

# GRUB STREET

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# GRUB STREET

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## About Grub Street

*Grub Street* is an annual publication funded by the Towson University Provost's Office. The staff is comprised of undergraduate Towson University students who review all submissions through a blind review process.

To keep up with the latest *Grub Street* news, visit our website at <http://wp.towson.edu/grubstreetlitmag/>, follow us on Instagram @GrubStreetTU, follow us on Twitter @GrubStreetTU, or like us on Facebook at <https://www.facebook.com/grubstreet.towson>.

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## Submission Guidelines

Anyone is welcome to submit. Please limit your submissions to five poems, two short stories, two literary essays, and five works of visual art per edition. We're especially excited about receiving genre-defiant submissions, such as poetry comics, prose poems, flash fiction, flash essays, lyric essays, graphic novel or memoir excerpts, and speculative nonfiction. (Please submit poetry comics and graphic novel or memoir excerpts as visual art.) Only previously unpublished works, either in print or online, will be considered for publication. It is assumed that all submissions are original creations. Please credit your sources.

We evaluate submissions in a blind review process, so please remove all identifying information from your works (title pages, headers, document file titles, etc.). Please submit one work per file. Do not submit group submissions. If, for example, you submit five poems, do not put all five poems into one document. Please create five separate documents for each poem.

Visual art should be at least 4x6 inches and sent as a .png, .raw, or high-quality .jpeg file with at least 300dpi and a size of at least 1MB. Please include medium and dimensions in your cover letter.

If you have questions or concerns about these guidelines, please contact us via email at [grubstreet1952@gmail.com](mailto:grubstreet1952@gmail.com).

Visit us at [grubstreet.submittable.com](http://grubstreet.submittable.com) to submit your work. Email submissions will not be considered.

We look forward to receiving your work and wish you the best of luck in your literary and artistic endeavors.

Grub Street, London, 18th C.



DR. H. GEORGE HAHN

Professor / Past Chair, TU Department of English

Home of butchers and foreign manual laborers, Grub Street was not a fashionable London address. In his *Dictionary* of 1755, Dr. Johnson noted further that it was also a place “much inhabited by writers of small histories, dictionaries, and temporary poems, whence any mean production is called grubstreet.” Hard living, hard drinking, half starving, Grub Streeters turned out biographies before the corpse was cold, poems during the event they were watching, ghost-written speeches and sermons to order, and satires to deadline. First draft was final copy. They walked with pistols or swords to defend themselves from creditors and angry satiric targets.

Yet however poor, low, and scorned, they were the first fully professional writers to whom “publish or perish” was not a hyperbolic metaphor. Forgotten today, they nevertheless throw a long shadow over us. With them the modern periodical press can be said to have been born with its interests in live events and lean prose. Their plagiarisms led to copyright laws, their defamations to better libel laws. Their work encouraged a free press. Their writing to a newly but barely literate public doomed the long, aristocratic romance in the hard language of realism. Their work helped to produce a mass market of readers. Freelancers no longer under pressure to praise patrons, they showed finally that a writer could be independent.

Masthead

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## Letter from the Editor

**BRENNA EBNER**

Dear Reader,

I doubt you picked up *Grub Street* for my letter. If I had to guess, you grabbed this issue for its stunning cover, or for the creative works tucked between it and its equally mesmerizing back (feel free to check it out now, if you haven't already). You may know one of our contributors—if so, thank you for supporting this author or artist. Or maybe your work appears here—if so, thank you again for making our magazine what it is. For those of you who picked up *Grub Street* with no preexisting obligation—and yet you're lingering here rather than skipping ahead to page 1—you are my crowd. Too often people skip the odds and ends to get to the meat (or tofu, depending on their diet).

Until editing *Grub Street*, I had no idea that running a literary magazine required so much work. A lot of readers assume that an author just writes something and then publishes it. I am here to tell you that after each piece of writing was accepted—which took some time, considering we received more than a thousand submissions—multiple staffers cared for it. Our editors, for example, flagged mixed metaphors, suggested new openings, and even compressed a novella into a short story. Our copyeditors caught inconsistencies in description (wasn't the narrator wearing a blue—not a yellow—shirt two paragraphs ago?) and punctuation—though you may notice we loosened the rules for poetry. Our proofreaders spotted mistakes that had been introduced during the copyediting stage. All of this happened—well before you opened this issue—in order to share the best possible version of each writer's creative work: the meat or tofu. Without the “cooks” bringing us these “dishes,” readers wouldn't be able to sample this wide variety of creative writing conveniently gathered here. I hope volume 69 leads some readers to develop new tastes for forms of writing that they had never previously liked or considered, such as prose poems and lyric essays. Turning to a new page and finding a new creative piece—in a different genre or aesthetic, and with different characters, settings, or situations—is probably the closest thing to time travel or Freaky Friday that we could possibly get. It's magical.

I'm sure you can infer, by looking at this issue of *Grub Street*, how hard my staff worked—but regardless, I'd like to thank them for their dedication. Almost every Monday and Wednesday, for eight months, they deliberated, discussed, and debated submissions and edits. They compromised, argued some more, and compromised again. They laughed and danced during proofreading breaks. While I'm thrilled to hold volume 69, I'll certainly miss working with each of them.

Beyond my letter is the work of those who have bravely shared it with us. Together it covers subjects as wide-ranging as death, feminism, cheese, love, slavery, mental illness, and so, so much more. Some of it may resonate with you and some of it may not, but that is okay. That is, in fact, the whole point. So now, I invite you to turn the page and encounter the perspective of someone new.



**Brenna Ebner**, Editor in Chief



## ornithology

GABRIELLE GRACE HOGAN •

the summer between deaths, i watch a crane dip in  
& out of the aviary's wire dome. it doesn't fly away—

rather through & around the skeletal latticework  
leftover from a World's Fair generations away.

no one else notices the swimmer's deft escape from the metal.  
if only the whole year had been this, a bird coming

& going as it pleases. but it wasn't.  
it was the illinois river's bloat of bodies.

it was a hot gun & limp hand in a cold car.  
it was my grandfather left in his armchair for hours.

## *i'm reading a book about disease on the train*

GABRIELLE GRACE HOGAN •

to chicago, which is a disease in the way  
all cities are, one wherein my friends live & i don't.

if i'm being honest, i hate when my friends date,  
because i am fraught with fear of abandonment.

this is how we look upon looking. the roads we pass  
are barren as wombs most times, except for the semis,

these ghosts in the fog, haunting the patch of dry skin  
this state is. i've never known a place like the back

of my hand. i've been in love with all my friends  
at one time or another—if not then soon i will be. the horizon

is just the end of something. these stations, fat  
gnarled veins, bulge out from thickened arms. these towns,

cysts off illinois' back, bubble & burst & drain away.  
i'm not sure if my friends are liars or idealists when they say

they miss me. either way.



## ОБЛАКО В ШТАНАХ ТЕТРАПТИХ

Владимир Маяковский •

Вашу мысль,  
мечтающую на размягченном мозгу,  
как выжиревший лакей на засаленной  
кушетке.  
буду дразнить об окровавленный сердца  
лоскут,  
досыта изъиздеваюсь, нахальный и едкий.

У меня в душе ни одного седого волоса,  
и старческой нежности нет в ней!  
Мир огрómив мощью голоса,  
иду — красивый,  
двадцатидвухлетний.

Нежные!  
Вы любовь на скрипки ложите.  
Любовь на литавры ложит грубый.  
А себя, как я, вывернуть не можете,  
чтобы были одни сплошные губы!

Приходите учиться —  
из гостиной батистовая,  
чинная чиновница ангельской лиги.

И которая губы спокойно перелистывает,  
как кухарка страницы поваренной книги.



## *Cloud in the Trousers* (Prologue)

VLADIMIR MAYAKOVSKY, •

(Translated from Russian by Andrey Gritsman)

Your thought,  
contemplating on your brain gone soft,  
like a fat servant on the soiled couch,  
I will tease with my bloody torn heart:  
I will make fun of you as much as I want,  
asinine and obnoxious.

I don't have a single gray hair in my soul,  
I don't have elder tenderness in it either!  
I shock the world with my voice power,  
and march ahead handsome,  
twenty-two-year-old.

You tender ones!  
You sing your love with a violin.  
The rude one yells about his love by the  
kettledrums.  
But you can't turn yourself inside out like me,  
so there is nothing but lips and lips!

Come on to study —  
from the living rooms,  
you batiste proper girl  
from the league of angels.

And the one who coolly turns the lips over  
like a chef the pages of a cookbook.



Хотите —  
 буду от мяса бешеный  
 — и, как небо, меняя тона —  
 хотите —  
 буду безукоризненно нежный,  
 не мужчина, а — облако в штанах!

Не верю, что есть цветочная Ницца!  
 Мною опять славословятся  
 мужчины, залежанные, как больница,  
 и женщины, истрепанные, как пословица.

Вы думаете, это бредит малярия?

Это было,  
 было в Одессе.

«Приду в четыре», — сказала Мария.

Восемь.  
 Девять.  
 Десять.



If you want me –  
 I'll be mad from the meat –  
 and like sky will change my colors –  
 if you want –  
 I will be impeccably tender,  
 not a man,  
 but – cloud in trousers!

I don't believe that there is flowery Nice!  
 And my name is praised again  
 by the men who are stale like infirmary,  
 and women, worn out, like a proverb.

You think this is delirium of malaria!

That happened,  
 happened in Odessa.

I'll come at four – said Maria.

Eight.  
 Nine.  
 Ten.





### *Ghost Light*

DANIELLE FAUTH •

Plaster, found lighting  
apparatus, bulb.  
18" x 8" x 4.5"

### *A Day on Race Street*

TARYN PAINTER •

In the Jiang-Johnson household, there were two celebrations for the New Year: one on the 1<sup>st</sup> of January, and another when the Chinese Lunar calendar began. The second celebration was introduced with less fanfare than the first but was nevertheless duly acknowledged by all members of the house at the insistence of Anna's mother.

Anna's mother had off from work for the Chinese New Year and wanted to go to Chinatown to pick up some duck, fruit, and *yau gok* to properly celebrate. As usual, she asked if her daughter could go along with her, and, as usual, Anna agreed out of familial necessity.

They were quiet on their way to the city. Mom's choice of music filled the space between them, while the occasional blare of a car horn sounded whenever Mom drove below sixty on I-95. Mom appeared to take no notice at these sudden outbursts, lost in the words of Phil Collins: *oh, think twice, it's just another day for you and me in paradise...*

"Anna, you eat yet?" Mom asked, taking her hands off the steering wheel to change the disc when traffic slowed beside the Schuylkill. "You hungry, we go eat at restaurant."

Anna lifted her shoulders in response, not looking at her mother and continuing to scroll through her Twitter feed. "I ate earlier at school. I'm not that hungry."

Mom clicked her tongue three times. "School food full of MSG, no good. You hungry, I buy food for you."

Anna let out a slight huff at her mother's proclamation, but kept her eyes glued to her phone. Sometimes Anna thought her mother was like an elementary schooler repeating words heard on the playground, saying things without fully comprehending why they were being said. "Ma, I said I'm good. And school food really isn't all that bad. There's more MSG in Chinese food, you know."

"School food have too much fat, too," Mom said. "And school food expensive. Everything expensive. You save money, *ji mo*? If we save enough, one day, I take you home. China is better now."

Anna lifted her cheeks in a mocking smile. "Yeah. One day. You know, maybe next summer. I hear the smog is especially great during the heat."

"Huh?" Mom asked, looking over her shoulder to merge into the adjacent lane. "What you mean, 'smock'?"

"Not smock, Ma. Smog, with a hard 'g' at the end. You know, like black fog? The stuff that makes the sky go dark in Beijing in the middle of the day and gives people lung cancer?"

"Ah. Like the smoke here, from trucks?" Mom pointed to a large semi-truck in the lane next to them, belching dark rings into the overcast sky. The rings of smoke drifted upwards into the clouds, evaporating in its entirety, but leaving the stinking stench of burning fuel.

"Yeah, like that, but it just stays closer to the ground."

"Why?"

"Ma, I don't know. Do I look like a scientist to you?"

Mom pursed her lips and said nothing in return. They continued southbound into the city, coasting by the rapids of the river. Anna shut off her phone and mulled over the thought of China, her supposed home. There was little that Anna knew of China, but the small details of her mother's life growing up painted a vivid picture. Anna knew that her mother had never gone to school and never learned terms like mitochondria or *pemdas*. She knew that soldiers, on several occasions, knocked on Mom's door in the middle of the night, and would demand that her parents hand her brothers over to the army for recruitment. But that was all; Anna knew only the surface of her mom's life from shards piled together by a letter of asylum that Anna found buried with their 2014 tax records. Anna never bothered to ask her mother about her life overseas after reading the letter, but her curiosity never faltered. Though she had an idea of what her mother's life was like, she wanted to have her mother's unprompted explanation.

They reached their exit at Vine Street and located an empty parking spot a few blocks from main street Chinatown. Once Mom parked the car and locked the doors, she held out a hand for Anna to take.

Anna accepted out of reluctant obligation, gripping only the edges of her mother's fingers. Her mother's skin was rough under her own, coarse as a sheet of sandpaper. Anna remembered a time when it was soft and squishy, before the years of dish-washing and under-the-table waitressing rubbed it all away. Those were the hands that would caress her cheeks and embrace her in a greeting or a goodbye. Now, the only thing that was ever offered to Anna was the occasional hand to hold when they were crossing the street or walking down the dim aisles of a grocery store. She took what she was given.

Mom pulled on Anna's hand, leading her eastward in the direction of Race Street. "We go to market first, okay? Then we go eat."

"Ma, I said I wasn't hungry."

"You should have food," Mom said, cutting between two cars stopped at a red light. Anna felt a reprimand build on her tongue, wanting to tell Mom that crosswalks were made for a reason, but the honk of a car beat her to it. Like on the highway, Mom seemed to take no notice of the car horn. "I buy some *youtiao* for you, ah?"

Mom hurried through the throngs of tourists that crowded the Friendship Arch, not stopping to apologize to those she had elbowed out of the way; that job was left to Anna. Each person they passed looked back at them, some with scowls, some with curiosity. The scrutinizing looks made Anna the most unsettled, especially when their glances shifted to her and her mother's intertwined hands, brown against white. With their brief gazes came the odd sensation of being trapped under a microscope or the blinding heat of a spotlight. Over the years, Anna had grown mostly immune to the attention, but the weight of some stares still made her wince. They were the reason that she only put "Anna Johnson" on the tops of her school papers and began carrying a family photo—of her, her Chinese mother, and

her white father—in the folds of her wallet, just in case someone happened to ask.

A few more blocks passed before they finally reached the market at the corner of Race and 7<sup>th</sup>. It was a shoebox of a building with a wretched, green facade yearning for a paint job. Located at the edge of Chinatown, it was the last shop that had prominent, Cantonese symbols displayed on the outside and the only place still advertising mooncakes for sale. It never received much foot traffic, from what Anna remembered; all of the tourists and shoppers glazed over the smaller shops of Chinatown once they spotted the sparkling, behemoth Gallery mall on the opposite side of Race Street. Anna had journeyed to the Gallery only once, which was enough for her. It was too loud, too bright, and smelled too heavily of granny perfume. She would always prefer the loneliness of the market, trailing behind her mother with a mouth full of unasked questions.

As Anna and her mother walked through the front doors of the market, her mom let go of her hand and said a quick greeting in Cantonese to the woman at the register. Anna gave a closed-lip smile to the cashier and followed Mom back to where she began inspecting dragon fruits. Anna always thought dragon fruits looked like a magenta fireball, and when she first tried it, she expected it to taste just like that: fiery, with a smoky aftertaste. Instead, it had the disappointing taste and texture of a pear.

"You like dragon fruit?" Anna's mother asked, feeling for any soft spots on the skin.

"I can live without it."

Anna's mother nodded, satisfied with the fruit's quality. "I think I'll get two."

Having forgotten to grab a basket, she handed off two dragon fruits for Anna to hold, along with a bundle of messy-haired rambutans and smooth-faced persimmons. Anna felt a flash of irritation as the fruit was pushed into her empty palms.

She opened her mouth to protest, but her mother was already heading toward the next aisle.

Anna followed her mother down like her shadow, trying to decipher the boxy scribbles and letters with funny hats. With her one free hand, she picked up a silver tin that was sitting on a shelf, urging her brain to translate what she was seeing. She read over each of the characters repeatedly, imagining what each one meant.

.....

**"Over the years, Anna had grown mostly immune to the attention, but the weight of some stares still made her wince."**

.....

She liked to make up her own descriptions, like the ones she would read on the sides of the Cheerio boxes at Acme: *Smile! There's something about the familiar taste of dried, peppered pork that kids never outgrow. Heart healthy!*

Anna heard her mom exclaim excitedly from behind her. Anna swiveled on one foot and watched as her mother pulled away from the embrace of another woman at the entrance of the aisle. The woman had her own daughter with her, a girl who looked no more than fourteen or fifteen. She had deep, almond-shaped eyes and fine black hair that seemed almost indigo in the grocery store lighting. She was the spitting image of Anna's mother.

"Anna, say hi to Aunt Mai," Mom called over to Anna. Anna walked to where her mom stood and did as she was told, trying to figure out if Aunt Mai really was one of her

mother's eight siblings. She looked similar enough to Mom that they could pass as sisters, with their high cheekbones and high nose bridges, but Anna couldn't recall ever seeing Aunt Mai at any family gatherings.

Aunt Mai and Mom continued animatedly, and Anna stood there rocking back and forth, searching for something to focus her eyes on. In her periphery, she could see the occasional curious glance from Aunt Mai at her. Anna thought of the wallet-sized photo tucked away in her back pocket and trained her eyes on the bags of pho noodles packed onto the shelves.

Aunt Mai's daughter was shifting from one foot to the other, earnestly looking for a distraction like Anna. She was trying to catch her attention, Anna knew; she too was growing restless from their mothers' endless chattering. But there was a certain hesitancy that stopped her from obliging to the daughter's call. It was the same hesitancy that prevented her from asking questions of her mother, the uncertainty that emerged out of a fear of not understanding.

But Aunt Mai's daughter lost her patience, and she began to speak softly in Cantonese. "*Ne hou maa?*"

Anna looked over to the girl, jarred by her words. "What?"

The daughter repeated her statement, this time speaking slower and a little louder. The tone of her voice rose and fell as naturally as Anna's mother's did. It sounded like she added on an additional piece, asking Anna yet another indecipherable question. Anna continued to stare at Aunt Mai's daughter in frustration, wondering what made her think that she could understand Cantonese.

She could only shake her head a few times before letting loose a defeated, "I don't understand."

Aunt Mai and Anna's mother paused their conversation and looked over to their daughters. Anna made the mistake of looking at Aunt Mai's slight smile. Anna's stomach clenched in dreadful anticipation, knowing

the question that was to follow.

"You don't speak Chinese?"

"No," Anna said with another shake of her head. "But I know how to count to nineteen. *Yāt, yih, sàam, sei...*" She trailed off with a shrug. Counting was one of the first and few things Mom had bothered to teach her, but she had stopped before Anna ever learned twenty.

"Ah." Aunt Mai nodded, and gave a polite smile. She turned back to Mom and said something to her in Chinese. Mom laughed, and out of the corner of her eye, Anna saw, or thought she saw, Aunt Mai's daughter chuckling softly beside them. Anna busied herself with readjusting the fruits as the two mothers continued their conversation without her. The rest of the Cantonese numbers were poised and ready at the tip of her tongue, but she swallowed them back before they could escape.

She felt her cheeks grow hot, and Anna averted her eyes again from Aunt Mai and her daughter. She looked at the aisle across from where they stood and saw the tiny wall display of tear-away calendars for the new year. Many of them were ornate, with red- and gold-colored embellishments along the sides, but the one that captured her attention was more conventional, with only the year, the Chinese zodiac, and the month across the top.

There was a time in second grade when she had doodled a calendar just like that. On that day, Anna was sitting on Miss Hanover's rainbow alphabet rug waiting for dismissal, drawing out the structure of the gigantic tear-away calendar that hung above her mother's butsudan. She had split a long rectangle in half, then penciled in a number on the bottom half. On the upper half, she began to stencil out the Chinese characters. Anna's pencil hesitated over the paper, trying to remember exactly what the characters looked like. It was so clear in her mind, but the moment Anna attempted to commit the image to paper, it was submerged

into a hazy smog. She thought of how much easier it would have been if she knew the language.

Anna flipped to a new sheet, determined to sketch out the characters the right way. She drew two sides of a triangle, then two straight lines across it at the center. Then, she fenced in the figure with three lines running along the two sides and top. Anna frowned as she twisted and turned the pocket notebook, expecting it to change with the angle of the light. No matter which way she pivoted the pad, it looked all wrong—nothing like the characters in her head.

She tried again. And again. And again.

Four doodles later, and she still wasn't any closer to finding one that looked exactly as she pictured it. It really only looked like she had drawn the same wrong character repeatedly. Anna was about to attempt a fifth drawing when someone had interrupted her: Ronnie, a toothpick of a kid who, three years earlier, had inched his hand overtop of hers on the bus seat and asked if she wanted to be his girlfriend. Her immediate response was a crinkle of her nose and a soft, "My mom wouldn't really like that."

"Are you writing in Chinese?" Ronnie asked, loud enough for the other students to hear. A few heads turned towards Anna, their interest piqued and ears expectant. Anna's cheeks reddened at the sudden attention. "Is it your name?"

"Uh, yeah," Anna replied automatically, not sure which question she was addressing first. "Well, no. I mean, it's a name, but not my name. It's my... grandmother's name. April, like the month. You just write out that same character four times since, you know, April is the fourth month of the year."

She waited for another student across the room to laugh at her, to call her out on her sham. She waited for someone to call her a faker. She waited for her mother to come into the room and yell at her like she did when Anna left her chopsticks sticking up in her rice. But it was only the dull hum

of children chattering and Ronnie's excited reply that filled her ears.

"Oh, that's so cool!" Ronnie said, plopping down beside her on the rug. "Show me how to write it."

"What? Why?" Ronnie tried pulling Anna's notepad from her hands. She begrudgingly let him take the pad, not wanting the notebook to tear in half. "You aren't Chinese."

"Because it looks cool," he said, flipping to the next page. "Just show me, it won't take long."

At his insistence, Anna showed Ronnie the steps—triangle, two lines, three-fourths of a square around the outside—then passed him the notebook to let him give it a try. "Make sure to do it four times," she said in her best Miss Hanover voice.

Ronnie finished the last character and regarded it with a critical eye. After a few seconds, he handed the pad back to Anna with a sigh and stood up from the rug. "Mine doesn't look as good as yours."

Anna let out a wheezing laugh, certain that it sounded more like a cough. "I haven't had much practice," he added. She closed her notepad and placed it into the front pocket of her backpack, wishing that the flush of her cheeks would subside. Anna stood up from the rainbow rug, ready for her dismissal. She was already planning which garbage can to bury her notepad in when she arrived home. "Mine really isn't that good."

Anna thought of Ronnie and that beautiful calendar and those dreadful characters. She felt tears start to prickle at her eyes. She fingered at the pink skin of the dragon fruit, squeezing and unsqueezing it in the palm of her hand.

"Uh oh," Anna heard Aunt Mai exclaim with a finger toward her. "She don't look too good."

Mom refocused her attention to her daughter, turning her head to take in Anna's reddened cheeks and crinkled brows. Anna half-turned her head to her mother but trained her eyes on the ends of her short,

black hair to avoid direct contact. Mom said something brief to Aunt Mai who let out another ‘ah’ in realization. After another moment, Aunt Mai smiled and waved goodbye to Anna, urging her own daughter out to the next aisle over. Before Aunt Mai and her daughter could circle around to the next aisle, Anna heard Mom shout something in Cantonese to Aunt Mai’s daughter, who turned back and returned a quiet ‘*m’goi.*’ Anna let out two short breaths from her nostrils, a halfway attempt at a bitter laugh.

When Aunt Mai had disappeared behind the crab tanks, Mom began to touch at Anna’s forehead and cheeks, feeling for any sign of sickness. “See, I told you. School food bad for you!” Mom clicked her tongue in the way she did when she was disappointed, but she had the remnants of a smile still on her face. “We almost done.”

Mom briefly scanned the shelves and picked up a bottle of sesame oil, piling it on top of the fruits that Anna was gripping. She gently prodded Anna on to the next aisle, handling her daughter with the soft gestures that she had used when Anna was a child. It was supposed to comfort her, Anna knew, but it only made her feel the same shameful burning she had felt in Miss Hanover’s classroom.

“You feel sick?” Mom asked her daughter as she moved away to browse the options of biscuits. “I have *kwan loong* oil in the car.”

“That oil doesn’t work, Ma. It’s pseudoscience.” Anna followed behind her mother, but stayed a distance away, not wanting Mom to keep patting at her face for signs of sickness. Her cheeks had grown a bit cooler, but Anna could still feel the anger concentrated in her jaw. She was clenching and unclenching her teeth, chewing on the question she didn’t know if she wanted the answer to. She grew tired of its taste the more she gnashed her teeth together and finally decided to spit it out. “What was Aunt Mai saying?”

“Not much,” Mom said with a shake of her head. “She talk about you.”

“What about me?”

Anna’s mother stood up on her tiptoes to reach a box of biscuits on the shelf above her. “She said you big—tall. She wonder if you really my girl.” She chuckled at the last part, yanking the box off of the shelf and placing it onto the growing pile of products in Anna’s arms.

“And what did you say?”

“I told her, ‘Sometimes, I don’t know,’” she said, continuing down the aisle. Now she was looking for the Japanese sandwich cookies that she knew her daughter liked so much. “You don’t know?” Anna said, stopping in the center of the aisle. “What do you mean you don’t know?”

“You not like me, Anna.” Her back was turned to Anna who couldn’t see the slight smile on her mother’s face. “You more like *baba.*”

“Oh, great.” Anna felt her cheeks flush again, and she squeezed the dragon fruit against her torso, feeling the tips of her nails punch into the tough skin. “You think that too, huh?”

“Think what?” Mom hadn’t noticed the anger embedded within her daughter’s words. She continued looking for the cookies.

“Tell me, is it because I can’t speak to you in Chinese like Aunt Mai’s daughter? Or because I went to church on Sundays and said prayers to God and not to Buddha?”

Mom looked back at her daughter, perplexed by her questions. “What you mean, Anna?”

“You just said that I’m not like you. So what is it? Is it because I don’t have the exact same skin tone as you? The same nose or eye shape?”

“Anna.” Mom’s voice had a hesitant warning in it. Passersby in the market were beginning to stare, but for once Anna took no notice of their latching eyes. “You no yell.”

“Why not? Half of them probably can’t even understand me. Can you understand me, Ma?”

“Anna—”

“Don’t try and say that you do,” Anna said.

“You gave up on that chance.”

“Anna.” Mom tried again, taking a pacifying step toward her daughter. “What you saying? I can understand you fine.” Mom squinted her eyes at her daughter, hoping that the action would somehow narrow down the source of Anna’s agitation.

“I know you my girl.”

“That’s great that you know that, Ma, but I don’t know that. I don’t feel it.”

“Feel what?”

“Jesus Christ.” Anna’s irritation flared and made her entire body tremble. The box of biscuits that Mom had placed on top of Anna’s growing pile of groceries teetered on the slope of the sesame bottle and tumbled to the ground. Neither Anna nor her mother made a move to pick it up from the floor. “This is what I mean. Your daughter. I don’t feel like your daughter. I don’t even *look* or *speak* like I could be your daughter. There’s nothing about me that even hints at the fact that we’re related.”

“But you are,” Anna’s mother repeated, “I know you are.”

“I know you know. But how can you call me yours when you never taught me anything about you? About your language and your family and your religion? Your whole entire life?”

The squint around Mom’s eyes disappeared. “You upset about that? That don’t matter.”

“That’s not for you to decide.”

Mom swallowed and looked away, unsure of how to defuse the situation. When she next spoke, her voice was much quieter. “I did teach you a little. I— I taught you how to count.”

Anna scoffed. “Really, Ma? You only taught me to nineteen.” Anna began taking some steps backward toward the exit of the aisle, clutching the items to her chest like a shield. “Like that’ll ever be enough. You know, just forget it—pretend I didn’t say anything.”

“Where are you going?” Mom asked, following Anna.

“Back to the car,” Anna said without turning around. She continued walking toward the entrance. “I’ll be waiting for you when you’re done.”

“Anna. Anna, you don’t have keys.” Anna continued walking, not listening to her mother. Mom tried again, catching up to her daughter and placing a hand on her shoulder. Anna stiffened and halted in her place. “Anna, stop. Put down the food.” Mom spoke quietly from behind Anna, trying not to garner any more attention from other curious customers. “I have to pay.”

Anna pursed her lips, realizing just how many unpaid goods she was carrying. She spotted a large display bin, overflowing with kumquats and kiwis. Instead of handing the food over to her mother, she dumped them on top of the produce. Some kiwis rolled off the display and bounced onto the floor, but she didn’t pause to pick them up. As soon as the pile was out of her hands, Anna was on the move toward the door. Mom didn’t try to stop her again.

The brisk, January air was like a knife to her throat, sudden and unexpected. It was biting, but it soothed her hot cheeks. Anna traveled back the way that she and her mother came, past the Friendship Arch and its hoard of tourists. When she made it back to the car, Anna leaned her backside on the passenger side door and looked upward to the sky. Anna followed the trajectory of the clouds, watching their shapes morph and merge from one to the other.

It took five cloud transitions for her mother to return to the car. She held a large, brown paper bag in her arms, where the tops of the dragon fruit were peeking out from the bag. Mom walked slowly to her daughter, unsure if she was nearing a bomb about to burst. She began to pat her pockets for her keys, passing off the bag of groceries from one arm to the other. Anna just stood and watched, not offering her assistance.



The anger had morphed into something tinged with regret during her time alone, but she couldn't find the words to apologize to her mother. Part of Anna didn't want her mother to find the keys. Anna wanted Mom to sift through the ache and confusion that Anna had dealt with for so long. It was cruel, maybe a bit heartless, she thought, but it was making her mother understand.

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**“Part of Anna didn't want her mother to find the keys. Anna wanted Mom to sift through the ache and confusion that Anna had dealt with for so long. It was cruel, maybe a bit heartless, she thought, but it was making her mother understand.”**

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Anna and her mother settled into the car and buckled their seatbelts. Anna's mother put the key into the ignition but didn't start the car immediately. Instead, she set her gaze forward and rested her hands on top of the steering wheel. “You hungry, Anna?”

Anna looked at her mother, looking for any sense of remorse. Mom's expression was carefully neutral, not betraying anything. “Why do you keep asking me that?”

Her mother was quiet for a moment, opening and closing her mouth as she considered what to say. “My mom, she asked me if I hungry a lot. It's how to ask if you okay. If you need something.”

“You never talk about your mom,” Anna said, looking away from her mother. She looked out the window, regarding the Center City skyscrapers that twinkled in the dying evening light. The top of One Liberty Place

poked at the tummy of the overcast sky, attempting to crack it open and spill out the sun, but the clouds did not yield.

“No, I'm not hungry.”

Mom took her hands off of the steering wheel and turned over the ignition. She didn't quite believe her daughter and decided that they would stop somewhere along the way home. “You know, you already know how to say twenty, Anna.”

“Ma, you never taught me.”

“Just two and ten together.”

Anna thought for a moment, moving her fingers slightly as she counted one through ten. She counted again, and then a third time, just to make sure. “Yih... *sahp*?”

Mom pulled out of the parking spot. “*Yih-sahp*.” She repeated it again for her daughter, enunciating the accent and tone. It would take a few more tries for Anna to understand, but she didn't mind. She would keep going until Anna learned one hundred—maybe even one thousand. “*Yih-sahp. Yih-sahp. Yih-sahp.*”



## Not Good, Not Bad, But Okay

ERYNN PORTER •

Trauma leaves its imprint on you. A bruise only you can see.

In my new physical therapist's office, I sat and relayed my medical history to her. The years of starvation, the painful recovery and setbacks, muscles and organs slowly learning how to work again. By the time I was done, her eyes were wide.

"Wow, Erynn, I would have never thought you had gone through so much trauma, given your personality," she told me.

I shrugged, not sure what to say. No one had ever said something like that to me. How do you show trauma to anyone? I always thought you couldn't see it unless someone announced it. Or it was already too late. Like when someone flinches at a raised hand. Trauma is subjective; what's traumatic for one might seem insignificant to another. I wasn't trying to hide my trauma but I wasn't necessarily trying to display it either.

I imagined putting my trauma in a glass case, like a piece of art to admire. "Here, look what I went through, look what I survived," I'd scream at bystanders. They'd take a few steps back. That idea feels wrong, like there is a better way to show it. I don't know what to do with my trauma.



*Upside*, by Jim Rendon, is a book about Post-Traumatic Growth. He collected personal stories along with scientific tests and studies. Post-Traumatic Growth is the lesser-known but more common cousin of Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder. In the 1980s, researchers started to look into the beneficial changes after trauma. Richard Tedeschi and Lawrence Calhoun, professors at the University of North Carolina, created The Post-Traumatic Growth Inventory in 1996 to measure peoples' growth. A questionnaire that forces the subject to look deep inside of themselves and their trauma and measure their answers using a scale of zero to five.

*Indicate for each of the statements below the degree to which this change occurred in your life as a result of the crisis or disaster, using a scale of zero to five.*

### 1. I changed my priorities about what is important in life. Score: 5

Loneliness followed me around like a twisted imaginary friend. I always thought I needed a lot of friends to chase my lonely away. I thought if there were enough voices, then maybe I wouldn't hear my own. I thought it would make me happy. So I became everyone's friend. The cost was too high.

One day I came to high school and my locker neighbor screamed when he saw me. Then he fainted. My "friends" surrounded us

and started laughing. Apparently I had died without realizing it. They had spread rumors that I died. Before that I had AIDS, and then cancer. They made people stare at me, like they knew I was dying.

As I looked at their faces, red from laughing, something in me snapped. "Why," I asked.

"That's what you get for not being around and always being sick."

I clenched my fist, finger bones skeletal and cutting. "Fuck you. Fuck you all." The laughing stopped.

I still remember peoples' stares as I walked through the hallways. Suddenly I felt like I really had died and was now a ghost.

If all these people had thought it was true, why hadn't anyone come to check on me?

I went home and curled around my cat and stared my loneliness in the face. Loneliness filled the entire space of my room. It patted my shoulder, and I decided I would be my own friend until I was strong enough to try to find a few good ones. I snuggled into my cat's fur, listening to her purr, as my loneliness shrunk slowly to a small figure at the end of my bed.

### 2. I have a greater appreciation for the value of my own life. Score: 4

My stomach was full of flames, and I threw up too many times during college classes to hide it. People stared. Again. I hadn't resurfaced from my flare up in months. My joints felt like a rubber band getting pulled apart, slowly, every time I moved. My clothes stopped fitting again because of bloating. *It's been eight years, this should be under control*, I thought to myself.

I saw a delivery truck coming down a one-way street I was waiting to turn on. *What if this is what the rest of my life looks like*, I thought. My foot lifted from the gas pedal.

I pictured my car wrapping around me like a deathly cocoon and I would escape my physical caterpillar body and turn into a spiritual butterfly.

My car rolled closer and closer.

I took a deep breath and pressed the brake as the truck went by. Then I screamed and slammed my palms onto the steering wheel.

Was it even about valuing my life? I was more focused on ending the consistent agony of never feeling good, of always having something wrong with my body. Pain whispering in my ear and telling me that it's never going away.

I don't think I deserve to die. Sometimes I have my moments, but that's all they are. *Moments*. I believe I wouldn't be fighting as hard as I am if I didn't value my life. I have to remind myself that I'm not perfect, but I'm okay. Sometimes okay is all I need.

"Pain whispering in my ear  
and telling me that it's  
never going away."

### 3. I developed new interests. Score: 4

I've always been a bookworm, but being sick turned me into a book carnivore. I would devour books while on bedrest. I'd create piles of unread books. Books from yard sales, flea markets, gifts, and more. Then one by one I would read them. I'd slip into pain-free worlds. Slowly those piles would disappear.

I never felt more productive in those moments. I clung to those moments. I haven't stopped clinging to those moments. I now read more than I watch TV.

A traumatic event can be a natural disaster, a war, a sudden death, illness—something that shakes a person to their core. Tedeschi and Calhoun interviewed over six hundred survivors of traumatic events to discover growth in five areas: increased inner strength, openness to new possibilities in



life, closer relationships with friends and family, enhanced appreciation for life, and a stronger sense of spirituality. To me, the idea that you can measure mental and emotional growth is almost as unbelievable as measuring someone's pain with a scale of one to ten.

**4. I have a greater feeling of self-reliance. Score: 3**

This is a difficult statement: I'd like to turn it into a question. It's the question I've been asking for years. Can someone be self-reliant when their body fails without warning? When two parts that make you, body and mind, are constantly tugging at war?

I will be stuck prone in bed, staring at my torso as if it belongs to a stranger. But inside my mind, I will be making to-do lists, writing, figuring out what the next step is to calm the monster in my gut. But I never move. I can't.

When I attempt something, I can think of every avenue to take; being ill has made me crafty. But I can't always accomplish what I set out to do. Then I have to ask for help. It could be small, like handing me a book, or something large, like helping me walk into another room.

Does this make me dependent? Part-time dependent, part-time independent? Is that being human? Am I still the reliable one if I can type my help to friends but I can't rush to their homes? Can I still be a good friend or am I a burden? Am I bad person if I hurt people close to me because I'm so tired of needing them? Am I childish for having an outburst as I am handed pills, drinks—and when I need help getting dressed?

How do I explain this to someone whose body has never failed? How do I map out the complexities of needing them around but not wanting to need people? That I do trust them but I'm also afraid. That they are lumped in with how I hate having to rely on

everyone and I don't want to need anyone or anything.

**5. I have a better understanding of spiritual matters. Score: 3**

I guess it depends on your definition of "spiritual." To me, it means religion without the commitment or rules. I don't really have a religion and don't think too much about spirituality. I'm very focused on what's in front of me. That can be a good and bad thing.

**6. I see more clearly that I can count on people in times of trouble. Score: 5**

The last ten years of my life have been like slipping on ice and just continuing to fall, knowing I'm about to hit the ground. It has also been incredibly isolating; a lot of people decided I was too much trouble. Hell, I decided that too.

Some stayed. My mom stayed up all night with me when I was in so much pain I couldn't sleep or was too afraid to close my eyes. She curled up in the chair with a pillow and blanket while I stretched out on the couch. We had 3 a.m. conversations that we can't have at 3 p.m. Maybe because that was when we felt truly alone. Maybe because I was on pain meds and wouldn't remember. Maybe because she was so sleep-deprived she wouldn't either.

My sister bought me small, soft plushies to keep me company while bedridden. My favorite is a bug-eyed turtle dressed as a pirate with an eye patch.

I would line up all my new bug-eyed friends and talk to them when I was lonely.

Kea stayed before, during, and after I got sick and changed completely. She always checked on me when I felt my loneliest. She seemed to always have a beacon set for me. Mariah always listened to me. She never wavered, never made me feel shame, and never judged. She always smiled. Amy came

crashing into my living room after hearing of my latest episode and didn't mind that I was only wearing a big shirt. In her hand was a tub of chocolate chip fro-yo she bought because I wouldn't be able to go with her to a fro-yo place anytime soon. Then we watched bad reality TV shows on Netflix or a Disney movie and discussed the animation and storyline.

You can measure a plant's weight by taking the plant out of its pot and blotting out the excess water from the soil. You mark growth by its roots, by their width or how many there are. Plants are really similar to people. Both require water, nutrients, and oxygen to grow. Some people even talk to their plants, believing that affection will make them bigger and stronger. I wonder what my roots look like. Maybe withered in some parts and strong and scarred in others.

**7. I established a new path for my life. Score: 4**

What even is the "path"? Is it my goal? Because if so, I'm still striving to become a known writer and editor. Could the path be the way I get there? I have to concede that I am slower than I want to be, slower than most of my peers. If I try to keep up with them, I will make myself bedridden for months. This isn't an exaggeration. I have become the turtle in a hare's race but at least I know how that ends. I'll be happy just to reach my goal, however long that takes. I don't have much of a choice otherwise. Plus, I like turtles.

**8. I have a greater sense of closeness with others. Score: 4**

I guess I do in a sense, at least with the people who stayed around. Overall, I feel a distance toward others that they need to cross to meet me. I don't want to get hurt again. They need to prove their worth to me. I'm working on shrinking that distance.

**9. I'm more willing to express my emotions. Score: 2**

I'm used to burying emotions so deep there isn't a difference in the topsoil and burning the shovel. Not good, not bad, but okay. Steady. Crying makes me dizzy. Being too happy can make me throw up. I don't show aggressive emotions unless I'm really pushed because aggressive emotions come with a physical price. Often if I get angry and start to fight, I will end up in the bathroom for an hour or I'll pass out. Even now that I'm getting better, old habits don't die. I'm steady until bursts of emotion erupt from me. I'm like a firework soaring into the sky only to implode. There's too much vulnerability in being anything other than okay.

Trauma is a scary thing; it can stay inside you without you realizing it. It lurks in your amygdala. Something can happen—you see a certain object, you smell something, hear something—and then suddenly you're right back to that moment. Feeling it all over again. Your body and brain will react as if it's happening again. Why does this happen? Because when you are in a life-threatening situation, your brain focuses only on the situation, instead of thinking a million different other thoughts like we do day to day. So unlike normal memories that fade with time, traumatic ones stay vivid, real, because the stress not only enlarges the amygdala, but also starts to mess with your hippocampus. For the longest time, whenever I heard sirens I flinched and started to panic. My body would begin to sweat. I thought they were coming to take me away.

**10. I know better that I can handle difficulties. Score: 3**

This question has similar issues to the path question. It's too vague. What kind of difficulties? My life is full of difficulties, both big and small. Then there is the question of which is worse, a bunch of small problems or

one giant one? Either way I tend to be steady, take on one problem at a time. Like with my emotions, I do hit my limit and then just scream at every little thing for being difficult. When I come to a difficulty, I tend to come to it already analyzing. I see all the different paths that I can take to solve this problem, play them out in my head, and try to figure out which is the best. Does this make me anxious, a worrywart, an overthinker? Oh yes, which can be a difficulty in its own right.

**11. I am able to do better things with my life.**  
**Score: 2**

Yeah, kind of, but not really. I have a strict schedule that starts as soon as I wake up. If I deviate, my body suffers and it takes days to recover. Wake up, make hot chocolate, drink it, take a pill that will kick in in



**“Trauma is a scary thing; it can stay inside you without you realizing it.”**



thirty minutes, wait fifteen minutes, go into the bathroom for thirty minutes, eat, get dressed, go to school or whatever I’m doing; by noon or one I have to eat so I can take another pill, six or seven of the same thing, take two more pills, be in bed by nine or ten. This doesn’t include the chiropractor, physical therapy, specialists, and primary appointments. This takes a lot of my time, time I could spend doing better things. Time I wish I could be writing. I have to work within a small box but when I find the time to do the things I want, it feels deeply fulfilling.

**12. I am better able to accept the way things work out. Score: 2**

Little things I can accept. Like when I fall asleep doing homework because my body needs it. Or when my stomach hurts and I have a million things to do but can’t move, I use the time to binge-watch shows I’ve missed. Or when I lose feeling in my legs, but I’m in my bed and there’s a book by my side. I want to go out but the weather sucks. Or someone cancels plans. I’ve learned to always have a backup plan. Nothing when it comes to my illness “works out” though. Not when I lost my first job, the second, and almost lost the third but my boss showed mercy. Not when I lost friends. Not when I have to wonder if the rest of my life will be in fits and starts, pieces that continue to shatter as my body breaks apart. Tally marks on a doorjamb show children how much they’ve grown. Parents measure a baby’s growth through developmental abilities: crawling, walking, talking, and chewing solid food. Measure their ages by months, facial expressions, and facial recognition. A baby recognizes itself in a mirror at fifteen months. Sometimes I can’t recognize myself, not in the mirror, but in old photos. There is something in my eyes that’s missing, maybe something dark. Eyes that may have seen too much, eyes of a survivor. Post-Traumatic Growth is a contradiction. It seems like the more you suffer, the more growth is possible. It reminds me of growing pains from childhood. The more pain you had, the taller you became.

**13. I can better appreciate each day. Score: 4**

While I was traveling with a friend in Vermont, she pulled over to stare at a beautiful tree. I looked up from my phone. The leaves were changing color. The yellow—more than the red and orange leaves—stood out the most. Surrounded by reds and oranges against the greens of the field, this yellow tree stood

proud. We sat in the car and appreciated it in silence.

**14. New opportunities are available which wouldn’t have been otherwise. Score: 2**

See question 11.

**15. I have more compassion for others. Score: 5**

A friend recently told me that I’m the most forgiving person she knows. At first I was honored; that seemed like such a good thing. But then I thought about it more. We were having a conversation about how she was being rude to me. She had been moody, I knew she was going through a lot, so I was giving her space. When she apologized, I accepted, and that was that. Now I’m not angry at my friend, but it made me think more about my relationship with others. I thought about how many times I had been taken advantage of. Money borrowed and never returned, doing more work, doing someone’s work for them—being someone’s punching bag. A common thing with having a chronic illness is that you get told to let things go—because in the long run it’s better for you. I took that to heart and took it too far. For a span of a few years I let myself be a doormat. I wanted to be liked. I wanted friends. So I was everyone’s friend, always there for them, no one there for me. When I got fed up with that I became too mean, thinking I was assertive. Only now have I found my balance. Hearing her say that made me wonder if I really did.

There are few factors involved in Post-Traumatic Growth. Support is the biggest key but it has to be a very specific support, says Shira Maguen, a clinician at the San Francisco VA Medical Center. You have to allow the survivor to express what they need instead of what others think they need. You can’t force the survivor to share their feelings or experience—Maguen makes sure to em-

phasize that. The best way I can explain: it is like approaching a feral cat; you can give it what it needs to stay healthy and alive, but you’d better wait until it approaches you before you try petting it. I have scratched a few people when they pushed too hard. For me, the most important thing is to realize that you can move past whatever happened to you. That this won’t be the rest of your life. You can start again, and again, until you get it right. No matter how tiring the process is.

**16. I put more effort into my relationships. Score: 4**

See questions 6, 9, and 15.

**17. I am more likely to try to change things, which need changing. Score: 5**

To have a chronic illness is to be always changing. Everything changes. You can’t fight it. You constantly molt, shed your skin, and are reborn. I’ve had to change myself when my illness erased my old identity. I had to shed the cocoon of the patient, had to stop using it as a crutch. I set goals for myself every day, just to feel accomplished, to build up my confidence. I would give myself an allowance on how whiny I could be, how often I was negative, or how many times I talked about being sick. I had to change my lifestyle, diet, friends, emotions, and how I viewed the world to survive. And if someone thought I couldn’t do something because I was sick, well, I’d change their mind.

**18. I have a stronger religious faith. Score: 0**

Nope. I just can’t understand how a god that is supposed to be benevolent would torture someone so cruelly by having their body betray them. To have my nerves fire wrongly, causing me to crash into the ground or give me a stomach that is unable to digest food. This kind of pain goes beyond me, or Job, to anyone suffering.

But I have a stronger respect for religion if it works for others. I remember on one of the many late nights, I told my mom that prayer didn't do anything for me. She said, "That's fine. It does something for me." After that I kept quiet about her praying because she prayed for me, not at me.

For companies, growth is measured by earnings every quarter. If they have more earnings they grow. If they have less, it's a loss. Almost like when I get healthier and sicker, I gain and lose little orange pill bottles. I stack them up in pyramids, waiting for something to knock them down. Frustrated that I just keep building them up and can't make them fall.

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**"That this won't be the rest of your life. You can start again, and again, until you get it right."**

.....

**19. I discovered that I'm stronger than I thought I was. Score: 3**

Sometimes I feel like a well-made, over-loved teddy bear. My form is strong; tight stitching holds my soft stuffing together. My eyes are hard and glassy but tears never escape. A permanent soft smile on my face. Then I'm tugged and pulled and the stuffing starts to come out. I'm squeezed tight and the stitching pops. I have had one too many "operations" to keep the remaining stuffing in. Patchwork cloths covering scars. But that soft smile is still in place.

**20. I learned a great deal about how wonderful people are. Score: 0-5**

This is another complicated question. This seems more philosophical—because

no person is completely wonderful and no person is completely bad. Everyone is a mixed bag, including myself. I like to think of myself as good but I am sure there are people in the world who think I'm not. The people I surround myself with, though, they are the best people in the world. There are a lot of people who don't understand what I've been through and who I am.

I remember this one time when a nurse surprised me at the hospital. I always brought my iPod with me; it was the only thing that could relax me enough to breathe while waiting for hours at a time in an ER. The pain would be too much, and they would always take too long to give me anything for it. For a while, I felt like I was in the ER every other week. I remember lying on a gurney with punk-pop playing in my ears when a young nurse checked in on me. I can't remember her face or her name; those details are sunk deep in the murky waters of memory loss. But I remember she smiled at me and said, "Hey, you're the alternative girl. I can usually hear the music playing. What are you doing back here?"

I probably brushed off her question or cried—again, I don't know. But I remember being stuck on the fact that she remembered me. I thought that was impressive and depressing at the same time.

Maybe the answer is that I'm always surprised by people both good and bad.

**21. I am better at accepting needing others. Score: 3**

See questions 4, 6, 9, and 10.

Victims of trauma have to create a new narrative for themselves, to make sense of something insensible. They have to decide what their story will be: victim or survivor? Deliberate rumination is a key part in coping with trauma. It's a thought process driven by the person instead of the pain; it's when a person thinks about how the event impacts them instead of just the event itself.

Trauma itself doesn't cause people to change; it's how people look at it.

Most of the time it's suggested that you speak with someone else about your issues, but what about to yourself?

James Pennebaker, now a chair of the Psychology Department at the University of Texas, discovered that writing your troubles can be very helpful. By being able to get everything on paper, a person can see where they've been and where they are going. It allows them to tell their story and not be interrupted, to be organized about how they tell their narrative.

When writing, you are able to find meaning and how that event affects you emotionally, instead of just the cold facts of what happened. The key is to do it in bite-sized chunks, which writing allows, versus thinking about the event as a whole. Pennebaker calls it Expressive Writing, and there are both mental and physical health benefits to it. Tests proved that it lowers blood pressure, helps with stress, and can even get you hired faster than anyone else. The key is that you write only for you, no one else. But as long as you remember that you wrote it for you, maybe you can be confident enough to show your story to others.



*Storms in Ice Cages***BRISEYDA BARRIENTOS-ARIZA** •

Through the cracked linen screen of blue light,  
we all run  
to dry  
ourselves  
of reminders.

That—break—when the  
ice  
becomes water  
and the vapor of yesterday  
doesn't matter.

The stories where *coyotes* and cargo-driven trains are all the same.  
*Bestias* dually thirsty for more.

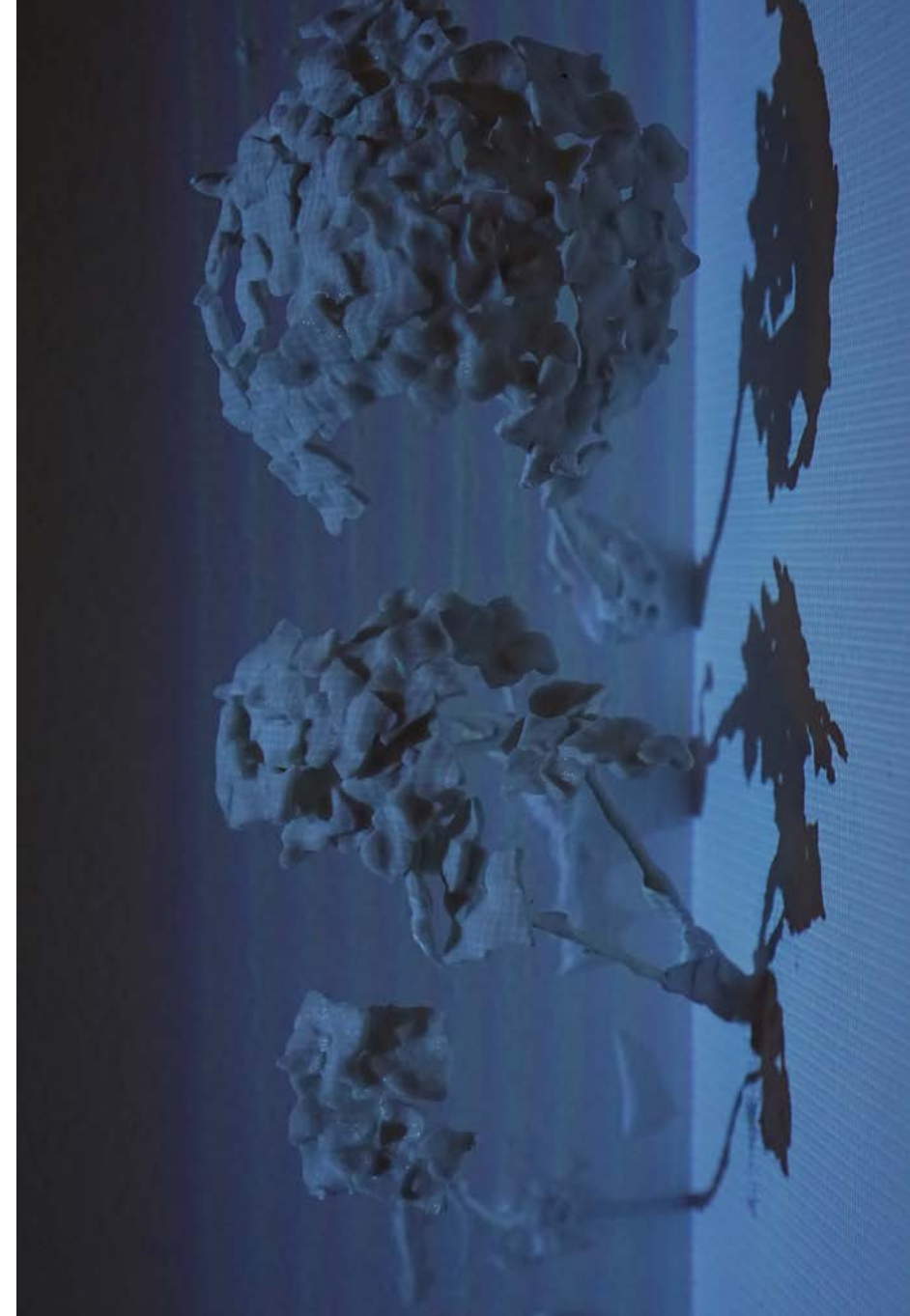
The rivers full  
\_\_\_\_\_soothing themselves in sullen water  
and in the fertile mornings weeping  
“*mis hijos*.”

Self-fulfilling prophecies of saturated folklore.  
The gone children never gotten.

Leaving the leaves unstained.  
The walls standing.  
Bodies cold.  
Backs wet.  
Dripping.

Melting through cracks in  
a land of holes.

Attempting to start storms from teardrops——in cages.

*Dream in Blau***DANIELLE FAUTH** •

3D printed flowers (Gypsum),  
metal, rod, plaster, blue light  
Largest bulb 4" diameter,  
entire piece 8"





## Gestalt

CHRISTOPHER LINFORTH •

Our misdeeds—let’s start with those. We made our old man piss his pants. He limped away, sopped the urine with a kitchen rag and kept his hand over his crotch. He swore at us, said we were no good since our mother left. We laughed. We didn’t care. We filched his bottom-shelf vodka and terrorized the neighborhood, rode our dirt bikes up and down the road, burning rubber doughnuts outside of Mrs. Macomber’s house. She watched us from her bedroom window. Her flash of silvery hair a clear sign we had her spooked. We stole her underwear from the drying line, strung it to the back of our bikes, to see if it worked as a parachute. The panties flew away, ripped, busted, left in the street for everyone to see. She came out, threatened to tell our old man. Go ahead, we said. He cares less than we do. Mrs. Macomber raised her fist, her knotted fingers thin and brittle. She wanted to punch us, knock us out, teach us a lesson. We rode up her

front lawn, stepped off our bikes, stood in front of her. We juttied out our chins. Take your best shot, we said. She fell to her knees. She cried about her flowerbed. We had destroyed her African daisies and her purple-blue phlox with our tires. She clutched the stems of her plants and tried to replant them; we hopped on our bikes, left her crying in the dirt. She died a few weeks later. Our old man said she tripped in her garden, broke her hip, developed septicemia. DNR.

We’re really here to talk about our virtues. Ten years ago, we slipped out of our old man’s house. We sped our dirt bikes out of town, down 84. Rumor had it our mother was shackled up with a man in Fishkill. We rolled along Main Street, eyeing any woman around forty. Any woman who seemed she’d had twin boys and abandoned them. A saggy belly, lopsided breasts, shellacked blonde hair—this is what we looked for. We propped our bikes

against the picture window of a laundromat and searched inside, then moved on to the clothing stores, the churches, the solitary teahouse. We questioned women, asked if they knew who we were. The women feigned ignorance. We slapped our chests and pointed to the color of our eyes. We match, we said. You match too. The women screamed, crossed the street, dialed cellphones. We ignored their negativity and carried on with our quest. Inside a florist’s, we stole a bouquet of hydrangea and white roses from the wedding display. We lugged the flowers all through a clapboard neighborhood. At the end of one cul-de-sac, a man stood talking

“We ignored their negativity  
and carried on with our quest.”

to a woman. She was our mother, she had to be, and he resembled Mrs. Macomber’s son. He had the same silver hair, the squashed nose. One of us tackled the man, sent him to the ground, and the other pressed the bouquet on our mother. She smiled at us. That was enough. We ran back to our bikes. We rode south then west a little, finally hitting the city. So perhaps we don’t have virtues. But surely we have something.



*No Tags, No ID*

CLARE NEEDHAM •

On the C train I watched a woman  
come on and ask for money: she  
wore a pale pink polo shirt, gray

pinstriped pants with flares, had  
dry blonde hair, sunglasses, a large  
wooden cross, and held a bag

of green globe grapes. She walked  
— haltingly —  
and extended to me a piece of paper

on which was printed the photograph  
of a beautiful woman's face. The  
woman had her eyes closed, and wore

makeup, but I could see her eyes  
were bruised, and there were cuts  
across her skin. The woman with

the grapes claimed the woman in  
the photograph as herself, and said  
she was the victim of domestic

violence, torture, rape. That was  
why she was here asking us  
for money, gift cards, prayers —



she couldn't work because she'd  
been badly beaten, tortured —  
she explained as her body came

close to my face. My heart clenched  
shut, and I felt those around me  
do the same. We all kept silent,

and the woman understood.  
She accepted her fate, and  
as we neared the next station, she

moved — haltingly — into the next car.  
Why the grapes, I wondered, as  
the blood began to flow through

my body again. Were they just a  
snack she carried to keep her blood  
sugar up as she limped through each

day, or would she have offered me  
some in exchange?  
She must have known

she was asking for a lot, more than  
I thought I dared: for someone to  
believe her, and for someone to give

her something that would make her  
feel human again, in possession of  
rights. Though when did I ever

feel that rights made one human, and  
didn't I know the right one  
never went punished? Why

did I with such habit take the time  
to photograph the posters of bad  
men who had fled the city, leaving



behind beaten or dead women? Why did I photograph these pieces of paper with contact information just

in case I saw the man and might be brave enough to call? It was similar to my photographing the posters of

missing men and women who one day wandered too far, and please call their families if you may have

seen them – I wanted to find myself in these situations, I wanted to be able to make these calls, to

say, I have seen them, I have seen them, just as I photographed the missing dog posters with a similar

aim, taking down their details, noting how often the dogs were described as skittish, anxious,

*please don't approach her, or  
please approach her gently, or  
just call –*

she has no tags, no ID, we

don't know where she is today.

## New and Recent Photography

TSOKU MAELA •

*“An archivist of a future African past in the present time, I wish not only to preserve but to rewrite the collective memory of blackness across the spectrum of her muddied hues in a language so vivid and worthy of our rebellion. To become, we reimagine what is and what is not. The edge we once knew to be fear became a springboard for us to leap into the unknown, only so our dreams could learn to fly. Therefore the Afrofuturist dreams in Surrealism.”*

Born March 29<sup>th</sup>, 1989 in South Africa and working, predominantly, on the mediums of photography, film, and text, Tsoku Maela uses his visual mediums to document not only the present but also as a way to look into the future by re-visualizing African narratives, culture, and aesthetics as part of surreal and abstract visual worlds.

His photography career began in late 2014, and his work has since been featured on CNN: African Voices, *Hyperallergic*, *VICE*, *GUP* magazine, and showcased in South Africa, Lagos, Zurich and Miami Art Basel at PULSE Contemporary Art Fair. He is also part of *Contemporary Art Curator Magazine*'s debut book publication, *100 Artists of the Future* (2019).

Academically, his work has also been used in student exhibitions in the United Kingdom to raise awareness around mental health and in the Hutchins Center for African and African American Research at Harvard University, archived as part of their *Transition* publication.



*The Anointed*

Hahnemühle photo  
rag baryta  
81 x 81 cm



*The Three (Love, Lust, Maya)*

Hahnemühle photo  
rag baryta  
81 x 81 cm



*Bardo*

Hahnemuhle photo  
rag baryta  
81 x 81 cm

*The Three (Mind, Body, Soul)*

Hahnemuhle photo  
rag baryta  
81 x 81 cm



*The Anointing*

Hahnemuhle photo  
rag baryta  
81 x 81 cm



*The Moment Of Half-truth*

HEIKKI HUOTARI •

Would you vote for quicksand if all that you heard of it was negative? It's that time now. The phantom horse's height is sixteen phantom human hands. Apologizing, I shall use to my advantage that the gospels pretty much agree *and* that they sometimes differ. If the currency of each of seven seas is innocence, then what one sees is what the other seizes. Ever equinoctial, I have one form letter for those who I'd send to hell and one for those who I'd make saints. And I can be persuaded.

*Angela Davis,  
Barely in Birmingham*

J.M. HALL •

Hails from Dynamite  
Hill, where bombs rained

on what blackness there  
dared to be vertical. Now

hail fires down Palestine,  
ghetto-land built by sons

of the *ghetto* primordial,  
Semites force-huddled

by medieval Venetian  
prejudice. Ergo unfolds

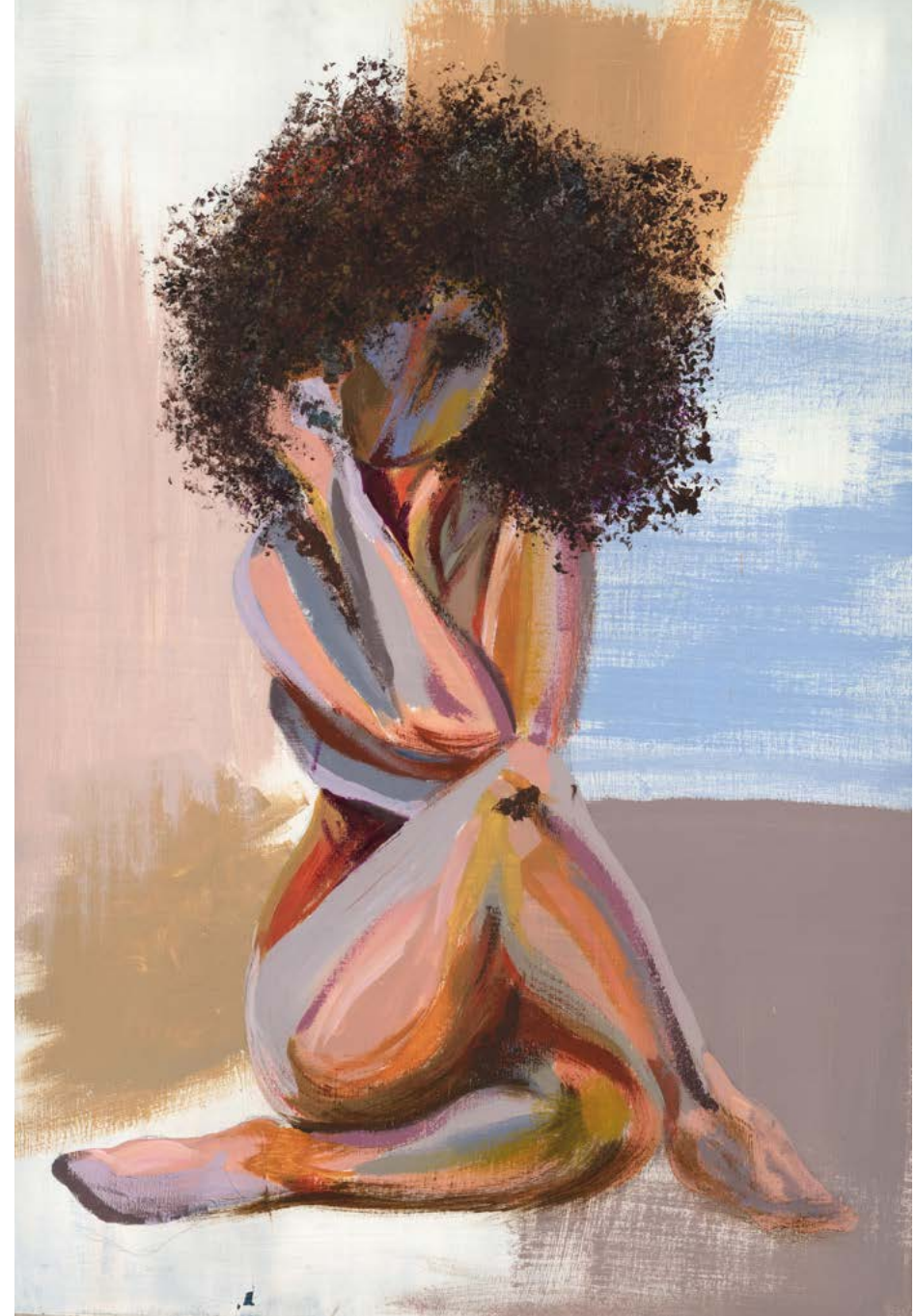
she her swift umbrella,  
for brown Others pelted.

Then the Civil Rights  
Institute, built on bones

of the bombed, rescinds  
her Fred Shuttlesworth

award. Unwelcomed  
again from "home,"

but our young mayor  
re-invites her anyway.



*Her 1*  
CHLOE YETTER •

Acrylic on canvas  
24" x 36"

## Fame and Fortune

DAVID CROUSE •



Some of Oliver's words are impossible to situate in a day and place, but they're still strong in Lane's memory—more striking, in fact, for their separateness, like a voice from behind a door.

But not what Oliver says on that last visit. It's all there, the look on Oliver's face, his familiar shirt seemingly grown an extra size, the walk around the house, the sun in the sky just so. It is Thanksgiving again, the second they celebrate that year, and this is what Oliver says. "It's a government thing caused by vaccine testing in New York. They tested on gay men. The most down and out raging homos they could find." He says this word, *homo*, like he has a right to it, like it will create some secret bond between them, and when Lane doesn't smile back—he's shocked actually, to hear it come from Oliver's mouth—he falls back into the story like a drunk falling into bed. He's that uncaring, that haphazard. These men, he explains, they were young and needed the money. It's not as if they trusted the doctors not to hurt them, probably, because most likely they didn't trust most people. But it was an abstract kind of danger, and abstract danger, he says, always wins out over actual discomfort. "That's what this person told me and he's dead from it, so he should know," he says, and Lane doesn't know what to believe.

There are many pieces here, each one commanding its own attention.

This person, Oliver explains, was a real mover and shaker in the New York publishing industry, and not very promiscuous. "He was almost fifty years old," he says. "It's not like he was out balling every weekend. He stayed at home with his dogs and read books." The wake had a line out the door and up the street. A person practically had to buy tickets. They *should* have sold tickets, he adds with a smile—that would have made this guy so happy. Lane smiles too. He can picture it, the long line of well-dressed people paying their respects.

These secret conversations, the death of the man, the image of the funeral, as if Oliver has been there himself to pay his respects—there is a sense of secret worlds, of places Oliver is going where Lane is not invited. The same is true in reverse, but strangely Lane doesn't sense any jealousy on Oliver's part—the dying man for the living man. No, it's quite the opposite. Lane wants more. He wants to know the whole story. "That is the whole story," Oliver says, like he's talking to a child who insists on hearing more of the book just so he can stay up later. Lane hears the click of the receiver, imagines the bleak walk to the fridge afterward for a glass of juice—maybe this is a phone conversation,

one that takes place deep in December. There are Christmas lights in the windows of the houses. But no, that doesn't seem right. Oliver's face is stern and sure as he says the words.

Lane wants to tell him the story of the kiss, the six kisses, and especially the last one, but Oliver is beyond these kinds of stories. His own talk confirms it. But still, there is the word chosen, the girl asking for tea from the man she used to work with, and what else? He and the director, too, kissing that night in the director's car, not more than that. The other man wears a wedding ring, says he just likes to experiment, wants to be that girl in the scene with Lane. He offers to drop him off anywhere. This is the last Lane ever sees of him. Oliver—the old Oliver—would find this funny.

Shooting resumes later than expected, in early February, on a sound stage on the edge of Los Angeles. The fifth director calls the cast and crew together and tells them he will not tolerate any lack of commitment. Yes, the rumors are true, but they will get through this together with minimal fuss.

Lane hasn't heard any rumors.

He rents a new room, even shoddier than the old one, with furniture that looks confiscated from someone's great aunt. The chairs are small and mismatched, a small desk doubles as his kitchen table, and the bed frame tilts slightly when he throws his weight there. The view, however, is a good one—an empty field where occasionally kids play baseball. He puts the TV in the only closet to make space, does sit ups on the floor until he gets rug burn. His neighbors, if he even has any, keep to themselves.

Ronald Reagan has just given an inaugural address in which he speaks about paying attention to the country's most important special interest group—Americans—and the heroism of everyday life. Lane hears it in drips and drabs from people at parties, as jokes from friends when they call him late at night to ask about Oliver, but it doesn't arrive

as news—it's just an unwelcome leak from the outside world. He is studying his new lines, learning the way his character holds his shoulders. He is trying to inhabit this person who doesn't have a last name, who doesn't even have the dog anymore. He's going to be traveling with a friend, an old man who will be father figure and foil.

The old man's lines are short like left jabs, and supposedly he will throw karate chops during the show's fight scenes. Or a stand-in double will, at least. The actor's name sounds familiar in the way that many simple names do, but it's more than that—yes, he's definitely heard of him before. Someone says he's flying in from Spain, from the set of a failed western. There's talk of some kind of suicide, maybe one of the producers, maybe the director or even his wife. The actor, one hopes, will not bring this tragedy with him, someone explains, but there's a feeling of energy and newness—even this trail of bad things has gravitas, and isn't that why they're bringing him in, like some kind of hired gun, the kind of person he was most likely playing in Spain, lean, disciplined? The film he's heard of—he's gone out of his way to track it down—involves two gangs of men, sunburned faces, some vague idea of treasure hidden in a remote part of Mexico. In one of the key scenes a man is hung upside down and interrogated, his torturers circling around him. The camera shows the victimized man's view—the boots of his enemies, the spurs, the dust—and then the scene cuts to open sky, a mountain range, and those same men on horseback. How much time has gone by? Two, three, four days? If the entire film were like this scene it might be brilliant, but instead that moment comes across as a hallucination, an accident. Lane writes to Oliver, "I'm not sure if I'm losing my focus or finding it. I think I need you to remind me who I am." Two hundred dollars is all he can spare. He wraps the note around the check, runs his fingernail down the fold to make it tighter.



The whole procedure feels like an insult for everybody involved, the person opening the envelope most of all.

Oliver's former business partner is suing him. "Illness has a way of clarifying a person's relationships," Oliver says one night on the phone. "It's actually kind of a relief. It's the death of fantasy too."

"Is that really true?" Lane asks.

"You'll have to wait and find out, I guess," Oliver says. No more talk about Lane being in jeopardy. Sometimes they talk about a future in which Oliver is not present and Lane is rushing, head down, into a long black car as people ask for his autograph. Another in which Lane plays a brooding character,

.....

### "It's actually kind of a relief. It's the death of fantasy too."

.....

a guitarist or painter, engaged in a series of sexual acts for which middle America is unprepared. But Oliver talks about it more than Lane, and even he seems to be a little tired of the story. Not of the story itself, so much, as the effort to tell it, to keep plastering it over the reality of their days. Oliver says, more seriously toward the end of the talk, "Maybe it just creates new ones. I don't know."

"What does?"

Oliver laughs.

The networks are close to buying the pilot, one of the producers explains over the phone, and Lane wonders how he has misunderstood, because he thought the network had already signed on months ago. He is stronger, though, from lifting weights and evening laps in a gym pool, and he flirts with younger men at bars and just that

simple decision to smile and speak in the language of innuendo makes him feel stronger too; it's strength gained from employing both his charm and restraint, and it makes him feel like his life is something he can steer like a ship. What was it Oliver liked to say? Men over thirty see even their lethargy as power. Although Lane is only twenty-eight he can see the wisdom in this, the wisdom in just about everything Oliver tells him. These are words that will come back to him.

"There's a snag," he tells Oliver, "but it shouldn't be too bad. How are you feeling?"

But mostly they simply exchange details of their days: the juices and herbs and small orchestrations of the body on the one side, the new lines, new characters, on the other. New words for the sickness enter into their conversation, and occasionally people—the most distant of their friends—send articles clipped from magazines and newspapers for Lane to pass on. "I'm famous too," Oliver says, and the words will grow to mean many things: a sign of faith, a glimpse of secret jealousy, and a joke that chases Lane down the long corridor of the years. He attends some minor auditions and he feels imperial and distant in the waiting room, standing the way someone might on a subway car, even when there are open seats. He wants to tell them—the people he's performing for—that he's dying. Later he looks at his bare chest in the mirror, traces a finger along his eyebrow. The lines he will speak are weightless and disposable as a napkin.



The old man insists on being called simply by his first name, Lee, or Lee V if they must, but nobody better call him sir or mister. He looks people over as if searching out the potential traitor, the person who might break this pact. Then his face blossoms into a weird sort of broken smile. Everybody follows along. Soon they are laughing.

There's not that much work to do while they wait, so Lane talks to the caterers, apologizes for his co-star. But no, they were happy to get the tea, and amused that she thought she had worked with them. They've never worked on a film in their lives, and neither would they want to—they're a married couple, co-own the business, own three vans, have a dozen employees and they're not even thirty. "We really like you," the woman says. "That kiss. Just the way you stand. I hope I'm not embarrassing you." He could reach out and touch her face. She wouldn't turn away and pull back. He knows this the way he might know anything: the color of a shirt, the name of a thing. It's that clear. She says, "I'm sorry."

"When are you coming back?" Oliver asks when they finally find each other on the phone.

"It's difficult," Lane says. "We're so busy. Why don't you return my calls?"

"I'm busy too," he says. His laughter sounds low and scratchy, a defect in the line.

It's a few days before Christmas, and the sun burns away the snow on the ground by noon. Oliver wakes from his nap to a different world. It's a world he wants to walk in, and Lane takes him by the upper arm and helps him around the property, stopping occasionally to breathe and discuss the overturned birdbath, the abandoned chicken coop—these remnants of his childhood. The bones in his face seem cavernous, but he does not talk about ethereal things. He talks about old pettiness, cash, and his dispersed students, the worst of them. He talks about their stubby fingers and bad memories and inability to grasp the pleasures of a well-written tune. He glances at Lane and says, "I never understood your taste. You were like those teenagers I taught. The ones with the expensive haircuts. Jesus Christ those haircuts."

At first Lane thinks that he is talking about someone else. His mother, possibly, because she is the person he talks about most, and

the list of grievances against her is a long one. "What?" he says.

"This is where he kept his dogs," Oliver says. "My father."

"You never understood his tastes?"

"You," Oliver says. "I was talking about you."

Of course, Lane thinks, and he realizes he heard him right the first time. Oliver is reaching out to the rusted fence, gripping it, pulling it back with a strength that's truly surprising. The wind is blowing uncommonly hard and wisps of hair move around his head in a little orchestra of madness. "I don't think you should do that," Lane says.

"I want to see what's left," Oliver says. His voice is loud and for a moment Lane worries that Oliver's mother might hear.

"There's nothing in there," Lane says.

"I have eyes," Oliver says. He's gripping the fence with both hands now, as if he might climb it to get at whatever treasure it's protecting, but inside there is only packed down dirt and scrub grass and two home-made dog houses with small square holes for doorways.

"Oliver," he says. "Stop."

It's easy to pull him backward. Even when he was in good health he was so much smaller. Now the only difficulty is not knocking him down. So as he pulls him back he holds him up. "Listen," he says, "We're in this together, okay?" But Oliver isn't listening. He's looking at his fingers, which have been cut by the fence, the sudden motion of being pulled backward, and when he glances up it's as if Lane has been scolding him for being bad. The look on his face is that childish and horrifying. "Oliver," Lane says. "There are still things I have to tell you."

"It's just a scratch," Oliver says. "You didn't mean it."

"You're right," Lane says.

"I meant it though," Oliver says. "I never understood. You were like those teenagers. The ones who wanted me to teach them how to play all the popular songs."

"I'm right here, Oliver," Lane says. "So are you. Stop being so dramatic."  
 "A funny thing for an actor to say."  
 They could argue like this forever, it seems, or at least until Oliver's mother moves around the house and finds them, Lane still gripping her son's windbreaker, his breath hot and malicious. But no, Oliver is already tiring. He's growing limp. Lane needs both hands to help him back toward the front door, the white T-shirts shaking on the clothesline as they pass through them. "Is everything okay?" Oliver's mother asks from the sink as they enter.  
 "Great," Oliver says. "Everything is great. I'm just tired."  
 "Me too, actually," Lane says, and he laughs.  
 That night, while Oliver sleeps, Lane sits at the kitchen table playing cards with himself. He flips through the deck, finds the appropriate matches, and when he's done with a hand he counts the points against himself, holding the tally in his head. As the numbers stack up against him he's tempted to cheat, but he feels pretty good about stopping himself—good enough that when he finally steals a few aces from the bottom of the deck it's with a sense of entitlement. "He needs to be more careful," Oliver's mother says, when she sits down across from him. "The smallest cuts can be very problematic."  
 "I feel bad about that. I'm not used to him like this."  
 "You're seeing him at a bad stretch. Usually he's very sweet."  
 "And he has a right not to be. If he wants."  
 "Ah," she says, "but he is. To me at least."  
 He deals the cards and they play while they talk, but within a couple of turns they've given up, and the cards splay on the table in a pattern like two opposite fans. Lane is telling a story. It's tumbling out of his mouth without intention or design. "When Oliver and I first met—it was our third time going out somewhere together, I think, although we had known each other from parties and

things like that for a while—this time, we went to a state fair as a sort of joke. Has Oliver ever told you this story?"  
 "I'm not sure," she says. "I don't know what story it is yet."  
 "We were trapped at the top of a Ferris wheel for more than an hour. He didn't tell you this? The Ferris wheel stalled or something—stalled isn't the right word for it but it jammed or whatever—and we were stuck up there. I was a little afraid but he was so casual about it. We had a big bag of pink candied popcorn and he would eat one and then drop one. He'd hold it out and make a game of aiming at people's heads."  
 "That sounds like him. How many people did he hit?"  
 "There was no way to tell. We were so high up and there was a wind. But what was funny about it was that people were looking up at us with such concern—a little crowd had gathered, and some emergency workers—but here he was, dropping little pink bombs on them."  
 "What were you afraid of?"  
 "We were trapped up on a Ferris wheel. Isn't it obvious?"  
 But she knows her son, knows how he would have acted up there. He must have felt as safe up there as he did sitting at the kitchen table, lying in bed. He remembers these comparisons, and the way she seems so interested in the story. Maybe she's hoping to be surprised. "Did that make you feel better?" she asks, meaning Oliver's obliviousness, his courage.  
 "Sure. Although I also thought that he was a bit of an eccentric. I was seeing someone else at the time, not seriously, and Oliver was the exact opposite of that person. He was, well, he was *fun*, which seemed like the rarest and most amazing thing one could find in another human being, considering what I was going through. I was starved for it."  
 "How did they get you down?"  
 "They did something. I don't know. The

wheel began to move. The crowd cheered. Oliver made a show of kissing the ground and people applauded. Then we went and ate these horrible little hotdogs."  
 He can picture himself up there, a hand tight on the cage, the faces below. He tries hard to remember the color of the sky, whether it was warm or cool, and exactly what kind of little thrill ran through him when Oliver first plucked a piece of popcorn from the plastic bag and said, "Look out below." The faces looking upward slackmouthed and innocent in their concern. He is enjoying himself, reliving this. He leans back in his chair, both palms flat on the table, and says, "I'm on the verge. I really am. I wish Oliver could see me when I'm working. I'm getting better. I can feel it. I'm tapping into something."  
 She says something about his grief—he doesn't catch it exactly.  
 "What?"  
 "Nothing."  
 "I heard you anyway. And it's not that. It's skill. I'm learning things."  
 "What are you learning?"  
 "Technique," he says again. "What are we talking about really?"  
 "I don't know," she says, and she slides her cards toward him across the table. She is probably wondering how he can look so healthy, what deal he has struck, and he can't really begrudge her for looking disgusted by the sight of him.  
 But it's not that, is it? Because she's smiling and there's something like sympathy in her eyes, like he's sick too. "How long has it been since you worked?" she asks.  
 "Not that long," he says, and they stop there, because Oliver is calling for the pink lemonade he loves so much.  
 What will this conversation mean years from now, when he is waking too early in the morning and sliding his legs from beneath a blanket? He'll remember it like he might those faces below him as he sits at the top of the Ferris wheel—as a kind of dream. And

the two will merge together, the event and the telling of the event, the faces below and Oliver's mother's face as she listens. He'll still be pleased by how easy that happens—how the story spills from him—but he won't know what next trick he needs to perform to pull all of that into the present, and more than that too. He will want to tell someone, as he lies in bed, arm thrown over his eyes, "I wasn't afraid of the height. It was pleasant actually. I was afraid because they were all watching Oliver."

.....

**"She is probably wondering how he can look so healthy, what deal he has struck, and he can't really begrudge her for looking disgusted by the sight of him."**

.....

But the only person to tell is Oliver's mother and that would mean heading back there for a third time in three weeks, making more soup, holding her hand, changing the sheets on her rank bed.  
 It's no decision at all. He's going back, driving the interstate at midnight. Along the way he stops at that same all night restaurant, sees the same waiter, orders the same meal.  
 "We're out of marmalade," the waiter says, as if this is something Lane might actually need. Maybe he thinks he knows him now, has decided there is something to the looks of that man in booth nine, and that he deserves more than the usual sarcasm. Or this is his usual pattern, a sort of feint and retreat. Lane eats almost nothing. Why did he stop anyway?

He doesn't know if he should tip him or not, considering the unspoken arrangement, so he decides to make a joke of it too, and stacks four quarters there and next to them a small, dirty note—but not so dirty as to not seem a little elegant.

He walks to the front registers and still doesn't see the waiter, but then, outside on the sidewalk, there he is smoking a cigarette. He smiles and rubs it out and walks with him. He won't even get the four quarters, the note, which is maybe for the best. Instead a mystery for whoever cleans the table. They do not go to the car. There are squat concrete buildings just across the two-lane highway—another restaurant, something else behind that, and a park with brightly covered architecture for kids to crawl on. That's deserted too. The waiter steps into traffic, waits for a gap, and then they are moving, Lane stepping quickly to catch up.

"We have to stop meeting like this," the waiter says, when they're in the motel room.

"Don't make any jokes," Lane says. "Please. Let's just hurry up."

"Suits me fine," the waiter says.

Excerpted from the novella *Fame and Fortune*. To read the rest, visit our website.



## *Contraband Chopsticks, Skinny Red Sleeves*

DARCY SMITH •

today i turn 28 which = pepsi + ribs.  
everybody knows family visits are better  
than diversity BBQs, better than free recovery  
tee shirts even if they let me pick black or white.

birthdays are glossy like Nurse Lisa's cranberry lips,  
sticking to our take-out chinese ± sweet & sour soup like  
the motivational lake taped behind auntie's head × mama's  
mountains of miss-me-lo mein + cupcakes, candles:

mama, may i please peel your lemon-lime  
sticky label? mama, i need XL air with no ice,  
auntie where's my gift? did you buy me a six-pack  
of tubular socks? mama, did you remember

my staggering tower of word-search books?  
mama, can we open this window? mama will you  
call me every Sunday at six o'clock? i'm sorry  
mama, don't. i promise. mama. i promise.



*Hallucination*  
**WILLIAM HARTMAN** •

Watercolor  
 8.5" x 10"

*Persistent Roots*

**DARCY SMITH** •

Come back to the tractor at the edge  
 of the upper lot. Come back to motor rust,  
 let this mud seep between  
 my toes and his mowing tan,  
 come back to root grafts, buried.

The tallest oak has lost its crown,  
 I hide in greening pockets, like love,  
 like splinters, like swollen fingertips.

When the creek refused to speak, when white  
 pines grew bare, my shelter fell. He drenched  
 his chest with baby oil, waited for new sun.  
 Here, an unthinking hum, the spread of dieback  
 disease. His breath, our branches, entwined.

Come pour my father a copper afternoon,  
 come grant him an ounce of ocean, dear silence  
 come, let him sleep on his morphine beach.

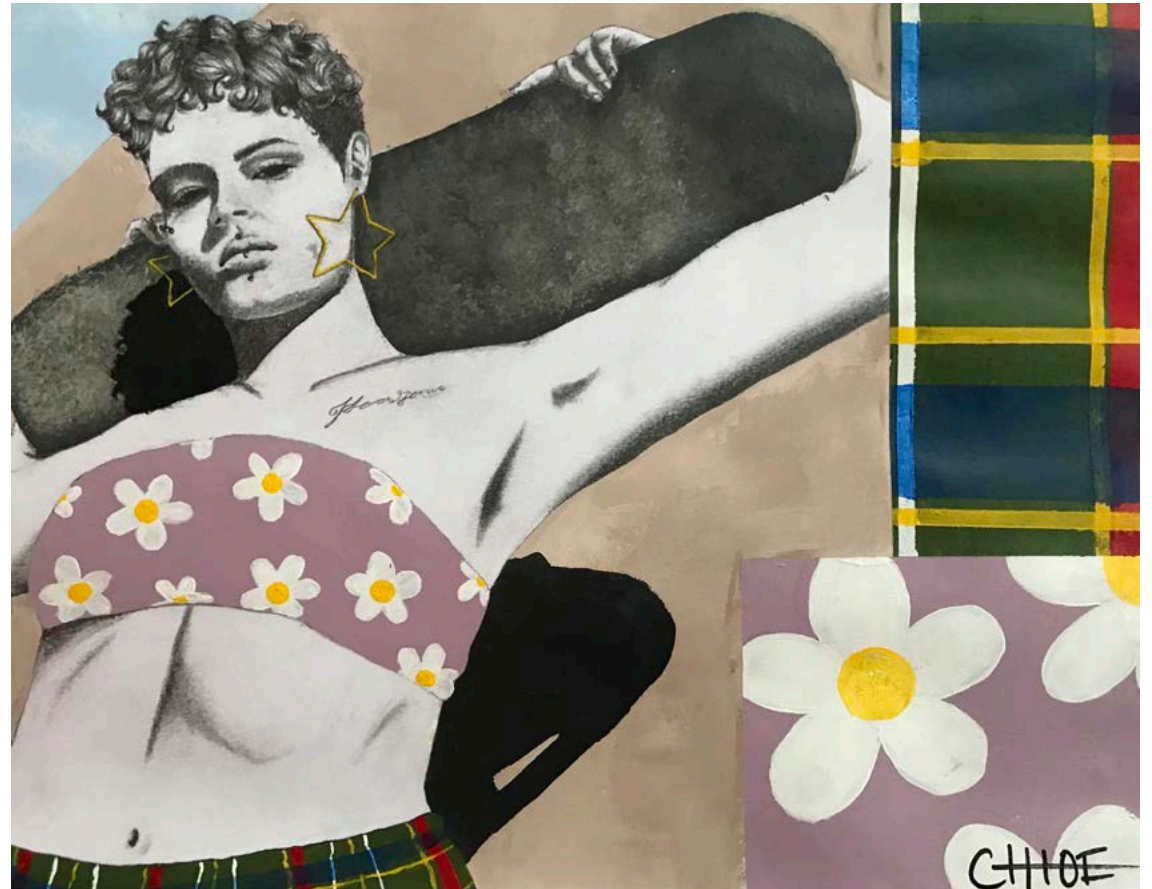


## *His Mother Smells Like Hairspray*

**MEGAN CLARK** •

Just because she  
chose  
to go drinking  
instead of tucking you in  
each night  
does not mean  
you're unworthy of love,

and the fact  
your most prominent  
memory  
is her AquaNet lingering  
near the foyer bathroom  
tells me that you'll know  
how to be better.



## *Concrete Daisies*

**CHLOE YETTER** •

Acrylic and  
graphite on paper  
9" x 12"

## Free Drinks

SHAYNA GOODMAN •

I met Chris after I had graduated from college and moved back into my parents' small apartment in Soho. I had gotten a job as a hostess at an upscale Mexican restaurant on Park Avenue. It was located across the street from several investment firms. Every evening, the restaurant was filled with financiers treating clients to rounds of margaritas on their company cards. Meanwhile, the economy had tanked. This was 2010, and jobs for recent graduates were few and far between. The only industry with jobs to offer seemed to be finance. I thought I would never move out of my parents' apartment. I'd be stuck in my 90-square-foot bedroom forever, unable to afford rent in the city I grew up in. I looked for an office job, and in the meantime, I found some pleasure in flirting with the bankers who came into the restaurant. Behind the host stand and out in the rest of the world, my youth and cleavage granted me limited power and free drinks.

Like the customers I served, Chris worked in finance and wore pastel-colored oxford shirts. I don't know how much money he made but it is likely that it was less than I liked to imagine. He was a friend of one of the servers at the restaurant, Arjun, a recent law school graduate who couldn't find a job either. Chris would come to the bar after work and tease Arjun, while he served him margaritas at a discount. "Don't mind us,"



Chris told me, "we're old buddies from college." They had been members of the same fraternity at the University of North Carolina.

I was not initially pleased when Chris took an interest in me. He was seven years older than I was, and he was balding. Back then I fantasized about dating bearded Parisian artists and muscular jocks. I hadn't yet identified WASPy, balding rich men as a desirable type until I overheard two of the servers discussing Chris's best attributes: his deep voice and very blue eyes. "I'd do him," one said. "Yeah, duh," the other replied. At 22, this was all I needed to be convinced that I was attracted to a man.

My first date with Chris was at a restaurant a few blocks away from my parents' apartment; it was a place that my dad had passed by many times and commented with a mix of envy and disdain, "Look at this new bullshit." My parents were intrigued by the increasingly young, wealthy residents of their neighborhood. My mother developed a habit of buying \$12 cold pressed juice. "And all the people inside the juice place," she said, "must work for some kind of fashion site." Chris said that the posh new bullshit was one of his "go-to spots." He ordered us round after round of drinks. There was a frothy cocktail that came in a martini glass—a delicate cloud of basil and strawberry. We ordered appetizers from the "raw bar"

section of the menu. "Get whatever you want," he told me. I had never realized how much I loved luxury until Chris granted me access to it. And I never knew how much fun drinking could be until the cocktails were free.

At first I didn't see a problem in taking full advantage of Chris's munificence. I would take perks where I could get them. So in the following weeks, I accepted all of his invitations to dinner and drinks. Tipsy on a work night, we'd take a cab back to his sprawling Chelsea apartment, lie down in his high-thread-count sheets and have a kind of sex that I can only describe as polite and clean. Like a handshake. There was minimal eye contact, kissing with no tongue. It was neither passionate nor personal.

On weekday mornings I would lie in bed while his alarm went off and he would shower, spray cologne, and dress in a suit. After he was gone, I'd respond to my dad's texts, pretending I had slept at a "friends'" house. Then I would fall back to sleep until noon. One day, Chris returned home on his lunch break and found me exfoliating my legs in his bathroom with his men's care products. "I don't mind," he said. But I felt like what my mother would call a *schnorer*: a parasite, someone who takes advantage of the generosity of others.

My friends liked to debate: is it anti-feminist to allow men to pay for your drinks? Chris told me stories about women who had taken advantage of him. They had run up exorbitant bills at the bar, buying shots for their friends without his "permission." I wondered when I would cross a line and lead Chris to suspect that I was "using" him. In truth, I believed that I loved him. But like many people, I loved the trappings of the relationship. I loved the idea of being beautiful enough to have found myself in a relationship where I was given free things in exchange for my looks.

It was an archetype that I could romanti-

cize and luxuriate in as I debated its ethics.

Months passed and I talked about Chris often at work. I told the other hostesses and servers about the places where he had made reservations for us. They said, "Get it while you can, girl."

"Watch out," Arjun warned. "If I were you, I'd miss a few of his texts on purpose."

From the stories Chris had told me, I gathered that he was rarely interested in any one woman for very long. But I thought that I was different. I was an intellectual. I was an artist. The attributes that I hid from him were the same ones that I believed would set me apart.

.....

**"I believed that I loved him. But like many people, I loved the trappings of the relationship."**

.....

This is what Chris said he liked about me: my stomach was flat. "You don't understand," he once said, "how gross women's stomachs can look." He liked when I dressed extra girly in floral dresses. I bought pink lace bras and underwear, dyed my hair a shade lighter, tried to conform to what I believed to be the aesthetic of his former girlfriends in North Carolina. And he liked that I was funny; my humor always surprised him. Each time I made a quip he'd say, "You're one of the few funny girls I've met." I could be funny, but I was careful not to sound too nerdy or academic. I stopped reading.

This is what I liked about Chris: he turned an average weekend night into a drunken, extravagant marathon of clubs, lounges, and bars. He kept a tab open wherever we went, and I grew accustomed to giving his last

name to bartenders. We dated from winter into early spring, when there was nothing to do but binge drink until 4 a.m. Outside, cold winds whipped around the Lower East Side. Inside, I had never been so drunk in my life. I would feel myself smiling so wide it hurt my cheeks, slipping in the wet spots on the floor, peeing on the back of my new thong in tiny bathroom stalls as I hovered and swayed above the toilet.

I was once so drunk that I left a bar in another woman's expensive coat. I still debate whether or not it was really an accident. In the morning Chris complimented the item and said, "I'm glad you went shopping." Was this a jab at the Forever 21 clothes I normally wore?

### "I still debate whether or not it was really an accident."

I also liked the idea of being included in Chris and Arjun's extended group of southern, fratty friends. They had all moved to Manhattan in their early twenties and saw the city in a way I never had before. I was impressed by their knowledge of new "spots." They were perplexed when I told them that I had grown up in Soho. "I can't imagine raising kids in the city," they would say, "I have three, maybe four more years of this city life in me." They complained about the cost of living in New York. "How can you *afford* to raise a kid here," they asked me.

"My parents couldn't," I once admitted and I blushed.

My family's shaky financial background was something private that I rarely shared.

When I left Chris and returned home to my parents' apartment, he did not know or seem to care about the place I went to. He

didn't know that I slept in a small single bed. He didn't pick up on the fact that I could never call him while at home because my parents could hear everything I said.

At one point, I told Chris that I was having trouble finding work outside the restaurant. He said he would try to get me a job as an administrative assistant at the private equity firm where he worked. I sent him my résumé, but I said that I didn't think I was a good fit for the position. I was disorganized and had no interest in finance. "Just wear a low-cut shirt to the interview," he said. In the end, I never got an interview and I was relieved.

Clearly, Chris knew very little about me. He hated tuna salad and lox, and I didn't want him to know that—like many American Jews—I love tuna salad and lox. I came to find the tuna salad suppression emblematic of the parts of myself I hid to appeal to Chris's white southernness.

Despite Arjun's warning, it took me by surprise when Chris began to text less frequently. When we woke up on weekend mornings, he seemed to want me to leave and didn't suggest getting brunch. "I have a busy day," he claimed. I wondered if it was because he could tell, despite my efforts to hide it, that I was poor and artsy and loved tuna salad.

One night I went to a bar alone with Arjun, and he joked, "You'll have to buy your own drinks tonight." I spent my paycheck on raspberry vodka sodas, getting so drunk that I began to complain to Arjun about Chris. "He used me," I said. "But," he argued, "you used him too." Though I couldn't put it into words at the time, I knew there was a difference.

The system had endowed Chris with the power to draw women into his life; my power was limited to enjoying myself within the parameters he created and allowed.

In the last weeks that we saw each other, I would lie awake, sobering up in his bed, staring at his bookshelf: Malcolm Gladwell,

Tucker Max, a copy of *Infinite Jest* that I am confident he never read, a copy of *The Great Gatsby*, which I'm sure he read and misinterpreted as an endorsement of the American Dream.

Our relationship ended at a wine bar.

I ordered prosecco and just after the drink was served, Chris suggested that we "slow things down." After that, the prosecco's celebratory bubbles felt antagonizing. I did not hear from Chris again aside from occasional late night texts. "Are you out?" he would ask. I was often out, tearing up at the sight of all the fancy bars and restaurants we had patronized together. Was I crying over the effects of late-stage capitalism on our city, or the fact that I no longer had access to its perks? "Yes, I'm out," I'd reply, hailing a cab.





*Hypebae*

**BRIDGET RODDY** •

Wacom Intuos tablet  
and Photoshop  
8.5" x 11"

*Girls*

**AMY ROA** •

From the spot where girls had peeled electrical wire out of the walls and wrapped it around their shoulders like cloaks, stood the clone of the long-deceased military leader, Napoleon. That new Napoleon wouldn't look you in the eye or attack prey. "They killed the elk and they didn't let me see it," he said, tears streaming down his face. Those girls just laughed and went back to locating precious stones by sound. In the suburbs of New York on Valentine's Day, other girls explain the connection between the nervous system and the muscles developed for a life in trees. They want a Napoleon clone of their very own. To sit him at the edge of a dam and cover him in lace. They said, "He'd be just like a baby we could throw into a bouncy castle." Those girls, their fathers had been sent to prison for the murder of grain dealers. They know the day sends a pulse of radio waves through the burnt-out shells of cars. It's as if life in its truest form was elsewhere, sitting under the asbestos in the crawl space where one girl spits out sunflower seed shells. She'd just carried a slain deer through the abandoned lot, kicked up her heels like a show pony the whole way. The weather was just like this, driving wild things back into the night. Blades of grass biting the ankles, then wind-borne seeds colonizing the slopes of a recently erupted volcano while girls twisted their bodies to stop fragments of glass from burying their town. Then I grew ashamed of myself for not helping them, for staying home and throwing roasted chestnuts down to the hungry girl stuck in a well. Her voice reached up and said, "What they don't understand is that if you stay on land too long, you become human."





*Nature Nurture Figure One*

**NATASHA ZETA** •

35mm photography  
13" x 19"



*Nature Nurture Figure Five*

**NATASHA ZETA** •

35mm photography  
13" x 19"

## Ballad of the Weird Girl

EVA NIESSNER ◦

My parents seemed to delight in the fact that they had raised me to be a noisy, morbid little weirdo who spent a lot of time talking about, and to, ghosts. How else could I explain their determination to fill me up with stories of the macabre, the bizarre, the unknown? If eldest children are guinea pigs, I was their attempt to build a Grand Guignol actress out of an elementary schooler. Horror films and books were not only allowed but encouraged when I was a little girl. “They filmed this right near your grandmother’s house!” I was told when *The Blair Witch Project* came on TV, and then I was invited to sit on the sofa and watch.

Despite her unshakeable faith in the Catholic Church, my mother has always been deeply interested in the metaphysical. She doesn’t just believe in aliens; she’s hoping they’ve got room in the passenger seat of their spaceship for her to ride along. She attributes most aspects of her personality to the fact she is a Capricorn, and spent years regaling me with stories of past-life regressions and the ghosts in the centuries-old home she lived in when she stayed with friends in England. A historian at heart, Mom particularly likes stories of Civil War battle-field specters, and she passed the taste for that on to me sure as an X chromosome. As an English professor, my father has a predictably literary taste in horror. As an adult,

I’ve come to realize that most of my friends didn’t get regaled with tales of the *Erlkönig* as a father-daughter bonding activity—to which I say, well, y’all really missed out. Picture this: the weird little girl rapt in the passenger seat of the pickup truck as we drive to the dump, the father telling the tale of another father, the one from Goethe. Like us, the characters in the poem are riding, but on horseback, the little son crying that the fairy king has him in his clutches. “The father finally rides to safety and turns to look,” Dad says, also turning to look, to make sure I am paying attention. I am. His voice becomes a ghoulish whisper and he turns up one palm for emphasis, the other on the steering wheel. “The boy is dead.”

Dad also passed on a few of his favorite books from his own childhood to me, hard-back volumes from the ’70s with names like *STRANGE STORIES*, *AMAZING FACTS* and *MYSTERIES OF THE UNEXPLAINED*. For the weird girl, these were the most valuable tomes imaginable. Where else was I going to get my fill of stories about demonic possession, Atlantis, Nessie, and poltergeists? This was not exactly pre-internet, but both the World Wide Web and I were just kids, and when we first got it, I was mostly using it to look up the names of all the Beanie Babies. For my darker urges, I stuck to the books, at least at first. They weren’t just descriptive,



they were also filled with illustrations—the Whitechapel Vigilance Committee’s sketch of Jack the Ripper in his floppy hat, the painting of St. Wolfgang forcing the devil to hold his Bible.

I loved them. I loved them all.

I don’t want to give the impression that everything I did as a child was freakish, or that my parents were some kind of early-2000’s Gomez and Morticia Addams. I wouldn’t necessarily categorize my childhood as painfully normal, but school, family vacations at the beach, Thanksgivings at grandma’s—all of this was quite typical. I played with Barbies and stuffed animals. I learned how to ride a bike and won free pizzas from reading lots of books through the Pizza Hut literacy program. I begged my parents for an allowance so I could purchase my own Furby.

But weird little girls are bloodthirsty, and even when the ghost stories bite like bad dogs at the girls’ fingers, make the girls cry in the middle of the night, these girls want to find out more.



These girls find their tribes quickly. I always had friends who were like me, friends whose backpacks contained *The Hobbit* and *Scary Stories to Tell in the Dark*. We listened to *My Chemical Romance* and kept each other up at night with stories of parents’ friends who had been possessed or had seen spirits. We held seances in our basements. At Girl Scout meets, we played a game where we told a story about a ghost cat scratching us, then we checked our backs for red lines. Somehow we always found them, even if they were just imprints from folds in our clothes, or wholesale delusions, we always found them, we did.



You’ve met the weird girl. You knew her in grade school, or she was in your science lab in high school. She sat next to you on the bus, or she works in the cubicle across from yours. She told you she could turn into a dragon. She told you there was a ghost in her closet, but it was a nice one, or maybe it was an evil one and it killed somebody. She was reading a big paperback copy of Poe’s poems or manga. She never spoke to anybody, or she spoke to anyone who would listen.

She wasn’t goth exactly. She was a little crunchier than that. She would offer you a ginkgo leaf, or an acorn, if she liked you. She folded up her arms and leaned back in the rickety old desk chair during Sunday school, and exhaled hard through her nose at every mention of Christ. Afterward, during coffee and donuts, she told you she worshipped Norse gods instead. She liked animals. She named her hamsters things like Aziraphale and Osiris. But her favorite animal was never a horse or a cat or a dog. Instead, it was a wolf or a tiger—or she’d find the most obscure creature in the encyclopedia and announce she was a fan of the aye-aye or the okapi.

Frequently she told you she was the reincarnation of somebody, and it was always somebody everyone knew. She might have been Anastasia or Cleopatra.

Later you’d meet more like her, or find out you were one of her, and she would seem less weird. Your eyes would adjust, and her brand seemed less outrageous, and she would merely be her name, herself, a real person.



The very beginning of the new millennium was a strange time to be a child in the mid-Atlantic. Beyond the backyard where I was pretending to be a werewolf and drawing sigils in the dirt, the world began careening down a fearful path that I was

just starting to recognize as such, the way a passenger might slowly begin to realize the bus they're riding is going the wrong way.

Only a few weeks into my fourth grade year, 9/11 happened, and because I lived so close to Camp David and, just a bit farther out, the Pentagon, there was real concern in my hometown that we could be in the radius of another attack. Most people around my age can point to this specific event as the first where-were-you-when moment of their lives. *Eight years old. Math test. Sent home.* My youngest brother, now an adult, was not yet two at that time and has no recollection of the day at all.

Just after that came the anthrax mailings, sent by a real-life mad scientist who worked just thirty minutes from my school, my house, my church, my playground.

My parents were kids during Vietnam. They watched children burning alive on the nightly news when they were the age I was in 2001, so they didn't see much wrong with letting me hang out on the couch and witness the War on Terror unfold. "You should be educated about current events!" my mother often said at a volume that could break glass. "You should know what's going on in the world!" But more often than not, I was reading *Harry Potter* instead of watching the screen, already bored with the images of the flaming towers and bin Laden's face.

The next year, in fifth grade, my class took a trip to the local planetarium. I was sitting near the rear of the bus as we made our way back to the school, with a clear view out the back windows. A few of the boys in my class were starting to raise a fuss, pointing at the vehicle that was following.

"That's the serial sniper!"

This was the first I'd heard of this, CNN time with my parents notwithstanding. Apparently the reports of people who had died in real life ranked lower on my list of things to pay attention to than *The Boy Who Lived*. But now, on the bus, my attention was fully engaged.

There was a white van riding behind us, its windows tinted, keeping close.

Later it would be learned that the two D.C. snipers didn't drive a white van at all, but a blue Chevy modified to better point and shoot from. What does that matter to a pack of hysterical elementary schoolers? The talk of the sniper began to swell, and when the van continued to follow us after the bus turned onto a new road, we all screamed. Code red. We were going to have to take drastic action. Before that action could be decided upon, though, the van turned away onto a different street, its side decal clearly visible, and it turned out to belong to a local florist.

Years later, my mother would tell me the snipers had finally been caught at a rest stop on Route 70, less than thirty minutes away from the spot the white van had turned away, heading in the direction of my hometown.

• • •

These days, former weird girls have it easy. They can just go on Instagram and search the ghost photo hashtag, or watch *Buzzfeed Unsolved*. The internet was just off to a stumbling start when I was a kid, which seems like an ancient statement to make now, in an era when laundromats and public bathrooms offer free Wi-Fi. Back in my day, I now screech from my rocking chair, I had to tie up our phone line so I could use our dial-up internet to look at alleged photos of ghosts, a dangerous prospect if you believed everything you read online, which I absolutely did.

Once the images of Beanie Babies got old and I had reread all my dad's old books a million times, I decided to head to the early 2000's internet, and there was no shortage of fake paranormal photos that wouldn't fool a first grader nowadays. One I specifically remember was a photo of a woman lying on a hospital bed, an image of a terrifying ghost—with sharp teeth and big eyes—

photoshopped lying horizontally beneath her, almost like they were in bunk beds. The photo was at the top of the page, so you had to scroll past the scary ghost to get to the accompanying text. "If you look at this ghost, she knows who you are and how to find you," the caption read, more or less. Now trapped, I was beholden to do whatever stupid instruction the caption spelled out so that a ghost wouldn't eat my toes off.

This was the heyday of chain emails, too. You'd get some stupid forwarded email that would promise an eternal curse on you if you didn't send it to ten people, usually prefaced with a list of supposed signs that Bush did 9/11 or something like that. My budding anxiety refused to let me get away with deleting the things. I was a powerless pawn, patient zero in the viral spread of this stuff.

I could have stopped any time I wanted, fled back to the security of the Beanie Babies website, but I never wanted to.

Other parents might chide their daughters, tell her that she was giving herself nightmares, but I could count on my fingers the number of times that mine actually did this. Even then, it was usually phrased as a question rather than a command. "Are you sure you like this?" they'd sometimes want to know, and I would be baffled by the question. Of course I liked this. We scream on roller coasters and then demand to get back in line, and this is what I was doing in my own way.

• • •

When I was in my early twenties, two middle school girls stabbed their friend nineteen times in an attempt to please the internet boogeyman, Slenderman. About twelve years before I was born, Carole Ann Boone was legally wedded to the serial killer Ted Bundy in the courtroom while he was on trial for the murder of dozens of young women. She bore his daughter the following year.

It is hard to say where the line gets drawn, when it comes to the weird girls who like weird things. When does the fascination become obsession?

When do the fantasies become desires, when does the game become reality?

I think of the macabre as shade, a pleasant dimness in a blinding world. At some point the shade that cools us and protects us from the burning heat of the real world becomes blackness, and you cannot even see the stars above your head. Still. There are so many of us. You knew us way back then, didn't you?

.....

**"When does the fascination become obsession? When do the fantasies become desires, when does the game become reality?"**

.....

Now we're mainstream. So many of us are both ridiculously normal and yet stubbornly weird, and now we all have Spotify subscriptions and our true crime and paranormal podcasts are our meat and potatoes. We have long commutes and shitty jobs, and we bring our work home. We take the tellers of these tales with us on the bus and on the train, into our cars and offices and to the gym.

As strange as it sounds, these voices are now so comforting, even when the stories are brutal. The popular ones now are as funny as they are horrifying, and maybe that's why we weird girls love them. The folks behind the microphones aren't removed from reality, perched up on tombstones and speaking in cryptic riddles. They're just a shade older than I am, and they feel

impossibly, gloriously human. They drive the topic of conversation like a drunk hick behind the wheel of a riding mower, swerving into tangents about their therapists and their pets and the size of the burrito they just ate. And there we are on the bus or the train and at the office and the gym and in our beds, listening, thankful.

The tribes we built in elementary school grow even stronger, now that we're sharing recommendations, now that we're befriending people purely because of macabre podcasts. We draw each other into these new things. I've gone to a true crime festival in Washington D.C. for a few years now, and the lines for the shows stretch practically to the White House. Every time, I meet new people. They all say the same thing. *You were there for me.* The communities we weirdos have built, and the creators themselves. *You were there. I was not alone, because you were there.*

• • •

In 2018, my anxiety dialed itself up in a way that I had never experienced before, not even when my mother had a stroke or my younger brother died. It had never felt more like a disease than it did then, like a lingering cough that I couldn't treat. I had long moments of relief punctuated by a ferocious terror, and the fact I was determined to power through it probably made it worse. Lying in bed at night in silence was not an option, the quiet made me feel caged. *Even hearing about Henry Lee Lucas will be better than this.* It was.

They're not gods, these podcasters. They're not perfect. They're just people, but we all find people we love, people who make things easier on us when the world is frightening. Even when they're telling us about the evils of the world, the strange and the unsettling things that exist and have always existed, they draw us into the fold and let us shelter in their humor. There is hope, after all. The demons can be exorcised, forced to touch the Bible of St. Wolfgang. Ted Bundy

can be caught and put to death.

Your fears can be assuaged, you can laugh about the most frightening things there are, and you will be okay.

Imagine the weird girl, grown up now, she has a job and an apartment, she is succumbing to student loan debt and fear, she is building her queue so the voices can guide her to sleep.

Are you sure you like this?

More than ever.

• • •

On Midsummer's Day, some of my friends and I drove to Pennsylvania. We had a nice dinner at a restaurant that doubled as a wedding venue, and we ate outside overlooking the gentle fields, the far-off treeline. At dusk there were deer roaming, far away and quiet as ghosts, and later, there were fireflies. We left the restaurant and situated ourselves out in the field. Sitting on a blanket, we drew tarot cards and called upon the people and things and ideas we wished to guide us at the start of the new season.

I called upon the weird girl, specifically invoking myself at seven, ten, thirteen years old. At first I didn't articulate it right, because the way I said it sounded like an insult, and my friends stepped in to comfort me, tell me no. But I explained it wasn't an insult, because the weird girl is the perfect guide, the girl who knows the way out of the anxiety is to barrel into it like a swelling ocean wave. She is the weird, enthusiastic, noisy, chubby, morbid, determined creature who cannot be daunted, who barrels forward unstoppably, who takes up space, who has an ugly laugh. She will take you by the hand and pull, chattering, she will tell you all the facts she knows. She will want to see what lies ugly beneath your Phantom mask. As long as you pledge to love her and listen, she will lead you through your fear, because there are such exciting terrors to see on the other side.



## Lunar Eclipse

MANAL BUKHARI •

Canon EOS REBEL T5 with a 135mm lens set to f/3.5-5.6 IS.

16" x 10"





*The Copulation of Dry  
Paper and Wet Ink*

BRETT STOUT •

Ink on paper  
11" x 14"

*Ikejime*

ASHLEY WAGNER •

(or Rumination Over Dinner)

I.

There's more than one way to kill a fish:  
Open it up gut first and see  
the ribs pried wide, no sternum, soft.  
See suffocated muscles, engorged and red  
and swollen.

But brain death is best, then sever the spine.  
The tremors will end; it won't feel  
the clinical cuts from knotted, modest hands.

II.

The fish is cold  
and cut, silvery like a knife.

I swallow down the needlepoint bones,  
as one or two won't kill me,  
though the cartilage nestles in the flesh of my throat.  
I crack a few between my teeth  
and marvel at their smallness—  
the cruelty of it all.

(We never ate  
much fish at home.)

III.

Some days, I can't eat at all. My throat  
collapses like fish gills and hollowed  
bones, and I want to pull  
myself apart from the inside.

Some bodies, I suppose, are meant  
to be empty.



## Second Fiddle

ASHLEY WAGNER •

### I.

First, to some handsome stranger: black tux nipped and tucked, slim at the waist, hibiscus pinned snug in the buttonhole, bright. He waits and his eyes are dewy like mine, like pine trees stiff-backed and safe.

*Oh*, the bride will laugh later, *didn't I tell you we used to date?* We're in some gauzy Catholic church, draped in stained-glass light, and the tropical bouquets dot each bridesmaid, red tendrils against white arms, soft underskin itching and I've all but stopped breathing as my esophagus tightens then snaps. Except this never happened. Except it's a bright dead lie. Instead, I bit through my own foot in a panic and ran on the day she told me she'd marry a man. She'd never planned for me. So I abandoned her. Her green, her careful moss, clung to me close and I hated her like a curse, though I didn't want to. She spit at me as I fled, and she was right to.

### II.

I nearly broke your nose one night years ago when I was of blood and bone and buzz and wanting, wanting to know if you were really the one, one and the same. We were drunk and it was the way you said it, quizzically turning the thought in your head, as if I was dead and gone and not beside you on the worn carpet, the yawning space between us electric. *Yeah, I think I'm still in love with her.* Well. Screw me, right? The night's warm chewed up my body, spit it out elsewhere, and left it to rot. The horses' hooves in my chest refused to let me rest there like that thing I was—not that meteoric first love, remember, always second best.



For Further Reading

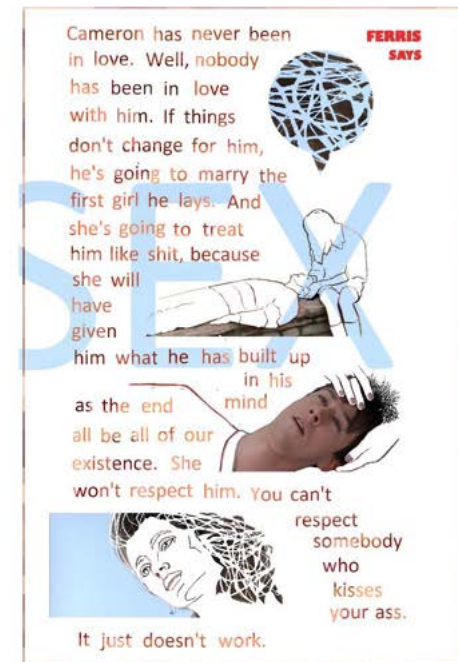
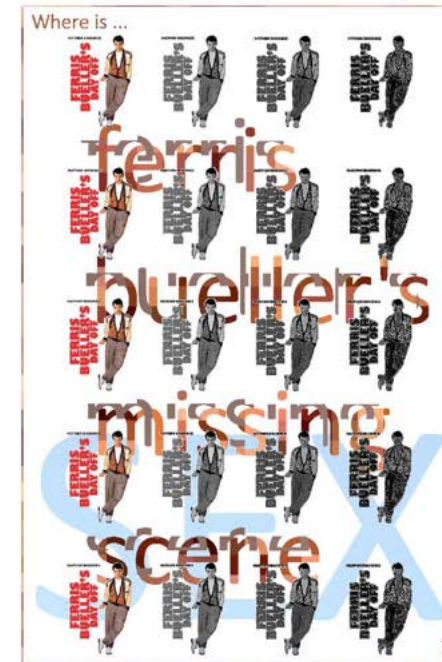
RACHEL PASSER •

Book pages  
and acrylic paint  
16" x 16"

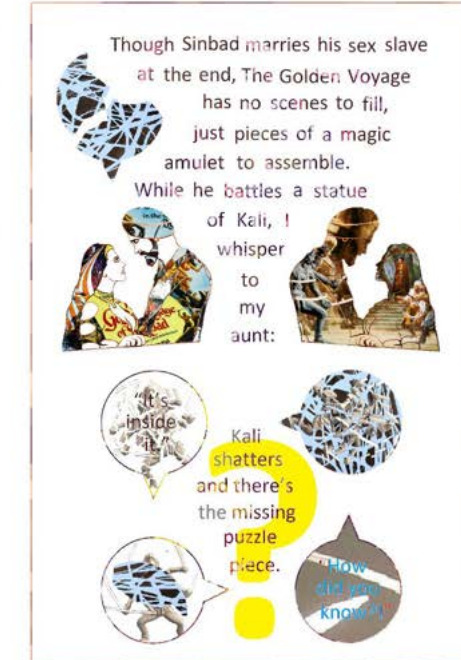
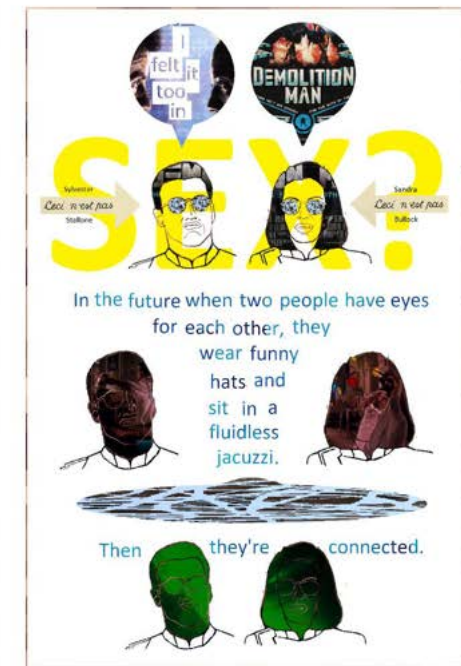
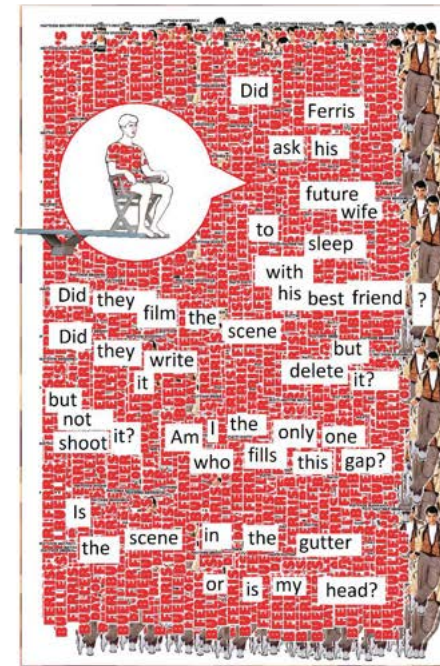
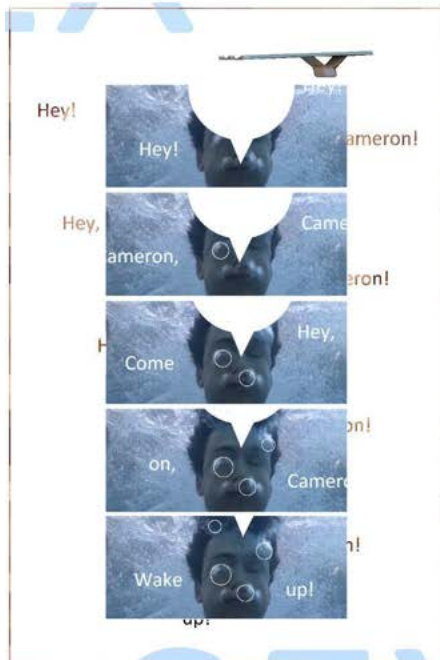
## Missing Scenes

CHRIS GAVALER •

I was a college sophomore when John Hughes's *Ferris Bueller's Day Off* was released in 1986. I don't think I've watched the film since, but a gap in its narrative logic never stopped haunting me. The first edition of Microsoft Windows had been released a few months earlier and included MS Paint, one of the first graphics editor programs. Photoshop made Paint effectively obsolete in the 1990s, but Microsoft still included it with Windows updates until 2017 when the program was discontinued. My mother died a few months later. "Missing Scenes," one in a sequence of graphic requiems, was made entirely in MS Paint.

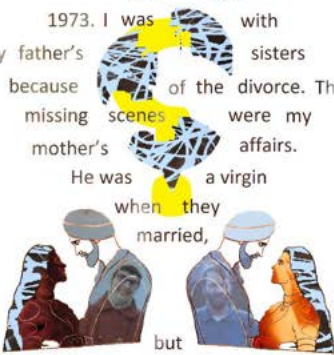








That was 1973. I was with my father's sisters because of the divorce. The missing scenes were my mother's affairs. He was a virgin when they married, but afterwards the wives of four of his five best friends asked to sleep with him. I was seven. I missed everything.



The next year my mother took me to my first PG. I want you to ask me later. So afterwards I asked, What's an enormous schwanz schtucker? That was the PG part. And she said, if any words confuse you She said,

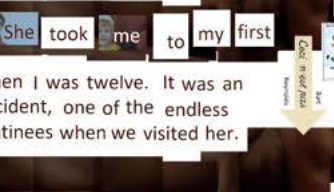


In V for Vendetta, a superpowered rebel tortures his daughter-like sidekick before leaving his body to her for a Viking funeral that destroys the corrupt government. The movie remembers saying kept deleting and reordering scenes. 2005, eight years before her diagnosis, makes more sense, but I thought it was Evita, a musical from a decade earlier about a woman who uses her body to rise to power in a corrupt government and die at her peak.




problem,	know	are	The
she	missing	which	missing
said,	or	It	or
with	in	will	in
watching	a	be	a
movies	different	The	different
is	order.	problem,	order.
sometimes	You	she	is
The	scenes	never	scenes
problem,	are	know	are
she	missing	which	problem,
said,	or	It	or
with	in	will	in
watching	a	be	a
movies	different	The	different
is	order.	problem,	movies


She took me to my first when I was twelve. It was an accident, one of the endless matinees when we visited her. He plots his suicide after a terminal diagnosis, but changes his mind in the end. It's a comedy. My mother plotted the same exit but missed the final scene. We dug a suicide manual from her closet after her Alzheimer's diagnosis.




Her mother died of the same disease. It's a plot twist I should have felt coming. My grandmother was just studying the narrative puzzle, filling in the missing scenes of her grandkids' conceptions. I should have known when my mother complained about movies on TV.



Wrenn is is funny



The morning after she died I called the remains of her friends, including the one she was probably sleeping with during Sinbad. I also started making this





## AS HE BEGINS TO FORGET HIS LIFE

WILLIAM RUDOLPH •

My father's first sailboat, bobbing briefly yellow to the surface, begins to take on water. Into his boxes of slides, *Time's* slight-of-hand has fuzz-shuffled 16-millimeter moments he's certain never happened—yet there they are: his judge-father, circa 1950, swearing in his emerging self; his established self, circa 1960, perpetually placing the cornerstone into the cavity of the church; posing with skis, circa some-time-or-other, his middle-aged arm in a cast, chairlift dangling above...

Every season the municipal golf course he orbited for half a century loses a hole—the greens level out, the tee boxes erode, the Elysian fairways bloom with hazards. Every month a grandchild's name flies off to study abroad or join the Peace Corps in some sub-equatorial region—some rain forest mirage in the desert of his mind. By 10 a.m. each Wednesday, another Ole and Lena joke, told and re-told by the guys at coffee year after year, becomes one he has never heard. Every day, absences accruing, he—Every day, more things—

This morning, shuffling through his gardens, my father wonders, "Which fall was it I planted that spruce? Those dogwoods?" "What happened to the transplanted mint?" and "When did the grape vines let go of that fence?" He swears those raspberries were a mix of red and black. "Did we hew the box elders," he asks, "before or after the willows?"—and asks, "How the hell did the tendrils of the strawberry patch crawl from the rock garden to the orchard? And where do they think they're going?"

## The Summer House

ANGUS WOODWARD •



## Susan and Sarah, 1965

ANGUS WOODWARD •

*You are only a year old, and you have six siblings. Susan and Sarah are the oldest, at 13 and 12. You have no idea of what's happening here.*

1: Your only memory of this kitchen is an image of the tile floor you crawled across. In '66, your family left the cramped house on Lorraine Place for a big place on Washtenaw Avenue.

3: Every day after school, Susan threw herself on the lower bunk bed, put a pillow over her head, and quietly cried until her face hurt. She could not say what made her cry, except that it had something to do with Tappan.

5: Susan found a pea-green book on mental illness in Tappan's library, and the chapter on "melancholia" spoke to her. She read it secretly at first, and then openly, hoping Mama would notice.



Susan

Sarah

2: Susan and Sarah shared a bedroom on Lorraine Place. In '65, Susan started the 7th grade at Tappan Junior High, leaving Sarah behind at Angell Elementary.

4: Susan tried to cry in secret, but Sarah caught on. Susan's emotions seemed to vary widely from day to day, and so Sarah decided to chart her own emotions on a timeline. After a week, she connected the dots across the page. The line was nearly level—no peaks, no valleys.

6: One day after dinner, Susan asked Mama to meet her in the attic. They sat on dusty suitcases, and Susan told Mama she had melancholia.

7: The full story emerges (like a spiny anglerfish hauled up from the depths) three decades later, when you interview your parents, brothers, and sisters to research a memoir. Susan tells you about crying every day, and Sarah describes charting her own emotions. She also says that she saw Susan and Mama head up to the attic, then crept halfway up the stairs to eavesdrop. "I have a mental illness," Susan announced. "Melancholia." Mama reacted mildly and advised Susan to focus less on herself and more on others. "I was kind of appalled," Sarah tells you.

*They look happy here. You're not exactly sure what they were doing at that moment, but now you know what was happening. A year later, your family moved to the bigger house, and Susan and Sarah got their own bedrooms.*

## Boys and Hands

ANGUS WOODWARD •

*Someone is having a birthday party at a trout pond, and all of the boys hold bamboo poles with both hands, pulling keepers from the water one by one over the course of an hour.*

Paul's right hand: Two months from this day, Paul will form a fist and pound it onto your hand (see below). That sounds like a mean thing to do, but it will simply be the whimsical, loving gesture of an excitable best friend.

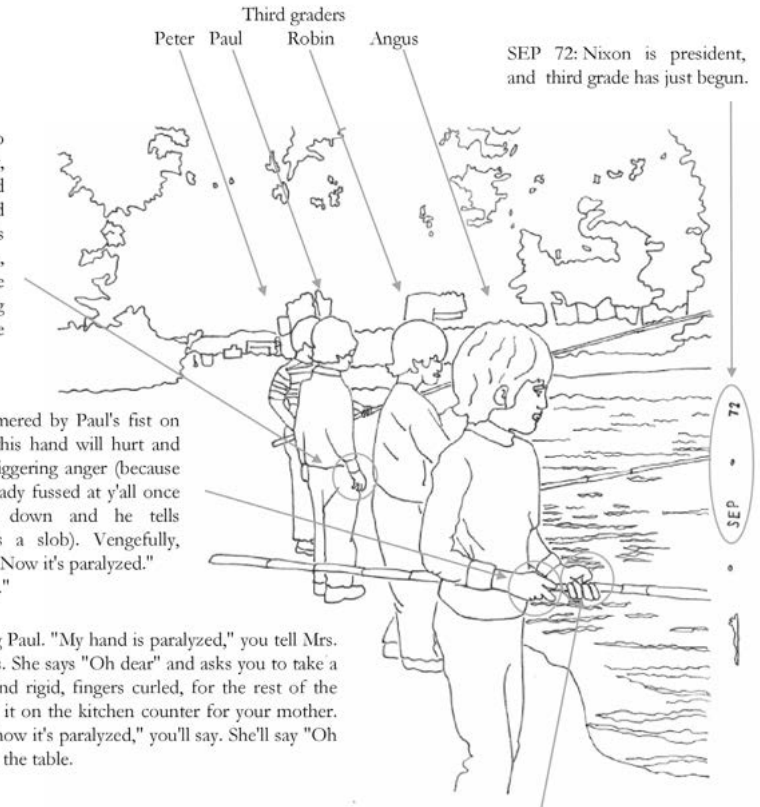
Your right hand: Hammered by Paul's fist on the anvil of his knee, this hand will hurt and tingle for a moment, triggering anger (because Mrs. Holtfrete has already fussed at y'all once and Paul won't calm down and he tells outrageous lies and is a slob). Vengefully, you hold up this hand. "Now it's paralyzed." Paul scoffs. "No it's not."

You will keep punishing Paul. "My hand is paralyzed," you tell Mrs. Fulton, after music class. She says "Oh dear" and asks you to take a seat. You hold your hand rigid, fingers curled, for the rest of the school day and later lay it on the kitchen counter for your mother. "Paul hit my hand and now it's paralyzed," you'll say. She'll say "Oh dear" and ask you to set the table.

Your left hand: You will use this hand to set the table, drawing Mama's notice. After dinner, Mama will call Paul's mother, who will yell at Paul and ask to speak to you, and you tell the simple story of injury = paralysis as Paul bawls and hollers in the background.

You will fret over having trapped yourself in a lie, but then again your classmates will be impressed and maybe your brothers and sisters and father will follow Mama's lead in making a fuss. And so in the morning there is no miraculous recovery, although the paralyzed hand has relaxed somewhat. Over the next month, you will see a doctor who progresses from mystified to skeptical to accusatory. Finally, on the last day before the Christmas break, you suddenly regain the use of your hand. The ruse involves waving good-bye to a turtle, acting amazed, and exclaiming "I can move my hand!" Paul will be there to celebrate with you.

*For now it is still September, and these boys are just using their hands to hold fishing poles and yank captive trout from a pond. There has been no pounding, no punishing, no paralysis. Perhaps none of that will ever happen. If it does happen, maybe everyone will just forget about it for a good thirty years, after which you might own up to the truth and even say publicly, "I am sorry."*



## List of Symptoms of Something I Cannot Name That I Have Taped to My Fridge

MAKENZIE SISSON •

1. The fiddling. I fiddle with things near constantly. My phone case, my receipts from Au Bon Pain or Susq Food Court, my hoodie strings (to the point of breakage), my headphones (to another point of breakage), the backs of remotes (the parentheses have a pattern, you know). When I was younger, I would stay up well into the night pulling out the yarn from my dolls' heads to curl it into small red balls that sat under my bed, gathering dust and spiders and all sorts of things my mom hated to clean up when I went to daycare. I went through four dolls that way, and my fingers still remember the pattern of moving my forefinger and thumb that I used to make the little balls of fuzz.

2. The grinding. I grind my teeth against themselves, through the night and during the day. It got so bad that the dentist prescribed me a mouthguard. I didn't know the dentists could prescribe anything but a toothbrush and a small sticker on my lapel when I was eight, but they could, apparently. I wear a mouthguard at night, but that doesn't fix the day problem, and I refuse to wear that green monstrosity out of the safety of my bedroom. So when I catch myself doing it, I force my tongue between the two warring parties, making sure that there's an

obstacle in the way of me doing it again. My mom thinks it's stress. My doctors think it's stress. It's been about thirteen years since I started doing it, so maybe it's stress, but it may also need to be added to the list, because I don't think you can experience one continuous strain of stress for thirteen years.

3. The checking. Checking the bag, checking the suitcase, pulling over on the side of the highway to check the backseat, checking my pockets, checking the cupholders. Everything is where it should be. Everything will continue to be where it should be. My dad says checking before you leave the house is healthy. Wallet, phone, keys. I check wallet, phone, keys, toothbrush, pads, mints, lip gloss, brush, sunglasses, Advil (expired, I have to replace it, I have to replace it), condom, pads, wallet. Wallet. I reach a stoplight and check with my eyes, since I don't trust that the thing my hand closed around is really the wallet. I am not looking at the light. I see my wallet, and the dopamine rush of relief hits my brain. This goes on the laundry list too, since I can't see this as anything but an addiction to the narcissistic belief that I've remembered everything, and I just want to remember that I have over and over and over again.



4. The guilt. The small guilt, when I check my bag and realize that I left my bag of earrings and necklaces at school. The big guilt of missing an assignment, or a meeting, or a birthday. This may not seem like a symptom in a physical sense, but it is. Dark Gray Guilt sits in the corners of my mind, a physical force inside of my skull.

A lurching pit in my gut, a tenseness that grows in my shoulders, the muscles in my body resculpting themselves to hold an invisible weight. Invisible, but tangible. Would you call Harry Potter in the Cloak of Invisibility intangible? Then this guilt is tangible, too. A foundation on which to place the checking and the fidgeting and the stimming and the grinding and the listing.

5. The forgetting. The sectioning away of the world into parts that are divided into subsections that are divided into categories that are divided into partitioned pieces until the dividing goes so low that it turns some pieces to dust. How far can you divide a chocolate bar before you lose track of the squares, before it's down to advanced compounds of dyes and sugars, before it's reduced to the three- and two-sugars, then the one sugar, before you hold carbon on its lonesome, before it's a carbon memory you want to piece into a compound again, before it's all crumbles of sweetness in your hands? That's what it's like, with this thing I cannot name. I've crumbled up all my sweetness.

6. The paranoid thinking. Being a science major right now fills my head with the knowledge I need to move forward and the wisdom I need to stay perfectly still, hoping that if the world does not see me, it will not come crashing down on my shores. The world's oceans will not rise over my ankles, the great wildfires will not scorch my back, and the hurricane building somewhere in the trenches, the one that will tear up my home, will never approach me, will never rip the anchor from the sand in which it lays. It is a

tenuous thing, the paranoia, because I have the education to prove that the paranoia is not all conspiracy theories and tinfoil hats, but my mind doesn't have the full bandwidth to process that the world is falling apart around me, in the slow, almost unfeeling way of a band-aid pulling off every individual hair on my arm. It's trying to calibrate a 720p video to a 144p screen, so all I end up with is blocky colors shooting past. Every presentation I give is a mixture of prepared notes and trying to parse the pixels into a working model of a world I am trying to accept as reality.

“Dark Gray Guilt sits in the corners of my mind, a physical force inside of my skull.”

7. The shaky hands upon acceptance of a world I am not ready to face. Similar to the fidgeting, actually. My hands need the knowledge of holding on to something definite. I have blamed it on blood sugar loss in the past, blamed it on not being prepared (Prepared for what? For *what?*), blamed it on the tone of a voice I had heard passing by, the voice pressing into my brain as if I were its intended target. My hands don't shake enough to interrupt my typical functionality, though. Don't worry. Sometimes I just can't get the jack of my headphones into my phone, the movement too precise to pin down with instability. On those days, I watch, with envy, the people walking past with cords around their ears.



8. The embracing, and the belief that not everything is worth embracing, and the continued embracing anyway. The guilt in holding (see point 4), and the holding nonetheless. The stilling of the shaky hands. The replanting of the anchor. I check with my parents after nor'easters, and they reassure me that they are okay, and the okaying bleeds into me like paint across a storm-sprayed canvas. I pick up the pencil. I rewatch *Harry Potter*, so I can uncycle myself. Recycle myself. The full embracing of a narrative in which the list ceases existing.

9. The belief that a perfectly completed list needs to end in an even number.

10. The writing. The story-building. The spitting of points 1-9, while knowing they are still there. The telling of a culmination of work, and the speaking of an "after."



*Water Collage #1*  
ERIC HOSFORD •

Gouache on  
collaged paper  
12" x 9.25"

## IGBO LANDING

VICTOR BASTA •

*(In 1803, 75 Igbo men—who had taken over their slave ship en route from Nigeria, chose to die walking into a Georgia creek rather than resume life as slaves on a new, distant shore.)*

This was the same sand, on a different shore.  
Only the ochre light of their gods  
had dimmed en route. Exhausted,  
tired of tracking a swollen ship  
across a swelling ocean, they spin  
less furiously now, like mothers  
watching, helpless, as grown children  
abandon home.

The only way to escape how this journey  
ended was under water.  
Marching into a blacker, hotter swamp  
than the stained Igbo skin it welcomes.  
Opening its cool arms to bathe  
men back to the babies they once were.  
Swaying their dark crowns down,  
where singing ends.

It had to be done this way. Seventy-five men  
could not wait for dying gods  
who chased their ship to a harsher shore,  
and did nothing. While each generation  
harvested better slaves to bury the last,  
in a chain further and further away from home.

It was the same useless light that burned  
hot, and powerless, through a younger sky  
where this started. Glinting the same chains  
that ripped wrists, yanked by those with even  
lesser skin, on rickety rides in from the Bight.  
The gods they begged tore the same size hole  
into Nigerian sky as in Georgia.

Where seventy-five landed only to die.



## A Selection of Reality #3

GREG HEADLEY •

Photographic print and  
collage with paper  
8" x 10"



Breakable  
JOSH DENSLAW •

There is only one possible combination of sperm and egg that will result in you. The timing has to be perfect. Twenty-three chromosomes in a particular sperm combine with the twenty-three chromosomes in a particular egg. At that precise moment. What if your mother thought that your father gave a bad first impression and decided not to see him again? You would not be here. It is also possible that your father wore a condom, and the sperm that would create you was flushed down the toilet. Or if your mother performed fellatio, you could have been destroyed by her stomach acids. Not to mention all of the terrible things that can happen during the pregnancy. Low progesterone. Uterine malformation or growths in the uterus. Polycystic ovary syndrome. High blood pressure. Hypothyroidism. Or maybe your mother smoked, drank, or did drugs. As Adolf Hitler said: “Who says I am not under the special protection of God?”

But a quick Google search reveals that there are 7,577,130,400 people in the world. Unfortunately, you are not special.

Albert Einstein claimed he had no special talent, only that he was passionately curious. Doesn’t abundant curiosity set someone to the side for scrutiny, like the screening process at airport security? And if we focused on those abilities, is it not possible that we could begin to divide people into groups?

Maybe the truly special people are the

only ones in his or her respective categories.

Take Vincent Manly, for example. A face that is exactly like the police sketch of a 29-year-old male with blond hair. He is, to the inch, the average height for men in America and, of course, ten pounds overweight. All of his clothes come from the clearance rack at JC Penney’s. His favorite color is green. You would never notice him at a party.

I walked right past him on the first day he came to my office. The receptionist, a temp if I remember correctly, said he’d been staring out the window for twenty minutes. “I got the feeling he’d been watching me somehow,” she said later. “Like he knew what I was thinking.”

I joined him at the window that overlooked the parking lot three floors below. When he finally turned to me, there was an electricity, a rupturing of the air between us. I had already turned on the tape recorder in my pocket. To this day, I still find myself listening to our first conversation. His slightly high-pitched voice, my aloofness. I can even hear the precise moment I believed.

“I’ve done this all over town,” he said. “You’re the last one on my list.”

“I’m flattered, of course.” I wasn’t above sarcasm, especially in regard to my livelihood.

“I have some anger issues,” he said. “But I don’t think you can help me unless you know why.”

“That’s usually the way it works.”

What you can’t see on first glance is that over the course of his life, Vincent has broken a profusion of things. Almost always on purpose. He loves the electric crackle of someone’s personalized coffee cup shattering on a tile floor. The numbing feel of a wooden baseball bat in his hands when it slices through a row of potted plants. The ecstatic pain that shoots up his arm when he breaks a framed picture with his elbow. He wished there were more things that he could snap in half over his knee.

It is not my intent to vilify Vincent. In fact, it is quite the opposite. This is a man who is indeed special—however you choose to define it. These acts of aggression are commonplace for Vincent, but what truly sets him apart is that no one knows that they have ever happened at all.

In that initial conversation, I only hoped to set him at ease, to get him talking.

As we stood there staring out the window, he told me in great detail everything that would occur a moment before it did. A car arriving. A woman dropping her purse. A bird landing on a branch. The hair on my arms stiffened and scratched at the sleeves of my blouse.

“I’m not psychic,” he said. “I’ve just tried this a few times.”

By our second session, I could fully sense The Trace. At least, that’s what he called it. The Trace is thousands of alternate possibilities set in motion, running concurrently while brushing against the reality we inhabit. All of Vincent’s *What Ifs* are unfolding just outside our five senses.

When he replayed moments, barely any residue collected. Say, if he wanted to watch a busty girl cross the street over and over again. Or if he wanted to replay a car crashing into a light pole. It was when he redid his own actions that the residue accumulated like taffy around him.

It started small. What if Vincent were to say exactly what was on his mind? He may have told one of his teachers that he couldn’t be bothered with homework. He may have told a friend that he didn’t like his or her significant other. How vindictive did he get? Did he ever tell a classmate that his or her dog had been hit by a car? Did he tell his boss to go screw himself? The specifics aren’t important. What is important is the unmitigated joy that Vincent felt in those early years. The freedom his gift allowed him.

At first, he ignored the deleterious effects that his outbursts were having on his social life. For you see, after Vincent said these horrible things, he was able to skip backward in time, as if it never happened.

.....

“He wished there were more things that he could snap in half over his knee.”

.....

He called it Rewinding. Vincent could speak his mind, soak up the reaction, then Rewind and proceed without all the theatrics.

Even a talent like Vincent’s had its limits. He had never successfully Rewound more than seven minutes. The window for corrections was small. He had a habit of glancing at his watch before he started any conversation, living his life in seven-minute chunks.

If he already knew the answer to a friend’s question, couldn’t he have a snappy comeback at the ready? If a joke didn’t work, might he double back to try a different one? He was finding his footing.

But make no mistake, The Trace was forming. It wasn’t until he attended community college that he realized the full ramifications

of Rewinding. The people to whom he was the closest were put off by him. They could sense all the times he spoke his mind, all the times he went back to erase his errors. These events had created their own alternate courses and everyone could sense them, like déjà vu. They couldn't put their finger on it, only a whiff of those possible futures. The futures that Vincent thought he had erased by Rewinding.

The Trace.

Vincent suddenly found himself alone, ostracized by his friends and tiptoed around by his mother and father.

That was when he moved to the city. And he came to see me.



“He could be a hero,  
he just didn’t know how.”



Before Barb and her collection of porcelain bells, when I still thought that I was the only one with whom Vincent felt safe, I attributed many of Vincent’s episodes to the fact that he perceived himself as invisible. He would cause a scene in a restaurant, or on an elevator, just to feel the eyes on him. The judgment. But most of his outbursts occurred because he didn’t know how to deal with his emotions. If someone cut him off in traffic, he might plow into the back of his or her car. He might tip over someone’s shopping cart if he or she was rude at the grocery store. He might destroy all of the plants on his neighbor’s porch if they took his parking spot. Vincent was the judge and jury when it came to his outbursts and to that extent, some of his rationale didn’t make sense.

But Vincent Rewound every time, never once leaving his actions to be experienced

by anyone.

Whenever we spoke, I always questioned the way he used his power. And yes, I did refer to it as a power, no matter how many times Vincent asked me not to. Because what else was it? He was capable of great things. I wondered why he never tried to help people. With a seven-minute buffer on his choices, it seemed to me that he could stop a robbery. Or chase off a mugger.

He could be a hero, he just didn’t know how.

Moving to the city seemed appropriate at the time. A fresh start surrounded by thousands of new people, but clichés are clichés for a reason. Vincent was lonelier than ever. He spent his empty weeks switching from one subway train to the next, circumnavigating the city a half dozen times a day before returning to his barren apartment to eat macaroni and cheese and watch prime-time television.

To keep him sane, I urged him to answer the ad for bike messengers in the paper. He claimed he only had to Rewind three times during the interview to land the job even though I implored him not to do it at all. He liked the helmet the company supplied and the tattered shoulder bag. There were other things, too. The thrill of weaving between cars. The wind slipping up the sleeves of his light jacket. The sense of urgency that accompanied every package.

Most of all, Vincent enjoyed the fleeting interaction he had with the customers. There was no pressure to Rewind, no fear that they would misunderstand him. He had one task. There was only one direction the conversation could go.

I was surprised when he first told me about the “pretty paralegal” at a small law firm who called for a bike messenger three or four times a week. After repeatedly seeing her, he decided it was time to ask her out. But he was unable to quantify why he was

so nervous. Or why his heart raced. He had a unique gift that could make an embarrassing rejection go away, yet he hesitated. Though I was never able to persuade him to admit it, I do not believe it was the awkward social situation that most bothered him. It was the fact that he would know, after the Rewind, that she rejected him. Even if no one else in the world, including her, did.

And that’s precisely what happened.

On that sunny day in June, Vincent finally asked. The “pretty paralegal” wore a blazer and a white shirt with the top three buttons undone. He was very specific about that detail, as if her ensemble was the culpable party in how things turned out. Her answer was curt, flat, and final.

Overcome with bitterness, he asked out every woman on his normal bike messenger route and received a one-hundred-percent rejection rate. I posited in our many conversations that this was not due to his personal appearance. Many women would probably find him intriguing, his earnest demeanor charming. These unfortunate women were attuned to his heightened state of annoyance, maybe even sensing a bit of his unchecked aggression. He may have been tired from all that Rewinding.

Though, as Vincent describes it on the tape from our fifth session, Rewinding is perfectly seamless. He holds his breath for a moment and pictures a giant clock standing upright in front of him. Then everything shimmers, like a drop of water into a calm lake, and he finds himself standing where he was seven minutes before. But he carries whichever emotion was generated back with him.

I can only imagine the toll that takes.

Vincent didn’t stop with the women on his route. He walked into every bar on his way home and continued to try. He claimed to have propositioned one-hundred-and-forty-eight women that evening.

I have almost worn out the spot on my tape where he joked later, his voice a warped

whisper: “If I ran into you, Doc, I would’ve asked you out. And ruined our doctor/patient relationship.”

I can’t remember what I was doing that night, but I know this for certain: I was alone.

Vincent met Barb at the Shady Oasis Retirement Home which took up two blocks in the part of the city that Vincent called “sketchy.” Barb worked in the front office and was the unusually cheery lady who showed you around when you were “considering locking up your elderly parents so your own house wasn’t depressing anymore.” Which is how Vincent eloquently described her job. She was short with rounded shoulders and hips. “Like a lamp,” he said. Her shoulder-length hair was jagged on the edges and bleached blond. Her wastebasket was full of lipstick-stained Kleenex and Diet Coke cans.

From the moment he met her, he wanted to say the right things.

“Are you the bike messenger?” were the first words she ever spoke to him in her reedy voice. She had a dimple in her left cheek.

According to Vincent, the hands of the elderly were leathery and as cold as the grave. On that fateful morning, he was accosted by a rowdy group of octogenarians who wanted to shake his hand and invite him on their bus tour. If you hear Vincent tell the story, he handled himself with aplomb, much to the growing interest of Barb the receptionist. In fact, over the next few weeks, Barb called for many bike messenger runs, always asking for Vincent by name. And in turn, Vincent learned the names of the most outspoken residents who awaited his arrival with anticipation.

It wasn’t until Vincent agreed to stay for lunch at Shady Oasis that his luck, and our future sessions together, shifted. The change may have been imperceptible to him, but to me it swelled like a dull throb.

Fluorescent lights buzzed in the cafeteria and it smelled of spinach. The old women,

most of them in wheelchairs, arranged themselves around him at the table. He said he felt like he was in a zoo. He ingested three containers of applesauce, one gray piece of meatloaf, and a bowl of pudding. But it was the boost to his self-esteem that was most evident. There, in that cafeteria, it didn't matter that he had a zit on his cheek and one on his chin. Or that his doughy sides jiggled when he walked. Or that hair grew on his shoulders. They laughed at all of his jokes. The women cackled. The women hooted. The women hollered.

Afterward, Barb asked if he wanted to see her bell collection.

.....

**“He yearned for someone to understand him, and I had to let him know I was that person.”**

.....

Oh, those porcelain bells! How they taunted me. They surrounded Barb's phone and lined the shelf above her stapler and tape dispenser. Fragile and intricately designed. She kept one next to the computer that she would tinkle lightly at the end of her workday at Shady Oasis Retirement Home.

How had she gotten so many? Had she picked each one, carefully choosing the ones that would best reflect her values and beliefs? Did her friends and family bring them to her after visiting exotic locations? I scoured all of our taped sessions, but Vincent never once mentions their origin.

If the bells were still there on Barb's sagging desk, arranged with painstaking care by their owner, I know it would be easy to find out. I could wander into Shady Oasis pretending that I was looking for a place for my aging mother. I would smile at Barb

and shake her hand. She would lead me to her desk, and I would marvel at the delicate world she had created for herself in that drab cubicle.

Unfortunately, the bells no longer exist.

I have no idea how many times Vincent Rewound our time together. Maybe I have been duped into thinking the best of him. At first, he was shy to tell me all of his actions because I am a woman, but once he opened up, some of his stories aroused such a feeling in me that I masturbated before falling asleep.

It wasn't the sexual stories that caused my cheeks to flush as I twisted my legs through my sheets. It was the tales of his destruction, of his bubbling emotions. I can see him knocking a tray of food from a waiter's hands, smashing his glass of water on the floor. Then the Rewind and the waiter's tentative steps toward him, sensing the rage that was boiling over. Vincent was so utterly alone and his survival techniques were so inadequate that I was desperate to save him. This was something that I was capable of doing. He yearned for someone to understand him, and I had to let him know I was that person.

In our myriad conversations, there were two anecdotes that recurred nearly every week: The Changing Room and The Rock Climb. The Changing Room brought Vincent back to happier times, before he knew he was different. He was six years old. Inquisitive and a bit of a troublemaker. I picture him this young and it brings a smile to my lips. His mother brought him into the changing room with a pile of shirts in her arms. Vincent immediately sat on the floor and began smudging his fingers on the mirror. The door to the adjacent changing room opened, and Vincent saw feet out of the corner of his eye. There was a gap of about a foot-and-a-half from the wall to the floor. Vincent rolled onto his back and scooted to the edge. The woman in the next room unzipped the back of

her floral dress and pulled it down past her waist. She bent slightly at the hip and then let it fall to the floor, her thick thighs covered by her slip. Vincent glanced up and saw the outline of her cotton panties and he suddenly felt very warm. He wanted to watch that dress fall again without knowing why. He closed his eyes and when he opened them, he was back against the mirror. You would think he would have been confused, but Vincent knew exactly what had happened. He rolled onto his back again and watched the woman unzip her dress.

The Rock Climb happened when he was in high school. His father had a business meeting in San Francisco and he brought Vincent and his mother along. While his father worked, Vincent and his mother went sightseeing. They drove their rental car to a crumbled building next to the ocean. They got out and his mother sat on the hood of the car while Vincent walked through the ruins. He saw a few boys his own age run down a path to a small cave where the waves of the ocean pounded against the wall in a rhythmic pattern. The boys timed the waves and ran to the other side. Vincent could hear them laughing as they continued down the path and he greatly wanted to join them. He waited for a pause in the waves and then ran across the narrow path as well. He followed it around the rock face, the waves crashing below him. The laughing was above him now and he saw the boys climbing the rock face to the grassy ledge above. “Come on!” one of them yelled down to him. Vincent grabbed a hold of a rock and began climbing in earnest, eager to catch them. But as he got halfway up, the handholds became smaller, his sneakers slipped. He looked down and realized that if he fell, he would crash on the jagged rocks below. He couldn't Rewind because more than seven minutes had passed since he had decided to climb. For the first time in his life, he felt stuck in a moment. He had to see this through to the end. He knew without a doubt that if he fell, he would not

be able to call up the concentration to Rewind before he was destroyed by the rocks and the ocean beneath him.

With Barb, he practiced every interaction to the tiniest detail. When he didn't receive the laugh he had hoped for, Vincent Rewound and tried again. When he offended her by insinuating her mother may be bipolar, he Rewound. When he forgot to hold the door for her, or she beat him to the check, he Rewound. Vincent wanted to be perfect.

She loved all of the attention. Most of all, she loved to tell her friends she was dating a gentleman bike messenger. She ignored their looks of disappointment the first time they met him. Their belief that he would be some sort of Adonis, or at least not so ordinary, evaporated the moment he extended his plump, almost truncated, hand. If they couldn't get past his physical appearance, he was determined to win them over with his charm. A two-hour dinner with her friends would for Vincent become eight hours of doubling-back, trying out jokes, appearing knowledgeable on the things they enjoyed talking about.

I tracked down two of Barb's friends after Vincent left: a couple named Shirley and Frank. They had been dating for more than ten years with no intention to marry. Shirley had been friends with Barb since high school and met all of her boyfriends. She liked Vincent the moment the two of them walked into the pizza parlor. He seemed reserved, but most importantly, he was clearly enamored with Barb. Shirley thought it was about time that men stopped taking advantage of Barb and began treating her with the respect that she deserved.

“It was the strangest thing,” Shirley said as my tape recorder whirled in the background. “By the end of the meal, I, uh... I don't know how to say this. It was like he became someone else. All the things I thought I liked about him became grating. He seemed to always have a clever comment. He was the first

one to offer his opinion. It was like he had rehearsed.”

Frank didn’t talk much during our conversation. I got the feeling I was keeping him from something, maybe a football game. He did offer one insight into Vincent that I found interesting though: “To me, he looked like a guy who jerked off a lot. Like more than you’re supposed to.”

In the course of our time together, Vincent and I did discuss his masturbatory experiences. Which, as it turns out, were numerous, but also technically zero. He Rewound every single time.

By the end of Barb and Vincent’s first few months together, Vincent had Rewound so much that he had confused himself. He apologized for things of which she had no recollection. He brought up stories that he had subsequently erased. Also, he was exhausted. With no prodding from me, he decided that he would reveal his secret to Barb. By coming clean, he could finally relax. According to Vincent, she was the one person in the world who was fated to understand him completely. It didn’t matter that I believed him. That I was there for him. He wanted *her* to truly know him.

With this thought in mind, Vincent began an excruciating exercise in futility.

She didn’t understand, no matter how many different times or different ways he told her. He tried when they were lying in bed, post-coital. He tried in the middle of a crowded restaurant after sharing a chocolate cake. He tried while she was in the shower as he carefully ran a trimmer over his sideburns.

Once he started, he couldn’t stop. He made three-hundred-and-fifty-nine attempts. He was convinced that she would understand. He only needed to reveal it at the perfect moment. It was the same each time. The look of dismay, her eyebrows rising, the whites of her eyes growing. He saw the fear and the confusion as she clamped

her teeth, her jawbones poking out of her cheeks in small mounds.

As his frustration intensified, he began to lash out before Rewinding. He might pick up the clock radio on the nightstand and hurl it against the wall. He might grab the flower arrangement in the middle of their table and smash it onto his plate. He might rip the towel rod from the wall and drive it into the mirror. He began acting out in public again. For six-and-a-half glorious minutes, he took a bat to a car that stole his parking spot at the grocery store while the entire parking lot watched him in horror. He threw a wicker chair through the front window of a bakery. He dumped a milkshake onto a traffic cop, and a few people actually cheered.

Soon Barb was making excuses as to why she wasn’t available to see Vincent. When they were alone, she wanted to know why he seemed so angry, why everyone in the restaurant was looking at him. It became incessant, as if The Trace was choking her. Whenever she brought it up, Vincent would Rewind and steer the conversation down a different path. Or he would plant a rough kiss on her pouty lips. Or he would leave the room before she could ask. He resented her for not understanding.

Before he knew what was happening, Barb was no longer returning his calls. She would excuse herself when Vincent arrived at Shady Oasis. Vincent left notes on her desk begging her to give him another chance. He left five-minute messages on her machine. He was most embarrassed of those messages, but I desperately wish I heard them. He thought if she saw how vulnerable he was, she would finally understand.

Instead, she got him fired. That bitch.

I should not have been there. Vincent told me what he was planning. I knew what I was getting myself into, and I still agreed to accompany him. I was there to keep him from Rewinding.

And I didn’t want to miss it.

It was a spectacular display. He brought the stapler down in a graceful arc onto the tiny beige bell, the red stenciled flower cracking in half as the pieces skidded across Barb’s desk. This was the one she rung at the end of the day, the one he hated the most. He fought the urge to take out the other bells in one fell swoop. He wanted to savor each individual one, the physical manifestations of her personality.

The second bell crunched under his shoe like a broken bone. He ground it down with the ball of his foot and then kicked the dust across the plastic mat that allowed her chair to roll over the carpet. He threw one into a framed picture of her family. He grabbed the handle of another and shattered it against the edge of the desk. He smashed two of them together with a resounding clap. He tried crushing one of the smaller ones with the wheel of her chair but the bell kept skidding across the floor, chiming jovially. So he ripped out the small metal clapper and left that one bell unharmed on her desk. Silent forever.

My watch chimed when seven minutes had passed. Vincent’s shoulders heaved, sweat sparkled on his brow. He kicked Barb’s office keys under her desk and looked at me. For the first time since I had met him, he looked scared.

I took his hand and we crept from the dark office.

In our last session, I told him it was important to let people see his successes and failures. His accomplishments and mistakes. He couldn’t grow as a person if he didn’t make mistakes, and ultimately, that’s how Vincent lived his life. Never changing.

Stephen Hawking once said that we are just an advanced breed of monkey on a minor planet of a very average star. But we can understand the Universe. That makes us something very special.

I can’t say that I know how Vincent got his power, or why he chose to do what he did with it—but in knowing him, I too feel like I understand the Universe, and it is bigger than anyone has ever imagined. Larger forces are at work.

Vincent didn’t say it was to be our last time seeing each other, but there was a sadness in me that I couldn’t dispel. He had talked repeatedly about leaving The Trace behind, starting anew. I told Vincent that if he ever saw me on the street that he should approach me and say hello. And if he said the wrong thing, he should keep going. I liked him that way.

I wanted to see his successes and failures.

“I’ve lived my life like I never left that changing room, when I should have been living like I was climbing that rock,” he said.

“It’s never too late,” I said.

He smiled at me, the only one I had seen from him, and stuck out his hand. “You’re doing well,” I said as I took his warm hand in mine.

“I’ve never done well.” He kissed me on the cheek and it felt so natural that I wondered if he had done it before.

I am gratified he let me keep it.







*The Moment*  
GERMÁN QUEZADA GAETE •

Taken on Motorola Droid Mini.  
3:2, 2000 x 3000px



## Loverboy

ASHLEY WAGNER •

### Part I – Identity

*“But fool that I was, I foamed in my wickedness as the sea, and, abandoning you, followed the rushing of my own tide, and burst out of your bounds.”*

### -St. Augustine

“So how have you guys been processing this?”  
“We haven’t.”

Alex looks at the two of us from her spot on the sidewalk, rooted there by the soles of her shoes. We’re twenty-one now, we’ve just caught up over dinner, it’s the height of summer, and the night is cool enough to loiter in, so we avoid going home. The black of the sky grows big above the black of her hair. As they always do, my eyes melt away from her and find their way to Jae and his sandaled foot propped up on the roof of a parked car. It’s Alex’s car, a Subaru. Patiently, it holds him up, all red and dependable. Cars are like dogs in a way; they always resemble their owners. “Ah,” Alex says. With pianists’ fingers—nimble and thin, tapered to the nail—she flicks up her glasses, then proceeds to look thoughtful. She is one of my oldest friends at this point—we met ten years ago, in middle school, buck teeth and unkempt hair and all. She says something about things happening in their own time.

I shrug in tenuous agreement and the back of my neck burns. The night gathers around like something crackling and alive, like underskirts, like radio static, like guilt. A man runs by, hood up, sneakers clearing the steps beside us in one satyr-like leap. A few beats later, flashes of red and blue fill the dark, lighting up faces like neon. The three of us wonder aloud about what he did, distracting from the topic at hand.

The moment wavers and is over. Alex’s question withdraws into the cerebral and licks its reopened wounds.

Jae jumps down with a clack and hangs a lazy arm over the thin scaffolding of my shoulders. He and I don’t really talk about how our relationship started. After all, even in the healthiest of partnerships, infidelity isn’t an easy discussion to have.

• • •

Sometime in early 2015, when I was seventeen and all angles, I fell out of love. What I want you to understand is that I fell out of love because I felt underappreciated. I fell out of love because I decided that she had done so first. But I wrongfully continued to invest in her, chasing the ill-fated idea of some queer-girl paradise. The lesbian experience as a fantasy novel. Nicoletta lay beside me on her bed, a green comforter in a red, red room, like a topsy-turvy watermelon.



It was late May in central Maryland, so the ceiling fan sliced through the air above us, doing little to alleviate the wet heat, but we liked the noise, so we kept it spinning. The two of us wedged ourselves into the slats of shadow and pried tank tops away from salty skin. We inched, day by languid day, toward our two-year anniversary, July fourth.

“I want a big wedding,” she said, and I rolled to face her, cheek on fist, pressing in. I could see the dreams begin to play behind her eyes. She wished they were green, and they only shined for want of grandeur,

.....

“But by saying that, I fear  
that I’m forcing significance  
where there is none.”

.....

like drive-in projectors playing *Casablanca* or *The Maltese Falcon*. In this moment, they looked full of the ocean. She went on about her big dress and a big church and inviting all of her *tias y primos*.

I loved the idea like you love a dream you’ve only just awoken from. We sat together. I sat, ethereal, on the precipice.

ooo

Our song was Jason Mraz’s crooning acoustic ballad “I Won’t Give Up.” In the bridge, the guitar picks up and the rhythm knocks like a desperate heartbeat. Mraz deviates from the titular argument of the song to say: “And in the end you’re still my friend. At least we did intend for us to work.” This always struck me as out-of-place in a song about resilience in a relationship.

It felt preemptively bleak, somehow. But by saying that, I fear that I’m forcing significance where there is none.

ooo

At sixteen, I told Nicoletta I loved her. It was the Fourth of July of 2013 and we were avoiding the party. Cousins and family friends were out on the lawn, green and well-tended. We were in the blue of my bedroom, and I was pulling on a pair of black heels to show her. They squeezed my feet. My father always told me we came from circus people, that tightrope walkers needed wide feet to bob their way above the world like birds on telephone wires. I always felt their lightness in my veins, like bubbles, or the tulle skirts they wore over silky ballet flats.

Even if it was all just a story, I liked it, if only because it made me feel better. Fancy shoes never fit me, so I lived my life in worn-down Chucks. But in that moment, I stood up nonetheless, unsteady, and grinned at Nicoletta, flicking my wrists outward. “I’m taller than you now!”

And I was. She walked over to me, all pink in the face, her blonde-streaked brown hair forced straight and long. She hid her curls then. Those days, she only looked Hispanic on paper, her surname derived from *fábrega*, or forge. She obscured herself, shrank herself down to an eight-letter name. She hailed from Puerto Rico, the island of enchantment, where frogs no bigger than your thumbnail sing *coqui* into the misty night. The legend goes: they call out the name of a chief’s son who was loved by a goddess. The legend goes: they are children-turned-frogs, crying out for their mothers. The legend goes: if they leave the island, they die.

“Your legs look so long.” She looked up at me. She looked like a lily, her hair falling like great petals, cocooning her from the world. This, right here, is where I wanted to kiss her.

It would’ve been so easy, my lips on hers like pollen on a bee.

But she was straight, and I ran away. I banished myself to the bathroom, waiting out the bee-sting pucker of embarrassment to cool off. I washed my face with cold water. Once my heart settled back into the kindling and wrought-iron bars of my chest, I flushed the toilet and ran the tap—wasting water and saving face. Back in my room, she was hunched over the side of my bed, scraps of paper scattered around her upper body like a ragged halo. My dream jar—opened and emptied and lying on its side. A trick I learned from my short stint seeing a therapist: write down something good that happened to you each day, put it in a jar, then watch the jar fill up with joyful memories. A tangible stand-in for emotional wellbeing. A visual trick to ward off my waxing teenage angst.

I smiled. She looked up at me, pale as the moon. I faltered. She handed me one of the slips.

Some loved and long-forgotten day: “I might have a chance with Nicoletta, after all!”

Perhaps due to my utter embarrassment, I can’t remember what happened immediately afterward. But whatever it was culminated in a confession. I loved her. I loved her. She was my friend and I loved her. Yes, in a gay way. Yes, enough to give her space if she needed. But that wasn’t what she needed.

She needed to be loved.

ooo

“Yeah, that sounds like fun,” I said, of the one-woman wedding plans. Nicoletta was an artist. She was the ringmaster. The sun had migrated, so I rolled over into a new patch of shadow and let my eyes loiter. A painting of mine hung between her windows, a French Bulldog on a splotchy pink backdrop, sticking out like a burn mark against the red of the wall.

The dog stared out with its folded-up nose. I stared back and listened.

What I heard: the buzzing of cicadas, drowsy. Children hollering in a distant cul-de-sac. The scratching of branches against siding. The rushing sleep behind my eyelids. A world not quite silent but holding its breath.

After a while, she chuckled and asked if I knew what would be funny.

“What is it, baby?” I asked.

“It’d be pretty funny if, in the future, you’re a bridesmaid at my wedding.”

I rolled over and left something behind. I rolled over and I doubled. I rolled away like a spirit splitting from a body in the ocean. She expanded: it would be *especially* funny telling her groom that the two of us used to date.

What I heard: her type. I heard her soft-haired boys with bright green eyes. I heard the rumble of broad shoulders. I heard wedding bells and ornate lace and the holy murmuring of a Catholic priest. I heard a crystal glass so near to shattering, struck by a knife in the hand of the beloved. I heard his voice, big and thrilled. It bared its teeth at me. It bit.

ooo

July 4<sup>th</sup>, 2013: We kissed in secret as fire-crackers ripped through the sky.

ooo

I came out to my mother at fourteen. Ever infatuated with science, I printed out a ratty JPEG of the periodic table the night before, all pixels and bleeding lines, and circled the symbol for bismuth: *Bi*, atomic number eighty-three, brittle, with a low capacity for heat. Its half-life is long and ghastly; it’ll outlive the universe a billion times over. We’ll all turn back to stardust, but bismuth will still color the cosmos silver. Persistence can be quite lonely.

I left the scrap on the kitchen table and ran outside to wait for the bus. My father had left hours before, dissolving into the cool pink light of morning. At the age of fifty, his hands, rough as bark and thick, would be hanging sheetrock in an empty office park until the sun had long retreated again. I couldn't tell him. All day, my stomach churned with nerves. I didn't want to go home.

Many months later, I will shadow-step down the dark hallway to find a light on downstairs and voices rising like steam. Quietly, I will crouch, toes gripping the edge of the top step, and listen.

"I just don't get it." That will be my father's voice.

"What's there not to get, Mike?" My mother's.

Father, exasperated: "Why couldn't she just be gay?"



I tried, if that's any consolation. When I was still so wide-eyed and new, I tried to convince myself that I was gay. It seemed easier. I could stick my backpack with rain-bow pins. I could stomp around in chunky black boots. I could cut my hair off, my nails short, my attitude to the quick.

These things are stereotypes, yes, but they could send a message.

I dyed my hair in streaks of blue. I told people that I only liked boys "in theory." Loosely translated: I crushed on characters in books. A friend of mine bought me a mug that exclaimed in block letters: "So gay, I can't think straight." I was complicit in my own erasure. I mean, I already had a girlfriend, so what was the harm?



On the day my relationship began to fracture around me, I began to hear the warning signs like sirens. I heard: my mother insist *you haven't been acting the same lately*. I heard: my

father telling me *I'm worried about you, girlie*. I heard: my strangled voice explaining to my mother how Nicoletta's opal-blue vein had been opened. I heard: her name being whispered to the guidance counselor. I heard: her name being crackled over the classroom's intercom.

I heard: the world giving out on me. I heard: frog-children, crying out for love.



As I write, I'm curled up on my old bed in my parents' house. I'm visiting for Thanksgiving. The mug still sits in the corner beside my dresser, gathering dust.



The three cardinal sins of bisexuality are:

1. cheating,
2. settling down with the opposite sex, and
3. changing your mind, *ever*.

As Carmen Maria Machado writes in her memoir, *In the Dream House*: "The irony of course, is that queer folks *need* that good PR."

These things are sins because they are what others expect. They are sins because humans tend toward painting in the broadest of strokes. They are sins because whole populations are confined to carrying their stigma. And I committed them all at once when I lived a second life.

## Part II – Loverboy

*"What was between / us wasn't a fragile thing to be coddled, cooed / over. It came out fully formed, ready to run."*

-Ada Limón, "What I Didn't Know Before"

I don't know what will happen when you read this. I hate to be the asshole.



I didn't know what would happen when the phone stopped ringing. It was June 2015, and I was no longer at the beach. As much as I rubbed my eyes, though, my sin stuck like salt to the skin of my knuckles and burned. I was back in my hometown—more specifically, in the parking lot of a local Italian-owned Italian restaurant, sitting in Jae's Optima. I had really only just met him—and nothing was the same.

"You don't have to do this yet," he said.

"But how long would I wait?" I asked. I had already called once, to no response. I had to tell someone that I'd cheated on Nicoletta. I had to tell someone first that *wasn't* Nicoletta.

My best friend's face, stuck ugly to the phone screen, was pressed against my ear as I called her. Her contact photo was bushy-haired and gofy—she had accidentally shaved her eyebrow short, and instead of filling it in, she had shaved the other one to match. It was a picture she pleaded with me to delete, but one that I secretly treasured. I planned to pin it up on the dormitory wall when we moved in together—if that was still an option. Infidelity is a pond rimmed with algae, slick and deterring.

*Click.* "...Hello?" Her voice was so warm I didn't think I could go through with it.

"Liz," I said, "I did something bad."



After I graduated high school, class of 2015, I piled into a friend's van alongside a few other girls, and we pointed the headlights ocean-wise. Sunday afternoon, June 7<sup>th</sup>, two days post-vaediction. A stash of fruity beers jangled in the back, hidden under someone's sweater. Not nearly enough for a week of drinking, but we didn't know that. At seventeen, I wore silver streaks in my hair—leftovers from prom—and a sleeveless button-down shirt. Dakota, a childhood friend of mine, was driving ahead of us in her silver coupe, swerving around when

the roads got too straight. I could imagine the glee on her perennially red cheeks. In the back seat of the van, I sat beside Alex's guitar, and Alex sat beside me. I didn't text Nicoletta to let her know we were leaving. Later, I wouldn't text her to let her know we were there. We sang all the way, and I didn't get carsick once.

It was a two-and-a-half-hour drive to Ocean City, Maryland, one that we all knew intimately from childhood trips—days that ended with shaking sand out of hair and bundling up wet swimsuits and napping. My family was big on just packing up and going; when my father had the rare short Friday at work, he would call my mother midday and tell her to *pack the bags, we leave tonight*.

He had an itinerary: from the chocolate chip pancakes at Happy Jack's to the wandering among the flashing lights of the boardwalk. It was all very fun and all very scripted. My younger sister and I would wave to the rusting landmarks as we drove down Coastal Highway on our way back home. *Say: bye-bye Jolly Rogers*, my father would prompt us, *say bye-bye!*

This time, it would be different, I promised myself as we hurtled down 50 toward the glittering sea. Say it again: this time, I would do things my way.



"Dakota," the girl who had invited me on the trip said, "we didn't want to tell you, but we snuck some beers."

We were stumbling out of the car into the thick of the sea air. Someone whipped the sweater off of the contraband. Dakota seemed contented—happy. *Huh.*

"That's fine," she said, "sounds fun!"

*Who was she?*

The house we rented sat atop another residency, and we never heard a peep from whoever was staying below the flood line. Our bags struggled up an unpainted wooden staircase to get to the door. We unpacked

ourselves into drawers and decided to go out for ice cream. As the five of us crowded a cream-colored booth at Dumser's on 124<sup>th</sup>, Dakota informed us she got a text. Five guys from our school were staying just across from our rental, squeezing into the tiny hotel room they booked far too late. I hoped in my bones that they wouldn't pay us a visit, and, years down the way, I will have forgotten why.



"You know Liz, right?" Jae asked. We were in the rental's master bedroom. The walls were whitewashed and bare except for a painting of waves crashing above the headboard. The only light came in geometric from the hallway. Everyone else was in the front room, splayed across the couches and sipping Smirnoff Ices on the carpet. They were playing Cards Against Humanity and laughing. It was Sunday night, we had just gotten settled, and already the boys had made themselves at home with us.

"Yeah," I said, "why?" I couldn't read his face in part because I could hardly see it. Purple-black bangs fell across his eyes, and I wondered how well he could see. He looked Korean. He wore a leather bracelet and a shark tooth necklace. I got the sense he owned a longboard.

"Here," he pushed his phone into my hands, watching my face. "Is she okay?"

Her texts to him were a little sad. I didn't know why, and who was this guy, anyway? I appreciated his concern for my friend, and I told him as much, and meant it, but she generally seemed okay. The texts were nothing out of the ordinary, I said, she was an artsy person, always nursing a little sadness in her belly.

And after all, if something was wrong, wouldn't she tell me first?

I didn't say that last part.

One of the girls poked her head in to ask what the two lovebirds were up to. My ears were hot, and something crackled—the AC

unit shuddering to life, perhaps. We laughed, and we waved her out. We'll be out soon, we said, we're coming.

I smiled big and swept past him towards the hallway, our arms making contact.

He followed me out and made contact once more, catching my hand in the wood paneled hallway just a wall away from our friends.

"You know," he said, "all those guys out there keep saying that you're really cool, really sweet, the most beautiful girl on the beach—"



I know that he was hamming it up, going big, but I was charmed. As I write this scene, he sits across from me, face downward, playing chess on his phone and dancing in his chair.

"I don't know how to write this part," I say, "you were too corny."

He huffs at me and leans back in his seat. He's since gotten a haircut, so I can see that he's lifting his eyebrow at me. On his shirt, Snoopy is riding a skateboard across his chest. "I'm always corny," he says, "write it how it happened."



"—and if that's the case," he said, "then maybe we should hang out sometime."

It was Sunday, and I had only met this guy a few hours ago. His lips were shaped like a heart. It was Sunday, and we stood close, insulated in teenage warmth. It was Sunday, and our friends were both right there and not, holy spirits, bodiless murmurs on the other side of the wall. It was Sunday, and I didn't remember that I'd actually met him before, through Liz. She had sketches upon sketches of him.

But it felt nice to be wanted. And I wanted to want again. So I pressed the salt-stripped petals of my lips to his angular cheek. It gave a little under the pressure. It was at

that point I knew I had no choice but to see things through. His hand squeezed mine, a message sealed with a cork and passed along the waves of us.

"Oh, you shouldn't have done that."

And, if you'll forgive the melodrama—*(oh, romantic reader, forgive me for telling the plain truth!)*—he kissed me without hesitation.



I'm romanticizing this a lot. I hear: *Where's your shame? Where's your reluctance?* I tell you: It doesn't come here. Here, I was emboldened and open and happier than I'd been in years.



A picture—taken the next night at some ungodly hour—shows the girls and me, lined up in sweaters and shorts. Dakota is missing. I know she was the one who took the picture because we are all tilted inside the frame, the world gone akimbo. I'm in front, facing away, one cheekbone highlighted by the camera flash. A khaki-short leg pokes in from stage right. I—that is, the I in the picture, with her pixie-haircut overgrown and one hand gripping her calf—stare at it, looking lost.

The picture taken just afterward reveals the leg to be Jae's. His face is blurred and laughing. My toes dig into the sand beside him. I—that is, the I right here, writing this down, with more to my name than I ever thought possible—wonder what I was thinking.



One night early in the week, after we kissed but before anyone knew we had, he and I sat in lawn chairs while our roommates played drinking games inside. We talked about depression as moths rammed against the porch light. We spoke our vulnerabilities to

life. I didn't know how simple it could be to talk to someone. I didn't think it would be so simple to talk to anyone else ever again. I thought of nothing but him and the moon suspended above our heads. Not the silent screen discarded in my pocket. Not my cat, with his six toes on each paw, grasping. Not Liz. Not my parents, back at home waiting with bated breath for some sign that I was out there finding myself. Not Nicoletta. Not the apology I felt looming careful on the spot the moon hits the water. Not the I'm sorry. Not the pain.

.....

**"His hand squeezed mine, a message sealed with a cork and passed along the waves of us."**

.....

During lulls in the conversation, I tilted my head back and listened to the drunken laughter floating out from the warmth of the house.

Drunkenness was mythical to me. I hadn't really been around that many drunk people before. I hadn't ever been drunk myself.

My parents never drank. A few of my uncles drank so much that even when they drank, they never seemed drunk. I had always wondered how they could take in so much poison and not vomit up black bile.

In William Goldman's *The Princess Bride*, the man in black spends years building an immunity to iocane powder. We teenagers had not had that sort of time.

So my drunk friends were loud and dumb and not at all the people I knew. On Thursday night, someone convinced us all it would be a great idea to go down to the beach even though half of us were wasted. All six feet and 250 pounds of Nick wanted to climb the

guard tower, and it took half of the group to restrain the giant. Two girls each had to grab handfuls of another friend's rain-bow-patched cardigan to keep her from diving into the blackness of the ocean, its waves still heavy with the latent chill of spring. I was scared that someone would get killed. That their loping spirit would fly up into the cloudless 2 a.m. sky.

It was up to the most sober of us to get the rowdy group to bed. Dakota took a few of them back to the rental. Jae and I herded the rest—including the big, belligerent Nick—to the hotel room through the beach-facing patio door.

After everyone had slumped into sleep, Jae and I lay on the bed that the couch had vomited up from beneath its cushions. The sheets felt musty and full of salt-air. I couldn't sleep, and my breath was haggard, signaling the onset of a panic attack. He rolled over, and his face, concerned and inches from mine, warped.

• • •

"What do you hear?"

A streetlight humming a warm summer-night tune, like a choir of bugs. The salt in the waves grinding against the shore. My life coming in measured breaths. "What do you see?"

The sky. The sky unHINGING its jaw wide over our heads. The waning moon like a smile.

I was sitting on the back porch. Jae and I were sitting on the back porch. We were sitting there, me stacked on top of him, him stacked on top of a lawn chair, with the open sky sitting above us.

"Hey," he said.

"Hey."

"Feel better?" He motioned for me to stand.

I stood and turned to face him. "I was worried."

"I know." He stood, enveloped me, and began to sway.

A moment passed us by, and I wasn't so worried anymore. I wasn't worried about slit wrists or the uncomfortable warmth of the guidance counselor's office. I wasn't worried about some unruly drunk eighteen-year-old falling from the whitewashed guard tower. I wasn't worried about showing this near stranger my dried tear tracks. He had seen it all before.

• • •

The worst part of a vacation is the long drive back home, shoved hip-to-hip in a tiny metallic cavern of sweat and peeling skin, but that part hadn't come yet, only the packing part had. I was unseating shirts from their temporary residencies in the vanity and reseating them in the far more temporary space of the cramped suitcase. I could hear them protesting, and their protests were mine. We didn't want to go back to the lavender smells of my parents' house. We didn't want the inevitable. We wanted sand in our creases. We wanted the easy breeze.

As I smoothed out the folds, I thought of the night before, the gleeful reprieve of a girls' only night. Alex and Toni and I had shoved the coffee table aside and hunkered down on the fold-out couch of the rental. We talked. We drank. We knew each other too well.

"So what's the deal," Alex asked me, "with you and Jae?"

I gave her some noncommittal answer, like "he's cute" or "he's sweet" or something. I continued my troubling new trend of lying by omission. The fact we kissed in the hallway while our friends slapped black cards down on the coffee table? The fact that we did unspeakable things on the bathroom sink in the early morning as our friends slept off their hangovers? Those things could stay between us.

Alex wasn't satisfied with my answer. Or something in my face said I was holding onto the truth. My ears were hot, but that

could've been the beer. Still, she pressed me for details.

She cited how attached he had become and how I followed him around like a puppy.

She pinned me and splayed out my tinsel-thin wings.

But she was hiding something, too.

• • •

One time at the rental house, Jae wrapped an arm around my waist and told Nick that I was "the same size as Melany." I thought nothing of it until the drive home, until his fingerprints had already seared themselves into my flesh. He was sealed inside me, airtight.

Alex, as we drove home: "Don't worry, you're so much cooler than Melany."

Me: "Who?"

• • •

"So, yeah, I cheated—we cheated," I summed up, and the line was quiet. Liz was quiet. The heat that welled up in my throat was quiet. Jae leaned in, as if the silence was a secret instead, broiling too low in my ear for him to hear it. He cracked a window, let us breathe. I felt that we were alone in the world. No—I felt that I was alone.

"Liz," I couldn't handle her pause for long; I felt anxious, stewed in it, the frog so close to jumping out of the pot. "Do you hate me?"

### Part III – Home

*"Girl competition can be refereed easily. The slut will never win. She has no credibility."*

### -Sophia Shalmiyev, Mother Winter

Melany, to me, was her curls. Her gorgeous black curls sat high on a face so round and unbroken by smile lines that it was a pale dot floating over her body, like the moon in the most pristine night sky. She usually

wore black; I thought she was mourning her relationship or something. Turns out, she was always mourning.

She was like my dark double.

Or, technically, I was hers—the other woman, the madwoman.

On the rare occasions we were in the same room, it was all girl power and flowery praise, as if we'd known each other for years and years. As if I had her contact saved in my phone with cute emojis and an embarrassing photo. As if we were on the same side, like I thought we were.

"Good luck with him," she told me when she first met me. It was conspiratorial, a secret between girls. She leaned so close that I thought I felt her teeth. "I think you'll need it."

Later, she told me she wished that I would cheat again and that he would kill himself.

• • •

When she and I first met, I was eighteen and sitting on a clean couch at her house. The room warped and curved around me, and I told myself not to cry, that this was all my fault, after all. But I cried nonetheless in that stranger's house. I glanced down and blinked until it was safe to look up again. These inevitable tears elicited more sympathy than I expected.

So I sat there: guilty and blameless and confused. Catty-corner from me, on a matching couch, Jae slouched and hid behind crossed arms. He was berated deep into the cushions by Melany and her mother. I listened. I was apologetic and polite and thus, briefly absolved.

• • •

No—she didn't wish. I checked the text messages. She *hoped*.

"I hope you fucking cheat on him and he kills himself."

• • •

I told myself that maybe she was the double, after all.



I try my hardest to be the type of person who warrants forgiveness, the type of person people like. I don't know why this is. It's not a religious guilt. The sanctimony of the confessional, the priest's face pocked and obscured by intricately carved wood, remains a foreign concept to me. There's probably some sort of social conditioning involved. Conditioning that Melany purportedly never got boxed into. Maybe, in this case, silence was repentance.



"I look up statistics on infidelity.  
How do I fit into this narrative?"



I do have something to confess. The worst part of my first confrontation with Melany wasn't the guilt of what I'd done to her. It was how much worse I felt after I left.



Because of my obsessive desire to be forgiven, I never protested. When Nicoletta kicked me out of her house, I went home. After beach week, Melany screamed at Jae, then was over him, then forgave him. Or maybe she simply ignored me. And suddenly, they were dating again. Something about business as usual. Something about his mother's advice. I was alone in the world. When Melany decided to take him back, decided to look past his infidelity, I congratulated them. I be-

gan to see hickeys at full bloom beneath his ears. I folded into myself and said nothing.

Then she forbade him—understandably—from talking to me. And I—unreasonably—began to hate her. He assured her that he couldn't follow that rule, that he refused to lose me. I was hopeful. Still, they dated. I brought him lunch at work. He called me baby cakes; I called him a dork. Still, they dated. We spoke in secret for months, waiting for the summer to end and for college to whisk me away.

Still, they dated.



I look up statistics on infidelity. How do I fit into this narrative? Everything has a precedent, a bit of foreshadowing that unlocks the timeline, leaves a you-sized space in the story.

Much of the data I find on who is likely to cheat focuses on heterosexual men.



Two weeks after we left the beach—June 26<sup>th</sup>, 2015, my eighteenth birthday—gay marriage became the law of the land. And I, home alone in the cool gray shade of my parents' house, felt light. As I ran into the living room from the kitchen, each foot stepped, weightless, swinging around the other like air under a ballerina's spread-eagle skirt. Momentarily, I walked on air again. I cried.

It was peak summer, one of those days when the air is thick with sun. There was intensity in the way the bugs chirped and buzzed in the air through the open window. A steady stream of applause, it felt like. The cheer in the electric humming of wings. The cheer of the crowd when President Barack Obama mused: "And then sometimes there are days like this, when that slow, steady effort is rewarded with justice that arrives like a thunderbolt."

It was a victory for the United States of America. It was a victory for its people. It was a victory for the communities they built. And the families they raised. And the people they loved.

All the way down to the chorus of cicadas undulating in the thick green of the air and leaves.



"Well, at least the two of you came clean immediately," a friend tells me, as if to pin me as the good guy. "You could've kept it a secret; it could've been so much worse."

Self-preservation leads us to change the story, pretend we were the good guys after all.



The doorbell rang clear throughout my parents' house. I heard tires squeal around the corner and pushed open the noisy screen door. On the front stoop, soaking in the late summer light: a birthday card; a pair of cloud-white Vans, size seven; and Reza Farazmand's book of comics about self-aware cartoon animals. I would bring them all with me to college.

"The chameleon is able to hide in plain sight," one comic strip begins. "Through a similar process, he is able to hide his emotions. Nature is amazing."



Later, in college, Liz didn't hate me, so we did live together. She and I would lean against the whitewashed brick of our dorm room wall, and we would mix vodka with whatever we could find at the campus MicroMart. Gatorade. Rockstar. Red Bull.

And we grew mean.

"Spill it," one would say, red cup in hand.

"I heard," the other would begin, one pale thumbnail flicking across her phone screen,

"that Melany asked him for a *promise ring* a few *months* after they got together."

We trashed everything. Her hair: a crow's nest. Her eyeliner: overdrawn. Her piercings: excessive. Her attitude: melodramatic. So much for loving women.

"Are you *serious*?" the first would say.

"Scared he would run away?"

I was vindictive in a way I did not know. We were spitting facts that may not have been true. I think I was trying to explain away Jae's disloyalty, to give him a reason for having left her. Even after they broke up, I compared myself to her, wondered what took him so long.

I called this healing.

"Yeah—isn't that the most *desperate* thing you've ever heard? Red flag much?"



Assessing contextual factors within a relationship has been found to be the most reliable way to predict infidelity—not personality traits, not labels. Red flags abound. A relationship as a rabbit trap. Other people as an exit strategy.

The day Nicoletta cut her wrist, she sent me pictures of it. The day Nicoletta cut her wrist, I began to think of ways out. I told the guidance counselor that *my friend* had hurt herself, and that I couldn't handle being her rock anymore. Ideations of self-harm filled her head like wasps. Self-sabotage was her strong suit. The counselor's office was stuffy and smelled like mildew, and I doubled myself again. I wanted her to get better, but I also wanted her to hate me for outing her issues. What she sent me didn't feel like a cry for help. It felt like a yearning to be nursed, for me to fix things for her. And that may not have been a fair assumption, but I had shouldered her burdens before.

And I realized: *if I leave her, she wouldn't stand a chance.*



And I realized: *if I stay, neither will I.*

I realize now that she's showing up in my writing more than I planned.



Just after I turned eighteen, after Melany's scraping touch, after gays could marry, I began to hear things about myself. They were contorted realities, though.

This girl was not quite me. She was both a dyke and boy-hungry. Or she was just fetishizing Jae. Or she somehow plotted to victimize a girl she didn't even know existed.

She was a harbinger of chaos, all 5'2" of her.

One such instance: A friend of mine flustered into my house one day. He was a year younger than me, just like Melany, so they hung around the same circles. He had been hanging out with drama club friends that day. Two of them saw my face hanging from his keys and went up in flames.

One of them snatched at the keychain. It was my senior portrait. She showed her friend. "Isn't this that bitch?"

"That's definitely her," the other said.

The first: "Ugh, she's awful."

The second, to him: "Why are you friends with her?"

Him, to me, concern nestled in the creases around his eyes: "What happened?"

Another time: I was relaxed among strangers. These guys I was with, they were friends-of-friends, distant branches in a closed network. We were at the mall. Walking close, but not too close, the group of us rounded Forever 21—which used to be an FYE before CDs fell out of fashion—and came around to the Books-A-Million, chatting about pleasant nonsense as all acquaintances do. The safety net of shared experience huddled around us in these familiar stomping grounds. There's an inherent bond in sharing the same spaces.

"Hey," the tall one with the beanie began. He was scruffy and walked bent at the back. The chatter quieted down, and he pointed his nose toward me. "What's your name again?"

So I was in good company. I had forgotten his name too. "I'm Ashley," I replied, offering a bone-thin hand, which he took in his own without thinking. But the large fingers hardened as my name dropped from my mouth. It was a coin slipped into a palm, something remembered and unsettling and shiny. It bounced against the polished floors and spiraled before settling facedown.

"Oh," he said. He seemed more angular now, no longer so familiar. This almost-stranger dropped my hand and slipped me a smile. It knew me, somehow, and disliked me for it.

"You're that lesbian, right?"

My reputation had begun to proceed me. Suddenly, I had two options: to run or to lean in.

"Yeah," I said, throwing back a projectile smile. "That's me: that lesbian."



"I heard," Liz would say, or I would say, "*she* cheated on Jae with his *best friend*."

"*No way*," the other would say, immediately opening up said best friend's Instagram. "*That's rich*."



The apartment Jae and I are looking at now—our happy ever after, a drafty two-bedroom in Charles Village—is old, but probably not haunted, I think. When these rooms are empty, they feel unsettlingly empty. They feel as if no one has died here. They feel lived in. They feel alive as the watery sunlight coming in through the windows.

So I bring my own ghosts. Not holy sheets, not ghoulish, no chains rattling or heads dangling from half-chopped necks. These ghosts are alive and well and pink in the cheeks. These ghosts aren't even in the rooms, per say. They are living in houses and townhomes and apartments and in my mind.

Melany is one of those ghosts.



When I first sat down to write, I meant to address this to Melany, to give myself some assurance that she's alive and well in these hyper-connected times. Her social media profiles are akin to radio silence. She's disappeared like a ghost through the walls of this world. Signs at Ocean City urge us to leave nothing but our footprints, and she's left no trace on my life besides my guilt.

In a way, this is immensely selfish. And in a way, this isn't what I expected.

I've learned that I have more deep-seated issues to process.



I dreamt about Melany last night. The ends of her hair were bleached and dead, all the red of her post-breakup dye job bled out. Imagine: a swirling crimson shower drain. Imagine: the urge to pull an enemy close, to feel the taut drumskin of another heart beating. Imagine: an apology thrown into the abyss, never destined to hit its mark.





Manakin Pattern  
MIKAYLA HENNESSEY •

Digital  
8"x10"

## Skycroft

VIOLET GRIFFIN •

I

You catch my arm, startling me from my inner monologue as I walk to the deep black parking lot, heading to the spot where every day I wait for my mother to come for me. Sometimes I sit for a half hour, sometimes for three. *Come with me*, you urge. *I'll take you home*. I follow you to your car. A red Saturn—the cheap coal vinyl peeling back from the seats, the ceiling's cloth lining draping down, sprinkling tawny stuffing into our hair as you turn the key and speed out of the alabaster-lined asphalt lot.

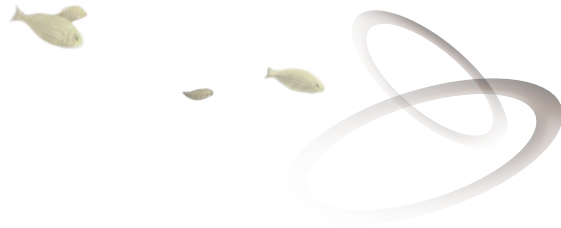
II

Your engine sputters and coughs as we speed up a twisted mountain road—but not the one that leads to my home. *Where are we?* I ask you. *Trust me*, you respond—a coy glance as you jerk the wheel to avoid a fallen tree branch. My face turns to the window. A group of deer scamper through the brush, lifting their heads to stare back at me. I feel naked. I envy the innocence I see in their eyes as they peer at me; I wonder where mine has gone, if they or you or anyone else might still see it glowing in my face. *I don't even know you*, I think, my eyes following the sunlight as it filters through the trees—the trees which I do know, which have known me since I was young, when I built forts and hotels and castles within them, befriending the inchworms and the mockingbirds that also made their homes among the moss and oak.

III

You cut into a space in the thicket—invisible from the road. The sun has started to slide below the speckled skyline, just barely visible over the pasture before us. With every step I take through the lush landscape, a cloud of lace-wigs, airborne aphids, flutter around my feet. The moon peers down at us from the darkening evening sky. You lie on the hood of your car, lighting a cigarette. I watch the warm glow of the embers, the smoke as it drifts up towards the glittering dusk. A meteorite sails through the darkness until it vanishes. *Is this the death of a star?* I feel the weight of this departure on my shoulders. No one else cares, or even notices. Not you, not the deer or the trees or the hundreds of thousands of glimmering lights both above and below us. You take another drag of your cigarette and toss your coiled chestnut hair over your shoulder, peering at me. *Hey*, you start. *How about I take you home?*





## The Human Mousetrap

JEREMY JOHNSTON •

Edgar came home from his interview in his \$900 tweed suit and got into the shower, fully clothed.

He'd worn the suit out into the New York winter day without any additional winter-wear. The water ran off him in little streams. His steam melted the cold off of him. His scowl remained. His shoulders hunched, remained hunched. He removed his sunglasses, reached out and placed them on the toilet's reservoir. He let the jacket fall off his arms and hit the shower floor like slop. A small pool grew. He unbuttoned his vest and shirt. He removed his socks and pants and underwear. He put all the items on the shower's small bench.

Edgar spurted some clinical-grade dandruff shampoo that was the color of cough syrup onto his head and applied it vigorously into a healthy lather. The shampoo made his hair feel stiff and sticky, hard to manage. He let it sit for five minutes, per his female dermatologist's instructions.

Edgar was contemplating his mouse problem. He had first seen a mouse scamper across the kitchen floor thirty days ago. He ran to his bed and stayed there for two hours while calling his mother, who spoke at length of her discontent and what would certainly be her son's immeasurable success. The next day he saw another, so he called the super. He had never dealt with pests before, had always let his roommates or mother take

care of it. The super came in a Hawaiian shirt and baseball hat. He carried a stack of glue traps, which Edgar refused to use, picturing a mouse squealing in the middle of the night. The super also brought a large container of cayenne pepper, which he shook all around the oven and the edges of the kitchen. "They don't like," he said. "It make them sneeze and they go away." The super brought three snap-traps and set them all up in the kitchen, perpendicular to each badly painted wall. He asked about Edgar's screenplay.

While placing delivery containers in the garbage the following evening, Edgar spotted a dead mouse in a sprung trap. He gagged looking at it. He hesitated to move, did not know how to continue depositing his refuse in the bin. After a half hour, he scooped the scene—trap and all—into a dustpan and dropped it in the trash bin—dustpan and all—with his shirt pulled up over his nose. That's that.

Two more turned up, snapped. Edgar did not like scooping up dead mice in new scooping implements. He did not like their gray, hairy bodies, divided, punctuated. The little plump corpses looked like pranks. They looked like stuffed animals arranged in murder as some dark joke. Edgar was convinced that their innards slightly inflated after they died, grew gaseous, and would eventually pop or collapse in a stew of maggots. He was embarrassed for them.

Edgar had never seen a mouse in the bathroom, which was one reason he spent so much time taking showers. His showers were long, maybe forty-five minutes. The water was warm and unending; the soft sound massaged his troubled head. He got down from the small bench and sat cross-legged on the shower floor. He did not look forward to exiting the shower, which was when his skin would get dry and start to tighten and eventually flake. His scalp flaked from dandruff, which he'd learned was a fungus; the rest of his body flaked from dryness. He filled his mouth with shower water and swallowed. He did not look forward to putting on his other clothes. He did not look forward to continuing his day, which had nothing left in it. There was nothing planned. It was a vacuum of time. He would throw out his suit. He did not look forward to leaving the shower and encountering more mice.

In fact, the shower was so comfortable that he decided he would never leave it; this was at 2:45 p.m.

It was while purchasing another dustpan at the local department store—which made him uncomfortable to shop at because he couldn't be certain that the employees he would have to speak to would speak English—that he encountered what was labelled a humane mousetrap. The trap was a green tube with flat bottom. On one end was a slim, plastic slide, like what someone might place under a microscope, and inside were various nuts to bait the pest. On the other end was a sort of spring-loaded drawbridge, through which the pest would enter to access the nuts, but would not be able to escape. The trap setter would then be able to move outside, pull out the plastic slide, and release the critter.

Edgar assumed it was called humane because it did not involve him handling little dusty, horrible corpses. He set it in the kitchen underneath the island and waited.

From this point on he saw mice everywhere, always out of the corner of his eye,

never knowing if he actually saw something. Every time he turned a light on, he risked catching one in the act of existing. Every morning he woke up, he risked finding a dead one bloated in a snap-trap or soiled in the green tube. Every little sound became a mouse sound, every squeak, scratch, or rustle. He kept the sink empty of food. All snackfoods he kept in the freezer. And yet he still saw them daily. They came from under the refrigerator, under the stove, under the closet door. He purchased steel wool and stuffed the cracks and holes of the apartment. He pulled the grates away from the radiators and stuffed their holes; he taped mesh to the grates' faces. He called the super; the super stopped answering his phone calls. He called several exterminators; none would work without the consent of the super. He demanded that they come; none did. He fantasized about punishing the super. In the future when he would be on talk shows, when he would give speeches accepting awards on national television, the super would still be pathetic.

The shower was the main reason Edgar had signed the lease on the apartment. Where the rest of the apartment looked old with splintered floorboards, crummy windows, and a spotty paint job, the bathroom looked to be newly redone, and the shower was a modern gray tile with a waterfall showerhead. He saw the small bench and thought about the long showers he loved to take. The kitchen did not matter, as he would be ordering food. The view was immaterial, as he would be spending every day in the adventure of Manhattan. And the bedroom could be ugly; he would have sex in the dark. Rent would be \$1,900 per month; the broker fee was one month's rent, the security deposit two. The super said Edgar would become famous one day, and Edgar signed the lease.

The reason Edgar didn't have a job was because he had moved to New York City without securing a job first. He had thought that if he moved to New York City, then he would

be able to have a boyfriend for the first time. But he didn't know where to meet boys. He envisioned being invited to a boy's room and watching the boy remove his coat, toss his wallet on a bedside table. Edgar would walk into the room, and the boy would remove Edgar's coat from behind, then reach around Edgar's front and hold him. Edgar pictured holding the boy's hands.

He pictured planted kisses on his neck.

“At 4:00 p.m., Edgar was in the throes of feeling his body and fantasizing about being completely hairless.”

One boy he was interested in catching was Jackson Shirley, a film student he'd met in college. Before moving to New York, Edgar and Jackson had begun interacting through comments and DMs. Jackson had his own boutique video production company; he wanted to hire Edgar. He wanted to read Edgar's screenplay. Maybe they could get drinks, Edgar thought, smirking.

At 4:00 p.m., Edgar was in the throes of feeling his body and fantasizing about being completely hairless.

Edgar had been regularly catching mice in the green tube—so regularly, in fact, that releasing mice into the street was now part of his morning routine. But catching and releasing so many mice raised questions. How many mice were being released and then finding their way back into the apartment building? How many mice could be caught if the humane traps weren't single occupancy? He did not want to find dead mice. Nevertheless, continuing to catch and release mice was unsustainable. Jackson

Shirley could not come to an apartment full of mice. He paid someone through Craigslist to set up more snap-traps. He would continue using the humane trap along with them; some mice would be lucky.

This proved to be pivotal. A few days passed and no mice were seen. The snap-traps offered no decomposing forms; the humane trap remained empty. The sky brightened. Edgar's shoulders relaxed, and he accomplished more. He worked on his screenplay and emailed producers. One afternoon, still in his pajamas, he sat at his table in the kitchen with his laptop and fantasized about his future as a filmmaker. He sipped his green tea and smiled. He looked out at the day. Sunlight came in through the window and warmed the wooden floor. He placed his cold, pale feet in the light. He took a sip of his tea and felt the tea bag bounce against his upper lip, moistening his mustache. He glanced at the blank white page of the document on his screen and felt something in his mouth. He stuck his tongue out and pulled hairs off of it. He sipped the tea again and spit it in his lap. Floating in his cup was a dead mouse.

At 7:15 p.m. Edgar knew that his phone had buzzed several times, but he was aware that anyone who would be contacting him would not be worth his time. He had emailed collaborators who, in retrospect, had no ambition. They were the type of collaborators that would define his ceiling and smother his vision. They were, honestly, pathetic. His fingertips had drained of color entirely.

Edgar had sent Jackson Shirley his portfolio from college and his résumé but insisted he wanted to discuss his new screenplay in person. Jackson was open to meeting with him. Edgar went to Banana Republic and looked at suits. He found a brown, tweed one that he thought amplified his intelligence. The jacket tag read \$398; the employee at the Nolita location pulled together the vest, tie, pocket square, pants, belt, shoes, and sunglasses that went with the display.

Altogether, the outfit was \$900; he paid with his credit card. He took a car home and spent the rest of the day inside wearing the full suit.

Jackson had emailed Edgar his cell phone number and invited Edgar to text him the morning of the interview. This invitation struck Edgar as oddly casual. He decided that he, in turn, should treat the interview more casually.

The morning of the interview, he slept past 11:00 a.m. After he got out of bed, put on some clothes and went out for a coffee, he texted Jackson asking when he should meet him at his office. Jackson suggested they meet at a coffee chain in Midtown. This now struck Edgar as almost offensively casual. He went back to the apartment, changed into his suit, and put his screenplay in a folder.

When he arrived, Edgar found Jackson sitting at the window on a sort of barstool. Jackson didn't recognize Edgar and specifically mentioned Edgar's suit. Jackson wore a down coat and blue jeans; he didn't even have a notebook. Edgar decided it'd be too awkward to order a drink, so he sat down. It was the middle of the work day; Midtown professionals walked in and out briskly. Edgar fingered his folder nervously. Jackson asked how he was and what was new. Edgar asked if Jackson could say more about his organization and what positions might be available for him. Jackson said he didn't understand. He said that his studio was really just him and that he did freelance videography, largely for corporate commercials. Jackson said he'd be happy to look at the screenplay, though. This invitation was difficult to parse—did Jackson mean it in a professional capacity, and could he pass the screenplay to connections? Edgar opened the screenplay in front of them and began to talk about it. The first thing Jackson noticed was that the screenplay was roughly ten pages. The second thing he noticed was that several character names were familiar to him. And the more Edgar expounded on the

screenplay, the more Jackson realized that the film's plot resembled that of his undergraduate capstone's, and not only resembled but sort of uncannily mimicked, and to such a degree that he began to suspect that this whole meeting was some kind of cute joke. Jackson mentioned his capstone to Edgar. Edgar said he didn't know what Jackson was talking about. Jackson asked him if he was kidding.

Edgar was then unable to speak for several minutes. Jackson tried to cajole Edgar back into friendly banter, asking about life in New York, asking about his family, about people from college, about projects he'd worked on since graduation. Edgar asked Jackson why they'd exchanged phone numbers.

Three days later, Jackson would receive in the mail a parcel in a padded envelope. He emptied it into his hand and quickly dropped it on his desk. It was the green humane trap containing, however indiscernibly, a mouse completely torn to shreds.

*THE AUDIOLOGIST SAID  
I CAN HEAR GRASS GROWING*

ROCHELLE JEWEL SHAPIRO •

At Seven Seas diner sits a mother, still  
and pale as an ivory carving—white hair pulled  
into a tiny topknot—eyes soft gray, open wide,  
barely blinking. Her face, breasts, belly, arms, and legs  
are round like The Venus of Willendorf.

Her daughter faces her with the same face,  
but her hair dark, flowing, her body lithe, long,  
her eyes trained on her mother's eyes,  
as if gathering in the last of her.

The mother reaches for her purse.  
“It’s okay, Mama. You took care of me all these years.  
Now I can take care of you a little bit.”

The daughter keeps her eyes locked on her mother  
who can no longer speak and her mother  
who can no longer speak matches the gaze.

How can I tell you of the happiness  
on the daughter’s face? On the mother’s?  
Like candle glow from an inner flame.  
The two of them in silence.

After a moment, long as an eon, they begin to hum  
low. My ears that can hear grass grow make out  
a lullaby about roses and lilies.

The waiter spills ice water into my lap.  
Nothing breaks the spell.



*Peach-Painted Steps*  
CHLOË WILLIAMS •

Canon EOS Rebel T7i with 18-135mm  
lens set at 35 mm.  
6000 x 4000px



## Places and People and Things and Ideas

EMILY BRISSE •

Paris at twenty was a dusky sweep of January streetlights, of bridge painters, of long afternoon hours spent in cafés with glasses of wine and journal pages. I had arrived there among other students but knew no one. It was a change—being so solo—and I stepped along back streets with sensitive feet, savoring each eager and bumbling exchange I traded with shopkeepers in my best French, a language I knew only by the vocabulary post-it notes I had used to wallpaper my dorm room. I sat in the Luxembourg Gardens on mornings crisp enough to reveal one's breath, and I dipped a baguette into jam and watched the birds brave my presence for the crumbs. I read Gertrude Stein and Eliot and Lowell and Hem. I thought, I know what it is to be me now, in this new place, with no one claiming me, no one with preconceived notions, no one to rush me toward some kind of end. I can be as much and as little as I want. And I was. I did. I danced close with strangers in jazz clubs, tossed coins into the Seine at 4 a.m., felt my blood racing down and up and out and back and pounding pounding alive alive alive. I had a boyfriend at home, but I didn't want to go back. I had parents who missed me, but I didn't want to go back. I had my life planned, but I wanted to scrap it. Run off. Be the girl

without limits, who lived in the intoxicating haze of no accountability except for the page you write with your breath. Paris: It felt like the answer.

London at thirty was less romantic, more flocked by alarm clocks and puddles and sliced white bread, but also the twitters of teenage girls and the antics of teenage boys—students of mine, this time—and the thoughts of one accountable for all of them. Ten years prior, this would have been a weight. But I led them to the The Globe, and after years of guiding both the eager and the reluctant child through *Julius Caesar*, I was delighted at their pleasure. I took them to the Tube, and after witnessing their initial overwhelm, I handed out high fives when they returned having mastered that web. And while walking with them about St. Paul's Cathedral, their stories of the unfamiliar streets and its smells and its colors bouncing out of their bodies, I felt content, absent of desire to be anything other than me, thirty, in a baggy red rain coat with frizzy hair and a body full of all the roads I had traveled. I thought, I know what it is to be me now, in this new place, with my loved ones thousands of miles away, with them a thousand miles the stuff of my veins, with them being my here everywhere. Oceans and borders



fade, don't they? I marveled at the tomb of Queen Elizabeth in Westminster Abbey. I wandered past the Oxus Treasure and massive busts of ancient pharaohs in the British Museum, and I coasted through Hyde Park on a smooth rented bike that reminded me of two white ones rented in southern Minnesota, and I felt my heart squeeze, my heart squeeze, my love running out and in and up and away and down and far flung, and I was so grateful that I had a husband who I wanted to go back to, a family who I held with such tenderness, a life that I did

.....

**“I can be as much and as little  
as I want. And I was. I did.”**

.....

not foresee, in that it had turned out so differently than I'd imagined it on the edge of the Seine, French wind in my hair, poems on my tongue. In London, those poems were still there. Are still here, tonight. But now, despite the beauty and wonder of the elsewhere, they are full of the nouns of home.



## HANNAH NATHAN ROSEN MEMORIAL WRITING PRIZE

### LESLIE HARRISON & JEANNIE VANASCO

#### CO-JUDGES

Hannah Nathan Rosen was a rising senior English major and creative writer at Towson University when she died unexpectedly in January of 2018. Her parents created this award to honor her memory, as well as her love of creative writing and the English Department. Both of us had Hannah as a student in her last semester at TU, and we adored her and admired her writing and her courage. It is an honor to be able to administer this prize on behalf of the college, the university, and Hannah's family.

The prize gives a financial award to a creative writing student whose work in either creative nonfiction or poetry (Hannah's two loves) is outstanding, and who has senior status. Our hope is that this award will make a gifted writer's journey and transitions after graduation a little easier.

## Letter for My Sister

### KIERSTIN KESSLER •

This is a time neither one of us remembers perfectly.

There are moments I'm sure you recall vividly, things I wasn't there for, and there are points where our memories diverge. There are a lot of things you've admitted to not remembering—and honestly, part of me is terrified of misinterpreting, of remembering things too differently than they were. This is how I look back on it all, when I do.

And I do, often.

I don't think I've always been aware of how severely this point in our lives affected me, really. Not until later, when I found that I get choked up thinking about it, talking about it. When I remember going to school in seventh grade and having the girls who found you unconscious in the park come up to me, naively asking in front of others if my sister was doing okay, and I thought I would pass out from how hard I was holding back tears.

"What's wrong with Kierstin?" my other friends asked.

I didn't want anyone to know that I'd spent the previous day picking you up from the hospital, listening to you cry through the bedroom walls, thinking about how heroin sucked and wondering why you didn't just stop. There was a lot I didn't understand then. A lot I was angry about.

When I think back, I don't remember a time before your addiction to heroin. At least, nothing big. I get tiny flashes of things, your



dad calling me *baby bird*, spending the night in your bed before Easter, you and Mom tricking me into getting ready for school on a snow day.

These were all in our old house—I didn't know what you were doing, really. The neighbor's son once cornered me and told me you were "French-kissing" boys. I was disgusted with you because he was, though I had no idea what that was back then. In retrospect, it was rather tame in comparison to what you *would* do, later.

Then we moved and everything exploded.

This is what I remember the most.

Not long after moving, and over a rather short period of time, you overdosed on multiple occasions, each one worse than the last.

None of them were mild. The first time we received a phone call from three girls in my class—they'd found you unconscious behind the bathrooms in a public park, panicked, and used your cell phone to call Mom and thrust her into a frenzy. She ran around the house, screaming, sobbing.

I didn't fully understand the gravity of the situation until that night when we picked you up from the hospital. Whatever drugs they'd given you there muddled your brain almost as badly as the heroin, it seemed. "Ants were eating me," you said into the silence, the darkness of our car. "Ants were eating me,"

you repeated when nobody had anything to say back.

"Yeah," I remember breathing out, voice small, disconnected. Even the dark, leather seats were quiet as we shifted among them, as if the world wanted us to listen to your mindless rambling and hang on to every repeated phrase.

"Ants were eating me."

My face was still wet, though I don't think you noticed. I don't even know if you realized anything was wrong or that the rest of us were upset. You searched for your phone again and again, thanked us for picking you up over and over. To this day, it's one of the most awkward car rides I've ever attended, though it feels almost as if I wasn't there at all, reflecting on it.

"Ants were eating me."

This time, you lifted your shirt, exposing your stomach to our youngest sister, Julianna, and me. Your flesh was riddled with grotesque bug bites. They lined your skin like freckles, already faint, attesting to how long the day had been. I couldn't tear my eyes away, because—well, yeah, ants had been eating you. I'll never understand how that was the one thing you processed, above all else.

Later that night, I lay on the floor and listened through the walls as Mom told you that you were going away to a treatment facility. Some trance within you broke. You cried openly, loudly, like I hadn't heard you cry since your dad died.

I stared blankly at the ceiling, mulling over how I never wanted to hear "ants were eating me" again.

The next time you overdosed, we thought you were dead. We prepared for you to die.

I remember being unable to cry, my insides hollow because it felt like *this was it*. The final overdose, the final call, the final worry. Yet, it wasn't a surprise, wasn't sudden. While you were using, we were waiting, anticipating the call where we would identify your corpse. You were hopeless.

The exact phrasing that stuck in my mind when I received an update on your condition was, "There's a 50/50 chance she'll survive. Even if she does, they don't know if she'll be the same."

You survived. Somehow, you survived. My memory blurs on what happened to you after, but I remember the next time I saw you I was expecting you to be brain-fogged, like you were when we'd picked you up the time before, except permanently. But you were fine, albeit a bit melancholic, your words wistful and distant.

I've always wondered how it felt, seeing us after an occasion like that. You once said that one of the main inspirations for your eventual sobriety was Julianna and me—the example that you were setting for us. Did it hurt you to see the way we looked at you? Like you were a stranger, like we had to tip-toe and be cautious around you?

I remember the fear the day we picked you up from rehab—though I have no idea which instance this was. Not one where you remained sober afterward. At the time, I didn't expect you to. When we showed up, I scanned the place, thinking it looked fun, almost—kind of like a boarding school. Then, we got you, and you were miserable.

You'd acquired something new at this rehab, but it wasn't a longing for sobriety—it was a crescent-shaped mark on the dip of your neck. When I questioned it, you shrugged.

It wasn't until months later that I discovered you'd dug a key in your skin, removing a chunk in your desperation for an escape.

In later years, I think and say aloud, *at least I'm not doing heroin*. In my mind, a hierarchy of addiction exists (despite all of yours and everyone else's insistence that it doesn't matter, drugs are drugs and alcohol is a drug). In this hierarchy, heroin and meth are the worst. The meth PSA's haunted my dreams—people with no teeth, sunken faces, aged—and what I've seen heroin do to you ensures I'll avoid it forever. Alcohol, however,

is somewhere in the middle. Socially acceptable, sometimes socially expected, and yet somehow still capable of destroying lives.

The first time I tried alcohol was later than some. I avoided wild high school parties and situations that seemed particularly dangerous. So, by nineteen, I'd rejected it a few times prior, scared of hangovers and addiction and losing my sanity and ending up like you. The first time I tried it, I realized losing my sanity didn't feel too bad.

Maybe it's because my sober self is more contained, anxious, quiet. Maybe it's because my sober brain thinks too much, questions everything, overanalyzes all social situations. Or maybe it's simply that being intoxicated is more fun, allows what feels like a truer version of myself to exist. Whatever the reason, that first night drunk exceeded my expectations. After only a single shot of whiskey and a mixed drink, I felt comfortable surrounded by strangers and at peace with anything that happened. I spent the whole night in a chair, finding everything funny, and nothing had ever seemed to dispel my anxieties so quickly.

Then, the following morning, I woke up early. No sickness. No headache, no violent vomiting, none of the scary things I associated with drinking. When I raised the question to my friends later, they explained it away with, "We're young."

Youth saved me from a hangover. I had no idea that was a thing.

My love for alcohol didn't become a problem until a bit later. I drank a few more times—sometimes alone, sometimes with friends. I used alcohol as a relaxer—and for quite a while, I could, because I always got tipsy and never drunk. It wasn't until I began going out more frequently that I experienced my first hangover, my first bout of violent vomiting, my first alcohol-induced anxiety attack (that then sparked weeks of health concerns and a trial period of Prozac, which I stopped taking abruptly

following a 20-pound weight gain and worsened hangovers.)

I guess my increased drinking worked much like heroin must've worked at first for you—eventually a shot or two was no longer enough and neither was the tame buzz that accompanied them and wore off much too soon. I wanted more—I wanted to be *wasted*, but not blackout. I wanted to drink to excess, but not feel hungover.

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**"Some trance within you broke. You cried openly, loudly, like I hadn't heard you cry since your dad died."**

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It's not that I like blacking out, but the thin line between losing yourself completely and staying in the moment is my favorite to dance. I always feel too sober, too anxious—maybe one more will help, I tell myself, but that *one more* is usually never just one. Sometimes, I wake the following morning, still intoxicated, still wanting the freedom of inebriation, and so I grab the nearest liquor and chug. The taste isn't so bad when you're drunk and desperate.

You wanted to die. I'm not sure whether I ever wanted to die (we both know I'm too anxious and scared for that), but I do wish I never existed in the first place. I wish I could live life as someone else—someone prettier, someone more confident, funnier, nicer, more outgoing.

And would it really be so bad to blackout and just never wake up from it? Do I really have much to offer the world, much to gain from pushing forward? Maybe it isn't the blacking out so much that I hate, but rather,

what I return to following it. Sobering up from a drinking bender is like waking from a good dream. Reality returns, but it is particularly bleak and dreary in comparison. Hangovers usually last a few hours—the desolation that accompanies them lasts much longer (until the next drinking binge).

I like myself better when I'm drunk.

Though that isn't exactly true. I don't know myself when I'm drunk. I do things out of character, things I don't remember and can't imagine. I've pissed off friends, family, potential partners. I guess it isn't that I like myself better when drunk, but I like myself when I'm tipsy, when my head feels foggy and nothing can hurt me—when fear is the furthest thing from my mind. Invincibility is just in reach.

I'm always talkative, but there's an instant regret that follows any conversation when I'm sober. I hold back, act differently. When drinking, I can be myself without the worry, the anxiety.

It helps me in relationships, I thought. Prior to alcohol, I'd had one kiss, and my distaste for spit had me laughing, pulling away from the guy, and awkwardly telling him I didn't like it.

Then, I drank and drank some more and suddenly my comfort with men followed. I met more, allowed them to do whatever they wanted, offered up whatever they wanted. My drunk self craved attention, praise, some form of affection. I got wasted, sucked a guy's dick so long as he agreed to play my music in the background. I went on date after date, pushing away anyone who wanted an actual connection and craved anyone who'd take me out, drink along with me.

The overdose of yours that terrified me most was not too long ago. Years ago, maybe, but the freshest one to date. Even though you were deemed safe and alive by the time I found out, cold fear ruptured within me.

You had seemed fine. You had a good job, a nice boyfriend, an apartment, a car.

That overdose taught me that nothing

could ever truly be okay. Things were not black-and-white, or easy, and when it came to addiction, the craving never truly went away—just subsided enough to be bearable. The same could be said about the worry accompanying loving you, or anyone with a deadly addiction. It would always be there in the back of our minds.

I often ask you about life when you were on heroin, and you're always open, prompt to explain fearful situations you experienced or to try and describe your mind when it was all you wanted, all you craved. You said you would sleep with random men for drugs, and the idea made me sad, scared. Never in high school could I have imagined going to a strange man's house a day after meeting him, trusting him to not murder you or harm you along the way.

You were used to it, and we were used to you disappearing for days at a time.

I don't know what heroin feels like, but I think it must have helped you forget, helped you feel something other than regret and sorrow. Stopping would mean you'd have to do what I've done time and time again—return to sobriety and face the mess you'd made while blitzed.

It doesn't feel like it's your mess to claim when you're sober—sometimes, though, you know it is.

At the moment I'm writing this, our brother is in a recovery house (God, I feel so fucking bad for our mom). He's not even a particularly excessive drinker. A drinking binge gone wrong landed him in jail, and now there. The other day we went to visit him and drop off leftovers from a Thanksgiving he couldn't attend.

He said he's probably going to swear off drinking completely. "I've been reading the books they have here. It's not the drinking that makes you happy—it's the thought of it."

Mulling over that, I guess it's true. Nothing particularly euphoric happens when I'm drinking. I don't even know what feeling I'm thirsting for, sometimes, but I know that

another swig might help me find it. I'm never loose enough, never comfortable enough, never happy enough—so I take it further, see if I'll reach that point of carelessness, without spilling over.

"Kierstin should read those books," Mom said.

I laughed along with our brother who mumbled, "Yeah, I was thinking that."

*At least I'm not doing heroin*, I think to myself as I down vodka shots, sometimes binge drinking for days at a time. *"At least I'm not doing heroin,"* I think as I beg my doctor for more lorazepam, telling her nothing else will soothe my racing heart, or my fear that the world is going to steal me away in my prime. *At least I'm not doing heroin*, I yell at my parents when they find empty bottles of vodka stored behind my dresser.

On heroin, you stole, lied, abandoned us. You destroyed yourself but yanked everyone else down with you. I felt sorry for you, but that sorrow was often overridden by anger.

You were given the ultimatum, "quit heroin and we'll help you—or leave," and you left to live with two perverts in a trailer. No matter how hard I tried, I couldn't understand you. Nothing about you made sense—you went away to some facility Mom was convinced was a cult, then returned without your favorite stuffed animal and instead with some deadpan, lackluster boyfriend. In what seemed like a short time period, everything shifted, and I didn't know you anymore, didn't recognize you.

I found something on my Twitter page from around that time. I've since deleted it, but it read something like, *My sister makes this house a living hell*. There was a lot I didn't comprehend about addiction until years later—all I knew then was that you were hurting us, you were aware of it, and you didn't stop.

With you, there was always the anticipation—the understanding that something bad would happen soon enough. I don't drink nearly as often as you used heroin, and I

don't mess up every time I drink.

Things go to shit whenever I don't watch myself very, very carefully. One Thanksgiving I could barely walk out the door, fell backward on the street, and smacked my head on the asphalt.

It's so tiring constantly pissing others off, the complete memory of what I'd done always foggy and out of reach. It's hard to apologize for things I don't remember doing,

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**"There are things that happened to me while obliterated—things other people regret doing to me, things I forgive because I know what it's like to feel that distant from your own state of mind."**

.....

things I can't picture myself doing. I've lost so many nights of sleep to the anxieties of that memory loss—questions flooding my mind: Was I too crazy? Pushy? Loud? Mean? Did I embarrass myself or make anyone angry or do something awkward?

Sometimes I wonder if you beat yourself up over all the horrible things you did while actively using.

I do.

There are things I did drunk that I don't remember and can't explain.

There are things that happened to me while obliterated—things other people regret doing to me, things I forgive because I know what it's like to feel that distant from your own state of mind. It doesn't absolve any of us, the knowledge that we did these things because we weren't sober or weren't ourselves, but I understand you more now.



I understand why you so badly wanted to escape sobriety, why sometimes it felt like you'd do anything necessary to reach that point of oblivion.

I'm not particularly fond of any version of myself, but the intoxicated one cares less about that. When wasted, I feel disconnected, not myself—that's what I want. To be someone else, someone more confident and happier. Drinking conjures that, sometimes. It allows me to briefly face the world without the cage of anxiousness, then brings it back tenfold.

Once, I asked you what heroin felt like. You said, "It's the best feeling in the world." For a while, I couldn't get those words out of my head. If it was truly the best feeling in the world, how did you stop? *Why* did you stop? So many people remain trapped in the cycle or fall back into it—even after years of sobriety. I often feel terrified you'll return to it. That one day you'll be that desperate again, that unhappy, and you'll turn back to what satisfied you for all those years. If that were to happen, would we be able to pull you out again?

When you were using, I never thought about what heroin did for you. I thought about what your addiction did to the rest of us. I thought about you not caring that you were torturing us all. It's not that I think you didn't realize you were hurting us. I think you knew, but it made you hate yourself more.

At the moment, you're a success story—proof that things can change, get better. You went from overdosing, hiding evidence from the cops, living in your car, to working a good paying job, receiving excellent college scores, having your own apartment. Things can change so quickly—which means it can happen again, and you could take another downward spiral.

Anyone who's close with a recovering addict knows this pain. An addict is an addict for life—the temptation will always be there, and so will the worry in everyone else. Like everything else, we all have to accept

the present, feel thankful for what we currently have.

The world could blow up, or any one of us could collapse and die at any second, or I could win the lottery, or you could start using again. To try and predict a future for any of us is impossible, and I've come to accept that I can't prevent it from coming.

For now, you're a call away and working toward bettering yourself. If you can, I can.



## Race

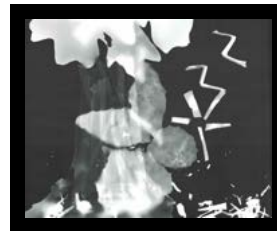
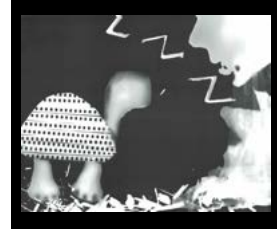
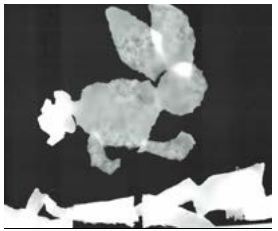
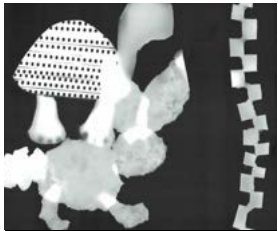
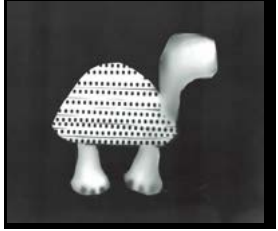
YEHUDIS RABINOWITZ •

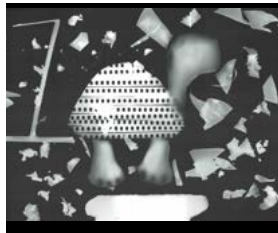
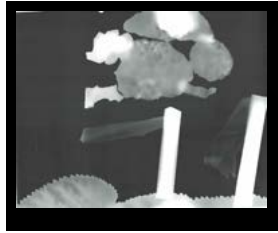
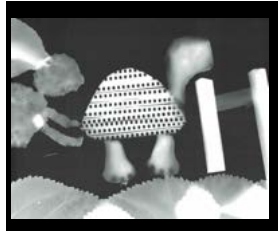
My children's book, *Race*, tells the classic fable of the tortoise and the hare, weaving together darkroom photography alongside pictures of a man signing out the story in American Sign Language (ASL).

In my experience, children learn sign through stilted lesson books and rarely get the chance to experience their language in printed stories. I want non-deaf parents to have a way to connect with their deaf children through an actual story and to explore the beauty of sign as a living, breathing language with its own contexts and subtexts.

To make *Race* feel like more than simply a dictionary translation, I went to great lengths to produce unique, fun "illustrations" to pair with the signs. I also want children to be able to explore the natural beauty of sign without the distraction of color. The sign language images capture complete, simple sentences, telling the whole story in terms that children can still engage with and understand.

I plan to create more ASL children's books in the future, using different mediums and working with a diverse range of deaf signers.





Film and photographs,  
silver gelatin prints  
8" x 10"



## INTERVIEW WITH JUNG YUN

MARIA ASIMOPOULOS •

Jung Yun's debut novel, *Shelter*, tells the story of Kyung Cho, a man in his thirties struggling to provide for his wife and son despite tens of thousands of dollars' worth of debt. By the end of the first chapter, things become even more complicated: tragedy befalls Kyung's parents, Jin and Mae, who live a short distance away. In the wake of a brutal home invasion, Kyung must take them in, unearthing a childhood's worth of trauma and betrayal as he takes on the role of caretaker while trying to balance his obligations to his own family. *Los Angeles Times* reviewer Steph Cha wrote that *Shelter* is "a sharp knife of a novel — powerful and damaging, and so structurally elegant that it slides right in," while a *New York Times* review called it "gripping" and "captivating." Yun's work has also appeared in *Tin House*, *The Best of Tin House: Stories*, *The Massachusetts Review*, *The Indiana Review*, *The Atlantic Monthly*, *The Washington Post*, and *The Los Angeles Review of Books*. She spoke with Maria Asimopoulos, *Grub Street*'s fiction editor, about the novel and her writing process.

### How long did writing the book take, and could you say a bit about your writing process?

There are two different answers to that question, depending on who's asking and how I feel like answering. I can either say that *Shelter* took three and a half years to write or ten and a half years to write. I started thinking about the book over a decade before it was actually a book, but kind of came back to it in fits and starts and didn't really know what I was working on. I just knew I kept coming back to some of the characters and some of the ideas. The actual writing of the book, once I knew it was a book, took three and a half years total of really focused, concentrated writing. My process is pretty unplanned. There are some writers that do a lot of outlining and use notecards and are very methodical and prepared, and I am not, unfortunately, one of those writers. I started

with the image of a man looking out his window and seeing his elderly mother walking naked toward the house. I just thought that was a really interesting image and was trying to backtrack into the situations that could have produced that scene, but I just didn't have it for the longest time. I started writing around it and would come back to it every couple of years, and then there was that big home invasion case in Connecticut back in 2007, and that was the moment when I realized that might be the instigating event that gets the characters together in the opening of the book—when readers begin to realize, when Kyung begins to realize, that something terrible has happened. And I think once I knew what got them together, that was the three-and-a-half-year point.

**That actually leads into another question, which is, I was wondering why you chose a home invasion as opposed to any other number of things?**

I was interested in the idea of violence and its effects on generations of families. I knew from the beginning that I wanted Kyung to have some sort of history of violence in his family, and I also knew that the event that was going to bring him, as an adult, under the same roof with his elderly parents, had to be an event of such magnitude and severity that it seemed like there was no other choice. It wasn't enough for his parents to be financially failing or for him to be at the risk of losing his house. It wasn't enough for one of the parents to be ill. There was real animus, historically, between Kyung and his parents, so the impetus had to be horrible. It had to be calamitous. It had to be evil. It had to be as bad as a home invasion and what happened in the book was. Because there was no way Kyung was ever going to live in the same house with his parents again under lesser circumstances.

**Obviously your main character could have been of any gender, so why did you decide to tell the story from the perspective of a man?**

I think part of it is Kyung's parents are traditional Korean immigrants in the sense that they have very traditional cultural values. Sons, for a very, very long time, in a lot of countries, were valued highly over daughters. There's also that pressure of having only one child and it being a son. And playing with some stereotypes, Western as well as Eastern, about masculinity was important. I thought there was just a combination of different things—cultural, gender, generational—that made it worthwhile to pursue the story with a male protagonist as opposed to a female protagonist. And also, violence can sometimes be so extraordinarily gendered. There's a lot of data that supports

that abuse is often at the hands of men, so that was something else that I was thinking about. What is the legacy of seeing domestic violence and also being the victim of child abuse? How does that translate from Kyung being the victim to being the victimizer?

**And which scenes would you say were the most challenging for you to write?**

The scene in which Kyung learns what actually happened to his parents on the night of the home invasion. That was the one moment in the book where the narration really had to shift because Kyung needed a way to learn the details, but I also knew enough about Kyung and his parents and their relationship to know that there was absolutely no way that he was going to learn the details from them. So he's getting this story about the event secondhand through Connie, who is telling him in a very blunt, sort of forensic way about the things that he heard, because that's what Kyung asked for and because Connie, being a police officer, doesn't really hold back. So that was a pretty difficult scene to think about from a craft perspective, about how do I construct this? Because I need Kyung to know the details of what happened, but I need it to be authentic to the relationships that he has with his family. And then, of course, just in terms of the substance, once I figured out the perspective, it's a really hard scene to write about because the violence is so hard to write about. That one took a while, just thinking through and then having to take really long, deep breaths during the actual writing, which took weeks just for a single section.

**I also find it interesting how Connie is very much still in that law enforcement headspace in the very beginning, but then by the end when he has to tell Kyung that his mother is dead, he tries to hide it a little bit. He tries to say, let the other officers tell you.**

Actually, I was talking to a class recently, and they said, do you share any characteristics with any of the characters? And I always felt like Connie was the closest to my own heart, just sort of straightforward and blunt and tries to do the right thing even though he sometimes fails, like we all do. I have a great deal of affection for him. It's a strange thing living with a book for three and a half years or ten and a half years, but you start feeling like these characters are real, and then when you're done with the book, you kind of miss them, which is something I was wholly unprepared for. I enjoyed writing about Connie. I enjoyed writing about a number of these characters, some more than others, but Connie was high at the top of that list.

**What were your main inspirations or motivations in writing *Shelter*?**

I'm so interested in the idea of the American Dream and the realities of actually pursuing the American Dream. I often say that I'm interested in people who live in the blast radius of the American Dream, people for whom the pursuit isn't quite working out for them for a variety of reasons. I like exploring and excavating what those reasons are. I'm also really interested in large scale economic phenomenon, like a housing boom or a housing bust, in this case, and how that puts pressure on people. The book that I'm working on now is similar in that it explores an oil boom and how it changes the fortunes of a very small, racially homogenous small town that doesn't know what to do with all these people who are coming to make their fortunes in oil. I'm attracted to people who are trying but not really succeeding at making the most out of that American Dream that so many people find so appealing. I'm interested in those failures.

**That actually is a good segue into my more general questions, one of which is: what other writing projects are you currently working on? Is it just that novel or do you have some other things that you're tossing around?**

It's all about the novel now. When I teach workshops, when I have taken workshops as a graduate student, I was always the person who really struggled with short story writing. I typically turned in stories that were twenty, thirty pages long, and everyone would look at me and say, what are you doing? They'd be so mad! But I am a long-form fiction writer. I just enjoy sitting with a project for years, as I have been with this book, as I did with *Shelter*. When I'm writing a novel, it's really hard to write a couple of essays or write a couple of short stories on the side. The novel just takes everything, and I'm glad for that. So that's the thing on my docket right now.

**How would you describe the experience of publishing your first novel in comparison to previous publishing experiences?**

Everything felt like a surprise. This is a strange analogy—have you ever watched that show, *30 Rock*, Tina Fey?

**No, I have not!**

Well, there's a character who—I can't believe I'm even talking about *30 Rock* right now—there's a character who is about to meet his biological father, and one of the other characters says, he's either going to love you and want you in his life, or he's not going to want you to be in his life at all. There's not going to be some weird third thing. And with publishing the first book, it was always the weird third thing. It was always, the thing that I never could've expected to happen always ended up happening. And it's still happening. I remember thinking that if I could just finish my manuscript, everything would be okay. And then once that was done, I remember thinking, well, if I could just get



an agent, it will all be okay. And then it's like, just replace the thing that I'm waiting for that will make things okay. Book contract. Second book. Everything's fine, but everything's always surprising. I guess it's a way of keeping one on their toes. Also, because I was in my forties during the first book, I had gone through a long period of my life thinking, well, this is never going to happen for me. It just made me extraordinarily grateful for all the things that did. That's how I would describe the first book. Everything was a surprise, but everything felt like a gift, that I had kind of given up on for a while.

**And how do you cope with writer's block while you're writing?**

One of the things I've learned about my own process is whenever I'm blocked, whenever I'm having a hard time continuing something on the page, it's usually because I've made a mistake somewhere earlier on. When I'm writing and things are going well, it's not hard for me to get fast drafts of something down, but when that draft starts drying up, it almost always means that I have made some sort of a turn that I probably shouldn't have, and a part of my subconscious is saying, go back, you've gone the wrong way, and before you get too far out of the gate, you need to change something or do a course correction. Once I've done that, things typically right themselves again. It's just this strange quirk that I've learned about myself over time. Writer's block, for me, is never really just writer's block. It's a symptom of a problem in the text that I'm trying to tell myself, go back and fix it.

**Could you give me an example of that happening while you were writing *Shelter*? If you can remember a specific time when you changed something and it kind of got the ball rolling?**

I think at the beginning, honestly. That first chapter. The first couple of chapters of any

new long-form project are always the slowest and the hardest for me, like everything sort of feels like a wrong turn. I remember that scene being much longer, with the realtor, and slower to build to the moment where Kyung looks out the window and sees his mother walking toward the house. Part of the blockage there was knowing I was spending way too much time with this realtor, touring and actually dramatizing the house tour in scene, as opposed to summarizing it like I do in the published book. I got really locked up and it went really slowly there, and I kept going back over and over and over, and not making any progress. What I realized was that my intention for that opening scene was to show a moment of normalcy in this family's life, pretty much the only window into their normal lives before everything started to go downhill. But I was spending way too long doing it. So once I was able to carve away twenty plus pages that I had labored over, then I was able to jump back into the writing again and move on from there.

**My last question is who are your favorite authors and why?**

I love the South African writer J.M. Coetzee. He writes about race, and he writes about class, and sometimes he writes about gender, in ways that I find very provocative. South Africa is such a different environment with a long legacy of prejudice and legalized bias. He also has this very beautiful and spare style of writing that I appreciate so much. I used to think, when I was a young writer, that in order for writing to be "good," the sentences had to be ornate and floral and embellished, and use a ton of figurative language. And I think Coetzee is one of those writers who flies in the face of those assumptions. His sentences are surgically spare, and yet so beautiful on the sentence level because of that. I'm a fan of Jhumpa Lahiri, certainly. I think she writes about the immigrant experience in the sense of feeling

like an other in a country that has been your own for a very, very long time. I think she does that work really well. She's also a beautiful short story writer. The kind of domestic lives that she creates in 3,000 words, 5,000 words, sometimes they feel like they have the richness of people that you're reading about in the length of a novel. So I just find that kind of remarkable. I will also always love Zadie Smith, forever and ever and ever. I think nothing will ever replace the thrill of reading the first couple of pages of *White Teeth* and knowing that I was in the hands of someone who knew exactly what they were doing and exactly where they were going. There's that narrative confidence in the book that very few authors can get away with, and she can. Those are some of my contemporary favorites. Going back a few years more, I certainly love Flannery O'Connor and Donald Barthelme and Richard Yates. Such a range of people, but the characters that all these writers write about are somehow at odds with society at large, which is what I find endearing about who they choose to focus their lens on.



## THE 2020 GRUB STREET PRIZE FOR HIGH SCHOOL WRITERS

### Tabletops

ANGELA QIAN •

At first glance, the structure of “Tabletops” made me pause. *Is this a prose poem?* I wondered. *A list story? A hybrid form?* Upon reading, however, these questions soon faded, replaced by a greedy desire to simply read on. Every line of this piece feels like a small and intimate discovery—stolen glimpses at a girl, her sister, and their family as they go about the process of growing up and moving on. What a special honor it is to nominate “Tabletops” for publication so that readers of *Grub Street* can see and experience this work for themselves.

—Jung Yun, author of *Shelter*

I.

My arm flies into empty space searching for the dining room table. Mom has moved it. It's her new hobby, this disorientation. She has decided that the house contains far too many old tables.

II.

*Tepui*. There's a primeval feel to them, these table-top mountains: huge, flat-topped, sheer-walled formations, remnants of an enormous Venezuelan plateau. Says *National Geographic*: Imagine scaling a mountain. Imagine scaling a mountain and finding yourself, with a gulp of air, with a twist of the stomach, impossibly, miraculously, on the edge of a verdant savannah, which scrolls immeasurably from your feet into the far-off sun.

III.

This trip to IKEA, we pass Småland and no one asks to go inside. My sister shops for a desk lamp for her dorm room desk, and

I am plotting the luxuries of becoming an only child. Truth is, I've been an only child my whole life. My sister has honed the skill of existing apart from all of us, a world unto herself, a girl-shaped cosmos that diverged from ours long ago.

IV.

*Lost Worlds*, Arthur Conan Doyle, 1912.

He refers, of course, to the tepuis. The summits are so isolated that life has evolved on their own terms. They are so isolated that they have been protected from our world's evolutionary battles. Doyle's scientists discovered a land of dinosaurs elevated thousands of meters in the air. Doubtless other fantastical universes exist on these table-tops, if one cares to look.

V.

Lost Worlds! Not so lost when my sister and I discovered them together. She woke me up early on weekend mornings and our small, round bodies tumbled down the stairs. We

peeked into the garage and eased into the basement. Here be dragons. She vanished gaily into the subterranean dark.

VI.

I can't recall if she came back the same.

VII.

I watched the film *Up* in Ikea's Småland. My sister made friends with a girl named Ivy and I begged her quietly to stay with me, which she did not, and I sat watching *Up*, watching the characters traverse a lush tepui. Better this than the ball pit. I studiously ignored their shrieks.

VIII.

My mom announces that since my sister has left the worn tracks of our lives, she and my father are tossing the—

IX.

We sat under the table, my sister and I. She wielded a hot glue gun and studiously pressed the trigger, held it, held the barrel to the table leg, and I watched a lick of steam curl from the table where the glue gathered in a mass. It was clear, like diamonds. I wanted to touch it but I knew the rules.

X.

Dinner! We are two stick-thin girls, and we insist on marching around the table after every bite yelling a song about trains, and my parents exchange looks of exasperation and amusement. Eat your dinner, girls.

XI.

I sneak into my sister's room while she is gone. I lie on her bed. I examine her collection of makeup. I am a ghost here, and I test her special pens on her special stationery, flip through her wall calendar, squint at her Polaroids. I pull back her chair and sit at her desk.

XII.

The tabletop contains streaks of nail polish and irregular scars. She has taken a ballpoint pen and in the corner has drawn a small and ugly heart.

XIII.

This tabletop doesn't contain dinosaurs but it's a Lost World all the same.



## фотографии островов ДМИТРИЙ БЛИЗНЮК •

ребенок не научился прятать разочарование.  
 а лес наполняется снегом, как вены холестерином,  
 наш домик в деревне - ковчег для четверых и всей свиты:  
 собака, кошка, нутрии, куры, теленок в закутке.  
 а лес наполняется снегом, как память - белым мокрым пеплом  
 прожитого, но почему же я ничего не могу разглядеть?  
 трактор чистит дорогу мощной клешней, фырчит, тарахтит,  
 его электроглаза без век и ресниц дрожат, как у краба, на спичах.  
 зачем я приехал сюда - в холодную белизну - писать новый роман?  
 улитка с ноутбуком. здесь настоящая зима, ее можно потрогать пальцем,  
 как спящего гризли, - аккуратно выломав лед в закупоренной берлоге:  
 чувствуешь запах прели и мокрой псины, ягодное дыхание?  
 бессонный зверь, я вернулся к тебе,  
 жить с тобой в гудящем тепле, есть жареную картошку,  
 цедить сироп твоих золотых волос, просто так касаться тебя -  
 не ради похоти или продолжения рода,  
 и разбирать по утрам монотонный бубнеж вьюги.  
 я смотрю на зиму из твоего лица. все мы прячемся  
 за толщей стекол-одиночеств, смотрим в иллюминаторы,  
 и зимняя ночь проплывает мимо, и над нами словно круизный лайнер:  
 там созвездия-миллионеры пьют квазарный сок  
 и щебечут непонятные фразы на языке черных дыр.  
 а лес наполняется нашими стеклянными трофеями, статуями,  
 милым бессмыслием. мельтешат белые хлопья,  
 но не твои ресницы - осмысленные жнецы с шелком, серпами и сажей.  
 все эти воспоминания - фотографии островов. на некоторых есть мы.  
 но мировая необитаемость сводит с ума, и я уже смотрю на мир  
 в прошедшем времени, как звезда, испустившая свет,  
 и свет вернулся к звезде, отраженный от будущей монолитной тьмы.  
 любимая, мы одни. и лисица кричит в лесу - так издает писк  
 наш старенький картридж на принтере.  
 распечатай же зимние вечера, где есть мы, наша семья,  
 пока зимний лес заполняет меня.  
 сколько же священной голодной пустоты  
 (снаружи и внутри),  
 готовый принять любой осмысленный хлам, звук, лик.

## Photographs of Islands

DMITRY BLIZNIUK •

(Translated by Sergey Gerasimov)

The child hasn't learned to conceal disappointment yet.  
 The forest gets filled with snow like veins with cholesterol;  
 our hut in the village is an ark for the four of us and for the whole retinue:  
 the cat, the dog, the nutrias, the chickens, the calf in the shed.  
 The forest gets filled with snow like memory with white wet ashes  
 of the past, but why can't I discern anything?  
 The tractor clears the road with its powerful claw, it snorts, rattles,  
 its electric eyes without eyelids or lashes tremble on stalks, like the eyes of a crab.  
 Why have I come here, into the frigid whiteness – to write a new novel?  
 A snail with a laptop. The winter is real here, you can touch it with your finger,  
 like a sleeping grizzly bear – after carefully breaking the ice in its corked lair:  
 can you feel the smell of rot and wet dog, and a whiff of berries in its breath?  
 Sleepless beast, I've come back to you,  
 to live with you in the throbbing heat, eat fried potatoes,  
 drink slowly the syrup of your golden hair, simply touch you –  
 not out of lust or for reproduction,  
 and examine the monotonous muttering of the blizzard in the morning.  
 I look at the winter out of your face. We all hide  
 behind the thickness of glassy lonelines, look into portholes,  
 while the winter night sails past and above us like a cruise ship –  
 constellations-millionaires drink quasar juice there  
 and chirp incomprehensible phrases in the language of black holes.  
 And the forest gets filled with our grassy trophies, statues,  
 sweet senselessness. White flakes flicker,  
 but your eyelashes don't: they are sensible silky reapers, with sickles and soot.  
 All these recollections are photographs of islands, and we still exist on some of them.  
 But the uninhabitedness of the universe drives me crazy, and I already look at the world  
 as if it were a thing from the past,  
 look through the eye of a star that has already emitted its light,  
 and the light has come back to it, reflected from the monolithic darkness of the future.  
 My love, we are alone, and a fox cries in the forest – and sounds like  
 our old cartridge in the printer.  
 So, please, print out the winter nights where we, where our family live,  
 while I'm getting filled with the winter forest.  
 I wonder how much sacred, hungry emptiness  
 there is inside and outside,  
 which is ready to accept any intelligent trash, sound, or face.





## Technicolor Textile

NATALIE JEFFERY •

Digital photography,  
Edited with Tegan & Ned Presets  
in Adobe Lightroom.

## The Field Party

DARREN C. DEMAREE •

1

let me start with the holy ground there is no holy ground

31

i'm not hungry i'm not full my bones are dressing how much liquor can you fit into a plastic cup that commemorates nothing except the drive-through sober sober sober can i still order fries if i have no intention of throwing them in the ash i shake & ohio calls it dancing it's sweet they think i am living in the same way they are living there are mornings where it takes me a moment to realize i am not at all what i once was yet every other piece of ohio is

41

cities are complicated the field party is simple the smoke means what you think it means the people who have refused to live in the retention pond have thought seriously about living at the bottom of the retention pond

49

the cloth is a sad feeling nobody gets naked unless they're going to try & jump the fire jump the fire just to get naked is my philosophy i suppose i should tell you i've been naked throughout this whole project ohio tossed my clothes after me into the flame that was fair i suppose i suppose i'll keep jumping until my legs give out

50

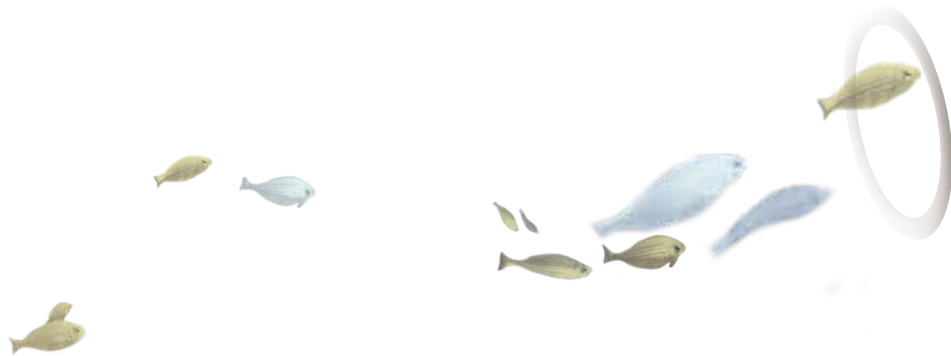
i know the boneshaker i know the bones i know my father believed that only he was entitled to take deep breaths in our home ohio is full of fathers like that some of them gather at the field party to talk shit about us where we can hear them too many of my brothers & sisters show up here & listen to them the mothers know my mother knew it will take more than a mother to save ohio it will take all of the mothers the fathers can burn in the fire for all i care i am a father i have no issue waiting for my jeans to get caught up in the revolution if you tell me my children will be safe if you tell me all of the mothers are coming to save them then bring on the fire

64

there's pleasure here most of the pleasure we cannot speak of on the paved roads most of the people here avoid the paved roads there are whole swaths of ohio that are never spoken of outside of ohio that's fine that's community i grew up without paved roads now i am surrounded by them most of my city pleasures have been filmed shared filmed again commented on those awful pleasures i grew up with are as tucked away as they can be my hometown is



terrible with unshareable pleasures that took place near fires that burned too long for the land to ever recover near bodies that were never recovered near the stink of ponds that have never held fresh water i know there is something special that takes place there the routine though the routine of those gatherings is punishing to the whole county i am in a city right now & my hometown cannot hear me but i have to say it anyway thank you for not killing me when you had a right to i'll never get over the idea that you had the right to kill me i know i cannot return it hurts to know i cannot return i suppose it would hurt so much more if i did there's a real reason i never use names in these poems i'm sober now i don't want to use names in these poems i still have family that sits by the field party they know how to find me they will find me they've told me where i can be found



## Process, Not Product

LIZA DENNIS •

Last year I graduated from Towson University where I studied fine arts and served as the art editor of last year's volume of *Grub Street*. I'm now in graduate school at Lesley University, studying art therapy.

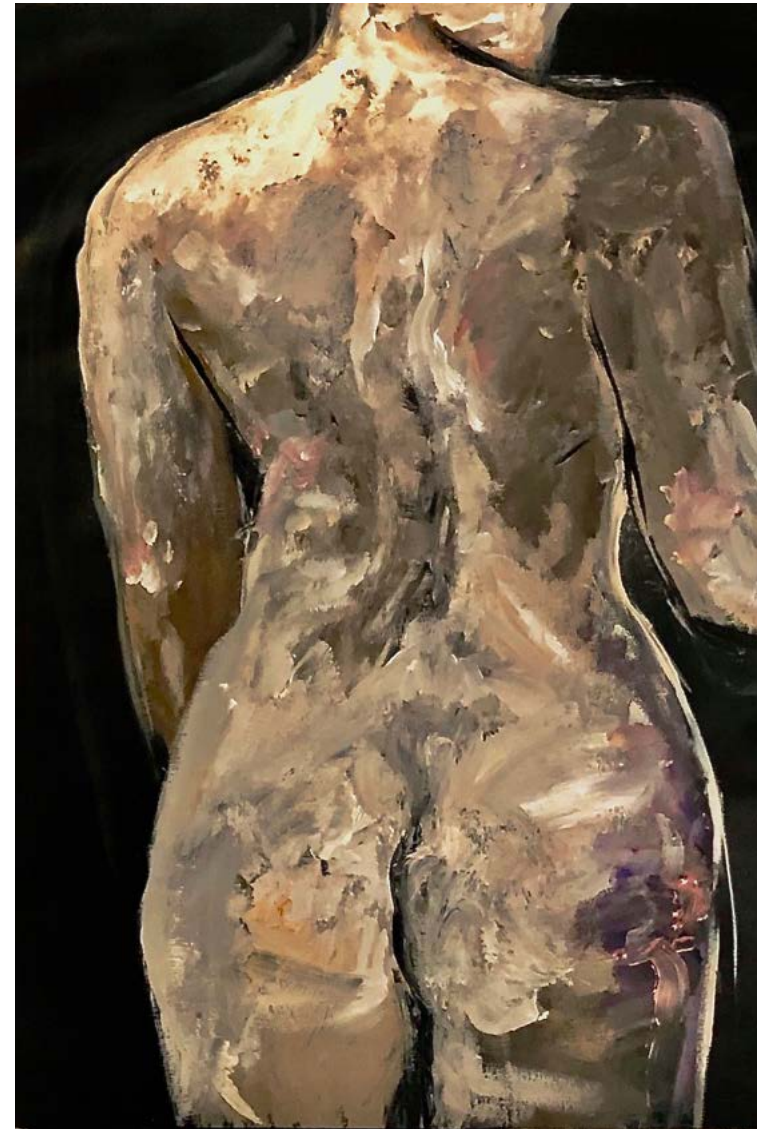
Exploring art and psyche together has transformed me into an entirely new artist. I've always been one to ask questions and then question the answers—but since graduate school started, I've focused more on arriving at questions than on figuring out the “right” answers. My recent art is inspired by this search. I am able to appreciate art making, journaling, dancing, and music in a new way. There is an indescribable therapeutic aspect when creating. Expressive Therapists say, “It's about the process, not the product.” This has become a mantra for more than just art, but life.

Peace,  
Liza Julia Dennis



*Find Yourself Through  
the Chaos*

Acrylic Paint and  
Marker on Paper  
24" x 18"



*Normal Isn't Always Natural,  
and Natural Isn't Always  
Normal*

Acrylic Paint on Paper  
25" x 30"





*An Optimistic Outlook  
of Women, Through  
the Centuries*

Oil Paint on Canvas  
36" x 12"



*Here vs. There*

Oil Paint & Mixed Media  
48" x 31"





*Frustration and Freedom*

Acrylic Paint on Wood  
24" x 36"



*Search of Every Color,  
in White*

Oil Paint on Canvas  
10" x 8"



## Vacation

### OWEN PARK •

The atheist sat on the toilet, swiping through Tinder. It had been a week since his boyfriend of three years had left him, neatly packing away corduroy jackets and fuzzy gray sweaters, ratty T-shirts and jeans, failing even to look the atheist in the eyes as he stepped through the front door of their apartment and into obscurity, a stranger.

Staring up at the atheist hungrily from his phone screen were men who wanted to clench and squeeze and choke and fuck him, and he missed the way Wendell would touch his face, the way he would rest his head on his shoulder. He remembered afternoons spent splayed across their hardwood kitchen floor, sharing ice cream and cheap wine, the air thick with incense and cigarette smoke and the scratch of old vinyl. They were so naked and sticky and truthful, alone together, on those sleepy days. He thought about the other days, too—Tuesday movie nights, Friday dinners, Sunday morning coffee, the routine of it all. He thought about the three years they had spent together, and the one during which they had shared a home, and how so suddenly, the sweet odor, the music, the color was gone, relinquished with cold swiftness, and the atheist's life was a silent film. His shit smelled foul in the stale air.



One afternoon, the atheist lay in a fetal position, his bloodshot brown eyes fixed on his phone. Another static week had crawled by, each Wendell-less day seeming to grow longer and more lonesome. Compulsively, the atheist scrolled through Wendell's Instagram and Facebook feeds, parched for an update, a sign that he may still have been thinking of him. Wendell, the atheist saw, was making a habit of visiting the Buddhist temple down his street. The discovery angered him. Wendell had meditated only occasionally during the time they were together, but now it seemed he had suddenly become much more devout, posting pictures of himself with stupid, adorable captions like "morning Zen," and "inner peace > coffee," as if the atheist wasn't sitting alone not a block away from him, as if leaving so heartlessly, without a word, without an answer, was his path to enlightenment. Upon discovering a third social media display of Zen mastery from Wendell—a third image of that blond, sociopathic masterpiece of a man in front of a gold and orange sanctuary—the atheist was beside himself. In the morning, he took a much-needed shower and gathered the resolve to confront him.



Wearing Wendell's favorite sweater and the jeans he thought made him look taller, the

atheist walked beneath the gold, arched entrance of the Buddhist temple, his ashy black hair combed neatly, simultaneously dreading and hoping for the sight of his lost love.

On the inside of the temple was a vast meditation space, completely shut off from the pale daylight of the Brooklyn morning, pitch black but for the glow of the candles that adorned each corner. The atheist scanned the tops of each silently meditating head—some hairy, some bald, none blond. Disappointed yet relieved, he turned around and left.

This practice continued for many days. The atheist understood the depths of desperation and creepiness that the habit contained, but it was a reason to wake up, to go outside—a ritual. Despite his continuous search for Wendell, the atheist labored to convince himself that he needed nothing and no one, that he was independent and happy, and that the only reason he wanted to see that man was to *win* somehow, to flaunt the pride and contentment he took in his solitude, however thrust upon him it was. He missed Wendell so terribly it made him nauseous.

By the ninth morning, the atheist was becoming doubtful. Maybe Wendell had seen him coming and decided to find another place to meditate. He probably wasn't there; he probably never would be. The atheist, throwing on gray sweatpants and a Pad-Thai-stained flannel, decided hopelessly to check the Buddhist temple once again.

When he got there, his scanning eyes landed on a blond head, glimmering subtly in the candlelight. His heart palpitated and his mouth grew dry. He sat down in the back row, next to a bald man draped in red and dark yellow robes, and pretended to meditate, his eyes remaining wide open.

His fingernails dug into the palms of his hands as they rested on his knees and he stared at Wendell's straightened back. Twenty minutes of this passed until Wendell

stood up and headed for the door. The atheist followed.

When he resurfaced from the darkness of the temple, he saw Wendell standing at the curb, taking a cool drag of a Marlboro Light.

Stepping into the street, he dropped his cigarette and climbed into an Uber, pulling away. The atheist only watched him.

Sitting down on the sidewalk, the atheist leaned against the gold arch of the sanctuary, catatonic. Tears trickled down his freckled cheeks. His contacts fogged and blinded him.

A bald man, the one beside whom he had sat, walked out of the temple, rubbing his eyes to adjust to the light. He looked over and down at the atheist and his expression filled with pity. The man was old, but his pupils were bright, adding to his face a kind of youth that peeked out from beneath the creased skin under his bushy eyebrows. The atheist turned, gazing up at the old man, his vision blurry with despair. The man then smiled radiantly to reveal a disparate row of silver teeth.

"Come with me," he said. His voice was rich, gentle.

The atheist was suspicious, but he could not yet muster speech. Wherever the old monk could take him, he figured, would be better than his empty home. He stood up slowly and followed what watery path of orange and gold robes he was able to make out.

The man led him back into the temple, walking through the meditation room and down a long, narrow hallway. The atheist, stumbling carefully behind, hadn't realized just how expansive the Buddhist sanctuary was on the inside. They arrived in a smaller room with a single window which let in gentle strokes of light. The room was paneled with gray slabs of stone and barren but for two maroon pillows placed opposite each other on the floor. The old man sat on one of them and directed the atheist to sit on

the other. Doing so, the atheist rubbed his eyes. Vision restored, he jolted backwards at the sight of the robed monk sitting crisscrossed to reveal a jarring absence of underwear.

“Jesus *Christ*,” he said, sliding backward on his pillowed ass. The Buddhist giggled.

“Why were you crying?”

“I don’t want to get into it, really, sir,” said the atheist, wiping his nose. “But... where are we? Why did you have me follow you here? Am I in trouble or something?”

“We are here only to talk,” said the Buddhist.

“I don’t like seeing people cry at my temple.

.....

“Life is moments,” he said. “And moments are clouds. They can be beautiful, and dark, and eventually you cannot see them, or feel them, or remember exactly when they drifted away.”

.....

What if I came to *your* home and burst into tears without even introducing myself first?”

“I’m sorry,” said the atheist. He felt like crying again.

“It’s alright,” replied the monk. “You seem deeply unhappy, young man.”

The atheist was surprised by the compassion in the monk’s crinkled face, his piercing eyes. “I—I am. There’s just—there’s a man that you may have noticed has been coming here awfully frequently. He and I used to spend a lot of time together, but... recently I guess he decided he was tired of me, so...”

The monk nodded thoughtfully, then stood up. “I’ll be right back.” He walked out

of the room and away from the light, and the atheist could not make out where he went.

He came back a few minutes later holding a thin brochure.

THE TEMPLE OF MOURNING, it said across the front.

“This is yours.” Sitting back down, the monk handed it to the atheist.

“What’s the Temple of Mourning?” the atheist asked.

“You seem to have lost something, someone. It’s a bit like a retreat. It’s a place for people like you.”

“It’s in Thailand,” said the atheist, confused.

“Oh, yes, you have to apply first to go, but if they determine you’re a worthy candidate for a visit, it’s an all-expenses paid trip!” The monk broke out into another exuberant silver smile. “Thailand is very beautiful, and I suppose a change of scenery would do you no harm.”

“It sounds *really* depressing,” said the atheist, skimming the brochure with skepticism.

“Well, that’s the point,” replied the monk.

“That’s why people apply—it will focus your problems in the face of those of others, and the man you spoke of will not bother you as much. You’ll find a community there.” He turned the brochure in the atheist’s hands to its back cover and pointed to an address listed at the bottom. “Write a letter about him and send it here.”

“Well—thanks, I guess,” said the atheist, standing up to leave, still bewildered, and moving rather briskly so as not to have to face the monk’s penis anymore. He hesitated for a moment. “Why are you trying to help me?”

The Buddhist stayed sitting, his legs crossed. “Life is moments,” he said. “And moments are clouds. They can be beautiful, and dark, and eventually you cannot see them, or feel them, or remember exactly when they drifted away.” He raised his hands above his head, taking a deep breath, and then exhaled, letting them fall gradually to his

sides. “Evaporation.” There was a long silence.

“Huh. Alright,” replied the atheist.

... ..

The next week, he returned to teaching statistics. The atheist liked his campus, the way right and wrong answers stood there as solidified as the tall, stiff buildings. At night, he drank and graded his students’ exams harshly, staring at pictures of himself and Wendell. The apartment was cavernous, a shell. His conversation with the Buddhist, as it grew distant with time, felt like a hallucination, something out of a dream. Outside of his lectures, the atheist said nothing to no one, and the days dragged on as students dropped his class and the impression in his bed where Wendell slept slowly filled itself in. He still cried sometimes, when his sheets felt particularly cold across his shoulders, but for the most part, time had pushed his despair into a kind of numbness, a monotony. In this new life devoid of the Wendell curriculum, Tuesdays and Fridays and Sunday mornings, numbers on calendars, all slipped away without purpose, without order.

The atheist considered therapy and deleted Tinder and cried a little more, and then a red envelope with gold lettering that looked like the Buddhist temple he’d stopped visiting since last seeing Wendell appeared in his mailbox. Unwrapping it gingerly and holding the letter it contained in his brittle hands, the atheist skimmed to the final few sentences, which read:

WE ARE GLAD TO EXTEND THIS INVITATION TO YOU FOR A VISIT TO THE TEMPLE OF MOURNING. YOU AND THE REST OF OUR UNITED STATES VISITORS WILL BE DEPARTING FOR THE TEMPLE FROM JFK AIRPORT ON FRIDAY, MARCH 14, AT 9:00 A.M. YOUR FLIGHT IS PAID FOR. SHOULD YOU MISS IT, YOU WILL NEVER BE PERMITTED TO CONTACT US AGAIN. BRING A SHARPIE.

The atheist, stunned, put the letter down

... ..

and stood for a moment, straining to conjure swimming recollections of a night when he had started drinking especially early, when he had rummaged through kitchen cabinets for the brochure he’d kept from his bizarre meeting with the monk, when he had written something about ice cream and music and color and stuffed it in an envelope, staggering to the mailbox across his street in sloppy tears and waking up with a headache and fading memory. In drunken anguish, he realized, he had actually applied to the Temple of Mourning.

“Oh... *God*. Fuck.”

He was shocked that this Temple was a real place with real people capable of writing and returning letters. Still, the atheist wondered if this whole thing was a ruse, a joke, a cruel experiment to measure the blind trust of the desperately lonely in mysterious strangers. *Was that guy even a real monk? Goddammit.* Even if it was all real, the atheist doubted he should go. Then, he looked around at the gin bottles strewn across his spotted hardwood floor, the black and quietness that drowned his home, the floating dust particles illuminated by the light of his droning TV. He packed his things quickly, slipping a black Sharpie into the front pocket of his duffle bag, and called the school to tell them he would be missing the following week.

The chartered flight to Thailand was at the farthest gate down Terminal 1 at JFK. The atheist yawned, rustling a hand through his brambly, undone hair, which had grown rapidly grayer and ashier in the past weeks of melancholy and alcoholism. The freckles had faded across his crooked nose, leaving his face dusty and sallow. The atheist passed through security hurriedly and walked down what seemed like an endless space, packed with tourists looking for the Empire State Building, young families leaving for spring

break, and businessmen jabbering into sleek black phones.

It was finally through this clutter that the atheist found a group of about fifteen blank-faced people with rings around their eyes, dressed uncomfortably in red and gold robes. He approached them, and a robed monk with a bald head and an air of authority handed him an identical set of clothing.

The atheist raised his finger. “Hi there, is it *absolutely* necessary that I w—?”

“Yes.” The monk walked away silently.

The atheist stepped into a bathroom and struggled to find the right way to adorn himself with the robes. When he finally did, he saw in the mirror that they revealed nearly all of his hairy white thighs, loosely covering only his torso and his privates. Cross-armed and awkward, he walked out and stood in the growing line to board the plane to the Temple of Mourning with the rest of its heart-broken passengers. He was surprised at how many others there were. He wondered how they had been made aware of the Temple’s existence, if similarly strange experiences had led them all to this point. The people in the other gates stared at the group. Children tapped each other on the shoulder and snickered, pointing at the atheist’s thighs.

The plane itself was an old 1970s airliner. The size of the group, though unexpectedly large, made its dim cabin look almost empty. As the atheist took his seat in the back, he hoped the rest of the tragedy-stricken loners had been assigned other spots and would leave him unbothered. He could hear some of them making hesitant attempts at conversation, asking each other what it was they had lost, why they were here, what they had written about in their applications.

To the atheist’s dismay, a frizzy-haired, middle-aged woman with tear streaks on her rosy face and mascara remnants at the corners of her eyes dropped herself in the seat beside him.

“Hey,” she whispered, her voice cracking. “Hello,” said the atheist flatly, pushing his

duffel bag closer to him with his feet.

“Thanks,” she said. After a moment, the plane rumbled and sped forward, leaving the ground swiftly to reveal the city below them. No matter what this was, the atheist was in it for good now.

He and the woman sat quietly for hours, and he dozed off to the hum of the aircraft’s engine. He awakened to the woman staring at him in silence.

“What?” he asked, annoyed.

“I’m Trish,” she said, extending her hand in disregard of his irritation. The atheist shook it hesitantly.

“Why were you watching me sleep?”

“Oh, I’m sorry, I must seem pretty weird to you, I guess,” replied Trish. “You know, I haven’t slept in so long, I guess I was a little jealous. I just wanted to see what it looked like.”

The atheist furrowed his brow.

“I really am sorry,” she said. “Also, you snore a little like my husband.”

The atheist’s expression softened a bit. “Is he why you’re here?”

“Yes,” answered Trish. “He left me a few weeks ago, maybe a month or two. He was fucking his secretary! How cliché is that?” She let out a cold, empty laugh that went on too long. The plane jostled a bit with turbulence.

The atheist sighed. “I’m sorry,” he said. “I got left, too.” Seeing the small, silver cross dangling at her collar bone just above the start of her robes, the atheist thought it best to leave it at that. Trish patted his forearm.

“How’d you hear about this Temple of Mourning thing, anyway?” the atheist asked after a pause, choosing conversation over paranoid sleep. The jostling became louder.

“Oh, I live by this big old monastery in Wisconsin, if you can believe it,” she said, raising her voice a bit. “They had something about it posted on their bulletin board. I’m not really into all the Buddhism stuff, but it said they’d handle my flights, so I said, why not? It’s kind of like a sad little free vacation, and, you

know, misery loves company.”

The atheist smiled meekly.

“You’re cute,” said Trish.

The jostling turned to shaking. The free water bottles that everyone had been given started to rattle, their complementary egg salad sandwiches falling to the floor. The shaking grew more violent, and then came a thunderous *BOOM*, as if the aircraft’s wing had been hit with the flyswatter of a distant god.

“Keep your seatbelts fastened!” screamed the bald monk who had handed the atheist his robes, hollering frantically from the front of the aisle. The plane bobbed and swayed, there were more pounding noises, and then the passengers were all at once thrown back in their seats as the aircraft plunged into a nearly vertical, careening descent.

The pilot’s crackling voice clamored through the intercom, speaking panicked, rapid Thai. The monk at the helm listened intently, and, squealing, demanded that everyone remain calm.

Amidst screams and sobs and *BOOMS*, the atheist, his knuckles white around his armrests, prepared himself for the end. His mind inevitably brought him to Wendell. The atheist wished he could have told him he was sorry. He wished Wendell had said something. He could have told the atheist that he was tired, that he wanted something different, something spontaneous. *I would have listened*. They could have had a conversation. After all, was boredom something to end three years over? Something that couldn’t have been brought up? Something that merited such a silent exit out of the blue? *No. No, it had to be something else*.

Beside him, Trish looked around hopelessly, her raw eyes wide and petrified. Her stare shifted to the atheist. Then, with no warning, no notice, she leapt with all her might out of her seat and over the armrest that separated them and began passionately kissing him. Suddenly, there the atheist was, a homosexual statistics professor of thirty-two, clad

sparsely in red and gold Buddhist robes that left him all but naked, trapped on a nosediving 1970s airplane run by Thai monks to the Temple of Mourning, as Trish, the near-fifty-year-old Christian woman from Wisconsin, rubbed her lips across his horrified face.

Just as suddenly, the plane righted itself, the passengers lurched forward, a whirlwind of egg salad sandwiches flew backward, and Trish fell back into her seat. The head monk told everyone to settle down.

Trish fumbled with her seatbelt. “Listen, I’m so sorry, sweetheart, I—I really thought

“No matter what this was, the atheist was in it for good now.”

that was it, at least for a minute there... I guess I just—I didn’t wanna go out alone. You get it, right?”

The atheist held his head in his hands, the blood rushing back into his knuckles.

“Oh God, I am so, so sorry. I don’t know what came over me,” said Trish. “I’m mortified.”

The atheist said nothing. His mind had shifted back to Wendell. *Something else. It had to be something bigger*. The hum of the engine returned. *It had to be me*.

“It’s alright, Trish,” he whispered finally, wiping his mouth. *He didn’t love me anymore*. “Let’s just forget about it.”

• • •

After twenty hours, the moment the flight touched down, the atheist grabbed his duffle bag and sped down the aisle, determined to avoid wet-lipped Trish. Each lonely passenger was vehemently apologized to by a bald, sweaty monk-pilot, his voice as crackly

as it had sounded through the intercom. The visitors were each provided with modest rooms in a small motel. The atheist flopped onto his bed as a honey-colored sun spilled viscously onto dark green mountains. He fell asleep, hoping to forget as much of the arduous flight as he could.

At 7:00 in the morning, the atheist was awakened by the rumblings of the other guests as a dull gong rang out in the hallway, acting as their alarm. Groggy, he fumbled down the stairwell and into the lobby of the

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“There the atheist stood, in Thailand, loving, missing, mourning, breathing.”

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rather quaint motel, with high, slanted ceilings and crosshatched walls of thin wood. A table offered fruit, coffee, and bagels. Standing behind it was the monk that had led them onto the plane, still looking rather shaken.

“Eat up, everyone,” he said, gesturing to the food. “But be quick, and afterward, go up to your rooms and grab your Sharpies. We leave shortly.”

ooo

Armed with their Sharpies and still dressed in their robes, the visitors were led by the monk out of the motel and through a trail that wound up a lofty incline. They passed low-hanging trees, peppered with the foreign squawks of exotic birds, and looked down at blue sea and white sand. Thailand was, indeed, breathtakingly beautiful. The atheist, for the first time since it began, was glad he had applied for the journey.

He walked on with the rest of them, watching their faces so marked with despair, even as they admired and marveled at their surroundings. He made brief eye contact with Trish and kept moving. He wondered how many of the others’ lost ones were dead. After what seemed like a very long time, the steep mountain upon which they walked plateaued, revealing before them an unnatural mass of gray bricks. The structure was unfinished—the roof failed to connect at its angled peak, and the orange Thai sunlight shone starkly through open slats within its walls. At the front of it stood only the outline of a doorway, surrounded by open space, revealing an empty inside. As the atheist walked around it, his view of the sparkling ocean was blocked completely, revealing the massive size of this dark edifice. His fellow guests panted and sweat and looked up, puzzled.

“Welcome to the Temple of Mourning,” said the lead monk, standing in front of its makeshift entrance. Pointing off at his side to a mound of bricks, just like the ones that made up the shoddy structure, he went on: “It is built by its visitors. You must use your Sharpies to write something on just one brick. Express your loss, capture your sorrows. Write them on the brick. Then, put it in an open space of your choosing and help us complete the Temple. We extend our deepest sympathies.”

The visitors walked slowly over to the pile of bricks, gripping their Sharpies. Black marker in one hand and gray slab in the other, the atheist walked inside the Temple, joining the group as they looked around, reading the sorrows of nameless others and searching for an open space in which to insert their own.

Some of the bricks already embedded in the Temple were completely covered in writing, while others displayed only one or two words. There were too many languages to count. People read and cried, finding something tragic, or harshly relatable, or

both. It was an incomplete room steeped in heartbreak.

The atheist’s eyes drifted across the back wall of the Temple. The wall was nearly complete, almost fully saturated in tragedy. He slowly made his way from left to right, reading the black words.

DAD – NOT DEAD, BUT GONE FOREVER.

NICARAGUA  
FOR ALL THOSE FALLEN  
MISSING  
FIGHTING

DANA, PLEASE FORGIVE ME. – MOM

The atheist struggled with what to immortalize on his own brick, how to capture his three years with Wendell on one pebbly, square surface of cement. He thought about moments—the one he had spent sitting, smiling, gorging with the love of his life, their bare skin cold upon the hardwood floor; the one he had spent plummeting to certain death, Trish’s tongue stuffed forcefully down his throat; and the one he lived in now. He wondered when this moment would be just the wispy end of another cloud, dissipating slowly into some shade of pale blue. Something about the Temple of Mourning made the vacancy in his heart throb and ache harder than it had since the first night Wendell was gone. There the atheist stood, in Thailand, loving, missing, mourning, breathing.

On a jagged brick pillar beside him, someone—some anonymous and eternal stranger—had written and rewritten boldly in layers of Sharpie:

LIVING ON.  
OH, WATCH ME, MY LOVE  
I’M DOING IT!

The atheist walked through the Temple’s exposed threshold toward the edge of the mountain, looking down at the blank

brick between his palms. Behind him, the strangers wept, their cries growing fainter and gentler as he approached the ocean. Softer, slower, as he stopped, gazing out into Thai expanse, and then silence.





Mr. Weltschmerz  
GERMÁN QUEZADA GAETE •

Taken on Motorola Droid Mini.  
3:2, 1733 x 2599px



## Job Quest

JAMES HANCOCK •

On the night of my graduation, I cried. It only took about half an hour after returning to my home in Crofton before I found myself huddled in the darkness of my laundry room, sobbing and wishing I was dead. I was scared. I thought about all the people I had met and how I wouldn't be seeing them regularly anymore. I thought about the consistent sense of security my life had—and how all of that had just been completely pulled out from under me. I thought about how I didn't want to stay at home any longer than I needed to. I thought about how terrified I was to have to look for a job.

For me, being told to get employed right after graduating was like being told I had to climb an invisible mountain; I knew what I had to do, but I had no clue where to start. The expectations placed at my feet felt impossible to live up to, and the first few weeks after graduation felt truly hopeless to me as a result.

• • •

You can have whatever job you want in *Final Fantasy*, a series of Japanese role-playing games that was created in 1987. The franchise's first game starts you off with a party of four adventurers. As the player, you assign each of them one of six "jobs"—except the occupations available in the game aren't anything like the ones in real life. Instead of

being a firefighter or an accountant, your characters can become a sword-wielding Warrior or a Monk who uses his bare fists. Once you select what you want your four party members to be and press start, you have a team of professional adventurers ready to save the world from dark forces.

In later installments, leveling up a party member's job gives them certain skills and abilities depending on what they are. These can be versatile, such as a Monk being able to heal other party members or a Mage gaining the ability to cast more powerful spells. Just like in the real world, your party members can carry the skills they earned from one job to another based on their experience.

• • •

Experience was exactly what I lacked. A week after coming home, I found myself going to my local library, sitting down with some music, and looking for work. But everywhere I looked—LinkedIn, Handshake, Indeed, Glassdoor—it was all the same. Three years or more of editing experience was required for anyone to take me into consideration. It didn't matter whether or not I felt like I had enough experience, or that I had spent the majority of the last two years working as an editor for my university's literary magazine. I wasn't good enough because they said so,

and that was that.

A friend of mine told me that I should ignore those kinds of requirements and send my resume out regardless. She said that kind of confidence is exactly what recruiters want to see, that that's how I'll get places throughout my life. Another friend, a girl who graduated at the same time as me, told me the same thing.

I wished I had their confidence, but instead I closed out of the job site every time.



“Everyone I knew was more than happy to see me, but I couldn’t help but feel like I had crossed a line somehow.”



If you have enough confidence and proper knowledge of the game’s systems, you can win almost any fight in *Final Fantasy*, even if you don’t have the game’s recommended amount of experience. This is especially true in titles like *Final Fantasy III* or *Final Fantasy V*, where you can change the role of each of your characters with just a few button presses. Maybe your party needs a dedicated healer like a White Mage, or maybe you can make use of the Ninja who can wield two weapons instead of one and use special scrolls that have varying effects. Sometimes, when a challenge seems too difficult, all it takes is a few edits to your party’s composition, and victory is back within your grasp.



I held on to my position as an editor for my university’s literary magazine after I graduated. It was something to keep me busy while I

was unemployed, so I made sure to come in twice a week, every week, just like I did when I was still a student.

My body was hot and shaking the first time I went back to work on the magazine. Everyone I knew was more than happy to see me, but I couldn’t help but feel like I had crossed a line somehow. You always hear about those kids who never quite leave college, as if their bodies are there in the present, but their minds are dislocated, stuck in the past, as if they never received their diploma. Every time I drove up and went to work on the magazine, I hoped that I wasn’t becoming one of them. When I told one of my closest friends who was on the magazine with me how I felt about staying on the team, she told me that, at the very least, it was good that I was still being productive and working on something while I was between jobs. In a way she was right, but I never managed to shake the feeling that the only reason I stayed so heavily involved with the magazine was so that I could hold onto the security that college had given me, even if it was only for a little while longer. It was also an excuse to not look for work. The magazine was my job, in my eyes, and it felt good to forget about the career I was supposed to try to start and focus on helping my team instead.



I played a lot of *Final Fantasy XIV* instead of looking for employment. Being an MMORPG (Massively Multiplayer Online Role-Playing Game), *Final Fantasy XIV* has you work with other players in a team to accomplish quests and fight monsters together. Interestingly enough, it differs from the traditional job system by starting your character off with a “class” instead of a job. It isn’t until you’ve gained enough experience that you are given a “job quest” for your character, which, upon completion, will allow you to obtain one of the classic jobs from previously in the series. Unlike other entries in the franchise,

you need a requisite amount of experience before you can apply for your job.

In *Final Fantasy XIV*, I always play as the Bard. My role is to shoot arrows from a distance while singing songs that help my teammates perform better in a fight. Initially, I was attracted to the Bard purely for the aesthetic of it all. Eventually, I discovered that I loved playing as someone who could support other people. I was never dead weight whenever I joined a party as a Bard. In fact, people were always happy to see me join, and in turn that made me happy as well. It was nice to feel needed, like I had a purpose.

Along with the jobs you can play that are designed for combat, *Final Fantasy XIV* also has crafting and gathering professions. The gatherers collect materials throughout the world, while the crafters use those materials to make weapons and armor for the combat-oriented positions. Since these classes aren’t played by a large percentage of players, they’re valued highly by the people who want good equipment but don’t want to invest the time to do it themselves. These crafting classes all range from a variety of different professions, from the Blacksmith who makes armor, to the Culinarian who can prepare food for others.



I was no Culinarian, but with the help of a close friend I managed to land a part-time position as a kitchen worker at a movie theater in Annapolis. I didn’t love the idea of working with teenagers who hadn’t finished high school yet, but I was beginning to lose my mind staying at home almost every day, and the two days a week at the literary magazine weren’t enough for me anymore. Once, at my cousin’s wedding reception, an uncle had asked me what I was doing for work now that I had graduated. “Oh, I’m just a kitchen worker,” I had told him.

My uncle, who had a history of working as a chef, misunderstood what I meant. “So you’re basically a prep cook, right?” I lied and told him that I was, hoping it sounded better than what I was doing.

I wasn’t embarrassed by the fact that I was working at a movie theater (although, it was a bit awkward every time I was reminded that, at twenty-two years old, I was one of the oldest people there). I was embarrassed by the fact that I had friends who were already so much further ahead than I was. Rachel was getting freelance editing gigs and earning valuable work experience. Morgan got offered to work in account management with some company in Dallas. Ashley was asked to come on as a teacher at a local middle school almost two months before she even graduated. Meanwhile, I was stuck in the back of a kitchen, staring at my phone and waiting for orders to pop up onto a screen.

After only three months of working at the theater, I ended up getting hired to work as a transcriber in the same city I had gone to college in. With the cost of gas and a limit on how many hours I could be scheduled, I was going to be making less than what the movie theater paid me, but I didn’t care at all. I was too excited. It was still a part-time position, but it was the first time I’d ever use the tools and skills that I had gone to school for. It was a step in the right direction, and for the first time in the seven or so months that I had been out of school, I didn’t feel like I was a waste of space.

That sense of joy and accomplishment didn’t last as long as I had hoped it would, though. Transcribing, while being a task that certainly exercised the skills I had learned from editing, wasn’t as exciting as I had hoped it would be. For seven to eight hours a day, I sat in front of a computer with headphones that made my ears hurt and typed away, correcting and editing subtitles that the company’s voice-to-text program missed

or made a mistake on. In the beginning, none of this bothered me. I was so enamored by the fact that I got to transcribe NPR podcasts that I loved every second of what I did. But after just a few weeks, the work became routine. I wore the same painful headphones, sat at the same desk, transcribed the same podcasts and legal seminars, all in a tiny office where nobody talked to each other. Maybe I was impatient, or maybe I was ungrateful, but it didn't feel like enough. The work was already starting to grind on me.



Like plenty of other role-playing games, sometimes in *Final Fantasy* you have to grind to get what you want. Maybe you want your magic-using characters to learn their next new spell, or maybe you need more money so you can splurge on new equipment for your Knight. Whatever it is, you have to be prepared to set some time aside during your day to sit down and fight the same groups of monsters over and over again until you can finally get whatever it is you need. The process itself can be incredibly dull, but it's hard to deny the sense of satisfaction you feel when you're done grinding and finally accomplishing your goal.



Almost a month into my transcribing position, I applied to work as a Legal Marketing Editor for a company in Baltimore. I had heard through word of mouth as well as customer reviews that the company didn't seem entirely honest in how it went about its business, but it was full-time work and it was the exact kind of experience I needed, much better than what I was doing now. I sent in my application and hoped for the best. The wait to hear back from them wasn't bad at first, but after being called in for what I felt was a good interview, it became more agonizing with each passing day.

After about three weeks of hearing nothing more from them, I assumed that I didn't get the position. Then, on a Friday afternoon, I got a call from one of the hiring managers saying that I had the job. By the time I hung up the phone, I was shaking. I called and texted as many people that I could; I was so proud of myself. It really felt like the happiest day of my life. I knew that I had just gotten exactly what I needed.



No matter what jobs your party members have, their characters remain the same throughout the story. Bartz, the protagonist of *Final Fantasy V*, will always be the same optimistic, cheerful young man regardless of whether you have him as a flamboyant Dancer or a protective Knight. From a game design standpoint, this makes sense. With only one story to tell and more than twenty jobs to choose from, it would have been too much work to implement any kind of noticeable change in characterization based on so many different choices. Instead, the four party members of the early games act as blank slates with minimal personality. They're a little simple, but also incredibly charming. *Final Fantasy IV* does the opposite of this. In *Final Fantasy IV*, each character is given a preset class that goes together with their character, such as Rosa, the softhearted White Mage, or Yang, the strict and disciplined Monk. These classifications can't be changed apart from when the story demands them to. Cecil, the story's protagonist, begins as a Dark Knight, burdened by the sins of war crimes he had committed under the name of his king, but later becomes a shining Paladin after taking responsibility for his wrongdoings and fighting to atone for his actions. For the duration of the story, Cecil and his friends are defined by these titles. Their occupations say everything the player needs to know about who they are.



One year after graduating and two months into my first full-time job, I'm left wondering if my occupation, too, says everything people need to know about who I am. As a Legal Marketing Editor, I'm training to edit advertisements for stock advice newsletters. My main task is to ensure that the ads are just legal enough to sway their customers—who mostly consist of middle-aged adults who know nothing about stocks—into giving companies their money without breaking any laws in the process. I knew going into this field that the company wasn't exactly known for its integrity, but after seeing the advertisements firsthand and hearing from coworkers about the lengths the copywriters will go to get away with as much as possible, I can't help but feel a little uncomfortable about the way they go about their operations. And yet here I am, still training and accepting their paychecks.

When I was still waiting to be accepted by my current company, I went to see my previous professor read from her newest book. After the reading, I spoke with her partner and told him about the job I was applying for and how I wasn't sure if I fully supported their business practices. In response, he told me about a friend of his in New York. "He's the most left-leaning, liberal guy you'll ever meet," he told me. "But do you know what he edits? *Guns and Ammo* magazine. Sometimes you have to do what you can to pay the bills."

I took this position and applied to others because I'm confident in my skills as an editor. It's something I'm good at, one of the only things I know I can do well. But do I enjoy editing because I enjoy editing, or do I only like what I do because I'm good at it, as if it were nothing more than an effective means to a financial end?



Hironobu Sakaguchi, the creator of *Final Fantasy*, dreamed of being a musician but instead started working for Square Co., a Japanese video game company, to get programming experience. He ended up staying with the company, leaving behind his musical aspirations.

That wasn't the first crossroads that Sakaguchi arrived at during his time at Square, though. Before *Final Fantasy*, none of the games released during his time as Director



**"I do this with places from my past. I leave a piece of myself in the form of thoughts, emotions, and memories, and then come back to visit them long after I've moved on from that place."**



of Planning and Development were very successful, leading him to question if he had what it took to be a game writer. He decided that if the next game he worked on didn't do well, he would go back to school. The game Sakaguchi and his team released next was none other than *Final Fantasy*, and the rest was history. Sakaguchi never went back to school after that.



Sometimes, even though I've graduated and finished my time at the magazine, I find myself coming back to my school. I'll park in one of the nearby garages and go for long walks on the campus, looking at the buildings where I had my classes and all my

favorite spots where I would sit around with my friends. I do this with places from my past. I leave a piece of myself in the form of thoughts, emotions, and memories, and then come back to visit them long after I've moved on from that place. I do it because I always miss those reminders of who I was at that time, of how I felt back then. In the case of my old university, I suppose I come back because I miss the part of myself who still had faith in the "next step." I didn't know what was going to happen after I graduated, but I believed that something would work itself out soon after I did, that I would have more things figured out. In a way, that was true. I have a full-time job and some semblance of a plan for where I can go from here. But with it comes even more mysteries. The more confident I become, the more answers I have for myself. But the more answers I have for myself, the more possibilities there are, and the more confused I become, and the less I know about what I want from life. Then the questions return, and I'm back to being lost all over again. And so, the cycle continues.



My first instinct would be to say that, while I don't necessarily wish life were like a game such as *Final Fantasy*, I can't help but be a little envious at how easy it is to accomplish the game's goals. More specifically, I think I'm jealous of the fact that the character's lives are always guided by the reassuring hand of the player who takes over and makes sure they get through everything safely in the end. Not being able to choose anything for myself would be terrifying, and I would hate to lose that freedom. But if I knew someone could just take the wheel for a bit and get me to where I want to go? I can't deny that the offer wouldn't be a little tempting.

Sitting at my computer at work, I once again have started wondering what's next for me. My browser is opened to a page of

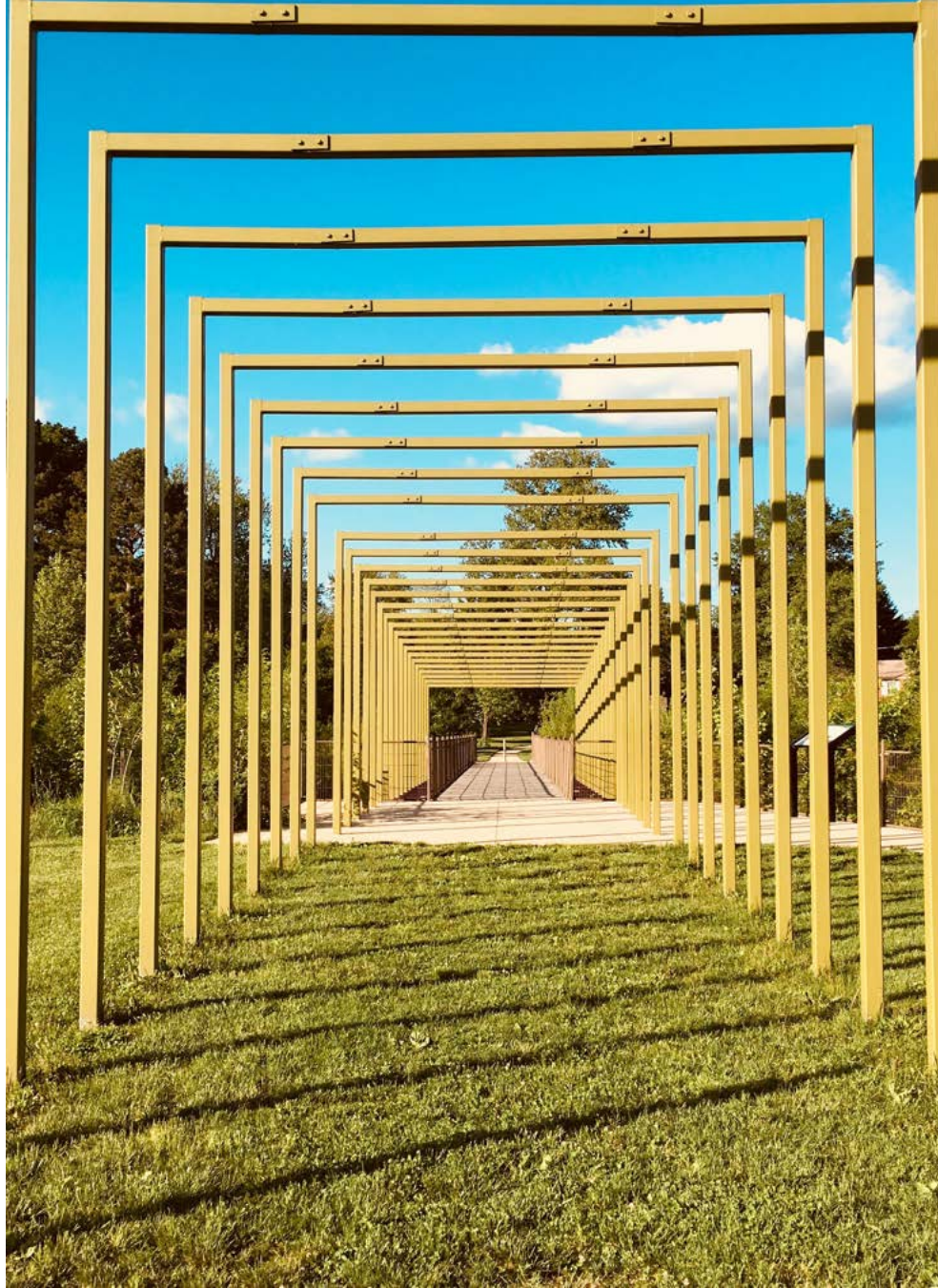
apartment listings. Most adventures in RPGs start when the main character leaves their hometown. *Final Fantasy* is no exception to this. It signals the beginning of a character's arc where they can figure out both the world and themselves by the end, but I doubt that anything like that will happen to me. Instead, I'm sure that I'll only have more questions, then some answers, then more questions. I can't count on any sort of omniscient player to guide me through my own little game of life. Instead, all I can do is wake up and go to work every day, and hope that I'm moving forward as best as I can.

## MIDDLE EARTH

ROBERT BEVERIDGE •

Lower the boom, lower the cheese, lower the flag and see who *still* salutes. Pieces at half eight, a basket in the Presidential rose garden, unsure which restroom is safe or desirable. You find you can dip pretzels in *anything* once you've had a couple of joints and they still taste good. Breast milk took some getting used to, but now you favor it over ranch (the houses, not the dressing). Keep pushing your shark to level up, he slacks off on his training regimen every time a Wapner rerun shows up on the tube, but he responds well to rewards of Jarlsberg, Limburger, Stilton.





*The Fine Lines*  
GERMÁN QUEZADA GAETE ◦

Taken on iPhone 5 SE,  
approximately 7:5, 2270 x 3116px

## *SHOULD'VE STAYED SHARP*

KEL MASSEY ◦

I dream about having sharp teeth that can bite  
through apples and bone,  
and kindly someone reminds me

*you already can*

Frightened, I file down my teeth  
to dream of hands and hugs,  
and unkindly someone reminds me

*you can get those as easy as temporary tattoos from grocery store vending machines*

And I kindly try to explain that it's not the same,  
that not all tattoos from grocery store machines  
are made the same.

Some only last  
a few seconds,  
a season or two,  
and I want something that never fades.

Unkindly someone says

*that's impossible and you're stupid for thinking that grocery store machines exist*

I bite my tongue and unkindly agree.

## Contributors

**Briseyda Barrientos-Ariza** is a first-generation Latina, Guatemalan-American writer, activist, and now poet. She currently finds herself halfway done with her degrees in English Literature and Psychology. You can usually find her at her local coffee shop, grocery store, or responding to emails regarding a new organization she founded in the Honors College entitled *Honorables of Color*. Briseyda is fervently passionate about everything she does—and that includes writing her author's bio. This is her first publication. Feel free to contact her: briseyda.barrientosariza@gmail.com.

**Victor Basta** was born and raised in Cairo, Egypt. Basta immigrated to the United States with his parents when he was eight. An investment banker as well as a poet, Basta helped build three different investment banking firms over thirty years. His current focus is helping African tech companies raise money and expand internationally. His poetry has been published by *Poet Speak Magazine*, and he is very active on the website [everypoet.org](http://everypoet.org).

**Robert Beveridge** (he/him) makes noise ([xterminal.bandcamp.com](http://xterminal.bandcamp.com)) and writes poetry in Akron, OH. Recent/upcoming appearances in *The Virginia Normal*, *Credo Espoir*, and *Chiron Review*, among others.

**Dmitry Blizniuk** is an author from Ukraine. His most recent poems have appeared in *The Pinch*, *Press53*, *Magma Poetry*, *The Nassau Review*, *Havik*, *Saint Katherine Review*, *Star 82*, *Naugatuck River*, *Lighthouse*, *The Gutter*, *Palm Beach Poetry Festival*, and many others. A Pushcart Prize nominee, he is also the author of *The Red Forest* (Fowlpox Press, 2018). He lives in Kharkov, Ukraine.

**Emily Brisse's** essays have recently appeared in publications including *The Washington Post*, *Creative Nonfiction's True Story*, *Lumina*, and *december*. Her work has been shortlisted for the Curt Johnson Prose Award, nominated for the Pushcart Prize, and awarded a Minnesota Arts Board Artist Initiative Grant. She teaches high school English in Minneapolis.

**Manal Bukhari** is a senior at Towson University and a part-time freelance photographer. This is her first publication. She appreciates the raw reality of everyday life, the fleeting beauty of those in-between moments, and she does her very best to take every picture with that in mind. She wants her viewers to relate to her work through emotions and energy.

**Megan Clark** graduated from Towson University in 2018. She majored in English with

a concentration in creative writing. She lives in Harford County with her soon-to-be husband and their Jack Russell Terrier, Rudy.

**David Crouse** lives in Seattle, Washington, where he directs the Creative Writing Program at the University of Washington-Seattle. "Fame and Fortune" appears in a new collection of short fiction entitled *I'm Here: Alaska Stories*.

**Darren C. Demaree** is the author of twelve poetry collections, most recently *Nude Male with Echo* (8th House Publishing, October 2019). He is the recipient of a 2018 Ohio Arts Council Individual Excellence Award, the Louis Bogan Award from *Trio House Press*, and the Nancy Dew Taylor Award from *Emrys Journal*. He is the Managing Editor of the *Best of the Net Anthology* and *Ovenbird Poetry*. He is currently living in Columbus, Ohio with his wife and children.

**Liza Dennis** graduated from Towson University in 2019. She studied Fine Arts and served as the art editor of last year's volume of *Grub Street*. She is now in graduate school at Lesley University, studying Art Therapy.

**Josh Denslow** is the author of the collection *Not Everyone Is Special* (7.13 Books). In addition to playing Zelda games with his three boys, he beats the drums in the band Borrisokane.

**Danielle Fauth** is a contemporary sculptor with a BFA in Sculpture from Towson University. Her work intervenes with found objects via digital fabrication and mold-making and casting processes. She replicates or alters familiar objects to make them unreal, intangible, of dreams—from our world and one that could be an in-between.

**Germán Quezada Gaete** graduated from Northwood High School in 2015. Three years later, he received a diagnosis of bipolar

disorder. Not only is music his therapy, his passion for it has led him to study at Omega Studios' School in April of 2019. His other interest is photography.

**Chris Gavalier** is an associate professor at Washington and Lee University. His books include: *On the Origin of Superheroes* (Iowa 2015), *Superhero Comics* (Bloomsbury 2017), *Superhero Thought Experiments* (with Nathaniel Goldberg, Iowa 2019); and forthcoming: *Creating Comics* (with Leigh Ann Beavers, Bloomsbury 2020), *Revising Fiction, Fact, and Faith* (with Nathaniel Goldberg, Routledge 2021), *The Comics Form* (Routledge 2021). His visual work appears in *Ilanot Review*, *North American Review*, *Aquifer*, and other journals.

**Sergey Gerasimov** is a writer, translator, and poet living in Ukraine. His favorite literary genres are those he invents himself: crazy surrealism, "The Glory of the World" (*Clarkesworld Magazine*) or "The Mask Game" (*Upper Rubber Boots*), unconventional fantasy, "Oasis" (*Gypsy Shadow Publishing*), and his favorite, metaphorical realism, "Wings," upcoming in *J Journal*. His taste in poetry is less erratic. He likes writing poems that make people think. See, as an example, "The Bitterness of the Grapefruit" (*True Chili*).

**Shayna Goodman's** essays have appeared in *The Cut*, *Salon*, *Lilith Magazine*, and *Jewish Currents*. She received her MFA in memoir from Hunter College, an MA in Judaic Studies and MSW from the University of Michigan, and a BFA from Sarah Lawrence College. Shayna received a fellowship in creative nonfiction from *Tent: Creative Writing* (2017). She teaches first-year writing at Hunter College. She was raised in Manhattan and currently lives in Brooklyn.

**Violet Griffin** is a senior at Towson University studying creative writing. They were also a poetry editor for *Grub Street*, volume 68. They live in Baltimore with their best friend and two cats.

**Andrey Gritsman**, a native of Moscow, emigrated to the United States in 1981. He is a physician as well as a poet and essayist. He has published eight volumes of poetry in Russian and six collections in English. He received an honorable mention in the 2009 Pushcart Prize XXIII anthology and was nominated for the Pushcart Prize several times between 2005 and 2011. His poems, essays, and short stories in English have appeared or are forthcoming in more than 100 literary journals and also have been anthologized. He received his MFA in poetry from Vermont College. He runs the Intercultural Poetry Series in New York City.

**J.M. Hall** has published a mini-chapbook collection and individual poems in numerous literary journals, including *FOLIO*, *Off the Coast*, and *Roanoke Review*. Currently Director of Liberal Studies and Assistant Professor of Philosophy at William Paterson University, he has also published over fifty peer-reviewed essays, and edited with Sarah Tyson, *Philosophy Imprisoned: The Love of Wisdom in the Age of Mass Incarceration*. He has over twenty years' experience as a dancer and choreographer.

**James Hancock** is a writer currently living in Towson, Maryland. He loves driving to nowhere in particular, acting like he knows what he's doing, and romanticizing the wind. His other published works include two separate interviews on *Grub Street*'s website.

**William Hartman IV** is a senior at Towson University, studying Graphic Design. Starting out as a fine artist, he continues to create both physical and digital works to pair with his designs. He looks forward to the beginning of his design career with works available on [williamhartmaniv.com](http://williamhartmaniv.com).

**Greg Headley** is an artist and writer in Austin, Texas. His recent work is published in the *MacGuffin*, *Burningword Journal*, *Indianapolis*

*Review*, and *Raw Art Review*.

**Mikayla Hennessey**, an artist based in Southern Maryland, focuses on making patterns and printmaking. Her creative passions are fueled almost entirely by the natural world and the species that reside within it.

**Gabrielle Grace Hogan** is a poet from St. Louis, Missouri. Her work has been published by the Academy of American Poets, *Arcturus*, *Ghost City Review*, *Sonora Review*, and others. She is the co-editor of the forthcoming Harry Styles anthology *You Flower / You Feast* and is attending the University of Texas at Austin for her MFA. You can find her social media and also poems on [gabriellegracehogan.com](http://gabriellegracehogan.com).

**Eric Hosford** is an artist based in Boston, Massachusetts. With a BFA in Illustration from the School of Visual Arts in New York, he works as an illustrator and graphic designer. His personal work focuses on the immense power of nature and humanity's relationship to it.

**Heikki Huotari**, in a past century, attended a one-room school and spent summers on a forest-fire lookout tower. He's a retired math professor and has won two poetry chapbook prizes and published two collections. Another collection is in press.

**Natalie Jeffery**, a prior *Grub Street* team member, has been enjoying her newly post-grad life by exploring untried destinations near and far. As she moves forward, she is eager to use her voice to evoke political change for women through writing and photography.

**Jeremy MacKenzie Johnston** is a Queens-based writer whose work has been published by *Aqualamb Records*, *Splice Today*, *The RS 500*, and *College Zine Press*. He received a Bachelor of Arts from Hampshire College in 2014.

**Kierstin Kessler** lives a relatively quiet life in Shrewsbury, Pennsylvania. She graduated from Towson University with a degree in English in December, 2019. In her spare time, Kierstin enjoys reading and writing urban fantasy.

**Deandra Lee** is a 19-year-old photographer interested in surreal self-portraits. She creates work to help herself and others wonder about themselves, the world, and their thoughts, feelings, and emotions.

**Christopher Linforth** has recently published fiction in *Grain*, *Fiction International*, *Notre Dame Review*, *Day One*, and *Descant*, among other magazines. He has been awarded fellowships and scholarships to the Sewanee Writers' Conference, Vermont Studio Center, and the Virginia Center for the Creative Arts.

**Tsoku Maela** uses his visual mediums not only to document the present but also as a way to look into the future by re-visualizing African narratives, culture, and aesthetics often as a part of a surreal and abstract visual world. His work has been featured on *CNN: African Voices*, *Hyperallergic*, *VICE*, *GUP magazine*, and showcased in South Africa, Lagos, Zurich and Miami Art Basel at PULSE Contemporary Art fair. Learn more at [tsokumaela.com/about](http://tsokumaela.com/about).

**Kel Massey** is a senior at Towson University who can't stop thinking about holiness. They enjoy peach tea, big jackets, and advocating for collective kindness. Their poetry and short fiction has been previously featured in the *Sprout Club Journal*. You can find them @knifeocean on Twitter.

**Eva Niessner** is a writer living in the Baltimore area. Her work has previously appeared in *Grub Street*, *Pemme*, *Crepe & Penn*, and *Baltimore Magazine*. She teaches English at Community College of Baltimore County and enjoys caring for houseplants and traveling.

**Clare Needham** is a writer living in New York City. Her work has appeared in *The Stinging Fly*, *Ploughshares Solos*, *New York Tyrant Magazine*, *Burning House Press*, *Catapult*, *Bodega Magazine*, and elsewhere. She has been awarded residencies and grants from the MacDowell Colony, Yaddo, Vermont Studio Center, and the Virginia Center for the Creative Arts.

**Rachel Passer** is originally from London and has been living in Phoenix for many years. She has a passion for painting abstracts and writing stories. She has written a medieval fantasy novel and gotten a publishing contract for it with TouchPoint Press. It will release in 2020! Insta: @r.j.passer.

**Taryn Painter**, a native Pennsylvanian, is a second-year Honors College undergraduate at Towson University. She is double majoring in History and Political Science and minoring in Human Rights. This is her first publication. Connect with her on Twitter @tpainofficial.

**Owen Park** is an undergraduate student of History and Creative Writing at George Washington University. "Vacation" is his first published work. He grew up in Brooklyn, New York, and now lives in Los Angeles with his family. He looks forward to a lifetime of writing.

**Erynn Porter** has a BFA in Creative Writing from New Hampshire Institute of Art and is Assistant Editor for *Qual Bell Magazine* and Nonfiction Editor for *Blanket Sea*. She has a chronic illness but that doesn't stop her from writing reviews, essays, fiction, and whatever else interests her. She's been published in *Bust*, *the Meadow*, *Brooklyn Magazine*, and more. You can see more of her work at [erynn-porter.com](http://erynn-porter.com).

**Angela Qian** is a senior at Dulaney High School and plans to study the humanities in the fall at a to-be-decided university. Her



work has appeared in her school's own art and lit magazine, *Sequel*, of which she is the literary editor.

**Yehudis Rabinowitz** studies Art + Design at Towson University.

**Amy Roa's** poetry has been published or is forthcoming in *The Yale Review*, *Poetry Northwest*, *Guernica*, *The Antioch Review*, *Poetry South*, and *Quarterly West*, among others. She lives in Brooklyn, New York.

**Bridget Roddy** is an illustrator and law student living in Chicago, IL. She pulls inspiration from Americana and being generally aimless. You can follow her at @roddycreative on Instagram and check out what else she has going on at roddycreative.com.

**William Rudolph**, for a given while, intends to keep holding onto his memories of sailing across the green water of Spirit Lake, golfing the rolling hills of Hiawatha Country Club, and digging into the dark soil beneath his father's gardens. He earned his MFA in Writing from Vermont College. His poetry has appeared or is forthcoming in *Barrow Street*, *Flint Hills Review*, *The North American Review*, *Quarterly West*, *Rattle*, *SLANT*, *Steam Ticket*, and many other journals. He coaches student writers at Grinnell College and in GC's Liberal Arts in Prison Program.

**Rochelle Jewel Shapiro's** novel, *Miriam the Medium* (Simon & Schuster), was nominated for the Ribelow Award, and her novel, *Kaylee's Ghost*, was an Indie finalist. Her essays have been published in *The New York Times* (Lives), *Newsweek*, *Empty Mirror*, and many other publications. Her short stories and poetry have been published in *Moment*, *The MacGuffin*, *Permafrost*, and more. Her poetry has been nominated by Best of the Net and for a Pushcart Prize. Currently, she teaches at UCLA Extension. rochelle.jshapiro.com. Connect with her on Twitter @rjshapiro

**Makenzie Sisson** is a senior at Towson University, with a major in Environmental Biology and two minors: one in Chemistry, and one in Creative Writing. She lives in Baltimore with her three roommates and their many, many plants. She aspires to save the planet and to be an environmental writer. This is her first published work.

**Darcy Smith** works as a sign language interpreter. Recent poems have appeared or are forthcoming in *New Reader Magazine*, *Sequestum*, *Coe Review*, *Two Thirds North*, *River Heron Review*, and *Anti-Heroic Chic*. She is a Buddhist and a kickboxer. Her current obsession is executing a six-punch-three-kick combination with perfect form.

**Brett Stout** is a 40-year-old artist and writer. He is a high school dropout and former construction worker turned college graduate and paramedic. He creates mostly controversial work usually while breathing toxic paint fumes from a small cramped apartment known as "The Nerd Lab" in Myrtle Beach, South Carolina. His work has appeared in a vast range of diverse media, from international indie zines, such as *Litro Magazine UK*, to Brown University. He is tired of talking about himself at this point and prefers that his artwork speak for itself.

**Ashley Wagner** works in publishing and is the poetry editor for *Ligeia Magazine*. She recently received her MS in Professional Writing from Towson University. Her work has previously been featured in *Up the Staircase Quarterly* and *Grub Street* Vol. 66. She lives and works in Baltimore.

**Chloë Williams** is a West Virginian writer, filmmaker, and photographer. She is published in *Maelstrom* magazine and will appear in Make Our Rights Reality's upcoming anthology. She is currently an undergraduate at Towson University, though much of her work is inspired by her time in Leeds, England.

**Angus Woodward** was raised in Michigan by Virginians and has taught college writing in Louisiana since 1990. His books of fiction are *Down at the End of the River*, *Americanisation*, and *Oily*. "The Summer House," "Susan and Sarah, 1965," and "Boys and Hands" are part of a larger work-in-progress tentatively titled *What Happened Here?*

**Chloe Yetter** is an artist based in Silver Spring. She has been painting since 2016. Since then, she has been developing her craft, experimenting with mixed media and often playing with texture in her work. Most of her pieces center around the human form and she often draws inspiration from the female experience.

**Natasha Zeta** is a multi-disciplinary artist from Philadelphia, focusing on mental health. Her work can be found at natashazeta.com. "Nature Nurture Figure Five" is part of a series of 35mm photographs that depict found natural objects—in stark comparison with parts of the artist's body—with little digital manipulation. Instead of representing an isolated ideal, the body here is a part of a larger ecosystem; being human means growing, breathing, and bettering our environment in society, in nature, and within ourselves. "Nature Nurture" seeks to reclaim our bodies as both person and place, as textured and natural as any landscape.



## About the Cover

### KAITLIN MARKS

Deandra Lee's work has a whimsical essence grounded in reality, much like the pieces cultivated in this year's edition of *Grub Street*. I first came across Deandra's work in *Adroit* and found myself seeking more. When I discovered that she is an 18-year-old artist who creates work using an iPhone, her talent shone even more brightly. Her work is vibrant while bringing the viewer a sense of peace. She uses art to look beyond the surface of a subject and find a light.

"Loop" features a woman within the limits of golden loops, clouds soft against a muted blue background. Her skin glows with a youthful radiance. Her hands cradle her chest, and fish swim in every direction through the air surrounding her. Upon my first encounter with the piece, I found myself captivated by one defining element: the way her eyes gaze upward. Surrounded by ever-changing directions and confined inside the loops, she has hope. She focuses her eyes on something other, beyond the ordinary.

There is femininity in the image, but there's most importantly humanity rooted in whimsy, something beautiful grounded in the ordinary. "Old Beauty," featured on the back cover, shows the same woman, aged, with the clouds and the fish narrowed to single, poignant elements. Deandra describes the piece, "A beautiful face will age and a beautiful body will change, but a beautiful soul will always be a beautiful soul," highlighting the ideas of aging and identity seen throughout the magazine's individual poems, fiction, and nonfiction pieces. Feminine identity runs throughout, and Deandra's piece focuses the viewer's lens on identity over appearance. While aesthetically beautiful, her art has elements that challenge the reader to think beyond the physical limits of beauty.

The main focus in Deandra's work is to capture wonder, and in this year's edition of *Grub Street*, even the darkest moments are infused with a sense of wonder, an essence of hope. By juxtaposing confinement with freedom, rules with creativity, Deandra creates a piece that itself represents the human craving for literature and art that excites. Seeking to inspire people to wonder for themselves, her art blends limits and freedom, creativity and confines, femininity and race and identity, aesthetic beauty, the traditional with the new. I hope readers leave this year's edition inspired to wonder, and inspired to create. As Deandra says, when it comes to art, "the only way that it could be wrong is by not trying." We need artists and writers and poets. With the world being a place filled with pockets of darkness, a sense of wonder leads us toward the light.



