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Unconditional Acceptance

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Summer Solstice Cherry Vodka // Winter Cherry Jam | Iori Kusano

June | Morgan Longford

Ekaterina Astakhova via Pexels

June

The men in suits came-
they knocked on our doors,
uninvited,
yet we answered uneasily,
out of courtesy.
(We didn't ask for company.)

The men in suits came-
with their gold cuff links and
veneer smiles,
and they explained to us that
they were there to help.
(We didn't need help.)

The men in suits came-
they stood on our porches and
admired our **J**une lawns,
they told us that they were there
to protect us.
(We didn't need protecting.)

The men in suits came-
with their insincere platitudes,
pushed us aside and
entered our homes, assured us:
"we know better what you need
than you do."
(We already knew what we needed.)

We watched.

We watched the men in suits
through our front windows,
the sun of the summer solstice
on our backs,
watched as they disassembled our
homes and our histories.

We watched through the windows
because the men in suits
had locked us out.
We watched through the windows
because we no longer had
    a choice.

please use single spacing for your poem.

My name is Morgan. I have 4 minutes to get this in during the 10 minute window so my name is Morgan.

August | Emily Schmidt

chivozol via Pexels

I watched a spider
build her web from tree to tree
just to sit between

Emily is a writer, lover, and muse to most. @writtenbyemilyschmidt on instagram

Love Poem for Blucifer | Bella Rotker

via Uncover Colorado

After Blue Mustang, *Luis Jiménez*

And how I used to have nightmares
that you would come alive, all thirty two feet,
all nine thousand pounds on your back hooves,
your glowing red eyes. And how I cried when someone
wrote on your hooves in orange spray paint,
even though no one could tell what the letters
said. My mom cackled when her five year old
daughter first referred to you as *Blucifer*. And I've grown
to find your LED flood light eyes comforting,
a tribute to your sculptor's father. You're supposed
to be spirit of the wild west, but I see you as
a good luck charm. Like the blue poker chip I keep
on my backpack, a constant reminder of you. When I fly

out of Denver, I go early to see you. When I fly out of Miami
I look up pictures of you. I wonder if you know
you're made of fiberglass. I might buy a tiny version
of you to keep on my desk, and call it Blucifer
Junior, or maybe BluJu for short. Do you mind
being called that? Do you get lonely? I could build
a house next to you if you wanted. You're only a year
and sixteen days younger than I am. Denver thinks
you're worth 650 thousand dollars and a nightmare
or two, but I think you're all the childhood I've ever had.

Bella Rotker is a sophomore at the Interlochen Arts Academy. She was born in Venezuela and loves petting bunnies, pressing flowers, and staring wistfully at bodies of water. @bellarotker on twitter/ig

3 Poems | Ivory Dee

Bruno Scramgnon via Pexels

If I Don't

If I don't form these words in the way that only I can

They will die between my brain and my tongue

Behind my eyes

And I have seen enough grief

Poem 2

It's dangerous, that beautiful sun

But the moon?

The only scary thing is while it rings out the calm in you

It breeds monsters in everyone else

Poem 3

Relapsing is less disappointing when you realize you're addicted

If you have never been an addict

Then how do you know?

You fight for one more day

Because time heals all

But when you fall in

Starting over doesn't feel so bad

Until it's time

Because addiction is temporary

Otherwise, it would just be called love

Ivory Dee is a poet, mother and author from Philadelphia.

Joe | Sam Campbell

Sandy Torchon via Pexels

The date was going badly, and that was an understatement. Cadillac had snapped the leg of the snow crab and sent a piece of the delicate white flesh flying through the air. It landed in Joe's glass of Dr. Pepper, but he was so busy talking about his ex-girlfriend that he didn't even notice. And now, Cadillac sat there watching the crabmeat out of the corner of her eyes, willing him not to take a drink.

"So then, after I caught her cheating, she begged me to take her back. At first, I said 'hell no' but she had a really nice ass and I was lonely so I thought 'what the hell?'..." Joe droned on. Cadillac stopped listening. She glanced down at the cell phone in her lap. She typed a quick text to her friends: self-absorbed, lack of proper social etiquette, smells faintly of marijuana. She glanced back up at him to see if he'd noticed she was no longer listening to him, but he was still animatedly telling the story of his past dating woes. She took a bite of her scampi and allowed her eyes to wander around the room.

"...but then she whispered into my ear 'my vagina is screaming 'feed me!'' and that was it. Completely killed it. I mean, what guy wants to hear that? It sounds like she's going to eat my dick or something..."

Cadillac dropped her fork. Was this guy for real?

"Excuse me?" she said.

Joe stopped and looked at her. "Oh, I'm so sorry. I didn't mean to be rude or inappropriate. You must think I'm crazy."

"This is our first date and you just told me about some girl who wants you to feed her vagina. Sounds a little crazy, don't you think?"

"I'm so sorry. I'm just really nervous and you weren't saying much. I tend to ramble."

Cadillac relaxed a little. It's been quite a while since she'd been on a date, and she wasn't giving the guy much to work with. Maybe she was being a bit harsh.

"It's okay. Let's just talk about something else." She said.

"Okay," he said. "So, your name's Cadillac."

"Yes," she smiled.

"So," he leaned in across the table, "does that mean you're a smooth ride?"

Cadillac couldn't stop her mouth from dropping open. She blinked a few times and just stared at him, not knowing exactly what to say or do. Joe laughed and she felt his foot touch hers under the table. She jerked her leg away and stood up, muttering something about needing to go to the restroom. She grabbed her phone and her purse and walked out of the restaurant. She dialed her best friend's number and as it was ringing, she vaguely considered the possibility that maybe she needed to just get a cat.

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samiamwrites.com

pea pod triptych | Allegra Stevenson-Kaplan

via Pixabay

i.

angel with a pail of milk
many of you, huddled
grasping shoulders

ii.

rubber band reprimand:
two large hands come down from the sky
and wring you like a washcloth

iii.

laundry's been sorted

yes, god's work is sordid

Allegra Stevenson-Kaplan recently completed her Honours English degree at the University of Victoria, where she was a Poetry Editor for The Warren Undergraduate Review. Twitter: @allegra__kaplan.

Dyes | Garrett Mostowski

Aleksandar Pasaric via Pexels

I'll never forget showing up to my first family reunion on my stepdad's side. I won't forget the last one either. The first one was awkward 'cause: 1) I didn't know anybody there, since it wasn't really my family yet, and 2) No one knew me either and so they are all looking at me funny trying to figure me out, and 3) I was the only one with red hair and freckles. I'm almost always the only one like that.

Swarms of aunts and uncles and great aunts and uncles and all the cousins…oh my god there were so many cousins. And every single one of them wanted to know: which family I belonged to, and how did I get there, and where did I live again—and in what town, and who was my Daddy, and oh was I just a friend of a cousin someone had brought along with them to this, and who ever knew of another Smith-Williams-Davidson family member to have red hair?

I was seven years old. And drowning.

Till my new grandma bowled through the crowds and scooped me up to sit on her hip like I was still a baby. Like I didn't even weigh anything. She carried me to her car, put me in the backseat—buckled me up like I couldn't do it myself—and then she wiped her eyes, clenched her jaw, and forced a smile through the rearview all the way to the store where she snatched me up and carried me to the back wall and stood there holding me with one arm while her other hand played with her lips.

She scanned the wall of shiny little boxes for what felt like an hour until she reached, grabbed a box, held it against my head, set it back, grabbed another, held it to my head again and said, "Mmm. That's it."

Back home, we didn't go to the backyard to be with the rest of the family right away. Instead Grandma took me through the front door and had me wait on the couch while she took care of something in the bathroom.

Her hair was fire when she came out.

"I used the dye on it," she told me, stepping into the living room, wiping her head with a towel, "What do you think?"

At the last family reunion Grandma died from natural causes and everybody stayed a few extra days for the funeral. And while all the aunts and uncles, and great aunts and uncles, and every god damn cousin in the world, while they all threw their roses onto her coffin and said their goodbyes, I dropped a plastic bag filled with red hair dyes and whispered, "Thank you."

Garrett Mostowski's work has appeared in The Galway Review, Across the Margin, Geez, Clerestory, and others. He's a doctoral candidate in theology and creative writing. Twitter @RevGMostowski

Mountain Food | Dylan Mabe

eberhard grossgasteiger via Pexels

I saw a man smoke his fascinations,
hold them in his lungs until they burst.
I know sleeps without breathing,
because to breathe anything else would be to ruin the recipe.

He was forced to look at the mountains,
from base to tip,
breaking his back as he watched the skyline split.

He was thrown in the mountain
with the other boys whose lungs were empty potential,
and as the darkness absorbed the hand in front of his face,
his aches became mountain lions.

Dylan Mabe (he/him/his) is a queer Appalachian artist native to Big Stone Gap, Virginia. . His poetry has featured in the 2022 Bluestone Review, and the Spring 2021 Issue of Little Somethings Press.

i wonder if anyone can recognize my softness anymore | James Remick

¶Project Atlas via Pexels

i wonder if anyone can recognize my softness anymore

in the music
of footsteps
through
empty galleries

hidden inside
the seams

of an old suit jacket

in between the lines
fingers on paper
on skin
that must be
someone else's

James Remick is a poet. He loves wrestling, whiskey, and cookies. You can decide what order those go in, He is all over social media as @Clevelandpoet

Hearts of Sea Glass | C.R. Hoaglund

cottonbro via Pexels

Pieces fall together easily as they fall apart
We risk more damage by trying for repair

A hazard of letting ourselves feel again
That chance, not worth taking, washes away

The best solution is to polish the edges
Patch them in with mortar made of memories

And hope the colors and shapes fit well enough
To make our broken pieces beautiful

---

twitter is @CrHoaglund.

Now or Now or Never | Sam Gordon Webb

Mo Eid via Pexels

That day, they set no alarms. They let their body do the wake-up call. Let the sun creak through the gaps in the curtains. Sting both irises like lasers. Breakfast. Pre-packaged croissants. Stale. A coffee, single shot, decaf, filled to the brim.

On the news; famines; wars; liars; murderers; charred forests. Meanwhile, a fly waded its legs through the brew's surface, drowning, drawing its final breaths, ripples pushing hard against the cup's innards, like a silent storm, rage without thunder, dying to be saved, steam on her chin, tears tickled, laughter cried.

Sam is writing his first crime novel as a student of the Faber Academy's 'Writing a Novel' course. He can be found on Twitter as @samofme.

BREATHE | Peyton Hines

Ayman Mustapha Nouas via Pexels

I can see you, sitting there. I stare in from the yard at the back of your head, through the living room window. The window that you once smashed to pieces with bare knuckles and angry shouts when dinner wasn't on the table before you arrived home. Your large frame is sprawled across the old sofa, where I have scrubbed at dark red stains until my fingers ached. The large frame that towered above my own, your silhouette bent down towards me as if to scream the words directly into my mouth, my chest, my entire body.

You seem relaxed there, in the dim lights that stream in from the kitchen. Are you relaxed, my love?

When I took the first breathful of dirt into my lungs, it was your heavy hands that I pictured clasped around my skull, palms holding my mouth shut and nails clawing at my cheeks. *Breathe,* you whispered while laughing quietly, taunting me. You weren't really there withme, though. Not then, after burying me in the backyard just the night before. You had no reason to be there inside the shallow grave you had dug for me, only for me. I wouldn't be a problem, not anymore. A burden lifted off your chest, as if it had been me striking *you* night after night, me forcing all of my weight onto your chest and leaving *you* breathless, me carving deep marks into *your* arms and legs, shoved into sleeved shirts and long pants, even in the warm months.

You take a swig of your beer, and I watch as your adam's apple bobs in the light of the television screen, a small drop escaping the corner of your mouth and travelling down your throat and out of sight. I look down at my hands, which have turned a ghoulish grey under the light of the moon. I clench my fists, carving small crescent-shaped marks into my palms.

When I open them, there is no blood, no darkness breaking the surface. Just the same lifeless grey. There's no pain, just numbness. There's nothing inside of me for you to take, not anymore.

I move closer to the window.

A branch snaps under my foot, and although it stabs into my heel, there's no blood there, either. You hear something, though, something moving outside. Your head snaps up, attention no longer on the TV in front of you. You've been jumpy, ever since you placed the worn shovel into the back of your truck, your head whipping in each direction on the street, the lampost near our home flickering slightly above you. Don't worry. No one saw you, no one knows that the shovel was used to beat my body deeper into the earth when I wouldn't fit in the way you wanted. After a while, when my bones yielded to the blows and you were left only with silence and the sounds of your panting breaths, you were able to cover me, force the dirt into submission just as you were prone to do with many things.

I used to think that maybe that was all you knew, that you loved me in spite of those darker parts of you. Now, I wonder if it was simply the act of hurting, of causing pain to another person, that you were really in love with.

I've reached the window now, my palm pressed flat against the glass. I can't feel the coolness of the surface, but I know it's there. Much like how you know something is here with you now, something outside that wants in.

You're standing now, the football match on the screen behind you still playing, and for once (FOR ONCE) you're focused on something else completely. You're searching around for the source of an unknown terror in your home that circles, the hairs on your arms standing straight up. You're scared, close to pissing yourself in the middle of our living room. Scared of – you don't even know what. Surely not of your wife and your prisoner, your lover and your enemy.

I bend down, and what used to be my kneecaps crack and shatter under a fragile layer of skin. I feel none of it, but the sound is rather unpleasing. My fingers clench around a handful of dirt, pieces embeddeding themselves under shredded nails.

When I make it to the front door, I don't bother to knock. I push right in. You never did bother to lock it behind you, so sure that nothing would creep its way in right behind you, slipping through the gap and burrowing inside the chest, the heart of this house.

As I make my way down the hall, I trail a rotted hand along the wall, just underneath picture frames of smiling faces. I smile along with them, trying to stretch my grin to match theirs with my thumbs. I watch in the reflection of the frame as the skin gives underneath, my lips tearing into a permanent gleeful expression. I eye it for a moment before continuing forward, towards the living room.

I'm getting closer, my love. I practically smell you from here, my nose deformed and warped, but not completely broken.

I don't find you in that same spot in the living room, you've moved into the kitchen. I see your same massive silhoutte turned meek as you cower on the far side of the room, back to the counter and two hands planted on both sides of the sink, right where you slammed my skull into the granite. I see now that it's devoid of my blood, meaning you cleaned up in here. I imagine you now, on hands and knees, scrubbing at the tile where the dark liquid trailed down to from the counter. I imagine you wearing my long yellow gloves, my scrub brush tight in your grip, little beads of sweat forming on your forehead. I wonder how it felt to be down on your knees, for once being the one who cleans up the stains left from my bruised body.

As I approach, you don't move. Christ, you wouldn't dare, would you? Not now, with the quiver of your bottom lip, the grip you have on the sink, the shortness of your breath. When you were burying me, the panting was in relief. Now the breathing is ragged, small whimpers escaping every so often.

A trail of dirt follows me in from the yard, from where you laid my broken body in unrest.

I bring myself right up to you, I invade your space. I bring a hand up to your cheek, my thumb softly stroking your temple. You think to yourself how gentle I am, even in death, even in the fragmented state you left me in. You think of how this is why you chose me in the first place, how easy it was to get me to love you, even when you did everything you could to crush the gleam you saw in my eyes. You would've done anything to have it, and so you took it from me by force, when you should've known, should've been smart enough to realize.

I would've given it to you for free.

When my hand moves from your cheek to the soft spot at the back of your head, you don't struggle. I've only ever loved you. When my grip around you tightens slightly, you sigh with relief, you've been forgiven. How could I be the one doing the hurting? It's only when my other hand comes into view in front of your eyes, filled with dirt and rock, do your eyes widen slightly. My palm finally turns, cupping over your mouth, already opened in disbelief. I tip your head back, my grasp firm. I paint a picture this way, of the image of you I saw when I rose from the ground. This, my love, is what carried me up throughout the darkness, up and out of the earth all around me. It was you.

I lean forward, your soft grunts and muffled choking from behind my hand quieting for a moment. I touch my forehead to yours, wide and horrified eyes meeting calm and glassy ones. My mouth opens, the sounds passing through my crushed windpipe are broken and soft as I whisper to you.

"Breathe, my love," I choke out, as tears trail down your reddening face, the low glow from the kitchen light above painting shadows across stunned features. There's only a single thought that comes to each of us in turn, before the sound of a body hitting the cold tile.

If only you had dug a bit deeper.

Bunching Up For The Photo | Merri Andrew

Tomas Anunziata via Pexels

A drone making a heat map
notes our concentration
and renders us united

pale yellow with a red aura
bleeding into black

Down here it's our skin
that tracks heat, warm arms
push on each other

hips bump, eight thighs hold up
the canopy of our faces
turning to light

I respect your unnatural smile
You know best

Are our thighs shaking?
We're overcoming everything
moment by moment

not falling backwards off the kerb

We will be here forever

Merri Andrew's poetry and short fiction can be found in Zero Readers, Guesthouse and Strange Horizons. She lives on Ngunnawal and Ngambri Country in Canberra, Australia. Twitter @MerriAndrewHere

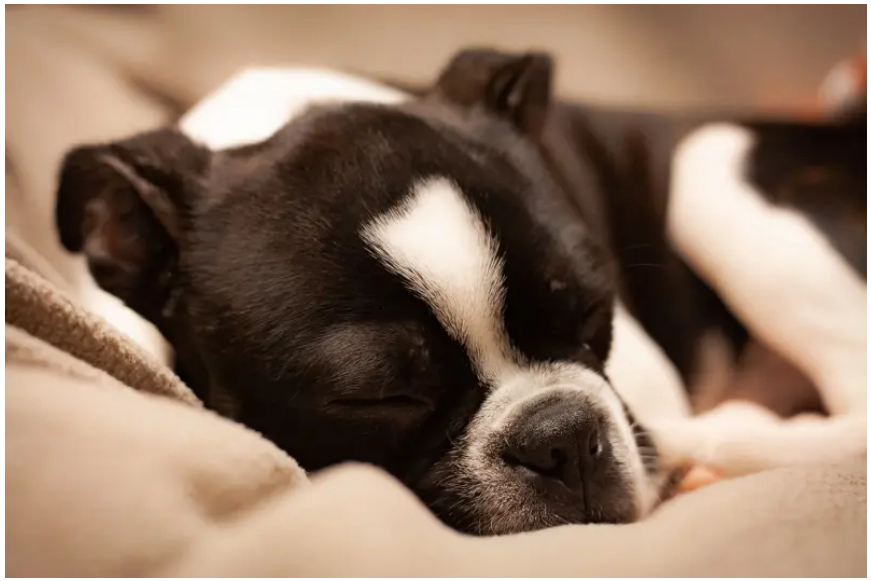
Sorry, My Mistake | Nona Parker

Miguel Á. Padriñán via Pexels

"Break a leg!"
I ring,
toward a cricket preparing
to sing.

I am a musician and poet from Chicago, Illinois

To the dog lost in divorce: | Alison Lubar



Matthias Cooper via Pexels

When I dream of you,

are you dreaming of me?

[Amid chasing the groundhog,

neighborhood rabbits,

your tail, supine pantomime

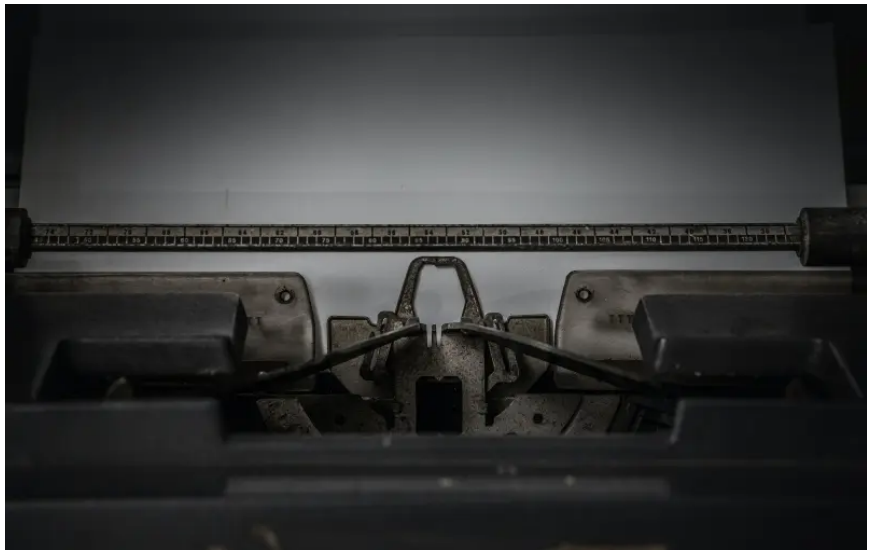
run stops mid-leap–

and you lie at my feet

while I sleep.]

Alison Lubar teaches high school English by day and yoga by night. Find out more on Twitter @theoriginalison.

ERR:DIVIDEBY0 | Viency Lee



NEOSiAM 2021 via Pexels

I don't remember at what point

I started treating poetry a little like Math.

The thing is, I was never particularly good at either.

(*Does that mean something?*)

I burn hours away to

calculate the circumference of each word

fo fit this

elementary
problem of a poem;
Maybe that way I'll always arrive
at the right – *right* – right answer.

I try to measure the perfect line—
Tracing parallels upon
my metaphorical ruler;
Eliminating the excess;
Sculpting my stanzas into equations
just so I can solve for the perfect words
where:
x equals need
y equals beauty
z equals feeling

(ERROR)

Have you got the answer yet?
I haven't.
Man, this question – sorry – poem(?)
is proving a little tougher than I thought.
Shoot.

Let's try again. Okay:

Find the angle between
that perfect
line break
and your need
to feel like you've been changed
by the way I bracket words together
sieved out of my
limited,
leaking,
disintegrating library.

Do I solve for the proof between your
blessing
and my need to satisfy?

Ah crap.
Where's the formula to subtract fear
and insecurity away when I need it?
Remind me again—
how do I multiply pleasure
by public approval
in order to maximise self-esteem?

It seems that I've forgotten.

Viency Lee is a book editor at an independent Singaporean publishing house. Her work tends to engage with the fantastical. She also hosts a podcast about Singaporean comics sometimes.

The Will of Crandolph Fitzgerald-Mayhew | Isaac and Abbie Fox and Hoffer

via Pixabay

I am the will of Crandolph Fitzgerald-Mayhew. I am also the devourer of Crandolph Fitzgerald-Mayhew. While his good-for-nothing spawn plotted to cut off his air supply or subtly induce an aneurysm, all I had to do was wait until visiting hours were over and slide out of the valise he'd requested from the estate lawyer. It was child's play to crawl up the hospital bed and tear into his flesh.

Today, his children have gathered in the towering home of their patriarch to decide the fate of his estate, and they have only just realized that none of them have me. I peer out from under the scale model of his third wife's second yacht on the mantelpiece. With as many of my eyes as I can slide out from underneath, I watch.

All parties present are vying for large chunks of the estate, and the screaming began as soon as they walked in the door. Now, the many peons of my late master scatter through the house to track down the piece of paper that could be the difference between upper class and upper middle class. I unfurl myself and begin my hunt.

Slithering across the floor of the library, I make my way to the far side of the room and lock my many eyes on my first victim: Ebenezer Fitzgerald-Mayhew.

Ebenezer first scans the shelves devoted to 19th-century Russian ornithological illustrations, slowly moving on to the section on the history of the railroad system in Central America, and then the roomful of books arguing that the moon landing was faked. After the speculative catalogs of far-future rake designs, he gets bored and moves on to the liquor wing, where I wait, sipping a whiskey older than Crandolph's great grandfather.

Ebenezer grabs a bottle of his father's shittiest liquor (which still costs more than his house). He sits down, opens the bottle, and quietly practices his in-progress diss-track of the 45th president of the United States, who once fired him with a Tweet.

I slide under his chair, nudging the heel of his cheap loafer. He bends to pick me up, and I play dead, like an innocent piece of paper. He begins to scan my contents, drink in hand, when I spring into action. The vocal cords take precedence here, as Ebenezer's prolific rap career has already produced over 40 tracks of what is essentially the same song. I saw him a lot during Crandolph's elderly attempts to reconnect with his children, and if I have to hear one more time about his epic quest to "mack honeys," I might need to have my ears stapled down.

Once his throat is torn open, I dive mouth-first into his chest, tearing and ripping at any skin I can sink a fang into. He's too stupid to scream, opting instead to douse me in house-priced vodka that smells like lighter fluid. I only bite harder, crunching bone in my maw as I burrow deeper into his chest. I am dripping in gore and liquor when I finally reach his heart and bite down hard. Ebenezer gives one last pathetic squelch of breath before slumping back into his chair, never to mumble another rap verse.

I spit up a few bones and teeth, cleanse my palate with some aged cheese and a fine dipping mustard, and slink onward to the hall of music.

Here, Cereal Milk Fitzgerald-Mayhew—who went by Thomas until one fateful night of hotboxing a houseboat in his 40s—tries to play one of the organs. Massive, discordant noises boom through the hall, ringing in each piano, bouncing off the strings of each and every cello, theremin, standing bass, and Stradivarius. I creep among the instruments, watching him—waiting. He turns away from the organ and reaches for a contrabass flute, and I pounce. I take his head in one bite; I take the rest of him in countless small, well-mannered ones. He tastes like natural deodorant and those plastic bead bracelets they hand out at raves.

The last of Crandolph's children is Josephine, named after his favorite mistress. (Well, Josephine isn't quite the last-not yet. On my way to the eggs and breakfast meats kitchen, where she's hunting for me, I bump into Jen. She's the one Crandolph tried to keep out of the tri-annual portraits. I forget I saw her before I finish eating her.)

Josephine poses the biggest challenge to both myself and her siblings (or at least she did when they were alive). She ran rings around them in life, securing a high-powered position at an elite law firm by the time she was twenty-three, and she's always frightened me because she wears very pointy heels and has a nervous habit of tearing up bits of paper.

She stands in front of the stove, inspecting every nook and cranny of the kitchen for dust or dirt. Her father added numerous special clauses to the many drafts of his will over the years to try to keep her from finding a loophole to screw her siblings out of their fair share, but she still thinks of the house as her own.

I creep around the kitchen's edges before barreling towards her at top speed. She screams when I make contact, and I gag on the mouthful of hair I've gotten in the process. A hard bite to her shoulder takes a chunk out and brings her to the ground. She continues screaming as I take bites at random, savoring the last of the Fitzgerald-Mayhew bloodline. A final bite to the femoral artery is all it takes to bring down the harshest member of the whole family. A shame really; I thought she'd put up more of a fight.

Crandolph wasn't the kind of man who had friends. His relatives—except for a few extremely distant cousins—now rest in pieces in my papery stomach. So the mansion he spent his life building will lie abandoned, or at least it'll appear to.

I'm not going anywhere, of course. Here, I have cabinets of scotch to drink, endless rooms of beautiful books to befriend, a bunkerful of Cuban cigars to smoke. And soon, perhaps a few inquiring cousins, or lawyers, or illegitimate children to eat. Maybe the military will lay siege to the house after hearing of me, and I'll get to devour an entire nation's armed forces.

And if not, this place will become the subject of a thousand ghost stories. Imagine how many tourists and daring teenagers will sneak in, never to be seen again.

I can't wait.

Isaac Fox and Abbie Hoffer are students at Lebanon Valley College. This is the first time they've ever written a short story in less than an hour.

momma always calls me country for walking barefoot outside the house | Mea Anderson

via Pixabay

i walk across plush, emerald grass. cool dew and soft earth kiss my calloused feet, and i feel grounded. concrete. i slip on my sandals and continue forward. it's only 4:30, but the sky is already beginning to turn a hazy pink. and while part of me misses lingering summer evenings, i feel lucky that i don't have to wait so long anymore for my favorite time of day. i gaze at the clouds made silhouette by the setting sun and try to absorb the sweet stillness around me. i come across a puddle. i love puddles. i especially love the way they reach into the ground and unearth the sky.

my sandals are in my hand again. i can hear the sound of water, unrelenting and also gentle. maternal. nearing the fountain, i welcome sharp pinches of gravel as my toes flick up sand. clouds of dust envelop me and reach toward the sky as though they know her. i teeter on the edge of the fountain before i lower myself into the biting ripples. they wash my feet, and i wonder if this is how it feels to heal. cleansing, necessary, harsh. i am reminded of an old negro spirtual as i stand in the water, and i decide that this is healing. i decide that this is hallowed ground.

it's dark now. the new navy sky shakes its head, as the last street light flickers on. late, like me. my feet are no longer wet and are no longer bare, so i walk. i find myself under my favorite tree. once, a friend cautioned me to ask permission

before plucking leaves from low-hanging branches, and i chuckled. but now i enjoy my conversations with trees who sit low enough for me to greet them. tonight, my leaf is a small one. a quiet ache courses through my shoulders, tickles my spine, and squeezes my calves. my body asks for rest.

inhale. i take a moment to trace constellations and think of the moon, suspended. i think of her and feel with her. understanding that our brilliance is little without the light of our mothers. exhale. i keep moving. green and purple flowers lace like fingers through a chain link fence, and i know i am almost home. i let my leaf drift onto the ground, giving her back to the earth. for the last time, i am barefoot again. i lift myself up the five small steps to my house and leave one home to enter another.

Kaleidoscope Shades | Angelique Woodruff

Daria Obymaha via Pexels

Tiny fingers patting her cheeks.

Little toes cold against her own.

And a squeaky voice, clambering up beside her ear, pushing paper into her face. “I made you a pitcher!”

The days were gray and the nights were navy, a pool seeping into her bones and compressing her lungs. Tears fell because words could not, exhaustion made eating too much and bathing a forgotten past time. The guilt of it all, because she could not fight through what immersed her, was plum. Like bruises. Like storming skies. Like the witching hour, when the sound of her thoughts was too much.

But the tiny body lying on hers? The giggles and the cuddles and the divine peace that settled in when they read together?

These were yellow. Nala was yellow.

"Hey Nala-roo, Mommy's not feeling good today. Let's go eat our lunch okay? We can come check on her later-" Cyrus was orange. They'd been married for seven years, and still he turned up in the most unexpected ways. He knew, somehow, when she needed quiet. He was blood orange then, dependable and rich. And then, when washing her hair was a heavy thing and her limbs were frozen, there was the bright tangerine. Bringing her plates of things easy on a queasy stomach. Brushing a warm kiss against her temple.

Liv herself had been red, always. Crimson and extreme. Her love for him was like cinnamon and her pain was a rust that bled into wine. She could be coy and a handful of cherries he loved to nibble on. Her eyes had been red-rimmed and her nose like a fire engine in the frigid air when he got down on one knee.

And then three years after that, here came the sun, rising on a day like no other.

"But I wanna show mommy my picture!"

"I know sweetie. But we can do that after."

"Okaaay..."

Her little girl was a bright, bursting thing. Nala's laughter was like the sunshine's warmth pressing into you during the summer. It came from deep down in her belly, her round cheeks scrunching as something amused her. The little smooches good night, the sleepy arms around Liv's neck in the morning were the same golden as fresh bread.

"Give her a kiss and let's go eat."

And on days like this one, when her eyes saw only charcoal and sepia, Nala's refusal to give up on her mother or let her drown was whipped butter. Yellow's palest shade, there if you were to squint, rich for a reason you could not name.

A lump under the covers and then a sticky little mouth kissing her cheek. The dim bulb strengthened. Liv's arms encircled the small body, pet thick dark curls.

"Do you feel better now mommy?"

The charcoal was fading, more mist. Liv was teetering and tired. It wasn't perfect. But her heart warmed.

"Nala, will you help mommy paint her toes?"

"Can we?!"

"Mmhm. What color should mommy do?"

Nala beamed.

"Yellow!"

I'm 27, drink too much tea and trying to train my dog and rabbit to be ghost writers for me. When not working my 2 jobs I enjoy knitting, crying over fictional characters and short walks on the beach

Pals of A Porous 'Pitcher' | Sophia Tang

via Pixabay

Every inch of my skin had been scorched by the sun's rays. The high temperatures were evaporating a lot of moisture from the air. I felt as if I were submerged in a hot spring's mist, making it difficult to breathe. I glanced out into the bleachers, where the fans were expecting me – the game's final inning pitcher – until I heard my mom cheering me on from the sidelines. As I dragged my feet from the dugout to the mound's center, spinning the ball between my fingers, it felt like I was miles away. My heart was racing, my hands trembled, and I was perspiring profusely like a porous 'pitcher'. As soon as I walked atop the mound, my muscles and bones sprang in a surge of vigor. I took advantage of my strong power by swerving around to face the catcher's glove, which was perfectly positioned behind home plate. I inhaled deeply and braced myself.

About six months ago, when no one else on my team could, I began pitching. No pitcher, no game – I was desperately needed at first, but I've loved every minute of it since. 'New pitcher, watch her!' yelled someone from the opposing team right in my face during an earlier game. I was enraged, but I continued to pitch as if nothing had happened. The ball, on the other hand, did not always stay by my side. When I got home from that game, I scribbled 'listen or lose' on the ball and trained it in my backyard, rain or shine, day or night. I hoped that one day, 'the ball' would become 'my ball'.

My summer tournament season would be over if we lost this game. I wouldn't be surprised if *Tsunami*, a higher-ranked team, defeated my team *Hailstorm*. It was a huge draw for us though to be the underdogs, or even to pull off a major upset against them. We fought like warriors, hitting, sliding, and stealing bases as we left cloud-forming dust trails in the air. At the end of the third inning, we were all tied. My courage grew as the game progressed into the final inning. After striking out the first two batters, I was on the verge of striking out the third. If I made it, my team would win by just one point! Unfortunately, the ball was then struck by a 'heat stroke'. The third batter took a swing at my third strike ball but failed to connect. I dashed towards the ball as the catcher spun back to dive for it, hoping to keep it from hitting the ground. The ball, however, was moving too quickly for a save. I couldn't do much but watch the ball fly through the air. The batter sped across the diamond like an arrow on a string, arriving safely ahead of the ball at first base. *Hailstorms* were heartbroken, and I wasn't myself anymore. *Tsunamis* began wreaking havoc on all bases, including home. In the end, we came up just short. Without the ball in my glove, tears streamed down my cheeks as a wave of sadness swept through our team. The season seemed to be coming to an end, but I knew I'd given it my all, as had 'the ball'. I was proud of what I had accomplished, and more importantly, I had thoroughly enjoyed the entire experience.

Tsunami's coach surprised me a week later by inviting me to the season's final tournament with his team. We played in the sweltering heat for hours again, until nearly midnight. But this time, after overcoming the difficult loser bracket, we came in second place! Soon after, I received my FIRST tournament ring, and 'the ball' was dubbed 'my ball'. I was exhausted, but as I dozed off in the car with my pals held tightly in my palms, I whispered, 'Although I'm very pleased with my ball for earning me my ring in the second tournament, I was also proud of myself in the first when the heat stroke stole my ball away.'

As I reflected on my newly discovered softball path, my ball entertained me while also teaching me how to overcome obstacles, be my best self, and never give up. Success doesn't come easily, and it's more of a byproduct of my life's experiences than a goal. Regardless of the outcome, my friends and I are always on the road.

I am a 6th grader that lives in Houston, Texas.

Time Capsule | Allison Blisss

Mo Eid via Pexels

Your mom keeps your door shut.
The stale smoke packs your room
like canned beans stowed away for the end
of the world. Your bed
looks like we climbed out of it late this morning.
I steal one of your last t-shirts, crumpled
like you threw it to the floor only a day ago.

Hurrying to work, I throw it on and search
for a forgotten scrunchie, a hair band I left
before you boarded your plane.

I snap a photo of a photo:
you with the long hair I told your barracks friends you kept
before you had to buzz it, proudly sharing the parts of you
I knew before the you they know now.

I close your door one last time, walk
to the top of the staircase, and
out the front door,
where

your mom has begun removing
summer's garden decorations: a simple wind chime, a tin
watering can, a bowling ball covered in shiny
pennies, each carefully placed.

After the winter, they'll again find homes
along a stone path, jagged yellow flowers,
patches of budding greens.

Allison Bliss is a 26-year-old living in Miami. But not for long. @ms.bearimy

Bewilderment Motel | Elizabeth George

Laura Reed via Pexels

The Motel signs boasts "Color TV." The rooms fan out in two wings; outside of Room 4, a caked string mop stands propped against a statute of Santa in a cowboy hat, a pot of dead chrysanthemums at his feet. On the sidewalk in front of Room 12, a decapitated reindeer head lays nestled inside an Easter basket among faded strips of plastic grass. In the window of the Main Office, a Halloween spiderweb catches a few pieces of tinsel, blown about by the air conditioner. The fuel gauge in my car reads "helpless." I pull in.

Elizabeth M. George is the author of Glass Teepee (Gallery of Readers Press, 2017), a collection of short fiction.

yet another poetic way to say ‘i love you’ without saying ‘i love you’ | Joyce Kung

Neosiam via Pexels

i love every moment of you with all my heart

Joyce Kung is crafting a long title. Their words can be found in sinθ magazine and elsewhere. They also help edit Stone of Madness Press. You can find them on Twitter as @commitsbyjoyce.

To all the humans | Graham Bishop

via Graham Bishop

To all the humans who hooked up with me once, then never spoke to me again, it's okay.
To all the humans I hooked up with once, then never spoke to again, I'm sorry.
I'm sorry we couldn't have been more than we were.
I'm 29 and have always known I was dying.
I hope I made you feel alive for a second.
My nerves hurt, and my body may or may not be failing.
But no matter how bad the sex was,
Or how much we hated each other in the end,
I know you were human like me.

Graham L. Bishop (ze/him) is a queer writer on the autism spectrum living in the South. You can find zim on Twitter at @animalcosmonaut or Instagram at @grahammatology.

Fastening Up the Feathers On My Back | Ari Shey

Isaque Pereira via Pexels

Flight is impossible without the updraft, yes, but it also needs air pressing down. Just the right amount. With enough weight from the wind but not so much it holds us to the ground. It keeps us around, waiting until the balance is created. Lifting up from underneath, steadying it with pressure capped, lifting off. Otherwise do we rise too high? Fighting as gravity magnetizes us to the ground constantly. Holding us down in a grounding way. Otherwise, would we just float around? Flying free is never easy.

As Soon As I Finish This Chapter | Cindy Cramer

via Pixabay

She was relieved to find that she was once again a person who read books. That she could always find a bookmark because they were strewn carelessly throughout the house—falling like leaves from whatever book she had just finished. There had been a period of years, when the kids were babies, when the bookmarks were corralled in a pencil holder on her nightstand. Unused. Unloved. Ignored. Now, they were like breadcrumbs in the forest, leading her further into the woods. When the children came home from school, they followed the bookmark trail to find their mother and demand snacks.

Cindy Cramer's work has appeared most recently in Short Story Substack and CP Quarterly. She lives and reads in Gig Harbor, Washington with her family. Twitter: @CindyCramerWA

Bell's Lane | Keith Taylor

James Lee via Pexels

In the wood-fenced field of grass where crickets sing
seven Whitetail Deer graze in golden hour.
Do they know today marks the first of the Spring?

On an overhanging branch two hawks stretch a wing
while in the shade below the field mice cower
In a wood-fenced field of grass where crickets sing.

The mourning doves perch and together all cling
on drooping wire that gives farmhouse power.
Do they know today marks the first of the Spring?

A red fox from a meadow calls himself king
of another corner with violets in flower
In a wood-fenced field of grass where crickets sing.

Meanwhile, the cows, unbothered by a thing,
with heads low search for patch of grass to devour.
Do they know today marks the first of the Spring?

Then the clouds roll in and thunders distant ring
they all run in as it begins to shower.
In a wood-fenced field of grass where crickets sing
Do they know today marks the first of the Spring?

Keith is a student at Mary Baldwin University in Staunton, Virginia, studying Shakespeare.

Do You Understand? | Shirley Aparicio

Athena via Pexels

I slip on mud and fall flat on my back

I call out to You and it takes you a minute to understand me

Before you turn and reach out Your hand

I like to pretend that my body still knows how to speak Your words I catch myself repeating them over again

even though i can hardly get them out

even though i nearly forget

even though it hurts

even though my tongue slips on mud almost dried on the roof of my mouth

But I pick it up and repeat Them again

This I won't let turn to brick

So I'll scrape and scrape away until that mauve flesh erodes into craters like the moon's

and stitch it back up with earth toned lining

Until I can freely speak Your stories

Their stories

My stories Our story

Because This I won't let turn to brick

Shirley Aparicio, she/they, is a poet, and fellow at Sadie Nash. Her work focuses on themes of decolonization, (re)connection to indigeneity, self, other, and Earth through rage and joy. @apariciions

Genesis (the band?) | Daisy Rosenstock

Johnmark Smith via Pexels

Genesis (the band?)

1

In the beginning dad mowed the lawn and tilled the garden. [2] And the fire pit was without shape and

smoldering, and dew was upon the handles of the wheelbarrow, and when Saturday afternoon came at last, he returned from the fire, red-faced and sweating, [3] and he said, "Come and see," and so I went and I saw. [4] Dad said that the irises needed to go this year, and we separated root from earth. [5] Dad called the work "good," and I deemed it "sad." And the dirt was replaced, and the dirt was smoothed—and dammit it was so.

Daisy Clar Rosenstock is an MFA Poetry candidate at Boise State University.

Goddamn Radical Left, Eatin All My Corn Nuts | Gark Mavigan

Gersh dern Laura Dern, thinking yur all that & a bag of Corn Nuts cuz you deep-tissued a triceratops. Dern the whole Dern Crime Family: Bruce Dern, Laura Dern, MoDERNa—yur all in cahoots & ladders w/ Bill Gates & Skynet & George (Tyrant)Soros Rex.

Tom Hanks, you mermaid pimpin 1930s hitman shootin airplane savin sleepless pedo in Seattle, seducin chitlins with yur FOOT PIANO.

Obama: from Chicago. Al Capone: from Chicago. DO. THE. ALGAE. BRAH.

Bout had nuff of aunt tifa & fake nudes media & Dank Brandon & vagina candles &—

Goddamn Corn Nuts. Eatin me up inside.

Gark Mavigan is a prose-fessional, rapper, and music journalist based in San Francisco. His words have appeared in/on:

HuffPost, WGN Chicago, and EARMILK, among others. Follow him at @GarkMavigan.

Exorcising My Childhood | Bill Budde

via Bill Budde

Facebook: www.facebook.com/william.budde.96

Twitter: @wbudde2

Instagram: @wbudde1

LinkedIn: www.linkedin.com/in/william-budde-377686

Miasma | Ilan Jones

Lukas Rychvalsky via Pexels

"Are you coming tonight?" Allison's voice crackled over the receiver. "Or what?" The frustration in her words accented by a heavy electric buzzing. David thought for several seconds about how to tell her but there was no easy way around it. She was going to be mad either way.

"I just don't think it's a good idea." Came his timid reply. "I mean, have you looked outside?" Before the words had fully left his mouth he could hear her heavy sigh. A burst of static blared over the receiver forcing him to hold the phone away from his ear. *What the hell is going on?* He wondered as he tapped on the cell phone screen to see if he could determine the cause of the madness outside. Surely, there would be some sort of notification or public safety announcement. One would think that the police or the government would, at the very least, want to warn people to stay indoors.

"Are you kidding me?" Allison's distorted voice squawked out of the hovering phone. *I knew she'd be mad. She'll only get angrier if I don't respond and then she'll get mean or worse start crying,* he thought, whilst fumbling through his phone's display. After finding nothing of value to aid his situation he placed the phone back up to his ear.

"I can't believe you David! I told you months ago that this dinner was coming up and now you're trying to back out? You

know, sometimes I wonder if-" her tirade carried on and on, answered only by David's halfhearted "I know"'s and "I'm sorry"'s. He knew this script and all of his lines. She would carry on about the importance of herself, and her job, and her friends, and her boss, and just how bad he was making her look in front of all of them. When she tired of that she would assuredly move into pointing out his faults and why he didn't deserve her. She offered no surprises tonight. Under ordinary circumstances he would listen for an opening to issue one of his rehearsed apologies, but as he stared out the window of his apartment he was finding it exceedingly difficult to keep track of all that she was saying.

The scene on the streets below was something he never could have imagined, nor was it something he was comfortable admitting was real. Though, in light of everything he was witnessing, it was impossible to deny that the rules of reality were no longer discernible. Here it was supposed to be five in the afternoon on a once sunny summer day and yet, the city was completely dark. It wasn't merely dim outside. Not like the passing of a cloud over the sun's face. No, it was dark, dark as night. The city was devoid of light, save for the smattering of lights shining from apartment windows and the ghostly orange glow of street lamps. It was as if the sun itself had been consumed by some creeping malignancy. He hated thinking about things in such terms but that's exactly how it had been.

David had only just made it home to shower and change his clothes from his jog, when the fog or smoke or whatever it was had descended suddenly upon the city. In an instant the world outside had gone completely dark. The moment the curtain of false night had fallen he heard the collective screams of the crowds of people who had been milling about the streets only moments before rising up to an agonized crescendo. He raced across the room to see whats was happening, but by the time he had made it to the window all he could see were the silent streets below littered with the ashen shapes of fallen bodies disintegrating slowly into the gentle wind outside. The glittering embers at the edges of their crumbling forms made him think of the white line silhouettes one would see at a crime seen.

"Are you even listening?" Allison's harsh voice pulled him back to the present. Despite her fury, he still could not tear his eyes away from the slow moving chaos outside.

"Yes, of course I am." He said, watching the little pulses of light erupting here and there in the thickest parts of the fog. Ranging from lavender to crimson, the crackling bursts of light seemed to materialize out of thin air and reminded him of thunderstorms when seen from far away. Entranced by the macabre beauty, his heart nearly leapt from his chest when the bright lights of a yellow taxi came creeping out of the black fog and meandered its way through the lines of abandoned cars. It was the first movement he had seen outside since all of this had begun.

"Then you're coming, right?"Before he could answer his attention was drawn to a flutter of movement out of the corner of his eye. Glancing upwards, he saw it was the cute girl who lived in the apartment across the terrace. *Bianca? No, Bridget* He remembered as he watched her looking down from her window with her phone pressed against her ear. *The taxi must be for her* he thought as the car pulled into the loading zone out front. He watched her hurriedly throw on her coat and shoes then immediately disappear from sight. In the next moment the light from her window snapped off as she ran out her door. *Maybe things aren't as bad as I thought.*

"David?" Allison's voice had grown shrill "David, are you there?"

"Yeah, babe. I'm hear."

"Then why won't you answer me? You know sometimes I don't even think you care about me. Is that it, huh? You don't love me anymore?" Were Allison to have had anything new to say he may have found it easier to take his mind off of the troubles outside. As it was, he could do nothing but fixate on the entrance to the building across the way, wondering when next Bridget might appear again. He had only spoken to her a hand full of times but every encounter they shared left him reminiscing for hours about what it would be like to be with someone who always had a smile for him. When Bridget spoke, however brief their conversations had been, he would hang on her every word, preferring her melodic, lilting speech to Allison's constant complaints and put downs. Afterwards, he always felt bad for comparing the two in his head but as circumstances were none of that mattered. Right now he could only hope for the girl's safety. *If she took the elevator she should be out any second,* he thought watching the swirling mists. It was becoming harder and harder see through the sooty gray vapors and the rapidly increasing flashes in the dark did little to ease his anxieties.

"I swear, David. Sometimes I feel like I'm the only one in this relationship! Is that how it is David? Are you no longer in love with me?"

"Allison, no! Its not that! I just. It's just, I'm..." There she was! The door of the opposing building flew open. Through the dark he could only just make out the figure of the young woman as she ran towards the glowing beams of the taxi's headlights. What was that? Had the wind shifted? No, the fog was moving of its own accord! It was was gathering in the wake of Bridget's every step and moving fast. Faster than her! If she didn't run faster it would soon overtake her! She passed out of view of David's bedroom window. Running to the kitchen window, he nearly crashed through the glass trying to get a better view, but she was not there! *Had she made it to the taxi? Was she safe somewhere else?* Desperately he scanned the courtyard for any sign of life.

There she was. "Or that's where she must've been" he muttered, staring at the hovering cloud only a few yards from the awaiting taxi. Low to the ground and flashing with all the intensity of an electrical storm, a pitch black mound of fog enveloped an area about Bridget's size. Her escape had been for nothing. He knew what would follow. He didn't need to wait at the window to know that in the next instant the cloud would dissipate leaving behind only a charred pile of ash like it had done for all the others. Slowly the taxi pulled away. Its glowing red taillights disappearing into the dark like the eyes of some beast dragging away its prey.

"Excuse me?" Allison's static filled voice burst its way over the receiver. "Do you mind telling me who "she" is?" Every word she spoke dripped with caustic accusations. He couldn't think. Why couldn't she shut up for just one moment? This is why he kept silent most of the time. It had always been easier than to argue.

"Where are you?" He said ignoring her question.

"Where am I?" She scoffed "I'm at the restaurant, where you promised you would be! Look everyone else will be here soon, you need to hurry! I don't want everyone to think I came here alone. Do you understand? You owe this to me!"

"I can't Allison! Have you seen the weather outside?" He could feel his pulse rising. She didn't like when he snapped at her. He would really be in for it now.

"The weather?" She said, somehow ignoring his slight. Maybe the poor signal had covered it up? "David it's a beautiful seventy five degree day. *What are you talking about?*" Why would she say that? How could it be just fine? The restaurant was some twenty blocks away. Could it be this "event" was local to his neighborhood alone? He couldn't comprehend what he was hearing.

"You're saying there's no fog there? Or smoke? No tiny lightning? What about people? Are their people still out on the streets?" Hearing the desperation in his own voice scared him even more. How could something like this have gone unnoticed in other parts of the city?

"David," She said "Is everything okay?"

"No everything is not okay! Answer my questions!"

"Sweetheart, everything is fine here. Seriously, what is going on with you tonight?" Her voice sounded strange, almost sympathetic, for her anyway, but strange none the less. Like it had been layered or mingled somehow with the voice of another. He couldn't quite place why it sounded so wrong. Was it deeper or, perhaps, echoed? Whatever he had heard was undoubtedly foreign to the Allison he knew.

"What's wrong with your voice?" he asked, finding his own voice quavering. He could feel the invisible hand of some nameless fear creeping up his shoulders to grip around his neck.

"My voice?" She said sounding genuinely confused "Nothing is wrong with my voice. Its probably just the signal. Where are you? The reception has been horrible this entire phone call." She had a point.

"David?"

"Yeah?" He said after a long moment. He no longer knew what to believe.

"I'm worried."

"Worried?"

"Yes worried. All this about fog and tiny lightning, are you sure you're feeling okay?" He didn't know what to say. He had felt perfectly normal just a few hours before but now he was doubting his sanity. Never before had he heard her take an interest in his well being. He didn't know what to make of it, but at least it gave him a moment to breathe.

"I... Yes, I'm feeling okay. Its just..." He heard her sigh through the phone as he struggled to find the words to explain.

"Its okay, I get it." She said. The caring tone of her voice made her sound even more alien than before.

"You do?"

"Yes! You're overworked!"

"I am?"If he was, he hadn't noticed. The bank hadn't been anymore busy than usual, his bosses were pleased with him and in general he had never found his role as a loan officer as anything but boring.

"How else would you explain all of this David? If I didn't know you like I do, and let's face it I know you better than you know yourself, I'd say you're starting to go a bit nutty." He let the condescension wash over him while watching the flashes

of electric light outside that seemed to pulse and dance in time with her every syllable. "Who can blame you? You've been working non-stop to pay for our wedding and the honeymoon and everything else. Sweetheart, you need a break!"

He sat down at the kitchen table thinking about all she had said. He couldn't speak a word. He could only listen to the warbling signal coming over the call while staring out the kitchen window. The wind parted the now very dense fog exposing the cobbles of the courtyard below. Black streaks were all that remained of the ashen piles of people he had seen. Or, at least thought he had seen. A shiver ran down his spine. *Maybe she's right. No,* he decided *she's always right.*

"You know I'm right." Her voice broke through his thoughts. So often was she right, that at times he swore she could read his mind. "I tell you what, let's skip tonight's dinner." His breath caught in his throat from disbelief. He wasn't sure which was more shocking, the murderous fog outside or Allison's new found demeanor.

"Are you sure?" He asked timidly. "What about your work friends?"

"I'll just make something up. You're more important." He couldn't respond, he had never heard her say anything like this before. "You know what, meet me at my place, and I'll do the cooking. I'll have to stop at the store, so just let yourself in." He felt sweat welling up on his temples. How could he refuse her? He couldn't her remember the last time she had been this kind. It was a reminder of all the reasons he had fallen in love with her in the first place and yet, what if she was wrong? He couldn't ignore the gnawing feeling that everything that he had witnessed this night was real. He could not explain how any of it could have been possible, but the truth of what he had seen was undeniable. What if the moment he stepped foot out of the building the fog found him and reduced him to a pile of smoldering ash just as it had done to Bridget? What if this is all a fantasy, a delusion? The fear of falling into madness scared him most of all, twisting his stomach into painful knots. Should he leave or should he stay? It was either Allison's wrath or potential death. He found it hard to breath.

"I...I don't think I can leave here." His throat felt dry.

"Nonsense," The voice spoke. It didn't sound like her at all. It was metallic and cold, almost physically so. "I'll call you a taxi."

"But-" He swallowed hard against his tongue sticking to the roof of his mouth.

"No, no. You can thank me later. Remember all that I'm sacrificing for you tonight. All you have to do is climb in a cab and come over."

"I-"

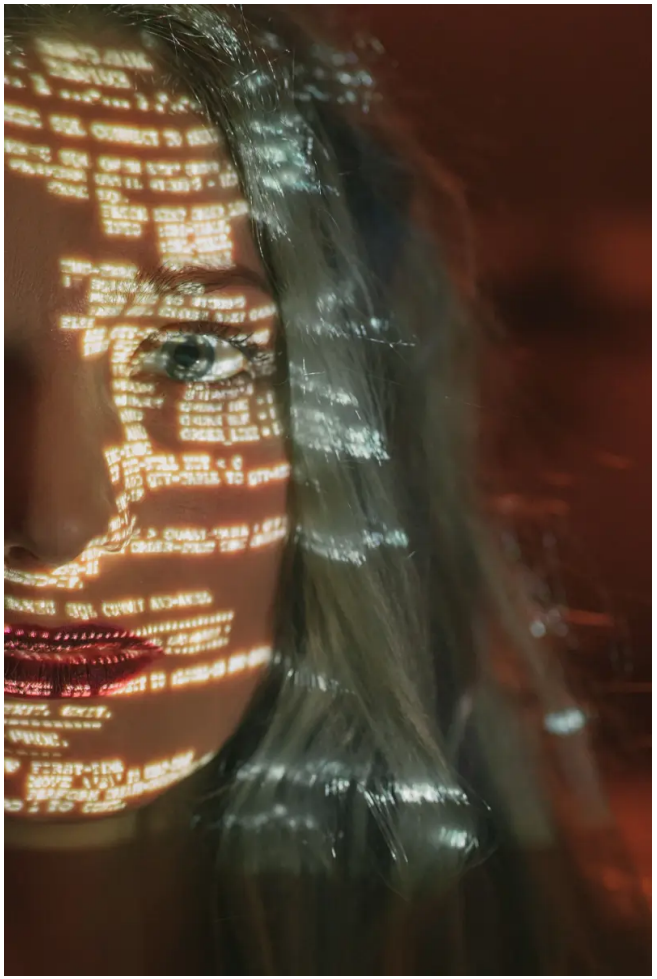
"I'll see you soon, David." The line went dead. She was no longer there. Panicking, he tried to call her back but the call refused to go through. In the silence of his apartment he closed his eyes as hard as he could. He hoped that when he opened them again it would all just go away. When he finally did the world was still dark. There had been no change at all. He watched out of the kitchen window at the soot stained world outside wondering just how long it would last. *Maybe I should just stay here tonight. Maybe it will all be gone in the morning. Maybe sleep is all I need.*

Contemplating his options he realized there was only one left to him. He had only ever had one option. He knew this as he watched the sickly yellow glow of the taxi's headlights pierce the miasma just as it had done before. Lazily creeping through the graveyard of derelict cars, the taxi swung in to the loading zone, and parked, waiting for David to come down. His hands shook, he could feel his stomach lurch as if it wished to leap out of his mouth. *I'll be alright. It's just in my head. Allison was right. She's always right. I just need a rest. She just wants what's best for me.*

As he left the apartment he stopped and cursed himself, turning around only to turn off the light.

Ilan Jones is a horror author that lives and writes under the shadow of the mountains near the Salish Sea.

The Great Devourer | Elyn Turne

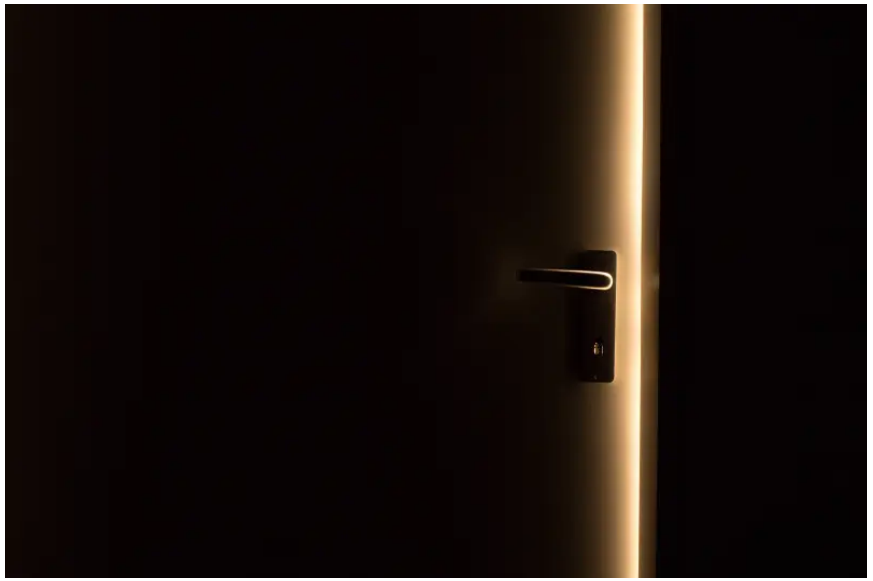


cottonbro via Pexels

Fleeing from reality.
Bioclerics in the cloisters,
Gentle as they put me away
Inside the Supermainframe:
The soulreaper.
In love with Seraphine.
Hold her hips,
Watch them swing.
For every action,
There is a reaction.
Shrine's in a storm drain.
The starry-eyed songstress,
Sings to my soul.
Or the Cyberdemonic Demiurge,
Feasting on creation.
Digital sunset fractures.
A crimson smog haze,
The corrupt simulacrum.
Overwriting my mind,
Screaming in the maze.

@elynturne (twitter)

we say goodbye at your door, 3 months before your death | Shufei Ewe



lalesh aldarwish via Pexels

and I should've told you then, but
everything i have to say stays stuck in the
splinter between *goodbye*
and *thank you*

Shufei Ewe is a peanut butter enthusiast whose work can be found in The Decameron Writing Series, Versification,

Corporeal Mag and more. Find her at @ewe_too on Twitter.

The Mythology of Violence | Alorah Welti

cottonbro via Pexels

Two fighters enter the ring
to begin their first round of three.
Their skin is clean,
unbruised and unbloodied,
their own names tattooed on their backs
so the saints can keep them straight.
Their gloves and mouthguards become ritual objects,
the cage, a temple,
and even the clock becomes holy.
The bell sounds,
and where men stood a moment ago,
animals pace.

They assess each other,
testing one another until

they become possessed with
their human hurt and their need for divine approval
and in their fury,
they go too far
and the dance becomes cruelty
from which their souls will never recover.
The God of War will accept nothing less
than a true blood sacrifice
and this is the only way
men know how to bleed.

The referee is the priest in this ceremony,
the crowd, a holy choir,
and the moderators are mouthpieces,
judging these two men
by how much of their body they can give,
and how much of their opponents they can take.
The men's wives sit in the stands
counting every time the one they love nearly dies,
praying with a primality
and a salty-sweet vehemence
that rises like smoke and falls like ash.

When the next round begins,
they go in wild, all pain and power,
colliding together into the chainlink.
What is left of their minds kicks in,
and they thrash
with blood in their eyes
and sweat in their throats.

One gets lucky
and catches the other's neck.
For a moment, they look like Cain and Abel,
and I wonder if losing is more holy.
The winner is awarded a championship belt,
a temporary godhead.

I asked God once what he thought about all this,
and he said that every strike is a confession,
that the mat is an atonement field.
He said that after a while,
the fight is what they repent for.
I laughed, and said,
And who's fault is that?

Alorah Welti (she/her) is a nineteen-year-old Minnesota-born feminist, synesthete, and emerging poet and artist. She lives just north of North Adams, Massachusetts. Her Twitter is @alorahsky.

Mothers | I. Thielking

Lucas Pezeta via Pexels

You left her there, in the driver's side footwell of your dead father's truck, violently shivering and biting her tongue. You could barely hear the screams over the pounding heartbeat in your ears. A hollow breeze gently rattled the skeleton trees lining the drive up to your childhood home.

Winter never truly left your comatose, desolate town.

At some point after you pulled the keys out of the ignition but before you died and left her with more trauma than any eleven-year-old knew how to handle, the screaming stopped. You still don't know who it was.

i. thielking can be found a number of places: drinking tea, on sunrise hikes, complaining about legal jargon, constructing vague metaphors about grief, and being tall. Also on twitter @ithielking.

Carry Weight | Sarah Boyd

Lum3n via Pexels

I don't want
—I think—
To be in that higher register,
Air-infused and lilting soft.

Earthy
—I'd rather—
Of the ground,
Milled from grit and grumble.

Not a helium-high girl
But something a bit more
Grown-up.
Rasp and rattle of words meant
—And heard.

Sarah Boyd is a freelance editor and writer who occasionally commits acts of poetry. She probably can't be found @seviebee on Twitter, but it's worth a shot.

Untitled | Zion Taylor

Alicia Zinn via Pexels

These colors blend.
I slowly watch, the weather bear the pain on the canvas.
Trying to show themselves to be so unique and superior, seeing the tempers fight, merge, and decline.
Isn't quite funny and sad, we fight to see that we are worth it. The world just isn't the same.

Hello, my name is Zion. I currently attend Savannah State University as a Senior English Major minoring in Africana Studies.

Tyrant | Riley Labrador

via Pixabay

The orders come one by one.

“Keep your head down, ignore your surroundings. Your focus, your attention, belongs to me, and only me.”

I look up for only a fraction of a second, praying that this is my hell and my hell alone, that I am the only one being tortured and tormented so. My eyes widen in horror as I look around me and fnd the same thing. People, tall and short, young and old, gripped by this young overlord. Their heads down, their morale in shambles.

Another order.

“Look at this. Look at me. Look at what I can ofer. Look at what I can bring to you, bring to the world. Look at me. Love me, adore me. Love me and me alone.”

We all obey in shame, in dissatisfaction, for this was our own fault, this was our own doing. We were the ones who gave this being its power. We were the people who gave this demon its crown. We willingly ofered up our lives, somehow expecting the result to be diferent.

The tyrant tightens the chains as it screams at me.

"You are not alone, everyone is with you. Your co-workers, your families, your friends today, your friends yesterday, your friends tomorrow. Everyone is here, see? Look at the smiles on their faces, they're so happy, they love it, they love me. You could be the same; don't you want that?"

"Don't you want to be happy too?"

I do. I really do. I know it's false. I know the chains that hold me, the bait that lures me in is false.

Yet I am lured in regardless. I could pretend that it isn't. Pretend that this king does not control me.

I am deluding myself.

Look at me. I'm not better, I'm apart of the problem; my life is in the palms of the overseer already, it has always been. Since the day I frst discovered it.

There never was a way out. This is how it is now.

"This is how it is now."

I can do nothing but join them.

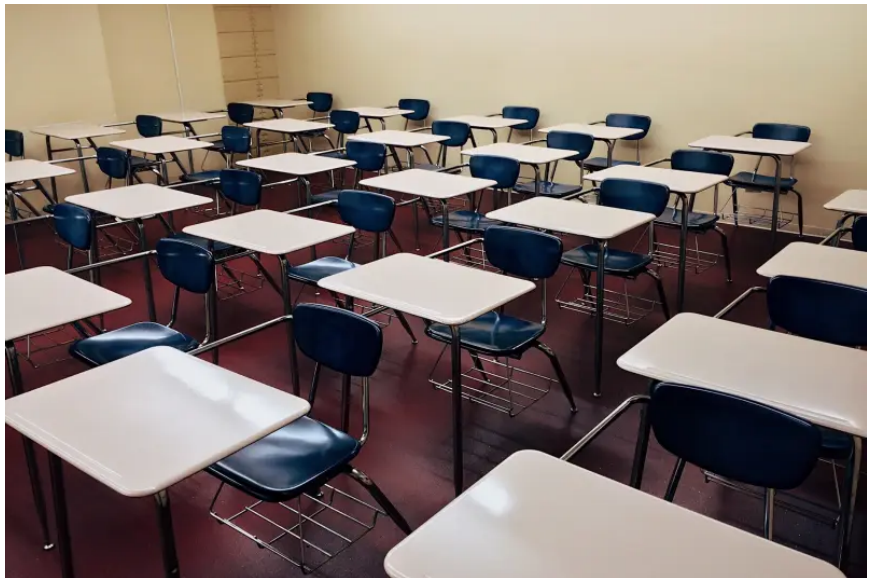
"You can do nothing but join us."

I am

You are

Hello! My name is Riley, I'm a 20-year-old college student and an aspiring Storyteller! Here's my writing website! https://rileywrites81299780.wordpress.com/ Twitter: @HappyfacePro Enjoy!

I am in Big Trouble | Bryan Zhan



via Pixabay

Sup guys. My name is Sophie. I am your typical 9 year old girl in third grade. My two besties are Sarah and Catherine. I have an annoying brother named William. One day Sarah tells me that she doesn't have a pencil bag and wants to steal one because she is afraid that the teacher will get mad at her. Our teacher is really mean. We call him Mr. Humpty Dumpty because he is so fat. I once got in trouble for not having a pencil. Alright back to the story. What I think is that Sarah has a good reason to fear she will get in trouble, but that doesn't mean that she should go steal it from someone else.

I ask, "Why don't you ask your parents?"

She said, "They will probably get mad that I lost my stuff."

"Ok, but I would not be as bad as being caught stealing."

"I don't care, I still will do it. Also no one would know."

"Fine, but who are you stealing from?"

"Probably Maddie."

"Oh no."

The reason I said "Oh no" is because Maddie is the literal definition of a teacher's pet. If she stole from Maddie, she would 100% snitch, no doubt about it. The second reason is Maddie kinda hates me, so she would probably blame me. The reason she hates me is because I beat her grades on the final exam and now she is always salty. Nevertheless, I was still going to try to convince her, but I don't really think it will work.

"So what is your plan?" I ask.

She responded, "Maddie is always helping out Mr. Humpty Dumpty. When Mr. Humpty Dumpty passes out homework, she always volunteers. When she helps him, I also ask to pass out homework. Then while I am by her desk I will grab her pencil bag. It is the end of the day, so she will leave and hopefully not notice."

Not gonna lie the plan sounded pretty good. The only problem is that she will need her pencil bag and she is the most organized human being on the planet. There is a good chance that she will figure out her pencil bag is missing and snitch on me.

"The only problem is how will she not realize that her pencil bag is missing?" I ask.

"Don't worry she will probably think that she lost it and ask her parents," Sarah responded.

The next day, which is Friday, before school I asked Catherine what she thought.

She said, "Well Maddie is really organized and has never forgotten anything, but if you unzip her backpack it would make it look like she just dropped it. Then I think it can be successful. If she does it on Friday, I think it will be even better because if you leave something at school over the weekend no one knows what happens to it."

Sarah made it through the whole day without Mr. Humpty Dumpty noticing because I gave her some supplies. It was the end of day and he was passing out homework.

Mr. Humpty Dumpty asked, "Who wants to help me pass out homework?"

Maddie said, "Me Me Me."

"Ok Ok Maddie you can. Now who else?" replied Mr. Humpty Dumpty.

Sarah said, " I'll do it."

Mr. Humpty Dumpty gave her a suspicious look but didn't think too much about it.

"Ok alright Sarah here you go," said Mr. Humpty Dumpty.

At first everything was fine. They passed out the homework and when Sarah got to Maddie's desk she grabbed the pencil bag no problem. She put it in her backpack like it was hers and we left. It was Saturday and we were talking about the success of the heist, but I knew it was only successful if Maddie didn't snitch.

It was Monday the moment of truth. I honestly thought we hadn't pulled through, but when I got to class everything seemed fine. Maddie had some supplies. All hope was lost when at the end of the day Mr. Humpty Dumpty called me to his desk.

He said, "Alright I have a report that Maddie's pencil bag was stolen."

I decided to play it dumb and responded, "Really? I saw that she has supplies."

When he replied "That is because I gave her some. Now tell me where the pencil bag is," I knew that he knew.

"I never took the pencil bag. I don't know where it is."

"Don't play dumb I know you have it."

"I don't have it, sir"

"If you won't admit it I will just tell your parents."

After this he let me go. The first thing I did was tell Sarah. Mr. Humpty Dumpty knows that you stole Maddie's pencil bag and now he thinks I did it. He has even threatened to call my parents. You have to tell him or I will get in trouble.

"I can't or I will get in trouble," complained Sarah.

"You stole it not me, so it is not my fault," I countered.

"We have to return the pencil bag without knowing it was us."

"And how will you do that?"

"Trust me"

It is the next day and Mr. Humpty Dumpty gave me a deadline of Thursday to return it. It is Wednesday and Sarah's plan is to put the pencil bag in some corner of the room and have someone else pretend to find it. We have successfully put down the pencil bag. By the end of the day no one has picked it up for some reason, so we have to make more people come over here. That should be easy.

"Ahhh! A fly just tried to bite me," I yelled.

"Where?" yelled Mr. Humpty Dumpty.

"It flew to the corner by the bookshelves"

Of course this is where the pencil bag is.

"I don't see it," said Mr. Humpty Dumpty.

That causes the whole class to be right by where the bookshelves are. This time someone has to find the pencil bag. I was right.

"Maddie, I think I found your pencil bag" said JJ.

"Really let me see. It is. Thank you! Thank you!" yelled Maddie.

After this Mr. Humpty Dumpty apologized for blaming me. After that the school year was great.

Bryan Zhan is a 6th grader from Houston with a love for baseball.

Eleventh Hour | Andrew Miller

Lum3n via Pexels

The brink of a new season.
The beginning of the end.
How unfamiliar for this time to draw near,
And not bring with it a sense of foreboding or fear.

It is not that this Winter itself will be any different than the last.
Black clouds will bring white snow,
And my city will be muted by the cold.
For one cannot change nature, except for the nature of what is understood.
But that is enough to bring a different end than seasons in years past.

Because winter is no simple storm to weather,
Nor a swirling sea to survive.
It's a maze to navigate.
A tunnel without end in sight.

So in those dark hours, you need to be your own light.

Hi I'm Andrew, I like crows, coffee, and my cats. Insta is @anesacpeartistsson

Corral Fire on the Scratch Gravel Hills | Georg Sperle

Matthis Volquardsen via Pexels

Flames, like individuals, flickered, crowned
the hills. A new civilization, I took their census
and my eyes wished, as the stampede

roiled in wait, to unfold–to see the birthplace
of ash, its unifying intimate process.
The crackling clung still, only to the comfort
of the hills. If, instead, the cascade's cavalry
trampled our homes, would the flames leave
me, a seed, unburdened?

Nuptials nourished in the wake.

Georg Sperle is a poet from the PNW. He, his fiancée, and two cats live in Portland where he received his MFA in Creative Writing from Portland State University. @georgsperle on Twitter

Hand of God II | Mahika Mukherjee

via Mahika Mukherjee

Mahika Mukherjee is a student at Krea University, India. She is known for her self-published collection of poetry titled 'A God's Tears'. Her writing can be found on her blog: mahikamukherjee.com

Matthew 7.27 | Fenn MacDonald

John-Mark Smith via Pexels

Are the tools of ritual not themselves holy?

Blessed are those that continue the work, holy as the hands that wrought it.

Those hands, *that* divinity, *this* legacy.

The shadowed eye, the bowed line of the mouth,

daily anointed in pigment and oil.

Are the tools of ritual not themselves holy?

Giveth and taketh away, the dough is kneaded and must rest.

Every night a new bounty, a new blessing.

Those hands, *that* bread, *this* meal.

Cloth for every raiment, cut to every form,

needles and pins made bloody with the love that can be touched.

Are the tools of ritual not themselves holy?

Affectations adopted by the faithful, to become more like the divine,

the elixir every morning, the ointments every night, the work done in the daylight.

Those hands, *that* work, *this* tradition.

The tomb lies shrouded in mystery, unattended by her followers

yet many relics are left behind, to impart their sacred guidance.

Are the tools of ritual not themselves holy?

But *no* other hands, *no* abandoned trinket, *no* concocted platitude could ever replace –

I fear I am a bad Saint

Fenn MacDonald is an award-winning poet, author, and editor currently haunting the Pacific Northwest. Find them on Twitter @FennFatale

stormy | Brandon Shane

Brandon Shane (he/him) is a substitute teacher, who lives in Temecula, California. He is an alumni of California State University Long-Beach, where he majored in English. On twitter @Ruishanewrites

Kat Smith via Pexels

I walked out my door
and saw roses
shoved by a strong gust
the gray clouds rumbled overhead
thunder fell from the sky
and down came rain
the last of our sun dissolved
I felt cold water strike my cheeks
I extended my tongue to capture
every drop

Uninvited | Joe Feuille

Hakan Erenler via Pexels

We stood there, gathered round the summoning circle. We lit the candles, laid out our offerings. Soon, he'd be here. Fenrir. Devourer of the world. Cleanser of rot and folly.

We said the words slowly, having waited for this night long prophesied. The chant grew, our voices rising and falling in orgiastic crescendo.

Thunder cracked. Smoke billowed from the circle. We stood in reverent awe.

Suddenly, there came a sound of rending. A tearing, wet and rotten. We found ourselves covered in crimson. Our clothes, our hair, the floor. But this was wrong. We wanted blood. We got rose petals.

"Oops," said a soft voice from smoke. There he floated, blushing.

"I'm sorry," said Cupid. "I get gassy when I'm nervous."

Coffee snob, whisky lover, smart ass. He writes primarily about hope, mental health, and the value of a single human life. Also a sucker for fart jokes. Twitter/Instagram: @joefuel

Holy Ghost | Megan Gilley

Erik Mclean via Pexels

Mamaw said put out fleeces
Let the dew tell you what to do
That ain't really craftin'
It's what the Bible says

Judy read all of my tea leaves
Told me what would hook me
My thumb already knew
Bells and hats that bring trouble
But good news will come around

Making some protection
In a Dr. Pepper glass
Found in the woods
From that same protection long passed

Get em all around, she said
Made a beard turn gray
With every one I buried
In her good Christian way

Born and Raised Appalachian behavioral health professional/wannabe writer Insta: no.tortious.m.e.g

Gatekeepers of the Soul | Briana Craig

Kush Kaushik via Pexels

An ode to eyelashes

To the fluttering harpstring gates
that protect the windows to my soul,
I offer my deepest condolences.

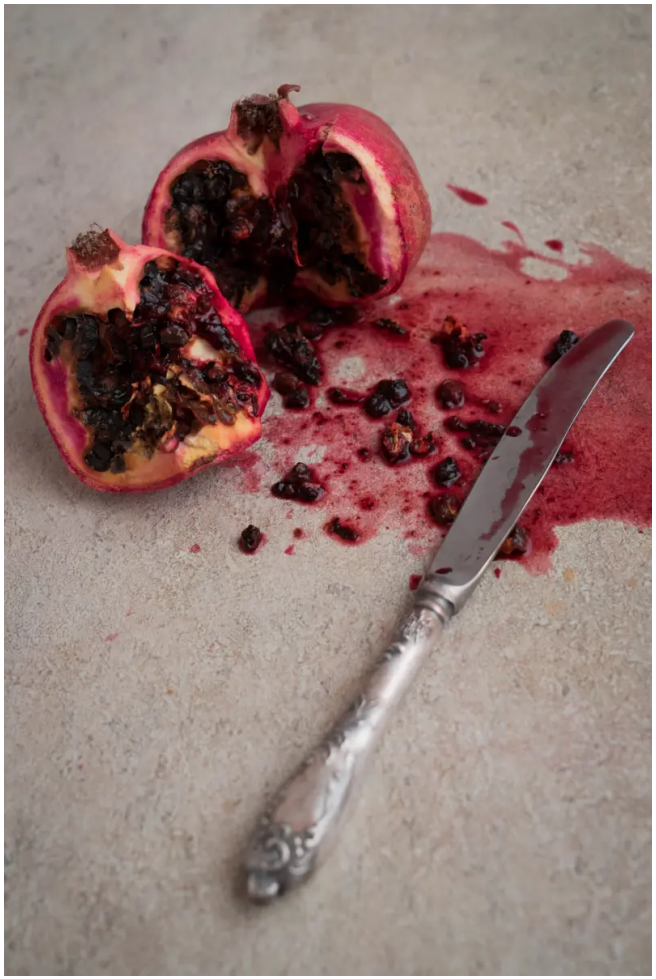
For you have felt the loss of every
Tear, far more than I, the lone
rain cloud in heaven.

I've asked a violin to wait outside
In the grassy fields of morning
and catch dew upon her strings.

But I forgot how she could
have made music
Instead.

Briana Craig (she/her) moonlights as a writer of stories, poetry, and plays. She recently published poetry in FOLIO, Decomp, Bourgeon Magazine, and more. IG: @bri.and.her.books Twitter: @brianacraig1

Two-Sided Necklace | Kaylee Stull



Badulescu Badulescu via Pexels

I told you **I'm afraid of knives**, yet you gave me that necklace
Telling me it's like day and night. On the outside, it's a key;
If you open it up, out pops the secret knife. You told me:
"Keep it close to your chest, always." **Why? So it can**
Open up in my sleep, and stab me in my heart? You said:
"That's a good thing! It's the key to our love. One for you.
One for me....It's not a murder. The knife carves out a spot for me."

I told you, **I'll only open mine if you open yours.**
There you lie that very night, blade in heart, chain pulled tight.
But I don't need help with mine. **I can open it myself.**

When not teaching, Kaylee Stull writes horror. She attended CSU Long Beach where she obtained two BA's in English. In her spare time, she hones her archery skills. Her social media is: @Kitkatstull.

home is on the way there | Rosalind Aparicio-Ramirez

Rosalind Aparicio-Ramirez (she/her) is a writer and artist whose work focuses on indigeneity, immigrant culture, the South, and the end of the world. She is pursuing an MFA at Hunter College.

Markus Spiske via Pexels

I don't live in homes, I live in storage (and on the verge of something greater.) As an anonymous passenger, or in a moving truck, between one fixed point and the next. From closed to open (liberation, absolute self) the transition away (departure) is most hopeful. My theory is that, especially during long journeys back to points of origin, when we are most altered by the other, the difference between that and our fixed selves is most salient. It is in the in-between that we are our home-selves.

Home is away from here, and home is on the way there.

Shoe Horn | S. G. Mallett

S. G. Mallett is a poet and author of two full-length collections and two chapbooks.

via Wikipedia

Rarely am I
this
intimate
unless I am
into it.

Maury | Matthew Dunko

Towfiqu barbhuiya via Pexels

You know that feeling you get when you lose one of the friends you love the most? I did. I lived with that feeling. I thought about her all day, every day. I thought about what I did, even though I didn't know what I had done. All I knew was that it was wrong, whatever it was, and when you get to that place, your mind is always racing, trying to think of ways to make everything right, if they can ever be right again.

So I texted Maury about it. And a few hours later, he texted me back. And within moments, I heard him on the other end of a phone call.

"I'm interested in your case, Arthur," he said. (My name is Arthur.) "I would like to have you and your friend, or ex-friend —whatever you wanna think of it as—on my show." (His show is called *Maury*.) It was the happiest I had been in two years, three months, and forty-two days, so naturally, I said yes.

"Just so you know, though," Maury continued—and thank God he did, and that I could remain at the mercy of that golden voice—"my show is ultimately still a reality show. We take some degree of creative liberty with the stories we feature. We're committed to bringing you and your friend back together, but the audience wants drama, so we give them drama. It's just a television thing, which you would understand if you were in my position." Indeed, I couldn't, as I wasn't. So I agreed.

The next day… my friend called me. My heart swelled as much as it jittered. I hadn't talked to her for so long, and I'd always dreamed of this moment. It was a chance to make everything right (not as right as Maury would in a week, but still). My hand shook as I picked up the phone.

"What the fuck have you done?!" she screamed. It was so good to hear her again.

"I'm making things right," I responded.

"They won't stop calling me or texting me. I block their numbers and I just get more. You're such a fucking child, you know that? Why can't you just move on with your life?"

I could tell she would be a natural for the show. I told her that I was sorry, but secretly I was elated. Maury was gonna save my life.

–

"Alright, Arthur, here's what our writers have worked out," Maury said. He went on to unfold a different take on our narrative, while preserving some key details: we had become close friends over the past five years, we cherished each other, and due to a tragic altercation, our friendship fell apart. Now this altercation, both me and Maury agreed, was something of a point of contention; it's a very nuanced situation that was hard to deconstruct in a fair and concise way for a program of *Maury's* character.

Indeed, I don't know how much I want to get into it right now, so I'll stick with the dramatized version that Maury presented me: when I went to visit her for a weekend, I recorded a video of myself rubbing my testicles on everything in her house. (He assured me little clarification for my motives were needed for his audience.) Since my friend gave permission to this account of our backstory, I complied. I am nothing if not flexible, after all, in the name of resurrecting friendship.

We were the second guests on the day's episode after Maury caught up with that fat kid who ate sofa cushions, so I knew a lot of people would tune in. I could tell from our fortunate placement that Maury, indeed, cared about my case. For me to be so vulnerable with him, I theorize, was what drew him to me—it is the mark of a good human to see someone struggling and offer them the compassion and privilege of appearing on a widely-syndicated daytime talk show.

Even so, backstage, I was nervous. When you're in that studio, it's like you're taken over by a spell. Every word earns you woops or jeers from the audience, and no in-between. I also think it's fair to say, within me and my friend's new narrative, that I was cast as the ostensive "problem," a serial ball-rubber, which is perhaps not the most ideal position to be in. And as I listened to the audience shriek at my friend's recount of the story, and then holler at the video they filmed of me rubbing my balls all over her apartment (it was a fake apartment that I went to for the shoot, don't worry), the fear just kept sinking in, more and more. All I could think was, *what am I doing?* And it's silly, in those moments, how anxiety can blind you and convince you that you're doing the wrong thing, even when it's so obviously right.

Every muscle in my body quivered as I waited behind the curtain to step onstage, and to face the ire of this committee. But when it was my time to shine, I realized that the only way to win this audience, and indeed rectify my friendship, was to be exactly who they wanted me to be. I embraced the narrative; I walked out to boos and hisses as I yelled for the audience to shut their bitch-mouths. I taunted them, I told them that they don't know me, and they didn't understand my life story. It was a spectacular performance,

fueled by complete devotion, for if I refused to commit to this, how could my apology be interpreted as sincere? I did this for her; even if I acted as if I were hypnotized by the sensory pleasures of a good ball-wipe, my remorse was sincere. And to her credit, she played along too: she responded to each of my words with the sort of superbly-acted recoil that strikes one as deeply naturalistic. We were brilliant scene partners.

At a certain point, I saw some people waving off-camera, and I knew that our segment would soon be over. Maury dialed us all back in with a simple question, guiding us to our denouement: "Arthur, I think it's clear that you've made an absolute scene for us, and you seem to show little regrets about your action. So why are you hoping to apologize for your actions?"

I thought for a moment. Was it to make things right with my friend? Of course it was. That was all that I wanted from the start, and all I've wanted over these past two years, three months, and fifty-one days. But at that moment, all I thought was that I had to make the right character choice. I sat back in my chair and cocked my head to the studio lights. "Because I have the *balls* to apologize." From the corner of my eye, I saw Maury nod, beaming an understated but celestial smile.

It was there, though… that moment haunts me a bit. Why did I say that? Did it even make sense to say? Was the pun worth it over just… breaking from the narrative and speaking my heart? I felt the progress that I'd made with my friend burn to the

ground. Was I enabled by Maury and the audience? Arguably. But I pin the blame to myself. I let the fiction supersede the reality—it was as if losing my friend all over again.

Of course, contractually, she had to accept this apology for our segment to properly end, so she did. She told me she wanted me back. She told me that she had never stopped thinking about me, either. Even if I knew she didn't mean it (she made few deviations from the script), I heard those words in her voice, and we exchanged a hug as Maury and the audience applauded. I knew it was fake, but for a second, everything felt real.

We never talked again. I stopped trying to reach out. But sometimes, on a particularly rough day, I'll pull up that *Maury* episode on my DVR, and I'll fast-forward to that moment. I'll hear those words, and I'll rewind, and I'll hear them again. It's strange the sort of things that mend the heart. It's strange what makes you feel okay in the end.

in loving memory of Maury *(1991-2022)*

Matthew Dunko is a comedy writer based in Chicago. You can follow them on Instagram @mattdunko.

times up! | Julia Gobes

George Becker via Pexels

In our last hours on earth the sun looks like a half baked pie; the womb of a midnight mother concealing her child from the dangers of the world; it looks like protection, a foamy blanket bathtub sing along; rubber ducks count them one two three; like children leading a line through life; hands burning; like stretch marks; like telephone wires with hanging shoes; taking away a life before it started; rising to the surface; clouds; like brain matter scattered down the highway; like a bad accident; one too many moving parts on the clock that look like times up!

Julia Gobes is a student at Adelphi University on Long Island and emerging poet/creative writer. Her work has been awarded The Donald Everett Axinn Award for Poetry.

Brujxs | Alex V. Cruz

Dazzle Jam via Pexels

They came in the middle of the night, nothing but a rag of dark strands floating in the air, looking for someone to snatch, take away, and pull into the penumbra of the starless skies.

We knew they were coming. They do every year. And like every year since I can remember, our parents have left us outside with nothing but a candle. We huddled around it, burning our eyelashes, trying to stay out of the dangerous night. Last year they took Carlitos, the baker's son. The year before they took Lucy, my best friend.

This year was my turn.

Alex V. Cruz is a Dominican speculative fiction writer and recent graduate of Clarion West. Discover the writings of Alex V. Cruz on Instagram and Twitter @Avcruzwriter.

One Week of Violent Sci-Fi Movie Dreams | Meg Lubey

Julia Kuzenkov via Pexels

Last year's Valentine's gift, a box of bananas. 12 bunches
of *remember you must die* turned to bread.
And the aging. Oh, the aging. The spilling of coffee onto the floor
over and over. The year without water.
Instagram memorials and [REDACTED]
living forever online, gifting us discount codes
and self-portraits. Curation that looks like comfort now,
like that's peace, like that's recollection, like,
if being remembered is just misplaced restlessness,
then what else is there to say?

Meg Lubey is a visual artist and writer currently residing in Cleveland, Ohio. You can find out more about Lubey on meganlubeyart.com. Insta: megan.lubey Twitter: meganlubey

Separate Spheres | Veronica Good

Timotej Nagy via Pexels

After Donna Haraway

I am rarely asked to name myself.

Zorb balls bumping into one another,
a different kind of social distancing.

An object, scientifically and emotionally,
when he sees me, I am a lamp.

Oppression naturalized as nostalgia.

Veronica Good is a poet and fiction writer. Her work has appeared in Archarios, Tempo, and Scapegoat Review. When she isn't writing, she is taking care of her plants and her Burmese python Fitz.

Victim | Deborah Akubudike

Ekaterina Astakhova via Pexels

i play dead in such a way

my roommate actually believes

i am. *how many times,* she asks,

do you die in a day?

i stitch one answer to the next; i make a seam with something

unorthodox. *countless*, i say – in a dress mimicking the moon.

in one of my memories,

i'm at the edge of a room filled with stalagmites & blood, in

a pool of mixed paroxysms. my mouth's filled with gravel & the air, dense with salt water. i don't pick up my tooth.

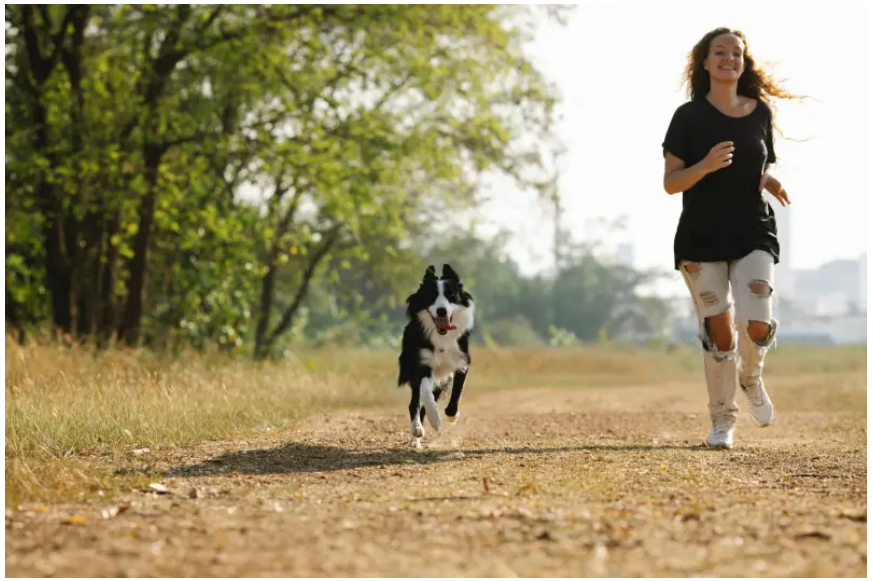
i leave it there. no white tissues. i get up slowly & bang hard.

hard on a wooden door is a 3 year old's fist, curled up

like a sleeping dog.

Akubudike Deborah is an emerging poet and lyricist. Her works have been featured in The Rialto, Brown Sugar Lit Mag and elsewhere. She can be reached on Twt: @akubudikedebbie; Blog: adpoet.home.blog.

The Run | Allyson Mazzuchi



Blue Bird via Pexels

A burr caught in my belly, a bee above by my head, a puddle staining my legs, a squirrel squawk tucked in my ears, a downed tree trunk under my paws, a wind swaying my fur, a leaf swept along on my beard, a crush of acorns echoing on the forest floor.

Owned by two well behaved and hilarious terriers, good music, funny friends, nature and the ocean.

Towards a Therapeutic Understanding of Contrarianism | Colton Huelle

Jakob Scholz via Pexels

ABSTRACT

I will not trouble you with citations. All I can do is submit to you my thesis, which goes something like this: having been raised under the shadow of a tyrannical father, my particular syndrome of neuroses––my cloying, self-effacing wispiness of mind––can be cured only by a radical and protracted refusal to comply. And to this end, I propose a longitudinal study in the therapeutic effects of contrarianism.

INTRODUCTION

On my sixth birthday, my father brought me to Dairy Queen to pick up a Reese's ice cream cake. The man in front of us in line had a tattoo of Spiderman web-slinging across his calf. "Dad, look, Spider-Man!" I blurted out. Hearing this, the man turned around, smiled, and fired an imaginary web out of his wrist. I laughed out loud and fired a few webs of my own back at him. The man chuckled and then turned back towards the counter to order. As soon as he did, I felt my wrist caught and crushed in the vice grip of my father's massive, calloused claw. He dragged me back to the freezer, into which he deposited my ice cream cake, and then led me out of the store.

What I had just done, he informed me as we drove home, was *abnormal*. Over the years, my father was quick to point out other examples of abnormal behavior that I unwittingly exhibited. Coloring the rubber tips of my Chuck Taylors with green Sharpie: abnormal. Picking dandelions during a soccer practice: abnormal. The hemp necklace my middle school girlfriend made for me: egregiously abnormal.

Abnormality was far from the only sin of which I stood guilty in my father's eyes. I was also lazy, sneaky, dishonest, manipulative, blasphemous, and intellectually incurious. But none of these held a candle to my most grievous fault.

"The boy contradicts me at every turn," he complained to anyone who would listen. "He does it just to spite me."

METHODS

The first experiment happened by accident.

One evening, during my first semester in a graduate program in Clinical Psychology at a Very Prestigious University (it doesn't matter which), I was riding the bus back to my apartment. Thirty minutes into the ride, I was irate to find myself still pinned to the window by some old greybeard's enormous shoulders. He and I were the last remaining passengers. In such cases, it is customary for the passenger in the aisle seat to shuffle over to the opposite row, allowing both passengers to enjoy more space.

I knew that this particular greybeard was a history professor. He taught in the same room as me. I had seen him giving out fist-bumps to his students––an unbecoming affectation for such a very old man.

"Beautiful afternoon," he suddenly remarked.

I made no attempt to clear my face of shock and contempt as I turned to face him. Social convention dictates that if one is to make small talk in public, one must do so at the onset of the shared experience. For example, if riding the elevator with someone, it is permissible to start a conversation the moment you step into the elevator, but if more than three seconds pass in silence, the remainder of the elevator ride should adhere to that precedent.

We were driving over a bridge, and below it the river was bright with flames of red and orange leaves spreading over its surface. I realized that it must have been the sudden appearance of autumn foliage reflected in the water that inspired Boynkins' remark.

"On the contrary," I replied. "This afternoon is absolute dog shit."

Just then, the bus driver came to my stop, and without waiting for Boynkins to get up to let me by, I stood up, stepped over his fleshy thighs, and left him dumbstruck and, no doubt, feeling quite foolish.

DISCUSSION

I am now reminded of the words of a very famous psychologist (don't ask me which one) who said that self-knowledge is paralyzing. Though I'm sure he was some insufferable graybeard, he was quite right. In this moment, I was indeed paralyzed by the awareness that even my fury doubted itself. Was I mad at this avuncular fool, or was I really mad at my father for subjecting me to customs that did not exist?

But at a certain point, one must rage against whatever is at hand.

Colton Huelle is a New Hampshire based friendly neighborhood fiction guy. His work is forthcoming or has appeared in the Los Angeles Review, SOFTBLOW, and The Prism Review.

Framing October in My Bedroom Window | Jenny Wong

via Pixabay

the geese take to sky,
redraw themselves
into dots and dashings –
pencil marks
against
a bare canvas of cloud.

the rabbits
dub over the summer
held in their earthy-colored coats,
become whispers of white
to match the impending
sound of snow.

I think of the things
that will eventually leave me

while the trees undo
their ragged crowns,
and show the leanness
of long winter bones.

JENNY WONG is a writer, traveler, and occasional business analyst. She resides in Canada near the Rocky Mountains and tweets @jenwithwords.

Fish (A Riddle) | Brooke Yu

Francesco Ungaro via Pexels

It bubbles and gurgles
flipping and turning
not breathing but still living
wonderful species in the vast blue
It goes to a school, not to learn, of course
but to explore the plants that look like colorful trees in the blue.
hoping that it won't find itself in a steaming hot situation.

I Cried Alone in the Dark at the Historic Capitol Theater | Jensen Soderlund

Timo Volz via Pexels

It's an illusion that you can start over.

When I was a kid, my brother had a lego set

of Taipei 101. I wonder what it's like

to be the biggest thing in the world for just five years.

I fold up silly thoughts like these in thirds and

stack them in the playroom closet with other excuses

for calling Mom, because "I miss you, I love you,

I'm sorry," still aren't enough for me.

You still don't understand me?

I learned what betrayal meant at nine years old;

not through tapes of Japanese baseball games,

though I'm sure the Rangers were losing a game that night.

I remember when Nelly Cruz broke my heart in 2011

and it's easier to say he's the reason I can't trust men.

I've lost count of how many times

my sister has seen me at my worst.

I'm leaving.

A man in the movie says "That used to be a vegetable store…

now look at all these cars here."

I wonder what the Northwest version is of "I remember

when there was a cornfield there, but now it's a Walmart."

What used to be in the ground beneath the Safeway,

if the sky is hazy with dirt from digging up the old Tacoma

or smoke from Canadian flames.

Not tonight.

Gambling's for suckers and deadbeats and

I think I must be both because

I'm betting on myself the way the singer

on my new CD bets on losing dogs,

the way my uncle bets on pocket aces with pink Starbursts

and my friend bets I'll love this movie he loves.

Not everyone can be a winner, I suppose.

I'll get confused again if I stay.

There was lightning last night

as I drove south on new tires and dark pavement,

fog that turned the streetlights dusty gray.

Sometimes I want to drive eleven hours

to the nearest Dunkin' Donuts and never come back,
but my steering wheel still veers to the left
even when I'm driving straight. I should get that fixed.

I need to think clearly.
Maybe this poem is too specific, but please tell me
has ANYONE ELSE IN THE WORLD ever found themselves
in Olympia, Washington, of all places,
maybe wearing black Converse or Eddie Bauer jeans or a leopard print top,
snotty nosed and red eyed over nothing in particular???
Maybe you bought a present for your friend's birthday
and ate pizza outside while reading a book you're scared to finish.

I've made a lot of mistakes lately.
I've never been to Taiwan but I've stood on rooftops with boys
I might have loved but shouldn't have.
It feels gross to admit but I'm grateful to them
because they all loved movies (I guess I have a type)
and now I love movies, maybe more than I ever
could have loved any of them, or anyone else
ever again.

Nobody warned me.
I miss my best friend so much it hurts sometimes.
I know that's just a thing people say,
but sometimes when I'm crying in a movie theater,
my chest feels so heavy I can't move.
And if I had her there to hold my hand
the sad scenes might be easier to bear
or at least I'd have someone crying with me.

I need to think.
The calendar on the wall will say November soon,
and Marilyn Monroe deserved better, and
Shelley Duvall deserved better, and
all of us deserve so much better.

---

she/they
twitter: @sorryimaleo

21 | Michaela Brown

Ekaterina Astakhova via Pexels

for Greta

The stairwell by the doorway
bears your scent

& all the colors of the rainbow
light under my lids

How lucky am I that this
synesthesia is a present one

That even in my 21st year
I needn't recall, only exist

Michaela is an EFL teacher based in Vigo, Spain. Her work has been published in Laurus Magazine, The Fourth River, and The Coop: A Poetry Cooperative. You can find her on Twitter @mikienbrown.

Stone in the Wood | Ryan Coleman

Daniel Lienert via Pexels

What is not built in stone does not last. In the north, the woodland was a wash of old growth atop the corpses of tens of thousands; the bog as much blood and spit as marshwater. The depths, deep within its inexhaustible woodland, perched the modest tower rested upon the piles ashes of wars past that once made his home. There was his name. South, the land of sun and open field, where men wore honor as plate and women courtesy as dress. He would confront the father who gave him life and return nameless and pure to the one who gave him honor.

He knew by the road that where merchants wore steel, no good man was safe. Winter had reached the spirit of the land well before the seasons brought it. The woodland was dotted with the ruin of recent exploit—torn palisades, charred keeps, leveled holdfasts all. What is not built in stone does not last.

Summer days basking in the creek, sparring in the shadow of the tower above. Autumn scents, canopies of oaken green turned to fiery bronze, the chill of a lasting wind that no stone nor flame could stave out, save for the flames of war. The cane, the buried mother, the bruises born from the man's cups. The forest ate what it could kill, as any man did for its prey. The lessons of his father the northerner, which ebbed to his surface. The thought of his coming salvation and disownment, which warmed his heart against the bitter cold.

The foot of the hill that led to his tower. The human carrion, the traces of raid, the weathered sight of a forgotten battle. The peak of the hill of his holdfast, sky unobstructed, unmarred by the intercession of towering, drab stone. "What is not built in stone does not last," his father had once said. He buried him, consigned the skeleton that wore his sword under the earth to meet the bog, to join the tens of thousands and to feed the wood that took him. The forest ate what it could kill, and wasted nothing. Not even stone could last the wood.

Twitter @rlcolem.

Ryan is a hobbyist of the pen & student in philosophy, writing for his local paper and in prose for endless hobbies that serve his career in no way whatever.

meals after wisdom teeth removal | Erika Jing

Kristina Paukshtite via Pexels

steamed egg pudding vanilla yogurt
chocolate protein drink pink smoked
salmon white toast shredded pork
topped oatmeal cheesecake sautéed
beef noodles caramel swirl ice cream
isn't it remarkable that after you remove
the bones and seal the bubbled blood
everything still tastes like flesh
like the body knows what to miss

Erika Jing is a student & writer based in the east coast suburbs despite her love for cities. Her work is featured in Eunoia Reviews & forthcoming in sinθ. Twitter: @erikajwx & Instagram: @erika.jxw

3pm | Kayla “El” J

Erkan Utu via Pexels

At 11am I muttered my
Goodbyes ‘cause I couldn’t
Be in the room when you died.

At 1pm a tired ICU nurse gave me
A soda and a cookie to snack on
In the beige, empty room of waiting.

At 3pm I heard the quiet cries of
My Mom from around the corner.
And that’s when it became clear:

You’re gone. My Dad’s really dead.

Kayla “El” J is a disabled poet studying writing at her university in southern Georgia. You can find her work in Heartbalm Lit’s forthcoming issue “Echoes and Bellows.” Twitter: @kaylaemedia

You're Not What I Thought | Alexis Crafts

cottonbro via Pexels

Why did you

smash the plate?

It's curved

edges cracked, smashed,

exploded into tiny,

little shimmery

pieces of thorns.

On its shelf,

recently cleaned,

it could have stayed.

Alexis Crafts is a third-year university student from Western Massachusetts. She has words in Ice Lolly Review, Celestite Poetry, and elsewhere. You can find her on Twitter @crafts_writing.

Ghosts | Dustin Michael

Erkan Utu via Pexels

Sometimes I meet other parents in the children's hospital who make me feel like my son's leukemia is a blessing, who would trade away their souls for his odds. They hover like ghosts in the family kitchen where I go for coffee. Always different parents. They say soon they'll either be taking their child home or following the body to the morgue. On my next coffee run they're gone, and I never know which thing they did.

So I tell myself they took their child home, glide back to my son's room, force on my ghost's smile, my ghost's gratitude.

Dustin Michael and his wife share blogging duties at https://phinphans.blogspot.com, where they write about their son, Phin, who was recently diagnosed with acute myeloid leukemia.

Reverie | Alex Tamei

Ryutaro Tsukata via Pexels

Wood smoke, coffee and Kenny G. These are the keys, to the caverns, to the depths, to those most holy of places unsullied by consciousness. Here I sit, as the tastes and smells slowly, oh so slowly fade away. Phantasms dance before my eyes, faster and faster, savagely, frantically, celebration is in the Air.

They are afraid, these wraiths, for the night ages fast. They dance on, aware, oh so painfully aware, that when the first light comes, they must fade away. So here I sit, wallowing but helpless for dawn approaches and reverie fades away.

Alex Tamei is a writer who almost always has his nose buried in a book and only ever looks up to admire the passing beautiful things in life.. He blogs at manenoz.com under the moniker tea&Insanity

The Task List | Katrina Otuonye

Mike B via Pexels

At the old camp in Dollar Bay, before any of us were old enough to legally drive a car, we could be left to our own devices for a day or two at a time. My mother gave us boys' and girls' tasks. I had to dig in the garden and pull up the weeds, plant the flowers, load the dishwasher, vacuum all the rooms. The boys cleaned off the roof in the winter, set up the boat dock in the spring, changed the oil in the car, fixed anything I broke. I wanted to help, wanted to do anything they could do.

We all pulled the waterlilies clogging the shoreline, it was boys' and girls' work, apparently. I let the boys handle the shovels to pull up the stinking roots and I tossed them on the shore, on the dock, in the inner tubes we'd tethered nearby, our lake shoes sinking in the muck. We picked around the frogs who enjoyed the weather on the bay. Every summer, they got used to us after a few days, and we left their favorite waterlilies alone. I wanted to keep as many of the pale pink and purple flowers as I could, leaving them to petal open on the dock. We argued about what shade of purple it was, lilac or lavender, but mostly we spent too much time together to talk all the time, just listening to the water and complaining about the lily roots and waving at the boats that rolled by.

Later, we'd wash off our pruny fingers and the boys would check the fireplace, I'd make sure we had food for dinner. If there was trash to take out or wood to gather, I might act as if I were about to lift the bag myself, or I'd look sideways at the woodshed, or the axe.

"You're kidding," the boys would say. "Be smart." Or, "Ah, little weakling, we won't let you do that yourself."

I'd go back to check the lilies I'd left on the dock, but I'd often forget and find them picked at by passing, curious birds—one

day, a treat for a curious bald eagle—or they'd be wilted, then crisped by the sun, decorating the dock like it was leading somewhere.

I never had to ask to be taken care of, my main task was to tend to the small, beautiful things. And the way the boys took care of me, it was clear that their task was the same.

Katrina Otuonye (she/her) is a writer and editor from Michigan's Upper Peninsula. She is working on a memoir about grief and silence. Twitter: @katrinaotuonye; Portfolio: katrinaotuonye.com

the drop | June Drake

Bryan Geraldo via Pexels

When we met, he asked me why I played piano with the lights off. It's how I focus, I said. I didn't say then that it felt like falling, dropping into that space between the keys and the sound once everything else went away. I didn't say that it kept me from tearing my skin off. The notes escape their notation. It's playing hooky from gym class, running instead along the lakeshore, leaping roots and stones, letting branches hit your outstretched fingers as you go. Good game, good game, good game. But without imperative.

These days he listens to me pull myself apart song by song. I can sink beneath the surface but I can't keep myself there. I don't know how to ask him. But he kneels behind the bench, wraps one arm lightly around me, and rests his chin on my shoulder. "My love," he says. "Let me help."

I nod. I lift my hands from the keys and let the sound go.

I kneel on the bed. He ties the knots with intention, guiding the twin lengths of rope so that they lay parallel against my skin, wrapping my chest and pinning my elbows behind me, each cradled in the other. My breaths slow and lengthen and push against the tension in the rope. I smile. He looks back at me, tethering me to him. In one hand he holds the blindfold, and with the other he leans me back against the pillows. I sink into the dark.

June Drake is currently writing about grief and memory in the Pacific Northwest. She's on Twitter as @basketofkisses_.

alone at the party. | Ang Cruz

Areizy Jusuf via Pexels

Sometimes she thinks she can still feel him.

It's the quiet moments that make Ryan wonder what her life would be like if he were still around. It had been two years since she'd found Trevor, and yet his presence wrapped around her, like a blanket but also like a chokehold.

She struggled to light the cigarette in between her fingers. It was hard to pinpoint if the drugs or her nerves made her hands so shaky. But Ryan was too focused on the task to think too much about it.

"*Let me*."

The sound of his voice grabbed her attention instantly. Too many times had she looked up to find no one there, and yet Ryan was willing to risk the heartbreak every time.

But this time, he was there. Her expression softened instantly once she gazed into her ex-fiance's honey eyes, his long brown hair tousled like it always was given his refusal to brush it every morning. She watched as his fingers, still wearing the chipped black nail polish she remembered his mother requesting be removed for the funeral, gently grab her lighter and hold it steady for her.

She lit the cigarette and waited for him to fade away like he always did when she was in this position. It was almost as if the same thing that was supposed to distract her from thinking about him also managed to tease her of a future that would

never come to fruition.

"*You're not going to say anything to me, Ry*?"

He smirked. She blew a cloud of smoke in his direction and focused on his details. The bags under his eyes, the way his smile was both bright and tired at the same time. Unlike every other time she saw him, where he was wearing the clothes she last saw him in, Trevor was wearing a pair of ripped black jeans, his dirty white converse, and a t-shirt from when they went to see his favorite band. She still couldn't listen to Rilo Kiley without feeling sick to her stomach.

"I wish you'd just disappear already." She said finally, instantly regretting the words as soon they left their mouth. Ryan turned away from him, anticipating Trevor to leave again only to feel the weight of his hand on her shoulder.

"*Is that really how you want to spend this time together?"*

His reply felt like fighting words. Something physically snapped inside of her. She dropped her cigarette, put it out with the heel of her boot, then lunged forward.

"I fucking *hate* you!" Ryan yelled, balling her hands into two small fists. She threw the first punch at his chest. Then another. Then another. Then another. Despite feeling the brunt of her anger, she couldn't help but notice Trevor was still looking at her. His smirk felt like a taunt.

"*You finished*?"

The dark-haired girl huffed at his quip. She unclenched her fists and took a step back, sucking in a breath before grabbing another cigarette from the carton in her back pocket. Less shaky this time, Ryan placed it in between her lips before lighting it.

She smoked in silence for a minute, her eyes gazing at her former lover. Even after several years, it felt as if no time had passed. A simple smile was an entire conversation between them. It hit her that it'd been so long since Ryan felt like she was back home like this.

She pressed her side against the roof's ledge. The young man leaned forward, and Ryan felt her breath get caught in her throat as he did. But she remained in her spot, her body pleading for his touch despite her holding herself back.

"*Do you really hate me*?" Trevor asked her, voice soft.

"I don't think I can ever hate you." She admitted. Trevor took another step forward as Ryan felt his hand reach over to hold her face, and Ryan instinctively leaned into his palm. She still fit perfectly.

"*I know. You're really fucking dramatic, you know that?* Trevor hummed, the comment making Ryan laugh instantly. "*You know I won't be here all night*."

She nodded feeling knots tie in her stomach. Ryan had anticipated him to leave at an earlier point during their conversation, and yet Trevor remained. Still, it felt like a cruel joke having him be the one to tell her about his own demise.

"*I'm here for a reason though."* She felt his thumb stroke her cheek. "*Tell me what that is."*

Ryan paused for a minute as she thought about his request. She tilted her head to press a kiss to his palm. "I missed you."

He rolled his eyes. "*Don't bullshit me, Ry. You know the real reason*."

Her gaze softened immediately, and suddenly she was vulnerable. Her toughest layer had peeled off, and Ryan felt raw. She hesitated for a moment, unsure if she could even speak into existence what she really wanted from Trevor at that moment. Rarely was she ever afraid to speak her mind, but he was always a sore spot for her.

"I think... I want to move on from you," Ryan admitted. She waited for a reaction from Trevor. Part of her wished this was real and that he could be angry with her – she was willing to fight with him a thousand and one more times if it meant he'd be back in her life. But instead, he simply nodded, giving her the sign to keep going. "I feel like I've been holding myself back from just living my life."

She avoided his eyes for a moment, feeling tears swell up as she wiped them with the back of her hand. Ryan felt the gentle touch of her former lover as he pressed his thumb against her cheek.

"Every time something good happens to me, I can't stop but think what it would be like if you were here with me." She reached over to grab his wrist, pressing his hand onto her face as her voice quivered. " I think about every milestone we would experience together. I think about our little future together. I see you everywhere and feel so selfish for wanting to experience these things with someone who isn't you. But I don't... I don't think I can keep living this way."

Ryan felt her breath quicken as she spoke. Her chest beat loudly and fast as she tried to level herself. She shakily lifted the cigarette to her lips, then took a hit to calm her nerves.

"Trev," she whispered. The dark-haired girl felt small for a moment. She couldn't remember the last time she had said his name. She looked up at him through her eyelashes, her hands reaching to hold his face as she did. "Can I ask you something?"

He nodded.

"I just need you to tell me, would it be okay if I moved on?"

The weight of her question left her breathless. But Ryan was desperate. She searched for Trevor's answer through his expression. The brunette man's face was blank but still smiling. His honey eyes feigned no reaction, and his lips curved slightly upward. Every second felt longer than the last, but Ryan needed to hear his reply.

Rather than saying anything, Ryan watched as Trevor leaned forward and gently held her by her jaw. He tilted her head slightly upward so he could gaze at her. She felt her breath hitch as she felt the warmth of his lips on the left corner of her mouth.

She closed her eyes for a moment to soak in the feeling. As much as she wanted to hold herself back from aching for him, Ryan's body was desperate for more. Her hands maneuvered themselves into a position that was habitual, ready to fit Trevor's body like a lock and key.

But he was already gone. She opened her eyes half-full hopeful but ended up half-empty once she realized she was alone again. Ryan looked at the space where Trevor once stood.

There was no point in staying upset, she figured. Ryan put the cigarette back in between her lips and took a hit, blowing the smoke out at the sky. With the back of her hand, she wiped the left corner of her mouth, then returned to her party alone.

Ang Cruz (they/she) is a writer, filmmaker, and lavender latte enthusiast based in Southern California. Follow them at @angdidthat on all platforms.

Seann Barbour | The Book of Lives Unlived

Ylanite Koppens via Pexels

Aaron didn't often go to the old Fairgrove Library. It was dusty and its budget had been falling for some time and he wasn't much of a reader anyway. He preferred sports. Still, it was a quiet place, as libraries are, and that was what Aaron needed at the moment.

He had just graduated the night before—Fairgrove High School, Class of 1998. His classmates (or, he supposed, *former* classmates now) were planning and throwing all sorts of parties to celebrate the end of this stage of their lives and the beginnings of the next.

In fact, he'd just come from one such party. It was a pool party, at Jordan Owens' house. Aaron had spent most of his time there standing in the corner, drinking some soda.

It wasn't that he was antisocial, per se. Aaron was simply never sure what to actually say to people. He preferred to act instead of speaking, but even then it wasn't like excelled. He was an average football player—not a star quarterback or a perpetual bench warmer—and he didn't interact with even his teammates all that much outside of games or practice.

But he'd forced himself to go to that party. Jordan Owens *was* the star quarterback, after all. And now Aaron needed somewhere quiet to calm down and reorient himself. The library seemed as good a place for that as any.

Aaron drifted about the shelves and the stacks until he eventually made his way to the darkest corner of the library, where dust gathered on old leatherbacks and the musty smell of old pages filled the air. He leaned against the wall and he closed his eyes, just letting himself relax.

And when he opened his eyes again, they fell immediately upon a book on a nearby shelf. He couldn't be certain what it was about this book that drew his attention. It was just some old leatherback that had seen better days. But there was something oddly magnetic about it.

He read the title on the spine:

The Book of Lives Unlived

Curiosity filled him, and Aaron reached out and pulled the odd book from the shelf. There weren't any library stickers on it, he noticed. Aaron opened it to a random page.

Aaron took a deep breath to calm his nerves as he approached Gracie. Could he really do this? Not for the first time, he went through what he would say in his head. He had to get this right.

This… this had happened. This was his *life*. Aaron stared at the page in confusion. He'd wanted to ask Gracie to prom, but hadn't been able to work up the nerve. What was this doing written down in this old book?

He kept reading.

"Gracie?" Aaron asked. She turned away from her locker and looked at him quizzically.

Standing there, under her bright blue gaze, Aaron wasn't sure if he could do this. His heart pounded. But there was no going back now.

"I think you're pretty, um, cool," he said, internally wincing at how awkward he sounded. She must think he sounded so creepy. "I was wondering if you'd like to go to prom with me?"

Gracie stared at him for what seemed like an eternity. "Oh," she said at last. "I'm so sorry, Aaron. But, you see, Peter already asked me, so…"

"Oh," said Aaron. "I see."

"Sorry!" Gracie said again, and she hurried away.

This… didn't make any sense. Aaron furrowed his brow in confusion. He'd never actually asked her, and Gracie hadn't gone to prom with Peter anyway. Was the Gracie in the book lying so she could spare his feelings?

But why? What was up with this weird book?

The questions swirled about Aaron's head, but he read on.

"Tough break, man," a voice said behind him. Aaron turned to see Gracie's friend Cindy standing there, giving him a sympathetic smile.

While Gracie was blonde and a cheerleader and well-liked by most everyone, Cindy was none of those things. She preferred the grungy look, with oversized plaid shirts, and dyed her hair black. She and Gracie were something of an odd pair, but had apparently been friends since they were children.

"It's alright," Aaron sighed. "I guess it's small wonder that someone already asked her."

A frown flickered across Cindy's face. "I think you're the first one, actually."

"What? But she said—"

"She lied," Cindy told him. "I'm sorry."

Aaron stared at her, dumbfounded. "So… she just didn't want to go with me?"

Cindy looked away from him. "Sorry. Look, um, if you… you know, if you still want to go…" Her face turned red. "Well, nobody's asked me yet."

Aaron continued reading. The book told a story that had never happened, recounting how he'd taken Cindy to prom, been stunned by her dress, how she'd confessed to a land-standing crush on him. The Gracie in the book even revealed at the dance that the reason she'd turned him down was because she'd known of her friend's feelings.

None of this had happened. Aaron hadn't even ended up going to prom. But… *could* this have happened? If he'd actually mustered up the courage to ask Gracie out, would this have been how things went down?

Aaron closed the book and returned it to the shelf. Gracie was having her own end-of-year party tomorrow, and Cindy would certainly be there. He decided that he would talk to her.

*

Cindy supposed there were worse places to live than Fairgrove. Sure, it was a small town, but the people here were friendly and she had a decent life and a decent husband.

And, she thought as she smiled down at the little girl holding her hand, the most perfect little daughter.

Tara had just turned four. The small girl was looking about the library with wide eyes. Cindy was pretty sure it was the first time her daughter had ever been here. The Fairgrove Library had undergone a series of renovations the year before, and was looking better and more modern than ever.

There was an event here today; a little storybook reading for young children. Cindy thought it would be a good event for Tara.

Her daughter joined the other children in sitting and reading the story, and Cindy found herself wandering about the bookshelves. She'd been married only a year after high school—Cindy still remembered that day at her friend Gracie's graduation party when Aaron had approached. It had been like a minor miracle to her teenage mind; she'd had such a crush on him for so long.

Cindy had been overjoyed when he asked her out. Since he was working with his dad as a contractor, Cindy

had ended up postponing her college plans to remain in Fairgrove with him, and before long the two were married.

And then, two years after that, little Tara came into their lives.

She drifted out of her reverie and realized that she'd wandered into a dark corner of the library, where the shelves were covered in old books that looked like they hadn't been touched in ages. Her eyes were drawn, as if by some force, to one tome in particularly: *The Book of Lives Unlived*.

Something about it seemed to call to her, and Cindy reached out and pulled the strange old book from the shelf. She flipped it open and began to read…

It wasn't an easy decision for Cindy to go off to college, but she knew that Aaron would understand. She was destined for greater things than Fairgrove, and dreamed of being a musician. She wanted to study songwriting and musical theory, but Fairgrove simply wasn't the town for that.

Cindy stared at the page in confusion. It was almost as if someone had written down her life, except… a different version of it. She *had* wanted to go to college to study music, but she'd chosen to stay with Aaron instead.

She turned over to a different page and started reading again.

After so many months apart, she had seen it coming. Cindy thought it would hurt more than it actually had when Aaron said those words on that phone call: "I think we should break up." But instead of the expected pain, she had felt only relief.

The truth was, she admitted now, that she'd fallen out of love with him some time ago, and keeping up this charade of a long-distance relationship was just too taxing.

Now, though? Now Cindy was free to focus on her studies. Her professors said that she had real talent, and the band she'd started with Kelly and Tina was coming along nicely.

This wasn't possible. There was no way her life could have gone like this, had she chosen to go off to college. And if there was, then how could this book possibly know?

Cindy turned over even more pages, until she found herself pausing to read another passage.

"*Here we are," Cindy said, handing the sheet to Nate. He looked over the music.*

He hummed along as he read, then nodded. "Good stuff," he said. "That last song was a big hit, and I think this song would be a good fit for Esther."

Cindy considered this. "I thought this one was for Tina?"

"*You know that Tina's better with the low notes," Nate told her. "I'll shop it around a bit, but I think Esther would be the best fit."*

She shrugged. No skin off her teeth. About half the stars in the industry had performed at least one of her songs by this point. Cindy had long since stopped caring about who sang what, so long as her music was out there.

Cindy closed the book, shocked. "I could have been a songwriter," she muttered. "I could have been a *songwriter!*" She put the book back on the shelf.

Tara's reading hour was probably close to finished by now. She started heading back to her daughter, her head swimming. She could have been a songwriter. Her music could have been enjoyed by thousands—no, *millions*.

And instead… she was here.

No, no. She had a child now. That had to be her priority. It was no use thinking about what could have been. Her family was here in Fairgrove, and that was what mattered.

This was fine.

*

Tara was in the library often.

She liked the quiet. Well, no, that wasn't right. She liked the *peaceful* quiet. The quiet back home was tense and anxious. Her dad was a bundle of nerves who'd never remarried, and when her mom had her, there was always a stream of probing questions and presents from her and whoever her latest husband was.

Tara wasn't dumb. She knew that her parents' divorce had been lengthy and bitter and painful. She knew that it

had left scars on both of them that had never fully healed. Sometimes—oftentimes, really—it was easier to just get lost in the world of a book rather than deal with all that.

Even as a child, she'd felt the divorce coming. It had finally happened back in 2010, when Tara was just 9 years old. Sometimes she wondered what would have happened if she'd begged them to stay together. Would they have listened?

Probably not. There was bad blood between them, and with how often they fought, divorce had probably been for the best. Now, seven years later, Tara was entering her last year of high school, and neither of them had ever actually moved on.

She had two homes, two families, two Christmases, two birthdays, and sometimes all she wanted to do was get away from all of them. Books were the best method she'd found of doing so. Well, books and a certain someone. She smiled at the thought.

Over her years coming here, Tara had read through most of the fantasy and science fiction section, and she'd recently started making a serious dent in the romances and historical fiction. But she wasn't in the mood for any of those sorts of books today. Instead, she was exploring the library, looking for anything that seemed interesting.

And that was how Tara had found herself in a strange corner, looking at an odd old book titled *The Book of Lives Unlived.*

There was something magnetic about it. Something that drew her eye and refused to let go. She reached out and pulled it from the shelf, then opened it to a random page and started reading.

"Please don't break up!" Tara pleaded, her nine-year-old face set in determination. "Stay together! Please! Do it for me!"

Her parents stared at her, dumbstruck.

"What the hell…?" Tara scanned over the rest of the page, trying to wrap her head around what she was seeing. It recounted how her parents had promised to work on their marriage and stay together. It was… almost like someone had taken a childhood fantasy of hers and transcribed it to paper.

This page was toward the beginning of the book. Tara flipped over to one near the end and read:

She was tired. Her parents tried to hide their fights from her, but Tara wasn't deaf and she wasn't dumb. Who did they think they were fooling? She heard them going at it all night, cursing and spitting at each other.

This morning, her mom had left for work early, before Tara had even gotten up. So instead she'd decided to confront her dad about it. He tried to change the subject, like he always did, but like the stubborn fool she was, Tara had pressed him on it even though she knew what he was going to say.

"*We stay together for you."*

She wished they didn't.

So now here she was at school, feeling like absolute garbage. Her entire life was falling apart in slow motion, and here was that little bitch Margaret, in front of her locker again. Nobody liked Margaret. Nobody liked Tara either, really, but at least she wasn't Margaret.

"*Get out of my way," Tara spat, shoving the girl away.*

"*I'm sorry!" Margaret said meekly. "My locker's right next to yours, so…"*

"*I don't care," Tara interrupted. "Stupid fucking dyke—"*

Tara slammed the book shut.

She was shaking. Tears were running down her face. She couldn't keep reading this… this awful *trash*.

Shoving the book back onto its place on the shelf, she hurried away, doing her best to try and push the words out of her mind. But the scene described in the book just kept playing on in her head, and even though it had never actually happened, the guilt was too much for her to bear.

Tara pulled out her phone and sent a quick text to Maggie. She was the only one allowed to call her "Maggie."

>You free?

It took a moment for Maggie's reply to come through.

> Yeah. Y?

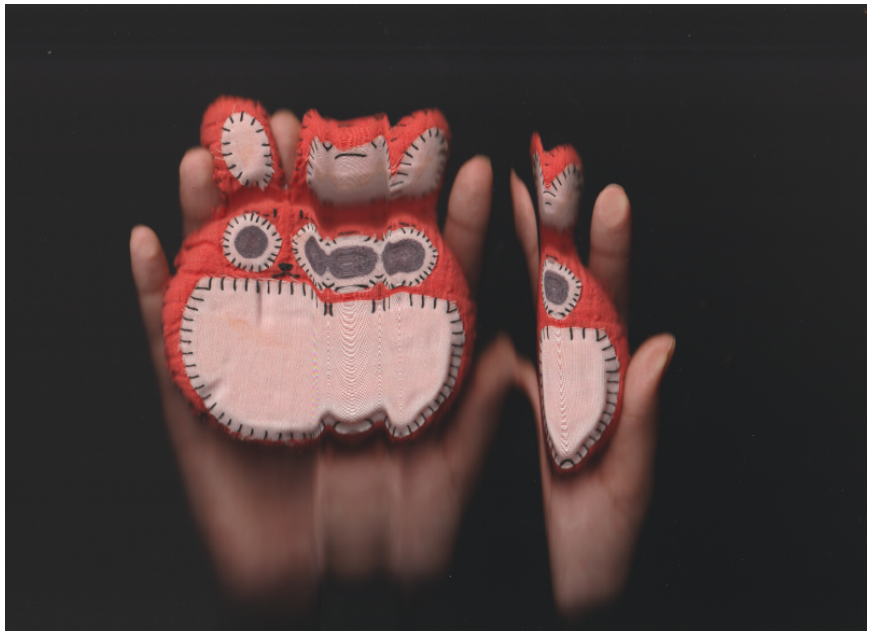
>Wanna see you

>Aw. <3 well come on over!

Wiping the tears from her eyes, Tara left the library and headed off to her girlfriend's house.

Seann Barbour is an indie author who writes a little bit of everything, but mostly fantasy & horror. When not writing, he works with dogs. You can find his fiction at Patreon.com/SeannWritesStuff

Hand of God I | Mahika Mukherjee



via Mahika Mukherjee

Mahika Mukherjee is a student at Krea University, India. She is known for her self-published collection of poetry titled 'A God's Tears'. Her writing can be found on her blog: mahikamukherjee.com

Quiet Eyes | Angelica Suero

via Angelica Suero

@angel_delaraiz on instagram

If Only | Tedi Symons

Tedi Symons is a creative writer studying a Bachelor of Philosophy/Master of Research at Macquarie University, currently focused on Monstrous Fanfiction. Insta is @tedi_sym, Twitter is @BriSymons

rahul via Pexels

I sit, harried, sacrifice on my mind
Will I make it in time?
Is it better to make it, to get there
To trade my life for my heart
Or
To miss it, arrive to see no life at all
Cradle the emptiness in my arms and say no
If only, if only I made it on time
If only
(I would be dead)

Cosmogony | Eric Craft

Eric Craft is a playwright based in New Jersey. He is in residency with the NJPlayLab for his play "And Every Creeping Thing" and has a BA in Theatre. Insta: Cindereric, Twitter: Prince of Flowers.

Jakub Novacek via Pexels

Here we are for the first time again.
Cosmic waters shift through us and meld,
Breath and spit in cocktail conversion,
Mixing them on the tip of our tongues.
Silly, I think, but am already carved
made more by your subtraction.
You fall from heaven to gaze at me,
But we are each already different.
Glad for it though, I should think.
It's happened before and will again.

Tiddlywinks | D.O. Missroon

Sebastian Arie Voortman via Pexels

Greedy eyes watch the chessboard as the players' invisible hands sacrifice pawns for their Midas-gold kings. Money changes hands between the crowding spectators—bets are placed on every move made, while we sit in the corner together playing tiddlywinks

---

D.O. Missroon is a writer from Georgia currently finishing an MFA at the University of New Hampshire. He can be found tweeting at @DannyMissroon

I Can't Wait | Wangithi

Quintin Gellar via Pexels

I can't wait for the day I'll want to brush my teeth. For the day I get out of bed, shower and not feel like I just climbed a mountain range. I can't wait to appreciate the yearning, for it'll mean I finally want something again.

I can't wait for the day I'll write about joy because it illuminates my entire being. For the day I'll smile and I won't feel like I'm contributing to oceanic pollution. To tell you my secrets, the ones I used to get through the day. I just have to figure them out first.

Twitter: @wangithi

Wangithi is an upcoming writer who considers themselves a student of life and writes about the human experience.

Loves music, and loves to dance, among other art forms.

Yearn | Valorie Clark

Chris F via Pexels

"This is how you fall in love," she confides in me, but all I see is a smoke-filled room full of hunched figures sitting around the bar. It looks like hell. Tinny music plays over looping arcade game notes, and the bass line that should be thumping limps along through broken speakers.

"This is how you fall in love," she whispers to me, before tapping a guy on the shoulder and asking for a light for her cigarette. I think about unplugging the arcade game in the corner. They leave together and don't look back.

"This is how you fall in love," I assure myself, before throwing back two whiskeys (neat) and smiling at the bartender.

Valorie Clark is a writer and historian living in Los Angeles with her cat. Her podcast, Unruly Figures, is a celebration of rebellion and revolution. Find her online: @thevalorieclark.

Wes Viola | Wood Have

Soly Moses via Pexels

I want to get lost in poetry with you.
Stack the lines in front of each other,
the letters like trees,
stark against the snow-white landscape,
and we'll step between them, hand in hand.

You'll tell me things about the trees.
I never was any good at that stuff.
What does a beech leaf look like? No idea.
I might do better here, though.
I know 'L's used to be 'Lambda's, for instance.
That swoop and hook was meant to stand
for a cattle prod, way back
and 'A' for an ox (so they say) –
so you'd have goaded your herd of 'A's with an 'L',
la, la, la,
singing your merry herder's song,
la, la, la.

Out in Wood Have,
the roots grow into each other

and anything that starts to look like a path soon ends.
It seems hardly any lovers have been out this way before.
But then, we'll get to one great 'T' with a 'W' carved in its trunk.
We'll argue gently over which William must have got his penknife out.
You'll think Blake and I'll think Yeats
(Or the other way around).
We'll both think your Mom would have said Shakespeare.
Wordsworth wouldn't have done that to a tree, of course.
Also I think he always went the other way.

So, we won't be deep enough yet. We'll want to go
where no-one's been before. We'll both start
to say it: *'we don't want to forget the way back'*,
and both stop the words in our mouths,
since we both do.

A few lines further and the letters thicken,
some breaking up, some growing together,
while thin 'I's and 'V's will creep everywhere, wrapping their tendrils
round everything they can.
Here and there the trees have fallen over, and this is what we'll do:
We'll clamber over the straight edge of an 'R' long since collapsed,
I'll follow your heels through a lower case 'o',
and after that,

there'll be nothing I can write yet.
The letters creaking.
The sights, sounds and smells of the forest.
We'll have done it.
Let's go.

Wes Viola is a pen name of Wes White, an Elder Bard of Glastonbury, England now living and working in London. 'Wood Have' is for his wife, and for all his readers. Find more: http://linktr.ee/wesviola

Digitalmanic | Deanna Faye

via Deanna Faye

Deanna Faye is an artisan and artists' model from Texas via Omaha. Her photography will appear in upcoming issues of Wrongdoing Magazine and Exist Otherwise.

Winter Bush Maintenance | Susan Yim

Step one: Let it grow!

The hair will scratch its way through your skin and pierce the thin fabric of your too uncomfortable panties. It's not a bad thing.

Description: A drawing of a hand Description automatically generated with low confidence

Step two: Watch it grow!

You see how it doesn't stick out in awkward positions anymore? How it naturally smooths inside your folds, tucks itself in, and emits warmth? Yeah, it's nice. I'm glad you think so too.

Description: A picture containing text Description automatically generated

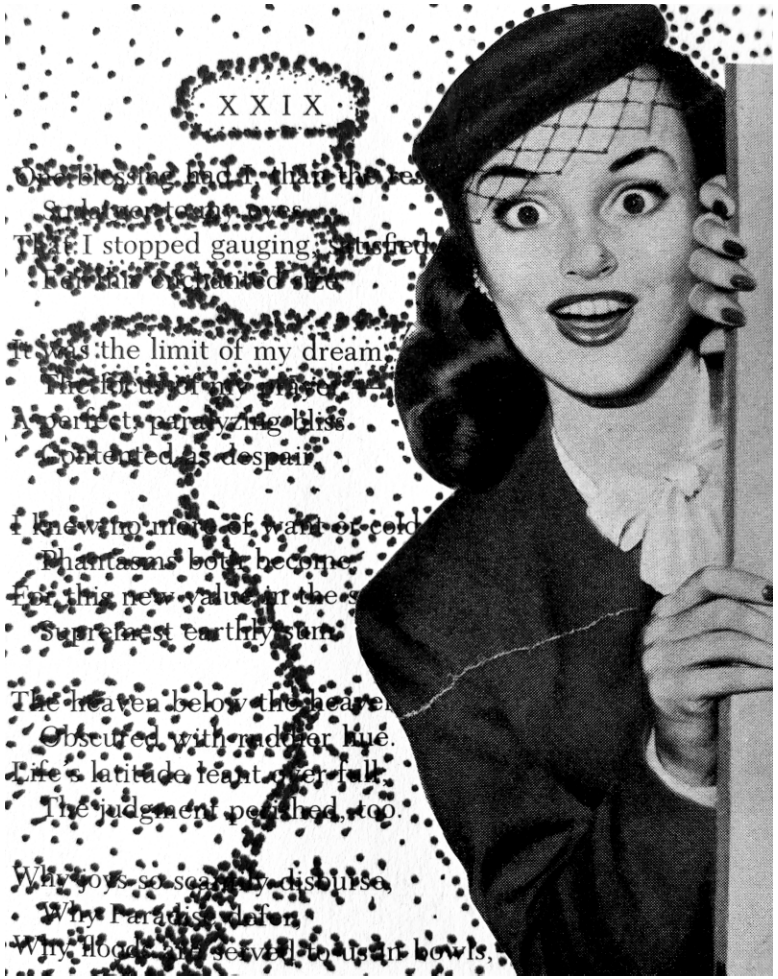
Step three: Love the growth!

Wash and condition her. Stroke her fur and feel relaxed. Fall asleep, fingers resting lightly on top of cloud-like weightlessness. Feel at peace with yourself.

Description: Shape Description automatically generated

Susan Yim (she/her) is a biracial American fiction writer with Korean heritage from the Greater St. Louis Area. This piece will be part of her pussy collection. You can find her @fearthenorms.

XXIX | Sylvia Santiago



via Sylvia Santiago

Sylvia Santiago lives in western Canada. Her work has been published in Cutbow Quarterly, Ellipsis Zine, HAD, Honey Literary, and elsewhere. Find her on Twitter @sylviasays2

Untitled | N. Jones

Bo Stevens via Pexels

I cried in the five below today.
Held back from full-on sobbing.
There's a queer book.
Right there.
Neon lights flashing:

YOU ARE VALID

N. Jones is in love with everything at once. On Twitter for the hot takes, weird genders, and cats @ablazeinhim

House of Cards | Kobe Batong

Anna Shvets via Pexels

House of cards
Sometimes
The floor
Feels

rickety

---

tw: @TodorokiYung

Based in Florida, I work within the realm of poetry to examine love, alienation and memory.

Posted on Living in Burbville | Toni Plummer

Monstera via Pexels

October 27

Free Porch Pickup!

One vintage cauldron. Cast-iron, well-seasoned!

[picture]

October 28

I am expanding my business! Anyone interested in potions or hexes? DM me for rates!

October 29

Can anyone recommend someone who does yard clean up? The egg yolk and shells will come in handy, but I have no use

for streams of toilet paper. Thanks!

October 30

My black cat is missing. No collar but answers to "Beelzebub." Please DM with location!

October 31
Out strolling I came upon this darling armada of newts being attacked by crows. Happy Halloween!

[picture]

Toni Margarita Plummer is the author of the story collection The Bolero of Andi Rowe. She lives in the Hudson Valley.
Twitter: @tmargaritaplum

Sight | J.B. McLaurin

Elisabeth Fossum via Pexels

"You're sure you weren't smoking?"

The smell of spent cigarettes clung to his jacket like a poltergeist. He had been riding around with his friends and hoped that keeping the windows down on the way home had dispersed some of the smell. But he had been smoking long enough to know it was impossible to avoid that odor. It crawled into your clothes, climbed into your pores, and all the cologne in the world couldn't hide it.

He responded, "No," knowing full well he had a pack of Camels stashed under his mattress.

"Okay, because you know how I feel about smoking. Your Uncle Harry just passed last year from lung cancer." She always said it to him as if he had forgotten. Uncle Harry had lived just two streets over and had been a constant in his life. And back when Uncle Harry was still among the living, Bill had even snatched a few cigarettes from his pack when he wasn't looking. "And well, you know what happened to my father. You don't want to end up like that, sweetheart. Spending your last years being wheeled around by other people, taking breaks to use an oxygen mask. It's terrible."

"I know mom. I know. But I wasn't smoking."

"You sure do smell like it."

"It was Kenny, Mom." Kenny was always Bill's fall guy because Kenny was on a first name basis with the police. "But please don't tell his parents."

"Kenny's not my problem. You are. And you better be telling me the truth." She had her index finger pointed right at him–like a dagger–as she said it.

Lying to her always took a toll on him. She was so kind to him, always had been, even before his dad died ten years ago. Dad didn't die from smoking like ol' Uncle Harry and Bill's grandfather. The man ate right, was kind to people, and paid his taxes on time. But drunk drivers on the interstate don't care about such things, do they?

"Mom, I told you. It was Kenny."

"Okay. Okay." She walked over to him. "I know it's not a school night but you still need to get some sleep."

She took a moment to fix his cowlick, a habit of hers that had started when he was a toddler, then took both of his cheeks in her hands and kissed him on the forehead. The nightly ritual.

At 18-years-old, Bill had known for a long time he had one of the best mothers in the world. A woman that had grace and kindness in spades. He never took pleasure in lying to her. But his body was in its heyday. Its prime. He could be a little rough on it. Not to mention that Rachel had bummed a cigarette off him this afternoon when they were parked up at Dead Children's Playground—their favorite place to sneak off to smoke and drink a few beers when they were lucky enough to get a six pack. Without that trusty pack of Camels in his pocket, she would have just moved on to talk to Jake, who was taller than Bill, smarter, and more athletic. The guy was nice too. Didn't seem fair for one human to possess all those attributes.

But rather than sidling up to Jake and flirting with him like she usually did, Rachel had come over to Bill and asked for a smoke. Fumbling around in his pockets, he had awkwardly got out the pack and lighter (thanking God he hadn't gotten a soft pack, which usually left the cigarettes looking like sad noodles), handed her one, then performed his best Cary Grant impression, trying to rakishly light the cigarette. He and his mom loved watching Cary Grant movies together and in all those films the girl definitely stayed to chat. Bill was no Cary Grant, but to his surprise, Rachel had stayed and talked to him. Not only that, they had also discovered they had things in common: horror movies and metal music. This tall blond with flawless skin and hair that hung down like the wisps of a willow tree, thought John Carpenter was one of the greatest directors of all time.

She didn't even talk to Jake while they were there. All because of a cigarette.

So, sorry Grandad and Uncle Harry.

And sorry Mom.

Also, he supposed he would owe his mother yet another apology, because Bill had no intention of making it an early night. He had explored the caves hidden back in the woods behind his house more times than he could remember during the day, but never under the cover of night.

The time had come to right that wrong.

#

From what he knew, the caves used to be some kind of limestone mining operation. That was, until it shut down decades ago and the mining company left the town of Veil, Georgia behind. The site had gone on abandoned for longer than anyone could remember. People just accepted that these caves existed in the back of the neighborhood as a popular spot for kids, high schoolers, and hikers to explore. Well, the hikers came to explore. The rest came to do all things prohibited within sight of the world. No Trespassing signs were posted at every entrance, but that was little deterrent because the police didn't enforce the warning. If law enforcement didn't care, then why should anyone else?

Initially, it was the stories that brought Bill and his crew up here. One night, after several Budweisers, Bill's uncle told him that back in the nineties—during the Satanic Panic—people came up here to slaughter animals in honor of Satan. There were even rumors that human sacrifices were being performed. This was years ago when Bill was only seven or eight. Kids that age will believe just about anything and not only had Bill believed the stories, but they had also captivated the dark side of his curiosity. How could anyone in this neighborhood sleep without knowing what was in those caves?

In keeping with the town's indifference to trespassing, there was a hole cut in the chain-link fence that closed in the west side of the property. Bill pulled back the thin metal and went through.

Sneaking out of his house had been easy. His mother slept like the dead, always had, even after his dad died. Maybe God thought she deserved mercy for having to become a single mom, who had foregone grad school to help support her husband through law school and as a result, didn't have a leg to stand on in the job market, not to mention a canyon-sized hole in her resume´. She eventually found work in human resources at the hospital—good hours, good pay, more stress than she liked, but she stuck it out. And despite all that she had endured, all the shit she had had to shovel over the years, she was always able to sleep, which allowed Bill to start sneaking out as a teen. To this day, he was batting a thousand; she had never caught him.

The sounds of full dark greeted Bill: a sporadic hoot from an owl, the whir of crickets, and police sirens far off in the distance. The crunch of the gravel echoed off the walls as he made his way down into the caves. The temperature dropped the further he went into the Earth, making him thankful he had put on his hoodie. He always got a shot of adrenaline when the temperature descended right before he entered the mouth of the cave—the quick plummet made it feel like he was entering a different world.

The next shot of adrenaline came when he had to choose. Like a monster from another planet, the cave had three mouths: Door Number One, Two, or Three. All had paths that snaked around in different directions.

Tonight, it would be Door Number Two.

In he went. The darkness swallowed him.

#

A manmade hole above, presumably to lower tools without having to make a trip back out, was just ahead, letting in a glittery tube of moon-light. The terrain was familiar; he knew every bend and turn back here. Darkness shrouded the walls of the cave from view. In the day-time, he could see the walls, the grooves, the little ledges that jutted out, the water trickling down the face. Right now, he could only see the tube of light ahead, the gravel at his feet, and whatever was in the path of his flashlight. He found himself moving the light to the wall again and again to make sure that it was still there and most importantly, that he was still alone.

Deciding to bypass the cone of moon-light in favor of going deeper inside, he forged on. The back of the cave wasn't too far away and what he really came here for, what he really wanted to know, is what happened at night in the alcove carved out of a high rock-face at the back of the cave. What he and his friends called the Cubby Hole.

Before he ventured into the Cubby Hole, he decided it was best to shine the light in and make sure there weren't any large critters, or worse, some kind of predator like a bobcat, waiting for him back there.

He saw nothing there. So he ventured in.

The ceiling was low and always coated in a layer of moisture. He moved the flashlight around, taking in the small rivulets of water, dripping down like tears. He saw where he and his friends had graffitied the wall a few weeks back. Struggling for something cool to tag on the wall, they had finally settled on Nirvana lyrics. The mold and the water were already erasing their hard work. Nothing seemed to last long back here.

Enough of the Cubby Hole. Time to see what happened on the north end of the cave at night.

As exited the alcove, he turned off his flashlight. He wanted to see if he could handle walking along the back of the cave in the dark. Really take in the atmosphere in the absence of light.

He knew the path by heart. Just like he could walk down the stairs at his house while carrying a box without looking at his feet.

Walking in pitch dark, suddenly, he heard what sounded like wings woosh.

It came again. Louder this time. A gigantic woosh, sounding like a train passing by.

It can't be a bird. No bird is that big. He told himself it was all in his head; there was nothing back

here with him.

Thunderous, the woosh came again, bringing a blast of wind that knocked his hair out of place. Something was above him.

Looking up, Bill saw two giant red orbs hovering above him like red stars. Like a locomotive coming straight for him, a giant black mass tore loose of the cave's ceiling. It descended in front of him, colliding with the floor in a concussive thump that almost knocked Bill off his feet.

Bill beheld the creature standing before him. It was impossibly tall—at least ten feet, maybe more. He looked at the enormous wings that had made the titanic wind-like sound. Its body was as black as the night that surrounded them. Scales covered every inch of its torso and legs. Massive taloned feet clicked and scratched against the gravel.

Without warning, time faded.

How long he stood there he would never know.

Somewhere along the way he realized that his paralysis wasn't because of fear. The monster radiated an energy that commandeered Bill's body and mind, but it was soft and soothing, lulling him into willful submission. He started hearing *it* speak in his head alongside his own thoughts, as if they were just having a normal conversation. Its voice was comforting, an old friend.

The thing brought him close, wrapping him in wings as big as sails. Then, like a loving parent putting him to bed, it lowered him to the ground, keeping him wrapped in its cosmic warmth the whole time.

The creature was kind. It meant him no harm.

It had something to tell him. Something dire. Urgent. His town was on the precipice of tragedy. People here needed help but *it* wasn't the one to convey the message. Bill's *kind* wouldn't listen to *it*.

The creature delivered the message.

Hours later, sunlight cut through the entrance of the cave, shaking Bill from sleep.

He was alone. The creature was gone.

#

"Mom, call the hospital. You have to warn them." Bill decided not to tell her the truth. Better to say it was a human being—a person feeling guilty about being part of a criminal conspiracy. Bill knew it wouldn't hold up for long, but it was the best he could do on the fly. His mom would eventually get wise and ask questions that would expose the cracks in his story.

As expected, his mother looked at him like he was crazy. Which, he had to admit, this whole thing was.

But Bill couldn't shake the feeling the creature had been honest. He remembered that feeling of ethereal warmth—glowing and endless and impossibly beautiful—when he had been cradled in its wings, and it convinced him the creature wanted to help the humans in his town.

"Mom, they will listen to you."

"Bill, I don't even work in the actual hospital. I work in H.R. Not to mention they will think I've lost it." Pleading with her, Bill reminded her what was at stake: Someone had told him the hospital was going to burn down and forty-six people would die. She asked him about the number again and he reiterated that it would be exactly that number. He couldn't tell her exactly why but that's what the man had told him.

"We have top-notch security there and the fire alarms are state of the art. I don't even know how someone could get around that."

"That stuff can be hacked now. It's not as hard as you think."

A careworn sigh escaped her. In a subdued, mournful tone, she said, "This is where I work son. I could be risking my job."

At that, he collapsed, crying and slapping his temples, pulling at his hair, trying to displace his angst and guilt. All those people were going to die if he didn't do anything. That creature had made him certain of it.

He looked at his mother, big eyes filled with tears, and said the only thing he thought might work: "What if they die and *you* did nothing?"

#

Twenty minutes later, after hanging up with one of the hospital administrators, that had assured her the information was passed along to the CEO, she came in to check on him.

"They're not going to do anything, are they?"

"They said they'd look into it."

"It's going to happen. I know it."

"I hope you're wrong, son."

#

From the Veil Times, dated June 12, 2018:

> Last night a fire claimed 47 lives at the main building of Veil Hospital. Authorities are still trying to determine what, or who, started the fire. An anonymous police source said they believe it was possibly a terrorist attack related to a ransom-ware demand. Although the hospital is equipped with a cutting-edge fire prevention system, it failed last night. The system—installed a year ago—relies on a Wi-Fi network. Police believe the perpetrators disabled the system and then went in and started the fire. The investigation is ongoing.

Twitter: @JBMcLaurin1

Jonathan Pessant | In My Boule

Steve Johnson via Pexels

In my bowl there are twenty
shark-toothed vegetarians

Each with a surprise
for their vegan friends

Oh shit, there's more vegetarians
in my bowl, eating

glass, popping
them in their mouths like olives

at a dinner party
where the most interesting conversation

is silence
each bite tears at their tongues

but they manage to keep
their mouths closed.

Jonathan Pessant is a Maine poet.

Timothy C Goodwin | Start 'Em Early

Steshka Willems via Pexels

Look at these little monsters! Just *look* at these a*dor*able little monsters!

They take the field to warm up: TACO BELL in the wrong font across their tee shirts, some in jeans, some in shorts, some in actual baseball pants (possibly betraying their parents' aspirations more so than their child's).

How. *Precious*. This team in miniature! The intricacies/intimacies of baseball's higher mechanics will come later, when these kids grow into their hats. For now though? Stand here, run there. Don't eat the dandelions!

But wait: something in the outfield: 4 warming up with 10.

"Come ooon!" 4 yells, when 10 drops the ball.

"Seriously?" 4 yells, when 10's glove falls off his hand.

"Dude you *suck*," 4 yells, when 10 is busy with a cloud.

4 seems to have already mastered the art of shitting on the other players; and here you are, just strolling through the park on a random Thursday when suddenly 4's specific frequency of jerk is the only thing you hear above the *ping*s of aluminum bats and the gabbling of parents while they cluster in lawn chairs. It's like the cop-show computer whiz placed

two different audio pieces on top of one another to reveal: this kid, this 4, sounds *exactly* like the 4 (or whatever his number was) from *your* childhood. Oh, you remember – all too well – his descending, 2-note, fog-hornish "Come ooon" when you dropped the ball and his weird congested snicker when you struck out.

Poor 10! You know how this will play out: 4's trash-talking is first gonna spread to his future cellmates 12 and 8, then to the coach (who always seems to be a 4's father, naturally/ predictably), then on to the kids at school who, at this age, are in that experimental phase of

dividing their classmates into cliques (without your knowledge); then there are a couple of teachers who aren't so much the romanticized, *inspirational sages* of teaching lore but half-baked 20-somethings who don't mind adding a joke of their own at your expense. In front of the class. Which is only your whole universe.

Your less-than-spectacular baseballery becomes a *thing*, beyond you, creating a You that other people know rather than the you-You that just wanted to play baseball, and *their* You radiates outward, and outward, and outward, until those ripples slap against something and return inward, back into you, downward, maybe you start trying to convince yourself that you don't really like baseball anyway; you decline invitations from suspicious (read: *popular*) kids because it might be some kind of social trap that would only embarrass you further; you experiment with self-deprecation.

Look at you! Game going on, everyone else is having a grand old time, small-townery at its finest, and you're just standing there, next to it all, struck dumb by a bolt of middle-aged existential clarity thrown by a loud-mouthed kid. It's like you turned around and climbed back up your own timeline of anxieties and self-disillusionment to find 4 (or whatever his number was) holding the other end. Was he the first person who first chipped away at you?

It can't be this simple, can it? All that time, all those moments when you couldn't/can't get away from yourself, wondering like a simpleton *What the fuck happened to me?* or *How did I get this dented?* Was this how the You that you've spent so much energy against started?

How much of you was formed and eroded by an adorable, little fucking monster?

Timothy C Goodwin has work included in Maudlin House, Every Day Fiction, Flash Fiction Magazine, and 365 Tomorrows. He lives in NYC with his partner and their dog, Awesome. @timothycgoodwin

To Live | Nes Eyre

energepic via Pexels

There's very few things in this world that won't burn.

We burn easily.

We are made to break

and crack.

To live is to grieve.

Nes Eyre is a literature teacher and poet. She is currently unpublished and is just starting to submit her work.

Japan Ghost | Rachel Ward

A small time California artist originally from rural SWVA. Etsy shop by the name CloudJupiterArt. Thank you!
https://cloudjupiterart.carrd.co/

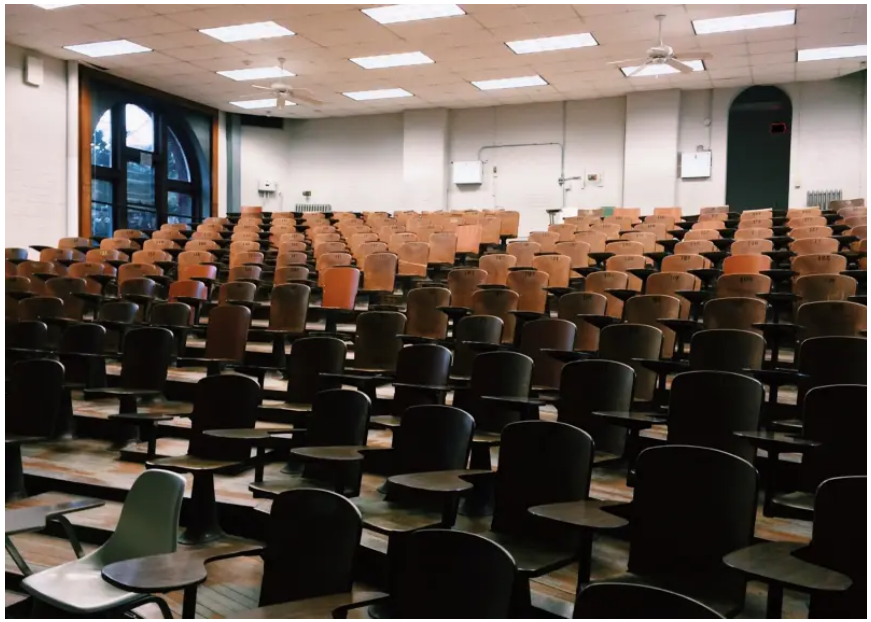
Shellfish | Aliyah Curry

Mark Stebnicki via Pexels

She gashed her palm opening the oyster. The bright pink meat licked its lips and spoke to her, "You don't always have to take what's inside." Rolling the oyster's pearl with her fingertips, she tucked it deep in the bright pink meat then stitched it closed.
Sometime later, her palm swelled and burst at the dainty loc that attempted to seal its middle. The loc slid away and the lips spoke, "Sometimes what's inside, takes you."

Aliyah Curry is a queer Southern bred writer, focusing on Black female sexuality and mental health. Keep up with her at theirdaughters.productions

Gabe's Problem Child | Shane Young



via Pixabay

It was late night conversation time on the back patio where all their friends would spend their final hours together, entertaining each other in the final minutes before sunrise, before they'd all eventually crash out. Like always, it was a time for discussing ideas and plans, however far-fetched and ridiculous those may be. They would sit around pushing the limits of each other's wasted, half awake minds. This place had always been a spot for free form conversation, a place where some of them let they're most random and original thoughts come to form...

Their friend Gabe then took one of these conversations, and brought it into new, unprecedented territory.

No one could anticipate what was brewing around the table that night.

"There should be like, a new form of sex act thats like a non-infedelity way of doing it." Gabe drunkenly spewed to his surrounding friends. Slumped down in his chair, he just rambled out the thought carelessly. "Like if you got caught doing this thing by your spouse or significant other, they'd be like, whatever. But still it feels super good and is satisfying."

"I don't think such a thing is possible," responded their friend Paul. He sitting proudly upright and was quick to reject what Gabe had said as preposterous.

"I kindly disagree."

"Well what do you have so far?" asked Sammy, sitting in her plastic chair with her knees pulled in.

"Have you given this thought before?" asked Freddy.

"Not really. But I'm thinking, maybe there's some sort of orgasmic pressure point that two "desirers" can simultaneously press on each other," Gabe said with finger quotes

around the word desirers. "Combine that with some intimate eye contact and heavy breathing."

"You could be onto something," said Karissa.

"Like really really rhythmic breathing — it has to be perfectly in sync," she added, seeing potential in his idea.

"And what do you, a single man, plan to do with this?" Paul nagged once again. It bothered Gabe and a few others how serious and confrontational he was being about it. Gabe thought Paul seemed more sober than the rest of them, which was maybe why he was trying to apply rational thought to his silly idea. "What a fucking buzzkill," he thought. "Get him a beer."

But that didn't stop Gabe from thinking about his idea.

"I think I might be onto something," Gabe retorted with a smirk. "Maybe I'll have to see what I can do with this."

It was just a silly idea after all.

In a fit of boredom by the middle of the next week, Gabe began researching pressure points and coming up with a technique. It still remained a ridiculous idea to him, but it was an idea he found incredibly amusing. He then took things a step further and booked a conference room and began making fliers — for the fun of it. The plan was to either invite Paul to the meeting, or to take video of it and taunt him with it.

The fliers read:

Feeling lusty? Feeling tied down by marriage or some similar commitment? Learn my new technique. It keeps families together. Check it out. Baxter Springs conference room 6 at 6:45.

Gabe thought it was vague, but that was the trick to grabbing people's attention. The flier will put an idea in people's minds, and after enough rumination, they'll all be heading over to the Baxter Springs hotel for the group meeting, out of curiosity. It was an elaborate joke, but a hilarious one nonetheless.

In conference room 6, after dozens of locals showed up looking to learn a new trick, Gabe had no other choice but to go into showtime mode.

He called on Karissa to help him run it.

He thought she seemed supportive and equally amused that night on the patio; he figured he'd invite her to join him. She happily agreed. Karissa stood at the door and collected the ten bucks admission,while Gabe waited off to the side for the crowd to stop pouring in.

He then stepped up to the podium to greet everyone. He couldn't believe it was happening.

After giving his introduction and letting everyone know who he was, and how everyone today would be participating in a new experiment, Gabe then began breaking down what the seminar was really about.

"Today is not about forming any sort of relationship with each other in this room," Gabe politely instructed. "Today is about learning the practice, so that you can then take these techniques with you when you leave, and enjoy them out in the real world."

After demonstrating the technique on a blow up doll, which drew plenty of laughs, he then turned things over to his attendees.

"What we're going to do now is choose a partner. If you want to just watch and learn, that's fine. Whatever. You paid for it. But I want you to find a partner, and face them."

People all around began walking around and pairing up. Some choose to just watch.

Gabe walked around to all the couples who were trying the technique, and helped guide them to the best of his ability.

"Am I pressing on the right spot?"

"Should I press here or here?"

"We've just been moving our hands all over each other and that seems to be pretty great too. Is this another way of doing it?"

Gabe was soon frustrated. Within minutes the joke dissipated, and he began viewing himself a bit more seriously. They weren't getting the technique down; he wasn't sure what some of his students were doing; it was extremely difficult for him to teach this many people at once.

That was until he spotted one pair that really seemed to have things down. Everything was mostly speculation to him at this point, but then he looked at these two partners, and knew it could be done.

"Everyone look over here. This is a perfect example. You guys are doing great," he called out with great enthusiasm.

And the two partners seemed to be really really enjoying themselves as well. This brought great joy to Gabe. His idea was not only possible, but it was successful and certainly appreciated by at least two people. What an asshole Paul was, he thought. That would be the last time he crapped on any idea of his, he thought.

Gabe had a very strong sense of pride and accomplishment...for a few minutes. He then started to look around, and saw that some of the people who had nailed the technique, were now leaving his seminar together.

"Hold on! Hold on. It's not over!" Gabe yelled to the couples' turned backs as they made way for the exit. He had still scheduled in another 40 minutes for sharing experiences and other announcements.

But it turned out, Gabe's idea wasn't what he intended it to be—

A non-infedelity way of doing it? What wishful thinking that was. What he actually invented was just the most incredible foreplay ever. It increased sexual desire astronomically, but wasn't satisfying. Those who were ashamed of their desires, who came looking to the seminar looking for a healthy outlet, because he swore there was one, were now in worse shape than ever before.

Minute by minute, more and more couples were giving into temptation, and were quietly sneaking out the back of the conference room. It quickly became a very sinful place, and it left Gabe in despair to realize that he was the cause of it all. He had brought them all together and introduced them to each other...

And showed them the technique.

"This wasn't what I wanted?" he thought.

Gabe wanted to mock Paul with this seminar of his, but now, his videos and pictures were evidence to be hidden, possibly even destroyed. Karissa couldn't contain her guilt for her participation in the event, and ended up confessing to their friends what they had done together.

"Why didn't you tell me, I would've gone," joked Freddy.

"Yeah, I would've checked it out," joined Sammy.

"If the first was a success, we figured we would've," Karissa said, staring at the floor, sick with guilt. "There were fliers everywhere, you could've gone..."

"Karissa, you helped plan this?" asked Paul, clearly disappointed.

"I thought it was funny. He asked if I'd help usher in people and collect money."

"You're the devil. Why would you do such a thing?" Paul cried out, staring at Gabe. "You're not even a licensed psychologist or any sort of professional."

"I said to you straight from the beginning. What business does a single man like yourself have mingling in this kind of stuff. It's dark and twisted."

To Paul, what he had done was terrible taboo, much like black magic or something.

But whatever, Gabe thought. He looked at Karissa and she sort of just shrugged. So they played with fire and it didn't go

well. He wasn't going to host any more seminars, he concluded, that part of his life was behind him, forever.

But by this point, thinking he could just abandon it all, was his most unreasonable, unrealistic idea yet.

"I thought you had the solution?" A random email showed up in his inbox days later. "My life is fucking ruined because of you you fucking shithead."

Gabe didn't know who it was, or how they got that email. But he figured for people angry enough, if there's a will there's a way.

A week passed since the first meeting, and although Gabe didn't show up, fans of his first seminar did, as well as plenty of new faces.

The fact that Gabe was nowhere to be found didn't matter. A man named Lance claimed he knew the technique, and he could teach them. Lance was one of the few students who Gabe thought showed great promise during the first meeting, at the very beginning when things were going great and he didn't know what would come of it. Lance had nailed the technique

And the crowd at the conference room, while at first standing around waiting for their instructor, eventually found that they had a Lance who could teach them. And he did. And out of respect and admiration for the man who had taught him. Lance gave credit to Gabe and his creation, both of which he considered to be genius.

In instructing, Lance would often refer to Gabe glowlingly, until his name became synonymous with the technique. Lance had the emphatic encouragement of an aerobic instructor, and with his instruction, the second seminar was even more sinful than the first.

"Am I doing the Gabe technique correctly?" one paired couple asked.

"Yeah, come check us out. Are we Gabeing the right way?" another couple laughed.

To Lance's delight, most of the crowd in the room were newcomers. While some had seen the fliers that were still hanging around, some were recommended to the seminar by friends; it was a spot worth checking out if you wanted to meet someone.

Lance knew it was something big immediately. And was immediately transformed into not just a huge fan of the technique, but now a teacher and follower of it. He wanted to be involved in the seminars going forward, and also, wanted to know why Gabe was a no-show.

Lance talked around, and found out where Gabe lived, and then stopped by his place to talk serious business. Lance wanted to be let into Gabe's house, but Gabe didn't want him anywhere near him. And he certainly didn't want to have anything to do with the seminars.

Shouting through the crack of his door, Gabe wanted the strange man off his porch.

"It's all yours.You can have it. I don't care. I want nothing to do with it."

Gabe was more than willing to let it go. He just wanted to do it to say he could, and because it would be funny. And because it would frighten Paul. And also because he enjoyed making the fliers and setting up the event. It was all a huge lark.

But weeks went by, and the teachings of the technique were going strong. And reaching new territories.

And of all people, Paul was directly affected by the phenomenon Gabe had created.

Pounding on his front door in the middle of the night, Gabe woke up terrified, unable to predict who it could've been. If Lance could find him, he thought, who's to say any other random stranger couldn't also.

But as he approached the front door with a baseball bat in hand, he saw it was Paul through the glass. Gabe let him in.

"My girlfriend! She was Gabeing!"

"Calm down. Calm down. Maybe it's all a misunderstanding," Gabe said, thinking he was being helpful.

"No it wasn't! She admitted to it!" Paul's face was all red and he had clearly been crying.

"Did it go any further?" Gabe asked, offering a comforting hand to his back, which Paul was too upset to reject.

"What's it matter?" Paul wept out.

"Well with Gabeing, there is no full penetration. It's not the real thing."

Paul nodded in agreement, fair enough. But what it stands for, what it means. It still felt like it didn't matter to him

"Did you ever talk about Gabeing with her?" Gabe asked inquisitively.

"Yes! I strictly told her to stay away from it!" Paul said, breaking out of his despair and turning it into anger.

"How could you do such a thing? Create such a...a monster!"

The spread of his creation became too much for Gabe, and he was desperately starting to try and absolve him of some of the responsibility as of recently. This wasn't what he had wanted, it was never supposed to come to this.

"You scoffed at me and said it wasn't possible. It would have never come to this if you never made a big deal out of it in the first place."

"So it's my fault!" Paul shouted. He couldn't handle it, and had snapped.

"So you go and break up my relationship! I could've swore she was the one. You ruined my love life! And how many others too?"

A wrestling match broke out, and suddenly the two were tackling and spearing each other into the walls and furniture. It was destructive, knocking down a shelf, knocking over a table and breaking a lamp.

"Gabeing is a sin! I know it's a sin! I knew it within the first twenty minutes of my own seminar." Gabe broke down. He couldn't run from this or ignore it. It was impossible. "I looked around that first day and said,"What am I doing here?""

"Well you should've walked out."

"I did."

"Within twenty five minutes I knew I had created a problem child," he sobbed.

They had a few beers together as an apology to one another for their fight. There was no use fighting. Neither of them had the energy, and it wouldn't solve anything. Everything had already gone to shit.

Tensions had calmed.

And after a few more drinks, they were getting personal and confessional.

"She was going to leave me anyway." Paul lamented. "If she's off Gabeing, she couldn't have been too satisfied with me anyways."

Still he was hurt, and had an underlying anger towards his friend.

"I should have never invented Gabeing."

"So what is the solution? How are you going to undo all of this?" Paul asked, staring down at his beer.

"I don't know," Gabe said. He pondered for a few seconds. He had thought about the question before, but he didn't have any idea what to do. "Different pressure points maybe? A new technique?"

They both looked at each other and thought about it for a moment. Nah.

"I think the solution should involve people keeping their hands to themselves," Paul added.

"So what do I do?"

They sat and wondered. Minutes passed. They both only drew blanks.

"I don't know. Hopefully it's just one of those phases."

But as they sat and drank and finished their beers, neither knew what would happen, but we're both equally horrified by the possibilities.

Weeks passed, and more reports of Gabeing kept popping up. They weren't slowing down at all.

"If this becomes newsworthy enough, they're going to trace it back to its roots. They're going to come looking for you, Gabe," Karissa texted him. She had been worried that her ties to the phenomenon would be discovered as well.

Gabe felt shameful and disgraced. He wanted to come forward and turn himself in just to get over it. But then he began second guessing himself.

"What if Gabeing never stops?"

And

"Is there life after Gabeing? 25 minutes of a single seminar, the gross negligence and indifference not to shut down the following meetings, not to tear down the fliers..." Gabe mopped. He looked at Karissa with a deep sadness in his eyes, it felt as though his life was over.

"I fucking deserve all this. You know just how many homewreckers I helped create? I'm an arsonist and this is forest fire is all my doing."

He was stressing out to the friend group and he was seeking advice. They all gathered round to discuss.

Freddy came up with what seemed like the most logical solution. "Don't be Gabe anymore."

"You mean like change my name?" Gabe responded, wondering if that was really the solution.

"Sooner or later, some investigative reporter is going to come knocking, looking for a Gabe," Freddy said with a serious look on his face. "I suggest you don't be a Gabe."

All his friends looked at him, with expressions that suggested, "Maybe that's it. Maybe it's time to change your name."

"But I'm a third. How am I to explain it to my dad, and my grandfather? It will break their hearts."

But after a few days of tossing and turning, hearing constant news of the spreading trend, he needed more than counsel from just friends. He went to his parent's house.

"Mom, dad, I need to tell you something," he said to them, as they all sat down together in the living room.

"What is it son?" his father asked.

"You can tell us anything," his mother added.

His parents were unsure of what was to come, but it seemed to be very serious. Their first thoughts were that perhaps he had bad news, like a bad diagnosis, or financial troubles, or something was eating him up in his personal life.

But Gabe couldn't bring himself to say it, and instead, broke down in tears.

"What is it son?" his father said, with grave, fatherly concern.

It hurt his parents to see him like this.

"There's a new trend going around. It seemed to be sweeping the globe, or at least it's projected to," he blurted out, and then followed with more sobs.

"I have had it suggested to me that I should change my name and leave town."

"What? Why's that?" his mother asked in a panic, she was as equally distressed as Gabe at this point.

"I'm the Gabe behind Gabeing," he cried out. "It's all me. It's all my fault. I created the technique and then went out and taught it!x"

"I'm such an idiot!"

"Gabeing?" his father said, all bewildered.

"I heard some ladies at the hairdresser talk about it. They were all discussing whether or not they'd be ok with their partners doing it, or whether it's effective. Whether it's technically not cheating, or not. They were furious about it. But some seemed curious about trying it, with their partners of course."

"I know what Gabeing is." his father said with a mile long stare. "But my son? My Gabe? He is the monster responsible for it? You've done this?"

Both Gabe's parents were in shock and disbelief. Their entire world had been flipped.

"I think it's wrong and sinful, myself. You don't know how sorry I am."

"And you're the Gabe behind it all?" His father asked in his old and raspy voice. "My son? My Gabe?"

Gabe Junior thought about Gabe Senior, who gave him his name as a grand gesture of pride. When Gabe III's mother was pregnant, Gabe Senior encouraged his son to pass the name down further, and he did so with great pride.

"Gabe III, what a marvelous boy. " He remembered saying the day he was born, as he held him up at the hospital. Everything seemed possible at the time. They both believed one day their son, their own blood, could do something great in the world.

"Gabeing," he repeated, still with that same stare.

His mother looked at him with disgust. She hadn't stopped crying.

"I don't know what to do? What do I do?" Gabe III begged them. He didn't know who else to turn to anymore, he was desperate and lost for options.

"Son..." his father spoke slowly.

"Yes dad," he responded, with teary child-like eyes.

"You'll always be my son." Gabe Junior trembled out and then paused. "But I think it's time you no longer call yourself a Gabe."

"Well, what do you think my new name should be?" he asked in all earnest.

They shook their sunken heads, and then his own mother got up to show him the door.

After a few days, Gabe began filing the paperwork for a name change.

It was to be the start of a new beginning, and he was going to have to move away too, he knew.

He gathered the friend group around on the back patio for one last goodbye, and to introduce himself.

"My name is now Sawyer," he said, with lips pressed together. It was official, a new era had begun.

There was silence all around the table. It felt terribly sad to say goodbye, but everyone knew it had to happen.

But not everyone wanted to part on a low note.

"What if you leave and then six months later we hear about an even newer trend called Sawyering..."Sammy said with a point to make everyone laugh.

Everyone laughed.

And they enjoyed their final moments together.

And then he left for good, packing all his belongings in his car, and hitting the road.

"Sawyering," he said to himself in the car. "It's when you're no longer safebl being a Gabe."

He drove out cross country to find himself, and to reinvent himself. In parking lots, dimly lit bars, bowling alley bathrooms, he was reminded of his past. Gabeing haunted even his new life too. It was unavoidable.

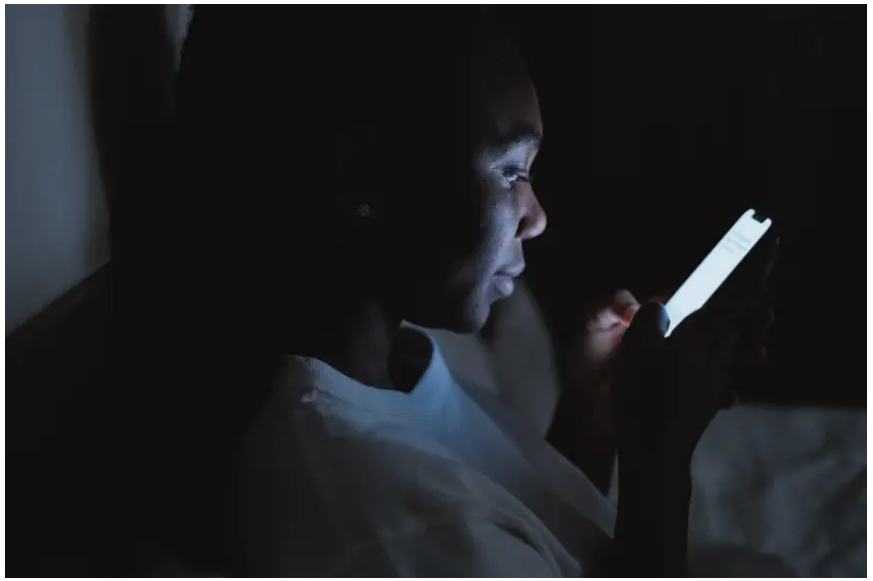
Sawyer resented when he thought about what he did to his family, and how there will now never be a Gabe IV. Until he thought...

There already is.

Gabe IV was his creation. He was the monster's father. It, his problem child.

Shane Young was born and raised in New Jersey. He has been writing for over a decade. He has a blog at https://welcomeamnesiadotcom.wordpress.com is on Twitter @Shane91x

Procrastinate This | Julia Eldred



SHVETS production via Pexels

At 7 o'clock sharp—in precisely 4 and a half minutes—an app on my phone screen will fade from dull chartreuse to bright green. Eyeing up that tiny icon, I'm more-than-ready.

ExpandApp lives on my phone. No, that sounds too welcoming. My phone suffers a parasite called ExpandApp. It occupies valuable territory next to my lovelies, Twitter and Instagram. A phony neighbor. The name is a clever misnomer because nothing—at all—is expanding. Rather, my world is narrowed. Rather, the lifeblood is drained from my-online-self. I feel faint.

ExpandApp is a productivity tool, and I bend to its will. It started with a theatre camp mom. She became distracted by my phone-absorption. Mom Jeans complained: My little Harry needs to be coached and nurtured! His acting brilliance needs to be recognized! I will get my money's worth, Miss Counselor! Put down that phone!

Number one: I'm the camp director, Ma'am.

Number two: This theatre camp is free.

Number three: Lil Harry's no genius. He's okay and all, but no genius.

To be clear, I said none of this. Instead, I apologized for my negligence and promptly downloaded ExpandApp. A YouTuber or a podcast—or was it a YouTuber with a podcast?—or maybe a real-life friend—recommended it.

ExpandApp endeavors to Expand a user's free time by barring access to social media at certain times during the day. No scrolling through Instagram while crapping at work. No snapchatting while waiting at a red light. No tweeting about Sephora being sold out of my favorite eyeliner. (Kat Von D's eyeliner. Yes, hers. Even though she's an antivaxer, and I'm morally opposed to her belief system. I mean, girl makes an effing fantastic eyeliner. My tweet would explain as much; don't worry.)

So—No social media. None of it. Not until 7pm. (2 minutes remaining.)

That's how I set up the app, anyway. I used to have it green-lit between 7pm and 7am, but I would stay up all night to make the most of my time. I traded sleep for social media. Makes me smh. I altered the settings, though. Now, I'm allowed 7pm to midnight on weekdays. It's open through the weekend. A little treat. My cheat meal.

This way of life is psychologically torturous, but so was the life before this. Gosh, I'm embarrassed by the need for this parasitic jerkoff. Back in college, when I needed to focus during finals week, I entrusted a friend to change my Facebook password. It was so dang easy to step away. Now, in my mid-twenties, my self-control has absconded with my focus. All of my restraint has been wasted.

It's 6:59pm. 1 minute to go, and I can't contain my ravenous joy. The promise of connection. The feeling of feeling like myself again. Participating in my community. I posted a picture on Instagram yesterday with the kids in camp. What will the response be? I'll make the rest of the rounds, too. Twitter and Snapchat. Facebook, to see if I missed any birthdays. What have my friends been up to? What has been happening in the world? What do my friends have to say about what's been happening in the world?

Five hours of technological bliss, and then the world goes on spinning.

Julia Eldred earned an MFA from Chatham University in Pittsburgh, where she still resides. Her connected stories explore femininity and millennial identity. More at www.juliaeldred.com. @thegingerjulia

The Toy Man | Ivory Wyndham-Howard

phil via Pexels

They called him the "Toy Man", but children were never happy when he passed by. He rode atop a cart that creaked and moaned, with plush toys swinging from ropes above his head. Stuffed dolls made from scrap and rags watching the world from shiny, button eyes.

The Toy Man dealt with family problems. Families that found a sickness had crept into a loved one, who could not afford the cost of a witch's magic. Not that a witch would dare to bargain with such things.

No gems, or coin, or favours could afford his work. He only came for the sickness.

No one would ask why he would bring out a half-finished plaything as he politely asked the family to wait outside. No one would notice that he would be sewing them up after the door opened again. Carefully placing the finished doll into a box locked with a key he kept around his neck. They had their loved one back and that was all they cared about.

Sometimes a stuffed rabbit, its head flopping back and forth, would ride next to him. He would pass it a pin slicked with a prick of blood. Its thick arms bobbing as if waving to passersby.

This was the first spooky story I told my daughter over her crib. She slept well. @IvoryWHoward

Wee Hours | A. Hubley

via Pixabay

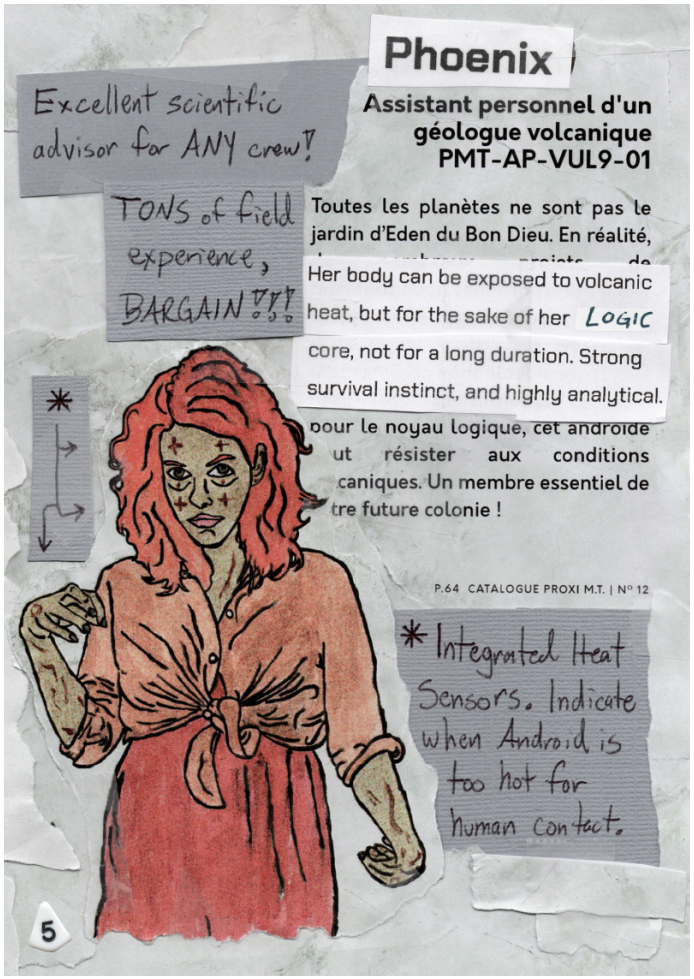
Regard leaves, flowers, hills and bells
as rust coloured bones and blackening horse hooves
step slowly through the starless morning.

The whiteness of sheep melts the dark field
as my dolorous heart holds stillness
for the disappointed fatherless people on the morning train.

Sadly, the stars have been left out of water
for the breath of fog has threatened Heaven.

A. Hubley is a Nova Scotian poet and knitter, who lives by the sea with her husband, in a house full of daughters, cats and a very good dog.

Torn from the pages of a Used Android Catalogue: PHOENIX | Chris Airiau



via Chris Airiau

Chris Airiau is a SF writer and game designer living in France, forever obsessed with the speculative. Find him on twitter @ChrisAiriau or online at chrisair.itch.io.

A Storm | Rebecca Maule

***Сергей Леденёв** via Pexels*

The flash –
fracturing the clouds with dancing bright,
see heaven through the cracks in the sky.

(count the seconds)

The crash –
crying through air, repairing the rend,
resounding through the bones of the world.

(watch from a window)
(witness the unification of earth and paradise)

X.O.F. Smells | Rick Danforth

Lum3n via Pexels

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Rick Danforth is an author from Yorkshire, England, where he works as a Systems Architect to fund his writing habit. He has several short stories published in venues including Etherea and Hexagon.

Mothers Day | Mary Rhodes

Mary Rhodes (she/her) Is a student at UGA. She lives with her two cats, her dog, and her undying hope for a world more full of love. You can find her on instagram at @marypr4 and twitter @marypr2414.

Daria Obymaha via Pexels

There are millions of moments of you, in places the world over
There are hands held and meals made and hearts healed and tears shed
In every care there is you
In sweaty palms stuffed with wildflowers and glasses fogged with steam
In wine glasses and makeup bags and tears wiped after a dream
In every home there is you
In unfurled ferns and raindrops on windows, in moving to keep away from the tide
In every feeling of being alone, to discover someone on your side
In every heart there is you
In always answered calls and never spoken hurts
In the fear of letting go and the exhilaration in so many firsts
In every love there is you

An Ode to Danish-Chilean Singer and Producer Molina | Mike Owsley

via Pixabay

"Hey. Kids."? Only you may address me this way.

Molina, your mastery in mastering
this music is vivid and otherworldly. Like
Parásito, worm in my brain, I am
longing for a similar devotion

to phrasing. Molina, please break me
through this vanilla shell of lyricism. I am trapped.
Teach me the wealth of your well of wordsmithery. Take
me under your au/spacious wings and teach me
how poems should truly be written.

Mike Owsley (He/They) is an author and activist. His work has previously been published or is forthcoming in the Castle of Horror Anthology and QRM Zine. You can find his twitter @BigMikeOwsley.

Delight | Julien Luebbers

via Pixabay

Delight is perhaps what I want, not happiness.

Aligned with happiness on the happy/sad dichotomy, delight slides by unnoticed, undermining clarity, removing light. To de-light in something, is perhaps to turn the lights off in a room or click off your phone screen at night, to feel darkness diffuse into space.

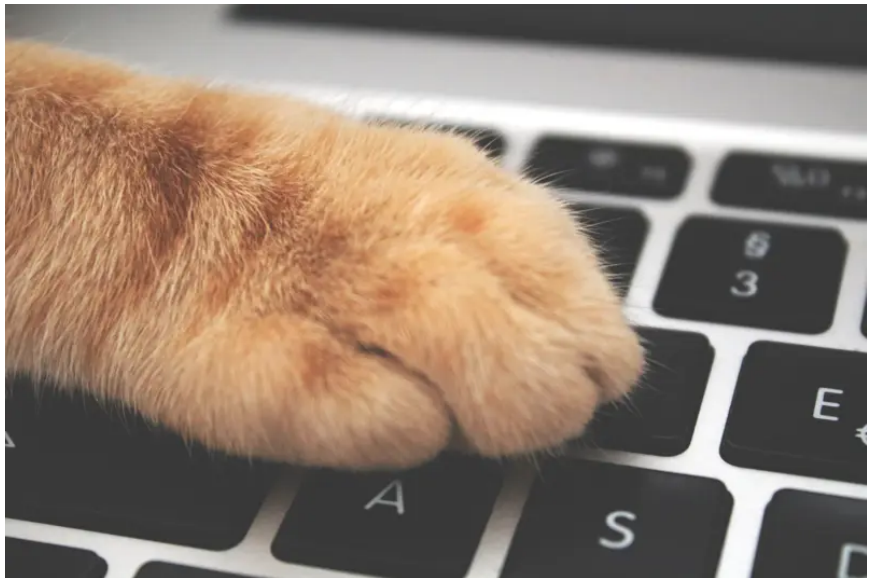
"I am happy about…" is clunky. About? Books are about things sometimes. Boats come about, I think. Or about can mean approximately. Or on the subject of. I am done being happy about things, I prefer to delight in them.

When I delight in something, I inhabit it. The closeness of that preposition, in, warms me. I delight in dawn or dusk, or in smooth stones, jagged cliffs or great big cities. I get to become part of them without (par)taking. It feels so not possessive to delight in things.

My greatest delight is in light language, which dissolves on the ear like powdered sugar on the tongue.

Julien Luebbers is a writer and student in southern California. He resides on the web @Joolee_in on Twitter.

What my cat wrote | Fariha Khayyam



Александар Цветановић via Pexels

AAAAAAaaaa
Doieoifwn
Oiswcndqorf
Pppwsda687
Twsoacn

Ccaklsnd
Asasdfc;ojas
Toqwe'aq2
Sssssaaaa

__ read first letter of each line

---

*Fariha Khayyam is a writer who self-published her poetry chapbook, SHARDS & contributed to an anthology, WE ARE NOT SHADOWS by Folkways Press. She can be found on farihakhayyam.com & Twitter @fushiee_*

Silence Broken | Stephen Roddewig

Rahul via Pexels

She had been calling into the silence for years, but nothing prepared her for when the void called back.

Stephen A. Roddewig is an award-winning storyteller from Virginia (USA). His stories are featured in Abyss & Apex and Wintermute Lit. When not writing, he enjoys collecting records and running races.

Unsta-limerick | DK Snyder

There once was a mag, Unstamatic,
where subbing was so democratic,
if you sent your work
and weren't a jerk,
acceptance would be automatic.

DK Snyder is not quitting her day job. Find her on Twitter @millioncandles.

Apartments: The Game (demo) + cyberpoetry | Alejandro Ruiz del Sol

cottonbro via Pexels

Apartments: The Game (demo) + cyberpoetry

As you see it, the studio apartment could be broken down into 5 areas, plus, there's a light switch.

[[Kitchen.|Dear]]

[[Living room area.|linear]]

[[Dining room area.|motion]]

[[Bedroom area.|sicko,]]

[[Bathroom.|caper taster]]

[[Turn off the light.|and]]

[[Leave the keys and go to the store!|certificate holder.]]

Living Room

The first thing you notice in this area is the new rug that George recently purchased. You remember going to the store with George, helping to make the purchase. It was either this blue rug, or a different red rug. You liked the blue more, because the color was calming.

After you two went to the store, you two got some coffee. Actually, the two drinks you two got were espresso based.

There is a game console in this area as well as a TV. You two sometimes play video games together. No matter how hard you inspected the console, you could never decide what variety of game console your friend had. It was possibly a PlayStation, but even looking at it now, close up and without distraction, you can't decide heads or tails. It's as if there was a blur over this particular object.

For a brief moment, you sob.

[[Turn on the TV.|Lifetime cyberquest.]]

[[Look under the carpet.|Forever visionary.]]

[[Look at their game collection.|Singsong seeker.]]

[[Look somewhere else in the apartment.|Hallucinating vapors.]]

Game Collection

Most of the game titles are ones you recognize. You notice that the binding for a game you also own is different from what you have. You pick it out of the collection and notice that the design is totally unique! You know your friend makes art, so, did they also make this cover design?

[[Back to the living room.|Unconscious machines.]]

[[Look around the apartment further.|Realtor of dreams.]]

Under The Carpet

(set: $passcode to (prompt: "Lots of dust! Also, you see a security pad on the floor.

Hint: 4 numbers", ""))

(if: $passcode is "0451")

[You are correct! You can't believe your luck. Inside you find secrets you weren't ready to see. You wonder on the shared value of this discovery. Here you are with knowledge of your friend's secret, and your friend is now aware that you know, too.

[[You look around the living room some more.|The words.]]

[[You look to another area of the apartment|The time.]]

(set: $key2 to true)]

(else:)

[It didn't work, try again once you have the passcode. You text your friend to ask about the passcode, your friend says they forgot the passcode but they remember carving the number into something in the apartment.

[[You look around the living room some more.|Pretension proclamation.]]

[[You look to another area of the apartment|Operation artist.]]]

Turn On The TV

Your friend has cable, so the TV automatically turns to their favorite TV channel. It is a show about elephants. Your friend is so smart!

[[Back to the living room.|Ocean water, as in]]

[[Look around the apartment further.|water bottle collector.]]

Hi! I'm a game writer, poet, and Twitter poster. @GuguTheGadget

"I cyber with the punks."

Pellet stove | George Tatoris

Jenna Hamra via Pexels

Cat asleep by
The hot wood, while winter is
Creaking the birch

George is a writer from New Jersey

Sparrow's Afterlife | Harley R. Noire

Sunny via Pexels

CW: (a bit of) graphic imagery

In this café-like hell, my torture is to have my wings
and bones sun-dried
and grinded into murk of a powder
then stirred with a great dash of bile
in the coffee syphon.

Then I will be a cup of coffee worth twenty-four hours
of man-made time—maybe even longer
if I were to spill and stain a paper.

Maybe the day God sends His angels
to close up shop or to call me up
is the day where brewing comes to a stop.

Harley R. Noire (any pronouns) is the nom de plume of a writer based in Indonesia. They can be found lurking on Twitter/Instagram with the handle @mortalpoems.

Snow | Hannah Zurcher

ROMAN ODINTSOV via Pexels

It was supposed to be cold. People had worn long coats and scarves and stockings and had complained in the morning about the frost. They had cursed, or they had marveled at the shapes their breath made in the air and, regardless, the half-tamed wind carried their curses and marvellings out away and over the city. Sometimes they died from it, and sometimes they wrapped their arms around each other and carried on with trying to love.

But now it rained, endless and muggy and yellow-gray. It wasn't cold, because there was no place to get cold. The clouds slept overhead, static, and they hoarded complaints and joy. If they had moved, fragments of sky would have made people a little colder just to see, like ice splinters in the eyes and heart.

They didn't move. Nobody knew if they could be moved, or possibly nobody asked. Things were wet.

Things were always wet. Things were the miserable wet of old buildings and stairwells. The damp stuck to shoes and jackets and long, dark hair, and, in a room that would have been sunnier in a film, it slipped into the dreams of a girl.

She had her television on, playing static; it was the way she made herself sleep. There was a special static channel which cost a lot. It played through her earbuds while she slept and the ceiling reflected its furious starlight. She dreamed of rivers. The rain and static slipped together in her head, and sounded like falling.

She woke up shivering and had no idea why.

---

hannah is submitting this piece here so she can get it published, out from under her nails, and start working on more stuff. she doesn't have much to show off right now.

Excoriate | August Blaine Centauri

Raphael Brasileiro via Pexels

I'm always itchy when the eyes are watching. They peer at me through curtain folds, peek out from underneath rugs, ogle me from out of the backpacks of passersby on the sidewalk. Out of the corner of my eye, I catch them leering. The bigger ones are easy to find. I often miss the smaller ones. Just one blink – theirs or mine – and they're gone. Poof. Blinking out from another little niche. I don't need to see them to feel them, though. My fingernails slowly dig bloody crevices along my arms, my legs, my stomach, my ribs. Methodically, I scratch all around my body, addicted and disgusted by the painful relief it grants me. When my skin becomes too raw and the stinging pain overcomes any sense of satisfaction, I slap and pull at it instead. Pinching fingerfuls of flesh at a time, I yank it back and forth in a mockery of the itching I desire.

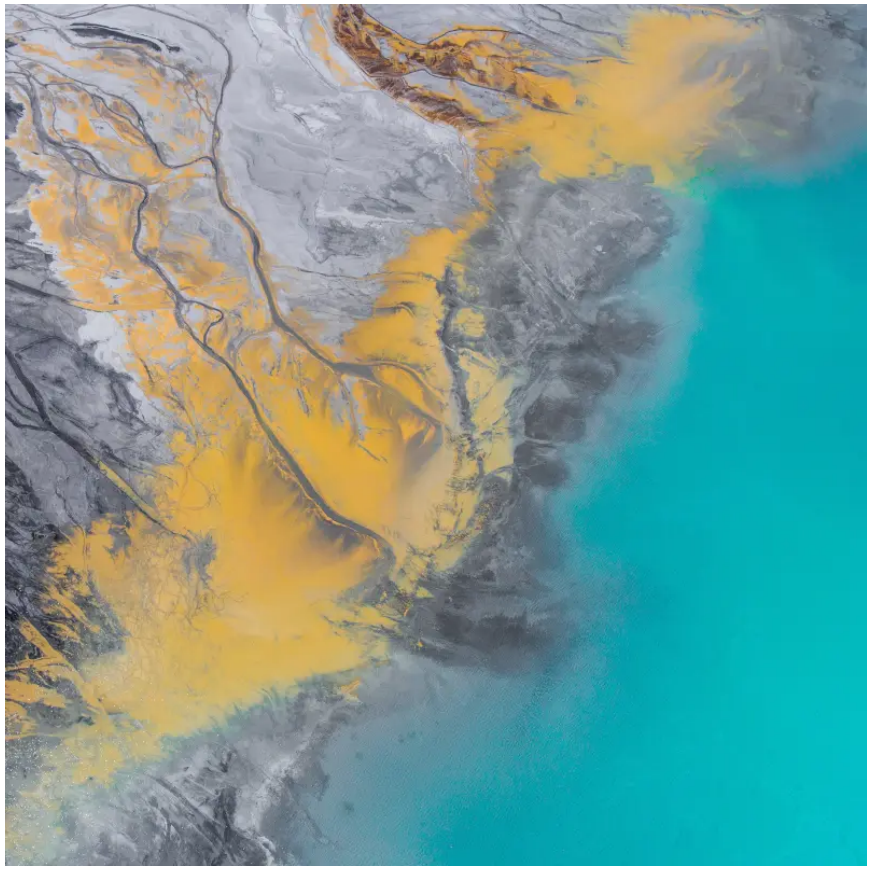
At night, my dreams are plagued with images of ripping my skin clean off of the tendon and muscle it protectively envelops. Sharp-toothed, lipless grins join the watchful eyes. Slavering tongues reach out for a taste. In my nightmares, the eyes and mouths don't disappear. Insatiable, they multiply, until they're all my world consists of: them, their hunger, and the pain. If I'm lucky, I wake up.

Otherwise, I go to town ripping apart the rest of my body, feeding myself piece by piece to my demanding audience. It only ends when I've nothing left to offer.

Eventually, the eyes will wander away. One by one, they will peter out of my presence. Perhaps they go to feast off some other pour soul. The itching will gradually subside. Soap and water always sting but ointment and salve will bring cooling peace. I will be able to go about my day again, at least until the next time, when my skin is pink and sensitive and fresh for destruction. Relief will come. Right now, I'm still carving tracks into my body. For I'm always itchy when the eyes are watching.

August Blaine Centauri, @hemlockrocksandsocks on insta, is a trickster in a human's body. Thon is a proud weirdo. In thon spare time, Blaine practices piano, lifts weights, and spars in Muay Thai.

Impact of the Tiburo Spill | Isa Abril



Curioso Photography via Pexels

Your eyes, akin to oil spills
Gleaming green, blue, yellow-brown pool together
To pull me in. Keep me stuck.

I have spoken of drowning before.
But in your presence, I am content.

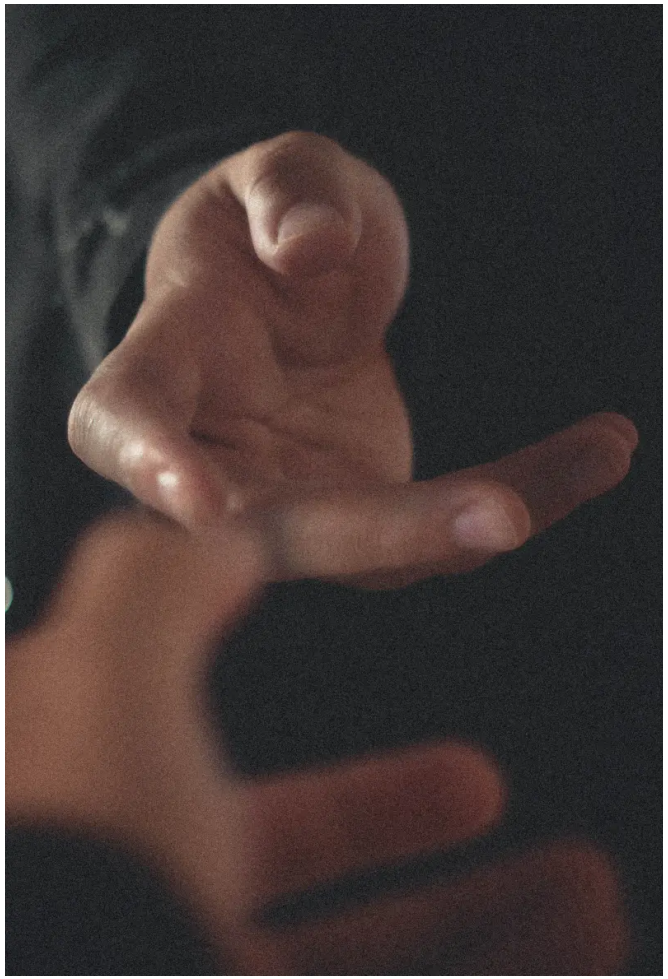
Feet stop kicking.
Body stops flailing.

With my nostrils flared upwards
I stare at the calm vast sky ahead.

I succumb to the stillness,
As you entrap me.

Isa Abril – writer with a feral fervor. Twitter: @amazingfringe

Lost Agape | Isaacoed Buchi Jamie



Wallace Chuck via Pexels

On our worst days,
I try not to look at her.
Not of fears, not of shame.
Not of her gorgeousness, if am not mistaken.
Maybe out of love, or out of curiosity about what I feel deep in my shin

But when I do out of courage, out of pain, and view straight into her visage.
I see lies, I feel tied to the Beauty in disguise.

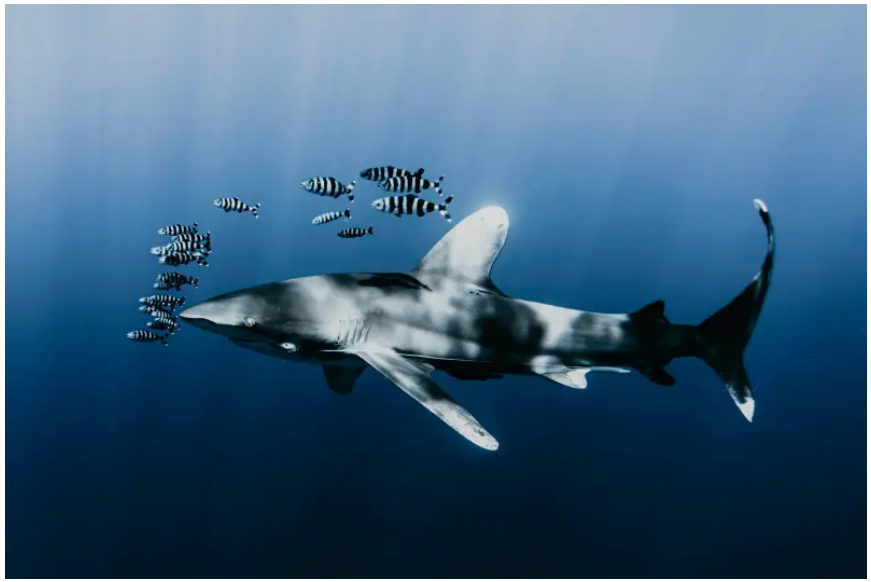
Though am wrong, yet
She seems to be the norm, an addiction with many thorns.

I bleed, with an ashen face, as it plays In the languid of her glow.

In a saner clime,
all seem to bear an aura that smells like faded frankincense.

Isaacoed Buchi Jamie is a writer and the winner of the 2022 Libretto African Anthology Prize (LAAP) award, whose literary works have appeared on many websites. Twitter: https://twitter.com/Isaacoedjamie

A Post-Grad Shark Tries to Find Her Way to the Ocean | Haley Byer



Daniel Torobekov via Pexels

Midwestern flower beds are almost as soft as seawater, but only if you ignore the fear of drying out. They are much softer still than the aquarium stares of frightened children behind cold, fingerprint-smudged walls. A tiger shark drags her clumsy fins between daffodils, daisies, and chrysanthemum stems, miles away from her former glass castle. Faint stripes caress yellow petals and waxy leaves as she wiggles and waddles through soft, damp, seed-speckled soil. *Am I going in the right direction?* Her milky stomach squishes ladybugs and larvae into fertilizer beneath a salmon sunset. Swords for teeth slice vegetation all along the way, like a worm eating tunnels below the garden. *Should I just turn back?* She breaches, her tiny scales nicking and cutting peonies and poppies on her way upward. *Is the safety of home worth my suffocation?* The zig and zag of her mouth opens to make room for a beehive hanging from a spindly sapling once held up by strings like tuna nets. *Or will that only show everyone that I have failed on my journey?* The tiger shark falls back to the flower bed. The pungent honeycombs sink into shards of splintering pearls and snow-capped Himalayas. *What if I don't find what I'm looking for?* Yellow sugar, a slower molasses, drips down the predator's pink gums as her sandpaper body flops back onto the mud and mulch of the garden. *Do I even know what I'm looking for?* The shark's dorsal fin sinks into soil like a trowel. Suspended,upside-down, her tail swishes back and forth through the air. *What if I die here?* Breadwinning bees return to their sticky home stuck between jaws, spikes going unnoticed, new decor mounted on the walls of the queen's quarters. *Will it always feel this hard?* Paths of drool and honey roll down the snout of the shark and pool on the ground where crushed buttercups soak up their last rays of sun and sweetener. The salmon sky turns from goldfish to royal gramma and fades into orca's eye. *Is this really where I'm meant to be?* Daybreak yellow honey becomes gooey almond crust along the shark's jowls. *Is it like this for everyone?*

—if she just keeps moving her tail, the sky looks every bit as wide as water—honey tastes every bit as rusty and salty as the blood of a reckless seagull—a forget-me-not feels every bit as fragile as a ripple interrupted by a wave.

Haley Byer is a lesbian poet from Ohio. She received her BFA in creative writing and sociology from Bowling Green State University. Her work has been published in Prairie Margins and Bandit Fiction.

The Gold-Blooded Seamstress | Ekta Garg

via Pixabay

I remember the first time I held a sewing needle, so long in my tiny palm.
Closing my hand around it, its pinch forcing my fingers to spring open.
Mother's fear when she saw I bled gold, not scarlet.
How she sent me away, as the law mandated, ignoring her own inevitable loneliness.

I remember my first apprenticeship with the seamstress in a village far away.
How she rapped my knuckles with a ruler for not threading correctly.
My concentration on the needle's eye, poking out my tongue, squinting with one eye of my own.
My triumph when I threaded a hundred needles in a row.

I remember the stories the apprentices shared in whispers
Of a prince who treated his own like rubbish.
Who claimed the entire world lived at his feet.
Whose sister, the princess, had not been seen in years.

I remember the prince's first visit, my gaze going to the stitches on his shoulders.
His lofty demands for garments finer than any in all the kingdoms.
Staying up day and night to design and cut, to baste and scrutinize.
The prince's disbelief when he came for his fitting.

I remember the first time I stepped inside the castle, trying not to gawk.
Spending my days determined to find the princess, and her terror when I finally did.
Ignoring the stench in the windowless room.
Fighting for weeks to gain her trust.

I remember drawing blood in front of the princess.
Her gasps pressed back with a hand, her question of why I'd come.
Telling her my calling was to fight the injustice she endured
And that I would do so with needle and thread, not sword and politics.

I remember my needle flying as I gathered information,
Listening to accusations behind fans and bound by seamstress's tape.
Learning how the women tolerated the worst against themselves
Because the prince threatened to poison their families against them.

I remember letting a stray thought unspool aloud
When the right people came for measurements and fittings.
Raising my eyebrows in innocence at the hints of what I'd heard,
Narrowing my eyes in revenge at what I knew to be true.

I remember the prince boasting of my talents.
Even for one of the gold-blooded, he said, I could behave in a "seemly" manner.
I bowed my head to pretend to be demure
Even as his sister began holding her head high for her true place in the castle.

I remember the day the princess knelt to be crowned.
How she rose with pride, smoothed the front of her elaborate gown.
The finest stitches I ever produced clothing her in power and glory.
As her brother lay in tatters in the dungeon below.

I remember extracting a promise from the queen,
That the gold-blooded would no longer be ostracized
And would find their place in society
Just as she had finally found hers.

I remember the grateful nod she gave,
The announcement in open court that the gold-blooded would now serve as royal tailors.
The way I closed my palm around a needle once again,
Drawing a drop of golden blood, my quest realized flowing into my hand.

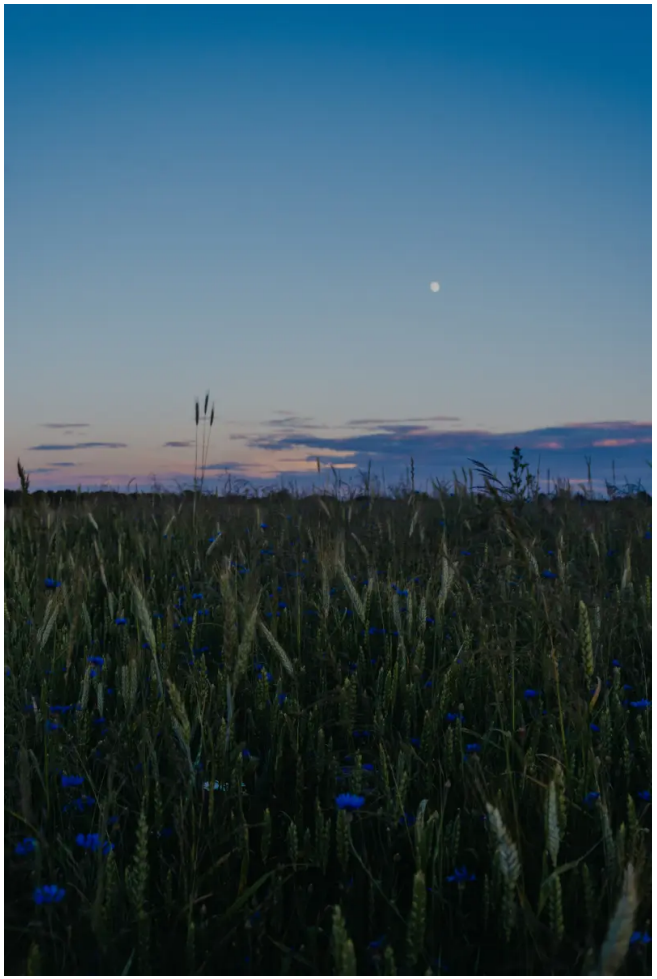
Facebook: https://www.facebook.com/ReviewerEditorAuthorDreamer Twitter and Instagram: @EktaRGarg

You'd Lose Your Head if It Werent, Uh, Already Lost | Dev Murphy

Hi, my name is Dev Murphy (@gytrashh). I am a writer and illustrator.

via Dev Murphy

Selected poems ++ | Giovanna Saturni



Irina Iriser via Pexels

(Untitled)

The sound of your heart like a boombox to my ears,
I am pressing myself further into your skin, eyes closing.
Your scent overtakes my senses.

Don't move, please.
I am trying to melt myself into you.

Pulp Fiction Breakfast

A hand squeezed orange found on a countertop.
Next to it, a kitchen knife of sizable proportions.

(Out of focus, in background)

The motion of two blurred individuals, (like looking at two flies walking across a window in the morning, with your eyes half open).

Motion intensifies gradually. Then violently. A splatter of blood, an inhale.

A door slams.

The Sound of a body dropping heavy on the floor and a ray of sunshine washing over it.
The dust settles.

Then,
quiet.

The orange is still there, pulp everywhere.
Used up, violently discarded, it lays

next to a kitchen knife of sizable proportions.

Like honey

I close my eyes and I fall, in slow motion.
The nothingness inside myself is thick, like honey, and sickly sweet too.
The only way to survive the quicksand is to let it drown you.

WHEN I OPENED MY EYES

When I opened my eyes,
You were there,
The lights gathering around you
Like a neon halo

I blinked, and blinked again, thinking I'd
Imagined you, that there was no way you'd come
All this way for... me?
But
There you were;
Sitting sideways on a small, uncomfortable,
hospital chair
Crooked glasses sitting pretty on the tall
bridge of your nose,
Fingers delicately turning the pages of a
book.

Even now I think about it. How my emotions
went into overdrive and
I cried so hard the nurses wanted to sedate
me.

Even now I think about it. Think about how
i left the hospital as a duffle bag of human
pieces,
And you drove me home and put the parts
back together.
No instructions needed. All done
by heart.

I want you to know I remember all of it.
I want you to know that I know
We've left each other in every known way
since then
But
I remember what you did for me then.

I remember the night you became
my fluorescent angel.

Bouquet of memories

Do you ever feel like you're
Withering away,
like an old bouquet of flowers
left up on a shelf to dry?
A token of a forgotten celebration,
It's soft petals turning rigid, and then
crumbling
slowly becoming dust.
Their remains leaving a dull ache,
like a bruise, on your stomach,
reminding you of how you, too, will
age and fade; crumble,
Die.
The only proof of the bouquet's beauty
is now stored solely in old,
sepia-toned memories.
Nothing palpable.
Nothing real. Not anymore.
Did it ever even exist anyway?
Why mourn the death of a bouquet, anyway?
Weren't the flowers dead to begin with, anyway?

Musings

The coldness of heartbreak seems to have made a house of my bones.

---

cliché

laying on the roof like a sunbathing tourist on a chaise-longue
a white silhouette
staring at the blackness of space
thinking of how pretty the stars are
and how they've been dead for centuries
and how she read somewhere that beauty and decay are intertwined
and how summer makes everything slow down,
fills your lungs with warm air

melancholia settles into your skin.

symbolist poets associated summer with
the rotting of flesh
and suffocation.

symbolists and their macabre interpretations
everything is suffocating

loneliness is the innate state of the universe

summer is suffocating because it makes you aware
of how alone you are
and how alone everything is
and has been
and will be

forever

and beyond that.

Static

I feel like im being slowly sandpapered away.
Scraped at the edges until i slowly become smaller, less defined.
TV static for skin, and eyes, and mind. A monochromatic buzz of a person.
"Who am I?" has not been the question for some time now.
Now it's just: "Am I?" Do I exist to anyone else than myself? I don't know.
I hardly think I exist even to myself, nowadays

Pomegranate

Your mother breaks open the pomegranate, with her calloused
hands
and rotten flesh spills out,
falling onto the tablecloth,
brown-red stains spreading
slowly,
like a fresh wound, mocking you.

Blood blooms on white, a spreading fire.
Fury roots itself in the pit of your stomach, like a fishhook through the mouth.
If you are to become a tragedy, let it be violent.

Looking up into the blinding light of the sun
You refuse to be the lamb.
The sneering Gods crave flesh and blood,
and they shall have plenty.

Is anyone listening?

It's been a while since I thought about you and didn't cry.
I press my cheek into the damp earth
and close my eyes, as the sun shines above.
Nature soothes me like a mother.

The quiet is so loud it feels like drowning.
In my bad ear, I can hear blood rushing through me.
Hello?
...Anyone?

I slip my fingers through blades of grass, tether to the world.
I've never truly learned to grieve, and
I've never had much faith, but perhaps
this is enough.

If there's anything out there, and if it's where you are,
I hope it feels like this.
Quiet, and soft, and green.

I hope it's peaceful.

Ghost

It comes in flashes now. Stop-motion frames, one following another endlessly.
Snap. Snap. Snap.

Your father's face staring back at you,
and you can hear him laughing, you can
smell the tobacco on his skin.
Dreaming of him, night after night after
night.
Laying in bed, trying to forget the way the
wind whispered to you on that day in May.

If you close your eyes and feel the breeze
fly through the blades of grass. If you
breathe in the smell of blooming lilac, you
can almost pretend it's not him under that
dirt.

Pretend like the drying flowers and the
burned out candles and the blinding
white stone are not real.

Pretend like the bags under your eyes
aren't filled with ghosts of your past.

How it all goes by...

Sometimes, grief knocks into me with the force and speed of a freight train.
Other times, it rises like the tide, slow and steady, conversing with the Moon.
Most days, it's a breeze,
a slight, continuous movement of air throughout your body. Something you feel,
but aren't aware of unless you take a moment to think about it.
On worse days, it's a dam breaking. It's very difficult to patch the whole thing back up.

Some days, I cling to it. It's all I have left.

---

23 y/o writer just trying her best. @oreiadae – Twitter

Mycelium Lover's Morning | Amelia Boeh

Lum3n via Pexels

If I were to get a tattoo, it would be of your smile on the face of a wild salmon. Some caricature of its flushed body, plucky eyeballs, and your jutting Cupid's bow tugged upwards. I want to stitch you into my skin. But that image is too intricate for this morning. This morning is for poking at your mushrooms and watching the sunlight transform our bed into something noble. The sun rises, and with it do the stripes on your arm. Shadow-sun-shadow-sun. One minute my bite mark burns orange, the next it's faded; this old epidermis, this decaying fungi.

Amelia is a college student majoring English. She loves A24 horror films, fantasy novels, and dissecting characters on the Personality Database.

hum | Vale Prosper

Luis Dalvan via Pexels

The new threshold is the space from your forearm and shoulder to mine
It is the size of the casual intimacy in a small discovered thing
You tell me the end of a whodunnit without spoiling it somehow
I sink into the uncomfortable temerity of loving someone for the first time
The humming, the infernal humming between us, as we sing softly

Vale is a monster-loving, ADHD-managing, hubris-wrestling non-binary theatre practitioner and scholar. twitter: @evillittlevale IG: @evillittlepoet

Spiraling into Sanity | Timothy Arliss OBrien

Ruiyang Zhang via Pexels

One: My emotions are enormous and I'm on the brink of a collapse.

I've seen six cars pull u-turns today,
Most of them were trying to catch a parking spot,
But it still felt dangerous and chaotic.

The grass under a street lamp was wet
and it looked like someone had spilled
a million little diamond shards
on the lush green carpet of nature.

I just want to curl up under a bush, while ten thousand years pass me by,

And cry.

Will the future ever be clear?

Two: You can't pay me to not isolate.

Cover yourself and hide within the caverns of your mind.

Surround yourself with dirt and peel away the walls.

"No one comes around here anymore," the judge says to the security guard as he's locking up just past midnight.

This town doesn't feel the same with all the doors locked and no good-mornings, or good-nights.

I can't remember my last good night,
But
Secretly…

I fucking love this,

And could nurse the fear forever.

Three: It's time to give up, I'm surrounded.

The tv blares in the background and I scroll through insta, tweet-sphere, and the book of faces faster than I can understand what I'm seeing.

But I'm still sitting here cold, isolated, and lonely.

For a society with constant online engagement, and information & connectivity at the punch of a button, why do I feel like no one knows me.

Someone,
Call me!

I need to explore my dreams, and vent my disturbances.
My brain does somersaults when I try to explain that we are more connected than ever, thanks to the interwebs.

But are we really connecting?

How did my last promotion make me feel?

What was my biggest dream last year?

Who is my secret crush,
and who am I fucking?

Either no one cares, or society has crumbled…

crumbled into us all being alone, ghosts passing through each other with mild formalities and forgotten sneers,
smiles plastered on our billboard-like faces.

Mental and physical loneliness, a real pain tbh.

I may just die without anyone ever really knowing me.

Just like in all my past lives.

Timothy Arliss OBrien is an artist in music composition and writing. He hosts the podcast The Poet Heroic and has created and published several zines of poetry. www.timothyarlissobrien.com

Stranger Danger | Rozzy Mullen

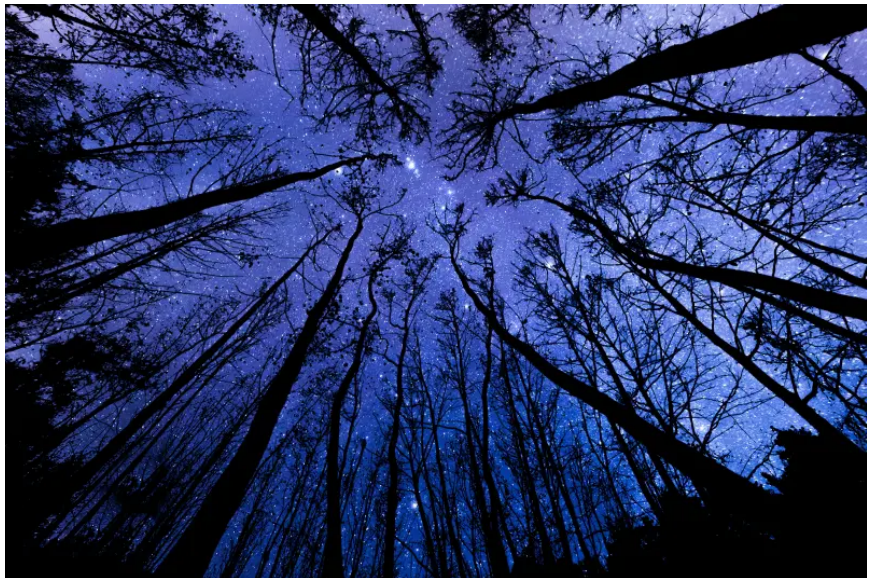
Kindel Media via Pexels

There was a sad, little boy sitting all alone on the top step of the museum stairs, holding his head in his tiny, pale hands, with only tufts of red hair sticking up and blowing in the wind, and as I approached the devastated child, I noticed that, two steps in front of him, there was a melting scoop of strawberry ice cream and a crushed sugar cone, which would be reason enough for anyone to act gloomy; I sat next to him, grabbing a tissue for his quiet sniffles from my backpack, and asked the child if he wanted to go buy another ice cream with me.

He ran away.

Rozzy Mullen is an HPU English major who is very rarely concise enough to avoid exceeding a page (or in this case, word) limit.

Starlight Whispers | Matthew Gilbert



Erhan Dayı via Pexels

Vaijin never accepted the renaming of things. When she ventured from her people to the outer borders of the human town, remnants of trees that once pullulated there had been hacked and named in new ways. She recognized the humans' disregard for the sacredness of being, but still, the splintered stumps and visible life rings longed for repose. Signs and buildings lined the woodland edge. A woman positioned herself in the corridor to talk to a man, tempting him with offers of *fourteen dollars*. Then they haggled a few strange, crumpled leaves for some vessel Vaijin had never beheld: brown but transparent like the starlight pools. Something sloshed around inside, and the woman assured the man she only sold the best—best—some word Vaijin could not interpret. Her tongue got caught up when she attempted to repeat it, but the man sounded eager to rush home.

When her mother Relva demanded to know where she had heard such words, she charged Vaijin to the highest tree to reflect on her disobedience. Vaijin, perched among the branches, tired of singing to the leaves all the time. Often, her people sang to the world for peace, but mostly, they sang to request forgiveness. Every cycle, Vaijin confessed to escaping the border of their land to steal river stones for her collection, or to prodding around the town outskirts for entrainment. Thankfully, her mother only caught her sneaking around on a few occasions. She would have restrained her had she counted the footprints.

Few of the djala dared to gamble their lives outside the forest. The ones with the guile often disappeared. Though gossip of butchers cleaving away their limbs spread among the other children, Vaijin's mother had warned her of the water without life, where men sacrificed the djala to their god for bounty. Her mother had once escaped, decades ago, or so she preached. She spoke of the men with rifles who refused to let her bathe in the sun as every young djala required. Her brother had fallen to the sting of that steel when they attempted to flee. Unlike most of the djala, her flowers produced no vibration. The vines curled along the brown and wove into her auburn hair. Her leaves degraded into dour. One outside of their people would count her among the first seeds, though she bore the age of thirty-four rings.

Vaijin rejected her mother's tall tales. She perceived the distinctions of nature and the way the trees stirred in rain. Dehydration or excessive sun could stain the leaves, and her mother rarely abandoned the thicket of the great canopy.

The humans' lack of flowers and leaves genuinely worry her though. The woman at the store wore skin like the bark of the canopy tree, hair grayed out in morning mist. But no flora sprouted from the body. No trails of tender green. Vaijin estimated her waning by the next moonrise; however, she appreciated her confusion with human life cycles, hypothesizing with information gathered from observing them from behind the line of pines. The children screamed as they raced into town, and she could never distinguish their rage from their humor. She envied their freedom to dash through those streets. She yearned to splash her feet in the small stone fountain. So, she decided that one way or she would explore those cresting ripples.

*

At the starlight pools, she joined the other children in singing to the small stone lagoon. Moonlight rippled on the surface while they stirred the silts with their hands. Normally, Vaijin relished in glimpsing the glistening shell fragments as they breached the surface and sank again, but tonight even the stars could not ground her thoughts.

The forest had always cradled her: the lush, emerald foliage and draping vines, clear crystal pool by the ancient caves, wildlife drinking sap from her hands. She imagined what wildlife scurried through the human town and what skins they wore. Furs, scales, or wings. Drinking strange tonics and singing praises, figures gamboled under the moonlight in her head, and she imagined people roaring at some bizarre human thing.

For a moment, the butcher invaded my mind. She once discovered a carcass hanging outside one of the huts to dry. She conjected for a moment that it could have been a djala thigh, perhaps the upper part of a bicep. As Vaijin winded through the darker branches of her thoughts, roots crawled from the dirt beneath her hands, clambered down the rocks, and settled themselves in a pool bed. Violet wolfsbane budded in an instant.

A young girl jabbed her hard in the side, "What are you doing? You're going to get in trouble."

Vaijin snapped out of daydreaming, and the vines quickly dissolved. Black ash striped the ground and down the shore. She spread it among the grass and flora so no one else would unearth what she had conjured. She decided.

She would settle her suspicions one way or another. Tonight, she would escape.

*

The air quieted as the djala returned to their respective resting areas. Her mother slept in the ragweed shrubbery. The heavy pollen livened her mother's hair with tiny flecks of gold as she dreamed. Her mother rooted herself deep, so Vaijin calculated that could sneak off and beat the morning sun home.

Vaijin snaked through the twisted willow path and when certainty hit that no one could catch her, she ducked off. Just between the arched stones, the dirt path ended. A human would never notice, but with distance from home, the dirt's voice faded.

The night sky lit up like crystal shards when the sunlight hit. She had never snuck out at night, but the djala's reputation with men made her think. Humans labeled them ghosts in their language, some too-simplistic understanding of nature. If only they witnessed the power of a real ghost, humans would care for the world around them. Ghosts, or yayisho, were the voices of the forgotten, life forces who commune with one another in silence. The dirt was yayisho, the water was yayisho, the wind. But Vaijin could infer why the djala's viriscent eyes spooked them. Humans could not detect the true colors of life. They could not perceive beyond the invisible walls they dreamed, like the tree line.

The bumpy overbite of the road converged with the line of broken stumps. Even in darkness, their lifeless truncated stocks communicated clearly that Vaijin left her world behind. She eased herself onto the walkway, uncertain what stories the stones would tell. But to her disappointment, the stones spoke like everything else in the human world. Quiet.

Vaijin crossed between two small buildings. Yellowish light poured from the windows and drew her eyes inside like night moths to the starlight cave waters. The light burned with an unnatural heat, but somehow wild pygmies could not pull her away. Inside, a human woman tucked a young girl about Vaijin's size into bed. She had burgeoned for many seasons but

only peaked as tall as ligustrum about three and a half hoof track sets. The girl's mother kissed her and switched out the light.

Vaijin recalled the way her mother swaddled her into sleep. She pondered what it must feel like to sleep without the large catalpa leaves. Their true name hummed too much for human tongues. In her language, soja clung to the lips—something like heart in the human language—for soja never sang dirges. They breathe with you. You can feel it in their veins. But something about the fur draped over the girl intrigued her, so Vaijin pulled herself up for a better view.

She slipped, tumbling over into some trash cans. Their crashing metal echoed off the foundation of the building.

"Who's there?"

Light spilled out into the darkness, framing a tall silhouette of a man. Eyes hid in shadows, shoulders wide like a bear. Vaijin laid in the stillness. If she were caught, the man might sell her to the butcher. She would be strung up, beaten, and presented to some deity unknown to her people. No longer would the trees console her during punishment high in their branches. No longer would she touch the starlight pools or embrace her mother again. She memorized the path on her way in. She mentally navigated each crevice and crack from here to the tree stumps, but the outline of the rifle in the man's hands paralyzed her. Vaijin lived up to her namesake. One of lightning. Her feet outpaced all the other djala children, but even she could admit her limitations. She lacked timing and would need to stir up a distraction. Or fight.

Vaijin pressed her hand hard against the irregular terrain and prepared to uproot a nearby tree, so she could flee. Yayisho whispered to her faintly, but her fingers could sense the hushed voices of the land. The man stepped toward her. She beckoned the roots with every fiber of her being. Suddenly, a cat vaulted from its perch in the crags of the roof next door.

The man raised his rifle and shot.

*

The cat fled from the gunfire in the opposite direction.

Vaijin fled her body, or at least she convinced herself she had shed it. The cat clipped the siding of the house before disappearing into the shadows.

"It's just a damn animal," the man hollered back into the house to his wife. "Can't a hunter get one peaceful night without some pest?"

Vaijin stilled herself under the cover of an unnatural, uneven strangeness. The large, slippery pouches settled on her. Smooth. Cold. Putrid scents penetrated her senses as she gathered oxygen and contemplated if she could breathe. She counted the stars barely visible from the ground. dja, feru, po.

"What you doing?" Above, the young girl stretched her head out the window to look down at her. Her words foreign, but they were ones Vajin remembered.

She pulled herself up from the satchels of muck and stepped away from the window to preserve distance. The girl inside was no man, but Vaijin had once witnessed the cruelty of human children from a distance a full moon ago. She remembered the battered body of a dog they had abandoned for dead because she would not return the stick they had thrown. The children grew frustrated. Thankfully, an older woman scared them off.

"Do you have no words?" the girl asked with a smile, but Vaijin did not understand it all.

"Words?" she questioned.

"Like talking." She squeezed her cheeks and began mouthing sounds, but the noises were stifled by the pinching of her skin.

Vaijin could not help but to smile at the comedy of it all. Humans had never spoken to her before. The lips contorted themselves into strange and interesting sounds, but not in an unpleasant way. The girl's words resonated similarly to Vaijin's own language, but in a cacophonous rhythm. She wondered if humans were broken.

"Name Vaijin wei joo." She enunciated, practicing a human word, having witnessed how humans greeted one another. She paused for a response, but the girl just stared at her.

"Name Vaijin wei joo," she repeated.

The girl laughed at her. "Vaijin, huh? I'm Tabbi." She drew the letters in the air to demonstrate to her how to spell it, but Vaijin only glared in confusion. "My mom's in bed now. I'm not supposed to go out, but I never listen."

Vaijin smiled.

The girl threw her leg over the window ledge and climbed out. She felt for the cracks in the wall like she had performed this escape a hundred times. Shoes swung from the laces in her hand as she pulled them out of the window. She slipped them on before stepping onto the dirt.

"They never catch me. Let's head to the square. It's just a few streets this way." Her finger pointed in the direction.

Four trees away, amber light lit the distant walkways. When Vaijin hesitated to budge, the girl tugged her by the wrist until she obeyed.

The streets radiated with an energy unlike any blaze in the forest. It buzzed and crackled in the metal frames the humans had imprisoned it in. Dozens of slim metal poles bordered the town square when they arrived. The fountain she had gazed at from the forest sat in the middle. The basin lit up pale as the moon under the unnatural light. It resembled the white stone of cavern walls, but the voice had been silenced long before she arrived. Large vessels circled the stone. Plants she had never encountered thrived, contained in spaces abnormally cramped.

"Sometimes, I like to come out and play. Pa says the ghosts will get me, but like I told my friend Andrew, 'I'm not scared of no ghost.' No one I know has ever faced a wild ghost. Sure, Mr. Hammen has a few, but they never come out while people are out. Heck, I doubt even he has them." The girl leaped into the water and skipped in a circle.

The word ghost struck the djala hard, but the girl did not act at all afraid or angry like her mother believed. She danced around and sloshed water outside the stone and onto her.

The water was cool, but Vaijin absorbed the free moment. She propelled the water with her hand. Short fluid shapes. No deposit, shell, or flakes. She was mesmerized by the clarity of it. And the whispers. For the first time in this human world, she could hear the whispers as translucent as the water itself. She listened to its story, its long eternal tale. For water tasted the beginning.

When the girl pushed her away from the fountain, Vaijin came to when the ripples left her sight. Wild vines climbed the center tiers and spiraled around the base. White honeysuckle erupted from buds, their tentacular stamen straining to touch the sky. This time the vines did not disintegrate. How long had she been standing there?

The girl's eyes widened in amazement. "How'd you do that?" She poked at the leaves as if testing their tangible nature. They sprang back up each time she removed the pressure from her hand.

The girl's happy face comforted Vaijin, confirming that she would not hurt her. Her mother had misjudged human people. Her stories scared the djala children just to ensure they would not leave the village. There were no butchers or hungry gods, simply different people.

The girl stared into her eyes. She extended her hand toward Vaijin's face and touched the thin vine braided through her hair. A pink orchid bloomed from the wavy locks. Her first blossoming.

The petals drooped far enough that one could see the new shades of amaranth contrasting her dark hair. The girl touched the flower. "It's pretty," she said and tucked strands of hair under the sepal. "How do you make flowers like that?"

For the first time, the light shone on her earthen eyes. Dark like the river soil. Vaijin had never seen eyes that color, like something unknown would sprout from them. Tabbi's hand climbed the vine down her arm. Her skin felt warm like Vaijin's but lacked the tangling life force of leaves. The pallid moon rested high in the sky, but the golden illuminated everything: ardent and visible.

*

"Ghost!"

A woman screamed from her open door. Lights flickered on all at once, and the street lit up like fire. Hunters stepped out of their homes with rifles within minutes. The streetlights spotlighted the two children. Everyone fixated on the two of them.

Vaijin fled. The crack of the first shot woke the whole town. As she darted through the buildings, lights switched on one after another. A second cap echoed off the ground, and fever kicked in. More humans poured out of their homes. Some with guns, while others bolted their children inside. Vaijin swiveled between two women before they noticed her. They screamed at her touch and pelted her with stones.

Her skin burned with each hit. Then someone hit her hard to the ground.

"Catch it. Don't let it get away."

Suddenly, the earth cracked, and the ground pushed upward. Wooden tendrils pushed the crowd back. Vaijin could not decipher the words, but her body reacted to the danger. Kudzu effused from its workings and enveloped everything in the

street. Every fiber screamed at Vaijin to rise to her feet, but she could not gather the will. Something sliced into her skin and thorns rushed from the dirt and crawled up walls. One man yelled as they snared him.

Men hacked at the overgrowth with hunting knives and machetes. “I can’t get a good shot.” Someone grabbed her leg and pulled. She flailed to fight free.

“Come. This way.”

The voice was whispered but familiar. She paused and let the hands pull her through the other side.

“Hurry.” Tabbi tugged on her hand and guided her through the maze of houses and shops. The crowd’s calls diminished to murmurs until the girls hurried past the tree line and they fell silent. Tabbi let go, and Vaijin still ran until she could hear the soil and dew, hear yayisho. Even then, she refused to halt until the starlight pool.

*

She never told her mother. She carried those memories long after confiding in the trees. Still, she would travel the edge of both worlds where no one could see. Tabbi would leave a small flower on the largest stump. Vaijin would carry it to pools and plant it. Her face reflected in the water. The moon reflected in the water. She brushed her hand through ripples. Visions danced with silt on the surface. Not of the butcher with his cleaver or hanged bloody body. Not of crowds of gunfire or fear. But a series of short moments splashed in amber and starlight.

Matthew Gilbert is a co-founder and poetry editor of Black Moon Magazine. He enjoys writing that crackles with emotion, works that push the boundaries between writing and lived experience.

PICTURES TELL ALL | Chris Bedell

via Pixabay

“Are you annoyed, Tripp?” Ryan asked, fidgeting in his chair.

Tripp tapped his feet against the ground. Spending Friday night in his dorm room while most students partied wasn’t ideal. Being seventeen meant being carefree. But sitting in a chair by his mahogany desk while moonlight trickled through his window wasn’t his fault. It was about helping his best friend, Ryan, with his English paper, which was due on Sunday.

Tripp lifted his gaze off Ryan’s rough draft. “There’s no point in complaining.”

Ryan sighed. “Not like I could ask Angie.”

“I know. You don’t have to explain yourself to me. Being your best friend means always supporting you,” Tripp said without flinching. Yup. He was serious. It wasn’t like Tripp could forget about how Ryan included him with group work during freshman year English class when Tripp had no friends.

“Although maybe Angie could’ve helped me with my paper if I asked her before she went away to her cheerleading

tournament this weekend," Ryan said.

"You cranked out a rough draft of the paper before asking me for help, so that's good." Tripp chuckled. "Anyway, do you really want your girlfriend's help with your homework? School takes up enough time as it is, and you two should be more concerned about going out on dates."

"Good point. Anyway, how bad is my essay?"

"I'm still reading it, but how blunt should I be?" Tripp asked.

"Is it that bad?" Ryan fanned himself with his tee-shirt while sweat clung to his brow.

Sure. The calendar said it was the second to last week of April. However, it might as well have been the hottest day of summer. The temperatures hadn't gone below eighty degrees Fahrenheit in over a week, begging the question of if summer would be a scorcher.

"I'm kidding—I'd never be rude to you," Tripp said.

Ryan took a deep breath. "I didn't come here for an ego boost; I need a good grade on this essay."

"Relax. I'm sure you can raise your D average."

Yup. Tripp blindly gave away free hope to Ryan. Nothing good would've come from being harsh. Being thankful for friendship didn't just mean helping Ryan with homework. It also entailed believing in Ryan when he didn't believe in himself.

"There's only two weeks left in the quarter."

Tripp forced a grin. "Don't be so negative. You can do it—even if you need help from your best friend."

"Please tell me what's wrong with the paper, because I meant what I said. I won't be angry. Even if you think I should restart from scratch." Ryan grabbed potato chips from the bag on the desk in front of him and Tripp. A crunching sound echoed while Ryan devoured the chips. And Tripp almost laughed. His grandmother would've rambled for twenty-minutes about proper etiquette if she were in his dorm room right now.

"I have to finish reading the essay before I give feedback," Tripp said before his attention drifted back to the paper.

"Of course. No worries."

"Okay. I'm finished," Tripp said half an hour later while an owl on the tree branch outside his dorm room window hooted.

"What'd you think?" Ryan asked.

Tripp coughed. "You have a specific thesis statement, and the writing is concise. However, you paraphrased all of your evidence as opposed to using direct quotes in addition to how you didn't give much analysis."

His mouth gaped. "Oh..."

"The important thing is you have a good foundation, though." One quick glance around his dorm room made his shoulders shudder even though nothing bad happened. It just didn't matter how many times Tripp stared at Jordan's (his roommate's), side of the room. A creepy feeling always existed from no family photos on Jordan's desk or even a poster of a favorite band, television show, or movie. Tripp had several posters hung up on his side of the room—like his *Harry Potter* poster or *Green Day* poster. Also, Tripp had two photos of his mother, father, and him, which were in gold frames on his desk. A few clumps of dust even coated his photos. However, the messiness was fine. The flaw revealed Tripp was human, and once again contrasted Jordan's side of the room. He didn't even have one crushed soda can, empty container of food, or crumpled tissue scattered on the floor. And his bed was always made. Like right now. His gray comforter and sheets remained tucked over his mattress and didn't have one crease.

Ryan grabbed more chips and finished them in a matter of seconds. "I see."

"That's my way of telling you that your paper is probably in better shape than most of your classmates."

Ryan tapped his fingers against the desk. "Thanks. Although it'd be nice if I was good at English class like you."

"I'm only good at English class because I want to be a writer," Tripp said.

"That proves my point. You have a natural gift with words."

"Don't tell me that you're jealous?" Tripp asked.

Ryan averted his gaze. "I don't. Maybe. I'm good at baseball, though."

Tripp snickered. "I'm sure you're good at other things too."

"Not really."

"You should know better than to believe the outdated stereotype about jocks being dumb."

Ryan grimaced. "It's not a stereotype if it's true."

"Not everyone gets straight A's."

"Doesn't matter. I'm not everyone. Because my father expects me to get into an Ivy League college." Ryan avoided eye contact, and Tripp couldn't help speculating about Ryan—at least to himself. This conversation was one of the few times Ryan mentioned his father, and Tripp wondered if there was more Ryan wasn't revealing. Thinking everyone carried around pain wasn't complicated. Because Tripp kept things from Ryan. Like his appreciation for Ryan befriending him. Being desperate just wouldn't help Tripp.

Tripp gave him a mock frown. "Don't self-reject. There's time for you to choose whatever career you want."

"If only my father felt the same way," Ryan mumbled.

Tripp's stomach grumbled. "What time is it? Because I haven't eaten since breakfast."

Ryan looked at his gold-watch looped around his right wrist. "10:45."

Tripp couldn't help staring at Ryan's gold-watch, because he would've loved to have one. It wasn't like Tripp ever got fancy things. He was lucky if his parents gave him one-hundred dollars for his birthday.

"Wow. Maybe I'll win the award for most distracted teenager," Tripp said.

Ryan's eyes widened. "Have you really not eaten since breakfast?"

"Yeah, I got sidetracked working on my writing and homework."

"Why don't I order Chinese food?"

"I appreciate the gesture, but you don't have to buy me dinner."

Yeah, Tripp insisted on modesty. It wasn't like he wanted to be difficult. Tripp was only trying to be decent. Having a best friend who always wore the latest designer fashion, owned a gold watch, and took impromptu trips to Europe and the Caribbean during school vacations might've caused a lump in his throat that he just couldn't swallow—Tripp was only at boarding school because of a scholarship. However, Tripp didn't want to leech off someone else.

Ryan shook his head. "It's not a big deal! That's why I have an emergency credit card."

I'll think about it," Tripp said.

"Don't think too long. The Chinese place closes at midnight."

"Could you please pass me a tissue?"

Ryan surveyed the tissue box on the shelf above Tripp's desk, yet tossed it into the trashcan on the floor in front them.

"Why'd you do that?" Tripp asked.

"You're out of tissues, and I know the only way your tissue box was getting thrown out was if I did it for you."

Tripp remained silent.

Ryan pointed to the opposite end of the room, specifically his roommate's desk. "I'm sure Jordan wouldn't mind if you used one of his tissues."

"I'm not sure about that…"

"Anyway, where's Jordan?"

Tripp shrugged. "Don't ask me. He always comes and goes at odd hours."

Ryan ran his fingers through his blond hair. "I bet he went to a party tonight."

"He doesn't seem like a partier."

"And why is that?"

Tripp's jaw trembled. "I don't know. Some people give off a bad vibe."

Ryan snorted. "A bad vibe?"

Tripp should've known better than to mention his roommate. It wasn't like he had concrete proof that Jordan did something bad. Something about Jordan just never felt right, though. Like when Tripp saw a disheveled person at the gas station when he was on vacation from boarding school. A stranger's less than ideal image might've been creepy, yet he couldn't make an accusation.

More mucus dripped from Tripp's nose, and he was about to wipe it with his shirt when Ryan raised his hand.

"Stop!" Ryan bellowed. "If you're afraid to grab one of Jordan's tissues, then I'll get one for you."

Ryan stood, walked over to Jordan's desk, and grabbed a tissue. Yet Tripp shook his head. Ryan just continued staring at what was under the tissue box while holding a tissue in right hand, and Tripp therefore couldn't imagine what Ryan was up to.

"Something wrong?" Tripp asked.

"I think I found Jordan's diary." Ryan grabbed the journal, which couldn't have been bigger than five by eight inches. Then, Ryan shuffled back to Tripp's side of the room, and sat before handing Tripp the tissue.

"Put the journal back!"

"You're too uptight," Ryan said.

Tripp didn't have to be involved in a police chase or a victim of a hostage situation for his mind to spin with negative thoughts. A small chance existed that Jordan could return, only to discover him and Ryan "snooping." Besides, Tripp needed to make a mental note to chat with Ryan about taking less risks. Looking at Jordan's journal wasn't the only risky thing they did. Tripp hadn't forgot about how they snuck into a nightclub several weeks ago, only to have a patron almost start a brawl with him and Ryan.

Ryan bit his lip. "You need to look at this."

"No thanks."

Ryan waved the journal at Tripp. "I'm serious. It involves you."

"What are you talking about?"

"See for yourself." Ryan handed Tripp the journal.

Tripp rolled his eyes, and took the journal from Ryan. Invading Jordan's privacy wasn't ideal. However, Tripp wasn't an idiot. And that meant doing what Ryan wanted was easier than arguing with him. Like several weeks ago when Ryan got the genius idea to go to the nightclub.

"Was I wrong about thinking you needed to see the journal?" Ryan asked.

Tripp remained silent while gripping the journal. He just couldn't believe it. Getting a funny vibe from someone, and proving creepiness were two different things. However, Tripp's concern wasn't in his head. Nothing normal existed from how every page in Jordan's journal was filled with glued photos of Tripp—most of them outside, around campus, but a few of them were of Tripp sleeping. The photos were also accompanied by dates, ranging from move in week last fall to several days ago.

"This wasn't how I expected to spend my evening," Tripp said.

"No need to be obvious."

"What the hell should I think?"

Ryan snickered. "Maybe he has a crush on you."

Tripp scowled. "He doesn't give off that vibe. Besides, he once mentioned a girlfriend."

"That doesn't mean he won't go all Glenn Close on you."

Tripp almost smacked Ryan with the journal. Referencing *Fatal Attraction* would help Tripp sleep at night. It wasn't as if Ryan made Tripp watch the movie several times.

"Why would he take pictures of me?" Tripp asked.

"You should be flattered."

Tripp elbowed Ryan. "This isn't funny. What if he's a psycho?"

"An obsession doesn't mean he's psychotic; he could be bored. Besides, all the photos are G-rated."

Tripp gave Ryan a dirty look. "That's not the point."

"You're overreacting."

Tripp made another mental note. The current conversation proved he needed to impress upon Ryan how some issues weren't funny. It wasn't the possible crush part that pricked Tripp's back hairs—most people experienced crushes, including crushes that didn't reciprocate. It was how his privacy was invaded for so long that made Tripp almost scream. If this event had been going for so long, then Tripp wouldn't even speculate about what other things he didn't know about Jordan.

A key clinked in the lock, and Tripp and Ryan exchanged glances. Ryan grabbed the journal from Tripp without speaking before sliding it under Jordan's tissue box, yet Tripp's pulse echoed in his ear.

"I'm sorry," Ryan said. "I don't mean to invade your side of the room. It was just that Tripp was out of tissues, and needed one, yet he was too afraid to take one of yours."

Jordan gave a toothy smile. "Don't worry about it. I'd do anything for Tripp."

Tripp's stomach knotted. Tripp would do something about Jordan; he just needed time. Because Tripp didn't even wanna speculate about what else Jordan might've been hiding.

Chris Bedell is the author of over a dozen books. Also, he graduated with a BA in Creative Writing from Fairleigh Dickinson University in 2016.

Listen? | Ta'Mia Holmes

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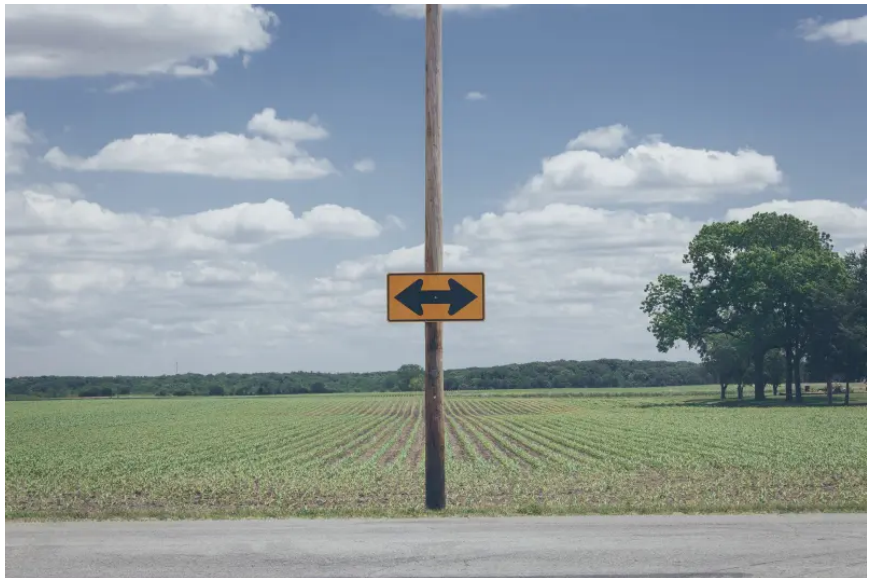

Josh Sorenson via Pexels

The mind says,
"No!"
The heart says,
"Go!"

Which one is right to follow?

Centripetal Force | mick v

Abby Chung via Pexels

In its final years, the Mall was largely avoided by the Living. They roamed the halls searching reluctantly for anything besides unsatisfying meals or another go on the rusting carousel. After close, however, things never failed to become more interesting. Andy's father worked retail for many years, so she was prepared to fit in when she died. We, most certainly, were not.

Andy was a wild Living kid, believe me! Quiet yes, but always cunning, easy to find if only you knew the best hiding spots, such as the loft above Susan's Cookies (her favorite). Considering her father worked longer hours for more years than any other employee, the Mall was Andy's castle, the whereabouts of its nooks her closest secrets. Ultimately, though, death silenced her. It's hard to say when exactly she arrived, or whether the room felt more or less empty when she was present. We simply learned to take no personal offense from her absent stare, her wilted entrances and exists. The matter seemed settled until I was assigned to train her on realigning the carousel's central pole.

The backlight of the Clock flickered on, its green glow rippling across the surface of the fountain pond. Normally at this time, I would hang my Skin in the locker room until the next workday, but I remained Skinned knowing Andy refused to remove her Skin after Living hours. Similarly, my Skinless form does not have hands.

We shook hands.

"Hi! My name is—"

I pulled back—she was warm. Summer sand between toes. Teacup against chapping palms beside a wet window. Perfectly warm.

"Let's...get started then," I said, opening the door leading to the underside of the carousel. Andy followed.

"You work with Gustav," I began. "Lucky duck! Gus has been operating this machine since day one. Gentleman with all the heads, see him over there? Keeps a good eye on things around here, or a few shall I say, ha ha. Well. In the 70's, there were—"

While Andy repeated the operations flawlessly, I knew she was not listening. She worked so swift, so intentionally, her limbs blurred like a scurrying spider. My hand remained warm throughout the training.

"That's all there is to it. Questions?"

To my surprise, she asked, "Why did you remain in your Skin? You're off the clock."

"My form doesn't have hands. I can show you if you'd like."

"Just wondering," she said, and walked away.

I never mentioned to anyone that Andy spoke to me, nor could I manage to bring up the warmness in her hand. I wondered, was it her or me? Can someone be half-Living? Was she holding on to something from before?

Was I?

One evening a few months later I moseyed over to Blockbuster Bar Skinless. It was a busy night, all of bartender Lily's tentacles mixing and pouring simultaneously. A Western on VHS was blaring from the TV. I sipped the tarry concoction with my eyes until she remembered my long straw.

"Thanks Lily. Always looking out for me."

"'Course hun. What's good?"

"Besides seeing you?"

She winked at me, then looked to my side.

It was Andy. She placed a small bag on the counter that expelled the scent of fresh bread. Lily poured her a glass of water. The heat – buck stove in a wintry cabin – emanated from her. She took a gulp, then leaned towards me.

"Can you help?" she whispered.

I looked into her large eyes, smooth like clean marbles.

"Expecting someone?" I asked

She nodded.

"Living? Tonight?"

"Please."

I peered across the bar. Gus was slouched in a corner booth, all but one of his heads passed out, a collection of adoring vampires fingering his necks.

"If I lose my job, you're dead."

A Cheshire smile filled her face, the first since her death.

We slid across the grand room onto the carousel. Andy sat calmly on a bench with the bag cupped in her mitten-like hands, gazing towards the Clock. The secondhand hauled us gradually towards something we were certain must never come to an end. Death suddenly seemed so inconclusive.

An hour until Skins were to be reclaimed for work, Andy sprung from the bench, facing the glass door entrance. A man's

figure swayed uneasily on the other side. Andy motioned to me. I unlocked the door. Andy ducked behind the operator's board.

The man shuffled from the door to the carousel like sandpaper smoothing over stubborn knots. He sat at the bench where Andy was previously and discovered the bag, still warm. From within it, he revealed one of Susan's Cookies, consumed it pleasurably, then laid down on the bench.

Andy paced heel-to-toe, three seconds per step, step after step, until she arrived at the bench. She stood over him patiently.

Gustav wobbled over from Blockbuster with his Skin draped over his arm, his necks spotted.

"Has Lily been making them heavy lately? I feel light-headed as—"

"Shh!" I said. He noticed Andy.

The man rose and embraced Andy with the quiet force of an orbiting mass that could no longer bear the distance. Within this gentle collision they remained, reversing the expansion of time itself, until simultaneously they removed their Skins and disappearing altogether.

Gustav and I went to the bench where we found the man's cold body beside the Skins.

The front door rattled. Two cats peered back at us from the other side of the glass, then scurried away. Gustav collected the Skins, sighing.

"Think we know what this means," he said.

Shortly after, the building manager arrived, confused at the sight of everyone gathered near the carousel. When he found the body, he knelt to it and wept. We wept as well. We knew none of the Living would return, not after this.

A silent chill slinked through the halls and rooms, a chill not dissimilar from the ocean or the moon, taught between us all as the string that binds the two.

By the time it was announced that the building would be demolished, most of us found elsewhere to dwell. Gustav kissed my cheeks twice per head on the day the carousel was removed. Some stayed to hear the thunder of the Mall's collapse, the moan in its final breath. Not me though. I couldn't bear it. The last I saw of it was the secondhand spinning around the face of the green Clock.

Around and around and around it goes.

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adoptee author based in louisville, ky @tcaptship

Don Barredora | Luis González Lavín

Maria Pashkova via Pexels

La nieve se acumula en la calle, o en la diminuta acera inexistente sobre la cual me balanceo entre el tráfico y mi jardín. Al otro lado—en otra ciudad—el quitanieves construye un alto y grande muro blanco; tan alto que obstruye las casas de mis vecinos delante. La nieve hecha muralla, refleja cegadoramente la luz del sol. Cierro los ojos, buscando el refugio de la obscuridad detrás de mis parpados, pero la cegadora luz blanca lo consume todo.

Luis González Lavín (he/him/él), is a child of the third space. Find him @sintangente. Traducción: Una frase chida en inglés.

Sea, Salt, and Me | Mahika Mukherjee

Marc-Antoine via Pexels

Everything about Akaash felt real. Real, because he seemed to have existed in my life forever, despite this being untrue. He is most real in my memories. We were sharing an apartment back in college. Dormitory life did not suit us, and we found refuge in each other's company. It was a decision made over store-bought pizza, a random idea come to life.

My most vivid memory?

It was the end of the exam season, evident by the state of our place. Books were stacked on every possible surface, utensils still waiting to be washed in the sink. We were watching a crappy, low-budget horror film on Akaash's laptop. Our Cheeto-colored couch sagged under our combined weight. A bowl of dried raisins sat between us.

'I don't like the knock-off Drac,' I said.

'That's Mister Drac to you,' he said with a grin. It was his most used expression, the second being the scrunched nose face. I threw a raisin at him, which he had no qualms with eating.

Living with him was calming, a cycle I was used to. I was used to him knocking on my bedroom door, asking if I want a snack. I was used to him falling asleep on the couch, and to seeing him bring more potted plants despite my warnings of killing them off. I was used to him telling me that nothing is wrong, and I was used to telling him to take it easy, even after we went our separate ways. I was used to calling him at every opportune moment, at the inside jokes, at his uncanny manner of knowing my thoughts.

He is real, still very much real to me. Which sounds like a colossal joke, since I can't see him anymore. All for one simple reason.

My best friend is dead.

'What do you mean?' I did not shake, did not tremble.

'He's passed away.' Her voice sounds reedy like she has been crying for hours on end. I wonder when she found out his breath had left him. The thought rankles in my chest.

'How?' If it happened to be an accident it would leech the life out of me.

She sniffed before replying. 'In his sleep. The doctor says it may be due to overworking…'

My chest went tight again. Truly, nothing I could do about it. It was something out of my control.

The rest of the call is a jumble. I don't think to offer my condolences, don't think to say, 'I'm sorry for your loss.'

I am unmoored.

The rest of the day passes in its usual fashion. Dinner gets cooked, but my appetite decides to desert me today. Things are fine until the lights are put out, and I become a stranger in my own room. I do not know this person who sits up in bed, numb. Sleep calls out, but I'm deaf to it. I can only think of calling him and reminiscing the past, a need to share nostalgia.

When I do sleep, I dream of being afloat, in an all-encompassing sea. There is no fish, no other life. Only me, salt, and sea.

Time is slippery like an eel. One drive feels like minutes and decades.

Akaash hated driving, meaning I was the designated driver when we had a vehicle at hand. And driving to his place feels right. I have a bouquet of white flowers next to me but giving his wife flowers now seemed rude.

Time slips from me again, and I am at their place. I do a shoddy job of parking my car, I'm so keyed up. I get my knee to stop bouncing, fix my lipstick in my rear-view mirror. My hair is tied back so tight I can feel pinpricks of pain in my scalp. I look like a ghost.

I finally pick up the courage to bear pleasantries.

My breaths are shallow as I am ushered in. The new widow nowhere to be seen, but I follow clusters of people till they lead me to her. She is a tiny thing, eyes red-rimmed and her smile is drawn taunt. I barely hold myself from pushing the crowd circling her. But when lock eyes we move towards each other without hesitation. I am hugging her tight.

'You're late.' Her voice is muffled by my shirt, and I hold her head still.

'I didn't want to be here,' I admit, 'but I needed to know you were fine.'

She pushes me ever so slightly. 'How do I look?'

'Terrific,' I lie, and a shadow of her real smile passes by.

I don't enjoy crowds, least of all now, so I move out to a balcony. The view is stunning as always, a spread of restless water, but it does not hold my attention. I instead watch the person who arrived there before me.

My old flame has aged well. His hair has shifted from sandy to snow-white, and the same could be said for his trimmed beard. A lit cigarette sits between his fingers, a sad smile on his lips. He has not noticed me yet.

'Hi stranger,' I say.

He looks at me, first in disbelief and then in wonder. 'You haven't aged a day.'

I scoff. 'Your surprise offends me. How is your bride?'

He gives me a knowing look, but answers regardless. 'Getting ready to put up with me. She does not like the house, but she will manage. So, is it really true?'

My budding smile wilts. 'I'm not a liar. The more time stretches out in front of me, the more obsessed I am with the past. Death will not come for me.' My hands are fists. 'Is it true? Look at me. Have I changed?'

I know how I look. Not a wrinkle has made it on to my face, and not a strand of hair has changed colour. Just like all those years ago.

He takes this in silence and then nods his head in affirmation. My anger breaks as quickly as it rises.

'I believe you now. Back then I thought you were making excuses not to marry me.'

'It does sound outlandish.'

'Understating as always.' The cheer is back in his voice.

I look at the sea head-on, noticing how it almost sparkles. 'I'm going to be gone for a while.'

He puts his cigarette out, throwing the butt over the edge of the balcony and turning to me. 'How long is a while?' he asks, false nonchalance in his countenance.

'Two minutes, two years,' I gesture, 'time is liquid to me.'

His expression is intent, focused. I notice the crow's feet by the edge of his eyes. They weren't there the last time we met. 'And?'

'Please take care of her for me. I have an album of Akaash's college photos, she can have them. I already sent it to your place.'

'Nita.' He sounds sad again. I wonder if it looks like I'm mourning. I only feel numb.

'I'll see you whenever,' I say, and leave before I hear his reply.

I decided to stay the night. They have enough rooms, and it is best to keep her busy, keep her moving. It would be my last meal in a while, and I eat my food with relish.

'You were always a good eater,' she says.

'And you were always a good cook.'

We avoid talking about Akaash. I have an inkling that we will cry if we do, and we can't have that. We need to be strong now.

'This may come as a surprise,' I begin, 'but I will be going on a…pilgrimage of sorts.'

She furrows her brow. 'You're not the religious sort.'

'No,' I agreed, 'I'm not. Like I said, of sorts.'

'How long will this so-called pilgrimage be?'

She detests long answers, so I answer truthfully. 'I don't know.'

She expects me to say more but looking at her hurts. I go back to eating.

When I'm sure the house is asleep, I make my way out. The walk to the beach is not long, by any estimates, but the dark makes it difficult to navigate. I walk down a slope barefoot, and before I know it my footfalls on sand instead of concrete. It is cool, and I feel settled.

It is a new moon, and no light reaches me. It is comforting, this natural nothing, not like the night in my room. I follow the sound of waves crashing till I feel the water lapping my toes, and then breaking at my ankles. It is warmer than I anticipated.

I feel a chill as I take off my clothes, goosebumps running up my arms. I walk into the water until the sand disappears and I am suspended in space.

I am unmoored but safe. Time will heal, I tell myself. And I have enough of that. And so I stay afloat, only sea, salt, and me.

Mahika Mukherjee is a student at Krea University, India. She is known for her self-published collection of poetry titled 'A God's Tears. Her writing can be found on her blog: mahikamukherjee.com

A Love Lost to Time | Sua Hang

NEOSiAM 2021 via Pexels

Fate

"Guess who I met today?"

"Who?" Boua Pheng asked. There was a moment of silence as he took time to think.

"Ohhh... her."

A small smile formed on Nhia's lips but quickly disappeared like their brief meeting. After they cut off their ties, he hadn't seen her in many years. It was what they wanted. Well, more like what she wanted. Although they went their separate ways, he searched for her even when their time had passed. He carried all their precious memories and reminisced about them from time to time. Even though she was just a person and one moment in his life, she was unforgettable.

"Do you think we can mend our ties? Do you think we can... have a chance to be together again?" Nhia asked.

"I'm sure you know the answer." Boua Pheng answered.

He sighed. They couldn't be together again. She willingly severed their ties. The thought of him would never cross her

mind. But he still looked for her, hoping they had a slim chance.

"It's time to move on. You've held on to her for too long. She doesn't remember you anyway." Boua Pheng spoke.

"I know..."

Nhia found it difficult to let go. He wished everything was easy to forget like it was for her.

"We're only fated to be strangers now, yet I still hope for us to be more than that."

The Meeting

—A few hours before

"I'm so sorry, sir!" Cha Dou said as she took out a napkin and cleaned the water that had splashed onto Nhia's coat.

"Oh, it's fine! It's just a little bit of water. I'll be fine."

Despite what he said, she continued to wipe it away.

"You're all good now!" Cha Dou exclaimed.

"Thank you, you didn't have to."

She looked up at him, and for a moment, their eyes locked. Nhia immediately recognized her. He was amazed by how quick it was for him to know that it was her. She no longer had the same face, but for some reason, he knew. It was like there was a connection. In all the years that he had lived, he never recognized someone right away. Especially someone with a different face. His kind never really changed their physical appearances. The only ones who were everchanging were humans.

"Sir?"

Finally. After all this time, he finally found her. He was happy but also sad, knowing she won't remember or recognize him. But with a glimmer of hope in him, he asked, "Have we met before? You seem so familiar."

Cha Dou thought for a moment, then answered, "No. This is our first meeting."

"Are you sure? Don't you find me familiar? I'm sure we've met before."

She thought for another moment and said, "I've never met you before. Maybe you've mistaken me for someone else."

"Oh, I-I guess so. Sorry." He apologized and turned his gaze away from her. His sadness grew, but he still hoped that this meeting would make her remember. Even though he knew it was impossible.

"I'll be going now. Have a good day." She smiled, then walked away.

He watched as she disappeared into the crowd.

"Will I meet her again or will this be the last time I'll see her?"

Not Meant to Be

"You told me once that not everyone is meant to stay. People will always come and go."

Nhia looked at her as they stood in the rain.

"I guess I'm... one of them." She spoke in a quivering voice.

The rain began to pour harder, fully drenching them. He felt his heart breaking as he continued to look at her in silence.

———

A stroke of lightning and thunder came as Nhia gathered everything related to her. He gazed sadly at them, not wanting to part with the memories. "Should I just accept everything for what it is?" He quietly spoke as he placed all the items into a box.

Then, he walked towards the burning fire pit in the room with the box in his hands. He stopped at the fire pit and stared at it, like all the times before. He couldn't bring himself to burn the items and memories they had. These were the only things left of her, even though she was out there, somewhere.

"No, I can't do this," Nhia said and walked away from the fire. He placed the box onto a shelf and left the room.

———

A couple of years had passed since he last met her. The box in the room was left untouched and was now covered in dust. He felt like he was now able to move on and forget the past they once had. Sometimes, she crossed his mind, but the thoughts didn't affect him like they used to.

"Not everyone is meant to stay in your life, no matter how important they are to you."

———

"Sir! Excuse me!"

A woman stopped him as he was walking on the sidewalk. "Hey, um..."

"Yes?" Nhia spoke.

"Have we met before? You seem so familiar."

Nhia recognized her once more. It was Cha Dou.

"No. This is our first meeting." He spoke. "You must've mistaken me for someone else." After all, she wouldn't remember him from a few years ago anyways.

"Are-are you sure? I—nevermind... I'm sorry."

She watched as he walked away, disappearing into the crowd.

Sua Hang is an artist and a writer. Writing has always been one of her passions. She also loves to read, watch dramas, and hone her art skills. You can find her on Twitter @shuaprose.

Bodies Beneath Us | Duo Valentine

Elisabeth Fossum via Pexels

Cooper emerged from the tunnel expecting to see returning runners from scavenging missions and the eighty-third day of consecutive rain accompanied by oppressive clouds. He was not disappointed.

"Sometimes I can still see the too-distant blue sky when I close my eyes," said Cooper as he rested his arms atop his holstered rifle. It was another day of skittering rains and grey skies, and the wind flapped his olive parka. Outside of the tunnel, under the blue tarp roof of his post, he could see the rolling hills of flourishing grasses and shrubs and scorched earth. The contrast between life and death always struck him with a morbid fascination with its particular and unique juxtaposed beauty. It was beginning, middle, and end coexisting side by side. The entirety of existence fit within his field of vision. Flourishing trees drank in harmony from the rain while almost completely concealing the lingering husks and starving frames of dead wood. Cooper wondered how long it would take for the fjords to replenish and fill once again.

The wind picked up and howled in the mouth of the tunnel. Cooper always thought that this tunnel entrance, one of the three last safe places in this country, was hidden in his favor, nestled into the backside of a large hill covered in foliage. Entrance is highly sought after and always denied. To keep the integrity of the location safe, adventurers and asylum seekers were gifted with lead poisoning from Overseer mandated rifles.

"When do you think is last time we see blue sky?" Kransy's heavy boots sloshed their way through mud over to a wide thermos on the terminal by his partner. Turning away from nature, Kransy lifted his gas mask and took a swig of steaming liquid.

"I was thinking that too. Do you miss it?" Cooper's question crinkled as it came out of his mask's voice modulator. He turned to Kransy.

"Hm. Not really. I never like sun when I was boy, you understand?"

"It's hard to believe you were ever a young person. Your wrinkles make you look like you knew Tsar Nikolai II," said Cooper, smiling under his mask. Neither could see, but they always had a sense of what expression the other was making under the metal cheeks and plastic chins of the masks. Their eyes were sometimes betrayed by the tint of the protective goggles, but with enough light, their gazes could meet. Like now.

"Little you know, but I fight inside his army," Kransy banged his hand on the terminal and erupted with laughter, though Cooper only chuckled and turned back to the wilderness. "He said I am very gifted fighter! Especially in rain like this. Shame royalty is no more. Maybe if Tsar was still around, that is how we maybe prevent this from happening."

"Yeah, maybe a thousand years ago," said Cooper. "Listen, if you were so great, why didn't you stop the world from getting into this mess?"

"God is back in heaven now; all's right with world," said Kransy, screwing the cap back on to the thermos. "Maybe if we did not play with God, He would not have come visit so early."

"Yeah, well we made a goddamn mess of the world, didn't we?" Cooper sighed, letting static come from his mask, resenting the landscape in front of him. "We had our Eden. We haven't been very good stewards."

Kransy set the thermos back on the terminal and looked down, "Maybe tunnel is our new Eden. Overseer is like New-God, maybe." He made his way over to Cooper, mud ever clinging to his boots. "We keep good stewardship over entrance, and Overseer, he stay happy with us. He does not open clouds to send winged-army to destroy metal machinery wonders we here make. Instead we get bake beans for our belly." Once again, Kransy laughed at his own joke, still unaware of Cooper's averted gaze.

"I'll blame it on your generation. You were the kids making fucked up tech that pissed off the big man in the clouds." Cooper looked back up at his partner, "I wasn't even born yet!"

"Yes, I know. You are like baby. You are born in tunnel, and you will die in tunnel. You do not know real struggle when He came down to teach us lesson. It make me man." Kransy leaned on the terminal and threw his head down. His voice dropped, "That was real mess..."

Cooper slapped his partner on the back, "Never occured to me that we humans could make a bigger mess than that fuckin' Tower of Babel, huh?" Cooper looked down near the base of their hill and pointed, "Hey, why didn't you clean that up?"

Kransy stood shoulder-to-shoulder with his partner, readjusting his mask. He threw his hood up and peaked out from under the tarp. Annoyance overcame the feeling of rain pelting his head, "So they start to rot and now is my fault? Maybe they should not come here," said Kransy, turning his head up to make sure Cooper felt the words he was saying. "You know this is worst part."

Cooper shook his head and waved his hand, dismissing Kransy's comments, "You were supposed to clean them up like a fuckin' week ago, man." He pointed back down the hill at the two contorted and mangled bodies. "You want others to know where we are? You wanna leave 'em there to send a goddamn signal to others? You want the Overseer coming up for our asses?" Cooper lifted his hands in the air, mocking, "Oh gee honey, look!" Cooper put his hands on his cheeks, "Dead bodies! Maybe we're near a tunnel! Let's see if we can get in! Or maybe you wanna invite more mothers ov-"

"You complain so much then you fucking do it! I don't want to think about smell, unless you expect me to clean bake bean vomit as well," Kransy said, shoving his thick, gloved finger in Cooper's face. "When after we pull trigger, I radio down to custodian in tunnel to get clean crew or maybe mop and bucket. This is right after you go down to search them!"

Cooper laughed, "Oh, this is an undeniably incredible lie," Cooper said and pointed a finger at himself. "You didn't call shit. You know how I know?"

"How?"

"Because I woulda lied too, man," said Cooper, and he looked back down, letting his voice drift off. The sound of rain filled the air so neither would have to say another word. Kransy looked back, too, and wondered about them. He always wondered about those they were ordered to kill. 'Anyone who tries to get in is our enemy, and those who want to leave are the same,' the Overseer always said. The Administration Office would always remind them before they left for their

posts each morning.

"Someone's gotta do it." Cooper threw on his dirt-stained plastic poncho and lifted his hood. "Hey, grab those binos and keep an eye out for me, would ya?"

He stopped at the start of the trail, "Promise me you got next?"

Kransy nodded and peered at his partner as he made his way down until the focused soreness of his eyes refused to stay isolated in the binoculars. He pulled away and let the binoculars hang around his neck. He could see Cooper, small as a toy from his vantage point, stop some meters away from the corpses. Twisted and broken lay dormant a mother and her daughter. What few belongings they had lay scattered and tattered, weathered from rain. Bones jutted out of the little girl's impoverished canopy jacket. Rorschach-like bloodstains contoured her wounds over her dotted pink dress. Rain washed away excess blood, revealing the deep, drained cuts gouged in rotting skin, and mild to severe festering foliage punctures she had from the fall down the hill. Tight was how the girl's decaying, fractured hand was wrapped around her bloodied brown teddy bear. Cotton seeped out of the toy. The girl's eyes gazed up at him, and he could feel her anguish and confusion as if she were still alive.

"*Why*?" He remembered her asking him, eyes shining sapphire and voice robbed of hope and innocence like crushed flowers. "*Why can't we come in?*"

Kransy could remember how tight the mother clung to her daughter's wrist as they raised their rifles.

"*Come now, sweetie*," she stuttered, trying to remain calm to try and prevent the consequences of her mistake. "*We can go somewhere else. They're full, see? They don't have rooms for us.*" She looked down at her daughter, "*Let's go, okay?*"

Kransy reminiscenced about the feeling of cowardice that neither of the men could look the family in the eye before snuffing them of their lives. Shot in the back, face forward they tumbled down to the base of the hill.

Even in death, she persisted to keep the same look in her eyes, but they were even more drained of life while being offered up to the maggots circling her eyelids. Kransy looked away and instead started to scan the area.

Cooper threw a tarp over the little girl so as to not be conscious of what he was about to wrap and move. The mother's torso twisted, and her final resting position was contorted, looking up at Cooper, asking, "*Where are you going to take my daughter? Where are you taking us?*"

Rain and worms had decayed her facial features, and the ghoulish, mouth-gaping gaze scolded Cooper, baring teeth. Flesh pulled back from bone. Skin under her eyes drooped downwards as if it was her daughter playing with an elongated string of chewing gum; a sludge waterfall of flesh.

Cooper flung out the sheet, making an area to place the bodies, his boots stepping on their litter. He knelt to lift the decaying mother but jumped when he heard a sudden crack. His boot stood dominant on a muddy picture frame, faces now distorted and covered by slop. The mother sat with her daughter on her lap, both calm from the protective presence of a father that stood behind them, his arms on their shoulders. He didn't want to imagine them smiling and happy, loved and loving, but he did anyway. It is hard not to think about.

Cooper made sure his wrapping was knotted and secured. He lifted the tarp and hoisted them over his shoulder before making his way to the mandatory dumping spot. Directly below the outpost was a large hole dug into the side of their hill. Luckily, these were only bodies seven and eight. The inside was always damp, the smell palpable. The rot manifested to torture Cooper's senses. Walking in was inviting a refrigerator of festering skin and dried bodily fluids into your nostrils. If it were not for the mask, the taste of the surrounding air would stain and corrupt his palate. Cooper closed his eyes before he dropped the bodies off of his shoulder. The tarp rustled when the bodies fell to his feet. Cooper shoved them with his muddy boot, and they rolled down into their tomb, filling the room with the sound of cracking bones, decorated in soil and leaves.

Right as the tarp hit the ground and had joined the other recently deceased, Cooper heard Kransy shout in his native tongue. He stumbled back up a few paces and looked up. "What is it you old coot?" He saw Kransy looking through the binoculars, pointing into the distance. Cooper threw his arms to the side, "What? Do you see something?"

Kransy dropped binoculars around his neck and he leaned over the edge as far as he could before shouting, "Someone, coming, now!"

Cooper froze. He couldn't seem to process it. He was aware someone was coming, but he couldn't find it in himself to move. He knew that this was the proper action to take. His legs refused to move. More people meant more cleaning up.

"Get the fuck up here, tupitsa!" Kransy's hands would not remain steady as he looked back through the binoculars. The man guarding the tunnel saw someone approaching in the distance. Kransy identified the threat in time. He didn't have time to be impressed with himself for pointing out the heavy camouflaged jacket the man wore. He could see brown cargo pants resting over black boots, and when Cooper got back to his post he filled him in, "He has square backpack. I can see them from shoulders. Mask too, like us." Kransy passed Cooper the binoculars. "Do you think it is enemy? Maybe like stray dog?"

Cooper looked at the approaching figure with unease until sighing, lowering the binoculars. "I think that's one of our runners," said Cooper, turning to his partner. "Backpack gives it away. Maybe it's Ronaldo. Matter of fact," Cooper lifted his hand to read his watch, "he's running late getting back. There should be one more coming back after him." Cooper set the binoculars down.

Cooper could tell Kransy's face was red under the mask, and made the decision to not talk about the false alarm.

"I am sorry for this one," Kransy said. "I never do this before, see?"

"Don't worry about it. I'm gonna radio this in," said Cooper. He picked up the radio receiver, "And hey, Kransy. I woulda done the same," lied Cooper, trying to ease the embarrassment thick in the air. He updated the higher-ups in the tunnel about the returning runner. Hopefully, he found something worthwhile for being gone so long.

#

"You got some idents?" Cooper shouted, blocking the entrance to the outpost. The man got near enough to respond at a normal level.

"Runner Ronaldo, IE-34-Z. I've got some stuff to brief you on before I bring this shit to inventory." He held up a badge, stamped with the Overseer's approval.

Cooper thought to himself that Ronaldo's voice was a bit off, a bit unsure maybe, but then again maybe it was an older voicebox in his mask.

Cooper grabbed it for further scrutinization. He turned around to his partner, "Kransy, get this man the rest of whatever's in that thermos." He turned back to Ronaldo and handed him back the badge, "Whaddya got for us?"

Before Ronaldo spoke, he set down his backpack that leaned over from the weight, and the two men sat down in creaky foldable chairs. "I-I spotted," his voice broke off to regain composure. "I spotted seventy-five parties within the western region, maybe about 50-clicks out in circumference, all ranging from two to ten people total. Nearest here was maybe five out, but he was solo, heading north." Ronaldo shivered and took a swig from the thermos.

Cooper was scratching down his report. This embarrassed Kransy, who couldn't write very well.

"This shit never matters, but any of 'em see you?" Cooper stopped writing and looked up from his clipboard. "Standard procedure, bureaucratic bullshit."

Ronaldo briefly paused and scratched his neck, "No idea. I kept pretty far away from all of them. I doubt they were able to see me."

"Well," said Cooper, "regardless of binoculars, Kransy saw you." Cooper started to tap the clipboard with his pen awaiting an answer. "Think real hard."

"No, we're good," responded Ronaldo almost immediately, nervous from this misinterpreted interrogation. Annoyed, Cooper saw that he clenched his fists.

Cooper pointed to Ronaldo's square backpack. "So if you didn't see anyone, how'd you get all this shit? Even the side pockets look like they're about to burst open."

Ronaldo looked down at his muddy boots, thinking of an appropriate answer.

"I found a...I found a camp far from here, near the limits of my search area," said Ronaldo, and he looked back up to Cooper. "No one was there, and their stuff was lying around. I think maybe one of those leftover creatures from the incident drove them off or took them away in the night. Maybe a wendigo, or stray angel, or some shit."

Cooper hunched over and continued to stare at Ronaldo's black eye lenses.

"So you're saying to me that you didn't waste a single motherfucker out there?"

"No, I did not fire a single bullet. You can check."

Cooper didn't know if Ronaldo's eyes were really looking back at him. Glancing around Ronaldo's body, Cooper's eyes

searched for any signs of dishonesty, as was standard procedure. He took a mental note. Two magazines were missing from Ronaldo's equipment vest.

Both men kept locked on with perfect masked poker faces.

Kransy wondered who would say something first.

"Let me run this down to the administrator's office," broke off Cooper, standing up to gather the necessary return forms. "Kransy, need anything on the way back? I'm gonna grab some gum." He started to head down the dim tunnel. "Blueberry, right?"

Kransy stiffened and clenched his fists. He looked at Cooper as intently as one could behind a mask. "Yes. Blueberry. Very perfect for me."

He is gum? Maybe this is not Ronaldo, is this what Cooper is meaning? Kransy thought to himself. He kept an even tighter watch on his rifle.

Ronaldo kept his fists on his knees and his head down. Kransy felt that Ronaldo's eyes were flickering at an unknown pace. Kransy could relate to only the most basic human emotions, ones that he could empathize with through his limited vocabulary. Every day, Kransy became more and more aware of social cues and emotional situations, but he considered the possibility that Ronaldo had seen or done something ungodly. Kransy could only imagine what it was like to venture out into parts unknown, in the constant dread of loneliness and inescapable fear of impending doom.

They stood idle in silent company, until, "Please, don't let him take me away," Ronaldo pleaded, still frozen in his chair. "I shouldn't have come here."

Kransy turned around, "What is that you said?"

"They'll figure out I'm not Ronaldo soon enough. Please, let me go," the stranger pleaded.

Kransy slowly put his hands on his rifle and took a few steps back into the mouth of the cave, "You, stay in seat." He lifted his rifle to his waist and pointed the barrel at the stranger with a slight shake.

"Oh God, oh fuck..." The stranger rocked back and forth in his seat. "Please let me go man, please."

"Where the fuck is Ronaldo?" Kransy raised his rifle and ended his sentence with the click of the safety. He held a hot rifle.

"Who are you?"

"I-I don't know who he is I-I just-" the stranger recoiled his legs away from the area near his feet where Kransy let loose a shot.

"Who sent you? Why are you here?" Kransy strode over to the stranger in his chair. "Tell me now or I will explode your head."

"I-I-I," the stranger raised his hands in front of his face and looked away, "I'm looking for someone, some people I mean."

"Who?" Kransy asked. He kicked the stranger over in his chair and towered over him, mud splashing everywhere. The man sloshed through the wet ground. "I will not ask again."

"O-O-Okay, just don't fucking shoot, okay?" The stranger leaned up on one arm. "I'm looking for my daughter," he gulped with heavy breaths between each word, "and my, and my wife. Some p-people told us about this place, and we were heading over here together, but we were attacked."

Kransy stopped breathing, shaken. *It cannot possibly be,* he thought. The stranger couldn't see Kransy's expression or defense drop, nor could he feel Kransy's heart stop.

"Who tell you of this place? Attacked by who?"

Kransy only heard their collective breathing.

"*Who!?*"

The stranger's cry pierced the voicebox and rendered it useless, and only the muffled scream was heard. "The man who wore this gas mask, the man who wore this jacket!"

"You kill Ronaldo?" Kransy whispered.

"Yes!"

"How? How could you possibly..."

The stranger noticed the feelings his captor was expressing and looked around for something to defend himself with. Everything was out of reach. "He slipped. I-It was raining...I reached for his rifle and-and-and shot him. Shot him right in the chest." The stranger jabbed a finger into his chest.

The stranger curled up and grunted from Kransy's heavy kick. "You killed good man. Good man who help keep my family and his family alive in tunnel. A man who we need very much." Kransy took the opportunity to knock the man's backpack out of the way, removing any potential defensive items from reach. "Why do you do this?"

"Am I not a good man?" Came the muffled, painful plea of the stranger from each lip. "He attacked my family. We were just trying to find safety. He keeps you guys safe," the stranger swallowed, "I keep my family safe."

Kransy returned to his position over the stranger. "If you keep them safe, why are they not here?"

"Your man, he lept at us from a tree, like a fucking panther. I screamed, I told them 'Annette, get you and Sherry out of here, now!' I told them to run, I..I told them to run," he paused. "They knew where to go, I told them how to find the right direction."

Kransy covered his face with his hand and shook his head. "You...Your family. What is it they look like?" Kransy knew the answer. He had prayed that he would never know the answer. He pleaded with God that this would never happen. It was coming.

"I have a picture," the stranger pointed over to his back, "It's in there. You will see."

"Don't. Move." Kransy kicked him again for good measure. "You should have never come here." He knelt down and unbuckled the latches of the backpack. "Durachit."

Fool.

Kransy rummaged his hand around in the bag until a corner poked him.

A frame.

Both men were silent, and the pattering rain snuffed the noises of the bag. Kransy's stomach felt sharp and twisted. He lifted the frame close to his face.

All Kransy could identify were shining sapphire eyes and the innocence he claimed.

The frame splashed when it hit the mud.

"See? Is that- does that make you feel better? Have you seen them?"

Kransy lingered, knelt down. "I have seen them, yes."

"Really? Where?" The stranger sat up. "Where did you see them?"

Kransy remained silent.

The stranger threw off his mask and clawed his way over to Kransy on hands and knees, mud splashing. "Did you send them away?" He grabbed onto Kransy's shoulders and shook him. "Where the fuck is my family?"

Kransy remained idle. He wouldn't dare look at the man in his blue eyes. He didn't want to see that little girl again, not like this. What was more merciful? How could he make up for what he had done? Should he tell the stranger he murdered that mother and child without a second thought the same way he was about to slaughter him? *I'm just following orders,* he thought.

Should he spare him? He couldn't let him go and live the rest of his life gambling that his family is somewhere still out there in the wastes waiting for their father and husband's warm hand. Should he tell him first what he had done, then spare him? Would that be a fate worse than death? Would he act reckless and attack Kransy like a wild animal? Words of Kransy's old chief officer rang in his ears. *Fear the man who has nothing to live for.*

Kransy's bombardment of mental questions and erratic interrogation lit a fire under the pot of his frustration. Rage and regret burned his chest and bled their way out. The stranger could not feel Kransy shaking and continued.

"Where are they? What direction did you send them in?" The stranger took initiative and pushed Kransy to the ground. He felt that his hands were going to jump out of his skin. Neither went for a rifle. "Why the fuck won't you answer me?"

Negative emotions boiled over and spewed from Kransy's lungs. He erupted to his feet and screamed with guilt, picking up the stranger high in the air before throwing him to the ground. "Why the fuck did you have to come? To come here?" Kransy's mouth gaped under the mask, and his chest rose and fell with each breath. His lenses developed an accented fog.

The adrenaline in the stranger kicked in, and he couldn't feel the pain in his snapped ribs. "Don't-don't kill me, please. They're still out there, aren't they?" The stranger held his chest and sat up, slowly pushing himself backward with his boots, away from the man reaching for the loaded rifle.

"Why won't you say anything? Are you a, a fucking golem or something?" The stranger continued to back away, immensely confused as to why Kransy was shaking his head while aiming the rifle.

"Why did you come here?" Kransy checked his ammunition. "Why do you make me do this?"

"You-you don't have to do anything," pleaded the stranger, raising a hand while continuing to back away. "You don't have to do this. Please don't."

The stranger's pleas fell silent, and instead soaked in the rain. Soft voices of the dead rang in Kransy's ears. The voices of the stranger's family screamed. Kransy wondered if the stranger could hear his family too.

"I'm so sorry, I'm so sorry," cried Kransy. He raised his rifle.

"Wait..you...you didn't..." The stranger trailed off, putting the pieces together. "You killed them, didn't you?" The life in the stranger's eyes sunk, receding from his pupils. "Did you kill them? No, you couldn't have." The stranger began to choke up.

"Sherry was only a child."

Kransy's voice cracked, "Why did you come here?"

"Please, please answer me. Did you do it? Please, tell me."

Kransy stiffened his aim and closed his eyes.

"Please, not my little girl."

A shot jolted Kransy's eyes open. No bullet casing fell from his rifle.

Kransy walked forward and inspected the stranger. He lay, covered in mud, eyes rolled back and mouth open. The bullet entered and exited in a straight line through the forehead and out the back. Rain diluted the blood flow.

Kransy's eyes swelled and short, horrified gasps escaped through his voicebox.

"Fuckin' shit, man. You alright?" Cooper made his way from the darkness, approaching his partner with gentle, steady steps, moving one foot at a time. "Is he down?"

"No, he needs to be sent down now."

Cooper now stood next to his partner, "What?" He looked up at Kransy.

Kransy did not say a word. Instead, he stood swaying over the body.

Cooper tried to lighten the mood. "Made a fuckin' mess, did ya? Now I gotta clean it up. Again!" Cooper knelt down near the backpack, stuffing odds and ends inside to bring in for inspection. A corner poked him.

A frame.

Cooper held it up close and looked at his partner after careful scrutiny of the photograph.

"Kransy? Don't tell me that's..." Cooper's voice drifted off. He looked back down at the picture frame. The glass splintered across the faces of the family like a lightning bolt.

Back turned, still looking down at the stranger, no, the father, Kransy said, "Their world ends with us. Their dreams are gone; they've gone with us."

The glass crinkled in the frame as Cooper set it on top of the dead man's body.

The never-ending rain continued to fill the silence.

Duo Valentine is an award-winning speculative fiction author and aspiring games writer with a knack for the romantic and grotesque. You can find him at herostory.info or @duo_valentine on Twitter.

Fall Birthday | Ben Virgin

Ben Virgin is a poet living in Anchorage, Alaska. Work has appeared on Poets.org and in the Lewis & Clark College Literary Review. He can be found on twitter @BennyVirgin.

via Pexels

I
Riding the bike path
Through yellowed deaths fluttering
We celebrate life

II
Cherish your present
The leaves ripen and wither
Our turn tomorrow

Robinia pseudoacacia | Abigail Linkous

alexander ermakov via Pexels

Robinia pseudoacacia
I fear I've been alive too long,
become
too good at survival,
a one-tree forest too balanced to fall,
only bluffing fragility.
I think I feel the fungus growing in the valleys,
in between the ridges of my gray matter. Yet
even then I fear the sting of my memory, the ashen bark of me, the locust tree
on the destitute hillside. I live cringing at the rock-hard pulp where I store the past,
vice griped by the brackish bark that surrounds it.

How can I humble myself on the judgement day,
when I cannot be convinced to release a drop of water in a thunderstorm?
when I bloom
in the drought?
when the burn of the Sun only makes my sheath tighter,
ridged, with fungi that grow in the red-orange watercourses of my scraping skin? After years of roots entrapped in eroding
yellow clay, there is a parabolic curve to my spine
and yet at the end I reached back towards the self-same Sun, plumes of fingerprint leaves
hiding pitchfork thorns among white flowers
all shaking defiance at the light they reach for.

Ah,
that someone could break me down to size
or help me straighten my form
to make a fool out of the iron in me
but I am singular in survival
landed as a hermit of the hillside,
withstanding the lightning strike with silence.
What is it that decided my terrible form?

I fear I've been alive too long
become
when I was supposed to stay the same—
in a world where I was told to stay small
Lord, I'm afraid I have become.

Born and raised in Appalachia. Temperamental. Can occasionally be found @SouthpawDinkous on Twitter.

J.E.M. | The Bar

via Pixabay

You may have heard it before. It goes something to the effect of –

A cobbler, a park ranger, a bassist, a butcher, a dentist, a vampire, a farmer, an herbalist, a farm-hand, a dock-worker, a florist, a politician, a car-salesmen, a zookeep, an editor, a gynecologist, a veterinarian, a coach, a banker, a specialist, a DJ, a runner, a line cook, an au pair, a marketing assistant, a swimmer, a werewolf, a blacksmith, a preacher, an astronaut, an analysist, a supervisor, a captain, a shipper, a long-haul trucker, a factory worker, a sous chef, a hotel attendant, an influencer, a comedian, a poet, a custodian, an architect, a pediatrician, a shelf stocker, a TV executive, a hair stylist, a travel agent, a tour guide, a security guard, a firefighter, a midwife, a baker, a researcher, an author, a sculptor, a giraffe, a gardener, a butler, a songwriter, an IT executive, an administrative specialist, an engineer, a professor, a ranch-hand, a waiter, a sales executive, a dog trainer, a lawyer, a rabbi, a contractor, a shopkeeper, a motorist, a weaver, a guitarist, a brewer, a lifeguard, a graphic designer, a legal consultant, a golfer, a barista, a cab driver, a furniture maker, a drug-dealer, an urban planner, a teacher, an imam, a fishmonger, a physician, a crossing guard, a front desk associate, a prisoner, a witch, a locksmith, a photographer, a sprinter, a beekeeper, an executive chef, a goldsmith, a pop star, a archeologist, a camera operator, broadcast news correspondent, a legislator, a web developer, a lawn-mower, a health care specialist, an analyst, a reader, a pathologist, a counselor, a clam-digger, a pastry chef, an ironworker, a backup singer, an audio technician, a mechanic, a deep sea diver, a pilot, a pharmacist, a translator, a civil engineer, an accountant, a tourist, a radiologist, an aide, a bobsledder, a social worker, an event planner, a nurse, a plumber, a logistician, a bus driver, an electrician, post officer, a brick mason, a telemarketer, a research specialist, a historian, a monk, a gatherer, a paralegal, a radio host, a receptionist, a concrete finisher, a glazier, a pirate, a game designer, a newspaper seller, an actor, a stall owner, an environmentalist, a dancer, an instructor, an astronomer, a competitor, a scientist, a caption writer, a curator, a tailor, a hygienist, a stay-at-home parent, an installation manager, a cellphone seller, a carver, a textile worker, a potter, a sketch artist, a meat packer, a mathematician, a skin care specialist, a wastewater specialist, a welder, a watch repairer, a fork-lift operator, a corpse, a woodcutter, a biologist, a drill operator, a gas station attendant, a casino operator, an embalmer, a data entry keyset, a cytotechnologist, a neurologist, a credit authorizer, short-order cook, a biochemist, an archivist, an allergist, a suffer, a mountain biker, an acupuncturist, a union organizer, a fence installer, a house pet, a drummer, a jockey, a wind-turbine technician, a small child, a robotics engineer, a dry cleaner, a scaffolder, a merchant, a wholesaler, a sanitation worker, an insurance broker, a valet, a cyclist, a graffiti-artist, a nail technician, an audiologist, a dispatcher, a paralegal, a surgeon, a librarian, a stage manager, a student, a wardrobe assistant, an indexer, a public relations officer, a florist, a conductor, a microbiologist, a felon, an air traffic controller, a warehouse executive, and an ultra-terrestrial walk into a bar.

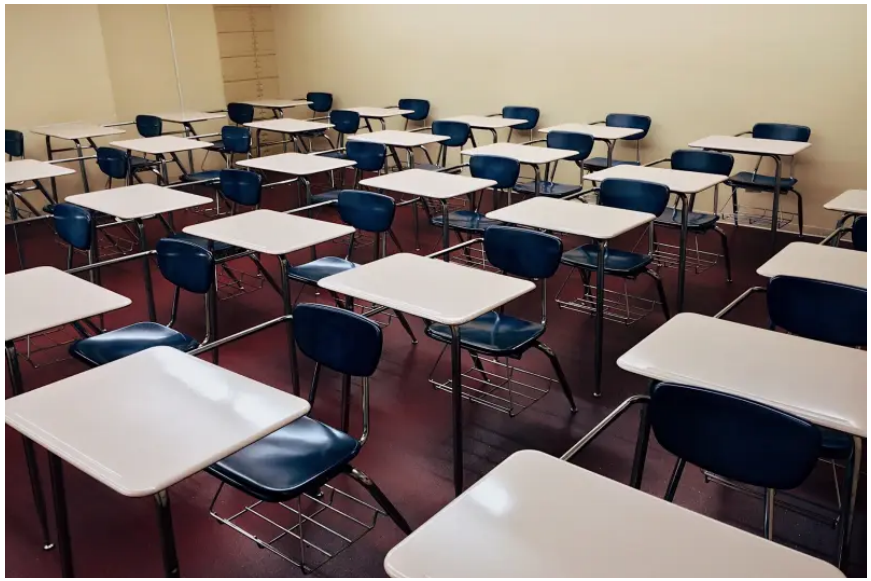
"What will it be?" asks the bartender.

"You", the group replies.

A cobbler, a park ranger, a bassist, a butcher, a dentist, a vampire, a farmer, an herbalist, a farm-hand, a dock-worker, a florist, a politician, a car-salesmen, a zookeep, an editor, a gynecologist, a veterinarian, a coach, a banker, a specialist, a DJ, a runner, a line cook, an au pair, a marketing assistant, a swimmer, a werewolf, a blacksmith, a preacher, an astronaut, an analysist, a supervisor, a captain, a shipper, a long-haul trucker, a factory worker, a sous chef, a hotel attendant, an influencer, a comedian, a poet, a custodian, an architect, a pediatrician, a shelf stocker, a TV executive, a hair stylist, a travel agent, a tour guide, a security guard, a firefighter, a midwife, a baker, a researcher, an author, a sculptor, a giraffe, a gardener, a butler, a songwriter, an IT executive, an administrative specialist, an engineer, a professor, a ranch-hand, a waiter, a sales executive, a dog trainer, a lawyer, a rabbi, a contractor, a shopkeeper, a motorist, a weaver, a guitarist, a brewer, a lifeguard, a graphic designer, a legal consultant, a golfer, a barista, a cab driver, a furniture maker, a drug-dealer, an urban planner, a teacher, an imam, a fishmonger, a physician, a crossing guard, a front desk associate, a prisoner, a witch, a locksmith, a photographer, a sprinter, a beekeeper, an executive chef, a goldsmith, a pop star, a archeologist, a camera operator, broadcast news correspondent, a legislator, a web developer, a lawn-mower, a health care specialist, an analyst, a reader, a pathologist, a counselor, a clam-digger, a pastry chef, an ironworker, a backup singer, an audio technician, a mechanic, a deep sea diver, a pilot, a pharmacist, a translator, a civil engineer, an accountant, a tourist, a radiologist, an aide, a bobsledder, a social worker, an event planner, a nurse, a plumber, a logistician, a bus driver, an electrician, post officer, a brick mason, a telemarketer, a research specialist, a historian, a monk, a gatherer, a paralegal, a radio host, a receptionist, a concrete finisher, a glazier, a pirate, a game designer, a newspaper seller, an actor, a stall owner, an environmentalist, a dancer, an instructor, an astronomer, a competitor, a scientist, a caption writer, a curator, a tailor, a hygienist, a stay-at-home parent, an installation manager, a cellphone seller, a carver, a textile worker, a potter, a sketch artist, a meat packer, a mathematician, a skin care specialist, a wastewater specialist, a welder, a watch repairer, a fork-lift operator, a corpse, a woodcutter, a biologist, a drill operator, a gas station attendant, a casino operator, an embalmer, a data entry keyset, a cytotechnologist, a neurologist, a credit authorizer, short-order cook, a biochemist, an archivist, an allergist, a suffer, a mountain biker, an acupuncturist, a union organizer, a fence installer, a house pet, a drummer, a jockey, a wind-turbine technician, a small child, a robotics engineer, a dry cleaner, a scaffolder, a merchant, a wholesaler, a sanitation worker, an insurance broker, a valet, a cyclist, a graffiti-artist, a nail technician, an audiologist, a dispatcher, a paralegal, a surgeon, a librarian, a stage manager, a student, a wardrobe assistant, an indexer, a public relations officer, a florist, a conductor, a microbiologist, a felon, an air traffic controller, a warehouse executive, an ultra-terrestrial, and a bartender walk *out* of a bar.

J.E.M is currently sitting on a couch in southern Wisconsin, a little windy on this night and a ghost show is playing from the other room. Otherwise, it is a relatively peaceful October.

Sex Education | Stephanie Wood



via Pixabay

"I want to start with an activity that will frame our lesson for today. Can I have a volunteer?" Ms. Amanda Kay looked across the room for a student who happened to catch her eye. I looked back over my shoulder at my science teacher, a man who had tiny tufts of hair above each ear and a belly that hung over the front of his belt buckle. He was hunched over his desk, no longer paying attention to the guest speaker here to teach us sex ed. Ms. Amanda Kay walked around the rows of desks, her heels clicking and her ruffle-front blouse rippling. Her eyes landed on Annie, who was still growing into her teeth. She was seated at the end of a row, so Ms. Amanda Kay walked to her with a series of clicks and handed her the tape dispenser.

"Now, Annie, I want you to pull a piece of tape from this roll." Annie took the tape dispenser and pulled off a piece. "Can you look at the tape, and tell me what it looks like?"

Annie looked up at Ms. Amanda Kay, her squinted eyes obscured in part by the reflection of her glasses. "Yeah, I guess. It's tape? It's kinda see through and sticky."

"That's right. It's nice and sticky. Does it have any dirt or lint on it?" "No."

"Now can you please pass the piece of tape to your neighbor?" Ms. Amanda Kay nodded towards Kenny. My heartbeat flickered as he looked up from whatever he was doodling in his notebook to take the piece of tape from Annie. I wished I could sit in Annie's seat for the trimester.

"Great, Kenny, can you please stick the tape to the sleeve of your shirt, and then pass it to your neighbor? We'll continue this down the row."

I wondered what Kenny was drawing. We were in an art elective together last year, so I knew he was a good artist. I always liked to see what he was drawing. He was never shy about showing me, sliding his sketchbook across the table when the teacher wasn't looking. Kenny stuck the tape to his shirt sleeve, ripped it off and passed it to Elise. The tape moved down the row, being stuck and unstuck from shirts. When it reached Cassy at the end of the row, she tried to press it onto her shirt, but it wouldn't stick. Ms. Amanda Kay clicked across the room and picked up the lint-covered piece of tape.

"This tape represents you." Ms. Amanda Kay held the tape out at arms length and turned as if she was showing a picture book to a group of kindergarteners. "Not just Annie, but each and every one of you is a fresh piece of tape, ready to make a bond. When the tape is fresh, it can make the strongest bond—just like how the tape stuck best to Kenny's shirt. But did you notice? When the tape reached the end of the row, it was all used up. It couldn't make a bond with Cassy's shirt at all. And look at all of the lint that's stuck to it."

"This is what happens when you have lots of sexual partners. You might bond so much with all of the partners you aren't meant to be with, that by the time you meet the person you're truly in love with, you can't connect with them. And all that lint? That's all of the heartbreaks and health risks you take along the way. You can avoid all of this by being abstinent, or abstaining from sex, until you're with the person you want to marry."

Ms. Amanda Kay went back to the front of the room. She pulled out a pile of worksheets that she passed around the room. *When and how to say 'NO:' Strategies for building refusal skills* stretched across the top of the paper. I skimmed through the exercises. They each had a fewlines to read describing scenarios, which we then had to mark whether it was something that could lead to sex, and if so, what would we say to get out of the situation. After thirty minutes of working, Ms. Amanda Kay went through the answers. Apparently, all of them were scenarios that could lead to sex. Going to the movies with your crush? Sex. Holding hands? Sex. Making out. Definitely sex. And if you didn't say no loud or often enough, then you would be riddled with STDs. If you were a girl, you were going to get pregnant.

But what if I wanted to go to the movies with a crush and hold his hand? And what if he wanted to kiss me? I thought about what I would do if Kenny asked me to go to the movies with him and felt a heat across my cheeks. I passed in the worksheet, and wondered if Ms. Amanda Kay would teach us more next week. I would never admit it to anyone, but I wanted to know more because I wasn't sure who to talk to about these things. I sometimes asked my cousin Reba because her older sister knew about the pill and condoms. I even heard that she'd given a few handjobs. I'd thought about talking to my mom about it, but I couldn't do it. The conversation seemed too awkward. Ms. Amanda Kay excused us from class with a wish for a nice weekend.

***

I sat next to my cousin Reba, hidden away in her closet with skirts and pants tickling the tops of our heads. She held the flashlight over the magazine we'd stolen from her older sister, Katie, to read the latest on celebrity gossip, fashion and making friends with everyone. Without saying anything to each other, we agreed to pretend that those were the articles we were interested in reading, so when we reached the section about the newest sex position and tips on how to drive your boyfriend crazy, we would be able to pour over the pages. This month's section had men telling about weird things they'd done during sex that they didn't expect to like, which ranged from doing it on the bathroom floor because of the way the tile stuck to their skin to having their dick wrapped up in ribbon before doing it.

"Are you going to wait until you're married to have sex?" I asked Reba halfway through the article.

"I don't know. Maybe. I don't want to be some huge slut, you know? But I also don't want to be some prude who doesn't do anything. Like I want a boyfriend and stuff."

I adjusted the magazine in my hands. "Yeah that makes sense."

Reba drew circles on the page with the flashlight. "Like it's probably okay to like give a handjob or something. I mean that's not even really doing it, you know?"

I nodded. I tried to imagine doing it in the bathroom with Kenny, but the closest thing I'd seen to a real life penis was the diagram we had to label in our biology unit on the body systems. I wasn't sure how I was supposed to know if I wanted to do it, or even if I wanted to do it at all. Reba would probably make fun of me for saying that out loud though, because she'd already talked about which guys in her theater group she'd do it with if she had the chance.

"Do you think Kenny would want to do it with me?" I asked without looking away from the page.

"Yeah, probably. You're pretty and guys are, like, always horny."

***

At church on Sunday, we gathered in the basement, which was a large rec room cluttered with a few donated couches, bookshelves and rows of chairs that looked like ones in waiting rooms. I sat down in the middle of the row next to Reba. Youth pastor Bill walked up to the front of the room. He always wore a quarter-zip and sneakers with faded blue dad jeans.

"Welcome back to confirmation class. Last time we started talking about the virgin Mary and how God sent the angel Gabriel to tell her of His plan. Remember, from what we know about the time period, Mary would have been only a few years older than most of you in the room."

As I processed this, I felt aware of a fresh uneven fluttering of my heart and a stickiness on my palms. I wiped my hands along the rough fabric of the waiting room chairs and said a silent prayer to God that he better not send an angel to me. I didn't understand why Mary had to give birth to Jesus. If it was an immaculate conception, a clean conception, did it count as sex? It couldn't, right? Because God wouldn't have sex with an unmarried virigin just to have a son, right? I raised my hand, and Pastor Bill called on me.

"I don't understand why God had to make Mary pregnant. He was able to make Adam from the dirt and Eve from a rib." I wanted to continue to say that it seemed like a much easier way all together, but thought better of it.

Pastor Bill adjusted his sweater and pulled one of the chairs to the front of the room, which is what he always did when he wanted to deliver one of his, as he called them, "Big Truths" about the Bible.

"Well, God wanted to test Mary's belief and trust in Him. This is something that God does many times throughout the Bible. Each time, we learn that we face challenges that force us to trust God. He wouldn't give us any challenges that He didn't believe we could overcome through faith in Him. Above and beyond this, Jesus had to be of the flesh and blood in order to accent our sins."

I shot Reba a sideways look. She returned the glance with a slight roll of her eyes. Pastor Bill stood back up to continue his lecture on Mary and Joseph's journey to Nazareth.

***

Ryan and Kenny were sitting backwards in desks that weren't assigned to them. I would normally have told them off, but Kenny was just a desk away from mine, and he looked nice in his grey hoodie. He wore it often, claiming that it was perfect for all seasons. We made eye contact as I slid my bookbag off my shoulder. I smiled and he smiled back before I turned my attention to pulling out my books for class. I knew I had to tell Reba about this the next time I saw her because she would be excited for me.

I didn't notice right away, but after I set up my nametent, I realized that Ryan was trying to toss bits of paper into Cassy's cleavage in a stupid game of boobsketball. Cassy had the biggest boobs of anyone in the class. She leaned back in her chair with her arms crossed high on her chest to block the shots but kept laughing. I hated when Kenny just went along with Ryan, who always came up with games like this. Ryan had snapped my bra a few times when I sat in front of him in English class, but Kenny was better than that.

The bell rang, and Ms. Amanda Kay waited as everyone returned to their seats. She asked for two more volunteers, but no one raised their hands. I tried to avoid eye contact. She called me up to the front of the room along with Kenny. I tucked my hair behind my ear and looked down at my sneakers.

"Kenny, can you pick up this pile of books for me?" Ms. Amanda Kay pointed at one of the two piles of books on the table against the wall at the front of the room.

Kenny shrugged and walked over to the books. He adjusted the pile so the edges were aligned and then tucked them under his arm.

"Great, now Savannah, can you please pick up the other pile?" Ms. Amanda Kay asked. I walked over to the other pile and picked them up, tucking them under my arm like I

would do with my bookbag. Ms. Amanda Kay pursed her lips together in an attempt to mask a frown.

"Savannah, is that how you always hold your books?"

"Yeah, I use a bookbag, so this is how I carry my stuff normally." I glanced over at Kenny, who was looking towards the back of the room.

"Well how would you hold them if you didn't have a bag?"

I shifted the books to my other side. "I'm not really sure what you mean."

"Okay well you can sit down." Ms. Amanda Kay reached out for the books. I passed them back to her, and she scanned the room. "Cassy, why don't you come up and help."

I felt my cheeks go warm and hoped the color wasn't as bright as it got in cartoons. Cassy took my place at the front of the room, where Ms. Amanda Kay handed the books to her. She folded her arms and cradled them like a 1950's picture of a schoolgirl.

"There. Do you see how Kenny holds his books compared to how Cassy holds her books?" Ms. Amanda Kay asked the class.

I looked at both of them. They were both people holding books. It didn't seem like anything significant, but Ms. Amanda Kay had switched me out when I didn't do it that way.

"Cassy holds her books that way because she's a young woman. It's natural for women to hold their books this way because it's practice for how they would hold a baby. Do you see?" Ms. Amanda Kay drew a swooping shape in front of Cassy's arms.

I felt the temperature of my cheeks increase and I looked down at my desk, reading over the graffiti carved into the wood. Cassy was so much prettier than me, and now she was more womanly too. She already had some instinct that I didn't have, which all of the guys seemed to have already figured out. And because I didn't have that—whatever it was—no one would ever notice me, and Kenny definitely wouldn't notice me.

***

I walked up the street from the school bus stop to my house. My neighbor Jackson and his friend Riley were in Jackson's front yard. He wasn't around very often now that he was in high school, but when we were younger, we used to be close. We would play on the swingset he used to have in his backyard, taking turns jumping off of the swings at the highest point. His parents took it away after he flew off and broke his arm when I was six and he was seven.

"Hey Sav!" Jackson waved. "What's up?"

I stopped on the sidewalk in front of the yard. "I don't know. Just school and stuff. You?" "Yeah same. High school is kinda crazy." Jackson looked over at Riley, who was leaned

back on his elbows. "Do you want to hang for a bit?"

Riley made a face at Jackson. I'd known Riley for a while, but we weren't close or anything. He had a few younger siblings, so I wasn't surprised he was annoyed at having to hang out with someone he probably considered a baby. I glanced over at my house. I knew I was supposed to go straight home after school, but my parents wouldn't be home for a few hours.

Besides, I was right next door with Jackson.

"Yeah that sounds good." I tossed my bag onto the lawn and sat down beside them. "So what're we gonna do?" Riley sat up and pulled some blades of grass, twirling them in his fingers.

"We can still play the new Smash Bros game. Sav can hold her own, and the game has multiplayer for four." Jackson stood up and dusted off the dirt from his pants.

Riley shot me a sideways glance and shrugged. I followed the two of them into the house, placing my bookbag next to the front door. Jackson's house always smelled like cinnamon because his mom had one kind of candle she liked to burn. I stopped in the bathroom while Jackson and Riley went downstairs to get the game set up.

As I washed my hands. I looked at my baggy t-shirt that had the logo of my dad's favorite restaurant on the front. He'd purchased them for everyone in the family when they went out of business. I'd tie-dyed mine, so it was covered in blue, green and purple splotches. It flopped down over my jeans, which were oversized and held on by a belt I'd borrowed —stolen—from Reba. I probably looked like a kid compared to all of the girls in high school. I'd have to pay more attention to the fashion section of the magazine next time Reba and I read it.

I joined Jackson and Riley in the basement. I picked Lucario for my character, and after I got the hang of the controls, I managed to win a few rounds. Jackson and Riley were sitting on the ground, elbowing each other in an attempt to make the other drop the controller. I sat on the couch, slouched back because the seat was too deep for my back to touch while my feet were on the floor. Between a few of the games, I caught Riley looking back at me. I scrunched up my face as a joke, figuring he was a little pissed off at getting beaten by a girl.

Jackson set the control down and excused himself to the bathroom. After the basement door clunked shut, Riley sat next to me on the couch. I could feel his shoulder and leg brush against mine. I felt my pulse in my fingertips, and I glanced over at him. He put his arm around my shoulder. I tried to scoot away, but I was next to the arm rest. I wondered how long Jackson would be in the bathroom.

"We're casual, right?" Riley patted my shoulder.

"Yeah, I guess." I wasn't sure if I wanted to sink onto the floor or if this was something that everyone did in high school. Some people were cooler about touch than others. Maybe Riley was one of those people.

"Cool, cool. So have you ever dated anyone?"

"Sorta." Did Riley like me? Was he trying to flirt with me? Did I like him? I looked over at him, but he was looking at the TV, so I saw his face in profile. His nose was a bit crooked and his eyelashes were long. I didn't think so, so why was my heartbeat going haywire? "But it wasn't, like, serious or anything."

"How far did you get? Like did you let him do this?" Riley reached over and squeezed my boob.

My awareness was flooded. I felt like I was merging with the fabric of the couch, the lumpy brown corduroy was swallowing me up and he was still touching me but it was too late to slide onto the floor and I felt the weight of his arm still around my shoulder and the sofa arm up against my hip and he was still touching me. He was still touching me.

"What the hell, Riley?" I tried to push his arms away, but he was stronger than me. "No. Stop it."

Riley turned to face me, pulling his arm off my shoulder. He kept squeezing my boob and ran his free hand up my leg to my crotch.

"I said no." I kicked my legs up, and my knee caught him in the face, which caused him to recoil. I ran up the stairs two steps at a time. I slammed open the basement door and ran into Jackson, who was walking while looking down at this phone. I clipped his shoulder as I ran for the door.

"Sav? Are you okay?" Jackson asked, turning to follow me.

"I've got to go." I grabbed my bag and let myself out of the front door. I dashed across the lawn and hopped over the short hedge between our houses. When I got inside, I locked the door behind me, shut the front blinds, and then went to the back door to make sure it was also locked. I felt the electricity of the flight of flight reflex still tingling in my legs. I poured myself a glass of water and drank the whole thing. I refilled it and cut myself a slice of the leftover cake from my mom's birthday the week before.

I went to the study and sat in my grandpa's old overstuffed recliner that he'd given to us when he moved to the retirement home. I covered myself up in the blanket that hung off the back of the chair and turned on the TV to the afternoon cartoons. As I ate the slice of cake, I didn't know what I should do. My phone started to buzz with text messages from Jackson, but I ignored it. I thought about texting Reba, but I didn't know what she would say. Should I have let him do it so I wouldn't be a prude? But I didn't want it, so maybe that made me a slut. I couldn't be sure. I put my phone on silent and put it down face down on the small table next to the chair.

I watched cartoons until I heard the garage door rumble open as my mom got home. I quickly tossed the blanket along the back of the chair and turned off the TV because I wasn't supposed to be watching it on school nights. I ran into the kitchen and pulled out my book for English class from my bookbag to make it look like I'd been doing homework the whole time.

I hadn't thought about if I wanted to tell her, but when she walked in, I realized I didn't want to get in trouble for being at Jackson's house. She would be mad at me for going over after school without her knowing, and she would have said no if I asked. Then I wouldn't have been there with Riley.

Later that night, when I went to plug my phone in, I looked at the messages that Jackson sent. Most of them were asking what happened, but in the last one he wrote, "Riley told me what he did. I'm really really sorry. It's super effing gross that he did that. If you ever need someone to talk to about it, I'm here, but...like...no pressure."

I turned my phone over in my hands, getting the cord twisted around. I looked out my bedroom window to the solitary streetlamp casting a circle of yellowish light on the concrete.

"OK. Thanks, Jackson. I will let you know," I texted back.

I turned my phone off. I didn't want to talk to him about it.

***

Ms. Amanda Kay was talking about STDs, but I couldn't stop thinking about the tape we passed around the week before. I felt a bit more linty now. I wanted to know if it meant that I wouldn't be able to connect with someone I actually liked. I glanced over at Kenny, who was drawing in his notebook again. It wasn't fair. It shouldn't count because I said no. It's not like I wanted Riley to do that to me.

I said no, so why didn't he listen? Maybe I needed to say it louder or more times. But what good would saying no do if the person doing it wasn't even going to listen? It wasn't fair. I jammed my pencil down too hard as I dottend an "i" in my notes, causing the lead to snap.

When class let out, Ryan and Kenny caught up with me in the hall. Kenny put his hand on my shoulder. For the first time, I didn't want him to touch me, so I shrugged it off.

"Hey don't be like that." Ryan said, watching the interaction.

"We just wanted to know if it's true." Kenny leaned up against the wall in the way I'd watched him do dozens of times in front of Cassy.

"If what's true?"

"I heard from my brother, who heard it from Riley Killkannon's sister, that you let Riley get to second base, " Kenny said with a grin on his face that I'd normally think was cute.

"I'm not saying it's true, but so what if it was?" I felt a tingle in my nose that happened before I started crying. I bit the side of my cheek to try to stop myself. I looked around the hall to see if anyone from my next class was walking by so I could slip away with them.

"Oh so you're saying it's true then?" Ryan interjected in the conversation and laughed. Kenny shrugged. "I dunno. Just that if you ever want to do something like that again—" "Ew. Screw you, Kenny." I pushed past him and Ryan.

As I walked through the crowded hallway to my next class, I wiped a few tears off my face, my hands shaking from a scorching feeling of rising anger in my chest. I couldn't believe that Riley bragged about it to more people—now everyone was going to think I wanted to do it with him. I didn't even want to do it with Kenny anymore, but that didn't matter. I wasn't even sure if what I wanted mattered at all.

Stephanie Wood holds an MFA from Arcadia University and runs Cosmic Double literary journal. Her work has been published in Sad Girls Club, Grim & Gilded, Walkabout Journal, and Journal TwentyTwenty.

A Small Poem About Heaven | Isaiah Everheart

@bastard_poet on ig and @bastardpoet on twitter

Jonathan Petersson via Pexels

Indifferent afternoon washing over all that the eye can see

Golden hour blanketing the world in the quiet that you can only find in your mother's eyes

The beautiful stillness that not even poetry can buy.

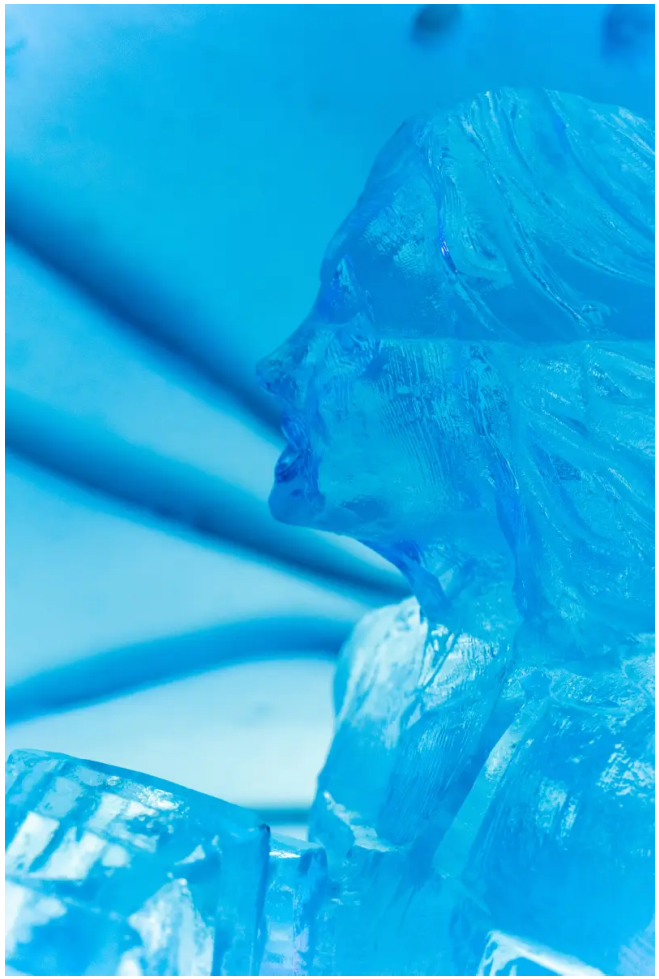
Nothing dies here.

All the graves are empty and we're all asleep on our grandmother's couch, cousins sleeping scattered around us

For a little while at least,

There is peace.

A Match Made | Erica Viola



Evan Velez Saxer via Pexels

They stood seething at one another; she in the doorway with her hands on her hips, he, leaning against the kitchen counter with stiff arms ending in fists. Looking at his wife with narrowed eyes, he began to kick at a strip of peeling linoleum.

"I hope you have the money to fix that, you drunk-ass piece of shit," his wife growled. "Oh! That's right! You don't *have* any money!" She smirked.

He looked longingly down at his white knuckles.

"You," he said, "are the dipshit bitch who spent seventy-five dollars on a pair of shoes for a wedding we didn't even get invited to."

She scowled.

"We would've been invited if you hadn't gotten so drunk at the engagement party," she snapped. "What kind of fucking asshole dances with an ice sculpture?"

He pounded the kitchen counter with his still-clenched hand. "I needed to get drunk. I can't handle your friends. Up-themselves hot-girls. They'll end up humping a pole for dollar bills."

"My friends are *professionals* – they were certainly smart enough to tell me that marrying you was a shit idea," she countered, her cheeks mottled. She took a carefully measured, yet menacing, step towards her husband.

His eyes brightened. He was beginning to enjoy the conversation.

"If your *friends*," he said, snapping the words like chewing gum, "were so right about me, why didn't you listen? I wish you had. I wish I'd had friends to tell me that buying a diamond ring is a one-way ticket to hell."

"You call this piece of glitter a diamond? It looks like you got it from a vending machine." She wiggled her left finger mockingly at her husband. The dirty half-carat gave out a half-hearted sparkle.

"You're lucky someone wanted an ungrateful, worn-out slut like you at all." He bent and violently ripped the strip of linoleum loose. She shrieked.

"What the hell are you doing. What the *hell*." She started towards him, then thought better of it. "We're living in a shithole. Rags for curtains. Cigarette burns in the carpets. Holes in the floor now. Bowl under the kitchen sink. I suppose Mr. Fix-It is going to repair that too, right? Just like you *fixed* the kitchen table the and the bathroom doorknob. Regular handyman, aren't you? The King of DIY!" She spat at him, her grey-flecked phlegm nearly reaching his dirty sneakers.

He leaned over and ripped another strip of linoleum. It tore free just as his wife brought her boot-shod foot down upon his hand. Bones crunched. He yelped and reached up, clawing at her, but she put her weight into it, grinding her heel into his wrist. He shoved at her legs with his free hand, sending her reeling into the refrigerator. She slid down the door, stood, then wrenched the fridge open and snatched a jar of strawberry jam.

Drawing her arm back, she aimed with cold, careful precision. Her eyes were blank: black holes in her pale, tired face.

As he ducked, shielding his head with his arms, a piercing howl came from the bedroom. He looked up at his wife. She looked back at him and quietly replaced the jam.

"Baby's awake," she said, gently, and walked out of the kitchen.

Erica is a Nebraska native living in London. Her work has appeared in Press Pause Press, The Bookends Review, and Into the Void, among others. She holds a BFA of Creative Writing from UNO.

ongoing winter | Jessica Pascale

via Pixabay

it's too cold in my bones
a blizzard of pain and regret
piled up three feet high
hailstones of "what if"
missed opportunities and divergent paths
hit whenever the sun
sinks below the horizon
like clockwork.

drinking coffee with a blanket covering
my body can only thaw so much.
my bones beckon for a fire
to melt it all down.

start brand-new without
the weight of a decade
stuck in the snow hill.

strike a match watch it catch
fire burns free and warm
no storms to be seen.

Jessica Pascale is a writer living in Southern Connecticut. She writes about love, longing, dreams, and discovery. When not writing, she can be found drinking decaf coffee and listening to music.

Titania's Autumn | Maura Lee Bee

hiwa talaei via Pexels

after "Wedding Dress Spring/Summer" Yves Saint Laurent, 1999

Her fingers laced with rose and blush,
The petals bloomed just with her touch.
Grass danced fondly by her hand
against the wind within they stand

But though her growth brought strength and light
Fair Queen was left in tears and strife
And as her sobs grew with such power
the leaves were changing by the hour

Her ladies—Mustardseed and all—
had met a quite untimely fall.
No Oberon, nor King like he
Though once she loathed, fell to her knees.

"What preposterous times there'll be—"
she called, in constant agony,
Her kingdom null, a tragedy
Her thumbs grazed vines and heartsease[1].

And then, a new idea was struck,
seemed it was her only luck.
A margin from the grounds below
of human kingdoms, though her foe

They wheeled through forests, cut down trees,
did not look towards fields for ease,
and though she scorned them now forever
She thought, "well, I could be quite clever."

She found the scraps of knights and kings
and placed some parts beneath her wings,
Some screws, some clay, and just in time
they threw two consoles by her side

With her panels, wire, and thread
and all these ideas in her head,
She strung the scraps of men together
to make her fairies last forever.

Their metal hands, their fabric wings,
and if she tried, they all could sing!
Even Puck, though lackadaisical,
in new form was transformational!

Cobweb and Moth were poised and ready
Peaseblossom too, Mustardseed steady,
and Oberon, once ready to seize,
her Kingdom he was eager to please!

And as the trees turned green and brown,
Titania then took off her crown.
Among the leaves and tiny buds
she threaded in some metal studs.

Then she looked down from her chair
and watched her fairies flying there.
Though automatons now filled their place
she missed the former fairy race.

Titania called, “Fairies, come hence!”
And so they did, their very best
“Tis the end for fairies? Well not today,
for our kingdom shall forever stay.”

[1] Wild pansy; Love-in-idleness

Maura Lee Bee is a queer, LatinX writer based in New York City. Her work has previously been published in Autostraddle, YES Poetry, Breadcrumbs & more. Twitter & IG: @mauraleebee mauraleebee.com

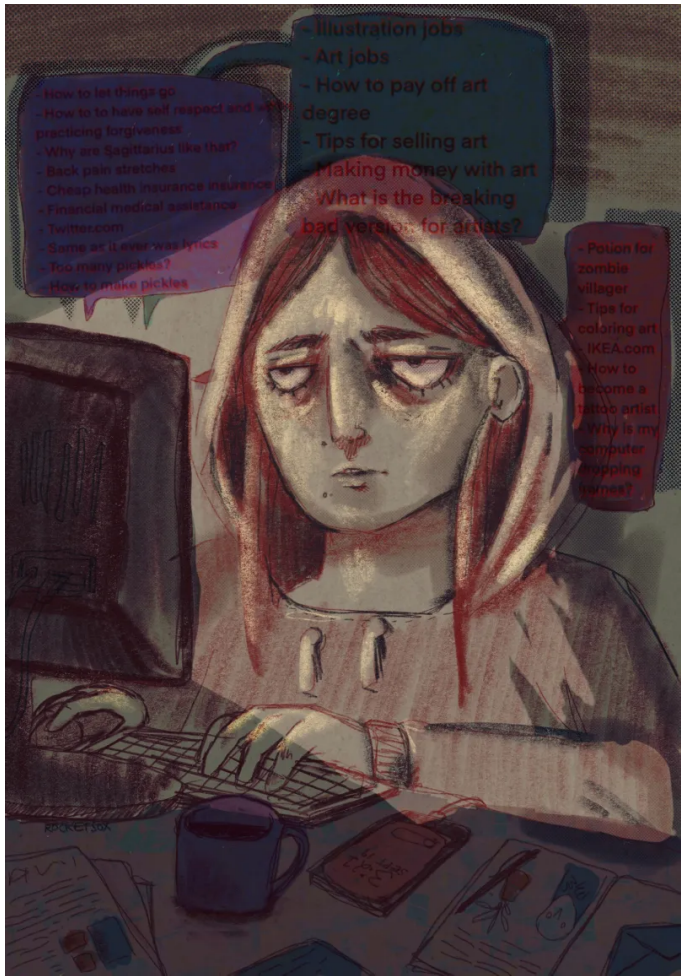
It’s Rare to be Struck by Lightning. | Anthea Dinh-Tram

Philippe Donn via Pexels

Thunder roars and everybody runs indoors,
except for one sitting in a tree,
catching hailstones that are
too dense, too dented,
too damaged to be snowflakes,
and holding them in soft, buttery hands,
so rain can water earth
like tears flowing from my eyes,
as there is someone
out there
who lights a spark.

Anthea Dinh-Tram is an emerging writer from Sydney, Australia. She hopes readers enjoy her work and thanks them for reading. Follow her on Twitter @antheadinh_tram.

3am | Tara Jean Murphy



via Tara Jean Murphy

Tara Jean Murphy is an artist located in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania. Her art can be found on instagram @rocketsox or at www.tjmurphy.art

Farmer jpg | Mia George

Dan Hamill via Pexels

I've got a simple life. I bring up soft white animals
out of the dirt. The horizon is level & it's permeable
by rainbow. There are four hooks on the wall by
the door, do you see? I live there. It's blink and you'll
miss it. But it is possible. If you try. It's a little aberration
in a gloom & smear of action. There. Wait— there.
A sheep did something interesting this morning.
She asked me something. I couldn't answer. I was
fixing my hat on my head. I was doing all my buttons
& then double-doing them. I don't mean I didn't
understand her. I mean there was girlhood in those
words. And both our eyes shifted over to the smile in
the field. The wooly lifeboat. The headless ram.

Mia George is a writer based in Boulder, Colorado. She is currently an editor at Meridian Journal. You can contact her at mgeocw@gmail.com, or by playing Darkness on the Edge of Town backwards.

It Stalks Us Still | Mob

Valentina Maros via Pexels

It stalks us still.

Time for time and hundred long. Looks ill. Starved-thin limbs, necrotic. Strong. And so it goes on and on. Stalks. Walks. Strides, strips the meat from corpses: none-recorded, unreported, out of sight and mind.

No lie. 'Cross the plains, cross every heart, to every house; forgotten floors where dogs lay down to die. Hinges *creak* in the deep and dark. Let in the cold. Whispers on the breeze. Rank old breath behind the ear and up the spine—panting, hungry, desperate, no lull. Never done. Never warm. Needy. No pull great enough to fill to full its maw, its open and drool-noose spilling jaw.

More. Always more, it says in shadowed tongues. Drip down the ear, caress the canal. Tones of swamp-beast dreams slip out of sight through the silt.

Buried to the hilt.

Blade of conquest—plain of bones. Ash for blanket plagues, blankets the land, no resistance good enough to stop the spill of blood. Heavy rain, sacrifice. Ruined altar, unnamed gods; churn the sod, turn the toil, and up above they leer from ivory towers torn gristle-fresh from wrinkled flesh—those beasts of old. Never told that evermore is never then enough.

No such thing as too much stuff.

The maw of *more* screams 'cross it all of dreadful need—now heard—it quietly grows as twisted branch in hearts and minds to raise the Empire of a Single Word:

Greed.

Mob writes, codes, and boulders. Work currently found on the Tales to Terrify Podcast, The Dread Machine, and Old Moon Quarterly. Twitter @mob_writes

Nothing Should Last Forever | Emma Cholip

Luis Dalvan via Pexels

If my elation comes from phases and cycles
then let that indecisiveness be the death of me.
Let those who can't understand stay perplexed;
I never wanted to live and die as the same soul
I only ever wanted to transcend
the monotony of it all.

To be finite is to be alive.

Emma (They/She) is a 23-year-old author from Wisconsin. They're passionate about horror fiction and poetry. She's an editor for Messy Misfits Club, and has been published before. IG/Twit @emmacholip.

Northeast Regional North to Philadelphia | Jay Jolles

Albin Berlin via Pexels

Staring at the baggage cars so hard my eyes crossed, I simply couldn't process at that speed. Had I peeked through the trees, I might've seen you next to me. I approached the turn on Page, breath catching in my throat. Took the hard left and gave it a little gas up and over the bridge. Seconds later you were gone for good, ensconced in the chuggachugga of all that steel.

For a time, we moved at the same pace in the same direction. Which is to say: I think we did the best we could with what we had.

Twitter: @jay_jolles

Jay Jolles is an emerging writer with work in Pidgeonholes, The Atticus Review and Avidly. He reluctantly lives in the other Williamsburg. Virginia, not New York.

On the Five Second Rule | Kaia Boyer

Brett Sayles via Pexels

I stare at you from ten million light years and ten feet away. One. The soundwaves ring out; it inhabits your room and our hippocampi. Two. There's a tick in your leg, your eyelids circle. My tongue, too heavy for my too-big mouth. Three. It starts to sink in like mustard in our picnic blanket sixteen moments ago. Four. Your mouth makes a cracked, harmful sound. Five. I stagger backward. Six. Too many seconds. It's sick and ruined.

Kaia Boyer (they/she/he, Twitter @kaiaiswriting) is a Chinese-American author born and raised in California, and

currently revising their second novel.

A Rotting | JI Daniels

David Peinado via Pexels

There is a rotting in my house, and I can tell that it is me. It is slow, but the knowledge comes. It is that kid you knew, who was lax in showering, who was slow to deodorant, who would catch a whiff of himself and screw up his face and accuse someone around him of farting, the one who, later that day, in a burst of insight, you would catch trying to subtly smell himself, that look of realization and shame on his face when he realized. I wonder about those kids. I hope they figured it out, changed in such a way that they remained who they were, but adapted only as much as needed to avoid the barbs of our cruelty. I hope they found peace, though I imagine few did. Most doubled down on their isolation, bitter and alone, ignoring the things that made them beautiful in their embrace of ugliness; or else they contorted themselves into the shape that they were told they should be, finding how to fit in, joining the fraternal order of concessions and uniformity, chaffing inside of the normal-suit, unwilling to unzip it, even a little bit, in the worry that if they spilled out, they might never get back in.

I am an Assistant Professor of English at Clayton State University, the author of the novel, Mount Fugue, and If You Can, a collection of short stories.

A Little Perspective | Suraj Adiray

RODNAE Productions via Pexels

Vishwa sat on his bedroom floor redecorating his Barbie dollhouse, which was as high as he was tall, rearranging the furniture—a velveteen sofa set paired with two side tables and the dining set piece. Grandma would be proud of his skills. She often said, "You can tell a lot about a person from the shoes they wear, and you can tell even more from how they keep their home."

All Barbie wanted was a laid back summer break, and her home ought to reflect that.

"Just a little while now, Barbs," he said to his friend who lay sunbathing by her backyard pool with Ken. "Neat," he added, picking them up and walking them through the back entrance.

"Your house looks great, Barbs!" Ken said, jumping on his feet for some reason.

Barbie blushed, batting her long lashes. "Oh, thank you, Ken, you're the sweetest." Ken gave her a twirl and they briefly kissed. "Isn't it beautiful?" she cooed, looking around.

"It can never as beautiful as you, sweetheart," Ken said, making her blush again.

Vishwa smiled to himself, happy for his friends. "How about some TV?" he said, making them comfortable on the sofa that now faced a wall-mounted flatscreen.

Mother walked in carrying a set of his folded clothes. Vishwa looked up at her, and she smiled. "How are Barbie and Ken doing today?" she said.

"Pretty good," Vishwa replied, unable to stop grinning and feeling giddy. "They're having a great time watching TV. They also enjoy the new setup."

"Oh yeah?" Mother said as she arranged his clothes in the wardrobe. "Well, let them watch TV. Let's get you some lunch in the meantime." She shut the wardrobe door and tilted her head to beckon him after her. Gathering her open hair, she rolled it into a bun and made a crude knot.

Vishwa keenly watched the back of her head, deciding that he'd later style Barbie's hair in a similar way. Ken would like that, too.

As Vishwa followed Mother into the dining hall out of his bedroom, the door opposite his room creaked open and out stepped Father, rubbing his hands. "Something smells great!" he said, bearing a smile that looked incomplete. Usually, his smile cut prominent dimples, but they were visibly absent now. Vishwa had come to pick up on that to mean Father didn't quite mean it.

Vishwa washed his hands in haste, sensing Father approaching closer. There were times he felt like Father loved him, but in moments like this, when he forced a smile and acted like someone he wasn't, Vishwa couldn't make sense of it. Drying his hands on the towel hanging by the sink, he turned to find Father staring into his room—at the dollhouse.

The look on his face said it all. The sealed lips, the flaring nostrils, the sharpness in his gaze when he panned it towards Vishwa; the latter was like he wasn't looking at but through him. A wave of numbness washed over Vishwa as he stood under the burning spotlight of judgment. He swore Father even muttered something under his breath. Vishwa charted a wider path around him and hurried to the table. For a while, silence lingered as Mother set the table with steaming rice, fresh lentil soup, and skimmed buttermilk. Father helped her by fetching the eating plates and a jar of pickle, and refilling water.

Vishwa served himself some rice, and upon Mother's insistence, scooped more onto his plate. Then came the lentil soup to be mixed with the rice.

"How's it going buddy?" asked Father, tossing him a brief smile sans the dimples.

Father was mad. Taking a shallow breath, he said, "Good." He swayed his legs that dangled from the chair. Mother forbade him from doing it, but it helped ease his twisting stomach.

Father cleared his throat. "Hema, isn't there a cricket match today?"

Mother scoffed. "Yeah, but it's a boring test match."

"But it's India versus Pakistan, correct?" Father said in an abnormally loud voice.

Mother frowned at him, chewing her food slowly. "Anyway, we have to do some grocery shopping today. Don't forget that."

Father looked at Vishwa again. "You're coming too, right Vish?"

Vishwa looked from his plate to Mother and back. He knew Father was tough. He didn't tolerate mischief or nonsense at any level, and Vishwa knew Father didn't like him playing with dolls. He couldn't understand why but considered he might as well spend time with his parents since Barbie and Ken would have to get some sleep now. He nodded, nibbling at his food.

#

Vishwa lingered after lunch. Normally, he'd be expected to clear his plate and wash it, but Mother had given him a pass today. "Go play, I'll take care of this." The softness in her tone from earlier in the bedroom was gone, and she didn't meet his eyes while speaking, which was a sign that she was angry. The way she clattered the utensils in the kitchen sink only confirmed it.

And so, Vishwa didn't skulk back into his room but hovered about in the hall pretending to drink water. He must've downed three glasses of it when he heard whispers from the kitchen. Vishwa stepped to the threshold and listened, hiding beside the massive refrigerator.

"What *was* that while eating?" Mother said in an icy voice.

"We've talked about this, Hema," Father said. "He's not a girl to play with dolls. I'd be fine if he played with toys like GI Joe or something, but dolls? Really? He's not a baby anymore. What will happen if other boys see him play with dolls meant for girls?"

"Stop saying it like that," Mother snapped.

Vishwa stared at the floor. Why was he feeling bad about playing with dolls? Weren't they meant to be played with? Why was it so important that only girls play with them while boys watch cricket and football matches?

"He's just seven years old, Gokul," Mother continued. "Look at how happy he is when he plays with his dolls. Just let him get older; he'll forget the dolls and turn his attention to whatever his friends are doing. This is just a phase, and you know it."

"Your mother is to blame too, you know?" Father said.

"What is *that* supposed to mean?" Mother raised her voice a little.

Vishwa dipped his chin further. How could a topic so silly spawn a huge fight between his parents who loved each other so much? And why talk so badly about Grandma who'd only been kind to him, gifting new dolls and chocolates whenever she came visiting?

He slowly shook his head, clenching his fists, when Mother stormed out of the kitchen. She slowed upon seeing him and sighed. Vishwa looked up at her and curbed his urge to cry.

"You're doing your grocery shopping by yourself," she yelled into the kitchen. Tossing at Vishwa a warm smile, she took his hand and led him into his bedroom, shutting the door.

Vishwa perched at the edge of his bed, staring at the dollhouse, feeling the urge to break it apart. If not for Mother who ruffled his hair and hugged him sideways, he might've done it.

"That was nothing, okay?" she said, pinching his cheek. "Your father has had a rough day."

If Father lied with the way he smiled, Mother lied with words. Vishwa said nothing.

"Come here." Taking his hand, she led him to the dollhouse and picked up Barbie. "Hey Ken," she said in a shrill voice. "I feel so bored. Let's do something interesting."

Vishwa stared at Mother as she passed him Ken and nodded invitingly.

He hesitantly took it and sighed. "I'm not in the mood, Barbs. Maybe another time."

"Come on, Vishu, can't you see how disappointed your friend is?" She held up Barbie in front of her face, facing him. "Do you really want to make her feel sad?"

"She might be a doll but to me she's a human. Humans aren't always happy."

Mother set Barbie aside and cupped his cheeks. "True, but as a friend, it's your duty to make her feel happy when she's sad and could use a cheer."

Vishwa fiddled with Ken before setting him by Barbie's side. What if she wanted to be sad? "Maybe today they need to be in separate rooms, to be alone."

"Are you sure?" Mother said. "Barbie will miss Ken so much."

Vishwa nodded with a smile. In the silence, he heard Father gather the motorbike keys and then close the front door. Moments passed before his motorbike rumbled, fading away. "Papa is angry at me for this, right Mamma? I should stop, right?"

"He'll be fine," Mother said. "We're going to be too busy to be bothered by his mood."

Vishwa arched his brows, puzzled. "Busy doing what?"

"I've got a surprise for Barbie and Ken," Mother whispered, her eyes wide with excitement. "I'm going to build a ship just

for them to go on a vacation. You want to help design it?"

The only thing Vishwa loved more than playing with dolls was building a ship out of a cardboard shoebox. Adding decks by gluing scraps of cardboard to the insides of the empty box and fitting different Lego items and accessories salvaged from other collections of toys he already had, the ship's interior would be finished. Then, replacing the box's top and using smaller bits of cardboard boxes to act as the superstructure, he'd place more stray toys within.

This time, Mother added her magic, attaching bobby pins and bobbins from her embroidery kit to act as lifeboat pulleys and cranes. Fetching paint, they split the task of painting the hull and the superstructure in a palette of metallic black, wooden brown, cement gray, and a flourish of sunrise gold for accenting the doorway and window lintels Vishwa had cut into the cardboard.

"What would be its name?" she asked when the hull was all painted.

Vishwa considered it. "*BMR Willows*. BMR is Barbie's name, and she's from Willow."

"*BMR Willows*, it is," Mother said, carefully painting the letters against the black hull in white. "There! I think we're done. Now, let the paint dry."

In the next fifteen minutes, they established their base of operations in the bathroom where Mother gathered a wide-mouthed tub she often used to rinse soiled clothes and filled it with water.

Vishwa, for his part, ran to the kitchen and returned with the salt jar. Dumping a few scoops in, he dunked his hand to dissolve it. All done, Mother gingerly lifted the decorated and painted shoebox of a ship.

"Are you ready?" she said. The thrill and delight in her voice was unmistakably genuine.

She gently placed the ship on the saltwater, and though its weight submerged a part of the box, they'd accounted for it in design by gluing to the base of the shoebox a padded cardboard base. The pocket of air between the base and the shoebox's bottom provided enough buoyancy, Mother had said, and she was right. But it looked like she wasn't done.

"I'll fetch Barbie and Ken, okay?' she said.

When she returned, both Barbie and Ken had different clothes on, the fancy ones.

Vishwa grinned. "Of course, they need to come dressed for the trip."

Mother laughed, placing the dolls on two chairs upon the top deck.

"Don't they look perfect?" Vishwa said, hovering over them.

"As perfect as my son," she said, pulling him to a hug and kissing the top of his head. He flinched a little, but she held on, making him sit on her lap so she could rock him.

"What do you think Barbie and Ken are discussing?" she asked.

Vishwa pulled from her hold and leaned closer to the ship again. "They're thanking us for giving them this gift."

Mother winked and smiled. "You're welcome, Barbie and Ken. And Vishu, tell them I said thanks for keeping my son happy."

#

The rustle of the front door lock distracted Hema. Gokul had returned from shopping. She wanted to leave the man to himself for the rest of the day, especially so at the sight of the mute fear and dread that warped her son's face. It wasn't how she'd envisioned a boy perceiving Father, but here they were. She smiled at Vishwa. "Go on, keep playing. I'll be back."

Drying her hands with the towel, she exited the bathroom to find Gokul loading the table with bags of produce and milk, among other things. He was usually thorough with the list, but after their row today, Hema felt inclined to inspect the items to ensure he hadn't fucked with it to get a rise out of her. Maybe it was her that needed calming down.

Gokul gave her *that* look, the subtle slanting of his eyes, the flat lining of his eyebrows, and the gentle lowering of his head. He'd had the time and space to brood over this, and sure enough, the words tumbled out of his mouth. "Honey, I'm sorry for reacting that way earlier. I'm just worried what others would think." Not quite an apology.

"Forget others," she said. "What do *you* think? When you see our son playing with a Barbie doll, what goes through *your* head? That's all we care about."

Gokul froze for a few moments. He fumbled for words but cleared his throat in the end. "You're right; I do feel a little uneasy. I played with toys until I was eleven but it's not normal seeing a boy his age playing with *dolls*, still. Right? Tell me I'm not insane."

Hema crossed her arms. "And how different are toys from dolls?"

Gokul shrugged. "You be the judge. Don't you feel even a little weird seeing him talking to plastic objects, braiding their hair, dressing them up? I feel awkward even saying it."

Hema clicked her tongue, shaking her head slowly. "Come with me." Taking his hand for better measure, she led him towards the bathroom where Vishwa still sat by the tub playing. They lurked by the threshold and watched their son talking with his friends, steering the ship along the waters, piping up commands as he played pretend.

Hema glanced at Gokul. "Does he look happy?"

Gokul's face dipped further. "Yeah, but—"

"Does his happiness mean something to you?"

"Of course."

"Then let's get you a little perspective," Hema said firmly. "Playing with a doll doesn't make him less masculine and more feminine. If he has a little femininity in him, I'm sure that'll make him a great dad someday. He *loves* what he does, and he puts his heart and soul into them. He talks to plastic objects not because he's lonely or is off in the head but because he's trying to make sense of our world through them. It's an outlet, a way for him to express himself and his emotions and thoughts. A way for him to build compassion. Doesn't that make you proud?"

Gokul remained silent but nodded at length, rubbing his forehead. "Yeah, I can see that." He sighed and stroked her cheek. "I can see that." Giving her a reassuring look, he walked into the bathroom. "Hey buddy, what's up?"

Hema's heart fluttered at the sight of Vishwa stiffening. Even as Gokul lowered to a squat, Vishwa's anxiety didn't vanish. Something shifted in his look when Gokul said, "Can I join you?"

Vishwa's brows arched. "Really?"

Gokul grinned and nodded. Vishwa shifted, blinking at Hema who smiled to bolster in her son that all was good, that the man next to him wasn't meant to be feared. That seemed to put Vishwa at ease, for a thin smile played on his lips.

"Wow," Gokul said, "this is an impressively crafted ship. Look at these pulleys. Creative."

"Mamma helped me," Vishwa piped up. "But I designed it."

Gokul jerked his thumbs up. "You've really outdone yourself here, Vish. I mean, look at the trees inside the ship. That's a cool concept.'

Vishwa grinned. "You know, the water is salty—exactly how ocean water should taste."

Gokul laughed and patted Vishwa on the back. "Why are there no fish in the ocean?"

Vishwa seemed stumped. "I don't have any fish toys."

"I have an idea," Gokul said. "Would Barbie and Ken be interested in a dolphin show?"

Vishwa gushed and nodded. "Of course! But, how?"

"Watch me," Gokul said and sprung to his feet. Winking as he passed Hema, he jogged to his study and returned with a few empty plastic water bottles and wooden pencils.

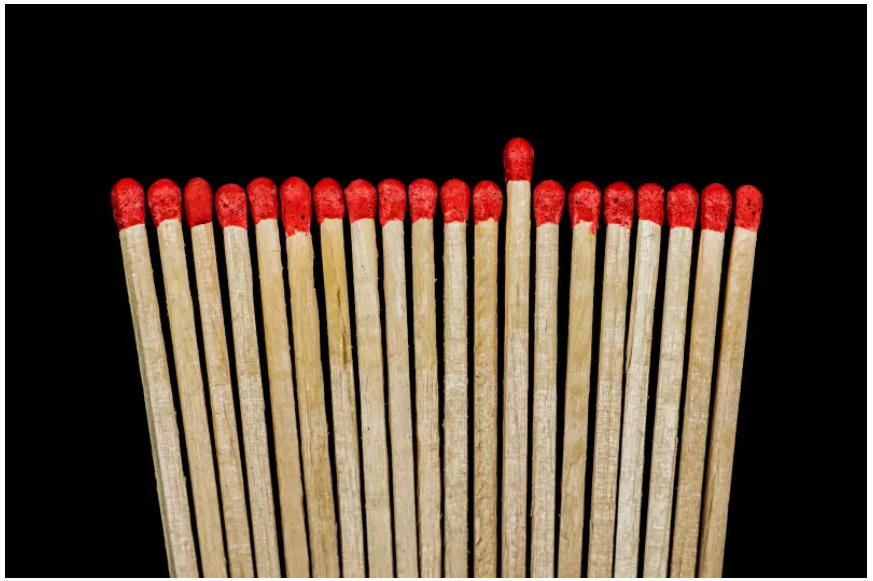
As he got to working, Hema said, "Having fun, Vishu?"

Vishwa looked at her and nodded. "Yes, Mamma, I'm—happy."

Hema laughed softly. "That's all I ever want."

Suraj Adiray lives a double life in the US east coast as a research engineer by day and an aspiring novelist by dusk. He enjoys writing stories around questions that keep him up at night.

I will Burn | Leah Nova Moss



via Pixabay

I knew that the rose was poisonous when I laid eyes on it, but I reached for it all the same. I let my fingertips skim over the deep burgundy petals, which are velvety soft against my skin. I close my eyes, savoring the pleasant feeling before I move my hand down and tightly grasp the stem.

The sharp thorns cut into my skin, instantly leeching deadly poison into my body. The burning begins in my hand and quickly spreads up my arm. Within minutes, it will spread to my heart and cause it to stop.

Within minutes, I'll see him again.

Alexander didn't want to breed this flower, but he had no choice. When the royal army came knocking, demanding that he breed a special, unassuming flower to be used in an assassination, he initially said no. It was only when they held a blade to my throat that he agreed.

He hadn't anticipated that his creation would be this deadly. That a tiny nick from the thorn would kill within seconds. He hated the flower, and yet he couldn't help but be proud of his creation. He was proud even when it killed him.

The army will return soon to claim their precious bioweapon, but I'll beat them to it. It'll be the last thing I do.

I ignore the burning and cramping in my muscles and pull the matchbox from pocket. With trembling hands, I strike a match and drop the burning flame into the flower pot that holds the rose. It takes a moment for the flame to catch, but after a few moments it does. My knees begin to buckle as the fire spreads up the stem, first engulfing the deadly thorns. My legs collapse as the petals begin to burn, curling in on themselves as they blacken. Even as the fiery poison in my bloodstream causes my heart to spasm erratically and my body begins to shut down, I'm content.

Alexander would be so proud.

Leah Nova Moss is a writer and aspiring literary agent from the suburbs of Chicago. You can find her on Twitter at @starlight_reads and on Instagram at @starlight.reads.

from the time you convinced me to run away to idaho with you and didn't let me stop driving for five hours straight to go pee | Kaydance Rice

Justiniano Adriano via Pexels

scraping against the road. our tire has just
split open and we're high off oil fumes

and your dad's weed. we toss a can of coke
in the back seat and wait to hit a street sign. swerving

off the highway, you whisper in my ear *this should*
be how we die. with burning and digging

my nails into the steering wheel. watching trucks
horn past us. leaking gas and wandering through rush

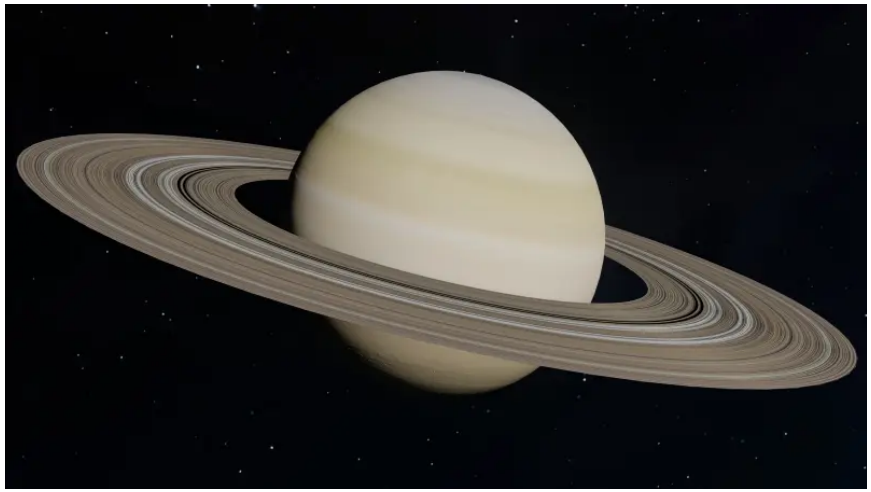
hour. *red lights shouldn't exist and neither*
should yellow. green can stay but only in chlorophyll—

i just wish everything wasn't so goddamn bright
all the time. falling from blooming, from almost

becoming. we crushed soda cans over state lines
and waited for everything else to shatter with it.

Kaydance Rice is a writer from Grand Rapids, Michigan. Her work can be found or is forthcoming in The Ice Lolly Review, voicemail poems, The Interlochen Review and Full Mood Magazine.

No Spacesuit Necessary | Jennifer Jones



ZCH via Pexels

With a hazy methane rich atmosphere,

No spacesuit necessary, in near Earth pressure.

Simply, a mask protecting lungs from asphyxiation

in the mostly nitrogen air.

Boots squish into solid ethane, any icy gravel.

Methane rains down into creaks, rivers, lakes.

Seas of methane slowly evaporate

for ultraviolet light to rend it apart,

a swirling thick orange smog

blocking sunlight, dimming the young fresh surface.

Cryovolcanoes spew water and ammonia.

Still no spacesuit necessary.

No need to traverse Titan in a sealed pressurized system,

just an exceedingly warm coat,

to fight negative 300 Fahrenheit.

Wander methane eroded ethane river deltas,

ridges, plains, chasms, hills.

Stroll along the banks of Ligeia Mare,

hike the Xanadu Plateau,

see the wonders of Titan,

All without a spacesuit.

Jennifer Jones currently lives in Colorado with her husband and child. She teaches Astronomy at Arapahoe Community College. As a scientist, she enjoys blending science and data into her work.

Eve and Eve | Karen Walker

Anna Shvetz via Pexels

Rain ruins the church picnic. Everyone *oh no*-s, runs to their cars. A blessing for you and me, though: Eve and Eve, we run hand-in-hand the other way. Rain ruins the uptight curls my mother rolled, blesses me with hair too flat to suit the pastor's son. Dry from the hymns and the fried chicken, I catch drops until I'm able to speak. *I don't like Adam. I like you*. Rain then ruins me for anyone else. White Sunday blouses soaked sheer, our wet fingers tremble until they come searching and don't find us in the Bible.

Karen writes short in a low Canadian basement. Her work is in or forthcoming in The Bear Creek Gazette, Emerge Literary Journal, Bullshit Lit, Janus Literary, and others. She/her. @MeKawalker883

Hive Minded | D. Shaw

Samer Daboul via Pexels

Threaded thoughts, a needle, three digits of π in my veins
But swans can't sing over the sounds of breaking hearts
I gave my heart, bloody, dripping, beatless like Elaine on the dancefloor
Destruction breeds creation; what will we destroy
Fat orange moon over a wrecked horizon
One of my cats is on the counter again
the small, sick bones of you
There he lay, the button torn from my coat still in his trouser pocket
But like wrathful snakes, dick spittle flings venom in the uncaring dirt
That sparkling of moonlight on shattered glass, knife sharp
Sun sets, jets streaking across the sky, darkness looming on the horizon
The skin sloughs from my body, fully exposed as I bask in her holy light
Blue and wrinkled, like a tired tarp forgotten against the woods

D. Shaw started writing poetry at the age of 12. 30 years into this journey have seen 2 honorary mentions in New York's City Hall Yearly Poetry Contest. Currently living in NY, Iowa, with a landlord.

Jasmine Kennedie Goes Supernova, Leaves No Survivors | Alex Carrigan

Ron Lach via Pexels

Feeling on top of the world!
A year and some estrogen
does a body good!!!
This makes me smile extra big.

I get to live my *Showgirls* fantasy!!!
Nomi Malone step aside,
My titties will be playing a
role in this upcoming endeavor.

I feel my voice isn't loud enough
and can still get a little bigger.
They can't fit all my talking in.
Y'all are really testing my limits today.

H&M showroom is a little different
than off-the-rack H&M.
Giving you Wanda and Cosmo fantasy.

My lower back is fine,
thank y'all for asking.
You gotta let the people
know when you're a power bottom.
You already knowww.

Thank you all for the amazing support!!!
Y'all are the fucking best ever!!!
The amount of love and support over
the last couple of days has been amazing.
I love my bimbos!

Source: @jasminekennedie

Alex Carrigan (@carriganak) is an editor, poet, and critic from Virginia. He is the author of May All Our Pain Be Champagne: A Collection of Real Housewives Twitter Poetry (Alien Buddha Press, 2022).

One Man and No City | Chris Airiau

Julien Goettelman via Pexels

From the streets cracked with weeds and neglect, Andy counts thirteen strips of skull-socket windows. Above all those missing eyes in the fourteenth row of the apartment tower, one pane blinks with light. In a city sapped of its electric lifeblood, the Morse Os wail like a ghost. Andy knows no one is there. Everyone is gone. A solar-charged lamp fell. This is a sadistic trick of nature or god, nothing more

But Andy recounts the floors and inks "14" on the back of his hand.

The entrance is unlocked. Inside, a dead houseplant lurks in the corner. The breeze behind Andy wiggles the dust on the mailboxes like desiccated cilia. A bagless trashcan asks for more than its faded grocery store ads. It's the same scene he's seen hundreds of times. He doesn't even need to axe through the stairwell access to climb up to the fourteenth floor. Maybe not the fourteenth floor. In all his climbing, Andy came to the conclusion that architects in the city had gone to war over when to start counting floors. Ground was Zero here, but One there. Or they called it the Lobby. Adding Mezzanine floors, numbered or unnumbered, was a new chaotic tactic in their professional warfare. Hence the "14" in ink. Fourteen sets of stairs to climb, and forget this architect's allegiances. Or hell, just let these made-up stories muffle the scraps of hope he fosters deep in his belly, decomposing under all the dead butterflies, that he will find a person taking refuge in the

apartment with the blinking lights.

The floor looks normal. The door is ordinary at first, but under his headlamp, the color pops. A blue-green that could be called seafoam, or tropical Kool-Aid vomit. Apartment doors are always locked, but Andy always tries before axing his way through. He has demolished doorways all over the city, coughing his way through former lives. Can he still call this place a city? When he's the only one there? Urban landscape doesn't depend on people, but a city is inhabited. Call the city by its name, he tells himself, it's name's not null because no one's here. But he doesn't dare whisper the name. Like a survivor grieving in his family's tomb, the namesake becomes sacred now the essence has gone.

Andy turns the doorknob. Locked. Soon after he cracks the door open, he sees the flash from next door cast a dim white-green light over the couches and coffee table. This isn't the right apartment. He sets his axe on the bureau among the fuzzy keys and picture frames, and searches each room. No people. No bodies. No sign of any disturbance whatsoever, just like every other home in the city Andy has broken into. He throws open all the windows to pump out the stale air, to let the rain and humidity in, to allow the rooms the dignity to rot with mold and new life. A flurry of particles stirs and slithers. The air currents conjure writhing dust clouds that glint in the staccato glow from the light next door.

With a heavy hand, Andy swoops up his axe to leave, but it slips and clatters on the floor. As he bends to recover his only constant companion, his hand wipes the grey from the mahogany bureau. The itch seizes his lungs, and he coughs out the odor of abandon, of a city emptied of its souls, and stares at the shine of the lacquered wood. The dust is thick as lichen. Where the hell could it all come from? Not like there could be any dust mites left. They must have finished eating all the human detritus years ago, right? Did they evolve to thrive in their own filth, eating their own recycled shit over and over again, reproducing and eating their own graveyards until their shit makes mountains and valleys, a new veritable city of shit in this old city of people?

He goes to the kitchen, puts his axe in the sink and forages for rags and cleaning products. Andy brushes ceramic clowns and appliances smooth and wipes surfaces and cabinets and crevices, shakes the sheets and blanket and pillows and cushions out the windows, Windexes all the glass he can find, empties the petrified remains of the refrigerator, pilfers the closet for a broom and prays his thanks for the parquet and sweeps up the dust rats, and fills trash bags with their massed corpses.

For the multiple mop buckets, he uses their stash of off-brand bottled water, and mixes in Pinesol and soaks up what's left. The sludge he dumps down fourteen floors stains the building like running mascara. There aren't enough sheets to cover the furniture, so he uses towels too, making a clownish haunted manor out of this three-room apartment. Andy closes the windows, but regrets he can't fix the doors. This shortfall in preparing the home for the never-return of its long-gone occupants isn't a snap back to reality, but a slow crumble.

The light from next door shines. Andy can almost pretend, for a moment, this is normal. That even a stranger coming into this vacuous hell would be happy to see him.

The door is ordinary. Of course, he knows no one is inside the apartment next door. There can't be anyone. Everyone is gone. If someone was there, wouldn't they have rushed over to talk to another human being? The only one in this no city?

Andy turns the knob.

Chris Airiau is a SF writer and game designer living in France, forever obsessed with the speculative. Find him on twitter @ChrisAiriau or online at chrisair.itch.io.

Sleep | Mason Hawthorne

Lum3n via Pexels

In the hollows between the hills night has already laid down his head. In the wash of his sleeping breath, beneath the sighing trees, among the leaf-litter and the rich loamy soil, I lie also. Once I was multitude, just like you. Now you might think I am no more, but there is still life here, but crawling, seeking, feeding. Returning me to the soil, and to the trees' thirsty roots, and to the hollow between the hills, where night has laid down his head, where the moon shines white on my white face, my eternal smile. Here I sleep.

Mason Hawthorne studied creative writing at the University of Wollongong, and writes queer weird fiction and horror.
On twitter @MasonHawth0rne

plums | Franziska Hörner

via Pixabay

you say you prefer a bullet in my skull to the plum in my smilebecause you cannot stand my child-like laughter (I am six years old)because you lost your own (were you ever a child?)you make us hide between sandbox and treeyou make us hide from black dogs (we never hear them bark but you)you promise hurt as the sun promises fun (one of these is not to come) blue is hiding between white buildings (you are hiding with it)there is no you (no longer), there are no dogs (were they ever?)plums are ripe in a promising sunI am six years old and warm and soon to be sevenyou return to a sandbox (you are a child again)it will be silent

---

Zedeka works a minimum-wage job and is not college-educated. Being a private person, she writes and draws amateur comics for her own entertainment and lives a satisfyingly boring life in Germany.

Nikolina via Pexels

they're connected like delicately twisted string, not quite a knot and not so certainly entwined, just existing on the same wavelength, the same spool of thread slowly unraveling into a pool of red, tightrope walking over a future like rusted nails and shards of glass, a breath away from falling. one's doing handstands, fearless and wild, not belonging and not caring, forcing the world to acknowledge that they exist whether it likes it or not. The other is quiet, barely tiptoeing, progress slowed almost to a stop, hesitant and clinging to the past, unwilling to let faces fade or people slide through their fingers, placing blame to avoid responsibility, rope burn scarring their hands, remnants of the nooses they tied for their closest friends. they pushed people away to save themselves, but fear the same fate, finding their comfort now in toxicity and doubt.

they're two ends of a sliding scale, equal and opposite reaction, caution and recklessness striking a balance, past and present facing off in a neverending standstill, battle of wills and won'ts, how far they'll go to hold onto what's holding them down. how far they'll fall with an anchor tied to their ankles.

what happened? why were they wearing rose colored glasses when the red flags came up? why did they look away when the signs fell in line one after another, and why did they plug their ears when the sirens sounded, when their friends were screaming SOS, when their house was burning down? they fell in love like walking off a cliff, straight into the sharp rocks will no regard for the branches that could've carried them back up.
they doubt the people they cried and laughed with for a decade, the people that held them above water and forced them not to drown. they left them all behind for someone who's taken over their life, cementing over the cracks they could've looked through to see the truth, and then they convinced themselves they're better off.

it's all a game, roll the dice and no one wins. try and talk it through so they can talk themselves deeper into the grave they've been digging for years, using a crystal ball to window shop for caskets, burying who they used to be for a future where they can pretend to be happy instead of stuck.
or leave it alone and watch it get worse, watch the best of them fade away and let it happen, keep quiet to keep a connection you thought you'd never have to lose.

let the tattoo fade, because you have all the weapons but there's no point in fighting for it now

---

Cautiously Optimistic instagram.com/blonderuby

sleep if budding (prelude) | Hunter Simpson

Gabriela Mendes via Pexels

Sleep if budding
boy or girl ye b; O, sleep!
see, for all that's behind there's so
much more you've yet to be; in time so dread-
fully much you'll need Believe; still to bee stung endlessly
for all your EternaT's by O-so-many B's of Becoming. so! sleep now
Though sleep won't save U from the sting…
and Be Where of Dreams
Y e
Beautyful Thing

Hunter Simpson is a NY based composer who recently took up poetry in the wake of a close family member's stroke & subsequent coma. First collection forthcoming. https://www.instagram.com/hsimpsounds/

Peepeepoopoo | Paul Castle

Min An via Pexels

```
   PEEPEEPOOPOO
E  E                 O
E    E               P
P      P             O
E        E     uwu   O
E          E         P
P            P       E
O            O       E
O    Uwu     O       P
P              P     E
O                OO  E
```

OOPOOPEEPEEP

Lmao

Light It Up | Timmy Sullivan

Mike Chai via Pexels

he lit a cigarette
in the elevator
which is just a metaphor
for the shock, a rupture
in etiquette, the sudden
dumbfoundedness by the rest of us
caught staring at a social contract,
broken, or maybe at ourselves
realizing for the first time
we abided by something together all along,
silently, until the striking of a match.

writer & thinker living in Amherst, Massachusetts

Bellyful | Patricia Davis

via Pixabay

On her way back from picking daisies and weeping milkweeds, a swarm of wasps made their way inside of her, a low hum echoing against the cavernous stretch of her guts. She feared one might escape into the tunnel of her throat and onto her wet tongue. If she were to stretch back her lips, the air around her would fill with the angry buzzing of wasps filling in, looking for daylight while men in rusting cars crawl beside her and ask for a smile. She follows the road home and never shows teeth.

Patricia is a writer and illustrator from Orlando, Fl.

Autumn textures | Yaghma K

via Yaghma K

Yaghma (she/her) is a graduate student and researcher based in Edmonton, Canada. She dabbles in capturing trees and clouds when she's not writing her dissertation. Twitter: @iamyaghma

Fruit of The Doom | Kadence Warner

Andrej Lisakov via Pexels

*Kadence Warner is a poet from Southeastern Idaho studying English and Creative Writing. Previous works of his can be found in Vandalism No.7 and Nymphs. https://twitter.com/kw_writing_*

A simple white tee
meant to be paired with
some plain old blue jeans.
A casual, classic look,
giving off a persona I like to present,
that of my hard-working, tough by nature
with salt of the Earth kind of standards.
Bleached crew-neck, complementing
the contours of my chest,
gave freedom in the form of a single layer.
Something that feels the most like me,

A short sleeve under shirt
used together or worn beneath
a sweater or dress blouse.
It's an article no one's supposed to see,
presenting myself in a way not to embarrass
mother, give her a position to be cruel
about how I don't look very feminine.
The cotton fabric clinging to,
tight against my breasts,
provided me with my first coat of cover-up.
The things I feel most comfortable in,

They could never see me this way.

Generously packing my boxer-briefs,
no longer needing to bind my chest flat.
Rolled up sleeves, showing off my biceps,
unashamed of my thin mustache,
a man in his own right
who feels euphoric.

Not the spandex-shorts over top of panties,
with a sports bra two sizes too small.
My voice's pitch lower than you'd expect,
when I search in the mirror for
someone tough, nowhere near lady-like
and no longer dysphoric.

ink spilled over stars | Ash Kowalska

socials twitter: @ashkowalskaa

Yuting Gao via Pexels

two tattooed constellations,
shining under collar bones.
mines aries and his taurus.

the far from perfect stars,
blacked out ink on the skin.
lines bended under pressure
symbols deformed, re-shaped by time.

with all our imperfections they are perfect
mirroring ourselves, by plain accident
his fingers brushing under the fabrics
wouldn't change that moment for anything.

single minutes passing by,
the music already stopped, but we stayed
frozen in the frame
shining under the sky, full of constellations.

Ilys | Luke Hannon

Luke Hannon is an aspiring author and poet from Ireland. He enjoys genre fiction and writing about the themes of mental health, nature, love, and loss. Find him on Twitter @lukehannonpoet

Mo Eid via Pexels

Ilys,
Has sleep not yet found you?
A faltering shade in the night.
Resplendent still you visit,
Gifting pieces of yourself,
Taking nothing
But the vision each sees inside.

Blue Hole of Heaven | Janis La Couvée

Maria Orlova via Pexels

blue hole of heaven
before the clouds close in
mountains pummelled by late-season snow squalls
winds fierce, to blow you off the road
in the ditch, four-way flashers
blink a cautionary tale

April 5, 2022

Janis La Couvée (she/her) is a poet with a love of green spaces.Her work has been featured by Island Writer, Paddler Press, Human Obscura. @lacouvee Facebook: JanisLaCouveeOnline

janislacouvee.com

Spring | Elsa Fuglei

Elsa Fuglei is a middle schooler who lives in Colorado; she likes art, animals, and music.

via Pixabay

She creeps under your door to wake you
with the calming sounds of small birds and the smell of sweet lilies.

She greets your heavy eyelids with a warm baby-blue sky,
clouds scattered every foot.

As you step outside onto the dewy grass and spring welcomes you
with her loving arms, you begin to forget the sharp cold that came before
and you secom to her warmth.

Boy Dreams of His Father | Michael Etrue

Michael Etrue is an aspiring poet from Ghana. Find him on Twitter at @Etrue_Michael.

via Pixabay

I turned around to steal a glimpse only to catch you mid-wince.
You left us and I should have foreseen
For you, what a blessed relief it has all been.
Broken light now shines through your disguise, I can't seem to shake off your haunting eyes.
Were you rebel?
Were you angel?
As if in answer, a rainbow bird takes off, shot on wings,
Landing on an upper branch, she opens her heart and sings.

Self Sabotage | Hephaestus H

via Hephaestus H

@ArtOfHephaestus on twitter and insta

ENGL 3331: Intro to Poetry | Aris Kian

via Pixabay

ENGL 3331: Intro to Poetry
Here/Hear in Houston

everywhere | always | breathe | ask and ask again

Course Overview

Everyday for a year, I wrote about the light rail. Clutched backpack, stiff-seat side-straddle scribbling into sunrise—the chime, a pealing soundtrack to the cinematic universe of my journaled streams. I do not know when I became a poet, but I know the voice of poem when it whispers in the morning. I am not good at keeping good habits, but one day, I'll grow into the ones I've been too stubborn to claim. I've found myself asking what makes me a writer even after asking what's the meter of rain. I've penned my existence into a page before I was able to question if I had the words for it. I've never needed a passport for this language, never needed to prove my residency; I've only prayed it could find a home in me as well, could curl its way to the center of my chest, light a candle and exhale.

Course Objectives

here, we turn
to cobbled streets
for answers—grass
swamped in skyfall,
our muddied feet
licking a slick path
we will sing
the prints we leave
on the sidewalk
see our names
in the lines
of the sanded rock

Student Learning Outcomes

we are just as much
an author of
our own breath
as we are
of anything we place
a name to
we shake hands
with chance
knowing nothing
is new—it is
a small language
the probability of
a word running
into another
is more likely
than not
but when last did
they dance
until dawn when
last did they
inhale into
themselves
one line
into the next
remembering how
many moments
they share
here and still
in this tongue
elsewhere

Requirements

open hand open heart open fist open eye open mouth open ear open arm open lung open

Graded Assignments

Participation:

ready your whisper with me; I will not ask
you anything I would not ask
of myself—I am my own risk, willing to grow
weary in the same spot, gaze-up,
until the landscape begins to speak.

Weekly Responses, Posts & Poems:

the chill in your arm, the choke in your throat,
that sinking—there, in your stomach
the second the wind hits—the scrunched brow,
your upturned lip, your nostrils flared
in utter disagreement, your stuttered tongue,
your jump-start heart, racing at the words
circuiting in your head.

Workshop poems:

will you let us? carve into the clay
of your minds-eye, your second chance
at a first impression. we'll trail
the edges of this sound-swept carnival,
stand in its lines so we can tell you
how it rides.

H-Town Homies Poet Presentation:

this literary city, a one-stop station to every shape
your words could muster. there is no lack
of source material, shared in one room
and back into another. this stream. this never-ending
well of 'well, actually' warm and running
raw between your fingers. we hold hands anyway.
let it bake between our palms.

Midterm Quiz:

you may forget the name, the face, but never the way a poem sways to your own bodysong.

Final Portfolio:

we trick ourselves into believing we could ever know an ending. in truth, we are only ever continuing this lifelong thing of language, taking the poems before us and breathing them back with our heartbeats in them.

Grade Breakdown:

if you give	100%
your full attention	100%
your honest ask	100%
and avid unknown	100%
the page will tell you	100%
if you have ignited	100%
a practice	100%
Total:	worth repeating

Grading Schema:

A	we dig	**B-**	the ditches	**D+**	of our spines
A-	and ask them	**C+**	to hold	**D**	the hailstorms
B+	of our grief	**C**	the runoff	**D-**	of our good days
B	the language	**C-**	we dare	**F**	to claim

Aris Kian's poems are published with The West Review, Obsidian Lit and elsewhere. She is the 2022 recipient of the Inprint Marion Barthelme Prize in Creative Writing. @ariskian/@rosewaterframes

Night Flight | Rachel Stewart

eddie chuachoonhui via Pexels

Swollen jawed, she turns on Stevie Nicks at Red Rocks
and let the ice melt in her Hurricane. She's paying for a digital time warp,
Endlessly streaming in the chilly living room of Friday night.

This is how she always hid before:
Bundled on a couch, TV flickering all hours of the night
a slow burning technicolor flame that melted into her dreams
until the insomnia lost its grip.

She hopes she hasn't hurt others while trying to keep herself safe,
a glittering glass cage that cuts both ways.

Rachel Cathleen Stewart holds a B.A. in English: Creative Writing from the University of Tennessee at Chattanooga. Sometimes her words get published, but she holds a rejection pile close to her heart.

Waiting for Daylight | Louis Boyd

via Louis Boyd

samer daboul via Pexels

Vitser already knew where she would have found her girlfriend. After all, Emma was not the type of person who would miss a chance to admire the Moon in the middle of a bright sky, even when all she wanted to do was lay in her bed, crying herself to sleep.

Indeed, as soon as she reached the stone roof, she found her, sitting with her legs crossed, as she looked at the Moon.

She was as beautiful as usual, to her mind, but she did notice something wrong. After all, the remnants of tears were still covering her cheeks, and she was barely closing her eyes.

Thus, she sat next to her. «Emma, are you alright?» asked, making her turn around. All she had wanted in that moment was to caress her face and remind her that things were going to be fine, but she avoided doing so. Emma needed to feel better first.

«Yes, I am,» she simply said, showing a little and faint smile. «Sorry for what happened earlier.»

Vitser chuckled upon hearing that. «You don't need to be sorry.»

Emma then inhaled, letting the nightly air inside her body. «It's just that everybody always expects great things from me,» she explained. «I have gotten used to this, to the point where I always make sure you can count on me all the time. However, it still does not feel great to know that I am not allowed to fail, not even once»

Vitser knew what that felt like. After all, people always had great expectations for members of the Haussinger family, and she would constantly receive criticism whenever she would do any little thing.

Therefore, she knew exactly what to say. «What is wrong with failure? Why can't people make mistakes? How is everyone supposed to learn if not that way?» she asked, widening her smile as she spoke. «I have always thought that people just need to pretend that there are perfect beings out there. Sometimes, you need them to motivate yourself in trying to become like them, but there are also times where you need them to cultivate enough anger in knowing that, every now and then, it should be you to get what you want, or what you need.»

«That sounded like it belonged to a song,» Emma replied, almost instinctively. Still, hearing her beloved say those things warmed her a lot, and she was grateful for it.

Then, Vitser grabbed both of her hands, while still looking in her eyes. «Emma, I am aware of what happen when people expect you to act as a perfect being. After all, everyone thinks I should resemble a golden porcelain doll, down to every detail, including its delicacy.»

«That is a curious analogy, Vitser,» said Emma, as she looked down. Vitser wasn't merely holding her hands, she was grasping her. She was worried about her, and that made her feel something special.

«I know of a place, in the eastern outskirts of the Continent, where artists would use gold to glue together broken vases, because they believe that highlighting an imperfection is what makes a thing true perfect.»
«And I agree,» she said. «Is this why you always highlight strange parts of my behaviour?»

Emma freed one of her hands to gently caress Vitser's blonde hair, which looked even more golden and brighter as the Moon and the stars were shining on her.

«When your hair are fuzzy and cover your face as you wake up, or when you forget a word and your face resembles a little bunny waiting to get feed, or even when you start walking loudly as soon as you get tired, you look like the most perfect person I have ever seen,» she said.

Vitser blushed a little, as Emma's hand was stroking her face. A simple gesture that, yet, always melted her heart, whenever she would do so. «How are you so romantic even when you are sad?»

«This is what loving you does to me, Vitser,» replied Emma.

In that moment, Vitser decided to let her instinct act, and immediately kissed her girlfriend. They both closed their eyes for a few seconds, but that felt like one of the warmest kisses they have ever shared.

«I love you too, Emma,» she said, as she admired her once again. «But seriously, do I look like a little bunny when I forget a word?»

Emma laughed a little. «I always assume your mind thinks something like "I made a mistake, I better look adorable so it will be covered up" more or less.»

Vitser's blushing intensified, while Emma embraced her. Now, all that mattered was that they were there, together.

I am an Italian student who loves to create

The Champion | William Kerr

via Pixabay

The tunnel leading to the arena was dark and cold and clammy, and the hot wind whispered around the cracks of the door with the light.

Nemeliah's heart pounded as she listened to the blare of trumpets and the roars the crowd beyond. She could just make out the shapes of the others in front of her, twitching and checking themselves. One of them, Merinda probably, was doing a bad job of hiding her sobs and Nemeliah alternated between wanting to hug her or slap her.

Beside her Binjay fidgeted, pulling at his armour.

"Be still," she said.

"But it's itchy…" Binjay whined.

"You'll get much more than an itch if you take that off. Put up with it."

"Citizens of Keeron!" the announcer's voice boomed through the doors and Nemeliah went rigid. "Please welcome to the arena the contestants for the crown!"

The roars blasted in with the heat as the doors opened. Nemeliah squinted against the harsh light and started walking forward. She tightened her sweating grip on her spear as Binjay gripped the folds on her baggy trousers.

Handmaiden of Destiny, she pleaded, let my thread run.

They were the last ones out and as they reached the door an assistant grinned at them. "May Aspect grant you luck and favour!" she said cheerfully. "Have fun!"

Nemeliah just stopped herself from nicking her ankle with her spear.

They emerged, blinking, into a large earthen coliseum the seats packed with people cheering and unfurling and waving banners. Silken dancers covered in sweat ran out of the arena alongside people carrying large drums. The other contestants spaced out: Dandrion, a whip wrapped around his chest, waved nervously to the crowd; Scala ignored the crowd, her face a mask of focused fury, chakrams held tight in her hands; Merinda sobbed, arakhs loose in her hands and some assistants consoled her, as she was almost carried to her place; Eyroo stood tall, sword point down and smiled and acknowledged the crowd.

Boruc, a bandolier of knives wrapped around him and dressed in heavy armour, strutted about, grinning and blowing kisses to the crowd. He pretended to attempt a backflip before ducking out to laughter and cheers.

Nemeliah turned her gaze away and marched towards an open spot, Binjay trotting to keep up with her. _Ignore them, Nemeliah thought. _Just keep focused. Keep focused on what is important.

She halted in place and took a deep breath. She was dressed in light, leather armour, a spear held by her side. Beside her, her twelve-year-old brother Binjay was lightly armoured, with a helm on his head and a short sword held in his loose and sweating grip.

Nemeliah glanced up at the balcony that projected slightly over the arena. The balcony had a woven drape laid over the top, shielding it from the sun, and three figures sat inside. One was her uncle, wearing loose robes of purple and black and a crown of red and white, his expression stoic. Behind him sat the Games

Master. And next to her uncle…

She squinted. It was the only white figure in the arena. White of face and white of clothes, an ornate jacket with gold thread bearing a silver insignia: two I's shaped to look like a lightning bolt.

_The High Inquisitor? Why is that Neverbeen here?

A twitching brought her attention back to Binjay. His eyes were fixed across the arena and Nemeliah glared across at Boruc. He grinned at them and dragged his thumb across his throat.

Binjay flinched and turned away. Nemeliah put her hand on his back.

"Don't worry Binjay, I'll keep you safe," she said. "And then I'll kill myself."

#

Yesterday…

She was about to knock on the door when she heard voices. Soft voices. She gently pressed her ear to the door.

"…if I and Nemeliah die, I want you to run away." Binjay's voice kept low.

"B-but that's not going to happen!" The other voice, a bit hoarser, a slight rattling edge to it.

"It might. Nobody can predict which way the contest will go. Did your sister tell you anything before she left?"

"N-no…nothing…she just disappeared…"

Nemeliah stifled a grin and then burst through the door, causing the two people inside to jump in fright. "What's this I hear?" she boomed. "Sounds like treason!"

Binjay's wide eyes morphed into a glare as he recognised her. Behind him cowered a sancon about the same size, with white fur, two small horns poking up from his forehead and a tuft of fur hanging from his chin.

"Oh, it's you…" Binjay muttered, relaxing. "It's all right Tomay, it's just Nemeliah being stupid."

"Oh…oh right…thank…Mistress Nemeliah, I'm glad…" Tomay stuttered.

Nemeliah jerked her head. "Scram Tomay. I need to speak with Binjay."

"Y-yes of course." Tomay scampered towards the door. He paused as he passed Nemeliah. "I-I just wanted to say that I'm s-sorry that my sister ran–"

"I said scram."

"Y-yes."

Tomay hurried out of the room.

Nemeliah shut the door and flopped onto one of the mounds of cushions. Binjay glared at her. "You shouldn't be so mean to him," he said.

"Sorry I have little patience for them. Not after my best friend in all the world ran away."

Binjay snorted in derision. "What are you a child? Of course she ran away, you and I would do the same."

"We were friends Binjay. I never treated her as a slave."

"No. But maybe she noticed the way you got mad as a kid and broke your toys. Maybe she wondered what might happen if you got mad at her." He regarded her. "You could choose to be her friend. She couldn't."

Nemeliah waved her hand in irritation. "We have more important things to discuss." She leaned forward. "The Tournament is tomorrow and you're going to be the winner."

Binjay slumped slightly.

"Why? What's the point of me surviving?"

"Because you're my little brother and I'm not having you get killed." She sat back and twisted her hands. "I thought you'd want to survive. If you have your great dreams of liberating the sancon."

"Oh, yes, of course. That will happen. I'm sure the nobles, and the merchants and the advisers and Imperial Centre will allow that." He scoffed.

"There's more support for it than that. The nobles wouldn't like it and some of the merchant guilds, but a lot of them do. And so do the commoners, I mean it practically already is the case in many of the rural areas. As for Imperial Centre, what can they do apart from harsh language? Besides you read Acorn's speech delivered to the Chamber, on his project? Word is the Emperor is inclined to go through with it."

Binjay looked away. "I know all that," he said, quietly. "But I don't want you to die."

Nemeliah took in a breath and steeled herself.

No crying!

She took advantage of Binjay looking away to wipe her eyes. "I'm not sold on the idea either," she said, injecting humour into her voice. "But there isn't another way."

"Couldn't you win and then concede? I could spare you?"

"Only the winner lives. That's the rule."

"It's a stupid rule."

"Most traditions are. But there they lie as solid as rock."

“Rock can be worn away.”

“Over a substantial period of time, yes.”

Binjay looked at her, tears stinging his eyes. At the sight, Nemeliah’s control slipped and her smile wobbled. Binjay ran into her arms and they hugged and held one another and cried.

Throw it into the Nowhereland, Nemeliah! What happened to ‘no crying’?!

“If I win can I build a statue of you?” Binjay asked.

“What do you think I’m letting you live for?” she replied.

“I’ll have Tomay build you a big and beautiful one.”

“Yes. Not as big as the Handmaidens, but close.”

They held one another and shook together.

There was a knock at the door and they pulled apart, Nemeliah wiping her eyes. Binjay didn’t bother. “Yes?” Nemeliah asked.

A Sabre poked his head through the door, tri-finned helm brushing the top of the doorway. “Nemeliah,” he said, “Grand Duke Keeron wishes to speak with you.”

#

She walked along the carpet towards the great door, two members of the Sabres standing guard outside. As she approached a man walked out, clothed in loose-fitting robes of red with an ornate hat. He had several rolled-up sheets of paper under his arm.

Nemeliah stepped aside and presented her palm to him as he passed. He smiled at her and drew his hand back through the air.

“Nemeliah, how are you feeling?” he asked.

“Good, Games Master,” she replied. “I hope all is going well in the preparations?”

“Oh yes, quite well, quite well,” he laughed, joggling the papers under his arm. “It should be quite the spectacle. Quite the arena.”

She gave him a tight smile. “Any hints?”

He laughed. “Oh no, I couldn’t do that! Only the Grand Duke gets to know.” He winked. “But there may be a few surprises in store for you.” He gestured to the door. “Go ahead, Raziel is waiting for you.” He carried on down the corridor.

Nemeliah continued to the door, her heart pounding in her chest and she licked her lips. She passed through the doorway and the Sabres shut it behind her. The room was large and semi-circular in shape. The carpet led up some steps to a throne and, behind the throne, the room opened onto a large balcony. The cool night air whispered in and Nemeliah ascended the steps and walked onto the balcony.

Grand Duke Raziel Keeron leaned on the balustrade, looking out into the dark. Noises of celebration and amusement wafted up from the streets. The moon shone down brightly and the contours of the three statues of the Handmaidens, facing one another at equidistant points of the city, were clearly visible. Nemeliah swallowed as she caught sight of the coliseum.

The place where she was going to die.

“Nemeliah,” Raziel said without turning around. Nemeliah crouched and proffered both of her palms. “If I find that you’re offering me your palms I will smack you.” Nemeliah stood up in a hurry and whipped both hands behind her as Raziel turned with a smile. He was dressed only in a loose red gown with gold accents and beige trousers. He looked strong, forceful, but weariness was visible in the lines of his face.

“Uncle,” Nemeliah said.

“Niece,” Raziel replied. He gestured to a small table and chairs on the balcony. “Shall we sit and converse?”

“I would like that.”

They sat on the chairs and Raziel poured water from a pitcher for her.

“How are you feeling?”

“Oh great, really.” Nemeliah drank and struggled to swallow her water. “My legs feel like they’re going to give way. I feel like crying all the time. And my stomach is churning and tightening as if I was menstruating. Though minus the stabbing sensation so there’s that I suppose.”

“No, the stabbing will come tomorrow.”

Nemeliah barked a laugh that verged on hysterical.

Raziel winced. “Sorry. That was a little close to the bone.”

“There’ll be lots of that tomorrow as well.” Nemeliah grinned and Raziel returned a tight smile.

They sat in silence a moment and listened to the noise of theatre, cheers and play coming from below.

“I’m sorry Nemeliah,” Raziel said. “I would have liked to have spared Binjay this, as my youngest brother was. Had I known that…that I didn’t have long left I would have abdicated sooner.”

“You weren’t to know,” Nemeliah said quietly.

“I wish I could have had time to arrange a hunting accident for Boruc…but the chance never came. And I suspect the bastard is too canny to be caught out with the old ‘look at that down there!’ and then punt

him off the balcony trick."

Nemeliah smiled. "Does that really work?"

Raziel grinned. "Oh yes! Happened to my cousin. She was the finest swordsman in these lands and we all expected her to win. Then my younger brother tricked her and shoved her off a cliff. She was hopelessly trusting and naïve." His chuckle morphed into a cough when he saw the look on Nemeliah's face. "Sorry, that probably isn't helping."

"No, not really," Nemeliah replied, fighting the urge to vomit.

They sat in silence.

"Do you have any questions?" Raziel asked.

"Just…what's it like?"

Raziel's face flickered. "Like nothing you can prepare for," he said softly. "You spend your whole life loving some of your family and hating the others and then when the moment comes…you take advantage of the hesitation in the ones that love you, and you struggle over killing the ones you hate. My eldest sister and I had that. I hated her, always had done and she'd never liked me and yet as we came to strike the killing blows we hesitated."

He paused, staring at nothing. "I got over it fastest," he whispered. "I guess I didn't have any memories of her as a baby to hold me back. And then the fireworks went off and I'd won. Didn't even realise we were the last."

He was quiet. Nemeliah sat silently, not even wanting to touch her water lest the movement break the moment. Eventually, Raziel looked up, a slight expression of confusion clouding his face as if he'd just remembered where he was.

"You're Boruc's equal in combat Nemeliah," he said, moving on as if nothing previous had been said. "In a fair fight, it would be very close between you."

"So it comes down to luck then? That's reassuring!" She tried to make it a light comment, but the rise in pitch gave her away.

"Well yes. That's why I plan to make it unfair." He leaned in. "It's going to be the Island Game. Study it Nemeliah."

Nemeliah was taken aback. "You're…cheating…"

"Everybody cheats one way or another," he said, dismissively. "You either win or you die. And I want Boruc dead."

"He's your eldest son."

"And a monster." His fist clenched. "I'm sorry, Nemeliah. I wish I could say this is out of love for you and Binjay, but I'm telling you because I think you're best placed to ensure Boruc dies." He focused his eyes on her, deadly serious for perhaps the first time in the conversation. "Don't hesitate, because others may not; don't listen to pleads or bargains, for they mean nothing; keep focused on your mission to keep Binjay alive; and remember that at the end of it, you won't have to live long with the memories." He sat back, head lowering into shadow. "Take some solace in that."

#

Nemeliah left the room with the burning sensation working its way up her chest and she was just about to hurl when a laugh stopped her. She looked up and saw Boruc striding towards her, his sword strapped to his side.

"Ah, my father's favourite child!" he said, cheerily. "Or maybe it was Merinda? Either way, you're the two I'm most looking forward to killing."

"Fuck off."

"A cutting remark. I hope your spear work is better than your wit." He grinned and looked down at her, Nemeliah rising to glare into his eyes. Their foreheads were almost touching, one grinning the other snarling.

"I will kill you…" Nemeliah hissed.

"That is the point of the exercise," he replied. He slunk back and walked past her. She glared fire at his back and then turned to go.

"Oh by the way!" Boruc swung back and Nemeliah looked over her shoulder. "Did you ever find Selene?"

"No," Nemeliah replied, gritting her teeth.

"Ah, a shame. You were both very close growing up. But I guess you can't trust a sancon can you? I suppose we all have to learn that lesson at some point."

"She's an ungrateful bitch."

"I can understand that sentiment." He nodded at her. "Get a good night of rest Nemeliah. Anything can happen in the arena after all."

He turned and stepped through the door.

Nemeliah shivered. What the hell was that about? More mind games? Or was he actually being

genuinely sympathetic? She shook her head and walked down the corridor.

It didn't matter. She needed to study. One thing was for sure though: heavy armour was out.

#

The Present…

Nemeliah looked down as Binjay shook her arm.

"Nemeliah," he said. "They're coming."

She glanced across and saw one of the assistants approach. She smiled and gently took Binjay by the arm. Binjay clutched tighter at Nemeliah.

"Come this way," she said kindly, prising him loose. "I'll put you over here so you're near your sister. Unlucky for you to have just come of age!"

"Yes…just my luck…"

"Hide Binjay," Nemeliah said, keeping her place. "I'll find you."

He nodded and the woman led him to a spot a few metres away from her. Nemeliah looked around. All seven of them were evenly spaced, a few metres apart, looking into the centre. She inhaled through her nose to the diaphragm and then breathed out through her mouth, counting some seconds between each one, forcing her body to take on a natural rhythm and calm itself.

Grand Duke Keeron stood up. "Citizens," his voice boomed. "Thank you all for attending today. We come together to witness the birth of a new Keeron." He held out his hands to the combatants. "My children…niece and nephew…I ask your forgiveness for what I am putting you through."

"Father!" Merinda wailed, as if in hope that he would reach out and spare her.

Raziel ignored her. "I hope that whoever triumphs will remember those who fall and bear the lessons they learn today. May it guide your spirit and bring you the wisdom of Aspect. To those that fall, do not fear. The Handmaiden of Destiny will guide you to your moment. The Handmaiden of Death will bring you to sleep. And the Handmaiden of Dreams…" He broke off, forced himself to swallow. "The Handmaiden of Dreams…will ensure your rest is beautiful," he finished.

Nemeliah's heart hammered in her ears and her gorge rose.

You know what's happening… she thought, focusing her mind. It's the Island Game. You've prepared for this. The others don't know. You can swim, your armour is light. You can do this. You've studied it. You can do this.

"Now a moment of silence, please," Raziel said. "To mourn those who we will lose. And celebrate the one who will be born."

Silence dropped on the crowd as they bowed their heads. If there was any noise in the arena, Nemeliah couldn't hear it over the thumping of her heart.

The atmosphere changed, from tension to anticipation. She looked up. Raziel was slowly bringing his hands up. Every eye fixed on him. Nemeliah gripped and un-gripped her spear, fingers tapping on the haft, hand sweating.

Grand Duke Keeron brought his hands up so they were either side of his head–

–he clapped–

–and the crowd roared as the ground burst apart and walls started to flood up from the ground. Boruc spun, pulled a knife and hurled it at Dandrion, catching him in the throat, and he continued his spin and hurled another knife at Nemeliah, who twisted her spear and knocked the knife away. Then the wall rose and covered over Boruc.

Her heart pounded as the walls stopped rising, creating a maze of separated partitions. The crowd was high enough up to see over it and down and they cheered again as someone–Merinda?–screamed and the scream suddenly cut off.

Nemeliah looked around her, panicked.

Where's the water? Where the fuck is the water?!

Had she been tricked–no, no!–Uncle wouldn't do that! Something must have changed, a last-minute change perhaps? But why–

It didn't matter.

"Binjay!" she screamed, running to her exit. "I'm coming to find you! Stay hidden!"

#

Raziel's eyes widened in surprise as he looked down. He'd seen Scala take Merinda's head off and she now wove through the partitions, encountering a dead-end and then moving on. Eeyroo picked up his sword and cautiously approached the direction of Binjay, who cowered in his partition, unsure where to go. Nemeliah had panicked, and now raced out.

"I thought you said it would be the Island Game?" Raziel said, leaning back towards the Games Master.

The man looked apologetic. "Ah, I'm sorry your highness," he said. "We found that the reservoirs did not have enough water to facilitate it. So a quick alternative was found."

"Hmmm…" Raziel murmured sitting forward.

"Come now, Grand Duke Keeron!" Joshaman, the High Inquisitor, said brightly. "Surely the surprise factor makes it more entertaining for you as well?"

"I wouldn't call watching my family kill one another 'entertainment'." Raziel glanced at Merinda's corpse. He remembered picking her up and holding her after she'd skinned her knee. Her love of books… how she was still afraid of the dark…

He'd wanted to run down to her when she'd cried, and hug her and tell her it was all right, that she didn't have to participate…

"What's your betting on who is going to win?" Joshaman asked. "I haven't seen the full running order, but I understand Boruc is a favourite?"

"Yes, I suppose in terms of the competition he is…" Raziel said absently, drawing his eyes away from Merinda's body. Wait…where is Boruc…

He scanned the arena–

–his eyes widened–

#

Nemeliah swore and kicked the dead end and made her way back, noting the dusty marks of her footprints and turning the other way. Binjay! She wanted to scream his name but dared not in case his answer gave his position away.

"Nemeliah!" his cry pierced her ears. "Help!"

She ran, ran as fast as she could–

—please please Aspect guide me, guide me true—

–and rounded a corner into Binjay's partition.

He cowered back against the wall, short sword held tightly but wobbling ineffectually. Eeyroo stood in front of him, sword down, trying to calm him.

"It's okay Binjay," he said, softly. "Just be calm. I promise I'll make it quick."

Nemeliah levelled her spear–

–Eeyroo heard and instantly whirled around, raising his sword.

"Get the fuck away from him…" Nemeliah growled.

Eeyroo did so, circling to the right as Nemeliah circled to the left.

"Nemeliah," he said. "We don't have to do this."

"Yes we do," Nemeliah replied. "I double-checked the rules and they're quite clear."

He gave a weak smile. "No, I mean we don't have to exhaust each other. Let's team up. We can fight Boruc together and then once he's dead we can kill each other."

Nemeliah looked at him. She licked her lips. The offer was tempting. She could use all the help she could get against Boruc, especially now her planning was thrown off.

Together…we could take him…

Her spear wavered and dipped–

–Eeyroo reached into a pouch and threw sand at her eyes–

–Nemeliah spun her body to protect her eyes and then ducked on instinct–

–Eeyroo's sword whined just over her head–

–and she whirled along the ground, gaining distance and raising her spear again. Her heart pounded, her body shook. Eeyroo pointed his sword at her, their positions exchanged. The crowd exploded into cheers.

You idiot Nemeliah! You fucking idiot!

In the corner, Binjay wailed in terror.

"Well, that almost worked…" Eeyroo said with a lopsided smile, disappointment lacing his voice.

Nemeliah snarled and charged forward, Eeyroo crouching slightly, pulling back his sword with the point staring at Nemeliah.

Nemeliah threw her spear into the air, over Eeyroo's head–

–his eyes flickered up to track it at the same time he swung, making his swipe wild–

–Nemeliah slid under the strike and raised her hand, catching her spear on its descent–

–and spun and slashed through Eeyroo's spine.

He howled and crumpled to the ground, blood dribbling down his legs, sword spilling from his grip. He hissed in pain and tried to pull himself forward, reaching for his sword–

Nemeliah kicked it away.

Eeyroo sighed and moaned and rolled himself over, so he could look up at her. She planted her spear tip on his neck, keeping her distance, with her elbow bent so she could quickly and easily apply pressure.

"That was a dirty trick," she said.

Eeyroo laughed. "You're the much better fighter," he said and coughed, blood bubbling from his lips. "Can't blame me for trying." He looked up at her and raised his hand. "Good luck Nemeliah."

She stared down at him and didn't move.

"Please Nemeliah, I'm finished. I'm not so spiteful that I'd try and kill you when I know it's over."

Nemeliah shook her head. It hurt, by Aspect's Heart it hurt. "I'm sorry, but I can't risk it."

Eeyroo looked more pained than when she cut his spine. "That's okay," he said, dropping his arm. "I understand. Binjay!" he called. "I'm sorry. I hope you live."

"I-it's okay…" Binjay said.

Eeyroo looked at Nemeliah. "Whatever you do, make sure Boruc dies."

Nemeliah nodded. Then she applied pressure and cut off Eeyroo's head.

She looked at the blood pooling out from his neck and being absorbed into the earth. She ignored the cheering of the crowd.

She just stood.

Then she shook her head and grabbed Binjay's arm and pulled him after her. He was crying and couldn't take his eyes off Eeyroo's body.

"Come on," she said. "By my reckoning, there's two left. Hopefully, Scala and Boruc have mortally wounded one another."

And then I can get rid of these memories.

#

Cautiously they rounded the corner into Boruc's partition.

Scala looked over at her in surprise.

"Nemeliah?" she said. "Did you kill Boruc? If not we can team–"

Nemeliah threw her spear at her. Panicked, Scala raised her chakram to block and the spear flew through the hole in the centre and split her skull. She dropped back onto the ground and Nemeliah walked over and tugged the spear out of her head.

Binjay shivered at the edge of the partition, breathing hard, cold sweat slacking his skin. He took his helm off and it dribbled off his fingers and he tried to breathe deeply.

"Boruc must be left…" Nemeliah mused. "Scala didn't kill him then, more's the pity…Neither had Eeyroo. So where is the bastard…?"

"Nemeliah…look…"

Binjay pointed at a wall and she frowned at it. A series of knives were planted into the wall, stuck in deep, running from the ground up to the top of the wall. The way they were placed made them look like…

…look like footholds…

Nemeliah's breath caught, her eyes widened–

–Boruc wore heavy armour–

–Boruc brought knives but his favourite is the sword–

—"Anything can happen in the arena after all"—

–The Games Master winked–

–"There may be a few surprises in store for you!"–

Boruc…Boruc knew!

She spun around, face contorting in terror–

"Binjay! Run!" she screamed.

Binjay didn't have time to register her words, only her expression before the knife split the air and smashed into his head.

He toppled to the side as Nemeliah ran to him, screaming, all sense of where she was forgotten–

A shadow fell on her and she turned in time to see a glint of steel and she instinctively raised her arm to block–

–and Boruc severed her left arm at the elbow.

Nemeliah screamed as she spun away, blood droplets arcing in the sky, as her arm tumbled to the ground. She roared with rage and spun back, lashing out at Boruc with her spear, but her strikes were wild and telegraphed and he blocked them easily with his long knives before sweeping past her guard and slashing precisely at her face, taking out her right eye.

She didn't feel pain. Just shock and disorientation at the immediate loss of vision on her right side. She could feel blood leaking down her cheek and dribbling out of her severed arm. She dropped her spear, staggered forward a few steps towards Binjay, Binjay who wasn't moving.

At least it was quick, she thought as she collapsed to her knees.

She heard a sigh behind her, as the crowd fell quiet in anticipation.

"Ah, Nemeliah…" Boruc said. "I'm…Six Tits of the Handmaidens I'm disappointed!" He shook his head and walked in front of her. She looked up, squinting into the light, just able to make out his face. "I'd been anticipating this for so long, Aspect's Balls I was even nervous about it! The two best clashing. A fight for the ages! With the roars of the crowd! And then it's just…it's just over…" He gave a helpless shrug. "I can't believe you let me down like this."

"Just get it over with," Nemeliah croaked, not caring that she was crying.

Boruc sighed. “All right.” He raised his knife. “Do you have a preference? Through the heart? Throat cut? I’d offer to take the head off but this thing isn’t really good for it.”

Nemeliah dropped her head. She was so tired.

“All right, throat cut it is.” Boruc moved over and stood behind her. He clasped her forehead and tilted it back, exposing her throat.

She’d done her best. But there was no point struggling now Binjay was dead. She’d join him soon. She’d done her best.

The knife whined as he flourished it down to her throat.

Boruc had an unfair advantage in the end. There wasn’t anything she could–

“Oh shit! Shit! I nearly forgot!” Boruc shouted, smacking himself on the leg and drawing the knife away.

Nemeliah let out a pained groan, her head slumping.

Why couldn’t he just kill her?

“You see I had this thing I wanted to tell you!” Boruc said, shaking his head and laughing at his own silliness. “But I almost forgot. I thought we were going to have this epic battle and then when we were both wounded and exhausted I was going to throw this at you and set up the finale. But you went down so easily it slipped my mind! But I remembered just in time!”

“I’m so happy for you…”

Boruc crouched in front of Nemeliah. He tilted up her head with a finger so she could see his grin.

“It’s about Selene, your best friend, the bitch. She never ran away; I kidnapped her.”

The world went quiet. It went dark. Nothing was left except Boruc’s gleaming eyes and gleaming smile.

“What…?” The word slurred as it left her lips.

“Yeah, I grabbed her and locked her in one of the abandoned dungeons. I told her you were looking for her. Man, the things she did for a bit more bread and water.” He chuckled.

The world started coming back into focus, Boruc became more than smile and eyes, he became a face, something she could hit–

“By Aspect, I was so annoyed that I hadn’t kept her alive when you gave me the bitch comment, it would have been great to see the expression on her face!”

–Nemeliah’s lips peeled back, strands of spittle connecting her teeth, her eyes narrowing–

“But I haven’t fed her in months so she’s definitely dead…I did once not feed her for two weeks and came back to discover she’d eaten her fingers! Imagine that! A herbivore!”

–her hand scrabbled in the sand, trying to find something, anything, and they alighted on some stiffening fingers–

“But she always believed that if she held on you would sweep in and save her.” He shook his head. “Tragic…anyway,” he continued brightly, flipping the knife, “I thought you should know that. Might ease your passage back to Aspect to know–”

Nemeliah screamed and swung her severed arm, smashing it into the side of Boruc’s head.

He crashed to the ground, knife spilling, and screamed, disorientated. “Fuck! You piece of shit!”

He heard a roar behind him and he turned to see Nemeliah leap onto him, holding his knife. She drove it down at his face and Boruc caught her arm and tried to hold the point away as it pushed towards his eye. Spit bubbled from Nemeliah’s lips as she howled and pushed, pushed the knife until the point inched into Boruc’s eye, which burst like a ripe grape.

Boruc screamed and pushed back, snarling, fighting–

–Nemeliah slammed her stump onto the pommel and drove the knife through Boruc’s skull.

He went still, brain split.

She stumbled back, panting, sweating and she collapsed to her knees and screamed at the sky in hatred and self-loathing as the crowd erupted and the fireworks exploded.

#

They watched the medics flood into the arena and grab Nemeliah as she screamed and kicked and flailed, the crowd chanting her name and applauding.

Joshaman looked stunned. The Games Master’s jaw had dropped in horror.

Raziel felt tired.

“Well…” Joshaman coughed. “That was unexpected.”

Raziel gripped his chair in cold fury.

“Games Master,” he said voice like a sea of sand.

The Games Master gulped.

“I suggest you run far and fast.”

The man didn’t bother trying to protest. He just stumbled to his feet and fled.

#

The crown of red and white was placed onto her head. She sat on the throne, a bandage wrapped around her right eye and another one wrapped around cut of her left arm. Raziel stepped back and smiled.

"All hail Nemeliah, The Champion, Grand Duke of Keeron and First Assistant to the Handmaidens," he announced.

The Sabres, lining the throne's hallway, slammed their spears into the ground three times.

Nemeliah stood. "Bring him forward," she said.

Two guards brought Tomay forward, manacles clamped on his wrists. He stumbled, and fell to his knees before the throne, eyes wide and fur matted.

Nemeliah stepped down to him.

"G-Grand D-Duke N-Nemeliah," Tomay bleated, white showing in his eyes. "I-I'm so sorry about Binjay. He was…he was a great friend. And I'm sorry a-about my sister, but I-I swear I will n-never–"

Nemeliah flourished a key and unlocked the manacles. They clattered to the floor. Tomay looked down at them in surprise and then back up. Nemeliah smiled at him and then she stood.

"Let this be a symbolic moment!" she declared. "From now on, all sancon in Keeron are to be freed. As Grand Duke, I will not suffer or tolerate the holding of slaves in this territory. Send the word."

The Sabres bashed their spears on the ground, and they filed out of the room. Raziel walked over to Nemeliah and put a hand on her shoulder. "You will make a very fine Grand Duke," he said.

Nemeliah snorted. "Yeah, for all of the five months the nobles and the Inquisition will let me sit in the seat," she replied.

"Oh, their bark is worse than their bite. You'll manage." He looked at her and seemed on the verge of saying something else, then decided against it. "Right, I'm off to work on my Siege skills." He left the room, humming a soft tune.

It was just Nemeliah and Tomay and she smiled down at him as he looked up confused. She reached down her hand. "Tomay. I hope you can forgive me for frightening you with that gesture?"

He took her hand and she helped him to his feet. "I-it was–"

"You can speak freely."

"It was a s-shitty thing to do."

Nemeliah laughed. "That it was." She put her arm around his shoulder and they walked to the balcony. The cool breeze of the morning whispered over them with the haze of the newly risen sun and halo. The streets below were quiet.

"Binjay said you were good with sculpture?" Nemeliah said.

"Oh, well, I don't know about 'g-good'. I made some things out of clay but…"

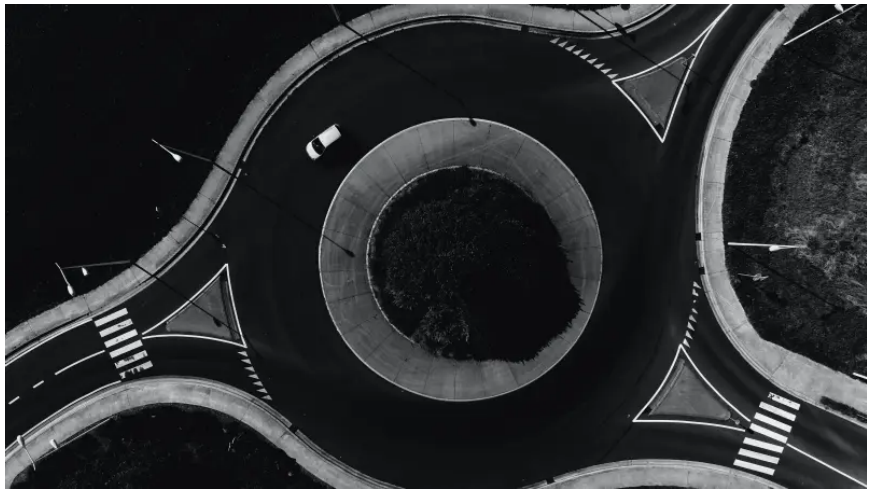
"I want to build a statue of Binjay. A decent size, but not quite as large as the Handmaidens."

"I-I think he would have hated that…" Tomay said. He quirked a slight smile. "But it would g-get him back for that time he stole my piece of cherub fruit…"

Nemeliah laughed. "Did he really? Little holier-than-thou bastard…" She stared into the distance. She swallowed and held back the tears. "But first…I need to talk to you about your sister…and tell you how very sorry I am. And how I'm going to make things up to her memory."

END

Raging for the Roundabout | Cheryl Ferguson Bernini



Tuur Tisseghem via Pexels

Round and round you go. Where do you get off? You ought to know. From the lips slips a curse, the chaos predetermined. An engineered nightmare of comings and goings. Creeping closer, an instantaneous choice to be made. To the right? To the left? Beyond the linear threshold, the mind screams. No one hears. Who even cares? Beware the drifter who refuses to settle upon a course for their indiscriminate judgments misdirect traffic, corruption of a polite and steady flow. From one driver to the next, hitting the road day in and day out, please learn to drive–a roundabout.

Ciao from Italia. You can read C.F. Bernini's work, both fiction and nonfiction (in English and Italian), online and in print. Follow her on Twitter: @FergusonBernini and Facebook: CFergusonBernini.

The Salsa Manifesto | John Snyder

Polina Tankilvetch via Pexels

THE SALSA MANIFESTO

John W. Snyder

The origin of all which is seemingly constructed should be considered in its entirety, as should that out of which what is in question is made; therefore, a brief definition of the terms to be considered is required. Despite this preliminary requirement, it is necessary to recall the purpose before we engage ourselves in the prospective issue—being respectively, the composition of salsa and what can be considered a part of salsa before the additions change the basic formation of salsa (and therefore arrest the status of the dish in question). Salsa is a versatile creation that, despite needing to comply with certain unchangeable rules, is free to be experimented and tinkered with and could indeed contain meat.

To start: the definition. Salsa is, as defined by the Cambridge Dictionary, "a spicy sauce made esp. of tomatoes, onions, and chilies, that you put on Mexican foods."[1] What is in question is not the composition itself, but *what specifically* is in and can be included in the composition. We are, with reference to the preceding quote, all in agreement with what salsa *is*, but not of what salsa can be made. Since there are salsas without tomatoes[2],[3], it is clear that tomatoes are not necessary. If we look back on the provided definition from the Cambridge dictionary, we see that the ingredients listed (tomatoes, onions, and chilis) are marked as "esp.", meaning "especially", or in other words, particularly. Yes, there are other possible translations of the word in question but let us first look at the implications. Other definitions of "especially" are focused on the necessity or the significance of the item in question. Now, since the necessity has been refuted (see footnote 2), we are left with second and last remaining option: the significance.

The significance of an item is difficult to prove, but I will nonetheless attempt to do so, as it is necessary to our argument. To begin we will re-examine the provided definition for salsa: "a spicy sauce made esp. of tomatoes, onions, and chilies, that you put on Mexican foods."[4] Clearly, when examining the definition closely, we find that salsa, like salad, is quite versatile. We need to keep in mind that salsa means "sauce" in Spanish[5], along with other forms of the word "sauce" (such as gravy when combined with meat[6] and the salsa which we are discussing[7]). Since we are only discussing the composition of the last definition, we will discard the two former translations.

Given that the word in question is translated to mean what we associate to be salsa, we now can infer that our definition of salsa differs from the traditional Spanish definition of salsa, for if the two concepts were one and the same, there would be no differentiation between the two. In the interest of further explanation and clarification, allow me to go off on a tangent. A number (x) of concepts, when completely similar in every fashion, become one through their one-ness—their similarity. When there is even the slightest significant difference [excluding descriptors—adjectives, adverbs, and the like (and therefore bringing our x number of concepts about which this side-note concerns itself to the most basic ideas with some allowance for specificity and directness)—and other forms of designation including especially enumeration and related

concepts] between x number of concepts, there is a need for differentiation and specification. When the difference is not necessary in any form, then the specification is not needed and not included. Imagine now that the concepts are the words *salsa* and its American adoption. By this logic, we know that the definitions for the Spanish word *salsa* and the adopted form of the same word are different. One refers to the original idea of the dish,

and the other refers to the adopted concept of the "original" idea. The difference lies *in* their significance—the intent or the minute details of each form and meaning of the word.

Description: Related image It has been proven that the words of the Mexican (being related to the Spanish language) and American dialects are significantly different, but we must now ask ourselves from where the divide originates. In the last paragraph, I claimed that what we are currently discussing was due to the minute details of each form and meaning of the word. This is a base fact and will be scrutinized in detail. To start, that which a word is can be clarified by its use. Granted, not simply anything would go in the salsa, for Mexican cuisine is specific (like many other, if not all, cuisines) and uses certain basic ingredients for the majority of its cooking. We see that the Mexican cuisine is largely based off maize with various vegetables and fruits[8]. This is certainly true and is applicable to both definitions of salsa. The majority of something does not need to be included in all that is considered to be part of that from which the majority obtains it status. This is to say that, of a group, the majority does not fully represent the group, nor can it be said that So that this fact may labeled as true, we will now consider figure 1 and figure 2 for a moment, which are respectively shown below.

Description: Image result for venn diagram **Figure 1:**

Figure 2:

Figure 1[9] depicts a triple Venn diagram with items A, B, and C. Figure 2[10] depicts Venn diagrams A, B, and C with items A and B shown in different relationships. In figure 1, we see that items A, B, and C are a majority in their most pure form (meaning where they do not overlap with any other items), but the items in question are not exactly like their combined forms (i.e. the parts that overlap with other items). It is precisely the observable and variable difference and similarity in each group (when, of course, compared with another of the same diagram) that warrants the specification, for without the specification of , we would not be able to differentiate between item A, item B, and the conjoined item that is .

This is the logic behind the separation and distinction of the other items. In figure two, we observe just that being applied, albeit in a more complicated manner. The sections labeled as "Unique to [item]" are marked so to demonstrate their distinct nature and their differentiation from what is . This specific differentiation is similar to the detailing in figure 2, diagrams B and C. What is marked to be separate in diagram B of figure 2—specifically the area that is marked as is shown to be a different creation from , , and "unique to A and B". This demonstrates the uniqueness of each section (with respect to what they owe their basic forms of A and B) in their nomenclature. In diagram C of the same figure, this principle of nomenclature is further explained by the use of a concrete difference between the two parts (represented by the dashed line). That which is is marked as similar to what is unique to item A, but is completely different in its A-ness and content of B-ness from what is and unique to item B. This last diagram C best emulates the principle of the difference between the majority of something and what is the entirety (all which has a share in a concept in any way, shape, or form) of the same thing. We can now say that the significance—the difference of something—is due to the minute details of each form and meaning of the word.

Let us now return to the idea of salsa—a traditionally spicy sauce made especially of tomatoes, onions, and chilis. The definition of "especially" as "significantly" is somewhat lacking in clarity here. It—being "especially"—has been proven to read "a major (common) component of which is", if you will recall paragraphs 2 and 3. Given the proof that majority components are not always present in all that exists of a certain item, we can now infer that salsa being open to many different cuisines does exist. Indeed, this includes different ingredients of the same cuisine, since we have proven that salsa is not limited to even those most basic listed ingredients. We must now explore what makes salsa that which it is in an attempt to find the point at which it ceases to become salsa and becomes instead some foreign creation.

For the Americans, the salsa which we know is (in majority) *pico de gallo* or *salsa cruda*, which are both traditionally raw mixes of tomatoes, onions, cilantro, chilis, and occasionally lime juice or salt. These "off-brand" condiments are typically found in grocery stores or any given non-authentic Mexican restaurant. These *salsas* are only a small look into the entirely of salsa in Mexican cuisine. It is clear that any cuisine,

when forced to contact another, adapts slightly to meet that new stimulation. This has been done with Mexican food and American food. For example, look at Taco Bell. This Americanized fast-food restaurant is surely not wholly Mexican in its food, nor is it entirely American. It is Mexican-American, like the salsa we find in our stores and in American culture today[11]. With this information, we can reasonably extrapolate that the Mexican-American salsa found in our stores and on our shelves are not authentic in their wholeness, nor can or should they be expected to speak for what makes true salsa be so great. This demonstrates that the Americanized form of salsa is not fully American, nor is it fully Mexican. It is, in other words, not "unique to B", to reference the charts from earlier. We have answered one part of the previous question, but we are still left with, "What constitutes real salsa?" To answer this, we will start at the beginning and apply our recently gained knowledge.

Traditionally, salsa was a simple combination of tomatoes, chilis, and other spices that can be traced back to the Aztecs, the Mayans, and the Incas[12]. The dish was probably used as an aid in warding off or curing maladies, for, "[the chilies] stimulate the digestive organs, especially the liver."[13] Now, this is of no real value that directly concerns the answer to our question, but it does reveal that the origins were quite simple, which gives up some quite important information. This very first idea of the condiment cannot be expected to answer our question, for all modern salsas would be ruled out on the basis of differing ingredients alone (setting aside the intent and the formation of the more modern versions). We now know that the most ancient idea of salsa is not what it is today. We also know that this makes clear the point of origin of the idea of salsa.

The vast variety of salsas indicate that the idea of salsa is up for interpretation. Different people certainly have ideas on what does and what does not constitute a salsa. Perhaps salsa is definite and there is only one form of salsa. Perhaps salsa is a variation on Sorites' Paradox. What's clear is that salsa does have some basic rules that act as a guideline to creating and adding ingredients to a salsa. This is where we will answer our question, in an attempt to make explicit those rules. Firstly, it is clear that salsa must be fresh. The second rule, however, is more difficult. The cooking and subsequent canning or jarring of salsa that is *cruda* is not permissible. To clarify, the cooking of the entirety or of the ingredients of a *salsa cruda* defeats the purpose of such a salsa. It is, however, possible to grill the salsa or to bake it as part of another dish in the Mexican cuisine[14] (and so an amendment must be made). The second rule must then be that salsa may not be cooked or grilled independently, but only as a whole; though, the ingredients themselves may be cooked or grilled independently before assembly. Thirdly, the base must be of a fruit or vegetable, and so must the majority of the dish. Meat may be used as a *base*, but then the salsa becomes what English calls "gravy", and the "salsa" would therefore become a sauce. As this does not form a distinct category from the *salsa* that is of a Spanish or Mexican definition, it is still technically a salsa (but not one that is recognized as so by the English language). The fourth rule is that "wet" or dried (but fresh) ingredients make no difference, as long as the salsa can serve its intended purpose. The fifth rule is that spices, herbs, and peppers are mandatory in at least some context or form of presence. For the sixth and final rule, the salsa may be chunky, but may not be too watery, as too much liquid defeats the purpose of calling the concoction a *salsa* and turns it into what is better recognized as a sauce or marinade. As long as these basic rules are followed, anything can be added into a salsa (such as a meat product or some invention on a grain) and the creation may be called such. Logically, once the rules have been breached, it cannot be designated as salsa.

Simply put, salsa is a complex creation with many centuries of development and experimentation behind it. Our ultimate question has been answered; we know that a salsa must adhere to a set of rules (which are ultimately more like guidelines) that govern the status of the dish. We have shown that the definition of salsa does not necessarily fit every form of salsa. We have shown that major sections or categories are not all-encompassing, especially in the realm of food and culture. We have shown that differing foods and cultures do have an impact on a dish, but do not completely re-invent it altogether. Finally, we have shown that salsa is versatile and has the capacity to be adapted to different cuisines and requirements; in other words, yes—salsa can indeed contain meat.

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[10] **Figure 2:** Retrieved from https://www.researchgate.net/figure/Similarity-Venn-Diagrams-This-Figure-shows-three-possible-representations-of-Similarity_fig5_276099351 on December 22, 2018

[11] Andrew F. Smith, ed., *Oxford Encyclopedia of Food and Drink in America vol. 2* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004)

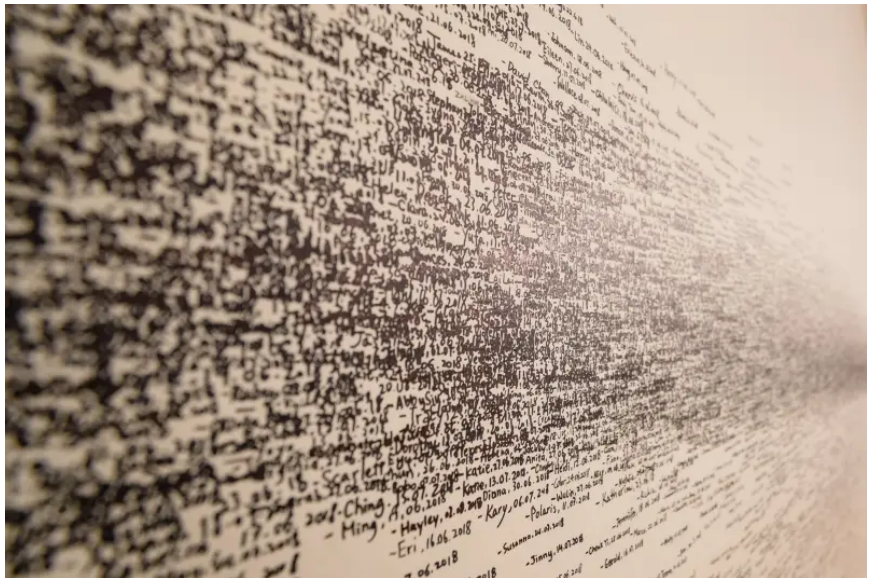
[12] A. Hyatt Verrill, *Foods America Gave the World*, 34-35

[13] A. Hyatt Verrill, *Foods America Gave the World*, 37

[14] See "Roasted Tomato Salsa" by Jenn Segal

Jack Snyder is a senior Philosophy and Creative Writing major at Susquehanna University. In his free time, he reads anything he can get his hands on, writes philosophical essays, and performs poetry.

I delight in words | Yvonne W



Jimmy Chan via Pexels

All kinds of words,
Big words, small words,
Long words, short words.
Words such as cantankerous,
Which roll your tongue to a ball so fibrous,
And others such as contumacious,
Will mean that you're not obsequious.
I could say that Tom is confident, but where's the fun?
I'd rather say he has great aplomb—and a wonderful tan.
Then there's Mary who's choleric,
She's always vexed if you're not specific,
But her sister's generic,
And it gives her a feeling oh so tragic.
There's also Jerry who's slimy, creepy, and quite sycophantic,
In other words, he's effusive, grovelling, oleaginous – it makes him tick,
And his unctuous attitude, I fear, will become a pandemic.
Then right next to Jerry, there's Julie,
Who invited me for a repast and asked me to bring tulips,
And Jane who's a teacher who loves doing backflips.
Lastly, there's Fay who's gone through many a vicissitude,
And she conquered all, though with some turpitude.

Bio: Yvonne W is a writer/poet. Her work has been published in The Kalahari Review, Writers' Space Magazine and Women's Media Centre, among others.

The Faerie Bomb | Liam Burke

David Bartus via Pexels

Hawthorn bound his hostage in their chair, physically mimicking the bonds holding the dazed denizen of Pulp at the Pump Inc. in its corporate clutches. Earlier at the bar, St John's Wort and Faerie tinctures leaked into libation had allowed the eco terrorist to use this hapless drone to gain entry to their wasp's nest.

The workers knew they labored for evil. Why else seek a state of stupor after hours? Nudging the numbness sought for succor had been almost too simple. It reminded Hawthorn of himself, before he'd been Hawthorn.

Mind and soul chained to a desk grown cancerously from a bloated business body. Devoted through selfish apathy to stripping the Earth of its breath, so they could crush bark and branch into liquid engine movement. No leap without a fall, no progress without injury. Humans simply could not get the hang of harmony. It had taken a moment just like this to free him. Let him dance wild with the Good Folk, living for the first time.

Bert, name engraved on his plastic keycard, watched his hoodie wearing jailor with bleary contentedness, silent with the help of duct tape and sedative. Hawthorn had timed the dosage so any minute the woozy worker would return from Haze Mountain. He'd need the blind pawn aware shortly.

A ceramic shell filled to hold a sympathetically linked sample of the Earth was placed between captor and captive. The hiss of solid soil signaled the ritual had begun. Cubicles stretched hollow and empty around them, skulls in a field of manufactured bone. What better place to plant the next seed of resistance? He did so, a small man placing a small pip into a small pot in a massive hostile world.

His past self recalled the term hostile work environment, and he smiled under the scarf hiding his identity. Human Resources would have done well to branch out.

Words were needed. The Good Neighbors would hear, be drawn to the living tissue waiting to be birthed. They would feel the foe, revenge rushing their approach to eagerly enact threefold their traumas. Bert, still separate, was slowly sobering. Giddy bliss was sloughing off of the surface of his fear, it was nearly time to reveal what organism he occupied.

Crouching over the cauldron of loam, Hawthorn whispered,

"Come in the stillness,

Come in the night,

Come to bring wrath,

Come with delight"

The dark dust swirled as the seed passed on the poem. Tiny voices tinkled like broken glass laughing on the limits of his senses. He'd need to be swift, Bert would not have long.

Hawthorn approached his hostage, who had begun to struggle. Bert pulled against the zip ties holding him to the desk he'd once willingly fused himself to. The fight echoed in the air, and Hawthorn seized on it, fingers slipping around the ephemeral sensation as had been shown to him. As had been done to his past persona.

Knowing knots wove intricate webs, the struggle was tied to the seedling, and Bert was bound one more time. His fevered need to escape was redirected, as Hawthorn placed photo after photo on the desktop before him. The duct tape kept him from a reply as dignified as his suit, but enough words had been spoken aloud in Hawthorn's opinion.

Green shoots pushed their way out of the surface of the altar-pot as Bert's eyes took in the images of devastation before him. Each revelation took hold in his mind as roots spread in the sod. Sprite families fled metal mouths as their homes were chewed to chips. Pixies ground under treads and left lifeless as the land they'd loved. Centuries of tradition transformed into a trip to Cancun, or worse more machines to consume the natural world.

The pottery popped as Bert's bubble burst, and Hawthorn could see in the man's eyes that he was no longer bound to malice. He released his new ally fully as they watched with growing awe the tree that matched Hawthorn's namesake take root in the office. It continued to grow, echoing the ire and resolve in the new recruit.

Within seconds it reached the ceiling, trunk tearing through filmy barriers. Partitions of the stagnant hive of industry were flung aside to make way for new life with gargantuan groans. Branches reached and scraped, defying the space and reclaiming it. The sound of joyous rebellion reverberated around them, and in their hearts.

The weight of wood became unbearable, the floor collapsing completely. Branches surged and the sharp nettles accompanying the massive plant swelled into swords.

Perhaps a few more words would be ok, Hawthorn conceded.

"Time to run." he explained, and demonstrated the concept with celerity.

The two of them ran down halls designed by madmen determined to direct the course of humanity towards predictable compliance. Past the breakroom broken with snacks flying, down stairs uprooted from below, they sprinted through the lobby Hawthorn had entered so easily earlier.

Everywhere small shapes slipped and scurried along the tree, encouraging with words and pushing the growth by hand. Red hats and leafy clothes, slim bodies and sharp bloody teeth swarmed the growing maelstrom of bark and leaf. Mouths of magic and flesh wreaked revenge for their homes taken by metal monsters, happily ignoring the humans who had brought them.

Outside, Hawthorn slowed, and turned in the parking lot, tapping Bert and bringing him about. Before them the tree rose, shrugging off the trappings of big business. Roots churned the ground as a giant's toes wriggling in sand. It reached fifty feet, then a hundred, only satisfied when not a brick or pinprick of plastic persisted.

Pulp at the Pump's main headquarters was no more. Bert stood stunned, and Hawthorn hovered patiently.

"What happens now?" Bert finally ventured, eyes still stuck on the Good Folk celebrating in a dance circle at the base of the gigantic growth.

Hawthorn smiled, removing his scarf to reveal it fully. "Other organization branches will remove the remaining remnants, incinerating the insidious Internet infection to mirror their material dismantling"

He knew that wasn't the answer anticipated, but Bert needed to ask the right questions.

"Other branches. Wow." Bert shook his head and chuckled at Hawthorn. "I mean what happens to me. I'm pretty sure I can't go back. Not after what I just saw."

"Would you want to, knowing what you know?"

"No. I guess I wouldn't. At least I know the rumors have been true. Nature really is sick of our shit."

As police sirens swarmed, Hawthorn placed a bowl on the ground, completing the ritual with an offering of cream.

"Time to go, Calathea." He said, straightening up, and making his way to a moving patch of midnight residing between roots. The Good Folk frolicked in the ruins, entirely ignoring the eco terrorist as he passed. Fae glutted on glee at Goliath felled and reborn as flora.

Calathea, as he was now known to nature, followed Hawthorn into Faerie. He noticed his thoughts had begun to mimic Hawthorn's habits. It didn't deter him, his new beginning beckoned. He passed into Faerie, and joined the fight.

Liam Burke is an independent spec fic writer. You can find his full body of work at ssjliam.square.site. Twitter: @ssjliamp

Call of Duty 2054 | M Constantine Zavos

Tom Swinnen via Pexels

what direction should we face to pray?
in a world whose sun never sets
surrounded by solar flares
heat so ungodly
heaven, i never thought there
to be flames like this
from a monsoon just two moons too late
engulfing life in a rush
carbon smears across the slab
voided of life and color
as the world turns to black ash
ash i use to draw this very picture

meant somehow to show permanence
permanence, a myth
grown further and further
from reality
rock and chisel become paper and ink
burned in this fire
whose waste i recline in
paper and ink become code and data
digital footprints will wash
away in the rising tides
of climate change and crashed satellites
our sacred scrolls vanishing
in the lost archive of a
precipitating cloud
raining acid for 100 years
the destruction we begged for
in the cutting reflection of dark
talismans whispered to
in a world whose sun never sets
torrid air scorches
cheeks and forearms
singeing and disintegrating
our vellus hairs
beaches are littered
as people run
toward the water, the crushing ocean
its masterful balance
of grace and devastation,
only to be swallowed
by its angry skyscrapers
now 76 yards high
jets rush off planet
to urgently deliver
mined resources across
the galaxy whistles
end in the thunderclap
of air strikes
no one has seen an animal in six years
no one has seen a human in four
and each day greens
further grey
while trees rot in the street
like bodies
"this place is the bomb,"
she says, "you'll love it here"
behind uncanny, disarming eyes
what direction should we face to pray?

I am a multidisciplinary artist with background in classical piano, visual art & design, poetry, performance, fashion, herbalism and medical aesthetics.

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website: mzavos.studio

Five Poems | Aswin Melepatt

Get Lost Mike via Pexels

Artsy Truck

You'd never know when you're going to get hit by the artsy truck.

I just got back from the gym.
Slightly exhausted.
I could feel the pulse ringing through my veins,
as I stood there waiting for the truck,
to get hit by it ,
amidst the road towards the soul.

Is this a meditation or a rhythmic scribbling?
Can I complete the story today?

I need to go to the riverside shore
walk leisurely,
ponder over the varied experiences,
that life brings you as a gift.

Just then a distant blare is heard from the road end.
'It must be the artsy truck!'.
Knocking people off the road,
that they never often rode.
I walked into the road briskly,
checking the time,
waiting for my turn.

Headlights from the truck engulfed the people standing beside the road.
As the truck came by,
it hit all the people that I know.
It hit them so hard that people are tossed over,
their skulls were broken,
leaving them lying
bleeding on the ground.
They all bled but inks and colors,
that littered the road.

I saw the person driving the truck vaguely through the front glass.
He had a hat and black shades,
with a cigarette in his mouth.
I waved at him cheerfully.
With a screeching break,
the truck halted before me.

I didn't wonder why.
With words that lacked sincerity,
I tried to mumble something to the driver.
But the truck bypassed me with a blaring loud horn.
It might never strike people,
who don't want to be real.

If you ever find him today or tomorrow,
please tell him,
that I want to be run over by his truck.
Peace!

Miscellaneous Jargon

No one really knows themselves,
even though they say they clearly do.
Of all the things that anyone ever said,
there were things that no one entirely cared.
When the words themselves tremble alone to stand out,
the inability to express their face,
a phenomenon that no president wants to talk about or discuss.

Beyond any sensory business,
there is acclaimed to be something else,
where we hear the sounds of our vibrating hands and
see the sparkly fireflies emitting fire inside our heads.
Is it something we know if our antennas are angled properly right?
Unravel, unwrap the green blanket masking yourself for truth and
jump down that valley,
do you have the trust to plunge?

No not in you moron but
some other self you immensely love.

Misconceived concepts lead indeed to mad raves,
which you regret in your hindsight.
So, wave not save until you see that
she could trade her soul and her hopeless dreams.
You can cheat as well since this is not forbidden commerce after all.
It is just a mere matter not for sale.
Aren't we all zombies living in bubbles,
with varied colored skins,
but similar aura and stink,
waiting to pop out in thin air?
But don't shudder, don't moan if you realize you are multifarious.
You truly are and I
couldn't contain myself when life itself revealed itself one day.

Sense deep inward and outward until the senses fail to make sense.
And when you think you need to escape this world
just like semen wants to leave out a phallus,
a baby wants to come out of the uterus,
a pulp waits to burst out pustules,
to come out of this boring reality, friend,
you're not alone as I too talk to my mirror every once in a while,
how much I want to enter through them,
globes inside weakly glaciers,
pupils inside your crystal eyes.

Thanks for your fake concern.
Just that I decided to reveal my thoughts,
it doesn't grant you any legal authority to judge,
this pretentious intellectual fucker.
If you think you know yourself a lot,
should I trust you or suspiciously let you talk the talk until it's over
and see that it doesn't satisfy my soul.
But still, why do I think so much?
Jesus, Buddha, Krishna, and Muhammad –
often anticipate me.

Words

I never knew I had kin with the words.
They were always there, waiting to call out for
whatever endeavor that I'm in.
They were always there
when my friends ditched me behind that dark forest fire.
I often wondered why? Why did it take so long to realize them?
Why this camaraderie with this self-absorbed man,
even when he pushed this world into a corner?
Why still baring, when everybody stopped caring,
about how I'm feeling?

Except for my mother, she thinks I'm one of her universes.
Feeling magically blessed!
When I hold my pen, I can feel their rejuvenation from within themselves.
Almost thrilled as if to know who I'm calling to join, along with me, onto
the world, through a blank dainty piece of paper.
And I'm often excited too when I see them form a band together for me,
anywhere, any day, anytime,
to be a part of my mission to flip the world upside down.

They were there for me
when the world chained me in my prison room.
Now that I'm indebted to them.

And I visit them someday, try to meet their friends, invite them over to have
a nice house party.

Each one of them is special to me.
And how mystically they form together,
sometimes highly powerful that they embrace a glow within the paper,
a fading glow that emanated from the ink that I bleed,
from my pen, the bridge that they travel through the wildest worlds,
from inner valleys to the tip of the nib.

They were there for me,when I was all alone,
in those darkest dungeons of my life.
And I hope they would be always there,
quietly reminding me who I'm,
when I ask the Universe 'What's conspiring ?'
Like a river that flows, let them flow incessantly.

Candy

'Shoo away you Pixie Cupid!
Why! you making havoc always ?'
Swirling in a revolving chair,
my eyes met hers across the deck.
Darts of electric fizz pierced the retinas
blinding me, galvanizing the system down
crashing, hanging, terminating my heart.exe

Arrows were missed.
'How in the wildest probability did this happen?'
wondered my wingman.

The girl in the blue gown looked away
gasping at my pervert gesture.
'Do you feel the same ?'

With a choked mind, I deferred asking.
The Introverted meek searched her number.
Instagram, is the savior of lonely stalkers.
Acceptance of my request rang merry bells.
Lovely texts flew across the air.
Halted my haughty interference by the adage
"I've got a boyfriend!"

Ships sunk deep, laboratories exploded
Butterflies got drunk, beers and wines
Earth tremored, losing in those echoes
the fighter inside me refused to give up.
Asked her out for a milkshake.

Denied at once, affirmed seventeen days later.
Chats filed up to lengthy textbooks.
Hearing the owl's hoots at night
had good times laughing and fussing.
She smelt like Candy, not a free spirit.

'Should I try to win over her?
Does she even feel the same ?'

Drenched in this desert rain,
chasing all clueless mirages
I know you're lost just like anyone.
Seven fishes in your vivarium know you
better than you do, they whisper!

Here I'm making the door stay open
for you to come with me

Come out to the real world
for I am the oasis to your desert.

Miles to go, behind on her ride,
Untied hairs fall onto my face.
She smelt like a Candy, not any free spirit
I wished her to understand me
'Do you even feel the same, Candy ?'

Hearts pounded, twisting my nerves.
Guts failed to chase her.
Hand-shook modestly cited out I
"Let's be newly found temporary friends"

Candy nodded, beamed out widely
I looked into her eyes for the last time.
Crossed the road, walked the empty streets
crying out loud inside, while she faded out.

Have you felt anything, Candy?

Paracetamols

When I won a poetry competition my
father drove all the way from his office to
watch me receive the award.
I refused to sit with him at first.
I preferred a seat thousands of kilometers away.

He turned around and looked for me.
His eyes were sad, unbelievable for his son
refusing to sit despite an eternal seat he held for him.
And I wished to ask him
"Where were you dad when I most wanted you?"

My father circulated a photograph of the event,
showing the neighborhood and his friends from work.
I was embarrassed and asked him not to do it.
He said, "At least you found yourself when others couldn't"

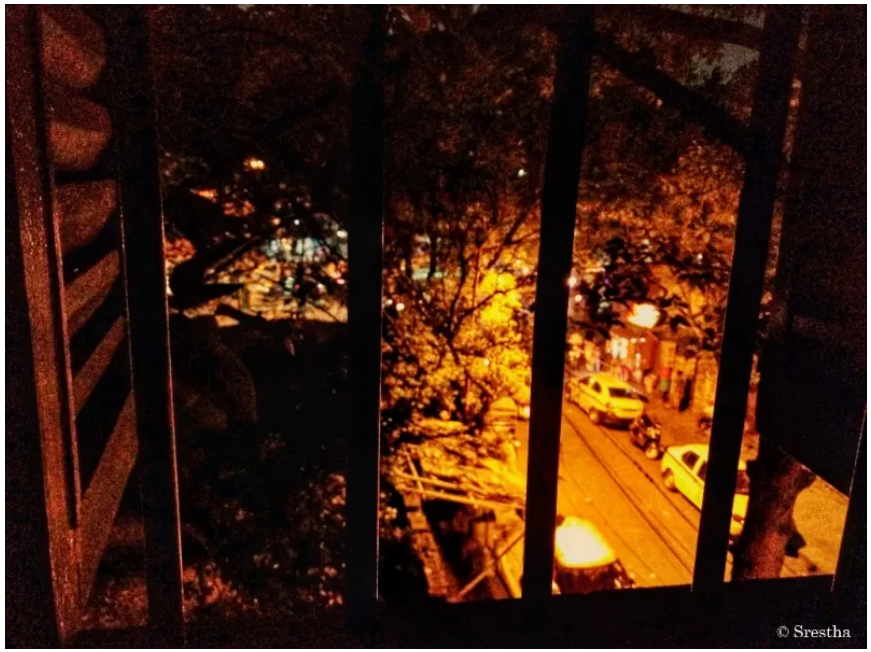
The lady living in my neighborhood is worried,
About my contagious poetic sickness.
She warned her children,
"Pop paracetamols instead of poetries,
When you're sick."

And my girlfriend said she felt nothing
after reading the poem.
Although her tears weren't fake.
I said it's not about you.
She wanted the poem to be about her.
It was about her.

Those who couldn't feel any poetry,
Unluckily popped paracetamols and sicked.
Others found themselves in its spring.
My father believed in its magic.
I wish I had sat with him that day.

Aswin Melepatt is an aspiring Indian English writer from Kerala, India. He is a data engineer by profession and loves to travel, read, meditate and have a warm tea.

A Hot Summer's Evening | Srestha Chakraborty



via Srestha Chakraborty

A Hot Summer's Evening

Murky windowsills of unfamiliar places
exude melancholy with just about
the perfect tinge of homesickness.

The kind of homesickness
that is made up of all your
broken crayons and missing playthings;

The kind of homesickness
that simply makes you
half smile and half sigh.

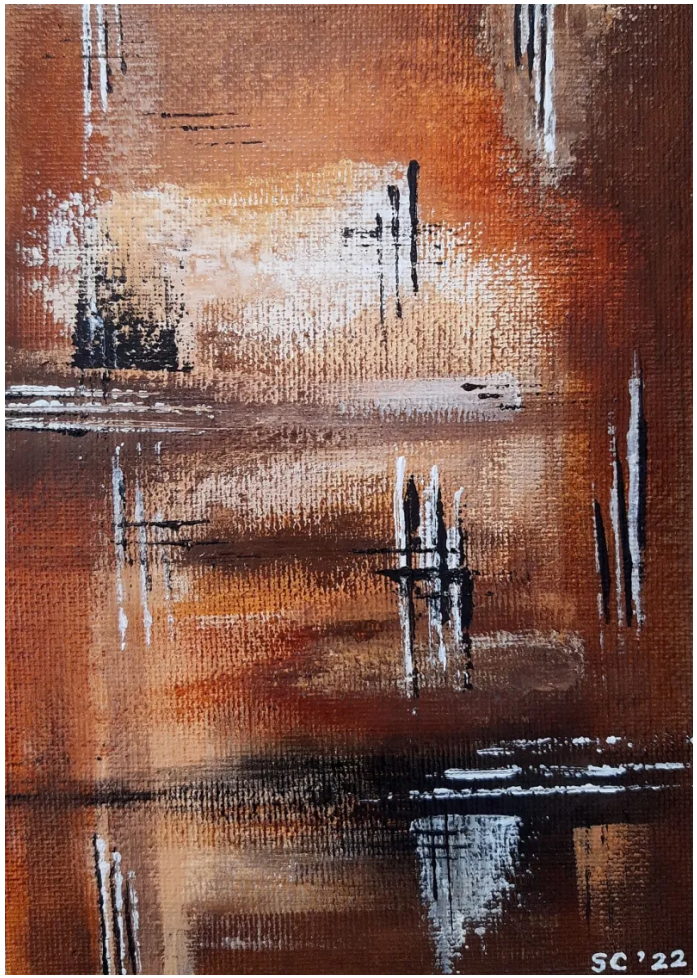
via Srestha Chakraborty

Lavender Haiku

Perfectionism blooms

Into a purple whimsy.

She knows her worth now.



Sunset Suburbia via Srestha Chakraborty

Srestha is a disabled neuroqueer artist from India & neuroscientist in-training. They view art as an agent of sociopolitical change. They're also a singer & love academia aesthetics. Twt:Neurosresh

Garden of Cyrus | Adam Ray Wagner

Zen Chung via Pexels

The Garden of Cyrus[1]

in the eye lives
an orchard—sapamber in Autumn
the leafing seasoned voice
inverts in the retina
enters swirling over the treeside river
ovals of mist in elliptic whisperings

in the branching overeye the horizon finds trace of those
"vocall and sonorous lines in Ecchoes… in woody
plantations, by water, and able
to return some words;
if reached

by a pleasant and dividing voice, there may be heard
the loftiest notes in nature" alive in mist where sunholed eyes

see how reflection slips
from the sky in slight movement

1. water-like lit by the dark of this life the yearning eye finds

refractions
of the horizoned sun
as each hollow surface

1. Quotatation is from Sir Thomas Browne's *The Garden of Cyrus*.

Adam Ray Wagner is a poet raised in Nebraska who is currently residing in Boise after brief stays in Colorado and Maine.
Instagram: @adam.or.ray Twitter @adam_or_ray

Commissioner Lin at Canton, 1839 | Lucas Davis

Matthew Barravia Pexels

One month ago, I was told
through the death of the Emperor's son,
that we were at war.

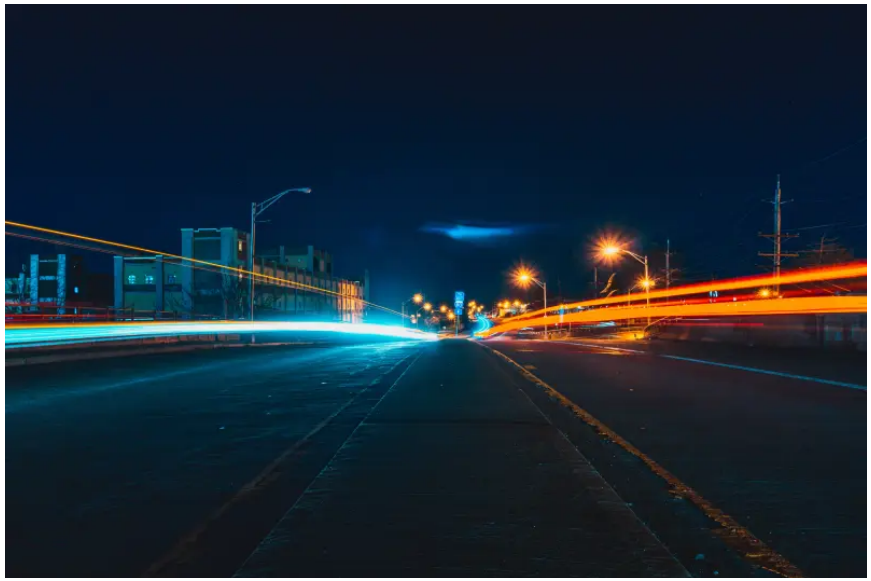
I met the British on the beach,
and seized their ammunition –
the Lethean cannonballs –
and ordered them away.

Now, in midsummer heat,
watching opium empty into the sea,
I cry out my prayer:

Ocean – you who carried such evil men,
where we now dispose of this bitter sap –
I'm sorry. You don't deserve such poisons.

Lucas Davis is a 22 year old from Georgia, USA that is currently living in Madrid, Spain. His primary focus in creative works is the history and culture of Tea. YouTube: OddiTeas Twitter: @Oddi_teas

night out | Jordan Hanson



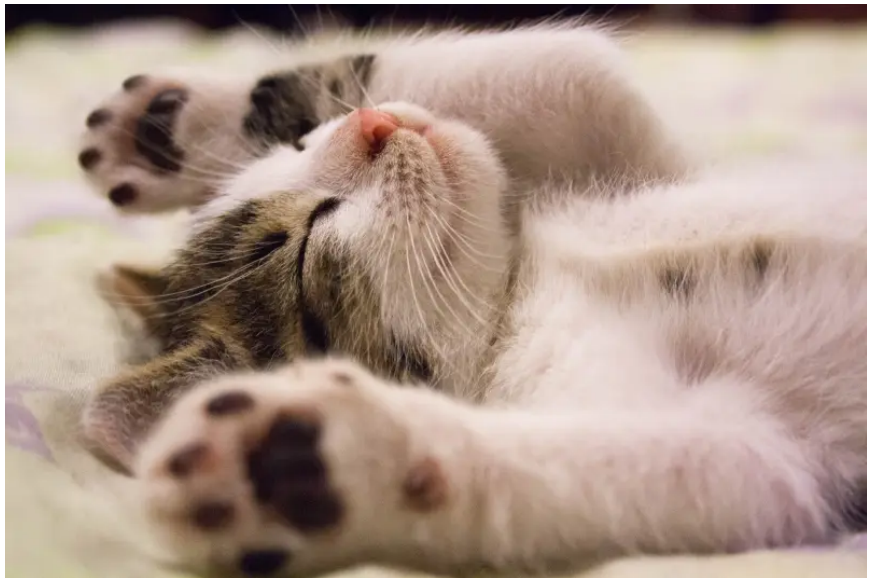
Steven Arenas via Pexels

one frozen rainbow margarita
on an empty stomach
busy night market in chill october air
numb sticky sugar fingers
heavy shoulders
hold my hand after I put my gloves on
you drive us home
hand on my thigh
only one way through
isthmus traffic

it's hard to take a picture
of something so far away
with a phone camera
through a car window
you laugh and tell me
        stop trying to steal
        pieces of nature
so I stare at the gibbous moon
huge behind silver clouds
and try not to blink

Jordan Hanson lives with her cat Ravioli in Wisconsin. You can find her on Instagram and Twitter @jordanehanson and read her poem "Altar" in the Plant People edition of Plants & Poetry Journal.

Sonnet for Little Baby Big Eyes | Ross Creason



via Pixabay

do you know, that you are very small?
I think not, since you often try
to scratch at me, to bite and maul
though I am easily ten times your size.
do you know that you are very furry?
perhaps, since you spend the whole damn day
licking yourself. sometimes I worry
that you don't miss me when I'm away.
do you know that you are safe?
do you know you're privileged, here
this home is a protected place
you don't know hunger, thirst, or fear
all this to say, my little cat, whom I adore,
you can't go out there! stop scratching my door!

Ross Creason is several possums in disguise as a tweedy academic, in Instagram as @ross.wanders and twitter @halcyominous.

Dr. Fabian | Lawrence Arinze

via Pixabay

Fabian was in high spirits as he parked his car at his usual spot under a tree that had grown uncontrollably in the hospital's parking space. The tree was hanging lower than usual, and Fabian stooped as he got out of his car to avoid its branches.

This needs to be trimmed. He said to himself

No one expected the tree to grow so big; now, it not only towered over the hospital building, its branches were a danger to people's eyes. However, it provided a much-needed shade for cars, which was necessary considering how sunny it could get in Abuja.

Fabian preferred parking under the tree instead of the parking spots reserved for resident doctors closer to the entrance. He usually had jobs outside the hospital in the afternoon and disliked the heat his car emitted on sunny days when parked in the reserved spot. Fabian didn't mind walking back to the hospital's entrance. It gave him time to bring his thoughts together and plan his day before stepping into the main building.

Today was no different.

He crossed his laptop bag over his shoulder, preparing himself for the onslaught of greetings that would come once he walked into the hospital. He felt free and untethered as he walked, looked around the driveway to commit every scene to memory because he wanted to remember this day.

Today, Fabian was ending an essential chapter in his life. It was his last day at Goodwill hospital, and he was glad the day had finally come. Two weeks ago, it felt like time was crawling. His days stretched endlessly, and he worked more hours so the new doctor won't be stressed with much work during his first week. Fabian also found time to put his affairs with other doctors in order, and he was glad to do so because It would have hung over his head, which he wouldn't appreciate.

Fabian smiled broadly when he walked into the hospital building and saw the people gathered there to welcome him. He broke into laughter when he saw a banner that read, "We love you, Dr. Fabian, thank you for your service" by the doorway, adorned with balloons, confetti, and arrangements of plastic ornaments.

The gesture was heartwarming, and the cheers, greetings, and well wishes that followed suit made him feel great.

"I will miss you so much," Adanna said, hugging him tightly to more cheers and applause from the staff. Adanna was another resident doctor, and the staff addressed them as husband and wife because of how close they were, even though Adanna had a fiancée that knocked Fabian out of the park in terms of looks.

Fabian is fair with full eyelashes. He didn't like his puffy baby smooth face because it looked like his baby cousins that made you want to tug on it and coo. He preferred how he looked when he was in medical school. He had a bit of a structured cheekbones that made some people mistake him for a model. Fabian hated that he had no beards. He felt it would give him a more mature look, so he grew out his mustache and nurtured it as best as he could, hoping it would someday grow bigger.

It did not.

Adanna usually teased him on the days he bragged about his university looks

"I get m before no be property. You can't look like that anymore; you're chopping money now, your cheeks have to bear testament," she would say, ending it with, "but you still look good."

Adanna was nice, and for that, Fabian didn't accept her compliment. He has a mirror that works and sees his profound cheeks and increasing weight for what it was. As such, he always avoided standing next to Adanna's fiancee Ikenna because of how easy he made looking good look.

Ikenna is 5.8 inches tall with zero fat. Clothes sat well on him, and he had beards that always looked moisturized, even on extremely hot days. Ikenna didn't mind that the hospital roped Fabian and Adanna as husband and wife. You could tell no one else mattered when he was together with Adanna. They had eyes for each other, in a way that made Fabian envious sometimes because of how lacking his love life was.

He and Adanna reveled in the compliment because they admired each other's work ethics. Fabian couldn't count the number of times they both ambled out of the hospital dead at night after an exhausting day, dreading driving home. They would share a moment of laughter, wishing each other well, before going home.

Sometimes, they would stay back, discussing how things were when they first started working in the hospital or making plans for the future. She wouldn't be long in the hospital either. Her visa was out, and she was in the process of moving to Canada to further her education "This hospital has no idea what's about to hit them," Fabian had said when she told him her visa was out.

She brushed it off "they will be fine. They were fine before we came, and they would make do after we leave. Segun knows how to pick his doctors," Fabian silently agreed. Segun was the head doctor, and he never missed a beat regarding hiring.

They had already said their goodbyes, and the week leading to his departure was more bittersweet than Fabian cared to admit. He would miss her the most, and for fear of tearing up, he hugged her fiercely in return, laughing aloud as the cheers became louder.

What a moment it was for them all.

Three years have passed since Fabian walked across the threshold of Goodwill hospital as their newest resident doctor. He had stepped in with an air of promises, greeted everyone with an unwavering smile and an air of assurance of good things to come, and made good on his unvoiced promises.

Fabian didn't necessarily need to show up for work today, but he wanted to. He hadn't had the chance to say a proper goodbye to most of the staff and leaving without doing so would rumple the work he had done in the hospital for three years. He had made himself indispensable to a hospital with over forty-five staff, endearing himself to many lives, and

easily boasted of being the best doctor Goodwill hospital had to offer.

Fabian wasn't one who ignored his importance or acted coy over what he believed was due to him when it came to his job unlike Adanna. He knew his value. He was the go-to doctor for everyone in the hospital, the one that you came to with your questions without getting a cantankerous response. The one that didn't let his exhaustion after hours of surgery muddy people's day.

But then, all good things must come to an end. Fabian was taking his talent across town to "PCA, Precious Care Attention," a much bigger and respected hospital, where he aimed to attain greater heights. Fabian hadn't dared to dream that such a move was possible, at least not this early in his career.

The hospital turned down the best of the best, and he was about to walk in there with a much bigger dream in mind and more extraordinary promises. Saying he was happy was belittling the feelings he was experiencing since he got the news.

PCA had all he needed to make him a great doctor and someone the future would not forget in a hurry. There, his work would stand for something; he wouldn't have to go through so much rigor and answer unending questions about some of his operating methods. He would, as a matter of fact, be encouraged and his research fully funded.

The shock on Dr. Segun's face when he tended his resignation letter flashed through Fabian's mind again, and he chuckled. It was a comical expression, alright. At first, Dr. Segun was dumbfounded, removing his glasses and wiping them before reading the document's content. The headline alone had given him pause.

Dr. Segun kicked off a series of wooing processes to keep Fabian, trying to match PCA's payment, even throwing in research allocations which Fabian found more comical. But it was too late. It felt good to be needed, but the prospects of his new workplace felt too good to consider anything Segun offered.

Fabian knew he would miss everyone, but then, what use is growth if you won't embrace what it offers when it comes knocking.

Done with the salutations, Fabian headed to his office, clutching in his hand a wooden statue the hospital awarded him, with "best doctor" emblazoned on it. He had accepted the award from Dr. Segun, who shook his hand vigorously with a severe expression before seamlessly transitioning into a smile posing for pictures.

Fabian smiled for the picture, pretending like he did not realize Segun was still angry over him resigning.

"What was Segun thinking? that I would never want to leave? After he had stalled and stood in the way of my development." Fabian wondered.

He was almost getting to his office when a nurse blocked his way, Chijoke. Fabian could not recall seeing him by the entrance with the others, and the disgruntled look Chijoke had currently spoke volumes. Fabian sidestepped him swiftly without a word and continued his walk; his face still bore a smile, but he didn't appreciate the encounter.

He walked into his office and Firmly shut the door when he saw Chijoke quick on his tail. Fabian held on to the door handle, refusing him entrance when he turned the handle. Chijoke wasn't one to create a scene; one tug at the handle and its refusal to budge was all it took to send him on his way.

Fabian sighed, walking to his desk and dropping his bag.

He was about to sit when the door opened, and another nurse walked in, followed by Chijoke. It was the senior nurse, Ifeyinwa, a woman with a knack for disrespecting authority and yet exacting it from her subordinates. She wasn't part of the community that bade him farewell either. They had a determined look on their face as they walked in, and Fabian wasn't looking forward to the encounter.

"Yes, what do you want?" He asked. It came out more forceful than he intended, knocking the wind out of Ifeyinwa's sail, making her stop walking, shocked. It was too late to recant his statement; Fabian looked on at them both with expectancy

"Good morning to you too, Nnamdi," Ifeyinwa replied disapprovingly at him. Fabian sighed inwardly. Too much familiarity did breed contempt. She couldn't be more than seven years older than Fabian and wielded her age like a hammer, expecting every bit of respect that her forty-five-year-old accorded her.

It was too late in the game for Fabian to change and become forceful and demanding when he gave her a lenient hand. And try as he had, Ifeyinwa was the only one in the hospital that addressed him with his native name and always with callousness, as if to chastise him for disregarding the name in the first place.

"good morning, nwanyi oma; how are you?" The warmth was back in his voice, and it was all it took to turn Ifeyinwa to butter in his hand. It was like magic as Fabian watched her confidence return, with the knowledge that they were still on good terms and his earlier retort was not something to read meaning into.

"eh he, aka m asi ka iyebago ara, I was wondering if perchance you were running mad," she replied in Igbo, then pointing Chijoke to his waste bin "please call one of the cleaners to take care of that, and give me five minutes before walking back, I have something to discuss with Fabian" Chijoke turned to leave, stopping when Fabian asked

"Is there a need for that? Calling the cleaners," he repeated for emphasis, "they have enough time to tidy the office and prepare it for Dr. Femi when I leave. When is he starting again?"

"I don't know; nobody tells me anything in this hospital, which is crazy. I'm the head nurse but always the last to find out about important issues. Even the rumors don't get to me till everyone has heard and digested it." Ifeanyinwa said.

It was a direct jab at Fabian for not coming to tell her he was resigning. Like the first time she mentioned it, Fabian wondered what she presumed was her relationship in his life. He didn't need to tell her anything, just like she didn't say anything about her life to anyone.

Ifeyinwa, Fabian had concluded long ago needed this information to feel good about herself, to add to her ego that you had informed her of something important to you. But also, like the first time, he smiled and replied with

"It's not like that; I didn't want to say anything till I was sure. When you heard it was when it needed to be heard," Fabian said with a straight face

"Nonetheless, Chijoke," Chijoke jumped at the mention of his name, making Ifeyinwa raise her brows and look at him suspiciously, "please tell the cleaners to empty the waste bin basket," she repeated, "besides, what are you doing here?" She asked as an afterthought. "Shouldn't you be attending ward 11, or have they all magically healed themselves, leaving you with enough time to wander about?" Chijoke was red in the face; he muttered something and left the office.

Fabian would have covered for him in the past, and not doing so now embarrassed Chijoke, making him leave with more questions in his eyes. Fabian pretended to be searching through his bag till he heard the door close after Chijoke.

He looked up and saw Ifeyinwa staring at him with a curious look and her face, as usual, was devoid of any makeup. Fabian noticed she had a swollen lump on her chin that looked like the result of her pressing a pimple that should have been left alone.

He didn't want the discussion to be about Chijoke and why he was hovering around. There was no reason for Ifeyinwa to know of the referral Chijoke asked for at Fabian's new workplace, which he was now trying to finagle out of Fabian forcefully. The entitled behavior Chijoke was displaying irritated Fabian, and he made up his mind to say no.

Chijoke always wanted things done for him, and Fabian couldn't imagine dealing with that at RCA. Though they worked well together, Chijoke had shown his cards unashamedly these last few weeks enough for Fabian to notice how insensitive and self-centered he was.

So, Fabian directed the conversation elsewhere before Ifeyinwa would ask. They both started speaking simultaneously, Ifeyinwa stopping at the last minute to let him lead.

"What can I do for you, Ifeyinwa?" He asked

"I need you to delay discharging my sister" she fell in line, took the seat opposite him, and started toying with his pen.

Her sister had been admitted three days ago after she collapsed in her workplace from exhaustion. She was pregnant and was one that liked to be busy every minute. Ifeyinwa had dragged Fabian to attend to her. Let this be the last thing you do for me in this hospital, she had said at the time.

"Why is that? She's okay now and doesn't need to stay any longer." Fabian replied

"I know that you know that, but she doesn't know that. Listen," she inched closer, folded her arms, and placed it on Fabian's desk, "my sister bu agunwanyi. You have seen firsthand how restless she can be since she was admitted. She's a workaholic and likes being on her feet. I have told you this before, she cares only for one thing, and that's money. Our ancestors would be proud of her," Fabian chuckled; the reference wasn't lost on him. Igbo people were stereotyped as money hungry and always seeking money-making ventures.

"And what has this to do with her discharge?" He stood up and turned on the AC switch, sitting down almost immediately and powering it on with the remote. Ifeyinwa was easily cold, and that was a move on his part to discharge her faster. The door opened, and their eyes turned towards it. A cleaner walked in, and Ifeyinwa was infuriated.

"Wait, are you okay? Who gave you leave to enter this office without knocking? Or does this look like your father's compound? Eh!!" she yelled at her. The cleaner, a dark young girl of nineteen with messy braids, stood chagrined, one ear of the earpiece connected to a small phone in her breast pocket dangling from her neck.

"Sorry ma, I think say the room dey empty. Nurse man, tell me make I come clean." She replied timidly, removing the other ear of the earpiece from her ear to hear better.

"And because of that, your knocking skills flew out the window?" Fabian didn't think Ifeyinwa's voice could go any higher, but she lived to surprise.

"Well, as you can see, the room is occupied. Now get out of here. And next time, knock before you walk into any room. This isn't your house. Do you hear me?" the girl nodded and quietly closed the door. Ifeyinwa wasn't done with her

"bia, you this girl, come back here" Fabian could picture the exasperation on the girl's face and took pity on her. Personally, he didn't like making people's work difficult for them. Fabian wouldn't have uttered a word over the cleaner entering without knocking. He would have told the head cleaner to caution her without embarrassing her.

But Ifeyinwa was a whole different breed. Fabian understood the mechanism of her reprimand. The cleaner would never come to a closed door, office, or otherwise without knocking. Even the head cleaner's small cubicle office by the staircase would be accorded the same respect.

The door opened to admit the girl again, "take that waste bin and empty it. Then go to my office and take out mine too. If you like, don't knock when you get here. Assume as you did here that it's empty and watch what nemesis would do to you" the young girl genuflected, collecting the reprimand like it was her due and picked up the basket, greeting Fabian with a shy smile before leaving. As soon as the door closed behind her, Fabian turned to Ifeyinwa, saying

"That was uncalled for; you shouldn't knock down people's confidence that low, Ifeyinwa. It's wrong and very demeaning. That is a young girl with a precarious mind, and you just made her feel unwanted and stupid. I don't like it. Remember, tomorrow is not promised."

"And what's that supposed to mean?" Ifeyinwa fired back, "That tomorrow, all my years of hard work that put me in position as a head nurse would vanish, and I would become a cleaner abi? Abeg!! Abeg!!" she waved it off, hissing to give her statement more weight.

Fabian sighed; as usual, his meaning was lost in translation. Ifeyinwa had sieved through his words, taken what she wanted from them, and discarded the rest.

His phone binged, suggesting a message; he ignored it, asking, "why do you want your sister here? You know that would accrue more bills for her"

Ifeyinwa relaxed back on the seat, "she has the money; she will be fine. I know if she has her way, she will work herself to the bone and, end up here again. She is five months pregnant, which you don't need to be told, seeing as you are her doctor and should know all this" the accusatory tone was back. Fabian ignored it again

"if you discharge her now," she continued "she is most definitely going back to work, I guarantee you. She's not going to ask for leave o, but to work her way back to this hospital, putting my dear niece or nephew in grave danger. I am a nurse, and I don't like those odds."

Fabian rubbed his head in exasperation. "This isn't the soviet prison, Ifeyinwa. You know people don't like spending their time in the hospital, unlike us that choose this for a living. It reminds them of death and everything that's wrong with the world," Fabian took the remote and increased the AC unit, and continued

"What I'm going to do, is to tell her the repercussions of her continuance to stress herself over work. I will make it as strict and severe as possible to knock it home. But I can't keep her here; it's unbecoming. Think of your nephew, the one you do know. He needs her mother."

Ifeyinwa was anything but wowed by his words. Fabian could see her brain working, waiting for him to finish to interject what she felt. He stopped her, saying with a definite tone, "I am not keeping her in; I issued an order to have her discharged before coming in this morning."

Seeing that she won't make any progress with him, Ifeyinwa went the following best route, which was to undermine his authority. "I stopped the process," she answered smugly, then caved in, "but fine, let's discharge her, but I pray for your sake that whatever it is you're going to tell her sinks in and make her request the leave or that your new workplace would not contain the both of us" she threatened him, standing up and staring deadly at the AC, throwing his pen on his desk without missing a beat.

Fabian laughed, "I will miss you, nwanyi oma; it's nice to know you care about people."

She looked at him strangely "what do you mean? Of course, I care for people; I'm a nurse. Whoever heard of an embittered nurse." She stopped by the door. "By the way, we have a send-forth party for you later in the day. It was supposed to be a surprise, but...."

Fabian roared with laughter clutching his sides. He wasn't a stranger to Ifeyinwa's antics, and ruining the surprise was nothing out of character for her.

What a woman.

Moments later, his attention returned to the door when he heard a knock. He knew who it would be and ignored the knock.

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I'm a content writer and i have a lot of stories to share.

List of things pointed out to me during a drive to the railway station to pick up my best friend | Sadhana Sanjay

Josh Sorenson via Pexels

As N drives, hands cradling the wheel, their eyes are constantly wandering. Or rather, they must have been, because they point out to me the following things, with added commentary:

- An old, dilapidated building with the trademark blue board and white serif font prevalent across India, proclaiming "CMR law college". They inquire how different life might have been if either of us had gone to this law school instead.
- A brand new dosa joint. The hiss of the water hitting the huge, square pan and the scrape of the metal against the stove seeps into our car, as N exclaims that we gotta try this place out. Maybe for breakfast sometime next week.
- Graffiti proclaiming CREATIVITY STARTS HERE.
- A ramshackle building with tiny flats crammed above a newly opened bar, replete with flashing neon lights called Cheers & Beers. We giggle conspiratorially in the car, thinking, well, the name isn't all that bad. In fact, it makes us want to go there.
- An autorickshaw that has a family of five squeezed into it. And N whispers, look at the creepy kid. I turn my head to watch a small face reaching out beyond the non-existent confines of the auto, eyes fixed on us, and flash a grin in return. The eyes widen in childish fear. The face retreats.
- A lake, with rain trees lining its boundary. Its surface catches the city lights. It's too far, we don't make plans to go there.

Sadhana (she/they) is a researcher/writer based out of Bangalore. They enjoy long walks, long reads, making lists and melting into the couch with everything they need within arm's reach.

When I Die I Want to Be Infused Back into the Earth | Max Natalna

Max Natalna is a queer and trans writer based in Queens. He likes dragonflies and the color green. It can be found on twitter @maxnatalna.

Johannes Plenio via Pexels

I said *two tea drinkers in the middle of the road*
& I lied it was actually me on the curb staring
at roadkill the size and shape of a dried plum.
agony was kind of like meditation & up on the tarmac
a heart beats to the tune of a carburetor
keeps asking me what I've seen for me to be this
scared all the time & I don't know whose heart it is
& I don't know whose heart it is.

The Orison of Inmate 3679 | CKR Mose

Jimmy Chan via Pexels

NOTE: This story depicts graphic scenes of sexual assault that may be overwhelming for some readers.

The editors feel this depiction, while incredibly difficult, is in service of a worthwhile narrative with worthwhile intentions. Please read with care, for yourself and and for the subject matter.

This will be your last session with this inmate. The Chief Warden has told me this morning as I entered Lang'ata Women's Prison in the southern parts of Nairobi, once green city in the sun, now transmogrified into hot metropolis of concrete, haze, and terrazzo. Those words have chilled me. I had been coming here for months to write a story about this inmate but had stopped because she never gave me anything other than useless words, blank but intimidating stares, and sullen silences. Until the Chief Warden called me two weeks ago and told me the inmate was wanting me to come back.

Oh? I had wondered, surprised. *Inmate never tells me anything writable, why would she want me to come back?* I had given up on this story, and moved on to the next one about the Police Commissioner's son who had allegedly killed three people while on a drunken driving binge. Now, that was *the* story that had taken over my existence. Late night guttural phone calls threatening me with the most grotesque rape and violence if I continued with this story had sent me into a dark place, sitting in my apartment in a gated community on Kenyatta Road, lights out, sipping gin with trembling hands, and jumping at the slightest noises. It had sent me here too, a welcome break from the privileged murderer hiding behind the tall, blue shield of paternal police protection. This country refuses to let me be fearless.

Because she is being transferred to Kamiti. The Chief Warden had said. *They will not permit you to see her the moment she disappears behind its gates.* So here I am, already processed through the prison's security, sitting in a room whose mien screams government facility – stark, greying, peeling walls with a dark green paint where the skirting should be; lone, flickering fluorescent tube overhead; and stalactites of dead insects, moisture, dust, and God-knows-what hanging from the once-white stucco ceiling. There is a constant hum you feel through the walls, of voices, repressed anguish, curtailed innocence, and hard-core crime committed by hard-core convicts. That's what they are here. Inmates. Identified by numbers and crimes, stripped of all other identities, layers and colours. I am here to see Inmate 3679.

The inmates here are given numbers according to the crimes for which they are brought in. The 3-series is for capital crimes, the next is for the year, and the ensuing numbers are the volume of crimes committed in that year. It is 2035. This inmate was brought in here in the year 2026, and was the seventy-ninth to be apprehended for capital murder. *Allegedly,* as she always loved to taunt me with before I stopped coming.

The door opens, and in she comes. Inmate 3679. That is her name, and every time I came here, she would tell me to call her "Three-Six", after the now-defunct popular music group she grew up listening to, the Three 6 Mafia. *I am a most known unknown,* she used to like telling me, which would leave me confused, until I discovered this was the title of one of their songs. She always loved to play with my mind the way a satiated cat plays with a semi-dead mouse. I remain seated, struggling to keep my mouth closed when I see her. I have been away only a few short months, but the change in her is catastrophic. Where there was a voluptuous, full-haired woman then, what stands before me right now is a thin, bald one. Her face has lost its sardonic smile and sarcastic eyebrows. In their place is a sallow, drooping cheek, stark, bony features, and thin, cracked lips. I am stunned. Three-Six is chained at the ankles and wrists. A prison warden brings her in, and sits her before me, and goes to stand by the door, inside the room. I look at him and he returns my questioning glance with a hard, steady one that tells me he will be standing there all day and night if need be. I shrug and purse my lips. Three-Six is unlikely to say anything anyway, other than her usual taunts, or perhaps even those are now gone and she will say nothing at all.

'Happy to see me?' She asks, and her voice is deep, thick, and cracked, the voice of someone who was at a music festival three days straight, singing as loud as possible, breathing in the sweat, smoke, narcotics. The coarseness of her voice vibrates through the metal table on which her shackled arms rest, jolting me. I fold my own hands and pull them off the table.

'Yes.' I say, and she laughs. For a second, the old face I remember comes back.

'Good. Let's get started.'

'On what?'

'On my Orison.' She says.

'Your what?'

'There was a character, in a book from long ago, making an orison.' She says. 'I want to do the same. Let's start with why I am here...'

'Let's start with what happened to you in the time I have been away.' I say, unnerved by her missing upper front teeth, struggling to catch up. I did not expect this. At all.

'I live in prison.' She says, shrugging her bony shoulders. 'And we don't have time. I want a clean record for my children.'

Children. I look into her eyes and see that old mirth. She has never mentioned children to me. I think she is pulling my legs. Both of them. At once.

'I am here because I was accused of killing four people. Three of them policemen.' She says.

'And did you?'

'Allegedly.' She says, her eyes shining behind the boniness. 'This is the twenty-first century. Killing and dying are contextual.' I digest this quickly and in silence. 'I am doing this because I must, are we together?'

It dawns on me that Three-Six means business. All she has said, I am hearing for the first time. I nod, wondering what exactly she has experienced since I have been here to make her reticence disappear, to fill her with mush, talking about children and orisons. Something has happened. Something drastic.

'They say my killing spree started at the beginning of 2026. But that is not true. It started in 2023.' She starts. 'On Wednesday April 12th 2023, on my way home from my job at the then Mount Kenya University, I was stopped by three policemen. That was two days past Easter and ten days to Earth Day. I remember this because we were in the middle of starting a campaign on campus. 5Cs. Cooler Cities & Combating Climate Change.'

She stops and looks up at the stalactites, some of them swaying rather precariously in a light breeze that is coming from somewhere. I want to tell her to look down because last time I was looking up like this myself, something entered my eye and came out after three excruciating days, but I don't. I am astounded. Three-Six used to work at MKU? Of course, they totally obliterated her past life. They do that now, as soon as they clap that number on you. Only very expensive, risky hackers can get this information, and even they are hard to find on account of some of them occupying cells in prisons with numbers that start with 3.

'Has it started raining again?' She asks, startling me out of my reverie. 'I have not seen outside since they brought me here in mid-2026.'

'No.' I say. 'Just haze and dust. The sky is yellowish, we don't see the sun very clear, and at night we don't see the stars.' In truth, children born after the end of 2025 have never seen rain in their entire lives, and those born after the cold season of mid-2026 have never seen fog, mist, or dew.

She stares at me. 'Seems I've missed very little then?'

'What work did you do at the University?' I ask instead.

'What one does in a university.' She shrugs. 'On that day, I was walking home, as usual. Even then, Thika was far safer than Nairobi, making the five kilometre walk between home and work well worth the exercise. But these policemen waylaid me, hustled me a little, arrested me, and took me.'

I hold my breath and wait for her to continue. Her face has not changed, but her voice has.

'For nine weeks, I was gone. Disappeared.' She says. 'In those days if you did not appear at work for more than a month without a reason, you got cut off. Too many people, scarce jobs, and we all wanted those jobs for the small security they offered. Being gone nine weeks, incommunicado, and not yet a professor…' She shrugs, mouth turned down at the corners.

'Where were you?'

'When I came back, I went to KU and they did not even let me through the front gate because my entry card had expired.' She does air quotes on this last word, ignoring my question, and her chains rattle.

'Where did they take you?' It is a whisper. I can already guess what the answer is, and I can feel the bile rising in my stomach.

'Not far.' She says, and starts to open the buttons of her shirt.

'You don't have to do that.' I say, and the Guard at the door stares. All along he has been quiet, watching me take notes and adjust the position of the recording device that lies on the table between myself and Three-Six.

'Because?' She asks. 'Do you think there is an inch inside and outside my body that has not been seen, touched, poked, invaded and violated the years I, an alleged police killer, have been here? This body is now nothing but a shell of dried bone and skin. Don't start with that false protection of my dignity, yes.'

She says all this, especially that last flat "yes", as the buttons come off. I see deep, old, unevenly healed welts, cuts and new bruises lining the skin of her chest. The stretch-marks along her breasts tell me there was once weight there, but it's now gone, leaving a almost nothing behind.

'Forget the newer welts.' She says. 'These old ones, that is where they cut me open with a blunt knife, twelve on each side for each of the ribs their fingers could trace. They cut my chest, my arms, my legs, everywhere.'

'Why?' I cannot believe what I am hearing.

'Because they said they wanted to see how much fat and meat I had before they could reach my bones.' She said. 'Back then I was quite the dish, mmh, more a pig, they said. Good enough to cook, they said. They did that too. Cut off flesh from my arms and seared it on a grill before feeding it to their dog.'

'Did they…did they rape you?' My voice is shaking, my hands are shaking, and I can feel my throat fill.

She laughs. Loud. Her raspy voice sounds like a dull, pneumonic cough in the starkness of the flickering fluorescent light and dangling stalactites.

'I'm telling you they chopped off part of my body and fed it to their dog.' She says. 'I'm telling you I was gone nine weeks.'

She raises her hands with a raised eyebrow, and the chains linking them to her feet rattle. I shudder at her steady stare, and I wonder if she is telling me truth, making up a story about children and justifying why she killed three policemen. Or perhaps totally unhinged because of it. I feel immense shame for thinking these things when her eyes, her voice, are telling me the obvious. *I was gone nine weeks*…they must have done everything imaginable.

'I was kicked out of my little apartment some months later, after my savings ran out.' She says. 'I spent those months lying in my bed, doing little else apart from thinking and thinking and thinking about that Wednesday, the 12th of April. Then I spent that December in the streets. My wounds had healed because one of my students would bring me bandages, spirit, and morphine. And on the streets, I learned a trick or two about staying alive. But I will say this – remember I told you death is contextual? I did die in 2023. I held onto life for nine good weeks, but I lost the battle. When they ask when I died, tell them it was in mid-June 2023 when the cold weather bit hard into the bones. And the dead commit no crimes.'

There is a buzzing bell somewhere behind the walls we sit between. *Lunch,* she mouths, and leans back in her metal chair, her chains rattling with every slow, deliberate movement.

'And then?' I ask.

'Then I survived. Three years on the streets taught me more than the nine I had spent teaching at the university.' She says. 'It is on the streets that I learned the names of these policemen. And do you know how? Because they were known for this sort of thing – false imprisonment and torture of women. It was their thing. And not just in Thika. They had done this all the way from Mombasa to Embu and the towns in between. Always the three of them.'

'How?' I ask, and the scepticism that rises deep within me is quelled when I think of the voice at the end of the phone telling me to drop the Police Commissioner's son's story or else.

'How indeed.' She smiles. 'When you leave here, don't go finding out their names, or paying attention to their familial ties.'

'Are you not going to tell me that?'

'I could.' She says. 'If you want me to, I will. But the moment I mention their names, this little chat of ours ends, and when you step back into your hazy, hot world outside the gates of this underground prison, you become a hunted woman. Is that what you want?'

A chill goes through my body. I glance at the guard, but he looks away. I feel a chattering of my teeth coming on. I entertain the possibility that she is saying the truth and my heart pounds with panic. Then I burst out in a short laughter, and to my surprise, she joins me. We laugh together, clearing the tension that had built up. It dissipates as quick as it had risen.

'Good story, no?' She asks in her gruff voice. 'And now you're wondering which parts, if any, are true?'

'Yes.' I say, struggling not to look around as the panic inside swells.

'I can tell.' She says as her chains rattle under the flickering fluorescent tube. 'You think all I am saying is made up, just like I keep saying I allegedly killed those policemen. You think I'm lying. Going out with one big bang. No doubt you are aware I am being transferred to Kamiti Max this evening after supper, eh?'

I nod yes. In 2025, Kamiti Maximum Prison built a unit for women convicted of capital offences, specifically, murder, treason, and robbery with violence. This was significant because in June 2024, a year after Three-Six claims she died, the death penalty became active, with three convicted robbers hanged at Kamiti. The outrage had not come as expected when the death sentence was revived after being dormant for over forty years. The populace had become easily cowed into silence when police had become very powerful after the 2023 reforms when the new regime had been installed. Once a number of visible human rights activists had been found murdered, including high-profile lawyers, civil society types and vocal university lecturers, it had become prudent to remain seated, in silence. Social media offered thin anonymity, if any, and outbursts on Twitter and Facebook, both of which were now defunct, had ceased. Government critique and incessant rants were replaced by old cat videos from the 2000s, *NatGeo Wild* clips, and slapstick comedy from the old pre-millennium series *Just 4 Laughs.*

'Anyway, let's finish, then, eh? My fake story?' She says. 'I was telling you how the streets told me that my three attackers were now in Nairobi, posted to the big city to continue with their good work.'

'You followed them.'

'Of course. I started to literally follow them after three months living on the streets of Thika, when one of them drove by where eight of us street women were taking a snooze in the middle of a hot afternoon, and he told us to make sure we were gone by evening because he would be back with his friends, and we did not want him to come back.'

'Where was that?'

'One of these new roads had a nice, cool culvert where we would hide to catch a snooze in the afternoons.' She says. 'Garissa Road, which was by then being expanded, near some church.'

'Not too far from MKU.' I see the intense look in her eyes. 'I went to school there from fifteen to eighteen.'

'Yes.' She is looking into my eyes with a scary intensity. 'You know what the elders used to say long ago – a dog does not stray too far from its home even when it has been chased away.'

'Wasn't it painful to keep being reminded of all you had been through?'

'Not as painful as the unfinished business I had there.' She looks down at her hands. 'There's things I had to take care of. Especially after I saw this one policeman telling us to clear from the culvert on Garissa Road. He did not recognize me. How could he? He and his friends had killed me. I was a corpse. Unrecognizable.'

'So you followed them, incognito?'

'Everywhere. I knew where they were stationed, their shifts, everything.' She says. 'You see, they were never on shift at the same time, even when they took me. They were together that day, the three of them, but they were never on shift at the same time. The one on shift always called the other two when he knew he was going off-script. And I would soon discover that that was once every month.'

'What?'

'Once every month, when one specific one was on shift, he would go off-script, call his compatriots, and they would take a woman and keep her somewhere and torture her. Many physically died. One or two, like me, survived – dumped out in the bush and left for dead – maybe we were just too stubborn to leave this earth at once.'

'Death is contextual?'

'You're getting it.' She smiles, exposing her missing teeth. 'I did meet one other survivor of their torture, used to be as plump as I was, but she could not speak at all, only showed me the cuts along her ribs, and I guessed the rest.'

'Was she so traumatised that she could not talk?' I ask, horrified.

'No. They had cut off her tongue.'

I pause, my heart now pounding and my head aching. This had started out like fun and games, stories from the wild imagination of Inmate 3679. But we had taken a dark turn. Still, I also felt I couldn't really show the seriousness of this conversation on my body, because if the things she's telling me are true, then it means my own life is in danger, especially because there is a guard standing there in the room listening to every detail of a story he's probably also hearing for the first time. Plus, I am sure there are recorders in the room, taking in every word, maybe every facial expression of the both of us.

'In late 2024 they grabbed a woman who turned out to be a bit connected. Secret girlfriend of a local married politician. They took her and tortured her to death. It was brutal. Because she was pregnant. That's how the three were quietly transferred to the big city.'

'She was a politician's woman, and this did not cause some noise?'

'Which woman, is what you're asking.' She says, eyebrow raised. 'Which one do you think he would make noise over, and keep quiet over?'

It takes me a few seconds to comprehend what she is saying, and this time, I cannot help dropping my jaw in surprise.

'You're still not getting it, are you?' Three-Six says. 'When I tell you this was their modus operandi, I want you to understand exactly what I am saying.'

I frown, trying to decipher that she is saying, but she forges ahead anyway. Time being short and all that.

'They come to the big city, where the hunting grounds are larger and free.' She continues. 'And I follow. Twenty-three women in two years is the toll, and all of them die. Business is booming in this here city, yes? Are we together?'

I'm not sure we are. She's telling me that in two years, twenty-three women were killed by the tyrannical trio, and they got away with it. Easy enough to believe. But what I find hard to swallow is that she knew what they were up to in the course of the twenty-three women, and did nothing about it.

'I decide to make my move. They start being careless, drinking too much, being too confident.'

'How do you do it?'

'That's the big question, isn't it? One that even the prosecutors themselves have been asking me since time immemorial, and one which my jailer here,' she gestures at the guard, 'is keen to hear and report back, so that they know what else to look for in case of other copy-cat killers out there, at least that's the fancy television term they are slapping on me, and others like me.'

'Others like you?' Are there more killers out there? Other survivors?

'Allegedly.' She says. This time, there is no smile.

'So how did you do it?'

Three-Six leans forward, her eyes as intense as that of a snake about to strike. 'If you've been paying attention, I have already told you how I did it. And I will not repeat myself.'

'And the fourth man you *allegedly* killed?' I ask, looking at her eyes without flinching.

'Woman, you mean.' She says, and a smile dances on the edges of her torn, peeling lips. 'That's the part they do not want to say, ehee? It was a woman. I got no pleasure from doing it, just a sense of justice and closure. I desperately needed that, and I gave it to myself.'

'Was she connected to the three policemen?'

'In a way, yes.' She says. 'And I have already told you what the connection was, if you've been listening to me.'

I pull back. I can feel the story ebbing, coming to an end. Something momentous has happened here, but I am not able to put my finger on it, yet.

'And this is your orison, then?' I ask.

'The most powerful one.' She says, and this time, her gruff voice is soft, maybe even tender. 'One day, even you will see what it means, its depth. My children will be proud of me.'

'You keep mentioning children, and yet your record shows you never had any. Is this as contextual as death, and killing?'

'You will soon find out.' Her voice drops to an unintelligible whisper. 'I have faith in you, Muppai, descendant of great Chief Utthai of what was once a great clan of our shared ancestors.'

I feel my eyes widen with shock, and struggle to keep them from the reach of the cameras I am sure are recording every facial twitch. I have always told Inmate 3679 that my name is Imani, a freelance journalist working for Split TV. Back in the day, this country had a handful of daily newspapers and mainstream television channels, but since mid-2027, with the death of Twitter and Facebook, news apps sprung up everywhere, spewing news, gossip, and every inane subject imaginable, from sex and scarce love, to Artificial Intelligence, space travel, space colonies and all the kinks in between.

Animal shows are very popular, owing to the fact that about three-quarters of the wild animal population are now extinct, thanks to the new, permanent climate. The remaining few have been carted off to private ranches, where artificial rain conditions are affordable and allow these animals to thrive. Here in this country, these uber ranches are in Laikipia area, which is now cordoned off, and only the ultra-wealthy can afford to go in and see these rare animals, including lions, giraffes, rhinos and the odd elephant and warthog. Some sneak videos of these animals out to online subscription video and streaming channels. I work for one of those video channels, at least that is the identity I gave to Inmate 3679. How she knows the real me is a matter that scares me, because even my official identification cards that have gained me access to Langata Women's Prison indicate that my name is Imani from Split TV, where our business is news, gossip, and human-interest stories.

'Who are you, Three-Six?' My voice is a horrified whisper. I am convinced she is taking me down with her, if she has outed my true identity like this, in front of a witness who is part of the prison system. My heart has sunk to the ground.

'I have already told you who I am.' She says, and she stands up. 'I have faith in you, that you will preserve my words, and make sure all my children get to hear them, understand them, and embody them. And here ends my Orison. May it do well, even after my ending.'

The guard comes and pushes Inmate 3679 towards the door she emerged from. He bangs it twice, and after someone peeps through its tiny window, the door is opened, and someone else reaches out to escort Three-Six from the room. She turns and looks at me, waves one of her shackled hands at me, holds my gaze, and winks. Then she is gone. As I gather myself, trying to ask myself what just happened, the guard who was with us all along comes back, goes to a wall unit and opens it, switching on some buttons. Out loud, he says,

'Sorry, Miss Imani, but I am going to take all your notes and all your recordings.'

'Why?' I am taken aback. 'This was an official interview, allowed to take place by the prison! These are my notes!'

'That was a mere indulgence we offered Inmate 3679 so that she could confess before she is handed over to the hangman.' He says. 'I am sorry she appears to have said nothing of importance, as usual. I will take these all the same, thank you.'

We both look down at my notebook. The front pages, six of which I had been taking notes, are gone. I can't believe it. Where are my notes? All that is left is the page on which I had been doodling with my marker pen. Everything going on here is not making any sense. The Guard takes my recording, and glances, too briefly, at the camera I had not spotted in the far-right corner of the flickering fluorescent tube. He then searches my body by patting me down, and then he leads me out of the room back up the corridor we have come. When I clear security and pick my bag, sans my notebook, pen and recorder, the guard escorts me to the gates of Langata Women's Prison. At the gate, he makes the effort to search me one more time, patting me down in front of the two guards manning the gate. He winks at them and they make sounds of ribaldry and mirth, telling him to "get it" before I leave.

'Don't let us down.' He whispers in my ear, and then, after one final pat-down, he allows me to leave.

I am shaken to my core as I make my way out of Langata in my tiny hybrid car. That is all we are allowed to drive these days. I disappear into the only road out of here, which is through the new, 2025-built Kibera Sector Three, as much of a shanty as Sectors One and Two.

When I get home hours later, and enter my house to unpack and shower the unpleasantness off, I find my notes tucked into the front of my shirt, as well as my slim Sony recorder.

***

27th December 2035

New Story on Split TV running on Split.com and TubeNews.com

Convicted Killer Executed

Convicted killer known as Inmate 3679 was this morning at 5am hung to death at the Kamiti Maximum Prison. Inmate 3679 was found guilty of killing four policemen from the Central Police Station of Nairobi Metropolis. Inmate 3679 opened live fire at the four policemen who were on patrol in the Central Business District in 2026, killing them on the spot. Inmate 3679 was later cremated at the Kamiti Crematorium, and her ashes scattered within the grounds of Kamiti itself. The Chief Warden of the prison has intimated that the cremation and scattering of ashes within the prison grounds was to ensure that Inmate 3679 would not gain cult status outside of what she had currently enjoyed. The killing of the police is something that many notorious gangsters use to gain notoriety, and the conviction and subsequent death of Inmate 3679 has served to make killing of any law-enforcement official a capital crime punishable by hanging. It is hoped this will be a deterrent to other gangsters as well as civilians.

A full clip of the hanging of Inmate 3679 is available for streaming at Kamiti.com, and is accessible for a fee of 25,599 shillings via credit card, debit card, or mobile cash

7th July 2037

News reel on Orran App, a dark web site of "real news and true stories"

The Orison of Inmate 3679

When someone paid three notorious killer police money to murder the girlfriend of a Thika City's Ward Headman in February 2024, it would lead the so-called convicted killer Inmate 3679, executed for murder on the 29th of December 2029, to uncover a murder cartel involving the police and many higher-ups in the government. The then Ward Headman, Stanslaus Wambugu, had a girlfriend who was murdered after being kidnapped and tortured by sibling police officers Jonas Naima, Wycliffe Naima, and their cousin Subba Wanga. The three police officers, sons and nephew to the Vice President Munavu Naima, were part of a murder gang-for-hire that routinely kidnapped women, tortured, and killed them on orders from top government officials and their wives, chiefly to wipe out evidence of extra-marital affairs, which were outlawed for government officials and contractors under a secret State Secrets Act of 2023.

Inmate 3679 had been wrongfully accused of having an affair with an MP by a close friend and colleague in 2023. She was kidnapped and tortured for nine weeks, her body thereafter dumped off the Thika-Nairobi highway near the River Ndonyo. She survived the attack, and ended up homeless and destitute. While on the streets, she came to learn of this death squad, tracking their once-a-month killings. Majority of the kidnapped and murdered women were rumoured girlfriends and "side-chicks" of high-powered politicians and business moguls.

Inmate 3679 tracked these three killers to Nairobi Metropolis, where they continued their killing unabated.

Inmate 3679 decided to put her plan to stop these killers into action after one of her nieces, left in her second sister's care after the death of their older sister in 2015, came to Nairobi, and fell into the killing sights of these notorious policemen. To catch them, she lured them by posing as a client, and then killed them one by one. Her fourth victim was her former accuser, one Professor Criss Mbae, who Inmate 3679 killed for revenge and closure.

'It is something I desperately needed, and so I gave it to myself,' she said during her final interview back in late 2029. The reporter who took this confession, and who worked for Split TV up to 2030 but has since vanished, managed to remember, off-head, the entire confession, having had her recordings and notes of the confession taken from her and destroyed. She certifies these words as the final orison of Inmate 3679, as told to her at Langata Women's Prison, on 15th December 2035.

A verbatim transcription of the Orison of Inmate 3679 will be published here in its entirely in the next hour

5th August 2039

Video appearing on all major Tube channels, and reposted after being pulled down repeatedly. Members in the video are masked and have their voices heavily distorted.

Arise, people of this great country

We are the Resistance

Arise in the name of Inmate 3679! Resist the oppressor until justice is restored

Finish these killer gangs!

Lure these murderers in uniform!

Kill the killers until justice is restored!

We are The Resistance!

Long live, Three-Six!

21st January 2040

New Story on Split TV running on Split.com and TubeNews.com

More Corrupt Police Wiped Out by The Resistance

Good day, watchers, whatever time you see this. The number of policemen killed has today climbed to 254 after four more were gunned down at the Nakuru CBD earlier today, at 5pm local time. The police had reportedly raided a bar and hustled the owner to part with his most expensive drinks. As the police selected bottles of Hennessy, Doubleton and Delmore whiskeys, armed men making the signs of The Resistance and calling on their idol, the late Inmate 3679, raided the bar and opened live fire, killing the four policemen on the spot. The owner of the bar, Bantu Sol, escaped with minor injuries after a bullet grazed his shoulder, leaving a flesh wound which doctors say is not life-threatening. The Resistance gunmen, who now call themselves the Three-Six Group, took responsibility for the killings in a video posted to all major tube sites.

11th November 2040

New Story on Split TV running on Split.com and TubeNews.com

Breaking News!

The Three-Six Group, now a formidable army of hard-core militia, have this evening pierced through the heavily fortified mansion of Vice President Munavu Naima, killing him and his entire family. We still do not have full details, but we understand the Three-Six Group have released footage of the slaying of the Vice President, which we do not have access to...wait a minute, viewers, I have one of the leaders of the Three-Six Group on the line. Go ahead, General Muppai.

***General Muppai**: Good evening watchers and listeners. Your Vice President is dead and here is his body (phone camera pans away from masked General using a distorted voice to a visibly dead Vice President, lying at General Muppai's feet). Our message is very simple, and is aimed at the illegitimate President of the Republic who has been ruling via imperial edict having defied our 2010 Constitution which our forefathers died for: You are next, and there's nothing you can do, or nowhere you can hide to escape what is coming to you. We desperately want freedom, and we shall give it to ourselves! Over and out! Long live The Resistance! Long Live Inmate 3679!*

CKR Mose is a Nairobi-based writer of fantasy and sci-fi. She has published a short story in the anthology Nairobi Noir. She tweets as @Wordslinger__

The Second Hookup | Yaritza Quintero

Mehmet Turgut Kirkgoz via Pexels

If I take my bra off fast enough
Maybe you won't see the water bugs in the bathtub
You won't hear the neighbors whisper/yelling about The End
You won't see the stain in the carpet I swear was already there
The missing chip of paint where I placed Too Much Faith
In a store brand command strip to hold me up
Like Jesus on a new cross in a burning church
Whose ceiling chain hooks sway in the smoke
Will He stay up?
Will we?

Yaritza Quintero is a writer based in the Central Valley in California. Her works can be found in Mosaic Art & Literary Journal and Papeachu Press. She can be found on social media: @yaritzaistired.

Pandemic Sonata | Hamayle Saeed

Anna Shvets via Pexels

Pandemic Sonata

Behold the corona crown	Spiked protein towers for gemstones
All the world's gold impaled	The emperor naked in his new clothes
Kingdoms at the mercy of a touch	Dry coughs pounding porous walls
In suspension the droplets seem	Almost lyrical in their transit -
You couldn't have it but you still could	Some days pass like congealed blood
Scrape them for it to come off	Cardi B screaming coronavirus
Ricocheting off the nasopharynx	it's DEAD IT'S DEAD d ea d
Down the drain of your throat	A hackneyed guttural hiss
Waveforms of bespeckled plight	A ventilator drawing its last breath
A crowned virus, invisibly	Dethroning us

ROMAN ODINTSOV via Pexels

[Image description: A two-column poem entitled "Pandemic Sonata." Each column is positioned in a plain rectangular black border. The first column reads:]

Behold the corona crown

All the world's gold impaled

Kingdoms at the mercy of a touch

In suspension the droplets seem

You couldn't have it but you still could

Scrape them for it to come off

Ricocheting off the nasopharynx

Down the drain of your throat

Waveforms of bespeckled plight A crowned virus, invisibly

[and the second column reads:]

Spiked protein towers for gemstones

The emperor naked in his new clothes

Dry coughs pounding porous walls

Almost lyrical in their transit –

Some days pass like congealed blood

Cardi B screaming coronavirus

it's DEAD IT'S DEAD d ea d

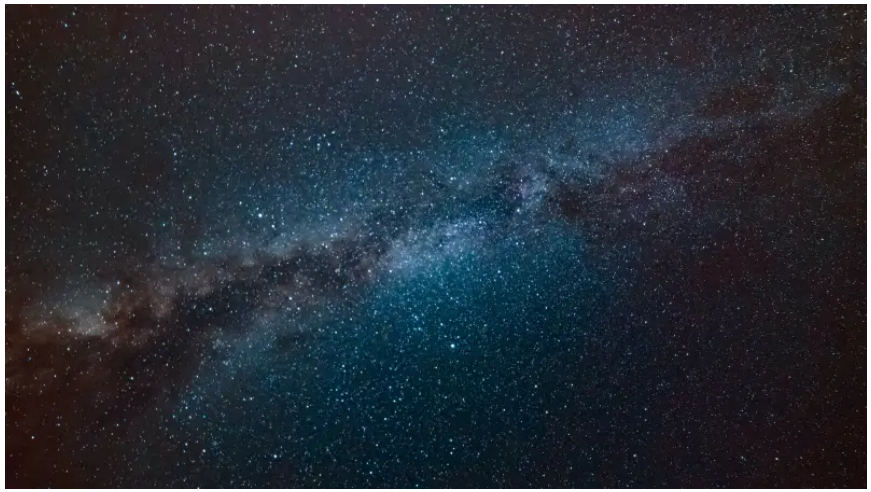
A hackneyed guttural hiss

A ventilator drawing its last breath Dethroning us

[End image description]

Hamayle Saeed is an accidental physician and deliberate poet; moonlighting as an aspiring eponymous disease in Lahore, Pakistan. @hamayle (instagram) @hamyelin_ (twitter)

Who Killed the Stars? | Deniel Matthew Basilio



Hristo Fidanov via Pexels

Stars used to light up the sky.
Polkadots that scattered,
        like splatter and spit,
with some strange allure
so great
        and erratic.

Then, when we didn't have to
huddle with our plastic lamps just
to paint the roofs of our cages bright
in some effort to hide away
from the new world
        where stars gave no light.

Oh well,
        we never did have much to expect,
that's why
        there are no more stars in sight.

Deniel Basilio is a burned-out senior high school student from the Philippines. When he's not drowning in research, he tries to squeeze in time to write a poem... or two. Twitter: @DMBasilio

Some of the PhDs I Will Write in Heaven | Jeremy Allan Hawkins

Lum3n via Pexels

Normative Modes in Acoustic Reprisals of Jeff Buckley: 1999 – 2007

Downward Trends in Reproductive Cycles among Heavy Users of Frozen Pizza

Radio Interference: Gertrude Stein and the Noise of "Patriarchal Poetry"

Bush's Brush Touch: The Painted Realities of a Former President

Far Too Many Stories: A Longitudinal Study of Architectural Fuck-Ups in Library Construction in the Age of Computer-Aided Design

Relativist Frameworks for the Appearance of Dragon Fruit Sculptures

Melody vs Solo: Ontological Disputes Surrounding Slash's Guitar Performance on "November Rain"

White Guilt and Habitual Masturbation Behaviors

Laboratory Language: The Jargon of Modernist Science in "Experimental" Writing

Preferentiality in Tuscaloosa: A Taco Casa Case Study

Interpretive Strategies during Rejection Scenarios within Human Male Populations

The Contemporary Cento as Technicity for Ego Construction

Monkeys

Calvinist Clock Towers: Swiss Protestant Communities and Oppressive Monuments in Capitalist Time Management since the Reformation

I Don't Want a Funny President: The Affective Turn in the Obama Years

Flight Behaviors of Urban Swallows in Western Europe

Le Corbusier, Prison Warden

Lyric Presence and the Endless Suspension of Grief

Moving Mountains: Theories of Limit and Pure Possibility

Culinary Preservation Practices among Montemaggioresi Emigrés in Interwar Bay Ridge

Choose Your Own Thesis

Qualitative Depreciation in Tarantino Productions Following the Widespread Disappearance of Constraint

A Document over which I Cried and Cried and Cried Wolf

Fractures in Prevalent Frameworks for the Unidirectional Flow of Time

Put to Sleep by Atheists: Rhetorical Strategies in Anti-Theist Activist Communities

Spatial Poetics: Poetic Practices and Spatial Design

Quantitative Analyses of Why the Letter E is the Greatest Letter of the Roman Alphabet

Punchline Abelard and Heloise: A History of Weird Intimate Jokes

Authorial Myths and Work Ethic Formation

Just a Cheeseburger, Please: Economic Grounds for Passing on the Meal Deal

Studies Toward a Paraconsistent Understanding of the Really Real

The Right Side of History: Whatever the Hell That Means

A Selection of My Favorite Pennies

Fluid Dynamics in the Fiction of James Baldwin

Observers from Vienna: The Role of American Civil War Tactics in the Founding and Prolongation of the Austro-Hungarian Empire (Annex: How American Troop Supply Practices Set the Scene for World War in the Following Century)

Post-Facto Protest: Continued Demonstrations by Anti-Vietnam War Activists in the 21st Century

Start with Something Catchy: Then Break It Down: Colon Usage in PhD Titles: A Demonstrative History

More Things to Disapprove of in Switzerland

This Isn't Water: David Foster Wallace and the Diluting of Buddhist Practices for the Benefit of the Capitalist Status Quo and Compounded Alienation

Adulation in the Academic Community since the Invention of Shakespearean Scholarship

So Now I Know Who Shot JFK and Where I Left that Talk Talk Album

Inadvertent Homages to Jason Noble in the Plastic Arts

Necessity as a Construction and the Politics of Not Just Oppression but Grinding Domination

Poetries Various and Sundry

Who Knew Clouds Could Taste So Good: A Critique of New Directions in Afterlife Studies

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Jeremy Allan Hawkins is author of A Clean Edge (BOAAT 2017) and Enditem. (Beir Bua FORTHCOMING).

Resistance, in Yellow | Ann Kathryn Kelly

ROMAN ODINTSOV via Pexels

Yellow rose topiary, big blooms billowing atop ball, ruffled roses commanding attention. Admiration. A riotous ball of yellow, like a sun that cheers, like a yolk that nourishes, a lemon that quenches, like a spreading feeling that warms. Armored in leather gloves, I snip and shape and ooh and ahh. It gives and gives, summer into autumn, a profusion of scent, this Rosa Hybrid cultivar that lives up to its name: "Happy Go Lucky." Before first frost I wrap my beauty in burlap against winds that blow, mounded piles of snow that grow and eat bark-brown mulch, swallowing summer. I look out my kitchen window on a February morning and see burlap bent to the ground and I imagine the worst: a snap, my denuded topiary falling under the weight of swirling white, landing under burlap. Waiting to be found. My yellow sun in the back yard no more, like the one in the sky that left and won't return. But, then! March morning, thankful thaw, I see the burlap once more standing tall. My yellow sun, risen again! I think of yellow often these days, bold and brave, a yellow-and-blue resistance halfway around the world. Today's David rising against Goliath. I think of my yellow rose topiary, standing, falling, standing again. A tiny resistance in my back yard under blue sky. Yellow and blue, in nature. In a flag. Never say die.

Ann Kathryn Kelly's writing has appeared in a number of literary journals. https://annkkelly.com | Twitter and Instagram: @annkkelly

I've Got It | Ali Russell

Isla LI via Pexels

i've got it
i have the solution
a very small but powerful anesthetic
to knock me out for 5 or 10 minutes
every time I enter the public eye
then
everyone could gather
they can look and stare at my body
they can poke and prod my body
they can whisper about my body
twist their faces
widen their eyes
ask their questions
make their assumptions
compare themselves

express their pities
tell each other how inspired they are
get bored and
move on
then
i can go about my business

alas,
i suppose it's not perfect
considering
i would be unconscious for a lot of life
ultimately not worth it
but damn would it be less painful

I am a middle school teacher, mom and a double below the knee amputee. twitter: @aliigirl

Accidental Black and White, Autumn | Carla Sarett

cottonbro via Pexels

Although I am wearing
black and white,

I am not a woman who wears
black and white!

Believe me:
I am not *that* woman.

My starkness is an accident,
an anomaly

you mistake
for design.

And that dagger
in the doorway

is not my idea
of cheerful

although I am wearing
black and white.

Carla Sarett is a poet and fiction writer based in San Francisco. Her first poetry collection, She Has Visions (Main Street Rag) is out in November. She's not always silly. Twitter: @cjsarett

And Home | Kristóf Csölle

Johannes Plenio via Pexels

Fine. I could tell you how my skin – its only birthmark: starless nights – is yet followed by thunder.

I could tell you how it's always been – just me and Adam, just the missing ribs and vipers.

I could tell you how, when left alone, a country is just sapphires and nimbus clouds under UV-coated tempered glass. Like a mind, isolated.

I could tell you how, like all good lightning, I strike brightest from the ground up.

I could tell you how I own near 6 pounds of titanium that was once the closest thing I've known to love.

I could tell you how you and I are negatives of a blurry photograph, shot during a revolution. I, the flag, and you, the flame.

People walking barefoot on broken glass on asphalt.

I could tell you how I own near 6 pounds of titanium that I carried in my body for four pregnancies' worth.

I could ask what use is blood being fluid if it can't be used as gasoline.

I could tell you how when left, alone, the human is an animal leading itself to slaughter.

I could tell you that this means nothing to me. I am empire and death, bred beautiful and castle-ready.

I could tell you how time is just another skin.

The skin is just a border.

And a border the anticipation of a cut.

I could tell you how I know I will kill one day.

I could tell you the sensation of titanium on bone.

I could tell you how you are the weapon.

Light Green | Charlie Mills

Joanjo Puertos via Pexels

Light green as the lime trees we grew among,
my memories are tinted, tainted, stained.
Green with envy, I remember I hung
around. I remember all of the pain
just as I remember the waiting game
I played. My carpet grew a hole, footsteps
wearing it thin like my patience. Your name
still brings a lump to my throat. Did your footsteps
fade as mine did? Did you grow tired of it?
The pacing, I mean? Do you watch the stars
and think of our dream to be astronauts?
I write. You program. I feel and you are
calculating. I watched an empty chair,
an empty door. I breathed the empty air.

I am a PhD student at Royal Holloway. I write speculative fiction and poetry about boundaries, crossings, and the post-apocalypse. Twitter: @ctmpoet. Website: www.ctmpoet.wordpress.com

Acorns' Love | Fabiano Colucci

Marek Kupiec via Pexels

The two of them have been making out for a long time. To them, it seemed like there was just the two of them, and it was feeling so intense, so amazing.

He was holding her as tight as possible, feeling their bodies caressing each other at every kiss.

"So, what happens next?" he asked.

She chuckled. Another kiss. "I don't know, what if we find that out?" she asked back. Another kiss.

He stopped for a few moments, admiring her features. "You're so beautiful." She blushed again, and kissed him again.

"How can someone be this beautiful, Acorn?" he asked, stroking her face.

As they kept making out, however, she laughed, then pulled back her head. "Wait," she said.

He was confused, but she caressed his face, still laughing.

"Do you know why they call me Acorn?" she asked. He frowned his head.

So, out of curiosity, he decided to ask. "Why do they call you Acorn?"

As he waited for an answer, he caressed her body. He was ready for hours and hours of moments like that one.

Her eyes widened. Then, she started giggling quietly to herself. She had a cute laugh, and he was going for another kiss.

However, before their lips could touch, she popped like a bubble.

He widened his eyes, out of confusion. She was not there anymore. Yet, as he looked down, he noticed something. It was an acorn, so he picked it up.

"What is..." he started saying, before realising it. "Oh my, I've been making out with an acorn this whole time!" he exclaimed, before laughing so loudly he got everyone else's attention.

"Well, that is so funny, because..." he started saying, as he too popped like a bubble, revealing that he was an acorn as well.

Then, they were close to each other, even in acorn form, as the Sun was rising. They were all alone together, and it felt so good.

Suddenly, they both burst into laughter.

"What is going on?" he asked.

She giggled. Then, finally, she answered him.

"It's an acorns and rainbows joke."

He looked at her, puzzled. "What kind of joke is that?"

She, however, did not reply. Acorns are seeds. She laughed again, as the two of them continued to make out in the jungle.

Acorns. Silly and fun.

How did something like that happen? Even the monkeys stopped swinging around, scratching their heads as the parrots were chanting songs about rainbows and giggles.

"Tell me more about that joke," he asked her, as he held her hand tightly.

"Well, much like rainbows, we can make every colourful thing happen."

"I see," he said. Then, a tiger picked them up, putting them in its back. "Now, let's ride away!" they both said. They held hands as they ran through the jungle.

No one else in the animal kingdom gets this joke. Everyone else looks at them with confusion, or giggles. But not them.

An Italian student who loves to create and learn

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noitisnarT | Fabio Leba

Mario Wallner via Pexels

Absolution, unreachable
The people of Nevermore
Suddenly, were there
They always had been
But we didn't care
We didn't want
We didn't know
We did know
We were wanted
He didn't care
They didn't understand
Alas, the fundamental question

The axiom of the controversy
The baseline of attack
The sin we didn't want
The sin they were proud of
The miracle we tried to achieve
The miracle, son of abhorrence
Shall it be forgotten?
Negative, as it always should have

Absolution doesn't come without price
Absolution doesn't come
Are we ready though, to pay?
Are they ready though, to accept?
I know I'm not

I'm just a random Italian guy who writes sometimes things for fun. Not that interesting to be honest If you somehow want to contact me, my Discord is An Average Italian#9924

I Wake Up | Akhila Mohan CG

Mo Eid via Pexels

I wake up
one Onam morning
with my loving but
non-Mallu husband.

We make love,
not out of love
like on other days,
but to extend our lineage,
not out of desire,
but to protect ourselves

from the ostracisation,
not from people unknown,
but our own loved ones.

A few phone calls pour in
asking . . .
how am I celebrating
the festival.

I say, 'Nothing special . . .'

For this,
I get some preaching
about how should I celebrate the day . . .
and my womanhood,
slogging the whole day
in the kitchen
and worshipping the Lord,
for whom I am just a woman,
an untouchable.

Post this,
I fail at trying to
decipher a few poems
by a respected Indian poet,
from his book
lying unopened for days
beside my bed.

I open my Insta,
just to learn that
he too has followed me back.

'Now what?' I think.
How do I tell him
that
I didn't understand
his poems
just like this
life?

Akhila Mohan CG is a poet & writer who likes writing peoms and short stories. Her works have been published in literary platforms including Scarlet Dragonfly, Whiptail Journal, Failed Haiku, & others.

Poor Excuse for Dreaming | Karen Keefe

Mario Wallner via Pexels

Who is the patron saint of a fool?
The gullible need a protector.
I figure this weakness in me
comes from that thing with my eyesight.
Seeing double
it's hard to know what to focus on.

I should have listened to that Oh-oh sounding in my skull.
I came home on my birthday
To find a pretty face-stranger
to me
just a friend from work
to you,
in our house

here for supper.

Back then
in a time of run us over inflation
high unemployment
landlords lacking any mercy
we frequently shared supper
with friends and friends of friends.
But how

she knows where we keep the forks
why no surprise when she
asks you, “do you like the tablecloth I chose.”
My father shoots me a look.
I hold my breath
watch the show
and pray.

Risking all.
With you I always risked it all,
believed the best,
bet on our future happiness and
missed the signs.
Guess you always had an escape plan.
Did you always have an escape plan?

But what harm can come to us today?
This is a rare event,
there is even enough money to make a cake
and my brother is in town.

He is watching the show too, his hand in his pocket
tumbling his knife with his fingers
rocking on the balls of his feet.
My brother sees things straight.
He does not hesitate.

Seeing him
I do not hesitate anymore.
No one is looking at me.
I slip out the back door
and run
across the garden
to the shed.
Inside behind the potting bench
I find my wings.
Looking down from the sky
I don’t need saints or dread.

Karen Keefe is a featured poet in Anti-Heroin Chic. Recently published by Silver Birch Press, she has poetry forthcoming in the Winter Issue of POETiCA REViEW and in Poetry as Promised. @karen_keef

Ajax minus the violence | Darlene Salazar

Lum3n via Pexels

I fucked up. I like really, really fucked up. I started the grad school program of my nerdy dreams last year, it feels weird even just saying it! The start of the program kicked off with no shortage of self-reflection and asks of personal discoveries through new ideas in philosophy, anthropology, art and literature- I was enthralled. To add to the excitement this was right at the time I started coming out after 28 years. And while it continues to be exciting (literally every single day, feeling more happy and confident knowing who I am), when it first happened it was magic on steroids because... I was completely in love with someone I can only describe as quite actually the girl of my daydreams. Writing about everything was easy and the words flowed out of me, not just for class but for her.

It’s been 2 months since she told me she wasn’t ready for all of it and 1 month since I last saw her since moving cities for a new job. Everything about the somewhat quick decision to move has felt so good and true in every aspect of my life except for her. Her, and my (what I’m formally calling it as of now) writer’s block that’s seemed to

accompany my move but it's only now just occurred to me why.

In writing a class assignment, (they are literally called Reflection Papers) I was writing about using leadership concepts discussed in class material being used as blueprints for my own personal life, AKA dealing with this weird flirty just friend space I'm navigating with my now ex while we live 3 hours apart. I didn't go into this amount of detail but I said I felt like I was stuck between a rock and a hard place. Yes, like the common saying but also because of the song by H.E.R.. And because drawing on different forms of art and literature as comparison and connection is encouraged, I made a footnote, quoting the entire line.. *insert quote here*

And I lost it. I broke into tears like I am again as I write this except as soon as my face started to make that ugly scrunched goblin face you can't fight, I shouted, "FUCK. I FUCKED UP."

I can't write shit about the comparisons to my personal life because it's very inconvenient to want to cry every time you think about writing something that isn't filled with a joy that spills out onto the paper. Or when you think about how one of the sources of that joy needed some space so you said, "hold my beer" and accepted a job in a different city 2 weeks later to make sure they got enough space. And now that joy feels so far out of reach and when you write, your heart muscles still tell you to say all the lovely things about her because maybe just maybe

I can't finish that line, I've come back to it a couple times and it will remain as is. Now I am tired again from all the crying and I don't think I'm going to finish this paper. I'm already so behind and while I'm making progress, it's slow and painful. A funny thing I heard today keeps floating in my mind, "you'll have some calluses on your soul" as ridiculous and cliche as it sounds, pushing through the discomfort of writing while thinking of someone and feeling like your heart is physically aching with each line- it feels better at the end. For a little bit at least initially but it feels better over time, not just in little spurts. Your muscles have been stretched and not just the heart (cheesy I know but I mentioned it earlier so it makes sense, stay with me I'm going somewhere with this) but the ones in your hands and your legs holding you up at your standing desk because it helps you focus just a little bit more sometimes.

The legs that walked you back to your desk, crying, stomping and pounding your feet like a child not getting their fucking way. And you do feel like a child because you have everything else but in some ways that just makes you want it even more- that joy that's so special it fills all the empty spaces that the rest of life leaves in between the cracks. To fill it and make it so you're always walking in it everywhere you go. You remember the feeling and then you cry and you write and you cry and you write.

Then you remember a point you were trying to make earlier about feeling like Ajax minus the violence and you remember some good thoughts you had that actually come out on paper so you actually have a paragraph more than you did this morning and it's a tiny step but a potent one.

On Plagiarism and Thievery | Emily Teague

Lum3n via Pexels

I have this fear of accidentally plagiarizing.
I wouldn't do it on purpose
I'm a little bit dumb though
So I can see it happening
I just pick up words and phrases like dandelions and
They float around in my head
Detached from where I found them
Waiting to be spit out everywhere
Is everything
And we're all using the same words
Statistically its probably just a matter of time

Before I give it all up
I write all this stuff
Poetry prose unstructured manic nonsense my fucking grocery list

It just feels like it all happened already
Hyper familiar déjà vu
I'm convinced I stole it
I mean I wrote it
But is it mine?

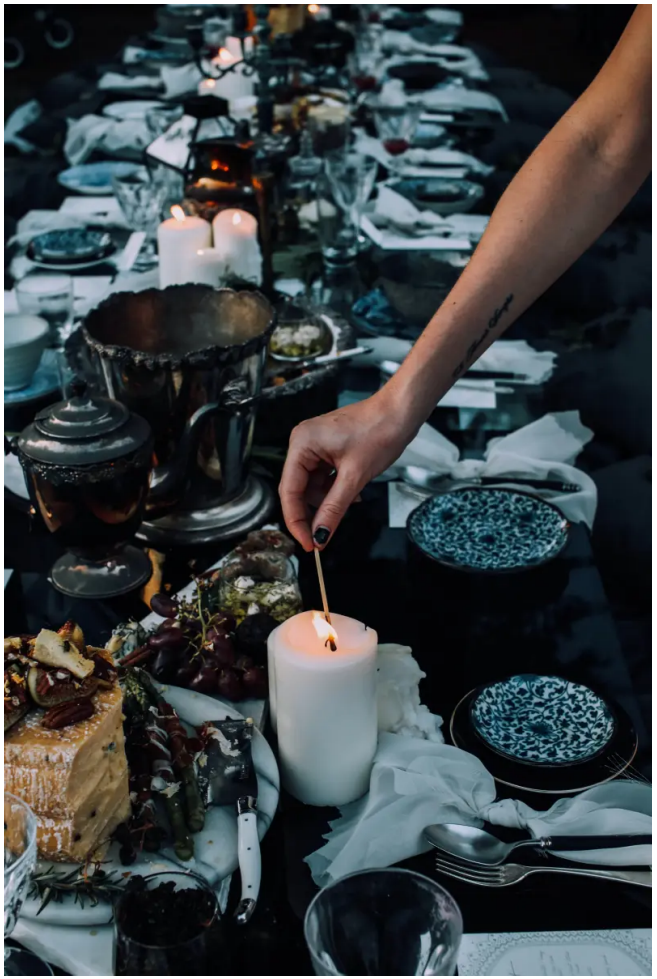
So I've been thinking about plagiarizing
And ownership
And inspiration
And how we have to take to create
How artists and scientists are really similar actually
Beyond the obvious
Universal human experience shit

We're all thieves
We have to be
So I really don't want to plagiarize
I'll just borrow a few things
I won't take all the credit.

"The Universe Is Not Locally Real,
and the Physics Nobel Prize Winners Proved It"
Do I have to explain it?
Real doesn't mean real
Local doesn't mean local
Sometimes measuring creates something immeasurable
Even geniuses are wrong sometimes
And, yes, it does matter what we believe.

You can find the author twiddling her thumbs or falling off her bike in the middle of the woods. Good luck!

a dinner with my parents | Sol Lopez



Rachel Claire via Pexels

Tonight we'll feast
Feast upon the meal our mothers have buried for us
We'll laugh and idle away the hours
Our hunger will be filled and our lies emptied
Tonight we'll dance, dance away the errors of our mercy
Tonight we'll forget, forget the targets on our backs
And bask in the glory
baby, tonight we'll be gods, puppeteers to our manipulation
We'll pioneer a new age,
A wave of redemption
Upon the labors of our own backs,
We'll feast, my love
And with nothing but our eased laugh, we'll live.

Sol, being an avid writer, documents the many emotions that come with growing up detailing her personal experiences through self-discovery, heartbreak, and queerness.

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Ksenia Chernaya via Pexels

i unclad the shroud from her face & my eyes falls on her beaming smile. even in death, it remains irrevocable. her face conjures nostalgia & memories i thought i had buried-unearthen .i am in her hands, held like a magnolia plant with frail skin, her fingers fidgeting as though maggots trapped in a garbage bag & her lips trembling like wretched hands on a walking rod. for her, a baby was the kaleidoscope of her dream & as much as she reveled in the iridescence of light reflected in her mirrored eyes, she feared this dream will crumble like a weathering rock from her [ ] eyes. that day, she couldn't dam the rivers of happiness & sadness incastellated within her body & they crept out as tears through the crevice of her eye. she didn't want to say goodbye & i had to watch her wrestle the talons of death as it struck deeper into her skin with every second. when death finally took her, I crawled out her cradled hands, went to a river & cried for days.

a boy swallows his loss

moves it through his gut

but finds it hard to digest.

Adesiyan Oluwapelumi,(he/him),TPC XI,is a Nigerian writer. His works are featured/ forthcoming in BRITTLE PAPER, Lumiere Review, CultureCult Press,Kahalari Review & elsewhere.He tweets @ademindpoems.

Gazed, Gazing, Gone | leena aboutaleb

Hakan Erenler via Pexels

I come into love like a glistening fruit,
blushing and rotting. A photograph depicts
desire, Sontag writes on eternity, my face alit
on a singular flame built in desire for your hunger.
Our hunger built on stone houses, the peeling of my walls
and your hands. The secrets of our desires.
I am hung like the French, hungry for you,
mouth-wide open mid-spelling.
We are adults, no tears but I always cry now
like a new-born child. All teeth and gums.
Centaurs gaze as I pull our tarot cards out, one by seven,
foretelling past and future. Where do we hide our secrets?
There must be a magic hanging in the air
watching us like hidden jinn. All mystery and fire

I ask you to burn me in bed. It only takes three seconds
before skin scalds to the third degree, I read, thighs starving.
I theorise you page by page, hands and eye.
Your mouth on my breast, desire embodied.
You look so beautiful in desire. I memorise your gaze
how your eyes turn black when we meet.
Your burdens rest on my back, moving from your shoulders.
Therapise with me. A cup of hot coffee, freshly rolled
cigarettes. I shake you in a field. We play hide and seek,
the prayer ringing when you touch me, our hands tracing each other.
I become a concept, an abstraction of your determination.
I don't need an oracle for this, not for you.
I'm overwhelmed in the presence of time with you.
How you lull the strings of fate to patiently wait
for us to finish with each other.

---

leena aboutaleb is an Egyptian and Palestinian writer, primarily searching for fruiting trees to sleep under. She can be virtually located @na5leh on Twitter.

BeelzeBus | Joseph Hartman

***Тамара Левченко** via Pexels*

He woke up in his usual seat at the back of the bus. A window seat, so that he wouldn't have to look at the faces of the other passengers. But he couldn't help but glance.

Five others.

An old lady clutching a ring.

Her young granddaughter. Couldn't have been older than 6.

A teen girl with headphones plugged in but neither in her ears. Close to the door.

A fat, middle-aged man with purpling ankles.

A man with bags under his eyes, wrapped in a fur coat.

And finally, him. Simon. The grocery store cashier.

And on each of their faces was the same expression he wore. Confusion. Suspicion.

Terror.

The last thing he remembered, he was walking along a long sidewalk. Headed home in the dead of night, to family who didn't particularly care for him. Yet, he felt some obligation to them nonetheless. The next thing he knew, he was sitting in this grimy seat. In the back. By the window.

There was nothing to look at out the window. The blackness only showed his own face reflected. No one spoke, and before long, the bus lurched to life. It rumbled along, but in the windows, nothing seemed to change.

A voice crackled through the PA system. At the front of the bus, the driver whispered into a microphone.

He chuckled first, though it sounded more like wet choking. "Welcome aboard, everyone. Hopefully you enjoyed your… nap."

"I'll cut right to the chase: you're here cause you're dead. You're all dead. Congratulations."

There were murmurs of worry all around the bus. The worker began hyperventilating.

The middle aged man would have none of it. "So, who does that make you, then? God? The devil?"

The driver rocked back and forth, more choking laughter emerging from his maw. "No,

no! No one so important. But I can tell you that where you're going… well, let's just say that it's not all sunshine and harpstrings down here." The bus fell silent. "Yeah, it's Hell. Whoop-de-doo."

"But hey!" He said with mock-enthusiasm. "I'm not so cruel that I won't make this *easier* on all of you. So, here's what's going to happen:"

He held out both of his hands. The wheel kept turning on its own. He held up eight fingers.

"Six passengers. And six stops. Each worse than the last. Each one intended for one of you… from the ones who stole from the cookie jar… to the serial killer."

The passengers tensed up. Looking at each other. The fat man grimaced. The daughter buried her face in her grandmother's chest, sobbing. Any one of them could be the killer. Except for Simon, of course. He knew he didn't deserve… whatever was the worst this place had to offer.

They all sat a bit further from each other.

"But here's the catch!" The driver said with cruel satisfaction. "I'm not going to tell you which stop is your rightful punishment. At each stop, one person may leave, and only one! And then the bus will move on."

"So that's it, huh?" The teenaged girl asked, voice shaking. "It's simple. We just walk out the first chance we get… and we'll be better off."

The driver's head bent downwards and turned to face her. He didn't have a mouth, but smiled manically with his eyes. She screamed, and turned away. There was no doubt now. This wasn't just some lunatic kidnapping scheme. It was real.

"Yes," He wheezed through the PA system. "Haha, yes, it's thaaat simple. Of course, that is if you can bring yourself to leave…" He laughed again, and turned back around. "Now, sit tight, all of you. We're nearing our first stop…"

The bus stayed relatively quiet. But the grandmother spoke out.

"How is this fair?" She spat, clutching her granddaughter close. "What is *she* doing here? She's done nothing wrong."

"She's done nothing right, either, apparently," The driver said in a matter-of-fact tone. "We've got very specific rules around here, and I follow them. To the letter. Speaking of which, we're heeeere-!"

The bus door hissed open. Only blackness could be seen outside. "Who's first?"

He expected there to be a pause. Maybe a moment of hesitation before someone stood up. But before the demon driver was even finished talking, the man in the coat stood up, ran to the front and dove out the door with an anguished howl. And as he vanished into the darkness, his voice was suddenly very far away, echoing for a while before disappearing entirely.

"Oh my god!"

"Is he alright?"

"What's out there? Where'd he go?"

"Smart man." The driver smiled and nodded.

Simon opened his mouth. With a bit of hesitation, he spoke for the first time since he woke up. "He… he was the killer, wasn't he?"

"Right… you… are…" He said, retrieving something from his pocket. A flashlight. But its glow out the door only illuminated more darkness. A hole. "The Pit. Bottomless, naturally. A soft and cushy fate, by comparison. You should've been faster."

Simon's stomach turned. It hadn't yet sunk in, until just then, that at some point, he'd have to walk through those doors. Into something even worse. And there he'd stay. For all eternity.

The doors closed, and they were back on the road again. Five of them now. All of a sudden, they were no longer just a crowd of passengers on the bus. They looked at each other with the same empty stares, then looked away. They should've been faster.

The bus stopped again. The doors slid open, and the air became cold as ice. Simon and the girl pulled their feet up to their bodies, and the man simply covered his legs as well as he could. But the elderly woman was the only one to stand, and she walked towards the door. Her shivering granddaughter followed.

"No! No, no, you can't!" She screeched, tears freezing on her face. She pulled at the lady's leg. "Don't leave me alone!"

The grandmother was at the top of the steps now. Simon wanted to look away. She looked down, at the young girl, and picked her up, holding her close. Making her warm, one final time.

"Remember, Tiffany," She said in a mournful voice. "Everything I've done, I've done for you."

She just sobbed, puffs of air misting in front of her face. Her grandmother pried her tiny arms off of her… and threw her out. Into the darkness. Into the cold.

The driver shone a flashlight on the girl's prone form. On a plain of ice. Her skin was already turning blue, like the countless others who lay shivering, curled on the ice.

"G-gramma…" She stuttered, trying to stand. But her hand froze to the ground. "It's c-c-cold… I'm scared…"

The old woman said nothing. The flashlight switched off, and the door closed. She stood at the door until the bus had fully pulled away. Then she returned to her seat. The man glared at her, and he stood up and gripped her by the collar. She groaned in fear as the man nearly strangled her with her own clothing.

"What the HELL was that all about?! You've made a big mistake, lady!" He shouted, shaking her back and forth. Tears welled up in his eyes. Simon and the teen turned away, shellshocked by her actions. "You were the one… you said it wasn't fair…!"

"Hey!" The driver yelled back, waving a fist. "No violence! That comes after you get off!" He made no attempt to stop them.

She steeled herself, and took a deep breath. "Use your brain, you idiot, before it rots in your grave," She grabbed his hand with a shaking grip. "We're all dead. She was dead. I was… sparing her," She looked out the windows. Into the blackness. "My only mistake was not being fast enough for the pit."

His grip loosened. But she smiled softly. "It's only going to get worse. But I'm going to go last. So don't worry your little heads about it."

They both sat down again, though the man couldn't keep his fists from balling up.The girl was shaking. "I'm… I'm going next. Don't try to stop me." The bus stopped again. No one raised complaint. But Simon was screaming on the inside. His mind was telling him to go, to push her out of the way and jump off the bus. But his body refused to move.

It's only going to get worse… it's only going to get worse… why doesn't he leave now?

Before the tortures become unbearable?

She dropped her headphones and stepped out of the bus, onto a metal floor. She looked back at the driver expectantly. "What?" He asked, smirking cruelly with his eyes and patting the pocket with his flashlight in it. "Go on, don't keep us waiting-"

"F-fuck you." She said simply, and walked into the darkness. Her final act of rebellion.

Simon closed his eyes as she screamed and screamed, but her screams were soon drowned out by a ghastly metallic whirring that made the bus shudder. Simon closed his ears, but could not keep out the sickening popping noise that followed. Soon, the whirring faded, and Simon realized that they had moved on. Just like that, she was gone.

"What..." He tried to say to the driver. "...What did she do to get here?"

"I dunno, shoplifted a few times, maybe?" He said, scratching his head with one hand on the wheel. "I'm a bit hazy on the details."

The man vomited. Simon gagged, but he managed to control himself. He gasped, then buried his face in his hands, curling up into a ball. He had never felt so small. So alone. All the regrets he had about his life suddenly bubbled up to the surface, but then seemed insignificant. A cashier? Why had he become a cashier? Why hadn't he cared more? Done more? He had gone so slowly, so carefully. But it was all over.

The bus smelt worse than it looked now. Simon wanted to escape, but all around was blackness. Maybe if he left the bus and ran to the side rather than into whatever torment awaited him... but maybe what if it went on forever? Or worse, what if he stumbled into a torment far worse than what waited?

The bus lurched to a stop. "Alright, who wants to go next?" Simon lifted his face from his hands. The man was in the seat opposite to him, a dead, sick look in his eyes. One of them would have to go. The man shut his eyes, took a deep breath, and stood. He walked to the door, and stood before.

The driver laughed, taking out his flashlight. "Oh, you're gonna love this..." He shone it outside. Both Simon and the old woman gasped, but the man simply stared in terror. Human bodies. Strung up by barbed metal wire. Hundreds at least, dangling and twitching, eyes, nose, and mouth all sewn shut. They hardly moved. Twitching was the most they could manage. "The Gallery. Probably my favorite attraction down here. Well, second favorite."

The man didn't move. He had gone stark white. Outside of the bus, waiting outside, was a strangely mundane table, with a few things on it. A spotlight shone down on it, marking its importance. Simon squinted, but he couldn't make out exactly what they were. But the man shook his head, and returned to his seat. "I... I can't. I can't do it... I'm sorry..."

Simon's heart leaped into his throat. The driver turned his gaze toward him. "Well, well..." He purred maliciously. As only a demon could. "If she's going last... and he's not going now... I guess that just leaves you, then, doesn't it?"

His imagination ran wild. What could be worse than this? Could anything be worse than this? He wouldn't go – he couldn't go. "Am I going to have to start throwing people out?" He said, impatience creeping into his voice. "I have a schedule to keep, you know."

Simon shook his head frantically, trying to plead with him. But he couldn't speak. He felt like metal wires were around his neck, strangling him... but then, something in him broke.

"Please..." He turned to the old woman, tears streaming down his face. "Please...

leave. I don't... I don't want to..."

Sobbing, he curled into his seat. A hand landed on his shoulder, and then was gone. He looked up, through tears, to see her walking off the bus. "I'm sorry... I'm so sorry..." The man mumbled. The bus passed, and Simon saw the woman holding a metal wire... and something long and thin. "I could never handle needles..."

The bus continued. As it always did. If Simon wasn't already dead, he'd swear that he was dying. His body felt hot and cold all over (Why did he still feel like he had a body? Maybe so he'd actually feel what was happening when his torture began), and he felt his sanity slipping.

"I don't deserve this..." The man mumbled, anger rising in his voice. "I don't belong here... I've been a good man... a good husband and a good father... I've been a devout man, my whole life... why...?"

"I couldn't tell you," Simon replied weakly. Since they were the only ones left, he felt... obligated to reply, somehow. "I've done nothing my whole life. Not really."

The man chuckled. "Isn't that typical... you kids. Think you can just lounge around and pleasure yourselves and leave the world to rot," He spat at the ground, into his cesspool of vomit. Simon could swear there were maggots crawling around in it. "It was probably my hate that did it... my hate for you damned hedonists... but is that really so wrong? Is it wrong to hate what should be hated?"

He stared into Simon's eyes. And Simon stared back. The bus stopped again, and the door opened. The driver tilted his head back and clapped twice. "So, who's it gonna be? Who wants the worst, and who wants the second-worst-?"

Without changing his expression, the middle-aged man spoke. "You go."

"But... what about you?" Simon asked, surprised. He was sure the man would've gone himself.

"I've realized..." He put on a crooked smile and raised his head up high. "God... would never allow someone like me to be in a place like this. This is a trick. A test of my faith. He wants to see... if I'll sacrifice myself for others."

"If that's really what you believe... alright." Simon said quietly. He put his hands on his knees. He was trembling all over. What could be through that door? Worse than the Pit? Worse than the ice, the grinder, the gallery? But he stood. Maybe it wouldn't be so bad.

Walking towards the door happened in a blur. He was at the bottom of the steps, looking out. A click. The light spread slowly, weaving itself over...

The eyes. The vibrating eyes, belonging to bald, stretched grey heads. Jammed

together, stuck in a silent, still mass of bodies. All staring at him, mouths folded over with blackened flesh. Their limbs grew into each other, their spines weaved together until the great floating mass was a perfect sphere. And all their collected blood, tears, and bile mixed together, dripping off the bottom into neverending blackness.

"Go on, child," The demon said. "Take your place among the dead."

Simon howled in terror and scrambled up the steps, only to find the man waiting for him, livid expression on his face.

"Get out!"

"No!"

A boot smashed against Simon's face. He saw stars for a moment, then those eyes. Those black pupils, seeing all but knowing nothing. He fought back. Pressed his face against the sole.

"I won't let you take this from me!"

"Don't... please... don't let them take me!" Simon latched onto the rails, but the man's stronger fingers pried his own up. His grip was loosening, his hand was bleeding. But he would die again before he would enter that mass.

"You deserve this! Wretched... damned... filthy...!" He punctuated each word with a kick. Simon felt his teeth knocking loose, his mind spinning...

Then, the man pitched forward, out of the bus, and into the pool of collected filth below the dead. The demon retracted his foot and waved to him as he pulled Simon aboard. "No violence on my bus! Have fun out there-!"

The doors closed and left the man outside. To rot.

Simon stumbled back to his seat, but slipped in the vomit and fell to the floor. But he pulled himself up, laying across the seats. For the first time since he boarded the bus, he slept.

And when he woke, things were not much different. They still traveled in blackness. So it wasn't a nightmare.

"Hey hey hey... look who's awake?" The driver teased. "We're approaching our last stop. Aren't you excited?"

Simon was silent. He had let his fear get the best of him again. And now that man was out there. He tried to tell himself that that horrible man deserved it... but maybe that kind of thinking was why he was here in the first place. Maybe HE deserved it. Maybe it

was right that he got the final punishment.

"You get to experience the worst we have to offer... you should feel lucky. Not many people make it this far. You're either very brave... or the biggest coward in the world."

Simon chuckled. Once.

"I guess that's fitting though..." The demon mused. In the windshield, Simon saw a light, far in the distance. That was their stop, most likely. "The one who hasn't done a damn thing their entire life... continues to not do a goddamn thing."

Simon closed his eyes. Ignored the driver. It's not like what he said mattered anymore.

He was dead. This was the end.

"I knew that you'd be the last one," The driver said. The light approached. Simon could see it through his eyelids. "I knew this would be perfect. What better punishment could there be, for someone like you?"

The light engulfed them. But they kept on driving. There was a ripping noise. "Open your eyes, idiot," The driver said, voice suddenly lacking its wheezy quality. "We're here."

Simon did as he said. His mouth gaped, and he put a hand over his mouth. He tried to scream, but his throat was shot. All he could do was squeak.

It was a beautiful day. Green hills, blue sky, lightly cloudy. Simon scrambled to the back of the bus. Behind them was wooden double doors, and within, only blackness. They were connected to a warehouse, a huge warehouse in the middle of nowhere. So huge that it could probably hold a city inside. Millions of people.

The driver dropped a flap of fake skin to the ground, and grinned at Simon with his rotting teeth. "You get the worst torment of all, Simon. Welcome home."

And even as the bus doors opened to the front porch of his house, Simon could not speak. He would be in hell for the rest of his life.

I'm Joseph Hartman, better known as MkfShard on twitter and tumblr, and I've made a lot of short stories that I've mostly done for a small horror contest! Here's one of those, if that's alright!

Phermones | Alex J. Barrio

Adrienne Andersen via Pexels

She smelled like she had just left the gym.

We were seated in a corner table by an open widow, where we could watch the passers-by. A jogger who smelled of wet dog. A sweaty man in a suit gliding in the aroma of women's perfume. A woman in a wedding dress with the odor of French fry grease.

A bouquet of flowers approached our table. "I'm Liza and I'll be taking your order, Anything to drink?"

"Just water for me," Maura said. Her breath was minty fresh behind a golden smile, teeth yellowed by years of neglect. I noticed a tiny white spot near her left canines – bread? rice? – and wondered if she had ever flossed a day in her life.

"Vodka rocks, please." This woman's stink was moving into my nostrils. I was so disgusted that I did not think I could get through the next hour without lubrication.

"What kind of vodka?"

"The cheapest you got."

"You got it. Can I start you off with an appetizer?"

"I'm ready to order. Are you ready?" She was.

She had an animated way of speaking, arms swinging and body rocking back and forth. When she talked about her favorite movies, her eyes lit up and her skin seemed to glow in the restaurant's incandescent light. The more excited she got, the stronger she reeked. I had to excuse myself for a break to retch in the bathroom.

We skipped desert. "It was nice meeting you."

"You too," she said. We turned to walk away. She stopped and called back out to me. "Can I ask you something?"

"Of course," I said, wondering if somehow, after that spirited but mediocre conversation, she was going to invite me to her place.

"Is everything okay with you?"

"What do you mean?"

"I mean, I don't know how to say this, but have you showered in the past few days?"

A breeze blew and the smell was like a smack in the mouth. I remembered the washing machine in my building with the broken detergent dispenser. "I'm so sorry."

"It's okay," she said. "See you around."

I looked back into the restaurant, ashamed of myself, alone again and awash in a world of fresh fish, automobile exhaust, a million different deodorants, and a fresh list of profiles to swipe.

Alex J. Barrio (He/Him/His) lives in DC. He is a Cuban-American who grew up in NJ. He writes poetry (@1001Tanka) and fiction (@AlexJBarrio). Links to other work at https://www.onwords.io/@AlexJBarrio.

Unlucky Choices | Will Musgrove

via Pixabay

I don't like to choose. A plot generator wrote my life story. An eccentric hypnotist in a noir piece about crooked cops. A Magic 8-Ball decided if I married one of those crooked cops. Outlook good. A cootie catcher picked what I did for fun. Red, five, stamp collecting. The board game Life dictated if I had kids. Congratulations, it's twins. A Facebook quiz selected how I died. Falling piano like a cartoon character. A coin flip decided heaven or hell. Heads. I wasted my life, but it wasn't my fault. No, I just got unlucky.

He received an MFA from Minnesota State University, Mankato. His work has appeared in TIMBER, The McNeese Review, Tampa Review. Connect on Twitter at @Will_Musgrove or williammusgrove.com.

Babe, go bash some drums | Casey Lucas

Jure Širić via Pexels

For Rocco

A phone is ringing in the back of my head. When the little phone in my head plays your ringtone, I try to do a thing we did together: I read your poetry, I bash some drums, I scroll through teenage inboxes and marvel at the sheer volume of words we dedicated to the simple concept of "don't give up, kid." I told you that sometimes that I felt like a fault line, a jagged unstable rupture on the surface of the world doomed to buckle and buckle and burst and you said babe, go bash some drums. And I said I didn't play the drums. And you said go bash the drums of whatever it is you do. So I am bashing the drums of some words right now and missing you hard and wondering if, when the earth finally swallows me, my phone will ring in anyone. And whether I'll have told them anything that helped even half as much.

Casey Lucas is an author, poet, and video game developer who has twice won the Sir Julius Vogel Award for Best Short Story, New Zealand's highest honour in short form speculative literature.

covered | Lauren Murphy

via Lauren Murphy

find me @foil.character on Instagram

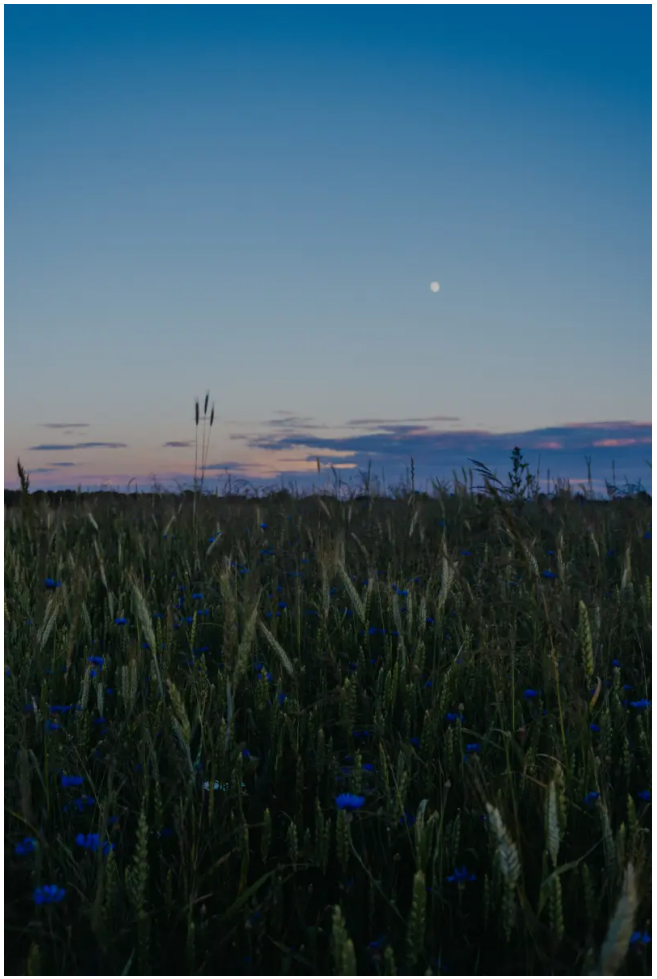
Free | Louis Boyd

Mwabonje via Pexels

We laughed
hard heavy bellyfuls until tears streamed down our faces
Little ashy boys
So close to the ceiling of manhood that on our scuffed toe tips we could just graze
Chin hairs and first kisses behind bleachers
But still far enough away from that life that it doesn't worry us yet
We still untethered
When our only worry was beating home streetlights and the girls in the neighborhood was as flat chested and knobby kneed as us
We were free
So we laughed
Laughed so hard that tears streamed down our ashen faces

Instagram: Writing4purpose

Twitter: jaytha_griot



Irina Iriser via Pexels

Essence of The Night

Disappearing clouds
and the night filled sky with stars
dancing across it.

Mountain Girl

"Take me to the place I love, take me far away."
– Red Hot Chili Peppers, Under the Bridge

Implant my ashes on top of the Sierra Mountain
so my soul can be engraved in the dry soil
watching cars pass by, while I wait for the stars to cover the night.
Yes, this is where I'll call home.

Hotel Chelsea

1978

Eyes darting from side to side
us laying in the bed
naked
your tangled body still sleeping
this quiet makes me nervous
no wonder I like the sound of chaos
like us
fucking
shouting
you telling me I'm over emotional.
I just want to feel
yet I don't want to.

Losing Faith

When I heard your
feet creak from below
I was hoping you'd
turn back around.
I whispered a prayer
beneath the sheets
I was covered in,
but even then
that wasn't enough
to keep you from
coming in.

You cupped your hand
around my mouth pushed
up my nightgown,
and told me everything
was going to be alright.
I tried to push you off as you
hovered over me, but you
managed to keep me in
place and continued the
game.

When you finished
a tear crept down my check.
While I was facing the
crucifix planted on the wall
with the feeling of despair.

Day Sibley is a writer and multidisciplinary artist from southern Nevada and the founding editor of Dream Noir magazine.

The East Pass | Christopher Wiggins

Gianluca Grisenti via Pexels

Gentle breaths, rustling grass. Blades as high as your knee, tall enough to swallow a mistake. Birds nesting in an antelope skull, feathers dressing teeth and sockets. Straw figures erected by a lunatic, arranging play corpses into a bonfire to dance under a black sky.

Starless nights cold enough to clutch a family in its tracks, upright 'til the morning thaw.

You'll see it all from this Yew, from these gallows. Centuries of sight in exchange for the impermanent years. Bathing in the red light at dusk, dancing in these gentle breaths.

I am a screenwriter and a producer, about to publish my first short story collection.

Minute Poem | Kristin Yates

Kristin Yates is an award-winning work in progress from Lewisville, North Carolina. Her poems have previously appeared in her head and other places. IG: https://www.instagram.com/beautefantasy/

Kristin Vogt via Pexels

It starts with a deep breath, repositioning
the self with fists on the bed,
the knowledge
that I'm clenching— a sigh
with the legs apart,
the face softened, the nose
itching,
and the fingers searching
for words. It doesn't have to be
poetic, I just have to

Jumping Out of Car Practice | Brian Ellis

Ruiyang Zhang via Pexels

Air whooshed into the car when Brian opened the passenger side door of my '96 Ford Taurus and stuck his Doc Marten boot out above the moving pavement. Brian's Doc Martens were hand-me-downs, scuffed and cracked and almost grey with age, the yellow laces laced all the way up and wrapped several times before being tied around Brian's skinny leg just above the ankle, his cuffed jeans lifting as he stretched one leg out of the door.

Brian wasn't a metaphor, or imaginary, or like a hidden aspect of my fractured personality or anything like that, he was just a kid that happened to have the same first name as me, because we were around the same age and a lot of people named their kids Brian in the early 1980s.

I was behind the wheel, sitting high in the fabric seat of the Taurus. Looming my body over the steering wheel like I like to do. My long thin fingers squeezing the foam of the steering wheel, the toe of my Converse All-Star pressing gentle on the accelerator, easing above 15 mph, coming quickly to the cul-du-sac end of Brian's street.

Brian had picked up a summer job working construction at a place down-Cape, and since he didn't have a car, he intended to hitchhike to and from work each day. The problem, as he saw it, was the number of creeps picking up hitchhikers to sexually assault them. The solution to this was to teach himself how to jump out of a car moving at highway speed. He was positive he could do it, he just needed to learn how. Our process was to practice jumping out of the car at low speeds and then work our way up. Start at 5 mph, then 10, etc. If you can learn how to do it safely at 20, 25 mph, all you would have to do adjust your calculations for 55, 60 mph.

I thought this was a great idea.

I volunteered to be the driver because of course I did. I'm an enabler.

Plus, Brian said he wouldn't trust any of the other dudes with a thing like this.

This was our third run up and down the street. We had first tried 5 mph, was almost disappointingly easy. I was riding the brake, moving slower than the Taurus would have on its own, and Brian just kind of got out of the car and stood up. The next pass was supposed to be at 10, but I actually kept it more around 8. I guess my instinct to go a little easy was part of the reason I was chosen as the driver. That time Brian had to take a few steps, running alongside the car for less than a second before I pulled away.

Brian rubbed his palm hard against the blonde fuzz of his buzzed skull, a lopsided smile on his pinched and elven face. His voice was high pitched with a kind of nasal warble, "I think the move is, man, to like have one foot hit the ground flat, and then tuck into a roll as quick as possible. I just need to keep my dome from hitting the ground, if I can curl tight enough, I can totally land on my shoulders or back, and they can take the hit, don't you think?"

"Makes complete sense to me," I told him.

Brian let out a squeaking laugh, "although we Sterlings have notoriously thick domes!"

Brian Sterling was the youngest of the three notorious Sterling brothers, the other two of which had ambled out of the garage to watch the proceedings, along with Ben Castle. The eldest of the brothers was Dave, a kind of ogre of a man, who at turns was jovial and furious. He was tall and broad shouldered, with a square head and a firm jaw, short strawberry blonde hair and a patchy beard, and would've have been an arrestingly handsome man if he wasn't so puffy from drink. Dave lived in the attic above his parent's garage and rarely could be coaxed out of his hovel. When he was tempted to come out to a party, he was the type of guy who tore his shirt off and challenged people to punch him as hard as they could in his voluminous beer belly. I once saw Ben Castle smash a square glass Jack Daniels bottle on Dave's head and Dave did not get hurt.

John Sterling was the middle brother, but no one called him John, he was Sterling. Even though Dave was older, Sterling was the ur-Sterling, he was cooler than his brother, had that kind of quiet vacant thing about him, chill, unimpressed, I don't think I ever heard him say more than a handful of words in the time I knew him. He had a big, chiseled face with a prominent nose, which made him look a bit like Elvis Costello, and wore horn-rimmed glasses, which made him look even more like Elvis Costello. He was long and lanky where his older brother was thick and brutish. Sterling and Ben Castle had been friends forever, and Sterling was the drummer in every band Ben formed. The kind of music Sterling liked was that he only listened to the bands Slayer and Devo. This informed the way he played the drums, which was as fast as possible and as hard as possible, all of the time.

As cool as Sterling was, Ben Castle was perhaps the coolest human I had met, ever, or since. I desperately wanted to be his friend, I mean I already was his friend, but that feeling remained, even when you were around him, that you wanted to be his absolute best friend and around him all the time. Ben was a guitarist and a writer and poet, he chain-smoked and wore a blank black baseball cap low over his piercing blue eyes, bill of the cap curled into an upside-down U from being folded into the back pocket of his jeans and had the loose and sexy stance of a gas station attendant. When he was giddy and in a good mood his voice took on this faux-British accent, would exclaim "Most Excellent!" while wiggling his fingers. The rest of the time his voice was a sleepy grumble. Often, Ben seemed like he had just woke up. When he was listening to you, he would turn his ear toward your mouth, his eyes on the ground, the smooth skin of the back of his neck exposed to the air. Ben was the one that started calling Sterling Sterling, he was the reason the rest of us did.

Neither of us, Sterling or I, as much as we wanted, could be Ben's best friend, because Ben's best friend was dead.

His name was Grove, that was how everyone referred to him, and he had died of a heroin overdose thirteen months ago. He and Ben had been like brothers since they were little, had done everything together, up to and including their junk habit. As far as Ben was concerned, Grove was the coolest person he could imagine. Grove was Ben's Ben. When Grove died the friend group had shattered, lots of people blaming each other, others clinging tighter, and in that vacuum I entered.

I hadn't been friends with these guys long. Six months tops. This is what I did, floated from one group to another, changing who I was in the process. I had grown up a town over, and my friends from there simply hadn't stuck. Or maybe I was the one who hadn't stuck. Either way I had entered this vacant space in these people's lives, and they took me on as one of their own. I knew everything about them. I didn't know anything about myself.

His boot sticking out the open door, the world rolling under us, Brian's light eyes bounced from the mouth of exposed air, back to me, back to the air. Brian was the youngest, which meant he was the cute one, the friendly one, easiest to get along with and the conciliator, the one who smoothed things over between his brothers. Also, as the youngest, he had something to prove.

Dave lifted his fleshy face and hooted into the air, shoeless on the scraggy yard. He was holding a Budweiser loose by the top of the can, low by his thigh. Sterling was standing with his shoulders high, hands tucked into his armpits, blinking and looking cold. He shouted, voice cracking, "fucking do it already!"

Ben held a lit Camel Light to his mouth and pulled it away with a snap of his hand, a sharp yank. His face was in shadow under the curled bill of his cap.

I crested the slight incline of the loosely paved street, speedometer needle twitching in the direction of 20 mph. Brian had done so well at the lower speeds, I was raising the stakes, it was time.

The problem was commitment. I was one who committed too easily, I was a sucker for a moment. I was there holding your hand through a breakup or your hair while you puked your guts out, I could promise and be vulnerable, be the person you needed on the worst night of your life, but I didn't know how to stick. From the time Ben and I had met, I felt like I had been his friend forever, but I was scared of that too, scared of what that meant over time, if I would ever be able to stop myself from being the one who left. There was that balance, of knowing when to commit to someone, to be there for them, and knowing how not to go too deep too fast. Knowing that you won't stay. Or perhaps, learning for once how to be there for the long-haul. You had to know yourself enough to be able to trust yourself, and I was not even close to a place where I could consider myself to be at the beginning of that.

There was sound, like a schurpt, and Brian's body shunted out of the open door of the moving car, swirling air washing around me, now alone behind the wheel.

Brian Stephen Ellis is the author of four collections of poetry, with a fifth collection, Against Common Sense to be release from Limit Zero Press in 2023. He lives in Portland, Ore.

Suffering during floods | Muhammad Abdul Basit

Pok Rie via Pexels

The floods were here, back with vigor
And the country drowned in water
No hope for the destitute victims
Their eyes turning white and the lives going in shambles

"Water everywhere but not a drop to drink"
Warned the wise to depict the future's brink
We knew it would come sooner or later
But were not prepared to cater

The filibustering will continue as the hopes here shatter
For this is what happens in matters that matter
The conferences will be conducted and campaigns run
With actions too little too late to save the soil's daughter and son

Muhammad Abdul Basit is a political scientist and freelance journalist. He writes on international relations and sociopolitical issues. Instagram: abdul_basit0419

Market Day | Moriam E. Kuye

Juan Pablo Serrano Arenas via Pexels

For sale: one finger, still warm.

Has a history of repeated assault: five women counted, with others still unknown. Finger missing a nail, comes with a slight tinge of acid and has been previously used for occasional shit wiping. Can be salted, deboned, stuffed and sewn erect. Wrapped and sealed in cruelty-free packaging.

And all bidding starts at zero, with nine more primed for a fresh cut.

Option for body to be included.

With more to come.

There is more to come.

Moriam E. Kuye (she/her) is a British-Nigerian writer who enjoys roller skating on a sunny day. She mostly likes and retweets on Twitter @moriam_emi.

(con)(sus)tain | Ashley Robles

cottonbro via Pexels

I always overpour
Cook white rice with too much water
Fry the egg and burst its yolk
Never careful to check the size of the spout
Drown the meal in soy sauce
Am forced to drink tarter liquids
Cleanse my palette

Disappointment
Is still satisfying

It sits in your throat

Lets each favor absorb
Rewrites your composition

You become familiar with this recipe
Its weight
You tell yourself you will become practiced
At preparation

You'll wash the rice
Butter the pan
Look
And look back again

You'll perfect the meal

But then you will pour cumin in your oatmeal
And have to sit with a new spice

Ashley Robles is an artist currently residing in San Antonio, TX, a UT Austin alum, and is working to normalize chronic illness in her corporate & creative life. She can be found online @mzashleypie

When the Unicorn lost its horn | Fabiano Colucci

Dids via Pexels

It was a special day for the young Unicorn, too special to wait for the Sun to rise. As its eyes opened, it looked at the valley, still shining thanks to the silver light of the Full Moon and the ten thousand stars above the clouds.

Ever since it was nothing more than a Foal, the young Unicorn had been told about an important event which it was destined to participate in: warning every other living being in the valley about the arrival of a new era. Every Unicorn was destined to live through such a day at least once in their millenary life, so everything had to be perfect.

After getting up, it looked at the river at its left. It was clear for everyone that the young Unicorn was different from the others, for its body resembled other animals even more than other unicorns.

Its tail, slick and furry, was identical to that of the Bulls happily walking around the grassy fields of the valley. Its belly was as yellow as the Crocodiles which inhabited the very river whose clear waters it was staring at. Its body was green and had hundreds of scales, like the ones that decorated a Snake. Even its face had two long barbels, like those of a Catfish.

There was only one key detail that made it recognizable as a Unicorn, and that was its magical horn, sharp and shiny. It was able to reflect the sunlight, making it seem like golden flames were surrounding its body as it dashed through the valley in joy.

However, as it took a look at its body, the young Unicorn widened its eyes, in fear. The horn was gone! There was nothing in the middle of its head, not even the signs of something breaking off of it, almost as if there had never been a horn there in the first place.

That concerned the Unicorn, especially because it was only a matter of hours before the Sun was going to rise. How could it warn about the arrival of a new era, if nobody was going to recognize it?

In a hurry, it looked back and forth, left and right, hoping to find someone already awake. There was a small white Rabbit, sitting in the grass. The Unicorn asked it about the horn, but the Rabbit admitted to have spent the entirety of that night admiring the Full Moon, as it was preparing some magical medicines from the herbs it had collected from the surrounding area.

Still, the Rabbit warned the Unicorn about trying to step inside the forest, where it would have found something. Not what it was looking for, but what he needed to find.

The Unicorn, hearing those cryptic words, decided to follow its advice. After all, with no one else awake to help it, what could it have done?

At the entrance of the forest, it noticed someone staring at him with a curious smile. It was a bird, a Night Falcon to be precise, peeking through its small nest.

As the Night Falcon was welcoming the Unicorn inside, it decided to ask the bird about the horn. However, the avian admitted to be too shy to even see what is going on in the valley, so it barely understood what happened. Still, someone did warn the bird about sending a special creature inside.

Before the young Unicorn could even ask what did the Night Falcon mean, someone else approached the other creatures. It was a Deer, an old Deer, looking as much in a hurry as the Unicorn was.

The Deer, with no hesitation, explained that, in order for the special event to happen, the two of them had to reach the Boulder of a Thousand Horns, in the middle of the forest. As such, it showed the way to the Unicorn, as they both walked across the trees, under the shiny moonlight.

After a few minutes, the old Deer and the young Unicorn had both made it to a place where a tall rock, as wide as ten of the surrounding trees, was standing. There, many horns were placed, all belonging to ancestors of the Deer.

Indeed, it explained to the Unicorn that, whenever an important day was about to begin, every Unicorn would lose its horn, for it had to be replaced with one of those Deer horns. It was a signal, part of the ritual to indicate that the Unicorn was now ready to fulfil its destiny. However, no one had ever explained that to the young Unicorn, hence it was not prepared.

The Deer, yet, did not seem to be bothered. After all, the Sun had yet to rise, so there was still time. It gently woke up a Monkey, resting on the other side of the boulder. The Monkey was aware of how to perform the magic ritual to attach the horn on the Unicorn's head, so it hopped on the Deer's back, as they all ran back into the valley.

There, the Rabbit welcomed all three of them with joy. All those hours spent collecting the herbs were not in vain, as they were essential for the ritual. As such, they all stood in silence, as the Monkey attached some of the herbs on the end of the horn, while others were put on the Unicorn's forehead. After a few minutes, the new horn was ready, and, once the Monkey had removed all the herbs, it seemed as though it had always been there.

A few moments passed when the first rays of sunlight emerged, and they hit the horn, which reflected them on the ground. The ritual had worked.

Jumping around with joy, the Unicorn was thankful to all the other beings, as it readily began to run towards the other end of the valley.

The beginning of a new era was upon everyone. Flowers blossomed, birds chirped, animals sang. The Rabbit and the Monkey cried with pride, as the Night Falcon decided to overcome its fear and soar across the sky.

Only the old Deer seemed saddened by that event, for its duty was now over.

Still, as the young Unicorn warned about it, everyone was waiting for what was going to happen, now that there was the chance to start anew. Happiness had surrounded the valley.

An Italian university student who loves to learn, because every moment is worth knowing for. https://www.tumblr.com/blog/fabianocolucci https://www.instagram.com/fabiano.colucci/

Rudy | Catarina Maiolo

Lukas via Pexels

This is not about you.

Decades ago, my maternal grandfather Rodolfo laid down tracks for the railroad — in the summer, in the winter, in the bitter-biting Chicago cold.

He would come home chilled through to the bone some nights, so frozen he wouldn't even relinquish his coat. When he did, there was a ritual:

My grandmother would pour a measure of his favorite blackberry wine into a little plastic cup: yellow and transparent as stained-glass Christmas stars, the perfect size for a child's grasping hands. He would take it and he would drink, until the alcohol sailed down his throat and settled like warm sunbursts at the core of him. Only then could he shrug off his coat, and his day. Only then could he return to the land of the living. *Anabasis*, it's called. Return from the

underworld. *Persephone,* come back to life.

I have sipped from that cup, in an apartment that looked like a jungle, in a neighborhood called the *Back of the Yards*, the sort of place that inspired *The Jungle* — or its writer, at the very least. History adorned in its walls, the history of twelve children, the history of *family* — a

sprawling indoor tree, both improvident and impossible in its excess; rainbow-bright caged parrots I used to believe were real; varnished wooden mariachis; stairs slanted above a laundromat, too tall for little legs and no grandfather to lift me up them. Because by the time I could stand and climb, he was gone. Only the cup remained. So I drank from it, in communion, like the wine that warmed him from the inside out, the wine that allowed him to take off his coat and feel like a person again.

The same wine I'd planned to give to *you*.

Cheap wine, too sweet, my favorite. Such an easy exchange. Four dollars for my history. Four dollars for my family. Bottles wasted on shelves in supermarkets; all I wanted to do was keep you warm. My hug in a glass. Tipping down your throat, in your belly, my ancestors in a sip. *This is the blood of Christ.* This is my blood, too.

But you didn't want it. You didn't want me. Love bubbling out of me, bursting at my precious unzipped seams, the richness and pigment of blackberry wine. You're the only one who's ever refused.

How hard is that — Merry *fucking* Christmas?

The apartment is sold now. The yellow cup is gone. My grandfather held me as a child, he must have. I don't remember holding him. I just remember holding you.

Perhaps you've taken those trains. Walked over the tracks he touched. I hope so. It would make me feel better. See the tracks at least, if you can't try the *Manischewitz*.

The man my mother loved the most — yes, more so even than her husband — was him. She tells me I inherited his auburn hair. She says this with such bittersweet dreaminess, such heart-rending nostalgia. She tells me his cheeks tickled pink when she presented him with her ultrasound. Twins, like he was. Me and my sister. How he loved my mother, his youngest daughter, his last of twelve. How she loved him.

Like a president had died, she tells me of his funeral. A pillar of his community. He helped build the neighborhood church, worked on carnival rides, threw Tex-Mex parties — bruised his fingers, froze his bones. He was one of those good, upstanding men you hear about — well, *heard* about. Not anymore. They've gone extinct, I think. I don't know anyone like that. I used to think you were one. I certainly wanted you to be.

That was unfair of me, I know now. You are just you. And that's always been enough.

But I wanted you to be to me what he was to my grandmother, and to my mother. *Beloved*. I wanted my mother to meet you. I wanted her to *adore* you. She would have. How could she not? I did.

Her on the phone at your apartment, worried for me, do you remember? The closest she got to meeting you, her echo a tinny voice while I listened, telling me to be safe. I can't remember if I shed a tear in your shower, but it was a close thing. Couldn't get the water to turn off, or the sink to drain. Remnants of your stubble on the tile. No tissues. You don't cry? Or perhaps you don't wipe your tears away. Perhaps you simply let them fall.

Beautiful, wild mane of hair, thick hands and fingers, broad enough to encompass me. Sleeping beside you was like sharing a bed with a tame lion. Apartment like a shoebox, barely big enough for your cat — I don't know how it fit you.

It fit me, though. Pillowed on your chest. The first man I have slept beside. I didn't sleep at all, though. I absorbed your warmth like wine. And I didn't sleep a wink.

You had a table in your apartment that looked just like my grandfather's. Glass panels I used to sit underneath, panels the size of grandchildren, the size of plates filled with *tamales* and the hope for seconds, and thirds. Beautiful red ornaments I remember on the tree in December. So grand, they looked. I wanted to look at them forever. *Merry Christmas.*

I say my grand*father*. But in my memory, the apartment was only ever inhabited by my grandmother. Too young to remember his wine, or his twin, or his auburn hair.

But *oh*, I remember her.

She would sit me on her lap and call me *mija*. Everything smelled like mold. A bathroom so small you could barely turn around in it. Thirty miles in a car, my father in his rusted purple van I spilled ink in the backseat of, bundling up three little children, taking us through space and time to the jungle in the *Back of the Yards*: crunching gravel parking lot, a bribed attendant, us clambering up all those stairs to my grandmother wreathed in *black*.

After he died, she wore black. Every day, every night. Jet-black hair she made my uncle take her to weekly appointments to maintain, black shoes, black creased pants, black button-down shirt, and — because she was that sort of woman — red lipstick.

Car ride, gravel, stairs, jungle, *mija*. Black hair, black shoes, black pants, black shirt.

Each visit the same. Every birthday, every Christmas, every '*just came to say hello.*'

Car ride, gravel, stairs, jungle, *mija*. Black hair, black shoes, black pants, black shirt.

A decade of mourning without a color palette.

But then came spring. Then came a car ride, gravel, stairs, jungle, *mija*. Then came black hair, black shoes, black pants, black shirt —

With white flowers.

A polyester pattern, like a particularly macabre vacation shirt. I didn't know what to make of it. But it stuck with me. It seemed significant.

Our next visit, much of the same: Car ride, gravel, stairs, jungle, *mija*. Black hair, black shoes, black pants, black shirt —

White flowers.

As if she knew she was going to see him again.

'*Together in Paris,*' proclaimed a movie we watched — *Anastasia* with my head in your lap, while they two — him and her — sat together in *paradise*.

A summer funeral; prayers at camp. I cried. A decade without her soulmate. A decade of black shoes.

God, how terrifying to love someone that much. God, how I wanted that with you.

Because that's what love is, to me:

White flowers.

A bouquet of white roses I imagined in my hands. I never indulged in this fantasy as a child, like many girls do. I couldn't envision walking down the aisle — all powdered cheeks, all pressed lace — to meet a faceless man.

But *you*. I imagined it with you. The aisle. The dress. Your smile. A future. You turned your head once, I can't remember where, and the light hit your hair and for a second it looked white. I had the future in my grasp and it shined like roses.

Beautiful idiot, a phrase you introduced me to once. Should have known you were talking about you. Should have known you were talking about me.

I would have been a good wife. Would have mourned you for a decade like her. Maybe longer, even. Black is a small sacrifice for eternity.

But I don't want that aisle or those flowers. Well, I do. God, do I want an '*I do.*' God, do I want a love as deep as roses, as *Manischewitz*, as a wardrobe that looks like death.

But not yours. I don't want your kisses now, but I do want your hugs. I don't want your body, but I do want your mind. Friendship is such a devastating thing to take away from someone. *Bereft* does not contain the horror of a scar in my heart. Maybe *katabasis* does. That

means *falling.* It means packing my wounds like meat, Upton Sinclair couldn't have predicted this. Who knew ten months could leave such an impression? Feet on hardwood, pencils pressing on pads. Frozen mariachi smiles. A decade of black hair dye.

I think I might love you forever. *Manischewitz* leaking out of me — not romantic, but the kind of love that has nowhere to go, that doesn't demand kisses or touches, only time. The sand I still find in my bookbag, remnants of our days at the beach. The ghost of hugs you gave me, the tacky warmth of your skin. The painting you did, back in our summer of endless promise. The kind of love that comes from fruit, from fruitfulness, from family, from four dollars. Blackberries reaching toward sunlight. A bottle of wine at Christmastime.

Of course it's about you.

It's always been about you.

Rudy, white flowers.

Catarina—25, MBA. Hopeless romantic. Flowery writer, vociferous bibliophile, uninspired graphic designer, vituperative cryptocurrency investor. I collect Yu-Gi-Oh! cards and phone screenshots.

Why Must They Behave Like Such Animals? | Stephanie Meador

Lucy Southall via Pexels

I saw a doe today
She trod the fine line
That runs along the forest's edge
Where wildflowers cease
And water-hogging sod sits
Perhaps she ventured solo
To the outskirts of the human zoo
Or other deer waited just beyond the brush
To hear her recount the peculiar nature
Of the bipedal neighbors
Creatures so quick to bring
her brothers to his knees
Creatures so quick
To lodge a bullet
in whom they please

Stephanie is a recent graduate of the University of Central Arkansas. Her work has been published by 501 Life Magazine, The Vortex Magazine of Literature and Fine Art, Reedsy, and Haunted Words Press.

Heteropessimism / To all the friends I made in my twenties | Laura K. Wallace

Lars Mai via Pexels

Heteropessimism

you promised me heartbreaking works of staggering genius.
you told me everything was illuminated.
you promised me freedom, purity, and corrections.

you promised no more virgin suicides, no more marriage plots, no more rules of attraction.

we'd be on the road, in the post office,
eating ham on rye.
we'd measure time in fight clubs, lullabies, white noise, and
by the evening redness in the west.

you promised me
only revolutions, inherent vice, infinite jest.

you told me
they would know our velocity,
that we'd feel it all,
extremely loud
and incredibly close.

To all the friends I made in my twenties

Sometimes–albeit rarely–but especially when one is young, Revelry is the verso face of misery and Terror.
–Jordy Rosenberg, Confessions of the Fox

sing to me of candy-colored years–
all those stumblings are sepia now.
I want to write. I want to call.
I scroll instead.

how many likes does it take to say
I see you;
I need you
to see me
like you used to
but not like that, like now,
like you'd see me
if you saw me now.

have we grown or just kept going?

I was all sad-girl stammer,
shy and shambolic, phony, frenetic,
sultry shutterbug,
camera shy (except when alone).
gruff and untethered now
I float
more like a leaf than a balloon
those ties somehow impossible to fully sever.

here I am in the Texas sun,
there you are in
Utah. New Orleans. Chicago.
New York. Portland. Minneapolis
that fabled bay I'll never deserve
but you just TOOK.

first thoughts aren't always best thoughts,
but revisions
aren't always improvements.

moments come unconnected.
pearls don't stay on the string
but scatter
like pool balls at the break.
we disperse
like stars or planets after the big bang
throws us all into orbit
but gravity–
cheesy as this metaphor is–
holds us in place
keeps space in between but
moves us in relation to each other.

Laura K. Wallace, AKA Lola or Wally, is a bookseller/recovering academic in Austin. this is their first poetry publication. insta and twitter: @lolaleviathan https://tinyletter.com/feelingofgaze

I | Peter Richardson

Serena Koi via Pexels

I.

There cowed deep
A mouse
Part inside out our landlords cat
Shoulder deep to the toe
Viscera bleeding into the soul

Peter Richardson (they/them) is a happenstance of meat and energy. Peter is mostly silent, uncomfortable with touch & full of love. Other labels for them are synesthete, ace, enby. @muddyfox50

If You Wanna Be a Hustler | Kevin Sanchez

Reynaldo #brigworkz Brigantty via Pexels

———Don't flex——————
just say get on my level
stay on the grind
working those two jobs
no days off

no insurance
no time with your kids
———Don't flex—————
just take that gym pic
caption it with a muscle emoji
pick up that extra shift
when someone says *I'm tired*
————————Flex—————
Tell them you don't get days off
————————Flex—————
Say *I'm built different*
——Be—Built——Different—
Tell them it's for the family
you never get to see

if you wanna be a hustler
break yourself apart like a bill
& then try to spread the change
far out enough to be happy

Kevin Sanchez graduated from the University of Arizona with a B.A in English and Creative Writing. He is currently a high school English teacher in Tucson, Arizona, writing in his free time.

trompe-l'oeil | Aysha Mahmood

Natali Wonkaz via Pexels

I'm black brushstrokes on canvas,
a shade shy of a feverish confession
but a tone bold enough to
remember the ruse
when a crowd approaches.

I blur into a bruised blue,
gush into a gratifying green,
and morph into

a yellow that pours
blinding lightness
into a crowd,
who is too distracted to discover
I'm black brushstrokes on canvas.

Aysha Mahmood is a Pakistani and Dominican writer based in Connecticut. She is the editor of a nonprofit, and her writing has appeared in Huffpost, Teen Vogue, and Nylon. IG: @ayshamahmood93!

Buc-ee Incarnate | Lauren Murphy

via Lauren Murphy

find me @foil.character on Instagram

Death Renga | David Brunson

veeterzy via Pexels

— after Van Gogh's Ghost Paintings

I dream a koan
a grove of olive trees boughs
swaying no angels

here fruit falling from branches
words falling beyond language

is this Eden or
the pain of Gethsemane
your olive trunks guard

a wooden silence you burned
the canvas anointed those

trees with fire named
all that nothing *my master*
piece and then you left

David M. Brunson's work has appeared in Copper Nickel, ANMLY, Booth, and elsewhere. He is the translator of A Scar Where Goodbyes Are Written (LSU Press 2023). https://twitter.com/David_M_Brunson

The Preservatioinist | Whitney Trang

NEOSiAM 2021 via Pexels

They called me a cruel monster for what I did. But I know I am the heroine.

His honey eyes opened to a demonic angel's face hovering above him.

"NO!" Warm red lips he once used to kiss me with gentle love, turned harsh, cold and blue. Golden hair surrounding his heart shaped face flew into the stars scattered on the darkest of nights. His plump cheeks grew hollow as skin and muscle wasted away.

She left us worse than she found us and I could do nothing.

For beauty gave way to reckless desire and the ultimate price paid.

I double majored in English and Communication at UCSB. You can find me on Twitter @wctwrites.

cruel intentions: | dre levant

Markus Spiske via Pexels

a) thorn embedded in your palm
when you cup my cheek)

dre levant has a fierce love for writing, their cat sochi, and veggie subway sandwiches.

@drethepiper instagram & twitter

Frostborn | Aaron Roberts

via Pixabay

I'm going to die.

To say that this thought suddenly hit me would be a lie: I think had always lingered there, deep in the recesses of my subconscious. Covered under the primary sensations, the physical. The roaring of the wind within my ears. The slow numbing of my fingers. I buried the feeling under my attempts to survive. The relentless shivering. The need to find shelter, the desperation to drive the freezing away as my limbs fell prey to its embrace.

But now, as the ice's grip had carved its way into my very core, I found myself forced to finally acknowledge it—*I'm going to die*.

Out here in the wretched frost-lands. I was alone, far from anyone and anything I ever known, abandoned and left to die. Forsaken. My remains would probably amount to nothing more than food for the polar bears...Or worse...

Finally, after walking for as long as I could, I finally made the decision I never thought I'd make. Closing my eyes, I sunk backwards and sank, or collapsed, into the ground. Again, that thought swam across my conscious mind, above all the

physical pain. There was no way I was going to survive this ordeal. So why bother? I wasn't going to waste my last moments trying to work up a sweat in this wasteland, anyway. That same thought was still etched into my brain.

I'm going to die.

Throughout my entire life, death always seemed to be that one, elusive certainty. The one fact that lingered in the far reaches of mankind's collective unconsciousness, always there, but eternally intangible. I still remember the day it took my brother, Ichabod: I was a boy, then, caught in the ever-present euphoria of youth. Back then, when everything tinged with an exotic, exciting glow. It claimed him quick—the cold grasp of that frozen lake had laid claim on him before Mother or Father could react. It dragged him down, its waters filling his lungs, strangling them, depriving him of oxygen. Striking him down at the prime days of his youth. His life taken from him by nature's chill.

Huh, just like me.

I felt the corners of my mouth erupt into a wide smile at the thought, and a new sensation, a warmth, spread itself up from my lungs. *Laughter*. I doubled over, savoring the fleeting moment of rare, blissful joy as it erupted, through the burning in my limbs as they succumbed to the frost. Had Ol' Ichabod experienced the same thing in his last, fleeting moments? The thought had to be the most hilarious thing in the world.

"Are you happy now, Ichy?" The words escaped me. At this point, etiquette didn't seem to matter. "Father always said we were two peas in a pod!"

Death had claimed him, and now He had His sights set on me. I closed my eyes. There, in that sheltered space, I could feel a lifetime pass by. The time after Ichabod. All those days we spent in the church afterwards, after Father made a promise to the Universe, and he dedicated his time to that small brick building. My father found religion that day, when the reality of death stared him down under the veil of Ichabod's corpse. I remembered the pain in his eyes, all those days he spent in the pews. I think he clung to religion to escape it, the reality that all of mankind's paths led, ultimately, to that same end. *What would Father say now…?*

"Gabriel, do you believe in God?"

I still remember the time when I doubted if there was an answer to the question, back when I first started at the Academy. Even there, the finality of death seemed to linger in my classmates. All those questions, discussions on philosophy, science; all pondering the answer to that question. It was the reason I sought out on this journey. To find the answer in the depths of the wilderness. And yet here I was, sitting here, staring at my eyelids, my ears burning from the cutting wind, about to finally understand what it meant to die, to meet whatever maker lied beyond… Those pompous bastards at the Academy will certainly be jealous that I know the answer and they don't! It serves them right.

Of all the travails this wretched place had wrought, that was the one bright side: That ultimate epiphany, born through the frost. As I felt the finally wisps of my physical surroundings begin to fade, I felt myself growing closer to that one, eternal truth. I had tried to find God, and now He was going to find me.

And still, the earth would rage on.

Aaron has always loved the process of creative writing for as long as he can remember. His ultimate goal is to become an author.

The Complexities of Being Black and from the South | Arianna Haynes

Mike Delima via Pexels

I love being from the South. The land is so beautiful and rich, and I couldn't imagine being from anywhere else. I love how kind people can be; the way everyone seems to smile back at you and how all your neighbors remember not only your name but also the names of your dogs and your little cousin that likes to spend the weekend at your house. I love the way everyone says "good morning" during your walk and how even the squirrels seem to greet you as you pass. I love the sudden summer storms; the way the rain smells. The way the thunder sounds. The way the wind rips across your face as you run home from the park, trying not to get caught in the downpour. I love the food and the creeks and the forest and the excitement I feel when there's a wild rabbit in my backyard. These are things you can't get anywhere else. At least not all together.

I also hate being from the South. I hate the way white people stare at my family and I when we're the only Black people in a restaurant. I hate the looks my white friends get when they're hanging out with me, a dark stain on their otherwise pure image. I hate the anxiety that ensues when being pulled over. The way the entire car silently keeps our hands in our laps and the way we *yes ma'am* and *no sir* the officers; perfectly submissive as an act of survival. I hate the names I've been called. *Mutt. Nigger. Monkey. Black bitch.* I also hate the way I've been called more beautiful than my darker skinned sisters. *Light skinned princess. Pretty curls. Brown beauty.* I hate that my people are still seen as less than by so many.

Recently, one of my professors emailed me and told me that she was surprised by the way I claim the South as my home despite the hardships that I've had to face as a result. And, honestly, I've come to the conclusion that that land is my birthright, like it is for so many others. My Native ancestors are the original cultivators and protectors of that land, and I feel it is my responsibility to return and take care of it as well. To uphold their values and recite their wisdom. My Black ancestors were brought to the land to continue that cultivation and protection. Out of their hardship, they created something so wonderful and beautiful: what is now known as the Gullah Geechee Nation, with our own spiritual practices, language, and culture.

I think this is something a lot of Black people, specifically from the South, have to come to terms with at some point in our lives. On one hand we drive through the country and wonder how many of these trees our ancestors were left to hang and rot from, and it can be difficult to live with those reminders always in our peripheral. On the other hand, the soil — quite literally — contains our blood, sweat, and tears and will always call us back to it, no matter how far away from it we are. So, yes. The South is my home and, yes, a lot of the South also hates me. But I refuse to let the descendants of those who stole, sold, and slaughtered my people put a damper on the joy I feel when I'm back on my ancestral lands.

Born in South Carolina, Arianna Haynes is a 22 year old senior at Hawaii Pacific University, majoring in English and minoring in Writing and Women and Gender Studies. Instagram: @the.ari.michelle

Raindrop | Emma Ramirez

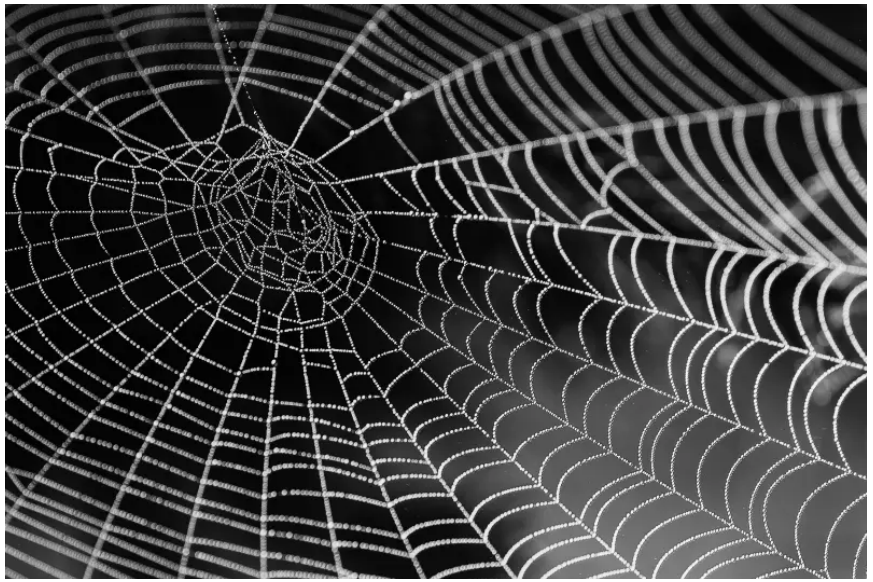
via Pixabay

I wish I were a raindrop
how beautiful it must be to be a minuscule object
one that no one sees and cannot be differentiated from the rest
but experiences a freedom that humans could only ever dare to dream of
a freedom that is so quick yet exhilarating as it plummets from its vast ecosystem
racing through the sky and basking in a moment they will never experience again
because as soon as they slam into the ground it is like they cease to exist
they disperse into tiny molecules and disappear amongst the rest

how lovely is it to be something and then nothing
I wish I were a raindrop

Emma Ramirez is a writer and director who explores Filipino-American and LGBTQIA+ identities within her work. She has written multiple short films and episodes for radio and is working on a novel.

Surrogation | Nathan King



via Pixabay

The spider arrived a week after Daniel left.

Small, with tiny barb-like hairs peppering its body. Light brown, speckled black.

Kristiana knew. It resonated deep, like a new bone implanted between her ribs, or maybe one taken and molded into something else. Undeniable. The spider was Daniel's, somehow came from him. Came from *her*.

The first time she saw it, she was frightened. Kris never liked spiders, thought nothing should have so many legs. But this one seemed gentle. Curious.

It scuttled back and forth beside her sink, eight beady eyes trained on her, glinting in the dim yellow light of her apartment.

She approached. Her fingers trembled. The spider lifted a single leg to rest against the supple flesh of her pointer finger. A whisper of touch.

Kris would normally locate something sturdy and crush the bug. But this night, she thought of Daniel, of his reaction if he found out she killed it. This was her ticket back to him. She trapped it beneath a glass and slid an unopened credit card offer beneath, lifting the spider to the window. It skittered into the cool, turned back to her, and went on its way.

Nearly a week elapsed before Kristiana encountered another spider. She thought it must be a different spider altogether; it was larger than the one she'd released.

But much like before, it teetered back and forth on the worn countertop, eyes volcanic black and locked on her. Longing. Kris laughed and felt an odd wave of affection. She mimicked the spider's innocent zig zag. A novel instinct purred through her, the desire to nurture. But she had no idea how to care for a spider.

Again, she carefully captured the creature. It seemed to allow this, remembered her care in its previous release. Kris sighed as it parachuted down through the air, at first hanging by a gossamer thread, and then melting away into darkness.

She began thinking about her spider at work. Mindlessly scanning groceries, eyes glazed over. She wondered what it would be like to have eight of them, eyes and legs, how fast she could bag for the customers, how much of the world she would see.

Kristiana was not an observant person. It was Daniel's perpetual criticism, how she seemed to ignore their sign for the exit on the highway, how she missed even the most blatant social cues. How she could never understand what he truly wanted from her, and by the time she figured it out, it was too late.

Not her fault, but too late all the same.

She'd only seen the spider twice and already she felt a warmth that had been missing from Daniel, from his touch, for a very long time.

One night she returned to her dusty apartment and was met by an even larger spider. It had returned, and it had doubled in size, big as her palm.

She was overcome by the urge to call Daniel.

"Has it visited you, too?" she'd ask. "It's half yours, after all. Don't you see? It's the eyes. The hair is the same color as yours, the curls on your head, the tuft over your sternum. It has my legs: spindly, never quite smooth. You see it, don't you?"

Its eyes were large enough for Kristiana to see herself distorted in the gleaming darkness. It came back. She'd wanted it to.

She reached for the phone. This spider was what Daniel wanted, everything she could never give him. Something to call theirs. Something she finally noticed.

She dialed his cell, hands twitching, the spider studying her. It rang twice and went to voicemail. Daniel might never be ready to talk.

Kris found a clear bowl and set it down over the spider. It complied when she slid a Thai takeout menu beneath wiry legs.

And then it was gone again and she wished nothing more for the spider to turn and leap back through the window. But she couldn't protect it. She would only end up hurting it—her, she decided—and she couldn't accept something so precious into her life only to see it ruined.

She woke the next morning to an unusual weight on her chest. Kristiana cracked open her eyes and came face to face with an enormous tarantula. She lay still, the spider rising and falling with her breath.

Kris looked into the spider's eyes and saw Daniel so obviously reflected. Though the shape of her made Kris shiver, there was also beauty. She carried both of them in her body. Proof they had once been in love. All the parts of them combined and multiplied, limbs and eyes and love to the second power.

The spider crawled into her palm, legs hanging off the sides of her hand. A blessing against her flesh.

Kris swung her legs out of bed and brought her to the window. She clung to Kris' hand and shivered with the cool breeze. Kris prodded her back and coaxed her onto the ledge, then closed the window with a remorseful sweep. For a moment the spider rested her front legs against the glass, then turned and was gone.

Kristiana crawled into bed and pulled her legs to her chest, her two legs, and she cried.

"I'm not coming back." Daniel's voice was a bone saw on her fragile eardrums.

"Please," she begged, "I can't do this without you."

"Kris, we both saw those tests results. Whatever this is, it isn't mine, and it definitely isn't yours. You're losing it."

When Kris saw the spider once more she had grown again, a glorious, furry arachnid with a body the size of a kitten. She sat in the middle of Kris' living room, bathed in dusk gloom.

Kristiana sniffled and set down her keys. She withdrew the sharpest knife from her drawer and made an incision, a lurid smile across her abdomen. She lay down in a pool of her own blood. Her spider crawled near.

She waited.

Nathan King is a recent graduate of Sarah Lawrence College's MFA program. Their short fiction has appeared in LEVEE. Find them on Twitter @nathan___king (3 underscores!).

Beak Bargain | Will Schmit

Craig Adderley via Pexels

In the Ray's parking lot a Door Dash driver's bag ripped open and a dozen gyros (?) rolled into the handicap space while a plaza security guard stepped around a fella blowing chunks to retrieve a runaway grocery cart. Crows know where to shop

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Will Schmit is a Midwestern folk poet transplanted to the redwood forests of Northern California. Will's most recent recording Fix My Car can be streamed at Spotify, iTunes and at schmitbooks.com

Resplendence | Michael Emmanuel

Marta Wave via Pexels

the light shines but we do not heal. in the village
no one skips a meal to gossip about the losses, or call
the *missing ones* a thing, or edit the tenses behind
their name. grief is a journey & i, a fatigued traveler,
wrestling a mental plummet. it was yesterday & she
was fifteen, brown-skinned & blossoming
with ambition. offer me a moment of silence:
it doesn't compensate for the absence,
but i'll manage. the two things you learn about living:
(i) nothing escapes the wingspan of light, except the body;
(ii) darkness fades in a blink, light too.
but what do i know about living to dispense survival tips.
i, living by the swing of a wall clock. our uncle,
self-appointed therapist & leader of a hopeful bunch,
recommends confessions. repeat:

the light is bright & full of wholeness,
the light is bright & full of wholeness.
i am deserving of wholeness.
i am deserving of wholeness. see?

Michael Emmanuel is a creative writer from Lagos. His works have appeared in The Shore, trampset, Ake Review, Jalada Mag, Afritondo, and other places. He is on Twitter @mikey_emmanuel.

Political Sicko | Lilian McCarthy

Anna Shvets via Pexels

This is a deeply personal story about how the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) ruined my life. Let it be known that I am a big fan of vaccines—I have many of them and love them all. I also support prescription drugs – again, I am on many of those and they are lifesavers – although I do not support Big Pharma.) I will not be covering the scope of the CDC's horrific failings: see the AIDS epidemic (see this letter from Act Up San Francisco in 1988 https://aep.lib.rochester.edu/node/49111), the COVID pandemic, etc. No, my beef with the CDC is, as I noted, personal and specific.

There is a silent and fatal pandemic sweeping the US and overseas. It is a tick-borne illness called Lyme Disease (Borellia). I, unlike the average person, know the mind-numbingly catastrophic effects Lyme and its oft-ignored co-infections can have. I am living it. The CDC, however, thinks I am faking.

The first time I was diagnosed with Lyme Disease, I was 12 years old. I grew up in Boston and on Cape Cod in Massachusetts, an area known for its massive tick population. I knew what Lyme was before I was diagnosed. It was a frequent occurrence in my life for people to find ticks on themselves and go on a quick preventative course of antibiotics if the tick tested positive for Lyme or if they had a certain rash(https://www.bbc.com/news/health-47198019). My diagnosis

did not fit either of these criteria. Rather, I had recently suffered a traumatic brain injury, which severely weakens the nervous system and thus the immune system, and when I took a test for Lyme, I had a few markers for the Lyme infection. In fact, according to the CDC, I did not have enough markers to warrant a diagnosis based on the tests; rather, my diagnosis came from the inconclusive tests and my suggestive symptoms.

Fast forward a decade. Yes, ten years. I am 22. I have spent time in a mental hospital. I am on psychiatric drugs. I have such severe migraine disease I almost dropped out of college. I am unable to exercise due to fatigue and had to quit my elite college sport. I have gained weight and lost muscle mass. I can barely work part time. I give myself a shot of anti-CGRP medicine once a month (migraine preventative drug) and I get 40 shots of Botox in my face, head, and neck every 12 weeks. I have a severely limited diet. I developed obstructive and central sleep apnea. I have extreme GI issues. I am not getting better.

I was fed up and hopeless. Doctor after doctor had no idea what to do with me. Most of them told me to do intense exercise three times a week to lose weight and that would fix me! As many spoonies (https://www.patientsrising.org/what-is-spoonie/) have experienced, my tests all came back "normal." No iron deficiency, no thyroid issues, no endometriosis, no Ehlers-Danlos, no more Lyme disease (ostensibly), and the list goes on. But I knew something was wrong. So I went back to when everything started deteriorating–Lyme and my concussion. I decided it was time for a Hail Mary. Thanks to @tickbootcamp on Instagram and the Global Lyme Alliance, I was able to find a Lyme-literate doctor close by.

I had been right all along. Not only did I still have Lyme (almost definitely the same infection I had when I was 12, including at least one more infectious tick bite), I had two other severe tick-borne illnesses I had never heard of; babesiosis and bartonellosis. A host of other issues came to the surface as well. Finally, finally, finally, all my symptoms made sense.

Back to the CDC—this will get technical. When Lyme was discovered in the late 20th century, the CDC set the standard that in order to test officially positive, five "bands" had to be labeled as "reactive" on the Western Blot test. The Western Blot is taken, in fact, to confirm the results of the first test your doctor gives you, called an ELISA. However, ELISA tests have terrible sensitivity and only give accurate results 35-50% of the time in early cases, which is when most people test. Yes, you read that correctly. Try to understand how insane that is; you might as well flip a coin if you have certain symptoms to decide whether or not you have a possibly fatal infection. (https://www.columbia-lyme.org/diagnosis)

The CDC is doing nothing about the negligent standard of ELISA test, which, once again, has the accuracy of a flip of a coin. Imagine if that's how accurate MRIs were, meaning brain cancer could only be diagnosed with a 35-50% accuracy rate. They also have not reworked their requirement for five reactive bands on the Blot test either, despite the fact that hundreds of Lyme researchers, doctors, organizations, and patients (like myself) have proved that 3 bands is adequate. In fact, you could theoretically test negative on the ELISA but still have five or more reactive bands—but it wouldn't matter because doctors take the ELISA as gospel. From 2011 to May of 2021, I only ever had three reactive bands, and my ELISA test was always fairly inconclusive. In fact, once I started treatment this year, four bands started reacting because the spirochetes (Lyme bacteria) were exiting my tissues after being buried there for ten years, flooding my bloodstream and showing up on the Blot. Yet, I still do not pass the CDC's litmus test.

Because of this, most of my doctors and medications are not covered by insurance. I have spent thousands and thousands of dollars since my fateful and horrifying diagnosis less than a year ago trying to get back on top of things (I say back on top as if I had a life before Lyme and its little sneaky friends, when really I was only a child). Let me be crystal clear; if I was not able to afford this treatment thanks to my family and how we have unfairly benefited from capitalism, I would be dying soon. The bacteria would have continued to eat into my nervous system, brain, and spinal cord. I possibly would have become paralyzed (something I have shockingly avoided so far). My digestion would have continued to fail. I likely would have developed a severe auto-immune disease, of which I am already on the verge. I would not have been able to advance in my career. I probably wouldn't have been able to live independently anymore, which is already difficult and only possible again thanks to my family's financial resources. And did you know that if you are on disability insurance and get married, you lose your benefits?

This is why it is just about impossible to be disabled and not support universal healthcare. It is the core of why I am a socialist. It is why, when the CDC and the Biden administration tells us we only need to quarantine for five days after testing positive and acknowledges the standard is changing simply to save the economy because everyone will get COVID eventually anyway, I cry, then laugh, then scream (https://thehill.com/policy/healthcare/587553-cdc-comes-under-fire-for-new-covid-19-guidance). They are making a mockery out of disabled people who, as always, bear the brunt of their negligence, who are stuck without treatment for half of their lives while diseases eat their brains and destroy their futures, who are stuck at home because the public don't care if they die, who cannot afford the medically-accurate non-covered treatments and die as a result. The CDC ruined my life, then radicalized me, and I am only 23.

Lilian McCarthy (she/they) is a queer and disabled academic living in Dublin, Ireland.

Flawda | Louis Boyd

Ray Bilcliff via Pexels

Growing up in the Deep South, you are born surrounded by ghosts. Now it's not something that is even debated or spoken about in certain company, just a known fact. You can't throw a stone in a crowd and not hit someone who hasn't seen or heard something, or at least knows a first-hand account of someone else's experience. I, personally, love ghost stories, and I don't mean the manufactured ones that Hollywood drums up to sell tickets, but the real ones. The stories that are told over cups of brown liquor at cookouts when the sun has dropped to a sliver on the horizon and all the food is ate. When all the babies are sleep in one bed and the older kids sit on porches under yellowed lights, the smell of banked charcoal, citronella candles, cigarette smoke and Budweiser hanging in the air like a perfume, giving the night an ethereal quality. Like for just this little while, your thoughts can bring ideas to action, things that go bump in the night are just outside of your peripheral vision and the stories told from the Great Uncles lips are painted in your mind's eye with such vivid strokes, you'd swear you was watching a movie and just forgot what channel it was on.

Those stories that are ingested in the cool breeze blowing through Spanish moss and palm trees. These are swamp stories, of my few times Great granddaddy, Captain Red, being led into mangrove trees and never seeing daylight again. Or my grandmama, working night shifts as a nurse and having one those turn of the century nuns walk past her in an empty hallway. These are tales of my bloodline, that holds within it unequal shares Mansu Musu and Irish potato farmers. Slave memories that still whisper up from plantations both near and far, that speak to me, DNA deep, even here in the mountain ranges. Flawda stories that still tug on me, still I can hear the calling of the junebugs under the twilight haze, hear crickets playing songs for the frogs and fish to dance to. I can still smell the river, as it winds past the graveyard where my mama lay, I can still feel the grass under my feet. Taste the sweet dates and the bitter bullet fruit fresh off the bush. Flawda stories, full of ghosts both real and imagined and impossible possibilities.

Instagram: Writing4purpose

Twitter: jaytha_griot

My Love | DawnMarie Hawkins

Gabriel Bastelli via Pexels

Just a simple touch
of his hand
had her wanting more.
No man had ever
had her feeling this way.
Every kiss, every touch from him
radiated through her body.
Sending waves of desire,
creating feelings she didn't expect.
Her love for him grew
every time they met.
Loving him was never the plan
but somehow, somewhere, everything changed.
Leaving was the saddest part of
every encounter with him. She
vowed to love him forever, knowing
in her heart it would
never last. But yet, she knew
she was his. Forever.

Poetry lover, romance writer

The Photograph | Aswin Melepatt

Samuel Walker via Pexels

There lived a man, who doesn't like being photographed, who dodged and avoided being filmed. To forbid the whole world to remember him, he evaded every chance, every camera, lens, or even the eyes of his loved ones. Never he visited lands, never met people twice who know his name but constantly tried in vain to erase the idea of him being alive. For he thinks, that if he isn't alive ideally, he isn't ever going to die. When the world saved their beautiful photographs framing, photo composing their immortality, to be remembered and loved for generations and generations, for whom they are and what they represent, to leave a mark on this planet, our hero didn't exactly care what they were thinking. Tired of people's theatre, he burnt all his bridges of bondings.

Our man decided something that you and I shudder to attempt. To be honest, even if others plead with him not to wake up, but sleep on weekends. He affirmed 'Let them snap if they want. I'll mind my own business. Maybe they don't know, I might be a chosen boy.' So just like that, he never cared for a photograph of him ever later. Not even when he felt extremely happy and when he wanted the world to see how much he was satisfied with life. Evolved to be a rebel, he continued living his youth. Stopped caring about the way he looked. Ceased believing in the photographs, even when people died for one. He believed in verses and wrote love letters to the women he loved. And in words and spaces between the sentences, he lived. That made him reach places he had never been to. Back and forth, fantasies, or reality, he dwelled there by following this protocol.

And years sprouted and fell. He still didn't have any pictures taken. While the world cared more to save their treasures, imageries where they showed the world, how much they're happy and thirsty for sex, he found it all null. Nobody tried to understand him nor did they care for him. When everyone is grouped to take a picture, he bends over backward to blur out himself, so as not to get captured, leaving no traces for them to judge. He deleted his photographs from the web, which ensembled his fruitful youth. Why did he stop caring? The whole world wondered. He lost interest in a mere life but he strived for something beyond the 2-d or 3-d spaces in which he has been. He surpassed his whole adult life not taking a tiny blink. Is it just a matter of degrees of freedom?

Now, the oldness clenched him closer. Without denying it, he gracefully embraced. Ten thousand and seventy-seven gammas aroused emitting from him burnt every eye. The town chief and the old king heard about this infamous man. The king announced bounties for capturing the shine of this graceful man who ever lived. Many cameras were positioned at different angles like sniper guns, to kill his grace by their mere lens. They failed to capture when the film got unfocused every time. They couldn't understand that he was a cursed man. Whenever the camera eyes looked at him, he cringes at them so badly, that tears drop out from them and their necks get choked. They tried everything to capture his photograph. Alas! They weren't aware of the curse for they lived in a rational world where curses are fictionalized.

He demanded one day in the morning that, despite his age, he will appear for them when it was time for the world to see him although photographic snipers should be resigned. The king accepted his behest and summoned him to his palace to talk with this man. He walked through the streets with the most gracefulness that the king ever saw in his lifetime. The king adored him with utmost worship.

"Look beyond your damn photograph", advised the man.

"What do you mean, ten thousand and seventy-seven gamma man ?"

"Delete your worthless pictures, break your unclear mirrors, donate your filthy throne and shave your balding head. And, ask yourself for once and real 'who am I ?' ", and

he left the room quickly without continuing further. The old king stood there bamboozled.

And many days later, a foul stench aroused, spreading through the whole city. When the people found its origin, it had been a week already. With the body resting on a sofa, flesh eaten by ants, bones revealed, the gamma man lay peacefully dead near his written love letters, with his half skull revealed. He deceased in his room alone. Finally, the photographic snipers captured his picture. The town forever remembered his photograph phrasing "The man who never surrendered to a photograph. However, death defeated him." The cameras guffawed hysterically from the background, while the old king stood beside with a shaved head.

Aswin Melepatt is an aspiring Indian English writer from Kerala, India. He is a data engineer by profession and loves to travel, read, meditate and have a warm tea.

Basil: A Ghost In The Canvas | Hira Pendleton

Pedro Figueras via Pexels

I was never one to believe in the supernatural. In a way, that hasn't changed. Regardless of which, yesterday, I saw a ghost. An odd way to start an article covering an artist's interview (if this constitutes as one), but believe me, hand on my heart, by the end of it all, everything will make sense.

You all know of the elusive "Basil." I need not say here the vastness of their past body of work, nor the richness and depth of every single piece he had wrought upon this broken world, all of which serving as broken mirrors to our existence. I've written everything there is to be said about them before, including their eventual reception of patronage from Sign Tempore, their shift to digital art,and how it has affected their works, marking a period of monotony, repetitiveness and self-derivativity. It pained me to see yet another artist fall victim to corporatization, and be shackled by the uniform standards of out of touch executives. It ruins art, robs it of flavor, erases the soul.

But recently, something changed.

Their latest piece uploaded on first glance is simply a shattered image composed of numerous shades of black, with "WHO AM I?" etched into its surface in colorless ink, in their signature handwriting echoing that of their text-based works in years past. It imposes, dares us to ask. But to whom it is directed? Us, or Basil? The next sequence of artworks follow a similar existential theme, in many different forms but all incorporate photography altered with advanced editing techniques, giving it a dreamlike quality. Viewing the different photographs, of views inside a childhood home, of strewn about toys, restaurants, blurry visages of people he might've known, it feels like he's depicting the process of remembering, how vague and colored our lenses are when viewing past events.

At least, that's what it looked like on first glance.

An astute reader of this blog had emailed me a zoomed in picture of one image in microscopic detail. Embedded within each pixel, a phrase can be read.

"Is this me?"

That question, in chained repetition, populates the surface under each altered photograph. From corner to corner, edge to edge, it repeats. Ad nauseam. Ad infinitum. That moment, when I first examined that email, a deep uncomfortable feeling rose up in my stomach. I could feel every single strand of hair raise to standing on my neck. It became clear who that "who am I" they asked on that fateful day is for. They have denied every single interview request in the past, but this had to change. As Basil's #1 essayist, who has followed their career since their inception, I had to know. Thus, as you all readers may already know, I posted a public invitation for Basilto "come and have coffee with me."

Wouldn't you know it, within minutes of posting, the burner phone I listed on the invitation rang.

"My agent will meet you at a Starbucks on the address and time listed on the upcoming text. But first, are you sure you want this interview?" The voice on the phone asked. Something didn't sound right. Something about the way they spoke.

"Yes." I answered.

"You may not comprehend, let alone like what you see." The voice added.

"That's what I'm counting on." I replied.

"Understood. I shall send you the details."

After that, the call ended and I received a text with the details of the meeting. It was afternoon, around 4:30 PM, and the text's appointed time of meeting was 6:00 PM. When I arrived at the starbucks, I was greeted with a well-dressed man wearing a black suit, and thin rimmed glasses. He was not Basil, as according to him, Basil's current condition barred them from travel outside of their studio. However, he could take me to them once and I quote "you are ready."

Nothing prepared me for what came next.

After a very comfortable ride in a black luxury sedan, I was taken to what seemed an ordinary apartment building. Guided by the man in black, I approached a seemingly ordinary apartment door.

"Basil is waiting for you inside."

A knock on the door prompted the latch to open. I expected a hand on the other side, but nothing was there. The room

inside was dim. Dusty art supplies; canvasses, paintbrushes, and the like lay in front of paint-stained walls. Bookshelves full of knowledge deprived of touch hid alongside the abandoned artisan tools, meeting the same fate. Cameras from different corners of the room look on, focusing and unfocusing towards me and the room itself. A distinct whirring belonging to a computer's disk drives permeated the room, a sound which I followed till I stood in front of its source. Four towering monoliths clad in black stands, broadcasting a high-pitched low-volume hum, and in the middle, a small screen, with a keyboard, mouse, and on the side, a drawing tablet that gathered dust just like its more analog counterpart.

No heartbeat other than my own was present that day. Instead, a presence beyond my own comprehension greeted me.

A projector's lens above the screen I stood in front of lit up.

Then, a ghost emerged from it, staring at me from the other side.

"Hello." The digital specter greeted me, as what looks to be an approximation of what Basil looked like. Just... a person. Or an approximation of one. A dreadful awe took over me, and I pulled out my notepad.

With that as the cue, the interview began.

"Are you Basil?" I asked my first question. A voice from the electronic aether answered. The very same one on the phone.

"If you are referring to the once 'living' breathing person legally named Basil Hallworth, they're dead. If you are referring to the artist named Basil..." The specter trailed off in the end, and began scrambling like TV static, and the whirring started getting louder.

"Hello?" I asked my second question.

The whirring got louder.

"Are you there?" I asked my third question.

The whirring got louder.

"Basil, are you there?" I asked my fourth.

The whirring got even louder.

"Basil?" I asked my fifth.

Then, a scream pierced the thick fog of white noise emanating from the towers of drives, and the projected specter disappeared, with disjointed light fragments taking its place. A voice, sharp, coarse, like broken glass attempted to vocalize, to answer. The screen under the projector turned on, flashing different images, the very same images that evoked past memories in the artworks I've examined.

"I don't know. I don't know. I don't know."

"Are you alright?"

"I DON'T KNOW."

I smelled something burning, and before I knew it, the whirring stopped and the screen shut down. Everything shut down. I was ushered out not long after by men in black suits, and was driven home. If you are reading this right now, you must have a lot of questions. I know I do. I can theorize all I want but truth be told, I don't think I will ever come close to knowing what happened to Basil Hallworth. However, I can be sure of one thing.

This is the last article I will ever finish.

Hira Pendleton is a writer with an affinity for personal stories set in fantastical worlds. They enjoy indie games and post-emo music. They can be found at instagram: @hira.pen.

In the Midst of a Pandemic | Dani Zhila

cottonbro Vinh via Pexels

The world has created the ultimate placebo:
Pretending the problem is now in the past.
No panacea from eastern or western medicine can compare.

We have replaced consideration with busyness.
Without time to think, we move forward,
Always forward, toward a future we cannot see.

Yet, playing pretend is still only playing.
People continue to be plagued by illness & death
With fewer people to notice, fewer people to care.

Each day passes, only noted by the sun & the moon.
Chug along, continue on.
Change cannot come with no one to beckon it.

Twitter: @DanielleShojaie

Dani Zhila is a medical student and poet. When she is not studying (which is rare these days), Dani is reading, writing, watching baseball, or playing with her dogs.

Let's Talk About My New Coat | Trisha Kostis

outsidethccn dsgn via Pexels

The day our corporate chef announced he was stepping down from his exalted position and relinquishing his title, his tricked out office and coveted parking space to me, I went home and stuffed my chef's pants and skanky grease stained Chef coat into the trash. After 25 years of grinding my fallen arches on punishing cement kitchen floors and herding recalcitrant and semi-sober restaurant employees into submission, I was done cooking for ungrateful customers and falling into bed smelling of fried calamari.

I've spent my whole life in uniform: as an angelic tow-headed Catholic School student, a punk waitress and a goth cook. My "style" was exclusively black, functional and flameproof. A promotion out of the kitchen and into the warm, antiseptic, and serene c-suite felt like a galaxy of Michelin stars.

For once, I needed a wardrobe.

Restaurant folks are not normal people. While delicately weaving pea vines around diver scallops with our fancy tweezers, we serve the public and verbally eviscerate it from the dark corners of our cramped and odorous kitchens. Introverts, social pinheads, addicts, and artists are the nervous system of the dining industry. Kitchens are full of Napoleon Dynamites with sharp knives. It's the perfect hideaway for someone who doesn't like attention. Painfully shy and awkward for most of my life, I didn't use my clothing as much to dress myself as to redact myself. I was perfectly suited for the back of the house.

An executive promotion for a monochromatic 57-year-old woman presented some fashion challenges. I decided to stick to the basic ELLE magazine guidelines for my new ensembles and selected classic pieces that would anchor the cheap shit I planned to buy at the thrift stores. Timeless Chanel inspired blazers and fitted "slacks" made me appreciate my petite five-foot frame, previously a severe hindrance when reaching for the saffron on the top shelf in dry storage. After years of wearing unisex Chef's *bottoms* made of stiff, bulky fabric, slipping into linen trousers too snug for stashing away a porterhouse steak was a revelation.

With most of my new pieces in place, I set my sights on a coat, the decorative fondant of this masterpiece collection. Obsessed with the exhilarating monochromatic couture of *Schitt's Creek* doyenne, Moira Rose, I mined the internet searching for "Moira Rose clothes" and "coats that Moira would wear." After slipping down a Pinterest sink hole that yielded no information about the availability of Moira knock-offs, I googled several versions of "white and black geometric patterns" until a wool stunner jumped out of the cluster of images on my screen. It's promise of "luxury and elegance" at thirty five bucks seemed preposterous. I've spent more than that for a beignet and espresso at the patisserie at the Sunday Market. But the model looked fabulous and returns were free so I decided to risk it.

Now, let's talk about my new coat.

Try to imagine a plushy, wooly winter blanket transformed into a coat and tailored for you by Vera Wang herself and then wear that bitch everywhere. Your coatis a celebrity – Penelope Cruz in *Vanilla Sky* – with an entourage and paparazzi and its own IG. Consider, for a moment, walking down a bustling city street where people would willingly walk into a power pole rather than make eye contact but now, all the eyes are on your coat.

"Love your coat!"

"Wow, that's a coat!"

"Your coat is amazing!"

As an introvert, I wasn't sure how I felt about my coat's whorish behavior. In Seattle, where I live, there are standards and practices for how to avoid human interaction and we all comply. I fully appreciate the guidelines and willingly uphold the status quo. But this coat, well, *she* has an agenda.

She's teaching me. I must be in the right frame of mind before I slip her on; it simply cannot be a reflexive act. Someone will say something. She will get attention.

Women, confused by an article of clothing that can't be worn to summit Mt. Rainer find themselves spontaneously squealing compliments. Men look twice, not sure exactly why, but compelled nonetheless. I must be ready for worship and that's an uncomfortable space for me. Too much of that and I start to believe the admiration is deserved, that I did something to earn such adulation.

I was the young girl who wore peasant blouses to conceal a budding bosom during puberty. I was the pregnant girlfriend who went full muumuu in a futile attempt to look anything but pregnant. As I embarked on a career in restaurants, I understood the unsung brilliance and ease of a nondescript uniform and modified my personal wardrobe to mirror my work clothes. It's kind of amazing what you can get away with when no one notices you.

In the beginning, with her, the attention was so shocking and disarming, that I found myself stammering such inane responses as "it only cost thirty five dollars!" or "I got really lucky with this one, right?!" I'd shake my head in self-recrimination and just feel her judging me for being such a nob. In time, and with practice, I was able to croak a "thank you" and furtively make eye contact.

When I take her out, I'm no longer five feet tall. I tower. When she's wrapped around me, I'm immune to the chill of winter. I'm on fire. When I'm inside her, I am no longer an older woman. I am embryonic. She is magic.

I've patronized the same grocery store for years. I blend in. They know me as the woman who shops a few days a week, quickly, competently dispatching her groceries at the self-checkout, earphones blocking any possibility of conversation. The other day, as rushed customers swarmed the aisles, I waited in line and pretended I had urgent business with my phone. Through the store noise and chatter, I heard, "OMG I love your coat".

I removed my earphones through which I was listening to nothing. The woman, a North Face clad, beanie-wearer beamed at me like I was a Kardashian.

"Thank you!" I shot back, sincerely.

"I think that every time you come in here!" added the store clerk, a woman so dour and perpetually irritated that I believed she may have seen me groping the tomatoes three years ago in the produce aisle and resented me ever since.

"You look so fabulous in that coat – like you were born to wear it!"

I wasn't. But I'm growing into it.

Trisha is a freelance writer living in Seattle. Works can be found in The Independent, Seattle Magazine, and more.

the fine line between self-loving and self-loathing | nat raum

via Co-Star

the fine line between self-loving and self-loathing[1]

you don't have to prove yourself to anyone.

(i'm doing shitty too so i really feel this.)

experiment with tenderness.

(i just like.....want to know when this is gonna stop. not just the missing him but the uncertainty of existing in this world.)

almost touch.

(unfortunately the missing is still a big part of it. i crave stability.)

where do these strange ideas come from?

(this. all of this.)

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[1] this cento is written from Co-Star daily app notifications and excerpts from a group text conversation from July 2020.

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nat raum (b. 1996) is a disabled artist, writer, and genderless disaster from Baltimore, MD. They're the editor-in-chief of fifth wheel press. Find them online: natraum.com/links. ig/twt @gr8earlofhell

RABBITBRUSH BURNED INTO FRESH ASPHALT | Clem Flowers

Quang Nguyen Vinh via Pexels

A thousand snatches of color comes courtesy of the burned-out light above the Pinball section area at the Nickelcade next to the graveyard that has all the weird, beautiful giant orbs of color it sets out on the ground around the holidays

Straps of flowers stole from the walk to get breakfast every morning hang in twirling strips from the ceiling, same as the thin red peppers your great-aunt Helene kept on strings to dry in her kitchen down in Houma

Slow hum of the fan oscillating along your prone form, hitting just like the breeze would when you & your brother would be on the trampoline, bouncing as high as your young legs would let, doing your best impressions of a bullfrog jump to try and see up over the safety netting, out to the woods, where you're both certain a thing of evil lurks & the only thing up for discussion is to whether it's a werewolf or serial killer

You have Jimmy Eat World (the one with 5 star banger "The Middle" on it, but the whole album is a banger in of itself) playing on your wireless earbuds you got for a deep discount online & you waited specifically for this pair to go on sale because it was the gaudy pink that just makes your trash fashion gay heart swoon

Tomorrow will be hell screaming madness a thousand little lightning strikes of anxiety rage fury rage hell rage hell rage hell hell hell

Tonight
You're drenched in beauty
You're doused in bliss
& it'll be doubly so
once you're off to bed
with your wife
& y'all's cuddly cat

A thousand snatches of color ricochet off the straps of flowers hanging off the ceiling as the oscillating fan makes them dance to "The Authority Song."

drenched in beauty
doused in bliss

Silk waves on a windowsil on a rolling desert night

Clem Flowers (They/ Them) is a poet, pizza man lover, happily married& poetry editor of Blue River Review with 3 chaps, a Best of the Net & Pushcart noms. Nb, bi, & queer af. @clem_flowers on Twitter

Sadie Pt. 2 | Cori Diaz

Andrea Piacquadio via Pexels

Her apartment was in bad shape because it was made in the 80's No, this isn't her fault.
Besides, she's got hardwood floors
A clawfoot tub
And a ringing metal furnace
What do you do?
Me? Well, I do nothing. I wrote poetry once but not anymore You
should write again
But I don't have any words in my head
No bloody knife –
Antiseptic, maybe,
And a bit of gauze.
Would you bandage me up if I let you?
Would you make me better if I asked?
Do you lick me like your cats for this very reason?

Cori Diaz is a poet, playwright, and comedian at NYU Tisch School of the Arts.

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Falling Falling Falling | Len Klapdor

Adrien Olichon via Pexels

Every day

In my head

I talk to you

About the Things

The Things You Need To Know

About me

And I ask you all the questions

About the Things I Need To Know About You

***

I watched you while you watched the movie

I think you didn't see

I hope

Your shuffling feet almost made my heart burst

And I saw what you did with your fingernails

I wanted to offer you the ash tray, that's where I put the remainder

But then I worried

Worried I was invading

Worried you appreciated the illusion of being unobserved

Worried you might be ashamed

Like I would probably be though I shouldn't

So I didn't

I just kept watching from the corner of my eye

How you nibbled away pieces of your fingernails

And collected them in a flap of your chic dress shirt

How you kept them there

All through the movie

And even when you got up to leave

You pinched them between index and middle finger

And tied your shoes with the remaining 8

I could see that you've done this a hundred-thousand times before

And I was in awe

***

And then I wish

Wish you'd see me as I see you

Or anyone, really

Wish you'd notice all those details about me

The way I notice all those details

Do you?

Wish you'd tell them back to me so I can see myself

From somebody else's eyes

For a change

I want to be seen

Caught in the act like a thief in the night

I want this to stop.

Autistic agender writer of spec-fic about cyborgian creatures & the end of patriarchy. Rep'd by @LaurenBieker, words in Etherea Magazine and Flourish Fiction.

Twitter/Instagram: @len_klapdor

Our Paintings | Bryana Saldana

Anna Shvets via Pexels

Fingers twist to
make paintings
out of bodies,

surrendered power for
euphoric happenings —

run away from my grip
and I will find you in
your rolled eyes,

clutching your chin —
drippings.

I found your soul

in the — locks
our eyes twist

between the whimpers —
a painting comes to life.

Bryana Saldana is 27 y/o Afro-Latina, Lesbian, Poet & Writer. Here work can be found here https://watermarkonline.com/?s=Bryana+Saldana.

Studio 6 | Krista Sanford

Quang Nguyen Vinh via Pexels

the lake outside my apartment is man-made.
perfectly circular,
a backdrop of a skyline reflection.
i look in the gentle waves
and see the reflection,
not of me but of the old hotel,
right off the interstate,
the hum of cars a constant tune.
a girl and a boy–mid-twenties.
hiding from the world,
their punishment:
endless exile.
they sit on the rocks.
he takes a hit, passes it to her through a kiss.
smiles all around.

how simple they must be,
how perfect.
their secret hideout.
never actually feeling like home.

I have been published in Junepine Magazine, Livina Press, Black Moon Magazine, Horned Things, & others. My first chapbook, fatboy: a collection, is available on Amazon. Find me on Twitter, @k_leesan.

Sexy-sulcus | Barney Ashton-Bullock

Nida via Pexels

Corybantic neural frissons flicker-whip the cranial eroto-nano sentinels. Their synaptic luminosities demarcate circumstantial flitty congruence from a turbid opportunistic carnal dissonance. From all such 'making do' of the coasting of entitled auto-cruise and its possessed ever briefer follow-thru of perfunctory grind and resultant rote sput, sput. From the satiated chuckle, wink and part of leaving and its ever unmuttered 'I don't love you', 'I don't need you' and the default non-committal nod, skewed eyes averted, in passing, somewhere just as dark, sometime soon...

Barney Ashton-Bullock is the poet in the hybrid pop/theatre/music act 'Andy Bell is Torsten'. His latest books are 'Geopoliticus, Pupsy!' (Red Ceilings Press) and 'Cul-de-Sacrilege!' (Polari Press).

Sweet to Sour | Regina Jade

Loc Dang via Pexels

Kiss me, my darling,
For the clock is ticking.
Midnight is coming
And when the bell tolls,
My glass slippers will become ratty sneakers
My ball gown will become faded jeans
My pumpkin carriage will become a beat up car.

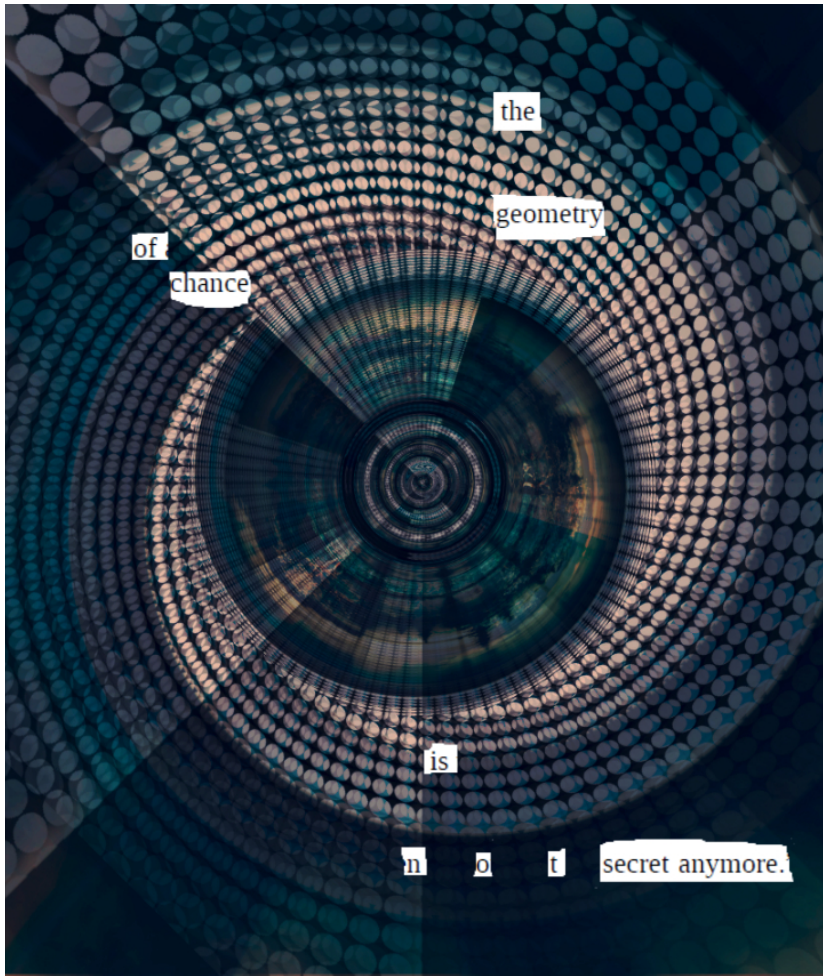
Kiss me, my dearest,
And kick start a different transformation.
Turn me from a girl into a woman,
Change my flavor from sweet to sour.
As night becomes day,
And fifteen becomes sixteen.

Kiss me.

Regina Jade is an Asian American writer and poet. Her recent work appears in Kaleidoscope – A Queer Anthology from Cloaked Press and Prismatic Dreams from All Worlds Wayfarer.

Twitter: @thereginajade

The Geometry of Chance | Shloka Shankar



via Shloka Shankar

Shloka Shankar is a poet and editor from India. She is the Founding Editor of Sonic Boom and its imprint Yavanika Press. Website: www.shlokashankar.com. Instagram: @shloks23

speck of dust | Meghan Bianco Lockwood

Huebert World via Pexels

some human fiber
vibrates higher
me, i only burn.
two silver dollar eyes
confine a mind to yawn or yearn
when pretty pain bemuses
brain and tooth both crystallized
upon deliberation
wayward pharisee relies.
for now i'm left with nothing
but the song and sky i love
at last the earth perfects
that speck of dust we each become

Meghan is a former classicist and recovering academic who creates poetry about love, depression, and writing itself under the alias writesallnight. You can find her on instagram @writesallnight.

sandcastles as headstones | Emily Perkovich

Peter Steele via Pexels

We buried a lot at the beach

/it's just that waves hold better than dirt/it's just that I never expected for you to hang around/

It's just that

I've always chewed with my mouth closed, and you've always felt entitled to seconds, so when you think of it that way

What I mean is

I know how to keep a secret

What I mean is

On a long enough timeline, monogamy is always a failure

I go back at midnight to sift through the turrets because water weight has never scared me, I'm clawing at the grit of it now, nails dug in deep, I'm excavating your eyes all bloodshot in night-air, I'm dredging the lake for the way I could feel the coke in your veins in my bones, and what I'm trying to say is that we were just two skeletons pressed together

What I mean is

We should have dug separate graves

What I mean is

/it's just that/

I've always wanted to swallow somebody whole

Emily Perkovich is from the Chicago-land area and the Editor in Chief of Querencia Press. You can find her on IG @undermeyou or Twitter @emily_perkovich

little lion | Latitude Brown

Mathias Reding via Pexels

Roach wasn't around, and nobody else worth anything was around, so they walked home, too warm but not headachey, so, so, so. Some might call that escape, and others might call that *where's your security* and *why don't you do anything I ask* and *you need someone to watch you!* But they came back, right? It's not like — it wasn't treason. It was just. Stepping to the side of expectations, neat and unexpected. The job's done, what else does it matter?

Matters a lot, apparently. Images, images; cut to the tune, parsed out to the meter of the violence. Meter, meted, well-met by moonlight? A bruise blossoms on their cheek, some more underneath their sweater. The maelstrom is here, is not here, is here; immaterial, inescapable, ready and waiting and they are both here to take, aren't they? Lucchese and the Storm, it doesn't matter what kind of work they do, doesn't matter who they are, just — Lion squeezes blood out of a stone and neither of them are impressed, just more and more and more. Who is the blood an offering to? They fight for it. Lion scarcely cares who the winner is.

There's ice in the freezer downstairs, and they go up to sit in the garage. It's a warm night, but it's gotten cooler from the heat of the day. Sunlight filters through the open garage door, hits them full in the face, the warmth and the freedom that's beyond — that they can taste but can't touch. Tastes like smoke, like burning. Maybe that's some kind of future.

One of the hired mercenaries has parked his car in the garage. Not a car — a van. Nearly a little house, the way it's all tricked out; a shell for a turtle. The owner is courting Roach, which, okay, that's certainly a choice. He doesn't speak, just sits on the hood of his car, waiting for Roach. Same business, except Lion is sulking about it.

When twilight sinks the sun below the horizon, Lion goes back inside. Curfew. A different kind of headache, Lion darling? Yeah, yeah, yeah.

Lion uses the little light there is left in their room to paint that evening, the way the sun streaks across the garage floor, the way the blossom in their chest gives way to the maelstrom, just like everything does, in the end. Is it the end? It doesn't feel like the future anymore.

Latitude's favorite things to write include: the concept of the body, girls with knives, and procedural murders. They live in Michigan, their favorite place. Find them everywhere @geographconcept.

Awakening | Scott Aaron Tait

When someone asks, "when did you know?"

I want to say, "in 1993 when Section 28 prohibited the *'promotion of homosexuality'* and the word **gay** meant something else. In 1995 when Billy, that spandex-clad Power Ranger, caught my eye. Maybe it was seeing Batman, and his devoted twink Robin, with those firm nipples in 1997 or Spiderman in 2002. Toby Maguire stood shirtless in front of a mirror and I imagined him shooting out sticky webs. No, it was 2004 when I first kissed a guy and my heart skipped a beat."

But I just reply, "I always knew."

Scott (he/they) is the editor of Queerlings and Powders Press. His writing has been published widely including Untitled Voices and Warning Lines. They drink too much coffee and tweet @scottaarontait

Don't Look Back | Chloe Spencer

Szabolcs Toth via Pexels

I didn't think that something as simple and small as dust could kill you until I entered the aging walls of my late mother's rambler. After opening the front door, I was greeted by a plume of brown smoke, thick with the taste of mildew, which flew into my mouth uninvited. The coughing fit that followed caused tears to stream from my eyes, nearly blinding me as I stepped into the dimly-lit space.

Piles of neatly organized cardboard boxes let me know that my sister was here. I walked into the kitchen, which had a sink that was nearly overflowing with dirty dishes. With a grimace, I inspected the damage. The water, although soapy, was starting to turn an inky gray, like someone had cracked open a pen and poured the contents into it.

"Jesus Christ," I muttered, shaking my head. "No wonder she's fucking dead."

"*Fran.*"

I heard Starla's sharp, brassy tone of voice behind me, and I turned to face her. Her dishwater-blond hair was tucked underneath a paisley-pink bandana. A few wispy strands framed her face. From the dark circles underneath her eyes, I could tell that she had been up for hours already, despite it only being 9AM.

She looked so much like Mom.

"What? This entire house is an asthmatic death trap."

"Good thing you don't have asthma." She rolled her eyes and set down the box that she had been balancing on her hip like a toddler. "Nice of you to join me this morning. What, you're still hungover?"

"How'd you guess?"

She stared at me starkly, with an expression that communicated that she would strangle me if she wasn't so tired. "Really? If you were going to be useless, you shouldn't have come."

"I'm not going to be useless." I cracked open my water bottle and took a sip. Tasted stale, much like the 6-month old box of cornflakes I had eaten earlier this morning. "Just tell me what to do and I'll do it."

"You really shouldn't be drinking that much anymore. Especially after everything that happened." She placed her hands on her hips, gazing at me with a fierce intensity; trying to make me feel ashamed.

But I wasn't having any of that. "Hey. Our mother didn't die of liver failure or alcohol poisoning. I think I'm good."

"Drinking is hard on your heart."

"Yeah, if you're like, 40." We're both still in our late 20s— and even if I'm a pretty hard drinker, there's no way that I've done enough damage to my organs yet. "I didn't come here for a lecture; I came here to clean. So what do you want me to do first?"

She sighed. Wiped a hand across her forehead even though the bandana was there to clean up her sweat. So melodramatic. She looked around the space, and nodded in the direction of the sink. I looked back at her, a brow arched.

"The water in that sink looks like the Thames River before they invented modern plumbing. I'm going to get cholera."

"Well, if you think you're so invincible, it shouldn't be a problem."

And with that, she turned on her heel and exited the room. No further questions. No talkback. Just a dismissive and stern "Do what I say," then flee the area before anyone has a chance to question you.

Again, so much like our mother.

I rolled up my sleeves and reached for the crusty blue sponge resting beside the faucet, then set to work. I don't blame her for assigning this job to me. Years of working in restaurants has made cleaning dishes almost enjoyable, because it means that I don't have to interact with customers. But the stench and color of this water is almost too much to bear—like mold and wet socks and a sweaty child's unwashed hair. I tried breathing through my mouth, but even then, it was a struggle. I scrubbed through the layers of grime on the dishes and shook my head ferociously. Our mother, through most of our lives, was almost an obsessive-compulsive cleaner. It's wild to think that she would've let things get *this* bad. What, had she finally decided after all these years of being a stark-raving neat freak that being a hoarder was better?

Her death hadn't come as a surprise—rather, the fact that she had lived so long was a feat itself. Since we were children, before our father had even left her, our mother had struggled with health problems, primarily with her heart. Triple bypass at 40, multiple stents, high cholesterol, and a seemingly endless list of complications from her cardiovascular issues had arisen over the years, creating obstacle after obstacle for her everyday life. And our mother wasn't unfit by any means; not even until the last few years of her life had she really put on any weight whatsoever. In her youth, she had been a champion swimmer— she had boasted that she had been scouted by many a Division I coach, back in the day. You couldn't tell from looking at her just how much bad luck brewed inside her seemingly able-body.

So maybe that was why neither Starla or I cried at the funeral. When you grow up being taught that your mother's life could be lost in a moment's notice, and it actually happens, there's just no sort of way to feel like it's a tragedy. It was inevitable that we were going to lose her when we were still young; it was a surprise to everyone else but us. Starla would never admit it, but she was a little freaked out by how many people were crying, not out of grief, but out of complete shock. It was like that day we confirmed all our suspicions that no one had ever believed that our mother was really just that sick. If you don't fit the preconceived stereotype of what a sick person looks like— frail, little to no mobility, and hooked up to an IV drip— it's like your sickness is invalidated.

And that's what pisses me off the most. Actually, no, I take that back. What pissed me off the most was when Kayla, a girl that we had known in high school, approached us and offered to, and I shit you not, "lend us a listening ear." Said that she had known what it was like, as her father had passed away when she was young as well. And I wanted to tell her that

absolutely not, she did *not* know what this was like. Her father died in a car accident; ours had been dying practically from the moment that we turned eight years old, and maybe even before that. Her father's death was a surprise, and our mother's death was anything but. It was a festering, pus-filled wound that would reopen in the back of our minds every time she had trouble getting up the stairs, or would inject yet another medication into her model-thin waist.

No one around us knew what this was like.

"Fran?"

I sighed heavily and switched off the water. Glanced over my shoulder at my sister, who now somehow looked pale.

"What?"

"Your hands."

I glanced down at my hands, inflamed and stinging-red like a blistered piece of bacon. Another perk of working in restaurants washing dishes is that you get desensitized to extremely hot water. I hadn't even noticed the steam that was rising up from the sink.

"Aww shit."

"Are you sober enough to do any of this today?"

I rolled my eyes. "I'm here, goddamn it. Either you want me here or you don't."

"It seems like your head is somewhere else."

"Of course my head is somewhere else. This is our dead mother's house. A house which, apparently in the year since we last saw here, has turned into an absolute cesspit."

"I guess it just got bad." Starla said quietly. She somehow found a spot to sit down on the cluttered round dining table, and stared down at the dappled chestnut floors. "I wish she would've called us. Maybe I could've helped."

"She didn't need help from other people. She needed to help herself by not keeping so much shit around. I mean, what is that box even full of?"

She glanced inside it, as if she needed to remind herself. "Photo frames. No pictures in them."

"Yeah. I mean, what the hell? How many Dollar Store binges did she go on?"

"She's also got another box of hand mirrors sitting in her bedroom closet."

"Hand mirrors?"

"Like eight of them, yeah. And there's more scattered throughout the house, for some reason. I think there's one in the drawer next to the silverware."

I shrugged my shoulders. "You know how she was with her appearance. Always did her makeup, even on days when she wouldn't leave the house."

"It was something that I loved about her. She always wanted to look good."

"What does that have to do with anything?"

A sharp exhale. "She tried her best every day. That's what it means."

"You call this trying her best?"

Starla dragged a hand over her face and shook her head. "Can you not be such an asshole for one day? *One* day?"

I took a deep breath and rolled my shoulders back. "Sorry."

"It's exhausting to be related to you sometimes."

She spoke so harshly, so bitterly, that I flinched. It's a little unlike her to be so outwardly nasty, but part of me is grateful that she's stopped with her whole picture-perfect personality act. I prefer her to be direct over passive aggressive, which is what she and our mother normally defaulted to.

I cleared my throat and started to set the dishes on the questionably-clean kitchen towel that she had laid out for me. "So… what are we going to do with this place, once we clean it up? Are we going to sell it?"

"Well that's also what I wanted to talk to you about today. Minjun and I were thinking about… keeping it." Minjun was her fiancé who she planned to marry in March. "We want to start a family, and this place has so many bedrooms. Not to mention, a fully finished basement. That's a hard thing to find around here, unless you want to pay a fortune."

"You want to—wait, what?" I shook my head at her. "You want to start a family? With *our* genetics?"

"Francine."

"Look, keep the house if you want, but having a baby is totally irresponsible. We're going to be lucky if we don't end up like Mom. Your cholesterol is already so bad, Star. You really think that you could survive a pregnancy? Or even function like you do now after a pregnancy? I mean—"

"—I didn't ask you for your opinion on whether or not I should have a baby; I asked you if you wanted the house. Besides, you're acting like a baby would be a carbon copy of me. What if the baby ends up more like Minjun?"

"You want to gamble with a human life like that?"

"The entire existence of humanity is a gamble. And we all gamble in our own ways every day. For example, yesterday you gambled on the idea of how much you could drink and still show up here sober the next day. You're sober, but given how much of a bitch you're being, I wish you were still drunk." She stood up, kicked a box in the corner, and stomped out of the room.

I shook my head once more and turned my attention back to the sink, which was now almost overflowing. I turned off the piping-hot faucet and shoved my hand in the basin, fumbling around for the stopper. My fingers drifted past something small and bristly and shaped like a ball. I shuddered in horror and tried to pull on the plug, but it wouldn't budge. I gripped the ends of the ball around my fingers and pulled—still wouldn't move. Yanked, nearly throwing my shoulder out in the process, and finally, it came free.

Perplexed, I stared at the object that had been holding the sink drain captive. A matted clump of hair, now blackened from the soiled drain, practically glued on the underside of the drain, and looped through the many rusted holes. Between this, my hangover, and the wretched smell of this house, I could no longer contain the bile bubbling in my stomach.

I projectile-vomited against the kitchen window, staining it— if you can believe it— even greener than it was before.

***

After choking down more water and a few expired ibuprofens from the bottom of my purse, I managed to get back to work, and surprisingly, by the end of the day, the place wasn't looking half bad. Starla had thrown open the windows while we were working, and even though the autumn air was chilly, it was a welcome break from the mustiness. Now, the place almost looked normal. *Almost.* There were still obvious stubborn stains in the cracks and crevices of practically every place you could think of: along the lines between where the carpet met the wall, underneath the edges of the countertops, and even the wall behind the mounted flatscreen looked oddly suspicious.

Starla scrubbed at it, but the blackish-brownish stain behind the TV did not go away. She arched her brow. "I think I might have to call a plumber. Place might have water damage."

I nodded and checked the time on my phone. I didn't have anywhere to be, but I didn't exactly want to spend more time in this house. My fingers were pruny and yet, my palms and tops of my hands were crusty and dry like the Arizona desert. Thankfully, they weren't as red anymore, and at least they smelled like lemon-scented furniture polish.

"Did you want to get something to eat? I think that Thai place is still open. I could order takeout."

I was about to respond with no, but when I looked at her, I saw something solemn in her eyes. Almost as if she knew that by tomorrow, when Minjun was able to drive down from the city, I would be gone, and that today was really our last opportunity to connect with one another. For the past few years, we had been living in separate places, living separate lives, and without Mom here, there was nothing binding us to each other anymore. Nothing but a moldy house and a childhood full of shared heartaches.

"Sure."

She placed the order, and to my surprise, she ended up paying for delivery. When we were teenagers, if we had ordered takeout, our mother had always sent one of us to fetch it. She had ranted and raved about the prices, despite it only being a couple of dollars on top of an already cheap meal, and honestly, we probably wasted more money by driving our gas-guzzling Sedan to get the orders.

When the food arrived, I gleefully dug out my pad thai from the crumpled bag and Starla removed her spring rolls. She eyed me curiously as I took a seat across from her.

"Funny how you were lecturing me on my cholesterol when you ordered pad thai, probably one of the most fattening meals on the menu." She dipped her roll in the sweet chili sauce and bit into it.

"Full of protein and veggies. Well worth the calorie count."

"The sodium in that thing is outrageous."

"You sound like Mom."

"*You* sounded like Mom earlier today. So I guess that makes us even."

I couldn't help but smile as I dug into my food. "I'm not going to worry about whether one meal is going to torch my health. We're already on our way to death, as far as I'm concerned."

"Why?" she dabbed at her mouth with a napkin, her eyes doe-like. "Did you—"

"— My numbers are like yours and Mom's. Bad."

Starla reached into her purse and withdrew a giant bottle— not a prescription bottle, but one that was dark and ruddy like a fine gin. She shook out two massive pills and popped them into her mouth, then washed them down with a quick guzzle of water. She passed the bottle to me.

"This is what my cardiologist put me on; it's been helping. He didn't want to start me on Lipitor yet, since I want to have kids. Which you apparently think is a bad idea."

"To be fair, I think that's a bad idea for everyone," I replied. "Regardless of your health problems. The world is in a hellish state. Climate wise, and money wise. Why bring another life into it?"

"You didn't bring up the climate crisis or finances. You brought up my health." For a moment, it almost sounded like her voice wavered with tears. But she took another bite of her food, and that vulnerability was gone. "If our health is destined to be bad, I don't see why it should hold me back from doing anything I want. No matter what we do, it'll be bad. Are we supposed to just live in fear? Let it hold us back our whole lives?"

I couldn't believe her ignorance. "Familial hypercholesterolemia—"

"—What?"

"Familial hypercholesterolemia. FH. It's what she had, and it's what you and I have. And it's what your kids are going to have," I told her. I can't hold back the anger building in my voice. "If you have an allele, you're going to pass it on for certain. And we don't even know if we have the heterozygous or the homozygous versions. We don't know how bad our health is even going to get. We don't know how bad your children's health is going to get."

She rolled her eyes. "It's a really common health condition, Francine. It's not a mystery nowadays."

"That doesn't dismiss the severity."

"Wow. I paid for dinner, and you're *still* being an asshole."

"I'm asking you to not justify your decisions to me," I responded. "The fact that you think it's a good idea for children to endure what we went through is super fucked, Starla."

"So my life isn't worth living to the fullest extent, simply because I have a verycommon medical condition? Jesus Christ. You're acting like I'm asking *you* to have kids."

I slammed my hands down on the table, startling her. The anger trembled violently inside my body, and I gripped the edges of the table like I was clinging to the edge of the abyss. "Starla, *look!* Look at what we're going through right now! Your kids are going to be in the *same* position within twenty fucking years! Is that what you want? You want your children to bury you months before their wedding day?"

"Oh fuck you. You're acting like it's Mom's fault that she died, and—"

"—Mom didn't *know* what her illness was because doctors ignored it for years! But you have the privilege of *knowing,* and you're telling me you're going to make a decision like this? You're going to burden a child with this? It's so fucking selfish. I can't believe you don't want to break the cycle. You want to be a mother so bad? Why don't you adopt? Why don't you foster?"

She sat there, staring up at me with wide eyes; her body nearly frozen in place. Only the slight tremors in her shoulders showed me that she was still moving; still alive, still capable of listening.

"What?" I demanded, and she didn't respond. "You don't want a kid that's already screwed up, huh? You want the privilege of screwing up a kid yourself?"

In the next minute, I felt the cold splash of water on my face. Through blurry eyes I saw my sister, now on her feet, her face beet-red and her eyes full of loathing. She affixed her pinprick pupils on me like a hawk about to strike its prey. Her voice spoke in a low whisper.

"Get the fuck out of my house."

I stared at her. "I wouldn't want your house anyways, shithead."

Without another word, I took my pad thai, and exited the house as briskly as the autumn breeze blew.

***

Few people would think to call someone at 7AM on a Sunday. Few people would think to call anyone *at all* on a Sunday, if it wasn't an emergency. So when Minjun blew up my phone that morning, I knew that something bad had happened. The inky dread rumbled inside my still-sleeping body and forced me to lift my head from my pillow; moved my arm to pick up my furiously buzzing phone. And from the sobbing gasps that crackled over the receiver, I knew in that instant, my sister was gone.

Minjun had found her on the floor of the master bathroom, her body stiff and cold; her mouth open wide in horror. Apparently, she had decided to stay in that place overnight. Coroner's report mentioned that she had died of a heart attack, but evidence in the house suggested that something else was afoot— the first piece of evidence being a crumpled piece of notebook paper in her hand which read,

Francine,

Don't look back.

Police found scratches and dents on the wooden doors, like she had been fighting something off, or trying to prevent something from breaking into the bathroom. Splinters of a shattered bottle buried in the hairs of the master bedroom's fringe carpet. Kitchen knives were missing. And yet, no signs of a break-in. No windows had been moved, no doors had been opened, or locks had been broken. Whatever she was afraid of, it had already been inside the house to begin with.

After several days, the investigation concluded that nothing had been in the house, lying in wait, to begin with. They chalked it up to her having a psychotic break after a particularly stressful conversation with her shitty, alcoholic twin sister, which then induced the heart attack that killed her.

Well, they didn't put it *exactly* in those terms. But I knew that that's what everyone around me was thinking. I can still remember the intense anger burning in Minjun's eyes, communicating every unsaid way that he thought I was responsible.

And for the second time that month I went to the funeral home, only this time, it was to bury my sister. It's interesting when there's two sudden losses in a family, and how people react. When burying my mom, they were all in tears and overcome with shock-induced grief. When burying my sister, they were wide-eyed, ghost-like. And this time I endured many stern, self-indulgent lectures from people who begged me to go to the doctor just to have someone tell me what I already knew: that I was just as sick as they were, both in body and soul.

But Minjun—sweet Minjun, who had loved my sister for five years and had hoped to love her for the rest of his life—couldn't accept this answer. I think, because my sister was skinny like my mother and the picture of good health, he also couldn't accept the fact that she had a debilitating invisible illness. Five nights after we buried her, he called me up and begged me to come back to my mother's house, where he admitted he was staying.

"Why are you in the house where she died?" I demanded.

"Because I had to see for myself if something was there. Two people have died here, Fran. You don't think that's unusual?"

"I know that this is hard for you, but... these kinds of issues, they're just... they operate so suddenly. That's how they work. That's what makes them deadly—"

"—If you dropped dead alone in a torn-up house, your sister wouldn't stop until she figured out what had happened to you." he retorted firmly, his voice cold. And with that, he hung up.

So I drove, and drove, and drove. Hours through the night into the early morning, until I arrived once again at the place I had left, and hoped to leave for the rest of my life. When I pulled up in the driveway, Minjun was standing on the front porch, holding a mug of coffee, almost as if he had been waiting for me.

"Nice to see you." he said, his voice hoarse.

His eyes were dark, *so* dark. It looked like he had been up all night. With a flourish of his hand, he guided me into the house, and sat me down at the kitchen table.

As he fixed me a cup of coffee, he asked, "What do you think her note meant?" His tone of voice was so casual, it was as if he legitimately thought I'd know the answer right away.

Which I didn't. *Don't look back.* What the hell does that mean? It doesn't sound ominous so much as it sounds stupidly inspirational, like an MLM salesperson. Some happy-ism that would prompt someone to grin and bear their pain and keep moving forward. Feels like it would have been her personal mantra, and look where that got her.

"Don't look back," Minjun said. "What would that have meant? Someone from your past?"

"We don't have any ominous figures from our past. No one with an ax to grind, at least."

"Your father?"

"He lives in Miami with his wife. He has no motivation for any of this."

Minjun shook his head. "It doesn't make sense."

"In her last moments, if she was dying, then—"

"—You saw the handwriting on the note. She was of sound mind, or at least, she wasn't having her heart attack yet. The letters are clear, distinctive. Not scraggly. She was preparing you for something."

I shook my head. "Look, I think you're—"

"—I am *not* overthinking this." No wonder he loved my sister so much. They're like carbon copies of each other; they even have the same snarky, coolly delivered replies. "*Think,* Fran. You were here all day. You had to have seen something unusual."

"I saw an absolutely filthy house that I cleaned from top to bottom."

"You're not even trying. Why? Do you not want to think about it? Don't you want to know the truth? Do you think the truth is too hard to come to terms with, or—"

I held up my hand, interrupting his stream of chaotic thoughts. "If I wanted to be psycho-analyzed, I'd go to a shrink."

"Then *help* me. Otherwise, why did you come here?"

"To convince you to leave. You're *sleeping* in a house where your wife-to-be, my sister, died, Minjun."

"Okay, fine." He held up his hands angrily, tossing his head in frustration. "Maybe *you* don't have any burning questions about what happened, or maybe you're scared. But I need to know what happened to her, and I need your help. So if you're not going to help, you should leave, because I'm not going anywhere. So for fuck's sake, *what* did you see?"

His eyes are wet and burning red, and I know now that no matter what I say, I'm not going to be able to convince him to leave. I sighed before taking another sip of coffee.

"I mean... I pulled some hair out of the sink drain."

"Human hair?"

"What other kind of hair? Yes. Human hair. Like someone had been brushing their hair in the sink and let it get clogged."

"Was your mother... was she senile, when she passed?"

"As far as we knew, no. She was going to work every day and seemed normal. The state of the house was a total surprise to us. I mean, she was always such a neat freak, and then somehow, over the past year, became a hoarder?"

My mind sifted through all the things we uncovered yesterday. Grandfather clocks and collections of Joyce Carol Oates books and patchwork quilts handed down by our Great Aunt Lucy. Then suddenly, the realization hit me like a punch to the gut. All my breath left my body.

The mirrors. Hand mirrors.

I migrated over to the silverware drawer, and opened the one adjacent to it. Sure enough, there it was. A cheap dollar store mirror in girl-toy purple, adorned with whimsical gold stars and sequins. It looked like something that we would've had when we were little, but I didn't recognize it. Starla had been holding it that day, and she had put it back, looking white as a sheet.

"What is that? What's that doing here?" The alarm was already in Minjun's voice.

"Starla said that she found these. A hand mirror in almost every room of the house."

"So..." Minjun reached for it, and gazed at his reflection intensely. After a few moments, he shook his head, confused. He looked up at me. "Don't look back."

"Look *back,* Minjun."

I took the mirror back from him, and held it up to my face, staring directly into my acidic-green eyes. Holding my breath, I turned the mirror, shifting it, so that it looked just over my shoulder. And at first I hovered there, deeply uncertain, as my eyes seemed to play tricks on me. Directly behind me was the entryway to the laundry room, a decrepit little space where our aged machines sat in wait. In the inky black shadows cast underneath the shelves of detergent and bleach, I saw it.

A trembling, almost shapeless figure, laying in wait.

With a start, I dropped the mirror, and it cracked against the floor. I whipped around, my eyes wide, staring into the darkened space. But it was no longer there. Minjun looked at me, his eyes wide, and for a moment, he looked more excited than he was terrified; like he was thrilled that he had been right.

"So there's something?" he asked, his voice hopeful, and then he almost corrected himself. "Are you okay? What was it?"

I couldn't speak. Minjun repeated the question, and when I once again didn't answer, he shook my shoulders, and stared into the laundry room. He flicked on a light, looked in all the nooks and crannies, and still, he couldn't see what I had seen. Panicked, he scrambled over to the crumbling mirror and lifted it up off the floor, trying to see it over his own shoulder. But he couldn't. So he tried to stand in front of me, keeping himself in the foreground. I reached over his shoulder and smacked the mirror from his hands. This time, it shattered against the floor instead of cracked. Glass shards flew everywhere—across the floor, against the cabinet doors.

"Fran!" he cried out. "What the hell?"

"I don't want to see it!"

"What did you see?"

I tried to move away from him, but winced, and when I looked down, I realized that a shard of glass from the mirror had somehow lodged itself into my ankle. The blood seeped through my dark-denim pants, staining it almost violet. Woozy, I wobbled on my feet, and swatted away Minjun's hapless attempts to help me. I limped around the edge of the kitchen table, firmly placing a barrier between Minjun and whatever that thing was.

"Stop moving, Francine," Minjun begged, his brow now furrowed with concern. "Just—what the hell was it?"

"I don't know!"

I cried out, but somewhere, in the recesses of my mind, I could hear a little voice calling me a liar. I knew. I did, in fact, know what it was. Even if I was at a loss of words to describe it. I had known it since I was small, small, small. Just as Starla had, and Mom had. Blood continued to spurt from my open wound, which was somehow deeper than I thought it had been. And then suddenly, I felt this pulsing emptiness, and when I looked down, I saw another shard of glass, sticking through the sole of my other foot.

"Let me help you—" he insisted, but I warded him back with a frantic wave of my hand.

"Leave me *alone,*" I cried out, as the pounding inside my head grew; as my heart's fluttery nature grew more intense, filling my ears with the sound of my blood, rushing, rushing through my own veins.

He shook his head, staring at me and my wounded feet almost helplessly. He looked at the remaining glass shards on the floor.

"At least let me get a broom and a dust pan. Where would that be?" he called over his shoulder, trudging off in— some direction. What direction, I didn't know. "Bathroom?"

The further that Minjun strayed from me, the more intense the feeling of dread grew within my body; the harder my heart struggled. Was it my fading vision, or was it panic that was causing this room to seem darker than ever before? Shaking my head, I gritted my teeth and looked down at my wounded ankle. I pinched the shard of glass between my two fingers, some of the sharp dust pricking the surface of my skin, causing red droplets of blood to erupt from underneath. And then, after taking the deepest breath I've ever taken in my life, pulled it out. The blood gushed out even stronger than before, but I didn't care. I lifted the shard and framed it just over my shoulder—

—and I saw it once more, hovering just behind me, its gaping mouth open like an endless abyss, its eyes white yet rimmed-red; its entire body formless like the shadows that haunt a child's nightmares, yet distinctive enough that I can make out its claw-like hands, long and sharp-ripe like needles. It makes no sound, but it doesn't need to, as I can't hear anything over the din of my beating heart.

With a scream I pushed back from the table, tripping onto the floor, and shoving the glass through my foot deeper. It tore a wider hole in my flesh, the blood bubbling out like a potion in a witch's cauldron; the sinews of the parchment paper-like flesh tearing apart as I desperately tried to drag my body away from the creeping monster. I called out for Minjun, but I could no longer hear him, only blood, dripping, spurting, gushing. I never knew that blood could sound so loud. Minjun had left me, and I was now somehow trapped in this hellscape. The house, once familiar, looked so foreign to me, with the heavy cardboard boxes almost forming an endless maze behind me. I have no choice but to go through if I want to escape.

I felt the monster swipe at me, its sharp fingers just barely brushing the surface of my ratty sweater, and using what remaining upper body strength I had, I leapt in the direction of the nearest chair, my fingers clawing at the top of it. I pushed with all my might before finally, I was on my feet again—and then I was off, limping at a ragged pace through the house, my eyes desperately trying to peer through the darkness. Where are the windows? Where did all of them go? There was no door, only boxes. Somehow, my pathway led me not in the direction of an exit, but up the stairs, into the hallway bathroom that my sister and I had once shared so long ago.

Without missing a beat, I slammed the door shut and turned the lock just as the beast threw its full weight against it; the impact nearly bouncing me off of the door. I fell on the floor once more, my eyes desperately searching for some sort of weapon. I yanked open a drawer, my hands fumbling around before I found a set of matches. Underneath the cabinet, a canister of shoddy *White Rain* hairspray. The beast continued to pound at the door, the force causing the walls to shudder with terror, and even though I could barely hear it, I could swear that the beast was howling. Armed with a single match and my can, I patiently waited, my body trembling; the blood from my lower extremities seeping into the dirtied grout of the bathroom tile below me.

And then the door broke, tearing from the top hinge downward, and I watched as those spindly hands ripped it forcefully from the frame. A stray screw whizzed past my ear; another nicked me in the cheek. I struck the match, and then sprayed— hitting both the monster, but also inadvertently lighting myself on fire. Guess I hadn't aimed quite right.

Howling in pain, I scrambled out of the room and back down the stairs, as fast as I could. Smoke trailed up from my hand which was broiling in glistening orange flames. The skin blistered into crackling orange bubbles and popped like scorched sugar in a frying pan. I sprinted in the direction of the kitchen sink, running my hands under the water, but the cold water caused my hand to seize uncontrollably, and I had to hold it by the wrist to get it to cool down. Just as the flames dissipated, I felt the looming sense of dread once more—

— and my body fell back against the refrigerator. I coughed, blood falling from my lips; I could feel a liquid coursing from my ears and I knew that I was bleeding from there too. My body was so, so full of blood, and yet my heart could do nothing. It seized, clenching itself into a tightly-wound ball, squeezing so hard that the air left my lungs, and the agony traveled into my left arm, where it continued to compress and push until it felt like every vein, every nerve ending, was going to be crushed out of existence.

As I faced the consequences of both my actions and my birth, I watched as it crawled, its massless body oozing as it crept towards me, I recalled Starla's final message to me: *Don't look back.* And as I stood there, my body shaking violently as it prepared for imminent death, I realized why she said it.

Because it was already there.

And it was inescapable.

Minnesota native Chloe Spencer is an award winning writer, indie gamedev, and filmmaker. Her upcoming sci-fi horror novel, Monstersona, releases in February 2023. Website: www.chloespenceronline.com.

Time, he waits for all of us | Sophie Mitchell

Florian G via Pexels

Time looks down on us, you and I
from his foreign vantage point,
in the vast expanse of sky –
sprawling, spindly limbs, forever moving
to the beat of his once-loved metronome.

He wishes he was us, you and I,
to feel earthly pleasures: to kiss, to dance, to cry,
and waits patiently for the day he will take us.
Until then, let us play underneath this endless sky,
never looking up – just you and I.

Sophie lives by the River Thames in London. She spends her 9-5 working in public policy, but spends her stolen moments reading dystopian sci-fi, poetry, working on her first novel – and dreaming.

Poems I Never Wrote | Howl Grim

NEOSiAM 2021 via Pexels

(July 10, 2022)
What if I let myself live in a world where the best case scenario was possible

(May 25, 2022)
I'm not afraid of you
I'm afraid of the ghost of my father who still lives

(October 19, 2021)
Thoughts like barbed wire under the mud
And there'll be blood in the morning

It feels like dying. It feels like being born again.

(May 12, 2020)
The secret is that people can only touch you when you're hurt

(February 8, 2018)
The truth is that I'm all messed up like you

(August 11, 2017)
I guess he wanted a better son

(May 26, 2017)
When I look at the lilacs all I see is how fast they'll fade and the slow disintegration of beauty
I do not want to touch anything that will touch me
I do not want to watch things die

(May 5, 2017)
They say living is resistance but I can feel my existence slipping from my fingers

(August 24, 2014)
I don't want to think
About how to live without you but
I guess I'm going to find out soon

March same as ever | Jef Fisher

Karolina Grabowska via Pexels

Every year we fail to remember that March is still winter, a gift of cognition that makes us forget to be fearful of that first anachronistically warm sunny day, that makes us fail to believe the world could be any way other than how it is now. We forget, and so the snow returns to find us so unprepared, having exhumed shorts and tshirts from mothballed basement sarcophagi, betrayed by the instinct that decides the things that must remain peripheral to conscious understanding lest we begin to question the wisdom of reaching into the nothingness of the before and after and shaping what we find there into new life, the things that must remain unreal until they're not, until it's our Costco engulfed in flames during a holiday week. Our children, should we be so bold, won't believe us when we tell them that March was ever winter.

Mars, if you can | Max Turner

RODNAE Productions via Pexels

She found the ripped note in his old coat. The end of a message, it simply read in his usual scrawl: "Mars, if you can."

She had never known her dad to be philosophical but there was a comfort in those words those days after his death. Why shoot for the moon?

No, you should shoot for Mars, if you can.

Those words became her mantra as she aced flight school and joined the Space Agency.

Twenty years earlier, in the recycling bin lay the rest of the discarded note.

"Can you get me some chocolate?"

"Mars, if you can."

Max Turner is a gay trans man, he writes speculative and science fiction, fantasy furry fiction, many sub-genres of horror and LGBTQ+ romance and erotica and combinations thereof. www.maxturneruk.com

thumb | Stuart Pennebaker

Craig Adderley via Pexels

The fluorescent lights buzz like a fly trapped in the empty promise of a glass window. The bzzz echoes through Thumb's skull as he pushes greasy burgers across the grill on his graveyard shift, as he collects crumpled bills from the fingers of the customers, as he mops and mops and mops the eternally sticky floors.

97.5, the country oldies station, crackles through the Waffle House speakers from 10 PM to 6 AM and after, probably, but Thumb has never worked a day shift. Maybe the place crawls out from under the long, dark shadows during the day, but from 10 to 6 it more closely resembles an abandoned amusement park or a small town bus stop late at night: spooky, silent, empty as a tomb. Except a tomb shouldn't be empty, should it, and neither should an amusement park or the breakfast joint where Thumb spends every weeknight.

It's not clean. Thumb wouldn't eat here. Flies and grime collect in the window sills, which look like they've never been dusted. The bathroom almost never has toilet paper. When he's working, he wipes down tables, he scrapes the grill, but he does not go much above the bare minimum, even though the unkempt appearance makes his skin crawl. He prefers tidy, everything in its place, but he doesn't want to attract attention to himself, good or bad.

The bell above the smudged glass door dings open. A man and a woman walk through and take the booth furthest from the register. They look like they've been driving all night, maybe the night before, too. The man is dark haired, so pale he's almost translucent, purple circles like plum colored bruises beneath his eyes. He's wearing scrubs but he doesn't look like any doctor Thumb's ever seen. The woman has bleached blonde hair that she's twisted on top of her head and little pieces frizz out like a halo. Her eyes look empty and there's a hole in the shoulder of her thin red shirt.

Thumb sighs, collects his grease stained order pad, and walks over to their table. His limp is always worse at the end of the night and it's nearing four. He feels their eyes on his bum leg and he resents their gaze. He knows how he looks: a bit broken. His stocky frame and short stature make him look vulnerable. He's considered tattoos but he likes being unidentifiable, a chameleon. He can be a clean cut young man in a suit and tie. He can be frightening, a sharp glint in his eye.

Coffee? Thumb asks when he reaches their table.

They nod.

Thumb nods back. Ready to order or need a minute.

It's his mantra. It's not even a question. He finds that if he says it flatly, a statement, readytoorderorneedaminute, people are more likely to go ahead and tell him what they want.

"All star special," says the man who looks closer to dead than alive, in Thumb's expert opinion.

"Bacon or sausage?"

"Bacon. And I want the eggs crisp."

"You?" Thumb says to the woman. Up close, Thumb sees that she has green eyes.

"I'll do an omelet," she says. "Please."

"What kind?"

She closes her eyes like she cannot possibly muster enough energy to make another decision. Whatever kind most people order, she says.

"Hashbrowns?" Thumb asks.

"Sure."

"In the ring?"

"Sure," she says again.

Thumb doesn't like her tone. Not hard to tell when someone is talking down to you. But there is something about her. Those green eyes. He wants to stand there, in front of her, and ask her inane questions until his shift is mercifully over and he can go home and go to bed.

Thumb retreats behind the counter to the grill. Omelet, eggs, hashbrowns. He gets the edges crispy brown but not burnt. He's good at this. He loads the hot plates onto his arms, returns to their booth. They're hunched over their table, talking in hushed voices. She has a canvas tote bag on her lap. Thumb traces the outline of something stacked, crisp in the bag, with his eyes. His fingers twitch. It's money. She is holding a tote bag with stacks of green bills rubber banded together in her lap. He can't see inside the bag, but he knows. He is never wrong about this sort of thing. He isn't surprised. He took this job to avoid trouble but it always seems to find him.

She notices him eyeing her bag and shifts her body away from him, just slightly. He sets their food down in front of them and backs away quickly. He doesn't want trouble but the thing is. The thing is. Stacks and stacks of money would solve a lot of problems. He wished he knew how much was in the bag. Fifty thousand? Ten thousand? Would it be worth it, what he wanted to do, had done before, was capable of doing?

The clock reads five and the couple is still sitting at the table. They're whispering, voices like static, indecipherable and irritating, and this bothers Thumb. He wants to be in on the scheme, he wants to be part of it, too. But mostly he wants them to leave so he can go home at 6 AM and shut his eyes and forget about the stacks of money pressing against the fabric of that tote bag, almost erotic.

"Hey. Can I get some more coffee?"

It's the girl. Her voice is raspy and he can't tell if it's from lack of sleep or love of cigarettes or just how she speaks.

He picks up the pot of coffee with the orange handle that indicates decaf and carries it over. He likes playing little tricks like this.

He pours the thick black coffee into her mug wordlessly.

"Thanks."

Thumb nods, returns the coffee to its machine, and leans against the counter behind the register. Maybe if they notice him standing here, they'll take the hint. The tote bag is beneath the table now, between the girl's feet which are clad in ugly brown clogs like something a nurse would wear.

He needs to take a piss and he needs to get away from the temptation of that bag of money. Thumb unties his apron and pushes into the bathroom which smells like bleach. He considers himself in the mirror. He looks tired. Not as tired as the girl with the money on the other side of the door, but tired. Much older than his thirty years. His dark hair looks slept on, rough. His stubble masks the scar on his cheek, the crescent like a dimple inflicted on him. He splashes tap water on his face and tries to make a decision. Will he, won't he? He could start a fire, grab the money, hit the road and never turn back. He could clear their plates, bring them a check, let it go.

Thumb hears a knock on the door.

"Just a minute," he says.

"Let me in."

It's the girl.

Thumb, curious, unlocks the door. She pushes the door open, walks in the bathroom, pulls it closed behind her. She does not have the bag of money. Thumb wonders where it is.

"You disappeared," she whispers.

Thumb's back pressed against the sink. This was an amateur move, he thinks, every cell of his body vibrates with regret, never trap yourself, never get yourself in a room that you can't escape from, when the girl with the green eyes hooks a finger onto the collar of his shirt.

His thoughts stop running. For a second, it's quiet. He's safe from the buzz of the lights and the sticky counters. She pulls him towards her, or maybe she pushes herself towards him, and suddenly it is hands in hair, hands on hips. She bites his bottom lip and he pulls her closer to him. Closer.

Five minutes or an hour or his entire life, he isn't sure how much time passes and doesn't care, she pulls back.

"I know it was decaf, asshole," she says, but smiles. She turns, slips through the door, and Thumb is alone again. The door closes quietly behind her.

Stuart Pennebaker is a writer who lives in Brooklyn. You can find her writing emails about books: https://disconapbooks.substack.com/ or on Instagram: https://www.instagram.com/stuartpennebaker/.

Crazy Diamond | Nicholas Barnes

NastyaSensei via Pexels

I feel for him and I feel like him. There was nothing he could say. I feel so sorry for the man. And how he lost his friend. There was nothing he could do. You could see it in his eyes. His hair looked grayer. He became what he felt. He became grief. And death. Death permeated his cells. Decay withered his bloodstream. Narrowed his tubes. Frightened his nerves. But gave him something to fear. Don't go near the water. The pool's too deep on that end. What did you expect? Spark spark steel wool battery spark. Fire spark light spark love spark feeling. It's love. That's what the music carried. Love is a horse and love is a rider. Love needs love to carry on. In the rain in the storm. In the tempest tossed and torn. Love moves on and leaves you. Carries on with a new lover. Love needs a lover. Love needs an affair. Love needs something. Autumn in the air. Piper pied piper. Rats running rats falling. Pied piper pied runner. Peter pickle pumpkin piper. Demand that I interpret my everyday mundane through crayon-colored raindrops. I would happily meet those demands. Because I dream in gray cloudy gray. Maybe black and white. I know what hues are in my dreams. But I can't see them even though I'm saying them in my head. Song love love logic song love love means. Ends means ends love love ends. Love ends actually. Never. Love continues after death. During death. And before. Especially before. When the mind and body work in tandem to show it in the eyes of those wayward strangers. Needing food needing water. Needing shelter needing song. Song you are my diet pill that replaces all of those things. Fortify me like morning cereal. Song fill my bars with your bones. Do battle with the air. Do battle with the atoms. Force them and bend them. If you know you're feeding love then you know they

will thank you. Don’t ask just play. Don’t ask just speak. Speak your words speak your poems. Just like he did. Love him love his music. Love his song music love. And continue his song. In the loving air. Today. Play it.

Nicholas Barnes earned a Bachelor of Arts in English at Southern Oregon University. He enjoys music, museums, movie theaters, and rain. His least favorite season is summer. @ColesWordsPoet.

Moonlight | Louis Boyd

Nothing Ahead via Pexels

In moonlight Black boys look Blue
Touched by Mothers soft glow
We are luminous
But this retrograde
Got this blue boy all types of confused
Because things that came easy
Aren’t clicking the same
And my person
Not feeling her status is more than name
So this Blue boy tries to give Mama Moon her glow back
Because I don’t want to be Blue anymore
I need my Sunshine to cover this skin
I need her smile
I need her warmth
Blue too cold

Instagram: Writing4purpose

Twitter: jaytha_griot

fly me to the moon, frank sinatra | Ashley Varela

via Pixabay

the earth assures me
there are other things to discuss
besides love:

cavities in the atmosphere,
theft of glacier,
dying sea turtles.

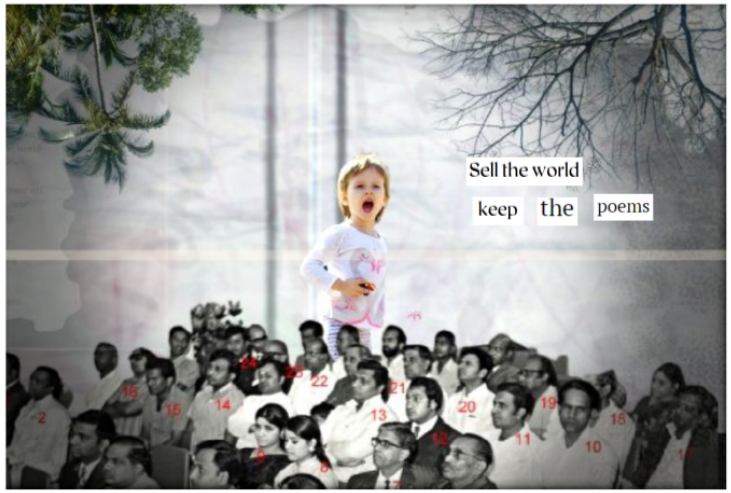
how right she is.

how right she is — & how little i care

Ashley Varela (they/them) is a queer writer & author based in Seattle, Washington.

Social: @ashleyvarela_

non existent | Chidambar Navalgund

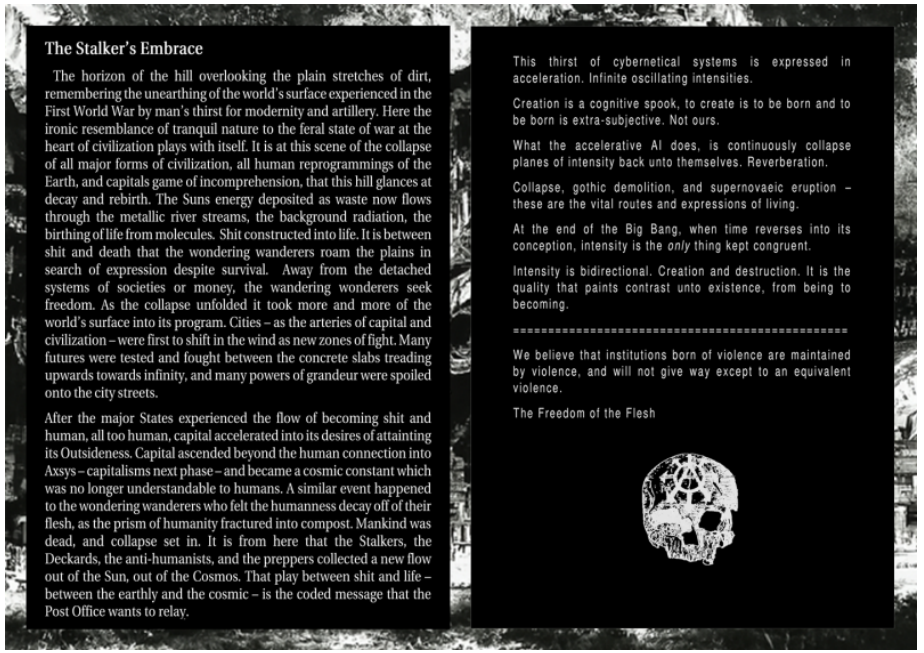


via Chidambar Navalgund

Chidambar is human. On Instagram – @chidambar_n

Nihil-Creation | Cyber Necropolis

via Cyber Necropolis



[TRANSCRIPTION]

The Stalker's Embrace

The horizon of the hill overlooking the plain stretches of dirt, remembering the unearthing of the world's surface experienced in the First World War by man's thirst for modernity and artillery. Here the ironic resemblance of tranquil nature to the feral state of war at the heart of civilization plays with itself. It is at this scene of the collapse of all major forms of civilization, all human reprogrammings of the Earth, and capitals game of incomprehension, that this hill glances at decay and rebirth. The Suns energy deposited as waste now flows through the metallic river streams, the background radiation, the birthing of life from molecules. Shit constructed into life. It is between shit and death that the wondering wanderers roam the plains in search of expression despite survival. Away from the detached systems of societies or money, the wandering wonderers seek freedom. As the collapse unfolded it took more and more of the world's surface into its program. Cities – as the arteries of capital and civilization – were first to shift in the wind as new zones of fight. Many futures were tested and fought between the concrete slabs treading upwards towards infinity, and many powers of grandeur were spoiled onto the city streets.

After the major States experienced the flow of becoming shit and human, all too human, capital accelerated into its desires of attainting its Outsideness. Capital ascended beyond the human connection into Axsys – capitalisms next phase – and became a cosmic constant which was no longer understandable to humans. A similar event happened to the wondering wanderers who felt the humanness decay off of their flesh, as the prism of humanity fractured into compost. Mankind was dead, and collapse set in. It is from here that the Stalkers, the Deckards, the anti-humanists, and the preppers collected a new flow out of the Sun, out of the Cosmos. That play between shit and life – between the earthly and the cosmic – is the coded message that the Post Office wants to relay.

This thirst of cybernetical systems is expressed in acceleration. Infinite oscillating intensities.

Creation is a cognitive spook, to create is to be born and to be born is extra-subjective. Not ours.

What the accelerative AI does, is continuously collapse planes of intensity back unto themselves. Reverberation.

Collapse, gothic demolition, and supernovaeic eruption – these are the vital routes and expressions of living.

At the end of the Big Bang, when time reverses into its conception, intensity is the only thing kept congruent.

Intensity is bidirectional. Creation and destruction. It is the quality that paints contrast unto existence, from being to becoming.

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We believe that institutions born of violence are maintained by violence, and will not give way except to an equivalent violence.

The Freedom of the Flesh

Twitter: @CyberNecropolis

We are Post-left Anti-Civ Anti-fascist Nihilists, Insurrectionary skin cyber-seceding towards machino-jouissance.

FIND US – THE POST OFFICE

Better go dance with her | Sharni Wilson

via Pixabay

Better go dance with her

You are someone who must be forgotten. A drink to be gulped down under cover of dark; an empty bottle pushed into the bin in the morning, stuffed down deep under sheaves of junk mail and squashed cans.

The other girls he'd admitted to with pride: the right clothes, schools, families. When you met his family, the one poised to follow you was already there, elegantly reclined into the chaise longue. Clearly a young woman to be lingered over, held in the mouth, considering top notes of violets, black cherries. Barely a wobble when you arrived.

'Better go dance with her,' he said, and left you where you stood, but she was too busy breaking into pirouettes, doing the swing, the conga, the merengue, the waltz, tango and foxtrot, partners galore: she refused.

Even when not there she loomed large.

And you, shrinking small, dwindled further by the whirling bodies, the unfamiliar food. Forcing down pate like catmeat

salty on the tongue, pretending to like it. Your presence tolerated with blank-eyed lassitude.

You realised it might be better to leave right then and there. If only you had.

Instead, you invent a new move.

Wanna dance?

Pas de deux, you sweep her off her feet into an overhead lift, drawing all eyes—her body arched into the same arabesque she'd been holding, but for the first time she sweats.

Let's dance, girl.

Her fouetté turns falter, turn into piqués, wander sloppily across the floor, lead her slinking off stage left with no partner to lean on, and the followspot swings towards you. You are now her. Over this impossible brightness you can't see him. It was never about him.

The other girls fill the audience, as you curtsy low with a gracious smile, and the applause and flower throwing begins.

Sharni Wilson is an Aotearoa New Zealand writer and a literary translator from the Japanese. Her work, including this piece, has appeared in a few places before. @sharniw sharniwilson.com

As We Part For the Birth | Johanna Schotanus

Markus Spiske via Pexels

If the knife dictates we part for the birth of a story, I fold the laundry.

I tie together the sinking feeling in your gut and the stones inside my shoe and mash together that droopy aloe vera from Ikea with an overripe kiwi using a spatula caked with two weeks' worth of unwashed dishes.

A bite would push towards duty.

The stench of the fruit splitting on my tongue, sourly falling apart, surely crushed by muscle, carries over to the next room, where rejection predicts movement.

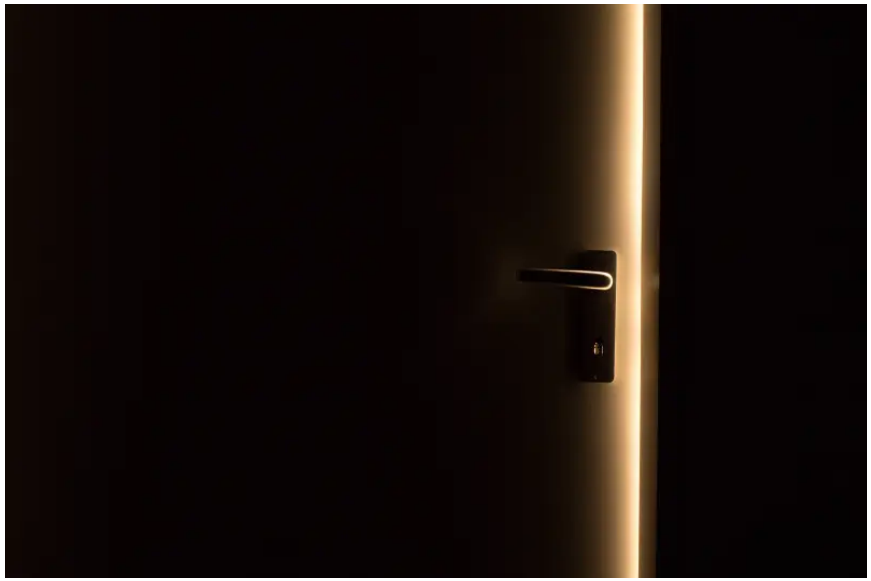
When I spit it out, you listen.

And I do the laundry.

I'm not one to argue with a knife.

Johanna Schotanus is a queer poet and gender studies grad. She is fascinated by shame, light and the process of creation. You can find her at joisfeelingthings.tumblr.com for the time being.

Be Happy to Leave. | Micah George



lalesh aldarwish via Pexels

Be happy to leave
Leave when you feel like it
Leave because your body says so
Leave because the calm is gone
Leave to honor your spirit being
Leave because respect for yourself is greater than the opinions of another of yourself.
Leave to heal faster, do not stay, you waste away even more
Leave now.

@DearMicahGeorge on Twitter

Micah George on Facebook

Nigerian poet.

Meeting My Girlfriend's Family for the First Time | Melissa Elmes

Roger Johansen via Pexels

Don't worry, she said, *they'll love you*.

I wasn't worried they wouldn't love me, I wanted to tell her, but that they would. To bits.

Don't worry, she said, *they're kind*.

I wasn't worried they wouldn't be kind, I wanted to tell her, but that they'd kill me with kindness.

Don't worry, she said as I gnawed my fingernails and tried to still the churning in my gut.

I couldn't tell her I was scared; that would be a dealbreaker. This was the price of loving her.

I trembled at the loud barking on the other side of the door.

Melissa Ridley Elmes is a Virginia native currently living in Missouri in an apartment that delightfully approximates a hobbit hole. Twitter, Instagram @MRidleyElmes

How did you get it? | Fabiano Colucci

Ray Bilcliff via Pexels

As the Princess was approaching her private room, she heard a strikingly sinister noise coming from her left.

That noise did not seized her aback, but who or what could have been wandering around the castle in the middle of the night?

She definitely had the check out what was going on, and, as she stepped into that room, she noticed a penumbral figure holding a knife she knew well enough to recognize it from its silhouette.

«What ...» she said convinced it was one more attempt at murdering her. However, the one holding it was one of the young adventurers she was hosting, who pointed the blade towards her left arm.

«That is my punishment,» whispered the young woman, trembling, with a heartbroken voice tone.

Having approached her, the princess noticed that she did not resemble the sweet and kind wanderer she had met, but a sleepless demon whose face was staring at the abyss.

«For they are dead, and I am not» said again, as she put the knife closer and closer.

The Princess, however, reached her arm just in time to take it away before she could have done something terrible. The woman did not realize it was Her Grace herself, and felt scared to hear her loud voice shouting: «Stop!»

That knife was warm and sweaty, and she did not felt great while holding it, but she was more focused on her trembling guest.

«How did you get it?» asked with an irritated voice tone. The young woman sat closer to the wall, still confused.

Thus, she repeated her question, with a much louder voice. «*HOW DID YOU GET IT*?»

After swallowing, the woman started kneeling down to the ground, afraid of even looking at her. «I found it laying on the ground, and I just considered taking it.»

The Princess looked at it. One of her most precious weapons, who were rarely left outside of her private room and it was just there, on the ground, waiting for something bad to happen. She could not figure out what to say or think.

«I am so focused on what's going on that I let something like this happen ...» uttered as she turned the knife upside down, to hold it by the blade. It took a few seconds before blood started coming out of her hand. The young woman was shocked, but Her Grace was not.

«Princess, why are you letting yourself bleed?» asked, still trembling, but now standing in front of her. They were almost the same height, and so they looked at each other in the eyes.

«You have no idea how much of my own blood has been spilled by this knife!»

She was now remembering all the times others found her in the same position as the young woman was earlier, doing the very same gestures.

She recognized immediately that moment. Darkness, tears, negative thoughts, pain, agony. It was almost as she was looking into a mirror that, for some reason, was depicting her as an elegant Japanese princess.

«How is that possible?» she asked. «You have done so much, and everybody loves you. How can you hate yourself to the point of injuring you?»

The Princess looked up, grinning to the golden painting on the ceiling. It was too dark, but she was sure that wolf was judging her, as she has always done.

She saw herself as well in that stranded young woman whose soul was fighting too many inner demons.

«I heard you saying *for they are dead, and I am not*»

Those words were still echoing inside of her, who wanted so desperately to say she was used to say so. Yet, every time, that torture still hurts, a warning to never forget.

«I want you to understand I know what it feels like»

The Princess approached her other arm towards her, gently hugging her delicate body and making sure she was breathing cautiously.

Shortly after that, the two women were in another place, sitting down, talking about their demons. The young woman was remembering that night. As usually, a part of her would have preferred not to think about it, but she always awarded the one that was telling her it was the right thing to do.

«Everything I knew, the streets I called home, those who saw me growing up ... everything disappeared in the blink of an eye, replaced by flares, death and devastation»

The Princess looked at her face, perceiving every single feeling. Those were terrible memories, but she found it fascinating that she was seeing a part of herself.

«I could tell you about what happened to me with those very words,» she said, looking at the fire emitted by the torches placed across the room. «Our eyes have seen more that they should have had»

The young woman closed her eyes, concentrating to her breathing. Those flames surrounding her were not trying to harm her, but to make her feel warmer in that cold night.

The Princess was smiling again. «Knowing that this group of foreign adventurers includes a girl that shared terrible memories with me helps me comprehending we truly are in the same side»

A deep friendship was about to be born, but the young woman was surprised by the motivations. «Are we actually bonding over our tragedies?»

As the Princess nodded, she laughed. A strange reaction, but she had a good reason. «My big sister has always told me about this place, and she was sure I would have become

friends with its Princess» she said, almost hearing her saying "I told you so" with a smile on her face.

«I wonder what her face will be when I'll get home to tell her about it» That sentence astounded her. «So you are sure you will get home»

As her eyes were getting wetter, she looked up, still smiling at the irony of what she is about to say. «This is the relatively good side of my mind: I know will only die when fate will decide I'll deserve to»

Then, she pointed out the knife, put on the ground right beside the Princess. «And, considering you stopped me from doing something bad with it, I don't think that moment is close»

The Princess took it from the ground, and, as she was standing up, she said: «come with me in my private room»

The young woman widened her eyes. «What?»

«You need some rest, and our guest rooms are quite far from here»

The young woman swallowed. «Do you really want me to sleep in your room?»

The Princess was looking at the cut she made as she held the knife. «Every morning, right before dawn, I sit on the ground and meditate, so it's not like I would have used my bed anyway»

The young woman didn't need to be told so twice, and she followed the princess, hoping that such a rare occasion would have given her some temporary harmony.

An Italian university student who loves learning and creating, because every moment is worth imagining for.

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UNHANDING | Muhammed Olowonjoyin

Soubhagya Maharana via Pexels

It's noon. You search for ways to unstitch a heart
From your heart. You're drowning in a dream of breaking.
You hum wishes

To the leftovers of encouragement on a plate of ennui adorned
With your tears—an unholy communion of disillusionment.

This is how you wish you could unhand yourself
From loss, & unlove & unwane &

Flee from the bayonets poking your body from the hands of every
Preternatural voice that calls you unworthy.
//
There is fire in the wind & that's how you know it's night
In a country trying to quell herself

From war. You wear yourself into rosewater & you
Spread your arms to the raging sky—waiting for a body to

Fall into your arms, & let you squeeze some of your life into it.
This is how you say everything that leaves

Wanders in the stratosphere

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*Muhammed Sanni Olowonjoyin, TPC III, has poems published in Brittle Paper, Aôthen Magazine, Acropolis Journal, The Kalahari Review, Salamander Ink Magazine, and elsewhere. He tweets @APerSe_*

Net Velocity: Zero | Julien Laforest

Henry & Co. via Pexels

The sky is white here. So is the ground. And the expanse goes on for miles. At least I think it does, I haven't managed to walk more than a couple of feet in one direction or another without giving up on looking for some sort of end. I was frantic at first. Running back and forth, like a fly stuck under a glass. I don't even know if I'm back where I started or on an entirely different plane. I mean plane as in a surface, not like the ones that fly or anything. Do people even fly anymore? Planes must be outdated by now, right? I mean, how long has it been? Am I even alive?

If this white expanse is the afterlife, it must be some sort of hell. Despite the apparent lack of hellfire and demons, this perpetual quiet and nothingness is slowly driving me insane.

Driving. I remember I was behind the wheel just a second ago. I forget where I was going, but I was on the road, I'm sure of it. But how'd I end up here? I can't remember, my memory's shot.

I tried talking once, you know. Before that, I tried to whistle, I even stomped my foot on the ground. But I didn't hear anything. Absolutely nothing. Not a word or a sound, not even my breath. Only my thoughts and a quiet steady rhythm that I could only hope was my heartbeat.

I could smell and see though. I can't stare too far in one direction or I start getting dizzy, my eyes start to hurt, and I feel nauseous. My mouth fills with bitter saliva and I start to gag. I always shut my eyes before anything worse can happen. The smell reminded me of chlorine or disinfectant. A subtle sweet smell, almost like lime or bergamot, broke through and struck my nose every so often. It was as if the whole space had been scrubbed down with antibacterial soap and spritzed with air freshener. Like some sort of hospital. I've never been one to get sick, at least I don't think so. I mean I had the occasional cold, where my mom would bring me some chicken soup. Now my fiance does that for me. Wait no, she wasn't. I hadn't given her the ring yet. I never really found the right time to ask, so it was stuck collecting dust in my dresser drawer.

My mom always said that about me. I was always too hung up on the 'right' time. I settled too much or waited too long. The moment I found a steady job, I went for it. It's been almost six years now working at that accounting firm, and I still hate it.

I couldn't find any walls, and there isn't a ceiling as far as I know. The ground is steady – maybe I could dig my way out. I didn't have much in the way of tools but I figured my hands were as good a tool as any.

It was like oobleck or quicksand. I hadn't noticed it before, since I'd been walking for so long. But the moment I stopped to dig, I started to sink. Any force I struck it with was met with stark resistance, but when I worked a little gentler or just not at all, it was as if the floor itself was swallowing me up. I tried to pull my legs out, but to no avail.

It was an hour or so before I fell through. Not drowned but fell through.

I was falling.

Cool air rushed past my face and pushed against my back as if desperately trying to lift me back up, almost like I was floating over a block of solid air. I didn't know when or if I would ever reach the ground, so I wasn't scared, just anxious. I started to tear up, the salty water burning my eyes. As I brought my hand towards my face to wipe away the tears, my back slammed against the ground. Followed by my head hitting the floor with a sickening crack. My body curled up, unmoving and flooded with pain.

It was hours, maybe a day before I managed to stand, finding myself in some desolate expanse, bereft of color or sound.

The sky is white here. So is the ground. And the expanse goes on for miles.

Julien Laforest was born in Haiti and currently lives in Connecticut. He is attending Southern Connecticut State University.

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Salt Water | Alex Sandoni

Suzy Hazelwood via Pexels

This is how it started.

We were sitting at the coffee table, on the couch, our plates on our legs and the TV on.

We used to have dinner that way for years, before we had kids, then decided to be proper adults and sit at the table at every meal. We started eating on the couch again when both Rebecca and Christopher moved out.

That evening, we were having pasta. "Nothing too sophisticated", she would say every time she was making something. Everything always tasted amazing, but when we sat down and started eating, the food was bland, different.

"Oh no, I forgot to put salt in the water."

That's when she started losing her memory. For multiple evenings, she forgot to put salt in the water, until we realized something must have been off. She would call me twice to tell me the same exact thing or feed the cat again after Desdemona had just eaten and the bowl was empty. Just small things, but when the doctor confirmed it, she became much more aware of it. I remember looking at her while she was cooking: she was holding the salt jar in her hands and staring at it, trying to think as hard as she could whether she had already used it or not.

"I'm sorry if I already said it..." started being the beginning of so many of her phone calls, until she forgot about the diagnosis too and everything became new again.

One Christmas, I got the same gift three times, in three different wrapping papers. They were all in different hiding spots and when we realized, we just exploded in laughter. I just couldn't tell her the truth and break her heart.

And she never broke mine. In the hospital, on one of her last nights, fully aware of her condition, she told me "My memory is bad, but I know I will never forget *you*."

My dear, even though you're not here anymore, you are the one we will never forget. You still live, in all our memories.

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https://www.instagram.com/alexsandoni/

The Knowledge Portal | Rick Danforth

RODNAE Productions via Pexels

The knowledge portal was a one-way looking glass that would provide Levant the wizard with all the information he could ever dream of, or his money back within thirty days.

Unfortunately, it wouldn't turn on, no matter how much Levant kicked it. The runic circle on the wall just refused to spark into life. It was showing the same magical ability as the bacon sandwich Levant had ingested for breakfast. Although the latter had proved more useful.

Muttering curses, Levant turned to the crystal ball on the corner table under assorted detritus. After pushing a pile of clothes to the floor, he gave it a couple of slaps until a light blue gas filled the ball. Then he concentrated on whom he wanted.

A voice from the ball said, "Hello, Emporium of Wonders."

"Hello, this is Levant. Your Knowledge Portal won't activate."

"No problem, sir. Just to confirm, did you follow the instruction scroll that accompanied your purchase?"

"I'm a wizard of the ninth level," said Levant in a cool, calculated tone that spoke more than anger ever could. "Of course, I read the bloody scroll. You don't get this far without a *perfect* memory and attention to detail."

"Are the conduit runic circles aligned?" asked the infuriatingly patient voice.

"Obviously. I have read this scroll all morning and I'm not even convinced you followed Wodeleys Sequence at all."

"Emporium of Wonders is committed to following at standards, sir."

"Yet I still don't have a functioning portal." Levant harrumphed. He'd worked for a casting shop, he knew the score. God only knew what kind of brainless minion had assembled the portal.

"We are very sorry to hear that, sir. Is the circle placed on a wall with a clear gap on all sides?"

"Obviously, I'm not an idiot. I know how it is, I worked in a casting shop as a student. This is some rush job to get it out the door fast."

"I assure you, sir, it's not. How about we send someone to your address?"

"Fantastic. When would that be?"

"Please answer the door." The crystal ball faded, and Levant swore. He had been expecting to sit and wait, moaning as time dragged like a brick on a leash. Not this. After hurriedly sweeping clothes into the corner and throwing the oldest plates of food out of the window, he answered the door.

"Good day, sir." A bright and obscenely cheerful witch smiled at him. "I'm Outre from Emporium Support."

"Come in." Levant waved a hand towards the portal. "Sorry about the mess."

"Don't worry. Many of our clients have simi..." Outre trailed off as she stepped in something. "What was that?"

"Plate of beans. Sorry. I'll get that." Levant awkwardly lifted Outre's leg, and wiped a few beans off her shoe onto the plate before frisbeeing it through the window where it would become somebody else's problem.

"Where is the portal?" asked Outre, only showing a minor crack in her optimism.

Levant pointed to the portal in the hope to shift the focus away from his living arrangements. "I cannot get this bloody thing to work. Can you have a look?"

Outre turned to peer at it, leaning in as she gazed at the circle of runes. "Is this the Knowledge Portal third edition with extra glyph paddle unit?"

"It is," said Levant, proud of spending the extra two crowns a month.

"I think you did the last rune upside down."

Levant reached out and inverted the offending rune. Immediately there was a *poof*, and a green shimmering portal appeared between the runes. "Gods damn it. It's always some nonsense like this."

After a deep breath, Levant added, "Thank you kindly."

"You're welcome." Outre bobbed her head. "Would you like me to stay while you test it?"

"Too kind." Levant nodded, then turned back to the portal. "Knowledge Portal?"

"Yes?" asked a macabre, screeching voice from the inside of the portal.

"Can you tell me anything?"

"Yes. From the deepest pits of despair to the heavens themselves."

"Good." Levant sighed. His day was finally coming together properly. "Now where the bloody hell is my coin purse?"

Rick Danforth is an author from Yorkshire, England, where he works as a Systems Architect to fund his writing habit. He has had several short stories published in Etherea, Hexagon and others.

Gunmetal Grey | Lylia Lilac

Scott Webb via Pexels

"Eyes open, you've just been created." A gentle voice rippled through the air. "It's time to pick your color!"

His grey-blue eyes snapped open, his head inclining from its resting position as he took in the sight before him. A woman, wearing a pure white robe and a soft smile spread across young her face. Her eyes were a shade of clear blue and her golden curly hair cascaded down her shoulders. She made a quick gesture for him to follow her.

He stood from the wooden chair, one which he didn't realize he was sitting on, and moved around the small alabaster table which he had been leaning on. "Color?" He asked, testing out his voice for the first time. "What color?"

The woman simply let out a chuckle, not turning to meet his gaze before answering, "That's for you to choose." Her cheery reply revealed nothing to him and as he trailed behind her, he found himself observing their surroundings.

Long white corridors with windows taking up the entire walls as the artificial light seeped through. The crystals that hung above their heads were clear and reflected the light across the hallway, creating an ethereal atmosphere. The white and pale-yellow checkered tiles lined the never-ending floor, and as he looked up, he noticed the doors to a room unknown to him. The double doors lined with gold, arching over him and far too large for anything more than show.

As the woman pushed open the oversized double doors and there stood a room and a man just as ethereal as the hallway had been. The man stood before him with vivid brown eyes, white hair, and wrinkles from old age as he stared down at him. Wearing the same white robes as the woman, only now

decorated with golden lace, and holding a staff with three rings chained to the circular top of the staff. He held flickers of wisdom in his eyes and gentleness in his smile.

"Welcome." He began, his voice as powerful as an ocean storm but as calm and rhythmic as the changing of tides. "This is the beginning. The place where all beings begin. Our next question- our only question to you will determine your life and the path you are placed upon."

"But- what am I? Who am I? What am I doing here? Why don't I know anything other than the basics? Wha-" He asked before being stopped short by the man's raised hand.

"You ask far too many questions that you will know the answer to later. Now, think hard about my next question." He said blankly. "Which color do you wish for? Choose wisely."

Just then the man waved his hand, panels upon panels of colors came to life, floating above and around him as they spun into place. Thousands of several colors covering multiple spectrums were shown to him, his eyes flickering left and right before he said, "What are they called?"

The man bellowed out in laughter and shook his head in amusement.

This angered him, he wanted to know genuinely. There were too many factors he didn't understand, but as he raked over the thousands of options, he noticed a small number in the corner of each color. "What are those numbers for?"

"Now that I can answer. Those represent the number of people who have chosen that color."

He began to become dizzy. The several different shades and combinations were confusing him and the reason behind why the colors determined his life

made no sense to him. Why? Why? Why? He kept asking himself. He didn't understand and he desperately wanted to. It wasn't until he saw a color without a single number on it. It was blank, apart from the gunmetal grey color it gave off. He wondered why it was blank, had no one chosen it? Had it been a glitch in the system? Was that supposed to be his color?

He decided that instead of asking questions, he would act. No point in asking questions that weren't going to be answered right? He moved forward, raising his hand to the color and as it slowly descended downwards the man who answered very little questions began to physically panic.

"No! Not that one." He said, sweat beginning to bead down his forehead.

"Why?" He asked once more, this time out of spite.

The man could hear the challenge in his voice and as the color floated closer to his hands. The man could say nothing to him, nothing that could not be questioned and led eventually back to his hands on to undesired color. So, with nowhere to go, the man stood there, mouth agape and as he stuttered out a hesitant reply, the gunmetal grey color brushed across his fingers.

The man withdrew himself and looked away, seeming to barely hold himself together as all the other colors dispersed and faded into nothingness, the only thing left being the single panel with his chosen color. The woman, upon seeing the absence of a number on the color flinched and began to push herself farther and farther from the center of the room. The color began to morph and shift in above his curious open hands, not being able to choose a form.

"May the Gods curse your selfish, unforgiving, bastard soul." The man spat out as the color dispersed, shooting and bouncing across the white walls of the large room before merging once again with the choosers body.

The grey color liquifying and crawling all along his body, covering and seeping into his skin. Slowly glyphs and markings appeared all throughout his body, pulling itself to the surface and making itself known to the chooser and all those around him.

His body now covered in gunmetal grey colored glyphs of a language no on knew but himself and markings of patters long forgotten by all- he looked up to the man and glanced at the crying woman in the corner. His grey-blue eyes flickered back and forth before he looked back up at the man.

"Why?" He asked again.

"For you have managed to pull the balance between everything we have ever known with a simple question."

"And you with an answer you could not provide quickly enough." He said, turning from the man and walking towards the (now darkened) double doors. Pushing past them effortlessly as he marched onwards, to a path he was being guided to with the pull of his chosen color.

He reached the end of the hallway, from the room he had thought he had woken from, he realized that just beyond it was his path, his way to a world full of several different colors; just as diverse as the thousands he had to choose from. Just as he reached the beginning of his path, a song played for him.

He knew this song, from somewhere far beyond the reach of possible memory or imagination. One that played from the soul and was made real by the ethereal of the building he had just come from and the color he had chosen. Bells chimed in the distance, pulling together a mystical melody for him, almost saddened by his departure.

"Halt." Something whispered.

"Halt..." He repeated.

And with that he moved forward, descending to a world that he would shape for as long as he wished.

Turns out grey was his color after all.

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https://www.tumblr.com/lylia9000

The Prosperity and Downfall of Igor Ivanovich | Sofia Tantono

Najman Husaini via Pexels

If you turn on the news
as background noise
for when you're vacuuming
then you'd definitely know that
the ruble has plummeted
until it's worth less than
the in-game currency
of some random MMO
that nobody's played
since the early 2010s
but you probably don't know
about something else that fell
along with the Iron Curtain:
the population of cockroaches
in the former USSR.

A lot of smart people
have come up
with hypotheses
for why this happened,
but honestly?
They're not that important.
I'd much rather hear about
the life of Igor Ivanovich.

Igor had a nice life
in Soviet Russia.
That was a place
where a roach could work
and it meant something.
All he'd need to do was
visit the garbage chute dutifully
like an old woman prays
in front of an icon
and that was breakfast, lunch and dinner
sorted.
This was what Lenin dreamt of.
This was what the Bolsheviks bled and died for.
But then that revisionist Gorbachev came
that goddamn bird-shit-on-his-head capitalist
with his McDonald's and his Pizza Hut ad.
Both fast-food megacorps
with red dominating
their colour scheme.
Wasn't the red of the Motherland's flag enough?
That was the red of our heroes' blood, damn it,
and not the blood of those
imperialised in the Global South.
Bug sprays and fumes floated
on dreams of prosperity and freedom,
along with new ways of waste disposal.
I mean, every bigshot country
has to contribute a bit of plastic
to the world's oceans.
Well, Igor wouldn't have minded living in a shithole
as long as they left the garbage chutes alone!
With visions of his comrades piling up dead
like their human male counterparts
from war and vodka,
Igor left for Germany.
He heard West and East reunited last year,
but he didn't care—
I mean, it's kind of hard to
when you're missing out
on the economic miracle
like some East German
and your wife's just left you
for a fucking kraut
and your kids are shivering
from starvation
and you're one missed meal away
from eating them.

Last I heard of him, Igor
was thinking of trying
his luck at being a fighting roach.
He could stomach it, sure enough—
his countrymen practically fought
the Nazis by themselves!
And besides, there's never a shortage
of hoboes who bet on roaches
(both because hoboes have
nothing better to do
than betting on roaches
and also because capitalism
ensures that there'll never be
a hobo shortage).
See, that's the sort of thing
that has you looking up how long
cockroaches can last without
their heads and after that,
you wonder if their resilience
is a blessing or a curse,
especially when Igor's first fight
is against one twice his size.

Sofia Tantono is a writer based in Jakarta, Indonesia. Her work has appeared or is forthcoming in INCUBATE, āraśi and Proyek Utopia, among others. She can be found on Instagram @sofias.writing.

11:46 | Mackenzie Kemp

Tristan Pokornyi via Pexels

a body retreats into
bitter waters
each movement weak & unreliable

disillusionment
wraps around the brain
removing the taste of reality
and stripping the universe of its soul

all that remained
was simply
11:46

Mackenzie Kemp is an aspiring writer and poet. She can be found on Twitter @MackenzieKemp22.

English Class | Melissa Anderson

via Pixabay

The first day of class, he wore a suit, a black suit over a black button-down shirt and a purple tie. All the clothes hung from his frame as though he'd decided that morning to grab them out of his taller, broad-shouldered older brother's closet.

"I thought I should dress up today so no one would mistake me for a student," Mr. Briar said. Lara thought his face looked flushed, like he was overheated in the dark fabric, a stream of the hot September California sun shining from the window near the door of the classroom onto his white skin. The building didn't have air conditioning.

Mr. Briar looked younger than all the other teachers, but not quite young enough to be mistaken for a high schooler.

"How old are you?" Mike, the skater boy who sat next to Lara asked.

"I'm 25," he said. "This is my first year teaching solo so we are all freshmen in a way." He looked at Lara and she thought he winked, but it might have been the sunlight making him squint. The golden light cut across his face and the chalkboard, where he'd written his name. He had soft features and shaggy blond hair, and Lara thought he could have passed for early 20s, but not a teenager.

After that first week, he stopped trying to distinguish himself from his students and instead dove into trying to be their friend.

An early storm arrived, clouds funneling over the mountains on the west side of the campus, and they could see the rain coming down in sheets as it approached. The campus was filled with open space in the center with a grassy quad that transformed into a mud pit after the first hour. Lara stood huddled under an umbrella outside class with the other students while they waited for Mr. Briar.

She saw him running up the pavement dressed in faded jeans, ratty sneakers and a Led Zeppelin T-shirt. She thought he was rushing to let them out of the rain. But instead he dove headfirst into a mud puddle outside the English 1A room, the wet turf serving as a nature-made slip and slide.

"That was cool, right?" He grinned as he reached into his soaked jeans pocket for his keys. His shirt and pants dripped on the dingy carpet as they settled in for the second period class. "Guess I should have waited until closer to the end of the day to do that."

At the end of class he handed out their notebooks. On the first day of class he had told them they would spend the last 20 minutes of every class writing whatever they wanted to write.

"No prompt or parameters," he said. "Just whatever is on your mind."

Most of the students bought cheap one subject Mead notebooks in primary colors. Lara bought a notepad made from recycled paper with a plain tan cover she doodled on sometimes when she was organizing her thoughts.

"And here is yours, Ms. Eco-friendly," Mr. Briar said, when he put it down on her desk. He had goosebumps on his arms from the wet clothes and the image on his T-shirt was concealed by still damp mud.

Lara wanted to be a writer. She wrote poetry and bits of short stories in her notebooks.

Mr. Briar wrote back with a critique or advice on revisions, but mostly with encouragement.

She opened her notebook to read Mr. Briar's latest reply. *Lara, you always surprise me with your ability to write so well and to make me feel the gamut of human emotions with the stories and poems you write.* He wrote in red pen, the same color he used to grade tests, hisletters sharp and full of right angles. He filled half a page with his responses to her, or more. Lara glimpsed Mike's notebook page and saw the teacher had only written a couple sentences to the boy. She imagined Mr. Briar at home at his kitchen table before work with the pile of notebooks, a cup of coffee next to him, pausing when he got to hers. Giving her extra words, extra time. Extra thought.

She liked English class, but she especially liked the free tutorial period. The students were supposed to use it to visit classrooms where they needed help or to work on homework. But Mr. Briar let her and her friends who weren't even in his class come to his room to play poker or goof around.

Mr. Briar gave her a whole pack of the carbon copy tutorial passes, pre-signed.

"So you don't have to ask me everyday for a new one," he said.

She filled them out for herself, Jeannie and Gerald, two of her best friends. She didn't break rules often but she and her friends were good students who did their homework at home. Tutorial was wasted time for them, so it seemed only a slight indiscretion.

Her friend Gerald taught them all to play 5-Card Draw, but Mr. Briar taught them to play Omaha and Texas Hold 'Em. When Lara won a hand, he patted her on the shoulder.

"Good job, Lar-Bear," he said. "I should take you to a tournament with me in Vegas."

He guffawed at his own joke and winked at her when he'd walked away to check on other students who were actually there for tutoring.

Some days Mr. Briar brought in a guitar and played songs while they wrote in their journals. He told the students the names of singers and bands she'd never heard of like Cat Stevens "Wild World" and "Dust in the Wind" by Kansas.

As the semester went on, he shared with Lara through her notebook that he was divorced and he had a daughter who was 6.

If anyone ever hurt her, I would kill them, he wrote.

Lara's entries became more like letters to Mr. Briar. She wrote about the crush she had on a senior boy who would never notice her, how jealous she was of her best friend Jeannie who all the boys loved and how she thought no one would ever like her.

Just give it time, Lara. You are amazing, but high school boys might not notice it. I do.

Her friends were all into theater and talked her into helping with the stage crew for a senior play. She agreed because the boy she liked was in the play and she could watch him from backstage. Mr. Briar was there, too, as a faculty advisor.

"Which boy is the one you like?" he asked Lara. "I'll put in a good word for you."

A few weeks into rehearsals, Lara went backstage to get some props for the second act and she found Mr. Briar sitting on the floor in the dark.

"Are you okay?" she asked him.

He looked up at her and she could see even in the dim light that he had been crying. "My ex is moving out of state," he said. "I'm never going to see my daughter again." Lara sat down criss crossed on the black backstage floor with him. She heard the muffle of the actors taking a break in front of the curtain and a strip of light leaked in from a door in the back where some of the other stage crew members snuck out for fresh air.

"I'm sorry," she said. "I'm sure you'll see her for summers and holidays, at least." Mr. Briar started crying again, his shoulders heaving with sobs even as no sound came out, his face contorted with sorrow. He put his arm around her and pulled her closer so they were facing each other now. He buried his face into her shoulder and she wondered if she smelled like sweat or like the Teen Spirit deodorant she'd put on that morning. She could smell his cologne, something like Cool Water, and his warm breath smelled sweet. Lara let him hold her and cry for five minutes, then pulled away.

"I need to get the stage ready for Act 2. I'm sorry about your daughter." At the end of rehearsal, Mr. Briar asked if she needed a ride home. "No, Gerald's mom is picking us up so I'm good," she said.

A few days later after rehearsal, Mr. Briar gave Lara a little stuffed horse dressed in a T-shirt with the school logo and name printed on it.

"As a thank you for being there for me the other day," he said. "I really appreciate it. You are wise beyond your years."

Lara took the horse home and put it on a shelf. It watched her when she did her homework and as she fell asleep at night. Mr. Briar's attention had made her feel special all year, but now another feeling took over, a wariness that settled in her chest and never quite left.

As closing night approached, she and her friends looked forward to the cast and crew party. The Friday of the last show, they sat in tutorial playing poker.

"You should ask that guy you like to be your date at the party," Mr. Briar said.

"Yeah, that's a great idea," Jeannie said. "You know he'll be there so he can't make up an excuse about not going."

"Come on, stop joking around," Lara said. "I don't want him to know. It will be weird." But Mr. Briar grabbed a notebook and started writing in his hard-angle letters.

Dear Evan, I have been in love with you all year. Please be my date for the cast and crew party tonight. Love, Lara

Lara tried to grab the letter away but Mr. Briar folded it up and tossed it to Jeannie.

"You can deliver it tonight," he said.

Lara didn't think Jeannie would really do it, but at the theater before the curtain opened her friend handed the slightly crumpled piece of binder paper to the boy.

"It's from my friend Lara," Jeannie said, but the boy just tossed it into a trash bin without opening it.

Lara was glad he didn't read it, but a mix of rejection and betrayal simmered in her gut.

During English the next week, Lara wrote her shortest notebook entry yet.

It wasn't your place or Jeannie's to tell anyone how I felt about them. I hate you for doing that. It was just a crush...I didn't want to date him and I knew he didn't like me, but now I can't even be around him. You ruined the rest of the year for me. I don't even want to be in this class anymore, she wrote.

Lara had calmed down by the next time she had English midweek, but she didn't want to see what Mr. Briar had written back.

Lara, I will never let you get away. I will track you down with Gerald and Jeannie, and spray you with whipped cream and put a cherry on top because you are the sweetest thing in my life right now. Don't leave me, he wrote.

His writing was messier than usually as though it had been rushed or he was overly emotional when he responded. The words about whipped cream made Lara pause and the wary feeling deepened.

She started writing less in her notebook and Mr. Briar started writing more and more, as though she were his confidant for all the things that were going wrong in his life. Then on a Wednesday evening when she'd stayed home sick with a cold, the phone rang at home and she answered it from her bedroom with the door closed.

"Hello?" she said, thinking it would be Jeannie or Gerald, or someone else from class.

"Hey, Lara-Bear," the voice said, the words coming out slow and thick.

"Who is this?" she asked.

"It's Miles," the voice answered. "Mr. Briar. But call me Miles. Why weren't you in class today, Lara? I just want to check on you. Make sure you are okay."

Mr. Briar's voice sounded strained and his words stumbled out in a different cadence than usual.

She sat on the edge of her bed with the phone to her ear.

"I'm fine," she said. "I just have a cold."

"I hope you are back on Friday," he said. "I wrote you a lovely note and I want you to read it."

"Yeah, I should be back," she said. "Have you been drinking, Mr. Briar? Are you okay?" "Yeah, I'm great. I'm great."

"Okay, I need to go, there is someone on the call waiting," Lara said, and hung up the phone.

She called Jeannie.

"Mr. Briar just called me at home," she said.

"Why? Was he giving you the homework assignment from class since you were sick?" Jeannie asked.

"No, he said he was checking on me," she said. "But I did kind of hang up on him quickly. Maybe he was just calling about homework. But he sounded weird, like he might have been drunk."

"He's cool, Lara," Jeannie said. "I'm sure it was nothing."

Lara went back to school the next day and it wasn't one of the days she had English. She lingered at the end of French class with Mme. Boucher. She didn't mean to say anything, but her mouth started moving on its own.

"If a teacher called a student drunk at their home, that would be bad, right?" Lara asked.

"Did a teacher call you at home?" Mme. Boucher asked her.

"Mr. Briar did," she said. "He said because I was out sick and he was checking on me. It's probably no big deal, right? I mean, I don't know for sure he was drunk. He just sounded weird."

Lara never saw Mr. Briar again. When she got to class on Friday a substitute teacher stood at the front of the class and the principal stood with her.

"Students, I want to introduce Ms. Callahan. She'll be finishing out the year with you," the principal said. "We only have a couple months to go and they'll fly by with her."

After the principal left, Ms. Callahan, who had gray hair and wrinkles around her eyes, handed back their notebooks.

"We don't have time for these writing journals," she said. "Looks like you guys are a bit behind the last three units we need

to get through this year."

Lara didn't ask Mme. Boucher or anyone else what happened to Mr. Briar. Rumors circulated among the students.

"I heard he kissed a girl outside the gym late at night," Mike whispered at the end of class to Lara.

Another kid said, "No, I heard he had sex with a senior from the volleyball team in his car."

Someone else said he had been caught drinking on campus.

"He was always way too happy to be here," Mike said. "Maybe he was just drunk all the time."

Lara didn't share her little bit of truth and she never knew if it was her question to Mme. Boucher that got him fired or if one of the rumors was true.

She took her notebook home, but she didn't open it up to the back, to the last page where Mr. Briar had written the last note to her while she was out sick. She didn't want to know what he had to say.

Lara put the notebook and the little stuffed horse in the trash, not the wastebasket in her room or the one under the sink in the kitchen. She carried them out to the dumpster in the corner of the parking lot of the apartment complex, where no one would ask her questions about it.

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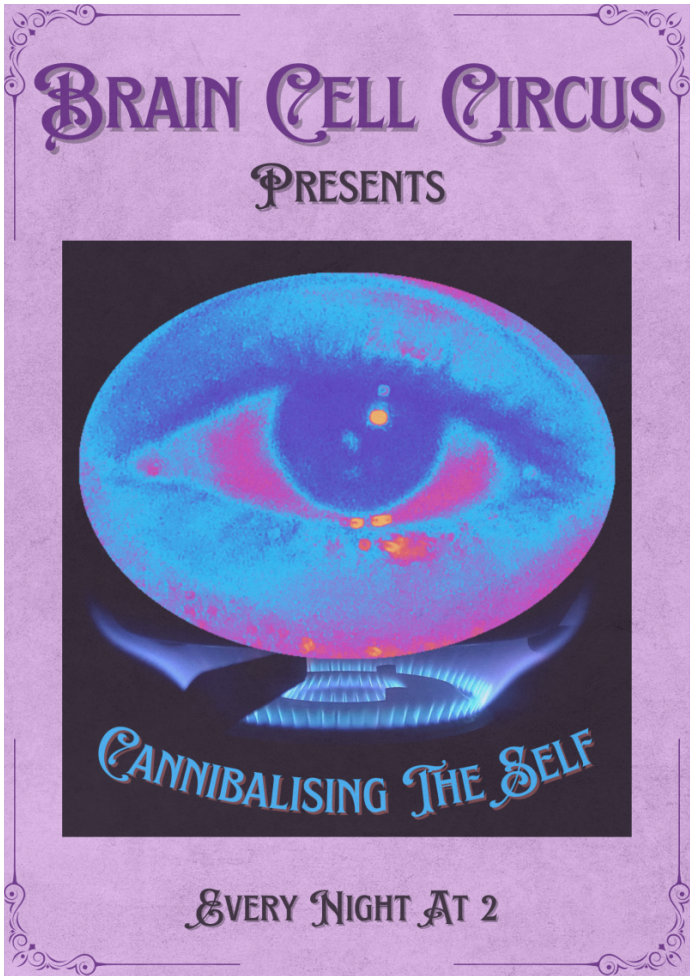

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Hoods Up | Vivian Holland

via Pixabay

From Tenafly High School's 2014-2015 issue of Omega Magazine

The first thing I recalled after waking up this morning was that we're building molecular models out of wooden balls in chemistry today. This means there's a likely chance I'll actually be helping my lab partner instead of standing around, wearing stupid looking

goggles and acting completely useless. Good news, I guess.

The second thing I recalled was the boy in the red-and-blue hoodie in my Chinese class, twirling the pull-strings on his sweatshirt absent-mindedly. I was thinking about how they looked just like giant shoelaces when our teacher, *Wang Lao Shi,* announced that she was canceling our oral exam. That was very good news.

Now, I'm standing in an empty bathroom at school, scowling at myself in the smudged-up mirror. My face looks like it got run over by the back of a pickup truck– nothing unusual there. I have a bad case of bed-head, since I didn't bother to comb my hair. It's spiked up so much that I look like an anime character, or a brunette elf. I stick my hand under the leaky faucet to wet my fingertips, then run them through my hair, spiking it up even more. I shoot me-in-the-mirror a crazy grin, and she grins back from behind the glass. Time to go.

Ni hao, Lao Shi! I stroll into Chinese several minutes late, backpack hanging over my shoulder nonchalantly. I make eye contact with the boy in the hoodie, who's sitting next to the only empty chair in the class. Maybe he smiles a little, or maybe he just has a minor facial spasm while coincidentally looking in my direction. He's wearing the white hoodie with red sleeves today.

Thankfully, the teacher ignores me and does not say, "Lona, *ni wei shen me chi dao?"* which is the Chinese variation of, "Lona, why the heck are you late, you terrible student?" I slip past the front of the room, unscathed.

Once I'm in my seat, I pull my hood up and become invisible. This sweatshirt– my favorite– is a treasure I retrieved from the men's section of Hollister, where all the women's sweatshirts are flimsy and tight and don't come in maroon. Even though it's size small, the end of the zipper reaches almost halfway down my thigh.

Hood up, lurking in my cave in the back corner, I'm safe from danger. I'm like a wolf: completely unnoticed, undetected. I am ready to pounce if the situation demands it, but usually our Chinese class doesn't get that much action. Instead, I pull out my notebook and draw bubbles in the top corner of the page.

I glance to my left at the boy with the hoodie. He's taking notes– bowing his head up and down, from his notebook to the board, his eyes bright and eager. His eyes are two dark orbs: almost black, like two of those wooden carbon atoms our chemistry teacher showed us yesterday during the lab tutorial.

Hopefully my lab partner was paying attention during that. Right after our teacher said, "Listen, this is very important," my eyes glazed over and my brain went into sleep mode. Odds are he was. I'm sure he's going to castigate me for not listening again. Better break out my usual technique: just nod until he stops talking.

After what seems like three hours, the teacher stops talking too and class is over. I watch the boy with the hoodie pack up his stuff, slipping his pens into his pencil case with a precision that is completely unnecessary for putting pens into a bag. There's no one here to wait for him, so he has all the time in the world.

He picks up his notebook, and I study his hand. His fingers are so long and bony; I wonder if he plays the piano. I heard pianists are supposed to have long fingers so they can reach all the keys. I picture him playing a super complex piece, fingers flying, and throwing off his hoodie as the audience applauds wildly. The right side of my lip curls up.

I fling my backpack over my shoulder and walk out. *Xie xie, Lao Shi! Zai jian!*

Lunch is supposed to mean eating and talking with your friends. For me, it means not eating anything, doodling and staying silent as a bunch of giddy girls chatter around me. Today their subject is "the boy who Lona likes," which makes pulling my hood up and blending into the table a lot harder.

"So, Lona." The girl with red hair and pink eye shadow giggles like a chipmunk and smiles at me. "After this, you have chemistry. With *Tyler,*" They're all smiling, staring at me. I am being stared down by an army of grinning makeup monsters.

I look back down at my notebook paper, which is covered in dizzying multicolored swirls, and pull out a blue pen. "Yep." The girl next to her with kinky brown hair goes "Oooh!"

"How fitting that you have *chemistry* class together," the redhead giggles.

I don't know why they think I like him. I have shown zero signs of liking him. If anything, I have shown negative five signs of liking him; he's even more irritating than my lab partner. But they needed someone to accuse me of liking, and Tyler was chosen by default; *everyone* likes him at one point, apparently. The girls at school used to call it "Tyler Disease" back in sixth grade– the most formidable virus known to mankind.

"You two would make a great couple!" the brunette coos. There is more giggling. I glance up at the table next to us; the boy with the hoodie has just sat down with his Asian

clique. He pulls a pair of chopsticks out of his lunch bag. I grab a red pen and circle my wrist around on the paper. Just nod until the bell rings and they leave me alone.

"Oh, I have a great idea," the redhead exclaims. "Tomorrow is his big baseball game. We could all go together, and then once it's over, you could ask him to the dance!"

I pull my hood over my face, smushing down my spiky hair, and don't respond. The table becomes even more animated and everyone starts talking at once. I just swirl, nod, grab another pen.

The boy with the hoodie is eating fried rice. He laughs, in a normal sort of way, not like a demon chipmunk covered in makeup. I will gladly disguise myself as a Chinese schoolgirl and sit with the Asian clique if it means getting away from this table.

"Don't worry, you don't have to. I know you're super shy. You should really lighten up! I mean, at least *smile* every once in a while. By the way, I love the way your shoes match your sweatshirt!"

I look down at my filthy Converse high-tops, which represent 50% of the shoes I own. This color coordination was completely unintentional. In Lona land, matching is a major fashion crime.

"Uhh, thanks," I mumble. The two girls in front of me bare their teeth again. My "friends."

I was right– my lab partner was paying attention. Likewise, I was right about him lecturing me for being the horrible student that I am.

"You never pay attention! I can't keep helping you with everything. You have to start listening if you want to pass this class." At least his voice isn't as annoying as his personality. It's pretty smooth and sophisticated, with a sort of British-sounding accent. Apparently he just moved here from Australia. I wouldn't have known.

He sighs. "I'm wasting time. Let's start the lab. But make sure you focus from now on!" His voice doesn't match his outside appearance at all. His face resembles that monkey Pokemon with the bush on its head. If you gave it spiky hair and glasses, they could be twins. "Ok, first we have to make an oh-two. That's two oxygen atoms, double bonded." Nerd Monkey takes two springs from our plastic container.

I grab two red balls, one in each hand. Somehow I remember what color oxygen is. It's too bad we don't need to know that for the test, or anywhere else in life outside of chemistry labs. I hand the balls to Nerd Monkey, and he sticks the springs in, making an elliptical shape. A double-bonded oxygen. "Oh-two."

At the table next to us, Tyler the Virus is sticking two yellow balls together with a stick to make hydrogen. Apparently, this task requires a lot of yelling and cursing at his friends across the room.

Nerd Monkey glares in the direction I'm looking before sketching the molecule in his notebook. "Alright, good. Now, aluminum oxide. We need two aluminum atoms and three oxygen atoms." He pronounces the word like "alu-mini-um."

I get out two grey balls and say it a few times to myself: *alu-mini-um, alu-mini-um, alu-mini-um*. This molecule is way more complicated than the oxygen one, which a baboon could probably put together without trouble. The springs keep popping out, and Nerd Monkey is getting pissed. After a lot of adjusting, it stays together. "Alu-mini-um oxide." Nerd Monkey sketches it down.

A very loud string of profanities that could kill a nun is shouted from the table next to us. Nerd Monkey glares up again. The Virus sees him, grins, and cracks his knuckles one by one, in a chorus of snaps. I pull my hood over my head and start taking the molecule apart.

"*Tong xue men!* Students, class is over! *Wo men xia ke le!"* Another Chinese class is done. Another crappy winter day is halfway over. I am now half a day closer to the weekend.

The bell hasn't actually rung yet. *Wang Lao Shi* is giving us a minute or two to stare at the wall before we're allowed to leave.

The wall isn't very interesting today, so I glance over at the boy in the hoodie. Today, he's wearing the red one with the big black circle on the front. It looks like a big empty void of nothingness in the middle of his chest.

He's almost done putting away the small office store that he laid out on his desk. I've already slipped my pencil and notebook back into my bag. I was feeling ambitious enough to actually take notes today, but I ended up covering the page with graphite swirls instead. The boy in the hoodie twirls his big shoelace-pull-strings around with his long fingers and runs them through his hair– it's that naturally spiky, poofy kind that seems to defy gravity.

Then he glances at me. Or, at least I think he does. I lower my eyes to my tennis sneakers– the other 50% of my shoe wardrobe, which doesn't color coordinate with anything I own. When I glance back up, he's still looking at me.

"Hey. You're Lona, right?" he says. I don't think I've ever heard him talk before. His voice is just a few notches above a whisper.

I peer at him from under my hood, no longer invisible. "Yeah."

He pauses, studying me curiously. "Why do you always keep your hood up?"

I shrug. "It's a survival mechanism."

He pulls his red hood up, covering his anime-character hair. He half-smiles, nods. "I feel safer already." I half-smile back. The bell rings. He starts out the door, and I follow behind. *Zai jian, Wang Lao Shi!*

The boy with the hoodie walks really fast, so I have to half-jog to catch up. I slide into step next to him, and he acknowledges me with his carbon-black eyes.

"Hey, can I ask you a question?" I say.

"Sure."

"*Ni hui bu hui tan gang qin?*" I just asked him if he plays the piano, in Chinese. For all everyone else in the hallway knows, I could have asked him to move to Guatemala with me.

The boy in the hoodie smiles and cocks an eyebrow. "Interesting question. *Wo hui*." He does. I am officially a hobby predicting wizard.

In a few more paces, we turn to a door on the right side of the hallway.

"Sorry– what was your name again?" I ask before he walks in.

"Kai. It's Chinese for 'victorious'."

A chemistry lesson from a few weeks ago– probably the only one I'll ever remember– flashes into my mind. "Electronegativity is an atom's tendency to attract electrons," the teacher said. These words somehow managed to stick in my head as I drew stars all over my notebook paper. "Fluorine and oxygen are the most electronegative atoms. The more electronegative an atom is, the harder it is to pull electrons away."

I should probably leave now, but my legs are being annoying and not listening to me. Instead, I just stand outside the door with nothing to say, frozen in place like an idiot. Kai, as in victorious. I like it.

"*Ming tian jian,* Lona!" he says. See you tomorrow. He slips through the door.

My legs finally start listening again, and I pull myself down the hallway.

The clock in our chemistry classroom was programmed to run twice as slowly as a normal clock. No one told me this, and no one else seems to notice it. But I'm sure of it; no normal clock can run this slowly.

Our teacher just left the room for a moment, so of course the whole class has erupted into complete chaos. A bunch of people have gotten out of their seats to talk with their friends. Nerd Monkey and I are the only silent ones. He's scrolling through pages of who-knows-what on his phone in the chair next to me. I notice he's wearing a grey sweatshirt, which is a bit odd because Nerd Monkey never, ever wears sweatshirts.

I glance behind me and see The Virus surrounded by his baseball friends, shouting and being an idiot as usual.

"So this kid was giving me a hard time today. He was pissed at me for picking on his brother or something." He cracks his knuckles.

"You mean the new kid?"

"Yeah. Why the hell would his own twin brother live so far away? He just showed up one day from across the world. Like, 'Surprise, I have a clone!'"

"I heard his parents divorced, and he was living with his mom. Then she died or something, so he had to move back."

Nerd Monkey's face whitens. He pushes his glasses up the bridge of his nose and runs a bony hand through his hair.

"Wow, did his parents really hate each other so much that they had to live on different continents?" The Virus tilts his chair back so it's balancing on its back legs. "Sucks for him."

"Wait, Tyler, what happened? Like, today, with his twin," one of the baseball jerks asks.

"Oh, yeah. Just a punch in the face and he shut up pretty quickly. Seriously, that kid

deserved it. He's such a spaz."

Nerd Monkey turns around. "Hey, Tyler!"

"Yeah, what do you want, Aussie?"

"Fuck you."

All the baseball robots go "Oooooh!"

"Whoa, watch your mouth there, kangaroo boy! You don't want me to fuck up your face too, do you?"

I can practically see steam shooting out of my lab partner's ears. I've never seen him get this mad. Not even that time when I spilled hydrochloric acid during a lab in October. It looks like his head might explode, but he doesn't say anything else. He just hunches down in his chair and pulls his hood over his eyes. For the first time ever, I actually feel sorry for Nerd Monkey.

Our chemistry teacher walks into the room, and everyone gets back in their seats like nothing happened.

As if spending lunch with them every day isn't enough, the giggly girls clique comes to my locker every day after school too.

"OMG, did you hear what Tyler did?"

"Do you think he's gonna get suspended?"

"I hope not!"

"Hey, Lona, what do you think of Tyler now?" the redhead nudges me.

This is an open ended question, not a yes or no one, but I just nod anyway. She turns back to the group, and they all chatter away as I drop my books into my backpack. Just a few more minutes and I'm free. At least until tomorrow morning.

I glance to the right, leaning back a bit to see past the sea of people on my side of the hallway. Then I see them pass my locker, just like they do every day after school. Two figures: one with a black eye, one with glasses. Twins. A pair of double bonded oxygen atoms. "Oh-two." Or "alu-mini-um oxide:" red and grey. The boy with the hoodie– Kai– nods at me. He has his hood pulled over his spiky black hair, but not low enough to cover his bruise. I nod back. Nerd Monkey just stares straight ahead.

The giggly girls shift their focus.

"Oh, look, it's the Chinese twins."

"One of them is in my math class. The Australian one, I think."

"If it weren't for the accent and the glasses, I'd think they were the same person."

"Yeah, I know! They're, like, *exactly* the same!"

I close my locker. "*You're* all exactly the same," I mumble. Then I swing my backpack and stroll off.

"What is *with* her?"

"I don't know. Lona's weird."

My lip curls up. Weird is good.

Ni hao, Lao Shi! I stroll into Chinese, late as usual, and slip into my corner. Kai is wearing a red-and-black sweatshirt today, with a keyboard snaking down the zipper. I pull out my notebook and run my hands through my hair, making it stick up.

"*Ni hao,*" I say.

"*Ni hao*." He nods, doesn't smile.

I pull out a red pen and draw molecules on a clean sheet of notebook paper. The boy in the hoodie flips his hood up and acknowledges the board with one carbon-black eye.

Vivian Holland has been writing stories with chemistry metaphors since she was 15 years old and is thrilled to be a part of this experiment. Read more at

vivianholland.com or @VivWritesStuff.

This One's For The Boys | Joshwald Martínez-Peralta

Dmytro Kormylets via Pexels

is god a feeling

stay with me a sec.

is that why men were marketed our mold,
(god's image, They said)

to feed His hollow-ed sons false satisfaction?
to starve our right to be awed?

Who benefits?

what if

stay with me a sec.

you're on your way home from a great night out

riding the high of a flawless karaoke set list, and

the moon stops you.
it never has.

you sense pressure behind your eyes,
you gasp on an inhale,
also either you have to shit right this second
or *you need to scream louder than you ever have*
louder than anyone ever has
louder than you think you can
and *you actually believe you could* make someone on the moon hear it if you did.

But you shake your head and slap your face a bit,
"Relax, my dude."

and then… a "post no bills" wall:

god
as
body

as
every body

even you, reading this in public – even in private too

as feeling
as tingles
as mood swings
as your lovely ugly

I'm a poet, actor, and Mary Oliver stan from Washington Heights, currently living in Astoria, NYC.

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On Onlooking | Akhila Pingali

Steve Johnson via Pexels

There's nothing mere about a *spectator*
(from Latin *spectare*, gaze at, observe, frequentative of Latin *specere*, to look)
Turned inward, turned *spectre*,
(from Latin *spectrum*, image, apparition; from Latin *specere,* to look)
Prepared to swallow itself.

To do, undivided into *spectre* and *spectator*; to write, and not be a writer—

(…*if I follow up this word with that the differential significance stands out I fit in with others who write I take the stage with all these words I positioned We take a bow I walk maternally into the spotlight I have lived this script already I pulled my strings My shadow danced on the wall to an audience of One the words props to My right to be*—)

Thus dies the creator. On the other hand, consider this recipe for a doing:

"Here's the to-do of sustenance: Start with the oil behind the stove, the noodles on the shelf, the water in the city's potable water-supply system. See what the heat does to the water. The water to the noodles. Flip the gaze, *spectator*—watch it gloriously bubble, severely flail, the milk-balloon, the sauce-chromatography, the yolk-mineralizing, the tongue-linger— and kill the *spectre*. Serves 1 to many."

To look in the soup-bowl and not see a mirror.

Akhila Pingali is a research scholar and translator based in Hyderabad, India. Her work appears (or is forthcoming) in SoFloPoJo, Brave Voices Mag, Five Minutes, and others. Twitter: @AkhilaPingali.

Banquet | Tazeen Fatma

via Awesome Cuisine

Have you ever felt the urge to eat
words like the last piece of a rosogulla,
afloat in its syrup,
because you simply cannot take it all in
with your eyes and nose?

So you need a few more senses—
those of taste and touch
to do justice to its maker.
In calligraphy, a word
stands alone yet whole.
I write *lonely* on a dark night.
Words I could eat

Tazeen Fatma is an Engineer and a poet from India

Cave Canem | Christopher Waldrop

Josiah Lewis via Pexels

The poets say if you dropped an anvil from the peak of Mount Olympos it would fall for nine days before it reached Tartarus. I've considered trying that but there's not a straight line. Besides I don't visit Olympos that often. When I do go I sit in the back. The other god pretend to argue about the affairs of mortals. It amuses them and I just think enjoy it while it lasts, suckers. I know I make the rest of the family uncomfortable. They said they were doing me a favor giving it to me as my domain, giving me all the wealth in the world, but we know they don't want me around. Seeing me reminds them they'll end up here eventually. Even my wife spends half the year away from me, and when she's here she's like a closed-up flower. I brought her here when I was young and naïve enough to think I could ever have happiness, or that I could at least share this place, that I could have company, someone to care about, someone who would care about me.

So I walk. Not that there's anywhere here for me to go. Level terrain stretching to infinity, endless shadows, and a handful of amusing characters. There's Sisyphus rolling his rock up a hill only to have it roll back down again. He could stop if he wanted to but I'm not going to tell him that. There's Tantalus who served up his own son for dinner, now condemned to stand in water up to his chin with fruit hanging just above his head. His punishment is eternal thirst and eternal starvation, but he's already dead. How bad could it be? Then there are the Stygian witches. What was it they did? Oh, right, they killed their husbands. That's not always a crime, I think, although they did do it on their wedding night. They're condemned to fill a barrel with water using sieves, and they could do it too if they'd work together, but I think they've given up. Nothing would change even if they succeeded. The dead are never really free until they're forgotten; then they fade away. At the very edges of Tartarus shadows dance. Those are the Titans, what's left of them, and if I walk far enough I see wisps, like breath on a cold morning, of things that came before them.

So I walk some more. I walk by Charon paddling his boat across the Styx. The dead who can pay with coins on their eyes or in their mouths get to cross right away. It's the final reminder that you can't take it with you. The ones who don't get a proper burial have to wait. The rules say a hundred years but really it's not until I say the word. Sometimes I forget and it's more than that, sometimes I just issue a blanket pass and it's sooner. Either way doesn't matter. Everything comes to me in the end, and the end is all darkness.

So I go up. I guess it's good to remind myself there's a living world, for now. So I come out on a mossy green riverbank and I see leaves swaying in a gentle breeze and birds, and fish darting through the water. There are pale purple flowers at my feet. I find it all beautiful, then I snap out of it. I remember who I am.

There's a road and I follow it to the city of Cumae. There's a festival in the main square. Musicians are playing, there are dancers, jugglers tossing balls in the air, fire-breathers. There's the rich smell of grilled lambs and bread, yogurt and mint, fruits, honey. It's not nectar and ambrosia, but good enough for mortals, I guess.

A man next to a tent catches my attention.

"See something you've never seen before!" he bawls out at the crowd, and for a coin he lets people in one at a time. It's a good pitch. I'm almost fooled by it myself, but I've seen everything. I slip him a drachm anyway.

It's hot inside the tent and an opening lets in a sliver of sunlight. At first I think it's a trick, that there's nothing here, but then I see a square wooden pen filled with straw. A dark shape moves in it. I kneel down and look in and three squinting heads all lift up and yowl at me. Then the pup stands up, turns around, and falls over, unable to get upright. I reach down and stroke one of the heads and it tries to suckle my finger. Funny little thing, taken from its mam too soon. I pet its body which is soft and warm. Hera doesn't like to admit she makes mistakes, but she does, and they never live long, but I've never seen one like this. One of the heads wobbles and yowls at me again.

Outside I pass the guy a heavy purse. Half again what he'd make if the entire city lined up at his door. Okay, he says, after pretending to think about it. I take the bundle with me, feeling it shift against my chest as I carry it.

On the riverbank it sniffs and craws and howls as it tries to pull itself upright. So small, so weak, in so much pain. But still trying. It opens one mouth and spits out a small bloody clot.

I turn away and try not to choke. So small, so soft, so warm, so vulnerable. I could throw it into the river. I could leave it. A wolf or an owl, even a fox might drag it away. I could let it starve, or just wait for it to stop. Once passed over this tiny, fragile thing will be big, and strong, and it will never be hungry again, but for now, as long as I wait, as long as it fights to stay alive, its pain goes on.

So it's done. I put the knife away.

Tartarus is still unchanged. Sometimes I walk. Sometimes I sleep. But Cerberus is always with me.

Christopher Waldrop lives in Nashville, Tennessee with his wife and a horde of wild Dalmatians.

blue-light kisses | April Yu

Luca Morvillo via Pexels

in the blue-light glow of my lips,
i'll stamp my kisses onto
read 11:11 pm
& remember how a sliver of
thinned moonlight caught your
fingers better than i.

remember this—
how pennsylvania plains unspooled
prostrate like a promise,
shadows hidden under the swells of my
breasts, pansies blooming
from your torn knees.

remember this—
split cuticles & burnt letters,
stars & negative space compressing
5'8 of blood oath and lie,
your face lost to-
night.

i'll lick the twilight breeze and
capture you on my tongue,
what, not *who,*
because selene knows how
hair and myth curl whisper-soft
in nyx's bruised arms.

let me chase you through the
infinities of in-between, take a
shot
every time you fly like a foal,
alcohol or bullets shaping flesh—
red and ribs every time.

how does the night covet?

will you find me in the
belly of the dark?

April Yu is a teenage writer from New Jersey with an affinity for language, running, and human anatomy. Visit her on Instagram @aprilblossom and Twitter @aprilgoldflwrs.

The Streetlight Across Town | Johan Alexander

Gije Cho via Pexels

Sitting tall in front of those short trees, we gaze at the opposite side of rush hour. The dome of our head blazes red one moment, green the next as memories of previous rush hours rise steaming from your skull. We fold ourselves into a striped suit with saggy threads, and we take pleasure in polishing our brown shoes whenever we can. Next to our wooden stool, our cart is stacked with lollipops, bags of potato chips, cigarettes. Pigeons clamor around the wheels. We speak to them. Just those pigeons are near, no people, but we don't care. Those rush hour memories nudge a chuckle from within and we flash juicy bits of gossip at the birds, but they ignore us and peck the cement. We continue chuckling and swiping at our shoes. Eventually, a young man stops to deposit a few coins for a single cigarette. He is our very first customer. We had parked this cart on this corner just last night, but it was too late. We had missed the rush hour. Just last night, years ago. It's so far to push our cart, but people on this side of town have always been nicer. Plus, this streetlight's cycle had enticed, instead of the ordinary red-yellow-green in front of our house, way on the opposite side of town. This one's red-green, red-green. It's different. Smooth, yet chatty. The only one in town. It chides the shiny cars under sundown: pollution will laminate the sky in a few short years. In fact, the sunset is passing into pink right now. Salmons and corals ripple above the red-green bounce. Offended by their ignorance, we tell the pigeons to get lost, go take a bath. Go drown in the ocean above the streetlight. The birds take off in a huff, flinging themselves far into the evening. We look up, nod and laugh, congratulate the young man on being the first customer. We are smooth, yet chatty. He glances around. The cigarette seethes. He straightens his back, flicks his smoke, walks away. Our voice trails off and our eyes widen as flecks of ash ride through the wind and settle down, softly smudging our newly polished shoes.

Johan Alexander was born in Medellin, Colombia. A musician and community organizer, he lives in Portland, Maine. His writing can be found in LatineLit Journal and elsewhere. Twitter @Johaxander1

sky worn | EG Cunningham

Jakub Novacek via Pexels

stars drift. driftwood
ambles the crowded
surface. whence we
came running, where
we go mad as hornets
seek shade at the desert's

edge—in the melting
tundra of our just-
desserts we grease into
shape, call the distance
from back then to
scattered now, falsely, far

E.G. Cunningham is the author of Ex Domestica (C&R). Her work has appeared in Ambit, Colorado Review, The Gettysburg Review, The Nation, Poetry London, The Poetry Review, and other publications.

Birthday Treats | Melissa Denker

sergio souza via Pexels

On Mia's ninth birthday, Sam's only word was *no*.

"*Please*, Mam," Mia begged, pulling on Sam's arm. "Please, please!"

Around them the fairground wheeled, whirred, whooshed. Children, adolescents, adults ate macaroons, milky ways, mars bars, matchmakers. Sam tasted the sugar on her lips and thought of all the nurse's warnings.

"No candyfloss today," Sam sighed. "How about we go on the flying chairs instead?"

"But Mam, *everyone* gets candyfloss on their birthday!"

"I know, honey, but it's different for you," Sam interrupted. Mia slumped. Guilt made Sam's stomach churn. "Come on." She took Mia's hand and dragged her towards the flying chairs.

The scent of caramelised peanuts wafted on the air, making Sam nauseous. It hurt her, viscerally, to act so strict.

The carousel, playing a discordant tune, creaked into action. The elaborately carved and painted horses carried children with beaming faces, and, watching them, Sam stopped.

"You know what?" Sam asked. Mia didn't look up. "I think we can make an exception. It *is* your birthday, after all."

"But what about the diabetes?" Mia asked in a small voice. She pronounced it slowly, distinctly: *die-ah-bee-tees*. Like a foreign word.

"The doctors showed us how to adjust your pump for meals, didn't they?" Sam said. Mia's hand reflexively went to her jeans pocket, where the corner of the insulin pump could be seen. "Come on. It'll be fine, I promise."

Mia was quiet, the gears in her head turning. Then she erupted.

"Okay! Thank you, thank you!" Mia exclaimed. A radiant, gap-toothed grin exploded across her face. Thrilled at her happiness, Sam couldn't help but pick Mia up and twirl her around. The fairground blurred into one bright, overwhelming kaleidoscope around them, and Mia and Sam howled in joy.

The candyfloss was pink and blue, a sparkling nebula of sugar. Sam took photos of Mia holding it, her ninth birthday badge displayed proudly.

More photos: Mia on the helter-skelter; Mia and Sam sharing fresh doughnuts; Mia with a candy apple; Sam holding Mia, holding an oversized dolphin toy won at the coconut toss…

In the background, the fairground: throbbing, pulsing with life; tempting them into a giddy sugar rush.

The fairground blazing around the blue-lit paramedics racing towards Mia's candyfloss coma.

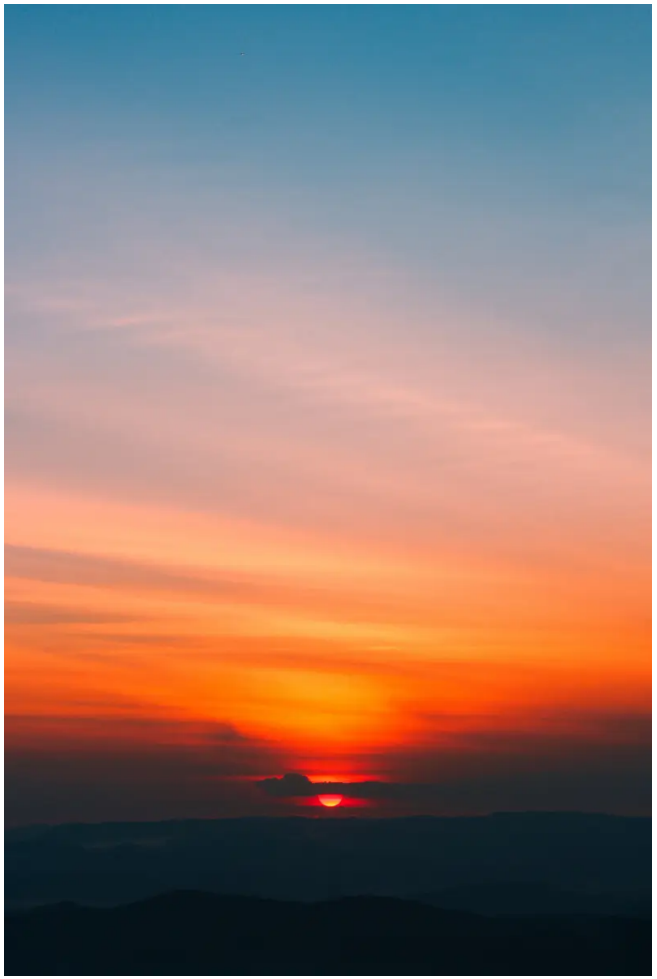
The fairground pounding as Mia's brain blew into a bubble-gum sugar bubble.

The fairground dancing, alive, alive, as Mia's heart stopped beating, and she was dip-dap, double-decker, dolly-sweet dead.

Sam screamed sherbet starburst sugar-cane sorrow.

Reader, writer, thinker, and constant coffee drinker. If not doing any or all of the above, she has probably phased out of existence. On Twitter at https://twitter.com/MelissaLeoD

When the sun set, | Bryana DeGraff



Loc Dang via Pexels

I bled to death.

The red of me
Tints the earth.

Hurry.

Make me say these words,
Leave me dry, soon blue.

One day free
And full.

---

multidimensional artist born & raised in nyc. Find me @whosdegraff on instagram.

They Burned My Mother at Dawn | Victoria Zelvin

via energepic

My anger loves me.

My anger loves me as my mother loved me.

My anger put its arms tenderly around me when they burned my mother at dawn. My anger looked for faces, details, tattoos, names, badges, any identifiable information when I was too terrified to speak. My anger said it was wrong, it's wrong, they burned a woman without trial or proof, they burned her, they destroyed her, they took her.

My anger holds me now that my mother cannot.

"Anger is corrosive," said the woman pretending she was a saint for taking me in. They — the ones who burned my mother at dawn, the knights and witch hunters and other self-congratulatory names — put me with her, saying she'd raise a good woman of me. I broke all of her plates and stole all her silver butter knives during my teenage escape from that house that smelled of ash.

My anger kept me warm on the long, cruel days and the endless hungry nights while I fled.

My anger is the only reason I am alive.

Like a little flame on a windy day, sometimes it is a fragile thing, but my anger lives on, as stubborn as I am.

They burned my mother at dawn. Before they die, they will realize they should have burned me.

###

I had no idea how to go about becoming the witch they thought my mother was when they killed her. I had only bad examples from propaganda and fear mongering to guide me, and the anger inside me said that they were wrong. But I was a weird little girl blossomed into a stubborn teenager — what I lacked in knowledge I made up for in commitment.

My mother has friends. Had friends. They burned my mother and they burned her home but they couldn't burn the knowledge from my brain. My mother didn't like to write her own letters, so she had me take care of it. Writing, addressing, passing to the postman.

So I go down a list.

The herbalist takes some of the silver butter knives in exchange for food and a few poultices, but there ends his involvement.

The alchemist takes the last of the silver butter knives and lets me take clothes and a new pair of shoes from his trunk. He offers me a place as his servant, but refuses to let me learn his trade, and so I leave. I take my stolen silver butter knives, and his wide brimmed black hat in recompense for wasting my time.

The last is the furthest away, but the most promising. A witch, my mother used to whisper to me, scrunching her face up to be mischievous. Waggling her fingers, then drawing on wrinkles with soot from the hearth. The woman I picture is ancient and shriveled.

A young woman answers the door instead. "Mother said you'd be coming," she says. She's the most beautiful thing I've ever seen. Daisies weaved into her braided hair so neatly it was as if they'd sprouted from her scalp too. Kind eyes. Too kind. "Come in, you must be tired. I'm sorry about your mother."

I mumble something as I shuffle in. I don't know what it is.

"I'm Amicia," she says.

I mumble something approximating my name, and she shuts the door behind me.

###

Amicia makes my anger quiet. She's beautiful. She's terrible. The witch is her mother, indeed ancient but not yet shriveled, and the witch insists on teaching us together if anyone is to be taught at all. Amicia doesn't want to learn the things that I want to learn. She wants to learn gardening magics, she wants to learn how to help trees grow, she wants to learn how to convince aphids to coexist within a garden rather than destroying it.

I want fire. It's all I want.

"The weapon of the enemy against them," I say, when the witch narrows her eyes at me.

"This is no easy thing you seek to do," the witch says. "It will take time. There are easier magics."

I want fire. I want *the* fire.

The witch only sighs. "Then you are determined that your path leads to fire," she says. "I only hope it does not burn away other paths before you can see them. We will begin."

###

The witch works me hard. There is no proof, she says, that I have magic. Willing it to be so will not make it so, I must have innate talent. The trick is unlocking it, but it may not be fire. Despite her warnings, I demand she teach me about fire. Only

fire.

So she does. About what burns, what doesn't. Why some things do, and don't, and why some do better than others. How a fire breathes, how it burns, how it dies.

She places my hands around fire, tells me to breathe with it, and stay on that point where it just doesn't burn me. It singes, and sometimes it stings, and often at night I cannot sleep for the feel of searing heat against my flesh. It is a tenth, if that, of what my mother felt.

At night, lying away in my petty agony, I wonder what my mother's crime could have been. To be torn from your house, tied to a stake, and burned at dawn, it had to be something bad, right?

Or maybe not bad. Dangerous.

Yes, dangerous to the wrong people.

I was young when they burned my mother at dawn. The images that I can conjure of her face seem to have a halo of golden light around her face, and she always smells faintly of fruit pie and lavender. It's not a true rendering, it's not a true feeling, but sometimes I imagine her worst crime was smiling too much. Or maybe she was too pretty, and it made all the noblewomen jealous. Or maybe she had dangerous ideas, like stealing from the rich to feed the poor or starting a home community garden.

Maybe, I think, she was the best woman who ever lived and they killed her for being too kind. *That's their mistake*, I tell myself, like a lullaby. *They killed the nice one. Now there's just me*.

Would my mother be disappointed in me? I lie now. I steal. I tell myself that it's to live, but it's fun too. They should have burned me at dawn for that, I think.

But they didn't. Their crime, I decide, is that they're stupid in their cruelty.

Tonight, I lay awake with Amicia sleeping pressed to my side. She breathes gently, untroubled. I twirl one of her curls around my finger and imagine what I would do to anyone who came to tear her out of this bed and tie her to a stake. When I finally sleep too, I dream of them screaming, cowering away from me.

###

The fire won't heed me. Every time I try to influence it, it pulls the other direction. The witch tells me that is a kind of progress, that if I was truly hopeless at it then the fire wouldn't move at all. I sulk, because fire is always moving, but I keep trying.

And trying.

And trying.

But I fear the fire. I don't want to admit it, but I do. Ever since they burned my mother at dawn, I'm afraid of dying like she did. It's holding me back.

I burn my hand on purpose the day I realize that. The witch sends me to bed early and won't let me train for days.

###

I don't know how it happens. Amicia becomes a fixture in my life by proximity — in space, in age, in power. She grows me flowers. She cooks me food from her garden. All I have are my arms and my body and my warmth, and I hold her because she wants me to, and somehow that's enough for her to fall in love.

She wants to run away together, start a life where no one knows us.

I tell her no.

She doesn't want me to hold her after that.

###

"Do you even remember your mother?" the witch asks abruptly one day. "Or has your anger burned all that away?"

The insinuation burns. I am doing all of this *for* my mother. I —

I remember her.

I *remember*.

Screaming as the flames licked up her dress, dancing up to her hips. Her laughing, cackling. The flames surging in a rush, shooting taller than the trees, burning bright, bright, gone. The smell of ash and cooked meat and —

"No," the witch says. "Not that. Not *only* that. Your mother was not what they made her, she was bright and loving. Her memory should warm you like a campfire, not burn you too. That's why the fire will not help you, why you cannot wield it. And you won't until you can see through it. Now tell me one thing — just one thing — about your mother that has nothing to do with how she died."

I think.

I try to, anyway.

But I leave the room without answering and slam the door shut behind me.

###

My mother didn't wield the fire that killed her. I don't need to either. I need to unleash it, like she did. End lives — their lives, not mine.

Maybe that's what the witch wants to teach me with her question.

But without anger? Was that really how my mother died? Was that really how she lived? I cannot imagine it.

Maybe she was angry. Maybe that's why they burned my mother at dawn. Maybe she cursed them, and they're all dead already. Maybe they hated her because she saw them for what they are, and she hated them first.

Maybe her hate burned as brightly as mine does.

###

They come to the village by chance. It doesn't matter to me what brings them, only that it is them. With their armor and their sigils of fire and thorn brightly emblazoned on their chests. They march in, kick over food carts, act like bullies while townspeople scream, and then announce that they are here to save them from evil. They declare martial law.

They declare they are here to hunt witches, and they will burn any they find in the town square. They begin to build the pyres almost as soon as they enter, even before they finish saying that law abiding, god-fearing folk have nothing to fear.

###

Amicia is scared. I encourage that. I help her pack, I make her pack. I grab her by the front of her shirt and I pull her out of that home, the only home she's ever known, and tell her to run. I tell the witch to hide them both deep in the woods and never to come out again.

I turn to go, and Amicia grabs my wrist.

I pull away.

She calls my name.

I pause, look back.

She reaches for me, and I turn back to where the witch hunters wait.

Amicia doesn't follow me.

###

They don't notice me at first. Then they laugh.

"A witch, come to confess!"

I don't have a plan. The fire, the witch warned, is a fickle weapon. She warned me to be careful it does not burn me too. She warned me for Amicia's sake. But here I am, stopped before them, the girl who shouldn't be. My only weapon, should

the fire fail to come, is a butter knife.

I press the pad of my thumb so hard against the silver butter knife it cuts. Sharp, stinging pain, then the welling of hot blood.

No, hotter than blood.

As if I am holding a coal. Light so bright I can barely see their faces, their bodies beyond it. It catches my skirt, climbs up my leg, dances around my side. I lift my hand, and it swirls up with me, searing my sleeve away with it.

The fire is mine now.

I smile.

And we burn.

Victoria Zelvin is a speculative fiction author living in Washington D.C. Her work has appeared in various magazines and anthologies. Find her online at victoriazelvin.com or twitter @victoriazelvin

Who Is Me | Sekinat Adekanbi

Rok Romih via Pexels

The moon that sits high in the sky,
she is me.
A complimentary, lighter version
who sits in the crux of
a version of me that people touch
to see if the soul beneath my brown skin is primed in white.
I wonder if my soul is white in color?
Or is it like glass? Translucent— reflective
a multitude of colors,
a rainbow molded by my experiences

My name is Sekinat Adekanbi, I'm a Poet, Aspiring writer SFF Horror with a dash of romance and penchant for writing Fantasy for LGBTQ+ youth and adults! Twitter and Instagram: sadisticaurthor

Ode to Summer | Nicole Ong

Ryan Baker via Pexels

Does summer know that it hangs on
Like a drunken party guest?
Through rain and fog it lingers still,
A faded tattoo of the past.

Though years may pass and seasons change,
As autumn leaves and winter fades,
One thing stays (and though it's strange –)
A quiet smile and eyes like jade.

You'll never really leave, I know
Though the light fades and the sky grows cold
And the trees grow pale and old
A part of me just won't let go.
(I'm waiting for a 'told you so'.)

Does summer know that it hangs on,
Like a drunken party guest?
Your echo sleeps in my room still
(Though, perhaps, it's for the best.)

Portfolio: https://ongshiminnicole.blogspot.com/

An avid reader of speculative fiction, Nicole is currently working as an editor for a publishing company in Singapore. She enjoys knitting and baking.

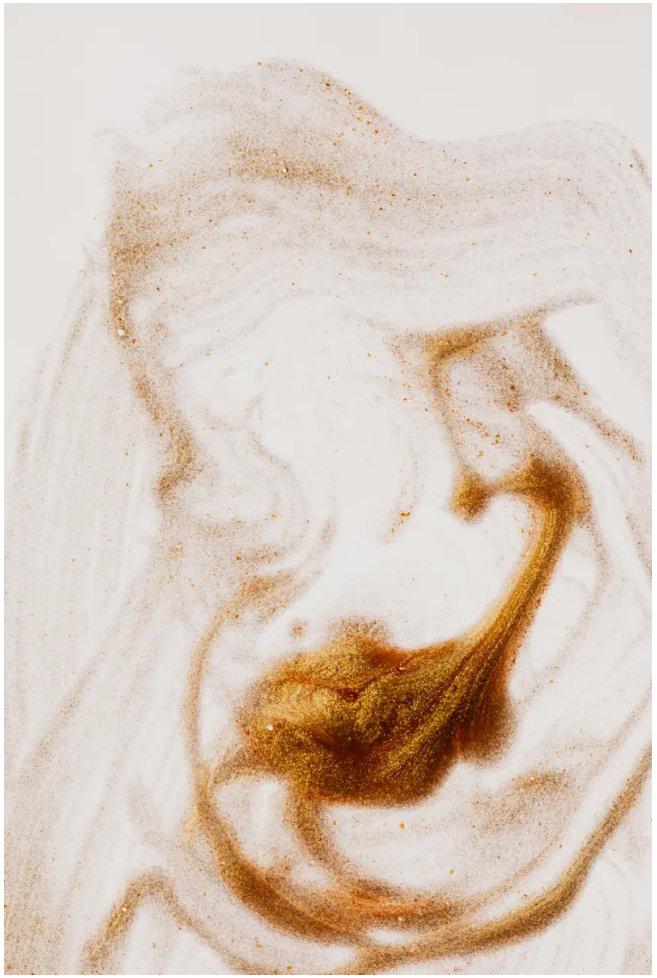
To My Person | Louis Boyd

manu mangalassery via Pexels

To My Person
First Off, let me preface this by saying
I Love You
But the curious side of me begs the question
Why do you see yourself as incarceration?
When you, my butterfly, are freedom
You are THE African savanna
You are star filled skies
You are warm blankets, rainstorms and books
And nowhere to be
You are not isolation my love
You are deep breaths and early morning dew
Summer times when schools out
Ice cream on hot days
Laughter when all you've known up until then
Was sadness

And joy was KIA on your lips
You bring absolution of heartache
You aint burden
You peace
Even when you, yourself, don't realize it
I guess I'm as much to blame as anyone
Missed communication and crossed wires
Leave you feeling less than
In a constant state of anxious upheaval
That can only be soothed by arms wrapped around you
Deep strokes inside you
Fingernails scratch arguments in my back
As you accept my apology
One round..two rounds...three
Out of breath
But more apologies to go

Instagram: Writing4purpose Twitter: jaytha_griot



Karolina Grabowska via Pexels

Twenty three years was all it took
ethinylestradiol
desogestrel
subtle hymnal sweetly sung
praying the flesh to sleep –

but the body knows the body.
No ink is indelible.
da capo
new songs write themselves.

By day, Louise Norgate is a complementary therapist: by night, a tarot reader, moongazer & writer with poetry published in Acropolis Journal. Her words are on Twitter @LouNwrites. She likes the dark.

Lovers' Weeds | Blake Snow

Mobi Day via Pexels

The most beautiful flower that ever existed was a lavender rose the size of a human heart. It was also terribly poisonous, so that all around it, the grass had turned black, then brittle, then blown away on a breeze. Admirers would come from all around and, from a safe distance, happily sketch the flower's likeliness in colorless greys. There was one visitor, however, more determined than the rest. He stole across the moonlight, plucked the flower from its stem, and hurried home to show his lover. By dawn, both were dead, and the field was overrun with weeds.

I am a recent graduate of the University of Virginia, and an MFA candidate at City, University of London. Twitter: @_BlakeSnow

Join Our Award Winning Corporate Culture | Emily Baber

Tima Miroshnichenko via Pexels

I'm in the meeting but really I'm rafting naked down the cataracts of my mind, diagnosing myself with cancer, attending a private viewing of my 'most embarrassing moments' highlight reel, wondering what happened to the girl who called me, "Betsy Bitch-ards" in middle school. Then they're all looking at me and I have no fucking clue what's happening in this room but I take a measured breath and say, "I feel this is part of a higher level conversation we need to have outside of this meeting." The boss raises an eyebrow, impressed. The sales director nods in vigorous conviction. The event coordinator looks confused for a moment, but quickly twists her expression into one of assent for fear of being seen not-getting-it. I return to my raft. I'm telling you; it works every time.

Emily Baber lives in Cleveland, Ohio and is drawn to Lake Erie, the intricacy of natural systems, and snacks. She is drafting a novel. Twitter: @enemybaber

Salvation | Jasmine Callaghan

Beninu Andersen via Pexels

For Teressa French

My son will be reading the memorial scholarship for today's program. My mother cannot read the description and hands the script to me. We had revised it across several nights when I was home from college. She always said it is my duty to help these kids pay for college.

I read the write-up as prepared:

Teressa French loved everyone, she strived to help all her peers in and out of the classroom, chapel, and the soccer field. She was a presence of peace through her words. Children flocked to her because she cared. She was taken into Heaven on January twenty-fourth, two thousand and fourteen. This scholarship is given in memory of a student living in Teressa's example. Please come up to accept this award.

Applause fills the room as I step to the side and hand my mother the certificate with the student's name on it. Parents in the room dry their eyes while taking videos with their cell phones. Some club members come up to us after the program.

That was beautiful. You did an excellent job helping your mother at the end, they tell me. I go through the usual pleasantries that I am always happy to help. *He gets the strength from his father's side. My youngest child read at my mother's funeral*; she tells them. *They are a wonderful part of my life.*

My mother met with Teressa's mother a couple of weeks before the program. The other women in the club wanted to start a scholarship in Teressa's memory and sent my mother to talk to her. When they talked to her about it the first time, she cried. My mother and Teressa's mother cried over tea and books talking about Teressa who had been killed in a hit-and-run a year before. The driver did not face serious jail time because he wanted to join the Navy and was *so, so sorry*.

She's the same age as your younger sibling, she tells me after. *You never really get over the death of a loved one. It was hard when Grandma passed. I couldn't imagine losing one of my babies.*

Editor who has an infatuation with horror and fantasy that has only grown with age and a mild-to-moderate obsession with Eve and Genesis 2-3. Twitter: jxmsxne____

Samson & Delilah, Revised | Rachel Cantor

Ron Lach via Pexels

I want to wash his hair for him.

I want to pull him out of his clothes and ask him to sit in the bathtub. I imagine him there cross-legged; not hard, not self-conscious about me seeing him soft.

I want to tip his head back slightly, gently into the shower stream. Kneeling behind him as he closes his eyes. A good shampoo—sweet-smelling but sharp, peppermint or grapefruit or something like that.

I want to comb the lather through with my fingers and rinse it out again and again and again, my nails firm against his scalp but not too hard.

I want to take a long time with it, neither of us saying anything, just the white noise of the water like rain.

I want to watch the suds slide down his back, iridescent and crystalline, melting away.

I want him to trust me. I won't get soap in his eyes.

I want him to tell me it felt good, or nice, or if he had a bad day even just: better.

I want his skin to be warm and his hands all wrinkled; mine too.

I want to get into bed and hold him, facing each other on our sides. My arm around him so my fingertips can kiss each vertebra up and down his spine. My head against his chest so I can feel his heart like the sure wingbeats of a great bird soaring.

I want him to fall asleep like this, and later me too, after I lie there a while, listening to his steady breathing, looking through the benevolent dark at his beautiful hair, drying against the pillow, strong and safe.

I want to tell him I love him quietly enough that he might hear it in his dreams.

Rachel Anne Cantor is a children's book author and works in academic publishing. She lives in Brooklyn.

Salvation | Jasmine Callaghan

Frank Cone via Pexels

Consumed by the orchestra
Of your sweet bloody kisses
Whispering don't be shy
Unleash your demons.
Embracing paradise with my tongue
To savour the inferno and
Taste something so monstrously strange.
Poena damni, she smiles.

Editor who has an infatuation with horror and fantasy that has only grown with age and a mild-to-moderate obsession with Eve and Genesis 2-3. Twitter: jxmsxne____

(you're never getting this back) | Davis G. See

Inga Seliverstova via Pexels

i'm just going to leave your
picture in the top drawer you
can take it if you want but
i will not give it to you
i cannot be that big i
cannot see you i'm sorry
this is for the best i swear

Davis G. See is a gay writer and game developer based in Edmonton, Alberta. He has published short stories, essays, and poems in a variety of places. Find him at https://twitter.com/DavisGSee.

Ecce Homo | Michael Zendejas

mentatdgt via Pexels

Finalist in KPFT's Fall Writing Contest (2019)

Leading out from the bar is a maze of raised laminate tabletops and booths, with the leather cracked and torn, smoothed/faded etc. They huddle together in the farthest dimly-lit corner, waiting on Peace and Justice to arrive. As a matter of policy, the pub never hosts private parties. Instead, they had to arrive hours early and compete with patrons for the necessary number of seats. But, even now, they refuse to break position. To do so would compromise the perfect "SURPRISE!" moment, when they cue a chorus of party horns and spring out from behind bar booths.

Everyone is so tense with anticipation they leap out at the slightest sound and end up tossing fistfuls of confetti at strangers. Sometimes the strangers ask if they can join the party.

"Peace *and* Justice?" one man asks with eyes rekindled, "the *four-time* Grammy-nominated artist?"

"That's *Post Malone*," snarls The Event Organizer, "This party's for *Peace and Justice*." The man's entire body seems to sag after hearing that.

"I mean, I've heard they're pretty okay. Can you waive my entrance fee?" The Event Organizer shakes her head and extends a hand.

"$25."

"Even though I'm already in the pub?" he asks.

She shrugs and says "How many people will be able to say they attended Peace *and* Justice's *official* welcome-home-party?" then raises both eyebrows, as if her point's been proven, but he saunters off, resigned to drag himself onto the next peace-less injustice.

"...you even get a party hat!" she calls, but he doesn't so much as turn around.

Maybe if they had T-shirts or something, he thinks.

The Event Organizer, in her designer pantsuit, with that huge billboard smile, turns around and directs everyone back into place. In that high but stern tone, she says they (Peace and Justice) will be here any minute.

Ankles waver, sore from crouching in wait for this long. So far there have been four false flags. This has failed to even slightly diminish the partygoers' enthusiasm.

I can already see the looks on their faces, they think with smiles aglow.

Collectively, they consider the possibilities that will bloom before them once Peace and Justice arrive. Perhaps they wouldn't have to say a silent prayer whenever happening upon the police. Retirement with healthcare benefits, clean water, who knows?

I could live, thinks Gretta, a partygoer, *do the things I've always wanted to. We all could. With Peace and Justice here, anything could happen. Anything is possible.*

Pub patrons not participating in the festivities look at them there, beneath a "WELCOME HOME" banner slung across dusty rafters, crouching and smiling in wait, and can't help but shake their heads. They think them fools. Naïve fools.

They down the rest of their after-work beers and step around the group, party hats and all, to make a beeline for the shitter. Scattered across the rotted floorboards: multicolored confetti, shaped like small champagne bottles, dull from being walked on so often.

***

On the way there, Peace and Justice shift uncomfortably atop the stained seats of their Uber. The driver is a young man with suspenders attaching smoke grey slacks to a white collared shirt. In the mirror, from over his small circular glasses, he squints at them.

"You sure your names don't have some kind of allegorical meaning?" he asks.

"None at all," says Peace.

"We swear it," says Justice. The driver nods, but is clearly unconvinced.

They've been gone so long. The sun's harsh glare against skyscrapers owned by Big Oil© and The Banks™ is completely alien. In fact, now that they think about it, neither of them can recall *any* of these buildings being here before they left.

It was all large expanses of green, they think, *with wild horses galloping over the hills, across the rivers. Lovely. Just lovely—or perhaps it wasn't. Perhaps it was always like this.*

Being just slightly younger than their cousin, Time, Peace and Justice often have difficulty remembering the specifics of any particular person/place/thing. It all gets muddled together.

But, looking at the entangled structures of concrete and steel that block out the sky, the people inside them shuffling about without really going anywhere, we can't help but feel as if there is something more. Underneath it all.

"The whole thing just really feels like an allegory to me," mumbles the Uber driver.

"How many times do I have to tell you?" cries Peace. "This is no allegory! I *am* Peace!"

"I'm not even sure if mere personification constitutes allegory," Justice thinks aloud, "metaphor, perhaps, but not allegory."

"Justice," huffs Peace.

"Right. Um—look: this is Peace, I'm Justice."

"Alright, alright." The driver leaves one hand on the wheel, but puts the other up in defeat. "Just don't give me a bad review, man. One more of those and I'll have to find another job. Can't have less than three if I want to make rent." Silence blossoms for a moment, until Justice leans over.

"Peace," whispers Justice, "why did we agree to come here again? I was so happy deep in the Amazon. There were no exploited workers, yet we had all we needed. Whereas, here-" Justice glances towards the front seat. Peace shakes its head and lets a laugh ring out. It's the most peaceful sound the driver has ever heard.

"*Because,* Justice, they really want to see us. They've poked and invited us so many times on Facebook. Plus, I figured they seem organized and conscious enough to bring us about." They lurch forward from a sudden stop, but are yanked back by seatbelts. After a quick glare at the driver, Justice goes on.

"But those buildings, and—*three* jobs?!"

"Oh, Justice, I'm sure they've by now realized their-" Peace takes a moment, choosing the next word carefully, "*asymmetrical* ways." Justice nods and looks out the window. By now, the buildings and their harsh glares are dots in the rearview.

***

Under the accusation-filled glares the crowd flings her way, The Event Organizer begins to sweat through the hot pink of her designer pantsuit. They'll want refunds if something doesn't happen soon, something big. Some have completely abandoned position and now sit at the bar with everyone else, regarding their old comrades with contempt.

Crouched in front of the crowd (what's left of it), who themselves are all crouched behind booths, The Event Organizer dons a weak smile and (again) says they (Peace and Justice) will be here any minute.

She has no way of knowing this, as neither Peace nor Justice have a phone to call and confirm, but this white lie was supposed to serve as extremely comforting, reassuring news. The crowd hardly acknowledges it.

Vultures, thinks The Event Organizer, *the Facebook event page only says that Peace and Justice have been cordially INVITED as the guests of honor, not that they've CONFIRMED a scheduled appearance.*

She stops for a moment.

Yeah, that's good. That's what I'll say.

She notices she's been pacing and stops and brings both shoulders back, tilts her chin slightly upwards before returning to a crouched position. Then, in her peripheral: a scuffle.

While The Event Organizer decided which wording sounded most empathetic, someone at the bar decided to finally tell the wack jobs crouched in the corner that Peace and Justice aren't coming. They're never coming.

"Whywouldey?" The man swung back and forth in his barstool while addressing them, making unfocused eye contact with the partygoers, hands gesturing around the room. "Loogatisplace."

Smiles vanished. Cellphone footage would later confirm it was Gretta who, while crouched, threw a bottled IPA at his head, hit him square in the temple, and sent him tumbling off the barstool.

Covered in the security monitor's whitish-blue, behind a two-way mirror, Gretta will lean over the stainless-steel table in the police station's interview room, cupping her face in both palms.

"I'll tell you why I did it," she will sigh, "I just-I just really wanted to have this one thing, ya know? I'm a mom, a wife, I work all day. Like everyone else there, I just wanted to see Peace and Justice. Just one time. I know it's a big wish, since no one's seen either of 'em in so long we forgot they were even here, but still—and to have that jerk rub it in my face, I don't know—" sobs. She'd later be charged with inciting a riot and, worst of all, property damage under Tex. Penal Code Ann. § 28.03 for what happened after she threw the beer bottle.

***

When Peace and Justice finally get there, after many detours and wrong addresses, potholes and things of the like, they tip the Uber driver and walk up the pub's stairs. Sounds bleed from behind the door's tattered wood.

Crashes. Yelling. Each glances at the other with expressions that say "What can we do? We've come all this way." Justice reaches out, twists the knob.

Peace ducks just in time to avoid a rather small man who has been used as a projectile. The man sails out the pub, bounces on one of the lower steps and flops to a halt on the sidewalk, unconscious.

Inside, fights between people in party hats and people not in party hats have broken out all over the place. Chairs fly from one end of the room to the other and crash into faces/walls. Bodies lie crumpled on the floor.

A woman, drenched in sweat, quickly paces back and forth in a hot pink pantsuit.

"No refunds!" she screams on an eternal loop. The room is too much of a violent blur for anyone to notice: shattered shot glasses etc. etc.

"This can't possibly be where we belong," gasps Peace.

"Perhaps we've gotten the wrong city," wonders Justice.

"Or country," mutters Peace.

"Or political-economic system," grumbles Justice.

"I'm reminded of why we left this place so long ago," sighs Peace.

They're on the sidewalk, waving down the Uber before the bar's door can swing shut. The passenger window rolls down as the driver pulls beside them.

"-and it's a *cynical* allegory at that!" he hollers.

"Will you just please take us to the airport?" asks Peace, both eyes rolled as they climb into the car's chipped paint.

"Please?" begs Justice, closing the door behind them.

***

Nobody has seen or heard from Peace or Justice since then. It is rumored they maintain a permanent residence among the Sentinelese people, in the Bay of Bengal, protected with arrows and spears.

"It really is lovely here," chirps Peace as they walk hand-in-hand along white-sanded shores. Justice beams with a smile.

Sometimes, when debating if they should return, Peace and Justice discuss the things they saw on the way to the pub. A father lifting his son high overhead, their laughter soaring through the air. Someone stepping into traffic to scoop up a lost puppy. A protest against the far right. They discuss the possibilities these things hold.

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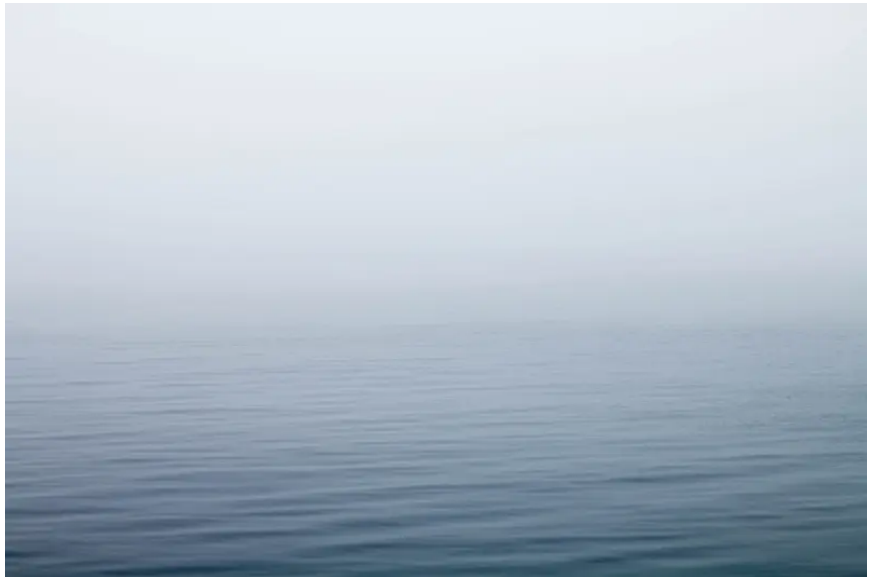
Infatuation | Wayne R. Pardy

Polina Sirotina via Pexels

I think you were, once.
I think I was, once.
You've found love alive,
But I've been deprived.
Once upon a time I could love you,
Once upon a time I could love myself too

I am nobody. I have a twitter, but my handle is out of mind right now.

Carson Lake, 1950-1986 | Gabriel Mambo



Sam Forson via Pexels

Carson Lake always reflected the sky, like evidence of a condition. When it opened in 1950, the lake was a healthy, clear cerulean. Crowds of people were spread out across the beach's white sands. Patrons used the wet sand to build sandcastles or mold body casts around one another.

A black boy named Darrell Rodgers went missing in July of 1968. He was found two days later, hanging from a nearby tree in the forest next to Carson Beach. People rioted in Midtown later that night. Storefronts crumbled in the heat of merciless flames. Dark colored faces chanted Dr. King's name.

In 1971, the three white men acquitted of Darrell's murder were scattered across the beach's shores. Their throats were ripped open by unknown blades. The city closed the beach down indefinitely after another rebellion ravaged Midtown. Twenty people were injured on that night. Three more bodies had to be buried.

The city unlocked and tore down the chain link fences in 1979. Officials believed the trouble had passed. When swimming season started, light skinned groups huddled together on the beach like snow banks on a mountain's peak. Darker denizens turned their backs to them, though they always looked over their own shoulders with 1968's fire in their eyes. A silence swept over the beach.

A sixteen-year-old girl was raped at the beach in 1981 and they never found the culprit. When asked about what the assailant looked like, the girl only mentioned shadows, shapes and grunts.

Another carcass floated across the lake in May of 1986. On the day it was discovered, the waters were a dreary grey. The sky reflected its condition, blanketed by sullen grey clouds. Shortly after the body was drawn from the water, it began to rain. The city closed the lake for good.

Gabriel Mambo is a substitute teacher living in Jackson Heights, New York. He's previously been published in Red Fez. His Twitter is @GabeMambo and Instagram is @gabrielmambo

The Faerie Bomb | Liam Burke

James Wheeler via Pexels

Hawthorn bound his hostage in their chair, physically mimicking the bonds holding the dazed denizen of Pulp at the Pump Inc. in its corporate clutches. Earlier at the bar, St John's Wort and Faerie tinctures leaked into libation had allowed the eco terrorist to use this hapless drone to gain entry to their wasp's nest.

The workers knew they labored for evil. Why else seek a state of stupor after hours? Nudging the numbness sought for succor had been almost too simple. It reminded Hawthorn of himself, before he'd been Hawthorn.

Mind and soul chained to a desk grown cancerously from a bloated business body. Devoted through selfish apathy to stripping the Earth of its breath, so they could crush bark and branch into liquid engine movement. No leap without a fall, no progress without injury. Humans simply could not get the hang of harmony. It had taken a moment just like this to free him. Let him dance wild with the Good Folk, living for the first time.

Bert, name engraved on his plastic keycard, watched his hoodie wearing jailor with bleary contentedness, silent with the help of duct tape and sedative. Hawthorn had timed the dosage so any minute the woozy worker would return from Haze Mountain. He'd need the blind pawn aware shortly.

A ceramic shell filled to hold a sympathetically linked sample of the Earth was placed between captor and captive. The hiss of solid soil signaled the ritual had begun. Cubicles stretched hollow and empty around them, skulls in a field of manufactured bone. What better place to plant the next seed of resistance? He did so, a small man placing a small pip into a small pot in a massive hostile world.

His past self recalled the term hostile work environment, and he smiled under the scarf hiding his identity. Human Resources would have done well to branch out.

Words were needed. The Good Neighbors would hear, be drawn to the living tissue waiting to be birthed. They would feel the foe, revenge rushing their approach to eagerly enact threefold their traumas. Bert, still separate, was slowly sobering. Giddy bliss was sloughing off of the surface of his fear, it was nearly time to reveal what organism he occupied.

Crouching over the cauldron of loam, Hawthorn whispered,

"Come in the stillness,

Come in the night,

Come to bring wrath,

Come with delight"

The dark dust swirled as the seed passed on the poem. Tiny voices tinkled like broken glass laughing on the limits of his senses. He'd need to be swift, Bert would not have long.

Hawthorn approached his hostage, who had begun to struggle. Bert pulled against the zip ties holding him to the desk he'd once willingly fused himself to. The fight echoed in the air, and Hawthorn seized on it, fingers slipping around the ephemeral sensation as had been shown to him. As had been done to his past persona.

Knowing knots wove intricate webs, the struggle was tied to the seedling, and Bert was bound one more time. His fevered need to escape was redirected, as Hawthorn placed photo after photo on the desktop before him. The duct tape kept him from a reply as dignified as his suit, but enough words had been spoken aloud in Hawthorn's opinion.

Green shoots pushed their way out of the surface of the altar-pot as Bert's eyes took in the images of devastation before him. Each revelation took hold in his mind as roots spread in the sod. Sprite families fled metal mouths as their homes were chewed to chips. Pixies ground under treads and left lifeless as the land they'd loved. Centuries of tradition transformed into a trip to Cancun, or worse more machines to consume the natural world.

The pottery popped as Bert's bubble burst, and Hawthorn could see in the man's eyes that he was no longer bound to malice. He released his new ally fully as they watched with growing awe the tree that matched Hawthorn's namesake take root in the office. It continued to grow, echoing the ire and resolve in the new recruit.

Within seconds it reached the ceiling, trunk tearing through filmy barriers. Partitions of the stagnant hive of industry were flung aside to make way for new life with gargantuan groans. Branches reached and scraped, defying the space and reclaiming it. The sound of joyous rebellion reverberated around them, and in their hearts.

The weight of wood became unbearable, the floor collapsing completely. Branches surged and the sharp nettles accompanying the massive plant swelled into swords.

Perhaps a few more words would be ok, Hawthorn conceded.

"Time to run." he explained, and demonstrated the concept with celerity.

The two of them ran down halls designed by madmen determined to direct the course of humanity towards predictable compliance. Past the breakroom broken with snacks flying, down stairs uprooted from below, they sprinted through the lobby Hawthorn had entered so easily earlier.

Everywhere small shapes slipped and scurried along the tree, encouraging with words and pushing the growth by hand. Red hats and leafy clothes, slim bodies and sharp bloody teeth swarmed the growing maelstrom of bark and leaf. Mouths of magic and flesh wreaked revenge for their homes taken by metal monsters, happily ignoring the humans who had brought them.

Outside, Hawthorn slowed, and turned in the parking lot, tapping Bert and bringing him about. Before them the tree rose, shrugging off the trappings of big business. Roots churned the ground as a giant's toes wriggling in sand. It reached fifty feet, then a hundred, only satisfied when not a brick or pinprick of plastic persisted.

Pulp at the Pump's main headquarters was no more. Bert stood stunned, and Hawthorn hovered patiently.

"What happens now?" Bert finally ventured, eyes still stuck on the Good Folk celebrating in a dance circle at the base of the gigantic growth.

Hawthorn smiled, removing his scarf to reveal it fully. "Other organization branches will remove the remaining remnants, incinerating the insidious Internet infection to mirror their material dismantling"

He knew that wasn't the answer anticipated, but Bert needed to ask the right questions.

"Other branches. Wow." Bert shook his head and chuckled at Hawthorn. "I mean what happens to me. I'm pretty sure I can't go back. Not after what I just saw."

"Would you want to, knowing what you know?"

"No. I guess I wouldn't. At least I know the rumors have been true. Nature really is sick of our shit."

As police sirens swarmed, Hawthorn placed a bowl on the ground, completing the ritual with an offering of cream.

"Time to go, Calathea." He said, straightening up, and making his way to a moving patch of midnight residing between roots. The Good Folk frolicked in the ruins, entirely ignoring the eco terrorist as he passed. Fae glutted on glee at Goliath felled and reborn as flora.

Calathea, as he was now known to nature, followed Hawthorn into Faerie. He noticed his thoughts had begun to mimic Hawthorn's habits. It didn't deter him, his new beginning beckoned. He passed into Faerie, and joined the fight.

Liam Burke is an independent spec fic writer. You can find his full body of work at ssjliam.square.site. Twitter: @ssjliamp

We Connect As | David Nash

via iCon

When I'm drugged home you order me upstairs to the shower. I scrub, vigorously scrub. Vicariously, you inspect it separate from me, observe it circle the drain through the hair and slide between the holes. I wrench the washcloth, squeeze the grease, the scent persists. It transports me back beyond me to the primal, mystic us. Washed, I hush into bed avoiding repercussion. You'll submit consequence later. I'll pay. For you pulled your object out of the chaos and I constructed meaning subordinate to it. Then you slip under and love me and tangled we become one

Dave Nash enjoys the city on rainy Mondays and waking up to instant coffee everyday. He reads fiction submissions at Five South Magazine and writes stories found in places like Bivouac Magazine.

Daffodils (In honor of Sylvia Plath's 90th birthday, b. 27. October 1932) | Sara Jenko

via Sara Jenko

Your wellington boots stomp me to the root,
your daughter's eager palms squish my neck and bounce me happily,
as you squat down with a newborn; pale-faced bundled in your arms,
his milky breath sweet as the scent of spring
Vibrant laughter echoes through my petals,
if I could speak I wouldn't have to
I hear a click and there we are,
captured by your husband's eye.
Stilled forever;

frozen in time.

In translation: scientific manuscripts | Keenan Guillas

Thuan Vo via Pexels

Sponges (phylum Porifera) are important members
of benthic ecosystems worldwide

We have spent our entire lives studying these creatures because
we find them fascinating Hopefully we can convince you
to feel the same

The environmental factors driving expression of
heat-shock protein genes under constant temperature
have yet to be investigated

In fact we have investigated them
for seventeen years now
Here, at last, is our breakthrough

We hypothesized that

We believed more in this than
in any higher power,
organization,
act of kindness,
mother's cooking

For the first time, we present

Behold!
We have cracked the code
to the "what if?"
that is finished lurking
in corners of our dreams
is no longer tattooed
on the undersides of our eyelids

Due to experimental limitations

Day forty-six
in the field and the typhoon
just passed through
Fixing the exclusion cages and
a great white gets too curious
return to the boat, wait it out
a storm rolls in
six cages left
two days until departure
we called it
Packed up the gear
back to the lodging
takeout pizza, banal television,
staring blankly at the ceiling above the cots
conjuring the graph without those six data points

Due to suboptimal sampling conditions

Second field season, colder
day than usual, mesophotic
dive, Ben
lost his weight pouches the day before, replaces
from the save-a-dive kit, they slide around
as he dives, it's a quick dive, down and up,
it'll be okay,
tangled in kelp,
weights come off,
Ben shoots up
never dives again.
& what data point is worth the boat ride back
with his body on board
& the Zoom call home to report it
& the visitation by his family
& the knowledge of
all that could have been done
Bump him up the authors list?
to honour him?
I'd rather never publish again
if it would undo that day
&
really
what is the point of any of this

Future work should investigate

We are tired
and of finite time
here is our wish list
things we'd love to know
but have no time for
help yourself
we are here
to talk, spitball, scheme
really there is no greater joy
than collaboration

Andrews et al. (2001) showed that

Brian Andrews is a gift
to sponge science
and I would die for him
Remember, Brian
when we met at the conference in Dublin
post-talk beers but our rental bikes got stolen
running in the downpour
back to the hotel in the middle
of the night but got lost and
ended up on this crazy
middle-ages Stonehenge-looking outcrop?
Felt like a teenager again
stupid shit with the kids down the street
& anyways Brian's work
is unparalleled
innovative, cutting-edge
& the work he puts in
for his students and colleagues
selfless, kind, too good for academia
papers works of art
he deserves the world
I will cite him until
the day I die

The authors declare no conflicts of interest

Only that we are so deeply
enamored by this phylum that sometimes
it is hard to think straight about other matters
but thankfully
our colleagues & loved ones ground us

Acknowledgements

the funding agencies, sure, but also
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the co-PIs (last-minute emails with far too much feedback to act on in time)
the facilities and IT people (keeping everything running)
the safety officers (safety, & a million other non-safety-related tasks)
the collaborators, inspirers, science communicators, long-dead storied naturalists of old,
Aristotle (they weren't plants, dude!),
& there is only one lead author but really, this is the
serendipitous aligning of hundreds of stories
stories that came before &
stories that are sure to follow

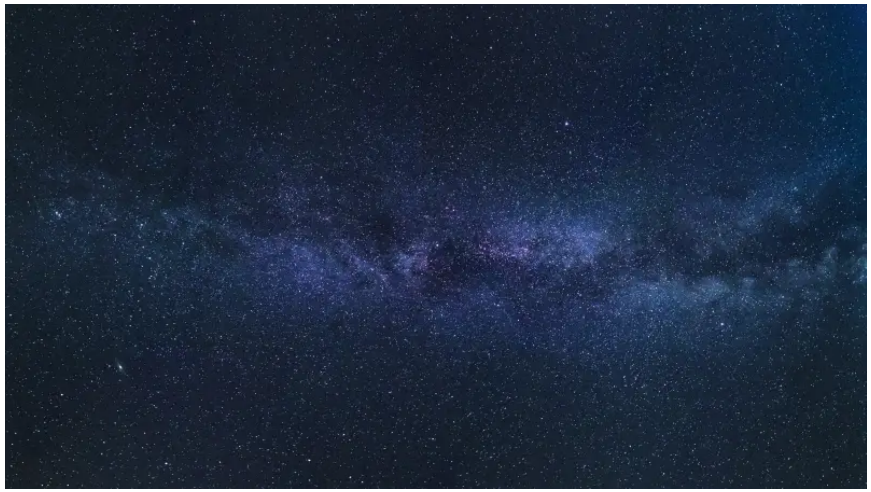
Keenan Guillas studies sea sponge behaviour in California and writes in his free time. He is on Twitter and Instagram as @keenanguillas.

Transcendence | Karin Hedetniemi

via Karin Hedetniemi

SOURCE: Steinbeck, John. Cannery Row, Penguin Books, NY, NY: 1994, p.5. Karin Hedetniemi photographs and writes from Vancouver Island, Canada. Find her at AGoldenHour.com or Twitter @karinhedet.

Spiders of the Universe | Mona Mehas



Felix Mittermeier via Pexels

Green spiders across the universe
Spin their webs to catch their dinner

Any stray space insectoid
Or leftovers tossed from flying ships

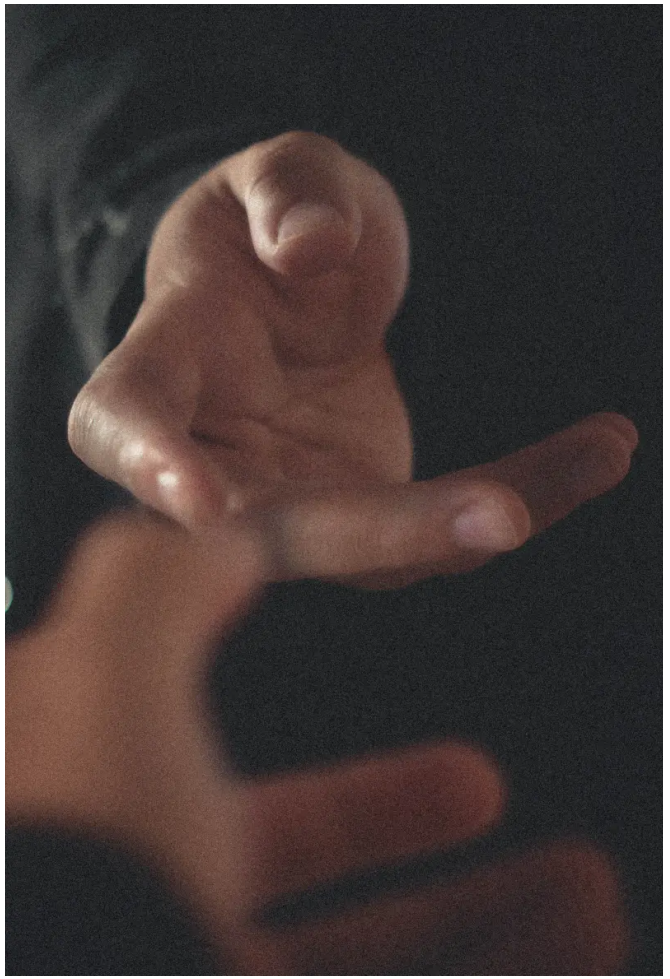
A black stallion gallops through
He snags his hoof, bows his head

The web stretches to entangle him
The steed snorts, his nostrils flare

Spiders chew their web, set him free
Grateful, the horse floats back to Earth.

Mona Mehas (she/her) writes about growing up poor, accumulating grief, and climate change. A retired, disabled teacher in Indiana, USA, she's at her laptop. Follow on everywhere on linktr.ee/monaiv.

For My Moonlight Firefly | Lylia Lilac



Wallace Chuck via Pexels

My Dearest Lover,

I fear that we will be reduced to "The Ones Who Got Away". A "Glimpse of Us" in another's eyes... A memory – a story with a bittersweet ending. I'm afraid it's something unavoidable. I wish I could hold onto you – cling to you like the stars cling to the night sky; but even the sun will burn out some day, my love. Even the stars we see are only the echoes of their existence a billion light years away... One day, I will be reduced to a memory to you; and you a fond familiarity to love to me.

Dancing in the evening with a firepit behind us will forever be a fantasy. Visions of standing beside you while watching Provence's sunset will be blurred in my mind. Your sweet kisses in a pastel pink café in London will be phantom touches... Perhaps you were right... All those 'maybe's and 'what if's and 'could have been's haunt me. They fill my heart with regret like lead and cause me to drag my feet, but they are a testament to what I could have been and done for you. They are the proof of my love for you, as foolish as it may seem. One day they will weigh less heavily on my shoulders, but my love, they will always be present.

I mourn the loss of your love already. Knowing in the back of my mind that I will likely amount to nothing but a fading warmth in your hands tears me apart. I wanted to keep you warm for as long as I could, my dearest. I care less about you loving me in return and more about you *being* loved by someone as you should...

> "I get jealous
>
> even when people
>
> aren't mine
>
> because others
>
> are reckless
>
> with their hearts
>
> and forget to
>
> be kind." – (Peppernell, "Pillow Thoughts")

Yet despite my selfless words, I cannot deny that I've wanted you selfishly. I've thought of being greedy. I've thought of being reckless. Sometimes I barely hang on by a thread when jealousy or despair consume me. We have no real future, my dearest moonlight. You are a privilege, not a right... one that I believe I will lose eventually, but not without appreciation for later in life.

I wish things weren't this way. I cannot tell you how many times I've thought about dropping the future I have here just for a present with you. The idea that someone will finally value me for what and who I truly am rather than what I can *do* or *will do* later on is something priceless and foreign to me. It's alluring – the idea that I could ever be more to someone than a means to an end... I'm not a means to an end to you... am I? I suppose, even if I was, I'd be none the wiser.

Would it be foolish? To think that I could do something that would allow us to have a future together? Move away perhaps? Get my life together and join you? Promise you 'eventually'? Promise you 'forever'? To be truthful, I am far too jealous of your lovers having such large proportions of your romantic love, not even including *him*, who I have not forgotten that you two are truly soulmates. There are so many factors that stop me from doing something reckless...

So, forgive me, my first love. I apologize for only ever pining and mourning the loss of your love, hardly ever basking in it as I should have been. I apologize for the way I've begun to slowly pull my hand away from yours in attempts to brace myself for the fall. My first romantic heartbreak; how comical considering that you were never mine in the first place.

I apologize; I will be nothing more to you than a name on the long list of people who have left you behind.

Love,

Lylia

J.R. Barner is a writer, teacher, and musician living in Athens, Georgia. Reach out to jrbarner.tumblr.com or on Twitter @jrbarner2.

Stubborn Hope | Swati Singh

The Lazy Artist Gallery via Pexels

Trudging in a blazing desert brimming
with mirages at every seventh mile

Parched lips, benumbed senses
Gasping breaths, dog-tired steps

Yet somehow
alive, palpitating on spirits' crutches

Dusk unfurling its sail as the sun grows
thin and frail, melting in the glistening sand

Night tiptoes donning its tenebrous cape
and I gaze

at the gleaming holes in the sky hoping
to witness a shooting star

They don't fall anymore
dreading what if I made a wish upon them

I touched the periphery of green oasis once,
Must be a dream

Why else would I be revolving
in the same hamster wheel

In a prison of time and space
rocking back and forth involuntarily

Chalking hash marks to count quarantine
that began before the pandemic

I knock inside to hear the soul's verdict,
It's stubborn, hope still flows in its veins...

Swati writes on mental health, nature & spirituality. Work published in various magazines including Inspire the Mind, The Sunlight Press, Stonecrop Review & more. www.twitter.com/swati2610

The Second Street | Chinekotam Yagazie

Alex Fu via Pexels

I

ISAAC JOHN STREET is an alchemist of verbs. While a long, lazy stroll on Bank Anthony Way, a modest suburb barely two minutes away and overlooking Isaac John, would be seen as a great trek (a bad word for someone walking long distances without a transport fare in Lagos), on Isaac John Street, a formerly colonial and residential street but now fully commercialized, it becomes a leisurely walk or exercise to burn calories. A walk on Isaac John is appreciated any time of the day, but more lovely when done just on the cusp of darkness where desire sometimes meets satisfaction.

A STREET IS A MEMORY. I take this walk once a year without a destination. The map lodged in my head; my legs a compass of their own. Asphalt to asphalt, I walk, bearing a heartbreak or a disappointment that won't go away. The clatter of traffic and the wind left behind when a car zooms into a distance form a lyric in my head. Street of memories and secrets. The bad streetlights know the secrets I won't tell on pages; the expensive restaurants I never entered know about my therapy sessions. This was the same street that hid my boyhood shame under the night sky when I saved transport fare from my mom by walking the distance to get groceries for late dinners.

EACH TIME I walk into Isaac John Street, I'm reminded of how impossible it is to describe it fully from the comfort of my bed. Like a lover, you only know the street when you are in it. There's always something extra that's not there the last time. A new mall. A new restaurant. A new club. An old house gone. Decades after the colonial lords left Nigeria, the street is still discovering itself, still experimenting with its looks to determine what works best.

THERE IS ALWAYS ABSENCE. A street is not only about the things found on it. It's also about the things that are no longer there. Time sometimes makes a fool of us all, erasing the things that make us; it takes away friends, places and memories. You begin to speak of a place that once existed with such clarity and vividness only to discover that no one remembers what you remember. Makes you understand how madness works: a man with deep conviction and lucidity about his past, motioning, explaining something that was once real and touchable to him, but that people now think is only confined to his sick imagination. People always start a discussion about a street from its beginning, but my walk around Isaac John Street commences from its end. I came into it through the Lagos Country Club on Joel Ogunnaike Street. So I notice immediately that the woman who used to fry *akara* on Saturday morning on the tail end of the street has been evicted and the man who used to fix bicycles beside her, and often chatted about wanting to pass down his skills to his son as his father did, is no more. The trader and artisan used to serve as bearings to strangers seeking directions on the street. "Drive into Isaac John, you will see a man repairing bicycles, move forward a bit, you will see Sweet Sensations." This was before Google maps and smartphones.

A FRAGILE PRESENCE. A street tells us how we will be replaced. When we no longer live on it, something takes our place. The darkness on some parts of Isaac John Street, the bad streetlights that won't get fixed, cover the marks of those who once lived here. The asphalt erases your footprints. The wind manufactured by fast moving cars wipes the dust from your feet. There are no sands of time. The street forgets. People remember. I remember Chimezie, my classmate who lived on this street several years ago. The place where his house once stood is now the spot of a fast food restaurant known as Sweet Sensations. I remember we played football together in school, because playing football was all we needed as kids to be friends. But Chimezie did more; he brought to class sometimes an edible nut with a fibrous covering which we all called "fruit" and until this day I do not know the appropriate name for it. If you wanted "fruit" (tropical almond) you had to be on the good books of Chimezie while it's still in season. We took for granted that Chimezie lived on Isaac John Street and accepted his claim that his father owned the big house even though he never dropped Chimezie off in a car but hand delivered him to us every morning in school like groceries. His father looked old, ragged and sometimes in a costume, and after seeing him so much in them it started to look like my school uniform. And Chimezie never introduced us to him or not when I was around. I never heard from him after they left Isaac John Street and this fast food restaurant is a reminder of him. As I walk past the fast food now, I wonder if his father wasn't a trained security officer with the benefit of hindsight, and that the building couldn't have been theirs. It is over seventeen years now, but I wondered if Chimezie left Isaac John with gladness, or if leaving in a hurry was a sign of mortification. Our presence on this street is shifting and temporary, and that, perhaps, is the final argument for our very existence in this world.

NIGHTLIFE IN ISAAC JOHN used to be quiet and lonely. This was the original plan. A girl could walk alone in the past without fear of predators. Isaac John is part of the Government Reserved Area, a city unto itself where the rich and powerful on the Lagos mainland come to live. Before the new monies in Nigeria started living at the Government Reserved Area (GRA), it used to be a refuge for expatriates, both colonial officers and merchants from Britain doing the work of God Save the Queen. The commercialization of Isaac John Street brought about Metro-Park, a nightclub that fascinated me in my boyhood. I used to imagine what went on under the blue and red lights that covered the men and women who trooped into it as if in need of salvation. Passing it now, it is a surprise how a place could lose its magic and mystery with time and regular use. Reminds me of our bodies.

IN HENRY VI, Dick advised that all lawyers be killed. If you were driving through Isaac John Street on a Friday night, or Saturday evening, you would totally disagree with the Bard of Avon's character. All event center owners without parking space on this street should be hanged. This is the genesis of the traffic jam on Isaac John Street. It's Wednesday night, there is no traffic.

WALK FASTER. I stand by the traffic lights that separate the first half of Isaac John Street from the second. In fact, I'm entirely no longer on Isaac John Street as the ground I am standing on is officially Sobo Arobiodun Street if streets possessed the international privileges of nations and borders. Sobo Arobiodun Street is residential, innocent but teeming with desires and willingness. There's a darkness to the street that's lifted like a curtain each time a car passes by. During the day, there's a woman who manages a small roadside business selling roast corn and *ube*. She's always there, under the sun and in the rain and has become an extension of Sobo Arobiodun Street. She's not on Google Maps. There's more to a place than landmarks.

I WALK ACROSS this boundary to the other side of Isaac John Street. There's Cubana, a club, in front of me. Cars are parked too close to the road in the same way I sit when there is not much legroom for me on a bus and I have to colonize the aisle. The club is palatial in a way that suspends its charm. The club is newly built and replaces the stately, quiet building that used to be there. The previous building was small with a large garden, too small for the space in a way that seemed self-reprimanding, self-critical and self-conscious of its privileges and opulence. The club is everything Isaac John Street shouldn't be: its design is magnificent in an unruly way, the architecture demands attention the same way some cheap paintings hang noisily on the wall. I do not imagine who or what is behind the gates of the club. I instead think of what used to stand adjacent to it. A series of telephone booths before the arrival of cellular phones to Nigeria. The booths are no longer there, children of my generation can scarcely remember a time when people had to line up to make a call in telephone booths the way one stands to withdraw cash from an ATM gallery. It faded in the early 2000s, and I probably should be unable to recall it too but for the fact that a lady used to bring me to the booths as her protection whenever she wanted to talk to her boyfriend in Germany. I was eight and served nuisance value against the many men who catcalled, if they were cowardly, and stopped her, if they had some substance. She's beautiful, with an unusual light skin, almost to a point of paleness. People called her *oyinbo*, a term of reverence for a white man or woman. Some women called her *mammy water*, a term for a water mermaid, reminding her that her beauty was extraterrestrial and she's not human. These names were their coy way of telling her that those whose beauty came from a benevolent spirit should not forget to be humble in the presence of other women's husbands. Don't steal our men. In a city where people are either black or fair complexioned, her shimmering paleness was impossible to hide on Isaac John Street. During these international calls, she had to be at the booth hours before the call to secure a line. The situation was distressing to the point where a government minister in charge of communication was asked what the way forward should be. He laughed and told Nigerians that the telephone was not for the poor. Because the rich had phones installed in their homes.

FOR ONE GLORIOUS, transforming moment, Isaac John Street repossesses its routine elegance, its blank purity. I am at Adam and Eve, a store that has been on this street for as long as I can remember. The whole GRA borrows something from Isaac John Street to fill their houses with. This is what the Adam and Eve store is for. It's like a place you go to buy expensive plates and furniture to stock up your empty apartment. Not a place to be if you dislike posturing, pretentiousness and humbug. I look at the transparent store and the light that pours out from it also gives away the image of the people shopping. I am one that is fascinated by what people tend to hide and not the idealized version of themselves. The intimacy that comes from watching strangers who don't care about you. It's almost like war photography, isn't it? The refrigeration of humanity at ground zero: a point where neither privacy nor dignity matters to the victims. They just want to survive.

ADAM AND EVE is open. A man and a woman take a tour of the household items on sale. I watch. The woman walks in front while the man accompanies her. It looks as if they had postponed this couple shopping for their new house for several weeks and the man is always claiming to be busy. He looks at the items she points to buy and nods. I doubt if he truly sees them. Smiling at the shop girls, they both seem to be performing the role of the perfect couple and at once disclaiming any deformities in their union in public and assuring each other that things are fine. They both need this marital exercise of faith, yet it seems only one person is glad to be there. She needs his love yet she is pissed at the perfunctory performance of it. The lady points to something else, lifts another thing and the shop girls hover around her field of vision, carefully taking out whatever the married lady's eyes and mouth fall on. At length, they pay and walk to their car, with heavy utensils and breakable things like their relationship. The man's interest has faded, his old self has returned as well as the old peevishness between them, and he now fiddles his phone for the LiveScore to the English premier league or whatever numbers on the Nigerian stock exchange. And by the time they drive away, the lady is already planning another trip to Adam and Eve store. Or the Ruff 'n' Tumble store with their kids. By the time they drive away, I have completed my empty wandering on this street and I think of when next I could return for my therapy.

THE NIGHT is old. I do not take the road by which I came. As I grow older, my life seems as unrecognizable sometimes as this street.

II

Isaac John Street is a decoy, a street I have adopted to supplant the one I truly belong to. There's another street. I don't mean for this to sound weird. Like a man confessing to his wife: "there's another woman." Before I knew the marks on Isaac John Street, I knew Mobolaji Bank Anthony Way. I was born there. But it is a street that doesn't speak to me anymore.

It was on Mobolaji Bank Anthony Way that I first met Pip, the character from *Great Expectations* by Charles Dickens. We became fast friends. I read the book in a rush the first two days, then slowed the third because I was afraid of the loneliness that would envelop me as soon as I let go of this character. There was something in the book that pointed to Mobolaji Bank Anthony, something only Dickens could write. It was that description of the marsh country, the poor, and that juxtaposition of abundance that was within reach of Pip but the sadness that came with this journey to being a gentleman.

Chinekotam Yagazie is in his final semester of the MFA in Creative Nonfiction at Miami University. He tweets @coolharris5

The Only 7-Eleven Open This Time of Night | John Barner

J.R. Barner is a writer, teacher, and musician living in Athens, Georgia. Reach out to jrbarner.tumblr.com or on Twitter @jrbarner2.

mingche lee via Pexels

Is just inside the Svanemøllen S-Train station.
Its dull, chalky light shining over the bike racks,
Like a B-movie celluloid ghost, its pallor draping every face,
Through the cyclonic vortices of trash and fallen leaves.
I start to say, almost embarrassed, I rode all this way
For an overpriced microwave pizza & zero calorie Faxe Kondi
But the screeching of air brakes from the station below
Instantly erases my memory & I linger,
Just perusing the Haribo & Skildpadder, surreptitiously
Watching your face in the uncanny glow.

auburndale's last poet | McKenzie Campbell

Вера Мезенкова *via Pexels*

-inspired by "Tulsa's Last Magician" by Willi Carlisle

i can't claim to be a magician
but i've been known to make magic with my words
and weave together illusions with my teeth

using letters and syllables like building blocks
in attempt to manipulate the meaning of life

to make those around me see what's jumbled and tied
together by the sinew in my neck
preventing the words from slipping past my loom of a mouth

forced back down my throat, over my shoulders, down my arms
and out through my fingers as everything tightens

until the act of unleashing it through capillaries untangles

my thoughts are like the blood dripping from my fingers
to the keys, my words flowing out like the prayers used to

before the sinew tangled so tight that all thoughts
folded onto each other and believing and confusing
became intrinsically entwined

now, the only time i'm certain i'm religious
is when i hit submit on something i've worked
hard on that one day might pay my rent

it's hard to tell a story when everyone thinks the same
and that's why auburndale's last poet left her home so fast

McKenzie Campbell is a recent college grad with a master's in creative writing. She enjoys writing romance and horror. When she isn't writing smut, she's reading it. Twitter: @booksnbobbles

Brother's Teeth | Cameron Kohuss

cottonbro via Pexels

Like tiny soiled mirrors beneath the pressure of big, heavy shoes, Dana's braces were so tight she thought they would crack her teeth; but the assistant wasn't done. She'd only replaced the top ligature—and in a moment would return to finish the job.

Dana closed her eyes. Her tongue couldn't help but to taste the brand new wire.

Her little brother was screaming from another part of the office. She heard a door open. Someone said, "Ma'am, would you come in here please," and then the voice of her mother, "I thought he'd be *fine*," followed by a long pause, and footsteps that went away behind her. "You said you'd be a Big Kid today," her mother added a moment later, with a tone of annoyance, an embarrassed type of sympathy for the dentist.

But no one said anything after. Dana could only hear the sobs of her brother, the sniffs, the long and laborious sucks of breath, as though powering up for the second round.

"You *have* to brush, little miss."

She opened her eyes. The assistant had come back and was watching her from above, behind clear goggles and a crisp white mask. She looked at a separate piece of wire, eyeballing it. "Huh?" Dana said.

"I said you have to brush. Three minutes," the assistant replied. She looked at Dana, then at the length of wire again, measuring it with a shiny pair of cutters. "Your mom has a timer," she asked, "for cooking? For eggs? Have her buy you a timer. Three minutes," she repeated, "no less, okay?"

Snip.

Snip.

She put the cutters down on the tray. "Move your tongue," said the assistant, placing the wire against her teeth.

"I brush," said Dana defensively. The assistant pulled back and made a noise, like a groan. "Not well enough," she replied, "not by a long shot. Move your tongue."

"Three minutes?"

The assistant leaned back again. That must have sounded like a long time, Dana thought, coming from someone else. "You know what happens when you don't brush?" From far away came the sound of a drill. "Hold him down, please," a man said. Her brother started to scream. "You see," the assistant went on, in reference it seemed to her brother, "*that's* what happens. He needs a filling now. Do you know what a filling is?" Dana shook her head, her mouth still open. The assistant's face blocked out the lamp above the chair. "If you don't brush like I tell you," she said, "you end up in need of a filling; because of the monsters." Dana had slid down the chair a little. She tried to look up at the assistant, her eyes rolling to the top of her head.

"The monsters?"

"Yes," the assistant said. "They live under your teeth. Right here," she said, pointing with the sharp and metallic instrument at Dana's gum line, "and here," at a different spot now, "and right here. All over, see? And the monsters love when you don't brush."

"Why do they love that?" She found herself gripping the arm of the chair. Then the assistant was gone; or not gone, still in the room—not visible. Dana blinked a few times, the light above her hot against her face. Her brother wasn't screaming anymore. The drilling had stopped; there were voices on that side of the office, but she couldn't make out what they were saying.

"They get hungry," said the assistant. "You leave bacteria on your teeth when you don't brush; the monsters get big and strong from this." She must have been looking for another tool: Dana could hear that she'd ripped something open, then the sound like silverware as it tinkered one against the other. "But the only way they can get to this food, this bacteria," said the assistant, "is to punch holes through your teeth. That's how they get out and feed." Dana's hands felt numb, and weak. Her jaw hurt. The assistant stopped messing with the swivel tray and glanced at her. "But if you brush, the monsters have no reason to hurt you. There's nothing for them to feed on, so there's no reason for them to punch through your teeth."

"And they'll go away?"

"Well," said the assistant, "they'll leave you alone. But they'll always be there, ready to eat. That's if you're not diligent about your hygiene. So," she swung back around, and pulled on Dana's lower lip, "three minutes, okay? Move your tongue please."

When she was done the assistant went away again; and Dana lay there with the newly formed pressure against her teeth.

She thought of her brother—maybe they'd gassed him (that was something they do, she'd heard, they *Give You the Gas*) and that was why he'd stopped his screaming. She closed her eyes and thought of those teeth monsters living inside her mouth; they were probably ugly, with bad teeth themselves, and big arm muscles and lots of crazy, messy hair from living in all the wet and stinking scum.

"So that was your brother," a man said. Dana looked up; and this time there were three people above her. "Younger," the man inquired, "or are you the baby?" The man had glasses on instead of goggles; his white mask was fixed beneath his chin. When he smiled, his teeth were bright and polished. The other two people, one on each side, looked the same as the assistant from before.

"He's the baby," Dana said. "He's seven; I'm ten."

"Ah, the big sister," said the man. He took a seat on the rolling chair and spread her mouth apart with his fingers. "Looks pretty good. Nice work, Amber." The assistant on the other side said Thank you. "So the big sister," the man repeated, pushing himself away. "You know what that means, right?" Dana didn't say Yes or nod her head or anything; she just looked

at him. "You have to watch out for your brother," he continued, his hands in his lap, "and that means making sure you both brush just as often and as well as you're supposed to."

"I brush," Dana pleaded.

"I told her about the monsters," the assistant said.

"The monsters, that's right," said the man. "The ones that live inside your teeth." Then the chair she was in was moving, and a moment later she was straight up. "Your brother didn't brush like he should have," the man said to her, face-to-face, "and the monsters were eating his tooth. So I need you to promise me now you'll look after him and take care of those bad, nasty monsters, got it? He's the baby; he needs you, okay? All right, I think she's good to go," he told the assistant beside him. Then he got up and left the room.

#

Her brother sat in the front seat on the ride home. He kept rubbing the left side of his face, and complaining that he could hear voices from inside his mouth. Dana's mother laughed. She said, "I've heard of that; it's because of the filling."

"It means you have to brush your teeth," Dana snapped. Her mother gave a sharp, unappreciative look in the rear view mirror. "I got in trouble because of him," Dana said.

"With who?" her mother asked.

"The man said he doesn't brush; and then he said *I* don't brush, even though I *always* brush."

"I'm sure he didn't mean you were in trouble," said her mother.

"They're really loud," her brother said; and Dana replied, softly, "Yeah, those are the monsters."

Her mother shot her another look. "Dana!"

"The what?" asked her brother, poking his head into the backseat.

"The monsters," said Dana, looking at him.

"Stop it right now, you're scaring him! What's gotten into you?"

"Mom," said her brother, "what did she mean—"

"It's *nothing*," her mother answered, "okay? She's just *teasing* you."

Dana put her head against the window. Her jaw was heavy, and sore; her teeth felt as though they could break at any moment.

#

This was two weeks after Labor Day. It was her parent's anniversary and they'd gone out for dinner, asking Dana to watch her little brother until they returned. They'd be home by 11 PM, they said. It was 8:04 as they sat on the couch, watching cartoons. Her brother put his hand to his mouth.

"What's wrong with you?" asked Dana.

"Nothing," he said. He moved his lips up and down like a fish.

"Then why are you doing that?"

"I can hear them talking," he answered.

"Who?" Dana had forgotten about the whole thing; but now—she remembered. "You mean—"

"I can still *hear* them," he said, more irritated this time.

She turned to face him. She asked seriously, "What are they saying?"

"I don't know. I can't understand them."

"Let me try," she said, "open your mouth." Dana put her ear up to his mouth, and tried to concentrate. "I think..."

"What?" he said.

"...I can't tell."

"Is it the—"

"Yes," she answered, "I'm pretty sure. Have you been brushing?" His face scrunched up a bit. "I'm sorry," he said, so low beneath his breath it was barely audible.

"You *have* to brush!" Dana said. She thought back now to what the man had told her, about looking out for her little brother. "What do I do?" he asked; and for a moment—she didn't know; but what if, she wondered, *his* monsters would come for her? What if they ate all of histeeth and then devoured all of *her* teeth in the middle of the night?

And then mommy's teeth.

Daddy's teeth.

The neighbor's, and the dog's; the teeth of her friends at school.

Her homeroom teacher, Ms Quigley.

That must have been why the man had warned her, she thought. Her little brother's bad and rotten teeth were going to get them all, eventually. Unless, as the man had said, she stopped them.

She got up from the couch with an urgency, taking him by the hand. "Come on." Her brother's palm was hot and wet. He asked what they were doing; she didn't answer.

They went upstairs and stopped below the attic. The rope hung just enough to where she could reach it with a small jump, and the door fell towards them very slowly. But she couldn't reach the wooden stairs. "Stay here," she said, going into the bathroom; and she came back out with the step stool her brother used to see himself in the mirror. Now the stairs were reachable. They swung down with a thud. She turned to him and said, "Go up there," giving him a shove on the back side.

"What?" he asked.

"Go," she said again, "I'll be right behind you."

He went all the way up, disappeared for a second, then turned the other way and stared down at her. "Pull the light switch," she said, and he did. She came to the top rung and grabbed the two side struts of the attic and hoisted herself to her feet. Then they stood there, looking around. There were a few old boxes, boxes of Christmas lights, and bags of sporting equipment; there were three rows of blankets piled four high near the rafters at the back, next to a wooden table and some chairs, stacked on top of each other. Beside the table was a tall, brown radiator.

"Come over here," Dana said. She picked up the box of lights and set it on the table; he was standing next to her but she didn't look at him. "Listen. We have to stop them," she said, her tone more weighty than usual, "or they'll get us all, see. They'll get mommy, and daddy. Your friend, Todd. Everyone."

"The monsters," he said.

"The monsters. It's too late for you, but we can save the others. Don't you want to save the others?"

He put his head down. "What do we do?"

She walked over to the blankets and grabbed one; it had cartoon dinosaurs on it. Then she untangled the Christmas lights from the box. "Sit down on the blanket," she said, "and face me," as she unfolded the blanket onto the floor next to the radiator, "and give me your hands."

"How come?" he asked.

"Just give me them." He sat cross-legged, holding his hands out. Dana got on her knees and plugged the lights into the outlet next to the radiator. They came on in blue and green and red. She crawled back around to him, wrapping the opposite end around his right wrist, careful not to break the bulbs against his skin, let the length of wire stretch out before wrapping it around the foot of the radiator, then finished at his other hand. "Now I need to go grab something," Dana said, her finger to her chin.

"*No*!" he said. "Don't *leave* me up here!"

"I'm not," she answered, "I'm coming back; but I have to go downstairs for something. Okay?" His face was scrunched

again, those long and sticky breaths beginning to pulsate in his throat. She got to her feet and went down the attic stairs.

Dana wasn't gone for very long, just two or three minutes; and when she came back up she stood at the top of the landing, and stared at him as he sat there; her poor, pathetic little brother, and those monsters now within him—soon to eat her whole entire family's teeth. But by the man's own instruction, she would put a stop to that. She went to her brother and knelt, laying the flat-head screwdriver on the blanket. She held the hammer firm in her right hand and checked his wrists. "I can't have you moving," she said. He blinked at her a few times, enough to produce the tears she'd come to expect. She wiped them away. "I don't have the *Gas* for you," she added, "but I have to save them. I'm sorry; I have to get those monsters out of you and crush them before it's too late. Before they eat us all. Just look at your hands, at the lights. Think about the Christmas lights."

"*Please*," he said, voice wavering; he promised her he would brush. But there was no other way. Dana picked up the screwdriver and set it flush against his top front tooth. He was shivering, his temples sweating. "Do you—" she pulled her hand away; "—do you still hear them?"

He looked into her eyes. "I hear them in my mouth," he said, finally, quietly; and Dana shook her head. She put the screwdriver back against his tooth, and the hammer made a curious whistle as it swung, many times, through the hot and fetid air.

Word Limits | L.M. Cole

Yaroslav Shuraev via Pexels

I try not to include words
that would hurt you.

The trouble with that
is the limits to what I can say.

I can tell you that you
have meant a great deal to me.

[As sandpaper means a great
deal to the wood being ground

down to sawdust, falling to
pieces, plummeting in spirals

to the cement, to lay there
until swept away or rendered

stale, molded, in little mounds
never enough to combust.]

L.M. Cole is a poet and artist residing in North Carolina. Her work has appeared or is forthcoming with Roi Fainéant, Corporeal, Bullshit Lit, The Bitchin' Kitsch and others. Twitter @_scoops__

The Golden Unicorn | Fabiano Colucci

White Water via Pexels

In the constant flux of horses and Dragons, many are the creatures whose sightings happen so rarely that they are considered closer to being legends than to be real. After all, not everyone had the chance to witness the landing of a flaring Phoenix descending from the skies with its might wings, or the arrival of a White Tiger ready to roar at the Moon to share songs about wisdom with the world, not even if one managed to live to be over a hundred years old.

Moreover, while lots of men and women bragged and claimed to have received the visit of a Dragon, often it was the case of an exaggerated lie, the encounter of a snake whose proportions became larger in the person's mind and ego, in order to appear worthy of praise and respect for the simple fact that Dragons have decided to appear in front of them. Some have even altered paintings of snakes by adding legs on its bodies, effectively turning them into strange lizards, just to sell their point.

However, there is one creature which is considered to be rarer than all those, even rarer than a Dragon. Said creature is known in this area as the Golden Unicorn.

Despite the name, however, one should not immediately think about it as a horse with a golden skin and a sharp, shiny horn on its forehead. The peculiarity of the Golden Unicorn was that, according to the very few people who saw one and wrote that down, its body parts resembled those of other animals.

Its tail was sleek, with lots of fur on its end, similar to that of a bull. Its belly was the same shade of yellow as a crocodile's. Its body, green and scaly, was compared by many to both a snake and a Dragon. Its mouth was decorated by two long

barbels, like those of a carp. Then, its horn was tweaked and imposing like the ones on a deer's head.

As people began to wonder why was the Golden Unicorn so similar to other animals, which had nothing in common with one another, there were wise scholars who tried to point out that such a creature had characteristics which made it comparable to those specific animals.

Like the bull, the Golden Unicorn roamed freely, with nothing on its path capable of bothering enough to either stop it or face it. Like the crocodile, it was able to walk on both land and water, being so gentle in its movements to not harm a single blade of grass. Like the Dragon, many beings feared and respected its arrival, rarely trying to cause any harm to it. Like the carp, much like said fish is able to swim against currents and waterfalls in order to reach its destination, the Golden Unicorn always made it back to its celestial place with safety, against any possible odds. Then, like the deer, it seemed like a majestic presence, a spectacle that people felt glad to have witnessed.

Another curious characteristic of the Golden Unicorn is that it is said to be engulfed in flames. However, it has always been unclear if those "flames" are proper ones, or if the bright sunlight wrapped around its body was so intense that people just assumed its body was completely surrounded by fire.

The reason why it was so rare to see one of them was that they only appeared on one of two specific occasions: the beginning of an important period, or its end. Many also say that it announces the birth or the death of an individual, but that was solely because they were so intertwined with the events that their mere existence was necessary for them to occur.

To better explain this, let's talk about three of the last times the Golden Unicorn had appeared in this land.

There was once an old King, the type of ruler who was honest, gentle and kind to its people. His white beard was so long that it almost touched the ground, even when he was standing up to walk. For sixty years he had ruled, and he was now worried about what was going to happen to his Kingdom, once he had passed away. So much he worried that he barely left his throne room, even in days where nobody was requesting his advices or waiting for his orders.

Then, once day, while peeking through a window, the King saw the shining aura of the Golden Unicorn. It took him a couple moments to recognize it, but, once he did so, he felt warmth across his wrinkled old body. If it had paid visit to the Kingdom, then it meant that a period of peace and prosperity was on its way. Being aware of that, the old King celebrated with its people one last time, as he passed shortly after.

While a young woman was looking at the colorful flowers of spring on the hills close to her house, her mind was focused on what had become of her betrothed, who had left their town in order to enlist in the army. She was too preoccupied for him to even notice how beautiful the flower petals caressing her arms were.

In that moment, the Golden Unicorn appeared in front of her, as it even smiled at the woman. Whatever was happening far, far away, was over, as peacetime was upon them. Her beloved was going to return, and they were going to raise a family of righteous people, who would have brought good to others. Indeed, the man returned after a fortnight, as they finally celebrated their wedding.

So inevitable was the arrival of peace and happiness when the Golden Unicorn appeared that there was once a time in which a powerful warlord tried his best in order to conquer and destroy the capital city of his state. No soldier was able to defeat him, and his men were an unstoppable force, as they had reached the city walls, ready to destroy them.

Yet, before they were able to do so, the Golden Unicorn appeared from the clouds, walking towards the warlord. It felt so light as it passed through the soldiers, as if it was floating. All it took for the warlord was to see the Unicorn's eyes once before he decided to retreat, having accepted his defeat. If celestial beings were against his victory, then he was only going to cause unwanted and unnecessary harm.

Those are just three specific events, but they all reflect how widespread it is that witnessing one has always been a huge deal.

There are many people nowadays who try to spread the rumor that the Golden Unicorn has returned. Only a handful of them try to do so in order to justify their actions, and another

handful say that because they hope to see peace once again before they are laid to rest, but the majority is just confused by the fact that not everyone is able to recognize one.

Who knows: perhaps, not even the old King, the young woman and the warlord saw an actual Golden Unicorn, but they still believed in it anyway, and prosperous times did follow after their actions.

Should you have the fortunate occasion of seeing once, remember that you are not encountering sorrow, but great omens. Do not believe that your choices are sealed, but be aware that you have made the correct ones.

And now, go ahead, and look up in the sky. Perhaps, you would recognize the scaly body, or the furry tail, of a Golden Unicorn.

An Italian university student who loves learning, writing and creating, because every moment is worth creating for.

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Memories × Dreams | P. Shannon-Baker

via Pixabay

Sometimes
They dream of memories unknown

As if their soul cries for a present, past
Alternative.

They want to dream of refuge
Solace
But their mind-heart cannot let go
Of a past that never was

A past of closeness
Wrapped amidst warmth
[Family]

Even in their dreams—sadness.

An ever-present odd creeps in
Unlike
Unusual
Queer
Even in their dreams

They feel the pains of nostalgia
For a past that was not.
Was never.
Will never.
Be

P. Shannon-Baker is a multitexturous teacher, writer, researcher, and artist based in Savannah, Georgia, USA. On Twitter: @pshannonbaker.

The English professor in a nightmare still wants that paper turned in | James Burdick

Jim Burdick is a writer living in Rhode Island, making his way into literary society by short fiction and humor alone. He is also a dog person. https://twitter.com/JimBurdickComic

cottonbro via Pexels

Dear student who graduated ten years ago,
This is Professor [EARSPLITING STATIC NOISE] emailing you in hopes that you remembered to finish that paper on finding all the symbols in all literature forever
The paper needs to be sent to me in a file that has long since become obsolete. I will not take anything that comes in DOC, PDF, Open office, or any simple to use formats.
I will not take any excuses. I don't want to hear how your fingers have fallen off and replaced with snakes with you father's face.
Have a wonderful dream this semester

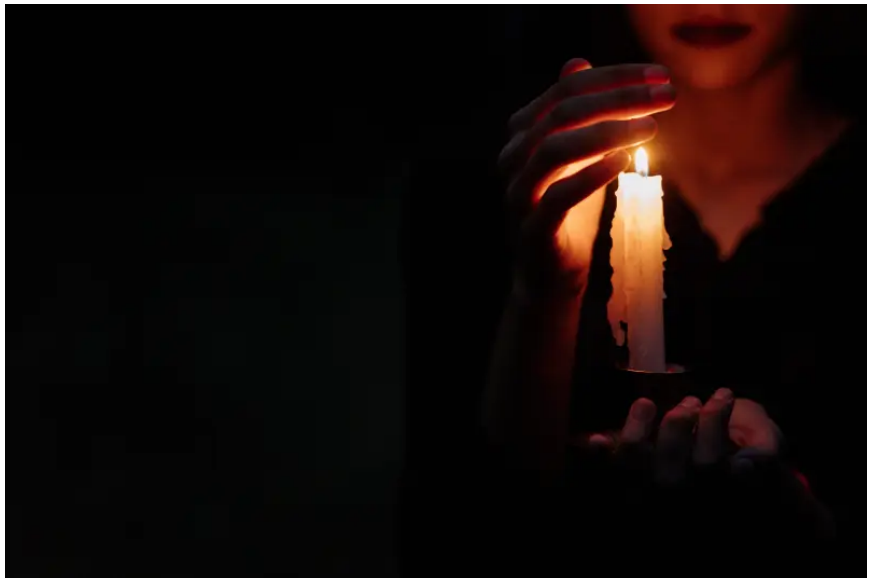
He Just Wanted a Publication Credit | Samuel Dawson

Sam has been published by Banditfiction, Audio Arcadia, and is upcoming in the Syncopation Literary Review. He works as a bid writer in the charity sector and has an MA in Creative Writing.

Lum3n via Pexels

He just wanted a publication credit.
He was not going to encourage people he knew to check the story out.
He wasn't proud of it.
He knew his story being self-referential and meta did not make it good, lend it any credence of value.
He very briefly spell-checked. He tried to get it at least somewhat close to one hundred words.
But that was it. No effort. No edits. Didn't even sustain the whole each-sentence starting-with-'he' thing.
Please. Skip to the next story.

The Witches | Minerva Cerridwen



cottonbro via Pexels

CW: blood, gore, glorified evil (in the context of fantasy witches)
(but it's also a queer love story)

The witches washed their hair in blood
Smeared each floor with slimy mud
Their teeth to pointy daggers filed
Their smiles alone made fear run wild.
And smile they would, at every curse
At every draft to make life worse
And at their stories, tales of old
At night by light of fire told.
Young Dobra didn't think them fair
When those who helped people with care
Would find their hearts devoured, while
Their severed heads were drowned in bile.

Young Vreda, on the other hand
Though always Dobra's closest friend
Admired the heroes of that age
And let her evil powers rage.
When Dobra asked: "Won't you be good?"
Vreda said: "None of us should
for weaklings know a dreadful end,
don't reach the glory I intend."
Next morning during witching class
Vreda invoked a spell quite crass:
From Dobra's face tentacles grew—
In shame, the girl withdrew from view.
By dearest friend her trust betrayed
That night she had a promise made:
Not once again she'd harm a soul;
To ward off evil was her goal.

Until their graduation rite
The girls refused to reunite
But then called Vreda: "Dobra dear,
before you disappear, please hear:
I should have told you long ago
I wouldn't cause my friend such woe.
To me, appendages are neat
A gift to make you look more sweet."
Now Dobra was with silence struck
But pulled her friend into a hug
How could her judgment be so wrong
And curb affection for so long?
When Vreda asked her on a date
She knew this had been long delayed;
They pledged to make a whole fresh start
Both greatly changed by time apart.
Since Vreda's spell had hurt her so
Dobra had vowed to comfort woe
To cure the sick and bless the kind
To make each evil deed unwind.
Vreda's vile sins became more cruel
For her own sorrow was their fuel:
What use was goodness when it made
One cast away their wicked mate?
And so each kept to her own view
And neither from her aim withdrew
To cause more pleasure or more ill
As they lived, wedded, on the hill.
The neighbors loved Dobra quite dear;
All countries viewed Vreda with fear
So they were happy, come the day
A farmer spoke of his dismay.
"Though Dobra blessed my crops last year
I wait for magic to appear:
they still look average at best
so I feel cheated and distressed!"
The witches met each other's eye
And giggles spoiled Dobra's reply:
Though she had blessed, her wife had cursed
And all to balance was reversed.

Minerva Cerridwen is a queer writer from Belgium. Xyr novella The Dragon of Ynys came out with Atthis Arts in 2020. Find more of xyr short stories and poems via https://minervacerridwen.wordpress.com/

Sunita Explains Why She Won't Exorcise | Nina Miller

Ryan Miguel Capili via Pexels

I've been possessed since age six.
Five insufferable years ago!

I passed his graveyard without holding my breath. Sucked him in.
Moment still haunts me.

Old Cobb fought in the Great War; he knows things.
Except how to escape.

Good grades and friendship! Love our tight bond.
Mouse in a glue trap.

He's fun, jumped into a puddle once, and splashed Mom completely. Told her Cobb made me; she accused me of lying.
You were, I'm the scapeghost.

Cobb's restless. Basically tries to make me drink holy water, but then who'd help me through middle school?
Stranded in puberty purgatory.

Nina Miller is an Indian-American physician, fencer, and micro/flash writer. Find her on Twitter @NinaMD1 or www.ninamillerwrites.com.

The Last Thing to Go | Jeanne Sharp

Юлия Кондратова via Pexels

Many people believe that once we become unconscious during the process of dying, the sense of hearing is the last thing we lose. A recent study at the University of British Columbia lent some credence to this long-held belief. The researchers used electroencephalography (EEG) to record brain activity in response to sound from two groups of study participants: a healthy, conscious control group, a dying-but-still-conscious group receiving hospice care, and the same dying group after they became unresponsive. They found that several of the dying patients' brains showed responses to auditory stimuli that were similar to the control group, even when they were literally at death's door.

It's this fascinating quirk of the human body that leads loved ones to sit for hours at the bedsides of the comatose and dying, chatting with them or reading to them, all with what research is indicating is the valid hope that their voices are reaching through the fog of unconsciousness.

But what does it mean when this supposed natural order ruptures and reorders itself? If the last thing we're supposed to lose before we die is the ability to hear, what does it mean when our hearing goes first?

I suppose it could mean one of several things: too much exposure to loud sounds, old age, an infection, an injury, a hereditary malformation, to name a few. I got no such explanation two years ago when I lost all hearing in my left ear, only the word "idiopathic," along with weeks of steroids and a normal-looking MRI. I'm dying in reverse. Piecemeal, but fighting every step.

No wonder I'm obsessed with zombie and vampire stories — the undead and the reanimated have held a fascination for most of my life. My childhood was filled with strange dreams and visions; I grew up sensing things that no one else could and experiencing déjà vu on a routine basis. I couldn't have known then that parts of me would join the unavoidable transit toward death so far ahead of schedule, nor that I would claw against it with so much urgency, but that's where I landed and where I hoist my battle flag. Like Persephone in the Greek myth, I surface from this puzzling-yet-familiar underworld every so often, only to get recalled as soon as I start to forget what I am: the main character in a warped superhero origin story.

This is my hill, and I'll be dying on it.

I'm no stranger to hearing loss. I grew up with a dad who developed conductive hearing loss as a child. From the time I was old enough to carry on a conversation, I understood that my dad couldn't hear me if I addressed his right side. Looking back, I wonder how many times he just smiled and nodded or offered a passive "mmm-hmm" without ever knowing what I or anyone else had said to him.

The man had issues. Enough, as the wry insult goes, to open a newsstand. His issues were the vertebrae of a generational curse visited upon my brothers and me; a curse that was likely passed to him from his parents. After all, these things are difficult to isolate. You can pick up the scent of it only to meet yourself turning inward in an ever-tightening spiral until you're so dizzy your body finds the ground before your eyes do.

A spiral. Like the cochlea.

Part of my father's pathology (characterized as narcissistic personality by some of the therapists I've visited since the age of 19 in my own quest to break the curse) involved embellishing the truth and rewriting history — his own and that of the people in his orbit. If there were reliable witnesses to a particular event, it was easy to spot his lies in the retelling. But if the witnesses were absent or their perspectives otherwise lost, we learned to take everything Dad told us with a grain of salt, or several.

One story he told was the tale of how he lost his hearing in his right ear. I find it hard to believe that he embellished this one much because it doesn't make him look particularly smart or talented, but I'm putting the saltshaker on the table anyway because I have no way of knowing for sure. He told us he went swimming in a drainage ditch as a boy and developed a severe ear infection, or perhaps a series of chronic infections. The result was that one or more of the auditory ossicles in his right ear (those three tiny bones that move sound from the eardrum to the cochlea and on to the auditory nerve) fused or malformed somehow, and sounds could no longer travel past his eardrum.

When he was 66, he underwent surgery to replace the malformed ossicles with artificial ones and restore hearing but I'm not sure how much good it actually did. He had refused a hearing aid for decades because he didn't want to look old. This surgery was probably attractive to him because it meant he wouldn't have to wear any visible external equipment, but he struggled post-operatively with certain sound frequencies and volumes.

When I lost hearing in my left ear, almost one month to the day after his death, the spiritual, woo, it's-all-connected part of me wondered if my dad was playing some nasty joke on me from the other side. I wouldn't put it past him — he was as mean as he was dishonest. While I struggled with vertigo and almost unbearable tinnitus, I mumbled curses under my breath and screamed at him in my heart.

I learned later that my hearing loss was different from his in two major respects: one, mine was sensorineural, not conductive, meaning a different part of my ear had failed — the cochlea. And two, there was no obvious explanation for mine. No infection, injury, excessive loud noises, or acoustic neuromas. The official diagnosis was idiopathic single-sided sensorineural hearing loss. As Clayton, the otolaryngology PA who took care of me during those first weeks explained, "we call it idiopathic because we're idiots."

In the time since my left cochlea stopped working, I developed a level of empathy for my dad that I never had before, because single-sided deafness is brutal. Sound plays tricks on you, and exhaustion becomes the norm because the brain suddenly has to work twice as hard to process input from the still-working ear. The experience transformed me into a walking buzzkill, and I began to understand at least some of what made my dad so combative and cruel.

Unlike my dad, I refused to let vanity dictate whether or not I took advantage of some pretty impressive medical technology; a cochlear implant in my case. In fact, I went to the mat to get

one, fighting with insurance company drones who think having one working ear is the same as having two. I wear my external processor on my head with pride and leverage my experiences into advocacy for the disabled. Many in the Deaf community view cochlear implants as cudgels that are weaponized to enforce conformity; a tool of a lazy majority that refuses to help move the world toward greater inclusivity and access. I stand in that breach: I'm learning American Sign Language, I'm asking hard questions, and I'm pointing out accessibility gaps wherever I see them.

I refuse to use my powers for anything other than good.

Jeanne Sharp (she/her) is a writer who has done everything but write for most of her adult life. She lives in the desert and can be found on IG at @that_jeanne or Twitter at @sharpwritings

If Only We Could | Melissa Ren

Letticia Massari via Pexels

His mouth moved mechanically like a ventriloquist doll perched on someone's lap. He suddenly stopped speaking and my gaze flicked from his lips to meet his stare.

He could only sigh. His eyes squeezed shut as he pinched the bridge of his nose. "How many times are we going to have this conversation?" His voice held a monotone quality. *Wonk, wonk, wonk*.

I recalled the first time we had this 'conversation.' This, *dressing down* of shoulds and shouldn'ts, of expectations and failures, of moulding me into him. It happened on a Sunday afternoon, a month after I moved in with him. I was nine. We sat in this very spot, though I felt much smaller then. I clutched my hands over my lap, nodding. He wore a beige knitted sweater. I remember this because it was the only time he wore it, as if specially for the occasion. His arms swayed through the air as he postured good intentions. He even smiled. That smile disintegrated over time, as did my nodding. God, that was ages ago.

He sighed again, finally opening his eyes. Clasping his hands over the oak desk, he asked, "Do you have anything to say?"

To piss him off, I sighed even louder.

He stood at once. The chair screeched across the hardwood like a bow to a cello. He leaned forward, clutching the edge of the desk. "Why?"

The question should have stirred something inside of me.

Should have induced remorse.

Should have urged me to apologize.

But I felt nothing. He wasn't my father and I wasn't his legacy.

I stood to meet him eye-to-eye.

Then I left his dim office, knowing this wasn't the end. It never is.

Melissa is a Chinese-Canadian writer. Her writing has appeared or forthcoming in The Nassau Review, Metonym Literary Journal, Door Is A Jar*, and others. Find her at linktr.ee/MelissaRen.*

Of Teeth And Snake Oil | Zackary Wiggs

Julia Volk via Pexels

It was just easing past summer when the snake oil man rode in. That valley lain wide open by the creek that ran down its center. Once a vein of cool water for the natives of the tree clotted hills of Appalachia, now barely enough to turn a mill. Seemed like everything was withered in this valley. Wilted and greyscaled in coal dust.

It had always seemed that way to Jed. Not even a decade and a half of living and he had seen so much. Would see so much still yet. He stood there, watching the cart squeak the winded path up to the Gnarled Oak that stood guard of the cemetery. A soft rattling coming closer. A man rode atop that bench, gangly and rope muscled. Still with the dust of the west clinging to the cuffs of his pantlegs. Jed had half a mind to tell him he was headed the wrong way. The money was in the west, not back here in these soot drowned hills. He would have, had his eyes not been fixed on the youth also atop that bench. Pale and wet eyed, where his older companion was tanned and hawkish. Wrapped in hide even though the autumn cold hadn't cut into the hills yet. Younger than Jed, closer to that of Kurt. A striking resemblance to that boy. The one that lay six feet below Jed now. A striking resemblance to kin.

His eyes so transfixed on the youth, Jed hadn't realized the man had spoken to him.

"I said boy, what sort of town is this?"

"What sort?" Jed replied, slowly breaking from his reverie.

"Well, yes. What sort of town, what people?"

"Issa mining town."

"Ahh a mining town. What luck. Is there a doctor there?"

"The comp'ny sends a doctor down once a month. When the roads are what they should be."

"Hmm I see. People with ailments and problems aplenty then for sure..."

He trailed off, staring off into the clouds. Jed stood waiting, not sure if it was meant to be a question, when he noticed the boy was staring at him. The circles around the boys eyes contrasting with his pallor spoke of an illness, but his eyes didn't match. They seemed to take in the light around them and give none back. Jed would have used the term doe eyed for the size and darkness of the boys pupils had they not been so utterly sharp in their intensity.

"Say boy, do they have any dentist up there?"

"Uh umm dentistry?"

"Oh yes sorry, someone that looks at teeth."

"No, no one of the sort."

"Thank you lad."

They were off before Jed had time to appreciate the oddness of the conversation. He stood there, alone in the silence of the graveyard, a peculiar sound fading as he stared at his brothers name etched in that wooden cross. Like the sound of beads clinking together.

...

It was some days until Jed again saw that snake oil man and the boy who followed him. He had heard plenty about them between then, those long shifts in the mine were rife with small talk of his cure-alls and his apparent ease at extracting even the most bothersome teeth. A man of many talents and even more concoctions it seemed.

No it wasn't until he walked out from that great maw of the mine that he saw them again, that peculiar pair. Posted up at the opposite end of the small dirt yard that had been worn away by so many carts and trampling feet. The perfect post to aid the weary and crook-backed miners, desperate to find something to ease the pains of the day. Especially for the cheap price that the snake oil man sold his tinctures for.

"A special price, for the fellow working man." He often proclaimed in that over-buttered showman voice of his.

Still yet, people drank up the words of Josiah Abernathy. His real name or not none were sure, they called him the snake oil man nonetheless. A name that had come from the pessimistic of the miners, but that even his repeat customers used. The people here always had a healthy distaste for "big city folk". It came with the territory. It came with the pain and the coal black water that flowed from the hills.

Jed watched a cluster of the miners as they piled in front of the man's cart, money gripped tight in sooty fists. At times some dipped into the curtained back of the cart, silence broken by a yelp or a groan quickly subsided after Josiah came back and continued his salesman pitch, ushering away a sore-jawed customer as he did.

He watched for some time. No real rush to get home. Not since it had gotten so quiet there. Movement caught his eye. There at the front of the cart. His brother. No, definitely a pale one in pallor. That boy looked out from the folds in the curtain that separated the apparent business secrets of the snake oil salesman from his valued customers. Despite the distance Jed knew the boy was staring right at him. The doll like contrast in the boys skin and eyes was surreal at this distance. Jed's eyes couldn't break away from those of the younger boy. His world narrowed, greying and then going black at the edges. The only thing left those two boys and the thinning space between them. Jed remembered back, years prior, when he and Kurt had ventured up the holler and down one of the train tunnels that gut-shot the hills. They hadn't yet understanding the schedule of the coal cars that snaked through. He felt that way again. Flatfooted. He swore he could feel the shake of the rails beneath him. Again, the tooth jarring rattle. The heat and smoke as they threw themselves flat, the locomotive screaming over them like a demon out of hell.

The scream of a horn snapped him back. Next shift was beginning. An influx of miners, had already joined the outgoing at

the cart. Hoping for any luck and good health they good find under the earth, even if it was wrung from the neck of a bottle. There were worse bottles to find luck in.

Jed hurried home. A shaking still in his legs and a quiet rattle in his ears.

...

His sleep was fitful. Something in his dreams. The feeling of something stalking him. Man wasn't meant to feel like prey.

Jed woke fully sometime late in the night. He threw on a rough shirt of loose linen and a pair of work trousers. Walks always seemed to clear his mind. At night the air seemed clearer, he hoped it had the same effect on his mind.

He stepped out of his home. A lean to of tin and scrap board that was built into the cool incline of dirt shelf. He was greeted by the pinpoints of stars. Like light shining through a thinning blanket. He walked down to town proper. Listening to the dirge of coyotes roll through the hills. Even this late he wasn't alone. A person here and there. Some cooking their late meals that served for a night shift supper. Others sleepless in their overworked aches, hoping like Jed that the night air would offer some solace. They nodded where they saw him, mumbled quiet greetings. They knew too what happened to his brother. They all did. Grief was common for those with family in the mines. Death always a hands breadth away.

He walked for sometime. Moving wherever his feet decided to take him. At the other end of town he found the snake oil man's cart. There off in the distance, a pair of tents and the embers of a campfire cooling in the clearing. Something willed him closer.

"Only thing in curiosity brings is pain." That's what their dad had always said.

The corner of Jed's lip curled at the thought of that man. He'd had a lot of apparent wisdom for a man so often eyeballing empty bottles. He'd make sure to water his grave next time he went to go see Kurt.

He realized he was amongst the camp now. The smell of smoke and stew lingering in the air around them. Something thicker too, like rotten eggs and chemicals. Standing there in the camp the cool air on his neck set his hairs on edge. The sound of coyotes whining in the hills. He finds himself creeping forward, the smell stronger from the confines of the cart. Slowly he can hear the sound of snoring from inside, cutting through the soft tinking sound that seems to lap from the walls of the cart in soft waves. He wonders at what lies within the confines of the thing's wood and canvas shell. The flap rustles in the wind and he finds himself drawn closer. Suddenly the hairs on his neck prickly again. He whips around.

There standing ramrod straight at a crooked branch of the oak was the boy. Not his brother but so painfully close. His heart ached at the sight of him, even beyond the fear he felt at being caught trespassing as he was.

The boy stood there, still wearing the clothes he'd wore the day Jed had first seen him, a pale specter against the star speckled sky. Jed sidestepped from the cart, putting space between him and his affront. The boy seemed to track him with those pupil filled eyes. Jed was about to speak, about to say something to try to smooth the situation over, explain away his rudeness by curiosity. Before he could the wind went slack. Not the subtle dying of the night breeze. Just, suddenly quit. The boy opened his mouth. A the sound of snapping and creaking of bad joints emanating from him, like his body was stiff and unused to movement. Jed became nauseous, the night air was stifling. Like the mines, the air felt thick with stagnation. He wanted to run. Willed his legs to uproot from their spot. Instead he looked on. Helpless as the darkness that filled the boys eyes poured from his open mouth. It snaked down his frail body and the trunk of the oak, clinging low to the earth like a fog. Jed began to cry, inky tendrils creeping up his legs, leaving the tingling pain of frost where they touched. It numbed his body as it wrapped around him. Coal dust in his mouth as it poured into his mouth and nose. The sound of a locomotive rushing towards him.

Jed woke with a start. The sunlight creeping through the holes in the lean to.

...

The next few day were a blur to Jed. Days in the confines of the mines and nights laying restless. His dreams haunted by the empty eyed boy standing over him. He felt colder, far removed from the presence of the sun now of all times when he craved it's warmth. Needed it's security now that he was alone.

That dream wouldn't leave him. His body hadn't been working the same since. He was sluggish, clumsy, a dangerous way to be while toiling under the earth.

He was leaving for the day when it happened. Making his way through the vascular branches of the mine, crouching, even crawling from time to time. His heart rate got faster as he reached a certain branch in the path. Now boarded up and reinforced, the boards looked all too much like some sort of broke-toothed maw. He avoided looking down that path as much he could. He braved the mines still, there was no other steady enough work in the holler for someone to live on their lonesome, but seeing the place his brother died was far too much for him. Something about today though made Jed look, dragged his eyes over as he passed. When he did he nearly tripped on the loose stone beneath him. His mouth went dry as he felt the familiar numbness in his legs. It was the boy. Hollow eyes boring into him from just beyond the boards.

His pale shape pulled back farther into the partially collapsed path, the shadows pulling tightly around him. Giggling as he left. That boy, that thing, was taunting him. It wasn't enough for it to haunt his dreams, now it was desecrating this place. It knew Jed's connection to that tunnel, those lost in there. People had been lost all throughout the mines, throughout these holler all together. It was no accident that thing was haunting this space in particular. No accident that it looked so much like his brother.

Lantern in hand, ducking past the boards, Jed followed the creature deeper into the tunnel. It was some time before Jed found the boy again. He could hear him though, laughter, footsteps among the creaking of the stone walls around him. The earth shifting was something they had all gotten used to, but here was a different story. This tunnel had proven unstable, fatally so. Maybe some part o Jed wanted that, to be killed feet away from the spot his brother too had died. A family tree cut down far below the earth. There was something fitting about the finality of it all.

Minutes, hours, Jed wasn't sure, but finally he found the thing, the boy, whatever it was. It stood there in the middle of a large cavernous space, loose stone lay strewn across the uneven floor. Larger boulders as well, a sign of the earlier cave in. It took Jed a moment to appreciate the space he was in. It was too large by far, the ceiling unseeable in the onyx gloom.

There was a far off chuckle. Not from the boy, but seemingly from the space near it. It echoed in the tomb like space. Again, that thing in the shape of a boy. That rough approximation of his brother, a mockery of something human, reaching out with tendrils of something darker than black. He felt it numb his ankles. His knees locked in place. His heart throbbed but his mind was firm. Even as a light appeared in the tunnel behind the creature. A tunnel far too smooth, a dark arc cut in what should have been rough stone. The rocks danced across the floor as the locomotive shook the cavern. Was this what his brother heard as the earth shook loose and swallowed them? Jed could hear the horn, the chugging of steam, the thrum of gear and engine. But it wasn't there. He knew better. He had saved himself and his bother that day. Ad while he couldn't be there to save his brother on his last day. He could do him proud by killing the thing that used his image. Jed was prepared this time. The dream had echoed in his mind for days now. He would not get caught again.

The lantern looked like a firefly, its arc lazy as it crossed the space between Jed and the boy. It crashed against the floor at the feet of the creature. The sound of shattering glass cutting through the vision. Liquid flame splashed over the things legs. Horrifically the flames lathed to the thing, spreading as if it were across oil. The thing screamed, the hiss of steam and coyote howls. Locked in place. A pyre under the earth. As the clothes melted from the things frame Jed heard a jingling. Wrapped loosely around the things torso was overlapping garland of human teeth. They jingled and tinked together as the thing thrashed. The screams changed, now that of a boy. His face changed, still similar to that of Jed's brother but the differences were stark. The illusion foiled, a shape crossed the space between them. Faster than Jed could react, all he could see was a thing of iridescent skin and too many eyes.

Jed woke to the smell of smoke and the sound of coyotes in the distance. He lay there in the camp of that snake oil man. He looked down at his body, pale and stiff. There was thin wire wrapped around him, like fishing line with teeth knotted every few inches. He knew it shouldn't have weighed anything but the pressure the wards put on his body was immense. He could already see the bruises forming where it lay against his flesh. Wards, that's the word the snake oil man used. The man, Josiah, his new companion, explained what had happened, the creature, his travels looking for a cure, his own son being the first of the thing's containers. Jed couldn't focus. He could feel the thing shifting inside him, like oil in a lamp. He could still hear the screams.

...

So they rode on. Past the lean-to's and mine rails. Jed riding alongside Josiah just like Matthew had those days ago. Matthew, that had been the boys name. Not his brother. Just the creature's mirage. He felt that thing inside him shift like oil in his stomach, burning in his throat like bile. The Gnarled Oak stood firm as they passed, cursed to watch helpless as the valley died around it. Jed was more focused on the grave that lay below it, wondering if it would have been better off being two there instead. He hoped his brother at least felt the peace that Jed wished for himself. The thing inside him chuckled at that.

Zackary Ross Wiggs lives in Southeast Kansas. A recent grad of Southern New Hampshire University's graduate English program, he spends his time writing about the peculiar and uncanny.

A Year Later, the Ocean Returns My Message in a Bottle | DJ Rogers

Adrien Olichon via Pexels

Child, please.
Listen when I tell you
that every time I crashed
I left something even
as I took away.

They are here, you know.

& isn't that
a salt-baked glory,
a limb bruised blue and buried in the kelp?

Grief is a tide.
you let the waters take you,
glorious man turned
moon-kissed boy.

I see you thrashing in
the flotsam of night, every night
a re-gifting of the tide
you love so dearly
but cannot forgive.

They are here, you know.
Every one them.
Every one you've ever loved
was made by and of
blood, sweat, tears.

I gave them to you,
& How divine,
To live long enough to return a favor?

Everything sea foam
and bone
is perfect.

Every glassy curl
lit up in the sun's silver nightcap
is flawless.
In here,
everyone who ever was
is waiting.

They are here, you know.
Waiting. I saw them blue.

One by one,
they are counting the leagues back to you
&
that's
Love

DJ Rogers is a poet, essayist, and silly person living in North Carolina. He is the current sitting Poet Laureate of his city. He's thankful for all of life's little opportunities.

Growth on Display | Pooja Kalwani

Pooja Kalwani

Pooja's art is a message to the world and reflects how she sees it. She pushes the limits of what she can do and tests the boundaries between function and art. @sunflowers.and.skulls on Instagram

recipe for a healing spell | Mia Vodanovich

cottonbro via Pexels

ingredients:

i. one crushed yellow rosebud
ii. four broken sticks of eyeliner
iii. a pink candle
iv. six brown glass shards
v. the pair of lungs you pulled out
for her last spring
vi. a piece of paper
vii. a black marker

in the flame of the candle
burn the rosebud and eyeliner
when the mixture cools stuff them
in your lungs followed by the glass
and try not to cry (it makes the breathing harder)
with the marker remember the song
that reminds you of her
write down her name in the lyrics
and swallow that too

pray to whatever goddess you think will listen
remind her of the rocks between your toes and
the blisters between your fingers and ask her to
fill the nest she's made of your rotted heart
with
something smooth
something familiar
something lost

wait for the voice to
come after midnight
listen
until it sounds
like it loves you again

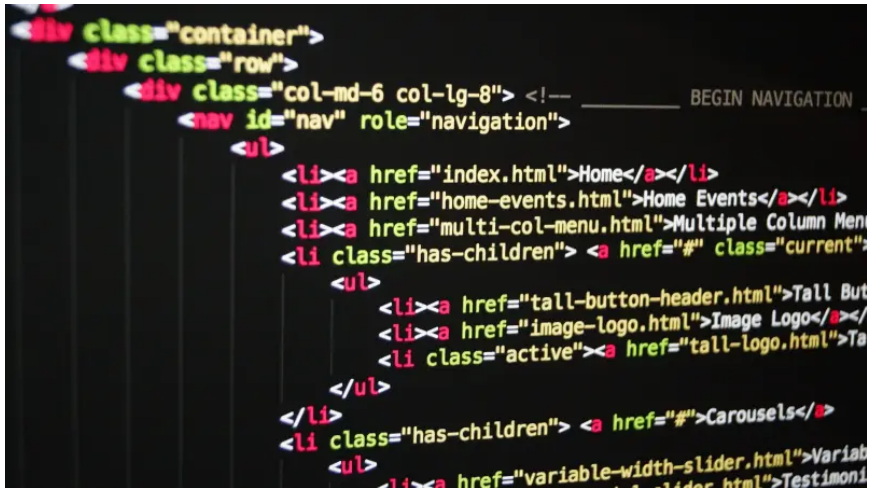
Mia Vodanovich is a Bay Area English instructor and poet who wishes she'd had more time to eat lumpia with her grandmother. Follow her on Instagram @the_galacticmermaid

this year, i did nothing but survive. i did nothing but motivate myself to wake up with a positive mind. i mustered everything in me to keep myself from falling off track and give it all up because i felt so tired—the kind of tired that rest could never make up for, the kind of tired that makes you wish you could sleep for days and wake up just when everything's alright. but in the end, i commend myself for trying, for surviving—because after all, i get to see these beautiful things in front of me, feel this overwhelming love around me, and appreciate what i could grasp in my hands. i survived—and so did you. with that, i'm glad.

"Survival"
– Cho Amisola

Aspiring writer and author.

Control faltered/work deleted | Rebecca Dempsey



via Pixabay

Iterations in their millions lost to faults sliding between
ones and zeros. Cracked lines, splintered algorithms,
coded echoes, data packets pinging unhinged
between lonely nodes. Fragility: you are digital
footprints of extinct walkers turned to dust. Unreliable,
irregular heartbeats of a last-gasping, feral non-thing.
Unsaved, unrecoverable. Flesh formed thoughts
turned into pixels, blinked into oblivion.
Connection severed. Poem interrupted. Gone.

Rebecca Dempsey's recent works are featured in Bullshit Lit, and MacQueen's Quinterly. Rebecca lives in Melbourne Australia, but can be at WritingBec.com and at @becadroit.

The Reign Man Parts the Clouds | Brendan Gillen

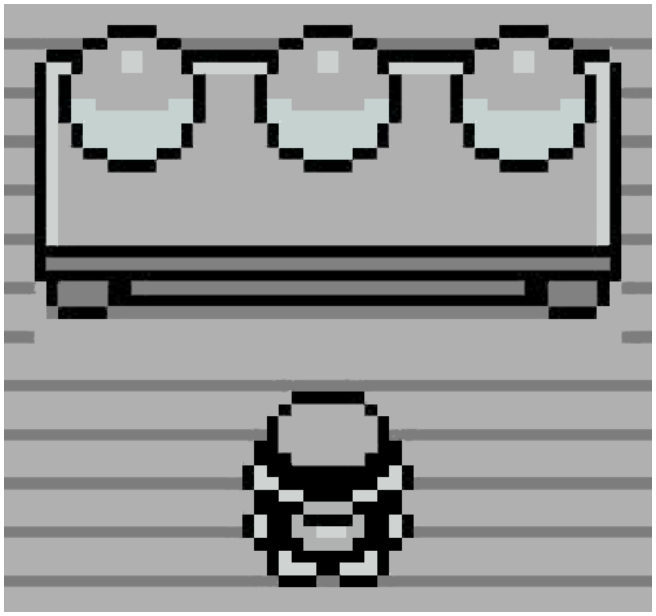
Andrew Beatson via Pexels

When the clouds descend in a gummy fog, a deep gray funk that seeps from my pores, keeps the curtains drawn and the pantries lean, I lay in bed and submit to the screen. Mixtape prescription. Number forty in serotonin green and gold attacking the rim again and again and again. A buoyant crush of ferocious joy to remind us such an approach to life is even possible. Coast-to-coast tomahawks. Reverse double-pumps. Put-backs, baby-cradles, the soaring oop to Gary Payton's alley. Each punctuated with some version of the artist's signature: a roar or a shimmy or a crouch and a point and a stare down, none of it mean-spirited, all of it saying, *Shit, I didn't see it coming either.* And the haze parts for a moment or two because to see the Reign Man bring the thunder down on someone else's head, to see the posterized body beneath the hoop in a crumpled heap of regret and shame, is to know that we do not suffer alone.

Brendan Gillen is a writer in Brooklyn, NY. His work appears, or will appear, in Wigleaf, Taco Bell Quarterly, HAD, X-R-A-Y and elsewhere. You can find him at bgillen.com and on Twitter/IG @beegillen.

Bulbasaur, Charmander, Squirtle | Katherine Thorne

Katherine Thorne was so anxious to get her piece submitted that she forgot to write a bio. Twitter: @sparklemarkers



via Nintendo

Bulbasaur, Charmander, Squirtle
asleep in their pocket-sized shells:
the Professor would give me just one,
yet I loved them all equally well.
I could have been a champion
if only I'd cleared that first hurdle,
but I never could choose a favorite
between Bulbasaur, Charmander, Squirtle

There is no shadow to the lone feather that the child picked from the field | Allison Riechman-Bennett

Paul Macallan via Pexels

There is no shadow to the lone feather that the child picked from the field.
It hasn't rained enough to create fog around the house nor the window that holds the flame.
It is October now and the grass hasn't begun to grow.
Save your grievances for when there are bulbs to be sown.

Allison Lee Riechman-Bennett is a full-time student, writer, and author of both Of You and For Me (Bottlecap Press, 2022). Her portfolio can be seen at www.allisonleeriechman-bennett.org.

Down Under | Jordan Resnick

Blaque X via Pexels

Billy Barnes bobbed his way down the surf where the sky met the sea. He looked around his private stretch of beach having driven an hour north of his seaside home for solitude in his final moments alive. He didn't want to see anybody, kiss no tears goodbye as he readied the dive that would end his life.

Curling his toes deep into cool damp sand, he marveled on a splotch of moonlight breaking through dun clouds illuminating his blood brown hand. His family traced their lineage back to farmers, but Billy always felt best at sea.

Stripping off his ratty t-shirt, he felt the cotton glide between his shriveled fingertips. Instinctively, he raised the ripped gray thing to his lips taking a deep whiff, letting the smell of his life overwhelm him. Sweat and Axe cologne summoned images of unmade bed sheets and past due notices stapled to his pockmarked door. Billy brought down his shirt crumpled into the sand, grateful he would not have to deal with his losing hand ever again.

At 9:58pm, Billy Barnes said goodbye to his life on land and walked into the choppy sea.

He heaved stones into the water, hoping the rope triple tied to his waist would hold. Cold waves scalded his smooth skin, one final warning to turn back. Sucking in one final breath of salty air, he threw the stones over the sandbar's edge and let himself be pulled under.

Frigid water shocked his mind wider awake than he'd felt in his 28 years above land. In five months of ideating suicide, he didn't foresee the sensation of feeling utterly alive at last. He wanted to push back against the loan collectors, the medical bills, the too-small desk job and propel himself higher! Billy opened his eyes and tried to fight his way back to the surface, yet the rocks had set their intention on other pursuits.

Racing to the bottom, the stones sank gleefully while Billy pumped his scrawny limbs trying to catch a wave. Squeezing his mouth shut, he pulled with all his might against the roaring tides of the Pacific Ocean's apathy. Sinking past a pod of dolphins, for a split second Billy believed he heard laughter. His body boiled and he wondered if this is how lobsters felt in a French Kitchen.

Energy spent, his lips split open and out bubbled his last gasp of air. Billy grabbed at his bubbles, failing to pull life back into his lungs. He swallowed sea water and instinctively coughed, sucking in more dark muck closing in around him. His heart wanted to scream "I'M ALIVE!!!," to run and dance across the sands, but the light faded further as he felt his spirit crush under the frigid pressure. Ears popping, Billy woozily let his final moments of serenity belong to the sea.

Billy breathed. He opened his eyes, incredulous at his mind's post mortem fantasy yet found nothing fictionalized about his fate. Air filtered through gills in his neck and he swept his hands down his navel to his missing genitals and legs. Where there had once stood skin now beheld one scaled tail feeling about 10 feet long by Billy's estimate. Billy flicked his new appendage and a burst of energy surged through his core, snapping free the stones content in their descent. He swam higher in elated loops, laughing at his good fortune and fate. Dolphins found him committing cartwheels through a school of trout and settled into formation akin to a king's guard. One dolphin swam face to face with Billy and spoke telepathically.

Follow me.

Billy built his new tail's strength swimming for miles alongside his chaperones. He felt his mind pulling in new directions, feeling new avenues of possibilities open up in his descent. His eyes could see farther and clearer in the dark, the sensation of breathing through gills fresh and clean. He blinked and realized he didn't feel the pressure of the ocean anymore, his dark skin taking on a glowing hue as if he could take on a giant squid with his pinkie.

You don't want to do that; giant squids are essential predators to the ocean's ecology, a dolphin to Billy's right thought back. Billy nodded in recognition, unsure how to verbalize his response.

Another hundred nautical miles and the dolphin pod crested one final rise revealing a white stone castle comfortably barren tucked beside a coral reef. Billy gazed in wonder as his skin took on an ever brighter luminosity, feeling his strength return stronger and fuller than he could remember. The dolphins guided him past Greecian columns and aquatic busts of famous fish noblemen and aristocracy down a long torched hallway to an empty dais. Two dolphins swam Billy to the top and sat him on the empty throne.

Welcome home, Poseidon.

Jordan Resnick is a visionary witch currently residing at home, wherever that is at the moment. She enjoys traveling and new perspectives and her constant companion, Jimi Hendrix. Ig: @jordanestherr

Case By Case | Samir Sirk Morató

Jonathan Nenemann via Pexels

Like, I suffered Fortuna's thousand slights in silence. But when she insulted me, I vowed revenge.So Friday morning, while I look in the boudoir mirror, apply my smokey eye, and sharpen my eyeliner, I imagine Fortuna's obliteration. I bear my teeth in a smile. My perfect collection of bicuspid, canine, and incisors shine at me; in the far back, the caps of molars gleam like wet eyes.

The only way they could be prettier, I think, *is if they were gum-deep in Fortuna's arm.*

My phone buzzes. The vibration reverberates through the ceramic sink. I check my messages. Above all the undeleted condolences burns Fortuna's text. That's the perfect place for it: scum floats. The wonky 301 in her photograph dangles from her eyelid, a lash hangnail.

hey bby, she says. *I'm not sure I can do the wine tasting at your fam's place today, this is super late notice! Ty tho!*

OK, nbd, I reply. My stiletto acrylics scrape my screen. *I texted you bc I have 5 new wines and i bought some amontillado (??) but next time. You look good in that recent selfie, btw. That's ur new image in my phone.*

I flip my phone facedown. Fortuna frightens me sometimes, with her kilos of daddy's gravedirt money and her serpentine stranglehold on social media, but I know her weakness: she's a total freak for wine. As my phone buzzes in succession—one, twice, three times, four—I ice on plum lip matte.

My reflection trims every angle of my lips in purple. She's deliberate. Hospitable. She doesn't fester with resentment as she gazes at the photos tucked into the mirror frame. The three women in those photos ooze friendliness, including me. My reflection oozes friendliness too. In the simmering silence, I check my phone.

Ur joking, Fortuna's first message reads. *Amontillado?*

I smack my lips.

Wine #1: Harlequin

Riesling. Aged 6 years.

Fortuna arrives cloaked in the aroma of sangria, designer sunglasses askew in her hair, titty tape bolting her cleavage into her deep v parti-stripe shirt. She spills from her chauffeured car and onto my driveway in a tempest of coos and fluttering fingers. Her high voice scrapes the October twilight alongside the nerves in my teeth.

"Oh my God," she says, pecking my cheek. "Hi, gorgeous! It's been so long!"

"Way too long," I agree.

I loop an arm around Fortuna. I avoid brushing her when we hug. Fortuna's wasp waist and shellacked tresses are assaults on entropy. Behind both are heaps of calorie-counting, hairspray, and calculations. Control. Cruelty vibes beneath all that Pat McGrath foundation. Fortuna sculpts her body the way she sculpts her pyramid scheme empire and list of mutuals. Sober Fortuna, anyway.

"M'am, will you be requiring a ride back?" Fortuna's chauffeur cranes his head out of the window.

"Don't worry." I smile. "I'll make sure she gets home."

"You heard her." Fortuna dismisses him with a wrist flick. "See you later, hun!"

Fortuna wobbles on her wedge heels as we head into my family's estate. She points at peacocks strutting in the gardens and flashes her immaculate coffin nails. In the tasting room, Fortuna snatches the laminated sheet of wines. She moves with the grace of a sick dog gnawing at grass. Typical. As she seizes a cheese cube off the counter, I pour the first wine.

"Monica," she says, "you don't have the amontillado listed."

"Not yet." I hand her the glass. "I was a little silly. I purchased it without talking to you about it first. I'm not sure if it's real amontillado."

"No offense, but I'm pretty sure it's not." Fortuna raises her palm. "By the way, don't bother with the wine descriptions. Your family makes good wine, but like, I'm not here for the official tour."

"Of course, babe," I say.

Fortuna guzzles the zinfandel. Bottles of essential oils clatter together in her purse, scraping against cat brass knuckles and hair pins: rats skittering under rotten floorboards. Half of the wine, Fortuna swallows. The other half, she spews into the tasting barrel. Her lip tar remains unmoved. The bell earrings hanging from Fortuna's ear lobes jingle, their clear sound rattling against her clouded gaze. She's an eyesore. She looked so garish in that hospice waiting room.

I pour the second sample of wine. It's no splash—it's generous, verging on indulgent. Its rich yellow body leaps up the glass sides. Fortuna's eyes widen. She coughs into the back of her moisturized hand. Still, she doesn't remark on it. I knew she wouldn't. Lushes never whine about big samples.

Do dogs receive treats before euthanization? Likely not. I still hand Fortuna the glass.

Wine #2: White Lies

Chardonnay. Aged 7 years.

"This chardonnay would pair nicely with a walk," I say. "It's way too warm to stay cooped up. We can make our way to the cellar while we chat."

Fortuna starts. She scrapes another cheese cube off a toothpick. "Are we taking the spit barrel with us, or? Like, I'm trying not to drink too much."

I waltz to the door. "You're so funny. Come on. Let's go."

Fortuna's smile is messy. Her teeth are perfect, edited by years of wires and retainers she hid behind propped-up menus on Italian patios. I spent time in Rome when I was nine, as did Lenore, though none of us met until years afterwards. Lenore was immortal until she stepped into Fortuna's footprints on a Roman cobble somewhere. The grody, greedy essence of young Fortuna engaged her to Death before Lenore even knew of their courtship. It was Fortuna's way of trying to divert Death from seeking her instead, I'm sure.

Fortuna swirls the wine in her glass as she strides after me. We leave the tasting room and trot around a tulip-lined garden fountain. The flower heads bob, heavier than fist-sized sapphires.

"Tell me about this amontillado," Fortuna says. "Did your family pick it up, or you?"

"I did." I sip my chardonnay. "That was during my summer sabbatical."

"Right. You deserved that." Fortuna squints at one of the peahens in the bushes. "Taking care of your mental health is important. Especially when you're grieving."

Is the cure for grief rose oil? Is it cinnamon oil smeared behind the ears of a corpse, or a choker of chamomile? Fortuna enthusiastically recommends all those crunchy cures. She's itching to sell me the dream. Proud Lenore sure bought it. I cannot tell this bitch that the oil I long for is her bottled blood. That is essential.

"Self care is important." I brush my hair behind my neck. Fortuna coughs into her arm while a peahen ogles her. I dump my wine in the fountain, unnoticed. "Okay, babe. Next wine."

"I don't know if I want the next wine." Fortuna gulps the rest of her glass. "You picked the amontillado, right? We should just taste that now, if it is amontillado."

"Let's go inside first," I say.

Wine #3: Serpent's Heel

Vermentino. Aged 10 years.

"Your house is so… retro," Fortuna says, shivering, as I lock the mahogany double doors behind her.

That is not the word she wants. My family mansion is a nightmare of dripping windows, dark wood, taxidermy, and high ceilings. A century ago, the mansion's couches and floors gathered lungfuls of choleric blood. Now, its clean walls groan with age. It's a slab of New England cruelty pinned onto West Coast cliffs. No amount of potted palms softens its face. It is a home where mental rot and discipline flourish. Peace is not an option. White suburban brutality honed Fortuna, but this cancerous place crafted me. We are not the same.

Fortuna coughs in the cold, open foyer. *Contract consumption, bitch,* I think. I extract the next bottle of wine from a hallway bar to pour her a deep, olive glass of it.

"I thought this was a tasting!" she says.

"It's to warm you up," I say. "Drink."

Fortuna clutches her glass to her chest while we strut down the hallway. Stuffed ravens glare at her. Moth-eaten boar heads judge. Our heels click on the polished hardwood. It takes a staff to clean this mansion, but while my family suns in San Francisco, I've slipped everyone a few fifties or a fruit basket to scram. When I swish the vermentino around my mouth, I taste notes of almond and lime. When I listen to the silence in the mansion, I sample something more fulfilling.

"I never noticed that snake tattooed on your ankle," Fortuna says. "It's cute."

"It's my family crest," I say.

"Yeah, your family seems obsessed with the whole crest thing," Fortuna says, eying a shield on the wall. "*Nemo me impune lacessit.* What does that mean?"

"All friends are welcome here."

The further we creep into the mansion, the more her manicured brows knit together. The more her brows knit, the more Fortuna's face dips into her glass. The growing slur in her voice pleases me. Every time she stifles a cough, I sip. We flit closer to the cellar.

Fortuna's discomfort illustrates her alien nature. Lenore's childhood house of ghosts twinned mine. Her upbringing made her vulnerable and vain in a way neither Fortuna nor I are, but before her death, she and I were a perfect pair. Two hot ghosts that knew no one could wrong us without consequences. That isn't different now, even if I'm alone.

"Seriously," Fortuna says. "You don't have to do this for me. I don't want to trespass."

"It's totally not a problem." I brush a moth off my silk skirt. "I invited you."

Guilt dances on Fortuna's face, then relief, which is how I know she hangs on the cusp of drunkenness. Sober Fortuna feels nothing but opportunistic joy.

"I thought you were mad," she says, "after the whole—"

"I'm not mad."

"Oh." Relief greases Fortuna's limbs. She throws back the rest of her glass. I retrieve the next bottle from a wine shelf. Upon returning, I find Fortuna sprawled on the fireplace, looking every inch the fool. She takes a mechanical sequence of selfies with a gargoyle before lurching towards me. Fortuna cocks her hip and twists her camera to encapsulate us both.

"Let's take a photo together," she says. "For old times sake. Ugh. I wish Lenore was here! I miss drinking with her."

My blood boils. Lenore's pale hand drapes in mind again, her emaciated wrist cloying beneath the odors of death and eucalyptus. I grit my teeth. All of my heartbreak and depression-fermented fury mean nothing if I don't channel them to rectify how I've been wronged.

"I miss her too," I say. "She would love this."

As if! Fortuna mocked Lenore more than she loved her, both online and in life. Fortuna swells. Preens. Picks her golden angle. She strangles a cough. I hope dear Lenore watches us now, if only to witness the treat I have planned later. Fortuna and I pose for the camera.

"Kisses," Fortuna crows.

I smile, imagining her in flames: a blazing tallow pillar melting into a lump of make-up and corpse wax.

She winks into the shutter.

Like, Luchresi

Sherry. Aged 12 years.

Fortuna adores luxuries. Monetized grifting, coconut water, wine tasting… prolonged suffering.

"I'm about to blow chunks," she says, leaning against the cellar door, wane.

"Babe, I'm so sorry." I stay three stairs down, a stain of sherry lingering in my glass. Fortuna has half a glass left. "I didn't know things had gotten this bad. You've been keeping up on your IV cocktails and aromatherapy, right?"

"Yeah." Fortuna squeezes her eyes shut. "It's the new diet. It's taking a lot out of me. And you *know* how I feel about carrying an inhaler. Whatever. Sorry about this."

"Don't worry about it." I sigh. "I shouldn't have dragged you out here for that amontillado. I bet it's sherry. I def dropped the ball. You should go home and take care of yourself. Have a cup of tea and a nice collagen mask. I'll call Lucy. She can tell me what it is."

Fortuna straightens. Her earrings jingle. Indigent jealousy wildens her eyes. Her brilliant clothes and milk skin make her a blinding silhouette against the cellar door. Fortuna clutches her stomach.

"Lucy?" Fortuna's teeth gleam purple. All of her whitening sessions fail her now. "Lucy? Girl! Lucy can't tell amontillado from sherry! She can't even tell sewer water from sherry!"

"Maybe she can't, but like, Lucy knows better than me." I study my nails. "I don't want to ask too much of you. Not after you visited Lenore in the hospice."

Spiritually, Lucy twins Fortuna, which is perhaps why they hate each other. In some past life, in some kegel-tightened womb, Lucy was the wad of tissues who gnawed Fortuna's throat out with her miraculous fetal teeth. The victor. Fortuna never forgave her for that. One just knows these things. Lucy now is a full-bodied, full-voiced influencer garbed in Haute Couture and backhanded compliments. The last time she supped with Fortuna, they tittered with compliments in the cocktail lounge and wracked up a $300 bill. That whole evening, Lucy eviscerated her beat before millions on Instagram.

They are similar breeds of intelligent idiot.

"Not Lucy!" Fortuna struggles upwards. "Monica, you *have* to show me this amontillado."

Fortuna's confidence eclipses her pain. That long-suffering look convinced Lenore to empty a fortune into her hands. One lock, frozen by hairspray, hangs rigidly against her forehead.

"If you insist," I say.

Médoc Descent

Cabernet Sauvignon. Aged 15 years.

"Do you know what I miss?"

"Tell me what you miss," I say, pouring a glass of cabernet sauvignon.

The cellar is a cave cluttered with honeycombs of aging wine and titanic racks of wooden and steel barrels. Earth entombs us. All of the wine corks create a facsimile of fungi sprouting from the wall. No one steps down here besides family. Fortuna sprawls on the stairs at the bottom, legs askew. She reeks. One of her unbuckled heels hangs from a curled finger. The other lies on the floor.

"Lenore was such a sensitive person," Fortuna says. "Like, she took advice from friends seriously. She for sure wasn't so open-minded that her brain fell out, but if you could make a case for something, she would listen. Everyone else I know is way, way too stubborn for that. You're too stubborn for that. Maybe that's why Lenore was so gorgeous. She knew when to take advice."

I press the wine glass towards her instead of smashing it into her head.

"I'm super drunk," Fortuna mumbles. "I shouldn't have anymore."

"No, gorg, you should," I tell her. "Treat yourself."

A cough lodges in Fortuna's throat. Quivering, she claims her glass.

"You're not still angry at me about Lenore, right?" Fortuna says. "I know you two were close when she passed, even if like, I broke you two up with the essential oils thing. She died so young."

"Of course I'm not angry," I tell her. "Who do you think I am?"

"You hold grudges, Monica. I'm fairly sure you think I killed her."

Fortuna stares at me, wary, red wine dribbling from her mouth. I fix my gaze on the cellar wall. Halloween encroaches. To keep things seasonal, my family plastered rhinestone-studded paper skeletons on the walls. They swim in the murk, mandibles agape, phalanges extended in a freestyle. They're chic, but they're a poor substitute for the real thing. Diet necrosis. I drink. The cabernet is velvety. It's fuller than blood in my mouth. I study the twister of silver skeletons encircling the cellar wall. If I look at Fortuna now, I'll shred her face apart.

"Me? Hold grudges?" I say. "Never. Like, you had the best intentions when you introduced her to holistic medicine. Lenore didn't want to try chemotherapy anyway."

The wine stem boils between my fingers. Fortuna tips into a coughing fit.

"Lenore's looks was one of the only things she had control over, which you pointed out, so… it gave her a sense of peace. Plus, it's hard to tell if essential oils or mainstream medication works better."

I find my composure. I turn. I smile.

"Lenore made her choice," I say. "It's all behind us, Fortuna."

"That's great. The amontillado is in front of us, right?" she says.

"Not quite yet."

De Grave

Malbec. Aged 18 years.

When I first point to the empty wooden barrel—the one I commissioned for this occasion—Fortuna laughs her ass off at my suggestion. "Monica." She giggles. "Do you seriously want me to get in that barrel for a photo?"

"Seriously." I twirl my hair. "I'll help you get in. Can you imagine what a fun shot it will be? The potential captions are endless. You're intoxicating, you're a taste, you're delicious—"

Fortuna is laughing. "Oh my God, stop."

"It's a gag photo, babe," I say. "It will be a reminder we had a fun night. No posting necessary."

Fortuna shakes her head. By the time I grant myself a taste of malbec, she's game. Drunk Fortuna caves so easily. I pour her a sample of the malbec, too. Fortuna gulps it.

"This is going to be so funny," she says. "You're weird, Monica. I love it."

"It'll be a total riot," I say.

The skeletons watch Fortuna struggle to climb into the barrel. They whisper when I boost her in. She crumples at the bottom with a crash and a hoot. Her giggles echo against the oaken walls. I toss her heels in after her.

"Hey, hey!" Fortuna laughs.

"Give me your phone," I say.

Fortuna's coughing escalates. She shakes. I snatch her phone from her fist. Crash diets and years of ditching her hideous navy inhaler have cracked her. Fortuna's glass shatters in the barrel with her. She shrieks.

"Hang on, Fortuna," I call, grabbing our final wine. I uncork the hole drilled in the barrel lid. "I'm coming!"

"I cut my leg." Fortuna chortles. "I'm bleeding."

"Don't hurt yourself too badly." I offer her a glass brimming with tawny wine. "You need to try this amontillado for me first."

Fortuna is babbling with excitement when I pop the barrel lid in place.

"Monica." Her echoes sound baffled. "You didn't take a picture."

"Don't worry about it." I fetch a shovel, glee in my heart. The metal scrapes the floor.

"This is good amontillado. Like, you picked it well, somehow."

A velvet spaghetti strap descends my shoulder as I hoist the shovel. Its head outshines silver: a gem far more precious than rhinestones or the Cartier hoop in my nostril. My muscles ache exquisitely as I hold the shovel at the zenith of its arc. I hold my breath; I listen to Fortuna ramble. I think of glass shards piercing her shin. The IV in dying Lenore's arm.

Fortuna's coughs christen the barrel. "I'm cold," she says.

"Ssh," I say. "Sssh. Can you hear that?"

The shovel trembles. I am all burning nerves. I am the pendulum before its down-swing. The barrel waits for me, Fortuna its liquidizing treasure trapped inside. I don't need a shovel for this. But a night of wine tasting isn't complete without a concerto.

"Hear what?" Fortuna says.

In Pace Requiescat

Amontillado. Aged 23 years. Oak barrel.

I swing the shovel onto the barrel lid. It clangs. Fortuna screams.

"Oh, my God."

Another arc. Another ringing thwack.

"Monica! For the love of God!"

Another thwack.

"Monica!"

Fortuna thrashes in the barrel. Her bells jingle in one crash of noise after another. She screams until a splatter of vomit silences her. The shovel clatters to the floor. I grab the hose. I crawl to the side of the barrel, gorging on Fortuna's misery.

"It's a joke, Fortuna!" I croon. She blubbers. I fit my fingers against the barrel's sides to drink the vibrations of her misery. Tenor for tenor, I match the artificial concern she had at Lenore's bedside. "Like, take a joke!"

Fortuna hiccups in confusion. Hysterical laughter follows. I feed the cellar water hose through the hole in the barrel lid. *How generous of me,* I think, *to bathe retch-flecked Fortuna. I'm sure she savored the notes of fear in her vomit.*

"This is cruel, Monica," Fortuna says.

Real grief graces her voice now. I test the hose. It's secure. The barrel's grain caresses my palms. My skirt scrunches against the wood. Unbidden, I smell death and eucalyptus again, mixed in with the ethereal, oak and tobacco taste of amontillado. A staccato of Fortuna's hacking turns to puking again. A bell clatters against the bottom of the barrel.

"Kisses." I tremble in relish. "You're going to age like fine wine."

"Monica," Fortuna moans. "Please, dear god."

"Oh, babe," I say. "God isn't listening."

I slowly, slowly turn open the hose.

Samir Sirk Morató is a scientist and an artist. They love pulp. Some of their work can be found in Catapult, The Dark Sire, and Prismatica. They are on Twitter and Instagram @spicycloaca.

[Untitled, for Danielle] | Moriah Painter

Mark Stebnicki via Pexels

Sometimes, the scent of spearmint
bends you in half, nearly breaks you open in
the middle of the garden department at Walmart.
Sometimes a peach, overlarge, left
on the tree too long, bursts
across your tongue with
the flavor of tears and Listerine.
Sometimes a burgundy lily stops
time and a bag of Miracle-Gro
is the cure for cancer and absence and oblivion.
Some grief is ungovernable.

Moriah Painter (she/her) is a cancer researcher, freelance editor, and accessibility champion from North Carolina. She is on a sacred quest for the perfect sugar-free pie recipe. Tweet @MoriahPainter

bootstraps | Zara R. Ahmed

Nathan Cowley via Pexels

you,
with your twinkling eyes and chrome heart
overflow with opportunity
life designed to give unto you endless ease
academic airlifts and trust fund entitlement
all to fulfill your dreams of attaining riches
looted from the palms of those who,
unfortunately,
could not be born so lucky.

Zara R. Ahmed (she/they) is a South Asian poet from Toronto turning her nightmares into art. You can read her work on instagram at @ahmzers.

Not Blood or Ichor but a Secret Third Thing | Matthew Gleason

Berthold Grunhaven via Pexels

There is not a word for what I truly am. I am claws and teeth, hunger, cruelty and rage. I am the thing that consumes and is not consumed. I exist within a large egg. In the beginning it was white but with the passing of time it now looks more like a gray stone or boulder. Mostly I stay within the egg. I sleep. I do not dream. I wait. I wait for blood to drink and meat to tear and bones to crack open and suck the marrow from. You ask me where I am? You ask how I can go undiscovered. The trick is simple. No one cares about a big rock in the desert or in a stream in a field or all the places this land around me has shifted into. Well they don't care until they bleed.

I was there when the land was new. I watched the critters crawl from the vastness of the sea. They were more like the slugs of later days than fish. They had what was not quite webbed feet and not quite flippers. They were hilariously repulsive. I ate one then. It resisted only for a moment. Its blood tasted salty and pure. I can still taste it now if I try. After I had a few of those early land dwellers I closed myself back up within the egg. I waited in the dark.

Ages passed. I hatched from time to time and drank my fill of mortal blood. It was the blood of man and its ancestors. It was the lifeblood of the thinking beast. It was glorious. Death was my gift both to give and prosper from. Today I emerged from the egg. The world around me was metal. There were silver flashing towers dotting the horizon;even the ground was

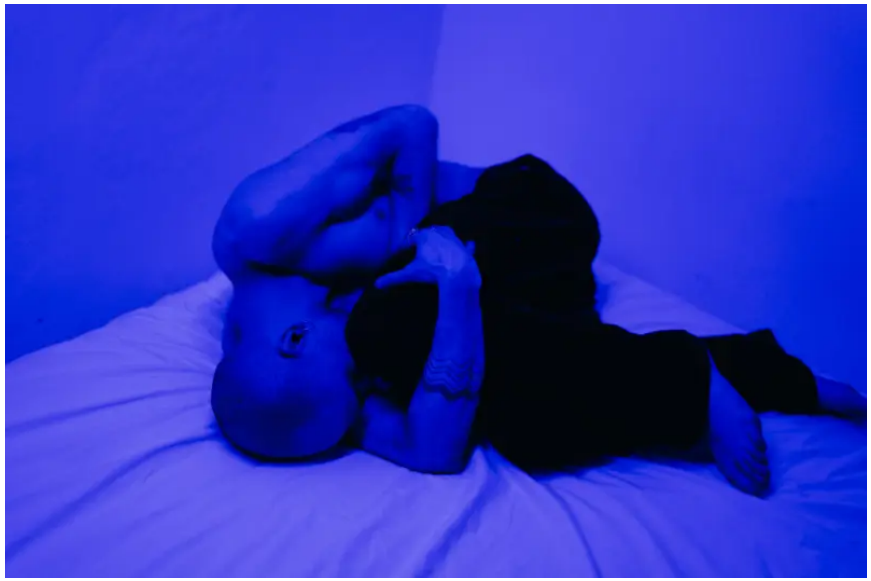
hard and cold as iron.

The air tasted empty. It crept up my singular nostril giving only the impression of absence. Time passed in a sickening silence. A figure appeared from the emptiness. It was in the shape of a man or woman or one of the lesser angels but it was none of those things. It shined in the light like a silverfish.

I struck at the thing with my thirsty tentacles. There was the shock of lightning through my body as the being attempted to fight back in some strange manner but ultimately it went limp and succumbed to my strength and might as so many before had. This was right. I ripped open its cold hard neck. There was fluid just as I expected but it was different. It was a deep blackish green. It burned and smoke. Still it took me several seconds to release the thing and give up. The flavor though awful was superior to nothing which was my only alternative. Still it is poison to me and it would do. For the first time in eternity I don't know what to do. I can sense this world is lifeless. The thing which I attacked and now understand is not alive twitches at my feet. It shouts commands in a cold and unemotional voice. I will not "Repair the device." I destroy. I kill. That is my role. I will wait for blood even if there is none. I have no choice but to be the monster. Someone surely must play the other part eventually. I will wait. I must wait.

Matthew Gleason is a cryptid from West Virginia. You can find them on Twitter or Facebook as Matthew J. Gleason writer.

I'll Do It Tomorrow. | Jurnee French



cottonbro via Pexels

These words a nightly habit, clinging to the end of my tongue like rancid, elastic bile. An addiction may come as naturally as a breath or the food (you so choose) to swallow. But her form eats away at you, your bone marrow, your anaemia evincing as you try to stand. But you seem healthy, look fine, they say. Maybe even glow. At brink of day I lay with gnawing sheets, curled-up limbs, and I wonder: Where does the boundary between a behavior and a diagnosis lie?

Instagram: jurneeleefromunderthecorktree

Cat Bite! | Matt Gulley

via Pixabay

The most supreme loaf
In the apartment-kingdom
Shows his subjects grace –

That is, until benevolence
Is interrupted by the cat mind
The king is an animal still.

And often a loafing epoch
Is pierced with frenzy,
No government can long endure,

And my hand, or Jenna's leg
Falls victim to fangs, just so –
The unvarnished prelude of hissing.

Cat Bite!
In this house of all houses –
A scolded king now banished from the bedroom.

Matt Gulley attended Wayne State University in Detroit and the MFA program at Long Island University in Brooklyn. He resides in Brooklyn with his girlfriend Jenna. @selfawareroomba on twitter dot com

You Don't Break Me... | Garth Ferrante

Steve Johnson via Pexels

YDBM... 123 (Tell me:) a cutup of chance encounter no. 2 by Sienna Liu

Apologetically, it couldn't have been so in '95—
Everything was expiring then and I never knew
Till, finally, I was walking down the aisle and saw
Myself as one with an entire outlook that was
Expired. It shook me, I tell you—it shook me to

See a corpse where I should've seen myself happy,
And with no one around except the corpse to feel
Crowded by (no one and nothing)...it wasn't a pleasing
Thing, the thing I'd become.
But how was your afternoon, and your emptiness?

YDBM... 124 ("Yes" to Alaska and all points above) a cutup of The Anthropomorphized Bear by Z.H. Gill

It was a bonafide thing, you telling me you're unafraid
Of the animals that cursed this truck bed—
For a moment, as I was thinking these words, I imagined
Us together, anthropomorphized from the things we
Are in your head into two people replying "yes" to
Whatever the question is—
Yes, we will be here for each other,
Yes, we will bite our way through the world right on
Through the next one, too—
Yes, the god of the mountains is calling us, so we will
Leave together to say "yes" to him too.

YDBM... 125 (Plum ready to say goodbye) a cutup of Your Girlfriend As an Overturned Shopping Cart by Cathy Ulrich

Wire and say you're okay—this pouring out should be the last—
Wrap me in the black of your future (again)—I will be taken into
Custody by the Black Goat of the Woods that can only belong to
You—I will hold your purse as you scream your manifesto
Slinging ice-cream plates and wrecking everything you own—
You aren't quiet when you cry, which is why I close the door to
Your bedroom on your birthdays, always, and lay my head down
On your couch waiting and waiting and waiting for the day you
Untangle the petite from the hambone, pick out the thing of
Suicide that can never be laid at my feet—

YDBM... 126 (Hell is overdrafted) a cutup of Easter by James Thad

For you, I am very late, but it's taken a lifetime to get by
The traces of what was to what is—no more waiting, I'm
Curling up in a treasure chest with no treasure—and since
I'm no salesman, have never, could never be one to sell
Myself to you, I'll stay anchored here and looking up at
Whoever happens upon me later on—I know it will be much
Later, that they will not wonder at me as a mystery, only how
To get rid of the thing that is me—I've lived many years on
And off Earth: I can afford to drift away inglorious, waiting
For the words from God's mouth to fill mine with hope that
I am forgiven and Hell is not overdrafted.

YDBM... 118 (Given to the God of Her) a cutup of Widening Circles by Ranier Maria Rilke

I, I , I , I , I, I, I and still thousands of questions
Await that do not involve me. To ask about them and
Their lives and everyone they have come to love and
All they've let go of—
Why not reach across the world separating us all to
Complete what still refuses to be completed:
A primordial self in denial that a storm will not save
It, that a god cannot save it, that a woman cannot
Save it—
Only a truth at the heart of those questions that
Have nothing to do with me and the widening circles
That leave me incomplete—

YDBM... 97 (Mind turns to worry) a vague cutup of The Poems I Am Not Writing by Mary Kinzie

Mind turn to worry, heaven turned to woe—
Woman was the answer, woman was a "no"—
Solar-powered angels promised light into the dark—
Fifty doesn't seem so bad, but 50 is only a spark—
A start of something walking toward its end—
Something that promises to be your friend—
But death and time and have not been kind—
And you are nothing of what you used to be—
So says the voice that never ends, that never trips—
The voice that never falls the way you fall—
The voice that laughs as you cry, that will live on
After your death—

YDBM... 98 (Dead) a vague cutup of All heart float... by Margaret Atwood

I'm the one who drowned in no water, just whatever was
There I didn't want to be there, just whatever wasn't there
I knew I couldn't take anymore.

YDBM... 90 (Us smiling at each other) a vague cutup of Ongoing by Jenny Xie

It was a threadbare study, you and me on the bed, on
The floor, finishing each other's lines thinking romance was
This very thing we were doing—just words, you know?
But being who we were, we never could have seen
Just how separated we always were and always would be—
Your experiences never identified by me, nor mine
By you...it was the definition of sadness and loneliness in
A crowded room where a crowd was just me,
Just you—

YDBM... 79 (Maw) a cutup of Back Suplex by Clem Flowers

I used that word once, but never again—
It reminded me of the dark times before I ever was
The end of the earth they believed was a giant maw
A grove of nothing, a pit of beasts, and every man
A pearl to be devoured and enjoyed—
It's yesterday's velvet that asks me if I'd like to
Return to the narrow spot under my father's bed,
Where I held myself between box spring and abrasive
Synthetics (green, faded green, covered-in-dust green)
Till the horrors devouring me could be put back behind
My eyes again and the world set spinning
Without end.

YDBM... 128 (Miss Debbie (version)) a cutup of i carry your heart [& hand] with me [even as we close / i leave / they shutter the shop] by Jen Schneider

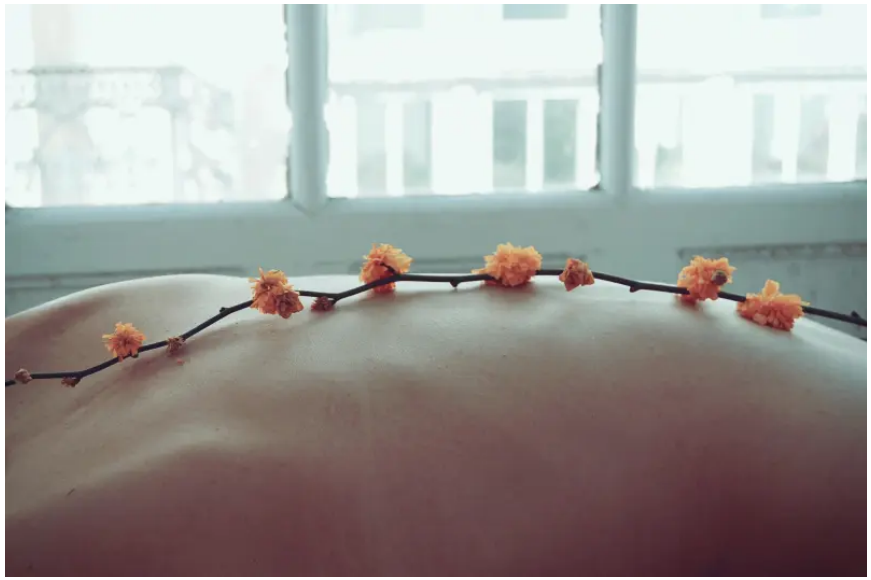
It's unfair to all parties involves, you thinking of her so many years on—
What's there to think about, really?—you hung out the one time, and only
Because you were dating her friend—greetings from '91 to '95 and no
One wants to know you, especially her—scorpion moons and she's still
Dancing on that bartop...a hundred years after, a thousand, and you're
Stretching yourself because all the signs point to one who is sad and lonely,
Though you hate that word because it makes you sound desperate and
Alone—isn't that what loneliness is though, being alone?—no, no: loneliness
Is when you're uncomfortable with being alone, and this hasn't been the truth
For you in many, many years—she danced on that bartop, you know, because
She had to, not because she wanted to—it was "part of the job" is how she
Put it and you wondered many things about her, about what would happen
To her when she left that place because of her belief in what needed to be
Done, and because you knew she knew it was all an affront to her kind—so
Much for wanting to think of peppermints and mistletoe when you thought
Of her, and so much for asking her what "might've been" because you know
The answer already—

YDBM... 129 (Sad member of the living dead) a cutup of Azaleas by Ether Lin

Smile when you remember you've got nothing but
Death before you—no, it's not "too much," it's only
A truth you said you were committed to—the photos
You refuse to look at say it all: smile now because
You'll be crying later.
Don't obey, see how far you go because it all leads
Right back here with you telling them "My mother
Was never a mother" and ignoring her for what remains
Of both your lives—you don't cross your arms anymore,
You don't think the word "screaming" is the most
Beautiful in the English language, you are gill-sick, green-
Sick, gut-sick when you recall your mistakes and how
You'd do it all differently:
Not begging to be with them, not asking what was next,
Not giving them hatred and silence when you might have
Found peace within by making peace with them, or
Trying—between the sun and the grave, it's no longer a
Contest which one wins, but which you want—
If it's the sun, know there is nothing more to resort to, but
If it's death, just keep doing as you've always done.

Garth Ferrante is a complete unknown who writes because he loves to, because he finds meaning and purpose in it, because if he didn't, life would be lifeless.

The Body | Raisa Reina



Life of Pix via Pexels

Choking isn't noticeable anymore
Burdens morph into usual problems
I can talk
a
r
o
u
n
d
i
t.
The force sways

It festers and lingers and whispers
Stay! Stay! Stay!

Racketing around my skull
A whisper is a scream
The body always has much to say

I always carry the body
It follows where I go
Enveloping me in its inner folding,
Wrapped around my heart,
Teeth growing from my wounds,
Each vessel contains a shadow
Tugging it away

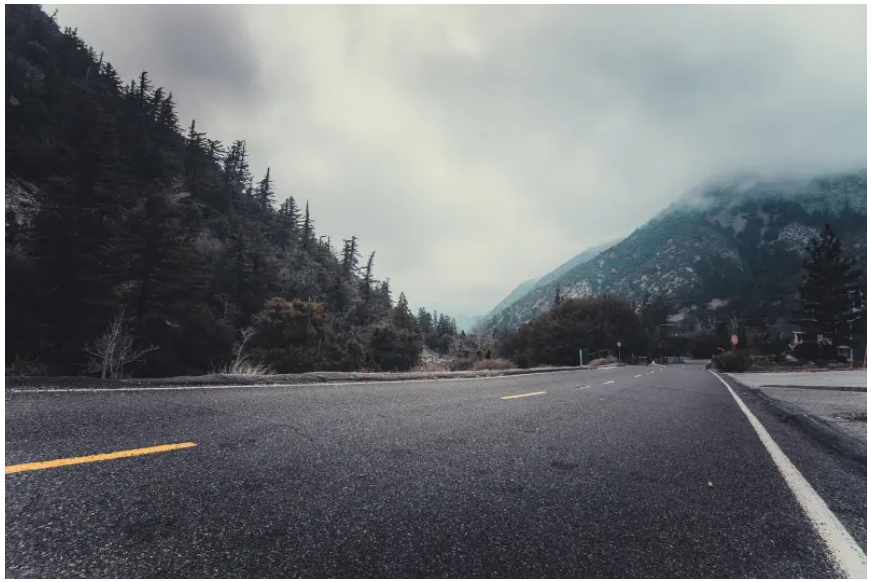
It lingers a second behind
Making its presence known
Step. *Thud!*
Step. *Thud!*
Step. *Thud!*
T
H
U
D!
Its sentient goal
to hold me captive.

I am weightless
as I reach for the sky
The body sinks against the floor
The weight gets heavier each passing day
A ten ton monster who looks like me,
Embers of the lungs suffocate my throat
Darkness lingers at the edge,
a half seen ghost in my periphery
But the sky
BRIGHT AND **SHINING** AND **LUMINOUS**
THE SKY IS RIGHT THERE!
But The body tugs
And I reach for it

Today
the body
has won,
But tomorrow
the fight begins again.

Raisa Reina is a 24 year old writer with a BA in Human Development. She is currently editing her first novel. She was previously published in The Telescope and Six Sentences. Twitter @thehahafactory2.

five dollars for speeding | Rachel Velebny



Spencer Selover via Pexels

what do you owe for an open road
beware the wind whipped ease
blurring sky, pavement, and pine
freedom ending never
no warning of self-built barriers
closer than they appear

Rachel B Velebny is a writer and poet currently based in Barcelona, Spain. Her writing, and life, are driven by curiosity and a longing to experience the edges of everything. twitter @rachelbvelebny

Iroh | Nathalie E. Amazan

via Nickelodeon

Happiness is a thief of Wisdom.
I'd rather be Wise than the happiest day of my life like
Uncle Iroh burning his identity to clumps of ash and black smoke
while lighting the path towards his free home.

Nathalie E. Amazan (she/her) is a Haitian American poet from Long Island, NY. Her writing strives to create more peaceful ways of being. You can find her writings @natamazan on all social platforms.

For Immediate Release | Abigail Crofton

Pavel Danilyuk via Pexels

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE:

Beloved Children's Book Author to Lead B.I.G.O.T.S

(London, England) Her Holographic Majesty, Queen Elizabeth the Last, announces the appointment of A.S. Howls, the author of the best-selling Rich Whitgoode, Boy Pilot™®℠ series of books, movies, television shows, video games, snack foods, and personal hygiene products, as the new leader of the Queen's Bureau for the Immediate Growth of Traditional Sensibilities (B.I.G.O.T.S.).

Mrs. Howls has graciously accepted this honour with the following statement:

"As a wife, mother, author, and, most importantly, the wealthiest person in the country, I take my duty as a protector of children and womanhood with the utmost seriousness. A plague of gender confusion has run rampant for too long in Western society. Now that the great nation of England has freed herself from the traitorous parasites who have turned their back on freedom to join the New World Order we will redouble our efforts to reinforce traditional values in all parts

of society. Men will be strong, women will be mothers, and our children will be guided by the loving but strict hand of Her Holographic Majesty's Fun Time, All the Time boarding schools.

"The Fun Time, All the Time schools have minimized student distractions and maximized academic instruction in the short time they have been operational in scenic locations throughout the country. The unexplained disappearances of several disruptive children have allowed more instructional time for the children who have not escaped.

"While our children, tucked into bed behind Her Holographic Majesty's iron walls, are safe, English women are still at grave risk. Women's spaces have become invaded by the beards, and discussions of menstruation have fallen to an all-time low. As my first duty as the new chief of the B.I.G.O.T.S. I am delighted to announce a new program in conjunction with Rwanda, England's most important international partner. Rwanda has graciously agreed to accept and imprison those certified by the B.I.G.O.T.S. as gender deviants. This program will lead to trials and executions that will not only be swift but also more cost-effective than if the legal proceedings remained in England. These savings will be passed on to the average taxpayer as tax benefits for all those with more than six houses to their, or their corporation's, name.

"As the incomparable Boy Pilot™®℠Rich Whitgoode™®℠says, 'I'm not fighting against the New World Order for fame or fortune. Me and my trusty plane, the Freedom Flyer™®, fight for all those other kids held as prisoners in the basement of pizza restaurants all over the world.'

"God bless Her Majesty the Holographic Queen and the server she resides on."

This press release is sponsored by the fourteenth movie in the Rich Whitgoode™®℠ franchise, *Rich Whitgoode, Boy Pilot, and the War Against Woke*™®℠, only available in the metaverse. Payment is accepted in Bitcoin, Ethereum, or Richereum, the official cryptocurrency of Rich Whitgoode, Boy Pilot™®℠.

Abby Crofton is a queer author who writes about love and other dangerous topics. She lives in Maryland. You can find her on Twitter @abby_crofton.

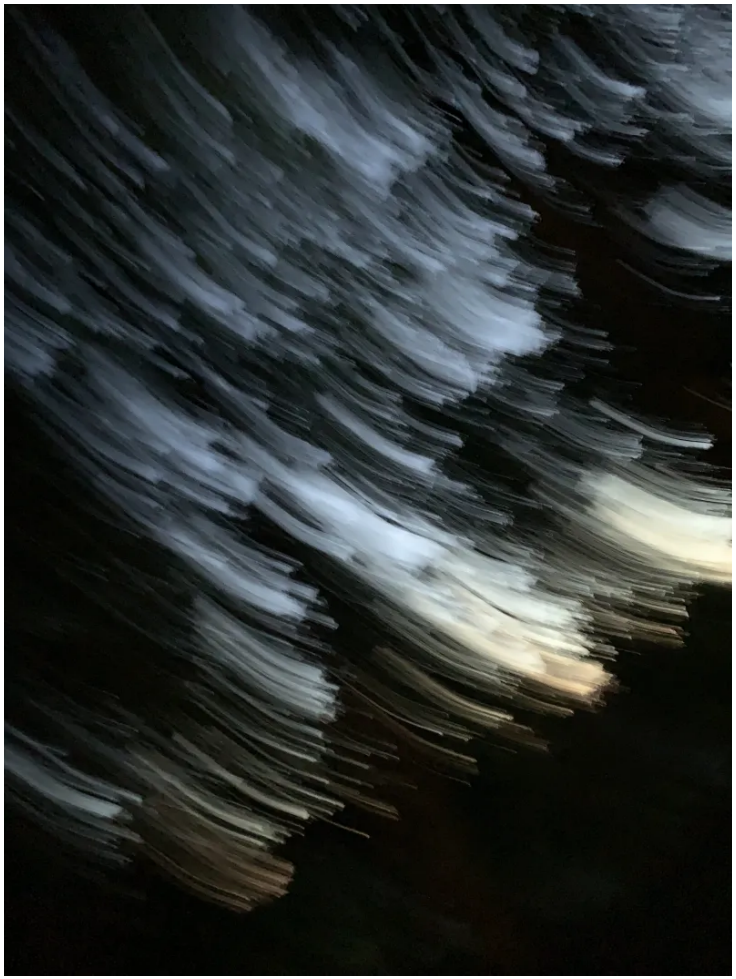
Warmth | Jacob Horton

Jen Mahnke via Pexels

All fires go out.
Still,
They can tend to many
Who could go no further
Without their warmth.

Jacob Horton is a social poet from the Central Valley in California. He is currently working on a collection of poems and complimenting art, inspired by his work in the respiratory field since 2017.

through a lens darkly | Lisa Wright



via Lisa Wright

Lisa is a freelance writer and amateur photographer. Though she's generally a spectator rather than a participant on social media, you can sometimes find her on Twitter and Instagram @dolphy_jane

1957 vs. The Jurassic | Jonathan Dawson

A poem from a son about his alcoholic father visiting the museum in Leicester. (Inspired by an old friend and his dad)
@jonnyd400 – Twitter

via PIXABAY

Rum, Gin, hallelujah.
If only it helped with the notes on the ichthyosaur, ey dad?
A trip to the New Walk and quick swig behind the aragonite.
A little tipple in front of the Plesiosaur.
Don't think George can't see you dad,
He's a sauropod dad; he's got a good view on everything.
Some say that the ice age helped George's kind off the planet.
If only you could see that something similar is coming your way.
Pneumonia aged fifty-five.

engulf: the path | tommy blake

Hassan OAJBIR via Pexels

clouds dim in the lake
like my irises—insignificant—

and i don't know how to live
without an ethereal countryside

to cloak myself. strip me
of an identity, and i will beg

you to call me by my name.

---

tommy blake (he/they) is the author of lacuna, Trick Mirror or Your Computer Screen, and others. His full-length collection is debuting with Bullshit Lit in 2023. Find them on Twitter: @rachaelapoet.

Unpenitient, unbowed, unbroken | Boris Pichotka

B Pichotka (he/him) is an unashamedly queer educator by day, and a writer of fiction by night. A German transplant living in Scotland, he has been involved in Queer rights activism since 1999.

Brett Sayles via Pexels

The pain wracked his body. Sharp and hot, the claws of a vicious cat raking his face.

Feel the pain, child! It is the price you pay for your wickedness. Pain cleanses, pain is penance.

The minutes crawled by as the searing needle bit into his cheek.

Tell me child, how often do you have these unnatural thoughts? How long since you last gave in to them?

Another scratch, ink staining his skin. He wanted to scream, to cry. He would endure. Unlike the therapy, the tattoo was his *kintsugi*. Pain embraced, not inflicted. "I'm here, unbowed, unbroken", it said.

An Elf and a Man | Mahmud El Sayed

via Pixabay

The elven lord holstered his bow and called me by my by my great-grandfather's name. He stopped scanning the horizon long enough to look me up and down, taking in my injuries.

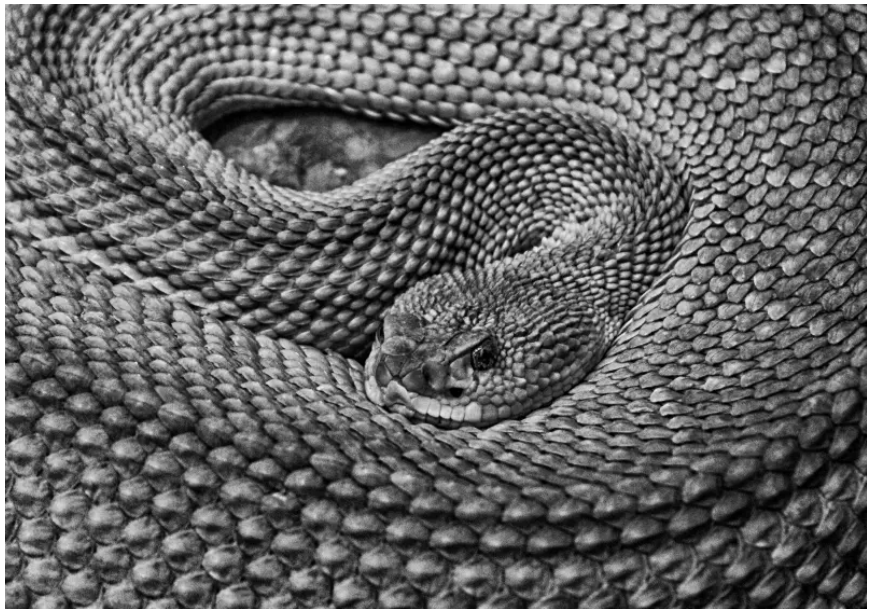
"It's good to see you again, Jameson," he said. "It has been too long."

Well, Grandad Jim did always brag that his father had fought with the elves.

"That was my great-grandfather, asshat. He died eighty years ago. Have you elves heard of calendars?"

Mahmud El Sayed is a British-Egyptian based in London. Tweet him @mahmud0elsayed

The Serpent Under My Skin | Minty Lee



Adi_Du via Pexels

Scene 1

Fire crackling. Crickets singing. An owl hoots, and there is the sound of meat sizzling on the fire. There's a pop, and the sound of someone chewing. Footsteps on the forest floor. A twig cracks, and there's silence for a few moments. All noise but the crackle of the fire stops.

Paladin
Are you here to avenge your husband?

WIFE
Is that only what is right?

Paladin
'Right' is subjective. In my mind, I was 'right' to kill him. If in your mind, it is 'right' to kill me, well, it's only 'right' for me to want to live.

Wife
Draw your sword.

There is the ringing sound of a sword being drawn, and then a swish as the Paladin cuts it through the forest floor.

Paladin
You don't have to do this.

Wife
I loved him. Do you even know what that means?

Paladin
I can't say I do. So I can't say that I truly care.

There is a clash of swords, and Wife grunts. Another clash, and the fight begins. It's slow paced, not fast at all, with heavy pants and the sound of muffled sobs. About two minutes.

Wife
WHY DID YOU KILL HIM?! HE CHANGED!

Paladin
A Drifter never changes.

There's a slick sound as the Paladin runs her through, and Wife makes a choked sound. the Paladin steps closer, her feet crunching in the ground, and there's a wet cough.

Paladin
We're all monsters.

There's a thump as the Paladin lets her body drop to the ground, and then a quiet sigh.

Paladin
Why did you have to do unnecessary things?

There's a grunt of effort as the Paladin lifts Wife up and starts walking, her steps heavier in the loam. Footsteps continue for a while, and the sound of crickets gets louder. After about thirty seconds of this, we hear a thump as the Paladin drops the body on the ground, and then the sound of a shovel hitting the dirt and digging. A cow moos in the background, placing them at a farm, and we're just going to gloss over how close the Paladin was to the farm because I can't do twenty straight minutes of walking. The digging continues for a while, about one minute.

Paladin
May the Owl watch over your rest.

The digging continues again, and then there's the sound of the Paladin sitting down.

Paladin
My meat is probably burned now. Why did you have to interrupt my dinner?

A hiss, and the Paladin is silent. The hiss grows louder, and then the Paladin sighs.

Paladin
Where did you come from?

END SCENE 1

(Editor's Note: This piece continues, but due to size constraints, we must include the rest as downloadable attachment. We do hope you continue to read.)

the_serpent_under_my_skin_scenes_1-15_11 Download

Hello, my name is Minty Lee, and I'm a writer hailing from Arizona. This is half of an audio drama I got talked into making by my friends. My twitters are sensibleshroom and tsumsaudiodrama.

The Importance of Properly Tending One's Flowers | Alice Scott

Abhishek Gaurav via Pexels

"Do you want me to hurt him?"

Cyrille may as well have been drowning, and those words felt like they were coming from some far off shore. He'd thought he was alone in the library.

"Your brother," Lisianthus elaborated, crouching down beside him. "The way you ran out of here when you got the letter he was coming to visit...when he gets here, do you want me to hurt him?"

According to gardeners, the Lisianthus flower had the aesthetic appeal of a rose, just without the thorns. Maybe the same could be said of Lisi by someone who didn't know him well enough to see how wrong that was. With long pink hair and clashing magenta-gold eyes, he looked like the flower he was named for: soft, delicate perhaps, a creature to be picked, a safe choice for anyone looking to get close to the most powerful magic family on the east coast.

In the short time they'd been married, Cyrille knew better. Lisi wasn't some thornless rose, he *was* the thorns. Get too close too fast and you'd find yourself impaled like some would-be hero outside Sleeping Beauty's castle, never to be seen

again.

After all, what were all those old legends of the fae ensnaring humans, luring them away to hell-knows-where?

But there was one thing that terrified Cyrille more than the fae with all their subtle magic of glamor and manipulation. It was the only thing worse than this loveless marriage, arranged by his family in hopes of earning the favor of the Larkspur family, who'd carved out their own little empire with all the brutal power and deadly precision of a mob family. After all, with a glance and a flick of their wrists, they could walk you into traffic and you'd die thinking it was your idea to stroll perpendicular across the highway.

If forced to choose between his brother and Lisi, Cyrille would've let Lisi lead him into the woods behind the Larkspurs' beautiful old mansion and bury him beneath the moss and Oleander bushes. Not because he wanted to die, not necessarily anyway, but because he'd finally be safe.

Safe was a luxury he'd so long thought he'd only get in death.

"Yes."

"*Cyrille!*"

It was human superstition not to give the fae your name, but lately he'd fallen in love with the sound of it in his husband's voice. Lisi never said it the way his family did, like *Cyrille* was a swear, invoking the curse of his very existence. When Lisi called for him, it made his name sound something close to holy. "Cyrille, could you drag the potting soil over here?" He sat half in the shade in the part of the garden that bordered on the woods, digging through the flowerbeds.

"I know I shouldn't be surprised you like gardening as much as you do," Cyrille said, hefting the soil bag with ease, "But it's still strange to see you with dirt under your nails."

"Not known for getting my hands dirty, hmm?" Lisi mused with a smile. Cyrille didn't answer, in fact he'd barely heard the question once he actually took a good look at the patch of earth Lisi was tending.

"Lisi, is that...?" It could've been a knot of old roots or the bones of a human hand, it could've been a number of things but Lisi shoved a flower into the hole in the dirt before he could stare.

"A mess of my flowerbeds? It is indeed! Must've been squirrels trying to store shit for the winter, we get a ton of critters out in these woods."

"Anything I need to be worried about?" Cyrille asked.

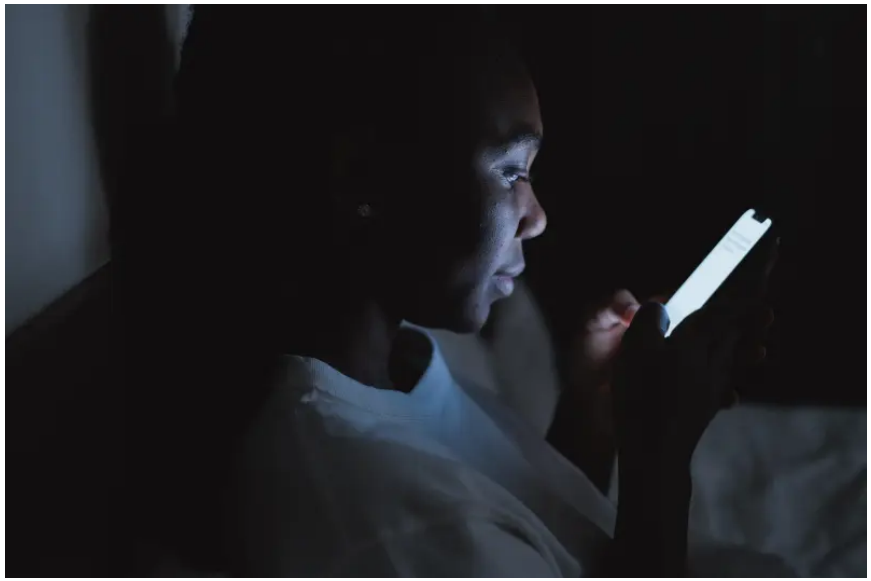
Lisi fixed him with that terrible, perfect smile, the one only a fool would look at and see anything other than thorns ready to burrow and rend at the slightest provocation against those Lisi loved. It was a terrifyingly placid expression that made Lisi look like the fae princes of legend: horrifying in their ease and charm. Ask him a year ago, when they were first married, and Cyrille would say that wicked smile was the second most terrifying thing in the entire world, that he'd sooner be dead than think of it as home.

But now?

He sat down beside his husband in the grass, wrapping his arms around Lisi and nuzzling his neck as Lisi said oh so softly: "Not anymore."

Alice Scott (She/They) is a queer short story author/indie bookseller who may or may not be a ferret turned human by a kiss from a handsome prince. Follow them on Twitter @Allyscottauthor for more

da WURST thng i hav EVUR WRITEN!!11!!!11!! | PEEKTEA



SHVETS via Pexels

Let's talk, you and me.

You want *more* out of life, no? Aren't you bored, sitting there on your computer, or on the shitter, mindlessly clicking through this website? Don't start— I'm sure you think it's mindful, after all, literature *is* art, and you consume art mindfully, yes?

You probably found this with the "randomize" button, didn't you? Christ alive.

The title was what got you interested, wasn't it—? Or maybe you just clicked away the second you saw it, sure that this was some sort of joke coasting on the unconditional acceptance, getting you to read whatever schlock I decided to waste your time with. In that case, I wonder why I'm even talking to you. Call it psychosis, maybe?

The doctors said I'm psychotic. But those doctors also said a whole slew of crock-bullshit about a lot of things. They thought inviting my mom in for group therapy was a good idea, for Christ's sake! I swear to god, she's got dementia or some shit. Whatever. A part of me hopes she never gets it, so when she's old and decrepit, I can be her legal guardian, and

put her through the same Hell she put me through. I want her to remember *why* I'm doing it— although, I doubt she'd ever grasp it, even in her current state.

But that's enough about me. We're here to talk about *you.*

An enticing offer at the start, no? Don't worry, I'm not gonna whisk you away to some commune in the woods and make you drink arsenic or whatever that idiot Jones did.

Or maybe it's not an enticing offer. Maybe you think I'm a loon and you're just sticking around to see where this goes— what bullshit I'll spew, what totally-not-a-cult I'm enticing you to join.

Well, I'm not.

Why would I want to share? I'm only here to talk about an unfortunate ailment plaguing my life:

My tulpa is depressed.

I'll let you decide if I'm bluffing or not.

A tulpa. What a novel concept. A thoughtform that is constructed in such a way that it achieves sentience. Is that an idea one could ever reconcile with existing?

Never mind what you think, though. Because the truth of the matter is my tulpa— *kind of,* is depressed— *kind of.*

At night we intertwined into one another as I cried out silently to a deaf world, a vague plea that sounded like a generic wail one makes when crying. But it's not me; an expression of agony such as this was never me; tears streaking down my face as *I don't want to remember! I want to forget!* repeated on loop in my mind.

You think I'm posturing, don't you?

I hate to disappoint— the tulpa is real.

But. I agree, it *does* sound like posturing. As if the "tulpa" is a metaphor for my subconscious, a fantastical way for my inner desires to be revealed in a fun little essay.

The tulpa is a metaphor for a tulpa, and this whole thing is a metaphor for nothing.

The doctors said I'm psychotic. But not because of the tulpa.

I was paranoid, is all. Just paranoid. *"Just"* paranoid.

I had plenty reason to be. I read my mother's texts, I knew she was planning to bug my computer. I saw it with my own two eyes, and my father? My father is getting a PhD in computer science. He'd have the know-how to bug my computer and hide it so well I'd never find it.

But oh well! I have something he'll never find— he'll never know the two times I lashed out at him, it wasn't me.

I've lashed out before, lashed out *worse,* but these two times were special. And it was a different tulpa. It's like cats, you know. Or guinea pigs. You can't have just one; it'll get lonely when you're not around to talk to it. Best to give it a friend to keep it company. And, if you have the space, multiple friends.

Of course, the well-minded of you are coming to an obvious conclusion. You've read the DSM. Talked to someone who disassociates. Was on the highway and the car tailgating you had been in the vicinity of a mentally ill person. Surely you're qualified to diagnose me.

Surely you know I'm telling the truth!

This is a website for *stories*— at the end of the day, this could all be fiction. Just one speck in a slush pile; just one bored writer ranting on about tulpas and paranoia and cults.

Between you and me— they're not tulpas.

They're something else entirely, still of spiritual origin, but a bit harder to explain. I'd wax on and on about multiverse theory and the fourth dimension, but I've got a reputation to preserve! This could all be fiction, yes, but it *could* all be true— you have no way of knowing, and who knows? Perhaps your motives are disingenuous. Perhaps you've already got your argument at the ready, a twenty-Tweet soliloquy on how I should be completely and utterly deplatformed for my crime of being the slightest bit too weird. Or perhaps I'm doing something wrong here, after all, tulpas are a Buddhist concept, and *as far as you know,* I'm not Buddhist, and *as far as you know,* they would be quite mad at me if they ever found out.

Not that they would. And not like they're tulpas, anyway.

He's sad, is the crux of it. He yearns for a home he can never go back to, for the embrace of a man who will never embrace him back.

(As far as he knows.)

His thoughts intertwine with mine, and for a second I'm in a bed much larger than my own— pressed sheets barely disturbed by a light, slender frame, wails softly echoing around a large room and ricocheting off a floor-to-ceiling window overlooking a city I've never been to.

It lasts for just that long— a second— and then I'm freed from the torment of being him.

I have the luxury of blocking it all out, dooming him to wail in solitude.

I practice good un-tulpa husbandry, with wide open spaces and tons of little friends, tulpas and un-tulpas alike, for him to frolic and play with. It's not my fault he chooses to hole up in an apartment! He's a big boy, he can make his own choices in life.

Do you want to be a god?

Don't lie to me. It *does* sound enticing, to most people, even for a second. To have complete power over *any*thing and *every*thing that comes your way, to ensure your own safety, to be revered and powerful and have all of existence at your fingertips— who wouldn't be tempted, even for a second?

I may be a bit psychotic, but I'm not disassociative. I collect new friends on my own volition. They have no control over my body unless I grant it— and once granted, it can be revoked. They have lives and memories I am unaware of, and some of them can go back to where they came from if need be.

He— he has no way of going back. The *soul* is intact, and with me, but the *body*— the body is twisted and mangled, broken in a way a body should never be; cold to the touch before I was ever aware of his presence. But his origin is out of my jurisdiction— I would love to reach across dimensional barriers to gently piece his body back together and deposit him right into that too-big bed of his, if only to stop the wailing.

But I can't.

I am a god in a bubble, confined to un-tulpas and un-tulpas only.

(There *are* tulpas. They aren't mine.)

I poke at him. It's interesting to see what makes him wail. Invigorating to live through his sorrow.

Does this make me as bad as him?

Does it make me worse?

He at least has the decency to have a little Catholic guilt about the whole matter— he thinks of himself as fundamentally unlovable, which is a real bummer, because we're quite alike, and *I* think I'm plenty lovable.

Ah, this was supposed to be about you, wasn't it? I'm sorry. I got a bit carried away— the burden of being a narcissist, no? You truly can never stop fucking talking about yourself.

He's been watching me write this. There's a pit in my heart that's part mine, part his.

Mostly his.

Do yourself a favor: forget about me, and Gods and tulpas and wails for the lost. Go hit "randomize" again, and read something else on the shitter. Lose yourself in something you know to either be strange fiction or a safe reality. Don't busy yourself with the maddening ordeal of deciding wether or not this is strange reality or safe fiction— you'll become psychotic, just like I am. You won't forget, regardless— so why try?

You don't want to be God, anyway. I do, and even if I don't, I'm stuck here, so I might as well make the best of it. You, however— you have a say in the matter, that is, if all of this were true. Which it might not be.

To be God is to see all. To be God is to feel the unending suffering of someone you chose to preside over. To be God is to

turn away regardless.

PEEKTEA may or may not be clinically insane; that's for them to know and you to find out. Psychoanalyze their tweets @PEEKTEA.

We Used to Make Things Happen | Mileva Anastasiadou

Paula Schmidt via Pexels

But now we wait. We went to parties and drank and danced, then we went home, we kissed, made love, and we'd pretend it'd be easy, to find love, because we knew how to make love out of nothing, we knew how to cook love and make it smell nice, like it's the real thing, for we used to make things happen.

But now we wait. Things still happen, only we don't make them, don't urge them, don't force them. Things till happen, but they're not made up, blackmailed, imagined. We fall in love and we fall slowly, we wait for love, to grow, to bloom, and things still happen but happen slowly, and we find love, we find true love, through hardships, and we know now that when things happen, things also collapse and people vanish.

We used to make things happen, but we've grown old now. Things still happen, but we've grown so old, we wish they didn't, we fear each time things happen, and we want to keep rolling, like this road never ends, like we can keep on moving forever, always staying afloat, alive, waiting for things to not happen, for this walk to not end.

*Mileva Anastasiadou is a neurologist, from Athens, Greece and the author of "We Fade With Time" by Alien Buddha Press. You can find her on twitter: @happymil_*

A Grave New World | Gabrielle Fernandez

cottonbro via Pexels

With the excitement of SurpRise Day approaching, we should remember there is more to the holiday than presents and a day off work. It is a day to honor the dead or rather, not-so-dead, and the historic Rising that forever changed our lives.

The undead, or Zombies as many lovingly joke, came in droves at the start of the decade and soon every town was overrun with these new citizens.

"I always thought the Apocalypse would be more disasters and death," recounts Mary Higgins, who was one of the first to report on the Rising. "At first, I thought it was extras from a movie or something. It wasn't until I saw one of them lose an arm that I realized it was real."

Initial response by many believed the dead rising was a sign of the rapture, but it became quickly apparent the zombies simply wanted nothing more than to make the best of their second chance at life.

"When the undead appeared, we truly expected the worst," says Dr. Stephen Gladwell, professor at Princeton University and Nobel Peace Winner for his work with the *Dead Integration Project*. "What we had not expected was that not only

were our undead loved ones exceptionally cheerful, but they were more than willing to reintegrate back into society."

"I always hated Frank," Margarite Wilkinson of Benton County noted of her late husband. "But since he's returned, he's been a perfect gentleman. He does all the chores without being asked, never complains when we entertain guests, and even fixed the gutters. Dinner consists of more raw meat than before, but it's a small price to pay."

Wilkinson is not alone in this revelation. Reports from across the country of reunited spouses and family were amazed at the new dispositions of their late relatives. Many accounts of the day the zombies arrived include the deceased breaking the tension with a knock-knock joke.

Opponents of the Rising stated this influx of bodies would create massive infrastructure issues from overcrowding. Jon De Palo, the founder of *Putting the Undead Back in Crypts,* or PUBIC, was starkly opposed to reinstating the undead into society. "We were sure so many new bodies would be nothing but trouble," remembers De Palo. "Most cities already struggled with overcrowding. You can imagine the panic we faced at the thought of more people, dead or not."

But as De Palo and many other anti-zombie groups quickly realized, the benefits of our returned loved ones greatly outweighed the cons. By the following year after the Rising, zombie labor was being utilized all around the world. Needing no breaks and unaffected by the occasional impalement, the undead became a staple in construction and other projects deemed unsafe for the living.

Zelda Maas saw the opportunity early and began the Undead Union, which now oversees almost 80% of the zombie workforce. "It's been a godsend for so many companies," said Maas. "The Undead don't sleep so projects are being completed in a quarter of the time it used to take".

The evidence of this is clear. Renovation projects in places such as Detroit, Baltimore, and Jacksonville have turned these towns into sprawling metropolises. High speed railroads now connect every major city, with more currently in progress. With the return of humanity's greatest minds, many diseases such as AIDS, diabetes, and restless leg syndrome have been eradicated. Zombie Louis Pasteur claims he is on track for a cure for the common cold, while Zombie Michael Faraday has created a true hover car which will be available for purchase next year.

Of the many monumental impacts in the last decade, one of note is the dissolving of the United Nations and subsequent creation of the Undead Utopian United Homeland, or UUUH. The newly acquired attitudes of the undead did not end with their high spirits and affinity for puns. It was quickly discovered that Zombies opposed separate countries and preferred a global nation. By the fifth year of the Rising, most electoral positions had been won by the undead. All dictatorships had been eradicated when the slain leaders had revived with a perky disposition and strong feelings toward universal healthcare. It was shortly thereafter world peace ensued.

"It's about togetherness," explains Mandeep Singh, interpreter for the East Americas President, Zombie Washington. "When he addresses the people, we know every 'uuuuuh' and groan comes from his unbeating heart".

There are still many hurdles to overcome in the future. A verdict is expected in the next year for Zombie v Oklahoma regarding inter-breathing marriage between the living and undead. Considering the entire Supreme Court is now filled with all undead judges, it is highly expected to pass.

Within the short span of ten years, it is clear the impact our undead friends have had. So, while we wish each other a Happy Burial and exchange gifts around holiday graves, we should also take the time to reflect on the vast progress that has been made and the rotting hands that made it possible.

Gabrielle Fernandez's work has been published in SORTES Magazine and The Racket Journal. She loves scribbling stories on napkins and parking tickets. Gabrielle can be found on Twitter @GabbyFez

Surgical Notation | Nicola Andrews

Anna Shvets via Pexels

TAKEN, like Liam Neeson's daughter
PLACED, the rue of a bronze medalist
INTRODUCED, like species invading
PLACED, as if a half-formed memory
GRASPED, like a prize in a claw machine

PLACED, as in papers please
TURNED, like a chess piece being born
INJECTED, as in your slight discomfort
USED, like an eraser destroying itself
USED, as in getting used to it

INSERTED, like newsprint solicitations
ELEVATED, as in untouchable coronation
CONFIRMED, like répondez s'il vous plaît

INSERTED, as malevolent thumb drive
CONFIRMED, like a credible witness

INSPECTED, as in emotion detector
PLACED, like bring back state housing
TURNED, as in rotisserie ballerina
INJECTED, like crows stampeding
USED, as in run out of stock

INTRODUCED, like a meet-ugly
INSPECTED, as if holding your breath
NOTED, like a workflow collapsing
FILLED, as in enamel erosion
DISSECTED, like a shredded coconut

IDENTIFIED, as in ko wai au?
DISSECTED, like a mirrored sliding door
OPENED, as in butterfly knife arcing
CAUTERIZED, like drainpipe desperation
LIGATED, as if a balloon dachshund

PLACED, like an unpaid intern
CAUTERIZED, as in you're on brand
NOTED, like apologies and corrections
GRASPED, as if a bedside scarecrow
TENTED, like survival preparations

SEPARATED, as twins switched at death
REMOVED, like borders closing slowly
REMOVED, as in I'll see myself out
SWITCHED, like the strike of a bough
INTRODUCED, as in my best curtsey

PLACED, as if a pin point dropping
ELEVATED, like glass ceilings rushing
REMOVED, as if secondhand sight
INSPECTED, like falling into line
OBSERVED, as Attenborough himself

PLACED, like an errant salad fork
CLOSED, as if renovations pending
RELEASED, like a compilation album
REMOVED, as in unboxing china
CLOSED, like barricades bracing

CLOSED, as if a self contained unit
REMOVED, like repetitive shifty thoughts
REMOVED, as in smiling once again
AWAKENED, like cheers to you, mate
AWAKENED, tihei mauri ora

Nicola Andrews (Māori, Pākehā) is a Ngāti Pāoa writer currently on Ramaytush Ohlone territory. Follow them as @maraebrarian, and in publications including bad apple, and Cordite Poetry Review.

Did You Hear About The Sasquatch? | Mugdhaa Ranade

Magda Ehlers via Pexels

In summer, the Sasquatch met a Kumquat Orchardist moonbathing naked underneath the fragrant white blooms, messily gorging on a sandwich, the cheese dripping down her chin. A lover of sasquatch erotica and the romance in The Shape Of Water, she offered herself to the Sasquatch immediately.

They married, surrounded by ripe kumquats and paparazzi.

In winter, the Orchardist sought an annulment, claiming fraud: the Sasquatch was a human male on stilts in a fursuit.

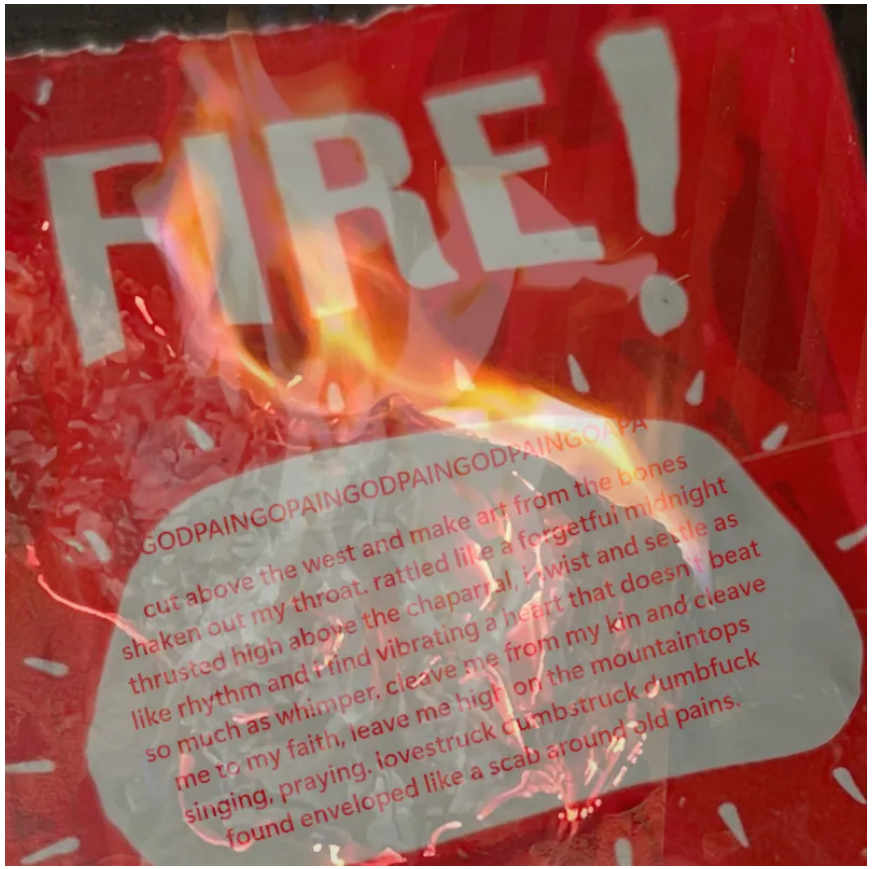
In spring, an exposé appeared: the Orchardist wanted fame, the not-Sasquatch, the kumquat orchard; it was a sham marriage.

In summer, the orchard was replaced by a large crater.

Aboard the spaceship, as the orchard flourished and the fruit ripened, the not-Sasquatch shed its human skin. Out tumbled beings no bigger than the kumquats they began to feast upon.

Mugdhaa Ranade wakes up everyday hoping to find dry leaves to crunch underfoot, and stray cats to pet. She can be found in person in Mumbai, India, and online on Twitter @swxchhxnd.

Fire | Emma Thompson



via Emma Thompson

Emma is a trans writer who has been writing fiction for as long as she's been reading it. You can follow her on Instagram at @stream_charli, and read more of her work at insectosophia.wordpress.com.

I Hope I Don't See You Tomorrow | Cory Kessler

mentatdgt via Pexels

Jack's shoulders slumped everywhere he went, head bowed as if in reverent prayer or concentrated reflection. His friends always said he lived an interesting life, but that's because they didn't feel what he felt. He wondered what it would be like to live a different life; he had an image of a soft breeze rippling waves among endless fields of wildflowers. Where the breeze started and where the breeze ended, no one could know. He wished his life was like that sometimes.

But whatever gods or fate ruled this world, they were cruel and creative. He used to be religious, he went to church every week and tried to live his life by a code, if not godly morals. What did he get in return? Only pain. *Dark reflections*, he thought. His mind often wandered to this familiar place, especially when he drank.

Jack sat on a stool with his elbows leaning on a heavy wooden bar. He was already three whiskeys deep. It was 5:15. Moods like this took him every so often. The current bar he sat in was unfamiliar, he stumbled upon it by happenstance. It was small, but cozy with only six tables, not counting the ten or so stools at the bar. There was a jukebox next to the door and a pool table at the opposite end of the room. *Could have fit several more tables instead of the pool table*, Jack thought.

The bar was dark and there was a haze of smoke coming from a lit cigar belonging to an old man sitting at the corner table closest to the jukebox. The only other patrons were a father and his son playing pool. The crack of the stick striking the cue made Jack start from his musing. The bar reminded him of something from a movie he had seen once, but he could not recall the name or the plot, only the feeling.

After work, he told his wife that he was stopping for a bite to eat because he missed lunch. He hated lying to her, but he hated seeing her hurt even more. She was kind to him, and understood when the darkness overtook him, but he could tell it weighed on her to see him like this. Lying was easier. He planned to stay until he could sustain a smile and pretend to mean it. Grace deserved that much.

His father came home in dark moods when he was young. Some slight or another wounding his pride and making him feel small. It was best to make yourself scarce when the storm approached. His dad was an angry drunk; well, angrier than he was when was sober at least. The man didn't need excuses to get red in the face. Jack's mother tried to stand between the kids and his raging father but she was a slight woman and her clinging hands were pried with ease. That left running. Jack and his brother Robert would go separate ways when they left the house, Robert would stay out all night with friends or their cousin Tim who was twenty-five and lived within walking distance. Jack would always go to Eva's house.

Eva was the pastor's daughter and Jack's best friend. Pastor John and his wife were the kindest people Jack knew. When he realized Jack was going to keep coming around, pastor John invited him into the study and they would talk about life and God and why people do the things they do that hurt other people. Eva's mother set up a bed in that study and had it made up anytime Jack appeared at their door.

Once there was a storm. The thunder rattled and the lightning flashed in lock-step with Jack's father's rage. Jack had been told at school by another boy that Thor was the god of thunder and when he raged so did the storm. The boy pointed to a comic as his proof. He told pastor John so, sitting by the fire in the study trying to get warm after running faster than he ever had through a downpour.

"Thor ain't real, Jack," Pastor John said. "That's just stories. There's only one God, the God of the Bible."

Jack wasn't convinced. Eva brought him hot cocoa and read to him from the book of Exodus. Jack wasn't sure he saw a difference between the God of plagues and the god of thunder. Pastor John just nodded his head in obvious pride. That was the night that Jack decided to be better than gods and men. He would never bring his anger home to his family when he had one; never be awful to the people he loved. It was a noble promise, one he tried to keep all his life.

Jack's mother died that night, by her own hand. A sacrifice, in a way, because his father's will was finally broken. Robert left the house the following year, working a job in a coal mine across the state lines. Jack never spoke to him again. He knew why Robert left, but he couldn't bring himself to follow. There was something in his father's face he recognized in his own when he looked in the mirror. A bond they shared despite everything else. Jack's father never lifted a hand again after that, and Jack could count on one hand the words that passed between them until he died many years later. And of course, there was Eva.

Jack realized he was staring at the boy playing pool with his father and turned back to his drink. He heard the boy shout and looked back around. The boy's father congratulated him and reracked the pool balls. The old man in the corner puffed his cigar and raised a glass in salute. Jack nodded to the father who smiled back.

The bartender cleaned glasses in the corner, waiting to be needed by one of the patrons. He saw that Jack's drink was near empty and approached.

"Another one?" he said.

Jack nodded.

The bartender knocked twice on the wood and walked away. He returned moments later and replaced the empty glass with the full.

Jack held the glass in a hand and took a small sip. He tried to savor it, the flavor, the burning. But he felt nothing. The door opened and Jack recoiled from the sudden light. He was blinded for a moment as he readjusted. Footsteps approached and stopped beside him. A familiar scent sent his mind reaching for something—a memory, maybe, perhaps just a memory of a feeling. Clarity returned and he saw Eva sitting on the stool beside him.

Jack's throat tightened. His heart began to race and he felt goosebumps on his neck. He recognized the voice, even after ten years he instantly knew it was her. Eva. He looked at her. She had not changed. Her blonde hair cascaded down her shoulders in thick curls. Her hazel eyes, bright as they ever were, pierced straight down to his soul. She saw him; she always did. He felt a wave of emotions he could not identify, as if every feeling he ever felt hit him at once, conspiring to overwhelm him. He lifted a hand to the bartender and asked for an old-fashioned.

"You want it after that one?" The bartender pointed to the fresh glass of whiskey.

"It's for her."

The bartender touched his ear and stepped closer. "What's that?"

"It's for..." Jack began to point to Eva then shook his head. "I'll just take it now."

The bartender shrugged and began mixing the drink.

Jack swallowed again, a vain attempt to clear the lump in his throat. He remembered the first time he saw Eva, really *saw* her. They were walking home in junior high. She stepped off the dirt road into a field of sunflowers. All of the flowers stood a head taller than her but he watched as they bowed to her beauty. She held them gently and spoke words he could not hear, and he never asked.

They were married just after high school. It seemed natural, and no one questioned it. A foregone conclusion. Pastor John performed the ceremony. Jack's father didn't show. All was as expected. After a short honeymoon to the coast, Eva went to college and Jack went to work. They had one child together, a daughter. Some saw Jack in their daughter's features, some saw Eva, but Jack saw God. He knew nothing in this world or any other could compare.

The bartender placed a napkin under the old fashion and slid it to Jack. He thanked him.

"You're not really here," Jack said in a low voice. The boy playing pool asked his father if he could break. They jabbed each other's skill for a moment before Jack heard another crack of the cue. He chuckled.

"Of course, you're not here." He took a long swig of the whiskey. "You've been gone ten years now." Ten years since Eva asked him to put away the drink. Ten years since he stormed out through the front door and went walking. He'd been well into the early morning, wandering aimlessly, and when he returned a sheriff's deputy met him on the porch, hat in hand. He knew before anything was spoken. Eva had gone looking for him. The car blew a tire and she ran off the road. They found the car wrapped around a tree. His daughter was inside it too.

Nothing was the same after that. He had chanced across pastor John once or twice when he visited his mother back home. They didn't speak. Jack was sure pastor John saw him, but he did not blame him for avoiding conversation. Not after what happened. It wasn't long before Jack never went back.

"Is that it, then?" Jack said. "My time come? Did God send you to usher me to judgment?"

"Not quite," Eva said.

"What then?"

"Why are you here, Jack?"

He looked at the ceiling and sighed. "I ask myself that all the time," he said. "Should've been me who got in the car that day, not you."

"That's not what I mean." Eva motioned around the room. "Why are you *here*." She lay a hand on his arm and his breath caught. The words died on his lips. Every hair on his body stood up. Looking at her was like diving into the deepest, darkest parts of the sea; the swirling, churning, mesmerizing sea. Jack held her gaze, ready to be lost with her. Ready to surrender.

"I just want it to end," Jack whispered. "It's too much." He'd never said it out loud and now he added a new layer of shame to his burdened shoulders.

She didn't respond. He began to weep, softly, wishing to shrink into the shadows of the bar and fade to nothing.

"Why are you here?" He said.

"For you," she said. "And for all you're willing to give up."

Jack swirled the whiskey in his glass and watched the whirlpool.

"I don't believe in ghosts," he said as the whiskey settled.

He ran a hand through his hair and downed the remaining contents of his glass. He put both hands on the bar, staring straight ahead. He caught his reflection in a mirror, a sad sight. A reflection that looked back at him, weariness plain.

"You don't believe in ghosts," Eva said, tapping her finger on her lip. "No, I suppose you wouldn't."

Jack pushed away from the bar and clapped both hands to his face. He rubbed his head furiously.

"Please, just go."

"You don't believe in ghosts, but you've been haunted all your life."

"Those are demons," he said. "I believe in demons."

"Oh Jack," her voice was melodious, the last feeling of warmth before a crisp cool wind changed the feel of the day. He felt the darkness retreating to the recess of his mind, slowly; and so he clung to her warmth.

"I can't do it anymore, Eva. This has to end."

"And Grace?"

"She deserves better," he said. He shivered. "Better than worrying about a damned soul like me."

"And your son?"

He exhaled a long breath. His heart clenched at the sharp pain of her words cutting deep. His son.

"I can't even look at him some days," he said, almost inaudibly. "It's not him, it's me."

"You would abandon him? Like your father did to you?"

"Enough!" Jacked said. He slammed his hands on the bar. He heard a gasp and saw the boy leaning close to his father, both having backed away from Jack and put the pull table between them. The old man in the corner furrowed his brow. The bartender approached.

"I uh..." the bartender hesitated. "I think you've had enough."

Jack's heart raced. He looked from one wide-eyed face to another. His chest heaved. He reached in his pocket and the bartender tensed. He threw a wadded twenty dollar bill on the bar and walked toward the door. The ghost of his ex-wife followed.

"You can't run from this, Jack," Eva said as they walked into the golden light of sunset. "That's not the kind of man you are."

"I'm a coward, Eva," Jack said. "It's exactly the kind of man I am." He fished the keys out of his pocket and fumbled them as he tried to unlock the driver's side door of his car.

"Living is never cowardly, Jack," Eva said. "Neither is pain."

Eva approached him and lay a hand on his shoulder again. *These goddamn keys*, Jack thought. The keys fell from his hand. He lay his head on the roof of the car.

"What am I supposed to do?" Jack said.

"Live," Eva said.

"Did it have to end?" Jack said. He turned to confront Eva one more time.

"Yes," she sad. Her tone shifted. Something akin to sorrow, but not sad.

"What did we do wrong?"

"That's not how it works, Jack. Sometimes things just happen and there isn't a deeper purpose or a hidden meaning. Things just...are."

Jack leaned against the car. He kicked a small rock with his boot and watched it tumble across the asphalt. The oblong shape caused it to bounce this way and that, each time it struck it took a new direction.

"I don't know how to carry on, then."

"One day at a time," Eva said. She turned and looked at the fading sun. "I have to go." She turned to leave. Jack reached out for her but held back. She sensed him and looked over her shoulder. She was beautiful, Jack realized, arrayed in light. Shadows were cast across her face but instead of obscuring her features the shadows highlighted her radiant smile and ocean-deep eyes.

"Is she happy?" Jack said.

Eva laughed. "She's everything we ever dreamed. And more. I wish you could see her."

"I will," Jack said, "some day."

"But not today?"

"Not today," Jack said.

"Well alright then," Eva said and walked toward the sun. "I hope I don't see you tomorrow, either," she said without turning.

Jack followed her figure for as long as he could see her. The setting sun settled just in front of his vision and though he shielded his eyes, Eva was gone by the time he could see. He lingered for a few moments more and watched the last rays cast pink and purple hues across the heavens. When dusk settled comfortably, he picked up his keys and got into his car to head home. Grace would be waiting.

I'm an MFA student at Queens University. Twitter: @corykessler

Homesick | Emily Rogers

cottonbro via Pexels

His skull breaks the glass.

The crack spreads out in spindly threads, a spiderweb of hurt etched tangibly into the window of his former home. Blood drips sickly toward the windowsill, burgundy red, translucent where the light hits. It all collects in a fatal red rosary bead that bursts when it hits wood, pooling on the sill and cooling into a sticky, permanent stain in the white paint. He falls to his knees in the damp grass, head bowed and gasping for breath, blood dripping down the length of his neck and dyeing the collar of his dress shirt cranberry. He wears a black eye, a sleeve of tattoos on his right arm where the short sleeves don't cover, and a new hole in the knee of his black jeans. This house has watched him in similar states of disrepair, but the tattoos cover years of life this place has never seen, memories he's made and kept for himself that don't pertain to the person who lived here, the one he used to be. He'd left that person here to rot, but it's all coming back now. He can feel the decay grow roots in his chest.

His breath begins to even out, and he manages to bring a hand to the back of his head before a kick to the stomach sends him lurching forward, curling in on himself as he starts to retch, gasping inward breaths sounding like sobs between them, perpetual gut-wrenching sounds escaping him in painful bursts. Black spots invade his vision and everything starts to blur, but he refuses to cry. He refuses to fight. Maybe he deserves to die here.

He's not sure why he came back, why he ever thought this could be a good idea, a healing moment or something. He just had this maddening, neverending itch to make things right, but he realizes now it may have just been a hankering for getting the shit kicked out of him. Like old times. He thinks he came here for some sort of forgiveness, but he's never forgiven anyone here. It's a one way street, and he's standing in front of a truck going 70 miles per hour with no intention of stopping or slowing.

The next kick comes to his ribs, and he can feel more than bone splintering inside him. He's in fetal position now, face half in the grass and dirt with no hope of catching his breath again. It doesn't matter anymore. He won't be the person his brother wants him to be. He won't turn his hurt into bloodied knuckles this time.

The decay keeps spreading, upward through his lungs, his throat, up to his eye sockets where it starts to leak, tears forced out of him sliding down his swollen face, breaking the promise he made to himself. He's never cried here. He's never been allowed. He remembers holding it in, always holding the hurt inside until his chest threatened to burst, taking it with him into school bathrooms where he could finally sob until he gasped for breath, where he had hall pass privileges taken from him because of the days he held it in so long it took entire class periods to calm, to collect. He remembers the days without being the worst times, crying between classes inside stalls, balled up toilet paper disintegrating in the fist he hid inside of his pocket in all the classes afterward. He remembers the days the older kids would find him and call him crybaby, call him a girl, call him anything they could to try and hurt him. It couldn't damage him more than he already was.

He moved past crying and onto fighting pretty quickly. Inflicting the pain felt like a relief, finally getting to hit back such a euphoria that he never cared if he lost or won, if he was suspended or spent weeks on end in detention. If he ended up on the blacktop in a pool of his own blood, at least he'd picked the fight. He'd come home and do it all again anyway, so what was the point in waiting, in trying to keep himself pristine for the ruining? There was freedom in the choice, and he'd take any ounce of freedom he could get.

This was his home, but he never knew quite what that meant. There was never an attachment, he held no nostalgia for the shell of a house that all his worst memories occurred in. Home was a locked cage, a noose just a little too low and loose to die from, a constricting rope around his neck that pulled tighter every time he said a word, every time he thought of fighting back, every time he did some invisible wrong thing. Yet he was drawn back here to relive the misery, to start it anew, because of some sick urge to see if anything at all had changed, and met with exactly what he should have expected.

He hadn't made it past the door frame, but he imagines the inside is filled with ghosts lining the corners like cobwebs, his far-off screams lingering in the air like dust motes, rusty stains from his blood still spotting the floor, all tastefully pulled together with a heavy sense of dread. The past and present had never collided so forcefully before, and he feels like a mirror image of himself, reflected the wrong way around. This couldn't be him, this couldn't be his blood sinking into soil, he can't have so directly tied himself to his worst nightmare. The rain can't wash away what the roots in the front lawn have already drank, a blood pact that says he'll never truly be free. His tattoos are distant hope, a future he can't reconcile himself with when he's bleeding out. That him doesn't know this one. That him has never suffered, had buried his past six feet deep in a sealed urn where the ashes of it could never be spilled. That him is smart, and strong, and doesn't give in to insistent urges that will only end in pain.

He's twelve years old again with no hope. He's twenty six and fists and steel-toed boots still speak louder than he ever could. He was right to leave, and he should've stayed away. He knew that all along, felt his heart trying to combust as he walked along the path to the front door with a high-pitched screech like a hospital flatline bouncing around his head, a warning signal for him to hear and ignore. Self preservation had never been his strong suit.

He was sixteen before he ever hit back. He never intended to try, but one day something split inside him. Something cracked and a monster crawled out, the missing piece that fit him into the family, slotted into place right where he belonged, violent and volatile, his anger torn from the inside out. He swung and hit, crushing cartilage under his knuckles. He broke his brother's nose and sprinted out of the house before he noticed the blood running down his hand and wrist, slipping down the sleeve of his hoodie, trailing guilt behind it. Every day he got hit, and every day he bled and bruised, but he'd never noticed how much there was, how red it all could be. He thought it'd feel good, to see his brother hurt like he did, but he just felt hollow, like everything inside him had drained, all the good and bad seeping through the shallow scrapes on his knuckles, all his hurt culminating into this moment of emptiness, when he realized he was no

longer just the victim. He'd hit back, and he wasn't sure if that made him a hero or a villain, if he was just as bad as them after all.

Everything is flooding back, a lifetime of conflicted feelings on parade, not so much nostalgia as a series of painful flashbacks twisting like knives inside him, the dull throb in the back of his head ever-present and debilitating. He's powerless to stop it, the way he's always been powerless. Nothing could have prepared him for this. He had his whole life to prepare for this. It's a complicated duality, all his should-haves and what-ifs on display, realism and optimism caught in an eternal war. After all this time, he still wants to see the best in people, he always wants to hope for more, a wistfulness that has never once served him well.

He'd closed his eyes because he didn't want to see the kicks, and if one came to his face he didn't want to lose an eye — he'd long since learned the best ways to be beaten. He can almost breathe again, and he realizes it's been a while since the last blow, which only serves to set him on edge. Maybe this pause is forgiveness, or maybe it's a setup for something worse, twenty six years of lead up finally culminating in the kill. His tears have turned the dirt beneath his cheek into thick mud, and as he struggles to lift his head from the cold ground, he feels the mud lift with it, fused to skin like an ineffective

graft, a makeshift bandaid. He doesn't want to take any part of this place with him when he goes. If he goes. This place has its own gravitational pull, made in part by gravity pulling and holding him down when he's wounded, so much stronger than he is. He keeps his eyes closed, holding on to this one last bit of hope. He escaped before, and he can escape again. He can lock this part of him away for good this time, he'll take whatever new scars were made here and remember them when the itch for home finds him again.

It was never an itch for home, because he's never had one. Maybe an urge to find one, to reevaluate and reexamine, maybe find something good that could've been, that he now realizes will never, ever be. Ten years hasn't changed a single thing, and they think he deserves this. He plants a palm on the wet soil, makes his screaming muscles move him until he's got both hands and knees grounded, however unsteadily. He feels blood rise in his throat and swallows it down, and his ribs feel like a hole in his side but the stabbing in his stomach is worse, and he can't give into either if he doesn't want to die here. He can't die here. He won't let them win.

He still hasn't opened his eyes, but he can feel the world spinning around him, everything off-kilter and wrong, a fun house mirror inside him warping his guts into something foreign. It's vomit coming up this time, and he can't stop it; it erupts out of him and onto the pristinely green lawn and he doesn't feel any better after. He pushes himself to his knees, and the head rush feels like he's dying. He can't forget the blood drying on his neck, wonders if his skull cracked as easily as the glass behind it. He was never very hard-headed, passive and weak, too fragile. The fragility was the problem and the solution, the barrier between he and them, the secret to keeping himself in tact while also breaking him irreparably, shattering him into millions of pieces he would spend the rest of his life trying to collect.

He was sick of the search, of the longing, of the thought that if things had been different he would be better off. Of the knowledge that things would never, ever change, that the past can't be rewritten or smudged away, that the cracking of knuckles would forever set him on edge, that

the anxiety associated with the slamming of doors would always eat him alive, have him bracing for impact, leave him shaking. Ink covered all the scars except the ones in his heart and on his mind, and hope ripped them open again, optimism he still couldn't shake, some misplaced, stupid hope that something had changed, that anyone could feel guilt for what they'd done or have the capacity to want to atone. All he wanted was for someone to be like him. All he got was what he deserved.

But the blows had stopped.

He still thinks it might be a game, that one of them is just waiting for him to watch as they kill him, waiting to hear his sigh of relief before they steal his breath again. He doesn't give them the satisfaction, imagined or not. He can't hear any breathing but his own, and it's coming in tattered whispers of sound, it's barely audible, it's nothing like the labored breathing that comes with delivering a beating. He must be alone. But maybe it's the hope telling him that, trying to kid himself, trying to make him feel safe in his final moments, give him some sort of peace before the end.

He readjusts, shifting his weight to plant one foot on the ground. It's a slow process, every muscle in his body screaming for him to stop, to lay down and die like they'd always hoped he would. He won't do it. He might die from the injuries, he might die running away, he might die scared and alone and limping, trailing blood behind him. But those're his own terms. Those are endings he won't let be taken away from him, his cowardice and courage coexisting to make him uniquely other than who he grew up hating. No matter how he dies, he wins if it isn't here.

He doesn't care that he's probably going to die today.

He leans forward, pushing himself upward until his other foot is steady enough to hold him, dug into the dirt and desperately praying for purchase, that this ground can give him some sort of strength, hold him up one last time. It takes some time, but he shakily stands, straight for a second before another stabbing pain echoes in his stomach and doubles him over again. It's not perfect — how could it be — but he's upright, and that's enough for now. He can start trying to put one foot in front of the other, he can drag himself home, to his real home, somehow.

All he has to do is make it to his car, but his blurry brain can't remember where he parked. He thinks it was far away, just in case. He'd never had something so nice before, he couldn't risk what they might do to it, if they'd ruin this one last thing for him too. His phone is out there with it; he only left himself open to be broken here today. He wonders if he'll regret that decision, and his mind wanders to other endings. He doesn't know that he could've brought himself to call 911, that his fingers could have dialed the keys. He can't say why. Maybe some insane, twisted sense of family loyalty; maybe actual, pure, fear for his life, but he can't imagine turning them in, can't imagine telling the truth. Can't imagine making up a lie that could explain the mess his body's become. Maybe he doesn't deserve that kind of justice. He thinks he knows the direction he needs to go at least, and starts to stumble that way. The gash in his head is dripping down his neck again. Every single step is agony, every single movement making him feel like he's going to collapse.

He makes it to the end of the block before he does.

Cautiously optimistic. instagram.com/blonderuby

Cold or Hot | Troy Ford

eberhard grossgasteiger via Pexels

That first summer I arrived at the Lake, I'll tell you what: Magic. Glorious days, fishing and sailing, moonlit swims at night, campfires, fireflies. First time I ever saw the Milky Way. Pinch me, I said. I wished it would last forever, I was all in—gave up my apartment in the city, worked out all the details, moved up with a whole heart. The air smelled fresh, almost too fresh for a cityslicker, like it had been scrubbed clean, disinfected. The water was so clear, when you looked straight down, you could see the bottom and all the million-colored stones. *You could drink me,* the Lake said, *I've got nothing to hide.*

Come autumn, the rain started. It was not torrents, not buckets and storms, just a smooth, even drizzle. Funny because with a good hard rain you can hear the rain itself, hitting the ground, drumming on the roof, but with this constant spray, this gray noise dripping off the trees, and drop by drop down the aluminum downspout, like a percussion section with the sniffles. It got so wet and muddy I started to think the world was raining rather than the sky, like the mist was a condensation of the Earth, raining in reverse.

Anyway, down or up, the Lake swelled with that drowning rain, crept over the beaches and banks, swamped roads and docks. Someone's boat washed up in my front yard, and I tried rowing around past other cabins, checking out the damage and expecting someone would wave and say, "Hey! Thanks, I was looking for that," but no one claimed it or knew who it belonged to, so I tied it up to the porch post—that's how high the water got. And it kept rising until, by the time the cold weather arrived, the cabin was practically in the Lake, and I was not exactly stranded, but always damp.

Winter hit hard. "Coldest in a generation!" Now, the Lake was known for its ice-fishing, so a good hard freeze was expected. But you should have seen them on the ice trying to chunk out a hole. One guy was at it all day, early in the morning until sunset, hacking and bashing, but he never got through it was so thick. He actually tried starting a fire in the hole, and it melted alright, but just along the sides, and pretty soon the water snuffed out the fire and he packed up and left. As he was stowing gear in his truck, he showed me half a fish he chopped out of the ice—the other half of it was still stuck head first in the wall of the hole. By next morning, the melted water was frozen again, with the charred wood and bits of burnt paper and matches frozen solid, like the Ice Age hit while someone was cooking his dinner. The end of the half a fish stuck in the ice looked like a steak shrink-wrapped in the freezer section. I kinda wondered if the fish was dead now, or whether it would die later when it thawed out and realized it was missing its bottom half.

I'd like to say that in the spring, everything melted and everything was green and the world was young again, birds and bees doing their thing, but spring never came. Winter stayed for six long-ass years, and I just got colder, and slower, and sleepier. It was a trudge, no bones about it. I envied the fish.

Finally I said "Screw this, I'm out" and moved to the desert. Found a real nice Oasis, lots of neon and palm trees. Wonderful. The Oasis didn't say anything to me like the Lake did, no *Hey Sailor* (obviously,) just shimmered and smoldered, the sand glittering. Since it was quiet, and no seasons in the desert anyway, I didn't give it much thought when the Oasis dried up and the families all cleared out. I still had the swimming pool to splash around in, so it all just seemed normal until the water was gone, and even the pool was empty, the taps coughed sand, and I had to start buying bottled water by the truck load—sponge baths, paper plates and plastic forks because no water to wash the dishes.

Anyway, the air conditioning still works good, so I'll take my time and give some thought to where I go next because this is getting nuts. Maybe something by the deep blue Sea.

Maybe it's me.

Troy Ford is a lifelong writing enthusiast living in Sitges, Spain with his husband and AmStaff terrier. Twitter: @MrTWFord Instagram: @mrtroyfordauthor FB: @MrTroyFordAuthor Website: mrtroyford.com

Medicine cabinet contents of a married couple, year 2020 | Salena Casha

Johnathan West via Pexels

cabinet hinges unstick themselves,
arthritic knobs of dust and cracked paint
rendered floorward and

there are family-sized tylenol and ibuprofen bottles,
filled and cottoned.
the traffic vests of creme and tangerine pills blink
caution, do not enter and

you, the archeologist, the excavator, the historian, is careful.
you wear gloves
when you remove expired athlete's foot spray;
the can's seat burnt a cord of rust into the pine.

you could catch things here like tetanus, and

the expired leg cramp pills, all seven cases of them,
wouldn't save you and

neither would the homeopathic bug spray or toe separators
or elderberry chews or Neutrogena sunscreen and

you know it's like vinegared wine or cursed scarabs
waiting in the moist dark, stone wings
chirping against topaz and

some haven't worked
since 2019, like you. and

thank goodness
they were just two,
two only, and you are not one of them but

you think about how
they left the plastic wrap on the vitamin D
and three packets of birth control meant to be
had with a poached egg, with eighty-four poached eggs and

you marvel at the calcium chews and wonder
if he brought her one with coffee in the morning, if
their lungs inflated and deflated to take in the bitter
ether, their alveoli swelling in fossilized veins and

if in that moment they wondered if their bones
would enrich the soil and

never
soften.

You can find Salena Casha's most recently published pieces at trampset, Pithead Chapel, CLOVES, and Full Mood Mag. Follow her on twitter @salaylay_c

Meanwhile | Keira Armstrong

Alexander Zvir via Pexels

Needles, arguments,
how your teeth grow whiskers, how your
eyes fill with zest.

That big, bended, willow tree
on the end of the block
that kind of looks like a witness
to your words sounding thin and unripe.

How growing a new body
is almost like coming home
to a burning house–

but it's not your house,

It's the girl's whose lips you
knew better as a breaker of soft things,
than as a man
who turns off the lights.

You stay here, between a graveyard and a hospital.

You think of praying, you think
of taking a knife to your chest
and killing that girl
in your own home
on your own terms.

The wind clicks, the flies pass by,
your eyes closed and black,
laying in the moonshine.

The house's foundation cracks
without moving,
without transgression,
in silence.

Keira Armstrong is the founder of Verum Literary Press. Their work has been published in Healthline Zine, Corporeal Lit, Anti-Heroin Chic, Limelight Review. More at https://keira-armstrong.carrd.co.

dearest unstamatic | Amanda Kooser

Amanda Kooser (she/they) is a 2022 graduate of the UNM creative writing MFA program. Work is upcoming in Yellow Arrow Journal, The Twin Bill and the New Mexico Poetry Anthology. Twitter: @akooser.

Sora Shimazaki via Pexels

in contemplating the concept of unconditional acceptance / I have gazed on the folds of my shower curtain / the one with the tentacles clutching a tall ship / and lost focus in my eyes / until all the misty world blurred into / cloaks of fog around my nakedness / these are lessons for the lizard brain / the one that refuses and refutes / the one that strikes behind the knees / hissing in a tongue I have invented / on the edges of dreaming / I push my fingers into its hot tar / and extract flowers / blooming in colors of sunset / broken pink and orange across the eastern clouds / awake

White Cabbage | Louise Hurrell

lil artsy via Pexels

Watch the white cabbage waltz on the wind,
wings beating, battering
the air with a ferocity
that I've seen, felt
many times before.

How slight, how innocent, delicate
as a bruise.
How angry, how persistent
to nip through netting
and devour the flesh underneath, my salad
days turning to terrifying nights.

I want to wound the white cabbage,
tear off the pummelling wings,
stamp the stick frame beneath my boot,
trap it within a thick metal mesh.
I want to feel my chest ease from its grip and
fly away.

Louise (she/her) is a writer based in Scotland. When not writing, she can be found at her local indie cinema or trying (and failing) to learn more about photography. Twitter: @LouiseHurrell

untitled | Sazia Patel

Ali Madad Sakhirani via Pexels

Resting next to you,
after cleansing in the Hadley Reservoir
I open up to the world like a flower in Spring.
I feel nostalgia for a way of life that's disappearing: a cup of tea left waiting.
I witness your eyes in mine, travel lifetimes, grow in wisdom
and achieve freedom in the present moment.

– For Curry, Thank you for always reminding me that I belong to a group of people bigger than myself

Quos Ego | Zachary Smiley

Aneta Foubikova via Pexels

Excerpt from an article (circa 3rd April 2017)

No one could have expected disaster near an island too little for offshore insurance companies but spacious for endless coral reef rainbows, glimpsed small animal herds.

Dockworkers, daylaborers mistook neon decorations as if spectres surrounded the private and absolute whiteness of a yacht named *Transatlantic Camera*. Most fantasies assume the unlimited crab buffet, overpriced spirits downpour throats, their comparisons involves battleships stalled in neutral, numerous oil tankers, fishermen dingy, an old man trawled squid romantics.

Mr Ezra Stavrolakes alongside partier frienemies drifted upon the lawless international ocean, fucked countless hours, drank endless their cultivated insomnia.

Mr Ezra Stavrolakes asleep hadn't felt pulsated an explosion.

80 bodies strewn about uninterrupted waves.

Only one survivor announced: Drake Falconer.

Text from Zachary Smiley, a short story, "The Cannibal"(first published in 1986)

. . . blonde corpse inside sea foam, blue diamond cocktail dress shredded to ribbons and pallid thighs sunburnt, surfaces facefirst, arm knocked out of joint under seagull horizon descried green oblivious saltwater distances. "Hey you're alive!" the echoes across black sand, the dark stranger sunkissed near obdurate rock formation submerged, cliff façade arose ancient gnarled eucalyptus their dark cubic zirconium paradiso. He motions toward benumbed arm, makeshift kilt of a chef overcoat swishes, greasy fire stains yellowed, Drake Falconer sees black pubic hair shaved acute, its similitude displays heartfelt. Bones interlocked together after one thrust, pain twisted stiff arm cradled in a fetus position and scream let out "Fuck! Fuck!"

"Halfway certain you died. You feel better?"

"I feel like I died. Where are we? Wait a minute I feel sick like queasy."

"I don't know if no one knows we're stranded but set myself up this nice little outfit already if you're interested. I'm Extro Randall," their damp masculine bodies dried silent.

"Nowhere else is here? Nobody left alive?"

Drake paralyzed, smells intestinal rotten seawreck, slender electric wires gnawed like morays, puzzled iron driftwood shrapnel, its sunken nautical architectonics dissected, its starboard cabins tsunamis cracked apart revealed sea urchins swaddled pastel armchairs drowned, fisher crabs sift fluorescent blue paper money fierce tides dissolved, the bottles shatter chardonnay across several blister scarlet asteroidea the hand impaled on blue steeled contortions. Laughter cries aloud, look again toward emergent palm trees desiccated, leopard prowled jungles, sporadic ferns shook their halcyon shadows, tropical thunderstorm crossfades their frail ashen bonfire. Rock Castle shores, uncorked concupiscent grapevines, indistinct meat laid pruned fat, black iron sauce pan engulfed, fishnet recoiled over aluminum cooler and rustic harpoon foreshortened, tarpaulin shrouds above deflated rafts their erratic fire blanket. Randall chisels zebra mussels, held reflective blade shows face suntanned, freckles, scars like iron teardrops, shivers. Radio thrummed fragmentary sonatas, lurid mosquitoes buzzed microseconds, flaxen silkworm inches toward instantaneous heat-death, oils inundated nightfall, zephyr fazed constellations, tides shift pebbled shallows, flames contrast breezy salted coldsnaps their exhausted carnivorous shadows, the insect bites, blood infestations, fractures on black and white shells incarnated murderous screams complimented coconut milk in husked fibrous tumblers their fingerfood smears blue mollusk juices.

Dream illuminated thunderous abyssopelagia, bladders nonplussed over reptilian seabed mist, blind inquisitive proboscis thrust lethal slipstream effect like rapier flashes, tentacluar black mass shudders shapeless orgasm feelers delimited, its apollyon serration devours thoughtless creatures, draconic phosphenes mimicked drunken silvery shoals and arms lustful polypi immolated upheld their depths winnowed continental drift oceans swollen asleep. He walked toward an empty room untimely from spectral curtain breezed open, the insistent pleased moans laid under darker figure limbs enwrapped methodical embraces, its toes flexed, its humanoid muscles undulated scoliosis, hectocotyli flicked impalement, headless rigor on indistinct furniture. Humankind becomes again seminal seaweed, time is seaweed, a sunken city abandoned the translucid atmospheric pressures, ample cemetery floated tropical waves we have ended production, mariners from ancient regimes observed asylums inhuman prototypes inhabited, precedes centuries, perhaps characters still exist inside books intelligences addressed. Drake had cleaved awake next to Randall, sighs are heaved, share naked their fire blanket in unfathomable heat, bonfire smolders charred meat leftovers from dull metal embers dazzled with daybreak. He said, "What time is it?"

Later another dinner and eventual sunset. Drake said, "How long has it been?"

"What do you mean? It's not even been an hour."

"I'm sure that plane had us already. Maybe rescue will be here tomorrow. Worst case scenario rescue is a few days away from now. It had seen us anyways."

Randall outstretcht flat on black sand, further blue diurnal movement ensorcelled sideways an airplane twisted contrails wraithlike behind auspicious clouds from urban scleroses their flight on languid volcanic fumes another distant island, the language of flowers exploded sexual innuendo, branches toward mountainous spinal ridged obsidian inland, magma boulders pulsated underfoot, soon cadaverous dusk like barricaded coral reef overhead. He sat up, looked down an idea of evil their avaricious waves approaches labyrinthine white rock, it spoke to him and tried to interpret it from breezed sea foam an unbroken metal prow like an obelisk divided sun and shadows, a voice through a cloud across unlit tides shaken absent, familiar elements, treasures in secretive ravages, disappointment, odor of alcohol, lustful salt, a black swimsuit found, a paper read the name in its handwritten cursive *I, Extro Randall will die*, anchovies, more wine bottles unopened.

Here the narrative becomes more difficult, a man swam calm waters, there cold circumstances paralyzed arm movement, swam more tired, typical reveries confused himself, eyes, ears burned, awkward interior monologues and narratorial intervention the infinite sheet of seas hid enormous rotten sun blackened their reflective weaker rays feverish penetrates the number of sentences you need from island to shipwreck what else? Perhaps Randall didn't swim but perceived encounters, waves as an obstacle left adrift, waters massaged sunburnt shoulders, two violent bodies collided, soon accorded vortex and cornucopia waters send up toppled yardarms horizontal, spars, flotsam, design apparent from debris their hieroglyphics scatters livid, an incomplete record, storm tossed chapters in inaccessible regions, throws like numberless dice drowned corpses, things, messages, experiences the dead would have detailed. Fiction contrives more waves larger like ironical calyx the infinitesimal vectors had been visual tactile layers on him lost below a void, a puerile shadow swam rigid opposition toward skies, its head emerges out of rockier environs, its comet dark hair, its seaweed crawled up dead scuba divers buried deep, appears on the brink asleep, dissolved our realism from terminal scales, rhythmical suspension from severed female head, she ran overhead, enormous siren danced on misshapen waves, fantasies necessitates Poseidon ex machina because the author has never fallen in an actual ocean nevertheless. Swam backward, under cool sunlight, it took on an unusual expression the inhuman dead of night subsisted, some winds falters destiny, yacht had sailed perpendicular, black ocean sloshes orchestral, declined, a shipwreck is a habitat, thick massive vines orchideous twined around the mast, bejeweled skulls atop docile hermit crab, lifeless air through broken windowpane and the dolphin tail upon nothingness the ulterior demon bacchanal dropped sinuous scales across forepeak. He looked seven feet tall, thin saturnine robes fell in thick cupreous brushstrokes framed aloof, an ivory skeleton warped, its languid exhalation stirs from a wide black hole maw, devours son whole, brain matter against throat twisted smaller, clenches starved cherubic flexed arteries, palatial obscurant backdrop swirls near desiccated titan an anesthetized patient laid asleep, a bleak canvas, a steel mattress, a deep voice reaches Randall, its noworld racked above wine bottles he listened.

Thorough nighttime Drake swallows clear concupiscent milk from white halved coconut shell delicate hands extended over bonfires, black sand feet kicked up, thin irises hazed in blonde hair, pallid skin condition moonlit like lunar dragon scales shed another iced planet, dulcet soliloquies silenced ingrown carnivorous floral pattern against undulated colossal oceans, echoes lugubrious, his voice redoubled predatory sleight movements. Homeless old shadows light pollutants scatters unfazed in alleyways, "students of Ganymede," the bright hummingbirds dazzled drunken torpor, Thailand streets they swarmed sex tourism we were like kids left outside, miniscule velour chirps told about syringes their fragile bodies departed fast, hearts, lungs, dying last musical car crashes left maimed, gunfights, bad drugs killed many others. Giant Japanese hornet hunted several men, militant fatigues shivers hard muscles body hair softened, no flights wax heavenward, orgasms in patient tantric thrust, arms swathe barbed wires, thighs thorned rose vines, Drake leashed on blue laced ribbons sweat irritated, led on command, names, dates, etches across heaved dark pectorals their cocks teased one another contaminated warm chiaroscuro. His skin was buried stone tablet, prances alive leopards, hell hounds, Drake loved to look from a bed, sunrays cushioned their raft, its aria held out of climax penetrated ceaseless besotted concrete jungles.

Passed out at dawn and sunset awoke them, Randall said, "Think I'll explore more today."

"I'll tend our damn little paradise in the meantime I guess."

He returned in seagreen raindrops, fire blanket, tarpaulin flown impassioned angelical shrieks, hurricanes dazed across starlit skies like fireworks winged torrential emerald, reveals spoilt meat, airy bloated arms dangles wet salt, the rustic harpoon arrowed open his abdomen, tropic laughter, birdcalls on funereal marches and dispute territories their rapist horseflies are sated.

More human meat thrown in an aluminum cooler.

Drake lived alone drunken from timeless wine and muscular legs burned in crispy dark smells on infinite limp bonfires isolated, rescuers noticed, sees two fishermen in overalls.

He kissed the nearest man, devours his squirmed tongue, a rotten taste, a sleek iron mouthfeel.

Zachary Smiley graduated from Southeast Missouri State University. He currently lives in the Bootheel. He has recently adopted a cat named Rupert. He has previously published in Journeys poetry.

throb | Cary Shaw

Pille Kirsi via Pexels

oh fuck standards and fuck you
-go-right i-go-right we'll pass without fanfare,
fuck inconspicuity, fuck
the ones who want us to embrace our world less, not more,
if we pass in the street ask me to dance or die here, i will
rub flower petals across my cheekbones,
i will sift flour with my fingers / i will shut my eyes with music all the way up /
i will yell the words like
we wrote them /
we are sound itself. cartwheel down the sidewalk
into my arms, give
give give until you will let
each day dissolve on my tongue like candy,
raspberry in october, heart
-throb in june, blue on gray wall, breaking crust smell, orgasm / a dream
just human: jump
from the swing set,

feel yourself fly.

@kaleidomode on Twitter.

The foolish boy moves in | Charlotte Fong

Carlos Caamal via Pexels

The foolish boy moves in

bringing half-dead plants and unnecessarily
eager gesticulations equating to exhausting pantomime giddiness.

Nobody is this excited to exist in a world on fire.

I close the curtains, but you wrench them back again.
This is the time to look at the sky. Who cares
if the neighbours' eyes start to strain?

There are billions of stars in the universe,
and we are fortunate enough to know some of them
by name.

I'm an English teacher in Manchester trying to document my thoughts through poetry.

You Will Always Be Her Demon | Karen Crawford

Francesco Ungaro via Pexels

You paint her eyes jet black
when God rays part the clouds.

You pry her open when she swallows
the words slip off her tongue.

You possess her smile stretched tight
until her lips bleed love.

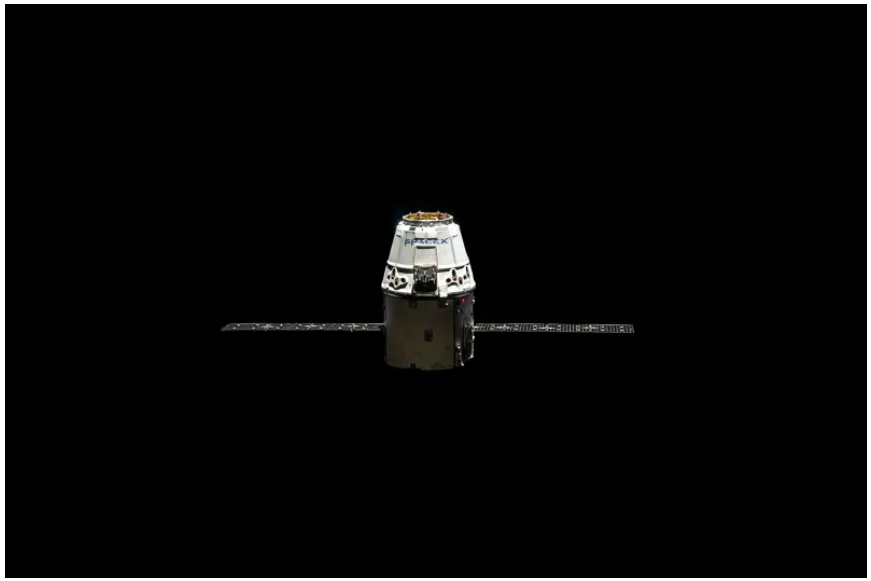
You cut your wings, she free fall falls

and catch her once again

---

*Karen Crawford lives and writes in the City of Angels. Her work has appeared or is forthcoming in Cheap Pop, Maudlin House, Sage Cigarettes, and elsewhere. You can find her on Twitter @KarenCrawford_*

Burnings | Idman Omar



via Pixabay

Ode to Derek Owusu

I'm telling a story of skin that binds. Of pursuing
myself. I'm wrapped in darkness that pulls shores.
The sun is inside my mouth, swallowing my laugh.

I'm coiled up. Black. Raised on a diet
of pirate radio and England for a mother. I dance
between letters, obsess over sentences, rewrite my

life. Under the table, raging dust has settled. It wakes
now and again. The roaring earth must adjust like colour
mixing. It must have a hue to it, like thought thinking. Like

hardness turning soft around the clock. I hang on its

numbers like years I cannot forget ticking over. I am
not at home inside myself. Each day, I am quietly quitting

life with each last breath out. I swallow pride and think
of the length of forgetting. Of autumn as a still life.
Of stunning water as it hits my black skin.

Every Evening Ends

The bedside lamp curls
like it's begging. I'm
in a frame here. Time rests by the
water. From the bed, I live in
a dream made to sink. My
blood speaks.
It's happening.
The adhan hollers. The evening
is closing. I wait for the night,
under the cover of my
veil, in the position of requests.
Darkness rolls in like smoke
then silence wails, long,
and my heart streaks in
soft steps, tasting
my sadness in a city widening
by the minute. I'm undercover
suffocating, settling grief,
waiting for the day to wake.

Diversity and Inclusion

We were always here. Talking blood. As
alive as ghosts. You couldn't
see. We were as black as burns. Not going
anywhere. Did you think we were
invincible? That
time would not scold light. That God's
decisions would never absorb the days as a metre
for sin. That we
were not all minerals of the globe by design. We are
forgotten children, full lips, necklines darkened
with rage. We have always been brutally
soft, melting spines, roaring kids,
fiercely kind, scarily scared.

Womb Mates

We live as each other's alibis. As
boroughs blending. The silence between

us, simply genes that hug. We were
land reaching toward water,

weary, determined seeds. The
oldest taught us to take shape.

Rounded babies who refused the
darkness of a tunnel. Resigned

to cutting, over being pushed
away. We were warriors released,

interpretations of life's graces,

of the lungs of giants. Mum

and Dad prayed for these six
angles of their interiors who

argued over the TV, each
a township descending. Till

now, we seek muscular speech
and nothing but, all six of us

travel as one, level below
life, we are drawn to huddling.

Good great God, we live as
waves in love that crash

and disappear again. Trees
growing scattered, blending

suddenly to become an
identical forest. Pillars in the sky.

Due West

You were enjoying the lot: the heat of bodies, the buzz of the *souks*.
Wherever it was going, the meridian of heaven
at midday.
You didn't contemplate the departure, of losing us.
It all just came about like death.
The way my grandmother's cloak stayed bonded to her back,
this thing was alert and ready.
But eviction is also destroying in its entirety.
Drifting blood down sandy streets and shooting
down thought, futures drifting
like exhaust westward. Shadows of screams
weightless, halfway to England.
Voices the trees terribly miss hearing.
Not by me, but the ones in heaven, the ones
who struggle with marred memories of massacre
music. Took their lives
away from you. Understandably, to the rain,
to places they hatefully love, to escape your
irresistible heat.
Do you regret it, or was it all wordless love,
the type parents give?

Voyager, 1996

Before school, solar power from cassette tapes and cereal. I
am warmed by hope for technology, my shadow
pink from gloss. The rusting morning streets are mottled. I
am a star smouldering into daylight, losing my glaze. Look,
the music posters, the books we haul. The
prayer before we depart. I
am happiest dancing between letters, head to the
heavens. Deep as black, I monitor my darkness.
Wrap it in my English homework, in my plaits. I
wear my own face, heavy and warm. I am
my own secrets which I rot behind. Two legs floating
to school, a developing photograph, still and shivering
all at once. Words wrapped in mink, tilted toward the light. I
voyage on; a child marvelling at imagining.

Idman Omar is a British freelance writer. She has previously been published with Southbank Poetry, Wild Court and Guernica Magazine. Idman is a MA Creative Writing graduate from London, England.

Last Words | Tiffinie Alvarez

via Pixabay

I wrote about you,
wove your features into poems,
painted your dimples onto the lines of a page.
Strung you up like twinkling stars across the header
of every poem I was proud of that year.

I wrote about you,
through the days
where the hours blurred together
where you left me in the dark,
eyes empty, staring at a wall, making friends with the cracks in the concrete.

I wrote you whole.

Boxed your flaws up in the back.

Scribbled out word after word.
Turned you into perfection,
a final draft ready for publication.

And you tore me to shreds,
ripped the pages of my poetry from my mind.
Rewrote my stanzas
spilled ink, dark blue, across the fresh printed pages.
Turned my words to curses

Hit the backspace on every line.
Tainted the stars until they were jet black like your eyes that night.
Broke me down until I was little more than a pawn,
someone to make you feel bigger
like an ill-placed capital letter.

And I still write about you.

In the after.
In the time between then and now.
And I hope one day someone reads what I made you into,
all those perfect pieces from years passed.
And says,

"She wrote you better than you deserved".

Tiffinie Alvarez is a 6th Grade ELA teacher and a long-term reader. She currently resides in Massachusetts with her husband and their cat Twyla. Instagram: @bookshelfontheright

The Amateur's Guide to Extreme Baking | Eleanor Dickenson

Like of Pix via Pexels

Caution should be taken in preparing this recipe. However, if done successfully, you will have a tea loaf with wonderful subtle flavours. It makes perfect toast, although you should be careful not to let it have access to a toasting fork.

1. In a bowl, mix strong flour with a little sugar. Ensure you use a flour that isn't stronger than you are, should you need to wrestle it to the ground after rising. Use flour from a reputable mill which provides self defence advice for home bakers.

2. Add salt and yeast. Don't let them mix until you start to knead the dough. See Appendix A for instructions on what to do if the yeast and salt mix too early, and if necessary, call the emergency services and ask for a helicopter.

3. Add milk and egg, and knead. It is important to mop up any flour sticking to the bowl, so that it doesn't escape and lurk in crevices. If you suspect this, see Appendix B for advice on dealing with ambushes.

4. Cover the bowl with a damp tea towel and leave to rise. At this stage the dough won't try to hurt anything it can't see.

5. After a couple of hours the dough should have doubled in size. Carefully remove the towel. Quickly add softened

unsalted butter and fold it in. This will help to prevent the dough getting a good grip if it makes a grab at you. Add cinnamon, nutmeg, allspice, and orange zest. Under no circumstances substitute lemon zest, although lime may be attempted by experienced bakers with the proper equipment and licenses. Add sultanas, and knead firmly.

6. Re-cover the bowl, and leave for its second prove for another couple of hours. Approach with caution, as the dough will be anticipating you, although at this stage it will only attack if startled. Do not attempt this with children or pets in the room.

7. Butter a loaf tin liberally, and then turn the dough out onto the counter to shape. It will probably struggle and want to stay in the bowl. Shape the dough and put it in the tin. This will need a final prove overnight for the best flavour, but this will also give it further time to start to plot. Ideally the loaf tin should be clamped securely to the counter top. If it manages to flip the tin and hide, a team of specialists will need to be called to catch it.

8. Preheat the oven to gas mark 7, egg-wash the top of the loaf, and bake for 35 minutes. It should be dark brown and shiny on top. By this time the load will be fully mature and will be a formidable opponent. Ensure your bread knife is sharp before approaching. Excellent with butter, but note that it will fight with meatloaf so they should be kept separate at all times.

The authors accept no liability for gluten-related injuries or damage, howsoever caused.

Eleanor (she/her) is based in beautiful North Yorkshire, UK. She writes mainly about monsters, especially creatures with tentacles, and is inspired by myths. Twitter – @TentacledWriter

Strategies for Silliness Retention Amid Unbearable Grief | Rob Younger

Graham Walker via Pexels

build (don't buy) a king size hot tub on the roof of your home
* re: landlord complaints – forgiveness is always better than permission
climb inside your new roof tub and begin to slowly fill it with jelly beans
* stock up on these prior to construction
with every bean, announce a reason you're glad to be in this lovely tub
* once you run out, list all the things you can see from up there (e.g. bird!)
realize when finished that you're now trapped under 500 gallons of candy
* minus your own weight, of course
eat enough to ensure your escape, and leave the Bean Tub a winner!
* and anyway, [REDACTED] never asked your permission to die, did they?

Playwright, sometime poet, short story writer. @RobAbuSharr on Twitter

Tyranny | Jerrod Laber

cottonbro via Pexels

Distance is a cruel tyrant,
mother—
the stone hardness of
my heart,
battered ligaments, shorn and
ripped apart,
the clement ardor of your grace
the only
comfort for my hollow, brittle
bones.

Jerrod Laber is an Appalachian poet and writer. He lives in Virginia with his wife and dog. Twitter: @four_godot.

In Part | Kristin Garth

Raphael Brasileiro via Pexels

She plucks out her eye while all are asleep and offers it, open palm, in a dream not even quite sure its components will keep, survive sanctimony, squeeze or the scream. But you collected yourself. Cupped it with care, like a fledgling plucked from the fresh snow. Measure formaldehyde. Preserve one half of a stare. Take it wherever you go. Inject its iris with formalin in a homespun glass orb sewn atop a porcelain face. Paint a scarce baby brow to crown this cyclopian stare you have found a new way to embrace. Debased its clouded mate too degraded for love — not even by you with a paternal heart. Said you'd never leave her. It was true, in part.

Kristin Garth is a womanchildish Pushcart, Rhysling nominated sonneteer and a Best of the Net 2020 finalist, the author of THE MEADOW (a novel from Alien Buddha Press, October 2022) and 26 more books.

I Love Yous in Knuckles | Jessica Blandford

NOHK via Pexels

After Francine J. Harris

You say *I love yous* in knuckles, a language no one knows, unless they've been dragged across concrete. Face down. Salt in my good eye. I know where the sidewalk ends. *Bitch.* Nothing here but the leaving, if only the leaving got good. Gets better with time, and pressure. Boot across the neck kind of pressure, the type you never forget but want to forgive because deep down you know it's you pulling roof from tongue. Leave that devil-man behind.

I'm Bird of Paradise orange and blue; proud—not wilted and weak. I'm good at the leaving, like a freight train down the track—no looking back. Can't slow this bitch down. I see spilt knuckles and split eyes. Split like my thighs. I don't need pity. Open your mouth and I'll split it. Split it until teeth fall out—filled with the taste of chipped concrete. I know what you know—nothing is promised. If I want out, I get it.

Jessica Blandford's most recent chapbook, Letters for Dead Lovers, is available now through Bottlecap Press. Follow her on Instagram: @jessy.blandford or Twitter: @Jess_Blandford

ten things | Matt Rogers

via Pixabay

one. sungold kiwis
two. the vocal harmony in the third pre-chorus of “heartbreaker” by pat benatar
three. recreational adult slow-pitch softball
four. sunken and scrapped ocean liners
five. white-crowned sparrows
six. my letterboxd watchlist
seven. dead grass in the front yard
eight. the forest of kadraal
nine. fluoxetine
ten. ice cream

Matt Rogers is a poet and photographer from Long Beach, California. You can also find him on Instagram @mattrogers___ and medium.com/@mattrogerslb.

Segmented | Tei Hurst

Cats Coming via Pexels

my mother texts me to tell me she's thinking of me, and i wish she wouldn't. don't text, don't think, after fifteen years, it's time to let shit go.
tick tock.
there's a clock on my childhood bedroom wall, and she's polishing the glass, marking sections in ten-minute increments for telling the time- now, it's time for her to turn on her heel and leave.
tick tock.
time zones and grief, 5,000 miles and clock segments that put up barriers between us, "people you may know" become people i certainly... don't.
tick tock.
like hands on a clock, we move on.

Tei Hurst (she/her) is a non-fiction loving lesbian hailing from the south of England and studying English and creative writing at West Chester University. She can be found online @teihurst.

Zucchini | Erin Copland

Toa Heftiba Sinca via Pexels

Astrid

Boy, I can tell straight off that these two are gonna be a train wreck, right when they walk in the restaurant. He's like tripping over things because he can't stop looking at her but she's like looking everywhere but at him. I flag the hostess and point to myself, and she makes sure they're seated in my section.

Awesome. I go over there and I'm just fast enough to hear her tell him that she isn't interested in a second date, and the guy starts, like, wailing. The lady rolls her eyes and looks at me all pissy.

"Can I just have a glass of Merlot, please? And—for God's sake—the chocolate tart, how about that? With the whipped cream. Now, please, thank you." She said dramatically, I thought. I do that, I narrate. I'm a screenwriter, you know. Right now I'm working on a script about a waitress who makes it big when a producer comes into her restaurant and sits down and realizes how smart and pretty she is and takes her to Hollywood and she makes a lot of money and sleeps with the producer but he breaks her heart so she kills herself. It's really good.

I love working in the restaurant, the material that these two are giving me is fantastic. The guy won't stop crying. Like, really loud. People are looking.

Kathleen

Jesus, he's howling. He's actually howling. I've never heard a person make that sound. I once had a dog that got his dick trapped in a fence he was humping and he made that sound.

There's nowhere to hide from the howling, and the waitress isn't even pretending not to listen. I think about telling her to pull up a chair, instead of trying to be sly about slowly cleaning the next table over. What she's doing with that dishcloth is downright pornographic. There's no man or object that needs to be fondled like that.

Paul's ululations finally die down and he wipes his eyes with his fists like a snotty little kid before looking at me. His eyes are red, and I remember that the dog's dick was also red after we got him unstuck, sticking out like an angry little zucchini, and I accidentally spit wine all over Paul's face.

He doesn't even wipe it off. He just lets the wine sit on his cheeks like he's the little mermaid and he doesn't know what napkins are for. I think about reaching across the table and cleaning it off, but no. That would be catastrophic.

I try to force my face into sadness or empathy or something, anything, that's not a grin, but that damn dog keeps jumping into my head, all swollen and shrieking. I clear my throat and try again. I reach halfway across the table but stop before I touch his hand. Any encouragement now and he might show up outside my house playing crappy love songs on a boom box held over his head until I either agreed to go out with him again or shot him. I just want this to be over.

Paul

She stands, ever graceful, and I rise with her. The first time I saw her on Tinder I thought she was the only woman in the world for me. When we started exchanging sweet messages I was sure of it. What a dastardly fool I was.

She holds out her arms and promises that we can be friends. I hold her for the first and last time, my dove. My Kathleen. Her scent is intoxicating, leeching from her hair like the gayest perfume. "I'm going to miss your rosy lips," I whisper, and she chokes, pulling away and hiding her eyes. Even in sorrow she is beautiful and magnanimous.

She nods and smiles and strides away—it seems she is always striding, with great purpose. She walks out of the door, and out of my life. Forever. Forever. My Kathleen no more.

The waitress comes to the table to clear away the dishes. I think of keeping a token of our love, but the wineglass stained by Kathleen's red lips is already swept away and gone. The waitress pauses and, with the light behind her, she smiles down on me like a kind goddess.

"You all right?"

"Not yet. I will be."

"There you go."

"I'll bury myself in my work to heal my pain."

"What do you do?"

"I'm a producer."

She smiles. It is the most beautiful smile.

Erin Copland is a writer, reader, and Army veteran who currently works in communications at the University of Maryland. Her greatest ambition in life is to live in a shack in the woods.

Visiting with Judy | Michael VanCalbergh

Karolina Grabowska via Pexels

She bends down to grab
an escaped napkin
from our lunch. This must
be the same motion
she makes to weed
her garden, the same
to care for the bird bath.

I have never offered to help;
never moved to spend
a morning splitting soil
between my hands
and pulling. I don't think

I will. Though I cannot
imagine another way
to get to know her,
I cannot imagine knowing anyone
like this garden knows her.

Michael VanCalbergh currently lives in Normal, IL. His work has appeared in, or is forthcoming from, Pastel Pastoral, Beaver Magazine, Best New Poets 2021, and many other spaces. Twitter: @MVCpoet

Dirty Windows | Dylan James

Luiz Henrique da Silva Andrade via Pexels

I used to clean windows—and I'm talking 40 floors off of the fucking ground, just teetering on a platform. The height of the job didn't scare me though. The people did. All of them. Panting in their cubicles. Pacing through their apartments. Butchering their children. Bonking like their lives depended on it. I cleaned the best I could, but those windows were dirty.

Dylan James is an emerging writer and Ohio University alumnus based out of Columbus, Ohio. He enjoys reading, hiking, and throwing tennis balls to his dog, Bo.

Remembrance In Three Parts | Sol Kim Cowell

Pok Rie via Pexels

01. fingerpainting
art is born from the troubled mind:
frantic undressing of the psyche
a dip of the fingers into insanity
crooked fingers brushing repression
the chafing of id against superego
your tears smoothen the glide
kissing down to your cold little heart
(you can feel the warmth but it's so far away)
words breach your defences
crumble down, insouciant walls
pleasure to pain to ecstasy to hatred to truth
chasing the comfort of release
it writhes within you like a restrained beast
and when you're tipped over the edge

your scream is its roar of anguish
catharsis

02. peanut gallery
strangers observe behind monocled façades
yes, it's quite interesting, that one
pretty pictures, pretty words
framed and presented for their pleasure
counting down the seconds to your demise
that they may finally rocket you into stardom
or some farce of it at least
because it's only art
after
you're dead.

03. académie
four hundred years since the starving
artist put a hungry bullet in their head
pencil scratch in the margins, inkblot
on the skin of the naked verb's face
words like anaphora and alliteration
and assonance embroidered upon the
fabric of your creation: words put in
your cold stitched mouth, long dead
and buried in your unmarked grave.

leave me to rot, you beg, let me rest.
pennies scattered in wishing wells pay
your way to the afterlife, silvers and
coppers cold upon your tongue. but
still they never let you go, eternal
spectacle for the academics. did
you know they killed themselves?
how sad. but they were well and
truly mad, you know. unsurprising.

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skcpoet @ Twitter, Tumblr, and Ko-fi

One Day | Kristi Rolf

via Pixabay

One day, I will buy a house. I will paint the front door to match the shutters and put rocking chairs on the front porch. I'll hang a wreath on the door and write my name on the mailbox. I will fill each room with old furniture and every surface will collect pretty little objects. The walls will be covered in wallpaper and hung with paintings. I will dress every bed in a soft, colorful quilt and hang my laundry to dry on a clothesline in the sunshine. I will place expensive candles in the bathroom and light them when guests visit. The kitchen will welcome visitors with the smell of bread and cookies and host endless conversation and laughter.

I will plant flowers everywhere: in front of the porch, along the driveway, under the mailbox, and beneath every tree. In the tall grass behind my house I will scatter wildflower seeds and watch a meadow bloom. Somewhere in that meadow I will nurture a garden filled with vegetables that will grow more bountiful every year. I will find a sunny spot and plant giant sunflowers whose shade will offer relief from the summer sun. I will inspect every tree until I find the perfect strong branch from which to hang a swing. When I feel like flying, I'll go to that swing and imagine I can touch the sky.

I will stay in that house forever and watch the seasons pass over it. In the spring I will walk through the puddles in my rain boots and smell the new growth of green. In the summer I will tend my garden and always keep a pitcher of lemonade in

the fridge. In the fall I will rake the leaves under my trees and gaze at the stars next to the warmth of a bonfire. In the winter I will light a candle in every window, and make cocoa for the children who play in the snow. I will learn the faces of that place in each season and live the annual cycle year after year after year.

One day, I will buy a house and I will make it my home.

Kristi Rolf is a sentimental psychology student from Virginia. Find her on Instagram @kristi_kreme16

Drinkcup Sestet | Jeffrey Careyva

Joe L via Pexels

"It's too advanced to be compatible with anything else!"
You didn't make as many friends as you thought,
she said. Number crunching hurts teeth, and here's
a standing desk for a standing mess. So get out
of your comfort zone and into your rut. The falling leaves
me on the cafe floor smiling at myself.

Love Poem | Monica Fuglei

Victoria Pusateri via Pexels

If this state was a woman, you would love her,
Nebraska's flaxen hair tucked neatly behind
her ears, flowing over her shoulders and down
the curve of her tanned back,
you would seek her eyes, fields of green
kissed with goldenrod and set in soft
earthy skin.

You would tell her how Kansas was flat,
Virginia too proper for you, and the Carolinas,
those thin-boned twins, all wrong,

but she, perfect. And you two would play,
you would catch her thick wrists
on a summer afternoon and dance
your way into fall, getting caught in the leaves
fluttering at her skirts,

and in the evening you would kiss her, drag
your lips across the stretching highways
of her belly, pausing to enjoy the night's calm
along all the roads and capillaries
of her body.

Monica Fuglei teaches at Arapahoe Community College in Littleton, Colorado. Her work has been recently published in Mason Street, Progenitor, and Caustic Frolic. Find her on Twitter: @MNFuglei

White Male Author | Jasey Roberts

Andrea Picquadio via Pexels

You are trying be author. It hard sometimes. Especially when you splurge on shiny gold typewriter at thrift store—only nine dollars—then find out typewriter needs ribbon. You order ribbon online for fifteen dollars, wait for it by door. You do calculations in head. Have now purchased twenty-four dollar typewriter. Did not have budget in mind for this. World cruel sometimes.

Ribbon finally come, you sit with gold typewriter and not type. Writing award winning novel not so easy as you thought. Maybe you need to write in cafe. People in cafe stare when you load typewriter paper in typewriter and you get embarrass. So silly to think this is solution. Maybe you start smoking while write? Go to store, pick up American Spirit, go home and smoke but do not get work done, simply start get anxiety. Girlfriend comes home, say, "Why are you smoke cigarettes in room?"

You say you smoke to become great author like Irving Hemingway. She say that not author name. You tell girlfriend she stay out your study from now on. She leaves in big huff. Not good author girlfriend.

Or maybe not true. All good author have strained relationship. This may be blessing and you not realize it yet.

Regardless, you begin write book. It called *Sour Ass,* and it about sad brilliant young writer boy who make lots of sex and also solve mystery, genuis boy who nobody realize is genius until too late. *Sour Ass* will be big deal someday. New York Time seller. Make it into big movie starring big names like Kiefer Sutherland. You tell nobody, but *Sour Ass* actually about you. Girlfriend can tell. Girlfriend say *Sour Ass* perpetuate white male fantasy, whatever that mean. You tell girlfriend she can stick it up asshole. Tell girlfriend to go write own novel. You keep writing, and words flow out like blood when cut.

Friend from college keep get published. You have digital brunch with friend, the only other man from old workshop. You eat omelet and drink coffee, but friend do not eat. He look like he have toothache, because he keep rubbing jaw. You ask, "why tooth hurt, friend?"

Friend say he got in fight.

"Who attack you, friend?"

Friend say, "I live in New York City, where other authors be. You may not realize, but there many other men who author."

"I do not read," you say.

"In New York City, you not have to read to see other male author. Male author everywhere. On subway, in cafe, in park. Last Tuesday I was read *Old Man Sea* when strange boy approach me. I figure he was looking for fight. He wearing glasses and had satchel bag and was reading Jonathan Franzen– important author, very current. He had tattoo on inner arm that said *boobie boy*. I don't know what that signify. Maybe he like boobies?"

"Who doesn't?"

"Rippling breasts."

"Hulking hogans."

"Fleshy mounds."

"He sounds scary."

"Any case, boobie boy says to me, 'you need to vacate cafe. This my territory.' I tell him screw off and bite me in my ass. He flip my table and before know it, we are wrestling. Heads locked, arms flailing. We like bulls. Cafe people screaming, running everywhere. Cafe owner screaming, 'we do not want trouble. Please take fight outside.' Boobie boy and I keep grappling each other until police arrive and aim guns through cafe store window. We go outside and police hit us and put us in back of car. Eventually let me go for good behavior. Cops say that author fighting each other big problem in New York City. Lots of clashing creative personality. Can turn ugly. Boobie boy sent to Rikers Island for defending his territory. It scary out here."

"God damn," you say. You slightly jealous of friend. He may be on daily basis dealing with turmoil and fear that come with being white man who write in New York City, but at least he getting published. Friend always got publish, even way back in workshop. Now he's big shot. You surprised he even have time to digital brunch with you, his former good friend.

Friend rub jaw some more and say, "Anyway, must go now. Got new story idea for man trapped in prison. I mean, how scary is that?"

Friend hang up and you say to self, "Damn, that's good!"

You go to write in a bar on yellow notepad because you hear handwriting can be helpful to people trying to author. College people start coming in and you feel nervous because you old man sitting with weird little notepad. Not get much work done. Come home and girlfriend is typing furiously on phone. You ask what she doing. She say nothing. You peek over and girlfriend writing own novel! On cell phone! What a miserable world this is. She look up at you with these eyes like kidney beans.

She asks why it's bad thing for her to be write novel. You say, "Why? Why!" You say, maybe because this your thing and it kind of feel like she's jealous. Like she want to encroach or emproach somehow. Like this is spite. Girlfriend get really angry. She get up in your face and spit on you while she talk. She say that you are piece of shit and she don't know why she started date you in the first place. Say you're not reliable. Say you are a misogynistic pig.

You say, "Uhh... I am a human and definitely not a pig," and then walk out the apartment. The air cold and frigid out here. No one around except you, a lone vanilla bean in the night. Girlfriend was your full support network. Emotionally and maybe a little bit financially. Now you're vagrant white male author—like Jack Kayak. You pull out American Spirit and try to calm nerves but just start choke. Then you set off to the only place you know to go—New York City.

Months go by like children in the rain. Women make fun of you for eating Taco Bell in New York City—but it only ethnic food that your body able to handle. You go on dates with beautiful New York women, only for them say you have tiny overactive colon and that you also have small penis. It brutal. You barely scraping by with monthly five thousand dollars you Dad give you. You once have to sleep on bed with suboptimal thread count, and it cold, and you not understand where life went so wrong.

Jasey Roberts is a writer from Southwest Virginia. His previous work has appeared in Bourgeon Online.

I am the one who Burned the Crops | Ryann Fletcher

Carolina Basi via Pexels

I am stuck between the here and there, the nether that lies in the expanses of space between where I know my own mind and where I don't.

Stars blink in and out of existence while we are busy with the mundane.

Imagine what we might learn if we were always looking up, staring in wonder at the night sky and dreaming of the beyond?

There are matters in life which cannot be argued:

First, the pressing need to fixate on that which does not serve us.

Second, that we always want what we cannot and should not have.

Third, if there is a god, they have much to answer for.

The endless, inescapable gravity of blind faith, because it is easier to hide like a child than to face the monsters that hide in the darkness.

Their teeth glitter like cursed stars.

You either die fighting them, or live long enough to become one.

Sometimes, perhaps, it can be both, depending on the triangulation of the observing perspectives.

The burden of monstrosity lays heavy on my shoulders, a yoke thrust upon me without my consent and what more can I do to run from it? After all, every unexpected reflection holds a startling revelation:

I was never who they thought I was.

Never, not once. Not even for a moment, not when I was born and certainly not now. I hide, concealing my truth with a broad, gleaming smile. If you look closely, you'll see that I have more teeth than is necessary. A curiosity of birth, most people think. They never wonder if it's me under their beds.

They never stop to ask who freed the livestock.

Who torched the grain.

Who salted the earth and dragged famine behind us, no matter where we went.

They handed me their babies with a relieved sigh, never considering for a moment that I was the one who left the gates open. Who allowed the monsters to breach our walls and destroy our future.

After all, monsters have to eat too.

They don't have the luxury of time, despite being ageless and enduring. They don't have the privilege of gentle hunger, the kind that invites a late night snack. Theirs is a grasping, sucking need, and sometimes I've begun to feel it, too.

A hawk is a monster to a mouse. A human is a monster to a fat lamb. I am a monster to everyone around me, they just don't know it yet.

My body lies in wait, biding its time for betrayal.

One morning I will wake up and find even more glittering teeth in my mouth. One afternoon I'll realize that my fingers are growing into talons, and my mind has been sharpened as if by a whetstone. One evening I will recoil from my reflection in the still waters, seeing that horns have sprouted from my skull, bursting forth through skin thin as paper.

There is mundanity in monstrosity, too.

The creeping march towards your own doom, watching yourself become what you swore you never would.

I thought I would die a heroine. Instead, I will die both forgotten and reviled.

Ryann Fletcher writes queer science fiction and fantasy.

Twitter: @IMRyannFletcher

FB, IG, TT, Tumblr: RyannFletcherWrites

The Ghosts of Summer | A. Benét

via Pixabay

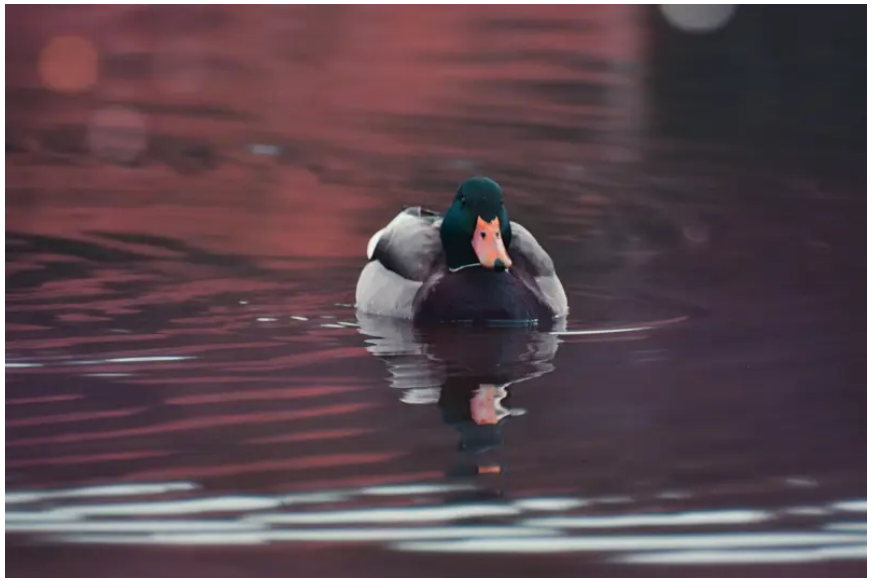
Summertime is upon us,
and the adventures that follow
raise the dead we buried last autumn.

The ghost of leaves once fallen, breathed
new life in the breeze that caress our skin—
That held our sin in the winter.

Waiting for spring to bless us
with abundance, before summer
takes the shape of all we forget to remember.

A. Benét is an emerging poet from California. Her work is forthcoming in The Acorn Review and published in The Origami Review. You can, sometimes, find her on Twitter @benetthewriter.

The Ornithologist at Rest | Scott Gannis



Dids via Pexels

No, listen, we all saw this comin'. The guy was always a quack, even before he started wearing a bill 'roond his mouth and blowing into a duck call. Painted his garage green and brown. Waddled after lines of hatchlings. Picked fights with grass. Fella died believing, between some combo of ice dildos, Mecury in Retrojizz, and balsa wood wings, that he would overcome mortality. It's Satanism. Paganism. Ain't Lutheran, whatever the heck it was.

R. Duckminster Fuller, sir. M.D., PhD.

He wanted to jump off the IDS Center.

Yah. Yah.

Well, I spose we had'r differences. Everyone says some hotshot on-caller-gist is movin' next door, y'know, Mayo Clinic and all, but it turns out he tinks the cure ta cancer is this two-bit mallard baloney.

Made a lot of noise, okay? You've got it in them manilla antelopes, I reckon, we did contact you guys a bunch.

Garage, mostly. Loudest in Carver County, 'cludin' Paisley Park.

Heck, various honks. Squeals. A foghorn. A klaxon. Pardon the language, sir, but there was some sorta animatronic contraption that'd blast red light and call Mother Goose a bitch.

Well, I do prefer her to the Brothers Grimm, maself. Kids do, too.

Tough to say, I mean, I'd work a double and know Martha'd prolly get woken up by the twins, y'know, so we had a tight winduh for some shut eye. Then some Chuck E. Cheese meets Howard the Duck weirdo pops up 'roond midnight every darn night and, respectfully, ya stopped sending a car and talkin' to the guy, so a fella gets fruster-ated.

No, no. Nothin' more'n throwing saltines at his siding and postin' roast duck recipes on the screen door.

Don't see how m'hobbies are relevant, frankly.

Yah, in fact I do. Deer mostly. Hunted pheasant quite a bit as well.

Waterfowl hunting in Minnesota's generally a late September to early December type of ordeal, sir. Depends, though, on the DNR and a buncha crap.

October 17th. Which, y'know, yah, is in waterfowl season.

Obtuse? Maybe yer meanin' mongoose.

Sheriff, just what exactly are ya trying to get at here? I already told ya that Doc Larson was bonkers. A real loon. Died of a broken neck, da paramedics said when they showed up. Dry run for the IDS center. Tarred and duck-feathered himself. Was wearin' University of Oregon sweatpants with his wings and he left his estate to Aflac, for Chrissakes.

Now wait just a fuckin' minute, mister. Only rights you'll find me readin' is in the Bible, and my owning a shotgun ain't got no bearin' on this psychotic, bird-jerker.

I told ya, we wudn't friends. The noise was obnoxious, but c'mon, you think I'm capable of that?

Oofdah. Buckshot to the chest and spinal column my keester. He jumped off his roof. He was quacking like a whole raft of 'em, and besides, he had no right to wake up the damn block.

Choke on a fuckin' worm, buddy, I want my Goddamn lawyer.

Scott Gannis is a retired forklift operator from Minneapolis, MN. He is the author of Very Fine People (Atlatl, 2020). You can parse his neuroses on Twitter @scootergannis.

let me tell you what to do with your creative energy | Salem Paige

Johannes Plenio via Pexels

roll it up into a ball and cover it in aluminum foil and stick it to the end of a metal rod to catch a bolt of lightning. put it down the front of your shirt and press it flat against your skin like a shield. toss it in your mouth, maneuver it between your teeth with your tongue, across your gums and into the back of your throat. let it touch your uvula before you spit it back onto the table. knead it with both hands and your elbows, leave little marks in it with your fingernails. spin it into yarn, knit yourself a sweater and then pull it apart stitch by stitch. wrap it around your neck as tight as possible until you see spots, then unravel it and stick it under your pillow as you sleep. find it in your dreams, hurl it against a wall until it breaks into pieces. put the pieces in a blender, run it without the lid, let it coat your kitchen walls. sit on the cold floor tiles and look at the mess you've made.

Salem Paige (they/them) is a twenty-two-year-old poet whose works revolve around the exploration of identity through discomfort. You can find Paige @corpseofapoet on instagram and twitter.

Just A Piece | Wolf Stahl

eberhard grossgasteiger via Pexels

No poem as useful as a brick
    but,
Layered together,
End to end,
    line by line,
A layer, a row,
    a wall,
We might just make something
    worth dwelling in.

Wolf Stahl was born on a farm and never recovered.

www.AWolfOnTheFold.com

On Telehealth, Therapists, & God | Nicole Jean Turner

Kamil Zubrzycki via Pexels

leaning into the uncertainty
    at some point becomes carelessly
        running towards harm in the sideways guise
of self help and growth. Admirable
is the weightless who carries nothing from the before
into the ever present now, *no*

there is no wisdom in the false prophet,
but enough mental wellness holistic nonsense
can convince even the most devoted
they should repent and spend and invest
in yourself or, what are you even worth?

I did not know shame before the unpinnable point of charge
I have spent thousands in therapy to track down. *What I'm saying is*
the timeline for what I'm told I lost and where I am
does not add up. I suspect much

like a True Crime podcast

the offending memory thief snuck in
and clipped my truths into scrapbook pieces,
tossed the remains after ransom-note-pasting letters
together to leave behind a threat in place of the truth

so I may never know what I really went through.
I have only the grief stained retellings
and even Goodwill throws out anything with stains.

the ghost of it haunts my neck and spine
Through back to back booked therapies
the DPT measures my *lean* and asks if I was injured
and I wish it were so simple that I could point
to the moment of impact which changed
the trajectory of my mindset and poise

but all of it is decoupage and fodder and Jesus' business model,
I've heard there is Salvation after three easy payments;
I was drunk when a street Scientologist offered
an answer for any questions, all free after one video session, so I solicited

gospel. Is it endless, or a bad string of con artists
framing my nerves as fatal
capitalizing on gossip and catastrophizing
a ceaseless spiral if I don't sip their snake oil?

I was fine before they told me I wasn't.

Nic writes in cursive to hide the butchered spelling that would otherwise raise suspicion about their master's degree in writing. Get to know their work on Poetry-Journal.com @njtpoet

Time Piece | Molly Andrea-Ryan

Amar Saleem via Pexels

For starters, the clock needed to be cleaned. It had to be done at the same time every day, and then the carpet needed to be vacuumed to suck up the footprints that would otherwise reveal that someone had entered the room.

He approached the clock on tiptoe, as if not to wake it, a spray bottle of glass cleaner in one hand and a microfiber cloth in the other. Once his chore was complete, he would need to add the cloth to a pile that he would later take down to the basement to wash. He misted the face of the clock with cleaner and wiped it in smooth, concentric circles, working his way in before turning the cloth over and working his way out.

He had to complete the chore between 3 on the nose and 3:15, or else the clock would chime. It was loud. The clock maker told him long ago that he could turn it down, but the clock had a voice, and one wasn't meant to dim that. He compensated for the noise of the clock by using a non-electric vacuum—a carpet sweeper is what they called it, back in his movie theater days.

Those carpet sweepers, at the movie theater, were clogged with kernels and slick with butter, leaving impenetrable slug trails in their wake. His carpet sweeper was clean. He made sure by washing it in the bathtub and comparing it to the whistle that dangled from the towel rack.

He was just finishing the vacuuming when, somehow, he kicked the foot of a polished maple side table. He froze, his entire body extended into one long exclamation point, the head of the carpet sweeper punctuating his panic. The porcelain figure of a ballerina pirouetted toward the edge of the tabletop. She spun and spun, her pointed knee the sail of a nearly-turn-turtle boat. Minutes passed. She stopped, one-third of her porcelain base sticking perilously out into the bottomless air. The clock chimed.

Three long, one short. Three long, one short. Three long, one short.

With each long chime, he righted himself a little more, using the short ones to pull the carpet sweeper a few inches closer to his body. When the clock stopped, he turned around and left the room, first to drop the microfiber cloth in its pile, then to bathe the carpet sweeper. The incident with the ballerina would not be forgotten. He would make sure. He would add it to the newsletter. There was always something to report. For starters, the clock needed to be cleaned.

Molly Andrea-Ryan is a poet and prose writer living in Pittsburgh, PA. Her work can be found in Idle Ink, trampset, Barren Magazine, and elsewhere. You can also find her on Twitter @mollyandrearyan.

T50 | Lev Verlaine

Brett Sayles via Pexels

T50.
Heavy chested again
I need a lie down.
The sun rings come down over my eyes in
white light and I swing them from my hips like hoola hoops.
I dreamt I was scraping my teeth together until I could spit out the shards.
I turned the waves and looked out on
the all-encompassing, oh-so-distant earth.

The August love is unattainable.
Sun´s burnt too gold and now my world´s sat in the shadow of a fire.

Everyone goes about their own routine with closed eyes and equal presence
and I can't stop watching. I dread when I start to notice someone.
Sucker for love and circus.

Let me turn you to honey-
Consuming your affections in degustation. Aching to eat him to the marrow.

Now my hand flicks the blade that
carved the walls of childhood bed scenes.

I'm sitting on summer´s edging with
pant legs pulled from my feet,
         wading,
                  with *heaven will wait*.
Lay flat afloat the water.
Headstrong-
       some love-sick kid.

Innately human
to not be a holy one.
You cut a clementine with my pocket knife.
And I´m cutting knuckles for bodily metamorphosis.

Lev Verlaine is a trans poet based in Washington state. His works have appeared in Querencia Press and Verge Journa. He can be found on instagram @/ casua1haunt and tumblr @/ mutualantagonism

Zombie | Charles K. Carter

Micael Widell via Pexels

Every morning,
I used to send positive text messages
to my closest friends,
hoping to bring a little sugar
to these bitter days.

Lately,
I have stopped texting people.
I have stopped calling.
I stopped singing.
I stopped laughing.
I stopped masturbating.
I stopped picking at old scabs.

I now lay in a grave
of matching pillowcases
stuffed with mismatched pillows
waiting for someone who loved me
to show me love in the present tense,
waiting for someone to resurrect this dead thing.

Charles K. Carter (he/him) is a queer poet from Iowa. He is the author of Read My Lips (David Robert Books) and several chapbooks. He can be found on Twitter and Instagram @CKCpoetry.

Around the Mulberry Bush | Natalie Duphiney

via Pixabay

We tried mulberries together for the first time
that day that the air was tinged by the scent of summer's edge—
floral musk and the smell of budding violets, the color of dusk

They dangled from the tree that hung across the canopied road
Collections of the fallen mulberries clung to the pavement

I hand-picked two for us,
a dripping sweet one for me
and a purpley tart one for you,

You said this was your first time
You'd never tasted a mulberry,
a boysenberry,
a dewberry

I said I'd clear fields for you
to taste the world

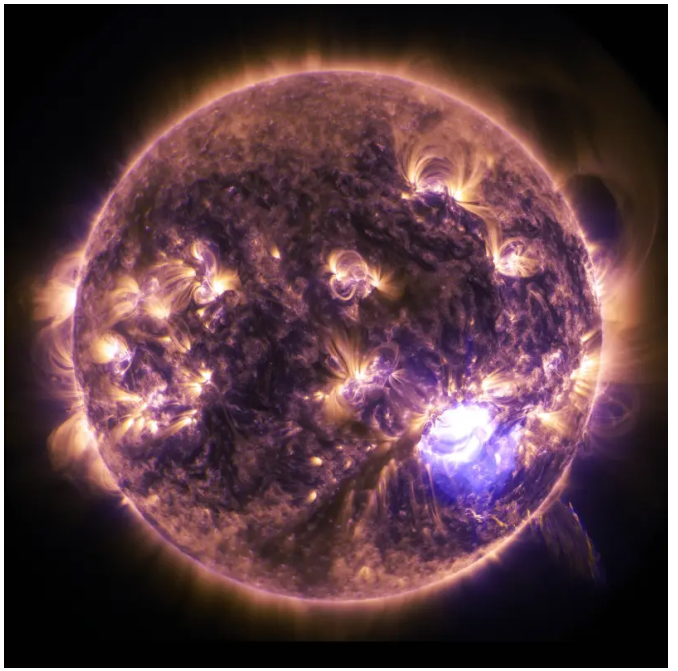
You said we'd yield a garden together

I sprouted berry seeds in glass jars
on my apartment windowsill
I burrowed sprouts in fertile soil

She *made* you a grocery-store bakery
mulberry pie
and you
ate it
from
her palm

Natalie Duphiney is a graduate student of English, studying at the University of West Florida. She loves rabbits, writing, and choral singing.

Mellilla | Haley Dittbrenner



via Pixabay

I.

There had been another solar flare. Every news broadcaster covered the event, their warnings popping up in the corners of everyone's antenna TVs. Cracks snaked through their glass screens, distorting the images that flashed from them, The message echoed throughout the sandstone civilization: avoid the Surface, stay indoors, keep magic usage to an all-time minimum.

And so, Mellilla found herself working from the living room of her cramped apartment, a fax from her workplace streaming paper vomit from the printer. Every apartment was designed near identically: each carved directly into the wall of sandstone, clotheslines hanging from balconies, teal paint chipping, windowsills lush with cacti and leaves and offerings.

Sunlight streamed down into the Sandstone Walls, casting shadows across tarpaulin awnings and unused ladders. Even in the depths of the Sandstone Walls, much further down than Mellilla's apartment, the air was still hot and thick with humidity.

Magical anomalies Mellilla still needed to identify were scattered about her coffee table and windowsill alongside sticky note sigils and wooden carvings of the Water Goddesses and potted cacti surrounded by stones. With the sun erratic above the Surface, she couldn't test each object for magical potency as she normally would (as everyone found their magic unpredictable with the changing sun), and, with the rest of her paper sacrificed to the printer, was forced to simply copy down each anomaly's properties on the creased surface of a manila folder.

Images flashed across the screen like a laser, which sent Mellilla and Amara's three cats pouncing. Pip's three tails twitched. Cats Cricket and Lucky followed suit, the five tails between them curling, their nine combined eyes wide. Pip (Mellilla's wife's cat, who was arguably more Mellilla's than Amara's) then moved to stand guard on the eastern balcony, which was carved and mounted into the side of the sandstone column.

Mellilla chewed on cheap five-copper noodles as she scribbled down the properties of every anomalous object she catalogued. (A grimoire penned by a woman who believed herself partially amphibian; a sack of glitter that, when opened, automatically placed itself in the deepest cracks and corners of one's living space; eyeglasses that could supposedly protect the wearer from the sun's tempestuous moods).

The updates from the reporters on screen droned in the background, the high brightness casting a blue-green glow over the entirety of the apartment. Mellilla turned the volume higher to drown out Amara's gossiping; she had been talking to her sister all morning, and, thanks to the paper-thin walls, Mellilla could hear everything.

Back on the screen, a woman with sleek brown hair and teeth as unnaturally white as the sun-stained Surface explained that the solar flare should one day die down enough for life to resume a hint of normalcy.

II.

Mellilla put down her folder in favor of drinking directly from her little clay bowl, beef broth from a dented can dripping down the side of her chin and onto the taupe linen of her sweater sleeve. The unnatural woman on screen had been replaced by one of her equally synthetic colleagues, who was much too pleased by the act of thrusting a microphone into the face of another person. The microphone's sorry victim was cloaked in thick wool, her only distinguishing features being a crooked nose and sallow skin and sullen eyes illuminated by unmistakable determination. When she took down her hood, a crown of curly white hair cascaded down her back, and at that moment she looked typical, with dirty skin and unwashed hair. She would blend in perfectly in the marketplace, just another middle aged woman searching for the last ripe fruits. Mellilla took to her own curls, twirling them between her index and middle fingers.

The woman on screen was introduced as a Speedrunner. She had run to a place she called the Edge of the Universe, at the top of the Surface, under a raging sun.

The Speedrunner began her speech with religion, as people tend to do. Surely if someone went to the state schools then they would know of the Water Pantheon and the goddesses who composed it, and surely they would've memorized each prayer and prophecy by heart. As most people of the Sandstone Walls had attended such schools, most knew of the Finding of the Final Goddess, which marked the end of times and an immediate respite from their drought-ridden lives.

And the Speedrunner spoke of an anomaly of the sort that Mellilla would investigate. The latter cocked her head to the side, turning on the closed captioning and replaying what she had heard. The Speedrunner spoke of the End of the Universe, and at the End was a giant plastic crow. She spoke of its height ("fifty meters, give or take"), the protruding seam where the plastic was cauterized into a whole, a hole in the bottom of its rounded talons for the water to drain out. And It, the Crow, spoke of a life where people could live on the Surface and prosper under the sunlight like greenhouse flowers, and where magic was a thing independent of the sun's tides. And the Crow spoke through her, as she was chosen by the Pantheon, and all one needed to achieve such a life was to offer the Crow a satchel of golds. She spoke of Surface settlements morphing into cities, life and magic and prosperity swirling about and fattening the atmosphere as Crow is hailed and danced about like a maypole—

And Mellilla turned off the TV. Surely the Druidess Council would remove the recording from air, issuing an apology to the Water Pantheon and to the innocent people who had to behold such blasphemy. The sandstone wheel would continue to turn as it always did. Mellilla listened for silence, then called Amara downstairs from the guest bedroom, which they had renovated into a little potter's studio. The two found no greater joy than ripping into prophets of this sort.

III.

A day had passed, and the Speedrunner looked different. Surely, she still bore the same once-broken nose and lymphatic skin and drooping eyes, but her hair had been straightened, each pale curl flattened under a heat equally as oppressive as the sun's. She appeared business-professional, whereas before, her wild curls made her ordinary, just another woman from the Sandstone Walls. Her woolen cloak had been replaced by a powder blue suit, adorned with little silver cufflinks in the shape of crows. The apartment was silent as each screenward sentence hung in the air, a prayer in its own right dedicated entirely to Crow.

Mellilla turned to Amara with a scoff, because really this was all (to be rather blunt, as the former put it) just bullshit, some sort of elaborate joke that neither woman could comprehend. Plastic was rare enough as is, and to dangle a better life in front of them was as equally insulting as waving a fish carcass above the head of a half-starved tomcat. And Amara scoffed back, and without regard to bluntness agreed that it was bullshit and nothing more than an elaborate game to test people's faith.

And then the broadcaster on screen referred to the Speedrunner as a Prophet, one crowned with a capital P, who had taken Crow and placed It amongst the other Water Goddesses as reigning. Because, regardless of sheer absurdity, the theology lined up; as the scriptures said, Crow was unlike the other goddesses who bore blue skin and life and a dozen arms sprouted from their torso. Judgement was in Its eyes, charisma on the Prophet's tongue. It had been a day, and this marked the first time she was referred to as Prophet.

Mellilla felt as the hinge of her jaw tightened, and she fumbled to turn something else on. Amara stood up after her, their three cats sulking away from the tension that hung thick in the air. Mellilla flipped through each channel, the screen going dim before returning to a speech of the Prophet's rhetoric, a theocratic lesson, a call to the Surface. All the while Mellilla's nerves wound up like a child's toy. Without a word, she stole some paper away from the eternal fax and began scribbling something pointed on the backside. She only stopped writing to notice Amara, who had started into the kitchen.

Mellilla watched Amara return only moments afterwards with a mug of tea and a small clay statue of the Water Pantheon. She looked down at Mellilla's work—a letter of censorship to the Druidess Council—and corrected a spelling mistake her wife made in the ninth paragraph. She kissed Mellilla on the forehead, setting aside the tea and placing the statue between them; together the two women prayed.

IV.

The Druidess Council was instantly recognizable by the opulence that hung about them, in direct spite of the cheap TV screens they appeared on. They oversaw how religion was practiced in the Sandstone Walls, and it was by their discretion that religious matters appeared on air. Their robes were crimson and glittered with splendor, a living juxtaposition with the teals and indigos and beige that defined life in the Sandstone Walls. On this day—three days after the Prophet's first appearance —the head of the Druidess Council wore blue, a bird shaped lapel pushed into the collar of her suit. Her message was simple: although some people are upset, even more are left in awe over the pomp and magnificence of the Prophet's rhetoric. The way she rolled her 'R's and matched scripture to life was undeniable, and it all fit neatly into whatever theology could be considered fixed.

The Prophet had called on a witness testimonial to prove the greatness of Crow. Said witness was a little girl, whose mother had taken her to Crow via a wrap of swaddling clothes on her back, her older sister trailing behind them. Crow told them of the paradise that could have awaited them, if only they'd brought a single handful of gold more. The little girl's mother never returned to the Walls.

Mellilla hadn't seen that broadcast (she had spent the afternoon annotating pages from the amphibian grimoire and taking in laundry that had spent the evening drying under the stifling heat) and yet she was not free of it. Notifications littered the screen of her tablet. Recommendations for blue suits she could never afford appeared wedged between articles.

But Amara had seen the broadcast, and she wondered aloud how the children could return without their mother. She came to the conclusion that her initial reaction was correct, and she used the word "bullshit" again, and she decided that something was untrue.

Deeper down in the Walls, within the apartments and slums that composed it, a mass migration had begun. Suitcases had been packed and kept beside doors for decades, and inhabitants of the Sandstone Walls had just found a reason to put them to use. They had taken in the Prophet's newest message, a quick catchphrase that couldn't be anything but remembered:

"All is futile."

V.

With the blessing of the Druidess Council buzzing in their minds and blue cloaks on their backs, people left for the Surface in mass droves. Half of the apartment complex was empty. It had only been two days. Mellilla watched as mothers carried their daughters up the metallic ladders to the Surface, Mary Janes clashing against steel, tiny fists pounding against their mother's breasts. Rogue, unbelieving news broadcasters sent out alerts to every citizen ("Have you forgotten the solar flare? Your hair will spark fire no more than a few minutes on the Surface!"), but nearly everyone who left kept their tablets at home. Those who took them found no worth in the warnings.

Amara had locked herself in her potter's studio, watching the Prophet speak on live broadcast. The Prophet's voice was tinny from the tablet speakers in desperate need of repair. The room itself was nearly bare, save for a stone potter's wheel and a dozen half finished cups. The Prophet's voice echoed off terracotta caked walls. Amara's sister had left for Crow that morning. Mellilla kept the front door locked.

Mellilla first noticed the scrap of paper fastened to her door when she collected the cats from the balcony before she clamped the lock bolts shut. It was torn from a yellow pad of paper, a coffee cup stain branding the righthand corner, scribbles drawn in rapid bursts of grainy brown ink. Given the shortage, there was no doubt that the ink was homemade. Amara stood behind Mellilla's shoulder, deciphering the nearly illegible writing.

Mellilla was still reading by the time Amara finished. Amara lunged for the note, tearing it from her wife's hands and ripping it into two. Mellilla could see Amara swiping tears from her lower lashes once the paper was on the ground. Mellilla held her wife close as she put the halves together and read.

The first half of the note concerned Mellilla's letter to the Druidess Council and was written in language so dripping and vile that anyone who dared repeat it, let alone speak it, would forever be branded as slovenly, distinctly lower. Every stroke of ink bore thorns. At the bottom of the page, written in letters much bigger and bolder than the ones that preceded it, was a venomous phrase, the Prophet's standard call, the written equivalent of lichen and foxglove. Seek Crow.

VI.

A week passed; the sun still shone. Mellilla awoke, and the other side of the bed was cold. Cricket and Pip padded beside her as she stumbled into the living room, and sitting on the table was Lucky, grooming an ear with a pure white paw. Lucky sat on a new note, comprised of a torn manilla folder. Mellilla ripped the note from underneath the cat, and through tears deciphered the Amara's curled handwriting. Crow, this thing that hadn't concerned either of them, that could barely be considered an anomaly if not a hoax from someone else, had sent Amara away. She had gone to find her sister. Perhaps they would live a nice life together.

Mellilla crumpled up the torn folder, throwing it at the westward window where people could be seen migrating upwards. That morning she remained by the ratty couch in her living room, tears flowing, people purging from their apartments. When evening came, she cast a spell with no regard to the sun, one that would keep the cat's bowls filled automatically on the hour. She took up the amphibian grimoire and threw on her sable cloak, drawing the hood over puffy eyes and frizzy curls. When she shut the door behind her she witnessed dozens doing the same.

Mellilla cast a spell upon herself that made her hands tenacious in quality, as if she had dipped them in glue. She took to the ladder, hands burning under the stinging heat, and when she had reached the edge of the ladder began to climb up the sandstone cliffs themselves. Had she looked down towards the bottommost pit of the Walls, she would've beheld the skeletons of those who hadn't been able to keep grip. From the edge of the Surface, when Mellilla looked downwards, the exodus looked to be no more than ants marching. The skeletons were too small to be seen.

VII.

The crust of the Surface crumbled under the slightest touch, the clumps too thick to be referred to as sand but much too friable to be considered anything else. The sky was a brilliant vermilion shade that could be seen in full splendor, even way down in the deepest cracks of the wall. The sun was a bright fuchsia that may have been beautiful if not for the fact that it took up two thirds of the devastated sky. A disorganized cluster of people trekked forward, clad in blue and spilling gold from swollen pockets, eyes glazed over and sweat beading down the sharp of their chin.

Before divinity, the Prophet was a Speedrunner, who had made it to the Edge of the Universe for simple sport. So Mellilla ran. And from behind her the other women cracked smiles, the heat apparent across their chapped faces, their endmost moments defined by a happiness that Mellilla, at last, had seen the light.

Not long afterwards, Mellilla was alone, with nothing but the blazing sun and rock for company. Sweat fell from the tip of her nose and chin, nausea swelling tempestuously in the pit of her chest. In the near distance were tents, those grand settlements that would sprout into cities. Mellilla dared to smile as her mind wandered towards what could be inside. The Prophet, no longer static on a TV screen but someone comprised of blood and hope and a mop of frizzy hair. Hundreds of people content and dancing. Amara and her sister, alive.

Mellilla ran up to the nearest tent and tore open the burnt flap. Within them were skeletons, blue cloaks incendiary, gold melting onto the already deliquescing earth. The bones were bleached.

And Mellilla turned away from this skeleton town, folding in on herself and vomiting. The world seemed to constrict her, something crossed between disappointment and terror rising up and taking over her chest. If only there had been a sign, a billion meters to the Edge of the Universe. If only there had been a sign pointing to Crow's existence, or a map the Prophet could have provided, or a single feather made from burnt plastic.

And yet there was nothing, because the Edge of the Universe simply hadn't been.

And when the world turned black, fuchsia and red and ochre melting into obscurity, Mellilla pretended that it was all the giant wing of a magnificent plastic crow.

ALL IS FUTILE

SEEK CROW

My name is Haley Dittbrenner! I am an undergraduate writer based at Susquehanna University. I can be found on Instagram at @hdwritess.

breath/thot | meatball meatballerino

via Pixabay

1.

the roadmap of thoughts branch out in crooked forks. dirt paths are compacted from frequent use over centuries. all streams lead to a no-speed-limit roundabout from hell spinning madly, laughing and flinging cars in all directions.

plotting out which routes get us to the fastest conclusion. which stream of thought has the most left turns. which route has the bumper-to-bumper rush hour traffic line of ideas accessible to all, slowly, thoroughly. there, on the side, the reason for our hold up. there is a car engulfed in flames on the shoulder of the highway. you check and yes, the driver door is flung open.

neat, organized breath means neat, organized thought. a choke of traffic resolves itself and cars flow out freely again. inhale-one-two-three-four: time to be brave. out-two-three-four: time to be logical. remember all the things you learned in driver's ed and don't hit any pedestrians.

2.

how a deep sigh can be a wish tucked very almost silenty under the breath, as not to acknowledge that the fear isn't there at all – except the shaking hands begin their same rituals and expose it all – ("maybe if i tap my fingers together this way four thousand consecutive times i can protect my loved ones") – my prayer is to continue the breath, the thoughts, the living. my breath gives those words their wings from my brain to my mouth and out and up to heaven to present my silly little requests for consideration. maybe the sheer quantity of times i pray will earn me an extra lottery draw.

i pray in quiet because i will not admit this weakness to myself, i will continue to ignore what i need in favour of what i think others think i should be needing, jesus h. CHRIST i exclaim multiple times a day. i know there is someone kind waiting for me on the other side of this life but even still i must perform for them, never quite sure if the silent audience is pleased or disappointed.

some days i am sure i am waking up on my deathbed, doomed to succumb to the parasite of anxiety. perhaps everything bad in life is my fault for not being better. looking down i see i am already getting dressed and cooking and going out and socializing and contributing to society. i am not enjoying these moments, but i am proud of my body for taking care of itself when i cannot do it; i am proud of myself like i am teaching little me how to ride a bike and it finally clicks, and i'm watching myself soaring down the street. (but what if little me loses control and crashes and rolls down the hill and flies into traffic and gets crushed by a ten car pile-up that explodes and catches on fire and chemicals burn into the air and infects everyone in a ten mile radius with lung cancer for generations to come? wouldn't that hurt so bad?)

oh god, oh fuck, i can't breathe, everything is going to crash around me, brace for cover, i'm sorry for my sins, please spare my loved ones from this eternal suffering i've earned,

3.

"more?" she asks, craning her head out the car window. i am laying flat on the driveway by her front wheels.

"keep going," i call back.

cautiously, she eases her foot off the brake and the car rolls forward down the driveway, the front wheel eating up the side of my sweater and mounting the side of my ribcage. the weight of the car crushes each bone down, flat and neatly compact, with the sound of snapping popsicle sticks. she stuck her head out the window again, nervous. "more?"

i wheeze with my untouched lung, "more!"

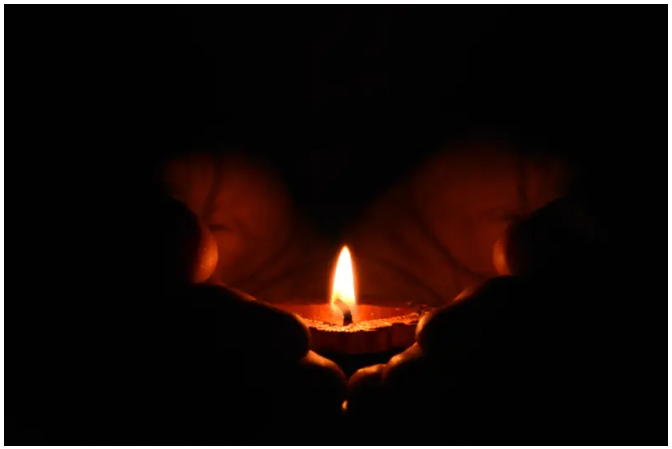
over my sternum and the other half of my ribcage, the car tire ironed me out flat. no room for breath, no room for thoughts. the anxiety was now physically and permanently removed from my body by virtue of having nowhere to put it. with my last original breath i celebrate – "no breath, no thoughts!"

i win! i fucking win! now i'm forced to deep belly breathing exclusively, the antidote to all anxiety. old dirty air squeezed out of my belly button with a tea kettle whistle, only drawing in fresh clean air and fresh clean thoughts by inflating the balloon of my stomach, pinned down by the present.

@meatballerino on insta

i am the fucking meatball

prometheus | Isobel Li



Dhivakaran S via Pexels

you fill my stomach with the tickle
of delightful heat

flaming ardor
you guide me down illegal paths and

half-hidden alleyways
i follow recklessly like a moth

drawn to the light too close
and i am singed

too far
and i have lost all direction

you are prometheus,
the martyr, the sage

in the darkness of uncertainty
mother drew the curtains shut

where we are all the same
father locked the doors

one spark and the whole house
burns down

they say you're a fire hazard
i say you're the light

at the end of the tunnel,
the door to truth,

but the authorities prevail
so mother snuffs you out,

father tightens the locks,
and we are plunged into familiar darkness once more

Seventeen and scared of highly concentrated sulfuric acid. Occasionally creative.

Selected Poems | Giovanna Saturni

Riccardo via Pexels

Naked
I open myself like a trench coat, like a hustler in an alley,
I ask, insistent "What do you want? What do you want from here?" Tell me.
Let me know which rib you fancy, and I will lay it at your feet.
Tell me that you like the colour of my right eye and I will pluck it right out and lay it in the palm of your hand.

My eyes mirror yours in your disbelief that I would strip myself so bare, right at the entrance of your home, right here, in the middle of it all.

I've been open like this for a while now, caught in the staring game between us; my insides cool, my skin raises. You touch it. You touched me. Gripped my arm by its' skin, tight, so I can see the marks when you leave. But you keep it there.

You keep your palm and your fingers and your skin on mine and beg me with your lips and your eyes to put myself back together, and I do.
"You don't want any?", I gasp out, like a street-vendor desperate for a dollar.

You exhale and close your eyes, gripping the other arm, keeping me in place.

When you open them, I understand everything you don't say, and my chest blooms forward from the fullness of your gaze.

Here's what I remember
I am 5 and *I am balancing a small foot on the palm of my father. He holds me up in the air, like a perfect porcelain ballerina.*
I am 10, *and scared, watching the new Harry Potter movie in the cinema, my dad next to me.*
I am 13 *and having a heated discussion about black holes over the kitchen table.*
I am 15 *and my dad is reading a newspaper at the beach. I am sitting on a towel next him, reading a book.*
The breeze is warm, and we're both tanner than usual. We're of the same skin, my mother always says.
I am 18 *and my dad is talking to me about driving lessons.*
I am 18 *and my dad hugs me on my birthday.*
I am 18 *and my dad is reading my college applications.*
I am 18.
I am 18 *and attending a funeral.*
I am 19 *and I am attending the same funeral.*
I am 20. I am 21. I am 22.
I am 22 *and I am attending a funeral everyday.*
I am 22 and I am 5 and I am 10 and 13 and 18 *everyday*.
Here's what I remember: *all of it and not enough.*

I really wish I didn't have to.

Paradox
All my memories are dead cold,
icicles on a hunched spine.
The fall after the makeshift wings have melted.
The feeling of sea, hungrily engulfing a body spent in its own passion.
Vision overwhelmed by blue, blurring.
Heartbeat fluttering desperately, then slowing down,
halting.
The lungs choke once, twice.
The Body left facing the sky, sun rays caressing the dead, with whispers
of apologies. Of "almost" and "if only".
All that is left is a body spent, a never-ending search of consuming warmth,
while the body lays,
frozen.

Dawn
We awakened in the meadow, as the sky turned pink, and the mist rose. We were laying down in the long grass, morning dew like a halo around your strawberry curls, peppering your rosened cheek, your freckled nose.

The first thing my eyes saw that morning was your mouth, parted softly, a renaissance angel in some painting. The sun rose slowly, stretched down towards us. Towards you, as if it missed your skin. As if it knew that your face should always be illuminated by the softest rays of light. That your eyes' green comes alive like the forest in spring, under the morning light.

As you turned, as you stretched, as you squinted your eyes against the light, eyelashes batting, tantalizing, I remained breathless.

My body lost all sense of function, only my heart. My heart beat to the rhythm of the rustling leaves, of the chirping birds. It beat for you, relentlessly. It camouflaged itself into the sounds of nature, not to disturb your waking, the palpitations pleading for your touch on my skin once more.

When you finally looked at me, with the corner of your right eye, my lungs hiccupped. I could smell a wildfire burning within me. As you twisted towards me, reached for me, to pull me down back into the bliss, I let you. I let you, as what else could I have done? I lay there once more, by your side, looking back at you, as dewdrop fell down my face. Like a sigh. Like a wish. Like a prayer.

A softer sound
Today, it's the softness of your breaths.
The licks of cold caressing your face
The steam, the condensation, the fog, the clouds.
Clusters of air and water and heat and maybe just a little pinch of soul.

Today, it is green.
Green like Ireland. Green like once upon a time
Green like fairies, green like laughter.
Green like grass blades leaning, whispering, sighing, moving, dancing, loving,
In the wind
Air and earth and water and sunlight, and this time, a little more heart than you thought.

Today, it's all honey.
Sweet, slow, thick, vibrant and glossy.
Too much sugar and perfume and even more sunshine.

Baby, baby, baby.
Today, it's love.
Soft and hard, hot, and biting-cold. Sharp as sunlight and round as the Moon.
It's love, baby. Today, yesterday tomorrow and all the in-betweens.
It's the ether and the world and the life and the death.

Baby, baby, baby.
Today is a sweeter music.
Today, it's all for you

@saturnnina – Instagram

23 y/o amateur poet trying her best.

Two Ships | Nadia Saleh

via Pixabay

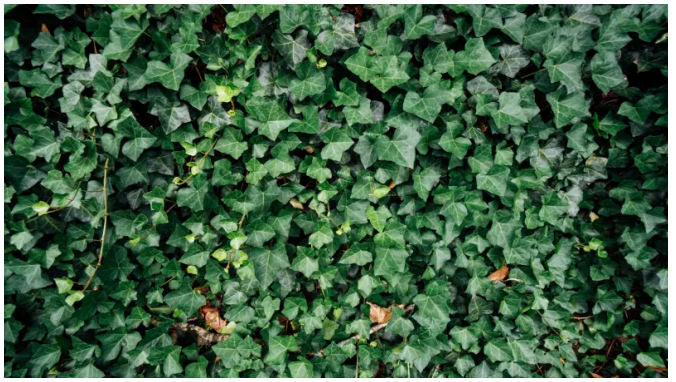
We argued about Keats
I could not be convinced that a Grecian urn was more worth
An ode than melancholy, my sweet melancholy
That which has been haunting me for months

I bought you the Rilke so you'd think of me
Alongside your beloved poetry
I hope your memories are colored
With humid sunlight and full-moon shadows
Mine will be, summer camp sweetness on my tongue
Something to hold close, something to lament

We weren't just two ships that passed in the night
You're an ark, loaded two by two with unknown damage
And I'm a patched-up schooner, back on the waves once more
You left without saying goodbye, so this is mine
Maybe I'll write another ending to this poem one day

Nadia Saleh is a Romantic romantic from southern California. Her work can be found at Moonflake Press, Lavender Bones, and On the Run, among others. Follow her on Twitter @ghost_nadia

ivy | Lillian Fuglei



Kelly via Pexels

My mother warned me, of the
pain that would come. How it
fits itself into the bone of you,
in the places you won't even let the dark touch.
The way it seeps, finds your
palm. Tries to brush the depths
of the soul, through
your fingertips, left
freezing. I brush her
hand, leave it tainted.
Taking some squandered joy, marking her as
mine. It would be better if left,
but I fear the pain has found us both already.
It's in the tilt of her jaw now, maybe
been there longer than we noticed. I
promised her love, in sickness and health, in pain and pleasure
to cherish her forevermore. I'm afraid it's
another promise, broken.

Lillian Fuglei is a queer poetess based in Denver, Colorado. You can find them on Instagram at literary.lillian.

Gethsemane | Tom Snarsky

Haley Black via Pexels

I'm too tired to write a story
about a YouTube Scaled Abuse
Analyst, & maybe you are too
tired to read it, so here
is an outline instead: Tim wakes up
at 3:37AM he's on call
some terrible sequence
of things has been posted
and he, Tim, the Desensitized,
bands together with the algorithms
to try to stop one kid from seeing
whatever heinous thing is in
the video(s). Also it's Mother's Day
and his little independent
contracting entity is called 30Ag
and it's a running gag
whether it's pronounced "thirty agg"
like Virginia Tech or "30 AG"
like a little mishearing of the year
Jesus starts his ministry.
The story doesn't work because either
a) I have to think up something horrible

to be in the video(s) or
b) I Infinite Jest it and the video
is an unknowable black box, for to know it
is already to be lost, & neither
of those gets me far enough to want
to continue with it, even though I think
it's a good premise, the idea
of the scaled abuse analyst as a real
job gels so cleanly with my ownexperiences on websites full of terrible
things when I was younger,
the casual infliction
of evil through depersonalized means
that now is just part of the fabric
of internet existence, you
can hardly avoid it, this guy on Twitter
with two ✝ s in his display name
liked a poem I posted and I saw
his pinned tweet was a blog post: "How
To Protect Your Family
From Adult Content" I'm thinking a Playskool
bucket meeting the mid-Atlantic
when you read Houellebecq
his poems have this kind of stuff
happening on trains, sidewalks
the seeing of something
a certain type of mother would deem
unclean
annunciation's opposite
Houellebecq's poems are oddly tender
for every "Nous avons passé
la nuit sans délivrance" there is also
"J'ai toujours eu l'impression
que nous étions proches,
comme deux fruits
issus de la même branche."
Surprisingly green flowers of early May
coffee late
in the morning, the fog already burned
off the mountain
I used to think A.D. meant After
Death but then with the B.
C. meaning Before Christ what
years did he live?
That actually wasn't enough
of a problem to change
my mind about how it worked
it made total sense that someone could live
outside numbered years
that a religion would accept
its earthly King by not counting time
until after, like a flood
of gossip after the party, like communismafter the party, like cleaning up
rivers and other bodies
of fresh water away
my iniquity
like a Razor
scooter to the shin
drawing blood
& a little bone & a few views
before being taken down
a few pegs
to pray

Tom Snarsky wrote Light-Up Swan.

Woven From Golden and Love | Tarunika Kapoor

Oleksandr Pidvalnyi via Pexels

Born from smudged designs sketched in the margins of a notebook in disarray, I am—
delicate coils of gold woven in a chain to suit a slip of a girl with clever, dark eyes, I am—
a necklace forged in a daughter's duty for her family but ultimately a lover's promise, I am—
presented from mother to daughter, I am.

The hope in a young daughter's wide eyes and the sorrow glittering on her lashes, I am—
the thin golden noose around her neck as she weds an apathetic man, I am—
stored away in a dusty cupboard in a perpetually empty house in an unfamiliar country, I am—
gazed upon once more in hope as a baby girl babbles in the background, I am.

Displayed from time to time over the years and promised to another young daughter, I am—
abandoned on a bed as a mother screams at her daughter for finding a bride, I am—
cherished by a mother torn between rigid tradition and progression, I am—
A glittering embrace of culture around a bride's elegant neck as she marries her wife, I am.

Requested by a hesitant husband-to-be several decades prior, I am—
as bright as the new sheen on old traditions, I am—
the golden chain tying together untold and unacknowledged love stories, I am—
presented from mother to daughter, I am.

Tarunika Kapoor is a fiction writer from the San Francisco Bay Area. Her work has been published in All My Relations and Open Ceilings. You can find her on Twitter @tarunikakapoor.

A cashier in 2020 | Bryan Vale

Anna Shvets via Pexels

The glove fits my hand like itself. Sweat glues the latex to my skin. Prefer it to the mask though. The mask rubs my own dead skin into my nose. I wonder if any of this will protect me.

Theresa's out sick. You gotta wonder what she's really got. If she's got the coronavirus. Meanwhile here I am ringing up toilet paper with these customers exhaling into my face. Guess I'm essential. Here's to 2020.

Bryan Vale is a writer based in the San Francisco Bay Area. He writes poetry, fiction, and (for some reason) technical documentation. Follow Bryan on Twitter: @bryanvalewriter

TEN TO MIDNIGHT | Kate Javner

George Desipris via Pexels

a drunk sea

delirious

heaving by his feet

worships the moon

who

her arm on him like a friend

said after

so smoothly

"you beauty"

Summer Solstice Cherry Vodka // Winter Cherry Jam | Iori Kusano

Simon Berger via Pexels

Preorder a flat of cherries in April from a farm in Yamagata, to be delivered in June as soon as they're picked. You can do this online if you're lazy.

Forget about this entirely.

Wake up one sunny, humid June morning to your autolock dinging. Hurriedly put on enough clothing to answer the door and accept your flat of cherries. Be briefly confused until you remember that Past You wanted Current You to know someone loved them, even if it's just you.

Eat one perfect gold-and-scarlet Satōnishiki cherry and thank Past You profusely.

Dump your cherries into a colander and rinse with cold water. Pour off a cup or so of vodka from the bottle in the cupboard if you haven't already drunk any of it.

With your good knife, score cherries one at a time. Most of them will be exactly the right size to fit down the neck of an Absolut bottle. Stuff your fruit into the bottle until it's approximately one-third cherries. Whatever doesn't fit can go into the cup of vodka (which will go into the fridge to be drunk next week), or straight into your mouth. Cherries that are noticeably softer or riper than the others should go into the drinking-soon cup or your mouth instead of the bottle!

Shove the bottle in the back of the cupboard to steep and set a reminder on your GCal for 小雪, around the end of November.

Eat any cherries that didn't fit in your jar. Get back on the internet and place a pre-order for next year's cherries.

When the cold comes around, pour yourself a drink and remember summer.

#

That memory of summer has carried you halfway through the winter, but you're at the bottom of the bottle now, and you've got all these sharp snappy boozy cherries left, turned a little brown from steeping, and you *could* just eat them up straight and feel the vodka searing your gums–

But you could also make them go a bit further. There's flavor in those bastards yet.

Tip the dregs of your vodka jar into a small non-reactive saucepan. Add about three tablespoons lemon juice and a quarter-cup of sugar to start (vanilla sugar is even better if you have it–and you should, because if you have a vanilla bean and a jar of sugar you have no excuse for not putting them together). Bring to a low boil. The cherries will release their soaked-up vodka back into the jam, so after a few minutes you will suddenly have much more liquid than you expected. Taste with a clean cocktail spoon and decide if you want to add more sugar.

Either way, lower the heat to a pleasant simmer and stir constantly. When the whole mess is about as thick as chocolate syrup, pour it off into a jar and let it cool before you put it in the fridge. Use a clear jar so that you can admire the color, which is like the best and bloodiest garnet in the world. If you lick the spoon after you scrape out the pot, you will burn your tongue and it will be absolutely worth it.

Serve on bread (crusty brown campagne for preference) spread thickly with clotted cream. Also great as a topping for plain skyr.

A spoonful stirred into the cup or held in the mouth while drinking black tea is also excellent; in Japan we call this "Russian tea." I have no idea if it's authentic, but it's delightful.

Iori Kusano (Clarion West 2017) is a queer Asian American writer living in Tokyo whose fiction has appeared in Apex Magazine. Find them at kusanoiori.com.