
Us like a delicate pecan hull with nothing inside.

It is my last summertime escape here;
I feel it surely as the bark under
My fingertips that it is time. I will
Be back, but with no time for dozing
And dreaming into a tight-bound book
The color of leaf-shadow. My heart balks
In dread of the day it is truly over and gone.

The magic is fading. The only thing
Which will not dissipate is the God-woven
Green lace of my tree, my confidant. She
Is the only thing in this dearly loved
Place that is really still alive,
All rustling, fluttering constellations.
Perhaps one day, I might have
A dancing, lacy tree of my own
Where I can doze and dream of
Being sixteen, and here, and her.



aidan acevedo
after class



entry;exit

amirah khan

The summer wind that swept in from the window tickled the back of my throat,
tangling itself with the words I couldn't quite taste.

In that small sun-kissed space,
where I watched from a quiet corner,
you gathered all of the memories I had of love,
and replaced them with your coming.

You didn't mind the dust of the windowsill
that collected on your elbow's sleeve.
The view of the world outside entranced you—
a green canvas burning with soft golden hues.

The wind ran its fingers through your hair,
gently scattering it.
If only you knew how many times
I've imagined doing the same.

Would you have looked at me
the same way you gazed at the sky
if I, too, could hold the art
of stars and raindrops on my skin?

Could I have occupied a corner of your thoughts
if the room wasn't filled with blooming colors
that so brilliantly outshine my own?

My love—
I will never be able to call you that
outside the veil of my own illusions.

The whispers of affection tied to your memory will forever remind me,
that although I was never given the key,

I am glad to have passed by your doorway.



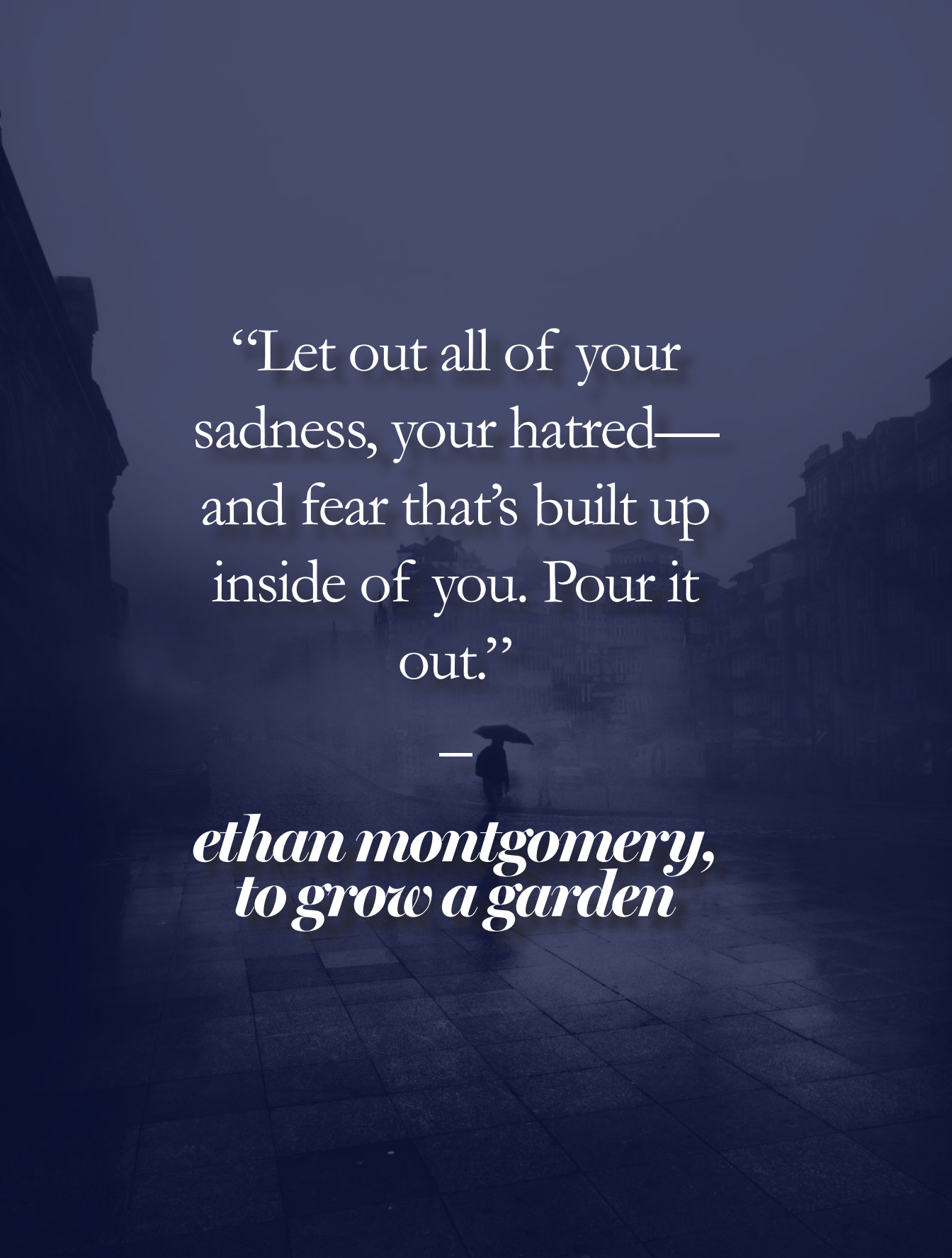


ACT

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“Let out all of your
sadness, your hatred—
and fear that’s built up
inside of you. Pour it
out.”

—

*ethan montgomery,
to grow a garden*

bedroom theophany

emma fleckenstein

You wind your way up the stairs, pilgrimage
to the sacred amber light emanating from my bedside lamp.
I lay out the sacrament: my heart, wet and writhing, at the altar.
Your hands find home upon my waist, I find fulfilment
in the manna of your kiss. The silvered savior hangs
from the chain around your neck, and his body invades
the chapel of our lips—saliva transubstantiates to salvation.
Divinity embodies itself in these gentle fingers, shoulderblades,
and humbled eyes; the pillared fire relentlessly warms
the deepest fibres of my form. Your love redeems the filth
in me; the cross of kisses lain upon my face—
forehead, chin, cheek, cheek and nose—
gives absolution from any weight I held before.



erotica
anna marucci

to grow a garden

ethan montgomery



THE CHAINS

clinked together like a mocking array of laughter. Sven stood on a wooden block, the sun burning the back of his neck through his long, blonde hair. Wrists bound together, coarse rope dug deep into his skin. The auctioneer announced to the crowd—

“This man is Sven! Son of Astrid the Great! Seasoned veteran of the great Morian and Aesterian Two Hundred and Fifty Year War! Better yet—only seventeen years old!” Murmurs rippled throughout the crowd.

“Aesterian warrior?” someone spat. “Should’ve hung the bastard after he lost!” Regardless of their scoffs and mockery, dozens of hands lifted at once, all eager to bid on him. Sven glanced at the sky. That same sky was once adorned by the Aesterian Army’s banners of white and gold. Now it stood barren, watching him rot. Sven gritted his teeth, turning his eyes to the ground. The auctioneer continued.

“Former Captain of the Aesterian Vanguard, captured in the capital of Moria!” *Oohs* and *ahhs* filled the crowd. “He’s strong, and loyal when broken!” Laughter and cheers filled the air. Sven’s fists clenched, his teeth grinding at the thought of being a slave. How humiliating to be brought so low. The auctioneer excitedly pointed towards Sven.

“And now, the price you have all been waiting for...” he said, “1,000 crowns!” The crowd again erupted into chaos, complaints, and taunting.

“He ain’t worth the mud on my boots!” one of the men sneered. “We ain’t got that kind of money round here! We’re farmers!”

“Hell yeah he is!” another man interjected, “He’s Captain of the Vanguard!” The crowd bickered, and hands went down one by one. In the end, only one remained raised. An old elf approached the auction block and handed a hefty bag of crowns to the auctioneer. His gaze rose to meet Sven’s. Not a gaze of pity, nor disgust. Just intrigue. Sven towered over the elf, yet kept his eyes on the ground beneath his feet. The elf broke the silence.

“Sven, I’m Leif.” The elf paused, as if expecting a response. When none came, he continued with a simple command. “Come.” Sven had no choice, so he followed the elf, chains clinking against one another. The noise

made his head throb.

No words were exchanged during the wagon ride to the master’s home, the silence filled instead by the sound of the wooden wheels slamming against the poorly paved road of the city outskirts. Sven saw decrepit huts, beggars, and traders calling halfheartedly; these were his people... or they had been. They didn’t spare him so much as a glance. Beyond the city, the land opened into a luscious display of plains and mountains. Tall grass swayed beneath trees that stood hundreds of feet tall, and far ahead, the silhouette of the mountains stabbed the sky. Leif hummed a soft melody to himself. Sven didn’t understand the language.

“Where are you taking me?” Sven said, breaking the silence.

“Home,” Leif said simply.

“Home?” Sven echoed. “Have you bought yourself labor or company?”

“Neither,” Leif said, his eyes fixed ahead. “You’ll come to understand. Worry not, we’ll eat dinner first thing.” This prompted a nervous chuckle from Sven.

“Not hungry—” Sven’s stomach growled, betraying him. A scowl developed across his face as he gripped the ropes that bound him. Leif’s eyes remained on the road ahead, pointing to a bag behind him.

“There’s bread and dried meat. Eat as much as you’d like.” Sven remained motionless, his gaze fixed upon the back of Leif’s neck. He glanced around the wagon, searching. Next to the bag of food laid a dagger with a glimmer emanating off its clean blade. Sven inched towards the dagger, each small movement more eager than the last.

“Take the dagger if it makes you feel safe,” said Leif. Sven stilled, too stunned to speak or move. Damn elves and their giant ears. “If I meant to kill you,” Leif added, “you’d be serving dinner to Hades right now.” The words cut through Sven’s pride in an unfamiliar fashion.

“Just who are you?” Sven asked. Leif ignored the question, choosing to continue manning the front of the wagon in silence. Sven grabbed the dagger, and cut his binds, but made no move against the elf.

The pair rode late into the night. A bright display of stars painted the sky. Their environment slowly lost its bustling fauna, leaving only chirps from the occasional cricket

to replace its lost vitality. Sven sighed; it'd been months since the war ended. Since he had a purpose for living. His eyes rose, looking at Leif's back. Had he truly fallen this low? Low enough that an old elf could sense his movements? Then the crickets fell quiet.

"Elf!" A group of bandits appeared before Sven could utter a warning. The band surrounded the carriage, weapons at the ready. Sven wielded the dagger, his arms raised in anticipation. A raised hand belonging to Leif stopped everyone in their tracks.

"Sven, put the dagger down," he said.

Sven laughed at the idea.

"What then? Let these scumbags have my head? To Hades with that!" There was a pause; no one moved. Leif gave a gruff sigh before clearing his throat.

"I suggest you leave, men," he said. "I have no desire to harm you."

The bandits exchanged bemused looks before bursting out in laughter, sounding more like dogs than humans.

"Ha! Watch out, boys!" one man cried out. "Knife-ear is gonna getcha!" More laughter. Leif stood, the carriage creaking underneath him. His lips began to move, producing a noise so low Sven couldn't make it out. Was it a prayer? A chant? Before Sven could surmise an answer, Leif's lips closed, his hands drifting outwards from one another before pausing. Leif inhaled deeply, filling his lungs, then clapped his hands together, producing a thundering boom. Sven immediately fell to his knees, fighting to stay conscious. His head hit the wagon stiffly. The sounds of the struggling bandits faded into a distant murmur as the wagon began to close in, swallowing him. In his last moments of lucidity, a soft voice called into the gathering darkness.

"Forgive me, Sven. It was the only way to avoid bloodshed," the voice echoed. His limbs refused to obey him, feeling heavier than steel. A cool breeze ran over his entire body as the edges of reality began to fade. Unable to resist, he fell into the darkness.

The world felt blurred, as if he had only closed his eyes for a moment, yet his body ached to his very bones. The straw beneath his head squeaked at the slightest movements; it stabbed his cheek. The smell of pastries and roasted meat filled his nose; his mouth watered. His eyes fought against the soft light, struggling to focus. Wooden pillars of a bed squeaked as his feet found the floor. Sven did not know this place. Standing, he examined his surroundings and found his way to the

door. Behind it laid an empty kitchen with a table of assorted meats, vegetables, fruits, pastries, and plenty of water to drink. Sven inched his way to the table, the inner walls of his mouth filling with saliva. He stood over the table, admiring the beautifully arranged meal, and wondered if this was Leif's doing.

"Eat." The words startled Sven such that his head thudded against the ceiling.

"Gods! You startled me, elf," he stuttered.

"Hmph. Eat," Leif replied. Sven needed no further encouragement; he sat down and devoured the food in front of him. He grabbed the meat with his bare hands, ripping into it like a dire wolf eating a troll carcass. Before Leif could so much as shake his head in dismay, Sven's tongue was already cleaning the plate.

"How many years did you fight in the war?" Leif questioned. Sven, tongue on plate, locked eyes with Leif before speaking.

"Ten years," he said bluntly. Leif's eyes widened.

"Since you were seven years old?"

"Yes," Sven said, adding, "I was trained from birth to be the best warrior of Aesteria. It was a duty...and the sole purpose for my existence." Leif's lips curled at the thought.

"I see. Well, now that you've eaten, come. Work starts today," he said, heading for the door.

"And if I refuse?" Sven retorted. Leif paused before turning around, a crescent smile plastered on his face. Sven's eyebrows arched, eyes widening in curious defiance. Leif turned without answer and left Sven in the now empty kitchen. Damn you, elf.

He stepped outside and the sunlight enveloped him in a brilliant display. His eyes narrowed, brimming with water.

As his eyes adjusted, he found himself tongue-tied. Sven stood on a large hill, teeming with long, luscious grass and flowers. In the far distance stood a vast mountain range, dense with moonwood trees that towered so high they pierced the cerulean horizon. A stream ran next to the house, producing a relaxing tune of water. Sven took a deep breath. He had never seen something this breathtaking. He took it all in, absorbing every sound and sight he could. The wind danced through the grass like it belonged there. His eyes eventually found Leif, standing next to a bountiful garden. There were briar berries, moonrocks, hearthbeet, starplum, as well as several plants he had no name for; foreign to his homeland. The garden was massive, spanning hundreds of feet, with rows upon rows hosting different

plants. His steps stopped just short of Leif, taking the scene in.

"Well, elf, you live in quite the area," said Sven. Leif said nothing, instead handing him a strange tool. Sven's head tilted.

"What's this for?"

"It's a hoe," Leif grunted. "Take it." The tool felt odd in his hands, so different from that of a sword or dagger. Leif's knees touched the grass, holding up a sapling. "It's Moonwood, the same plant that surrounds this very glade," said Leif. Sven looked intently at the plant. Its stem boasted a pale blue tint and a meager size that contrasts with its destiny.

"Moonwood..." Sven whispered to himself. He turned to the distant mountain, conquered by that very tree.

"Plant it here," Leif grunted, pointing to the ground.

Sven obeyed, his hands clumsily handling the delicate thing. After planting it, Sven grabbed the unfamiliar tool and began slamming it towards the ground. The earth was heavier than his sword, the ground more stubborn than any Morian breastplate. Leif placed a hand over Sven's.

"Hold it right here, then let the hoe guide your arms. Don't force it." His touch was firm but not harsh, grounding Sven to the rhythm of the land. Sven tried again, the hoe disrupting his balance, causing him to fail again. "You're too tense, Sven," Leif said. "Breathe. Trust the hoe's strength, you don't have to depend solely on your own." Sven's chest rose and fell. Slowly, his swings became smoother. Sweat dripped down his brow, yet he noticed the calm in Leif's movements, the patience in every step he took. By evening, the rows of soil were tilled neatly, the sapling standing in proud isolation. Sven wiped his hands on his dirtied pants and looked towards Leif.

"I... I don't understand. Why even take the time to prepare and plant a tree this big? Why plant it knowing you won't even get to see it grow past your own height before you die?" A chuckle escaped Leif's mouth.

"To plant a garden is to believe in tomorrow. War teaches you how to kill, Sven. Gardening teaches you how to live. Both are battles. Battles which require two very different types of strength." Sven considered the words as he joined Leif by the stream, watching the water ripple over smooth stones.

"And if I fail?" said Sven. Leif rested a hand on Sven's shoulder.

"Then you try again."

Sven stared at the hand on his shoulder, pride spreading through him in a way the

battlefield never brought him. For the first time since the war ended, he felt like he had... A purpose. Leif left Sven to continue tending to the garden, walking back up to the house. As darkness began to envelop the land, Sven looked up as a faint glimmer on the young Moonwood branch pried its way into view, captivating him as he stared back silently.

"Food!" Sven's head snapped to Leif. His body understood Leif's message before his brain did, sprinting towards the cottage. He was starving. He met Leif in the kitchen, seeing a table full of food, fruits, vegetables, and water. The two dined, the meal ending with Sven's tongue on his empty plate yet again.

"The food is good, elf," Sven said. "Who taught you how to cook?"

"My wife."

"She must be quite the cook then. Where is she?"

Leif's hand paused. The soup dripped off his spoon back into the bowl.

"One hundred years," he said softly. "And 15 days ago."

It took Sven a moment to understand. He blinked, clearing his throat. He shifted in his chair, the wooden floor creaking beneath him.

"Man, those moonwood trees sure are huge, huh?" The words clumsily stumbled out of his mouth in an attempt to fill the silence. "I was able to see their shimmer all the way from this side of the mountain range," he said, forcing a chuckle. Leif didn't speak, his spoon returning to his bowl for another bite. The clink of the spoon hitting the bowl made Sven's heart jump. The silence was eating away at him, causing him to blurt out the question he's been thinking of the entire day.

"Why did you buy me?"

Leif set down his spoon.

"It was the look on your face."

"What?"

"The look on your face," Leif repeated, more sternly this time. "I saw the look on your face and—" He paused. "I saw myself. That same empty husk I once was." Sven wanted to ask a million questions at once, but his lips remained sealed. Leif continued. "I was once a great warrior. Not unlike yourself, Sven. I fought in the same war long before you were born." Sven couldn't find the words; instead, studying Leif's body. He was a frail, hunch-backed man; old even by elven standards. How could he have fought in the war and not gotten killed? Leif kept talking. "Around a hundred years ago, my home was raided by Aesterian warriors. They killed my wife, my son, my

livestock, he whispered. "I wanted revenge on the men who killed them, so I joined the war effort," he said, his words barely escaping his mouth.

"How many did you kill?"

"It would be easier to count the blades of grass in a field."

Sven gulped. He struggled to believe he had been looking at a seasoned warrior all along, let alone one who had killed so many of his countrymen. The pair had no more words for each other, and the night ended in silence.

Months passed. Sven slowly became accustomed to the farming tools, though still lacked the practice of Leif. The two worked in the fields together all day, painfully toiling away each harvest. On the night of Sven's third month as Leif's slave, the two ate a large feast.

"Leif," Sven said, pausing, "why did you stop fighting in the war?" Leif stopped mid-chew, swallowing a large piece of meat. His fork hit the table, followed by his knife.

"Allow me to show you," he said, walking outside. Moonlight shone through the thin clouds in the sky, beams of light peaking through. "I found that revenge means nothing." The pair continued walking around the garden. "I killed the very men who took my family from this earth," said Leif, "yet I felt no better than before. So I gave it all up, moved to this quiet meadow," he paused. "And I began to grow." The pair stopped in front of the moonwood sapling. A slight breeze ran through the grass, sweeping through Sven's pants and sending chills throughout his body. He turned his gaze from Leif, looking towards the moonlit sky.

"I was raised to be a warrior, a great warrior," Sven whispered. The crickets' chirps pierced the silence between his words. "I was meant to protect my people. I failed. All I know is warfare, so without it, I have—" His words caught in his throat. "I am nothing." Leif joined Sven in his gaze towards the sky.

"Sven, the war is over." His words pierced Sven's aching heart.

"W-what?"

"The war is over," he repeated. "The war is over, Sven. It's been over. If war was all you knew, what does that leave you with now?" Sven's breath caught in his throat.

"Emptiness."

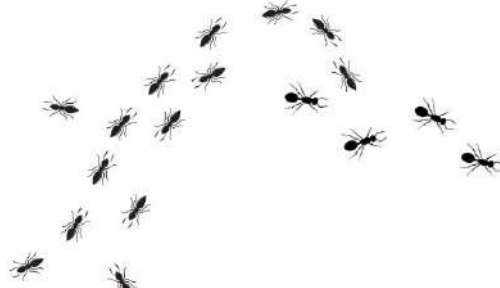
"If you're empty, you can fit anything inside of you. In fact, it's better to be empty if you want to be reborn." Leif said softly. "Become a true warrior, Sven, son of Astrid. Become reborn." Sven's head turned to face

Leif, whose eyes had been studying him. The pair stood inches away, silent.

"How can I be reborn?" he said. Leif stared silently before speaking.

"Let it all out." The wind picked up, blowing the hair out of Sven's eyes. A nearby owl began to who, the crickets chirped, and the nearby stream sang its fluid melody. "Let out all of your sadness, your hatred—and fear that's built up inside of you. Pour it out." Sven's fists clenched, and he released a short, shuddering breath. "That's the first step to becoming reborn." Sven's trembling knees hit the tilled soil beneath him, his breath unsteady as his body shook of its own accord. "I'll pick up your pieces, Sven," Leif said, facing the opposite of Sven.

"Le-e-e-if," Sven said, his lungs fighting to draw air. His fingers curled into the tilled soil, nails digging deep into the wet earth until it filled the creases of his hands. He smelled of sweat and dirt, the same familiar smell that clung to the battlefields of his youth, his past. Leif walked to the house, leaving Sven to be with the garden. Everything came rushing back to him. The lives he had taken, the childhood he had been robbed of, the smell of blood on his hands. The next sound to leave his mouth wasn't quite a sob, not yet at least. It was a soft, low, broken exhale that released all of the air from his lungs; the sound of something giving way inside his soul. His chest heaved, causing his shoulders to silently jerk and convulse. Tears followed, creating a hot stream down his face, around his nose, over his lips, and off his chin. He tried to fight it, tried to dam the river, but the flood came regardless. The soil absorbed his tears, making them disappear, like a mother wiping the tears off her child's face. His final tear dropped, and landed on the moonwood sapling he had planted those months prior. It hit the top, flowing all the way to the bottom. He was no longer on a hill. He was kneeling on the ashes of his past. The owl called him once more. The stream murmured next to him. The clouds dispersed. His eyes glanced upwards, meeting the moon's gaze. He no longer saw that sky once crowned by the Aesterian banners of white and gold; no, he saw a different sky. One enveloped by a canopy of moonwood.



la primavera

lexie glenn

Sandro Botticelli, circa 1480

Thaw your hearts, frozen with unsaid speeches
the waging winter war is over
ashes are absent from the fields
in fertile feeling, an array of flowers spring
go ahead, pick the weeds of your consciousness
and let the sun give birth to you

gaze your eyes upon me
see how my fingers are interlocked with my sisters:
barefoot, elegant, wild
I swear
the antidote is in our stretched-out arms

orange roses reside over our heads
like a halo, yet
our eyes are fixed elsewhere
in each other's eyes, yes
we have seen those nebulae
since we were young,
skipping rocks and school dances
silky spins at dusk
to think that those hands have braided my hair
embraced and sought the callouses on my skin
felt my bruises, purple and pulsing
I've jumped into ice-cold pools
head first, holding your hands
we were sick for days after

I would hold my breath for a few minutes
if it meant more oxygen for their lungs
to sing me songs as I lie on my bedroom floor
we match
in both hearts and dress
white clothing is easily spoiled, yes
but I wanted to look the same
to be considered an equal —
loose-laced and regal.

Take honor in knowing angels
on earth, they dance for you!

leaky brain syndrome

camille valencia

AT 17 I sit in the car with my dad as he explains my MRI to me. No degree but even he could tell something's not right, not normal. He delivered the news with the best bedside manner he could muster—*jita*, it looks like your brain's leaking out the right side of your skull?! He says it as if I didn't know, as if I hadn't been feeling the leak forever. From this my sister starts to call my affliction leaky brain syndrome, and it sticks.

When I am 16, I go to the eye doctor. She asks me if my eyes hurt at the end of the day—yes. Do you get headaches too? — yeah but just the everyday normal ones. The what? — y'know the ones you get throughout the day, they aren't too bad they're just the normal ones. It's not normal to be in pain every day, she says. She turns to my dad—take her to see a neurologist. But he doesn't. This must be normal.

By the time I'm 12 my legs are covered in round splotchy scars, central to my knees, from tripping and scraping my skin against the ground. Severing it off, leaving skin smeared on concrete, and a scar taking its space. My elbows show the same. I couldn't seem to find my balance.

When I am 8, I break my first bone, shockingly my first bone, my parents say. I am so clumsy I tumble instead of walk. A kid sat on my finger after we collided, going down one of those blow-up slides at birthday parties. The cousin of whoever's party it was couldn't wait his turn and decided to barrel down the slide when I was nearly at the bottom. Boom! My parents didn't believe me when I said I had hurt my finger. My dad will go on and on about how I'm always complaining about something hurting, how I must be exaggerating, until five hours later he sees my purple, sausagey finger fail to pull the car door shut.

During elementary, I go to the nurse around once a week to get Tylenol for my head. Right here. Here is where it hurts, pointing to the base of the back of my head where the pain radiates. That's all I can do. Point. A kid doesn't have the words to describe pain as throbbing, dull, aching, sharp, searing. As splitting them apart. After I point, she'll tell me I just pulled a muscle in P.E., this must be what a pulled muscle feels like. It isn't until around a decade later that they will split me open and see my brain trickle against my spinal cord.

When I'm _____ I don't pass out after "seeing stars". Instead, I stand up to see orange blotches take over my vision. I am shrouded in a black tunnel wishing I could see something as pretty as stars. When I am 80 or 90, I will still be wishing for something prettier, still wishing for stars.

When I'm 21 it's become normal. By now they've split me open and done what they can to ease the pain, to stop the leak. Still, I wake to the right side of my body swollen. I pump my fist to shake away the stiffness, except I can't make a fist, my body resists. I weakly rub at my knees, ankles, and fingers hoping to soothe the swell, hoping the leak will let me leave my bed, and hoping my body will listen.



lockbox heart

*by jacqueline o'neill after lying in a hammock at william
duffy's farm in pine island, minnesota by james wright*

Sat across the jail cell is a hound
Holding in its crimson mouth a jagged, pulsing, beating, red key.
The shaggy beast can see the struggling sot
That aims to escape past the two bars locked tight.
The bone he dangles is loved yellow
Corroded by past lovers scorn and torn,
And the old dog considers a bite
Carrying his key to give him the slip.
Knowing full well the man wanted out
The mutt never so much as wandered
Until the white weathered teeth of bone were shown
The red lipped key had found its way home.

But when we kissed I suppose I could tell
That your lips didn't so much as quiver
Until I moved them.



a morning

isaiah lock

There is a Morning– clouds driven by breath from God
made of wind, rivers, and love
We will be happy in this Morning– there will be no bombs in Gaza
The stars of Tehran won't fall like rocks in water
The sun– comforting soul of Earth– will embrace the horizon
Like a phoenix in perpetual rise

There is a Morning– rabbits give chase through tall grass,
Green blades dancing like licks of flame
We will be happy, like a child in a mother's arms. World in warmth.
The earth's spin will steady, oceans will cool
The moon is our loving father, ensuring our sleep is sound

We are at midnight– baphomets in white houses scream wildly
But our fathers' shields have been here before
Weathered this storm. Like resilient oaks deep in woods
Like anxious dogs in kennels
Our resistance is natural. There is a Morning– no doubt– just hours away
and we are moving for it



woodland magic

alex briggs



dragon skin

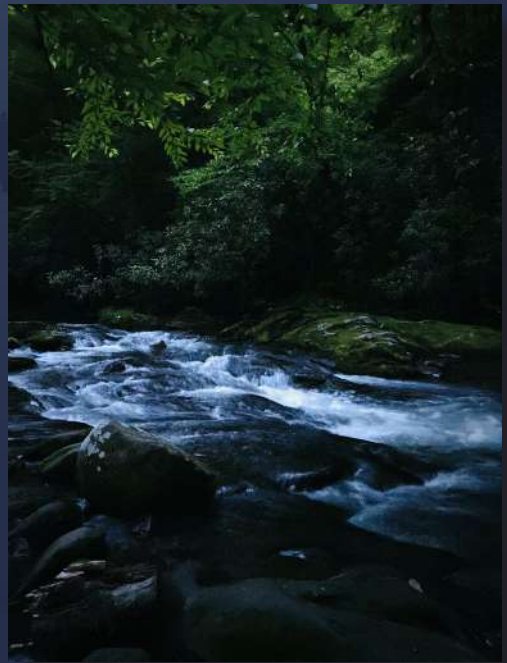


layers

breakthrough



fairyland



machu picchu

sabrina wants to be better

cupid chrustawka

SABRINA can't afford much. It's not like she's asking for all of Rome, served up on a silver platter—goddammit, she just wants ice. A cup of ice.

The barista hands Sabrina a tiny dollop of whipped cream. Her cheeks are sucked in like she's biting her tongue. Sabrina takes it and the drive through window slams in her face. She's been driving in a hot, humid car for an hour now. Texas summer heat has brought a full fist of mosquitos and thrown them with splendor over the fuming fields of Gainesville, Texas. Sucking all the green out of the Spring grass with a stingy proboscis. Sabrina only knows that body part because of her uncle. Entomology. *Entomologist*. Piece of the puzzle. She wants to suck that liquid gold from the world with a straw.

"*Savor it,*" she mouths to her passenger once they've pulled past the window. What a lousy excuse, she thinks, looking down into the depths of the pup cup. One dollop of whipped cream in a miniscule cup. It's barely a mouthful. Sabrina hands it over. The mosquito bite on her ankle itches when it rubs against a frayed bracelet.

Her little brother Marcos is here, along for the ride. Twelve years old. What a neurotic thing he is. His little dark head swivels back and forth, back and forth, as he looks out the window, to Sabrina, to the concave walls of City Hall. He hasn't touched it. His pup cup melts in the soldering sun.

Sabrina's dark hair pools around her neck in sticky, staticky clumps. Without the hat she left at her mother's door, heat crawls through the cracks and pinches her scalp. Sabrina opens her mouth to say something and then closes it. What a waste, she thinks. She thinks more and cuts off another car as she turns right out from the Starbucks.

Whatever crawled up into the heart of man and died, she doesn't want to know. Sabrina is past it. Deep eyebags curl into themselves like the rings of a tree, signaling her age and chronic stress in swoop after swoop. Ring after ring. The baristas could afford to be nice, she thinks—they could afford to spare her a little dignity. They could at least mean it when they say, *sorry, we can't give you any ice. Sorry, we aren't allowed to give handouts unless you buy something, too. Sorry, we sold our soul to the*

company and now we parrot their every word. Sorry. Sabrina is so tired of *sorry*.

"I'm so tired of sorry," Sabrina says.

"Sorry," her little brother parrots, sitting sidesaddle.

He's a little acorn. His black hair is a soft-skinned shell over his tan skin. Marcos is a small pebble kicked between two fiery familial streams, a lost puppy Sabrina got on muddy knees to beckon over into her car. She hadn't seen him in years and promised him ice cream. *Marcos, I love you, I'm sorry, I don't have any money, a dollar; I don't even have a fucking dollar,* she wants to say, but instead they sit in astonishing silence while Marcos quietly rubs sweat from between his eyes and the car's engine hums with heat. Years of unspoken indignity breathe in the backseat, like a decomposing body in a psycho's trunk. Maybe Sabrina would become that psycho for even just a dollar.

The car pushes forwards down Main Grove Street. Every few seconds it stutters, and jerks back and forth like a tremor. Marcos' bottom lip wobbles. His pup cup is like a wilted rose in his small tan hand. When Sabrina hits a particularly stingy pothole, Marcos spills half of it on the seat of his pants. He still hasn't touched it otherwise.

Two weeks ago, Sabrina lost her job as a cashier. Stealing coins out of the register. Pocketing marked-out expired boxes of instant coffee. Then, she started to notice subtracted hours off her timesheets. Forty-hour weeks dwindled down to thirty-five, then to thirty. Like Sabrina wouldn't notice. Like Sabrina wouldn't care. Like Sabrina could ever make enough to catch up with life. She had been behind on rent for longer than she'd held the job. *Thuck-thuck-thuck.*

"Savy," Marcos says.

"Marcos," Sabrina says back.

Marcos has not looked her in the eye ever since he got into her car. The closest he gets is staring behind her, like he sees someone coming to get them both in trouble. "Does... your car have a flat tire?"

"Are you a mechanic?"

"No."

"Do you want ice cream or not?" Sabrina does not know why she says this.

"... Yes." Marcos looks away.

Forty, thirty-five, thirty. The car vibrates when it pushes forty like it wants to sing.

Sabrina won't say it, but she knows that Marcos is right—like he usually is—and like she usually denies. *Thuck-thuck-thuck*. The low tire pressure symbol has been lit up on her dash for weeks. *Thuck-thuck-thuck*. The car is hotter than the comal Sabrina's abue cooked on. *Thuck-thuck-thuck*.

The welt on Sabrina's ankle mixes with sweat and stings like the bite of a fire ant.

Here is what happens next:

1) Sabrina hears a cicada chittering in her right ear, so her head jerks towards it. She runs the red light at the intersection between the gas station and a left on Gray Avenue. The blaring red light above her halo of black hair gleams. A blue truck smashes into the driver's side window and both vehicles screech as they spin. Sabrina holds a memory of Marcos when he was first born and his cheeks were a ruddy red, never crying, always puffy and warm with a nervous smile. Sabrina dies on impact.

OR

2) Sabrina has a brain aneurysm. The car stops before an intersection when Marcos lunges for the wheel and scrambles into her seat like a ghost trying to get back into her body. She sees herself at five years old, in a vision, sitting in her uncle Emil's lap, dissecting a praying mantis. Sabrina wakes up in the hospital crying. Sabrina wants to be better.

OR

3) Sabrina pulls into the gas station. Marcos finds a dollar outside and obediently hands it to Sabrina because he's thirsty and they're here for water. When they go inside, she fiddles with a scratcher. When Sabrina purchases this instead of water for her little brother, she wins \$10,000. Her world changes in an instant. She turns to Marcos. Sabrina says, eyes full of tears, "I'm so sorry." 19 15 18 25. Sabrina wants to be better.

OR

4) Sabrina has enough money to save everything.

OR

5) Sabrina keeps going past the green light. She drives out of town, out south, and points to landmarks along the way. This is the house you were born in, Sabrina says, and runs her finger over bricks and ashen land. This is where our uncle Emil left his hat on the couch before he left and never returned. The country dirt road crumbles under bald tires. This is where our mom told me there are family secrets best left unsaid and to leave you out of this. Further south, central hill county Texas courthouse. This is where our mom first drafted the restraining order to keep me from you. Sabrina breaches

the eastern Mexican border. She runs her palm over a dust-ridden home. And this is where I was born, where my dad sat on the porch every night with a clenched fist. Further down along the coast now, where the rocks dig holes into the tires, and yet they glide. This is where I became five and my dad became nothing. This is where our mom and his brother Emil started to trek north for somewhere better.

Heart highlands of Guatemala; this is where generations of relatives were systematically murdered, and our grandmother ran without her sisters and with her pregnant belly to where she would be safe. This is where our grandmother gave birth to our mother, and where she promised herself, *here is where things will be better*. Sabrina gets out of the car. Marcos gets out too. There is dust blooming all around them and their busted car like saints.

And then she turns to Marcos, and Sabrina says, this is where you find out Emil is your dad. That's why he had to leave, that's why we have to leave, that's why mom can't leave. Sabrina is so sorry. Sabrina is so, so sorry. Sabrina still wants to be better.

OR

Here is what actually happens.

White-hot yellow sun.

No AC.

Marcos is still obediently waiting for his promised ice cream. Sabrina is almost out of gas and completely out of coins. She runs a red light, but the blue truck just honks and squeals as it shudders to a stop. There's a green light up ahead, but Sabrina turns right into the gas station before she can pass it. The dramatic turns in Sabrina's life are all self-constructed. There is no more room for miracles.

Thuck... thuck... thuck.

The gas station is a miniscule thing. There are two pumps and three parking spots sloppily painted by the front door, and nobody is here. The afternoon sun glitters off a crack in the windshield as they pull up into one of the three spots, park, and cut the ignition. Sabrina gets out of the car. Marcos gets out too. He still holds a half-spilt cup of whipped cream.

So, Sabrina takes a few steps forward, messily smears sweat across her brow with the back of her hand, and sits on the curb. Marcos is her shadow. A decent amount of shade covers their twin heads. When Sabrina glances over at her little brother, he looks more tired than she's ever seen him in her entire life. She realizes she hasn't looked directly at him since he got in her car. He suddenly looks years older. Marcos stares down into the untouched pup cup like it's his dried-up fountain of youth.

After a few seconds, Marcos sets the paper cup down between them. He pulls his knees up to his chest and tucks his dark, clammy face into the crook of his inner elbow. They sit together—Sabrina watching the cars speed by in the street and Marcos folded into a small ball—for five minutes, wordless.

Sabrina knows her mother will get home in a couple hours from work and see that Marcos is gone. She'll know exactly who took him, and Sabrina will never see Marcos again. She has until the sun starts to bend back down in its curve over the sky to sit here with her little brother. Yet, somehow, Sabrina can't find the words for anything.

"Savy," comes Marcos' weak, pitiful voice, like a damp towel.

Sabrina doesn't respond this time. This time, she only turns her head to him, sweat leaking down her cheeks.

"... I don't want ice cream anymore," Marcos says. "I just want water."

Sabrina tries to say she's sorry. The words can't come out. Instead, Sabrina lifts her head, salt stinging her eyes, and watches the mosquitos that pepper the sky.



obake

gabi baca

i.
the house is empty, and so are you,
sans the inflorescent walls
blistering with
frames from a better time. my love, you loved me
most when i was a mirror spinning on a string,
when i was being nothing but me being you.
 well you don't look the same when you look at you now.

ii.
you were blessed as a silver bullet
and i held you like a breath,
hunkered down in your hell, 'cause
they say to stay put if you ever find yourself
lost. no matter whose name's on the mausoleum
anymore, this mawkish tomb's stone cold,
 and you don't look the same when you look at me now.

iii.
cannibalized by moths under any spasmodic
light; with you i'd like to watch the wild horses
kick dirt into the dust i'll be deserted in,
then buried beneath. the joke—prophesied,
apostrophised—is nothing new, yet nothing
short of cruel when told by you nova at the start.
 now you don't look the same when i look at you now.

iv.
snuffing out the sparkly end of dynamite
is about as fun as picking out the sutures on my face.
a sickly green to match the veins of this jaded
marble slab will do. it fits the charming turned
beguiling, the harmless turned to heartless, after all. i
can't punch myself awake or patch the exit wounds,
and this battleship is sinking as i watch it sinking in.
 boy, i don't look the same when i look at me now.



phone

*a "soft" imitation of "alone" by jack gilbert
blaine curl*

I never believed she would call again
after the accident.

It's always 12:03 when the phone lights up.
The same name every night—*Lena*.
Her contact photo still a candid
from the coast last year,
her smile backlit by a storm.

I sit in the same recliner,
the one she spilled wine on during a movie
we never finished.
The room's dim, just the glow
of the TV on mute
and the flicker from the streetlight outside
casting ghost-shadows on the blinds.

Lena's ringtone is Debussy now—
soft piano, echoing off my ribs
like she's tuning my grief
instead of playing a song.

She died in late September.
Head-on collision. No skid marks.
Just silence and shattered glass
on a rain-slick road.
I wasn't with her.
She was driving home to surprise me.

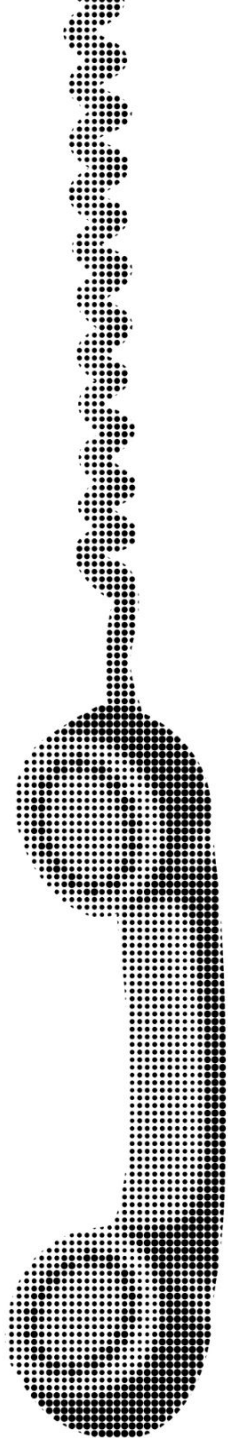
The first time the phone rang
was a week after the funeral.
I thought it was a cruel prank—
a glitch, or worse, someone pretending.
But the calls never stopped.
Same time. Every night.

Sometimes, I let it ring,
watching her name bloom on the screen
like a wound reopening.
Other times, I answer.
There's no voice. Just static,
but it breathes—faint, rhythmic—
like the soft rise and fall
of someone sleeping next to you.

I speak anyway.
Tell her about my day,
what I cooked,
how I didn't cry this time
when I passed the coffee shop.

The line always clicks off
at 12:09, never later.
And every night I wonder—
what stirred inside those six minutes —
that time buried but didn't kill?
Does grief know my number?
Is it Lena — the unfinished part of us —
dialing from whatever comes after?

I guess. I should have believed so.



using thirty-two fragments of women's conversations that i happened to overhear, i made you this poem on mothers and daughters because

alex briggs

1. Sometimes, you can look at a person and know, "You aren't quite right.
2. I think something or somebody hurt you—maybe when you were little...?
3. After the divorces and the deaths, when everybody stopped caring...?
4. I want to help. Tell me what you need."

5. But your mother isn't helping
6. your sister who is living with her boyfriend now. She's barely eighteen, and he's
7. some kind of cyber-punk, new-wave loser, and your
8. mom is pretty "chill" about this kind of stuff.

9. "Congraaaats!"
10. She keeps repeating it over and over. It's funny. Why
11. can she not hear her baby crying?
12. It makes me wonder if she thinks

13. women are just too much sometimes. We shouldn't always be so,
14. "You must love me!"
15. So "You feeling okay?"
16. "Have you showered lately?"

17. Can we also talk about her boyfriend? Please,
18. imagine a world without men—
19. There's still a war going on, even if nobody talks about it.
20. "It's two girls, squabbling. What else is new?"

21. I hate that. I should just give up
22. speaking of parents?
23. I don't think what she's doing is healthy. You're supposed to be there for your kid.
24. If you do it correctly, it turns out so pretty and good.

25. Part of me still feels like I have to—I gotta...
26. nothin,' I guess.
27. What am I supposed to do if
28. they're both competing against each other in this season? At some point, I just hope we get to see them perform the classic

29. "Oh! I have to talk to you, like, now! Let's just sit here.
30. Well, that was a crazy detour. All those traffic cones and caution tape. What a wreck!
31. Anyway, now I have to go back and try to fix all the mistakes myself since

32. I love you."

we're too young for this

anna walter

Texas Woman's University – Denton, TX

Hot August boredom seemed to seep
into every crevice of the cots mesh cover,
suffocating him with memories of a year ago.

A different kind of heat. A different August. A different person.

It had been hot then, too, hotter than most Maine summers.
They hadn't talked about it.
They thought they had the time.

He thought he remembered everything,
but now thinking back only bits
and pieces stood out to him.

His fingers twisting in her curls,
the taste of her sweat
as he
pressed his tongue against her neck
as he
sucked love bites into the succulent skin
as he
tilted her head up by her chin
as he
listened to the sound of their breathing, so loud in such an empty place
as he
let himself be taken in by her beauty, poise, and grace.

Each drag of her white dress over milky thighs—
we're too young for this
Each batting of her watery blue eyes—
we're too young for this
Each punch of her angelic sighs—
we're too young for this

No matter what they said,
he knew that was not true,
especially now.
after everything changed,
after he was handed
a pack
a gun
a ration of cigarettes.
A different kind of heat. A different August. A different person.



Did she remember? Did she think about it on the
dreadfully hot August nights?
when the sweat dripped down the side of his forehead and
the smells of bodies permeated the dugouts so that even when he slept
he was reminded of the dozens of boys his age that he looked in the eyes—
a similar blue that, a year ago, in the same August heat, he looked into and thought—
we're too young for this



misaligned
kai reyes

a lesson in verb tenses and grief

amelia abney

I see you in every
gaily-painted wildrag, in
every sunset glowing in my wind-shield.

I hear you in every
story about a difficult mother-in-law, in
every 'afternoon, Mills Feed'.

I feel you in every
roll of my hips in the saddle, in
the muscle-memory of a buckaroo knot.

And what do I do with that?

And what do I do with the things
that don't remind me of you
because I don't know what they are?

With the answers to the questions
that I didn't get to ask?
With the skills from the lessons
that you didn't get to teach?

I miss so much.
I missed so much.



psychohazards

thomas rooney

MY WATCH read 6:55 a.m. The day was still overcast from the night before, and the pale blue of the sky peered through the cloud cover, the ground soggy with rainwater. Sam and I had planned for this. We wore rain gaiters and cargo pants, our packs heavy with field equipment. We got out of the Jeep and began hiking through the meadow. It wasn't long before our boots were caked with mud, and I could see the border of the forest ahead of us.

Sam was ecstatic to be in the field. I was less so. We worked late the night before and hadn't taken much time for breakfast, though you never would have been able to tell from the way Sam was charging ahead. She was downright giddy, half walking, half racing her way through the tall grass to the tree line, a shimmering blonde spark piercing through the grey and green. I hated it. She turned to wave back at me.

"Kat!" she yelled, "Hurry up!"

Ugh. I met Sam in college. Both of us had been in the biology program. We shared a room during sophomore year, so a few conversations about growing up with stepparents, the occasional coffee, and just like that, we'd been friends ever since. Almost. She had invited me to a few get-togethers at her parents' house, but I never quite felt like I belonged there. I was a "brew two pots of coffee and pull an all-nighter in the lab" kind of person. She was different: name-brand athletic sweaters, a legacy student, seemingly never pressed for time. Energetic too, so damn energetic. That didn't dissuade us from keeping each other company through the trials of dorm life, and through a senior project studying species distribution across a square mile of woodland. Still, we parted ways after graduation, and I can't say I missed her.

Now, several years after I got my master's degree, we found ourselves working together again, this time on a survey project with the Department of the Interior: I signed up a few months back, only to later discover she had been on the project from the start. My field data always came back riddled with errors, though no one believed me when I said I didn't know why. Soon after, Sam was assigned to double-check my findings. She had become something of a rising star in the world of conservation biology.

"I'm almost there, just hang on. Jesus..."

I grunted, hauling my field pack over my shoulder and trudging up a dirt slope to the edge of the tree line. It looked like mostly live oaks ahead. They were sparse at first, then slowly grew closer together the further in you went. I stretched and cricked my shoulder back. Sam got out the GPS and navigation equipment.

"Looks like... Four miles due north from where we left off last time, then another six miles north by northwest. After that, we can re-assess where to go next."

I sighed. "Lead on, sparky..."

"Caffeine withdrawal?" she asked with a polite smile.

"Something like that."

Regardless, we started to make our way to the survey point. It wasn't ideal. Our Jeep would have been faster, but there were no trails here, and most of the area was unmapped. The exception was a few tattered sketches put together by local backwoods hunters, back when the land was still open territory. We stumbled and fought through brambles, past fallen tree limbs, and around vernal ponds. Sam checked our position every few minutes and adjusted accordingly. Dead leaves and lichen littered between tree roots. It wasn't until we were an hour into the woods, cold and, yes, in dire need of caffeine, that I noticed it.

"Hold up a minute." I held up my hand and looked up at the tree canopy. "Do you hear that?"

She looked up, eyes wide.

"The birds," she said. "I can't hear any birds. There should be—"

"Cardinals and thrushes. Sparrows, too." I took out my phone and played back one of my field recordings from the week before. Chirps and whistles filled the otherwise dead air.

She turned to me. "You don't think last week was a fluke? Maybe some of them broke hibernation early, or—"

"I don't know." On any other day, I would have stopped and recorded everything I was experiencing, especially something as unusual as this. Something about it was also throwing me off. It made me feel the way I used to feel in church, or outside the principal's office after starting a fight. Like this climate was the habitat of some higher power, not meant to be lingered in for long. "This is freaking me out. Let's just keep going. Another hour or two and

we'll be at the survey point. I want to get this over with."

"Don't you think we should—"

"Nope."

Sam looked toward the tree canopy a while longer, then followed me. The cloud cover grew thick. As we marched through the dead soundscape, I couldn't help but think about the ways we had changed since those early conversations. Sam had been with the same person since college, yet I was still in an apartment by myself. She had quickly signed on to her dream company, published her research, and then pivoted into federal work; I was still trying to pay off loans. Sam flooded my feed with the comings and goings of her social circle; I could barely keep my cat fed. I tried to push the thoughts away, but it didn't seem fair. The same school, the same education. I was even the one who encouraged her to pursue graduate studies! But somehow, life spun itself in her favor, and somewhere along the way, I'd been left behind.

More hiking. The air started to get colder, and I pulled tight on my jacket drawstrings. Even then, the moisture still worked its way between the layers of my clothes, and the air was chilled by sparse droplets that dripped from the tree branches. My breath fogged ever so slightly in front of me. Once an appropriate amount of silence passed between us, Sam spoke up.

"You know, Kat, I've been thinking. Once we're done with this, it'd be... well, it'd be kind of wonderful if you came to visit sometime. I could host something, you could meet new people, maybe get out a bit. Oh, I have this one friend, Chris, who always has the best taste in wine. And I'd love for you to meet Belle. She's done fieldwork overseas. Wouldn't that be fun?"

"Uh... sure." I had been avoiding alcohol since New Year's. For good reason. "Why not?"

She smiled, then looked down. Her face contorted.

"Weird. The GPS, it's..."

I stepped over to see what was wrong. The coordinates flickered, first one set of digits, then another. They hit zero and it died. Sam got her compass out. The needle spun wildly in every direction. She dug around in her pack to find another way to navigate. I looked up at the sky, but the sun was still hidden behind a heavy shroud. There was no reason this should be happening, no ferromagnetic minerals in this part of the country. I would be lying if I didn't admit that for a brief moment, I enjoyed seeing her struggle. The equipment had been her responsibility. Still, I knew they would blame

me for this back at base camp. The atmosphere started to feel less than accommodating.

"Alright, well... we've only been out here a couple hours." I checked my watch. "So it shouldn't be hard to—"

My stomach flipped.

5:48 p.m. Either my watch was busted, or we had been walking out here for over nine hours. I chose to believe the former.

"What time is it?"

"Uh, let me see... About three o'cl—" Sam caught my tone with a raised eyebrow and glared in disbelief. The gears in her head began to turn as she immediately got out her logbook to jot down notes. Then she checked the rest of the equipment for errors. The camera batteries were near empty, and the radio was dead. The preliminary sketches of the region were also missing. I paced, trying to formulate an answer, but nothing resolved into a solution.

"Okay, just... hang on. Hang on," I told myself. I took a deep breath while I tried to think this through, even while I kneeled forward. I struggled to keep a grip on procedure, even as I held back the adrenaline. How? How? I was a scientist. I was a professional, goddammit. I knew what I was doing, right? I could deal with this. I wasn't going to lose myself.

"Do you hear that?" Sam snapped up straight.

"What?"

She didn't explain, and immediately sprinted off into the woods in a random direction. It was all I could do to keep up with her.

"WHAT?" I called out. I jumped over a log, trying to keep pace as her raincoat grew smaller and smaller in the distance. She gradually grew back to size as I caught up, my lungs burning. She stopped at a ridge and pointed below, panting.

"The river," she said. There it was, rushing ten feet below. Nature's replenisher, our salvation. Only now could I hear it. I was still trying to catch my breath. Inhaled, coughed up some mucus from the back of my throat. There was no reason she should have been able to hear it from so far away, unless I just hadn't been paying attention. Even still, this wasn't a watershed region. There wasn't supposed to be a river within fifty miles of here. I didn't like that this was all we had to go on, but couldn't come up with anything better.

The river started out as a narrow rush but grew wider and lazier the further we went. The bank eventually turned to flat gravel, with a high rock face looming above and walling us in against the stream. It made the walking

easier at least. Another twenty minutes went by before Sam spoke up.

"I've wanted to ask... present circumstances aside... well, you've seemed really on edge lately. Is there something on your mind?"

A part of me thought it might be a good discussion to have, but no. That would lead to too much hurt. No. I scoffed at her clear inability to read people. She wanted to be empathic now? She certainly never acted that way before. Not in any way I recognized as kindness.

"I don't know," I said. "I'm still thinking about the lack of bird calls. About how we've been out here for so long and haven't even felt the need to stop for a break. Our gear is busted. Even the sun looks weird."

"Yes, I know. But I meant before this."

God, just take the hint. I wasn't in the mood to give her a list of all the ways my life had unraveled. It's not like she would relate. I closed in against myself and searched for a new topic.

"You were double-checking our position against the sun before the GPS went on the fritz, right?"

She sighed. "Yes, of course I did. And I'm fairly certain we're headed the right way."

"Just *certain* would be nice."

"Look, I'm trying my best here. Can you help me, help us, get through this in one piece? Besides, we'll have, like... field reports and shit to write up about this back at camp. Save your grievances for then."

I sighed. She was trying to use the mundanity of daily work as a distraction, but her play at normalcy fell flat. I think we were afraid to admit to ourselves what was happening; that all our assumptions about the natural environment could be upended so quickly.

More walking. I swore we passed the same gnarled willow tree at least three times. My watch read 9:88 p.m. Still no change in the light, just smears of grey blanketed across the sky, filtering out whatever was left of the world behind it. At times, I felt like I was better off away from it all. And why not? Was there really anything wrong out here? Get lost among the fey oaks and the wild grasses, far outside the range of cell towers. It wouldn't be the first time someone went missing in the woods. The neighbor would take care of my cat, though I forgot her name. Few would notice my absence, and the ones who did would probably assume I found a job elsewhere. I knew enough of plants and waterfowl that I could probably keep from starving if I wanted to. I could even craft a shelter out of the pines and the mud.

"Oh shit, hang on." Sam interrupted, holding up the compass. "It's stopped spinning. It's pointing to somewhere else. Downstream. Sure enough, the needle was oriented toward something ahead. I offered no objections, so we walked on.

I saw it before Sam did. A narrow, rocky crevice in the cliff face. I wanted to take a look but... what I heard then couldn't have been described as anything other than unearthly. A shrill, high-pitched wail sheered through my eardrum. I stopped, my nerves running high on evolution's archaic mental subroutines. Sam kept walking, oblivious, but turned back when she realized I wasn't keeping pace. It took a moment, but I found the words.

"I— do you hear that?" I asked.

She squinted. "Hear what?"

My voice rose with the noise. "You don't hear that?"

It still rang out to me, the shrieking whine of a dentist's drill in my ear getting louder and louder. I focused my eyes on the shadow of the cave. The sound let me go. Sam knelt down next to me, and put her hands on my shoulders. Panic struck. My breath steamed out of my lungs, my muscles tried to escape their own skin.

"Hey," she said in a lowered tone. "Hey. I'm right here, and I'm not going anywhere. I'm right here."

I wanted so badly to believe her. At least, a part of me did, but I couldn't feel her hands anymore. I closed my eyes for a moment, and then the next thing I remember, I was headed straight to the cave. Red mossy vines were growing out from around the entrance. Sam tried to pull me back, said something about getting home. But... there was something else. Something reaching into my chest and pulling me forward. My mind brightened, but there was also a... buzz. I grabbed my flashlight and started working my way down into the tunnel.

"Whoa. Kat. Kat! Jesus Christ, are you serious right now?!"

I paid her no attention. I was a scientist. I was born for discovery, right? She'd received her share of acclaim. I slid forward, down the narrow passage and between the sharp walls of the cave, following the mossy tendrils deeper into the tunnel. I heard Sam grunt in frustration, trip, and fall over as she climbed in after me. I grinned. The tunnel grew darker, and as it did, the red tendrils on the walls started to glow. I assumed it was some new, undiscovered species of bioluminescent fungi. Definitely worthy of being published in a journal. They wouldn't question me then; my

expertise, my dedication.

Eventually, the light from the cave entrance was gone. Only my flashlight and the strands of red fungi were there to light the way. The tunnel narrowed, with only a few inches of space between my chest and either side of the tunnel. I dropped my field kit. It started to get warmer as the air became humid and thick. I felt Sam's hand as she grabbed at my jacket, but I swatted her away, clung to the harmony coming from the end of the tunnel. The bright buzzing in the back of my skull grew, and I felt a wriggling under my ear.

She called out behind me, scared. To her, I was acting irrationally. Irrational. This was irrational. God, I am irrational.

"I need a sample." Surely this was worth investigating, yes? I checked my watch. 5:7:88 a.m. We had plenty of time.

The crack grew tight. Tighter. I fought my way down, scraping my skin with every inch. Something caught my eye in the darkness. A larger space, and a glow on the other side of it. The end of the journey.

I felt the cave compress, as though it were trying to keep me from reaching my destination. The rocks dug into my skin, scraped at my vest, pierced my legs. I exhaled, loosened my joints, drew my chest in as much as possible, and with a final effort, I burst out of the tunnel and fell to the ground.

As I clambered to my feet, I saw that I stood atop a pile of rocks on one end of a large cavern. Even without the flashlight, I could see the outline of the cavern walls, covered in that vibrant red moss. Little pulses of soft light rushed down to... something bright. I turned off the flashlight to let my eyes adjust. The sensation in my head was no longer distinct from the rest of my mind. A spike of consciousness so thoroughly driven in, its nail head was flush with the surface of my skull.

"KAT!"

Right. Forgot about that. I grabbed her flailing arm and yanked her through the crack and into the chamber. She collapsed onto the dirt, scuffed up and exhausted. Sam coughed, caught her breath, and I saw she had also ditched her field kit. I offered to help her up, but she pushed me away and stumbled to her feet, still coughing up dust. So much for sophistication. I left her there and walked down the cavern to see where the trails of red growths had led me.

The thing laying at the end of the cave was... unearthly. That much I knew. It covered the wall from floor to ceiling. A unified series of trapezohedral junctions, shimmering with the

flux grace of a ballet dancer, her Venus-flytrap jaws wide open. Spider-silk laced together plates of chitin. The smell of roses and gasoline flowered from it. A hint of strawberry acid on the end of my tongue. I heard the low rumble of the ocean, and was tacitly aware of a ripple under its hide.

"Kat..." I heard her say, her voice weaker and more distant than before. "What..."

"I'm getting a sample," I said, and walked closer to it.

The spike in my mind magnified. The promise of power within. Knowledge. Transformation. I could feel all of these things, emanating from the source. Genuine. Real. Raw. More pure, more authentic and primal than anything in this universe or the next. A force to be wielded against heaven. Against all who doubted me. I wanted it—needed it. Out of the chrysalis, I would emerge as greater than the sum of my parts, the world to be remade as I saw fit. I felt my memories fade in and out; traces of an era yet to come. I would see hymns written to my glory, seize the rightful justice she denied me!

The cave became an oven, the air unbearably hot. I heard her groan behind me, stumble, then stop. I turned back, saw in her eyes the same glimmer of understanding that crossed through mine. She felt it too. Before I had the chance, she'd take it for herself. She always did. Because this was the way the cosmic wheels turned. On and on and on...

Not this time.

I picked up a rock. Aimed—

My hands and face were slick with warm blood. It had been quick enough. I got up from the cavern floor, drenched in sweat, and left the body there. My leg was torn up. My arm was broken. I felt more alive than ever. My body burned all over from where she fought back against me. I limped to the source at the end of the cave, primed to take hold of it. Adrenaline surged through me. Everything would be right now. Everything would be the way it should be.

The thing opened, and there was a brightness at the core of it. I reached for it as it called back to me. I remember that sound as the way I remember my mother's voice. Justification. Acceptance. Finally acceptance.

But its expression shifted. It shuddered, receded. Maybe it knew what I did, or maybe I still wasn't enough. Either way, the brightness went out.

Everything went black, and then it was over.

I awoke back at the Jeep, at the meadow.
I looked around. Her body lay there, a few feet
away. The noise stopped, the bright spike of
feeling gone, its hold on me diminished, but
not absent. Even then, her blood still cried out
from the earth, and as I returned to myself, I
realized what I had become. Only then did I
scream.

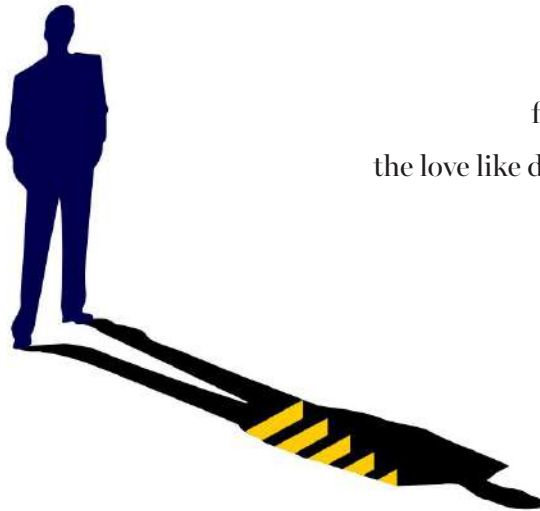
the serpent wrapped him *franciella camarena*



drugs/vans/dark roads

brendan matocha

go FAST. upside
down inside
out side
ways. Mercury thinks asphalt
and grass mix
well. moon
shine and moon
shine mix well; you can not
move and not stay
still at once. you're only eighteen
grand in, go
nowhere. go everywhere
but here. get
light. lift yourself
from the mud, these
sticky people. unstick
yourself, tear your feet
from foul earth and shake
the love like dirt from root. graft wings
to your sandals and fly
above them all
.



regretfully,
jacqueline o'neill

Canker sore.

A sour spot in my mouth

When I remember what

I said last night.

Never having happy helicopter crashing

Liver lifting smashing belly laughing acting

Like you did now that we're done.

Was I right for asking whether or not masking

Would help after the facting our love

And where I let you down?

Spots of yellow coat up all that you had

Showed up on your rosy cheeks you frowned.

Asking for an army just felt so alarming

But god you're so disarming I just pout.

I miss having you around.

Now I can barely speak

I feel so unseemly, weak

What's mine was yours.

And it's barely been a day.



graveyard shift
jesse sutton



ofrenda

lexi soto

JOSEPH LAIN dies on a hot September day, inconveniencing the priest, his nurse, his three children, and in the coming days, the rest of the family. My tia Victoria phones everyone on my father's side of the tree (though most of them do not pick up). Some only answer when the priest calls, and since there are too many to call individually, the ever-efficient Man of God ends up emailing the entirety of Joseph Lain's contact list, including me, because he sent me a happy birthday message once, on the notice of his death.

I don't even know a Joseph Lain. The message is marked as spam and Google deletes the email. I don't know a Joseph Lain until I come home two hours after gmail cleans my inbox; I'm clad in pumpkin pajamas from Spirit Week, half-moons of sweat soaking under my arms, yet I'm holding a hot cocoa from the Starbucks down the street. My father is standing in the middle of our living room.

Victoria called, he says with one hand running through his pepper-salt hair. I turned fourteen a week ago and already, my teenage terror has shocked the color from him.

Who?

My sister, your Tia. Joseph died.

I sip my hot chocolate. It burns the tip of my tongue and makes me sweat more. I take the lid off and blow on it, though it's no use because there's an inch of whipped cream on top.

Who's Joseph?

Your great-uncle.

He is weary. He should be; it's five o'clock and he's just gotten home from work. His laptop bag is still on the stairs. He runs another hand through his hair and it sticks out like roadkill porcupine.

Victoria said the nurse found him. He clears his throat. *Kidney failure.*

Oh. I drink my scalding hot chocolate. I sweat. I stay quiet. I don't know Joseph. In truth, I know nothing about my dad's side of the family. They are figures in the fog, shadows in the background of family photos, obscured by both time and irrelevancy. But standing in the living room, with my dad pressing his palms to his eyes, the death of a Joseph Lain is tangible and it sours my mouth, makes my stomach churn and my throat tight.

I am not always a teenage terror. I set

the hot chocolate down and hug my dad. He lays an arm on my shoulders and looks to the ceiling, blink, blink, blinking.

I will admit his name is not Joseph Lain. In truth I do not remember his real name. I know he lived, and then he died, and that was that; no mystery, no half-baked murder plot, he died, dead, done. I learn about how he died a couple years later, when I'm \$k in debt and crying to my parents because I can't save a paycheck for the life of me, and I keep buying on Klarna, or Zip, or Afterpay and I'm late on my car and I can't afford college anymore. I'm sobbing as my father holds my shoulders in an iron grip and tells me we have addictive personalities.

The Lains, I take him to mean, cannot control themselves. A generational Curse, founded in the early days of our ancestors, likely exacerbated by the natural progression of readily-available vices in our modern time. The Lains are linked by more than blood; it is compulsion, a need to make the bad decisions, to validate those bad decisions from others making bad decisions. My addiction is spending. My grandmother's is gambling. Joseph Lain died with a beer in his hand. The Lains' fate has been sealed a millennia ago and is inevitable. Haven't I already proven it, with my negative bank account and cut-up credit cards?

I don't know Joseph Lain, or my grandmother, or my tias, because my father broke his Curse and fled that life, taking the privilege of choice with him down to Baylor University where he met my mother. It's where he had two children who wouldn't know the pain of too-small shoes, who wouldn't know the despair of opening the fridge to find nothing in it, who wouldn't know what it's like to get a job, to get that first paycheck working 60 hours on minimum wage only for it to be plucked out of our hands and into the slot machines down at the discount mall, feeding the Curse with blood and sweat and tears. No, we don't know our dad's family but it's for the best. Yes, my father lived the curse but he beat it. I am trying to beat it.

Joseph Lain did not.

Joseph's nurse sends us a letter. It's chicken scratch Spanish, indecipherable to my mother and her two white *no-sabo* children,

barely legible to my *no-mames* dad. Joseph's children, my tias, have decided on a service to be held at a nondescript Catholic church somewhere deep down in El Paso. It's wedged in on a Thursday during the evening, a quick penciled-in addendum to the weekly calendar. The nurse and the priest (I still don't know who they are) are the ones setting it up. They gather invitations, lick envelopes, make reservations, plead with the family I don't know to show up or else this will all be for nothing.

My dad reads the letter then runs a hand through his hair and down his face. My mom's hand is on his back. I'm laying my head on his arm. My brother sits and stares at our sad beige placemats on the kitchen table.

We can take care of the house, I say, even though I mean my brother will take care of the house and I will just try to stay out of trouble, but my dad shakes his head.

We have work. And you have school.
And then we sit in silence.
We do not go to the funeral.

The Curse takes The Lains one by one, slowly over the years. It chips at us, makes us feel good, makes us want more while giving all that we have, and then snatches the husk of a person we become. My dad was able to break his Curse; not just because Joseph Lain told him to, but because he knew he could be better than that. And here it is, the grand culmination of my dad's efforts, affording a cup of \$6 hot chocolate because I just wanted one, no stress over what the money could be used for, what it could be better spent on, no slipping a pack of powdered Nestlé under my sleeve at the grocery store. Luxury, to have this overly expensive cup, to not have the worry that if I drop it I can never afford it again.

I don't think this. I just drink.

My dad tells me that Joseph Lain was a good man. He worked hard, made an honest living (doing what, I don't know) even if all that money went back into the Curse; beer bottles and lotto tickets, six-packs and cig stacks. But he handed my dad five dollars for Chuy's sometimes, or dropped a few quarters into the title at Wednesday mass. He spoke out against my grandmother when she did something bad or said something bad and made my dad doubt himself. He told my dad about Up There and though we don't attend church, and I don't really talk with the Big Man myself, my dad still prays. Joseph Lain told my dad to keep going, even when he was about to fail out of college, even when his first apartment flooded, even

when my mom had to sell her wedding dress to afford food.

My dad now tells me about our family. Not just the bad parts, but the good, too. Sandra was the first in our family to get a degree. Victoria has her own home. Samara became a teacher. We have cousins who have visited before, their presence smudged in the old family photo albums, but they remember us, and they love us. And our tio, who loved our dad. Who died too young. Who should've seen my dad break his Curse.

So while I don't know him, didn't know him, and while he is dead; yes, Joseph Lain, you died on a miserable hot Texas day with a Shiner in your hand and three dollars to your name. The nurse and the priest were the only ones to attend your funeral, but you were still a man and more importantly, Joseph Lain, you were a man my dad loved. Now I know more about The Lains when we were immigrants and farmers, cooks and musicians, performers and artists, *creatives!* Now as we are hardworking men and women who only want to live. I'm slowly learning Spanish, and I set up a picture for you on my altar, and in your own way, Joseph Lain, you broke your Curse.

Thank you.



ACT THREE



“When you are twenty years old, the world might ask if you are ready to experience everything.”

—

*rhianna lewis,
your greatest souvenir
won't fit in your suitcase*

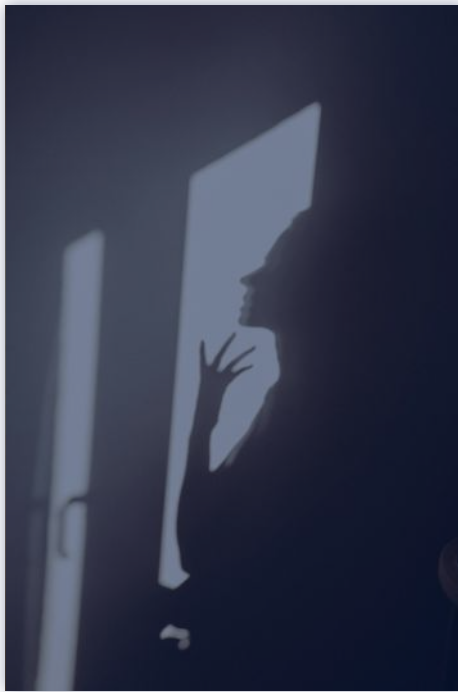
what the world doesn't see

alida askill

Ohio Wesleyan University – Delaware, Ohio

I FIRST MET ^{t h i s} shadow on a Thursday, just a random Thursday, with absolutely no significance whatsoever, but that Thursday changed something in me; well... it changed my life for exactly three days, then I got over it, like a stubborn cold that clings to you, refusing to let go until it finally drifts off into space, gone without a trace, truthfully, I never thought I'd see that shadow again, not after that fateful night of drifting words and unspoken thoughts on a cold balcony, a night that felt like it belonged to no one but the stars, but seven months later, as I was dancing beside my closest friends beneath a foggy night sky, my eyes glanced upon that shadow again; this time it was a Friday, just a random Friday, meaningless to anyone else, but to me it meant something, with no real importance, because seeing the shadow again opened my eyes to possibilities far greater than anything I had planned, and maybe those possibilities had nothing to do with the shadow at all, maybe it was just the reminder that life can shift in an instant, that people can reappear after vanishing for months, and that sometimes, the unexpected has its own kind of magic, and there that shadow was, standing at the edge of the crowd, the same half-smile, the same unbothered posture, something that even time hadn't even dared to touch, and for a second it felt like the air forgot how to move, like the music had dulled just so the universe could play its little joke on me, the kind of joke that makes your chest tighten and your stomach twist, not in pain, but in that strange nostalgia that comes from recognizing a moment before it even becomes one, I didn't go up to the shadow right away, I wanted to see if the world would move these two lost souls closer, if recognition

would find its way through the blur of faces and light, because what do you even say to someone who unknowingly haunted your thoughts for months, someone who had become an unfinished sentence in your story, someone who had become a half-remembered dream, a line left unfinished in the book of your days, so I stood still, watching the crowd ripple between us, until somehow, almost naturally, our eyes met again on the far edges of the dancing, and it was like the first time all over, that quiet



spark of familiarity, the kind that feels both ancient and brand new at once, nothing happened at first, I was convinced the shadow didn't remember our night, that fleeting collision of words and silence beneath the hum of cold air, but then, during the after party, our paths crossed again, and the shadow turned, spoke, and for a heartbeat the world felt whole again, as if the noise and chaos of everything else had faded into stillness, leaving only that moment suspended in light, the kind that lingers even after it's gone, and for a while, the hours that followed felt weightless, like walking through a dream you don't want to wake from; maybe it wasn't longing, maybe it wasn't even fate, maybe it was just

timing, or bad timing, or the universe recycling old faces to remind us that not everything is over when it ends, that sometimes things come back, not to stay, but to make sure you've learned how to let go without forgetting what it meant to hold on, that some shadows return not to stay, but to show you how to release what you once clung onto, how to carry the warmth without needing the fire, how to remember without reaching,

and how to let go without forgetting what it meant to hold on.

nighthawks diner

edward hopper, 1942

alanna reed

Money green and sulphur yellow walls
Surround the diner's inhabitants.
It's lit by painful fluorescents.
Light spills out the window,
Flooding the empty street.
There's no moon at all,
Only a navy canvas sky

I can't remember from where I came
All I know is I'm here now, menu in hand,
Waiting for the lazy bartender
To take my order.

A man—my neighbor actually—takes a seat near me
We exchange nods, his cigarette illuminating
His ragged face. He wears the suit he's had
For decades, evenly pressed by his doting wife.

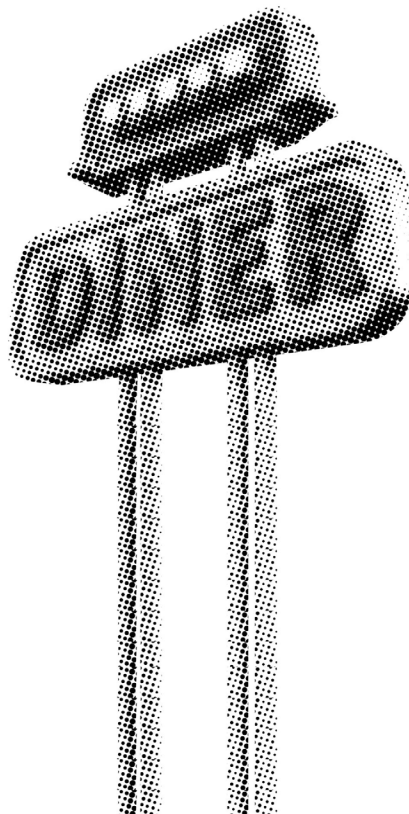
He orders a whiskey. Rocks.
I watch as the brown liquid fills the glass,
Swirling ice cubes around like pipe dreams
Melting in the fluorescents

I wonder if he ever got that job promotion
“Advertising is a competitive game,” he once told me
From across his manicured green lawn.
I wonder if his wife is cooking up a celebratory meal,
Praying he doesn't get home late again.
I can almost picture that meal

The ringing of the polished silverware
The muzzled wails of a blood roasted turkey.
For dessert, a pie, her mother's mother's recipe
Through the open window, nighthawks
Screech a high strung melody.
A bebop tune plays in the backdrop
Is it old Bird? Dizzy? No one knows or cares;
They serve to curate a mood, that's all.

In the diner, my neighbor shoots the whiskey back
Without letting a drop ruin his perfect suit.
He puffs out his chest, throwing a dollar
On the bar.

I look down at my soggy eggs and toast
There was nothing better on the menu
Cigars—only 5¢—fog the joint, causing a coughing fit
The bartender wipes a glass with a dirty rag
The verdigris brick of the walls scream
To be let out





winter's end

lily sewell

Icy winter pierces through my thin coat.
I am gaunt and worn, and each gust of wind reduces me
further to dust. My nose drips with condensed breath,
and my eyes are stung from arctic breeze.
Boots crunch through inches of blizzard, my
sore feet dragging through never-ending snowy ebb.

The bare trees with their fleshless boughs and branches
Loom, casting terrible silhouettes over my haggard bones,
Consuming me with images of skeletons in a graveyard, like the
corpses of a massacre posted erect in grim warning
of what lies ahead. They don't welcome me or greet me.
I can't stop to rest yet, and the hope of Spring urges me on.

But at the edge of the woods, I see Spirit take shape.
Sweltering tresses fall in auburn flames, wavy locks
reflecting summers long passed. Her shoulders are bare to the cold,
steam emanating from the sunkissed and blistering rind of her arms.
I clutch my scraps of warmth to myself against the tearing wind,
but she remains unmoving, billowing waves of her sun dress skirt
dissolving in flakes of yellow straw that fill the current.

I'm helpless then to the boiling tears that begin to spill from my
reddened eyes, staining the brittle skin of hollow cheeks.
Even from a distance, I feel beads of sweat begin to emerge from my
cold-flushed pores. She entices me, I know it. And I am not *ready*.
But the crunch of my boots is deafening, and beautiful eyes
of inferno snatch me up in their wicked gaze, so I can't move.

"When will this winter end?" Spirit asks.
"Spring will come," I insist.

"If you allow it to," Spirit scolds.
"It will come. And we will be there to see it."

"And they will be there to see it."
The correction is gentle, but bruising. And
I'm sobbing now, seizing my aching stomach
amidst sharp fits of guttural pain.

"Take my hand. Are you not cold?"
I'm freezing. I have forgotten warmth,
for months, maybe years.
I don't remember. I'm tired.

Spirit's thin and bony fingers reach out.
It's the same invitation.
But this time I do take it, and I am warm.
Spring has come.

ava chatter
weightless



david

michaelangelo buonarroti, 1501-1502

trey thornton

I will carve myself to the bone
Chisel and chip at my skin
With hammer and mallet
I'll carve myself into an angel for you

Like how Angelo carved David
I'll look past all the parts that you don't like
The marble that doesn't fit your definition of love
and sculpt myself into an image of perfection

Like any lover, I'll be methodical
I'll listen to you describe your ideal
And I'll create a masterpiece
You can marvel at, with your heart

But like any novice, I'll be impatient
I'll be quick to shortcuts, Satan's bidding
And come about at the wrong angle
I'll subtract too much, crack, and break

Like any first love, It won't be beloved
in the memory of thousands like David
It will be a broken, battered, fallen angel
Tied to this earth by heartstrings of hope

Hope that someone could love the poor angel
for what it was: Satan trying to love himself,
despite God's abandonment of Lucifer
God's devout, simply contorted by love's cruel chisel

The image of David, held for so long
One that had chipped the angel's heart
Into just another piece of jagged stone
Eternally blacked by the hellfire of unrequited love



franciella camarena
angel of light

carbon on the breath

leonardo chung

Yale University – New Haven, CT

Each dawn, the chapel bells dissect the cold.
My breath fogs glass as I conjugate sentir—
yo siento, tú sientes—sharp on frozen tongue.
At table thirteen, poetry critiques unfold
like surgical theater: precise, bloodless.
Outside, snow piles into rejected drafts.

The USB glows in my drawer, outside
this New England glass-lidded winter. I press play—his voice
warm, yet cold in its defiance: *Don't let English make you
bloodless*. I trace his Seoul accent through static. Neruda
would've loved his curses—raw, unfolded.
My Korean rusts, a dull blade flaking onto the tongue.

My teacher probes: “¿Tiene el dolor lengua?”
Does grief have a tongue? I stare past birches outside
as they shed their skins. My silence unfolds
its paper lungs into a black hole. Later
in the poetry club, pens cold-stab notebooks. *Show, don't
tell*, they snipe. *Siento, sientes, siente...* I rewrite
haikus, map-erasing Ottawa until it's bloodless.

All winter break, airport scanners blink bloodless
green. Mom's embrace of Illinois—a language my tongue
almost recalls. I gift her my poetry chapbook. Outside,
our old oak unthreads its shadows. “You wrote this?” Her hands, cold
from gardening, trace “Seoul Subway Psalms” She unfolds
a laugh, then says, “My boy stitches worlds with verbs.”

By spring's thaw, workshop notes unfold
pale flags across the dorm floor—*cut stanza 3. Too abstract. Bloodless.*
Darting over *cicada* in line 5, my classmate's tongue
clicks like a metronome. Meanwhile, outside
a family of robins builds nests from dead metaphors.
Coldly, I've learned to lay down measured lines like sutures.

7 (threaded)

alex briggs

—here-she-is-your-servant-at-least—she-sinks-heavy-like-eyelids—like-failure-ripe-in-shaky-hands—her-hair-is-puddling-down-dry-black—curls-soaking-into-the-cracks-of-pharisee-floor-tile—each-tiny-strand-long-and-snapped-and-singular—has-sprung-from-the-struggle-of-her-years—and-you-may-number-them-all—every-stinging-look-judah-freely-gave-her—before-she-closed-his-fingers—around-a-signet-a-cord-a-forgotten-promise—every-practice-scarlet-thread-looped-seven-times—round-the-window-lattice-unfolding—as-it-fell-into-warm-jericho-wind—moabite-tears-she-could-no-longer-quell—lining-the-midnight-threshing-floor-like-stems-of-wheat—waking-him-for-the-dawn’s-blazing-redemption—here-she-is-your-daughter-at-best—she-wants-to-know-what-you’ll-say—if-she-cannot-speak-herself-she-will—wash-your-feet-with-her-faith—dropping-in-tears-like-blood-upon-you—kisses-of-anointing-oil—on-your-skin-forgive-her-if-her-hair—cannot-fully-soak-up-the-sorrow—like-flowers-forgive-her—if-she-cannot-plant-her-nose—*inside*-the-dirt-she-wants-to—disappear-from-these-faithless-eyes—telling-her-she-is-a-body—she’s-blood-only-good-for-stones—even-the-great-chasm-severing-yourself—and-this-small-heaving-woman—is-madness-to-them-you-alone-see-her—share-your-parables-and-praise-above-her-moans—

—and-this-scoffing-crowd-rub-her-back—until-she-rises-light-and-laughing—





**don't draw with a
pen, asshole**
ryan crawford

I come out of the pits of hell
And here I am, on a rock.
This horrid, distasteful rock
Infected with parasites.

I'm forced to lead a life,
Make meaning out of the path and symbols I create,
And Color in what I outlined.
All because of them.

They even invented the clock.

I'm stuck here because of them.
Forced through the lines
Even after my eraser died
And the case I came in emptied and torn.

Use what I do,
And see what I drew,
To spell a way through,
More refined than my crooked cursive.
And if nobody sees this, that's fine too.

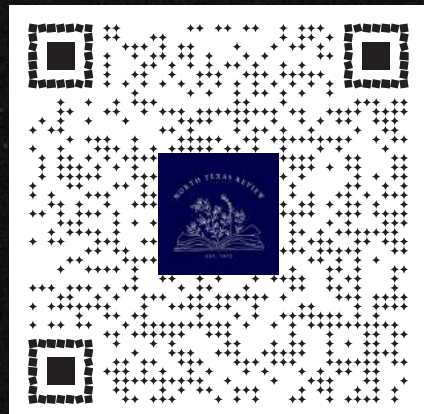
little moon

guy with musical instruments

little moon is a song from my album, "little moon," where i portray the human experience through the personification of the sun, moon, stars, universe, earth, and nature as a whole. this track is a mix bossa nova, folk, and singer songwriter, with 12-16 part harmonies and moving vocals in the background, and the lyrics showing a yearning for an unrequited love: the moon.

*Oh, little moon, don't you cry
Take a rest upon my shoulders
Before the night starts getting colder
Oh, little moon, please don't say goodbye
I want you to come near me
I want you to endear me
Just hold me tight and close your eyes
I wish that I could see you
I wish that I could feel you
But you're the moon in my night
sky
And I've washed away in the
rising tides
So let fate flow on by
And stay, my little moon,
tonight
Oh, little moon, why won't
you visit me today?
(Visit me, Oh Little
Moon)
Oh, little moon, how you
make my heart melt and
sway
(Melt and Sway, Oh Little
Moon)
Shining in the skies above,
reflecting back the sun
(Shining in the, Back the sun)
Wondrous, sparkling silver, signaling
the day is done
(Sparkling silver, Day is done)
Rising from the east and setting down right in the west
(Rising from the, In the West)
I lay here and dream of you while I sleep in my bed
(Lay here and dream, Sleep in bed)
I'm twisting, turning, heart is churning Oh, little moon
You've captured my love
My love
My love
Oh, little moon, why won't you look me in the eye?
Oh, little moon, why won't you reply
Oh, little moon, don't you say goodnight
Our time is far from ending
Please be requite my love in spending
Oh, little moon, don't you cry
Take a rest upon my shoulders*

*Before the night starts getting colder
Oh, little moon, please don't say goodbye
I want you to come near me I want you to endear me
Just hold me tight and close your eyes
I wish that I could see you
I wish that I could feel you
But you're the moon in my night sky
Oh, little moon, please just stay by
my side*



spider lily
rileigh peña vidal



wayward son
audrey grizzaffi



on ophelia

john everett millais, 1851–1852

emma fleckenstein

Surface tension tightly cradles that young,
Bright girl within its arms—bitter embrace
Of the creek mirrors that of her father's grave.
She holds no skull between slender fingers,
Just flowers, fresh plucked, glutted with life.
The rust-chested robin performs her requiem,
And fashions a home between the dying willow roots;
No life endures here, no death lasts, just

Floating, flying, in cold wet ecstasy,
with tendrils fanning out above, the copper halo
Of hair all tangled with crow-flowers and rue,
A bright green birth of thickening moss
And bone white blooms adorning her marshy grave.
The trunk uprooted beside, damp
Consummation of all this life and death—

To float, perchance to fly, angelic atop the creek;
Sunlight scours her face, painting the skin
Before she succumbs to gargling demise.
That grief, heavy overtaking, would rip
Fresh life from the ground—roots and all.
All wreathed in rosemary and despair,
The last small burst of life before muddy death:
The last of life so stubbornly persists!



ruben reyes
i, the returnee

feel

ryan crawford

I long to feel as those who truly feel,
from swaying silks in sunlit summer dress,
To ocean depths in shadows lost to teal.
I'd trace their textures, feel, and only guess.

I long to feel as those who love, feel love.
To slowly float on threaded gentle skies,
the trusted wind to show no funeral dove—
under the sky of stars seen in their eyes.

What would I do with dress, sea, and night sky?
I would not try to care nor make them mine.
Are they but what I think, glee, grief, and sigh?
Like weaves of silk moiré where feelings shine?

To feel as they would feel would be to guess,
for I must first see her in a nightdress.



the true self

chloe thorburn



how to (unsuccessfully) grow away from the monster under your bed

paige young

EVERYDAY, without fail, there are about 6 hours where I live alone in my parents' house. Sometimes they're simply out and about, living their daily lives without the child that outgrew them. Other times, it's because they're fast asleep and I'm wide awake.

It's currently 3:00A.M.

When blessed with a break from rigid school and work schedules, I spend about 21 of my 24 hours in a day on my bed. Be that by laying, sitting, leaning, *standing*, or any other pose¹ I decide to think up. My room is cluttered more due to a lack of space than my own intentions. I like Things: keychains, paint bottles, old headbands from my sophomore homecoming. Unfortunately, I do not have room for Things. There's a simple path from the door around my bed in the corner that nearly constantly has Things blocking off a part of it.

On my dresser there sits a skillfully and artfully crafted pile of stuffed animals I collected during my freshman year of high school². On the shelves in the corner, I have amassed even more stuffed animals who sit above me and watch me sleep. Behind the door to get into my room there stands an approximately 7 foot tall... creature³ who stares at my door and waits, like a vampire, to be let in. I have yet to oblige. In the crevice between my bed in the window, there are even more stuffed animals that stop me from rolling into glass as I sleep. At the foot of my bed are all the leftover stuffed animals and blankets that weren't deemed worthy of being off the ground. Buried in the clothes on the bottom of my closet is an uncomfortable life like tuxedo cat stuffed animal my mom got me as an 18th birthday gift.

Maybe the clutter really is more a fault of mine than it is the room's.

When I was 16, I got a cat for my birthday. My mom got one, too, but this isn't about that. The cat I got was a little black and white tuxedo cat. He had little gloves, like a lady would, that only covered his fingers⁴. His whiskers were

longer than an old farmer's beard, and the ones that sprouted from his eyebrows looked like antennae. He's probably an alien, thinking about it now. In true tuxedo cat fashion, he wore a tuxedo *as* fashion. The only white you could see outside of what I've already mentioned was his shirt collar and where it stuck out from under his buttoned jacket⁵. His eyes were chartreuse—but if you dulled it down and made it a different color. His ears were much too big for his head, making him look more like Debut Batman than a cat⁶. He was 9 inches tall, but could extend to a terrifying 2 feet. I called him a little monster, my mom called him a creature, but his legal/illegal⁷ name was Astro.

Every night, without fail, I have to leave my room. Sometimes it's simply to go down the hall and use the restroom. Other times, it's for a midnight snack. Every time, however, I open the door and wave at the tall creature standing just on the other side of my door. He never waves back. In fact, he actually isn't there. He moves out of the way so I can get my food⁸ and isn't there until I close the door again. I wonder what he looks like.

The carpet in my room is as caked in hair⁹ as it is with the carpet fibers themselves. Here and there are splotches of black paint and the chewed remnants of a water bottle ring¹⁰. At least 2 pairs of shoes are sprawled on the floor at any given time, rarely with their match, and with about 2.5 socks per shoe in their 2 foot radius.

My parents don't like any of the carpet in their house. I don't particularly care, I barely live there now, but one of them will always come in and complain about it. The easiest solution is to get it professionally cleaned, but they won't do that until they've agreed to sell the house. Then they'll like the carpet.

During my sophomore and junior years of high school, I would routinely get overly stressed out. Be that from overworking myself, thinking too much, realizing no one's willingly tried to talk to me in 2 to 3 (to 6) years, and as soon as

1 A personal favorite is reverse sitting, feet over the headboard.

2 A year I was unique in that I was actually in the school building. My parents said something about socialization. I wonder how that's worked out.

3 *Sure*

4 Cats don't have fingers, or hands, but you know what I'm talking about.

5 He didn't wear a cummerbund. Obviously. He did wear a vest, though...

6 He would've been a horrible Batman.

7 Can you legally name a pet? Can they get a certificate?

8 Usually a sandwich for some reason

9 Both my own and animal

10 A weird fixation I've had for the last half decade... maybe longer? I'm chewing one right now.

I realize how stressed I am¹¹, I would march out of my room to the living room chair where Astro lounged¹² from the hours of midnight to 11:59 P.M. He'd look at me like I was crazy¹³ and stare at the imaginary camera in the corner as I scooped him up and trotted back to my room with him lazing in my arms, closing the door with my foot.

Every couple weeks, without fail, I realize how lonely the night time is. Part of me, the usual small part, shrugs it off and decides she doesn't really care. The rest of me stops functioning. I freeze whatever I'm doing, slamming it into the blankets deemed worthy, and curl in on myself¹⁴. There is no purpose outside of the bed I laze on. There is no one who misses me outside of the 4 muted teal walls. There is nothing but the faint whirring of wind outside my window and the newly magnetic blankets keeping my cold, metal self in place. There is nothing but an unfortunate heartbeat and a stuttered breath of panic. There is nothing but me and a crushing weight on my chest.

Those are the nights I hear the creature scratch on the panels of my door. If I sink deep enough, stay frozen long enough, I can hear the handle rattle. He wants in.

There is no such thing as a blank surface in my room. There's a shelf littered with about 50 books when it can hold 21. There is yarn so close to falling I can't close my closet door like a normal person lest it topples like a sad and fuzzy avalanche. There is a table of Things¹⁵ that grows larger and less organized as the weeks carry on. My nightstand is so crowded it that when I'm going to sleep, my glasses knock something off every night¹⁶. Every cubby is overwhelmed by papers I got a 97% on and practically empty notebooks. Every corner has a trinket swiveled to be at a perfect 45 degree angle. A perpetual display, if you will. The rare and sacred empty spaces are caked with dust and are 4 and a half shades lighter than they should be.

Astro was a very independent cat. He liked living his way. My family made the joke that he thought he was human. I'm partial to the 'he thought he was a dog' joke¹⁷. Maybe he was a mole man... we always heard scuttling around the house. He must've had a tunnel system. He slept a lot, but when he was awake he'd run

amok with my dog, Lucky, inside or out.

Astro was especially independent at night. He wasn't social, at least not *really*, he liked one person¹⁸ occasionally. Eventually he'd grow tired of his chair-lazing and tunnel-digging and realize 'enough is enough' at around 12:15 A.M. Then, he would trot his way down the hall to my room. Once there he'd beat up the bottom half of my door like it was an opponent in an alley fight (*scratch scratch scratch*). If I didn't hear, which I usually did but he was a very impatient little monster, he'd *stretch* to his scary height and wiggle my door handle with his stick paw, making it sound like a low quality maraca. Astro and I worked on a 3 strike policy¹⁹. Sadly, we didn't know how the others' worked. With mine, I would let him try to open the door 3 times before getting up and letting him in. With Astro's, I *think* he would make 3 sets of noises 3 times then give up and bother the dog.

The night makes me think. It makes me think so much I've written about it²⁰. The main thing it makes me think about is my own impending doom. I'm going to die (I'm going to die...). You are too, but this about me.

Post-midnight²¹ makes me think about how soon or far away from death I really am. I don't know when I'll die, or when I want to die. Some days I hope it's decades in the future. Some days I hope it's the next, and some days I believe I'll never die and I'm the first truly immortal being because how can I leave this place when there are still going to be people I love here?

I always wanted Astro to be immortal. He would've been a great oracle. No one would know what he was actually saying²², but he'd end up leading them on wild chases.

The creature is immortal. There are days he may shrink or I may forget about his lurking, but he can never fully leave.

Overhead lights are the devil. Never in my teen years have I used the overhead light in my bedroom. No, instead I use the 2 lamps I stole from my older brother when he left right before my freshman year²³. One has 2 bulbs and sits across from the bed. The other is a simple desk lamp on my nightstand.

My ceiling fan is also the devil, but that's more due to the half-inch of dust decorating the top of it. Something very interesting happens

11 Usually at 3:30 A.M. on a school night, so about now.

12 Who has no relation to the Houston based baseball team much to the chagrin of my father.

13 Most days, a part of me was

14 Very different from how cats comfortably do

15 Told you I like them!

16 Usually the remote for the DVD player that hasn't been used since black cat fur covered my legs.

17 He played fetch twice.

18 Me :D

19 *Unintentionally*. He has never had any relation to the Houston Astros, Dad.

20 and you're reading about it!

21 approximately the last 4 hours

22 They'd think they would, though. Damn cat whisperers.

23 Maybe those stuffed animals filled a void...

with my ceiling fan, though. Due to the general shape of it, the shadow casted from my stolen lamps looks like Baby Yoda²⁴. I noticed this many eons ago and have neglected to mention it to most people.

I stare at Baby Yoda a lot for someone who has never watched Star Wars. The magnetic blankets almost make me.

About 3 months before I turned 18, I was sitting on the floor inside my room with Astro. He was crying at my closed door and stretching to reach the handle in an attempt to open it and let himself back out. He knows he *can* open the door. He's done it probably once a day since he got here. I had to use the Harry Potter series to keep him from doing so the night before tests because he would traumatize me at 4 A.M.²⁵ with an aggressive rattle from the doorknob. For all his agility and flexibility, he had almost no strength.

The issue he was actively having was that he's on the wrong side of the door to open it. He can't exactly pull a door open due to a lack of height, dexterity, and opposable thumbs. So he stretches to his terrifying 2 feet and has his paws higher than my head as he cries and cries and cries²⁶.

(You're breathing.) Every ten seconds or so, without fail, I breathe. It's been happening for almost 20 years. Nearly 2 decades. I don't realize I'm doing it until I do. Then, for some reason, I stop doing it, but eventually it fades back to the creases of my brain and resumes its natural cycle.

Sometimes I realize I'm doing it and have to strengthen my breaths, make them more controlled²⁷. Those are the nights where I stare at patched paint and dirt on the wall across from my bed. At least I assume that's what I see because typically the only thing I remember is that I was controlling my breathing.

Maybe I was seeing a shadow that's 7 feet tall. Maybe it had ears, or a tail. Maybe I was seeing the off-brand Lego flowers I got a little after I turned 18. Maybe they needed to be dusted. Everything needs to be dusted.

My room is safe from the creature in the hall. This is because the creature in the hall is not real, in case you missed that earlier, but it is also because the creature in the hall is very friendly. He has never been something I am afraid of. He is simply standing there in wait. His face has no discernible expression, he really

looks like he only has a skull. An animal skull, not human. Human bones are weird²⁸. The creature has a body. It's posable, though he only ever stands with draping arms and a hunched back. He's like certain panels of Batman. There's a college tote bag of Batman memorabilia²⁹ in a corner of my room. The creature's more a protector of my room than its villain. My room's like Gotham in that way.

A few hours later, though still 3 months before I turned 18, I walked out of my room at the incredible normal time of 2:30 P.M.³⁰ and Astro was dead. He'd been dead for about 7 hours at that point, I want to say³¹. Feline leukemia. It'd been killing him for probably about 3 months if my family's worries were to be used as a timeline. He was put down at the vet all the other pets would be and had been put down at. He was just shy of 21 months old³².

The 7 foot creature behind the door is a cat. Again, not actually, there's no creature there and there hasn't been in over 2 years, but he is in fact a cat. Astro most likely, but truthfully I don't know³³. I don't really acknowledge that he's a cat though. I've never acknowledged anything about him besides his looming presence just outside the door.

I ignored him most of the time. He didn't show up until about January of my senior year of high school, and even then I think I assumed I was waving at the monsters I remembered from my childhood more than I waved at him.

About 6 or 7 months later, about January, I got a pawprint that the vet had kept hidden in their back offices. Apparently, they'd accidentally stockpiled a bunch of families' dead pet memorial stones and with their new management, were finally distributing them.

It hides in a bin in my recently organized closet. The rest of the room is a bit of a mess, but the closets spick and span. There's more of Astro that's still here, though. The 17 pounds of hair that are caked into 15 year old carpet fibers. The hundreds of pictures that still, to this day, make him the second most photographed thing in my phone. The scratch that I had on my outer thigh for 3 weeks. The creature that protects me in the hallway³⁴. He's still here.

24 Not the regular Yoda, he's too old to match the youthful ambiance of my room.

25 About what time it is now... Fun!

26 And cries. And cries. And cried.

27 The only thing I hate to take control of.

28 Your ulna and your radius cross over each other when your palm's down. You can feel your own skull.

29 I love Batman.

30 Likely when I'll wake up tomorrow

31 Over 2 years now.

32 Is that the drinking age in cat years? Either way he didn't get to.

33 That cat didn't need another 5 feet added to his height if he wasn't even gonna try to open doors.

34 My parents' house is no longer the one where I met the creature. I have yet to realize if the creature has followed me. I have yet to know if Astro has followed me.



bruised ribs, poor memory—9/?/2025

mayah echin

I medication will do. rip away the pages of this awkward life
and start anew. sorry, i forgot. i forgot. i don't think i
remember... god, what *do* you remember? i feel incomplete,
like a blank sheet with lines erased more every day.
i live my life in songs which play nonstop in my head with stuff
i'd like to forget with stuff i wish i hadn't and it never ends
like the names in the movie credits...
sorry, how the outside looks all corroded but the door to inside
me is locked and bolted, here's to hoping you understand me enough to break
me open. hell i wouldn't care. tell me if you find anything there.
tell me there's something actually worth taking, how somewhere in between
these bruised, coughed-up ribs my pain isn't just faking.
maybe i could remember—do me a favor? i'll put it all back later.



**boredom, bad habits
and band-aids**
chloe thorburn

six short weeks

bowie savoie

Boxes, loading
Bags of clothing
Packing up the rest of your life

18 summers
Come and gone
Showing up and moving on

keep the thoughts and all the rest runs.

signs point towards the smallest town
get on out, look around
know you'll never be the same.

slap the bumper, call it home
now they've gotta hit the road

For the first time you've been left all alone.

—

And the rhythm of your life begins to drastically fade.
When you change do you nullify the memories made?
Losing step in the dance you've lived your whole life

Just six short weeks, and rearranged
To fill the hole that I have made
By leaving over choosing to stay

I remain,
I remain.

—

There's never been a part of me that
misses something drastically
or cries over the smallest things

but bump into my brother
with empty talks and longer stares
when did I get smaller?
They're growing up without me there.

—

some things stick and some things fade
which stairs will creak when you stay up late
where the puppy lays, which chair is mine

The shower head's just not as strong and nowhere feels like I belong
like a puzzle piece without its box

I am lost,

I am lost.

—

There always something small in me
that wishes I was happy
But takes away those thoughts and words

I'll always search the carpet floor
For memories made with paper
I find all of the teary sheets
From crying over my receipts

A tag from shopping with my mom
Knowing that's where I belong
but I go back and everything's wrong.

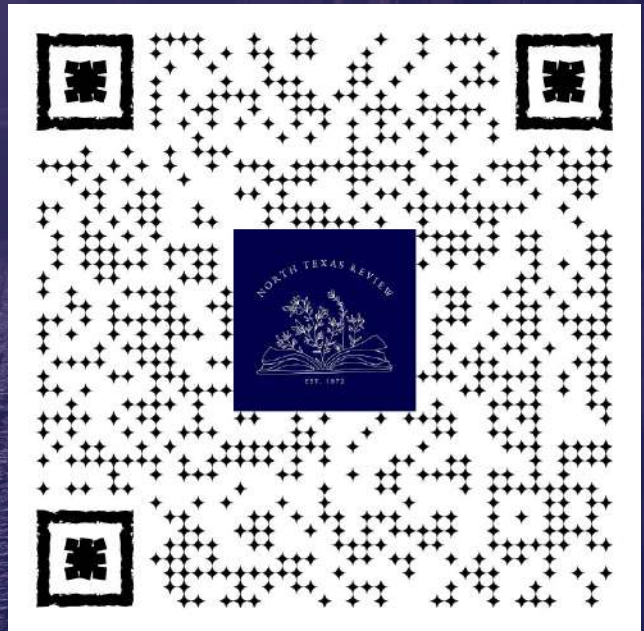
—

now we're settled in
stinging nettle
every step is worsening pain
trash the comfort that
Got us all here
For a chance at being liked the right way

When will something stay the same?
When will I feel ready for change?

When will things start being okay?
When will I feel found in the place?

I hope I can remain someday.
I hope I am retained someday.
I hope that day could be
Today



il tempo delle streghe ¹

amelia marcucci

A choking exhaust reunites with a smoky swirling wind stealing the light from the sky.
The wind picks up as you walk stepping on the curb and kicking that small pebble.
Bend down and feel the wind and the hair in your mouth and your shirt
Hiking up to your waist as the wind tickles your back.

Look up as your back curves like the rivers in the valleys
Your hands ache as you harvest the luxury you cannot eat.

Hold the pebble *il sassolino* ² as the crisp wind sings high and low
Whipping and whistling around the leather of your skin and the sable of your hair.

Sing the songs to remember the beautiful goodbye ³ of the *mondine* ⁴.
Hear the songs as your hands hold bitter rice ⁵ and pull the hat over your face
But remember to burn the wool covering your eyes.

A tear from the sky *cielo scuro* ⁶ unites with its human sister.
The wind picks up as you bend down picking up the small pebble *un bel fior* ⁷.
And then you are home your hair knotted as you tap the buttons for that steel garage
Humming the beautiful goodbye.



1 lit. weather of the witch / witch weather, the nervousness felt before a storm
2 lit. pebble, a stone worn smooth by the Po River
3 lit. bella ciao, a popular resistance tune based on a folk song sung by the mondine
4 an overworked and underpaid seasonal rice paddy female worker, especially in the Po Valley of Italy from the 16th to 20th centuries
5 a 1949 Italian neo-realist crime drama depicting the struggles of the mondine
6 lit. dark sky
7 lit. beautiful flower

american marigolds

anna walter

Texas Woman's University – Denton, TX

SCENE 1

AT RISE: There is a pulsing orange light that glows and moves. It seems alive. As we watch it for longer, it starts to materialize into memory vignettes. We get glimpses, but it's almost as if we are seeing them through a kaleidoscope. There is someone dancing, brief sights of a kitchen, a splash in a pool. The sounds of the memories are overlapping, and we start to see more and more of each moment, however, one thing is wrong. Whoever is in the memories—a woman—has no face visible. We think we may get to see her face when suddenly—

EXT. FESTIVAL – DAY

MARIFER, 18, is at a Día de Muertos celebration by herself.

Around her is colorful: sugar skulls, picado flags, brightly lit candles. MARIFER has dark under-eyes and frizzy hair. She wears a dark jacket a size too big for her.

Blankly, she stares at the activities around her. Children run and play, vendors sell food, people talk and laugh. Her attention is brought to where the ofrendas are, with families or individuals praying or crying over photos of their lost loved ones, leaving them offerings. She becomes uncomfortable and looks away.

Her phone rings. She looks down at it. “Mom”. She doesn't answer, instead letting it go to voicemail. Once the call declines, we see she has several missed call notifications from MOM.

The sounds of the festival are still heard as MARIFER starts to recall a memory.

FLASHBACK – MARIFER'S MEMORY

Though her face can not be seen, it is clear that this is a new character. ANACLETA, MARIFER'S older sister. She is painting on a large easel. She has long, dark hair that reaches the small of her back. Her paint smock is littered with orange splotches. Her hand moves delicately. We cannot see what she is painting.

EXT. FESTIVAL – DAY

MARIFER'S phone buzzes again. It's a WhatsApp notification.

She plays the voice message from “Mom”.

MOM

Marifer, honey, it's mom. Please call me back. I'm worried about you. Your sister's funeral was beautiful. Everyone was there.

MOM pauses. MARIFER'S eyes fill with tears. She was the only one not there. MOM speaks slowly.

MOM (CONT'D)

We miss you. We love you. We wish you were here. The house is so quiet now, without her. With you in American college...

MARIFER sees people her age—her peers—chatting with friends and eating food. There is a girl with waist-length dark hair. There is an artist doing caricature drawings. A little girl rides on her older sister's shoulders.

MOM (CONT'D)

Please call me back. At least send me a voice message. I worry about you there by yourself. Just let me know you are okay, darling. I'll talk to you later, I love you.

The voice message ends. MARIFER watches the festival for another moment. She opens the app and starts to record a voice message.

MARIFER

I...

She freezes, not knowing what to say. She stares at the crowd; it brings back the memories.

The girl with long hair. ANACLETA'S hair. The artist. ANACLETA painting. In the memory, she begins to turn around—

MARIFER stands up quickly, starting to leave. We follow behind—her frizzy, matted hair a stark contrast to the excited crowd around her. Vendors wave at her, but she ignores them. She knocks into someone, barely turning around to apologize.

MARIFER (CONT'D)

Sorry.

The man turns towards her, holding out a bouquet of orange marigolds.

MAN

Flowers? For your loved one?

MARIFER stops. The crowd whirls around the two.

MARIFER

Uh, sure.

She reaches into the pocket of her jacket, pulling out a few loose, crumpled bills. The MAN accepts them and smiles.

MAN

May I ask who they're for?

MARIFER

My sister. My older sister. She died last week. Her funeral was today. I had to miss it. I wasn't able to go back home.

MAN

I'm so sorry. Do you have an ofrenda for her?

MARIFER

No.

MAN

You should make one. Put these on it. I'll pray for you. For your family.

MARIFER nods and accepts the flowers. They don't do much to brighten her.

END SCENE 1

SCENE 2

INT. MARIFER'S APARTMENT

MARIFER enters her apartment. It's a small studio with a kitchen, living area, and bed. There is a religious altar. It's quaint and holds a small assortment of items: Candles, a matchbook, a vase with flowers, a Lady Guadalupe statue, and a rosary. There is a family photo hanging on the wall. She stops in front of it, but doesn't turn to look. Her head perfectly obscures ANACLETA'S presence in the photo.

A beat.

She faces the altar, eyes turned down. For a moment, she wills herself to look up, but can't. If she sees her sisters face in the photos, she'll see them in her memories. She places the marigolds in the vase.

MARIFER looks at the petals, then down to the altar, where an orange peel lays.

EXT. YARD – MEMORY

A young MARIFER jumps to reach an orange on the tree in her front yard, but is too short. ANACLETA, faced away from the camera, picks MARIFER up and places her on her shoulders. MARIFER picks an orange from the tree, holding it out to admire it.

She watches as ANACLETA unpeels the orange in a way that leaves one continuous peel. MARIFER 'oooo'-s at it, playing with the orange peel.

ANACLETA breaks the orange into pieces, feeding one to MARIFER. The juice dribbles down her chin, and both girls laugh.

INT. ALTAR

MARIFER lets go of the petals.

She kneels and makes the sign of the cross,
bowing her head and beginning to pray.

MARIFER

Our Father, who art in Heaven,
hallowed be Thy Name,
Thy Kingdom come,
Thy will be done on earth as it
is in Heaven.

(MORE)

MARIFER (CONT'D)

Give us this day our daily bread.
And forgive us our trespasses, as
we forgive those who trespass
against us.
And lead us not into temptation,
but deliver us from evil. Amen.

Then, she takes the rosary and wraps it in her
hands.

MARIFER (CONT'D)

Hail Mary, full of grace,
The Lord is with thee.
Blessed art thou amongst
women, And blessed is the fruit
of thy womb, Jesus.
Holy Mary, Mother of God,
Pray for us sinners,
Now and at the hour of our
death. Amen.

MARIFER takes several slow, deep breaths.
Her hands tighten around the rosary.

MARIFER (CONT'D)

Lord, I don't know what to say.
I've prayed every day since she
died. I prayed the entire rosary,
just like mom taught me to.
But nothing is different. She's
still...

She squeezes her eyes shut, not wanting to say
it.

MARIFER (CONT'D)

She's dead. And, God, I would
do anything to bring her back.
She was always better at this
than me. She knew all the

prayers, she knew what to
say. I don't. If I had known it
would be like this, I would have
listened to her. If I had known,
I would have stopped it.

Her breath is becoming shaky. She's holding
onto the rosary so tight her knuckles are white.

MARIFER (CONT'D)

Please. If you can hear me,
please. Just tell me this is one
big joke. Tell me it's not true,
send me a sign. My family says
she's in a better place now, that
it was your plan. But she was
my sister. She *is* my sister. I
needed her!

She's crying now, rocking back and forth on her
knees.

MARIFER (CONT'D)

I still need her... I've begged for
a sign, for anything to tell me
you're listening. How can I be
okay with no answer? Where is
the comfort in that?

A beat.

MARIFER (CONT'D)

My mother says you are
forgiving. My sister was the
perfect daughter, she never did
anything wrong. She stayed in
Mexico while I moved here. I
was the one that left! Did you
do it to punish me? So that I
would seek forgiveness?

MARIFER tips herself forward until her
bowed head is pressed to the floor.

MARIFER (CONT'D)
(quietly)

I just don't know what to do
anymore.

SCENE 3

INT. ALTAR

MARIFER begins to cry again, the rosary still wrapped around her hands.

MARIFER

Please...

She raises her head, looking at the table. She looks at the statue of Lady Guadalupe. Slowly, her face falls from a pleading expression to nothing at all.

MARIFER (CONT'D)
(just louder than a
whisper)

Why won't you help me?

Silence.

MARIFER (CONT'D)
(louder)

Why won't you help me?!

She looks at the statue, then the orange peel, then finally the family portrait. Her father, her mother, herself—

MARIFER (CONT'D)

Am I just supposed to wait?

MARIFER looks towards the altar, as if she actually expects a reply. When one doesn't come, she throws the rosary at the statue. It misses, but strikes a nearby candle and knocks it over.

MARIFER (CONT'D)

Is that what I'm supposed to do? Tell me!

She shoves the table once. The picture frame wobbles. She picks up the rosary.

MARIFER (CONT'D)

You just want me to sit here and—and pray all my sorrows away? With this? And that's going to... what, bring my sister back? Bring me peace? She's in the ground! She's dead and I'm here and it should be the other way around.

Finally snapping, MARIFER rips the rosary apart. Beads fly into the air, bouncing off the table and scattering on the floor. She slams her hands flat on the table, then does it again with closed fists.

She beats the table; candles fall, the Lady Guadalupe figure gets crushed under her fist. Screaming, she pushes everything onto the floor. The vase with marigolds shatters across the floor, glass exploding.

Above the altar, the family portrait sways and falls. MARIFER throws the picture frame with the rest of the ruined items, yelling now.

MARIFER (CONT'D)

She did everything she was supposed to! She stayed at home! I was the one who left. Why her? Why not me?! Take me instead!

The words hang in the air. She stares at the mess she made. The family portraits lays facedown. Slowly, she picks it up.

The glass of the frame has cracked. The photo shows MARIFER, her MOM, and her DAD. The fractures glass perfectly covers ANACLETAS face.

INT. CHURCH – MEMORY

The sound of water dripping from a faucet can be heard over the memory.

A young MARIFER sits in the church pews in between two women. We see the back of their heads, and they all have identical long, dark hair. Together, they lower to their knees, bow their heads, and pray.

MARIFER struggles to get her rosary—the same one she just broke—in the correct position in her hand. ANACLETA, fingernails painting orange, reaches over to help her.

MARIFER smiles up at her. She compares the way her sister holds a rosary to the way she is, drawing her gaze towards ANACLETAS face.

The camera cuts away before it can reach her.

CUT TO:

END SCENE 3

SCENE 4

INT. BATHROOM

MARIFER is in the bath. Her hair is wet and stringy and lays flat across her face and shoulders as she stares empty. It's cold and sterile. She shivers.

With every slow drip of the faucet, she recalls a memory. The memories feel cold, too.

ANACLETA painting. Long hair. Specks of orange paint.

MARIFER on ANACLETA'S shoulders, holding out the orange. Getting fed an orange, the juice dripping down her chin.

MARIFER smiling up at ANACLETA. Comparing their hands. ANACLETA wrapping the rosary around her hands.

In the bath, MARIFER frowns.

We see the moment from the previous scene of MARIFER pulling the rosary apart.

She turns off the faucet. The silence is deafening. The only other sound is the bath water quietly lapping.

The glass cracks over ANACLETA'S face. MARIFER sneers angrily and cracks the glass again. This time, it shatters over her own face.

SLOW MOTION – ALTERNATING BETWEEN PRESENT AND MEMORIES

MARIFER stands up from the bath, mirrored with a memory.

In the memory, MARIFER is sitting in a generic university classroom when her phone lights up with a call from “Mom”. She stands up, answering the call and leaving the room.

MARIFER'S wet feet on the cold tile floor, standing there.

In her memory, MARIFER'S feet come to a stop. Her phone drops and bounces off the ground, but she doesn't pick it up.

Squeezing her eyes shut, tears escape her face as she stumbles into her room.

MARIFER falls to the ground, sobbing.

She is having a panic attack, hyperventilating and shaking as she walks blindly. Her hair is still wet and she has only a loose towel around her.

MARIFER crawls towards her phone, crying so hard she can barely breathe.

She has fallen now, crawling towards her bedroom. She is in such a state that she doesn't realize she's crawling across glass.

END SLOW MOTION – CURRENT SETTING

MARIFER brings her legs to her chest, allowing herself to break down.

END SCENE 4

SCENE 5

The camera pulls away from MARIFER'S panic, turning around the room to focus on a picture on the wall. It's a painting of the same marigold flowers MARIFER got at the festival. All four of them are floating in water, two large ones and two smaller ones. One of the small flowers' petals is sinking into the water, just slightly. At the bottom, the name ANACLETA RÉNÁTA ANDUAGA JUAREZ. We pull away, back to MARIFER.

She is a stark contrast to when we saw her last. Her room is slightly messy, her closet open and a box turned on it's side. On the floor, she cradles an orange sweatshirt to her chest, using the sleeves to wipe the rest of her tears. Her hands are bandaged where she crawled in the glass. Her hair is still stringy but her eyes are brighter. She's looking at the painting. Her gaze drops down to the sweatshirt, looking at the sloppily written initials in the tag: 'A.R.A.J.'. She closes her eyes and cradles it closer.

SONG CUE: I EXIST, I EXIST, I EXIST BY FLATSOUND (3:45)

The memory of ANACLETA painting. Long hair, orange flecks of paint, a steady hand. Then,

for the first time, we see her face. ANACLETA turns towards us, beaming and showing the painting she's been working on. It's the one we just saw.

The memories start to spill out now, but with ANACLETA'S face now visible. They feel inviting instead of dreadful. ANACLETA using the orange peel to make a silly smile. MARIFER wiping the juice from her chin. MARIFER smiling up at her sister in the church and ANACLETA beaming right back.

We also get glimpses of new ones: a family dance party in the kitchen, splashing and swimming in the ocean, setting up an ofrenda on Día de Muertos and placing the familiar marigolds.

Still cradling the sweatshirt, MARIFER perks up. She opens her phone, clicking record on a voice message. The following sequence is voiced over.

INT. APARTMENT

MARIFER

Hi, Mom. I'm doing... okay, I think. Today was hard. But I found that sweater I told you I lost. It still has her initials in the tag. I have that painting, the one of the marigolds. It's perfect, mom. I really... I miss her so much. And I miss you.

(MORE)

MARIFER (CONT'D)

And some days I wish I never left. But I'm okay. I made her a space here. I love you. Bye.

MARIFER cleans up the destroyed altar. She sweeps up the broken glass and throws away the destroyed candles.

She fixes the rosary and Lady Guadalupe statue with some super glue.

She begins setting up something new on the table. It's an ofrenda. First, she places the statue and candles that weren't destroyed, striking a match to light them. Then, she places the

orange peel and a new vase of marigolds next to it. Finally, she places the family portrait with a brand new frame. ANACLETA'S smiling face is perfectly in frame now, not obscured by anything. In the photo, she's wearing the same orange sweatshirt MARIFER held earlier.

She looks longingly at the photo, her fingertips brushing ANACLETA'S face against the glass. Then, she smiles for the first time.

Angled behind MARIFER, we start to pull away. The place has the feeling of comfort. We know she will be okay.

MARIFER pulls on the sweatshirt. We linger. The music fades.

FADE TO BLACK.

THE END

your greatest souvenir won't fit in your suitcase

rhianna lewis

University of Denver – Denver, CO

Right before you pack up your things and say your goodbyes,
before you wipe tears from your face on the other side of security,
a little voice inside your head will ask if you're ready.

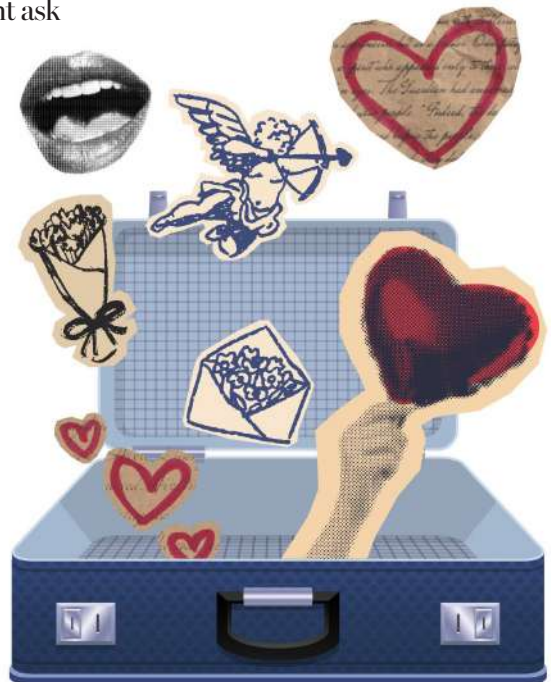
If you say yes, which you will,
(because you can't refund the ticket),
this is what that voice might say:

You have to listen -
to the safety demonstration, yes,
but also to the overwhelming wooshing of the engines.
When the intercom announces a gate change, yes,
but also to the consonants of continents being spoken all around you.

You have to watch -
for pickpockets and unfamiliar alleys, yes,
but also the way mornings start slow with cigarettes and conversation.
When there are tiny, windy roads and crazy drivers, yes,
but also for the sunrise over antiquity you've been reading about for years.

You have to remember -
to call across time zones and time apart, yes,
But also to put down your phone and pick up your head.
When the feeling of home can feel very lonely, yes,
it isn't hard to find family along the way.

When you are twenty years old, the world might ask
if you are ready to experience everything.
Your answer must be a resounding
yes, yes, yes.



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amelia abney

Amelia Abney is a student at the University of North Texas.

aidan accedo

Aidan Accedo is a student at the University of North Texas.

alida askill

Alida Askill is a current Junior studying Environmental Science and Zoology at Ohio Wesleyan University.

gabi baca

Gabi is a two-time published poet, screenwriter, and multidisciplinary creative from Texas, with a focus in art, design, and all things writing. She has a passion for activism and authenticity, and values narratives that spark empathy and curiosity.

jasmin benitez carbajal

Jasmin Benitez Carbajal is a Mexican-American poet who is inspired by English and Spanish poetry. In their own works, they indulge in writing about nature and their romantic view of life and its many conundrums.

alex briggs

Alex Briggs is a fiction and poetry writer in her senior year at UNT (Creative Writing major). Her dream is to become a novelist, and her hobbies include doodling, reading, and listening to classic rock.

franciella camarena

Franciella Camarena is a Mexican American artist at the University of North Texas who specializes in charcoal drawings. Her series of "The Divine Comedy", is rich with elements of the human form, narration, and iconography.

charvi chintada

Charvi Chintada is a student at the University of North Texas.

cupid chrustawka

Cupid Chrustawka is an undergraduate English major trying to immortalize every person who has ever existed. A fascination with humanity and an upbringing in Costa Rica haunt both his writing and his everyday life like nostalgic ghosts.

leonardo chung

Leonardo Chung is a Korean-American writer attending Yale University. He recently won First Place in Poetry in the Los Angeles Review and First Place for Nonfiction in the 93rd Annual Writer's Digest Writing Competition.

ava chutter

Ava is a freshman at the University of North Texas currently studying for her B.F.A. in Drawing and Painting. She enjoys all things art and hopes to continue growing as an artist in her professional career.

finn collins

Finn Collins is a student at the University of North Texas.

ryan cracford

Ryan Cracford is an English Language Arts major at UNT. He aspires to teach high school English and loves writing poetry to express himself.

blaine curl

Blaine Curl is a student at the University of North Texas.

karsyn doxey

Karsyn Doxey is a student at the University of North Texas.

mayah echin

Mayah Echin is a sophomore English major at UNT with a minor in Journalism. She enjoys reading realistic fiction, writing unfinished short stories, and playing pop punk songs on guitar.

emma fleckenstein

Emma Fleckenstein is a student at the University of North Texas studying English Literature and Philosophy. She writes poetry that focuses on love, desire, and the metaphysical.

lexie glenn

Lexie Glenn is a recent graduate from the University of North Texas. She enjoys long walks at Tj-Maxx and the late Princess Diana.

audrey grizzaffi

Audrey Grizzaffi is a student at the University of North Texas who has the goal of teaching art abroad. Her work, "Wayward Son" represents the many cycles of life reflected in herself and the world around; showing us that despite the time that passes and the change that occurs, maybe it isn't as unfamiliar as one might think.

mallory guilstorf

Mallory is studying English rhetoric and Spanish at the University of North Texas. Her passions include all things medieval, anything concerning etymology, and writing from the heart.

guy with musical instruments

Guy With Musical Instruments is a student at the University of North Texas.

amirah khan

Amirah Khan is a student at the University of North Texas.

grant leigh

Grant Leigh studies art history at Occidental College. See more work @my_mama_yours on Instagram.

rhianna lewis

Rhianna Lewis is a student, poet, theatre-maker, and aspiring world traveler finishing her undergraduate degree at the University of Denver. She is so grateful to be able to share her writing with the world in the North Texas Review and the cherished adventures that led her to it.

isaiah lock

Isaiah Lock is a student at the University of North Texas.

isaiah maddox

Isaiah Maddox is a student at the University of North Texas.

daphne mantle

Daphne Mantle is a 29 year old fiction nerd who has a Beloved Allergen-Free Triple Chocolate Threat cookie recipe to her name, and is set to get her Undergraduate in Creative Writing from University of North Texas this Spring (2026).

anna marcucci

Anna is a junior at the University of North Texas and is pursuing a degree in Studio Art, with a minor in Art History. They love to use acrylic paint and oil pastels, creating work with their own imagination and help from their cat, Io.

amelia marcucci

Amelia Marcucci is a third-year biomedical engineering student at UNT. She likes to explore the interconnection of history, literature, and STEM/robotics.

brendan matocha

Brendan Matocha is a student at the University of North Texas who writes everything from prose to poems to screenplays. He co-founded the award-winning Dirty Shoe Productions, loves hypothetical questions, and / deeply enjoys / enjambment.

ryleigh mccooy

Ryleigh McCoy attends the University of North Texas, where she is currently studying English and Linguistics. This is her first published work, though she hopes that her love of words will result in many more.

ethan montgomery

Ethan Montgomery is a student at the University of North Texas.

tryna nguyen

Tryna Nguyen is a student at the University of North Texas.

emma nielsen

Emma Nielsen is a student at the University of North Texas.

jacqueline o'neill

Jacqueline O'Neill is a student at the University of North Texas.

mckenna parra

McKenna Parra is a student at the University of North Texas.

rileigh peña vidal

Rileigh Peña Vidal is a metalsmith whose work explores biomorphic forms inspired by the microscopic structures of the human body. Drawing from her background as a phlebotomist and a lifelong fascination with the medical field, Peña finds creative grounding in histology, the study of cells and tissues. Her current body of work reflects on the stages of grief, with each piece representing an abstract cellular form tied to a personal memory or emotion.

sylvia polansky

Sylvia Grey Polansky grew up in Wisconsin and began to write at a very young age. She is currently studying at Mount Holyoke College as an English major and poetry editor for The Mount Holyoke Review. She is interested in telling stories that explore memory and what it means to be human.

alanna reed

Alanna Reed is a senior at University of North Texas, graduating with a BA in English Creative Writing. She is honored to be included in this year's issue, and she hopes to move readers with her poetry about love in its many forms.

kai reyes

Kai Reyes is a student at the University of North Texas.

ruben reyes

Ruben Reyes is an emerging artist and art education major at the University of North Texas, dedicated to using creativity as a tool for advocacy and community building. His work often explores themes of Identity, cultural heritage, and resilience, drawing inspiration from personal experiences and the diverse communities around him.

thomas rooney

Thomas Rooney is a jack-of-all-trades and literature major at the University of North Texas. He enjoys journaling, yoga, and exploring the intersections of nature and artifice.

bowie sarvoie

Bowie Sarvoie is a choral music education major in the University of North Texas's College of Music. They only started performing their original music publicly in the last year, and with the positive

reception, they are excited to share more of their music in the future.

lily sewell

Lily Sewell is a student at the University of North Texas.

mahvish shah

Mahvish is a junior studying film and advertising at the University of North Texas. Besides poetry, she is fond of oranges, cats, and all things purple.

lexi soto

Lexi Soto is a student at the University of North Texas.

jesse sutton

Jesse Sutton is a student at the University of North Texas.

chloe thornburn

Chloe is an Art Education major at the University of North Texas whose multimedia practice draws from personal experiences to explore themes of mental health.

trey thornton

Trey Thornton is a student at the University of North Texas.

margaret ude

Margaret Ude is a student at Texas Woman's University.

camille valencia

Camille Valencia is a student at the University of North Texas earning a BA in English Creative Writing. Their writing bounces around the Queer experience, love, friendship, and girlhood as well as living with a disability and chronic pain.

anna walter

Anna Walter is a student at Texas Woman's University studying English Writing & Rhetoric and minoring in Business Management. She is excited to be featured in the North Texas Review. Her past publications include Misdiagnosis and the Effect on Mental Health in Off the Quill.

evan mores wesly

Evan Moses Wesly is a student at the University of North Texas.

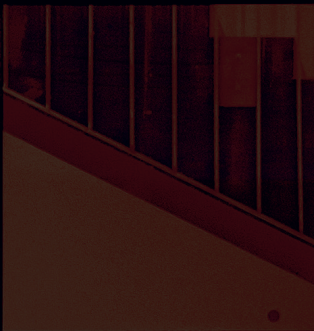
paige young

Paige Young is a student at the University of North Texas.



"North Texas Review has deservedly won accolades for standing out as one of the best college literary journals on the national scene. What a thrill that it now accepts writing from undergraduates across the country, printing that work alongside the best pieces by writers here at UNT. *NTR* keeps growing stronger."

—*Corey Marks, Director of Creative Writing and author of The Rock That Is Not A Rabbit*—



"To borrow a figure from contributor Ryleigh McCoy, this issue of *NTR* is 'a rock of Love' that I pick up and 'look underneath to watch all the little Love-bugs scurry away and back into the dirt.' In this case, the bugs are works of art, and the dirt is my psyche. Each poem, story, essay, and image in this collection burrows its distinctive, instinctive way into my consciousness."

—*James Davis, Lecturer and author of Club Q*—

"WHAT A DELIGHT, TO BE SO DEEPLY AND VARIOUSLY ACCESSED!"

"This volume of the *North Texas Review* affirms the extraordinary talent within our creative community. The writers and artists gathered here confront difficult subjects with nuance, precision, and imaginative force. Their work is thoughtful, formally adventurous, and deeply resonant—an achievement worthy of attention and applause."

—*Kimberly Grey, Assistant Professor and author of A Mother Is an Intellectual Thing*—



north *tejas* *review* *issue* *2026*