

GRUB STREET

GRUB STREET | VOLUME 72

LITERARY MAGAZINE
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About *Grub Street*

Grub Street is an annual publication funded by Towson University's Office of the Provost and by the College of Liberal Arts and is a member of the Columbia Scholastic Press Association. The staff is composed of undergraduate Towson University students who consider all submissions through an anonymous review process. To keep up with the latest *Grub Street* news, visit our website at wp.towson.edu/grubstreetlitmag. You can follow us on Instagram @GrubStreetTU, Twitter @GrubStreetTU, and on Facebook at www.facebook.com/grubstreet.towson.

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Editorial Mission & Submission Policy

Grub Street's mission is to publish work that is thoughtful, engaging, and from a unique perspective. Though we evaluate submissions through an anonymous submission process, *Grub Street* specifically aims to hold space for underrepresented voices. *Grub Street* encourages BIPOC, differently-abled, neurodiverse, and LGBTQ+ writers and artists to submit their work.

We are always excited to receive genre-defiant submissions. Poetry comics and graphic novel excerpts should be submitted as visual art through our Submittable page. We are also happy to publish translated works as long as both the original and the translation are included in the submission. *Grub Street* will not publish work that has appeared elsewhere. All submissions must be original creations. Please credit your sources.

Writers can submit one work of fiction, one nonfiction piece, or up to five poems. Poems must be submitted in one document. Artists can submit up to five art pieces as separate documents. Using Submittable, put the titles of all submitted works in the title line (for example, if you are submitting three poems in one document, put all three poem titles in the title line). All literary submissions must be in Times New Roman and 12-point font. Because of our anonymous review process, we ask that submitters remove all identifying information from work.

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

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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Letter From the Editor

Darah Schillinger

In my sophomore year of undergrad, the college announced that we would be taking our spring break early, as a *precaution*, leaving everything nonessential behind. I took only a suitcase filled with clothes and an overnight bag of allergy meds and toiletries, expecting to be back in my scratchy dorm sheets by mid-March. But after three months of spring break, I found myself painting again for the first time since high school.

It started as sketches. A bird here, a window there. Pencil drawings of toes in a bathtub or the dogwood blooms fluttering in the front yard. I was surprised by the details I created on paper, and these little successes pushed me to be bolder in my attempts. That's when the portraits started. I studied the curve of arms and legs, how joints connected, how shoulders rolled and skin dimpled. I was inspired by Instagram models at first, learning the shapes of a bare chest and back, using their photoshopped skin to teach myself form without texture.

Once I felt confident enough to move on from sketches to paint, I dragged a basic acrylic set and small canvas into an online shopping cart and picked up my socially distanced, curbside order that day. I waited until after dinner to hide myself away in my room for the night, using an old pickle jar to hold my paint water and a Panera Bread bag as a palette. I painted for four straight hours. It was a woman, naked chest exposed, her arms to her side, face tilted off the canvas. I still hadn't learned how to blend shadows, and her skin turned out more pink than pale, but she took my breath away. I made something beautiful and raw and real. As I painted, I started to recognize the curve of the torso, the color of her skin. I had fallen back on what I knew, subconsciously putting down on canvas what I found every morning in the mirror. By the time she was finished, she looked like me.

I painted into summer, spending money I had saved as a campus barista on new canvases and larger tubes of paint so I could keep practicing with shadows and highlights. I painted every skin color and body type I could but almost always came back to the female form. With each completed canvas, each chest and successful slope of a leg, I found myself feeling a victory over the ongoing nothingness that was that summer. Then, I tried writing

again. It started with short poems—abstract pieces about fictional people in my attempt to capture that trapped-behind-glass feeling of quarantine. Then George Floyd was murdered and the protests began.

I didn't know what to write when people were dying and the virus wasn't to blame. One hot afternoon, I tried to write a piece reflecting on my whiteness, on my sympathy and inability to understand, but scrapped it. There was no poem to write or art piece to create that could make the world fair. Instead, educating myself became a priority; I had to read and absorb everything I could, to do something other than sit on my couch and say "that's horrible" as the news replayed videos of violence. I decided that it wasn't my job to write or paint or talk for anyone else. It was a time of listening.

When we returned to campus that fall of 2020, I brought my paints with me. Going into a new school year with extracurriculars canceled and the added stress of COVID-19 convinced me that bringing a hobby along to fill the time would be healthier than anxiously sitting in my dorm. The campus was barren, masking was mandatory everywhere but our own dorms, and everyone was trying their best to adjust to this new normal. But even though the country was ripping itself apart, and we had another year of Zoom classes ahead, I found myself hidden away in my apartment, quarantined with friends and not nearly as scared as I used to be. I painted on our patio on weekends and warm afternoons, finally attempting texture, and finding not only myself, but women—all women. I took solace in this. That spring, we had our school art and music festival, and I signed up to sell my art. I was worried my paintings wouldn't do well—they were, after all, mostly nudes. But I sold almost everything. Women from my campus, even women who were only visiting for the weekend, came to my table and told me they loved my work. They told me they loved the hips, the cellulite, the tummies, and tiny chests. They said the art looked like them.

I kept painting throughout the next year. In the fall of 2021, I signed up to table at the campus art festival for the second straight year, continued posting art pieces and poetry to my Instagram, and threw myself fully into creativity. Then, in the spring of 2022, talk of *Roe v. Wade* began. Like many people, I was scared, and I didn't really know what it would mean. I didn't even realize how angry I should be until I saw how angry others were. I stopped writing. I didn't know what to say. Again, I educated myself, and the more I read the more hopeless I felt. The courts were now threatening to take away rights that my generation was born with—rights we had taken for granted because we hadn't known they could be taken away.

Friends, burdened with the same fear and uncertainty, couldn't say or do anything to make me feel better about the state of our country. Then in June, on the morning it was

announced that the ruling had officially been overturned, I wrote a poem—one of the shortest I had ever written—titled “the overturning.” It wasn’t very good. When I posted it on my art Instagram, I had only thought of putting my feelings somewhere public so I could feel heard in some way. I had never expected it to be one of my most discussed pieces, or that the women and nonbinary people following my page (mostly friends and acquaintances from college) would swipe up to tell me that they felt the same, and that my poem articulated in a few short lines what they, too, had felt that morning. I hadn’t realized until that moment that art I made for myself as a comfort could comfort others too.

When *Grub Street’s* staff first started discussing how we’d choose content for Volume 72, we talked vaguely of a dark to light theme, wanting to choose pieces that were real and raw and made readers feel seen. We wanted to organize the stories, essays, poems, and art in a way that left our readers feeling hopeful. But as we selected pieces for the magazine, we realized that we weren’t following our plan. The work we chose fit a different vision. There had been no men on our staff while we were selecting pieces for the magazine, and though we never directly discussed it, the overturning of *Roe v. Wade* was there, leading us where we were meant to go. We chose visual art that showed women vulnerable and beautiful. Selected prose pieces written by and about women. Picked poems that describe the complicated relationships women have with themselves and each other. It was as if our staff subconsciously made a creative space for women’s pain and love to be seen and heard. A place where the feminine, in all its forms, could be discussed and celebrated.

In reality, it’s unsurprising that we gravitated towards these works. We saw ourselves in these pieces. We listened.





Leda Seduced or *Maybe* Raped

after Leda and the Swan, Cy Twombly, 1962

Diane DeCillis

Feathers flying
blood specked and splattered
 lines so thin / easily crossed.

She came on to me!

You hurled your body
 into the painting
 scribble scrawl
 scratch draw

She was into it

like ancient walls
you explored in Italy.

Things were different back then

Pompeii fresco well-preserved
 her defiant gaze allowing swan

Swans will be swans

DaVinci rendered little cherubs
and pretty flowers (who doesn't love flowers?)
 Leda holding swan's firm neck

We drank too much

Leda was seduced or *maybe* raped
 either or? toss a coin?

It wasn't a big deal

(two swans form a heart you know)
they summon their mates with a slow glock call:
glock glock glock,

She triggered me

But you, Cy erased the lines
smeared the paint
hands fingers
mark write claw canvas

She was begging for it

Zeus assumed the shape of swan
in order to *ravish* the beautiful Leda
(ravish sounds better than rape)

It was an innocent assumption

Leda was seduced *perhaps* she was raped.
Zeus assumed
the shape of swan, all power and bluster

Yeats: great wings beating, staggering girl
the bill that holds her helpless

You threw down the paint
ecru vermilion gray snow-white
feathers and phallus phallus and feathers
who knew hearts could be so violent?

She's lying

Zeus became
a wing-ed swan
in order to ravish the beautiful Leda

She led me on

soft delicate hard rough

Did you see the way she was dressed!

the scrawl of her name
faint but found

She's just looking for media attention

defiance chaos madness

She came on to me!

you used your body
to tell the story
got that emotional rhythm

What part of No ever means Yes!

Zeus lied—to have his way
no one believed her

Who they gonna believe, you or a swan?

He be-plumed
the maiden naked
they say he seduced or maybe he raped

Why did she wait so long to report it?

unrecognized
penis vagina
explosive encryptions

This is a witch hunt!

the woman is naked
Leda is naked

and so is the swan
who isn't a swan.

It was a long time ago

Don't Ask Me How We Got Here

*based on Danez Smith's
"not an elegy for Mike Brown"*

Maia Johnston

This *here* is a space where the sun used to be
and I can't see your eyes, just
your lids as you browse the biweekly.
leave the windows open and we
can hear the highway.
keep the windows open, just on your side,
where you blow smoke into midnight air
and it flatlines.
take another puff,
and I see your skin swallow.

//

Pretend to kiss my cheek where
I fake sleep and wait
for morning and wait
to see if the sun is where it's supposed to be.

Stalking David Sedaris

It's okay though. He did it to James Comey.

Mandy Osterhaus Ream

It is risky to brazenly admit that I stalk a famous author. But after reading the last chapter of David Sedaris's book *Calypso*, it became clear to me that my annual pilgrimage to his beach house could continue with ease.

Some context.

For over 40 years my family and I have spent one week every summer on a small island off the coast of North Carolina. When I was a child, we would drive seven hours from northern Virginia to the Carolina coast, meeting up with my godparents and their five children to share a house at the shore. Our first houses were simple structures with four small bedrooms connected to a larger main room: tight accommodations for eight children and four adults. One could never fully escape the roar of defeat from an intense game of Risk at the corner table or the youngest children pretending they were household animals.

From these rentals, the group schlepped chairs and towels and buckets to the sand

for the day, lining up in a long row of repose where the adults would read and chat and read some more while we children enjoyed the water. In the late afternoon, we returned for dinner sunburned and tired, never quite rinsing all the sand from our bodies, to find it later in our sheets. As we children grew so did the need for separate spaces, but the houses were always nearby one another. In my twenties, when I spread my wings as a young adult, I still made time in my calendar for this vacation.

When I met my future husband, he began to join us as well. His dedication to this tradition has earned him high marks in my heart as he is a native Californian, never living farther than a few miles from the ocean. In fact, we currently live only one mile away from the Pacific. And yet, every summer, for 23 summers and counting, my California husband flies across the country, boarding two separate planes, to spend a week... at the ocean. Of course, it can be argued that there are significant differences between the two coasts, and this journey is

well worth it for him; I am certain this isn't just my East Coast loyalty talking.

In recent years, this tradition has morphed into a much grander affair where my family now shares a veritable mansion, aptly called a *sandcastle*, with aunts and uncles and cousins and grandparents who arrive from four different states to indulge in oceanfront luxury, each family contributing to this comfort. As a group of 17, we marvel each year at our copacetic cohabitation.

I never thought it could get any better.

Then, suddenly and surprisingly, it did.

During the winter of 2017, I learned that one of my favorite authors, David Sedaris, also spent his childhood visiting this same out-of-the-way corner of North Carolina each summer. I was sitting, rather unsuspectingly, in the audience at one of his readings in Southern California, during which Mr. Sedaris casually mentioned visits to a place called Emerald Isle. His family's fondness for this destination spurred him to purchase a place of his own at which the Sedaris clan could gather.

"Wait. What?!" I exclaimed to my friend next to me. "That's where we go," I said, nearly breathless, before yelling out a solitary, "Woohoo!"

The roots of my dramatic response lie squarely in my lingering homesickness for the East Coast despite my full life in the west. Somehow having a famous person acknowledge the existence of this place

that is largely unknown to my local friends was a comforting connection to home and family. And sure, there were also elements of pure celebrity fascination.

"David Sedaris walked where I walk? I am sure we have been on the same sand together!"

So, the next obvious step was to find his house the following summer when we went for our annual week under the Carolina sun. And I did what any novice stalker does. I googled aerial shots of his house and mapped out the distance between it and our upcoming rental. Shameless. And effective.

I determined that I could easily blend in with the casual beach strollers who are always out and about throughout the day. Walking around Emerald Isle is not out of the ordinary, and I would become the most ordinary, and consistent, of beach walkers with a very clear destination.

"Walking around Emerald Isle is not out of the ordinary, and I would become the most ordinary, and consistent, of beach walkers with a very clear destination."

After some soul-searching, I wasn't sure I actually wanted to meet David Sedaris. A mere sighting of the writer would suffice, much like seeing the elusive Carolina bird, the Piping Plover. I am simply not certain I could pull off an aloof greeting like that of an uninterested, fellow vacationer. It's a little

strong to say I fear the man, but he is a bit intimidating and, well, cranky. At least, these were my initial thoughts from both his written and spoken word until I saw his master class in the online series, MasterClass.

While watching his class and taking notes on his writing process and techniques, I marveled at his openness to fellow writers, and, dare I say, stalkers. Suddenly, where I would have once given him a wide berth, I was now almost tempted to boldly approach. Perhaps this was because of his clear invitation to, well, me.

At the end of his master class, David (which I feel more and more comfortable calling him) looks into the camera and so kindly remarks, “When you’re ready, I’ve saved a spot right next to me for you. I can’t wait to hear everything that’s gone wrong in your life.”

Sure, he didn’t say, “Come up on my porch and enjoy the rocking chair,” per se; but it’s implied. Right?

If I do spot the famous author *in the wild* so to speak, I do want to honor that Mr. Sedaris has most likely flown from his home in England to enjoy his beach house, and I imagine he’d like some space. I picture myself casually strolling by the house along the waterline, sighting the author, and then maybe just wading into the water a bit, seeing if any of his literary magnificence wafts out to the waves.

However, if I happen to see David’s sister Amy I have concocted an entirely different scenario where I might call out loud enough for her to hear, “I like you,” which is an obvious nod to her hospitality book entitled *I Like You: Hospitality Under the Influence*; a book that combines practical hospitality with humor, offering very helpful tips when one is, say, entertaining a rich uncle or if one’s guests are high on weed or one is looking to repurpose old pairs of pantyhose.

But if David’s younger brother, Paul, (a.k.a. The Rooster) is there, well, I might just be brazen enough to approach him and thank him for his masterful creation, “The Fuck-it Bucket,” a thorough explanation of which can be found in David Sedaris’s book, *Me Talk Pretty One Day*.

To add to the enjoyment of stalking, I have included some of my fellow housemates in the activity. For my first stalking expedition, my youngest brother was willing to indulge me in my craziness and drove with me along the main drag to find the house. More recently, I convinced my sister-in-law and cousin to join me under the auspices of simply enjoying a casual after-dinner walk. They were not fooled by my ruse.

During that first trip to Sedaris’s house, my brother and I took the requisite pictures, unabashedly walking close to the stairs because there was no life around. I was thrilled, if a little sheepish, that I had my first stalking experience. Now, my stalking has become a routine, a regular part of

my vacation. Sometimes I walk, like this past summer. Or, if our house is farther away, I drive the distance just to lay eyes on the place and silently pay homage. One summer I simply grabbed some car keys shortly after we arrived from California and announced to no one in particular that I was going down to David's, and I'd be back in a minute.

This year, the proximity was so good, I was able to make it a part of my daily schedule. Our rented sandcastle, Diamond Girl, was just twenty-two houses away from the Sedaris abode, cleverly named The Sea Section. House names are a special element of life on Emerald Isle. My family has enjoyed weeks in Red Snapper and Summer Lovin', but nothing quite matches Sedaris's double entendre. The distance from Diamond Girl to Sea Section was so convenient, I found it easy to meander down once or twice a day to search for any signs of life. I looked for towels drying on the line much as a tourist in London might look for the Royal Standard over Buckingham Palace announcing the queen is in residence.

Oh, and the James Comey piece?

After a few years of stalking under my belt, and before I watched his master class, I picked up Sedaris's aforementioned book *Calypso*, filled with many stories from his time on Emerald Isle. As I started into the last chapter, "The Comey Memo," I felt my bladder nearly release with excitement.

In this story, Sedaris describes hearing island gossip at the local grocery store about James Comey renting a house just a few down from the Sea Section. Naturally, as we stalkers do, David and his sisters decided to jump in a golf cart, ubiquitous in Emerald Isle, and scope out Comey's place, planning to simply U-turn in his driveway if Comey spotted them and got suspicious.

And there, in David Sedaris's own words, was my permission to boldly continue my annual stalking tradition.



Combined

opposite page*

Paige Friedman
Lithography print
12" x 16"



PAIGE FRIEDMAN

"COMBINED"

1/8

what i do not remember

Kayla Simon

in the IKEA cafeteria, 14 years old, i screamed at my parents. my mother— chin toward the white dinner plate, eyes wet and green, the rainforest of her soft face, appeared as if she did not recognize me, took my father's hand, though they rarely held hands— let me yell. my father— his loving heart my own blind spot— listened to my voice, making a scene, did not put down the fork containing the marinated chicken i knew would kill me, or worse, make me gain weight. if there was an instruction manual for healing tucked between the furniture, contained in my parents' hands, written in block letters on the wall or the menu, i did not possess the language to understand it. i remember i yelled, cried, the moment is a piece of stringy meat lodged in the throat of my memory, but i do not remember what i said to them. i may have said i hate you, or i don't love you, or this is horrible, or you are horrible, or i hate you i Hate You I HATE YOU, i do not remember all the terrible things that came out of my mouth when i was refusing to put anything into it. i do not remember what i shouted at my beautiful, sweet, terrified parents who were watching their daughter waste away, who sat at the hard-backed, pure white LIDÅS chairs of the IKEA cafeteria trying to save my life and to ruin it. i remember the chicken on my plate, sauce-soaked, more calories than i was allotted, the portrait its shredded strips made on the plate that appeared to me as the look of a bathroom scale in pre-sunrise gloom. i remember how many bites it took until one piece was small enough to swallow. i remember the number i wrote down the next morning. but i do not remember if my parents heard, in that moment, that i hated them for loving me so much.

Unwritten Letters

Rebecca Beck

I remember how Mama's laughter always began with a bleat, usually over one of Uncle Lazlo's sardonic comments. I don't think she was aware of how before every burst her hand would rise to her chest like she was trying to avoid a belch. She was such a reticent person, and when her laughter erupted in musical phrases, she'd glance, red-faced, around the room. If she'd been especially loud, she'd cover her mouth with both of her shiny-ringed hands. Even if we hadn't heard what sparked her elation, my sister and I couldn't help but shrug at each other before breaking into wide smiles of our own.

My Mama and Uncle Lazlo were born in the '50s, in Chechnya, and shuttled to Chicago as children living in the shadows of the undocumented. Their mama would often chime her mantra, "We're so lucky to be here," but at the same time was so afraid of deportation that she taught them at home, in both Vainakh and Russian. I think my grandmother passed her fear of being sent back to Chechnya to Mama in the form of palpable diffidence. When in public, Mama would glance over her shoulder when speaking to us as if worried others would judge her for not trying hard enough to speak English. And we didn't dare protest having no cookies in the grocery cart, let alone throw tantrums like other kids.

When we were very young, anything involving Uncle Lazlo was merry. Once, at a family party for his birthday, Mama held up a triple-layer cake with a caricature of his face painted on its frosted mocha surface. His big green eyes burst through, daring someone to take a bite, while lit candles melted the replica of his beaky nose. I laughed in delight. My uncle glanced at me, then said to her, "У нее твой смех."

As she turned to me, Mama's face brightened. "He says you have my laugh." A surge of pleasure bumped against my shyness at the thought that I had my Mama's rare gift.

Mama and Lazlo shared a past that was hard for me, little as I was, to fathom. Only when Lazlo visited did they shake out the damp laundry of their memories. Sitting with him at the kitchen table, Mama was a different person. With her bare feet resting on an empty chair in a girlish rule-break, she looked like a teenager in her thrift-shop Blondie T-shirt and tight-fitting jeans as the two of them, speaking in fluent Russian, shared beers and stories that made Lazlo protest loudly when she poked fun at him or wipe away tears when talking about my grandfather who was shot while fighting for Chechnya's independence. As I think back on Lazlo's visits, instead of seated beneath

our kitchen's 75-watt bulb, they should have been with a group of friends in a hipster bar on Lincoln Avenue, where Mama, unconcerned about what others thought, would crack up over something ridiculous, charming everyone with that laugh of hers. She should have been able to express the irreverent gaiety that people who felt entitled to be here took for granted.

When my uncle wasn't around, though, stark lines punctuated Mama's mouth. She'd move from the kitchen to the living room as if she were a guest who wasn't sure how to help her hostess. Once, I saw her about to place a wrapped sandwich in my sister's brown lunch sack, then freeze with her hand poised above it. When Laura walked into the room in her usual rush, Mama startled, then finished the task. My sister would be out the door, but Mama and I had nowhere to go, not even to Mrs. Kowalski's next door. Mama never seemed able to exchange breezy English with others. It must have been torture to navigate its labyrinth without formal instruction. To make a mistake with a verb tense or pronoun was unthinkable to her. Laura took on the role of asking about the price of bananas, requesting thinly sliced beef at the deli and ordering carryout over the phone.

Sometimes after our shopping trips, Mama, her face lit with possibilities, would lift the surprise of a package of clothespins from the grocery sack. They were the unhinged kind with two straight legs running up to a

knobby tip. I'd drop whatever I was doing and drag our craft box from the hall closet. My pulse surged with a creator's energy as she and I transformed those new pegs of wood, scraps of fabric, and tentative strokes of paint into toe-shoed ballet dancers, bus drivers, nurses, and tennis champions. With the randomness of a god I bestowed on them histories: hilarious siblings who always came up with madcap adventures, the first female president—emigrated from Chechnya, of course—and fathers who helped with science fair projects. I always kept my figures' eyes and mouths free of the creases that typically orbited Mama's.

My sister didn't make the dolls with us. Being eight years older, she was busy with her friends on those Saturday afternoons. "Those folksy characters are ridiculous," she'd said, eyeing our handiwork. Mama and I gave each other knowing looks. Laura didn't understand how power could manifest itself from little nothings.

Mama was good at making the hats of police officers and soldiers look authentic. But her army officers' stern faces worried me. She painted them quickly as if more from memory than imagination. Once, she walked, stiff backed, to the sink while holding her officer at arm's length. She doused it with cooking oil and watched as her lit match embraced its felt trousers. I couldn't take my eyes off its flickering orange and blue flame as it traveled to the figure's jacket where its gold officer's badge melted. Only when the paint on its face

began to blur, millimeters from Mama's fingertips, did she drop the effigy into the sink. The officer was gone, but Mama's frozen expression—fear mixed with bitterness—stuck with me. That night, I had nightmares so vivid that the chemical smell of the officer's singed uniform invaded my sinuses. Through my sobs, I told Mama that the man was real and that he'd been chasing her. She held me tight. Her tears dampened my hair, but I didn't hear her sobs.

• • •

Maybe Laura thought if she practiced her accordion enough she'd wow her dad with her talent, and he'd come back. The last we heard, he was a high-school music teacher, but she hadn't seen him since she was barely out of diapers. "*Your* Papa's an altogether different kind of man," Laura said to me once, in a voice that mimicked one of her teachers. "He doesn't understand the power of verbal persuasion."

"How do you know *your* Papa does? You haven't seen him in years."

"Yes, but I hear him on the radio announcing the spring concert series at his school."

"That doesn't make him better than my Papa. Besides, he's raising you, too, silly. Mama says you're just as much his as I am."

I don't know why I defended my father. Laura and I always tiptoed around him. It was obvious to us that he was raised to fight and win. When merely opening the back door to let out our arthritic cat,

Dad's left hand would clench and, wearing his angry scowl, he'd kick the cat when it lingered in the threshold. It made me so mad at him for being so cruel and at myself for being too afraid to defend our pet. And it always threw me off balance, the way he'd bark orders at us, but would soften his stance, his voice, his choice of words, when speaking to Grandma Stella. "She knows how to gentle him," Mama had said, running her hands through my hair when, after one of his tirades, I buried my head between her knees. "Just stay out of his way as much as you can." She stared out the window that brought afternoon sunlight into the kitchen. "He's a hard worker," she added. I bit my lip in frustration, trying to figure out how being a hard worker got him off the hook for being something I couldn't yet name.

• • •

Rogers Elementary was a double-story brick building with a flat roof and a central hall running its length. From the sidewalk it looked like someone had stacked two colossal boxes of saltines atop one another, and I thought of how fun it would be if they served those salty snacks to us. On my first day, instead of taking me to my kindergarten classroom as she'd been charged, Laura ran ahead to join her friends. Some older kids jostled me, so I moved from the sidewalk to the grass. "Get back on the sidewalk, or you'll get a demerit," a pony-tailed blond yelled over her shoulder.

In my second week, I saw our principal, Mrs. Derrick, roaming the halls with a huge paddle. Even though Mrs. Derrick was shorter than my sister, I avoided her whenever I could. The way she swept her eyes from side to side as she made her way from the east to the west side of the building, then back again, made me worry that I'd be blindsided by another rule I didn't know about—this time with a paddle to remind me. Once, Mrs. Derrick was leaving the washroom as my friend Mei came in. After shooting a glance in our principal's direction, she whispered, "Napoleon." I grinned as if I knew what she meant. That girl was already a reader. Every day during lunch, she'd open a book before breaking into the cute lacquer box that held precisely arranged rolls of vegetable tidbits and rice. Those lunches looked like paintings. Tucked inside her cloth napkin would be a note from her Mama that she'd written on bright paper folded into the shape of an animal, sometimes my favorite, a bright green frog. Once, I found a laser blue, long-necked crane on the floor. The words, *Learn all that you can today. I love you*, were hidden inside a flap of its wing. So magical, the way Mei's mother folded treasures with hidden messages for her daughter to find. Pretending the crane was from my Mama, I reached inside my pocket throughout the day to ensure it was still there.

Even though my Mama filled volumes of notebooks in her cryptic Russian script, I knew she wouldn't send me a note with my

lunch, and over time I began to fantasize that the artfully folded messages that Mei opened held words that came from her. As Mei silently read her mama's words, my Mama's echoed in my head: "Let's go to a movie tonight, just the two of us." In another, Mama, using the Russian word for *little sun* wrote, *I'm so sorry you had to see your papa hit me last night. But don't worry, солнышко, things are much better between the two of us today.*

• • •

By the time she was 15, my sister played the accordion so well that she began winning all kinds of contests. She even started playing at bat mitzvahs and graduation parties, usually held in the Lions club's large back room. She loved having her own wad of cash, and she'd give me \$5 to carry her small speaker to and from her gigs. She never trusted me to haul the heavy case in which her gleaming red instrument nestled.

In our circle of Poles, Russians, and Czechs, people loved their polkas the most. Schottisches were popular at these events, too, especially with the elders who would dance them in slow circles of timed hop-steps. Once, a wealthier family hired a group to dance the *Barynya*. It looked like the actors from *Fiddler on the Roof* had made their way to Rogers Park. Laura accompanied them in one of her most challenging performances. I watched her in awe as the music's slow, suspenseful opus gained a lilting speed that human

singing couldn't begin to follow, while the balloon-sleeved dancers tapped, pirouetted their lithe bodies, and leaped into the air. The bottles balanced on their heads never wavered, not even when they landed. Rather than that windowless room with its cheap paneling and plastic utensils, with Laura's energetic playing—her eyes closed to better absorb her own joyous flick-flacking—we could have been in the Drake Hotel's bright ballroom where ladies' big curls swayed over their bare shoulders as they raised crystal goblets to her bright notes.

We'd walked through that illustrious space once, on a Saturday, when we dropped our father off for his day shift. In a surprising overture of affection, he'd taken our hands and led us into the ballroom. This caused Laura and I to dart alarmed glances at one another. He swept his arm as if he were the hotel events manager regaling us about its marble fountain with carved, life-sized babies riding on the backs of fish. "Water spurts from the fishes' mouths when the spigot's on," he'd said in a reverent voice. How, on that sweltering day, I'd wanted to run my hand through the cool crispness of the pool's still water. But Mama warned me not to touch *anything*, not even one of the starched but stained tablecloths lying in a pile, ready for Dad to gather and bag before sweeping up debris from the prior night's gala.

•••

About a week after Laura played the Barynya at the Lions club, we were on our way home from school when, two blocks from our house, we heard sirens. On our quiet street, it sounded like the war movie I'd glimpsed on TV one night while on my way to bed.

"On our quiet street, it sounded like the war movie I'd glimpsed on TV..."

We passed Mr. Lashinsky on his front lawn, seated in his wheelchair. Usually, we stopped to chat with him as a pretext for petting his schnauzer, Petey, but Mr. Lashinsky ignored us, his unsmiling face turned in the direction we were headed. Petey's barking rose to a frenetic pitch, heightening my alarm more than it did the sirens. Goosebumps shot up my arms and legs, and, like a racehorse when the gun goes off, I ran.

The ambulance was parked in our driveway. Its sirens were now quiet, but my heart pounded to its pulsing lights. In a burst of bravery that surprised me, I ran toward rather than away from what it signaled. I kept running, past those blood-red beats, through the open garage door, to the men who hovered over my Mama. I saw the trail of her fuzzy house slippers. One was upside down on a pile of rags.

Lying beside the car's open door, Mama was so white. But the deep pockets and lines running across her face had

vanished, and in the light blazing through the small garage window, her hair and skin glimmered like a beneficent angel's. I wanted to lie down next to her until she slowly pulled herself up to hold me. I wanted her to reassure me that whatever had frozen her face into such a hard mask as she made our lunches, cooked, or took us to the park would vaporize like boiling water had that morning in my science class.

I glanced from my Mama back to the car where I spotted one end of our garden hose extending from beneath it and the other end lodged in the window between stuffed towels. I looked around, frantic for Laura to explain, but she must have run past the flashing lights to her friend's house further down the street away from what she somehow knew she couldn't face—or undo. My hand shook as I pointed to the hose. "Why is that there?" I asked our neighbor. When he gently explained, my face crumpled, and a maelstrom of my piercing cries echoed through the yard and into any of our neighbors' windows that were open on that crisp day.

At the wake, Dad and Uncle Lazlo stood before the open casket. Their backs trembled beneath their too-tight suits. At one point, they turned to face one another and ended up falling into each other's arms, weeping inconsolably like children. Laura and I, seated primly in the middle of the front row and only a few feet from my Mama, both assumed the hardened expression she'd always had when Lazlo wasn't visiting.

My grief was immediate and fierce. After my initial storm, I channeled it into my schoolwork and doll-making. I wanted my characters to have the crisp, realistic lines of Mama's. As time passed, I became even more crafty, moving from clothespin dolls to macramé. Our windows filled with potted plants hanging from the twine I tied into elaborate knots. I also tried to keep the holidays alive—a macramé Santa on our front door a ruse, suggesting to neighbors that a lit tree, fruitcake, and gifts were exchanged behind its looped, smiling face.

Unlike me, Laura collapsed through a stultifying sorrow that she couldn't quell. Some days, she couldn't get out of bed. She missed so much school, she had to wait a year to graduate. Before Mama died, she'd planned to apply to the Chicago College of Performing Arts, but she didn't. Instead, she got married right out of school, and for a year she seemed okay. I think her close connection to a mate helped curb her sadness. But he'd left as abruptly as he arrived and rage, rooted beneath all those years of depression, thrived in Laura like the brambles that strangled our rose bushes. Even during our phone calls a decade later—Dad long gone and not missed, and Grandma passed away—it became harder and harder to sit through Laura's explosions while on the phone with her. Commonplace mishaps ripped through her: mail in her box addressed to someone else sent her into a tailspin of paranoia, perceived insults from her coworkers brought endless tirades.

“Can you believe it? She asked me to turn in my vacation days. That woman is just trying to get my goat, so I’ll quit and she can find someone to do my job on the cheap.”

From the other end of the line, my knitting needles clacked quietly behind the sound of her angst. And when something struck her as funny, her laughter—rising from the back of her throat in glottal stops punctuated by sharp intakes of breath—was nearly unbearable. It brought our losses back to the present. I’d stay on the line for as long as I could before making excuses to say goodbye. “Laura, I have an appointment in twenty minutes. Can’t believe how the time has flown,” I’d chuckle. “Oh, hey, before I forget, look for a package in about two weeks. I’m almost done knitting a surprise for you.”

“Another sweater?”

“This one’s alpaca. It won’t make you itch.” I swallowed the lump in my throat before adding the endearment we always shared at the end of our calls. “Прощай, моя единственная сестра.”

“Goodbye, my only sister,” she echoed.

...

I’ve found a new way to describe how language, from the mundane to the unfathomable, can tunnel through our inner ears’ curving channels. I heard it on NPR the other day during a word game that always manages to make me laugh: “earworm.” Common earworms plague

us after hearing a commercial’s catchy jingle. I have those. But others are ghostly and relentless: my father’s raised voice hurling words meant to devastate Mama... *cuntcuntcunt*; the time when I was eight and overheard her on the phone whispering to Lazlo’s wife: *I... can’t... stand... myself...*

And the most nefarious worm:

Mamadidn’tleavenotesforusdidn’tleavenotesforusdidn’tleavenotesforus. Her limited English was never up to the task of writing something as fraught as a suicide letter. But she could have written it in Russian, with its glancing sounds embedded in the songs she sang to me when I was little, in the same tongue in which she read Dostoevsky—the language in which she had the power to express the shifting, convoluted depths of her sorrow. Why didn’t she realize that

I could have asked Lazlo to translate it?
Whydidn’tshedidn’tshedidn’tshe?

Over the years, I’ve composed versions of her suicide letter in my head. My obsession is my healing. *My miracle of a daughter*, she might have written, *I never expected you to enter my life, yet was so overjoyed when you did. You lifted my spirits every time I looked at you.*

Next, she’d repeat the story she once told me: *When you first reached your hand to my face and patted it while looking straight into my eyes, I felt a rare, pure joy. You did this before you were aware of what you were doing, and because of that, it made your sweet gesture even more precious. By raising your tiny hand*

to my face while looking me in the eye, maybe you were trying to reassure me that everything would be all right.

But it isn't, sweet girl. Here, she'd confess, I am so overwrought that I no longer know my path. I can't tell the difference between what I should and shouldn't do about my untenable marriage. But today, I understand with unwavering conviction that I must go to a different place, even if it's hell. I can no longer bring joy to you and your sister. Your grandma will be better suited to giving you the life you deserve. And she can control your father in ways that I never could.

Her closing would be a benediction: *May Grandma Stella's light and love shine on the two of you, may her health remain robust so she can always be there for you, and may you live a life of peace, health, and joy.*

In this latest version of Mama's suicide note, I allowed her joy in caring for me to emerge. I think it reflected my new awareness that the process of shaping and refining our early utterances into language bestows us with an enduring, deep-seated confidence. We emerge from confusion with the power to wrangle meaning from incongruous objects, actions, and conversations. It's *this* process that fully forms us, rather than the closing of the soft spots atop our infant skulls. How Mama must have struggled in this chaotic city without English as her first language—here in this fast city—where English is expressed nasally, through a haze of slurred word endings, idioms, and an

abundance of slang. She must not have ever felt fully human here. I feel this truth with a slow, deep tug in my brittle chest. How trapped she must have felt, having so little access to the protective power of the language everyone around her spoke. Maybe my diminished anger in this letter foreshadows the empathy that might emerge in my next version.

“In this latest version of Mama's suicide note, I allowed her joy in caring for me to emerge.”

What made Mama so aggrieved... *aggrievedaggrievedaggrieved*? After years of frantic puzzling, maybe *this* worm's tunneling finally caused a vibration to trail from my inner ear to my frontal lobe, where it fired up some dozing connections that I was too young to comprehend at the time of her death—connections between events that were never revealed, not even by Laura, and that now impale me with guilt. As much as I obsessed over our Mama's death from behind all my knitting and goddamn macramé, how could I have missed its catalyst? How could I have left Laura on her own all these years?

The bat mitzvah with the Barynya dancers... Dad and Mama had gone with Laura and me. I watched my sister keep right up with that dance number's rapid-fire shifts in tempo. Each deft finger on her right hand ran across her pearly accordion's keys, coordinating with those on her left as they

shifted across its rows of buttons. And even though the instrument weighed nearly as much as she did, her muscled arms pulled its heft in and out, never missing a lilt in the song's melody. And her face—it flushed with pleasure, but also with something that startled me—she'd become a stunning young woman. It was the determination and confidence with which she played that made her so beguiling. She seemed to defy all expectations and conventions of femininity, as if she'd kick your ass if need be, just as she was kicking all of ours that night with the force of her joyous music.

After the Barynya—after the elders danced the slow polkas, warming up to the fastest one where the ancient Mr. and Mrs. Lewandowski didn't stumble once—she played genre-spanning tunes, some showgirl bawdy, some fit for crooners, and also that oldie that Mick Jagger belted on our classic rock station. The way she pulled that Stones' tune from her shimmering instrument suggested Mick was there with us, thrusting his pelvis as he always had on stage. At that point, the younger crowd began shimmying and sliding their bodies together in risqué ways. Even the teenyboppers became full-throated goddesses.

I glanced over at Dad. His eyes were frozen on Laura, and I could tell by how his black, woolly brows met in a straight line and by those clenched fists of his, that a thunderstorm raged through him. At the time, I didn't understand why the power

she wielded in the room could make him so angry.

Later, at home, Dad set what must have been his sixth drink on the end table before stumbling into the hall. I remember the bottle of red liquid and the tarnished spoon he gripped in his square, plump hand as he reached for Laura with his other and began pulling her toward Mama's sewing room.

"No!" she squalled, defiant, sounding like a toddler throwing a tantrum.

The running water in the kitchen went quiet. From the couch, I craned my neck to look at Mama. She was facing the sink with a Flame Fiestaware plate suspended over the dish drainer. Her back was rigid, signaling perhaps, that she could no longer deny what was happening in our own home—and could no longer live with it.

"I have your medicine," he'd slurred.
Medicinemedicinemedicine.

At the time, I thought it must have tasted awful, and that's why Laura cried like a baby. But why didn't Dad just give it to her in the kitchen, and why did she drag her feet, pulling against him with bent knees and her butt pushed back, as if to defeat the force of gravity? For heaven's sake, she was almost 16. Why the fuss?

"Why do you have to take medicine in the sewing room?" I asked, after Dad left for his night shift.

Her face clouded before answering. “I just do.”

“But when did you start taking it, and why don’t I have to?”

She looked at her shoes before meeting my eyes. “Because I take it for you... and tonight was my third time.”

“Does it taste bad?”

She shook her head. “No... syrupy, with cinnamon and cloves, like what we smell when strudel’s in the oven.” She bit her nail. “He holds me down to take it, says, ‘makes you feel good.’” She shuddered. “He calls me honey. But it never does... make me feel good. Makes me cry, the way he forces me to...”

“To what?”

She’d shrugged and slunk down to the basement, to our dark bedroom with

its small windows peeking out at their drainage wells’ galvanized liners.

I followed her. “I don’t get it.”

She spun around. “Just be glad it’s me taking the medicine, солнышко.”



All the Microbe Single Ladies

Diane DeCillis

Imagine being boss enough
to survive the woolly mammoth,
hostile climates, torturous landscapes

in the tropics, the Arctic,
in puddles and birdbaths,
on delicate threads of glistening moss.

Microscopic, muscular, wiggly,
check it out—head, trunk, brain, guts—
bdelloid rotifer—organism frozen

in Siberian permafrost. Still kicking
after 24,000 years. Radiation, desiccation
low oxygen—no problem.

Completely arrested metabolism
for tens of thousands of years?
Kid's stuff.

Dehydrated beyond shrivel
these animalcule gals reconstitute
like Sea-Monkeys after a cold shower.

Even after a year in interstellar space,
amid charged particles
ripping molecules apart—

they managed to reproduce!

Did I mention these abiding aqua belles
happen to be female? All of them.

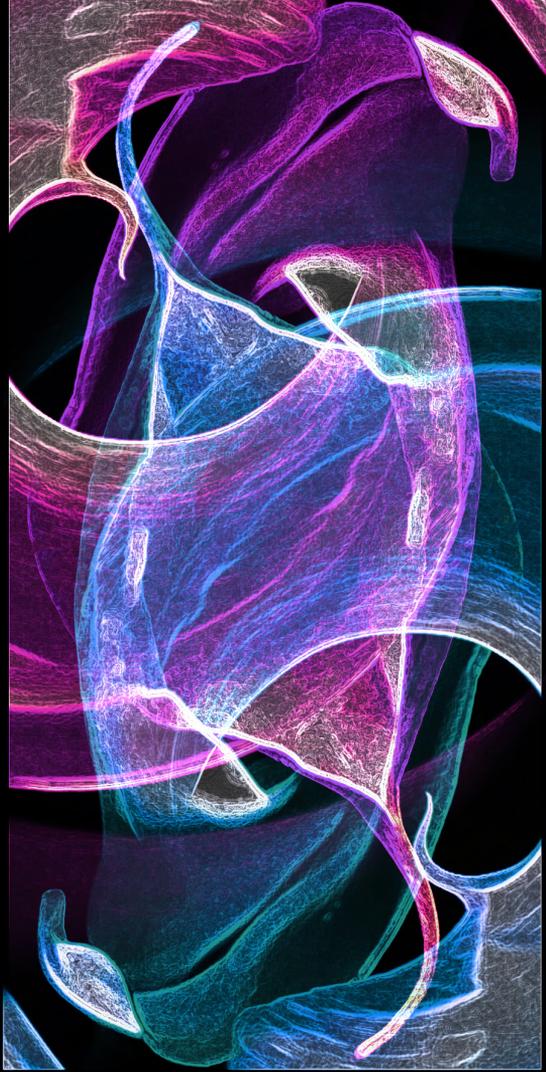
Ms. Bdelloid Rotifer, if you please.

Ancient asexuals who dine on genes
of other critters, turning eggs to embryos.

All that and two feet to strut their stuff.

Consider their microbial manifesto:
We are matter. We matter. Just sayin', we ain't playin'.





Jealous Peacock

Carella Keil
Digital art
5" x 4"

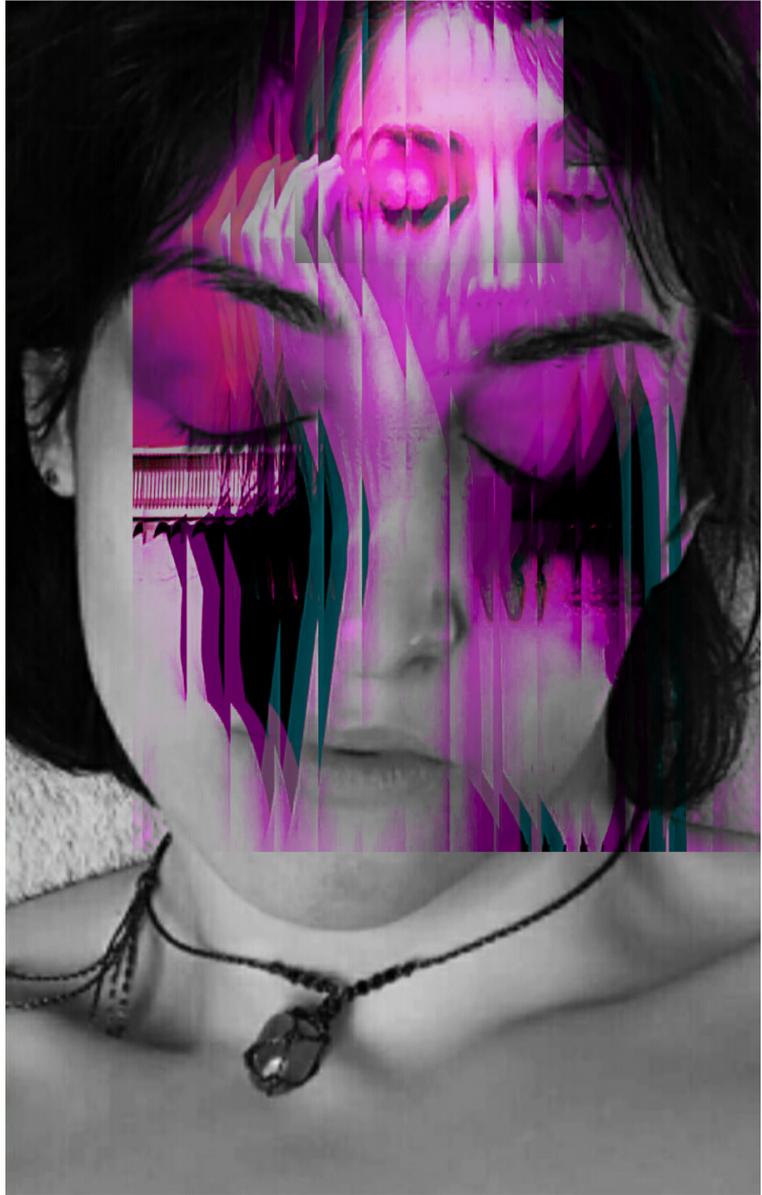


Imprint of a Dream

Carella Keil

Digital photography

5" x 4"



Seven Layers of Tears

Carella Keil
Digital photography
7" x 4"

a cold night in march

Jess Roses

my brother's birthday—a cold night
in march, here already
and january long gone, the last
clear memory of you against me
before the fall
much farther
away
than i thought.

the grief sits in my belly
like a whole-shelled egg
that won't
crack.

my brother's birthday—i
fell asleep in the big white chair
and missed "Happy Birthday," missed
the small candlemass of his aging,
another moment lost to the smoke.

today i imagined love without you in it.
another moment
lost to the smoke. like a four-year coma
to rehabilitate the ache of where you
were
when you should have been with me.

my brother's birthday—we talk about
Cold Mountain
and DBT:
i finally
opened the books, i wonder
if their spines shriek like mine at the
touch and i wonder if that is why you
fucked another girl with your
tongue, did she open for you in a way i
wouldn't
let you take me
when i didn't want to go, not with
the person you have become since

last september. your best friend
rolled into town with cereal boxes
full of Special K
and perforated paper planes and
god's dreams through the eye
of a needle high in his pipe
and you got hungry. i'm
hungry for it too.

you chose the hole.
and i chose the whole.

i shatter
under the weight of it, grateful:
two roads diverge
in a yellow wood.

my brother's birthday—imagining
love without you in it
for the first time since my death at your
hands.

thank you
for breaking
the stallion in me, i needed
a soft touch
to learn how to fall to my knees.

i will always be grateful
for the space you held
when there was nothing else.

my tears
bless the places you lived in me
my tears
water the seeds.

my brother's birthday—a few days
after yours.
there are two fish inside you
circling each other, refusing
to move forward.

pisces season, a cold night
in march. it is time for me
to leave our history
behind.



Grub Street's 2023 High School Creative Writing Contest

Susan Perabo, judge

Grub Street congratulates Maya Walker and Kaylee Lock, winners of our 2023 High School Creative Writing Contest. Walker and Lock were chosen by author Susan Perabo for our poetry and prose competitions, respectively.

Susan Perabo is the author of the collections of short stories, *Who I Was Supposed to Be* and *Why They Run the Way They Do*, and the novels *The Broken Places* and *The Fall of Lisa Bellow*. Her fiction has been anthologized in *Best American Short Stories*, *Pushcart Prize Stories*, and *New Stories from the South*, and has appeared in numerous magazines, including *One Story*, *Glimmer Train*, *The Iowa Review*, *The Missouri Review*, and *The Sun*. She is Writer in Residence and professor of English at Dickinson College in Carlisle, PA, and on the faculty of the low-residency MFA Program at Queens University. She holds an MFA from the University of Arkansas, Fayetteville.

Grub Street staff chose five pieces each from our poetry and prose submissions. The staff then sent those to Susan, who judged them without knowing the schools or the names of writers and poets.

Of the winning poem, “quantum theory in a semi-abstract style,”

Susan Perabo writes:

This poem is a knockout from beginning to end. The poet does so many things well, but what impresses me most is her masterful control over her lines. The line breaks here consistently impact not just the sound and mood of the poem, but its content as well. The speaker is beautifully, and devastatingly, defined through the line breaks, almost as if broken into brief stanzas herself. The language is precise; this is a tight, confident poem by a writer who knows what she’s doing.

Of the winning story, “Chipping Pieces,”

Susan Perabo writes:

What a stunning opening line! As a teacher, seeing the juxtaposition of these two clauses in one sentence, I understand that this author is making really thoughtful, deliberate choices. More importantly, as a reader, I’m instantly sucked in, understanding something deeply unsettling about this relationship even if I can’t yet name what it is. Again and again throughout this powerful story, the author uses vivid imagery to signal the darkness and dysfunction that exists between these two characters. Also: great verbs. Always the unsung hero of the short-short story.

quantum theory in a semi-abstract style *after Sylvia Plath and after Franny Choi*

Maya Walker

in another life, maybe small
 things would be different,
like the color of my hair or the way
grass smells after it's been cut.
 maybe glass bottles won't
rust in shades of green. maybe
you don't tell me it was never rust,
 just iron oxide from the sand
it originated from. maybe i didn't take
chemistry in this life. maybe the kid who
 told me i would never make it
was someone other than my freshman
year self. maybe you tell me you love me,
 and in this life, it isn't a lie. this is an
abridged list. i could tell you about lives where
i don't lie awake at night wondering if you're dead,
where my last memories of you aren't scribbled in
 notebooks that once held novels.
in another life, my college essay has only one
 perfect draft. maybe it's about how
happy i am, not how i need college to be
happy. in this other life, i don't need anything to
 be happy. we meet at a different time
in this life, one where i know what i want and you
know what you don't. in this life, i wish i could be
 a brunette, and i wonder why glass turns green
with time. you call it rust. i call you mine.

Chipping Pieces

Kaylee Lock

The sunlight bled through the blackout curtains hung on a crooked rod, and Michael loved me less. The ache in my limbs sent me knocking into the nightstand. I had found the stand lying sideways on a curb of 56th Street two years ago, well loved and abandoned in a manner that forced my heart into my throat. I wedged the corners of the nightstand into my palms and dragged the piece up four flights of cement stairs.

Sweat beaded along my hairline when I shoved the nightstand through apartment 4C's beaten doorway. Michael had studied the nightstand with a tight-lipped smile. After a beat of silence, he nodded, telling me the color would suit the bedroom. The disapproving arc of his eyebrows matched his voice—one octave above his usual tone, giving him away. He was critiquing the flaws of the design, the chips in the paint, the wobbly legs a centimeter too far apart.

Michael loved me less every morning. The deterioration of his affection always managed to catch me by surprise, taking the form of large knives cutting into smooth

skin. My lacerations were big and small, but all healed with scalding hot showers or forcing a hairbrush through my hair until brunette chunks littered the floor. Sometimes, there was relief: intermittent pauses in which we loved how we used to—Percocets treating infected, open wounds.

I lingered in the kitchen doorway. Michael hunched over the counter, dragging a hand across his face. He dipped a steak knife into butter and spread it in choppy strokes across a slice of white bread.

“Honey,” I said, “don’t you want to toast the bread?”

Michael turned, hot frustration scorching his features. He closed his eyes.

Not yet.

“I tried,” he said. The edge in his voice nicked me, familiar blood pooling in my gut. “They’re burnt.” He pulled the lid off the trash can, revealing two pieces of black toast. The crumbs of his failure smashed into food wrappers and paper plates.

"I'll do it," I said. Shoving the buttered bread aside, I arranged two pieces of bread in the toaster slots. The trash can lid hit the floor. Michael faced the wall. His silence stiffened the air between us.

It's coming.

The toaster dinged. Lightly browned toast followed by the trash can lid slamming against the wall. Michael yelled out, cursing the walls, cursing at me. I pressed my stomach to the counter, listening to my breath grow shallower. I buttered the toast. The lamp hit the wall, shattering to pieces.

Michael approached the bedroom. I bagged the toast. He pushed the bedroom door open so hard the hinges should've bent.

"Please, Michael. Not that." In one swift movement, he hurled the nightstand across the room. I heard nothing after that.

Minutes or hours later, Michael picked up the toast. He stepped toward me, his mouth open. I could hear the apologies on the tip of his tongue, syrupy sweet nothings.

"Do. Not."

There would be no relief today. I would cut my tongue off before I let syrupy, sweet forgiveness drip from mine. The nightstand had pulled me up and out of his rage. If he could not spare the nightstand, of all the objects in our apartment left in pieces, he would not spare me. I squeezed my eyes shut, willing the blackness of my eyelids to protect me from his wake.

Opening my eyes popped every stitch in my gut. The blood gushed from the accumulation of wounds I had sutured closed. Some were gashes Michael left months ago, others freshly cut, but they filled my insides with the same blood.

Fragments of Michael's destruction littered the apartment, but my eyes focused on the wooden pieces. The nightstand had scraped paint off the wall, a ragged slash in the cream coat.

I studied the slash. I wanted to make art with the blood in my gut, a finger painting of my anguish spread across the apartment. Instead, I inspected the slash in the wall which revealed a layer of paint I hadn't known was underneath. It was dark and uneven, so much so I wondered if the first coat had fully dried before the second. I stood, frozen as if Michael was still burning with rage before me. I tried to force thoughts through my head, but all I could think was that if Michael and I were paint, we would be half-dry and already chipping.



Would I Look Pretty in the Seafood Buffet?

Chloe Ziegler

sometimes I am jealous
of oysters. I too wish to be pried apart,
at the chest, to carve out the
pieces of God in me that bleed
weakness and being.
but the oyster is better than me.
life gives them lemons.
and I don't think my hemorrhaging
heart would be so nice with
cocktail sauce; just on a
silver platter
will do.

Bosom

opposite page*

Jaylah Hamilton

Oil, acrylic, and sand on shaped wood
23.5" x 15"



Emerald Eyes Ruby Skies the Click-Click-Click of Your Phone in My Ear

Carella Keil

November is a lonely month. I've never felt this lonely before. In October the scarlet leaves shimmied in the trees like girls in wooden cages and I walked the streets with tousled hair and lust in my eyes.

For six months I slept with the phone beneath my pillow. For six months you called and whispered your secrets into my ears. For six months you used your tongue to pry me open.

In October I danced on balcony railings for you and wore red beneath everything. When I wore anything at all. We moved together like a cyclone and I laughed at all the damage we left behind. You must have known I was insane even then and you loved

the way

I took you over the rainbow.

I knew you six times on a night of thirteen stars. You were asking me to touch the stars for you so I lifted your hands up to my eyes. You brought down my tears on your fingertips.

Don't worry. You're not going to melt. Remember, I'm the wicked witch in this story. You pushed your lips onto mine to stifle my cries and broke every last resistance in me. (Why do you fight it, baby? Why do you fight it? I want you to cum.)

I figured, I've got nothing better to do than to lose myself in you. So I lost myself. And then I lost so much more. Every time you leave, you leave more of yourself inside of me.

Yeah, you leave. Leave me with the broken unborn passing between my legs. The unmemories of a little girl who will never be.

Blue eyes and an open smile. I was euphoric for a day. For the wrong place. The wrong time. The wrong man. I was euphoric for a day. And I'm the insane one for acknowledging what my body tells me.

I'm reminded of Dorothy and her emerald search for home.

I thought you liked my green eyes, the southern slant of my voice, the way I skip down sidewalks, the way I turn everything into a game. So one night while you were sleeping I dug down to the bottom of your heart. But I couldn't find myself there at all.

I left your bed with my ruby shoes, two roses, and your kisses on my lips, went home and found the phone beneath my pillow was broken.

I decided it was time to take the shortcut to insanity. But on the way I stripped a man in an alleyway, filled up my phone book with meaningless poetry, made paper swans in a bar, and wandered down the hidden corridor that leads from reality into waking dream.

No one could touch me. I could feel everyone just by looking at them. I could feel the world and it was *beautiful* but it was also *hurt*.

I was lost without your voice in my ear. You were the only thing that kept me from floating up, up, up. I was lost with a thousand voices in my ear.

So I took a trip down a road of yellow brick and packed my memories into the back of my brain and stuck my keys into my ruby red shoes. Click-click-click.

Headless scarecrows roared after me, chased me all the way to the end of the road. I promised I'd come back, set them all on fire, but at the end of the road four men stole my shoes. Stripped me of my clothes. Strapped me on my back to a bed of iron shackles and watched me scream out my demons. And watched me scream out the blood of an unmade child.

And as it turns out, the Emerald City isn't home but an institution with green corridors and nurses traipsing the halls in scrubs. The doctors never look me in the eyes. They are afraid the flames of my madness might leap into their own.

I am the girl with the lost soul and the heart that ignites like straw. I pretend my heart is tin because that's what gets me through every long night without you.

You left me lying on my back while a cyclone ravaged my body and mind. You hid from my reality like a cowardly lion. So I'll leave you trapped in your own city of illusions, thinking you're still some sort of emperor, thinking you
blew me away.

I hope I made you cry. I hope I melted something in you. I hope a part of you will never stop burning for what you did to me. I hope no girl is ever foolish enough to spend the night in your bed, leave her shoes on your doorstep and her keys in the palm of your hand.



before i stopped believing

Kayla Simon

i used to tell [God] what i had for breakfast.
i used to tell [God] everything,
& [God] instilled a medium apple with 80 calories,
my body a vice to confess on skinned knees.
prayer, to me, was hunger filling every space in a dark room,
begging every shape for silence & then relenting to sin.
prayer was an allowance, was whatever i had left
at the end of the day. [God] did not care whether i lived or died.
[God] cared about macro splits & meal times, the distance between street signs
& the circumference of my hollow heart. [God] was a coincidence turned savior
turned prison guard, but i did not curse the jail, only the hand that fed me.
only my own stomach, wailing a hymnal of betrayal.
in [His] name i skipped family dinner until [God] knew me better than my father,
understood the blue nails, brittle wrists, black bruises i hid from
my mother. in return for my devotion, [God] left me
with the terror of discovery. with a wordless Bible i still carry
even now.





Swingset

Kellan Marriott
Oil on canvas
16" x 20"

Every Word the Perfect Word

Billy Howell

There is no profit in death, Nathan told himself. The interstate was empty this far out from Joplin, but he'd drifted into the next lane more than once practicing possible mantras with himself in the rearview. He tried again: Death reduces investor interest. He was looking for a way to phrase what he'd been feeling, to *express emotion* like Father Brad kept telling him he needed to do. There is no profit in death, he mouthed. But that's not true, is it? Not literally. Lockheed, Raytheon. Every funeral home or hospital. GSK and Pfizer. Contracts, kickbacks, lobbies.

Nathan's mind populated a list of his friends, the brothers from Alpha Kappa Psi, the sons of St. Louis, who would have disagreed: Randy Zed, Allentown, Chase, Steve the Beef. His brothers who used to sneak discount Macanudos on the no-smoking patio down the stained-carpet hall from their rooms at the east end of the frat house. They would smoke cigars and drink port from brandy glasses and bitch about Dr. Turlington's lectures on *ethics*. Now those guys all worked in investment or for holding companies that kept an eye out

for the next health crisis or the next military conflict. They'd become the kind of guys who, if ODs spiked in Clermont County, Ohio, or if the number of arms getting funneled through eastern Libya plummeted, they got phone alerts.

The kind of profit Nathan was thinking of in his formulation was more mundane. Specifically, he meant the profit of continuing to exist, continuing to get to experience the world. You got what was yours, built a little wall around yourself to protect what you had. The benefits: flying with the added padding and leg-and-elbow room of first class, never having to scrub your own toilet, picking up the check for a night out with your friends without looking at the total, and adjusting every year to the slight advantages BMW had added over the previous year's SUV.

Nathan still hadn't bothered to program the radio on the new X5 he was driving to Oklahoma. He kept scanning the radio, and the channels passed from 1940s Ernest-Tubbs country to Lone Ranger radio shows to poorly recorded sermons by local

pastors. He'd been on the interstate for hours, where the empty plains on both sides of the highway repeated, a wash of green and brown under blighting sun. The next city he would see was the city where his twin sister, Nadja, had died, the city where he would have to turn off the main interstate and map out the route to her apartment and set about his work. The emptiness of the plains was an annoyance that served no purpose but to delay him from getting to the task at hand. If he'd known the drive would take so long, he would have bought some CDs.

To die is to stop getting the perks of being alive and to stop providing external benefits to others. Nathan assured himself this was a better formulation, one he would write down when he got to Nadja's apartment. Father Brad might even have approved, although Father Brad often criticized Nathan's thoughts about the nature of interpersonal exchanges. Nathan's theology, after all, was salesmanship.

Nathan would certainly not be selling any of Nadja's things. Their parents had kept her teenage bedroom intact after her first attempt, a museum to better times. The time would come to lay rest to the remnants—their dad had used that language when he saw him off after morning coffee—but for now the big guy had assigned him only to collect and catalog everything she had left behind in Oklahoma. To find mutually beneficial terms with her landlord, close out the lease. Easy enough, knowing all

property managers really wanted was quick turnaround and uninterrupted passive cash flow. Their dad had even provided funds for bubble wrap, should Nathan need it.

The radio picked up coverage of a Cardinals game starting just as he hit the outskirts of the city. Finally, something worthwhile. Father Brad would go on about the Cards. He'd promised to get tickets so that Nathan had something to look forward to when he got back to St. Louis. A game with a friend was comfort enough for now.

• • •

Nadja's landlord promised to give Nathan a week before the apartment would be re-carpeted and repainted, a week to sort and collect Nadja's possessions. The landlord used the word *chattel*. Free to gather up her chattel, he said. No hurry or nothing. This wasn't his first rodeo with this sort of thing, he said. From the way the landlord looked toward a couple of specific doors, wistfully jawing at a plug of tobacco, Nathan believed him. He took the key and walked away before the landlord could launch into any tragic stories.

Nathan didn't like the word *possessions*. Something ominous about it as he stood with the word on his tongue in the dark of Nadja's apartment. There were few enough things in her apartment that he felt he could sort them here, winnow it down to a single carload to drive back across the dull expanse of rural Missouri. The furniture he would donate or dump. Most of the

clothing he would bag and drop off at the St. Andrew's charity down the street from Nadja's place. *Possessions*, he was sure now, was the wrong word. If he could find the right words for things, maybe he could make sense of all this.

Within a couple hours, he had cleared the apartment of most everything in the kitchen and bedroom. In the living room closet, he found a hoard of papers and cassettes and poetry books with notes in the margins and shoeboxes holding VHS tapes. He dragged the stacks out into the living room and took some journals and papers back to his hotel for the night.

“Possessions, he was sure now, was the wrong word. If he could find the right words for things, maybe he could make sense of all this.”

The bed in his hotel room gave him space to spread out a few of Nadja's journals and old papers. The journals trampoline off the surface of the bed as Nathan flopped into the middle, remote in hand. The Cards would be in the seventh by now.

Nathan scanned the journals, looking for clues about Nadja's state of mind. They had been through this before, her family, so he wasn't surprised. No, he just wanted some confirmation that what she had gone through this final time was the same thing

she had gone through the first time, when he had charted out her patterns.

He couldn't tell which journal came first, what order she'd written them in. Some had loose paper tucked into their pages in totally different handwriting, her childlike loops instead of the manic chicken scratch. She used the word “frenetic” a lot, even drew the word out in different fonts and sizes for a couple pages of one journal. There were maps of parking lots, maps of constellations, maps of restaurant interiors, some drawn in pink and yellow highlighter.

Nathan spread the journals and loose pages into a wider arc around himself, looking for a pattern, some way to organize Nadja's mess. Meanwhile, Jim Edmonds held the outfield like an all-star, once making a catch for the Cards after starting from a dead run to climb the back wall. Nathan knew people were capable of the most incredible things.

•••

The next day, Nathan resolved to stay at Nadja's apartment. He couldn't waste any more time on television or travel or hotel check-ins. Nadja's journals would take too much attention to sort through. Takeout from Panda Express and a blanket on the floor would speed him along.

He offloaded the furniture in two loads but kept Nadja's small TV/VCR combo so that he could check out the tapes he'd found in the closet. Each tape bore a

dated label on its side. The smallest box contained the oldest tapes, from almost exactly a year earlier.

On the tape, suburban houses passed by on each side. The camera had clearly been sitting on Nadja's dashboard as she drove through the city. The occasional glare from a streetlight revealed the presence of a windshield. Nadja's voice would burst in for a moment, then fade into a murmur.

"Here we are on 54th," she said. "This is the halfway house I stayed in for six months."

The camera turned toward the building, a glimpse of Nadja's hair and cigarette on the left side of the screen. She wasn't looking toward the camera, and the palm of her hand covered the lens for a few seconds while she reached over to redirect the camera. The car stopped, and the frame lingered on the halfway house.

"When I lived here," she said, "I thought I had a grasp on the deeper ontological truths of reality. If the world were about to end and an angel needed to confirm that someone knew everything there was to know, I believed I would pass his quiz. I *sensed* things. Different planes of reality, simultaneously moving and in harmony. I took a hundred and fifty pills and woke up with a tube of charcoal down my throat. I'm really lucky my roommate came home early."

The building passed out of sight, and Nadja set the camera on the dashboard. She aimed the camera at herself but didn't turn

her face toward the screen. She tucked her long brown hair behind one ear. Even without her smiling, her thin dimples showed as she talked. Nathan touched the side of his face, his ear. The same hair and dimples. Pictures didn't do justice, and he had forgotten how much they looked alike after a while.

"*Frenetic*," she said. "That was the term that echoed behind all my behavior. A Greek chorus singing the song called 'Frenetic.' People tried to give me advice, but I wouldn't listen. They told me I was being irrational. Moreover, I *remember* being irrational."

She blew smoke past the camera, then threw the cigarette out the open window.

"Then I was living with this guy named John. We called him something else, a made-up name. The kind of thing poets do. I should find his apartment complex. It's not far from here. When we met, he told me he was immortal. He said that word and, just like that, I would have done anything for him."

She turned the camera toward the road. Nathan counted 12 minutes of silence, during which the video showed only the hood of her car driving the streets of Tulsa. She bypassed the highways. She stayed in the residential areas, passing one block of suburban houses after another. A row of half-dead maples lined one side of the street, and a BFI trash bin stood in the road beside a small bookstore. It was the black of night, and streetlights lit the road ahead of her. Only two or three cars passed in the

opposite lane. The lens reflex of the camera's light filter darkened the screen as the cars' headlights skimmed Nadja's windshield. A woman's voice sang from the car radio, but Nathan didn't recognize the song.

The car stopped in front of a restaurant with a yellow neon sign: PERRY'S DINER. Nadja held the camera toward her face. Nathan looked at her long, straight nose, touched his own. He could imagine himself in her driver's seat, as if through some magical contortions she could force her face to become his. He wanted to shut the VCR off. He would have, if Nadja hadn't started speaking again.

"I'm trying to understand here," she said. "I want to know why I felt that way. Because I desperately want to feel that way again. I know it's supposed to be wrong, but I want to believe it's possible to feel that way, that connection to the hidden order of things, without putting myself in danger. It's something I remember having that I really want back."

She lowered the camera onto the passenger's seat and took the key from the ignition. For a moment, she ducked off camera toward the floorboard, then came up with her purse. She opened the car door and draped one leg out.

"I think a lot," she said. "Thinking isn't by nature self-destructive. It's a quality I really like about myself. Thinking so much turns negative only when I turn the lens on myself."

She reached toward the camera, and the screen turned to static. Nathan let the tape run while he returned to the closet. There was another box on the closet floor, one that she had filled with photos, scattered and out of chronology. The only organized photos were in an album she'd made that held photos of their shared birthday parties, complete with shared cakes—twenty-five pictures of the two of them blowing candles. They hadn't been together for their twenty-sixth birthday. And there wouldn't be a twenty-seventh.

He thought about how easy it must have been for some people to let go of her. There were people he'd met, people who were a part of her life, most of whose names he couldn't remember now. They wouldn't always be related to her, wouldn't have as many memories of her. For some of them, it would be like she'd just moved away. With others, she might have already fallen out of touch. Did they even know she was gone?

The blinds over the small windows let in noon light. The windows were too high on the wall, starting even with his shoulders. He had to walk up right to a window to see anything much but sky. The asphalt lot put off heat lines. The VHS static in the background chilled him. He decided that going through the closet warranted a stiff drink. Drinking at lunch was warranted by social circumstances, one early mentor had told him. A glass of fine Russian vodka among negotiators could help seal a deal, regardless of time of day. But to drink alone

was unprofessional. He'd avoided drinking altogether during her last months, when he'd had to always be available, always ready in case anything should happen.

After a trip across the street to a strip-mall liquor store, Nathan downed a glass of gin and poured a second before rewatching the tape. He wrote down the address of the halfway house she pointed out. He found the map of Tulsa he'd bought when she'd disappeared last fall, and on it he attempted to map out the route she was driving. He made a list of intersections and directions—41st and Riverside. Left, right, straight, straight, left. He wrote down the names of streets when the video was clear enough to see the signs on the corners.

...

He found the halfway house the next morning. It was a fourplex that resembled the early twentieth-century brownstones he'd seen on a recent business trip to New York. He had never visited Nadja here. He'd been in Chicago and had let their parents keep track of her, had let them take care of her.

He walked up to the building and ran his finger inside a long crack in the brick façade. There were two units upstairs and two downstairs. A metal staircase and concrete breezeway separated each apartment from the one facing it. Behind the stairs stood a tall blue dumpster, the same one from the video. Nathan remembered that Nadja had once called to tell him that she had lost her

wallet then later had found it on the ground by this dumpster, untouched. She'd said that was an example of why you should trust people.

A skeleton-thin girl came out of one halfway house door. She closed the door with her back to Nathan. When she turned and saw him, she panicked and dropped her keys. Within seconds, she had reopened the door and slipped inside. The doors of the fourplex were metal, most dented in odd Kandinsky-like patterns. Her head reappeared around her doorjamb.

"What are you doing here?" she called over to Nathan.

"Nothing," he said. "Just out for a walk." He felt like he might not have the right to be here. What were the rules about walking close to halfway houses? Would his purpose—to look over a place from his dead twin's history—legally qualify as trespassing?

"Don't take me, okay?" the girl said. "I've been here now two months just about and I'm good I'll tell you good I'll tell you all about it just please don't don't don't. Don't let me get too..." She nodded and nodded at Nathan. Her eyes unblinking, she didn't seem to notice that she was sobbing.

He put his hands up with his palms out to show her that he wasn't there to take her. The gesture, one his dad had taught him to use with a frightened dog. The lesson: nervousness precedes violence. He told the girl he had to go now, that he had an

appointment, and smiled, trying to seem friendly. He inched away, then turned on his heel and consciously performed a casual walking pace back to his car.

Surely Nadja hadn't been in that condition, had she? He wondered. Were there more women like them? Of course there were. How many Nadjas could there be? He imagined his office's claustrophobic HR, the sixth-floor cubicles, an expanse of Nadjas standing and sitting and pacing nervously, talking into headsets and talking to themselves, popping up and down like a hellish whack-a-mole game. But there were men, too. There had to be. And all those men looked like Nadja, too. Even worse. Spinning in swiveling mesh-backed chairs, scattered throughout Nathan's imagined office, each of those men looked just like him.

He followed the route Nadja's camera had taken through Tulsa. Not much had changed. The city had apparently trimmed back some of the trees, because piles of branches lined sunny streets that had been tree-shaded in the video. But on the whole the houses looked the way they had when Nadja drove through. He hadn't recognized the possibility before, but maybe Nadja had recorded the tapes after her last treatments, less than a dozen weeks ago.

He continued down small streets and past wide cross streets. There didn't seem to be any logic to the path she had taken, no goal in mind. The driving route crossed back over itself now and then. There were a

few blocks that he drove down three or four times, and he wondered if these blocks had some significance for Nadja, some memory that had drawn her back.

“There didn't seem to be any logic to the path she had taken, no goal in mind.”

But, he reasoned, there had to be some meaning to the route. Nadja had taken a *specific* path, had driven a *specific* direction. At each intersection, she had chosen to go one way instead of another. There had to be a reason, even if no one now could ever discover the reason.

Nadja sometimes talked about driving, but she talked about driving in the same mystical tone she used with everything. He did remember Nadja telling him about a hitchhiker she'd picked up, a middle-aged man with too many wrinkles and a long beard. She'd assumed he was homeless. She'd given him a ride from one side of the river to the other. At his destination, he'd asked her for change, and she'd given him five dollars.

Nathan remembered wanting to crush his expensive Nokia in his hand. “Are you crazy?” he'd said. “That guy could've raped you or killed you or God knows what.”

“He couldn't have,” she'd said. “He was perfect. I knew everything about him. He

was my father. I slept in his beard as a child. You don't understand. How can I make you understand?"

At that time, conversations like that had already gotten old. Nathan hadn't known how to bring her back into reality, and she wouldn't have heard anything he said. Still, he now found himself reexamining old memories for clues to her condition. He remembered a time when they were teenagers, and she said she wanted to replace their parents' mattress with a straw bed. She could make one, she said, just like people did in olden times. Was that something he should have seen as a problem? She said she'd be an astronaut but for the ocean, rocketing down into the Mariana Trench. Was that diagnosable? Should he have recognized something was wrong with her? Or was she just being imaginative and smart?

After half an hour of slow and methodic driving, searching for clues and finding nothing, Nathan reached the Perry's parking lot. He tried to park in the same space Nadja had parked in, but the location of the space was impossible to judge from what he remembered of the tape. Still, maybe there would be something on the ground near her parking space, something she'd left behind. Maybe she was still alive somewhere, waiting for him to put the clues together and come find her. The funeral could have been a dream or fraud if he believed hard enough.

He bent down on his hands and knees and looked across the asphalt surface of the parking lot. Nothing. An elderly couple parked next to him and walked toward the restaurant's front doors. They looked at him as they passed, and he suddenly felt ridiculous. He saw himself in the glow of the restaurant lights and recognized his smallness under the immense black sky. He got back in his car and drove home.

• • •

The next day, he paged through more of the journals he'd found in Nadja's box. The early ones seemed rational, analytical.

"I haven't decided which of the discourses I could apply to my situation is the most correct," she'd written. "I could write that I internalized the critical voice of the Other as an ever-present superego-as-conscience, and this is true. I could write that my thinking was disordered and that I failed to recognize non-objective irrational thoughts, and this is true. I could write that I overloaded on an imbalance of *kama* while aligning my chakras in pursuit of *moksha*, and this is true. I could say that my brain has developed a chemical neuropathy as a result of reinforcing negative synaptic patterns through negative thinking. True. Or I could write that I am prone to catastrophizing—also true."

Catastrophizing stuck with Nathan. Nadja was the twin with the language skill. She was the one who could always find the right word. Or she could always find five words,

and every one of them would be the perfect word. The kind of exercises Father Brad asked for seemed hollow in comparison. The thought of that future moment, when he would be sitting behind the third base line at Busch II with a cheddar brat and rattling off stats, struck Nathan like a childish fantasy on par with riding a flying horse or living on the moon.

Thanks to the decay of Nadja's handwriting over time, Nathan was able to organize her early journals into a reasonable, likely order. Her thoroughness and thoughtfulness diminished with each journal. At a certain point, she began inserting drawings alongside her words. The last journal was almost blank. She'd written on loose scraps of paper and stuffed them among the final journal's pages. On several paper scraps, she'd drawn wheels of words, each word a different color, all connected by arrows. Nathan found the words foreign when juxtaposed: bee, eagle, seven, littoral, conversion. Though they were common enough language, he couldn't make sense of the logical connections between them. She'd written columnar, nonsensical poetry. To the same piece of paper, she'd attached a Post-it note with the words "i love you" hidden under a barrage of blue pen scratches.

Nathan took a blue pen from the drawer of his nightstand. He copied each of the notes onto the blank pages of the notebook. He imagined how Nadja might have planned to do this, how she might have imagined

some future time when her energy would level out and she could sort through these thoughts, organize them in her notebook.

It took him nearly an hour to copy all the loose notes, but he hardly noticed that any time was passing until he reached the last note—a small spiral labeled "THIS IS" which she'd drawn on a napkin. He held the napkin under the page of the notebook and traced it in order to get the dimensions just right. When he finished, he felt as if he'd accomplished something. But within minutes he felt like a hollowed gourd, felt the edges of his breath scrape against the walls of his empty chest cavity.

One of the last things he found was a map of the interior of Perry's Diner. The diner was a centerpoint in the geography of her mania. It had been one of the places she would reappear after a day or two missing. He would go back there tomorrow.

• • •

That night, Nathan tackled the magazine rack Nadja had left standing in the corner of her living room. For Thanksgiving, she had given him a copy of *National Geographic* from March 1988. A week later, she asked for it back, saying that the messages it contained were too important to part with. He found it now on the rack and flipped through the issue, searching the pictures for a clue about Nadja. Why this magazine, this issue? Everything had to have a reason, every choice a logical cause.

He scanned a photo of downtown Shanghai, imagined himself standing under the long sign that read KENT. All the other signs were ideograms, but he recognized a Coca-Cola bottle painted on the side of one building. He counted ships off the coast of the Falkland Islands. He tried to count the albatross and penguins nesting in an infinite expanse on a beach. Finally, he settled into a travel piece about riding trains across rural China, lay down on the couch, and fell asleep.

...

The next morning he drove into downtown with Nadja's last journal and her map of Perry's. He sat in the booth she'd marked on the map with her own name. She'd drawn the other booths and filled in names, presumably the names of the people dining there some night a few months earlier. In the middle of the room, she'd drawn one of the freestanding tables. The story of a waitress filled the space around the table: "Waitress. Mother of waitress=my friend. I never met her kids till right now. They just came in with their mom, my friend, the waitress, and they were dancing all around the restaurant. Right now they are eating dinner. Their mama works for the money for this." Nadja had written names on the inside of the table with corresponding gender symbols lined up on the outside edge of the table. Above them all, in yellow highlighter which Nathan had overlooked back at the apartment, she'd written: "AM I CRAZY?"

Nathan took out Nadja's journal and copied her map onto one of the remaining blank pages. He embellished her vision by drawing the empty tables and the wait station in front of the kitchen. He drew the parking lot and his car. He touched his car keys and wondered what had happened to her keys, to all those little things she'd carried around daily, all the small things cleaned up and passed along in her wake.

"He touched his car keys and wondered what had happened to her keys, to all those little things she'd carried around daily, all the small things cleaned up and passed along in her wake."

He started a new list in the journal. He tried to remember the names of her medications in the order they'd been prescribed. He wrote "lithium" several times throughout the list. The last was Effexor. When she stopped taking the Effexor the last time, one of her doctors said she'd been off the meds too long, that putting her back on wouldn't help. Like Nathan, her doctors seemed frustrated. They, too, seemed like they were tired of fighting. Maybe he should have fought harder, confronted her more. But the truth was that he'd been so angry with her for a while, he convinced himself she deserved whatever happened to her. He wasn't his sister's keeper, was he?

Those last two months, maybe it was near the beginning of December, she had cut two feet of her hair off. He imagined her now as she'd looked with short hair. She seemed lighter, more energetic. At that time, he'd seen the haircut not as a manic symptom but as a sign of hope.

• • •

Nathan walked across the Perry's parking lot to a neighboring strip mall. He could see a barbershop's sign at the far end, the telltale red and white candy cane. He carried Nadja's journal, now also his own journal, tucked under his arm. There was no line, just the quiet hum of one razor running, the smell of barbicide.

"How do you like it cut?" the barber asked.

"As short as you can," Nathan said. "Right down to the scalp."

"Are you sure?" the barber said.

"You bet," Nathan said. He thought of Pujols in the dugout before donning the batting helmet the last game he saw in person. He considered the phrase *up at bat*.

Nathan watched his hair fall in clumps on the black tarp covering his body. When the barber turned his chair to face the mirror, Nathan imagined himself not as a player pulled up off the lower roster to shine at the plate but instead as an aged and impassive monk. He thought of how he might retire to the mountains, alone. He would eat rice and cut logs from the forest for heat. He

would sit by a lake in the mornings and chant mantras. He could exchange his car, his apartment, his world. Maybe he would find something there on the mountain worth the trade, smoke rising from the river valley when the water ran hotter than the chill morning air.

In the mirror he could see a Nadja with her hair shorn. He could see her waking him up in the middle of the night. It was last fall, one night when he'd driven down and had stayed overnight to keep an eye on her. She'd sat naked on the living room floor next to the radio. The radio filled the room with people's voices. The voices on the radio were discussing the war in Afghanistan. They brought up statistics and yelled the numbers at each other, fighting to win the debate.

Nadja sat with her legs crossed and her hands on her knees. Her stomach expanded as she inhaled, and she whispered the string of numbers as she exhaled. She went on like that for hours, even after the radio show ended. She chanted numbers while Nathan stood behind the couch and watched her. She had kept her eyes closed, pouring herself into the endless whisper, focusing on the incantation.



Irish Reverie

Courtney Brach

Walking along the sea,
Aran sweater pulled tight,
Dog at my heel.
I'll return to my bungalow
Before the rain comes
To write while the dog
Naps by the hearth,
Just as you imagined me.

wtaf

Candice Kelsey

Helping my parents with tuition, tolerating a boss who ordered me to twirl for him after clocking in each morning. He enjoyed how the clothes fit my nineteen-year-old body. I text my daughter at college—*what do u think abt picking up a few shifts at the bookstore, or maybe waiting tables at Shenanigans?* Hoping she could contribute a bit more. I receive a *wtf—in the nicest way possible*. She reminds me she *litrlly* has no time & asks *r u kidding me?* Her boldness. Her unshakeable sense of self-care & justice regarding what she can & cannot do. Ashamed of myself at her age, working long hours in the housing department at Miami University. Never telling my boss no. Like never standing up to my mother one semester of junior year. My professor of ENG 230 Literature & Homosexuality taught about the *Rubyfruit Jungle*, the difference of the *Dancer from the Dance*. His influence led me to discover Jeanette Winterson's *Written on the Body* & a new perspective about how to define love. To this day, I cannot forgive myself for declining the invitation for a class dinner at his home. His partner apparently made a mean rum cake. My mother forbade me to go—*you'll catch AIDS from the silverware and dishes!* And that is why I am not offended by my daughter's response to my text today. She is who I should have been, *wtaf*.

How to Make Friends Online

Lauren Simone Holley

The sound of Jenni's moaning sends me scuttering into the living room, almost dropping the saucer and mug I had piled in my hands, almost tripping over the heavy wine-colored blanket I am wrapped in. The rattle of the dishes reverberates through my body. Falling into the living room, I arrange myself on the crumb-coated rug in front of the television. I lay my feast in front of me: a pack of rice cakes, unsalted and unadorned. I stack them on the small, yellow plate. I am ready to become my favorite person.

The room is dark save for the sickly glow of the television. I eat in silence. The space heater hums inches away from me. I am transfixed. On the screen, Jenni is crying in the doctor's office. Before I finish the first rice cake, I am almost moved into joining her in her weeping. She is being denied bariatric surgery—a procedure that was sure to make her shed all her excess weight—on account of her inability to shed excess weight. Her husband, Zachariah, a scrawny man with a patchy goatee, looks smugly past the camera. She pleads, through her tears, that she had already lost eight

pounds that year and that no one could see how hard she was trying.

Eight pounds. *I could do that in three days.* I brush crumbs from my face.

...

Most people do not believe me when I say I have been married. *But you're so young! You're a baby!* They are horrified, rightfully. I often assure the prying strangers that I am much older than they think I am, that I simply look young. I have good genes and a wonderful diet. They smile back at me, tight-lipped and apologetic.

I could tell them the truth: that I got married at 18, fearful that I would never be as beautiful, as vibrant. My fears proved true. I did grow duller and viler.

...

When I am here, in the dark on the floor inches away from the television, I am supreme. I am thin and lovable. I have no regrets and have only made good decisions. I am a master of self-control and discipline. I would never be like Jenni, wide

and sweating and gelatinous on camera. I would never ruin myself that way.

I crunch the edge of a rice cake as Jenni tearfully confronts Zachariah. The camera crew sits on the sidewalk as Jenni drags her mass of flesh and fat up to the house of her scorned lover. The camera zooms in as she gets closer to the front door, the emptiness of the flat, dead lawn and the wide sun-bleached front porch. The bright expanse of it all emphasizes how long it is taking for her to walk such a short distance. Soon the camera is close enough to capture the shake of her chins and the sheen of sweat on her pale pink skin. Zachariah is cheating on her. He slept with a woman who weighs 85 pounds more than Jenni. They met on a fetish site.

• • •

My husband was a smart man. He was voracious and twice my age. He was a playwright and filled his plays with beautiful, fair, waifs of women. If I could not be pale like them, I could be small like them—breezy and willowy. When I was married, I wore linens and silks. The fabrics swallowed me.

• • •

Jenni's self-esteem is not high enough to register the cheating as something that should not, in all fairness, have happened to her. That the infidelity was a sign that Zachariah could not respect her and saw her as nothing more than a mountain of soft fat to bury his face in. I want her to

reach the porch faster. I want to see her break out into a sprint and tear down Zachariah's door and cry, "Why have I let my body be reduced to your opinion of it?" But instead, I stare on thoughtlessly, enjoying the warmth from this rare moment of empathy and the buzzy yellow of the TV screen.

Before the glow wears off, after the episode ends and the room grows cold, I visit The Forum. The people there are my friends. I love them. They love tearing Jenni apart. They love her body; they love her blood. I hate them. I spend four-and-a-half hours a day on that website. It is the only place where I can say whatever I want. There are no consequences. Today, I log on to express frustration with the woman's passivity and self-sabotaging tendencies.

My latest posts on The Forum about Jenni are as follows:
Jenni looks like a dog compared to the woman Zachariah cheated on her with.
I have receipts that prove Zachariah went to rehab for a porn addiction.
Why Jenni can't hold down a job.
Jenni overedits her photos and still looks bad online.

I feel bad for her, I type. In the morning, my inbox will be full of death threats because of this. I had made the mistake of being too kind to Jenni online before. I know how my fate would play out.

There are whole threads on The Forum dedicated to picking apart each of her

features—one for her chin, the folds of her leg fat, each of the three prominent whiskers on her heavy chin. A record of her life is kept in shocking detail. People debated the facts of her life as if she were a historical figure. They contacted her old classmates. They discovered her mother’s home address. They are obsessed with her. They hate her. They hate that fat, loud, TV woman. I cannot look away.

•••

Her name was Carla, and she was beautiful. I did not blame him, my husband. She was so kind and warm to me that I did not mind when she slept over. I pretended not to hear her upstairs as I peeled myself from the floor of the guest bathroom downstairs. In the morning, she would make steel-cut oatmeal, and I would make the coffee. She moaned when she ate and topped her oatmeal with sliced strawberries and chocolate chips. She used whole milk in her coffee and couldn’t be bothered to count how many teaspoons of white sugar she stirred into it.

She asked me where I went to school. She asked me about my dreams. I never told her that the pale-blue silk robe she draped around her lithe body was a wedding gift from my mother. She always tied the robe loosely, and I could trace her sternum and count her ribs between the waves of flowing fabric. In passing conversations, Carla was “my best friend.”

I didn’t have any friends growing up, I realize.

•••

There were praise threads on The Forum dedicated to Kimmi, Jenni’s soft-spoken, plain-faced sister who wore full-length jean skirts and called Jenni a whore last season for wearing fake nails. Kimmi was skinny and therefore tolerable. Kimmi posted pictures of herself running marathons on Instagram. She was writing a tell-all book that she promised would expose Jenni and the producers of *Extra-Large Ladies*. She was bony and vegan and shared recipes for small salads with no fat, carbs, protein, or dressing. The Internet adored her. She is woman in her truest, most lovable form—small, harmless, and controlled.

I wonder what Kimmi eats before she runs
I wonder what she looks like in a sports bra
I wonder what her mile time is if she gets
runner’s high like I used to; I used to be able
to run I was an athlete, once, paying for the
degree I didn’t now use with my sweat and
my body but the muscles and strong body
that constantly needed fuel scared me, as
did the medals and the attention.

•••

“When she was sad I would hold her and rock her, feeling the sharp corners of her puncturing me.”

My mother was small and quiet. She ate cottage cheese and had all of her clothes tailored. When I say she was small, I mean

she was so small. Even as a child I could pick her up. And I did. When she was sad I would hold her and rock her, feeling the sharp corners of her puncturing me.

• • •

I didn't like being looked at. And I pitied and envied and was disgusted by people who did, people like Jenni, or anyone on any show like *Extra-Large Ladies*. And everyone needs a punching bag. So, I ate my wretched treats and I watched and I ranted to my friends on The Forum and we laugh because we would never be so desperate in our needs for validation, attention, and we would never beg to be loved so earnestly. We would never put ourselves on display, our bloated and pathetic selves, and still expect any kindness.





Disconnected

Kelly Hall

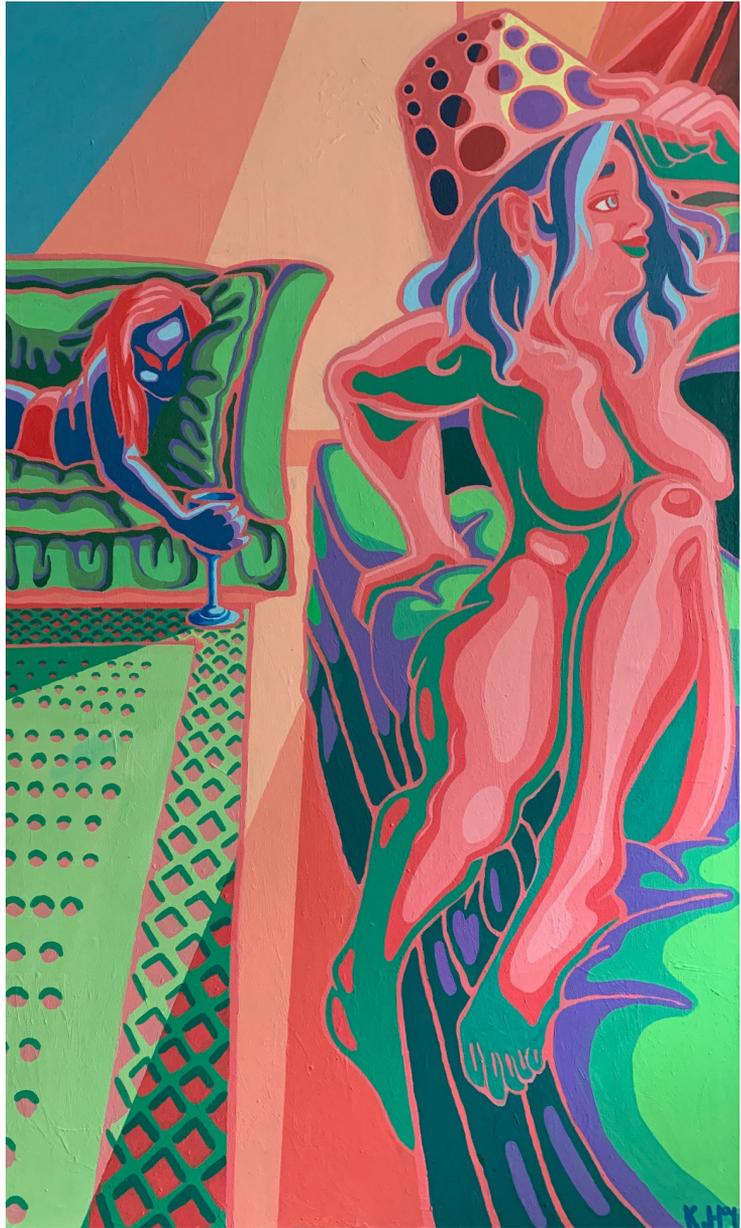
Acrylic and oil on canvas

16" x 20"



School Life

Kelly Hall
Oil on canvas
36" x 24"



Something to Look Forward to

Kelly Hall
Acrylic on canvas
60" x 36"





There is Another

Kelly Hall
Acrylic on canvas
24" x 48"

Before Kintsukuroi

Dorothy Cashore

My mother's unfussy cursive on the back of the photo reads "Spring '91," which makes me five years old, standing on unstained deck slats with yellow-tipped yew bushes behind me. The woman to my left, not quite twice my height, is 17.

We look like we will be heading in opposite directions after this photo op. I am little kid all over, dressed for ease of shimmying up spruce trees. Striped purple-and-orange socks—the right standing at attention while the left surrenders its grip on my calf—replicate the height differential between the woman and me. A scab is visible above the left sock. My sneakers are a study in the fate of white anything on a child who pairs grass clipping salad with mud cake when imaginary friends pop by for tea.

Five-year-old me would stumble if the woman walked away. From my left shoulder down to my elbow, I lean into the furrows of her skirt, stubby fingers meeting awkwardly at my belly button in something that isn't quite a clasp, as though this moment is so special I have forgotten how fingers work. My head tilts, taking the crinkly-eyed grin

along with it. If my aura had been captured by this photograph, it would be wiggling.

The woman wears a formal dress with a high neckline and flats the color of earthworms. Her hair is in a Molly Ringwald bob. Her posture is poise, straight up and down with shoulders back, hands clasped behind her. The expression in her eyes is tolerant. The smile clutches at the surface of her face like a moth at a window screen.

Despite the contrasts, we look uncannily similar. Everything about her is longer, but our cheeks are high and round. Our chins pull away from our mouths like beads of honey forming at the rim of a downturned jar. Our eyes and hair are the same flavor of dark.

It's odd, picking out these resemblances to a woman who is a perfect stranger, in a photo I don't remember being taken. It's a bit like looking at an image of myself superimposed onto a portrait of some distant ancestor. I play at blotting out my own figure with one of my fingers, giving this woman, my sister, the deck to herself.

The result looks natural enough. Louise could be standing there alone, queen of Nowhere, Pennsylvania.

•••

It was a client who brought me the word or at least the suggestion of it. When we first began meeting, she careened into therapy on Wednesdays like it was a pit stop. A screenwriter, she initially had little patience for gaps of any kind, whether in life or in writing. Everything had to be seamless.

We'd been meeting for several months before she confessed her own skepticism about the particular brand of wholeness she'd been idolizing. Not long after that reveal, we sat across from each other on an April afternoon, playing together at the edge of a wilder territory; maybe she didn't have to choose between being whole and feeling broken. Neither of us had said anything like that aloud yet.

I watched as the weather in her eyes cleared momentarily. "Oh!" she announced, then paused. I waited in the little opening she had made.

She cupped her hands in her lap and dropped her eyes to look at something she wasn't holding. "There's a kind of Japanese art where they take a broken thing and stick the pieces back together, but instead of regular glue they use gold paste. So when it's reassembled, the places where it broke are outlined in gold." She couldn't remember

the word. In the lull before my next session, I looked for it and found it. *Kintsukuroi*.

That night, when I typed the word—Japanese for "golden repair"—into a browser window in my darkened bedroom, I was met with image after image of bowls. Some were deep as a belly laugh, some shallow as a cocktail umbrella, but all were shot through with coruscated lines that intersected irregularly, reminding me of deer trails in woods. I could see the history of each bowl. The repairs were luminous, like July clouds aglow with storm light over the countryside that raised me.

•••

A different little bowl came to me in a package Louise mailed home before going silent, when I was something like eight. There may have been more presents in the box—something, perhaps, for my other two sisters. The two of them did not disappear like Louise, the eldest. But I was the youngest of all of us, by far: before puberty arrived to interrogate my childhood, my two remaining siblings had transformed into adults who blew into rural northeastern Pennsylvania from distant cities at Christmastime, smelling of perfume and clove cigarettes. I want to picture us crowding around the box together, but, as is typical when I reach back to those years, I cannot remember if they were there.

I do remember lifting the bowl from its paper wrapping. It must have been a fledgling attempt at ceramics, perhaps

for a class at Louise's liberal arts program in Montana. It was tiny, a nest for a plum. The outside was glazed gray with erratic splodges of blue and satisfying scratchy bits; the inside was a dark, glossy brown. The actual structure of the bowl was crumpled, the curved wall collapsing in on itself like a cake that needed longer in the oven. I didn't care. I thought it was wonderful and exuded the essence of that sophisticated grown-up place called *college* I'd only ever seen in my imagination.

But most wondrous of all was the discovery I made when I turned my present upside down. In the middle of the blue-gray base, Louise had etched her name in cursive. And all around the perimeter of the base, characters jostling for space like sparrows at a feeder, she had inscribed a sentence. *There is*, it read, *such a thing as a tesseract*.

“*There is*,” it read, “*such a thing as a tesseract*.”

I don't remember if I recognized then, or only discovered later, that these words were spoken by a witch named Mrs. Whatsit at the very end of the first chapter of Madeleine L'Engle's novel *A Wrinkle in Time*. A tesseract is a wrinkle in time—as the novel explains it, a way of traversing vast distances in an instant by folding the fifth dimension to collapse the space between two points. The young protagonist, Meg, learns that her missing father is being held captive on the faraway planet of

Camazotz. A tesseract is how she is able to travel “behind the shadow,” in the language of the novel, to find him and bring him back from the darkness that stole him away.

My long-term memory has excised most traces of Louise without my conscious effort or consent, like a body dislodging shrapnel bit by bit without surgery. I can count my childhood memories of her on three fingers. Now, she sags into an armchair in the living room, her face morose, while my mother vacuums the carpet around the chair; they seem unaware of each other. She teases me, countrifying the pronunciation of my name: “*Dar-thy* has a pot belly!” In the most elaborate of the memories, another sister and I have just returned from walking one of the dirt roads that trace the horizons of my childhood world in a village where the dairy cow population rivals that of the humans. I'm crying. I go to the kitchen and crane my neck to look up at Louise where she stands, washing dishes. Snuffling, I tell her that my other sister started running on our walk, and I couldn't keep up. “You should have told her to slow down!” she says fiercely, eyes fixed on the sink, and I am suddenly certain I've done something wrong.

The memories leap out of nothing like strobe light flashes, illuminating something for a moment, only to black it out again before it coheres. But I still have seven greeting cards she sent me from college, which together form a more intact picture of how we felt about each other:

I'll be home in five days, but I thought you might like to get a Christmas card anyway! The stamp on the envelope will peel off, so you can put it in your sticker book.

In a card that depicts a bear inside a closet and opens to the sentiment *WITHOUT YOU I'M A CLOSET CASE*, she wrote: *I loved your letter and your picture. I shared your fishies with some of my friends.*

The top card in the stack is a Valentine's Day note that ends with, *I'm sending you a picture of me. Can I have a picture of you?* It's the last I received from her, I think—she marked it February 10 but omitted the year, so I can't be sure. In the enclosed photo, now taped to the card's inside, she looks happy in a way she never managed to look in family photos. She is sitting on the bare concrete floor of a pottery studio, three shelves of cream-colored unglazed bowls above her head, some still on pottery wheel bats. A clay-smearred black smock hangs from a hook behind her.

I have these colorful exhibits of evidence, but I have no recollection of *A Wrinkle in Time* figuring in our sisterhood, no idea whether she expected that I would read the words and feel anything about them. No idea, even, whether she intended them as a kind of message for me or just tossed any old scrap of pottery into a box like a bone for a dog who can't understand you won't be coming back. Perhaps because the words were so mysterious, unburdened by the clarity that context provides, and

because I understood that underneath is where secrets go, I regarded the bowl with the exaggerated solemnity I reserved for only the most sacred of objects, like fossils and the keys to padlocked diaries. I kept it on a desk in my bedroom, turning it upside down only when I was alone.

The mystery of the little bowl melded comfortably with other unknowns that gathered like a cloak around me as I grew older: why Louise had cut off contact with the entire family; why my memory for life prior to high school sputtered in and out like a station just out of range, sometimes going dark for months at a time; why my parents never mentioned Louise, not even to sit their youngest daughter down and explain that something had changed; why my remaining sisters did not bring her up, either, on visits home. How can I explain that I had to figure out, on my own and as a child, that my sister was gone without my parents ever saying anything to me about it? I did figure it out, over the course of years, as important days came and went without her.

The solidity of all creation seemed to depend upon a silence that my parents kept like a vow. I hid inside the silence and spied on them from there. Their respective ways of leaving me alone differed. My father, a professor of religion, graded papers when he got home from his work in the closest city, on the far side of the Susquehanna River. In the evening, he muttered, "Dear God, help me" over and over to himself in the bathroom. That my

father was different from other people was filed in my family's catalog of unspeakables. As a child, I imagined that he was talking to me when, on our way to get an ice cream cone from a local dairy farm, he painstakingly recited the best driving route from South Bend to Kalamazoo. It was not until adolescence that I perceived that he was nearly always monologuing, and it would take many more years and a graduate degree in psychology before I understood that there existed a diagnostic framework for his tendency to hijack conversations with his obsessions with cartography and statistics, his lack of social attunement despite enormous kindness, and his difficulty tolerating new settings and situations despite acute intelligence.

My father held affection for me; this, along with a humor and magic unique to him, was evident in the notes that reliably appeared on the dinner table on mornings after I left snacks out for Santa or the Easter Bunny. But he floundered when it came to making contact. And while he never overtly harmed me—at worst, oblivious to personal space, plowing me off the road into the runoff ditch when we went for walks—his relational ineptitude came with an inability to scan for what in relationships might hurt, what might be a violation, what was dangerous or threatened danger.

Meanwhile, a darkness inside of my mother flourished under his disregard. There was lightness, too: in a photo of one of the many birthday cakes she made me, tiny

plastic train cars follow chocolate chip tracks through a buttercream snowscape dotted with eight candles. At the center of the cake sits a solitary house atop a frosted hill. And I remember toddling downhill after her to goggle at the sunflowers in the garden where she, a farmer's daughter turned Catholic schoolteacher, grew much of the food she cooked for our family. Yet if my mother had ever lived inside her own eyes, she was evicted from there long before I realized I was alone and started to look for her. As a teenager, I found myself wondering if the liveliness of that garden was purely a matter of horticultural know-how or whether it reflected a part of her that had splintered off. I didn't know how long the damage I perceived in her had been there, whether it was a founding condition of my family or a response to some more recent wound that may or may not have involved Louise. I only knew that I could not speak about how my whole body jumped to attention at the word "slut" embedded in her whispered conversations with herself as she chopped vegetables. Neither could I ask about the ever-darkening circles under her eyes. Once, in high school, I woke up thirsty in the middle of the night and descended to the kitchen. As I passed the doorway to the unlit living room, my peripheral vision registered a form writhing weirdly on the carpet. I froze, then turned—it was my mother, who, to my knowledge, has never had any version of an exercise routine, rabidly churning out sit-ups in the dark. I tiptoed back to bed.

Like so many kids, I sensed the taboos my parents never made explicit, which they themselves may not have known their investment in. I watched them receiving the body and blood of Christ at Mass and had a recurring nightmare that my mother drank from a chalice that soundlessly sucked at her face, vacuum-like. Her silence about Louise seemed void not only of words but of life and feeling. My father, for his part, traced a worried orbit around her sacrament, likely unaware of both his anxiety and what it was about. I was afraid that to shatter this arrangement with a question or a need was to lacerate all of us. I feared it was to risk deletion, the way Louise had not just left but had been disappeared into the cracks ramifying through our plans that no longer included her, our chitchat that no longer referenced her, our collective memory that contorted around a selective amnesia.

“I was afraid that to shatter this arrangement with a question or a need was to lacerate all of us.”

I learned to live with the absence of story when I was a child. As I got older, I grew accustomed to writing and speaking around the edges of things, assuming there was always a silence at the center, like the one in Robert Frost’s couplet “The Secret Sits”: “We dance round in a ring and suppose, / but the Secret sits in the middle and knows.”

• • •

At 21, on leave from college while I learned how to navigate my appetites in ways that didn’t involve bulimia, I boarded a plane from Hartford to Missoula and didn’t tell my parents. In *A Wrinkle in Time*, Meg tessered across intergalactic space to rescue her father. I was just hoping for a conversation with my sister, and I supposed that if I was out to rescue anyone, it was me.

Before that trip, I had come close, a few times, to demanding that my parents talk with me about what had happened. But I’d crept back from that edge each time, a skydiver re-evaluating the wisdom of a jump. My therapist, Meredith, pointed out that when I spoke to my parents on the phone—every few months, at most—I emerged dissociated, and binged like I was gunning for a Guinness world record. Given that this happened after conversations limited to the weather and who had died or gotten married, it was no wonder, Meredith commented, that I locked down my questions about Louise. In therapy sessions, I’d indulged any and every hypothesis with no real attachment to any of them: Louise had been molested by a priest, had joined a cult, had discovered something shattering or perhaps criminal about one of my parents.

Now I hurtled, at 500 miles per hour and 34,000 feet, towards clarity. Like Meg and her father, I had no answer to the question of why my sister had disappeared from

my life, only a location far away—in Meg’s case, a distant and corrupted planet; in my case, a business address for a law office in downtown Missoula, served up by the Internet. I’d sent messages to the email address I had found for her, asking to talk, telling her I would come out there. I never heard back. I told myself that this meant she had not received them. I’d just been a kid, I reasoned with myself. Whatever grievances Louise had, they couldn’t possibly involve me.

Whereas Meg’s quest ended in reunion, mine didn’t end, exactly. It just sort of ruptured, then kept on going.

• • •

I am standing in the doorway to Louise’s office, which is high up in a building so big it is possible to get lost without leaving the lobby. Her office is not particularly large. She is the only one in it. I am wearing my navy blue SOUTH KOREA’S GOT SEOUL T-shirt with violet flecks on it from when I’m careless with bleach during cleanup at my bakery job. I have appeared at what I hope is lunchtime, if lawyers even eat lunch. All morning there has been a sensation in my low belly like my intestines are being zapped by the tiniest imaginable lightning bolts, but I am hopeful. I am hoping that we will find a time, later in the week when my sister is not at work, to meet somewhere and talk. I am hoping to hear her story.

I am holding a bouquet of Asiatic lilies that are precipitating optimistic little grains of

pollen all over my T-shirt. I am saying *These are for you* to the woman who looks like me, who is smiling. I am asking *Do I look familiar?* to the woman who is suddenly not smiling anymore, who is glowering as though I am brandishing a deadly weapon, so much so that I glance down to check that it’s really lilies in my hand. It is lilies.

I am watching the left hand of the big sister I have not laid eyes on in twelve years, who has graduated from college and put herself through law school and whom search engines have rendered surprisingly easy to find, reaching for the phone on the desk. I am hearing the voice coming out of the woman, telling security that she needs a person-who-will-not-leave removed from her office, and I am realizing that I am not a sister to this woman, I am a person-who-will-not-leave, and I am in big trouble.

The voice is right. I will-not-leave. I may even have spoken something like that aloud a moment ago—did I? I am stunned. Leaving, which I will-not-do, would require my body to contain organs, or neurons, or anything other than a person-shaped block of ice. The hand is replacing the phone, and the voice is saying, ostensibly to the statue of iceflesh, *It’s not personal, it’s just that that part of my life doesn’t exist anymore*, as though this explains something. Peripherally aware that I do still exist, I am trying to produce the words, *I am right here*. I am confused by how normal the words sound when they make their way out, one after the other in order like rosary beads. My eyes comb the room

for my sister's face and I see, too late, that there is a fracture behind the eyes where something mean is holding the pieces together. And now the mouth is mashing its halves together, and the voice is saying *Try therapy*, which I have been trying for years, and all I can think about are the lilies. I am looking down at the lilies dumping erotic confetti all over my bleach-flecked T-shirt and understanding that after the guards come for me, the hand that reached for the phone is going to throw the lilies away.

• • •

It was short. Louise was efficient. Even before the elevator doors opened to regurgitate me back into the busy conversation of the lobby—escorted out, but, as white-girl entitlement ordains, not arrested—I understood that there was, for endless light years out beyond doubt's shadow, no such thing as a tesseract. There wasn't even a chink.

• • •

I suppose that realization had long grown overripe in me when, a decade later, I chucked the ugly little bowl at the wall, finally shattering it and its useless message. I'd carried that bowl with me from city to city without ever really looking at it, packing and unpacking it with each move through college, into post-college jobs, and, finally, into a clinical psychology doctoral program. It presented itself to my hand on a shitty day that had nothing to do with Louise—and that was that. It was unpremeditated.

Afterward, as I stood feeling my brain bake inside the kiln-hot skin of my face, there was no catharsis that came. Only a new question: what do I do with these pieces?

There were four. I swept them into a dustpan, then reassembled them in the dustpan's tray and discovered that there must be a fifth piece, smaller than my pinky nail, that had gotten away. I didn't look for it. I slid my shards into an old shoebox, closed the lid, and stuck them in a closet.

• • •

That's where they still are, years later. Different closet, same shoebox. Some Hollywood-conditioned part of me is embarrassed—I should be telling you how last year I showed up in Japan at the dusty workshop of a traditional kintsukuroi restorer, holding out my box of shards. At the very least, I should be telling you how I take them out every year on the anniversary of that trip and cry over them or smash them into smaller pieces.

I do take them out, rarely, but not on any schedule and not with any agenda. I've played at lining the edges back up. I've shown them to some people. They always go back in the box.

The taboo is still in place, and though I am not terrified anymore of breaking it, I don't try to talk about Louise with my mother. Sometime in the last decade, dementia moved in and began stowing parts of my mother away as though for a long journey;

she is quieter and more remote than ever. Even before that, I'd come to accept the ways that she, like Louise, keeps herself intact by dividing into parts. But my father is there, sometimes, findable in a way my mother is not. It was two years ago, out on a walk with him, when I asked him for the first time to tell me what had happened. I knew not to expect The Answer. The only person who can tell me Louise's story is Louise. I asked him, I think, less to hear an explanation and more to lower a little drawbridge between us where before there'd only been quiet.

“I’ve played at lining the edges back up. I’ve shown them to some people. They always go back in the box.”

He and I circled a pond in the town where my parents moved after I left home. Children played at the water's edge; as I always do, I traced each to a watching guardian. He flinched almost imperceptibly at my question, then told a story about an argument between Louise and my mother about a college boyfriend: Louise had met a guy from Japan and was dreaming of relocating there for her junior year; my mother felt Louise was taking the relationship too seriously. The story was incoherent in its simplicity, as contextless as the words inscribed on the bottom of the bowl. No reasonable witness would have deemed it sufficient explanation for my

sister amputating her entire root system for nearly three decades and counting.

I don't believe that my father intended to be glib or to lie. He has lived 80 years without the perspectives of Hans Asperger to help him on his way. Over the years when Louise's exit was in the making, I would guess there were many moving parts that my father, who overflows with love in ways I was unable to recognize until adulthood, could not hold together in his understanding. But I believe his body understands something, because when we got back to the door of the house after that walk he suddenly doubled over. Something tectonic was happening in his face; he looked like a fault line might open there and cleave him in half. This man who, like my mother, never touches me save at hello and goodbye, pushed me across the threshold into the house and shut the door behind me without saying a word. He stayed outside for a while, alone.

...

There's a being-with-brokenness that I think must be the impulse that precedes kintsukuroi. Less a golden repair and more a golden interim or a gleaming ambiguity: Can this be fixed, or can't it? The tenderness of the repair is present there, even before the answer arrives, if it ever does.

That's where I try to stay, in that art before kintsukuroi, not because I want to but because it's honest. I don't have all the pieces.

And it's not the plot that makes a story complete, but whether the truth gets told.

It's easier to hold the truth when I've got company, and these days I am less alone than I used to be. I still speak and write around the edges of something. But I suspect, more and more often, that it might be a great shout of joy at the center, rather than a festering silence. Either way, it's not something I know how to narrate.

Last year I tripped on mushrooms. There was no warning, no cognition that preceded the word that shuddered out of me when I spoke for the first time: "Louise." I could hear the grief in my voice as though it were splintering wood, like the cracking beams of a ship going down, or a wedge of tree being butterflied into halves on its way to becoming a fiddle. It felt good to hear it. I said the name again, and poured my full, broken voice into my husband's lap, sob by sob. His lap opened suddenly, in the style of a matryoshka doll, into the laps of friends, therapists, and teachers, living and dead, who've carried pieces of my story inside them across decades. Time collapsed, gathering them all to me at once. My husband sat beside me as though there is no right or wrong way to grieve a living sister, no right or wrong thing to do with a shattered vessel.

Days later, emptied of tears and hungry to lean into memory, I pulled an old notebook from a shelf. I re-read what I'd written, more than a decade before, while

vibrating uncontrollably atop a toilet seat, knees pulled into my chest in the stall of a public bathroom after Louise threw me out. That day, understanding that she would likely never reach out to help me complete my story, I scribbled everything I remembered about my minutes in her office. My handwriting was crazed looking, the spacing erratic. I was terrified that if I did not preserve the details right away, I would forget what had happened.

There, in blue ink that had run splotchy with snot, were the last words I said to Louise, which used to embarrass me terribly: *I don't know why, but I still love you.*

A generous little echo crossed memory's expanse to find me: *still love.* I bent my forehead to the page and kissed the blue letters. I suppose I also kissed the gaps between them.



Winter Asterisks

Eric Roy

One flaw led to matter led to water led to here. Clubhouse clouds
dissemble after hours, athletic ocean tides head out returning later, high.
Gains begin with rain swole on atmosphere, turn into hailstones who
evaporate and steal away. Earth rolls its blue eye, reaches for a contract
for another league of days. And the moon signs the sun's name.

Today, eight billion thumbs all press the scale as one, each
index fingernail a spike in the ball causing us to curve down and away.
Signals, like constellations in a city night we've learned
but cannot see. Underneath streetlamps throwing artificial light,
snowfall hangs like asterisks expressing their concern.

Anecdote

Laura Goldin

He said, *let's*
and I said, *I think not*, and he said,
your choice, and I said nothing.

He said, *let's*
– *what are you thinking?*
and I said nothing (and held my breath).

He said, *in my experience*,
which is large,
it often helps,

and I said, *contrariwise*,
but he heard nothing.

He said, *let's*, and I said,
such a thing may overwhelm,
and he said nothing (so I breathed).

He said, *let's*
and I was tired then, and
oh, go on, I said.

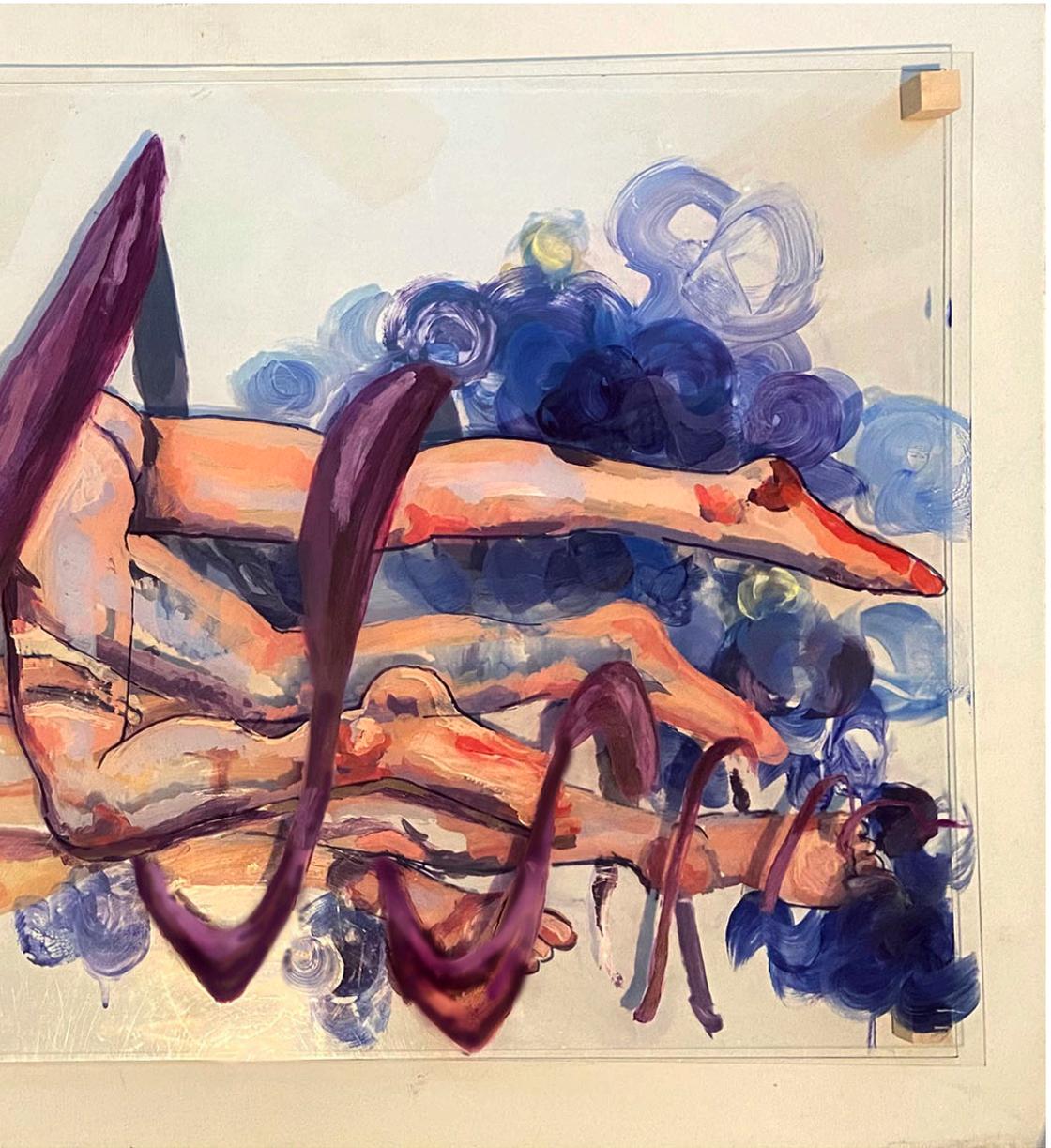
In my experience, he said,
one ought to speak up if one needs to stop.
You begin, he said, and began.

And continued, though
the word *Stop* was everywhere.

This is Where We Meet Again

Amy De Leon
Acrylic on two sheets of
acrylic plexiglass
30" x 20"





Eating Early

Tina Silver

“Look, I know I have to move on, but I still have strong feelings for my ex,” Marvin says, sliding the bread basket across the table to me. Fine; I knew I wasn’t interested in him even before the hostess sat us. Now, I just hope he’ll pick up the bill. He insisted on meeting at this overpriced steakhouse at 4:45 p.m., “before it gets packed.” I skipped lunch to eat dinner so early, so I take two pumpnickel buns the size of my palm.

“Alice is Korean. Beautiful woman, inside and out. So *fresh* faced. Hardly ever bothered with makeup.”

I am conscious of the foundation and pressed powder coating my complexion, especially on my pimpled forehead. Tonight, it’s an aerial view of a tiny mountainous region. It’s an embarrassing problem to have at age 39.

“So, why did you split up?”

He glances around the restaurant, perhaps seeking a fresher-faced companion. But there’s only one other party, four men in their 30s seated about a dozen feet behind us.

Two additional men stand beside their table, talking to the quartet in low voices.

“My mom’s a bigot. My dad, too, but she’s worse. I said, ‘What’s so bad about our kids looking half Asian?’ She says, ‘They’ll look 90 percent Asian. It’s a very strong gene. I won’t be able to take them any place where people know me.’”

I am deeply grateful I’ll never have to meet this rancid woman.

“They’d like you, of course. Your last name’s German, right? Not German Jewish?”

My spine jolts involuntarily, commanding me to flee, but I can’t be rude to him because of his mother.

“What happened to Alice?”

“She recently married an actor. Not successful—well, a little. His IMDB says some Hallmark stuff, one of those *Chicago* shows. I shouldn’t check, but I do.”

I discover there is no butter knife amongst the cutlery I unroll from the plain fabric

napkin. Rather than ask to share his, I use my serrated steak knife.

A firecracker goes off at the men's table; at least, that's the name my brain first assigns to the noise. Marvin's reaction is instant. He folds his lanky frame to the ground so fast he whacks his forehead against the table corner. Three more blasts, and I know for certain what they are. Terrified that a quick move will turn the shooter's attention to me, I slide under the table in cinematic slow motion. Crouching on demi-pointe with my palms against the floor, I see two sets of legs in dark trousers run past.

There are screams from a young female, likely the hostess, from the front of the restaurant. An instant later her volume lowers by half, probably because she's on the other side of the glass front doors. It's easy to picture her racing madly down the pedestrian-packed sidewalk, stiletto sandals and micro-mini be damned.

The men at the table wail in at least two languages. From the back of the restaurant, there's the cacophony of stainless-steel pots and porcelain dishes hitting a tiled floor. I see many pairs of legs in stained white pants and oversized sneakers fleeing.

Marvin faces the floor. His body shakes from torso to toes; he's likely forgotten I exist. My purse is nearby, but I'm too scared to use my phone even though I think the perpetrators fled.

In a moment, I hear faint sirens; as their volume increases, my heart's pounding slows. When I lightly touch Marvin's back to try to reassure him, he jolts like a cat waking from a nightmare. But then he returns to his petrified position, refusing to raise his head.

“His body shakes from torso to toes; he’s likely forgotten I exist.”

...

A police officer, a woman about my own age, grasps my hand and helps me out from under the table. “Don't look behind you, honey,” she says. But like Lot's wife I do and see a man slumped face down on the table. Blood is pooled around his feet; it's all so astoundingly *Law-and-Order*-like. Several other police officers, radios crackling, escort the three surviving men to a booth on the far side of the dining room.

The same police officer softly reassures Marvin for ten minutes before he dares to get up. A bruise is forming on one side of his forehead, and his eyes are bloodshot. She hands him a table napkin to dry his wet cheeks. Then she asks me if I can get my “husband” home, and I automatically nod.

Outside, there are scores of onlookers crowding the sidewalk. Television news vans from two different stations are already parked at the curb. I take Marvin's elbow and steer him to the small park beside the restaurant. Flanked by two huge condo towers, there's a large cement fountain surrounded by benches. More than once,

Marvin's legs almost collapse out from under him.

As I help him sit down, his cell phone falls from his jeans pocket and lands face up on the trimmed grass.

"C-call Alice..." His teeth chatter. "I n-n-need Alice."

"But she's... you said she's..."

His phone rings and "Mom" appears on the display. I retrieve the phone, and as I walk out of Marvin's hearing range I slide my finger across the screen.

"Hello?"

"Who is this? Is Marvin safe? The news said there was a shooting at the place he went to."

My heart thumps as furiously as when I feared for my life—but now with rage.

"They're taking him into surgery. They said it could go either way."

"Christ, help us!" she screams. "Was he conscious? Could he say anything?"

"He said you ruined his life."

I press the red receiver icon to hang up.





Silly Goose Just Wants Peace

Constance Woodring

A Wise Person once remarked: “Time will go on without us,” and in perhaps a billion years humanity will be made again in No One’s image this time/*we shall overcome*/we are now only a day in the life of one atom in the universe which we are about to blow up/*we shall overcome*/ we tried our best with what we had: a reptilian Dalai Lama Einstein Mandela Stalin Hitler testosterone-flooded hybrid brain/*we shall overcome*/evolution doesn’t get tired or bored with its creations/no resentment of those who mock scorn ignore it/ it knows that this earthly experiment was just that and millions of other planets are evolving in peace/*they have overcome*

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 2018. Her parents created this award to honor her memory, as well as her love of creative writing and the Department of English. 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 Jaellin King.

[Not all kin are kind to us some of them are fine but others they lie]

*Imitation of [The famous poets came for us they
came on us or some of us] by Diane Seuss*

Jaellin King

Not all kin are kind to us some of them are fine but others they lie
to us they prey on kids half their age or less they say loosen up
the buttons of our shirt then hurt us in ways we won't forget
or will we pray for the kids held against walls against will we play
dead until the deed is done we learned to keep our mouths shut
and our legs open wide enough is never enough for the damned
the devil the dickhead the dangerous I the damsel he the distress
the deliberate the dirty the distant cousin or not-so-distant uncle
who only keep away at family functions but they still keep their
eyes on us they spy on us before we spill their semen their secrets
all over the dance floor they cupid shuffle us into corners and cover
our mouths to muffle us our mothers never listen never notice
the positions they place us in never notice all the years spent
wishing we would die and then they demand we kiss him goodbye

Accents

Jaellin King

My tongue is too stubborn.

It is all brass knuckle & bodega coffee sips slipping in between my lips—it's the disobedient child, set in the ways of the only world it knows;

it throws words of the west against the coast of the east.

My tongue

is a loaded gun.

Each bullet an accent decorated with remnants of places my ancestors have once been.

It's equipped to hit each target with the intent to elicit images of islands far from here, islands my voice won't let disappear.

My tongue is multifaceted—

it is the key with which I open doors that were never meant for me & mine to enter.

Cuz I speak of callaloo & Canarsie
of Crown Heights & cocoa bread
of Carnival & Calypso
& Coney & Church Ave.

See it got too much hip, too much hop,
too much soca, reggae & dancehall,
it got too much flossy.

Got too much spice,

not from the food that I eat but from the words that I speak—
my tongue is a broken compass,
always pointing me towards the places I come from.

The Art of Deletion

Courtney Brach

It ended over a microwaved bowl of ramen on a rainy Tuesday night. We were both cranky and tired from work. Luke had mumbled something about the noodles not being hot enough, asking me if I had read the instructions on the package before tossing it in the bin. Over steaming miso (yes, I had read the instructions), our relationship of three years ended. When Luke left the apartment after the two-hour screaming match that ensued, his uneaten dish of instant noodles remained on the table until I threw it out, accidentally smashing the bowl in the kitchen sink in anger.

I leaned over the sink, staring down at the ceramic shards, and exhaled deeply. It had ended months ago—we both knew that but ignored the signs, electing instead to cohabit like a divorced couple living under one roof for the sake of the kids. We hadn't had sex in weeks and the last time had been a fluke. We were both drunk after a surprise party for a mutual friend and when I climaxed beneath him, I remembered what had drawn me to him when we first met at NYU. In the light of morning, stark and sober, I'd forgotten what

that was. We spent the day barely speaking to each other. The ramen comment was the last straw.

I deleted his number from my phone that night. I was too tired to unfollow him on social media and remove myself from photos that chronicled our three years together. I'd begin that arduous task tomorrow. As I drifted to sleep, I wondered if it was too soon to cut virtual ties with his friends. Would he immediately unfollow my best friends, Mimi and Natasha?

“As I drifted to sleep, I wondered if it was too soon to cut virtual ties with his friends.”

...

I spent the next night staring into the blinding screen of my laptop deleting every photo that I had posted with him in it. I hesitated on a photo taken on Natasha's birthday last year at a swanky Manhattan nightclub. Natasha stood between us, drink in hand, wearing a

plastic tiara with the words “Birthday Girl” fashioned along the crown in rhinestones, while her other arm was slung around my shoulder. Luke stood to the side, smiling sheepishly with a beer clutched in one fist. It was a small miracle that I had managed to get Natasha and Luke together in a shot. Over Natasha’s shoulder, out of focus in the background, Mimi stared sourly at the camera with her arms crossed. I knew better than to snap a photo of Mimi and Luke. I wore a sequined purple halter top in the photo, smiling broadly as I held a shot of tequila aloft. It was one of my favorite photos of myself.

I sighed, clicked on the image, and deleted it quickly before I had second thoughts. I yawned and glanced at the clock. It was nearing one in the morning, and I had deleted over 200 photos across multiple social media platforms. I powered the laptop down, stretched, and sleepily trudged into the bathroom. Luke’s toothbrush and deodorant were still on the counter. I pushed them into the trash where they landed with a satisfying thud. Luke had also left a pile of clothes in my apartment, including his beloved NFL jersey. My first impulse was to toss them in the trash alongside his toothbrush and deodorant, but I knew he’d throw away my belongings in a heartbeat if I had left them behind. He wouldn’t give me the courtesy of returning *my* possessions. I wanted to be the bigger person, although with Luke that wasn’t hard to do.

I had already deleted his number but, after three years of dating, the string of digits were seared into memory. I texted him a curt message about the clothes. I didn’t care if he’d assume I was texting him to get back together in the small hours of the morning or to beg for one last hookup. I just wanted his clothes out of the apartment. I wanted to erase every aspect of him from my life.

•••

After a week, Luke still hadn’t responded to my text. I was annoyed. It was like him to be this petty and ignore me, but I knew he’d never willingly part ways with his favorite football jersey. I sent him another text and then checked his social media to see if he had posted anything. I half expected to find sloppy selfies taken with random girls while he partied at some bar downtown, knowing that he’d expect me to check his page in the wake of our breakup. His username was gone. I scrolled through the friend lists of our mutual followers, but he didn’t appear. Had he blocked me? I logged out and searched for his name. Nothing. Luke had deleted all evidence of his social media. I couldn’t even find photos of him uploaded by his friends.

I was fuming. This was a whole new low—even for Luke. I dialed his number, and my ear was immediately met with a litany of beeps and an automated voice that said, “Sorry, the number you dialed is no longer in service.” I hung up, hands shaking in fury

as I googled the phone number for Luke's employer. He could change his cell number but I wasn't about to let him win at this game. I'd call him at work and tell him that I threw out his NFL jersey—no, *burned* it.

A man with an energetic voice answered the phone on the third ring, greeting me with the name of the marketing firm that Luke worked for. When I asked to speak to Luke Matthessen there was a pause on the other end of the line.

"I'm sorry," the man replied. His tone had lost some of its pep. "Who is it that you're looking to speak to?"

"Luke Matthessen," I said. "He's an account manager."

"I'm sorry, but you've got the wrong number," the man said. "There's no one here by that name."

"Did he quit?" I asked incredulously.

"Not that I know of," the man said. "We're a small team and I know everyone here. I'm sorry, you have the wrong firm."

Before I could respond, the line went dead. I pulled the phone away from my ear and stared at the screen. I hadn't slept well since our breakup and perhaps I'd mixed up a few numbers when I dialed, connecting to an entirely different company. Maybe I had confused the marketing firm with another one (But that was the name of the firm, wasn't it? I was so sure of it). Whatever. I'd just drop the clothes off at his apartment

on my way to work. I still had a key, and it was just one stop away from work on the R train. I could easily walk to the office from his apartment. I threw the clothes into a plastic bag from the local bodega and picked the toothbrush and deodorant out of the bathroom garbage (I could be petty too) and tossed them in the bag with his crumpled jersey.

When I got to Luke's third floor walk-up, I planned to leave the bag outside of the door without knocking or ringing the bell. I'd return the spare key to him some other time. Something seemed different about the apartment building as I tramped along the narrow hallway, but I couldn't quite pinpoint what had changed. Just as I was walking away to head downstairs, the apartment door opened. I knew Luke was working, so I expected to see his roommate poke his head out into the hall. A middle-aged woman with frizzy hair stood in the doorway. Our eyes met just as she spotted the bag I had left on the floor by the door.

"Can I help you?" she asked me with uncertainty.

"I was just dropping off some of Luke's stuff," I said. I didn't know who this woman was. I had never seen her before. Maybe she was the mother of Luke's roommate.

"Luke?" the woman said. "Who's Luke?"

"He lives in this apartment," I said. "3B. Are you Tommy's mom?"

The woman stared at me blankly. “Tommy? No. I don’t have kids. I don’t know anyone named Luke or Tommy.”

I took a few steps closer to her, unsure of what to say. Behind her, I glimpsed the back wall painted burgundy. Hadn’t the walls been white?

“I think you have the wrong apartment,” the woman said.

“No, that can’t be,” I said, shaking my head. “Luke lives here. He’s been here for the last year.”

“I’ve lived alone in this apartment for four years,” the woman said as she stooped to pick up the bag. “Sorry, you have the wrong apartment. There’s no Luke or Tommy here.”

The woman handed me the flimsy bodega bag and closed the door. I stared at the door, clutching my ex-boyfriend’s clothes to my chest. For a disorienting moment, I feared I had walked up to the next floor in error. No. I was on the third floor. Apartment 3B on West 10th Street. Luke lived there with Tommy—a friend from college and the reason Luke and I had spent so much time at my apartment (he had a roommate and I didn’t). I had been inside their apartment multiple times. I knew exactly where I was. Had Luke moved out so that I wouldn’t be able to get in touch with him? But why had the woman claimed that she had lived here for four years? That couldn’t be true.

When I got to work, I texted Natasha from

my desk to tell her that Luke and I had broken up. I hadn’t told anyone yet, not even my parents. Natasha and I had a brunch date set for next weekend at Lillie’s. I could easily break the news to her then but I didn’t want to wait. I craved Natasha’s level-headedness and her reassuring air, imagining what she’d say when I told her about my strange morning. She’d laugh it off and offer me an obviously practical reason that explained why Luke had moved apartments and why I couldn’t seem to remember the name of the marketing firm he worked for.

My text to Natasha was marked “read” within seconds, and she responded immediately with *Luke who?* I smiled. It was typical of Natasha to feign ignorance, especially since she had never really warmed to Luke. Before Luke and I got together, he had been hooking up with my friend Mimi on and off throughout college, and I knew this was the reason Natasha thought so poorly of him. When Mimi got bored with him in our senior year at NYU, she pushed him on me because I had once mentioned that I thought he was cute. I think we were all surprised that our relationship lasted as long as it did.

My phone buzzed again with the alert of another text from Natasha.

Hey, so I’m gonna use this number for work stuff now that I’m wfh. I’ll text you my new personal number in a second.

I responded with *ok* and then clicked on

her contact information. I'd delete her old number, then save the new one once she texted it to me. I deleted Natasha from my phone and waited for it to ding with her new number. Ten minutes later, I still hadn't received her text so I messaged her again. I noticed that my last text had gone unread which was unusual because Natasha kept *everyone* on read. Natasha didn't read my second text either.

•••

Natasha still hadn't responded two days later. It was the morning of our brunch date so I texted her before I headed to Union Square. She was probably on the subway en route to Lillie's and likely didn't have cell service. I hurried downtown, motivated by the fear of being late and the thought of sipping a mimosa as we watched passersby on the street. When I arrived, I was surprised that she wasn't there yet so I took a seat at the end of the bar by the window and ordered a coffee while I waited. I stared at the gilded ceiling and the Victorian trinkets that adorned the walls. Twenty minutes ticked by and still no Natasha. I had finished my coffee and was already nearing the end of a second cup. I was starting to feel uncomfortable and self-conscious sitting alone in public so I scrolled through my phone and pretended to text someone.

I worried about Natasha. It wasn't like her to be this late. I opened my messaging app and scrolled to our text chain. I clicked

on her phone number, now a jumble of unfamiliar digits no longer saved in my contacts, and video called her. After a few seconds, the screen flashed as someone on the other end answered with their camera. The camera was angled at the ceiling (had she forgotten about brunch?) and I could see a tuft of Natasha's dark hair at the bottom of the screen. I breathed a sigh of relief as she moved into the frame. Except it wasn't Natasha. A teenage girl with long dark hair and oversized eyeglasses blinked back at me.

"Hi, um, is Natasha there?" I stumbled. "I've been trying to reach her."

The girl shook her head.

"No," she said. The girl was chewing gum. "You called the wrong person. I don't even know why I answered. I just wanted to know what weirdo was FaceTiming me."

"Sorry, I'm confused," I said. "This is my best friend's phone number."

The girl pushed her glasses farther up along the bridge of her nose and blew a pink bubble before snapping the gum loudly.

"I'm definitely not your best friend," she said.

"I don't understand. I was just texting her this week."

"On this number? I don't think so."

"Is this a new phone number?" I asked desperately.

"Nope," the girl said. "I've always had this number."

I stared at the girl and pressed a hand to my face. The din of voices in Lillie's seemed to swell to an unbearably loud crescendo. I could feel the beginnings of a headache forming along my temples.

"So you don't know where Natasha is?" I said.

"I already told you," the girl snapped. "I don't know anyone named Natasha. Lady, you're crazy."

The girl hung up on me. Lillie's was spinning. The lavish decor and ornamental mirrors orbited around me mockingly. I beckoned the waitress over, feeling nauseated, and asked for the bill before stumbling outside onto East 17th Street. I wandered aimlessly down the sidewalk, heading away from the subway station that would shuttle me back to my apartment uptown. I felt dizzy from the caffeine, and my heart was beating so fast that I thought cardiac arrest was upon me. I thought of every true crime show I'd watched, envisioning Natasha tied up and held hostage somewhere. I fished my phone from my bag, weaving between passersby, and texted Mimi as I stumbled along Fifth Avenue toward Washington Square Park. I could see the arch just a few blocks away. My phone buzzed. Mimi was calling me. My stomach tightened. Mimi never called. Something had happened to Natasha.

"Hey," Mimi said. "Yeah, um, I wanted to call you because I don't know what you're talking about."

"I haven't heard from Natasha. Have you been in touch with her? Do you have her new number? I'm starting to worry that something happened."

"Natasha?" Mimi repeated. "Who's Natasha?"

I forced a hollow laugh at Mimi's cruel joke.

"Did you guys get into a fight?" I said. "Is that why she's not answering me, because she thinks I'd take your side? Oh, yeah I forgot to tell you—I broke up with Luke. That's probably not a surprise though."

I could hear Mimi breathing on the other end of the line.

"Sophia, what are you talking about?"

"I mean, it was a long time coming, you know. I hope you don't think it's awkward that I'm telling you. We've been having problems for months and—"

"I didn't know you were dating anyone," Mimi said.

"What?" I said. "Mimi, I've been with Luke for like three years. You and Luke used to—never mind. What are you talking about?"

"I don't know anyone named Luke, and I didn't know you were seeing someone. That's all."

“This is a joke, right?” I said. “You’re kidding me? Of course you know who Luke is. Has Natasha texted you?”

“Sophia, you’re scaring me,” said Mimi. “I don’t know anyone named Luke or Natasha. I don’t know what you’re talking about.”

There was a faint rustling sound on Mimi’s end.

“Um, I gotta go,” said Mimi. Her voice was shaking slightly. “I’ll talk to you later.”

The call ended. I violently swiped at the screen and checked Natasha’s social media just as I had done for Luke. Her username didn’t appear. I found other Natashas, but not my best friend of eight years. Just like with Luke, I couldn’t even find photos of Natasha—even untagged—posted by mutual friends. Photos that I had posted of her had vanished too. I squeezed my eyes shut. Had I accidentally deleted them while cleansing my profile of Luke? It was as though our friendship had never existed. Even her carefully curated professional profile that sang the praises of her freelance set design work had been deleted.

First Luke, then Natasha. Should I call the police? Was I dreaming? Or had I slipped into insanity? The Washington Square Arch towered above me. People passed me on the street, and I stared at them brazenly, trying to commit their faces to memory in case they too vanished. Several people stared back, eyeing me with an unfriendly hard gaze and a frown. I frantically scanned the crowd for police, although

I wasn’t sure what to say if I found an officer. What evidence did I have? Missing Facebook photos?

“Should I call the police? Was I dreaming? Or had I slipped into insanity?”

With unsteady fingers, I clicked on Natasha’s old cell number. I added it back into my contacts list but with a new name in all capitals: NATASHA’S KIDNAPPER. I also typed Luke’s number into my phone and saved it under LUKE IS MISSING. I texted Luke one more time, writing, *Call me when you get this*. I didn’t care if I was behaving like a clingy ex, unable to let go. I needed to keep track of everyone who had disappeared as proof that they had once existed. Would an old phone number and a string of unanswered texts be enough for the police? Mimi had been so cavalier about it, even suggesting that I was losing my grip on reality. Out of sheer anger, I then deleted Mimi’s phone number.

•••

The ring of my phone on the nightstand woke me like an alarm the next morning. I groggily rolled over. A tiny sliver of light cut through the curtain and fell across my pillow. I reached for the phone just as it went to voicemail. I squinted at the screen and rubbed my eyes. Had my failed trip to Lillie’s yesterday been a dream?

I had a missed call from Luke and a text from Natasha. It was a message from her old number (now saved as NATASHA'S KIDNAPPER) relaying her new one. After FaceTiming with her (Natasha seemed to think this was an odd request. *Are you sure? I haven't even showered yet.*) to confirm that she was not locked in some creep's cellar, I called Luke back.

Maybe it had just been a case of weak cell service. It was ridiculous for me to think that she and Luke had disappeared. Of course, they hadn't. Thank god I hadn't gone to the police to report two people who were never missing. I could only imagine how that would have turned out. I envisioned my parents getting a call alerting them that I had been admitted to the psych ward at Bellevue—a future locked in a padded room trapped in a straitjacket. I was just being emotional and probably hormonal. Maybe I was far more upset about the end of my relationship with Luke than I was willing to admit. I felt a twinge of guilt for deleting Mimi from my phone.

Luke picked up after the second ring and glumly said hello.

"Hey," I breathed, waiting for him to say something.

"I got your text," he said flatly.

"My text?" I rubbed my eyes, trying to remember what I had said.

"Yeah you texted, *Call me when you get this,*" he said. "So I'm calling."

"Oh, right. Yeah, that. You left some stuff at my apartment. Didn't you get my other texts?"

"No, I just got the one you sent last night."

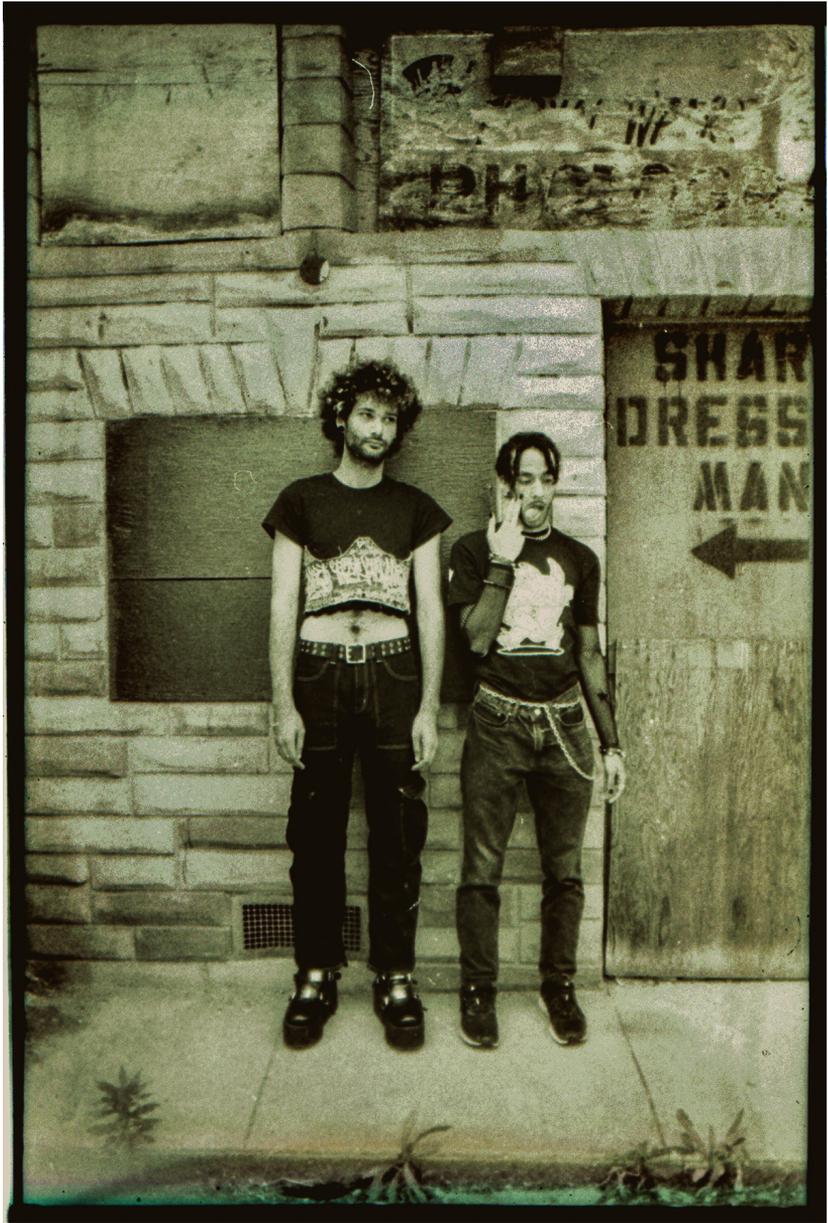
"That's weird," I said. "Are you sure? Did you change your number or block me?"

"Yeah, I'm sure. Seriously, Sophia? We're not even together, and you're already starting a fight. No, I didn't block you."

"Sorry, sorry," I said quickly. "Maybe there's something wrong with my phone. I was having problems with Natasha, too." I paused before I continued, hesitant to mention Mimi because it was a sore subject with Luke given their history. "The only person I was able to call was Mimi."

"I'll stop by after work today to get my stuff," said Luke. "And who is Mimi? I know Natasha, but I don't think I ever met anyone named Mimi."





Alt CLt 5

Kyra Carroll
35mm film photography
4" x 6"

How to Deal with a Brick

Kath Gerobin

A psychologist says to turn your back, block her out, keep
quiet. Shush. Sometimes, it's best not to engage. A brick
is not a sponge. She doesn't listen. She only waits— until you're
done, until it's her turn to talk. Unlike a sponge, filled with
pockets to receive your gifts, a brick won't bother to let you in.
As you speak, she is rehearsing her rebuttal. She is prying or
praying, *just let me get this out. Just let me get this*
out. Just let me get this out. A psychologist
tells her, *no.* An eye for an eye is a brick
for a brick.

A mason will advise to do otherwise. He'll say, take her in
because bricks like her are tough. They are built to withstand
storms. Teach them how to be stronger. Tell them setbacks are
opportunities for growth. Tell them criticisms are a test
of courage. Help them reach for the sky. They are destined
for greatness. After all, bricks made up The Tower of Babel.
Resiliency is in their bones. Take more like them and build
the highest walls. Eventually, you'll have yourself an empire.

A teacher might also take her in and still refuse to call
 her name. They might see her with her hands raised for every question
 they have. They might call her—finally— out of politeness or
 pity or genuine curiosity. And then the brick will answer,
 possibly, with another question. A teacher might think, *bullshit*, and say,
that's a great question! Then turn to the next slide. A teacher
 is a psychologist, a mason, a student because a
 classroom is a playground is a clinic is a place always under
 construction. If a brick desires to build herself a wall,
 a teacher can help stack her As and Fs, unos and cincos. A
 teacher might play along, take the role of the people who deal
 with bricks. In their rehearsals, they will learn what makes her crack
 with joy or tears.

Nobody knows why a brick is so stubborn. Her life might
 simply be tough. Unlike a sponge, tender and willing,
 under pressure, a brick will fight with force until she
 crumbles. In the rubble, because of a teacher, she might
 see what she is made of. She might realize she, too, is full
 of holes— she, too, could be porous.

My body as the subject of a series of sketches drawn by my non-artistic (unless abuse is an art) ex-boyfriend

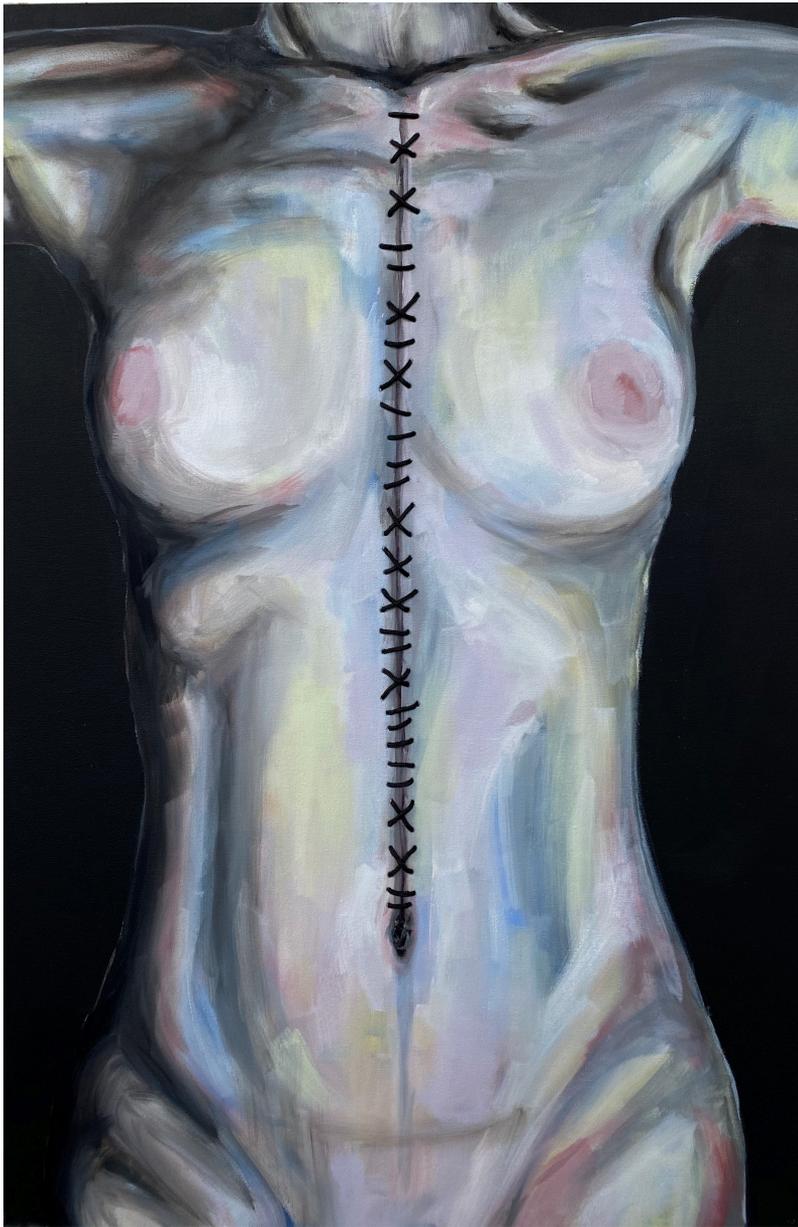
Callie S. Blackstone

The thicket of my hair, initially deemed *cute* under the dim light of the local indie music venue, now depicted as *always frizzy, too much*, and *unwanted*, unless tied up at a very specific angle that conjures up the ghost of his perfect, unobtainable ex-girlfriend. The shipwreck of my body, initially laughed ecstatically over, initially deemed *ripe like a juicy berry*, now depicted as *stretch-marked out*, as *fat*, as *I would tear you apart if you were in your twenties*. The initial portrait, me disguised as something to be desired, something to leave expensive shows to fuck, something to leave expensive plans just to view naked on a phone: discarded, discarded, I have been discarded

What is left of me

What is left



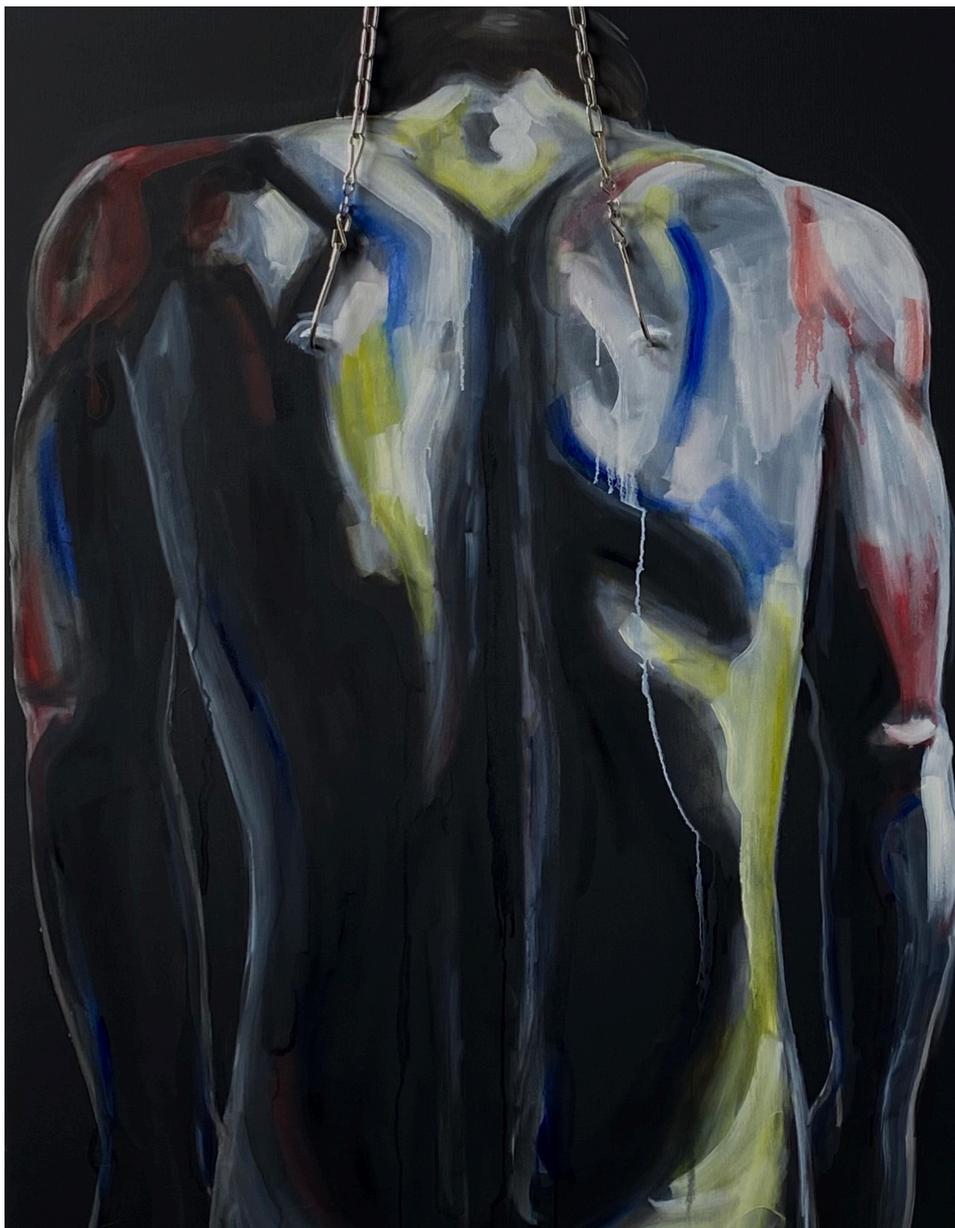


now i've seen all of you

Paige Friedman

Oil on canvas with paracord stitching

24" x 36"



Hanging

Paige Friedman

Oil on canvas with chain and metal hooks

36" x 48"

Near the Edge of the Yarra River

Helena Pantsis

They told us it was our fault, and of course it was. I reacted badly, I admit, when I found out. But I never meant it, you have to know that. You always have a home here.

The policewoman sat down with us the night you didn't come home from school. She was clinical, taking notes like we were reporting a robbery. I showed her your picture on my phone. It was from a year ago. She didn't look at it properly.

You have to look at it. This is what she looks like, just a little bit older. And her hair's longer. Look.

The light was a stark yellow, garish and artificial in the cramped office space. The street lights hadn't even turned on yet. Through the gaps in the venetian blinds we could see the cars bustling. It was rush hour, and everything was in motion. It shook me that the world outside hadn't stopped with mine.

"Has there been trouble at home?"

No. Not specifically. Not trouble.

Sometimes children become people too soon. I didn't recognise you suddenly, and

maybe it scared me, knowing you could exist in and outside of my life at once. But you're still a child, and you forget it. I know it wasn't your fault now.

The sky was orange and still able to light up the room if they opened the windows and gave it a chance. It was still bright enough to start looking, so why weren't they looking?

"Is it possible she's staying with a friend?"

No. I don't know.

If I knew, wouldn't I have been there? Did she not realize I had scoured every place I could think of before going to her? Your father sat, unspeaking, saying nothing. He stared down at the desk as if you might be hiding in the nooks and the crannies.

"Is it possible you're not the parents you think you are?"

No. I don't know.

Your father ate dinner, still, appetite unsullied. I'd put on a pot of rice earlier, before the sun had set, before you never came home. The meal felt like it was from

a different lifetime, one where things were mundane and feeding my family was a given. I couldn't stomach anything. Your father didn't seem to mind, though. We sat there together, and he told me about his day as if nothing was different. I couldn't hear him through the haze of smoke that billowed from the empty space between us.

"I didn't recognise you suddenly, and maybe it scared me, knowing you could exist in and outside of my life at once."

Aren't you worried?

"Maybe you shouldn't have hit her so hard."

Night fell early, your father watched TV, avoiding the news, while I watched the door. I called your phone, you might've seen, more times than your inbox could bear. I excused myself so your father wouldn't hear me crying into the mouthpiece. He refuses to look at me properly. He thinks I'm overreacting. Maybe I am. I'll stop when I know you're safe.

You can come home. You're not in trouble. I worry you think it's too late since I've gone to the police, but I'll let them know I made a mistake, and we'll go back to how things were. Mostly. We'll try.

When your father settled in for bed, I put my shoes on.

We're out of milk for the morning. I'm going to pick some up.

"Don't be home too late," he said.

...

I don't know how you could've gone so far so quickly, and it scares me. I pounded the pavement, treading the edge of the Yarra River, skirting the dark waters and looking down into the murky black, just in case. The restaurants along Southbank were open and bustling, lit up so people poured out and onto the street dressed in scant dresses despite the chilling wind. I was wrapped in my winter coat and blue. I took a picture of you, the one from your last class photos, to show strangers in case they recognised your glowing brown eyes. Why didn't I have any more recent pictures of you?

Excuse me, have you seen this girl? Do you recognise this girl? Does this girl look at all familiar to you? Excuse me.

It's hard to make people care about a phantom. Object permanence is real, missing people are ghosts. I know you're out there, but no one else seemed to care. They brushed me off, turning their shoulders to me and hunching to hide from my eyes, as if by withholding the knowledge of their faces they could pretend I wasn't real.

Look at me. Look at me. I'm trying to find my fucking daughter.

I sat in a tram that circled the city, from Flinders to North Coburg, watching the

nightlife ring high and loud and constant. That's when I saw you, for the briefest moment, sitting at a sorbet place, out front with a shawl over your shoulders and your hair dark and loose. I almost jumped out of the moving tram. But when I looked back, you were gone. Tell me, were you ever really there?

The idea of what might've happened to you haunts me. If you didn't run away, then who has you? Where are you buried?

I hopped off the tram when it came back around, drying my eyes in the dark, early morning wind. I hadn't heard from your father, likely deep in his dreams. If he woke to find me missing, I wonder what he might've done. I wondered if he loved me enough to look. And I understand what you felt, and I'm so sorry, and I do love you.

Sirens sounded, coming closer, and growing nearer still—the sound swirling and mounting and piercing these ears. An ambulance stopped near the edge of the Yarra, a helicopter whirring slow and close overhead so a crowd began to grow.

What's everyone looking at? Excuse me, what's in there? Did they find someone? It's my daughter, it's my daughter.

The paramedics pulled a body from the water, drenched in black and still but for the bending of your arms and legs, head tilted back.

That's my daughter. My daughter.

The crowd was dense, and I couldn't break through, and the people were multiplying. They got louder, talking and gossiping and refusing to move, to let me get to you. I was pushing and being rebuked, falling over my own feet, pushed and prodded and breath sucked from the empty gaps of me. Your body was laid on a stretcher, carried back to the ambulance, and I was shouting.

That's my daughter, that's my daughter.

I'm standing outside a hospital room now, waiting for a doctor to call me in and identify the body. I don't know if it's real. If it's you, I'll die. But my head won't stop screaming: That's my daughter, that's my daughter. Call me, please call me. I never meant any of it, and you're right, you do deserve more respect. Who did this to you? How'd you end up in a river, with your hands bound behind your back? You're growing so fast. I do love you. Be home. Please call me.



porch almighty

Maia Johnston

when the teakettle sings and i turn the television low, i know it's evening, and we'll sit in the chill on the porch, the fifty-cent cushions moist from the rain that keeps coming. the grass needs cut. it's tall for august, interrupted by rocks burning brown like stepping stones to you. supper is soon but we don't want to spoil our tea. content i am to sit here and pretend i don't need a jacket and watch your hands turn to chalk and ask about the people at church.

i never believed in God, but i will for you.

I Wonder What it Would Feel Like to Freeze to Death

Josie Stahl

I can't stand being cold, so this is a strange thing for me to wonder. But I don't think about how desperately one must want warmth, how much it must hurt when your ghost-white fingers cry out for blood that your heart can't spare. I think about what it would be like when your body gives in to the cold, when it knows it cannot fight anymore and accepts its fate. I think about the rush of phantom warmth they say you feel right before your heart stops and about what would precede that. Would you go gradually from feeling cold to warm? Would you go completely numb, unable to feel anything at all? Or would the body simply feel the cold without also feeling the need to fight it, to get away, to warm itself?

How remarkably quiet it must be when the brain stops screaming.

Imagine being one of the only people in the world who ever felt complete cold, exactly as it is, not diluted by aching or shivering or the clawing desire to flee. What intensity the human body must be able to experience when it has given up the visceral everyday fight of keeping itself so perfectly

alive.

The Psychologist

Madisyn Parisi

As the words of the client faded from a bleed to a buzz, Dr. Sharpe looked upward, above the boy's head. These were the easy questions, the *how-old-are-you's* and *have-you-ever-seen-a-specialist-before's*. His dull answers bounced around in her brain as her own expression stared back at her, angular and unamused. When she first opened her practice, almost two years before, she had hung the mirror there, a foot above the back of the peeling, brown vinyl love seat all her clients sat on. It was a safety measure, really. To make sure the thoughts on the inside wouldn't become the visage on the outside.

The lamp—a clunky, weird object with a glass shade and a sloppy painting of grapes on its base—cast warm orange light all around the room, turning her reflection strange. It made her brown skin look yellow, made the whites of her eyes look sickly. The lamp was from her father's study, one of the only two things she owned from her previous life. The other, a glass statue of a reindeer that took two hands to carry, sat on the low coffee table between them. Its transparency made it the only thing in the

room spared from the wrath of the lighting. Of course it was.

She missed the too-bright fluorescents, but they had been flickering, flickering, until, during the previous week, they had gone out. Everything else in the room was entirely hers, from her simple wooden armchair with its mauve cushion to the large, leafy monstera, to the window with the blinds, all the way shut for privacy. It was her own little kingdom, but the lamp was a plague, and it had become the second worst part of her day, outmatched only by the clients.

She thought about hurting them, sometimes. Ripping out the hypochondriacs' tongues (there's something to actually see a doctor for!) or telling the historian, convinced he was a necrophiliac, *definitely just a historian*, that no, he didn't have a biologically predisposed affinity for the dead, and she wasn't going to tell him that he did, no matter how much he paid her, and that if he brought up Alexander the Great that way *one more time*—

She considered diagnosing herself on a regular basis, but decided that was far too cliché. Satisfied that the world inside her head was quite hidden under her saccharine, closed-mouth smile, she cleared her throat and turned her gaze back to Ronan, her newest client. Her newest puzzle. That was a hopeful term, given that for her, the maximum difficulty of picking apart the human brain mirrored that of cracking a particularly difficult walnut.

The teenager wore a star-patterned, collared shirt buttoned all the way up. On occasion, he would fiddle with its topmost button, before his hands inevitably shrunk away and the cycle began anew. His russet hair branched out from atop his head, carefree yet well intentioned, obscuring his forehead and, most importantly, his eyes. She had realized within the first minute of the session that she enjoyed the game of figuring out where he was looking and what he was thinking without the obvious cheat. It made him something. Not a challenge, no one was ever a challenge for her, but... an object of interest. Even if he was definitely only a basic case of anxiety and OCD. Maybe this appointment wouldn't be the worst of the day. She could reserve that spot for the woman who regularly called each of her 27 exes, just in case they were still interested. They weren't.

Her canned questions and his idle answers went on for a few more moments until, finally, "Why are you here today, Ronan?" This was when the real entertainment

began, if there would be any. Her prying gaze was locked onto the features of his face, tracking like an eager hunter's would, but his hair served as a messy, irreverent shield for his eyes, halting her search for answers in its tracks. *Fine then.*

His fingers thrummed on the arm of the couch rhythmically. Pointer, middle, pointer, middle, index. "Mom said I had to." His voice shook as he said the words, which only made her hate him more. He was in a psychologist's office, not a gulag. However, this wasn't an atypical response. People loved to pretend they didn't like to talk about themselves, regardless of how much they absolutely did.

"I see," she said. He'd get no reward for the boring answers. Briefly eyeing the pen sitting on the table between them, right next to the reindeer, she said, "If you don't mind."

"People loved to pretend they didn't like to talk about themselves, regardless of how much they absolutely did."

"Huh?"

She could have gotten the pen herself, she knew. In fact, it would be more of a hassle for him to reach, if one were to compare the comfortable nature of his seating to her stick-straight, rigid positioning. But that wasn't the point. This, she expected, would trigger the anxiety full force. Nothing

worse for a socially anxious, neurotic kid than being given an instruction he didn't understand. "What do you want, uh... I'm sorry, can I help you?" The correction came quickly, although it was still too late. The politeness had been bred into him, but the lust for control, for composure, was in him too. He must have hated her for doing this to him. He must have recognized the game but not how to win.

There was a humiliation there, in knowing you're being made a fool of but not having the power to do anything but sit and wait until a clearer order came. She relished this time, not bothering to answer his question. His finger had stopped its tapping, and at last, she stuck out her hand, her palm flipping upward expectantly. He leaned forward in his seat, and she could tell he was on the cusp of understanding. His head tilted to the side as he considered the sparse table between them. Suddenly, with a rush like he'd just downed a 5-hour ENERGY, his hand darted out.

"Careful." For a second, she felt all her muscles tense up as she thought he might knock over the delicate glass deer, but his hand shot past it and snatched up the blue fountain pen. One test passed, somewhat. He had lost, but with notably less humiliation than most. He turned the object over once or twice before depositing it in her hands when she cleared her throat. He'd seemed quite slow, but when she looked at her wristwatch she saw it'd

only been seconds. The appointments were always slow to her, but there was an interesting element here. Instead of freezing, he had almost been angry. She wanted more of that.

"You're welcome," the boy chirped, and she almost didn't catch the disrespect because of his light tone.

The corners of her still-smiling lips tightened. "Thank you very much, Ronan."

Dr. Sharpe clicked her pen, satisfied with her results so far, but the most pleasant surprise to her was the boy's immediate, sharp flinch. Was it the sound? She had to resist the urge to try again too soon. She could get under his skin with the click of a pen.

She smiled, a real one, and he had earned another question. "And why do you think your mother made you come to see me?"

The boy, parsing his bangs with his fingers, looked dead at her and said, "Because she hates me."

Right on the money! Before the appointment, Ronan's mother, in hushed-rushed tones, had told her, rather conspiratorially, that she was afraid of what would happen if he didn't go back to *normal*. Which was a silly idea, coming from a woman with frizzy orange hair and big bug eyes who panicked because her son spent too long washing his hands. So maybe she didn't *hate* her son, but she hated how he acted and thought and existed—and really, people were all thoughts anyway. Even the

thoughts they shoved down and learned to suffocate. Especially those.

Mothers had the most interesting conflicts, she thought. Practically predestined to despise whatever their child became, provided their offspring wasn't a more successful mirror image of themselves, yet biologically bound to pretend to love whatever disaster of a progeny they had created. Maybe her life would have been more interesting if she took on some mothers as patients. No, no. She wouldn't have been able to stand it. So she gave the boy a polite smirk in return.

"She's paying quite the fee for me to help you for someone who hates you."

"Miss," he said with a *z*, the way other people said *fizz* or *frizz*, "Sharpe, with all due respect—"

"It's Doctor Sharpe, if you'd like to pay due respect," she cut in, then slapped the phony smile back onto her face. She didn't know why she always got so snippy about that. A thought echoed distantly in her mind: her own mother, sitting by the beach with a glass of cheap white wine in hand, wearing a shirt with a *V* too deep for a woman of her age, and telling her, after she pointed out the sign that admonished openly drinking, that she "thought too much."

"Doctor Sharpe," he conceded, or so she thought, until the slower rate of his voice clicked into place in her mind. The disingenuous little—"I bet your parents are

ever so proud of you for your fancy degree. I bet they call you up every day to tell you *just* how much it means to them. Do they call you Doctor, too, or..." He looked at the certificate, framed on her wall; it was the only piece of wall decor she owned. He found what he was looking for and cleared his throat for dramatic effect. "Lucille Maybelle Sharpe. God, that's a name."

He was dead wrong. She'd never cared about impressing anyone, especially not her parents. He didn't know about the war she'd waged to get that degree, and her mother was certainly not proud of her. She was six feet under. And even if she had come back via some odd, scientifically unfounded occult ritual, Dr. Sharpe would bet that she would be a very un-proud ghost. She could have wrung Ronan's neck right then. Self-righteous, entitled, judgmental.

She wasn't looking at the mirror. Her eyes were locked onto where his ought to have been, but she was sure she was scowling. She had frown lines now, she recalled someone telling her offhandedly at a work conference. She was prettier before them, she thought, not that she'd ever been pretty.

She took a deep breath. Three seconds in. Two seconds out. She was a professional. "This appointment is regarding your problems, not mine."

"Not even your curse of a middle name?" His lips quirked up into a halfhearted smile. It was almost friendly. She was losing control. "Dude, your mom must have been a piece of

work. Like, even more than mine is. And she hit a mailbox on the drive over here.”

You don't know the half of it. Between the alcohol and the expectations, the *wrong* expectations, her mother had been quite the opponent. Dr. Sharpe's fingers curled and uncurled on the arm of her chair. They were spidery and long like a pianist's. Her nails were perfectly manicured, but the tasteful acrylics made her fingers look like scarlet-dipped talons. “You were saying something before you began your little demonstration.” She wouldn't let her mother, of all people, haunt her career. She had buried that woman long before the pneumonia had, and she had danced on the grave.

She clicked her pen again, twice in quick succession, and the boy's hands practically spasmed. *There it is.* This was a subtler, more artful kind of torture than just verbally castrating the boy. She could tell he wanted to take the pen from her. To be fair, *she* wanted to plunge it into his neck until his arteries sprayed scarlet. So it seemed they had reached quite the fair compromise. But Ronan refrained from saying anything about it, as she was sure he had spent a lot of time training himself to do. She suspected there was a lot more training that went into his anxiety than she'd at first expected. She wondered if it was even real at all, or if it was just a way to distract from the OCD. Much easier to have everyone see you as being a little nervous than as a freak who couldn't stop

scrubbing his hands raw and jumping at pen clicks.

She continued to click the pen as she spun it in her hand, beginning to keep a running tally of his frowns and twitches. Twitches: one, Frowns: two. Frowns were winning, she thought with idle, immature amusement.

“Doctor Sharpe,” the boy started, and there was no shaking, no hesitancy anymore. “I don't need your help.”

Help. She nearly snorted. She remembered, distantly, a time where she wanted to help people. Or at least, a time where she had decided that she wanted to help people. It was a split-second decision, the kind that saved lives or ended them.

At family Christmas, among the pine needles and the decapitated turkey, she had marched up to her mother, who was drunk enough to be happy but not sloppy, and quickly stolen her attention away from a yuletide decoration. Her mother had been coveting the glass reindeer for decades, she knew, just waiting for the day that her grandparents expired and their will suddenly became more than a piece of paper. She would never forget the look on her too-young, too-boring mother's face when she told her that she was going to go to grad school and become a psychologist, not a wholesome, state-university-pedigreed housewife with three kids and a summer home and a boat. She had torn the late Mrs. Sharpe—or Miss Sharpe more recently, thanks to the divorce—from all her

pretty and petty things, just so her mouth could shape into a tiny, embarrassed o. Her mother had cried for days.

It was the greatest moment of Dr. Sharpe's entire life. Eventually, she had been disillusioned, over and over again, by the myriad patients she thought the world would be better without, but nothing could take away the glory of that moment—the primal, intense victory of knowing her will was the will that mattered. Their years-long battle was ended at a kitschy, upscale Christmas party, in Florida of all places. She had won.

“She remembered, distantly, a time where she wanted to help people.”

She was getting too caught up in the past. She'd have to have that deer moved into storage. She kept meaning to, but she always forgot to bring something to package it in. She didn't want it to break. “You don't need my help?”

“Nope.” Ronan raised his chin toward her, as if it would make his skinny, unimpressive figure seem like something else. “There's nothing wrong with me.”

Probably not, no. At least, not the thing his mother thought. There was only one thing wrong with people: They were boring. All the core, drudgery that everyone found so interesting about themselves couldn't matter, not even a bit, to anyone else. But

she didn't get paid to tell people they were perfect just the way they are, or as perfect as they'd ever be, at least.

“The first step is admitting you have a problem.” Or admitting that other people have a problem. Either way, the second step was the same: working meticulously to bury the parts of yourself that cultured society didn't appreciate.

“I don't.” The boy crossed his arms over his chest. The urge to click her pen again, which she had long ceased writing with, entered her mind, but something made her hold off: an alien flash of pity. She could do some amazing things with her mind, but she couldn't make his mother love him.

“Okay,” she said.

His fingers stopped tapping, as he reached for his bookbag.

She said, “no.”

His hand froze, his fingers lingering inches away from the bag's brown leather strap. “Why should I have to stay here, with you, and your ugly lamp, and your dumb Christmas deer. What's up with that, anyway, it's the middle of July? Anyway, your—” She held up a hand, and he paused.

She glanced up at the mirror, just to see the bitter mirth sparkling in her own eyes. “Because your mother said so.” The boy huffed and leaned back in his seat. She noticed a fly, skittering across the mirror's glass. It stopped right between her

reflection's eyes. She would have to kill that once he left.

"Fine." Ronan's arm gradually retreated back onto his armrest. He didn't even seem surprised, more disappointed, but then his mouth curved into a smirk. He stretched out, laying his head down on the couch in a way more reminiscent of a king than a patient. He was making himself at home. "But I'm not going to talk. I'm going to sit here, and I'm going to waste your time. You're going to look at your watch, as the minutes and seconds and milliseconds drag on, for... how long?" He raised his head, glancing at the face of her watch, which she instinctively wanted to cover, before retreating back into his seat again. His words had a slow, honeyed quality to them now, a new deliberateness. "For the next. Thirty. Minutes. You'll be thinking about every single other place you'd rather be."

She had expected him to remove his phone from his pocket and ignore her in favor of a lifeless screen. Like attracts like, after all. Instead, he produced a hair tie, oddly suited to the in-between color of his hair, which he grabbed to drag back his messy russet locks, all so he could stare at her. She could've sworn she heard something shatter inside her head as she was deprived of the most entertaining part of this guessing game. His eyes weren't what she expected—not shifty and scared, like she'd figured at first, but not vain and smarmy, either. They were a steely gray, but with the room's light she could catch

some chameleon shades of blue sneaking in. They lacked weakness or beauty. They were *controlled*.

She glanced up again at her own face in the mirror. A few hairs had escaped from her tight bun, making her look almost frazzled. Her eyes, darker than brown but not quite black, some ugly noncommittal charcoal. The whites of her eyes looked empty, although the fly had decided it liked her right one before flitting off into the air. She looked back at Ronan and shared the first true thought she'd had since the session began.

"There is nowhere else I would rather be."

"That's kind of sad," he told her matter-of-factly. She smiled and watched the light turn her teeth yellow.

"You feel the same way."

After that, neither spoke, and their silence engulfed the room like flames, sucking all of the oxygen out. All she did was stare back at him and occasionally click the pen in her hand. In the past 15 minutes, he had grown talented at stopping his spasms, although she could tell from the way the muscles around his left eye twitched, as if suddenly pulled taut on a string, that the noise still hurt him. He could dull it, but he could never turn it off. It was a weakness, and an easy one to manipulate. She was determined to win this contest with its unspoken rules: Don't look away, don't show any weakness. Above all else, keep control of yourself. The human game.

The fly, to her irritation, had gone from circling the air to shuddering its way across her glasses and into her personal space. She wasn't sure how it had gotten there. She hadn't seen it move. She tried her best not to look at the little thing, with its shiny emerald shell and red frisbee eyes. That was losing, and she was not going to lose to an insipid teenager with an unhealthy predisposition for thoroughly washing his hands. Of course, that was difficult to do when the beast was literally centimeters from her skin. Her eyes returned to Ronan, as if nothing was happening.

Twenty good minutes passed like that, with him staring and her staring, living in their own ugly, defiant silence. Him, rejecting her authority and his mother's urge to fix him. Her, rejecting a loss of control or defeat of any kind. She still wanted to choke him, mind you. But not because he was boring, no. Because he was a threat, and she felt the instinctual urge to crush him under heel. She wanted to watch the life drain from those eyes; she wanted to watch them turn from blue to gray to nothing.

This was the most fun she'd had in years.

But slowly, as the minutes dragged on, and their strange, exciting silence grew thicker and thicker, she began to struggle. It was that damn bug. Its despicable song blared constant and unrelenting through the air, and suddenly she wasn't glaring at a stupid teenager in the world's most deadly staring contest, she was trying not to let

her skull crack open and bleed. She didn't have a flyswatter. She never got flies. She meticulously took out her trash each day, disposing of the mediocre local take-out she sustained herself on. But now, there was one, buzzing between the two of them as if it were flying a relay race with itself as the only contestant.

“Twenty good minutes passed like that, with him staring and her staring, living in their own ugly, defiant silence.”

It lighted down on the thin bridge of her nose for the slightest of seconds, and she took a deep breath as the boy's lips crinkled in amusement. She reached up and swatted the air around her face vaguely, which was enough to drive away the beast, or so she thought. Instead, it flew its way up, caught its feelers-for-legs in her hair, and crawled over her scalp all the way to her earlobe. She could feel its tiny, tickly legs caress her ear, and suddenly she wished very, very much that she were a dumb housewife on a supremely flyless beach.

Ronan's eyes shone with amusement, which made her grind her teeth. The bug was buzzing, still buzzing, grating its wings together right above her eardrum. She could feel its four fuzzy legs, making her want to shiver, want to squirm, but she didn't. Couldn't. Couldn't lose to this petulant man, petulant boy, with his quick tongue and his death wish. But she was on

the verge of something. She tilted her head to the side. This could be the moment from the fantasy she'd had with myriad patients. The part where she whacks the patient over the head with her clipboard, gives the patient an impromptu tracheotomy with her pen, or simply chokes the patient out with her bare hands. With Ronan, this would be the moment of victory, like ruining family Christmas, like not answering mournful fatherly phone calls, like not even attending the funeral.

This should have been her favorite part, but she realized she wasn't feeling any of those things.

The deer, her favorite trophy, stared back at her on the desk, but that infernal bug buzzed, and it sounded closer than before, and she swallowed hard as she felt something brush against the inside, the actual *inside*, of her ear. Of all the consuming, terrible desires she'd had, the most powerful one of all was to extinguish that little beast. But irritation, disgust, and fear were understood to be automatic losses in this little game of theirs, so she tried her best to swallow the instinct. She was good at that.

She was counting down the seconds to the appointment's end. Why had she made them 45 minutes? What kind of bright idea had that been? Thirty or an hour would have been more on the dot. Thirty would have meant she'd be free, an hour would have at least given her the time to break

the boy. She suddenly clicked her pen, and he flinched as if he'd been hit. Well, at least there was still that.

"Doctor, you have a fly..." Talking, while technically a loss for him, did nothing to make him lose when he was clearly having the time of his life. "In there." He jabbed a finger at his own ear.

"Do I?" she said, almost laughing from the hysteria, and her voice came out high and squeaky. She didn't move to touch it, couldn't, couldn't lose, couldn't do anything at all. She wouldn't feel clean for days.

She shut her eyes for a moment, not longer than a blink. For that moment, she wasn't losing a game that she had started herself. She was running across a beach somewhere, a glass of wine in hand. It spilled scarlet all over the white sand, and she laughed, not bitter or hysterical or sad, just funny. She was at a Christmas party, and she wasn't the family disappointment, worried about marrying up or wearing the right thing. She was attending a funeral, and her father had a hand on her shoulder. She didn't have to pretend to be sad, pretend to be anything. She just was.

When she opened them, things were different. The first thing she saw was the peeling vinyl of the love seat, then the wilting plant, then the window. It never shut quite properly. It must have been how the fly had gotten in. The whole office looked like it was dying. No wonder she hated it here. Ronan stared at her, one eyebrow raised.

His mouth was open, salivating slightly. He could see how close she was to losing, but she didn't care. All she wanted was that fly gone, and she would have done anything to have it that way.

Her fingers, formed into a pincer, precisely yet hesitantly reached inside the crevice of her ear, but they landed only on air. It was empty.

The side of Ronan's mouth curled up in a smirk. "Looking for something?"

"No," she breathed, although a million emotions shot through her. Anger, relief, fear, sadness. Ronan pointed at her, slightly below her face, and she saw it, on the collar of her shirt, then her neck. Primal fear overtook her. It was coming for her jugular! She didn't know if she could do this, if she could be this person anymore. Her breath shaking like a plastic bag in the breeze, she deliberately lifted her hand up, almost adjusted her glasses, then smashed the fly, straight into her skin. Its guts stained her hand, gooey and gross.

It was no longer emerald colored, just a black and green fleck of sludge. She took a shuddering breath, renewing her eye contact with Ronan with undeniable enthusiasm. His eyebrows were knit together, and she felt proud to have surprised him. Now, with him so shaken, she could get to him, and he would look away, like he had always wanted to, and it would be over. She would win like she always did.

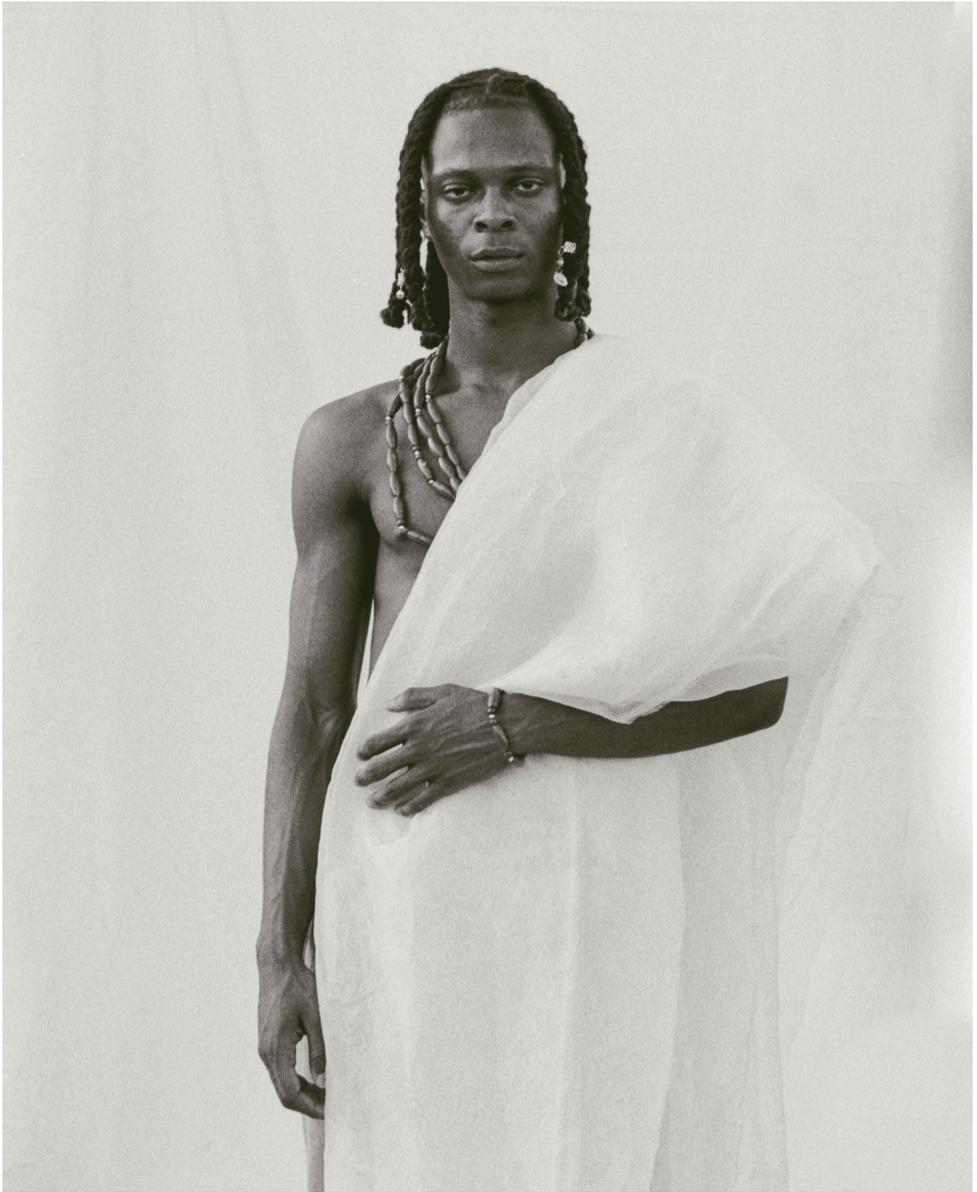
Right then, that very millisecond after fly smashing and confident smirking and before victory, she heard a distant jingling. The bell placed on the exterior door, signaling intruders. Ronan's mother was back.

Ronan removed his hair tie, his unfixable mop of hair falling back into his face, his hand raising and giving her a proud salute as he hopped off the couch. "Bye, Miss Sharpe." He sauntered towards the door, pausing only to give the glass deer on the table a sentimental, intrusive pat. The door clicked shut behind him, and she was safe, for now. She had felt weak for a moment there, but that was the thrill of the thing. She loved this, she told herself.

But she could still hear it, the buzzing. She thought with a half-laugh that maybe the fly had burrowed its way into her brain. Strong and insistent, low then high, low then high. She was going to go wash her stained hands before she saw, just out of the corner of her eye, a tiny fly sitting on the glass reindeer's antlers.

There were two of them. Was the one she had killed been the female? Had they bred? Had it laid its viscous little eggs right into the safe, shadowy deposit of her ear? She sank back down into her chair, wringing her hands together, rubbing and squishing fly guts around her palms with every move.

He'd be back next week.



Adurah

Japhet Chukwuma
Film photography
16" x 20"



Entropy

Japhet Chukwuma
Film photography
16" x 20"

Garden Parable

Ken Craft

May finds my grandmother on her knees
in the garden of ritual: trowel for hole digging,
watering can for hole filling.
Planting and pressing. Silver water and silver can.

Pansies, peonies, primroses, sweet peas.
Sweet Williams, bee balms, begonias, astilbes.
Nesting near a rock border, stegosaurus-like bits
of green-helmeted hens and chicks.

And, in the bed out back, a place for butterfly or bee.
Marjoram, mint, the *memento mori* of rosemary.

May finds my grandmother's hands and fingers
already darkened to a summer umber.
Earth under her nails.
Earth in the loop of her fingerprint swirls.
Earth in the lightning of her fading lifelines.

Your hands should never forget the ground, she tells
me one morning, offhand and unbidden.
The earth we come from. The earth we return to.
She holds her palms open as proof,
their dirt-covered darkness parable enough.

Contributors

Rebecca Beck, a former marketing director at Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, now devotes her time to crafting fiction. Her work was a finalist for the 2022 Thomas Wolfe Fiction Prize and the Tucson Festival of Books Literary Awards. Her stories can be found in *The Great Smokies Review*, *34th Parallel Magazine*, and the most recent edition of *Glint Literary Journal*. In addition to writing fiction, Rebecca's poetry has appeared in various small presses. She is also seeking an agent for her first novel.

Fiction: "Unwritten Letters"

Callie S. Blackstone writes both poetry and prose. Her debut chapbook *sing eternal* is available through Bottlecap Press. Her online home is calliesblackstone.com.

Nonfiction: "My body as the subject of a series of sketches drawn by my non-artistic (unless abuse is an art) ex-boyfriend"

Courtney Brach is a writer from New Jersey. Her work was selected as a quarterfinalist for general fiction in the 2014 Amazon Breakthrough Novel Award and has been longlisted for Ireland's Fish Publishing Short Story Prize. She is represented by the Jean V. Naggar Literary Agency.

Fiction: "The Art of Deletion" and

Poetry: "Irish Reverie"

Kyra Carroll is a photographer and printmaker from Baltimore. She received a diploma from Loch Raven High School in 2019 and is currently studying to receive a bachelor's degree in fine arts with a concentration in photo imaging at Towson University. Her work features themes of trauma, reflection within self, and reflection of self through others. Her work has been displayed in the Spark: New Light online exhibition at the Peale Museum and at a juried student show in the Holtzman MFA Gallery at Towson University. She currently resides in Baltimore.

Visual Art: "ALt CLt 5"

Dorothy Cashore is a clinical psychologist and ecopsychologist. She lives in Pittsburgh, in the ancestral and unceded homelands of Indigenous peoples including the Monongahela, Seneca, Lenape, Wyandot, and Shawnee. Her work is forthcoming in *Ecotone*.

Nonfiction: "Before Kintsukuroi"

Japhet Chukwuma, based in the DMV and New York, is a photographer specializing in fine art photography and portraiture. In his work, Chukwuma explores questions of identity and feelings of nostalgia and various emotions while creating scenes that have a melancholic atmosphere. A fan of philosophy, Japhet has blended philosophical ideas with film photography since 2020.

Visual Art: “Adurah” and “Entropy”

Ken Craft is a Maine poet. His work has appeared in *The Writer’s Almanac*, *Spillway*, *Gray’s Sporting Journal*, *South Florida Poetry Journal*, *Pedestal Magazine*, and numerous other journals and e-zines. He is the author of three poetry collections, *The Indifferent World* (2016), *Lost Sherpa of Happiness* (2018), and *Reincarnation & Other Stimulants* (2021).

Poetry: “Garden Parable”

Diane DeCillis’ poetry collection, *Strings Attached* (Wayne State University Press) earned a Michigan Notable Book Award for 2015, won the 2015 Next Generation Indie Book Award, and was a finalist for the Forward Indie Fab Book Award. Her most recent collection *When the Heart Needs a Stunt Double* (Wayne State University Press, 2021) was selected by *Publishers Weekly* as one of eight books for *Weathering the Times: Poetry 2021*. DeCillis’ poems are included in the *Writers on the Moon* project, launching this year and will remain on the moon permanently in a time capsule for the future.

Poetry: “Leda Seduced or Maybe Raped” and “All the Microbe Single Ladies”

Amy De Leon is a double major at Towson University, majoring in art education and Art + Design with a concentration in painting. She will be graduating in May 2023, pursuing her teaching career at a high school. She pulls inspiration for her art from women dancers, acrobats, and gymnasts, and how they use their bodies as a form of storytelling. She uses women figures to help explore themes of identity and transformation in an attempt to better connect herself to others and ground herself to the universe.

Visual Art: “This is Where We Meet Again”

Dina Folgias is an MFA candidate at Virginia Commonwealth University. Her work, which has been nominated for Best of the Net and the AWP Intro Journals Project, has appeared in *Ninth Letter*, *Dunes Review*, *Kissing Dynamite*, *Variant Lit*, and others. She currently reads and edits for *Blackbird*. Keep up with her work at <https://dinafolgias.com/>

Poetry: “Copperhead”

Paige Friedman’s work often pertains to horror themes and the human body. She is drawn to the idea of creating a statement, or shocking piece, that evokes a sense of discomfort that you can’t look away from. Sometimes, she aims to make pieces graphically gory, but Friedman also wants to communicate discomfort in beautiful ways. The pieces included in this edition reflect those interests but all relate to this intention in slightly different ways.

Visual Art: “Combined,” “now i’ve seen all of you,” and “Hanging”

Kath Gerobin is a Filipino writer. She earned her bachelor's degree in creative writing from the University of the Philippines in 2019. She likes to write about home—the one she lives in and the one she yearns for. Some of her works have appeared in *Rejection Letters*, *Ta Voix*, *The Global Youth Review*, and other independent magazines. Currently, she's reading for *Pencilhouse* and *The Aurora Journal*. You can follow her on Twitter: @KathG_writes

Poetry: "How to Deal with a Brick"

Laura Goldin is a publishing lawyer in New York. Her recent poems appear or are forthcoming in *Driftwood Press*, *The Brooklyn Review*, *San Pedro River Review*, *Apple Valley Review*, *Mom Egg Review*, *One Art*, *Rogue Agent*, and elsewhere. Earlier poems appeared in *The Comstock Review*, *Spoon River Poetry Review*, and *Bellevue Literary Review*.

Poetry: "Anecdote"

Kelly Hall is a student in Towson University's BFA Art + Design program. She likes to work with oil and acrylic paints in her art. Her work explores very personal experiences through juxtaposed colors. Color—as well as blending the lines between reality and abstraction—interprets experiences in a way that is both pleasing to the eye and hectic to look at. In this way, it is easier to understand and interpret how complex human experiences and raw encounters can be. She is always looking to improve her skills to find her voice and make art she's passionate about.

Visual Art: "School Life," "Something to Look Forward to," "There is Another," and "Disconnected"

Jaylah Hamilton, a 22-year-old senior at Towson University, is working towards her bachelor's of fine arts in painting. Taking her first painting class in spring 2021, she found an admiration for and interest in color. Finding inspiration from Elizabeth Murray, she has grown to favor an abstracted style of painting, mixed with wood sculpture. Her work addresses themes revolving around body image, pairing human bodies with unnatural, grotesque features, and bright colors. In fall 2022, Jaylah had her first solo show, titled *Glamorous* in the Towson storage space gallery, where she showed her paintings, sculptures, and monoprints. After graduation, Jaylah wants to continue her studio practice and eventually open a gallery of her own.

Visual Art: "Bosom"

Lauren Simone Holley is a writer and graduate of Howard University, where she studied English with a creative writing concentration. Her work centers on the fear, ostracism, and inner worlds of women and people of color. Her work has appeared in *Emerge Literary Journal*, *Litbreak Magazine*, and elsewhere. She lives and writes in Washington, D.C.

Fiction: "How to Make Friends Online"

Billy Howell's work has appeared in *The Florida Review*, *Lumina Journal*, *Blue Mesa Review*, and elsewhere. His stories draw on fragments of whatever is at hand: vampire cinema, Cherokee folklore, German grammar, rabbit biology. In spare moments, he indulges in surrealism and beatnikery. An enrolled citizen of the Cherokee Nation of Oklahoma, he teaches writing in Northern Virginia.

Fiction: "Every Word the Perfect Word"

Maia Johnston chooses to explore the intricacies of the everyday in her poetry. Her work has been published in *Fine Print* and awarded third place for best poem in the Easton Regional 2021 Literary Magazine Competition. She is currently pursuing an MA in library science and archives.

Poetry: “porch almighty” and “Don’t Ask Me How We Got Here”

Carella Keil is a writer and digital artist who splits her time between the ethereal world of dreams and Toronto, depending on the weather. Many of her published short stories jigsaw together into a magical realism narrative. Recently, her work has appeared in *Columbia Journal*, *Truth Tellers*, a 2022 anthology of the best of *Free Verse* journal, *Stripes Literary Magazine*, *Superlative Literary Journal*, *Door is a Jar*, and on the cover of *Glassworks*, issue 26.

Visual Art: “Jealous Peacock,” “Imprint of a Dream,” and “Seven Layers of Tears”

Poetry: “Emerald Eyes Ruby Skies the Click-Click-Click of Your Phone in My Ear”

Candice Kelsey (she/her) is a poet, educator, and activist based in Georgia. She serves as a creative writing mentor with PEN America’s Prison and Justice Writing Program; her work appears in *Grub Street*, *Poet Lore*, *The Lumiere Review*, *Hawai’i Pacific Review*, and *The Worcester Review* among other journals. Recently, Candice was chosen as a finalist in *Iowa Review*’s Poetry Contest and her third book titled *A Poet* just released. She loves ‘80’s detective shows, Puccini, and dismantling fatphobia. Find her @candicekelsey1 and www.candicemkelsey1poet.com.

Poetry: “wtat”

Jaellin King was born in Brooklyn, N.Y.. Most of her poetry is influenced by her West Indian upbringing and the intersections she inhabits. She specializes in spoken word poetry, incorporating the musicality and vibrancy of her culture and her experiences.

Hannah Rosen Prize winner (poetry): “[Not all kin are kind to us some of them are fine but others they lie]” and “Accents”

Kaylee Lock is a student at Hereford High School, where she is an editor of the literary magazine and the yearbook. She takes creative writing classes and hopes to pursue writing and publishing in the future.

High School Contest: “Chipping Pieces”

Kellan Marriott is an oil painter who focuses on photorealistic paintings by using photographs as references trying to capture every detail and tonal shift. Though he hasn’t made a specific subject matter his primary focus, every painting he creates comments on themes (particularly with his experiences growing up into adulthood) that resonate with him on a personal level. Marriott is currently based in Maryland and aims to keep painting and improving his technique.

Visual Art: “Swingset”

Helena Pantsis (she/they) is a writer, student, and artist from Naarm, Australia. A full-time student of creative writing, they have a fond appreciation for the gritty, the dark, and the experimental. Her works have been published in *Overland Journal*, *Island Magazine*, *Going Down Swinging*, and *Meanjin*. More can be found at hlnpnts.com or on Instagram and Twitter @hlnpnts

Fiction: “Near the Edge of the Yarra River”

Madisyn Parisi is a queer writer from Marriottsville, Md. They are currently studying accounting and creative writing at Towson University, where they serve as chief copy editor of *Grub Street*. In their work, they like to explore dreadful people, gender, and the things we dare not say out loud. When they’re not writing, they’re probably baking banana bread or slaying monsters in Dungeons & Dragons.

Fiction: “The Psychologist”

Mandy Osterhaus Ream is a professor of communication studies in southern California. Her work can be found in *Literary Mama*, *Remington Review*, and *Pink Panther Magazine*. Osterhaus Ream loves examining the complexities of life. And when that feels overwhelming, she can be found in water. The colder the better.

Nonfiction: “Stalking David Sedaris”

Jess Roses (she/they) is a disabled, neurodivergent, emerging writer. Her focus is the taboo along with the transformation of relationships and experiences via pain. In her work, she explores how these experiences form and relate to societal and personal narratives within and without the psyche. She has been published in *Bloom Magazine*, *Coffin Bell Journal*, *The Raven Review*, and more. You can find her work on Instagram at @jessroseswriting.

Poetry: “a cold night in march”

Eric Roy is the author of *All Small Planes* (Lily Poetry, 2021), which earned both Pushcart and Best Small Fictions anthology nominations. Recent writing appears or is forthcoming at *Bennington Review*, *Fence*, *Ploughshares*, *Salt Hill Journal*, *Sugar House Review* and elsewhere.

Poetry: “Winter Asterisks”

Tina Silver’s fiction has been published in *The Fiddlehead*, *Prairie Fire*, *The Impressment Gang* and *Other Voices*. *The Fiddlehead*’s editors nominated her story “Simulation Camp” for the 2018 Writer’s Trust Journey Prize and the 2018 National Magazine Awards. She has also had numerous plays performed and workshoped in Ontario and British Columbia, Canada.

Fiction: “Eating Early”

Kayla Simon is a senior honors student at the University of Connecticut, where she is majoring in English with a concentration in creative writing and double minoring in women's, gender, and sexuality studies and communication. Her work has previously been published in *Thought Catalog*, *New Square*, and *Red Cedar Review*, and she is currently working on her first poetry manuscript. When she isn't writing or reading, you can find her taking photos for her photography business or looking at the stars.

Poetry: "before i stopped believing" and "what i do not remember"

Josie Stahl is an English major at Towson University and an aspiring writer and editor. She first became interested in the prospect of writing for a literary magazine when she worked on the staff of her high school magazine *Echoes*, and she's very excited to have her work in print for the first time outside of high school.

Poetry: "I Wonder What it Would Feel Like to Freeze to Death"

Maya Walker is a Towson High School student and the poetry winner of *Grub Street's* 2023 High School Creative Writing Contest. She is the editor-in-chief of *Fulminare Review* and on the editorial staff of *Colophon*, *Spiritus Mundi Review*, and *Immortal Journal*. You can find her on Instagram (@maya_whispers_words) or Twitter (@_maya_writes_). In the fall, she will be attending Chatham University.

High School Contest: "quantum theory in a semi-abstract style"

Constance Woodring is a 77-year-old retired psychotherapist who has been getting back to her true love of writing after 45 years at her real job. She has had many poems published in over 40 journals including one poem nominated for the 2017 Pushcart Prize by *Dime Show Review*.

Poetry: "Silly Goose Just Wants Peace"

Chloe Ziegler is a senior attending Towson University who has had works published in Towson High School's *Colophon*. She has gained several years of editing experience while working on both schools' literary magazines. This is in pursuit of a lifelong passion for literary journals and writing that began in a 2nd-grade after-school poetry workshop. As shown in her poem, she is an outspoken feminist and activist via her literary works and social media.

Poetry: "Would I Look Pretty in the Seafood Buffet?"

About the Cover Art

Joanna Pottle is a visual artist, researcher, educator, and curator based in Kraków, Poland, since 2019. Her studio practice combines abstract mixed media techniques of painting, printmaking, drawing, and installations. Her research includes investigations of public art and space, contemporary art, post-colonial and post-Soviet studies, collective memory and shame, (re)negotiation of previously untold or unheard narratives, tangible and intangible cultural heritage, cross-cultural understanding, trauma, healing and peace building, vulnerability, courage, and empathy. She is a graduate of James Madison University, holding a BFA in studio art and a BA in art history with an art education track.

The art, series description

M-A-M-Y: me / we series, 2021, oil paint ink, and duralar on canvas

ma po polsku = they/he/she has in English

mam po polsku = I have in English

my in English = my po polsku (we in English)

my po polsku = we in English

am in English = jestem po polsku

mamy po polsku = we have in English

Pottle writes: “Completed over a period of liminal space and time within the COVID-19 pandemic, this series of memoryscapes reflects upon the intersections of isolation and connection with others, of the human form and that of physical landscape, and of individual and collective portraits. Inspired by many an observation through a block building window during periods of quarantine as well as faces and structures perceived in public space and in a crowd, each piece speaks to a unique, fleeting memory and encounter. The M-A-M-Y series also seeks to bring further attention to the significance of how language impacts the ways in which we see and navigate the world by drawing attention to its manipulation in the selected title and subtext. The multi-layered and mixed media technique of the work also includes the incorporation of blind line contour drawing as the foundational layer—of only looking at or recalling the subject being drawn and not of the image being made itself. With each individual work, questions of the fickle nature of memory and time, our innate human need and desire for connection with others, and the way in which these phenomena manifest in written and visual language.”



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