

GREYROCK REVIEW

2022

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The journal accepts submissions for art, poetry, creative nonfiction, and fiction each year in the fall from undergraduate students of all majors at Colorado State University.

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EDITOR'S NOTE

Dear Reader,

It is with great pleasure that I reveal to you the 2022 *Greyrock Review Literary Journal*: a collection of thought-provoking art, poetry, fiction, and nonfiction, produced by wonderfully talented CSU undergraduate students. Those of us who create strive to be published so our voices may be heard, so helping these artists expand their reach is a great joy of *Greyrock Review*. If it weren't for their creative endeavors, we would have nothing to bring to you, and that would be a travesty. Art helps to drive the human soul, and readers keep the fire alive. So, thank you for being a reader; it is truly the most important part.

Now I would like to extend my appreciation to those involved in the process. A thank you to our graduate advisor, who supported us through thick and thin; Megan Lear was an exponential help and overall leader within *Greyrock Review* and helped us stay on track and create a journal we can all be proud of in the end. Without her we would've been lost at sea, and we're a landlocked state. Thank you to Stephanie G'Schwind for overseeing the entire process and guiding us through challenges faced. A special thank you to our supporters as well. If not for the Lilla B. Morgan Memorial Endowment Fund and the CSU English Department, we would've been unable to print such a lovely journal. Most importantly, though, I would like to thank my fellow *Greyrock Review* editors for the time they devoted to this journal. A few words for you: We've arrived at the end.

As I bring this note to a close I will leave you with this. Your reading of this journal means, to every author, and everyone who worked on it, more than you know. So, again, we appreciate your time and for being you.

Happy reading,
Jack Zimmer
Managing Editor

Natalie Freeman

Vertere



Despina Norway

In a Town

On this bitter day someone is dead
The crows sang their song of joy
As in the news the towns people read

They go on ahead
The crowds in the square as a decoy
On this bitter day someone is dead

The funeral proceeds as much goes unsaid
The mother weeps for her boy
As in the news the towns people read

They march past the shop that sells thread
As many of the people act coy
On this bitter day someone is dead

The hearts of all that fled
Going to new places off to annoy
As in the news the towns people read

Into the graveyard of the deathbed
As the grave diggers are reemployed
On this bitter day someone is dead
As in the news the towns people read

Elena Martinez

The Room Was Dark

The room was dark. Bodies were jumping up and down like the blurred lights we passed on the drive there, to the house on Mulberry Street. The music was loud as it filled the room. The speakers blasted bits of beer up and down, splashing the people who were nearest, but they didn't care, they kept dancing. My friend led me to the center of the room where the heat radiated from the skin-on-skin contact of everyone in the room. The girls next to us took no notice of anyone around as they danced in their own little world. They were emotionless that night. They knew they would just forget everything the next day. Wasn't that the point?

Even amidst the music, I heard your laugh. I don't remember if I was scared or excited when I looked around for you. I guess I was both. The laugh that used to make me smile. The laugh I used to wake up to and the laugh I used to love was there with me, among the heaviness of the crowd. Quickly, I looked away scared. I was surrounded by people, as were you. We were a yard away but a world apart. I could feel your stare. You weren't laughing anymore. I know you saw me there but I was afraid to look. I always used to be able to feel your glance and I guess that never went away, even after the time that passed.

You never came up and neither did I. We both knew, even then, the danger of our interaction. My friends led me out of the crowd. I let them drag me away from you. You watched me leave. I was afraid to look.

Elena Martinez

Zucchini Bread

Even with the music playing, I turned on the TV at a low volume. Since I've been away at college, coming home didn't feel the same. For some reason, I didn't feel completely fit at home. It was a weird feeling. Maybe I created a lot of background noise as a distraction, or maybe I used it to fill an absence, or maybe it was just a trick I played on my mind. Whatever the reason, it made me feel better, which is why I didn't know what to tell my mom when she asked why I had so many different noises on.

The idea came while we were talking about my mom's garden. As the year was progressing and winter was approaching, the cold made for unideal gardening conditions. Because of this, many of the vegetables had to be picked before they began to die. Mom picked all the ready vegetables days before. We had four large zucchini's sitting on the kitchen counter. I forgot whose idea it was to make zucchini bread since we think so alike.

With the soft sound of Stevie in the background and the low murmurs from the TV, we began to prepare. We laid out all the ingredients on the kitchen counter near the stove. I don't know how other people bake but my mom and I have our own system, we always divide and conquer.

We made sure to set the oven to 350° before we got lost in the baking process. While my mom started grating the zucchini, I began to prepare the dry ingredients in a small bowl. Step one read: *In a small bowl, mix the wet ingredients together. This includes beaten eggs, softened butter, and vanilla extract. Next, add the sugar to the bowl and mix well. Let sit while preparing the other ingredients.* So, into the bowl, I measured four large eggs that I beat into a smooth batter. Next, I added one-and-a-half cups softened, unsalted butter, and four teaspoons of vanilla extract. I acquired the electric mixers from the bottom drawer by the stove and began to mix the ingredients softly into a creamy soup. I measured two cups of sugar and two-thirds cup of brown sugar, which I then dumped into the bowl and mixed into a thicker cream.

Meanwhile, my mom was standing by the sink grating the freshly washed zucchinis. Following the instructions of step four that read: *Begin to prepare the zucchini. Add the grated zucchini to the small bowl mixture and stir well.* She would grate one and let the remnants collect on a freshly laid wad of paper towels to dry. She covered that set and prepared another layer of zucchini bits. She continued this repeatedly, which I'm sure became daunting very quickly. Since I was finished with the first step, I went by Mom and watched her grate. She looked tired. "Do you want me to take over?" She smiled and handed me the grate. "Thank you that would be nice. While you do that, I'll add the flour and spices to the big bowl."

The next step read: *In a large bowl add flour, salt, baking soda, baking powder, cinnamon, ginger, and nutmeg.* She found a large bowl by the sink and began to measure six cups all-purpose flour, half-teaspoon salt, two teaspoons of baking soda, two teaspoon baking powder, four teaspoons cinnamon, one teaspoon ground ginger, and half-teaspoon ground nutmeg

Alongside her, I began to grate the last zucchini that she didn't get a chance to start. I continued her technique with the paper towels layer by layer. I admired how she had a specific, unique process for everything. Most people would have just grated the zucchini into a bowl or strainer. She was creative, and made a system that worked for her. She never needed anyone to tell her what to do. In the past, I never appreciated this about my mom until lately. We would butt heads and disagree over small, pointless things. We had a rough relationship for most of my teenage years, which was apparent almost every day of my adolescence. We would hardly talk in a civilized manner, if we even talked at all. Baking together was never in the cards.

After the last zucchini was completely grated, I drew a bowl from the corner drawer left of the sink. I thoroughly dried each layer of zucchini before finding the measuring cup.

"It looks like we will have an excess amount of zucchini, should I add extra?" I asked.

"Just add all of it. We might as well, otherwise it would just go to waste."

"Are you sure, it seems like a lot of zucchini, won't it soften the bread and make it soggy?"

"It might." She replied.

Eventually, I counted six and a half cups of zucchini that were

practically overflowing with zucchini bits. About the same time, I finished measuring the zucchini, Mom completed the mixture of dry ingredients.

I slowly dropped the zucchini into the small bowl with the wet ingredients and began to stir very gently as to not spill any of the mixture over the side. I was unsuccessful in this as the bowl was too small to contain so many ingredients.

“I went on a walk with Sherri the other day.” My mom said joyfully. Sherri was one of our neighbors that had moved in recently, in the last couple of years. They were a nice married couple with two elementary age school girls named Lydia and Sophie.

“That sounds fun, how is Sherri?” I asked.

“Sherri is really struggling. She has been very busy with full-time work and taking care of the kids. Lydia has been struggling in school because she is so shy and has been acting out at home. She is constantly seeking attention and is taking up a lot of Sherri’s time. Sherri’s husband is away at work so often that she is having trouble keeping up with everything and being present for Lydia. He is absent a lot and can get really angry at times.”

This took me by surprise because it always seemed to me like they were a cookie-cutter, perfectly happy family. I knew every family had their struggle; I just didn’t think they did. I didn’t know what to say. I was shocked.

“Sherri mentioned divorce.” Mom said.

Eventually, the batter was mixed well and ready to be combined in the big bowl as the instructions read for step five: *In the large bowl fold in the small bowl ingredients.*

While I stirred, my mom poured the zucchini blend into the large bowl. As I stirred, it was so satisfying to create a smooth, even consistency.

“Have they considered going to therapy? Divorce seems a little extreme. It may be good for Sherri and Lydia since they are struggling.”

Divorce. I hated that word, and I hated that idea. Divorce had been such a blockade in my family. My parents got divorced when I was young, only three years old, and it took such a major toll on me and the whole family.

“I mentioned it to her on the walk and Sherri seemed open to it.” My mom replied.

I looked over to the bowl of fruit on the counter. A couple of nearly brown bananas caught my eye. “Should we use the bananas,

so they don't go to waste?" My mom glanced over to the bananas I was now holding up. "That's a good idea, we might as well use all of them. They're in prime ripeness for bread." So, I chopped up the three bananas and added them to the bowl before I began to stir.

She continued, "The only problem is Sherri's husband. He seems to think that therapy would be a waste of time and money."

"Wow, he's not even the one struggling, why would he just shut her down like that?"

"That's part of the problem. He's not being open to what Sherri needs."

"If they aren't happy anymore, maybe they are right to consider divorce."

Once the batter was evenly mixed, we stirred in a mixture of walnuts and chocolate chips. Mom couldn't help but add a little extra chocolate chips. As we stirred, I saw the walnuts and chocolate chips disappear in a swirl until they were completely engulfed into the perfect zucchini bread concoction. Since we doubled the recipe and added a surplus of zucchini and banana there was enough batter to make about four regular loaves. That was before my mom pulled out the cute mini loaf pans she found the week before. "Why don't we try out these little loaves? We could make one large loaf and as many mini loaves as we can."

I loved her idea, so we tried to squeeze as much batter as we could into the pans. We were able to fill every pan with a bit of extra batter.

"What made you and Dad decide on divorce?" I asked.

As we loaded the loaves into the oven my mom answered, "Well it wasn't really a decision. I had no idea he was considering it. Your dad came home late from work one night and brought it up. It completely took me by surprise."

"How did you feel? What else did you say?"

"I felt sick, and I was in a state of shock. I forgot how the rest of the conversation mapped out, but it wasn't a long one. I remember going upstairs and crying."

We stood still for a moment. We had never talked about her side of the divorce before, and I never really thought about how hard it was for her. In the past, we talked a lot about how it affected me and the struggles I went through. My whole life the spotlight was open for me and my brother to act out and share our thoughts and emotions. On the other hand, my mom was expected to be strong and capable. Whether she set these expectations for herself, society did, or we did, is still something I question. Her feelings on the matter

were never validated in the same way as mine and my brothers. As a single parent it was her job to pay the bills, clean the house, and take care of the kids. Who was she going to talk to, her ex-husband or young kids? It made my heart ache to think how hard it must've been for her. It made me admire her more than I ever did. It also made me think that this is how it goes for many divorced parents. They are so busy taking care of their kids that they don't have time to express their own emotions.

As we were cleaning up the kitchen, we continued talking for quite some time. I didn't realize how much time had passed until the oven beeped telling us the bread was ready. I don't know if it was the fresh smell of zucchini bread sifting through the air, or the warmth in the kitchen, but I felt more connected to my mom than I ever had before. I no longer felt homesick. In that moment and every moment since we were no longer just mother and daughter, we were friends. I wonder if I am the only one who has experienced this. Can kids ever truly idolize their parents until they understand the sacrifices they have made?

Megan Fenner

Deciduous

Jim cannot get the image out of his head. The innocuous posture against the door, shirt innocently resting lazily against his smooth chest, untucked. He remembers the feeling of the soft kiss still on his lips, watching his hair sparkling in front of the rising sun, that sad smile as he looked down at the ground, and said, “I love you, but I can’t help but fear that the sun is starting to set.”

Jim bunches up his jacket in his arms and slaps down a few bucks on the sticky counter. A bit of money drained from his already exhausted funds. College tuition and one’s own personal romantic lifestyle, he was now realizing, do not go hand in hand. By the time it leaves his touch, he has already forgotten what it is for, but what he does know is he needs something real to drink. Coffee.

Shells or broken teeth from last night’s brawl crack beneath his feet as he strides out the dark cavern and into the sunlight of the day. It’s the type of sunlight trapped in plastic bags and discarded street hot dog wrappings. Blinding.

He scowls, his long, spider-like legs stumbling as he throws up a hand to block the light, the jacket fumbling in the other. He does not know what time of day it is, nor can he remember clearly where he just came from. All he knows is that where it was it was dark, just like the dark shadow of Nathaniel against his skin as he cast him out, cold and unfeeling, as ambiguous as hell.

He feels like his grandma’s dish rag, used, worn, and soiled with no place to go besides down the never-ending, spiraling drain.

The doorbell jingle cuts through his thoughts as he steps into the already crowded café, a local haunt that on most weekdays is filled with a mix of energetic college kids and rundown, sordid adults, all hungering for the liquor of life to keep them alive. He was not one of those people. He files himself into line and instinctually looks around, blinking largely, mind full of stimulus battling with his internal thoughts.

It’s not as though he and Nathaniel had been dating for two years already, or that for those past two years he had spent over hundreds

of dollars just to ensure they could be with one another. Renting an apartment just one floor and one room above his, when in reality all he could really afford was cheap overflow student housing. Buying expensive getaway vacations just so it would be the two of them in a 100-mile radius. All the dinners and drinks shared between the two of them, insisting he didn't need to be paid back. The fact that half his wardrobe was built to appease him. Nor was it true that for these past two years he has been keeping his relations a secret, exerting hours upon hours of induced stress during the holidays. Battling the questions posed by parents and grandparents and longing deeply for Nathaniel to be with him, out in the open. He could not let his friends see him like this. While Nathaniel was obvious with his sexuality, he was more overt, hiding in the shadows, letting unconscious external cues express the secret he protected yet flaunted like a hawk spiraling through the wind.

His eyes dart around the room, his skin prickling. Normally he felt confident in his skin, but this was not one of those moments. His heart hurt, and it was an unfamiliar feeling. He wanted to both scream at someone and break down in their arms crying, which, if either of those things happened, he was sure he'd be labeled as the one thing he only wanted one person to know.

A shoulder bumps into him as he steps forward in line, everyone packed together like little children on a school bus. His heart hammers. He scowls, breaking the line of fear and hurt creased on his skin.

He can still smell Nathaniel's perfume on his shirt, just below his collar bone, bled in from sweat. Something feminine bought from Victoria's Secret, with a description like mystic cherry with a hint of moonlight, or sundrenched cedar and boyfriend's tears. It makes him uncomfortable; it makes him hungry. He glances down at his shirt, a black button up dress shirt exposing a draping neckline and outlining his form voluptuously, and quickly he untucks a corner of it from his tight, hip hugging jeans. He rubs his hand through his hair, but stops midway, and with a quick sideways glance, rustles it back and forth, in a rough and tumble way, forcing the ends to stand on end. He scowls, yet it's as fierce as a kitten, and he slouches his shoulders, breaking his uptight form he has grown to love. The line moves forward and he shuffles his boots on the ground as he steps, catching drunkenly on the grooves between the cobblestone floor, nearly causing himself to fall. His scowl turns vitriol.

His wandering mind becomes blind to the small shuffle of feet of

a moving line, and in a matter of moments which the working mind can only perceive as seconds, he makes it up to the counter. He looks up, making eye contact with the man behind the counter, and freezes. His brain goes through a brief spasm. Instinctually he straightens his back.

“Hello, what can I do for you?” the man behind the thick counter says. A soft smile curls on the man’s lip, as light as an opening flower in a snow field morning. His cheek bones stand pronounced, sharp and effeminate. Jim can tell he is wearing makeup. No man’s skin is that smooth and shapely. No man’s lips correlate with the shade of skin that effortlessly. Nor do eyelashes curl as beautifully as the ones before him. He might be able to fool straight men, even a few women, who would just pass this off as desirable natural beauty, a working of good genes, but Jim had been around too many night clubs to be able to tell the difference. He glances down at his hands, nails painted a robin egg’s blue, contrasting his blond hair curling over his forehead, the string of metal earrings spiraling around his one ear.

His heart patters, betrayingly. His words stick in his mouth, caramel. Salty and sweet.

“I love you, but I can’t help but fear that the sun is starting to set.”

“Rough day?” asks the man behind the counter, and instinctually Jim runs a hand through his hair. He smiles before he can help himself, and quickly shoves it down with a scowl. There are people behind him, everything he was doing would be watched and who knew how it would be taken.

“No, just peachy,” he says with a bite, a flick of the head. The man behind the counter, who had glanced down at the pad in front of him, glances up and smiles, a knowing smile.

The urge to preen is strong. He looks down at his shirt and for the first time that day realizes how much of a mess he looks. A waft of Nathaniel’s perfume hits him. Quickly, he looks away, directing his gaze up to the chalkboard above the register, reading astutely the words written on it as though he hasn’t been here thousands of times before.

“Um, I’ll take a dirty chai, but I want oat milk and two pumps of caramel,” he says. He knew it was a weird order. Nathaniel always gave him crap about it, saying it was a fluffy drink made for sissies, insistent that hard black coffee was the only way to be a real man. It used to make him laugh. Now it made him feel self-conscious. But preferences are preferences, and habits are hard to break.

The man behind the counter chuckles, and it turns his stomach sour.

“Would you like a bit of sugar with that as well?”

“No, of course I don’t want a bit of sugar with that.” He can feel the line growing impatient behind him, he can feel them watching.

“I always like a bit of sugar with my tea,” the man says, typing his order into the pad, refusing to look up, though he could see the smile curling on his lips. Jim shuffles his feet.

“Do you now?” His hand twitches.

“Yes, but only once in a while. Special occasions stir the urge for something sweet.” He glances up, eyes fluttering.

Jim’s face flushes. Red hot, spreading like a mango’s skin. It is suddenly clear to him that this man is flirting. Flirting, *with him*. He chuckles nervously, clears his throat, looks down before looking back up again, anything he can do to break the tension he could now feel knotting in his shoulders. This conversation had taken a turn, and to his growing distress, it makes his skin prickle in a way he isn’t sure is strictly uncomfortable. Unnerving, like the first buzz of alcohol on the lips. Dizzying, intoxicating in a way he cannot control.

The line shuffles behind him, the omnipresent ambiance of strangers elevated like the pressuring whirring of the coffee grinder screaming behind.

“So, what’s a good name?” the man asks, almost a whisper, as he leans across the counter, elbows propped delicately on the smooth marble, and earrings glinting in the golden light. He holds the cup up lazily in his hand, like a glass of wine that has just been stirred, and his sleeve slips, falling silently from his wrist. Jim’s eyes slip down. A glimpse of his smooth skin overlying a bony wrist, supple like silk, a flash of peach against a counter top of black and white marble, blue nails, a soft kiss against the dirty brown cup. His eyes travel up, elbow to wrist to knuckle to the fingertip curling around the lid, and then his eye twitches, and he catches his reflection in the shiny metal of the espresso machine sitting silently in the back, its reflective gaze turned black.

A fire of guilt erupts like acid in his stomach. The hunger in his eyes is palpable. He can see it in his posture as well, the way he tilts his hip, the hand resting in his front pocket, thumb lazily hanging out.

It is a familiar posture.

Nathaniel, unlike him, had not found himself wound up in the bustling city of New York for some innocuous reason like himself. Good grades and an astute understanding of the college search process had allowed him to apply to nearly every school along the east coast and get into equally the same amount. It was nothing admi-

rable, like a cheap parlor trick learned by watching a few YouTube videos for a few hours of the day. Nathaniel, however, had wound up in New York for his eye. He was an avid photographer all throughout high school, and that intimacy with the art had won him a few scholarships into college and select invitations into a few prestigious photo galleries that many artists would kill to get into. It was nearly a miracle he had found such a precious jewel of a lover.

A few months ago, he and Nathaniel had been wandering through the deciduous forests of the northern part of the state. The sky looked like an explosion of color only expected to exist in the eyes of an artist and their easel, yet here it was in the flesh, red and green, yellow and orange, blue and brown, colors so bright he could feel them tickling across his skin. It was just the two of them, and in one hand Nathaniel cradled his camera, and in the other he had grasped his fingers delicately, until he let go, and told him to stand by that tree. Having been dating a photographer for years he was used to such a command, and being so high on the natural beauty of the world and the love he felt weaving between the two of them, like the falling fall leaves that danced between their feet, he did what was asked, and rested against it, hand in his pocket, hip raised, a small smile curling on his lips.

“You’re so beautiful,” he’d whisper behind the lens, and then the photo would snap, and that beauty would be preserved for him forever. Jim had always loved that of all the photos Nathaniel would take, his were the ones that would make his eyes glint with passion. It was this photo that he had rested upon his bedside table, and there were many mornings where he would wake, and see himself staring back at him.

Yet here he was now. He had made himself look completely desirable without even any thought, and it terrifies him. No wonder this man had started flirting with him, he was screaming availability like a beacon. His neck prickles warm. He hesitantly takes his hand out of his pocket. His eyes drift over, and he glances down at the man’s name tag for the first time.

Everett.

His stomach flips. For the first time he wishes he wasn’t so heavily influenced by the smallest things about people and himself. He wishes he had a name as seductive as Everett or Nathaniel. Not simply, Jim. *Jim*, like a cheap cowboy in a low budget movie. The scrawny inconspicuous office man that’s always asked to get the coffee but nothing more. The camp leader that all the kids imagine

slitting the throat of in the middle of the night. Everett, it's the type of name he knows would taste good on his tongue. Nathaniel was one of those names. It'd run off his tongue like dark chocolate, and Nathaniel would whisper his back, short and simple. Like the hand that would rest on his back, the delicate fingers curled between his banal ones as though they were special, it sounded like a promise, a tether keeping them close.

He wonders with sudden painful longing if he will ever be able to feel that sort of intimacy again. *Nathaniel*. He realizes it was a drug.

"Nathan—I mean, Jim," he stutters. The man behind the counter, Everett, he tells himself, chuckles, and it rubs Jim the wrong way. It is the type of laugh that makes Jim realize how much of a mess his life had become.

Everett grabs a sharpie and writes the name on the cup. Jim reaches into his back pocket and pulls out his wallet, fumbling for the right amount of bills. His fingers slip, unable to grasp the paper between his sweaty hands. Everett places the cup down, and glances at him, a cordial smile on his lips. Jim glances up, chokes out a quick smile, and pulls out the bills, the wallet nearly slipping from his fingers as he does so.

"Here you go," he says, and is almost mortified when he sees his hand shaking as he reaches out the bills. The man grabs them as though he doesn't notice, and delicately lays them in the register.

"Seventy-five cents is the change," he says, and begins fishing out the coins. Jim blinks quickly.

"No, no, keep the change," he says before he can stop himself, and smiles a crooked smile, shoving his wallet into his pants. Everett mutters a quiet thanks, and hands the cup off to a frowning teenager beside him working the espresso machine. His eyes glint and that dangerous fire erupts in Jim's chest. He realizes he might have made a mistake, again. Haste makes waste, and he is swimming in a sea of it.

He taps his fingers on the counter, pulls down his shirt, rubs a hand through his hair, and quickly walks away.

He finds an empty table, and throws himself into it. The curling metal chair hits hard against his back, cold as ice. He throws his jacket on the back of a neighboring chair, left to drape like a broken branch. He chose a table tucked away in the corner, closer to the window but farther away from the bustling line of the coffee shop and the people lingering hungrily by the counter. He needs quiet, he needs to be away from the watchful eye, and this is the perfect place to fill his desire.

He props his arm on the table, and collapses heavily into his hands. His fingers lace across his skull, gripping steadily onto his fronds of dark brown hair. His chin presses close to his chest, pointy nose grazing his wrist softly, eyelashes tickling his skin. He closes his eyes, letting the darkness wash over him, and breathes a heavy sigh. He inhales. He exhales. His shoulders rise. His shoulders fall. He smells the last wafts of Nathaniel's perfume over his fresh scent, and he lets it comfort him. This might be the last time he will smell his scent so intimately.

This morning had turned into a hell he could have never predicted, and in this moment of fragile silence, he can feel his last reserves finally starting to melt. Images pulse through his mind; images of himself, images of Nathaniel, images of his apartment and Nathaniel's, all mixing in his head in an intoxicating lull, and then he realizes they're no longer real, transformed into nothing more than a carousel of photos shown at a funeral.

Moisture balls in the corner of his eye, and a single tear falls silently, kissing his cheek before letting go and falling to its death upon the cold copper table.

He is losing his lover, and he doesn't even know why.

"Excuse me, Jim, your coffee is done." Everett's soft voice breaks him out of his trance, and he lifts up his head, quickly wiping away his wet eyes on the corner of his bunched knuckles before turning to face him. Everett sets his coffee down on the table carefully, and gives him a sympathetic smile. He must have seen something twisted on his face. Jim would scowl, only if he had the strength to do so.

"Thank you," he says, and takes the coffee in his hands, letting it bring warmth back into them. He stares at Everett. Everett stares back. Their hearts patter silently, a caught breath between the two of them waiting to break. Comfortable warmth begins filling his chest.

Jim doesn't know what to make of this feeling.

"Hey, I couldn't help but notice—" Everett's words are cut off by the eruption of Jim's phone on the table. Everett stops himself with a smile, patiently resting his hands in front of him. Jim latches onto his eyes, finding room to give him a half apologetic and disappointed smile as he hesitantly reaches across the table, and fishes his phone out of his jacket pocket. He turns it over, and frowns. Everett sees the look, and reaches into his breast pocket.

"Here," he says, as he pulls out a piece of ripped receipt, and places it on the table within arm's reach. "This is my number. If you ever want to talk, just, you know, give me a call," he says, smiling

sweetly, desirably. Of all the ways today could have gone, Jim could have never predicted it to go this way.

“Thank you,” he barely manages to whisper, smiling through his eyes, and Everett nods, quietly. For a second, they hold each other’s gaze, lingering, and then Everett looks away. He turns on his heels, and walks back to the counter. Jim gives himself the luxury to watch Everett’s hips sway until he disappears from view, then lets the buzzing phone consume his attention.

He sighs. Bunches up his coat. Folds up the number and delicately tucks it into his breast pocket. Fumbles with his phone and coffee, switching them until the phone is in his calling hand, and walks quickly out the coffee shop, past the crowd, sauntering into the brisk morning air.

He looks down at his phone, takes a deep breath, and swipes to answer the call.

“Nathaniel, hey, what’s up?” he asks, then begins his walk home.

Megan Fenner

A Boy like Aspens

It was raining when the boy's house burnt down.

The branches crackled, breaking silently under the heat, green leaves curled. A grey smoke mixed with steam from the bursting rain snaked through the branches of the woods, and the fire licked a bright red. A bright red against a green wall of leaves shrouded in a curtain of blue rain, a magical celebration of light and color. A whisper of a hiss.

The boy was not there when the electrical fuse in his house finally decided to snap. The boy was not there to wake his drunk father who had collapsed on the sofa. The boy was not there to run to his mother's room, who, with tears in her eyes, had thrown herself upon the bed, defeated and weak from the recent bruising. He was not there to tell her to wake up and come out of the house, you will burn to death, you can't leave me alone.

The boy did come running through the aspen woods following a tendril of smoke, fear snaking up his throat like bile and a secret wish threatening to slip through his lips at every gasped breath, as he was there to watch his house burn to ashes.

A house made out of nothing but wood and cheap glass panes. Curtains made out of thin wool. Electricity faultily wired, because no one had enough room to care when making a home for the destitute.

The boy was left in nothing but his school clothes, and he dropped his bag and began running. His white socks, muddy. His black hair, dripping. His white face, gasping.

His heart, knowing that he was alone.

He ran around the house, and the sides began to collapse. He screamed, calling a name, but it could not be heard over the roar of the flames, the crackling of wood, the smell of old alcohol drifting through the ashes. A sweet, caramelized smell.

He ran until he realized the stupidity of it. He started walking. Tall lanky frame, a silhouette of grace in the rain. A branch, threatening to break.

He stood back, the flames warm, and he watched his house burn

from the drive. His hands frozen at his side. His eyes opened wide. Water dripped from the corner of his cheeks. Rain curled around his fingers.

The final wall broke. A soft plume of smoke erupted silently. A piece of cloth floated through the wind, edges black, sweet smelling like cheap perfume, landing silently next to the boy. His mother's cloth, but nothing more.

The boy collapsed, then wailed.

Greta "Shredda" Nelson Bechtold
Autumn Aspens



Grace Cooper

Take Two Hands

Take two hands.
Not two hands, but four hands.
Take the hands that came before
and fold them gently into the flour
here.
Hear the way we laugh in the kitchen.
We are the women, hear
the women that came before. Listen
to the way my great-grandmother
folds her hands into the flour there.
The way our hands slip through the
silky dough, overlapping,
intertwining. These are the hands we
leave in the kitchen.

Meghan DeJong
On Loud Women

Editor's Note: We at *Greyrock Review* understand everyone has different and valid experiences, which is why we feel it is important to share stories that encompass a wide range of topics. Some of what is written below could be found triggering for those who have experienced sexual assault or harassment. Please take this into consideration before proceeding. Thank you, and happy reading.

—*Greyrock Review*

I hold a specific love in my heart for women who are loud. You know, the woman in class who will question the misogynistic tones of the professor's lecture even though it will likely hurt her midterm grade. The middle schooler who calls out a bully in the cafeteria, despite the fact that he will likely turn his critical eye on her tomorrow. Loud women are defenders of the weak and speakers of the truth. They embody bravery, both in speaking up against injustice and in using their voices as women. In a society where women are often taught to be quiet or submissive, women who scream in the face of a patriarchy are something beautiful, something special.

I used to be a loud woman. In middle school, a boy attempted to humiliate me in front of my whole class during a debate by asking me if I was on my period. I was, actually, but he had no way of knowing that. At fourteen, I had already overcome any embarrassment of my changing body and steeled myself before looking him in the eyes and remarking "I've been bleeding all week and I feel fine. Could you say the same?" I had never seen an eighth grade class in such chaos, and I reveled in the high of knowing an attempt to silence me had only made me stronger.

I kept my fire all throughout high school as well. I attended protests, I picked fights in class discussions, and I was quick to openly question the policies in place in my wealthy midwestern town. When my (white) African American history teacher insensitively showed a lynching photo to my class, causing a classmate who had found her brother after his suicide to run from the room in tears, I questioned

his decision to do so in front of the whole class. I argued with him when he said that we needed to “toughen up” and that this was “his method of teaching.” My hands shook as I left the class, but I felt proud of myself for standing up to his insensitivity and distance from his student’s reality.

I suppose that I may have inherited my volume from my mother, and I know she inherited it from hers. My mother was always more subtle than I, and she used her powerful mind to fight her battles rather than the fire that I knew sat in her belly. At her private Christian college, she wrote a paper for one of her pre-law classes on the legalization of prostitution, just to piss off her uppity professor, so the story goes. Her mother, while outwardly filling the stereotype of a docile grandmother, regularly writes letters to her senator, Mitch McConnell, telling him that “Putin would be proud of his behavior,” and that as a white, Catholic, senior citizen, she should be exactly in his prime demographic of voters, but hated him and everything he stood for. She has told off many a cashier for assuming that her veteran’s discount was due to her husband’s service, and not her years as a Navy nurse.

My sister clearly has the trait, and in fact may have a stronger copy than my own. I still remember her at the front of a crowd of students her senior year of high school, demanding that none of us receive tardies because how were they responsible for their lateness if there was a crash stopping traffic just blocks away from school? Her fire has shielded me from the bullying nature of our father, or waiters who ignore my dietary restrictions. With this pedigree of disobedience, it seems natural that I, too, would be a loud woman. I don’t know if the trait comes from nature or nurture, though I suppose it is likely a mix of the two. What I do know, however, is that you can lose it.

I lost my ability to be loud a week after the beginning of my senior year of high school. I was introduced to a friend of a friend with the sole intention of hooking up. The key difference lay in our definition of that often vague term, and regardless of my wishes, his definition won out. When I left his house, I was covered in hickeys and, for the first time in my life, silent.

In many conversations with my therapist since, I have come to forgive myself for that silence. It’s a defense mechanism, I’ve been told, designed to protect against possible further violence or trauma that women have been using since the dawn of time. I usually was the first to use my voice to speak against injustice, but when that injustice happened to me, my mind decided that it wasn’t safe to do so. The prob-

lem is once your mind learns that being quiet is the safest thing to do, it uses that same mechanism whenever it's scared. This was problematic, because in the time following the assault, I was scared a lot.

The assault happened on a Saturday, and by the time I returned to school on Monday a different version of the story was already circulating. I had yet to process what had happened, and still had not come to label it as it really was. My voice wasn't required, though. The three dark hickies on my neck were the only evidence needed to confirm the narrative he had created. My silence was taken as a confirmation. If I, a girl who was known for speaking against injustice, was silent, surely no injustice had taken place. I don't blame my classmates for making that assumption. I do blame them, however, for the cruelty they felt necessary to inflict on a girl they had assumed had a consensual sexual encounter.

I was a social pariah. It seemed that the whole world was against me at that time. Like some sort of cliché high school movie, groups of people would stop talking as I approached, and I felt the stares of classmates as I hardly knew on my back. A girl who I considered to be a close friend made the mistake of sharing the nastiest of the gossip with my best friend when I wasn't around, so I was able to hear the very worst of what all my classmates thought of me. Yet, for as outraged as I felt, I didn't say anything. I didn't tell anyone the way I felt, or the truth about what had happened that night. In fact, I put on a show of being perfectly fine, although silent.

My assailant, however, was gloating. The same gory (and false) details that were redefining my reputation were elevating his to a god like status. He, being a junior, was granted special appreciation for his "conquest" upon a senior. When a male friend took pity on me and asked me to homecoming, my assailant told him to "enjoy his leftovers." I wanted to scream. I didn't.

Logically, my history as a loud woman told me that what had happened wasn't okay. I had chanted with crowds of women and argued over the nuances of consent until my throat was hoarse. But time and time again, my voice caught when I tried to speak. It took me months to mentally arrive at the word "assault." In my (female only) gym class, we discussed consent, and how our state defined rape and harassment. I silently arrived at the correct word, according to the laws of state of Illinois, rape.

After graduation, I was crammed in the back seat of a car with my best friend and another supposed harlot. She was driving us all back from a party and, as our designated driver, had been far too sober

to deal with the desperation of newly graduated teenagers numbing themselves on stolen Svedka and an older brother's weed. She was lamenting the presence of her ex-boyfriend at the party and was appalled that he had tried to even speak to her. Faithful to our role as the drunken chorus, my best friend and I were berating his very existence. "He was horrible," my best friend cried. I never thought he was good enough for her. We reassured her that his actions were ludicrous, and that everyone knew he was scum anyways. This was far from the truth, of course. We all knew that after their very public break up, he had shared the details of their private sex life with anyone who would listen. In a story it seemed we couldn't help but keep hearing, he had been congratulated and she had been shamed for the same actions.

She kept her eyes on the road ahead. "You know the only time we ever had sex I was completely shit-faced? I barely remember it." The drunken humor that had filled the car only moments before died and the only noise was now the sound of wind blowing in through the cracked windows. I felt a familiar heat in my stomach. My mind flashed to hot pink protest signs and legal jargon.

"That wasn't consensual." I found my mouth spilling out words before I even knew what they were going to be. I said her name gently before continuing "That was rape."

From the back seat, I could imagine her tightening her fingers around the steering wheel, though it was too dark to clearly see her. The shape of her head didn't shift in the darkness, and so I imagined her eyes were still trained on the road. Her voice was quiet and wavered a little when she spoke. "I know."

Something in the way she had already resigned herself to the knowledge that she had been attacked broke me. I felt a familiar heat inside my stomach, boiling into rage at the silence we had both forced ourselves to adopt. She was so young. *I* was so young. What had happened to us wasn't okay. Yet, we both stayed silent. The silence in the car was overwhelming me. I wanted to stay silent still, to not reveal that we shared the same pain, but my outrage couldn't be contained. Perhaps I was inspired by her courage in speaking the truth, or maybe it was just the vodka, but for the first time since the assault, I spoke of it out loud.

"He assaulted me. In August, when I hooked up with him, I didn't want most of what happened. It wasn't okay." In the darkness that night, I said the name of the boy who had assaulted me. I don't withhold it now out of fear of retribution or any desire to protect his rep-

utation, but out of a conscious decision to not allow him any more space within my story.

After that night, something inside of me shifted. I began to test my voice again, trying it out with different people. I talked with my best friend about it first. Even though she was in the car that night when I first shared, she listened again when I told her everything. She said she had her suspicions but was waiting for me to be ready to talk. She told me she loved me and would be there for me in any way I needed as I healed from what happened. She's kept that promise over and over again since.

Next, I went to my best male friend. I had known him since we were five, and in place of an actual brother, he was the closest thing I had that would compare. After my best friend, he was the person I went to for life advice or support. I walked him through what had happened, explained the different things I had felt in the almost year between my assault and finally telling him. Although he and my assailant were not close, they occasionally ran in the same circles. While he did tell me he believed me, he cautioned me that others wouldn't. I needed to be careful who I told, he warned, because it would just be my word against my attacker's. I took his message to heart and stayed silent for the rest of the time I lived in my hometown.

Then I left for college. Any preconceptions of who I was, or more importantly, who my assailant was, stayed in my hometown. I was free to tell my story to anyone. No one had chem with him, or had known him since Pre-K, so they had no reason to not believe me. This was a good thing, because telling my story became more and more crucial. As the year anniversary of the assault came and went, I started having vivid flashbacks and panic attacks. I would be walking across campus, only to see a man who bore a passing resemblance to him, and again I was in his basement, frozen. These flashbacks were common and overwhelming. I now know these are common symptoms of PTSD, which I would later be diagnosed with. At the time though, I was just confused and scared, and I didn't know what to do.

So, I spoke. I first reached out to my new friends, the people who looked on with confusion and worry as the well intentioned brush of hand from a flirting stranger would send me into a dissociative trance. I then found myself walking into my campus's women and gender advocacy center, and meeting with a counselor for the first time. I told my gynecologist when I went in for my yearly exam so that I could receive trauma informed care. In my women's studies

class, I identified myself as a survivor—not a victim—of sexual assault. I claimed my story to those I believed I could trust more and more often, and found with each time I did I was more comfortable doing so.

It wasn't a seamless process though. There were days where a movie scene would trigger a panic in my stomach, causing me to curl into a ball as I relived flashbacks for hours. It took me months to allow a man to even touch me again, and parties filled me with a specific confusing dread. There were nights where I sat silently gasping for air, fully believing I would never feel okay again. On those same nights, I feared myself as I wondered if it even made sense to continue living a life with so much hurt in it.

But in my gut, that heat kept growing. I felt it surge each time I was reminded that the reality I was living was shared by more women than I wanted to count. Each day on the news, more women like me were being hurt. Before nights out, my friends and I would sharpie each other's numbers on our bodies, so if something horrific happened the police would at least know who to contact. At my first frat party, someone dropped something into my drink which made me lose all sense of sight or touch. I got home fine, but when I vomited stomach acid for two days afterwards, even my most progressive friends told me I was at fault for not properly watching my drink. I realize this list seems exhausting. If you identify as female (or nonbinary, or any gender identity other than cis-male), you, too, live this reality with me. If you don't, this may seem overwhelming. I would apologize for this, but that's the whole point. It is.

Somewhere between being told our classmates were only picking on us on the playground because they liked us and our classmates snapping the straps of our first training bras, we learned that this is just how life is. By the time these "jokes" turned to violence, we were just so used to carrying our pain in silence that we had forgotten that this behavior wasn't okay. Even some of the loudest women had succumbed to this silent acceptance of a society that allowed men to act however they wanted, regardless of the hurt it was causing. My mother, that same fiery woman who took on the male dominated legal system and her overbearing religious college for fun, didn't open up about the hurt she was carrying around with her until almost twenty years later.

There are a lot of proposed solutions to this problem. Some say legislation is where this needs to be fixed. If we make it easier for women to report, more predators will be taken off the streets. Others

think we need more representation in government. If more women are in power, they can better correct the barriers for women's safety. Others call for better access to mental health resources, or for more advocates in colleges and universities, or for curfews for men. It seems that the suggested ways of trying to make the lives of women better are as numerous and diverse as the stories of women who have been assaulted.

I won't pretend that I have all the solutions, although *something* would be a good start. I have decided, however, that my act of resistance is to return to being a loud woman. I have named my abuser publicly, because I refuse to keep his secret any longer. To adopt the language of another community of strong people, I am "out" as a survivor. It is no longer something that I want to carry in shame, it is something I need the world to see. My pain is not my own, it was created by a boy who had never been taught not to wield the power he had, and the society that granted it to him.

He reached out to me after I posted his name online for the whole world to see. It took three-and-a-half years, but more likely the destruction of his reputation for him to think that maybe something that happened that night was wrong. Although, that's not quite true either. In the text he sent me he said, "truly I don't remember an encounter between us that was violent or abusive," but that, "sexual assault is not something I stand behind and something no one should have to go through." Part of me would have been tempted to believe his clearly false apology, if I didn't know about the other women he's hurt as well.

In some ways I pity him because I think he's right. I don't think he remembers what happened as violent because no one ever told him it was. The only people who were taught about consent at my high school were the students in the all-girl's gym class. What he learned about sex was probably from porn, where consent is rarely expressively given and the line between "yes," and, "stop that hurts," often doesn't exist at all. Above all, he watched as senators, celebrities, and presidents bragged about their assaults on women to no consequence. This doesn't mean what he did was okay, please don't misunderstand me, but rather, I understand why in his mind, he did nothing wrong. Why would he know anything different?

I doubt I will personally bring about the end of rape culture in the United States. But I have remembered I am a loud woman. It's scary sometimes. I still am processing what happened, and since I've stopped hiding what happened to me I've lost some people very close

to me. But it feels *good*. I'm standing up for myself again in classes, or in social situations where "jokes" go too far. Perhaps, even more important than that though, I'm standing up for women like me, who just aren't ready to be loud yet. Maybe one day they'll be ready, or maybe they never will, but if the women who raised me taught me anything, it's that loud women beget more loud women. I'm ready to start shouting.

Cher Prazak

Healing Waters

I eased my body into the scalding hot water of the giant black tub. My skin burned all the way down, but I did not stop until I was situated at the bottom and completely submerged except for my head. Just as I was told, the scorching water transformed to a comfortable temperature, and I could feel all of my muscles finally relaxing. I felt a slight tingle run across my entire body under my skin, as if something was humming. It's probably from some salts they threw in here to help my sore body. However, after a few minutes, it wasn't going away. I became curious. I tried looking around, but with the low lights in the room it was hard to see what exactly was going on. As my eyes started roaming, I seemed to find that all the cuts and bruises I had made the past couple of weeks were all gone. *Gone?!* I bolted up in the tub, scalding hot water burned my skin again as it sloshed around only to settle back into the warm temperature it was. The realization had me sinking back into the water as slowly as possible, and sure enough I noticed my skin turning bright red and then immediately back to the normal color. My confusion changed into wonderment as I slid my sharp nails lightly down my chest and watched as the red lines faded away. I tried a little harder this time, and sure enough the little gashes vanished in a matter of seconds. The healing properties of the water were astonishing, but I had to wonder what would happen if you stayed too long in the tub. I didn't notice my hands becoming wrinkled like they usually do in hot water, so either I hadn't been in as long as I thought, or this bath could actually be dangerous. Worry started to grip the edges of my mind. I heard a slight buzzing sound and saw a door open. Three little nurses waddled in and started motioning me out of the tub and into a robe they brought me. Getting out proved to be a much more difficult task than I had thought it would be, as my body had started to relax so much that moving felt like I was swimming through a pool of tar. The nurses noticed the difficulty I was having and started to grab at me. I tried jerking away, but they grabbed my arms and yanked me out of the tub. My body screaming to return into the darkness.

I began fighting the nurses so I could scramble back in, but they proved to be stronger than I had anticipated. In a second I was completely wrapped in a robe and dragged quickly out of the room, still being called to the waters.

Peyton Farnum
Junk Yard Dance Hall



Trice Scroggins

To Joe

While the ice melts and / Dallas slowly becomes
beachfront property / I talk with you.
You and I / worry so often, about all the things / we cannot control.
We aren't the ones / pumping the world full of
gas but / you and I, / we feel their greed.
The world has gotten smaller / and now, so does the land.
Like a bomb / we wait / for the imminent fallout.
But someday, the / ticks of the clock get / slower.
And while I can't / save the ice cubes / floating in the sea; I'll take
/ any and every moment / to sit and talk / with you a while.
For that's all / I can control, there's no healing / I can do
of Mother Earth, / but I can sit with / her beloved son.
We're only here / for a mere moment / but
for you, / I'd melt even quicker.

Trice Scroggins

Notes

Strong brown leather
I'm the fourth to hold it as my own

Scuffs and scratches
Like scars from days of back breaking

Made by hand
Its master long forgotten

Honest farmers
Your notes held more value

I should write
Change the bills for something that'd last

Maybe it'd keep
Its stories to itself

For I know so little

*Will I have a son
For him to stumble across it*

*Will he too be an Edward
With something tangible to remember you*

*Did you struggle
To fill the folds, just as I do*

*Or did you use it
To keep the words of those you loved*

*If I asked
Would it tell what all it's seen*

*Push me to ask
What you can tell me of its past*

Erin Fuller

287

Sometimes I feel like I could drive as far away as possible and never come back. Sometimes I feel like the only destination I could end up at is home. Oh, the places you'll go.

When the coldness of the spring starts to melt away and slows its nipping at my skin, I find sanctuary in stripping the hard top off my Jeep. In its place is nothing at all, just wide-open air weaving in and out of the windows, ruffling my hair into intense tangles. Only for a few weeks a year do I get to experience the summer phenomenon of complete-Jeep-exposure, so I cherish the time I get with the warm air kissing up and down my skin. During the night, when the sun has settled into the comfortable sheets of the mountains and the breeze tastes like strawberry slushies from Sonic, I drive. I race through the streets in my chariot, the beat of the music and the whistle of the wind intertwining in my fingers as I grip the wheel. I shift quickly and smoothly, first gear being like a bull ready to charge out of the cage at a rodeo, second like a sudden rush of adrenaline pumping through my blood, third like climbing through the clouds towards cruising altitude, fourth like skiing down a mountain covered in firm powder at almost full speed, fifth like an entire year of seasons all in one night. One, two, three, four, five.

When I'm feeling restless or anxious about relationships or school or family, I snatch my keys and make my escape. The sun is beginning its nighttime ritual of brushing its teeth on the trees and stretching its arms out across the still-snowcapped peaks. Highway 287 is my personal main drag. The road that runs through Lafayette, Erie, Longmont, Loveland, and Fort Collins, in that order. Take a left anytime between the first three and I hit the streets of Boulder. Going south means I can go as far as Regis University. If I'm feeling more east/west, I can take 120th all the way to Brighton and beyond. I turn the music up between 38-42, loud enough for my thoughts to be swallowed by the rhythm but quiet enough that I can still focus my other senses. My go-to playlist is *sacred summer nights*, which I have been building since the autumn of 2019. It holds the kinds of

songs that, when mixed with the mellow air of the night, blanket your entire body with an indescribable feeling that no other season can achieve (for there's other playlists for other seasons as well).

Tonight, I choose 287 because I get a clear view of the sunset all the way down. *Doses & Mimosas* by Cherub shuffles into place, a song that's always at 42, and I tap excitedly towards the chorus ("To all the b*tchass hoes who hate me the most, oh yeah I hate you too"). I accelerate, weaving around slower cars and quietly cursing drivers who block me momentarily behind them. I scan the usual roads towards the west as I pass them, feeling out their paths and all that's included. South Boulder is hilly and turns into a mini highway. Baseline splits into Cherryvale and a neighborhood, reconnecting a couple hundred feet later. Arapahoe is my usual route, passing my school district's office building and the dinner theatre. Niwot runs past the high school where my mom used to teach and takes me to CO-119, which connects Longmont and Boulder. I make a split-second decision and swerve into the left turn lane, solidifying my route of Niwot Road. The night is closing in quickly, and I need to catch just one last glimpse of the sun. I make quick (and legal) pauses at stop signs, anxiously biting my cheek sitting at red lights, revving the engine up and down because I *know* it speeds up the process. I arrive at 119, so I make another breakneck decision to pull the wheel left once again—to Boulder.

It's all the same routine, in and out of the two lanes trying to inevitably avoid any other person that decided to drive along the nights I call mine.

I've been angry tonight, mostly at myself. I start to shift from second to third but I miss, the gears grinding and screeching against one another like nails on a chalkboard. I collect myself, gently slipping the stick into place, and apologize to Bee. This Jeep has been in my family for a while now, belonging to my grandpa, then aunt, then grandpa again, then sister, then me. Once I was handed the keys my sophomore year, I cleaned them out, vacuuming and wiping down every corner. When I was organizing the center console, I spotted a bumblebee in the cupholder, its wings put to rest forever. Henceforth the Jeep was known as Bee in honor of the little one, or Bean because of its dark green color.

I like to think Bee understands me when I talk to them, listening to my anxieties and catching my tears on their fabric seat. I hope they forgive me when I accidentally grind their gears or brake too suddenly. In all realness, Bee has been the only one I trust to stick by my side

and cry along with me. They've gone through so much (coolant sliding through the engine, the steering wheel pipe snapping, rust eating away at their body), but Bee always perseveres, and in turn, so do I.

I drift past signs pointing to downtown or out to Highway 36, and I feel myself calming down. I think through my problems, never solving them but accepting them, plotting my next move, Bee acting like my getaway vehicle. And just like that, I'm at another assortment of roads back home, the streetlights creating a beacon to follow.

But the stars pull at my sleeve like a little kid asking to keep playing even though it's past her bedtime. I dive into the highway, not because it's the fastest way back but because it can take me far away once again, to Denver. I signal a quick salute to my last exit and face forward, towards those playful stars, those thin streaks of clouds, driving further on.

These drives are my therapy, my only way to feel like I exist, my religion.

I miss you, Bee.

Micah Sample

Losing My Father Somewhere Between Then and Now

I must've been nine that day at the gas station parking lot outside town. I scooted past the man getting out of his car parked next to my mom's. He was dirty, wide-eyed, with an unkempt beard. His cracked lips parted as he stared down at me.

I climbed in my mom's Ford Expedition. My dad slid into the passenger seat in front of me. He muttered something to my mom. Something about how he didn't like the look of the man.

Truth be told, I hadn't liked looking at the man either. He made my skin crawl. But I was nine and I was kind. "That's not very nice," I said.

My dad turned around to face me. He looked dazed. His blue eyes hazy with dying anger. He had that restless energy I had started to recognize when he got like this. "Huh?" He always looked like he was sneering at me whenever he said that.

"You said you didn't like how he looked. You shouldn't judge people 'cause of what they look like." I was nine, and the love of Jesus was still new and exciting. I was nine, and I wanted so bad to be good. So good.

"Oh, gee whiz, kid . . ." I hated when he said that. It made me feel stupid. He shook his head and sighed. This wasn't the first time I'd put him on the spot like this. His voice dropped in that way it always did when he was trying to be patient with me. ". . . That's not what I said."

I blinked, my cheeks heating with shame. "Oh."

"If you're gonna listen in, make sure you hear me right," he said with a smile that was distinctly missing the smile part.

I lifted my chin. "What did you say, then?"

He leaned in, lowered his voice even more, his eyes pinning mine in place. Back then, he was one of the few people I never had trouble making eye contact with. "I said, I didn't like the way he was looking at my little girl."

He turned back around. My mom didn't say a word as she started the car, her eyes meeting mine in the rearview mirror.

My stomach twisted, like I needed to throw up. When I thought about the man again, I felt this need to crawl out of my skin and become something else, something he wouldn't want to look at. I didn't understand why at the time. But I had the same feeling ten years later, when I heard my dad's voice from the kitchen, where he couldn't see my face. He couldn't see the fury in my eyes. Couldn't recognize it as his own. "Well . . .," is what my dad told me, ". . . he was always nice to me."

Micah Sample

Landscape Portrait in the Middle of Nowhere

i grew flowers in my backyard for you
i followed you through our hazy hometown
scattered petals in your dusty footprints
in your body, sidewalk cracks
were signs of life.
in your weeds i found hope
the only gift you could give back and
through cicada song i watched
the flowers struggle toward sunlight.

my garden spent seasons
blooming with
my laughter as you and i hunted
our friends through their backyards and
got fishhook-snared on fences and
found homes for the night inside train cars.
my flowers flourished like the dreams
we had of train-hopping and hitchhiking our way
to a home we won't fight to fall in love with.
but sometimes i fed my flowers the same
poison we gulped down every night
kissing boys who grind their teeth turmeric
in anger and dancing with girls who promise to
pray for us. i wanted to suck the
poison straight out of their stems
for you.

i started finding what i'd
given you lifeless in the trash
in the trash where i could see.

still i tried to love you
i found beauty in your

crooked teeth
makeup you slept in, fucked up knees and
fingernails gnawed bloody to the bottom
laughing too hard and too mean but it's not funny,
none of it's funny when you come home
smelling like a million desperate and bored teen years.

when i woke up in my garden
you stood over me
grimy palms open and waiting empty.
i shook my head
i want to keep them. let me keep them.
this time they're all mine.
but you ripped them from the stem
i kicked and screamed and you
tried to bury me alive.
by the time i was on my feet
you'd stripped my garden bare
your arms were full
of uprooted
violets daffodils snapdragons tulips and
your dirt-smudged face grinned down at me
i clutched at you, i begged
please let them mean something. please at least
keep them where you can see them.
i wanted you to think of me
so much it ate me alive.
you laughed and turned away and
left me with nothing.

i wish i knew you were pressing my
flowers between books
or threading them through the holes

in your t-shirts or
dressing them up in someone's vase—
it wouldn't even matter
but when i sleep tonight
i dream of you devouring them.

this morning i found a tree sprouting in my backyard
and i have decided i will destroy you
for its life
for my own life
this one will grow.

Isaiah Remo

Mama, a Memory

Folding the small photo in his hand, Francisco stared out the car window, watching the endless desert fly past his eyes as streaks of pink and red in the distance faded into the night. They had been driving for hours and hadn't taken a rest since the tiny *Panadería* they raided for their pink and brown sugary treasures miles back. Papa made sure to get them out of el rancho as soon as possible and promised to stop at a motel when they had made good headway on their "adventure." But Francisco was becoming frightened of driving through this wasteland in the dark, especially without his mother near him. Francisco gripped the small photo even tighter, bringing it closer to his chest, dreaming of somehow reuniting with his mother once they reached the border. Francisco realized this would likely never happen and tears began to fall down his face as he drifted off to sleep.

Ever since he could remember, Francisco had always gone to Mercado Rios with his mother, taking the same dirt road from the ranch to the plaza to get to the market. While mama shopped, Francisco always pestered the sweet Doña Esmeralda as she restocked produce, asking each and every question one could about papaya and nopales one could think of. One morning, Francisco and Mama came to the store as usual, but Francisco noticed she had pulled la Doña aside to ask her a question, but Francisco couldn't make out what she was saying except asking about a train schedule.

Francisco thought hard about what train even passed near San Juan but couldn't think of a reason a train would even need to have a connection to an area filled with nothing but small farms. Even if it did pass through here, he'd never heard its engine or horn in the area. Deciding to take this mystery into his own hands, Francisco told Mama he was going into the la Plaza to visit his friends and bid Doña Esmeralda farewell. Walking past the church and through the center of the plaza where he usually played with his friends, he approached the gigantic brick building labeled, H. AYUNTAMIENTO MUNICIPAL DE SAN JUAN, and stared up in fear as it loomed

over him and the surrounding buildings. Francisco shivered at the thought of passing through the tall steel doors and encountering the calculating men that controlled every aspect of San Juan, waiting to strike down any request the lonely farm boy might have. Grabbing onto the ice-cold handle Francisco yanked the door back then walked into the gray atrium feeling the sun's rays warm his olive face and hands as everyone stopped to observe the scrawny child boldly entering a new world. While this might not be the best place to request information on transportation schedules, Francisco knew the city hall would have any information he needed about San Juan. He just needed to muster the courage to approach the old man sitting at the main desk.

Approaching the desk, Francisco confidently said, "*Buenos días, Señor,*" and smiled.

The man tipped his glasses down and said, "*Oye, chamaco,* I'm pretty busy here so if you're here with *una broma,* go bug someone else."

"Where is the closest train someone can catch from here?" Francisco asked, slightly annoyed by the man's bluntness.

The old man snickered and said, "The closest train is in *Montañas Moradas* with a service to *Ciudad Guadalupe*. Why? Looking to make it big in the city with your *rancho* education, *chico?*"

Francisco sneered but thanked the man, turning around and murmuring "*Pinche viejo,*" under his breath.

Making his way towards the exit of the city hall, he was blinded by the flash of light from the steel door being flung open. Francisco watched as Mama ran in and locked eyes with him, fury burning in her eyes as she extended her hand out to grab him. As she yanked him out of the atrium, she apologized to everyone she passed by for her "detective son" that infiltrated the building.

As they walked through the doors, a tall, well-dressed man emerged from an office and shouted "Marisol, there's no reason to get so worked up! He's just a—"

Mama let the door slam on whatever the man was saying and began dragging Francisco by the ear away from *La Plaza*, not uttering one word to him. When they finally got to the side of the church, she let him go and turned his face towards her. Francisco had never seen her so angry, nor had he seen her care so much about his whereabouts in town. Looking into his mother's eyes, Francisco sensed his mother was angry in a way she hadn't been before. As tears welled in her eyes, she asked Francisco one question.

“*Mijo*, what were you looking for in City Hall?”

Francisco sat on his bed, peering out of the small window to watch the sun begin to disappear behind the sierras. Running his hands along the cool, bumpy glass, he heard the door open in the front and a pair of heavy boots stumble in. He quickly shut the window and ran to sneak a glance into the dimly lit hallway. *Metiche*, his sister would call him.

“*Hola, mi amor*,” Papa said, as he tried to reach for mama’s face to give her a kiss.

She pulled away, resuming her work on the picadillo she was making for dinner. She sighed, gripping onto the edge of the sink. Grabbing her bowl of potatoes, she turned to Papa.

“Where the hell do you end up every day after helping Don Mauricio?”

Taking off his hat, he quietly said, “To the cantina with Josué. There, happy?”

Mama tightened her grip around the spoon she was holding. Francisco saw her turn her gaze to the bassinet that was sitting in the corner, feeling the same rage in her eyes she had when she found him at city hall. As she turned to yell at papa, the bowl slipped and shattered into a dozen blinding white shards on the orange tile.

“*Chingado!*” Mama yelled. Papa rushed to help her, but she pushed him away.

Francisco ducked back into his room as his mother rushed down the hallway, slamming the door once she had reached her room. Francisco had never heard Mama curse before, especially at Papa. He felt his chest tighten, feeling his entire world crashing in after seeing his parents confront each other like sworn enemies.

“*Ay, Panchito*,” Papa yelled for him. Francisco felt torn. Hearing the soft, muffled sobs of Mama from her room, he tapped softly on the door and walked in.

“Go back to your room, Francisco,” his mother said.

Francisco inched closer to her and asked, “Is everything okay, *amá?*”

She looked up, eyes glazed over and red from crying. “Come, *mijito*, sit with me.”

He made his way over as she sat up and brushed her apron off. Francisco sat next to her. “I’m sorry for wandering to city hall earlier, Mama. I know I shouldn’t have lied to you.”

She sniffled. “It’s okay, *mi hijo*. I’m sorry for dragging you out of there for no reason. I guess we both have been hard on each other.”

Francisco smiled. Their heads perked up as the ranchera tunes start-

ed up from the back patio, followed by Papa's awful singing. They both laughed.

"Have you ever seen this?" Mama asked.

Walking over to a small, wooden chest on her nightstand, she pulled out a small photo that looked like it had been crumpled in someone's pocket for years. She handed it to him, and he noticed it was a photo of her and a baby.

"Who's this?" he asked.

"That's you, *mijo*," Mama said. "I had that photo taken when you were less than a year old."

Francisco smiled. "I was chunky for a newborn," he said.

"*Muy gordito*," she said, laughing.

She closed Francisco's hand around the photo. She told Francisco to go to his room to change, and that she would have quesadillas or some quick dinner ready in the kitchen. Francisco opened his hand up and let the photo blossom to take another look at it. He began to wonder why his mother had suddenly given this to him but was interrupted by Pancha and the rest of his siblings stumbling through the door, finally coming back from visiting with *abuelita*. He scuffled to his room to put the photo under his pillow.

As light flooded through the tiny window, Francisco awoke to his sister shaking him to get up. He saw that she was already dressed, eager to get out of the house.

"What's the hurry, Pancha?" he asked.

"We're going to *abuela's* to help her around her house, so get dressed," Pancha said.

Francisco looked into the hallway and noticed the house was strangely still. "And Mama y Papa?"

Pancha responded, "Papa is getting ready for work, and I don't know where mom went. Hurry up and get dressed so you can come help me make breakfast."

Francisco began to worry as he slowly buttoned up his shirt. His mother never leaves without asking all the kids if they'd like to go, especially Pancha. Francisco began to think back to what he overheard his mother say to Doña Esmeralda at the Market. He could feel that tightening in his chest again, but he couldn't tell why. It's not like Pancha had given him any reason to worry about Mama or the family. So, why is it that he can't shake the feeling that something is wrong with Mama? It was just one fight that her and papa had. Yet why did this feel different from the rest? Francisco thought over and over again but couldn't find the answer.

As these thoughts sped through his mind, rain began to softly tap on the window. Francisco could hear the chickens clucking and doves cooing overhead, and he felt a sense of calm for a second. He decided to put his thoughts of his mother to rest for the day and finished getting dressed to go meet Pancha. As he walked into the dimly lit hallway, he bumped into Papa.

“*Buenos días, niño,*” said papa, “how did you sleep?” he said, cuffing his pants to put on his boots.

“*Buenos días, señor.* I slept fine,” Francisco said timidly, almost backing into his room to escape the looming figure of his father.

Papa laughed. “So, what’d your mother tell you last night after our disagreement?” he said, in a hushed tone.

Francisco gulped. “*Nada,* Papa. She just wanted me to comfort her. I guess she just looked a bit sad.”

Papa relaxed. “Oh, okay, *mijo.* I’m sorry you had to hear that last night,” he said, with a tinge of sadness in his voice.

“Papa, breakfast!” Pancha yelled. His father walked away.

After breakfast, Papa drove Francisco and his siblings to the *Rancho de Los Pinos* to where *abuelita* lived. Francisco despised going to help around *abuela*’s huge ranch but the drive through the rolling green hills along the edges of the towering sierras made it worth it. As the road began to wind more, Francisco gazed at all the idyllic *ranchos* with their towering willow trees and cobblestone streets, always looking for the inevitable bell tower that would rise above the towns, the church always a sign of life in the area.

As they pulled up to Rancho Valles, Francisco could see his *abuela* waiting for them on the porch with brooms and buckets in hand already. As they all hopped out of the truck bed, Papa whistled to them and told them he would come back at 7:00, after work. Waving goodbye to his mother and driving away, Francisco could feel the long day ahead as Papa left them, dust flying back from the truck and all.

Walking up the dirt path towards the *hacienda*, Francisco was always in awe of the mansion that had probably stood on this hillside for centuries. Giving *abuela* a kiss on the cheek and grabbing a bucket, he began to walk towards the barn to tend to the goats and cows. The sun was beaming down on him and reflecting off his tan skin, which felt good after the light drizzle had left the area cooled down in the morning.

When he had finished his tasks in the barn, Francisco walked towards the garden where *abuela* was busy preparing tortillas to send

home with them. Telling her that he had finished with the barn animals, she sat down and looked up at Francisco.

“*Mijo*, you look . . . tired,” she said, somewhat stunned. “You are never tired, even after doing the hardest tasks someone can give you. Is there something I should know?”

Francisco knew that he could trust *abuela*. Even though they didn’t have the closest relationship, she had always looked out for him, and he respected her without question. Before he could tell her about his worries about Mama, she spoke.

“Is this about Marisol?” *abuela* said, squinting her eyes as she moved closer to him. Francisco stopped breathing for a second. “How did you know, *abuela*?”

Abuela chuckled and said, “*Aye, mijo*, I could see this coming from way before you were born.”

“What do you mean?” Francisco said.

“Come,” *abuela* said, motioning him to follow her into the house.

Walking through the oak-paneled corridor of the house, Francisco felt small in comparison to the portraits that lined the walls, especially in the presence of the portrait of his grandfather Bernardo. Practically scurrying away from the painting, he followed *abuela* into the office that sat at the end of the never-ending hallway and sat down, waiting for her to show him what she needed to.

Abuela pulled out a small file from the drawer and handed it to him. He could feel his fingers shaking as he fumbled some of the papers when he opened the file. Falling out onto the desk was a large paper that read, ACTA DE MATRIMONIO, and had the names of both his parents signed on it.

“That’s a copy of their marriage record I took, along with some photos and documents from the wedding,” *abuela* told him.

“But why are you showing me this now *abuela*?” Francisco asked.

Abuela sighed. “I want you to realize that your mother was never content to marry your father, *mijo*. I love my son, but he has done some wrongs that I just can’t justify, not even to you.”

“But why are you telling me this, *abuelita*,” Francisco pleaded, unable to stop his leg from bouncing up and down.

Handing him another paper, *abuela* said, “Francisco. Your father stole Marisol to be his bride. He barely waited a few months after her *quinceañera* to take her to the church and marry her.”

Francisco looked at the church record *abuela* had handed him. The church record of the *quinceañera* revealed it had only been three

months before his father stole his mother. Tears welled in his eyes, feeling a stabbing pain for the life his Mama had lost because she was forced to marry at such a young age.

Francisco looked up at his grandmother. “Why couldn’t you have stopped this?”

Abuela looked into his eyes. “I wanted to, *mijo*, but your grandpa wouldn’t let me interfere. Said it was the way things had always been done.”

He could hear a somber tone coming from her voice now. Was she forced to begin her life this way, too?

“Abuela, how do you know it is my mother that has been worrying me? How do you know she has been acting strange lately?” Francisco asked.

“Since the baby passed away, I know your mother has changed. I now know that things will never be the same,” said *abuela*.

Francisco thought of his baby brother. His baby brother that haunted him every night as he tried to fall asleep. His baby brother that passed away only a month after being born in his mother’s arms. Francisco began to cry.

Abuela rushed to comfort him. “Everything is going to be okay, *mi vida*,” she said as she pulled a rosary out of a container on the desk, “Take it, *mijo*. Pray with it and pray well for your mother. If you keep it close to you, you will keep us close to you too. *Por siempre*,” she said, kissing the rosary then him.

As the sun disappeared behind the hills, Francisco had a sense of urgency, like something was nagging at him to get home. Waiting with his siblings in the driveway for what felt like months, the truck finally pulled in. But, when it got closer, Francisco could see that it was Don Mauricio’s truck. Confused, he and Pancha ran to ask what was going on, but Mauricio said for everyone to pile in so he could take them home. Kissing *abuela* goodbye, Francisco laid his head on Pancha’s shoulder and thought about what waited for them at home.

Finally pulling into the driveway, they thanked Don Mauricio and Francisco rushed into the house. When he entered, he was greeted by Mama cleaning up a broken vase from the floor, which looked like it had shattered into infinite pieces all over the room.

“*Qué pasó, amá?*” Francisco asked.

Mama looked up as the rest of the siblings walked through the door. “All of you to the room and go to sleep now,” she said, rage and sorrow seeping through her words.

Pancha ushered all the kids to the room, telling all of us to get dressed and began getting the twins ready for bed as well. For the first time in his life, he saw his older sister look scared. Francisco began to change and noticed the light flickering in the hallway. That's when he heard his father barge through the back door and loudly toss a beer bottle in the garbage. Loudly, his parents began to argue, but Francisco could barely hear what it was about because the twins began to wail.

Rushing to help Pancha, Francisco tried to calm one of the twins down and put them in their crib. Suddenly, he heard his parent's bedroom door slam and glass being broken from their mirror that sat on their dresser. Mama had locked herself in.

"*Vete a dormir!*" his father shouted. "All of you to sleep, now!"

The bedroom door was slammed shut from the other side and the lights went out abruptly. Not wanting to make their father even more angry, everyone quickly got into bed and didn't say a word. Once the twins had stopped crying, everything in the house had gone silent.

As the house began to settle a while later, Francisco could hear his father's snores getting louder and the rain beginning to pour down outside. Suddenly, a faint light seeped through the crack under the door and Francisco shut his eyes and pulled the blanket to his neck. Then, the door opened softly.

His mother walked in the room. She was draped in a large coat he had never seen before and was carrying a small suitcase in her right hand, a small paper in the other. She walked over to the twins and began to get them dressed. Once she was done with that, she began to make her rounds throughout the room, kissing each of her children on the cheek.

When she got to Francisco, she stopped for a second. Francisco had grabbed the photo of them from under his pillow and was clutching it tightly. Mama bent down and gave him a kiss on his cheek and said, "*Te amo, mi hijo.*" Francisco felt a tear fall onto his face.

Francisco heard a soft voice whisper from the hallway to his mother. Noticing his father's snoring had stopped, he assumed it was him, but couldn't be sure. After a minute, Mama came back in the room, put the twins back in their crib, picked up her bags and walked out. The light faded away. It was silent after that. There was no arguing, no yelling, no door slamming.

She was *gone*.

Francisco could only recall certain details of the day that followed his mother's departure. His father quickly sold a lot of the family's belongings and secured them a ride out of San Juan to the border. Why they were leaving so quickly, Francisco would never know. His father didn't have much to say to anyone, except to say goodbye to whatever friends they had in town and to pack anything they didn't want sold. Francisco hated his father not caring about what happened.

As for his mother, no one knew where she had really gone. Some people in town thought she took off for *La Capital* in search of some upscale life. Others speculated she was headed for *Ciudad Guadalupe*, as someone had begun saying they saw her heading for the train station. However, these were all just rumors, Francisco knew that. He just couldn't shake the feeling that there was something he was missing, something she had tried to tell him but that he didn't understand. As much as he wanted to go ask his *abuela*, he was afraid he would probably never see her again.

Two days after his mother had left, his uncle Ramiro arrived in town to help the family make the move to the United States. Francisco was terrified to move to a new country, especially when he was still set on trying to find his mother in this one. Packing the car and locking up the house, he felt a sense of dread wash over him, feeling like he had to escape something that he hadn't even faced yet. He grabbed his rosary, the photo of him and his mother, and her jewelry box to take with him to the U.S. and took one last look at the house. He began to remember every moment he had there. Learning to cook with Pancha. Talking to Mama about what had happened at school. Chasing his brothers around the table and Mama tried to fruitlessly smack them with a broom. Tears fell down his face, but he quickly wiped them away and straightened up. He turned away and never looked back, getting into the truck, and leaving San Juan one last time.

As they drove through an endless world of barren deserts, Francisco wondered where Mama had ended up. He grabbed the rosary and prayed one last time for her, feeling helpless to stop the change that was coming with her departure, but hoping he could bring her back to them. Francisco knew things would never be the same.

Waking up with the small photo still clutched in his hand, Francisco noticed they had made it to a city called *Ciudad Jiménez*, and he knew that meant they had finally reached the border. Pulling up to a house that faced a river that separated the U.S. from them, Francisco noticed the gloomy, dry deserts that continued on the other side. As everyone got out to stretch their legs and thank Uncle Ramiro,

Francisco couldn't help but stare at the new life that faced him on the other side. While he stood in front of the dream so many of his friends and family had at home, Francisco could only think of one word as he stared at his future across the river.

Bleak.

Ezra Ross

Lying to the River Styx

When I was smaller, I swore I would never be in love.
A child's promise, a tiny soul who
Believed I would ever listen to my mind.
I only broke my promise once (twice?
I've never been good at math)
But that was once enough.

So I grew a little taller to swear
That I would never speak such a thing
Swallow my heart and speak only smiles,
Hold my tongue until I had
Digested love into adoration,
Carved my heart around them into
A friend, a sibling, a person I would die for.

But then again, I like dying.

How many times have I betrayed you, little one?
You asked me to be beautiful,
but all I ever managed was to be kind.
Is this enough, darling? Can you forgive me?

Now I'm stuck somewhere between in love and
Unlovable
Jaw clenched as I clutch you in my arms,
Body shaking, teeth chattering,
With a smile, "from the cold," I promise
I am scared.
I have always run from the sacred,
I am so scared.

I will love you as I love you
Until this is over.

A promise as fragile as the mountains;
By the time it breaks, we will be long gone,
Ground to a desert our forgotten descendants will tread upon
As we rest as the warrior lovers,
Ashes wrapped in each other's arms.

Or not.

I will love you as I love you,

Today, that is on your lips.
I cannot promise who I will be tomorrow,
So come, beloved, let us dance.
And make this enough for tonight.

Greta "Shredda" Nelson Bechtold
Gaze of Italy



Colin McCallum

Creases

How did I let myself
rot dog-eared on your shelf

you thought you could mark my pages
but only I write my chapters

and you didn't know
power lies between the folds

I judged this book
by its tattered cover

pages flying through the mirror
ink spilled on fresh pulp

In humid nights
my spine still creaks
as its binding forgets

how to keep the words together

Abigail Thomas

Richards Lake Road

Fox in the middle of the road/ slam on the brakes/mesmerized by
its stare/ knuckles white on steering wheel/ not really supposed to
brake for wildlife/ but it all happens so fast/ head already slam-
ming back against seat/ blood pounding/ entire body/ pulsing
harmony to panting/ doesn't run away/ for a moment we both
stare/ almost dead/ almost killer/ who breaks eye contact first/
Too ashamed or/ too shaken/ scampers away/ do not watch/ do
not drive off/ until there are other headlights in the distance.

Kysh Lindell

From the Passenger Side

Owatonna, MN - 858 mi

There wasn't much to do but watch the power lines. On the longest stretches without cows or windmills, I made up stories about the lines—how they were in love with each other and kissed every time they crossed. Line One, that's the top one, she was always taut and wouldn't move toward the others even if she liked them. When we really got moving, Line Two jumped and dipped every second and kissed whoever, but it was more like barreling through them. I always knew Line Three and Four were together—you could tell because the gap between them was the smallest from the start—but they glided up and down so slow I got tense waiting for them to meet. Sometimes Line Two touched them before they got to one another, but in the end their embrace was the longest. I never told my family about the stories because I didn't want them suspecting I thought love was like that. I just watched the play of the space.

Des Moines, IA - 677 mi

Josh said daddy long legs aren't spiders because they don't have venom. He said you don't have to be scared because they can't bite through your skin. I said I hate their legs. I don't like the legs. He said it's okay, he won't hurt you. I said I don't want him to crawl on me. I said with his legs! He said okay, if you see him again tell me and I'll kill him. I said okay, and I checked the dark spot under the seat in front of me and I checked the edge of the window, and I checked the hole in the upholstery and I checked the dark spot and I checked the window, and I checked the upholstery, and I checked the dark spot, and I checked the window, and I checked the upholstery, and I checked. He said I got him, I got him, his legs are tickling my hand and he laughed. I said really? He said do you wanna check? I said no kill him hurry. He said yeah okay, and he rolled down the window

and he opened his fist. He said death to the evil. I laughed. He said 8 less legs in the car now. I laughed. I saw the real daddy long leg in the dark spot two hours later.

Hudson, WI - 937 mi

Mom gave us \$10 each to craft the best snack mix in the world.

My pitch:

Cheez-its, for salt and tang.

Frosted Flakes, for sweetness and gentle crunch.

Trolli Sour Brite Eggs, for chewiness and sour.

Nesquik Strawberry Milk, because they don't have strawberry at school anymore.

Bottled water, for balance.

Josh's pitch:

Pizza flavored Combos, also for salt and tang.

Gardetto's, for crunch and spice.

Butterfinger, for sweetness and cream.

Minute Maid Apple Juice, for health.

Hostess Donettes powdered mini donuts, because we can save some for breakfast tomorrow.

Dad's pitch:

Jumbo Slim Jim, for umami.

Jack Link's Beef Jerky, for meatiness.

Monster Energy, for monster energy.

Bottled water, for Mom.

She left Kwik Trip \$30 poorer, plus gas.

Lone Tree, CO - 25 mi

Dad taught me that the awful *wub wub wub* sound comes from the air outside the car hitting the air inside the cab at high speeds. It's called buffeting and all you have to do is open a second window. He likes the wind more than the AC in the summer, so I decided I do too.

Denver, CO - 8 mi

The brown fast food napkins in the glovebox are for bloody noses, leaky noses, bug guts, dead gum, ketchup globs, drive-thru donuts, stray mascara, soccer sweat, puppy feet, emergency pee, crocodile tears, ice packs, drool, rain, puke, grease, salty fingers, funerals, periods, ice cream cones, paper cuts, mouse bones, heartbreaks, snowflakes, skinned knees, saline, grass stains.

Lakewood, CO - 1 mi

Dad's a talker at any hour, even 7:03 in the morning. I let him tell me about his latest D&D venture for the four minutes it takes to exit the driveway, snake through the neighborhood, and pull into the drop-off lane. I tell him, "Thanks, I love you, I'll see you soon," as I wave and shut the door. Maybe he keeps talking to the car. He was only quiet one time, after he messed up big. I gripped my brown fast food napkin for three minutes and did not cry. "Do you want to talk about it?" I tell him, "No, but don't do that again," thinking of how I gathered up all the car keys and hid them in my nightstand. I tell him, "Thanks, I love you, I'll see you soon." We take a four minute ride together every day.

Santiponce, Andalucía, ES - 5,041 mi

When two people drive together, it works best when they're dedicated to their roles. I, Precious Cargo, curate playlists, pull up maps, retrieve snacks, nap, and point out deer. She, Fearless Captain, gets us there. When she tore up her knee, we took a bus trip around Spain. I was accustomed to long hours of sitting still, but her bandaged leg looked restless stretched straight out in the aisle. I tried to show her that being a passenger is not so passive.

"Holy shit, oh my god! Look over there!"

"What? What?"

"Olive trees." All we'd seen for hours were rows and rows of olive trees, squatting close to the Andalusian soil in protest of the dry sun. She scowled, smiled, held my hand. I don't remember looking at the power lines there, but I remember moving the armrest between us so she could tip over onto my shoulder.

Fort Collins, CO - 70 mi

I live 70 miles from my parent's house now, but they don't mind the trip. Mom is always the one to pick me up because, I suspect, she hates for the second half of a drive to be silent. She gets here at lunchtime, or three, or four, and we swing through a drive-thru before we get onto the highway. Extra napkins. She accelerates and talks, and I nod and hum. Wordlessly, I lean over the console to feed her hot fries. Otherwise, she wouldn't eat until we got home—both hands on the wheel, both eyes on the road.

Kysh Lindell

Official Conduct Directive

SECTION 1: WISHING POLICIES

- A. Always blow out your birthday candles.
 - a. Close your eyes and wish for pink high-top Converse with blue laces, a miniature trampoline, a pet fish, an iTunes gift card, the next book in the series, dinner at a buffet, and a better year.
 - b. Do not tell anyone what you wished for or it will not come true.

- B. Always make a wish at 11:11.
 - a. Keep your eyes shut for the duration of your wishing. Use the full minute to say all you can, but do not be greedy. Prioritize prospective romantic relationships and safety from school shooters.
 - b. Prepare, memorize, and repeat a script if necessary.
 - c. Only tell your friends the desires you are willing to let go of.

- C. Always blow away fallen eyelashes.
 - a. Only one (1) wish is permitted per eyelash.
 - b. Ensure that you do not see where the wish-carrying eyelash lands, or your wish will be revoked. Maintain the illusion that it has traveled beyond this realm, beyond your control.
 - c. If you fail to blow the eyelash off your finger within three (3) attempts, the inverse of your wish will occur. A blood clot will travel to your brain. Your father will be killed by a semi truck. The cancer will metastasize. A troubled young man will pick today, your school, your best friend's classroom, your best friend's body.
 - d. Avoid telling anyone about this practice and its hazards as they may become concerned about your ability to protect their life.

SECTION 2: MISFORTUNE PREVENTION PROTOCOL

- A. Always* pick up pennies.
- a. Hold the coin in your right hand for the remainder of the day. Prioritize its protection above all other tasks. Do not allow it to be seen or to grow cold. If at any point you lose contact with the coin's surface, you are liable for all resulting destruction—private, company-wide, and national.
 - b. Deposit it in your coin bucket upon arrival home, but always remember which it is. Do not, under any circumstances, spend this cent. It is no longer useful.
 - c. Never disclose the existence of the coin as to retain maximum luck and avoid suspicion.

* Rule only applies if the penny is heads-up upon sight. If the penny is tails-up, you are advised to avoid the area within a fifty (50) foot radius indefinitely. Failure to comply with this protocol will result in termination without mercy.

- B. Always avoid 13.
- a. Do not go to work on the 13th. Re_ain inside, in your bed for the duration of the day. Stay perfectly still. Do not look. Do not speak. Skip the 13th breath, and every _ultiple thereof. At _idnight, thank so_eone higher up that there are only twelve (12) _onths.
 - b. Change the volu_e.
 - c. Tear the page.
 - d. Give up a year of your life.
 - e. Shun the cursed offspring.
 - f. Spend a dollar _ore.
 - g. Avoid sports.
 - h. _iscount your teeth.
 - i. Pare down lists.
 - j. Eschew ti_e.
 - k. Eli_inate the 13th letter.
 - l. Keep few friends.

SECTION 3: E_PLOYEE VIGILANCE

- A. Always knock on wood.
 - a. When you speak factually, lie, opine, or think: knock on wood.
 - b. The proper knocking procedure consists of three (3) knocks in quick succession, three (3) sequences in a row. Repeat this process until you feel confident that your words cannot bind you to Platonic ideals. For certainty, knock until neither you nor anyone around you can re_e_ber what you have said.
 - c. Inhale before the first knock, but _ake certain that you do not exhale until after the final knock. Co_plete what you have started.
 - d. If there is no wood available, and it _ust be real wood, your bones will suffice. Knock on your sternu_, fe_ur, _andible, or hu_erus. Knock as close to the _arrow as you can to ensure success. Flesh, as _any e_mployees have noted, is largely a hindrance.
 - e. The co_pany is not liable for any injuries incurred as these actions are perfor_ed at your own will.

Andrea Day

I Wonder if Love Stays in Places, and Other Thoughts

Annabelle glanced out of the camper window. She loved being in the mountains. Her father had told her that they had the kind of charm that was appealing no matter the season, but she had to admit that she preferred the winter. There was something about the silence when the snow touched the ground in the morning, or when the ground glittered underneath the moonlight. Sometimes she just liked to look at it. Sometimes she liked to scream in the silence and hear her voice echo, throwing snowballs at trees that shook with her ferocity. She was a girl of the trees and they loved her for it.

The camper door flew open, a cool chill following after the steps of her father.

“The guy at the office said there’s a storm on the way.”

Annabelle looked outside. There were enough clouds in the sky for it to be believable. The air up here could change in an instant. She had learned to be wary of the sky and its moods. But there was something about the way her father had said it that made her uneasy. She couldn’t quite place it. She wasn’t old enough yet to pick out the way people’s voices rose and fell when they lied but she was old enough to feel when something was wrong.

“Snowstorm?” she asked, grasping for something.

“Apparently.” Her father’s voice evened out. Maybe she had imagined it. “I was thinking about leaving but it seems like we’ll have to wait it out.”

“Wait it out!” Annabelle smiled at her father. The tired lines on his face eased as he smiled back.

“If we can’t go outside we can just make s’mores in the microwave, okay?” Annabelle continued.

Her father shook his head. “I’m sorry weren’t you the one who told me making s’mores in the microwave was,” he paused and made air quotes with his fingers, “a punishable offense?”

Annabelle had indeed said that, but it was before they’d gotten up here. The firepit was still buried under ice and snow. She had tried to dig it out but the ice would not break no matter how much she tried.

“It’s a forgivable offense since we’re staying,” she clumsily claimed. Bigger words were still hard for her to manage. She had told her mother that she would start speaking as big and cool as her when she turned seven, so she was doing everything she could to manage it.

Her mother had not come with them. Annabelle’s mother hated the mountains. Her brother didn’t mind them, but as he got older he stopped being as nice. He used to play with her outside. He would even help her with her pronunciation. But now, Annabelle couldn’t remember the last conversation they’d had. He’d sit in the room with her sometimes when her parents were being loud. She didn’t know why. They were ten years apart in age. It was hard to understand what her brother was thinking so she tried not to dwell on it for too long. Her brother had always been like her mom. Annabelle had always been like her dad. It was a division that was easily noticed but never spoken.

“Okay,” her father sighed. “Go outside and put your snow boots on and we’ll go for a little walk, okay?”

“Okay!” Annabelle jumped up and ran out the door in what felt like a second.

Mark watched as his daughter ran out the door. He was shaking. It was a miracle that Annabelle hadn’t noticed. She had a knack for realizing when things were off. This was going to be harder than he expected.

Mark slipped his phone out of his pocket. It only worked in spurts in the mountains. He wished it didn’t work at all. The unanswered call still played in his voicemail box.

Hey Mark, it’s Luciana . . . I need you to know that Ashton and I are leaving. We just can’t . . . we can’t . . . I can’t do this anymore. Ashton says goodbye to Annabelle. You’ll have to find somewhere else to go . . . good luck . . . I guess . . . goodbye . . .

He couldn’t erase it. It was proof he had nowhere else to go. This had been his and Luciana’s place. Or maybe it had just been his. He didn’t know anymore. There were moments in Mark’s life that he understood but this was not one of them. He loved his family endlessly. Apparently it had not been enough.

“DAD!” Annabelle screamed from outside. “HURRY UP!”

Mark ran a shaking hand through his hair and set his phone carefully on the table.

“I’m coming,” he whispered. Annabelle couldn’t hear him.

Luciana walked in front of him. Her dress caught the light that weaved in and out of the trees and scattered across the grass on the

floor. *It was now or never*, Mark thought to himself. Luciana preferred beauty. She didn't love the mountains but she loved pretty things, and Mark couldn't think of anything prettier than this.

"Luciana."

She turned around. A branch snapped underneath her feet.

Mark jumped. A broken branch buried underneath his feet.

The memory settled onto his skin and buried in his bones until they ached with every movement. He could hear the creaking with every step. He was heavy.

"Dad?" Annabelle wasn't looking at him. She was a fair distance ahead of him but still in view. "Do you think that love stays in places? Like you and momma's love stays here?"

Mark wondered if love was the feeling that was haunting him. It was possible that he had simply forgotten what it felt like.

"I think it could, if the feeling is strong enough," Mark choked out.

"Of course it's strong enough!" Annabelle looked up at the trees. "What do you think, trees?"

The wind caressed Mark's face with cold fingers.

Luciana's hands had been ice cold. Even in the summer, she would bring a light jacket with her. She had forgotten it for the hike and her body was paying the price.

"Yes, my love?"

"I want to spend the rest of my life with you."

A moment of silence.

"Are you sure?"

Mark didn't answer.

Annabelle threw a rock at a tree. Snow scattered onto the ground and into her clothes. "Dad? Are you sure?"

Mark needed to sit down. The tears on his face froze before they could travel down his cheeks. He was a masterpiece of grief.

"Daddy?" Annabelle had finally turned around. "What's wrong?"

Annabelle was quiet for her age. She paid attention to the world in different ways. The only time she truly came alive was when she roamed these trails. She was made for this place. Mark thought he was too. The two of them were the same in so many ways: in the things they loved, in the things they left behind, in the people that had left them. Mark wished that Luciana had at least taken Annabelle with her. It was easier to explain why you had to leave someone than it was to explain why someone had left you. She was only seven. Mark couldn't help but focus on it. She was so young, and she was always paying attention.

“Something’s wrong.”

In a moment of insanity, Mark laughed. It bubbled out from his stomach and made him choke. The frozen tears on his face gave the impression that he was a clown that had just told a joke, but he was left gasping on the punchline.

“Dad. What is it? What’s so funny? Or . . . sad? You’re confusing me.”

Mark shook his head.

When he looked up, Ashton stood in front of him.

“You’re done confusing me, Dad. You and Mom have your shit! Stop dragging me into it.” Ashton was shaking. Mark had never seen him shake like that.

“You... you can never solve your own problems and then Mom turns on me . . . I’m the kid! I’m not supposed to be... taking care of you!”

“Your mother . . . Ashton, I’m sorry. I can’t control—”

“You can’t control her? No shit. Nobody can. But she’s not the only problem, Dad.”

Ashton went silent. He looked up at the ceiling. “I can’t even tell if you love me anymore.”

“Ashton. Of course I do.”

“Really? How come you stopped taking me to the mountains?” Ashton never looked him in the eye.

“What . . . ? Did you—you never asked.”

“. . . Neither did you.”

“Dad?” Annabelle stood in front of him. She tried giving him a hug.

Mark stared down at his hands. They were red from the cold. He could hear the river to his left as water gurgled underneath the ice. Annabelle ventured off again.

“What’s that noise, Daddy? I don’t see any water.”

Mark stared at her for a moment. She was beautiful, his little girl. He walked towards her and bent down to her level. He put a finger to his lips. Annabelle copied the action and smiled. Twin flames.

Mark whispered, “There’s water underneath the ice.”

He knew this river. It wasn’t deep. He stepped out onto the ice and it cracked under his feet.

“Come here, Annabelle.”

“Won’t it break?”

“Yes.”

Annabelle quirked her lips but stepped slowly onto the ice. Cracks followed her every step until she met her father in the middle. Water

bubbled up and snuck into their shoes. Slowly, their feet hit the bottom of the river. The water only reached a portion of Mark's shoes. Annabelle was ankle deep.

"This is cold," she whispered, her teeth chattering.

Mark bent down and moved the cracked ice away. Small fish peered at his hands in the water before swimming away.

Annabelle was easily distracted. "They're still alive!" She tore off her gloves and stuffed them in her pockets. Clumsily, she tried to grab at the fish. Her hands fumbled and grew slow in the water.

Mark smiled softly at her. He stayed knelt down next to her even as she ripped off her jacket and checked her pockets for crumbs. She splayed them in the water and watched as the fish came curiously to the surface. Her eyes glittered with the life in front of her. Eventually, Mark put his hands over her own. "I think that's enough, Annabelle."

"But I want to keep playing!" Her words slurred.

Mark closed his eyes. He knew. He knew. He picked her up and set her in a clear patch of snow. Mark couldn't tell what time of day it was. It was darker now than it had been but the snow clouds made it impossible to see where the sun might have been.

Annabelle was shaking. Her jacket had been thrown to the side along with her gloves. Mark sat down next to her. He was shaking too.

"I'm tired, Daddy." Her eyes struggled to stay open.

"Do you want to head back?"

His jacket had gotten wet from the river. He took it off slowly and set it next to Annabelle's.

"No," she said against chattering teeth.

"Neither do I."

Mark laid down in the snow. Annabelle rested her head on his shoulder. Carefully, Mark wrapped his arms around Annabelle. They looked up towards the sky. He had laid here once before, before Annabelle had ever been born.

Luciana rested her head on one shoulder while Ashton rested his head on the other. The ground was too cold at night but it was the best place to see the stars. Ashton had lobbied for hours for them to go out and watch the shooting stars. Luciana hadn't wanted to come at all. Her belly bulged with their soon-to-be daughter. Luciana had told Mark several times that she was afraid their daughter would be too much like him. She didn't want to come to the mountains in case the baby decided they wanted to come back. It was like drugs, she said, and if the baby had a taste they'd want more after they were born.

Mark thought she was being incredibly overdramatic. The compromise was one last trip, forever altering this forest from their place to Mark's own.

Ashton pointed upwards. The stars were falling. He playfully grabbed at the sky, as if he were a god that could touch stardust. Mark hoped he would be. His son had a spark that would outlast them all. Luciana swiped at her son's hands to get him to stop. Ashton looked up at Mark with something deep in his eyes that Mark couldn't quite make out.

"Did you get any stars, Ashton?" Mark whispered. He sounded like the wind.

"One," Ashton whispered back.

Mark looked around, as if he were about to reveal a deep secret. "Can I see it?"

Ashton balled his hands into fists and rested them on his chest. "Not yet."

Luciana rolled her eyes and sat up. Mark's shoulder grew cold immediately.

"When?" he asked, ignoring the feeling.

Ashton sat with the question for a while. He stared up at the sky again. For a moment, Mark thought that Ashton had forgotten about it altogether.

Instead Ashton whispered, "Whenever my sister is here. We can only see it all together."

Mark looked at Luciana's back. She didn't dare face him.

"Of course."

Annabelle's eyes were closed. No matter how much Mark wished it, the stars were not there. His other shoulder was still cold with their absence. He would never see the star that Ashton had captured.

Mark whispered to Annabelle, "If I said we could stay here forever, Annabelle, would you want to?"

"I don't know." Annabelle's voice sounded far away. "Could I go to school?"

"We could figure it out." Mark's own words were slightly slurred.

"Would Mama be okay with it? Or Ashton?"

"I don't think they'd care," he said, more to himself.

Mark could feel Annabelle smile into his side. Her voice hung heavy with exhaustion. "Then yes... forever."

Mark felt the cold in his bones. Something in him had gone quiet. He didn't hurt so much anymore.

"Forever," he whispered to the sky.

Annabelle didn't respond.

Greta "Shredda" Nelson Bechtold
Inked Flowers



Caitlin Wilde

Reverie Garden

Childhood kingdoms of make-believe
With lilacs and peonies that I weaved
So diligently into crowns,
And sunlight tinting my princess gown
With Queen Anne's lace upon each sleeve.

It was reality called naive.
Pristine realms my mind did conceive;
Like a pearly river flowing down,
Imagination ran free.

Made of stardust, the garden breathed
A platinum walkway I could not leave—
It looped through forests and led me down
To Cherry Tree Palace, a reddish brown.
Only something the young perceived,
Imagination ran free.

Imani Vontoure

Heaven's Watchful Eye

Em never meant to catch the barn on fire, and as his captain said, “He was damn lucky no one got hurt.” He didn’t know what came over him at that moment. First he was alone, and then he was surrounded by other teenagers who begged him to join them on an adventure. How could he say no? *I should have*, he thought. Yet, Em knew the only reason he went along with their plan was because he wanted to finally feel like a true teenager. He rarely got that opportunity now that he was an apprentice.

Not that Em minded much. Being the apprentice to the Guides’ captain was fun. He was able to travel the length of the kingdom, border to border. When he and his captain would stop at a border station, Em loved helping people cross over. Guides helped people travel from kingdom to kingdom and showed them the best and safest routes to their destinations. They knew the land the best and helped people find their home within it.

The apprentice stared out across the clearing. His eyes followed the swaying grass field up to the steep slopes of the mountain. Atop the sharp peaks, snow began to fall, which made the air around Em a bit colder. It would be a while before the storm front would make its way down to him. For now, the small fire Em sat by provided enough warmth, and hopefully the tent behind him would protect him from the night. Surrounding the little clearing was the dark forest the kingdom was famous for. More trees than there were creatures, and it covered more than two thirds of the kingdom. Em was used to the shadows that danced within it and didn’t even bother to pay attention to it.

As beautiful as his kingdom was, Em was bored. He was so used to always moving, riding his horse by his captain’s side. He hated being stuck here, but his captain knew that when she picked his punishment. *Perfect timing*, she called it. Here Em had to stay for the next three days, all because he accidentally started a fire.

Em was placed on Final Watch. When a citizen of the kingdom, Duzati, committed high treason, they were sent to the mountains for

a month as a test of survival. If they lived and found their way out of the mountains, they could rejoin society. Three extra days were added to the end of the Trial, called Final Watch. These three days were the last chance the people on Trial had to come home; after that they were announced lost. Guides were stationed at various points along the mountain range to welcome the people home. Even though it was important, Em hated this job all the same.

He bared his teeth at the sky, blaming Karma for everything that led him here. Em wished the Goddess would come down from her home in the sky, so he could finally tell her off for all that she has done. She had so much influence over people, yet she kept hidden from the backlash. *Coward.*

Em whipped around at the sound of a twig snapping within the woods. He was only given basic combat training as an apprentice, and he was not confident in his abilities. He listened instead, straining to hear clues about who or what was approaching him. Whatever it was was too small to be a dragon, and Em could detect a bipedal gait.

“Captain Askiro?” Em called into the trees. He stood now, knees bent and fists raised to defend. The footsteps he heard did not belong to his captain.

From the trees a hand emerged with wrapped fingers stretched out towards Em. Most of the figure’s forearm was also wrapped up, and their upper arm was covered with a dark blue sleeve. Across their chest the person wore black leather armor, a Guide emblem pinned to the right side of their chest. Across their neck swung a religious symbol to Karma, a minimalistic scale.

Good Goddess, that hair is awful. Em resisted the urge to blanch as the full figure came into the light. Their hair was chopped into a misshapen mullet that was dyed various bright colors with no concern or care. They gazed down at Em with wide brown eyes, a smile never leaving their face. As they grew closer, Em noticed bits of dark brown skin peeking out in between the wrappings of their hand. It is the same hand they offered Em to shake.

“Hey, hey, hey! I’m Riyon, nice to meet you!” Their voice was expressive, each syllable pronounced fully and loudly. “It’s so cool that we get to do Final Watch. I can’t even remember the last time a Trial happened in Duzati. Well, I guess I haven’t lived here very long. I just finished training. This is my first real assignment as an official Guide. Speaking of, you’re kinda young to be a Guide. How seasoned are you?”

Em stared at Riyon while they waved their arms around and turned every which way. They were very expressive. When they finished their long rant, Em remained still. Then he raised his hands over his face, running his palms down and tracing the bumps of teenage acne. He never realized how young he must look to others, after only really hanging around his captain.

“I’m Em,” he said. “I’m only fifteen but I’m Captain Askiro’s apprentice so that may explain it.” Riyon nodded and placed their hand under their chin.

“Hmm, you’re probably really good at this then. I bet you could tell where a dragon was born based on its roar. Well, it was great meeting you! I’m glad we get to work together.”

Em nodded back, a small smile on his lips. Both made their way back to the fire; Em watched as Riyon set up their tent and took note of the necklace that swung from their neck. Karma’s symbol was simple and could be found all over the planet. Yet every time Em saw it his heart constricted.

“Hey Em,” Riyon said as they continued to set up the tent. “Do you know what the princes did?” Em’s eyes turned downward, tears forming within them. This Final Watch in particular had the whole kingdom on edge, as the only heirs to the throne were on it.

“Heir Lorien and Second Heir Idris committed high treason while their parents were in another kingdom,” Em began, his voice shaking. “They traveled off world without proper training and in secret, and two high ranking knights lost their lives. No one really knew what they did for a long while, but eventually word spread. They never meant to cause any harm. They were just trying to help the kingdom out.” Em worried greatly over their safety. The princes were strong, but the mountains were unforgiving and have killed many before them. He tried not to think about what the kingdom would go through if they never came home.

Em sometimes trained at the castle and got to interact with both of the royals. They were always so kind to him, offering him advice and letting him train with them. He looked forward to seeing them whenever he was at the castle. He couldn’t imagine returning and them not being there.

Riyon had stopped moving as Em shakily told his story. They gripped their necklace within a shaking hand.

“I pray that Karma is watching over the princes.” Em stiffened at their words. *No, I hope Karma leaves them alone. They do not need her influence, they will survive on their own.* Everytime Karma inter-

vened something went wrong, and the princes didn't deserve that. It was clear Riyon was too naive to realise this and had never experienced Karma's true judgement.

"I'll take the first watch tonight," Em bit out and left no room for argument.

Em exited his tent only to place his open palm into the snow that had fallen the night before. He yelped, falling back into his tent while he listened to Riyon's laughter. When he re-emerged, he saw Riyon sitting at the fire with breakfast placed delicately on their lap.

"Good morning. I see the snow gave you a fright. Eat quickly so we can do our rounds," Riyon said, a soft chuckle escaping their lips.

"Morning," Em grumbled.

He took his place across Riyon and began to eat his own meal. It was silent for a moment, then Riyon began to pray. Their words of praise and thanks to Karma danced around the campfire. Em couldn't help but listen, even though all he wanted to do was block it out. Riyon continued to show gratitude to the food the goddess brought them, completely unaware of Em's internal battle. *That food never came from her, it came from hardworking people. You should be thanking them, not her. She doesn't deserve it.* Em ate his breakfast with a bit more ferocity as time ticked on.

"Have you ever seen Karma?" Riyon asked. Em stopped chewing, glancing at Riyon from the corner of his eye. The Guide sat hunched over their breakfast, wrapped thumbs twiddling in their lap.

"No," Em said, but he didn't need to see her himself to know what she looked like. She visited often enough for people to get portraits of her. "Prince Idris told me how she showed up when he was born. It was the last time she was seen in Duzati. For a Goddess that has her hand in everything that happens on the planet, she's not that involved with the people she controls."

"That's not true," Riyon said, shifting to face Em. "Karma does not control us. We still choose the path we walk down."

"Maybe, but Karma laid the stone, she chose the direction it goes, she created each fork within it, and decided how they each end. What real choice do we have then?" Riyon seemed to have nothing to say.

"May I ask," Em began, "how long have you been devout to Karma? I noticed your necklace." Riyon grabbed it within their hand, twirling the symbol around.

"All twenty years of my life, she is a very important figure to me,"

they said. Em hummed, solidifying in his mind that Riyon must have never known the darker sides to Karma's power. Most people hold her to a certain degree of respect, because no matter your opinion on her, she will always be a Goddess. People like Em were not as popular, but then again their opinions did not matter to Karma either.

"It is strange you are still so devout," Em said. "Not many people wear her symbol as you do. Not many people care as much these days." Riyon stood suddenly, their dark brows furrowed over their usually bright brown eyes.

"I care, which is all that should matter," they said, lips pulled back into a snarl and eyes wet with unshed tears. "My views still deserve respect even if I'm not the majority. I'll do the east half of our round walk." They turned on their heel and began walking east along the mountain range. Em opened his mouth to explain, but Riyon was already gone. He had no choice but to take the west half all alone.

The snow crunched under his feet, making it the only noise around him. Em meant no harm by what he said, it was just an observation. Yet he could also see how it may have been disrespectful. He was never around people who were so devout to Karma. He was used to open speech about her, good and bad. Mostly bad. He wasn't sure how to navigate someone who thought the world of her.

Karma's hands in Em's life were not kind. It left a lot of resentful feelings that built in his chest. He couldn't understand those that only saw the good in the Goddess. She was not good, and probably never would be.

Still, Riyon didn't deserve Em questioning everything about them. Riyon's relationship with Karma was none of his business.

Em made his way back to the camp, planning on apologizing for everything. When he made it to the clearing, he saw Riyon already sitting at the fire. They were turned away from Em, furiously wiping away at their eyes. Em tried to approach them slowly, focusing on making his voice soft.

Both of their heads whipped up as they heard hooves approaching them. Riyon rose up, assuming a fighting stance. Em strained his ears towards the sound, hearing a familiar whinny. He raced to the edge of the clearing just as Captain Askiro made her appearance. Her skin was as dark as the sky on a new moon night, giving her an ethereal appearance. Her braids were pulled back, which allowed Em to take in her round face and kind brown eyes. Her presence was the best thing about Em's job.

"Askiro!" Em said and ran forward for an embrace.

“Hello Em, hello Riyon,” she said and bowed to both of the young Guides. Em skidded to a stop, staring at Askiro with tears brimming in his eyes. Beside him Riyon returned the bow.

“I have come by to tell you that the princes have still not returned. Tomorrow night I’ll be back to relieve you of Final Watch. Until then, how are things here?” She stared at Riyon, who Em noticed still had a bit of moisture under their eyes.

“The cold has been tough ma’am, but it is nothing we can’t handle,” Riyon said. “Please excuse me.” Both captain and apprentice watched as Riyon made their way back to the fire, their shoulders slumped forward. Em turned back to Askiro, his hands placed in a begging clasp.

“Askiro, please. I’m really sorry about the barn. I really miss you, and I miss traveling with you. Please let me come with you.” Askiro placed a gentle hand on Em’s shoulder, her eyes softer than they were earlier.

“It is only one more night, Em. You must face the consequences for your actions, just as the other trainees are. It would be unfair to them if you were let go. Try not to worry too much. Karma is watching over you. I’ll see you tomorrow night.” She gave him a small squeeze before turning back to her horse and riding off.

Em’s body was stiff with silent anger. There goes Karma again, forcing him down this path. He made his way back to camp, slamming himself down to sit.

“I don’t think Karma is a good Goddess,” he blurted out. Riyon huffed.

“You seem to forget how she is the balancing of the scales, she is the weight of a single feather, the sun’s rays after clouds, and the feeling of victory. It is because of her that we have what is good after what is bad.”

“And you seem to forget the rest of the hymn,” Em retorted. “Karma is also the storm before the sun, she is the sickness before recovery, the weight of all the planets, and the consequences to our actions. Would someone who is truly good do all of that?” Riyon grew quiet again, how different they are now than when Em first met them.

“Karma is neither good nor bad, maybe she just is.”

Em let Riyon take the lead in talking the next morning. They seemed to forget the arguments from the day before. Em still felt terrible.

Winter had fully settled in her place along the mountain. A thick haze of snow swirled around the two Guides as they trudged their way through the snow.

“Riyon,” Em began as he swallowed the lump in his throat, “I just wanted to apologize for what I said yesterday. It is clear that I do not support or particularly like Karma, but that should not matter. I shouldn’t be trying to anger you into hating Karma as I do. I should have respected your devotion to her.” Riyon’s face remained neutral while Em talked. “I feel like I owe you an explanation for why I feel the way I do.” Em had stopped walking at this point. He turned to face the mountains to their right and stared up at the white peaks. Riyon was looking at Em’s back, their shoulders tense. The apprentice took a heavy breath before beginning again.

“My father is not a good man, but he was a great dad. He did some bad things when I was younger, but he loved my mother and me. He took me everywhere, got me gifts, and loved me better than any father could. But the life he lived outside of my home caught up with him, and now he’s in prison. He’s been there for ten years.” Tears fell down Em’s cheeks. “He deserves it, I know that. But what I don’t understand is why my mother and I had to suffer. Why we had to uproot our lives to run away from my father’s influence. I lost my childhood because of it! Why did Karma do it? What did we do to deserve that? I can’t help but think about the life I lost because of her. The life my mother lost. How was it fair?” Em’s shoulders shook. After holding everything in for years, the dam finally broke. Riyon placed their hand on Em’s arm, giving it a small squeeze. Em almost rejected it, how were they supposed to understand all that pain?

“I’m really sorry about your dad, and what you had to go through because of it. But I don’t think Karma was trying to punish you. She was trying to change you. Yes, it may have hurt to leave your life behind, but would you say it was all for nothing? You became the person you are now because of it, yes?” Em sniffled, a pout present on his lips. He had to admit that without that uprooting he never would have found his passion in becoming a Guide. He never would have met Askiro or the princes. He would be entirely lost.

Em wasn’t ready to admit that though. His pain was still dominant. Riyon’s words would not sway him so easily. He still longed for his lost childhood. He never got to play the games other kids played. He grew up too soon.

“My mother was killed when I was seven,” Riyon said, and Em jolted from his own sorrow. “She was the kindest woman in town.

My father and I loved her, and she never caused any harm. For a while neither of us could explain why she had to die. Even now the question still enters my mind. But, at my mother's funeral I saw Karma. She was standing in the back, crying. It made no sense to me, but then I realized that my mother's death wasn't a lesson for her to learn, but for my father and I to learn." They wiped a few small tears from their eyes, their voice barely wavering. "I like to think that when we learn a lesson, Karma learns one of her own. She is a complex Goddess, and that's why I remain devout to her. She grows and changes as we do."

Em continued to stare out at the mountains, his eyes glossy with tears. The bitterness within him refused to let him see things as positively as Riyon did. How could a Goddess cry over a woman she killed?

"I'm sorry about your mom, Riyon, but I think you were too quick in forgiving her. Karma was the reason your mom died, that was the path she led your mom down." Riyon gave a defeated sigh and removed their hand from Em's arm. They stiffened for a moment. Riyon raised their finger and pointed towards something in the snowy fog.

"Do you see her?" They asked. Em followed their line of sight and saw a giant woman making her way down the mountain towards the pair. Both remained frozen as Karma stood in front of them. She was over ten feet tall, her glowing white eyes trained on them. Her dark skin and hair was peppered with vitiligo. She wore a dress made of silver that shimmered in the snow. It was exactly as the paintings described her. Besides her eyes, Em wasn't expecting her to look so human. Her aura though, that marked her as a Goddess. It took everything in Em not to collapse to the ground in a heap. Instead, both Riyon and Em stood frozen.

Karma said nothing for a long while. The only sign of her being alive was her eyes blinking slowly.

"Take them home," the Goddess said, her voice echoed in Em's chest. A shiver passed through him. Karma began to kneel in the snow, tucking her ankles under herself gracefully. Within her arms were the bodies of the princes.

Lorien's entire left arm was wrapped, scratches and scars adorned his face. He looked better than his brother. Idris had his right eye covered, dried blood caked it. Both his hands were also wrapped, as well as one of his legs. Em was unsure if they were even able to care for themselves like this. He looked up at Karma, who returned his gaze before Em looked away again. He was eternally grateful the princes were home, safe and alive. A tear almost slipped from his eye.

The Goddess placed the princes in the snow and sat back up with a stiff spine. Neither Em or Riyon really wanted to get closer to Karma, but the princes were beginning to shiver in the snow.

They abandoned their fear and rushed forward to rescue the royals. Em hiked prince Lorien up onto his back, hunched over from his weight.

Karma nodded down at the two Guides, a ghost of a smile on her lips. She then rose up to her full height and turned back to the mountain. Em's throat was tight as he watched her walk away.

"Thank you!" The words escaped his lips before he could think, but he never regretted them. Karma turned. Her eyes stared deep into Em's soul. Many emotions flooded the young apprentice's heart, but he could not deny all that Karma had done for him.

Then, Em bowed.

Kate Jussila

There's a Window Where My Desk Sits

There's a window where my desk sits.
Sometimes I imagine its purpose is
to observe below the lack of fervor in minute
bustlings.
The nameless, dull interactions.
The ones that entertain the brain
but numb the heart.

To look forward upon green still life
grants natural ease.
The white smudges of my eyes' incapacities
mold into an array of birds.
A flock . . .
a frenzy.
I wonder, if I was to go to them,
if I'd find a more passionate chattering.

I suppose in both there is a loneliness,
a half-indulged curiosity over experience.
Regardless,
I cannot fly to the birds,
I cannot fall down upon strangers.

Chaos is a calamity,
but I'd argue its absence is worse, because in it I find loneliness.

Peyton Farnum
Sun Dancers



Andrea Day

**To the Ghosts of Mexico,
tell me my legacy, I can't
quite make out the words**

i ask my mother to tell me who i am,
she does not always listen
but there are moments,
when she glances at the corner of the room,
fantasmas
that she does

*

the Conquistadors rolled into ports
ships laden with gold
a movement unfolded

the ocean is not a friend nor a foe
yet they have overcome it

*

my abuelo and i sit down in the middle of his living room
i cannot speak to him,
i do not know how to ask him for the stories of his life
though, i have heard that he likes to tell them

andrea,

he says, whispers my name and rolls the *r*
it is the only thing that holds us together

*

only in *méxico* do i wake to the cries of Ghosts
it is a long time since these streets have been alive
cobble streets once blessed with *la rosaria*
my mother is afraid of this place

*

the Conquistadors travel,
away from the ocean and onto a new land
called to this place, called to this earth
by a need for legacy

*

my abuela speaks to me in broken languages
we will forget how to speak to one another in a moment
but for now
she brings me outside,
to the bush where my mother met the devil,

pulls an apple off the fruit tree next to it,
i wonder if his evils still remain

the Ghosts shake their heads and pull us back in
las brujas melting the fruit in my hands

my father is wary of this place

*

the Conquistadors bury their gold in the ground
a foundation for further generations,
they whisper into the ground
no olvides tus tradiciones

*

my ancestors do not remember me
estoy sola en este lugar
estoy fui hecho aquí

still, the ground shakes when i enter
bury my hand in the clay underneath
a home with no walls,
a memory not meant for me
no olvides tus tradiciones,
embedded in my skin
unwanted

and yet;

Kathryn Lopez

The Possession of a Stranger

I saw a girl who looked like you today and I remembered.

I remembered sitting in my car with you. The darkness of night seeping in through the windows, but still unable to take away the glint of a stray streetlight in your eyes. Your eyes were green, brown, beautiful. I used to love looking at them.

We had stopped in a nearby empty park to open my sunroof and stare at the stars. The air is warm and heavy, and crickets sing somewhere in the grass nearby. You grab my hand and squeeze gently as you crane your neck up. You turn and put your head against the window and your feet in my lap.

I turn up the music (I stalked you on Spotify to find your favorite playlist) and you wiggle your toes and tap your fingers to the beat. The car vibrates around us. The air shivers.

Everything is soft and gentle. Life feels like whipped cream melting in my mouth. Like rinsing soap off my skin in the shower. Like dipping my cold hands into warm water. We are over halfway through high-school and we feel free and untouchable. And I think this is the embodiment of teenage joy, this is *young love*, because I do. I love you.

Then I remember another night, a year later, after I've realized that something was off. I don't remember when your behavior towards me—towards us—changed. Perhaps it was like a gentle descent into madness; the same old image of turning up the heat slowly and watching the frog boil to death, unaware of any danger. Or perhaps it was sudden. Perhaps you simply went to bed and woke up the next day a different person. Regardless, something was wrong.

You are angry with me now, and you curl yourself into the passenger door, as though you are trying to put as much space between us as possible. The center console feels like a wall too high for me to reach across. You do not grab my hand. I do not grab yours.

The distance yawns.

It is nighttime again, but this time we are in a neighborhood, parked near your house, and the old, angry, yellowed streetlights

pound on the window. They pierce the glass like police flashlights, bang on the roof of the car and demand we step outside. They make my head hurt and somehow make you look so consumed by shadow that your eyes are black.

I stare at your face, trying to find beauty, joy, love, until you turn and snap at me for looking too long.

Our lives are full of contradictions these days. You want me to talk to you, but also to give you space. You want me to touch you, but also to stay away. You want me to know what you want without you ever saying it. No matter what I do, though, it upsets you. I have just begun to understand that you probably didn't know what you wanted, either.

This makes you frustrated. Frustrated with life, with the world, with your parents, with yourself. But I am the one that triggered these frustrations, and I am the only one here, so you are mostly frustrated with me.

I break the barrier, shatter the glass. My hand travels the endless void between us and lands gently on your arm. You feel fragile.

"I'm sorry," I say, although I don't remember what for. For whatever upset you that day, for whatever made you give me the silent treatment for thirty-six hours straight. For whatever made you blame me for the fact you couldn't change your life and neither could I.

Because that's what it came down to. You denied it, but of course you would. Who would want to admit to this? You wanted me to fix everything. You wanted me to be a friend and a lover and a therapist. Someone who had all the answers that you couldn't find for yourself.

I squeeze your arm gently with one hand and ball the other into an anxious fist as I hide it in the space between the seat and the door. It's where all forgotten things end up, and I want to squeeze into the dark corners of this car just to hide from your anger.

But it is my job to reach out, just like it has always been your job to pull away. This is how we love each other, right? We dance in and out of each other's grasp. It is not as beautiful or romantic as I once thought.

"I care about you. I love you. I *promise*." It sounds insincere because these words feel foreign in my mouth. I've never had to prove my love to someone before, I've never had to promise that I wasn't lying. But you ask me to at least twice a day. I don't think you ever believe me.

Eventually, I won't believe me either.

"I guess," you say, and the conversation suffocates in the stale air between us.

The girl had brown, wavy hair. Just like yours. I wanted to reach out and touch it.

I didn't tell my friends why we broke up until a year later. I never knew how to tell my story without also telling yours, and there were so many things I swore I would keep secret. What right do I have to put your darkest days on full display?

Instead, I told them a shaved version of the truth: "She didn't make me happy anymore."

But our lives were one, we were intertwined. Your story is just as much yours as mine. I need to finally speak up, speak out. My silence has never saved me from the memory of you.

Tonight, I am with friends, and we are being college girls, which means that we are supposed to be *free, free, free*. Tonight, I am in a foreign living room and I am brave and sad and bold. The alcohol is bitter on my tongue, and I finally understand how being drunk makes you say things you shouldn't. With every shot I take, consequences matter less and less.

"So why did you guys break up?" My friend Mary is perched on the couch of her living room, swaying. A drunken predator. She grabs the edges of the cushions for support. Digs her fingers in. The tally marks on her arm, a record of how many shots she's had, tell me she won't be able to get out of bed tomorrow. "I thought you guys were happy!"

I understand how they might be confused. I left you three days after our two-year anniversary. An asshole move, I admit, but I had been ready to leave you for months.

I stare at my drink, swirl cranberry juice and vodka. I giggle to try and maintain my light mood, because you have taken too many nights of joy from me already. Tonight is mine, or at least I want it to be.

My head had felt fuzzy moments ago but suddenly, everything is all too clear. Too painful. The corners of the world sharpen into points that make my eyes ache. "It's not exactly pleasant to talk about. I don't wanna be a downer."

Mary watches me, concerned. "I wanna know. You can tell me even if it's sad."

I appreciate her validation. No, this feels more like permission. You used to give me permission to be sad, permission to have time to myself, permission to hang with friends. But I can't blame you, can I? Because I was always the one asking for your approval.

I take a sip of my drink and try to swallow but can't seem to get it

down. I spit it out and the words *emotional abuse* float at the top of the red liquid. I take another sip, try to swallow it before Mary can notice, before she can see. I am scared now because there are things welling in my throat that I have not even admitted to myself.

Then suddenly it's all coming up, words and letters that I can't stop. I choke on the word *suicide*, the sharp ends of the letter *d* stick in my throat; too harsh to swallow, too harsh to spit it out. I think back to endless texts from you, telling me how much you hated your life, how you thought I could change that, but I let you down. How it's all *my fault, my fault, my fault*.

I tuck *self-harm* under my tongue carefully and wait for it to dissolve back into my skin. She doesn't need to know that part. She doesn't need to know that I used to blame myself for what you did to your body.

I talk for what feels like hours. Mary sobers up quickly. She stares angrily at the carpet.

I wait for her to snap at me. I wait for her to tell me that I should have done better, that I should have tried harder to help you. That if I was a better girlfriend I would have stood by you no matter what happened. I wait for her to say all the things that you said.

"It wasn't her fault," I say, still trying to defend you even now. "She didn't mean it. She didn't know what she was doing."

Because you didn't know that all of this was emotional abuse, right? It was just how you grew up, right? Who could blame you? Of course you would absorb that behavior. Of course it wasn't intentional. Of course you really loved me.

"No," Mary snaps. "None of that was okay, Kathryn. None of that was okay."

"I guess," I whisper, just like you used to. I shudder. Hearing your words in my mouth makes me want to throw up. My slurred speech helps hide the fact that my throat is closing. I don't want to be dramatic. I don't want to cry. It's been months. I should be over this by now.

The next time we drive by your dorm, Mary will yell "Fuck you!" at the top of her lungs and my other friends will shout and holler along with her. They all know now what happened between us, and they hold up their middle fingers with pride.

I will slide down in my seat, though, desperate to hide. I will feel ashamed.

Because you didn't mean it. I'm just being dramatic. Emotional abuse is too harsh of a term. It wasn't really that bad. I'm just blowing it out of proportion.

“Fuck you! Fuck you! Fuck you!”
Forgive me, forgive me, forgive me.

I saw this girl on my way to class. I swear she looked just like you.

And when I finally got to my desk, I couldn't breathe, couldn't think. All I could see was you and all I could feel was you. It was as if you were crouched beside me, talking to me, touching me, and telling me to *look at you, look at you, look at you.*

I don't know when I started bouncing my leg, shaking it wildly up and down. It was a last-ditch effort at comforting myself. But I'm shaking so hard that my desk shifts, screams as it slips across the ground, reveals my panic to the whole class. I feel distant and far away, like I'm watching myself from the corner of the room and helpless to do anything.

I push my nails into my leg, hard, and it finally stills.

I try to focus instead on my hands, squeezing them into fists and watching as the tendons poke out as if to inquire as to why I'm so upset all of a sudden. I don't have an answer for them.

These are the same hands that you used to hold so tightly. When you were happy. When you were anxious. When you were sad. When you couldn't get up out of bed for days and somehow it felt like it was all *my fault, my fault, my fault.*

I interlace my fingers and squeeze my palms together as though the action could ever erase the feeling of your hands in mine. I am violently trying to reclaim the skin that you took as yours. I am hyperventilating.

My lungs ache, and for a moment, I fear that I'll tip, I'll tilt. That I'll slide out of my chair and pass right through the floor and resurface in a dream. That in this dream I will see you sitting in my car late at night, crying and asking me if I even care about you. I will see you sitting in my car, angry and quiet and distant and all the things that are the most unbearable.

Through it all, the dream will whisper in my ear in a voice that is yours, but with words that you never had the audacity to actually say: *this is all your fault.*

Instead, the panic drips down my body, pools in my shoes like clear oil, like sticky corn syrup. I picture you walking out of the room, disappointed you could not claim me today. My panic smells like sugar and tastes like your chap-stick.

Soon I am only left with the embarrassment and the shame.

The truth is that I can't remember most of it. I can't remember what you said or what you did. I can't remember what you were so angry about. Honestly, I can't remember you.

I still don't know if that was intentional or not. I'd like to think that some deep, forgotten part of me quietly slid all of those memories out of sight. I hope it was a form of self-protection, because are my feelings still valid if I've forgotten what caused them in the first place?

You used to demand exact memories as evidence of the pain you caused and then acted as though I'd simply forgotten what had really happened. I have never felt okay with telling my—our—story until now. Until I could accept that it would be fuzzy, the edges of reality would be frayed. Until I could accept that memories sometimes feel like dreams but that doesn't make them any less true. Until I could accept what I've forgotten.

The thing I remember the most is how you made me feel. Yes, I remember it vividly. Being with you was like drowning in a crowded swimming pool, trying desperately not to splash too much because I didn't want to ruin everyone else's good day. Being with you felt like a wine glass on the floor, tipped, spilt, cracked. The red liquid staining the carpet, my mouth, my fingers. Being with you felt like shattering a plate against the wall, felt like feeling myself split in half again and again until you couldn't put me back together and somehow I was smiling through it all.

Being with you felt like sitting at the bottom of the ocean, greedily inhaling water, feeling trapped and helpless and losing hope despite the fact that all I needed to do was swim up.

The girl was turning to face me. She was wearing the same hoodie that you used to.

And I thought: What if it's you? What if it isn't? If it was you, what would I say?

Would we even speak to each other, or would I run, just like you used to? Would I avoid eye contact? Or would we stare at each other, and then decide to quietly go our separate ways?

I can picture it now:

We see each other, and by then it's too late to run. We are out in the open anyways, and you are taking up the middle of the sidewalk.

People are passing by us on their way to class. I force a smile and greet you. You walk up to me.

“Hey,” you say. I can’t look you in your eyes. They are both too familiar and too strange, so instead I choose to stare at the space beside your head.

“Hey,” I say. My voice shakes. It cracks. Or does it hold firm, like brittle glass waiting to shatter when you finally hit the perfect spot?

“How are you?” Your voice is soft. I remember this. I remember hearing that voice a year ago. Hearing the genuine concern in it, and thinking she loves me, she’s not so bad after all, I should forgive her for everything. For caring for me.

“I’m good.” I’m so sorry. Even after all this time, I never learn. I am still lying to you. I am not okay, and I am scared of you, and I can’t forget you. I swear I hate you, and that’s even more frightening. How can I hate someone who I used to love so unconditionally?

“That’s good.”

“I want to tell you something.” No, it’s too sudden, not at all something that I would say, but maybe desperation would force my hand. “I have something to say to you.”

“Okay.” You sound hesitant and unsure. I’m certain you are expecting the worst.

“I don’t remember my dreams. It doesn’t matter, because if you were in them I would want to forget. I woke up last night and couldn’t remember my own name. I woke up this morning and couldn’t remember yours.

“When I dream, I drift, I sink, I don’t swim. I never drown even though sometimes I dream I am inhaling water hard enough that it hurts. When I am dreaming, drowning does not always seem like such a bad way to go.

“I woke up. I rolled over and wished I were anywhere but here. I rolled over and wished I was a different person. I rolled over and over until I fell between my bed and the wall and went back to sleep, comforted by the claustrophobia. Fear is familiar. Fear is safe.

“When I hear your name my muscles tense. I try to hide it, but deep inside something in me twists. Something thrashes in its bed, throws off the covers, and wakes up, exposed.

“I wake up, but I am still dreaming. I am trapped in a dream within a dream within a dream. At its core, a nightmare rages, fueled by the memories of you.

“I wake up, but I don’t and I think of you, think of the person I used to love so deeply and hate so quietly. My room is cold, colder

than it should be. I left the window open hoping you would crawl in and come to bed with me. I miss the warmth of your anger.

“I miss you the way I miss the tightness of my lungs in the aftermath of a panic attack. I miss you the way someone misses something they hate. I forget so much, but I remember the way you made me feel. I remember the pain. I remember drowning.

“I wake up, I wake up, I wake up and I am still sleeping. I wake up and you are in the corner of my room, watching me. I wake up and I realize I miss you and I hate it. I wake up, and you are lying next to me. I still feel so safe that it disgusts me.

“I am beginning to realize that I belong to you. I don’t know when I realized this, or if I even cared. It’s possible it never bothered me since I thought love was ownership. I thought that loving you meant I had to give up all of me, forget who I was and let you shape me, sculpt me into the person you wanted. I am yours, and that’s okay because that’s love and I love you, right?

“This codependency is not something I am proud of. I am pleased to have a companion, but you are pleased to have a soulmate. We are not soulmates, and you will not be the first lover I have lied to about this. I tell people they are perfect and that they are everything I have ever wanted when the truth is I just want myself. I want myself back. I still somehow belong to you.

“Sometimes I check the bottoms of my feet looking for Sharpie, looking for the black ink that spells out your name. Sometimes I check my lower back half expecting to see ‘if lost, return to ---’ carved into my skin. Forever yours.

“You are free, and I am not.

“That is what I am most angry about. I gathered the courage to leave you. And yet you are on my mind all the time. I don’t think I really miss you, just the company. For years, I feared loneliness more than you. I am not sure if that is all a lie, because, deep down, I am so desperate to not miss you that I am willing to make any excuse.

“I am begging for the closure that I am convinced you have found. I left you to be free of you and yet you are still here. I see you laying in my bed. Wearing my favorite hoodies. Sitting in my car. I see you laughing. I see you holding me. I see your eyes when you are so angry that you can barely keep it together. I see your face when it lights up when you see me, and I see you crying, crying, crying.

“I see you in the mirror, standing behind me. I see your mouth

*moving, forming quiet words in that voice that I used to love: This is
all your fault, your fault, your fault.*

“Sometimes, I still believe you.”

The girl finally turns.

It isn't you.

CONTRIBUTORS

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Grace Cooper is an Oregonian who found her way to Colorado in pursuit of her two passions of writing and dance. In all of her creative work, Grace strives to explore and embody the deep connections she sees between language and movement. Currently working toward her bachelor’s degree, her writing has appeared in publications such as the *Greyrock Review*, *Remington Review*, *Pile Press*, and *Bella Grace Magazine*.

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Megan Fenner is an out-of-state freshman from California majoring in zoology at CSU. Despite her major, Megan has been interested in writing almost all her life, much longer before she even knew the word “zoology” existed. She finds the most happiness and inspiration from wandering spontaneously through an untouched natural landscape, capturing any sensation, sight and thought she can in her never-ending collection of journals, and finding the beauty in the hidden depths of the individual human experience, aiming to forever preserve just what makes us uniquely human.

Natalie Freeman will be graduating this May with a bachelor of arts in biological anthropology, a bachelor of fine arts in drawing, and a certificate in museum curation and cultural heritage studies. Upon graduation, she will work as a TA for CSU’s Paleontology Field School and then pursue a summer internship at a museum in the United States. Since she has combined interests within the arts and sciences, her career plans include working within a museum or pursuing a master’s degree in scientific or medical illustration.

Erin Fuller is a freshman from Broomfield, Colorado, studying English with a concentration in creative writing. They have a passion for playwrighting that started in high school with three of their plays being performed at their theatre troupe’s student-directed one acts. Erin is also a DJ at the campus station KCSU, emphasizing playing queer/trans artists on their show *Slouch Couch*.

Kate Jussila is a sophomore majoring in English with the intention of pursuing education. She has primarily focused on works of poetry and prose writing, and finds passion in all forms of art. She hopes to continue to write creatively and pursue literature.

Kysh Lindell is a senior majoring in English and history. They spend most of their time reading and writing creative nonfiction, literary criticism, and poetry. Outside of academics, they enjoy cooking, fishing, antiquing, and watching hockey.

Kathryn Lopez is a second-year English major at Colorado State University. In her spare time, she enjoys writing, playing video games, practicing calligraphy, and doing her best to keep her plants alive. Her most cherished possessions are her calligraphy pens, her blue vintage typewriter, and her withering aloe vera.

Elena Martinez is a freshman at Colorado State University. She is studying psychology and has an immense passion for English literature. She plans to continue writing fiction and nonfiction throughout her life.

Colin McCallum is a Canadian-American poet currently pursuing an English education degree at CSU in his fourth year of school. Greatly inspired by the works of Will Alexander alongside a profound love of nature and being in it, Colin often thrives in areas of the natural and surreal but is never afraid to take risks and try new styles.

Despina Norway is a second-year student at Colorado State University. She is currently studying and majoring in English with a concentration in creative writing and minoring in global environmental sustainability. She spends much time in nature and with people as well.

Cher Prazak is a senior watershed science student at CSU with ambitions to work with marine sciences after graduation. Cher's position as the president of The Book Was Better Club and the Watershed Club at CSU keeps them busy throughout the year. Otherwise, they can be found either cooking something up in the kitchen or stuck working on their upcoming novel.

Isaiah Romo is a third-year construction management major from California. He loves writing fiction stories and occasional poetry. Outside of writing, he reads, spends time with friends and family, and plays video games.

Ezra Ross is an aspiring multimedia artist and author. New to Fort Collins, they spend their free time exploring and looking for shiny rocks. They want to remind you to look both ways before you jaywalk.

Micah Sample is a freshman at Colorado State University studying creative writing. He was very happy to escape his small town, where nothing happened. They hope to one day make a living off their art/writing or disappear into the woods—whichever comes first.

Trice Scroggins is a third-year construction management major. His passion for writing was tapped recently by encouragement from loved ones and the town of Fort Collins. Other than writing, he finds life in rugby, music, relationships, and the outdoors.

Abigail Thomas is a senior at Colorado State University. She is pursuing a bachelor's degree in English with a concentration in creative writing, and a minor in ethnic studies. She is passionate about all forms of writing, and in particular loves to use poetry to explore identity through multiple lenses.

Imani Vontoure is a second-year student from California majoring in zoology with a minor in creative writing. When she's not writing, Imani can be found roller skating and staring at the stars. Questions about the universe and humanity fascinate her.

Caitlin Wilde is a sophomore studying human dimensions of natural resources with a creative writing minor. In her free time, she likes to run on nature trails, read books (especially historical fiction!), and participate in events with Ram Catholic on campus. She also loves being outside in nature, whether that means hiking in the Rocky Mountains, spending time by Lake Michigan near her hometown in Illinois, or simply making a snow angel.