



Johnson County Library's teen literary magazine

electronica

issue xvii

cover: Evening Cityscape by Megan Overbaugh

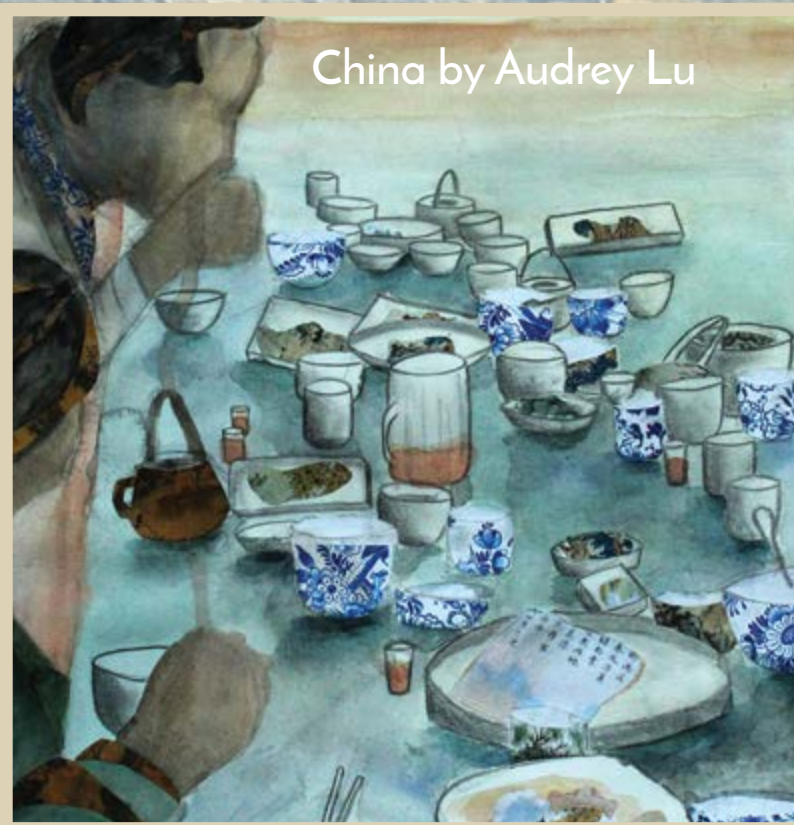
Heaven by Audrey Diggs

Letter From the Editors

Welcome to *elementia*, a magazine edited and designed by teenagers in the Kansas City metro area and published by Johnson County Library. *elementia* takes on a new theme every year; this year submissions were inspired by connection.

It is easy to feel small and isolated in a universe that seems to expand beyond our fingertips no matter how far we reach, when in reality, humanity has never had more opportunities for connection. From the cosmic to the commonplace, our artists and writers address the ways in which we connect with other people, with our environments, and with ourselves.

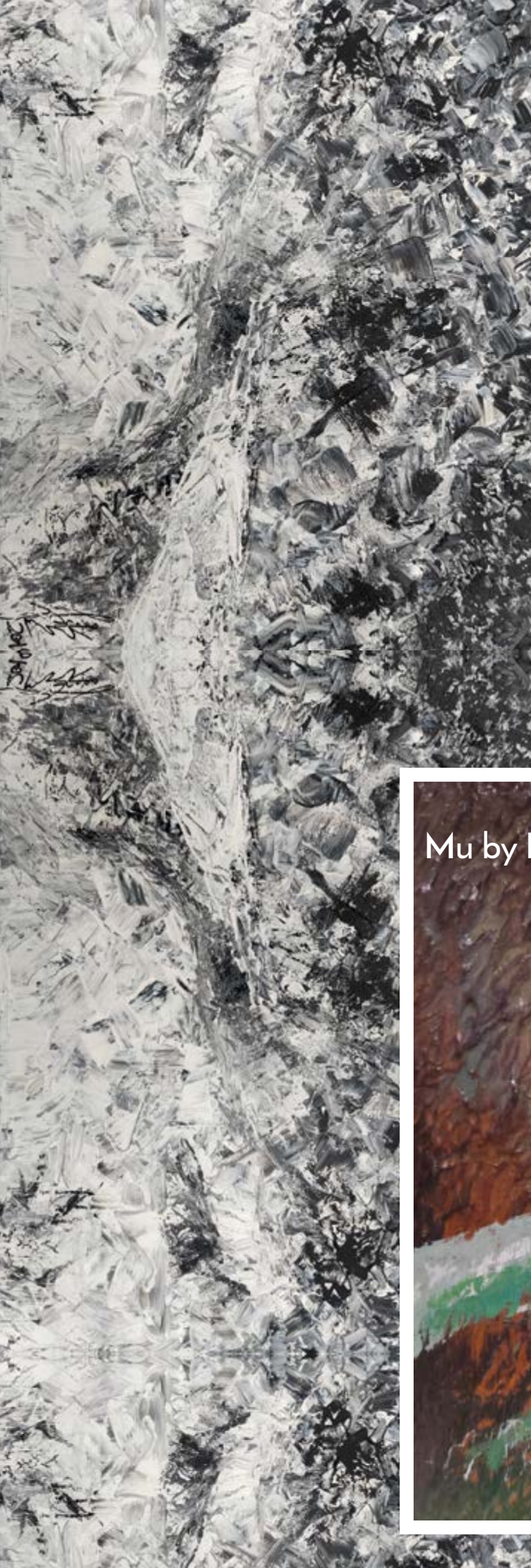
Our goal with this magazine is to give a platform to a wide range of diverse authors and artists, and as editors we were especially aware of that this year. We wanted to challenge our notions of connection, to push ourselves to see past our own experiences and to take the time to understand this theme through new eyes. In the end, that's what reading and writing is about: communicating and understanding new ideas and experiences. If you're looking for a place to share your own art or writing, see the back page for submission information and a description of our next theme: Bodies.



China by Audrey Lu

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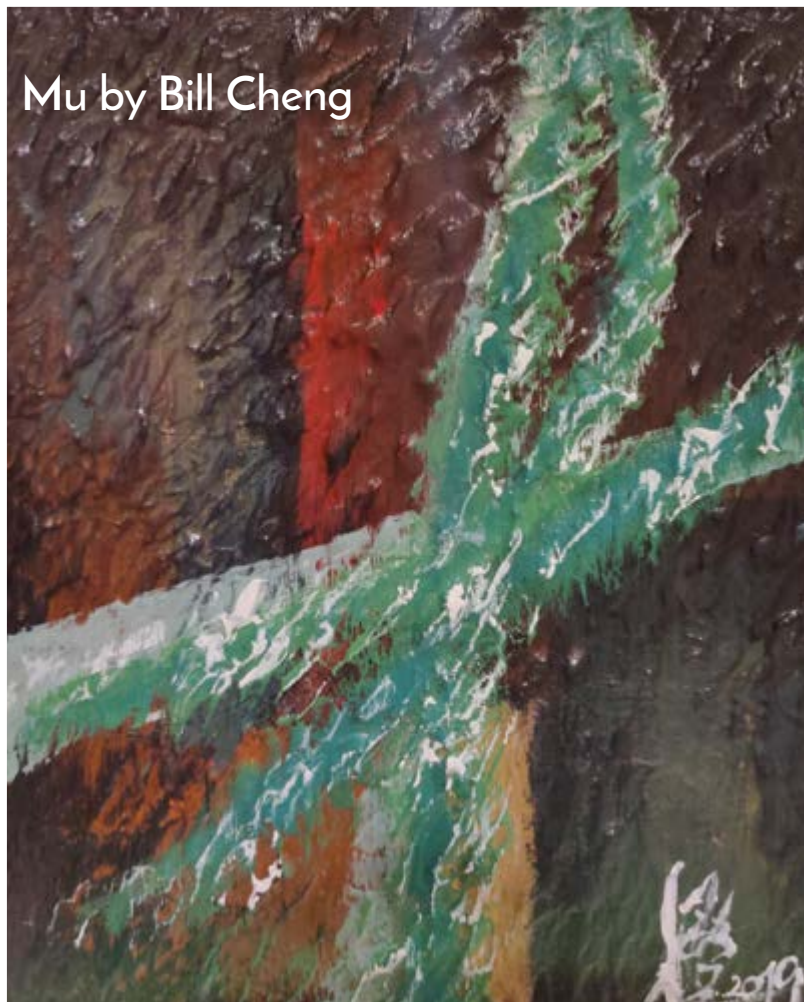


Without Heaven

Ada Heller

I know
that when I die
I'll sink into the soil
Be eaten by all the things I've eaten
Become the dirt for all to walk upon
I know that my thoughts are just neurons firing
That my heart is a collection of molecules
that happen to beat
but sometimes
I look into the sky
and wonder
how the sun manages
to hit everything
just right
There's no way
a universe without heaven
can paint pictures like that
with just light

Fog Road by Bill Cheng



Mu by Bill Cheng



Pop by
Ellie
Steere

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Rudy Francisco



Johnson County Library is honored to dedicate the 17th issue of *elementia* to slam poet Rudy Francisco. As our editors and designers worked on the publication, we were inspired by Francisco's powerful performances and incredible writing. His work weaves life experiences with metaphor and the human condition to reach audiences of all ages and backgrounds. His writing helps us find empathy and communal bonds.

In times where "liberty just [vanishes] without any explanation," his work brings hope in connection. Rudy Francisco's poems say, "I see you. You are not alone." His voice cuts through the noise clear and defiant in times of uncertainty. Mr. Francisco, we thank you and we honor you for helping us understand our own shared humanity and the graciousness at its heart.

Driftwood

Isabelle Shachtman

She whispers in my ear when hugging me
I want to stay here forever
I don't want to go

I'm driftwood
I don't ever stay for long
But I don't have the strength to pull away

When I started I was strong
A sink or swim
I knew how to stay grounded
I knew I wasn't built to navigate the sea

But eastern winds lured me
With their midnight arms
And soothing ripcurls bending over breaks in the shore,
A soft bodied girl

The sky's light grew with the distance
I acclimated well
And began to float

This is what I was made for
The unavoidable has formed me
I shall lie still in the dawn
Atop lies laced with simple beauty
Dark eyes and arms reaching out

I took her hand
And left half my weight with me
Letting the lucidity of my life fall from me
like eyelashes

Mere minutes ago the sea was dark and beautiful
Satisfyingly unknown
But now I am spotlighted by the sun
Reminded of my nature
Surrounded by a haze of evaporation

I am now so light that I seem to be floating
above the water's surface
Barely touching its crest
Like God's footprint

I am barely the weight of a breath
Barely worth the payment of a bard

Not even an imprint
Just a shadow

I miss what I could've been
Before I was hollowed

Look at how I've aged
How soft I've become
I wasn't made for this

Stay with me she says
And I will,
Because I must float

I will stay effortless for her
Light and tasteful
Beautiful

Letting her sun-streaked curls
Swing off her shoulder and onto my neck

Until even my air tastes like her.

Female Nude

by River Hennick





Bakeneko by River Hennick

Amateur Magicians

Amanda Pendley

Somehow, I pull the words out of my mouth like the colorful scarves inside the sleeve
of an amateur magician
And we are both trying so hard
To save our best magic trick to use on ourselves
So that everyone can stop asking so much of us
Such constant noise and one day we will show them how you can spend the day prophesizing
yourself into the sky
So that finally there is a wash of *shhhh* over the crowd as the clouds clear for constellations
to take center stage
And now they are the ones spilling and overflowing with all of their stagnant connections
There is so much to be gained just by looking at them
And the same by looking at us
Trying our best
Reminding ourselves that even if we don't have all the answers
we will always have an abundance of possible solutions
We are the people that connect the dots and give meaning to nothing and it's time that I start
piecing together the stars that once belonged in my brain,
Look up at the aurora borealis
I was never fooling anyone
These colors are exactly what they appear to be

Where I'm From

Emme Mackenzie

I am from
the expressions of my people
flattened nose and slits for eyes
leathery skin and cricks in my back
each feature of mine
a reflection of my family heritage

I am from
the calloused feet of my grandparents
step after step they walked towards a better future
flew on their first airplane to the USA
and called California the gates of heaven
a miracle that they made it off of a life's savings

I am from
the broken Tagalog conversations over the phone
the signal offers us more connection than the similar
blood running through both of our veins
roasted plantains on the dinner table
foreign spices and sun damaged over-worked hands

I am from
half and half milk
split down the middle between two distinct colors, countries
I am from the moment of hesitation before bubbling
in "Asian" under what race I am for the ACT

I am from
the salt of the southern oceans
drying out the culture inside of me
I struggle to hold on to my past
the pieces of me halfway across the world
pieces of myself that I've never felt so far away from

To Mom

Katie Stanos

Inspired by Ocean Vuong's Poem "A Letter to My Mother That She Will Never Read"

But you need it you said. I thought you wanted to be beautiful. I slammed my hands on the wheel of your Land Rover and pulled over to the side of the road near the big houses with green lawns and trampolines, Norfolk Way. I then burst into tears and cursed at you through the hands cupping my face. I wanted to be beautiful, but not like you. I yelled until your face became streaked by your black tears. I'm so sorry. I'm so so sorry, you replied. Without showing remorse, I wiped my tears and put the car into drive, driving all the way home with you crying in the passenger seat. I didn't want to get a nose-job.

I know that when you were in high school you were voted homecoming queen and cutest girl; you mention it a lot. Wearing your white stilettos, you stepped onto the makeshift stage in the auxiliary gym. You waved at the crowd of cheering students and teachers. *Oak Forest High School Homecoming Queen.* With your bright blue eyes gleaming with tears, you made a practiced spin. You put on a great show.

Torn by Audrey Lu

In the churchyard, on a beautiful Easter Sunday, a little girl runs aimlessly through the freshly cut grass and morning dew. Her white dress sways and her brown curls bounce as she leaps over puddles and rocks. She could be three or four.

Here it is! I stepped out from behind the bathroom door and spun around a few times to show you my homecoming outfit, a navy tuxedo, and black tie. Your eyes widened, and traced the edges of my body. There was no smile on your face. Staring at me with your beautiful blue eyes, they emitted a putrid stench.

I wanted to be beautiful, but not like you.

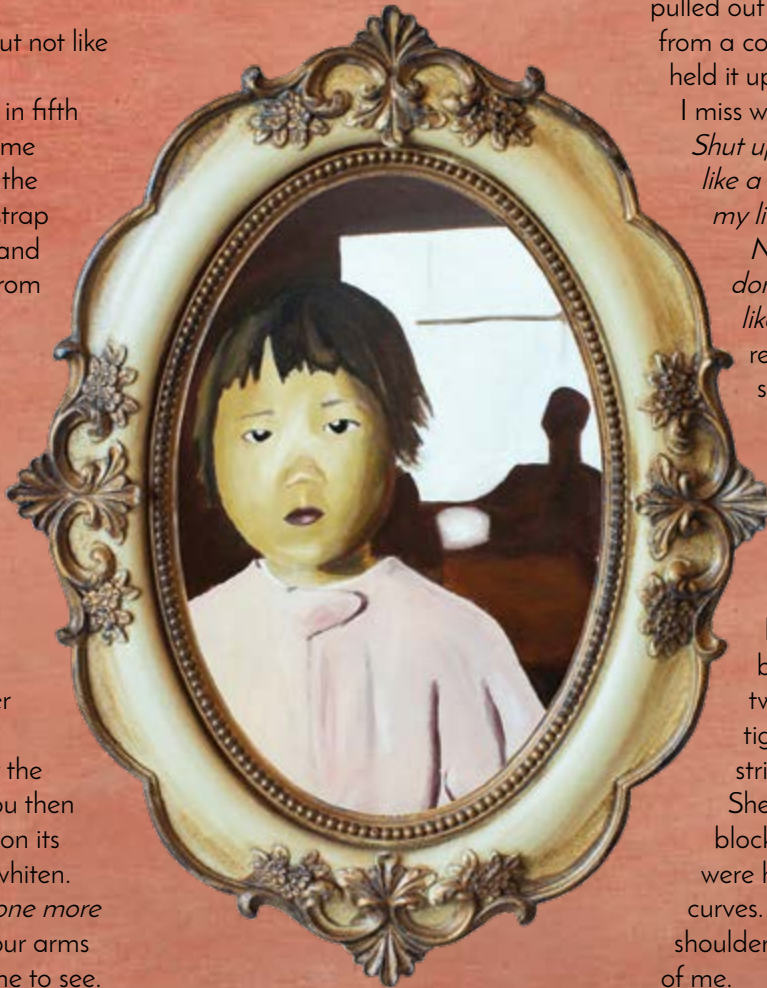
I know that when you were in fifth grade, Molly Buckingham came behind you in the hallway by the lockers and pinched the bra strap from underneath your t-shirt and pulled it down. Your bra fell from your sweater and landed on the linoleum floor. Everyone thought it was hysterical because you had such big boobs for a kid.

The girl in the churchyard slips on a patch of mud and falls. Her white dress dirtied by the mud, she begins to cry and calls for her mother. There you come. You pick up the wailing child and drive her home. Later, in the laundry room, your fingers glaze over the patterns in the white dress. You then meticulously spray oxy-clean on its mud stains and watch them whiten.

Come on Ma, show them one more time! You grudgingly lifted your arms and flexed your muscles for me to see. *I can't believe your muscles are that big. You don't even work out anymore* I remarked. *Don't say that!* you snapped back at me, clenching your fists. *Jeezus christ!* I replied, taken aback. *Why do your standards of beauty have to be so archaic? You should be proud of your strength.* You took a deep breath and stared deep into my eyes. *On my high school gymnastics team, my teammates would make fun of my arms, and call*

me "muscles" and "she-man." They were just so bulky and annoying. I hate them.

But you see, Anne, you are much, much smarter than your mother. She's not the sharpest tool in the shed. I chuckled. She said the darndest things. *Hey!* you jokingly barked back at her, smiling. We all laughed together in the Ridge Club parking lot, a Hallmark movie moment. But, for the rest of that day, you remained awfully quiet, with hints of sorrow in the few words you spoke. I could sense that you were hurt. I know she wishes you were more like me. You know it too. I'm sorry I laughed.



Innocence by Audrey Lu

I know that when you were studying late at night for your senior year finals during high school, your door creaked open and you saw your mother standing in the hallway. You tried to ignore her, but she entered your room and began to yell at you. *How could I have raised a girl so stupid? All your siblings are smart. We're paying for you to go to*

college, but you barely know... You burst out crying, screaming for her to go away. She abruptly stopped her speech, and coolly left your room. Once she left, you ran to your drawer and picked out a neon tube top and a leather skirt and snuck out the back door to your boyfriend George Sweeny's house. He liked your leather skirt; he thought it was sexy.

I'm not sure why I tried to break you on that day. It hurt me to see you so upset, but you looked ugly when you cried.

I miss when you were like this. You pulled out my infamous little white dress from a container in the bedroom and held it up to the light of my bedroom.

I miss when you wore stuff like this.

Shut up Ma, I'm not gonna dress like a three-year old for the rest of my life.

No you reply. *It's not that. I just don't understand why you don't like dresses anymore.* I didn't reply. What was I supposed to say?

It will only hurt a little bit, Anne. All they do is rip the paper off, and you're done.

I clutched your hand as I laid back in the chair at the waxing salon. The waxing lady put the hot wax in between my eyebrows, and I twitched, grasping your hand tighter. She ripped the waxing strip off. I didn't make a sound. She handed me a mirror. My blocky Frankenstein eyebrows were honed to smooth angelic curves. You placed your hand on my shoulder, glowing. You were so proud of me.

Sometimes, I dream of you pulling out my little white dress from underneath your bed. Your hands, shining in the moonlight, carefully pick it up. Still on your knees, and stopped in time, you scan its edges and caress the soft fabric. Bringing the material close to your face, you sniff its scent of laundry detergent and bleach. You smile but it quickly fades.

Where did my little girl go?

Coconut Kid

Neha Sridhar

Giggling, Aditi grabs my hand and twirls me along as her ghagra's elaborate mirror embroidery catches in colorful lighting. The soft clinking of anklets and bangles follows her movements like an afterthought as I reluctantly dance with her, though I do it anyway, since I am relieved I got out of wearing the traditional clothing that Aditi wears. We jump up and down with the rough basement carpet burning our feet as "Disco Deewanee" blares in the background and bright blazing string lights blind our vision. The sharp scent of sandalwood incense pricks our noses like tiny needles.

"Auntie! Look at what we can do!" Aditi calls to a woman who is not actually her aunt, showing off the routine we have been clumsily practicing for the last half hour. Priya "auntie" laughs and claps appreciatively, calling out her encouragement as she sets down another dish onto the table. Dinner is soon, something I am both happy and annoyed about. I would rather be sitting down with quiet chatter than prancing around with a girl I see once every three years, but I never like the food at these things. To my parents' never ending frustration, I continue to be a picky eater like no other. I desperately hope it is not chole or bisi bele bath with their mushy, grainy textures that sit unpleasantly in my mouth.

I glance around the room and bob in time to the music, wondering if I can convince my parents to leave early. It is the cruelest form of irony that my coloring of black hair, tan skin, and dark brown eyes fits in so seamlessly with the rest of the crowd, yet I couldn't feel more out of place. Later in life, I will have a friend jokingly tell me I'm a "coconut"—brown on the outside; white on the inside—and this term for being whitewashed will be quickly brushed off as a joke, but it will be an aspect of me that is continually inescapable. Even now, as a child, I recognize this in some form. It is apparent in the way that I don't speak the languages that aunties and uncles prattle on in over our little heads, even though I can understand them, and in the way that I feel no joy when I see the vibrant clothes and fragrant foods.

This is my heritage. My parents were born and raised on the Indian subcontinent amid fresh produce vendors and cows freely roaming noisy streets, so despite my very American roots and upbringing, I eat rice on a daily basis and occasionally go to parties with the Indian community at the Hindu temple or at the homes of other Indian American families where I hardly know anyone. Every time I am surrounded by this culture, I am reminded of how Indian culture is so flamboyant and unapologetic, as is often reflected in the amalgamation of spices found in Indian food and the colorful dyes used to make clothing such as ghagras. I, on the other hand, tend to be very reserved and quiet for the most part, and if one were to talk to my friends and family, they would tell you that I am overly cautious—which creates an automatic disconnect between my culture and me. It's not that I automatically dislike everything there is about being Indian American, though if anyone had asked

me that eight or so years ago I would have had a much more negative outlook, but I don't automatically love everything about it either. There are things out of my control, such as unavoidable stereotypes about my level of intelligence or the ethnic ambiguity that comes with the occasional restaurant server speaking to me in Spanish—another language I don't understand—because I vaguely look like I could be Latina.

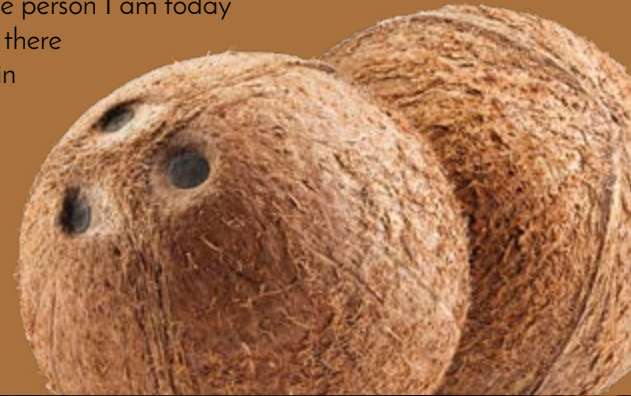
On the other hand, there are things about my heritage that are entirely up to me. After a childhood of being told I had to go to Indian parties and wear Indian clothes and eat Indian food without my parents ever asking me if I enjoyed any of it, I grew to resent what it meant to be Indian American. How was I supposed to automatically adore the culture of a country

I have visited maybe five times in my life? I stopped eating Indian food as often as I used to, I managed to find a way to avoid every party, I rebelled against partaking in any sort of religious celebration, I had even stopped wearing traditional clothing since I was eleven. The Indian culture faded in me until I almost forgot about it completely. I used to think this was a good thing, but as I grew older and became exposed to differing cultures and opinions, I regret not trying to connect to my heritage more. I wish I had seen the positive side of having a rich cultural background instead of trying to assimilate to the point where I don't know how to find my way back to being Indian anymore.



One of the first memories I have where I remember not relating to Indian culture was when I went to India for summer vacation when I was four years old. I remember loving the fresh tropical fruits and animals like monkeys skittering through the streets, bonding with my grandparents, traveling to the ocean to play in the tide, but I also remember being utterly bored after the initial wonder of a new country had worn off. As an only child, I spent a lot of time alone or with adults, having no one my age to spend time with, so as a child who enjoyed learning far too much, I was enrolled in an Indian school for kindergarten. Indian students are in school when American students are on their summer break, due to the monsoon season in India dictating the school year. In India, I fit in just enough to blend in, but I didn't know any of the customs or language. I remember coming home in tears, sobbing to my parents about how I didn't understand how to write in Hindi. To this day, the only good things I can look back on for that particular trip were the parts of India only a child could find magical, and the fact that spending time in school on summer break put me ahead when I returned to school.

I doubt I'll start learning Hindi or watching Bollywood movies anytime soon, but I still want to try and connect to the world of my family again. Maybe I'll actually put on the ghagras that I dreaded throughout my childhood the next time I have to go to a more formal event in the Indian community. I want to be more like the other second-generation immigrants who are my friends, the people who have achieved a balance of America and India without neglecting either culture. The little girl who used to be me would say that there is no power in having toffee colored skin; the person I am today would say that there is more power in understanding one's self than in anything else in the world.



Life Slow Mo

Ada Heller

Wet hair clings to my cheeks
salty from the rain
Drops like tears slide down my nose
as the gray of the sky peers down upon me
Barefoot in the grass
for a few moments
I forget about the life I am crushing below
With my eyes closed
I block out the rushing of the highway in the distance
and the schedules and the promises
I can forget nearly everything but the pounding of the rain
and the damp earth making its home between my toes
Pulling my coat around my books
I sink against a tree
to forget about the ruins of life
that were given to me

Captured Glimmer by Sierra Smith

she took my poems

Annie Barry

why do i allow myself to participate in something
as dangerously stupid as Love?
allow myself to participate
i say
as if i don't
put myself up to bat
in a room full of automatic pitch machines

Love looks at me
like the cracks in the sidewalk look at your mother
Love stares at me like a little boy
about to break his arm on a trampoline
like he's so excited
to jump; to feel high; to feel something
other than earth's gravity

only for earth to pull him back down
and remind him that trying to feel
something different
can be fucking painful

Love sounds
to me
like a voice crack in a crying man
like out of tune electric guitars
like car alarms
that won't turn off
like Fran Drescher's voice
and it smells like burning toast
on a mom and dad want a divorce type of morning

Love screams
at me through four windows rolled down in january
two hands gripping more than a heavy wheel

and i scream back at her
with a mix between the oxford and urban dictionaries
to let her know i still exist

Love is
in the cashier's voice that kinda sounded like yours
that probably didn't sound like yours
but i heard it anyways

She's in every rearview mirror's backseat
and every side eye's almost saw something
that was never really there
She sees what i never did in you
or maybe doesn't see
what i really saw in you

Notable

Seahawks: The NFL suspended linebacker Mychal Kendrick for eight games for his role in an insider trading scheme. The suspension includes time served. He pleaded guilty

Love comes back to you
even after you makeout with her best friend
She finds you
even when you curse her out
and tell her never to come back,
Love,
just spent her last dollars
on wine to help her write about you
and whiskey to help her forget about you
She wakes up every morning with the taste of you
still bitter on her tongue
and the feeling of you still fresh in her stomach
to her, you look like the toilet bowl last night
and you look like her notebook's last page
and you look like her wet, freshly reddened cheeks
and dripping nose
and you look like her favorite poem she's ever written
and you look like her most hated poem she's ever written
and you look like the worn letters on her backspace key
and you look like her
and you look like her
Love is more in love with you than i am with her

and i have been chasing her since she took my money
and my poems and my sobriety and ran

and I have been out of breath since
she gave them all to you

Misinformed by Nicolette Toub



Spring by Sophia Hammond



A Walk Rachel Stander

Yesterday, I took a walk.
I went through the park,
I passed by one empty cup,
two used napkins,
three cigarette butts.
I jaywalked across the street,
past the hardware store
and into the coffee shop.
I ordered a small latte,
handed the pretty barista a five-dollar bill
and stuffed the change in my pocket.

Tomorrow, I'll take another walk.
I'll go through the park,
I'll pick up one empty cup,
two used napkins,
three cigarette butts,
and I'll throw them in the trash can
or recycling bin permitting.
I'll cross the street at the crosswalk
and find somewhere to wash my hands.
I'll pass the hardware store,
where I'll wave to the owner's son,
who'll be repainting their logo on the window,
and I'll go into the coffee shop.
I'll order a large latte,
hand the pretty barista a ten-dollar bill
and set the change in the tip jar.
I'll ask her how her day is going
and if she's busy after work,
I'll take her out
and one day fall in love with her.

But today I'll lay around,
I'll look out the window,
the one next to my bed.
I'll watch the litter sit,
polluting and ugly.
I'll think of all the people
I will not impress
and all the money I don't possess
and my mind will spin.
Tonight, I'll dream of happiness
and tomorrow, I'll take a walk.



buzzfeed quizzes by Sophia Hammond

Fence in Nature by Ava Middleton



Trip James Fitzgerald

Montana and Wyoming
The sprawling landscape of Yellowstone
Against towering mountains
Form a place that I'd never seen before
The animals and people you meet at pull offs
Are what make the experience an experience
Waiting for Old Faithful to burst
After a long enough time it does
The height of the water felt as tall as a skyscraper
As people cheer it on

South Dakota
The tall, towering and terrifying Devils Tower
Lived up to the connotation of its name.
The Badlands weren't bad at all
But in the heat of summer.
It was hot as hell.

A Mirror's Story by Sierra Smith

Capoeira Clara Rabbani

The West,
To me,
Is *Capoeira*.

Boundless
And filled with
Saudade.

It is
The macaws
Of the Amazon.
And the macaques
Of the tamarind trees.

In the West,
I string words together like
beads.

Chew them in my mouth
Like the husks
Of *amendoim*.

It stays
On my lips
Like the taste
Of coffee beans.

In the West
I walk on wet clay
That stains
Like *açaí*.

Like *açaí*,
The West is bitter-sweet.
Inconvenient
Like the shells
Of things I break apart
With my hands.
Look inside.
And repeat.

The West, to me,
Stings like the bite
Of something I never see.
Yet, I've grown to love the
Sweat and tears
Of distant familiarity.



Forgotten Memory

Ada Heller

I can't remember
why pink ice cream
smells of lakes
and trips to grandma's house
I have no memory
of cherry chocolate chunk ice cream melting
in my mouth
But sometimes
I lick my fingers
just to make sure
I've gotten the last drops

Una Tarde Calurosa by Anahis Luna

Youth

Anna Schmeer

i never met her
but i always knew she was there
my dad talked about her so fondly
"we used to drive
for hours listening to old cassette tapes
singing along
not knowing where we were going
but not caring"
sometimes
one of the songs they used to sing
would come on the radio
my dad would turn it up
and sing along
i could almost see his eyes
flicker with the memory of his youth
driving with his mom
some old song that i wouldn't know
playing through a tinny radio
the windows down
and the sky is blue
just my dad
and my grandmother
that i never knew



Front Seat by Nina Kulikov

Museum of Broken Street Signs

Meghana Lakkireddy

I miss running down the street with you at half past 3
When your dad dropped you off after softball practice on Sunday afternoons.
And there was never anything more than grass stains on white pants and empty soda cans
that my mom told me to throw away two hours ago.
The boys that surrounded us were growing into their bodies while we still tripped over our
own names

That summer, we were our own gods
Worshipping at the steps of Wayne's World and punk rock mutiny.
Our voices anything but tender, rasping jagged prayers for our holy sins.
Our holy, innocent, sins.

You never told me that I wasn't good enough, even though I wasn't ready to believe it.
Humidity contorting houses into saints
And I wished there was another way to tell you that every hair you wanted to rip
from your body was there for a reason
Please forgive my rambling "take me backs" and "I still love you"

Everything that crawled on our wretched skin recoiled in disgust at the two teenagers in
love, scared to touch each other in public, wearing yellow raincoats that didn't
ever keep us warm.
Why was it the responsibility of two strung out fifteen year old girls to take the brunt
of the world's hatred?
Why couldn't I love you in peace, without Leviticus 18 breathing down our necks
to remind us of our sins?
It was all too much to handle I guess.

SHOW ME LOVE
by Summer Luna

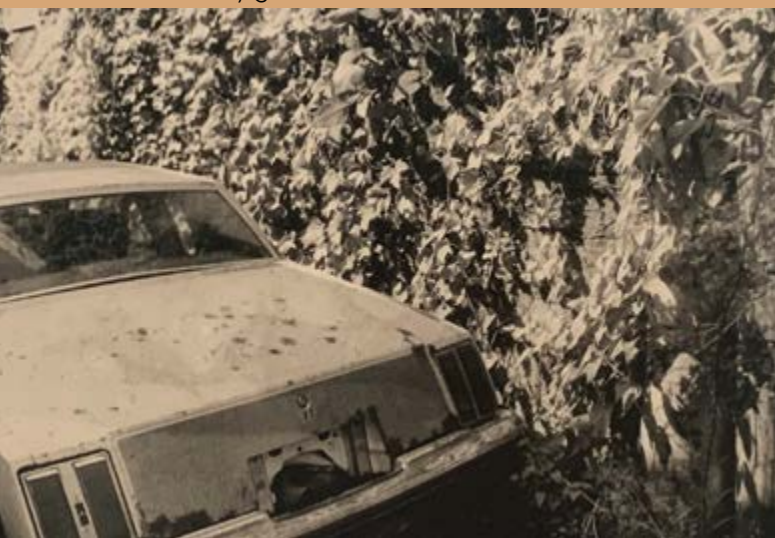
I hate your new boyfriend and his stupid \$800 dollar bass guitar that he can barely play,
And his superiority complex,
And how he only listens to music by greasy white boys who can't sing.
I hate his stupid haircut and how he probably only showers once a week because he always smells like sweat,
And how he touches you without your permission,
And doesn't bother texting back unless it's for nudes,
And I hate this stupid poem because I have so many things to tell you but I don't know how.

I guess I kissed too many people after we broke up
And I haven't washed your sweatshirt yet.
I sleep with it every night.

I want you to know that the lamppost you kissed me under needs a lightbulb replacement
And that I failed my driver's test more times than you can imagine
And I wanted to be your first and last love, but things rarely work like that, you know?
I need you to understand that everything we did changed me for the better

Please tell me that you understand who you have the potential to become
Please tell me this'll somehow work out in the end
Promise me that once this is all over, we won't look back and laugh
That we'll finally grow into our blessed limbs.

The Aged Car
by Ashton Melton



Blink

Sydney Fessenden

I like to stare at the Ikea light fixture in the living room, letting the middle bulb sink into my shallow eyes. I look until it starts to hurt, my ripped fingernails gripping the worn suede of the couch as pupils get lost in the dangerous yellow. For a moment I think of the solar eclipse, when I looked at the sunlight with no barriers, staring death in the face with a veil of night drawn over it, laying on an inner tube in the middle of the lake with hands of Tootsie pops and a friend. It was easy to like it.

The raft we lie on drifts to sitting on top of Oakhurst monkey bars, being upside down bats and not fighting with mom. Then to the static of the slide as it lifts my eight year old hair away from everything. If I went back to the slide, it wouldn't lift my hair again. For some reason I just know that.

I finally look away from the light, uneven fingernails loosening their hold. Nothing is left in my gaze but spots of yellow and purple.

I try to blink them away, but the spots grow and consume everything. My preschool picture in that pink embroidered dress that I would twirl in as my parents lifted me above the hammock that is now consumed by ivy, the empty holes in the mantel where stockings hung precariously, hearth melting the Ghirardelli my cocoa-burnt tongue licked off shiny foil. And my outstretched feet, almost as torn as my fingernails.

All I see is the yellow and purple, even when I close my eyes. The hues creep into my lids until everything about me is exposed to the dizzying colors. I can't see anything else. But it can see everything. Maybe that's easier.

Maybe it's easier, but I miss that static and joy of fairy houses in trees and stepping on raw pecans from the towering oak above my sunburnt head, and Solo cups of white flannel caterpillars that make little mouths scream for help when venom spreads to unsuspecting knuckles. Pricked fingers would turn as crimson as the overhanging mulberries by the curved concrete wall, whereas now a pricked finger is sterile and cold in an office, void of salt and unfamiliar in my teeth as I fake a smile at whoever is behind the two-way mirror. I've forgotten what side of it I'm on. I've forgotten a lot of things.

I used to look into the light and enjoy the geometric patterns that spread across my vision as soon as I looked away. Nothing was obscured by the colors, only enhanced and made into a masterpiece I could never recreate. Blinking made the patterns even better. Blinking also made them go away eventually.

Now, the patterns blind me and reach past my large pupils and cover up the wooden rings in my irises. Everything horrible that my eyes touch is still there even after I close them.

I still blink anyways.



Warmth In a Concrete Jungle by Nina Kulikov



Ike by Audrey Diggs

alleluia

Olivia J. Williams

I will never call a Latino "papi"
 sino héroe, soldado, sobreviviente
 Brother in bondage, sibling in survival
 The chains of the Hispanic clink with those of his Black cellmate
 We languish under the same white gall
 Asian men rattle wire fences in
 1930s internment camps
 White supremacists live
 On Black-tilled land
 One day the bank
 Of social justice will

Foreclose
Repossess
Reclaim ownership
Til then
We languish

Like the pain
Filling up a four-year-old boy's gaze at the colorful toy store
"Niggers not served here"
"Chinese go home"
"Jews have no place"
Like the swastika carved into the plastic tabletop
In my school
Filled with kids who cheered
When a white supremacist won the highest office in the nation

Like the time I learned my melanin somehow
Brought down the property value
Three girls
Sit
In a line
On the curb
Chins in hand
Their various brown-shaded skins
Sag
Under the weight
Of White beauty standards

We tried
We will build a land
Already watered by
The blood of black, brown bodies
By the tears of our great-grandmothers
And the screams of our sisters
As our bodies swung from the trees
And were lost forever in the river

We are bonded in struggle
Woven together by oppression
It is a grim unity
And yet
We rise in it
We are made bold by it
We fight
In spite
Of "progress"
Because the knife driven into our backs
Has not even been pulled out six inches yet

We will move past the red, white, blue
Dye our emblem red, yellow, green
Black, brown, purple
A heritage to be proud of
One unified
In struggle



poem for my killer

Yasi Farahmandnia

sometime before the clock hit eleven,
i thought of you.
i imagined the threat your caressing fingers possess
as they trace targets on the side of my belly.

i look to see you in mirrors and through
windowpane reflections,
but i am disappointed and relieved every time.

since i have matured,
food has become tasteless and i don't
care for the smell of flowers.
i am addicted to what
surpasses substance;
i yearn for violence to a degree which breaks my shell,
and i rarely want my comfort zone shared.

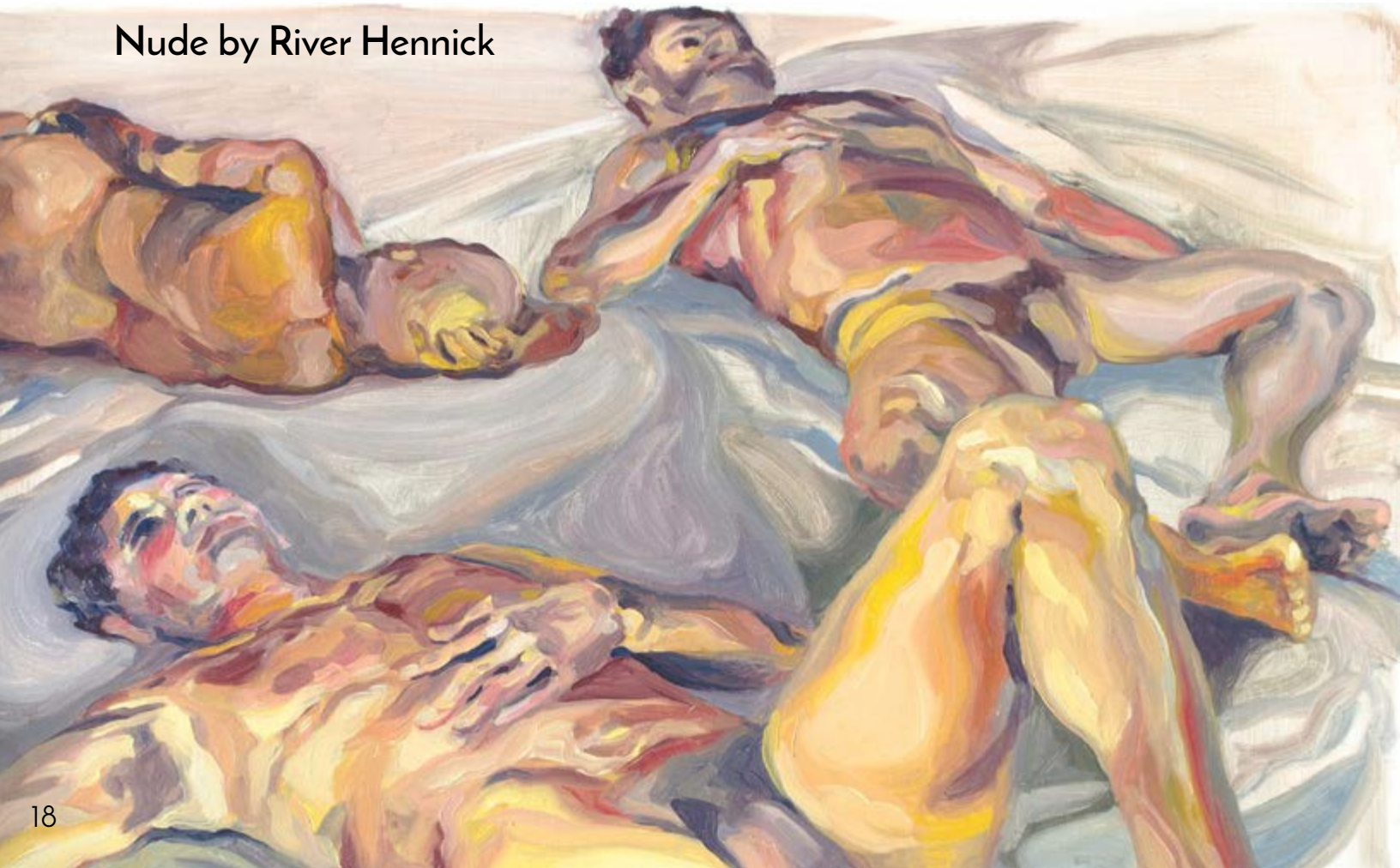
perhaps the essence of my soul is
not meant to fuel a human body.
perhaps my neck needs to be twisted and shrunken until i
have no more breath or thought.

if that is the case, lover,
i beg of you to lure me with charm.
make my last night on earth the best two hours
of my life.
let me hear the wind screech
and the washing machine cry it's end.
let my last claw marks on life to be the ones
i leave on the small of your back
when i see it best to prevent my death by hurting you.

then, let me sleep knowing that i
had lived my life to the fullest that i
had my wish come true with a genie
that was so generous.

let me experience thrill as it electrifies you and feeds your hunger.
my body will suffer but i will have ascended human form then,
so what does it matter if my death shall be gruesome?

Nude by River Hennick



silence

Katja Rowan

cactus spines
pink flowers
my quiet is not
blurred signs at the edges of
interstate
when the clouds
circle at night
pack of dogs
i will my body
to be
prickly pear
humidity is saturation
saturation of patience
saturation
tires the rubber
that child perches on grass
stem working between teeth
green-stained
interstate at night pack of dogs
i want a spine

Step in the Snow by Bill Cheng

Dream State Slip-Gown

Isabelle Shachtman

The sound of the train past midnight
And a clear sort of light seek my room and cheeks
Leaving the layers of darkness, moon, and house
light stale and stark
As if the lighter colored sheaths of air in the dark
are unbreathable
As if I'm lying to myself about what I really see
through the night

Under a warm tiredness
And a pungent desire to dream pleasantly
I fall, crumbling,
Restarting as ashes and anchorage:

I feel moonlight hit outside
I hold nothing of the day inside of me yet
I am tired already
I know what is to come will have something to lose

The putrid retelling
That I myself am only a matter of time

My heart and brain and lungs are trapped
inside me
Can't breathe, can't listen and notice
and perceive—
And want out
Out, far before their time
To see for themselves
What they work for
Understand why they are dying

The disappointing desire for love:
To pretend I exist within something else
Besides my little feeble self
My foolish self

A matchbox
A birthday cake
Lemon eyes and feathery skin
The layers — the leaf-like adjustments,
Grandma's old skin making sounds in my mind like
the wind and broken pinecones
Her movement:
The gentle appreciation of hot blood
The meek disgust of a sticky pulse under
a tight grip
Mom's love
An earnest inhale
A bulbous minuet of life
Lime green and slim shaven
Wistful, seasonal
Frosty bark and all

Like a dream that I'll die within
A memory that brings heat to my temples
and ripples to my exhales

My body
My sweet sweet servile self
A cave
Oh how, when I am alone in it, does it echo

Living likes the silk slips on pepper freckled women
Sharing kisses and hands and nightlight
At an easy hour past midnight
To make a passionate preface of theft,
Ultraterrestrial theft
Taking turns in giving love for life
Before they forget the night away

Namely shapely words and lines grow
at these banks
Beneath the sleeping bodies and overgrown lust
Like remorse
Silhouette
And consanguine
Mettlesome and meanderer,
Derivatives of saint and martyr
Wiry blood,
Splinters in the veins

Silently roaring under the spell
Waiting for a passing godhead
To drop a penny or two down the well

For the eternal feeling of her
Is an empty earnestness
A forgotten dream
A sleep most longed for

God, I don't even want her
But i seek her
As if a gentle lover is a synonym for painless death
As if I'll never have to know what my own heartbeat
sounds like
If i continue

cross cancel
simplify
root
restructure:
The Bodies the feeling the sleepiness
Lucky as wind and sky
To help one another
Forget

Her voice
And what I can remember of my dreams
Makes me think our names must've rhymed
in a past life

The irony pries meagerly at my heart
And leaves me second guessing that autumn smell
of deceit
And the orbit of my mind around a day like hers

A murky watered spell dances on my body
through my sleep
As if the night is my calling,
As if I'm coming home, and hypnotized by
the fireplace
As if I want to feel everything with her through
the wake and sleep

★ But I am too languid tossing under sheets
Bare besides my cold slipdress
Gold green, like her eyes tracing my hips
and bodice
Amber, like how I imagine the dead branches look
by candle light

As if everything that
Has always mattered to me
is
Slipping
down
my shoulders,
stopping at my hips—
Being forgotten
when I wake up.



Spacey by Rachel Stander

Disconnect Samiya Rasheed

My mother mourns leaving her own country so deeply it runs through her veins into mine. Bangladesh is what she knows and what she loves. She spends her time showing me her culture: spinning through dances, running through poetry, and wading through history. I, in turn, cannot read her Sanskrit language. My Bangla is passable, but the prose she serves leaves me helplessly thumbing through a Bangla-to-English Dictionary. Bangladesh. A slowly sinking country of dark brown soil and dark brown people that I have only ever loved by proxy. Her holidays are mine. Her foods are mine. Her blood is mine. Yet I hear of the trailing, frayed tales of the Liberation War beginning with a genocide of my people, and I feel the disconnect. It happened when my mother was eight, but I cannot imagine it.

I am defined by Bangladesh, but also defined by the split between her and me. My mother was born in Comilla. My father was born in Dhaka. My sister was born in Perth, Australia. I was born in Omaha, Nebraska; I have never lived far from it. My first tongue is English; so are the songs I dive into, the words I weave, and the past I drape myself in. Here, miles away from any tumbling ocean, are my roots. I spend my days willingly, cashing in hours for creating stories and people that I will never know. The earth travels its spin, and my tales appear lazily in smudged, inky English. Sometimes, I cash in my hours to imagine the saltwater people of Bangladesh: riding rickshaws in the ever boisterous city or on tin roofs under coconut palms. I ask my mother of prettier, formal words for this and for that as I try to paint her home into something I can understand. The roads form in

a dusty copper traversed by a thousand feet in all manner of shoes. The cars must travel slowly; the foot traffic will not stop for them. The air is filled with smoke and spice and the overlaying voices of both symphony and cacophony. The people wear anything from rich, embroidered saris of any color to tucked dress shirts and trousers as they amble, shop, and yell up at boys playing badminton on roofs, holding their birdies. There is no English plastered on the walls. There is little familiar to a girl who has lived in Midwestern suburbs her entire life.

It is not real. I have only ever loved Bangladesh from a distance, and these dips into her image do nothing to make her clear to me. I am creating newness that will not translate into my mother's sepia toned past. Neither can I ask her to change what I have made. Her eyes glide over the double-spaced, 12 point lines I gave days to and get hitched on certain syllables like getting splinters from wood. In trying to explain, I end up looking into identical brown-black irises and being struck silent at the gap.

She once told me, as we drove home on an innocent little road in Leawood, Kansas, you learned the important one. That she wished she could carve words in English like I did. Yet *these words*, formed mindlessly in careless Bangla, struck like a bullet. Is that truly what she thought? That it was better to leave behind generations of heritage for the clinical English I wield in America? How does one judge? I am Bangla, and I am American, but one is a country I have breathed for sixteen years and the other is a country I have visited twice. What did I gain and what did I forfeit?

I don't know if I'll ever find out. If that's a given or a decision. I try to keep them both: Bangla American and most definitely first generation: defined by polaroids of Bangla coasts, soles in American prairies, and dreaming of the Pacific passage. But the line between what I am and long to know is crust, mantle, core, adverb, participle, noun, and I haven't kept pace.

I suppose that's entropy; natural law. Heat and history lost over a thousand miles, ruling it greed to crave both ends of the Earth, leaving green-ink English a cold comfort, and weaving tributaries into the great river of my bloodline.

(The distance aches.)



In Orchards of Lemon Trees

Kate Rose

Lemon Head
by Isabel Dory

in orchards of lemon trees
we tiptoe, under the hanging yellow fruit
in blue moonlight, we will stay until
orange light leads us inside

in orchards of lemon trees
we giggle at your pinched sour face
as you taste the bitterness from the
tip of your tongue trailing back to your throat

in orchards of lemon trees
we hide behind the leaves
startling each other with
the simple break of a twig

in orchards of lemon trees
we doze off at the stars
hidden with fruit, we can only peek at the sky
until we are too sleepy, to peek at all



Room by Isaac Decker

Remember Summer?

Anonymous

He's got you stuck in his teeth.

Remember, summer?

Well, tell me:

Why'd you leave him and I alone in the blue tiled bathroom?

Remember, summer?

The one with the blood stained floors that we sat on for hours.

Well, tell me:

Why'd you trap us outside the screen door?

Remember, summer?

'Cause our eyes mirrored the clouds and our feet weren't touching the ground.

I hated you then, summer.

But, tell me why you locked us in a car that rainy evening/

Remember?

Remember?

His and I's hair so wet that it dripped all over the leather seat as he twisted mine around his finger.

Again, tell me, summer:

Why'd you shut down the lights at that party that he and I snuck into?

Remember, baby?

The one with hundreds of silhouettes dressed in whiskey.

Remember when you shoved us in that empty room?

Remember when he and I kissed for the very first time.

Remember that, baby?

Were you afraid to let me go?

'Cause months turned into days and then hours. You held onto my shirt like it was your God.

Just tell me why summer ain't honey anymore.

Tell me why it's been stripped to a lemon.

Tell me why he's got summer stuck in his teeth and we ain't got a toothpick to get it out.

All Things Terribly Lovely

Hannah Holliday

When you asked me who I thought you were and I didn't have an answer, I was worried. Why does my brain not instantly generate poetry when I think about how beautiful you are? Now that I have an answer I am terrified. You are not poetry, you are a reality that I never imagined I'd have and now that I do I can only turn the essence of you into words. You are a summer thunderstorm, warm yet harsh and rumbly in all the right places. You aren't the little things, you're the big picture. You are hard corners, sharp turns. You are hitting the side of the car and hearing the crack of bones. You are holding a victim of life on the bathroom floor at 3 a.m. You are whiskey bottles on the coffee table in the middle of the afternoon. You are all things terribly lovely. So how is someone like me, the winter drizzle, the little things, the slowing down before stopping, the soft corners, the tears after the cracks, supposed to be made for someone like you? People wonder why I'm terrified; I love you.



Connection at First Sight

Annie Barry

I read about you
in my horoscopes and in a relatable tweet last week
as soon as I saw you, I knew those were written about you

and and and on Tuesday, I saw chocolate vanilla swirl ice cream
and I thought maybe we could blend together that well
or maybe you'll see that, one day,
we could be perfectly misunderstood like frozen yogurt dates
in December like getting married to someone
you met on tinder like falling in love with your
issued public defender like

the way you're stained on my eyes
like when you leave the TV
on the same paused screen
all night long
and then your mom yells at you
because you should've
turned that off a long time ago

and and sometimes I see you around
but I don't say anything
kind of like waiting for the guy
to text first
because it'd be silly
to start a conversation
even though I really want to start a conversation
because Cosmo magazine says
that's the way to get a boyfriend
but there wasn't a column about how long you should wait...

I'm assuming you shouldn't wait too long
because bad bitches don't wait
for men who ain't shit right?

but what's the right balance of bad bitch
and quiet observant girl and cute Cosmo magazine girl?

someone told me to just be myself and I always do what I'm told because
that's what the women do in his story books and everything I learn in school should be correct, correct?
but I don't really wanna be myself this time because it seems like you don't like me
so I'll just change myself so that maybe you will

I mean you clearly must've liked me at some point because the night we met you couldn't keep your hands off of me
it was like you .. hypnotized me
your heartbeat like a metronome
your voice like a therapist
and your eyes: encapsulating

you see, every night I fall asleep and I go to you. I see your face on the backs of my eyelids every time they close
and I see your face every time I almost crash my car. I feel you in my hands as I write this poem
and I can't shake you from my brain but I wish someone would shake me because,
until I see you again, I will never not see you.

Vibrant by Sloane McKinney

34B

Jillian Otero

Dear 34B,

I thought that this was going to be a normal flight.

I got to the airport two hours early. Exactly on schedule.

I took my seat in 34A. By the window.

I went through all the motions. Cell phone turned off.

You were late. The last one on.

There was not room enough for all of our baggage to coexist. But you shoved it all in somehow.

Dear 34B,

I hope your family is doing well.

I loved all the pictures on your rule-breaking cell phone.

Your grandmother. In her Sunday best. Moments before the jello toppled.

Your nephew. Face covered with spaghetti. Three years old.

You at your senior prom. Wearing bright turquoise. And Converse. Embarrassing.

I told my mother about us. She was dying to know something about my life. You were harmless.

Dear 34B,

Thank you for waking me for dinner.

I didn't mean to fall asleep on your shoulder. But I'm guessing that you didn't mind.

I couldn't tell if you were actually scared. When you grabbed my hand during the Exorcist.

I was scared. But not by the movie. By the possibilities.

I caught you sleeping later. Your head lolled over. I prodded you awake.

You smiled and leaned on me. I could barely breathe. I was scared to wake you.

Dear 34B,

I still don't know if I should call you.

You gave me your number. I was caught up in the bliss of us.

You walked away. You had another flight. I did too.

I landed. My phone is in my hand.


"Hello, yes this is 34A. Is this 34B?"

...

"Okay. Thank you. Sorry to bother you. Goodbye."

Dear 34B,

Safe travels.



Self-Portrait on Floor
by Nina Kulikov

Plight of the Introvert

Kayla Doubrava

Typing the conclusion of my English essay,
in a loud, dimly lit coffee shop,
I peer over my laptop screen
and see the type of girl you only see
in pictures.

I thought of saying something to her
when I get up to leave.
That I'd compliment
her glasses,
or her lip gloss,
or the stickers on her laptop.
And then maybe she'd compliment
my hair,
or my new shoes,
or my favorite sweatshirt.
Then maybe I'd ask her if she knew the artist
whose name was written across that sweatshirt.
Maybe she'd say yes
and that she saw them in concert once.
Then maybe we'd find out I was there too,
and we'd laugh about it,
and find ourselves talking for over half an hour.

Then all of a sudden,
we've become friends.
And maybe being friends with her will remind me
that people are like objects in rearview mirrors.
They are much closer than they appear.
So then maybe I'll be bold enough to speak
to another stranger,
and another,
and even a few more.
We could laugh about the weather,
or whatever it is that people talk about
to feel a little less lonely in the world.
And maybe I'd meet a nice guy
and fall in love for the first time.
Maybe I'd spend a few years with him
until he eventually broke my heart,
but at least I didn't have to spend those years alone.
Maybe if I spoke to more strangers
I'd be happier.
Maybe I'd feel warmer inside
as if I swallowed something hot
like chicken soup
for the wallflower's soul.
But instead I spend my time alone in a house
where the TV's always on
so that the silence doesn't suffocate me .
But one day it'll happen,
and I will tell that girl
that I liked her glasses,
and her lip gloss,



and the stickers on her laptop.
 One day I will tell that kid
 that his performance was moving.
 And I will tell that man
 that he is one of my biggest inspirations.
 One day
 I will say all the things
 to all the people
 just because I can.

I take a deep breath,
 and look back down to my laptop screen.

One day I will find that courage.
 But until then,
 I'll finish typing my essay
 and steal a few glances from the type of girl
 you only see in pictures.

SPAGHETTI BOYFRIEND

EMMA ANDERSON

You were my
 Spaghetti boyfriend
 Blonde
 Full of spaghetti
 That's all I really
 Know about you

You were my
 Only friend
 Bright
 Full of potential
 It's strange how I don't
 Remember you



Spaghetti Boyfriend
 by Emma Anderson

Friends

Alexa Newsom

Tissues.
Litter my floor.
Scraps of Paper.
Crumpled and overflowing my recycling bin.
Eraser bits.
Cover my desk until the pale wood looks black.

My friend.
Cracks open the door, walks in.
My head.
Lifts off my desk, tired and stressed.
My mouth.
Opens to say *I can't do this*.
My hand.
Gestures to the white paper-covered carpet.

My friend.
Grips me by the shoulder, hauls me from my chair.
My legs.
Stand, support my weight, while
Her mouth.
Says *Let's take a walk, in the forest*.
My eyes.
Glance at the failures at my feet.
Her arm.
Pulls me out the room, down the stairs.
Out the door, into the fresh air. Into the
Forest.

We walk,
Hand-in-hand,
Listening to the rustling leaves and bird calls.
Our shoes make
Little sound.
The silence of the forest, both
Empowering.
And
Calming.

My tears dry.
We don't talk but.
We don't need to.
She squeezes my hand:
Once.
Twice.
My shoulders relax,
My posture improves,
My head lifts high
In a display of
Confidence.

We set our eyes on the road to my
Home.

I can do this.
My friend knows
I can.
And has reminded me.
That.
I.
Can.

My Friend Reality by Kenna Heller



Double the Fun
by Gracie Rodlund

Seeing
Double
by Gracie
Rodlund



Letters from College
Megan Schrek

Hey, I miss you

School started yesterday and
I really couldn't stand
You not being there

They had a pasta bar in the cafeteria
The germs wouldn't mesh well with your hypochondria,
But the butter noodles were okay

Watched some football today, too

Yellow and blue
I still don't understand how the score works

I made a friend in history, she reminds me of you

But she never wants to pick what we do
I miss you bossing me around

The parties are fun
But no one knows yet when to be done
So I end up cleaning for hours every morning, singing Johnny
Cash out of tune

I'll see you soon

Hey, I miss you

School starts tomorrow
And I have nothing to wear except the
Black jeans you let me borrow

I've been practicing for weeks but still
can't find the lunchroom without a map,
And I'm afraid of spilling food on my lap

Watched some football today,

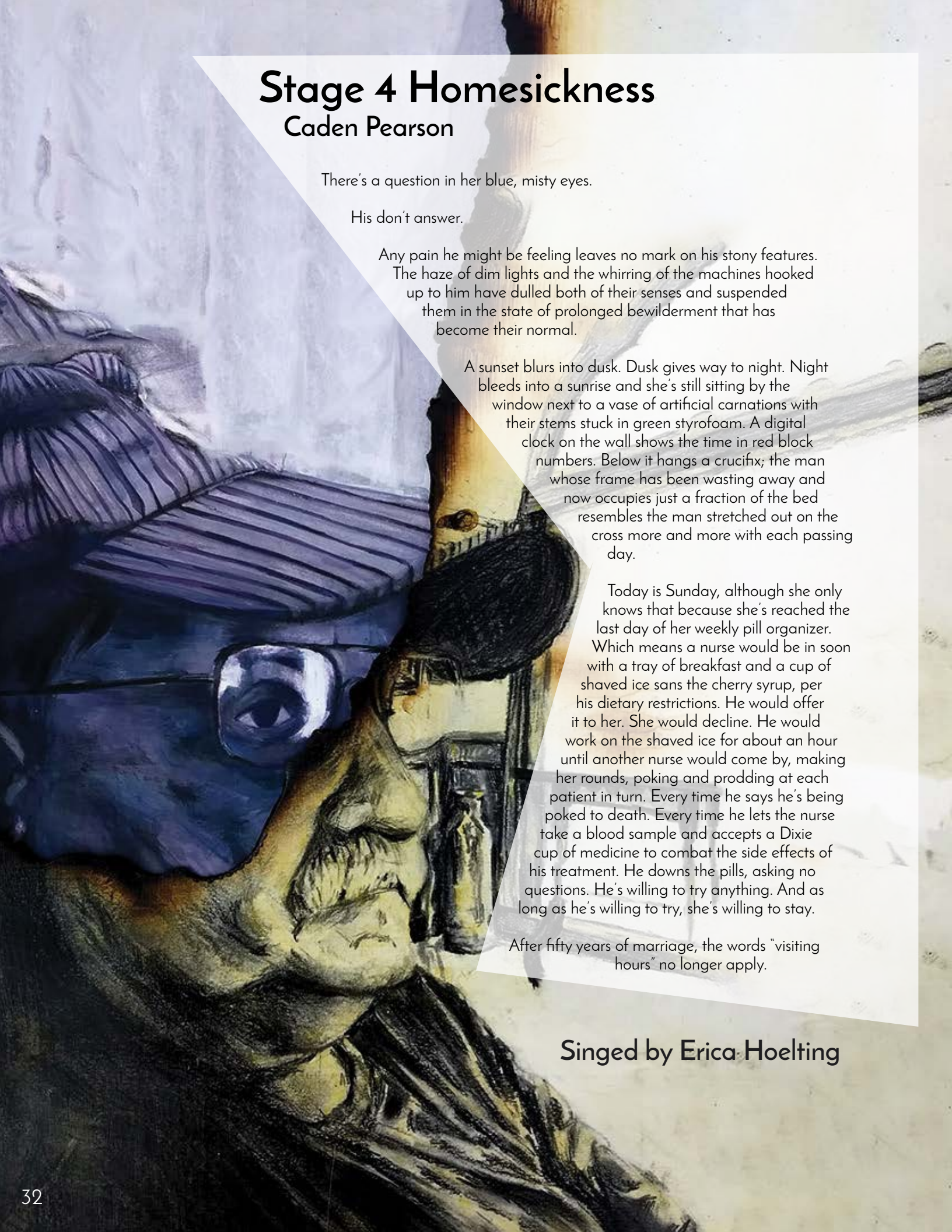
It's so much easier to follow
When you're just passing the ball over
The field

I made a friend in history, she reminds me of you

But always wants to pick the music we drive to
I miss bossing you around

The parties are lame
Because everyone has been drinking since sixteen, and no one
knows our favorite game

I'll see you soon



Stage 4 Homesickness

Caden Pearson

There's a question in her blue, misty eyes.

His don't answer.

Any pain he might be feeling leaves no mark on his stony features. The haze of dim lights and the whirring of the machines hooked up to him have dulled both of their senses and suspended them in the state of prolonged bewilderment that has become their normal.

A sunset blurs into dusk. Dusk gives way to night. Night bleeds into a sunrise and she's still sitting by the window next to a vase of artificial carnations with their stems stuck in green styrofoam. A digital clock on the wall shows the time in red block numbers. Below it hangs a crucifix; the man whose frame has been wasting away and now occupies just a fraction of the bed resembles the man stretched out on the cross more and more with each passing day.

Today is Sunday, although she only knows that because she's reached the last day of her weekly pill organizer. Which means a nurse would be in soon with a tray of breakfast and a cup of shaved ice sans the cherry syrup, per his dietary restrictions. He would offer it to her. She would decline. He would work on the shaved ice for about an hour until another nurse would come by, making her rounds, poking and prodding at each patient in turn. Every time he says he's being poked to death. Every time he lets the nurse take a blood sample and accepts a Dixie cup of medicine to combat the side effects of his treatment. He downs the pills, asking no questions. He's willing to try anything. And as long as he's willing to try, she's willing to stay.

After fifty years of marriage, the words "visiting hours" no longer apply.

Singed by Erica Hoelting

Goosebumps and Gummy Bears

Gillian Knaebel

I am from hard worn leather beneath my feet.
Watching my second home from my favorite place,
4 feet above the ground.

From sounds of gymnastics filling my ears
to a layer of chalk and sweat that coats everything from my
legs to the inside of my throat
It chokes me and tastes thick, and starchy with every breath,
but it doesn't matter.

I'm from the willow tree that hangs in the yard,
Stories that dance underneath until the last breath of summer
has been taken

From the goosebumps that engulf my arms as I dive in
into the books and into the pool
Swallowed by cool water and churning minds
I'm cold as winter takes my willow
But it doesn't really matter

I'm from shouts of "here I come," and pulling my best friend
into a closet.

"Up" I mouth, and she nods. We climb to the top shelf and
wedge ourselves in the small space
until we sit facing each other, cross legged, the cool surface of
the wall pressing into our backs.

I'm from her mysterious little bag she pulls from behind her
back,

And the small something she pops into her mouth.
Then one into my own.

A certain sweet smell dances in my nose as I bite down and
realize what she's given me.

A gummy bear.

Grape.

I giggle and my brother finds us,
but it doesn't really matter,

I'm from "grandma's sweet 'n rich chocolate cake"
From the gentle clatter of dinner utensils, and not so gentle
conversations,

My Zadie at one end of the table

My brother at the opposite, both loud and shouting.

I am from "what's the difference between ignorance and
apathy"

"I don't know, and I don't care"

Bellowing laughs, slamming hands, and shaking tables.
I have a headache, but who cares,

I'm from the faded blue la-Z-boy,
kids cartoons,

104 days of summer vacation

Baby diapers and the worn changing table,

From time for stories

To my mother's muffled "be right there"

I'm so tired, but I'll go anyway

Realizing

That sacrifice comes easy, when it's something you love.



Behind the Glass

Olivia Danner

It's 10 pm on a cold-for-California winter night, and there's nothing I want to do more than to leave the ice cream shop. I drag the mop along the floor behind me, letting its weight act as an excuse for my lack of movement. I'm unaware of my surroundings; my past, present, and future rest in this shop, and I'm unable to escape until I finish the task at hand.

"Why do you have this job?" I glance up at my coworker, his mouth just closing after completing the question. It feels a bit too profound a question to rest in a scenario where I'm holding a dirty mop in my hands. Nonetheless, I consider the question. I stare back into the puddle below me and observe my reflection, hoping that an ability to see myself will help me read my inner thoughts. It doesn't.

I shrug my shoulders and stare at the ground as I mutter, "I don't really know. I just like working." It's true, but it doesn't sound valid. If his question is a wall, my response is not strong enough to permeate its barrier of believability. I tap my foot to the ground, hoping that its sound can mask the fact that I have no idea what I'm talking about. My thoughts, guilts rather, spill out into my mind to the rhythm of my foot. My privilege. Tap. My education. Tap. My security. Tap.

"I guess I like having a responsibility other than school. Something to take my mind off of homework, and tests,

and other stuff." Tap. Tap. Tap. Tap. Tap. "School is important." I glance up. My coworker's eyes soften at the edges, demonstrating that his statement is not a threat but a piece of advice. He's a short, muscly, kind man with enough tattoos to make any mom glance twice. He's not young enough to be my friend but not old enough to be my Dad. I haven't worked there long. He's completely foreign to me, but, somehow, in the way his tongue maneuvers around his mouth, he is able to construct statements that I can't help but to adopt as my own.

"I didn't finish school." Perhaps it's his uncharacteristic tone, or the way his soft eyes water a little when he says it, but, when I stare back into the puddle, I notice my eyes mirroring his. Friends in processing emotions that feel much too heavy for a Monday night on the job. Much heavier than the tears I'm now trying to hide.

"Make sure you work hard in school." I promise him that I will in a way that's a dichotomy of watery and soft yet more serious and rigid than anything I've said in a while. But, I'm lucky I can even say that. I have the ability to work hard in school. I don't need to be here. The mop drags behind me. My reflection in the floor disappears, though it's likely the only thing that won't stick with me from that night.

"I don't even get much of my salary." I peer up at him through that vision-obscuring ice cream-case glass. I can't entirely make out his face, but his words paint the image of someone whose long hours and sleepless nights are wearing at them. Wearing at them enough to trigger them to say something like that out of the blue. I duck out from under the glass, and my thoughts are

confirmed as I am met with dark, tired eyes and soft wrinkles that seem 10 years premature.

"Oh, yeah, because of taxes." I sigh with knowing empathy.

"No. Because of my court payments." I glance down at the ice cream and pause. The shop where kids scream with joy and people smile after a hard day at work doesn't seem to contain that same excitement anymore. I didn't even know the court could take part of someone's salary to pay for court debts, but I don't want my words to show that. I find myself searching for something not too intense but not too nonchalant to say, but I end up floundering and reaching for something not-so-perfectly in the middle.

"Oh. That sucks," I mumble.

"I've worked 18 hours today," his hollow, tired eyes seem to sink as he says that, influenced by my newfound perception of him. 18 hours.

"I might quit this job," he adds.

"Why?" I selfishly don't want him to leave.

"My wife wants me to... she takes care of the kids, and I can barely help out. I only have one day off from work a week and use it to catch up on my sleep. I never see them." His statement is so ridden with guilt that to a casual observer it might sound like a confession.

I envision that time when his kids came to the store.


"Papi. Papi. Can I have strawberry?" one yells, hopping up and down and clapping.

"Mango. I want mango," the other exclaims, jumping up to see the flavors over the counter.

Their dad hands them their cones, and, their mouths dripping ice cream, they ask, "Mommy. Mommy. Can we go home?" She asks if they want to stay with their dad any longer. Other customers walk in, chatting happily about some event they just left. I knowingly go and help them, watching my coworker smile down at his kids.

"Can Papi come home with us?" his younger kid mumbles.

Their mom shakes her head. "He's working," she sighs. With a child-like naivety, they shrug and hop gleefully outside. They take turns making funny faces through our shop's glass walls. I watch my coworker as he emulates their jeers, but I don't fail to notice how his face falls when they turn away to bound



Falling Apart by Ashton Melton

into the car.

It's a couple weeks later, and we're swamped. People flood the store in those never ending waves that make me wish I could just get swept away with them.

"Vanilla. In a cone . . . please," one little girl declares through a cheek-to-cheek grin.

"For sure," I smile back. It's kids like her who remind me that these lines contain real people.

I look down at the vanilla container, which is currently empty. I scurry to the back of the shop to get another one before someone starts writing an angry Yelp review.

As I reach for the freezer, I use the spare second it takes me to yank it open to glance at the break room down the hall. My coworker's in there peering intently at the phone screen in front of his face.

"Papi. Papi. Can we get a puppy?" a chorus of two voices rings from the phone's speaker.

"I don't know. Let's talk about it later," he says with a sigh unlike the one he produces when a customer complains for the billionth time.

"But later we'll be asleep," the older one cries.

"I know... I know." As he says it, the second "I know" trails off, and he looks up, as if only then disillusioning himself of the belief that he would be home in time to tuck them in.

I grab the pan and sprint back to the front, realizing my observation of one familial moment has perhaps incited a slightly more negative one in the front. I hear bickering as I scoop the vanilla, careful to situate it just right in the cone. As I hand it to the little girl, her mom gently lays a hand on her shoulder. "Thank you," she says.

"Yeah. Thank you," the little girl adds, her words barely escaping her ice cream filled-mouth. They turn, and I watch them walk off together, the mom's hand remaining on her daughter's shoulder. My coworker appears beside me. His break is over. Back to work.

It's closing time again, and I'm leaning on the counter, lazily rubbing it, trying my best to emulate the behavior of someone actually working. I chat with my coworker, as we so often do when the noises of the customers have ceased and no longer drown out our thoughts.

"One of the worst nights of my life

was when I got arrested." This type of spontaneous confession has become characteristic of our conversations.

"I used to read to my kids every night. Every single night I would read to them and put them to bed. Then, one night, I was arrested for a DUI. That night, my wife later told me, my kids cried themselves to sleep, because I never came home to read to them." Following his confession, my heart dropped so fast that I could practically hear it thump down on the counter. Not solely because of that heartbreaking story, but because it's 10:30 pm, and, even out of jail, he still can't be with them.

"After that night, I promised myself I would never get arrested again, and I kept that promise." I'm not sure whether to grin at his achievement, or unmask the fact that I am still broken from his previous statement. Before I have the chance to contemplate further, he adds, "but now, I'm in trouble with the judge."

"Oh, my mom's a judge," I respond. It's the only thing in this conversation I feel I can meaningfully add.

He looks up with a glint in his eyes that I rarely have the pleasure of seeing from him, "Do you think she could write a letter for me?"

"A letter, why?" I ask, genuinely confused.

"Well, I am under threat of deportation, and I need trustworthy people to vouch for me."

"Ok. I'll ask." I grin as I say it, feeling as though I can genuinely help someone. It's not the kind of help where you're funding some far-off kid living in poverty. Instead, this is the type of help where you're responsible for kids suffering a few miles from you, ones who are probably crying for their dad right now. But my smile morphs into a mangled frown when I realize the true weight of my newfound responsibility. It sticks with me the rest of the night. These children are now my own, and their smiles are just as ingrained in my mind as that of the girl who asked for the vanilla ice cream or that of

my own little brother. I finish up my closing tasks sweeping and mopping. I cleanse the store to perfection in hopes that its cleanliness will transfer to my own conscience. It doesn't. I walk out of the store and observe my coworker still inside. All I can envision are his kids, jumping up and down, trying to drag him out of the store.

I ask my mom for the letter. Of course, she is unable to write it. It is against the law for judges to write letters in support of defendants.

I return to the store. I glance up at my coworker. I take a deep breath and propel the words out of my mouth faster than the time it takes me to change my mind.

"My mom won't be able to write the letter." The ends of my mouth crumple as I say it.

"Oh. That's ok." He sighs in a way characteristic of someone who has been let down so many times that everything seems "ok."

In my mind, our defining characteristics fade away. Our ages. Our backgrounds. I'm young; he's old. He's been convicted of a crime; I haven't. In spite of all these things, we are equals. We work together, and we perform the same tasks the way any diligent employee would. I drive home each night and so does he. But there is one fact that will never be able to obscure itself. I will get to leave my minimum wage job soon. For good. He likely won't. Maybe once in a while, I'll come back and visit. I'll peer through the glass walls and, over the flood of people, see his sunken, tired eyes propelling him through another 18 hour work day.



Treading Water

Katherine D. Westbrook

This is the pretend-dream,
where I am teaching you to swim,
and your body and my body
remember their names in the water.

We pull them from the lake
where they've been drowning,
covered in salt, covered in
sweat and horsetails.

Maybe the roof is on fire. Maybe it rains.
Maybe the fawns watch our movements
through the trees and we take the back
path in the woods to kiss their eyelids,

and then become something
better than what we are now,

something different

I forget how the rest should go,
anyhow it doesn't matter because
here we are at the pretend-dream,
where I pretend-love you,

and we are so in-love
and we are happy,

even when your arms sprawl the table, and you
tell me how you'd like to die losing breath at the
bottom of the lake. Even when you tell me
you've been practicing in the bathtub,

that there's a boy down the road,
and if there isn't there might as well be, that
that boy's at his own table, and he's got a gun,
and it's cold in his room when the lights turn out

You say he's thinking about flying but
let us not think of that now.

What are the good parts I remember

Ah, this is the part where you've gotten
that promotion. Great, baby, give me kisses.

This is the part when your song
plays on the radio, simple and
terrible, and this is when we stomp craters
into the linoleum, and are empty as shadows. ★

You go here and I go there.
Here is your mouth and there is mine.

Hello, sunshine
I've missed you

We stretch out our arms like children

Hello
How beautiful.

We say our names until I forget myself,
this is how I am in debt to you
This is the belly we live under
This is where we are alive,

alive
alive

But how did we manage to make it out?
shhh. We haven't yet. We're still sleeping.

Here is how I imagine it, I say,
I say, here is the real dream:

I take all this love and call it an inconvenience, and the boy
wastes himself across the brick walls like a constellation

Your mouth full of water,
filled with water,
filling with water

in a coughing fit
you are drowning,

you are floating face-down in the lake
and I go home to close the windows.

Oh, I ruined it again

The real things
The real things

Soul Striations
by Alexa Boyd



Imperfect
Reflection
by Sierra Smith



the code of separation

Katie Stanos

7 november 2017 (sight)

your veiny, wan feet/expansion/between you/the floorboards/creation of
space

smacking the granite countertop breaks

infinity they say

they said/stare into the threads of your black sweatshirt/the threads have threads and those
threads have threads/and so on

22 march 2018 (arrival)

everything/possible and imaginable was lived/call it the

10th dimension

dimensions of your cheekbones underneath the glow of the streetlights

suspended in reality

your image/an echo of my first and last breath

your image/a compilation of lights strung in time

10 august 2018 (dream)

floating in the eagle nebula/you sighed/into the dark abyss/it goes nowhere/silly

you can't speak in space/space can't speak

27 october 2018 (revelation)

we truly never/touched/space between us will never stop growing/even/when I clutched your

cold hands/from kilometers to decimeters to attometers/and so on

infinite decimals creating a code of separation

8 november 2018 (splice)

canyons separating your skin/little fragments of you/the pieces get smaller/smaller/smaller

until/there is nothing left/but/the shadow of your arm on the bedsheet

i bite my tongue in fear

4 december 2018 (hesitation)

i told you/sometimes the cosmos we see doesn't exist anyone/it's just the

light from the explosion

hasn't come to us/yet/not knowing/"it's over"/until/very much over

my consciousness implodes at the thought

23 december 2018 (departure)

the night you went to the eagle nebula/i pulled my car into your driveway/smacked the hood of
my car/one last try/i thought/one last try

to break infinity after all

Your Baby

Saadia Siddiqua

who cares about that umbilical cord when it doesn't stop you from hurting me
you say I'm part of you but I feel you don't love every part of me
let's go through my childhood book of memories
earliest one my neck falling backwards
self-esteem being not lifted high enough after
once curls popped out of my head you told me to straighten them
the sun hit my skin you told me to lighten it
desire set in to kiss and touch but you told me to fight it
wrong touch happened and you blamed me for it
said hell was coming for me
invasion of privacy
expectations I can't be
but every time, you say you can't possibly hurt me because you made me
you made me
but you also made drown and plead
because you only want the best for me
this damn umbilical cord is choking me
so controlling in and outside your body
can't help but cry and scream
and I feel powerless as you still
call me your baby

Fenced In by Ashton Melton



ugh
by Sophia
Hammond



Fancy a Game of Darts, Anyone? Olivia Humphrey

Pouring all of the liquor you can find in the house down the drain is the most fun the daughter of an alcoholic can have without attending therapy. Isn't that how the saying goes?

Our plumbing system has never looked more diverse!

Vodka from Poland,
Tequila from Mexico,

And of course, the finest boxed wine that France has to offer.

Our kitchen smells like a frat house.
The liquor mixed with the
Tears of a teenage girl and
Smoke from the pizza you fell asleep before you could enjoy.
The pizza that almost burnt the house down.
The pizza that almost killed me.
The pizza which is worse than the
Hole in the wall from the time you fell down the stairs which is worse than the
Floor to ceiling boxes of wine which is worse than the
Screaming matches between us when we talk about your problem-
Which is worse?
Not knowing you have a problem or not caring enough to fix it?

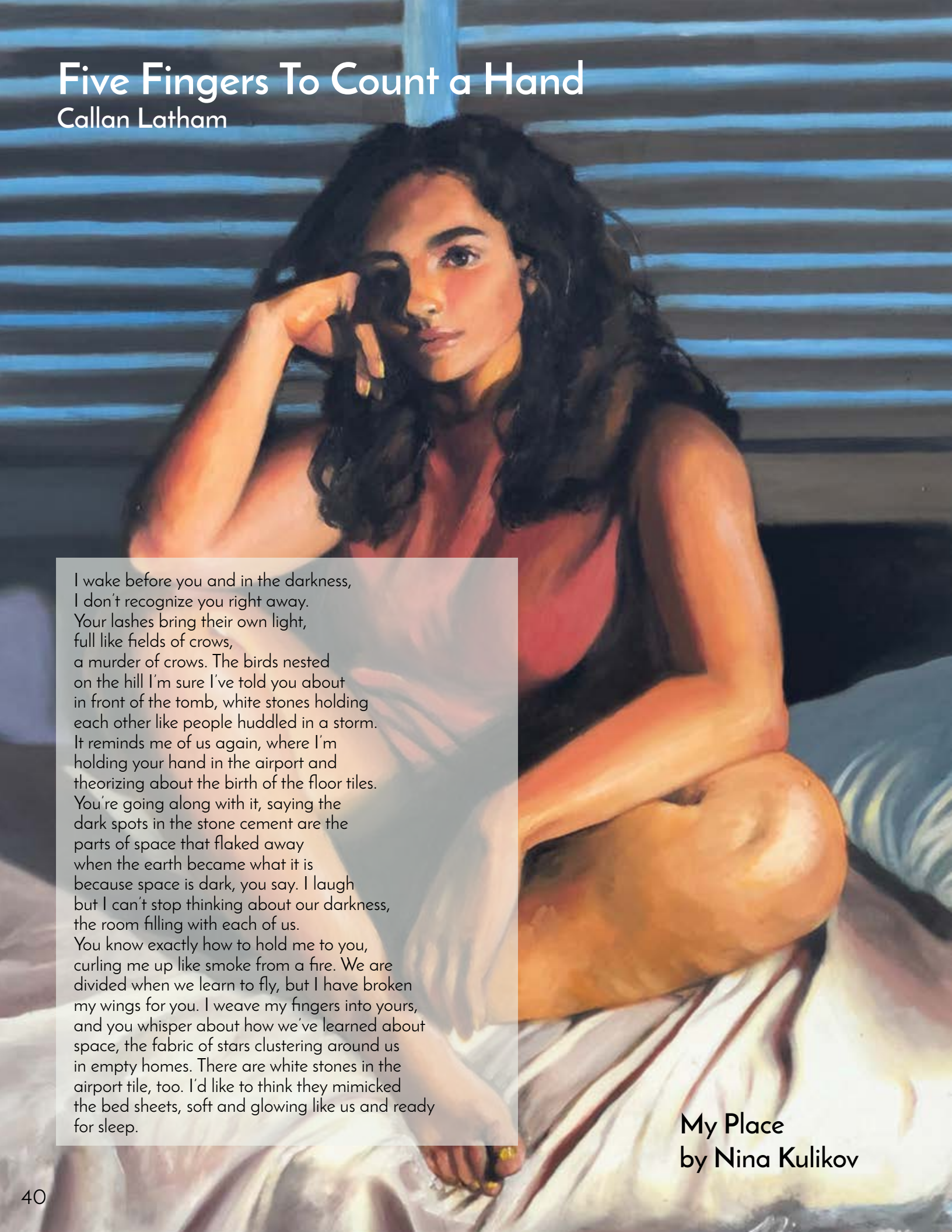
I have been a parent to my parent since I could walk and talk on my own.
I never got a childhood.
You'd be in such a deep sleep, I really thought you were dead on some nights.
I will never be able to drink, because I don't want to end up like you.
I will never have friends who drink, because I don't want to watch them end up like you.
Hearing slurred speech is gunshots,
Seeing wobbly legs is knife wounds,
Nausea is a fiery car crash,
Drunkenness is your head on a silver platter,
With a fine white wine to accompany it.

Alcohol is a depressant.
The only thing more depressing is watching a loved one poison themselves with it.

However,
The one and only perk from the years of trauma:
I'm great at darts—just ask the bartenders who watched me play on my own as you talked to your friends.
Bullseye after Bullseye after Bullseye after sitting and dealing with your
Bullshit.

Five Fingers To Count a Hand

Callan Latham



I wake before you and in the darkness,
I don't recognize you right away.
Your lashes bring their own light,
full like fields of crows,
a murder of crows. The birds nested
on the hill I'm sure I've told you about
in front of the tomb, white stones holding
each other like people huddled in a storm.
It reminds me of us again, where I'm
holding your hand in the airport and
theorizing about the birth of the floor tiles.
You're going along with it, saying the
dark spots in the stone cement are the
parts of space that flaked away
when the earth became what it is
because space is dark, you say. I laugh
but I can't stop thinking about our darkness,
the room filling with each of us.
You know exactly how to hold me to you,
curling me up like smoke from a fire. We are
divided when we learn to fly, but I have broken
my wings for you. I weave my fingers into yours,
and you whisper about how we've learned about
space, the fabric of stars clustering around us
in empty homes. There are white stones in the
airport tile, too. I'd like to think they mimicked
the bed sheets, soft and glowing like us and ready
for sleep.

My Place
by Nina Kulikov



The Trees and Us

Rachel Stander

Once, before the people moved in,
before they took my brothers
and sisters
and cousins
and friends,
I saw the sun.
I grew up
and I grew strong,
trying to reach the sky.
I meant to make
the world beautiful,
but I was robbed
of the opportunity
and I was conquered
and processed
and covered
in symbols I never understood
and I was a tree
and I missed the sun.

Once, the people evolved,
they grew into sisters
and brothers
and cousins
and friends,
they met the sun.
They grew out
and they grew powerful
and they tried to reach the sky.
They meant to make
the world theirs.
They robbed the whole Earth
by seizing their opportunity
to conquer
and process
and cover
her with inadequacy and incompetence
and they were the people
and they missed the point.

Utopia
by Audrey Diggs

Starless Planet

Paiton Stith

When we finally start talking to each other after the fall, huddling on the side of the island where the black-eyed humans can't hear us, we all tell the same story. A day that started with the sun rising and waking up and going off to whatever it is we do during the day. Then the holes swallowed us up. All at the same time, as far as we can tell.

Anya's the only one who tells it differently. She says she wasn't swallowed up. She was walking the road to work, fallen leaves soggy on the ground, and it opened a solid foot in front of her. People passing by didn't notice. She thought she was crazy.

She shakes her head, the shine of her eyes is desperate across the width of them. "My life was perfect. A thing like that had no place in perfect."

We nod in agreement, slowly in the semi-darkness. Anya says she could've kept walking. She could've left it behind. She hadn't fallen, she was just standing there, but it called to her somehow and before she could think to resist, she'd jumped.

"Worst decision of my life."

I give her a sympathetic look, but to me, that still sounds like being swallowed whole.

...

The underground is only mostly dark. A landmass surrounded by cavewater, clear and fresh, moving like a stream, though we don't know where it goes to. There's no sunlight, but some kind of grass grows. I only call it grass because I don't have another word for it. It's not like real grass at all.

The slender stalk is black. Impossible to see in the dark. The tip is weighted by a fleshy bulb, sticky like a peeled peach.

Michael says it tastes sweet, thought I can't for the life of me understand why he'd put that shit in his mouth. He's like a baby. I keep glancing at him, waiting for him to drop dead, but he doesn't.

The bulb lights up on a twelve hour cycle, like day and night in the world above. Dim light, faintly blue in a way

that I find dizzying, but it's better than total blackness. Maybe it's only dizzying because they move, swaying like there's a breeze even though there couldn't be wind this far beneath the crust of the earth. It makes the shadows swing back and forth, waving on the layered sediment of the rock walls and shifting across the planes of our faces. The shadows run back and forth, leaping over our noses like they're afraid of the light, trying to hide behind the bridge. The others notice it, too. How the stalks move as one.

"Maybe they're more like an animal than a plant," Eren says. "One big organism connected in a way we can't see." Eren's some kind of plant scientist. Not sure. Out of everyone, she talks the least. Spends all her time examining the grass and the bulbs. When she found out about Michael, she was thrilled and hounded him with questions about the taste. Most I'd heard her say, but she talks more now.

Lillian sighs through her nose, nodding toward Eren without looking. "Then what we see isn't real." She has her head tilted back, staring up to where the cavern walls disappear into a shroud of darkness. Her eyes shift to meet us for the first time since we fell. "The blades are lying to us. Playing at being individual." Her irises are a honey-colored brown, almost yellow, and bright against her pale skin. Black hair so straight it looks wet. Her expression remains vacant, then she goes back to staring up.

Nobody says anything. The grass covers every inch of ground, so we trample it when we walk or sleep or sit down. I can't stand the feel of the bulb on my skin, so I try not to sleep. When I do, I wake up sticky. The others don't seem to like it either.

The only people who don't seem to mind are the black-eyed humans at the other end of the landmass, huddled in a tangle of pale limbs. We didn't think they were human at first, but now we think they're like us. They've just been here long enough to lose most of their hair and for their skin to become

translucent.

Eren says that's not possible. I say she's only a plant scientist.

"What do you think they do over there?" Lillian asks. "They never talk, but they're always moving." She wrinkles her nose. "Crawling over each other like bugs." She says the whole thing without looking at them. I almost doubt that she's ever looked at them, but she's exactly right. Compared to them, we talk constantly, straining to be



Thesis of Creation
by John Chen

heard over the rush of the water streaming around us. Though, sometimes I feel like we're talking about nothing. Passing the time away on noise.

Eren's still fussing around Michael. Anya's at the edge of the landmass, staring into the water like she wants to dive in, stroking an idle finger



through it. I turn back to Lillian, my arms loose around my knees and suddenly I want to know her. I want to lean against her shoulder and tell her things. Real things. Ordinary and deeply embarrassing, torn straight from my core.

Instead, I say, "They probably don't have anything to say. Nothing much happens down here."

Lillian sighs through her nose again. I stare at the jeweled ring there, hanging in a point toward her upper lip. The air smells damp and sweet, heavy with moisture that sticks to my skin. No sound, but Michael's tired voice explaining to Eren, and the rush of water.

There's a splash. I look around, but I don't see anything.

"I knew she'd be first," Lillian says. She grimaces.

"Anya?" I whisper. She's not at the water's edge anymore. She's not anywhere.

Michael and Eren have stopped talking. Their eyes are wide, looking at me, at each other.

Movement at the other end of the island. The black-eyed humans slink into the water. When they come back, they drag Anya between them. I catch flashes of her dark skin between their naked bodies, then she appears fully. They peer into her face, and I don't know what it means, but she shakes her head at them and they throw her back with a splash. The humans swarm over each other and, eventually, they still.

Later that night, we hear Anya sobbing, like an echo binding itself to the walls. We're all awake, unseen, but there's the sound of four people breathing sharply. Her voice rises to a scream, and then I'm crying too.

I reach out in the dark, hoping for a person nearby, but all my fingers find is empty air.

...

Days go by. We have water, but our stomachs growl to each other from across the island. We all have places now. Alone. After Anya, I thought we'd want to be close.

The black-eyed humans stare at us. Blinking occasionally, so they make a chorus of flashing black dots. We talk as little as they do now.

Eren studies the grass, hardly looking up and only then to stare off in thought. She seems to have forgotten we exist. Retreating into herself. She strokes the stalks, moving her mouth like she's muttering to herself, but if she's actually making any sound, I don't hear it.

Michael lies on his back with his hand on his stomach. He was thin at the very beginning. Hunger has made him gaunt. With each of them, I try one more time to strike up a conversation. Michael doesn't even look at me. Eren at least shoos me away. Lillian only smiles to herself, always looking up like she can see the world we fell from.

"Come on," I say to her. Different sort of hunger in me. I want to know who these people are. We're stuck together on this floating mass of earth and we have no idea who we are. "Look at me," I say. "Lillian, please look at me."

"I'm sorry." Lillian's face, sharp and cold and covered in a foggy expression. The blackness around us is like being stranded on a planet in the middle of space, only without stars. The gleam of teeth in a faint smile. "I don't know how."

...

I make up stories about the others. They change by the hour, but in every version they are successful and normal. They seem happy, but they are as alone up there as they are down here. In every version, they fall.

I dream about falling. Falling again into something further below than this. The island cracks open and when I sink through it the water comes shooting after and there are more people sliding in on the waves.

These people touch my skin. These people say my name.

...

I sleep so I don't have to think about how hungry I am. Sometimes I wake up in darkness. Sometimes in soft blue light. Once I woke to the sound of snuffling and frantic chewing. In the dim light, I see Michael gorging himself on grass bulbs.

I choke and look at the others to see if they notice. Lillian sits with one leg stretched and the other bent, resting her arm on her knee, watching with eerie calm. Eren crouches near Michael, but she only moves her mouth some more, like she's talking to the grass.

I fumble with my voice until I finally manage to scream out at him to stop.

He looks up, panting like an animal with grass hanging out of his mouth. My chest heaves. "Michael, what are you doing? That could be toxic."

His wide-eyed stare flattens. "You don't have to care." He ducks his head and eats, plowing on until Eren acknowledges his existence and starts howling at him to leave her subject alone.

Michael keeps eating, when I glance at the black-eyed humans, they're frowning. I stand, hands shaking. "Stop that." I start to cross over to him when a glossy black claw shoots from the water and grips Michael between sharp pincers. It pulls him underwater and the cavern lapses into silence. The grass moves slowly back and forth, a visual lullaby, a rocking chair, a swaying serpent that wants to lull us back to calm.

In a daze, I walk to the patch of ground he exposed. It's hard like a carapace when I brush away the dirt. It moves beneath us, convulsing, and I hear something crunching within it.

The shaking moves from my hands to my whole body. I meet Eren's eyes behind the glare of her glasses. "Don't you care? Doesn't it matter that he's gone?"
"I didn't know him."

"Neither did I."

Eren turns around, fussing with the grass, mumbling about how this is hers. I feel something on my shoulder and flinch, but it's only Lillian. Her hand is bony and pale. "They aren't really themselves," she says, pointing at the grass, at Eren. "They aren't their own, and she's given herself away."

Something in her eyes asks me to understand.

...

We lay near each other, on our backs, staring up. I ask her why she does this. Is there something she's looking at?

She won't let me touch her. She doesn't look at me, but she speaks. "If there were stars up there, I might be convinced that this is the night sky." Her hand lies at her side. I see her fingers tapping. Close to mine. "I miss the stars," she says.

"There's so much space between them. A collection of isolation."

"Isn't that sad?"

She whispers to me. "Well, if they were all too close together to see the space between, then there wouldn't be any stars in the sky at all. It would be a blanket of light. Too bright to see. Are you saying you wouldn't miss the stars?"

I have her attention now. There's that hunger in me rising to the surface, pacing under my skin and bristling beneath my tongue. But I falter, and all the things I want to tell her about myself stay hidden. This is how it happens every time.

At some point, Eren goes still, and the black-eyed humans gather around her. I think they're going to eat her, I don't know how they could possibly live down here otherwise, but when they back away, the grass has covered her completely. She sinks into the island.

"It's just us," I tell Lillian. Her cheeks are deeply shadowed. "Tell me about yourself."

She crosses her arms over her chest, like she's keeping herself contained. I stare at the slope of her sharp, freckled nose and the hunger in me grows, creeping into my skin from the outside, a murmur filling my head. "There's a choice coming up," I say.

Her voice is hoarse. "Fine."

I try to talk about myself again, but it's hard to give away pieces of myself when I don't have anything of hers.

...

At the end, when the black-eyed humans finally come to meet us, we're too starved to move. They stand over us, every one of them the same height.

Bright spots in my vision, flares of light with streaking spokes. I turn my head to the





side and it's Lillian's low-lidded eyes, burning like the sun. She ignores the humans.

Their faces, so round and milky and formless. They make no move to swarm us, but we are surrounded. Their voices. I can hear them as a hum inside me, running along every bone in my body. I let it in.

I am afraid and I want to take Lillian's hand, but I am so weak and she's so far away, lying right beside me. "Lillian," I say, pain in my voice.

My vision darkens as the chittering hum grows inside me. I see her move so that both her eyes come into glaring view, facing me. "Go back up with me," she says, "and we can tell each other everything." The end of her sentence is met with total darkness.

In this instant of connection, she gives me something, white and bright like the core of a star it opens up in my palms, wraps me in a sky of deep blue. There's soft grass beneath me, a cup of something warm in my hands.

To my right, a woman offers me a dried apple slice and I take it. It's tart in my mouth, but sweet. She smiles

at me, hair dark and long like Lillian's. This is her mother. In this memory, she is also my mother.

I pick at the skin on my hands as we sit side by side, looking up at the stars. There's something scraped about the memory, like the moment after a fight, something trying to piece itself back together.

The gift cools and shatters. She is waiting for something in return. I search through everything I've ever been, looking for what is perfect, but she fades before I find it. Without her in it, the darkness is heavy.

The grass hasn't gone out. It's not night. This is something different. Only the black-eyed humans remain, so white they nearly glow. "What are you?" I ask them.

"Human." Humming inside me.

I cannot run. "Lillian," I say. "Lillian, where are you?"

"She is apart."

I don't listen to them. I keep whispering her name. The only name I know. That's all I know.

The hunger is still there, still growing. The brush of a hand on my cheek, one of their cold, clammy hands. Through it I feel presence, being, existence. My eyes widen. Dozens of beings, not all belonging to the one who touches me. The man and the women I fell with. They are echoes, not real people, not really here, not a part of this. They have stayed in place. Not moving to death, but not back up to life either.

They linger in the cavern's stagnant air. They have not changed. They have not chosen, and they line the striated walls, hunch within the sticky bulbs, waiting for the day they are forced to follow me.

Others are full, the essence of an entire being coursing through me. Dozens of lives filling my hunger, seeping into the part of me that wanted, filling until I am full.

"Is she coming, too?" I ask before I am gone.

They do not answer. Distantly, I hear her voice calling my name, growing fainter as if she were rising. At the bottom of the huddle, the swarm, the single mass, I cannot see the dark ceiling through the net of bodies and arms and legs, but that's fine.

Not a single one of us, of this mangle, had ever liked the stars that much. Too much space between the one bright spark and the others.



Head in the Stars by Kara Poje



Goldenrod by Sloane McKinney

mother and earth Katja Rowan

bent backs
grasses bent in a tweak of fingers
bent my fingers bent my bones
my toes in
earth sweating dew
digging a way out

sweetness
sucking on a single clover

sweat for me
my back wet and bent
bones buried snap like twigs
my bones tomorrow buried
my bones decay
and feed
clovers
children

the wheel rolls on through this earth

my skeleton straight
as a blade
of grass
snapped by fingers
like children at play.

the world will go down
and feed on me
and I will not see it.

but only my fingers
a snapped clover
and its sweet ends

African Violets Callan Latham

I will count them all
shards of glass in the mirror

every part of me adds
up to nothing

I'm standing in front of violets
in front of a Renaissance painting
and wondering what do I have

tethering me to this earth
other than a few pots of flowers
and I want to say you but

I could count the plastic rivers
in a road and know that I'm already
dying and what's more is that

I probably won't see you again
but now my stomach hurts and

I've been eating too much and it
reminds me of when I couldn't sleep

but now I want to sleep
and that's all I want to do



Silver
by Gracie Rodlund

HOUSE FIRE, ONLY ONE VICTIM, WHAT WAS SHE SAVING?

Annie Barry

Embers in my hair, black dust getting to my lungs. Red, yellow, purple, blue fire in front of me, behind me, beside me. Above and below me. Within me.

Hand in sweaty hand; we all make it through the front door. My family collapses on the lawn. Their chests pumping and coughs catapulting them into each other's embrace.

But still, alive as I am, it doesn't feel right. I wasn't supposed to make it, not in that way. And without hesitation, I ran with it. Rather, I ran from it. I barely get my seared skin off of the grass before I'm running back into the house. I feel them chasing me; reaching for my arms, my shirt, anything graspable. I hear their screams, I do. I account for them, but they're being muted with the rest of my thoughts.

I can't see through the fire but I go for the back door by memory. I run. I run. I run. I run. I run with breath I didn't know I could muster in this moment. I go for the woods, past the backyard. The fire's gotten some of me, but given me more. The crunching leaves feel like my skin and I couldn't feel more free. Strings knotted from my bedpost to my rib cage ripping like two big men playing tug of war with a single spaghetti noodle as my feet kept spitting forward. Joggers. A ripped, whiskey-stained, white t-shirt. My newest sneakers. No socks, no time for socks.

When I could no longer hear the sirens, I decided I'm far enough, for now. A clothing donation dumpster for the needy would supply me coverage from any camera, anyone looking for a possible house fire survivor. Gas station bathroom wetted paper towels and sink splashes washed ash and charred life off of my skin. An old, seafoam green, leather stool holds me to my diner burger, breaking news on the corner television, middle of the night meal.

BREAKING NEWS: Tragic; one victim to a family's house fire. What did she go in to save? What could she have possibly left in that house that could be worth going back for? What was she saving?



Serious
by Gracie Rodlund

The Heaven We've Been Slouching Toward Is Not the Heaven

Haley Renee Born

I feel that if I move from this spot I will die. But I take a step forward and don't.

Forgive me father for I have sinned.

Silent night, moonlight slants through stained glass windows. Here in this cathedral something is rotting. Behind my back I press my right thumb into my left wrist, feeling the veins there. Dark things with sloping shoulders sift through pews like silt in water, the stream of them murmuring.

Voices too faded to hear but speaking in unison gives them strength. I won't cover my ears, won't give them the satisfaction. Another few steps into the sun-bleached, moon-beamed church. I am surrounded.

God loves all his children.

I know where I have to go and it isn't the altar, I won't kneel here or I might never get up.

They look at me with eyes too many and try to sell me things. Tell me who to be or how to marry, they're just looking out for me. Will I put my soul in their saving hands? Maybe just my retirement fund. Where are their hands?

I pick up my pace, covering my face from prying; inside the confessional I feel absurdly. Like I am almost safe.

"I think God is a scratched record," I say, not willing to wait for an invitation. "I've never seen a scratched record, let alone heard one playing." But now that I mention it music seems to slide from behind the dividing screen, a distant hymn.

"It's just a metaphor now, no real purpose other than to conjure the image of sound repeating itself. Is a metaphor still a metaphor if the comparison is between something and a symbol for the same thing?"

I don't think so. I don't know. Scratching my forearm absently, listening for the sounds of feet approaching, I wait. Do I even want a response from that massive presence? I can feel it like a hundred insect legs under my skin, that's where the problem is. Inside, in the dark of our organs functioning. Our subconscious.

Amen.

"We've said god so many times since that first time, I wonder what it meant then." Picturing the potential of that moment – the simplicity – it used to unwind me, but I've over used it. "Heaven isn't a place. It's a promise so vague that anyone can use it to get what they want, but scratched records exist outside of a convenient metaphorical purpose."

I've said too much and it will never be enough. Because I'm speaking into the ear of the great and terrible believer. I think that maybe I no longer have hands. I think that however many eyes I had I now have more. I am among my peers in a place possessed; I can only walk here because I have been baptized in the same poison that makes this place bearable.

I stand up, shoulders slouching, and leave the confessional. The church is full of people chatting; I check the time. Decide I don't like the late-night service. Accidentally making eye contact with someone from work, I should know her name but don't, I nod and smile and move purposefully toward the open doors. Hope I look stable, unremarkable, keeping my arms pressed to my sides in case there are unsavory stains. I let my feet trace a path on the street like touching familiar scars. I walk home feeling guilty, always feeling guilty.

(left) Blue Beauty,
(right) The Lights of Midnight,
(bottom) The Beginning
by Nicole Brinkley



Beast

Hiba Faruqi

From the moment a screaming woman thrusts us into the world,
Soft, bloody heads first.
We begin to deteriorate.
For some, that occurs at a faster pace than others.

I began to diminish in quality while I was still in the womb.
When THEY found out I was to be born a girl,
When THEY decided what I could and couldn't do before I could walk.
When THEY decided what I could and couldn't say before I could talk.
I first felt their presence when I was four and told I couldn't play with action figures,
Then the beast grew.

Every time THEY told me
"Girls don't do that"
"You're becoming too American"
"Our culture is better than that"
Every word THEY said was a new laceration.
A fresh stinging sore

With every slice of that familiar jagged,
And rusty, fungus infested knife,

I lost more and more blood. When I turned sixteen, I ran out of blood to give.
But THEY demanded more.
So I gave sweat. I had no more tears, no more saliva, and no more
Freedom.

Red hot lies have replaced the blood THEY have been leaking out of me since I began to
produce it; And I feel no remorse.

When THEY told me to wear their primitive garments so people didn't
"look at me the wrong way",

As soon as I was beyond their field of vision,
I ripped off the heavy layers of starch filled fabric, still rife with the smell of Pakistan,
And I let them look.

So when THEY told me to come straight home, I went out with a boy until one in the morning.
When THEY told me that good Pakistani-Muslim girls don't talk to men they're not related to
And don't go anywhere without a chaperone,
I went downtown with that boy, and chattered with him all night.

When THEY said that good Pakistani-Muslim girls don't touch, much less, look at boy until
they're married against their will,
Until they're shackled down to a stranger,
I kissed him, vivaciously.

Briskly.
Fiercely.

For far too long, And gave him far too much.
He didn't care that I was hoping, pleading,
That his freedom would be blown into me; that I could emancipate myself with his lips,
That his hands would find their way up my waist,
Past my ribs, through my hair, and into my mind
That I could say everything I wanted to,
While staying silent.

Now, my lips, red from biting and blood,
Only open to reveal hollow gasps, because that is all THEY heard when I spoke.
My arms, sturdy and strong at birth are now branches of a decrepit willow tree.
They were trying to keep me from the monster of society,
The "plague of the west"

The "ووقی رط ی کی رما کل هم"
Or "Deadly American ways"
But THEY fed,
Watered, Sheltered,
And gave birth to an even bigger, gory demon inside of me.

Gallop to Creation
by John Chen

A painting of a hand with a red, textured object. The hand is rendered in warm, fleshy tones, with fingers slightly curled. A red, textured object, possibly a piece of fabric or a small animal, is draped over the hand. The background is a mix of warm and cool tones, with a blueish-green area in the upper right corner.

Silverfish

Kayla Doubrava

I've never understood why people are so disgusted
by silverfish.

I like the little guys.

They way they scurry around from place to place,
they've always got somewhere to be,
perhaps because they don't like where they are.
I know the feeling.

I live in my parent's attic
where a surplus of silverfish reside in the walls.
Occasionally emerging from the chipping paint,
as if to check up on me
and make sure I'm still okay.

I wonder if they like my music.
If they can feel it vibrate through the walls
and hum along to the rhythm.
I wonder if they get annoyed that I watch the same shows
over and over again,
and if they've already memorized every second
like I have.

I wonder if they like watching me
the same way I like watching them.
If instead of trips to the zoo they observe me
pacing nervously in my room,
like a tiger paces his cage.
Or if instead of trips to the museum
they watch me sit motionless and stone-faced on the floor
as my brain goes dormant,
and I transform into a lifeless statue.
Or if they watch me build skyscrapers out of
old pizza boxes and solo cups.
Or if they place bets over when I will finally
change out of these clothes.
Or if they try to forecast my unpredictable sleeping patterns
like the weather.
Or if they burst into celebration
whenever I finally stop talking to myself.
I wonder if they're tired of me yet.

But perhaps,
they're holding out on some hope for me.
Why else would they have stuck around this long?

Maybe they're just glad I haven't killed them yet.
Maybe they're just silverfish.

Flesh
by Audrey Diggs

carpet girl

Yasi Farahmandnia

in this town
words hold hostages
not meaning.
if i cry i will
bleed, and i will
lose,
integrity and i will
rip apart the frontdrop that has
made my portraits pretty
for (maybe) minutes on end.

alternative reality needs an alternative me
and i would sacrifice
every me until
i can use my words as hooks.

mediocre poetry that
is mediocre as long as i am the poet
might look pretty, portrait pretty on
a pink paper but as long as
my face is attached
it lacks
meaning.

let me weave meaning through my words
and
free the hostages so i
can
smell your hair and embrace your neck the way
i saw a boy do
in the X grade
X day, Y year.

if my insides were made of
polypropylene, i could
swallow carpet cleaner and be fine.
my skin would burn
but i'd be fine.

this is a letter to emily:
if i die and see the goddamn heaven i will
lock the door for you to be
locked behind it so you can
know
how much i am jealous of you.

this is a letter to lauren:
if i die and see the goddamn heaven i will
devour the milk and the
honey
so i can light a fire and not

worry about the way your flesh burns
when you step in the heavenly rivers.

this is a letter to maman:
when you die and see the goddamn heaven
please,
will you let me in?

these are just words.
and i trap myself within them
with the claim that i believe in heaven
with the power to take hostage
emily, lauren, and my mom.

don't look for a meaning.



Pain of Pointe
by Nicolette Toub

It Was Ricky

Anna Schmeer

momma momma momma
it was ricky it was ricky

*momma don't believe that it was ricky who done it
she thinks i killed him*

momma momma momma
don't call the fuzz
it was ricky it was ricky

*it was ricky who shot mr. hawkins in the head
little miss lilly hawkins pissed off ricky but ricky didn't wanna kill lilly
said she was too pretty to kill, that's what ricky said*

momma momma momma
ricky can't go to jail
he has to help his momma
i know, ricky has gotten in problems before
but he always bail himself out
ricky can't go to jail
ricky can't go to jail

*sirens sound in the distance
a baby cries from inside a shabby house
mr. hawkins' blood is pooling on the cement outside his house
coming from the hole in his head*

momma momma momma
ricky ran off
i dunno where he go

*momma called the fuzz on me
not on ricky
she think it was me who shot 'im
but it was ricky*

momma momma momma
they here
they comin' for me
tell them it was ricky
it was ricky

*some police officers knock on the door of the house
a group of paramedics surround mr. hawkins*

i gotta go

i love you mamma
don't tell them i'm gone
tell 'em that
it was ricky

*i open the window and jump out
i hit the ground running
past lawrie's deli
past ricky's mamma's place
to the old playground*

ricky

*ricky is sitting on the swing
the gun and mr. hawkins' blood on his hands*

i don't regret what i done
little miss lilly hawkins deserved it

what
what does she deserve ricky

to live with the fact that it's her fault her ol' daddy got
killed

ricky ricky ricky

what

you gotta run ricky
you gotta take the gun and run
they coming for you ricky

sirens are coming towards the playground

ricky gets up

i'll miss you

i'll miss you too ricky

don't tell 'em it was me

*ricky turns and runs into the woods
behind the swings*

don't fall in the creek ricky
don't fall in the creek

*the sirens stop as a police car pulls up to the playground
two police officers get out, with their hands on their guns
the guns are still in the holsters, at least*

sirs, it was ricky
it wasn't me
ricky got pissed off and shot
little miss lilly hawkins' daddy
i dunno why

the fuzz ask me where ricky went

i dunno
i thought he would be here
but he ain't

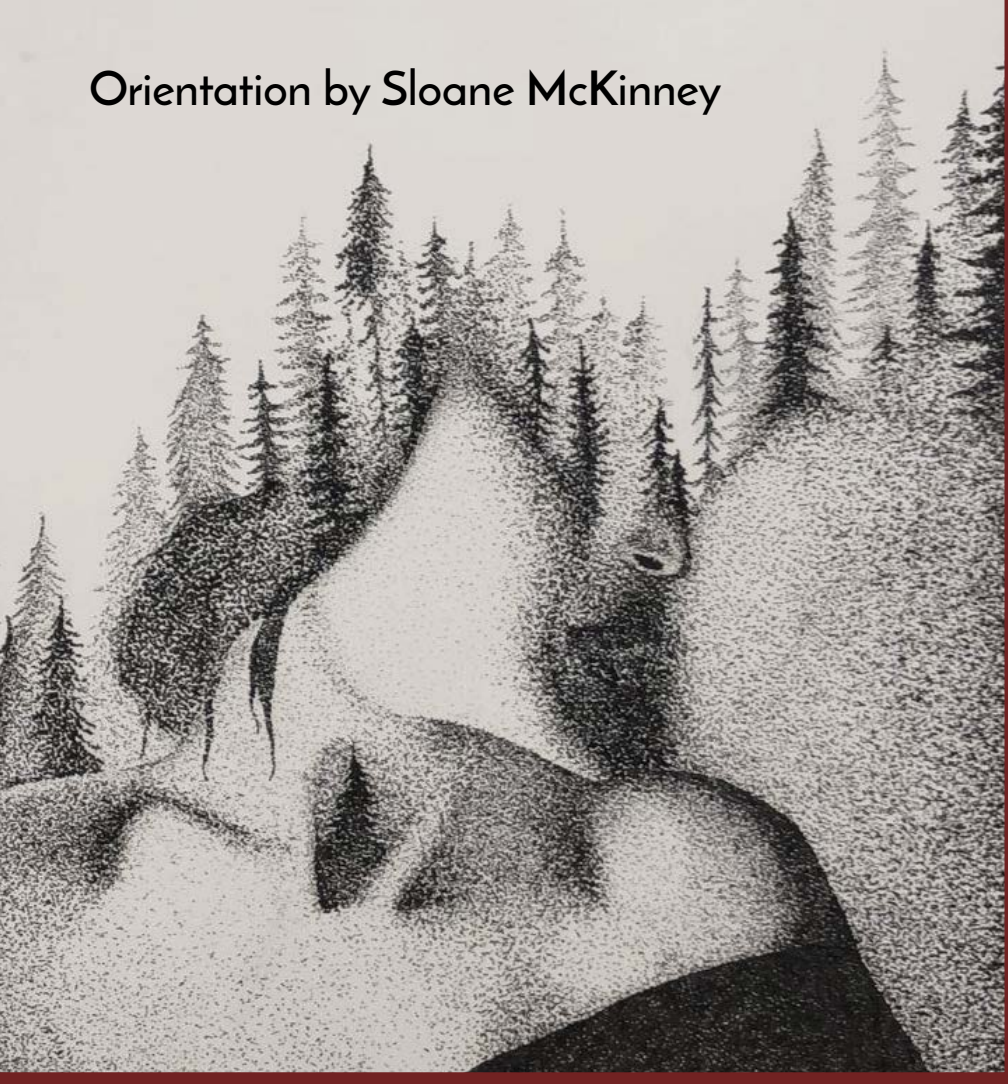
they ask me again if i'm sure it was ricky

yes
it was ricky

sorry ricky



Any Day Now by Rachel Stander



Little Red

Ada Heller

Let's make one thing clear:
there wasn't a big bad wolf.
Not in my story.
There was no screaming
and running of little girls.
This is an old story;
One where
the structure of power
that had devoured
the generations of women
that came before
lay in my bed,
asking me
to let it take one more.
This is the story
of a little girl
who finally told him no
and the whole world
turned red.

Oh my, what big teeth you have.

Peanut Butter Sandwiches

Elizabeth Yost

Even when she was young, Sonya had never been afraid of the supernatural.

It wasn't that she had been a fearless child—she'd shrieked like a banshee when a centipede had found its way into her bedroom. It was just that there were so many real horrors to choose from. She didn't need to make up impossible stories to be afraid.

As she aged, she came up with her own approach to managing fear. If fears were a problem, and problems were made to have solutions, then she could figure out a fix for every terror.

She was afraid of bugs, but bugs could be quashed in a manner of seconds by a nearby shoe.

She was afraid of this monster, too, but it could be dealt with the way she approached all fears. This bug would just require a bigger shoe.

At least, that was what she intended

to do, if she didn't get lost along the way.

These were not the hiking trails she usually followed, created for easy navigation through the vast Washington forests. She knew those trails well, how they curled around looming oaks and would angle upwards as they approached the mountains.

Her makeshift route was less reliable. Thick, throned weeds ripped through her jeans and left tender red lines on her skin. The ground was uneven, and patches of loose dirt threatened to send her tumbling towards the ground.

The autumn months were chilly in the northwest, but a cool sweat gathered at the back of her neck as she struggled to move forward.

She rested one palm on the handle of the small wood axe that hung from her belt. Soon, night would fall. Only in the shelter of darkness could she finally seek out her fiend.

Only then would she be able to introduce it to her blade.

It was nearly midnight when she first spotted the beast out her bedroom window.

She had tried to leave the beast

alone in the hopes it would stay peaceful. With each sleepless night that passed, though, the beast got braver. It would creep out from behind the line of trees, getting closer to her home with each moment, until she could make out the fine details of its appearance in the moonlight.

It was a shape carved from matted flesh and fur. She watched its labored movements, so angular it was almost uncomfortable to look at. It was like a wolf created by a person who had never seen one before.

Large as the brown bears that lived in the forest but much more compact, it towered over her. She stared down at it with an obsessive disgust that wouldn't let her turn away. Its teeth shone white as it smiled back up at her and in its eyes was something much more intelligent than she'd seen from any other animal.

Its presence felt like someone knocking on the door of her brain. Sonya would grit her teeth and shut her eyes, desperately trying to shut it out, but it was no use. The sound got louder with each passing moment until it reached an ear-shattering screech as the door swung open. Instantly, her head flooded with thoughts that

weren't her own. She could hear its thirst for blood and see it tearing her family limb from limb. The image stayed with her long into the day.

With every night that passed, it moved closer to her home. Sleepless nights became muddled—she couldn't tell if days or weeks had elapsed—but she knew this: the creature sat just beneath her window, grinning wider than she'd ever seen it before. There was nowhere else to go the following night but inside.

When light broke that morning, Sonya didn't waste a beat. Pushing aside her abandoned school bag, she found her hiking pack. She stuffed it with anything she might need—a first aid kit, a thermos for water, and a map of the forest. When dusk fell that evening, the beast would return once more to make its kill. Sonya intended to stop it long before that.

By noon, she was prepared to leave. Her father was gone, having left for work hours in the early hours of the morning, but her mother remained. Sonya found her in the kitchen, preparing lunch.

When Sonya was very young she had attempted to live off peanut butter sandwiches. For months she refused to eat anything else. Though her mother had insisted she extend her palate, she often agreed to slather some peanut butter on white bread in exchange for a few moments of silence.

In the years since, Sonya had grown out of her obsession, but on occasion, at the end of a particularly difficult day, her mother would serve sandwiches once again and Sonya would be as in control as when she was a child.

Lately, it felt like Sonya had been having a lot of peanut butter sandwich days.

Her mother had a plate waiting for her on the table. She was tempted to sit and eat, but stopped herself.

She could save the sandwiches for tomorrow when things were ok again. For now, there was work to do.

"I'm going for a walk," she'd said, shifting her pack up on her shoulder for emphasis.

Her mother turned to face her, warm brown eyes tinted with something uncharacteristic Sonya couldn't quite place.

There was something distant about her. Sonya could make out the dark dots scattered along her complexion and yet she felt as if her hand would go straight through the freckled skin if she tried to touch her.



Cover Up by Isabel Dory

Then, it was gone. Her mother was solid again, just like always.

"Alright," her mother responded. "Do you have water?"

Sonya nodded. "It's in my pack."

Her mother smiled, satisfied. "You have fun, then. Be safe—oh! And take the sandwiches with you. In case you get hungry."

Sonya did as she was told.

Outside, a few birds sang softly as she started walking. She stopped by the shed where her father stored firewood. An axe was lodged in the stump of a tree and she pulled it free, putting a cover on the blade and strapping it to her waist.

Sonya quickly found that the creature's tracks weren't difficult to follow. They seemed deeply ingrained in the dirt, as if this path had been walked a thousand times.

She followed its trail deeper into the trees for hours with no sign of the end. Cold wind pushed against her back, making her feel as if she was frozen solid. She shivered against its push, but she kept moving.

The tracks led into the middle of a small clearing now. The golden sun flashed through gaps in the skyline with a brilliant brightness as it fell

through the sky. In the slanted light, she looked for more tracks to tell her which way to turn next. Her breath caught in her chest when she realized there was nowhere else to go. The tracks ended here.

All that was left was to wait.

She found a rotting tree trunk to sit down on and rest her exhausted legs. From its place on her belt, Sonya freed the axe and removed its cover. The sharp steel of the blade caught a ray of sunlight, reflecting it back up at her and leaving her temporarily blinded. She pulled the nearly empty water canister from her pack and took a swig. She could practically hear her mother nagging her to stay hydrated.

Her stomach made a low growl. The sandwiches her mother had made were still sitting uneaten in her pack. The hunger was beginning to get unbearable, but when she moved to get out her delayed lunch she couldn't bring herself to open the Ziploc bag.

Later. She'd save them for later, when things were fixed.

The sky turned intense shades of pink and purple as dusk fell until, finally, the sun was nowhere to be seen. The darkness of night had

arrived. Sonya's grip around her axe tightened as she rose to her feet.

She saw the faint outline of something inhuman within the trees. It inched towards her, the slow, jagged movements reminding her of fracturing ice sheets.

Up close, with the moon illuminating the world with eerie light, the monster was taller than her by at least a foot and the tufts of red flesh that peeked through its fur

were even more gruesome.

She met the

in the creature's jaw didn't match the sounds at all.

Sonya nodded her chin in the direction of her axe. "I wish to end this."

Unfazed by her threat, it settled on the forest floor.

"If that is your intent," it said, "then might I ask for something to eat before you chop me to bits?"

Sonya hesitated as her gaze slipped over to her uneaten lunch. It seemed only right to grant it a final meal before the slaughter. After all, it did not choose to be an animal seeking prey. That was simply its nature.

She opened the bag and took the sandwich from its wrapper. Tearing it in half, she set a chunk just in front of the creature.

Glancing down at the piece still left in her hands, she felt as if a weight had been lifted from her.

She wasn't sure if that was for better or for worse.

The monster hummed as it watched her but Sonya did not meet its eyes. She kept her gaze glued to the food in hand, as if it might disappear the moment it left her line of sight.

"Why have you come, Sonya?" it repeated. "Did the other children not go to class today? Why did you stay behind?"

Sonya frowned. "I can't go to school," she explained. "They want me to have time."

It was not from lack of trying, on Sonya's end, either. She had attempted to return only a day after her leave began.

She'd only lasted an hour before the school called her father to bring her home. She wasn't ready, they had insisted. Maybe they were right, but that did not ease the way it stung.

"Do you think she is disappointed?"

it asked.

She squinted, confused. "Who?" "Your mother."

Sonya thought of her mother in the kitchen, preparing sandwiches. She had always been impressed with Sonya's dedication, but here she was,

in the middle of the woods rather than continuing her studies

"Maybe. It's hard to know for sure."

She didn't mention that, sometimes, not knowing was the hardest part.

"I'll fix it, though. I'm fixing it," she continued. The monster's smile widened and for a moment it seemed to shift in the moonlight.

Its grin was mocking. "Little Sonya, always trying to fix things . . ."

Sonya tried to swallow her fear but her throat was too dry. Her voice wavered when she spoke. "What are you talking about?"

"What about stale bread?" it asked.

Sonya gaped at it. "Pardon me?"

"You can't fix stale bread, can you?"

it repeated, motioning down at its half-eaten portion of her sandwich.

"Oh." Sonya glanced down at her own piece. She hadn't tried it yet. She lifted it to her lips and took a bite. The monster was right — the bread was firm and tough in her mouth.

"No, I suppose not," she replied, eyebrows drawing together. "I didn't want to waste them . . . I shouldn't have waited so long."

They had just been made that afternoon, right? She'd thought they'd last.

Then again, time was difficult these days. Perhaps it was the lack of sleep. Perhaps it was just her own childish denial. Whatever the case, days blended into weeks the way silent lecture halls felt louder than football games.

How much time had passed since that conversation in the kitchen? Had it ever happened at all? It was hard to know for sure.

"Sonya," the creature said and Sonya's eyes tore up to face it, "why have you come?"

She still gripped the axe with an unwavering ferocity. In her other hand was the sandwich, old and ruined. Her eyes burned.

Why did it keep asking this? The wood axe fell from her palm as she spoke.

"I thought it would be easier."

The monster took a step towards her. "And was it?"

She stared at the ground.

It was cold in Washington this time of year, but not quite far enough into winter to warrant turning on the heater. Her family lived by the woods, which made firewood easy to find. Sonya's father would take the tree axe and chop branches off to fuel their hearth. It was a quick way to save money.

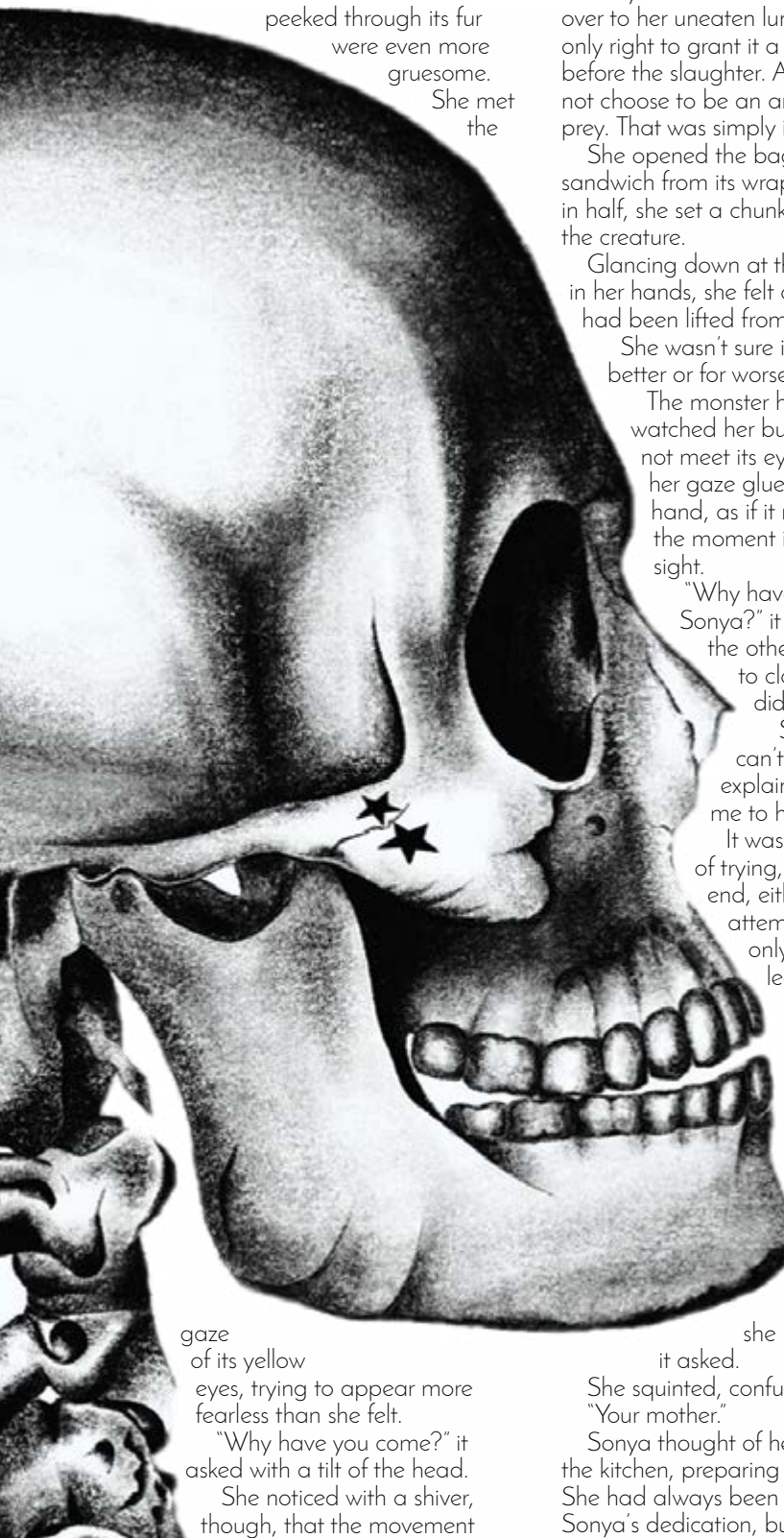
The morning things went wrong, she

gaze

of its yellow eyes, trying to appear more fearless than she felt.

"Why have you come?" it asked with a tilt of the head.

She noticed with a shiver, though, that the movement



and her mother had both complained of a headache before she left for school. Must be something in the air.

Her father had gone to work an hour before. Neither had thought much of it when Sonya left for class, fireplace ablaze and her mother left alone.

Sonya had been more concerned with her with memorizing vocab words for the day's quiz. That was the kind of worry that was easy to stomach.

She preferred it to what came next.

When she returned home, her mother had been asleep—an odd activity so early in the day but nothing to be concerned of.

At least, until her mom wouldn't wake up. Things happened fast from there—she dialed 911, paramedics came, her father left work early.

But Mom never did wake up.

Perfectly healthy mothers were not supposed to die of CO₂ poisoning before their daughter was accepted to university. There was no vengeance to be had, no corrupt society to blame. No monster to slay.

Sonya had never been afraid of haunted houses or horror movies, but she was afraid of freak accidents that took parents away from their children. She was afraid of not being able to save the people she loved and afraid this was something she couldn't fix.

Black formal wear, a church she only went to on the holidays, and an open coffin. Even then, her mother looked so alive.

Back in the woods, she wanted to put an end to this creature. To return home, and see her mom's smiling face, but what is done cannot be undone.

"I don't think anything can make this easier."

The beast shifted again, its smile so large now it was almost blinding. It grew and throbbed as its form became completely unrecognizable, and Sonya wondered if this thing had ever existed in the first place.

Maybe it was just a cruel trick of the sleep deprived mind created to solve a problem that had no real solution.

The horrific, in-between state it was stuck in now was nothing short nightmare fuel, but she could not bring herself to scream or run. What was this in comparison to the truth that awaited her at home?

Bright light began to peek through the pink, rotting flesh, so strong that she was forced to look away.

And then, a moment later, the light was gone, as was the creature it had engulfed.

Sonya picked up the remains of the last peanut butter sandwich her mother had ever made.

There was nothing comforting about being alone at night in the depths of the forest, but there were times when comfort had to be put aside to make room for sorrow. Sorrow, that filled her lungs like dunes of heavy sand. She was a child again, dependent and unsure. She was angry at fate for being unfair, and scared, so scared she would never move on. She would be consumed entirely by this despair.

She understood why children made up scary stories now. At least, at the end of the day, there was solace in the knowledge fiction isn't real.

She wasn't sure how long she spent sitting in the dirt but she knew it was long enough for grime to get stuck under her fingernails. It was also long enough to realize that closure didn't live in the forest.

She'd found some acceptance, though. That had to be worth something.

Her trip home was smoother than the approach. She was still cold and hungry, but her mind was far away from her body. She stumbled out of the trees and into the yard to find her father worried and waiting.

Only in his warm embrace did she finally collapse.

There was something missing in her now, the same something that caused the kitchen to stay empty for days on end, and it was a hollowness that would not be filled by a few hours in the woods.

But life went on, as life tends to do.

With time, the hollowness became more bearable. It was present when she returned to school, present when she received her acceptance letter and there was only one smiling face instead of two. Present, yes, but she was learning to manage.

"Sonya," called a voice from the kitchen. "Come on in. Dinner's ready."

"Coming," she answered, pushing a math assignment to the edge of her desk.

In the kitchen, her father was hard at work. He'd been a miserable cook before they'd lost Mom, but both of them had made adjustments. He was really getting the hang of it, too. It'd been two weeks since they'd eaten

out—a new record.

She pulled up a seat at the table just as he put down his latest creation. Her chest grew tight as soon as she saw them:

Peanut butter sandwiches.

Out of the corner of her eye, she thought she saw something almost familiar moving outside the window. Taking a deep breath and relaxing her shoulders, she smiled.

"Just like the ones Mom used to make."



Star Crossed by Isabel Dory



Shadows Need Light

Hiba Faruqi

A ransacked village in India is where my lineage began
Women.
Women, I will
And
Can never, ever know.
Tribulations my western brain
Cannot comprehend.
They made me.
I have the blood of
Hundreds
Of Maharanis, princesses, and queens of India.
The iron will of thousands of brave Pakistani women burn through my veins.



But,
The only monarchs I've ever heard of,
Were the ones who
DESTROYED
Everything my ancestors died to create.
I have European blood in my family, but it
Is
Not
Naturally
Occurring.



My great
Great
Great
Great
Great
Great
Great
Grandmothers, and
Every woman in between had to scrub white hot sin from her skin.

Here we are, still choosing to commend these men in our history books
For their "greatness".

WHAT
Is so great about the rape and massacre of my family?



When I leaf through the
Tattered and barely kept photo albums my mother tries to forget about,
I only look at one photo:
One of my maternal grandmother.

Her hair fell in long reddish, brown tresses down her shoulders,
She adorned her head with a
Hand made
Rose garland.
Her billowy skirt sprawled over grass that was more vibrant than any artificial sod I've seen in America.

She wore a smile brighter than Karachi on a summer day.

Her warm, hazel eyes,
Had seen a multitude of lies.

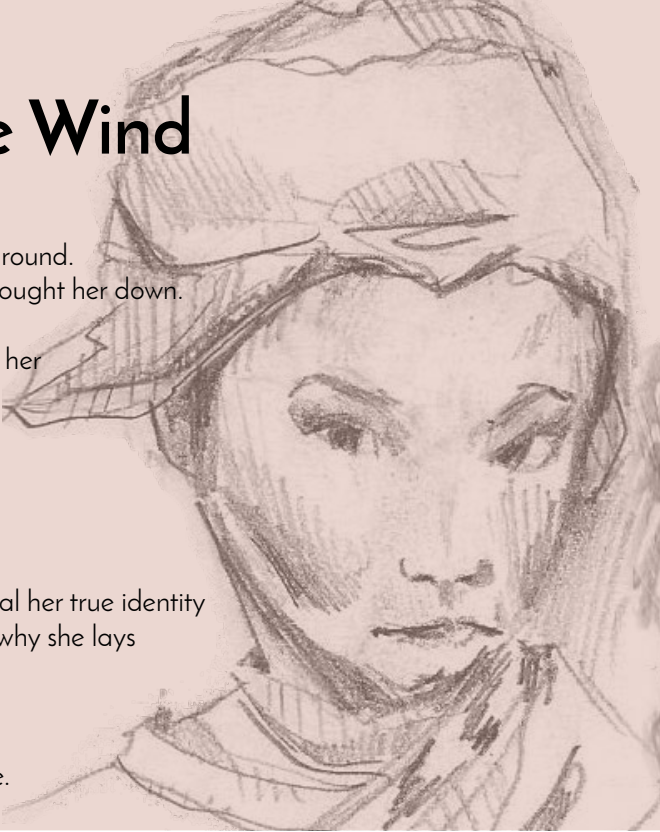
She was barely twenty-five when that photo was taken,
But she had already borne eight children.

My grandmothers would hurl themselves into the underworld,
Silver heads first,
If they saw where we wound up today.

Maybe it was the Wind

James Knoflicek

Maybe it was the wind that blew her to the ground.
Maybe a subtle hollow she hadn't noticed brought her down.
Either way, she ends up in the dirt.
Earth covers the soft pink fabric draped over her
Like paint splattered on a porcelain canvas.
She looks to the graying skies,
through a pair of unknowing eyes.
Upon this land, here she lies,
Hailing wind tunes out her cries.
Is she scared, shocked, at peace?
We may never know until she decides to reveal her true identity
And show us her face, hopefully clearing up why she lays
Upon the earth all alone.
Until them, maybe she just tripped.
Maybe it was the wind.
Maybe it's where she's meant to be, all alone.



Secrets Scrawled on the Astragal

Brett Seaton

It's strung together through the fibers on the back of the lost
Dreams that leave you sweat-stained and hopeful
How dare we doubt ourselves?
In the midst of our mist and making, we think to miss?
The power lines crackling with your work your thoughts your history you don't get to be
They lie there, carried on the shoulders of wooden giants for you
Sitting in a whirlpool
White noise: the sound of the drowned
I make out the swish of our custodian's paint brush
Sweeping beauty into cylindrical corridors
Entropy blooming like our happiness
But we cower inside don't we?
Pull your blankets tighter around yourselves, hold those sheets tight
Good luck sleeping at night when the heat's not right
Black sheep are eaten by the wolf
Hit me hit me hit me again
We all are just here anyway
Look out for a minute
The world is a monologue
Hot buttons and cold wars, do we need another stimulant?
Look back and tell us where we've been
Take it out into the rawness
Not polished till it's flawless but a song for someone's solace
Sing it till your name stops



Portrait Studies
by Erica Hoelting

Mayland

Isabelle Shachtman

You ask me If I know the way back home from here. I sing the words, "yes, dear" back to you like I'm someone else. You say "alright" because you've got nothing else to say right now; I respect that. I keep my eyes on the road. I'm not quite sure where you're looking at this point.

I could feel you side-staring at me in that room. Without knowing you, I could tell you were naive and worldly. I could tell you had inconsistencies. You were defensive and hard to read. A light gazer with flickering eyes. You're not really any of that anymore.

The smell of your freshly showered hair fills my car, and persists, even with the stream of air coming in from the windows. It gets to me, and takes me a minute to poke away. Just before you say something again.

You smell like your house and look like your father. Your dog always looks happy to see me. The color of your house reminds me of childhood. I dislike every detail about you.

I try reversing this process, but I cannot go back in my mind far enough to account for the change. I caught you looking at me and knew I had to keep watch.

When I was little, I thought when you broke a bone, it came out of you and appeared on the floor: white, gritty, and stainless.

I fall over my toes, into the saltwater. Porcelain shells bash my knees. The sky is turning brighter as I stir my gaze. I wonder why it isn't raining. It is May, after all.

I wonder where I got these dreams and tastes as a Midwesterner. I wonder where I found the faith in myself to keep with it after all of this. I wonder when I decided to leave God behind for girls; I wonder why her body keeps me wondering. I wonder why I always come back for love after all of this. There's no reason within reach.

You interrupt my daydreaming. My gaze focuses, and the color of the road sharpens as I hear you say, "I should get home soon, my parents don't like me out

at night in the rain."

I nod in agreement. I know you parents. I know your family, and they are nothing like mine. I've read the cans on your counter and scanned the photos on your wall. I turn on one last song for us. I let us sing like falling backwards onto my bed; I let us have this song together. I let us sing it in my car way too loudly not caring about how we sound. There are no attempts to talk over it.

Walk behind me up the stairs to my room. I want you to sit down as I make you a cup of tea. Tell me what it was that woke you. I'll help you fight it, again.

I want to talk to you, until I know again, why I keep coming back for you. I want to dress you in my silk nightgown and make you wait for me to come home from a peaceful night's walk. A long, barefoot, wet grounded walk.

By the time I'm back, you're an easy dreamer. Sound asleep, face down, under my covers.

As of now, we are three blocks away. Our phones shriek simultaneously; Flash flood warning.

I smile, remembering my childhood illusions. I still think I could find a way to breathe underwater if necessary.

You look like a river nymph; Holy hell, you're heavenly.

Don't get out of the car. Stay with me. We'll drive right by your dad at the dining room table and go straight to the park. I let you hold me on the park bench. We can sing this same song and dance together till we have to sleep. We can search for four leaf clovers in the dark.

I like it when you doubt my recklessness; do it again.

Outside it is magnificent: bare linen body temperature bliss.

God, I really want to kiss you. We both feel so much more than we say.

I hope the wind picks up. The rain needs to breathe.

Your dad is waiting. I unlock the door and let you leave. The air circulating my car still smells like your hair. I breathe through my mouth and taste it.

"Goodnight"

"Night"

I feel like I can tell you anything. You have receptive eyes and skin. You're gentle and always know how to move around

things. Things like this.

I tease you because you like the leaves that turn yellow. I prefer the reds.

I hate how you form your eights like snowmen and how you think math is useless.

I have so much inside of me that would feel like everything to say to you.

You haven't gotten out of my car yet. Let's keep you here. The image of you safety yellow and woven. The shape of your face and peak of your shoulders. The monotonous, suburban street.

You are confusing memories and trying to remember when I realized what memories I was making.

You are faint blue light and snail shells.

You walk a step ahead of me, through the itchy wet grass, down to the creek bed.

You exhale wildly, and the pebbles on the riverbed rattle up the stream, cutting through the mud like my fingers making you beautiful and vibrant. I kiss you, and the night falls quiet again. I can feel your heart beat slowing through your kiss.

Your body curves over mine like a soft tumbled rock. You share your wisdom.

You are not who you are when I dream of you, and I am not satisfied with that. Go back to your house that smells like you. I will go back to mine, dreaming.

The rain reaches your lips and you move your mouth around to taste the rain. I obscure the longing on my awkward, wobbly lips with my knuckle. Fist clenched and all. My sweaty palm gasping for air.

Your back is to me. The passenger window is splattered with rain. I see the side of your face as you open your door and your blonde hair, brown from the water as the sky is dark from the night. Your cheeks are flushed. You look divine.

I wake from an instant of sleep urgently, without the pleasant memory of a dream.

Your body odor on my pillows keeps me up.

Please, go home; it's late.

I want to be half asleep in my sheets by the time the rain starts.

I want my body to steep in it as I fall.

There it is: the memory. Of falling asleep to silent, thoughtless rain:

Of pretending that I already have you down.

Ashlyn and Delaina
by Nina Kulikov





Still Life

Haley Renee Born

I'm sitting in the middle of nowhere, on a hill looking toward the horizon. No tripod, just crossed legs and my elbows resting on my knees, holding an old camera filled with darkroom film. I like the slight blur of pictures taken by human hands, I like the unpredictability, the otherness of a smeared world. And I only care about what I like, what I want my art to be. This is before my photography is ever commissioned, before it belongs to someone else. This

act is purely selfish.

Just after five in the morning and still dark, the ghosts of stars are visible overhead. How the sky stretches for miles. I don't know the significance of the field I lie in wait in, I don't know what history is hidden under the grass. I suppose I am inviting someone to teach me, to remind me of our responsibility to the past.

I have come to capture the sunrise, to freeze an overwhelming moment of color, of aerial fire, eternally in shades of grey. I want to simplify the world. I'm sure some subconscious crisis of control has brought me here, but I refuse to see it. I don't want to reflect, like so much light in the sky. I want things to be simple, tints and shades without hue.

So I frame the horizon, just beginning to light. The picture is crystal clear, waiting to happen. And then it isn't. My view is obscured and shadowed, the viewfinder difficult to see through, but also difficult to look through. An ache starts behind my eye.

I pull back, turning the camera to check the lens.

And there they are.

Dusk is barely beginning but I can see them clearly. Four creatures sitting casually around me, forming a circle that I complete. They're cast in a warm flickering light as if we gathered around a fire, but the ground is bare between us.

The bodies of men, the heads of beasts. In uniforms dirty and torn, old military arm bands and buttons, fur trailing down the necks of shirts.

Something happens, something I'm not used to. I stare at glowing eyes watching absent flames and I freeze. Finger on the shutter, I don't move. My instinct for once isn't to trap the

moment in silver and light sensitive paper. Not that I could capture my strange subjects if I tried, not that I really want to.

To my right, the tall man with the black dog muzzle shifts to face me, yellow eyes fixing mine. His jaw opens, only slightly. A flash of curved teeth and a soft pink tongue. He speaks.

His mouth doesn't move. Neither do his hands, human fingers wrapped around a rifle resting in his lap. But I know it's him, even though his voice isn't as deep as I anticipate. Hearing it, I realize how full I am of anticipation. I'm rigid with it.

It's been a long day, hasn't it?

"Yes" I reply without thought, but I don't regret it. As soon as I've spoken, I know it is the truest word I've ever said. I am heavy with the weight of the day not yet begun.

His chest rises and falls, like panting but slower.

"Where's the fight?" I ask, looking at the guns in laps or slung across backs. I am intensely present, barely human. Stimulus and response. I see and I speak. This time, The Buck's mouth parts.

Here, of course. Hiding, but the daylight will find it.

He lifts his head, antlers climbing into the purpling sky, to look at me. I want to ask his name but I should already know it. We all should. His eyes are dark wells and I turn away in fear of falling in.

"At least for now we can rest," I say, but shift nervously. In the East, the horizon is almost lavender.

No rest for the wicked.

The Fox replies, and it feels like an electric shock. My chest tightens, the urge to scream gripping me. I want to contradict him, to grab his shoulders and shake him. I need him to know that he is not evil, that none of them are monsters, only beasts by necessity. I want the power to absolve them of their sins.

But I can't be sure he isn't talking about me.

"Where's home?" I hope to remind them what it's all for. I hope they will



Golden Girl by Nicolette Toub

tell me.

Far away. Lost. I don't know if I'll ever get back.

He responds, glassy eyes still on the spot where a fire isn't burning. I feel a cold breeze, but it doesn't buffet them. The Second Wolf, tawny and grey, speaks.

Things change for us. Things change everywhere. If we return our homes will be a fading memory and what we find in their place won't recognize us.

He leans a little closer to The Fox. He won't look at me.

"I'm sorry." Their heads pivot toward

me, together they move. Four pairs of shinning eyes find mine. I am an insect on a board, each gaze a pin through my wings.

The Black Wolf opens his mouth again, tongue slipping over teeth and falling from the left side of his muzzle. He's panting now.

Does the earth remember? Do these fields, upon which unspeakable carnage occurred, where unknowable numbers of bodies are buried, bear witness in some way?

I've seen the words on a museum wall somewhere, credited to the

photographer Sally Mann. I may recognize the quote but I don't remember there being any answer. A silence settles in me as color stains the sky. The curve of the sun is just visible over the edge of the world.

"The sun is rising."

We look to the horizon.

So it is.

They say, and when I look back, I'm not surprised to find them gone. I watch the sunrise, letting the reflected color fill me. I leave without taking a picture.

Supine

Sofia Calavitta

Too long we have forgotten
The story of breath in our lungs

Depending on who you ask
We started from clay, dust,
Half of a ribcage, the salt of the
Earth, the water of the sea;
The old gods.

My bones are drawn to you,
Like something in me knows
Too long I have forgotten what it
Feels like to be
Ancient

By your side I feel
Painfully awake.

Won't you let me entwine with you?
I know you feel this magic between us.

Every cell hums with highways of your energy,
Vibrating deep to my soul, into that
Forgotten place we share

Remember? The one between your ribs.
Not your heart, we both agree, but
Somewhere below your sternum.

Too long we have forgotten
The delicious sin of witchcraft.
I gorge myself on you.

My head deep between your
thighs, intuition guides me to
where you sleep.

We have been lost for so long,
Lost in the roads of our own
Vibrations, the backstreets and alleys
Of our interconnectivity

How am I so connected to you?
I know you feel this magic between us.

We flow like the softest avalanche,
Devouring the toothpick trees of
Denial.

We will defeat you, the jaded, armed with
misinterpreted ancient texts.
Our faith has been stolen, the memories of
Breath in our lungs, taken from us and wrapped
In the inky opacity of human opinion.

Let me *breathe* her.
Feel the skin on mine, eyes glazed over
In deep knowing.

Revealing
by Sloane McKinney

Let us worship the old gods; the
Salt of the earth, water of the sea, the
Half of a ribcage, dust, clay, of our own
Invention.

Too long we have been
Locked outside of our
Flesh, refused entry to the understanding
Of our human-ness

Too long their claws have
Ripped out the hair on my
Head, bleeding and bruised I have
Lain.
Too long we deny our own
Inclinations, of stone and rock and
Divine channels. Of ghosts and graveyards,
Spirits, ethereality of all forms we have
Cut off.

The Stories They Tell

Clara Rabbani

I envy the stories
They tell.
Of the East
And the West.

Of bare feet,
Guava trees,
Roasted fava beans.

Of tin water pails
That held curly-haired children
To keep the dust off their feet.

Too long their blood filled
Our mouths, constant reminder of
The wrongness we are contained in

My highways, my highways, they are drawn to her.

Can't you see how we are joined?
My floodgates do not dare release
For anyone but the holder of the
Keys to my thousands of barriers

She unlocks me!
Each molecule of mine screams
In recognition, slotting together of
Foreheads and lips and eyelashes.

I open like the gates that have been closed for too long.

Too long, too long, too long,

My soul swells,
Pacific heartbeat fills my head,
Warm waters, sinking cold toes
Dangling through the depths of your
Existence.

Drifting down to the bottom,
Head dizzy from lack of
Air, but I know I breathe something
Different when
I'm with you

If only I could open my mouth
And drown myself in the
Waters of our relationship;

A beautiful bloated corpse I would be.

—supine

Stories
Of bus rides in the scorching heat.
Trips to the mountains
And to the Black Sea.

Of waves that
Drowned fathers
Who knew to build houses,
But not how to swim.

Stories
Of chickens
That ran like
They weren't all there.
Of thieves
That were not at all
There.

Of half-empty Coke bottles,
And cigarette boxes
In a child's hand.
Between the fingers
Of a grown man.

Stories
Woven like
Grandfather's carpets.
And tangled like the mosquito nets
Of the Amazon.

Of sour yogurt drinks
And the sour taste
Of a coin
In the mouth of a child.

Of flat roofs
That tempted the sleepless
At night.
Of men that were wolves,
And kept dreams alive.

Ginkgo by Audrey Diggs



Juicing Season
by Alexa Boyd

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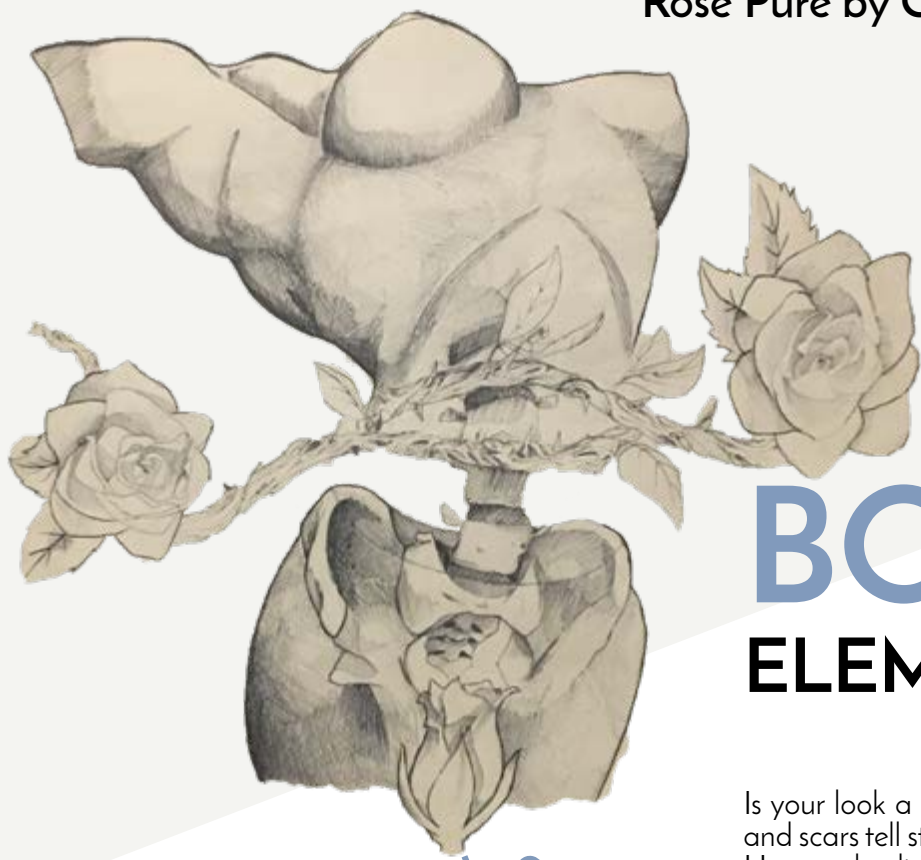
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Rush Hour
by Kate Christie

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Rose Pure by Christopher Shields



BODIES

ELEMENTIA XVIII

Submissions due
Feb. 1, 2021

Submit at:
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Is your look a choice, or did you inherit it? Tattoos, hickeys and scars tell stories. Bodies are fragile; bodies are powerful. Human bodies, governing bodies, bodies of water, and bodies of work represent and contain us all. From quotidian to quixotic, dig out the poems from between your teeth. Speak on skin color, speak on sex. Revel in the heft of the body's shape, adorn it, treat it or let it decompose. Inhabit the cycles of our somatic experience: we bleed, we heal, we kill, we kiss, we die. Anyone with a body can relate, but everyone sees bodies differently. Give us the perceptions inside your skin, by way of your hands and heart.

For this issue of our teen literary magazine, we invite you to examine bodies in writing, art and poetry.



FRANNY CHOI

Franny Choi has felt like a cyborg—a machine ever-programmed and ever-fighting for humanization, especially as a Korean-American queer woman living in a society that capitalizes off beauty, bodies, race, and sexuality. Through the technology of language, Choi explores and translates sensations of agency, the femme body, a desire for closeness, and the complications of race. With her writing and in co-hosting the VS Podcast (alongside poet Danez Smith) Choi presses us to consider—How have we shapeshifted? Where does our softness lie? What moves us?

Franny Choi is a National Slam finalist, educator, podcast host, and author of two poetry collections, *Soft Science* (Alice James, 2019), and *Floating, Brilliant, Gone* (Write Bloody, 2014). We are delighted and honored to dedicate our forthcoming issue of *elementia*, Bodies, to Franny Choi.

Baba's Garden

Clara Rabbani

Egg-yolks blooming in serenity
baba's palms turn upwards
black dirt falling on the sun.
The fruit of baba's hands
covered in spines
twisted but not the wicked way
that punctures skin.
Serpentine limbs extend in search of
hands to hold
fingers to suffocate.
Pungent soil moistens fingertips
incandescent dew settles atop
the hills of my shoulders
rise and fall
cradled against the synapses
between nerve-endings
and an instant.
What baba pours
grows backwards
towards itself.
Which side do I sink my teeth into?
The bitterness is unapologetic.
Watch baba chew
rhythmically
I swallow.
Crisp
ripe fruit
I peel back with my teeth
burst against the roof of my mouth.
With the seeds
I grow a house
it pours me
upside down.
Eggshell walls and roof of foliage
I step inside.



You've Peeked My Curiosity
by Isabel Dory