

The Reflector

2019



The Reflector

Shippensburg University's
Journal of the Arts

2019

The Reflector



The Reflector, founded in 1957, is the annual Undergraduate Arts Journal financed by the Student Government Association of Shippensburg University. We accept works of fiction, nonfiction, poetry, interviews, and artwork year-round. Works are considered for publication based on blind submission policy. Submissions are accepted electronically at reflect@ship.edu. All writers/artists retain rights to their work.

For questions regarding our submission policy, contact: reflect@ship.edu. Visit The Reflector on our Facebook, The Reflector. The Reflector office is located in the old section of Shippensburg University, in the Creative Writing Wing of Horton Hall, Room 301.

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A Letter From the Editor

Dear Reader,

It seems like yesterday that I walked into Horton Hall for the first time, sat diligently through my first Reflector meeting ever, and then left to not return for a whole year. It was actually four years ago though, and I was a Freshman. Through a combination of first-semester-of-college stress and social anxiety, I had unwittingly walked away from a room full of people who would later become my best friends, and who are some of the most creative, brilliant and caring people there are. In addition, I had also walked away from a publication that would grow to mean so much to me, as it has to many others.

Not all was lost though, as a seed had been planted in my mind at that meeting. It laid dormant for a time, as I found my voice in writing, and eventually I grew bold enough to submit my poetry to The Reflector. To my surprise, I was published, and the seed began to grow. I began to write some more poetry, and attended my first launch party, where I met people I half-knew already from mutual classes who were in the club. The atmosphere that they created at the event and through our interactions cemented what I had already known deep-down: I'd made a mistake not being a part of *all this*. When the first meeting of my sophomore year rolled around, I was there early, and I was ready.

The years since have seen this metaphorical growth continue. Our club has grown over the past few years, and with it, so has our creative and editorial output. Our Journal itself has grown in size quite literally, as the number of student writing and art we receive has also grown with it. Likewise, our presence on campus has grown, allowing us to host more events and reach more students. This growth is also what has allowed us to reach you, who might be reading *The Reflector* for the umpteenth time in your life or the very first.

In whichever case, I hope the pieces found within this book help spur growth in some aspect of your life as they have mine. Our current day-to-day existences in 2019 can seem turbulent and unnerving, be it due to personal, professional, political, or social

strife, and so the ability to be able to sit down and reflect on the writing and artwork in this year's book has been a privilege; reading the poetry, prose, and art created by the students of Shippensburg University is and has always been such a centering and revigorating process for me.

None of this creative growth would be possible without the constant hard work of our amazing staff, who have put countless hours into poring over the works found here. They have the most difficult position possible when it comes to creating *The Reflector*, as they are tasked with something seemingly impossible: to decide what pieces make it into the book. How does one judge a poem's worth? Who's to say what art gets in based on merit? What makes one prose piece *better* than the one before or after it? They answer these questions to the best of their ability, and their ability is great, as reflected here.

Likewise, without the support of our Associate Editor, Casey Leming or our PR Chair, Andrew Jay Houpt, none of this would be possible. On top of the immense amount of work each of their positions requires of them normally, they have gone beyond the call of duty a thousand times over in regards to leading this organization and creating this book. Our fearless leader and advisor, "Commodore" Neil Connelly is also equally responsible for this book's success with his invaluable advice, much-needed guidance, and endless patience. These three individuals and our entire staff of editors have been what's kept me grounded during the past year; my gratitude is immeasurable and my day is made.

I'll say again, my hope is that this book helps spur growth. That this book might surprise, enrich, challenge, and change you in some way, small or large. That it might show you that growth is possible, and can be experienced rapidly or gradually, that growth might be crystal clear or meander through the months and years of our lives.

May we always continue growing.

Yours,

Chris Carragher

/or

Untitled

First Place | Pound Prize of Excellence Winner



Savannah Manetta

Lemons

Second Place | Pound Prize of Excellence Winner

When life gives you lemons...
overanalyze why life gave you lemons
instead of limes. Try to add meaning
to the lemons, make them much bigger
than they were ever meant to be.

When life gives you lemons,
make enough lemonade for everyone around you.
Give it out for free while you die
from dehydration. Say you are sorry

for making the lemonade with your tears.
Apologize for the taste and the inconvenience.
And even when your skin burns from
the lemon juice seeping into your cuts. Never stop.

Push through the pain. And when your
knees buckle from the pressure,
apologize again. Stand back up.
Keep on squeezing.

Victoria Campbell

Worms: Part 1

Third Place | Pound Prize of Excellence Winner

I watch these hydraulic press videos on Instagram where essentially they put something, anything, clay, a cabbage, or candles in side of this chamber and squish them in this giant steel press with holes in it, and in slow motion, all of these little worms squeeze out and go all over the place. I feel like that's what is happening inside of my body. The hydraulic press that sits between my throat and my pelvis, just beneath the surface of my skin, is slowly squishing my organs together and into little worms that swim around in my hollow body cavity. I feel some of them trying to come up through my esophagus, and I keep thinking that I will vomit and the little red organ worms will start crawling around on the floor in front of me, and in front of you. I wonder if when you see my worms if you'll start to feel bad, if you'll realize how badly I hurt my self or if you'll realize that you only made it worse. I wonder if you'll pick up one of my worms and try to put it back inside of me, if you'll open my mouth and watch the worm slide into my throat and say you're sorry. I wonder if you'll try to shove them all back inside or if you'll watch them crawl away like I will. I will watch them as they disperse and the pile of worms expands and fills the room with my insides. And we'll stand facing each other, waiting for me to fall, waiting for me to deflate and crumple to the floor, waiting for the whole room to turn into a hydraulic press and crush us. So that we become worms too and there is no humanity or love or drugs or pain or sex or tears or friendship or any feeling left at all.

Emily Mitchell

Untitled



Mad in Late Pregnancy

She darkens into her usual epinephrine slumber
 Even in her dreams she runs marathons,
 exertion the only way her subconscious can conjure.
 Her carnival bag full of water and fish sinks her
 into the lead-blue waves of the coverlet. And he

picks up the Canon because uselessness
 is a sympathetic pressure on his stomach.
 In time he tells himself the strangeness of this image
 will lie tame beneath his fond ballpoint pen summarizations.
 The camera shudders once. Twice
 Before he heads into the kitchen
 to make a sandwich with the tuna she can't eat.

No, she instead must only be filled with squishes of jelly,
 jellyfish and a toothless basilisk which writhes
 in its salted sensory deprivation
 its movements stilled by the green plaid shirt
 which masks so well the already undergrown lump

Which 18 hours later is somehow
 seven and a half pounds of gasping
 glazed donut purple-red
 and a mountain of existence so large
 That looking at the picture
 I'm still half-afraid I crushed her.

Cat Crochunis-Brown

Be More Perfect or (A Day in the Life of Anxious Andy)

Baddabingbaddaboom. The bathroom door swings opens. A baby step. Bathroom door closes behind. The portal is officially gone.

I release a single breath that never really seems to stop coming. It's an exhale suspended in space. I really don't have time to deal with that inhalingbullshit these days. The universe is moving way too fast, so much faster than it did at the beginning. The grind doesn't change. The grind never stops. While there are still allpowerful, bigdicked, grosslybearded gods roaming Earth, I won't—I can't—comfortably complete the final step of the twostep respiratory process. Sometimes destiny overpowers biology. (Some would say they're the exact same thing.)

I have an important job to do. I'm the only human being capable of completing the task at hand. We're surrounded on all sides by hordes of youcantellyourgranny kinds of havoc, and there's only one firewielding entity to blame for that: the bitchboy Xenu. And I'm gonna kill him.

The Hallway stretches out before me like a cavernous vagina. (Imagine how your life could've turned out differently if you had never walked down the runway of that first, fateful vagina. (Trust me, you'll ponder it more when something bad happens to you. Wait six months, give or take a couple.)) The onceshiny wall tiles have contracted a yellowish tint, the result of prolonged exposure to splashysplashed tiedye dyes, bubbles, melted banana ice cream, and clunker dreams. A strange source of inspiration. The blotches of blackish mold on the ceiling look like a longforgotten Dada art piece. It would probably sell for a million bucks at an auction in Europe.

I quickly hoist up the waistband of my rainbowcolored sweatpants and gently scuff the heels of my Nike hightops against the floor. I like the sound that makes. Reminds me of the whimper a mousey lets out the moment it realizes a trap has been triggered. There's a certain power in that sound. The little squeak centers me and directs cosmic beams of efficiency and strength and awareness and synergy to the fovea of my frontal lobe.

I am unstoppable. Xenu, get ready to get fucked.

I lift my right leg six inches off the ground and hold it there. Thigh muscles tighten. Foot levitates. Modern magic. Gravity is an easy brute to overpower on this planet. A fuzzy wave of sciencebacked confidence crashes in the deepest trench of my stomach. I fabricate a small, menacing gameday smile, the kind of grin that could end a war. You know how it goes. The inaugural leg lift is the prelude to a wellrehearsed, cyclical dance we've been perfecting since Day 365. It's Day 4, 180 now. Call me an expert. Right foot down. Left foot up. Right foot push. Left foot down. Right foot up. Left foot push. And so on and so on. The bathroom door fades away without waving. Enforced Forward Motion. Inanimate objects aren't always as kind as my mom.

The small city on the bank of the half-frozen river went ahead and zoomed by outside, its cloudscraper lights mere maybe-I-saw-it-maybe-I-didn't shooting stars in the Christmas Eve sky. I etched a family of happy circles in the thin layer of condensation on the backseat passenger-side window and tried hard to imagine how the urban folk were spending the holiday. They were probably zipping up expensive Columbia coats, grabbing Tesla keys and hundred dollar bills and the kids and the grandparents, leaving the apartment with coffee mugs full of good cheer, taking the long way to the nicest restaurant in that part of town, through the park where Santa had set up shop for the season, singing carols that even God knows by heart, laughing, crying from laughing too much, talking about the universe, cozily coexisting—

“You doing okay back there?”

I snapped my neck forward to look in the general direction of the driver. I accidentally locked eyes with her in the rearview mirror and immediately directed my gaze into the abyss again.

I knew that face. It lacked the wrinkles of genuine concern and instead promised a concealed purpose. She was always thinking of the follow-up.

"I'm fine. I—"

"Did you have a good time today?"

"Yeah. It was fine."

I had inherited her half of the gene pool, at least that's what everybody said. When she and I exited the surveillance of the societal audience, our interactions morphed into spats between Superman and Bizarro.

"You didn't say much."

This again.

"I didn't feel like I had anything important to say, so I chose to say nothing. I—"

"That's ridiculous."

"What's ridiculous? I—"

"Of course you have important things to say. You're alive. You do things."

"I do things that don't matter to those people. I—"

"To your grandmother?"

"To my grandmother."

Five seconds of phone-checking silence.

"Why'd you wear jeans?"

"They're comfortable. They're—"

"I told you to wear something nice. The jeans are all wrinkled."

"Well, I didn't know the stakes were gonna be so astronomically high at our family Christmas gathering. Joe was wearing a Hawaiian shirt and flip-flops. I—"

"You need to take better care of yourself. Think about your actions. Put your clothes away after I fold them. They won't get all wrinkled. I should stop doing laundry altogether. You'd be on your own then."

"Come on, I—"

"None of that."

"I try to be perfect. I—"

"Be more perfect."

It never stops from her or for her. It never stops for me. It never stops for either of us.

As I move closer to the end of The Hallway, the air gets progressively colder and thicker, and the tiny hairs on my butt cheeks straighten up and start doing the wave. Oh, that rotten sumbitch is definitely here.

You're correct, little buddy.

A voice but no visible face. It peels the paint off my soul. I want to run back to the bathroom, but that's not an option at this point. Jesus didn't really want to die on the cross. Superman didn't really want to catch that flailing, falling jewel burglar. MLK didn't really want to take a bullet in the back. Ben Franklin didn't really want to contract syphilis from

a fancy French hooker. Great men don't want to do great things, they need to.

What's up, big buddy? I'm comin' for you. From the diaphragm. Savior slayer/opera singer.

The wall bends. I run my fingertips along the icy surface and feel the inertia of fear lightly thrust me away from the target. I can't turn around. I can't turn around. You can't turn around. I can't turn around again.

Whoopsie. There's the door. It's no farther than the length of an average pool noodle. Sneaky little bitch. He's in there, I know it.

A few fired neurons later, I'm holding the handle. Metal in flesh/ flesh on metal. My livelihood hinges on this handle. No. It's no longer a handle. It's the forbidden fruit on the forbidden tree. But luckily, that god is nowhere in sight. I twist like I'm playing Bop It and enter.

Inside. The lights are brilliant and blinding and painful. Supernovas overhead. The sounds don't request consent. They crash. In. Out. In. Out. Ear canals drown. The oxygen in the air even feels like Dasani in my lungs. These are the ways he alters the real.

Where is he?

Where are you?

There's a kid w/ a sax. No Xenu. Is he in that timpani? No, that's not Xenu's hiding place today. There's a—oh, wow—an upright bass over there. Plucked, plucked, plucked. No Xenu in the upright bass. I scan and scan, looking for a flash of the enemy. Not in the sheet music. Not in the

drumstick or the snare head. Not in the trumpet mute. Or the flugelhorn. Or the amplifier. Or the music stands or the mouthpieces or the reeds or the vinyls. Or the conducting wand—

1 (down)

Where are you, big buddy?

2 (in)

You're always in here somewhere.

3 (out)

Wait a hotmotherfucking second.

4 (up)

As the band begins to blast, I realize that—cue dolly zoom—Xenu is Everywhere. And then he eats me.

chaos

chaos

chaos

reality starts to bleed

life organ thunders beneath rain pillows pull that thing out of my chest and my legs are in a robot suit cant break the bond james bond remembers the happier times and watches those memories get crushed by tubas on top of trombones on top of small dicks reflecting the light of a billion knifey orbs are big brass bass big brass bass and a piccolo the piccolo pick my nose feel nothing RIP/rip my rainbow pants feel nothing kiss the eighties goodbye it was only a renaissance while it lasted man i am a renaissance man i will change the world as soon as i get my brainy brain in order of appearance thank you birdman for the title while i

watched sharon tate die i killed sharon tate and that poor wee baby put
me in the electric chair. put me in the electric chair. ten thousand volts
baby i am familiar with the rush of a hundred thousand volts now i am
outside of my body you cant call home when youre living outside your
body mommy love you daddy i cant call home cause im outside my body
the reaper holds up a sign in the distance what does it say youre dead im
dead? youre dead youre dead man
youre. dead. man.

Baddabingbaddabam. Bathroom door swings opens. A monster
step backward. The bathroom door closes in front. The real world is
officially gone.

I sit in the toilet and hit flush.

Blaine



Noelle Zeigler

Dropped Call

How strange for you to see me in this lighting.
I know I normally keep you in the dark.
It's safer there.
I know I haven't always been inviting but trust me
I'm tired of hiding too.
It's aching in my heart
Feeling my body tear apart
Like a sandwich that someone forgot to cut.
My mind can be overloaded
Like a computer that's reached its bandwidth.
But just know ... this has been me from the start
I never changed up or lied.
I'm sorry for making you cry.
But that's just me....
Not showing feelings to anything
Like a robot lacking that loving energy.
Maybe we can restart?
Will you let me show you the troubled thoughts on my heart?
Until then we grow far...far
Apart ... like an internet connection.
I wanna trap you in a safe deposit box
So you can never leave me.
Turn on the lights so you can see me.
But maybe it's best that I don't pay that electric bill.
I mean besides...
If you saw me for who I am
Would you feel like a bad connection?

Missed

Emma feels her sweat absorb into her plain navy sweatshirt that has faded with, well, sweat- and time. The front pocket is nearly torn off, which is to say, it was in better shape than her stained, ripped jeans that are in no way in accordance with recent fashion trends; they had almost lost all their color from being rigorously washed too many times. They hang haggardly off her hips, though they're not as loose as they used to be. She can smell herself as she reaches to push back a drenched, mousy brown strand of hair away from her face. *When's the last time I showered?* she thinks to herself.

"Ma'am?" The mover asks as he hunches under the bottom corner of the bed at the base of the stairs. It has three corners in the air and is balanced on the railing, the wall, and the mover himself. The stairway is too narrow. It won't fit. "Is your husband around? Maybe another set of hands-"

"No, he's not around," she says as she silences her buzzing phone.

"Will he be back soon?"

She swallows. *This, Emma thinks, is the hard part.* She tries to conjure up the words, but her tongue is slow and her throat constricts and she didn't really realize how long she had been silent until he clears his throat. Emma blinks rapidly and the mover's smile falls. "Just lea- let's put it over there, in the living room for now," she says. He waits for a beat as if he's waiting for the punchline. When he receives no further explanation, he dutifully helps her dislodge the bed from the stair and carry it into the other room. When they are done, sweat percolates from their brows. Emma doesn't move.

He swallows. "Well, have a nice day." He quickly walks out the front door to the moving truck parked on the curb, and the sound of the engine fills the air.

"Hey mom, check this out!"

Emma snaps to focus, in the doorway stood Thomas. He occupies about half of the space the mover did, he is all angles and elbows. He shoves his glasses further up his nose; his eyes glow hazel with a childish eagerness. His smile is black and white and crooked with various teeth missing while others grow in haphazardly. He waves her over and she follows her son. She hesitates on their front porch, the wooden slats beneath her creak. Thomas continues to run over to the driveway. "Look!" he squeals as he crouches over to his younger sister, Abigail, who is lying very, very still on the driveway as he draws a chalk outline around her. Just beside her is a bigger chalk outline about the size of Thomas' slim form.

"That's awesome," she says as she pulls her phone out of her back pocket. Emblazoned across the screen are the words: MOM 3 MISSED CALLS. She sighs and turns to go inside.

"Emma? Emma Shelley?" a shrill voice cuts through the air. A tiny woman appears, hobbling along the street toward her home. She has dark hair that falls around her shoulders and impossibly large sunglasses that cover most of her face. She is wearing a patterned short-sleeved dress that ends above her knees. Her skinny tanned legs end in beige, strappy wedge heels. She is shuffling across the street while holding the hand of a little girl, who stumbles like a baby giraffe across the pavement. Her only salvation is the iron grip of the woman, who is leaning over drastically to accommodate the height difference to keep the toddler upright. In her other hand, the woman holds a glass pan topped with crinkled aluminum foil against her hip. Just behind her a waif of a girl with the same dark brown hair pulled back in a ponytail is bouncing a soccer ball on the pavement like a basketball as she walks. She wears a blue jersey and black athletic shorts, tie dye high socks, and cleats.

"That's me," Emma says as she clamps her elbows to her sides as to keep her offensive scent at bay. As the woman reaches the curb, she lifts the toddler by her arm. For a moment she is airborne before her feet touch the sidewalk. The older girl looks up wordlessly to the woman. "Go on," the woman says. And the little girl darts over to Thomas and Abigail,

who instantly invite her to play. The woman holds out her hand causing the dozens of silver bracelets that cover her arms to clink together like hundreds of little bells. Her hand finally snares Emma's fingers in a tight handshake.

"I'm Maybeth Collins. Nice to meet you." she said, with all of her "i"s drawn out too long. "That's my Kelsey, and my baby, Kara." she nods over to the girls. "I thought I'd bring over my famous casserole surprise-" She leaned in closer. "My kids just love it. You know- surprise!" She laughs. "We should set up a playdate sometime, wouldn't that be nice?" She glances at Emma's left hand and said, "Where's your husband at? We'd love to meet him."

Emma swallows and shuffles her weight from leg to leg. Her eyes flicker to her bare feet; she rolls her ring around her finger with her thumb. Maybeth's smile fades. The etched wrinkles around her mouth are still dimpled, unable to catch up with her plaintive look of confusion.

"Emma?"

This is the hard part, she thinks, no one ever tells you that. She clears her throat, she flinches preemptively, because, really, there's no other way to say it. "Three months ago, my husband died."

Emma kisses Thomas on the brow and his long eyelashes flutter close as he snuggles under his astronaut sheets. Emma takes one last look at him as she turns off the light and shuts the bedroom door behind her. In the dim light of the hallway, she takes a deep breath. *Both kids are down,* she thinks. It's time.

She enters the kitchen and slips on her shoes. Her keys are on the kitchen table and she tries not to let them jingle as she collects them and her purse. She quietly exits through the front door and locks it behind

her. She gets in the Subaru and puts the keys in the ignition, but she hesitates. She looks at the darkened windows of the house that she hasn't thought of it as theirs yet. She thinks of her kids asleep in their beds, she thinks of herself driving away, she thinks about how he did the same thing- the same goddamn thing- three months ago. She thinks about how he left their home and never came back. She shakes herself.

"I will be back," she says out loud without really meaning to. She starts the car, pulls out of the driveway, and gently accelerates to twenty miles per hour. *I need to do this*, she thinks.

It's only twelve minutes later when she pulls into the church parking lot and she hesitates again. *This is what it's like*, she thinks to herself. She has always considered herself to be independent, but without him, she feels suddenly unsure. They were a team. They were in this together. She sighs and rubs her hands over her face. *So why does it feel like I'm betraying him?*

The parking lot is not full, but she is surprised by how many cars are there under the glare of the street lamps. The church is of greystone, except for the stain glass wall that runs from the ground up to the very highest part of the church, like a giant unfurled tapestry. Muted colors display the Ascension, with Jesus' arms raised out. A church at night is downright creepy, worship is for the mornings. But she supposed this was a different kind of salvation. She's about to throw it in reverse when her phone rings. When she looks at the screen, she releases a frustrated sound. It's inhuman almost like a distressed animal. She knows who is on the other line, but the broken parts of her remember what it was like receiving that other phone call, the one that made everything fall apart. *Hello? Ma'am, there's been an accident. Ma'am, it was instantaneous, he didn't feel a thing. Ma'am, we're going to have to ask you a few questions. Ma'am, we need you to identify the body. Ma'am, we're so sorry for your loss.* She shakes herself and silences the damn phone.

She turns off the engine and enters the house of worship. Signs point to

the stairs and she descends into the basement. The ceilings are quite low, there are no windows, the fluorescent lights beam mercilessly on the slew of grey metal folding chairs that radiate from an unclear center. Fourteen, fifteen, sixteen, she counts the people in those chairs. A few were talking to one another and she steers clear of them as she sits towards the back. She sits, clutching her purse like a security blanket. She tries to school her features but fails. She knows this because when someone's gaze drifts over to her, their eyebrows tilt up, their bottom lips pout, she can almost hear that click against their teeth, the one that told you that you were something that deserved pity. She tries not to clench her jaw and relax her fingers.

A woman with short blond hair clears her throat, she is wearing a colorful, patterned blazer and black dress pants, nondescript flats, and a silver statement necklace, the kind you would get at an art festival. The kind that she has seen her own mother wear as if to say, *yes I am old and I don't give a shit how gaudy my jewelry is, and I don't give a shit that my daughter's husband died, and that she moved away and that she needs space, because hello we moved-*

"Why don't you introduce yourself?" rang through the room. Emma's eyes snapped to the woman, who is not her mother and therefore doesn't deserve her anger. But Emma realizes she's been talking this whole time, and that last question was addressed to her. Her throat goes dry, she can feel her thighs squeezing together, and her elbows tuck into her sides as if to make herself smaller.

"Emma, I'm Emma," she blurts out. "And I- well, I have a question." This is off script and while some mumble out the usual "Hello Emma," the rest stare at her in anticipation.

Monday morning, Emma pulls into the driveway and begins taking groceries into the house. Their house, she chastised herself. She was going

to have to think of it that way. She couldn't hold onto to Iowa City.

This was a new start for them. She had to-

"Mornin' Emma!"

Emma is leaning into her trunk collecting groceries and her groan is eaten up by the car. She forces her lips to turn into a smile as she turns.

"Hey Maybeth!" she says. Maybeth is jogging in place on the sidewalk five feet away from Emma. She is wearing matching pink name brand sweatshirt and leggings. She has a pink scrunchy in her hair and pink socks poking out of her stylish sneakers.

"Do you need help?" Maybeth points to the groceries.

"Oh no, I'm fine-" Emma begins, but Maybeth is already by her side taking groceries out of Emma's overburdened arms.

"It's no problem at all sweetie," she says with her wide, straight, peroxide smile. Emma resigns herself to the help, and to be totally fair, Maybeth is a workhorse, and within minutes, they are both in Emma's kitchen.

"Oh this looks nice," Maybeth croons as she roams her eyes over the unopened boxes, stark walls, and empty rooms.

"Thanks," Emma says with sarcasm slipping into her voice. Maybeth's brow furrows and her eyes widen. Emma realizes that she sounded shitty, so she says that she regrets immediately.

"Can I get you something to drink?"

"Thanks, hun! I'd love one," Maybeth's face transforms into utter delight. As Emma shuffles over to find a clean glass in her cabinets, Maybeth continues, "How are you likin' Cold Creek?"

"It's fine."

"Have you explored at all?"

"No."

"Oh-" Maybeth's cheerful tone waivers. "I just thought- well. My mistake."

Emma feels her brows knit together. "What is it?"

"Oh, nothing. Just last night I thought I saw you go for a drive."

Emma doesn't move, she looks down to the ceramic mug in her hands, the only clean cup in the house. It's plain but for the bright primary colored handprints. In black paint was fine handwriting that said, "Happy Birthday Dad!" She swallows and feels her hands become slick.

"Oh, I'm sorry honey. I was up late- you know sometimes those girls give me hell at bedtime- so I was just sittin' on my porch and well-" she sighs. "I didn't mean to pry."

Emma looks at Maybeth, a perfect stranger, with big brown eyes, that are filled- filled with concern. Emma didn't like Maybeth's manicured nails, she did not like her neat ponytail, she did not like her matching sweat suit, she did not like the shimmer in her lip gloss, she did not like the conspicuous lack of sweat on her brow. But Maybeth Collins is not fake, she is not plastic, she is a mom. Just like Emma. So maybe that's why she opens her mouth.

"Last night, I went to an A.A. meeting," Emma said.

Everyone had been looking at her. To her right was a man in a

plaid, short-sleeved dress shirt tucked into his khaki pants. Another was an older woman with cakey makeup and a sheer tank top. Another was a skinny, skinny man who could've been twenty or forty, with his blonde wiry hair and beard, and large bloodshot blue eyes she couldn't tell. Strangers. All strangers. And that didn't make it easier, but this thing inside of her is like a wild animal trying to claw its way out. It demands to be heard. *This is the hard part.*

"Yeah— um—My husband. He— well— he died." She had said in that dark church basement. She hated that it felt like confession but there was no priest, only the desperate souls whose lives had been defined by substance abuse. Every face in the room had melted into sickening sympathy at her admission, so she had to close her eyes.

"He died," she repeated. She took a shaky breath and the words flowed out of her mouth of their own volition. "It was in the Spring. He was driving. And he wrapped the car around the tree and- they did a toxicology report and they found alcohol, large traces of alcohol in his blood. And I just want to know why. Why would he do that to himself? To me? To our kids?"

She said it. She finally said it. He did something dangerous and he died for it. And now, these people, whose struggles gave them that gleaming insight, that perfect answer that would solve all of her problems, that would give her something to explain away his death to their kids so they would never have to feel that shame, that anger of knowing it was his own damn fault. *Ha!* There she said that too. She remembers feeling elated and free for the first time since he was gone. But when she opened her eyes, no one else shared her joy in this victory. They all felt sorry for her now, but not as they had before.

The blonde woman, who reminded her so much of her mother spoke up. "You made the choice to come here, Emma, and we will help you in any way we can. But your husband, he made his choice too. We can't say where our demons come from or why someone decides to

drink. We can only provide support to each other in these times of crisis.”

“FUCK!” Emma screams. “Fuck— fuck— fuck— ing shiiiiit!”

She uses all of her strength to lift the bedpost off her foot, she lets it slam to the hardwood floor as she stumbles away. Thank God the kids are at school, she thinks to herself as she continues to curse at the bed. At that moment, the doorbell rings. Emma leans against the wall taking her weight off her foot. It doesn't hurt that bad, but it surprised her. She rubs a hand over her face and takes delicate steps over to the door. On one foot she goes to her toes and looks through the peephole. Maybeth.

Emma groans. They were friends now. Because Emma just had to open up her big mouth. And now Maybeth knows her shit. And for the past several weeks of their friendship, she has brought over homemade meals. Emma has learned that Maybeth is a lot of things. She is a fantastic cook, she's a kickass single mom, just like her, and she's Emma's friend. Her closest friend. You know, by default anyway.

Emma opens the door and there is Maybeth with her characteristic 5000-watt smile. She is wearing a flowy tank top, dark-wash skinny jeans, and cream colored kitten heels. In her hands is yet another glass casserole dish with aluminum foil on the top. Emma resists the urge to look down at herself and compare. She's gotten better at that, but Maybeth is so radiant sometimes it hurts.

“Mornin- Oh golly, Emma, what happened?” Maybeth says as she walks past Emma into the foyer. Her face melts into concern and Emma supposes that she might look a little pissed.

“It tried to move the bed. Dropped it on my foot,” Emma grumbled as she gestures over her shoulder to the bed frame, with the

mattress hanging off it askew. Maybeth looks around Emma and her eyes narrow.

"Em, it's never gonna fit. How long are you going to sleep like that in the living room? You have to get rid of it. Come on, we'll go mattress shopping and find something smaller."

"No," Emma interrupts, one of the nice things about being 'friends' with Maybeth is not worrying about being rude. She has seen the worst already, and this? This is nothing. "This is my bed, this is my husband's bed. We made Thomas and Abigail on that bed. We slept on this bed for over ten years- it stays."

"Alriiiiight," she says. Her eyes widen but she doesn't roll them, but her mouth pinches. It seems Emma isn't the only one more comfortable with their relationship. Maybeth goes into the kitchen and sets the casserole dish on the counter. Emma follows her and gets them both glasses of water. Maybeth has been over habitually and it shows. The cardboard boxes are mostly emptied, broken down, and in the recycling. Meanwhile, their contents have been delicately put away. Emma now has glasses in her cabinet, DVDs sorted alphabetically, towels folded and stored in the closet, Christmas decorations tucked in the basement, and besides the infernal bed, the Shelleys are moved in. Nosy as she may be, Maybeth is a worker, and Emma never- never-would've been able to do it herself.

The phone rings and Emma feels herself steaming. She ends the call almost automatically.

"Who was that?" Maybeth asks.

"My mother."

"You hung up on her again?" Maybeth asks.

Emma shrugs.

"When's the last time you talked to her?"

Emma shrugs.

"Emma— " Her voice has a hint of warning in it.

"I don't have anything to say." Maybeth looks at her with a raised, perfectly manicured eyebrow.

"I haven't told her yet," Emma sighed.

"You haven't told her about the move yet or that your husband was—" Maybeth's words died on her lips with a warning look from Emma.

"No- I haven't told her anything."

"What about Thomas and Abigail?"

"Don't start with me— "

"Baby girl, your kids need their mama. And so do you. Pick up the phone." Maybeth sighs. "If you sit on this, it's going to bite you so bad," Maybeth puts her head in her hands and runs her fingers through her hair. She breathes sharply through her nose- something that Emma has never seen her do. "I'm tellin' you. You've got a choice here, baby. And I'm tellin' you this mom to mom, they won't ever forgive you if you keep this from them."

Emma is used to her anger now. She had been numb to it before, her body had shut down like it was protecting itself from a virus. But now, she could feel it well up inside of her, she could turn it off now. But this time, she didn't want to.

"Godammit Maybeth— I am not having this conversation with you," Emma spit the words.

Maybeth stands. Her face is stone. When she opens her mouth, her voice is even, low and dark. "Then have it with your kids." Maybeth walks past Emma without sparing her a glance and leaves through the front door.

Emma's vision swims, and before she can help herself she sucks in a sharp breath, then another, and another. She can't breathe and she doesn't realize until she lowers herself to the linoleum floor that she is sobbing.

She cries because she feels sorry for herself and that makes her sob harder. *Selfish, selfish, selfish*, she thinks to herself. But she cries, too, for Maybeth, who has only ever been kind. She cries for her kids, who will never know their father as they should. She cries for her mother who is desperately seeking her daughter and grandkids. And yeah, she cries for herself because she was widowed after ten years of marriage preceded by two years of dating, and ten of knowing him as the little neighbor boy next door. She cries because she loved him from the very start, and he died.

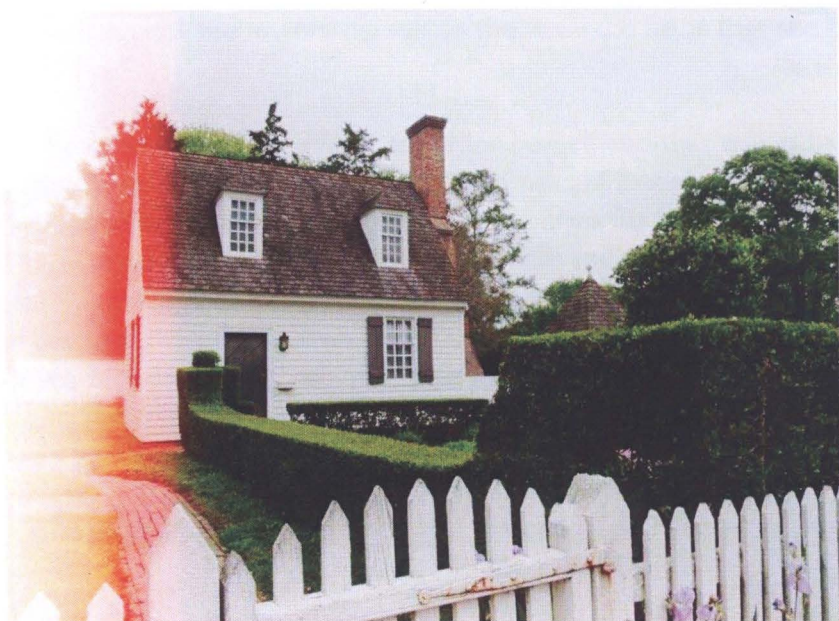
She picks up her phone and clicks on one of the dozens of missed calls.

"Mom, I have something to tell you. But before I do, I got something to ask you. Can you come to Cold Creek? I need your help with something, something big. It's about Thomas and Abigail. Oh no, they're fine. It's just I need to tell them something and I think I need you to help me. Yes, I want you here. Okay. Love you too. Thanks, mama. Yes, I know. I've missed you too."

She snuffles as she hangs up the phone, but she can't seem to put it down. She doesn't feel it when she dials her number. And when Maybeth's

voice chimes through on the other end, she can't help but smile.

"Hey, Maybeth. I'm real sorry about earlier. You were right, though. You were right about everything. I called my mom. I'll tell you all about it-how 'bout while we shop for a new mattress? Yes, I'm serious. Yes, I know. I know. Yeah, I'm real glad we're friends too."



Reminder

Have I reminded you today that your soul is black?

Shadowed, fettered down

By guilt or worse

Doubt

Have I reminded you that the written word hates you?

Unwelcome to the pen

The ink

Banished from its wonders.

Have I reminded you that there is still a crack in your heart and soul?

Morally broken from yourself

Nobody else was involved in your pain

How can you stand yourself?

Have I reminded you that the world does not hate you?

You hate yourself

With a passion too!

So sad... But who cares... Yourself.

Have I reminded you that you are forever plagued?

The voices that cry

Insecurities that lie

Soon I get to remind you again.

Have I reminded you that I am you just speaking what I see in you?

Poor choices and faults

Never ending, be sure of that.

I am here to make sure you go through hell.

Emily Bush

A Strange Seed

Dear America,

Am I the next seed of the Strange Southern Fruit? I know that I may not be, but what of my friends? My Family? An unsuspecting stranger? Will you tell the world how America was once the top producer of this strange fruit? However, you would never export it, only import it. It wasn't good enough to export so you let the sun rot it and the trees drop it. Only for you later to ruin the sweet magnolia breeze with harsh burning stench. So America, I implore you to grow this luscious dark fruit another way. In calm homes, stable schools and an accepting society. This fruit grows with care, understanding and attention. It does not come from a Southern tree but wherever you are.

Thank you,

A Strange Seed

Kyra Brown

Let Them Know

Grab them by the ballot box, because they've grabbed our pussies for too long.

Let's take back our country, and let them know that we've been watching. America is in need of a blue tsunami, not just a wave.

To save the oppressed, the broken, and the bruised.

Let the rains wash away their ignorance and bring new life.

Rejuvenate the dry soil and sow new seeds.

America needs a deep cleanse with water that is clean, not holy.

Let them know that we haven't forgotten about Flint or the Keystone Pipeline.

Let them know that we haven't forgotten about Parkland, Orlando, Sandy Hook or Pittsburgh.

Let's crash our blue wave into their white picket fences and turn them into picket signs,

Because they won't like what we're doing.

They won't like seeing women in power or Harvey Milk in our history books.

They won't like our laws, because they're "bad for business."

The same businesses that turn us away for loving the same sex.

Because they want freedom of religion, but we want freedom from religion.

Let them know that We are Stronger than Hate.

Let them know that They Will Not Be Erased.

Let them know that We Believe Her.

Let them know that Black Lives Matter.

Let them know that we're tired of saying Me Too.

Let them know that their time is through.

Grab them by the ballot box and never let go.

Moriah Hathaway

Stained Glass

She pulled her black Porsche up to the mailbox on her left. The sun beat aggressively upon the freshly waxed hood and glared back directly into her eyes. If she squinted hard enough she could just make out the door of the house just beyond her, adorned with the number 321. When she had just learned her numbers as a child she would spend her days counting random objects for no reason at all, other than just to prove she could. However, she had always been especially intrigued by the number on the front door. 321. It was harrowing now to see that the two was beginning to fall, while the one had been turned upside down. It was almost sad, but not quite.

There was no driveway so she just pulled her car to the side of the road and hoped that no one would scrape the side up while driving past, because just as she remembered, the street was quite narrow. There weren't even painted lines to guide them. When she clambered out onto the lawn, the brown remains of a plush grassy kingdom crunched beneath her feet. There had been a pirate ship there once. And once there was a castle. Sometimes there was a zoo. Now it was just brown and crusty. Just a lawn.

She didn't bother locking her car behind her, because no one in that area would be caught dead driving something as haughty as that. It would have been an embarrassing thing to steal. After only a short walk, that used to feel much bigger she reached the stone walkway that led to the front door. She never understood why it was there. It ended at the pale green entranceway, always characterized by the peeling paint that caught on your shirt when you walked through, but it started nowhere. Right in the middle of the lawn. As she tiptoed cautiously down the pathway, her eyes grew wider with terror after every inch closer to the house. And so she stopped. When she did her eyes landed on the remains to her right. A bed of tanbark made of shredded tires. The graveyard that was once home to a beautiful array of life and color. For a single moment, she was transported; her eyes slid shut. She remembered the day that her mother had come home with the beautiful flowering butterfly bush. The smile on her face as she carried it out of the trunk of her car and straight

into the lively garden is one that refused to be forgotten. Smiles like that had been rare for her mother. Every year after, the butterfly bush would bloom and would teem with hundreds of delicate insects; a landscape of fluttering stained glass windows. She never cared much for it. It was just there. Then, many years later, once she got to college and would only come home to visit, she noticed that the bush began to shrink. Her mother would lob off the dead parts, hoping they would grow back, but they never did. She opened her eyes and looked at the ground. Now all that was left was a big dead stump. Garish in the middle of the landscape all by itself.

She never even made it to the door to fix the numbers.

Kaitlyn McCann

When Someone Says Hello

When I step outside of my doorstep in the morning
I stretch the words of a broken boy onto my tongue.

The cold stabs my face.

My mask is on, I am stoic, and I am good.

Don't ask me about my day, because I'm good.

"How are you?"

I'm good.

Don't ask me about my day, I've been clouded in a cloud of shame.

I don't want you to see my bleeding heart,

Because it would make too much of a mess on the floor.

I'd rather the floors of the cub stay squeaky clean.

Then for you to see what lies beneath the small talk, my fears and my
dreams.

Seems, I wake up and realize insomnia and anxiety are my best friends.

How can that be?

How can it be that generational trauma has trickled its way into my mind?

Into my father's temper, into my mother's depression, into my own
thoughts of suicide.

We hang our sons out to dry

Alone, until their tears dry up,

And harden into something else, something darker, more sinister.

Turns into "I don't like myself"

Turns into a mask, turns into a wall,

Turns into a mask of me, a shell of me

But I wonder, how long this mask I wear will hold?

I wonder whether the weather will wear my walls down, until I wither
away,

To be just a shell of myself.

A passionless man on autopilot.

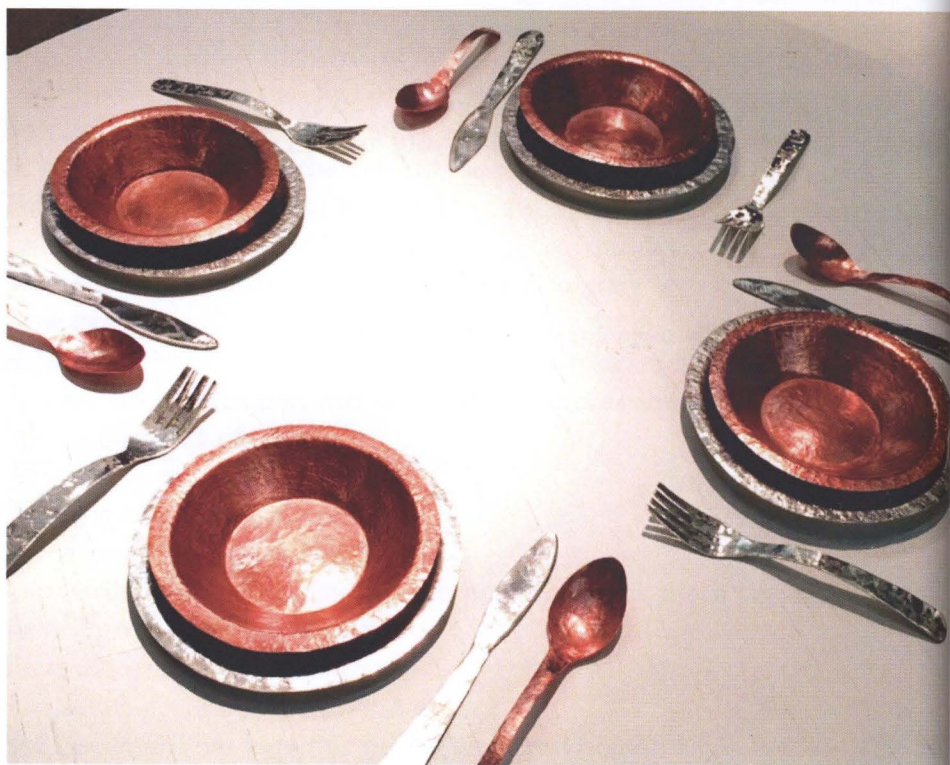
When my mask cracks and I realize I'm less than I ever thought that I
was...less than nothing.

Less than everyone around me
Less than every person that says hello
Less than you, less than you, less than you

"How are you?"
I'm good.

A smile can hide so much.
But who do u know that stops that long
To help another carry on?
The world moves fast and would rather pass you by
Then to stop and see what lies beneath your stapled smile.

Because I, am not good, and I wish I could cry
When you ask me-
"How are you?"
Because do you really even care?

Untitled

Floorboards

I apologize if my voice shakes
I am only just now learning how to use it.
I apologize if my hands tremble
it's my bones trying to jump out of my skin
and go back to my seat,
but I will not sit down
when I have already been sitting my entire life.

I apologize if demanding my rights
inconveniences you,
I apologize if wanting equality
puts a damper on your self-declared superiority
and I know you would much rather
shove me back under the floorboards,
so shove me under,
and I will beat on the familiar undersides
until this whole house shakes
I will beat on the undersides
until you can't sleep at night
until you carry that pounding with you
until your footsteps fall into the rhythm of my fists,

so no. I will not sit down.
I will not let you rip away my voice
when I have just begun to find it.

Andrea Kling

Zoo Adventures: How My Life Turned To Crap In One Day

When I started working at the Central County Zoo, I thought it would be exciting. I mean, can't a girl hope that she would be able to assist with taming lions or at least get to wear a giant python around her neck? I guess those things were reserved for people older than fifteen, because I got stuck at "Gorilla Gabe's Snack Shack" where instead, I catered to whiny parents and entitled kids. It wasn't the kind of excitement I was fond of. The kind I wanted happened only on one day.

That particular day started out annoying since all morning there was almost no customers until the last ten minutes of my shift. I glanced over at the clock. I sighed and wished the time to move faster as I waited for a mother and her four kids to choose between the Rattlesnake Raspberry Smoothie and the Baboon Banana Split. After about five minutes, they settled on the banana split. How four kids and one mother would share one sundae was beyond my reasoning. The mother slid her credit card over the counter.

I slid the credit card right back to her and pointed to a sign with bold, red lettering hanging from the counter. "Sorry Ma'am, we don't accept cards, only cash."

The mother huffed and shoved her credit card back into her wallet, muttering, "Honestly, no one carries cash these days." I opened my mouth to tell her that we have an ATM at the gift shop, but before I said anything she grabbed her kids' hands and ushered them away. I heard her tell one of them, "No, Timmy, we will just stop at McDonald's on the way home."

Luckily, the woman and her children took up so much time deciding, that when I glanced at the clock again, my shift was over. I clocked out and raced out the back door of the snack shack, eager to meet my friend Jay by the Ape House. I had something important to do and I wanted him there for support.

I passed small clusters of people milling around the exhibits as they gawked at the caged animals. The Central County Zoo wasn't the biggest zoo. My dad told me that back before I was born, this zoo was busy 24/7. There would be people standing in lines just to see the exhibits and the curator, Mr. Harding, had made sure that not even one board of wood was out of place. Mr. Harding kept the place alive. But he died about five years ago and the place just wasn't the same since. Iron bars started to rust, wooden beams cracked, and we had to cut some of the staff. They never hired another curator, so one of the zoologists just took over as a manager of sorts. Dad did the best he could but the work was just too much for one person to handle.

Yeah, the guy who took over was my dad.

I arrived at the Ape cage. I didn't see Jay right away so I walked up to the wiring separating me from Maurice, the Orangutan. I noticed another bent bar on his cage. I was glad that Maurice was content in his habitat, or else there could have been a huge, wild ape roaming around the premise. He was sitting in the dirt, his orange pot belly rubbing against his hairy thighs while he munched on what looked like a piece of melon. When I approached, he turned his round brown eyes to me and held out his melon.

"No thanks, you keep it," I said. He grunted and returned the melon to his mouth.

"And how is my favorite snack shack girl?" A voice behind me said and I turned to find Jay smirking at me. His light brown eyes sparkled extra brightly today and his hair was swept over in a perfect swoosh, as if he woke up that way. I hated him for that.

I gave him an exaggerated eye roll and blew a strand of my blond hair out of my face. "Don't ask. Let's just say that I have filled my quota of waiting on stupid people." I cracked a small smile.

At that he chuckled and gestured behind him. "Oh, liven up, Lacey. Weren't you gonna show me something?"

"Right," I said. He followed me to the back of the tiger sanctuary where the main personnel usually go.

"Are we even allowed back here?" Jay asked.

I pulled a key from my back pocket. "Well, I'm sort of allowed. After work I usually wait for Dad inside until he gets done with the tigers and all his other duties for the day. That's why he gave me a key." I turned the key and the door unlocked with a soft click. Then I led him inside.

"Wait, won't the other employees see us?" Jay asked quietly as we headed down the hall.

"There are only two other zoologists other than Dad who work here during the day, and they know me since Dad is in charge. Besides, this is just the back entrance. No one really uses this end of the building during the middle of the day."

"Why are we sneaking then?" Jay whispered, even though he didn't need to. I led him down a flight of stairs into a basement. Two large double doors blocked our way at the end.

"Because," I said grinning and stopping to pull out a different key, "we aren't supposed to be down here." I had found the key on the floor of Dad's truck and recognized it as the one he used every day to access these doors. I was never allowed in and today I was going to find out why.

My face grew warm with sudden anticipation. I had been waiting for something exciting like this to come along. I unlocked the double doors and Jay and I stepped into a short hallway lined with empty cages. They reminded me of abandoned jail cells. The air was significantly colder and smelled a bit like dirty socks. There no windows, and a few dusty light

bulbs hung above our heads as we walked. One flickered inconsistently, making the whole scene a little bit too spooky for my taste. But then again, I had wanted something interesting.

I was wondering what Dad could have possibly been doing down here every day, when we stopped at the end of the corridor.

Then I heard it: a low, rumbling growl that made my spine quiver. I looked to my right and found myself staring into the eyes of the most beautiful yet terrifying wild feline that I had ever seen. It had enormous paws the size of my face and a large, regal head. Its green eyes glowed under the dim light like two emerald discs. What amazed me the most was the big cat's fur. The whole of the cat's body consisted of sleek, bluish-gray fur. I could even see the faint outline of stripes against the odd backdrop of color.

It was a tiger. But a blue one? Then I remembered a certain tiger I had read about in one of Dad's books.

"That's a Maltese," I said with amazement.

Jay looked at me funny and I could tell he had no clue what I was talking about. "So... is a Maltese a special kind of tiger?" he asked.

"Very. The Maltese tiger is actually more of a legend at this point," I explained. "There have been none in captivity and only a few sightings of ones in the wild. Even those sightings weren't confirmed. They're one of the rarest tiger species in the world. Two normal tigers mate and a mutation in the genes produces the blue tint. They know that this type of tiger is definitely possible because of one particular kind of cat," I paused, pulled up a picture on my phone, and showed him the screen.

"That's a Russian Blue Cat," Jay said, looking at the photo. "My grandma had one. He had really pretty silver-blue hair," he turned to the cage and stared at the tiger. "Just like that."

I took a step toward the cage. "Exactly. The same mutation for the Russian Blue Cat would be the same mutation in a Maltese Tiger."

The tiger gave a small growl, as if it knew we were talking about it. Then it rubbed up against the bars of the cage, just like a cat would rub against your legs for attention. I suddenly felt really sorry for this animal, all by itself in a place with no natural light. I had a strange urge to go up and give it a scratch behind the ears, but I figured that petting a wild animal weighing three times as me probably wasn't the smartest thing to do.

But then again, smart isn't always fun.

I stuck my hand past the rusty bars and stroked the tiger behind the ear with two fingers. It was the softest thing I had ever felt. The big cat leaned in and started purring.

I wondered why the tiger was down here all by itself instead of out with the other ones. I had never seen it before until now. I looked down at the key in my hand. Did Dad know about this?

The tiger moved away from the bars and started pacing around the small space. The single lightbulb overhead cast a dim glow over the big cat, making its fur shine.

I watched the tiger lie down on the cool cement floor and my hands grew tingly. If my dad had known about this for a long time, why didn't he tell me? "We have to find out more about this," I blurted. I thought for a second. "How about you come over for dinner tonight. Maybe we can dig something up."

Jay shrugged his shoulders. "Sounds good to me. But why don't we just ask your dad?"

I headed back towards the stairwell and grinned over my shoulder. "Because that would be too easy."

My dad's name was Matt. He always had his salt and pepper hair slicked back smoothly and usually wore snazzy polo shirts when he wasn't wearing his work clothes. His coy half grin along with his pearly white teeth and the small laugh lines under his eyes always made ladies giggle cutely. Everyone wondered how he kept his teeth so nice but only I know his secret: whitening strips.

He was the one who opened the door when Jay arrived. My dad had this intimidating air about him that made people somehow shrink half their size in fear. When I found my dad and Jay talking in the foyer, Jay looked like he could have thrown up. Jay had met Dad a handful of times before, and every time Jay's face turned as white as a ghost.

When Dad noticed me in the room, he turned and gave me a kiss on the forehead.

"I hope you like burgers," he called over his shoulder as he led Jay into the dining room. He pulled out a chair for Jay and poured some water into a glass.

"Sure, I love burgers. I eat them all the time," Jay chuckled nervously.

I followed my mom into the dining room and she placed bottles of ketchup and mustard on the table. I took a seat next to Jay and gave him a reassuring nudge on the arm.

Dinner went better than I thought it would. Dad didn't seem to suspect anything about our snooping and all four of us were able to laugh and talk over our burgers and fries. After dinner, Mom went to wash the dishes while Dad cleaned the grill.

I ushered Jay upstairs. "Ok," I said, pulling him aside in the hallway

and speaking a mile a minute, "We have a few minutes until Dad gets done cleaning the grill and helping mom finish the dishes. Hopefully we can find something before then."

I led him into Dad's study and shut the door quietly behind us. Dad's desk was always highly organized: papers filed into labeled folders, a calendar with events scrawled in neat handwriting, and little pink post-it notes bordering the computer. If we didn't put things back in the right spot when we were done, he would have our heads mounted on the wall above his desk.

I took a seat in the office chair right away and began to peck at the keyboard. "Dad has used the same password for years," I said as I logged into his email. "We can start here, see if he had been in contact with anybody suspicious."

While I scrolled through the emails, Jay fished through a group of folders, heeding my warning to put everything back into its proper place afterwards. I felt like Sherlock Holmes looking for clues. Of course, if I was Sherlock that meant Jay was John Watson. Anyway, a few minutes passed of filing through messages about loans and billing information. I was about to read an email from a guy named Torvold Hemshlinger when Jay shook my shoulder.

"Hey, look at this," he said, offering me a newspaper clipping.

I took the clipping and read the year-old inscription: *Local Zoo Welcomes new baby tiger. Proud mother Nala gave birth to twin cubs last evening. Much to the zoo's dismay, the infant female was born with underdeveloped lungs and died hours after birth. Luckily, little male Simba is healthy and has a bright future.*

I gripped the piece of paper firmly and paused to re-read the words. My dad was there for Simba's birth. He had even brought Simba here for several weeks to take care of the cub when his mom became sick.

Dad never talked about the death of the other cub, ever. We just knew it was a sore subject.

"Umm Lacey," Jay nudged me, interrupting my thoughts, "you better take a look at this too."

It was a photo. In the picture, a man with salt and pepper hair sat on the floor of a dimly lit room, bottle feeding a cub with steel-gray fur. I looked to the right-hand corner of the photo where the date was spelled out in bright yellow, two days after the date in the newspaper clipping. Dad had hidden this information from me for a whole year. I felt a headache forming as my emotions rolled from confusion to anger and then to sadness. I stared at the photo for several long seconds.

Then I remembered the email I was about to read before Jay had handed me the newspaper clipping. I turned back to the message from Torvold Hemshlinger and clicked on it. As I read, my heart seemed to push itself up towards my throat with every word.

Then I heard the muffled sound of a door slamming below.

"We gotta go," I said quickly, exiting out of the email and shutting off the computer.

I stuffed the newspaper clipping and the photo into my pocket and we slipped out of Dad's office.

We were in my room. I paced the floor, like the tiger we had seen in the cell just hours earlier. "I can't believe this," I muttered, still trying to process things. "My own dad hiding such a huge thing from everyone, and for so long."

"Someone took that picture of your dad," Jay said, "He wasn't the only one who knows about this."

"I bet it was the team who was there when Nala gave birth. They're in on this too." I stopped pacing and sat down hard on my bed. "Dad is going to sell that beautiful tiger to that Hamschmucker guy or whatever his name is," I said.

I spent my entire life watching my dad work with these tigers. I always wanted to be like him. Now, I wasn't so sure. No one would even know that our little Central County Zoo had the most amazing animal in the world. It all just made me feel a little betrayed. I turned to Jay, who had taken a seat beside me. "You know how I said earlier that talking to Dad would be the easy option?" I asked.

"Yeah," He nodded.

I sighed. "Well, it doesn't seem so easy at the moment."

My hand hovered over the door to Dad's study, clenched in a fist to knock. I had told Jay that it was probably better if I approached him alone. Better to not let Dad know that anyone else was involved in the snooping. I finally knocked and heard Dad call me inside.

I eased open the door and slipped inside. Dad sat at his computer, a pair of glasses perched on the end of his nose. He immediately took them off when I came in, as if he was embarrassed that he had to use them to read. "Hey, Squirrel," he said, using my childhood nickname, "what's up?"

I pulled a swivel chair over to the desk and sat across from him. I said nothing for a few seconds, nervously picking at a piece of loose skin on my thumb. Then I pulled the photo and newspaper clipping from my pocket and slid it across the desk. "I found these," I said quietly.

His big white smile slowly turned into a flat line as he stared down at the two items. I was afraid he would blow up, start to scold me or even raise his voice. But he didn't. Instead, he let out a really long sigh and

rubbed a hand across his forehead. The act made him look five years older and I noticed wrinkles on his brow for the first time.

"I'm so sorry," he said.

Seeing my Dad looking so tired and defeated made my eyes sting with the threat of tears. "Why?" I asked just above a whisper, "why are you doing this?"

When he lowered his hand, I could see red rimming his eyes. He couldn't look at me. His sentences came out fragmented. "The Zoo. It was going under. Needed money." He swallowed, attempting to keep his voice from shaking. "You don't know how hard it was raising Cora this past year, knowing that I was just going to sell her." At that he broke, and for the first time in my whole life, I watched my father cry.

I tried to be mad, I did. But watching my Dad sobbing, I couldn't help but run and wrap my arms around him. Of course, I started to cry too. It was like one of those typical scenes in movies where both parties hold each other close and cry uncontrollably.

Eventually Dad's chest stopped heaving and I wiped my nose with my sleeve. The moment was touching but I had to get to my other point. "You aren't really going to sell her, are you?" I asked.

This time Dad looked at me. His eyes alone conveyed the truth.

My heart fluttered wildly like a hamster on an exercise wheel.

"Dad, you can't. You don't know what they'll do to her."

He gently pushed me away and swiveled his office chair back to his computer. "It has to happen, Squirrel," he said, his voice sounding like sandpaper on wood.

With the cry fest over, a twinge of anger crept into my chest.

"No, it doesn't. We can get money for the zoo somewhere else. A loan or something," I said.

Dad turned back to me and when he spoke it sounded painful for him to even open his mouth. "Lacey, I have tried everything. We can't find a proper curator to take over, and banks have turned down every one of my requests," he said it as if he had faced that reality over and over already.

It was my turn to rub my forehead. I could tell that Dad was done discussing the matter.

"Ok," I said, deciding to give the conversation a rest.

I turned to leave. Before I left the office, my Dad said wearily,

"Please keep this just between us."

I didn't even turn around. "Sure."

I tried to go to sleep that night but every time my eyes closed I saw Cora pacing in her small cell. I had a pounding headache anyhow and it wasn't from the two cups of coffee I drank before bed.

I had no clue what to do. I couldn't call the police because Dad could go to jail. I also didn't want him to sell Cora to some strangers who would do who-knows-what to her. I turned onto my stomach and did a half scream into my pillow.

It was all too much for a kid my age to handle. I should have been worrying about boys or watching reruns of Gilmore Girls, not wrestling

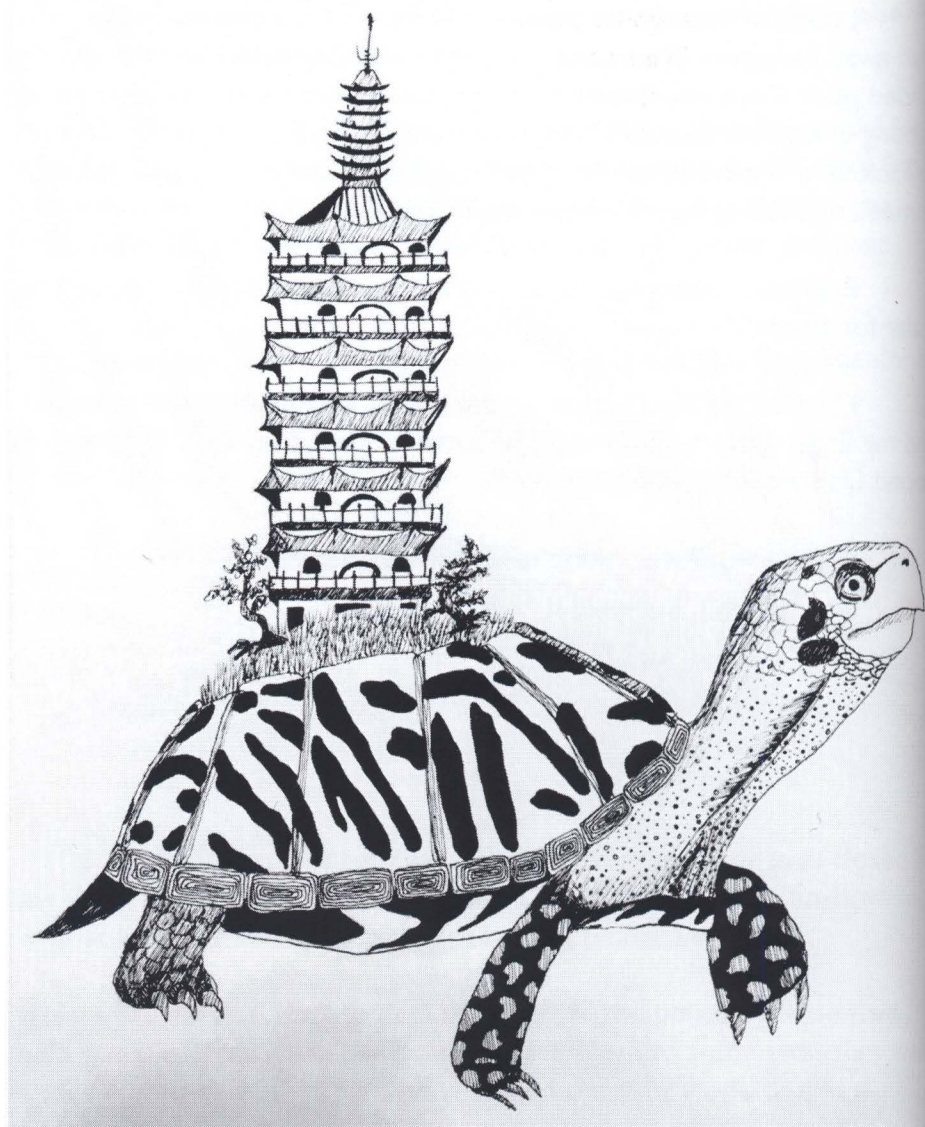
with whether or not I should turn my dad over to the police.

I couldn't even go to anyone asking for advice without giving Dad away. I imagined Dad standing nearby while Torvold Hemschlinger loaded poor Cora into the back of a tractor trailer. I could almost see her panting in fear, her beautiful blue coat shimmering. That image drove me to look up a hotline to call for reporting illegal activity. I scolded myself immediately, telling myself I was jumping too soon.

But then I remembered that all this had been going on under the radar for a year.

I blamed my next action on the coffee. I punched in the number and my finger hovered over the dial button. I closed my eyes. I really hoped Dad would still love me.

I gave a small whimper and hit the call button.

Turtle Tower*Jessica Epstein*

Vacation

If I could wake up anywhere,
 it would be on a white sand beach,
 in a church white wooden house,
 amongst milky colored walls,
 with billowy virgin white lace
 curtains blowing against the European white
 bed frame, and French flat white
 bedspread as

a black mass
 of
 power,
 pride,
 sense and sensibility
 in myself and my clear

contrast against the world around me—
 a place which has more peace in my imagination

than in my reality.

Denice Lovett

Disaster

You were my beautiful disaster

And you knew exactly how to shatter me.

You knew where my weakest points converged on my body,
On my mind.

And you placed just the right amount of pressure on those existing
cracks.

You pressed on all my mistakes that lined my body
Made them visible to everybody
I became a mess of broken pieces
Shakily put together
Crumbling at the edges

And then,
There were the pieces you took and the pieces I gave you
I couldn't replace those
So I was left
Walking around with these open wounds
On my self-esteem
Harsh whispers
Blowing through
And ripping at my wounds

You kept those pieces of me
And you left me with these battle scars
On display
As if I should be grateful
You used me
I'm not
I'm not proud of them
At least not for that reason

I'm proud to bear these scars
Cause they remind me

How something so
Amazing and beautiful
Can become the

perfect disaster

Rachelle Renninger

White Chocolate

I call myself a writer in the same way that I tell people I'm half Italian
When really it's just a quarter, half expecting to be called out
As the imposter that I am- as if anyone would expect me to lie
About something so trivial. The truth is that I'm just not that interesting.
But what's in a name? White chocolate isn't really chocolate, you know,
Just because it has cocoa butter in it. So maybe I can call this a poem
If I break the lines just so, maybe I can call myself a poet after all
And you just might believe me, if you even care to read it.

A poet. It's funny how it sounds romantic but it's not, like how
It took me so long to figure out that all that blood swirling down
The shower drain wasn't romantic. It was just fucking red.
It's not romantic to fixate on you and that night you kissed my hand
And never talked to me again, because I'm not what you wanted-
No, I'm white chocolate, cocoa butter and sugar, all sweet and no
substance

And I'm the one left with a bitter taste in my mouth.
Maybe next time we should both read the label.

Untitled*Sophia Damore*

Sunrises Over Dark Days

You'd think everything would be in black and white now. But it wasn't, it was the opposite actually. The cold air hit his wet cheeks and froze his eyelashes together. The blue railing leading to the sliding glass door was vividly colored. The red and white flashing box moving fast toward me was blinding. I couldn't move.

Ben lays in bed for what seems like days. He stares up at the ceiling with his hands over his stomach and his fingers laced. His legs are crossed, and his eyes are burning from all the tears that have now run dry. He shifts to his side and looks at the alarm clock on the nightstand. The red numbered lights bright to his sensitive eyes.

2:17 am. *Happy birthday to me*, he thought. But it wasn't happy—just birthday.

He shifted back to laying on his back and he felt another wave of emotion coming. He was tired and tired of crying, but mostly sleep deprived. Ben couldn't sleep much without the warmth or the smell of her. She smelled of lavender soap and smoke from her occasional cigarette. He rolled over to face the side she always slept on; the left. He reached out and put his hand where her chest would have been. He could still picture her there sleeping, looking as beautiful as always. Ben had his eyes closed and didn't notice the tears welling in them until they were open, looking at the empty bed. Every night was like this. Every night he would take her pillow and hold it close to him and breathe in the scent of it. It's been two weeks and he refused to wash the sheets because "they still smell like her," he would say when his mom would visit him.

He laid there unable to fall asleep until the sun came up. He got up and sat on the window seat. Looking out at the sun that was barely rising; orange and pink reflections hit his face. The colors took over the dim blue in his wet eyes. The scene was so beautiful and tragic. Pulling himself up from the seat he walked into the kitchen and started his coffee. The room was eerily quiet, and he hated it.

He turned music on to turn down the deadly white noise even though his mind was unbelievably loud.

It was 7:07 am and he was drowning in the deep thumping of the bass. The music shook the newly hung Mr. and Mrs. picture frames.

He walked over and opened the French doors leading out to the balcony and sat at the table and chairs looking out at the city. The sky was still deciding on what color to be with parts still dark blue with the moon showing and parts with swirling pink clouds in a sea of purple and orange. It reminded him of Julie. She was like that moment right before the sunrise. You knew what's coming, you just didn't know how beautiful it was going to be. Everything about this morning was perfect; except it couldn't be.

*Something Mesmerizing About the
Rain*



Adriana Townsend

An Ode to Andy

The street I grew up on is no longer the road to home
 Instead it leads to a broken house, accommodating a broken marriage
 Where the floors creak; the windows leak
 And "love" is held together by sinews and littered with holes

It leads to a room I grew up in, but no longer keep things of value
 In fear she'll eventually be strong enough to do it; to say screw it
 And I'll have stuff left behind, for we know you won't be kind
 And "family" – existing only as a scattered mess of ants on the kitchen
 floor

There's the yard I used to mow, in hopes you'd recognize my effort
 When all you'd really see is where I came up short; where I got that B
 So she works to make up for you. In lack of one parent, she tries to be
 two

Because your "daughter" shouldn't be the broken furnace you neglect

As a builder, you should know a house needs maintenance over time
 As a father you should show your child's value in your eyes
 But it's why I know that home shouldn't be a place of lies
 For what you've shown me is that ignorance, is no better than a crime.

Maggie Lawrence

The Pain of Trying to Forgive

To My Mother

You left when I was thirteen.
You left because I told you who I truly was.
Hoping you would still love me for me.
All I got from you was a plea, to go to therapy.
Little did I know that one simple word,
Would drive you away from me.

The relationship between Mother and Daughter,
Is still nothing but that of a bridge,
That has been burned, for if only you knew,
The pain that you caused me to feel.
Disowned, it felt too real.
I told myself I will never forgive you.

Twelve years of no phone calls, texts, emails, or birthday cards,
Not even a single I'm sorry I love you
Meant nothing to you, but it was a salty ocean for me,
Trying to figure out where I went wrong as a daughter
Now you come around demanding forgiveness

Now I know a different type of pain
It's not physical nor is it something that god can heal
It's the Pain of Trying to forgive you Mom,
And now the tables are turned for it is,
No longer you disowning me, it is me disowning you.

This is the pain I'm trying to forgive.

Baltimore Blazon

You with your chest of marble skyscraper for lease
Your eyes the fenceless harbors
drunks flounder in at night,
and the silky scent of South in the doorman's voice
And your voice, iron gate slamming shut
And your laugh, jazz from bars on streets
intermingling with rap blasting from cars cruising too slowly,
 their windows tinted
You with your hands of buses panting hungrily from behind crosswalks
 like hounds
You with your teeth of thick creamy steam rising lukewarm from
 manholes
Your mouth is a parking garage smelling of rainwater and catfish
Stifling, exitless, inevitable.



Mother Knows Best

I was playing “Pac Man” at the arcade with other kids. The game just came out a couple weeks ago. Just like a herd of pigs in a small pigpen, kids were crowding the arcade for a chance to play.

“Darn it! I died!” I cried out after losing to the game. A boy right next to me taunted.

“Ha. Ha. See, I told you he wouldn’t beat the high score.”

Quickly, I shouted back, “shut up Jacob, I can get it the next time!”

“Naha! You had your chance, now it’s our turn to play!”

I was tensed up and ready to push Jacob back to when he was a baby like he is until I heard a noise from the distance.

“Andrew! Time to go!” I looked only to see my mom from the distance calling me to return home.

“But Mom..... I have to beat this high score.....”

“No Andrew. Time to go home.” In sheer defeat, I ran out of the arcade away from my mom.

“Andrew! Where are you going?! Wait!”

I ran far away, far away that I cannot see my mom nor the rest of the kids. I felt like an idiot out there. It was so embarrassing. It wasn’t my fault! It was my stupid mother! I started crying and shouted to the birds in the sky. “Mom, you’re such an idiot!”

Then I heard a voice from behind me. It was the sound of an old man, “is that so...” he said. I turned around to see this man with khaki pants, plaid shirt, and brown leather shoes.

He was sitting on a bench with his cane looking at me with the most sincere look.

“Tell me young man, what makes your mother an idiot?”

“Who are you, mister?”

“Oh... no one special. Just a man waiting for the Grim Reaper to visit. Come sit, and tell me what's on your mind?”

I sat down on the same bench on the opposite side where the man was sitting. “Well, my mom is stupid because she wouldn't let me prove myself to the other kids my skills in this one game. She always thinks about herself and never about me.”

The old man paused and then gave a small chuckle. “Hehe. You know, mothers have a strange way of handling things, but never forget, everything she does, she does them for a reason. Let me tell you something back when I was six years old, right around when I was your age.”

It was a year after the Second World War, I was a timid boy. At school, I'd always kept to myself and stand from the distance while the other kids would play on the playground. No one would talk to me, but it was partly my fault because I would never say a word to them even though I did not understand that at the time. However, whenever I'm home, I was the happiest and most energetic child anyone would ever see. It was all due to my connections with my mom.

My mom was someone who you would only see in a fictional fantasy tale. She had an elegant poise with the voice similar to a tone you would make whenever you talk to someone you love. She had beautiful brunette hair with unique green eyes. She lived her life with sincerity. Whenever she held you, touched you, or comforted you, it gave you a

sense of feeling as if it was a sign telling you that the heavens were watching over you.

She was the only friend that I ever needed. I wish I could say the same about my father.

My father was never a bad man, don't give me wrong. I never knew my father very well. He died in the war when I was only a baby, so I can't tell you what my father was like. All I could tell you is from what my mother told me about him. He was a gentle soul with a big heart. He believed in doing the honorable thing, even when it was the most difficult decision. My father quickly signed up to go to war instead of being drafted in. I felt like my mother resented him for going to war even though she knew that he was going to war anyways. Just the feeling of being left behind by him bothered her, but she still loved him.

We lowered his body in his grave at the funeral. My mom was on her knees, uncontrollably sobbing. I looked around seeing everyone doing the same thing. I never understood what was happening at the time, but by how depressed the scenery was, I too cried. Despite everything that happened, my mom was a strong woman. She would never let the death of my father get to her. She continued moving on as if nothing happened.

We lived in this two-story house in the country side. There was a lake about an acre away from the house with an enormous tree over watching it. On the other side of the house was a corn plantation. She would always spend time with me. We would always run through the raked up leaves, she would lift me up in the air, and read stories before bed. We were so close and nothing came between us; or at least that's what I thought until the last week of October. I was in the living room playing with some puzzles until I heard a knock on the door.

"Coming!" cried my mother as she wipes her hands from the dishes that she was working on.

She opened the door and a man appeared from the other side of the door. He was wearing a long tan trench coat with matching pants, white shirt with a tie, brown shoes, and a Panama hat. The only thing that drew my attention from him was the one eye and burned scars on half of the face where his other eye was supposed to be. My eyes opened widely, my heart rate spiked, and my whole upper body shivered. I quickly hid behind the sofa and stared at his missing eye from the distance.

"Michael," cried my mom, "where's your manners?" She turned and faced the man, "I'm sorry Anthony. Michael can be very shy."

"That's ok. Wow, he's getting big!" he said as he was looking at me. "He's starting to become a young man."

I wasn't buying his fake smile. He had that look of a man with bad intentions. He approached me and crouched down to his knees until we were eye level.

"Hi Michael, how are you? My name is Anthony."

I quickly closed my eyes, looked down, and continued to shiver. Mom interrupts the man. "Michael, this man is Mr. Henderson. He's a lawyer, he came across the country to be here and will be helping mommy."

"What's a lawyer?" I said as I was focusing towards my mom.

The man then answered my question, "A lawyer is someone who makes sure people follow the rules."

"That's stupid," I said. "I don't like rules. They're boring. I bet you make like zero dollars and zero cents."

The man chuckles and rubs the top of my head. "Hehe, how adorable."

He got up and walked towards mom. Mom was leaning on the wall, crossed her legs, and smiled graciously. "I'm sorry Anthony. I know you're a busy man, but I'm so glad you were able to come."

"Not at all, Sonya. I'm always happy to help, especially after losing Garrett. I made sure that this was my priority. So, where will we be working?"

"Oh, this way, I have an office we can definitely use."

"Perfect! I'll just head there to set up, if you don't mind."

The man walks towards the office to set up while mom approaches me. "Now Michael, Mr. Henderson will be staying with us for a couple of weeks. I want you to be on your best behavior."

In a soft tone, I responded to my mom, "Yes mommy."

"Good boy. Come here." My mom hugged me and attempted to lift me up into the air until she felt flimsy. I was barely off the ground until my mom quickly put me back down. "Oof, ok, that's enough." Mom said after putting me back down. She headed towards the room where the man was at, but she was getting there as if there was an invisible force keeping her from arriving to the room and she struggled trying to reach there. I didn't understand why my mom was acting so funny and I didn't like having that man inside my house. He acted like a gentleman, but deep down inside he was a monster and the scar is there to prove it. Next thing I knew, I heard a cry.

"Aahhh!!!"

"Sonya!!!"

I ran towards the room and the man walked out of the door with my mom on his arms. I stood still in complete shock staring at the man

as he looked at me with his sinister eye. I felt my soul was being pulled into the missing eye. I ran to my room and slammed the door. I blocked the door with my body and started to breath heavily. My chest was pounding and I could hear myself breathing through my mouth. I cracked the door open and saw the man entering the room with my mom in his hands. My mom's room closed and I continued to hear my mom shout in pain. I ran to my bed and cover my head with a pillow. I laid there until everything was over.

Days passed and the man continued to stay at our house. Every time I saw my mother, she looked weaker and weaker. I noticed her face was getting paler, I saw more wrinkles on her, her eyes were getting lazier, and her hair was falling off more often. I can't stop convincing myself that the man is doing something to my mom, but for some reason I can't win. My mom is attached to this man and every time I warn her about the man, she would always get angry and have me sent to my room.

Every so often, I would ask my mom to spend time with me. I would ask with a cheerful, innocent face with my eyes wide open, happily waiting for her response.

"Mom! Mom! Mom! Let's go rake the leaves and run through them!"

"I'm sorry Michael, I have plans with Mr. Henderson, another time."

"Mom! Mom! Mom! Can you read me this book!? *The Turn of the Screw* for Halloween?!"

"I'm sorry Michael, I'm tired. I spent the whole day with Mr. Henderson, another time."

It was close to Thanksgiving break and we had a Thanksgiving party in class. Each of us had a paper bag with our names on it. All the kids put cards in each bag saying what they were thankful for. When class ended, all the kids looked into their bags filled with cards and they would all go to each kid thanking them for the cards. I quickly opened my bag excited to what the kids had to say about me that they were thankful for. I looked inside only to find not one single card in my bag. My heart sank and my eyes felt heavy, ready to shed some tears. I grabbed my bag and slowly walked out of school heading towards home with my head down. I went through the door only to hear my mom and the man talking in my mom's room. I looked at my empty bag and lifted my head with a smile on my face. I quickly entered my mom's room and shouted.

"Mom! Mom! Mom! Let's make some thankful cards to each other! Mr. Henderson can even join! Would that be Fun!?"

"I'm sorry Michael, there some things I have to do with Mr. Henderson, another time."

Mr. Henderson! Mr. Henderson! Mr. Henderson! That's all that came out of her mouth! I kicked the door as hard as I can. "It's not fair!!!"

"Michael!!! Go to your room!!!

"Fine!!!" I stormed to my room. My face was red, tears wouldn't stop coming out of my eyes, and I saw snot coming out of my nose. I felt so hot all over my body and I started punching the pillow screaming.

The next day, I was having pancakes and eggs at the dinner table. The man was sitting right across from me having toast and some coffee. I was staring at this man hoping a giant tornado would take him away. I stared intensely at his eye, but he doesn't seem to notice my hostility. My mom walked in the dining room checking up on the man.

"How was the breakfast, Anthony?"

"Breakfast was delicious, Sonya. Thank you."

"Good I'm glad you li—ahhh!" My mom grabbed her chest in sheer pain and fell onto her knees. The man quickly got up and held my mom. "Sonya!"

I sprang up from my chair and shouted at the man. "Leave mama alone! You monster!!!"

Mom got very angry and shouted at me while she was fighting off her pain. "Michael! Why would you say that! Get out of here!"

My face turned red and my cheeks became pouty. "Fine! As you wish, mother!"

I walked out of my house and sat down onto the front porch. I couldn't believe how mom was treating me. What happened to her? Why does she hate me? Where's the mama I used to know? Why does she like that man more than me? For the first time in my whole entire life, I was truly alone.

A few days passed and I had given up with my mother. I wouldn't talk to her, look at her, or even acknowledge her. It was just like school, but in my own home. I walked passed my mother's room. Mother was sitting on her bed while the man was next to her. They were doing their usual routine.

All of a sudden, I heard my mother calling out to me. "Michael," spoken in an angelic voice.

I paused for a second, my heart raced, and my eyes widened. I turned to my mother with excitement on my face. "Yes... mama...?"

Time slowed down while waiting patiently for her response.

“Could you give Mr. Henderson a glass of water? He is a bit thirsty.”

My face dropped and my chest felt heavy. I don't know who I was talking to anymore. I couldn't handle it any longer. That was not my mama! I started to cry, but with whatever strength of courage I had left, I shouted at my mother, “Why mama!?”

“Michael, what's wrong?”

“Why do you do this to me? All I wanted was to be with you mama. This is not fair! You stopped seeing me, you stop playing with me, and you stop treating me like your son! What happened, you are never there for me. I'm all alone! I'm all alone! Mama, I'm scared and you are not there for me! All I wanted was to be with you and play with you! I want you in my life! Mama! Do you even love me!?”

Everything got quiet and an intense feeling surrounded the atmosphere. I stared at my mother which felt forever. My mom didn't yell at me. In fact, she did not say a single word. She didn't ground me, sent me to my room, nor had me go think about what I have done. She just sat there with a frown on her face with her eyes wide and glossy. Tears were slowly coming out of her eyes and she started quivering. She had the face as if she had given up and defeated. Like she lost hope because deep down inside she knew that she brought this to herself. I felt a sense of guilt. I have never seen my mother looked at me like that. My heart felt heavier, I felt goosebumps raining down my body, and I was fighting back the tears.

I walked out of the room and closed the door. Once I closed the door, I heard her sobbing at the other side of the door. The man walked out of the room, paused for a moment, and began speaking to me.

"Your mother loves you very much, Michael."

"But why!? Why is mama treating me like I don't exist, I don't get it!?"

"You know, mothers have a strange way of handling things, but never forget, everything she does, she does them for a reason."

"Tell me! What's happening with mama!?"

"I can't tell you, Michael. Your mother's wishes."

"Mom! What's going on!?" I ran outside the house not understanding what's going on. They're hiding something from me and this feeling overwhelmed me.

"Michael! Where are you going!? Wait!"

The man chased after me as I continued to run. I ran towards the pond. I walked on a set of boulders that reached pretty far in the middle of the pond. I stopped and stared at my reflection in the water. All of a sudden, I slipped into the water. My leg got caught in the pile of boulders. I was stuck and was unable to escape. I began drowning and I called for help. I started seeing flashbacks of the wonderful times I had with my mom. I remembered playing in the leaves, reading stories, being pushed on a tire swing, and many small moments I had with her. I started thinking about all the mean things I did to my mom. All I could think about is, "I'm sorry mama..."

I opened my eyes only to be carried by the man. He was not wearing a shirt. I noticed how physically fit he was, but his body was covered in scars from burns and deep cuts. I heard screaming from the distance.

"Michael!!!"

I looked over to see my mom run frantically towards me. I got off the man and ran crying to my mom. Mom pulled me in tightly and cried right in front of me.

"I'm so sorry Michael! It's all my fault! I should have spent more time with you! I didn't know! I didn't know! I didn't know you were hurting! I'm your mother and I didn't know you were hurting. I'm sorry! I promise! I promise baby that I would never leave you alone again! I'm sorry! I'm sorry! I'm sorry!"

"I'm sorry too mama!"

Just like she promised, we continued where we left off and did the usual games and activities we used to do. We ran through the leaves, read stories, swinging on the tire swing, and many more. Mom kept getting weaker and weaker until she passed away about a month later.

We buried her next to my father. I couldn't stop sobbing, I lost the only person who understood me. The only person who I called a friend. The man walked right behind me and put his hand on my shoulder.

"Michael, I'm sorry... I know how much she meant to you."

I didn't respond to him. I just stared at her tombstone. The only person that I was thinking about was my mama. The man reached into his trench coat and pulled out an envelope. "Since Sonya is gone, I must now complete my end of the deal."

He hands me the envelope. I opened the envelope to find a letter and I began reading it.

Dear Michael,

My time with you was short, but it was the best time of my life. I regret not being able to be with you as you grow up. I regret that you won't be

able to have a mommy to care for you, to hold you, and to guide you. That feeling will forever haunt me. I want to let you know how much I love you and how I will always forever love you. You were the best gift God has ever given me.

At this point, Mr. Henderson will take care of you. He's your godfather after all. When we baptized you before both he and daddy went to war. Mr. Henderson knew your dad when they were kids and I met him through your dad. He became close to the family. It was Mr. Henderson who risked his life to bring daddy back home. And now I entrust you to him.

Please be the best you can be. Do well in school and make friends. You don't need a lot of friends, just a few is enough. As long as they care for you the way you are.

Goodbye Michael, please remember that mommy loves you no matter what.

I'll Forever Love You

Mom

I held the letter tightly to my chest and I was flooded with emotions. The writing on the letter was as elegant as her voice. It was mama! She did not stop looking after me. I felt her presence through her letter. I looked up to see an image of mama and papa right in front of me. They were holding each other and they looked at me with the most sincere and graceful smile. I cried out to them.

"Mama!!! Papa!!!"

Mr. Henderson placed his hand on my shoulder and took me to a restaurant for a bite to eat. He was telling me all the stories about mama and papa when they were growing up. He told me how papa was a brave man. He accepted a mission in the Battle of Iwo Jima even though he knew it was certain death, but very crucial for the mission. When Mr.

Henderson found out papa's company was being slaughtered, he rushed to the enemy heavy territory to rescue him. Mr. Henderson was burned, shot, and blasted. Mr. Henderson also told me that mama was a selfless woman and she knew her time on earth was not long. She reached out to Mr. Henderson to write letters that would be meant for me once she passed.

Every year I received a letter on my birthday and it was from mama. Mama wrote things that a mother would say to her child when they turned a certain age. She would say things like do well in school, brush your teeth, shower, and so on. I treasured each letter she wrote and put them in a box that sat right next to a photo of her.

Four years since mom passed and I was in school picking on a girl named Ashley. I wanted her attention by making her mad. I crossed the line and made her cry. I walked outside feeling extremely guilty. I wanted to feel better, so I pulled out a letter that mom sent me this year.

Dear Michael,

Happy 10th birthday! By now, you should already be thinking about girls. Let me tell you the secret of girls. They are completely different from boys. They will act ways that you may never understand. Just remember to treat them as if you would treat mommy. That is the secret.

I'll Forever Love You

Mom

After reading the letter I ran back in school searching for Ashley. I saw her sitting at a corner crying and I approached her. "I'm sorry Ashley... I was being a jerk..."

I sat right next to her and place my hand on her shoulder. She then wrapped herself around my arm. "Thank you... Michael..."

Eight more years had passed. I was standing outside the grounds of the university that I worked so hard to get in. I saved the letter that I got from mom that year. I pulled it out to read what it said.

Dear Michael,

Happy 18th birthday! Congratulations! You are now an adult! You are no longer my little boy, but a young man. That being said, you now have a whole new set of responsibilities. It will be a tough road ahead, but if you focus on these three strengths, your options in life are limitless. Physical strength, eat healthy and exercise daily; that way you can live long enough to enjoy the beauty of this world. Mental strength, seek knowledge and learn; that way you can use your head to overcome every challenge. Spiritual strength, I hope you got Confirmed because life will challenge your morals and ethics. You must be as honorable as you can be, just like your father. By achieving this, you can be the difference in the world. So go out there and face the world with your head up high!

I'll Forever Love You

Mother

I felt a sense of strength from mother's words. I lifted my head with a face full of confidence and walked into campus. A student from the university was standing there greeting every incoming freshman.

"Hi! Welcome to the University of Pennsylvania! I hope your time here will be the most memorable time of your life!"

"Thank you very much."

Twelve more years has passed and I just got back home from work at my law firm. Mr. Henderson just gave me the letter from my mother before I arrived home. I opened it up and began reading it.

Dear Michael,

Happy 30th birthday! You have probably already found the woman that you wish to spend the rest of your time with. You probably have already been married and had some children. Oh how I would have loved to see your wedding. Love is a beautiful and sacred feeling to have. It is not about you anymore. It is about you and your wife as a whole. You are one team and that means everything you two do, you do them together. I hope the woman you married loves you for who you are just as much as I love you. I give you my blessing.

I'll Forever Love You

Mother

I paused for a moment and lifted my head up. My eyes were closed with a big smile. With a deep breathe, I reached into my pocket and pulled out a small black box. I opened it and stared at the diamond ring for a moment. I closed the box and hid it in my pocket. "Ashley!"

Ashley walked out of the bedroom. She wasn't wearing any make up, her hair was a bit messy, and she was wearing loose clothing. "Yes... Michael?"

"Let's go for a walk, shall we?"

"Every year, I still receive a letter from my mother. Ever sense Mr. Henderson died, he gave the rest of the letters to my children, entrusting

that they will continue my mother's wishes."

I sat there taking everything that this man has said. It made me reflect everything that my mom has done for me.

"Wow, I'd never thought that mothers can go out of their way just for their children."

"Neither have I," said Michael. "But that is what makes this world so beautiful." The man paused and leaned forward. He started to cry and began talking to himself out loud, "mama...mama..."

I watched this man as he cries to himself and then I heard my mom shout from the distance. "Andrew!"

"Mom!" I ran towards my mom and gave her a big hug.

"Andrew, I was so worried!"

"I'm sorry mom!"

"It's ok sweetie. Let's go home."

"Ok."

Mom grabbed me by my hand and we headed straight home. I turned my head to get the last glimpse of this man. He continued sitting on the bench looking up towards the heavens with a sense of peace. I wonder, what's on his mind right now?

"Hi mom... Good to see you again... I just wanted to let you know... Thank you."

Adolfo Alvarez

Untitled*Elisabeth Points*

The Girl is a Bird

The girl is a bird.
She is not like a bird
in that she has
large figurative wings with which she can soar,
or a desire to be free, a detestation for limitations,
or an overwhelming need to leave where she is from
all the while knowing she will one day return.

She is not like a bird,
but the girl is a bird
in that her eyes are kind of beady
and she likes to collect things.

So maybe she is not so much a bird as she is a crow.

The girl is a crow
in that she is associated with death.
She can predict natural disasters
and she is a part of a murder.

The murder is not real,
it is an exaggeration,
a metaphor for a broken heart.

The victim of this metaphor
The victim of this murder
is a boy.

The boy is a question,
or an answer,
or a problem,
or a solution.

He is a boy,
but the girl-crow pretends he is a rock.
The girl is a crow who likes to collect things
and the boy is a shiny rock.

So when the rock who is a boy
So when the boy who is a rock
catches the eye of the crow-girl,
she decides she must have him.

But she is used to collecting quiet things,
pretty objects that will sit silently in her nest
until she grows bored of them.

The boy is not a rock,
he is only like a rock,
but the boy is like a boy in that
he can speak.

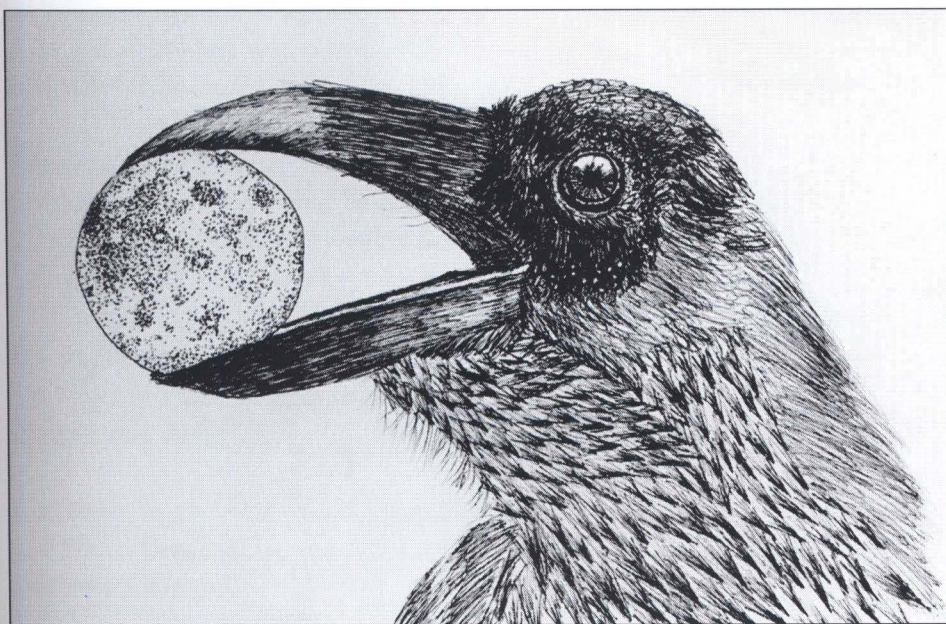
When the girl-crow bird-woman picked up
the rock-boy shiny-thing,
she did not expect it to have an opinion.

And now there has been a heartbreak,
a murder,
an eviction from a nest.

He wants to ask,
"If you did not plan to keep me,
why pick me up in the first place?"
and she wants to reply,
"I collect things
not so I may have them
but so others may not."

But this is not a conversation they have
because he is not a rock, and she is not a bird.

In that moment,
the shiny boy and the beady-eyed girl
are absolutely human.

Full Moon*Jessica Epstein*

Harvested Heart

It impales like a garden rake to the fertile earth—
your heart being clawed and dragged
down from your chest and pulled
out of your left ring finger—
the scars are only partially softened
by the tears that fill up the dam
of pending future plans—
engagement, marriage, a family, a picket fence—
all ruined by one motherfucking text,
no punctuation, no grammar, no emotion except blasé—

“I am done being a we.”

Untitled

The fire in your eyes that burned my skin
Had I kept to myself
The scars on my body may not have shown

I was ashamed for my heart that had absorbed your colorless words
Picking apart my body when it had not yet been fixed
Relapse called my name

The drugs I consumed came from the place you called home
I overdosed again and again
Until the pain I felt was numb
And then once more

The certainty of death had not sunken in
In the moment I took that blade to my wrists
Comfort flooded from my veins but regret filtered in
And emptiness became me

The unpredictable became the predictable
But you were sleeping so soundlessly
While I was dying

The water in my eyes could not put yours out
So I left to breathe air not smoke
And now I live

#WhyIDidn'tReport

Seventeen with only one ex-boyfriend in my directory. That naïve stage of
 life
 before you understand the hunger of men and what they'll do to satisfy it.
 Before
 I understood why I got so attached and that you can't find your missing
 pieces
 in someone else.

That's when I met him. The confidant of my fleeting "best" friend at the
 time. And later
 when he found an interest in me and I indulged in his hunger, she'd try
 to issue warning. But with her own pain curbing the integrity of her
 words,
 I wouldn't listen.

So, I smoked my first joint with him, told my greatest lies with him, tasted
 bitter fruit with him. And that's when he'd tell me that he liked me
 in my catholic school uniform.

And on a rainy day, when my parents had left town, he'd rip it off and
 force himself upon me. Telling me it only hurts for a second, and then it'll
 feel "real good."

And I'd scream him off.
 And bleed.
 And not know what had happened...

and within a week, he'd leave. Giving the classic, "You're too good, and I'm
 not." But asking one odd question before he drove off:

"You're not going to report me for... rape... or anything, are you?"

To which I'd say. "Why would I do that?"

I still wouldn't know the answer years later.

And it wouldn't be until the day that I shied from a good man's touch, that I'd finally know what had happened that night.

I'd burst with the bubble that kept me from my truth, and when I'd see him later in a movie theater— hyperventilate. But by then, it'd be too late.

Because living in a society that believes the rapist instead of the survivor, I know I'll only be questioned #whyidntreport sooner.

Maggie Lawrence

Crash

My heart pounded against my ribs and my legs went numb when I peered in the rearview mirror and saw the red SUV hurtling towards me in the midst of bumper to bumper traffic.

When I was sixteen and first began learning how to drive, I almost got hit by a car when I was turning right on red. It was completely my fault and my dad, who sat rigidly in the passenger seat, yelled at me the entire way to our destination about how I was a careless driver and was going to die in a car accident one day.

And when I saw that beast of a car going 75 miles per hour towards my motionless 2000 Subaru Forester, all I could hear was my dad chanting that mantra in my ear.

You're going to die in a car accident. You're going to die in a car accident. You're going to, you're going to, you're going to.

It felt like my car jumped off the ground like it was in a game of hopscotch. We were thrown forward as we smashed into the Honda Civic in front of me. All I could hear through the white noise was metal crunching and grinding against metal.

I screamed. A terrible description, I know, but there's no other way to describe it.

"What was that?"

"What's happening?"

Silence.

I turned around and saw three pairs of curious blue eyes looking back at me. My words caught in my throat as my lungs felt pinched and shut off. I clutched the leather steering wheel and my nails dug into my palms.

“Um,” I gasped out as my eyes began scanning and searching their little bodies to see if they were okay. I turned back to face my now cracked windshield. “We got hit.”

I didn’t know what to do. If there was anything titled *What to do When Your Shitty Car Gets Destroyed by an SUV 101* I never read it. And when I looked out the window and saw the offender pull off to the shoulder with his front bumper dragging along the gravel with his obliterated headlights, I could feel the panic begin to rise out of me.

I pulled off to the right-hand shoulder and I see the man who hit me stumble out of his car, curly black hair going in every direction. I look at the boys and choke out “Are you guys okay?” I couldn’t believe it took me that long to ask that question.

They nod and the oldest of the three timidly asks, “Are we going to be okay?”

I’m a terrible person and I ignore him. My pain and shock turn quickly to anger as I see the man groveling over his own car.

I yank open my door and round my Subaru. I pause as I take in the damage. Was that dent there before? Was that taillight always smashed? I see a bumper in the middle of the highway— is that mine?

“Are you alright?!” The curly-haired man says as he turns me around, grabs my shoulder, and shakes it. I look at his hand and see his vitiligo running up his arm. He smells like cigarettes, and I take a step back from him.

I know I probably look crazy standing on the side of the highway in a red bikini. We were going to the community pool, a five-minute drive from my aunt’s house, and we clearly weren’t making it there today.

I would consider it a blessing if it weren’t for the car accident that

stopped us from getting there. For that entire summer we went to the pool every single day and every time my cousins would exert every ounce of energy into trying to dunk me. Their pudgy hands would grip around my neck as they hung off me like monkeys as they would try to submerge my head into the chlorinated and grass-filled water. It was cute at first, but it eventually became obnoxious.

But at this moment I'd rather be dunked one thousand times than have to face reality.

"My cousins are in the backseat." I'm surprised I still remember how to talk. He gives me a perplexed look and moves to my car window, with a gusto that lets me know that he doesn't believe me. He clutches his chest when he sees three boys in navy blue car seats.

"Are they okay?" I could hear how he could just barely get those words out. He doesn't give me time to answer and his voice rises with panic with every word he says, "Oh my god, they're little kids. Please tell me they're okay."

"They're fine, don't worry." I say with a little too much edge to my voice. I turn away from him and cover my face with my hands as I feel it begin to crinkle up, a tell-tale sign that sobbing will soon commence.

He moves toward me. "Please, please don't cry. It's my fault and your boys are alright. Everything's going to be okay."

I don't let him touch me. I bent down and put my head in between my knees, feeling sweat already beginning to drip down my forehead.

We never made it back to the pool that summer.

My Political Viewpoints Consist of Making Fun of Politicians

If I controlled the highways, I would
part the sea of exhaust with my palms,
sweaty on my steering wheel, late for a meeting
I never wanted to go to in the first damn place.

If I controlled the highways, no one would
think twice if I drew plans of infrastructure,
structuring around bipartisanship, bisexual (hybrid) cars,
U-turning at "We don't have the money," and "No we can't!" I

would put on my pantsuit and walk into the office of Congress, the DMV,
and

your work cafeteria and demand my passing lanes be passing laws
that say men cannot decide on women's healthcare.

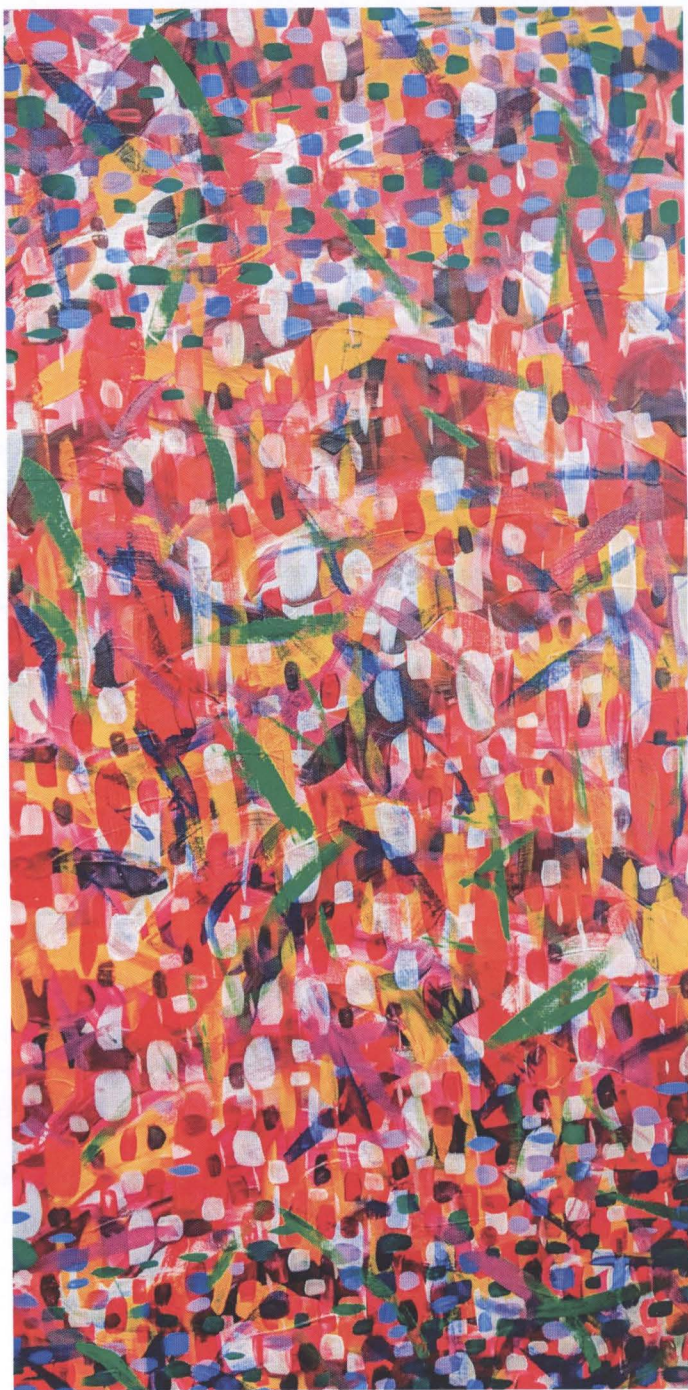
I would write sonnets in asphalt of chipped up roads, that smelled of
parking lots on hot days, their pages; hot engines, hot seam from bullet
shells, just missing your black neighbor you called the police on for being
"sketchy,"

in his own fucking home. They are ricocheting off signs that say,
"*This Bridge is Slippery When Wet*,"

and the "*With Wet*" is blurred from decay from Republicans' wet dreams
of sweeping rapists under the rug, just so they get another vote to the
right.

If I controlled the highways, I'd make sure rush
hour fell directly on the moment you realize you're late for work, because
If I were the highway Master, I'd be causing some sort of hellacious natural
disaster that caused ya'lls "president" Trump to miss his daily round of
golf.

Ali Laughman



Brown Skin

My brown skin is not a novelty. My brown hair is not someone's fantasy. My color is not an enemy. I am a person built with more than some stereotypical legacy. I am my brown skin. I am my brown hair. I am a person in there.

My worth is not an option. My respect is self-made. I am a Queen, yes indeed. I will hold myself tall and never be made small. I am my brown skin.

I am not some loud mouth black girl, but I am a woman with a loud mouth. My voice is my own and it shall be heard. However, I shall listen to your words with humble respect. Isn't that what we're taught and told? To be respectful of others even in a world so full of unjust hate.

Your words are important. Your features unique. You are worthwhile. You are not some novelty. You are a person. Living. Breathing. Feeling being, who sees the world in different eyes.

I am my brown skin. I am a different set of eyes. I am willing to stand out for what's right.

Kyra Brown

Charlottesville, VA – August 12th, 2017

One black shoe lies on its back,
The partner mid-air in opposite direction.
Laces of a third shoe reach for its owner
Who was somewhere else –
On the hood
Underneath
Or maybe flung back into the others.

There's a water bottle in flight
Crushed in the mid-section
With all its clarity screaming out

One sign, falling towards the road,
Reads, "Black Lives Matte" –
A man's head blocks the "r"
Man in silence over the haze.
Another sign, ahead of the car,
Spells F-U-K.
A flailing leg kicks the "C"
Into nothingness.

"C" like in clarity,
Like in the shards of glass
Speckling the chaos,
Eventually settling on the road
For bare feet to walk upon.

The bare feet of confusion
That plows through our minds
Leaving bloodied footprints
Amongst understanding.

Untitled



Taryn Good

How to Post an Instagram Photo

Step 1: Have a gram-worthy outfit. This means going online and buying the same, but different, outfit as the other girl you saw in the post before. For example: mom jeans, chunky sneakers, and a crop top.

Step 2: Spend three hours on hair and makeup for a series of shots that take 10 minutes.

Step 3: Pick a location that you don't normally go to, and that is way out of the way, like Hawaii.

Step 4: Strike a pose that's so fake, it looks like a natural emotion or position that others will try and fail to copy. Such stances include, but aren't limited to— laughing with your mouth wide open, taking a huge bite from a tiny spoon, slurping a drink through a plastic straw with a fish face, gazing at something far in the distance that isn't there, or taking a mirror selfie with your butt sticking out and your fingers making a peace sign (duck face optional).

Step 5: While holding the above pose, suck in your stomach so no one knows that you've gained 10 pounds over the winter and are still "working it off."

Step 6: Take 60 shots from which you will select 2, maybe 3.

Step 7: Filter your photo so that you look enough like yourself that people will recognize you, but not so much that they can see the acne across your face and the dark circles under your eyes.

Step 8: Post and pray for likes.

2018: A Space Odyssey

I've rubbed stars on the bottoms of my feet
pierced my nose with the crescent moon
borrowed Saturn's rings for a date
fallen in love with getting high off the volcanic fumes of Mars
burned all my split ends and nail beds with my impulsive tendencies on
Venus

Hello dear
Sorry, I was just staring
into space again
As if I was back in 7th grade algebra

Oh, Houston
We don't have a problem

But
I can see those same constellations
in her eyes.

Maggie Haynes



Material

guinness, scrambled eggs in the morning,
bad timing.
“you should probably kiss me or something.”
gold feather earring and a record collection.
fumbling over and into each other’s bodies
like teenagers, awkward and horny and
we should have been sleeping.
these are the materials of a few days
that i don’t know how to piece together and
don’t know if i should.

you said sometimes you sit on the floor of the shower and just let the
water hit you and
i’m sorry we’ve both been so broken.
i hope you ace that japanese exam and
find solace in the gentleness of growing alone.

Coca-Cola

Sometimes, I want to take a bag
of the most finely powdered cocaine
and pour it into my eye sockets
and roll them back into my face
and feel the sweet numbing burn in my eyebrows
and on the bridge of my nose.

I want to dive into a mountain of blow
and bury myself in it so I can't breathe.

I want to blend it into a smoothie
with kale and green apples
and chug it
until I hear my insides begging to come out.

I want to fill my house with it
floor to ceiling
and mix it into a solution with Rumple Minze
and drown myself there.

Eventually then
someone will come to my door
and when they open it
the liquid will come rushing out
and soak the bottom of their pant legs.

Then they'll find my body inside.
Drenched in white.
and they'll say,
"Another one bites the dust."

Untitled*Taryn Good*

This is Unacceptable Ship

Maybe a Negro can steal a computer in a single flick of the wrist,

And fornicate with every white blonde daughter in the library from 12:00 midnight to 12:05am. Maybe poison the water fountain with Malcolm X violent protest speech so when band players, who never put enough paprika in their potato salad, drink from it, suddenly taste a burst of melanin on their tongues. Enough to make every snare sound like a gunshot, every flute like a blow dart, and string sections to sound of whips crackling in the breeze. Blood in the turf field not red of raiders color, but of insides longing to be bursting out of wounds fresh from the words "I'm instructed to call the police at 12:02." "This has become a big problem" she says "people continue not leaving the library by 12:00 and it inconveniences the people who work here." She says this to me as if every problem she has ever had, is somehow my fault. Stares at me the way someone would stare at a dog they are trying to scare into submission. Trying to make me feel guilt for trying to make a 12:00 o'clock submission deadline. Somehow her displaced emotions have made her wrinkles show her age so much more accurately tonight, maybe she is secretly older than the dirt she is standing on. Somehow I envision that her implicit negative bias towards me because of the color of my skin sank into her mouth and spewed onto me with the whip of her words. Cognizant that most of human communication is non-verbal I can see every single prejudiced word through her teeth. "Can I see your ID please," she says, while standing in front of the only exit. I understand that she is not asking, rather commanding. That there is no response other than handing her my ID that she will accept. Takes my ID with a snatch, scribbles down my name, tells me that the police are on their way, and stands in a way that makes me feel she is telling me I cannot leave until they get here. When the police arrive they look at me and I feel threatened, because apparently they were called, and carry pistols at their sides into the library, because of me. Campus police duties apparently include: protecting the campus from intruders, patrolling, and being called to the library to try and intimidate polite students into thinking that them being disrespected by faculty is ever acceptable. Faculty and campus police whose salaries students themselves pay in tuition and fees.

If I inconvenience students who work till midnight and get up for 8:00am classes by leaving 5 minutes after the library closes then I apologize for that inconvenience. But maybe there should be an apology for the visceral trauma that occurs when I have to truly wonder, "Was I spoken to like that because I am black?" At a place I thought was safe from making me think that was even a possibility. Paying thousands of dollars to go to a school that I thought I loved. Scolded by an old white woman whose tone mirrored one of intolerance and disrespect, barking at me and calling the police on me like I had committed a crime for being 5 minutes past close of a building **THAT I PAY FOR**. Maybe she mistook my melanin for weakness, a common occurrence at predominantly white institutions, but she has done her job even better than a micro-aggression laced school system could have even intended, she should be employee of the century.

This is unacceptable behavior from a faculty member at a university that tries to celebrate its diversity and inclusiveness. We must do better Ship.

Dwayne Ellis

Cascade

"Shine its watchful light on you..."

Arching over the cosmos—
the light illuminating faces
riddled with anticipation of choice
between possible tear-stained
or blood-streaked faces—
ones where, for a moment,
thought the world could rest
a thousand hearts wishes
upon one star—
burning, screaming, dancing at the end
of its life—
what a foreshadowing of all peoples' plight...

A swift change, a quick drop,
an ear-shattering crack and blindness
from light,
children's screams filled
the darkness of the night
as each life ended the very moment
the bomb completed flight.

You know, we're all just flesh and stardust after all—
never really created to make perfect sense.
Just perfect war,
perfect threats and,
perfect deaths—
a perfect madness in which we digress.

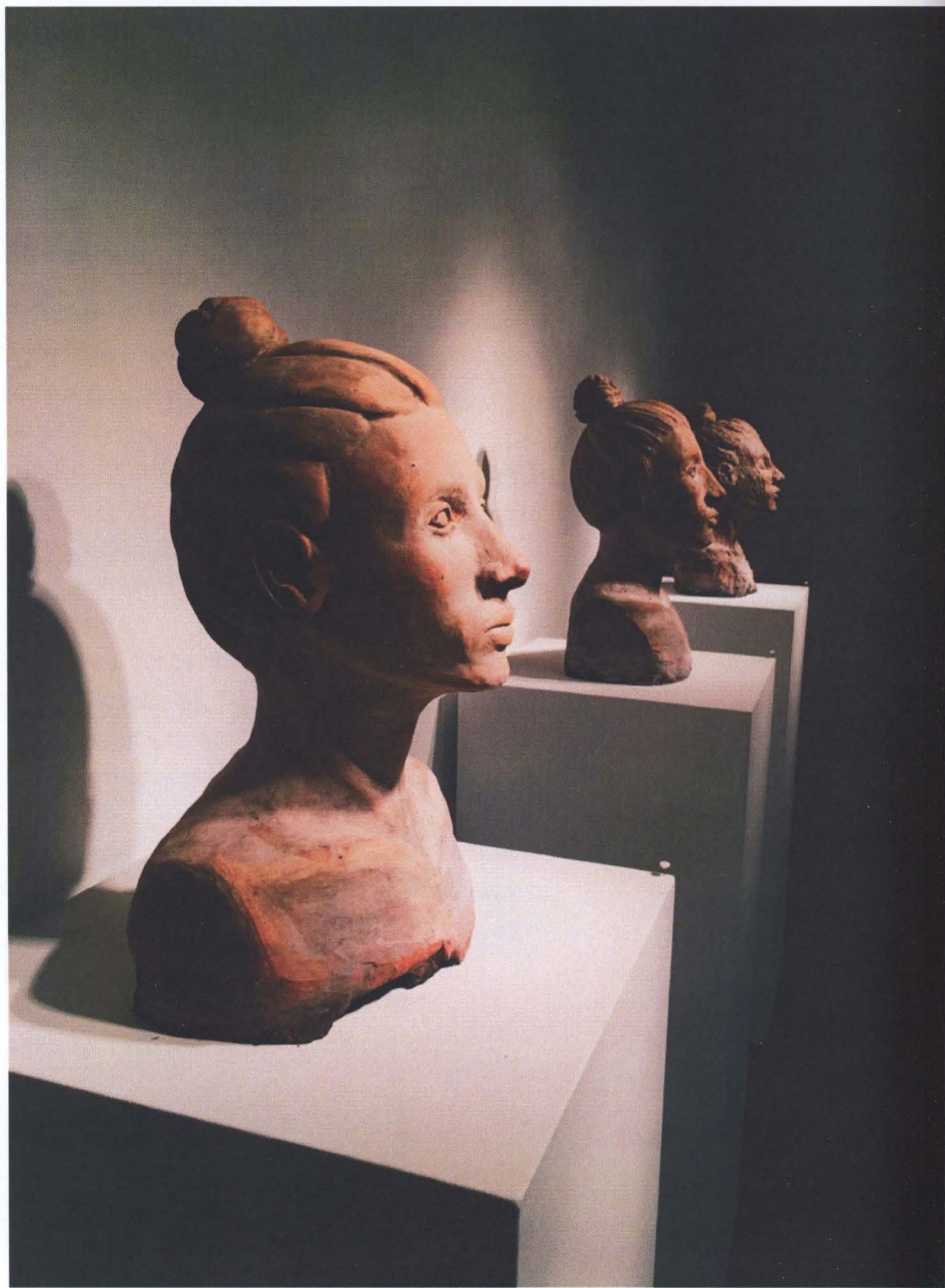
White Privilege

To me, White privilege was growing up in a town ruled by my race
It was never feeling alone, outnumbered, or out of place
It was walking down the street and being unafraid of the police
It was seeing kids on TV that looked like me being glorified for their
perfectly pale beauty

My White privilege was never being ashamed of my color, culture
Or hair's natural kink
It was never wanting to be someone else
Or begging my darkness to wash down the sink

My White privilege was never being stereotyped for playing on my
basketball team
Or being mocked for excelling academically
It was never being told to talk right or act white
Or speak for my race
My White privilege is a national disgrace

Moriah Hathaway

Portrait Perception 4

Lydia Westre-Stith

“Reality Check”

The room was cold, unbelievably so, and the gymnasium lights beamed down so brightly that they made Lucy's head swim with the unreality of it all. The combination of blackness of the bleachers and blinding light beaming down on where she sat masked the grungy, stained floors, the basketball hoops with frayed ends. The room was sleek in the dark, futuristic. It had never seemed so strange and echoing, even when the steel-gray tarps were spread across the floor and fold-up tables for the annual blood drives, Homecomings, PSATs. Lucy could somehow sense rows of warm, breathing faces in the blackness of the far-removed bleachers- intelligent entities. If this was the lame awards ceremony or the final don't-get-pregnant talk before graduation that she and Sam had decided it must be judging by the absence of boys surrounding her, the set-up was totally weird and dramatic.

Her former ninth-grade health teacher stepped up to the podium facing the plastic chairs arranged in rows across the half-court line where all of the girls in the senior class sat. The intense light from above turned her perfectly curled eyelashes into long spidery shadows across her face.

“If everyone has received their computers, let's begin! Thank you all for coming.” Her cheeks were stretched so widely from smiling that they spasmed slightly. A few coughs came from the bleachers, some rustling. No one applauded, thank God.

“I know it's been a long four years, but I don't doubt that each and every one of you is going to make us Eagles proud in the future. Whether that means becoming our next president or staying here, working loyally at a local establishment.”

Walmart, Sam mouthed at Lucy from the other side of the gym. Lucy pinched her nose to keep from snorting loudly.

“But it's important to also keep it real. To know your limits so you can push beyond them. The sky's the limit, but how the heck are you going to get there if you don't know which ladder to climb, right?”

Silence. Confusion. More rustles. Who was up in those bleachers? Parents? Local officials whose arms had been twisted by the administration, now forced to relive their high school nightmares?

"That's why we believe that implementing the Reality Check program for the first time this year is so important and exciting. Because we want to ensure every newly minted young woman to graduate from our high school is prepared for the world she's heading into."

So it was some sort of pathetic attempt at female empowerment, then. She grimaced at Sam, who mimed hanging herself in boredom. Just when Lucy thought she physically couldn't be more desperate to get on the train to her wooded Massachusetts college come fall. The crisp New England air would be detox for her cringing, traumatized mind.

"Wonderful, let's begin. Ava Ashbury, would you please step forward to the podium, sweetie?"

Ava rose, twisting the end of her ombré blonde ponytail, and sauntered up to stand facing the darkness in front of them. Lucy could tell Ava's fingers were itching for the safety of her phone screen as she stood. They began to tap against the side of her leg after a few seconds, the sole punctuation of the cavernous room's silence. She was the type of girl who Lucy and Sam had always taken secret pleasure in mocking relentlessly, the type who aggressively announced she was majoring in poli-sci to become a fancy lawyer even though she had fallen asleep every day for the last six months in Civics class. Sam had dubbed her 'sporty spice' years ago, a name which never exhausted its power to crack Lucy up.

A happy, generic *ding* of some sort reverberated through the gym, and with it a gigantic television-like screen hanging from the ceiling flashed to life. Lucy had no idea the school had the money for that kind of toy—her French textbook was from 1991. Apparently this was where all the money had been going.

AVA ASHBURY. The name appeared on the screen, bright green and pulsing. Then came words, sentences upon sentences flooding the screen, almost too quickly to read.

Pretty cute, not gonna lie.

Nice legs!

HOT.

The back of Ava's ears turned red. Lucy could sense her squinting into the darkness, looking for someone to thank or address. There was no one, of course. Just the screen.

Good body, but not as great as she thinks.

TOO MUCH MAKEUP. Disgusting.

The words kept coming, and with them a rumbling from the bleachers. Lucy made out the sound of good-natured arguments, laughter. There was a certain satisfaction in it. Wherever these words were coming from, they were *right*. Ruthless but satisfyingly, terrifyingly precise.

Ava stood in the light, frozen, until the words had all disappeared from the screen. In their place, next to the name, the number 87 / 100 blinked onto the screen.

The teacher stepped forward again, that big red-lipped smile once again plastered across her face. "Thank you, Ava. We're all so very proud of you."

Ava blinked at her dumbly.

"You can sit down now, dear," she prodded gently.

Her legs were shaking as she returned to her seat. A curtain of hair masked her face.

The teacher giggled. "Even for a high-scoring student, it can be a bit disorienting at first. But you all in the audience did wonderfully. Remember, please be as honest as possible. After all, how will Ava grow into a beautiful, successful young woman if she doesn't first understand the reality of the materials she's working with?"

There were a few chuckles from the people in the bleachers. They (were they students? Other?) were waking now, coming alive in their righteousness, and *oh God*, in waves of dread it was hitting Lucy, though she did not have names or faces before her, what was going to happen. How the teacher would call them all up in alphabetical order to stand as Ava had stood and watch the screen light up with words fresh and unfiltered. How this audience's brains would light up with realization when they spotted a sneaky imperfection that words and makeup or even deceptive attraction had masked from view. How proud they'd feel as they typed it in and submitted it for everyone's benefit.

The audience would realize that this was helping not only the subjects, who would certainly be grateful for such accurate suggestions, but was also helping the raters. Like they had learned to pick arguments out of flowery literature, numbers and equations out of complex math problems, they were learning the vital skill of reading the female face, the female figure, for the cold, hard facts and chemicals, for the geometric shapes of varying desirability.

"Samantha Avery." Sam stood up, her plaid shirt flapping open to reveal her 'Plants are Friends' t-shirt, her face white instead of red like it usually was, and Lucy felt all of the horror again a thousand times over. Sam's lumpy, short body seemed to confine her more than it ever had. She couldn't hide behind her usual curse word or death-glare as she moved to stand on the podium, slouched into herself. There were too many of them, and now Lucy could make out familiar faces, perhaps real,

perhaps imagined, as her eyes strained against the dark: the sweet, goofy guys from her Calculus class, her shy History teacher. Their lifeless eyes darted industriously from Sam to their devices, and then words began once again to fill the screen, more tentative this time, but then, gaining momentum, gloriously just.

She might look better if she'd smile once in a while.

Body might be attractive to someone, I guess.

A trip to the gym wouldn't hurt, either.

More to love if you like your girls big, I guess?

They made no attempt to smother their laughter now. They leaned forward in their seats as if they were watching the final play in the fourth quarter of a Sunday football game, saliva stretching in glossy strands between wolfish incisors.

The acne is overpowering.

Kind of a piggish nose if you ask me.

She really shouldn't wear shorts with thighs like that.

Eventually the teacher put her hand up and the words were mercifully replaced by the score. 17 / 100.

Lucy could barely watch as Sam returned, drained, a body without eyes, to her seat. She knew she wouldn't be able to ever look at Sam, really look at her like she had before, with freedom and fearlessness, now that she'd seen that number plastered above her forehead. Their conversations would be empty shells, weakly trying to paper over the insecure thoughts, the evaluative, competitive judgements. Whose nose would win? Whose lips? Whose body? In Reality there would always be

winners and losers, they'd just been too foolish to realize.

The sleepovers where in the 4 AM darkness their mortal frames had melted away and left only breaths and minds were lost now, forsaken.

They couldn't have been real to begin with.

Detached, shocked tears startled Lucy when she felt them sliding down her cheeks. They were tears of loss and weakness. She did not know how to make something out of the emptiness They had forced upon her.

Not yet.

Untitled



Elisabeth Points

5 AM

It's five AM where the house is loud and yet quiet.
My floor creaks with a groan that says it is clearly
too early for all this. I was groaning too when
my mother said to let the dogs out. That meant

opening my skin to the harsh chill of the wind, all
too early for my care. She woke up as gracefully
as I did. Messy hair, half closed eyes, and the zombie
walk till we understand that we are awake.

She left for work now. Dressed up, barbied and all.
Did I say barbied? Oh I meant... No I meant barbied.
It made me remember when I saw her work in
muck boots. I miss those days sometimes. That is

I remember how her horse got stolen. Going on.
I saw my pile of books by my computer so the hum
drove me to start the mess I should have done
days ago. Sorry Professor. I wrote this here at

5 AM. Staring at the blank page and reading the
twenty-minute exercise got me thinking. I'm
alive and dead here at the lovely hour of 5AM.
A cursed time where I must take on tasks, big or

small. My table is cluttered with other homework.
Don't worry. It isn't due for days to weeks. I just
like to get ahead. I stare at the eight sets of eyes
inside my dining room where I work with awe.

I wanna be a dog. It's five AM and they don't have
to pay bills, or drive to college early to work by six.
So easy. Shit... It's 5:42... I guess I overdid it huh?
I see the backpack but it is so far away at this time

Time is slower now since the sun is not up to greet
me. Why then, when I must get ready to go am I
struggling? Struggling with a thought in my head.
It keeps saying, 'I want to be a dog. It's easier for them.'

Emily Bush

Thoughts and Tendencies

How do you confess the truths,
Those from yourself you try to hide,
When it feels like trying to command the moon
to stop holding back the tide.

How do I explain that if
Fatigue was the sun
I am trapped in the Sahara.
And the tears that would offer relief
Are too dry to come.

So I let myself succumb
Because today I cannot fight

And those who care ask why
But I don't have the strength for the
Truth so I
Lie
And say
I'm
Fine

But some persist so I reluctantly proclaim
Fine, today I
Don't want to exist.

But that's bullshit
A memorized line
That makes people more comfortable
Than confessing how much
I want to die.

How most nights
I lay my head down on
Puddled pillows

Wrap myself in lament
Longing for Demise

The only way I might truly feel content
Rather than just wearing a guise.

Tatiana Purnell

I Should Be Dead

I should be dead but I'm not,
Every midnight,
With the half-moon I became a
Raccoon and a battery going dead.
I remember every crack to the beer bottle,
With the sweet red essence of life,
 pouring out, like raw meat.
I feel every night spent in the hospital after the overdose
I feel the needles in my wrist and the stiches in my stomach,
From being pumped.

I didn't see the reasons back then,
For why I am still alive, for the world
Felt cold and I felt alone.
My daddy would try to comfort me,
And tell me it's going to be okay.
But my ears were shut, and my eyes were blind.
For Darkness was all I could see, and silence was all I could hear.

I look back on the question of why I am still alive,
And now I see the reasons why.
For if I was dead my daddy wouldn't have
His little girl to hold, and to laugh with.
I wouldn't be able to appreciate the poetry
I read and the pieces I write.
I wouldn't be around my friends doing
The stupid things that we do.
I wouldn't be around some of the best people
 in my life whether student or staff right now.

I know longer question why I am I still alive,
For I know why.
For if I was dead I wouldn't be looking ahead to my future,
Which is bright with all of you here tonight.

The Doggo



Sarah Herlia

Share the Road

Stacked four high and eight across
200 turkeys barreled southbound down 81
faster than my car going 10 over
My tires crushed their brown feathers
as they struggled to keep red terrified
eyes open against the wind
I said aloud, by myself
I'm sorry
as I looked at chapped heads and scuffed feet
catching themselves as they bump into each other.
I'm sorry this is your life
this is your normal
You don't know anything different
from metal bars making steps uneven
as a summer sun bakes your journey
towards mass execution

further down, passing the trailer
a well-groomed pure-bred pup
sticks his happy head out the window
goofy comfort with big wet eyes
Man's best friend and his cruelest decision

Married to the Memories

Jerome Victor Lemont was a little frail man with thinning silver hair that laid on top of his head like the strands of an unwoven scarf. Circular bifocals framed his eyes, almost as if to emphasize the permanently dark discoloration of exhaustion that spilled over onto his high-set cheekbones. At 85, Jerome still worked 6 days a week, with Sunday as his only rest day. But truthfully, the thought of retirement never crossed his mind. He liked to keep busy.

Since he was 30 years old he owned Olivia's Thrift Shop, which sat downtown on the corner of 4th Street. And with no children, Jerome practiced the virtues of love and patience as he raised his shop over the years, like any good father would. The thrift shop housed a variety of knickknacks and antiques, or what he liked to refer to as "one man's trash and another man's treasure." You could find just about anything there if you sorted through the overflowing plastic bins thoroughly enough, but rarely anyone had the time or desire to do so anymore.

Every afternoon at 5:20 Jerome would flick down the switch to the shop's single overhead light and spin the sign in the front door's window from "Open" to "Closed" before he left. He'd carefully shut the beige door behind him, which he painted with his own two hands many years before. The door that was once so smoothly coated was dressed with dents and chips in the paint from natural wear. Mindful of its obvious age and abrasion, he made sure to lock it securely. Out of habit he tugged once, and then twice at the rusty metal doorknob to ensure its stability before sliding the single key into his chest pocket.

Tucked under the building's small striped awning, Jerome glancing at his watch neurotically. He counted down 5:30 p.m. to the very minute, which is when the #7 Raynesville City Bus would make its daily stop at the curb in front of his shop. It was late August and he stood waiting for the bus in his tattered trousers and wool overcoat. The early autumn breeze rushed straight through the loose seams of his clothes to his aching, arthritic bones.

The sun began to set over the city, and the tangerine hues bled together in a near perfect gradient, but Jerome paid no mind to the sky's evening masterpiece. He was too distracted by his watch. He checked it again, and studying its hands, he calculated that the bus was running a good minute late.

"It's probably because Gus got caught up talking to someone who was passing by one of his stops again. That brute has no care in the world that some people have places to be," Jerome grumbled to himself. Accepting that there was nothing he could do to speed up the bus, he waited rather impatiently— continuing to check his cracked, leather watch.

Tick. Tick. Tick.

In between quick glances toward his wrist, he spotted two young women who lived a few blocks down from his shop on their daily stroll. They made their way up the uneven pavement rather slowly, carefully avoiding where the pieces of cement were cracked and overlapped each other. Jerome knew that they would stop and attempt to exchange pleasantries with him as they often did. Sure enough, the two walkers, Rose and Camille, eased their arm swinging momentum to a halt as they approached Jerome.

"Good evening Jerome," Camille said, pausing to catch her breath. "Another busy day in the shop?"

Jerome recited the same response that he always did upon being asked this question, "Hardly had time to eat my lunch. I don't know how I keep up with it all at my age."

Rose and Camille grinned politely, but they knew that his shop was the furthest thing from busy. He was often the only one to enter and exit it by the end of the day. Like most residents in Raynesville, they felt bad for the lonely old man, but Jerome didn't like to engage in small talk when he was out of his shop.

And besides, he was insistent that he didn't have the time to. So after a few strings of forced conversation, they let him return to his solitude. When the walkers traveled about 30 paces homeward, the bus finally began inching its way up the now barren street toward the bus stop. *Eight minutes late.* Jerome promised his wife, Olivia, that he'd always be home by 5:45, and over the years he learned to never keep that woman waiting.

The doors of the soot-coated bus swung open and Jerome clutched the cool, metal railing. He toddled up the two steps and plopped down on the same seat he sat at every day—the window seat at the third row on the left. This bus ride was often the most enjoyable 10 minutes of his day. While it took three minutes longer to get to Roosevelt Lane than the #8 bus did, it took a scenic route through town. In the course of its travels it passed four locations where he and his wife shared some of their fondest memories.

Face pressed against the window like a child outside of a toy store, Jerome relived the last 60 years of his life with Olivia through the images flashing by on the other side of the bus's paneled windows. The only thing that shook him from his focused nostalgic daze were the occasional jolts he endured due to Gus's inability to dodge potholes.

Delly's Diner, which was located two blocks down from Olivia's Thrift Shop, was the first reminiscent location that the bus passed. Here, he and Olivia nervously slurped down chocolate milkshakes on their first date. Puckering their lips around their straws, they filled the hushed tension of apprehensiveness with the sound of static suction. This eventually resulted in a simultaneous massive brain freeze. The croon of uncontrollable laughter in their shared moment of discomfort shattered their bashful barrier.

Ten ticks of his watch later, Jerome's eyes fixated on the nearly ageless exterior of the downtown Scenic Cinema. This is where he took Olivia to watch *The Sound of Music* on their second date. When the two were saying their goodbyes after the movie, Jerome pressed his palm on

the small of Olivia's bony back.

On the corner of Willow Way and Eastworth Street settled the intricate architecture of St. Marie's Cathedral. The building was crowned with spires that pointed toward the heavens, and colored glass scraps adorned the walls with angelic scenes. Before Father Jacobson and an intimate group of family and friends, Jerome and Olivia said their "I dos" here in 1948. Olivia looked like she was blooming in her lacey floral dress, and Jerome's cheeks grew dewy as his whole life walked up the lilac-petal-lined isle toward him.

HONK. HONK.

"Jerome. JEROME. Quit your day dreaming," Gus said mercilessly. "Do you see the wheels spinning? No? You know what that means? It means they've reached their destination. So, scram."

Unaware that the bus had arrived and startled by the commotion being jammed into his ears, Jerome glanced around in confusion for a few moments before reality materialized around him. Picking himself up and silently meandering past Gus's piercing gaze on his way off the bus, he was quickly reunited with the now bitter evening breeze. As soon as his feet landed on steady ground, he raised his bent arm to eye level so that he could retrieve the time from his watch.

Right on time.

Beyond the bus stop, Jerome was greeted by his rosy-bricked house, or well, the house that used to be his. His eyes wandered on the building, much like a child who stares at the words on a page, trying to make sense of how the letters bleed together into meaningful words and sentences. With a glazed expression he approached the disheveled fence that caged the house. These wooden planks were once a set of pearly whites. With a shaky outstretched hand Jerome grabbed ahold of the splintering wood and from a distance, peered through the house's front window, which looked in on the dining room.

There were no lights on in the house, but he closed his eyes and imagined that Olivia was prepping the long ebony table for dinner with her favorite cherry blossom china set. His wrinkled face smoothed to a tight smile in the knowing of how lucky he once was to come home every day to such a lovely wife. But when he opened his eyes, all he saw was an empty house.

Olivia died five years ago from what could have been a preventable fall. One day she was alive, and the next she slipped from his grasp— *gone*. After her passing Jerome was emotionally unable to step foot into their house again because of the decades of memories that were permanent residents, so he put it up for sale. It sat in on the market for two years before it was foreclosed because he could no longer afford to maintain it. Apparently nobody cared for its charming character or its memories. They wanted the cookie cutter houses that were being built down the block in a development, where they could customize their boxes with all the newest and fancy additions. Soon it will be auctioned off for pennies of its worth.

At 6 p.m. Jerome released his grip on the fence and whispered inaudible words to the wind before turning his back and walked the seven blocks back to his shop.

When he arrived, the evening sunset was replaced with the dark blue hue of night. Jerome could barely make out the sight of his own two feet below him, but he had no trouble finding his way. Following the thin, untrimmed patch of grass that bordered the building, he approached the rear entrance. Digging into his shirt's frayed pocket, he retrieved the sole key of his possession and twisted the doorknob to the storage room. Inside there were not boxes of inventory, but a small shabby cot, a hot plate, an mini-fridge and a few other basic necessities to sustain his living.

He tugged on the beady string to a shadeless lamp that sat on a sideways plastic crate in the corner. Under the dim light he squatted down and grabbed his journal, and a *Bic* pen from inside the crate.

With a ruggedly ripped piece of paper in hand, he plopped onto the cot and scribbled:

Dear Olivia,

I spoke to God last night. I knelt beside my bed and I begged him to lead one person into my shop today. I've felt so worn down lately and needed a reason to keep going. To my disbelief, a man came did come today.

Olivia, I haven't had a customer in more than three months. He didn't buy anything, but he wanted to. His name was Michael and he said his parents used to always take him to our shop when he was young. When he'd spy a knickknack he liked, he'd save up his weekly allowance to buy it. Our shop was the source of many joyous moments in his childhood. His parents are now gone and he wishes to give new life to those memories with our shop.

Father Jacobson used to always say that if it's God's will then it will be done, and maybe this is his will. My beautiful wife, this shop means everything to me, and I know it meant just as much to you, but I think it's time to let go of what was, and find purpose again in what is.

-Jerome

Molly Foster

Baptism

Go down to the river he said
That's where God meets you
Down on your knees
Rinse your face with mud
Be filthy clean
Like your heart
Dress yourself in satin sheets
Look like a ghost
Haunting your own skin
Drown in the current
Feel forgiveness
Clogging your throat
Feel
Love
Collapsing your throat
You will never feel closer to God

Ethan Scalese

Fuck You Christopher Columbus

Fuck you Christopher Columbus for founding this nation
While high on the sickness of arrogant men,
While calling it India instead of America,
For founding a nation about a false dinner
Where diseases were traded
For land and crops in 1621.
For giving this nation the beginnings
Of racism and a racial divide we did not need.
A nation of problems, of war and death and sickness,
Where we all suffer from the human condition.
For bringing slaves over to work the fields
With white men believing themselves gods,
Greater than the black skin that worked to dust
Until the wondrous time of 1865.
For when the greed of the settlers took hold,
The greed of your discovery when you selfishly
Claimed the land was yours not anyone elses.
For the women who had to fight for rights
At a time where men ruled with white tall proud
Power that they claimed was the American way,
Until 1920 when the country became fair.
For the racism, hate crimes, and school shootings
That litter the world you began with no thought
To what nation may spawn from 1492,
The free, the proud, the somewhat biased people
Who live upon your discovery. Chew on that Christopher Columbus.

Your Television

I've been a part of this family for over ten years
 I was the family Christmas present, only \$699.99
 I've seen every girly sleepover
 I've seen every after game pizza party
 I've seen every frisky quickie before the kids came home
 I watched her tears during Titanic
 I watched you chuckle during Saturday Night Live
 I watched you yawn annoyed at Sex and the City
 I watched her scroll her phone during March Madness
 I know who had the remote last
 I know who allowed the dog on the couch
 I know who really spilled the blue Koolaid all over the floor
 I know who crushed their chips on mom's new Persian rug
 I've watch the sweet kids turn into hormone enraged monsters
 I've seen the boyfriend come over when you weren't home
 I've see him watch the R rated movie after you said no
 I was even there when they both went off into the great wide somewhere
 of local community college and Stanford

But I also watched it all explode like Mt Vesuvius
 The screaming matches before work
 The gallons of tears that surfaced as she went out the door
 The scattered bills covered in red letters
 You stumbling in at 2am
 Her sleeping on the couch
 Every annoyed glance
 Every pissed off head shake
 Every hidden phone call to her mother
 Every quick gulp of vodka before dinner
 I watched her disintegrate
 I watched you harden
 I watched her pack
 I watched them choose a side that wasn't yours
 I watched you open another bottle
 I watched you wait for her every night

I watched you give up and prop up the chair
I watched you sleep for days
Now I'm all you have left
You're only friend
Until you saw she'd moved on
And you threw your last bottle of whiskey at my face
I died.

Harmony*Jessica Epstein*

6:43am

Bend me over backwards and take
from my soul like it is a cheap wine
to sip on after a long day at work.

Breathe in the smell of sweat and
desperation as I try to convince myself
the venom spilling off my tongue is the truth.

Hold me close as I shake from the pain
and memories of girls past.
Of girls present.

Of girls who are lost like I once was.

Some Days

Some days
My emotions are as tangible
As the waves of landlocked waters.
My skin like cold, stale air.

I am lost in a mental purgatory,
One crafted by the scars of
my own spirit,
yet I cannot find
or understand.

Drowning in apathy
Like a rock that has succumb to the ocean's will

Only darkness awaits.

At times
In the trenches of my iris'
I think I see a ray of light,
but, as suspected,
that hope is merely a mirage,
a red herring
that the relief of the ocean's surface
Is near.

Tatiana Purnell

Bedhead

Weapons free.

Let's keep this operation high and tight, no cutting any corners. We'll do a few clean sweeps of the area and straighten those bastards out.

Combing my hair is a battle of its own— more like a Bay of Pigs than a Waterloo. My mom used to call it *friendly hair*. By the time I was old enough to ask why, she answered *because the back is waving to the front*. And so, I plead, don't blame my hair for the mess before you. It means well, or so I'm told. It's trying to wave to you, a hairdo howdy-do.

There's a process. It doesn't start when I'm facing myself in front of a mirror that morning; I'm a weatherman before anything else. The forecast is key, and I check the night prior hoping it tells my hair's fortune. If it rains, thank God. If it stops raining, take it all back. Because the rain bullies it into submission, drowns it. Might look normal for an hour or two. But when the rain stops, the revolution begins. Watch a *Planet Earth* documentary, where the flowers go from a bud to full bloom in fast motion. That's my hair when the sun starts shining after passing showers— more alive than me, at that point. When rain isn't even on the menu, I pray there's heat without humidity. If heat is pizza, humidity is pineapple (you never want the latter, especially on top of the former). The curls end up sickly bristles in the soupy Amazon air. If it's windy, I just roll the credits on any high hopes I had for the next day. All it takes is just one gust to turn this Picasso shit to Pollock like a magic trick.

For those keeping track at home, it's still the night before I need to comb my hair for class. Shower time is a lot like a baptism; great, but completely symbolic. My afro-runner-up gets pardoned of all its frizzy sins after one wash, and it's perfect for a while. But the sin clock starts tickin' once I walk off to bed, and it's up to no good when my eyes are closed. I don't sleep much, but I like to think I try so I don't see what my hair is up to at night. Out of sight, out of mind.

I wake up once my alarm works its magic. There's a song I really love called *Headfirst Slide into Cooperstown on a Bad Bet*. And, well, let's just say my hair looks a lot like a *Headfirst Slide into Cooperstown on a Bad Bet* in the morning. The song's only four minutes, my day is twenty-four hours. A day is far too long if you ask me; too much of a good thing.

Have you ever shown up to an accounting class with what looked like brain stew brewing on your scalp? With what looked like a stormy ocean at high tide, a boogie-boarding prime time that no hat could hide? With a mishmash melting pot of brown brushstrokes, amalgamation of Jimmy Neutron sundae swirls all packaged compactly, frozen like chiseled fixtures over your forehead? With a cotton-candy silky spearmint-teen-spirit-scented first impression, a testament to your deviance, a bang without a buck to back it up? With a pristine gear-grinding assembly line steampunk machine, mass-producing a hassle to comb?

I couldn't tell you where Waldo is, but I play a similar game with picking gray hairs at night. It's not all doom-and-gloom, though. The literal silver lining is that it's a tell for hard work. My hair's a talker, hence the waving to random strangers. I don't mind since I'm shy myself, but it definitely is loose-lipped with secrets. The roughest curls call people in close to whisper *did you know that he didn't get any sleep last night?* When a trench is striping down the center, it shouts *DID you KNOW that he was wearing headphones a few minutes ago?!* I don't mind that it gives all of that away. Some of them are nice, like when it turns gray. *Did you know how hard he's working at college?* If it's especially wild when I go home on the weekend, it's a good enough S.O.S. that I need a Saturday and Sunday to recharge. *Yeah, he could use a break, if you don't mind.* Not many people can say they have a mood ring on their head that people can interpret.

Folie à deux is this fancy-talk term for a disorder where you catch madness from someone else like a cold. That's what people get from me every once in a while. Any compliment I get for my hair, ah, there goes the *folie à deux* again. Telling me my hair looks nice, this spaghettified mess, is enabling. I try to surround myself with yes-men for my bedhead anyway.

I want this *folie à deux* to be an epidemic.

A haircut is a funeral, the barber is a mortician. Back home, the shop's the kind you see in cartoons, vintage-50's with the swirling red-white-and-blue bars on the pole outside. The interior looks like an old silvery-red diner with only a single chair and mirror. Barbers have a knack for looking like they practice barbarism—mine's no different, trudging the fine line between ex-con and farmhand, tattooed troubled thoughts across his arm and a bald, pierced eggshell of a skull. Hand the man scissors and he's either my barber or my worst nightmare, tends to be both on a bad day.

"What'll it be?" he gruffly asks each time off some unforeseen script. And all of a sudden, my friendly hair isn't waving hello, but *goodbye*.

Picture any angsty song about a lovebug-bitten guy parting ways with a girl. Overlay it while you watch me watch myself in the mirror, as the hair gets clipped and chiseled clump-by-clump. The barber always starts with a comb and gently scouts the scalp, snipping daintily piece-by-piece. Until he realizes he's way in over his head, and I didn't pay him for such patience. To speed up the process, he rakes his fingers through and chops a hedge-maze through the dense head-bound thicket. A tragedy befalls me, I've been deforested. I'm an activist for the bad hair day. If I could, if I was small enough, I'd tie myself to the follicle tree trunks all hippie-dippie-like, and cry out down with The Man, save our planet! The barber would have to bulldoze over me to get the job done. Instead, I'm restrained by the straight-jacket barbershop apron hog-tied 'round my neck.

My hair's been betrayed, I watch it run the grieving process gauntlet. Torn apart piece-by-piece, clumps accumulate around me on the pristine checkerboard flooring, laying there confused, decrepit, dying, vengeful, *et tu, Brute? Is this what it's come to? What did I do to deserve this treatment? I thought we had something special.* All the clichés. But I'm CIA-trained, at least when it comes to my hair. Keep it professional, don't let

your feelings interfere with the mission. Don't get attached. There must be some seventh circle of Hell, some inferno only Dante has made it back from, for people who betray their hair like I do. I'm a repeat offender, a criminal mind! I only do it over and over again because my hair rises from the ashes like a phoenix. The hairdo's a comeback kid, I gotta say. Resilience doesn't begin to describe it— no matter how many times I think it's dead for good, backstreet's back. *"If you strike me down, I will become more powerful than you can possibly imagine."*

Is this more than you bargained for yet? The real trouble having hair like mine isn't really the hair. It's what the hair hides, the brain underneath. That's the root of it. I don't like it when my hair is short, some of my thought process seeps its way out without the filter.

I am my hair. It's just more of me, an extension as much as an arm or leg. It's a nametag and a label, a to-do and hit list. It filter-feeds my mind moral, normal thoughts and turns them into mad ideas. It makes the trips I take, on open wind-tunnel window car rides to and fro, down red cold rivers and boulevards of broken dreams. It's my spaghetti bowl cut, a fettucine Italian cuisine I feed a smorgasbord of shampoo on my one-too-many showers. It's got its own gravity that pulls in as much as my ego as it can before it collapses in on itself from my black-hole heart. It holds more panic than the disco and more bullets than my valentine. It's my helmet in this goddamn arms race, this 5 kilometer cold war called college. It's more than a hook, more than a thesis, bigger than ebsco could host and j could stor.

When I find people out there with damns to give, I hope they don't mind my hair. In fact, I hope they *love* this Headfirst Slide into Cooperstown on a Bad Bet. I hope people are yes-men and live for the silver lining. I hope we share a certain *folie à deux*, that's madness-for-two, for the curly unkempt 'do.

Derek Letts

Writing Poetry

Writing poetry is like having an orgasm.
It starts with a desire, a craving—
A passionate thought
With some tickling excitement.
It evolves and spreads
From the back of the ankles
To the tips of the nipples
Until the hand can no longer resist.
The fingers grasp
And start convulsing to
The whispering moans
Of words
On a page.
Thoughts distorted
Through closed eyes.

The hand is joyously cramped
But you are nowhere near being done.
You reposition, loosen some clothing,
Stretch a little bit.
Maybe grab a towel—
Just in case.

The secrecy arouses you even more.
They puzzle over the means
By which this great feat is achieved.
An abundance of knowledge
For which you only know
And understand precisely.
You warm with vigor
As the pressure engorges.
A tingle in the toes.
An itch on the palm.
The surge rips from underneath,
And the rush carries you away

In drowning ecstasy.

Breath.

Shiver with pride
at what you have accomplished.
Sometimes you can go again,
Immediately afterwards.
Sometimes you must wait
And let the temptation ferment—
Let the thoughts linger in pleasure.

But don't worry.
Sometimes the current doesn't come
Back to shore when you want it to.
Sometimes it's waiting for you,
But you don't realize it's there.
Sometimes you will step right in it,
And it will instantly wash you away.
Sometimes you have to find it—
Wade through the waters until
You feel its pull.

But when you feel that desire,
Dive deep into the abyss
And gasp for your last breath
As you become baptized
In the art of poetry.

Taylor Caudill

Re: Absent Today

I did what I was supposed to
on the first day, after class

I said,

I have clinical depression

She said,

Thank you for telling me

I said,

Sometimes, I can't go to class

She looked surprised and said

You can't miss class

She said I can't say that's okay

I went to the disabilities office

I said,

I have clinical depression

They offered alternate test taking locations

They said,

We can't condone skipping class

Five years of syllabus after syllabus.

They said,

ATTENDANCE IS MANDATORY

They said,

Legitimacy only in funeral cards or family doctors

I said,

I am clinically depressed

They said,

Try harder

Queen Mother*Autumn Garibay*

Untitled

The Path that guides you, I cannot follow
These churning storms, cloud my heart
Spun cyclones cage my sorrow

Your absence fills me, makes me hollow
From you, I cannot bear to be apart
But the Path that guides you, I cannot follow

The light of dawn brings tomorrow
And yet, my love, I cannot see the lark
Such omens cage my sorrow

As the sun rises, casting every shadow
My love for you resides in the dark
The Path that guides you, I cannot follow

And here I search for you high and low
Out of reach, a whole yearning for its parts
My longing, a cage for my sorrow

A voice reminds me, you reap what you sow
I've ruined you, my dear, stained with my mark
I made the path that guides you, still, I cannot follow
I lost you, I love you, brings freedom to my sorrow

I tried to write a poem about you.

I tried to write a poem about you.

I started to write something about how I watched your fingers, stubby
and delicate span the frets of your guitar and wanting to know what it
would be like to hold your hand but that is

so fucking corny.

And I am so painfully holding on to the shower curtain
and you are so much still missing her.

Ian Davies

Sugar Baby

My bathtub
is full of sugar.
I'm soaking
in its sweetness,
and rubbing the grains
into my skin.

When I breathe
I can taste candy
behind my eyes
and in the back of my neck.

I roll over in the tub.
I like the way it feels
falling over
and off of
and around my body.
As I wiggle my toes,
they go numb
and so do my fingers
and my kneecaps
and so does the space between
my breasts
and the bridge of my nose.

Soon, my entire body is numb
and everything
tastes like candy,
and my pupils grow
so implausibly large
that you can no longer
see my iris
and the whites of my eyes
disintegrate
into liquid.
Simple syrup.

Emily Mitchell

Claire: The Older Sister

I am the reason my baby brother is dead.

It's my fault that he will never live the life that I wanted for him. When mom and dad called me I thought they would be telling me that they would be seeing me in the morning at the gates of the field. I was supposed to be attending his graduation— not his funeral. Instead of seeing “Matthew Temple” on the Luxor University School of Business graduate handout, a week later I have to see “In Loving Memory of Matthew Temple 1995-2018” As I look down at my engagement ring, I feel sick to my stomach. Dave is driving us to St. Michael's church. Ironical isn't it, the same place where our mom and dad got married, where we could never sit still or be quiet during Sunday services... This is where we have to say goodbye. Dave has been so gracious the past week. He said he understands postponing the wedding for a while, and that I can take as much time as I needed to cope with this. But how much time will be enough.

I remember the day mom and dad told me that I was going to be a big sister. Of course, being the only child at the time, I wasn't too excited to share their attention. I competed with my brother for the first five years of his life. Trying to show mom and dad that I was the better sibling. That all changed on that day in July. We were playing outside together, riding our scooters up and down our driveway imagining that we were at the x-games. Then we stopped when we heard the familiar tune of an ice cream truck. When I realized I had spent my last few dollars going to the movies with my friends. Matty pulled out a five dollar bill and gave it to the man and got two SpongeBob popsicles. He handed me the brightly colored treat and said “Here you go, Claire.” I embraced him like he had just bought me a brand new bike. What I would give to go back to that moment. We were both so innocent and untouched by the world.

As Matty and I grew up, we lived a normal all-American life. We were a pair of siblings whose home remained intact and unharmed by divorce and for that we were lucky. Our parents had good jobs and we met at the dinner table at 7 every day after swim practice. The day Matty

told us that he had received a scholarship to Luxor for swimming, I couldn't help but feel a little jealous. I had taken him to our public swimming pool that I practiced at and he fell in love with it, effortlessly becoming better than me. He always felt pressured to be the best, especially at swimming, like he had something to prove even though we all knew he was undoubtedly the most talented swimmer we've seen.

My parents and I saw Matty lose before and of course he was hard on himself for it but when we saw him get second place at his last college swim meet back in February— it was a Matty that we've never seen. Right after the meet my dad was rushing Matty so we could get to The Olive Garden and eat because we had a long drive back home. While he went back to the locker room to shower and change to go out to dinner, my parents and I were greeted by one of Matty's coach. He was in a track suit with a name I can't seem to remember embroidered on his chest. I wasn't too focused on the conversation he was having with my parents, I've heard it so many times. The coach started going off on a tangent, I listened at first when he said, "We have never seen talent like Matthew, but he needs to loosen up on himself. I can see it taking a toll on him." After that I lost focus. Instead of looking for my brother to go over wedding details, I should've listened to what his coach had to say.

The last time I saw my brother was when he was home from school on spring break. Instead of going to some tropical resort where college students drink to get away from the stresses of school, like I once did, Matty decided to stay home and work for extra cash. Dave and I had just send out our save the dates. Different issues of Bridal Daily were scattered all over my apartment. I was sat on the couch with a paper with all of the tables from the reception mapped out. I spoke up so Dave could hear me while he was in the kitchen.

"I can't put Aunt Mary anywhere near your cousin Brian, his political opinions will get a glass of wine thrown on him twenty minutes into the reception." I said erasing her name and putting her next to someone a little less conservative. I have had it with the CNN versus Fox

News debates. I was so focused on these seating arrangements, I didn't hear Dave open the door and my brother walk in. As I looked up at my brother, his appearance shook me.

"Did you forget I was coming over for dinner tonight?"

"Jesus Matty, you look like hell." I said not acknowledging our plans. He had dark circles under his eyes. I shouted to the kitchen "Dave can you order a pizza please!"

I explained to Matty how busy we've been making preparations and making sure everything was together for the big day in just a few months. He sat and nodded, giving me the occasional smile, I had to snap him out of it a few times to make sure he was paying attention. "You might want to start taking notes on all of this for when it's your and Amanda's time." I laughed. I had met Amanda years ago when they first started dating their freshman year of college.

Matty cleared his throat and spoke hauntingly quiet.

"Claire... did you ever think in school, why all this work and stress is worth it?" I partially thought he was joking when he asked, until I looked at him and he was wearing a straight face. Quickly changing the subject, I half answered his question.

"No, never. Now listen Matty, sooner rather than later you need to get fitted for a tux." I didn't want any of my time to turn into the Matthew show. For once, everything was about me— and I'm ashamed to say that— for a while, that's how I wanted it to be.

20 minutes later, he just sat on the couch picking the pepperoni off his pizza. But instead of asking him why he wasn't eating, I just kept blabbering on about the color scheme and how the floral arrangements would match. My brother stood up abruptly, cutting me off mid-sentence.

"I should get going, it's late but I love you Claire and it's good to see everything coming together for you." He said walking towards the door.

I turned myself around and watched him reach for the handle. I called his name, "Matty!" He stopped and turned around. "I love you." I said smiling. He returned a smile and walked through the doorway. I will never forget familiar pit in my stomach as he left my apartment.

As Dave drives on, I kept my focus on the trees that we were passing. I was the reason my brother tied that weight to his foot and dropped it in the deep end of that damn swimming pool. I just keep thinking of how much pain he had to be in. For him to take chains from the school gym then to take a 50 pound weight and use the chain to attach it to his ankle and to jump in off the diving board at the deepest end of the pool. How much pain was he really in? As he breathed his last breath of air and as his arms floated above his head, what his last memories were that he was thinking of? I hoped it would be of when we vacationed in Maine and watched the sun rise from the highest point of the east coast. I remembered how at peace we talked about feeling, and he told me it was his favorite feeling in the world. I wished that was the last feeling he had, peace.

We were pulling into the parking lot and he put the car in park as everyone was walking into the chapel. Dave's placed his hand on top of mine, snapping me out of my thoughts of my brother. I swallowed hard, as I look at my fiancé and feel hatred. If I wasn't so focused on that damn wedding, if I wasn't so focused on marrying him. If I just would have listened to him that day at my apartment instead of making it all about me. My brother would still be alive.

I'm the Reason Matthew Temple is Dead

I am the reason that my boyfriend of almost four years was found in a place that he loved, lifeless and floating just below the surface. Coach Flannery found him there and told me on the phone just hours before the graduation ceremony. There wasn't a note, and nothing was out of place.

Matt and I met freshman year of college in Professor Pearson's Intro to Business class. I didn't notice him at first. It actually took a week or two before I even knew he was in my class. He usually sat behind me but one day someone took the desk I normally sat at, so I took the seat next to him instead.

About a week later he dropped his pen and it rolled near my feet.

"Thank you. I really like your purple Vans" he said as I handed him the pen, then smiled. We talked and hung out together a lot over the course of a month, then that's when we started dating. A month into dating he had a confession.

"Do you remember that day I dropped my pen and said I liked your shoes?" he asked me.

"Yeah I dropped it on purpose just to start talking to you." He was always so sweet and caring towards others. He had so many friends and was well known at the college of business. He was also so smart in ways I wasn't. He could do all that math stuff and he was the best problem solver. So many people wanted to study with him that he started his own study group that met twice a week in the library and at least fifteen people would attend each time.

I often wondered what it was like being Matt. He put so much pressure on himself to succeed in everything he did. Which is why he succeeded in everything he did. He was the top of his class, the best swimmer, and he was happy. He had everything to live for. We were happy together and we were about to graduate and start our lives as real adults. Real adults who graduate college, get jobs, and usually get married, buy a

house, and have kids. Matt expressed interest in this the past year and I didn't. We were sitting on the couch in our living room when he asked me about it for the first time.

"What do you mean you don't want to get married yet?" he said to me obviously upset. I saw the gears turning in his head, like he was trying to solve a problem that wasn't there.

"I just thought we should wait until we had a more stable lifestyle before we thought about marriage" I said, trying to console him. He nodded his head and got up to leave the room.

"Hey Amanda what kind of pizza do you want?" he asked from the kitchen, and we continued our night like nothing happened. He did this a few more times throughout the year and each time I told him we should just wait. I think this is where I made a mistake. He started becoming colder and more distant as the year progressed. He picked up more days to tutor and was swimming more and more each week saying he had to stay in shape and was trying to cut down on his time for a big swim meet in February. I didn't think much of it at the time, but maybe he thought I was pushing him away.

Everyone thought we were the perfect couple, especially Matt. Now I'm not saying this to sound high and mighty, but people would actually say this to us. They would say we were "goals" and they wanted to be us like we were some sort of celebrity couple or the perfect model of what your relationship should be. I didn't like that attention we were getting but Matt didn't mind it as much. He welcomed and even encouraged it sometimes. He would show me off to everyone around and make grand gestures to make sure people were looking.

Two weeks after he came in second at his last swim meet of the season he made one of the biggest gestures a man could do in a committed relationship; he proposed. He got down on one knee and asked me to marry him despite my distaste. We were at a party at one of our mutual

friends' house and he just did it in the middle of the living room. Everyone was watching, and I got nervous and scared of what everyone would say. I said yes in the heat of the moment even though I knew I shouldn't have.

After it happened, and everyone congratulated us I smiled with gritted teeth asking him to come outside. We stood on the porch and I asked him things like "what were you thinking" and "how could you do this to me" without even thinking about him. I told him I wasn't ready and slid the ring off my finger. I looked at it for a second then held it out to him. The look in his eyes was heartbreaking but I couldn't do anything about it. I repeatedly told him I wasn't ready. After that neither of us felt like going back to the party so we just left.

A few weeks go by and as time passed, he became more closed off when we were alone but out in public, he was overly affectionate. He would always hold my hand or put his arm around me and would be kind of possessive of me. He would visibly become impatient when I would talk to other people for too long instead of him. I think he became insecure or something. I didn't mean for him to think that he was losing me or that he wasn't enough for me because he was. He was always the only one for me and I thought he knew that. I assumed he knew his position in my life and how big of a role he played in it.

Thinking back on it now I feel like I could have prevented his death. It haunts me knowing that he may have died feeling unwanted or unloved by me. I knew he always had to be the best and had to do everything perfectly. He wanted everything in his life to be perfect. I knew we weren't perfect despite what everyone was saying to us, but he felt we were until I told him I wasn't ready to get married. I loved him, and he had to have known that. He knew that. He might have thought we were done when I said no to his proposal that night, but I knew we weren't. We had our whole lives to be together, I just wanted everything to be perfect for him. I wanted us to start a life together on the right foot where we had a steady income and could support ourselves. But that doesn't matter anymore. Because of my selfishness and doubt in myself and my place in

the world, Matthew is dead, and it is my fault. A perfect version of us didn't exist but it didn't have to. Even though I knew we weren't perfect, the fact that we were happy together should have been enough.

Even now when I look back on the day of the funeral I couldn't bring myself to tell his parents everything. They still don't know he proposed to me and that I said no. I tried to tell them. I tried to confess at the funeral and the wake and the few times I went over to their house for dinner. I just couldn't bring myself to do it. I didn't want them to look at me and see the reason their son is gone. Nothing in life is perfect but their son— Claire's brother, my boyfriend— he was pretty damn close.

Just Enough for College Students

Seeking drugs
Fearing bed bugs
 Coffee straws
 Perfecting flaws
Gossip junkies
Worker monkeys
 Mental instability mood
 A forever mental feud
Pulling all-nighter to work
Douche bag, frat bro jerk
 Pill popping craze
 Constant “when’s the weekend” daze
Bowl— blunt— bong
Staring at the clock for way too long
 Young and broke
 Getting high off Coke
Ship happens
Memories blacken
 Overly motivated know-it-alls
 Underly motivated GPA falls
Too ready to graduate
Happy incoming freshmen who “can’t wait”

Portrait Perception 1



Lydia Westre-Stith

I Know He's Not Kidding

The woodpecker keeps returning
to my window in the mornings,
pecking in iambic pentameter—
but skips a foot every once in a while

The woodpecker speaks softly,
between pecks,
and says:

I

flew

out

of

the

cuckoos

nest.

I laugh but I
know he's not kidding,
and I *know* he's not kidding.
and

I

know

he's

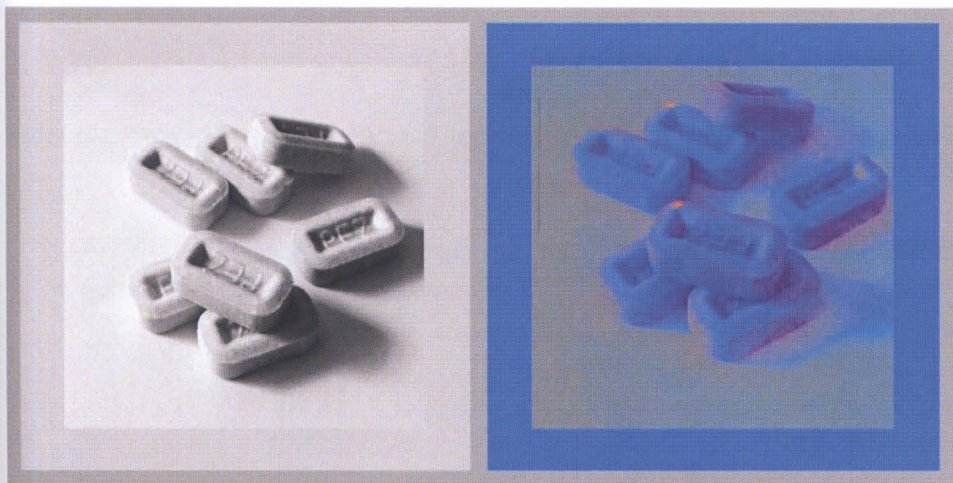
not

kidding.

I open the window to let him
in and he respectfully declines,
and is on his way— once again,
his wings, in the wind, on his way— once again.

And he's flapping his wings in iambic pentameter,
but skips a foot every once in a while.
The woodpecker will return to my window
tomorrow morning, pecking softly.

Ali Laughman

Pez*Sarah Herlia*

A Truth of Sorts

"I wonder if self-loathing's learned behavior/If so, can I unlearn it too?"
-Future Teens, "Learned Behavior"

When people ask me my biggest fear,
I usually say sloths.
That makes people laugh. It's nice.
But later, when I'm alone, the question clouds my brain.
I try to lie to myself and say something deep,
like,
I'm scared of loneliness. Failure, maybe.
That would make sense.
But if I'm being completely honest,
my biggest fear is eating by myself in public.

The only thing scarier than eating is not eating, and I usually yoyo between the two.

When I'm home, my dad remarks on my second helpings.
My mom takes me shopping and picks out clothes two sizes too big.
It's hard to be home.
I forgive them; they don't know me.

I've never had an eating disorder,
but there is this thing called "disordered eating"
and those words slept curled at the foot of my bed for three years.

The barista asks me if I want room for cream.
I shake my head, and feel my curls bounce,
brush against the tops of my shoulders.
I feel human.
Saving a calorie or two is like scratching an itchy phantom limb.
Every once in a while, I just need that fix.

When the words "I hate myself" slowly wind their way out of my mouth
it feels like the only true thing I've spoken in my life.

This isn't so much a confession as it is a purge.
Maybe I'm getting this story out of my system
just so I don't have to carry it around,
settled on my hips.

Rachel Smith

Fair by the Lake



Kristin Smith

Lighthouse

I always liked the thunder
The reminder that I am human
And I am meant to be afraid.

The boy loves the spring,
Loves the thunder
Says it calms him down.
He loves it like I love the sea
Love to feel small, to feel safe
In that I am not in control.

The boy is a sailor
And sailors love the light.
They love the sea and the storm
Like I've learned to love the
Shadows. Sometimes home is
Whatever you have left.
But the sailors love the light
Because their home is still
Waiting. Rolling thunder,
Waves, a single beam of light
Through it all, a silent siren.

Courtney Caro

This Ends in Love

It's all over.

No more having to shave every inch of my body,
 Making sure my hair down under meets his pubic proclivities
 No more having to try on ten different combinations of underwear,
 Rejecting the ones with even the slightest blemishes he could detect.
 No more having to quiet my roaring stomach, holding back the flatulence,
 Finding excuses to go somewhere private or painstakingly waiting until I
 arrive home.

No more having to act like I care about his conceited hipster ways,
 Choking down the avocado he put on my egg sandwiches.
 No more having to play it cool when he sleeps with someone else,
 Engrossing over whether he'll stay or— leave without saying goodbye.
 No more getting my hopes up, being deceived for many weeks,
 Overestimating how much I really mean to him.
 It's all over

Because now I'm in love with

A man who respects my occasional bush when I'm too lazy to shave
 A man who could care less if I wear sexy panties or period panties
 A man who cracks up when I fart from laughing too hard
 A man who puts bacon on my egg sandwiches
 A man who will never say goodbye
 A man who makes me happy that
 It's all over.

The Cold

The air becomes thin,
Crisp like a fresh dollar bill.
Frost is in the air and
Begins biting at your fingertips.
The leaves freeze to their deaths
As they float to their graves.
Coats and gloves can only keep you warm for so long.
The chilly air slaps you in the face,
Your nose is redder than a sunburn that you would rather have right now.
Only five more months until Spring.

Leann Helfrick

Confessions of a Black Boy Who Was Left Outside Too Long and Froze Into a Cold Man

Cold black bodies fall and die, like they expect to.

See them crash to the ground.

Black man in white man world, pick me out from the crowd.

Loud, noisy streets filled with blank hopeless faces litter outside my front door.

Never thought I would be nothing more, than another number

Another nigga with altitude, being shot down from the sky in mid-flight.

Tragedy strikes, here so often that we don't even blink when we read the news.

That another black boy was taken from us too soon.

But we know,

Funerals are beautiful.

Mothers cry and daddies die, and we try, to keep it together.

Now uncle sleeps with a berretta.

Now he doesn't go out at night

Now he don't breathe right

Numbing his mind with drugs and drank.

Sometimes I do the same.

But I pray.

Curtains close, lights fade

Exit stage left, climax, no catharsis

Sit in darkness, on lonely couches of paralysis.

He sits there so long numbing the pain and wishing it could change.

I feel the same.

Will I grow too cold?

Dwayne Ellis

Spicy Sweet Crisis

The top light inside this vending machine clicks as it flickers.
It makes its highest row of Doritos look
trapped in a perpetual loop in which
the bags appear suddenly, dramatically midstage in the
opening scene of an avante-garde play,
but that's the only scene in the play at all,
just that one moment because
it's some metacommentary and also probably someone's thesis
on the simultaneousness of entrances and exits and the fleetingness of life
or something
but the Doritos must perform every 2 seconds or so,
as the spasms of the faulty vending machine lights dictate,
and now their plastic packaging has grown crumpled and weary,
their makeup runny and their voices raspy from cigarettes
and they don't get paid nearly enough for this shit.
They converse in the milliseconds between each jaded gig
in thick Bronx accents, saying things like
that's showbiz baby and
cool ranch.

The show must go on
and off and on and off and on and off and on and
I am completely alone and
we are all so horrifyingly interstitial.

Ian Davies

/or

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