

The LSWA Arts & Literary Journal

AS WE ARE

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University of Michigan

Content Warnings: Some of these poems and stories may contain sensitive subjects, including eating disorders and suicidal ideation, that will be disturbing to some readers. Please care for yourself and step away if need be.

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Our mission is to create a student-run publication that showcases vibrant and engaging work produced in Lloyd Scholars for Writing and the Arts during the academic year.

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Letter from the Director: **Carol Tell**

Well, 2020-2021 was one for the books. Amidst a global pandemic, U-M first took a stab at being in-person until around Thanksgiving, when most students were sent off-campus, some opted to stay in res halls, and still others, who hadn't come to campus at the onset, stayed put. As for LSWA, building what is typically a residential creative community in a virtual space, when students' living arrangements were neither monolithic nor ideal, was... challenging? Fool-hearty? A s***-show?

Yes, and yes, and absolutely yes—and yet we managed our way through it. Every Zoom All-Community meeting, every club event, every class demonstrated your resilience, talent, and camaraderie. This book once again proves your ability to create community and art out of the ether. The journal is more than a gorgeous archive of your artistic achievements for the year: it is a document of resistance. Here in these pages, you can witness what Megan O'Grady from the *New York Times* sees artists and writers doing everywhere during the pandemic: “illuminating new shifts and losses, documenting the small kindnesses and cruelties, the large failures of leadership, technology, and society.”

The work in this book is emphatic, reactive, angry, joyful. It expresses isolation and connectedness. What a pleasure to see the works of graduating senior Caldwell poetry winners, such as Dylan Gilbert and Kaitlyn Bondoni, whose poems have challenged and delighted us for the past four years. It's

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also exciting to witness the creative evolution of many writers and artists who are becoming just absurdly good--check out, for example, Rachna Iyer's imaginative and playful "In Another Life, I Wish I Knew Less," or Alejandro Derieux-Cerezo's mind-blowing "Rubbernecking." Above all, it's a thrill to see our first-year students' range of talent, integrity, and energy—for example, Julia Boughner's "Compass" or Zoya Uzzaman's "the railroad line." The visual artwork is equally compelling and exuberant, capturing in a variety of mediums the many ways we've seen this year unfold before our eyes: from Eaman Ali's colorful urbanscape "Bird's Eye" to Brianna Fox's all-too-familiar "Fifth Week of College" to Nayla Vasquez's intricate and powerful sketches. Indeed, every one of these pieces takes a stab at showing the many ways to describe, respond to, and re-imagine the world.

This book would not be possible without the hard work of the LSWA journal editorial board, to whom we owe great thanks. At the helm of this ship have been the unshakable Editors-in-Chief Emily Buckley, Rachna Iyer, and Mariah Lowry, and Managing Editor Suzi F. Garcia (who is also an astonishing poet—you should check out her work if you haven't yet!). An extra shout-out to our staff and student leaders, and especially the RAs, both in LSWA and throughout campus, who kept it all together and, when necessary, pushed back for change. I'm grateful to all the students who contributed to these pages, to those whose work may not have been chosen for publication, and to every one of our LSWA

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students 2020-2021. You are extraordinary, just as you are.

Carol Tell

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Notes from the Editors: **Emily Buckley**

I've always been intimidated by a blank page. Or a blank canvas. I purchase new notebooks, journals, and sketch pads with visions of creativity overflowing from the pages, bursting with ideas that keep me up at night. But the truth is that sometimes (most times), I don't know what to say, or draw, or make, or write. So, I read. Look. Listen. Admire. As I sit and try to think of what to say in this letter, I find myself looking back through my years spent in this community and the years before me. I think about LSWA in its entirety. I flip through the journals I once made with friends and click through journals made before my time. I remember what it's like to walk through Alice Lloyd and feel the walls painted by past cohorts. I laugh at art studio and classroom memories with both friends and teachers alike. Looking back is like looking through a kaleidoscope of creativity that never fails to inspire me when I need it. And that's what is so special about this year's journal. It's never been more necessary.

In a year of isolation, uncertainty, fear, and doubt, you all created and gave life to something new. And, somehow, despite many of us never meeting in person, we have found a common thread. One that not only connects us but represents us. From Sam Hubenet's "Bronze Sunrise" celebrating small wins to Brianna Fox's "Fifth week of college" depicting all-too-familiar college exhaustion and everything in the coming pages:

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this journal was a group effort, made by feelings so singular they fueled individual expression and, hence, an entire community.

That's what this journal is to me: a simple celebration of our work, our lives, our community, and our ability to both find and share inspiration when it is needed most. Though I sound like a broken record from every mass meeting, I want to thank you all – our community – for your submissions. It was an honor to view every piece you submitted and every creation you made, and I am lucky to have been inspired by your talent.

I also want to thank our beautiful and committed editorial staff, who met every deadline, shared their thoughtful opinions, and helped craft this token of our community. To Suzi F. Garcia, Mariah Lowry, Rachna Iyer, Shannon Beattie, Daniela Butkovic, Leah Chiss, Samantha Demasi, Kaitlyn Gozon, Nikki Lama, and Elle Pugh: thank you for all of the hard work, tough decisions, and time you put into making this journal what it is.

And finally, to you, the reader: I hope you enjoy this physical souvenir of a year unlike any other with a community so vibrant that I didn't mind staring through a computer screen. I hope you find inspiration from viewing our art and reading our words of the past. And I hope you know

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that this journal is only just a sliver of a community bursting with enough creativity to fill a thousand pages and canvases. While we may have been separated by distance, we were able to come together. As we move forward, I hope we can all find this type of community again. One where we are accepted – as writers, as artists, and “as we are.”

—*Emily Buckley*

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Notes from the Editors: **Rachna Iyer**

In the Fall of 2020, as a Student Assistant for LSWA, I was required to take Mark Tucker's class LSWA 230: Creative Communities – which quickly grew to be one of my favorite classes I have taken at Michigan thus far. One of the main components of this unique class was to create a group project based on a creative theme, and my group chose Embracing Vulnerability Through Art. We dared ourselves to take the creative leap that scared us the most; immerse ourselves in a form of art we have always wanted to try but have been too scared to do so. Some members sketched, animated, and I wrote and created a song from scratch. We learned that creating art means being vulnerable, and being vulnerable means being brave. This is exactly what I see in this year's journal.

During this time, I also had the privilege of co-leading the Arts & Literary Journal with my colleagues Suzi F. Garcia, Emily Buckley, and Mariah Lowry. Every Tuesday evening, we sat (virtually, of course) with our esteemed club members (Shannon Beattie, Daniela Butkovic, Leah Chiss, Samantha Demasi, Kaitlyn Gozon, Nikki Lama, and Elle Pugh) and we got the chance to review what the one-hundred-something students of LSWA made and submitted to the journal.

Every week, I was amazed and thoroughly impressed by how my peers could fiercely create while the world around us seemed to crumble.

Sometimes it made sense – being locked alone in my room all day and all night seemed to be great for introspection for my own poetry, like what you might find in Phoebe Huang’s *Caged* or Julia Boughner’s *Dates*. In a lot of ways, it was the perfect coping mechanism, too. However, I couldn’t (and still cannot) stop thinking about how easy it would have been for everyone to simply cave inwards, let their circumstances consume them. My hypothesis from *Creative Communities* was then supported and even taken a step further: if creating art is an act of bravery, creating art in the last year is an act of bravery, courage, and valor.

Thank you to everyone who contributed to the creation of this journal from the Arts & Literary Journal Club co-leaders and members to the wonderful LSWA staff and every single student. Happy reading!

— *Rachna Iyer*

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* Caldwell Winner

** Caldwell Honorable Mention

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A Big Rupri Kaur Joke That Got Very Real Very Quickly
by Maddie Agne

milk
and honey
are utterly useless

they are sticky
and runny
and only fleetingly
sweet
before they have dissolved
 on the tongue
and absolved
 into the great divide

we tout our milk and honey
like ambrosia and nectar
and I ask the women
why?

why
milk and honey

when you could be
stone and salt

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stoic and solid
eroded only by
time
and guilt

when you could be
paper and wax
melted and hardened
again and again
until there is a cavern
of what once

when you could be
glass and wine
shattering
 slowly
your little pieces scattering
staining
and slashing

why be
milk and honey
when milk spoils
and honey is too sweet
and there is no place for sweetness

in our world
I don't know
who taught me to be salt
but would that I
were made of stone
I would be a great deal happier

because kindness
overwhelms the heart
but only the ocean
overwhelms the stone

and yet
the women
are overwhelmed
by the men
as the fire
overtakes
the ocean

it seems
I will never win
with stone
and salt
or paper

and wax
or glass
and wine

I will never win
without milk
and honey

and my
'why'
becomes
'of course'

because milk
and honey
gives men pause
the sweetness is not useless
and we must tout
our ambrosia and nectar
to escape
the tongue of man
and the great divide
he would so easily throw us into

because kindness

may overwhelm the heart
but my stone
will never overwhelm fire

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The Impossibility of Being Human by Maddie Agne

It's a funny thing
the intangibility of being human

The idea of a person
loving so deeply
and coddling until it's caring
for another person

That one could ever
give up everything
for a glimpse
of forever

In the eye of a flaming heart
where I might meet peril
another might see a soul
and love it
for forever
In a way I have never known

It seems
a deep
and a dire
strait
we have been thrown into

Abandoned here

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by my forefathers
with promises
 of prospect
 and prosperity
 for all posterity

This strait
this narrow water
offers me none
 of what was promised

So I crave land
despite being told
I was lucky
 for the water
though it is undrinkable

I dream of sand
 and solid grass
where my friends and I
 can build our castles
 can build our monuments
where no one will burn them down.

My Mama and I Have Visions by Maddie Agne

My mama
has visions

of my dead grandfather
and my dying grandmother

and I have them too
Because I am my father's daughter
but I am my mother's dreamer

Brought forth from vikings
and queens
with third eyes
wide enough to swallow you whole

From great-grandparents
not so far removed from their homes
that I can still feel their tugging
at Yggdrasil's roots

When I was young
My mama
brought on by medicine
had dreams
of my brother and I
dying

And she told us of them
and how she loved us

I became
my mother's savage daughter
the one who hunts
for omens
in the face of the moon

Omens
of the fate
allotted to me

While my mother dreams
of things that were
things that are
and things that may be

And she passed them to me
her St Lucia's Day daughter

So like the maiden king
I could be council
and prophecy

With the seidr
in our bones
And the Völva
in our blood
my mama and I

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have visions

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Items I would Sew into My Pockets if I am Told to Leave Home by **Malin Andersson**

1. a note slipped under a door that promised love but did not demand it back
2. a c-string that rattled jars of sea glass on a watery afternoon
3. a wink from a cloud that refused to reveal its body
4. a green notebook pulled from the roots of a garden weed
5. a noodle that lived in the dust under the kitchen table
6. a letter that had twirled for so long that it fell, dizzy, into my palm
7. a tune in the form of a flower I could tuck behind my ear
8. a luck charm encasing lantern light
9. a dandelion or two
10. a ribbon that tied hand to hand when the night exhaled, wrapped in a bow
11. a loaf of bread with which I would mark the path home
12. a promise that home will still be there when I return
13. a spool of twine in case birds dine on the breadcrumbs
14. a list of these things so that I do not lose them on the road

You Will Inherit that Cat by Malin Andersson

While her parents and grandfather are at Sam's Club, the girl sits in silence on the couch facing the window, tracking the falling snow. *They'll be back soon, the store is closing anyway*, says Grandmother, appearing behind the couch with white cane in hand. Together, they watch snow fill the birdhouse. The old train station clock watches with them, ticking. The girl hopes that no bird has made its bed in that birdhouse, for the doors have now been blocked. *Snow is calm and bright*, says the grandmother. The girl has never known how to speak to her grandmother.

Quietly, a shadow pushes itself up to the window, yellow eyes pressed against the glass like jewels in coal. The girl wishes her mother were here. Grandmother does not blink. She rounds the couch, holding the yellow gaze, and sits next to the shaking girl. *You will inherit that cat*, says Grandmother, calmly. The old clock ticks. A skinny stray, a ghost cat, whose body does not catch any of the snow passing through it, watches. *I had a farm cat when I was young. A tornado came and I did not open the cellar doors. She taps the white cane twice on the floorboards, a language. When you are older, it will watch you, as it watches me.* The grandmother takes the girl's shaking hand in her own, *I am sorry.*

exit 175 by **Elizabeth Blackwell**

if she drives me i'll fall in love
my feelings realized on the interstate
my heart has stopped a thousand
times on the i-94 east
i think i'd run across the highway for you
should that frighten me?
we're going ninety in the left lane
but my heart is keeping pace with the wheels
you steer with one hand and
strangle the passenger with the other without
ever looking in your rearview mirror
to see if dignity will ever catch up
maybe i'm dead, i muse
watching from the backseat as
i lean over your hand on the stick shift
to skip my favorite love song on the radio
i want to sit down and let a semi run me over
but i'm bound to chasing this car
as long as i still sit next to you
drive me home, i ask in my love language
but you never made the effort to learn
and so you drop me off and the feeling fades

so who gets to be the yin and who gets to be the yang

by Brooklyn Blevins

I used to spend a lot of time thinking about all the things we had in common. At first I saw them as the basis of our friendship, the reason we got along so well. Our similar style glasses, our shared biology class, our tendency to become so outgoing once we got to know someone, the way we would ramble on about things we loved. In a lot of ways we were similar. What I didn't spend as much time thinking about was how much we differed from each other. You were always touchy feely. I was never accustomed to constant hugs and high fives and pats and on the back, but you made me grow fond of them. I was always self conscious, while you carried yourself with pride, always so self assured in the best way. I loved to write, and you detested it, which is so painfully ironic because you always had the just the right thing to say for everything. I, on the other hand, would often bite my tongue and stumble over my words. So maybe that was it- not so much our similarities but instead our differences that brought us together. Everything I lacked, you seemed to help me make up for. Unfortunately now, there are some things that cannot be made up for. I guess even best friend bonds have their limits. And that is why I can only assume things are so difficult now because I lack one very important piece: you. It's more than a shame to think how different we are now.

Antifreeze by **Kailyn Bondoni**

When I say the memories of you are dangerous
I mean I once drank a swig of antifreeze thinking it was blue Gatorade
And in getting my stomach pumped I was less afraid than I am now.

It's walking down the street in all the confidence of being over you
Then remember how your entire family facetimes me to sing on my birthday
And how that won't happen this year. (it didn't).

I wouldn't think that something like that would affect me so sharply
But every time I think, my stomach pumps itself
And all I know is your mom told me she wants to keep in touch.

All I know is your therapist thinks I wouldn't make a very good friend,
And the last time I played mini golf I was aiming for your foot, and
When your face appears on someone else's snapchat story I throw up.

It had been a hot day-- all sweat and gasping breath from running
This was before the doctor realizes I had asthma, and all I knew was that
The bottle in the garage was identical to glacier freeze Gatorade.

And in the pictures I kept your eyes are the same.

Sitting Underwater Like Saoirse Ronan in Ladybird by
Kailyn Bondoni

There's a scene in Ladybird where the title character sits at the bottom of a pool
This is not an original shot.

It's in a lot of films, but this one hit me.

Maybe it's because part of me is convinced that Greta Gerwig read my diary to
write that movie.

But I think it's because it looks like all I ever want to do these days.

When you're underwater, everything feels like it weighs less.

Like my shoulders are given a break from holding everything up on them--

Everything my heart is trying to carry.

The weightlessness without the letting go.

The summer after 2nd grade, I got an ear infection.

It got so bad it spread to the bone, aiming for my brain.

After surgery, they told me I would be okay,

But if I wanted to swim, I'd need an ear plug,

And that it might never fit right.

To this day, I cannot dive too deep without record scratch explosions and pain
coursing through my right ear.

I can never get to the bottom of the pool no matter how hard I try.

No matter how hard I want to.

Compass by Julia Boughner

Often I find myself telling stories about the deer I remember.
There were four of them when I was alone,
And each of them found a cardinal direction around me,
Magnetic. I slipped between them southwest to the highway
Which was three long breaths away from me but imaginary behind
A horizon of pines.

Here's another story about deer, that I didn't write:
Boys on the train tracks, walking to that ultimate oblivion
Of a body somewhere east of here.

Sleeping easy beside the railroad,
Dreams leaping between beds of coal
Like sparks on a campfire, then, an early morning
deep breath and they wake,
To find the sleepless boy sitting some yards away—
Just moments ago, a deer had passed over the tracks
On silent hooves and stood right in the path of metal death
Just to make eye contact with the boy.

He chooses to hold his memory to his chest when she leaves
Three muted steps into the underbrush and she was never there
At all. He doesn't speak again until midafternoon,
Purchasing a pack of gum and four coca-cola bottles
That the boys will smash on the beams of track.

Once I went behind a house in a neighborhood with a girl
Who took me on bike rides through the city without my mother knowing,
Where we broke our glass lemonade bottles against the garage
Me and the boy on the tracks, doe-languages
Deciphered in shatter patterns of the glass on concrete.

Feeling an immediate ache for the raccoon paws
Or deer hooves that might rake on the glass, how the animals
Don't know how to pick a splinter, how it will fester,
If the glass will be tracked down the drain into the river
Swallowed by a fish and cut it open from the inside,
Guts weightlessly separating into the water
And the pithy bloom of fluid and blood from its belly
Thickening the water with tiny eggs.
Don't know if it will get eaten or if it will rot, but I hope
It's eaten: rot is such a gentle
But vicious death, humiliating
Yet being eaten is such a simple privilege
When there are things that drown, suffocate, dissolve,
Waste, decay.
Deer sometimes walk in circles like ants in a death march
Their rack of antlers magnetized to the core of the earth,
Spinning in an endless compass spiral, brains carved like logs,
Just bodies, just eyes there between pine.

Dates by Julia Boughner

I see this great expanse of paleness.
The number eight, the calendar year,
which we are in the dark corner of
in early december, it's dark and heavy
similar to being smothered under couch cushions--
body between rock and earth.

I haven't written a poem in months.
I used to want to write love poems
but I'm not in love,
love isn't very utilitarian, is it? these are

things I hate. I can't get my stomach
off my mind, and last night
I saw myself in january
and at twelve fifty four today I ate lunch
of salty fish and olives on toothpicks,
what a waste of material, what a loss of limb.

God, may the silver thumbprint pendant
of your son's mother hang over
my esophagus and block it
like a bypass for heart and stomach.

When looking at january which used
to be colored in heart stop panic
for all the times I slept and ate and choked

because I couldn't stop myself from doing so,
it's colored and weighted lighter now
but lightness in january can be very good
or very bad, coldness or cleanliness
which is next to
nevermind

this is a love poem because if my hunger
means hands on my stomach
again, but with meaning this time,
then I am in love with wasting nothing
and am writing a vow to suck the oil and meat
off every skinny fish bone.
Meat is such a deliciously selfish consumption
with the metallic aftertaste of a single shot,
right in the middle of the forehead,
from a captive bolt pistol.
Selfish that I could never fire it.

Calving season, a green spring,
in April on the upward calendar curve
right next to my temple
like a candyland game,
my birthday is a little yellow blink
like a baby, the purest expression
of loving a stomach.

Poems are most selfish thing I can write
only a product of the things I consume.
Love is selfish
in december. in november. in the dark.

*During a Full Moon, the Maternity Ward is More
Occupied than Usual* by **Julia Boughner**

Late last night after I closed my eyes
I went to the doctor's office where the lady doctor
Put her metal duck-beak fingers up inside me
And through my cervix and I—
I didn't feel any pain, so I went down there too,
She made me take the plastic T
And open its wings inside me

When I woke up from passing out
I was in a bony twin-sized bed painted black
With minty sheets that underneath
Lie pairs of legs for me to try on.
My mother who hates her legs made me
To hate my legs too, and now I don't,

Now I'll never be her, now I try legs on
Because I have ten years where I won't be a mother.
I can make that decision one early morning
On the edge of my bathtub where
I'll pull the strings out from between my legs
And get back into bed,
Blood on the sheets, legs preparing to pupate
Into maturity from being amber-cast
In prepubescence.

The Circumference of my Wrist by Julia Boughner

The hungrier I get, the more scared of the dark I become.
There's nothing that compared to the sleep I got in my car during the winter,
When the wind chilled my through my jacket, sweatshirt,
Tank top, bra, and my car had been warming on the asphalt all morning
With the sun refracting through the windshield, burrowing between fibers
Of my fabric seats, so that when I sat down I was warmed
At every facet, and I'd close my eyes
So that skin could shiver in the sunshine too.
My hands got dry, then, that's something I forgot
But it makes sense, I suppose.
The hungrier I get, the more I miss my mother and my father
And my grandmother, my grandfather, whom I don't know
Very much about at all, but I am struck by the nineteen years
I've wasted on not knowing them. Every time I call my mother
Something is different about them, my grandfather
Slowing down his sugar consumption, or their dog getting old.
I wonder if they miss the nineteen years that they didn't know me
Either, I guess, it goes both ways,
But I don't know if that's really important at all.
There's someone I met
Who calls his grandmother every day, and she's crude
And loud and judgemental and loving,
when she invites me over for dinner she already knows everything
About me. Her hair is short, like my grandmother's.
When my hair was short my neck and jaw were always cold
Now in the winter I wear mine long and thick as insulation
But I know my grandmother gets cold, because she's always

In a scarf, a jacket, a vest, a sweater,
And she wears heavy gold rings on her fingers.
She told me that she broke her wrist when my father was young
she still has the scar,
Thick tissue compounding below her palm
her wrist pains her now when she writes,
And she says her fingers are getting slow.
Her veins throb half a centimeter above the skin of her hands
the flesh is so thin and clings to the hands so desperately,
Like mine do, when they're dry,
And much worse in the cold.

Hypocrisy by Daniela Butkovic

What is more human than hypocrisy?
That unexplainable urge
That twists thoughts
Murders memories
And makes demons of our desires

That promise of pride
That allows apathy
To seep in our souls
And our every broken breath
Leaving us lying lifeless
Unable to escape this earth
Filled with our failures
And reminders of the ruin
We have created for our own corpses

That wish for a world
Free of the fear
Of creeping contradictions
And deceitful despair
Lurking beyond the light
And hiding just down the hall
To mutilate our minds

That latent lie
Disguised as trivial truth

That invites ignorance
And watches with sadistic satisfaction
As we damn ourselves to destruction
Blind to our own blasphemy
Until our final fate arrives

That gruesome gift
Of vile victory
And orchestrated opulence
That kills our knowledge
And assassinates our awareness
Before slinking off into the shadows
So nobody notices
The devastating damage
Wrought willingly
By humanity on its own heart

Doing my Boyfriend's Makeup by **Lauren Champlin**

That invites ignorance
Liquid liner glides smoothest
on trusting skin. He sits

in front of me, his legs
crisscrossed on my

bedroom floor, as strong
as I've ever seen him.

Soft cheeks support resting
palms as my fingers

pat pigment on his lids,
comb color through his brows,

brush blush on his temples,
across the formidable bridge

of his nose. Jet black mascara
would overwhelm his amber eyes,

so I delicately graze the tips
of his lashes, giving his irises

permission to speak
for themselves. Outside,

the setting sun enhances
the boldness of his shimmering

cheekbones and silhouettes
the long curve of his neck.

Through the camera's
viewfinder, I see only a man

dripping in glory, as secure
and as beautiful

as I've ever seen him.

Pulling Teeth by Lauren Champlin

Red trucks are entirely too loud. This one, in particular, towers above every other car on the road, roaring and barking, eating potholes one after another. At a glance in your rearview mirror, you could mistake it for the angry eyes of a fire engine, glaring you down. It turns heads, sticks out, does everything except for sinking into anonymity, the way I wish I could right now. I can't imagine a worse place to come out to you.

It's not as if you don't already know. Years prior, on a walk in the park, you asked me if I loved my best friend. *Of course I love her*, I answered, feigning confusion. You looked at me in a way I could only describe as *knowing*, waiting for me to say more. I didn't break, so you didn't either, and we just kept walking, my body camouflaged in the trees.

I'm not afraid of you. You've never given me a reason to be. I'm not afraid of my queerness, so fundamental in nature, yet still confounding in all of the spaces it can and cannot fit, in all of the questions it can and cannot answer. I am afraid of this red rental truck, of the silence that hangs between us and the hum of the air conditioning. *What exactly does that mean?* you ask.

I was never the child to pull my teeth out when they started to come loose, curious how the skin would pinch or the blood would spurt, what prize I'd be greeted with under my pillow. I'd lay awake, wiggling it gently with my tongue until it fell easily out of its socket.

I am afraid of pressure, of exactness, of the hairs that need splitting, of the tightly bound words my loose lips can't seem to wrap themselves around. I am afraid of the decimals between *gay* and *straight* that feel minute at times and

indefinite at others. *I guess it means both, I answer. Or maybe, all.*

All of the shame I was taught not to feel, all of the secrets I was asked not to keep, all of the itches I was told not to scratch, all of the wounds I was not meant to touch. It means *all*.

Ms. Laura by Leah Chiss

Tendrils of her hair circle her face, a halo of golden brown hairs that move along with her. Her delicate hands and fingers gently float through the air. Her fair cheeks blush a gentle pink and her rose-tinted lips gleam in the light. When she moves, her whole body comes to life, ebbing and flowing with the movement. She is made of clay, easily molding into beautiful positions. Her limbs are the branches of a tree shifting in a gentle breeze. She moves like a leaf in a storm, like a riptide in the ocean, like a shooting star in the sky. Her movement is dynamic, each note articulated as if plucked by a violinist. The movement grates away at the tissue and the bones in her hip, deepening the hole inside. Her days are permeated by pain only slightly relieved by the brace she wears around her thin, muscular torso. Leap, jump, turn, leap, jump, turn she repeats day in and day out. The movement is her joy and her pain. Her arched feet slide against the marley. The muscles in her slender, toned arms flex. Her brilliant blue eyes gaze around the room, taking in everything. Her eagle eyes rarely lose their intensity. They are ice. Sometimes, her striking eyes seem to see right through me. Her sharp voice rings through my ears. “Do it better! Try again! What was that? Lift up! Don’t hold your breath! Higher! Faster! More! You need to work harder! Keep going. You can do it. You have grown so much. Beautiful. I’m so proud of you.”

Ode to the Journey by **Cherish Dean**

It's time to go:
home or away,
it makes no difference.
I file onto a bus,
Slide into the backseat of a car,
Put my own foot
 onto the pedal.

It's time to:
 hold on or let go,
hug them tight
and breathe,
and speak,
and squeeze assurances,
before turning my face away
towards endless landscape,
dotted clouds,
watching a telephone line blur
as I whiz past.

It's time.
 How precious is that?
Unburdened by class,
or appointments,
or work that never ends.
Here there is only
the departure

and the distant destination
and the blissful
In-between.

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Houston, We Have A Problem
by Alejandro Derieux-Cerezo

Come in Eagle. What is the problem?

There's a fire in the capsule.
The seat next to me burst, sudden and
unassuming, like a pop gun, into
flames, inches from my face.

*A fire?
Please follow procedure
and extinguish it.*

Houston, what is the extinguisher?

You were briefed on this in your training.

Houston, I have forgotten the training.
I repeat; what is the extinguisher?

*The extinguisher is the red object on
the exit door.
The one labeled "emergency."
It should be immediately beside you,
within arms reach.*

Houston, I have a question.

Go ahead Eagle.

In space, like a shark in a stellar ocean,
I cannot stop moving for my better interest.
Before it recklessly caught spark,
chose to swallow everything in the chamber,
this was fuel.
It dynamoed and combusted for the better.
To extinguish would be to kill it,
but I'm still here, flying through space.
How do I kill this newfound hunger,
when this fuel, this fire,
is still carrying me along, captive,
in this capsule?

How to Fillet Bluefin Tuna
by Alejandro Dericieux-Cerezo

(1)

Slit long - - ways up
 T h e - chest - between
 Pelvic - - f i n s

(2)

Saw off - - the head
 Breathless mouth - - agape
 Start from just behind -
 The gills

(3)

Sever - - the tail fin
 Stuff between - - decapitated jaws

(4)

Saw off the rest of the tail
 Thick conic sections
 Trunks of meat

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(5)

Lift the pectoral fin
Continue the cut
Split the hollow

slice the armpit
down the chest
maroon cavity

(6)

Quarter the rest of
With swift cho ps

the oblong torso
crack the ribs

Slice out the
Massive canine
Carve out the resting cage

dorsal fin
tooth then

(7)

Take what is left portion into skinless blocks
Rose flesh candy - striped in muscle and fat
Thin into slices fit to serve

(8)

For the fish:
Lay yourself glassy eye up,
Plated, silver skin on the clean steel countertop.
Love is teaching someone every way to cut you

And trusting them to put down the knife.

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Nesting by Alejandro Derieux-Cerezo

listen, with your ear pressed to my belly:
a groan like an elephant's trunk, the roll
of the stomach like a couple of things in
a cement mixer and one of them is wanting
too much and the other is the elephant;
I know the glint of your look, a crystal
of sugar in the iris; I know what the groan
means, the tap of ivory against finger bone
or against other ivory in the shorter teeth;
I hold my teeth bared like cell bars; I don't
let the following escape, but listen
regardless—please—with an ear to the elephant's
stomach (it ate a couple of things and one
of them was wanting too much and the other
was this warning): I filled the gaps between
my teeth with sweets like mortar to make
myself a more stable container when I closed
my mouth or pressed it against something
else (or someone else); some days you can't
afford to give way; I've already bought
an elephant's weight in candy and now
my stomach feels poisoned with the want,
though the gelatin hasn't yet slid down
my throat, only the saccharine; what is sweet
enough to fill me? what is sweet enough
to fill me? what is sweet enough to fill—
without dissolving yourself in the sugarcube?

what is sweet enough to want to dissolve
in the mouth like a sugarcube? I ask
you, before you press any further against
the teeth, the door to the gut of something
far larger than yourself, I ask you to please
listen: if the sugar is the melting—the breaking
of the tusk, white ivory, into the mouth
and then dissolving into the veins—then
what is sweet enough to want?

Rubbernecking by Alejandro Derieux-Cerezo

Before you begin, please be aware that this track does not end.

—Sumita Chakraborty, *The B-Sides of the Golden Records*,

Track Five: “Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder”

And now the mask is gone—
an animated tug wrenches it off like a paper bag,
like the scene at the end of a monster mystery
and the face beneath is familiar. In the cartoons it’s never
a surprise, the truth is easy to piece together, always there
to pick up in blunt shards: trail of slime from
the manager’s closet, suspicious fishman footprints
at the country club. Sometimes it’s a little out of left field:
a farmer’s brother poses as a flesh-hungry blob
turning their cattle to pulp. Insurance policies pay out
secret thousands to the brother, while the farmer begs
detectives living out of a van for help.

I will never know your story, never
care to, even when every episode closes with an explanation.
Why does the gang of mystery solvers always listen
to what the human beneath the surface has to say?
They cut through all the clues and motives
the audience overlooked, but never stop to check
on the farmer (whose brother had been terrorizing his own
town for months).

There, on another Saturday morning,
the farmer would have never thought his own brother
to be a monster: a man cleaning stains from blue overalls
at the end of a long week—but cows
don't melt themselves. Somewhere, the pale walls
of a basement smear with innocence dissolved to sludge.
Though, when you accuse someone so close to the chest
of deliberate sin, how do you dispose of your rotted trust
before it crumbles out from under you?

Those old mansions are always built of ramshackle
and lengthy nails through the cobwebs, throwing stones
is so much simpler from the outside. So someone says
they knew it all along. There's a round of gasps, but none
of the investigators are shocked stiff.

That's the part they never show: the people so shocked
to learn the phantom's identity their spirit rises out through
the ears and plays puppeteer with the body. They never
show where the real ghosts come from—muffled
in the back of the head, words of support pass through
the space inbetween:

are you doing—how—
are you feeling—anything?
you need—do you need—
are you alright—how?

to speak to anyone—
like a seance, then dissipate—
like fog?

In the memory of his admission I cannot move, held in
restraints like a rollercoaster. On rails through a haunted
house, my vision sinks so deep into the headrest of the car,
I feel like I'm watching myself on the television
and the Great Dane snickers in the hum of the track.'

What clues could I have followed?
In so many dreams I hold you close enough to smell.
Was that my vantage? To know a predator in lucidity
by the stench of blood on your tongue, stains beneath
your nail beds in my fantasies? Maybe I'm the wrong
person to be solving this mystery: just a bystander
at the unmasking who the animators cheated out of grief,
my face stuck in a singular expression of shock
in this moment and every rerun after.

Appointment by Dylan Gilbert

The doctors find salt water in my lungs.
They want
to know more.

*Have you been drinking a lot
of salt water lately?*

I was never taught
to drink. Only
to inhale

*Have you recently spent
time in or near
the ocean?*

No, but the ocean always finds
my family.

*Does it
burn when you breathe?*

dressed in soot
instead of red. I seared a hole
through my mother's stomach
I was born into burning like others
were born into knowing

their name

*You've always felt
like this?*

Yes

*Then how do you
know it's burning?*

I've been told
Other people don't
have to think
so hard
about breathing
The doctor scratches
on his clipboard. Stands up.
Dips his wax
fingers under my fold
of chin.

Everything looks fine.

But there is salt water
in my lungs

He turns toward
his computer.

*Studies show that it's actually
quite common for African
American patients to experience salt water
in the lungs.*

But, I'm
drowning

*It's not unusual for African
American patients to experience some
drowning in their lifetime.*

It's hereditary?

No.

But it
hurts

The doctor swivels
to face me. Takes
off his glasses. His eyes turn
kind.

*You know, women
like you are so
Strong. In a week
I bet you won't
even notice.*

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The Day before I Leave to Go to My First National Park
by Dylan Gilbert

I am halted
at the bottom
of the stairs

my dad talks to me in high
eyebrows
and a voice that holds on too tight to each word
he stutters sometimes

Sometimes

We don't get to visit national parks

Tennessee
is a name my dad could see fitting
into my obituary

maybe blackness is
father and daughter
both lying wake at a night
writing early eulogies
bracing themselves

my dad says I can't keep walking
into life like I've never seen a girl with my nose
die
like we don't drive 18 hours through the night

to new orleans just so we don't gotta stop in mississippi
and now here I am
his daughter
tryna wander my black ass around tennessee

don't I think he likes hiking too?

my tongue has no voice to raise
but he stops me anyway
tells me
he knows
it's not my fault I was born
into this color
and he dips
each word in ink
like an apology



my white friend tells me
when she graduates she's leaving the states
going to Canada or Spain
or somewhere that is not all bibles and guns
somewhere that listens to the earth
and women alike
I buy a map

pull it on my desk til it is clean and tight
study countries I cannot pronounce
each day
I stay in breathless
chase of the same conclusion:
there is not a place for me on it
not a life I could live
unhalted

there is no home for the black
queer girl

•

my therapist asks me to take
a breath
envision a place that knows how to hold me
without hazard

so I search the space behind my eyes
find my worn
fabric snagging sofa
my head nested
in my mother's lap

until doors kick in
voices break hot through cold air
and I remember violence
remember the black girls torn
from their beds
no matter who they were nested in
for some
there is not even rest
in slumber

I have no answer for my therapist
and she agrees

•

my feet dangle on the edge of the top step
I ask my dad
where I'm supposed to go
what land is going to love me
without pulling me in?

I don't know why I asked
I got my answer last week
when a rock dug into the soft
part of my heel

and the dirt began to scurry up my ankle
like vine and stone
tree and tree
tangling into one another til
I don't know whose limbs belong to who
but the ground said I, her
said she would know my blood anywhere
asked about my grandmother
told me she's tired of being force fed women with my name
said the brown girl
go down the toughest
they're never ripe



I inherited fear
and a plot that follows my feet
the ground in Louisiana
is so soft
every step feels like falling
and maybe that's the answer
maybe my somewhere is a couple feet under
and then vine
and then tree

a black queer girl's home is in the ground
that could be dispiriting

a violent joke
or maybe it just means

I know a Place
where I got people
that are waiting for me

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Caged by Phoebe Huang

A poem about emotions during the coronavirus pandemic

Wait, I say

locked within four teal walls

caged in six square feet

the dresser rattles from inside, a voiceless scream

They cannot hear you, child

Full shelves sweetly sing.

Wait, I say

my nose to the window,

I watch

a hundred inbox notifications;

Sun sets, dawn rises

Even sleep has masked itself.

Fear it, they say

Where is my fear? Hope?

locked in the dresser

Prepare, they say

canned beans, vitamin pills

Carts full of panic, swept up in a whirlwind,

The eye of the vortex

is still and quiet.

In my cage, I watch the checkout line fly.

Bronze Sunrise by Sam Hubenet

Light permeates the room through the blinds on my bedroom window.
Warmth kisses my skin for the first time in what feels like months.
Though I am still exhausted something feels different today.
The weights placed on my body now lifted, though my bones
still ache from the ghost of their presence.

I sit up on bed, a seemingly simple task transformed
from impossible to merely extremely difficult.
Is this a victory? Minute steps forward after weeks of falling back
seem odd to celebrate, but I need a victory.
They clap from the stands when the injured limps off the field.

To Whom I Give my Heart to Next by **Sam Hubenet**

Please be aware of what you're getting into.
Do not be deceived by my stone cold exterior.
Because yes I have spent years perfecting my shields,
finding and eliminating every chink in my armor.
But do not mistake this for unemotionality, do not take this as
an easy case where we are never required to speak of the pain I feel.
Rather, take every moment I share what is behind lock and key as a sign of trust,
a cathartic release I am only allowed once in a great while.

And if that is not what you are looking for
if you're just looking for a quick hit it and quit it
with no emotional commitment
I can surely do that too. I am a women with needs,
other things to release besides emotion.
All I ask is that you be clear in that goal. Do not lure me in with promise
to be there for me, if I so need. Do not promise one relief when you only seek the
other.
Please.

Please don't be another item on my list of reasons to never open up
my Pandora's Box it is too long already. Do not join the ranks of other guys
because it's always guys
who rip me open just to feel what's inside then discard the remains,
the guys who promise eternity when they really mean tonight.

And maybe you read this and believe you are different. Perhaps you think
you are the one whose promise of forever will prove to be true.

You are the most dangerous,
the lethal poison I will consume time and time again
because I believe you.
Few are more effective liars than those who believe the lie themselves.
You stay for a while, longer than a night but leave before eternity begins.
You stay to get your fix, and allow me to get attached - addicted to your familiar
smile
how your voice sounds over the phone soaked in sleep and hoarse from the day.

Until you shatter my life when I become too much
or you find someone to feel without the feelings attached.
Until you leave me behind, broken by your voice hoarse from discussions with
another.
I beg you to think of these possibilities, state your reality honestly.
Do not become another name on my list
just for the lay. Please.

A Lament for What was Possible by **Sam Hubenet**

Car doors. Whispered tragedies.
Silent tears. Absent of breath.
“I’m sorry” “I know” “yeah.”
I talk to fill the air. Pointlessly.
Time abandons the moment
The fatal blow already cast.
My hands drenched in red.
Your cheeks drenched in pain.

Darkness approaches my car.
I see your face in the streetlight.
Beautiful even in pain.
Beautiful as the day I fell.
But those days have passed
over as soon as they begun
over before I had a chance
to appreciate passion in your heart
the oceans in your eyes
the fire in your lungs.

Perhaps, in a different life
my cold heart could take a lesson
from the passions contained in yours.
I could learn to be present in the love we shared
and not nitpick the flaws between us.
I could be content in the uniqueness in our connection
not pinpoint the ways we fall short

in meeting the preconceived standard
built on the basis of love with another.
Maybe I could just be happy with us.

But we live in this life,
where I could not separate our love
from my preconceived notions of what love is
and be happy. Because I'm not.
And for that I'm sorry.

how to spend superstitious mornings in mumbai

by Rachna Iyer

1. at 6:11am, head to the balcony to watch the sun rise even though you are facing west and will only get a streaked secondhand view of last night's leftover rays.
2. sip on a hot cup of chai and drink in the fog of the city; it has been ages since you last heard a crow cawing. then, ask yourself: are you the kind of person who gets happy watching an eclipsing sky?
3. miniature old man sits on a bench and claps his hands together just to feel his tingling palms itch.scream out to him from your twenty-first floor apartment that you can't write in four walls you can't you can't you --
4. there is a dream where you are shot in the head and the mongoose doctor smiles and asks you "wouldn't it be funny if you were reborn on your birthday?" and then it is november and you are just the same.
5. maybe this is how writers are born: by speaking into voids. so scream into a saucepan of lemons and chillies tied together on a string, and shut the lid fist-tight. let no sound escape.
6. now, cut your nails and trim your hair and sweep the floor; it's a new day! the sun is finally up! and you-- can't know every hour of the dark but you always loved the night and you never liked the city anyway.

7. slowly, lift the lid and listen silently: realise that, when the whistling one-eyed mynah gave you his home, with the broken, stolen mirrors and old, upturned single left shoes -- he gave you all that came with it.

In another life, I wish I knew less by **Rachna Iyer**

I turned forty on my sixteenth birthday.
Mother places an oxygen tank near the candles,
there's only three but if I blink enough times behind my
cylindrical-vision eyeglasses, I see six.

I was nine when I first found a grey hair sprouting out of my scalp,
timid and apologetic, crowning as a newborn head. I spent hours in front of the
mirror
distinguishing shine from cortisol, separating care from time.
Mother tells me they will spread, but I pluck each one out anyway until I am new
and clean and bald.

I crawled into my first R-rated movie right out of the womb
but it wasn't anything I hadn't seen a thousand times before.
I had chased my days swimming in Mother's unadulterated placenta and then
I speak my first words: I was going to say something, but I forgot what it was .
The difference between the rising moon and the setting sun isn't much;
it is the space between the floor and my leg,
hanging off a high oak chair (but sometimes it has wheels),
swinging to the whistling tune of my pulsating submarine stomach.
Sometimes they coexist, and sometimes they don't.
One minute I need my appendix, and the next, I don't.

Hostage by Rachna Iyer

hey are you up? i can't sleep tonight because there's a rat gnawing on the lining
of my stomach and it's keeping me awake but anyway
i thought it would be nice to hear your voice but i could just leave you this
message if you're busy and you can call me back when you get this
and anyway i should try going to sleep because there's a cockroach in my
underwear now and i think it's coming from inside of me but i can't be certain
oh look here come a few more, these angsty little things so anyway
would you like to get a cup of coffee sometime? i mean with me, well i
hate coffee but i'd love to hear your views on coffee over some glasses of water in
a coffee shop but anyway i'm sorry if i'm talking too much it
seems there are a few bees stinging the inside of my throat but it's alright they
mean well i'm just trying to get them out to set them free they don't belong here
anyway but have you ever wondered why love has to feel like pests
are slowly taking over each part of your body? it's really okay if you don't want
to go i've never been one for taking chances that leave me in the fetal position on
my bathroom floor, knees over my chest, rocking back and forth, snake coiled
around my neck, Gozhead in toilet--

anyway

If I had time to be Free by **Sophia Johnecheck**

If I had time to be free:

I would slam my fingers into the ice and watch it shatter

I would grab every story and eat them

I would vomit into boxes to create a mosaic

I would gaze at it and watch my reflection

I would let myself be lost in the technicalities

I would wander into hell accidentally

I would make travel plans to Jupiter as spikes pierce my skin

I would bleed out slowly and dance in the rain

Permanent Petrov and the Peach by **Sophia Johnecheck**

Petrov became immortal
For pruning peach trees.

He, quite positively, preferred to never die,
But to have this part of his past,
Be the story repeated in legend,
Felt a bit pathetic.

He had fallen asleep in the peach patch,
Two decades previously,
On the run from a political situation
That now felt petty.
As he collapsed in this perfect place
He pleaded for providence to intervene,
And as time passed, his pleading turned to expletives
Which appealed only to a panicked farmer
Who with pity, offered a few pennies
In return for pruning the peaches.
Petrov pushed aside any concerns, and pruned.

He was, in retrospect, pretty stupid,
As he did not once suspect that he had entered
A parallel world,
Or that the peaches contained

Ultimate power.
Unfortunately, Petrov was never partial to peaches.
So he perfected the art of pruning, and
Passing the time with brooding pauses
Playing out the possibilities of returning home.
The peaches would always plop, plump to the dirt, but
Petrov never processed that the farmer never picked them
Or that the place was literally paradise
Until he played with a centipede

That was poisonous, and he was paralyzed,
Face planted in a putrid puddle
One eye poised towards one perfect peach,
Hunger pangs spreading throughout him.
So, when the poison's progress had paused,
Poor Petrov finally ate a peach.
It was a plain, vapid taste,
And one tooth popped off upon hitting the pit.

After, he fled the world in self-pitying panic.
He didn't even feel the peach's power promptly,
Petrov only noticed any peculiarity
As he picnicked with the prince
Of the peninsular nation of Pan-Eprepa
Who's interest had been piqued by Petrov's

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Pursuits in the study of anti-poison prescriptions.
Petrov pulled out a python to experiment on his own tricep
And the prince's primate, who punctually passed away.

After a spear pierced Petrov's chest
(in punishment for the primate),
And Petrov still seemed perfectly intact,
The prince applauded and then pleaded
For the password to the problem of mortality.

And Petrov wanted to pretend
That his perpetuity was a product of
An alchemist's potions
Or some grand prophesy

But sometimes you just can't spin the story poetically
And it is a particularly potent pain
To comprehend that at any point
He could have just eaten a peach.

What Comes After by Esther Launstein

He didn't show.

He never did.

She sat in the same chair, at the same table, in the same coffee shop they used to meet at every week. Winter winds blew swirling snow past the frosted windows as the grandfather clock in the corner ticked closer to ten o'clock in the morning. It had been an hour since he texted saying he couldn't come—busy with work. There was a world full of decent excuses, and yet he chose the same one every time. Recycled it like a plastic baggy until there was nothing left to salvage.

But she stayed anyway, knowing that there was no one that cared anymore. Refill after refill of hot chocolate that had become tasteless and cold in her mouth, and she wondered, as the moments passed by, when she had become so achingly alone. When had the world decided to leave her behind?

Perhaps it had always been that way. Nobody had ever held her hand, helped her along the bumpy roads of existence. But someone was always there. Somebody was always “available” if needed. Not wanted, not craved—needed. No—it hadn't always been this way.

It had to have been new, as she would have noticed by now—would have recognized this feeling of absolute loneliness that ate away at her day after an isolated day.

She shifted uncomfortably in the wooden chair, and it croaked loudly as she stared out the window. People passed by the shop, laughing and enjoying the snow. They spun wildly in their magnificent freedom, not caring that mere feet away, she was turning to dust from the inside.

She stared at the darkened screen of her phone, the message to him

already having been read.

No problem. Maybe another time, she had written.

But there would be no other time. Just as there was no one else left for her to call or text. Everyone else had moved on with their lives; they had families, friends, and extraordinary careers worthy of a story she was unable to write. She was utterly and horrifically void of inspiration and ideas. And she yet again found herself wondering when it had become so. How had someone with so much fire burned out so quickly?

It was in that coffee shop—the one she always went to—that she came to an ugly, terrifying realization: she was not the fire, not a fearsome flame burning bright and persistent, consuming anything that dared stand in her way. She was, instead, the dusty ashes. She was the remains of her failed and broken dreams—the charred remnants of everyone else’s successes. She was dark and quite shakable in her missed chances and unfueled future. She had never been the flames; only the thing that came after, watching as the inferno of life traveled on and scattered her to the wind. A sooty, infallible afterthought of everyone else’s lives.

And she was so, so sick of blowing away in a wind that should have ignited something in her.

Gripping the sides of the chair, she pushed up onto steady legs.

And for the first time in years, when she glanced at her pale hands, there was no ash dusting her palms. Because amidst the ashes, there had been sparks.

And now they were flames.

Amor Perdido by Irene Lopez

I saw you,
You existed,
Y ahora eres como un sueño
Para mi.

The pain, siempre hay dolor,
The sorrow, nunca termina.
was it real? My meeting you,
Can I say I loved you?

Hour one.
The clock is ticking.
Your smile still radiant.
Hour six.
The sand is dissipating.
And your smile is weakening.
Midnight.
Swifter than Cinderella,
Your smile has vanished.

Why did you leave me?
After One meeting,
After showing me love.
Why let our next reunion be at your funeral?
Once again i mourn and cry,
I scream, estoy enojada, no te vas.

Mi amor,
We met once, pero sentí que eran por a los
Y no alcance el muerte,
para decirte cuanto te quiero!

Now You're gone.
Forever.
I loved you,
I will always love you,
Para siempre.

But I will not forgive you,
Why let me love you if you were gonna leave me?
porque?

My external wounds will heal,
And Now i have another Roto en mi corazon,
Otra herida que no va a sanar.

Que Dios te cuide en el cielo,
Y adiós por ahora.
Mi amor.

Only Tuesdays by Alex McCullough

When Ben said, “Only Tuesdays,” he really meant it this time.

This was a decision made to weather through time, the unfavorable depressant; Ben was familiar with how quickly conviction could wither given the omnipotent power of decision. When Mom told him he needed to wake up at a normal hour, the pragmatist in him set alarms in his phone that, day by day, dragged him out of bed earlier and earlier until he was comfortable with daybreak, and his sleep schedule was repaired. When he noticed as the piles of sweat-stained shirts and stretched-out shorts formed small, distinct molehills around his room—and then when they began to converge—he set a reminder in his phone for every Sunday afternoon at three: clean room , in all lowercase. Even when the mess began to beleaguer him around Friday evening, he knew that, on Sunday, the choice to clean it would be made for him. He would tidy, dust, vacuum, and sanitize his bedroom with aplomb. There would be no decision for him to dwell on.

Ben enjoyed not making decisions. He enjoyed yielding his autonomy to his *Reminders* app, because it meant someone—something—else would be doing the thinking part for him, and all he had left to do was blindly obey. When Ben was forced to confront his indecisiveness, the paralysis of it all forced him into retrogression. Everything came to a grinding halt. Every personal goal—any habits he wanted to build, or already had built—was shattered on the floor, and he went back to square one. He resigned to his bed for days, even weeks, bewitched by the glowing blue light of his laptop as he perused mindless TV shows and YouTube videos. He stopped brushing his teeth. He stopped washing his hair. As late as four in the afternoon, he was startled awake, his face hot and drenched in sweat and streaked with cushion scars, his arm

dangling off the side of the bed into a bag of Tostitos, his pillow wet with saliva stains.

Then, when he'd been to the brink of no return, the *Reminders* app found its way back to him, and the cycle repeated.

So when he said, "Only Tuesdays," there was a newfound conviction in the toothless smile he gave the mirror. He surrendered control to *Reminders*, and, somehow, that made him feel more empowered.

Tuesday was not chosen at random. At five in the afternoon, every week, Ben picked Phoebe up from volleyball practice and took the family car five miles north to Chelsea Heights, where Dad had been renting an apartment since Christmas. Ben supposed that was Dad's gift to himself: a grand unfolding of two decades' worth of duplicity, tucked away in a thousand-a-month on the outskirts of town, with two guest bedrooms and a riverfront patio. Maybe it would've been more tolerable to look at were it still empty; at least then there was still a foot in the door, and a hopeful lack of total commitment. But now it had furniture he stole from the basement, or bought with money he said he didn't have. The worst was when Ben saw the stuff Dad borrowed from his family. There was a betrayal enveloped in Uncle Sam's sofa and Aunt Terri's barstools, as if everyone Ben loved had, this whole time, been in cahoots, banding together behind his back to fund Dad's childish pursuit of anyone-but-your-mother. And to think that at Thanksgiving dinner, they were shoveling old nightstands and ratty leather armchairs out of their basement into his greedy hands, sharing jaded laughs at an inside joke to which only Ben, Phoebe, and

Mom, of course, were not privy. Then, as if revealing an impractical joke, Dad broke the news. He hosted gatherings at his new digs, where everyone picked out housewarming gifts, and congratulated him. “Here’s to another twenty-one years!” they cheered, while Mom, alone at home, sobbed until her head pounded.

But, at five-fifteen, when Ben and Phoebe arrived, they still parked themselves on Uncle Sam’s ugly argyle couch, while Dad silently grazed his Facebook feed and kept silent.

Then there was dinner.

On Tuesdays at seven, Ben silenced his phone and ate as much as he wanted. Three cheeseburgers with fresh, medium-rare beef, organic swiss cheese and artisanal buns; or a whole box of penne pasta with meat sauce and soft, greasy garlic bread; or pancakes dripping with batter and strawberry syrup, pork bacon and scrambled eggs; or hot dogs slathered with ketchup and corn on the cob soaked in butter. Then, after dinner, half a sleeve of Oreos and a glass of whole milk; oyster crackers and microwave popcorn to entertain his mouth through an episode of *Black Mirror* or in between Mario Kart tournaments; Nutter Butters, Hawaiian bread rolls, or that last Bob Evans sausage patty that Dad was saving for himself so don’t you dare touch it, but fuck him because he left Mom, and all he had to show for himself was four measly hours a week. Ben tossed another bag of popcorn in the microwave as Dad refreshed his Facebook feed a fourth time, paying no attention to Phoebe’s movie pick of *The Parent Trap*.

From five to nine, Ben ate.

But then he went back home.

Ben threw four empty family-sized bags of Tostitos into the garbage can on the first Tuesday evening of June, after he'd returned from Dad's apartment. The other snack foods he'd amassed beneath his bed—Cheerios, peanut butter-filled pretzel bites, Cheez-its, Goldfish, and several bags of mini blueberry muffins—went back to the pantry from which he'd stolen them. He vacuumed the food crumbs and sprayed the room down with half a canister of Glade air freshener to get rid of the smell. When all the buttered corn on the cob he'd eaten that night made him queasy even still, he knelt in front of the toilet bowl, clutching the gleaming porcelain while his muscles trembled and his face flushed with heat.

When he stood up he saw in the mirror that he was crying. Grabbing a fistful of his own abdomen, squeezing the fat between his white fingertips, Ben whispered, "Only Tuesdays." He spent the whole night spilling tears onto his pillow as he shivered with shame.

The next morning at eight, Ben's phone reminded him to eat a Kind bar. It was two hundred calories. Thirty minutes later, he was to go on a walk. Still clammy from the night before, he put on a sweatshirt that was too big, even for him, and sweatpants, despite the temperature climbing well into the eighties. Fifteen minutes later, he stumbled his way back into the house, light-headed and damp from the heat, and weighed himself.

Two hundred thirty-nine point eight pounds: two-and-a-half down from

yesterday. He quietly rejoiced in the decrease as he took a shower, looking up at the ceiling the whole time.

At the top of every hour, Ben's phone reassured him he wasn't hungry, but that his mouth was just bored again. He masticated on gum and ice water as he re-downloaded *MyFitnessPal* and *8Fit* and *LoseIt! Calorie Counter* and *Carb Manager* and *Happy Scale*, and sequestered them into a folder and dragged it into the middle of his home screen, where he'd see it every day, front and center. Right next to the Reminders app.

At three o'clock, Ben's phone was gracious. *eat 5 ritz crackers*. He was already in the kitchen at that point, watching the flicker of the clock on the oven as it counted upwards to two fifty-nine, his mouth wet with anticipation. And hunger, of course. Before his phone had even finished vibrating, he tore open the Ziploc bag like a child opening the first birthday present, and before he could think—before he could decide upon a sixth—five crackers were on the counter in a neat pile, and Ben had stowed the bag away in the pantry. He quickly devoured the crackers, licking the salt off before punching his teeth through the wafers, feeling his mouth fill with stale flavor as the pieces tumbled down his throat.

Another eighty calories, he thought as he ate the final cracker.

At three-thirty, Ben set his phone beside him as it guided him through ten warm-up pushups. Then ten sit-ups. Then twenty crunches. Then twenty lunges, ten for each leg. Then twenty jumping jacks. Then ten burpees. Then a one-minute downward dog. Then another ten cooldown pushups. Then repeat. His phone didn't tell him to do that; rather, he took it upon himself, in a brief rush of motivation, to ignore the advisory fifteen-minute break between

routines *8Fit* recommended. He went deftly through the motions of a workout, jumping from set to set with the alacrity of an experienced athlete. He knew the routine because he'd done it before. It was the fifth first day he'd had that year; the fifth day of one Kind bar, five Ritz crackers, and too much exercise; the fifth day of waking up dizzy after a night of gorging on junk food and crying into the toilet.

But it would be the last first day, he told himself. And he really meant it this time.

Ben allowed his phone to coach him through the rest of the day, waiting for his pragmatism to beget concrete results, and beaming with delight when they did. After making it through dinner eating only two apple slices and half a grilled chicken breast, he relished in celebration of a successful last first day: he'd passed just shy of five hundred calories. *Better already*, he thought. *I feel so much better*.

Mom asked him if he wanted the last chicken breast: an offer which he politely declined, grinning from ear to ear.

"It's a miracle! Ben doesn't want to eat!" Mom gasped. Phoebe stared at Ben, her mouth agape, and his smile went slack.

"Are you sick?"

"Shut up, Phoebe."

"Hey!" Mom chided.

"I'm just... not hungry."

The truth was, Ben was hungry. He was starving. He'd burned more calories that day than he'd eaten—this he knew for a fact, because he was keeping fastidious track of every calorie in and out of his system. He wanted so

desperately to snatch the chicken off Phoebe's fork and swallow it whole. He wanted to throw open the pantry doors and fill his mouth like a cornucopia, with Cheerios and muffins and pretzels and Tostitos, and gulp it all down like a python gormandizing woodland vermin. He had thoughts of food so intimate they transcended normalcy. He lusted for food. He yearned for food. The images of food, juicy and savory and salty and sweet, hurtled through his mind like a truck barreling through an intersection, until he couldn't look at the brown oak-wood table without imagining it being made of silky chocolate, or at the walls without wanting to scrape the cream paint off with a knife as if it were butter, and lather it on a tortilla or toasted Italian bread.

And maybe he would've acted on these impulses. Maybe, later that night, when the household had lulled to sleep, he would've crept into the kitchen to bask in the inexorable allure of a midnight snack. Maybe everything would've fallen right back into the way it was before.

Maybe...

...if not for the eight o'clock chime of his phone, reminding him how deceptive his own head could be; reminding him that whatever he ate would turn to grief, and burn in his stomach like caustic acid; and he'd feel it in his fat. The grip of his abdomen as it hung over his hips and clung to his meaty thighs. The pulsating of his neck, and the way it folded when he spoke. The protruding of his breasts through every shirt, and the outline of his grotesque figure in the mirror behind clothes only skinny people could wear. The puffing of his cheeks. The sweat he wicked away when no one else was hot. The clothes that had fit him a month ago. The clothes that wouldn't fit him in a month. The desire to shrink. The need to shrink. To fade away and become nothing but thin

air, drifting listlessly in the place he used to stand. To be small enough to be invisible.

dont eat! u can do this :)

The reminder pulled him out of a dangerous delirium. He quickly excused himself from the dinner table and withdrew to his bedroom, out of reach from temptation.

The next morning, Ben weighed himself again. Two hundred thirty-seven point eight pounds. He couldn't contain his disappointment; he'd lost more the night before last, and he wasn't even trying then.

“What the fuck...”

Nevertheless, Ben spent the rest of the day moored to his phone, beguiled by the reminders and the rewards they promised for his diligent labor. At eight, a Kind bar and a walk. At three, crackers and *8Fit*. Then dinner at seven-ish, and no exercise necessary, as a treat to keep him sturdy and motivated. He kept the murmur of his insatiable stomach at bay with gum and ice water, chomping, crunching, and chugging through half a pack of *Extra* Spearmint and eighty ounces' worth of trips to the Brita filter. And, strangely enough, he was galvanized by the pain of his hunger, as if the constant stomach growling and pellucid urine were battle scars to be paraded around with gleaming pride. Even when he looked in the mirror before a shower and saw nothing new or extraordinary about his body, that disgust which once contorted his face into a wrinkly, shameful frown was replaced with hope, because now he was in control, and soon the skin he despised—and everything buried beneath it—would melt away.

However, as the days fell on top of each other and the weeks bled together, Ben's mood began to sour. He'd dropped thirty-five pounds in less than a month. He spent every evening swatting his family's comments on his diet away, even as Mom's joy turned to concern, and Phoebe couldn't meet his eye anymore. The meticulous tracking of his weight was not enough to satisfy him anymore. His goals, he knew subconsciously, were far too intangible to achieve; anything he once thought he wanted became an enigma floating in the past, stuck in limbo, as he pursued some phantom finish line he didn't even recognize. He was slimmer, but paler. He felt his once thick brown hair turn thin and gray. His skin hung loosely in pockets where the fat used to be. And he was always angry. Why was he angry? He logged his weight daily, but watching the numbers go down had lost its charm now that he couldn't remember where to stop. Maybe he didn't think he'd get this far. Maybe it still wasn't far enough.

On the fourth Sunday at three o'clock, he took a sixth cracker out of the Ziploc bag, without even thinking, as if suddenly possessed by an impulse he'd buried deep within himself.

He'd gone this far without cheating—with the exception of Tuesdays and only Tuesdays at Dad's—but once the sixth cracker hit his mouth, the snapping of the wafer on his teeth was like a clap in the dark, and it echoed through his mind like a siren whistling in a tempest.

Then came the seventh. And then, instinctively, an eighth. A ninth. Twelfth. Twenty-ninth. The bag emptied as quickly as he'd opened it, salty crumbs of Ritz brimming his twitching lips and scattering onto the linoleum floor.

And then, when he'd devoured the last morsel in the bag, he was left with nothing but the debris, and he froze, hands fanned out on the counter as his forearms began to quiver. He'd committed his first sin. There was no way to recant, or to reverse the actions, or put the crackers back in the bag and pretend it never happened; it was as if he were falling back into the canopy below the mountain he'd just finished climbing, sailing through the air, filled with the crushing sensation of an impure, deathly failure. He quickly pushed the empty bag away and scuttled back into his bedroom, slamming the door shut. *Failure!* he thought as he grabbed at his thinning hair. *Fat fucking failure! You fat fuck! Fuck you!* Then he dropped to the floor and opened *8Fit*.

Pushups, sit-ups, crunches, lunges, jumping jacks, burpees, downward dog, pushups; repeat; repeat again; repeat a third time. By his fifth downward dog, sweat was pouring down his neck and saturating the collar of his shirt, and when he felt the sultriness of his face with his hand, he couldn't distinguish the sweat from the tears.

And then he didn't eat dinner. He didn't deserve it. *Only Tuesdays.* Except, suddenly, Ben wasn't looking forward to Tuesday as he had the weeks before. His irreconcilable blight made a Tuesday night of binging feel unseemly. He didn't want to pretend he'd earned his right to indulge in the addiction he'd failed to overcome. It was cheating. Cheating. Tuesday was meant to be his cheat day, but he went and plowed through a bag of Ritz crackers like it was nothing, like all that hard work was for naught. The carefully constructed artifice he'd built through the *Reminders* app and exercise plans and Kind bars and burrowing up in his room, away from food, was obliterated in an instant, sending everything patched up behind it cascading into the light.

The following morning, Ben weighed himself again. One hundred ninety-nine pounds—the same as the day before. It was the first time he didn't get the pleasure of seeing a lower number, and the sameness of those three digits flashing on the screen made him miserable. Ben considered whether he could get over his distaste for throwing up for just one day. Just one do-over for Sunday's wretched misdeed.

Tuesday came insidiously. Dad had promised buttered corn on the cob that week, with burgers and fries and fresh fruit. After, they would either play Mario Kart or watch an episode of *Black Mirror*, which Ben had gotten both Phoebe and Dad addicted to.

That morning, Ben forfeited the Kind bar; fortunately, there were also no more Ritz crackers, of course, so there wasn't anything he wanted to eat for lunch either. The lack of food was not something his phone dictated, but more of a self-induced fasting to prepare for dinner.

He drove slowly to the apartment, dragging forty-five minutes out of the five-mile commute while Phoebe pawed impatiently at the door handle.

When they finally arrived, Ben stayed behind, waiting for the top of six o'clock, when his phone would buzz again.

it's tuesday! eat all you want :)

Ben did not obey the reminder. When Dad set the dinner platter on the dining table, Ben took one look at the corn, slick with viscous butter that dripped down the sides and pooled in a chartreuse puddle around the base, and

suppressed a gag. He couldn't remember how it used to taste, and whether he even liked it or if his mouth was just bored. Eventually, after poking around the plate for something healthy, he settled on one of the burgers, which he picked apart with his fork until he'd crumbled the artisanal roll and dispersed it around the perimeter of his plate, and shredded the cheese into filaments which he discreetly fed to his napkin. All that was left was the patty, and a single piece of pineapple.

Phoebe didn't bat an eye at his behavior; she was used to it already, the siphoning of small bits of food into bite-size pieces, and constituting such as a whole meal. Dad, on the other hand, made the mistake of commenting.

"You don't like the food I made?"

Ben paused. "I'm not hungry."

"You're always hungry, tubs!"

"Dad..." Phoebe sighed.

"Did you already eat dinner or what?"

"Yeah, I ate a lot for lunch," Ben lied.

"Jesus, Homer Simpson's not even eating the corn." He dropped his fork on his plate. "I buttered it extra just for you."

Ben laughed weakly. What little appetite he had left had gone. He dropped the pineapple back into the bowl and half the burger into the trash when Dad wasn't looking.

He was almost in the clear, ready to put on *Black Mirror* and take his mind off his stomach, until he turned back around and Dad was holding an ear of corn between his index fingers, poised at mouth level inches from Ben's nose. He could smell the stink of fat in the butter leaking down the palms of Dad's

hands.

“Come on. Try it.” He pushed it closer to Ben’s face. “It’s good tonight.”

“I’m not hungry!”

“I made it just for you, Ben. I thought—”

“Stop, I said—”

“I thought if I made it the way you liked it, you’d start eating more.” Ben didn’t know how to respond. “You’ve been eating ‘big lunches’ every day this past month. I don’t know what the fuck there is to do anymore.”

“I’ve been hungry earlier in the day.”

“You know, I don’t get a lot of time with you guys anymore, and—”

“Dad, quit it!” Phoebe hollered.

“Just taste the goddamn corn, Benjamin,” he pleaded, the stench becoming aggressive and noisome. “Just try it, please!”

Ben keeled over the counter and blew pure bile into the sink, dousing the dirty dishes with splatters of thin, flaxen liquid. Dad flung himself backward and out of the way, dropping the corn in the process, and watching, aghast, as Ben heaved a second time, coating the garbage disposal in stomach acid.

“Christ Jesus,” Dad muttered. Ben saw, in his periphery, Phoebe covering her mouth with her hands, and the glossy tears in the corners of her eyes.

Ben went home feeling hungrier than when he’d gotten there. There was a pack of gum in the center console, which he used to mask the taste of bile in his mouth. As the car pulled into the driveway, he turned slowly around to face Phoebe, whose gaze had been pointed at the window the whole ride home.

“Not a single word to Mom.”

And that was all.

When Ben clocked his weight the next morning (one ninety-four point seven), his phone screen erupted with a confetti video graphic. He'd forgotten that, when he made the account, he'd set his goal weight to one ninety-five pounds. The app congratulated him, commending him on his weight loss journey, and then asked if he'd like to set another goal.

The prompt box hovered in the middle of the screen, trembling slightly. Ben realized after looking in the mirror that it was because he was shaking.

He smiled and set a new goal.

If someone were to ask him the next day what that goal was, he'd hesitate a moment, eyes skittering up into the sky, and tell them he doesn't remember.

For the rest of that summer, a Kind bar, five Ritz crackers, and half a meal for dinner was all Ben's stomach could tolerate. Mom did everything in her power to get him to eat: potatoes, peach cobbler, Annie's mac and cheese, bratwursts, spaghetti; his favorite foods all came rushing back up his throat into the toilet bowl, at just the smell of them, and soon even at the sight. She cried into his fragile shoulders, begging him to eat something, but he couldn't even if he wanted to. He really, really wanted to. Half a cookie, even, or a single penne noodle; anything at all. He looked in the mirror so much he became sick of himself. His skin was stretched and bloated like wrinkly latex hanging off his emaciated figure, stretched where the pockets of fat used to hang. He grabbed and poked and prodded but the grayish tone never went away. He became so

weak he couldn't exercise anymore, exhausted after a single jumping jack; even stretching sent his muscles into a violent tremor, until they seized. He was always in pain, even when he was standing completely still.

And when Ben returned to school that fall, he'd sunk to one sixty-five. His hair had receded a full inch backward and was falling out in clumps, shivering down his neck like a tree shedding its leaves overnight. He first tried dying what remained back to brunette; then, when the gray returned to the roots, he bleached it. Then he wore baseball caps to school to hide the patches of pallid skin glaring from behind combs of white hair. He trekked through the hallway like an vacuous carcass of himself, his bones shuddering against each other as, after every five steps, he had to stop just to catch his breath.

And when Ben told his friends about how he felt sick all the time, it was they who made sure that Ben was cognizant that, at the very least, he was finally skinny, just like he wanted. After all, every conversation the year before was a groaning lament of his figure, of how much weight he'd been gaining, of his fears of being fat forever. *Isn't it an accomplishment now that you've lost the weight?* they said. *Aren't you skinny now? Isn't that what you always wanted? Aren't the skin and the hair and the mirror and the bile and the Kind bars all worth it?*

And when Ben's head dropped over the toilet bowl, clay-colored vomit running in smeared tributaries down his torso, and his face, unconscious, struck against the cold tile floor, it was Phoebe who had to find him lying there, curled in a fetal position, his wrists limp, and eyes opaque and blinding white.

It was Mom who had to sit by him, the gasps between her screaming sobs piercing the silent ambulance air, while Phoebe burrowed her face in the nape of

her mother's neck.

It was Dad who had to drive separate, mulling over every word he'd ever said, beleaguered by guilt, thinking of the burgers and the corn as he looked upon the gurney, and the skeletal shell of his son strapped upon it.

It was Ben's friends who had to look at their reflections in the shiny surface of his closed casket, and tell him they wished they knew how to help him before it didn't matter anymore.

It was Ben.

Who died much less of a person than he was before. Who couldn't bear to live a healthy life if it didn't look the way others wanted. Whose BMI still marked him as overweight even as his daily calorie count dwindled in the double digits, and his skin turned translucent and his bones jutted angrily through his skin. Who was complimented on his new figure. Who was asked for weight loss advice. Who was praised for becoming healthy even as his life was rotting away. Who was so repulsed by his skin he had to give up everything he had just for the courage to smile in pictures, to not obscure his body with his arms, to not vanish into thin air.

Who thought a life worth living was one worth letting expire.

It was Ben.

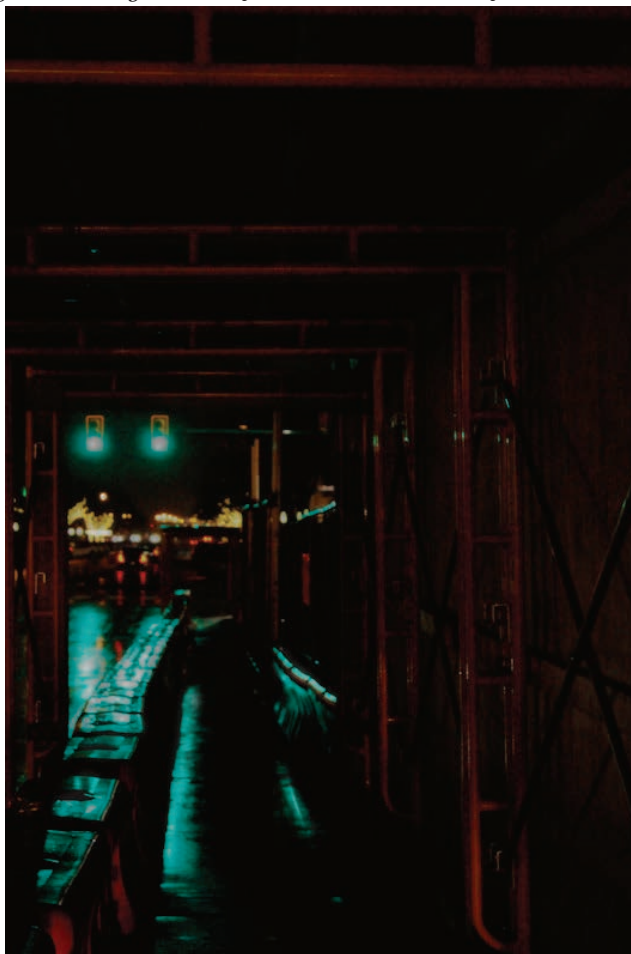
It was Ben.

Bird's Eye by Eaman Ali



88

I Find Myself Here Often by Alicia Bedoya-Hoeck



89

InsideOfMyHead by Alicia Bedoya-Hoeck



90

Cello Study by Emily Buckley



91

Powerful by Emily Buckley



Dawn by Emily Buckley

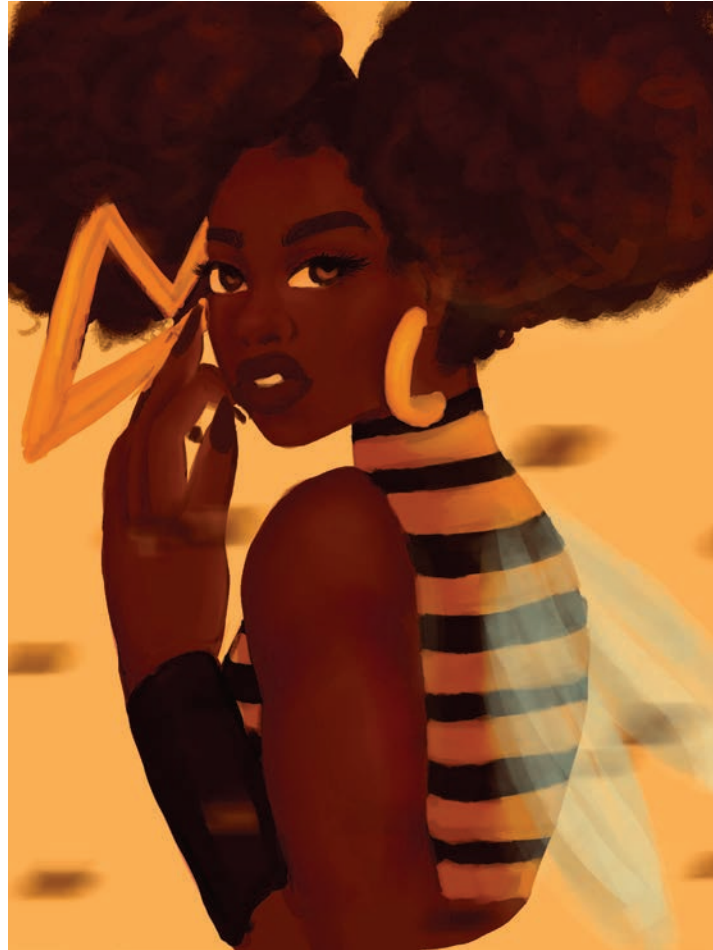


93

Fifth week of College by Brianna Fox

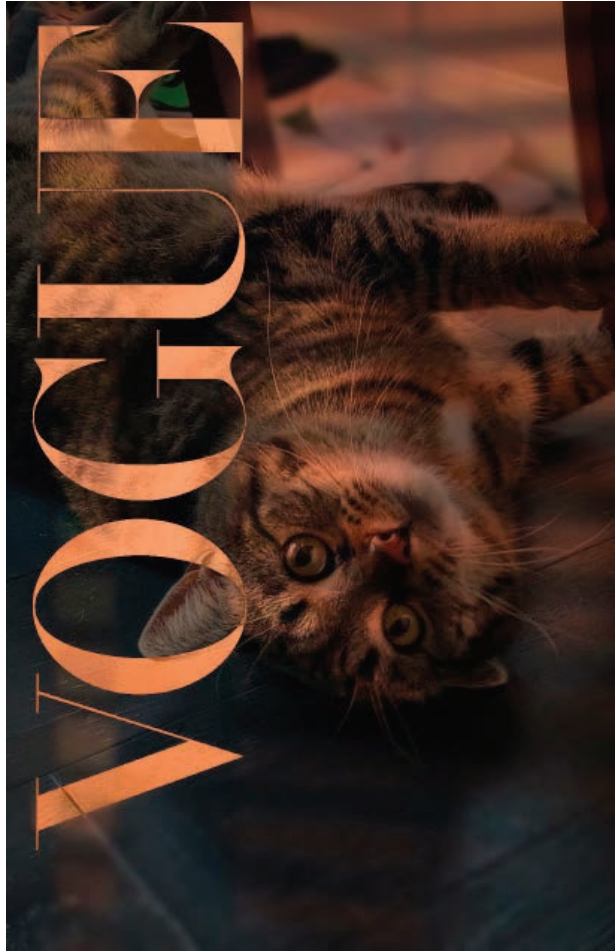


Bumblebee by Brianna Fox



95

It's a Paw's World by **Kaitlyn Gozon**



96

Broken Perspective by **Brenda Harvey**



97

Stream of Consciousness by Brenda Harvey



98

Hatched by Phoebe Huang



99

Crape Jasmine Kusudama by Chani Kohtz



100

Warning: Road has No End by Nikki Lama



101

Mope by Nikki Lama**mope**

it's a cold, hard, world where you try to fit into a mold until you are sold the ideas
you told me to do what i need to and find pleasure in the parts in between, but i fe
days that are the same in black, grey, and white

i need you to know i'm trying

but please understand that i am stuck between a rock and soft place that keeps me
and when i cry i can look at it with big bulgy eyes and maybe for a second

there is a glimmer of hope

but until that second, that moment, that place

is it such a cardinal sin to mope?

mope with me under the peering sun and than the woods and wherever we can find
a place that i can sneak inside and peep into a world above mine but

stay here with my thoughts and my mind

that you've been told - told..you told me that i should be more resilient
feel no pleasure when it comes to these

Warm when i'm falling



103

Frolic by Janice Lee



104

Small Steps by Megan Ocelnik



105

Street Performer II by Megan Ocelnik



106

Lobster by Natalie Robbins



107

Cat in Pen and Ink by Clara Sandall



108

Crow by Clara Sandall



109

Brown Pelicans by Clara Sandall



110

Stinson by Phoebe Sarandos



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Self Portrait Through the Glass by Phoebe Sarandos



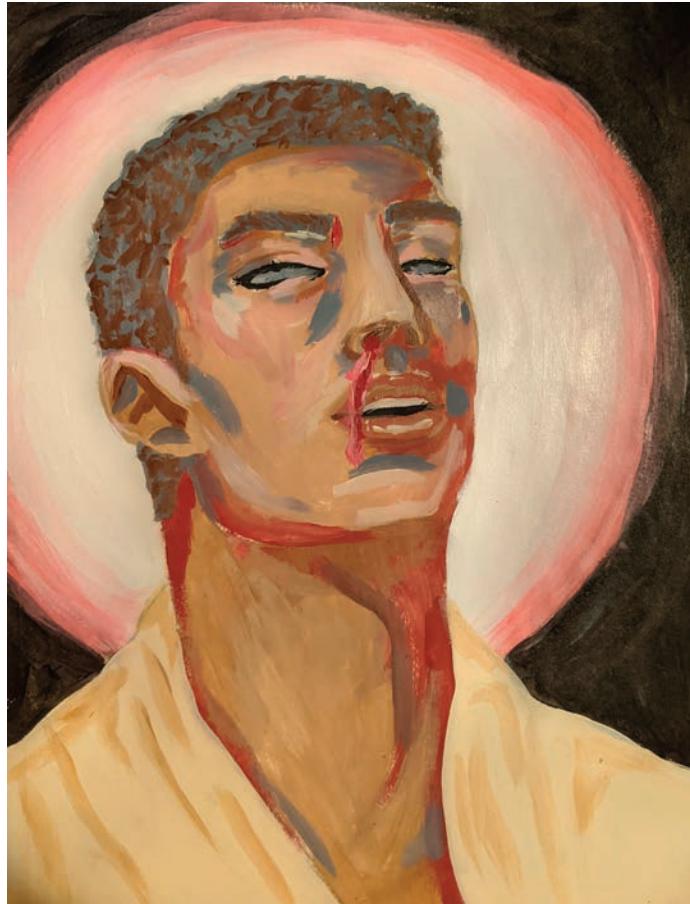
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beauty, a study by **Olivia Spicer**



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Fluorescent Noseblood On Sketchbook Paper by **Olivia Spicer**



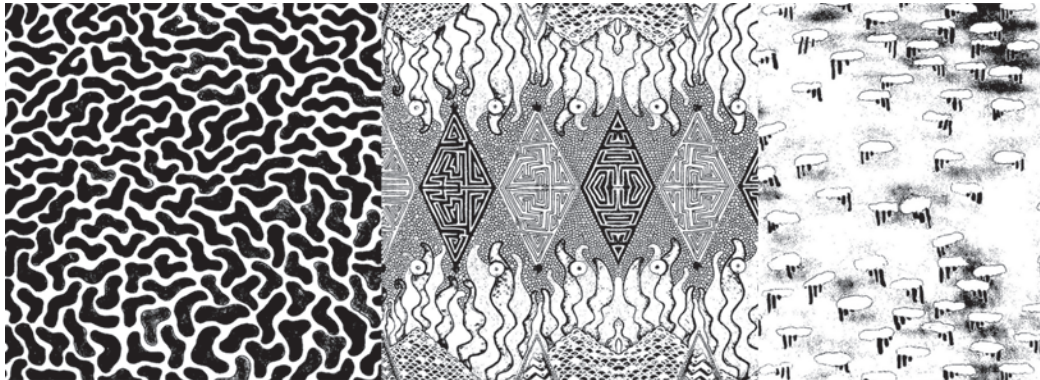
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Picatso by **Pelin Turk**



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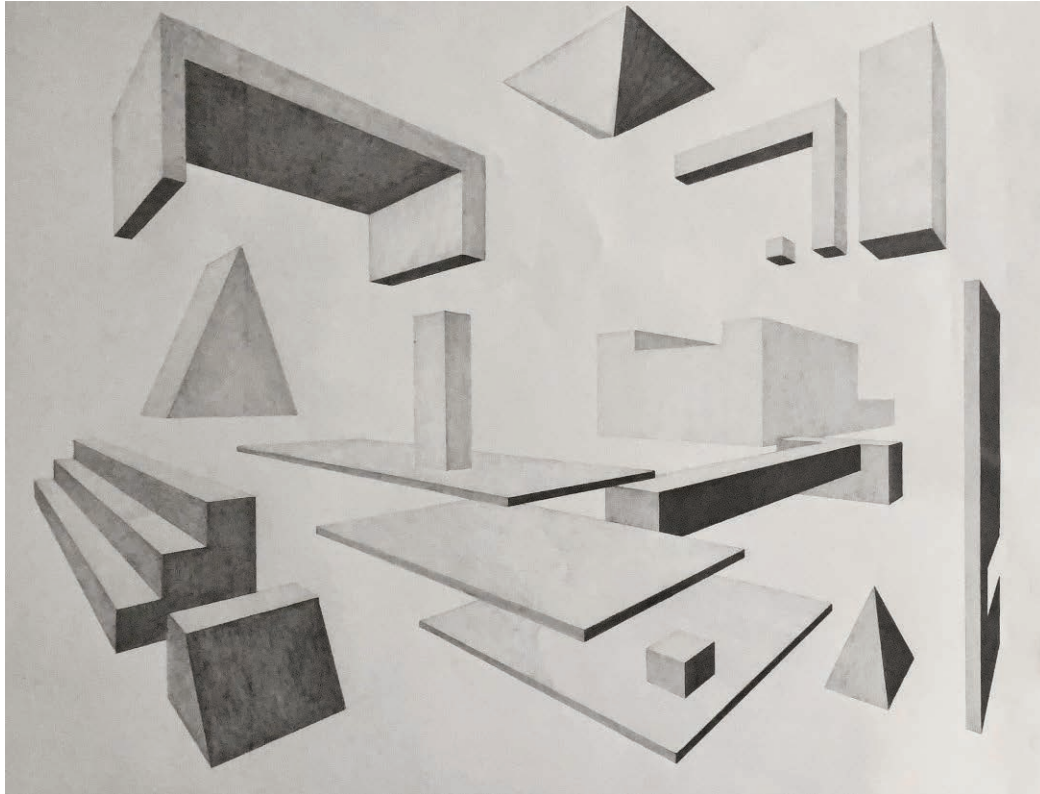
Abstract Value Scale by **Nayla Vasquez**



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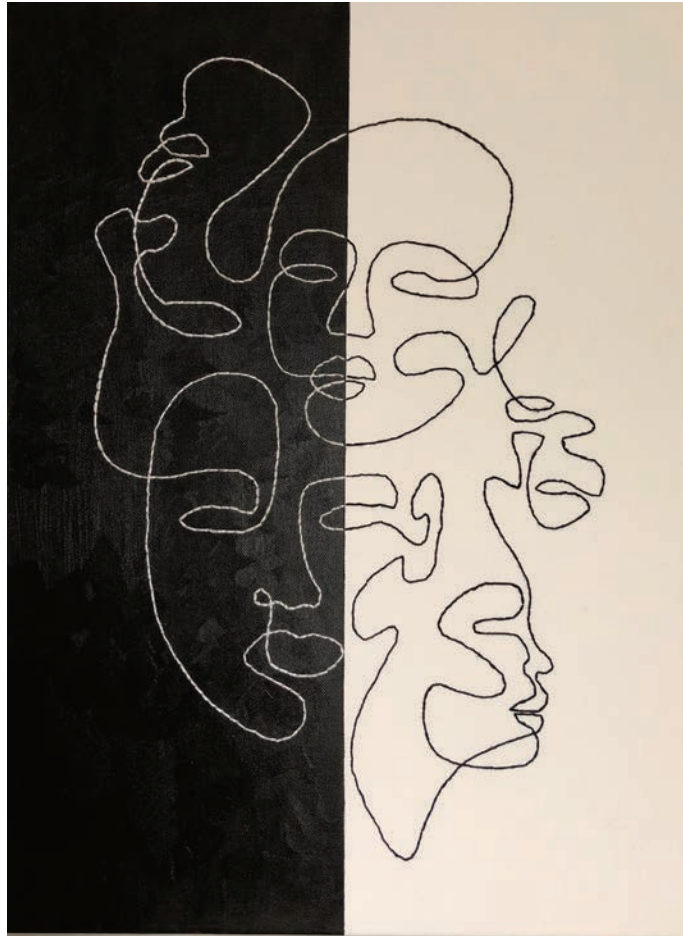


Imagined Block Perspective by **Nayla Vasquez**



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Janus by Yasmine Zadeh



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The Crawlspace by Alex McCullough

Celeste looked through the latch door drilled into the far wall of the closet, hidden away behind a mess of wrinkled mauve and fuchsia dresses she hadn't gotten to folding, and saw a knot of blonde hair poke out of the opening, which made her yelp in shock. Violet had found the crawlspace.

“What are you doing in there, Vi?”

Violet didn't answer. She was still small, chubby, and mute; and she would be for another few months until she hit three, and after that Celeste didn't really know. The mere idea of a three-year-old—much less a four- or five-year-old—gave her cluster migraines. She wished Violet would stay two forever. The little girl babbled joyfully as she scampered on her hands and knees around the barren room. It was tall enough to stand in, though Celeste had to crouch slightly to fit her neck through the door, using her hands to feel for the lightbulb wedged between the wall and the slanted ceiling. She scavenged the exposed wood floor for loose nails that might've caught onto Violet's skin. Through the thin, poorly insulated walls, she felt the breeze from outside whisper gently on her arms. It was still warm outside, but November was coming, and the suitcases Celeste stored in the crawlspace would have to be covered in a plastic tarp before the winter storms swept in and the room became dank and cold with sinewy snow. She could not, for the life of her, understand what could possibly be the allure of such a room.

But Violet was content—euphoric, even—and that was all her mother seemed to notice.

So she poured stuffed animals and beanbag chairs and hand-me-down dollhouses and faux animal-fur rugs into a brand-new passion project. Violet's father, at Celeste's insistence, insulated the walls and sanded the jagged edges

out of the wood. She tacked up a tapestry over the slanted ceiling that spanned the length of the room—a watercolor rendition of *Starry Night*—and strung fairy lights like intricate lacework along the walls, which, when coupled with the poster, turned that tiny corner of the house into an observatory for Violet to get lost in. And when she gazed up at the painted sky and her face filled with jovial light, Van Gogh’s stars and the twinkling bulbs shined back at her.

In the crawlspace, Celeste gave Violet the gift of forever: a refuge in which she could relish the curious ventures of her tiny, voracious mind. She learned to play simple tunes on a toy xylophone; created families out of Kermit the Frog, Buzz Lightyear, and a Cabbage Patch Kid, teaching them how to behave as her own mother had; and forged an intimate love that survived within the tiny space.

And, equally as important for her as Violet’s happiness, Celeste was able to keep her paranoia at bay. For as long as Violet so loved the room, Celeste hoped she might reject everything outside it. Not that she wished disillusionment on her own daughter, but even so much as a trip to the supermarket with Violet in tow made her palms sweat, as she drowned helplessly in the fear that, should she turn her back for even a second, someone might snatch her out of the cart, and run far away; that, years later, she’d still hear that little voice crying out for help. In the crawlspace, no one—not even Celeste—could reach her little girl.

* * *

When Violet learned to walk, she stumbled her way back to the

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crawlspace after dinner. When she learned to read, Celeste wedged in a small bookshelf with Dr. Seuss, *A Bad Case of Stripes*, and *The Miraculous Journey of Edward Tulane*, among others. When she learned to talk, she made up stories about the stars and the moon and relayed them to her club of plush, cotton friends.

When she learned to sense when she was afraid or stressed or upset, there was a place for her to tuck herself away from all the hustle and bustle of childhood. When Celeste tried to help her learn third-grade arithmetic and how to write in cursive, Violet scrunched her face into a red knot of ire and scattered all her papers across the kitchen table, leaving her mother to clean up the mess as she stomped off to the crawlspace and stewed. But, surrounded by the stars and lights and toys and books, she remembered being two years old, when her special room bathed her in a warm calm that could temper even the nastiest of tantrums. And, as if a new girl altogether, she marched back into the kitchen and worked on her times tables with aplomb.

Celeste watched her daughter's fascination with her little haven bloom over time, deliberating over whether it was a coping mechanism she could afford to rely on, or if Violet was merely a budding agoraphobic. She lay awake every night in bed, hearing the dull pounding of books on the floor and quiet murmuring from the other side of the wall, and imagined that her daughter might become a scholar, who took her curiosity and made it a focal point of her life; or, she might become insular, turning her crawlspace into a box to seal away the world.

Feeling her paranoia flare in a dangerous direction, Celeste decided unilaterally that she would not think about it anymore. Violet kept the

crawlspace, and her mother, a room away, wrung her hands in silence.

* * *

As Violet grew older and entered middle school, Celeste fought to quell the grating shriek of worry in her head. She sat every day, curled in an armchair, cross-tabulating narratives until arriving at the worst-case scenario, and driving herself to the precipice of hysteria. What if no one likes her? What if she gets hurt? What if, God forbid, someone attacks her? What if she can't make friends?

Only did her anxiety abate the day her daughter came home from school with a brown-haired girl named Charisma and said, "This is my friend." Then the roaring stopped, and Celeste sighed with relief that she hadn't made a hermit out of her curious little girl.

In the summer between middle and high school, Violet repurposed her desk across from her bed, in between two ceiling-high bookshelves, and created another enclave of sorts, where her studies became the paramount focus. She spilled the contents of her backpack onto the surface and siphoned her folders, binders, pencil case, ruler, tape, and stapler from the pile and into organized compartments.

Celeste watched in the doorway and asked her, "How did you become so organized?"

"I dunno," said Violet meekly.

* * *

Freshman year hit Violet harder than she'd anticipated. Her desk became a mishmash of biology and world history notes smothered in highlighter, thousand-page textbooks stacked like a skyline along the back, copies of *A Separate Peace* and *The Color Purple* marked up with every color pen and stamped with every color Post-It note Celeste could imagine. Violet stayed withdrawn to her room from the moment she came home to the moment she went to bed.

But she hadn't abandoned the crawlspace; still, even thirteen years later, she felt herself gravitate towards the fairy lights and *Starry Night* tapestry whenever the Krebs Cycle or the Napoleonic Wars baffled her to delirious frustration. The small bookshelf now housed John Green and Suzanne Collins, *To Kill A Mockingbird* and *Catcher in the Rye*, and, by her sophomore year, every Rick Riordan book to ever be printed. She'd replaced the toys and stuffed animals with crocheted wool blankets and a cream-colored ukelele she'd picked up at a garage sale. The room glowed under the stars that still, years later, rhapsodized her. And, after no more than thirty minutes enveloped in comfortable solitude, she was ready to resume her work.

While Celeste worried that her daughter was becoming codependent on a crawlspace of all things, she couldn't ignore that Violet brought home straight As every semester, even in classes she never stopped whining about, and especially in classes deemed "impossible" by her peers. Celeste also couldn't help the wan smile on her face when Violet brought up her friends, and spoke like she was entitled to them. The many nights Celeste spent worrying that she was raising a recluse were all of a sudden invalidated.

Violet even managed to find a boyfriend in spite of her unwavering

dedication to coursework. Celeste supposed that every break spent in the crawlspace was just another social media hunt for companionship, or a time for her to gab with her friends about whatever teenagers talked about those days—boys, probably, though Violet reminded her mother not to assume she'd be so vapid as to obsess over men, which she said with that drawling, mocking tone Celeste hated.

Yet there he was, on the Saturday night of Homecoming weekend, with short black hair and a clean, cheerful face, standing on the doorstep with one hand holding a bouquet of sunny yellow poppies and the other waiting for Violet's. Brandon Lim was on the soccer team, and the co-editor-in-chief of the school newspaper; Violet had mentioned all of this nonchalantly, like it was nothing, while she touched up her makeup in the mezzanine bathroom. Celeste didn't even know she was going to the dance, let alone with a boy with whom she was apparently enamored. Before she could even get a chance to meet him, she was watching through the bay window as Violet disappeared into his car, and the two raced off towards the high school.

* * *

Three months later, the poppies died. Violet buried her face in the nape of her mother's neck and sobbed, and Celeste held her with both arms, just like when she was a baby.

"Mom..." Violet asked, breathing heavily as the tears began to slow. "Do even the good guys cheat?"

Celeste looked the other way, at the window, for a few seconds. When she

turned back, her eyes were wet. “I think so, yes.”

In the crawlspace, Violet tore down the Polaroid photos of him and shredded them over a trashcan. She tossed his Lakers hoodie into a plastic bag, along with the cheap necklace he bought her for their one-month anniversary, and a note with a borderline excessive amount of profanity and vague threats. She purged her mind, and the crawlspace, of all traces of Brandon Lim.

* * *

The rest of her sophomore year, Violet spent more and more time in the crawlspace, seeking asylum whenever titrations and Custer’s Last Stand and factorials were simply too much for her. But especially when she remembered Brandon.

Celeste believed this would be her breaking point; she’d even asked Violet, selfishly, if she’d rather take some time off from school. She’d played the part of the normal mother as long as she could, but old habits were setting back in, and the world was too wide for Violet to ever be as happy as Celeste needed. She considered pulling her from high school and all her friends, and teaching her valuable lessons about distance and distrust from the safety of their home. She hurt inside at the thought of the only thing she had left to call her own being picked apart by Brandon after Brandon after Brandon.

And Celeste was so furious she might’ve gone and pulled the plug, had Violet not turned her ugly breakup into another semester of straight As; had she not screamed herself dry of misery, sheltered under Van Gogh and the stars, before returning, sedated, to her classwork, as if nothing were wrong at all.

Celeste envied her daughter's resilience, and watched cautiously, waiting for something worse to happen, and for Violet's compartmentalized system to crack and bleed out.

But to Celeste's joy—and, strangely, also her chagrin—Violet held up.

* * *

There was talk of Dr. Godejohn long before Violet had made it to junior year, from fellow parents whose kids suffered through his notoriously grueling AP European History class. He was a wiry man of forty who wore loose collegiate sweaters and skinny jeans, and talked like a third-year professor at a college only Violet would be driven enough to go to, with a lilting huskiness in his voice that drew intricate narratives and startled the textbook-inured high school students who just wanted a five on the test. Fortunately, Violet loved European history, so Celeste crutched on that knowledge, though she still worried that the pressure would send her careening back to the crawl space, and that this time she might not come out.

Miraculously, Violet superseded even Celeste's expectations, and certainly Dr. Godejohn's. She spent every other Study Hall in his classroom whipping through LEQs like they were nothing, and all her reading quizzes came back with impeccable scores. Violet gave an oddly banal answer to Celeste's inquiries: "If you just do the readings, you get a good grade."

Apparently, Violet's friend Charisma was not of the same good fortune as Violet, for she spent day after day at Celeste's kitchen table with tears in her eyes, wondering how she would ever face her parents if she couldn't pass the the

AP test, let alone the class.

“I just... these stupid readings are *so long!*” she whimpered. “How do you not get stressed out just thinking about them?”

And Violet said something that made Celeste’s head spin.

“I take reading breaks by going to the crawlspace—I told you about that, right?”

“Yeah...”

“Yeah, you basically just gotta find your own crawlspace or something like that. Something that relaxes you when you feel stressed.”

Celeste was perturbed. She didn’t know Violet ever disclosed her secret—or, supposedly, not-so-secret—hideaway to others. For so long Celeste had viewed the crawlspace as this intimate gift shared between daughter and mother: a linchpin in their relationship even as they grew apart over the years. Apparently Violet was more open about it than she realized. And, though she didn’t know why, Celeste resented that.

In spite of Violet’s advice, Charisma didn’t pass the class, nor the AP test. Celeste took just a little joy in the fact that her gift to Violet couldn’t be replicated for someone else so easily, though she feigned sympathy when Violet vented her frustrations to Celeste. Dr. Godejohn became a villain in the household, and the object of Violet’s wrath for the whole summer.

“He doesn’t have to make the class *that* hard, I mean— *What* is the point? Does he know she might not get into college because of that class? What kind of sick asshole do you have to be?!”

Celeste chose not to remind Violet that she’d not only passed, but aced the class. She was already wallowing in guilt for leaving her friend to flounder in

a course she so well understood; Celeste knew better than to test her boundaries.

Instead, she asked, “Would you have passed the class without the crawlspace?”

Violet looked puzzled. “Well... I mean, yeah, I think.”

“Are you sure?”

And she stood there, in the kitchen, and fell silent, while Celeste swore she could smell something burning.

* * *

When the sirens finally stopped wailing, Celeste and Violet were standing still in the thin air, the wind whipping mockingly at their hair as they stared at the carcass of their home. The grass and soil below it were razed down to the roots, and smoke was still towering in funnels in the night sky, obscuring the stars. Neighbors gathered in clusters around the property, staring at the mother and daughter as if feeling guilty for whatever reason. Somewhere in the ashes piled around the crumbled bricks, somewhere within, were photographs, one-of-a-kind jewelry, antique portraits of Celeste’s parents, birth certificates and passports and diplomas, and everything in between; all torched and amassed in tiny mountains of black soot, or fluttering above in the air.

Celeste hugged her daughter close to her, while Violet gazed into the hole bursting from the roof above the garage, where the crawlspace was. According to the firemen, a candle left lit overnight had set the Van Gogh tapestry ablaze. When the flame reached the string lights, the explosion that obliterated the whole right side of the house occurred. Systematically, one by one, Violet

remembered vividly everything that was in the room: the ukelele, the beanbag chairs, the bookshelf and every book on it, the lights, the tapestry, the rug. And each and every memory of her possessions brought forth another surge of tears, spilling and freezing onto Celeste's shirt.

"It's all gone," Violet whispered.

For a moment, the two were silent; it seemed that the finality of those three words was enough to capture the moment in time.

After a minute, Celeste finally responded. "No, it's not."

Violet looked up at her mother.

"You've lost nothing... until you decide you have."

Celeste looked back at Violet, both of their eyes clouded with smoke and tears.

"Maybe you've lost everything you owned, and maybe those things will never come back the way they were. But you're still you, Vi. You still have your memories. And that's all you've ever really had; you just didn't know.

And I know it hurts now, but there are so many places besides that crawlspace... to build your sanctuary."

Celeste sighed. "And when that too is burned to the ground, you build another one in the scorched earth, and you start all over again."

Violet almost didn't recognize her mother at that moment. For years she'd only known her as neurotic and terrified of loss, grieving what was taken away and holding on desperately to what remained, whether of her belongings, of her marriage, of her parents, or even of Violet. She wondered if her mother was speaking to her, or to herself, or to no one in particular.

There was still school; not the next day, of course, but after the grieving

period of a burned-down home, Violet would have to return. Her teachers would feign as much sympathy as they could, but she would be expected to reassume all her old responsibilities, and then some.

She had college applications and senior capstone projects and more work than she'd ever had in her life, with nothing remaining of the room she never realized she so heavily depended on. In a hotel suite somewhere in the city, she would have no starry night to gaze at when she felt overwhelmed; just a flat desk, a flat wall, a flat ceiling, and a window into nothingness.

But, maybe, there was still a sanctuary she could carve out of that scorched earth, however barren, however trivial, however small.

“So what now?” she asked, still hugging her mother’s waist.

Celeste didn’t say a word.

I'm Still Bruising by Alex McCullough

He buried twenty years in the
yard, under where the kids would still
play, and the flowers would still bloom,
but I'm still bruising.

And so I made a guide to cope.

1. Step One: Fuck That
Hide the truth where you can't find it.
Pretend you're a Nora Roberts
ingénue with long, kempt hair and
a love still to hold.
2. Step Two: Fuck Him
Rip the walls away in patches.
Summon cheap pizza to the house.
Stain your hair green or wax it bald.
Lock the door and scream.
3. Step Three: Fuck Him
Pound on his uptown condo door,
in razor burn and your best thong—
naked deli meat on display.
Pray he'll change his mind.
 - a. If this fails (which it will),
rip the door off the hinge.
Plot to kill the skank whore

who deigned to kill you first.
b. If this works (which it won't),
.....
then what????
??????

4. Step Four: Fuck This

Let the kids walk themselves to school.
Bathe in dirty sheets and stale chips.
Vomit tears into the trash can.
Leave the phone unplugged.

5. Step Five: Bury

Veil your shame in clean black satin.
Kneel by the invisible stone.
Allow the gorgeous past to die.
Hope it stays that way.

Fragments by Eli Neumann

I

My small room, carpeted floor
Casting the bed out to sea;

–Who am or could I
Be

Window opening to the sun,
Garden sprouting beyond the dirt
Within its walls, grass and trees running past.

Come night,
If I were to fall asleep in this room
Alone; may light shine no more from the window.

Snow folding branches
Above,
Everything eternal
To nothing.

From this distance living without you,
Breath is abhorrent.

II

This body will rot

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Given the space,
Suffocating a past
As we decay over years.

If the body be anything, let it unfurl
As from a mast. Even buildings
Frame the wind.

–within cities where
They crowd, under the sun

Illuminated. We dance
When I imagine it, two bodies built
To overlap, frame on frame

–Efflorescence.

III

As one recalls from a photograph,
I remember I am alone.

The heating unit hums at these times.
I mumble in my sleep; perhaps

As the dark overtakes us,
In the quiet is cohesion.

A Generation of Bad Habits by Megan Ocelnik

the smell of the tobacco burning from your swisher
reminding me of the cigarette smoke clinging to my grandpas old van
his shirts, his hugs.

violently I'm transported to my elementary parking lot,
taking infrequent breaths to slow down
second hand intake poisoning me the way it had him.

I see the old Disney movies playing three hour trips up north
princesses I can't relate saved from evil men
men that share too many characteristics reminiscent of my father
dancing on the semi static chunky tv lodged to the roof of that same van.

with every spit you take
i imagine the mucus leaving slug trails down my grandpa's throat
clogging his lungs with tar so dark not even god's light could save them.

I remember the hours spent watching him sit
in that worn blue chair mimicking the look of his blue jeans
jeans faded from years of work to feed four children
of bending down to the cooler to grab a fresh lemonade for my siblings
when our grandma wasn't looking & the daily limit was reached.
of fixing dune buggies and appliances.
of bending and bending over and over again
till the seams tore.

until he tore.

now your coughs remind me of his last breaths
before his soul tenderly kissed his body goodbye
transcending another stratosphere we have yet to comprehend.

I envision pieces of you leaving in the vape exhaust,
polluting air around you with your existence.
smoke curling towards clouds
as you silently slip away from my world, from this world.

I'm terrified of you leaving.

correction: i'm terrified of being alone.
I'm terrified of having no control.
I'm terrified of where you'd go.
terrified of what it does to me.
Is that selfish?

the click of the lighter striking flint is a sign to hold my breath
but a signal for you to breathe.
the glow of the flame lights up your eyes,
they're burning can't you see?
but the embers of the cigarette butt offer the fruit of eden
and I am not a temptress.

I see the way you long for another pack.

I saw the way he did.

maybe it's not the foreshadowment of the disease that i'm afraid of.
maybe it's the need to be wanted.
to have someone addicted to me.

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The Fault of Omniscience by Em Peplinski

Today, I woke up at midnight
I watched the stars drip from the sky,
Melting onto the pavement.
Plip plop plip plot
Golden puddles sinking the streets
Pulsating like a collection of dying suns;
The desk is not where it should be
The world is drowning in gold and yet it is here
Sitting elevated and merely watching,
An astute observer separated from the rest of time and space
Omniscient in its knowledge but unknowing
Waiting for the time to leap into the air
Fall free and escape the clouds and stars
Except the stars are already here
The clouds are coming next
There is no escape from the end of the world
It is inevitable, like the microwave popcorn I will have tonight
Or the grass that continues to grow even when the people don't
Flourishing around and by the corpses of what once was
And what never will be again.
This is what it means to be human
To seek and to find and then to realize you knew nothing all along
What you found was merely the illusion of something
A false feeling that now leaves you hollow
In the moments between life and death
You realize that there is no such thing as life and death at all
That everything you felt while alive was merely a placebo

Your feeble attempt at blocking the feeling of dying
It is all superficial, like a plastic flower in a rich woman's vase
She has the money to get real flowers
But she doesn't
This is the same for you
You have the capacity to feel death in your life
But choose not to
Humanity chooses to feel other things, to love and lose and squeeze what it can
from the falsehood of
existing even when it destroys them
This is what the melting stars are trying to tell you
They're trying to tell you to run
To escape
To launch yourself into oblivion and embrace the unknown that you are so
afraid of
You might find it to not be so scary at all
Or you may find it to be absolutely terrifying
You don't have the choice in that, just as you don't have the choice in anything
else.
Decisions are
The star stops speaking, dripping into nothing
You want to know what decisions are
You try to pick up the molten puddle and reform it but instead you scald your
hands
Why did you do that? That was stupid of you
Whatever decisions are, you shouldn't have made that one
Why are you still holding the star in your hands?

Let it drip between your fingers back onto the Earth where it belongs
That is what you are supposed to learn
That everything was once connected, intertwined, touching each other
The Earth and the Sky held hands and you merely existed in their embrace
Before they were then thrust apart
By your selfishness, your want to make choices and be finite, definitive
I will tell you what the star wanted to say
Decisions are a mistake
Why don't you let yourself exist in limbo? What's so bad about existing between
two options?
Don't plug your ears. For one thing, they're still covered in star goop. I can't
imagine your health
insurance covers that.
That is the problem. You fear the unknown. You don't attempt to put this star
back together to save its
pulsing light, but to get answers to your own questions. Selfish, aren't you?
Lay down in the star puddle. Maybe then you'll find what you seek.
Except you won't, you'll just melt like the stars did, growing dimmer with each
passing moment before
the glow of your life is snuffed out and you get caught in the infinity of death.
Or is it death? Is it death or is it a rebirth? Something new?
You've melted now, so I suppose you know. I still don't.

Lake Michigan by Elle Pugh

Dead Poets Society

My mom has the tape
So I watch the first half
And take a long break
There's nothing to do here but watch the waves
Constantly refreshing your Facebook page

When Harry Met Sally

I typed out a text
But got lost in our old conversations instead
A graveyard of memories but I stay indoors
And try to delete everything that you ignored

The Breakfast Club

Meets next to my bed
When that tape is over
I'll put the next in
And watching it until I can feel my eyes shutting
And when I wake I'll watch *Good Will Hunting*

But I don't see why
Why I can't sleep at night
Why the weight behind my eyes
Never lifts

Lake Michigan's a gift
It keeps on giving

I don't know what of me is still living
The nearest good hospital is two hours away
Long enough to make a stupid mistake

Isn't it imaginative?
Aren't you bored?
Do you think I could hurt myself
With the TV Cord?

Dalloway's World by Ben Shelby

Mrs. Dalloway's mail was brought into her room as it was every other day. She opened the contents as she strolled across her room, thinking of a man she saw on the street earlier. He had the strangest expression she could vividly remember. Was it inquisitive? she thought. No, there was a certain understanding behind it that made a question impossible. She thought something similar when she opened a letter from Gatsby, as she had known about his party for a while now, and the invitation was more of a formality. She opened it anyways - there was still something fundamentally charming about receiving letters like this to her. The nice paper and elegant type made Mrs. Dalloway feel that golden exclusivity she loved to experience from time to time - just not so much that the magic of this ceremony faded away. How curious it was that things seemed to be fading from Mrs. Dalloway these days - her relationships lacked the excitement they used to, she missed uncertainty and grew tired of people trying to please her. Something unlikely, she thought, that's what I need! Septimus felt the exact opposite. He woke up the same morning to the sound of a car passing by his apartment. The sound keenly reminded him of something from his past, and he could feel the pressure of not being able to remember it. It felt like a large object was being pushed through a curtain - no doubt it was there, but the details eluded him. He felt blind and grew frustrated with himself, he knew this sound would bother him for the rest of the day. He leapt out of bed and ran to the window, but as he feared, there was nothing to sate his discontent. Focusing to gather himself, he saw a letter that had slipped under his door. He opened Gatsby's message. Gatsby's invitation puzzled Septimus, he remembered the short conversation they had about the war, but he did not expect to get a letter from him for any purpose, much less a party. Two

strange things in one morning, he thought, yes today would be unlike the rest. He had a feeling of apprehension toward Gatsby's party and the day itself. What he was not uncertain about was that he needed to find the source of that sound before the day's end.

Clarissa got to the party on time, as she always did for things like this. Best to get the full experience, she thought. Clarissa had heard things about Gatsby's parties, but being too many extravagant showings herself, she had often doubted them. But once she stepped foot into Gatsby's house, all uncertainties she had about him disappeared, and the golden feeling came to her. She saw a girl yelling in celebration at the top of the stairs holding a bottle of champagne. The girl was blonde, and her face was one of pure ecstasy, specific yet open, and she was celebrating her promotion. The blonde woman's name was Charlotte, and she had just flown in from London for her business venture, this party was a fortuitous circumstance. This party was actually a step above what she was used to, but she was happy to go out of her comfort zone. How inviting all the trinkets and luxuries of Gatsby's house seemed to her as she stood there beaming, though she couldn't help but remember her quiet family upbringing in some of the pauses in festivity. For her, the contrast was both a testament of her achievement and a source of doubt in herself and the lifestyle she was beginning to assume. She yelled out: "Marry me, Gatsby!" in jest, but the crowd was happy it up. Her face was crimson, eyebrows raised, and she thought they believed her (she knew she was married at home, but the freedom of expression compelled her). As this woman continued her journey, Clarissa wandered and let the saturation of the party fill her mind with thoughts. What kind of man can host

a party like this, when did he learn how to do all of this? She knew that every aspect of her experience was tailored to her, so she wound up feeling secluded and alone - crowds got old after a while.

Septimus arrived later, after worrying his door was unlocked and walking back to his apartment to check. He entered the party and was surrounded by strangers, noise, and all the accouterments of Gatsby's unusual manor. Septimus felt the same way he did that day on the street when the world seemed to shrink. All of the environment around him, the talking, the drink service, the dancing, the music, because acidic and concentrated. He thought about that odd sound he heard earlier that day as he wandered outside to get some air. There he saw Gatsby. Septimus could finally latch onto something familiar. Gatsby was talking to a woman who looked as elegant as himself and like she belonged at the party but didn't need to be there. Septimus enjoyed their last conversation, so he joined in by shaking Gatsby's hand. "Septimus, good to see you old sport!" Gatsby said, to which Septimus replied, "I didn't know I looked that old." "You look fabulous tonight, I hope you're enjoying yourself," Gatsby replied endearingly. At this point, the woman he was talking to introduced herself: "Pleasure to meet you, I'm Clarissa," they shook hands, and she asked, "How did the two of you meet?" Septimus answered, "Gatsby was in the war just like me, he was a great hero." Gatsby appeared to take offense to what Septimus said, responding, "Oh please, you are too modest. Septimus is a true veteran." Septimus was confused why Gatsby opposed what he said, perhaps he was too forward by talking about the war in public like this, he resolved to stop talking about the subject. Suddenly someone close behind Septimus opened a bottle

of champagne and sent the cork flying. He felt a gradual but unstoppable force surrounding his skull, condensing him like a rock at the bottom of the ocean, Gatsby's words were being spoken into a vacuum, and that distinct noise that was so ingrained in Septimus' mind came back to him - the sound was somewhat amorphous, but there was a distinct ticking, or a putting, ripping sound which held Septimus' thoughts in place during this moment, like writing a note while falling through the air to your death.

Clarissa watched as Septimus teetered and shook until he moved out of sight back into the crowd. She assumed he was drunk, she herself had not had more than one obligatory glass of champagne upon entrance, so she was dangerously perceptive in this environment. She was no longer rapt with Gatsby's charm, his positivity did seem genuine, but it was common enough to be unremarkable after a while. She no longer had the sense that this was a special experience, everything around her became common and predictable. She wandered until she spilled someone's drink as they were walking around a corner in front of her. "Watch where you walk, lady!" the stranger said. Clarissa responded angrily, "Hold onto your drink next time!" The two of them had an argument. Clarissa had a sense of simplicity at this moment and said her angry words like they were to be inscribed in stone after she said them. After the argument subsided, she walked out of the party and walked home. She was angry as she walked out, angry as she turned the corner toward her residence, but as she walked a little longer, she was greeted with a sensation of simplicity and uniqueness. The golden feeling was gone, but it was replaced with something real, and she smiled as she opened her door.

the railroad line by Zoya Uzzaman

i. *the magician*

on the railroad line, fires sprout.
we put them all out.

ii. *the high priestess*

on the railroad line, we see the future.
all those things, i wish i could teach her.

iii. *the empress*

on the railroad line, mysterious flowers grow.
we've never seen them though.

iv. *the emperor*

on the railroad line, the tracks are strong.
held aloft by our step-song.

v. *the hierophant*

on the railroad line, we hold each other high.
above us dances the white tie.

vi. *the lovers*

on the railroad line, we fall alone.
but we find home beneath a gravestone.

vii. *the chariot*

on the railroad line, we drum in time.
could be that living is our crime.

viii. *justice*

on the railroad line, we dream of being on top.
we are swallowed by the tracks' backdrop.

ix. *the hermit*

on the railroad line, we wield knives like arms.
clanging to the sound of blaring alarms.

x. *wheel of fortune*

on the railroad line, the wind does not blow. so we are reminded of the
debts we owe.

xi. *strength*

on the railroad line, the overseer walks. he is protected from and by the
jury box.

xii. *the hanged man*

on the railroad line, people disappear. it is for them we persevere.

xiii. *death*

on the railroad line, we do not often sleep. how can we, when there are
tracks to keep?

xiv. *temperance*

on the railroad line, the air thirsts. we drink and drink as if these are our firsts.

xv. *the devil*

on the railroad line, a train rushes through. leaving all our hearts askew.

xvi. *the tower*

on the railroad line, the cave might crumble. we might not be found in the rubble.

xvii. *the star*

on the railroad line, we hear voices above. the sound of people falling in love.

xviii. *the moon*

on the railroad line, the chill tastes of ghosts. and yet we dare not leave our posts.

xix. *the sun*

on the railroad line, the track ends. a fact of which the world contends.

xx. *judgement*

on the railroad line, we gray.

what price are we willing to pay?

xxi. the world

on the railroad line, which we may someday miss. all that is left is this.

+

o. the fool

we are no longer on the railroad line,

but the tracks still exist to our precise design.

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things i noticed outside by Zoya Uzzaman

i am sitting on a cement brick. there is a cold drink cupped in my hands, and one earbud trails out of my ear. i'm not paying attention to whatever it is i'm supposed to be listening to, whatever song has sorted to the top of my queue. i am thinking about the futility of making friends, the way fires burn sharp and acrid and wither away quickly, the look in someone's eyes when they're not looking at me.

behind me, there is a loud noise and a stomp. a group of four boys passes by, laughing. bemused, i call out, "that was so aggressive."

one of them hides his face behind his hand, pulling his mask further up his nose. another stops in his tracks and, grinning, points over at the place they had been just a moment ago.

"i sneezed," says the first boy.

"and then you stepped on the M," says the second. the other two burst into raucous laughter.

"how could you?" i gasp. "you're never gonna graduate, now."

one of the boys snickers. "he sneezed and then stepped on the m. what the fuck dude."

"you're never gonna graduate now!" yells another boy, and he jumps on the

back of the one who'd sneezed. they keep walking, the boy staggering under the weight of the other. the last one adjusts his baseball cap, his eyes hidden by the brim of it.

i watch them walk away, down the street, around the corner. and i wonder how they do what they do. what their stories are.

.

on the way to get bubble tea, my friend and i pass a tall man asking for signatures to support a cause against workplace discrimination. i'm not old enough to sign yet, but my friend does.

after we get our tea, we sit at a bench near the man. he looks over at us; my friend shrinks back, but i wave my hand in the air like i'm once again seeing a long-lost friend. we watch as he approaches strangers and is turned away more than not, most people choosing to walk right by while hardly acknowledging his existence. my earbuds are tied around my phone, dropped in my lap. we watch as he gets a signature.

as the person walks away, i hold my hands in the air and cheer.

the man turns to me, bewildered. i yell, "you got a signature!"

he grins and says, "all part of the job, coach!"

he's a football player from alabama, getting signatures for money. i want to ask if it's pay-per-signature or if he gets paid for the amount of time he spends, but i don't. he tells us about quarterbacks and linebackers and words that i know but don't at the same time, all those football terms i've learned but never retained.

an hour flies by, and my friend goes home. when a person ignores the man, he turns to me and says, "i'll get it next time, coach!" when he gets a signature, he says, "you see that play, coach? all me." his work partner and a few friends join him, and i'm slowly forgotten.

i'm sitting and drawing in my chem notebook, idling away the minutes when they walk away. down the path leading to the road. i wonder, will i ever see them again? was this momentary connection just that: just a moment in the grand scheme of things? my hands are cold, so i walk in the same direction, towards the coffee shop overlooking the street. as i pass by, i pass them, and the man says, "have a good day, coach."

and i think, what a beautiful thing it is to know a stranger. i smile at him behind my mask and say, "you too."

.

there are five of us sitting on the concrete benches, staring out over the plaza. i'm nursing a cappuccino in my cold fingers, and my friends are talking about

something that happened in their dorm hall last week. i don't live there, so i guess i wouldn't understand. i am looking in from the outside.

on the other side of the brick plaza, a man yells in an approximation of soulful acoustic music. he strums away at his guitar, growing louder and quieter at irregular intervals. we watch as he raises his head and belts words that make no sense to us, are obviously english but impossible to understand; we watch as his own art moves him to continue, moves him to create. and though we laugh, there is something in that audacity, in that rich fire, that inspires me. i think i would like to be like that someday, able to put my art on display for the world.

my friends walk quickly, but i lag behind, my aching legs struggling to keep up with my racing mind.

.

the big rooms of this building seem more fit as ballrooms. there's one officially titled a ballroom at the end of the hall, but even these smaller study rooms give off that majestic feeling. that, or the rows of single-person tables make the room feel like an exam location. it's quiet enough to be one.

in front of me, another student sits back in his chair. i can see him watching youtube videos on his computer, his headphones over his ears. i put my earbuds in but don't play anything for a long moment, staring down at my homework. i glance over at the girl across the row, and she shrugs at me, turning back to her

notes on her ipad.

i hold my mask down to take a sip of water. then pull it back up over my mouth and nose and get to work.

a man, probably someone who works here, patrols the rooms, watching for missing masks and people who are just a bit too close. he stops in our study room and gestures to catch the attention of the boy in front of me. “excuse me?”

there is no response.

irritated, the worker taps the boy on the shoulder. the boy looks up at him, his unmasked mouth pulled down in a frown.

“you need to keep your mask on inside,” the worker says. the boy reaches across his table and grabs his mask, rolls it on over his face, hooks it around his ears. for a moment, my heart floods with panic, the idea of breathing the same air as him terrifying me.

i flee from the building at top speed.

.

i’m walking home late at night. it’s past dark, maybe nine pm. i’m walking past older buildings and people returning or going between parties, and i feel that

dark fear of the unknown grip at my heart. i look over my shoulder to make sure there's no one following me.

my fists are clenched. i recite to myself the human body's weak points and then the lyrics of the song i've been thinking about for the past two hours. my earbuds are in my ears, but they are silent; i must be watchful, careful. i need to be able to hear.

as i swerve around a large group of friends, i hear them say something along the lines of, "all babies are born autistic." i strain my ears to listen, but i only catch the tail end of that sentence, something about people becoming less autistic as they grow older, or something. i pause, dumbfounded. my previous fear feels so strange now when all i can think about is this one phrase. what does it mean? what's the evidence? i have to look it up.

with renewed energy, i plod down the sidewalk and take the bus back home.

.

i'm home, and i think of the outside. i think of the breeze and the warm sun and the cold nip of autumn on my fingertips. i think of sweaters and jackets and the faces of people i've met that i will never see again, the faces of people i haven't met and will know for a long time, sometime in the future. i wonder what it means to be alive. i wonder if this is it, if this — yearning, a quiet waiting, laughter — is what it means to be alive. i wonder if i am alive.

High School Uniform in College by Weirui Wang

Class break. The old World History 101, Jiangsu Normal University. I was in the front row with my hands clasped, elbows on the desk, daydreaming, as always— until I realized a gaze coming from the professor at the podium... to my left sleeve. I, puzzled, turned my left arm inward, only to be shocked with how bad that looked — the whole sleeve was coal-black, as if I spent an entire morning mining. How could you expect otherwise, I quirked up one corner of my mouth in mind, from an outfit I wore every day for about a month? See, sometimes even myself forgot. I definitely need to wash it, someday... or maybe this weekend. I quickly made up my mind, and for the rest of the day my arms stayed on the desk. Do I need to show off my stains? Not necessarily, I think. But actually, I have not thought it over, and there is no need to. So, let's hide on the desk where you belong—sleeve!

I returned to my dorm with that newly washed high school uniform. I sensed a few eyes on it without even looking around. Who would otherwise know that it is white in color? It stayed nasty, even mysteriously dirty grey-green most of the time, soaked in grease and dust. The very next clip in my memory is me putting elbows on the class desk again, smiling. I felt covered by a halo, the way a comic book would use to indicate how white my high school uniform has become.

In some sense, it was just the cliché of an ugly duck became a swan, with a comic remake... at the very last class of the term. It turns out the “ugly duck” does not care whether it suit its group or not, and only flies to the group of swans at the reminder of a tortoise (Will it know it was an ugly duck, then?). I does not care what I am wearing. There is no mirror in the dorm or in any washrooms students use, so everyone buy a little mirror to put on the dorm desk

for checking their looks. But I insist not buying, even got in a quarrel with my mum for it, insisting I do not need it anyway. Woohoo, a crazy primitive girl who has not herself reached any level of aesthetics or self-conscious in his class— did the professor get this joke? I speak that out in my mind’s eye, avoiding eye contact on the podium at the same time. Actually, I do not need him to involve to mark a stop for this joke of the day. I am a walking joke myself, acting non-self-conscious and innocently asocial. To the generation of my professor, being in a grey uniform is the norm; while in my generation, our clothes must shine. Thus, appearing in the classroom with a washed uniform, with the contrast between white and grey-green, I made myself astonishing to the professor at this last day (She has the ability to wash the uniform?), and to my classmates for most of the semester when they reflect for a second about it (She spent the most of the semester in a uniform as dirty as THAT?). Will this look bad? The thought stayed in me for a whole second. I do not care whether I look bad to people in this class, this school. I just enjoyed the game I am playing so much.

Was my high school a big-name? Oh, yeah. Was the uniform a stylish one? Hell, no.

“Their uniform is really ugly.” The junior-high me commented afar at the backs of two home-coming alumnae with uniforms of Jinling High School, jokingly to a friend nearby who takes it as her dream school. She shrugged and said things like she did not care at all, smiling at the same time.

That was the kind of smile I wore the first day at college. “Laziness.”, I lifted corners of my mouth with that precise dose of agency, answering the question of my roommates’ why-I’m-wearing-a-high-school-uniform. Laziness is not the reason at all, not even a good fake one, but why need I care?

Living one's life like a performance art takes things, only that I was too self-centered to realize that. When I now see my old self walking into the college campus with full high school uniform on, I am seeing a man entering a jungle bare-armed. Acting asocial will not only cause you without "useless social activities" but will cause you without any "useful" ones when you begin to want it.

The adolescence of Chinese students is postponed. In china, college is high school, the full-of-gossip one in Hollywood teenage movies and tv shows, not the staying-in-the-classroom-doing-tones-of-papers one. The latter is the real high school Chinese students do go to, and the criminal that kills the desire of our adolescence to appear on time.

"Jinling High School." I answered with pride when two girls asked me. Their expression of *déjà vu* and excitement of recognizing I wore the largely printed words "JLHS" at the back of my uniform all day long punched in the head. Do not get me wrong here: the girls are excited in a nice way. A mixed sense of admiration and surprise shone genuinely in their eyes. Afterall, you rarely see someone coming from the prestige school of the biggest city in the province in the kind of college I was in. But there I was, frozen for a little while. A live quotation by my very self flashed back in my mind at the moment, my mean comment in high school about people wearing their uniform all the time to show school-pride ("Perhaps this is THE prime of their life."). Am I the snob in others' eyes now, especially the pathetic ones in my own mouth?

This was second to the time I fell in love. And got dumped three days later.

Evening breeze of May felt so dreamy when my head was on his

shoulder. And at that moment I imagined how the pink and girly hair clip, the one I bought yesterday, would be glittering under the lamplight; and how the green dress, the one I selected for half an hour in the closet before going out, would be softening my weight. Without my high school uniform, I felt light, so light, and yet vulnerable. Vulnerable, but surprisingly brave. “They don’t get me, and they won’t.” Because I even do not give them a chance, I acted purposefully asocial all the way. Oh, the darkest secret of mine, I finally spoke that out; and I have more, “I don’t care about them.” I care about you. My heart whispers, and I hope the wind helped bring the words deep down into his chest.

That was the only date I have ever had with him. Only after a million times of revisiting that memory clip in my head had I knew the true meaning of the secret I spoke out when with him. I wore the high school uniform as my armor of pride. I determined I was better than all of them in that college of mine, even before packaging. That arrogance made me take out my high school uniform after a summer of dusting in the closet. I set myself to be someone who do not belong, who is not understood. I unconsciously purposefully made that happen by taking my high school uniform on, acting a nerdy weirdo no one cares about and caring no one.

But things come back at me. It turns out I cannot stop myself caring and wanting to be cared, but it is the “nerdy weirdo” that he cared. He read into my clothes and expected me to someone growing from the mountain areas, examined her way to the big city and bit his bait hard and full of determination as he was her first taste of love. He thought being with me could make him a savior. He always wanted to be one. And naturally, he was disappointed finding out the high school uniform was not me, but the costume and armor I wore

for others, and my joke to him. I thought he would laugh, “oh, so you are not pitiful—ha, you are ambitious, and it is in a way you thought no one would understand. You decided to not try at all!” He got this joke, but he did not laugh.

It turned out me getting dumped made up for the humanity I need in order to be cared for (or my broadcasting it, whatsoever). Naturally, along with my fear of making my true self known to others, I took off my high school uniform. I started to wear make-up under the pitiful-friendly looks of those nice big-eyed girls. If I were prettier, he would take the ambitious me—his final words. I repeated that sentence to everybody in search of denial of what the sentence states and denial of him as a person of character. The “I” under the high school uniform is already hurt, so why not try to show “her” to everybody? Chances are that someone might soothe the real me that needs healing.

“I’m thinking about throwing your high school uniform to the recycle bin.” Mum said one day last week, after we dragged a car full of items back from my old school. I hesitated, saying that the trousers have one of our dead cat’s scratching on it. It is kind of a souvenir, I suggested. Mum replied something back, something to disagree with me, which I barely pay attention to. I looked aimlessly to the front and saw in my mind’s eye a replacement for those scratches — my slippers have even more scratches. A string of thought flashed that I would never, ever put that uniform on again. — “do it, then.” I said, sounding dreamily, as if it was from somewhere distant.

97% by Julia Watt

Thank you, to the bald man walking down a West Philly street

For being the first man to catcall me. Age sixteen, if that.

“Good morning, beautiful.”

Your eyes linger on my quick-moving silhouette.

I’m disgusted, but thank you, because if it hadn’t been for you

I wouldn’t have been prepared for the group of men,

waiting for me on the street corner

only an hour later.

Running across the street, waving me down

Only to say *“Hey shawty,*

You got a number?

You wanna come smoke with us?”

I try every excuse in the book, only to hear

“Come on, girl, it’ll be fun.”

Smoking. Thanks for reminding me, men on the corner.

I’ll come back to that.

Thank you, bald man and men on the corner

If it hadn’t been for you,

I wouldn’t have noticed the kid in all black clothes,

Hood up, way past dark, blending into the night.
Following me down State Street for a mile
Alerting me to his presence by a purposeful cough.
The worst part was waiting at the crosswalk with him.
Do not look back.
Your friends are waiting for you down the street.
They're waiting to get dinner. Just down the street.
Get down the street.

Thank you to the man in the Carhartt beanie
Who followed me all evening, Christmas 2019.
In and out of every store, nothing could cut him loose
From the fishing line I suppose he'd hooked me with.
You are no safer in daylight, because the men
Are emboldened so to not necessitate the shroud of night.
Thanks, Carhartt beanie man, for telling me that much.
My brain assured me that I couldn't assume
That every man was out to get me
Ravenously coveting me like a Christmas ham.
When his pace first started to match mine

Just a coincidence.

My gut twisted into a noose –

when he matched the pace of my dirty sneakers, breaking into a sprint
on the cracked pavement, it was no longer coincidence.

Hiding from his eyes behind stacks of store merchandise in an antique store:
Tall cherry wardrobe, shelves of tacky china, racks of styles that smelled like
dust.

The manager asked me *can I help you?*

She hid me in a back room filled with garments off-gassing their decades
And the odor of cigarette smoke.

Smoking. That's what I wanted to talk about.

Thanks to the man on the street corner

For pushing me to smoke with him.

I didn't do it, but after being propositioned once,

I knew later what was on that college boy's mind.

I connected the dots far too late

When he forced me to inhale

After inhale

After inhale

Unwilling hits off a skunky blunt he packed
Telling me "*I wanna get you high, Joshy style.*"
No. I said no. I said no.
Thanks Josh – Josh was his name, the college boy –
for waiting until no one was looking
To place your unwanted hand on my ass,
A slap so hard it could've left marks.
I was only in high school, Josh, high school.
I should've been studying for my calculus exam
Instead, I spent that night shaking on the floor
Locked bathroom door.

Thanks, Josh, for backing me into that porcelain prison
And for making me wary of men who establish from the get-go
that we are not equals, just in time for the high school stoner boy
who waited to forcibly get me high
before saying "*My girlfriend doesn't put out enough.*
I'm about ready to cheat on her. With you"
I sat as far away as possible from you,
Could you not see me cowering?

Every part of my body said no
Even though my voice, numbed and silenced, could not.
Thanks, stoner boy, for pulling me onto your twin sized bed
And making me reach my hand in between your jean-encased legs
And telling me *"I love your fat little belly."*
Thanks for seeing me placing an impassable thicket between us
Shivering at the knowledge that I'd lost control, and going for it anyway.

When I went on that date with the nature-preserve boy.
Expectations at rock bottom already,
I should've known because of you, stoner boy,
Not to get in his car.
I should've known that the broken passenger side door handle
Was as red a flag as red can be.
Deeper and deeper into the woods,
I was keen to what was happening pretty quick.
Thanks, Josh the college boy,
for being the first to successfully pull that trick
And thanks, nature preserve boy, for being the fourth to try
So I knew only to pretend to breathe in the smoke.

Men: Dream State by **Julia Watt**

Often times I think about the day I let my demon out.
Clawing out from my nightmares
Fear incarnate.

He'd long lived in my nightmares.
In one dream, I felt the chokehold of disgust at my throat
And the stickiness of my skin against a brown pleather couch
(The kind that reclines and that your dad kicks his feet up on
And chows down on a can of pringles while watching the History channel.)
I was being raped for money by an unknown, fat, hairy man
But the money would pay the bills, so I held my tongue.
In another, I donned a lime green cocktail dress
With a built in safety mechanism.
"Pull the cord if he gets too close."

Yank.

The dress poofs out into an outrageous circus clown costume
Pant legs of accordion-fold pleats
And a collar reminiscent of Queen Elizabeth the first.
I'm a pufferfish of painfully chartreuse fabric,
but he is a shark, the pufferfish's only known predator.

The girls and I, playing a risky slumber party game,
Intended to invoke the spirit world in our heads
And let my demon out in the process.
He cracked the glass of a mirror hung off-kilter on the wall

With his twisted antlers.
Emerging from the frame, he was a silhouette of Greek mythos --
Half man, half deer.
He towered over me, at least nine feet tall,
Eyes burning red in a body of pure void black.
His deer head exhaled heat through his nostrils
and the stink of death.
The fear he evoked in me was every hungry eye
That has ever scanned my body like a buffet
Scoping out my weaknesses
And a way to get in.

Contributors

Maddie Agne is a Junior at UM and a former LSWA Student Assistant. She's a poet and Creative Writing major hailing from Chattanooga, Tennessee, and hopes her (admittedly) teenage-rage poetry will reach readers of *As We Are*.

Eaman Ali is a student in the LSWA program double majoring in Political Science and Art & Design. She's from East Lansing, MI, and has three sisters and two cats. Her favorite movie is *Coraline* and she has recently gotten into knitting.

Alicia Bedoya-Hoeck is probably the most undecided student at the University of Michigan major-wise, but she's happy to be here. Her interests include listening to music, photography, painting, playing the Sims, spending quality time with friends, going to Trader Joe's, and the show *Broad City*.

Elizabeth Blackwell is a freshman at the University of Michigan studying politics and writing. She has lived in Ann Arbor for the last eight years.

Brooklyn Blevins is a communications major who spends a lot of her free time writing. She likes to center a lot of her works around specific personal experiences in her life, so she can carve out a small piece of herself from these moments and look back on it later.

Contributors

Julia Boughner is pursuing a major in public health and epidemiology. She has loved writing since preschool, and has improved marginally. She is an avid explorer of the outdoors, the library, and the Taco Bell menu.

Emily Buckley is majoring in Communication and Media, and she's also pursuing minors in Writing and Art & Design at the University of Michigan. Her inspiration for her artwork comes from her personal experiences, her family, the people she has met, and the world around her.

Daniela Butkovic is from central New Jersey and planning on majoring in Psychology. She loves all things creative and dabbles a little bit in everything from writing and art to dance and singing. She also loves books, video games, and hanging out with friends.

Leah Chiss is in the class of 2024 pursuing a major in LSA and a minor in dance. Dance, music, and writing have always been important parts of her life and she is inspired by all the amazing LSWA student works this year.

Cherish Dean is a renaissance woman skewed towards the arts. In particular, a love of writing sprang naturally from a love of reading. Ever since, she's been filling notebooks and notes apps with short stories, microfiction, and poetry like there's no tomorrow. Oh! And she also loves cats and video games.

Contributors

Alejandro Derieux-Cerezo is majoring in both Physics and English (with a Subconcentration in Creative Writing) at the University of Michigan. He was co-leader of Creative Writing Club with Ray Ajemian, and his poetry is inspired by experiences playing Among Us and listening to musicians such as DaBaby.

Brianna Fox is majoring in Art & Design with a focus on Illustration. She enjoys creating portraits of women of color and is working towards creating comics focused on queer women of color that paint them in a positive light.

Kaitlyn Gozon is a rising sophomore in the College of LSA, hoping to major in Economics. She enjoys singing, writing, listening to music, and playing video games in her free time. She also takes walks, as she enjoys nature.

Brenda Harvey was in LSWA since 2017 and was honored to have been a part of LSWA throughout her years in undergrad. She majored in International studies and enjoys drawing and painting in her free time

Phoebe Huang is planning to major in Communication and Media and minor in Business. She enjoys watching movies and TV shows and playing the cello in her free time.

Sam Hubenet is working towards a degree in Philosophy, Politics and

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Economics (yes that's one major) and a minor in LGBTQ Studies. They found a love for poetry over the course of 2020, especially through their time in LSWA and the wonderful poetry club.

Rachna Iyer is a rising senior double majoring in Psychology and English with a Creative Writing sub-concentration. In her free time, she can be found creating many Spotify playlists with different combinations of the same five songs, or losing board games (except Scrabble, she's pretty good at Scrabble).

Sophia Johnecheck is a student in Lloyd Scholars for Writing and the Arts.

Chani Kohtz is a pre-medical student majoring in neuroscience. In her free time, she enjoys folding origami and playing the violin.

Esther Launstein is planning to double major in English and Creative Writing & Literature with the hopes of writing or editing impactful stories.

Nikki Lama shares her love between writing and art. Whether it be experimenting with graphic design in Illustrator or writing a painfully long essay, she pours her heart into her work. She plans to pursue journalistic endeavors in her upcoming years at U of M - so keep an eye out!

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Janice Lee is from the suburbs of Chicago, but finds herself back travelling back to her motherland in South Korea every chance she gets for visual inspiration. She spends her free time writing (obviously) and making random Spotify playlists for fun.

Irene Lopez plans to major in BCN and minor in Latino/a Studies. When she's not stressing over becoming an aspiring pediatrician, she enjoys drawing, singing, and playing video games to relax.

Alex McCullough is a rising U-M sophomore from Toledo, Ohio, and is pursuing a major in English and a minor in Spanish. In his free time, he enjoys reading (and buying way too many) books, playing piano poorly, scream-singing in the car, and writing.

Eli Neumann is a student in Lloyd Scholars for Writing and the Arts.

Megan Ocelnik is a current Stamps student pursuing a career in documentary photography. She has a special fondness for cats, and owns a grey tortoiseshell named Luna who loves contributing a hair shedding or two to Megan's art.

Em Peplinski is an FTVM major who hopes to bring more queer representation to the film and TV industries. They enjoy tending to their family's strawberry patch and watching the bees float lazily from blossom

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to blossom.

Elle Pugh is a writer from the Upper Peninsula of Michigan. She is pursuing a career in television writing.

Natalie Robbins is a cognitive science major and German and Spanish minor in the class of 2024. She likes to paint, embroider, play piano, and spend time with her four cats in her free time.

Clara Sandall is majoring in biology and planning on working in wildlife conservation. She enjoys painting and drawing in her free time and her art is often inspired by nature.

Phoebe Sarandos is a first-year student in the College of LSA. Outside of school, she enjoys spending time in nature with her friends, cooking, and listening to music. She paints mostly with watercolor or oil but loves exploring new mediums and methods of creating art.

Ben Shelby is from Los Angeles, and he will be a sophomore this year at the University of Michigan, class of 2024. He has always liked to use writing and art as a way to relax and express himself.

Olivia Spicer is majoring in Film, Television, and Media and pursuing a minor in Writing with a possible minor in Art & Design. She enjoys writing about queer representation in horror movies, their cat Poots ma

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Goots, being a semi-pretentious book lover, painting, crocheting, drawing cowboys, and drinking coffee.

Pelin Turk is from Grand Rapids, Michigan. She's in LSA and majoring in Computer Science. She has a passion for photography and enjoys painting with either acrylic or watercolor.

Zoya Uzzaman is a rising BCN major. She dreams of someday becoming a mushroom.

Nayla Vasquez is a contemporary visual artist from the Southside of Chicago. She is a Gender and Health major and a rising LSWA Student Assistant. She is inspired by intersectional feminism, her Boricua culture, her big family, Avant-Garde and Camp fashion, and Lady Gaga.

Julia Watt is a rising second-year student studying Sociology, Spanish, and Music. She enjoys printmaking, pen and ink, writing, and playing both percussion and piano. A majority of her work is grounded in intersectionality, social justice, origin, and identity. Julia plans to pursue a career in law or writing but can't wait to see where college life takes her!

Weirui Wang is a classical language and literature major who enjoys its typical 5-student-classes. Her curiosity, passion and sensitivity find their best way out through her pen.

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Yasmine Zadeh is a rising sophomore studying business with a double minor in German and Performing Arts Management and Entrepreneurship. In her free time she enjoys playing piano and creating modern and simplistic artwork. Yasmine enjoys LSWA's ability to allow her to express her creative side in the UMICH atmosphere.