



# sweet

In this year's winter issue, we invite our readers to savor a variety of **sweet** experiences, told through narratives that are touching and melancholy, silly and heartbreaking. Beginning with the innocent euphoria of a birth, we make our way through the sweet sentiments of the present moment, from the saccharine delights of sticky desserts and candies to the pleasures of physical intimacy; from the tender simplicity of our animal companions to the delicious taste of new love. But we also relive bittersweet memories—memories of the almost loves of our childhood, snatched from our lips, and of buried stories we carry within us; of troubled relationships brought into a new light and stories of our passed loved ones, evoked by enduring reminders. Whether drawn from old memories or budding hopes, we hope you enjoy the varied sweet flavors of these stories and poems.

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**memoryhouse** is a quarterly student-run publication that curates the personal narratives of the uchiago community through creative writing and visual art. in addition, the organization features a performance ensemble called **memento** and hosts a variety of literary events, performances, and workshops each quarter.

to learn about joining memoryhouse or submitting work, please visit [chicagomemoryhouse.wordpress.com](http://chicagomemoryhouse.wordpress.com)

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founded 2012, alida miranda-wolff  
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# her bump

*peter halliday*

I speak to it  
with a tender tone. Trying  
to calm her (us)  
with the wonder of the world waiting.

I reach for it  
playfully poking  
with desperate fingers, dedicated  
to cracking the morse code.  
Your sighs showing your impatience  
with me  
with yourself  
with time.

I kiss it  
dreaming of the approaching day  
when my precious matryoshka  
will finally be un-nested  
into our waiting arms.



fong chai

epitaph  
for  
a giant  
pixie stick

*a.j. huffman*

Oh my sweet! How you shall be missed.  
And though a part of you remains with me,  
inside me, driving me through laborious days  
and lugubrious nights. The memory of you  
still lingers on my tongue. My heart stutters,  
blood thickening. My body surges, forward.  
I will not collapse, though the sight  
of your hollow shell disheartens me. I promise,  
you life was not digested in vain.

# on satisfaction

*laurie kolp*

fong chai



I crave Bavarian cream,  
a lingering tongue-lick  
swirl of ecstasy,  
around the edge  
indulgence  
without the calories

but you say  
it might cause cancer

give me custard instead,  
a watered-down, letdown drip  
of sticky disappointment

like the tears that pool  
beneath my pillow  
when shower steam  
fills the room  
with wetness,

your voice a tenor  
singing Pavarotti  
while my fingers  
finish what you started.

# sweet tooth

*jim ross*

**B**y the time I was five, I played mostly with other boys. But I still played with Roberta. I was the only boy she invited to her 4th and 5th birthday parties. We liked playing together, just us two, in her basement. I especially liked hiding together beneath the basement stairs.

After our fifth birthdays, while we played in her driveway, Roberta cocked her head one day, threw her pigtails, and said, "Let's play a game." Out of her pocket she pulled a foot-long strawberry Twizzler. Holding it up, she said, "I'll put one end in my mouth. You put the other end in your mouth. We'll eat until we get to the middle. And then, there'll be

a surprise."

She positioned us face to face. I held one end between my teeth while her teeth held the other end. An exceptional glee covered her face. I began chomping from my end, carefully, hands at my side. Every now and then, when it seemed the Twizzler was popping out, she nudged it back into her mouth or mine.

The distance between us shrank. Neither of us said a word, except for her saying, "Keep it in." My heart raced. The middle came closer. I could feel her body heat. She reached her hands out to hold onto my shoulders. Then, in a moment, our lips touched.

I flinched as our lips grazed. A

half-inch segment of Twizzler, with my front tooth sticking out of it, dropped into Roberta's hand: the first baby tooth I lost.

After that, I don't remember playing together much. Her father moved to a different house. She and her mother moved to a tiny house by an old windmill. And then they moved again. And again. We didn't attend the same school except for seventh and eighth grades, but even then we were in different classes. By now, people called her Bobbi.

In high school, every now and then, I saw her at church. If I was serving Mass and luck was on my side, I held the communion plate beneath her chin as she leaned her head back, eyes shut, mouth open, tongue extended, while the priest placed a wafer on her tongue.

After high school I moved away.

Decades later, I spearheaded a reunion of people with whom we'd

graduated from elementary school, which ended in 8th grade. I got a lead on who'd know Bobbi's whereabouts. Then I learned Bobbi 'got into a bad marriage' and spent days and weeks sitting on the couch, lights off, in between flights of exuberance. Before she turned 30, Bobbi ended her life.

I tried contacting Bobbi's 85-year-old mother by phone three or four times. She never picked up. I never left a message. I never got to ask, "Why?"

\*

The adult tooth that replaced the one that fell out when I flinched was never a good tooth. It chips often and has been fixed repeatedly.

Now and then, I string a Twizzler from my teeth to my outstretched hand. I see Roberta's face, ecstatic still. And, I picture learning together how hesitating in love can cost you your teeth.

# scrutinizing the nun's story

*carol lynn grellas*

The day I watched the Nun's Story  
I draped a snowy scarf around my neck,  
wore my brother's dark cape backwards,  
my hands folded and tucked for prayer.  
I placed my father's dollars,  
tucked inside in my pocket,  
my suitcase packed beside me  
for a life's excursion containing no  
possessions save a handful of memories  
stilled within and ready for release  
as soon as my feet passed over  
the threshold of the rectory. And when  
called to cut my hair, I heard myself  
saying, 'send the remnants  
to grandma who will weave a lovely  
macramé out of anything.' In my heart  
I quelled the desire to be fulfilled—  
to put another's dreams before my own  
yet I'd felt unworthy, not ready to cross.  
So I returned my brother's black cape  
and stroked my nearly cut curls,  
and thought what a disappointment  
I would have been to my mother  
had I ever attempted such holiness;



# chicken

*nina robins*

To cuddle with a chicken, first  
find a comfortable chair  
In your uncle and aunt's  
Costa Rican kitchen.

Make sure you've finished  
your fresh grapefruit juice  
and fed the chickens  
their lunch of corn kernels.

Sit down.  
Wait for her  
to be handed to you.

Grab her ankles  
and pull her close.  
Wrap your other arm around her.

If she's tired from eating,  
running the farm,  
and you're lucky,  
she might fall asleep  
against your twelve-year-old  
cuddles.

Manhattan,  
school,  
all the fights back there,  
the cars,

erased  
in two little yellow  
closed eyes.

I bet you thought  
only kittens  
slowed a heartbeat.

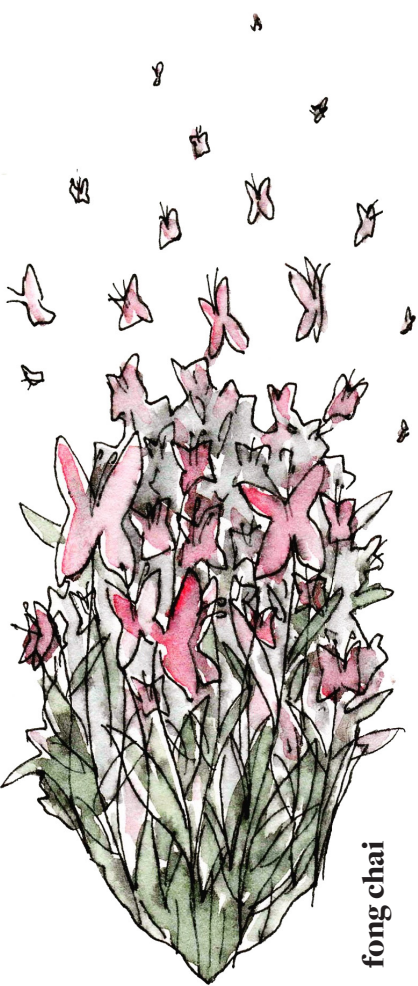


# remember love

*samara crutchfield*

Remember love like voices  
when morning whispers the day into being.  
Your name in my mouth—  
a blueberry burst on my tongue.  
Kiss me for the flavor!  
Brush the web of slatted window  
sunlight from my hair—  
away, away, sun!  
Be butterflies,  
quiet and simple.  
Unlearn gravity's  
harsh ellipses, hush  
your nuclei. Let me be  
with my love in the half-dark,  
murmuring, and I will press blueberries  
to his lips, one by one.





fong chai

Be butterflies,  
quiet and simple.

# an ode to sugar pie

*carol lynn grellas*

Because she is a feathered thing,  
I hold her in my upturned hand,

and yet she never tries to fly  
though she spreads her wings--

and croons *I love you* every time  
I pass her by. There are days

she cries for the wild hollows  
of a tree. A cacophony that breaks

my heart. Those days she's like a child  
I take her in my palm and make a home

inside my skin. I cradle her  
in a silent benediction

since we both know there's something  
greater past the window's ledge

beyond this place called home.  
And yet I've robbed her of the rain

the verdant grasslands in the spring  
those days I hold her near and

whisper gently through her unlocked  
cage, forgive me tiny one, forgive me

for this crime. I've made your kingdom  
small, and even though you sing

you are a captured soul; the cruelest thing.



fong chai

# christmas at lethe

*nancer ballard*

**I**n my sixth grade social studies class we learn that holiday traditions remind us that we are part of history, a history that defines our past and shapes who we are and who we might become. Our textbook doesn't explain that for those who aren't sure of their history, or present circumstances, or their claim on a future, there are magazine articles, television specials, and Christmas recipes to help you follow along.

In the first week of December Mom hangs up the red felt advent calendar that she has made from a pattern she saw in *Good Housekeeping*. Dad is

away on business, and I tell Mom and my four younger sisters and brother about the holiday story we've read in English class.

"It's about a man and a woman who don't have any money for Christmas presents. The wife cuts and sells her hair to buy an expensive watch chain for her husband and her husband sells his watch to buy combs for his wife's long hair. It's very sad, but also kind of beautiful." When I ask Mom if she's read *The Gift of the Magi*, she shakes her head and says it sounds familiar, but she can't remember where or when she heard it. This is a familiar response to questions

about her past, but I hadn't realized I was asking about the past. I am disappointed that the story, which feels baffling and profound, didn't make more of an impression on her.

After dinner Mom pulls me aside and cautions me for the fifth time in a week, "This Christmas is about being with family, not presents." Her remark feels like a little stab, as if I were being accused of being greedy. Or needy. I don't say anything because I know it won't do any good, and I need to finish my homework.

The following week my sister Susan, who looks a lot like Natalie Woods in *Miracle on 34th Street*, hops out of the car to drop off a library book. Mom has pinned a little plastic Santa Claus to her coat. "Are you coming to my winter concert on Thursday?" I ask hopefully.

Mom pulls a handwritten list of errands from her purse. "I don't know, we'll have to see whether we can get a sitter." Dad has told me that Mom played clarinet in high school, and I'm about to ask whether she participated in any winter concerts, but she is already scolding me. "I hope you're not expecting a big Christmas. We've tried not to burden you, but things are tight this year. You need to set an example for the others."

"Uh huh, I know."

I don't actually know anything. My parents never reveal anything about the household budget, and

no one is asking for extravagant gifts. Maybe Mom heard this line as a child. Maybe she is trying to snip our hopes in the bud, so that any presents we receive will seem like a miracle from heaven, or Santa. As Mom resumes her speech, I stare out the window at the stiff, colorless grass on the library lawn, trying to quiet the gnawing in my stomach that tells me Mom doesn't care how many times she repeats the same thing, or what I think. She puts her list back in her purse. "...And Christmas is really about family, you know."

"Oh, I thought it was about Jesus." My shoulders and arm fly up to block her swat. Mom is the most religious person in our family, and she doesn't like smart remarks.

When Mom lowers her arm, her hair is vibrating with anger and frustration. "I don't need lip from you, young lady. I have more than I can do as it is, and your father is out of town until Friday."

I drop my shoulders and force myself to look at the Santa Claus on her lapel and then at her face. "What do you want me to do?"

Her eyes skid past me. "Here comes your sister. Try thinking of someone besides yourself for a change."

On the third weekend in December, Susan, Patti, and Tig go out shopping with Dad. The smell of coffee, the lingering sweetness

of buttered cinnamon toast, and the faint tinkle of Christmas carols on the radio lures me down to the kitchen to finish my homework. Mom opens a plastic bag and pulls out a hideous white plastic garland and six Styrofoam balls covered in fraying gold thread that she's bought on sale at the grocery store.

I pretend to read as I watch her out of the corners of my eyes. I am waiting to see if she will ask what I am reading, or recall that we sang the song playing on the radio at our winter concert. I can imagine her sitting down in the empty chair next to me, and saying, "What are you working on?" She'll bring her cup of coffee over, and we'll sit and talk about Johnny Tremain. She'll tell me about the books she read when she was in school, and say she enjoyed my concert and is proud of me. And I'll tell her I really don't like moving so much, and she'll tell me she understands how hard it is to make new friends again, and then she'll hug me. This is crazy because Mom would actually say she is too busy to sit and talk about the concert or the books she's read.

Mom climbs up on a kitchen chair. "Nancy, can you hold the end of the garland, while I wind the other end around the curtain rod?"

I consider telling her that the bristly white plastic garland doesn't look at all real, but this would only lead to a fight. If Mom wants to drape white plastic fringe across

the top of the kitchen window, why do I care? Gingerly I lift the end of the garland, and she steadies herself against the top of the window frame. "What was Christmas like when you were a kid?" Mom grew up in Corinth, Mississippi, so I know she didn't have snow.

"I don't know, it was a long time ago."

"Did you have a tree?"

"Yes, of course."

I ignore the slight condescension in her voice. "Did the stores in Corinth have moving figures in their windows?"

"Yeah, some, I think."

"What were they?"

She exhales exasperation and looks at me over her shoulder. "I don't know. Why would you want to know that?"

"Just curious. What did you do at Christmas?"

She pauses. Her mouth becomes a thin line. After a long second she says, "We went to church. Everyone went to church." She probably did go to church on Christmas, but she sounds like she is making this up. Or doesn't want to tell me the truth. She is an only child, so maybe her Christmases were lonely.

Mom threads the loop on the top of a Styrofoam ball onto the section of the garland she has wound over and under the curtain rod. After she secures the ball to a fringy white frond she looks down at me. "Things are tight this year, and the things you

want cost more than the gifts for the younger ones. You're going to have to show a little maturity."

I moan in protest. "Mom, have I ever complained?"

Her face goes blank, as if she's confused by what I've said. She turns back to the window. "I need you to set a good example. Let the younger ones open their presents first."

I grimace.

"And no long faces. Try thinking of someone besides yourself for a change."

I drop my end of the garland, scarcely caring if the weight of it pulls the rest of the decoration down. "Why don't you just forget about me and make your life easier?" I snarl, furiously collecting my books and papers. I'm furious at her stupid plastic garland, I'm furious at her refusal to even *try* to understand me, and I'm furious at my own stupid idea of doing homework in the kitchen. Before I reach the top of the stairs these rages burn off, and I hate knowing that I've let Mom down, and that I will always let her down because I'll never be one of the children in the handmade reindeer sweaters on the cover of *Good Housekeeping*.

School ends, and Susan and I spend our first vacation morning in our bedroom, relishing the freedom we're given while wrapping presents for the rest of the family. After lunch we use the empty ribbon spools to transform our wrapped boxes into

baby carriages and racing cars. We stuff the smallest gifts into empty paper tubes which we wrap to look like candy canes. When we emerge mid-afternoon and place our creations under the tree, Mom stops to admire them briefly before complaining that she has a lot to do and isn't getting any help.

I suggest she skip the cranberry sauce and mincemeat pie. "Nobody but Dad likes mincemeat, and you've already made a pumpkin pie."

"You need to think about someone beside yourself," she chides. "Christmas is about being together."

Susan and I roll our eyes and agree to coat raisins in flour and grease pie tins with Crisco for the mincemeat pie recipe Mom has clipped from *Family Circle* magazine. As soon as she leaves the room Susan grumbles, "Mom wants us to act like Shirley Temple or the Bing Crosby family."

I waltz over to the cupboard, mimicking the children we've seen pretend-skating in a Christmas special, then skate back to the counter with a box of raisins and blow flour-snow onto Susan's face.

Susan shakes her braids and wipes her face with her sleeve. "I don't get it. We're not supposed to want any Christmas presents, but..."

"We're supposed to tell Mom what we want, because she doesn't want to get something we don't want, but she won't let us pick anything out, because...then it wouldn't be a Surprise!" I skate a Crisco-covered

paper towel around the rim of the pie tin. “We *could* do what she wants, and see how she likes it.”

“What do you mean?”

“You know how Mom is always telling us to let the younger ones enjoy Christmas, and not to pick out presents for ourselves, even though we’re not supposed to look at the tags to see who the present is for?”

Susan pops a raisin in her mouth and nods.

“What if we put all our presents in the back, behind the tree? Then she could see how patient we can be. Maybe she’d like that better.”

We both know she wouldn’t.

I glance at the empty doorway and step closer to my sister. “We could sneak downstairs at 4:00 in the morning. Mom and Dad will be too tired from wrapping to wake up. If Patti, or Tig, or baby Kat hear anything, they’ll think it’s Santa, and they won’t dare come out to investigate.” Susan’s eyes widen. We are strictly forbidden to come downstairs on Christmas morning before Mom and Dad wake up. “It won’t take long. Are you chickening out?”

On Christmas Eve night I lie in bed, listening to another telling of *The Gift on the Magi* on my transistor radio. I can’t quite puzzle it out. Della and Jim gave up what they cherished most. Surely this was unselfishness, and yet it came to nothing. I feel sorry for the couple, but I also envy them, even resent them a little, for

being so loved without having to do anything. I wonder if you have to be willing to give up what you want most to feel loved. This doesn’t seem quite right for a Christmas story, but....

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I wonder if you have  
to be willing to give up  
what you want most to  
feel loved.

---

I glance at the clock and bolt awake. “Psst, Susan. It’s 5:15.”

Susan and I tiptoe down the steps. Even in the dim gray-blue light I can see presents spilling out from under the tree. Susan points. “I thought this was going to be a small Christmas....”

I put my hand to my lips. Quickly we check tags and shift packages. I am trying not to make noise, but my heart is beating in my ears. Suddenly I hear thrumming in the kitchen, and we freeze. “It’s the refrigerator,” I mouth. But we are spooked now, and quickly scamper back upstairs.

I pull the blanket over her head, and before I know it, the room is light, and someone is pounding on the bedroom door. Susan and I yawn and stretch dramatically as we follow Mom and Dad and my others sisters and brother down the stairs. Patti leaps over the last two steps,

shouting, as Tig skip-hops around the tree.

While Mom makes coffee, Dad unpacks the camera, and we gather round the tree. Tig and Kat open a couple of presents. Mom gets her annual box of Barracini chocolates from Dad, and Patti gets a new hair brush. Soon Patti, Tig and Kat have a pile of crayons, coloring books, and See’n Say animal sound boxes in front of them. Susan and I sit, patient as saints, watching Dad unwrap the paper clip holder I’ve decoupled with foreign stamps.

“I think I see something for Susan or Nance,” Mom murmurs. Dad bends over and plucks another package off the floor. “This one’s for Tig,” he says, and hands it to my brother. The next gift is a nightgown for Patti.

Mom leans toward me. “There *are* some for you. I know there are.”

“It’s okay. I enjoy watching the others.”

Susan snorts.

“And there’s a couple of big ones for you,” Mom says to Susan. Two or three unopened presents sit in front of Tig and Patti before Dad finds a box for Susan which turns out to be a small pouch of catnip for Whiskers, her cat. “This doesn’t seem right,” murmurs Mom. “Did you do something?”

“Me? Like what?” I can see she thinks something is awry, but she can’t picture any possibility that makes sense. She wriggles deeper

into the chair drawing her bathrobe up over the scalloped neckline of her nightgown. In my peripheral vision, I see the lines on her forehead deepen. At rest her face often looks vaguely unhappy, critical, or frightened, but now she looks troubled by something unknown, even unknowable. I wanted the upper hand, but now that I have it, I feel bad. I didn’t really want the upper hand, I just wanted to be seen and feel loved. I wanted Mom to want to understand me.

I couldn’t have known then that my mother’s failure to remember what songs we’d sung at our winter concert, or the books she’d read to me as a child was part of her inability to retain certain kinds of memories. It was a deficit that wouldn’t have a name for decades, a deficit she must have known intimately, in the nameless way that led her to dismiss the past and rely on newspaper and magazine articles, rehearsed phrases, and errand lists. When Mom sought to create memorable occasions that seemed false to us, we assumed that she wanted us to be like the faux children in magazines and on television. If we sometimes guessed that photographs and television pictures were her only images, how could we not have thought that this was our failure to interest her?

Decades later I would read about Severe Deficient Autobiographical Memory—the inability to create mental pictures—and begin to


comprehend why Mom hadn't understood me the way I had wanted. How she could say she loved me but not remember anything specific about my childhood. Why she could tell us the name of the Secretary of State but couldn't describe the town where she grew up. Many Decembers later I would realize that Mom must have been frightened and confused by all my questions about her childhood. And I'd understand why she was always so brusque when I asked her to imagine how I felt. In time I would realize that I had to give up on being remembered to believe she loved me.

But this Christmas I glance at the crumbs on the plate Mom set out for Santa, and I know only that her wish, however ridiculous, is to create a momentary impression of surprise and delighted appreciation. Susan and I are spoiling her wish, and I know this is a mistake, even if Mom won't remember this Christmas, and the day is likely to go downhill in a few hours. I pick up a package I've stowed behind the tree. "This one's for Susan."

Susan looks up, surprised. She will retaliate by picking a present for me, and the game will be over. Now Susan and I will receive what to Patti and Tig will seem like more than our fair share of the remaining gifts, and Mom will remind them that they've received a lot already. They will fuss and leave Legos on the floor and someone with bare feet will step on

one, and our Christmas won't be anything like the television specials of Bing Crosby's family. But it will be familiar enough that Mom will know what to do, and she'll forget what this day had actually been like before our turkey leftovers are gone.

Dad stands and raises the camera to his face. I smile for the picture that will serve as my mother's memory and hold up the gift.



Now she looks troubled  
by something unknown,  
even unknowable.



# wifely houdini promise

*or one séance candle  
unneded on the nightstand*

*carol lynn grellas*

When my body no longer  
feels the rain, forgets the way  
to quiver at even the sound  
of your voice, loses the strength  
to make footprints in freshly  
cut lawn, right over left,

left over right, and before  
the night we disappear  
from the other, vanish without  
notice enough to say goodbye  
as time can be unforgiving  
when death calls your name...

my closet will still be filled  
with shoes, neatly displayed  
in perfect order, though hollow  
inside, if I am the first to go.  
Please know, I will be watching  
over you, through the skylight,

the dog still laying on my pillow,  
my vase of lavender gathered  
in a cluster of cut glass, our bedroom  
window slightly ajar, a trickle  
of stars slipping through,  
surrounding you with heaven

my best pair of Louboutins  
missing in the morning.



Please know, I will be watching  
over you, through the skylight

brooke nagler



dazed & confused | alejandra velasco

# the diet starts tomorrow

*samara crutchfield*

Mellowthick, molasses rich—  
this is cheesecake worthy of Betty Page.  
Apple syrup pools, golden and languid  
like a Rosetti painting.  
A raisin bravo emerges from  
the earth-spice mud on my tongue, and—  
    *slow cream smear—*  
    *fork sex—*  
    *flavor brothel—*  
    *cinnamoan—*

—morsel, come to the coffin  
of my pornographic mouth.  
    Sweet doom!

My lips,  
my hips,  
    are thine.

