



# GREYROCK REVIEW

2024

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*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.

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## EDITOR'S NOTE

Dear Reader,

Thank you for reading the 2024 issue of *Greyrock Review*. The stories, essays, and poems included within are the culmination of hard work, dedication, bravery, and community. Many of the works inside will hold a special place in my heart and mind forever. Through pieces that had me laughing, crying, thinking, and biting my fingernails, these csu undergraduate authors achieved something spectacular. By bringing these works together, we are creating a bond for the csu writing community to share, for those beyond the campus to read and enjoy. As you parse through the pieces in this year's issue, I encourage you to think not only about the piece itself, but about yourself, your community, and your life.

From a young age, I have always loved being a storyteller. Even more than that, however, I have always loved being a story enjoyer. Immersing ourselves in a world other than our own for a short while and falling in love with characters, feeling their fear, excitement, curiosity, grief, and even their love, is one of the many simple pleasures of life. Helping others tell their stories to the world has been such an amazing experience. I am so grateful to the dedicated editors of this year's issue, as well as to Anna Emerson and Stephanie G'Schwind for being by our sides throughout the entire process. There is no *Greyrock Review* without them, so again I say thank you: to the staff, to the authors, and to you, dear reader. Remember to dream on, for without dreamers, stories cease to exist.

Forever a story enjoyer,  
Jackson Green  
Managing Editor



## THE PESSIMIST EATS AN ORANGE

An orange is cradled in his hands. Well, he wasn't sure it was an orange. It could be a mandarin or a clementine. A fruit seemingly created to have fun wedge shapes for ease of consumption. Domesticated. He doesn't know exactly what it is, but for simplicity's sake he'll call it an orange, because it is, indeed, orange in hue.

He had snagged the orange for free from his boss's business building. He and his two coworkers had waited on a sterile gray couch next to a table with a fruit bowl. Perhaps there were other fruits there once: an apple, a peach, a pear, a banana. Now, only oranges remained. One of his coworkers had taken an orange (the poet who always takes an opportunity to get something for free, but also, apparently, loves oranges). He had taken one as well. Not out of desire for the orange, but a desire to gain something, anything. Yet, he hates oranges. His mouth recalls sourness and acidity at the sight of them. They are not a satisfactory meal, nor worth the mess. Two options are presented: dispose of it, or go through with the work of eating it.

Sitting on a fallen log in the middle of the forest, he takes out a knife. Shame to waste something so small. He pierces through the skin first. Nobody eats orange peels. Even bugs avoid the acidic armor, or so he's heard. He lifts a chunk of skin to his nose and inhales the aroma. He doesn't mind it, but there is no doubt that an orange is not subtle.

He doesn't know if there is a specific way to peel an orange. (He never cared to listen. When he was a child, he was given pre-sliced oranges. Then he was no longer a child and was no longer given orange slices. He never willingly chose to eat an orange after that.)

So, he starts to cut it in half. Fifty-fifty, like an apple. Even while exhausted he wields his knife steadily. Yet, from the moment of the first incision, juice starts to bleed out. An inevitability. The wretched thing he hates most about the orange: the juice! Juice is persistent

and messy. It will not leave without a good wash, and he is not near a sink.

He peeled his gloves off at the start of the process. Exposed himself. Therefore, he tilts the orange so that the juice will not run to him.

Yet, you cannot eat an orange split in half without shoving it in your mouth and getting juice all over your chin (and using a finger is out of the question). So, in quarters is how an orange should be eaten. He rests one orange half on his leg, and with his knifeless hand he picks up the other. Now he is in near perfect form. Orange: hand. Knife: hand. Orange: leg.

Time for round two. He starts at the top of the exposed half. The force of the knife (against his fingers pressing into it) squeezes the orange with enough force to break the thin layer of skin that kept the juice at bay. The juice is allowed to dribble down the orange, kiss at his palm, then descend down his wrist, into his sleeve—

“NO!”

He flinches. His legs twitch ever so slightly, but just enough to disrupt the balance that held the other orange half in place. It falls into the dirt, juicy side facing downwards.

“F##K!” (He mutters a swear that sounds suspiciously like the French word for seal.)

He lost. He lost at eating an orange. He completely cuts through the half he still has. Juice oozes out like a wound. What else can he do? In defeat, he must eat. He lifts an orange quarter to his teeth and bites, all delicateness abandoned.

An explosion of sweetness and acidity working hand in hand. It doesn't make up for the struggle, but it is nice. Chew, swallow. Juice and pulp. He holds up the remaining quarter. Pulls out the wedge with his already sticky hand. His mouth is already filled with the sweet orange taste, so there isn't as much of a contrast. Yet, he still savors the last of the nectar. Orange pulp lodges itself between his teeth.

The betrayed orange half remains on the ground. Dirt dampened by juice clings to the orange's face as one new thing, mud. What a waste. He isn't going to eat it, but he isn't going to leave it either. That would be littering, and he's not that evil.

So, he takes a towel, dampens it with his drinking water, and tries to wipe his fingers free from juice. He wraps the orange half carefully in the same towel, wraps the peel in as well, then puts it in his bag.

The orange is now a weight upon his back, a burden upon his mind. He must dispose of it as soon as possible. For if he forgets it, lets it rot, the smell might never come out. Or the orange will get crushed under the weight of his other obligations. Right now, he must live in the present, he is in the forested outskirts of his next work destination. He doesn't have time to rest.

His mind wanders. He thinks of his two coworkers. The one who sees the orange as poetic, and the other who would never give an orange an ounce of care beyond food. He wonders if they think of oranges. He wonders if they think of him. It doesn't matter, he tells himself. The only thing that matters is that they do their job right, so that his boss praises him.

Eventually, footsteps lead to progress. He arrives at the edge of town. Nobody in it will want to see him (nothing personal, he is a stranger), and he does not want to see them (nothing personal, they are all strangers). Yet, there is an object he longs to see. He spots it. A trash can.

He swings his backpack over his shoulder. Pulls out the towel, unwraps it, and takes out the orange half. He doesn't want to be sentimental, so he isn't. He tosses the orange half quickly. Good riddance! If this journey had to end in waste (which is what he wanted to avoid), he should never have bothered with eating the orange. He should never have picked it up.

The orange left a slight, almost negligible stain on the towel. He can clean it easily enough. However, there is still a bit of pulp stuck in his teeth (he is unable to dislodge it with his tongue, he has no toothpick, and his hands are too dirty). Despite it all, his mouth is still filled with sweetness, and he wishes he could have eaten the other orange half.

He walks into town, a sea of orange tile roofs and orange brick streets. Wearing his brown jacket, he was an out of place speck (although, what is brown but a dark shade of orange?).

Planted along the streets are orange trees. Below, the sidewalks are littered with fallen oranges in a variety of conditions: fresh and

brightly colored; squished, oozing juice and exposed insides; molding, vibrancy overtaken by white. No ants come to decompose the remains. What a terrible sight! Yet, despite it all, the trees are wealthy with fruit. Handfuls upon handfuls of harvest beaming bright, orange, and ripe. Small green babies wait for their time to shine like sunlight. The plants show no sign of strain. The streets are dotted with orange corpses, but the trees are still filled. What abundance!

He weaves through the town with orange roofs, orange trees, orange fruit, (orange cloaks, orange masks, orange signs, orange cats, orange doors), the sweet orange aftertaste still lingering in his mouth. Oh, to be haunted by an orange! To avert his gaze from the orange (to give his eyes rest from the exhausting color), he looks into an open window. It was the first thing his eyes set upon; he didn't mean to snoop. In that window, he sees bare hands laid upon a table. He cannot see the person's face. Grasped in those wrinkled, aged hands is an orange (or perhaps a mandarin or a clementine). With a casualness that comes from frequency and skill, the fingers dig into the orange and pull away the outer skin. No need for a knife, no need to cut the center (no need to split the atom). The center of the orange, the heart, is presented. Careful hands pull out two wedges (domesticated, for ease of consumption). Another set of hands appear. The orange-gold treasure is placed inside, and the hands carry the orange wedges outside of the window's view (to where the hidden faces are). The orange slowly disappears. Consumed.

He feels insulted, like the world is out to get him. How is it so easy for others to take joy in an orange? To bypass the juice, to rejoice without wasting a wedge? He would admit that an orange is seductively sweet, but what's the point if the process only brought him disappointment? The world must be divided into two types of people, he thinks. A feeling gnaws at his chest. A dark, creeping, vivid tangle he labels as hate towards oranges. He pulls out a snack, a packaged granola bar, and overwrites the taste of orange juice inside his mouth.

When he meets his coworkers again (the poet who loves oranges and the pragmatist who is indifferent), the poet pulls out an orange, and offers him a slice. The horror! He looks away and declines, as if something obscene had been offered. His coworker slinks away

to eat the orange in solitude. The companionship of eating in the presence of another will not be offered casually. He would not watch anyways. He would never share an orange, he tells himself. He hates the skin. He hates the juice. He doesn't know how to peel it. And yet, he still remembers the abundant trees, the old hands, the sweet taste. He clenches his fists. His coworker was savoring that orange bite by bite in a way he never could.

Metaphorically, he lives his life like he just got drenched by rain. His shoes soggyly squish with every step and the rain obscures his view. He is so cold. Every little discomfort builds up. Which is to say: the orange problem doesn't go away. Oranges haunt him. Oranges are supposed to save sailors from getting scurvy, but he goes mad at the sight of them. Reverse scurvy. He tries to focus on his job, because it is his only source of pride, but he is distracted. (He had to write an analysis on the town for work. Notable features? Orange trees. Economic potential? Sell the oranges.) His mind highlights oranges every chance it gets, but it cannot give him a solution. (Like a calculator that cannot comprehend negative numbers. If you have nothing, people can't take more from you.) Even getting more sleep does not save him! He, unfortunately, begrudgingly, must seek another mind to talk to. This problem won't just be in his head, it'll be spoken into existence. He'll have to talk to his coworkers.

He and his coworkers already have such lovely conversations. For example: *If you actually pay attention to my presentation, I will weep with joy. I'm sorry, I cannot make my machine any less unethical—stay mad. Or Do you go by Ant of your own accord, or did your parents know that you would be a pest?* What a bunch they were: the pessimist, the pragmatist, and the poet.

He asks the pragmatist first. Her advice will be practical, but she won't be invested in the question. Her back is turned away from him as he speaks, her face lit by the only source of light in the room: a computer screen. She is working.

"Has anything menial ever bothered you, and you didn't know how to get rid of it?" He asks.

"No," she responds, not necessarily because it was the truth, but because she thought it would end the conversation.

“Is it possible to get too much vitamin C? People always say that you should eat an orange to get enough, but do you really need to?” The question is factual, and not about dumb emotions, so there was a greater chance of getting her to bite.

“You can get too much of anything; deficiency is easier to come across, unless you chug orange juice every day. Actually, hold on, I think we know someone who would do that.”

“Well. Good. I would never want to get my vitamin C from orange juice. I would never eat an orange, even if it was the last thing in my backpack.” He pouts like a child.

“If you have such a problem with oranges, don’t pick them up. Go eat a banana.”

That was a logical response, but he did not feel at ease. He already made himself vulnerable, so he pushes further. Yet, he makes the mistake of asking a nonsensical question, “Would you eat an orange half if it fell on the floor? Would it be a waste to throw it away?”

She tilts her head, “I think you are vitamin C deficient. Don’t eat oranges off the floor.” She turns away again to work, closing off the conversation. He wishes he was more like her. Practical. Efficient. Unconcerned by citrus fruits.

He asks the poet next. They’ll tie this problem up in emotion, but he doesn’t have another option. He approaches them as they sit on a bench, delighting in a particular beverage. He asks the question in the only way he knows how, “Why are you sipping orange juice like a toddler?”

As a testament to their will, they give a genuine answer instead of brushing him off, “It’s nostalgic. I lived underground, so I needed to get plenty of vitamin C.” Instead of elaborating any further on their past, they shake the bottle of orange juice, and the pulp flies around like it was auditioning for the role of the soggiest eco-friendly confetti alternative. “These things come in six packs. I have plenty of extras if you want one. I have nobody else to share with.”

“No.”

They sigh. “And just this morning I was told you wanted to eat oranges off the floor. I am sure you have some appreciation for them deep inside you. Oranges have been a fascination of humans for centuries. They have an inexplicable draw. People can’t help writing po-

etry about them. Is it their color? Their sweet taste? They once were a symbol of luxurious status, you know?” They take a sip. “What luck we live in an era where they are commonplace.”

“Poetry about oranges? What a waste. The word orange doesn’t even rhyme with anything. Bore-ange? Snore-ange? Why would anyone waste their time talking about oranges?”

They raise an eyebrow. *He* was the one who wanted to talk about oranges. “Well, I’d give you a pomegranate instead, but it seems like you are already doing a good job of trapping yourself in the underworld. You can do things for the fun of it, y’know. I think it would be good for you if you thought about things other than work. You should find joy in other things.” He is utterly embarrassed by this advice, finds it irrelevant, and decides to cut his losses and walk away. His coworker’s eyes remain fixed on his retreating form. Why should they care if he is happy, he thinks.

He walks into the meeting place, radiating a false sense of confidence. His coworkers already received the briefing on their next mission, and they exchange a glance with each other upon his arrival. When he reaches for the relevant document, the pragmatist doesn’t hand it over. The poet tells him the two committed to a decision without him. The poet and the pragmatist were nearly opposites but, for once, they agreed on something. He looks away as they tell him to do the same. The two hand him their resignation letters and walk away. His eyes remain fixed upon the two of them until they are gone.

A week later, he stands alone with his boss in his boss’s business building’s executive office. He doesn’t have to compete for his boss’ attention. He gets the praise he craves. His boss says, “Antagoras, it doesn’t matter that your coworkers quit. I always knew you were the smartest one out of all of them. The other two only wanted the benefits. You, however, dedicated yourself fully to your work. You aren’t passionate about anything else.” He realizes that he knows little about his ex-coworkers. Was what his Boss said true? He doesn’t have to ponder what his boss said about him, though. He knows *that* is true. Yet, for the first time, praise doesn’t taste like nectar. His

boss continues, “Here is where you will be able to do great things. It might surprise you, but even I, a man of great influence, can’t do this alone.”

He looks over the plans. If executed, it would result in great damage, if not total destruction, to several towns. He recognizes one of the towns. (Orange roofs. Orange trees. What abundance.) He looks up and sees the sun brooch his boss always wears. He always thought it was gold, a professional and luxurious color. Yet, would you believe it, after giving the brooch a good look, he realizes it wasn’t gold but orange. He tried to dry out his dreariness in the sun, but it didn’t work because he wasn’t laundry. He was a person. (Underneath the skin was juice and pulp.)

He passes by the fruit bowl on his way out. An apple inside has a bite mark in it. Somebody learned the hard way that these new apples were made of foam. Inedible. Not a satisfactory meal. A bendable wooden snake was placed into the bowl, perhaps as a warning, a joke, or a religious metaphor.

He walks out of his boss’s business building. He walks straight forward, going wherever the sidewalk leads him. His steps are precise and focused, unlike his mind. He sits at the first bench he sees and puts his face in his hands. He stays in that position for a moment, frozen. After a moment, his hands spring unzip his bag. An orange aroma wafts out of his bag. The scent has stuck around since he put the dropped orange half in his bag. He pulls out a pen and paper and gets started drafting two messages. He sends one to his boss, and one to his ex-coworkers.

He sits down at a cafe. Waiting for him are his two ex-coworkers. (The poetic one, Bec, and the practical one, Tessa.) His letter said he just wanted to talk, to properly say goodbye. He should probably call them something other than his ex-coworkers, but in his mind, he doesn’t have another word to describe them. Co-conspirators? He’ll figure out the word ‘friend’ once he ponders the reason the two agreed to meet up with him. Conversation loops around, and Tessa asks him upfront: “Why are you so uptight about oranges?”

For once in his life, he is honest. “I ate an orange. Everyone else



enjoys them, and I thought I could too. It was messy, awkward, acidic. If I can't even enjoy an orange, how can I enjoy anything?"

Bec, fittingly, is drinking orange juice. With their finger, they slowly move the straw in their drink in an arc around the rim, so that the straw is facing towards him. "Try a sip. This stuff is good. Forget about the rind for a moment and think about the reason you deal with the mess."

Did he want to eat an orange again? The pessimist had to confront himself. Shouldn't his opinion be clear by now? He always said he hated them. What else could he call the inexplicable, harsh feeling he got when he saw someone else savor an orange? Frustration? Jealousy? Longing? He inhales, and the air pauses in his lungs, like a tiger about to pounce. At the exhale, he reaches out and brings the straw to his lips.

He expected an acidic taste. He expected pulp. He expected it to be weird to share a straw. He expected his next words to be a sarcastic remark. He expected the last of their patience to snap as they decided he was a lost cause. He expected to never find joy. He expected to live an unloved life and die alone.

"Oh, it's sweet."

They smile and say, "I heard you quit your job."

If he truly allowed himself indulgence in the nectar of an orange, what other forms could it take? He realized he wanted to try the orange sherbet on the menu. Would it be overwhelmingly sweet? The vibrant orange taste would have a strong presence, but the milk would mellow it. The ice would melt upon his tongue quickly, but the sensation of sweetness would linger upon his tongue for hours longer. The delicacy would end, consumed, but he could come again and ask for more. He, Ant, said "Could we do this again? Same time next week?"

andy park er 茂欢微

## LOVE POEM IN RED THREAD

i once told you  
i didn't  
believe in soulmates,  
which is not  
a lie and yet  
sometimes i like to  
picture faint red threads  
around our pinkies—  
that every time  
we say  
good night you feel  
a little tug.  
i'd like to think  
with each embrace  
that it's trails  
we get a bit more tangled,  
me every  
gordian knot  
where i go  
a beautiful scar

andy park er 茂欢微

**GOLDEN SHOVEL: DONG XIAN TO EMPEROR AI**

*AFTER LIU ZUN*

dear heart, if i may ask a favor—s  
tay for a few moments more? the gifts i of  
fer are few: a second's solace from the  
raging storm outside, lips pressed to cut  
s and bruises, hands to roll up sleeve  
s when the fists start swinging. but are  
n't we lucky for even that? a generous  
gift for fate to throw our way, that love  
like ours transcends time. the love of  
long-dead poets and kings, found in the  
ashes of textbooks set ablaze, the half-  
light of illicit nights under moth-eaten  
sheets. not asked, nor told, but bitten (as a peach)  
or tucked in back pockets (as a hanky). may we never  
forget this history incarnating our bo dies.

colin m c c a l l u m

## **MOMENT**

I hadn't come out to anyone yet  
didn't know I had to  
until I wanted so badly to kiss

your deep dimples curled  
like the gold-sapphire leaf  
caught in your coils

I laughed, wiped it off your forehead  
you smelled like faded pine deodorant & monster  
energy drink still dripping off your tonsils

you said it was silly  
how I closed my eyes every time  
I hit the vape we stole  
from your brother

because having my lips this exposed  
near you feels  
like a closed-eye kind of thing  
I just smile—leer back

in that exact  
I decided to be everything we envisioned  
I wished we had known it was the last

colin m ccall um

## **NAPAAQTUQ**

*INUKTITUT WORD FOR "TREE"*

I'm slurping your sanity  
through my elastic elk tongue  
the everemerald heart  
of taiga pines  
sweet sap

ling leaking  
your ego  
pooled in half  
thawed slush  
oily  
color

s on the tip of your cheek  
bones cold  
cavitation between  
a humble god

's eyes  
you

r eyes at  
peace with  
boiling amethyst on  
the edge of north

ern lights sparking  
coniferous acidity

## SATYRUS

Following a long night of collecting animal droppings and tediously rolling them into a perfect sphere, the African dung beetle will climb atop its ball, gaze up into the night sky, and—for a moment—dance.

I'm sitting awake at five in the morning, restless eyes basking in the indigo of a late October sky. The few wispy clouds that crowned the horizon a few hours ago now strain themselves against the dawning of another day, pulling a dark gray partition between the bare trees and the moonless morning. I creep out of my apartment, soon my hands grip the steering wheel of my car, and I pull out onto cold asphalt.

No, it is not an act of celebration. The dance is one *Scarabaeus satyrus* has danced over countless lifetimes. Orienting itself to the light shed by the Milky Way, the dung beetle can keep a straight course across the savanna, avoiding a return to their starting point where thieving beetles would swipe its hard-earned dung without a second thought.

A light dusting of snow begins to collide with my windshield. Each flake leaves a drop of water in its place. I turn up my heater. As I get further out of town, the snow gets heavier. By the time I reach my destination, a sizable flurry has stirred up. I park my car in an empty dirt lot and stare forward at a swath of the snowstorm illuminated by my headlights. I take a moment to align myself within these frozen constellations. After a moment, I shut off my headlights, pull out my phone, and send a text. I draw a long breath in, exhaling it onto the driver's side window. I flick the headlights on once again and drive back through the snow. I follow the same route, and soon I'm back where I started. I get back into my bed and sleep before work.

The life of a dung beetle is a fascinating one. Rising with the moon to fight over elephant droppings; forming said droppings into a perfect sphere; and rolling said sphere away to be buried and eaten, but not before stargazing and dancing on a ball of shit.

●...

## HUNTER'S MOON

We don't eat anything that we don't kill ourselves. Father says eating plants, berries, and tubers is a sign of weakness. Father sees weakness everywhere, lurking, waiting to make itself part of us. The forest is our home, though it's harsh and cold. My brothers, sisters, and I eat little and sleep less. We roll naked in cold mud and move by moonlight. The howling strips our throats raw. Our hair is long and matted and our nails curve like claws. We sometimes wrestle with each other, snarling and spitting. We huddle together for warmth on the coldest nights, a shivering pile. My siblings seem to find our lives easier than I do, especially the boys. I am tired all the time and so monstrously hungry.

There is a village on the outskirts of our woods, and during the winter months, when the cold snow falls and meat is scarce, we wait until nightfall then creep into town to steal food, to break the narrow necks of chickens. This is where I meet the girl in the blue gown. She lives in the biggest and finest manor in the village. There is a hutch on the outskirts of the property where rabbits are kept. I thought they would make for an easy kill, simpler than trying to run off with a suckling pig or a long-legged calf.

The girl catches me by the hutch, cradling a rabbit in my arms and deciding whether I can throttle it. She is about my age. She stands tall and straight, an intricately woven blonde braid thrown over one shoulder.

"Oh, you poor thing!" she exclaims. I assume that she is speaking to the rabbit, but to my shock, she places her sweet-smelling hand on my face. No one like her has ever spoken to me before, let alone touched me. "You come from the forest, don't you?"

I should fight, claw, bite. That's what Father would want. Instead, I nod and allow her to lead me into the big house. Her maids are

frightened of my wild appearance, but she gives them instructions in a firm voice. I am cleaned in a tub of warm water. My hair is cut, my nails are trimmed. I am given clothes to wear, long dresses made of softness beyond my dreams. Father would hate to see me like this, but I'm so warm and clean that I can't bring myself to care.

"I will make a pet of you," my rescuer says to me, and she is as good as her word. She seems to enjoy the project of it, of teaching the wild girl what's wrong with her. As the weeks go by, I learn to walk without crouching, to speak long sentences. I learn what politeness is, and that I am impolite. She eventually begins showing me off to her friends and society acquaintances, who are all happy to gawp and marvel at me. At first, I merely tolerate their curiosity, but after a time, I almost begin to enjoy it.

The food is what strikes me the most about my new home. My knees buckle just looking at it: bowls of rich yellow custard and thick syrupy jams and towers of pastries shedding crystals of sugar. I eat until I am beyond satiated, until my belly is round and groaning. I am given a fine room of my own, with big windows that face the forest I came from. I don't sleep in the bed, which is too soft to be comfortable; instead, I make a nest of blankets on the floor.

At night, I lie curled in this nest, eating food that I've stolen from the kitchen. I can't seem to stop myself from eating, even as it causes me pain. Sometimes I can hear my brothers and sisters baying at the moon through the open window. I don't dare join in, but I listen to their howls and ache.



## TERMINUS

At the sound of the distant wail, Henry ran out of his house. Henry's mom stood by the window over the kitchen sink, watching her son run barefoot over the short gravel drive and slip into the woods in a matter of a breath. Her hands slumped in the sink, dishwater draining into the rusted grate, and she sighed. For a moment, her permanent frown curled up and her eyes twinkled as she watched the last leaf disturbed by her son settle. She then looked back down at the sink and continued washing.

Henry ran through the dense bracken. His feet were bare, and branches thick with thorns tugged at his sleeves. His feet didn't bleed, as the path he ran down had been smoothed to silk from constant, habitual travel. The trail was no more than a brick wide, a path for a child's feet.

The sudden drop in temperature as he submerged himself into the depth of green took Henry's breath away in a hiss, but he kept running. Slowly he began smelling the tainted smell of iron and hot acidic tinge of worn nails; but he couldn't yet see the tracks, and he knew he was still a pace away from their edge. The woods hadn't yet cleared, parted in that unnatural, yet subtle way, and he knew this meant he would still be obscured from view. That wouldn't do. The slow build of the crescendo wail shook the leaves and the branches groaned to its mournful call, scattering hidden birds tucked away into the bark into flight; but Henry took angsty excitement at hearing its bellow draw closer.

Haunting, it called. It was a creature that stalked through the woods, churning coal into steam, muffling the loud rush of the river close by into nothing but muted silence, the heartbeat from the churning wheels thrumming through anything with a chest large enough to beat an echo of a heart in time. Henry closed his mouth

and gritted his teeth, pushing down his nerves as he counted the gaps of silence between each of the train's bellows, all the while knowing that as the train was getting close, he was getting closer.

He felt a burst of energy, his legs started to burn, and with a huge push, he threw back the last slapping branches and emerged into a clearing. He stopped inches from the rails, stopping despite himself. A brief reprieve, a moment to catch his breath in deep, moist plumes. His feet vibrated, and he could feel the train now, pushing its way through the earth, and he knew he had made it in time. One last swallow of air and he stood up, and turned bravely towards the sound of the wail, loud and piercing, the last one he knew he would hear so close before it disappeared back into the wilderness, an iron ghost. He squinted his eyes, hunting for the dark metal steam engine to appear through the trees. He didn't have to squint for long, as there it was, barreling down towards him. He stood straight, a smile already beginning to beam on his small cheeks, colored red from the cold, sweat gleaming with anticipation. The engine came closer, and his feet began dancing, left and right, in time with the thrum of the wheels he could now feel deeper than his heart. He blinked, biting back the sting as the engine's fumes blew his way, and his hands twitched by his hips, waiting, itching for the moment when he could see clearly the window to the conductor.

He saw it and quickly threw his hand up, bouncing on his feet left and right, jumping out of time with the train so as to stand out. With a burst of thrill he locked eyes with the man standing behind the window, who, with a beaming proud smile, took his hand to his head and gave him a wave. Henry's heart nearly exploded as joy filled his insides, the small gesture filling gaps of silence and wanting he had been subjected to for months. Though neither of them could say words, the love he felt between himself and his father re-ignited, and in that brief moment Henry knew that no matter what distance separated them, nothing would ever vanquish the feeling of love between them.

His father sped out of view in a matter of seconds, yet even as Henry turned to watch him go, he still kept waving, hoping that his

father could still somehow see him and know how much he missed him. It didn't matter what car went by Henry, his gaze never drifted from trying to find the front of the train amongst the trees. Finally, the caboose made its appearance, and only then did Henry put his hand down, a dead leaf falling to the ground. Instead, he simply stood and watched in silence as the caboose slinked past him and disappeared out of sight, waiting to leave until he heard the train give a final wail of goodbye and longing in the distance. Once natural silence returned to the woods, and the rails no longer singed hot, only then did he turn and begin his slow walk back home.

A year later and the times had changed. The woods went through their ritualistic transition, changing from green to gold, browning from hazel to copper, the forest floor sinking into the rhythm of sleep. Henry wandered to the woods, following a path meant for child's feet that, despite his age, no longer seemed to fit his. His feet were bare, the ground cold and biting, but they were numb. Twigs pricked just as much as moss, leaves slipped just as much as dirt, and yet Henry couldn't tell the difference.

There was a silence to the woods, something natural and protective. It covered Henry like a blanket; and yet, this seemingly peaceful comfort—something others would find a quiet, delicate delight in—felt suffocating. Farther into the woods the blanket thickened, numbing the senses deeper, sending tingles through his skin in promises of something yet to come, but he didn't turn away.

Slowly, the woods parted and Henry spilled into the clearing, looking upon the tracks. Yet in them, they held no vibrance. Stale, the iron smelled vitriolic. Quiet, the tracks hushed with leaves blown across metal, acrid and beautiful, a thick carpet of undisturbed leaves in a cascade of decay. Henry looked down the tracks, but nothing came. A gap, a tunnel of trees curling their branches, having finally been able to grow in the absence.

Henry kicked the rail, and a nail rumbled and jarred itself loose. The wood track splintered.

Something tore through Henry then, and he collapsed to his knees.

At the edge of the woods, Henry's mother startled as she heard a wail break in the distance. She placed her hands on the sink, dripping murky water into the grate, and stared out at the space where footsteps could still be traced along the gravel, depressions in the leaves, a carefully bent twig before swallowing itself into the woods. She sighed then, and a single tear fell down her cheek as she listened carefully to the mourning of her son.

Lying next to her elbow lay a letter, inky words smeared, edges crumbled from shaking hands. It was a report of an accident, broken down into plain letters and translucent condolences. A train. A man. A life.

The tracks sat silently, collapsing to take the weight of a boy mourning the death of his father, and through his gasping breaths, they hummed a life of loss.

## DELTA BREEZE

Through the heated conversation, she could hear the fly buzzing at the window.

“I understand, but what I’m trying to say—what I want you to actually listen to—is that I am going to need to get picked up from work tomorrow.”

The daily of toil of conversation between the adults around her had become a muted breeze that blew through between the times of 5:00 pmt to 6:30 pmevery day, much like the expected Delta breeze that made the hot California summers bearable. As to be expected with every conversation, the topic of which passed between heated lips always changed but it was the tone that didn’t. And in the end it was that that made it all sound the same, and the reason why she gave up paying attention to it long ago. Not knowing the next retort, she knew almost instinctively exactly what the gist of it would contain. Upon hearing the familiar lilt in tone as whatever was said progressed the conversation forward on its predestined track, she couldn’t help but give a small smile of satisfaction. Even though she wasn’t listening.

In front of her rested a cup and it became the center of her attention. A fat and long yellow straw was submerged in a pool of cloudy water, and it protruded far past the rim of the glass, making the glass look like a child’s toy filled with transparent plastic instead of the standard sized glass that can be found in nearly any household cabinet. She traced the straw with her eyes, watching the point where it disconnected with itself in the water, grew a size too big, and distorted. *Refraction* is what she knew that was called, but still, the clarity of it didn’t loosen her gaze of wonderment. The glass had been previously filled with milk, chai syrup, and ice cubes, but the drink had been drunk, the ice had now melted, and she was surprised to see

how full the glass was. She imagined pouring the water back into the ice tray, counting how many ice cubes could be made from the water still so freshly preserved for future use.

Everything around her circulated in a never-ending cycle that was all too predictable, and she fought against the normalcy of it, searching for the wonderment against her growing exhaustion. The water in the cup could be refrozen, and the ice cubes could be left in a glass to melt again, only to start the cycle all over again. The fly buzzing at the window hit in a natural rhythm that even the ears became deaf to after a while, as the mind is programmed to tune out even the most unpredictable of natural sounds. Once the rhythm is no longer heard but felt, it becomes a point of familiarity and, therefore, forgotten. The conversation always carried with it that familiar end-of-the-day angst and stress, and so despite the exchange of ideas, it never had the weight to move mountains. It was then that she realized it was up to her to be the vessel of change.

She reached across the couch and took the glass, chugging down the diluted milky water as the straw fell to the floor. Walking to the window, she opened it, and the fly escaped back into the stifling summer air. She took a breath of air, opened her mouth, and talked.

“I have something to say,” she interrupted, and smiled as the conversation fell quiet behind her.

## RUBICON BAKERS' VEGAN VANILLA CUPCAKES

“If you just avoided a second helping, your stomach wouldn’t hurt before bed, Roo.”

Deep down, Ruth Josephine knew her mother was just trying to help, but it seemed so unfair. She clutched her stomach over her dress as it gurgled and digested the heavy dinner she apparently had “too much of.” Ruth Josephine went upstairs to change, get ready for bed, and finish up homework. Anything to distract from the bitter taste the evening left in her mouth.

As Ruth Josephine sulks back to the stairs, her mother’s voice echoes between her left and right ear, and she thinks to herself, *Since when have I been eating too much?* She eyes her dad on the couch in the living room. He continues to stare intensely at the glowing tv screen in front of him, zoned in on a hockey game. Ruth Josephine silently studies his behavior from the bottom of the stairs, like he is a zoo animal. As his mouth is open, salivating for the dessert before him, he looks down briefly to stack one gooey, melty, and fresh chocolate chip cookie atop another, and shovels both into his mouth simultaneously, chewing with his mouth open. Ruth Josephine’s attention now turns to the plate on the coffee table in front of him, where there are six more cookies to spare. She sighs to herself and heads upstairs.

A few hours have passed, and Ruth Josephine completed her mandatory reading for her Language Arts class due tomorrow. Not one page less, but not one page more. She crossed off achievements in her planner with a proud smile on her face. As she is closing all her homework and zipping up her backpack for the next day, she hears her mom shout, “Goodnight, honey!” followed by a door locking from the inside and lights flickering off. The hallway by her room goes dark. Her stomach is no longer hurting, and so now is her moment.

Ruth Josephine tiptoes downstairs in thick socks, her boxer shorts, and one of Dad’s shirts too big for her she is swimming in (he still

doesn't know it is missing from his closet). There is no sense in turning a light on, as she has walked these halls all her life and knows no other route. Carefully stepping on the stairs in a toe-ball-heel fashion, on the edge and as close as she can get to the banister—that is where it is quietest. Ruth Josephine runs through her alibi in her head if someone does end up catching her. “I am just getting some water,” she will say in a casual and tired voice. On the contrary, she is wide awake. The kitchen's hardwood floors are a brand new obstacle all by themselves. The goal here is to utilize the socks as best she can. Slide, slide, slide to the refrigerator. When she pulls open the freezer door (with possibly too much force), she checks to make sure no one else heard it and would begin to investigate the sound. The glow of the fridge light is something for her pupils to adjust to. Right on top of everything else, just as she suspected, is a gallon Ziploc bag of the chocolate chip cookies her mom made earlier this evening. She rips the bag open, stuffs four into her hands, and, forgetting every detail about the walk down, runs back up to her room on just her toes as quickly as she can. She takes big strides between each step to get back to the comfort and solitude of her bedroom.

Ruth Josephine keeps only the bedside light on as she eats the frozen cookies in bed, the crumbs falling to the floor with the goal of giving away her cover.

One random, early autumn day, Ruth Josephine's mom, Mary, comes home with her hands full of shopping bags.

It is not Christmas, the little girl wonders, *So who are all these presents for?*

“Mom?” Ruth Josephine calls from the top of the stairs, as she sees Mom skipping every other step and almost running out of breath as she climbs to her daughter.

“Oh, Rudy! I got a little carried away earlier. Do you want to see what I got before Dad gets home?”

An impromptu fashion show! Now Ruth Josephine is excited as she waits impatiently on the couch in her parent's room for her mother to leave the closet and showcase one of her many new outfits.

Mary comes out with a questioning smile on her face, but Ruth Josephine is already in awe. Her mom is the most breathtaking woman she has ever seen.



“Wow, Mommy! I love that color on you! The sweater is so fun and perfect for the change in seasons,” Ruth Josephine could continue on flattering her mother in regard to every detail that catches her eye of this new ensemble—she cannot wait to grow into it herself.

Ruth Josephine continues adoring her mother. She hopes she will look just like her when she gets older. Mary has curly long brown hair, an ability to run for miles and miles, and effortless beauty when she is wrapped in jeans and a T-shirt, with a string of pearls as a garnish around her perfume scented neck. One time Ruth Josephine invaded her mom’s privacy, walking in on her submerged in a body of hot water and bubble bath. What is not to love about it? It is all so beautiful.

However, Mom is disappointed. You can see it in her eyes when it looks as if she will start to cry.

“I don’t know, hun,” she says as she is very obviously trying to push her stomach fat back where it came from. “These pants hardly hold my stomach in . . .” Then, more to her reflection than anyone else, “I am disgusting.”

The first time you watched *Little Miss Sunshine*, you were completely in awe. There is so much to love about that movie, and Paul Dano screaming “fuck” at the top of his lungs is just one of those things.

Near the beginning of the movie, the family makes their first pit stop at a diner on their way to California for a beauty pageant. At the diner, the youngest, Olive, orders waffles à la mode, meaning “it comes with ice cream.” As they are waiting for their drinks (and ice cream) to arrive at the table, Olive’s dad wastes no time before explaining to her where ice cream goes in your body once you eat it. Olive contemplates this new reality, wondering how something so sweet and yummy could be so evil. Her dad asks her a philosophical question: “Are the models in Miss America skinny or fat?”

Olive waits a minute, but responds innocently, “They’re skinny, I guess.” The father retorts, “Guess they don’t eat a lot of ice cream.”

With a pint of Oatly’s Non-dairy Chocolate Ice Cream melting in Ruth’s left hand and a clean spoon sitting hungry in her right, she thinks vividly of Olive as she pushes her dish away from her, offering it up to anyone else at the table.

dani gagne

## THE REVENANT

The rotting sun

a caustic parasite—

heating the sloughing flesh of the deer

melded into the asphalt

antlers somewhere far away

the face carved into a smile by vultures—

red like the lights that fled

it oozed from the creature

and traveled in rivers to the gutter—

disgraced dismantled disregarded

the deer rises gathers its mutilated flesh and disappears into the woods

micah sample

## A SERAPH SHARES A CIGARETTE WITH A CAMPFIRE

come on, let's pass each other  
a light & watch the sky drink up our smoke

i say something stupid like it's crazy  
    how small the stars look  
    from all the way down here  
you laugh in a crackle of sparks  
    & say you can still remember when  
    you & me & everything  
    were all made of the same stuff  
god built me too many bones  
    & wings & eyes out of eternity  
but you have stood the testament of time

you tell me about all the bones  
    you've warmed & the souls you've stirred  
& i can tell you all about hellfire  
    but never how to escape it  
instead i watch the way the stardust  
at the end of your cigarette glows  
    dying sun orange on your cheeks  
& your eyes are charcoals  
sizzling with their last breath

you tell me stories of who fed you  
    built you from warmth  
    & music & laughter &  
    you were home & you were home  
& i'm not from around these parts

home for me means clean  
& cold, means beauty  
unknown & untouched  
& unseen

you brush the embers off your jeans  
& ask if i'm clean & cold enough  
to see the mind of god  
when he asks himself what he's  
gonna do with your world  
so i tell you about the end of it  
& how only the cracked  
ribs & twisted  
spine of the earth will remain  
all her children buried  
beneath, their memories left  
to scorch in the sun  
but at the end of the world you  
are still a sign of life.

i've made you laugh again & i  
would fall from the cold  
grace of god for all eternity  
if i knew at the end of the world  
i would land at your feet.

you crush the blistered end of  
your cigarette under your feet  
i offer you another so we can  
burn a little while longer  
you think i think too highly of you  
after all, you say you only  
take the bite out of winter  
but you could take the fight  
out of me

## THE WORDS THAT MAKE FRUIT BLEED

It all begins with a word,  
soft and sweet like a plum  
in the summer. It is  
hard to control oneself, once the word is given. Too delicious  
to resist. With a pout,  
it begins; a push, a push  
in return. The warmth and luxury  
of indulgence, over-indulgence, of  
breathing too deeply, self-love  
becoming selfishness. Savoring  
one moment, and the next, and the next. A murmur,  
or a gasp; it is hard to be certain with a head full  
of heat, blood, sheets, budding interest in  
another blossoming into desire. The  
burning of mouth  
against mouth, falling  
into bed, like  
falling through the realms and gates of sleep. The fruit  
of one's labors, culminated in skin pulled taut,  
nails against skin,  
suddenly pierced,  
hastily bitten.  
What could have provoked  
such violence? Tender skin turning into  
bleeding wounds, fruit hemorrhaging juice,  
moaning, of pain and  
not of pleasure. One is tempted to describe the juice as tart,

but that isn't quite it. Any child of this hunger knows the taste of flesh,  
but this one is new. The bite is a question  
for this one, but for most, it is a reply.  
They have grown familiar with lip  
against skin, and  
then blood on the tongue.  
Indulgence asks a question, what does it taste of?  
And those who know let out a simple reply. It tastes of pleasure.

There are some pleasures in this world so powerful that they bend and  
break the laws of the physical plane.  
These are the words that make sacrifice sweet.  
These are the words that make fruit bleed.



i feel Her in my Renaissance eyes, my Roman nose, my Midas curls,  
the way the Others are staring at me with the same (blood)lust,  
that they tear her to pieces over.

She is there and i am here, with Her  
and i weep for us both.



## THE RABBIT AND THE HOUSE IN THE SKY

The church organs began with a rapturous twang of sound, signaling the people in the pews to rise. It could be heard from the street outside, or from the playground nearby, where K sat on the swingset, not swinging but simply staring down at his hands clenched in his lap. His parents were inside the church, singing and praying and going through all the same motions that happened every Sunday. K used to be one of them, too, singing and praying and lifting up his hands when they were meant to be lifted.

“Wait outside,” his mother had said to him as they all slid out of the car in order from oldest to youngest.

K’s father was already halfway to the door, with his older sister not far behind. K’s mother had paused to say this to K, without looking at him.

So K went to the swingset without arguing and the minutes ticked by. K’s mouth moved to the words of the hymns, but no sound came out. A motorcycle whipped by, and for a moment, the organ was a forgotten thing. It returned like a mold in K’s ears, slow and festering.

“You don’t like the music?” The swing beside K became occupied.

K looked at them. He could have sworn he had seen them somewhere before, although it was lost to him now. Their voice was light and fluid and jarringly calm.

“It’s not that I don’t like it,” K said. “I just don’t remember *how* to like it. I know I used to.”

“I see,” the person said.

K wasn’t entirely sure they did see, but he let it slide. The stranger kicked their feet off the mulch ground and began to swing. Higher and higher they went, until K thought they might fly away. Eventually, though, they started to drift back down until the swing was suspended in a small movement, like the ticking of a metronome or the watch of a hypnotist drifting back and forth.

“You don’t swing?” The stranger asked.

“I guess not.” K shook his head, digging his shoes into the mulch until they were enveloped completely. Then, “I swing sometimes. Not today.”

The stranger suddenly pointed to a cloud in the sky. “That one’s an interesting shape, don’t you think? One time I saw a cloud that was shaped like a circus tent; it even had an elephant next to it.”

“I just see clouds.” K squinted up into the sky, trying to find shapes in the fluffy condensation of the atmosphere. He found nothing that was shaped like anything other than a cloud. The organ stopped playing, and K looked towards the wooden doors of the church, but they remained firmly shut.

“Why do you not go inside?” The stranger asked.

“You ask a lot of questions,” K responded.

“Questions are good. Don’t you have questions? I have so many. Like, why do the bees dance instead of sing? Why are books printed on slices of trees? Why do humans like sugar so much?”

“Something science-y.” K looked over at the stranger now, taking in their glasses and odd vintage coat that was damp up to the elbows.

“Hm? Oh, yes. Something science-y. That would explain it. Science always has a way of explaining things.”

“Unless it doesn’t.”

“True.” The stranger jumped from the swing, landing a few feet away with all the grace of a house cat. They spun on their heels to face K. “Would you like to see something magnificent? Not explained by science in the slightest.”

K hesitated. “I don’t know you,” he said, although he was greatly tempted to go with this person. He thought it might have been because they looked familiar, but it could have also just been the thrill of the adventure, or of running away.

The stranger took a dramatic bow. “Sam, at your service. Sam like Samuel, or Samantha, or Samwise. And you are?”

“K,” said K.

“Now we know each other.” Sam pulled a timepiece from their pocket and watched the hands stutter along the face. “We’ll make perfect timing if we leave now.”

“To see what?”

“That is the question! It’s different every time!” Sam jumped like a gleeful child. “Once, I saw a castle bigger than the entire state of Washington, and stretched hiiiiigh into the sky until it poked into the sun. And another time, I was completely underwater, walking among the crabs and corals. I even saw space once, full of nebulae and twisting, sparkling galaxies like candies. I wished I could eat one, but they were too big to fit in my mouth! And another time, I was deep in a forest, and the ground fell away and down I went, until I landed in a town that was built completely out of aluminum and tree wax.”

K was beginning to think this person was very weird, stuck in their imagination or a fantasy. A place that was different every time it was seen—it couldn’t possibly exist. Still, K had to admit he was interested. He glanced at the church again. Still, the doors stayed shut.

“Quickly now!” Sam exclaimed. “Don’t you want to see it?”

K nodded. “I do. How?”

Sam grinned, revealing white teeth like rows of kernels on an ear of corn. They began to rewind their watch, the hand traveled several revolutions around the face. Finally, Sam stopped and held out their hand to K.

“Shall we?” they said.

K took their hand, which was soft, yet bony, as if it belonged to a pianist. He watched as the hands on the watch lurched forward to the present moment, splintering his vision of his surroundings as he became consumed by the maelstrom of time and earth and atoms.

“Jump!” Sam said suddenly.

K jumped.

The pair rose into the sky, rushing through the air steadily and without the weight of the troposphere pushing them back down. K’s stomach rolled, threatening to evict the remains of his breakfast up his throat. He thought his lungs would collapse with how high they were, and with how thin and light the air was, but that did not happen.

Soon, they began to slow down. They hovered in the sky for a moment, miles above the church. Then they started falling. K felt

the beginnings of panic start to rise in his chest, felt the way his skin and hair fell half a second behind the rest of him, but then his feet met something firm. He and Sam were standing on something.

K looked down. At first, he only saw the land far below, until it began to shift and blur into grey stones that formed under his shoes. He realized he was standing at the beginning of a path. If he stepped backward, he wondered if he would fall over the side and plummet to the earth. Ahead of him was a small house. It was blue, with a little brown fence, open windows, and a vegetable garden along the side walls. There was a single tree with a tire hanging off a branch by a mangled rope.

“Ah!” Sam said, releasing K’s hand. “How interesting!”

Sam started down the path toward the house and K followed, absently staring at the familiar wind chime over the front door. Behind the house was only the blue sky, not a cloud nor a bird in sight. He knew this house; he knew that wind chime and hanging tire. He knew that the front window was jammed and needed to be fixed. He couldn’t remember why he knew these things.

Sam stopped in front of the door and gestured for K to go first. K looked up at the wind chime, which sang above him now, glistening pink in the sunlight. He faced the door. He wasn’t sure why, but he didn’t feel the need to knock, and simply turned the handle and entered.

It smelled of fresh bread, lit candles, and bourbon. Familiar, familiar, familiar. K stepped past the entryway, glancing through the living room with the blue walls and into the kitchen, where a fish tank sat on a wooden table. A singular goldfish made laps around the tank at the same steady pace as Sam’s watch.

Sam licked a finger and held it up into the air. “Your childhood home, I believe. Strange.”

“Strange,” K repeated as it all finally clicked into place. “How are we here? How is this in the sky?”

“Good. Always good to ask questions, K.”

“But I don’t understand!”

“Some things are not meant to be understood.” Sam shrugged.

“You see the fish? Do you think it understands that there is an entire world outside of that little bowl? The bowl is all it knows. The fish is not happy and it doesn’t know why. Of course, we can see that the bowl is much too small for any fish to be happy in, but we couldn’t possibly explain that to the fish; it doesn’t speak English. Or any human language, for that matter. And yet the fish lives there and does not understand that there are entire oceans full of other fishes.”

“But it . . . it’s in the sky! This shouldn’t be possible!” K exclaimed, moving through the living room, looking around corners, and squatting close to the ground to see if the same red stain was in the carpet from his old paint set. It was.

“There are many things that shouldn’t be possible.” Sam picked up a pillow from the couch, squishing it between their hands. “Life shouldn’t be possible, yet despite everything, the earth is teeming with it. And airplanes!”

“I don’t care about the planes,” K said, suddenly angry. “Why can’t you just give me a clear answer? Who are you?”

“I’m Sam.” Sam smiled. “Don’t you remember me? We used to have so much fun together. I always had the blue teacup. It was the only one that wasn’t chipped, because I was your favorite. I sat across from you at the little plastic table. Of course, Star and Salami were there, too, but you didn’t like them as much. You told me about every time the boys at recess wouldn’t let you play with them, and about the time you punched one because he said you were a girl. My favorite story was the one where you got lost at the theme park and met a human-sized dinosaur. And then the flood happened.”

Coldness spread up K’s ankles and he looked down, finding himself standing in several inches of black water. It flowed in through the front door, through the back door, and eventually through the windows. The furniture rose with it, drifting into corners of the room. Sam was washed away in the water, sinking into the ooze in a quiet gulp. A dirty stuffed rabbit floated by, and K snatched it up by one of the ears. He lifted it up, dripping wet.

The rabbit blinked and opened its mouth.

“You left me here, K,” it—*Sam*—said, though not at all angry or

accusatory. “Your parents said I was too dirty to save. The flood went away and so did you. I waited. Mushrooms grew from me and mice stole my insides.”

“I’m sorry,” K said.

“It’s okay. I forgive you.”

The rabbit and the water faded away and Sam, the person, sprung from the carpet, coat soaked and hair mussed. “That was a long time ago. You asked who I am. Now you remember.”

K nodded. “Why don’t you look like a rabbit anymore?”

Sam tilted their head. “That’s a funny question. Do you really need me to answer?”

K supposed he didn’t. He was no longer the little girl setting tea parties and being banished from the football field. He still didn’t play football, but he cut his hair and grew taller and wore shirts he stole from his father’s closet.

“I guess not,” K said. “Why are we here?”

“Because it’s impossible!”

“Why—”

“Because this is what happens in your—in anyone’s—time of need. A reminder of how far you’ve come.” Sam stepped into the kitchen. “This fish, it had no name. You called it Fish.” Sam pointed to a paper taped on the fridge. “That report card. It was the first time you had gotten straight A’s and you were so proud. You made your parents hang it on the fridge right away, all while your sister complained because she *always* got straight A’s. They took you out to get ice cream and you came back with chocolate staining your clothes.” Sam peered out the back window, glancing from side to side. “The sandbox that your mother turned into a garden one day, but nothing grew in it.” Sam turned back to K, a hesitant smile lingering on their lips. “You’ve come a long way, K, even if your parents still treat you like their daughter, but exile you from church because they’re embarrassed to be seen with you under the eyes of what they worship. You did what you needed to survive and you created yourself, and that’s more than a lot of people can say for themselves. Some people only live in the shadow of themselves, but you live to be alive for yourself.”

K glanced around, taking in the memories of his childhood. “Why not show the future instead?”

“That’s for you to find out on your own.”

The walls of the house fell away, vanishing into the ground. Sam faded away with them, leaving nothing but the grass and stones and sky under K’s feet. The edges of the floating island crumbled, shrinking in towards K’s feet, closer and closer. K nearly screamed when the last bits underneath his shoes disappeared. The wind rushed through him, cold and strong.

K dropped quickly. He didn’t have time to feel the terror of free falling.

He was sitting on the swingset again. A motorcycle sped past. The doors to the church opened and a crowd of people spilled out, faces pale and sublime. K watched them, struck by dizziness, nausea, and, unexpectedly, the curious feeling of hope.

K’s family appeared within the crowd and he locked eyes with his mother. He stood. She stopped in front of him, reaching out to fix the collar of his shirt.

“I’m sorry,” she started. “I shouldn’t have made you wait out here. We’re a family and we stick together.” She frowned, took a breath, then lifted her face and smiled. “Let’s go home, K.”

## PERFORMING FOR MYSELF

### *Barré*<sup>1</sup>

The other night, I had one of those dreams again. I was in a small room, the sun glancing through a window, the panes of reflective glass mirroring the dancers in the space. There is always a dance I must know, a routine that everyone else has known for two or three weeks, that I've only just learned today. The instructor weaves between small groups of two or three, observing them rehearse. She taps her cane and gestures with her thin, graceful hands. Thin, graceful bodies respond like clay to her words, molding and shaping into perfect forms.

When she stops at my group, my throat tightens. I feel my insides twist, and I am sure my face flushes like a burn from the stove. She starts dealing corrections like a person deals cards: *two for you, two for you*. But this isn't a game of luck—she's blunt with her honesty and her words cut true. *Inadequate, inadequate!* The dream words cry, and the cane taps, and her mouth curls into a frown, and then she is done, and crosses her arms.

*Usually*, the dream goes like this: I bow my head and try again to match the steps of my group. And again, I fail, but I'm stuck in this pattern of necessity, where I must perform and dance and be seen as “good enough.” So, the dream stretches out long and shallow through the night, and the message is repeated over and over before morning light breaks.

But tonight, in this dream, I step forward and tell the instructor that I'm done. I don't want to perform with the group anymore, I don't want to learn the dance, and I'm tired of the stress and pain of it all. Then I walk out of the studio, through the double glass doors, and onto a grassy, sunny hillside.

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<sup>1</sup> Barré is the first segment of a ballet class, consisting of multiple exercises that focus on footwork and technique. It is usually performed at a wooden or metal bar, hence its name.



## *Center*<sup>2</sup>

From age six to eighteen, I was trained as a classical ballerina in a small, locally owned studio in Southern California. The studio's dance company was small, with fifteen girls my age at my level. There were younger children there, too, but our little group was serious about our career. We grew and learned together, destined for a professional relationship with our skill. The studio owner and company director was named Mrs. Florence.

Mrs. Florence wore black: black shoes, black leggings, and a black jacket tight to her body. Sometimes, her shirt was red or purple, always emblazoned with the company logo: a dancer in flight. I can see her now as she taps her cane (only used in emphasis, never support), and glides around a formation of dancers—a slip of darkness, razor-thin, and sculpted by time. I never saw her hair down from its high bun. She was from England and, even decades later, retained a clear accent. She had been trained in The Royal Ballet and was an esteemed company dancer from a young age.

I liked to think that Mrs. Florence thought I was special. I used big, fancy words when I spoke, I talked of books and writing, and I had several creative hobbies outside of ballet. Maybe I was mysterious, quiet, refined. (I liked to think that.) I was older than the other dancers by a year, with strong legs and arms and, just like the others, appeared at classes every day for four hours or more. My exterior breathed commitment and potential, yet in class I always chose the farthest row from the front.

One evening, I participated in a breathing exercise at the end of a class. We laid down on the broad, golden-wood floor and Mrs. Florence shut the lights off in the room. The space had been designed to double as a performance venue in addition to a rehearsal room, so the black walls swallowed the residual light. It was like being consumed by the void of space. A great mirror on one wall, ceiling to floor, reflected the darkness, and eight supine figures.

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<sup>2</sup> Center marks the second portion of a ballet class. Aptly named for its position, dancers put away the bars and spread out across the middle of the floor to practice combinations without the support of the barre.

Mrs. Florence walked us through the exercise, pulling our minds into deep introspection. I think the intent was for us to reflect on goals and connect to our bodies in a way that is necessary for dancers, but instead, my mind chose to delve into a complex narrative defining light and dark, developing a message—in order to become something greater than oneself, change must occur. After, the group shared their goals and, at my turn, I spilled this revelation excitedly, the shadow of the space disguising features and expressions. I felt freed to speak out into the night, with distant stars as my audience. Mrs. Florence said she was impressed with my storytelling skills, and I felt pride blossom in my chest, forgetting the real goal of the activity—to become a better dancer. These were the things, I thought, that made me special.

Mrs. Florence led most of the ballet classes at the studio, but she also had an assistant, Mrs. Diane. She was the opposite of Mrs. Florence in many ways—a testament to her craft. Mrs. Diane was in charge of contemporary dance—jazz alternative styles I shied away from. She was loud, confident, strict, and beautiful in her passion. I can still hear her, vocalizing each hit, rhythm, and pulsing beat. *And one, two, cah, TAH! Higher, stretch, roll, BAH!*

Everyone else loved the experimentation with genre, but it scared me. My movements were awkward, like a gangly twig struggling to bend as a flower does. I couldn't move fast enough; my feet were trained to beat and step in specific positions in ballet, and this was foreign, a change in my very gravity. I had stepped onto distant Mercury and floated free.

Ballet made more sense to me, and Mrs. Florence, formidable as she was, was a figure of admiration. I could be Mrs. Florence, but I could never be Mrs. Diane.

### *Adagio*<sup>3</sup>

There is an order to everything in ballet: order to the dance steps, to the classes, to a performance. It is methodical, repetitive, and necessary to produce good dancers. When the untrained eye watches

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<sup>3</sup> Combinations are performed in the center and are especially slow and deliberate. Adagio is often challenging because of the positions that are held for long periods of time, often balancing on one leg.

a ballet, what do they see? My mom marvels over the costumes or the story. A friend gushes about the emotion present in the dancer's movements. Some pay closer attention to the music, some to the dance steps. Part of the difficulty of learning this kind of art is that the viewer and the performer become inextricably linked—a plastic plate melted to the stovetop.

One day the studio welcomed camera crews to report on the “unique” life of our company dancers. How did we juggle homework and dance? How did we deal with stress? *Why* did we dance? It was one of those community segments, put on by a news program. Before we were called into film, a group of dancers and I watched a reporter position her leg on a bar in the smallest studio. Repeatedly, she leaned forward in a “stretch,” then lifted her leg from the bar to introduce her segment. Clever. I saw her rehearsal for the ten second scene, and then remarked on her technique. I think I laughed.

It's the same thing the company talked about when we saw other teams perform in competition. We're merciless, tearing apart the performance, the dancers—a rival pack of coyotes on the prowl. Nothing they could ever do would be good enough. Careful words from our instructor reminded us to be kind, be human.

So why did I care if the reporter's ballet technique was not perfect? That wasn't her job, and it wasn't what the viewers saw. They saw tutus and pointe shoes, smiling children, and diligent students. A line of girls in leotards and tights sat in a small white room, tapping gibberish onto a glowing screen, their legs crossed under their desks. They feel the drama, organized and fleeting, but only what is in front of the curtain. The magic is in the performance: scenery that pops into view, delicate women balancing center stage, curved in a graceful arc like a swan gliding to touch water. The order is for the performers: a stray hair out of place, a slipped leap, a missed cue in the music. We are lucky to make magic, even if we lose sight of it ourselves.

Trained to look for cracks in a painting, part of me has become critical of others, but more so of myself. In my dream, it is always about *my* failure. The other dancers, shadowy wisps at the edge of my vision, perfect in time and harmony, never stop to ask after me, and never slow down or assist with choreography. Do they notice?

I wonder if they are too busy looking at their own reflections.

*Allegro*<sup>4</sup>

It goes numb after a while, a scalp. The hair is pulled slick, paper thin against the skull, and twisted into practiced loops. Little pieces of metal scrape the ponytail into complex, dense shapes, domes the texture of straw grass. At my first performance, an older dancer disapproved of my mom's frustrated attempt at a bun. She called a friend over; they laughed and produced a massive bottle of high-caliber hairspray. "Hard hat," they nodded to each other using their strange lingo, and unleashed a torrent of the chemical mist.

It took three showers to get the gel and hairspray out of my hair, and a week later, it still felt crispy to the touch.

As I aged, I entered more involved, rigorous levels of the company. We performed for audiences countless times a year: competitions, full-length ballets, community events, grade school visits, news broadcasts, holidays. One year we even traveled out of the country for a series of performances. I remember a warm coastline, white tutus ruffled by a salty breeze, piling into an old pickup truck for one photoshoot after another. Once, the truck pulled off before I was fully inside, and I shrieked and grabbed another dancer's hands as my legs dangled over crushed gravel.

Even as we prepared for one performance, choreography and music was chosen for the next, and my weeknights and weekends were packed with events and expectations. One of my school friends told me she didn't believe I had so many commitments. *It just doesn't make sense; I feel like you're lying.* When I did have free time to myself, I wanted to focus on quiet activities—art, writing, streaming shows, millions of little escapes. I wanted a break from people and routine. I worked on homework after dance until midnight. Those news images of quiet groups of dancers in the studio's little white "study room" were *dreams* for a tired highschooler: completing homework in the

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<sup>4</sup> Allegro involves quick, leaping movements that fall in the second part of a ballet class. It often covers the most space as the dancer travels across the room to lively music.

daylight, dictating my own hours, finding more than ten minutes for a snack.

Some dancers on the team skipped classes for school projects when we entered high school—a wise and bold decision. While success in school was encouraged by Mrs. Florence and Mrs. Diane, I still remember lectures on attendance and effort. *Every class missed, the other dancers will be working*, they warned, pacing before us in an elegant statement. *We expect two hundred percent, every day. This is what is expected as a professional, and you are all future professionals.* In class that day, the dancers around me pushed themselves to exceed two hundred percent. Their legs trembled as they pulled them higher, faster combinations, reversed footwork, pirouettes of two, three, four rotations.

We paused for water and I tried not to gulp it down. Too much and I would feel it sloshing inside me as I danced. Someone also told me it caused cramps, or a stomachache, but I really couldn't remember why. I took just enough to wet my tongue and quench the thirst. I grabbed a paper towel and dried myself off, the sweat clinging to me in a fine mist. By the end of the class, it would be pouring across my body, flinging itself from my nose as I spun across the floor. At the edge of the room, one dancer sat with an ice pack to a braced leg—she had dislocated her knee earlier in the year and was recovering. I saw a notepad in her hands as she watched the class. Her eyes tracked us, desperate for crumbs of improvement. Two hundred percent was not possible with an injury.

We were told that we were future professionals, that performances were professionally rigorous. Large theaters were rented for a weekend of full-length ballets. These theaters had spacious backstage rooms for the performers—each top-level dancer was provided with their own mirror, golden lights shining around the edge, and a desk for a hurried salad or makeup bags. It gave us something to look forward to, to work for, to want (or something like that). It also forced us to put ourselves on pedestals, fighting to stay above the people dancing among us.

I raced from the stage to a few minutes of rest, pointe shoes clacking against the floor. Even with fifteen minutes to spare, it was common practice to keep my pointe shoes on. I limped to my mirror and

threw my legs onto a chair as my eyes unfocused to the golden lights and movement of the quick-change volunteers. If a dancer took their shoes off, their feet swelled, and the satiny blocks of cardboard and glue would be impossible to pull back on. So, I rested in pain.

My first solo was for our performance of *Cinderella*, and I was appointed as lead. *Cinderella*, a childhood fantasy, a ball gown that transforms a pauper into a princess, and Mrs. Florence and Mrs. Diane chose *me*. I was surprised, tentative to gloat. I learned my choreography—critical, critical. I rehearsed alone, in the smallest room, away from the watching eyes of the other dancers. The very first rehearsal of the full solo was in the main room, before the instructor's table. Sweat trickled from my hands as I waited my turn. The ballet numbers rolled on, and Mrs. Florence nodded to them, running through moments of their choreography. I leaned my head back against the wall and wished for release. My pulse drummed in my chest like an executioner's march, loud and heavy.

When Mrs. Florence called my name, I had already risen to my feet, warming up my legs and ankles, finding the edges of my pointe shoes. I breathed slowly to calm my nerves. I was not one of those dancers who had conquered stage fright or yearned for criticism.

I took my place on the floor, hands resting in a gentle arch on either side of my body. In this scene, Cinderella was overwhelmed with deep sadness and a longing to join her stepsisters at the ball. It was a mournful dance that grew quicker at the end as she grew angry with her fate. The music began, and I floated my hands across my body, rising to my pointe shoes. On the first turn of the dance, I slipped, falling toward the wooden floor. Flushed red, I picked myself up quickly to carry on.

My toes stung when I balanced upon them, and my stomach sank as I realized my pointe shoes were deteriorating. Nerves shook my legs, and I slipped again, my leg extension falling short of its full height. Hot tears welled in my eyes, and my vision grew blurry. The floor tilted back and forth as I blinked away tears. I pushed on to the finale of the dance.

Classical music swelled to a crescendo, the eyes of the other dancers hot on my back, like steaming red pokers, prodding me. What were they thinking? I could *feel* them thinking. Final turn, I prepped

and made it halfway around before my foot slipped again. If the floor could open up and swallow me, I would embrace the darkness.

I finished the dance and held the final position, a one-knee kneel, as the music faded. My knee wobbled underneath me, my fingers trembling. I couldn't wipe the tears away until I was released from my position by my instructors, so I bowed my head in shameful silence.

I didn't hear them when they spoke.

After I left the studio floor and the ballet continued, I exited into the hallway to wipe my face. One of the moms who had been watching approached me, tears glimmering in her eyes. She pulled me into a hug.

*That was so beautiful! I felt everything, you are such a wonderful dancer.*

I nodded my thanks and tried to laugh. Then, I stumbled my way to the bathroom, where my red-streaked eyes glared at me in the mirror. I wanted to dive into an ocean and lose myself in the waves, or rip my hair out if that meant I could dance better. I wanted to cry and cry until someone noticed and asked me what I wanted, because why would I want *this*? Maybe if I was more flexible, or taller, or thinner, or smarter, or more determined, or had more time. Maybe I needed to care more. Maybe I already cared and I needed to be a different person. I looked up again, into the mirror, and took a deep breath.

### *Reverence*

I rarely dance now.

The co vid -19 epidemic ended the final act of my ballet career prematurely. I spent my last classes attempting extensions and jumps in a six-by-four foot space in my parent's room. They had a hardwood floor, closest to the one used in the studio, though it was slippery and creaked. All of our performances were canceled, and for a few months, I lived in a half existence, forced to come to terms with my new life too soon.

Part of me enjoyed the quiet ending. Like a clean death, I would disappear from classes one day. I would be gone. Guiltless, blameless, invisible. Really, I think I always wanted that.

It's been four years since the last ballet class I ever took. Maybe once every two months, the endless sitting gets to me, and I have a burst of energy to reclaim part of my identity. I have full control of my time now, the adult strength of decisions and priority like a scalpel cutting me loose from anything that becomes too . . . repetitive. I give myself time, a gift I can only appreciate now, and have started to notice a want in my life.

Somehow, all of my hair pins and dance shoes have ended up in my new apartment with me. My last pair of pointe shoes are tucked away in my sock drawer like a dirty flamingo amongst pigeons. Recently, my heeled character shoes made an appearance when I tried Scottish folk dancing for the first time, but were quickly switched to flats when the leader chided, *you won't want heels for this!*

I tried to pick up fencing. I found it beautiful, artful, orderly; but something about the competitiveness, self-criticism, and movement was too close to something I'd spent years of my life chasing, so I faded away from practices after a year.

I can't reach my toes anymore when I stretch, and that makes me sad.

The reverence is the concluding dance of a ballet class and performance. It is simple, and usually involves the entire cast as they return to the stage for their bows. There are three moments of gratitude expressed by each dancer. A curtsy to the pianist or orchestra gives thanks to the music, a curtsy to the audience gives thanks to their patronage, and then the dancers turn and sink into a graceful position, head bowed, right hand over their heart in reverence to the teacher.

I think they should add two more: one for the other company dancers, and one towards the mirror, to the reflection that hovers in mind when performing for an audience. Because beyond the stage, the theater is absolutely dark, a wall of ink that consumes and watches in silence. The space is not empty. I saw a mirror, reflecting my movements and mistakes, disillusioned to the other dancers, the narrowed eyes of my instructors, and my own eyes, sad and distant.

A performer must fill the darkness for themselves, or else they are lost to it.



## DANCING GIRL

When she danced, she danced with her whole body. She was copper, burned, and tanned. In the sun she was dusty, in the shade soon forgotten. It was only when she danced you saw her. Then you could not look away. When she danced, she became molten copper, sleek and smooth, mellow as sleeping, yet she burned you at the touch. There were no corners, no ends. When she danced, she was fire, she was the blaze licking the sky and the embers scorching the earth. When she danced, she came alive and the world died watching her.

Her arms were rattlesnakes, twisting and bending, jolting and jingling out beside her, sweeping through the air and making it smell like lemons and sand. At the ends of her arms, her fingers sang, whispered to each other as she brought them close, and then fluttered from her hands like songbirds when she spun, filling the air with the trills of tiny throats and tiny wings. Her hips were the axis of her body, they spun her around and called her back when she leaned too far. Her legs were a long tan skirt swaying beneath her, blown by the wind, riding on the beat of the music. When she danced her feet curled and popped, they leaped and spun, gripping the earth as the rest of her flew away.

But it was her face that made people look, made them stutter, made the music drift into their closed ears. She had the tiny, laughing lips of a child, always curled up at the corners, seashell pink, shut like stage curtains—until she sang. And she did. Quietly, softly, like pearls falling from her lips, little words slipped out. Snippets of song. Patchwork music notes. Falling to her ankles, bouncing and shuddering with the fleshy tap of her feet.

The curled-up corners of her lips swung you up. You were caught in her eyes. Pale dawn, blue and glittering. She always looked up. Her eyes were fixed on some distant spot above her, her throat stretched

out like a bird, her chin pointed up, so you only caught flashes of her eyes, tiny bits, fragments of the sky stuck down from heaven to land within the shadows of her lashes.

When she danced her hair was loose. It was the dusty brown of the road at midday. It smelled of the sun, and of dirty wild things that slept in the open. It was the jealous sister of her child lips and sky eyes, it coveted their beauty, leaping to hide them as the girl twirled, hating the world for not loving it more than them. When she danced, her hair danced too. It danced for sad things, forgotten things, it danced to the earth and the dry wind. It danced to the quiet beats of the music. It danced in the moments she trembled, danced the moments she rose.

When she danced, she was no longer bound, no longer tied. She danced away laughter, danced away tears. Faster, faster, until she couldn't breathe. Tap, tap, jump, spin, a swoop of the ankle, a graceful reckless fall, and she breathes again, a wild panting within the silence. The song is over.

## NAKED AND AFRAID

In their childless and unfettered youth, my mother and father visited a nude resort on a small Caribbean island. Their motives for doing so were not something I cared to dwell on. I asked my mother what it was like, being around so many naked people at once. Surely it was uncomfortable? She shrugged and said, “Let’s put it this way: nobody should play tennis without *something* on.”

Some twenty years later, I found myself on the same island. Saint Martin had been selected as the site of a weeklong family trip. For a somewhat awkward seventeen-year-old girl, the Caribbean made for a mixed bag as a vacation destination; the island’s natural beauty was undeniably breathtaking, but the sun and surf tourism culture seemed calculated to awaken old insecurities and create brand-new ones from whole cloth. Spending all-day in a Land’s End bathing suit, on beaches populated by hopelessly chic European women and strong-limbed young men, was a kind of hell.

The beaches of Saint Martin (or Sint Maarten, as it was called on the Dutch side of the island) were a confounding patchwork of nudity rules. Some beaches allowed full nakedness, while others cast a questioning eye on anything more than run-of-the-mill toplessness. On one of the less modest beaches, I had seen a French woman with thick dark hair acting the role of Lady Godiva, a sturdy Brazilian boy playing the part of the horse. I particularly anticipated—and dreaded—the appearance of a nude man. I spent most of my Caribbean vacation watching, vigilant, for any sign of a man taking his shorts off.

Toward the end of our stay on the island, I found myself in the back of an overheated rental car, bearing witness—very much against my will—to a struggle between my mother and father. The trip has begun normally—we were driving across the island to meet my sister and brother-in-law at an Italian restaurant. The sinister

overtones of the expedition did not reveal themselves until several minutes into the drive.

Once we had reached a speed that would preclude a quick tuck and roll exit from the vehicle, my father revealed our intended secondary destination: the La Vista Caribbean Resort. It was my parents' old stomping ground, home of the unsightly nude tennis players. He had planned his raid on the Resort carefully; it was directly on the way to the restaurant that we were headed to. No plausible objection could be raised on the grounds of proximity. All he wanted, he said, was to run into the gift shop and purchase a T-shirt, a souvenir of pleasant times gone by.

This excuse was thin, even by my father's standards, and both my mother and I quickly realized that the hijacking was motivated by something even simpler than the desire for a souvenir T-shirt: he wanted to catch a glimpse of some naked women before the conclusion of our trip.

"I really can't believe this," said my mother. "A *shirt*?"

"What's so hard to believe about that?" My father's tone was carefully injected with false bonhomie, but his tanned fingers were throttling the Mazda's steering wheel. "It's right on the way, right? Ten minutes."

"You expect me to believe you're going to all of this trouble for a souvenir T-shirt?"

"What else would I be doing it for?"

"You know," I said. "I'm not feeling very well."

"Let me think," said my mother. "Let me wrack my brains. What could you possibly be wanting to *gape* at?"

"Oh, come on."

"And *this* is what you want to spend our time on. The very *limited* time that we have here." My mother's tone was dripping with acid. It splattered the glass of the windshield and sizzled there.

"Stomachache or something," I said. "It's come on very suddenly."

My father was undeterred; his mission was a holy one. God was real, and She was on his side. He kept his eyes fixed firmly on the winding, dipping road in front of us.

“Mary, it’s not a big deal.”

“I really don’t want to see any big deals,” I said.

We had reached the boundaries of the resort: pink shale roofs, sprawling golf courses and tennis courts, winding paths that no doubt led to a long strip of white sand beach. My window was open a few inches, and I could smell the tang of salt water and sunscreen in the air.

I had worried that my father was driving me straight into the heart of a bacchanalia, all floppy gyration and nubile singles with their full monty on display. The reality was considerably less intimidating. Everyone that I could see walking around had clothes on, and nearly all of them were eligible for an aarp membership. The La Vista Caribbean Resort appeared to be an overbaked Jimmy Buffett fantasia for middle-class American tourists indulging in a little light beach bum roleplay. Wasting away again in Never-Neverland. There was very little glamor to it.

My father found a spot next to the Resort’s welcome center and, showing an absolutely outrageous lack of shame and remorse by whistling a merry tune, left us sitting in the car, scowling. He made sure to crack each window, as though we were pets being left in the car at a supermarket. For the next few minutes, my mother and I shared our views on the idiocy of this expedition and our grim predictions for how long my father was likely to take in the gift shop.

At one point, a middle-aged woman appeared alongside the car, naked except for the sarong wrapped lackadaisically around her waist. She was thoroughly bronzed from the sun, and each of her exposed breasts was roughly the size of a not-quite-grown puppy. The sarong really was not wrapped well at all; I could have picked her out of a gynecological lineup. Yet there was something more poignant than prurient about her—her nudity was cheerful and tenacious, not alluring. Here I am, she seemed to say. This is it.

It didn’t strike me until later, the import of what I had seen at the Resort. What I glimpsed was the way a life can stretch out—one moment you are young and in love and naked under the sun, and the next you are a little old and a little gray and very thoroughly clothed.

There was something profoundly arbitrary in it. In the moment, though, my reaction was muted by anxiety: I was too busy worrying that the first naked man I would ever see would be a sixty-year-old tax attorney from Indiana indulging in a little low-risk exhibitionism.

Eventually, my father returned, empty-handed. If he had a tail, it would have undoubtedly been between his legs.

“They were closed.” Although the T-shirt had surely been more of a pretense than anything else, he seemed genuinely disappointed. “I don’t think they even had T-shirts for sale.”

“You’re a fool,” said my mother. The bite had gone out of her words, replaced by a twisted kind of tenderness.

My father nodded. He threw the car into reverse. “I know,” he said.

## DIPTYCH

It starts like this: I find you in the library.

It's been three months since you disappeared, Jacks. Part of me expects you to be exactly as you were the last day I spoke to you, that manic gleam of *you won't believe me* in your eyes and day-old oil paint still staining your hands. I've seen you that way so many times, I almost forget that you can look like anything else.

But you wouldn't be the same, would you? You can't be. Because you wouldn't leave for this long otherwise. You wouldn't have vanished. Someone like you doesn't know how to do that without a trace, and *Jesus*, do you have any idea how hard it's been to follow you here?

Impossible, they told me. The people with glassy eyes and too-sharp teeth. They said you were theirs. They said you had come home.

And I told them that I didn't care where you were, but it was my job to find you. That's always been my job, even back when—

*No, Briar.* You're telling it all wrong. You skipped ahead too far. It actually started like this: you found me in the woods.

Before the library, before I smeared my hands with oil paint, before I even knew my own name. I was something new, all gangly limbs and wide eyes. The world was silent in a way that I didn't realize was wrong. There was no whistle of wind between the trees, no crickets chirping, nothing rustling in the bushes.

Everything was still. Quiet.

I hated it. I hated it with the kind of passion that burns your lungs from the inside out until all you can do is scream.

That was the first thing I knew about myself.

This wasn't how things were supposed to be. I was sure of it. I was made for color and noise and chaos, not the kind of stillness so thick you can practically reach out and touch it. The kind of stillness that will shatter like glass when you do.

I opened my mouth. Sucked in a breath. I was going to scream. I had to. There wasn't any other choice—I was alone and I didn't know where I was and I was so *sick* of the quiet.

But for the first and last time in my life, I wasn't the one that broke the silence. Somewhere behind me came the sound of crushed leaves. Then humming.

I spun on my heel. *There's someone else here*, I thought with a kind of desperation. Someone else meant noise. It meant movement. Color. I needed it like most people needed air.

That's when I first saw you, framed against the pale pink of a sky beginning to lighten. You were walking with a bag slung over your shoulder, and your hand jammed in your pocket. Your brown hair was unkempt, and your clothes were all wrinkled. You looked exhausted.

But you weren't. You weren't smiling, exactly, but you walked with a bounce in your step. You were humming. Content is the word I'd use now. You looked content.

I tried to croak out a word. Maybe "hello." But maybe not. I wasn't sure I even knew what that word meant by then. All that came out was a sound, sharp and strangled. *Like a trumpet falling down the stairs*, you would later tell me.

But that would be years from now, when I'm twenty-eight and you're a month shy of twenty-nine, when



you've finally navigated your way through the labyrinth under the hill and we walk hand in hand out the side you came in. That hasn't happened yet.

Right then, you were twelve and I was something like a ghost, and neither of us knew about the hill. All you knew is that someone had caught your attention, and they sounded like they needed help.

So you turned and looked me in the eyes, and you said in a voice more scared than I'll ever hear you sound again, "Oh."

—we were kids.

Their faces split when I said that. Like a crack in the earth, the smooth porcelain of their expressions shifted and creaked until I could see every one of their teeth. "Be our guest," they said, and my stomach dropped as I discovered I was standing in front of a door in the side of the hill where there hadn't been one before.

I'm not going to leave this place, I don't think. These people—the neighbors, they called themselves, like that meant anything—were too happy to let me see all of their secrets and treasures in the hill to just let me go when this is over.

I don't know what to do about that. Maybe I can beat them. Maybe you'll have an answer when I find you. I just have to hope they haven't killed you already, and I have to survive long enough to make it to wherever you are. I hold onto that, the idea that maybe you can help me fix this. Because I wasn't thinking when I went in, but I can't go back without you.

For a while, I was sure that you didn't come willingly. Why would you come to a place like this? You hate basements. Alleyways. Anything with narrow walls makes you want to bolt like a rabbit in a trap. This place is stone tunnels all the way up, all the way down.

Except, sometimes, I can almost see why they called this place your home. The marketplace I passed through yesterday, full of bustling laughter and cut-throat haggling on every corner. The signs were painted so bright that they made my eyes hurt to look at.

The music hall the day before nearly made me throw up. It was a cacophony there. Every instrument playing all at once, melodies overlapping and weaving in a way that I guess you could call nice, if you have earplugs.

In a way that you would call nice, Jacks. Maybe this place really is your home, and all the music deafened you as a kid. Maybe that's why you always talk so loud.

The library, though. I didn't think you'd be here. You've never been big on reading. You're too hands-on for that, right? That's the way you explained it to me, at least. And it's not like there's anything to look at here that you'd find interesting.

There are piles of books scattered across the floor so tall I nearly trip over them. Not a comfortable chair in sight—every one I come across has a back arched over my head or is made from solid gold or quartz, and not a single one has a cushion—and there's no art on the walls. I can't even tell if they're still stone, with the shelves lining them flush against each other's sides like soldiers marching off to war. They're the one organized thing here, even if half the books are overflowing onto the floor.

The one exception is the stained glass window. Every color of the rainbow, colors that I'm pretty sure I'm not actually supposed to be seeing, all clashing together in a series of mismatching geometric shapes. I don't know how it's here, if we're underground. I still don't know how you can be here, either.

But kneeling in the multicolored light the window casts across the floor, there you are. Your wild red hair

is neatly combed back, and you're actually wearing a sensible overcoat. Your socks match. You have a book open in your lap, and there's no charcoal under your fingernails, no paint stained on your palms. I don't recognize the language that the book is written in, all circular shapes and lines that cover the entire page.

"Jacks?" I ask, and—

"What's your name?" That's the first question you ever asked me. Your brown eyes were wide. I remember wondering just how bad I looked if your face had gone all pale just from seeing me. "Are you all right?"

"I..." I just about managed to say. "I don't know."

I hadn't expected the sounds to all come out in the right order, I don't think. But it came about naturally, like I had been speaking all of my life. The muscle memory was there, I just didn't know how to use it.

"Okay. Okay. Okay," you said, your voice starting to crack. Your grip was tightening on the strap of the bag over your shoulder. You bit the inside of your cheek.

"Are you all right?" I repeated back at you.

"Um, yes, I just wasn't expecting..." The question caught you off guard, judging by the way you stumbled over your words. Halfway through, you noticed something new. "Wait."

You narrowed your eyes and took a step closer to me. I stood up a little straighter without thinking about it. But you weren't trying to scare me; you were narrowing your eyes like you were looking for something I couldn't see.

I could feel my skin prickle as you just kept looking at me like that. I didn't know what I was supposed to be doing. I hated it.

I broke eye contact first, glaring down at my shoes. They looked clean, against all odds. They were white, and somehow barely stained. Even the laces were nicely tied. I didn't know where I had gotten them. Or the clothes that I was wearing for that matter. They were too

nice for someone lost in the woods.

You found what you were looking for, somehow. “I know you,” you said. The fear was leaving your voice. It was being replaced with something like awe.

“What?” I asked.

“Your parents have been looking everywhere for you,” you laughed. I couldn’t tell where the relief ended and the disbelief began. “I think we live in the same neighborhood. You’re Jasper Hill, right?”

—you don’t look up. You just sit there and keep reading your nonsense book like you haven’t been missing for three damn months.

For a second, I want to throttle you. I want to slap you across the face and scream that you can’t just do this to me—do you have any idea what I’ve been through? Because of you?

But that’s not how this works. You’re supposed to be all action, and I’m all direction. If I fly off the handle, then neither of us is in control.

And more importantly, something’s off here. You’ve been gone for three months and I find you, what? Reading? Not a chance in hell.

Even if you did come here willingly, somehow, you’d be in the music hall. You’d be painting, trying to show our neighbors all the beauty of a sunset. You’d be in prison somewhere, maybe, for disturbing the chaos of this place with your own, special brand of chaos. You wouldn’t be in a library.

“Jacks,” I say again, louder. “*Jacks.*”

You finally look up. “What?” you say sharply. You’re frowning, your mouth a thin line of anger, your shoulders tense. It looks wrong. You’re not grinding your teeth. Your voice is pointed and even, like you’re being *so* calm and rational right now. Usually, you just yell at me.

It takes me a second to find the words. There’s so

much I want to say, and I've spent so many nights lying awake trying to plan it all out. "Jacks," I wanted to say. "I've been looking everywhere. Are you okay? Did they hurt you?"

What comes out instead is "What the hell are you doing here?"

You roll your eyes—you actually roll your eyes—at me. "Reading?"

"You don't like reading," I tell you. It makes me feel like an ass.

You sigh like I've said something incredibly stupid. I haven't heard anyone sigh like that since our school librarian passed away when we were fourteen. But the sound is nearly identical—a deep breath in, and then the breath out sounds more like a hiss than anything because it comes from between clenched teeth. "You don't know anything about me."

I clench my fists. I'm starting to reconsider the whole not-hitting-you thing. "Your name is Jasper Hill. You grew up in North Carolina. You had a yellow mailbox. Your first pet was a dog named Benny, and he ran away when you were seven. I know you."

Your gaze flickers back down to your book for a moment, and you press the book closed. There's a kind of reverence to it that I've only seen you have in museums. But I don't have long to linger on it before you're turning back to me with your eyes narrowed. Your head tilts to the side as if I'll make more sense from a different angle.

"Wait," you say slowly. "We grew up in the same neighborhood, didn't—"

"We're neighbors?" I asked.

"Well," you said, drawing out the sound like you were embarrassed by it. "Sort of? We live at opposite ends of the neighborhood, so we don't see each other that often. We're not in the same classes at school, either."

It was my turn to stare at you. Furious, I tried to place if I knew you. Maybe I'd seen you walking down a street somewhere. That sounded like something people saw. I was pretty sure I knew what a street was. Maybe I'd been to your house. Maybe it even looked like what a house was supposed to look like.

I came back with nothing. "What's your name?" I tried instead.

"I'm Charles Briar." You puffed out your chest a little when you said it, like you were proud of the name. "Like my dad."

"—we? You're Charlie Briar."

There's a dull kind of shock to your voice. The kind that usually precedes the sentiment of *it really is a small world, huh? How have you been?*

"No one's called me Charlie since I was a kid," I say.

A beat passes. This is the part, I think, where I'm supposed to start asking my questions. Maybe I should start by repeating "what the hell are you doing here?" for good measure now that you've placed who I am. Maybe I should ask you how you even forgot in the first place.

But you beat me to the punch. "Why are you here?"

"I'm looking for *you*," I say.

You're frowning again. You open your mouth. Close it. It's rare to see you think so hard before asking a question. "Charlie," you say, and oh, that's *weird*, I don't like that. You've never called me that before. "We haven't seen each other since we were twelve."

"No," I say immediately. "What? That's—no."

I hate tripping over my own tongue like this, but I don't know what else to say. I was the last one to see you before you vanished. The police confirmed that much. We *live* together. I'm the first person you show your paintings to. I've been stitching up the holes in your pants for over a decade.

You don't get to act like this. You don't get to act like you don't know me.

"Charlie, I'm sorry," you try, but it sounds too flat to ring true. You're lying and you—

"Right," I said a little too loudly. "That's right, you're Briar!"

I was faking it. I knew it. Judging by the way your face screwed up like you were trying not to laugh, you knew it, too.

"You remember me?" you pressed. I wasn't sure why. Maybe you just wanted to see what would happen.

Yes, I opened my mouth to say. *Yes, I know exactly who you are.*

Not a sound came out. Not even a croak. My throat hurt with the force of it, trying so hard to speak and coming up with nothing. I broke out into a fit of coughing.

"No," I admitted instead, and the pain lessened.

"You're a really bad liar, you know that?" you said flatly.

*Sorry*, I wanted to say, but I didn't try. I wasn't actually sorry for trying to lie. I was just sorry it didn't work.

—never lie. You always freeze up before the words come out. Once, when we were fifteen, you tried to lie about not breaking Mrs. Lindsay's window and broke out into a coughing fit so bad that you had to lie down.

*This is wrong*, I think again. "You're not Jacks."

The thing that isn't you shakes his head, his face the perfect picture of sympathy. "I'm Jasper Hill."

"No, you're not," I say, like he'll actually admit to it.

"Yes, I am. I grew up on Holborn Street in the house with the yellow door. It matched the mailbox. I named Benny after my cousin, like you were named after your father." He recites it in a monotone, like he's reading it out of that book. But he's not, because he's looking at me with *your* eyes all wide with sincerity, and I want to burn this library to the ground with both of us in it.

Somehow, I find it in me to laugh, sharp and hysterical. “Then why don’t you know me?”

That catches him off guard for a second. He pauses to consider it, and while he mulls the whole thing over, all I can hear is my heartbeat pounding in my ears, because this isn’t you. But if it’s not you, then where are you? I have to—

“It’s a school day,” you said out of nowhere. “I’m supposed to be walking to school right now. I’d offer to walk with you, but you’re a week behind, right?”

“On what?” I asked without thinking.

You made that face again, the one that meant you were trying not to laugh. “Everything.”

“Oh.”

You shrugged. “You should go back to your house. Your parents will want to know you’re back.”

My mouth went dry. “Right. Okay.”

“You know the way, don’t you?” you asked. If you tried to ask that three years later, your voice soft edges and bordering on pity, I probably would have socked you in the face. But in that moment, all I could feel was gratitude. I was just glad that I didn’t have to be the one to bring it up.

“No,” I admitted. “But you do.”

You glanced behind you at the still-rising sun. Standing against the twilight-blue fading to pink, you looked like some kind of hero. I’ve tried more times than I’ll ever admit to paint it, but it never comes out quite right. I can never quite catch the heartbreak on your face as you said, “I really can’t walk with you. I have to get to school. My mom will kill me if I’m late again.”

“Do you have to?” I whined. I regretted it the second I tried it, with the way your eyes widened like I had hit you, but I was . . .

“Hey, hey,” you said. “Don’t be scared. I’ll tell you the way, and when I’m out of school I’ll come back to make



sure you made it to your house. If you're lost, I'll just come find you again."

You didn't say how you'd do it. I'm not sure you actually knew. But you said it with so much conviction that I couldn't help but believe it.

But words were just words. I needed something more than belief. I needed *certainty*. "Do you promise?"

—find you.

Finally, the thing that isn't you finds an answer he likes. "Because you don't know me."

I drop my head into my hands. *This place is going to kill me*, I think. If this thing in front of me doesn't first, the way he talks in circles and isn't *you* will. "We've been over this," I say.

"That's not what I meant," he says a little too quickly, a little too loud, covering his own mistake. He almost sounds like you again. "I mean that I'm Jasper Hill. But I'm not Jacks."

"Jacks is short for Jasper Hill," I point out.

"I mean," he says again, still with too much force, "that I haven't seen you since I was twelve. I came to the hill when I was twelve, and haven't left since. One of the neighborfolk must have gone home in my place."

I think of the thing that showed me the door, with its porcelain face and too-long fingers. Does he mean to tell me that you're one of those things?

Maybe he sees the doubt in my face, because I don't even have to say anything before he's elaborating. "There are stories about them. Near-perfect replicas, but their manner is all wrong."

"Are they dangerous?" I bring myself to ask. Maybe this was all a setup. Maybe you were always going to lead me here to die. A trap set sixteen years ago, with bait in the form of my best friend.

"All of the neighborfolk are," Jasper Hill says. "The only reason I'm still alive is because I'm quiet."

So then why hasn't he . . . ? "But you haven't left."

"I promised them I wouldn't," he says, like it can't be helped. He smiles faintly, his nose scrunching up. *What can you do*, he seems to be saying.

A promise. That's important, isn't it? "Okay." I take a deep breath. I hate this. Jasper Hill is stuck, same as I am. Same as you are. I want to tell him I'll come back for him, but I shouldn't make promises I don't know that I can keep. There's nothing more that he can do for me. There's nothing I can do for him. "I hope you make it out," I say.

"I hope you survive," he tells me in turn.

There's nothing left for me here. I turn to leave.

As I do, I hear him behind me pick his book back up. Of all the ways he could spend time imprisoned beneath the earth, he chooses reading. I guess I really didn't know him at all, back before I met you.

I hope you didn't plan this. If you did, I might just kill you for it. I thought you were my best friend. But then you left, and I followed.

You had to have left, right? This place is your home, so much more than I've ever been. You came here willingly. You didn't tell me where you were going or if you ever planned on coming back. And now here I am, walking into the jaws of the beast on the off chance that you need my help.

But I've known you sixteen years, and I can't just give up on you now. I am going to find you if it kills me.

It ended like this: you smiled and said, "I do."

It ends like this: it almost certainly will.

zoe at kinson

## **PASSENGER DOOR CONFESSION**

I  
pull over  
on the  
highway,  
puke  
in the  
tall grass.  
the half moon  
lemon slice  
hangs  
in the sky  
as a reminder  
that the watch  
face means  
nothing  
if it's stopped.

II  
this must be the end of things: fire set to grass and prairie.  
  
before the field is even lost to blackened sweet smoke smell,  
I'm choking again.

### III

stomach acid burning through my skin  
from the inside out / it's like when I tell myself bad things can't happen  
to good people / it's the secret I keep deep down  
that bubbles back up when I'm scared / there is something about /  
this world /  
that I cannot remove from / this body /  
I'm just a / beam of light / a prairie fire / a bird flying overhead /  
and these words are stuck in the throat of it all

aidan chesemore

## THE PARK

I've felt you—

I've felt you in the wind—I've felt you in the wind when it brushes my cheek and tells me that I am not alone on this blurry day of nothing but peace and quiet and storms and loud and thunder and home—

I've felt you in the rain—I've felt you in the rain when it drops on my hands and holds me to the thought of you and your love and your patience and your care and your safety and my safety—

I've felt you in the birds—I've felt you in the birds when the birds fly above me and show me what it means to fly against the wind and towards the mountains knowing the journey is a real one and the real journey is the hard journey—

I've felt you in the past—I've felt you in the past and the present and I will feel you as I feel you now, because you will never have left me the way I thought you did. You only let go to come back as a memory of something more than what you were. This grief persists and I resist but I know it is you and I know that it is with love that you come to me—

I've felt you

I've felt you

I've felt you

I've felt you

I've felt you and I feel you and I will feel you. So feel me as you've felt me and continue to feel me in the wind and the rain and the birds and the past and know that this feeling is not a disappearance but a recurrence and a grief I love of you and a grief we can share for the times and feelings that have been and that are now going away like the water I cannot walk on and the wind you cannot fly within. This feeling is a memory—a memory of a time I do not want to lose nor plan on losing because when I lose it I will have lost everything and that means that I have gone and you have gone and this beautiful moment that was us and this feeling is pure and wonderful and gone, but it was present and it was beautiful. We are beautiful and—

I've felt you—

I've felt—

I—

aidan chesemore

## AMONGST TERMS OF A YOUNGER MEMORY

My eyes blink open and my face feels oliff seas tickle my nose  
and give butterfly kisses to my cheek.

Past my head, the sun and shadows give me a galescent shiver  
from my back to my left heel. Then the curtains of my sweater  
land on me and I feel my skin falway.

This

is when I breathe and feel the cens in my head  
balance and center in their seats.

My enmending limbs feel strength and push on the grass that clings to  
my onion skin.

I feel the day break

in my felmere blood

and my feet steady

beneath the weight

of

this

chassis.

When I stand the world crashes

around

me

and the astuary dream

becomes a memory

that I leave in my heffling heart.

This eirsom is more to me than I know

and so

this dream is what I imagine my perfect eyes would see.

The recollection fades

like trums from the orchestra

and I come back

to where I'd be

when I write this.

*You see?*

moll y c ampbell

## THE UGLY SWAN

Did you ever stop to consider  
That maybe I didn't want to be a swan  
That maybe I just wanted to be like my brothers  
Maybe I wanted to go home

Where I come from  
I am not out of place  
My brothers and I are birds of a feather  
They care not for what I am  
As long as I am family  
And that is an easy enough request, as

I have never been good at being anything  
Other than myself  
A duck, a goose, a swan—a rose by any other name  
Would be just as fowl  
What you call me won't change me  
No matter how hard you try

It will not make me quieter  
It will not make me more beautiful  
It will not make me like them  
And it certainly will not make me  
More like you

And I know that you did not call me a swan because you thought me  
elegant.

You did it because you knew I was not a duck.



molly campbell

## **FOR ELLA**

There are mice that eat gravesite flowers  
And there's an owl that eats graveyard mice  
*Memento mori* means everyone dies  
But in the spring that graveyard will be alive  
With the sound of rustling leaves  
And owlets chirping for their mother

## MATER MORTUUS EST

I look at the cathedral and feel a memory pushing out of me: building a blanket fort with my family. The red and green light shone through rippling glass as the panes turned into grandmother's blankets, and the holy hymn became the sound of my mother's laugh. The stiff air and dust of the pews became the notch in the family couch and the ray of sunlight hitting my shoulders felt like a warm embrace from my mom. Then I felt my father's hand on my shoulder. It was cold. I shudder at the memory and put my hands on the bags under my eyes. That memory was long ago, and my mother is gone. Now it's time for a funeral.

"You all right?" my father asks and then immediately flinches as if I had just asked him the same question.

"I don't think my eulogy is very good."

"You don't have to give one if you don't want to. I just thought it would be—"

"No, I want to. I just don't think it's good enough. I don't know what to say to get her right, ya know?"

"Well, whatever you say, I don't think she'll get up to scold you."

"She might roll over in her grave."

"Not till she's buried." He nudges me and I pretend to fall in slow motion, one tradition that is still left. Of course, when I lean against the pew, it scrapes across the floor and makes a big enough noise to attract the priest, the *other* father. He rushes over to us out of nowhere, almost like a bad miracle.

"Hello, Robinsons." He shakes my father's hand. "So sorry for your loss." My father and I fix our posture in unison.

"Th-thank you. Sorry about the noise . . . we were just figuring out Syd's eulogy." *Dammit.* I'd really rather not talk to Pastor Eustace about it.

"You're giving one?" He looks at me with something between pity and surprise.

"Yes. Just not sure what the right thing to say is . . . or what to think,

really?" *Dumb. Stupid. He's gonna give you a sermon.* Sure enough, he opens his mouth.

"Well, nobody is expecting anything . . . there isn't anything right or wrong to say." *He's bullshitting me, right?* "You speak whatever your truth is."

"What if my truth is that this is bullshit and I want my mom back?"

"Sydney!" My dad looks redder than the stained glass.

"Well, the colorful language is a bit inappropriate." Pastor Eustace rubs his brow beneath his glasses. "But I believe you can express whatever you need to. Jesus used parables, maybe try that . . . Now, I'm gonna open the doors soon. Is there anything I can get for you both?"

"No, thank you, Pastor Eustace." My dad raises his hand as the pastor walks away.

"You mad?" I ask.

"No." He sighs. "This *is* bullshit . . . let's sit down."

As we walk through the pews, I keep my head low. A few others are scattered about and I imagine they are all looking at me. When we reach the front pew, I raise my headband and see someone talking to her. Beyond their shoulder, I see her face. She's smiling at me. Mom is here smiling at me. My legs disappear for a moment. I stumble and Dad helps me up. I look back up and see the funeral display, painted to such a degree I had mistaken it for reality. I realize this is the first time I have seen her face since she passed. She looks so much more alive here. My eyes betray my throat. A figure is rushing up to us.

"Syd, you alright?" My dad helps me to sit down.

"Yeah . . . I-I think I might need some water." I shake my head and feel my cheeks redden. I pull my face down and rub it with my palms, caving into myself. Dad says he'll find some water and rushes off. I look back up at the painting of my mother. She is perfect again. I had wished her back but never thought what it would mean to see her again, like this.

"Excuse me, are you Sydney?" A familiar voice comes from my side, startling me: the woman who was standing by the display. "Sorry, I didn't mean to startle you. It's Ms. Pole . . . I'm your neighbor?"

"It's all right—I forgot you were there. It's just—I saw the painting and—"

“Yes, I understand. I was hoping it would turn out well. Sometimes, when I paint at night, I lose a sense of quality.”

“You painted her?”

“Yes, I volunteered as soon as I heard the news.” She looks back up at the painting like an invitation. I join her. “It was a rushed job—”

“I-It’s really good.” I feel her move her head back to me. Doubtless, I look like a mess.

“How are you holding up? I mean, right now?”

“It comes in waves.” My eyes are fixed on my mother, her dangerous smile and beautiful curly hair. “I’m supposed to give a eulogy . . . I’m not sure how to describe her.”

“I can understand that.” Ms. Pole blinks hard. She is a skinny artist, eyes sunken all the time and thinning hair. She’d come by our house for dinners once a week. She left her husband a few years ago. I still don’t know why. Her skin is stretched, and her nails are bitten down to her fingers. She looks tired, like me, I imagine.

“How’d you do it?” I ask. “How’d you capture her so well?”

“I’m not sure . . . I typically use oils because they have more pigment, but I had to use acrylic because I needed it to dry.” Her eyes widen for a split-second, almost like she’s waking up. “My teacher used to tell me not to paint the subject but to paint your relationship with them.” She looks at me and gives a faint smile. “I’m not sure what it means, but maybe it means something to you.”

Ms. Pole and I turn back to look at Mom: we have the same nose. My dad comes back with a water bottle.

“Thank you, Jill.” He looks at me and then at Mom. “For everything.”

“I’m still in debt from all the thank yous I owe her.” They talk and I drown them out. I want to spend this moment with Mom, to study the way our faces match.

Sparse applause ensues as my father walks down from the podium with red eyes. It’s hotter in the room now, the bodies of strangers shaking and crying. He taps my shoulder and I see his mouth move, dry from the salty tears. It looks like he’s telling me to stand. I turn for one last glance at my mother’s face again before I walk up to the podium. The sounds muffle and I turn to look at the pews. Dad, Ms.

Pole, and Pastor Eustace are all sitting in the front row. Everyone else is a blur. I speak:

I have been trying to figure out how to describe my mother, how to do her justice without her here. I've had some help, Ms. Pole's portrait, for one, my father for two, and Pastor Eustace for three. Talking to these people and thinking about her, I was reminded of a myth I had heard in Sunday School. I can't remember it perfectly and I'm sure I'll butcher it, but it goes something like this: God offered King Solomon the greatest wisdom in the world, and he accepted it. Many years later, amid a famine, the people all called to Solomon for food. At this point, Solomon's wisdom had been replaced with pride, so he came up with a way to appease them without giving them his stock. He announced a challenge, stating that if any man in the kingdom could prove they knew better about any subject, then he would give them enough food for seven years. For months, Israelite families all came to challenge Solomon but nobody could come up with a subject they knew better than the king. Until one day, a boy named Acacio came and claimed he knew more about a subject than Solomon. When Solomon asked him what a child could possibly know better than a king, the boy said, 'I know better than anyone in the world what it is like to be the son of my mother.' Solomon, of course, admitted defeat and gave the boy his reward.

I loved my mother, and she loved me in a way I will never experience again, that no one will ever experience. Her love for me, and for all of us in this room, I'm sure, has touched you in some way. Otherwise, you wouldn't be here. Now, without her here, I'm grateful to have her nose, her sense of humor, and we will miss her. I will miss her, but I will always know how she loved me. Thank you.

## MOUSETRAP

Life is a procedure. Not following its steps will lead to error; a fuzzy film of bacteria on unbrushed teeth or too many red marks on a driving test. Life is simpler when it is a procedure. Its steps are already written. There is no need to tear one's brain in half over how many shots of espresso. A procedure is unsurprising. Comfortable. Nicole likes procedures.

Her bedtime procedure begins at nine o'clock every night. Wrap up leftovers for tomorrow's lunch. Brush the nonexistent creases from tomorrow's blouse. Read fifty-seven pages of a crime mystery novel, because that amount makes her sleepy enough without being too sleepy to turn off her lamp.

Yet two things interrupted her routine on Sunday night. First, a glance at the stovetop clock. It was 9:11 pm. The second thing was a slip of shadow in her peripheral; something in the living room that shouldn't be there.

Nicole walked back into the kitchen, muttering, "Oh wait, I forgot . . ." The knife's handle was warm, freshly washed and sparkling, as she quickly reached into the dishwasher. She closed it softly. Soft footfalls as she approached the living room; her face made of hard, grim lines; the desert plains at night. Two quick deep breaths. Tightening her dry hands on the knife.

*Swoosh!*

Nicole charged silently into the living room, knife poised at neck level. On the other side, a head. Dark, featureless. On the wall. That's not right. If the silhouette was in front of her, that meant—

*Fuck*, Nicole thought, swiftly spinning around. *Oh, actually, the velocity will drive it further into their neck—*

A strangled gasp, the shut of a coffin. Her gasp. *Her* gasp? The wooden floor punched her chest. The blade clattered. A blossom of warmth on her stomach. *How?* Her mind howled. She looked up, defenselessly waiting for her fate where she fell.

No one was there.

Nicole scrambled to her feet, hand clutched to her chest. No one behind the curtains. Empty behind the sad, once-loved couch. Clear behind the tv, up the chimney, the broom closet. The doors locked; the windows unbroken.

Her knife gleamed on the floor, wet with blood. Her blood. As she fell, she cut her thumb open, which now she sucked. Not enough for a stitch thankfully.

She looked at the far wall of the living room. No shadow.

*How stupid*, she thought and went to bed.

The next night, as she encased chicken parmesan in a plastic prison, Nicole saw it was already 9:11 pm. A minute late, borderline unacceptable. The lunchbox zipper hissed closed as she counted seconds in her head. A minute behind meant a minute less for her novel. Her anova calculations would be off tomorrow.

The living room slumbered in the dark. Save the electricity. Her novel lay abandoned on the side table, brought down accidentally this morning—wasted seconds—and she glanced up, dusting off the clean cover, and there she saw another shadow.

Her chest squeezed. Nicole whirled around.

No one was there.

She whirled back around, book hoisted for a slap. No one was there.

Except the shadow.

The shadow was distinct, an image once printed on the back of your eyelids that would never fade. A circular head, followed by a thin forest of neck, and a set of rounded shoulders. A shade of oil slick without a shine. Illuminated by moonlight through the window, a halo, split into striped lines, from the blinds. Unassuming and uninteresting and it shouldn't mean anything but also was definitely, most definitely above all, human.

She was alone. No one stood in the living room with her, no one else to create the shadow. She shifted, but the shadow didn't. *It's quite late for me*, she thought, yanking the blinds closed with a single stroke of her arm. *When the mind is tired, it plays tricks*, she thought, pulling back the covers from the bed. But she placed her handgun under the pillow.

The third night that the shadow appeared, she was ready. Her mind was awlirl with possibilities that day at work, barely able to conduct simple addition and subtraction because she was so occupied. Abraham even asked her if she was okay, but she pretended not to hear.

Ready with a dusty notepad, binoculars clipped to her belt, along with a random assortment of tools, a hammer, a screwdriver. A knife. She strapped a headlamp on. Some might think that overzealous—she thought about wasting time holding a flashlight.

She stood at the front door, back to it. She looked at the wall. Not there. She glanced at her wristwatch. 9:11 pm She looked at the wall. It was there.

Nicole was sure that it wasn't an actual silhouette, although bits of ice slithered down her spine in its presence if she considered it too long. But that was foolish—it wasn't real. Her religion was science, and all the ghost stories or extrasensory phenomena were pseudo-science. She might as well become an English teacher like her mother before she resorted to that. No, a natural explanation awaited her, shapeless, floating, silent and waiting until she molded it into form.

The moonlight was vibrant against the wall, the white gleam of teeth. Nicole stepped outside, gauging the moon's location. About ten o'clock, which was a reasonable angle, for maybe the moonlight playfully highlighted some object on her living room wall. A street-light was the wrong shape. Maybe a garden gnome? Although the moonlight isn't low enough for that. Nicole didn't have anything so frivolous in her yard.

After fifteen minutes, she concluded the search. The house across the street had a spire on its roof. The moon was behind it. The spire was a sphere stacked on a cylinder, a human-like silhouette if she unfocused her eyes. That was probably it. The moon isn't in the precise location until 9:11 pm, but the timing should change as the year goes on.

When she stepped back into the house, the shadow was gone.

Nicole didn't tell anyone about the shadow.

Her colleagues would mock her, but that was the small concern. She wanted credit. It was her discovery, the origin of the shadow, whether that be light bending differently than the great god laws of physics, or some grand ellipse of the moon. Her bones hummed



with anticipation, breezing through her day, following procedures by muscle memory rather than thought, forcing doodles in between half-baked sentences in the shared lab notebook, unimportant meetings about unimportant paperwork in a unimportantly grand meeting room funded by an unimportant philanthropist whose name she once knew but now has forgotten.

The shadow was hers and hers alone.

One night, she ignited the fireplace. The shadow didn't move. Other nights, she tested for radio signals, then UV light, infrared, then moved onto the chemical composition of the wall. That's the only significant thing she did the next morning at work—testing its composition from chapstick she rubbed against it, which she does during lunch, because she didn't bring it. Next came cameras, from polaroids to Nikon Z 50.

Every night, the shadow graces her wall for a minute, from 9:11 pm until 9:12 pm

Although she checked only a few nights ago, she steps outside once again, noting the moon is lower now. The moonlight isn't as strong though, because the house across the street is awash in a warm glow. *It's fairly early to have Christmas lights up*, she thought.

Science is just a scary word for the process of elimination. To some, science is peering through a foggy window, bright lights assaulting their eyes, the procedure room filled with faceless whitecoats, which you can only detect through their movement, not their silhouettes; the blinding whiteness is only interrupted by the silver of instruments, instruments that would take paragraphs to describe, menacing in their sharpness and intricate nameless shapes.

It's more of a cavern of rabbit holes. It's dank and dark, sometimes you'll encounter bones, and sometimes you will encounter nothing. You leave a trail of footprints, so you're not in danger of becoming lost, but the unknown mocks you from its perch on your shoulder. Sometimes you find the end of the rabbit hole and celebrate with a drink. Other times you will spend years wandering. Sometimes you aren't lost but your mind reflects an empty map.

A tug in her gut tells Nicole that light is the answer. The current models of light—the ray model, the particle model—don't explain

the absence of light on her living room wall, but these models aren't perfect anyway. *Now there will be four models taught in classrooms*, she thinks with satisfaction as she reruns numbers on one of the whiteboards that now live in her living room. When she runs out of space, she continues her writing on the wall.

One night, she wants to beat her head bloody against that wall. She hit another dead end. Her stomach twists in one itself, a helical dance, but she ignores it until half an hour later she realizes it's twisting because she's hungry. Nicole ventures into the kitchen, happily spotting a plate laden with dinner on the counter. *So efficient that I can't even remember everything I do*, she thinks happily. *Life is a procedure*.

But the salad is wilted, crinkly like worn bandages. Slices of tomatoes, once vibrant red, are now the color of old blood, oozing something slimy onto the plate. A gnat lands on a carrot—its landing sends a dozen more gnats into the air, buzzing with annoyance until they find a prime spot on the sweet ranch dressing. One small gnat has fallen over in it, not moving. It had drowned.

Nicole frowned. *That was awfully quick*, she thought. Maybe she bought produce that wasn't in the best of condition, although it still shouldn't have gone bad in the hour since she made it. The gnats. They probably helped it along. With it getting colder, they were creeping into any crevice they could find. That's why there were so many.

She threw it all in the garbage can, plate included. She didn't have the luxury of washing it, with the important work on her shoulders. A faint odor wafted from the garbage can, her throat closing as she spluttered. It definitely needed to be taken out on her way to work tomorrow. Nicole opened the pantry, shuffling through empty cardboard boxes and wrappers, until she found a smashed granola bar in the back.

It was stale and small. It didn't matter, because she wasn't that hungry anyway.

As the shadow appeared on her wall for its brilliant minute, a brilliant idea crashed down on Nicole. Her limbs trembled with mostly excitement but also a little bit of exertion, as she shoved the tv stand

into the downstairs bathroom. Her muscles protested—the stand didn't used to be so heavy—but the internal tornado rush of joy kept her spinning upright.

She thought the shadow was created by something outside. But there was no reason it couldn't be something *inside*.

Let the redecorating commence. The couch slept in the kitchen, the armchair blocking the backdoor, the side table half-fallen on top of it, the rug on the couch, the second rug thrown on the stairs, the tall lamp was on the front porch and the small lamp in the bathroom sink. Just to be extra thorough, which she applauded herself for, her favorite yellow aspen painting was placed in the garage next to the leaky oil can.

At 9:11 pm the shadow appeared. *Now I have more space to work*, Nicole thought with satisfaction.

After several nights, Nicole once again found herself at a standstill. Removal of all her living room furniture was a stupid idea. What if this light-bending phenomena was present in the doorway; the doorway to her kitchen, the doorway to the bathroom? The furniture could still interfere. *What a stupid mistake to make.*

As she was wrangling the side chair out into the backyard, there was a *thump thump*. The side chair was still wedged in the door frame, its legs dangling above the first backyard step. The shadow was already gone for the night. Nicole scanned the backyard for glowing raccoon eyes.

*Thump thump.*

A prick of fear in her stomach. Nicole was not superstitious, the shadow would be explained by the universal laws of physics and mathematics, but sometimes her instincts betrayed her. Sometimes she would only stare at the shadow for ten seconds, before an unsettling ice spider trailed its legs slowly down her spine. Sometimes she would see shapes in the dark, heart seizing, before remembering yes, that was the lovable curvature of her couch in its new home in the kitchen. Her mind was made of steel—her body less so.

A knock. It was a knock at her door.

*It's past 9 pm*, she thought crossly. Abandoning the side chair to its fate, the cool night air at her back, she crossed the living room

and flung open the door. Not before a quick glance told her that her shadow was not on the wall. It was safe in her memory where no one could take it from her.

There stood a man. He cringed as the front door slammed against the wall, his pupils dilating as he struggled to see her in the dark. All her lights were off. They had to be, for the shadow. “Hi?” he said with uncertainty.

“Hello, Abraham,” Nicole said. Her voice was old, a wheeze combined with a gag, her larynx struggling under the weight of her voice. “What do you want?”

Abraham was staring. He had stared at her before, but this time it was different. Instead of shy glances under his lashes, barely daring to look at her for more than a moment before jumping away to the spot just right and up from her head, his gaze lingered thoughtfully with a little crease she never noticed between his brows. Nicole felt an undeniable urge to shout, bare her teeth, slam the door in his face. She felt exposed, naked, vulnerable as a bloody newborn taking its first breath to cry for its mother.

“What?” she asked with daggers. Abraham blinked, reeling his thoughts to the present.

“Are you all right?” He asked the question slowly, like his tongue didn’t know how to find the right sounds.

“Yes.”

His brow dipped further. He leaned slightly to the left, eyes skipping past her into the house. She leaned left too, meeting his state without an ounce of sympathy. Maybe he could sense the possibility of discovery as her coworker. She would be damned if she let anyone in on her secret.

Abraham frowned. “No one heard from you at work today. Salah might come for your head.”

It was Nicole’s turn to blink, but her body knew what to do, lies sliding out easily as if they were coated in butter. “I wasn’t feeling well,” she said, reaching up to comb through her hair as if she was tired and anxious. She winced as her fingers caught—somehow, she had gotten a knot in her long hair. “I thought I called in, but my fever is high. It must be affecting my memory.” It was quite convenient that her skin gleamed with sweat, sweat wrestling with that damn armchair.

Abraham still had that stupid look on his face, brow bent under some heavy thought and a slight slant to his mouth. He had a few freckles scattered above his lip, which she also had never noticed before. “Is there anything I can do to help?” His eyes lingered on the knot in her hair. “I’m not the best, but I could prep some food or something.”

*He’s trying to come inside the house! He knows, he knows, he knows he knows he knows!* The urge to bare her teeth struck again, like a muscle cramp. “Why would I let you inside my house?” She blurted.

*That was suspicious,* she scolded herself, but Abraham’s unamused, unbelieving expression disappeared under a shy glance, eyes flickering to the spot next to her head. “That’s more like you. Just let me—us—know beforehand next time, okay?”

Nicole nodded. The door closed before he hit the first step of the front porch.

*Waste of my time.* Nicole entered the kitchen and grabbed the scissors from the knife block. She would remember to call in tomorrow. She had so much sick time, because she never stopped working a day in her life. It might be suspicious, a person who never got sick calling in, but it was a risk she had to take, for the sake of the shadow.

Her knotted hair fell on the floor. There were many tangles, a bird’s nest, to know that her hair is naturally straight. She stepped over the hair as she left the kitchen.

The next night, as she wrestled a hallway mirror off the wall, her fingers pinched until she bled, she caught a glimpse of a skeleton. In the mirror, staring at her with blank sockets.

The mirror clattered to the ground. It shattered. She stumbled backwards, tripped over herself, and fell into a fresh sea of glass, her outstretched hands immediately shredded into cheese. Her mind was a reflection of the mirror—empty space, white with shock, nothing, although her heart pounded. She was incapable of a single thought.

But her body knew what to do. Nicole saw her bloody hand reach, but she’s uncomprehending, a baby who doesn’t yet know that their hand is their hand. The hand found a palm-sized piece of glass and picked it up. Raises it. Her heart screams in her chest.

Her. No skeleton. Only her. She was the only one in the mirror.

Her face was paper. Her eyes were two dark holes with a streak of green at the pupil. Her freshly cut hair limp, frazzled, and oily wet, like a corpse dragged across the grass. Her skin was painfully tight, her cheeks sunken, lips cracked and bleeding.

Nicole prodded her abdomen. Her shirt was torn and smells like mildew. She could feel her ribs distinctly underneath, but she didn't dare lift the mirror to see. When had she last eaten?

The light in the hallway was dim. It was 9:06 pm That was it, yes, the lighting. It made her look as pale as a ghost, distorted her image and then her mind built up a towering mountain of preconceived notions. As for the ribs, well, she just needed a snack.

Nicole didn't look into the mirror again.

She gagged as she entered the kitchen. The garbage can sat in the corner, overflowing and forgotten. The refrigerator was bare, except old fruit stains, which she half-heartedly considered. The freezer was ice. The pantry full of torn wrappers. Her fruit bowl was a gnat's paradise, mini cities built on the graying contours of what once was an apple. No food anywhere.

Nicole visited the grocery store just this last week. She went through her groceries like candy when she was hard at work.

The garage was silent. Oil seeped at the bottom of her favorite aspen painting. A light layer of dust covered the car—was something wrong with her ventilation? She always kept emergency food in her car. Nicole dumped the contents of the middle drawer and the dash on the floor, dragged out her emergency kit, extra random blankets, and the spare tire. Her niece must've eaten them, maybe as a prank, all three snacks in all three different locations.

Her watch read 9:08 pm She would find something after the ceremonial appearance and disappearance of the shadow. Missing it would be like the sun suddenly disappearing, throwing planets, throwing her, out to some unknown cold destination without the sun to ground them.

A quick scan of the garage revealed empty oil cans, a slumbering lawn mower, tools gifted from her father's shed hung along the wall, and a couple of old mouse traps. She bent to sort through a box, and something crunched under her foot. A sunflower seed. The large sac next to her held sunflower seeds.

*Just what I needed!* Nicole thought triumphantly, ripping it open. Seeds piled out with a squeak.

A squeak?

A mouse scampered from the burlap and dove under the car. Nicole ran a hand through the seeds. They were ruthlessly torn open, gutted and fouled by mice droppings. Inedible, unless she wanted to get sick, but that would take her time away from the shadow, so it was unthinkable.

Inedible. She had nothing for food.

Nicole leaned down to look under the car. The mouse sits still as a picture, sandwiched behind plump hindquarters and staring back, but it only knows food or fear—there is no thought behind those eyes. She's a god to its little speck.

Only two minutes until the shadow appears. Nicole ran back into the kitchen and grabbed an empty food wrapper, almost fainting from its residual scent, she was so hungry. It crunches as it's loaded awkwardly into the mousetrap. She had no time to boil water now, as it was 9:10 pm

A good meal and a day's sleep awakened her. All this time, experimenting with light, seeing how the shadow measured on miscellaneous devices, explaining top down, was the incorrect way to approach the problem. No wonder she made little progress.

Nicole gingerly stepped over the dozen or so mouse traps in the garage. She only needed one more nail. She spent the last few weeks hammering and pounding, disassembling the wooden living room floor to cover each window, each door, and most of the exterior walls just to be sure. She ran out of nails, so she began pulling staples from the furniture, needles out of her sewing kit, and the nails that hung her tools. She also repurposed her bedding—an extra cloth later over the doorway—and now slept on the dirt in the living room. It worked well, because she didn't want to be too far from the shadow, lest something changed.

Nicole pried the last nail out of the wall. Once returning to the living room, she stuck it in the last loose flap over the door. Like a proud artist, she stood back and sighed with satisfaction. *Finally, I will have something*, she thought. *Maybe not an answer, but something.*

With a quick flip of her hands, which were still covered in a light layer of dried blood, she turned off the lights and settled into the dirt. The clock read 9:10 pm. The room was a cave—endless black that swallowed you whole, where you couldn't find your own thoughts. Complete, perfect black.

9:11 pm She struck the match. With a childlike grin, she looked at the wall, excitedly shaking. She had sealed herself in the room, like a tomb. No light could enter except what she produced. She would unbury herself and see when the shadow revealed itself. Then she could pinpoint its source.

The shadow—  
—it was there.

A low moan breezed through the room. Nicole jumped to her feet, almost dropping the lit match on her foot. The low moan became a cry. The cry became a wail. The wail became a shriek. The shriek became unending.

The match's flame trembled. Nicole put everything she could into that single shriek. Better that she be cut open from head to toe than feel this pain. Better her guts grace the floor. That was preferable to this unending misery of conscious thought, of knowing that she was wrong, knowing that this unknown thing was never meant to be known.

She also took flooring from upstairs, to encase the exterior living room wall. Her shriek sent the walls vibrating. A loose board fell, landing on her, knocking the breath out of her. Her head cracked on a cement block peeking underneath the dirt. The match stayed lit long enough for the shadow to mock her as she bled out.



## FROSTED WINDOWS

The breeze blew, icy and clean.

The sounds of night thudded into glimmering, muting snow—a snow found strewn across weighed down windshields, laden pine trees, and the thin black railings of levels atop levels of apartment unit balconies. Somewhere far off behind me there was the slush of wet tires cutting through muddy snow slough. It was December. Three months after Grandma died.

Question: What three things have you discovered that are most important in life?

G: Finding out what you want to do. Family. And having a nice home.

The April before she died, Grandma sat across from me on the back patio of my parents' house. She sat in a blue patio chair with a black metal frame, her white hands with thin purple veins weaving between bony protrusions. It was a sunny day. A good day to sit in the cool shade. A good day as any to be asking questions. Grandma and Grandpa had come over to visit. Grandpa, the ninety-two-year-old retired truck driver, still drove at the time. Even then he couldn't walk very well, but refused to use a cane since he couldn't hold them very well. It just gets in the way he said, makes it *harder* to walk.

These days he uses the same folding blue metal walker that Grandma used to. The same one he would load with the oxygen tank into the back of the car. The same one we'd help him unload in the sloped driveway so it could support Grandma's thinning body as the pair of them made their own pace as we accompanied them into the house.

How many jobs have you had?

G: Three.

I found myself taking the path to the small park at the bottom of a hill that sat in relative darkness. As I walked toward the center of the park, and into the outer edges of the ring of illumination, a young Labrador with no leash chomped piles of snow in passing. As the dog and its human made their way through the center of the park, I took the right path that followed alongside a frozen over creek bed.

What is one of the hardest things you have had to overcome?

G: Being shy.

When Grandma and Grandpa made it into the house that April day, Grandpa held onto the door frame and shuffled sideways through the opening. Grandma used the blue walker to help her step up. Grandpa looked up at me with his brow furrowed, cheeks taut in the restraint of a grin. He gave me a light jab in the stomach.

“And who are you? Huh?” he asked.

Before I could respond he released his grin and his crow’s feet deepened, partially obscured by the metal frame of his tinted rectangular bifocal lenses. He laughed and gave me a hug.

I said hello to Grandma as I rested a hand lightly on her shoulder.

“Hi, Dear,” she said and shakily grasped at my other forearm in greeting. I might have hugged her then. But at this point a hug would just get in the way of her goal.

She let go of my forearm and rolled the walker towards the living room.

Do you have any advice on how to bounce back after hard times?

G: No, I really don’t. Have to go along with the flow, I guess.

I walked alone for a time with the music from my earbuds and the squeaking sounds of crunching snow. Eventually an elderly couple with earmuffs, scarves, and fuzzy hats rounded the corner. They passed very quickly. Their appearance didn't exactly remind me of my grandparents, yet as I listened behind to the dull rubbery squeaks of snowshoes compacting through inches of snowfall, something about the playful expressions on their face reminded me of Grandma reading with an amused expression, sitting in a burgundy red recliner chair.

The snow was falling very slowly now, drifting sideways through illuminated blue, white, and yellow cones of light dotting the frosty night environment. I was wearing a comfortable jacket, felt cozy wrapped in a gray and white cocoon of snow clouds and crystalized water. All the same my movements felt tight and sluggish in the snow.

What three things have you discovered that are most important in life?

G: Finding out what you want to do. Family. And having a nice home.

After they rested in the living room for a time, I asked Grandma if now was a good time to interview her for my emt training assignment. That's when we went out to the back patio. She sat across from me in the blue chair sitting among the patio's shadow. She pulled out her large, wear-over sunglasses to mitigate the onslaught of the ambient sunlight reflected from the surrounding houses and the warm gray concrete dividing the lawn from the end of the patio. I began asking questions.

Do you have any advice on how to bounce back after hard times?

G: No, I really don't. Have to go along with the flow, I guess.

I thought back to the elderly couple that had passed in the snow—at my mind's grasping at some similarity or memory of my grandmother. The last time I'd seen her alive, she had been deep into long months and years spent in pain, running from sunlight, worsening allergies, and diminishing lung capacity. So, when she was dead and I saw her tiny, frail form resting in that hospital bed, I felt it as a sadness, a pain, and a relief, but also as a continuation of the certainty in the knowledge of her death. There was a cogency to the moment and the feeling that her death had already occurred. That thought disturbed me.

What three things have you discovered that are most important in life?

G: Finding out what you want to do. Family. And having a nice home.

The emt assignment wasn't *just* to assess our proficiency at gathering the medical history of an elderly person. It was also to ask simple but deep and personal questions. To serve as another window into that particular home that lives in the student's city of memory. The home that holds the memories of Grandma. When she died, she remained in that home of memory living on. But when loved ones are gone from the physical world it falls to the people that remain to sustain the structural integrity and aesthetics of those memory-homes. To look on a particular home with a probing gaze. To consider the crackling hearth of insight, and to tend that fire with the fuel of attention, reflection, and care.

When Grandma died, though, her health had been declining for a long while, and I had prematurely let that home grow cold with the chilling certainty of her unpassed passing.

There are always windows, though, even if they're mottled with frost.

What was your first job and how much did you get paid?

G: Babysitting. A dollar for watching kids was pretty good if you were lucky.

When I was eight years old, she babysat me in another home. The white countertops of the kitchen were decorated with a yellow and green leaf pattern. I was helping Grandma pack lunches to go to the pool with my brothers. She bustled across the kitchen and, with a steady hand, set the empty green plate to *clink* beside the blue one filled with orange slices. My hand rustled around the plastic of the sandwich bag as I pulled two white slices and plopped them onto my green plate. I unscrewed the blue lid of the Skippy peanut butter jar, then scraped the last of the accumulated mound out of the jar and slapped it onto a white slice. I spread the peanut butter gracelessly and repeated a similar process with the jelly.

I put the sandwich into a Ziploc bag and went to grab the peanut butter jar again. When I couldn't get much more peanut butter out (and some started to stick to my wrist) I gave it up for a bad job; I deposited the meager sum onto another slice, swiped the jar, and chucked it into the recycling on the other side of the kitchen. I started to forage the pantry for another jar.

"Get that jar back out of the bin," she said. I spun around from the pantry on one sock and the wood floor creaked.

"But there's none left," I said. Grandma raised an eyebrow.

"Bring the jar here."

So, feeling a little silly, I retrieved the jar and handed it up to her. She scooped up the knife and in less than sixty seconds of knife wielding and jar twisting had lathered and sliced two more pb&j's. I don't know what she said next, but that memory always makes me think of her and Grandpa telling us about being children during the Great Depression. The message was clear enough: don't waste away what you've been given.

What three things have you discovered that are most important in life?

G: Finding out what you want to do. Family. And having a nice home.

I continued back to my apartment in the December snow. As I exited the park, I passed town houses that cast yellow porch light. Glancing at a frosted town house window, I recalled driving my car in the snow months earlier. It was after visiting Grandma. She hadn't been feeling well. It had been then, seated in the illusory view of my grandmother's corpse—drip-fed by love and good medical care—that I'd pulled over and mourned my grandmother's unpassed passing. So, when she did die months later, there was a cold stiffness to the grief, as well as a painfully warm relief in the end of suffering. A frigid warmth.

That frigid warmth creaked, though, when I entered my apartment complex. Not when I entered the bottom hallway that bore black spots of snowmelt on the carpet. Instead, it was when I passed a favorite neighbor's corner unit from which a cracked brown door let the cayenne sting of savory gumbo radiate outward.

My neighbor was also "Grandma" to someone. To a small boy who tested the limits of her energy, she once told me. She once tried to play chess with the boy. But, of course, three moves were the limit before he wanted to run the gray halls of the apartment once again.

I slowed a step as I passed the spacious corner by my neighbor's apartment. For in that spacious corner by my neighbor's door sat a tall Christmas tree adorned with ribbons and ornaments of silver and blue—gold and red. There were countless presents hugging the tree, and two wreaths and a green Christmas ribbon on the adjacent wall. My neighbor knew what my grandma knew. What the neighbor's grandson and I were struggling to understand. The apartment's halls were gray—the neighbor's corner might have seemed dreary, might have felt cold—it didn't.

How many jobs have you had?

G: Three.

There's a wall of pictures in my grandparents' condo. Ten years before Grandma died, I was working at a water park near their condo.

So, when I spent the nights at their condo, I would sit on the couch on the opposite side of the living room and see the wall of their children and grandchildren from over the top of their heads as they sat beside each other in matching red burgundy La-Z-Boys.

I could give some examples of what we might have talked about. About the mountains, or school, or their neighbors. But right now, as I sit in a bedroom lit by the dim yellow lamp and the ambient white of snow-reflected sunlight glancing through the window—as I clack the mechanical keyboard and think back to my grandparents' third-floor condo ten years ago—what seems more important is the sense of peace that I now experience as I recall lying on that couch after the conversation was spent. The slipping into a sudden nap when the just-past sounds of the bucking cadence and precise dance of Grandma and Grandpa's respective voices had faded into the dreams of memories.

Memories that can elucidate a pathway through the snow-laden trails. A trail to old memories. A trail to future memories. A trail to care, attention, and warmth. A warmth that can light up the inside of a particular memory-home, and reveal a bustling Grandma through the defrosting window.

What three things have you discovered that are most important in life?

G: Finding out what you want to do. Family. And having a nice home.

## GR8-1

The first thing Edmonton gives him is punch-outable teeth. Well, that isn't exactly true. Before the punch-outable teeth, he's given a carbon fiber skeleton, plastic-coated copper nerves, a motherboard brain, and a name: GR8-1, colloquially known as Gretzkybot. Then, on draft day, when he is selected fourth overall, they give him an orange-and-blue jersey and an orange-and-blue baseball cap and a Gretzkybot-sized cardboard box for easy shipping, already post-marked for Rogers Place. He has no family with him in the stands—there's no family for him *to* have in the stands—but he has the next best thing, the team of mechanics and engineers responsible for his existence, who cheer louder than anyone when his name is called.

Gretzkybot isn't disappointed about not being selected first. Mostly because he hasn't been programmed to feel disappointment, but also because the National Hockey League has always been a bit old-fashioned when it comes to these things. The fact that he's been drafted at all is a wonder in and of itself. Twenty, thirty years ago, even the concept of Gretzkybot would've been unthinkable. But, one too many hall-of-famers diagnosed posthumously with cte, one too many close calls between a skate blade and a tendon or a major artery, and it's remarkable how quickly things can shift.

"How do you feel, GR8-1," the reporters ask, "about being the first android drafted to the league?"

"Ready to play," says Gretzkybot. He has never felt anything else.

So, *not* counting the body, the name, the clothes, and the cardboard box, then the first thing Edmonton gives him is the punch-outable teeth. He starts out with a solid aluminum plate, painted an inoffensive enamel color. *But what*, the fans ask, *is the point of a robot who can goon it up on the ice for you, if he can't lose a chiclet in the process?* And what is the point, indeed? So they take out the metal strip and replace it with a set of porcelain dental implants, just as real-looking and imperfect as the human ones.



On opening night, in a move that would earn him the nickname “The Luddite,” a Winnipeg defenseman swings at Gretzkybot’s kneecap with his stick like he’s trying to hit a hole in one. Gretzkybot’s not in any pain—he’s not programmed for that either—but his knee isn’t responding like it should, and the monitor that constitutes his vision is flashing a nasty red color that tells him that were he human, it’d be a different story. He only ends up missing the ten minutes it takes for the mechanics to drill in a replacement part and solder together a few wires. The Winnipeg player is given a five-minute major penalty.

It happens again against Ottawa, and again against Calgary. Fed up, the Department of Player Safety dishes out a five-game suspension for the Calgary player, who appeals the decision. “Are you kidding me?” he says, “It didn’t even miss a period! It’s not like I injured it. The fuckin’ thing can’t be injured.” It’s eventually ruled that in lieu of suspension, players who maliciously damage Gretzkybot will be held liable for the cost of his repairs. He stops getting targeted so much after that.

Though Gretzkybot starts his rookie season on the second line, he’s quickly promoted to the first. Centering him is the captain, David “MC” McConnor, and completing their line is a man who is only ever referred to both on and off the ice as “The Dogg,” with two g’s. Adjusting to their style of play is easy—Gretzkybot has access to footage and analytics of every game each of them have ever played, after all, and his programming allows him to adapt quite rapidly. He knows that MC prefers to pass the puck during a two on one, and that The Dogg’s got a wicked backhand shot, so he tweaks his game accordingly.

“I’ve never been on a plane before,” Gretzkybot says as the team is boarding for their first road trip to Vegas. It’s a lie, technically. He has been in a plane before, just never in the cabin instead of the cargo hold.

“Get used to it, man,” says MC. “You’re living the high life now.”

“Hell yeah. Vegas, baby,” adds their goalie, a man named Johnson who eats an entire 12-inch meatball sub before every game. “We’re going to get you drunk, dude. Wait, *can* you get drunk? Does your id say twenty whatever, or, like, two months? Do you even have an id? Can you even drink?”

“I drink BioSteel. Like in the commercials,” shrugs Gretzkybot, “Don’t really have the equipment for anything else.”

“Jesus fucking Christ,” says Johnson.

In addition to the teeth, Edmonton gives him other upgrades, too. Some of them are functional, like when they install software in him to mimic a hot or cold streak in a human athlete. Other upgrades, though, are purely aesthetic. Like when the guys request he get a full-body paint job instead of just the parts that show with hockey gear on—head, neck, wrists. Management hems and haws about it, saying it’s unnecessary, but they fold eventually when the guys start spinning it as a team bonding issue. *How are we supposed to build chemistry with him when he’s sitting in the dressing room all uncanny valley and shit?* they ask. Gretzkybot thinks it’s a bit of a stretch, but they don’t pay him to think. They don’t pay him at all, actually—all of his expenses are taken care of by the team—but if they did, it wouldn’t be to think.

When he sets foot in the dressing room for the first time with his new cosmetics, The Dogg lets out a piercing wolf whistle and claps him on the back. “Damn,” he says, “looking good, Gretz.”

“Jesus, dude,” says MC, “you couldn’t have paid them a little extra to give you some fuckin’ chest hair?”

“Wait,” Johnson adds, squinting at him and prodding his shoulder, “did they give you *freckles*? Holy shit, that’s adorable.” Gretzkybot stares down at his shoulder, the newly pale ‘skin’ that doesn’t quite yet feel like his own. *Huh*. Yes, apparently, they did.

Edmonton makes it to the playoffs for the first time in seven years. And, though they’re taken out by Nashville in the first round, Gretzkybot finishes the year with seventy-six points. *The Athletic* runs an article on whether it would be fair for him to win the Calder Trophy for rookie of the year. *What would a robot even do with it?* it reads. *These kids fight their whole lives to play in this league, and then they get outshone by some tangle of wires? Hockeybots have proven themselves to be an interesting new way to shake up the league, but pretending they’re anything more than that, much less rewarding them for it? Reward the engineers. Reward the scientists. But at the end of the day, hockeybots are nothing but a collection of ones and zeroes.*

It's not entirely fair, Gretzkybot thinks. After all, he too has spent his entire life fighting to play in this league—his has just been much shorter. In the end, it doesn't matter. Gretzkybot doesn't even break the top three in voting.

In his second year, The Dogg decides it's his personal mission to teach Gretzkybot the art of the chirp. "You gotta get under their skin, dude," he says one morning, as Gretzkybot funnels pucks to him for slap shot practice, "shake 'em up a little."

"Usually I can do that by just being myself," Gretzkybot points out helpfully.

"Come on, man. It'll be fun," he insists.

Gretzkybot is programmed to do whatever helps with team bonding, so he acquiesces.

"Repeat after me," The Dogg says, "Does Coach know you're out here?"

"Does Coach know you're out here?"

"I've seen better hands on a digital clock."

"I've seen better hands on a digital clock."

"Quit diving, bud. The water's frozen, eh?"

"Quit diving, bud. The water's frozen, eh?"

The Dogg lets out a grimace that would be near imperceptible if Gretzkybot didn't have state-of-the-art camera lenses for eyes, but he offers a gregarious fistbump all the same. "Good try, buddy," he says. "We'll keep working on it, yeah?"

The next game, during a puck battle, Gretzkybot pins a forward from New Jersey against the boards. "Reminds me of what I was doing with your girl last night," Gretzkybot says, attempting to put his chirping lessons to use. The New Jersey player starts laughing so hard that he collapses to the ice.

"Oh my god, what the fuck—" he manages to get out between laughs, "that doesn't even—I mean, can you even—are you just a Ken Doll down there, or did they give you a—" The guy's wheezing so hard he has to skate to the bench to catch his breath.

"Attaboy." The Dogg high-fives him once they're on the bench at the end of their shift. "Hey, a win is a win, am I right?"

In his third year, they sew an "A" on his jersey, designating him an

alternate captain. MC hands him his new threads with a “congrats, buddy” and a slap on the back. Gretzkybot is not programmed to cry, but if he could, he probably would be doing so right now, he thinks.

They’re on a heater the whole season, putting up an eleven-game win streak in December. In February, they’re selected to play an outdoor game against Seattle, and MC’s wife knits them all orange-and-blue toques. Even though he can’t feel the cold, Gretzkybot skates with his on during practice, just like everyone else. By the end of the regular season, they earn more points than any other team in the league, receiving the President’s Trophy for their efforts.

It all falls apart in the first round of playoffs. St. Louis, having barely scraped their way into a playoff spot, absolutely wiped the floor with them, going up 3–0 in the first three games. Facing possible elimination in game four, they put their heads down and get to work. It’s a grueling game, both teams passing chances back and forth but unable to put anything in net. They end regulation tied at 0–0 and stay tied through the next twenty minutes. Near the end of the second overtime, Gretzkybot makes an atrociously sloppy pass that leads to a St. Louis breakaway, and the St. Louis player buries it. The final buzzer sounds. They’ve been swept.

The dressing room is quiet, after. Johnson is the first to break the silence. “The hell was that, 8-1?” he asks, cold.

“I know,” Gretzkybot says. “I’m sorry, I didn’t mean—”

“Just tell me you weren’t hacked.”

“What? Come on, don’t be ridiculous.”

“I’m just saying, I know what I saw. Never seen you fumble a puck like that before.”

“Jesus Christ,” MC says. He sounds tired. “Come on. You know that’s not fair. None of us have been at our best this whole series.”

“No, I want to hear him say it.” Johnson levels Gretzkybot with an icy stare. His eyes are red-rimmed. “Say you weren’t hacked.”

“I wasn’t,” Gretzkybot says softly. “I swear, I wasn’t.”

Gretzkybot gets traded to Pittsburgh during the summer going into his fourth year. It’s not really a surprise. He’s good, but Edmonton sours on him after last season, and there are newer, shinier hockeybot models out there now. Tech gets obsolete much more quickly

than humans, anyway. And unlike human players, Gretzkybot has not been programmed to hold a grudge.

The guys still hanging around Edmonton in the summer—there aren't many of them—throw him a going-away party when they get the news. MC hosts and his wife bakes a cake that reads "Happy Trails" in looping pink icing. Even though he cannot eat it, it's still nice to look at. He sees Johnson there for the first time since they lost the series, who gives him a sheepish apology. "Look, man," he says, "please don't take it personally. I was frustrated at myself, really, not you. I know it wasn't your fault."

He will not miss his teammates. Not because they've been unkind, but because he is not built to miss someone. Even so, in Pittsburgh he'll have to learn a whole new roster of teammates. Not their names or their faces or play styles or stats. No, that can all be learned in nanoseconds, but whether they'll jump every time he says hello. Whether they'll let their kids around him. Whether they'll keep him awake to celebrate after a game, or plug him in for the night right away. Those things he can only learn with time. And the feeling that thought brings to the surface, he supposes, can't be that far off from missing someone.

"Will you disassemble me?" he asks MC, after the party's died down. It's only the two of them left in the kitchen, MC rinsing off plates and Gretzkybot placing them in the dishwasher.

"Huh?" says MC, sounding a bit scandalized.

"You know," Gretzkybot says, "When they put me into sleep mode and ship me off. Would you mind taking me apart and packing me up so I can get there safely? Bubble wrapping me and everything? I can get one of the equipment managers to handle it if you don't want—"

"Oh, kid," MC says, which is strange, because while Gretzkybot's technically only three, he's modeled to look and act like a twenty-four-year-old. Only two years younger than the captain himself. MC pulls him into a hug, and when he pulls away, his eyes look a little wet. "Yeah," he says. "Yeah, of course, bud. I can do that for you."

Gretzkybot is not the only hockeybot in Pittsburgh. In fact, they were one of the first teams to get one after Edmonton. Technically, he's

named JJ-68, but everyone calls him Jágrbot. Gretzkybot's favorite thing about Jágrbot is the way he can cut through a defensive pair like butter, deking around opponents like the puck is magnetized to his stick. Gretzkybot's second favorite thing about Jágrbot is that whoever designed him gave him the same hairstyle as his namesake. A long, dark lion's mane of a mullet that flutters in the wind when he skates.

"Welcome to Pittsburgh," says Jágrbot, and, huh, they gave him his namesake's Czech accent, too.

"Thanks, happy to be here," says Gretzkybot, and he's fairly certain he means it.

The first time Pittsburgh goes up against Edmonton, they play a tribute video for Gretzkybot on the Jumbotron in Rogers Place. He stares up at the screen as highlights from his time there dance across it, and that strange feeling bubbles up in his chest again. Like if he could, he would be crying right now.

In the second period, Gretzkybot accidentally gets his stick under The Dogg's skate, and he goes down in an overdramatic heap. "Dirty player!" The Dogg howls with put-upon indignation, wearing a shit-eating grin the whole time, "You're a dirty fuckin' player, Gretz. The hell are they teaching you in Pittsburgh?"

The referee blows the whistle, giving Gretzkybot a two-minute penalty for tripping and The Dogg two minutes for embellishment.

"Quit diving, bud," Gretzkybot shoots back as they skate to their respective penalty boxes, "The water's frozen, eh?"

The Dogg laughs all the way to the penalty box and doesn't stop for the entire two minutes.

Edmonton makes it to the Stanley Cup final that June. Having already been eliminated from the playoffs during the Eastern Conference final, the other Pittsburgh players have all flown back home to lick their wounds, surrounded by partners and family and friends. Given that the closest thing either of them have to any of those is the team itself, Gretzkybot and Jágrbot decide to make do with each other, hosting a two-man watch party in the bowels of ppg Paints Arena. They watch as Edmonton goes down 0-2 against Carolina to

start the series, and then, by some miracle, wins the next three in a row, leaving them 3–2 after five games.

“You okay?” Jágrbot asks as the final seconds of Game six tick down and all the Edmonton players rush onto the ice, victorious at last. Gretzkybot makes a face. It’s the sort of question a human reporter would ask, but Jágrbot, being a hockeybot himself, really ought to know better.

“Of course,” Gretzkybot says, watching MC hoist the Stanley Cup and skate a lap with it, happy tears streaming down his face, before handing it off to The Dogg. He wonders what order he would’ve been given the cup in. If he would’ve been given the chance to take a victory lap at all or just been patted on the back and shuffled into storage for the summer. But Gretzkybot has not been programmed to hold a grudge. “Of course.”

“What would you do for your day with the cup,” Jágrbot asks, “you know, if we won the whole thing?”

And even though he’s spent quite literally his entire life chasing it, Gretzkybot’s never really considered it before. There’s no hometown for him to bring it back to, no childhood rink or coaches for him to show it to. No family or pets or kids he could eat out of it with, if he were even capable of eating at all.

Maybe they would just skip over him, he thinks. If Pittsburgh won it, maybe they wouldn’t give him a cup day at all. Maybe they’d just leave two blank spaces on the cup where Jágrbot and Gretzkybot’s names would’ve been engraved, if they were human. After all, what would a robot even do with it?

“I don’t know what I’d do,” Gretzkybot says. “I really don’t know at all.”

Gretzkybot’s punch-outable teeth are finally put to good use just days into the next season, when a Toronto player slams him up against the boards at an awkward angle. Gretzkybot’s head cracks hard against the plexiglass, sending him crumpled down to the ice. If he were human, a play like that would’ve resulted in a concussion, if not worse. He can feel the tooth rolling around in his mouth, and he spits it out onto the ice where it gleams, bloodless. He has the wild, utterly human urge, to run his tongue over the raw gap of flesh

between his teeth, but no tongue with which to do it, no flesh either, technically. He has no need for them; all of his speech is produced digitally.

He has never felt simultaneously more and less human.

He can hear yelling, and when he looks up, Jágrbot's whaling on the Toronto player in retaliation, yelling at the referees, "Call a penalty! Do your fucking jobs, dammit!"

Suddenly the ice is a mess of black and yellow, and blue and white—half the players trying to pry Jágrbot off of the Toronto player and the other half trying to get their own swings in. Amidst the chaos, Gretzkybot can only stare. Jágrbot's programmed to fight on the behalf of other players, but not *him*. Gretzkybot doesn't need defending. Gretzkybot can't be injured.

The Toronto player leaves the ice with the beginnings of a shiner purpling his right eye. Jágrbot leaves with a game misconduct, a dent in his jaw, and the paint scraped off of the bottom right quadrant of his face, exposing the metal underneath. A steady trickle of oil drips from a gash on his forehead. He has never looked simultaneously more and less human.

"You shouldn't have done that," Gretzkybot chides him, once the game is over. "Why did you defend me like that? We don't need that. *I* don't need that."

Jágrbot shrugs. "Don't you?"

The next day during practice, a trainer taps Gretzkybot on the shoulder.

"We've got that replacement tooth ready for you," she says, "whenever you want to install it."

"Thanks," Gretzkybot replies. He pauses, taking breath. It's a purely vestigial motion that does nothing to settle him at all. "I think I'll leave it like this, for now."



## CONTRIBUTORS' NOTES

zoe atkinson

is a fourth-year undergraduate student studying neuroscience at CSU. Though she reads, listens to music, and studies infectious disease, she really just spends most of her time on her best friends' couch. This is her first published work.

samantha bilodeau

is a junior at CSU majoring in English with a concentration in creative writing and minoring in film studies. She competes as a member of the CSU logging sports team and previously served as captain of the worst dodgeball team in the history of intramural sports. She lives in Fort Collins with her partner and a truly untenable number of books.

molly campbell

is a sophomore at CSU majoring in English. She is from North Carolina and enjoys art history, folk music, being the first person to leave footprints in fresh snow, and drawing. This is her first time being published in a literary magazine.

aidan chesmore

is an English major with a creative writing focus in his fourth year at CSU. In addition to publishing in *Greyrock*, Aidan has self-published one poetry collection, a novella, and co-authored a Webtoons series. Outside of writing, Aidan enjoys photography, art, and filmmaking.

ruth evilsizer

is a fourth-year student majoring in interdisciplinary studies and minoring in English at Colorado State University. When she isn't writing or reading, she is most likely roller skating, playing tennis, or strumming on the guitar. Evilsizer enjoys completing her studies anywhere outside in the Fort Collins area.

peyton farnum

is a fourth-year student at CSU pursuing a degree in studio art with a concentration in printmaking. Originally from Savannah, Georgia, Peyton is a devout lover of the outdoors, animals, and all things art. Peyton hopes to continue in the arts professionally using her expertise and enthusiasm to bring more kindness and acceptance into the field.

megan fenner

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

dani gagne

is a senior English major at CSU. They enjoy baking, collecting rare books, and writing about queer experiences. Dani has two cats who like to help them write. They are often inspired by their pets, music, and car rides.

anna hartwick

is currently earning a bachelor’s degree in biological sciences with a minor in microbiology. When not obsessively dotting on her houseplants or crafting, she can be found hiking (if it’s warm) or drinking chai tea (if it’s cold). She is a junior.

rose redinglis

is a Denver native and an English major at Colorado State University. Rose’s interests lie in horror movies and media, and she’s been writing short horror poems and stories since middle school. She also enjoys video games and knitting scarves for her friends’ stuffed animals.

colin m c c all um

is a Canadian-American poet, writer, and student who, in his final year of a creative writing undergraduate degree, is currently aspiring towards an MFA program. He is inspired by global artists and his global experiences, especially the works of French surrealism, Latin American magic realism, fields of natural sciences, and beyond. In his work, he seeks to create unique experiences, alternate methods of thought, and compassion for the universe.

ale x mol ai

was born in Denver, Colorado, and graduated from Littleton High School. Growing up, he loved playing sports, playing video games with his friends and brothers, and storytelling in any format. He doesn't know what the future holds but he hopes he can have some small positive influence in the places that he can.

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is an occasional writer of poetry and prose and a constant overuser of em dashes. Their work has appeared or is forthcoming in *Gasher* journal, Beyond the Veil Press, the Icarus Writing Collective, and elsewhere.

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is a junior at CSU studying environmental economics and creative writing. They enjoy cooking, video games, camping, and hanging out with their cat, Paperclip. After graduation, they plan to pursue a career in community planning.

gabby re il and

is a second-year art major interested in the intersection between storytelling and visual art. She enjoys watching squirrels, drawing little creatures, and contemplating oranges. She hopes that you will have a nice day today.

micah sample

is a queer poet who grew up in southern Colorado. Although he was originally attending CSU as a creative writing major, he has switched to psychology to one day pursue a career in the mental health field. He is also a new cat dad.

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is a first-year student majoring in English with a concentration in creative writing and has minors in real estate and design thinking. Her hobbies include glass art, writing, photography, woodworking, reading, and snuggling with her cat, Nimbus. She loves skiing, swimming, and designing new art projects.

hailee stegall

is a senior history major and a Colorado native with a long-held love for writing. Her work primarily focuses on themes of womanhood and growing up in the digital age. While she's been a writer at the *Collegian* throughout her time at Colorado State, this is her first creative writing publication.

abigail wolshon

is a writer from California who focuses on genre fiction and only recently has branched out to nonfiction. She has been published in *Greyrock Review's* 2021 edition ("The Cave Hunters") and is excited to debut her second published piece in the 2024 edition. When she is not writing, she is exploring the outdoors and seeking inspiration for her next piece.





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