

Grub Street

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Grub Street ^{Volume 71}

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To contact *Grub Street*'s editorial team, write to grubstreet1952@gmail.com or call 410-704-2871.

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Editorial Mission & Submission Guidelines

To have the time, physical accommodation, social infrastructure, emotional energy, and support to write can be a privilege that many people do not have access to. In addition, the standards of English writing are rooted in the study of a racist, sexist, ableist, and otherwise exploitative English literary canon that centers white, cis-gender, heterosexual male voices. In our mission to challenge mainstream narratives, we encourage people from underrepresented voices—including Black, Indigenous, Latinx, differently-abled, neurodiverse, lesbian, gay, queer, asexual, intersex, trans, and gender-nonconforming—to submit their creative work. The staff of *Grub Street* is committed to supporting underrepresented writers and artists in the development of their work and will work with submitters personally to help them realize their creative goals.

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 Only previously unpublished works, either in print or online, will be considered for publication.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

We evaluate submissions in a blind review process, so please remove all identifying information from your works (title pages, headers, document file titles, etc.). Please submit one work per file. Do not submit group submissions. If, for example, you submit five poems, do not put all five poems into one document. Please create five separate documents for each poem. Visual art should be at least 4x6 inches and sent as a .png, .raw, or high-quality .jpeg file with at least 300dpi and a size of at least 1MB. Please include medium and dimensions in your cover letter. If you have questions or concerns about these guidelines, please contact us via email at grubstreet1952@gmail.com. Visit us at grubstreet.submittable.com to submit your work. Email submissions will not be considered.

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



Grub Street, London, 18th C.

DR. H. GEORGE HAHN

PROFESSOR / PAST CHAIR, TU DEPARTMENT OF ENGLISH

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

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



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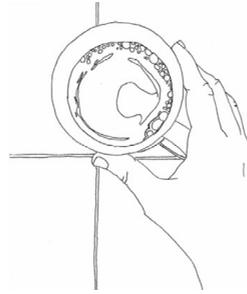
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Letter from the Editors

Dear Reader,

The literary magazine has died a thousand deaths.

Given how time-consuming and expensive literary magazines are to produce, they (especially print editions) can be a low priority over more lucrative endeavors—even for universities with liberal arts missions. Nick Ripatrazone writes in his 2018 article for LitHub that these publications are “born to die.” He argues that “radical passion often meets practical reality.” Here at *Grub Street*, however, we question such statements. What makes a passion “radical”? Whose reality are we talking about? In this late-capitalist, post-pandemic life where nothing is certain except uncertainty, who determines what is practical? Beneath all of this lies a much larger, much more important question: as we wake each day to news of constantly changing public health regulations, atmospheric extremes, and increasingly complicated global identities, what will be of value if the experiences and perspectives of those who have lived through it mean nothing? We have no answers except this: we continue to create space for these voices and perspectives to grow, gain clarity, and inspire others like them—COVID outbreaks, inconveniently-timed Zoom updates, and our own personal vulnerabilities and distractions be damned.

Despite looming creative burnout, our editorial team spent nine months on this issue, and our contributors devoted themselves to creating the art and literature you are about to indulge in. This time—and the passion, talent, joy, and frustration contained within it—has been condensed into the seventy-first volume of *Grub Street*.

In this edition, we wanted to encapsulate how different, nebulous ideas can come together to create an eclectic and meaningful whole. After all, art-making is often a solitary act that, when shared, transforms into meaning beyond the text itself, unifying the author and readers. So too are these unique works of art, fact, and fiction unified by this volume. Each piece is complex and wonderful on its own; we hope that together, these pieces reveal new truths and motivate you to ask new questions.

To that end, we curated a spectrum of genre-defying perspectives that challenged us to consider and reconsider our own preconceived ideas. We chose selections that engaged various subjects: the binary ideas of the normal and the bizarre, the power of

memory and grief, and other deeply human conceptions. “Deerhead & I,” a short story by Matthew Savin, examines the events of a silent and lethal pandemic, asking readers to confront old ideas in a new and increasing world of precarity. (Does this sound familiar to you, or is it just us?) Hope Rosenblatt’s essay “I Am So Dumb,” explores the self-critical nature that often accompanies neurodivergence as the narrator navigates social expectations. Previous *Grub Street* contributor Angus Woodward plays with texture and genre, juxtaposing font and medium while exploring the value of language in “Coffee, Women, Snow.” The stylization of Alexander Lutz’s poem “disparate reflections on new year’s and remembering” confronts the past and memory with chilling urgency.

Each volume of *Grub Street* honors one Towson University student with the Hannah Nathan Rosen Writing Award. Hannah Nathan Rosen was a talented poet and essayist whose poem “Parable of the No Longer Man” appears in volume 67. Selected by TU creative writing faculty, Esther Rose is the winner of this year’s award. Her essay “Someone You Know” deliberately and powerfully delves into the interwoven circumstances of womanhood and how those experiences shape our views of others and ourselves.

The winners of our high school contest were selected with the utmost kindness by our judge, Ben Purkert, author of the critically acclaimed poetry collection, *For the Love of Endings*, which our staff enthusiastically recommends. The finalists were selected from more than one hundred submissions from high schools all over Maryland, sparking hope for our literary future. Our winners, Amanda Amadi-Emina and Daniel Gaughan, present us with richly layered texts in “You are getting box braids.” and “Orbit” respectively. Each author explores how we handle ourselves in pressing or uncomfortable situations at the monumental and deeply personal level.

With volume 71, we hoped to capture manifold ways of existing in an increasingly complex world. We are grateful beyond measure for our staff and contributors, without whom this volume would not be what it has become. Publishing a literary magazine is a process that is bound by time. Once published, the volume cannot change. What can

change, and often does, is how the works in this volume will be perceived by future readers: new editors-in-chief preparing to introduce their own volume, future Towson University students and future contributors, fans of our current contributors, and readers seeking out the humble beginning of some future literary leader. As the staff of literary magazines know, and a great many people have learned, nothing is guaranteed, and not much is static. But we hope that this volume and the work within prolongs the priceless existence of the still-necessary literary magazine by even just one more day.

Best wishes,



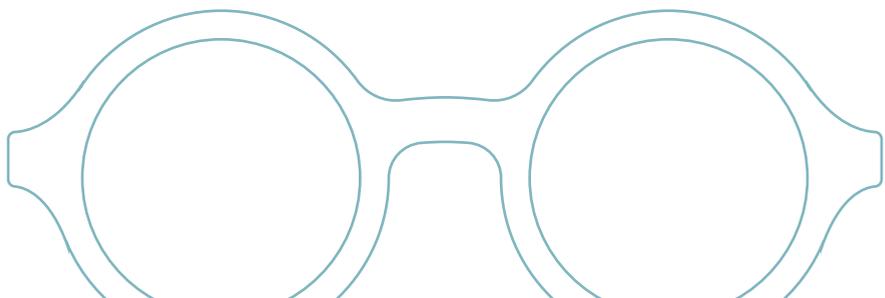
Kelsey and Kourtney



disparate reflections on new year's and remembering

ALEXANDER LUTZ

when asked / what my earliest memory is / I never quite / have a
good answer / so I look for my / worst / instead / children don't
ever / think to themselves / and ask if / this moment is important
/ they just live it / so children like I was don't get what makes
December / different from January / because they are both just
cold / and only require changing one number / when writing the
date / I did not understand what made / midnight / so special /
why everyone was cheering / or clapping / because nothing had
changed / which is why as an adult / I am obsessed with history
/ my history / that neatly divides life into slashes / 10/26/2021
/ I write a date on every / note / because I need to know who
wrote it / to keep record of what I / was / in the past / and to
remember / one new year's / where a dog sat on my lap / the
entire time / luckily I have pictures / with timestamps / I worry
/ perhaps / that these pictures / are my only memories / and if
they go away / I will lose my past / and / repeat it.



My Mother's Addiction

CHEYENNE GREEAR



Jessica

Cheyenne Greear
Digital photography
5184 x 3456px

I shot a photo of my mother. In the center of this photo, the cigarette. Smoke coming from the tip. My mother in the background, looking down. Seemingly unaware of the photographer, me.

I remember asking my mother to smile at the camera, so I could see if my settings were correct on the bright day. Instead, she looked down at the gambling game on her phone. A year later, my high school photography teacher asked me to submit the photo for the Goucher Art Show. For high school students, this art show is a big deal. I told him I would consider it, but the photo needed to be edited, and I no longer had the RAW file. To avoid the RAW file, I put the photo in black and white. Mourning my loss of her to yet another addiction. I initially titled the photo "Smoke" because, well, the cigarette is the main attraction. But my teacher said he wanted more ambiguity, so I changed the title to "Jessica."

The photo was chosen for the Goucher Art Show. My mother asked me if she had to attend. I made her go. The photo won Honorable Mention and was selected to hang in a lawyer's office. I thought, *Why would they want this?* Then I forgot about it.

A year after graduation, I received a text message from a friend still in high school: *Mr. Twentey has something of yours he wants to give back.* He had printed the photo on a large sheet of matte paper. When he handed it to me, I thought, *What*

the hell am I going to do with this giant photo of my mother?

The framed photo now sits under my mother's bed.

To Cigarettes

Smoke follows my mother. Like an aura. Some have a white aura. Some have red. My mother has smoke. The smoke is not only gray, either. It is white and gray and yellow.

The cigarette determines our actions. Together, my mother and I cannot go to the movies. We cannot stay in a restaurant. We cannot take long flights. We cannot rent certain houses.

*Smoke follows my mother.
Like an aura. Some have a
white aura. Some have red.
My mother has smoke.*

My earliest memories of my mother are of her with her cigarettes.

In the dining room of my childhood home, she would sit at the head of the table. Newspaper and cigarette always in hand. The ashtray smelled like burnt peanut butter.

After we were evicted, my mother noticed how the walls were black once she took the art off the wall. Where the art had been, a square of untouched paint outlined by black.

What is this from? she asked me.

As if she did not know.

The smoke was slowly destroying her and her surroundings. The smoke engulfed everything it touched.

My mother was rarely seen at my softball games. She could be found in the nearby woods, smoking.

Much of my childhood was spent at convenience stores, buying cigarettes. In seventh grade, a rumor was spread about me: I smoked cigarettes. My clothes reeked of cigarettes.

In the car on our way to Florida, my mother's lit ashes flew into my window and landed on my arm, scarring me.

I realized: what I once believed were birthmarks were actually cigarette burns.

Branded on me: an addiction not my own.

On a family trip to Disney World, our flight was delayed due to stormy weather in Orlando. My mother went without a cigarette for six hours. She slept the whole delay to kill the addiction. When we finally landed in Orlando, my mother reached for the nearest door, the one that said *Emergency Exit Only*. I told her she could

not go out that door because it led to the airstrip. In Orlando, we had to wait for a tram to pick us up to go to baggage claim. There she could smoke a cigarette. But she was persistent about smoking on the airstrip. Again, I said no.

You are such a fucking bitch. You never let me fucking do anything. Do you understand me? You are a fucking asshole who thrives off of my miserable life. Fucking bitch.

My nephew's baggage never came.

My mother went to tell the employees our information. I waited and waited and waited and waited for her to return. My mother left me at the airport.

Can I get two packs of Marlboro Light 100 box, please? A sentence I said too often after work when my mother had smoked her two packs. Secretly, I was elated when Maryland changed the tobacco purchasing age from eighteen to twenty-one.

In our new apartment, my mother smokes outside. I rarely talk to her anymore. I worry her cigarettes will burn the house down.

I often wonder what life without her cigarette addiction would be like.

I, too, live with the addiction. But not firsthand. Only secondhand.

I will live with ear infections for the rest of my life.

I may lose my hearing.

I have developed smoke-induced asthma. I have a higher chance of lung cancer, on top of my already high chance of breast cancer.

The cigarette, which I have avoided my whole life, controls me.

The cigarette is her longest addiction. It goes hand in hand with coffee. I am not writing this to shame those who smoke cigarettes. I am writing this to share my own experience of witnessing someone else's addictions.

To Caramel Apple Lollipops

The caramel apple lollipop temporarily replaced the cigarettes. We were homeless, living in the basement of a non-smoking house. So when my mother was inside, she could not smoke. Instead, she sucked on the caramel apple lollipops. This may sound like a great idea, until you are in the room, on the same bed, right next to her, listening to the click of her tongue and the sucking through her teeth. Finally when the lollipop was gone, the rustle of the bag for another one. Repulsed at the sound, I would listen to music or watch a movie.

When she was out of lollipops, I thought maybe the addiction would end there. But no. I would hear from the space next to me, *Oh fuck, I'm out of my fucking lollipops.*

What the fuck am I going to do? As if it were the end of the world to be out of lollipops. Maybe it was to her. She would hop in her car to go to the nearest dollar store.

Every day for eight months, I listened to the sounds. She ate half a bag a day. The trash rarely made it to the trash can. The leftover sticks stuck to the glass table until I picked them up and threw them away.

I wished for another addiction.

To Coffee

Coffee has just recently become my favorite addiction. See, I am addicted to coffee. But not in the way my mother is addicted to coffee.

Her coffee addiction is her second longest addiction. I spent a lot of time in a local Starbucks buying coffee. Three times a day, every day for six years. I knew my mother's coffee order before I knew how to read.

Triple venti hot caramel macchiato extra hot, please.

If the foam was not coming out of the hole in the lid, it needed to be returned. Three times a day. Everywhere we went. Yes, even Florida. When we started running out of money, I begged my mom not to go to Starbucks anymore. The drinks cost us \$15 a day on top of the

\$15 for cigarettes. I used to hate going to Starbucks for years after homelessness.

Now my mother makes the coffee at home. I cannot even begin to count the amount of coffee mugs we have. But every coffee comes with a cigarette. My mother drinks a lot of coffee.

To Twizzlers

This addiction is the same as the caramel apple lollipops. A substitute for a cigarette. The Twizzler flavor is Hershey's Chocolate. These used to be my favorite, but now I cannot stand their smell. Walmart is the only place that carries these Twizzlers. I hate Walmart. Every other night we pile ourselves in the car and drive to Walmart, hoping the Twizzlers are there. If not, she settles for black licorice. The worst flavor.

Due to my mother's cigarette addiction, her teeth are rotting. When she eats Twizzlers, she has to get them out from between her teeth. She sucks on her teeth, just like she did with the caramel apple lollipops. The sound chills my spine.

I often wonder if my friends' parents have any addictions.

To Facebook Games

Facebook games always start off innocent.

When I first made my Facebook account in 2010, I showed my mother Treasure Isle. I do not remember the objective of the game. I do remember my mother becoming hooked instantly. She never really spent much time on the computer in our den until Treasure Isle. She could not play without a cigarette.

Treasure Isle forced her to get up at four in the morning, four hours before her shift. Treasure Isle sent my mother to Patient First for carpal tunnel in her right hand. Treasure Isle kept my mother in the den for hours.

The den sat at the bottom of the stairs. I never understood why we called it the den. Like we were bears, hibernating from the rest of the occupants of the home. The smell of the cigarette would slowly creep up to my room.

Why are all of my mother's addictions unhealthy?

To Her Other Daughters

This is not necessarily a negative addiction, however, it is one that has an effect on me.

My sisters are closer in age to each other than they are to me. Jamie was born

in 1981 and Aleshia in 1986. I credit them for my ability to quickly become friends with people older than me. I have never felt attached to them in the way that sisters should. Yes, we are family. But with an age difference of eighteen and thirteen years, we are more like cousins. We see each other only during the holidays and special events. I am closer in age to their kids than I am to my sisters.

Jamie recently went through a breakup. This breakup left her vulnerable. She left her job. Sometimes she would go missing for days. I once went over to her house to find her crying on the floor, leaving my nephew unattended and crying. She moved in with a man she had known for only a few months. Eventually, she was diagnosed with bipolar disorder. Just like my mother. Just like Aleshia. Just like me.

My mother could spend hours on the phone talking to my sisters every day. When I call her, she tells me she has to go. When I come home from class with good news, I have to wait three hours to tell her.

I have always felt as though I was an outcast in my own family. My mother cares more about them, and I have come to live with these terms. My sisters could do no wrong in her eyes. I do not know if this is an addiction, but sometimes it feels like one.

To Pills

I did not know my mother was addicted. I did not know what addiction was until I met my mother on pills. I cannot name all the pills she was on for my first ten years. One day she would be out of it. Sitting on the couch just watching the news, cigarette and coffee in hand. I could talk and talk, but she was not there.

I could talk and talk, but she was not there.

The next day she would be cleaning the house. Going and going and going and going. The living room, the dining room, the kitchen, the bathroom, my room, Aleshia's bedroom, her room, the basement, the bathroom, the garden. All day and night.

The next day, she was mad. At anything and everything. I used the bathroom, I changed the channel, I turned the music down, I turned the music up, I invited a friend over, I went over to a friend's house, I did not leave the house enough. It seemed as though her anger was pointed at me. But she was also angry at my father. She said it was my father's existence that drove her to self medication.

Or maybe it was the death of her mother. Maybe it was the event of my birth.

Due to the pill addiction, she does not remember what she did to me.

I grew up listening to Elvis Presley. His song "Don't Cry Daddy" was one of my favorites. I always thought the lyrics, *why are children always first to feel the pain and hurt the worst*, was about me.

To Alcohol

With alcohol came abuse. When my mother was drunk and on pills, I feared her. She hit me with long sticks, punched me, locked me in a closet.

The mother that hit me remembers, but the mother I have does not.

Today she jokes about it. Despite not remembering it. She threatens to lock my nephew in a closet when he acts up. When she threatens to lock him away, I see the mother I knew: drunk. I wonder if her drunk behavior could front without a drink.

Alcohol allows my mother to commit an act and then forget about it.

The last time she punched me was Thanksgiving 2015. Five years after her sobriety. The mother that hit me remembers, but the mother I have does not. Alcohol used to control her actions. Is

the woman who hit me still controlled by alcohol? Is it the desire for the next drink?

To Gambling

Gambling is a common addiction. Luckily, my mother's addiction to gambling was not that costly. She mainly just played online slots where people gambled fake money.

Then, the gambling became a problem.

My mother spent small amounts of real money on a game, ranging from \$5 to \$10 at any given point. While we were homeless. She spent all hours of the day clicking on a button to win fake money. Then, when she was out of fake money, she spent her real money. When I first found out about the real money spent, I was angry. I wondered how she could leave her child in a house not her own—starving and thirsty and exhausted and depressed and sick and lost—to spend money on a game. Money that could have been saved. I felt betrayed and hurt.

She could not hear me, or talk to me. She just wanted to play and smoke, away from me.

They say money cannot buy happiness. The same people who say that have never been homeless or lived in poverty.

To Crime

The most recent addiction. How can someone be addicted to crime?

Every day my mother listens to YouTubers talk about crime. That is it. From the moment she wakes up to the moment she falls asleep, she is listening to crime podcasts. I hesitate to even call them podcasts since these people are not educated in the field.

She will tell you this person was murdered, this woman was kidnapped, this girl was raped, this guy was shot, there was a drug bust up the street, this man is being sent to prison for killing his girlfriend. She tells me every day. Texts, calls, in person. I do not have the energy to care anymore.

She tells me her theories about why crime happens. *There's a mental health issue, there's a poverty issue, and children growing up without dads.*

I can tell her about Hirschi's self-control theory, or Durkeim's Anomie, or even Broken Windows, and life-course-persisters, or adolescent-limited offending. These are things I am tested on. These theories have empirical research to back them up.

But still I am wrong.

To her, everything is a crime. A man standing on the corner waiting for his

Uber is obviously choosing his victim. The teenagers leaving the apartment next door obviously just bought weed. Walking through the city alone is dangerous because I am obviously going to be attacked by someone I do not know. She does not care to hear my ideas.

I used to love studying the criminal mind and deviant behavior. I thought writing papers about it would exhaust me, but instead it was my mother who blew out the fire.

How do you love someone who is addicted? What makes an addiction?

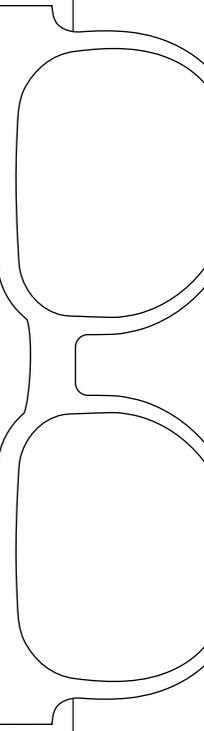
I may never know the answers.

My mother's addiction will eventually be replaced by another and another and another. I try not to blame myself for these addictions, but it is hard. I wonder if my mother would be different if I was not here.

I have addictions, too. I love to sleep, eat, read, and write. I can watch movies and television all day. I am addicted to music that exploits women. I am even struggling with my tattoo addiction. It's expensive. I chew on gum and plastic straws and the inside of my cheeks until they bleed. Sigmund Freud says this is an oral fixation.

Michael Gottfredson and Travis Hirschi's self-control theory says deviant behavior comes from low self-control, developed around the ages of eight to ten. This places the blame on the parents of the child. Without established self-control, the chances of deviant behavior increase when an opportunity arises. Deviant behavior includes addiction.

Maybe this is why my mother's addictions are harmful to herself and others. Maybe this is my answer.



Memories From the Sick Bed of My Father

OISÍN BREEN

I

It was like moss on the south face of the wall in the northern hemisphere; or thyme growing errantly on the windowsill opposite where you have your morning coffee, that hard gavel-grinding earthiness tapping out notes of odour on a punchclock upon which time maps out not the limp unforgiving sermon of the wasted hours, but an aria of three-foot weather-worn signage that recounts all the places we have been and loved; where pigeons peck the grains on the grey cement, and old men sup soup through food-flecked beards telling each other – *'if they did, shite, I'd laugh me hole off'* – *'He was out there and ... it was ridiculous ... like 22 year-olds chatting me up'* – *'He's just, you'll have to ask him'* – *'ah but here she comes...'*

II

Or it was where scoliosis stitches up once beautiful women into the shape of feuding Christmas birds; and where I once sat hammering out inconsistencies, where others fled to the soft arms of pretty girls as a means to find a rum-soaked, chin-splitting escape that happened to the clock, every fourteen years; and where I held hands and felt whole, totally and utterly whole.

III

It was like following a raggedy dog with the tremors, its parting breath overdue but it unwilling to sunder itself from loving, even while lost in the thorny mountains of Northern California; or the kind of idle happenstance that leaves you wildly obsessing over the beauty of someone, knowing they're all caught-up in the same mutual eulogy of brittle hunger and sharp fast hang-dog wasting-into-wanting for a taste or a bite on the slenderness of the nape of the neck or the shoulder – wildly too aware that now is not the right time, for you're already in love, though it's the right time for them – then for you, and not for them – so you go on wanting and wanting in asynopatic rhythm, so you might as well just fill yourself hoarse on the fluttering breeze of the moments when you almost meet – O Étaín – or the day you – do you remember – the day you were sitting at home drawing in a picture book till your father lifted you up and threw you out the front door, telling you how the sun is a haven that spares you from regret, and this then led you to roaming till – as the sun climbed down from its screeching perch – you went to gather flowers to give to your mother on time for tea, only to be met by her howling?

You were gone and she did not know why, she did not know where, and she was chewed up by the fear that you'd be gone before her.

IV

And it was like the faint memory of a jolting, shuddering heave that left me in the back of a car, covered in broken glass and drowning in purple beet stains, after a bus clattered into the back of us, and we on the way to the centre for the deaf – for I could not hear – but then seeing the faces of my mother and the driver convulsed into the rotten death-masks of neolithic soldiers burned by fire, for they saw death, a shattered husk – in infancy – torn from life by nothing other than the steady melody of idle chance; and it was like us laughing together, her having heaved me from herself, then stunned me, first with her wisdom, then with her ignorance.

V

And it came
In a single reckoning
Of release.

...So Why Start Now

CANDICE KELSEY

Do I look yellow? Like jaundice yellow? I half-jokingly ask
My husband sitting in the driver's seat during half-time
Of our daughter's soccer game. We came to charge
Our phones and get warm.

Look at my eyes carefully, I urge him. He is distracted
By the Michigan–Michigan State game on his phone, but
Manages to toss me a glance. I look back into the visor's tiny
Mirror, convinced I look sick.

*I've been trying to drink myself to death, but it's not
Working,* I confess. He bitches about Fat Pat, who carelessly
Texts *and that's the game!* before it comes through on a two-
Minute internet delay.

The tall pine trees that thickened the edge of Fury's Ferry Road
Have been bull-dozed. It's a fifty-million-dollar project
To widen the road where we live. Orange barrels stand guard
Over newly exposed backyard fences.

There were so many trees just a month ago. Oh, some still
Lie there, waiting their turn to become dust as we just continue
Learning new words—*feller buncher, excavator mulcher,*
And bull hog attachment.

The smaller trees seem to watch, waiting for someone to offer
An answer. Or to help. As though they expect one of us to notice
And make it stop. As though they expected us to keep our end
Of some ecological deal.

Well, we don't—at least not for them. Or for us either. Nature
Realizes it's on its own. And now that his game is over, I repeat
I've been trying to drink myself to death. My husband smiles:
You've never been a quitter before...



Lovers

Paul Rabinowitz
Digital Photography
5400×3577 px



Silence

Brooke Petrucci

Oil on Canvas

17 x 24 in

At the Demonstration

ALAN ELYSHEVITZ

Here is a street, the surface cracked from ingratiating itself to our weight. Storefronts of labored breathing and a mob of window reflections brand this event as a demonstration.

Or is it a counter demonstration against Second Amendment sloganeers? All I'm doing is eating Greek yogurt, which, I believe, my complexion permits. I have news

and a good imagination but have left my lucky truancy at home. Dauntless police want to witness abnegation, see it for themselves, no matter the laws of restraint and those

of Newtonian physics. They disarm me of a plastic spoon and ostracize my limbs. My chin ordains the ground. I don't understand my curbside jeopardy, why they designate a knee

for the small of my back. This may be the time to pray to any god willing to do the hoisting required to drop one day and lift the next.



Art Exhibit

Paul Rabinowitz
Digital Photography
15400 × 3577 px

Crushed Velvet Space

MK

First: background. Raspberry-colored crushed velvet couch at Grandma's house. Conversation couch. Ruminaton couch. A place to read *Magic Tree House* books, pet Pasha (Grandma's obese Siamese), eat handfuls of salty Burger King french fries couch. French style, framed in ornate dark wood carvings of swirling, looping design. Ostentatious. Strokes of light and dark depending on the direction of fingers. The smell of Grandma's rosewater perfume bound to sunken cushions, holding laughter and tears and family: the sounds of a living couch.

A swatch transmuted to coarse, white canvas.

Then: subject. Woman. Cold, pale skin with dark hair, limbs angular with left arm jutting from her side at the elbow, head tilted to the right. Body soft, curved, and frosted in warm shadows. A knowing smirk and a flat-foot confidence.

Now: artist. I want to swallow Woman.

I feel her jagged acrylic edges scrape at my throat, like drinking glass instead of sugar in my nighttime coffee. Or I feel the canvas ball up inside me, like the moment before crying. Tears in suspension, I think I will choke on it, this piece of me. This piece, unfamiliar, unrecognizable to

those outside the crushed velvet space. Unwelcome.

Life in need of straightening; I had become too tangled. I couldn't put things away. Congealed coffee cold in ceramic mugs, old short stories splayed on my desk, sewing scraps with pins sticking upwards in the beige carpet.

My mother wants to help me. Clothes strewn all over the floor. As she picks up a pair of jeans, she finds my painting: *Portrait of a Naked Woman*.

A laugh—Mom's laugh, as she unearths my portrait. "Is there something you want to tell me?"

"What is this?" she asks.

Finally, I swallow Woman. The acid inside me dissolves her to—

"Nothing."

As the door snaps closed behind her, I free a glop of black paint over Woman's skin. Right in her middle. And in a violent stroke of the brush, I make tangle the Nothing inside me—so vast and greedy, it fills the crushed velvet space.





Conversations

Rutvi Vakharia

Watercolor Quadriptych
8 x 8 in

What's the Deal with Airplane Food?

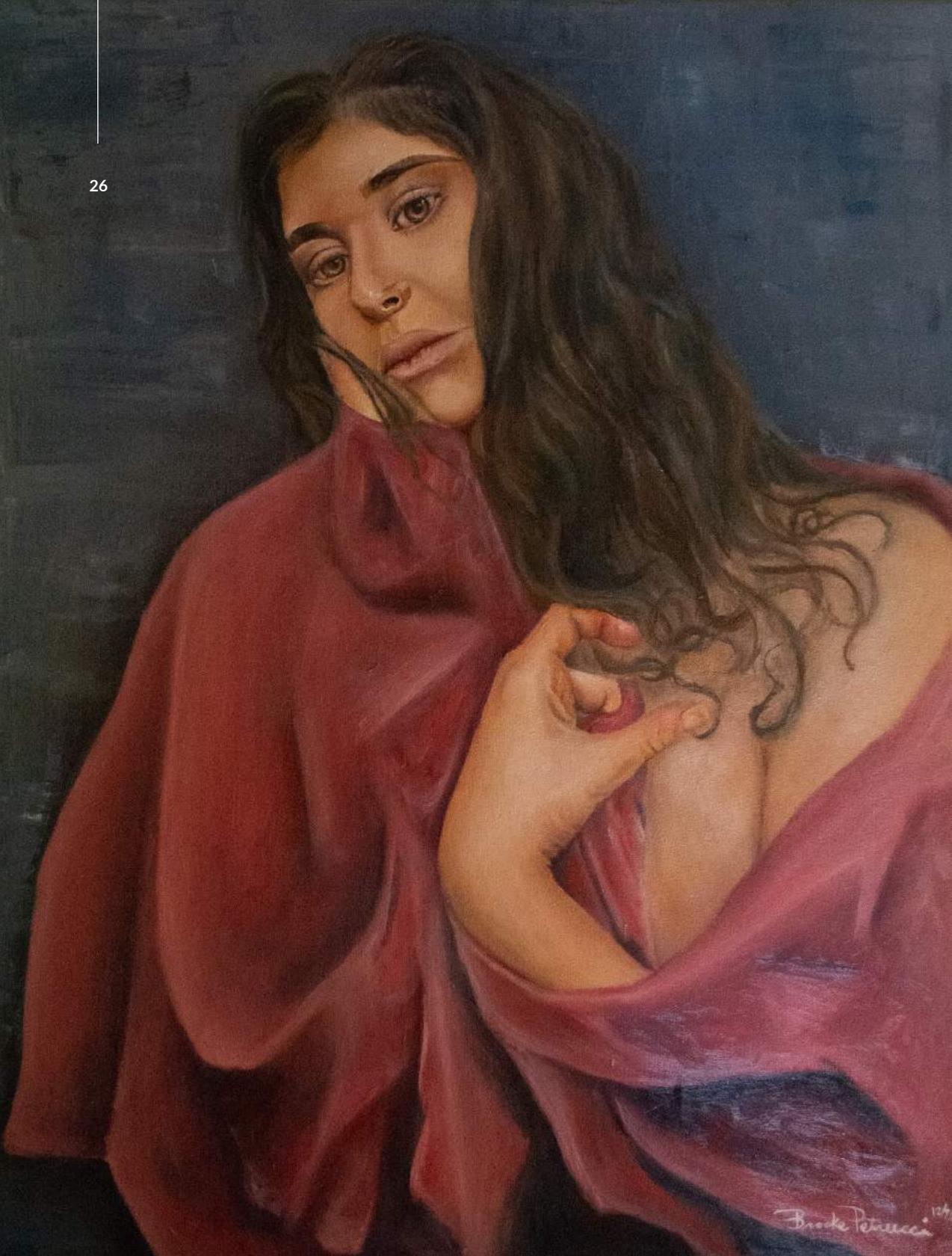
CHLOË WILLIAMS

Once I went against my gut and
it was stuck sour for three years.
Hopped on a plane with things
unsaid, choked them down with
rubber bread and cardboard chicken,
watched television in the wrong
aspect ratio. The next ten months I
jetted around with a backpack and radio,
never found a slice of home, just
stale pretzels on a tray table alone.
Every night I tried to phone a ghost, but
forgot the area code and got the dial tone.
I packed my bags for Leeds Bradford
and hurled myself into the sky again.
Overcooked pasta in a tin told me
you should make it up to him. I
listened until I didn't, and hovelled
where I began for ten more months
begging myself to leave. The tray meals
betrayed me, how's that for sorry?

On Being Mean

OLIVIA SOKOLOWSKI

A man walks up to me at the gas station air pump
and tries to explain how to use the machine. I understand
how to use the machine. When he won't take the hint
I get back in my car and he shouts, *I don't want to hurt
you! I'm just trying to help!* And that's when I get the urge
to lean out the window and smile *I'm just a mean
person!* Right, don't I remember your voice from last year
calling to tell me the same? Or was it my mother's
laughter, saying *zippy, zingy, feisty*—little tap-
dancey words, maraschinos? Oh man, by now I know
the artistry of *Mean*, its well-lit pastry case
haloing flavors: *blistering pineapple, thoughtless
plum...* Rich beyond measure were the egg yolks
plashing the windshield of that new Subaru. I once
stole back a birthday gift, a mounted painting, and stayed
thirsty for that urge days later. Were you not
in the car when A. read us his poem about the body
in his backseat, dying, white hair loosing
from that figure which *must have* been his grandfather
but turned out to be the treasured family dog? O,
how the rest of us laughed! Like shards of hard candy
shooting out of the sunroof and into the mouth
of the moon. The moon is kind because she eats this
kind of laughter, fashions it into an ambergris
waxed with sleek window cats and tulle-purple dusks, an average
she used to perfume the crags of the quiet stadium
we parked beside. But now, I only want to cross
the highway of that memory to touch the dark
noses of the cows that grazed there—sweet and sad
beneath the moon's blue spit. Why can I only
see them now with their faces to the earth, how the pulses
of their breath ask a question the grass still refuses?



In Quarantine

Brooke Petrucci

Oil on Canvas

24 x 30 in

Static, Rumble, Jazz

MADISON MATTISON

We sat in the newly refurbished theater, filling out the first few rows from the stage. Distant chatter carried throughout, but to me it was a chaos of noise. Wanting to sit in the quiet until the director arrived, I removed my hearing aid. The voices were now far away. I had my feet kicked up on the seat in front of me, and my back comfortably reclined. I read comics on my phone until my screen caught the reflection of someone hovering over me. I looked up to see a girl smiling down cheerfully—too cheerfully, holding onto the straps of her bookbag.

Her lips moved, and I picked up only: “Can ... next ... you?”

I waved my hands up to my ears and shook my head, pretending not to understand that she wanted the seat next to me. She looked confused until she spotted my hearing aid resting on my shoulder. Her hands then moved gently in the air as she gave the sign for ‘sorry’ and then ‘sit.’

I froze. Pretending I didn’t understand was my way of solitude, and she took that away from me. Before I could respond, everyone rushed to their seats while the director, Mr. Keshner, marched on stage and clapped. As the girl pushed past to take the seat next to mine, my legs were

forced to the ground. I felt my shoulder for my hearing aid, but it was no longer there. I patted the dusty floor, and once my hand gripped the device, I brought it to my lap to clear it off before plugging it in my ear. The stranger next to me seemed not to notice. Her eyes focused on the stage.

“Welcome all!” Mr. Keshner said. “It is such a joy to have you all here to help us with the spring presentation for our graduating seniors. We have a lot to accomplish in a little bit of time, but I thought today we’d start with some icebreakers and team-building exercises.”

When he called us all to the stage for our first icebreaker, I didn’t know what roles Mr. Keshner had assigned us for the semester. I didn’t know the girl next to me would be my partner and I had no idea that I’d be stuck with her.

Our first exercise was to mirror each other, a super cliché experience in any theater department.

‘I’m Nina,’ she signed.

“I can hear you now,” I said.

“What’s your name?” she asked.

“Isaiah,” I said and signed.

She smiled.

We began the exercise. At first, I was sloppy, and she was almost surgical—doing everything I did as I was doing it, as if

she was in my head. When Mr. Keshner called time, I breathed out the air I'd been holding in. After another short exercise, he kept us on the stage and said what he expected of us. He ended with assignments, and when my name was called after Nina's, my stomach sunk a little. Her face wore a smile that was true, and my true expressions hid behind a nonchalant nod.

Something about Nina intimidated me. Maybe it was that she was a half inch taller than me or that she seemed to know where she was, who she was, at all times.

Hopping from train to bus in this busy city, I stopped thinking about Nina on the way home. In my room, at my overcrowded desk, I pushed aside pages torn out of my notebook, pens left with no ink, and other gadgets I'd collected over the week. I made room for my laptop. Its old battery ran. The fan vroomed harshly. Under my feet were the strong bass and vibrations of the music coming from my speaker.

I scrolled down what seemed like an endless webpage of sneakers in different colors and designs. The next two hours I put together my dream cart—\$1,400 with two customizations. Feeling someone watching me, I looked over my shoulder. My sister, still in her work uniform and looking tired, stood in the doorway. Her eyes wandered around the poster-filled walls before landing on me.

'Your music loud,' she signed. I reached over and twisted the round knob to where I could barely feel the beat. After I faced her again, she added, 'Didn't know you liked M-E-T-A-L-L-I-C-A.'

'I don't. I like song,' I replied.

She turned her head out to the hall and signed, 'Mom wants you.'

I took a couple deep breaths to muster the energy to reach for my hearing aid and walk downstairs. When I joined my sister in the hall, we went in opposite directions. I wished she had followed me.

My mother stood before the hall mirror, wearing her uniform for her second job.

"I asked you to take the trash out, and when I get home in the morning those dishes in the sink better not be there," she said, barely looking in my direction.

I nodded.

"Hello?" she asked.

"I heard you, Mom," I said. "I'll take care of it."

She turned to me, and her eyes slowly softened.

"How was school?"

I shrugged. I couldn't let her know that things had changed. The group I had once called my friends had all separated and scattered. I now preferred to sit alone at lunch. The music didn't feel the same.

"It was okay," I said.

Her eyes narrowed.

"They called me to check in," she said.

"Have you been struggling?"

"No," I stated defensively.

"You still need to prove to me that going

back to this school was a good idea."

I watched her lips move with a sharpness that cut into her pride. I knew in some ways she hoped she was right—that I couldn't handle it.

"It was a good idea," I said. "You don't have anything to worry about."

"I need to go, or I'm going to be late for work."

She grabbed her purse and left. My arms hung lifeless at my side. Didn't she know that I was trying?

I never understood my mom's worry about me returning to my performing arts school. I had a hearing aid now, after all, and she had seen how unhappy I was at my old school. The sign interpreter there was almost always on her phone. When she did sign, her hands looked like they were fighting off early onset arthritis. At that school, I felt as if something was wrong with me. I wanted to go back to the music and the people who dressed weird and dyed their hair all kinds of colors. Why couldn't my mom accept that?

Monday, on my way to lunch, I was greeted by the friends I used to surround myself with, but now our interactions had been reduced to a nod or high five while we were still in motion. I sat by myself at a table away from the crowds. I took out my hearing aid, enjoying the calm static buzzing in my left ear. I was halfway into biting into my apple when I felt a tap on

my shoulder. I turned to see Nina yet again standing over me.

'Your shoes I like,' she signed and pointed at my kicks.

I nodded. She took the seat across from me, uninvited, and unpacked her lunch. She placed a variety of vegan snacks in front of her. Then she took out her phone and started typing before she turned the screen toward me.

So where are you from? You look familiar, I read from her notes app. I placed my hearing aid back in my ear to keep her from typing.

"I just transferred back," I said.

"Oh. That makes sense."

"Yeah," I responded plainly, encouraging the conversation to end.

"Did you hang out with a large crowd freshman year?"

I wondered about the relevance of her question before nodding softly.

"Yeah! You guys used to make a whole lot of noise in the cafeteria! What happened?"

I fell into a soft memory of how we'd abandon our trays, slide them to the side, and make room for a show. I'd drum on the table, others sang and rapped, and everyone would dance. No one knew then that what I heard sounded like something trying to fight its way from behind a closed door. The long table that we used to claim as ours—with all of us stacked on top of each other—was now where the school kept the trash bins.

I shook my head.

"Different lunch periods and classes I guess."

"So how long have you been deaf?" she asked bluntly.

"I'm not... profoundly deaf yet," I answered.

"Yet?"

"Yeah, eventually I won't be able to hear." I paused. "Even with this aid," I added, gesturing at my ear.

"My dad's deaf. That's how I know how to sign," she shared, then said quietly, "if you wondered how."

I nodded.

"What's your art?" she asked, stabbing her straw into her boxed apple juice.

"Music. Percussion to be exact."

"Cool. Mine is theater," she said. She produced yet another question while casually chomping down on a carrot. "What made you wanna help out with the spring production?"

"I just wanted to."

She nodded her head suspiciously.

She was pretty, but in a strange way. Her eyebrows were full yet refined in these fierce arches that made her appear judgmental. I found myself getting sucked in, lost, searching for myself in her large black eyes. Her face was clear compared to all the other sixteen-year-olds I knew, and she never wore makeup aside from the occasional gloss. The only thing that took up space were the small specks of freckles sprinkled about. Her hair fell to her shoulders and wrapped around itself. It was decorated with shells and jewels. She suddenly put only the front up in a messy knot so it wasn't all in her face. I rolled my eyes, forcing my thoughts off of

her. The bell rang just in time. I grabbed my drumsticks and tray and left before Nina could chase after me.

As I had expected, it was hard to shake her. I saw her around campus, around the cafeteria during lunch, and, of course, at rehearsals. When we worked together, our conversations were brief, but she had a way of making them carry on longer than necessary. After some time spent in the booth, the awkwardness subsided—even though she'd find ways to slip in questions about why I chose to spend my time alone. I found easy ways of escaping her moments of psychoanalysis and directed the attention back on her. I asked her why she'd chosen drama. I also asked about her dreams. She loved talking about her dreams. She described them in such detail I almost felt as if I was imagining them with her. At lunch she gave me a reason for keeping my hearing aid in, which I didn't mind. After rehearsals, we'd walk to the train station together before parting ways.

At rehearsal today we sat next to each other, laughing together at how frantically Mr. Keshner moved around while giving notes. Our inside jokes seemed to grow louder, and Mr. Keshner had to clap his hands to tell us to focus. Nina leaned over, pressing her head into my shoulder. I let out a snort.

"Okay everyone! Great job," Mr. Keshner said. "Next week will be tech week, so I expect you to come and perform at your best."

More like hell week, Nina wrote down and showed me.

I took the long way home, avoiding the quick commute. It was the first warm day after the cold winter months. I wanted to feel the breeze blow through my shirt for as long as possible. As I entered the house, a familiar scent of expensive cologne mingled with my mom's cooking. I felt the warmth growing inside as I turned the corner into the living room. My uncle was seated on the couch. Our faces lit up at the sight of each other.

My uncle, like my father, was a traveling musician, and despite our closeness, I didn't see much of him. Some of my favorite memories are of him and my father teaching me about music. Before my hearing started to fade, my dad had this desire to teach me how to listen to music, how to play it, and most importantly, how to feel it.

My love of music started with a tickling of the keys and learning of certain chords. One day, my dad and my uncle took me to a music store and told me to pick an instrument. I lifted two sticks, both different sizes. My father laughed, gently correcting the size of the sticks, and from there, the beating began. I followed the tempo of my heart, and that rumble became my favorite sound until it became my favorite feeling.

"How are you?" my uncle signed.

"Good," I said and shrugged.

"Just good?" He teased me by bringing his arms up to my shoulders.

"How's the tour going?" I asked.

"One more show Thursday night," he answered. I could see my uncle had his

sax next to him. The idea started brewing in me, and when I looked up at him and asked about it, I could see his eagerness too.

"You brought your sax?"

"Take it with me everywhere I go."

"We should play!"

"I expect nothin' less," he said, holding his arms wide out. He took a step back and reached down to unbuckle the case. I dropped my bag, pulling my drumsticks out. "Isaiah, don't you have homework?" my mother said.

"I did everything already," I answered, which was the first time I was honest when it came to playing before homework.

"Well then go freshen up and set the table for dinner. Your sister will be home soon. Y'all can play after."

I couldn't understand my mother's resistance, but I put my sticks back and left the room.

Before my hearing started to fade, my dad had this desire to teach me how to listen to music, how to play it, and most importantly, how to feel it.

After we cleared the table and cleaned the sticky barbecue off our hands, the living room welcomed us back. My mother allowed us to play while she cleaned. My uncle with his sax, my sister at the keys, and me rumbling on the drums. He started with a tap on the piano, setting the tempo for me. I followed and just felt everything else.

Our jazz started off slow with me leading this time. My sister soon followed, and then my uncle. We spoke to each other with those instruments, checking in, edging on, debating. My uncle took

the loudest voice for some time, with the agreement of my sister and me. I grew louder, and my uncle welcomed me. My sister was the moderator, keeping us steady and on track in the background. My opinions were thunderous as my drum rumbled and my bass boomed, growing louder and more aggressive with each round. My sister played a little louder, telling me to stay calm. I brought more peace. She was quiet again and my uncle came back in with the bright side of things, as he always does.

My love of music started with a tickling of the keys and learning of certain chords.

What felt like twenty minutes to us was a century to my mother. Not having any more to clean, she inserted her presence, which told us to wrap up. My uncle looked down at his watch and pretended it was late and that he had to go.

"Five more minutes, Mom," I pleaded.

She shook her head. "You have school tomorrow."

My sister had already excused herself, as she had to get up early for work.

I sighed and placed my drums back out of the way. I gave my uncle a tight squeeze, wishing he could stay longer. I kissed my mom goodnight on the cheek and left the room. I was halfway up the stairs, about to take my hearing aid out, when something kept me in that stairwell, just to linger for a few more moments.

"Why were you so tough on him?"

"I was not tough. He has school."

"That's not what I mean. You give him such a hard time. He just wants to play music."

"Music isn't everything."

"You, twenty years ago, wouldn't have said that."

"Well, that's the thing. It was twenty years ago."

"Don't you remember what it felt like?"

"What, all those nights Oscar was on the road? The few months at a time he was here with the children? I was alone having to raise them, having to face what Isaiah has to go through, alone."

"You were not alone, and Isaiah is fine."

"You're not here, Lou. You don't get to tell me my boy is fine."

I lost some of what they said as their voices went to a whisper, or their steps got farther away from me.

"Well, I don't want him to end up like Oscar!" That was a shout. "And I don't want him to be different, because then people will treat him differently."

I removed my hearing aid and rushed to my room before the stinging in my eyes amounted to too much. I blasted Metallica so loud that I could feel it from my bed. I let those vibrations rock me to sleep.

The next day it rained, which fit my mood. All the way up until practice, I dwelled on my mother's words. I started plotting ways I could show her I wasn't as much of an outsider as she thought I was.

At rehearsal, Nina and I sat in the booth, testing out the equipment that had been out of use for some time.

"Hey, are you okay?" she asked, leaning over.

I nodded.

"I can take the sound if you wanna do lights," she offered.

She made me feel incapable. I knew it wasn't her intention, but I had pride.

"I can hear fine. Besides, eventually I'll just pick up the cues."

"Okay, I just thought—"

"I'm good."

Silence quickly entered and sat with us. Sometimes it felt like my closest friend. A lullaby of static that soothed the burning of my ears.

For the rest of the rehearsal, she and I only spoke to update each other on the status of the equipment. After rehearsal, I carried the gray cloud I'd had all day, even though the sun came out and Nina was soaking its rays into her skin.

"I love it right after it rains, don't you?" she said, following behind me.

I walked faster than usual, ignoring her.

"Isaiah, what is your problem?" she asked when we reached the corner.

"Can you please leave me alone!" I yelled.

Nina took a step back. Her eyes lowered.

"I don't need you always hovering over me! I have other friends. I'm not a loner. If I am, it's by choice because I like it! I like being alone, and I like silence. I much rather prefer the humming in my ear without this," I said, snatching my hearing aid out, "than you yapping around me all the time. I'm not your charity case, so stop feeling sorry for me!"

Her lips remained pressed together, and her eyebrows were wrinkled.

"For the record, I never felt sorry for you. Maybe I do now," she said.

"You do realize I can't hear you!" I said back.

She was angry now. She backed away, holding up both her middle fingers.

A few days later, for the first time in a while, I did feel alone. I kept my hearing aid out during lunch, but I wished I had a reason for wearing it.

Monday came around and I was back in the booth, alone for some time before Nina arrived. She dropped her bag and flopped down in the chair on wheels that rolled back ever so slightly, not even acknowledging me. I disliked not being seen, but I knew it was my fault she was giving me the cold shoulder. Nina had seen a friend in me and that was something I couldn't see in myself.

I turned to her. She was already focused on the lighting board and ready for the onstage action to begin. I pressed my hand gently onto her arm and she looked at me, her eyes judging me as usual.

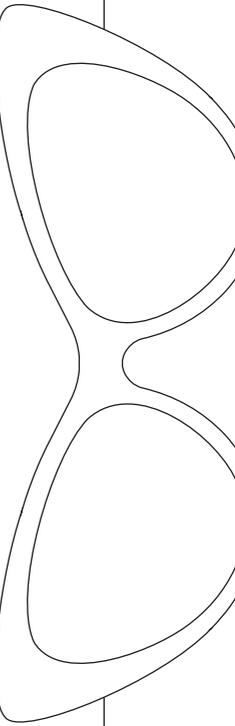
I signed to her, 'I'm sorry for being a jerk.'

She searched my eyes, then put her hands out in front of her, palms facing her stomach, and moved them back and forth a couple times.

'Whatever,' she signed, but just before looking away she tugged at the corner of her lips, telling me that she could forgive me. I smiled down at the soundboard.

Taking her cue from the stage and the orchestra below, Nina dimmed the house

lights. I pressed a button to unmute a mic, and the sounds of narrations swirling with the hum of a violin was a symphony playing in my ears. For the first time in a long time, I was pleased, happy to hear something other than static buzzing faintly, happy I could hear what Nina could hear and live in her world for a moment.





Forging Friend
Chloë Williams
 Digital Photography
 6000 × 4000 px

Thaw

B. J. BUCKLEY

Was out with Clay checking fence, where we could get to it, for breaks and popped staples and slack wire and any place the drifts had broke posts and laid it flat or where early melt had washed the ground out from under it, Clay in his "perfesser" mode about his special foolproof wrap splice for bobwire and where to find dead seasoned wood for posts 'cause only a fool paid money, and how to braid in stays for when you had to cross the coulee, and other tricks for rough and broken country, and on and on. Neither of us was looking anywhere but at the four-strand right in front of us, so that we was nearly on him before we realized—pronghorn buck, whittled down to hide and skeleton, back ankle caught fast where his leg had clipped the top wire jumping over: pulled it down below the second strand, snapped back and made a snare: hung him up. Dead right there, though dying would've taken days—he'd made a groove near through the bone trying to twist free, all the sage in an arc in front of him ripped out to bare earth. Antelope ain't rigged to leap like deer, their legs are wrong for it, so they kneel to go under a fence if there's room. But this one's horns were huge, trophy size maybe, the bottom strand was too low—over was his only chance. He was likely after some doe in heat, Clay said, grown too old and heavy to make the same jump he'd made last season, and it wasn't right, Clay said. It just wasn't right.

Whiskey with Old Etchemendi

B. J. BUCKLEY

So many things you see one time and never more again, it ain't like science—you can't prove nothing, have to take a man's word 'cuz you know it'll happen to you, some wonder, or something so terrible what you have to share out somehow or die of it. Light plays tricks—you can walk past such miracles and revelations what could turn a church inside out, there's a kind of brilliance burns you—once't has you, you don't own yourself no more. You might walk through time as if it was only rain falling, break out of it and see mouse tracks chitter back and forth in the shade of outcrops, flakes of chert and jasper from some long ago hunter chipping points, coyote scat, little bones. Such ordinary leavings—dropped seeds, sage—then the air shimmers, radiant with ghosts, voices—feather print of owl-wing brushed that silence, held it, lifted it away.

Myrna

PETER F. STINE

Three weeks into our sex drought, I told old Mrs. Durdan down at the post office that Myrna had a fake leg.

"My stars!" she replied. "Why, your wife walks so nice. Which leg is it?"

"The left. She can kick like a mule with her right, but that left one, it's just wood and paint."

I bought a book of stamps even though I didn't need them. I figured they'd keep just fine, so I chose nature scenes. An eagle swiping a rabbit from the tall grass. A fat, pink-bellied trout jumping up from the river. Things like that.

That night at home, I told Myrna about my chat at the P.O.

"Why on earth would you tell her that? Now she's going to tell everyone I got a peg leg!"

"So what?" I asked. "Who cares if she tells everyone?"

"You know damn well my legs are just fine."

I looked up from my magazine.

"I guess I haven't seen them up close in a while," I said.

She left the house without feeding me. I ate a TV dinner and wrote my brother a letter about how great everything was going. I couldn't find the old, half-used book of stamps so I used my new book. I chose a colorful landscape with a moose sauntering out of the woods while looking pleased about something. Underneath the moose, I drew an arrow

pointing to a caption I'd written that said, "What the hell does this fella look so smug about?"

Sometime after midnight, Myrna came home and climbed into her side of the bed.

"Hey," I proposed, half-aroused from sleep. "Hey yourself," she answered.

It sounded like she was reading the words. She turned her shoulders away while keeping her hips flat against the mattress, like a bent spoon refusing to nestle into the drawer.

That night I had a dream featuring Postmistress Durdan in the role of the town crier. She wielded a pink megaphone with which she announced, "Myrna Ryan's got a wooden leg, folks!" Her other hand held the reins of her steed, a self-satisfied moose. I recognized him from the stamp.

In the morning, I got up, drank instant coffee, and left for work before Myrna got out of bed.

A month and a week into the embargo, I told the boys at the VFW bar that Myrna had an artificial heart.

Sonny Taylor said, "Damn!" That was all he had to say about it, which was fine by me.

"How often do you plug her in?" one of the fellas asked.

"It's going on five weeks now," I told him, my face the picture of husbandly concern.

A communal murmur followed. Someone by the jukebox lamented the fact that one woman would need an artificial heart and a fake leg. Word travels fast in a small town. Indeed, by nightfall some of the gals from her bowling team had swung by with a basket of flowers and some sodium-free snacks and left them on the porch.

"What have you done now?" she asked, walking in with the basket of goodies on her arm.

Over pie and coffee, I told the waitress that Myrna was away getting her right hand replaced with an iron hook.

"I haven't the foggiest," I lied.

She opened the card and read it slowly.

"You told them I got a robot heart?"

"Well?"

I stared back before she turned and stomped upstairs, locking the bedroom door behind her.

The couch was not comfortable for overnight sleep. Strange dreams troubled my mind. In one, Myrna had a voice like one of those dolls that speak when you pull the string in her back. She could say only three things: "hey yourself," "why on earth would you tell her that," and "goodbye."

In the morning she came down, ate breakfast, and left before I got up. After that, I didn't see hair nor hide of her for three weeks. I ate canned tuna and crackers from the cupboard until I eventually had to go to the diner for a hot meal. Over pie and coffee, I told the waitress that Myrna was away getting her right hand replaced with an iron hook.

"And after all she's been through," she said and shook her head.

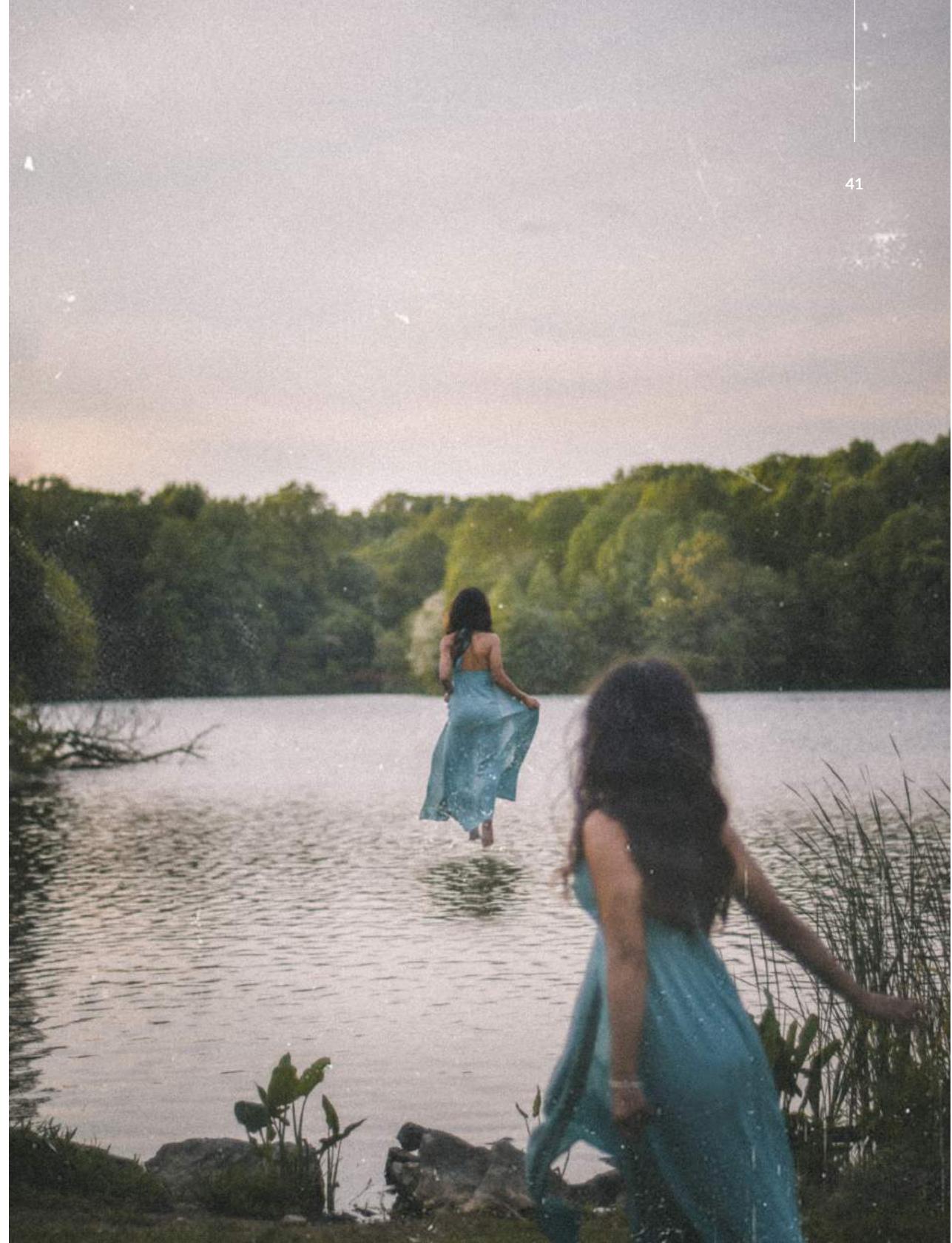
That night I climbed the stairs to find the bedroom door standing open. Myrna had cleared out her things and left a naked mannequin face down on her side of the bed.

That was two years ago. I don't talk about her around town anymore and people don't ask. I fix my own meals. I don't wait up. I expect she's off somewhere far from here giving some new beau a business-like goodnight handshake. I wonder if he talks about her down at his P.O. or VFW yet.



Other Half

Khôi Nguyen
Digital Photography
4000 × 6000 px



Grub Street Writing Award for High School Students

BEN PURKERT
JUDGE

The winners of the 2022 *Grub Street* Writing Award for High School Students are Amanda Amadi-Emina and Daniel Gaughan. Their works were chosen by critically acclaimed poet Ben Purkert from among hundreds of submissions. Purkert's debut poetry collection, *For the Love of Endings*, was featured as *Adroit's* Best Poetry Books of 2018. His poetry has appeared in the *New Yorker*, the *Boston Review*, *Ploughshares*, the *Kenyon Review*, and elsewhere. He edits *Back Draft*, *Guernica's* interview series focused on revision and the creative process. His debut novel, *The Men Can't Be Saved*, will be published in 2023.

Orbit

DANIEL GAUGHAN

What does it mean to live in a world seemingly on the precipice of disaster? How can we still find joy in such a place? Daniel Gaughan's "Orbit" asks these questions with an unflinching resolve. Just as Alexandra Kleeman's "You Disappearing" considers a world of impending environmental loss, "Orbit" describes how it feels when we're left staring "at the thing that will erase [us]." In addition to the scope of the piece, I greatly admire Gaughan's eye for detail: "I forced a swallow through my throat, which seemed to pull the corners of my mouth down with it." This is a writer with terrific potential, one who sees the present moment clearly and faces it with the necessary courage.

—Ben Purkert

"Doesn't it bother you?"

The question passed my lips before it had even formed in my mind. The silhouette next to me shifted, abandoning the comfortable position she had found lying in the grass of our small hill.

"I mean—" Jess shrugged. "Not really." Her face was hard to read in the sparse moonlight, but I could still make out the concern superimposed on her features. It was a familiar expression—it appeared whenever I talked about something like this.

I propped myself up with my elbows, grinding dirt into the crevices of my exposed skin. My neck remained craned toward the sky. I didn't take my eyes off it. I heard the slightest sigh slip from Jess's lips, the same sigh I always heard whenever I was being difficult.

"It bothers you though, doesn't it?" she asked, politely hiding her exasperation. I forced a swallow down my throat, which seemed to pull the corners of my mouth with it.

"I mean, how could it not?" I lifted my elbow and stretched the fingers of my right hand towards the sky, as though I needed to point out the celestial form to her.

"They say it's the thing that will end all life on Earth. For good," I elaborated. "Doesn't it seem so... I don't know."

Jess nodded, her eyes tracing the path of the asteroid as it streaked across the clear night's sky.

For now, it's just fun to look at. Marvel at. Get drunk and party and thank god you weren't born three hundred years later.

"Not for like, three hundred years, though." She shrugged again, completely indifferent. "For now, it's just fun to look at. Marvel at. Get drunk and party and thank god you weren't born three hundred years later." She chuckled like she'd said something funny.

I tuned in to the murmur of the bodies below us. The flicker of firelight seemed to mimic the asymmetrical crease of light purple that Dante's Asteroid cut across the sea of tranquil black above. There was laughter and muddled snippets of conversation. There were cups flung about and the fluid movement of arms pushing and pulling bodies into one another. There was happiness. There was reverence.

"But how can it not mean anything?" I asked. "Millions of years of evolution and history and art and people and progress. And we get to just stare at the thing that will erase all of that. We just stand around and celebrate the hunk of space rock that makes it all for nothing."

"Christ, Mark why can't you just—" She pinched the bridge of her nose between her thumb and forefinger. "Why can't you just be here? Why do you have to be three hundred years in the future with all the people who actually have to worry about that? Can't you just be happy that you're fine? That you get to enjoy all that progress? That you get to lie in the grass with me and experience something that only comes around once a decade?"

She sat upright, staring down at me. I slid my eyes away from the asteroid and connected them with hers. I fell into the deep leagues of her irises, which were rendered nearly black in the darkness. My mouth slipped into a small, tentative smile. Her lips lovingly mirrored my own, and she slid her hand across the Earth to cover mine. She squeezed my fingers tight as we reveled in the calm of each other's gaze.

Then, the purple scar of the asteroid

cut through her eyes. I felt my eyes widen, and my heart sink, and my hand go limp in hers. I could see the heavenly form tearing through the planet's atmosphere, swelling to the size of the sun. I could see it ripping into the Earth. The asteroid, nothing more now than a flash of fatal light. I could see it burning through the bodies below us, in the next instant, reducing Jess to ash in my grasp. I could see it slipping right past me, as though it knew leaving me alive was worse than taking me with her.

I could see it slipping right past me, as though it knew leaving me alive was worse than taking me with her.

Jess sighed and her disposition shifted to pity. I felt her slide her hand from mine, leaving me alone in the damp earth. She stood up in silence, her eyes fixed neither on me nor the asteroid above. She walked gracefully down the grassy hill, shaking her head just slightly in disappointment.

I stared timelessly into the empyrean comet as it made its way peacefully across the infinite dark. I watched, briefly, as Jess slipped into the sea of bodies and laughter and happiness beneath. I thought once or twice that I could hear her laugh, but it was impossible to tell, really.



You are getting box braids.

AMANDA AMADI-EMINA

Amanda Amadi-Emina's "You are getting box braids." is a wonderfully layered text of compelling vignettes and character studies. Auntie Gifty in particular comes alive on the page: "She will insist she fits you for waist beads. As the cold measuring tape hits your stomach, she will make a fleeting comment that should not hurt your feelings. It will hurt anyway." The sentences are pithy and to the point; not a single syllable wasted. And once our time in the chair is done, we get this terrific simile: "When your graceful retreat to the car begins, your head will be held high, slightly stuck out, to ease the weight of the braids and the sprinkles of now cold water on the back of your t-shirt. Shuffling slowly, like a beloved flightless bird." Yes! I can see Amadi-Emina's image so vividly. I can't wait to read more in the coming years.

—Ben Purkert

Friday

When you get home from school, your mother will be home early, sprawled on the couch. She will take a glance at you and decide something must be done. She will declare that you look a mess, your hair is nappy, you look like you don't get fed at home.

"can we talk about the antiblack connotations of what you just said."

"no, go comb out your hair so it hurts less tomorrow."

iMessage

Your friends will not understand why you can't hang out this weekend. You will tell them you're getting your hair done

tomorrow. They will be confused. You will wonder what is so hard to understand. They will ask you why you can't just come to the mall after you get your hair done. You will put the groupchat on mute.

"sunday, then?"

"i gotta factor in recovery time, eva."

16 Minutes

The car heater will be on, blowing in your face and freshly combed hair. Your mother will take a right turn at McDonald's and order herself a coffee, and you a sausage Egg McMuffin with a hash brown and medium hot chocolate. About halfway through the drive, she will hand you a twenty for pizza in case you get hungry. You say you don't need it. You will.

“is there even a domino's near there?”
 “god, you better hope so.”

Gifty

Aunty Gifty will be very excited when you get there. You will wonder if she actually likes you or the fifties in your back pocket. You will decide you don't care. She will insist she fits you for waist beads. As the cold measuring tape hits your stomach, she will make a fleeting comment that should not hurt your feelings. It will hurt anyway.

“it's almost summer, yeah?”

“yup.”

“i make gold for you, yeah?”

“thank you.”

Jenifa

An old Nollywood movie will be playing you when you get to the chair. One you've seen many times before. Even when you close your eyes as cold water soaks your hair, you will know every word and scene that comes next.

“this girl? i go show you peppe in this in house today.”

Sectioning

A rattail comb, or maybe a broken wide tooth comb, will cruise down your scalp multiple times, perfecting cuts and edges.

Geometric shapes will take form on your head, each one more accurate than the last. As the comb pricks through, you will thank your Creator for not making you that tender-headed.

“girl if you don't stop flinching.”

Vain

Gifty's hands will not hurt, probably because she's been doing this for longer than you've ever existed. You will hear the swoops and flicks as she tucks your fluffy brown strands into thick black hair extensions. You will crane your neck slightly, trying to peek at the mirror you've been strategically placed away from. Gifty will place her cold, Indian Hemp coated hands on your neck and turn you away.

“no looking, yeah?”

*Geometric shapes will take form
 on your head, each one more
 accurate than the last.*

Hot Water

With an iron grip, she will hold your stiff locks and dunk them into a plastic food-grade pitcher, seconds away from melting from the boiling hot water it was filled with barely minutes ago. The impact will splash a tiny droplet on your skin. Miniscule. But to your aching scalp, this is the end of the world. You will arch your

back away from the chair, hysterical. She will push down on your shoulder.

“not water, just steam.”

“no, it burned me.”

“just steam, yeah?”

Penguin

When your graceful retreat to the car begins, your head will be held high, slightly stuck out, to ease the weight of the braids and the sprinkles of now-cold water on the back of your t-shirt. Shuffling slowly, like a beloved flightless bird.

“why are you walking like that?”

“can you not.”

Bonnet

Your new burden is too large to fit in your usual nightwear. Not even in the freakishly large ones made specifically for it. You resort to pantyhose and a shoelace.

“all my bonnets are too small.”

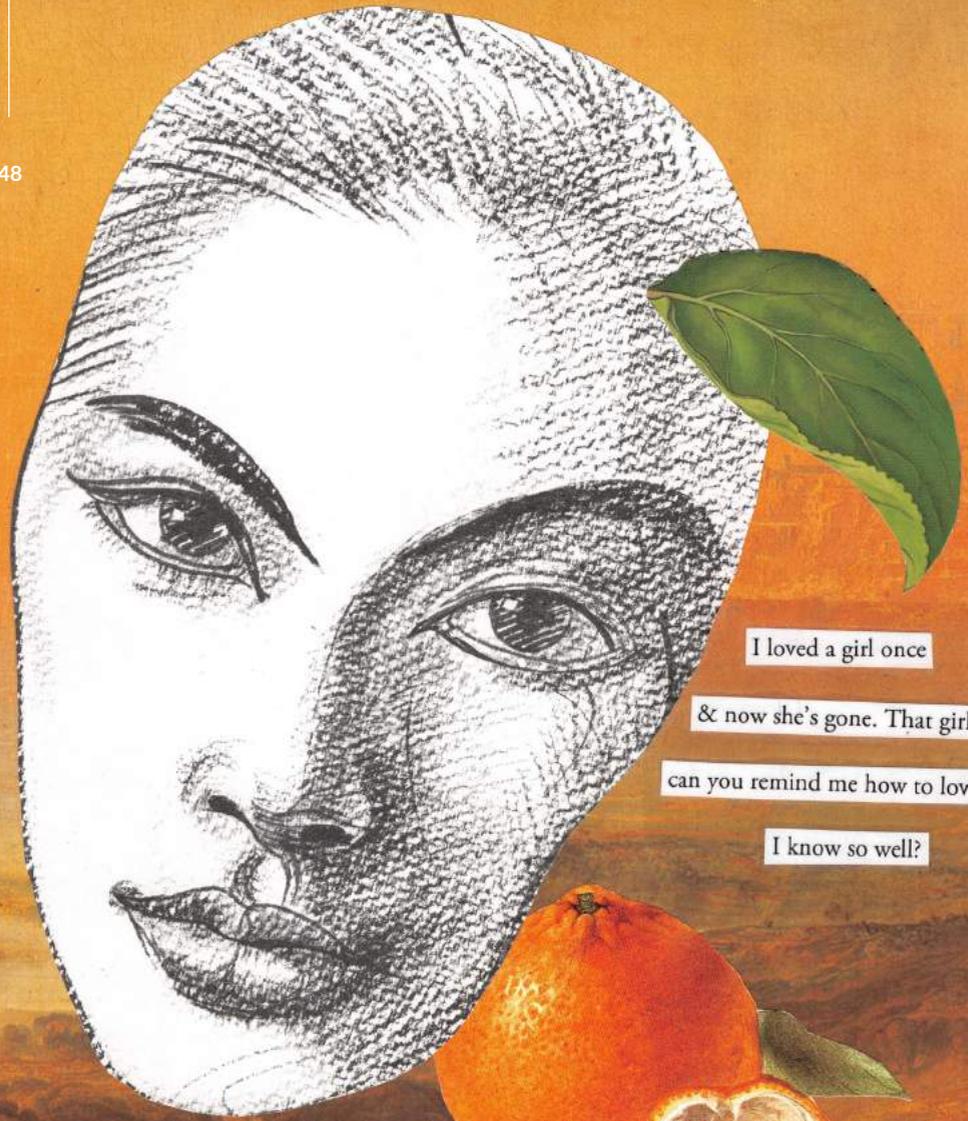
“i spent 160 on those, get creative.”

Monday

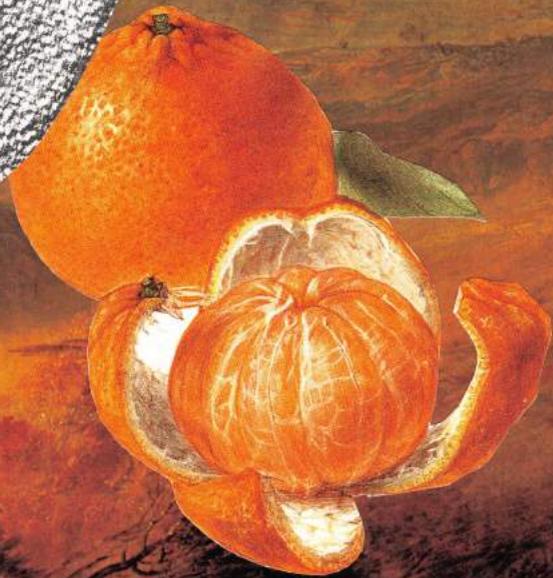
When you sit at your desk, head less heavy, neck less sore, the teacher (white), will walk in. He will adjust his tie, scan his eyes through the classroom, and land on you. He will draw back, gauging his words, ready to pounce.

“ooh, new do! almost didn't recognize ya there!”





I loved a girl once
 & now she's gone. That girl is me. Lord,
 can you remind me how to love something
 I know so well?



With you I'm all animal,
 all hunger & hankering, all bare-pawed
 in the forest, running toward my need.

Like any girl
 who values survival, I wonder
 what it would be like: to lie here
 for eternity, bruised limbs lost
 under this waning light, my body
 nothing among this clutter of trees.



[I loved a girl once]

Despy Boutris

Mixed media collage

8.5 x 11 in

[With you I'm all animal]

Despy Boutris

Mixed media collage

8.5 x 11 in

[Like any girl]

Despy Boutris

Mixed media collage

8.5 x 11 in

Queer Joy Magic Machine

JUPITER BERRYSMITH

Straddle my thighs and the clanging sounds in
 the warehouse We're producing secret tongue kisses to accompany
 hands caressing a stitched-up chest I've heard
 the sea is pleasant this time of year and the cherry pit
 they carved out of my torso fits
 with yours, for now

The car sped past before you could shout in the rearview, the water
 bottles struck our bodies
 to the beat of my mean heart The conveyor belt rattles
 At least we are loved dearly, right I say
 HRT and rather than tossing me back into the water,
 you hook me at the lip

We massaged our bruises into
 sweaty September night, my hand resting
 on your boxer briefs, we're saturated with honey, rage that glows
 while the machine rumbles spills out thick blood where
 can I store these long nights in your arms

Interlaced fingers can only do so much when
 the boiler room's on fire
 A mechanic groan that
 grinds against our hips Isn't the sea
 nicer than this You pull me in by the belt
 loop closer to you

Hannah Nathan Rosen Writing Award

LESLIE HARRISON & JEANNIE VANASCO
CO-JUDGES

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

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

This year's winner is Esther Rose.

Someone You Know

ESTHER ROSE

The first time we met, I waited anxiously for you in an unfamiliar dining hall, dipping my fingertips in soy sauce. According to your profile, you were a junior, five foot nine, and "down to cool." You were seven minutes late.

I hadn't really wanted to do this, but I was nearly two weeks into my first year of college, and I needed someone to distract me from my worsening loneliness. My shirt felt suffocating, and I had just decided that I was going to message you and reschedule when suddenly you arrived, winded and grinning. Sweat trickled down the side of a face different from what I had imagined. Older, more confident. I forced a smile, fiddling with my chopsticks. I wasn't very hungry anymore.

"I had to run all the way from 10 West to get here," you said, collapsing in the seat across from me.

"I can see that."

You laughed and slammed your elbows on the table, leaning over to inspect my plate, now in disarray. You raised an eyebrow.

"That's a lot of food."

I stared down at the eight pieces of sushi.

"I bought some for later," I lied.

I don't know why I bothered continuing our date. You were playful but careful.

You watched my gaze intently, trying desperately to read the signals I wasn't giving off. You were the kind of person to reference names I had no way of recognizing in the middle of a story.

Somehow, I found myself in your bedroom an hour later regardless.

You poured me a drink.

"Breakfast," you stated and took a sip first, handing it to me afterward with a grin before flopping onto the bed. I furrowed my eyebrows.

"Just so you know it's not roofed," you said, nodding to the drink. I took it and stood awkwardly next to the bed, wondering if I was going to be on the news tomorrow.

You patted the bed like you would for a dog. My pulse quickened. Slowly, I crawled next to you, flinching when you put your arm around me despite having expected the gesture. Your hand traveled down to my thigh.

"I-I'm a virgin!" I yelped, thinking for a moment that if you intended to undress me against my will, you'd feel a little worse knowing you had robbed me of my purity.

You laughed and shook your head, lifting your hand off my thigh.

“Hint taken.”

We spent the next hour browsing through your Instagram page, my soul withering more and more with every passing post. You never made another advance toward me, having received enough gratification in recounting the tales behind each photograph. While you told me stories of ex-girlfriends and indie-concerts, I sipped my drink.

It tasted like maple syrup and orange juice.

The first time it happened to her, we were in DC and we could’ve stopped it. If my mother hadn’t given her the keys. If I had tied her to the counter.

They had been chatting online for a couple of weeks now, and he was two blocks away. My sister left at 8 p.m. to meet him for burgers. My mother and I sat at a bar for hours, waiting for her to message us that she was okay. My mother, more than anyone, knew not to trust a man who was always just a couple of blocks away.

The first time it happened to her, we were in DC and we could’ve stopped it.

I didn’t see my sister again until morning, and she didn’t say a word to me. I thought I saw bruises on her neck, but I didn’t pry. Her last boyfriend had planted mines underneath her skin. I could kill her if I tried.

Two months later, she told me he had locked the door behind her when he invited her into his barracks. He had forgotten his wallet, he told her. His roommates were gone, so they could be alone.

“What would you like to watch?” he had asked my sister.

She said she didn’t care, she wanted dinner. Could they leave now?

He put on *Indiana Jones* and slammed her skull into the bedpost.

I had called her seventeen times.

I saw you again a week later after having been rejected by a group of girls who found a new plaything they liked more than me. I texted you in a spur-of-the-moment decision instigated by a friend of mine, both of us itching to get drunk. You were twenty-one and had an apartment. That was all we needed.

We spent every weekend with you after that night, despite your obvious intentions. You always kept me within arm’s reach. Your hand made a home of the small of my back, even when I shrugged you off.

I watched your desire boil over the course of the year. On Labor Day, you took me to a sunflower patch and compared me to soft yellow petals. We went to an amusement park later that week, and your friend teased you, saying you looked more out of breath holding my hands than you did suspended upside down. On Halloween, you cried because you watched me kiss Spider-Man. Christmas Eve, I stood on the counter and

drunkenly announced that I’d kiss the first person to pound two shots. Three seconds later, we kissed for the first time.

You took me to the four-story bookstore and let me browse for hours. You wrote songs about me, and I had never been a muse before. You surprised me with home-cooked meals, my childhood favorites. You liked the chase until you didn’t.

On New Year’s, you told me you were in love with me, and everything changed when I told you I didn’t feel the same way.

You became angry. I had let you sweep me off my feet because it made me feel beautiful, let you hold me because it was better than being cold. I had given you the wrong idea, and you hated me for it. The months began to blur with ceaseless efforts to appease you, drunken standoffs in the hallway at 3 a.m., my friends and I armed with bruised kneecaps and sharpened tongues pleading with you to go to bed. The endless endings of our friendship and the inevitable return to the stairwell, where you’d cry and tell me that you were really sorry this time, pinkie promise. You’d take me to bed, cradle me in your arms in an intoxicated haze, kiss my neck, and slip your tongue into my ears, knowing that in the morning you could snatch an empty bottle of Svedka and claim it took your memories.

That summer, I told you I never wanted to see you again.

You called me five times the night that my sister was dangling off the ledge of a

parking garage. She had been meeting up with her ex-boyfriend, the one who left bombs in her skin. She left with a box full of his things, ready to move on.

I got a call from him at 10:34 p.m., June 7th. She was hanging off the side of the third floor, fingernails chipping the concrete. His friend was peeling up the garage to haul her back over the side; meanwhile, he was on the ground, watching her tiny body sway in the wind.

“She’s not okay,” he told me. He sounded like he couldn’t breathe. “She stood up on the railing and slipped.”

“If she falls,” I told him, bruising my fists against the side of my dad’s bedroom door, “I’ll kill you.”

I messaged you when she got back. My dad was upstairs in his boxers, armed with his desktop, googling affordable psych wards near me. My sister sat next to him with Band-Aids on her knuckles.

You had called me so many times I worried that if the police needed me, they wouldn’t bother calling me back. I had to block you to stop all the messages.

My sister just tried to kill herself, I began. *What could you possibly want?*

I’m sorry, I didn’t know, you replied. I didn’t respond. You messaged me again a minute later. *You could have at least picked up one of my calls and told me.*

I remember suddenly feeling as though the sheer weight of my anger could split the floorboards.

I spent all night trying to reason with you, begging you to give me one good reason I should have prioritized you over my little sister. You claimed that I didn’t care about you, that I was just making

excuses not to talk to you. You made me feel as if I had committed a crime for not bending to your will for a single night.

The next morning I blocked you, and we didn't speak for months.

I felt your absence crash over me the moment I arrived back to campus that fall. It was the weekend, and suddenly I was no one. I had nowhere to be now that you were gone. My friends didn't have their own apartments, and none of us had thought about what our days would look like now that we weren't speaking to you. Almost as an impulse, I messaged you, asking if you wanted to talk for the first time since that night in June. I didn't want to go through the entire school year knowing I might run into you, that we had ended on bad terms. To my surprise, you agreed.

We met at a park bench scorched in moonlight. I flinched when I saw you. It was strange seeing you again.

I flinched when I saw you. It was strange seeing you again.

"Thanks for meeting me," I said.

You stared at me intently.

"Of course," you said.

"You know why I had to stop being your friend, right?"

You told me you knew. Then you told me you had changed. That summer, after my friends and I had decided we were done cleaning up your messes, you

decided to make things different. You quit your old job and dropped the friends you had always been complaining about. You stopped smoking. You were making music again. You moved out of your mom's house. You bought new sneakers. This time, you told me, things were different.

"I don't even think I've had a drink since that night you told me it was over," you said and laughed, shaking your head. I laughed too, because neither had I.

Then, you looked at me.

"Want to break the streak tonight and have a drink at my place?"

The last time it happened to her, he had followed her home. A different man this time. She had wanted to end things, and he wanted her pregnant.

He waited outside of our house in his red pickup truck, engine humming behind the big oak tree we used to hide in as kids. When it snowed, we built forts around it that the neighborhood boys would knock down.

He had driven two hours to get there. *I just want to talk*, he texted her. *Come outside.*

It was midnight. The house alarms were on. My sister crept downstairs and squeezed her frame out of the window. When she got to his car, he was standing at its trunk. Out of the corner of her eye, she saw a rifle in the backseat. He took a step toward her.

That was when she realized it was too late.

In one swift motion, he had thrown her over his shoulder and tossed her into the backseat, clicking the child-locks on before her foot could kick through the door. He slipped into the front seat and took off down the road. She told me he stopped eventually, after her screams to let her go became too infuriating. She promised she wouldn't run, she needed to use the bathroom, *Please just unlock the car*, and when he did, she took off again, quickly seized by a pair of arms squeezed tightly around her ribs. She felt the knife she had hidden in her pocket slip from her fingers. For a moment, she stopped breathing. He hoisted her back over his shoulder, and when she came to she bit his neck until she tasted his blood.

He chucked her into the backseat again and began to undress her. She could only sob, kicking and thrashing like a wild animal. She told me she thought she might never see us again.

He had looked at her calmly between her desperate spasms, whispering into her ears as he slipped his hand into her pajama shorts.

"Don't do this to me. I love you. This isn't like you."

Twenty minutes later, he dropped her back off at the front of the house. She snuck quietly into the basement, reaching for the pocketknife that had abandoned her that night. She remembered the note he left for her in between the blades months ago when he had first gifted it to her. The note that had granted her freedom. She had quoted it to him

after he had finished with her, hoping its promises would return her home. It had worked. Shakily, she unfolded the wilted piece of paper. His words were smeared across the page.

Forever Mine.

The next morning, we filed a restraining order.

I told you I would only have one drink, and eight drinks later, I had agreed to stay the night. It was nearly three in the morning, you reminded me. Walking back to my dorm could be dangerous. Your cheeks were flushed and you were staring at the ceiling, a dizzy smile on your face. My body felt warm, skin tingling with every ounce of the smooth, dark whiskey in my veins.

"I missed this, Esther."

I could feel my heartbeat against your sheets. Instinctively, you put your arms around me, your fingertips circling my belly button like they always did. I thought about telling you we wouldn't do this again. But I hadn't been touched in months and suddenly I was freezing so I leaned over and I kissed you and you kissed me back.

It took me only a couple of minutes to come to my senses. We had become a drunken, tangled mess of sheets and limbs and it finally struck me that this couldn't happen again. I couldn't

let this happen again. I pushed you off me, searching for my shirt amidst the seemingly endless fabric.

"Hey, I changed my mind," I said. "Can we just go to bed?"

When I didn't hear a response, I looked up at you, and my stomach knotted.

I could just barely make out your face in the dark, the only light accentuating your features bleeding from the windowsill behind us. Your eyes were hungry and you hadn't moved. Your body was still contorted over me, arms on either side of my waist. Primal. I opened my mouth to repeat myself but you had already reached down and captured my hips, roughly flipping me over on the bed. You peeled my pants off my legs in seconds, burying your face in between my thighs, the soft skin that no one had touched. I struggled desperately under your grip and finally struck you with my heel when I felt your tongue slip in between me and when I managed to scramble away from you, you stared at me blankly. I could see myself dripping from your mouth.

"Why?" was all I could manage to ask.

"I'm drunk. I'm sorry," you said, as if you had been practicing that phrase for months.

Devastated, I got back under the covers and faced the wall, stiffening when I felt you do the same. Your arms did not find their way around me, and in the dark, I told myself that I hadn't just been raped by the man lying next to me.

I told myself it wasn't rape because you were never inside me. That night, after a summer without you, I had let myself sink into arms wrapped tightly around my waist, fingers circling my belly, and I had

leaned in first against the exhale that fed me empty promises. I had been the one to kiss you first. It wasn't rape because all you did was flip me over and press your lips up against parts of me that, amidst the drenched and drunken haze, prompted my legs to seize and kick until you and I were left gasping for air and staring each other down in the darkness. I knew rape from the eyes of my sister, and the thought of daring to make a comparison made me sick.

*I could see myself dripping from
your mouth.*

The next morning, you complained that your stomach hurt from where my foot dug into your side, and the day after that, we met for coffee. I told all my friends that you had changed, and they believed me. We grabbed a pizza with you for the first time in months and stayed up until 4 a.m. just like freshman year. You and I never talked about what had happened, about how you had thrust yourself onto me and put your tongue between my legs. How on the night that I believed you finally changed, you did the unthinkable.

And I told myself it wasn't rape because a week later, I'd let you do it again.

The last time I spoke to you, you were shouting to me across the campus courtyard, our figures illuminated only by the stars. You were panting, sweat and tears barreling down your face. From yards away, I saw a wild panic in your eyes, a glimmer that made my stomach turn.

"Please, Esther," you begged, stepping toward me. I pressed myself against the pillar of my friends' dorm, hurriedly glancing at the window as if trying to manifest their sudden appearance at the door. You were drunk, and so was I.

"Don't," I croaked. I didn't even know where to start. "I can't do this anymore. This was the last time."

You stared at me tragically, and I knew at that moment that you were searching for any possible reason to justify texting my sister throughout the day, complaining that I wasn't paying enough attention to you. That I belonged to you, and I owed you my attention. I saw all of the messages you sent to her. I had still been letting you touch me, letting you continue doing the things we had been doing all year that had led us to that moment in your bed. I hadn't stopped it, and it was killing me. It needed to end. I grit my teeth and spoke to you for the last time, all of the hatred I had stored deep inside me over the past year singeing my lips.

"Never fucking talk to me again."

When my friends arrived downstairs, you were long gone, and we spent the night running around campus screaming at the stars. Cursing them for never being lucky. Thanking them for the chance to be reborn.

My sister and I talk often about the things we've done and had done to us. On car rides, the long route, the same playlist played over and over.

"Do you think I'll ever find someone good for me?" she often asks me.

"Without a doubt," I tell her, and I always mean it.

I didn't tell her what had happened to me that fall until nearly a year after it had happened. When I did, she looked at me softly from the driver's seat.

"Why didn't you say anything?"

"Because I know all that you've been through," I told her. "I didn't even think it was anything to worry about until recently."

"Have you written about it?"

I paused. I had thought about it. But nobody wants to write about the wrong ways to have your face stuffed into a pillow, the wrong ways to feel dizzy on a Friday night with one too many shots of liquor buzzing through your veins. Nobody wants to write about the people we scan crowds for, blood beating against our eardrums like an anthem of war. Writing makes it real.

"No, I haven't," I answered her. "It wasn't really rape. It doesn't feel like I can call it that."

"Esther, it was," my sister said. "Assault isn't defined by severity. It's defined by whether or not someone was given a choice."

I sat there, absorbing what she had said. It felt like a shift, and I was suddenly heartbroken.

"Why do these things happen to us?" she asked quietly after a long silence.

I sighed, wondering the same thing. After a moment, I spoke up.

"I don't know. Maybe it's just in our blood."

I smiled bitterly. She turned to me.
 "As in our family?"
 "Maybe," I said.

I knew the stories of the women in my family, whispered over the glare of a bonfire, the fifth glass of wine. My mother's fingers tremble when she sifts through old boxes of photographs and letters. My sisters wield weapons disguised as lipsticks in their fists. I spent years hearing about what happens in dark corners, in bedrooms with men we hardly know. In restaurants, on the street. In your own home, your own bed, where you're meant to be safe. At the hands of someone you know. At the hands of someone you love.

My mother's fingers tremble when she sifts through old boxes of photographs and letters. My sisters wield weapons disguised as lipsticks in their fists.

I looked back at her.
 "Or maybe as women."



Relief
Autumn Joi Ellis
 Acrylic on Canvas
 24 x 36 in



Coffee, Women, Snow

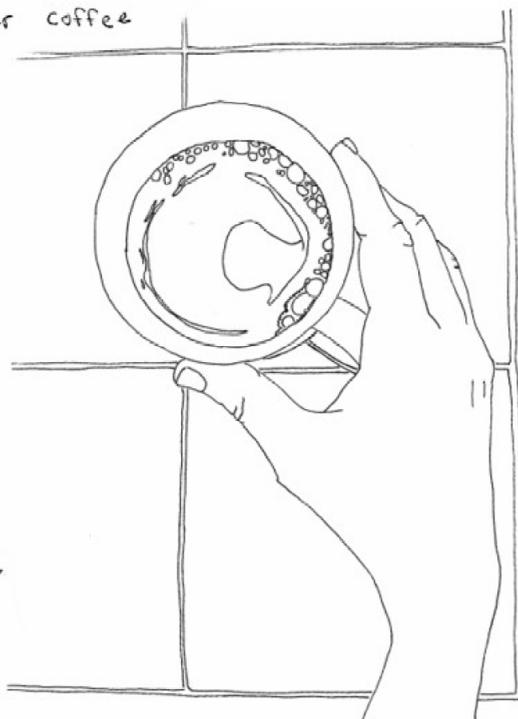
ANGUS WOODWARD

In 1984 your sister lost her job and decided to try her hand at poetry.

Musings over coffee

I sit
and watch
as
The two
elements
swirl
and mix
one
white and pure
like light
the other
dark, bitter
like pain

2/3/84



"What I ought to do is get a nice blank book somewhere and copy them all down in that, which I might very well do," she wrote, in a letter to your oldest sister.

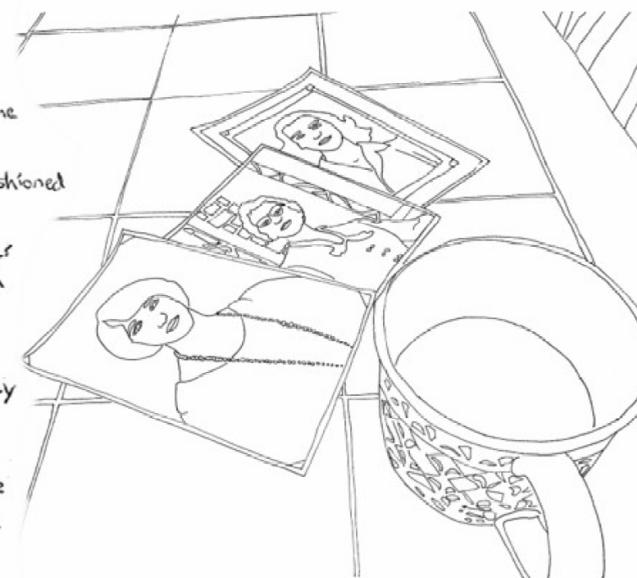
You were 20, a university student, and when she showed you some poems you were neither interested nor impressed.

Decades later, you read all 90 of them.

I mages

I sort
through the
images
of old-fashioned
women
and wonder
what kind
of life
they led
were they
happy
did they
ever smile
in genuine
warmth

2/3/84



And you wonder if this poem is about looking at photos of her mother and grandmothers or merely about flipping through a history book.

"All I have to do now is get it copy-righted and published somewhere," she wrote in another letter.

Of course it was not so simple, and her poetess phase lasted just seven months.

A winter's day

They fall
silently
like tiny
stars
only a few
at first
and then
they come
down thickly
gently at
first
but then
they are
flung
caught in
a demonic
wind
only to
settle, quietly
like
weary soldiers



You are grateful that she kept the poems, that your brother found them among her things, and that you have reminders of how she saw the world. Because now she is gone, and you finally understand that poetry doesn't have to be impressive.

Deerhead & I

MATTHEW SAVIN

Wake up. Shave beard. Go on daily jog. Step over deerhead crumpled over on the sidewalk. Run past the blocked-off area of Schenley Park where they store deerhead victims and see how high the pile has grown. Take a left on Panther Hollow Road to get to Fifth Ave., where I run past the empty university to return home. Pass the doorman who is now a deerhead. Shower. Today I need to stop by the grocery store, the butcher, and, if I have time, I can maybe window-shop and purchase myself a little gift. I've been good lately, plus it's a special occasion. Daniel said that he would cook dinner for me tonight if I picked up the ingredients, and this time he seems motivated enough to do it.

People were confused at the sighting of the first deerhead. A man was found dead in the park with a deerhead in place of his own head. A week later there was another. And then another the next day. Then the next hour, and so on. I don't really remember how long it has been since then, but deerhead deaths are more sporadic now, and a lot more random. But they always appear quickly. As the Doe Covenant—the cult of those who remind us constantly that we must have done something to bring this on us—have put it on their propaganda posters, *One minute they're your friend, the next they're a*

deerhead. I've had it happen where I'm in line for coffee, look down to get my wallet out of my pocket and, when I look up, the patron in front of me already has been deerheaded and is a pile on the floor. That can really reduce the wait time.

I start by walking off to the grocery store. I think that living in the city really has the perk that I can walk to anywhere, and it limits how much food I buy because I know that I will have to carry it all back. Really helps the wallet and the body image. Daniel says that he likes me slim, and I know that we aren't committed or legit or whatever, but I think it's so strange how I want to follow his rules. He works in some sort of finance job but fancies himself as a revolutionary because by day he analyzes numbers for the bench company that invested in his firm and by night he goes to nightclubs that he considers to be underground where he wears shirts with cool slogans and surrounds himself with people who read political theory so that he can absorb their knowledge through osmosis. But I guess it's nice that he has his job and his hobbies. The bench business is booming apparently. That's good news. Tonight we can have roast lamb with a mossy green herb coating. Right off the bone, that is when it is most succulent.

I think that there is something beautiful in the way that we all continue to live among the risk of becoming a deerhead. There is a constant dread that clings like summer heat, yet we just continue going about our jobs and lives. There's something I love about moving languidly through the aisles like I'm the woman at the end of *Stepford Wives*. But today the produce is rotten, so I can only guess that there weren't any deliveries. One of the employees is hawking rotten cabbages to the patrons, telling them that there are plenty of people who would have found a way to use the rotten vegetables, so why can't these people make the damn effort? Though I wish that there were more fresh herbs for me to pick and forage through, I have settled for the dried ones. Plus, I have some basil and rosemary plants at home that I can use. The usual set are sitting outside, a group of old ladies who speak some language I can't decipher, and they stop when anyone gets near them. Today is no different as they stop when I walk by. I want to ask them why they think they're so special, and really let myself yell at them, but it's not worth it so I move on. With a canvas bag of groceries in tow, I make the five-block pilgrimage to the butcher shop. I would have gone to the meat section at the supermarket, but it was surrounded by flies and caution tape, and I decided that it would be best for me to move on.

Along the way, I wait at a crosswalk only to see a blue sedan come careening down

the street. When it goes past and runs through a stop sign, I see that the driver has now become a deerhead. Everyone knows the protocol for this. The car coming up on the opposite side of the road smoothly swerves away, and the one behind it politely stops and waits so they can move on with their day. The deerhead car hits a telephone pole and crumples with almost no effort. Smoke quietly curls up from the car and gasoline fills the air. Up front, the driver is slumped over the wheel, and traffic moves past them like business as usual. I guess that it's The Authority's problem now. I continue my stroll until there's a meaty, pheromonal smell in the air. I have arrived at the butcher who always upsets me, but it's fine. Daniel is going to cook lamb for us tonight.

As the Doe Covenant always reminds us, One minute they're your friend, the next they're a deerhead.

I don't like the butcher. His mustache is made of grease and his face is always scrunched. I don't like to look him in the eye because I know my reflection will get trapped there and ultimately I'm his. One time I snuck a glance and saw the outlines of everybody he's ensnared, writhing in agony in the gray of his iris. The worst thing about him is that he thinks he is cool because he knows how to fuck and take

apart a dead animal with equal precision. And then I freeze right outside the door because what if he doesn't have any lamb? And I just stand there looking like an idiot while the weird music he plays (that he listens to because he's so cool) just continues and all the other customers are yelling out orders for meat and shoving me aside. I had made all of these plans for tonight, and it could all come crashing down with one accident. It's kind of like that actress who had planned out the most beautiful and elaborate suicide she could think of, but her dinner didn't react well to her stomach acids and it bubbled up and she had to go throw up, and she died with her face right in the can.

Along the way, I wait at a crosswalk only to see a blue sedan come careening down the street. When it goes past and runs through a stop sign, I see that the driver has now become a deerhead. Everyone knows the protocol for this.

I don't want to be the one with my face in the can at the butcher's.

The chopping block is at the end of a long hallway filled with shelves of giardiniera, imported pesto, and canned oysters. I pick up the canned oysters. The brine is delicious.

"Hello, sir," I say.

"Well well well! Look who's back," he says, and I see only the grin and his grease stache because I refuse to look past his nose. Instead, I focus on the meats, and the pattern of fat in the soppressata and the artful arrangement of pistachios in the mortadella.

"Can I please have a rack of lamb?"

"No fair! I've been waiting!" a man at the end of the counter yells. "This used to be an establishment where people would take the time to notice me. Now, I'm nothing."

"Be quiet," the butcher says. "You can wait. I'm dealing with my new favorite customer." He says this with a smile, and I wish I could ignore it. Like this guy I knew whose arm lost most of its feeling. One day this guy got a small cut but didn't realize it and it got gangrenous and pus filled. I want to ignore his gangrene smile, but it's irresistible, like his lamb rack.

"Oh it's fine. He can order," I say. "I'm in no rush."

"He can wait," the butcher says. The man runs out crying. "You got here early," he continues. "I still gotta separate the rack from the rest of the body. You said you got time?"

"Yes, sir."

The guinea pig has an interesting social ritual where they need to figure out who is going to be the dominant member of the herd. They will usually mount or hump each other, and within every pack there needs to be a leader of the herd. The butcher will lead the herd. The crying

man will be the bottom of the pack. He will be the last to get the hay, veggies, and pellets. I assume this makes me somewhere in the middle of the hierarchy. It's a comforting thought.

"You know that guy used to be kinda fun," the butcher says, grabbing the skinned and hairless animal to prep and sell to me. It's such a lovely shade of pink, like a gentle blush on someone's cheeks, and it's a lovely contrast to the stained gray cutting board it's on.

"But—"

THWACK

"—he's turned into such—"

THWACK

"—a whiny bitch lately. God sometimes I—"

THWACK

"—wish his day of reckoning would come—"

He slides the lamb around to get a better angle.

THWACK

"—and he becomes a fucking deerhead."

He wraps the meat in delicate layers of parchment and places it in a paper bag before printing out a receipt.

"That'll be \$35.88. Hell, stay tuned little man, maybe someday I'll have a special on venison."

He gives me that gangrene smile that sends me lower in the pack.

"Thank you, sir."

I hand him \$40 and tell him to keep the change and run out with my package. I feel something metallic clang around

in the bag. Shit, I forgot to pay for the canned oysters.

The sun has made the decision to peek out from the clouds now, and it spreads out over the streets like roadkill. Up ahead, a man on the street is handing out flyers and yelling something I can't make out. I just need to keep my head up and continue walking as quickly as I can.

I don't like the butcher. His mustache is made of grease and his face is always scrunched. I don't like to look him in the eye because I know my reflection will get trapped there and ultimately I'm his.

"You!" he yells.

Keep walking, keep walking, keep walking. It's a member of the Doe Covenant, and I don't want to interact with him.

"Young man! Do you pray each night out of fear or out of respect? Are you tired of living with those whose actions make God turn us into deerheads?"

Fuck, he caught me. Once these guys see you, they tail you until you answer their inane questions. I turn around and face him. He's lanky and could topple over with one errant breeze. I clutch the lamb tightly because I can feel anger physically rise through my body and snake around my organs and into my head. I want to beat the shit out of him. Beat him with the lamb rack so bad that his rotten brain

would fit right in with the crap lining the shelves at the supermarket and oh god I just want to give him a concussion that makes life flow by like a river. But I breathe. I breathe and I let my shoulders relax. Today is going to be a good day. Daniel is going to cook lamb for us.

"Out of fear, sir, I'm scared of what happens to those who interact with me. I pray that it stops soon." I grab one of his flyers. "Thanks!"

He recoils immediately, and I continue my stroll. I think that it's healthy to indulge in a giggle every once in a while.

Once I've reached home and safely packed the groceries in the freezer, I make myself a lunch of canned oysters and toasted rosemary sourdough rolls that I've been saving for a special occasion and grab my basket to use the laundry machines in the basement. There's only one machine left, and I toss everything in along with a laundry pod. The ones I use are so bright they hurt my eyes, and I wonder if this is how audiences felt when they saw the first technicolor film. I seat myself on top of the washer and do my needlepointing. Daniel once told me that it's cute I keep needlepointing and said I must be listening to him because he thinks it is important to make the most out of life because you never know when you're gonna die. As the Doe Covenant always reminds us, *One minute they're your friend, the next they're a deerhead*. The radio in here is blaring the afternoon news. Mainly

reports from The Authority on how many documented deerheads have popped up as of now, and today's grand total is seven. I think that's so amazing because that means I have seen 43 percent of today's deaths. There's not much else to report on today. A new kindergarten has opened in Bloomfield, and the Mothers Against Guinea Worm annual charity ball went off without a hitch, with not a single attendee becoming a deerhead. I'm not a big fan of the reporter. Her name is Macy St. Tracy and she speaks like someone in a 1940s film. I think it's because she doesn't feel confident in herself. Somewhere in her head a voice must be telling her that she needs that silly transatlantic accent so she can move up in her career. The news used to broadcast live on television, but Macy's co-reporter Johnathan Willoughby got turned into a deerhead mid-broadcast when no one was noticing him, and the channel decided to stop airing.

One of the other tenants in the building is also here, and he's just staring at me when he needs to be focusing on his own laundry. Why can't he just leave me to my own devices? Is he looking at the pattern on the canvas? It's a great design of the titular character from *Die Geschichte vom Suppen-Kaspar* in his more thinner stages so that I can use less yarn. But it's fine, he can watch me do my craft. The other tenant folds his own laundry into the most perfect squares with each article of clothing having

hospital corners, the whole time just staring at me. I don't get why he feels the need to make each item so perfectly folded if he's just gonna ruin it sometime this week. I can try to do that with my laundry whenever it's done, but I don't think I care to. Besides, I don't have the time. I need time to put my face on, and it takes at least twenty minutes to get to Daniel's place, and that's without any deerhead-related incidents.

Daniel's apartment is in a nice neighborhood, and I know he can barely afford it. He keeps coupons in the pockets of his Larrimors khaki pants, and his apartment is filled with every design trend he can think of. Normally, he would have taken me to this week's chic restaurant so that he can order bone marrow with garlic toasts because apparently everyone at the office says it is delicious, but I know he just doesn't have the money.

He doesn't even greet me when he opens the door. Instead, he takes the lamb rack and walks into the kitchen, where he slams it down on the cutting board to trim some more fat off of it. I begin to combine the herbs with breadcrumbs (made from leftover sourdough) and oil to create the coating.

"Today one of those Doe Covenant people stopped me in the street," I say. "And he tried yelling at me about God and whatever and I thought it would be so funny if I tried to give him a scare so I said to him God does bad things to those who interact with me."

"So what did you say to him?" Daniel asks, chopping vegetables.

"I thought it would be so funny if I tried to give him a scare so I said to him God does bad things to those who interact with me."

"Oh," he says. "I kinda just expected you to run off like you usually do."

"Well I thought I would do that too, but I guess that something just sparked in me and—"

"God, my boss was being such a dickhead today," Daniel says. "The investors are freaking out because the areas of Schenley Park that have been roped off contain the most benches so they're getting worried about brand image. And he somehow found a way to blame *me* for that. I just think it's so annoying, but I decided to have a talk with him about that. Something *you* wouldn't do," he says with a slight laugh in his voice while motioning his knife toward me.

"Yeah that sounds hard," I say. "But I'm glad you spoke with him."

I slide the plate of breadcrumbs and herbs over to him and he dips both racks of lamb down to evenly coat them. The racks are transferred over to a skillet so hot that it's shrieking and groaning before it's weighed down with a lamb rack ready to be seared.

"Get the oven door for me."

I get the door for him, and he slides the lamb on one rack and a tray of vegetables on the other one.

"Thanks for cooking for me," I tell him.

"Yeah, well you got all the stuff and brought it so it's no problem I guess. Keep an eye on the lamb for me. I gotta shower."

He trods down the hallway and leaves me with the lamb and his dirty kitchen. His kitchen is always dirty, which is so confusing to me because he spent so much money buying the latest appliances and they're stained with grease, fingerprints, and food residue. A bottle of stainless steel cleaning product is only \$5, and I've bought them for him before, yet they always disappear. I try to get him every scent I can! Citrus, lavender, and even rosehip but the bastard, no, the man who is doing his best, refuses to clean. I scrub every dish with a steel wool so hard that every crevice in my hand begins to turn gray and I have to take a break from the cleaning that I tell him to do nearly every damn day so that I can fix my hands from doing his job. But it's okay! It's all okay. He cooked the lamb for us. The oven beeps and I take the lamb out so I can tent it with foil and let it cook and stew in its own juices. He could have used those to make a pan sauce but what do I know? Again, he cooked the lamb for us.

There's a crack in his table. I don't know if he is aware he is doing it, but he covers it up with the serving platter, even though the dish is no longer centered. It's fine, because he cooked the lamb for us. He returns and is gracious enough to serve a large portion to me. With a final garnish of mint pesto, my plate looks like something that would be served in the

finest restaurant. He immediately digs in and rips meat from bone with great relish and enjoyment. I could attempt to make conversation, but he seems a bit busy at the moment.

"You know," I say, "this kind of reminds me of that moment in that movie when—"

"You always reference some movie or tv show or whatever," Daniel says, picking up the bone to pick the last bits off of it. "I don't think comparing your life to whatever you see on a screen is healthy."

"Oh, well I'll try to stop, I guess."

"No, it's cute. Just a little weird, I guess."

He reaches for another serving, and the juice leaks from the lamb and patterns itself all over the table. We eat the rest of our meal in silence, because I don't want to reference any more pieces of media or accidentally get Macy St. Tracy's accent midway through the conversation. Once we are finally finished and the rack is now just a pile of bones on a platter, I excuse myself to go to the bathroom.

"Please start doing the dishes, Daniel."

"Yeah, yeah, I will."

I do my business and stare at myself in the mirror. My under-eye bags have gotten worse, and I think I have two more milia that are appearing on my right cheek. The folliculitis on the area where my lower chin meets my neck has gotten worse and I ran out of my exfoliant. Other than that I think my face is still presentable, and I don't have any food in my teeth. I walk down the hallway and sneak into the kitchen.

The television is blaring some sports game, and I check the fridge to see that a beer is missing, while all the dishes are just piled in a heap in the sink. But it's fine because he cooked the lamb for us. It's fine because he cooked the lamb for us. It's fine because he cooked the lamb for us.

"It's not fine," I whisper. "It's not fine at all. Daniel?" I call. "Daniel, why are you such an insolent piece of SHIT?! What value does your damn life bring to me? God, if this were a movie I'd fucking up and leave you and the audience would cheer because they recognize what a piece of shit you are."

I run into the living room to ream his ass a bit more when his new visage stops me mid-step.

Daniel is now a deerhead.

I didn't even hear who or whatever it was that had come in to do their job, and now my lover is a deerhead. Posed on the couch with a beer still in hand and feet on the coffee table, even though I've warned him that it can cause wear on the wood. My first reaction is to check on his orchid. I bought it for him a few months ago and it was quite the finicky bloom. He forgot to rotate it so that it could get equal amounts of sunlight and now one of the petals is burned and has a hole in it because it got too much sun. He also forgot to dust the blinds, which I specifically requested he do because dust will trigger my allergies. The duster I got

him is still in its packaging in his hallway closet, and I carefully fold it so that it can be placed in the recycling bin, but that is empty too. His trash can is filled with all sorts of recyclables, and I know that portions of pizza boxes can't be recycled because the grease has tainted it, but he can still rip off those pieces and put them in the recycling bin. He can also rinse out his glass bottles and remove the stickers from them and—

But he can't. He's a deerhead. He can't do anything anymore. What do I even do in this situation? Eventually I have to call The Authority so Macy St. Tracy can report about another body in the pile, but what do I do right now? Call his parents? Tell them, "Hi, I'm your son's lover he never committed to, but he died right in front of me. Don't have an open casket. That deerhead is gonna freak out the mourners!" The area where venison meets human is ragged, and I notice that there could have been a much better effort to have a clean slice. The butcher would have done a much better job.

But I guess Daniel was right. We continue living. We go to bars and drink our neon sour bombs and tear meat from the bones on our chicken wings before we go out and dance to the music that leaves our ears ringing and vibrates the floor. Though I know I just yelled about how much I hate him to his corpse, I still feel like I need to do something for him. I once heard a rumor that Edith Piaf wanted to

die in Paris but ended up dying in Nice. So a friend drove her all the way across the country with her dead body in the front seat to try and show her fans that she died in Paris.

I am the driver now, and I can never drive in silence.

I dig through the records he used to thrift and decide on one that's a close-up, black-and-white photograph of some woman with highly defined cheekbones. I put it on his record player attached to a large cabinet and as soon as it starts I think that it sounds like a drinking song. I can imagine all the men in the bar slamming down their glasses filled with beer so dark that it looks like dehydrated piss and said liquid sloshes everywhere. They all gather and shimmy side to side with molecules of foam from their piss beer clinging to their beards as they drunkenly sing along to it.

I once heard a rumor that Edith Piaf wanted to die in Paris but ended up dying in Nice. So a friend drove her all the way across the country with her dead body in the front seat to try and show her fans that she died in Paris.

Daniel's body is light and still warm. Though I would expect the deerhead to add on some weight, I find that I can easily pick him up. I lead him in a final

dance together, to the lyrics that I can't understand, before I have to call The Authority and watch them add him to the pile. Daniel would often mention the other lovers he had taken up, and I don't know how many of them he had cooked a rack of lamb for, but I'm grateful I got to be the last one.

Arriva, Gigi L'amoroso!

We dip.

Il rubacuori gli occhi neri da insolente!

We twirl.

Gigi L'amoroso!

We step to the left.

Il vincitore senza cour ma così affascinante!





Think

Michael Wilcox

Digital Photography

3000 x 2400 px

Coin-Slot Time Machine

ERICA LEE BERQUIST

“Dude, are you serious?” I said.

A middle-aged man in a tweed suit peered at me from over his horn-rimmed glasses. He was seated behind a desk piled high with papers.

“And what,” he asked, “might you be referring to?”

“I’m talking about the sign out front.” I gestured over my shoulder. “That’s a joke, right?”

He sighed.

“If it was a joke, why would it be hanging there? Do you think I enjoy being subjected to the rabble from the streets, traipsing in and out of my shop all day asking about my sign? Because I can assure you, I do not.”

“So, you’re really serious then? You’ve got a time machine in here?”

I expected the room to be loaded with flashing lights and whirring machinery. Instead, it appeared and smelled more like a stuffy old bookshop with papers stacked all over. Apothecary cabinets, which I recognized from a trip I took to Chinatown, lined one wall.

The man gave a hollow laugh.

“Let me guess,” he said. “You’re a college student studying something like accounting or engineering. But your true passion is sci-fi. You’re a bit of a nerd. Am I close?”

I bristled, unsure if I was being mocked.

“You might be. But I’d guess anyone who claims to have a time machine is a bit of a nerd too. How about that, am I close?”

He grinned.

“You might be. And yes, the machine is as advertised.”

I approached the apothecary cabinets, expecting to be hit with the strong odor of medicinal herbs, but smelled nothing.

“What’s in here?” I asked.

The chair creaked as he stood.

“Places. Trips. Moments in time. This is how I do it.”

“Do what?”

My fingers tingled. I wanted to pull out a drawer, but I waited patiently as he opened one and extracted nothing but a coin in a clear plastic case with a card behind it.

He read from the card, “Philadelphia, United States. 1969.” Then he looked at me, seeming to gauge my reaction. “Interested in going? It’s both—a trip to the place as well as to the period in time.”

“Why would I want to go to Philadelphia? No offense, but I could drive there anytime.” I thought more about it. “The year though... Are you saying I could go to 1969 and watch the moon landing happen live on TV?”

The man shrugged as he put away the coin and shut the drawer.

“There’s no guarantee about that.”

I opened my mouth to protest, sensing there was a catch coming, but he continued before I could speak.

“Man walked on the moon on July 20, 1969. I can only guarantee that you will arrive on a day in 1969, not on which day you will arrive. It could be on that exact date if you are lucky. Or you could be weeks early and have to wait. Or you might arrive too late, having missed the moonwalk.”

“I don’t get it. Why do you know the city the trip would be to, but not the day?”

He gestured to the boxes on the wall, drawing my attention to the row on the far left of the room.

“All of the coins in these boxes were minted in Denver, Colorado. Therefore, they can bring you there on the years specified on the coins. There’s no way of knowing, though, what day they were minted. If you’re unsatisfied with the day they bring you to, I recommend trying again with another coin.” He gestured to more rows. “I also have Fort Knox, Philadelphia, San Francisco, DC, West Point, New York. And New Orleans, but of course only from 1838 to 1861 and 1879 to 1909, as the mint is no longer active.”

“Wait, wait, wait.” I held up my hands. “You just said something about ‘trying again,’ so you mean this is a two-way trip? You’ve got to tell me how this all works.”

“Well yes, I expect a lot less people would be interested in going if it were a one-way trip. Would you?” He took

the alarm on my face as an answer and continued, “Some people book one-way trips, I don’t ask questions. But most take one of these with them.” He reached into his pocket and extended a fist to me, saying, “Here.”

He dropped a shiny, brand-new penny into my palm.

“Oh, I get it. One coin takes you to the past, and the other brings you back to the present year.” I grinned as a thought came to mind. “Hey, can your machine take people to the future?”

“Ah, you get it do you?” He raised an eyebrow. “Well, just as soon as you find a coin from the future, bring it to me, and we’ll see if you can time travel with it.” Then he started to speak very slowly. “But, for now, we can only travel to the past. Got it?”

“Yes, yes. No future trips.” I offered him the shiny copper coin back, but he waved dismissively, so I stuck it in my pocket. I asked, “So, what about the places you can travel to? Is it just the USA?”

“Not at all.” The man turned back to the apothecary cabinet, pulling out several drawers, seemingly at random. He rattled off names and places as he went, “London, 1900. Vancouver, 1964—if you’re lucky, you might see the Beatles. Beijing, 2008. Capitoline Hill, Rome, 509 B.C.” He glanced over his shoulder at me, seeing me taken aback by the date. “And if you’re feeling really daring, I’ve got some ancient Greek coins. All over 2,000 years

old, but the Greeks weren’t as good at marking their coins as the Romans. Who knows where you’d end up, or in what year exactly?”

The guy genuinely seemed entertained by the idea that I might be thrown into the distant past in some random time and place.

“I have more questions,” I said.

“I’d imagine you would,” he said as he shut the little drawers.

“There must be some rules to all this. Do you have clothes people can change into, so they can better blend into the past? I’d imagine you don’t want people sticking out in other times or countries.”

“Does this look like a vintage clothes store to you?” He raised an eyebrow. “No, I don’t care what people wear. You can go pick up a costume first if you want. Any more questions?”

“People can’t just go to the past and change things, right? Is there like some waiver you have to sign that you won’t mess with history?”

“Ah!” The man held up a finger as he walked over to his desk. He adjusted the glasses on the bridge of his nose as he flipped through the papers on his desk, finally coming up with a packet that he handed to me with a pen. “Here, sign beside the sticky notes. The form on the top is a waiver of liability, stating you will not sue for any accident or injury incurred during the trip. If you intend it to be a one-way trip—and note that if you lose

the coin needed for the return trip, that is no fault of mine either—you will need to fill out another packet to notify next of kin that my business is in no way at fault and cannot be sued. Lastly, the final page of the document is an agreement to not bring any currency with you from your trip back to the present.”

The guy genuinely seemed entertained by the idea that I might be thrown into the distant past in some random time and place.

Leaning against a bookcase, I signed and initialed the paperwork. The sight of official documents had oddly comforted me after the flicker of madness I’d seen on his face. This was order. This was clinical. This was law. And I could stomach that much more. I skimmed over the page about not bringing back coins. Before signing, I asked, “Is this so that time travel doesn’t cause inflation here in the present? Like if someone went to the past and brought back a chest full of silver, would it mess with the economy either here or back there, if the money was meant to do something important in the past?”

He shrugged as if the idea hadn’t occurred to him.

“I only added that rule because some idiot brought back a Roman gold coin in his pocket once. When I checked my own

inventory later, I noticed that my coin was gone. He'd removed it from history by taking it during his trip, and I just can't have my collection vanishing like that. So, no coins as souvenirs. Anything else is fine though. Except for people, as only one person can be brought back per coin. To bring someone with you from the past, you would need two coins, which would have to be arranged with me prior."

"But those can't be the only rules. What if I went back in time to meet myself? Are you saying that I can give my past self some future knowledge with no consequences?"

He looked bored at the idea.

"If you want to talk to yourself, that's no concern of mine. I don't tell people what they can or cannot do on their trips if it doesn't impact me."

It suddenly occurred to me that this man had neither concern nor care for the space-time continuum—if such a thing existed. He was the time travel expert, though, so was it really my place to criticize if he was acting irresponsibly? Yet I reassured myself, I was no stranger to time machines either: the DeLorean from *Back to the Future*, the teleportation device used in *Timeline*, and *Doctor Who's* TARDIS. I steeled my resolve. This guy was no more than a travel agent, like a man booking a cruise for me. And I wasn't the sort of person who gets blind drunk on a cruise, streaks, and vomits in the pool.

As a time traveler, I would follow

my personal code of conduct and act responsibly. I would observe history, seek no wealth, and have no impact on the timeline.

As I handed him the paperwork, I said, "I'm ready. Show me how it's done." Then I flushed at a thought. "Oh! I didn't ask how much the trip costs."

He snorted dismissively and said, "No charge. I don't do this for cash."

He headed for the back of his shop and waved for me to follow him through the doorway behind his desk.

As a time traveler, I would follow my personal code of conduct and act responsibly. I would observe history, seek no wealth, and have no impact on the timeline.

My eyes darted wildly around the room, once more searching for machinery. I had been picturing the teleportation pods from *Star Trek*. Instead, the room was mostly empty, except for the odd cardboard box shoved in the corner with "time travel stuff" written on the side in black marker. In the center of the room was a bus stop, much like any I'd see on the street corner—black metal framing clear paneling, either glass or plastic, designed to shield people from wind or rain, and underneath the overhang was a small bench. "This," I said, "is the time machine?"

"My life's work," he said, trailing his fingertips across the side. His face was expressionless as he looked at it. "See that metal box on the side that says Ticket Dispenser? That's what triggers it. Put a coin in the slot, step inside, and it will take you to the place designated by the coin. It's simple. And the bus stop is transported with you, so just remember where it is if you want to go back. There's no time limit. I encourage the return trip though, so my machine doesn't get replicated in too many places in the past. I don't want to get accused of littering history."

"You just called it a machine. But I don't see any parts. There's no technology here, no science. How is this thing supposed to take me anywhere? Unless a bus comes driving through this room, that is."

He laughed softly.

"It works. Trust me. I wish I could say it didn't, but it does. And don't ask me to explain it. I haven't patented the thing yet, so I'm not getting into specifics. Just pick a coin and drop it in the slot. Oh, and while I can guarantee you will return if you have a modern coin, I can't guarantee the day in this year that you'll return, so keep that in mind."

"Sure, just trust you." I sighed, unconcerned with anything he was saying because the only thing I trusted at this moment was that I wasn't going on any trip in time today. But I had nothing better to do, so I decided to play along with the madman for a little bit longer. "Alright, let's see what this thing can do."

"You need to pick a coin. Where would you like to visit? Ancient Mesopotamia? New York in 1969 for Woodstock?"

Knowing that none of that was possible, I said, "You know, there's some advice I hear is good in hair salons. You're supposed to ask a barber with the best haircut in the room who cuts his or her hair in order to pick the one to style your own hair."

"I hardly see how that's relevant. Are you saying you want to time travel to get a haircut?"

"No, Mr. Spock," I said, frowning as I remembered the *Star Trek* dreams that were dashed the moment I walked in this room. "I'm saying that in order to find the best place in time to travel, I've decided to ask you. You're the one with the machine. Where would you go?"

He became very still.

He said in a low voice, "You don't want to go there."

"I do. Take me there." I held up a finger as he opened his mouth to protest. "You said you don't tell people what they can or cannot do on their trips. And I say I want to go to the place you'd visit."

He stared at me for a long moment before finally shrugging.

"It's your trip. I'll go too." The man reached into his pocket, extracting two quarters, one of which he handed me. I was surprised to see that the coin in my hand was only twenty years old. He said, "We're going to Philadelphia. Drop it in the slot."

I bit back a sarcastic comment, knowing we weren't going anywhere, as I humored him by obeying. Then I stood beside him under the bus stop.

"Now what?" I asked.

"We sit," he said.

Sighing, I joined him on the bench. I stared ahead as nothing happened. And nothing continued to happen. I rested my eyes for a moment, listening to the only sound in the room, which was the humming of the fluorescent lights above us. In a moment, I was going to leave. I'd wasted enough time here today. Then I heard a bird chirping rather than the fluorescent lights, and I opened my eyes. I expected to see a bird that had flown into the shop, or maybe a pet in a cage I hadn't noticed earlier. I blinked some more, trying to make sense of the changed scene before me. The nearly empty back room of the shop was gone, and I gripped the side of the bench beneath me, as if to assure myself it was real as I gazed at the water.

Ignoring the obvious blue sky above me, I listened harder for the fluorescent lights, but only heard the birds chirping in the trees, the sound of distant conversation as a couple walked their dog down a path to my right, and the rustle of leaves as they blew in a breeze. I felt that breeze on my own face. Suddenly I couldn't deny this was real. I was here. We were here. As I turned to the man beside me, I asked, "W-where?"

His face continued to hide any emotion that might have been stirred by this trip.

"You already know that. The coin said Philadelphia."

"But—" I pointed to the lake, where the cattails and grasses were dancing in the breeze. "Where?"

"Ah," he said, adjusting his glasses on the bridge of his nose. "I believe that is Meadow Lake in FDR Park. We're in the heart of the city, not far from the Philadelphia Museum of Art." He gave a hollow laugh. "We're lucky the bus stop didn't materialize in the middle of the lake underwater. Or even in the middle of the road. That happens sometimes."

"Yeah, that would have been hilarious," I said flatly.

I stood up and looked around, but without any real sense of direction, I decided to stay at the bus stop. Like an animal hesitant to leave the safety of its cage, I peered through the glass at the scattered people strolling through the park. It was hard to see the differences in them, since I wasn't sure how much fashion had changed from twenty years ago, but then I realized what was off about them—some of them held Nokias. No smart phones. No Bluetooth earbuds. No drones. No selfie sticks. This was the past. We'd really traveled in time and space. My knees felt wobbly, but I fought the urge to sit down.

I asked, "You picked this place?"

"Hmm?" The man hadn't looked away from the lake.

At my words, he blinked and focused on me, but his eyes were shadowed by

an intense emotion. I couldn't put my finger on which one, but he didn't look like someone who was in his favorite place or time in the world.

"Um, I meant you said you'd visit here, but I'm not sure for what. Is it just the lake you like? Or something else?"

The man turned away from me as he said, "Come. This way. It's walking distance from here."

I followed him.

"There it is."

He pointed to a house.

We were standing in a vacant lot across the street from a squat, gray house. It was a ranch-style house with a tree in the yard and a child's bike lying on the lawn. The perfect starter house for a young family.

I asked, "Who lives there?"

The man looked up, perhaps guessing the time from the placement of the sun in the sky.

"They'll be home soon."

I sighed, accepting that he wasn't the sort of person who talked if he wasn't in the mood, and I occupied myself by nudging rocks with my tennis shoes. Luckily, "soon" turned out to be only about ten minutes, as a minivan pulled into the driveway of the gray house. By the way he stiffened, I knew this was who we were waiting for, and I opened my mouth to ask who they were until the driver stepped out of the van. My question died in my throat as I recognized my traveling companion, only younger.

He was still wearing glasses, but they were wire-rimmed, and the jeans and Jimi Hendrix t-shirt added to his youthful air. His hair was light brown, no salt in the pepper, and he was clean-shaven with skin that was smooth except for laugh lines at the corners of his eyes. He was handsome with a wolfish grin as he shut the door of the van, yet he stood waiting for something.

"What?" I asked, unable to finish my question.

The older version of the man beside me didn't answer. He didn't have to. Or maybe he wasn't able to. I heard the breath catch in his throat as two more doors opened on the van. A young woman with blonde hair swept back in a ponytail got out of the shotgun seat and walked around the back of the van with her hair bouncing as she rummaged through a massive purse. A little girl—who was like a miniature version of her mother, except with two ponytails and a Winnie the Pooh backpack—hopped out of the backseat before clambering into her father's arms. The woman had found her keys in her purse, and her family trailed behind her as she walked to and unlocked the front door. Through the windows, we could see lights being switched on in anticipation of nightfall.

As the silence stretched on, enduring it became worse than breaking it, and I didn't care if I was saying the wrong thing.

"You have a beautiful family." The silence continued. "What are their names?"

He sighed.

“My wife’s name is Marie. Our daughter’s name is Rosalind, after Rosalind Franklin, but we called her Rosie.”

I stole a glance at my companion from the corner of my eye, too much of a coward to meet his gaze. If I looked at him, I’d see the answer to the question I was afraid to ask. Why would a man need to travel to the past to see his family? For a few more minutes, we watched the house. But they didn’t walk past any of the windows. They were gone.

“You looked very happy. Is that why you wanted to come here? Because this was like the happiest time of your life?”

He sighed again, this time louder and longer, so I finally looked at him. He was glaring at me.

The man said, “Cut the bull. You’re not an idiot, so don’t act like one. It’s obvious why I came here. Don’t pretend otherwise.”

“Sorry.” I swallowed heavily. He was right, so I gave him the directness he deserved. I asked, “Something happened to them?”

“Yes.” He stared at the empty windows of the house for a moment longer, as if willing them to appear. They didn’t. He continued, “They’re dead.”

I opened my mouth but didn’t know what to say.

“Car accident. One year from now. They both died.”

I looked quickly at him. He was crying silently, almost absently, as if it was as natural as breathing for him to have tears rolling down his cheeks. He was still

staring at the house across the street, like he couldn’t look away.

Softly, I asked, “It’s going to be okay though, right?”

He stared at me with a blank expression but seemed distracted from his grief by my question.

“Is it? And just how is this going to be okay?”

“I just meant you have a time machine. Is that why you built the, um, machine?”

Something flashed behind his eyes, but I couldn’t place the emotion, and I had a feeling that I couldn’t place it because in my mundane life I had never experienced his level of trauma.

“And what would you do in my place?” he asked.

I gestured to the house.

“I would knock on the door. Warn them.”

“It must all seem so simple to you. Unbearably easy.”

He continued to stare me down, and the glint in his eyes became recognizable as rage.

Dropping my gaze to my tennis shoes, I mumbled, “Sorry. If it were that easy, you’d have done it.”

Silence enveloped us again for a moment before he took another breath.

He said in a steadier voice, “The time machine is my life’s work. I needed to warn them about the accident. As you might have guessed from the fact that they’re still gone, it didn’t work. I must have tried a dozen times, sending letters and making calls. Eventually I had to stop.

My wife thought she was getting death threats. I changed the past, but instead of helping her, I filled the last year of her life with terror.”

Something flashed behind his eyes, but I couldn’t place the emotion, and I had a feeling that I couldn’t place it because in my mundane life I had never experienced his level of trauma.

“I’m sorry. That’s— I’m so sorry.”

I wanted to ask more but couldn’t find the words. Not words that were tactful, that is. So, I bit my tongue.

“I can guess what you’re thinking,” he said. “How can a man with a time machine ever stop trying to rescue his family?”

I couldn’t figure out how to help my wife, so I tried to save my daughter. I’m older, but I looked enough like myself to convince her that I was her relative. I took her. I brought her home with me to the present, where she would be safe.”

“You—” I paused. “You took her?”

“She’s my daughter. I figured I’d saved her, and everything would be fine.” More tears escaped his eyes and his breathing faltered. He rubbed roughly at his face as he said, “But she wouldn’t stop crying. She wanted her mommy. I couldn’t get her to understand who I was and where she was. She was terrified.” His breathing was ragged and his speech was breathy as he continued, “And worst of all, I

could remember how things were for my wife twenty years ago. I’d changed my past by taking our daughter, and I could remember being in the police station with her. Putting up posters. The search parties. Draining the lake. We thought we’d never see our little girl again. We thought she was dead.”

“What did you do?”

He gestured to the house.

“I had to give her back. I had to convince myself that I wasn’t killing her, that she was already dead before. I couldn’t deny that every time I tried to help my family, I just hurt them worse. So, I brought her home. And now I just watch them.” He took a steadying breath. “I built this machine to save them. But now all I can do is watch them.”

I wasn’t sure how to think about that. Was it no different than someone who visits his loved one’s grave or looks at photos of them? Comforting in a way, like still connecting with them even though they’re dead. Or was it awful for him because by coming here, he knew they were right there, yet he couldn’t interact with, or even touch them, without causing them pain?

So, I asked, “Why do you still come here?”

“Because I deserve to feel this way.” He took a deep breath. His eyes roved quickly over the house, as if memorizing the anguish it brought him. Then he turned on his heels, heading back the way we’d come.

Feeling lost, I followed. He had been right. I shouldn’t have come here.

After inserting shiny pennies in the slot, we sat on the bench. The sun was setting on Meadow Lake, and we stared at it in silence for a few minutes. I blinked, and then we were in the back room of his shop again. I knew that if I thought about it, I'd have more questions, so I tried to clear my mind. The man beside me was hollowed out by grief, and I feared anything I could say would be trivial in comparison. I waited in what I hoped would seem a companionable silence, giving him a moment to collect himself.

The time machine is my life's work. I needed to warn them about the accident. As you might have guessed from the fact that they're still gone, it didn't work.

The man rubbed his cheeks, though they had dried on our walk back to FDR Park. Then he adjusted his glasses. His lips twitched in a smirk, as if he were trying out the expression. He wore his bitterness like a protective shell. He stood, once more looking like the abrasive personality I met earlier today, and he gestured for me to follow him.

In the next room, I faltered in my step when I saw another version of him behind the desk. Unlike the man at the gray house, this man looked the same age as my traveling companion. He shot me a bored look filled with lazy malice as I stared at him before he returned to

reading the papers on his desk.

The man beside me gestured to a calendar hanging on the wall.

"We're in our year again, as I assured you. It's last month, but it could be worse, so no complaining."

"I wasn't going to," I said. "Actually, I was thinking about a recent exam I'd done bad on. I wouldn't mind having a second chance at that."

The man snorted.

"If you were thinking of killing your past self and taking his place, I'd advise against it. And I'm not just saying that because my double is over there."

I gaped at him for a moment before asking, "Um, so how does this work? Are there two versions of me forever?"

"You're the one who was going on about time travel BS before. Why don't you tell me how you think this works?"

The double in the room, who was barely paying attention, snorted as he shuffled the papers. My head hurt as I thought about whether he remembered me from this, when I'd first met him today.

Nodding as I thought the question through, I said, "I just need to avoid my double for the month, if I want to have minimal impact on the timeline. Eventually, he will come to your shop, travel to the past. And bam, I'm the only version of me again. I'll step back into my life like nothing happened."

"Well, yes, you could do that. If you wanted to."

I blinked.

"What else would I do?"

"This," he said, gesturing to the drawers of the apothecary cabinet. He looked at me expectantly. I had come to recognize his devil-may-care attitude. He was a man who had lost everything, failed every attempt to get said things back, and consequently, he didn't care what happened to others. If I walked out the front door and got hit by a bus, it wouldn't surprise me if he laughed.

I had been planning to ask why he offered time travel services for others, after how badly it had gone for him. Now I didn't need to ask.

"Well?" he asked, as he stepped toward the cabinet with a hand extended. "Where would you like to go? Paris, London, Greece, Pretoria, Cairo, Venice? Any time period of your choosing, any city you could desire. So, where would you like to go?"

The wood grain on the drawers was mesmerizing. I couldn't look away from the gleam of light shining on the brass handles. Inside the drawers were coins that could take me anywhere I could dream of. Temptation drew me a step closer.

Slowly, with the satisfying scrape of wood against wood, the man opened a drawer.



(UN)FASTENED

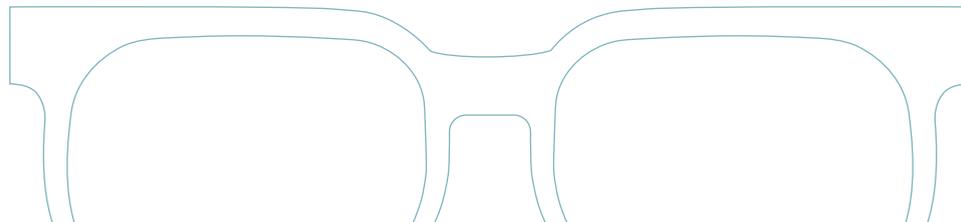
JULIA CHIAPELLA

A mother once put books on heads, marbles beneath toes, said, *Stand up straight.*
A lover once said, *Black is the presence of all color.* When did mercy lose itself?

Transplanting shocks the system. The maple's leaves curl in on themselves.
The oriole sat in its boughs, yellow flit against blue. I was almost happy.

A leaf floated, spun in an eddy. Left behind were a man's gun, a note:
I got tired of buttoning and unbuttoning my shirt. Were they pearlescent?

How many times did his fingers caress their smooth sides? We go round
and round, don't we. Still the buttons do our bidding. Still I crave a desperate
gentleness, to employ me as easily as a button.



Dress Rehearsal

ASHLEY HAJIMIRSADEGHI

One day you wake up & forget how to be alive. You have slept through four alarms set at fifteen-minute intervals & only ambulance sirens echoing across the city's buildings remind you of the difference between being awake and asleep. It is mercilessly cold. Dust collecting on naked hardwood floors sticks to your bare heels; the neighbor's radio crackles through thin walls. Another girl has gone missing last night, but at least there'll be sunshine around lunch. This is a sudden reminder you need to cancel brunch with the girls; you're not feeling up to it. It's too cold, you don't want to get dressed, & your bones feel too heavy to keep moving. Instead you sit by closed window blinds, shivering under the thin fabric of a cheap dollar-store throw blanket & dream you are dust. You, too, can defy gravity whenever you have a petty little desire, be so small onstage the world will never know of your standout performance unless disturbed. What a dream to be airy & move freely, to be dots traced on rays of sunbeams. You open up the blinds & are consumed by light, retinas burning, & then submerge yourself back in darkness yet again. It is not yet time. Another ambulance goes by, its shrill cries echoing, then fading.



Horizon Lines

Paul Rabinowitz
Digital Photography
5400 × 3470 px

Sana'a: Girl and Soldiers in the Spring

ALISON MANDAVILLE

Once, we shared a compound wall
beyond which young, conscripted soldiers,
fed from the worst tooth-broken bread,
washed at troughs before their prayers
for *peace be with you, God*. Each noon
they lifted white skirts, carefully, to splash
the tenderest underparts before me, fifteen,
hanging wet clothes in a hot wind
on a roof of mud, above the black Mercedes
cornered in that presidential yard, the windshield
bulleted and dusty—and I, like Alice, so drugged
and nearly drowned with life, just leaned
to look, floated the sheets, forgot altogether
the violence of modesty, the scars.



Faded

Autumn Joi Ellis
Acrylic on Canvas
24 x 36 in

I Am So Dumb.

HOPE ROSENBLATT

I regularly ask questions that are almost overwhelmingly absurd—the type of questions that don’t even elicit answers: just head tilts, wide eyes, and replies from others asking if I’m joking. Some questions I don’t even ask out loud. I don’t even google them. A page in the Notes app on my phone includes, *Is the North Pole real?* It’s like, I know it’s a place, but I don’t know if people are there, or if it’s more of a theoretical point? And it’s so dumb not to know, but I still won’t look it up. Sometimes I think it’s funny to not know what should be common knowledge. Like state capitals. I think I could maybe name two of those, and honestly, it stresses me out to think that one day I might be put in a position where I’m expected to name the major capitals and I just can’t. I don’t know so many things. Normal things. Common things. I think I don’t know more things than I do know, but I don’t know. I think I may be incredibly dumb. I also think I could be wildly intelligent. I think that mostly I don’t think.

There’s a certain power in choosing to be dumb on my own terms. Dumb is fun. Dumb is freeing and without pressure. There’s an inconsistency to my stupidity that defies subjugation to certain boxes. You could tell people that I am your smart

friend, but what does that say about you when I am only half-sure I know the capital of Texas? It says all your friends are concerningly stupid, that’s what it says. I could just try harder to pull myself together, but I really don’t think I’m going to. There are other things, too. So many things. Like, if you held a gun to my head and asked me how to cook rice, or to explain whatever that thing is about all squares being rectangles, I would tell you to please shoot me before I embarrass us both. I don’t know how many days are in each month, and I meet some people twelve times before I begin to recognize their faces. Maybe I am your smart friend. Maybe that just means you’re dumb too.

There’s an inconsistency to my stupidity that defies subjugation to certain boxes.

Of course, it’s some combination of ADD and panic-ridden anxiety that makes my dumbness more the result of a lack of retention than a lack of brain cells. ADD testing is enlightening but also mostly hilarious. This is because when you’re dumb, you’re allowed to find more things funny. From my own test, only a few of

the components stood out as intellectually significant. There was a part in which my instructor read out a series of numbers and animals meant for me to memorize.

“Cat, seven, bird, moose, five. Can you tell me the second number I said?”

“Bird.”

Maybe I am your smart friend. Maybe that just means you're dumb too.

We continued like this for a while. She'd give a list, and I'd stare at the wall past her, head nodding along as if agreeing to a question she hadn't asked. In the end, she told me I kept saying animals when asked about numbers, and numbers when asked about animals. I do know the difference. I think it's important that no one reads this and thinks I regularly confuse cows and the number five. I have a complicated relationship with thinking clearly. Sometimes I'm good at it. Sometimes I do it more than I need to, and then I have to lie down for a while. Sometimes it feels as though the voice in my head isn't mine, and then I don't think at all. Yet, when I do think, I need time. I do not think fast, which is why I walk past all groups of organized ball-catching with my hands in front of my face braced for impact. I also speak faster than I think, and it makes me mess up. I mess up a lot, all the time, so many things. There's very little I am confident about, but I am sure of

the fact that I am simply a girl who makes lots of mistakes.

I have mistakenly tried to make Easy Mac without water at least three times in my life, which I admit is on me. It is embarrassing to mess up the steps to something that has the word “easy” in the title, and it's a little unforgivable to do it on multiple occasions. I also can't find things, ever. Things in front of my face at the grocery store, people I've walked past while looking for them, classrooms I'm supposed to be in. These are dumb mistakes that could be solved by slowing down a little bit. I think I'd be the smartest person in the world if I could learn to take a breath. Chiropractors have said I breathe wrong, and therapists have said I need to breathe more. Sometimes I can't breathe for no reason, and sometimes my breaths come in short gasps that make me grasp at empty air as if I can physically insert oxygen into my lungs. I think the reason I'm dumb could be because my brain cells don't get enough oxygen to function properly.

I think I'd be the smartest person in the world if I could learn to take a breath.

I am sorry about my stupidity. I preemptively apologize in lab groups and study sessions, asking for forgiveness from strangers who don't yet know I'm not smart. I miss the instructions for

homework assignments and I send texts that say, *I'm so sorry, I am literally the dumbest person in the world, what page do we have to read tonight?* I do my best to ease the burden of my stupidity because stupid mistakes affect other people too. It's become my revolving door. Be dumb, mess up, and apologize. I am so dumb and so sorry in every waking moment. I am so dumb and sorry when I order the wrong type of car to pick us up from the airport. I am so dumb and sorry when I book plans on the wrong date and have to cancel. I am so dumb and sorry when I misplace my phone and I'm running late. I am dumb because I was listening to a podcast in the car and I missed my exit. I am dumb because I spent too much money this month. I am dumb because I misspoke, because I forgot, because I needed your help.

The dark side of dumb isn't nice. It's brutal and stressful and inconsiderate. It's math. That's part of the ADD testing too. Halfway through my test, my proctor read out a series of equations that increased in difficulty. I still get full-body nightmare chills when I think about it. She said ready, I said sorry, and we went through each one. I don't remember any of the problems, but I think I'll always remember what she said at the end as she lowered the equation sheet beneath her glasses.

“It's so interesting. You tend to get the easy stuff wrong and the hard stuff right.”

A different kind of dumb.

It's true. The easy stuff is hard for me. If it seems like it requires less attention, it gets less attention. Simple mistakes. Easy mess-ups. Inconsistent intelligence. I do not know things I should know. An SAT tutor once asked me if I had dyscalculia after I told him repeatedly that two multiplied by three was five. He asked for multiplication clearly, and I would have died on the hill that he was asking for addition. I don't know why I do that. The best answer I can think to give is that I tend to be “out of it.” My ability to be out of it is perpetual, and I don't even feel sure that I know what it is. I know I'm in it when I'm writing. I think that may be the only place I am in it. I'm grateful for it too. To have a place I can even be in it. A place unmeasured by the scale of hard and easy. A place I can house my dumbness and hide it in open air. On the page, dumb is not a mistake. It is a choice I make over and over again.

My ability to be out of it is perpetual, and I don't even feel sure that I know what it is. I know I'm in it when I'm writing. I think that may be the only place I am in it.

I fuck up. I make things harder for myself. I'm bad with decisions and I make the wrong ones. I call so many things an accident that it's become difficult for me to find purpose. Because I don't focus

and can't focus and won't focus. Because I am so nervous all the time that logic and rationale abandon me in times of desperate need. Because if I don't have every answer to every question, if I get it wrong, if I am absentminded, if I look a certain way, if I act a certain way, then I am dumb. And maybe I've been looking at dumb through the wrong lens. I've been looking through the lens of nostalgia, a lens that allows for the same mistakes and slipups that devastated me at the moment they occurred.

I forget to put water in the Easy Mac, and as the fire alarm shrieks, I sit on the family room couch with my fingers digging into my knees, staring at the carpeted floor with unblinking eyes and sputtering breaths. How stupid could I be? How could I not think? Everything smells, the sounds are so loud, someone has to open a window, and I am so unbelievably dumb.

I miss my exit, I drive the wrong way because my maps are wrong, my mom yells at me through the phone to pull over because I can't drive on the highway with hysterical tears clouding my vision. I panic, I get off at the wrong places, I add an hour to my trip. I am so fucking stupid. I need to calm down. Of course, I would do this. Why can't I breathe?

I've been told to stop using dumb. To be nicer to me than dumb is. Dumb is freeing and without pressure only when you lack the spite to refer to yourself as dumb in the first place. To enjoy dumb,

you have to be dumb without hesitation or regret. I'm not there yet. I'm trying to be dumber. I want more freedom from myself. I want to be dumb without the guilt that accompanies it. Dumb without the connotation that it's bad. I want to be dumb without having it mean that I'm not smart. I want to be out of it so I can enjoy the moments that I get to be in it. I want more time to be in it.



HOMELANDS SOME LANDS HOME BODY SOME BODY

KAI NHAM

i am not from places i am of them.
when places have slipped from your ancestors
like shadows chase the sun out of the sky,
home is not where you rest your head at night
it is supposedly this body
its skin both walls and borders at once
each bone a settled ancestor
all soil and breath and memory,
a faded map no generation can read.
can a body be a ghost in three languages
its hands all messy translation
the distance between diaspora and dysphoria.
just because there is a house
does not mean there is a home
look for the way laughter stayed
how it pressed itself softly into melanin
how many dragons brought rain to tend new life
how many boats braved the storms
touch the places that incense stained
the way ghost tongues still know how to burn
listen to the beat of a heart
the gentle thrum of heavenly
& earthly voices together
drawn in a nurturing breath
that keeps these walls alive
and the way they hold the shape of my hands.

Swing Creek Road

THOMAS ELSON

When a Ninnescah County road worker discovered me, I was buried under leaves hidden inside a grove of trees two miles west of a country restaurant where my husband and I shared our last meal. The parking lot where I left my car was now inhabited by weeds, potholes, and mud flung from tractors.

Within the hour, I was surrounded by sheriff's officers, state investigators, and the county coroner. Strangers in blue uniforms photographed, identified, tagged, and stripped me. They scraped my fingernails. Analyzed my skin. Examined my scalp. Studied my hair. Ripped, poked, dissected, and mauled my body. Forensics not only adopted me, they owned me.

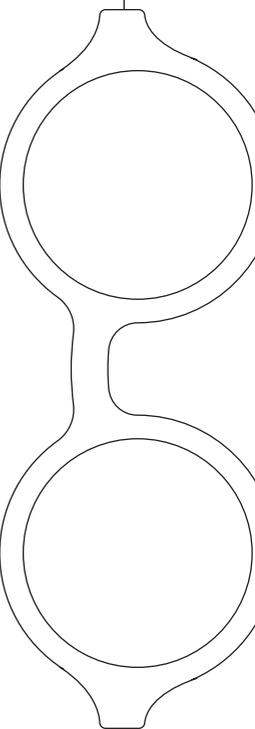
And, within that act of ownership, they constructed a backstory based on the caliber of the four shells found near my body, the angle of the bullets' penetration, the ambient temperature, the contents of my stomach, the witnesses to our dinner, and a myriad of other elements which they laid out so methodically that the only thing the county attorney had to say was, "Yes."

Within a week, my husband was questioned and arrested. Within ninety days, he was tried by my old boss (the county attorney), convicted by a jury, and given a life sentence imposed by the judge. Within a year, the state supreme court unanimously affirmed the lower court's decision.

Were I able, I would have told them this: Three hours after my final dinner with my husband, the same county attorney who prosecuted the case pressed a pistol to my head and pulled the trigger. His right hand jerked. The second bullet grazed my skull. He corrected himself. Pressed the gun under my chin. The third and fourth bullets exited my skull. Then he hauled me inside the grove of trees.

Strangers in blue uniforms photographed, identified, tagged, and stripped me. They scraped my fingernails. Analyzed my skin. Examined my scalp. Studied my hair. Ripped, poked, dissected, and mauled my body.

After which, the county attorney drove to my family's lakeside cabin where he and I frequented during our assignments—those intense, uninterrupted nights—and returned the pistol to the nightstand on my husband's side of the bed.



Contributors

Born in 2004 and half-raised in Nigeria, **Amanda Amadi-Emina** is a literary arts student at Carver Center. Her cultural experience finds a voice in most of her works, which range from short stories to personal essays. Amanda writes best on Fridays at 4 a.m., amidst style Pinterest boards and poorly curated playlists.

Erica Lee Berquist graduated from Towson University in 2014 with a BS in English. She has worked for KWF Editorial Services as an editorial associate and Cloudmed Solutions LLC as a recovery analyst since 2015. In her free time, she enjoys writing short stories and novels, making jewelry, and researching family history for herself and others. She also likes to read, garden, and spend time with her cats. She was previously published in *Grub Street* volume 65.

Jupiter Berrysmith likes to create poems and zines that explore queer identity, relationships, and the strangeness of growing up during this moment in time. He is from Monterey, California and is an undergraduate student at Goucher College. You can find him on Instagram at @macaroniman2001.

Despy Boutris's work has been published in *Copper Nickel*, *Ploughshares*, *Crazyhorse*, *AGNI*, *American Poetry Review*, *The Gettysburg Review*, and elsewhere. She lives in California and serves as editor-in-chief of *The West Review*.

A poet, part-time academic in narratological complexity, and financial journalist, Dublin-born **Oisín Breen** published his widely-reviewed debut collection, *Flowers, all sorts in blossom, figs, berries, and fruits, forgotten*, in March 2020. Breen has been published in journals, including *About Place*, *Door is a Jar*, *Northern Gravy*, *Blue Nib*, *Books Ireland*, *Seattle Star*, *Zvona i Nari*, *La Piccioletta Barca*, *Bosphorus Review of Books*, *Reservoir Road*, *In Parentheses*, *Madrigal*, and *Dreich*.

Montana poet **B. J. Buckley** has worked in Arts-in-Schools & Communities programs throughout the West and Midwest for more than four decades. She has recent/forthcoming work in *Calyx*, *SWWIM*, *Whitefish Review*, *Sugar House Review*, and *Aesthetica*. Her most recent book is *Corvidae: Poems of Ravens, Crows, and Magpies* (Lummo Press).

Julia Chiapella's poetry has appeared in *Avatar Review*, *Edison Literary Review*, *I-70 Review*, *Midwest Quarterly*, *OPEN: Journal of Arts & Letters*, *Pirene's Fountain*, and *West Branch* among others. She co-founded Santa Cruz Writes to enhance literary opportunities for Santa Cruz County residents. As the retired director of the Young Writers Program, which she established in 2012, Julia received the Gail Rich Award for creative contributions to Santa Cruz County.

Alexander Eikenberg is a poet from Hampstead, Maryland and a graduate student at Towson University. He is inspired by the people and things that fill his heart and dreams of teaching college students. His poetry has been published in *Runestone*, *Grub Street*, and *Next Page Ink*.

Autumn Joi Ellis is a self-taught artist with a focus on painting in the acrylic medium. Although she started her journey as a full-time artist late in life, her passion for art has been lifelong. Her goal is to bring attention to her culture by representing it through her artistic and creative abilities.

Thomas Elson's stories appear in numerous venues, including *Ellipsis*, *Better Than Starbucks*, *Bull*, *Cabinet of Heed*, *Flash Frontier*, *Ginosko*, *Short Édition*, *Litro*, *Journal of Expressive Writing*, *Dead Mule School*, *Selkie*, *New Ulster*, *Lampeter*, and *Adelaide*. He divides his time between Northern California and Western Kansas.

Alan Elyshevitz is the author of a collection of stories, *The Widows and Orphans Fund* (SFA Press), a full-length poetry collection, *Generous Peril* (Cyberwit), and four poetry chapbooks, most recently *Mortal Hours* (SurVision). Winner of the James Hearst Poetry Prize from *North American Review*, he is a two-time recipient of a fellowship in fiction writing from the Pennsylvania Council on the Arts.

Daniel Gaughan is completing his senior year at Bel Air High School. He offers a special thanks to climate change for slowly destroying the world so that he could write about it and win a contest. Worth it.

Cheyenne Greear is a writer from Baltimore and has a bachelor's degree in criminal justice and English from Towson University. She writes essays and poems about her complicated relationship with her family members and attempts to understand their childhood. Visit Cheyenne on Instagram @grindinmygreears where she posts photos of her cat, Squirrel, and tries to make sense of her Pisces moon placement through nonsensical poems.

Ashley Hajimirsadeghi is a multimedia artist, writer, and journalist. Her writing has appeared in *Barren Magazine*, *Hobart*, *DIALOGIST*, *Rust + Moth*, and *The Shore*, among others. She is the co-editor-in-chief at both *Mud Season Review* and *Juven Press*. More of her work can be found at ashleyhajimirsadeghi.com.



Candice Kelsey teaches writing in the South. Her poetry appears in *Poets Reading the News* and *Poet Lore*, among other journals, and her first collection, *Still I Am Pushing*, explores mother-daughter relationships as well as toxic body messages. She won the Two Sisters Writing Contest for her micro story, which was chosen as a finalist in *Cutthroat's* Joy Harjo Poetry Prize, and was recently nominated for both a Best of the Net and two Pushcarts. Find her at www.candicemkelsey.com.

Alexander Lutz is a political science student who hopes to unravel the complex relationship between America and Americans. He also enjoys cooking and watching old television from the 1970s. He also enjoys daydreaming about various ideas for novels but fails to ever write them down. One day, he hopes to write a good, engaging piece of research based on knowledge of creative writing.

Alison Mandaville grew up in Oregon, Turkey, Massachusetts, and Yemen. Her literary translations from Azerbaijani and interviews with Azerbaijani writers have appeared in *World Literature Today*, *Two Lines*, and *The International Journal of Comic Arts*. Her own poems have appeared or are forthcoming in *Terrain*, *Superstition*, *Fifth Wednesday*, *Skidrow Penthouse*, *13th Moon*, *Seattle Review*, *Berkeley Poetry Review*, *Knock*, and *Magma*, among others. Her recently completed book of poetry, *The Water Teacher*, explores human relationships to water. She writes, translates, and teaches future English teachers at Fresno State in the Central Valley of California.

Madison Mattison studied professional and creative writing at Goucher College. She is a Baltimore native and started her writing career in middle school, where she published her very first piece, a poem titled "Alpha and Omega." She has since published several other poems in *CHARM* literary magazine. This is her first published short story.

MK is a recent graduate of George Washington University and works in the publishing industry. This is her first published work.

Khoi Nguyen is an artist born and raised in Vietnam. He is a designer during the weekday and a photographer on the weekend. He is currently a senior at Towson University, studying graphic design and economics. He looks forward to connecting with other creatives. Find him on Instagram: @_khoin_.

Kai Nham (he/they) is a queer and trans Chinese-Vietnamese poet and scholar. As the trans son of an immigrant from Hong Kong and a refugee from Việt Nam, he explores in his poetry the fluidity of identity, borders, and gender. He is currently a doctoral student in information studies at the University of California-Los Angeles, where his scholarship focuses on the ways dominant data systems impact trans and gender nonbinary communities of color, as well as the development of grassroots and community-based interventions and technologies to resist violence and build new futures.

Brooke Petrucci will complete her undergraduate studies at Towson University for a degree in art education, art history, and fine arts in the spring of 2023. Her commissions, publications, gallery showings, and awards can be seen on her Instagram page @brookep_art.

Paul Rabinowitz's short fiction and poetry have appeared in many magazines and journals. His poems and fiction are the inspiration for numerous short films. Paul was a featured artist in *Nailed Magazine* in 2020 and nominated for Best of the Net in 2021 for his Limited Light photo series. Find him at Paulrabinowitz.com.

Esther Rose is a senior double majoring in psychology and English and the creative nonfiction editor for *Grub Street*. Her first publication, "Cream and Sugar," appears in *Grub Street* volume 70. Her essay in this edition was selected for the Hannah Nathan Rosen Writing Award. A braided-essay enthusiast, Esther hopes to hone her writing skills in an MFA program in nonfiction.

Hope Rosenblatt studies journalism and creative writing at George Washington University. Hope discovered the power of self-expression through writing at a young age and continues to find joy in telling her stories in the nonfiction genre. However, ironically, she has recently discovered that she is a terrible bio-writer.

Fabio Sassi makes photos and acrylics, using what is considered unworthy by the mainstream. He often puts a quirky twist on his subjects or employs an unusual perspective that gives a new angle of view. Fabio lives in Bologna, Italy. His work can be viewed at www.fabiosassi.foliohd.com.

Matthew Savin is an artist and writer from Pittsburgh. He attends Goucher College, where in 2020 he was a Kratz Summer Writing Fellow. His other work includes being a dramaturg and member of the production team for the Goucher student play festival, Playworks.



Olivia M. Sokolowski is a poet pursuing her PhD at Florida State University. She earned her MFA at the University of North Carolina-Wilmington and her undergraduate degree at Berry College. Her work is recently featured or forthcoming in *Lake Effect*, *Tupelo Quarterly*, *Gulf Coast*, and *Nelle*. You can find her online at oliviasoko.com.

Peter Frederick Stine's work has appeared in *Flash Fiction Magazine* and in Hiraeth Publishing's Drabble Harvest. He placed third in the Baltimore Science Fiction Society's 2021 Amateur Writing Contest. He lives in Baltimore with his wife, two sons, and a very loud cat.

Rutvi Vakharia comes from Rajkot, India. She recently pursued her BVA (painting) from MSU, Vadodara. Her interests are architectural segments, abandoned architectures, and her surroundings in the midst of sprawling urban cityscapes. She is a recipient of the Nasreen Mohamedi Award for Best Display 2021. She has participated in annual exhibitions at Birla Academy (2022), Bombay Art Society (2021), and KCC Ami Festival (2020)

Michael Wilcox is an artist and photographer who works with a variety of mediums. He resides in Virginia.



Chloë Williams is a photographer and creative from Martinsburg, West Virginia. She is a graduate student in Towson University's Professional Writing Program and works for the National Organization for Women. She has been published in *MAELSTROM Magazine* and the *Our Minds, Our Future* poetry anthology, and she has read her work at the Chapel FM Writing on Air Festival and the Crossing the Tees Book Festival. She is often found curling up with a good book next to her rabbit, Bean.

Angus Woodward was raised by southerners in the Midwest and moved to Louisiana in 1987. His works of fiction are *Down at the End of the River*, *Americanisation*, and *Oily*. Excerpts of his graphic memoir, *Words Fail*, have appeared recently in *Hobart*, *Shenandoah*, *Sweet*, and *Waxing & Waning*, as well as in *Grub Street* volume 69.





Founded in 1952, *Grub Street* is
Towson University's literary journal.
Grub Street features fiction,
nonfiction, poetry, and art.