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Dear Reader,

By intention or miracle of the cosmos, the 2020 edition of the Greyrock Review has found its way into your hands. What a treat you have ahead of you! As you read and contemplate each piece, you may find the work published in Greyrock Review to be mystical, complex, eerie, heart-wrenching, and hopeful. We on the Greyrock team considered each submission carefully and gathered pieces to make you think and start a conversation. If nothing else, the poetry, fiction, creative nonfiction, and artwork will provide a look into the hearts and minds of the incredible students at CSU, whose creativity drives and inspires this journal.

We must not let the vital cogs in our wheel go unnoticed: thank you to our graduate student advisor, Jonnie Genova, who simultaneously steered the ship and helped us chart the course, and Stephanie G'Schwind, a priceless resource to our group as we grew over the past few months. Thank you to our supporters: the Lilla B. Morgan Memorial Endowment Fund, the CSU English Department, and RamRide. I also must give thanks to the people who created the physical form of this journal, the Greyrock Review team, who dedicated time out of their busy lives to read, reread, research, and discuss the many pieces that came across our table. And not at all least, thank you, our readers, who inspire us to create and spread inspiration continually.

Enjoy,
Sabrina Robinson
Managing Editor
Spencer Abeyta

list from last week

ate applesauce made from pears,

  bit my lip when the bugle blasted,
  challenged a cow,
  game of chicken,

  danced in the downpour with indifference,

exercised my eating, éclairs and eggnog,

  faked fearless flight in fog,
  got a dvd for you and me,
  field of dreams,

hit a home run ball, straight into a napping baby,

  ignored weather reports,
  referenced my dancing,

jumped for joy on a ripped trampoline, last time,

knit another nightgown nice and new,

  lost my box of rocks,
  made faux socks for a fox,
  and his brother,

needed another nickel for knickknacks, never knew of dimes,

opened oranges only to find oatmeal,

  popped pills to pass time, purple and pink,
  questioned the
  consequences of a quick bake oven,

requested a real raise, seven cents,

salsa danced without chips and guacamole,

tucked in my dress shirt to reach for the top shelf,

uttered a curse in holy presence,

  by myself,

  violated the dress code by wearing too many layers,
  sent to the dean,

  wished i made the whirlpool waitlist,
  washing machine,

xeroxed a receipt for rocks, it was a present,

yesterday i forgot i got caught

  zigzagging to connect the dots
Sabrynne Buchholz

fons et origo

itty bitty house built a hundred wings wide
each little bird has eyes filled with a wayside light
settled high on a cliff above the telephone wires
itty bitty house feels sea coral skies

red morning sky it is, floating
daffodils in the yard breathe in rust colored sun
wheat grass sways in dew-mist settled gently, a waist deep pond
fog in the sky, fog in the grass

a fret wades off from the sea
clouds become haze in muffled light
quiet, so quiet
small drops of water suspended in crisp air

ether glows dimly as an opalescent blur
endless slow hours for light to rise
upon the bottom of the high cliff
needled fir melts to lavender in contrast

let go of trees and mottled wood
grasp golden sap, honeycomb chambers
yogurt moon sinks low
fading clustered reflection

those birds may see a treasure
something of a reposeful glitter
a hundred wings to scatter to half a century’s worth of feathered souls
black gold pinions shine a blue-purple hue

to snatch up stars and comets and fallen sky
tuck them away in hollows, caves
they fly counterclockwise around the itty bitty house
a merry-go-round

a cluster of tiny riches flash brightly in a whirl
around the cliff and the house set up above the foam
carousel at a sunrise carnival
dawn light in as many colors as a burst of confetti

set sail, set sail
The Cimmerian

to awaken old horrors, remember the night in that tunnel?
with a lantern clutched tight and graffiti like cave paintings
eyes set on the large spiraling tenebrous gape set up above a watery ground
a reverb in ink-black darkness and a low, low hush

the entrance to a tunnel, the portal
climb up and in, and crawl
further into this Stygian passage
think of the gloaming that led to this descent:

- glittering light bleeds through the curb hole
- motes scintillate in a thin sunbeam
- a gentle suspension, a breath
- this realm is new:

  like the night-long venture to the moon
  peregrination, an odyssey
  climb up to reach the macrocosm
  into the Elysian Fields;

  sun and moon in these moments of crepuscule and dayspring
  fight for the empyrean, a battle of cosmic proportions
  high in the heavens and much beyond reach
  glitter and shimmer, beauty in sky-fire light;

but this tunnel and its gape are too misty and dark
for sunbeams and moonbeams and faint trace of light
it is too deep and meant only for drainage
when water falls too heavy, too fast, too much

as soon as gloom encompasses and swallows, lantern light
lantern light catches an end to the passage,
but highlights the shape of an entity, or ghost?
and it bolts so fast that the tunnel is gone

return east to an old home, north of the beginning:
  39° 53' 34.8'' N
  104° 52' 50.412'' W
Sabrynne Buchholz

I do not have the Moon.

They creep in somehow, burglars,
They want nothing from you but the moon you don’t have,
But they don’t know that.

They are built from soft paper, into shifting plates,
Covered in felt and down, like the now-fragile plush rabbit I kept from childhood,
With dulled-down colors and a dusty fade,
They are a small, fluttering dust storm right beneath the overhead lamp.

That moon, they think, is everywhere,
They spiral toward it,
Like someone who has never seen water before, and must urgently take their fill.

Sometimes I find them in flowers,
Sipping nectar through straws,
I think they would love to eat moon candy, like Trick-or-Treaters on Halloween.

They come in for the moon and they rain dust down,
And they beat endlessly on the lights that they don't understand.
I have no clue how the moths creep in, I doubt they have any clue either.
Leah Cassidy

your worst cruelty

i.

i can feel the dimming of the light
in my eyes
but i’ll add that to the list of things i could never tell you

i rode the amniotic waves of your insides
and when you pushed me into this world

i saw your disappointment

and you have never offered me a life jacket
even though half of me is half of you

iii.

and you act so confused
when i give my sadness a name
like you have not seen my suffering
like you have not noticed

but i think that you have

i think that you have

iv.

your willful ignorance
your enduring blindness
your unconditional conditioning
You are never sorry
Never
Not without a caveat

you were the first
to make me afraid
of writing the truth

And you should be ashamed
But i know that in my future holds
An incredulous defense
An un-understanding apology
Fake sincerity
Veiled bribery

You refuse to recognize the parts of you
That crush the soft parts of me

And that is your worst cruelty
Maia Coen

No Future for Us

black rubber wheels turn on concrete
heat rising
    rising above fields of yellow grass
and windmills turning the earth
    Forward

In the distance smoke turns the earth
    Backwards
dearth looks like lilac flowers
lying
on the side of the road

your nail polish is beginning to chip
like teacups collecting dust in your cupboards
do you see
behind the fields
a child standing alone
    looking at you
Maia Coen

Yellow Dress

Mirrors reflecting flowers &
eyes full of oceans.
Monet painted flowers that looked like mist &
wisps of whatever he needed at the time.

You needed someone to tell you they loved you again.
Paris handed you bread and a place to be &
you sat in the sun &
talked about the ways the world wasn’t fair.
Spinning and spinning with nowhere to go
like a top that couldn’t stop.

Mirrors reflecting flowers &
eyes full of clouds.
Spinning in a dress that made you feel like sunshine.
how do you teach a woman that she is holy when she does not believe in a god?
the candles in this room smell like those that filled my grandmother’s church during a sunday mass

where i learned what worship is
when i learned that to touch this body is a praise dance
that i must sing of myself the way choirs sing for a god they have never seen

where i learned what rebirth is
to allow myself to be destroyed
to allow myself to rebuild
there is no god here to pull me from the earth
this is my own miracle

how do you teach a woman that she is holy when she does not believe in a god?
you let her live
am i meant to feel this
am i meant to feel like i swallowed Venus and birthed her again
not in the foam of the sea but in the spit from my mouth
ugly love
not a pearl but a cavity
a toothache kind of love
a bitter first taste
i understand what she is trying to say
that she wants me to feel like i am being drowned by the currents
wants me to wash up on the shore and have someone call it rebirth
when i barely survived

odd how the goddess of beauty wants to tell me
about how ugly love is
Logan DeBord

The Amish Farm in Ohio

deer and bump of wheels on no driveway, mom and dad were
standing talking to a lady in a bonnet for hours.
it smelled like horses and warm dirt. the warm dirt made the
rubber in my shoes go hot.

me and my brother ran
behind the house in the middle of Nowhere.
there was a pale yellow boy we insisted we bring home too.

and a big black bear named singer,
who sat down taller than me
mom and dad said later that he was millie’s uncle —

her name was april back then,
’cause her birthday was in april.

his lips hung down a mile from his face, and so did the skin
around his eyes. and so did the drool from his teeth.
bonnet lady said he weighed a very large number of pounds.
i remember it was a ton.

and there were puppies, millie's brothers and sisters running around.
we were supposed to get this pretty girl, and dad played with her
and whispered a secret to mom.
he told me the secret that her hips were not very good
and we want a dog with good hips.

i giggled and frolicked in tall green grass when we chose millie.
i got to hold the leash, and kept getting tangled in it
because millie ran circles around me, and i twisted
around, even though my dad told me to just put the leash
in my other hand.

i think a lot about the “people eyes” they always said she had.
she was pretty and she loved the snow, she knew
“go lay down” meant to go to the other room and stop begging.
millie died the same as any of them probably did.
millie’s hips gave away too.
Hope is a becoming thing.
Dickinson was right, It
Has never asked a crumb
Of me, and though It
Faces hurricane, gale,
And sorrow’s shivered breeze—
It persists — a silver lined
Sleuth —It persists—
And so to do I, its lost,
But bright faced companion,
I fall, skin my knees and
Nothing but light pours out.
Hope is a becoming thing.
Miles Gilbert

On Doubt

I keep thinking of backcountry fires. How I would wake before dawn and breathe deep the perpetual winter of Higher Places.

Kneeling down towards the waking earth I would stretch my hand over the pit and find, nestled beneath the ruin of yesterday, red-eyed coals and quiet warmth.

And with breath,
    but not too much—

People seem to think beginnings come before the end. The heat on my face says we’ve Gotten this wrong.
Something to Soften Me

It’s Autumn, and though the morning dew is colder today than it has been in a while.

It is still not cold enough.

And so, I will rush headlong into the coming cold and warm it until it is familiar as Spring. Then, when bough and branch forget the weight of early snow and the Gold-finches fly north five months too early, I will sing with them.

For no other reason but I like their song.
Claire Homan

fairy eyes

a crown of petals
haloes her hair where
she stands like a sunflower
in a barren field.

she asks
“how will I grow here?”

but she does not understand that
nature and God
shine in her fairy eyes.

they see goodness where others
see nothing.

that is how she grows.
Claire Homan

imprint

your hands are etched into my mind,
backlit by slatted sunlight or
running through your hair when you let your thoughts go.

they are gentle and good
like the smile lines around your eyes and
the grooves of your palms that I try to
memorize.

gentle and good like the memories I hold
of reservoir water on sand
and blue ink on a letter and
a yellow poster on a wall.

nothing about you is easy to forget.
Kendric Hubbard

Aurorae

Stars float on the lake’s black skin, tethered as if by fishing line to the silt. There my toes carve trenches after dawn’s burrowing frogs who await the springtide sunlight.

The spiked crowns of spruce and pines watch the fish and serpents of the lake depths. Here the scaled cling to the latent heat of day.

There—in the water’s core—the night sky’s lightning tongues unfurl, reflected. This is the last of the cycle, this borealis that burns the heavens verdant blue.

Or it’s the first, and burns as spring is born, alight as sated snows retreat to everwinter peaks, to hibernation or burial, a long wait on the promise of a resurrection.
Kendric Hubbard

Breaking

Once, I held a wasp nest between the fingers of each hand and cracked its paper shell, sure that I could drain the honey hidden in its gray straight cells as sticky rain from a thunder-shattered cloud.

Dry carapaces tumbled from the broken nest, knucklebones I cast against the stone borders of the flowerbeds. The exoskeletons are yellow, only, and their wings are shattered glass.

In the early nights, I sat before the fire as it shed rose-glass light on the ground and the stones, and I was told the yellowjackets painted on their stripes with flakes of charcoal to steal the honey from the honeybees. From that year, their sons and daughters bore black bands of their parents’ sins wrapped tight against their bones. What, then, of these unmarked skeletons, dry-dead and uncorrupted? Whose bones are these?

The wasp nest pricked my fingertip. An edge is jagged, splintered; the works of my hands. A black drop hung from my split skin as if a bleeding apricot. In that drop, sepulchre, tar, and honey-wine swirled and broke the hanging tension to splash among the rocks, the thirsty clay, and the cast wasp shells.
Bronchioles

Roots hang in wilting trails beneath the canopy of sticky resin. The roots are dyed black and seared by the tar. I am told that we know the identities of the megafauna who died in the Pleistocene extinction by their tissues preserved in tar pits, in those glue-traps set across the continent by a divine young as the minds who dream Her. When they pull my bones from the dirt and brush the pebbles from the cathedral roof of my chest cavity, what color are these roots? Still black against their marble cage. Tar keeps each tiny hair in place, the berry clusters heavy against the bars of ribs and sternum. Tar preserves each burned and swollen branch. What of the cobwebs of synaptic thread wound across the cavern behind my eyes. The lightning that crawled across those creeper vines, that fragile ivy, coagulates, trapped in that black amber. As pulleys winch my corpse from the earth, will those frozen thoughts squirm? Or is the amber sufficient to keep the mind it stopped intact?
By a
Headshot
Black Suits
In
Black Cars in
Black Streets
With
Black Cops with
White Skin
All
White Skin
Black with lots
Of
White Skin
Destroyed
Skin
Now red Skin
Black and red
Skin
Scared Skin
Scraped Skin
He
Is gone Skin
Not on him
We
All saw him
Die on
Stranger

On a chain with some keys, the head of a figurine
Attached to a carabiner old and faded too
With a card that is cracking; that is the color of brine
It could’ve been taken to a pool, dropped in chlorine
Maybe went once or more than two
On a chain with some keys, the head of a faded figurine
Its corners flayed, the victim of crime
It has been abused far from new
Is the card that is flaking; that is the color of brine
Only the head remains, isolated like a peregrine
The chest and legs are gone, Maybe shattered and broken through and through
On a chain with some keys, the head of a fractioned figurine
Held onto, forgotten, wasting away to time
Finite with nothing to do
Is the card that is breaking; that is the color of brine
The head is green, just like aventurine
The card is blue, white, and light blue. Three colors is exactly a few
On a chain with some keys, holds the head of a figurine
With a card that is collapsing; that is the color of brine
Anna Klemmer
Commander

By his command, we are
Treading the paths of our nightmare
Our throats singed with fields of smoke, our bodies
Are snatched, never again ours to cherish
We march on, hoping to vanish and crumble
Into the ash beneath our feet, graves that
Drift away with the winds that burn, leaving behind
The chains that eat our wrists

Our pasts have been demolished, by this
Craft, forged by only the most hellish, orders
Hammered into glowing steel
Patched and scraped, our bodies diminish into husks
Half strong, and rotten at the flesh, cattle
We are, reborn with no wish,
To the ground, until we fall once again
The Question

“Is it authentic?”

A question scratches its fingernails across time
leaving trails of shredded canvas
to bleed
behind scenes
but every so often it seems
to have found what it needs
so it stops

digs its claws
flesh
its fingers digging through layers
tissue
until they touch
bone
they can't leave it alone
fingertips frantically grasping
searching space
for something to hold

to rip
to break

--- ---

so

ribcages give way

to blood vessel vines of ivy
but the fingers persist
as a late Autumn wind
begins to twist

the buried treasure at last!
unveiled / vulnerable
it lies dormant
soft echoes

escape its weathered walls

the Heart
it calls
the fingers start to stretch
but catch
on cobwebs
and half-finished stanzas
(on) discarded paintings
with brushes abandoned

their shadows danced
with this

the Heart began to stir
a little unsure
at first
afraid of rusted pipes
they burst
but for every beat it made
the fingers began to fade
back in to the blank
canvases of space
where the question
still remains–

“Is it authentic?”

against the walls
forever
Rachel Melton

butterfly death

dying tell the dying not to leave
but the dying do not listen
dying tell the living not to be sad for them
but the living do not listen

cocoon cannot hear
ears stuffed up with silk
chrysalis hardening around them
not a coffin but a womb
from which they will emerge
to sip the sweet nectar of new life
but they do not know this
they do not know the brightness of tomorrow
all they know is the darkness of now

butterfly tries to whisper
into the cocoon
this little death isn’t the end
tries to make them understand how
they will unfold like a tongue
from the mouth of existence
embody all that is
and all that was
as they fly into the sun
Rachel Melton

flesh and bone

soft and supple; virginal
absorbing the sin from the forbidden apple; Eve brought to life by the rib tainted by consumption poisoning the family ingraining deceit the children the love

the internal wisdom that pulses electric and eternal concentrate deeply mindfully meaningfully the repulsiveness of the skeleton sustain thought seek joy bliss understanding the benefits eventually attain freedom from ageing sickness and death

hard yet at its core–sponge the pure white casing swallowing the red cells and choking on the truth flaking the ivory armour diminishing its light instilling doubt resistant to the warmth

understanding the benefits eventually attain freedom from ageing sickness and death

GREYROCK REVIEW • 35
Kobe Overby

Moon Is

The sun is old and noble,
But the moon is young and wild.
The moon stays out late
When it knows it shouldn’t,
The moon is free.

The moon is a moon
Speaking the language of lovers
In the tender criss-cross
Between swollen beams.
The moon marvels,
She is as inescapable as gravity.

The moon’s flesh is pale and lovely.
The moon’s crescent is a smile,
High and lonely.
The moon is a missed opportunity,
A blending in the eyes of strangers.

The moon is a window.
The moon is a widow.
The moon is a feminine shadow,
The last lit up pane
In early morning.

The moon is you
At midnight
Stirred by thirst
And in search of a lighthouse.

The moon is a silver dollar,
The moon hangs like an outlaw
Far above the Western saloons.

The moon was made for owls,
The moon too rotates its head,
Just very slowly.

The moon is a glint
On the domes of spoons
Who surf the quiet ripples
On big ponds and small lakes.
The moon is a spotlight of the Dream
Making the streets of New York and San Francisco
A stage, a play for the cyclops.

When the moon feels playful,
She plays peek-a-boo with the sun
Every 18 months or so.

The moon,
after all,
is just a leaky eye.
Passing through an open door I am
astonished by the atmosphere
as two worlds twist cold life
time breathes between our bodies
warmth and erosion my life
has been a jumbled pot of movement
I greet the cold of the outdoors as
a tablecloth with the frills
Max Roesler

Winter afternoon the sky opened
broad and weighty and eager.
fragile eloping
the dewdays in memory green
where we strut bright eyes
toward winter solstice somber
laze.
And all of our becoming
of the world ourselves
to write stagnant prose
upon the stoop where we sat
allowing time to dictate
simple moments without hum
but full of whisper
blue.
And of my hands and this earth
of the potential to create
of berating postlongings without item
my hand trails along the bedspread.
Megan Shaver

The Alaskan Safari

I should have left a letter.
A treasure map with a tilted
+ signaling my location.
Proof of me.
So that I may get proof
that others remember.

Silence.
The unwanted silence of prayer breaks
the howling of frozen wind.
If only someone could
cheer me up
with water guns full of warm milk
or bullets.

Why?
Why did they ever leave?
My frozen ears
dead to the world.
Abandoned,
with nothing
but the rifle on my shoulder
reminding me what it was like to be
hunted.
Abigail Thomas

Begin

there is a something

in chaos

a tugging at your navel

pulling you in as your trip over your feet

a tether uncut since birth -begin

this universe is cacophony and you are

the product

the stardust

the molecules

a gentle blend

a gaping wound

a harsh discoloration

you are greypurpleredpinkbluewhitegreygreygrey -begin

you are never found unless you are

lost

atlas shredded and you circle circle circle circle circle

begin begin beginbeginbeginbeginbegin

you are not the eye or the beholder

you are the beauty in chaos.

begin again.
Abigail Thomas

Dread

Adam Wagner

Spoken

The language of the green hollow house is too loud to hear. It asks song and history—in question. The known harbor; the constant ills of lineage are the frontman, the labor, the spearhead of the phalanx, the one pierced, the lineage. Melancholy erases the memorial. It is a list of names and deaths on the wallpaper of the bedroom.

The dining room has too many chairs for the floor. They must rest on table, on windowsill, and on each other. Still, there is no entrance to the kitchen. No footholds to be found in-between wooden legs and support. There is a glimpse but the blinds too are far.

It is the doorway entrance that is sudden. This the front door. The knocker is gone, though a different shade of paint knows that it was once there. This the threshold.
Reflection is a barter—
beaten back sought eyesight
100 seconds too long.
Pull bonfire from the wreckage
plumage from base.

To fall in would be sinful,
an act heinous an act known by sight.

The bull—the bull in the ocean
quick with the ropes quick with
hands binding coral reefs together
with the nonce in the beaten-back
mast-top.
Hannah Willis

Laments of Unrequited Love:

I.
Unrequited love.
An ant on a shoelace.
The deepest depths of the sea.

I feel old now but infinitely young.
I feel curious but constrained.
I feel annoyed. Scared.
And alone.

A sense of stability.
Self-love and certainty
If I had a clue it would be much easier.

Often, I can feel my brow tighten to the top of my forehead
and often I force its release.

II.
On the walk back to class,
I stare at the sky.
At the branches and the clouds and concrete around me.

I stare,
especially at the faces.
Observing which ones look up,
not just at the passing figures,
but also towards the ether.
Those aspects are rarer but do exist.

I observe the shift in their eyes downward to their feet
and to the feet of others.
There are also those that seem to look
straight through everything,
the crowd composed of fading apparitions.
The nodding of heads to the beat
of unknown and mysterious music.

Leaves of many colors
and varying aliveness,
some gray and shriveled like raisins
and others soft and new.
III.
A spider falls from the tree
And lodges its teeth in his obsidian locks,
But misses the nape of the neck.

IV.
The collective surrenders to the void.
I try to make connections amidst the noise,
unknowing if there are connections to be made.

V.
The hardest thing about it
Is accepting that
love is not lost,
simply in a different form than we wish to receive.
Love is reciprocated
And that hurts more
Sometimes
Than love unrequited.
At recess, I lived with myself in the sand. I entertained myself by making sights. The ground of the playground was light, nearly white—a scene like Tatooine in *A New Hope* (1977). With a gaze aimed straight down, I could make a bird’s-eye view of a distant desert. If I crouched on my knees and lowered my face close to the ground, I could make the subtle dips and curves look like massive dunes. If I fixed my head up toward the sky and then tilted it down, gradually, I could create the opening shot of a science fiction film, lowering some imagined audience in my head onto a far-off planet.

For the teachers supervising recess, it must have been strange to see a first grader sitting by himself, quietly pointing his face at things as though it were a video camera. If I could stand beside the teachers now and spy on myself as a child, watching this curious form of play from a distance, I’d have a number of questions. What was I doing, and why? What compelled me, at that age, to look at life from different angles? To position myself behind an imaginary camera? To see the world as a film, and wish to document it as such?

When I wasn’t pretending to take a recording with my mind, I would sometimes blink to imagine I was taking a photo. The rapid close-and-open of eyelids simulated the snap of a shutter. A quick *click*. I never had the real-life superpower of an actual photographic memory, but I wished deeply that I did. I remember trying to photograph mentally any sight I wished to keep—any sight that felt important to me.

My school playground contained many such sights. The warm glow inside the red slide, womb-like. Circles of light in neat rows below plastic platforms, like cookies on a tray of shadow. The sun resounding off blue metallic monkey bars to startle my unsuspecting eyes. I blinked at all of these, but mostly I spent my time in the sand, trying to capture it just right.

I remember picking up seething handfuls of the substance, soft but prickly at the same time, and watching the grains trickle, tickling, through the funnel of my fingers—a handmade hourglass of sorts. I tried to get a good angle on the action
by bringing my eyes dangerously close to the stream of sand for a closeup of its dusty descent, hoping the breeze wouldn’t shift directions toward my face. I felt a thrill as it rushed from my hands with a hushed hissing, pulled down, down, down by gravity. I pretended each grain had a name and a life. I pictured the sand grains as characters in a story and watched them plummet, reveling in the dramatic motion of the moment I was making.

It reminded me of a scene in *Treasure Planet* (2002), in which a black hole opens up in space and nearly pulls an entire ship and crew into its depths, tugging one of the characters overboard to fall down, down, down like the sand in my hands. It’s the first fictional death I can vividly remember, as well as the first PG rated movie I saw in theaters. Highly conscious of the rating, I knew and feared the power of images even at that age. I had a right to be afraid—especially when these images were experienced on a screen so large it absorbed me. Especially when a villainous pirate severed the rope tethering a crewmate to the ship, releasing him, shouting for help, to tumble into an eternity of darkness.

For an hour and a half, that story world set in outer space became my eyes. As with any movie, I stored the story inside, integrating into myself like a real memory. Once in a while, I brought the story back out to play. At recess I took the tragic moment in my hands to make sense of it, recreating the feeling I’d seen on-screen. Sending sand falling like that crew member to his doom. Holding death in my hands, trying to understand it.

Under the surface of light sand was a layer of dark, wet, brown sand. When I wasn’t looking at the surface, or playing with the surface, I plunged my hands into this deeper layer. I liked digging as deep as I could to see what was at the bottom of it all. By the time the bell rang, tolling the end of recess time, my hands would be caked.

Today, the beach-like sand on the Shepardson Elementary playground is gone, taken away and replaced with a wrinkled sea of wooden chips. It’s an understandable change—there’s less mess, less cleanup from kids like me tracking dust indoors. But when I visit my old school, the change still leaves me with a rising sense of sadness. I find myself blinking.
Where did it all go? Where did it come from in the first place? As hard as I tried to capture the sand, I couldn’t make it stay.

II.

My room today serves as a collection of collections. Among other oddities, it contains a dresser drawer heavy with the caps of dead markers that ran out of ink; a large piece of black fabric covered in an ever-growing collection of pins that hangs above my bed; a box bursting with bookmarks; a tin container filled to the brim with wrinkly Dum Dum wrappers; a large shelf of collectible Disney figures from a wide variety of films, displaying characters seemingly plucked from the screens of their respective movies and frozen like mini statues made of cheap plastic; and a gray metallic box that holds the movie ticket stubs of every film I’ve seen in theaters for nearly a decade—even a few from childhood, like the Treasure Planet ticket stub from November 2002.

I’m not sure where this compulsion to collect comes from. But if I dig deep down into the darker sand of my mind, I can make a few vague guesses. It’s something to do with time—it’s something to do with passing. It’s something to do with the material world and the comfort of having control over physical objects that grow in number and stay in one place. And it’s something to do with my great-grandparents.

Like my bedroom today, their small, one story farmhouse housed many odd collections. In childhood, I spent much time in that house, a place rich with abundant antiques and treasures to discover. The entry room held a gathering of glass birds, themed slow globes, and artistic paperweights. One of the bedrooms was full of angels: some made of glass, some made of plastic, some that looked like babies. A card table held a miniature nature scene with a cottage and an assembly of plastic forest creatures. A box contained a collection of old-fashioned blocks, dolls, and puzzles—toys used to entertain generations of children over the years.

In the cozy living room of the farmhouse were three large armchairs: one for my Great-Grandpa Bob, one for Great-Grandma Betty, and one for Betty’s sister, Alpha, who lived with them in later life. Between two of the chairs, a fountain of leaves sprang out from an artificial plant in the corner, complete with
little red plastic berries clinging from bendy stems. In the haze of early toddler memories, I recall crouching behind the plant and watching the grown-ups through a veil of greenery, trying to make it look as though they were convening in a jungle, like a scene out of Disney’s *The Jungle Book* (1967).

The chairs were positioned across from a large television where these three elders spent much of their time watching football or binge-watching *The Waltons* (1972–1981) on DVD. Seeing their great-grandkids was a preferable way to spend the day, a fact made clear through their joyous reactions every time my younger siblings and I stepped into the room, entering through a rickety screen door that was always unlocked. From their spots in these chairs, the elders would greet me cheerfully for a customary round of hugs at every visit.

In the corner next to the TV, was a tall glass case containing Betty’s collection of antique goblets of varying shapes, colors, and sizes. When the sun shined on them through the window, the whole case sparkled like a stained glass window in a church. When my cousins ran and roughhoused around the room, I would stand frozen in fear that someone might accidentally knock the case over—shattering all those shining, fragile objects in a glittering explosion. Looking back, I’m not sure I understand the point of having so many goblets that would never be used to drink from—but then again, why keep Disney figures that are never played with, or marker caps detached from their long-dead markers, or Dum Dum wrappers that should have been thrown in the trash?

Among the many enchanting treasures of their house, my favorite by far was a golden hourglass that sat high up on a top shelf near the ceiling, far out of reach. I can hardly remember the first time I saw it, but I imagine that my eyes widened. I imagine that I blinked, taking a mental picture. *Click*. Sometimes, if I asked, an adult would allow my request to see it, taking the hourglass down from the shelf and cautioning me to be extremely careful.

They didn’t need to tell me. I knew the item in my hands was something special, and handled it with the utmost respect—perhaps even a bit of fear.

Prior to finding this one, I had two experiences with hourglasses. The first was an hourglass seen inside a conquered palace saturated in red hues, conjured by a villain in the nightmar-
ish third act of *Aladdin* (1992). Jasmine was enslaved, Leia-like, trapped in chains and underwear, held captive by a sneering man who shouted “*Your time is up!*” while imprisoning her in a massive hourglass. Sand rained on her head until it buried her up to her vanishing fingertips. Horrified, I nearly watched her drown, powerless and panicked as the princess gasped for air. I wanted to smash the glass of the television screen and smash the glass of Jasmine’s enchanted cage. But I couldn’t smash either border. At the last second, Aladdin swooped in to free her for me, and sand poured forth onto the palace floor like the flood of relief in my small, frightened heart.

The only other hourglass I’d encountered previously was one I saw within a dark gothic castle in the third act of *The Wizard of Oz* (1939). Deep in her shadowy lair, flanked by winged monkeys, the Wicked Witch of the West pulled out a golden, ornate hourglass with bright scarlet sand, using it as a threatening countdown to Dorothy’s demise.

“You see that?” she cackled to the imprisoned farmgirl, flipping the hourglass, bloodred, on its head. “That’s how much longer you’ve got to be alive!”

To this day, the memory still haunts me. What could be more terrifying than watching one’s own time run out? To confront one’s own dwindling mortality in a visible form? Dorothy and I could do nothing but sit and watch, powerless to stop the sand’s steady drizzle.

Considering these memories, you can imagine my fascination and anxiety upon discovering a real-life hourglass in the tangible world of my great-grandparents’ house on the farm. This dark instrument, a weapon of witches and would-be Sultans, sitting right here in front of me. Mine to touch and hold, no longer concealed behind the barrier of a screen.

Oddly patient as a kid, I would spend an inordinate amount of time turning the object over and back around, watching the white sand fall—like recess hand sand but trapped in glass, trapped like Jasmine and Dorothy, the sand itself as untouchable as characters behind a screen, accessed only through the eyes. Playing with time visualized. It was probably because of this fascination that when my great-grandparents passed on, their hourglass was passed on to me.

As time passed in the farmhouse, there were three, and then two, and then one. The armchairs began to lose their owners.
Bob died when I was eleven. Alpha when I was twelve. Betty when I was thirteen. They became grains of sand slipping through the hole between my hands. I could stop them from falling no more than I could prevent the events of a frightening movie from occurring—no more than I could protect fictional characters from harm beyond my reach.

I was present for each of their endings—if not in the room at the time of departure, then there moments later. For the last year when she lived alone, Great-Grandma would greet me from her armchair in a manner increasingly weary and faded, burdened by the emptiness of the two other seats across from the TV. Her eyes held less and less light, until they went dark. Of the three, I remember her death most clearly.

Silently, on the morning it happened, just after sunrise, I filmed a grieving bedroom with my imaginary mind-camera. Turning my head around to pan across the scene, I captured the grieving grown-ups with a backdrop of little glass angels twinkling on old bookshelves. To the left, my grandpa, mourning the loss of his mom. To the right, my mom, mourning the loss of her grandmother.

Watching this from behind an imaginary lens provided a degree of distance; I could disappear into a realm of observation, retreating from feeling. Cameras can’t cry. But when I turned the lens of my eyes back to Betty, that glass barrier of distance broke with the sight. I was never really a camera.

It’s a curious sensation to look at a body with nobody inside. To see eyes that can no longer see. To look on the presence of a person without that person present. There is an uncanny stillness in death, caused by the absence of breath—that subtle motion, ever-present and taken for granted until it’s gone. Her fingers, which used to pick restlessly at the fabric of her shirt as she sat in her chair—and which would pick restlessly at the fabric of my shirt, too, if I sat on her lap—were stiff and cold to hold.

What happened to that person who would light up upon seeing me? Where does sand go when it’s gone?

In the aftermath of the last loss, all those assorted items and objects in the farmhouse had to go somewhere. The family was left in the midst of grief with a burdensome collection of collections to attend to, forced to sort boxes upon boxes of things accumulated over many decades. Some items were special—for
instance, each grandkid and great-grandkid got a goblet from the case; mine is a forest green color that shines like the Emerald City of Oz. Most of their things though, no one knew what to do with.

I guess the same will happen to my possessions one day. You might expect that witnessing the dismal sorting process of my great-grandparents’ material possessions would lessen my own enthusiasm for accumulating too many meaningless items in my lifetime. If the dismal emptying of the farmhouse—that enchanting place of childhood treasures, becoming an empty building—didn’t provide a direct illustration of the pointlessness of the pursuit in the grand scheme of time, what would?

Instead, it had the opposite effect—I now cling to my own belongings more closely than ever. Hopelessly hoping they might last forever. Something about keeping pins secured on a cloth and characters frozen on a shelf offers a feeling of permanence. Of safety. My collected movie tickets are always there when I open the lid—tokens representing experiences long past, but still there in squares of paper.

What can I say? People do strange things to cope with the reality of being alive, or more accurately, with the reality of not being that way forever.

Today, the hourglass sits on top of a shelf in my bedroom which I am tall enough to reach on my own, as though watching over me. Next to it is a small collection of other assorted family artifacts—Bob’s last driver’s license, one of Alpha’s angels, Betty’s green glass goblet.

Sometimes I watch the hourglass on the shelf from my bed until my eyelids gain weight and I fall asleep, falling down into myself, falling like a grain of sand into darkness and dreams.

I.

Blank white pages cry for color. Prior to entering kindergarten, I was a far more prolific artist than I am now—more efficient and productive than I’ll probably ever be again. I would sit on a yellow kitchen floor with a stack of printer paper and a box of markers and decorate page after page, quickly, driven by some mysterious impulse to move images out of my mind and into the world. My parents bound and kept every “book” I created, starting a collection of their own that now sits in my bedroom closet, stacked in a half-dozen, heavy banker boxes.
Flipping through this collection of childhood artwork as an adult, I feel like an anthropologist trying to decipher ancient hieroglyphics. Many of my pages feature incomprehensible scribbles, their meaning lost to time. What was going through my head at ages three, four, five? What was I trying to express? Why is anyone compelled to make art?

On some pages, the scribbles coalesce into recognizable characters. Spider Man emerges through streaks of red with highlights of blue in the shape of a person. Bright, frizzy, yellow lines make up Big Bird, and next to him a green furry head atop the gray smudge of a trash can. As if looking into a Rorschach test, I begin to see classic characters emerging from the chaos—Piglet, Tigger, Kermit, C-3PO, and Yoda. Each separate stack tells a story about a consistent group of characters, full page comic book panels or storyboards, pieced together out of visions I’d seen on the television screen.

All along, my family saw this creative work as evidence that I was destined to be a writer. It wasn’t until later that I realized these books were not books at all—they were movies.

Tellingly, a consistent opening line of text stumbles across the start of each story in clumsy preschool handwriting: “Walt Disney Presents.” Before I had a remote degree of access to the tools required to make a film, something in me was already finding a way to do it out of nothing but paper and markers.

Writing and filmmaking are different, but then again, they’re also the same—both involve creating an experience in someone else’s mind, whether that experience is made of words or sounds and images. Cinematography is sometimes defined as “writing in light with movement.” This form of writing in light, with its strange ability to capture two of the five senses that constitute a given moment in time, would have been difficult to imagine just a little over a century ago.

Unrecorded experiences come, and then they go, and if they come again it’s in the shifting, private realm of memory. Maybe that’s how things are meant to be. But to shoot a video is to take a portion of time and keep it for a while longer, cheating the universe with the ability to watch something happen more than once. It’s a loophole in life’s laws—specifically, the law that sights don’t stick. A rebellion against the universal rule that announces, like a bright sign in the window of a desperate store on closing day, “All Things Must Go.”
In one of my favorite movies, a documentary titled *The Beaches of Agnès* (2008), there is a moment that breaks me. The film explores, with poetic insight, the psyche of its director, Agnès Varda, as she attempts to recreate her memories; wandering through her life to make sense of it; seeking deeper meaning in a series of abstract images; always returning to her favorite place, the beach. “Open me up,” she says near the beginning, “and you’d find beaches.”

Not every memory sticks forever in my head, but somewhere in the last third of the film is a scene I doubt I could forget. It features a piece of personal footage, shot just before the death of Varda’s beloved husband, fellow French filmmaker Jacques Demy, in 1990.

Slowly, intimately, Varda traces a camera across her husband’s face as he lies on his deathbed, dying of AIDS. She zooms in to an extreme close-up, and she gradually records his hair, his ear, his cheek. His nose, his mouth, his hands. His forehead, his chin, his neck. As she films his eye in close-up, he looks subtly toward the camera with a twinkle that suggests he is smiling outside the frame.

“As a filmmaker . . . I needed to do this,” she says in a voiceover of lilting French accompanied by English subtitles. “I needed to take these images of him, of his very matter.”

This long take of her husband is an act of love, and an act of fear. It’s a powerful action in the face of a powerless circumstance. As his hourglass runs out and he prepares to leave his body, what else can she do? She can’t keep him alive. She can’t cure the AIDS, or freeze time forever. But she can capture his likeness in that moment, breaking reality’s rules to keep his light around for a little bit longer. Now Varda is gone too, but lives on through a body of work that explores her life, her memories, the sand inside of her.

I can’t say for sure that the motivation behind my obsessive artistic pursuits in early childhood was some kind of rebellion against the condition of mortality, a response to the knowledge that everything is temporary, propelled by a fear of death and a longing for personal permanence. In fact, I doubt it was—the scene from *Treasure Planet* aside, I probably didn’t understand death until somewhere around ages eleven, twelve, and thirteen. Perhaps as a child, my love for life was simply so big it couldn’t be contained in that small of a body and needed to spill
out onto sheets upon sheets of blank paper. A release of the characters, images, and stories I pulled into my head out of the strange, colorful world trapped just beyond the TV screen.

If I had to guess, the human need to make art has more to do with a love of life than a fear of death. Or maybe the two aren’t so different. Along with love for anything comes the fear of losing it. Filming pieces of time doesn’t mean keeping them truly—just keeping a glimpse of a moment for a little bit longer. It’s all we can do. We soak in the world while we can, like a sponge, and squeeze it out onto a canvas of choice. Just like breathing—we inhale and we exhale, seeing beauty in the sand as it trickles, slowly, away.
Facades:
Confessions of an Ex-Christian Commie

I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me.

—Jesus of Nazareth, Matthew 25:35

We do not say to the world: Cease your struggles, they are foolish; we will give you the true slogan of struggle.

—Karl Marx

Český Krumlov was a town of relics. Cobblestones paved the empty roads. The town was deserted in late February. It was as if a plague had hit a fairy-tale town and wiped everyone out. As my friends and I got off our bus, we searched for a place to eat. To our surprise, there seemed to be no restaurants open, or even in sight.

The day was gray and sodden. A pale light found its way through layers of clouds and fell opaquely on the pastel buildings with red-tiled roofs. We found what seemed like the only place open to eat—a sort of cafeteria serving “authentic Czech cuisine,” i.e., meat and potatoes.

We did a few touristy things—walked around a castle—but ultimately, there wasn’t much to do there. It was around noon and I think we felt the town owed us a little more to have merited the two-and-a-half-hour drive.

We spotted a small, white building on a tall hill in the distance. Someone suggested we try to go see what it was. After grabbing a few beers at the convenience store (the only place open that I had seen) and stuffing them in our backpacks, we headed on foot towards that white building on the hill.

The yellow of the tall grassy field contrasted with the deep, looming gray of the sky, as if God had split the horizon in half with a mighty sword. Hiking up through the grass we saw, hanging off the back of the white stone walls, three black crosses—the building was a church.

We had seen nothing but churches in our time traveling Europe. Buildings clad in grandiose biblical sculptures and archi-
tecture that were built to instill you with the fear of God. This one was different though, than the churches we had seen. Unlike the grand architecture of St. Vitus, St. Peter’s, and Berlin Cathedral, this one was simple and small. It didn’t instill the fear of God within me, but a sort of earnest diligence.

We made our way around the building and passed an old woman with a small dachshund sitting on a bench in front of the church. The church looked like one a coalminer or farmer would go to: a working man’s church. The front was a faded white with black streaks like it had been burned. Atop the steeple was a small, stone cross. It was barely there, like it was almost forgetting itself. On the front there was a circle of red paint that was faded and chipped, like it was molting, except what was underneath was not a new skin, but an even older one.

At this point in my life I was somewhere in the middle of my faith; transitioning from the raised-Christian boy into someone who felt his faith—even though it inspired the care of such things—was incompatible with the socio-political issues I was beginning to care about. My Christian community was one that claims love and care for one’s neighbor as its main tenets, but years and years of experiencing the ways in which it had fallen short of this had left me tired and disillusioned.

I felt they had not kept their word. Although I know this is not wholly true, and that there are communities of earnest and loving Christians, I felt my community’s facade of love had broken and I saw the rotting guts inside.

As we approached the church doors, I saw the metal handles were wrapped in chains and locked with a padlock.

“Damn,” I said. No sooner, an unfamiliar voice came from behind us.

“Would you like to see the church?”

It was the woman we had seen on the bench. Before I had seen her, but I hadn’t really seen her. She was a small woman with short, red-brown hair that fell down onto her forehead in unruly strands. Her plump face bore a smile soft as a mother’s and wrinkles like plowed soil. Her eyes glowed as though somewhere in her lived her younger self.

“Yes! We would love to!” I think we said. She approached
the locked door while fumbling to grab something from her pockets.

“I have the key, here.” As she swung the doors open, the woman turned around and gave us her name: Vera.

“I will take you on a tour now,” Vera said; puffing her chest out and clad in a black sweater, she seemed to be standing at attention. We nodded and looked around. The doors opened up to a sort of courtyard in the shape of an octagon. On each side was an altar: a painted picture of some biblical narrative, a faded memory of a fresco.

To my surprise, there wasn’t much to see. Blank walls, empty altars, this church was a sort of desolate courtyard—sprinkled with religious imagery, but otherwise quite bare. Vera began to walk the perimeter of the courtyard. We followed.

“This church was destroyed,” she said as she began to scan the inner walls, “or they tried to destroy it.”

“Who?” my friend asked.

“The . . . communist regime.” Her mouth fluttered ever so slightly, and I tensed up.

“They came here, and were sent to destroy all of the churches. This one . . . is small and old. It is the one me and my mother went to when I was young. We were lucky—many of them were completely destroyed—burned and demolished. We were lucky. They only destroyed the statues. They broke them and they took them away. You can see they tried to break down this pillar, here.”

She pointed to a pillar that was about three feet in diameter. Its plaster shell had been cracked by a giant hammer, and it spilled out its guts of brick.

“They meant to destroy the whole thing,” her eyes stayed glued to the crumbling pillar, “but they never did.”

So encapsulated by Vera’s tale and intoxicated by my own curiosity, I forgot myself, and out of pure interest in the story I asked something like, “What was it like living in those days, under communism?”

Her eyes shot to mine and locked. She began to shake her head.

“Those were bad times. We do not talk about that.” I nodded and my eyes fell to the floor; I felt embarrassed for asking.

How can a movement be good if it does something like this to
a poor innocent woman? Did it destroy rather than create? This cannot be “the riddle of history solved” as Marx put it.

I left the church. And later, I left the Church as a whole. Upon my departure (it wasn't so much a single event as it was three excruciating years of severing friendships, relationships, and theology) I had started to become interested in left politics—something that was taboo for my religious past, but a place that very past had led me to. As Jesus said, “I was hungry and you gave me food.” At the time I was visiting Vera’s church, I would not have called myself a communist or even a socialist. More accurately, I was a liberal who was curious.

But I had friends, mostly online, who touted the c-word (not that one); people who led protests and engaged in political action on a normal basis. Although I could never say it, especially to my Christian friends with whom I’d embarked on this trip, I was interested, intrigued—perhaps even enamored. But I was also intimidated, and even scared. They all seemed so angry. But I now know why: they are angry that the world is starving while food rots in dumpsters; they are angry because eight men own the majority of the world’s wealth while single mothers slave away to eat and sleep; they are angry because people of color are still systematically oppressed.

Still, I could never forget the image of Vera's face and how crushed I felt when she told me what the Communists did to her precious church. At times I would get too close and remember it again and be filled with guilt.

My mind often returns to the old Czech woman who tended to an empty church like it was her dying mother. Part of me wishes I could have done that with my own church, and part of me wonders why she didn’t just let it die. I did not know at the time, but this experience would become a sort of mystical humanizing token that I would take with me everywhere—a reason for me to not give in to the politics that had hurt Vera and her community so much.

Thanks to Vera, the church has since been fully restored. I saw a photograph of it recently and it has been nursed back to health—the red paint as bright as the sun.

It was dusk. I gathered with hundreds of other college students outside of the University Center for the Arts to demonstrate
against white nationalist speaker, Charlie Kirk. A man followed by groups of neo-Nazis.

The night was pregnant with conflict; lit only by the solemn glow of street lamps, the air was a gray cloud.

On the east side of the street people lined up in a sea of red hats that read in panicked white letters: *Make America Great Again*. Many were college kids in cowboy boots or khaki pants and polos. There were older folks too; clad in the same red hats, they lined up like drones into a building designed to be “an exquisite venue for music, theatre, dance, and art where future generations of arts professionals are becoming contributors to the essential vitality of our culture and society and advance knowledge in the arts through discovery, dissemination, teaching, and preservation.”

“Get that cock out of your ear!” one white supremacist gang member yelled toward the mass of black-clad protesters in which I stood. I don’t remember this, but it was in a news article after the event. He yelled in between chants of “No Trump, no KKK, no TPUSA!”

On the west side of the street: mostly younger folks, students, all clad in black, holding signs that read “Fuck White Supremacy” and “No Safe Space for Nazis.” And older folks as well one who had sung “For What It’s Worth” by Buffalo Springfield to us not thirty minutes earlier. “That song was from way back in 1969,” I remember her saying, “and we still have to do this shit.”

A Lakota woman stood in the street in front of us. She held a staff with a deer antler on top and the pieces of a torn-in-half sign: THE CULTURE WAR NEVER ENDED FOR NATIVES.

We yelled for solidarity. We yelled for liberation. We yelled for justice. We yelled for our lives.

I had become those c-word friends I was afraid of. My interest gave way to observation and gave way to participation. I saw behind what I thought was hate and unjustified anger; genuine, empathetic compassion and action. Behind the hard exterior was guts of love. I joined a group that held banquets for the homeless. I saw the stranger being fed—something that I could not say in twenty years of church.

But there is still tension: there is tension of knowing I am going to Thanksgiving dinner in one month with several peo-
ple with whom I share blood; and, had they been there that
night, they would likely have been on the other side of the
street. There is the tension of seeing Vera’s face, hearing her
say, *Those were bad times. We do not talk about that*, and feeling
like I blasphemed her with my political choices. There is the
tension of knowing I know that in every one of us, we hold the
capacity for good and evil. Creation and destruction. And the
tension of not knowing which is which.
My first dance class—the first real one where we weren’t bouncing around in leotards to Vivaldi’s *The Four Seasons*—was when I was eight. The air conditioning blasted, even during an evening in October. This was a different kind of dance, one where I handed over my ballet slippers for leather ones with laces more complex than a labyrinth. We were told to wear shorts and T-shirts, and the complex dance shoes that were two sizes too small so they would break in properly. Goose bumps covered my arms until we started to move.

*Five, six, seven, eight.*

It was my first hour of learning to control my body. I was told to keep my arms glued to my sides and to stand up straight, my upper-body was to remain still. I was to stand on my toes until my feet arched into a crescent, pointing them out at all times. I was told to look at myself in the mirrors surrounding the room, to watch what I did wrong and to fix my posture, my feet, my breathing. We followed a basic rhythm, a skip—one, two, three, up, one, two, three, up—that would soon be a meditation I’d think about before I fell asleep.

Afterwards, we were invited to watch the older girls’ class. It was my first time seeing the way the body could actually move. The women were like soldiers, the way they could lift themselves off the ground without any effort, their upper-bodies completely still. They glided around the room, their feet barely touching the ground before they propelled themselves upwards, again and again. The skips I learned the hour before were nothing in comparison to what these women could do. The way that their ankles looked as if they were going to break but held them up just the same, the way that their collarbones and shoulder bones and rib cages stuck out in a way that was so repulsive, but so gorgeous because they were able to move themselves so flawlessly. It felt so wrong to watch something so juxtaposing.

I wanted it.

*Five, six, seven, eight.*

My life started to pass before me in the dance studio. Tuesdays from 7:00–9:00 p.m., Wednesdays from 6:00–8:00 p.m.,
Thursday from 5:00–7:00 p.m., and Saturdays from 9:00 a.m.–5:00 p.m. I never grew tired of watching people dance, especially myself. I turned into Narcissus, staring at myself in the reflection as I clubbed my feet and lost my appetite, trying to fix every detail.

We were taught to listen for the timing of the music. At first the different types of music were difficult to understand, and I strained myself trying to hear the first four beats.

“You need to learn to hear it,” my instructor said. “Just keep listening.”

Eventually I heard it and even now, listening to the radio, I can always hear the silent one, two, three, four at the beginning of every song like an unspoken language. It locks me in, keeping me with the music until it’s over.

The first four beats were just for me, meant for adrenaline. The fifth was to prepare, the sixth was to point my toe, the seventh was to stand, to present myself. On eight, I sent my body into motion until the end of the music.

Five, six, seven, eight.

My body turned into a tool, something to perform, to be watched, to compete and move with the music. Hours of sweat, ringing ears, and buzzing teeth to look perfect on stage. I watched myself from all angles and slowly I started to look different; my feet changed first.

After a while I stopped cutting my toenails because they would break off on their own. After Saturday classes I would take off my shoes and feel proud because blood was soaked into my socks. As I got better I advanced to hard shoe dances, ones that forced an arch into my foot so deep that I bought inserts for my everyday shoes. I always had my toenails painted because people at school wouldn’t understand why certain ones were purple. I knew I could push myself harder in the winter because no one would ever see the missing nails. Calluses formed with a vengeance.

My ankles slimmed down a bit, but I realized it wasn’t the smallness of the ankles but the enormity of the calves. I loved the line that would separate the muscle from the bone when I would stand on my toes, when I would jump, kick, shuffle my feet. All I wanted was for my legs to lift me higher and do as I told them. Even when a boy in middle school told me my legs were gross because my calves would touch before my ankles
did, I thought of myself as beautiful because I was an object of my own creation.

My thighs stopped moving when I walked. They grew firm and apart. Girls would ask me how I had a thigh gap and “Oh my god what are you doing? You look so good,” and I didn’t understand what they meant because I didn’t want a thigh gap in the first place. I would stand in my bedroom with the door closed, looking at my reflection in the smudged mirror and bounce, watching my muscles keep me still.

I never disliked the muscles that appeared on my stomach because they had a purpose. When I needed power and control from my core, those bumps were there, but when they weren’t in use they smoothed out. I never disliked running my hands over my rib cage and feeling those bumps because it meant that my body was small enough to control, because there was purpose. They showed me how my body could be used to my liking.

When I was ten, I cried in a JCPenney late at night after school because my body had changed in a way that was outside of my control. My mom was standing on the other side of the door, asking me to come out to see if the bra fit. I stared at myself in the dressing room, looking at the wired tourniquet that shouldn’t be necessary. There was no purpose for breasts—they were hindering this fine-tuned body I had manifested. They were forcing me to relearn how to move, how to carry myself when others were watching me on stage. I was never upset by the meaning of them; the “you’re becoming a woman” narrative didn’t upset me the way that it bothered my friends. It was their purpose that upset me because they didn’t have one.

*Five, six, seven, eight.*

My diet was never restrictive. Even after years of separation from it all I can say with confidence that this part of it wasn’t toxic. But everything I put into my body had to have a reason. The day before a performance my diet was bananas, eggs, tomatoes, cucumbers, and yogurt for dessert because none of them would make my stomach bloat on stage. Bananas were my favorite—cut up with a slather of peanut butter on each like a delicacy.

Bananas make me nervous now. Trust me, I know how stupid it sounds.

I didn’t have much of an appetite leading up to competitions, but afterwards I would eat as much as I could without a thought.
because the food never touched me. My mom would comment on how much I ate when I could get myself to do it and I never understood what she meant until I stopped dancing and my reflection changed.

**Five, six, seven, eight.**

Before my first national’s competition, my mom and I spent hours gluing crystals onto my custom-made dress. The dress was spread on the kitchen table, windows open to push the fumes of E6000 outside. The white lights of the kitchen would make us both wired, and there wasn’t a sound besides *Jeopardy* playing on the TV and an occasional crystal hitting the floor.

The dress was white with black and red accents, and slipped over my body like a second skin. The skirt was unmoving, like a cardboard flap resting against my thighs. The sleeves were my favorite, the texture of soft fishnet wire circling around like a painting of snow, a little detail that would go unappreciated by the judges because they would be too far away to see.

I bought new makeup to go with it, and tanning lotion to make my legs stand out in comparison. Every night for a week before competing I’d apply more of the tan to my legs and practice putting my face together; dark red lipstick, smoky eye-shadow, and glued eyelashes would appear and disappear in the vanity mirror.

I had a tiara to accompany my wig—I’d never felt more beautiful.

**Five, six, seven, eight.**

In my freshman year English class in high school, we read *To Kill a Mockingbird*. When describing the relationship between Boo Radley and the rest of the town, my teacher used the word “voyeuristic.” There were snickers, of course, but after she described the definition to us outside of a sexual context I felt like I understood myself so much more than I ever had. I loved watching the beauty of the body, the beauty of how it moved and how it could be used. Even more, I loved knowing that so many people would only ever see this beauty, and never witness the pain of the body weeping when it was off stage.

**Five, six, seven, eight.**

It was my junior year of high school when I realized I could never keep this up. My body was tired, hurting, longing for hibernation. I was always lethargic, trying to balance school, a social life, and dancing. I joined lacrosse to incorporate out of
studio exercise in with being with my friends, but all it did was drain me even more. It became harder to work on my form, to watch myself in the mirrors when I couldn't see clearly; my parents told me I should focus on college applications, my friends told me I should focus on drugs, my boyfriend told me I should focus on him and start using my body for something that actually mattered. None of it would matter if I couldn’t see myself.

Eventually my shoes spent more time in my dance bag than on my feet. I cut down on nights in the studio so I could spend them in bed writing papers and in cars with my friends. I would show up late for Saturday classes to get more sleep so I could move with the music properly. Hours spent practicing at home were replaced with walking the dogs with my dad and holding on to moments with my family before I left them the following year.

One night in September, my mom and I sat at the computer, staring at the registration page for a competition in Longmont.

“I’m not sure if I’m ready,” I said. “I don’t feel prepared; it’ll be a waste of money.”

I confessed this three more times, before three more competitions, before I told her I needed to take a break—it was just supposed to be a break.

My feet stopped performing rhythms the way they were supposed to. I couldn’t get myself in the air long enough to perform a butterfly kick, or focus long enough to learn more complex steps. My lungs weren’t giving me enough air, and my reflection filled my body with disappointment.

I said goodbye to my instructors and my dance friends after my last competition. My dad told me that he’d miss taking me, that he’d miss the familiar faces and the people we’d carpool with. My mom was upset that I wouldn’t perform in another parade or another recital. I was upset because the body in the reflection was no longer mine.

I spent my last year in high school trying to forget about my body; it wasn’t meant for extraordinary things. It wasn’t meant to jump two feet in the air, to create rhythms, to be watched on stage by faceless people. It was just a body, a vessel to carry the being of me inside of it, not a work of art or a machine. All too quickly my body started to change, hiding away bones like precious artifacts under wrapping of skin and fat. Muscles dis-
appeared, lines blurred. My masterpiece slowly erased itself by my own doing.

One night during the summer before college, I tried on my dress just to see how it looked. I put on the lipstick, brushed my eyes with powder that was intense enough to see at a distance. I bobby-pinned my wig on and placed the tiara carefully in place. I slipped the dress on, running my fingers over the sleeves and feeling the crystals around the skirt. I tugged at the zipper in the back, and it fought against me halfway up. I no longer fit in my second skin, and I watched as the reflection of a dancer sat on the ground and cried.

*Five, six, seven, eight.*

Once I got to college, I tried to take back control of my body when I felt like I was at my worst, something I could fix when nothing else seemed repairable. I spent hours at the gym, running ten miles a day and pushing myself until I felt my teeth buzzing and could taste copper on my tongue. I scared myself because my body wasn’t going back to the way it once was—it could never go back to what it once was. It fought against me, keeping my masterpiece hidden from view.

I met a girl in one of my classes who had a shirt on from a competition I used to regularly compete in. I asked her about it, and we talked about the schools we competed with and how far up the food chain we got. We talked about how our feet still have nerve damage and how others have to point out when we stub our toes, and that Kanye moment from a mom during the nationals competition in San Diego. Then, laughing, she asked me,

“When was the first time you remember hating your body?”
I stand like a statue in front of the mirror, my eyes tracing the lines and curves and rolls of my figure. I remember the first time I did this; disgust suffocated me as my organs twisted themselves into knots of imperfection. My empty stomach used to feel so heavy. I remember the first time I decided I wasn’t worthy of feeling the light of happiness.

It is December of seventh grade. Snowflakes fall softly outside the window, frosting the trees with their ice. I am watching some cheesy rom-com at Iris’s house. I can smell her mother cooking dinner downstairs. Rachael and Iris lay their heads on Lil’ Bear, the biggest and fluffiest dog in all of suburbia. We laugh and we cry and we are together. I miss these days more than anything. The days of innocence. It wasn’t long after this night that the sun rose on a day that would change everything forever.

This day, during our typical post-school hangout at Iris’s house, Iris pulls out a book with a mint blue cover and the face of a girl on it. It looks frosted like her window panes or a sheet of ice.

“We are starting a book club,” she says.
“What is the book?”
“It’s called Wintergirls.”

Wintergirls by Laurie Halse Anderson is a story about two best friends who suffer from eating disorders and how that suffering ends with one of them dead. The book is written with the inner monologue of the friend who survives, and gives the reader the passenger seat in the vehicle of self-hatred. The way she thought and felt about food and eating and calories and living and dying worked its way into each of our heads like a worm in an apple and began devouring us from the inside out. We, too, wanted to be less. We wanted to be her.

This emptiness became a way we connected, invisible threads linking us together. We substituted rom-coms for investigating
the thinner side of the Internet, looking for tips on how to disappear. We replaced dinners at Iris’s house for nights spent bragging about how well we avoided the temptation of food that day. We replaced the comfort of Lil’ Bear’s presence with hourly reminders set in our phones so we would never forget what ugly, fat pieces of shit we were. We laughed less and we cried more and we were still together—but the innocence had left us.

Every day my mom would make me a quesadilla to take to school for lunch. Every day in the cafeteria I would give it to my friend Chris because I wasn’t allowed the luxury of eating that melted, cheesy goodness.

My phone buzzes at the lunch table as I sip my water: *You are disgusting. Don’t even THINK about eating. You deserve to die.*

I look around at the other faces in the room. Talking, laughing, eating. I excuse myself to go to the bathroom, the one that isn’t off of the main hallway so it is rarely populated, and choose a stall to sit in and cry.

When the lunch bell rings, I dry my eyes and go to algebra. I sit next to people I consider my friends. Stomach growling, heart aching, and no one noticing. This only deepens the pain. Those threads tying me to Rachael and Iris were pulling me away from everyone else in my life. I had a secret that was consuming me from the inside out, and I just wanted someone, anyone to tell me, “*Stop! I love you! Let me help you!*” But no one ever did, and I couldn’t get myself to admit to anyone the disgusting thing I was doing to myself.

My phone buzzes: *No one would care if you died. No one actually likes you. You are not worthy of love. You are better off dead.*

The suburban streets are blanketed in snow—soft and bleak. My window panes are frosted and cool the light as it streams into my room onto my unconscious eyelids. I shift under my heated blanket and groggily rub the sleep out of my eyes. My phone buzzes and I reach for it, ready to start my day with a reminder
of my unworthiness. When the screen lights up, I am assaulted with something different. It is a message from Rachael. It reads: Iris was admitted to the hospital last night.

My jaw clenches and my vacant stomach flips over inside me. My face turns hot as emotion pools behind my eyes and waters my cheeks. What does this mean? Am I next?

This was the moment when the consequences of my habits were shoved down my throat like a hot poker, forcing me to acknowledge them. I didn’t feel like I could fill the void so I was going to let it swallow me whole. Iris had let it and it wasn’t romantic anymore. The reality of this thing wasn’t as pretty as the words of Laurie Halse Anderson.

Up until this point we were all in competition with each other of who could make themselves suffer the most, but those invisible threads attaching us meant that if one of us went down, we would all go down together. Our lives were a high-stakes sack race to the finish line where the grim reaper waited patiently with our prize. I lay there thinking about Iris in that hospital room all alone, and cold, and empty. I’m not sure I want to win anymore. I’m not sure I want those threads connecting our fates. I’m not sure what I want, but it isn’t dressed in black and dripping in death.

I had seen myself as an indestructible vessel who could continue to be emptied over and over forever. Dying didn’t seem like a goal I could ever attain. We were all supposed to be indestructible.

Until we weren’t.

Until death began knocking on our doors and revealed his face as a warning.

I lock my phone.

I pull the hollow shell of my body out of the bed and down the stairs.
I drag the pale, thin skin of my feet across the cool tile of my kitchen and open the freezer.

I let the ice prickle at my skin as I reach in and pull out a box of waffles.

I let the smell of it warming in the toaster work its way through my nostrils and into the depths of me.

I let the butter melt and the syrup pool in the crevices of the waffle.

I let the sticky warmth pass my lips and meet my tongue.

I let myself swallow.

I let myself think about being alive.

I let myself try to be okay.

*Today, I will be okay.*

My healing isn’t simple and it isn’t always linear. There are always going to be bumps in the road and times when I fall back into the pits of despair and darkness. Habits are hard to break. All that matters is the effort of continuously trying to climb back out of those pits. This isn’t a common cold that you can take antibiotics for and be back to normal in a few days; instead, this is a parasite that works its way into your very core and becomes a part of you, turning you against yourself. The removal process isn’t simple and it requires more patience and forgiveness than you think you have in you. But it is worth the effort.

No one in this world is more equipped to torture you than yourself. No one is this world is more capable of loving you than yourself.

As I stand in front of this mirror, face to face with myself, I choose to love instead of hate.

I choose to appreciate instead of scrutinize.
I choose to grow into who I want to be instead of trying to shrink into nothingness.

I choose to believe that I am enough and that I am worthy, even on the bad days.

I choose life.

I choose me.
Noah Ruiz

Yard Sale

Light. There’s a bit of light filtering through the four glass panes set into the backdoor. It’s not quite golden, but it’s warm, and very clear. Illuminating.

I’m in my childhood home, standing at the end of the hallway just outside my bedroom. I called this house “Elmhurst,” a name I learn to appreciate only after I realize the power that names have and the immense tranquility which they can, by consequence, conjure. The air is still but glimmering dust drifts about in eddies. I can’t remember if I share my room at this time. Perhaps I do, but in this moment I am unencumbered because I know no one is home.

I close my door behind me and follow the light. The coolness of the hallway invites me to tread the soft carpet. I set my toes down first, then the ball of my foot, then the sole and the heel. In this fashion, I pad forward in white Gold Toe socks. The floor creaks unevenly beneath me as I walk. The end of the hallway runs headlong into a wall. To the right, the carpet turns to a browning linoleum—above, my mother’s kitchen, an old table and six chairs, some missing a spindle or two. To the left, the gray living room walls rise high and slant toward a vaulted ceiling. I go left.

The living room was, to my mind, stuffed—you could smell textile and stained wood furniture and musty particleboard in the air. It had an unused, antique oak table; it must have weighed eight hundred pounds and claimed the bulk of the room. Ringed around this table were six upholstered chairs with sickly patterned turquoise seat cushions. An aging mantelpiece loomed above, the scaffold for six or eight stained wooden photo frames, thinly coated with dust—a few ancient family portraits.

But I am not here for the living room. I am here because the living room houses the backdoor. Set into the corner, the door’s four-paneled window offers safe passage to the sun’s brilliant yellow rays, which twinkle silently and seem to paint the otherwise pallid, musty air of the room with a glistening fullness of color.

When I’m thinking about my life at this house, I see the interior spaces like they’re corners of my own mind. Each is
composited from many different times when I encountered the space—as a living, breathing, gasping child. Now, they live only in my memory. They are smudged together, impressionistic. I can still feel a sanctity, a comfortableness, a security—a sense that feels strongest once I step through my memories, through that glass-paned backdoor where the backyard awaits.

If you step through the door, there’s a small porch and a concrete step. If you look out to the right, you’ll see a sheltered cedar deck. I spent many summer evenings under the gazebo, sitting down on its frugal bench made from just two planks of two-by-four, contemplating the intensity of a broiling thunderstorm above—how the sagging old structure was the only thing protecting my livelihood from the limitless fury reigning above.

This step also bleeds into a concrete patio to the left, and from there out into a grassy yard with two tall pine trees that always wore pale, sickly needles, a turquoise plumage that never changed color or countenance with the seasons. As a child, I called them “ponderosa” but later I discovered they are actually blue spruce trees.

On this step, it smells most immediately of the aging cedar deck. Then, pine needles—the ones that poisoned the soil—encircling the base of both pine trees with an acidic dirt patch. My mother’s wind chimes bangle about at the far corner of the deck, sounding quite like tinnitus long before my ears have learned to know the endless whine and ring on their own.

Later in my tenure there, it would smell like unchecked quantities of dog shit, like zucchini squash flowers and vegetable pollen. At one point there was a trampoline, which for years afterward left its own bald patch of dirt. And, with it, a tetherball pole. In those days, I used to fantasize about having my own skate park in the backyard—a few scooped out ramps and rails, maybe a half-pipe. The chicken coop, the shortest of our backyard mainstays, was carted off after just four months of habitation when we moved out of this house for the second time.

It amazes me how much I experience in this backyard—and how much I have yet to experience. It is a place of sanctuary, a place for self-discovery and childish wonder. Most of all, it is an outdoor space for privacy—a rare and beautiful thing in my small suburban world, a world which even then seemed over-
run with the commerce and the commute. Yes, even then there was a lurking sense of chaos; perhaps my backyard was safe, but there was a menace latent in the outside world and I was acutely aware of that fact.

Perhaps it was something to do with the shiny cars that lined every street, the “STATE LAW: STOP FOR PEDESTRIAN” signs by the crosswalks, or the long, twilit shadows on my walks home from school in the autumn. Or, it could be the moral relativism and the malignant neighbors, which became harder and harder to ignore as I grew up and began to understand the effect that even our smallest actions can have. I began writing long essays in an attempt to discover the root cause of what I intuitively felt was wrong about this outside world. I wrote about how people seemed to lack empathy. I wrote then from a great distance, safe in my room, locked far away from the objects of my examinations, in the smallest voice possible with the greatest humility. I shared these musings with no one.

But things are a little different now. I write now because these images of Elmhurst haunt me. I write because I can no longer ignore the outside world. My private world has been invaded by the sickness of the exterior world. Though I sit now writing this in my private bedroom, it is compromised and I have no recourse. I am confined by circumstance, by unfortunate proximities, by the warring intentions of others. This is a room which has made me hate my things and my life. And there is no escape from this room, because I don’t have a backyard anymore.

Now, I live in a unit called I-79. It has three bedrooms. I live in the second, sharing the living room, kitchen, and porch with two strangers who could not have more in common with the dog flea.

They are seen for only fleeting moments—flitting between food, trash, toilet, greasy controllers, blackened couch cushions, and the university. They keep all the blinds closed, and pin up dark, sagging sheets over the window just in case any light suffuses through the crinkling, white aluminum strips. They prefer to keep the shower door wide open into the hallway, even though the shower is infested with mildew and black mold, the ceiling rotten and paint bubbling from underneath.

As for the main rooms of the interior: walls, chairs, couch
armrests, carpet—all rotten. Or (god forbid) the sticky light switches coated with . . . gum? Stuck with lint? . . . and food smeared who-knows-when? I can’t help but gag and tiptoe whenever I leave the unit through the living room. Sometimes I find myself filtering my breath through my shirt when I pass through a room. Once, I used a napkin to open the front door.

Though we have a designated kitchen, the fleas use every space and every place to ingest the sloppy chow they’ve heaped onto those green paper plates. I’m amazed they are comfortable enough to set their plates of food onto that living room carpet, which radiates an unconscionable musty, black smell. They eat with disposable cutlery and languorous nonchalance, their plates or their trash always seated next to them on the couch in the middle cushion that I’m technically paying to rent.

Though we have a porch with a beautiful view of the mountains, I cannot bring myself to use it. These two dust mites often retire there after school, idly smoking marijuana out of glass bongs they’ve dug out of the dumpster. Like the other spaces they inhabit, my every instinct urges me not to linger there. Whenever I try to enjoy the view from the porch, I find myself watching and listening in case one of them comes home.

Now I use slippers so my socks don’t blacken walking in the common areas of my apartment. I do this because the filth and squalor of each dog flea’s room spills forth into the hallways, the entryway, and the living room. To preserve my trust in my own possessions, I keep all of them in my room. But there’s not enough space for all my books or CDs in the closet. I find myself moving boxes and chairs, bass guitars, coats and T-shirts, furniture, and blankets just to access my bed, my closet, or my desk. There’s simply not enough room in this chicken coop for me to think. My throat hurts from all the sneezing and coughing—because there’s not enough room to breathe. And without a backyard, I can’t go outside to relinquish my self-inflicted tensions to the stream of unconscious being.

My room lacks not just space, but also suffers from the filth of a previous tenant (one of the dog flea’s siblings used to occupy my room, I was told without apology). When I write at my keyboard at my desk, I have to place tissues down so my wrists don’t collect sweaty, sticky, sickly grime. I wiped down my walls with vinegar water, and I sprayed my bed and the upholstery on my chair with fifty percent isopropyl alcohol, leav-
ing it to evaporate for hours. I used four boxes of baking soda on my carpet, but it didn’t help with the smell. Nor did it help with the quarter-sized spot where someone melted chocolate into the rug, which I found hidden under the stained, sagging box spring I call my bed.

I try not to see myself as subject to these transgressions. I step around them and theirs, and they step around me and mine. I have forsaken all use of the apartment outside of my bedroom, the only room where I have the right to say, “No.” Which means I spend all my time shut away in my room or outside, away from the stinking, moldy apartment.

It wasn’t long before I realized I would have to adopt the local streets and parks to satisfy my cravings for some semblance of peaceful, private space. And at first, it worked. I spent days and nights walking through City Park. I would bird-watch, turtle-watch, sky-watch. I would strap my acoustic bass guitar around my back and go out walking while I practiced. I would take breaks and then go on more walks. When that lost my interest, I would spend time in other people’s apartments. Their spaces were cleaner, with breathable air, spaces where I could relax my shoulders from their state of semipermanent contraction.

Inevitably I found myself entering I-79 only to grab something so I could use it elsewhere—perhaps a different bass, or an Aerobie Frisbee. I was lucky; it was summer and the weather was great. I enjoyed sunshine, birds migrating in droves, the wind and rustling leaves and the scarred, white bark of aspen trees. But I knew even then that the winter was only a few months away.

What I did not expect is that I would become disillusioned with the spaces Fort Collins had to offer even before the winter came. I began to find evidence that this outside world had been compromised too. Over the course of that summer, the city seemed to take on a dark duality. City Park and Plum Street and CSU’s campus were at once pastoral and enchanting, and then suddenly they felt like war zones. The civilians were friendly and open at first, but soon I understood them to be combatants in a violent conflict. There is evidence for a kind of terrorism on these streets—and when I discuss this with other locals, the debris of this invisible civil war seems to escape notice. When
my disappointment is not reflected in their eyes as I speak, I
know I am talking to a part of the problem rather than part of
the solution.

There's broken vodka bottles and splinters from 1990's
cheapest, dullest red furniture strewn across the sidewalks I
use to walk to classes. There's death and decadence around ev-
ery curve on Plum—whether it's another squirrel run over by a
Friday-nighter; shards of glass and broken pieces of plastic car
bumper at the four-way stop down the street; or the detritus
leftover from traffic collisions which were not all accidents.

That's some of the empirical evidence, the stuff you can see
with your own eyes. If you pay enough attention. But academics
say that logos is not enough on its own. Don't worry: I have my
anecdotal evidence too.

Just last night, I was walking on CSU's campus. It is just
down the street from me, a thirty-minute walk. I tend to walk
there about half of the time I go walking, because it's closer to
a backyard than anywhere else I can go—except maybe for City
Park. As I was traversing a pedestrian crossing outside Moby
Arena, two motorcyclists were at a four-way stop, looking to
turn left into Moby's parking lot. I made it halfway across the
white-striped crosswalk, but I had my eyes on the motorists for
the sake of safety. I'm glad that I did.

It felt like I was watching the event as a disembodied entity,
seeing through my own eyes but physically disconnected. I saw
one of the motorcyclists crank his throttle and turn towards
me. At first, I did not think I was in any danger. But he seemed
to get closer and closer. Reason failing, my instincts took over
and I jumped out of the way, though I still had trouble realiz-
ing that the motorist's action was deliberate. That was clarified
when the second motorcyclist rushed me. I found myself jump-
ing out of the way of yet another motorcyclist with a red helmet
and a red bike; body poised, in control, head down. I imagine
their jaws were clenched inside those shiny, red helmets, eyes
narrowed, brows trying to hook together and furrow in con-
sternation, determination. If I hadn't jumped out of the way
twice, once for each motorist, there's no question I would have
been struck. They were not the kind who lost when they played
“chicken.”

I was shaking and I felt my vision tunnel. I whipped around
because I didn’t know—I couldn’t tell—was this real? Though I
was standing on a highly populated street, no one had stopped, looked, or expressed any kind of concern for what had happened to me.

And what did I see?

One of the motorists stopped his bike. He turned around and jeered at me. His shouts were muffled in his helmet, so he took it off and resumed. He wanted to pick a fight—he said that he wanted to know what I was going to do about it. He wanted me to say something angry, so he could rush me with his motorcycle again.

Why didn't I?

There's something going on in this backyard of mine. There's something going on back there, and I think it's time someone said something about it. You may not believe me, but I've seen it on people's faces on the bus. I've heard it, shouted in manic tones from distant apartment balconies at the District. I know, because I've been hit by cars and almost hit by cars and nearly missed by cars, struck by bicyclists, threatened by drivers, threatened by other students and strangers and fellow musicians.

It's not restricted to the streets. Don't fall for that. It goes everywhere, carried on our bodies as we walk in public, transmitted like an infectious venereal disease. Gonorrhea of the mind. There are students who think I'm condemned to hell and need to repent. There are students who think my political views are not just different, but intrinsically wrong and unforgivable, that the system should punish me or censor me. There's a fifty-five-year-old guitarist I once met—he lives just south of Fort Collins on a quiet, dark suburban street lined with shiny new cars—who said I owned the wrong bass guitar. He told me with absolute certainty that young Mexican men compete to impregnate as many white women as possible, with no intentions of supporting any of the children. In his next breath he told me I needed to go home and practice the modes of the major scale before we could possibly work together.

It's inconceivable to me, but it is nonetheless true: there are people out there who are deeply concerned with the activities of others. They want you to act a certain way, think a certain way—make love a certain way. There's someone in North Korea that cares how you live. He wants your worship. He is plotting
to spread his power base through a cultist, pseudo religious ideology with him at the epicentre. There’s my mother, who turned around in her kitchen and said, “I’m just glad you didn’t come home with a guy instead. I just couldn’t picture that.” There’s these girls, the downstairs neighbors that live beneath my girlfriend’s apartment, who would come up—during dinner most times, but once during a blizzard—and bang all over the door and the windows, trying to control the volume of my music.

I wish I could tell them—these people, these ideas, these forces—what it means to me to be free. I wish I could explain to them that they’d be better off if they didn’t try to control others. I wish I could have explained to them why I fought so hard against these things; why I did my best not to open the door, not to yield, not to lower the volume and resume my meal sheepishly each time the girls from downstairs came upstairs to harass us; why I don’t follow ideologies; or why “I bet, Mom, that you’d be able to picture me with another guy if I was gay.” I wish I could tell my roommates, the dog fleas, to use the shower fan for longer so the black mold I’ve worked so hard to eradicate doesn’t come back.

Perhaps you will listen if I explain now, where on this safe, white page I can scrupulously illustrate. I will try to explain this using the case of the neighbor girls:

There were maybe four times that those neighbor girls came upstairs to issue their noise complaint through the walls and doors and windows of my girlfriend’s apartment. I most vividly remember the time that they came during a record-setting blizzard. The wind was well above seventy five miles per hour, and visibility was just a few paces afar. The temperature was thirty below freezing. That’s on the outside; on the inside of the apartment, I was busy helping Kelly cook in her kitchen. The windows were fogging and pots and pans clanged in our able hands as we began working. After the raw meat was handled and the water set to boil, I stepped into the living room to play some music. I plugged in the twenty-dollar Sony desktop speakers I inherited from my father when he moved out the day after my eighteenth birthday. I set the volume higher than normal; I was about to play an album that had lower peak volume than the average, and I intended the offset to even out to an appropriate volume.
The first track is slow to start. It takes about two minutes to reach full volume. Four minutes into that first track, there came a thunderous knock on the door—three quick raps—then the sound of wind, the faint crunch of boots shuffling through fresh snow drifts just outside the door. Kelly and I look to the door, but we already know who is there and why.

I don’t have to tell her that I don’t want to open the door, that there’s no point. I don’t have to tell her that we are under no obligation to speak to someone just because they knock on the door. I don’t have to tell her that we aren’t obligated to turn down the moderate volume on our moderately sized speakers at eleven o’clock in the morning during a blizzard. I don’t have to tell her because we’ve already discussed this the last three times it happened at dinner time. I’ve already explained to her that her neighbors have no power over us. *We owe them nothing*, I say, *and they can take nothing from us through such a visitation.*

But we’ve made a fatal mistake with our isolationist policy. I feel a moment of panic when I realize that this time, the blinds on the window facing the front porch are wide open. I suddenly expected a small frame to lean into its fogging windowpane and peer through the glass into our home. “Kelly,” I say, but she is already moving to the window, closing the blinds. Just as they sink to the bottom of the window frame, I catch a glimpse of the neighbor girl, who has also moved to the window to peer in just as I had feared. She caught a glimpse of us too, and I suppose that’s why she continued knocking—harder now—yelling, “I know you guys are in there!” soon joined by the much deeper sound of boots kicking at the bottom of the door. Soon, she is joined by her two roommates—the wood floor underneath our feet began shaking and thudding, and even the window began sounding with loud knocks. Together they began shouting and kicking, harder and harder, more intense by the minute. By now, the second track of the album is playing, and suddenly I felt that the air was unnervingly full: I had not turned the music down, and the whipping winds of the blizzard outside did not recede or abate, nor the knocking, kicking, or shouting. The whole air pulsed with sound and movement.

In this moment I suddenly realized that I was wrong. The neighbors did have recourse, after all. There was no safety behind the locked door. Without even entering the apartment,
these strangers to whom I owed nothing had managed to compromise what little peace I could hope to find when taking shelter from a winter storm with a loved one.

If it was peace of mind they wanted, they broke their own cause with the harassing noises and behavior. No. I rather think that they wanted to feel like they could make us open that door. That they could make us talk to them. That we could be coerced into hearing their piece about how Jimi Hendrix was too loud.

Control.

I feel this deserves more explanation. I will try to tell it to you as I often experience these considerations myself: abstract, impressionistic, smudged together. I will begin by explaining why I was so adamant about not turning down the volume.

It seems unlikely, but the place to begin is with the music that I played. The album that I refused to turn down was Jimi Hendrix’s Band of Gypsys—an album recorded live at the Fillmore East in New York by three musicians: Jimi Hendrix, Billy Cox, and Buddy Miles. Jimi was a Vietnam War veteran. So was his bassist, Billy. So was his drummer, Buddy. They made soul music. Psychedelic rock.

Or, to put it another way: they were three disillusioned African American vets who formed a band to make anti-war protest songs, a relatively new but nonetheless politically salient genre. At the time, some protest songs had enough influence on popular opinion that they resulted in changes in public policy. They certainly had an influence on public opinion and morale about the war. The government and the press and the media tried to censor, sue, and sabotage the reputations of some of these artists. The political risks, the fame, and the easy access to drugs were a stress cocktail. Hendrix had three nervous breakdowns. There are still pressures to the job today, but there was a special edge to the pressures faced by artists like Jimi. This sometimes resulted in death. Jimi Hendrix was just one of many. So it goes.

In the opening of track two on the album, Hendrix is tuning his guitar. The crowd is bubbling and chattering. It was New Year’s Eve, and the year was 1970. At this time, Hendrix’s show is construed in popular criticisms as a spectacle for the crowd, rather than a musical experience or a political protest. This is tragically inaccurate: the main rhythm of the song Jimi is about to introduce sounds like machine-gun fire. Buddy Miles uses his
snare—*rata-tata-rata-tat-a-tat*! Jimi palm-mutes and carves out the same rhythm with his plectrum, holding it sideways. The guitar he’s playing is a right-handed guitar, hung upside down, with the strings strung backward. Later in the song, Jimi uses feedback from his amplifiers and his whammy bar to simulate the sounds of warfare—airplanes dive-bombing, screams, more gunfire. In later years, these dimensions of Hendrix’s work will be obscured and forgotten by the children of this fragile youth movement. But Hendrix doesn’t know that. He dies within months after this recording was taped.

So it’s New Year’s Eve, and the band just finished playing track one, “Who Knows.” Hendrix leans into his mic. “Happy New Year, first of all, everybody,” he says, and he laughs, adding, “I hope you have a million or two million more of them . . . if we can get over this summer.” There’s a slight silence in the tape, but it’s been cut out for the CD version—the one I own—so there’s only moment’s pause before Hendrix’s voice comes over the mic again.

“We’d like to dedicate this one—uh, to this scene that’s going on—to all the soldiers fighting in Chicago, and Milwaukee, and New York [and] Vietnam.”

The core of this statement refers to a sinister reality of Hendrix’s time. Whenever I listen to this opening, I have a discussion with myself: how sick and convulsed must a country be to have soldiers occupying its own major cities? More importantly, I consider how the biological and intellectual children of this youth movement—you, me, us, and yes, even them—we forget. It was not so long ago. We are not as far removed from that reality as we think.

While slightly different than soldiers stationed in inner cities, I won’t spare this example: in Hendrix’s time, it was considered, worldwide, to be a tyrannical occupation for police or soldiers to be deployed to a university campus. When it happened in the United States—or in France, or in Czechoslovakia, or in Mexico, all in 1968—it was met with outcry. People thought the entire world was convulsed with revolution.

Things are a little different now. I don’t see soldiers in my forays throughout the city. On the other hand, I do see two or three cops on school grounds. And, a few on the way back. Now, we’ve got our own police station on the grounds, working independently from the city police force. Last summer, I got two
texts from the auto-generated police bulletins—one from Fort Collins municipal, one from Colorado State University Police Department. They told me that a man in a red sedan went to Moby Stadium parking lot and showed his penis to three groups of people—one group at a time, but all before noon.

When I think about this police department situation, or the man in the red sedan, I hear notes of trespass, exposure, invasion. In fact, for most people, these two phenomena seem to explain each other’s presence. One is seen as the antithesis of the other. But I can tell without verifying that if I were to hum the tunes that justify these behaviors, they would both be in the key of decadence. I know even before I mention this to others that they will wonder why I’m not concerned about “safety” in the community. It’s not hard to see why this community has sold its own backyard, out of fear.

It’s like I said. There’s something wrong. In 1970, Hendrix points out to that crowd in the Fillmore East in New York that roller skates shared the sidewalk with rubber combat boots just a few hundred miles away. Today, I still walk regularly through the streets of Fort Collins, musing as if it’s my own private backyard and not a yard that I share with 170,000 other people. And while I notice all the little things wrong with my world, I feel as though it’s too late—that the damage is too far gone, much more than I can combat with my art and my writing.

But while I’m cooking my lunch, weathering the shouting and banging and kicking of those neighbors, and listening to the opening of track two—“Machine Gun,” as this Band of Gypsys song is called—I am not thinking about how this moment in time is a product of many important temporal intersections, or how many dimensions of meaning can be split open to the core by this one forty-five minute album, or by any of the other albums I could have played, or podcasts, or lectures, or educational videos. Instead, I’m shaking. My body, my system, is shocked with adrenaline. I am afraid to go outside for that walk I promised Kelly after we ate our spaghetti because there’s aggressive, controlling, primate apes outside my door, and what they want is to take away my mind, my soul, my art, my freedom.

For a while it seemed like they wouldn’t go away until we opened the door and allowed them to say their piece. Eventually, the noises and the shouting and the banging cease. Kelly and I briefly debate: resolved; bringing some kind of bludgeon
with us outside is wise, in case the girls downstairs are waiting up for us. The resolution is negated because of pragmatism: we don’t have a bludgeon. So we step cautiously outside, fearful, scanning everything. We are surprised to find no one.

It seems like you could pull apart all the strands of my life and each would contain at least one thread of this kind. Each of these threads is like a poisoned seed from which a bramble thicket spawns; a living, moving, ruthless creature that hunger’s only for dominance over something it can never have, nor ever understand. It just grasps and grasps. It knows no trespass, does not suffer from overexposure. I wonder if it is even something that can be eradicated.

Though I say this, I understand that my life story is incomplete. More practically put: I’m young, and I haven’t seen the full scope of things. I don’t really know how it’s all going to play out for me. But I think at the end of it all, if you were to tell of my life in a narrative, you might find more bramble than twine tied up in the threading. At minimum, I would expect the ratio to be subtle, but present. In fact, if you read anyone’s biography you might find this same unsettling undercurrent. If you read history books, personal accounts, letters, or diaries, more often than not you discover some kind of struggle taking place on the page to make sense of an apparent incompatibility with the world at large.

So why bother? Why go outside? Why participate in the world at all, if inevitably its poisons seep into the very fabric of our being?

There might be an answer.

Let’s take Bruce Lee for example. When I think of these things, Lee comes to mind. I think his life is immense and important, yet also insignificant. I think his life makes a good case study for what I’m talking about.

He had trouble sleeping for many nights. Maybe it was the pressure. After all, most of the highly successful martial arts movies he had made with a Japanese director, who angered Lee and made him uncomfortable by continually making a point about Lee’s Chinese ethnic background. The director also made a point of working Japanese-Chinese ethnic conflicts into the script. In one scene, Lee’s character is prevented from entering an upscale garden when a posted guard points to a sign that
reads, “NO DOGS AND CHINESE ALLOWED,” once in English and again in Mandarin.

Lee needed something so he could finally get a handle on his sleep. He took sleeping pills that he was allergic to. Not that he knew. While he slept, his brain swelled until it crushed itself inside the confines of his cranial cavity. He was thirty-two years old. The coroner listed his official cause of death “Death by Misadventure.” Legally speaking, this refers to a kind of death “primarily attributed to an accident that occurred due to a risk that was taken voluntarily.”

This is how we will all die. Whether we think we are in control or not. If you’re paying attention, then that is all the information you will need to decide how to live your life—no matter whose backyard you live in.
Jesse Sanders

Hallways

If the meningitis had killed me, everything would have been perfect.

I don’t know where this thought originated, and I’ve been unable to remove it from my mind since I recovered from the infection back in December of 2016. The thought fires across synapse to synapse, slowly gaining width and extent, before it finally appears flashing inside my retinas: articulate, convincing, and unignorable even with my eyes held shut. Oftentimes I’ll let it stay, like a film left on in a vacant bedroom, allowing it to say its piece subconsciously while I focus on more immediate things. But sometimes (perhaps more than I would like) I sit on that couch, close the door, turn off the lights, grab an assortment of snacks, and I watch that film. And when the credits finally roll, I don’t know how to exit the room.

The main rationale of the thought is this: never will I have another opportunity to die as flawlessly as then. I don’t want to sound ungrateful. In no way do I mean to promote the idea that my life isn’t worth living, that I’m unhappy I survived, or any grandiose message that nonexistence is superior to being alive. It’s more that I feel perpetually uncomfortable and foreign now to a life I was once perfectly welded into. It’s as if I just narrowly missed a bus: a bus perfectly scheduled with all the stops, turns, and detours to craft my destined life. And now I’m sitting and waiting for that fateful vehicle to return again and it’s becoming clear that it’s never coming back.

The week I should have died was a finals week, a week that consistently stands as the sole week of classes in which I’m actually early to class. In the far recesses of my mind, I can just make out the evening.

My roommate Nate, a curly blond haired menace to society, yelled out to me from upstairs to declare he was now leaving, “For real this time, with or without you!”

I shot out of bed, threw on my backpack (then pinless and without color) and chased behind him, my shoes in hand, out to his crimson Toyota Highlander. Nate immediately blasted the defroster, but began driving before any significant thawing had
occurred. And after a stroke of luck with parking, we entered our campus Liberal Arts building.

We began taking off our jackets, mittens, and hats, letting the heat of the building dissipate the icy cold that had stowed away with us. I looked down the hallway and saw rows of students sitting in sparse groups, leaning on bland white walls, napping in corners, and studying with bowed heads almost becoming one with their textbooks. What I saw most were serious and anxious faces. I shot a quick smile to Nate and we began heading to my classroom: he parting the educational sea of undergraduates and I giving out ecstatic high fives, pats on the back, “good luck”s to those deep in studying, and “stay positive”s to anyone I sensed full of worry and concern.

I can’t remember what grades I or Nate got on our exams, mostly because the day after was far more cognitively consuming. I don’t want to dramatize my sickness or give it any theatrical ordeal, so I’ll just say as plainly as possible what happened. This is also a good idea because what I do remember is very fragmented, and intensely so.

The first thing that came about was coldness. An unnatural coldness that no amount of layering, heaters, bedsheets, or jackets could subside.

“I’m cold,” I said confusingly to a co-worker when it first struck.

“Yeah, me too,” they replied, sneaking a glance at our manager, “Lisa never turns the heat above seventy degrees.”

“No, I mean I’m really cold, like, in a . . . ” I was interrupted by my table’s food being ready to be walked to the table. “Just a second, lemme run this,” I say as I uncross my arms, leave the corner, and deliver the food to the table.

That’s around when my strength gave out. I’m known among my co-workers to be able to lift trays stacked high with dishes above my head on the very ends of my fingers, but when I tried to lift a tray with only two or three plates my arms suddenly refused to break gravity. Rather than extend above my body the tray fell towards the ground and I stared blankly at the odd collection of shrimp, straws, napkins, and pasta sprawled out across the floor. I was at a complete loss for words, not because the situation was so surprising and sudden, but because my brain now felt too large for my skull, as if my brain were pushing out memories, assurances, promises, tendencies, and
reasonings with its every pulsating expanse. I asked to be let home early.

Upon returning home I dressed for thermodynamic war: a short sleeve t-shirt under a gray long sleeve under a swollen sweater under a cotton hoodie under a Columbia jacket under a crochet blanket under an inky black comforter.

“What’s wrong?” my upstairs roommate Austin said peering through the crack with a lit up PS4 controller in hand.

“nothing, i’m fine, i’m just cold,” I slurred into my pillow. I didn’t look up until I realized he wasn’t leaving. “I think I just have a migraine coming on, gonna try to sleep it away before it gets any worse. Don’t worry.”

That was around eight o’clock, and it was around nine that I first noticed I was sweating profusely. My hair was damp, flat, and mossy. My hands were clammy. My forehead was aflame, like a kettle left screaming on a burner. But any instance of removing a layer of clothing or bed sheet produced reverberating shots of frost on any skin left barer than it previously was. I started to panic. I began talking to myself: asking open questions, reassuring myself, sobbing, contemplating an emergency room visit. Then I started praying.

“Oh sweet Jesus, God, please help me. Please, please, help me. Help me fall asleep. Make this go away. I don’t know what’s going on.”

The incessant praying made me panic more. This is real, and this is serious, I remember admitting to myself around nine thirty. Survival instincts kicked in and I reached for my phone. The light of which was excruciatingly overbearing. Each screen change, each dial tone, each animation on-screen hammered into my skull and caused me to wince, squint my eyes, and shudder. It was probably a really pitiful sight to witness.

I called my parents. No answer. I left a voicemail my mother says “scarred her for life.” I called Nate. No answer. I left a voicemail explaining the situation and asking him to come check on me when he got home. I called my sister, and within seconds of hearing my voice she told me to go to the emergency room. Agitated, scared, and acute, I listed off my excuses curtly and unemotionally: not enough money, this isn’t that bad, the only roommate at home couldn’t drive, and an ambulance was out of the question. She said the least I could do was contact
“Ask-A-Nurse Hotline,” a free service where you can describe your symptoms and get broad medical advice. I called, and they were closed. I tossed my phone under my pillow, not out of anger, but because my brain demanded total darkness and total silence.

I started to get delirious. My mind realized this and I tried various breathing exercises to try to calm down. Four seconds inhale, four seconds exhale. It became a momentary religion: I followed it to a T, strove for perfection, and believed it would bring my salvation. I convinced myself this would bring me to sleep, that sleep would bring tomorrow, and that tomorrow this would all be over. But my heart refused to stop thrashing against my chest. I was certain if I looked down I would see the artery rhythmically protruding from my chest. I craved Roman- tic-era piano duets, but my heart was stuck on jazz in the most elaborate and rapid of time signatures.

There was a turn, a sudden switch from “this is an awful experience” to “this could be my last experience,” and I called 9-1-1. What ensued was a desperate plea for help.

“9-1-1, is this an emergency?” The responder was a woman I assumed was my sister’s age. Her voice was harsh and cruel to my ruptured brain, but in retrospect she was soft, kind, and calm.

“I’m not sure, I need advice. You see, I’m just really cold but I’m burning up and . . .”

“Excuse me, sir,” she interjected, “do you need an ambulance? Are you hurt?”

“I don’t know what I need. Can I talk to a doctor? My neck is stiff, I’m sure I have a fever over 103, and I just feel really . . .”

“Sir, I can’t offer you medical advice but I can send you an ambulance. Can I get your address?”

I pictured the bill, my parents’ faces when it was discovered an emergency room visit was completely unnecessary. I envisioned extra shifts at work, late nights behind on homework, and the insertion of a minus sign in my bank account.

“I think it’s just a migraine, I’m just gonna try to sleep it off. Thank you for your help.”

I hung up. Not only my phone, but my whole mindset towards the evening. Perhaps this was God’s plan. My life was so, so, good, and if now was the time for it to end, I should end it on a good note as well. No use going out stressed, scared, and
violated. The Lord gives, and The Lord takes away. Blessed be the name of The Lord.

I sang “Amazing Grace,” I prayed Psalms, I erased my internet history. I texted vague appreciation texts to close friends, ex-girlfriends, and co-workers. I mentally divided up my things: my record collection split into thirds for Thomas, Trey, and River; my various instruments for Mark, Tylor, and Nate; my books offered to any friend wanting one; my Nintendo games and systems for my nephews; my clothes to Mark; my hoodies and sweaters to Madi. I laid burrowed in my fuming blanket fort, my last items belonging solely to me, and cried and cried and cried, feeling wholly complete and sufficient with the world.

I began thanking God and asking him to take me home. I was more thankful than I had ever been. I didn’t think of the people I was leaving behind, the things I would miss, or the ever present pain and coldness. I thought only of wanting to capture the transition from life to death as coherently and as peacefully as possible. I was fully alone with God and at his mercy, and completely accepting of this, and really, of everything, in a way I’ve yet to feel again.

I must have seemed at wit’s end when Nate came in my room. He talks about that moment every six months or so, when we’re alone together reminiscing on the past. It was close to eleven p.m. when he returned home from work. The first thing I did when he opened my door was hand him my Bible with frail shaky hands, accompanied by multiple “i love you”s and “you’re a really good friend.”

Nate immediately pulled off my blankets and sheets, my jackets and long sleeves, my shoes and jeans. I told him to stop, and that I was cold, but he explained that my body was playing tricks on me and that I needed to cool down.

“You’re burning up. I’m gonna get you some ice, stay right there.” Nate started to leave then looked over to me and placed the Bible down, “I’m not taking this. You’re gonna be okay.”

I looked up at Nate, his confident demeanor and his calm gestures. Death slowly slipped away.

Not more than ten minutes later I fell asleep, exhausted, with ice softening across my forehead, piano music playing on
my record player, and Nate sleeping on the hallway floor with my door cracked open.

I awoke to clumps and droves of hair falling from my scalp. Telogen Effluvium. The shock to my body was too much, and my hair became a last priority. I went into the bathroom and hundreds and hundreds of strands fell effortlessly into the sink, onto the floor, across my shoulders. I didn’t care, I was focused on the mirror, trying to make out the face that looked back at me. I went to the doctor a month later: meningitis. The doctor says I should have gone to the emergency room and gotten a spinal tap, but that my youth and healthiness saved me and I should expect a quick recovery. The hair will shed in waves for up to two years, but should all eventually come back. He recommends daily neck exercises and zinc shampoos.

Returning back to school the next spring I walk closely to the walls. I avoid harsh lights and take the most effective paths across campus to be outside as seldom as possible. Walking through hallways I try to blend in with the crowd: I wear hats, I watch my feet, I dodge eye contact, I take the stairwells less traveled. I abandon my friends in favor of closed doors. I stop visiting home. I exchange the tones of people’s voices for the tones of music. Noon becomes my moon. I slowly start praying less and less.

This is when the thought begins annexing my brain chemistry. I catch glimpses of my mother and father, smiling and proud at my funeral. My mother, concretely confident I’m with The Lord, gives impassioned calls to the audience to be like me: faithful from the start to the very end. My father shakes the hands of my friends and co-workers. My life becomes conceptual rather than specific, a placemat for those my age struggling with their faith in the face of sickness and doubt. The ex-girlfriends I texted, the friends I wrote out my belongings for, the family members I said “I love you” to, sit among the peers and become, if only for a moment, a family.

I clear the image from my mind, as if I had sinned and looked upon something immoral and forbidden. But the thought never fully dissipates, resting in the outer posterior part of my brain, where my brainstem and spinal cord converge, where the meningitis enacted its inflammation and failed to kill me. All my loose ends, once tied securely, unravel frantically before my eyes.
Presently, I go about my day, purposely consumed with immediate tasks, projects, work, music, people, and principles to avoid creating spaces in my brain matter expansive enough for the thought to shift its way into the forefront of my thinking. At school, I sit in the front row. I join communities and clubs. I fully immerse myself into whatever I’m doing and avoid my room, now with its door left permanently cracked open to become one with the hallway.

But when I walk down empty school halls, and a person suddenly appears walking on the other end, I look to the individual coming towards me, and I cannot help but envision them palm-ing my face, pushing me into the wall, and pulsating sharp kicks as I fall to the ground. My blood splatters onto the off-gray wall coating, my bones give way to the weight of their blows, and my spinal cord celebrates. The individual never appears angry, and I’m never screaming for help.
“I’ve done the math,” I tell her with a quick glance around the restaurant, “people forget about you after about six weeks.”

I say this to her with a bit of nervous anticipation and immediate self-consciousness. Is this appropriate Sunday brunch conversation? I begin thinking of backup discussions: next week’s football game, her blown over fence, the forecast of snow.

But her content and stationary smile dissipates only for a brief moment and, after a small pause, she replies with genuine interest and fixated eye contact, “Elaborate.”

“I mean, for close friends, lovers, and family it takes more time . . .” I stare at nothing in particular above and past her, “then it would take years or decades or maybe never. But I’m talking about general association. And also it’s a question of qualitative versus quantitative remembering and . . .”

“Wait, baby, slow down,” she says as she motions for me to meet her gaze again, “what do you mean by ‘forgetting’?”

I think a bit. I look down at my cranberry juice as if the words are floating about somewhere in the glass. I resolve to speak anecdotally: “You know when you work somewhere for a long time? And you start to feel like a part of the place? And you get this confident but unspoken belief that the place would be different without you? That if or when you left that the community there, or perhaps even the establishment it-
self, would feel some type of perpetual reverberation from your exit?"

I take another pause and stare off at a waiter rushing from table to table. “I’m not sure that ever really happens. At least not to the typical person. When Joey left our work he spent his entire last shift saying personal goodbyes to everyone. He probably drove away that night thinking he’d left an impact and our work would never be the same without him.”

I refocus my attention to her. “Do you remember him?”

“Well,” she begins, “I had to think for a second when you said his name, but I remember Joey. It’s hard . . . because we’re always getting new workers and the people who remembered past people are constantly replaced with new people and pretty soon nobody is remembering anybody.”

I finish a bite of my grilled cheese sandwich. “Yeah! Exactly—super true. It just makes me feel weird, the thought that somewhere out there, there are people who think back to a place and believe their ghost is haunting it in some way, but really nobody is mentioning or remembering their name. I don’t like it.”

We stare at our plates for a moment. Then, in an instant, she leans forward and says, “What about Lisa though? She remembered everybody! Managers often have a good knack for that.”

This was true. I shuffled my feet and straightened my back against the wooden chair. “Lisa does remember most everyone who has worked for her, but I’m not sure it’s qualitative remembering. Like, if you ask her about say, I don’t know, Andy or someone from when I started, she’ll think a bit and then say something entertaining about them. But they’re not in the forefront of her mind anymore. They’ve become almost caricatures of themselves: only the most notable and entertaining qualities of them can be drawn up from her memory.”

“It’s like it’s not really them . . . ,” I say with hushed energy, wondering if I’ve carried the conversation on too long, “it’s just her brain recollecting from far within its cache of no longer pertinent information.”

“Yeah,” she starts with her untouched meal growing colder, “but it’s still remembering, right? I mean, she’s had so many people work for her and in terms of us, we’ve met and come across countless people! Can anyone really keep everybody in the forefront of their thinking even if they tried?”
I fill my mouth with fries and don’t reply. She begins placing refried beans into a tortilla and the waitress checks in on us.

“Everything is so good,” we tell them.

And then I ask her if I had ever told her about my grandfather. She says I hadn’t and to tell her about him. I’m caught off guard, as if half expecting her to demand that I don’t tell her about him. I cover my hands with my sleeves and search again at my drink to provide me the words I need, its ice cubes slowly losing their shape and structure. And for a brief moment I think I’ve figured it all out, all the nonsense of forgetting, but it leaves me as soon as I grasp at its edges. And so, I tell her.

*My grandfather grabs my leg and drags me across the carpet to his recliner. He throws me onto his lap, and I burst into six-year-old giggles as he tickles my stomach. His hands are cold. Then he whispers in my ear, “Jesse, play your double five,” and drops me back with my brother and our game of dominoes.*

My grandpa was a burly man. As far back as I can recollect, he always wore giant blue and white striped overalls over a thin, white store brand T-shirt. Both articles of clothing bent and stretched at his heavily protruding gut. And to finish his outfit, a brown pair of slip-on moccasins and clear, square glasses. His palms had seen years of hard labor, both in childhood as a farmer’s son and in adulthood in a factory job I can no longer remember. His hair was silver, buzzed, and prickly to the touch. In his hand was always an electronic game of Hearts or Texas Hold’em, and on his head was typically a faded, black Colorado Rockies hat.

But as much as he would have wished otherwise, his accessories didn’t end there. When I was twelve he began wearing a nasal cannula: a clear tube that started at his nose, wrapped around his ears, then circled the legs of tables, rode effortlessly across the floor, the stairs, under the crevices of doors, until attaching to a static humming oxygen machine. His lungs were giving out and his respiratory system needed constant machine assistance. He also wore a foam neck brace, but I didn’t (and still don’t) know why.

Visits to my grandpa’s usually went the same every time. My
brother, sister, and I would fit ourselves onto the bed in the upstairs guest room and play Super Nintendo. Then my parents would call us to spend time with our grandparents and we’d sit on the living room floor sulking while my parents conversed. Sometimes my uncles would visit too, and bring their kids and we’d all run around and play tag in the deserted streets outside the house. My aunt never visited though and I know this because her son, my closest cousin and best friend, is nowhere to be found in my memory of us running around until night fell and our parents collectively called.

But most visits ended with my brother, sister, and I being taught some type of game by my grandpa while he lay in his recliner and watched television.

“The goal of poker is to make others think the wrong thing,” he’d say. Or, “If you can’t find a domino to play off of, pick a new one from the boneyard,” he’d call out to us. Or, “Josh, don’t let Jesse play that wild card!” he’d yell across the room, his eyes never leaving the television.

It got worse, and then the presence of an IV pole accompanied him throughout his excursions around the house. My grandpa now had two tubes going through him intermediately. He had lung cancer, and with that, an even greater propulsion and magnetism to his dusty oak-brown recliner. He watched a lot of baseball. Most of his journeys were to smoke outside on the porch, to drive around the streets on his golf cart, to go with a friend to chemotherapy, and to make the hike upstairs to sleep. I was now thirteen.

It got worse, and then one day we were gathered in the hospital. My family, grandma, uncles, and cousins were there. My father told us that we should be ready to say our goodbyes, and that the doctor said tonight would most likely be his last night. I had never seen my father cry before and I was waiting for him to at any moment. But he never did. He walked around the hospital and looked around aimlessly and looked at the various paintings and pictures across the walls. I followed beside him and walked with my hands deep in my pockets in mimic of him: it was a subconscious attempt at solidarity. In the far recesses of my mind, I remember we came upon a painting of Jesus holding a baby lamb, and I told my dad that I felt God was telling me that Grandpa wouldn’t die tonight. I was so sure of it. My father didn’t respond, but he did look at the painting for a long time.
It got worse, and then my mother gathered our family of five into the room. She plugged in her CD player and propped it onto a table and began playing quiet worship music. My grandpa finally looked like he was in a place where he belonged: exchanging his foam neck brace for a hospital provided cervical collar, his oxygen machine for a hospital grade respiratory system, and his IV pole for one completely identical to his, though with more bags of various liquids hanging off it. He laid across the hospital bed in a coma. His face was somewhere between restful and restrained. He wore a blue dotted hospital gown atop peach blankets. It was the only time I hadn’t seen him in his overalls.

My mother looked to us with tearful eyes and said he might still be able to hear us and that God could still save him. She asked us to sing his favorite song to him, which she guessed to be, “Take Me Out to the Ball Game.” We sang, and when we got to the line about peanuts and Cracker Jacks, I cried and cried and cried. When we counted “One! Two! Three strikes yurrrrr out!” I saw my dad cry.

Then my mother directed us all out and after everyone had left, she called me back in. She asked if I’d like to pray over him. I was crying, and I said yes, but all I did was hold her hands as she called out to Jesus and God and The Holy Spirit.

“God can still spare his life, or, if not that, God could still save him,” she said with tears running down her cheeks.

She pulled her Bible from her bag. “He might still be able to hear and ask for forgiveness.” She flipped through the pages until she came across The Book of John, and began reading softly at his bedside. I stayed for a passage or two, and then I left and closed the door.

It got worse, and then he died.

My father found the letters. Hundreds of them, crammed into the glovebox of my grandpa’s truck. Debts and overdue notices to a dozen or so companies. A quarter of them were directed and made out to my grandpa’s name, but the majority of them were directed to my grandma.

My grandpa never had cancer. Instead of chemotherapy, he would go to Black Hawk or whatever casino called out to him, and he would gamble. At first it was his own money, but when that ran out, it was my grandma’s savings. He would write out
checks, void them, then send them to nowhere to make my grandma believe he was sending payments for chemotherapy. He forced my grandma to stay home, in tears, on his trips to “the hospital.” My father was the only one the doctor had told the truth that night he passed: he died from a heart attack.

He’d spend hours conversing with my worried parents about how chemotherapy was progressing. But all the while, he was really fighting a different disease: a lust for risk that no winning amount could fulfill, a deep need to set his identity in his poker face, a rush of endorphins that met him when the cards dealt his way, an addiction to a future that promised him returns and fortune, an insatiable pit within him that drove him even so far as to carry around an unneeded IV pole to convince his family he was dying.

But unbeknownst to him, he really was dying. Maybe not from cancer, maybe not from respiratory disease, and maybe not from his gambling addiction. But from whatever moral degradation that invoked him to abuse my father, to molest my aunt, and to beat my grandma. My grandpa’s deterioration started long before the time he wanted to trick us into believing, and long before he ever knew.

My father didn’t disclose any of this until I was seventeen, roughly five years after my grandpa had died. “He had me buzz his hair every month because of chemo, Jesse,” he told me late one evening, his eyes never meeting mine but instead staring intently at the hardwood flooring, “but he never had cancer.”

It was (and still is) my father’s contention that my grandpa did what he did for attention: that he wanted to be pitied, made the victim, monitored, given sympathy, and perhaps most of all, not forgotten.

The ice in the glass has now fully diluted and the cranberry juice has turned a shade lighter in response. It reminds me of my grandpa’s IV bag, but the opposite conversion. I suddenly feel an awareness that I’ve crossed a line. Why did I say any of this to her? Why can’t I forget my grandfather? I forget my father’s countless commutes to work to provide for me, my mother’s daily words of encouragement, all the times my sister held my hand and walked me to school, all the nights my brother read stories to me. Those deserving aren’t in the forefront of my thinking but instead, my grandfather’s viceful actions infect
and transgress the wiring of my mind. Why does he get to be remembered? I don’t like it, and I don’t know how else to put it. Here I am talking about him and in a way I feel like I’m just perpetuating him further than he deserves.

My grandfather is dead, but he lives on through the intricate crevices of family discussions, the unspoken gestures of my grandmother, my father’s careful hesitance, my mother’s incessant prayers, and this recollected Sunday conversation. I can’t help but think that all of this is just what he wanted. I look upon all my writings, my songs, my stories, and my unsolicited thoughts, and all I envision them accomplishing is continuing the abuses of the individuals who prompted them, long after I’ve gone.

With nothing more to say and nothing left to eat on my plate, I look up to see her face. She’s neither shocked nor stunned, despondent nor agitated, but instead she’s sorrowful and compassionate.

“I’m sorry,” she says, and as she reaches for my hands our waitress takes our plates.

We pay the check and as we sit there waiting for the other to initiate departing movements, she asks me:

“What brings this all to mind?”

What I wanted to tell her was that I have a sneaking suspicion that what keeps us all going is knowing we’re remembered by someone: God, family, friends, children, the bus driver, the mailman, etc. I wanted to tell her that most days I went about how I thought everyone else does: trying to create remembrance, trying to instill in others notable actions attached to myself, holding desperately in faith the notion that good lives can make good stories, silently pleading for people to remember me. To lengthen out the days.

But some days, perhaps more often than I’d like, I was counting down the days; doing the equations and summations to know when I would be forgotten and would, and could, be free: free to consider and appraise more carefully the offerings, misgivings, and self-harms presented by my ever present darker self.

I wanted to ask her if she thought being remembered by our bedrooms, our desks, our books, our vehicles, our instruments, our films, our bank accounts, our CD’s, our blankets, our park-
ing tickets, our breakfasts, our ceiling fans, our laundry, our beds was enough. I wanted to ask her if she thought we could somehow keep going by remembering ourselves. I wanted to ask her if she thought God does all the remembering, and if she thought him remembering was enough. And if it was, why didn’t it ever feel like it?

What I did say was this:

“I always wanted to ask my grandma if she could forget about him, if she would. But I never did.”

We both paused for a bit and had nothing to look at but each other.

“I imagine she just tries to remember the good parts, and tries to forget everything else.”

My grandpa catches my leg and pulls me across the carpet to his recliner. He tosses me onto his lap, and I burst into six-year-old giggles as he tickles me. His hands are cold. Then he quietly says in my ear, “Jesse, play your double five,” and places me back with my brother and our game of dominos.

On the car ride back home, I tried desperately to remember our waitress’s name. And looking out the passenger window, I watched as we drove past thousands upon thousands of cars, each progressively less notable than the last.
Haley Arnold

Birth of Venus
Polyurethane foam, dye, and acrylic on plaster bust
Haley Arnold

**Psychosis**

Acrylic and enamel on canvas
Brie Hirsheimer

Bounce
Oil on canvas
Samantha Homan

Expired
Charcoal on paper
Kenzie Khoury
Steel Your Heart Against the Homeless Community
Steel
Kenzie Khoury

Third Best City to Live in When You’re Homeless
Oil on canvas
Anna Klemmer

Once Forgotten

Digital
Anna Klemmer

Resistance
White colored pencil and pastel on black paper
Rachael Lozano

Anxious
Photography
Rachael Lozano
Connection to Lore
Photography
Rachael Lozano

Interlocking Arms

Photography
Rachael Lozano

United We Stand

Photography
Alyssa McCall

Reflection
Photography
Patrick Persichetti

Breadth
Linoleum block relief and Chine-collé
Patrick Persichetti

Mountain Bell
Linoleum block relief and Chine-collé
Your mother died on your twenty-fourth birthday, so you started fucking your best friend. He isn’t very good. You wonder when everyone will stop telling you it will be okay. You know this already. Dragging yourself out of bed to find something to eat, you think you might still be drunk. You don’t know what time it is, but the sun is out. There is nothing to eat. You remember a time when your mother used to cook for you. She was a terrible cook. The old splintering cupboards don’t look quite clean, and the dishwasher sits full of clean dishes that haven’t been unloaded. You find a jar of peanut butter in the back of your cabinet and eat it with a spoon, bringing it back to bed with you. When you wake up the sun is not out anymore. You have a spoon with peanut butter stuck on your face like glue. You think this is funny, but can’t seem to laugh. You wonder what your mother would have said if she saw you now. You decide you don’t want to know, that maybe it’s better you can’t know anymore. You find your phone and call your best friend.

He comes over and says you look like shit. You say you haven’t really looked at yourself since your mother died. He says two weeks is an awfully long time to spend not even glancing at yourself. Then he gets into bed with you. You don’t look into his eyes during. Thinking that might be too much to take all at once. When you’re finished, he kisses you on the forehead and you feel like a child, but in a comforted way. He hands you a cigarette and you smoke together. The ashes fall on your bare chest, and you embrace the sting of the embers. You think your mother would hate that you picked up smoking, so you smoke another one. Your best friend gently brushes the ash off your chest and is looking at you like he wants you to say something. Maybe he’s wondering why you’ve gone crazy, he knows how bad she was. Maybe he’s wondering why you’re destroying yourself. Or maybe he’s just thinking about fucking you again, you don’t really know. Nothing that used to make sense makes sense anymore. You just keep smoking your cigarette and expect he will get bored eventually and go home. He doesn’t. He just keeps tracing little circles on your skin with his thumbs, and you think you are being lulled into comfort. You close your
eyes and pretend to sleep until he gets up to leave. When he is finally gone you lay there for awhile in silence. The apartment is so quiet. Your mother never lived here with you, and yet her absence is palpable. If she were still here, she would walk in the door and grimace at the state of disarray everything was in. Including you. She would take a rag, and clean the molding at the bottoms of the walls, grimacing all the while. She would clean the splintering cupboards. If she cleaned the hard to reach places, maybe she thought she could wipe the dust off of you. She would ask you why you hadn’t cleaned in so long, and if you were eating right. She would talk about how she was gaining weight, and compare herself to you to make her feel better. It wouldn’t make her feel any better. You would try not to scream.

But then maybe she would pull a shirt out of her purse, say she found it at a thrift store for you, and she would say it was perfect, wasn’t it? And it would be, because even though you never dressed anything like her, she always knew what kind of clothes you liked. And maybe she would offer to cook you something, even if she was a bad cook it would have still been nice to be cared for. And maybe she would start talking about how she had seen your photographs in a gallery somewhere and gush about how talented you were and how proud she was. But then she might tell you how a certain angle might have been better on this one photo, and your heart would sink a little.

You get out of bed and wander through the apartment still not knowing what time it is, but you don’t care to check. Grabbing your winter coat and another cigarette, you head out the door. It’s dark outside, so it must be nighttime. It isn’t snowing, but it smells like it’s going to. You remember the first time you saw snow, and how your mother put you in your little pink snowsuit and escorted you into that new landscape. You thought the snow looked like fairy dust then. It was late, and it was a school night, but she urged you outside, said you could sleep in tomorrow. You threw snowballs at each other and laughed so loud. It wasn’t so hard to laugh with your mother when you were little. But then you remember the tight frowns and clenched bodies of your adulthood, and you’re relieved she’s gone. You smoke three cigarettes before you reach the corner store. You walk up to the clerk behind the glass cage and ask for a small bottle of vodka. He holds up a shooter and you shake your head. Some-
thing bigger, you say. He holds up whatever the next size is, and you nod.

You drink your vodka straight out of the bottle as you walk. The paper bag crinkles as you press it to your chapped lips. It burns your throat, and you almost cough the first time. After that it’s easier. One would think drinking vodka straight out of the bottle would be easier when you’ve been doing it for the past two weeks, but the first sip is still always hard. You remember a time on your twelfth birthday when your mother interrupted you so she could tell a story. That burned your throat too. You remember what it felt like to be silenced. To sit there wondering why you weren’t allowed to talk. It was your birthday and all your mother could do was talk about herself. You blink back hot tears and take bigger gulps of vodka. You turn around and study your footprints in a light dusting of snow. You realize just then that it has been snowing for a while. Your footprints are not straight, the vodka is already affecting you. You think maybe you should get home before you get any drunker. It’s probably the middle of the night, and you are stumbling around with a bottle of vodka. You realize this is not a smart thing to do, but take another swallow of vodka and keep walking.

You wake up shivering on a park bench and don’t remember how you got there, but you know where you are. The playground is empty of children, and somehow it looks sad this way. The equipment stands motionless and cold, the absence of small hands grasping for—something, making you feel empty. The snow falls in flurries now, big puffy snowflakes coming down gracefully. You’re covered in snow, so you don’t move, don’t want to disturb it. The world is completely silent in the way that only snow can accomplish. Everything is softer. You think maybe if you just fall back asleep, you’ll fade away. Maybe if you fade away you won’t feel so guilty for being glad your mother is dead. But you shake the snow off, and struggle to a sitting position, and search for your vodka. Or maybe you’ll just keep trying to drink the guilt away. You finish the bottle and hold it in your hand for a moment. It feels cold in your palm. You remember how your mother caught you skimming vodka from the bottles in the cabinet and just laughed. She said you could have some if you just asked for it. Then you shared a drink. You chuck the bottle as hard as you can into the street, but there’s too much snow and you can’t hear it shatter. Muted. Fuck, you say. Then you walk home.
You wake up sometime later in your own bed and wander into the kitchen for something to eat only to remember that all you have is peanut butter. Opening your fridge out of habit you find the rotting remains of your birthday cake, and stare at it for a while. It seems impossible that she’s only been gone for two weeks, it feels like you’ve been in this state for years. Fuck, you say again, but a little louder this time. Instead of eating something you go out onto your porch and smoke more cigarettes. The nicotine cures your hunger in a different way. It’s bitterly cold outside and you’re wearing pajama shorts. It looks like it must have snowed four inches overnight, and feels like late afternoon now. Instead of going inside you let your body go ice cold and smoke your cigarettes with shaking hands. Your phone rings, and you are surprised you have it on you. Hello, you say. Hi, your best friend answers. Hi, you repeat unsure of what else to say. What are you doing? he asks. The guilt is eating me alive, you think. Smoking, you say. There’s a pause. I’m coming over, he says. Okay, you answer. When he arrives, you are on your last cigarette, and you ask him if he has any more. He shakes his head and looks at you in that way that makes you want to break something. And then he smiles, just a little, and you want to break yourself for feeling this way and making him watch. He sits down next to you and wraps an arm around your cold shoulders. Of course, your first urge is to shove him away, but you fight against that urge, and let him hold you. You sit there for some time and don’t talk, and you wonder how he always knows exactly what you need. You remember a time your mother looked you up and down and said you would look great in that if you lost a little weight. You were only fourteen. You get angry again, and pull away from your best friend. Want to go to the bar? you ask him before you can have a break down. Sure, he says.

The bar you choose is the closest one to your apartment. It isn’t very exciting, but the liquor is cheap, and it’ll go down easier that way. The song playing when you walk in is “bad guy” by Billie Eilish, and you find this funny because you think you might be the bad guy right now in this bar. Dragging your best friend around like a puppy when all you want to do is drink until you can’t remember his name, or your name. Or your mother’s name. You think, this is a good song. You take your seat at the bar and order two shots of vodka. The look on your best
friend’s face tells you he is either deeply concerned about you or he doesn’t like vodka. You are briefly concerned that you can’t remember if he likes vodka or not. You take your shot and feel the bitter liquor calm your body. The bar is empty, save for a couple people scattered around the room. It makes sense since it’s probably late afternoon, and likely a week day. It’s the kind of bar no one your age would normally be seen in. It has an old worn bar, and an even more worn bartender. You order another shot. Are you okay? your best friend asks. Yes, you say. You won’t look at him. You think maybe this hurt his feelings, but you don’t care right now. You take your second shot and try to remember it’s a tragedy that your mother is dead. Somehow it tastes worse than the first one.

The next thing you know you’re dancing on a table. You realize this is trashy, but do it anyway, with gusto. You whip your hair with such force you wonder if it could break your neck. Maybe that’s what you deserve. You know how you must look, but you keep going. What does it matter anyway? Your mother isn’t here to say you look like a slut dancing on the table like this. Or maybe she wouldn’t have called you a slut, maybe she would have said you should lose some more weight before you dance in public like this. You want to scream so you belt the lyrics of whatever song is playing now. You lost track of how many drinks you’ve had. When the song ends you stop dancing and stand there breathless. You suck in air violently, with difficulty, and you’re not sure what to do now. You remember your best friend is there, and you look for him. He is sitting at the bar and you look him in the eyes now. He looks so sad it makes your knees buckle. You hear the thud when they hit the bar, but don’t feel it because in that moment you feel what it means to be the girl who is so drunk, and so angry, and so sad that she is dancing on a table in an empty bar. You can’t look away from him and you know he sees everything. This makes you think maybe you are not okay. You climb down from the bar and let your best friend take you home.

Your mother died on your twenty-fourth birthday so you started fucking your best friend. He comforts you in a way you didn’t think you deserve. You wonder when you will start believing everything will be okay because you don’t know. You drag yourself out of bed to find something to eat. There is a bowl of macaroni and cheese in the fridge with a note from
your best friend that says, it’s two o’clock in the afternoon, get your shit together. You laugh for the first time in two weeks, and you know what time it is. You are happy to be eating mac-and-cheese instead of the undercooked stir fry your mother used to cook for you. Or peanut butter. You have a headache, and you wonder if it might split your skull right down the middle. You decide you don’t want this to happen. There’s Advil in the bathroom and another note that says, look in the mirror. You feel your stomach drop because you know you’re going to do it. You take a deep breath, but before you look you remember something else. You remember your mother was proud of you. You remember that in those terrible bitter years before she died that she said it so many times. She told you to lose weight, and she told you she was proud of your photography. She asked you why you yelled at her so often, and she told you she was proud of how well you had done in school. She never let you speak, and she was proud of who you had become. She made you feel like you didn’t matter, but she was proud of you. You look in the mirror.

Your beautiful dark hair is in tangles, and your eyes are so sunken you think you might be dead after all. The green seems to have left your eyes, and your skin is sallow. When you look carefully you think there might still be a tiny smudge of peanut butter on your cheek. You start to laugh hysterically, and then you start to cry. You let the sobs heave through your body. Feel them move you for the first time since she died. You scream at your reflection and cry until you can’t breathe. You rub at the peanut butter on your face until your skin is red, then get in the shower. As you turn on the water you realize you don’t remember the last time you took one. You turn the water hot enough so that it scalds your skin, thinking maybe you deserve the pain for feeling the way you do. When you step out of the shower you feel raw and red like a piece of tenderized meat. You think maybe you should call your father soon, and wonder how he is dealing with the death of his ex-wife. Probably better than you. You’re thankful you work for him, so you know you haven’t been fired during your meltdown. You put on real clothes after realizing you had been wearing pajamas for five days. You wonder why your best friend hasn’t run away screaming. You go to the grocery store and buy food that you can cook yourself. You are surprised when the rest of the world is acting as if nothing
has happened. The people at the grocery store pass you easily, and don’t look very long because you look normal now. You’re just a girl in a grocery store. You also buy a bottle of wine, but no vodka. When you get home, you call your best friend and tell him you’re going to make dinner. He says he’ll be there when he gets off work. You decide you should really call your dad.

When your best friend gets there, you are almost done cooking. He smiles at you and you want to do better just to see that look in his eyes again. You both sit down at the kitchen table. You pour each of you a glass of wine and take a large gulp. You say you’re sorry. It’s okay, he says. You say it’s not okay and you are not okay. He says he knows. You finish your wine and say you’re glad she’s gone. This is the first time you’ve said it out loud and it feels like relief. Fleeting relief because the guilt settles right back in, but now it’s a little lighter. He says, it’s okay. You say you’ve been torturing yourself about it for so long. He says he knows. He says he remembers what she was like. He knows how she made you feel, he saw it for his own eyes. Your eyes well up and you start to cry again because now that you opened that door it’s hard to shut it. He says, it’s going be okay, and you don’t hate those words so much this time. You think maybe he’s right, but right now you still feel like a monster, and you want vodka and cigarettes. Instead you take another sip of wine. You say, we need to stop fucking. He says, you’re probably right. He takes your hand and gives it a little squeeze. You think maybe being okay won’t be so hard if he’s here with you. You remember your mother never listened to a single thing you ever said. You remember she loved you as best she could. You serve terribly cooked stir fry for dinner.
Maia Coen

Bar Hopping

So, I was gettin’ ready to go out with my buddies. We’re listening to the music real loud. So loud I can feel the bass vibrating through me. All the way through me. And we start playing drinking games to get drunk enough to afford the bars we wanna go to later. That was always the goal: get drunk at home so you don’t gotta spend any money and then party it up later for free. So, we’re playing Flip Cup and I’m no good at it, so I take a shot of cheap whiskey instead and it goes down real rough. Like fire in my throat, but I think more of gravel tearing up my insides. One of my buddies’ girlfriends is dressed up real nice. She’s wearing the kind of clothes that’ll make every guy in the bar look at her and my buddy will put an arm around her waist and show everyone she’s his and it’ll go to his head the way everything does. I wish she’d dump him ’cause I know she’s too good for him. I wish I could find a girl like that to put my arm around. There’s another girl here, but she’s standing in the corner like she doesn’t really wanna be here. She’s wearing a sweatshirt that matches her eyes and I think she’s the kind of girl you take home to your mother. My buddy’s girlfriend is the kind of girl you wish you could take home to your mother, but you know she’d never ask to meet your mother.

My buddies are getting pretty drunk and they’re laughing louder now. The bass is still shaking my insides, but I can hear their laughter crystal clear. I think I’m laughing too, but I’m having a hard time feeling jolly like the rest of them. I think I must be laughing because no one is lookin’ at me funny and asking me why I’m being such a buzzkill. So, I must be laughing. The reason I don’t feel much like laughing right now is a mystery to me. I’ve been feelin’ real strange and empty lately. I’d been spending altogether too much time fucking around with people I didn’t care about. And it got me thinkin’ how I hadn’t been with a girl I really liked in a real long time. I had just been fucking around with whoever came along and all of a sudden that made me feel real lonely.

So, there was this other girl there with us who I’d met a few times. She was friends with my buddy’s girlfriend or something, so she’d been around a bit. She was wearing black leg-
gings that made her butt look nice and this shirt with little
white flowers all over it. She looked like she didn’t mind the
way the whiskey tasted as long as it did the trick. I decided
I would get with her tonight ’cause she was pretty cute and I
was getting drunker. I took another shot of that bad whiskey
before we left and it went down smoother. That’s how I know
I’m really gettin’ drunk, when the shitty liquor doesn’t make
me cringe so much. We start walking ’cause my house isn’t too
far from all the sleazy bars we wanna go to, and it isn’t so cold
tonight. I’m wearing a jacket, and I’m already too warm, but it’s
too late to go back now. My buddy and his girlfriend are holding
hands and the other girls start holding hands too, and I’m just
by myself, so I put my hands in my pockets. I remember the way
this one girl used to put our clasped hands into her coat pocket
when it was too cold outside.

Before I know it, we’re waiting in line for this one bar that
I actually like, and I’m grateful my buddies want to go there
without me having to ask. A part of me never wanted to go
to those bars in town that were more like clubs because they
were dark and gross, and the guys looked at the girls in a way
I hoped I didn’t. Their eyes following them around the room
like trackers, lookin’ for the gazelle that can’t run as fast as the
rest. But sometimes I wanted to go there because I was drunk,
and places like that always seemed like a good idea when I was
drunk. So, we’re waiting in line for the bar I like better, and I
hear the people behind me try to make that Wookiee noise from
Star Wars, so I turn around. It’s a group of guys who look like a
bunch of nerds.

“You guys trying to make the Wookiee noise?” I ask them.
They nod and one of them answers, “yeah man, props for
going that.”

“It could use a little work,” I say.

They laugh but I wasn’t tryin’ to be funny, they just didn’t do
the noise that well and another one answers, “Yeah, he’s work-
ing on it.”

I can tell they are even drunker than me, and I’m kind of
already tired of talking to them, so it’s a relief when we move
up in line, and get into the bar. I go straight to the bartender
to get another drink, but it takes forever ’cause the bartenders
are serving all the girls first. This makes me wish I was girl for
just a second before I see some idiot grab a girl’s ass when she
walks by. Shit like that makes me ashamed to be a man. Someone next to me orders an Amaretto Sour and it makes me think of how the girl who put our hands in her pockets used to order those. Said they tasted like maraschino cherries in a glass. I decide I wanna remember that a little more, so I order one for myself. I stand there sippin’ it for a while forgettin’ about my buddies. I knew they wouldn’t notice anyway.

Here’s how these nights always go: my buddy with the girlfriend will get too drunk and he’ll start a fight with her about how she’s too pretty to be talkin’ to those other guys like that, and she’ll get mad at him for treatin’ her like that, and they’ll go home. Then that other girl in the sweatshirt will drink just enough to forget that she’s here by herself with her friend with the boyfriend who’s so jealous he doesn’t wanna let her outta the house. And this girl in the sweatshirt will stop talking after awhile and just settle into that feeling. No one will notice that she stopped talking. My other buddies will keep drinking and hittin’ on girls who want nothing to do with them, and they’ll make shitty comments about how much makeup they are wearin’ and if they didn’t want guys to look at them like that they should wear longer skirts. And I’ll tell them to stop acting like idiots to make myself feel a little better even though I’m thinkin’ the same damn things about their skirts, I’m just not sayin’ it out loud. And the girl with the little white flowers on her shirt will smile and flirt with whoever she thinks is cute that night, and she’ll decide to go home with one of them and make it happen.

But that’s all just bullshit, at least the stuff about the girl with the flowers on her shirt. I don’t know anything about her, but the rest, the rest of that shit is pretty spot on. I’m still standin’ there at the bar drinkin’ my maraschino cherry in a glass, and it makes me mad how I know exactly how this night is gonna go, and I have the urge to give up and go home just to break the cycle. But I don’t, instead I finish my drink, and order a beer, and go find my buddies. They don’t notice I’ve been gone like I knew they wouldn’t. Some guy comes up to my buddy’s girlfriend and hugs her like he knows her, and they’re chattin’ and I see my buddy gettin’ mad like I knew he would, and I feel the overwhelming sense of being stuck in a loop I can’t seem to get out of.

That resolves itself, or doesn’t really, but they shove it away,
and we all go next door to the bar no one ever really wants to be in and somehow we always end up in anyway. Like I said, when we’re drunk it’s like we’re drawn to this fuckin’ place. It’s the kind of bar where they won’t give you real glasses ’cause people are too shit-faced to hold their drinks. The ground is always sticky, and you walk outta there with dirty shoes from all the shit on the floor. This is also where girls are more likely to dance on you, so I guess that’s probably why we always end up here. But the thing about this place is you gotta be the perfect kinda drunk to enjoy yourself and tonight I am not in that sweet spot. I’m not drunk enough to have a good time in this shithole, but I go along with it. I think maybe I got a shot with the girl with the flowers on her shirt if she’s drunk enough here. A strange thing happens when people come here, it’s like they suddenly feel anonymous under the faded party lights and the alcohol-fueled enthusiasm. And then you wake up in the morning next to some random person who was a lot hotter under those crappy lights, and your head pounds, and you feel like you’re gonna puke, and you can’t believe you did that to yourself again.

So, I push those thoughts away and get myself another drink, tryin’ to get a little closer to that sweet spot. I see the girl with the white flowers on her shirt is talkin’ to the girl in the sweatshirt and I walk over there. I start talkin’ to ‘em but I’m focusing on the one girl and she can tell. The other girl disappears after some time and I’m left with the girl with the flowers on her shirt and I suddenly realize I don’t know this girl’s name. I’ve been with her all night, and I was plannin’ on trying to take her home, and I don’t know her fucking name. She’s been hangin’ out with us occasionally for awhile now and I never bothered to ask her name. The air feels too thick all of a sudden and I can’t really breathe. I spot my buddy and his girlfriend, but they’re both drunk off their asses, so they’re fightin’ in the corner, and I just wanna yell at her to dump my buddy’s ass for treatin’ her like that. And my other friends are on the dance floor grindin’ with some girls I don’t know, and the girl with the flowers on her shirt is lookin’ at me with a question in her eyes, and it was just too much all of a sudden. I drop my drink in the plastic cup and let the liquor splash up on my legs and get the hell outta that bar.

So, I’m outside and I don’t know what I’m doin’ here or what I was doin’ in that bar, and I miss that girl who used to put our
hands in her pockets. I start walkin’ around the square, not go-
ing anywhere in particular and just wonderin’ about what I’m
doin’ with my life and why I’m so damn unhappy all the time.
I think maybe if I’d been a better boyfriend to that one girl
she might not of walked out on me, and instead of wondering
around alone on a Friday night I might have her hand in mine.
And maybe instead of being out at these shitty bars with my
stupid buddies we’d be at home under blankets, watchin’ mov-
ies, and foolin’ around a little, and I think I’d be much happier
like that. But I fucked it up, so I’m not with that girl and I don’t
know what she’s been up to these days ’cause she don’t spend
any time talkin’ to me still. So, I make my third loop around the
square, and I sit down on a bench outside the club.

So, I’m sittin’ on this bench and just stare at all the drunk
people stumblin’ by. I’m sober enough that I can tell they’re not.
None of ‘em are, except the occasional designated driver with
their arms crossed followin’ their friends around like a chaper-
one. I’m still feelin’ pretty bad for myself when the girl in the
sweatshirt comes walkin’ outta the bar and sees me sittin’, and
so she comes over. She sits down next to me and doesn’t say
anything for a little bit. Just sits with me and watches the peo-
ple stumblin’ by. I was startin’ to wonder if she was ever gonna
say anything when she starts to talk.

“Your friends are idiots,” she says.

I’m completely shocked by this statement ’cause who is she
to say that about my buddies? But then I think, hell, she’s right.

“Yeah,” I say sort of dejectedly, like I don’t wanna admit it,
or believe it maybe. “How come when you come out with us you
start out like you’re havin’ a good time and then just disappear
as the night goes on?” I ask. I don’t think she was expectin’ me
to say somethin’ like that. She probably thinks I’m just as terri-
ble as my friends, and maybe I am, but at least I pay attention.

“Because I start the night wanting to be here, and then I
don’t anymore,” she answers simply. “I didn’t think anyone no-
ticed,” she adds.

I nod ‘cause I know, “yeah, I don’t think most people notice
anything,” I say.

I think maybe this girl isn’t actually so simple like I thought.
Maybe what I’m feelin’ is what everyone else is feelin’ too and
we’re all just fooling ourselves into thinkin’ we’re havin’ a good
time even though every one of us is miserable.
“Why do we keep coming out to these bars when we don’t really wanna be here?” she asks me. She’s not really lookin’ at me, she’s still starin’ out at all the people walkin’ around, and I think she’s been wondering about this for a long time.

“I don’t know,” I say, ’cause I don’t. I don’t have an answer for her or myself. I think maybe I feel like I gotta be here because everyone tells us its fun. Or ’cause it’s the only way to meet anyone in this generation. Or ’cause I think I oughta be spending time with my buddies and this is all they ever wanna do. And I start to think about my buddy and his girlfriend, and how they keep doing the same thing every weekend. They come out, he gets jealous, and they fight, and then they come back next weekend for more. It doesn’t ever go well for them and they just keep putting themselves in the same situation, and the same fight, over and over again.

“I’m going home,” she says and finally turns to look at me. “Want to come with me?”

This really throws me off ’cause I didn’t think she ever thought of me like that, and I start to think maybe I don’t notice as much as I think I do. ’Cause she’s always been around, and I’ve always thought she wanted to be left alone to disappear into the corner, but now I’m thinkin’ all she wants is someone to notice that she’s there. And I think it’s nice that her sweatshirt matches her eyes and maybe I’d like a girl who’d want to meet my mom. But the thing is, I don’t think it’s such a good idea to say yes to this when I’m feelin’ all these things and I still really fuckin’ miss the girl who used to put our hands in her pockets. I think maybe it’s time I start thinkin’ a little more carefully about the decisions I make. But she’s lookin’ at me with her pretty blue eyes, and I guess I’m still a little drunk, and I’m not really sure how to get outta this loop anyway.

So, I say, “Yeah, why not?”
“Listen here, Rosie,” Bald Man says. “If you tell us what you know about the robberies there’s nothing to worry about.” My nose crinkles at how he touches my hand, the sweat massaging inside the cracks of my knuckles.

“My name’s Miss Rosanne Bennet, if you please,” I reply, turning my head to flip a strand of hair out of my lipstick.

“Miss Bennet. You’re a sensible woman. You dress nice, you like the finer things in life. You don’t wanna be stuck like this”—he nods at my hands cuffed to the table,—“do you?”

I sigh. “Would you hand me my lipstick from the right pocket o’ this fur coat here?” I ask Bald Man’s slender, young partner. Fresh on the force. He does a dumbfounded double take between me and his superior. I nod. “Listen, honey, if you wanna hear the story, you’re gonna have to let a lady touch up her lipstick.” The boy crosses over and pulls out the little silver tube from my pocket. “Theatrical Red really is my shade,” I laugh, bringing my mouth to my hands in bracelets attached to the table. A square in Scrawny’s pants catches my eye. “You got a filly, Mr. Copper, or are you just happy to see me?” Scrawny scrambles to quickly place a protective hand over the pocketed ring box.

“It’s the missus,” he blurts, eyes meeting mine for just a moment before averting contact, “or soon to be.”

“You and me both.” I wink at him. He blushes and folds his arms in the dark corner of the interrogation room.

“Snap the hell out of it, Johnson, this is what she’s in the Big House for!” says Bald Man, and I wink at his partner. Scrawny loosens his collar and leans back against the wall. “Now let’s get to the damn point and quit gumming the works, okay? We ain’t got all day.”

There was a feeling to that place, The Angry Sax . . . a certain way the blue lights reflected off the double bass, and men would chin at me and offer to dip my bill whenever I sat at the bar. It smelled like cigarettes and linen, and I would sit in the dark corners of the bar writin’ poems.
a stranger in dark velvet, every night
safety
she visits me in the form of
St. Louis men and their dimes
a bit of glamour before my return
to domestic mediocrity

How I loved the jazz clubs and speakeasies up in the city. Living in a little rural town was never my style, so I would drive with my daddy’s car all the way into St. Louis to get a taste of that music. But I always came to see Ethel sing.

Gosh, Ethel had the most gorgeous voice. I’d already been going to The Angry Sax most Friday nights the year she started singing there, so I knew just as well as anybody she was the coolest cat downtown. Everybody would line up to hear her sing those jazz tunes . . . the way that canary would wail, I started coming in every Thursday night just to hear her rehearsals when nobody else was around. I always went home to my little bed in Pettis County, and would stay up late writing poems for her, and would fall asleep dreamin’ about her singin’ those songs to me in the blue lights of The Angry Sax. Mornings after those kinds of nights, my daddy could tell from my face that I’d been thinking about a girl, because he always could tell, and he would make me fetch a bucket of water to scrub my skin raw until he thought I’d made myself pure again.

There was a Friday night in July of ’29 that I sat on the hood of that tin can I drove, a lit snipe in my hand. The city smelled like a hundred people slowly crawling through a sewer, but it was more a home than my daddy’s ranch ever was to me. It was one of those Friday nights where everybody in their little counties decides to go outta town and you can get all the best people peepin’ done in those clubs. The Angry Sax had moved on from Ethel’s performance to some egg’s old act, and I’d had just about enough of strategizing how my smile could get me a glass of expensive champagne instead of this bathtub gin I always got bought by fellas. So I decided to blow the joint, and I sat on the edge of my daddy’s car just outside, smoked my cigarette, and watched the people walk around.

After some time, Ethel herself came stumbling backwards up the exit steps of The Angry Sax yelling at the slamming door
somethin’ about “Get yo own damn singa.” She turned back round and huffed at the sky. This was my moment.

“You insured, miss?” I said, eyeing her left hand as she whipped around and rolled her eyes. She was wearin’ a shiny blue dress and pearls. She flashed a sparkling milk-white smile.

“Oh, he’s a regular, mad I’m not his sugar daddy. Would you butt me?” She sat next to me against the door of the car and placed the pale side of her hands face up. I lit a new cigarette for her.

“Ain’t I seen you around here before?” she asked. My face turned red as beets in the dark.

“Oh, you’re sweet.” She placed her hand on my knee. My heart shook.

“I’ll bump him off for you,” I said.

“Oh, it’s not worth the bother, he’s my ride. I’m tourin’ the country, see. I’m gonna be like Ethel Waters, I am.” She framed her name in lights in the air in front of her between her jeweled fingers. “Except I’m Ethel Green. And I’m not nearly as famous or good-lookin’ as she is. But I’m gonna be.”

“You are a much prettier dame than Ethel Waters, Ethel Green,” I said low, nodding at her sitting on my car, smelling like giggle juice and summer itself. Her skin glowed in the colored light just like the double bass and she smelled like the jazz of July. “I’ve got a car, you know,” I patted the red wagon we were sitting on.

“And I don’t suppose you’re offering to give me a ride?” she asked, folding her pretty hands so tight her brown knuckles turned white. She was tapping her thumb like she was excited about something. “We were supposed to leave for tour tonight.”

“I know for a fact I’ll be much better to ride around with than that pill o’ yours,” I said, grinning. She stared back at me for a long time, lip bit and eyes searching my face for somethin’. The curtain of her lips pulled back and showed off that glowing smile amidst that gorgeous face, brown as the double bass beneath a blue blanket of neon lights. My chest felt shaky and I picked at my fingers next to my lap. “You’re crazy,” she said.

“Maybe.” Our faces were close, to where I could taste her breath. I challenged her with my eyes and she refused to be the
first to look away, but I didn’t mind. The summer night air was cool, but Ethel’s presence felt like that navy sky, enveloping the whole world in a little bubble every summer night. I sat and soaked up the face that reminded me of sitting amongst the flowers of the dogwood trees back home, writin’ poems in the night about the dark-skinned girl that lived next door, way back in the day.

“Wait here,” she said, and ran back into The Angry Sax.

She came back out bursting at the seams with armfuls of clothes and bags, and dumped them in my backseat before jumping into the passenger seat of my car, squealing through heavy breath. “Go, go! Before he comes to find me!” she giggled, and I started the car and began to drive away. A man burst out of the club as we pulled away, shakin’ his fist, and we just laughed and laughed. She must’ve said “I can’t believe I’m doin’ this” a hundred times during that drive.

She closed her eyes and stuck her hand out the window, let it ride the wind. I watched the way her fingers flipped and danced past all the lights of the city. I got the feeling I was runnin’ from home while she was wanting to go anywhere. I was drivin’ away and she was riding the wind.

We parked in front of a motel and sat lookin’ at the buzzing green lights for a minute. I was trying to figure out how to tell her I didn’t have enough cash to get us each our own room when she grabbed my face and just kissed me real slow. She was warm even after driving hours with the top down, and it tasted like her mouth was made of honey and pecans.

That first night I drove us away, we fell asleep in the back o’ that tin can of mine, after I stayed up late thinking about that time I spent all night as a little girl baking a pie for that pretty brown girl, the one who’d talked with me through the fence every afternoon. My daddy never allowed me to play with her, but we would sit with our backs to the fence and talk, pickin’ at grass and twiddling our thumbs. She told me her favoritest food was pecan pie. I’d saved up my pennies and bought my own special ingredients that afternoon in town while my daddy was gossiping with strange men like he always did, and that night I followed my mama’s recipe in the dark kitchen while my daddy slept down the hall. We ate it together on the sidewalk while the sun came up, and when the cock called, my daddy was already standing on the front porch in his red flannel with his
arms crossed. That was the first time he ever made me wash my sinful thoughts away. I never got to talk to Millie again, but now I always say pecan pie is my favorite.

Ethel and I toured the country for the next six months. She sang to me in all our motel rooms along the way, and I showed her poems for her to put a melody to.

“Sugar . . . what rhymes with sugar, anyhow?”
“Sugar . . . Took her? Looker?”
“Looker!”

Sometimes she would use those songs we wrote together in her shows around the country, and nobody’d know how that song was about a Jane and another Jane, so goofy for one another.

Around Thanksgiving, things started to get harder, and clubs would cancel on us even after we travelled to be there. They had started sayin’ things about the stocks, and how there was nothin’ they could do. Money got real tight for everybody right then, especially me with my hayburner always pushin’ empty. My daddy woulda had something to say to help fix the car, if I’d dared to call him on the road. So after about two months of those clubs rippin’ us off, my car and its tank finally caught up to us, and we ended up stranded at a club in the middle of Detroit. A January night in Detroit is much like a January night any other place, except it feels a little bit like sitting in a sardine can, and everybody inside has gone sour.

Ethel and I decided to get our bearings, so I nodded some men around to get us drinks, and we counted our pennies alone at a little table in that club she shoulda been singin’ in. That’s when a big old copper with fat red cheeks came waltzin’ in. Nobody froze but Ethel and I, hiding our drinks and staring like saps. He laid a wad of dough on the counter, and the bartender scrambled back to bring him some fine liquor from the back of the building.

Big Copper looked over and asked what us two tomatoes were doing out so late. For a moment in the dim lights of an illegal speakeasy, he looked like my daddy. I lost my appetite for any more of my drink after that. I exchanged a glance with Ethel and then with the wad of cash. Big Copper brought a big pitcher of his fancy juice over to our table and made it his business to tell us about all the speakeasies he brought down—of
course, only the ones that weren’t his favorite, like this one. We laughed politely. He got thoroughly ossified and told us long stories about how each of the owners of the joints, without fail, would be hidin’ heavy sugar in vaults at the back of their offices. He said he never told any o’ the other cops about ‘em, and he would stuff all the money into a loose brick of the bathroom in the bullpen at the precinct, because “there ain’t no safer place.” Crooked copper, he was.

So while Ethel was smilin’ her milk-white sparklin’ smile, I pulled two other wads of cash from his back pocket and quickly tucked it all in my bubs while he was drinking up Ethel’s laughter. My hands were shakin’ after that, so I grabbed Ethel by the arm and rushed off to the restroom with her. I showed her what we stole, and after shushin’ her down from her cold-footed ledge, she stared at the money for several minutes while I giggled about how the bad copper was gettin’ what he had comin’ for him. That night, we made love like we’d just counted four hundred dollars cash.

After Big Copper, we started making a habit of seducing and stealing from rich men all around the country, in almost every place she toured. We made love after every one of those times, just each time we were wearin’ nicer coats to tear off.

“Dangerous quiffs,” Bald Man says. “You two have got it comin’ for ya. Men are in danger because of you dumb Doras.”

“Quiffs isn’t a very nice word, Copper,” I smile. “I like to think we’re in tune with our sensuality.”

“Yeah, that’s what I was gonna say, it seems like they’re only stealin’ from bad folks whose money didn’t belong to ‘em.”

Bald Man clenches his fist and bites his lip before turning slowly to Scrawny. “Johnson, I swear to the devil himself, if you don’t grow a pair of balls and stop fallin’ for this getup, I will find another dimwit to help me on this case.”

Scrawny pursed his lips and breathed real hard out his nose. I glanced at the clock above the big wooden door behind me through the reflection in the glass. I’ve got plenty of time to waste.

It was after we pulled a job in Manhattan that next summer that we finally sat down in our motel and counted enough money to rent a place in any big city we wanted. We cried that day.
I kissed Ethel so hard I thought we both might lose our teeth. That night, after we'd celebrated to our heart’s content, while she laid on my chest humming her little improvisational tunes, Ethel purred something about getting married. I sat up onto my knees next to her and asked her if she meant it. I told her, “We can go anywhere, Ethel. We can get married and we can move into a pretty house on the river in St. Louis right by where we met and we can keep this up and open our own jazz bar, funded by the worst men and the best women of the United States. You could be my wife, we could do it, baby.”

“Wife . . .” she muttered, smiling into our pillow. I rubbed her shoulder. “We could get married,” she said.

“Hell, I bet we could pull just a few more jobs in Manhattan alone and have enough money for a honeymoon.”

“Jobs?”

“Yeah, jobs, baby. We got all the money in the world long as there’s money in the world.”

“Baby . . .”

“I bet if we go to one of them upscale speakeasies in the middle of town by all them jewelry stores we could nab somebody who just got back with a ring I could give ya—”

“Rosie, dove, listen—”

“And the men that come into our club, we can rob them . . . hell, even the women, too—”

“Rosie!” she snapped, and smacked me across the face. “Shut the hell up and listen to me.” So I sat and rubbed my cheek. “We are not doing this shit anymore, Rosie. Do you hear me? I can be a cleaning lady and you can be a beautician or somethin’. We ain’t doin’ this for a minute longer. It just ain’t right.” I tried to argue with her about how is anybody supposed to get any money in this dead world, and she yelled about “Just because I don’t hate men like you do—” I began to cry. For the rest of the night, she laid in my arms and made me promise again and again that if we were gonna be together forever, forever wasn’t gonna be like this.

That night, I had a dream that while Ethel was singin’ a fancy gig, I perused the dark, hidden corners of the club, found a plate of hors d’oeuvres, and kept and kept eating until I filled the whole room, suffocating everybody.

“What the hell am I listening to anymore?” Bald Man interrupts. “This is a hundred miles away from the topic at hand.
We wanna know where your partner is. Now, what did we say about talkin’ nonsense before?”

“You said for her to quit gummin’ the works, sir.”

“Johnson, I know what I said,” he spits, then turns back to me to lean in real close. “Here’s the deal, lady. It’s eleven p.m. on Christmas Eve. All the evenin’ officers have gone home to their wives and their wives’ cookins. I’m trying to let you off the hook.”

“I’m not even to the best part yet,” I say in my best whinin’ woman’s voice.

“Johnson, I’m gonna tell Chief we’re finishing this in the morning,” he says, boots stomping like they’s full of lead as he exits the room, and Johnson comes by to uncuff me.

“Sorry, Ms. Bennet, you’re sleeping in a holdin’ cell tonight.”

“Oh that’s quite all right, Copper,” I say, patiently tucking my hair behind my ears.

“I’ll be back right quick in the mornin’, so I expect I’ll be see- ing you again soon.”

“If you’re lucky, yeah. You’ll be seein’ me.” I stand delicately and place a red kiss on his cheek. He smells like fries and eggs. He doesn’t look much better.

And Scrawny takes me over to my modest little cell (nice place, really), locks up, and jogs outside to catch a ride home with Bald Man.

The interesting part about the whole story is what happened after I kept doin’ jobs behind Ethel’s back. It lasted a few weeks before she started pickin’ up we had more money than I coulda ever made at my job sellin’ lipsticks. She got real mad at me that night she found out. She cried askin’, “What the hell is this?” pulling out a couple of fifties from my purse. I tried to tell her I got a bonus, but she didn’t believe me because it was not the season for anybody to be gettin’ no bonuses.

When she started to yell, I got to lookin’ real close at her. She had wrinkles formin’ in her cheeks. I thought maybe it was that angry face she was makin’, all twisted about in some fashion. But I knew those were not there just a few weeks ago. How could somebody even get wrinkles so suddenly?

After all the bulls have finished their paperwork, it finally rolls around to about one a.m., and I start on my original plan.

I take a pin outta my hair and wiggle it through the lock until
it clicks. The door swings open without a hitch. I find where they’ve stashed my purse and my hat, and put them on as carefully and as confidently as I did this morning from a motel just outside Detroit.

I saunter into the policemen’s bathroom nearby and check myself out in the mirror. “You are lookin’ mighty ripe to get insured,” I say, patting down the fur on my chest. I turn to the left and scan for the loose brick on the wall, and sure enough, I find one just under the sink, covered in dust. “Big Copper musta gotten fired,” I say, reaching in and pulling rolls of hundreds into my purse. “Handy fellow, though. Too easy.”

On my way out the front door of the precinct, I pull out a small, red box from my coat pocket and open it for my first glance at Ethel’s ring. It’s modest, and it might take resizin’, but I know she’ll love it. It’s got a blue sapphire right in the middle. Blue like the double bass and my baby back at The Angry Sax.
Casey Forest

The Registry of Trees

If it works how it’s supposed to, the world will transform into forests. But they will be forests of love, and from them will spring the most vibrant systems of life, and there will be no questions about whether or not it was deserved or supposed to happen. All it will be is green.

There is an alternative to having children now. There is an alternative to having sex now. Of all the ways to prove your love, this has by far the longest waiting list. Twenty years, or so. Plenty of time to fall out of love and withdraw your application and to cancel your appointment. Twenty years is a lifetime, or it is a season. That’s what they’ll tell you; if it’s meant to be, twenty years is nothing but time to settle. Settling is something you’ll do a lot of, if it works, if it’s right. Might as well get started now.

Couple after couple have signed on. Entire cities have been replaced by woods.

One of the perks is the ability to choose where you’re planted. There are trees growing on rooftops and floating in the middle of the ocean. Love, immortalized, where honeymoons happened, or first meetings chanced, or where first kisses were kissed. Many coffee shops boast their own ecosystems.

These two have picked something much less flashy. Her parents were planted in her childhood home’s backyard. They’re following suit: nothing big. They’ve picked out a nice glen overlooking the city.

If, they always remind each other. If, if, if.

The appointment is set for three o’clock. They’ve been waiting for long enough that even though she’s feeling under the weather, they still get ready. It’s drizzling. Boots are put on. Umbrellas are considered, but neither of them has used an umbrella in years. They’re getting used to the feeling of rain on their faces: they think one day soon it will give them life. Everything now is about the transition.

Despite the ‘ifs,’ they are still planning. Anyone would. No one can blame them.

The technology is still being perfected. Soon there will be flow-
ers, too, and vines, and ferns. For now, it is just trees. For now, the overcrowding problem is solved enough. Soon the whole world will be reinvented. The offspring of the earth will not be children, they will be the undergrowth of the forest. Squirrels, foxes, and rabbits alike will be protected and parented by the love that created the forests. That’s what the brochure says. But only if your love is strong enough, pure enough. Transformation, it says, is a business not for the weak or the unloved.

They leave as soon as their door is locked. Parked outside on the curb is their shared car. They got rid of the second one as soon as they got on the waiting list; everything now, they thought, has to be proof. And so the sharing started.

She drives because it’s her turn. They split everything equally: duties, food, the mortgage. See? They’ll say. No one is burdened. We’re both sitting on opposite sides of the scale, and everything works. Seamless is a word that’s come up more than once.

Both are nervous. They try to remember things, to calm themselves, to prepare in case the physicians have questions about the validity of their love.

“Do you recall,” the woman says. “In college? The lights downtown?”

“You saw your old professor,” he says. “And didn’t say hello.”

“What was that? Our third date?”

“Second,” he corrects her. It seems important that he does.

What about our first apartment? Where we lived on the edge of okay, when we’d tumbled off the edge of the city knife, when my parents were a year into their transformation and couldn’t respond anymore? I called for weeks. Eventually, the clinic called me back and told me to stop because it was interrupting the process. Our dryer didn’t work. Our clothes came out smelling like tar. When the windows wouldn’t open and you wouldn’t stop smoking? The fire department was an hour away. You always scared me. The landlord wouldn’t call us back. The smoke detector went off every other day. You only kicked it when we signed up because trees and smoke don’t go together. You said it was for me, that you suddenly cared about yourself. You couldn’t just leave me by myself. But it didn’t matter then because we moved right after that.
Ahead of them is a red light. She pulls to a careful stop, keeping distance between her and the car in front of them. *We’re always careful, she’ll say. We take care of each other. We would never endanger our safety.*

The brochure also says it will take a long time for this to happen. There are some ways to prepare, if you are confident in the weight of connection between you and your loved one.

Step One: Make sure you know. There is no way to say “I love you” once you’re planted. Take her on a date! Go to the movies, a picnic, or a festival. Get it out of your system now because once it starts, those days are over. Think of it like retirement, or going into a coma. Take care of him when he gets sick. Make sure to use barrier methods because disease will transfer too. Make sure. Love is a finicky thing, and resentment will transform into burls, into dead branches, into distance. Don’t you want to be planted near each other? The algorithms will sense absence of love. You have to know.

“I know,” she says to him. It’s a daily affirmation.

He replies, automatically, “I know.”

It’s a two-hour drive to the nearest clinic. They’ve read the brochure plenty of times, enough to know that this time matters just as much as the rest of it. All time matters. She used to say, *time isn’t real.* Now she says, *remember when I got pneumonia and you quit your job to stay home with me because they wouldn’t give you the time off. Remember when the electricity got cut off because we couldn’t pay, and we snuggled in bed to stay warm? That’s how I know. That’s when I knew.*

That story gets told at almost every dinner.

Step Two: Children will mess up the process. Out of the relationships we choose to transform, very few have young children. A child will not understand what you’re doing, or why you’re doing it. Think of it as leave-taking. Think of it as death, or birth, or rebirth. You will be a child again, a child of the earth. A child should not have another child. If, when your appointment is scheduled, you have a child that is too young to
know that their parents are imperfect, you may want to re-
schedule. We do not discriminate. But we also understand that
caretaking is not compatible with our business model.

You came home with a kumquat tree to practice. You said, I want
to know what it feels like. You spent days sitting next to it, potted
yourself, felt the waxy leaves and squeezed the tender fruit. I
watched television on mute because you asked me to. But the
light distracted you, you said. I turned off the television and left
you alone. And when I came back you were sitting cross-legged,
looking like a monk. Our yoga class was due to start in half an
hour, but I didn’t remind you. You wouldn’t’ve heard me.

The light turns green. The car grumbles off, the two of them in
tow. She sniffs a little.

“I’m sorry you don’t feel well,” he says. “I can drive on the
way back.”

She remembers then that there will be a drive back.

“Okay,” she says nervously.

Step Three: Spend your money! There is no reason to save any-
more.

“Do you remember,” he asks, “last week, when you started feel-
ing poorly?”

“And you told me to go to the doctor.”

“Why didn’t you?”

She doesn’t look away from the road: she feels no need to.
It’s more important that she keeps them safe, both of them, that
they get to the appointment on time.

“Because I wanted to spend these last few days with you,” she
says evenly.

See? They’ll plead. Picture-perfect. There were never two
more suited for a lifetime together as trees.

Outside, the countryside slowly dwindles down and becomes
pocked with city. A few buildings here and there. There’s a
city-limits sign, and next to it two oak trees, twins, planted
so close together that their roots and trunks have become en-
twined. They both look to see; sometimes they recognize the
trees. There are no faces anymore; the bark has completely co-
cooned any human body. But sometimes there is a faint bell of
recognition. A little uncanny reminder of someone who used to be able to move.

The city rears up around them. They drive through the outskirts of downtown trying to avoid traffic. *That’s one of our things, she’ll say. Neither of us can stand traffic. It was the first thing we bonded over. That’s why we moved out of the city.*

It’s romantic, the house with the chicken coop miles away from anyone else. The coop is empty now—they got rid of the residents ages ago, given to family members or just set free, to make sure nothing was tying them down. Now the only reason they go in there is to reach the breaker. It still smells faintly like poultry.

She’s worrying about the meeting, still flipping through memories, trying to keep down the flood of anxiety in her lungs. She considers saying something about it, but that might just upset him. She decides against it.

Step Four: Slow down! Your pace of life is about to change very drastically. No longer will you be in the rat race. But rejoice that there’s a new option, a way out of the monotonous drone of work and living. A new meaning to the word ‘life.’ You will become a nature person, even if you weren’t one before. Get used to that. Spend time outdoors, just sitting and listening. Any time at all spent this way will help you transition.

*You wouldn’t remember the test.*

Step Five: Be honest. There is no point in lying to someone you’re going to root down with forever.

*I threw it out before you could see.*

*It wouldn’t have worked. At that point we were ten years away from our appointment date.*

*You wouldn’t remember the doctor’s office. You didn’t go with me.*

*I went by myself, while you were at work. I walked because you had the car.*

*You’d brought the kumquat tree with you. It went with you everywhere, then. You were so invested in the future. You wanted the reminder every chance you could get.*

*I walked back, too.*
Step Six: Accept. There are big changes ahead of you. Big change, actually, just one, the only one that matters. You will cease to understand your own choices. You will forget what it’s like to be human. But consider, that human is only a feeling. It will still exist, even if you have no way of reaching it.
The leather jacket had been his grandfather’s. The boots, he’d bought at The Arc for nineteen dollars.

Last year, at Grandpa Jack’s wake, Peter had wandered into the detached garage to escape his great-uncle’s needling, which was primarily distasteful remarks about college girls.

“I’m an English major,” had been his response to the question of whether he had a girlfriend yet.

His great-uncle blinked at the non sequitur, frowning at his beer and his nephew in turn. “English? What are you gonna do with that?”

“Um.” Form poetry wasn’t a career path. It was only his first semester. Maybe he should switch majors just so he could stop answering that question.

Peter had shrugged and used the sudden unveiling of Aunt Sally’s seven-layer dip to slip out.

Grandpa Jack’s garage was a huge half-cylinder made of rigid metal. It reminded him of airplane hangars from movies. Or maybe whatever they kept space shuttles in.

In the house, surrounded by relatives both immediate and distant, Peter felt untethered. Bereft by a slight margin of everyone else’s gravity. He felt like that quite a lot, actually.

Here in the garage, the air was heavier. A weighted blanket on his shoulders. Like the one he kept on his dorm bed—probably the only thing that kept him from tumbling into a foreign orbit when his roommate Scott studied electrical engineering in his pajama bottoms.

Maybe Peter could switch to astrophysics. Then his metaphors about gravity could make sense.

His grandpa’s half-finished projects were in here. A gutted RV. A truck without an engine. Racks and racks full of tools and bolts. Peter wasn’t sure what he’d expected. They hadn’t been allowed in here as kids, and the speculation had driven them dumb. Treasure, dinosaur bones, a corpse. One of his cousins had dared Peter to sneak in during Easter dinner twelve years ago, but left him alone once he started crying.

What Peter did find, about five feet inside the side door, was a motorcycle.
Peter didn’t know anything about models or horsepower, but there was something about the bike that was awfully handsome. He went closer—stroked the leather seat, gripped the handles. Maybe high-speed rides would build enough momentum that he would stay grounded.

He looked behind him and saw the leather jacket on a work-table next to a helmet.

All at once, completely irrationally, Peter felt like he knew everything about his grandfather. This kind of motorcycle, those kind of threads . . . you could only really be one type of person.

Peter was not that type of person. But he wondered, if he had those things, whether he could be.

As a starting point, Peter took a deep breath, draped the jacket over his arm, and went to find Grandma Peggy.

“Hey,” he whispered to her as she brewed coffee.

“Hey, Peaches.” Grandma Peggy called all the cousins that—her Georgia peaches. She saw the leather jacket and smiled faintly. “You find that? I don’t think Jack wore that old jacket since he was your dad’s age.”

Peter chewed his lip. “Would it be, uh, would it be crazy if I asked for it?”

Over winter break, Peter spent long, quiet mornings in his room at his dad’s house wrapped up in the jacket. It was soft and heavy and smelled like aspirations.

Being home felt weird. Peter pretended he was going to catch up on his fun reading, but he was pretty sure British Literature and World History had collaboratively broken the reading mechanisms in his brain. He couldn’t focus. If his dad was bothered by how much Peter was sleeping, he wasn’t saying anything.

When he returned to school for the spring semester, he took the leather jacket with him. He hung it on the post of his dorm bed. Scott, who Peter tried not to think of as attractive, briefly noted that the jacket was probably haunted before he went back to ignoring him.

At first, Peter only wore the jacket around his dorm room. It was huge, heavy enough to keep him weighed down.

On a day he couldn’t convince himself to change out of his sleep clothes, he wore it to the counseling center. Students got
one complimentary session—his RA had brought that up in an oh-so-casual way. Peter had agreed, since it wouldn’t show up on his bill.

“Nice coat. That looks cozy.” His counselor was a woman with thinning blonde hair and a thinner smile. “You left a few things blank on your intake form, Peter. Can I ask why?”


Peter balled his hands into the fabric inside the jacket pockets. “I’ve just been . . . really stressed.”

After an hour, he’d been advised to try managing the stress with tea, oxygen, and podcasts.

Besides that day, Peter finally wore the leather jacket to class on a day it rained and he didn’t have anything warmer.

The TA noticed him for the first time and sent a smile his way.

A girl on the floor above him was a fashion design major. He didn’t know her that well, except that she and Scott had slept together.

Annaliese ruffled his hair whenever she saw him, and it made him feel cute and liked. Peter tagged along with her to the thrift store on a fabric run. The shoes were across the aisle.

Peter tried on a pair of scuffed combat boots, old Doc Martens, as a joke. A chuckle and a cheap ironic line at the ready, he called for Annaliese’s attention.

Annaliese, laden with discounted fabric, stopped in her tracks.

“You’re not allowed to leave without buying those. They match your freaking bomber jacket.”

Peter thought she was teasing him, until she pointed out the boots were half off. A total steal.

They were a little ridiculous, despite her enthusiasm. The soles were twice as thick as his thumb. But apparently, Peter wasn’t ridiculous wearing them. Plus, they fit well. Snugly.

The first time Peter wore them around campus, the left boot caught on the stairs and pitched him face-forward.

Gravity and concrete combined to give him a bloody nose and a black eye.

A week later, the bruise hadn’t faded in time for his niece’s sec-
ond birthday. His brother-in-law had cracked up at the sight of him, and other adults had joined in when Peter tried to explain the boots and the stairs. His dad frowned at him. His sister asked if he’d been in a fight, which was less outlandish than the truth by a slim margin, so Peter shrugged and ducked away to commiserate with the snack counter.

Cake and presents passed. Peter hadn’t brought anything, but on a college budget, no one had expected him to. His dad was his ride back to campus, which meant leaving an hour early. Peter pretended it was a bummer, but breathed a sigh of relief when he got in the passenger seat of his dad’s truck.

Knowing at least one of his family members would give him shit for trying to pull off Grandpa Jack’s leather jacket, Peter had left it in the car for the duration of the party, but he slipped it back on now. His head felt light, but the jacket kept him warm as his dad’s A/C struggled to produce heat.

About ten minutes onto the highway, as Peter hummed to the radio, his dad pulled over onto the side of the road and shut off the engine. Peter paled, gripping the cuffs of the jacket.

“Dad?” Cars zoomed past them. For a long minute, his dad just sat there, slumped in his seat. “What’s wrong?”

“Pete.” His dad had a faint southern drawl from growing up in Georgia. He thumbed his nose. “I don’t know if I like this. That you’re getting into fights. Maybe that school isn’t right for you.”

“Fights? No. Oh, Dad, no. I didn’t get in a fight.” Peter winced at his dad’s expression and looked down at the toes of his Converse, tapping them together. Shit. This wouldn’t be happening if he’d stuck to his Chucks on campus. “I really did fall on the stairs.”

His dad didn’t buy it. “Look, your brothers both had sports to let it all out. There’s gotta be something at that school, boxing or football, something you can do with yourself.”

“Dad. I wasn’t in a fight.”

“I don’t want to pick one of my sons up from jail ever again. It broke your mother’s heart when Luke got charged.”

“I’ve never been in a fight!”

“That shit, it goes on your record, Pete. Hardly any use in going to school if you ruin your future throwing right hooks—”

“Dad, holy shit. That’s not—I don’t—I, I’m gay.”

It got quiet again. Four cars rushed past them before Peter
could even inhale again. That wasn’t supposed to get out. He hadn’t meant to say that—and why the hell had he? Being queer didn’t exclude pent-up aggression.

“Oh,” his dad said. “Oh.”

Peter failed to swallow the lump in his throat. *Dipshit*, he thought to himself. It was still thirty minutes in the car with his dad until he could hide from this.

“Peter.” His dad sounded choked up, and his accent somehow made it especially tragic. “If you’re in trouble, if you got a guy who beats on you, and you need to come home for a while . . .”

It took a minute for his brain to sort the words. Once he realized what his dad was saying, Peter snorted in laughter. He held his cheeks, flushed and warm and wet from tears.

“I’m not . . .” He laughed again, bending over. “I don’t have a boyfriend. Let alone an abusive one. Oh, my god.”

“What’s funny?” his dad asked, eyes wide.

“I don’t know. Just that . . . Jesus, I didn’t have any idea how you would react. You know, Georgia and all. This is . . .” Peter wiped his eyes. What was it? A relief? “I don’t know.”

“Well . . .” his dad said, picking at something on the steering wheel. “You thought I would take it poorly? Christ, Pete. I know I grew up in a backwards sort of town, and maybe a lot of the family isn’t very *modern*, but you’re my kid. I love you. I love all you guys.”

Peter smiled, big enough to lift his ears. For the first time that night. For the first time in a while, maybe.

“Thanks, Dad.”

“So . . . no one hit you?”

Peter laughed as he tugged the sleeves of his jacket over his hands. “No one hit me, Dad.”

When he got back, Annaliese was in his room, and Scott was playing some game on his computer, laptop flanked by bags of junk food and candy.

Annaliese thumbed through a sketchpad. She’d moved his desk chair so she could sit next to Scott. She grinned at Peter, eyes crinkling.

“Hey, lovebug.”

“Hey.” Peter stepped onto his desk and swung up, jacket and all, onto his bed.
“Easy on the cutesy stuff,” Scott said, gaze focused on simulated gunfire. “You’re gonna make me jealous.”

Peter put one headphone in and queued up a podcast. “Except I’m gay.”

“Oh.” Scott looked back at him. “Hey, you’re supposed to take the trash out next, dude.”

He’d get to it. Annaliese stole a gummy worm from Scott and threw it to Peter. He grinned at her before he laid down.

Grandma Peggy hadn’t been doing much since Grandpa Jack passed. Near the end of April, Peter went with his dad to visit her. She lit up with a delighted gasp when she saw them get out of the truck.

“Peter. Heavens, do you look exactly like your grandfather. Joseph, doesn’t he look like your dad?”

Peter smiled bashfully. He’d been experimenting with all sorts of smiles lately, now that they were coming easier. His dad turned to appraise him, and Peter lifted his hands, still in the jacket pockets.

“Sure, Ma. All the boys have Dad’s nose.”

As Grandma Peggy ushered them inside for coffee, she leaned in conspiratorially. “But only one of you has his old bomber jacket.”

Peter gave her a grin. When they walked around the property later, they stopped into Grandpa Jack’s garage.

The leather jacket felt like it was glad to visit home. Peter saw the motorcycle, right where he’d left it.

“Oh, hey.” Peter swung a leg over to sit on it. It bounced a little under his weight. “Matching set.”

Grandma Peggy was showing his dad the engineless truck. “Isn’t that an idea! You should take it, Peter. It’s only collecting dust in here.”

“Hell no, Pete,” his dad disagreed. For a moment, Peter thought he was pointing out the obvious. Gay guys don’t ride motorcycles. Instead, his dad wagged a finger at the rotted tires. “That thing’s a death trap.”

“I could fix it up. And take lessons.” Peter still had graduation money from high school. Still, his dad shook his head. “You don’t trust me?”

“You don’t even ride your bicycle to class, Pete. What’s a motor gonna change?”
Peter shrugged. While he sat there, straddling the old motorcycle, hands in his jacket pockets, Peter thought he must look awfully adventurous. Maybe a little noble. This thing had a leather-scented gravity all its own. If he indulged the wistful feeling in the garage, he’d say it was choosing him.

*Him.* And that made Peter feel like sonnets and battered leather jackets and liking guys all made sense together.

Peter slipped off the motorcycle. He laid a hand on the worn seat.

“Maybe some day.”
Silence filled the room. Adelaide no longer remembered the question Dr. Rivers had asked, but she was pretty sure it was no less than thirty minutes ago.

She’d been to enough of these ridiculous sessions to know he wouldn’t make her talk. He didn’t know how to make her talk.

Adelaide usually passed the time by looking around the office and silently criticizing every piece of outdated décor in the place. For example, Dr. Rivers sat in an ugly paisley armchair Adelaide was sure he inherited from an ancient relative or found on the side of the road.

The chair Adelaide sat in was bright green gingham. She wondered if her mom had ever seen the ensemble. It was likely she would vomit.

When she got bored with the poorly decorated room, Adelaide moved on to Dr. Rivers himself. She was pretty sure his argyle sweater pushed the pattern limit in the small room.

Adelaide reached into her bag and pulled out her journal, making a note to tell her mom that all the stimuli in the room made her want to lose her lunch.

When she was done, she asked, “Can I go?”

Dr. Rivers looked down at the watch on his wrist. “Not quite. Your mother mentioned you write quite a bit,” he said, gesturing to the journal in her lap. “Tell me a little about that.”

Adelaide shrugged. “Sometimes.” She was pretty sure Dr. Rivers wore a wig. No one’s hair was that perfectly quaffed.

“Why don’t you read me something?”

“No chance,” she said quickly.

“This is a risk-free zone, Adelaide. I want you to share something,” Dr. Rivers said. “Why don’t you just pick your favorite thing and go?”

“I don’t really have a choice, do I?” she asked.

“You always have a choice,” he said.

But she knew she didn’t. “Fine.”

Dr. Rivers leaned back in his ugly armchair to settle in. Adelaide resisted the urge to roll her eyes.

“It was the strong scent of lavender,” she read, “that seeped into her subconscious and woke her from a lovely dream of peo-
nies. She could feel it beneath her hands, and when she dragged open her heavy eyelids, she saw it hanging from the ceiling, twining through the threads of the blanket splayed across her body, spilling out of her dresser drawers, and covering the window that should have let in the soft morning light. She breathed a small sigh that made a cloud of pollen spread through the air over her face.

She sat up, the weight in her bones making her slow. She tried not to disturb the twisting blossoms as she swept the lavender-covered blanket aside and let her legs dangle over the edge of her bed. Squeezing her eyes shut tight, she tried to make it all disappear. She pictured the fragrant plants creeping back into the darkness of the drawers and slithering out the window, leaving her nose to breathe in fresh, unpolluted air.

But when she cracked her eyelids experimentally, it was all still there. She shook her head, wondering why she thought anything would have changed. It was always there, and she had a sneaking suspicion it always would be.

She tiptoed through her lavender-covered bedroom, trying un成功fully to avoid stepping on any of the plants. Not because she particularly cared about their survival. In fact, it was rather the opposite. It’s just that waking up day after day with a blanket of that same strong scent covering your body and filling your nose gets rather old after a while, and stepping on them only made the smell more dominating.

So, she picked her way across her lavender-covered rug to her lavender-filled dresser and pulled out some clothes that she put to her face, hoping to smell sweet rose or smooth lily, but finding only the sharp sting of lavender. She felt broken, and tired, and on her way to the bathroom, she couldn’t even look down at the all-too-familiar plant to make sure she didn’t step on it.

She merely raced through and out of the room, slamming the door shut behind her and leaning against it, as if she had just shut in a dangerous enemy. And in a way, she had.

Pooling cool water in her hands and spreading it across her pollen-covered face, she began to feel better. Even if those hands had created this mess. She looked in the mirror as she brushed pollen and soft purple buds from her hair, thinking of the people she would pass throughout the day who would think she smelled nice, pretty, comfortable.

But none of them knew what it was like. None of them knew
how absolutely suffocated she felt every morning waking up surrounded by a veritable garden of the flower she disliked most.

She kept running the brush through her hair long after she needed to. All traces of the flowers and pollen were gone, but she just kept brushing.

She wondered if she hated lavender because it was the only flower she could make.

*Stroke.*

She wondered if lavender was the only flower she could make because she hated it.

*Stroke.*

She wondered if other people woke up surrounded by plants they had conjured from the recesses of their minds.

*Stroke.*

She wondered if it would ever go away.

She continued brushing, delaying the inevitable moment she would have to return to her bedroom and leave for school.

Just then, she saw something out of the corner of her eye and glanced up at the top of the mirror. They began creeping out from behind her reflection on every side. Her heart started racing and she felt bile rising in her throat. She couldn’t escape it. It was taking over her bed, her clothes, her mirror, her life, herself. She had become the lavender, and the lavender had become her.

When she walked down the street, people would see only green stalks and purple buds. They would smell the sharp scent and probably even enjoy it, thinking about babies and sleep and sunshine. But they wouldn’t know the girl beneath the lavender. They wouldn’t understand her love of lying in sun-soaked grass or pulling weeds from her vegetable garden. She will have disappeared, and the only thing people will notice is the lavender.”

“Okay, but why lavender?” Dr. Rivers asked after she had stopped reading. “Do you hate lavender? And I’m not sure I get the concept of the plant creation. Do they come out of her hands? Or do they just appear? How did you even come up with that?”

Adelaide shut her journal with a satisfying snap. “Hey, Professor Critical,” she said. “I thought you were supposed to be my therapist.”

“No, I am, I am,” he said. “I’m just curious.” He looked at her expectantly.
She shrugged. “I don’t know, it just came to me. It’s supposed to be abstract, you know? Like, you’re not really supposed to get it.”

He nodded his therapist nod. The expectant look hadn’t disappeared.

“I think . . . ,” she faltered. “I think it might be like . . . a metaphor or something.”

“Hmmm, a metaphor. Interesting.”

It was Adelaide’s turn to look expectant, but the man said nothing more. Idiot. They had a lengthy staring contest wherein Adelaide formed the words to convince her mom not to make her come back to this moron.

He interrupted the staring contest by looking at his watch.

“It looks like our time is up, Adelaide.”

“You’re a quack, Dr. Rivers.”

“See you next week, Adelaide.”

“No you won’t.” But she knew she’d be coming back. She didn’t have a choice.

When she walked out into the waiting room, Adelaide saw her mom sitting on the arm of one of the mismatched armchairs balancing an overstuffed binder on a knee, pressing a cell phone to her ear, and holding a cup of bad waiting room coffee in her hand.

Adelaide took the opportunity to look at her mother when the woman wasn’t rapidly moving. It was a rare sight.

After a few moments, when she made eye contact with Adelaide, she flashed her daughter a quick smile and nodded down to the thick binder, with its pretty white tulle and lace, moments from falling onto the dirty waiting room floor.

She closed the gap between her and her mother and lifted the binder into her arms. When she was younger, Adelaide wondered when her mother had time to exercise. It seemed like she was always on the phone or bossing around florists or meeting with panicked brides. Yet she was still so thin.

But she now understood that her mother didn’t need to work out. These binders weighed approximately nine thousand pounds.

On the way out the door, she saw a completely full cup of shitty waiting room coffee fall from her mother’s bony hand into a tiny trash can. That was the other way her mother stayed thin: she barely kept anything in her body anymore.

Lately, Adelaide had been finding PowerBars with one bite
taken out lying around the house. Yesterday, when she was taking out the trash, she saw a full waffle strategically placed under a paper towel.

When they got into the car, her mom still on the phone, Adelaide flipped open the hefty binder in her lap. A small smile crept over her face as she ran her hand over the smooth fabric swatches and flipped through the stapled-together engagement photos of the happy couple. This woman had dark brown hair that shone red in the sun, just like Adelaide’s. Just like her father’s.

They used to go to the weddings together, the three of them. Adelaide and her father would sit in the pew farthest to the back and play rock paper scissors or, if they could get their hands on a piece of paper and a pen, tic-tac-toe.

Her mom would run around making sure everything was perfect for the couple’s big day, but she would sneak a wave or a kiss on the tops of their heads if she could spare a second. Then when it was finally time, she would sit in between them, squeezing one of each of their hands, tears falling down her face when she saw the bride.

Adelaide had been to more weddings by the time she was five than most people went to in their entire lives.

She didn’t go to the weddings anymore.

Adelaide didn’t know if most people invited their wedding planner’s family to the wedding, but Angela Williams was far too efficient, too good at her job, too radiant to tell no. Some clients still sent family Christmas cards and summer barbecue invitations, but her mother always politely declined. She would say she had other weddings to plan or Addy was sick or some other such excuse.

But really, she thought the invitations were a little creepy. She would pull them out of the envelope, flip them around to show Adelaide, and grimace while Adelaide laughed.

“You’re just too good, Mom,” she would say. Or, “You need to stop showing them where we live.”

The couple filling the pages of this particularly thick binder were radiant too. They seemed just the type to send her mom an invitation to their first kid’s christening.

When Angela finally hung up the phone, Adelaide asked, “So on a scale of one-to-bridezilla, how bad is this one?”

No response. Her mom was staring blankly out of the windshield.
“Mom? You okay?”

Angela’s eyes lost a bit of their glazed-over look. “What’d you say, Addy? Sorry, I was just . . . lost in thought.”

“I was just wondering if this lady’s crazy or not. Like should we expect the casual thank you card or the all-out fruit basket when this thing is over?”

The laugh that came out of her mouth was quieter than usual, and it didn’t show up in her crow’s feet as well as it usually did. “Somewhere in the middle, I think. Maybe a nice massage coupon?”

“Sweet, I could use a massage,” Adelaide said. “What with these stressful visits with Dr. Rivers and all.”

Angela sent a brief glare her daughter’s way. “Addy, Dr. Rivers is the best there is. We’ve talked about this.”

“You’ve talked about this. I’ve listened. Mom, today I read him a story I wrote, and he was acting like an English teacher. He was basically like, ‘I think this is a comma splice’ and ‘Remember, Adelaide, scene verses summary’. Like, come on, man,” Adelaide said, throwing up her arms like she always did when she started ranting. “He’s supposed to be a therapist.”

“Addy,” Angela said, rubbing her forehead. Adelaide wondered if her mother had a headache and told herself to quiet down a little. “I’m sure everything he does with you is for a reason. Even when we were in high school, the guy knew he wanted to be a therapist. He was our resident Lucy.”

“Well I’m not Charlie Brown, Mom. I have serious issues.”

“Woah, woah, woah, let’s not start ragging on Charlie Brown.”

“You’re right, that was uncalled for. I’m sure Charlie Brown would think his issues were more serious than mine.” The two Williams girls smiled at each other.

“Mom—” Adelaide started. She knew she was no Dr. Kevin Rivers Ph.D, but she had been listening to the man talk about her own problems for long enough to see similar patterns in others. “Mom, I know you haven’t been eating.”

“What? Honey, why would you say that?” Her voice dripped with fake indignation and actual surprise.

“Don’t try it,” Adelaide said. “I’m not stupid. And I want to help. Is this about Dad? Or work? Or is it a body image thing? Because you know you’re the hottest mom that ever has or will exist. Seriously, Marney’s dad was gushing about you last time I was over there. It was super creepy. Or—”
“Adds, you’re rambling.”
“Sorry,” she said. “I’m just worried about you.”
“What a pair we are,” she said, a sad smile creeping across her face, soon replaced by a slight frown. “Addy, you have enough to worry about, don’t you think? With school and these appointments and being a teenager, I don’t want you to add me to that list.”
“You’re not even hiding it well, though,” she said. “I think on some level you wanted me to find out. You wanted me to help you.”
“Is that what you think, Detective Holmes? Addy I’m fine, seriously.”
“Then explain the barely touched PowerBars all over the house. And that waffle from yesterday. You said you were having breakfast in your office, and then I saw it in the trash can later.”
Angela sighed. “Please just leave it, Addy. I’m fine.”
“But—”
“Adelaide,” she said. But she said it more like a curse instead of a name. “I said leave it.”
Adelaide started chewing the loose pieces of skin on the side of her nails, and by the time they pulled into the driveway of their house, tiny droplets of blood bubbled out of her skin and pooled in the small canyon between her finger and nail.
Angela got out of the car and closed the door behind her a little harder than normal. Adelaide shut her eyes tight, and when she opened them, her mother was inside the house.
She pulled out her phone. _Marn can you talk? Can’t sorry at dinner with rents._
_No prob._
Adelaide leaned back in the smooth, leather passenger seat of the car that used to be her father’s. For a split second, she thought about dialing Dr. Rivers’s number just so she had someone to talk to. But she changed her mind when she remembered that her mom had given her that number for emergencies when she went out of town.
“Kev is my oldest friend, Addy. I trust him. Just for emergencies, okay?” she would say.
Now, sitting in that old car full of wonderful memories and a new, not so good one, she wondered if they were sleeping together. She deleted his number from her contacts.
When she finally worked up the courage to go inside, her mother was holed up in her office with the cutesy sign on display that said *I’m a working mama!* It said that more and more often these days.

When her dad had first bought that for her mother, she laughed and hung it on her door right away, the side reading *Mama’s here!* facing out. Adelaide missed that side almost as much as she missed her own father. Almost.

She thought about knocking on the white double doors despite the sign but decided she didn’t have the energy. Instead, she dragged herself up the stairs to her bedroom, closing the door softly behind her.

She stood in front of the full-length mirror she had propped up against the wall next to her door. Running her fingers through her shoulder-length hair, she thought about her father, just like she did whenever she caught a glimpse of her hair in a mirror or someone pointed out the gleaming highlights of red.

For the past three years, whenever someone mentioned his name, or asked how she was doing, leaving out but thinking *since his death*, she would say, “He died on a Monday. Sucks, right?” and they would leave her alone.

Dr. Rivers always said she was delaying the final stage of grief, but like she had already told him, he was a fucking quack.

As she sat in front of the mirror, running her hands through her hair, she thought of the Adelaide that existed in her journal. That Adelaide lived in her room, wore her clothes, used her brush, and had the same weight pressing down on her every second of the goddamn day. But that Adelaide had lost control, not a family member. Or was that the same thing?

Adelaide thought if she stared long enough in this mirror, lavender might come crawling out from behind it, and she would see the reflection of it spilling out her drawers, creeping through her window, suffocating her bedspread.

But nothing came. Exhaustion spreading throughout her body, she left her pale reflection, passing her dresser and glancing at the small bottle of lavender perfume her mom had given on the day of the funeral. She laid down on her bed and squeezed her eyes shut. Adelaide heard a soft knock on her bedroom door. Thinking it might be her father, *come in* nearly sprang to her lips, but then she remembered. And she knew she didn’t have the energy.
She said nothing, and the knocking eventually stopped. Laying on top of her bed, shoes still on, the spat with her mother still lurking somewhere in the back of her mind, Adelaide wondered what other shit life could possibly throw at her.

She thought, *He’s downstairs making a cup of tea. He’s sitting on the edge of your bed, trying to come up with just the right thing to say to make you giggle. He’s right outside your door ready to make all the pain go away.* Tears leaked from the corners of her eyes, and she felt their warmth trail down the side of her face and into her hair.

When she kicked off her shoes and crawled under her covers, she thought of the blissful nothingness she would soon slip into. Just before she drifted off to sleep, she thought she smelled something floral. Something pungent. Something overwhelming. Lavender. And she couldn’t escape.
Max Roesler

A Certain Slant of Wonder

That’s right, I grew up right there in the valley with everyone else. I didn’t have any idea at the time what was really going on, and if I did, I sure as hell would have done a lot more to keep it around. My earliest memories take place around age seventeen, right as everything was starting to shift. Reflecting upon those days brings me sublime happiness, inexpressible through the language that has become custom. All I have to share now is a story of how it all seemed to happen down there—how it all began to turn slant, abject, and gray—all right under our noses.

As it was and had been, the life of my small cabin lay on the outskirts of town near the water mill. There, I woke, bathed, breathed, and slept, all on my own—for at the time there was no need for parents, or even the concept of “parents” at that. Everyone lived alone, and everyone lived together. That’s just the way it was. I remember first recognizing “parents” after the shift; it left me feeling uncomfortable.

So, there I was up in the cabin just as the sun peeked over the horizon. I was starting my day, and breathing, and smiling, and walking about getting sorted out. I always enjoyed this part of the morning for how the sun breathed with me slow and gentle—in a much softer tone than its midday self.

In this early day solemnness, I fixed myself up some tea in the easy little kitchen in front of the window overlooking the golden pastures. I could see the mellow-blue mountains beam ing beyond the fields as I waited for the water to boil. That was all a great joy—how the world would stretch itself out in such a tone every morning. It made the process of making tea a sublime and gentle procession.

Once the tea-making process was completed, I stepped right on out of that little cabin to greet the warm breeze of day. The breeze smelled of budding roses and soft earth rising. It was a beautiful time to be walking out of a cabin into the warm breeze of day, and I took full advantage by doing so.

The dirt path to town was a short mile. It was a beautiful walk—everything about it moved free of resistance. The walk was es-
especially beautiful that day, for it was the time of year when the trees shared books with us in the valley. They littered the ground in shades of lavender, maroons, and soft gold. As it was, books weren’t written back then; they were birthed from the earth itself—dropping effortlessly from the limbs of the mature trees that flourished throughout the valley.

I scooped up an especially pleasant looking book from the blue shadow of a great maple. It had a lavender cover. The book was about hands and how nice they are. I thought this was very nice—holding the book about hands in my hands. I flipped through a number of pages and felt all warm about myself. These books were always good for doing that, and I hoped someone else would find the book after I was done, so they could feel all warm about themselves too.

As the path tended closer to the village, I always took some time to visit the animals living in the meadow behind the town’s inn. The animals were cows. The cows back then had long delicate legs and elegantly rounded bodies. They liked to hang out behind the inn because there was always jazz music drifting out the back door—and boy did those cows like jazz. The cows always seemed to know I was coming to say hi, for when I turned around the last bend in the path, they were always on their way over to greet me.

Following our cordial his and hellos, we had a short conversation about the festival happening in town. It was a weekly festival in celebration of “Tuesday.” The cows didn’t say much when I asked them about it, not because they didn’t have much to say, but rather because they just didn’t like to talk much. The cows just really liked the jazz music and really didn’t like to talk. When the cows felt satisfied with their interaction with me, they lazed off back to the pasture with an implied, have a good day, and I knew they meant it.

Life in the town was lively as ever. Everyone was smiling, and no one was working. Nobody ever worked in the valley because everything got done. That’s just the way it was. People were walking about eating melons and hugging one another drifting toward the town’s center square where all the festivities were to occur. The festivities of such an event consisted of sharing food (mostly melons and other sweet fruits) and musical per-
formances—all of which were acted out by citizens of the valley (everyone). These festivals were held for every day of the week, every week of the month, and every month of the year. The philosophy of the people for holding such events was this: that there couldn’t be a more fine way to celebrate a day in the world.

I loved the old town. Each building insisted itself upon the earth in such a distinct way that no two resembled one another. The town hall, for instance, resembled what we now consider a grand church to look like (but of course, there was no such thing as church back then; all faith was circulated between individuals). The residential buildings varied from pueblo-style clay homes to Victorian era mansions, and everything in between. The people liked variety, and so, variety there was.

I arrived in the town square right as the innkeeper and her makeshift band were performing a song about flowers. I thought that was a great thing to write a song about: flowers. All the townspeople were gathered around the four piece, raising their arms, allowing the juice from the melons they ate to run down to their elbows. I also had melon juice running down to my elbows. Everyone was sticky, and happy, and dirty, and new—waving, and spinning to the tune of the bizarre instruments the band had engineered for such events as these. Nobody thought the instruments to be bizarre, however. That’s just the way they were. They sounded like a soft color pouring over glass castles.

As the performance began to slow, I sunk back behind the crowd, taking a seat on a bench resembling a tiger. Beside me sat a plain man. His body was young, but he had the face of someone who had lived for some time. Sporting a sullen grin, he offered me an apple from his farm. The apple was a harsh golden red. I accepted it gladly, thanking the man, allowing the apple’s juices to mingle with that of the melons. The juices ran down my arm in swaths of sweet syrup. With the same pensive grin, the man promptly rose, and rejoined the crowd of the festival. I watched him a moment longer as he stood still amongst the moving mass of humanity around him. He observed an object he took from his pocket (what I now understand to have been a pocket watch), before grimly walking away and out of the town square. I had never seen him before that day.
Enjoying the sweet fruit, I allowed my body to recede into the comfort of the bench. It was covered in fine hair. It hugged my entirety. Playing with the swift fibers that covered the bench, I recall for the first time wondering why it looked like a tiger, and what a tiger was. This thought was uncomfortable and unprompted—never before had such an ineffectual marvel passed my mind. Confused, I quickly pushed it aside, promptly accepting more fruit—a slice of honeydew—from a familiar neighbor that had joined me on the bench without my notice.

“It’s a wonderful festival day, don’t you think?”
“Yes,” I replied, eyes placed firmly upon my lap.

The walk home was a good one. It was one of those tender walks where the sun seemed to linger indefinitely upon the horizon. I attuned myself to the setting, attempting to no longer reflect upon the day in town and those thoughts accompanying it. I allowed the trees to whisper to me with the breeze of dusk. They relayed stories of the mountains far away. I could feel their ridges on my bare neck. This seemed right. The wind appeared to bow the trees surrounding the path into a tunnel, the late daylight seeping through. I smiled as my feet brought the form of my small cabin into view. It looked solemn in the diminishing light, yet, for some reason, a bit slant. The wood of the doorway seemed more faded, and I passed through it as if swimming through a machine full of lard.

Another morning. I was awake. The sun dropped its fingers through the blinds to welcome my consciousness. I lingered about the bed for some time before rising into what would be the contents of a day.

I fixed my tea once again as I did, gazing out at the golden pastures and the mellow-blue mountains. It was later in the day than I usually woke up, leaving me feeling a bit morose. I had never felt morose before—it was an odd concept to approach in the early morning while looking out at golden pastures and mellow-blue mountains. It made them seem gray. This gray was abrupt and uncomfortable—a feeling I had felt only once: the day before.

I began my walk to town feeling off, but a bit better—by then having ingested my tea and a small melon from the garden.
The sun once again shone bright, my legs once again drove forward, and the familiar trees welcomed my eyes with grace. The breeze was a bit biting that day, but it carried the birds’ song all the farther.

Looking about as I did on my walks, I noticed something peculiar: the books upon the ground appeared tattered, their covers ripped, dark, and bland. I picked one up that was near my feet, and began to scan it with perturbed eyes. The images displayed on the inside were of rotten apple cores and dead forests; images of which I had never encountered before. The reception of these images made me feel morose, a feeling of which I had never felt until that morning. I recall at this time wondering: how were these things, and where had I been? Was it always like this? And why today? Feeling more inquisitive and dull than ever, I continued my walk with hopes that a visit to town would bring some sort of closure—familiarity.

Turning about the bend that introduced the village, I was surprised to find the cows standing some distance away. This was unlike them, as they always approached me to say hello. I continued my pace, moving toward them with prudence. I was unsure of how to approach such a situation—unsure of the cows, of our relation, of the setting at large. Such a lack of assurance had never crossed my mind, but it now flooded over me without ease.

Approaching them cautiously, I caught the eye of one of the larger bulls of whom I was well acquainted. Before I could say anything, I was frozen by the appearance of the bull’s face. He stared at me with large dull eyes. I could see my reflection in them—a reflection I had never encountered (for there had been no mirrors before). He stared and stared. I, meeting my own sunken apparition, felt drained. Curdling within myself, I left the scene—not waiting for a word from the creature, my mind seeking only distance.

This was about the time that I realized what was going on was not just the results of a strange day (for I had had those before), but rather some twisted reality I had somehow stumbled into. The bench yesterday, the insecurity of understanding, the “morose” morning, the horrible books along the trail, the cows . . . was it all happening? Or what was? I hurried myself to the village, head whirling through suppositions I had
never encountered, experiences I had never felt the weight of. I hoped the village would be different—the same? I couldn’t tell at this point. Forcing all thought aside, I pushed my way through the last of the pasture to the town entrance.

The village was recognizable enough. There were the homes, the well, the inn, the grand hall . . . the homes . . . the homes did not look right. The structures of each seemed to blend together in a sort of pattern—a sort of normalization of form. Such normalization had never occurred to me. Had the homes been so before? How could they have been any other way? Nothing was lining up, yet still I wandered on in hopes of some sort of closure. Turning the bend leading to the town square, I caught the shirt sleeve of a man on his way to the Wednesday Festival.

“Have you seen the houses? Why do they appear as they do now?”

“The houses? Why, I’m not sure what you’re getting at my friend. There is no need to worry about such things. The world is a beauty, and there is music to be heard and fruit to be eaten. Let us go to the festival! All the homes are quite fine, really. Always quite fine as they are!”

The man skipped away, unperturbed by the unwarranted question and the nature of it. I stood there, dumbfounded, uncomfortable, attempting to go along with the day as the man did—an attempt which had never required an “attempt” before. I couldn’t help but wonder why such things as the homes appeared as they did one day and not the next? Why were they yesterday as they were? Why the difference, and why today? These questions need not be asked, but they were—and I was among the wreckage of them. Hoping the music would soothe me, I stepped myself into the mass of humanity flooding the square, refusing to look back at the homes.

The festival passed quickly. I did my best to enjoy it as it was, but my suppositions ran rampant. None of the performances made sense—they dragged on, they dragged on over my brain. The melons were not as sweet as before. They tasted like plastered sugar paste. The friendly faces of my life seemed sunken; the people seeming as off as I. The musicians played with effort, they appeared to struggle to conclude each melody. The crowd,
preoccupied, stepped with tension to the twisted rhythms. And I questioned: was just I? Was it just—

I took a moment to breathe, allowing myself to sink into the fuzzy bench upon which I rested and close my eyes. Fingering the hair follicles littering the surface of the bench, I underwent a profound realization. The sensation of the hairs reminded me of my brief interaction with the odd older man from yesterday. Right after our encounter was the first time I had felt this sense of disconnect—this morose sense of discomfort. Not only this—I also realized that the odd man resembled the bleary and twisted figure I had encountered within the eye of the cow earlier that day.

I collected myself. The sun was starting to set itself down; giving the world a certain slant of light that brought the mind a feeling of rebirth. I was deeply perturbed by the realizations I had just faced—whatever they may have meant—but the sunset brought some instance of reprieve. I took this time to get up off of the bench and guide my feet toward the path home.

Once again, I began my walk. The wind had been gradually picking up all day, and by then, it was moving the world in a hollow sort of unsettling motion. I watched: the trees wrapped themselves about the gusts. They obscured the borders of the path. The smell of upturned soil filled the air. There were no books on the ground, and the flowers stood bare of petals. I wrapped myself in my shawl in an attempt to protect myself in some way from the wrath of the evening. Once protected from the elements, I allowed my legs to carry me to the one place I hoped would feel familiar.

I lingered on the front stoop of the cabin for some time, letting the bold of night reach me cold in the doorway. I was thinking—hoping what was going on was merely a bad day gone wrong—that the reality I had experienced was null. I quickly pushed these thoughts aside with anger: enough with hope. How could this be happening? Why to me, why now? I lashed out, thrusting my fist into the wood siding of the cabin—allowing the splinters to eat my knuckles. I growled within myself, insisting that it was a cruel joke, all of it, it had to be. Frustrated, head spinning, with wild and weary eyes, I retreated to my room in an attempt to sleep off the dissonance of day.
Within the familiar room, I undressed and relayed myself to bed. I lay on my back, eyes to the ceiling, pensive, listening to the increasing winds berate the house. The wind did not sing, the night was not magical. Full of apprehension and anger, I worked to focus my mind to sleep. It came with extensive effort. What happened after was this, a dream:

I woke into my mindscape haggard and raw spit out upon the apparition of a world once known. I felt drained—my body weak and visceral—but the world I found myself in was beautiful and golden. Standing in a field on the outskirts of a familiar village, I took some steps toward the forest near the trail. The forest looked as I had known it, bringing me conglomerative thoughts of relief and anger. How could it be such a way now as it wasn’t before—but it was before? I was undone: the sunlight burned my skin, the honey-sweet song of the birds rang my ears to shreds. I touched the first branch I met in the soft-green forest, denying its reality, disgusted by its untruth. I knew it wasn’t real, I had seen behind the illusion, was in on the joke.

Under my touch, the branch shriveled to a gnarled twig. I knew it, I knew it then. Looking around, I noticed the books. I reached to the forest floor to retrieve one. It was about cows and how friendly they were. Scoffing, I tossed the book behind me, amused at its ignorance. What did it mean to me anymore? I knew what was really going on, could see past the illusion.

Stumbling myself down the trail near town, I approached the cows I felt I had once known. I grabbed the soft muzzle of one that stood near me to get a good look in its eye. In its eye, I saw the image of the man from town—the one that had given me the apple. He had tears in his sunken eyes. It scowled back at me as I watched it raise a fist. The fist in the reflection met mine, sending the cow into an angry fit. With a swift motion of its massive head, it laid me out on the ground and I was awake.

I looked up to the ceiling of my bedroom for a long while before rising to make my tea. Out the window, I saw the field and the mountains. When my tea was prepped, I brought myself to the doorway and walked to town. I went and slogged on with the other people of the valley. We worked away, waiting to go home and sleep again. As the sun set, I carried my body back to my cabin. I stopped at the doorway and looked out at the path with
a sigh. The trees were green and the dirt was brown. I thought about both with longing,
as I experienced the world I had once known turn slant.
My Dear Mariella,

Ah, and what a first day it has been! I’m glad you have decided to write me back. It has been some number of years since you moved away, and I must say I miss you. It will be a joy to share this experience with someone else—no matter the distance. It is somewhat lonely here after all . . . I have been told it is important to the Experiment I stay fairly solitary. However, I see little harm in a bit of solitary communication! They will not know regardless—for I have made friends with the postman upon the delivery of your first message, and he has agreed to discreetly take my letters without question. I simply place them under the doormat, and he carries them off your way. How discreet I am! I have plenty of time between treatments, so I see no reason as to why my messages will not flow generously.

As for the nature of the Experiment: I must admit—I myself am not quite sure. They say the results will be skewed if I am given much insight. Though nervous at first, I now find little issue with this fact—seeing the elegance of the environment I am being housed in has brought me much comfort. It is a gloriously quaint building upon the cliffs of the Pacific. The view is rapturous. I wish I could share such an experience with you. Maybe, when I return, I can take my recompense and bring such a reverie to life. It will be nice to have some money again.

In the meantime, however, I must focus on the tasks I am given. I will write to you again within the week with updates regarding my situation. I eagerly await your reply.

With great affection,

Philip G. Ricoh
May 3

P.S. You must excuse my excitement; It has been far too long. I know how you must be feeling after what has been exchanged between us, but I assure you I have been doing nothing but progressing since we were last together. Nothing but growth!
I hope that in accepting a place in this Experiment I will do so further.

Dearest Mariella,

I apologize for not writing sooner; the Experiment has been occupying more of my time than I had anticipated. I hear your concerns, but have no fear! I am being treated well here, the doctors are very kind and hospitable. Although I am not to leave the premises, I have access to the gardens that surround the abode, adding tremendously to my comforts. As for food, I am fed fresh fish daily. Ah, how I long to live by the ocean forever! I wish They would allow me to visit the shore, but I suppose the view will have to suffice. It is a joy, really.

As for the landscape of the Experiment itself: I have learned a bit, but not much. What I know is this: that I am to sleep excessively, I am to avoid interactions with mirrors (of which the house has none), and I am to avoid reading books (they have confiscated my collection). I know what you will say, that these are odd things to correlate into the contents of an experiment. But worry not! I have much faith in the mind of the Head Observer. He is the one which I had met with before agreeing to partake in such a strange scenario. He is a kind, soft-spoken man that listens with his eyes. I trust his judgement entirely. I only wish that I had my books! Such a comfort as those would do me well right now, but our correspondence, I’m sure, will supplement such a lack.

With this being said, I wish you nothing but pleasant days until I hear from you again. Your words are always a joy to me, so please do not hesitate to share excessively. Even as I write this message, I can feel the loneliness further envelope me. Please bring me kind words, it means more than you can imagine.

Yours,

Philip G. Ricoh

May 16

Dear Mariella,

I am happy to hear about your doing well. It seems your life
continues to blossom out in such a beautiful way. It is remark-
able how close and how far we are and have become. I wish I
could say that I am well myself! My days are not all bad; such
brash general statements are useless to me. I am all right—
though now that I have begun to settle into this form of being
. . . life is beginning to drone in ways I struggle to cope with. I
know mundanity well, but this is of a whole other sort.

For the Experiment’s sake, I am allowed much less freedom
than I had anticipated. Upon first hearing the guidelines, I felt
that such an experiment would be good for me—give me some
time to decompress and separate. Being now nearly three weeks
into the process, I am recognizing that such removal from both
my internal and external catalysts of sociality are affecting me
severely. I long for my books—they are what bring me comfort
in times like these. Separation from my studies and practice is
something I am unadjusted to. And my students and friends in
the city! I miss them all—miss the ingenuity of such real human
interactions. I wish they would write to me, though I fear what
they would think of me in my current state . . . I am not well.
They know I have not been well . . .

I have not spoken to a person in days. The Observers told
me that it is the point in the Experiment where I am to be left
alone. They watch me, though I am not sure how. It is that I
sense Their presence yet see none of Them that drives me the
most mad. Given no mirrors, I cannot even view myself as they
do. I can feel their eyes on me while I struggle to place my
time—struggle to make my way through each squalid day. I take
the few liberties I am given and attempt to form some sem-
blance of ease.

Of the few things I am allowed, I am allowed to write.
It is what occupies the majority of my time. They collect my
writings—take them as evaluative pieces. These that I write to
you are secretive—I produce them with such subtlety anyone
would be amazed! I am very sly, very, very sly with these that
I write you. It is extremely important they stay so discreet,
for I need you with me here. You are my portal. Without our
relation I am emptied of compassion—left to my own confined
mechanisms.

When I am through with this experiment (of which I still
have faith in—do not take my complaints as a twisted reali-
ty!), I hope that we can conjoin again as we once were (the
reward after all, the reward!). You are my portal. Nobody else has shown me such consideration as you. I know what has happened in the past, but maybe now after such intimacy we can rekindle in the physical.

I eagerly await your next message.

Your love,

Philip G. Ricoh

May 29

Mariella,

I was unaware of your current relations. I must ask why you would write and torture me so with your kindness if you have been involved. I am not surprised—oh no! I expected such from you, from anyone at this point! You can trust no one’s eyes, no one’s person. That is what I know now. I have learned much from my time here—may it hardly have been a month! The relentless gaze I know is there, that I know is there. I cannot even gaze upon myself! I have lost this aspect of what it means to be an ‘I.’ I am another here, am another. Your gaze is the only one I had entrusted. But I am no fool, oh no! I always had my guard up. I was always aware. Even through my exhaustion I have been sharp in my speculation.

Oh, have I not mentioned the lack of sleep? Let me go on and tell you then, though you really are worth none of my words now! I have been starved of sleep, getting little more than two hours in the last week. I have asked the Observers if this is an issue—as I’m sure you may recall it was in the guidelines to sleep excessively! They told me only (and told me through written note) that any amount is enough, that they merely aim to see what will happen given the parameters of the Experiment. They aim not to help me at all! Of course not.

No, the setting is of no consolation now. I have forgotten about the ocean entirely; the gardens haven’t seen my gaze in weeks. The food is becoming bland and unsatisfactory. It is all truly useless to me! I seek only to understand myself now (that of which I am so estranged), and to be with you. The city is so far from me now. As is myself now! But you! You are so close to me. You have tainted our relation—I cannot believe. But so close! Never mind. Oh, that you have done this to me!
This is rot. We had so much—were so close. You have betrayed me. At this of all times! You know what you’re doing—have known and know now!

I am fine. I will rest and grow stronger. I will look harder. I need you here for this. I need you. Please write me ASAP.

Your only,
Phil G. Ricoh
June 10

Mariella,

I know you have not responded, but I must write you again! I must write you again. Nothing is moving in the right way. It really is not as bad as it seems . . . I apologize . . . But you must respond. You must respond to me. You are my only source. The Observers are less responsive than ever. I have cried and begged to the walls of this prison, but for nothing! They ignore me. They have explained in a late note that they must not intrude during this phase of the Experiment. It is very important I starve—Very important my mind burns!

I know now—have had time to think—think clearly. That is what this time has presented me, I am sure. So sure I am! Without sleep, I have been given real time to reflect without the intrusion of unconsciousness. I go and go! I only wish that I could see myself. I feel debased and uncertain as to where these thoughts come from. My hand moves now from letter to letter, but how these actions relate to me I am uncertain. You though—you. I am certain. Of all the things in the world, I am certain of you.

You must respond.

Phil Ric
June 19

Mariella,

Hello you are there. I know you are I and we have been for some time! Because please respond to me please. I am alone and not to return I suppose? My letters continue As you are aware. I can see the movement of my feet to place them. Place them under the mat. You will receive them of course! I know.
The experiment is beautiful! what Have I now that I have not had, but more! No the Observers refuse to speak—no, I do not wish for them now. But I yearn for you. One thing if you would just please respond we can go to the Ocean. I will leave. I will and you will see! I will show you. But the building I stay here it swallows Me. I tire of the white robes and stale air. What is here that I need now of all. Nothing will bring presence quite like you. I am alone more than I can comprehend because where is the I for me without you. But you had written me back! How could you bring others.

I do not mean it! if only you could come we could be. Alone. As in our youth. As when we were whole and I assure! You must feel this too. You must.

And without anything else, and well past the deadline, I will be here for nothing but you. For where am I? You must come. Please. You must respond.

Phil Ric
June 30
Maybe I’ll be ready to die soon.

This farm has always been my home. I’m certain it will be the place I’ll die. I’ve been here a full seventy-two years, living on a farm that doesn’t really belong to me. Four hundred acres of rich soil tilled to grow corn and peanuts and beans and cotton, rotating every two years to keep the soil rich. The farmhouse stands two hundred yards back from the main road. You have to turn down an unmarked dirt road to find the farmhouse and the barn. Both are at least ninety years old, built from strong oak wood and covered in flaking paint. The farmhouse, two stories with four bedrooms and a storm shelter dug right into the earth outside, was originally a cream color. Now the grey-brown wood peeks through the cracked eggshell. The rust-colored barn stands only a few hundred feet from the house and holds the equally rust-colored farm equipment. The back porch of the house looks over the barn and fields, as well as the mountains rising from the pine forests farther west.

The old farm did its best to support the family, but never was able to make enough money for us to live comfortably. It was my grandfather’s passion project. He had already made enough money before he quit his job with the government, so the farm wasn’t supposed to make us rich. He and my nana always wanted to own a farm, start a family on the prairie. They ended up getting locked in Washington for Grandpa’s job and had my father only a few months after they bought a house.

My pops felt the opposite. He and Ma moved out here when Ma was pregnant with me. They had wanted to help Grandma and Grandpa with the harvest and keep an eye on them in the winter, then move back to the city in the spring. They got locked in living at the farm because of me. The whole family joked that I was a miracle baby. My parents were supposedly never going to be able to have kids, and yet somehow they had me. My father said it was God, my mother said it was the hard work of hope and love. When my mom went into labor, my father had been in the barn and heard her hollering from the house. He ran back in and drove her the twenty-five minutes to the closest hospital. We only ever had six people at the table, but we always just loved being together.
I’ve lived on this farm my whole life. I grew up here. Spent my early years among the corn. Helped plant peanuts and harvest it when it was grown. Played hide-and-seek in the field with other kids around us. Got tan and strong with hard work. Stole my dad’s truck at night, before I got my license, to sneak out for a joyride. My school friends would steal beer out of the fridge and we’d drive out into a field to drink under the stars. I hadn’t ever thought about anything other than living on the farm forever. I met the love of my life when she came to help pick our harvest. Her parents had just moved out here and she had followed to help them with their dream of owning a small general store. She was nineteen and I was twenty. Her hair was the exact color of dried husks—gold and slightly dusted brown. We were married in the barn only a year later, and all of her family filled in the spaces that my family couldn’t. I swear that we had the biggest harvest that next fall. I’ll never forget the way she looked in that simple white dress, more radiant than the sun.

We never had kids. The doctors said it was my fault. When we found out, I was crushed. My vision of kids playing in the front yard, climbing the old oak, crumbled in an instant. My wife, Annie, had put her hand on the back of my neck and leaned into my shoulder, steadying me. She said not to worry, that it would all be fine in the end. That as long as we had each other, that was all that mattered. Eventually, I began to love the silence of the house. In the end, her brothers took over the general store and would come around with their kids for holidays. Most days, I would leave early in the morning and come home to my wife painting the early sunset on the back porch. The radio would be on and set next to her so she could listen to the news while she worked. She’d have fresh bread on the kitchen counter, and I’d grab a slice before joining her. Her cornbread was to die for. Naturally yellow, lightly browned on the edges. Best when warmed, but still delicious cold. The texture was always just right. Crumbling in your mouth, but not in your hands. When I sat down next to her, she would smile at me and give me a kiss before quietly going back to work. Color would flood her canvas as the sun vanished, as if she was stealing the light from the world around us. Night would fall and wrap around her like a shawl, but the painting could keep her face lit, like a lantern. Her paintings still hang in the kitchen.

My wife died four months ago.
Annie hadn’t even seen a big city until our honeymoon. We had to drive to the airport and we had to pass through the capital. Her eyes were blown wide and she laughed at all the noise everyone made. Even I was taken aback by the height of the buildings and I wondered how they got something that tall to stay up. She pointed out some of the city girls and joked that I should’ve married one of them. I said they wouldn’t last an hour out in the field. We flew to Hawaii and came back a week later in time for the start of planting season.

She died while I was out in the barn, trying to fix part of the broken wall.

She once tried to teach me how to paint. She had a second pan of watercolor paints, and we sat down and she showed me how to create a background and a midground and a foreground. The colors that looked so bright in the pan grew more muted and pale when mixed with water, but she kept all of their liveliness in the images she painted. The mountains looked bright and beautiful, the same way they do when you stand on the porch. The trees seem to blow in the wind if you look long enough. Light dances off bushes and rows of corn. The barn, despite still peeling off its paint, looks new and inviting. She made this old farm look like heaven in each of her paintings. I couldn’t quite get the hang of it, but she smiled and said she loved my painting anyway. She hung ours together in the kitchen.

She fell down the stairs and snapped her neck.

After she died, I wanted to learn to bake. I wanted to make her cornbread exactly the way she did it. I found her recipe and I tried to follow it perfectly: one cup flour, one cup cornmeal, one-fourth cup sugar, four teaspoons baking powder, one-half teaspoon salt, two eggs, one-third cup melted butter, and one cup buttermilk. Put it in the oven at three hundred and fifty for thirty minutes. Pull it out when the top is golden brown and you can stick a toothpick in and it comes out clean. When I finally got a slice, it left crumbs all over my hands. It tasted fine. Just fine.

I wanted to take up watercoloring for her. I sat on the back porch and tried to paint the sunset just like she did. I ate a slice of my cornbread. The radio sat next to me, announcing some new mass tragedy, something about a Gulf War. The canvas wobbled on its stand and I knocked it over with my foot every time I tried to stretch it out. The canvas kept falling paint-down
into the dirt. Brushing it off smeared the brushstrokes I had made. My chest ached the whole time. The sunset colors mixed together and turned brown. The barn also turned too brown. Everything mixed together to look like a big piece of shit. I burned the canvas that night in our old firepit and ate another slice of cornbread.

I overheard one of the paramedics say that she had been alive for a full thirty minutes after the fall.

One night, when she and I were laying in bed, she asked me what would happen when she died. I was reading a book about the Great War and she had been knitting a hat for one of the newly baptized babies at church. I said that she’d go to heaven, and she said, “I was asking about my body. What happens to me?”

I said we had a plot next to my parents. She just nodded. Annie always had a great memory. I didn’t know why she had asked. She didn’t say anything else until I went to kiss her good-bye the next morning.

“I think I want to be buried on the farm. No coffin. I just want to be put into a hole in the ground so when I rot, I can feed the plants.”

I tried painting again the day after my failed attempt. And the day after. And the day after. I knew what she would say if I stopped after one painting. She’d smile and put her hand on my neck, “You don’t dig a hole and hope for ducks, John.” And so, I taught myself how to paint the house and the barn and the fields. My chest hurt less and less every time. They all turned out too grey, too brown, too dark. I can’t get the colors vibrant enough. The house always looks broken down and empty, not like the house she painted. I try to paint memories, scenes I see in dreams. I’ve tried to paint Hawaii and the lush plants we saw on a hike while there. I tried to paint the busy city and its towering grey skyscrapers. I try to paint the corn as it was when it was waist high, as it was when it was taller than me. I try to paint my parents. I can’t get their faces right. The eyes would be too slanted and the jaws would be slack. I start painting them from farther and farther away.

I tried to paint her once too. I painted how she looked after we got married. I wanted to recreate the sparkle in her eye. How beautiful her hair looked in the light. I tried to paint her smile, always kind and gentle. It didn’t look like her. She
was too pale and her skin looked mottled in places. It became bruised. Her hair looked limp and pale. Her eyes looked empty. Her jaw stuck out too far and her neck twisted unnaturally. It was the only other painting I’ve burned.

I try again to paint the farm. It looks miserable. The colors are too dark, the fields are too barren, the mountains look cold and empty-echoing. The house tilts too much and gets lost in the details of the background. The barn turns into a reddish blob in the corner, no matter where I try to place it. The bright green corn turns grey and brown as I add more colors. Everything seems dead.

I won’t plant another harvest. The farm won’t grow anything anymore since I will never be able to sow another seed. I tried to plant a harvest this year and I couldn’t even put the seeds in the ground. The pain in my chest throbbed with a vengeance. After Annie’s death, I decided to retire. I have enough money left from my grandpa’s trust fund. Once I die, this land will be turned into a nature reserve. I already have the paperwork finished. The land will grow native plants again after the weeds have died off. They are sharp and painfully bright in my mind. I paint the wildflowers that will grow and die here long after I am gone. How soon will that day come?

I pick up another canvas at the store and buy a new painting palette. One without any greys or blacks. Maybe my next painting will be better.
CONTRIBUTOR NOTES

Spencer Abeyta is a business administration major at CSU with a concentration in real estate. He has the best parents anyone could ask for. Hakuna matata.

Haley Arnold is a fourth-year art major concentrating in art education and painting. Her work is primarily abstract and focuses on concepts of abjection, the body, gender, and self. Her goal is to create work that is visceral and makes the viewer feel a sense of familiarity and repulsion simultaneously.

Evan Bode is a fourth-year communication studies major with minors in English, sociology, and film studies. In addition to creative nonfiction, his artistic interests include drawing, piano, photography, poetry, digital design, screenwriting, and filmmaking. He hopes to pursue a career in the cinematic arts, combining storytelling and social justice work through the medium of moving images.

Sabrynne Buchholz is a senior interdisciplinary liberal arts major with a particular interest in poetry. Sabrynne is also an accomplished artist and musician. She enjoys entomology, reading over a cup of tea, and spending time with family, friends, and two young Italian Greyhounds who keep the family on their toes!

Leah Cassidy is a junior at CSU, currently majoring in criminal justice with minors in ethnic studies and political science. In her free time, she enjoys reading, writing, and doing SFX makeup. In the future she would love to continue her poetry and find a career helping those in need.

Maia Coen is working towards a double major in creative writing and natural resource tourism. She is in her fourth-year and is interested in creative writing of any kind, experiential travel, and finding a way to combine the two.

Kendall Constable is a freshman at Colorado State University majoring in journalism with a minor in global environmental sciences. Kendall’s poetry is inspired by nature and romantic poets from previous generations, and her work includes themes of healing, heartbreak, growth, and connection to the earthly world.
Logan DeBord is a third-year student studying music composition at CSU. As a queer woman, she writes as a way to make her voice heard and also just to have fun! After completing her undergrad, she plans to pursue a career in writing for film and musical theatre.

Casey Forest became sentient in 1998 and has been writing ever since she was able. She’s currently holed up at CSU, serving as writing editor for Cicada Creative Magazine. Find her in Clark, probably, where they banish all the English majors.

Miles Gilbert recently graduated from CSU with a degree in English literature. After starting college as a biochemistry major, he found himself drawn to the beauty, introspection, and thoughtfulness of the world of humanities. Miles’s poetry, and life as whole, is influenced by poets like Mary Oliver, Eammon Grennan, and Billy Collins. These poets model to all of us a specific way of looking at the world—a perspective grounded in the observation of the beauty found throughout our day to day lives. When Miles isn’t reading or writing, he’s likely taking a walk around City Park with his dog Lu, perfecting his pie-making techniques, or enjoying time with his close friends and family. Miles is currently employed as a bartender, and he is also partnering with local businesses and governmental agencies to work towards making Fort Collins a great place to live for people experiencing homelessness.

Brie Hirsheimer graduated in December 2019 with a BFA, concentrating in painting and fibers with a minor in forestry. Her recent works blend imagery from the natural world with mind-bending optical phenomena and are inspired by illusion, street art, pop art, and graphic design. She uses spray paint, oil, and collage in her paintings.

Claire Homan is a third-year English and Spanish double major at Colorado State University. In her free time she likes to write, find new coffee shops around Fort Collins, and embroider. Claire is originally from Kearney, Nebraska.

Samantha Homan is a first-year undergraduate visual arts major at Colorado State University. She is originally from Kearney, Nebraska and she absolutely adores living in Fort Collins, hiking, drawing, and doing anything outdoors. “Expired” is her first published piece.

Kendric Hubbard is an undergraduate senior in the English program with a concentration in creative writing. He writes in poetry and short prose, with an interest in oral storytelling, folklore, and naturalism. Kendric is also a competitive archer and an aspiring public school teacher.
Emma Kerr is a senior English major concentrating in creative writing with a history minor. Her passion is speculative fiction, but short fiction has helped her explore college life and queer identity. She hopes to meet you someday in the fantasy section of your favorite bookstore.

Joseph Andrew Killinger is an anthropology major currently pursuing a concentration in archaeology. He is a sophomore as of this publication, and is working on a minor in creative writing to teach him the skills he needs to write as a hobby. Not only does he hope to fulfill his dreams of becoming an archaeologist, but also to publish a book that inspires others to write as well.

Kenzie Khoury is a sophomore art major with a concentration in integrated visual studies as well as a minor in leadership. Her interests include educating people on their privilege of having a home and challenging the stereotypes of homelessness. She is also pursuing the intersection of art and psychology, specifically art therapy, and how she can help people with disabilities.

Anna Klemmer is a fourth-year Drawing and Electronic Art major. She is interested in illustration, sound design, and sequential art. Anna also has a strong interest in fiction and poetry.

Rachel Krieger is a fourth-year English education student currently student teaching at Fossil Ridge High School. She enjoys reading, sleeping, and going on outdoor adventures with her friends.

Rachael Lozano is a journalism and media communications major with a minor in creative writing. She is excited to be published in the Greyrock Review for her senior year. Her hobbies include photography, creative writing, drawing, and costume design.

Jake Lyon is a writer, musician, and recent CSU graduate with a degree in creative writing. He has been published in Cicada and Slit Lit (NZ). He currently lives in his hometown of Fort Collins, Colorado.

Alyssa McCall is a first-generation college student and adult learner. She received her Associate of Arts from Front Range Community College last spring. She is a very grateful CSU Ram, English major, and teacher candidate in the secondary education program. A few of her interests include camping with her husband and teenage sons, writing, photography, paddleboarding, and completing puzzles.
G Alexander McDonald is a first-generation student enjoying his third-year at Colorado State University studying communications and English. He loves his job working for the university as a mentor within the Fostering Success Program. In his free time he likes to play board games, Frisbee golf, and collaborate with local artists in his art collective, The Empty Tent Circus. Thanks for always believing in my writing, Mom, love you to the moon and back.

Leta McWilliams is a fourth-year English major, concentrating in creative writing with a minor in journalism. Along with creative fiction and nonfiction, Leta enjoys writing and editing rhetorical arguments and op-ed pieces for The Collegian. Outside of academics, Leta enjoys reading, having movie marathons, and watching her apartment slowly turn into a greenhouse.

Rachel Melton is a cat lover, plant mom, reader of words, and Animal Crossing enthusiast. She is currently completing the final semester of her English education degree at Colorado State University, and after graduation, plans to run away to a place where it is socially acceptable to never wear shoes.

Kobe Overby is a first-year student majoring in English with a concentration in literature. He dedicates the majority of his free time to reading, writing, and listening to music.

Patrick Persichetti is a fourth-year visual arts major double majoring in printmaking and graphic design. His work depicts scenes of nature with aspects of human interaction into these scenes. His core goal in his work is to explore and make note of the interactions and effects human-kind has had on nature without a direct commentary or connotation.

Max Roesler is a senior—now graduated—philosophy and creative writing student from Dunlap, Illinois, who is on the way to something new. Cheers.

Noah Ruiz is a senior English major with a minor in history. His studies focus on writing, rhetoric, literacy, and Russian history. In his free time he writes, plays bass guitar, and studies all manner of subjects.

Jesse Sanders is an English major who procrastinated not only his works presented in this collection, but also this bio. He runs the Fort Collins based record label Plot Line Records, and is a senior at CSU. He spends most of his time singing songs and writing stories that nobody else will hear or read.
Megan Shaver is a sophomore majoring in biology who has a passion for art and literature. She spent the majority of her life in the mountains of Colorado, and her many hobbies include fishing, hunting, birding, playing video games, and drawing. When she is not working on her studies, you can often find her lost in thought with a pen and paper at hand.

Emily Stockhus grew up in Westminster, Colorado. She’s a senior majoring in English literature at CSU. She’d like to thank her cat, Ethel, for keeping her awake while editing.

Abigail Thomas is an English major with a creative writing concentration. She is currently a sophomore at CSU. Her interests include poetry, fiction, culture, and various forms of artistic expression.

Adam Wagner is a fourth year creative writing student. He grew up in Nebraska and intends to attend an MFA or MA program next year.

Hannah Willis is a junior studying fish, wildlife, and conservation biology with a minor in journalism. She loves being outdoors and going on adventures, creating films and taking photos while she does so. When she’s not taking care of the blisters on her feet or stuck in the woods without cell reception, Hannah can often be found sipping tea at home with a book in hand.