



GREYROCK REVIEW

GREYROCK REVIEW

2023

Greyrock Review is Colorado State University's journal of undergraduate art and literature. Published annually in the spring through the English Department, *Greyrock Review* is a student-run publication.

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

This project was made possible in part through a grant from the Lilla B. Morgan Memorial Endowment, which works to enhance the cultural development and atmosphere for the arts at Colorado State University. This fund benefits from the generous support of all those who love the arts.

<https://president.colostate.edu/lilla-b-morgan-endowment/>

Cover art and design by Jesse Schaub

Logo design by Renee Haptonstall

© 2023 *Greyrock Review*

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced, in any form or by any means, without prior written consent from the authors.

Greyrock Review
Department of English
Colorado State University
359 Eddy Hall
Fort Collins, CO 80523
english.colostate.edu/greyrock/

Printed in the United States.



**COLORADO STATE
UNIVERSITY**



EDITORIAL STAFF

Managing Editors *Izabelle Hood*
 Sierra Reilly

Fiction Editor *Kailey Almquist*

Poetry Editor *Kathryn Lopez*

Nonfiction Editor *Xinhe Ma*

Associate Genre Editor *Paris Huckaby*

Typesetter & Designer *Jesse Schaub*

Graduate Advisor *Anna Emerson*

Faculty Advisor *Stephanie G'Schwind*

CONTENTS

7	<i>Editors' Note</i>
	Thomas Hasler
8	<i>Moving to the Midwest</i>
10	<i>The time an organ was extracted from that sacred place inside of me</i>
11	<i>The time when, on a journey, I was fooled by a mirage</i>
	El Triplett
13	<i>black(bury)ed</i>
	Cana Peirce
14	<i>The Selkie and the Siren</i>
	Carrena Amparo
20	<i>High Tide</i>
	Peyton Farnum
21	<i>Sea Dragon Study III</i>
	Samantha Bilodeau
22	<i>Oxen</i>
25	<i>The Outside</i>
	Olivia Friske
30	<i>Icarus</i>
31	<i>Persephone to Hades</i>

	Dillon Gross
32	<i>Mom's Chili Recipe</i>
	Jack Ratliff
35	<i>Your Shadow</i>
	Anaïs Markwood
36	<i>How to Be a Good Ballet Dancer</i>
38	<i>The Beginner's Guide to Becoming to Becoming the Main Character</i>
	Elliot Benson
42	<i>I went running</i>
43	<i>The Road Less Traveled</i>
	Cameron Shelton
44	<i>The Devil and the Piper</i>
51	<i>To Meet the Past</i>
	Katherine McGuinness
55	<i>Eclipse</i>
56	<i>Self-Portrait with Mud Wasps</i>
	Jade Roberts
58	<i>Oblique Reflection</i>
	Ali Owens
60	<i>The Cherry Tree</i>
61	<i>Until Safety Makes Its Home in my Bones</i>
62	<i>Things That Are Worse than Being Fat</i>

	Mitchell Glover
64	<i>Vancouver</i>
70	<i>Lunch with a Stranger</i>
	Andy Parker
76	<i>body braid</i>
77	<i>beholder</i>
78	<i>return to sender i & ii</i>
	Cambria Gifford
80	<i>Porkchop</i>
	Ethan Hanson
87	<i>No words to ask for an apology</i>
	Tanya Sopkin
88	<i>The Knife on the Floor</i>
	Maddie Christian
98	<i>the stars in their eyes</i>
	Ali Niaz
99	<i>White Ferrari</i>
108	<i>Contributor Notes</i>

EDITORS' NOTE

Dear Reader,

Thank you for reading the 2023 issue of *Greyrock Review*. We encourage you to read this issue with an open mind and heart for the experiences conveyed in the art and writing. For when you do, we think you will find yourself in appreciation for what this work evokes in your soul. The undergraduates' work displayed here is a demonstration of a community that cares about one another and encourages one another's creativity. The CSU writing and art community has demonstrated a passion for bringing voices together to better understand one another—and this issue is an example of just that. It is an exploration of experiences that question identity, place, our relationships to nature, and family—rudiments of who we are and our confrontations with life.

Greyrock Review is named after the hiking trail up the Poudre Canyon. When picking out the work for this journal, we wanted to acknowledge the different trails we may encounter and the art that comes from them. Our journeys look different, but our humanness remains—our ability to hike on, to discover ourselves, to live freely and wildly ourselves. It can be challenging to show this kind of vulnerability, and we admire the bravery of our authors and artists.

It was an honor and a privilege to participate in the creation of this issue of *Greyrock Review*. We are grateful for the wonderful editorial staff who shared a love for providing a platform for the brilliance of these authors and artists. It is their work and persistence that are the bones of this issue and the spine holding it together.

Wishing you the best,
Izabelle Hood and Sierra Reilly
Co-Managing Editors

THOMAS HASLER

MOVING TO THE MIDWEST

His eyes hurt. The DMV is cold and sterile. Not like his studio, which is warmed by the glow of incandescent bulbs and the smell of wet clay.

As he stands in line, he glimpses his reflection in the window. *Is that sadness? Melancholy?* No. *Ugliness.* Ugliness that lies not in the aesthetics of the image itself, but in the lack of meaning that image seems to possess. *A body with no soul?*

“Next,” the clerk says to him. And after a series of questions, flashes, fingerprints, and toothless smiles, the man receives his license.

He thinks about how a driver’s license is a funny thing. How it claims to capture all of the salient qualities of an individual but really holds none. The person displayed on his license is no different from the sculptures that he fashions from mounds of clay.

A body with no soul. A sculpture created from earth.

An empty vessel. A vase created from earth.

Why do I feel so empty? With the same attention he gives to his sculptures, the man is determined to perfect his body: shaving and washing, waxing and plucking, dieting and exercising. He feels some fleeting satisfaction having his appearance validated by others. By the people he meets at parties and on dating apps, the ones whose names he can’t remember, the ones whose faces, though pleasing, mean nothing to him.

A face with no name? He knows himself no better than he knows those men and women. He doesn’t love himself. He doesn’t hate himself. He doesn’t know himself. Because the appearance he works so hard to perfect is just a cloud of smoke. A collection of dark air that only obfuscates the nothingness that lies within. There is nothing tangible inside him to latch onto, nothing for him to grab and wave in the air, to point to and proclaim, “This is who I am.”

He knows that his sculptures will never capture the human soul—the mysterious quality that differentiates a man from a doll. Still, the man identifies more with the golems in his studio than with the people outside of it.

The earth here is different from the earth back home. The view outside his car’s window is much different from the one that he was ac-

customed to seeing back home. When he looks west, he never fails to notice the empty space where the mountains should be. In their place lies the endless expanse of Midwestern plains. A landscape where the horizon is the only thing separating the clear, blue sky from the road ahead of him.

The flatness and greenness of the plains suffocates the man with purity. It is a purity that exists not to promote some supposed moral good but to reject any possibility of difference. He sees this purity reflected in the conservatism of the people who surround him. The people who prefer to live a life of normalcy, where the only thing that truly changes is the length of the grass that surrounds them. He has only lived in Indiana for six months and he already feels the magnetic pull of the plains threatening to drag him from his unrelenting climb. To bury him deep in the earth, smothering him under layers of green grass, earthworms, and Midwestern "nice."

The earth here is different from the earth back home, but suburban sprawl is slowly rendering both landscapes the same. He remembers the moment in his childhood when he realized his house was built on a desert. When he learned that the suburbs were just places that conceal authenticity behind a veil of propriety and wet lawns. His grandpa took him to the valley beneath his home and four hands dug for fossils in the dust. *The earth never forgets.*

Why does he sculpt? Because suburbanization may turn desert into plains, but it can never conceal an entire mountain range. Because he believes that there is some truth inside the earth. Because the earth never forgets. It has a story to tell as well.

The man thinks about the piece of plastic nestled in his wallet. He hopes that this story is the key to understanding the person pictured on his first Indiana driver's license.

THOMAS HASLER

**THE TIME AN ORGAN WAS EXTRACTED FROM
THAT SACRED PLACE INSIDE OF ME**

Chest:

A gaping cavity.

A space, a memory

It's pulsing time (within me?)

Ribs (movement 1):

A cage?

Perhaps those tubes are filled with marrow.

Hymn:

Tubes of metal, not bone

were removed from their cascading rows.

At times, I still hear their tone:

a song that I could never transpose.

Ribs (movement 2):

A cage

imprisoned me within its pipes.

They glimmer at me from their place on the floor.

I don't believe your sermons anymore.

Silence:

Pascal's advice couldn't stop me

from dismantling my pipework house

tube by tube

until the music stopped.

Ribs (movement 3):

How can I fault you

for mistaking a cage

with a shrine?

How many times did I hear them play Bach in this place? Somehow,
it never lost its meaning.

Even when I stopped believing.

THOMAS HASLER

**THE TIME WHEN, ON A JOURNEY, I WAS
FOOLED BY A MIRAGE**

How many rings emanated from that spot where you dived into the
pond?

From my boat,
I watched your back
disappear beneath the sea of mirrors.

Silence,
water lilies,
concentric circles,
and my reflection.

Gazing into my own eyes,
I realize you were never human
but a mirror as well—
your back reflecting the version of myself
that might make you turn around.

Can there be beauty where there is truth?
Perhaps.
But reality is far more turbid
than this pond.

Resisting the urge to plunge into the glass,
I watch the rings as they dissipate
with the false hopes
that I mistakenly affixed to you.
“One, two, three, four, five, six . . . ”

Now, I must finally row away
The hull of my boat piercing the pond
into thousands of glimmering shards.

All
glass

is
made
from
sand.

EL TRIPLETT

BLACK(BURY)ED

in the youth of summer, flourishing's flood,
crickets heralding from the thicket in flight,
i see you frolic, blackberry thumb bud,
arms pink-scraped and teeth ripe with violet vice.
you still flaunt that bramble crown of girlhood
and i am the traitor who will pay its price.
if not for you, i would rip this rotten
husk of womanhood from my chest, this root
of tenderness once fertile, now trodden
beneath the grief of some stone-hearted brute
who grew from your bones like misbegotten
mold hungering for life in a strange body.
forgive me, sweet blackberry girl, for the
seeds of otherness that were your folly.

CANA PEIRCE

THE SELKIE AND THE SIREN

It was a sunny August day when a seal flopped up onto the beach. It was speckled gray with big, doleful eyes and long lashes. The sand was sweetly sun-warmed and it was the perfect afternoon for a long nap. Raising its head, the seal gave a sharp bark. The skin split under its chin and suddenly its pelt was receding, falling off from the head to the tail, revealing a beautiful woman. Her name was Orinna.

The selkie stood and stretched. She was completely naked—her skin pale and unblemished. Her hair was pure silver and her eyes had the same innocent stare as the seal's. She laid back in the sand with a satisfied sigh and went to sleep.

Angus was a fisherman. He lived on a cottage on top of the cliffs that housed the bay, and every day he ventured down a rocky little path to the seaside to take his boat out. He had a late start that day. The night before had consisted of copious drinking with the other village fisherman and it had taken him a long time to get out of bed that morning. It was the afternoon already, and he would be lucky if he caught anything at all before dusk.

Angus walked onto the beach, grumbling, and stopped dead when he saw her—a naked woman. She was the most beautiful thing he had ever seen. None of the village women compared. For a moment he just stood there, dumbfounded, then he made his way over for a better look.

She was even more beautiful up close. Angus admired the woman with lust and longing. He wanted her. That was when he noticed the seal pelt lying beside her sleeping figure in the sand. Suddenly a gleeful smile split his face and he snatched it up quickly. Selkies were well known among the Scots, and he knew that if he had her skin, he would have her too. He hurried away quickly to hide his prize before she awoke, and when he returned, he found the woman in a panic, searching the beach.

Orinna had no choice. Without her skin, she could no longer become a seal and return to the ocean. A despair took her as the wedding was planned. Within two days of their meeting, they were wed, and Orinna was bound to him not only by the laws of her species but by the laws of man. Angus dug a flower bed under the west facing window of the cottage where she now lived with him and planted

flowers in it, calling it a wedding present. She would need something to occupy her while he was gone fishing, he said. At least until a couple of babies had come along.

Orinna took to spending her days by the window, gazing out at the ocean longingly. Only when her new husband returned, reeking of fish, would she tear her eyes away and plaster a smile on her face. She knew how unpleasant a marriage could be for a woman when the husband was unhappy, so she did her best to keep him happy. She cooked dinner and laughed at his awful jokes. When he pulled her in for a rough kiss, she would oblige, and at night, when alcohol stank on his breath, she let him have her body.

One day, months after her skin had been stolen, she was walking along the beach with her toes in the water. A kind of sadness hung over her. Her home was right there, but without her skin, she could not return to it. Sandpipers scurried onto the wet sand as the waves receded, pulling clams out of the ground, then hurried back to the safety of dry land when another wave rolled in. She watched them quietly for some time.

There was something in the water when Orinna's attention returned to the ocean. She squinted, trying to make out the shape through the glare of the sun on the surface. It almost looked like a person.

"Orinna!" came a shrill shout, and her heart leapt into her throat. Before she knew it, she was running—stumbling—through the sand, kicking it up behind her until she fell into the waves. Still she struggled forward until her feet could barely touch the shore beneath them.

"Helena!" she screamed, "Helena!"

Slick arms wrapped around her tightly and suddenly she was laughing and crying at the same time. The girl holding her had pale skin, almost translucent, and tinged slightly green. Her hair was so thick with tangles of seaweed that maybe it simply *was* seaweed, and she was crying too, clinging to the selkie girl.

"Orinna," she gasped, "Orinna, I thought you'd left me."

"I'd never leave you."

"Where have you been all this time? I've been so worried!"

Orinna's expression darkened.

"My skin," she answered quietly. Helena's brows furrowed.

"Please . . . please tell me you're lying."

She shook her head solemnly. Helena's face became stormy in an instant.

"Show me the bastard that did it, Orinna. Where is he? I'll rip him limb from limb!" she hissed.

"It wouldn't matter. Without my skin, I can't come back. Without my skin, I have to remain his wife," Orinna said and looked away.

"He made you marry him?"

She nodded. For a moment neither of them spoke.

"But don't worry, if you come back tonight, I can come see you after he goes to sleep," Orinna said, trying to fill the angry silence. Helena gripped her shoulders tightly and looked into her eyes with such intensity that all she wanted to do was look away.

"I will be here every night," Helena promised. "Every damn night. Whether you come or not, I'll be waiting."

Orinna pressed her forehead to Helena's. They closed their eyes. Neither wanted to let go, but the sun was setting and Orinna's husband, Angus, would be home soon.

"I have to go," she whispered. Her throat was tight.

"Every night," Helena said solemnly, and Orinna stood and waded back onto dry land. She looked back and saw only the flip of a tail on the water as Helena dove back below.

After that, a secret vigor returned to Orinna. She no longer spent her days in wistful monotony, watching the horizon, but instead scoured the little cottage on the cliff every chance she got. At night, she waited until Angus' snores shook the walls, and then she would venture down to the shore to meet Helena in the cover of darkness. If she could just find her skin, escape was possible. Angus wasn't a particularly bright man, he couldn't have hidden it anywhere too difficult. If she could just figure it out, she could be under the waves again, warm in her love's arms.

The weeks ticked by without success and Orinna grew weary. The nights spent under her drunken husband as he satisfied himself only grew the pit of anxiety in her stomach. She dreaded becoming pregnant with his child. The nights in the shallow waves with Helena were the only thing that kept that fire of hope alive.

It had been a full month since Orinna and Helena had been reunited. She was certain that every damn nook and cranny of the house had been searched. She had even ripped up the floorboards and nailed them carefully back in place one day. She stared out at the ocean. The flowers outside the window had really taken root, and the lupines were so tall now that she had to look through them to see the ocean.

Orinna stopped. The flower bed. Angus had planted it on the day of their wedding. Her heart quickened and on shaky feet she made her way outside. *Of course! How could she have been so stupid?* With

her bare hands, she dug frantically, scraping her hands on stones and scooping up dirt by the handful. She ripped up the flowers brutally. They were only an obstacle.

The moment her fingertips brushed something soft, her heart stopped. Everything stopped. The birds stopped singing and the wind stopped howling. The whole world held its breath in anticipation as she dragged it from the earth. Suddenly Orinna was laughing, laughing with tears streaming down her dirt-speckled cheeks because she was free. Free! She whirled around and looked out at the ocean with bright, shining eyes. She wasted only a moment gazing before her frantic feet were stumbling down the narrow trail to the beach.

“Helena!” she screamed out across the open water, “Helena!” It was broad daylight. She didn’t know that her call would be heard, but within a few minutes a familiar face had risen. Orinna was sobbing as she held up her seal skin high so that she could see. A bright, ecstatic smile split Helena’s face and Orinna dove into the water and into her embrace. They held each other for a long time.

“Let’s go,” said Orinna.

“No,” Helena said sharply.

“No?”

“I still can’t forgive what that monster did to you.”

“What are you saying?” breathed Orinna.

“Bring him to the beach tonight,” said Helena with a sly smile. “We can leave together after that.” Instantly, Orinna knew what she was planning. She nodded solemnly.

“I’d better get going, I have to make it look like I didn’t find this,” she said quietly. She pressed the seal skin into Helena’s hands, “Hold onto this until tonight.”

Helena looked up at her, shocked.

“After just getting it back, don’t you want to keep it with you? Why would you want another person to have it again?”

“I trust you,” Orinna answered simply. She kissed Helena softly on the lips and left her in the water with the skin in her hands. When she arrived back at the house, she stood the lupines up in the disheveled garden bed and supported them with soil. They wouldn’t survive, but that didn’t matter. They only had to look alive for one evening.

That night, the moon hung low and lazy in the sky, its silver light washing over the beach and cliffs. The shore was abandoned. The wind was the only sound as it blew the water to beat upon the sand, for all of the creatures could feel what was to come. The wind rattled

the little cottage on the cliff, and Orinna roused her husband with a soft kiss. When his eyes opened and met hers blearily, she smiled.

"It's the middle of the night," he mumbled.

"The moon is full," she answered, "and I have something to give you." Angus said nothing for a moment, the wind deafening in the otherwise silent night.

"A gift? Now?" he asked.

"I've been preparing it for quite some time, I think you'll like it," she coaxed with an enticing look. She stood up and the covers fell off her naked form. At the sight, Angus was suddenly awake and very willing to follow her out into the night. He stumbled out of bed and the two were off, Orinna's bare skin glowing in the moonlight. He walked behind her, unable to take his eyes off the sway of her hips, getting more excited with every step. Orinna's heart was pounding too. The ocean was calling to her.

The sand was cool beneath their feet and the wind brought the scent of salt to their noses. It was a truly breathtaking sight, the rolling waters alight in silver, the moon's twin reflected brightly on the surface. Orinna breathed deeply and spread her arms. Angus watched as she picked up a shell from the sand and tossed it into the waves. This had been where the two had met, a man and a selkie, where he had taken her for his wife. She turned to him with a curious look and made her way to him. His pulse quickened as she slid into an embrace, pressing her naked body against him. He closed his eyes and leaned down for a kiss.

"Oh Angus," she breathed against his lips. "Goodbye." He opened his eyes, confused, and his mouth began to form a question, but he was stopped before any words could come out. A sound was piercing him, right through like the blade of a sword. It was shrill and haunting—a song. A strange, otherworldly song. Orinna pulled away and watched. Something was happening in the water, the surface bubbling, and a face emerged. A woman's face, with seaweed for hair, and she was singing. Angus' eyes were no longer on Orinna. They were fixed on the singer, and every muscle in his body had gone rigid. Each note seemed to tense him further, until he was nearly trembling from strain.

The song's tempo picked up, and Angus took a step, then another, and another until he was sprinting at full speed toward the water. Orinna's eyes were cold and merciless as she watched him stumble into the waves. The woman's arms wrapped around him and dragged him under so quickly that he might have never been there at all. For

a while, the surface bubbled violently, and then there was nothing save for the waves rhythmically pounding against the sand. Orinna waited. After a few minutes, those seaweed locks raised above the water again and her face broke into a smile.

“Is it done?” Orinna breathed.

“My love, you are free,” the siren answered.

With a laughing shout, Orinna stumbled through the waves and into the arms of Helena and their mouths met in a salty kiss. When they pulled apart, both of them were beaming.

“God have mercy on any man who tries to take you from me,” Helena whispered. Without another word, she wrapped the soft skin around Orinna, and the girl before her changed into a seal. Together they slipped below the waves.

CARRENA AMPARO

HIGH TIDE

You come and
go, as if lured
by the moon.

I wade through
fleeting waves and
wait

for high tide.

My alabaster sea,
frothy
and foaming;

I taste salt

while I leave
footprints

through white sand.

PEYTON FARNUM

SEA DRAGON STUDY III



SAMANTHA BILODEAU

OXEN

I've seen pictures of my grandfather as a boy, looking remarkably like and unlike the man I knew. He is heartbreakingly young, curly-haired, his freckled skin smooth. Even beneath the cracked yellow surface of old photographs, his eyes sparkle. I am confident that this boy and I would have been friends had we had the chance to meet across time. He grew up on a farm in rural Maine (there was no other kind of Maine at that time). It was a world lush with green fields and hazy with the kicked-up dust of dirt roads. He was born in 1939, the year that Hollywood released *Gone with the Wind*, *Stagecoach*, and *The Wizard of Oz*. These movies feel like historical documents now, but, at the time, they were just what was on at the moving picture show.

There were animals on the farm: chickens, pigs, and oxen. *Dumb as an ox*—*not accurate*, my grandfather would later tell me. Oxen had just gotten bad press. They were actually tough, intelligent animals, excellent for plowing fields and pulling heavy loads. He told me how an ox could be trained to respond to the gentle tap of a stick on its shoulder to change directions or stop at a second's notice. Oxen were dependable, hardworking, and even capable of rudimentary creativity under the right circumstances. Their capacity for intelligence and sensitivity may have been chronically underestimated, but wasn't that a kind of virtue, too?

The days on the farm were long, full of the kind of backbreaking chores that were required to keep a farm up and running in the days before four-wheel-drive tractors and chemical fertilizer. My grandfather learned to work and work hard. Sometimes he would become so tired that he would lie on his back among the stalks of tall corn and take a nap, unobservable. The family would huddle around their radio in the evenings, the sound high and tinny: *Roy Rogers*, *Gunsmoke*, *Jack Benny*. The town they lived in was small and insular—everybody knew everybody. Especially, everyone knew his parents. Years later, they would name a road in the town after his father, my great-grandfather. The family was wealthy by some standard, but in the 1940s and 1950s, in the Maine woods, you acquired wealth through the sweat of your brow. My great-grandfather wore grimy, mud-splattered overalls to deposit money at the bank.

My grandfather possessed a love of mischief and a reflexive dislike of authority and self-importance. I can picture him in a crude schoolhouse, surrounded by other red-cheeked, rough-clothed children, taking enormous delight in puncturing the pretensions of whatever unfortunate young woman found herself in charge of the class that year. Irreverence is a quality I prize highly (like grandfather, like granddaughter), but I imagine his teachers felt differently, confronted with this tow-headed boy with his easy grin, his quick, merciless tongue. He wasn't malicious—not very, anyway. He simply enjoyed making it clear that his own wit and intelligence were the equal of theirs, that he saw their respective positions as instructor and student as mere happenstance. If the roles were magically reversed, he would cheerfully have taken charge of the chalkboard.

One day when he was eleven or twelve, my grandfather was involved in an incident that became the stuff of family legend. He was in the classroom, and one of his besieged young teachers corrected his pronunciation of the word *sumac*, which referred to a type of flowering plant. He had pronounced it with a *sh* sound, like the word *shoe*. This was incorrect, the teacher informed him, a telltale gleam of pleasure behind her spectacles. Their battle of wits had finally reached an inflection point after a long, bitter campaign; she'd caught him at last. "This word begins with *s-u*, David. Words that begin with *s-u* are pronounced *su*. Like the name, Sue. *Sumac*. *S-u* is always *su*. Do you understand?" The class held its collective breath at seeing him challenged. My grandfather never broke eye contact with the teacher; he leaned back in his wooden chair and smiled. I think it likely there was a smudge of dirt on his cheek. "Sure," he said.

He never went to college, although he considered it seriously, and would have excelled. He served instead aboard the *USS Wright*, a Navy aircraft carrier, during the Korean War. He never saw combat, but he did watch a man's head be lopped off by the rotor blade of a descending helicopter, saw it bouncing on the deck before coming to a stop against a midshipman's grimy shoe, face up and unblinking. It was not the kind of thing you could forget. After the war, he married and raised a family. He first worked as a plumber, then owned an undistinguished general store in a small Maine town not unlike the one he grew up in. He would experience numerous disappointments over the course of his life, and many more underestimations. More horror too. Life is long.

When his service aboard the *USS Wright* came to an end, he was given a souvenir, a cigarette lighter emblazoned with a tiny engraved

image of the ship. A token, a reminder: thank you for your service. Sixty years later, the lighter is mine. I don't smoke. Just as well—it doesn't work anymore. Sometimes when I take it out and flick it open and shut, the dull metal warming from the weight of my fingers, I can feel the presence of the man I knew, and loved. Sometimes I can feel the presence of that boy I never met, the boy with the sparkle in his eye. I love him too. When I hold his lighter, a spirit of durability, of defiance, seems to leap from the aged metal to the skin of my fingertips. I feel connected to something that started long ago. I feel like an ox.

SAMANTHA BILODEAU

THE OUTSIDE

I usually woke in the morning to the sound of Sloan moving around in the kitchen, noisily preparing her breakfast: the whirr of the blender as she made her smoothie, the thunk of her knife as she chopped an avocado. Still buried beneath my comforter, I would retrieve my phone from the nightstand and peruse social media to see what Sloan had been up to while I slept. I was hooked on it, on her. We rarely saw each other around the house, spoke even more rarely, but I could hardly go an hour without looking at her life.

We had been living together for about three months at this point, the result of random chance. I had heard through a friend of a friend about a girl who needed a roommate on short notice. It was a stroke of luck akin to being struck by lightning—three days after moving to the big city and I was in a comfortable, rent-controlled apartment in a pricey hipster neighborhood. I had received many dire warnings from my small-town friends and family about what my move might entail and I was prepared to endure the kind of experiences that (I was told) defined urban life: rat infestations, leering neighbors, malodorous toilets.

I had found life in the city far easier than I was expecting. The speed with which I had secured the apartment had proved a harbinger of things to come. I quickly landed an internship with a small graphic design firm. The job was straightforward: my coworkers were friendly, generous with happy hour invitations and small talk, and the work itself was undemanding. Half the week I went and sat at my assigned desk in the open-plan office and the other half I worked propped up in my bed, laptop balanced on a pillow. The elderly man who ran our neighborhood bodega always greeted me by name when I dropped in. He never even blinked an eye at any combination of purchases, however hideous: frozen meals, tabloid magazines, sugary energy drinks, tampons. My fears, so overpowering in the months before the move, had come to nothing. By almost any metric, my move had been a total success, so I had a hard time understanding why I felt the way that I did.

If asked, I could not have precisely defined what Sloan's occupation was, but it seemed to involve modeling and online marketing (while being technically neither of those things). Sloan was gorgeous, multi-

lingual, physically fit, widely read, bisexual, politically involved. Her online presence was witty, thoughtful, sharp, spicy, teasing, intellectual, woke, goofy. She was socially aware, environmentally aware, self-aware. In her clothing she struck a balance between glamor and an air of carefully constructed casualness. Her hair was honey-toned and heavy with shampoo-commercial suppleness. She was funny—sometimes sexy-funny and sometimes funny-funny. She was always doing something or going somewhere. Every day something happened to her.

One Saturday afternoon, I was in the kitchen making myself a rather sorry sandwich from the leftovers I had accrued over the workweek when Sloan entered the room. She was sleekly attired in a black jumpsuit and dangly silver earrings and there was a bright mauve on her lips that would have looked absurd on anyone else. She looked like something out of a magazine ad.

“Hey there, stranger,” she said. “I’m going to this thing tonight. I don’t feel like drinking alone. Come with?”

This invitation, which had been tossed off with great nonchalance, was unprecedented in the short history of our relationship. My knowledge of Sloan’s life outside our apartment came almost entirely through virtual means.

“I guess I’m not doing anything much tonight,” I said. This was an understatement. “What is it, exactly?”

“It’s this gallery show kind of thing,” she said. “Artsy crowd—you’ll like them. And free cocktails.”

I found myself wondering how I’d given her the impression I would fit in with an “artsy crowd.” Maybe it was my community college degree in graphic design. More likely, she had simply gotten this idea because of the cheap Manet print I had put up in our living room.

“Where is it?” I asked.

“Downtown,” she said. Her lack of specificity was breathtaking.

There was no point in putting up even a token resistance. “That sounds like a lot of fun, actually. What’s the dress code?”

“Wear whatever you got, kid,” said Sloan. She gave me a quick, dazzlingly sweet smile over the lip of her phone. “Wheels up in fifteen, okay?”

Calling me “kid” was an affectation Sloan had picked up somewhere: an old movie, a Truman Capote short story, a TikTok. I was only two years younger than she was. I hated when she said it but I didn’t want her to stop.

I put on the only blouse I owned that could be considered remotely appropriate and we took a cab twenty blocks downtown. Sloan

had waved away my offer of using a rideshare app; maybe she found Uber too unromantic a mode of travel.

On our way, Sloan pointed out a comprehensively graffitied warehouse and informed me that she had attended a Czechoslovakian film festival there the previous week. I already knew about it. She had posted a photo of the artisanal popcorn she had been served at the concession stand, which had been assembled out of concrete blocks. “Oh?” I said. “Was it fun?”

“Kind of depressing, honestly,” she said. “Those guys know how to frame a shot, but *God*, would it kill them to throw in a joke once in a while?”

“I’m not really a big film buff,” I said.

We were quiet for the rest of the ride.

The event was held in a small art gallery with the pristine white walls of an Apple store. Art pieces stood on pillars around the room, fewer than I had expected: snarled coils of blown glass and craftily misshapen statues. At no point during the evening did I fully understand what was going on, despite several lengthy speeches from people with asymmetrical haircuts. Sloan and I were given multiple martinis by a man wearing a simple white T-shirt that I guessed probably cost more than my first car. Everyone knew who Sloan was and seemed to like her very much.

Late in the evening, Sloan and I found ourselves in a small knot of people standing by a bas-relief of a minotaur with an impressively erect penis. Everyone was talking very quickly and making lots of jokes I didn’t understand. I contributed to the conversation mostly via nods. Earlier in the evening, someone had asked me a question about one of the art pieces, assuming I might know something about its composition, and my stammered response had been so painfully inadequate that I resolved to say as little as possible for the rest of the evening.

“The thing is, *some* form of the system is necessary, I think,” said Sloan. There were two bright spots on her cheeks. “The question is, which form is best?”

A stunningly beautiful girl with a pierced septum and a blouse that plunged down to her navel said, “You have read Foucault, right? I feel like this topic is, like, impossible to even discuss without that perspective.”

“I have read Foucault,” said Sloan. “Not as much as I would like.”

“What have you read of his?” The girl’s tone wasn’t openly unfriendly, but a knife had been slipped into it. She sipped her martini. “*Discipline and Punish?*”

Sloan's eyes narrowed perhaps half a millimeter. "I don't think so. Not the whole thing. It was an excerpt."

"An excerpt can never really capture the nuances of an argument, can it?" said a man with a waxy black goatee. "I definitely recommend checking out the whole book."

"It's dense," said the girl with the nose ring. "Hefty. I took it on vacation with me, do you remember, Jack?" She laughed. "I was sitting on a beach in Mykonos and plowing through critical theory. Everyone around me was reading *Gone Girl*."

The people who were standing with us in the circle chuckled. Sloan smiled thinly. A few days ago, she had posted a picture of herself sitting on a near-empty subway car; a Gillian Flynn novel had been visible, peeking out of her designer handbag.

"It was so worth it, though," said the girl. "So worth it."

"I liked *Gone Girl*," I said. "The movie, I mean. I didn't read the book."

Sloan looked surprised and a little pleased that I had said something. Everyone else looked at me as if I had just been violently ill between my own feet. The conversation moved on to another topic, but I could still feel the hot thud of my heartbeat under the skin of my face.

We left the gallery shortly afterwards, several exceedingly well-dressed people wishing Sloan a good night on the way out. Our cab moved schizophrenically through the streets, sometimes snailing to a near-stop, sometimes whipping around corners like we were contestants in a particularly grimy NASCAR race. I had nearly grown used to traveling this way.

I watched Sloan's face as we drove; the light from passing banks and bodegas made a kaleidoscope of her high cheekbones and kewpie-doll lips. She was quiet but did not appear especially perturbed—in fact, she seemed calmer than she had been all day.

"Do you ever feel like you don't have the first clue what's going on?" Sloan asked me. She was still looking out of the cab window. She didn't look upset. Her mouth was twisted in a strangely humorous way, like she was amused by something. I thought briefly of chess players I had seen in the park: a small smirk, a rueful shake of the head at the move of a cunning opponent.

"Only on, like, weekdays and weekends," I said.

She chuckled. "I know *exactly* what you mean, kid," she said, so softly that I almost missed it over the road noise.

I just nodded in response, unable to think of anything else to say.

Sloan suddenly darted forward and rapped on the plexiglass divider sealing us off from our driver, making me jump. “Can we make a quick stop? Just up there.”

The driver grumbled in a language I didn’t recognize, but he pulled the car through a miniscule gap in traffic and parked, one wheel up on the curb. Without a word of explanation, Sloan leapt out of the cab, banging the door shut behind her. I was too surprised to follow her.

“Meter is still running,” muttered the driver. “Your friend better not be long.” He was unabashedly scrolling through Instagram pictures of half-naked women on his phone.

Sloan was gone for about ten minutes. She had entered a used bookshop and record store, the kind of dreary little basement where they would yell at you if they caught you taking a picture of anything. She had a brown paper bag with her when she returned. I didn’t have to ask her what was inside.

Sloan saw me looking at her purchase and smiled. Something had changed about the quality of her smile; it made her look less pretty, but I liked it much better. “Silly, right?” She nudged the bag with the toe of her ballet flat.

“I don’t think it’s silly at all,” I said. The impassable gulf that I had always imagined between us seemed to have suddenly narrowed. I felt for the first time that we were on the inside of something together, she and I.

The cab pulled away, jolting us as it moved off the curb. “Hey, do you want to make a video with me real quick?” Sloan asked me. “I want to show everyone my roomie.” She raised her phone, pivoting towards me and snaking an arm around my waist. Her eyes went blank, her features leaping into a huge, practiced smile. It was very unlike the one she’d just given me. I copied her expression, the corners of my mouth widening. I stared into the glassy, dispassionate eye of the camera and pretended that I loved it, and that it loved me back. Pretending was easy, it turned out.

OLIVIA FRISKE

ICARUS

To love in halves is a mercy
Splitting the orange, letting the juice ripen your tongue
Without the starchy pulp
Why would a bird want to commit to the air?
But God, the wind, gently kissed by the sun, feels
Eu

pho

ric

Until the skeletal wings lay out every fiber of soul
Candle flesh melting into hopeful rain
Begging for the clouds to spoon it
The earth blesses the bird with a plummeting release

OLIVIA FRISKE

PERSEPHONE TO HADES

I buried the letter in the corpse of a lamb. Innocence in the wake of Death. To call you, beckoning me to your arms. As the rot seeps into the parchment, I kiss the petals you left for me to find. Chrysanthemums. They crumble beneath my lips, having been long dead. You always tell me you water them when I'm away, and I always tell you it's not your fault. Now they will be reborn. I will make a crown from the beast's ribs. One to make the ground shiver and ghosts bow. I hope to throw a party when you are back; my mother is not invited. She would ruin all the fun. After all, you are her worst nightmare. I suppose you are mine, too. Something to breathe for. Death consumes you and so it must consume me. I embrace it.

Give me a funeral

DILLON GROSS

MOM'S CHILI RECIPE

Note: This recipe is best served on a cold, cloudy Sunday in January, preferably after the Denver Broncos win a game.

Ingredients:

1 large can of tomato soup + a can of water

It's the very same tomato soup that's served with grilled cheese.

I come home from a long day of school and it's waiting for me. Grilled cheese and tomato soup. I smell it the moment I open the door and throw my backpack on the floor. I can't get to the table fast enough. Mom is so considerate; she knows just when to have dinner ready. I feel like I can never thank her enough.

1 large can of kidney beans, drained

I help with dinner by setting the silverware. It should be simple, but I ask too many questions: "Do we need knives? Butter knives or steak knives? Do I need to set out big spoons or little spoons? How many napkins should everyone get?"

I circle around these questions so many times that I never actually set the silverware. Mom eventually explained to me that it's not the silverware that's important, it's important that we're eating a meal together. I figure it out. Everyone gets a different-sized spoon.

1 pound of ground beef, browned and drained

Mom shows me how to brown the meat. It's easy, but I'm young and anxious. I feel the heat radiating from the pan and it feels wrong. The spatula doesn't fit in my hand the way it fits in Mom's. Did she used to feel like this? I don't want to mess up our dinner. She reassures me that I'm doing it correctly. I don't believe her.

I turn off the stove and my mom incorporates the meat into the rest of the meal. I feel proud of myself for helping contribute. Mom is proud of me too. At least I think she is. I hope she is.

1 can of chili-ready tomatoes

Nana grows tomatoes in her garden most years. The plant starts out as just a tiny seed but it soon sprouts, sending green vines racing up the structure she had set out several years before. By the end of the summer, the tomatoes are growing like crazy—swelling like vibrant, red balloons ready to pop at the lightest touch of her kitchen knife.

She grows so many that she doesn't know what to do with them. She passes them off to Mom, but now we have too many tomatoes and the vicious cycle continues.

We might have too many of them, but we find uses for them. They taste better than canned tomatoes. Nana's vegetables are always better.

1 envelope of chili seasoning

I was shocked when I found out that Nana makes the same chili Mom does. Nana does it a little bit differently, but that's only because Mom does it to accommodate my tastes.

I'm not sure how I never realized that Mom wasn't the first to make her chili recipe. I would never make chili any other way than Mom does. It's Mom's chili. It only makes sense that Mom learned her chili from her mom. Of course, it's generational chili. How could I not see that? Now I'm the one learning it. I feel honored to carry it on. I hope I do it justice.

Optional ingredients when chili is cooked and ready to be served:

Shredded cheese

Mom is lactose intolerant. Nana is too. But I'm not.

They share tips and tricks on how to avoid stomachaches.

A handful of diced onions

Mom gets a lot of nosebleeds. Nana does too. So do I.

We all share the tissues.

Bag of Fritos Scoops

Fritos remind me of Papa. Mom tells me stories of when he used to work for Frito-Lay. He drove their trucks over the Rocky Mountains and the altitude would make the bags explode in the back. I wasn't around in those days, but I love hearing stories about it. I love hearing stories about him.

I miss him. Mom and Nana do, too.

Sometimes, when I'm wearing one of his shirts and I can hear the ambient sounds of a football game from the next room, it feels like he isn't gone at all. I can see him in Mom's face, in her olive complexion and her kind smile. I can't begin to imagine how Nana sees her.

Mix all the ingredients together in a large crock pot on low for 3 hours.

While the crockpot does its work and the house begins to fill with the delicious smell of chili, there are many ways to spend the rest of the afternoon.

Play a board game, like *Star Trek Catan*.

Watch television, maybe *Jeopardy!* or *Little House on the Prairie*.

Do schoolwork—as the student or as the teacher.

Read a good book.

Or Mom's favorite, watch football and yell so loud that it scares our poor dog.

Final step: pass the recipe down again.

JACK RATLIFF

YOUR SHADOW

I saw your shadow slip into the grass
And circle around the tree.
How many days do you think have passed
Since you were lost to me?

I can still see you here as real as dirt,
Stretching in that copper shirt
That matched your eyes so well.

The way their amber light would dance
And leap like fire when you'd sing,
And though it was a little thing,
I remember them the most,
All those little loves.

The way that your hair moved
Like the flax grass blown in seaborne
Winds,
Greeting the morning,
As you'd rise from my side and survey
The tide rolled in with a newborn day.

ANAÏS MARKWOOD

HOW TO BE A GOOD BALLET DANCER

*All the world's a stage,
And all the men and women merely players;
They have their exits and their entrances;
And one man in his time plays many parts,
His acts being seven ages.*

—William Shakespeare

Point your toes. Tuck your thumbs into your palms. Soften the angles of your elbows. Keep your eyes up. Look into the stage lights and try to find God. Tell yourself stories about the audience. Make eye contact with the tired young dad in the front row and allow yourself to be him for a moment. Imagine him dressing up his tiny daughter in her tiny tutu and let your stage smile turn into a real one for a fleeting second.

Lose yourself in the music. Let muscle memory take over. Let memory take over. As you stretch your toes to the ceiling, think about that time you did handstands on the beach with your grandma watching. Feel the lights turn into the sunshine, the music become the sound of waves, and the stage floor melt into the sand beneath your hands. Feel the love reaching out from your grandma like shining silver-golden rays of light that pierce your limbs until you feel invincible. Notice how you glow slightly after this moment, like the ring of sunlight behind the moon in an eclipse.

As you tuck into a shoulder roll, think about how that boy's words caused you to retreat inside yourself until you were a black hole of a person. Think about how the pain from your shoulder meeting the hard floor is only a fraction of the pain in your chest every time he told you that you weren't good enough and how this happened far too often from someone who was supposed to be your best friend. Think about the coldness in his pale green eyes when he said those things to you, and the way he reached for your hand as if he hadn't just killed a little part of you. Think about the anger you felt at yourself for failing to recognize the serpentine being that resided underneath his mask of curly hair and freckles. Think about the anger you felt at him for failing to be the first love you had hoped he'd be. As you pop up from the shoulder roll, think about the relief you felt when it finally ended. Think about how the two weeks after you broke up were the best of your summer.

As you leap into a grand jeté, think about the fleeing colors of fireworks, of fall leaves, of rainbows on muggy August days in Massachusetts. Think about the burst of sound when you open the door to a party or the way it feels to sing with a big group and become liquid sound. Think about the way strangers' faces light up when you compliment them or the way that women smile when they tell you their dresses have pockets. Think about the euphoria of accomplishment or the incandescent happiness of knowing your partner is about to tell you they love you for the first time.

As you lift your dance partner into the air, think about the way that boy picked you up and twirled you around in the train station on that December night right before Christmas. Think about the way you let out a happy shriek as he spun you, and the way you were breathless with laughter by the time he set you down. Think about the way he kissed you goodbye: soft, then hard, then soft again. Think about the way you jokingly made plans for a future you both knew you'd never have but wished more than anything was possible.

As you pirouette in place over and over again, think about the circular motion of the disco lights you keep in your apartment, of the smoke curling from your roommate's joint on a cold night, or the way your brain feels when you're drunk. Think about the way the world blurred when you turned in circles under the stars on the beach with your best friend since kindergarten. Or when you sat down and spun on the hardwood of your kitchen floor until you tipped over into a giggling mess of glittery makeup and yellow plaid. Think about the moon rotating around the Earth and the Earth around the sun and how you are just a tiny tiny speck in a corner of the universe.

When the music stops, pretend you haven't just lived through all of your lives and smile into the lights, into the illuminated faces of the audience, into the glowing eyes of a God you're not sure is there. Pretend you remember having moved your body instead of letting muscle memory take over for you and disappearing into the movie reel of your mind. Pretend you know what it means that all those moments have led to this one, that all those versions of you have led to this version. Pretend you know which you is the most real. Pretend you know who you are.

As you walk off the stage out of the lights and sound into the quiet blackness behind the curtains, don't giggle or breathe a sigh of relief. Think about how you were born from darkness and to darkness you will return. Think about how the edges of the stage could be the edges of your life and you wouldn't know the difference. And of course, point your toes.

ANAÏS MARKWOOD

THE BEGINNER'S GUIDE TO BECOMING THE MAIN CHARACTER

1. Romanticize everything. Whether it's taking out the garbage, getting your heart broken, or attending college—do it.
2. Walk around as if everyone is paying attention to you. You are the hottest person in this town. This is your world and everyone else is just living in it. If you believe it, so will they.
3. Dress in a way that would look good on paper or in a movie. If you couldn't write it in a way that sounds cute, whimsical, quirky, and put-together all at once—don't wear it. All your clothes must be thrifted or designer, no in between. J. Crew will not do. And stick to one aesthetic. It doesn't matter whether it's dark academia, street style, emo, et cetera—just pick one and lean into it. Everything in your closet that doesn't match must be donated graciously to a friend, a thrift store, or, ideally, a charity for Syrian refugees.
4. Live either in a big, well-known city, or a tiny town in the middle of nowhere. Suburbia is not allowed. You must either be able to talk about landmarks you often pass by and know that people will have seen them (i.e. the Chicago Bean or the Empire State Building) *or* make sure that nobody will have ever heard of your town unless they live there themselves.
 - a. If you choose the small town, the population must be under thirty-one thousand and the name must be something ridiculous, like Lorna, or Mayonnaise.
 - b. You must strike a fine balance of shit-talking the town and praising it. Say contradictory phrases like “I love my town, I just have no idea why anyone would ever actively choose to live there,” and “God, I am so glad I left [town], but I really do miss it.” Also, throw in a handful of vague phrases such as “ah, classic [town]” and “that's [town] for ya,” to leave people wishing they knew the context to understand what you mean.
5. Own a pet, preferably something quirky like an axolotl, and name it a very human name like Eric or George. If possible, rescue said pet from the side of the road or a barrel at the barn where your roommate boards her horse. Even if you get the pet from Petco, make it sound as if you rescued them by captioning Instagram

posts with/of your pet with phrases like “Who rescued who? [cat heart-eye emoji]” and “We saved each other :)”.

6. Surround yourself with a diverse and interesting group of people. They must all be extremely different and yet function as a perfect and problem-free friend group. Think *The Breakfast Club*, but at the end when they’re all friends. And make sure to check your star charts before committing to friendship—if your zodiac signs aren’t compatible it’s not even worth trying to make it work. Each person must have unique hobbies, skills, and backstories that are interesting, but not so much so as to overshadow you. Essentially, you should be a hodgepodge group of people that shouldn’t work as friends but somehow do, and seamlessly so. Also, they must all have unusual names like Ember or Versailles or Orion.
7. Have a nemesis that is the bane of your existence, the thing that keeps you up at night, and the motivation for everything you do. This can be a person that you do or don’t know personally, something bigger like an idea, or a societal or governmental structure.
 - a. Examples include: your academic rival, capitalism, your ex, climate change, toxic masculinity, Shawn Mendes, et cetera.
8. Be elusive about your social media. You must not have more than two kinds of social media and they must be perfectly curated.
 - a. Instagram: You can have it but you must only post a couple of times a year. Said post has to be either of you doing something artsy, or devoid of human subjects. The latter may be artsy or weird, it just cannot be basic. Though you should only post every couple of months to a year, make sure to change your profile picture at least once a week to show how much you constantly evolve as a person.
 - i. What to avoid at all costs: presenting your life as it actually is. This is not a biography; it’s a highlight reel.
 - b. Snapchat: You may have this, but you must make sure to have a cute bitmoji as well as a variety of private stories for different audiences, and content with quirky names that make people want to watch. Also, you must remain elusive by not keeping streaks and only replying when you feel like it. You are too busy doing cool and important things to be easily reachable. Also, keep that snap score low at all costs so that people know it is a rare privilege to receive a snapchat from you.
 - c. Tik Tok: This is allowed but only if you go viral. As with everything in this guide, it’s all or nothing. Your content must

consist of you grossly over-sharing about your life without ever sharing anything important about yourself. Post Tik-Toks making fun of yourself for having to take Plan B but never talk about how hard that experience was or how you're actually doing. Never do trends for what they are but take creative twists on them. Don't just copy a popular dance, do it while outside in a field or on a moving train. Also, make sure you look effortlessly put together in everything you post. As far as the world is concerned, you *did* just wake up like this.

9. Go out to parties but only cool indie ones with interesting themes. An album cover-themed party hosted at a house with a backyard and a fire pit? Yes. An America-themed frat party in a shitty college apartment? Absolutely not. You must not betray your quirkiness (this is your entire personality).
 - a. Take themes creatively and liberally. Always dress up as something not-obvious and conversation-provoking like a musician nobody has heard of, young Dwayne “The Rock” Johnson, or “the devils lettuce.” Even if others seem to think you have not fit the theme, simply maintain that you have. Go forth and prosper. (Remember: you are hot, smart, confident, and cool, and thus get a free pass).
 - b. Start conversations with people who seem cool by complimenting their outfits or asking whom they know at the party. Make everything you say hyperbolic, e.g. “OMG you look SO cute” or, in response to them telling you their very average major, “WOW that is SO cool!” Make sure to squeal a lot and give them a hug before you leave. Act genuine and extremely interested in everything they have to say even though you both know you’ll probably never see each other again—and even if you do, you’ll either actually forget having met or pretend to.
 - c. If a drunk person tells you they love you, say it back. Maybe they won’t think they meant it tomorrow but right now, they do, and love is one of those things you’ll want to collect as much as you can.
10. Cry about things that seem like you should cry about them—cute movies, sweet words from love interests and strangers alike, pretty songs that have been deemed “heartbreaking” by the media and art. But cry prettily. No snot, and no red eyes or nose— just a few crystal blue tears brimming at the edges of your eyes. Apologize

profusely for becoming emotional and talk about how much said thing means to you. If possible, tie it into a melancholy memory of someone you loved and lost. If the people around you say, “That sounds so hard,” or “You’re so strong,” or “Feel what you need to feel,” then you’re doing it right.

- a. If you’re actually upset about something, either don’t show it or play it off as being related to one of the items listed above. You may have the emotional climax of your story when everything seems to be going wrong, but the resolution must come soon. If you’re too upset or upset for too long, you’ll start to become a burden and, as the main character, you must always be likable enough to keep people interested.
11. Lastly, you must maintain a very strong sense of self. It doesn’t matter if you are loud, shy, rude, calm, et cetera, as long as you know who you are and stick with that. A character arc of personal growth is necessary, but never stray too far from where you started.
- a. Even if you cannot be the main character of everyone’s lives, don’t forget that you are always the main character of your own.

ELLIOT BENSON

I WENT RUNNING

shin splints be damned
I beat around the world
jacket spilling
from my shoulders
I breathe heavy
moon air
cool
I've got no one to
sing to

brain buck up
outdo yourself
speak louder than the
pounding already
drowning hiccupping
dumbfounding nonsense
out my ears

deafen me

for then I'll
no longer have to hear your
savagery
a tormented theme park
lives behind my eyes

there's several of me
that wish to be free
all tied up by my skull

and
skin
please, dearest.
cut the
ropes.

Release me.

ELLIOT BENSON

THE ROAD LESS TRAVELED

There's something clean
About standing in the middle of a road
Stepping deliberately in the negative not-space between painted
Yellow rays

CAMERON SHELTON

THE DEVIL AND THE PIPER

In a time forgotten by all who now live in the region of Iggorea, there was once a contest offered by a strange man. Unknown to most at first glance, this man was a devil from the Abyss. But to most, he appeared as simply a stranger from some distant land. He came offering riches to any who could best him in a contest of music. It was upon a great old hickory stump that he would stand and offer his challenge. Before his feet, he kept a mass of gold and silver, and it ever enticed the musicians of the country. Many came, and all of them lost. But what they had lost, no one knew. The stranger bargained with them, but none ever gave a single coin over. All anyone knew was that they were never seen again.

Each man who challenged the stranger believed that he was greater than all the rest and that he would undoubtedly win. And each time, they lost.

The stranger was now sitting patiently upon his hickory stump. He was clad in dark clothing, including a black and grey shawl with a hood that covered his face in shadows. He slowly began to drum his fingers on his thigh out of boredom. The man before him was sawing a bow across the strings of a viol. The music was intricate and beautiful, and the few people nearby were nodding their heads along.

The last several chords were struck in succession and the man finished his song. He looked up at the stranger, smiling arrogantly.

“What do you think of that, sir?” he asked, pointing his bow.

The stranger sighed. “It was fine. But it could be better.”

The stranger stood and produced a fiddle made of dark wood, with intricate golden decorations and thin steel strings. A black wood bow came along with it, with shining, bone-pale horsehair to be pulled across the strings.

A small container of rosin was brought out and rubbed into the bow, then the bow was pulled across the strings. A sharp hiss pierced their ears and the small crowd shuddered at its sound. But then, a piece of new music emerged; it was complex. It rose and fell and sounded similar to that of the viol player’s, but with more layers and intricacy.

The viol player’s smile slowly faded. His breathing became uneven and his heart beat quickly. Even he knew that the stranger was play-

ing a better tune than he ever could. For several minutes, the music continued, and the onlookers had somber looks on their faces. They knew the music was better. This man had lost, and they knew they would never see him again.

Before the song was even over, the crowd had dispersed quickly. They had muttered several condolences to the viol player, but then they were gone.

The song slowly came to an end and the stranger smiled maliciously. His yellowed teeth shone from the shadows under his hood. The viol player's lower lip quivered. His hands shook and he bowed his head.

"I've lost, then," he said quietly.

The stranger nodded. "Come with me." He ushered him into a small tent behind the hickory stump, and the man was never seen again.

Johnny stumbled into his father's workshop, his arms filled with supplies that he struggled to keep from falling to the ground. He eventually made it to his small desk off to the side, past the other master craftsmen.

A dozen tables, set in two rows running down the long room, were all covered in similar supplies to those Johnny had brought. Behind each table sat a craftsman of instruments. They were all hard at work, tinkering with their newest creations.

Johnny sat behind his own little desk and rubbed his hands together in preparation. He attempted to mimic the actions of the men around him. He tried to put pieces together and glue them in place, attaching new pieces and strings. The other men eyed him curiously. Several found it amusing that the boy was trying to be like them. They let out a few stifled laughs and quickly returned to their work before Johnny could see who it had been.

Johnny's face turned red every time someone laughed. His cheeks were hot and his ears burned. He decided he would try to carve a piece of wood into a new shape that he wanted to use. He shuffled his supplies around, but couldn't find a knife to carve with. He tried to push everything back where it had been, but several things rolled off the little table and clattered loudly to the floor. More laughs erupted that were quickly masked.

Johnny's face grew hotter. He averted his eyes and went to the back of the room, opening a door to his father's office. The room was

empty, so Johnny went to the desk and looked for a knife to use. He opened the drawers and looked through them, but found nothing.

He was about to close the last drawer and leave when the door to the room was shut with a slam. His head jerked up; he expected to see his father. But all he saw was the bare door. He moved to open it, but it was stuck. He couldn't pull it open. He struggled to yank the door, and it moved slightly, but not enough. As soon as he let go, it slammed shut again.

"Can someone help me?" he called through the door.

Only muffled laughs answered him from the other side of the wood. He tried the door again, but it felt like someone was holding it shut.

"Please?" he called once more.

Finally, he stopped pulling for a moment and waited. When he tried to yank it open again, it gave way easily. He fell backward and heard the laughter of all the men outside. He stood and brushed himself off. Avoiding their gaze, he went back to his little desk to sulk. After several minutes he realized he still didn't have a knife for carving.

Sheepishly, Johnny stood and went to the nearest desk.

"Do you have a knife I can use?" he asked quietly.

"No. Go on, leave us alone," the man said curtly.

Johnny moved on to the next man.

"Can I borrow a knife?" he asked with his small voice.

"Go on, boy." The question was completely ignored, and Johnny was dismissed.

As he moved on to the next man, his face growing even redder, the door to the workshop opened. A large man stepped in, with a bushy beard and caterpillar eyebrows. He wore a button-down shirt and a short apron that was tied around his large waist. In the apron's pockets were numerous tools, along with the man's hands. As he stepped inside, he produced his hands to wave at the workers. His hands were large, but his fingers were surprisingly slim. They were leathery looking, with calluses and a few old cuts on the palms.

"Johnathan Jr.," the big man boomed as he came in from the bright world. "Leave the men alone. How many times do I have to tell you, you need to let them work. You're distracting them."

"Sorry father." Johnny scrambled away back to his desk like a little mouse. There, he continued to try to put things together.

"Listen up, gentlemen," John Sr. called as he walked down the aisle between the two rows of tables. "We have a very important

man coming to look at some instruments tomorrow. I want your best work on display for him.”

The craftsmen all shouted their understanding and began to work even harder than they had before. Johnny was excited by the prospect of someone looking at everyone’s work. He too began to work hard, trying his very best to put something together that would make a nice sound for the important man. All day he toiled until the sun went down and the craftsmen went home. Johnny lived with his father in a house adjacent to the workshop, so after he had eaten dinner, he scrambled back to his desk to work on his instrument.

For hours into the night, he worked. And when he awoke, he found himself, face pressed onto his desk, groaning at the sight of the sun. There was a knock at the big door and he stood to open it. One of the older craftsmen was outside, and he brushed past Johnny to get to his work table.

As the morning progressed, the rest of the craftsmen arrived and put the finishing touches on their newest instruments. John Sr. supervised them, and after a few hours, he left out the front door.

Johnny was wrapping a piece of stiff woven fabric to keep parts of his instrument together, when his father returned. The big man ushered in three men along with him. Two were older, one of them being thin and small, with a slightly hunched back, and the other being broad-shouldered and tall. The third man appeared middle-aged, with raven black hair. His face was covered mostly by a thick but neatly trimmed beard. His hair was long and pulled back into a tight ponytail. If it were allowed to drape down, it would likely have fallen just past his shoulders.

“This is the workshop where our highly skilled craftsmen work hard to produce the finest instruments in Iggorea. You will, of course, have the pick of the litter.” John Sr.’s voice was loud and called the attention of everyone in the room.

The tall older man walked up to each table and inspected the piece that was offered to him. Several lutes and mandolas, a harp, a few flutes, a pair of piccolos. The smaller man followed closely behind the entire time, hovering over his shoulder. He offered his opinion on each piece.

“Not elegant enough. You require something great, not a children’s instrument,” he said about a recorder.

The bigger man grunted in agreement and continued on. The youngest of the three stayed back and observed things for himself. He walked slowly around the edge of the room surveying all the

craftsmen, his hands clasped behind his back, his eyes inquisitive. He scanned each table until finally, his gaze fell on Johnny. Slowly, his head pitched to the side and he watched as the young boy fiddled with an instrument, turning it over in his hands.

He could tell the boy was new to this. His space was littered with discarded attempts and miscellaneous bits of material. He could also tell that the boy was sad. The two older men hadn't even glanced in his direction and Johnny's lips quivered ever so slightly.

Johnny looked up and pulled himself together as the young man approached him. He pitifully offered up his instrument and the man took it gingerly. It was a pan flute, with six pipes in all. The bottom ends of the pipes weren't all equal lengths apart like a normal flute, so the sounds wouldn't quite match. But the man took a special interest in the instrument.

"My name is Peter." The man introduced himself and offered a hand to shake, which Johnny took quickly. "I am a professor of music at the University of Ashten. It's nice to meet you—?"

"Johnny," the boy completed the sentence.

"Johnny," Peter echoed. "How much for your flute?"

"Uh . . ." Johnny hesitated. "Two copper," he decided.

Peter smiled and reached into his pocket, producing two gold coins. "All I've got is gold. It'll have to do." He placed the coins, one on top of the other on the desk, and gave Johnny a wink as he stored the pan flute.

As Peter pulled back his long coat, Johnny saw that there was a case on his belt for a panpipe with about eight pipes. Johnny blushed as Peter removed the shiny panpipe and placed it in his pocket, storing the smaller, more crude pipe in the case.

"This will do fine," the oldest man was saying, holding up a violin and handing it over to his shadow. He paid John Sr. and left swiftly, Peter following him after several moments.

Johnny was walking down the road toward the old stranger's contest when he saw a familiar figure. Peter was standing at the edge of a small crowd, facing the carriage on the roadside. Johnny quietly slipped next to him and waited for the man to notice.

"Hi, Professor Peter," he said after several silent moments.

"Hello, Johnny. Care to watch?" Peter asked, nodding his head in the direction everyone was facing.

Johnny smiled and nodded. He was then hoisted up onto Peter's shoulders and he could see beyond the crowd. The dark-clad stranger

sat upon his throne-like hickory stump and watched as the old man who had come to the shop earlier tuned his new violin.

“That’s Headmaster Ideli. He is the head of the Music Department at Ashten. He believes he will win this contest,” Peter informed Johnny. Then everyone fell silent as the music began to play.

For several long minutes, Ideli played a piece of music that almost bored Johnny to sleep. But the crowd, including Peter, seemed convinced it was an excellent performance and worthy of great praise.

“Give it your best shot, stranger. Hold nothing back from your performance,” Ideli said arrogantly as he finished.

“You wish to hear the best I can perform?” the stranger asked.

“I do.”

“Very well.” The stranger rosined his bow and pulled it across the strings of his fiddle and played as though a whole band made music with him.

Upon finishing, there was no doubt that the stranger had won. Several in the crowd wiped tears away from their eyes at the beauty of the song. And Ideli hung his head. But before he could be taken away, there was an interruption. Peter dropped Johnny back to the ground and moved forward through the crowd.

“That was the best you could do?” Peter asked.

The stranger gave the most subtle nod of his head.

“Well, you’re pretty good, old chap, I’ll have to admit. But if I might, I think I can do better.”

A shocked gasp and a clamor arose from the crowd. They were in disbelief.

“You just sit right there and listen.”

Peter produced his panflute. The smaller one that he kept in the case now. Johnny let out a small cry of fear, but Peter gave him a reassuring wink. The stranger barked a laugh at the sight of it.

Peter blew into the pipes to get a feel for them. Several did not make the sounds he had been expecting, but he adjusted accordingly. Then he began to play. His song began soft and seemed to have started before anyone had noticed. The song grew and continued to rise—forming a melody. It became more intricate and loud. Then suddenly, it fell. It dropped from the long notes into a series of shorter, more complex chords.

Not only did it sound beautiful, but it conjured images in the minds of all those who heard it. Scenes of green grass and wide-open prairies. Of clear waters and swift-moving streams. Of nature at its height, untamed and wild, her majesty towering above all who walk upon her.

When Peter had finished, the stranger bowed his head in defeat. He stepped aside from his hickory stump and offered up the riches of gold and gems before his feet.

"I don't want your gold. Not all of it." Peter leaned down and retrieved a small bit of gold in the shape of a fiddle. It was about a third the size of the real instrument but weighed much more. He offered it up to Johnny. "Take this. And make something of yourself. You could be something very great indeed."

"Who is this boy who carries my gold?" asked the stranger.

"He made this." Peter held up the pipes he had played.

"Such ragged construction. It's a miracle it stayed together."

Peter smiled. "It's not always about the quality of the instrument. Sometimes it's about the quality of the craftsman, and the care put forth by him. And of course a little bit of skill at playing." Peter chuckled at complimenting himself.

The stranger grumbled momentarily. "And what of the rest of my gold?" he asked.

"It is to buy what my friend here has lost." He gestured to Ideli.

The stranger looked at him, then at Ideli, then back. Peter stepped close to him, so he could see under the shadow of the hood.

"Between you and me, we both know what you are. And what you take for winning. Now I'd like you to leave. Of course, come right on back to me if you ever want to try again. I'll tell you once, I'm the best you'll ever see."

CAMERON SHELTON

TO MEET THE PAST

Sarah paced in the main room of her home. It was a small house with two bedrooms, one bathroom, and a combined living room and kitchen. She shared the second bedroom with her two sisters—eight-year-old twins. Her mother and father shared the other room with her brother, a newborn of ten months.

Her mother was, at present, in the kitchen, trying her best to cook dinner while keeping baby Tomás entertained. She plopped a bit of cooked carrot on the little table in front of him. He picked it up and immediately stuck it in his mouth without question.

The twins, Isabella and Laia, came running into the room, chasing each other about. Sarah could never quite tell if one was angry at the other or if they were really just playing. But at the moment there was no angry yelling, so she let it go.

“Isa, Laia,” their mother called. “Ven pa’ ‘qui. Ayúdame con la mesa.”

The twins groaned and walked, dragging their feet toward the kitchen. They began to place silverware at each seat alongside napkins.

“¿Y usted, Sára?” her mother asked. “¿Vas a comer con nosotros?”

“Creo que no, mamá. Quiero ir cuando papá llegue,” she said.

“Pues, para ahora, ayúdanos con la cena,” her mother told her, picking up Tomás because he had begun to whine.

Sarah went to the stove and stirred the pot, adjusting the flames to let it simmer. The twins began to argue with one another, something about the order the silverware went in.

“Will you two be quiet?” Sarah hissed, rolling her eyes at the pair.

The girls immediately switched to yelling at their older sister, until Sarah finally got up and walked back to the living room. At which point, they went back to yelling at one another, seeming to forget she existed.

Sarah sat down in the large brown recliner that her father loved. It was the seat he often fell asleep in on Sunday afternoons after early morning Mass, still wearing his nice white shirt and his best tie. Sarah closed her eyes, just like he would, waiting until she heard the front door open and the screen slam shut after. She jumped up and embraced the man who had entered. He was dressed in a pair

of slightly worn jeans and a gray button-down with a tan jacket. His coat smelled like it always did—an old cedar chest and a hint of sweat. Sarah inhaled the familiar scent of her father.

“Hey, Sarah,” he said, wrapping his arm around her. “Are you going?”

“Yes, Papá,” Sarah told him, ducking out from under his grip.

“Pues, have a good time,” her father said, opening the door for her.

“Thanks, Papá,” she called as she skipped down the front steps.

The door shut behind her and the cool night air made her shiver for a moment. She considered going back in for a jacket but rejected the idea, unwilling to deal with the chaos inside. Instead, she walked down the road. Her parents believed she was going to her friend Itzel’s house to watch some movies, but she passed the street she would have turned down if she were going to see Itzel.

Sarah looked down the street, her chest tightening slightly as she thought of going to see her friend. Maybe she should actually go. Itzel’s parents would be happy to have her. But no, Sarah walked on. She shoved her hands into her pockets and held her head low, trying to keep a little more warmth in.

Eventually, Sarah stopped at a set of high, wrought iron gates. They blocked a driveway, but there was a narrow gap between the gate and the fence next to it. She walked through it and continued up the road. Eventually, she stepped off the hard pavement and onto the soft, yellowing grass. Looking at the gray headstones lined in neat rows, Sarah moved into the cemetery.

Finally, she stopped and looked down at a long slab of flat concrete. The stone was gray and at one point had been smooth and polished. Now it was cracking in certain places, especially along the edges, and the writing on its surface was faded. Sarah swept her hand across the top, brushing leaves and dirt off to reveal a name:

Emma Maria Perlinda Maes

Sarah proceeded to clean off the top as best she could, before sitting on the cold grass next to it. For a long while, all she did was stare at the grave. Then she spoke up.

“Grandma?” she asked cautiously.

There was no response. Of course, Sarah hadn’t expected a response. She was talking to a stone.

“I know I’ve never visited before. And I know you never met me,” she continued, “it’s just . . . all the other kids know their grand-

mothers. They talk about fresh cookies, warm quilts, and telling stories.” Sarah paused and blinked, preventing her eyes from watering. “And I don’t have those stories. I never got to meet you.”

Sarah stopped and stared for another long while. She reached into her pocket and produced a small candle.

“I heard you used to read by candlelight.” She lit it with a match and watched the wax drip slowly down onto the stone. She produced a thin book and opened it to a marked page. “You don’t mind if I read a little of my own poetry, do you?”

*From time to time, life leads you astray
From here to there, through night and day
But there will always be the one
Someone to guide you ‘till you’re done
Even from beyond, unseen, untouched
Every time you feel your hand clutched
Every season, all year round
A helping hand when you feel drowned
Guiding you forward, on and on
Through each dark night, and to the dawn
Like a companion, always there
Ever on the wind, and in the air
A steady rock, a solid stone
Never forget, you’re never alone*

Sarah finished the poem and closed the book softly. Her eyelids grew heavy, and she let them fall closed. She sat still for several minutes, slowly slipping away into unconsciousness.

“Ay, que linda,” said an unfamiliar voice.

Sarah opened her eyes but found no one around her. She was calm, despite the startling sound of being spoken to when expecting to be alone.

“Who’s there?” she asked. “Quien es?”

“Solía leer ese poema a su madre,” the voice continued, ignoring her question.

Sarah found something oddly familiar about the voice, though she was sure she had never heard it before. The candle she had brought was burning low now, and she couldn’t see much beyond a few feet. She thought she ought to be afraid. But there was a sort of presence that had a soothing effect on her nerves. For several moments, all was silent. Then a thought came into Sarah’s mind.

“¿Abuelita?” she asked carefully.

“Ah, me reconoces,” the voice said happily. “Me orgullo saber que quieres hablar conmigo, mijitita Sára.”

“Pues, no te conocía, pero eres mi familia, pasa lo que pasa,” Sarah said, stumbling over some of her Spanish, flustered by the turn of events.

“Ah, no importa. No te preocupes por conocer una anciana como yo. En cambio, preocúpate con los poemas. Es mejor uso de su tiempo.”

Sarah couldn’t help but smile as her grandmother jested with her. She turned the little book of poems over in her hand and smiled even wider.

“¿Te gustas las poemas?” Sarah asked.

“Claro. Solía escribir algunos originales,” her grandmother told her.

“Podrías decirme uno?” Sarah asked cautiously, waiting in anticipation.

There was a wholesome laugh, and her grandmother began to recite a poem.

*En día, eres mí sol, mí flor
En noche, eres las estrellas, y la luna
Eres mí vida, eres mí amor
Eres brillante, eres mí fortuna*

Sarah smiled as her grandmother finished the short poem. Her heart was glad, and she couldn’t help but feel warm despite the cold air. She closed her eyes and drifted back to sleep, comforted by the presence about her.

KATHERINE McGUINNESS

ECLIPSE

The body aches the way it always does:
like thawing snow, a moth drawn to lamplight
The body aches the way the moon aches,
for a light it does not know
the kind that illuminates craters, years apart and somber.
The moon cannot know the pain of years
 Only phases, only seasons.
It is autumn now and I am aching.
Not the body, not the soul,
Whichever part of me they baptized
in cold water, what's the word?
Body, blood, soul— that's right.
Divinity. My divinity is aching like the
moon, like rain on glass, like always.

KATHERINE McGUINNESS

SELF-PORTRAIT WITH MUD WASPS

grasping

grasping

grasping

daubers, they call them
 abdomen thrice as long as the body
 falling
 and

plums digest the festering young,
 eggshells left to rot
 flesh left to carve

cup it in your hands:
 the metronome
 the tuning rod
the frenetic thrum of life
 trying to escape.

grasping

grasping

grasping

the stinger pierces your skin and embeds,
 barbs scrape the dermal layer, unseaming
 as the body pulls free, the yellow anger
 the compound eyes
 the beating, glasslike wings;
fragile as salt.

your lips are petal pink, petal soft
petal everything, to them:

 bristled legs wander over tender flesh
 spindled oviscape probing for an
 entrance

a depository
a sanctum,

doomed though it may be.

grasping

grasping

grasping

finding nothing
but hymn-stained
berry-stained
promise-stained lips

they depart in a swarm
(to some, a plague)
to other fertile trees, other plums
 other petals

sidelong over drifting wind,
 downriver,
 downriver

JADE ROBERTS

OBLIQUE REFLECTION

Who are you?

A six-mile run on a Tuesday morning, forty-five minutes of relief. I sit in the library and toss the bagel I just bought into the nearby trash can. Blood in my throat. Mouthwash stings the cut made by short nails. Fuck. Chips and queso and gossip: the backbone of modern era friendship. My arm through hers as we run to the parking garage—our reprieve from fifty minutes of solitude. Stepping on piles of leaves, but none of them crunch anymore. Too soaked from the snow, like the laces and tongue of my converse from the icy puddle I stepped in, now melted snow. I left a light on in my bedroom. Not the overhead one, though, that one is too harsh. Instead, one of the four—yes four—lamps in my tiny bedroom. Covers peeled back, sheets thrown in the wash, stuffed animals on standby waiting to resume their place among the pillows. Flipping through the pages of a book I have half-read at least three times at this point. I fold my laundry and put it in my closet. I'll wear that shirt tomorrow.

Who do you love?

Rain is my favorite weather, the bone-shaking thunderstorm kind, the kind you watch from inside. There was a lunar eclipse this morning at 3:55. I bet it was beautiful. I didn't see it—I was asleep, dreaming a blank dream or sleepwalking. A burn on my thigh from the oil popping off the stove and laughter fills the under-decorated living room of the apartment as we shoo the cat off the counter. Pricked my finger on a sewing needle as I sewed my pointe shoes, making them pretty, only to break them in thirty seconds. I suppose functionality requires pain. I spend more time on my knees these days than I should. In front of that big white bowl praying for forgiveness as I revert back to a little girl day after day. Mouthwash stings the cut made by short nails. Fuck. The scar on my ankle from a surgery that has caused more trouble than it's worth. The cool blue tint of my skin parallels the lavender light that reflects from the snow onto the frozen windshield of my car.

Is love truly unconditional?

My cat broke three glasses yesterday, and I cut my finger picking up the broken pieces. I cut my finger a couple of months ago too—my fingertip gone, blood everywhere. I was drunk so it couldn't stop. It's supposed to snow tonight, and my winter coat is a three hour drive away and my roommate isn't talking to me right now—I hung up a poster but took it down (it didn't look quite right). And it is so cold at night now. I bought a heated blanket but don't care to use it. I walked outside and saw a shooting star and I wished that the flood wouldn't ruin my vinyl collection. There is no flood; I made it up. I clean my toilet three times a week now, not including the times before people come over. Mouthwash stings the cut made by short nails. Fuck.

ALI OWENS

THE CHERRY TREE

we'd get bears under the cherry tree,
splayed on their bellies, nose to tart fruit
and jammy-pawed

one fell asleep there, lulled by creeksong
into doze, pink flowers falling,
brown back sun-puddled and rising

backcountry beasts were no match for
the wilderness of your rage
home was the haunted forest

i'd stare out the window
count myself petal-blessed
holy baptism of blooms

you, the sleeping bear,
i tiptoed blossomsoft, lest i wake you

ALI OWENS

UNTIL SAFETY MAKES ITS HOME IN MY BONES

I sparrow through shadowing skies
I falcon over fields
birds-eye my vigilant ballet

I jaguar through jungles at dusk
snake-belly a path through the brush
chameleon my flesh into figment

I hummingbird, I dart
I tentate, wait in wings
atomic heart pulped and droning

I owl my way through darkness
obsessing—who? who?
I break my own neck for protection

I serpent the nights, suspicious
firefly the shadows
deer myself in headlights

dove, I mourn
mantis—
I pray

ALI OWENS

THINGS THAT ARE WORSE THAN BEING FAT

Waking up in the mornings and feeling
reality drop into your stomach,
a brick to the gut,
brittle ribs cracking like
scallop shells shucked.

The mirror that paints
a stranger's face, so you
test your tongue, the tickle
of lip-licking the only
thing to trust now
that all your favorite books are
joy-drained, cloaked in dust.

That time you got stuck on the roof
after he pushed the ladder away,
and still you were closer
to the dirt than to the sky, even
as you stretched your
greedy fingers, even
as hot shingles seared
the backs of your legs.

Violence.

The time the river spilled its banks
and you were jealous, seeing it destroy
the whole damn canyon, dragonlike,
the matchsticks of houses bobbing
like bloated corpses, the grand
piano upside down, keys
strewn, lost teeth littering grass.

Watching the news, most days.

Letting your desires lie dormant
in some trivial to-do list
while you sweep the floor
for the feet of other people, serving
lavish gilded cakes with a smile
as empty as your own plate.
Hunger.

Starvation.

The slow and somber unraveling
of the self like
a secondhand sweater,
lousy with loose threads, like
it is you whose fit is all wrong
for the world and not
the other way around.

MITCHELL GLOVER

VANCOUVER

We stood on the street corner of my new apartment. I was excited to finally move out at eighteen, to a new city in a new country. My siblings both moved out when they went to college and now it was my turn. The last child to go. I couldn't wait to see what the world would bring. That's how I felt at first.

It never occurred to me that my dad could cry.

"I love you," he said.

It was the way he said it. I heard that crack and tone shift that comes with holding back. I saw the first tear on his face and my excitement, eagerness, and anticipation fluttered away. I wasn't ready.

"I love you too."

We embraced one more time before my dad left. Just like that—I was alone, standing on a street corner in Canada realizing I had no idea what to do next.

Orientation

I went to Canada so I could attend Vancouver Film School, though I didn't have a clue what to expect. My school wasn't a typical university—it felt strange. Most of my friends were posting all kinds of pictures of their college campuses, but my school didn't have a campus. It was just a random building downtown. I got my first real glimpse of what it was like at orientation.

Once inside, things seemed to be what I would expect. The ceiling was high, and the walls were bright white, lined with a collection of several different movie posters. A line of people waited to get their student ID photos taken, while the random gear was handed out. A pen, an umbrella, and a backpack. The backpack broke within the first month.

They gave us the sticker name tags that you usually get at events like this, with your name and what program you're in. That's how I met my first classmate, Isadora. She gave me nerdy book girl vibes, but we only got to say hi before being whisked away for the pictures. The photographer put a hand on my shoulder as he guided me to sit in front of the camera.

“So where are you from?”

I hesitated for a moment, unsure if I should say Colorado or the United States. “Uh, Colorado.”

“Oh cool, you’re from the States.”

After a mistimed smile, I was sent downstairs, to one of the school’s studios. The floor, the walls, the ceiling, everything was black, and the room echoed a bit too much. I also remember seeing several very fake plants and rocks, which made for a nice social setting.

It was supposed to be this event with food and drinks where you get to meet everyone. That was true, but if I’m honest, the food selection was more than sad. It consisted of some small oranges and bananas, with a handful of fruit snacks. However, despite the strange setting and lackluster food, the event did go as intended. My new classmates kept popping up and introducing themselves.

I first started talking to Zoe, and several other classmates came and joined the conversation one by one.

Zoe: The South African horse girl. I thought the horse girl vibes would annoy me, but it turned out not to be an issue. She was relatively down to earth.

Casey: Somewhere between surfer-bro and Canadian redneck. At first, I didn’t like him. I think he was trying to flirt with Zoe.

Aiden: Basically me, but shorter. I thought he was as much of a nerd as I was. We went on a long rant about *Star Wars*, and I realized he was more of a nerd than I was.

Ed: The guy who overdresses for everything. He was chill, but a little too professional. Also, he wore a lanyard around his neck at all times. I don’t know why that detail jumped out at me.

Shae: Short. She had a lot of tattoos and was a strange mix of shy and overly cheerful. Also, she and Ed were dating.

Francisco: Tall, funny dude. He felt like he was trying a little too hard to be funny at times, but he was pretty cool.

A few of us decided to go explore downtown after orientation. That’s when I noticed the beauty of Vancouver. Our school was located in Gastown. It was grungy, yet charming. The buildings were a little older, the shops were hip and trendy. Until this moment, that’s all I thought Vancouver was, but this was my first glimpse into the city’s identity-changing magic. We walked maybe two blocks away from Gastown and the city put on a new face. As we transitioned into downtown, the buildings became tall, silver towers that stretched the height of the city. There were bars, clubs, and restaurants. Everything

felt more extravagant, more refined. This is the first time I remember feeling enchanted by Vancouver. What could I find? Where could I go? Whom could I meet?

School Life

Three-hour classes, five days a week. Don't forget homework. Needless to say, school kept me busy. The classrooms were weird in a distinctly film-school way. We were either in editing labs, studios, or theaters. Theaters and editing labs at least passed for normal, but the studios didn't. They are large, entirely black, and echo. A studio only passed for a classroom if it had a small cluster of desks randomly sitting in the middle. Honestly, the best part was we could sign up to use any available room. In other words, we could have movie nights in our theaters.

The school became more of a home to me than my apartment. I slept at the apartment, but that was about it. If I wasn't in classes, I was in the editing lab, hanging out with my classmates, or working on a project in one of the studios. The time I spent there was ridiculous.

As ridiculous as it was, it was somewhere I felt comfortable. The best moments were the ones that had nothing to do with class.

We would watch movies in the theater late at night. A few of us sat scattered throughout, enjoying the empty room to ourselves, and blasting whatever movie we felt like. The night I remember the most was watching *Old Gregg*—it's a bit unusual.

In later terms, we would book editing rooms. They were small private rooms with a specialized editing setup and a couch. As an editor myself, I spent countless hours locked in those rooms editing away, with various friends coming and going, passing out on the couch, and bringing food. One night in particular, Casey (surfer-bro/Canadian redneck) and I stayed there till the early hours of the morning trying to refine a project last minute, because that's the only way to do it.

On another late night, a few of us were doing some last-minute editing when the fire alarm went off. We decided that editing was more important and continued to work until the security guard kicked us out. When we finally did leave the building, I was both surprised and completely unconcerned about the number of people still at the school at such a late hour. It was more than twenty, maybe, I don't know. I didn't count.

It's these memories that made the school special. The random moments and the odd events. The strange layout and design of the school. The community of people is all grouped. The makeshift classrooms. The printers never worked. The elevator had to bounce up and down several times before opening its doors. The school was all of those things together, that's what made it feel like home.

Bugs

Bedbugs are the worst.

A few months into film school, I noticed their bites on me and even found a couple. I complained to my landlord, and he sent a guy to come spray to get rid of them. It didn't work. So, we tried again. It didn't work again. So, we tried again. And shockingly, to everyone's great surprise, it didn't work. Again. It reached the point where my landlord told me it wasn't a big deal and that they didn't cause any harm.

After that, I moved out. I suspect that the problem was in one of my neighbors' units and the bugs kept spreading to my room, but they only ever sprayed my room, so nothing ever resolved.

I hate bedbugs with a passion. I remember looking at my bed each night, knowing there were bedbugs. There is something deeply unsettling about that feeling. And it's impossible to fall asleep knowing that bugs will be crawling all over you during the night.

My school helped me find an amazing new apartment. The problem was I needed to figure out how to move over there. There was the process of decontaminating my stuff, but the tricky part is I had no way to move it. Turns out, this is how Casey went from a guy who gave me surfer-bro vibes to a good friend.

Casey happened to have a car, so I offered him pizza in exchange for some help shifting my things across town.

"Nah, man. You don't owe me anything."

"You sure?"

"Yeah. I just want to help you out. And hopefully, if I ever need help, you'll be willing to help me out."

After that we were friends. We got food between classes, wandered around town, worked on school projects together, and always helped each other when needed.

It would've been pretty easy for him to make up some excuse to not help me out. In my experience that happens a lot when you ask

people to help you move. People already have plans, or something with work came up, or they got sick, or anything else people can think of as a reasonable excuse. Casey didn't do any of that. He said he would help out and followed through. It's people like him that are worth keeping in your life.

My Favorite Place

Coal Harbor and West End turned out to be areas in Vancouver that surprised me. They were quieter than I thought they'd be.

West End is where my second apartment was. It's a large area: apartments, parks, and beaches. It turned out to be another one of Vancouver's "identities." It was peaceful, a side of the city I was surprised to see. I couldn't get enough of it though. My apartment was in the perfect spot. I could walk ten minutes south and end up at the beach. I could walk ten minutes west and end up at Stanley Park. I could walk ten minutes north and end up at Coal Harbor, where I found yet another Vancouver identity: beauty.

When you are in Coal Harbor, you can walk right up to the waterfront and look out across Vancouver Harbor. It didn't take me long to fall in love with that view. You can look across the water and see North Vancouver and, behind it, the mountains. There's something special about seeing large mountains filled with green that stands next to the ocean's blue.

I found walking around these areas was often the best part of my day. I would mix up my route home, each time trying to find a new path I hadn't yet explored.

I find walking through places like that allows you to find secrets that those places hide. You wander, with no urgent goal, hoping to end up somewhere interesting. Along the way you can admire the cute little neighborhoods and the various unique houses. You can find that hidden park or the coffee shop that no one knows about. For me, that's when a place starts to feel like home.

Work Visa

After all my experiences there, I intended to stay in Vancouver. There was one tricky hurdle I had to get over first: I needed a work visa. This proved to be more of a pain than anything else. There were multiple types of visas, and, in hindsight, I should've attempted to

get a different type than I did, but at the time I thought the one I went with made the most sense. There was an option to apply for a post-graduate work visa.

It seemed perfect on paper. As soon as I was done with school I applied. I thought everything would be good to go, my editing professor even had a couple of job offers lined up for me as soon as I managed to get a visa.

I took my paperwork in and waited for a while before being called to the desk.

“The school you attended doesn’t apply for the post-graduate permit.”

I didn’t know what to say back. I had been informed that other people from my school had received this type of permit in the past, but now I couldn’t. I inquired about how that could be the case but the lady at the desk didn’t have any answers for me, so I was out of luck.

The post-graduate visa wasn’t going to work, and I didn’t qualify for the other types of visas. There was one option that would allow me to get a visa if I had a job, but any job I looked into wanted me to have the visa *before* giving me the job. After that, there wasn’t much I could do, so I had to go back to the United States so I could get a job. I’d say I had to go back home, but it was just leaving home all over again.

MITCHELL GLOVER

LUNCH WITH A STRANGER

Sunday, 8:30 am: I wake up and head down to the kitchen. Mom is watching the news in the living room while Dad makes coffee. 8:45 am: I make breakfast and have the coffee Dad made for me. 9:00 am: there's a knock on the door—it's Grandma and Grandpa.

In my experience, there were specific times I would see my grandparents. If I, a sibling, or a cousin had a birthday, we would see them at 8:00 pm for some cake and presents. Holidays were another occasion—sometimes an Easter lunch, other times a Christmas brunch. I could always expect to find them on the sidelines watching my soccer games and I could always expect to find them in the crowd after a band concert. The only other time I saw them, let's not forget, was Sunday at 9:00 am.

Over the summer, August 2022, Grandpa came over and had lunch with me. Grandma had a friend in town, whom she hadn't seen in a decade or two, and they were planning to go downtown to get lunch and shop around. The plan was for Dad to spend lunch with Grandpa, but he had to make an unexpected trip out of town, and Mom had work, so it fell to me.

Great. I liked Grandpa enough, but conversations with him are tough to get through. It would be awkward. There wouldn't be much we could do. There wasn't much to look forward to, but sometimes that's how it is. Part of me feels guilty for not wanting to talk to him. Maybe that's justified, maybe it isn't, but I was, and still am, more than willing to talk to him.

"We'll only be a couple of hours," Grandma kept insisting.

I couldn't seem to talk her into spending more time with her friend. I couldn't really tell you exactly why. I think that she still saw me as a young kid, which I guess is what you get when you are the youngest of your siblings. I also think she was scared to leave Grandpa for a large amount of time. Thinking back over the last five years, I can't think of a time that she would have been able to.

When I was young, I really liked trains. It's a memory that escapes me, but for one of my early birthdays, Grandpa built a train table for me. This turned out to be the perfect present, although I did not know it at the time. I used to have a wooden train track set and I

would put the pieces together, almost always in a circle from what I remember (very creative, I know). I would send my plastic trains spinning in circles round and round.

When Grandpa came over for lunch, I assumed we might grab McDonald's—a favorite of his. My grandparents like meat, potatoes, and McDonald's. I thought we would have lunch, then put on a nature documentary while we sat in awkward silence. A nature documentary was the only thing I could think of that we could watch. I still figured I'd get lots of questions about it, but it might be easy enough for him to follow. He wouldn't be able to follow anything with a story, so it wouldn't be worth trying to watch something like that. I also thought we could watch sports, but even that is hard for him these days. More recently, during the World Cup, we were watching a soccer match when my grandparents came over. Grandpa and I sat in the living room, and he kept asking me the same three or four questions on repeat. *What's the number in the corner there?*—the game timer. *Is this football?*—it was soccer. *So, most of these players are from the US then?*—it was a game between Belgium and Morocco. It's hard to enjoy watching something like that when you have to answer the same questions over and over again. It's difficult to avoid getting annoyed by it. It is annoying, but I don't think it would be fair to express that annoyance to him.

On the day we had lunch, Grandma dropped him off around noon. After Grandma left, we hopped in my car and drove to McDonald's. Knowing Grandpa, I went out of my way to drive carefully. He was, shall we say, an overly cautious backseat driver, at least to everyone else in the family.

"You're much better at this than Dona," he told me. Dona is Grandma's name. His name is Jack.

"What do you mean?"

"She, uh," he turned and looked at me, "she doesn't really know what she's doing."

I bit my tongue after that comment.

When I was fifteen, like most other kids at my school, I was learning to drive. Both my siblings had gone on long drives with Grandpa when they were fifteen, so I had to as well. I remember dreading it after hearing about how painful it was to drive with him. Grandpa, even in his prime, was one of the slowest drivers on the road, to the point where it was dangerous how slow he would go. He was cau-

tious, which isn't a terrible thing in itself, but, because of it, everyone else hated driving with him.

When he took me out to drive at fifteen, I don't remember having any issues. Actually, I think it was one of the best experiences I've had with him. We drove for about two hours together, just going wherever we felt like. I don't think Grandpa made a single comment the entire drive. Instead, he just told me stories. He told me about the time when he got certified to drive semi-trucks, and how he used to teach others to drive them. He told me about his dad, and how he would work for his dad at the gas station that he owned. He told me about his time in the marching band. He told me a lot about his sister and their relationship growing up.

I really should have written those stories down after we got back. I don't remember any details from them, and he wouldn't be able to tell me any of them now. I don't even remember if he really told me all those stories or if I made up some of them in my head.

McDonald's was weird. We walked in and there was a rush of people which made it a bit chaotic. I don't know if Grandpa hadn't been to a McDonald's in a long time or simply couldn't remember, but he seemed amazed by the self-order kiosks that they had. I walked up to one, asked Grandpa what he wanted, and put our orders in. Grandpa thought it was incredible I could do that and that I was amazing for doing all this. All this when all I did was drive to McDonald's.

I told you I had a train set when I was a kid, right? Grandpa had one too. Actually, whenever we were over at their place for a birthday or a holiday, one of my favorite things to do was to go down to the basement with Grandpa to play with the trains. His trains were quite the upgrade from mine. He had a proper, motorized train with an intricate setup. I remember he had a very boxy remote that controlled everything. He let me flip the switches and set the speed but made sure I didn't send them flying around the track too fast.

After we got back from McDonald's, we sat down and ate. It was a quiet lunch. We didn't really have much to say to each other—other than Grandpa continuing to praise me for how amazing I was. I still don't know what I did that was so impressive to him. It could have been the fact that I knew how the McDonald's kiosk worked, but I suspect he thought I was younger than I actually was. I think he was just impressed I was able to drive somewhere and order and pay all

on my own. That's just a theory though. I wish I could see what was going on inside his mind.

A couple of years ago, my grandparents came over to my parents' house for Grandpa's birthday. I was there at the time and while Grandma ended up in the kitchen talking with my parents, I ended up standing in the hallway talking with Grandpa. The conversation felt like I was listening to the same song on repeat.

"Let's see, uh, how old am I? 80 . . . 82?"

I reminded him that he was 84.

"Oh, that's right. Well, I don't remember. Don't fall down!"

After an awkward pause he would then go on to tell me about when he was a professor, at least he tried to. Then somehow, he would circle back to his age, and we would go again.

"Let's see, uh, how old am I? 80 . . . 82?"

I reminded him that he was 84.

"Oh, that's right. Well, I don't remember. Don't fall down!"

In recent years, he's been in the habit of telling me not to fall down and to not get old.

We finished eating lunch and I asked Grandpa if he wanted to watch a nature documentary, but he actually suggested that we sit outside. I figured that we would just have an awkward conversation loop like we did that time on his birthday, but the conversation was different this time.

I don't remember exactly what year it was when he fell. I was in late high school, so I would have been 16? Maybe 17? I'm not sure. Either way, I remember getting a text from Dad while I was in school that day.

Grandpa is in the hospital.

Grandpa slipped and fell on a step and broke his neck. I don't think any of us were confident he was going to make it and he wasn't himself for a few weeks, but in the end everything was okay. His mind and his strength weren't what they used to be though.

I was more worried about my dad at the time. Maybe that sounds foolish. I don't remember ever asking my dad if he was okay, and I never visited Grandpa in the hospital. Part of me feels guilty and a bit selfish for not doing so. The other part of me thinks it's okay because I didn't really know how to process the information at the time. If it had happened today, I wonder how I would react differently.

Grandpa has had Alzheimer's for a while now. That's why he surprised me when he started talking while we sat outside after lunch. It wasn't just the same conversation loop, things repeated, but he went back and told me some stories. He tried to anyway, as best he could. When he started telling me stories, I started recording the conversation. If at all possible, I wanted to be able to keep some of these stories. What I got from the recordings wasn't coherent stories. Instead, it's more like I caught snapshots of what he was thinking. I was really just there to listen and be someone he could talk to.

He stuttered a lot. He struggled to find words he was looking for, he got lost in his head. I think some of the memories he got lost in became reality for him. These are the things he said that stuck with me:

"Well mother is, well I think one or two years younger than me. Yeah, and we, we met in high school, yeah."

I think he thought I was my dad here, and for a lot of this conversation. I asked if they met when they had a class together.

"Um, probably," he laughed. "Uh, because she did so much medical work, and um, she didn't do, no, when I graduated from high school, she was right with me, I think we were one, were one year, apart, and she . . . uh, I don't know, definitely, she was a um, a . . . what do you call them, because, there was a period when she was not teaching anymore. That's when you came. Is that right?"

His thoughts don't always connect. It makes it difficult to follow and at the time I had a hard time responding to anything he was saying, because most of what he was saying didn't go together.

"Well, I'm trying to think whether your dad . . . was . . . we had him, as a dad, when I, before I became a professor . . . I think, maybe not . . . maybe not, because it's just the two of you . . ." he laughed, patted his legs, and smiled, *"I'm just . . . I've forgotten these things."*

There were multiple times in the conversation when he acknowledged that his memory was bad. After he did, we often sat in silence for a few minutes. I wouldn't really know what to say.

"How, how were we, how were we, we have enough to, to, uh, what's the word? Well, no, see you were a toy before, when did you start going to college?"

I told him when I started school.

"Boy, I thought you were older, because, um . . . uh jeez, on my, in my, what is it? Beth? No, that's not right. Jeez, well that's what happens when you get too old," he laughed again.

I noticed he always laughed after commenting on his age.

“Well, my mother and dad and, and Dona, what is she? She’s my wife, um, she’s a year older, I think, um lighter than me, is the way it is.”

This reminds me of an instance Grandma told me about a few months back. Grandpa walked into the bedroom and asked her where his wife was.

“And she went into the med school also. Um, wow, I was also in school because we, I think we, got to med . . . got to . . . marriage. After, after when? I think I was. Well, I was always a year younger or a year, older than her. And she was the one that pushed me through what I could do after she started to teach. Yeah. Cause we had the money to do the more education. Oh my, anyway, you’re here. You’re what? In your fifties now?”

I told him I was only twenty-three.

“Oh, you’re only in your twenties, oh, okay, well yes, that’s right. Because it was your dad that we had first, yeah, that’s right.”

I never know when I should correct him and when I shouldn’t. If I don’t correct him, what he says will make even less sense. If I do correct him, I can’t imagine how hard it would be to have people constantly tell you that you’re wrong about something.

“You don’t have anyone underneath you though? Do you? Now wait a minute, is it three kids that we have?”

He pauses, again.

“I think mother is—is quitting. She’s turning that in—working.”

I told him that she has been retired for a while.

“Well, I hope we have enough money to get going . . . Yeah, not, not um . . . Time is over for me. We just hit one, didn’t we? Well, anyway.” He paused here for a while. *“I’m wasting your time.”*

He wasn’t. I loved hearing his stories. Even if they didn’t make sense, and even though I was never looking forward to lunch. I told him that his stories were important to me and that he was in no way wasting my time, though I doubt he remembers.

ANDY PARKER

BODY BRAID

i've always had hypermobile fingers, so they say; the thing with hypermobility, i would later learn, is it's not really that you are particularly special and talented at being bendy but that your body doesn't provide the right feedback when you stretch too far—doesn't send out the right pain signals to let you know when you're about to break or dislocate something—and this magical safety net that i did not have—the lack of which allowed me to touch both feet to the back of my head until i was fourteen and which still allows me to bend my fingers all the way back but also makes it hard to hold things or write for a long period of time—i would not have a name for until my freshman year of college which is when i learned this sense is called proprioception, and not only does it help tell your body when to stop but it also lets you be aware of the space you occupy in ways such as being able to walk without looking down at your feet or being able to smoothly guide a cup to your mouth; one of the ways to help people with hypermobility is by wearing something called a body braid which is a series of connected loops of stretchy fabric—almost like resistance bands—that you loop around your body (in a way that's not *not* a little bondage-y) and you wear it over your clothes so when you stretch the resistance of the bands mimics proprioceptive feedback so you know when you're stretching yourself too far, which sounds very helpful but they are so expensive i could never get one; still it's nice to imagine having a body that loves me enough not to tear itself apart: one that treats itself kindly, doesn't feel guilty for crying out when it feels pain, and while i've never had that kind of body i can imagine it feels a little something like when i first met you and you looked at me and my body felt truly inside of itself for once—like the imprint it left on the universe was just the right shape—so, while i have never worn the thing, sometimes i dream of body braids made not of black elastic but of elaborate twisting hóngxiàn, encircling me like your arms and showing me how not, for once, to rend myself apart.

ANDY PARKER

BEHOLDER

is myself, _ut also
understo
we. it seems my anc_sto
od our cap
it may be misheard
acity f_r
multitudes
as "war" or "woe" or "woah" wish it sounded
mo_e like me.
rs, like w_itman
in its b_ing. i only_a_l of which is imple-

ANDY PARKER

RETURN TO SENDER I & II

Dear [],

It must be st_ange, being audience to the conf_ssion of a stranger.
How should I begin?

I often find language melon-bi_ter and foreign on my tong_e. Is that
your fault?

I apologize; this is not how I was taught to speak to my mothe_.

Can I be ho_est with you? I wonder if my need to bend myself in new
shapes is in the hope tha_ one of them might mold to you, if I'm only
trying to alchemize myself into the s_n you would have kept.

Some nights I like to think you're chasing after me, de_perate to loop
the oth_r end of the hóngxiàn line back 'rou_d your finger like you
never cut it at all.

I would let you, you know. You could laugh at my coltish Man_arin
and I could show you all I have burn_d at your alta_.

-

Dear [],

Could I ask for some mothe_ly advice? How much time is long
enough to build a s_lf upon? How many more nigh_s must I dream
myself prodigal before I ret_rn ~~home~~?

Can you think of a kinder word for what I am than “f_aud?”

I sometimes wo_der if the impulse to dedicate poe_ry to you twins
the impulse of moss to cling to graves, of m_thers of children thirty
years mi_sing to leave the porch light on.

Do you ache with the thought of what could have been, too? Do
you binge on the ache until you find yourself prostrate ov_r toilet or
notebook, expelli_g polysyllabic bile?

_ear [], are you l_aving the po_ch light on?

~~Love~~, Yours,
()

CAMBRIA GIFFORD

PORKCHOP

November 14th, 2022: 7:00 a.m.

I don't trust my grandmother.

I don't trust her to pick me up on time, or to water the plants, or to empty her ashtrays when they're full. And I don't trust her around Benny. When my mom came to the school play last year, she left Benny at home with my grandmother, and I forgot my only line because it was raining and Benny hates the rain and I knew my grandmother wouldn't close the curtains to hide the lightning or turn up the TV to drown out the thunder.

I also don't trust her to drive, but it doesn't matter because she still takes Benny and I to school every day. Benny usually just sits in the back and doesn't say a word. But this morning he's "sick," so I'm alone in the passenger seat of her car. Even though I'm sure he'll feel all better for his birthday party tonight.

As I wait, I kick my legs above the crumbs and coins that litter the floor mats. I stick my hands under my thighs to keep them warm. I lean my head against the window and the chill sends goosebumps bubbling over my skin. I puff on the glass—fogging it, letting it clear, fogging it, letting it clear.

A cold front swallowed us last night. This morning, I woke to blades of grass coated in thin, translucent layers of ice. Sidewalks chalky with snow. Heavy gray blankets of clouds tucked around the edges of town. I shivered just looking out the window.

The passenger door opens and I jerk, nearly flopping out of the car, my seat belt digging into my neck as I struggle to pull myself up. My grandmother leans over me, rooting through the glove compartment. She reeks of muddled rose. My grandmother likes to put roses in the blender with some vodka and dab it behind her ears. *Poor woman's perfume*, she calls it. I think it's just a waste of flowers.

I lick my lips, chapped, rough against my tongue, "Good morning."

"What? Don't mumble," my grandmother says. She's wrist-deep in the glove compartment. She wears a bathrobe, and the belt is loose enough to show a thin camisole sagging across her bony chest. Her blue-veined feet are stuffed in slippers, mud caked on the fur lining. She emerges from the glove compartment with a crumpled pack of cigarettes in her hand. The door slams—I flinch—and she walks

around to get in the driver's seat. She shoves the keys in the ignition. The car whines. The vents cough out cold, stale air.

My grandmother peers at me for a moment, the harsh winter light casting ugly shadows under her eyes. I pull my lips into a flat smile. She does not return it. Instead, she pinches my cheek, hard, then uses the same fingers to pluck a cigarette from the pack. She sticks it between pale, pursed lips. She flicks a lighter and the flame leaps. She hunches toward it.

One deep drag and the smoke floats to the ceiling, coiling above my head. I catch my breath and hold it; the smoke thickens. My chest is tight against the seatbelt. I look down and see my shirt twitching to the beat of my heart.

Finally, my grandmother cracks a window. I blow out my breath like it's a stream of smoke. Without a word, she wiggles the car into reverse, bounces over the curb, wiggles it into drive, guns the gas.

"Your father did a lot of stupid things with his money," my grandmother says abruptly. As she speaks, she gestures with the cigarette. I feel the urge to duck every time the ashy tip comes tilting toward my face. "You could lose the house."

We swing around a corner. A bunny zigzags across the road. We swerve, and the side mirror decapitates a mailbox. I shriek—a quick, involuntary thing.

My grandmother flicks her eyes to the rearview and shrugs, "Don't be dramatic." She presses her foot heavy on the gas, "Do you know what'll happen if you lose the house?"

Sometimes I think my grandmother only drives me to school so we'll be trapped in the same place for a while and she can say whatever she wants without interruptions. I try to think about what she might've been like at my age. I try to imagine her braiding hair, doing fifth grade math homework, swinging across the monkey bars. I can't picture it. Maybe she's always been like this. Maybe she was born with frizzy white hair and a frown so deep it leaves creases at the corners of her mouth.

"Are you listening?"

My toes are going numb. "Yes."

"Speak up."

"Yes."

"Don't spit at me. Have you asked your mother what will happen?"

"No." I stare out the windshield. The wipers are on as fast as they can go. It's not even snowing. They squeak and groan as they whip across the dry glass.

My grandmother flicks her half-smoked cigarette out the window and rolls it up. She grabs the steering wheel with both hands like it's trying to run away from her. "Ask her."

"Why don't you just ask her?"

My grandmother throws a glare in my general direction. Her crooked glasses make it difficult to know exactly where she's looking. "I already know."

"Then why don't you just tell me?"

"Who taught you to talk back?"

The question isn't meant to be answered, but I open my mouth without thinking: "My dad." It's not even true. I just said it.

My grandmother brakes. The car behind us screeches and veers into the other lane. It flies by with an angry finger wagging out the window like a flag. We sit in silence, the engine thrumming impatiently.

Her voice, thick beneath layers of ash, could strip paint. "My son did not teach you to be a bitch."

April 9th, 2016

When I was a kid, almost Benny's age, my dad filled a backpack with ginger ale and cream-cheese-and-tomato sandwiches and we walked to the park. His hand was huge and soft, squeezing my fingers to the rhythm of his whistling.

I remember I flopped in the grass, cold and prickly against my arms, and he swooshed the picnic blanket over me. Then he rolled and rolled me until I was wrapped so tight I could barely kick my feet. He pretended I was a burrito and gobbled my toes and patted his belly and burped and said I was the most scrumptious meal he'd ever eaten.

My grandmother met us under the old maple tree. She brought brownies wrapped in tinfoil, still warm from the oven. She smacked away my dad's hand when he tried to eat one before he finished his sandwich, then pinched off a corner piece and gave it to me when he wasn't looking. She shook up her can of ginger ale and sprayed us with bubbles and we didn't even care that our hair got all sticky-sweet.

When the sun dribbled into the hills she gave me her sweater, moth-eaten and fraying around the collar. I poked my finger through a hole in the sleeve and my dad pretended to snip it off and hide it in his pocket.

I remember my dad pulled the blanket around us and asked a lady walking a golden retriever to take our picture. My grandmother had it framed. It used to hang in her kitchen.

When my dad died a few months later, my grandmother packed the photo into a box and shoved it in the attic along with the rest of her life.

November 14th, 2022: 5:00 p.m.

Today is Benny's seventh birthday.

I just finished smearing red lipstick on the tip of my nose, the apples of my cheeks, and in big, exaggerated curves around my mouth.

I tell my grandmother, who is slumped in the peeling leather recliner, smoking a cigarette, that I want my mom to let me be the clown for Benny's party. My grandmother's cigarette smoke drifts lazily in front of her face. The dusty winter sunset streams through the window over her shoulder. When she lifts her scotch, the glass reflects a slice of the light and it hurts my eyes.

"Saddie," she says. My name is *Sadie*. She calls me *Saddie* because when I was a baby I cried every time she looked at me. "Clowns have to be funny. Tell me a joke. And I'll tell you if it's funny."

I rub my nose, and a bit of lipstick smudges onto the back of my hand. "Okay, what do you call a pig that does karate?"

"Who," she says.

"A—what?"

"A pig *who* does karate."

I swallow a sigh and scratch the back of my arm. "Okay, um, *who* do you call—no, I mean, *what* do you call a pig that—*who* does karate?"

"A porkchop." She stares at me through skewed glasses. Her lips don't even twitch. The ice in her glass cracks as the scotch slowly nibbles through it.

I shrug. "Well, yeah." My voice is quiet. My cheeks burn.

"That's funny," she says without smiling. The ash at the end of her cigarette gives up and crumbles to the carpet. "Tell it to your mother."

I walk backwards out of the living room, holding my breath until a wall separates my grandmother and me. At the counter, my mom is chopping onions. Her eyes drip round, glassy tears.

I slide across the kitchen tile in my socks. "Mom, can I be Benny's clown? I have a really good joke."

My mom sniffs. “What’s the joke?”

“Porkchop.”

My mouth hasn’t opened. I turn to see my grandmother in the doorway, holding her scotch and cigarette in the same hand, the other one pushing her glasses further up her nose.

“What, Ruth?” my mom asks dismissively. I can’t remember the last time my mom made eye contact with my grandmother. It’s like they interact without actually acknowledging each other.

“That’s the punchline.” My grandmother wanders over and snubs her cigarette on the edge of the cutting board. She leaves it there. Some onions brush against the ash. “Isn’t it funny?”

My mom’s hand slips on the knife and she slices off a bit of her fingernail. She pauses—just for a second, doesn’t even look up—then keeps cutting.

I want to cry. I want to scream *and* cry. But my grandmother is watching me, so I just stomp into the backyard and let the screen door slam behind me. My socks immediately soak up the frost on the deck. My toes curl. I lean against the wall, hands behind my back separating me from the scratchy wood. I wish she was dead.

July 20th, 2016

My grandmother sat next to me at my dad’s funeral. She held my hand and let me lean against her during the eulogies. She put her lacy black hat on my head to block the sun when we all stood up and watched them lower his casket into the dirt.

Benny was with a babysitter. I could’ve stayed with them, but I remember thinking I needed to see him be buried. It felt important. I wore my new rain boots—red ones he bought me the month before, on my seventh birthday. I accidentally rubbed them together during the pastor’s sermon and they squeaked like a dying cat. My grandmother whipped her head around and glared at me so poisonously, I flinched a little bit. She just pursed her lips and said nothing. Her arm, the one I was leaning against, was suddenly tense and cold. I slowly shifted until we were no longer touching. I felt like I’d been bitten.

My mom was far away during the funeral. I could reach out and touch her, but it was like reaching through a fog to touch a cloud. Her wrinkled forehead was heavy on her eyebrows; it still is sometimes. Her gaze slid past my face; it still does sometimes. My grandmother had to lead her around, speak for her when people apologized. I didn’t understand why everyone kept saying sorry. None of them had done anything.

My grandmother drove us home in silence. She didn't play music because she didn't want bad memories attached to any of her favorite songs.

November 14th, 2022: 7:00 p.m.

The party guests shuffle through the house, politely complimenting my mother on our tasteful bubbled wallpaper, plush-stained carpet, and lovely wrinkled curtains. This house hasn't changed in five years. A week before he died, my dad pushed the coffee table against the wall to clear a space for game night. It's still there. Our living room just has a permanent hole in the heart of it.

I'm moping in the corner with my head in my arms, so I only hear the sound of my grandmother's body hitting the floor exactly as Benny blows out his candles. *Thump*. Wisps of smoke climb to the ceiling, from her cigarette, from his candles. Her scotch glass lies in shards on the kitchen tile. Colored wax traces down the candles and drips onto the cake, forming hot, vibrant pools in the icing.

I crane my neck and prop my chin in my hands. My palms stain lipstick-red from where my cheeks rest against them; I am an amateur, a leftover party clown.

In the living room, Benny is perched on his piggy stool. He got it when he was two and still sits on it even though his bony butt hangs over the edges now. The cake is in front of him, waxy, melty, smoking. My mom's in the middle of checking a text when she looks up, a residual smile still on her lips. It fades as her brain processes, but she's lagging, blinking too much, opening and closing her mouth over and over. I watch everyone abandon Benny and pile into the kitchen.

The birthday boy swivels his wide owl eyes at me. "Sadie?" He's starting to cry silent tears. He's only ever cried quietly and quickly, even when he was a baby. He just calms himself down before anyone might notice he's upset. I threw big tornado tantrums when I was a kid, and my dad used to distract me by tap dancing. Just in the middle of the grocery store or wherever.

I wander over and start playing the piano on Benny's arm. I don't know how to tap dance.

"Sadie, what?" he asks. He's glancing at the crowd in the kitchen. His bottom lip is slick and pink. His skinny fingers grab at mine. The cluster of adults is becoming more agitated, and my mom breaks away and yells into her phone. Others are covering their mouths and glancing nervously at each other. Some start collecting their kids from around the house.

“Sadie.” Benny tugs my fingers. His tears have already dried up, leaving specks of salt on his round cheeks. “What happened, Sadie, please, what happened?” He’s squirming on his piggy stool. “Sadie?” He lurches up, and I have an odd feeling he’ll never sit on that stool again.

He sways on his feet, watching our mom in the kitchen, but he knows he shouldn’t go in there. He knows a lot for a seven-year-old. More than I do, anyway.

“I think she’s dead,” I say, and then I hand him a stubby plastic fork.

“Oh.” Benny squeezes the fork. He gnaws on his bottom lip. He looks at the kitchen one more time. He looks at me. Then he gives a little nod and starts prodding the cake frosting with the fork. He takes tiny, respectful mouthfuls, avoiding the swirling cursive that wishes him a “Happy, Happy Birthday.”

The cake is slouching to the side, weighed down by too many candles. I slowly remove each one and cup them in my fist like a bouquet of wax. No one is paying us any attention; the guests trickle out the door, their expressions halfway sympathetic, halfway horrified. The waxy candles in my hand turn soft and pliable. I mold them into a ball and roll it between my palms.

My mom is still in the kitchen, alone now. I peer through her legs at my grandmother’s stiff body. Her face is bright pink, and her blank eyes are bulging. She looks like a dead pig. Like a porkchop.

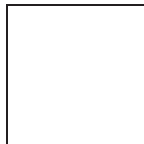
ETHAN HANSON

NO WORDS TO ASK FOR AN APOLOGY

There will be no gunshots in this poem.
If the word gun makes you cringe
here is a box to stay in.

I need
safe
space
too

Here is a box to breathe in



Here is a box with doors

And you
don't
need to
let
anyone

in.

No,

just cause it's silent,
does not mean
it's safe
to breathe.

For a second
here is a box
loud as the
opposite of violence.



TANYA SOPKIN

THE KNIFE ON THE FLOOR

The incessant doorbell ringing finally stopped when Nadya opened the door to her mother standing like a tree. She slouched, her branches snowed in weight by four mismatched tote bags and a big leather purse. The brief pang of guilt from making her mother walk alone from the bus to her apartment disappeared when she immediately stormed into the house.

“Why are you barefoot? You will get a cold,” her mother nagged as she hurriedly took off her shoes to put on the set of heeled slippers she forced Nadya to keep in her apartment for when she came over. “Take these please!” she said as she slid the bags off her arms onto Nadya’s and headed straight for the kitchen. Nadya slowly followed, recovering from the tornado of a Russian woman that just barged through her house in a long floral skirt, TJ Maxx blouse, and hair fresh out of curlers.

“Look what I got you,” her mother said as she pulled out a large, unlabeled jar of honey. “Blessed!” she yelled and continued taking out loaves of bread, glass bottles of water, candles, repeating “Blessed!” after each one.

“Thanks,” Nadya said with a flat smile as she went to put them in a cupboard already containing previous, now dusty, blessings. She paused as she saw the photograph taped to the cabinet door of her five-year-old self standing alongside her mother. It was taken on their last day in Russia, the two of them outside their old apartment, grasping two large suitcases with everything they owned. And yet here they were, the American dream diminished to her mother coming over to help her cook borscht for the week because she wasn’t able to make ends meet on her own.

Nadya began unpacking the rest of her mother’s bags, taking out beets, carrots, short ribs, celery, dill, potatoes, and onions.

“Did the priest whisper some words to these too?” Nadya said.

Her mother gave her a droopy-eyed look and swatted at her, “No, King Soopers did.”

Nadya put a pot of water and a pan on the stove as her mother began peeling vegetables. It took a few tries to get the stove to light, every click making Nadya wince as she prepared for a remark about how shabby her apartment was. Nadya’s cat jumped up onto the

stool by the kitchen counter, only his eyes and ears visible as his head poked up and scanned for unattended food to snatch.

“He better not jump on the counter,” her mother said.

Nadya went over to scruff his little head, “Oh, he wouldn’t. He’s too scared of you,” she said.

“He should be,” her mother said, waving a fist at him, the cat returning a battling glare.

“I think you two could be friends if you worked through this tension you have,” Nadya suggested.

“He’s the one who starts it!” her mom said as she handed her onions to start chopping, continuing to side-eye the cat.

“I applied to the bank I was telling you about.”

“Did you have an interview yet?” her mother said as she swiftly peeled and shredded beets.

“Wednesday,” she said.

“Are you prepared? Do you have a nice outfit? Are you going to do your nails?” she began asking.

“Yes, Mom. It’s just a bank teller position,” she said, scraping the chopped onions into a bowl. Some pieces fell onto the countertop and Nadya glanced up at her mom to make sure she wouldn’t see her wiping them off the counter with her bare hand.¹

“You couldn’t keep the last one,” her mother said.

“I didn’t force the company to lay me off.”

“Wear long sleeves to cover your tattoos,” she said, gesturing at her with her beet-bloodied hand.

“Mom,” Nadya sighed, turning away from her mother to distract herself with the cooking. She turned the bowl upside down and emptied the shredded beets, onions, and carrots into the pan. A loud sizzle filled the kitchen and she hurriedly began to sauté them to calm it down, the smoke filling the air.

Her mother noticed Nadya’s teary eyes and jokingly said, “Oh, don’t cry, you will get the job,” spitting over her shoulder three times.² Nadya laughed and pointed to the cat, who let out a whimper from the kitchen stool as his teary eyes also fell victim to the onion’s fumes. “He also wants you to get the job, so he can finally live in a nicer apartment,” her mother added. Nadya gave him a little pout as she continued mixing the vegetables, their aroma filling the kitchen.

1 If you wipe a table with your bare hand, you will have no money.

2 Similar to knocking on wood.

The water began boiling in the pot and her mom put in the short ribs, salt, bay leaves, and a spoonful of black peppercorns, covering it with a lid.

Nadya let out a little whine. “I hate the peppercorns, I always accidentally bite them and they hurt my mouth.”

“So watch what you’re eating before you bite!” her mom said.

Nadya continued stirring the vegetables as they softened in the oil. “What time is your flight next week again? I should be able to take you to the airport before my interview.”

“Lena and Olya will be at my house at 5:30 so be there early, okay? Do you promise to water my plants?” she said.

“Yes, I know. And to make sure that your neighbor hasn’t slid any notes under the door.”

“She’s crazy!” her mother said. “That woman wants to get me evicted! She keeps complaining about things that are not my fault—I play TV too loud one day, and I have too many plants on my balcony the other day. She’s the one with the ugliest apartment because she doesn’t decorate anything. I have to run away all the way to Mexico to celebrate my birthday so she can’t complain about me being too happy.”

“Oh! That reminds me! Do you want your birthday present now?” Nadya nudged her to say yes.

“Do you want to ruin my trip? Too early.”³

“You always give me my presents early!”

“Those are not birthday presents, they’re just presents. Besides, you should be saving your money right now. I don’t need a present.”

“You’ll like it. It’ll let you carry around good luck all the time.”

The pot interrupted their conversation with a loud hiss, milky bubbles rising against the lid. The hot water began leaking out onto the sides, hissing louder and louder as foam dripped down to the hot surface of the stove.

“Mom!” Nadya yelled as she lifted the lid so fast it hit the side of the pot with a loud bang. The cat sprinted out of the kitchen and her mother jerked from the suddenness, dropping the knife onto the floor with a loud clatter.⁴ Their eyes locked as Nadya froze with the lid in her hand, her mother a statue armed with a potato.

“I wonder what man is going to come,” Nadya laughed, breaking the stillness of the room.

3 It is bad luck to celebrate a birthday early.

4 A dropped knife means a man is coming.

"I should drop more knives, we need one," her mom joked, rinsing the knife to clean it of its omen. Her mother continued cutting the potatoes as Nadya stirred the vegetables until the entire apartment smelled like an earthly stew.

"Those are cooked enough, you should start washing the floors," her mother said as she pointed to the cat sniffing around the soup ingredients that had fallen on the floor.

"Why? I will just do it later," Nadya said.

"Wow, after I leave?⁵ You really do hate my luck," her mother said. Nadya sighed and left to go grab the bucket and the rag.

Nadya fought sleep as raindrops drummed on her car. She tried to concentrate on the headlights piercing the navy blue of the road but the dark sky and empty roads made it feel unnatural to be awake so early, especially dressed up in a pencil skirt and a blazer. Cold air blew through the air conditioning even though it was turned up all the way to high heat, Nadya's teeth chattered and a coffee mug was squeezed in her lap to create some warmth. Her nose was running—the past week she had been trying to fight off a cold but it nonetheless came, this morning's lack of sleep and cold air finally giving it the opportunity to attack.

She pulled up to her mother's apartment complex and tried to run quickly up the cement slab stairs. She could hear the women bustling inside the apartment before she even reached the floor. The door opened before she could hit it with a second knock, and was sucked inside the apartment by various old ladies' arms.

"Nadya, Nadya, Nadya!" Lena yelled, taking her face in her hands and smothering it in kisses.

"Oh, so good to see you! You look so beautiful! And professional!" Olya said, prying Lena off of her so that she could have a turn to suffocate her.

"Good timing," her mother said, giving her a quick hug and then going back to kneeling on her suitcase so that it could zip closed.

"Okay ladies, hurry up! We need to get going," Lena said, putting on her thick jacket and throwing everyone else's jackets at them. "Nadya, where is your jacket? You will get sick," she added.

"I am okay. The car is warm," she said, her muscles still tense as they fought the cold.

5 It is bad luck to clean the floors after someone leaves.

Nadya's mother finally zipped up the suitcase and began yelling, "Okay, sit down, sit down!" and everyone scrambled to find a place to sit.⁶ Nadya took a seat on one of the suitcases next to her.

The apartment finally quieted except for the murmurs of the three old ladies praying under their breath. They finished doing the cross in unison and hurriedly lined up at the door, suitcases and large purses in tow.

Nadya led them to her car and helped them climb in, a chorus of grunts and curses directed at the car emanating as the women had to hoist themselves in. Relief took over Nadya as soon as the women were corralled in her car and she could zone out on the road.

"It's raining! It is going to be a good trip," Lena said.⁷

"Nadya, this is a good sign for your interview," her mother said.

"A good sign would be for it to be warm and sunny today," Nadya replied, still shivering as the air conditioner was finally able to start blowing dusty heat.

"You should have dressed warmer!" her mother said, "I hear you sniffing."

Once at the airport, the women noisily filed out of her car, not forgetting to remind Nadya about checking on the apartment, driving safely, and acting confident at the interview. They signed the cross in the air before officially closing the car door and hailing her off to the bank.

When she got to the parking lot, she laid her head against the steering wheel, finding a moment of peace in the darkness of her eyelids. The lack of sleep, the bustle of Russian women, and her intensifying head cold had culminated in a headache and she could barely open her eyes. The shock of the air outside her car compared to the air conditioner's artificial heat made it impossible for her to find the will to open the door. She watched the clock's minutes tick up to 7:55 until she had no choice but to go in or stay unemployed. She had no energy or savings left to keep job hunting and coupon clipping, but also had no strength to do a job interview.

The inside of the bank was not any warmer than the outside, making Nadya's nose run more. The still grayness of the interior sucked out any energy she had, and she immediately yawned as she walked through the doors. There was only one employee visible, a teller who was slowly clacking away on the keyboard.

6 You must sit before leaving for a trip for good luck.

7 Good sign when it rains before a trip.

“Hi,” Nadya sheepishly walked over, “I have an interview today at eight.”

The teller looked up at her and sluggishly said, “Kay. I will be back.” Nadya blankly looked around the drab building until the teller came back with a short man, in his mid-forties, with dirty round glasses and a wrinkled pinstriped suit.

“Hi! Nice to meet you!” he said, his tone piercing the monotonous atmosphere.

“Hi,” Nadya smiled, introducing herself.

He led her through the hall into his office at the back of the bank, scooting out a chair for her. The walls were blank except for a corporate calendar and a poster of a meadow with an inspirational quote.

“Okay, let’s get started, what makes you want to work here?” he asked.

Nadya’s mind was filled with fog. All she could feel was cold—her brain unable to put together thoughts. There was a lull in the conversation until she was finally able to process his question, answering, “Oh, well, I have always wanted to work in a bank.”

“Okay,” he paused, “so you have never worked in one before?” he said as he stared at her resume which said that she previously was a teller.

“Oh,” she awkwardly chuckled, “I meant I have always wanted to work in this bank.”

The interviewer furrowed his brow as there was nothing special about this chain bank and continued to the next question. Nadya went on autopilot, somehow managing to answer the questions while not being present. All she could think about was getting home so that she could stand in a hot shower. After the interview was over, the only thing she could remember was the still look on the interviewer’s face after the twenty minutes of awkward and slow conversation, the job already a lost cause due to her first impression.

She sat down in her car and bent her neck all the way back as she tried to drink from her empty mug, hoping there were any drops of warm coffee left. On her phone was a text from her mom, *Good luck with your interview! Sending prayers. Your eyes looked glossy today. Cut some garlic when you get home.*⁸

Nadya laid face down in her bed, hiding from the stench of the peeled garlic cloves on her nightstand when her phone began ringing. She

8 Carry around garlic when you are sick, it will make you better.

prepared to hear the voice of her mom barraging her about how her apartment was doing, but instead it was the man from the bank.

"Hello, is this Nadya?"

"Yes, that's me," she replied.

"Are you still interested in the bank teller position?" he asked.

"Yes, I am very interested!" she said, trying to hide the sound of surprise in her voice. After she got home after the interview, she regretted not trying harder when she had to wrap herself in multiple blankets, being immediately reminded of how unaffordable heating was for her.

"Well, it is your lucky day. No one else showed up to the interview. Can you start Monday?" he asked.

Nadya almost screamed through the receiver, "Yes!"

The excitement of finally being able to live in a state of financial stability subsided as soon as she clocked in on the first day. On the job, she struggled to keep her eyes open. Training barely counted as training, as the bank got so little traffic there was no point in teaching her anything that wasn't immediately needed. Day in, day out, customers would occasionally trickle in, and Nadya would deposit or withdraw, often miscounting the cash because her brain had become dulled. The environment of the bank deterred any small talk, and every interaction became exactly the same. The only liveliness came from Adam's whistling when there were no customers.⁹

"You shouldn't do that, you know," Nadya said one day, interrupting him mid-tune.

"Do what? Play computer games during work? You do it, too," Adam responded, slowly gazing over at her screen.

"No, I mean whistle in a building. It's bad luck," she said, "You will have no money."

"How the hell would whistling make me have no money?" Adam said.

"I don't know, my mom just says that will happen," Nadya shrugged. Right as she mentioned her mom, her phone began buzzing as she got a phone call.

"Speak of the devil," Adam said, "time for your daily call."

Nadya gave him a glare and answered the phone, "Hi, Mom."

"Ah, the American dream," her mother said. "We moved here just so that you could talk on the phone all day."

9 If you whistle inside a building, you will have no money.

“At least I am getting paid to talk to you.”

Her mother ignored her comment and immediately began ranting about the airport, about how torturous it was to wait hours in the Cancún airport for their delayed flight, about how Olya’s son forgot to pick them up and she got home so late that her neighbor complained about being woken up, about how Nadya had watered her plants wrong while she was gone.

The calls became the only ripple in the monotonous work days. Despite Adam’s occasional banter, his sarcasm was too much to endure in large doses, and the hours of mindless staring at the computer screen eroded her brain to sand.

Nadya was about to fall asleep mid-solitaire when a man came to her counter and put a check in front of her. Without lifting her head to look at him, her arm’s muscle memory picked it up and began to type the information. Her eyes were lazily scanning over it, looking for the name and amount, until it hit her that the check was blank.

“Hey, this check isn’t filled out,” she began to say and was met eye-level with the barrel of a gun.

“Take out all of the cash,” the customer said, his face covered by the shadow of his hood, voice deep and calm.

Nadya froze, the check flapping in her trembling hand. The bank was silent, as it seemed even the air conditioner’s whirs stopped along with Adam’s whistling.

“I said,” the gunman’s voice getting louder while staying calm, “take out the cash.”

She remained trapped in ice.

“*Nad-ya*,” a forced whisper was thrown at her. Her eyes slowly shifted to the left to see Adam standing still, arms up, nodding towards the cash drawer. “*Open it.*”

The gunman pivoted the gun toward Adam, who was two booths down. “You, too. Open yours.”

Nadya put down the check and picked up the jingling keys, a blur from her trembling. The gun was now pointed back at her as the gunman watched her miss the keyhole multiple times until she was able to fit it in. A large clatter sounded as the drawer popped open and pushed her purse on the ground, scattering the contents. Nadya dove at the floor, scurrying to hide under the counter and curling up against the wall with her head in her hands. Her breathing was getting faster yet her lungs unable to expand, her eyes burning from dry tears. She tried to block out the chaos by focusing on the ground,

silently whispering everything that she could see “*peppermint chapstick, red wallet,¹⁰ quarter, nickels, penny, Mom’s necklace.*” When her eyes landed on the jewelry, she spiraled, breaths she didn’t have quickening as she realized she might not be able to give her mom the gift after work like she was planning to.

“Goddamn it,” the gunman muttered as he reached his arm over the wall meant to protect the teller, trying to grab the cash which was just slightly out of reach. Adam saw his chance and lunged towards the back of the bank, a gunshot immediately silencing the room. Nadya watched him fall forwards with a solid thud, right on top of the debris from her purse that was strewn across the floor. The robber hoisted himself up and jumped over the counter, his feet landing right in front of Nadya’s view.

The gun appeared in front of her face, “Get out, now.”

Nadya began to slowly crawl out from under, short wheezes escaping as she kept repeating *sorry* over and over. She crawled on top of the necklace, grasping it in her palm.

“Fuck! Faster! I need you to open his goddamn drawer,” the man said, one of his arms continuing to stuff money in a sack he had laid out on the counter, the other following Nadya with the gun as she got up and ran to Adam’s station.

A vibrating buzz pervaded the bank, and Nadya glanced down to see her phone screen light up with her mother’s photo. The gunman reached down to stuff the phone in his pocket and noticed the red strap from Nadya’s wallet poking out from under Adam’s body. He pulled out the wallet and flipped it upside down, emptying it of the few cash bills and coins she had and stuffed them in his pocket as well. Nadya let out a gasp and he gave her a glare, forcing her to immediately turn back to Adam’s counter as he finished emptying her own drawer. She was blinded except for the image of his threatening face, jaw clenched so tight she could see the muscles flex at the hinges, seared into her mind.

She tore Adam’s station apart until she finally found the key to the cash drawer tucked in a crack behind his computer, continuing to whimper *sorry, sorry*. The man’s gun was no longer pointing at her from afar but touching her head. His breath fogged up the back of her neck as she struggled to fit the key into the lock, her fist unable to hold both it and the necklace.

10 You will have more money if you keep it in a red envelope or a red wallet.

“Jesus Christ, just give me the fucking key!” he yelled, yet Nadya’s fist closed tighter. The gunman paused for a moment, disoriented by her sudden refusal. He grabbed her wrist, and she jerked her arm away so hard it slammed into the counter, smashing his fingers with it. He let out a scream and pulled her arm harder, twisting her towards him. The gun fell as his other hand tried to unfurl her fist, yet her fingers wouldn’t move. The chain of the necklace was hanging out of her palm like a tail.

“What the hell is this?” he asked, yanking the chain into two pieces, Nadya letting out a shriek as it broke. The charm stayed entombed by her hand.

Please, Nadya sobbed even louder, *please*.

The robbery became a wrestling match, as the man continued to try to unfurl her fist, Nadya pulling her arm further and further away. The man’s anger towered into screams, “Give me the fucking key!” until his fist swung out into Nadya’s face, the force flinging her body to the floor. Her hand landed right next to the gun. The man reached to grab it and she punched it away, sending the gun spinning down the hall that Adam had attempted to run down. He ran after it and Nadya sprinted towards the entrance, swinging the doors out as she ran through them. She looked up to see flashing lights in the distance approaching closer and closer.

Nadya sat wrapped in a space blanket as she watched the crash of glass breaking, yelling, gunshots, and a swarm of officers storming the bank.

“*Dochenska! Dochenska!*” a woman’s shouts cut through the police sirens. Nadya looked up to see her mother running towards her.

“Mom,” Nadya exhaled, unable to find her voice, “how did you know?”

“You didn’t pick up your phone,” she said, taking off her jacket and spreading it on Nadya’s shoulders.

Nadya bent her head down onto her mother’s chest.

“What are you holding?” her mom said, pointing to her fist. Nadya had forgotten, her hand clenched for so long that her knuckles had cracked. She opened it up, showing the key and a broken necklace with a ladybug charm.¹¹

“It’s your birthday present.”

11 Sign of good luck.

MADDIE CHRISTIAN
THE STARS IN THEIR EYES



ALI NIAZ

WHITE FERRARI

The heater's warm breath rattled the air freshener that clung loosely to its vents. Mahogany teakwood. The dark and oaky scent contrasted the bitter cold that smacked against the car window. Though these were two different sensations, one like a warm hug during the winter holidays, and the other, like a frigid plunge into cold water, they exist within the same plane. Warm and cold. They were opposites, but they needed each other. Like dark and light. Yin and yang. Young and old. Past and present.

I twirled the metal chip between my fingers. It was light and seemingly insignificant, but I felt the weight of its meaning in my hand. I felt like if I dropped it, it would fall through the earth, right to its hot, molten center. One year sober.

I backed out of my signature parking spot as I had several times before, with the same feeling that I had felt about a million times before. The soft, white snow was gentle in its descent and was blanket-like in the way that it swallowed the quiet, dark earth in front of my windshield. I rolled up to the first stop sign as I found myself in my usual juxtaposition. The red shape commanded me to stop, as I would oblige physically, but my mind refused. My thoughts raced as the right blinker clicked and clicked and clicked. This feeling, the usual feeling I always embark on during this late night drive, tugged at my heart.

Let's see what my mind has to say tonight, shall we?

I turned right.

I was driving home from a bar. I know, quite unusual for someone who once had a problem with alcohol and is now an entire year sober, but that bar felt like somewhat of a home for me. The bartender there had become a close friend of mine, and contrary to what you may think, he had nothing to do with my addiction. He actually encouraged me to quit. I started going to his bar near the end of my drinking days, more so for his company than for the drinks.

I had a complicated relationship with alcohol. At first, it was just to have fun, like any other college kid. Then, I'm not sure how or when, but it became more about wanting to forget. There were lots of nights where I needed to do that. I found myself at that bar with the sole company of the bartender on many occasions. Our conver-

sations always flowed naturally and went on for hours. He was there for me, and I was there for him. He had had a rough year, with the death of a family member and a failed marriage. I wondered if he needed our talks as much as I did.

I had developed the willpower to be around alcohol without partaking, but the night life was never as good. I had to drift away from my friends in order to pursue this new sober lifestyle, and it seemed like my only remaining friend was the bartender.

I was an extrovert. I loved people. Being in the company of others was something I loved, and my nightly talks with the bartender were perhaps the only social interactions keeping me sane. I will admit, I was lonely. But I never felt lonelier than I did on this drive. I would be all alone on this road, heading back to my rundown, cheap apartment.

I had the usual music playing in my car. My late night music. I had done this drive so many times that my body switched into autopilot, and my mind wandered. The roads tonight looked different for some reason. They seemed darker, more ominous. All streets late at night tend to have this quality, but this wasn't the usual—

“Hello!”

My body jolted and the car swerved on the frosted roads a little. I shut off my music and looked to find the seat next to me filled. I had a passenger.

“It's been a little while since we've talked. You've got to stop ignoring me man.”

I'm not easily surprised, but this wasn't something that I think anyone had experienced before. It was *him*. What was he doing here? How did he even get here? It wasn't possible. I spoke to him, glancing back and forth between him and the road in front of me.

“How I, what? Ignoring you? What? How am I supposed to do that? It doesn't even make sense that you're here right now. How *are* you here right now?”

My focus returned solely to the road and my body relaxed and became more acquainted with this new passenger, this new presence that was joining me on my late night drive home.

“Seriously, dude. I know you've been thinking about me. I know you better than anyone. You could've just reached out, ya know?”

My eyes were set on the path in front of me, thinking of what to say. He was right. I had thought about him a lot recently. But I wasn't aware that I could just summon him whenever I wanted. Maybe he had questions for me. Maybe he wanted advice. Maybe he—

“I’m here to help you!”

Whenever I get confused, I scrunch my eyebrows and curl my lips to visibly notify those around me that I am confused, and I was making this exact face when he said that he was here to help *me*. What.

“What?” I had said aloud, alerting him of my baffled state of mind.

“I know, I know. To be honest, you don’t need me. You’ve never needed me. And I’m here to remind you of that,” he responded.

I pulled over to the side of the road and glared at him, trying to decipher just how old he was.

His hair, curly and dark like mine, definitely needed some work. I could tell he was at a point where he didn’t know what to do with it yet. His face was young and expressive. You could see all of his emotions on his face. Yeah, he was a bad liar. There was a small cut on the corner of the left side of his jaw—no doubt from shaving too carelessly. It used to happen to me all the time. His cheeks still had baby fat, emphasizing his lingering boyishness. As the lights from the streetlamps outside bounced off his dark eyes, they seemed to flicker and dance. As if once these rays of light had made contact with him, they became alive. He seemed to have that effect on things. His smile was warm, playful, and kind. It crept onto his face naturally whenever he spoke. He was always flattered when someone complimented him on it, but I knew how he really felt about it. He saw how crooked it was every time he looked in the mirror. How symmetrical it was. His smile was the thing that he hated the most, but it was something I had grown to love because, well, I had to. It was my smile.

“It’s kind of embarrassing seeing how chubby my cheeks used to be,” I smiled the same sly grin he was wearing.

“Yeah, I guess having that patchy thing you call a beard on your face made you forget. Huh, old man?”

I found myself laughing. A bit harder than I feel like a sane person would. Then again, it isn’t every day that you find yourself talking to a younger version of yourself. I think it’s completely valid to throw sanity out the window. I started back on the road, but something seemed off. I’d been on this road countless times before. I knew it like the back of my hand. But now, it was different. The snow stopped falling and the long, achingly old pavement stretched in front of my car. The two-lane street was now one lane that seemed to go on forever. The trees that stood proudly on either side of the street had disappeared. The only thing around was the road in front of me, and the night sky that seemed as if it was about to swallow the Earth that had fallen asleep under it.

"I'm happy to see that you still have a sense of humor," the Kid pulled me back into our conversation, "Though I did notice the weight gain, but hey, I'm not judging."

"Wow. Low blow, kid. You know, I never realized how much of a jerk I was back then," I bit back.

"Oh no, you weren't. I mean, I'm not, well at least I try not to be. We always tried to be nice to everyone. Maybe a bit too nice. Remember when we volunteered for that pig race and had to cancel our date with that cute girl from geometry class? Honestly, I don't think Ms. Barker would have minded us saying 'no.' Also, do you know how geometry girl is doing? I can't believe that acute angle pickup line worked on her."

"The Bacon Trot? Yeah, I remember that. Did you come all the way here just to tell me to stop being a pushover? No offense, but I've grown a lot since then. I can say 'no'. And no, we haven't seen her since graduation."

The stars in front of me sparkled. The sky had never looked this big or this close before. It seemed like there was more sky than there was earth. If I was outside, I could just reach out and feel every pattern in the sky that was as old as mankind. I saw the constellations glitter and dance. They swayed, twirled, and frolicked. All the shapes in the sky that I had ever known came to life in front of me. Orion, Pegasus, Aries, and Gemini took the shapes their collective stars made and painted a scene. They were breathing, functioning, and vibrant. They were *alive*. The blackness of the sky curved in front of me. The apex touched the horizon, while also reaching out, inviting me to join their dance. I felt something within me that I haven't felt in a long time.

"Isn't it beautiful? I know it sounds crazy, but that's because of you," the Kid had said.

I looked at my younger self and wondered how this mural in front of me was in any way my doing. I wasn't an actor, a painter, or a singer. I barely felt like a functioning member of society. I couldn't understand how this had any correlation to me.

"I find it hard to believe that I had anything to do with the contortion of the sky," I said, sounding a bit harsher than I intended to.

"First of all, I don't have a college degree yet," the Kid said, seemingly unphased by my aggressive tone, "So, I'm not entirely sure what contortion means, but I think I have a pretty good guess. And second, that's how you used to see the world. You used to give it meaning, you used to bring things to life." He said this while gesturing to

the night sky. The spectacles of wonder outside seemed to acknowledge him, confirming what he was saying. Canis Major, Orion's dog, seemed to do a little flip. I stayed quiet.

I saw an end to the road up ahead. A circular parking-lot-type ending. A cul-de-sac. I kept driving. I was thinking about what the Kid had said about me bringing things to life. I felt like he saw me as something that I wasn't. Something that I wasn't anymore, at least. The stars that danced in front of me were not my doing, they were his. He had this warmth in his presence that seemed to bring comfort to me. I trusted him, and a wave of shame washed over me. I was a recovering alcoholic. I felt like I no longer belonged in this world. I was far from home and alone. All the parts of him that were good no longer existed within me. I used to be like him—hopeful, determined, kind. I had my whole life ahead of me, which had seemingly amounted to nothing.

I glanced over at the Kid, whose face had become more somber. He was watching me, reading me, making sure I was okay. The kindness lingered in his eyes.

"You can pull up over here." He pointed at the cul-de-sac. "Let's go stargaze."

The warmth outside shocked me. The gentle breeze helped keep me cool and the smell of summer flowed through my body. I knew exactly where we were.

I was home. At my favorite spot in the whole town. It was a cul-de-sac with a little pond just visible from the parking lot. The sunset had always had a beautiful reflection in that little pond, spraying red, orange, and blue all over the world. There were rolling hills on either side of the cul-de-sac, with long blades of grass that danced in the wind like they were alive. A tingling sensation ran all throughout my body. I felt the power and strength that comes with these kinds of places. That comes with all familiar places, and comes with home.

I began to smirk. All the memories of this place came to me. I had my first kiss here. I'd bring my friends here and we would gossip about the happenings of the world around us, a world that was much smaller than it is now. My sister and I would come here all the time and talk for hours whenever things got hard for either of us. I was broken up with by my first girlfriend here. I also asked out my second girlfriend here. I came here with girls a lot, sheesh. Here was where I wrote a letter to myself, my future self, right before I went off to college, and wished him luck on the journey ahead.

The Kid looked over at me and chuckled.

"Yeah, I know what you're thinking. We brought way too many girls here."

We both started laughing until we were bent over in pain. The kind of laughter that can only happen between good friends. Old friends. Tears rolled down my cheeks as I collected my breath. I hadn't laughed like that in a long time. I hadn't felt this happy in a long time. The Kid's face became more serious as he spoke.

"Listen, I know what you've been going through lately. I know what you've been feeling. You're ashamed. You think the person that you used to be isn't you anymore. You think that the best parts of you are gone, but that's just not true."

His words echoed throughout my head. He was right. That feeling that I always feel? The feeling that would be more prevalent on my drives home? It was shame. I began to understand why the Kid was here. He was an embodiment of the letter I had written to myself all those years ago.

"You're right, kid. Honestly, I'm not a big fan of myself right now, and I haven't been for a little while. I feel like the best version of myself was you. I felt like I had everything figured out, like I was ready to grow up and be the person I wanted to be. I think that we're the same person our entire life, just different versions of that one person. And the person that I liked the most was you. You got your whole life ahead of you, kid. I feel like my time's passed."

It felt relieving to finally tell someone how I felt about myself. To admit my shame. To admit that I just saw myself as another lonely guy at a bar. I made eye contact with the Kid, the best version of myself that existed. He was quiet for a while before he spoke.

"No, I agree that there are different versions of ourselves all throughout our lives, but I'm not the best version of us. I am just *a* version of us, during a different time. A happier time. And you, my friend, you're nostalgic for that time. You look back at me and think that I had it all figured out, but I didn't. I had good grades, good friends, all those soccer medals, and we were a part of all of those clubs and committees, but it really wasn't all that. There's so much about you I wish was me, that I can't wait to be me. I don't have your experience or your wisdom or your kindness. You have strength, bravery, compassion, and so much more. So much more than you give yourself credit for. I run around trying to please people, while at the same time being selfish. I always pick fights with mom and dad. I always come home late. I think the rules don't apply to me. And, man, I should've gone on that date with geometry girl!"

The Kid stopped for a second and let his words sink in. His eyes watched the dancing.

“You’re kind. Genuinely kind, and genuinely good,” he said, his eyes still on the stars above, “Maybe you’re not where you want to be in life, but that’s never stopped you from doing the right thing. I’m so far from figuring it out that I don’t even know what I have to figure out. I’m not what you think I am. I’m a kid who is more lost than you think you are. You’re nostalgic, and let me tell you, nostalgia is a dirty, dirty liar.”

We both stood in silence, me thinking about what the Kid had just said, and the Kid looking somewhat surprised with himself that he had said everything he did. The stars continued to put on a show in the sky. Orion was playing catch with his dog, Canis Major.

The Kid was right. I looked back at my life and thought of him as my greatest accomplishment. All the friends, soccer wins, and good memories seemed to blind me from the truth. I was lost then. Confused and scared about the world that lay ahead of me. I remembered the Kid’s smile and how I knew he hated it. He didn’t have to tell me, but I knew. I knew it was an imperfect smile, but it was mine. It was ours. It was worth loving for that sole reason.

I began to look at myself now. I was a bit chubby with a desperate need to shave, but I had never really thought about the good parts of this version of myself.

“The bartender,” the Kid continued, “I know he’s your only friend. Well, it goes both ways. You’re also his only friend. You’re not aware of how much your conversations with him have helped him this past year, and he’s also not really someone to get all sappy like that and tell you. And you going to see him tonight to celebrate your year of sobriety? It meant a lot to him. You helped him through his divorce, and the death of his mom this past year. Those little acts of kindness go a long way.”

“Anyone would have done that for a friend,” I interjected. “It’s nothing really out of the ordinary.”

“Right, but you’ve been at a low point. The lowest you’ve ever been. You haven’t been kind to the guy you see in the mirror, but you’ve had enough kindness to share with him. That’s what matters. You were there for him when no one else was, when it was hard to even be there for yourself. You and I are different, so different. But the parts that matter are the same.”

I had never thought much of what I had done for the bartender. I was there for him when he needed it. It was second nature. May-

be the Kid was onto something. Maybe I hadn't been giving myself enough credit. I was stuck looking too far back into my life, viewing the past and my accomplishments as the best parts. I needed to start looking forward.

"All right. You're right. I need to stop looking back. I need to move forward. I need to grow up. Where . . ." I stopped for a second to look at the sky once more. I used to be able to make the stars dance. Not actually, but I'd describe the constellations to my friends, my sister, my family in such a way where they would be given life. I'd tell their stories and origins and in front of our very eyes, they'd come alive. I wanted to do that again. I wanted my magic back. "Where do I start?"

I felt a burning sensation in my pocket. I pulled out my sobriety token. The intricate details of the coin were glowing in my hand.

"You already did," the Kid's smile returned, "You've been sober for an entire year. Fighting addiction is as good of an accomplishment as anything I've ever done. Hell, I'd say it's probably the best thing we've ever done. You've *already* started, and I'm proud of you."

I glared at this badge of honor I held in my hand and I began to tear up.

"I know that you're ashamed of these past few years," the Kid's voice cracked, "I know you're ashamed that alcohol, at one point, consumed you. I also know that you're ashamed of this coin because you think it symbolizes your failures and shortcomings, but don't let it. When you first noticed the stars dancing in the sky, I saw this look on your face and I know you felt something you hadn't felt in a long, long time. Hope. Let this token help you remember that feeling. It's time for a fresh start. Don't be regretful. Don't dwell on the past. Be hopeful for what's to come. And remember to give some of that kindness back to yourself."

I felt a chill run up my spine. A tiny white speck fell slowly in front of us. Snow. I looked around and saw that the snow was once again falling ever so gently.

"It looks like our time is up. It was a pleasure talking to you again, and uh, don't forget about me. The good and the bad. I'm going to miss ya, Old Man," the Kid embraced me and we stood there together in our old spot. Past and present colliding.

The snow continued to fall around us and I began to cry even more. It felt as if a weight was lifted off my shoulders. It felt like I was free from my shame, my regrets, my failures. Something new took its place. Hope.

I pulled back from the Kid and said one last thing to him, “I know you get this a lot, but you’ve got a good smile. I’m not just saying that. Just wait, kid, it’ll grow on ya. Also, try shaving a bit slower next time.”

I walked back to my car and drove out of the cul-de-sac that I had driven out of so many times before. I drove and drove until the road transformed back into familiar territory. The trees proudly returned on either side and the snow stopped falling. The world sat in front of me, quiet and asleep. I was at a stop light when I looked up at the sky. The night sky I had gazed up at so many times, and I swear I saw Orion shining a little brighter than usual.

CONTRIBUTORS

Carrena Amparo is a sophomore studying English education. When she is not in class, she is likely snowboarding, drinking iced coffee, or exploring Old Town. Carrena's inspiration for her poetry is often the places she has seen.

Elliot Benson is a senior dance major with a minor in creative writing. In the rare moments when he's not devouring fantasy novels or performing, he trains in aerial dance and spends time with his bunny. He plans on pursuing circus arts post-graduation.

Samantha Bilodeau is a sophomore student at CSU majoring in English with a concentration in creative writing. She is a member of the CSU logging sports team and previously served in ASCSU as a senator representing Adult Learner and Veterans Services. She lives in Fort Collins with her partner and a whole lot of books.

Maddie Christian is currently in her junior year at CSU, pursuing a BFA with a concentration in graphic design. Her approach to design often includes mixing physical and digital processes in an effort to find unique artistic solutions. Her preferred mediums include gouache, film photography, lithography, and relief printmaking.

Peyton Farnum is a third-year honors student at Colorado State University pursuing a Bachelor of Fine Arts in studio art. Her work focuses on exploring color in many mediums, such as fibers, and metals, and her primary discipline, printmaking. Peyton hopes to continue forward with a career in the arts as an advocate for environmental appreciation, acknowledgment and acceptance of emotion, and enthusiastic creativity.

Olivia Friske is a freshman in the interdisciplinary liberal arts department. She is focusing on women's studies, history, and English throughout her time at CSU. Writing has been a place she found solace in and wants to pursue becoming an author for her career.

Cambria Gifford is a senior journalism major. She aims to work in the publishing industry. When she's not writing, she's painting, cooking, or spoiling her dog.

Mitchell Glover is a third-year student attending CSU. He is in the English creative writing program, and an officer in the CSU Writer's Society writing club. Outside of school, Mitchell enjoys reading, telling stories, playing games, spending time with friends and family, and really wants a cat.

Dillon Gross is a second-year student studying English education. When she's not busy writing in one of her thousand journals, Dillon enjoys reading, taking long wistful walks, listening to podcasts, and finding a new way to wear eyeliner. After college, Dillon hopes to teach high school students to love language just as she does, and write and publish as much as possible.

Ethan Hanson is a junior at CSU. They are majoring in geography and creative writing. They like writing away traumas of growing up in the tumultuous political environment of the 2000s. They have like a whole bunch of succulents.

Thomas Hasler is a junior studying philosophy at Colorado State University. In his free time, he likes to read, go to concerts, and play the bass. These are his first published works, and he hopes to continue writing in the future.

Anaïs Markwood (she/her) is a third-year student with a major in English and a minor in interdisciplinary Arabic studies. Within her English major, Anaïs is double concentrating in creative writing and writing, rhetoric, & literacy. Outside of school, Anaïs works for the CSU admissions office as an admissions ambassador and is also the co-founder and vice president of the Arabic Culture and Language Club of CSU. This is her first publication in a literary magazine, and she hopes that everyone enjoys reading her pieces!

Katherine McGuinness is a poet, theatre nerd, shark-fact supplier, and thunderstorm lover from Bothell, Washington. She appreciates warm tea, the night sky, and dinosaur-themed accessories. She is currently pursuing a degree in zoology with a minor in creative writing.

Ali Niaz is a sophomore and is double majoring in journalism and English literature. He enjoys storytelling, hanging out with his friends and family, and anything outdoor related! He would like to shout out his family, his sister, Amani, and his friends Sam and Zach!

Ali Owens is a dreamer, rebel, writer, designer, and activist who fully believes in the power of story to change the world. Passionate about liberation and fascinated by abolitionist imaginings, they work hard to create radical social change through advocacy, compassionate leadership, and community care. Ali is pursuing BAs in sociology and women's and gender studies, with a minor in creative writing, and they currently co-facilitate an LGBTQ+ student advocacy group through CSU's Pride Resource Center.

Andy Parker (he/they) is a third-year English major in the literature concentration, born in Maoming, China, and raised in Colorado. He enjoys writing about his experiences as a trans, queer, and Asian interracial adoptee, and abusing punctuation marks to make his sentences as convoluted as humanly possible. You can find more of his work in the forthcoming CHERRY MOON: Emerging Voices from the Asian Diaspora, and more of his labyrinthine ramblings at @_andy.parker_ or @readingwhileasian.

Cana Peirce is a second-year English major at CSU. She has lofty goals in the writing world and spends her time cooking, reading, and playing cozy video games.

Jack Ratliff is a senior majoring in history and minoring in global studies. He enjoys traveling, photography, martial arts, and anything outdoors. He also enjoys reading and writing poetry.

Jade Roberts is a third-year student at Colorado State University majoring in English with a concentration in creative writing and a minor in legal studies. She moved to Colorado from Ohio and has a passion for poetry and living among nature. She is pursuing a career in law, but will continue to dive deep into her writing and art.

Cameron Shelton, originally from Albuquerque, New Mexico, is a first-year student at Colorado State majoring in English with a concentration in creative writing. He primarily writes fiction, though has a secret passion for poetry. Going forward, he would like to continue

writing, and thanks his friends and family for their constant support of that endeavor.

Tanya Sopkin is a second-year student majoring in sociology with a minor in English. They enjoy writing fiction, creative nonfiction, and poetry, often inspired by their family and experience growing up Russian in the United States. They enjoy reading, art, making crafts, and spending time outside.

El Triplett (they/them) is a first year majoring in fermentation science and minoring in creative writing. Their favorite place to write is in the middle of nowhere, and their favorite time to write is in the middle of the night. When they are not writing, they can be found baking, climbing, hiking, and drinking tea.



THOMAS HASLER

EL TRIPLET

CANA PEIRCE

CARRENA AMPARO

PEYTON FARNUM

SAMANTHA BILODEAU

OLIVIA FRISKE

DILLON GROSS

JACK RATLIFF

ANAÏS MARKWOOD

ELLIOT BENSON

CAMERON SHELTON

KATHERINE McGUINNESS

JADE ROBERTS

ALI OWENS

MITCHELL GLOVER

ANDY PARKER

CAMBRIA GIFFORD

ETHAN HANSON

TANYA SOPKIN

MADDIE CHRISTIAN

ALI NIAZ

