R2: The Rice Review is a free student literary journal at Rice University.

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Dear Reader,

Let us be the first to tell you that neither of us are originally from Houston. Somehow, however, we have found ourselves here together with you in this space—this vibrant place of cars and queso, of languages and light pollution. Over time, Houston has molded us, has grown on us, has gotten underneath our skin.

When Harvey came, we saw our city under water, trembling on the verge of fracture in the wake of the storm. When the Astros won the World Series, we heard an unbridled cheer echo throughout the streets of our city, a much-needed triumph over the ever-present flood that was, and still is, in our minds. When our politics became steeped in controversy, we walked freely in our city while yearning to protect the threatened: the women, the dreamers, the systematically oppressed, the vulnerable.

Our city is a dwelling, in every sense of the word. It is home: where our beds are, where our routines are, where we find ourselves capable of feeling settled (a difficult feat for college students, sometimes). Our city is in the act of dwelling as well. We ruminate on climate change and the attritional violence we enact upon our city and our earth; on the local challenges that push and pull our city together; on where our city’s collective sense of justice stands within a deeply conservative state in a deeply-divided nation. We dwell both in and on Houston—both externally and internally, physically and emotionally.

We believe that stories and art are dwellings, too. They offer shelter, allowing us to inhabit them for as long as we keep them close. They circle around obsessions through words and brushstrokes, through constructed line breaks and rich color palettes. All the pieces in this issue of R2: The Rice Review are concerned with dwelling, both as a place and as an act.
As such, our fourteenth issue is divided into four sections that meander through dwelling: *Here, There, Back Again, & Again*. In *Here*, you will find works that craft a sense of place, that ground us with an impression of stasis and ask us to linger. In *There*, you will find a careful estrangement of the familiar: prose, poetry, and art that move us beyond our familiar thresholds, that are themselves in transition. The pieces in *Back Again* will return you to where you started—but with the sense that something has changed, that things don’t quite fit into the space in the same way they did before. & *Again* will draw you back once more, enveloping you in a wondering, an unfinished closure—a dwelling.

We are so incredibly grateful to the countless number of people who have made the publication of this issue possible. We would like to thank our faculty advisor, Ian Schimmel, for his unwavering support, manifested through an endless supply of cupcakes and ideas that have helped our magazine flourish. Furthermore, we are indebted to the Rice English Department and Department of Visual and Dramatic Arts, as well as to our contributors for entrusting us with their creative works. We would also like to thank our wonderful staff, who took the time out of their busy lives to ensure that writers and artists on our campus continue to have a platform to thrive.

Lastly, we would like to thank you, Dear Reader, for being here (and there, back again, & again) with us. We hope that you take what dwells within these pages and carry it all beyond the margins of your palms.

Erica Cheung, Editor-in-Chief & Chelsea Wu, Managing Editor
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If you say I am addicted to smoking because it doesn’t leave scars, I’ll give you my last cigarette so you won’t hurt yourself. If you say I am crying because I can’t remember to whom I lost my virginity, I’ll give you mine so you can remember your own name instead. If you say I can’t breathe because I don’t know the answers to: Why are we here? What is in my life that makes it more meaningful than a bird’s?, I’ll give you my ribs so your lungs won’t collapse.

Sit here, in the grass. I’ll sit here. We’ll wait for the train, and watch kamikaze fireflies dive into the creek, and we’ll try to figure out what they are dying for. See, how their tail lights disappear into the water, and how the ripples will calm to reflect the flickering of your All-Natural American Spirit. See, how comets vomit nightlights for us.

You say, If two weak things lean on each other, before how long will they fall?

I have followed you away from home like a moth to your lighter, because I am attracted to tragedy. You say it’s wrong of me to follow you because you don’t know where you are going, but you haven’t told me to go away yet, so I’ll give you myself until you do.

Did you know that the pelican cuts her breast open to feed her young the blood? No, I don’t know if it’s true. My pastor told me that one day. He gave me this secret: Jesus was a pelican.

You say, What’ll we look like in heaven? Will we go with the faces we’ve died with? Or will we fly there, as birds?

If we fight tonight, it’ll be because you’ll be praying for a derailing. You’ll say I have no patience for you, who self-destruct so slowly. If you say it, I swear I’ll give you all my secrets. Here’s another: Hold your hand out when the train is slowing around the bend. Wait for a boxcar. Do you feel how uneven the stones under your soles are? Do you feel them coming loose over the thunder in the ground? When the wind feels just right in your palm, and when the metal is so close you can smell rust, and when you can no longer hear my instructions over the sound of the earth shaking—

***

There are other stories of the pelican, too. Once, on the coast, I saw a pelican swallow a duckling whole. That’s how they eat everything: swallowing it whole. Do you want to know something? It’s something that I’ve never told anyone, and it’s my biggest fear, and it’s that I’m afraid of running out of things to say. And, my dear reader, because you are the love of my life, let me take this breath and I’ll tell you something else: It turns me on to give myself away like this. And you can say that it’s vulgar, but please know that I won’t feel a thing.
COLOR FIELD ABSTRACTION / LINT
by Suzanne Zeller
In the fading contrail evenings,
Dad would make a hollow of his hands,
stand in the baked driveway and gently
trick the birds who oversaw us.
They’d always call back, however hesitant.
Even then, even when he was playing
his brow would crouch at the ready.

Sometimes in the yard I trail his inspections,
send my words along that tailwind.
From the leaf-litter comes
the dove’s insistence—
her gray-green body
like my two fists held together:
Me too, me too, me too.

CALL AND RESPONSE
by Lenna Mendoza
NO. 2 FOREST GREEN
by Ginny Jeon
According to ratemyprofessor.com, 100% of your students would take your classes again. What’s your secret recipe for awesome classes? And, on another note, what drew you to teaching?

Oh wow—that’s so much higher than I would have guessed! That’s very heartening. I’m really touched by that stat. I absolutely love teaching, but even in my own class I’m like, *Man, this is a lot of work. Am I asking too much?* I really push my students. I’m not sure I’d take my own class again. But ultimately I think that level of work is necessary. So much of writing is like an apprenticeship. You try and fail and recalibrate and problem-shoot and start over again and break your ideas and then build them back up again and progress. For the rookie writer, that can be pretty frustrating but it helps if you have some guidance and someone to laugh with along the way. We laugh a lot in class. As the great Larry Heinemann says, “There’s no such thing as a literary emergency.”

For me, teaching and writing draw from the same energy reserves and to that end come from the same place in the heart. It’s important to have an urgency to the message in the classroom as you might on the page. And, of course, the stakes are very much real. I think that’s what ultimately drew me...
to teaching—the fact that it is a very natural extension of my writing.

**Does teaching influence your own writing, and if yes, how? Have specific students or experiences in the classroom ever taught you things about writing and literature that you don’t feel you would have learned otherwise?**

I have epiphanies in the classroom all the time. Sometimes, students have a way of facilitating those by exploring the nuances of any given piece in the context of the contemporary—they’re really good at that. Other times, they just have a really novel take on something I hadn’t thought of before which catalyzes a new way of thinking about the piece, but also things more broadly. Baldwin, for example, casts so many shadows and is a writer whose nuance and genius I feel can be lost when we read him in isolation. I wrote about one such instance in teaching Baldwin in the wake of Hurricane Harvey and the way I’d never thought of the imagery of the Harlem riots and the Houston floods as parallel things—so much wealth as Baldwin puts it, out in the streets. To that end, I think all books are meant to be discussed, not simply consumed. That way the characters and ideas are living. The dialogue is important for me.

And, of course, teaching craft always helps me get a better understanding of it. Francine Prose has this incredible essay on what the short story is where she basically gives various examples of what it’s not and I love that piece. Talking about writing helps me actively theorize on it and break it down and figure out how it works, which is essential to being a writer.

**For many young writers being published is the dream. Your first novel has recently been published. Could you describe the “publishing-part” of writing from your perspective? What did it feel like to have your first book published?**

Going with a Latinx-centric indie press was very important to me with this book. I think it’s really easy to sensationalize the drug war in Mexico, especially when you’re trying to sell books, but I wanted a press that was sensitive to maintaining the humanity of these characters and also the very real people impacted by the drug war. I also wanted a press that honored the original vision and scope of the work. And so I gave my first book back to my community, which was scary as a debut novelist—it flew against all practical advice concerning literary career, advance numbers, trajectory, etc.—but ultimately the right move, I feel. I’m incredibly proud of *BANG* and I know the editors at Arte Público Press put a lot of work into making this a better endeavor.

I launched *BANG* here in Houston, at Brazos Bookstore, which is a mighty little place. They clear out the shelves and tables at the
entrance to the store and transform the shop into this reading space that’s very intimate, very scary actually because the crowd is right there with you, but that also makes those kinds of reading beautiful. You’re in a room with your tribe. I think in a nutshell that’s what publishing your first book feels like—like finding your tribe.

How did your novel evolve as a work? Did you start the project with a defined idea of the finished product?

In the beginning, I only wanted to write a novel about dignity. When systems fail people, they create their own systems. So, BANG very much bloomed from that idea. To what extent is it a privilege to buy into “the right way” (i.e. the legal way) of doing things? To what extent can you really blame someone for trying to maintain their own dignity at all costs? And to what extent can you really blame someone for prioritizing their own survival by buying into systems that are alternatives to the ones that failed them?

We almost never talk about immigration policy and the drug war in Mexico in light of the way those U.S.-led campaigns are inextricably interlinked and have systematically violated basic human rights. That’s a fact. We also seldom talk about how borders themselves are systems of oppression.

Look no further than the Trump travel bans. Or the more than 400 people systematically killed by a militarized border that pushes migrants into the most dangerous and desolate terrain on the North American continent. Or the border patrol agents themselves who routinely terrorize migrants by slashing their water jugs or urinating on their food reserves in the heat of summer. To be complicit in that is to dehumanize those people, which we all know is a preamble to genocide—something not entirely implausible in this Trump era.

To that end, I wanted to write a book about people and their problems, not a set of macro problems and their people (to borrow an idea from the great Tayari Jones). And in the end, I sincerely hope I didn’t write a book about the drug war or immigration or black markets. I hope I wrote a book about a family that parted ways for a little while, but then sought each other out again because they recognized their dignity was in each other. They were each other’s alternative to the systems that failed them.

One thing aspiring writers (and apparently established ones, too) struggle with at times is the feeling of “being stuck.” Have you ever had this feeling, and what is your advice on how to deal with it?

I’ve definitely felt stumped about how to proceed with regard to specific passages but never truly stuck. But when I am stumped, it’s less because of lack of ideas than a multitude
of ways I might cut the thing. Sometimes I get overwhelmed by the possibilities. I’m also hyperconscious in writing that if I change one thing early on then ten or twelve other things will also change down the road. So, I try to stick in scene as much as possible. I try to build the thing brick-by-brick while only glancing up to keep an eye on the long arc of the piece.

The way that scene is informed by the scenes that have preceded it. So, sticking in scene as much as you can (for me anyway) is actually a very good way of getting unstuck. I limit the possibilities of what might happen and I write toward what should happen given the way each character is acting and reacting according to their motivations.

This all sounds kind of technical, but it’s really not. It’s just you, the writer, reminding yourself that you’re not God and sometimes it’s okay to let the story unravel how it unravels.

As for being completely stuck, I typically tell my students when they’re completely uninspired it’s probably because they’re not reading enough. You should read a thousand pages for every one you write. That’s very prescriptive but I said what I said, you know?

The articles on your blog, i.e. the numerous book recommendations and reviews, reveal that you are as much a reader as you are a writer, especially of Chicanx literature. Who is your favorite author or poet? Do you have a Chicanx author in mind you think everyone should have read? How has their work influenced your own?

Right now, I’m teaching Helena Maria Viramontes who I think everyone should read. She was a mentor of mine while I was at Cornell and she also happens to be my favorite Chicanx writer. Their Dogs Came
With Them is a feat. That was a book I read early in the drafting of BANG and the craft lessons from that book are very much a part of my DNA as a writer. As for poetry, I’m a huge fan of Rigoberto González. He’s actually a very accomplished novelist as well. I’m always circling back to things he’s written but mostly Other Fugitives and Other Strangers.

“...I THINK SO MUCH CONTEMPORARY LATINX WRITING IN THE STATES ISN’T SO MUCH IN REACTION TO CHICANX LITERATURE AS A BLOOMING OF IT.

I grapple a lot with whether or not my work might be considered Chicanx Literature or if millennial writing might be categorized in that way at all. Not because I dislike that categorization—I think of it as a high honor—but because I’m not sure if I’m culturally legible in contributing to the canon of a civil rights movement that I had no part of. It wasn’t my body on the line in the East L.A. Walkouts. Not my body on the line in the Delano Grape Boycotts. And though I know that history intimately—and my mentors came from that tradition—I sometimes feel like it’d be disingenuous to claim that as well. I’m not sure I earned that title.

To that end, I think so much contemporary Latinx writing in the States isn’t so much in reaction to Chicanx Literature as a blooming of it. It feels like a new segment of something in reaction to this dark new era of American insularity. Our literature, I think, is increasingly international, increasingly nuanced in our thinking of gender and sexuality, increasingly radical in reclaiming the American in Mexican-American, Guatemalan-American, Cuban-American, but also Undocumented-American, which is to say increasingly radical in claiming our place in the American fabric. We have skin in the game (we can’t afford not to) and I think looking forward, Latinx Literature will interrogate the ways in which Mexican-American issues are also increasingly Guatemalan-American issues, which are also Cuban-American issues, etc.

I think looking forward, that bridge between Latin American letters and American Latinx letters will become more substantial. And, hopefully, speak truth to what we know about America already—that it’s always been an extension of Latin America.

This year’s R2 is especially interested in the idea of “dwelling” (dwelling as home, shelter, habitat, culture, but also as a state
STUCK IN A RUT
by Chelsey Wen
of contemplation and retrospection). I love the way you characterize Houston in your *Ploughshares* article “Before the Storm and After, Houston Still a Poet’s City”. What kind of “dwelling” is Houston? And do you feel that your writing is in conversation with the idea of “dwelling” in any other particular way?

Houston is the most diverse city in the United States by most every metric. More languages are spoken here than in New York. More people of color live here than in New York. We’re a direct flight to Frankfurt and a direct flight to Beijing. Houston is a nascent global city by virtue of that crossroads status, but also because of its proximity to Latin America. It’s set to take over Chicago as the 3rd largest metropolis in the US and the triangulation of all of that is that the city itself is naturally a poet’s city—you hear the sounds of those different languages everywhere you go. You have some of the best artists and writers in the world either living or coming here. So, the city itself is an incredible conduit of contact zones across art and culture and language.

I’m constantly thinking about place in my life and in my writing. Of course, in writing *BANG* I was constantly thinking about Northern Mexico. My mom is from Matamoros, which plays a role in the book, and so I was really thinking about the texture of that place which I spent some time in as a kid. I still have a lot of family there. And then my time in Mexico City, which was crucial for me as a writer, but also as a person.

I’m privileged enough to have two passports—one from Mexico and one from the United States—and so I’m able to cross back and forth very easily. Both places were home to me for a certain period of time, though I’m undeniably Tejano. Mostly, I think of dwelling as that—as a beautiful hybridity of being where you can exist in all of your complexity and where there’s pretty okay coffee at arm’s reach and where you can read and write and be without the pressure to be anything than what you are.

“**Mostly, I think of dwelling as that—as a beautiful hybridity of being where you can exist in all of your complexity and where there’s pretty okay coffee at arm’s reach...**

In that vein, Leipzig was home to me too for a magical little while. I have a very soft spot in my heart for Germany. My wife is
German and so we’re there a lot. So many of my literary influences have come from Germany. Goethe, of course, but also Herta Müller and Rilke and Heym. A lot of visual artists too. Neo Rauch actually lives in Leipzig and I think he’s incredible.

My mother-in-law is constantly sending packages and so it’s accidentally happened that all of my writing tools are also from Germany. My pen is the Stabilo Worker though I’ve become a huge fan of the Lamy Safari, which is what grade school kids use to learn to write (I understand) in Germany. My pencils are all Staedtler. My notebooks are the kind that first graders use to practice lettering—kind of like composition books. The ink never bleeds on those pages and naturally I press down too hard on my pen. Those notebooks are incredible, indestructible things. McPaper is kind of a cool concept. We don’t have stores like that in the United States. Stores dedicated entirely to writing, which isn’t the same thing as a stationary store. McPaper forever, man.

If I could dwell in one store I’d dwell in McPaper. Or Mein RothStift, which isn’t a bad indie option.

You recently spent a semester at one of Rice’s partner institutions, the University of Leipzig, as an exchange professor. What was your experience in Germany, or more specifically Leipzig, as a writer? Has the time you spent abroad inspired your writing, and if yes, how so?

Living and teaching in Leipzig was an incredible gift that came to me at a pivotal time in my writing career. When I landed there, I didn’t recognize that right away. The book wasn’t out yet and I was quickly burning out from teaching and speaking engagements that spread me very thin right before I left Houston.

When I got to Leipzig as a Picador Guest Professor, they put me up in this apartment that overlooks Friedenspark, which is essentially a former cemetery that was converted into a public park under the former DDR. And so, it was late October, kind of spooky, there were a lot of ravens who never got the memo that the park wasn’t a cemetery anymore and they were just hanging out, and then the sun that would go down at, like, 4:00 PM in the afternoon. And I was like, What am I doing here? No Mexican food.

But then I showed up to my first day of class and it struck me like a lightning bolt—oh shit! I’ve been thinking about writing wrong my entire life. Not in a craft-sense—I could teach the class—but in the way that I’d been conditioned to think of writing as a business. This very American sense of production and consumption. Trends. Twitter. PR Campaigns. And that had been
burning me out, that had been boxing me out of my own work.

My students in Germany were viscerally engaged in only the art of it all. Like, zero ego. All ideas. And incredible ideas at that: earthshaking ideas, ideas that spoke toward the best of what great art does which is interrogating what it means to be human. Those workshops and discussions were very evolved.

And I didn’t know it, but I needed that grounding. My former students at Uni Leipzig are thinking about writing and art at a very high level and there was an urgency to it, they were seeking it out and sharing it and talking about it and having beers over it and getting into arguments and fuming over it. And I was really proud to have facilitated that class for a little while. I felt privileged to have been humbled by their vision of what art could be which, by extension, spoke to me in terms of what my art could be.

They reminded me of the importance of conversing with one’s vision but also actively cultivating a conversation of visions with other people. They reminded me that art doesn’t happen in a vacuum—there’s always a context. But they were also always sure to constantly remind me that I’m still young, which can be tough to wrap your mind around when you’re working in academia. I just turned thirty and so I’m still wrapping my mind around it and what this stage of life means for my art.

Leipzig is another creative home for me. I think I’ll always feel a connection to that city.

Thank you so much for doing an interview with us!

Thank you. It was a pleasure.
I see them through the window. Chasing after the sweet, lilting melody creeping down my street. The little boy is not wearing pants. His half-moon butt cheeks are a pale yellow under his polo; her sundress flutters on the upbeat of their frantic, delicate waltz.

The boy’s definition of the American Dream is tantalizing images of grinning ice cream cones and technicolor popsicles, begging for their flesh to be consumed. A two in the afternoon, All-American tale of Motherly Love, brought right to the living room of yours truly. If it had been Rockwell peeking through these blinds, these words / sunlight soaked strands, ebony salmon leaping upstream against asphalt current / would be the brushstrokes.

The truck lingers at the intersection, turn signal blinking. The boy picks up speed, he is a tow boat dragging along a cruise ship. She mustn’t let go, for wherever he goes, she shall follow.

I watch them walk back. Her laughter is the sun: bright yellow, dripping down his forearm.
NIGHT OUT
by Ginny Jeon
PITSTOP
by Marcus Tierrablanca
Isaac often wondered what would happen if the cable ever snapped. Would the car plummet straight down to the ground, several hundred feet below? Or would it fall in an arc, a perfect circle compassed by the severed coil? What sound would a length of tensile steel, six inches in diameter, make as it split in two? Would the car land cleanly in the river, or dash itself against the rocky cliffs of the far shore?

The notion of passengers was largely irrelevant. Isaac knew that the cable cars never ran empty, but he always quashed that thought whenever it emerged. It was not a question of compassion, but aesthetics. The presence of human bodies complicated the clean mechanics of the catastrophe, presaging the quotidian details of ambulances and inquiries. It added a splash of messy reality to an otherwise perfectly escapist fantasy.

Unfortunately for Isaac, the safety inspector was a dedicated man. In the thirty-eight months that Isaac had served as ticket seller at the bottom station, there had been few malfunctions and nothing even approaching a cable failure. Such a disaster would be unthinkable; those two spindly wires bound the city together across the deepest, widest chasm of the river gorge. Day in and day out, every fifteen minutes on the mark, the little red cars carried thousands of commuters without incident as Isaac watched and waited.

When he tired of watching the cable cars, he often cast his gaze onto the passengers, studying their clothes, their gaits, the groups they traveled in. Isaac’s shift was in the evening, but he developed a keen eye for spotting curious details in sparse light. Most of the people he observed were frightfully dull, but sometimes one would stand out.

One night, a woman approached the ticket booth and asked to rent storage locker number forty-eight. Her walk was purposeful, her expression revealing intent but not intensity. She was middle-aged, in businesswoman’s clothes, with a simple gold band on her right wrist and a small white pin in the shape of a rose on her lapel. As the storage lockers lined the wall opposite his booth, he watched with vague interest as she placed something in her locker before boarding the 8:15 car.

She did not return. In fact, she might have slipped from Isaac’s mind by the end of the night had he not noticed a short, plump man in a suit approach locker number forty-eight sometime after eleven, enter the combination, and nonchalantly remove the object which had been placed there three hours before. His bald head was beaded with sweat, and every so often he cast a surreptitious glance to one side or the other.
He also wore a white rose pin on his lapel.

It was with somewhat increased interest that Isaac watched the locker on the second night. The tall woman returned just after eight, deposited something new in the locker, and vanished into the darkness. Isaac duly waited for the short man to return, soaking up the chatter of the commuters and the din of the city beyond. Five minutes after eleven, he heard a small commotion and the squeal of tires on the road outside. The short man did not appear for the rest of Isaac’s shift.

At midnight, after lowering the grate over the booth window, Isaac ambled in the direction of storage lockers without any specific intention. Almost unconsciously, he found himself using his custodian’s key to unlock the door to locker number forty-eight. Inside, almost invisible in the deep shadow, was a fat, white envelope, tightly sealed. Isaac placed it inside his jacket and clocked out shortly after.

The envelope was still unopened the next morning. The material was too thick to see through, even when held under light. The papers within were densely packed; certainly too large to be currency. It was an envelope, Isaac pondered, that could hold any number of things. Reluctant to break the seal, he kept it tucked in his jacket throughout that evening’s shift.

The third night, a mustachioed man came in on the 7:30 car and walked without hesitation to number forty-eight. Finding it empty, he came to Isaac next. “Excuse me,” the man said with a rueful smile, “I’d like to report a missing item. I left it here a few days ago and it’s up and vanished.” His face was handsome, his eyes were cold, and he bore a rose on his lapel.

With irrational confidence, Isaac pulled out the envelope and placed it on the counter between them. “Is this it?”

The man with the mustache betrayed a moment of surprise. His hand twitched towards his belt. His eyes roved up and down, looking for ambush, trickery, or even a trace of motive. Isaac tried a smile. It was awkward, lopsided, but it seemed to do the trick. The man seized the envelope with both hands, nodded a quick thanks, and was gone as quickly as he had come.

Some time later, someone new arrived. He was well-dressed and soft-spoken, but Isaac decided that there was something unpleasant about him. Perhaps it was his stare—relentless and searching, as if he was trying to look through everything he saw. Worst of all, his lapel was bare. “Ahem,” he said mildly, “I’ve lost my key. Could you unlock number forty-eight for me?”

“I would be happy to,” Isaac replied, “but station regulation requires that I see your claim ticket first.”

The unpleasant man shifted his feet. He licked his lips. Isaac realized with a bit of a thrill that this man might be deciding whether to kill him. He kept his expression blank and his eyes focused on nothing in particular, least of all the way the man seemed
to be grasping something in his pocket. “Do you need to go retrieve it?” Isaac asked, voice still and bureaucratic. The man shook his head and stalked away. Isaac’s heart was still racing when he lowered the gate, and there was a spring in his step as he walked the quiet streets back to his apartment.

The fourth day was his day off. He spent the morning in bed, and the afternoon running errands. In the evening, he joined a group of friends for drinks. He had known these men since their school days; their boasts and banter were familiar to him. It was relaxing, in its way, to sit back and let the noise wash over him. This week was no different, except that he wore a quiet smile as he sipped his warm beer. No one noticed; they were too busy talking about wives, work, and other extraneous details. Isaac was glad to return to his station the following afternoon.

The fifth night, the clock struck nine, ten, eleven times. With a pang, Isaac realized that the station had probably been written off, too dangerous to return to, by whoever made such decisions. He watched the last car slide in with a heavy heart, and resigned himself to normalcy’s return, when there was a shout and a sort of loud crack from the road outside. A minute later, the mustachioed man stumbled to Isaac’s booth, clutching his side. He pressed against the glass, and blood ran down from his hand. “Help me,” he gasped.

Isaac opened the door and bade the man sit down. He fetched the first-aid kit from the janitor’s closet. He had used it once before to help a woman who had missed a step and sprained her ankle. Now, with steady hands, he cut away the bloodied fabric and bound the wound as best he could. It was quick and sloppy, but it helped to staunch the bleeding. The man swore and spat and grit his teeth but he did not cry out. When it was done, he slumped backwards, breathing heavily. “Why?”

This was not the response Isaac was expecting. Some words of thanks were in order, he thought. But the man grimaced and asked again, “Why? Why help me? Who are you?”

Isaac thought on this. “A friend,” he replied eventually. It seemed the proper answer, given the circumstances. “A friend?” the man persisted. “One of us? But you haven’t got the—” He made a vague gesture towards his collar with his good hand.

“A friend,” Isaac repeated, more insistently.

“Who do you work for? How do you know who we are?” His eyes narrowed. “Do you even know who we are?”

Isaac glanced outside, where the last few stragglers were gathering their belongings. “The station will close soon. You ought to get moving.”

The man struggled to his feet. Each step seemed to cause him pain, but he made his way to the door unassisted.
CRYBABY

by Chelsey Wen
“I’ll be here, if I’m needed,” said Isaac.
The man looked at him in a very odd manner and shook his head. Saying nothing more, he limped down the platform and ducked out of sight.

Isaac made sure to wipe down the chair and mop the floor to remove any trace of blood. It kept him almost half an hour after closing, but he thought it was worth it.

It would take days or even weeks, but Isaac had no doubt that the mustachioed man would return. The sixth night, he kept a hopeful eye out, idly toying with his collar all the while. He checked locker forty-eight again, to no avail. Still, the rental would last until the end of the week. Someone would come, he was sure of it.

THE CAR DID NOT SWING IN A PERFECT ARC; NOR DID IT PLUMMET STRAIGHT DOWN.

Someone did come, late that night as he was locking up. “Ahem,” came a voice in his ear, and he felt something hard and cold against his neck. Was this what the barrel of a gun felt like? “We’d like to have a little word with you,” said the unpleasant man with the mild voice.

Together, they walked onto Car 02, its metalwork gleaming softly in the moonlight. The unpleasant man sat at the controls while his equally unpleasant friend kept the gun trained squarely on Isaac. The car started with a heavy lurch and began to ease out over the river.

“Who do you work for?” asked the unpleasant man in a conversational tone.

“The city transportation office,” Isaac replied.

“Is that all?” The words had more of a bite to them now.

“Yes,” said Isaac, trying to sound stoic. The gun pressed hard against his neck, and he dropped reluctantly to his knees. The unpleasant man sighed.

“Let’s stop playing games. We know you’re one of them.”

One of Them? What a stupid thing to say, thought Isaac. I’m one of Us.

“If you don’t tell us what we need to know, we’ll be forced to take, ahem, extreme action.” The unpleasant pair exchanged glances. Isaac wondered idly whether they would shoot him when they got to the far station, or just throw him out of the car halfway across. Most likely, they would shoot him and then dump him out halfway across. Just to be sure.

At that moment, there was a flash of light in the distance. Shouts could just be heard over the whir of the car’s engine. In the chaotic dazzle of flashlights and electric lanterns, silhouettes were brawling on the platform of the top station. Gunshots rang out. There was a painful squeal of metal on metal.

“What—?” cried the unpleasant man.

The cable snapped.

32 Matt Pittard
The car did not swing in a perfect arc; nor did it plummet straight down. It continued to glide forward even as it succumbed to the grips of gravity, forming the latter half of a parabola. The car must have been front-heavy, for it began to twirl as it fell—a factor Isaac had never considered. He observed the proceedings with a zen-like detachment, while the other two tumbled and screamed. He watched the broken cable above him ripple with released tension. He felt himself float, weightless, as the walls turned around him. He saw the lights of the city blink through the window. And he gazed at the reflection of the scarlet car in the dark water below, growing larger with each second, until the two became one and time stopped.

On the ninth evening, Isaac returned to work. He took his seat gingerly, for he was covered in bruises. Yet it was reassuring to fall into the old routines of passing out tickets and making change. The doctors had wanted to keep him at the hospital a while longer, but Isaac knew there was no point to that. Thrown clear through the window just before impact, he had landed painfully but without serious injury. There was no good reason to waste a week in bed when he could be back at the station.

There had been questions, of course. The police were full of them. Isaac answered everything they asked. He told them about the envelope, and about the short man and the unpleasant man and the man with the mustache. He regretted betraying their confidence, but he wasn’t a good enough liar to explain it all away. He hoped they would forgive him.

When he had told the whole story, the officers left the room for quite a while. He heard muffled disagreements through the door. At last, they returned and told him he was free to go. They looked as surprised as he did.

From his booth, Isaac watched the cable cars scuttle from station to station. The line had been repaired in a day; connection was too important to be cut off for long. As the crowds poured in and out of the vehicles, he scanned for interesting sights, but there was nothing. No guns. No envelopes. And certainly no one wearing rose-shaped pins on their lapels.

The cars ran like clockwork. Isaac rented out locker number forty-eight to a family who needed a place to store their baby’s stroller. At midnight, he finished his shift and closed his booth without incident.

On the tenth evening, a young woman bustled up to the ticket window, her expression panicked. “Please put out an announcement. I’ve lost my handbag, and it’s absolutely crucial that I find it at once.”

Isaac blinked.

“Why?”
The first time I meet her, she falls to her knees. She envelops my hand in hers, the touch of her coarse fingers chafing the unworked skin of my knuckles.

“Sunny,” she hums my name like a prayer. “Sunny.”

Her forehead glistens under the moonlight and humidity of the air. My knees ache to bend and level my head with hers, but I remember the crash course I had just taken on Ugandan etiquette. My host mother stands by my side with her chest out and back straight, lips curved upward in approval.

“It’s nice to meet you,” I say. She cannot understand, but she nods enthusiastically, thin hair bouncing with each sway of her head.

“This is Safina, our housemaid,” my host mother says.

“Safina,” I repeat, but on my lips, the word is just a name.

***

The foundation that I intern under has its home office based in San Francisco. But it rains more in Uganda than it does in California. When it rains in Uganda, the village houses sing. Not in voices, but in the drumming of the rain on tin roofs. I stand in the doorway to my room, watching the rain and mentally slapping myself for the dreams I had of this country before I arrived, bursting with sun and flaxen fields.

Safina steps into the courtyard from the room adjacent to mine. She watches me watch the rain, and bursts into a fit of laughter. Her laugh is high and wild—almost a little too loud.

“Sunny, Sunny,” Safina says.

I smile at her as she shakes with a mirth I cannot understand. Her eyes are shaped like crescents.

***

In the United States, my breakfasts typically consist of five strawberries, one banana, and two heaping tablespoons of yogurt. Sometimes I’ll throw in coconut flakes and granola for texture. In Uganda, my host mother force-feeds me two slices of bread fried in butter, half a corn on the cob, a pile of grey scrambled eggs, one banana, one cup of purple porridge, one cup of passion fruit juice, one cup of whole milk, and one cup of African tea.

“You must have energy,” says my host mother as she watches me gulp down the last of my milk. There’s nothing quite like the milk here—thick, creamy, sweet. I lick up every drop like a starving calf.

In the courtyard, Safina is scrubbing red dirt off my red shoes. With each gulp of milk, I hear another round of scuff scuff scuff. I hate when she scrubs my shoes and washes my clothes, but here it is the norm.
I only know that it’s considered hospitable of my host mother to insist that her maid washes my things. She wants me to look good because the whole neighborhood knows that for three weeks, I am her daughter.

“Weebale okufumba, nnyabo,” I say. Thank you for cooking, madam.

“Kale,” she responds. Yes. There are no words in Luganda for you’re welcome.

I’m so full I can hardly breathe. My host mother beckons Safina into the room, and a tray of food is shoved into my face. I eye the mango, banana, and carton of passion fruit juice warily.

“Take with you,” says my host mother. “You will be hungry.”

It’s considered rude to turn down food, so I smile and stuff the contents into my backpack. “Weebale, nnyabo.” Thank you, madam.

I tuck my feet into my red shoes while Safina watches.

“Weebale nyo,” I say. Thank you very much.

“Kale, kale.”

I pee into the pit latrine before I leave the house.

***

The air is thick with the scent of matooke—steamed starchy bananas—as I sit on my tattered green mat and soak in leftovers of the day’s heat in the courtyard. A flickering bulb creates a circle of light as the sun sinks beneath the mountains behind me. The sky blushes before darkening.

To my right, Safina works tirelessly, bent over a foot-high stove with one hand gripping the steaming metal pot and the other stirring a peanut sauce—The Pink Sauce, my host mother calls it. Her red dress is like fire as she stands in the corner of the courtyard, encased in shadow. Smoke billows up in full, heavy clouds around her. She catches my eye and briefly pauses from her work to point at the plate next to me.

“Sunny, Sunny,” she says, nodding at me and grunting a few times for added emphasis.

It’s the same every day. One mango, one banana, one corn on the cob—a maize!—and a cup of fresh passion fruit juice: snacks before a dinner heaping with carbs. I smile and nod, like always, and sip the sweet juice as she giggles. It’s all we ever communicate in—grunts and laughs and smiles and broken English and Luganda.

The circle of light around me flickers out. The small kitchen light dies, and we’re bathed in darkness. Another power outage. The flames on the stove—as if braver in the black—dance higher and the crickets sing louder and the stars shine brighter. But Safina only huffs before disappearing into the office and returning with a small lamp, an LED bulb taped to a bent wire to make it stand up. She hands the lamp to me and returns to cooking, trying to light up her kitchen with the small flashlight on her Nokia.

I sit stupidly with a white ball of light in my hands, useless. The light catches the gleam of sweat coating Safina’s face as she crouches over the stove in the heat of a
Ugandan night.

Power outages happen often, and Safina is used to cooking in the dark. Yet, some unexplainable part of me—perhaps the part moved by her generosity, her gift of light—cannot handle this. I move to hold the light over her bent form.

She throws her head back and laughs, “Sunny, Sunny.”

“I want to help,” I say, but she doesn’t understand—just giggles some more. I follow her, stumbling in the dark, as she hustles about from the kitchen to the courtyard to the living room. She laughs because the light follows her and because I trip over everything and nothing all at once.

“Weebale, Sunny,” she says. Thank you.
I think it is genuine.

That night, I chew on a spoonful of rice covered in The Pink Sauce. It’s one of the best meals I’ve had since arriving.

***

At the foundation in San Francisco, life is scheduled down to the minute. But the Ugandan branch runs under Uganda-time, where the lines of time are so blurred that the word late doesn’t quite exist.

“We’ll be there at 2PM,” Margaret, the head-coordinator of the Ugandan branch, says to my host mother over the phone. We’re leaving, and they’ve arranged for us to be picked up from our host families and dropped off at the airport. Except there are 14 interns, and she tells the same thing to every host mother.

My host mother, Safina, and I wait by the roadside with our eyes squinted against the red clouds of dust rising from the traffic. I have a 24-hour flight line-up ahead of me, and I can hear the dust snicker at my attempts to remain clean. To my right, Safina grips the handles of my duffel bag as if her life depends on it.

Her dress is like fire as she stands in the corner of the courtyard, encased in shadow.

“Let me take it,” I say as I reach for my bag, but she holds it away from me, giggling. “Sunny, Sunny,” she says, shaking her head.

My host mother laughs heartily, and turns to a man who is approaching us, lugging a sack at his back. He smiles at us with rotten teeth, reaches out and shakes my hand. He communicates with my host mother in hand gestures, and I realize he is deaf. He gives us two passion fruits in return for a few coins. My host mother nods at Safina, who relinquishes a tight handful of my bag to hold on to the small fruits.

When the charter bus finally arrives to pick me up—an hour and a half after the appointed time—my host mother and Safina walk me to the door and envelope me in warm embraces.

“Weebale nyo, nyo, nyo,” I say with my
chin tucked over Safina’s shoulder and my hand clutching the fabric of her red dress. Thank you very, very, very much.

“Sunny, Sunny,” Safina hands me my bag, and laughs her high, sky-breaking laugh. “Kale, kale, kale.”

Before the bus takes me away, I turn around and see my host mother standing straight and proud in the red dust. I see Safina standing at her side, tilted with one shoulder higher than the other, her back shaped like a twisted tree that could never quite find the sunlight. She breaks open a passion fruit with her fingers, its juices running down her arms in swirling rivulets.
Robert entered the Camp Mead hospital at exactly 6 o’clock as perhaps its only regular visitor since it had been constructed two months prior. It was a one-room affair, painted a sloppy white. As a training camp hospital, it was much smaller and less maintained than those at the front lines. Spiders made their home under the peak of the roof and spun webs between the rafters. It was part of the nurses’ jobs to swipe at the webs with a long-handled broom, but it was an easy task to ignore if you only kept yourself from looking up.

He shifted on the uncomfortable chair next to Caleb’s bed.

“So,” he said. “Which one is your favorite?”

Caleb blushed. “Any of the redheads.”

Robert had been taught all his life to leave things unspoken, but Caleb was the perfect repository: drowsy and isolated in a hospital bed, where everyone was too afraid of being associated with a possible traitor to visit, or else couldn’t be bothered. If he left a little early from dinner, he could walk to the hospital unseen and spend some time talking.

Caleb looked much better than he had two weeks ago. The bullet had gone clean through the lattice of small bones in his right foot, slicing off several of the middle toes in the process. Now his bandaged foot had finally been removed from the complicated suspension device that kept the blood from pooling in the wound. His face had lost its pallor and he was existing on a morphine cocktail that made him delighted at all the small things in the world.

“Maureen wasn’t supposed to tell me this, but I might be up and walking in a few days,” he said. “Well, hobbling, more like it.”

The accident was the first of its kind to happen at Camp Mead. The crack of the gun had sounded inexplicably wrong. The powder burns outside the bullet hole marked a self-inflicted wound. Someone, shaking Caleb by the shoulders, asked him why.

“I just wasn’t thinking, I suppose,” Caleb stammered before sliding into unconsciousness.

Caleb’s accident had disturbed the camp’s equilibrium. They were unaccustomed to such a visceral expression of fear. Bravado made sense to them, and praying every night, and pretending the target in target practice was the Kaiser himself, who was taking them away from all they knew and loved. The fact of death went unspoken. That’s what they were all heading towards; they all knew it, but it wasn’t anything they acknowledged. They couldn’t. Not if they wanted to stay sane.

“You know, I’ll be gone in a few days,” Caleb said, his eyes beginning to droop.
“They’re finally sending you home?” Robert asked.
“For some rest.”
They both knew very well this meant dishonorable discharge, pending court martial.
“Well, that’s good news,” Robert said, and rose to leave. The new ambulance corps was supposed to come that night. They were medical school students mostly, who could use their education as a pass to avoid combat. One of them would be sleeping in Caleb’s old bunk and Robert wanted to know, as soon as possible, who he would be dealing with.
He pushed back the chair, put his cap back on. Suddenly Caleb clamped onto his pant leg.
“Thank you,” Caleb said.
“For what?”
“Well, you know.” Caleb blushed again.
“The idea.”

***

Robert’s mother specifically requested that he burn the sheets when she died. They were a rosy pink, the same color of her cheeks when she was younger, and she had found them at a thrift store in Cheshire. That’s where all of his clothes had come from—hand me downs from someone else’s family, piled in a bin on a dusty shelf. She would leave early on Saturdays, catch a ride with the milkman into town, and hunt for hours through the discount stores. The sheets were a prize: new in the package, the leavings of someone with too much money to treasure them the way she would.
That day, she brought them home and snapped them on the bed with a flourish. Robert was standing at the doorway. He watched her fall backwards on the bed and lay there on the cool sheets with a giddy smile on her face.

“IT WAS, AFTER ALL, THE MINUTIAE THAT KILLED YOU.”

Now that the smile had been buried in a respectful but poorly-attended ceremony at the church yard, the sheets had to be burned. There was no one to help him with the task. There were no stoic brothers. There were no sisters to do his weeping for him. The sheets had to be burned, but so did anything else that might remind him of her sickness: the wooden pill box, the hair ribbons he used to tie her hair back in bed, the violet night dress that swung in circles around her ankles as she walked. All of this he piled in with the sheets, dribbled with bacon grease from his breakfast, and lit with a match. As soon as they cart me off, she said. I don’t want you to wait until the memorial. Burn it all.
The superstition came from her father’s side. It was the same side of the family that believed bits of your soul were burned onto the paper along with the photograph, caught in the bright flash of light and smoke. They left trails of salt behind their shoulders and calluses on their knuckles from knocking on wood. And when one of them died, they
burned everything.

“Would it be so bad to keep just one thing?” he had asked her towards the end. It took him three tries until she understood. “Bad luck,” she said, simply enough.

***

It wasn’t until Robert was halfway down the path outside that he realized Caleb meant that he had inspired the self-mutilation. They had only had one conversation on the subject.

They had taken their food and eaten it outside, under the long shadow cast by the mess hall at high noon. Caleb wouldn’t stop talking about the mechanisms of death they would face: bayonets, machine guns, bombing raids, stray shrapnel at high speeds, bowel and stomach-terrorizing diseases. Caleb described all of these in great detail as they had been described to him in letters from his brother at the front. Unlike the rest of them, he couldn’t think of war in the abstract. It was, after all, the minutiae that killed you.

“You know,” Robert had said, partially by way of comfort and partially to move on from the subject of dysentery and trench foot, “if it really is that bad, we can find a way out.”

“Not suicide,” Caleb said.

“No, just enough of an injury they’d have to send us home,” Robert said. There had been a lot of talk of men who shot themselves in the hand or the foot, or right above the shoulder bone. They passed it off as enemy fire and came back heroes. “No one believes anyone would be insane enough to do that to themselves.”

“Suppose not,” Caleb said.

Robert took a bite of the egg salad sandwich that was falling apart in his hands. “I guess the fact of dying gets big enough and then all of a sudden an entire stretch of existence without a leg or a hand or a shoulder seems better than going over the trenches the next morning,” Robert said.

“I see,” said Caleb, in the tone of someone who saw quite well.

“It must be a bit like a coyote caught in a hunting trap gnawing off its own leg,” Robert said, and then, becoming more confident in his own metaphor, “The pain seems like nothing next to death, and with both options laid out like that, they choose the more reasonable one.”

Caleb picked at his sandwich crust. “Do you think it’s wrong?” he finally asked.

Robert looked at him, his round, pale face, with its thick blond eyebrows and too-small, afterthought of a nose.

“Not at all,” he said. “I think it makes quite a bit of sense.”

***

Towards the end he played French music for his mother on the radio. She loved the operas especially. Somewhere along the line she was the descendant of a Bourbon—the great-great-great-granddaughter of some bastard child of a maid who worked in the palace, she would joke. At the end, he turned the radio up all the way and let the music rock the house. To
her, every shout seemed like a whisper. Even when the radio was at full volume she would screw up her lips and complain that it felt like it was playing from a far off room. And Robert would screw up his lips tight knowing she couldn't see a thing.

Every day at 9 o'clock, 1 o'clock, and 5 o'clock, he brought her something to eat. Her lips made ugly smacking noises as he spooned in the soup. There was a slurp and then a tsk-tsk-tsk sound like she was rolling the soup with her tongue over every taste bud and sucking the goodness out. Then she'd swallow and open her bird mouth for more.

It was a body that was similar to, but decidedly not, hers anymore. Every movement under the rosy pink sheets was an echo of what it used to be. Her lips were shrunken and lined. All of her was drying out except for her eyes, which remained a watery blue. When he was younger, those eyes had frozen him and melted him equally; now they felt like cool glass on his skin.

***

The new recruits had already arrived when Robert returned to the barracks. There were only six canvas-covered trucks filled with boys in uniforms they had just unfolded on their bodies, who had hands that did not yet smell like boot grease and leather. The new barracks that would house them as a unit was still under construction, so they lived scattered, mixed in with other regiments.

At first glance, nothing about Caleb's bunk signaled that he had ever been there at all. The bed covers were freshly folded, and all of Caleb's boxes of personal items that held his letters and chocolate bars from his mother were gone. The only evidence Robert could find that he had ever known his former bunkmate was that Caleb had forgotten a single white sock. It was balled up under the foot of his bed.

A fresh-faced man who introduced himself as Barnes was sitting on his old bunk, dumping dirt and sand from his boots with one hand and picking at a callus on his front toe with the other.

Robert pointed out the sock.

"I wonder if he'll be needing that wherever he went," Barnes said.

"I doubt it," Robert said, thinking of the cast covering the mangled foot.

"This is Barnes, and he's from Hah-vad," Alan said, appearing with some of the other boys in Robert's unit—Nelson and Carl and everyone.

"Well, originally, yes, but really the medical school at Maryland State University," Barnes laughed. "I was supposed to be a nephrologist."

"I'll be sleeping above you," Robert said.

"I was under the impression that I'd get top bunk," Barnes said, frowning. "I've already made all the arrangements."

Robert smiled nervously before he realized that the frown was actually a smirk.

Barnes laughed again. "As long as you are not overly fond of flatulence, I will be happy to stay below deck."
They all roared in laughter, and Robert tried to laugh along, hoping it would distract from the red he knew was creeping up his face.

“Has anyone told you what happened to the fella who was sleeping there before you?” Nelson offered eagerly.

As Caleb’s bunkmate, Robert was the most authoritative on all matters concerning the accident. He went over his version of events again: the pop of the gun, the burn marks, the screaming, the tangled foot.

“Was he a good shot?” Barnes asked.

“I should say so,” Nelson said. “Near the best in the unit, if not the whole camp.”

“And he still didn’t know not to point his rifle at his own foot?”

Alan shook his head. “It doesn’t sit right with us either.”

“I studied some psychiatry at school,” Barnes said. “I might have to see him for myself.”

“It’s sick,” Nelson said. “And cowardly.”

They all shook their heads. You couldn’t catch any of them trying to shoot off their God-given limbs.

Barnes was true to his word. When Robert opened the hospital door a few nights later, he found two pairs of eyes looking at him expectantly.

“Robert!” Caleb called out happily. “I was just telling Barnes how much I wished you were here so you could meet.”

“We’ve met,” Robert said, trying to determine if the uneasiness in his stomach was simply panic or panic mixed with dislike. Caleb had never been famous for his discretion, but on morphine he held nothing back. Barnes could have easily gotten the wrong idea.

“Caleb was just explaining to me how he came to the decision to sever his index, middle, and ring toes,” Barnes said, slowly running his pointer finger along his jaw.

“Really,” Robert said.

“Dr. Burg already referred me to the court martial,” Caleb shrugged. “He doesn’t think it makes much sense for the best shot in camp to suddenly shoot himself in the foot, and,” Caleb started to laugh, “I think he’s right!”

Barnes gathered his jacket and cap and gestured for Robert to take his seat.

“You can stay,” said Caleb. “It would be nice to have both of you here.”


When Barnes left, Caleb turned to him sleepily.

“IT WAS A BODY THAT WAS SIMILAR TO, BUT DECIDEDLY NOT, HERS ANYMORE.”

“You know, I almost thought you might’ve done it with me, too,” he said.

“Why?” Robert asked.

“Just the way you talked about it. Made it sound so natural.”

Robert thought that Caleb’s injury would
have tainted everything, but the notion had only festered and swollen. He couldn’t get the idea out of his head.

His mother had died slow, but he would die fast. A bullet to the neck, the kidney, the brain. Metal slicing through his heart. There would be no shouting for music on the radio, or complaints about pea soup that had gotten cold. There would be no time. The pain would be brief and penetrating. It would snap the muscle fibers in half. It would divert the blood in his veins. It would ricochet off of organs, send reverberations through his ribcage, and come to rest somewhere it could do its dying work.

Robert didn’t stay long. He waited until Caleb had fallen thoroughly asleep and then started his walk back to the barracks. He would avoid Barnes as much as he could, he decided. There were a lot of things to pay attention to here. Maybe Barnes would forget.

***

His mother’s hands were the only part of her that were instantly recognizable. They were thin, piano-playing hands, soft and smooth despite all the years as a farmer’s wife. She had protected them religiously with special hand lotions, creams, and salves, and her palms always stank of apple cider vinegar when she held Robert’s face to kiss him goodnight.

They were the perfect length for stretching to reach high octaves on the piano, which was a wedding gift and the most valuable item in the house. She took lessons from one of the neighbor kids when she was growing up and then started teaching lessons herself. He knew exactly what kind of teacher she’d be—bitterly disappointed at every mistake, joyful at every perfect note, capable of a vicious contempt when you weren’t capable of receiving the knowledge she was offering when she gave it to you pure, untranslated, and expected you to understand.

His father hadn’t wanted him to learn, and so he hadn’t.

“His job was to sustain her; her job was to be sustained.”

“There’s enough noise with one of you,” he would say. Then Robert’s mother would frown, and he would kiss her on the cheek and twirl her around by the tips of his fingers until she stumbled into him and laughed.

But what could one woman say to make a man leave his home and his son and never come back? It was a question he should have asked—had asked, many times, and never gotten a straight answer. The question sat on the tip of his tongue, perfectly formed, but he could never bring himself to say it. The sense of embarrassment was too strong—this was a fundamental fact he should have always known, and yet he did not, and now he never would.

In fact, she and Robert rarely ever spoke. She preferred the music to conversation.
His job was to sustain her; her job was to be sustained. They both attended to these tasks with the due diligence required and no more.

Well-wishers told him this was the best possible way for his mother to die. The slow shriveling would give him plenty of time to say goodbye, hear her stories, get her last words of advice. It wasn’t like that at all. They had both looked forward to the end.

***

Later that night, a line formed in front of Robert’s bunk. That Robert had no one to write home to was almost a relief. He acted as the official proofreader for his barracks instead. Men would crowd around Robert while he pointed out sentences too light on detail or a word that might be changed. They took the letters deadly serious, as if writing was a spell they must perform and a wrong word might curse them while the right one could take their rough-edged thoughts and make them shine.

Tonight was particularly busy—probably the result of the USO performance being scheduled for the day after next. If they wrote letters to wives and girlfriends now, they could enjoy the spectacle free of guilt.

“What’s this?” Barnes asked when he was back from his shower, water carelessly dripping from his earlobes and chin. “Are you the resident scribe?”

“I just help them.”

“He works miracles is what he does,” Alan said. “Wrote my girl a love poem that coulda made the First Lady fall in love with me.”

“Oh?” said Barnes. “Let me take a look.”

He slid the pages of Nelson’s letter from Robert’s hands and started leafing through them. All the boys who had formerly been waiting their turn to pass their letters under Robert’s eyes now turned their backs to gather in a bunch behind Barnes’s thin shoulders. Robert traced circles on the floor with his stocking feet while Barnes’s eyebrows furrowed over Nelson’s careful handwriting.

“This is all wrong, see?” He tapped a paragraph with his damp finger. “You’ve done it backwards. You can’t tell her how much she means to you and then go on and talk about the good memories you shared when you were together. Don’t you know that will make a girl sad?”

Nelson glanced in Robert’s direction. “It’s worked pretty well before,” he said.

“Do you want her to be sad whenever she thinks of you?” Barnes pressed.

“Guess not,” said Nelson.

“It’s a simple formula. You tell her that she’s beautiful. You say it again with different words. Then you paint her a picture of what her life will be when you’ve come back. The nice countertops in the kitchen, the white shutters on the house, the walks in the park to feed the ducks. A brand new Chevy to elope in. She’ll eat it up.”

There were all nodding. Robert scratched at his arms, leaving a white trail of dead skin.

“Once you give her that image she’ll memorize every detail and start adding in
KICKING DUST
by Mascha Lange
some of her own. She won’t be able to let it go. Like a cow chewing her cud,” Barnes said, laughing.

Robert pictured knocking every perfectly white, university-educated tooth out of Barnes’s wide grin, toppling each one individually like a row of dominos.

“I don’t want to put Robert out,” someone piped up from the back.

“I can’t tell you what to do, boys, but if you’ve been letting him help you for so long and that’s the best you can do, hadn’t you better give me a shot?”

They inquired with their eyes. Was it all right? Robert waved them away. Sure. It was all right.

***

Robert and his mother slept in the same bedroom from when his father ran out until he was fifteen. That first night, she had asked him to stay just to keep her company. She couldn’t sleep in an empty bed. She’d always shared: first with her two younger sisters, then with Robert’s father. Robert had crawled into the swaybacked bed beside her and curled up in the depression left by years of his father’s weight. After enough nights, the mattress sprung back to curve around Robert’s sleeping body instead. He quickly learned to use his own set of blankets since his mother was always hogging the comforter, and when she was snoring, to gently roll her on her side to make her quiet down. He thought maybe she’d want him there for a week, and then a week passed and she
didn’t say anything. She didn’t say anything the next week either, and it soon became habit to have her sleeping next to him. The boys at school—if he ever went back—would think it was hilarious.

On the nightstand he accumulated his earliest collection of worldly belongings: a small wristwatch, a yellow alarm clock, three books from the discount store—the I, O, and U editions of the World Book—on top of which he had arranged a pocket knife, a jar of acorns, and an embroidered handkerchief with his initials stitched near the hem on the occasion of his first communion.

He was just thinking about whether or not he could trade one of the World Books for Martin Toomey’s Swiss Army knife when his mother startled him with a loud “Bobby!”

“Did you hear me?” she said in her usual, abrupt way. “I think it’s time you go back to your own room.”

“Ma?” Robert said with his mouth full of egg yolk.

“It’s childish to be scared of sleeping alone,” she said, waving her hand.

“I’m not scared,” Robert protested. He wasn’t at all scared. In fact, he’d prefer it to sharing the bed with someone who turned into an ice cube at night and always left her mouth open for snores to whistle through.

He was about to tell her all this when she started to cry. The tears dripped into her bowl of oatmeal, and it was so quiet that time of morning that he could almost hear the *plip* and *plop* as they fell. He thought maybe he should ask her if she was alright, but the question seemed beside the point. He reached across the table to hold her hand, which squeezed his so tightly her knuckles glowed white.

“It’s time you and me both grew up,” she said finally, and let go of his hand.

So Robert collected his books and knife and wristwatch from the nightstand and returned to his own room, where the quilt on the bed was dusty and the pillows badly needed a wash. It was hard to sleep at first without another body there, but he soon got used to it the way he had gotten used to no father, no school, and no money.

***

As a result of poor planning by the Department of War, the mess hall was clear across camp from the barracks. The road there was a narrow path piled with a thick layer of white shells. They were easy to come by, and cheap: just drive a few hours east and you could cart truckloads off the beaches along the Chesapeake Bay. The manual recommended gravel. It held up better under all the foot and car traffic, and the fragile curve of an oyster shell shattered instantly into razor-sharp slivers under the force of a tank. The sound of them underfoot—a kind of crack and pop with every step—was the rhythm to which Robert kept his stride.

On either side were rows of barracks. Every building looked the same: low-slung, rectangular, hastily constructed from unstained wood bought in bulk from the local lumber company. Every one of them could hold eighty men, stacked on top of each
other on identical bunk beds in identical, regulation sleepwear. The mess hall itself was wider and even squatter than a barracks, but raised slightly on stilts to keep away the marshland below. The building had been raised three months ago and already there was a worn and dirty path up the stairs from the hundreds of pairs of muddy boots that came to eat three times a day.

Instead of barracks or armories or infirmaries, there were only loblollies as far as the eye could see.

Beyond the mess hall was emptiness. Instead of barracks or armories or infirmaries, there were only loblollies as far as the eye could see. Their trunks extended bone-dry for hundreds of feet before they deigned to spread their branches. Depending on how long the war went and whether they had to draft even more boys from their farms in Maryland, they’d raze the loblollies and build more chicken coops to keep them in.

Robert scraped his boots on the steps before walking into the mess hall. His stomach twisted at the smell of cooking oil mingling with sweat. Close to six weeks here and he still wasn’t used to the odor. And he was late. Almost everyone was already sitting and talking through mouths full of food. Without mothers there to admonish them for chewing with their mouths open or slouching at the table, they shoveled in food faster than they breathed air.

Lunch was roast chicken. It was soupy, somehow, and the only way to eat it with a fork was to soak up the moisture with rice and shovel it in. The others had finished shoveling already and were biting into fist-sized Golden Delicious apples that required constant vigilance to eat to avoid the bruised parts. The apples were trucked in from town every Monday and spent the whole bumpy journey slamming against each other in the crates. The army cared a lot about the quality of its soldiers; less so, he noticed, about the quality of the food they fed them.

They were talking about the USO performance in a few days. No one could keep their mind on anything else. The thought of perfectly coiffed girls doing the can-can on a makeshift stage in the name of patriotic duty was, simply put, overwhelming.

“Robert, what do you think?” Alan said. Alan was always trying to pull people into conversations who didn’t want to be there.

“I think your fiancé will be very sorry to see the expression on your face,” Robert said.

“He’s right,” Barnes said. “You look hungry.”

“Well, can’t you blame me? Barnes, you’re not even a month out from a woman’s touch, and Robert, you hardly seem to care one way or the other about meeting a nice girl. I, on
Orders went out at the end of the meal. Colonel Marsh stood at the front of the room and read down the list: latrine duty, shower duty, stable duty. In between the marching and shooting, there was always cleaning and repair work to be done. This week he’d be chopping wood and fixing fences, just like he had for the past two weeks. The other boys would be out of the hot sun, scrubbing the showers or sanitizing the mess kits. He’d be cutting trees at the edge of the forest, just close enough to the shade to taste it.

Barnes’s name was called directly after Robert’s. He smiled when he heard they would be working together, his thick lips parted in a strange, toothy grin.

He started the long task of packing up the house in early July. She was confined to her bed and when she did care to inquire about all the banging, he didn’t reply, hoping she’d either fall back asleep or think he couldn’t hear her from so far away.

Blue was her lucky color and she had filled the house with it. The porch ceiling was painted a traditional haint blue to ward off spirits, but she wasn’t satisfied with the exterior alone. She liked to cut out the colorful art from old issues of women’s magazines and paste them to card stock and hang them on the wall. She was so proud of those clippings, like she’d picked them up at Barnaby’s Fine Art and Supplies.

She lived in blue, too. She wore a stately indigo on Sundays to show her reverence for the very same Almighty who struck her down, but come Monday there was turquoise, Robin’s egg, teal, sky bursting from her sleeves.

Now he dismantled the blue piece by piece: took down the card stock clippings and stacked them in a paper bag; folded the dresses she could no longer wear and boxed them up; carefully wrapped the plates and bowls in newspaper to sell them back to the discount store. The piano was long gone, as was the good china in the back of the cupboard, which his mother was always saving for guests who never came. Selling those had kept the bank away for a time, but soon people started coming around to look at their hundred acres, too.

The land was valuable enough with the house, she had explained. She could lease to some nice family just like them, who would take care of the corn fields and chickens better than they could. In the end, she leased out 50 acres to the neighboring farm; they ripped up the corn and planted soybeans with thick, waxy leaves.

It was enough money to keep them for a while. Not long, but his mother didn’t have very long, anyhow.

At exactly 2 o’clock, they walked along the neat row of stumps at the edge of the stand of trees, looking for a loblolly thick enough for splitting. They’d use of one the big axes to bite into the middle and wedge it open. Then they’d bring the axe down again
to force another split, and then another. The wood would crack down the length of the trunk and come apart in long, thick splinters. It took two men to carry each log, which they would load onto the cart one by one, with one of the three of them watching and yelling to turn a little to the left or right. Someone would be assigned the task of digging post holes, cutting away gaps in the post, and fitting the logs through, three slats per post. They were rough fences, but they worked.

The saw was a two-man saw with a handle on each end. The cart-horse didn’t like the look of it; Robert had to hook a finger through the bit to keep him still while Barnes fixed a good starting point.

They soon got into a rhythm. The saw chewed through the first layer of bark and spat out pieces on the ground. Ants and mites swarmed out of the crevices and over Robert’s gloved hands; he fought the urge to shake them off, which would only slow down the work. The cambium was tougher. Sap-filled, it was more springy and able to absorb the force of the saw. Back and forth they worked, breathing in as they pulled and breathing out as they pushed. In this equilibrium, they advanced through the old wood and made it shudder hundreds of feet above them. They felt its hulking, elderly weight lean and lean until Barnes yelled “Ho!” and they leapt away from the trunk’s thunder. It joined the ground with a trembling thud after all those years of separation.

Afterwards, it was Robert’s job to cut away the jagged tooth where the inner bark had torn away from its base and leave a pristine stump in its place. He hacked at the wood randomly, not directing any blows but letting them fall where they may. Then he went back and did some more precise cuts until the stump was smooth.

Barnes liked to talk and that made things slow. He wouldn’t stop asking questions.
“What was Caleb like when he got here?”
“Quiet,” Robert told him, which was the truth, and also what he wanted from Barnes.
“Why do you think he shot himself?”
“Got scared.”

BLUE WAS HER LUCKY COLOR
AND SHE HAD FILLED THE
HOUSE WITH IT.

“Why did he sign up?”
“Got drafted early.”
“Why did you sign up?”
“Had nothing else to do.”
“Where’s your family?”
“Dead and gone.”
Barnes paused. “Dead how? Gone how?”
“Dead in a grave I dug myself.”
“How do you country boys say it? ‘My pa ran oft, my ma done died?’” Barnes joked, and slapped Robert on the back so hard it stung.

“Something like that.”
“How did she die?”
Robert straightened up, axe in hand, and looked Barnes in the eye. “Quietly.”
Barnes stopped asking questions after that.

Robert nodded. His stomach was so empty it felt like it was dropping to his knees. “We’ll finish the last five tomorrow,” he said.

With the saw stowed away and the logs loaded, the cart horse was calm and collected. He stood quietly with his ears flopped and bottom lip hanging low. While Barnes readjusted the loose straps, Robert flicked the slack lip to make it wobble like gelatin.

He wanted to confess to the horse. It looked at him with enormous, half-lidded eyes, requesting an explanation. He wanted to whisper into the cavernous ears that Caleb and his mother had both asked, in their own way, and he had simply provided the necessary tools. He had helped when no one else would. He wanted that to count for something.

***

He made her last day wonderful. She was no longer asking for French music, but he put the radio on to see the faint smile dance across her face. She was in more pain now, and the task of eating was more of a burden than a joy. Often she refused to eat anything at all—even when it was split pea soup, even when it was warm.

He opened all the curtains wide and let the sun in. It pierced the glass and fell in a white blade across the bed covers. He pulled up the rocking chair and read the newspaper while he waited. In the late afternoon, while she slept, her hand fell off the bed and hung there. He thought about reaching out and holding it, and then thought better of it. It
could only make things worse.

At 5 o’clock, Robert called Dr. Morrow to ask him to come by as soon as he could.

“Is it an emergency?” Dr. Morrow asked. He would be eating dinner with his wife and three identical daughters. He wouldn’t want to interrupt his meal for a dying woman, and certainly not one so stubborn as Robert’s mother.

“Don’t think so,” Robert said. “She’s having some trouble breathing,”

“That can happen,” Dr. Morrow said, and told him the earliest he could come by was the next day at noon. “Appointments. You understand.”

“Thank you,” Robert said, and hung up. He gave himself a few minutes to make a cup of coffee and drank it quickly. Then he set the cup down on the nightstand and knocked on wood.

She didn’t react immediately to the downy pillow on her face. Perhaps thinking it was a dream, she lay still, and Robert half-wondered if she might have already passed away in her sleep. Then he felt her mouth open under the fabric into a muffled scream.

She struggled more than he thought she would. All those weeks of lying in bed, but there was still some last reserve of strength left to be summoned by a soul determined to defy its own end. He was straddling her thin body. Her knees thrashed against his abdomen like tiny fists. He felt the crescendo and watched her go limp and be still. He removed the pillow, lifted up her warm head, and tucked it beneath her.

***

“I do not have good news,” Colonel Marsh began, rather redundantly given that he had appeared at their barracks, which he never did unless he had to announce a change of schedule or enforce disciplinary action. This time it was both: he was canceling their attendance at the USO performance the following afternoon.

“Certain members of your ranks couldn’t be bothered to finish chopping as much wood as they were assigned yesterday, which led to a number of inefficiencies,” Marsh began. He listed them all: unfinished fences, loose horses, insufficient firewood. The whole regiment would be punished—one for all, all for one.

“Your laziness and your failure to report your failures resulted in Colonel Lemming banging on my door at 10 o’clock at night to complain,” Marsh said. “I have been far too soft on this regiment thus far, and now your incompetence has outlasted my sympathies. Sloppiness is unacceptable. Out there—” he pointed in the direction he hoped was Europe “—sloppiness leads to death.”

When Colonel Marsh left, the barracks erupted. They demanded an explanation.

“Barnes talked too much,” Robert said. “It took too long.”

“He didn’t say a thing about a quota!” Barnes protested.

“He shouldn’t have had to say anything,” Alan muttered.

I’m really from Maryland State University, if you go by most recent—"  "Really, no one gives a damn," said Alan.  "Not now that you’ve cost me a night with USO girls."

They sat, despondent, on their bunks, talking about the spectacle of legs they could have seen on stage. Barnes was in disbelief.  "Caleb mutilated himself because of Robert and you all insist on blaming me," he said, raising his voice.

The room fell silent. Robert rose from his bunk to face Barnes, who stood gesturing at him with a long, pale finger.  "Robert told Caleb to shoot himself," Barnes said.  "He told him that was the best way to stay away from the front lines. And," Barnes sniffed, "he told me he buried his mother with his own two hands."

"Don’t bring my mother’s death into this," Robert said quietly.

"You don’t seem that cut about it," Barnes said, nodding slowly.  "Her dying. You really don’t. And you know what I think? I think you’re a sick bastard who likes seeing people get hurt, and you told Caleb to hurt himself. You did something to your mother. You wanted to see her die, I’m sure of that—"

"She did, too," Robert said under his breath. Barnes didn’t hear him.

"That poor old lady. I can’t imagine what it must have been like to have someone so twisted as her son."

Robert lunged and felt his hands clasp around the warm neck. He remembered the papery mouth opening under the pillow; he saw Barnes’s bulbous pink lips opening and closing in O’s, like he was blowing sloppy kisses. He could feel his body connecting with something firm, hot, and alive. He could have killed him. He really could have killed him. Barnes didn’t even have to ask.

The door slammed open, and Colonel Marsh stomped in again. Robert and Barnes fell away from each other, breathing hard.

"I am too daggum tired to be breaking up fights in the barracks like the housemother at a New England boarding school," Marsh said.

THE CRACK OF THE WOOD ECHOED THROUGH THE WOODS BUT HE KNEW THERE WAS NO ONE BUT HORSES THERE TO HEAR IT.

"Sir—" Barnes managed.

"If you have a complaint, you may put it in writing and submit it to my secretary tomorrow morning. I will not have my night’s sleep disturbed by cock fights next door."

The barracks fell into an uneasy silence as he left.

"You better goddamn believe I’m filing a complaint tomorrow, you madman," Barnes said, wiping his hands on the side of his shirt.
Robert felt the others staring, but couldn’t meet their eyes. He collected his jacket and pulled on his boots.

“I’ll go finish those last five logs,” he said. He walked on the side of the road to avoid the noisy layer of shells. With the moon to his back, his shadow loomed sideways, marching beside him. The night air wasn’t much cooler than during the day at this time of the summer, but he was glad to be out of the barracks. It had been a long time since he had meant much of anything to anyone, and he thought, perhaps, the camaraderie—but then again, maybe not.

When he reached the lobollies, Robert wrenched the long-handled axe from its resting place with a heave. He saw that the blade was getting dull, but it would have to do; the sharpener was packed away in the equipment shed and only the quartermaster would have a good idea of where it might be.

The last trunk they had felled lay where they abandoned it for a meal of beans and pork sandwiches. He was about to drag it over to a moonlit patch of grass for splitting when he noticed a spike of wood jutting from one of the newly minted stumps. Just splitting the trunk into five or six pieces would take him an hour, but he couldn’t leave the stump rough-edged and unfinished.

He set himself up on either side of the stump, legs spread an even distance apart, and brought the ax down in a clean arc. The crack of the wood echoed through the woods but he knew there was no one but horses there to hear it.

He slipped once, shaving off a bit of bark on the stump. He wrenched out the axe from where he had embedded it deep in the soft dirt. A few inches to the left and he wouldn’t be able to walk.

He saw the splintering bone. He saw how it would cave inward and collapse on itself. He saw the red yawn in the white flesh of his leg.

The lobollies swayed while he readjusted his grip.
I.

The swelling of the rain that carries on for hours; your hands become the rain: your hands, closing for hours.

With lack of rest—with lack of contact finding its way back to man—he is still (the blinding of the hour).

a) lover’s hands are now the hands of Macedonia; the hands of Macedonia didn’t last the hour.

As you do not love me I do not love pretending.
II.

I find there is no movement in the changing of the body—therefore finite; hanging another hour or two, and listening. I listen. I, withering. The rain is everywhere; rain carefully descending.

b) still, pretend I don’t know why; loving you like this—pretend I am not lost in the losing of hours.

As you love only the rain, collapsing for hours.

As I love only the rain I do not love at all.
THERE
THE LAST ONES

by Victoria Oliha

She slipped on a banana peel.

It only happened a day ago. Yesterday, around 9 AM. She was in the grocery store parking lot, arms weighed down with plastic bags weighed down with the types of foods that would weigh her down with extra pounds around her belly.

She slid the bags down the length of her brown arms, one after the other, into the trunk. It was empty, except for the umbrella she never seemed to remember was back there. There was only one bag left to stow away—the one with a 6 pack of muffins topped with cinnamon sugar granules and a box of bendy straws—when someone yelled.

“Fucking monkey!”

She wasn’t sure whether to look for a rogue monkey, rabid and raving, or the source of the shout. It was quite the shout. Guttural and all that. Enough to make her heart throb with anxiety and to make her armpits burn from fear-fueled sweat. So, she looked this way and that way, stepping towards the driver’s side of the car.

It was not the particular slipperiness of the asphalt that caused the fall. It hadn’t rained in two days and all the water had percolated into the ground. It might have been the banana peel, still three weeks shy of being fully ripe. It was green on top, sturdy enough not to turn to mush underneath her feet, but slick enough on the inside to slide.

But it was really the fact that the banana peel had not been there moments ago. Her foot, being blind, and her eyes, searching for the monkey and the person that yelled, didn’t see it coming.

She stepped on the peel and the angle was all wrong. Up her feet went into the air. Down she came crashing onto her right elbow.

“Oh my God!” she cried out.

The crows lounging in the tree hanging over her car heard her. They flew away, not wanting to be questioned as witnesses.

A teenage boy saw it happen. His name was Eugene. He worked at the grocery store on the weekends. It was the best time to work, he thought. He got to see his classmates come in with their parents. It never got any less funny, seeing the embarrassment and the discomfort creep onto their faces when he bagged the groceries for their mothers. “Hey, Janet. Going to the party this weekend?” he’d ask. And Janet, or one of the countless others, would shake their heads like baby rattles and turn red. But that was nothing, absolutely nothing, compared to what he had just seen.

The man that had thrown the banana peel was long gone. He wasn’t sure if he should’ve stopped the guy. Was it a crime to throw a banana peel? It wasn’t littering. It would eventually decompose. And the woman, she
didn’t have to step on it. It was her fault. No, no, even better, it was her FALLt.

He started to push the bevy of shopping buggies again, then paused. Breathe in, he thought. Breathe out. His mouth quivered. Don’t laugh, she’s hurt, he told himself. He abandoned the shopping carts and approached the woman. Or the girl. As he got closer, he wasn’t sure which one she was. Her body was plump and her head was large like a child’s, but it might have been her fluffy hair that made it seem that way.

“You okay?” he asked.

“I don’t think so,” she said. She lifted her arm to inspect her wound.

Bits of gravel covered the glistening, exposed flesh like sprinkles. A gnat hovered nearby, intrigued by the sight. The boy could see she was not okay, but the way it happened—goodness, it was funny.

She lifted her eyes from the wound to his face. “You’re laughing.”

“No, no. I’m not.” He placed his hands in his pockets and rocked back and forth, trying to lull the laughter into submission. “Um, I saw the guy,” he told her.

“Who?”

“The guy that threw the banana peel. And called you a monkey.” He left out the expletive because he’d been raised not to curse.

She pointed at herself. “Me? I’m the monkey?”

It seemed like she was processing the new information, rearranging what she had collected in her mind, replacing the old with the right. He waited and thought of the grade he’d gotten on his last algebra test. That wasn’t funny. The jittery warmth bubbling about in his belly finally quieted down.

“Now, why…” she shook her head and released a sigh-like laugh. “Why would he do that?”

Was she serious, he thought.

“I mean, I know I’m black…”

So she did understand.

“…and I’ve heard of stuff like this before…”

So had he.

“…but that can’t be why.”

The only reason he’d seen the whole thing, gotten lucky enough to see a real live person wreck themselves on a banana peel, was because he’d been watching her the whole time. It was like actually finding the two free roundtrip tickets the cereal boxes claimed to be giving away in his own cereal box. He knew they existed. Knew they were out there. Just never in his reach. And what a shock it was to see her right in front of him.

She started to cry. It really wasn’t funny anymore.

“Does it hurt? I can get you some alcohol
She pushed herself to her feet. “No thanks. I’m good. I’m gonna go now.”

He should’ve helped her up. They’d talked about that in training. If a customer falls, help them up, they said.

“Get that checked out. It looks real bad.” He gestured towards her arm.

She nodded through her tears and slid into her SUV. She drove away slowly, so slow the spokes of her tires didn’t even blur. He watched the car go and picked up the bag she’d dropped on the ground. He wondered what she’d planned on doing with the bendy straws.

***

Today, Eugene tells his friends.

Johnny sits down in front of him and leans back, nearly piercing him with his gel-spiked hair. He taps Johnny on the shoulder. He turns and picks up the pencil on Eugene’s desk, twirling it between his fingers as if it were his.

“You’re never gonna believe what I saw at work yesterday,” Eugene tells him.

“What?”

“I saw someone slip on a banana peel.”

Johnny twirls the pencil faster. “You’re kidding. That only happens in cartoons.”

“That’s what I thought, but I saw it. She stepped on it and boom. Wiped out.”

Johnny nods and starts to laugh, as if he can suddenly picture what his friend describes to him. Eugene smirks, pleased with himself. He knew it would be a good joke. Something his friends would understand.

“Are you serious? Was it like the cartoons?” Johnny asks.

He nods. “Just like them.”

This seals the deal. Johnny belly laughs, seemingly overwhelmed by the cartoonish hilarity of the situation. Their other friend, Donald, arrives. He sits beside Eugene and leans toward them. “What’s so funny? I want in,” Donald says.

“Tell him!” Johnny smacks his desk and yells out the words, “Tell him, Eugene!”

He shifts in his seat to fully face his second friend. “I saw this girl slip on a banana peel and face plant in the parking lot yesterday.” He walks two of his fingers across his desk, lifts them into the air, wiggles them a little bit, then slams them back down.

The reenactment works wonders. Donald laughs to the point of hiccups, his body unable to process such a funny story.

Eugene pushes out a few chuckles. He had gotten all his laughs out when it happened. The humor of the banana peel is dead to him. It doesn’t stir his body anymore.

As Johnny and Donald snivel and snort, Greg walks into the classroom. He slides onto Donald’s desk, pushing his notebook off the edge. He watches the boys lose themselves in laughter and looks to Eugene for an explanation.

“Oh, I just told them a story.”

“I’d like to hear it,” Greg says.

He doesn’t really want to tell it again. Things tend to lose their luster after the
third time. He decides to try to infuse and imbue it with new details, try to cover up the varnish that has already been worn away. “Well, I was working yesterday,” Eugene says. “I know you work Sundays instead of going to church.”

“Right, well, anyways, I saw a girl slip on a banana peel. She flew in the air and somersaulted a couple times. And then she landed on her elbow. She probably broke it, that’s how hard she fell.”

Greg considers the story. He chews on it, pulls it out of his mouth, and analyzes it. Sticks it back in and reacts. “Who was it?” “I don’t know. Never seen her before.” “What’d she look like? I’d probably know her. I know everyone in town.”

He shrugs. “Well, she was black.”

Johnny and Donald return from their humor-induced stupors. “She was black?” Johnny asks. “Are you sure?”

“I’m sure.”

Greg slaps his knee and jumps off Donald’s desk. “My dad said he saw a black girl at the store. I didn’t believe him, that good for nuthin drunk, you can’t believe a word he says. But it’s true.”

They sit in their own isolating silence, untouched by the chatter of the classmates around them. Eugene knew that detail would kill his joke. It had taken him some time, a lot of trial and error, to hone an eye that knew what others would find amusing and what would make them think too much. And he’d intentionally left out her blackness because he knew that would make even his fool friends ponder.

“What do we do about it?” Johnny asks, chewing on Eugene’s pen now like corn on the cob.

“Do about what?” Eugene asks.

“The girl. I thought the sheriff ran them all out of town.”

Eugene remembers the day the sheriff ran all of the black people out of town. It was eight years ago now. He’d been doing his math homework in front of the TV set when his dad came in huffing and puffing.

“Where’s the remote? Damn it, Eugene, where’s the dang remote?” his dad asked.

And Eugene pulled the remote out from between the couch cushions and handed it to his father. He switched the channel from cartoons to the news and turned up the volume, drowning out the numbers swirling around in Eugene’s head.

It was on live television. The footage was in high definition, not a pore on the sheriff’s puckered skin unaccounted for. He told the reporter Jetty Town had had enough. They were done with them. Then, he went door to door—there were only three doors to visit—and told them to leave.

“Git outta here! Git!” he said.

And they moseyed on out, grabbing their things which were already packed, as if they knew the sheriff was coming and were just waiting for the day. Their cars rolled down the road and past the sign: Thanks for comin’! Jetty Town, Pop: 854. The next week, the number had been readjusted to 837.

“My uncle said he saw a black guy last
year,” Donald says.

Eugene doubts that. Donald’s uncle drank just as much, if not more, than Greg’s father. But there were reports of sightings every now and then. Someone would say they met a family with a deep complexion asking for directions to the lake. Someone else would say they saw an elderly man, skin dark as wet asphalt, smelling flowers on the side of the road. But there was never anyone to back them up, and the family and the old man were never seen again.

“Do you think she’s one of the last ones left? Or you think she lived here before and thought she could just sneak back in?” Johnny asks.

Eugene is certain the girl never lived here before. She had a nice car, bought nice things. Bendy straws. He didn’t even know they had those in stock. And who in their right mind would return to Jetty Town after getting an excuse to leave?

Greg shrugs. “I don’t know, but we should find out. Let’s look for her. Tell her to get out of our town.”

The others agree. “Yeah, yeah.”
“Yeah,” Eugene says. “Yeah, let’s do it.”

They decide tomorrow is the perfect day for snooping. Tomorrow they will find the black girl that slipped on the banana. It can’t be too hard, he thinks. She was clumsy. She slipped on a banana peel. He would tell her to kindly be on her way and she would leave.

***

The day moves at snail speed and Eugene welcomes it. When the bell rings and school ends, he stays behind to ask the teacher a question. His friends wait for him, though. They ride home together in Greg’s Jeep. Greg in the driver’s seat, manning the steering wheel. Donald sits beside him, head hanging out the window. Johnny and Eugene sit in the back. Eugene on the left, Johnny on the right.

The ride is normal until he spots it. He sees her car. The SUV turns into the driveway of a home he believes the Holkinsons live in. When had he last seen the Holkinsons? It wasn’t strange that he hadn’t seen them. They didn’t talk much. They were strange people.

He doesn’t tell the boys he’s seen the girl’s car. Not for any particular reason other than their plans. Tomorrow, they’d decided. They would look for her tomorrow because today would be too soon. Not part of the plan.


“Did you now?” Eugene pulls at his seatbelt. Yes, it’s still fastened. For a moment, it didn’t feel like it.

Greg nods and meets his eyes in the rearview mirror. “He said he wants to come with us. And he said he wants you to tell him what she looked like when she slipped. He’s sad he missed it.”

He will not repeat the joke for Greg’s drunk father.

Greg pulls up to Eugene’s house, a squat ranch home with bricks the color of mud. He gets out of the car and stands by the rusted
“Can’t wait for tomorrow!” Johnny shouts at him.

“Yeah!” He pretends to check the mail and closes the mailbox door on his finger. He howls and jumps around.

Greg backs out of the driveway, not a fan of slapstick humor, but Johnny and Donald grow feverish with fits of laughter. He stands by the mailbox and waits until he can no longer hear their hysterics before he starts walking back down the street.

He knows he has to tell the girl. Because Greg’s father is coming now and that’ll be embarrassing. She was already embarrassed when he laughed at her. And there’s a big difference between being told to leave by five men compared to one familiar face.

It only takes ten minutes to reach the Holkinsons’ house. It’s similar to his, one story with faded bricks. He almost hopes the Holkinsons, as strange as they were, always wearing business attire and never attending the town functions, still live there.

He walks up to the front door, knocks, then waits. A cricket bounces beside him, hopping in time with his heartbeat. The sun shifts the shadows westward and he stays at the door. It’s best to give her time, he thinks. She’s probably busy doing the things she does. What does she do? Probably not much with her elbow in its current condition.

He decides to wait until the cricket leaves before knocking again. He needs total privacy to do what he must do. Nothing and no one can be around to see it happen. The cricket bobs around his sneakers, then leaps into the bushes.

That was quicker than he’d anticipated.

He knocks again, twice. There’s movement inside. The muffled sound of a chair scooting across the floor. The jangle of the doorknob. The door opens and he steps back.

“Hi,” she says.

“You gotta leave. You gotta go.”

She starts to open her mouth, but he doesn’t want to hear her speak. He just wants to deliver his warning and be on his merry way. So, he puts a finger to his mouth and shakes his head.

That stops her. She looks confused. He glances at her right arm, but her elbow is shielded by the sleeve of a green sweatshirt. Her hair is tended to, the sides slick with gel and a puff on top of her head. She hasn’t lost any weight, although why would she have lost weight? It was only the other day that she fell. Was it yesterday? It hadn’t even been twenty-four hours.

“Am I in trouble?” she whispers. She whips her head from side to side just as she
had done when the man yelled at her. 
“
“You can’t be here,” he says.
“Why not?”
“Because it’s not allowed.”
She holds her hands out in front of her like she’s about to play a game of Patty Cake. “Look, I’m not looking for any trouble. I already paid for the extra night here. I can show you my receipt.” She takes one step backward and pauses, looking to him for permission to leave.

He nods and she retreats back into the Holkinsons’ home. But apparently, it’s not theirs anymore.

The girl returns with a slip of thin, waxy paper in her hands. She shows it to Eugene, pointing to the date at the top and the price at the bottom. “See? Everything’s all taken care of.”

Except that it isn’t. Because at the top of the receipt, next to the date, there’s a line that says Jetty Town: Home of the Last Ones. And at the bottom, underneath her total, $156.78, it reads Thanks for visiting! Hope you come “backwards” again!

Eugene has never lived outside of Jetty Town and no one outside of Jetty Town has ever come to Jetty Town to live. The population only rises with the rise of the temperature, a time when the residents wake to the sound of crying babies instead of chirping birds. And while he knows little about the way the world outside Jetty Town works, he knows this is not a rental agreement. This is not a lease. This is much more temporary.

“What is this?” he asks. He stares at the word backwards bookended by the quotation marks. That’s a joke. He knows it’s a joke. But he can’t figure it out.

The girl explains. “I hurt my elbow yesterday and took some pain meds to knock me out. So I booked another night to finish up my notes. I don’t know what else you want me to say.”

More than that, he thinks. Because that doesn’t mean anything to him. He wants to know what this joke is. He’s good at jokes. He can make a joke out of anything. Absolutely anything. Laundry detergent, for example. There once was a guy who had some laundry detergent and he… well, not right now. Right now, he can’t make jokes because things aren’t very funny, but he could do it if he tried. He could make her belly shake with laughter.

“What does this mean?” He points to Jetty Town: Home of the Last Ones because once she explains that, he can figure out the joke himself.

“This is Jetty Town, isn’t it? Home of the last racists?”

She asks him as if he has the answer. But he does not. Does Jetty Town have racists? Sure. A lot them? Yes, one could say that. But the last ones? That can’t be. There have to be more. The world is big. There’s at least 100 countries and one of them has to have a town with some racists in it, too.

“We have racists,” Eugene says, then remembers he’s talking to someone who most likely isn’t comfortable with that fact.
“Well, we have some racists, but we aren’t the only ones.”

The girl smirks. “But you are. You definitely are.”

“That’s impossible.”

“I wouldn’t be here if it wasn’t. I’m writing my dissertation on the disappearance of discrimination and came here to see what makes Jetty Town different.”

“So Eugene laughs. He laughs and laughs and laughs until his lungs vibrate and he has to cough to get the laughs out.

“Are you okay? Do you need something to drink?” the girl asks.

“Yes, please.”

She goes to the kitchen and grabs her mug. It’s cheap and stained from coffee even after thousands of rinses. She hopes the boy doesn’t mind. She fills the mug with tap water.

“Here you go.” She hands it to him and notices his hands tremble as he takes it.

“Sorry it looks dirty, but I promise it’s clean.”

He takes small sips and speaks. “I know Jetty Town isn’t the best place to live…”

That’s an understatement, she thinks.

“…and we’ve got some racist people…”

There’s no doubt about that.

“…but we can’t be the only ones.”

The only reason she’s there, visiting a place where the residents would like her better with a different tone of skin, is because Jetty Town is the home of the last ones. It’s like actually living inside a history textbook. She’d heard of racists. She knew they existed and knew they were out there. Just never in her reach. And what a shock it had been when one of them had thrown a banana at her, called her a monkey.

The boy continues to chuckle to himself. Whether he’s amused or shocked, she doesn’t know. She thinks maybe if she reads him some of her dissertation, he’ll understand.

But he places her mug on the decorative table by the front door and smiles.

“I think I should get going now,” he says.
“Oh, okay. Do I still need to leave? Is there anything else you need?”

“No, no, no. Nothing. This was just a misunderstanding. You’re leaving tomorrow, right?”

“Yep, tomorrow morning,” she says.

“Good, good. Have a nice day.”

“You, too.”

She holds the door open for him. He stops at the threshold, turns around, and walks out backwards.

“Get it?” he asks. “Because Jetty Town is backwards.”

She laughs and he leaves, eager to tell that joke three times, four times, maybe even five times, over and over again.
Three years ago I kissed a boy
in the Masonic Temple.

We explored the elevator cage
like laced fingers:

redbrick mezzanines
and wire baskets under plush seats

where men hung top hats upside-down
like bats waiting for darkness.

There were things we weren’t allowed
to see, too: painted backdrops concealed

in the theater’s ceiling
and a cryptozoology museum

rumored in its basement.
When a vampire made the voyage
to England, he did so
in a coffin filled with dirt,

turnips, and grave grass.
Monsters can’t cross the ocean
unless sharp enough to smuggle in their native soil.

If this is a self-portrait, then I miss the ship, the dry earth on my face, rain lashing the decks above and that *in utero* sway when storm waves crashed against the hull— if this is self-defense I guess all I can say is what it feels like to be *The Thing*

*From Another World*: a hot spot on an ice sheet, infrared and pulsing, exposed by its own alien temperatures.

And after a while all you want is to be anointed.

Drenched in gasoline, then the white wonder of sleep.
SETTING: We find ourselves on the set of a small but well-funded independent film. First time writer/director, Alan J. Nœudgland, runs a tight ship.

DIRECTOR: Alright people, blocking’s done, makeup’s done, lighting’s done... time to make things happen. Camera two, you’re in position, right? Perfect. I want plenty of that wide-angle shot to work with later. Wardrobe, can we get a slight adjustment on Steve? I can see his mic. Thanks. In the meantime, have we taken all the continuity shots we’ll need? There better not be any more fuckups in that department. I’m looking at you, Phyllis. Wardrobe? You good? Alright, settle on set! Lower the boom... boom’s in the shot, Dan. There we go. Ok, sound. Camera. Speeding? Perfect. And, action!

Pulsing light. Sweating bodies. Alcohol and a Saturday night. It’s a party, and Brian is there. He’s always there. If not in college then when, right? Anyway, the kid is in the middle of chugging his sixth or seventh beer when he sees this gorgeous female, bombshell-type, twisting on the other side of the room.

There’s really only one thing Brian can do. So he finishes his drink and sidles up behind the girl, doing his best to stumble through the gyrating mass. “Hey you wanna dance?” he shouts. His voice is almost lost in the throbbing music. The girl turns around. “Brian!” she says.

Oh shit, Brian thinks.

And then he runs the other way, bolts for the nearest bathroom. Slams the door, locks it tight. He doesn’t realize he’s hyperventilating, but we can tell. The camera resists the urge to do a tight zoom on Brian’s face, stays pulled out and keeps the entire bathroom in the shot. Before long, all Brian can do is panic. He walks up to the mirror, leans both arms on the sink. Refuses to look at himself, looks down at the porcelain basin instead. He’s pale and sweaty, the sort of cheese-faced unfortunate that would make you lean over towards your buddy and go: “Fifty bucks says that kid is about to toss up his milk money.” You know, if you were at the same party. Before Brian can do the deed, though, there’s a drunken banging on the bathroom door. He jerks upwards, looking backwards in fear.

“Open up!” a slurred, male voice says. “C’mon, open up man. I gotta take a shit.”

With a sigh, Brian unlocks the door. A large figure in khaki shorts and a pastel pink, button down shirt shunts past, forcing Brian out into the crowded hallway. With an uneasy look around himself, Brian begins the long stumble home, light-headed in the pouring rain.
DIRECTOR: And—cut! Beautiful, people, just beautiful! Great work on that scene. Five-minute break, then let’s move on. Are the kids on set? Perfect. Someone tell makeup to go ahead and start getting the monster ready. Phyllis, let’s make sure everything is set up for the first scene. Hana, why don’t you take a walk with me?
HANA: What’s up, boss?
DIRECTOR: (placing a hand on Hana’s shoulder) Nothing honey, nothing. You feeling alright?
HANA: Um, fine.
(Hana tries to move out from under Alan’s hand. Before she can move away, though, Alan places the same arm around her waist, pulling her even closer in.)
HANA: Is this about how I’m playing Brianna? Because in that last scene—
DIRECTOR: (Interrupting) No, honey, no, nothing like that. Just wanted to see if you’d have a drink with me after we wrapped tonight. Here, let’s walk.
HANA: I think maybe we should stay here.
DIRECTOR: What are they going to do? Start without me?
(Forcefully, he pulls Hana along. Together, they begin to walk across the stage.)
DIRECTOR: You know I wrote this entire thing myself? No help from anyone. Well, except Mr. Morgan of course. (Alan leans towards Hana and winks. Hana, remaining silent, visibly leans away).
STEVE THE DP: Hey! Alan! We’ve got a problem with the color on camera three.
DIRECTOR: What? Can’t it wait?
STEVE THE DP: We need it balanced right for the bathroom scene. Camera crew needs you to give it the ok.
DIRECTOR: Christ. Can’t they do anything without me?
(Alan drops his arm from around Hana’s waist. Hana uses the opportunity to sneak off stage.)
STEVE THE DP: They could, but—
DIRECTOR: But what?
STEVE THE DP: Well, you’ll see.

SETTING: The same set, but the party set up has been replaced by a bathroom. Stage lighting is darker, more surreal. Alan, Steve, and the first AC are all grouped around the monitor of a single cart-mounted camera.
DIRECTOR: What the hell is that?
FIRST AC: Don’t know. It started with a sort of… graying of the color palette. Then…
STEVE THE DP: It looks like a face.
DIRECTOR: I don’t know whose face you’re thinking of. Sure feel bad for whoever it is, though. This—this looks more like a grease stain. Is the lens clean?
FIRST AC: Of course.
DIRECTOR: Hey, don’t get so offended, I was just checking.
FIRST AC: (Ignoring Alan) At first I thought maybe it was some sort of glitch in the electronics. But I’ve tried everything I can think of. Nothing seems to help.
STEVE THE DP: (Scared) That’s a face. A lady face.
DIRECTOR: Steve, don’t be a jackass.
STEVE THE DP: It’s moaning.
FIRST AC: Don’t do that! What the hell?
DIRECTOR: What? All I did was turn it off.
Now c’mon. We’ll just shoot the thing with
two angles and it’ll be fine.
STEVE THE DP: Lady face.

**KENNY, MAKE SURE YOUR GUYS HAVE THE LIGHTS READY, THAT BITCH BETTER BE TERRIFYING.**

DIRECTOR: Steve, shut the fuck up. Let’s
get this thing on the road. Places, everyone!
How are we doing on time?
WIDE-MOUTHPED SCRIPTIE: We’re three
hours behind schedule, sir.
DIRECTOR: Perfect. Just perfect. Alright
people, I said PLACES!
(Large-scale scramble from the crafty table,
which stands on stage right. The crew seems
to have been grouped around Hana, listening
to something she was saying. Alan waits
impatiently as everyone takes their place.)
DIRECTOR: Ok. Alright. Action!

Small boy, bathroom mirror. There are
little blue roses on the wallpaper and a bottle
of multivitamins by the sink. The toothbrush
has Superman on it. Staring into the full-
length mirror, a younger version of Brian
is standing in his underwear, attempting to
flex his muscles. From off screen we hear
shouting, a man and a woman. The little
boy ignores it, but his reflection transforms
into a little girl. She looks in the direction
of the noise, concerned. Brian stops flexing.
The girl steps forward, as if attempting to
give Brian a hug. He punches the mirror,
which shatters outward from his small fist,
sending fissures through the girl’s face. Her
expression fills with anger and the image
fades. The sound of fighting fills the room
as the shot pans away from the mirror and
the boy, towards the bathroom door.

DIRECTOR: Cut! Excellent job, Max!
Somebody give that boy a lollipop.
(The director moves away from the bathroom
set, toward the bedroom cross stage.)
DIRECTOR: Perfect, perfect. Ok, do we
have the bedroom all set up? No, Alex, I
wanted the bed over on the other side of
the room, next to the window. Get a couple
of grips and move it. And while you’re at
it, scatter some more clothes on the floor.
Maybe some trash, too. This is a dorm

(Brief break in shooting while director looks
for new continuity supervisor.)
DIRECTOR: Ok, let’s try this again. New
Phyllis—don’t fuck this up. Action.

(76 Sonia Hamer)
room, not a nursing home. Now, while we wait let's go over the scene one more time. Brian confronts Brianna, right? And then as he's about to get rid of her, she transforms. We'll stop the scene at that point, switch Hana out for Lauren and take care of the transformation in post. Kenny, make sure your guys have the lights ready, that bitch better be terrifying. Ok, Alex, are you all set up? Nice. Places! Settle! And—action!

The first shot is of the dorm room door. The lock turns, the door opens, and Brian stumbles in, still wet from the rain. He falls down on the bed and rolls over so that he's staring at the ceiling. Then a shadow flits over the shot. As it turns out, it's Brianna, one-hundred percent dry and standing now at the end of the bed, looking down at Brian.

"Why did you leave the party, Brian?" she asks.

Brian doesn't answer, doesn't move.

"What's wrong? Were you upset that I didn't want to dance with you?" Brian's silence continues; Brianna smiles and starts to climb onto the bed, creeping on all fours towards Brian's face. Her long dark hair brushes against his legs. "I'm sorry I disappointed you. Let me make it up to you." She smiles.

"Get off of me."

"Oh, Brian, don't be that way." Brianna's voice is like warm, dark silk.

"I said get off." Brianna's chest is level with Brian's now. He places his palm firmly in its center and gives a shove. Brianna compensates for the blow by sitting up.

"What was that for?" Her voice is hurt. "You're acting just like dad."

"Even if that was true, it would be your fault."

"My fault, your fault," Brianna says with her dangerous voice. "As if there was even a difference."

"Stop messing with me like that! And get off!" Brian emphasizes the final words by placing his hand on the side of Brianna's hip and giving a shove. She loses her balance and falls off the bed, but manages to land, crouching, with her feet on the floor. Brian sits up, hanging his feet off of the side of the bed.

"Brian."

"Leave me alone!" he says. "I told you to leave me alone."

"You know we need to talk."

"No. We don't." Brian stands up. He is suddenly much taller than Brianna. Grabbing her shoulders, he pushes her backwards. "Now get out."

"No."

"Get out!" He's screaming now, twisting his fist in her long hair and pulling her towards the door. With his free hand he turns the door knob, flings open the door. "Get out, get out!"

"No!" Brianna's voice deepens, she begins to transform. Somehow she is taller, darker, a spreading mass of emotion incarnate. Her hair, her skin, her clothes disappear until Brian is confronted with a grinning mass of monster. It has two looming, furious eyes.
EVERYONE KNOWS
by Allison Yelvington
They stare into Brian’s for a moment before fleeing out of the open door.

DIRECTOR: And cut! Beautiful!
(Behind Alan, one of the rigs begins to roll backwards, apparently of its own volition. Steve is standing directly in its path. The first AC begins to run after the rogue rig, frantic.)

FIRST AC: Steve, watch out!

STEVE THE DP: Wha—
(The rig bowls Steve over, catching his legs between its wheels. The machine passes over the fallen man, unconcerned, and continues to roll offstage. Steve lies on the ground, one leg bent at an unnatural angle.)

STEVE THE DP: Oh Jesus!
(First AC kneels beside Steve. The rest of the crew gathers in a circle as Alan pushes to the front of the crowd. Steve continues to moan. Hana appears at his side and kneels down beside him.)

FIRST AC: I think his leg is broken!

DIRECTOR: Nonsense, I’m sure he’s fine.
(Alan sends out a foot and nudges the wounded leg. Steve releases a bloodcurdling scream.)

HANA: What the hell are you doing?!

DIRECTOR: Ok, ok. I stand corrected. Can I get some grips and a PA to take him to ER?
(The crew members look at one another nervously. Finally, two bearded grips and a carbuncular college kid step forward.)

DIRECTOR: Finally! Thank you.
Everybody else, get to your fucking places. I’m not paying you to stand there gawking. DP or no DP, we don’t have a budget for another day of shooting. (Hana goes with the volunteers to escort Steve off the stage. The crew disperses, some of them clearing the stage and others pulling out a new set, an abandoned alleyway.)

DIRECTOR: Alright, is that camera ready? Good, good. Lauren, we don’t need to go over the blocking do we? Excellent. Then let’s shoot this thing! Places. (Louder) Places! And action!

The shot opens on a dark, empty alley. It is still raining. In the center of the frame a dark form appears to be rummaging through something, a view of which is blocked by the creature’s broad back. Zoom out to reveal Brian, soaked and watching quietly. Slowly, he approaches.

“Brianna,” he calls. “Brianna, I’m ready to talk.” The shape snorts and raises its head. Beady eyes glitter. Just enough light falls on the darkness beneath the beast to reveal that there is a corpse, half-dismembered, lying at its feet.

“Christ in heaven,” Brian says, halting. “What did you do?”

The monster’s only reply is a growl which comes from somewhere deep in its belly. In the darkness, its tail lashes viciously.

“What did you do?” Brian’s voice is hoarse. He takes one step, a single step forward and the cords of his neck stand out in rage. “What the hell did you do?”

The monster growls again and lowers its body to the ground as if it is about to charge. Brian, however, charges first. Screaming, he spreads his arms and runs at the beast with the full force of his body weight. They collide and collapse, struggling, onto the concrete.

“I’ll kill you!” Brian screams, grappling with the dark, furry form. The beast roars and flings him into one of the brick walls lining the alley. Brian’s body slides to the ground. The monster approaches, bringing its moist, slavering jaws ever closer to Brian’s face. But just as the beast opens its mouth to take the first bite, Brian opens his eyes.

“Gotcha,” he whispers.

The beast looks down. The camera zooms out and we see that Brian has stabbed the monster through the heart with a long, jagged piece of scrap metal he has pulled from the refuse scattered on the pavement. With a gasp, the beast staggers backward, falling to the ground. Long seconds pass as the beast, panting, takes its final breath, eyes glittering and fixed on Brian, on the camera. Then, the twitching eye ceases its movement. The breath goes still. Brian stands over the body and watches as it shrinks, first becoming Brianna, and then growing younger and younger until there is nothing but the body of a small girl. The camera pans out, leaving us with the final image of Brian’s silhouette, soaking, staring at the ground where the monster should be.
DIRECTOR: And cut! Gorgeous, just gorgeous! Incredible work, Owen. Just magnificent. I know it’s been rough, but that’s a great way to end the day. The sooner we get the set cleared up, the sooner we can wrap. Where’d Hana get off to?
FIRST AC: I thought I saw her over by the ladies’ room.
(Alan, ignoring him, begins to amble towards the far left of the stage, where Hana stands.)
DIRECTOR: Hana! So what’ll it be? You going to take me up on that drink?
HANA: (Ignoring Alan) Hey, how many hours has it been since lunch?
WIDE-MOUTH SCRIPTIE: Shit! You’re right. Six hours!
(At these words a mumble rises from the bunched crew members. A pink-haired woman pushes her way through the crowd.)
NEW PHYLLIS: Is dinner on the way?
DIRECTOR: (Furious) Dinner? Are you people crazy? We’ve still got eleven scenes to shoot!
NEW PHYLLIS: Hey, man, no dinner, no work. It’s union rules!

“NO DINNER, NO WORK!
NO DINNER, NO WORK!”

(A crowd of crew members has gathered behind her. Hana steps up to New Phyllis’s side.)
DIRECTOR: You don’t even belong to a union!
HANA: Since when does that matter? All sets run on the same rules. (The crowd behind her cheers.) No dinner, no work! No dinner, no work! (The crew takes up the chant)
MOB: NO DINNER, NO WORK! NO DINNER, NO WORK!
DIRECTOR: What the hell is wrong with you troglodytes? Christ, that’s not even a good slogan!
HANA: Now he’s just insulting us.
MOB: YEAH!
DIRECTOR: (Screaming) As if I need any of you to get this film done. You think you’re essential? I could hire lobotomized chimps to do your jobs!
HANA: Careful, Alan. (An angry hum rises from the mob.)
DIRECTOR: (Still screaming) Hell, forget the chimps! I could shit into my hand, mold it into thirty-three lumps, and replace all of you with my own steaming turds.
(The mob surges forwards, surrounding Alan and crashing into the camera. They continue their stampede until the mob has disappeared off stage. Alan lies on the ground, half-trampled. The third camera has been largely destroyed. Hana, alone, steps forward and leans down towards Alan.)
HANA: Your move, sir. (Straightening, she strides off stage. Alan gets up and shakes his fist after her. A wind begins sweeping across the stage. Papers, mostly copies of the script, begin to rip apart and swirl. Whipping through the air, they rise, forming a single, shingled vortex.)
DIRECTOR: YOU’LL PAY FOR THIS, YOU FUCKING—
The lights go off. When they come back on, the wind has stopped. The papers have settled. There is a large, dark figure against the back wall. Alan walks towards it, then realizes that it is Lauren’s costume, the monster, affixed to the wall by large nails. The costume is empty. Blood drips from the points the nails have entered. As Alan comes closer, he sees that the front of the costume’s mask has been removed and replaced with a mirror. Framed in the darkness, Alan sees his face.

Alan whips around. “What the hell is this?” he screams. “WHY ARE YOU DOING THIS?”

There is no response. Only silence. In fury, Alan turns and rips the costume down from the wall.

“I’LL SHOW YOU,” he screams. “I’LL SHOW ALL OF YOU.” In response, one of the stage’s large lighting units begins to fall. Alan sees it coming and darts out of the way. He skids away, looking up as the large, black spotlight falls with a crash on the remains of the final camera.

The dust settles. The curtain falls. The story ends.
DOES PRAYER PICK A SIDE?

by Meg Brigman
INTERVIEW WITH MOLLY HENNESSY-FISKE

by Sarah Wozniak & Hania Nagy

Molly Hennessy-Fiske is a staff writer for the *Los Angeles Times*, where she has spent a dozen years covering foreign, national, metro and business news, including reporting rotations in Afghanistan, Egypt, Iraq and Lebanon. She won an Overseas Press Club award in 2015, a Dart award from Columbia University in 2014, and was a finalist for the Casey Medal. She has reported for newspapers in Boston, Miami, Raleigh, Schenectady, Syracuse, Washington and West Palm Beach. She spent last year as Middle East bureau chief before returning to cover foreign/national news as Houston bureau chief.

First, thank you so much for taking the time to speak with R2. To begin, can you tell us about your role at the *LA Times*? What are your current projects and responsibilities? How have these grown or changed over the course of your career?

I’m a staff writer for the *Los Angeles Times*. As Houston bureau chief, I belong to a small staff of national correspondents and am responsible not only for covering Texas and the region, but also responding to breaking news nationwide. That has included everything from the most recent Austin serial bombings to the high school shooting in Parkland, Florida and ongoing border coverage.

You served for the past year as Middle East bureau chief. Can you tell us about that experience and if and how it changed you as a journalist? Did it affect how you view journalism in general, or journalism’s place in our wider world? In your opinion, What does the American “news-reading” public misunderstand or not know about news in the rest of the world?

Working in the Middle East was an amazing opportunity. I had traveled there to report...
for several months at a time in the past, rotations during the Arab Spring protests in 2011; the Iraq war in 2007 and 2006 and a Thomson Reuters fellowship earlier that year. But being able to live in Cairo and then Beirut allowed me to travel to more countries and report stories at length. I started at an interesting time, when U.S.-allied troops in Iraq and Syria were fighting to oust Islamic State militants from Mosul, Iraq, and Raqqah, Syria. I had to learn how to cover conflict in new ways, not just shooting photos and video myself and working with translators for weeks at a time, but also doing what I could to ensure the safety of those I worked with and interviewed. I think readers forget what goes into the reporting of stories, not just overseas but here in the U.S. Reporters and photographers take risks, but so do the people who agree to be interviewed and allow us as readers into their lives. I did my best to convey their stories to the wider world not just accurately but in a moving way that readers could relate to. The Middle East is far away, but many human emotions—grief, loss, loneliness, joy, gratitude—transcend the barriers of distance and language.

On a related note, this year’s issue of R2 is exploring the theme of “dwelling” (dwelling as home, habitat, culture, also as a state of contemplation and retrospection). How has your work overseas shaped or refined your understanding of home, or the place that we, as Americans, occupy in the world?

One of the reasons I love living in Texas and Houston in particular is our diversity. It’s what kept me in Los Angeles for five years before I moved here seven years ago. In that time, I have seen us grow more diverse in interesting and challenging ways—language, race, nationality, religion. Working overseas at the very least gave me something to talk to strangers about here at home, but more often those conversations grow into exchanges of shared experience and insight. I try not to underestimate strangers here. Many are well traveled with interesting roots and stories to share.

A number of students at Rice are interested in careers in journalism. Can you talk about how you entered the field? Was there ever a specific, defining moment when you decided that this is what you wanted to do? Can you walk us through that memory?

As a freshman in college, I had intended to major in biology until I received the results from my Chemistry placement exam. Instead of getting upset, I sat down in a church and weighed the choice: Spend four years training myself to be good at something I wasn’t passionate about, or follow my heart. My father was a reporter and editor. I grew up at the newspaper where he worked, playing in the paste-up room, and later working myself as a papergirl. When I was invited to tour the college paper that first week at school, it felt like home. Newspapers have not always been kind to

86 Molly Hennessy-Fiske
me. I like to say you can love the paper, but the paper won’t love you back. Every story won’t satisfy you. In fact, many will end up feeling incomplete and frustrating. But if, like me, you’re curious, love writing, talking to strangers and exploring, you probably can’t help yourself, so come on ahead and try anyway.

*I LIKE TO SAY YOU CAN LOVE THE PAPER, BUT THE PAPER WON’T LOVE YOU BACK.*

Journalistic writing differs in some obvious ways from other written forms, but what particularities set it apart? What draws you to it as a form? What have you learned about the form that you didn’t understand initially?

I love both breaking news and narrative. I like experimenting with story formats, integrating video and social media— for instance, the travelogue I did in Syria or the story about a woman’s secret apartment in Saudi Arabia. If you don’t know about narrative writing, and narrative news writing in particular, research some of the greats, and not just the New Journalism of years ago: Lisa Pollak’s stories for the *Baltimore Sun*; David Finkel at the *Washington Post*; Stephanie McCrummen at the *WaPo* and Richard Fausset at the *New York Times* who combine narrative and breaking news. You don’t have to work at a newspaper or a big paper to use narrative technique.

**How has the field of journalism changed over the course of your career? What is it like to live and work as a reporter in this era of “fake news”?**

As a reporter, it’s my job to be objective and to earn the trust of those I’m trying to interview, to show them why they should share their story, and that I will tell it fairly. To those who are skeptical because of “fake news,” I say check out my social media. I’m a real person, with family and passions and (I like to think) a sense of humor. If I ask you to share your life, I have to be willing to share mine, too.

**Do you have a sense of the future challenges (social, political, cultural) that aspiring journalists might have to negotiate or overcome?**

People’s short attention spans! The rise of mobile reading/scanning stories and headlines on cell phones and devices is a challenge I know we can turn to our advantage. There are technically no space constraints in the online mobile universe, no boundaries to the integration of photo, video, audio, text, interactive, etc. If you’re imaginative, it’s a great time to be in the business. But thanks to those same mobile devices, there are also fewer barriers between the office and home, between our
personal and professional lives. If this is the vocation you choose, get ready to work long and hard.

What advice do you have for a younger person who is trying to enter the field? Is there some piece of wisdom that you wish you had known when you were just starting out?

Ask for specific advice. Seek out mentors to help you practice job interviews, proofread your resume, recap job interviews and weigh job offers. Be humble, and flexible. I was willing to move almost anywhere for internships and jobs. I learned a lot about the U.S. that has helped me later in my career as a national reporter. I became a national reporter because when no foreign jobs opened up, I persuaded my bosses to reopen the Houston bureau and let me cover the border. It's a challenging hybrid national/foreign assignment that has grown me as a journalist and a person. Plus, I get to live in Texas. It doesn't get much better than that.
On this, our last night, we pack a picnic of cake, champagne, tangerines and grapes, and drive slow to your father’s fifty acres. Past the cattle we creep to make our nest: layers of quilt, black-eyed Susans, stones slick like those we skipped over the pond’s stiff fabric.

I cannot see the whole of you in the light of candles and weak lanterns, just sections of trick bioluminescence and your tooth and eye glittering like dolls’ do, but in the darkness I feel even more than your material.

Eyes pinched, we do something like praying that the dawn chokes in a fevered sleep. Hours peel back like citrus skin. We do not speak of tomorrow or its consequences, even when your tongue is all coffin velvet and ash.
CORNUCOPIA, WI
by Marcus Tierrablanca
Suddenly, I jerk as on waking. The earth bellows open, a roar warping the air around my plummet. Pulled down a tangle of roots and iron cables like the beaded curtain in my parents’ doorway, I’m struck to breathlessness at the planet’s jaw. In the wash of a pool I steady. Dirt-caked face cut, leaking blood into soil, makes stinging iron mud.

I sweep the stone for a shipwrecked you, and I finally find your body, slick and ragged. Without light I can’t quickly tell your outside from what’s in. Shuddering, my fingers creep to your wrist and find a living tick within you.

We eat cavefish, drink dark water and forget each other’s faces, the color of light—trapped like two doves for a wedding.
MI MÉXICO
by Areli Navarro Magallón

It’s always existed, this urgent attachment to a country that will never be yours. At times you have nurtured it, at others you have resented it. Regardless, it’s a hunger that can never be satisfied; with every reclamation, your loss grows more evident. It’s made of memories untamed by chronology, a tangle of idyllic childhood summers that you are still combing through. Part bruise, part amulet, you burn in love for a country as you imagine it, not as it truly is. The hurt comes from nowhere. You come from nowhere.

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I step down, taking care that the wheels of my small carry-on don’t hit my heels. Low desert mountains sprawl out to my left, spilling over the horizon and into the muted pinks of sunset. I can see the shrunken figures of other passengers landing, their silhouettes shimmering wearily in the soft heat. To the right, the airport cuts through the landscape halfheartedly, the small white building almost an afterthought beside the dignified towering of a cardón cactus. The smell of pressurized cabin air and packaged peanuts clears and I take what feels like my first real breath of the day. La Paz rushes at me—all cigarette smoke, pollen, and salt—calling every one of my fatigued nerves to attention and then rest. They rush to find other places in the folds of my body, sighing as they settle into this new silhouette with ease, one I know the shape of by heart. I take hold of the rail for a moment, in a belated attempt to brace myself against the unforgiving power of scent. My mother tilts her head and smiles at me curiously. I do not have the time to question whether everyone experiences this same reorientation of self when landing; the stairs have cleared and I am too busy rushing down, carry-on biting at my ankles, though in that moment I can barely feel it.

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I am sitting in the heat of a too-small bedroom that holds too many children, pretending to ignore the bead of sweat making its way down my neck. We all face the T.V., focus fixed on Mario’s dash past Bowser’s minions. Only two of us can decide Princess Peach’s fate at a time. The others act as witnesses, relegated to the couch where the single, swiveling floor fan barely relieves La Paz’s midday sun. My thighs stick to the sheets covering the couch (I ask my sisters what they are for, once it is night and we all lie on the living room floor, the aggressive air-conditioning keeping me from sleep. “To keep the couches from getting dirty. After years and years of people’s sweat soaking into them, they swell in size from all the moisture they’ve retained.” I roll over, gravely accepting my sisters’ all-knowing wisdom, and imagine an exploding couch.
whose debris rains down on this dry, desert heat.) and I join the chorus of voices that yell out as Mario teeters on his tightrope.

We are all comrades in that room, sworn together by our sacred duty to combating boredom. Reunited with our troop every other summer, all pleasantries dry up on that first ride back to Abuelita Alicia’s house; by the second day, we are on to our main order of business: entertainment. Communication is crude, but effective, as childhood languages tend to be. Inside jokes are our compromise, serving as concessions uniting two different worlds and languages. They arise suddenly and easily, and are later recycled, slipping off our tongues readily during that first hello in what feels like lifetimes. Our current favorite consists of the phrase “in the tower,” a literal translation of the saying en la torre, a euphemism exhaled when you are screwed. So when Bowser triples in size and comes pounding towards Mario, we all scoot closer and breathe “in the tower” into each other’s faces, widened eyes reflecting the screen’s blue light. There is something about this bastardization of English and Spanish—about hearing my cousins’ tongues dance through the strange, heavy consonants—that strikes me as the most hilarious thing that has ever been uttered. And then we are all laughing and laughing and Mario has died and the sheets are slipping off and we are laughing and sweating directly onto that couch until I think that it will be me who bursts.

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The sidewalks in San Cristóbal look like the jagged, uneven smile of the homeless man that sits two blocks around the corner from Abuelita Mari’s house. At times, they are impossibly narrow and raised; at others, they give way to sloping, dangerously smoothed edges that have been worn down from centuries of rain and feet. Brightly painted walls—eye-watering magenta, pastel pink, brick red, I never tire of tallying the colors—are all outlined by these stone perimeters. I have finally learned which ones drop and which others climb up abruptly. Leaving Abuelita Mari’s house, I know there is a dip to the right that I must step over and then an entire bald patch of dirt underneath the graffiti image of President George W. Bush, a swastika painted on his forehead. My careful navigation only lasts so long, however, before a step inevitably lands at the wrong angle and the world slips away. The scrape rips into my jeans and then knees, stinging in the chill mountain air.

Sometimes a word disappears and I am watching myself miss the last step of my own story, stomach dropping and pulse quickening before I concede and substitute the missing bastard with English. Sometimes the words catch on something loose and lodged deep in my throat. The wrong conjugation will trip out, a mistake common among eight year olds that I once used freely, but that now sends warm waves of shame coursing through my spine. My Spanish is deliberate, sifted through carefully like the beans Abuelita searches through for pebbles
before boiling. If there is mescal warming me, the syllables come out almost too fast and slippery for me to catch up. They sound seamless and beautiful—the language of lullabies and butterflies flitting from stone to stone—though I can never tell if that’s just the alcohol’s selective hearing. Even so, it is accented, betraying the life I’ve led in the States. My cousins can sense that there are moments I want nothing more than to cut out my tongue, nothing less than to have lived a year in México like my older sisters, whose Spanish barely creaks anymore. They reassure me that the school-learned English of most Mexicans is far more scarred than my limping Spanish. Later, I will cry and cry and cry because I cannot find the words to tell them that the two are not at all comparable. How do I explain that Spanish is my birthright—that I belong to Spanish and it belongs to me—and that its betrayal haunts me in ways that rip at the soft flesh of my intestines? How to explain that their tenuous hold on English could never understand the sting of being cut off from the flow of my own blood?

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157 pesos jangle lightly in my pockets, though these shorts have grown tighter in new places this past year. We count out the total over breakfast, when the dew softens everything’s edges and a distant water truck jingle replaces a rooster’s crowing. Each coin is gathered solemnly in preparation for today’s pilgrimage, to be taken during the hottest part of the day.

"I am certain, positive, in this moment that deliverance will feel like this, that there cannot be anything sweeter than this rush of cold, fluorescent lighting."

The walk traverses a few blocks, though it’s grown shorter over the years; what was once a trek suffered through heroically, is now a brisk break from the comfortable monotony of Abuelita Alicia’s house. We march under the blinding, cloudless sky, largely in silence. Under my breath, I repeat my sisters’ request, willing it into memory with mutterings not unlike a prayer. A packet of Canelitas, a Gloria, two bags of Sabritas. We pass by the park made of cement and metal, unpopulated except for the cacti that stand at attention as we salute them on our way. Down the street, almost hazy enough to be a mirage, the bright red and yellow of an OXXO tempts us forward. The smell of a neighboring tortillería hits its peak as we cross through the gas pumps, anticipation speeding up our last few steps. I reach the double doors first, feel the gust of air conditioning on my shining face as
they open, and the tendrils of hair stuck to the back of my neck sigh. Inside, bright plastic wrappers and iced bottles hum angelically to the rhythm of refrigeration. I am certain, positive, in this moment that Deliverance will feel like this, that there cannot be anything sweeter than this rush of cold, fluorescent lighting. Nothing more divine than an eternity behind Heaven’s glass sliding doors, where I pick out candy with my cousins, knowing that the walk home will be cooled by the sticky sloshing of a Sidral.

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His hand is stained with the smell of San Cristóbal—gasoline and the sweet, sticky tears of a mango. A darker brown outlines the veins snaking his outstretched palm. Dirt or worse—I don’t think to question its origin. The throng of adults amble around the church’s courtyard, avoiding him naturally as they huddle against the cold. I see this and am taken by the funny little man who they orbit unconsciously. I realize that I may be the only one who can see his bobbing head and graying whiskers as he approaches no one and everyone, a secret that has been shared with me alone. I am enamored by his huaraches, which hug his feet neatly, molded to the shape of his shuffling. His shaking hand guides his winding path, reminding me of the papel picado that sways over my favorite street (the one with the best palertería, where I lick my hands clean of melted sugar as my parents ask us if we’d like to go to Disney World instead of La Paz next year and I shake my head in shock, rendered speechless by the traitorous suggestion and the sweet, sweet sandía that stuffs my face). I am hopping from stone to stone when it reaches my face and I can see that the skin is soft and smooth, worn down from centuries of rain and prayer. His head barely reaches above mine and I find this lovely too: a man barely taller than a six- and-a-quarter year old. His eyes neglect to find mine so I look downwards, blinking at his outstretched offer. Freeze when I see nothing there. Think that I must be missing something when his gaze continues avoiding mine and nothing miraculously appears on his palm.

I place my hand in his. I have decided that he must want a greeting from the one witness to his rounds. As our hands turn and form a handshake his eyes finally meet mine. A wide, gummy grin breaks into his face. He lets out a meaningless cry and I see that my greeting has surprised and delighted him and suddenly he is laughing and picking me up, my ruffles twirling in the wind. And then he lets go and I am watching him shuffle away hurriedly as my mother rushes to my side, taking my hand and smoothing out my pleats. She scolds my older sisters for not having intercepted the visitor. I’m still seeing spinning colors but my sister is very clear in her irritation. “He wanted your money, not your handshake, stupid.” I recoil slightly in embarrassment, remembering the cool grime of his grip. I scan the crowd for his face, his hand, a huarache, but can’t find him. I pray for him
every night that summer. Ask that he forgive me for my misinterpretation. That someone else sees him soon. And always that we will return to México forever and ever and ever.

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My tías sit at a wooden table whose tablecloth never seems to change. Several mugs accompany a basket of warm bread and butter (where the hell did people get chips and salsa from, I wonder), each rimmed with a different shade of lipstick. A large tree dominates the far left corner of the courtyard. She offers shade and a constant confetti of petals that persist regardless of how often the stones are swept. In the center, a small fountain hums out a gentle stream of water, unconcerned with spectacle or function. La Casa Utrilla is a large, Spanish colonial home—though the fresh, white adobe doesn’t betray its age—that has been converted from family home to restaurant. Its center is taken up by a square, open-air plaza, where tables now surround the fountain and Tío Julio performs with his guitar. Its elegant columns dominate one of the major streets, looking down benevolently on the neighboring shops. It is the center, the beginning, and the end of San Cristóbal.

When the afternoon showers surprise us (as they often do), my sisters and I take cover there, ducking in to greet Tía Rocío and sneak a glass of jamaica. My father catches us in our rush and insists on walking us through the building, ignoring that he does this every year. He always pauses too long on the room full of ornately carved combs and tarnished, silver tea sets. Runs his fingers along a stitching of embroidery and widens his green eyes at me, willing me to share in his fascination. I gloss over the lacquered bed frames and fountain pens but pause at his words: “Mira, these were your great, great, great, great grandparents.” Generations of photos stare up at me, all pale skin and the same drooping, brown eyes I resent in the mirror. The same thin lips. They carry our features nicely, I decide. Something about their solemn little faces and polished suits granting them a dignified beauty. I can almost hear their swishing skirts and clicking heels as they crossed this same courtyard. Outside, a street sign somewhere reads “Navarro,” and Abuelito stands at the restaurant’s entrance, smiling demurely as passers-by recognize his wide-brimmed hat and greet him.

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We have been making our way through México’s National Museum of Anthropology for what feels like hours now. Tío Carlos—who my mother explains is not a mean man, just self-important and proud—takes us through the different rooms, each dedicated to a different ancient Mexican civilization. Information placards border the artifacts and models, detailing dates and names such as Huitzilopochtli. Tío Carlos’ inner professor comes out and he takes it upon himself to supplement this information though his tongue sometimes stumble on the Nahuatl consonants (I take a savage, quiet pleasure in this, counting the times he
must begin a word over). Lecturing quickly gives way to quizzing. Once the first five questions go unanswered (later, I count five crescent marks in the fat of my palms), he seems to double down in his determination, and by lunch he is undeterred, doggedly questioning our knowledge over the Mexicas and tonalpohualli. “God dammit. Don’t you girls know anything about your history?” My fist curls tighter. I nurse that wound for the rest of the trip.

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GOD DAMMIT. DON’T YOU GIRLS KNOW ANYTHING ABOUT YOUR HISTORY?

The neglected lime tree in Abuelita Alicia’s backyard surprises us all as it grows heavy under the weight of hundreds of dripping limes. We inspect this development, the troop all lined up as we consider the twisted branches with one hand on our hips. It is confirmed that the limes are indeed the soft yellow-green necessary for picking. Further inspection reveals swarms of fire ants crawling at the base of every root. We find a thin rope in the abandoned pile of house down the street and the day becomes dedicated to our harvest. I tie a thick knot at its neck, creating a crude lasso, and we take turns swinging wildly at the branches, hollering every time it catches hold. As the limes drop, someone races forward, retrieving as many as they can before the fire ants can claim the fruit or their ankles. They plop off easily and unpredictably. One hits the youngest in the face and he threatens to tell Abuelita on us, but we are all laughing at the welt on his forehead until he is laughing too, sweat and tears becoming one, salty stream.

Later, we’ll fill all the pitchers in both Abuelita Alicia and Tío Beto’s houses with limeade and still have bags of limes left over. We play catch with them in the living room, joking that they are simply shrunken tennis balls, when my mother shoots us a warning glance. Our skills grow impressive; with every round, we risk knocking over less ceramic figurines and incorporate more and more limes. We get to four in rotation, simply popping another in when a lime is lost to the crack under the bookshelf. Days later, I find a colony of them underneath the couch. Their peels are thinning and yellowing, curling in on themselves as their juices puddle around them. In the middle of the rotting scene stands a single fire ant, perhaps scouting on behalf of his own colony, and I cannot help but think of the poor person who will have to deal with the mess.

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Our flight is announced and the group parts. Suitcases and sisters stand on one side, a row of cousins and tíos lean against each other on the other. The familiar gutted feeling sinks me and I yellow with want as I picture a reality where my parents never
left these mountains and street vendors and brightly-painted walls. I fill to the brim when we exchange our last kisses, and stay rooted afterwards, unwilling to surrender to the loud overhead speakers that summon us away. Later, I ask my sister how she could be so dry-eyed and rushing. “I mean, we already know we’re coming back. So this isn’t really a goodbye.”

And I curl in on myself as the tears feel dramatic and trite. There is no arguing with her logic. Still, that does not stop this feeling of rotting in love for something that will never be.

***

I am in a car, hair flying, watching the blurred colors of rushing time as we pass the same street we did one year ago. Here, where the same man sells the same flowers spilling out of the same tissue paper bouquets on the same street corner every summer. It’s begun to feel as if no time has passed, as if every visit is just another continuation of the last. Here, where time itself is returning, also taking in the smell of exhaust fumes and the waft of fabric softener. Or maybe it’s México who is also catching up with herself, taking stock, slumped in relief and respite. If I am still enough and the car fast enough, the present moment feels to have always existed. Like maybe it’s been paused, tucked away for safekeeping, and waiting for me to return. And I will. I Must. Because although my entire life is tethered to American soil, I have given myself over to a México I alone have created, and have been creating for as long as I remember. Somewhere in the future, I am already there, hanging my cloth earrings out to dry on the broad leaves of a potted plant, settling into my alternate silhouette. It pinches and strains at my joints, but I don’t stand a chance, really. Who really ever gets over their first unrequited love?
It always begins with something—
not migration, no. More elemental.
A notch in a rib that breath gets caught in,
a single note from a dreamed-of piano.

And my father is a quiet man
and his father también. On occasion
they preach sudor like a superstition,
each drop invites a coin on our hot skin.

Orange flags unfurling at danger,
the roads grow as in a game of Snake:
they swallow up golden bodies, collecting
breath and blood for just an inch more.

La lechuga y las fresas
pass endlessly through
golden hands, leaves sighing,
fruit bruised and wet.
As they pass the white school, 
the kids speak *urgentemente*, 
pouring themselves out before
a teacher yells at them in English.

At home, the girl and her grandmother
practice a softer language. Eyes down,
she pinches the loose fabric of her jeans,
where a cellphone stretched out the front pocket.

Suddenly, on the bus words become
poem stuff, dilating and echoing:
*hueso, cielo, dolor. ‘uelo, ‘uela,*
I now know what it was all for.
Oscar was dealing with things.
Not well, maybe, because he kept thinking old thoughts, and he was staring graduation down, seven months away, and all he knew was that there were a lot of things college hadn’t taught him.

He always walked around campus to do his worst thinking. Mostly because it felt like he was making progress, one way or another. He didn’t really want to be thinking about it all right now, but he’d walked into the suite earlier and his roommate, J, had just hit him with one of those looks and sat him down and now all Oscar could think about was how much he hated LED streetlights.

Years ago, when Oscar and The Girl used to do the whole night-time walk thing back home, she liked to put her hand up to the orange of the street lamps and marvel at the glow. But soft light is a safety hazard, and the county came in and propped up taller posts and stronger bulbs. Too bright, too white, too invasive. If you want that stark kind of definition on stubble starting and old acne scars, maybe.

Oscar knew he should be supportive if J was graduating early or whatever, whatever the fuck that meant, but really he was just thinking that you have to turn those forms in months in advance, that J would have known last spring, that Oscar was feeling betrayed for no reason other than that he could.

He didn’t want to be pissed at J on a Saturday night, not when they could be drinking and fucking around on Steam for hours. There were only seven Saturdays left before J just fucked right off forever. Oscar didn’t even know what J was doing after graduation. He figured it had to be worth it, to make J give up that last golden semester.

Some part of Oscar wanted to keep walking, past the southern boundary of campus and straight out into Houston, but his feet turned him slowly, brought him back to his room. J wasn’t asleep, but he wasn’t in the common room.

Oscar punched a pillow instead of the wall.

***

On Wednesday, Oscar went to the coffee shop on Waugh, all dark wood and bearded hipsters. It was a good first date place, he’d always thought. He figured the baristas must have seen him with a dozen different people over the last few years. They had a system worked out where they’d usually just wink at him and offer a ‘best of luck, man’ when he came back to pick up drinks.

Virginia took her coffee black and laughed briefly at Oscar’s complication of a latte. He’d only really spoken to her once
before, the kind of dark hallway conversation that stuck with him even after he'd realised it was just a matter of situational proximity and not vibes.

“What d’you think of the state of the world?” Oscar asked, because he’d never quite gotten the hang of small talk.

“That feels like the kind of question you ask when you don’t want an answer,” Virginia said.

“But what if I do want an answer?” Oscar wasn’t sure he wanted an answer.

“I dunno, man,” she said. “Do you?”

No, he thought. “Of course,” he said.

Oscar had been on this treadmill for a long time.

He’d meet somebody—girl or guy or whatever, he was equal opportunity. He’d entertain the thought. He’d let them get a few steps inside the door, whatever door it was, and then he’d look at them in harsh lighting and something would remind him of The Girl or his music or something else he was running away from, and Oscar didn’t like running away from things, but he also didn’t like being reminded that he was running away from things.

He’d been thinking about The Girl a lot recently, and J always said that was no good, especially not three years out from having held her or something like that, and Oscar got it, he did, but there were just some days where he wondered if he’d really be in love with anybody ever again in quite the same way.

“How’s your week been?” he asked, stirring his coffee.

Virginia shrugged. “It’s been.”

“What?”

Virginia shrugged. “Rough week, but I’m not dead yet. You?”

“Uh. You know.” Oscar had counted fifteen cups of coffee in the last four days, mostly because such a dangerous amount of caffeine made it physically impossible to wallow the way he wanted to. “It’s been okay. School is kind of fucking me sideways right now.”

She made a low noise of agreement.

“You know. “Yeah, this time of year’s hard for STEM.”

“I’m a history major.”

“Oh.” Soft pause. “What are you working on?”

“Thesis stuff, mostly.” But before he had the chance to get into it and talk, something hot and wet took a dive right over his right shoulder.

Coffee stains on dark jeans don’t look like coffee, really—more like you just pissed yourself five minutes ago except the five minutes ago thing was a new baseline constant, both in your existence and your jeans.

Her laughter burst out like a machine gun—one of the old ones, World War II on Omaha and people were looking like there was something to see on that scale of massacre.

The guy who’d dumped his drink apologised six times and offered to pay for dry cleaning three. Oscar was mostly just trying not to look like a complete fucking
maniac in front of Virginia, even though the skin on his thighs was tingling from the heat and these were, like, his only nice pair of jeans.

"It's cool, man," he finally said. He'd said it five times before the man left.

Virginia was amused, at the very least. Oscar could feel the coffee making itself at home in his pants. Unpleasant.

"Tell me about your thesis," she said, finally.

Oscar had grown up in music, soaring and pure against a backdrop of zits and vocal cracks. Something about a stable left hand and floating right, dancing along the greasy shine of piano keys late into the night. It grounded him most days, and those other days were buried in the deep, icy space behind his lungs.

Every sonata he pressed into his fingertips brought false honesty, a new insecurity under recital lights and his mother’s proud eyes. His mouth too feminine. Fingers too thin. Ears stuck out. Maybe he'd grow his hair out to cover them. Too loud. Too observant. Stuck in books or with his head in the piano.

When he was sixteen and just starting to come into the ears and the nose and the weight of the world he'd never quite wanted, a pickup game of flag football unlooped the tendon from his right middle finger. Surgery to pull it back up, shrunken and deadened; the doctor said physical therapy and he'd be right as rain. Stretch it in the mornings, in the evenings, every time he thought about his grand that he'd been temporarily estranged from.

He did it for a while, straining against the curve in his finger every time he missed the grounding feel of notes in his hands. But he was sixteen, and crooked fingers didn’t feel quite like the end of the world to him. For months, he told The Girl it was her fault—that making music wasn't the same once he realised it was already there in her wide smile, the uneven line of her teeth and dark, glittering eyes. He found it in her heartbeat, in the heavy bassline of the farthest you can get from classic.

But The Girl’s chest was a tropical burial ground. He didn’t believe it until she started excavating the fossils in her thoughts, bringing a new one to him every day. Afraid of her own body, numb everywhere that didn’t feel pain, in pain everywhere that couldn’t be numbed; jealous, angry, hateful. You can’t rebury things like that, Oscar found; and she didn’t want to set them on fire, even when he offered her matches, even when he spent hours every week playing therapist.

Oscar left when the only thing holding them together was her threat of falling apart. Survival instinct, at that point. Or survivor’s guilt. He'd never quite been able to decide.

Oscar hit Virginia in the face with the swinging cafe door on the way out. She brushed it off, his panic and her bloody nose and everything.

"Shit happens," she said.
THERE WAS SOMETHING IN THE JUMBLED ANGLES OF HER CANINES THAT LOOKED LIKE HIGH SCHOOL.

Oscar asked Virginia out again, partly because he was bored and partly because there was something in the jumbled angle of her canines that looked like high school.

It took her three days to respond to the text message that he knew she’d seen the moment it came in. In those three days, Oscar and J spent so much time playing Battlefield and so little time talking that Oscar thought he might actually go insane.

***

He left the door to his room open when he walked back in after lunch on Saturday morning, trying not to step on the pile of clean laundry he’d dumped on the floor the day before. It wasn’t a lot of space, not by any means, but it was full to the brim with—well, shit, mostly. The walls were draped with flags and horizontal Icelandic sunsets and an Empire Strikes Back poster, all coexisting under a thin film of dust and low lighting. There were a few plates piled up on his desk that he’d been meaning to return to the cafeteria for two or three days. Oscar couldn’t tell if his room smelled okay or if he was just used to some unknown, catastrophic scent.

Oscar’s mattress sat directly on the floor. There used to be a frame, but he’d decided two years ago that he liked being able to quite literally roll out of bed in the morning. He’d done away with the frame ever since. At the moment, his grey fitted sheet and dark green quilt were the only things on the bed. Usually he had a pillow. After a few minutes of searching, he found the pillow thrown under his desk, but it was naked, pillowcase nowhere to be found.

“Yo, J,” Oscar started, voice raised. “You seen my pillowcase?”

“Nope.”

“Cool.”

“Where’d you sleep last night?” J’s question floated in from the common room.

“Good point,” Oscar said.

It had been one of those nights, anyway. He’d turned in a shit paper at 11:57—three
minutes ahead of the deadline—then seven shots of shit vodka and two boxes of shit mac and cheese and then he was out on the flat roof outside his window, waiting for a shooting star.

Except he’d been out there, destroying his tailbone on roof tiling for the better part of an hour, and nothing. Shooting stars weren’t rare. All you had to do was look. Fifteen minutes, tops. You were basically guaranteed something, he’d thought. At that point, it was really the principle of it all. He’d gone out to see a fucking flameball of a meteor and he’d do it, damn it.

He fell asleep out there on the roof, only woke up for as long as it took to move to his bed, then crashed again. Sans pillowcase, apparently. He could almost reconstruct a memory of taking the case off—some twisted logic meant to keep it from getting dirty; but then again, he could almost reconstruct a memory of drunkenly stumbling upon a unicorn.

The roof in daylight always looked smaller than it did at night. It was about the size of his room, extended to line up with the edge of the first floor below him. His roof was like a step in the building’s construction, the left edge of it bounded by the third and fourth floors, the right and front sides open to the air.

The only thing on the roof at the moment was a bag of chips that drunk Oscar had weighed down against the wind with a loose tile.

“Well, fuck,” he said.

Oscar sat there for a long time, holding the empty chip bag. He thought about a lot of things—Virginia, and the “tomorrow at 3 PM?” text she’d sent the night before; the realisation that he’d never seen J doing homework, really, ever; a little about what Putin was doing, that very moment, 8 PM in Russia; the N on his New Balances that was doing its very best to disassociate from the rest of his shoe; but mostly, that the loss of his pillowcase was more upsetting than he would have expected.

“Did you find it?” J asked, right behind him.

Oscar jumped. “Jesus, J, make some noise.”

“Sorry.”

J didn’t look very sorry.

“It’s gone.”

“You lost it?”

“No, like. It was here last night, and now it’s not.”

J grimaced.

“I know,” Oscar said.

Oscar followed J inside, taking care to firmly latch the window.

“You wanna go to Target, get a new one?” J asked. Oscar was still having a hard time looking at him.

“Sorry,” Oscar said. “Can’t today.”

“Oh. It’s chill. What do you have?”

Oscar picked up a bleach-stained towel from the laundry heap and studied it, trying to work out the best end to start folding from.

“Just a meeting for one of my classes,” Oscar said. He didn’t want to tell J about Virginia.
GETTING LOST
by Ana Paula Pinto-Diaz
Like, J was supportive and everything, all the goddamn time, but Oscar hadn’t gone for a second date since The Girl and something felt weird about Virginia and J in the same breath. And the whole graduation thing. J still hadn’t apologised. Oscar didn’t think he was owed an apology, either. Oscar wasn’t sure what he wanted.

J squinted at him. “Right.”

“Yeah.”

“Let me know what you’re tryna do later, then,” J said. “Today’s my off day.”

“Will do, man,” Oscar said, dropping the towel back on top of the pile on the floor. “You wanna play Smash?”

Video games were J and Oscar’s closest thing to a tradition. They’d been rooming together since sophomore year, mostly because J was okay with Oscar’s mockery of a sleep schedule and sometimes in conversation, they’d both say the same thing at the same time. Oscar liked to say they met fighting over the last corndog at lunch, even though he was pretty sure that they were roommates now because Oscar had been so frequently sexiled by his freshman year roommate that J took pity on him and invited him to play Smash whenever J saw him grumping about at 3 am on Fridays. And Saturdays. That one Tuesday afternoon.

J used to beat Oscar every time at Smash, but Oscar had since gotten tired of playing a game he was bound to lose. Oscar was pretty sure he’d spent more time working on his gaming techniques in the last month than he’d spent writing his thesis. He would’ve been more concerned about this, but Smash was a good distraction from thinking about how much of a distraction Smash was.

The game did its job until Oscar had to walk across campus, freshly applied deodorant and short fingernails and wad of cash and all.

>On my way, he texted.

>k cool

Virginia was standing outside of her dorm when Oscar shuffled in. The afternoon light hit her face carelessly, unevenly brushing against the powder cratering her skin.

“You look nice,” Oscar said. There was something bouncier about her hair today, anyway.

“Thanks, Oscar.”

“Yeah.”

“What d’you want to do?”

Oscar shrugged. “We could go to the art museum?”

“Or natural science?”

“Or that, yeah, that works,” Oscar said. He went every other month for new exhibits, but it’d been a few weeks at that point and something about museum dates really got him.

Virginia offered to drive to the museum. Oscar agreed to ride shotgun before he saw the car.

It looked like it belonged at a junkyard, or maybe in the before scenes from a chop shop show. It was doing its miserable best to blend in next to the rows of dirty Fords and secondhand Chevys surrounding it. The
rear bumper was almost entirely composed of faded rectangles of paint where bumper stickers had piled up in the car’s past life; the only sign that the car wasn’t slated next for a compactor was the crisp COEXIST sticker near the half-rusted off exhaust pipe.

“BUT SMASH WAS A GOOD DISTRACTION FOR THINKING ABOUT HOW MUCH OF A DISTRACTION SMASH WAS.”

“She’s not much, but she’s mine,” Virginia said, patting the car’s hood. Oscar winced with each light tap, certain that the car would crumble under anything greater than atmospheric pressure.

“Where did you get it from?” Oscar asked. He hoped she’d tell him that it once belonged to her deceased grandmother, who had driven it in the parade that killed JFK. Rolling history that she couldn’t bear to part with.

“Oh, I bought it used,” she said. “Super cheap.”

“I imagine.”

Virginia drove calmly through Saturday Houston traffic, not flinching when a Tesla almost T-boned them in an intersection. Oscar wished she would have flinched. He had to prepare for death in that split-second of zero reaction that she’d given him.

“Houston drivers are so chill compared to New Yorkers,” Virginia said. Oscar grunted in response, most of his energy going into the death grip he had on the hand bar above his head. He only unclenched when they reached the museum’s parking garage and Virginia put the car firmly in park.

“I haven’t been here in ages,” Virginia said.

Oscar was still trying to even out his breathing. “I love it here,” he said finally.

Virginia laughed. “You seem like a museum dude.”

“What does that mean?”

“I dunno,” she said. “You’ve just got the vibe. The whole tortured history major thing.”

“Tortured?”

“You know. Sad-boy.”

“I’m not…”

Virginia shrugged. “It’s okay, man, you just gotta own it.”

They walked around for a while, through the long rows of Egyptian artifacts, the dark, sparkling gem halls, the crowded little rooms housing hundreds of curiosities. The dinosaurs.

Oscar always loved the paleontology hall. Half of the fossils were casts, anyway, but there was something so satisfying about standing in front of something so old, so massive.

“So dead,” Virginia said, breezing by the T-rex that Oscar was having a moment with. “Is she your favorite?”

Oscar shrugged, following her. “I dunno. I like that pterodactyl, too,” he said, pointing.
“Cool,” Virginia said. “Cool.”
“Cool?”
“Cool.”

They stood at the human evolution exhibit for a few minutes. Oscar stood beside the Neanderthal skeleton, thrust out his chest and posed. Virginia laughed.
“Identical,” she said.

Oscar stood there, watching her smile in a sea of bones. It was something about the backdrop of death that made her look so much more alive there in front of him. He liked it. Something different, at least.

“Why are you looking at me like that?” she asked. “You look sad.”

Oscar blinked. “Sorry. I wasn’t.”
“No?”

Oscar shrugged. “It’s just my face.”
“Ah. That sucks.”

Oscar laughed. “Sorry, I’ll try to fix it.”
“Good shit,” Virginia said. “You know—oh, is that your phone?”
“My—oh, shit, yeah.”

The massive hall threw the sound of Oscar’s ringtone everywhere, cutting the silence with a tinny chime.

“Oh, it’s just my roommate,” Oscar said, before picking up. “J? What’s up, I’m kind of busy right now.”

J exhaled hard into the phone. “Yeah, sorry to bother you, dude, uh, are you around?”
“Um, not really.”
“Okay, no, I definitely broke my leg, it’s like. Oh god. Okay. Well, I’ll call for an ambulance, then.”
“You haven’t—what the fuck happened? Wait, dude, we’re coming back now. Stay right there.”

“Not really like I can move, man,” J said.
“How long you gonna be?”

Oscar was already speed-walking towards the entrance of the museum. “Ten minutes. Five minutes. Not long.”
“So I don’t have to pay for an ambulance?”
“We’ll be right there, J.”
“What’s happening?” Virginia asked.

Oscar held the phone away from his face. “Somehow he broke his fucking leg,” he said. “Can you drive me back to campus?”
“Oh, fuck,” Virginia said. “Of course. Should we run?”

“Maybe,” Oscar said.

They took three flights of stairs at a gallop, sprinting through the parking garage until they found Virginia’s car. She had it running and out of the garage in less time than Oscar thought physically possible for the machine.

“How’re you holding in there, bud?”

Oscar put J on speakerphone.
“I mean, it’s not great,” J said. “Six people have walked by and nobody’s asked if I need help. What the fuck, guys.”
“So you’re not, like, bleeding out on the sidewalk?”
“Well,” J said, “I might be, but I like to
think that I hide it pretty well."

Virginia swerved hard to avoid hitting a
woman walking her dog.

“Jesus!”
“Sorry, sorry.”
“You good?”
“Yeah. Where are you?”
“Uh. By the fountain.”
“One second.”

Oscar was out of the car before it came
to a stop. J was leaning with his back against
their dorm, looking for all the world like he
was just out getting some sun.

“Hey, Oscar,” J said.

Oscar slid to his knees in front of J, right
hand finding J’s shoulder without thought.

“Which leg?”

J patted his left thigh. “Ow.”
“Okay. Okay, this is gonna be okay.”
“Yeah, dude,” J said.

“Are you okay?” Virginia said, coming up
the path to them. “I’ll drive to the hospital.”

“Thanks, man,” J said. “What’s your
name?”

“Oh! Virginia,” she said. “And you’re J.”

to meet you.”

“Yeah, we should—maybe,” Oscar said.

“Get you fixed up.”

“That’d be cool,” J said.

Oscar lifted J to his feet, propping him
up on his right leg.

“Oh, wow, that one doesn’t feel so hot
either,” J said. His normally sunny skin was
turning an uneasy, pale color. Oscar could
see him gritting his teeth.

Virginia rushed to his other side, wedging
herself under his right arm so that J’s feet
were hardly touching the ground.

“Thanks, man,” J said again.

They worked their way back to the car
like that, J swaying between them like they
were a pair of crutches. After they got him
wedged into the passenger seat, Oscar
hopped in the back and Virginia behind the
wheel.

“Where to?” Virginia asked.

“I know how to get there,” J said. “Just.
God. Please start driving.”

Virginia floored it. Oscar was surprised
the car could even move that fast, though it
was making a score of unsettling noises in
protest.

Oscar was perched in the center of the
backseat, his hand clutching J’s upper arm
through the gap between the front seats.

“What happened?” Oscar finally asked.

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What Oscar finally asked.

“J,” Oscar started.

“No big deal, Oscar,” J said, looking over
his shoulder.

Oscar was feeling quite the opposite. J
could have died while Oscar was walking
around with some random—Oscar looked at
Virginia. No, not random. But J could have
died. J could have died.
“Ow,” J said quietly. Oscar loosened his fingers on J’s bicep.
“Sorry,” he said.
“Oh, motherfuck.” Virginia banged her hand against the dashboard. “Come on, baby. Don’t do me like this.”
Oscar looked up. “What’s happening?”
Virginia pulled the car to the side of the road. “I think that we should all probably get out now,” she said, a bit too calmly.
Oscar looked around. “Where are we?”
“The hospital’s like, two streets over,” J said.
“I think my car’s on fire,” Virginia said.
They scattered. J somehow managed to get out of the car by himself, hobbling a few steps until Oscar could round the car and catch him. Virginia stood by the open driver’s side door, studying the plume of smoke rising from the hood.
“Should I open it?” she asked.
Oscar shook his head for half a minute straight.
“I would,” deep inhale, “would love to see it,” J said. His body was shaking against Oscar. “But everything is going fuzzy.”
“What if you ran to the hospital and brought a wheelchair back for him?” Oscar said. “I don’t think we can carry him that far.”
Virginia nodded, still watching the smoke. “Yeah. Yeah, I can do that.”
She saluted them before tearing her eyes away from her decomposing car and running for the second time that day. Oscar helped J settle down, back against a tree. Once seated, J regained some color.
“Who is she?”
“Virginia?”
“Yeah,” J said.
“Uh.”
“Wasn’t a meeting, was it,” J said.
“No.”
“You haven’t been on a date in a while,” J said.

BUT J COULD HAVE DIED.

J COULD HAVE DIED.

“It’s been a few months,” Oscar said.
“Why?”
“I dunno,” Oscar said. “I didn’t really want to.”
J nodded. “And now?”
“I dunno,” Oscar repeated. “I needed it, I think. We went out Wednesday, too,” he said, mostly just because he hadn’t said it before.
“Oscar,” J said. “I’m sorry.”
“For what?”
“You know.”
“Yeah,” Oscar said.
“I was gonna tell you last semester. But you started talking about senior year and I didn’t want to fuck with it. And I knew you’d get weird—don’t look at me like that, you got weird anyway—I knew you’d get weird and sad about it.”
“This didn’t make it any fucking better.”
“No,” J agreed. “But the first half of the semester was so good, dude. Don’t start
moping over me like I’m going to die in December.”

“Dude…”

“You’re pissed, yeah.”

“Yeah. Yeah, I’m fucking pissed. I thought we were—I don’t know.” Oscar ran a hand down his face. “I’m going to miss you, dude.”

“You have Virginia now, though. She seems pretty cool.”

Oscar frowned. “What do you mean? We’ve been on two dates.”

“Dude, she’s into you. And you never double date.”

“So?”

“So. I know you.”

“What do you know?”


“What about you?” Oscar looked at J.

J raised an eyebrow. “Have you let me in?”

“Yes,” Oscar said. Maybe. J knew more about him than anyone at this point. Oscar wasn’t sure if that was what J meant. “You’re my best friend,” Oscar said.

J was. Oscar couldn’t imagine life without J’s perpetually messy dark head, his low, rolling laugh late at night, when they were drunk on sleep deprivation and nothing more. Somebody else would move into J’s old room and Oscar would have to keep himself from sprawling into them on the couch, from absentmindedly toying with their hair while watching a movie. Boundaries that he hadn’t realised had disappeared between them were coming rushing back, illuminated under an interrogation light, and J was looking at him still, sat on the ground, waiting.

“You’re a dumbass,” Oscar said, instead of something that he knew would have been too much.

The corners of J’s eyes crinkled in a smile.

“Maybe.”

“Did you get a job offer?” Oscar asked.

“Peace Corps,” he said. “Zambia.”

Oscar felt his heart stop. “You’re—Zambia? When? How long?” He knew it was stupid, but he’d thought—maybe. J would still be in Houston. Long-distance roommates. But Zambia wasn’t long-distance. Zambia was half a world away.

“I leave in January,” J said. “For two years.”

Oscar bit his cheek. Hard. He could feel everything welling up inside him, and he didn’t fucking want it.

“Although,” J said, looking at his leg, “Depending on how long this takes to fix itself, might leave a bit later.”

Oscar tried to smile. Judging by J’s face, though, he didn’t quite make it. “I’m excited for you,” he said. And it was true.

“I need this,” J said, looking down. Oscar followed his gaze to an ant, carrying a too-large crumb across the sidewalk. “I love it here, you know. But the city, and… and everything. I’ve been lost lately.”

Oscar didn’t like the high, bitter laugh that came out of his own throat. “I feel that.”

J’s eyes found Oscar’s again. “Oscar…”

The clattering of a swiftly moving wheelchair drew both of their heads up,
away from just this side of too close.

“Sorry I took so long,” Virginia said, red-faced and panting as she approached. “They didn’t seem very keen on letting me borrow the wheelchair, so I just ran.”

J laughed. “Fast and Furious.”

Oscar looked back and forth between them and all he could think was that it was all absolute bullshit. To feel it all like this again after so long. Too much, now.

They leveraged J into the wheelchair and rolled him along bumpy residential sidewalks until they reached the hospital, where they waited for another twenty minutes before anyone was ready to see them. The X-rays showed J’s left tibia, split in two places; his right ankle with a less serious fracture. Oscar held J’s hand while the doctor reset J’s leg and sealed it into a cast; his ankle “wasn’t too bad,” so they strapped a thick boot on and wheeled J back into the waiting room.

Oscar wasn’t sure why he was surprised that Virginia was still there after so many hours. She threw aside the HGTV magazine she’d been reading and crossed the room to join them.

“What’s the deal?” she asked. “Are you going to walk again?”

“Never,” J said. “They had to amputate. Everything.”

Oscar laughed, in spite of everything. “His tibia’s fucked, but his right leg’s more or less okay.”

“You sure fell lucky,” Virginia said. “Are you guys ready to go?”

It wasn’t until they’d exited the hospital that they remembered the condition that they’d left Virginia’s car in. And it wasn’t until they turned onto the street where they’d left it that they realised the siren they’d been hearing belonged, in fact, to a fire truck.

Virginia cursed a blue streak as they approached. Her car was charred black, smoking now from every part of it.

A policewoman met them before they could get too close, instructing them to stay back.

“That’s my car,” Virginia moaned. It was probably not the right thing to say at that moment, Oscar thought—confirmed when the policewoman ushered the three of them off to the side to grill them on where they had been, where they had come from, whether it was intentional. She released them after another half hour of questioning, at which point the sun was setting. Taking pity on them, she offered to drive them back to campus.

Half of Oscar and J’s dorm came out to see why there was a cop car pulled up at the back door, lights flashing.

“Stay safe, now,” the policewoman told them as they rolled J away. “And don’t buy cars that are going to turn into flameballs.”

Virginia sighed. “Can’t believe my baby died like that. What kind of meteorite bullshit? We didn’t even get to watch.”

“I think maybe I just have bad luck with shooting stars,” Oscar said.

Virginia kissed Oscar on the cheek when she left. Ruffled J’s hair.
“Don’t go falling off any more roofs,” she told him. 

J laughed. “Come hang with us whenever you want to,” he said. “Open invitation.”

Virginia looked at Oscar. He nodded. “Door’s always open,” Oscar said, his own slow smile taking him by surprise.

When Oscar finally got J’s chair maneuvered upstairs and into the suite, the pair of them collapsed onto the couch. J’s eyes closed almost immediately.

“Long day?” Oscar asked, laughing.

J stuck out his tongue without opening his eyes.

“Do you want to go to bed?”

“No,” J said. His head fell on Oscar’s shoulder. “This is good.”

“Yeah,” Oscar said, his arm around J.

“Before I forget,” J mumbled, working his hand into his sweatshirt pocket. “I found this.” He dropped a balled-up piece of grey fabric into Oscar’s lap.

It was Oscar’s pillowcase.

“Where was it?”

J laughed. “On the roof.”

“You did not.”

“It was just hanging off the edge. Didn’t realise how far it was.”

Oscar fought the urge to smack J. “You’re a fucking dumbass.”

“Yeah,” J said, resting his hand on Oscar’s ribcage. “Sounds about right.”

They stayed there like that for a long time, until J had to pee and Oscar’s exhaustion hit him all at once. Oscar put the pillowcase back on his pillow before he fell asleep, even though it was dirty. They had been through a lot.

Oscar woke up with a softly growing light the next morning—the first sunrise he’d seen in some time. He pulled on his shoes and closed the door quietly, heading out for a long overdue walk.

J’s bones would heal a lot faster than whatever broke inside of Oscar years ago. But Oscar could feel it now, slowly. Slowly knitting itself back together, maybe a bit unevenly, maybe a bit stronger. He hadn’t had a doctor on hand to set it cleanly. Virginia saw it in his face, but most days, Oscar felt it in his shoulders, in his chest; the remnants of a graveyard passed on like the flu. This wasn’t a padlock. This was Oscar’s feet, turning him away from its borders. Saying goodbye, for now. Letting the grass grow back again, over opened pits and eroded stone. He’d be back someday, he knew, but he wasn’t so afraid. He liked it, even. The idea of a well-earned someday, a lifetime away.

The sun had been up for a while before he finally went back inside, to a room in his dorm that he’d never had reason to visit before.

For the first time in five years, Oscar’s fingers rested on a line of white keys.

He smiled.
“Well why don’t you just fuck her, then?” Shannon screamed. Her boyfriend was defiant, defending the offending friendship with an ex-girlfriend from undergrad. The stained couch and the stacks of flattened boxes bore dual witness to his testimony, her fury. And then the phone rang. Incensed, Shannon answered it.

“What?” she snarled.

“Sorry, I’m, um, I’m looking for Shannon Rabinowitz?”

“Who is this?”

“Stephanie Taylor, from Parkwood Regional Hospital. I’m calling about your father, Solomon J. Rabinowitz.”

“What about him?” Shannon’s voice was still savage, reinvigorated by a different hatred.

“I’m afraid he’s passed away, dear. There was a complication following his surgery.”

“Surgery? What surgery?”

“For his herniated disk. He had a reaction to the anesthesia.”

“I—I didn’t know,” Shannon said. “What is it?” her boyfriend asked.

“He listed you as his emergency contact,” the nurse said. Shannon made a sound of assent. She hadn’t seen the man in over ten years. “When will you be over to take care of his final arrangements?”

Shannon lived in Austin. Her father had passed away at a county hospital in Houston. So Shannon broke up with her boyfriend and got on a bus. She tried to relax her mind amidst the rising smell of the stained, fabric seats. Outside, the cracked black of asphalt and the stagnant green of commercial farmland barreled by. Shannon coasted forward like a beachgoer lifted by the lazy roll of an oncoming wave. How on earth could it matter so little that he was no longer out there? He was gone, a puff of air sucked into an open vent. But Shannon still felt the same. In her mind’s eye a spider sat, fat pedipalps clicking as it reeled her back in.

The boy next to her had bright blue hair and a small, empty aquarium in his lap. Shannon tried not to stare. She slipped in her earbuds and pulled out her laptop. Opening the document in which she kept her notes, she began to write:

Though the word ‘tarantula’ originally referred to any large, unfamiliar spider; in its contemporary usage the word applies primarily to members of the family Theraposidae. Large and hairy, the tarantula as popularly imagined is indigenous to North and South America, with approximately 900 identified species spread across the two continents. Most North
American varieties are a dark, dusty sort of brown, including (obviously) the Texas Brown tarantula. Like most other tarantulas, neither the venom of the Texas Brown nor the stinging hairs it releases when threatened are more than mildly irritating to humans. The worst thing about these spiders, in fact, is just that they look really fucking freaky to the average human being. They feed primarily on cockroaches and crickets, though they will often eat other insects, including various beetles and mealworms. They live in burrows, and young spiders have been known to stay with their mothers for up to a week after hatching. Females can live for as long as thirty years, but males typically live less than one. Evolution does the individual few favors. Or many favors. It’s all a matter of perspective, really.

“What’s that?” the boy beside Shannon asked, pointing to the screen. Shannon tried to pretend she hadn’t heard him, but the persistent bastard just asked again. Giving in, Shannon explained that she was a grad student at UT, that she worked in a lab studying rare arachnids. She lied and told him that she was writing up an experiment in which the venom production of spiders exposed to various chemicals was measured and then compared.

“Why would anyone want to do that?” Why would anyone want to dye their hair blue? Shannon kept this thought to herself. Instead she explained that she had always loved little, creeping things. Small insects and spiders especially. Giving her life to study them seemed only natural.

“That’s cool. I’ve got my passions, too.”
“Oh yeah?”
“Sounds cool.” Shannon’s eyes fell on the glass box. “What’s the fish tank for?”
“My sister.”
“Really? She must be awful small, to fit in that.”

The boy didn’t seem to get the joke. “She’s like you. Into animals and nature. Science, you know. What did you say your name was again?”
“Shannon.”
“Shannon. Good to meet you, Shannon. You can call me the Wiz.”

The Wiz. Shannon suppressed the urge to laugh. Shutting her laptop, she leaned back in her seat and fell asleep.

It happened on a rural highway somewhere outside of Schulenburg, Texas, a few months before Shannon turned thirteen. Her father was driving. Outside of the car it was not quite nighttime, but rather that dangerous sliver between dusk and full dark when the eyes have not yet adjusted to the lumbering shadows and one can see almost nothing. From the passenger seat, Shannon could tell that her father’s stony eyes were trained on the looming asphalt without
really seeing anything about it. He was too busy yelling at her. As his irritation reached
a fever pitch, he swung around a bend in the country road. Shannon’s eyes widened
as she saw a large, motionless form in the middle of the oncoming lane. Her father
did not see it. The car passed over the body with a wet, skipping leap. A hundred yards
later, Shannon’s father had pulled the car to the side of the road and ran back along the
shoulder to investigate.

The first thing Shannon noticed was the smell. It was a moist, nauseating musk
which rose to meet her as she followed her father towards the body. As she got closer,
the smell grew stronger. It was becoming difficult to breathe. The body belonged to a
deer. It had already been dead when the car hit it. And not freshly dead either. Bloated,
decomposing, fermenting dead. The impact of the wheels had torn the carcass in half.
Exploded it, really. The slender head, still intact, lay nestled against the road’s
shoulder, stretching into the ragged ruins of the forelegs and thorax. The lower half of
the deer was not readily identifiable. Gore was streaked along the pavement for several
yards, originating at the point of impact. As Shannon drew closer she made out the
jagged shape of the deer’s muscular heart, thrown into the middle of the road by the
force of the collision.

Shannon stopped. She stood on the soft, graveled edge of the road and looked at the
shipwrecked organ. She imagined it was still pulsing. She imagined it was boiling
in the open air, writhing like a landed fish and screaming as it writhed. The smell was
overpowering now. It was a thousand hands, forcing their slender fingers into Shannon’s
watching ears and nose and eyes, caressing her head and holding it there and lifting the
heart up, stretching it until it was the only thing she could see.

But then the spider came. A dark, scurrying figure the size of a grown man’s
outstretched hand, it whistled across the road, vibrating with thousands of boar-bristle hairs. It was coming for the heart, Shannon knew. It was coming to eat the
heart.

And so she screamed. She screamed and she ran panting back to the safety of the car.
Her father followed her at his own pace, unperturbed by his daughter’s terror.

“Yo, Shannon, wake up.” Shannon opened her eyes to find the bus in northeast
Houston. The Wiz’s looked concerned. “They’re pulling over. Something’s wrong
with the bus.” And indeed Shannon could feel that beneath her the bus was slowing,
pulling off of the highway and onto the feeder road.

“Sorry for the inconvenience, folks,” the bus driver’s voice crackled. “We’ve got some,
uh, technical difficulties.” Smoke began to pour from the front of the bus, down into the
narrowing road. In the air, the passengers’ panic crackled. As the bus pulled over they
surged forward, pushing their way out of both doors. Shannon found herself standing
at the edge of the feeder road with a crowd of other passengers, clutching her bag and wondering what the hell had brought her here. They were in a part of Houston she didn’t recognize, but it could have been many parts, really. Behind her, one of the strip malls, which so reliably lined the highways, stretched as far as the eye could see, its preeminence interrupted only by a gas station and several parking lots. Beneath her feet, sparse, crabby grass grew up to calf-height. Mosquitoes buzzed about, insistent in the mid-March heat. Home sweet home, Shannon thought.

“Hey Shannon.” Shannon turned to find herself face to face with the Wiz, still holding his tank. “You got anyone coming for you?”

“No.” How did she say that she didn’t have anyone, period? Not anymore, at least. Not for a long time, really.

“My folks are coming to get me,” he said. “Maybe they can give you a lift?”

“Yeah,” Shannon said. “Yeah, that would be good.”

In the years before her death, Shannon’s mother would take one day off every summer to take her daughter down to Galveston Island. To the beach. No YMCA day camp for Shannon, then, no days spent at the neighbor lady’s house waiting for her parents to return. Just some slightly squished bologna sandwiches, nestled together in their clear plastic bags. Just Shannon and her mother, speeding south along the highway, singing at the top of their lungs. Alanis Morissette, usually—*Jagged Little Pill* was their favorite tape. Shannon loved to watch as they crossed the causeway, as the land disappeared and Galveston Bay unfolded beneath them, spreading out until the horizon became one with the sea. And then, just like that, they were out on the island, the highway flowing into that big street called Broadway. Thick, stone buildings like something out of a movie. *Gone with the Wind*, maybe, or *Rebecca*. Shannon’s mother loved *Rebecca*.

Farther out from the island’s downtown, the houses began. Squat, wooden houses in neat little blocks, growing and growing as they got closer to the water. By the time they overlooked the beach, the houses were huge. Stilt-legged monsters tilting with the wind and their own weight. And beneath them, the beaches empty, unused. Then came the Seawall. A giant slab on concrete with a street on top, the wall looking out across the sea. On the beach down below people teemed. Shannon would wave down at them as her mother drove by.

The beach Shannon and her mother liked
was a long way from the Seawall. All the way down the island, on a road called Eight Mile. A burst of happiness would unfurl inside of Shannon as they made that turn, as the peeling paint of the giant wooden sign that read “Sunny Beach” came into view. It wasn’t a popular beach, back then, and for most of the day Shannon and her mother had the entire place to themselves. For the first hour or so, Shannon would run and tumble in the filmy waves, growing used to the warmth and the salt and the smell of ripe fish. Her mother, meanwhile, would put on her sunscreen and her bright pink, thick rimmed sunglasses. Then, she would stretch out on an old towel, flipping through a magazine or watching her daughter plunge through the overheated surf. Eventually, though, Shannon could always get her mother off of the sand and into the water, tugged along by the threads of her many games. Mother and daughter would surf backwards in tandem along the oncoming breakers, or plunge one after another into the shallow water and the churning foam.

As it turned out, The Wiz’s real name was Daniel. He was a junior at St. Ed’s coming home for spring break. His parents were loud, friendly people, their car filled to the brim with their many daughters, all of whom had piled in to welcome back their big, prodigal brother. The family’s questions were endless, but so rapid fire that in the end Shannon didn’t have to answer any of them. All she had to do was sit tight and smile, crammed tight between the Wiz and two of his kid sisters.

“You brought Kelly a fish tank?” one of the girls cried. “That’s so not fair, what did you bring for me?”

“My beautiful smile.”

“Danny!”

“Ok, Jesus, relax Susan. I brought you some poetry.”

“Daniel James,” the Wiz’s mother cried. “Did I just hear you take our Lord and Savior’s name in vain?”

“What kind of poetry?”

“Emily Dickinson.”

“Young man! Answer me!”

“It’s fine, Ma,” the Wiz called. “I was talking about a different Jesus.” Shannon tried very hard not to snicker.

“I love Emily Dickinson!” the poetry sister said.

“Your grandmother would be appalled,” the Wiz’s mother went on. “Her only grandson, talking like that.” In the far back, additional girls giggled. “So, Shannon,” the woman said, turning her attention back to the hitchhiker. “You were saying—”

“Where should I be taking you?” the Wiz’s father interrupted.

“Um, Parkwood Regional,” Shannon answered.

The Wiz’s mother turned around, shocked. “A hospital? Why is that? Is somebody sick?”

Shannon almost lied, but for some reason the truth compelled her. “My father died.”

“Oh,” the Wiz’s mother said, placing her
hand over her heart. “That’s just horrible!”
Shannon told herself that it would be worse than inappropriate to shrug. “It is what it is,” she said.

“Is anyone meeting you at the hospital?” the Wiz asked. Sweet kid, Shannon thought. If only he wasn’t dumb as rocks.
“Not exactly,” Shannon began, but then stopped.
“Well we’ll pray for you,” the Wiz’s mother said, filling the silence. “And your father, too.”
“Actually, we’re Jewish.”
Silence. Shannon couldn’t imagine why she’d said it. For a moment, the life of the car stopped. Then, creeping back to life, the Wiz’s father said:
“Ah! One of God’s Chosen People. I thought you had an aura to you.”

Shannon bought her first tarantula two weeks after the incident with the deer carcass. It was a curly-haired tarantula whom Shannon named Sami. Sami was black, with blonde curlicues of hair sprouting from her swollen body and many legs. Shannon saw her in the pet store one day while running an errand for an elderly neighbor. A spasm-echo had shot through the girl at the sight of the spider. It was night again: the beastly thing was scurrying across the road. Sick compulsion. Shannon pressed her face against the outside of the spider’s terrarium. It lifted up its pedipalps and opened them wide towards the peering girl, its black eyes glittering.
She had to have it.

It took all of the birthday money her father had given her for the past three years. In all, the tarantula required: a tank, a shallow dish of water, some peat moss, a curling piece of cork bark, and the occasional cricket or pinky mouse. Given this, Sami thrived in her little world on the middle of Shannon’s bookshelf. The girl would spend hours watching the jerking machinations of her new pet, unable to look away from the wavelike movements of those long, furry legs. Shannon never removed Sami from the tank. As long as the spider was contained, it was controlled. It was safe. She could ask for nothing else.

Standing in front of the hospital, Shannon had never felt more alone. It was a pricey looking place, landscaped with fountains and huge walls of glass. Shannon was surprised her father had had health insurance good enough to cough up that kind of dough. The
woman at reception first gave her a stack of forms, then directed her back to an elevator that rose up and up in an intimidating glass column. Shannon looked at the elevator and found she couldn’t go near it. Instead, she returned to the waiting area where she had filled out her forms, opened her faithful document, and began to type.

All species of spider can weave more than one type of silk. Some can weave as many as seven different silks, each of them specialized for a single purpose. The difference in each type lies in its structure—the thread may be a single fiber, a series of fibers, or a sticky mass of silk globules. Most silks produced by spiders are extraordinary, mechanically speaking. The tensile strength and ductility of these fibers is far beyond anything humans can excrete from their numerous glands. Combined, these qualities give spider silk a toughness greater than Kevlar. Toughness is the derivative of the stress-strain curve, the amount of work required to fracture the fiber. There are only two other fibers comparable to spider silk in terms of toughness: polyaramid nylon filaments and the patience of a well-policed young woman.

“I had my parents bring me back,” he said. “I didn’t like the thought of you doing this alone.”

“Well that’s very nice,” Shannon said. “But I’m a big girl. And my dad was a shit. So I think I’ll be okay.” Shannon paused. “Alone.” The boy hadn’t even flinched. Just kept staring at her with those wide, honest eyes and that stupid shock of blue hair.

“I know what you’re trying to do,” he said. “Yeah?” Shannon felt her lip pull into a sneer. “What’s that, Dr. Phil?”

“You’re trying to push me away,” the Wiz said. “That’s what some people do, when they’re sad.”

Shannon did not reply. Between them, the silence stretched.

“What were you working on?” The Wiz finally asked. “When I first came in.”


“I can’t wait to read it.” Shannon let her eyes fall on the sleek waiting room’s sole decoration—a giant canvas filled with variegated handprints. The bright, childish shapes left her sad and slightly perturbed.

“Look,” Shannon sighed. “You’re a sweet person. But it’s me that has to do this, not you.”

“I don’t understand.”

“Go home,” Shannon said. “Go back to your family and have a nice break. Don’t worry about me.”

“I—”

“Get away!” she snapped. “Leave me alone! Why can’t you understand that?”
the sound of her raised voice the waiting room’s other occupants burrowed deeper into their magazines and paperwork.

“Fine,” the Wiz said. He looked as if he had been slapped. To Shannon’s relief, he rose and strode out through the reception’s automated doors. Refusing to cry, she put up her laptop and strode towards the elevators.

There was another woman waiting beside the elevator. An older woman with chunky sunglasses and a short, teased hairdo. Why had she thought that she could face her father, Shannon wondered? Even in death, surely, he was stronger than her. A might so powerful that Shannon had been forced to move to another city, to create another life to escape him. She had left the house at sixteen, worked shit job after shit job just to keep herself afloat. Scraping grease off of her shoes and scrubbing her skin half-off after long nights in front of a deep fryer, she had been happy simply because she could put him away, stick him up in some tiny box on a high shelf at the back of her mind. When her legs ached and her eyes twitched from hours spent standing behind a cash register in an itchy red shirt, she had contented herself knowing that this is what it would take to keep the past in the past.

And then, in college, gathering debt like an elephant snowball, Shannon had thrown herself into work the same way. Solve equations, memorize theorems, cram the mind so full of information that it has no room for anything else. Shannon sighed. So much effort, and yet here she was, the same little girl, terrified of looking him in the face. As the elevator came the rhinestone woman looked at Shannon and smiled. “It’s going down,” she said. “Must be for you.”

Whenever her mother would leave, back then, Shannon always assumed she was never coming back. The woman never did manage to stay away for good, as it turned out. Not until that night when Shannon was twelve. The dark, rainy one when the tires slipped and the metal crumpled and the windows cracked. Shannon hadn’t been there. Her mother had been alone, discovered several minutes later by a fellow motorist. All those times the woman had tried to leave, and that was the way she would finally go. Her mother’s many departures always seemed to blur together in Shannon’s memories. Sometimes she would try to take the girl with her, sometimes she would simply leave. Always, Shannon felt alone. It was impossible for the girl to tell what was real and what was a swirling combination of memories. What was the memory. All of that terror.

“IT WAS IMPOSSIBLE FOR THE GIRL TO TELL WHAT WAS REAL AND WHAT WAS A SWIRLING COMBINATION OF MEMORIES.”
from long, long ago was so tangled up that Shannon couldn’t quite tell what came first and what came last, what squatted firmly in the middle. There were just images and feelings, spinning. Connecting, twisting into one another. Gossamer filaments, they shot out and snapped, weaving patterns which fluttered across the gentle wind of memory and time. There was her father, grim and huge, reflected across the many eyes of Chronos. He stood apart, alone, a steady storm in a sea of anxiety. The spiders, crawling. But then they were gone, replaced by something else. There was her mother, now, standing on the threshold and crying as she kissed her daughter goodbye. Why was she leaving? How could she go? Tears glittered on the bruised flesh of a darkened eye. Shannon wondered if those were her only bruises.

Did she know what her husband did to their little girl? Was that why she was leaving?

But then, knowing, how could she leave her daughter alone?

The door slammed. Mother was gone. Shannon felt a fat, heavy hand come down upon her shoulder, her father’s gut rising behind her. In a web a spider sat, fat abdomen glistening, dark spots pulsing. With a careful whisper the spider opened its prickling jaws.

As the morgue’s attending prepared to open the metal drawer which held her father, Shannon was convinced that she would faint. She hadn’t seen his face in so long—she was so sure that upon glimpsing it all of those memories, that awful place, would come rushing back. The gloved hand closed upon the metal bar. Shannon held her breath. The screeching sound of sliding out, and—


“What?”

“That’s not my father,” she said again, her voice coming slow like sour, clotted milk. Where was he, if this wasn’t him? A terrible thought occurred to her. What if he wasn’t dead? Shannon whipped around, convinced that he would be behind her, waiting. A ploy, all of it, a ploy just to get her to come back. Terror beat against every cell, her entire body a hungry flame. He was back, he was back. There was no getting away. Panicked, Shannon began to hyperventilate. The world was a rippling shadow behind the crashing waves of fear. She felt the doctor’s hands upon her but at the same moment she felt his hands, his eyes. Beating them back, she began to run, stumbling, out of the morgue.

There was a corpse in the hallway. Still on the gurney, its bottom half hidden beneath a clean, pressed sheet. Staring at it, Shannon’s split worlds began to converge, becoming once again one reality. This was now and she was herself. She was herself.

Breathe in.

Trembling, Shannon approached the body. She could hardly recognize his face. Aged, yes, but that was not the problem. In death, it seemed, the familiar muscles of his jaw, his cheeks had gone slack. His face had
lost its former shape. Stiffening, bloating, pale and blue with dimming blood. Shannon would not have known him had it not been for the brows, the nose, those tender ridges of bone she knew so well. Seeing him, Shannon was struck by an unexpected grief. He was dead, really dead. She tried to imagine the space that his life had left on the earth, the father-shaped hole that shimmered somewhere and nowhere all at once. Her throat constricted at the thought. How could she be feeling this, for the man she so hated? So feared? And yet she was. A violent ache spread through her throat, her chest, her arms. Gone. There was anger in her grief, a wild rage. Shannon’s fingers twitched with the desire to reach out and dig her nails deep into that cold, motionless face. And then everything bled together, swept away. Shannon found herself floating, buffeted about by a swirling squall of unidentifiable emotions. It was as if some anchor, some tether which had held her to this world, had suddenly snapped. She would never have the chance to change it, Shannon realized. She would never get that something he had taken from her back. Not from him, at least. Behind her, she felt the doctor’s presence, cautious after her outburst.

“That’s him,” Shannon said. “That’s my father.”

Though the exoskeleton is a marvelous source of protection for spiders, it does have one glaring drawback: it cannot grow. Several layers of protein and chitin protect the spider from damage, anchor its flexor muscles, and keep its gelatinous insides from drying out. But this armor cannot expand. The spider must adapt. Its body changes as it begins to prepare for molting—a new layer of chitin begins to form beneath the old exoskeleton as the gap between the two is widened with the production of a special molting fluid. When the time comes, the spider must separate itself from its old skin mechanically. The heart rate of the spider increases, forcing a large amount of hemolymph into the abdomen and cephalothorax. This causes the body segments to expand, cracking the unwanted exoskeleton and allowing the spider to flex its legs until it has managed to shed its skin. Then, like a new flower, the spider crawls away.

Jewish funerals do not tend to be intricate affairs. Not in the normal ways. There are no flowers, no wreaths, no rich, tumbling music or clouds of fragrant incense. There is only a small, pine box and the austere cliff faces of grief. To her relief, Shannon found that she did not have to act sad. The few that came to her father’s funeral were not the type to press in upon her with their condolences. As far as family, they had none. None that had bothered to come. There were some coworkers, some friends, faces that trickled in and out of the gray spaces of the funeral.
home. Shannon was not sure how they had found out about the event. She had planned the funeral because that was what daughters did, but she had not exactly publicized it. And yet somehow this handful of people had still come. Shannon had arranged for her father to be buried in the plot beside her mother. She hated to do it, but that was where he had bought his space. Even with the meager contents of his estate, Shannon couldn’t really afford to put him anywhere else. And so, one last time he would win.

But none of that could change the fact that she was the one standing out of the ground, she was the one standing above him. As Shannon watched the coffin lowered, the sound of the mechanized winch whirring beside her, she realized that she was alive and he was dead and he was not going to take that from her. She thought of the Wiz and his family. She thought of the boyfriend she had broken up with and the spiders in her lab and the fat stack of unpaid bills sitting back in Austin, waiting for her. She realized that she was alone. And then—then Shannon had a vision of herself. She was floating in that little tank the Wiz had carried on his lap. The water stung, but it was warm. And then the tank was breaking and she was tumbling outward on a tide of salty water, soaked to the bone and trembling like a red faced newborn. Shannon closed her eyes and cried.
You graduated from UPenn last year with a double major in English and Consumer Psychology, and you now work as a content marketing associate at a California start-up. Has your study of creative writing been useful to you in the working world? What is your reaction to the idea that “English majors can’t get jobs”?

Oh, definitely! A lot of the things you learn as a creative writer—how to exercise grit, how to deal with rejection, how to effectively interact with ideas—apply to almost any industry, I think. I think “English majors can’t get jobs” is something that people say to justify not wanting to major in English. And it’s totally okay to not formally major in English as an undergrad —of course, the reality is that one can be a creative writer and study nearly anything. I know writers who studied everything from anthropology to engineering in undergrad. The literary industry is an undeniably ageist industry, so I don’t mean to say every English student will find a job in editing or writing, but of course English majors can get jobs—it’s just more difficult to get the sort of jobs people who say “English majors can’t get jobs” seem to seek (consulting, for instance). To make it as a writer out there in the real world, your whole heart has to be in it—whatever you studied, wherever you did it, and however
'marketable' you are, that’s what it boils down to at the end of the day.

You founded The Adroit Journal when you were a sophomore in high school. (Wow.) What was the experience of creating a literary journal like? How has working as an editor shaped your identity as a writer?

Founding The Adroit Journal was simultaneously exhilarating and occasionally overwhelming! Where most people dip a toe in, I think I leapt—naïve as it sounds, I didn’t realize it was novel to found a publication at the age of fifteen. I thought it was something that young writers all over the world were already doing—surely I couldn’t have been the first. In reality, I learned a ton about both writing and editing in the first months (let alone the first year, let alone the first five years, and so on) that I’ve been developing the journal. I’d only been writing for about six months (and submitting work for barely three) before I started the journal, so it’s effectively completely shaped my understanding of both the writing and editing worlds.

Ultimately, editing The Adroit Journal (going on eight years now!) has shown me that one is a writer even when one is not writing, that being a writer is a lifestyle more than it is a job. We’ve had some disappointments and some big wins (both for the journal itself, as well as young writers as a whole), but no matter what kind of day it is, it’s a day filled with writing. And that is tremendously comforting for me—even when I’m not writing, I rely on it to stay connected to the world of writing, but it also makes me continuously want to stay connected.

We live in a moment when young people’s representation in the literary community is increasing. Adroit, which publishes poetry, fiction, and creative nonfiction, as well as book reviews and interviews, is now home to many established names, but it continues to showcase the voices of high school and undergraduate writers. Why is this important to Adroit, and to you?

Oh, without the plethora of young voices in our issues and mentorship program, Adroit wouldn’t be Adroit! I founded the journal because I was extremely frustrated with the opportunities that existed at the time for young writers—basically, read and worship the work of older writers until you graduate from college and enroll in grad school and magically become ready to publish. I find the argument that young writers are still developing to be fallacious—I don’t care if you’re eight or eighty, we all are. I started the journal to be, at its core, a home for the work of young writers—beyond the individual affirmation that can come from publication for a young writer is the more universal and influential visibility that has accompanied the rise of writers like Talin Tahajian, Aidan Forster, Brynne Rebele-Henry, Lily Zhou, Yasmin Belkhyr, and more. With this visibility comes self-recognition and
self-actualization, and with self-recognition and self-actualization comes (eventually) community.

"I'M INFLUENCED MOST BY THE EXPERIENCE OF DWELLING WHEN I'M REMINDED THAT I INFLUENCE MY OWN EXPERIENCE OF PLACES AND PEOPLE AND THINGS."

You once balanced the editorship of *Adroit* with life as an undergraduate student and you now balance it with a full-time job. How do you make space for your writing life around your other commitments? Do you have any advice for college students on how to maintain a space to be a writer?

As the journal has continued to expand and expand, it takes up more and more of my time, so of course it’s a sacrifice, but it’s a sacrifice I will always be willing to make. Now that I work a 9AM-6PM day job, it just means that I block time out of evenings and weekends to execute, and that I’ve built out my time to continue to scale the growth that the journal is experiencing. When I was back in high school, I came up with a philosophy that I still live by—procrastinate efficiently. Procrastinating efficiently has turned what could’ve been a lot of Netflix binging into a tangible publication with legs and a gut and a voice.

Your chapbooks, *Hook* and *Makeshift Cathedral*, explore themes of identity, family, and queerness. To what extent do you view your work as autobiographical? Do you approach poetry as a way to represent personal experience, or does each poem generate its own internal truth?

This is a great question. I find that there are different layers of truth—narrative truth and emotional truth. Narrative truth sometimes feels topical, and isn’t always the best way to access emotional truth. *Hook* as a body of work is much more conventionally “autobiographical” in its exploration of my adolescence than *Makeshift Cathedral*, which (hopefully) conveys the need of LGBTQ+ folk for security and hope, through persona poems from a variety of forgotten LGBTQ+ victims of violence in the 80s and 90s. However, with the freedom to explore oneself and one’s convictions through the stories of others comes an undeniable danger—that one will appropriate, misattribute, and so on. My rule for my own work is—if you have to deny your identity to write something, don’t do it. Don’t write from the perspective of an LGBTQ+ person if you’re straight. Don’t write from the perspective...
of a person of color experiencing police violence if you aren’t.

In this day and age, whether you like the Internet or not, it has given a voice to those who, for so long, have been voiceless. I’m not interested in work that appropriates as some publications seem to be (and those publications are, unsurprisingly, on the decline)—we can and should hear from marginalized populations directly. If these writers aren’t able to write and/or share their work (due to financial or emotional burden), our work as gatekeepers then becomes to create opportunities or better existing ones so they can.

This year’s issue of R2 is interested in the idea of “dwelling,” both in the sense of our dwelling places, our homes, and in the sense of continually returning to or exploring—dwelling on—a subject. I see this theme as particularly resonant with your work, which often deals with aspects of the Midwestern culture and landscape where your family originates. Do you see your work in conversation with concepts of dwelling?

More than dwelling I find that returning really inspires and jumpstarts a lot of my work. I think that’s why I write about the Midwest so much—I was born and raised in Connecticut, although my family is from a small town in northwestern Ohio, so whenever I’m there, it awakens awareness of the huge contrasts in lifestyle between members of my family as well as between Americans.

I think I’ve acquired an increasingly analytical response to the world around me as I’ve delved further into my identity as a writer, as well—it’s more difficult for me to return to a place and just experience it, in the theoretical sense of the word, without conclusion or conviction. Then again, I think the term ‘experience’ is more applicable outside of theory, anyway—‘experience’ is a static perception based on a static individual and a static place; the convictions of the self can’t be removed from it. All of that is to say, I’m influenced most by the experience of dwelling when I’m reminded that I influence my own experience of places and people and things.

What are you working on now? What writing projects are in your future?

Right now, I’m figuring out how to balance writing and editing and working! It’s tougher than I thought it would be, but I’m giving myself a hot sec to really evaluate what I want my next writing project to be. And that requires living off the page!
MORNING STRETCH

by Katharyn Hernandez
STEP TWO IS RETURNING

by Alice Liu

There is a sense of time as endless, as having one’s whole life stretched out ahead that one never has again in life. Likewise, there is the sense that all doors are open and that anything is possible. Finally, there is a kind of absolute trust in others, possible in childhood but then never again.

~Samantha Brennan, The Goods of Childhood

A sense of time as endless

I ask my grandpa to teach me how to make dumplings. He is delighted; me, notably less so, when he pulls a freshly thawed monster of a pork chop from the depths of the kitchen sink. I learn that the squelches and squishes a cleaver evokes from raw meat are the dying breaths of prey that has accepted its fate. He feeds the strips to the hulking machine on the counter, which growls with pleasure at each turn of the crank. I wonder how many times this pig will have to die for my family, what snuffing, smothering sins it must have committed to deserve this ceaseless humiliation. Yet, the death machine creates life, reincarnating the creature in a squirming cascade of tiny, pink worms. A smooth, squeaky birth.

The worms are christened with the holy spices of soy sauce, scallions, and ginger. Each dumpling requires two dips from the tip of my finger. The pot boils for the third time and they float to the surface. At last, I bite through the hot, slippery skin and feel the juices run down my throat; the poor pig and the wriggling worms are all but forgotten.

***

My backyard is only an acre large, but it feels like the whole world stuffed between faded fence posts. From the back door, take twenty steps forward to travel from red-rocked desert to a copse of pine and oak. A few more steps to the left is my favorite—tall, billowing grass that tickles my waist when I run through it, and giggles back when I shriek with laughter.

One day I come home to find the grass chopped at the roots. My cheeks tinge red at the naked ugliness of the stubble, the crime scene, the mound of sheared locks huddling fat and shameful in the middle of it all. I watch as my dad douses it in gasoline and strikes a match, watch as the sparks leap up against the heat of the dusk like tiny angels. Whoosh. The flush against my cheeks, the backs of my eyelids, brings to mind tan lines and blistering skin.

From the fertile ashes springs his vegetable garden, his self-made paradise. Two hours in the morning before work, and all day on Saturdays. He leaves with 22 ounces of ice-cold Dr. Pepper and comes back with dirt underneath his fingernails.
That year Christmas comes in July as our refrigerator spills over itself with saran-wrapped cucumbers and bulging tomatoes. And when the shelves grow bare again, he hobbles, cheeks stretched tight, into the kitchen cradling a gourd as heavy as my baby brother. Dōng guā—winter melon—because its delicate flesh is white as snow, and because it sits warm in our bellies when the sun starts setting before dinnertime.

I decide that I want to be a farmer. I want to wake up before the rooster does and throw grain to the hens, bare hands numb in the cold. I decide that I want to be a farmer. I want to wake up before the rooster does and throw grain to the hens, bare hands numb in the cold. Hear their satisfied clucking as the dew catches the first rays of sun. When it is time to lock them up at the end of the day, I call and they sprint to me in a frenzy of feathers. They only like me because I am the provider of yummy treats, but that is okay. I name them after various Chinese desserts.

Thanks to a fortunate combination of my mother’s latent childhood nostalgia and her guilt for denying my earlier pleas for a puppy, she says yes when I ask for chickens. It is strange, how happy I am to be standing in between twenty-pound bags of duck food and fertilizer, breathing in the feed store’s curious mix of manure and alfalfa. The teenager behind the counter transfigures a crinkled ten-dollar bill into four baby chicks. Two fifty each—a life for the price of a Whopper Jr. During the car ride home, I cup one in my trembling, sweaty palms and fear that it will fly away at every bump in the road.

My dad is upset when he sees them—did no one tell him?—and we eat dinner in silence, but the whole thing is kind of funny. Besides, my brother and I have promised to take care of them all by ourselves. For a few months, a soft chorus of chirps fills the interstices of our mealtime conversations. I watch each chick grow fat and feathers, and find it impossible not to feel a distinct sense of loss as the precious coat of down is ousted by sleek, prickly intruders. Eventually the absurdity (not to mention the smell) of having four grown chickens living practically underneath our kitchen table becomes impossible to ignore, and my dad spends two nights building an outdoor coop by hand.

i. Liminal space: the time between the ‘what was’ and the ‘next’

In moments either of great despair or of great liberation, I climb onto the roof of the shed to feel the fading sun seep from the shingles through my t-shirt, and watch
the stars emerge from magenta one by one. I’ve built up a collection over the years, a list of nooks and crannies in my little corner of suburbia. This rooftop, the ancient oak in my backyard, the top of the bleachers in the old football field. They are tethers that tug at me even from my college dorm room, and returning feels like proof that I can be absent for 9 months a year and still belong. In these places I am safely and utterly alone. It is a selfish preferred state of existence, to be able to suck in the world through my hungry senses and not have to give anything back. Sometimes I journal and sometimes I draw, but it feels predatory to steal the images of these secret spaces. The only acceptable form of preservation is memory, despite or perhaps because of its ephemerality. And this is sufficient, this tenuous neural connection through my pen and paper. But what happens when something changes, and my treacherous fickle memories become the only path between the past and the present? It feels like an immense burden to bear.

A sense that anything is possible
My friend wants to be a cardiac anesthesiologist. I ask her why and she shrugs. That’s cool, I tell her. I go home and google it. “A subspecialty of the medical practice of anesthesiology devoted to the preoperative, intraoperative, and postoperative care of adult and pediatric patients undergoing cardiothoracic surgery and related invasive procedures,” I read. I have exactly zero thoughts or opinions regarding this newly-acquired knowledge. I wonder how my friend could possibly know that she wanted to be involved in the preoperative, intraoperative, and postoperative care of patients undergoing cardiothoracic surgery. I try and fail to find a single appealing phrase in the entire description.

In class, my teacher scrawls the question, “art or not?” on the whiteboard. If art is beauty, then art must be a sunset and the eyelashes of the girl sitting next to me. If art is man-made beauty, then art must be footprints in the snow and the Dallas skyline. We spend forty minutes debating whether or not an ornate door knob should count as art. There are valid arguments on both sides; meanwhile, I fill a page of my sketchbook with misshapen llamas. I want to be an artist. I want a studio with a concrete floor and leafy plants, like the ones I see on Instagram. I want to make art that will bring down oppressive regimes, that will make asshole fuckboys cry their eyes out, that will dry the tears of sad and lonely little girls.

***

My grandpa’s hands are weathered, sturdy and expansive as an oak, covered in discolorations and moles. His technique does not possess the self-important flourishes of chefs seen on television. For him, cooking is not fun or beautiful, it is a skill borne from necessity; yet, for all its lack of grandiosity, it is no less mesmerizing to watch. The methodic motions are the result of decades of practice, refined over thousands of dishes.
I know this, but I cannot seem to convince my eyes that the hand is guiding the blade, and not the other way around. The lopsided rectangle of metal, unaware of its own pitiful condition, eagerly performs its task with machine-like precision. Each cycle is the same: slowly, the blade finds its place, then—\textit{wham}—each time I must re-teach myself not to wince.

Leaning against the counter, I let the scene fade to the dull, rhythmic thud of metal on wood. Suddenly silence. I open my eyes. A thin line of crimson waltzes down my grandpa’s fingertip. It tangoes with the half-chopped cabbage, free at last from its prison of skin and flesh. The colors, they were so fresh—spring green and pale yellow and the brightest red. Over frozen pizza later that night, I feel an intense desire to apologize, but I don’t know what for.

***

The first time my dad leaves, it is because of a phone call from the other side of the world. When he finds out his brother has committed suicide, he orders a plane ticket to China for the next day. He packs his suitcase. Then he goes to work. That night I see him standing in the hallway, bathed in stale yellow light from the kitchen. He sighs, tired, deflated. For those long seconds, I hold my breath with him. One. This was a stolen connection, I am a voyeur of my own father’s tragedy. Two. I try to imagine an empty bed down the hall from me, an odd number of chairs at the dinner table. Three. My chest, my stomach, are hollow. Maybe this is how it happened—the sudden, too soon, nonexistence of a man. Four. He opens his lungs and the air rushes back in.

His plane soars into the sky while I am still warm and unconscious; I stand in his bedroom with my palms spread flat on the cool cotton of the sheets, lump in my stomach from not waking up in time to say goodbye. It’s only a few weeks. I imagine his tethers, stretched tight over decades and thousands of miles, slowly slackening with each ear pop of ascent. While he is gone, we do not talk about it. When he comes back, we do not talk about it.

\textbf{ii. Liminal space: a place of transition, waiting, and not knowing}

A friend tells me the Houston humidity feels comforting to him, like a hug. I scoff but I too love the dry, sleepy heat of Dallas that I grew up in. It doesn’t feel like a proper summer without that tangible gust of heat hitting you in the face when you open the backyard door. My body gets used to the whiplash of existing in two climates at once, the inside and the outside, and moving between them evokes certain expectations of sensorial constants. \textit{Stepping inside}: Sound, light, and heat momentarily disappear and for a few seconds I am a being from another, brighter world. Then inevitably my surroundings reappear drained of warmth under fluorescent lighting, and I hear the bored humming of the air conditioning, and my skin sprouts goosebumps. \textit{Stepping outside}: I instinctively close my eyes so that
the experience is entirely tactile. It feels like an enveloping, a return to the embrace of familiar arms. There is no transitionary period. The world is red, has always been red, against my eyelids.

I wonder which world I am native to, and which world I am merely traveling through. I try to imagine staying in Houston after I graduate, or getting a job in California. I try to imagine living in a city where the sun doesn’t love me enough to kiss my shoulder blades scarlet. Looking back now, the state of not knowing, when anything is possible, is one of such privilege. It is unburdened by the indisputable reality of the present, the terrifying diminishment of potential futures.

A kind of absolute trust in others

My dad is late to dinner. There is an even number of chairs, bowls, pairs of chopsticks. An odd number of people. He emerges, buttons on his shirt off by one, hunches in front of us; He did not go to work that day. He has not slept for the past three nights. He does not feel well. I see him half a year ago, bathed in stale yellow, and realize the naivety of believing four seconds was enough mourning for a lifetime. He is still breathing out out out, has been exhaling this whole time.

I used to have an inexplicable desire to punch someone as hard as I could. To feel the satisfaction of the impact, the softness of their flesh against my fist. It is always for a righteous cause—perhaps a thief has broken into my house, and my family members’ muffled screams drift from the kitchen. I am a coward, I know this now. It takes just a few weeks for me to start averting my gaze, to stop asking him if he’s okay, to learn the answer is always the same. Sixteen years repaid with a few half-hearted attempts at conversation.

I want to be a doctor. Rather, I think there is a high chance that I will become a doctor, and it seems like Americans respect those who pursue a profession out of some innate passion or noble cause. It seems like Americans don’t respect those who pursue a profession because their parents tell them to. Yes, I want to help people, I parrot weakly. Because how do I convey the acute awareness of the generations of sacrifice that my everyday comforts and vast opportunities are built upon? How do I explain to those unthinking proponents of individual freedom that the obligations between a child and a parent do not and should not flow only one way?
When the time came for my mother to decide what she would study in college, my grandparents sat her down. “You can be a physicist like me, or a doctor like your mom.” She hated both. My grandparents discussed and researched. They decided the field of computer engineering had the most potential for growth, so my mom studied computer engineering.

***

The second time he leaves, I get to say goodbye. His room is dark, heavy curtains drawn against the painful midday sunlight. I strain my eyes to see him, can’t remember if I had ever really tried before. A paradox, a delayed distortion of a tragedy as far and as close as possible. He is scared of himself when he is alone. He sits in the passenger seat watching the cars rush past on the other side of the highway, feels a terrifying twitch in his arm. His hands are not his own, but still. One hand for me, one hand for my brother. The silence is musty, and his voice makes barely a dent.

“You have had a good life, right? Have you had a good life?”

I grip his hand, stare straight ahead. I should be the one asking that question. A wedding photo hangs above the headboard. He looks the same, and I wonder when his life diverged from the way that it was supposed to be, how he kept living when it did. A few days ago, he taught me to replace the smoke alarm batteries and asked me to take care of my mom. I blink fast. This is not a deathbed; inpatient treatment is not hospice care. I want to scream, I have had the best life and I don’t deserve it at all. I want to shake him, you are not dying and I am still a coward and everything will be normal again.

“It’s only two weeks,” I whisper instead. He leaves, and it’s only two weeks. But ever since, it’s felt like he’s still coming back.

***

I visit home for the first time over Thanksgiving break. My pillow smells the same; I didn’t realize it had a smell, and that I had missed it.

I watch my grandpa cook, legs dangling from my seat at the kitchen table. The intimate sounds of a kitchen—another subconscious yearning I have developed since leaving, along with the ticking of a metronome and the scratch of bristles against canvas. Halfway through, my grandpa sits down with me. His back hurts, so I chop the rest of the cabbage. The knife reverts to a useless hunk of metal under my guidance, and we laugh together at the misshapen scraps I produce.
“Remember when you could outrun me riding a bike?” I say.
“I remember when you drank a quart of watermelon juice and threw up all over the living room couch,” he says.

***

After half a year of silence following his treatment, my dad screams until he loses his voice, and my mom cries because he blames their marriage, he blames his job, he regrets coming to a country that stretched him until he snapped. I hug her but I don’t think it was ever really about us. We were so happy, and I try to convince myself that my dad was too, that his depression is just distorting his memories. Because the alternative seems unfathomable—that this whole time, our happiness was just ignorance, or that it came at the cost of his suffering.

***

The garden has returned to wilderness, and the weeds scratch against my calves. A family of possums have taken up residence in the chicken coop. Obviously there’s a metaphor here, but I can’t figure out the correct interpretation: Should I feel hope or sorrow? Is it a recovery or a failure?

***

I don’t want to be a doctor.

iii. Liminal space: where all transformation takes place
Summertime thunderstorms always seem to hit at night. The first rumble strikes when the last of the dinner dishes have been washed and dried, and the only light on downstairs is the one in your mom’s office. Or when you’ve just gotten comfortable under the covers. Or when you’re up way later than you’re supposed to be, cramming for a test the next day. No matter what, your ears perk up in anticipation. And sure enough, it comes. The familiar progression of the rooftop celebration: from the pitter-patter fiesta of woodland creatures to the rowdy boot-pounding of a Texas two-step, until eventually it sounds like an entire zoo has been released outside your bedroom window, and the sheer power of a million tiny drops of water causes your heart rate to skip a beat.

But listening to it is nothing compared to standing on your porch, hit with a sharp cool breeze instead of the expected dull heat of a summer night. Sometimes you run into it, one time wearing only underwear. Each drop a soldier, planting goosebumps on your bare skin. Most recently, you stand under the infinite downpour and see your life with such clarity. You feel with absolute certainty that this storm, this exact storm, marks the beginning of a new era. You think, it’s stupid that I have changed so much from none of my own doing.

Year eighteen: Here I am, back at square one.
THROUGH THE EYES OF DR. ECKLEBERG
by Macklyn Hutchinson
The worst thing is, you didn’t look away. *Stars above like LEDs, a ghost town shooting gallery.* Trust me, man, when you’re

a waxy smear from your deepest place—
pink crayon scraped over the turnpike—
you won’t appreciate turns of phrase.

You spy on me like you observed
the harvest failure, *symposium of comets flinging pollen*, same as you watch the inbox

for your ding of dopamine. But I’m a drag of light
across tar, dead information. Leave me alone. I mean it. So what if all that’s left

are footprints in wet grass? They’re mine.
So what if all I leave behind are tire marks?
Find your own tragedy. I’m not raw
material to plumb for pages.
Find another mangled motif; yes,
I resonate with caverns under Tennessee,

*bats like black suede darkening the sky,*
and your guilt ushers in the gloaming.
I get it—you’re trying to write something

sufferable, leaning forward at your desk
and clutching someone’s startled skull—
your own or Yorick’s—big black eyes

as round and wet as mirrors.
WANDERER ABOVE THE SEA OF FOG, REIMAGINED
by Kristen Hickey
WINTER TOWN
by Tammita Phongmekhin
FOG OUT THE WINDOW

by Ana Paula Pinto-Diaz

I.

People who are barely awake have a tendency to lose words in a lot of big places. I realize that, when I’m drunk and barely awake, I lose them in a lot of little places, too. Today, by midnight, I’m thinking and speaking in fragments. I stand in my room for a while, lean against the wall next to an open window for air. My head floats and inside it feels a little like a balloon being gently blown upwards, an ascent blocked by the top of my head, which starts to pound under the pressure. The white lights in the room press their thumbs against my eyes and I reach for the door, stumble out into the halls where I hug a couple of people I happen to run into. I shove my way through the ‘dance floor’ in the lobby with a lot of elbows and shouldering. We push and get pushed; shout at each other even though we can’t hear. We know we’ll find blue aches on our bodies the next day and we hand them out gladly to each other. Everyone is all sweaty and desperate, and I think about how it feels all on my skin—only the warmth and the sweat, without the noise—and I try to remember something simple. I see myself as a little boy with my arm hanging out the car window. I remember how we used to ride the winding roads for hours. In those early mornings the blue world always felt a little bigger than usual, like we could keep going and going and never leave the fertile laps of the mountains in the fog. We swallowed its vapor, and everything glowed under the soft grey mask of it. I remember that sometimes I would lay with my head on my dad’s shoulder and just watch the jungle leaves spattering the windows. And when I think about this I also think about Sam. Mostly I think about how I wish I didn’t think about
her. Mostly, because I told her all of these things: about how the air was thin but you could breathe it forever, because it smelled like rain and dirt, or the orchids on the rock walls, with a hint of my mother’s hairspray coming from the front seat.

***

I realize the girl just in front of me in the hall wears the same stuff in her hair. When she turns and trips over her own feet it reaches me, and I feel a little dizzy as Shakira starts pulsing over the speakers. Again. As usual I’m thinking someone should teach the DJ you need to have more than one playlist to be taken seriously, but I just tell John I want to leave now and we push our way out again. We would fall over, but there isn’t any room to, and when we finally get back out to the halls, we just keep talking about how bad the music is. I don’t tell him sometimes I like the outdated pop songs because they remind me of those childhood road trips. And I don’t tell him I’m thinking about my dad tonight, but I am because it’s October and I miss him. It takes me a minute to realize it’s a little strange to be thinking about the smell of my grandmother’s hairspray on Saturday night at an ugly, sweaty party. But I am. John doesn’t call his parents anymore so I never tell him when I feel homesick on the weekends.

I realize John’s still talking only when he stops mid-sentence and I notice the corners of his eyes twitch. He adjusts his damp shirt with wine-dizzy fingers. I squint my eyes at him, he shakes his head, his eyes get wide and I almost ask what’s wrong, but then there’s a hand at my shoulder. I always thought she smelled like sycamore. I turn and look Sam in the eyes for the first time since we broke up three weeks ago.

II.

One time, as we stood on the balcony outside a friend’s apartment, talking, she told me she always wondered if she would beat her kids. She never mentioned fear, but all I could hear her saying was: *I’m terrified I’ll beat my kids.* It was so vulnerable, but she said it so calmly, and I still think about that now and then, almost a full year later.

“It’s just the way I grew up,” she said that night. She didn’t seem sad about it, exactly. It was just a fact of her life. Something she’d given a lot of thought to; something about herself she understood well. But it wasn’t the kind of thing she said often, and I guess that’s why I remember it so well. That, and the fact that it was the night I first thought I’d started to fall in love with her. Although now I realize I never really did.

“I don’t know why I think about that,” she added after a moment.

She’d been leaning with her elbows on the balcony railing outside my room, blowing cigarette smoke up and out towards the central quad of our dorm building. I watched her hands as she moved them towards her lips and then back down to dangle the cigarette delicately over the edge of the railing. I used to think the way she held things was strange—there was a certain
softness to the shape of her hands and their movements that made it seem like she barely ever touched anything at all. Instead, things simply drifted between her fingers and around her palms as if without weight or gravity. Like the hand models in magazines, with their fingers perfectly posed around some object they would never own or think about again. I found it impossible to think they could ever hurt anything.

“I think it’s fair to ask,” I told her, and I believed it, even though her honesty frightened me a little, somehow. I leaned with the small of my back pressed against the railing and watched her out of the corner of my eye with my own inadequate hands thrown awkwardly in my pockets.

“Is it?”

“Why wouldn’t it be?”

“I feel like it doesn’t make a difference what I think now. Like, I can say whatever I want, but I won’t really know until it happens.”

“I don’t think it’s too soon to make up your mind.”

“I wish I knew that for sure.”

Earlier that night we had pushed through small talk about the weather for a while, and normally I would have gotten irritated by it, but at the moment I knew we were circling around the edges of something else. I’d waited, let myself listen and speak a little bit slowly. And while we both said we were cold, we made no move to go inside, just kept talking. And then, somehow, there it was. That something else. It was that fear, and that uncertainty. It was the feeling of us beginning to wonder what was next.

“I think it says a lot about you.” I said. “How?”

AND THEN SOMEBODY, THERE IT WAS. THAT SOMETHING ELSE. IT WAS THAT FEAR, AND THAT UNCERTAINTY.

“At least you’re thinking about it. I’d say that means a lot.”

Sam didn’t say anything but looked at me for a long time, then smiled, and that was the end of it. After a while at some point I looked up and said something about the light pollution that made the sky look orange at that late hour, when it should have been pitch black. She chuckled softly.

“I’m just used to it by now,” she said. “I’ve lived in cities my whole life.”

“I still think it’s the strangest thing.”

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The two of us had weeks of conversations like this before we started dating, and then we got together just a few weeks after that night. At some point when I asked her more about her parents, she said she didn’t get along with her dad, and that she loved her mom but didn’t feel that close to her.

“I don’t think she knows me at all,” she
told me. But then she also said she wanted her first tattoo to be the Chinese characters of her mother’s maiden name, because it didn’t get passed down to her children and would be forgotten otherwise. All I could think was, how funny, that we barely ever get to keep the things we actually want, even when they’re so small and abstract. Even when they don’t mean anything to anyone else but us, like a name. Instead we try to find some way to make these things real so we can hold onto them in some strange, pseudo-physical space. And the things we get to keep are the hardest to understand. The fears of our parents. Their violence. Their courage. The dreams they couldn’t find after all. Their ambition. The hope for something else, and something more. And it’s just funny, sometimes in the saddest way. For Sam, because she started smoking cigarettes to prove she wasn’t afraid of them after her father burned her. For me, because I’ve never been sure I can live up to those dreams.

The first time we had a serious argument, I had put my hand on Sam’s shoulder to try to calm her down. She shoved me away, hard, and then recoiled like a pill bug. When she pushed my arm away I lost my balance for a moment and backed into the coffee table. A mug dropped to the ground and showered the floor in its fragments. Sam was so afraid that she sat on the couch with her hands under her legs, clenched in fists, for almost two hours. She just cried and cried silently. I mumbled apologies for minutes on end but nothing seemed to reach her. I told her it didn’t matter, that she had had the right to push my hand away, that she didn’t hurt me. She didn’t say anything then, or after, when she finally stopped crying and began gently picking up the white flakes of ceramic on the ground. She never spoke about fear, but all I could hear her saying was: *I’m terrified.*

People tend to talk about how we all turn out like our parents or nothing like them. They never talk about how terrifying it is to stand in the middle and not know where to go. Or about what happens when you know where you want to go but don’t know if you can get there.

III.

Tonight in the dim hallway Sam’s hand on my shoulder is warm, but there’s no warmth in the gesture because it’s only there out of habit. Also out of habit, I say hey. Mentally I’m screaming at the top of my lungs. She’s dressed all in black to match her hair and her eyes, and the freckle on the apple of her left cheekbone. The redness of her drunk eyes is probably the most color on her right now. She says she didn’t expect to see me, but she’s glad she did. I know the first thing, at least, is a lie, but I’m surprised that the second sounds so sincere. I don’t say anything back. She leans in and I freeze.

“Vodka?” she asks, smelling it on me.

“What else?” I say. She tells me I might as well be using it as cologne by now.

I remember that there weren’t any sycamores where I grew up, but the smell
NIGHT LIGHT
by Miranda Proctor
of it on her, almost like that of a soft, dark tea, still makes me miss home somehow. It scared me that she didn’t make me feel less lonely, but I don’t think I ever told her that.

“IT SCARED ME THAT SHE DIDN’T MAKE ME FEEL LESS LONELY, BUT I DON’T THINK I EVER TOLD HER THAT.”

“Weren’t you gonna stop?” she asks.
“I’m drinking a lot less.”

She rolls her eyes and I feel the irritation whip down my body. Her hand is hot on my shoulder. Say something, say something, say something, I think, but I struggle to catch any words in the right order. Before I do, she turns to John.

“And you?” she asks, twisting her lips.
“Are you also still an alcoholic?” At the silence and the looks on our faces she laughs. It was a joke, she says. When John smiles a little uncomfortably she moves her free hand over to his shoulder and I feel a coolness in its absence. Her words sting, but I know why she says it. I wish I could tell her that. I also wish she wasn’t here, because my head is hurting again. I spent too much time today thinking about my parents, and home, and I feel my stomach starting to kick itself like it does when I feel guilty or afraid. I don’t know how I got here, but I just wish Sam hadn’t found her way here also. I think about the mountains again and they seem so clean in my head—so much the opposite of these halls and all these people.

“Who’re you here with?” I ask in an effort to remind her, hoping she’ll go back to whoever it was. She slurs something about an old mutual friend of ours I’d forgotten about, making no move to go. I mumble some excuse and start walking back towards my room, but John follows with Sam hanging onto his arm, too drunk to shake her off. A minute later their two sloppy bodies fall into the room after me, so I tell John I’m going to the bathroom and hope he’ll get rid of her by the time I come back. Under the white lights I slosh a bit of lukewarm water on my face and gaze into the mirror for a little too long. I remember doing the same thing three weeks ago, in the same mirror, right after I told Sam I didn’t want to see her anymore. Just like then, I don’t learn anything new by looking at the center of my forehead for five minutes, but I find myself thinking about when my grandma told me I look like my dad. I’ve never been able to remember, but I wish I knew if that was true. I’m also thinking about how I had thought not seeing Sam anymore would make me feel less lonely, but it feels the same.

In the lobby of my suite she’s still on John’s arm, and a few other people have drifted in since I left the door propped open. John is laughing at something someone perched on the coffee table just said, and then he and Sam sit, their sloppy bodies sinking into the couch. I decide to just stand still and quiet.
for a while, because even though my head is clearing, my thoughts stay pretty much the same. I close my eyes and all I can think is that everything was so different three weeks ago and I just don’t know how I got here. Then I think I should just go to bed and pretend I never did.

I open my eyes and, of course, John is still here. And so is Sam. But this time when I look at them I have to shake my head to throw off the impression that they look like they’ve been kissing; that John’s hand hovers just a little too low on her waist. She’s sitting with her legs across his lap. She shifts and lays her head on his shoulder. I feel my body like a sugar cube in hot water.


IV.

The night Sam and I broke up, I had poured a sizeable fraction of a handle of vodka down my throat and later proceeded to nearly fall out a window seven stories up. Around the same time Sam, also barely conscious, had flung herself on my roommate’s bed and told everyone—in the sort of way where she pretended she didn’t know anyone was listening—that she was too good for me and my bullshit. She barely looked up when I crawled over the windowsill and set myself down on the downward-slanted ledge just beneath it, but that didn’t really hit me until the next morning.

John told me I was being stupid when I first opened the window, so naturally I bent at the waist and leaned over as far as I could.

I wasn’t really thinking of what could come after; I just felt hot and stuck in my own room with all the same people I saw every day. The skyline looked nice and opening a window seemed a lot more reasonable than trying to get outside. Below me was the north parking lot and beyond that a dark mass of trees in the dimness of the grey-pink night. On the very horizon, like teeth on a zipper, the skyscrapers of downtown Houston stood as always, lights strong and unblinking. The sky around and just above the buildings glowed just a little bit lighter than the rest, as if a soft, rosy star were about to rise through it at any moment—like a warmth emanating from the city.

While I was there on the ledge there was a lot of yelling and swearing behind me, so I did a lot of yelling and swearing back. I’m going to the roof, I said: I’ll be fine, I can do it. Don’t be so damn boring. On and on. The more I shouted and got shouted at, the more irritable I got. I’m not sure where it came from, but that night I also thought about my dad. I mostly wondered if he’d be disappointed, because I couldn’t imagine he’d be happy to see me out of my mind, in danger of flattening myself on the parking lot pavement. The next day John told me that I had sat there and mumbled like a lunatic about my grades, about my ex in high school, about my mom and my dad. He said I started crying and talking about when I was a kid, that I said crazy things like “What the hell does it even mean to be an immigrant?” and “I swear I’m going
to jump out this fucking window.” I think John and a few other people tried to talk me down for a while, and eventually, someone’s hand ended up with a grip on my shoulders and I tripped my way back inside the room, but not without putting up a fight. I kicked and shoved my way free from the concerned hands that tried to push me onto a seat, but not once did Sam look up from where she whined with her face in my roommate’s pillow. She was utterly unphased by the violence of it; the shouting and shoving couldn’t touch her. They already had a few too many times.

Eventually I calmed down, and a while later managed to convince John that I was okay, that I needed to go out for some air. I stumbled down the hallway for a while. Like always, the lights were covered in thin colored paper to set some kind of unnamed mood, and my shoulders grazed the walls as I walked. When I passed the girl’s bathroom a tall, blonde girl I’d never seen before asked if I was with Sam, and I said no. She asked me if I knew who was, and I said no. Eventually I found out Sam had spent the rest of the night in the bathroom throwing up. When she sobered up she found me on the roof, and the breakup was simple. It started with “what the hell was that?” and ended with “I can’t deal with this anymore.”

V.

As I watch Sam tonight the memories in my head spin like dervishes and show no signs of slowing down. I try to leave but halfway out of the room my anger gets the best of me and I turn back towards her.

“Why didn’t you stop me?” I say. It takes a while for Sam to realize I’m talking to her. She blinks rapidly and asks me what the hell I’m saying.

“What? Stop you from what?”

“Why didn’t you?” I say again.

“What? What? You’re being so crazy right now.”

By now all the people in the room I’d forgotten were there are looking at me like an orphaned kid left on the side of the road. I don’t move, but I raise my voice and tell everyone to leave. Five or six different faces look at me like I just kicked their dogs.

Get out. Louder this time.

As people start to shift and wander towards the door, I see that John is looking as if the last few shots he took just took a shot at him and hit home, so I figure he can spend the night here and get his ass kicked in the morning. Sam has moved her legs off his lap and sits awkwardly on the couch beside him, rubbing her eyes so the black of her mascara almost makes it look like she’s been crying. To my surprise she looks me right in the eyes.

“Honestly, you could’ve pretended you cared.” I finally say. “Just for a second. I mean, that would’ve been okay.” Her eyes are wide now—as wide as they can get in her sleepy, sluggish state, anyway—but I just keep going. “Seven stories,” I say, stepping closer. She doesn’t say anything and I can tell that she remembers. She stands and I think
that now we’re almost too close, because when I breathe, heavily out of frustration, I catch a hint of sycamore as she moves. “You didn’t care. Not for one second.” I add. This time I lower my voice and, even to my own surprise, I realize there isn’t much emotion left in it. It hits me that I sound like Sam that night when she told me about her dad. This scares her, and seeing her look like that scares me, because I don’t think I ever have before. A long pause. As the hot room suddenly begins to feel like too much, I just walk out.

"She stands and I think that now we’re almost too close, because when I breathe, heavily out of frustration, I catch a hint of sycamore as she moves."

“Wait,” she says behind me. I keep walking, not even sure where I plan to go. “Wait, wait, wait,” she keeps saying, and then: “It’s not like you cared about me, either.” At that I stop. I want to think she deserved it but instead I just admit to myself that I feel sorry. I have to, because the guilt I felt kicking my stomach earlier gets restless again. I didn’t think she knew about that, and I guess I didn’t want her to because then I couldn’t be completely blameless.

When I don’t say anything I can see it frustrates her. She walks up and puts her hands on my shoulders, pauses for a split second, and shoves me against the wall. I gasp because I make contact with it a little harder than I had expected. “Don’t you have anything to say?” she says it as a whisper that’s so much worse than if she were yelling. Still I don’t say anything. I can’t think. She raises a fist and punches my chest. Once, softly. Then again, a little harder. My hands fly up and grab her by the wrists. She fights against it so I press my fingers into her skin, harder, until she can’t move, and then her face breaks and she’s screaming. She doesn’t move and she just screams. Then, after a while, she stops as if someone snipped her vocal cords and just stands with her mouth open, screaming silently. By then most people have gone to bed, but their faces appear around corners when their curiosity gets the better of them. When they see us in the hallway they gawk for varying lengths of time, then turn away uncomfortably and urge each other back into their rooms.

For a few minutes I just watch her like I’ve never seen her before, and at this point I’m not sure I have, but I’m guessing she’s thinking the same thing about me. I watch her mouth when it finally closes, a strand of hair, damp with sweat, caught between her lips. I watch her eyes tighten, feel her
shudder through my hands still on her wrists. Finally she breathes evenly. I let her hands down and, to my surprise again, she looks me right in the eyes.

Neither of us says anything for a long while.

I think we both break at the same time.

***

We talk quietly for about twenty minutes, sitting across from each other on the dirty hallway floors, and find our way to apologies, but without any fillers or explanations. At this point those are unnecessary.

“I’m sorry if I hurt you,” she says.

“It’s okay. You didn’t.”

“I did. I’m sorry.” I know she’s not talking about tonight.

“I’m sorry.” She knows I’m not talking about tonight.

In the ensuing silence I finally walk Sam back to her room.

“Where are you going?” she asks softly when we’re at her door.

“I don’t know. I just need to go somewhere.”

“Are you gonna drive?”

“Yeah, probably.”

“Please sober up first.”

“Yeah. Okay.”

“Okay.”

“Do you need anything? Water? Food?”

“No, no. I’ll be okay.”

We look at each other quietly again. I don’t know why but, impulsively, I reach for her hands, taking one in each of mine. I want to kiss her knuckles, but I don’t. Instead I look at how they rest in mine, and wonder if they’re even touching me. If they ever did. I squeeze them, just a little bit, softly, and run my thumbs over her knuckles. She understands. Just a shake of the head, and she smiles. I nod, let go. “Goodnight.”

“Goodnight.”

VI.

When Sam had asked me about my own parents for the first time I told her what I always tell people who ask: that my dad died when I was nine, and my mom brought my brother and I to America a year after that. I told her how our mother brought us up all on her own with half a tongue of English and another of Spanish. But I also told her things I’d been too afraid to say before, like how I was terrified I’d never go home again, and how every time I got drunk or skipped class too often, I wondered if my parents would be disappointed. She said she was afraid of being a disappointment, too, but mostly to herself.

“My parents were immigrants, too,” she told me once. “From China. But I grew up here, lived in Austin my whole life.” I always thought it was kind of beautiful, in an almost sad kind of way, that we’d lived in the same city for almost ten years.

“Do they miss it?” I asked her.

“Guangzhou? They won’t admit it, but I know they do. We go back once in a while but I know it’s not the same for them now. I guess sometimes you change too much for home to feel like home.”

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“And then you’re just stuck, aren’t you.”
“Yeah. That’s what you’re afraid of, isn’t it?”

She was right, and I told her so. She said she couldn’t even imagine what it’d be like to be so far away from home. I said sometimes I wasn’t sure I was, because it felt like a dream.

“Tell me about this dream,” she would say.

And so eventually I told her about Quito, my city. About the mountains, and being a little kid with my arm hanging out the car window on those long drives when things were so different. I told her about the fog and the colors; about every little thing that I could think of then, if I tried really hard to recall it. These are all those moments I still remember over and over again, the same ones that came to me on the dance floor earlier tonight. I think these are some of the small, abstract things I get to keep in this lifetime. But I realize now that I still don’t really know exactly how to hold onto them, and maybe that’s what scares me the most.

VII.

In my car I drive with one hand and send the other out the window. At first I leave the radio off so I can listen to the rush of my movement, but eventually I get bored, flick it on, and leave it on the first station that comes up. It plays some kind of alt-rock and I hum along to a song I haven’t listened to since senior year of high school. In the passenger seat is my backpack, sloppily stuffed with impulse alone—a few changes of clothes and contact lenses, a book I told myself I’d start reading last summer, and a water bottle full of coffee.

I TOLD HER ABOUT THE FOG
AND THE COLORS; ABOUT
EVERY LITTLE THING
THAT I COULD THINK OF
THEN, IF I TRIED REALLY
HARD TO RECALL IT.

When I told Sam I didn’t know where to go I meant it, so I took a short walk around our building and ended up right back in my bedroom. I shifted John into a more comfortable position on my bed and left a glass of water on the nightstand. I spent a few minutes watching the skyline out my window. Another few replaying my conversation with Sam. Then I opened my window again, smoked a cigarette, and started packing my bag. By then it was nearing 2AM and I figured I could get home before anyone was awake on a Saturday morning, hopefully with enough time to figure out what to say.

***

When I was seven, the last time we drove up the mountain, my dad told me the fog was the breath of the earth, warm with sleep
early in the morning. Beneath it everything rushed by in every shade of green I’d ever seen. My dad told me the spirits of our dead would come play in the fog sometimes.

He’d said if I whispered, they’d whisper back.

He’d said I could only hear them if I stayed very quiet, just for a while.

I laid my head back and listened.

What did you hear? he asked later. I said I couldn’t hear a word and he made me try again. After a while I found my ears filled with the rushing of the river as we drove over a bridge. Pieces of stone crunched beneath the wheels of the car. Wherever the road became narrow, branches knocked on our windows and I reached out to greet them. The rainforest chanting: insects, birds, monkeys, bending branches and pebbles rolling off the rock wall. I almost thought I could hear the fog whenever it touched my skin. Just my little arm floating out a car window.

***

I tried to hear him that night a few weeks ago, with my body halfway out a window and maybe even closer to being nothing at all. And again last night, in the hallways with Sam. When I make it to Austin, early while everyone else is still asleep, I eventually just wander up onto the roof like I did with her the first time I brought her home. I sit there for hours in the early morning, alone. I close my eyes and just try to remember. Again I think about the fog—how it almost filled the air with its own perfume. It wasn’t quite the same, but I realize it used to carry a soft tea smell, almost like sycamore.
BLOODLETTING

by Alison Liu

There was once an Uber driver who told me the secrets of his passengers. They were the common ones, romantic ones: The woman who was in love with her husband’s sister; the man who killed his ex-girlfriend’s cat; the girl who kissed her mother’s boyfriend. He himself was having an affair with his mother-in-law. Well, I gave him one for his collection, but it was a lie.

This is the truth: I can’t stand the men in my life—I am nauseated by the thought. As in, I smoked a pack of cigarettes and vomited ashes from my lungs. As in, every time I am kissed now, they taste to me like betrayal or tobacco.

Well, the first time I smoked, it was with my neighbor the winter of seventh grade at the bus stop and I, just out of the shower, touched my frozen hair, broke off pigtails like popsicles. Sprinklers scattered sleet onto the grass and the apple trees above—encased in ice from the night’s storm—moaned through their new glass shells. Their branches fell around us like an apocalypse, shattering in the street, antique relics that would be the first to go at the end of the world. And the bright yellow bus pulled up to show us engine exhaust ghosts—how they linger above asphalt, shivering.

***

I work in a hospital, writing patient charts for doctors in the Emergency Department. This is what I can tell you of the human body:

1. The color of a brain spilling from the open scalp like secrets—pink and grey, same as a baby being born. Close your eyes to see it, brimming with images of the first kid, first kiss; and can you think of anything right now except how desperately you want to reach between the ridges of grey matter and hold your hand there in a groove where it might be warm, or moving?

2. Most women do not know when they are having a miscarriage. Many do not even know they are pregnant. See an ultrasound, revealing the empty pregnancy sac, where the embryo would have grown. The doctors say that the symptoms are the same as those for menstruation: bleeding, cramping, crying. They say it is normal; they say that as many as one out of every four pregnancies end in miscarriages. They say that emotion is a clinical diagnosis.

3. Hemoglobin transports oxygen from your lungs to your muscle, cradling air like an infant in your blood. This is why an unhappy person can die staring through her windshield at an oil painting of red tulips hanging crooked in the sterilized suburban garage; oxygen has no way of moving through her blood when the carbon monoxide exhaust holds so tightly to hemoglobin and will not let go, with dry fingertips forcing...
FRACTURES
by Ana Paula Pinto-Diaz
into its binding pocket—so that, with every breath she takes, her muscles can breathe each a little less.

***

This is how it always goes: I ask my hook-ups, “Can you believe how delicate our bodies are, wrapped together like this, like gifts?” In response, they touch me as if they want to rearrange me, as if they are searching. I want to ask them if they know how slowly their hearts beat, like a blue whale’s, like the march of a funeral procession.

Instead I say, “What?”
“Nothing,” they say.
“What?” I say, again.
They say, “Nothing,” and rest their cheeks on my head. They say, “Your hair smells like fire.” They smile. Kiss it as if to put it out.

***

“Here,” I told my neighbor. We were catching up for the first time since we’d left for college. “This pick-up line is for your Tinder matches. Ready?”—deepened my voice—“Hey girl, I must be Rick Perry, because the best I can do is get a D in you.”

He didn’t think it was funny, and I should have known better; he the capitalist, I the socialist, each thinking the other an uglier ideal. “What about this one,” he said, “How free are you tonight, on a scale of workers-seizing-the-means-of-production to free-market-is-a-pillar-of-American-capitalism?”

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“You can seize my means of production any night,” I said.

“You don’t mean that,” he said, eyes hardening.

“Oh,” I said, “No, I don’t.”

***

Once, in Chongqing, a street fortune teller told me that the wrinkle inside my hand was a concubine’s necklace in a past life. She closed my fingers over my palm as if over pearls, told me my story read from paper skin; I was buried alive to keep him company in his afterlife; I was the tongue between two lips shaped like permission. Oh, if she could see me now—

For, I am broken windshield glass on I-45 under a hitchhiker’s bare foot, twinkling red and blue against asphalt. I am wanderer from ambulance to ambulance; I have been sleepwalking for years, over highways littered with armadillos and opossums, over guts spilt on asphalt like from the glass of a crybaby.

I am cannabis smoke, thick like white-picket-fenced-in grass and clinging to your skin like corrosion. I am your breath as you hold a high; I am your blood racing through dilated veins, made of oxygen and iron. I am your eyes rusting over, and I am your skin, crumbling under lover’s touch.

Well, I am the voice at the end of a suicide hotline. And I can tell you all the secrets in the world, but you’ve probably heard them all; you’re probably heartbroken, inconsolable. How could you not be?

***

The summer before eighth grade, there was a creek behind the highway by our neighborhood, where we spent our afternoons. It was the summer that kingbirds were dropping dead from the sky in the heat. These were our state birds: scissortail flycatchers, with feathers so sharp they’d cut our tongues, us running away, us running our mouths. Us run over by Sleek Mom Volvos propelled by pretty housewives, leaving us and their affairs behind.

This was the creek chasing Route 66. This was where we wrote childhood secrets that we sent away as paper boats, where we trapped fireflies in sticky plastic Coke bottles, where we stood in the water with toes digging into the sediment, sinking until we were up to our knees, then our hips, then… It was a slow sort of disappearing.

Above us, bird bones cracked mid-flight; the kingbirds had fallen, discovering for the first time that their own skeletons were hollow.

***

In the hospital, they play a lullaby over the intercom when a baby is born. The anesthesiologist tells me that it is to remind us that life is coming in as life falls out, like a broken hourglass. He tells me how the melodies are eerie in the OR, how they play right before patients slip away, how he has never heard the end of a lullaby because the flatline always drowns out the creaking of the bough under the weight of a cradle, like a requiem, like rock-a-bye-bye-bye...

I watch the anesthesiologist’s long fingers
reaching across the keyboard like the bars of a cage, and imagine how a patient would feel falling asleep under his touch—vulnerable, undoubting, chilled.

This is the only surgery I’ve had, performed by my father: Excision of central incisor via thread and slamming door. I left it under my pillow, but found it decaying under the bed years later.

***

We were in my neighbor’s first car driving down Route 66, past cows asleep on their feet in fields and graveyards, past the iconic 66-foot neon soda bottle glowing at night, bubbling stars into the sky. I watched his lips, moving disjointed from the rhythm of the radio.

“What?” I said.

“I’m mouthing the lyrics,” he said.

“I swear to God you’re not,” I told him, “The words are, ‘Now I’ve hit the mark, stabbing at the dark, and I cannot help but ignore the people staring at my scars.’”

“This is the secret,” he said. “It’s the watermelon trick—if you mouth the word ‘watermelon’ it looks like you know the lyrics.”

“But—” I said. He showed me his teeth; I’d never seen a smile so ugly.

***

In high school, I had a canker sore inside my lip the size of a fingerprint, from being kissed too hard, that grew and grew behind my lips until every inch of my gums tasted like concentrated rust, raw. I sat by the window and poured salt water in my mouth, and it dripped through as if in a sieve.

Outside, a cuckoo was dying. He was trying to pick up a tortilla chip too large for his beak and the cuckoos around him were plucking off his feathers slowly one by one, but he never noticed them. Too consumed by his chip. In the flurry of soft brown, a gentle tornado, he was swept away, and all that was left was the chip, rugged in the smooth green of grass.

***

I sat by the window and poured salt water in my mouth, and it dripped through as if in a sieve.

I did not know I was crying until I tasted the salt on my tongue, though my water glass had fallen empty to the floor. This memory like a grain of sand has escaped my mind, a sieve also.

***

I asked my neighbor, “Do you know any constellations?” His eyes were quiet in the dark; he said, “Only the secret ones.” He said, “They’re shy,” and he made me promise not to show anyone. He showed me a canary, staring warily because it could not tell the difference between night and coal mine; a joint being lit by the spark of the North Star; a dancer stumbling down the stairs, still graceful in her fall.
Now, for my canker sores, I swallow Benzocaine gel by the spoonful. It is a local anesthetic and numbs my throat, tingling on the way down. Outside the window, highways tangle themselves into irreversible knots, and cars trip over each other like clumsy feet, and children play chicken with the light rail. My heartbeat is caffeinated with metronome vibrations, pendulum heartstrings. I imagine my ribcage arranged around the muscle; I imagine my bones tattooed with secrets. I imagine my organs embracing each other, desperately, irretrievably in love. I imagine they are arranged geometrically inside my skin, like apples on a tree in Eden.

My roommate wears cigarette perfume. She is a chemistry major, and tells me that Benzocaine will impair hemoglobin’s affinity for oxygen, slowly. I tell her, the smoker, the hypocrite, that no one has come to the ED for dying slowly; it is not an emergent condition. Resume looking for birds on the power lines outside our window.

***

If someone dies in the ED, you write the chart almost exactly as if she had not. The story—history of present illness, review of systems, medical and social history—the same. Under Physical Exam: *No palpable pulse.* *Pupils dilated, not reactive to light.* Under Assessment, *Expired.*

Consider this—a secret not for my own body:

I want to pour concrete down my throat so that I will be hard, too. So I will sediment, and settle. So that if my heart were to burst, there would be nowhere for the infection to seep except into stone. I want to give all of myself away, until all that is left is me. I want to donate blood until I am dry and say all the words you could say in a lifetime in all the arrangements you could possibly say them. I want tragedy. I daydream daily, of flirting with death, flirting with cigarettes and the open ocean, with the open window on the seventh floor, with telling a Texan on a windy day, “Shoot me. I dare you.”

But I know Death, or someone like it. Well, he’d call me a tease, jokingly at first. He’d eye my tank top strap fallen down my shoulder, tell me all the reasons I should vote for Trump, wait ’til I’m sleeping to hold me down and—

Well. I dream in monochrome now; it is a silent film, it is a bloodletting. The words are deliberate and heavy as blood during a stroke.

I dream that he mouths the words, “You were asking for it, you know.”

The next night he says, muted, softened, “Forgive me, I never meant to hurt you.”
And the next, the nightmare, he tells me, “I’m sorry; I have been in love with you since seventh grade.” Those nights are the worst. Those nights, I believe him.

Some nights, I mouth, “Watermelon, watermelon, watermelon,” and wonder if he has gotten better at reading lips. It is cruel, I know. I know it is not a humorous scene; likewise, I do not laugh. I know—I should say something more. But it is not in the script, and in the morning it will be winter, and I will wake with ashes clinging between my teeth.

When we were young, my neighbor and I spent our loose money at Frontier City, a cowboy-themed amusement park, distinctly Oklahoman, distinctly entropic, red-dirt tornadic. It was his first time on a roller coaster, and I could see the apprehension draining like aqueous humor behind his eyes. We were holding hands by the last crosstie, though I do not remember when we started. This is how I will remember him, cheekbones wet with fear and fingers gripping mine like carbon monoxide on blood.

Had the world ended in this moment, had the roller coaster run off its rails, I would have been contented with the truth uncovered from the debris: the bones of two hands holding, decomposing into each other.
RIGHT SIDE UP
by Miranda Proctor
Dr. Hayan Charara has earned a PhD in literature and creative writing from the University of Houston, where he currently teaches. His most recent poetry collections include *The Sadness of Others* (2006)—which was nominated for the National Book Award—and *Something Sinister* (Carnegie Mellon, 2016). As an Arab American, his work often addresses identity, as well as family and loss. His children’s book *The Three Lucys* (2016) won the Lee & Low Books’ New Voices Award Honor.

You’ve spoken on the ephemerality of poetry born from social media in past interviews. Of your poems, which do you feel have the best chances of ‘surviving’ throughout time? Is this a preoccupation of yours when you write?

A teacher of mine, who was also a poet, told us how he and most everyone he knew back in the late 1950s thought Allen Ginsberg’s “Howl” wouldn’t last, that the poem was only a fad. He couldn’t have been more wrong. Even Ginsberg didn’t think that anyone other than his friends would read the poem. It’s out of our hands, really, whether a poem makes it.

I can say, though, that some of my poems work harder than others. The ones doing more than I ever imagined are “Animals,” “Usage,” “Something Sinister Going On,” “Mother and Daughter,” and “Thinking American.” Most are from my recent book, *Something Sinister*, but “Thinking American,” from my first book, goes back to the late 90s.

Relatedly, have you noted a change or general trend among your students as social media has become increasingly ubiquitous and central to so many young lives? In their poetry?
Yes and no. On the one hand, some poems are stamped with the language of the times, but this is true of every age, every time. There’s also a surface-level depth to some poems, which could be a consequence of the brevity, the here-one-moment-gone-the-next quality of tweets and posts. But this kind of superficiality isn’t new, either.

Ultimately, I’m not worried about poetry. Whatever the influence, young poets who continue to write, who read poems outside of classrooms, they’ll end up becoming more deeply influenced by poets and poems than social media—they’ll know (if they don’t already) that there’s a huge difference between poems and posts.

You are (or were?) skilled in woodworks. What do you have to say about developing different crafts? Any merits to woodworking in particular? Do you keep any pieces for yourself?

Poetry is terrible at giving its creator immediate satisfaction—even if it does, the feeling is short-lived, and the work is hard, and often very solitary. Plus, any problem I ever came across with a piece of furniture was relatively easy to see, and to fix. Not so with a poem.

Woodwork—let me put it this way: it would take me on average about 25 to 30 hours to make a substantial piece of furniture, whether a table or cabinet (some poems take me a year or two or more to finish). Everybody understands a piece of furniture, no matter how creative you get with it; most people know how to talk about a table or a cabinet or chair, even if they don’t know squat about woodworking (if you’re at a party and want to bring a conversation to a screeching halt, start talking about poetry). And a piece of furniture can be used every single day.

“POETRY IS TERRIBLE AT GIVING ITS CREATOR IMMEDIATE SATISFACTION—EVEN IF IT DOES, THE FEELING IS SHORT-LIVED, AND THE WORK IS HARD, AND OFTEN VERY SOLITARY.

I’m not trying to discourage anyone from writing poems or “being a poet.” I am encouraging poets to find something in addition to poetry to provide them with pleasure or gratification because, most of the time, poems either fail to give us those things or are stingy in giving them to us.

As for my own woodwork, I haven’t done much since becoming a parent (I have two children, six and seven years old). I still have
all my tools, though—there’s hope I will get back to it.

I used to keep some of my pieces, but I’ve since sold or given them all away, except for one—the first piece I built, a cabinet.

**Considering your success at writing a children’s book (The Three Lucys), are there any other genres you’d like to try out? Did The Three Lucys come of any larger tradition such as creating bedtime stories for your children?**

I’m almost done writing a novel—I’ve tried my hand at novel writing before, and those manuscripts I think of now as practice runs. This one, I have high hopes that it’ll get into print.

I write essays regularly, too. I have one coming out soon, on memory, place, and poetic. It’s called “Thinking Detroit.”

The Three Lucys, I wrote several years before having children. Since having kids, I’ve only worked on one story for children, but it’s probably not really for children: it’s called Oblivion, and I began it after one of those days my kids had driven me absolutely nuts, and the first line reflects the mood I was in: “Everybody dies, even Mommy and Daddy.”

**Have you considered a future in which your children will one day read your work? Given the serious subject matter in many of your poems, would you censor their accessibility to your kids? Will you allow them to discover or show interest in your books independently?**

I’ve read The Three Lucys to my kids—it’s a tough story (about a child and his pets living through a war), but they got it, they asked insightful questions, and they moved on quickly.

Kids are usually more resilient than most people think. My kids, at least, were also already familiar with the themes of the book: by the time they were 3 and 4 years old, three of our pets had died (a cat and two dogs). So life prepared them for the story.

My wife and I also talk to them about, well, everything—nothing is off limits—we just do so with language they’ll understand, and if we judge a subject to be intense or too difficult to comprehend, then we try to break it down so that it’s not too scary or hard to understand. Whatever we do, we never lie or twist the facts around.

The short answer: yes, they can read anything I write, any time they want. You should know that, right now, they could care less about my poetry. They’re way more into Harry Potter than anything I’ve ever written.

It is clear from both your poetry and interviews that the implications of being an Arab American are pressing to you.
Although the issues that come with the particular intersection of your identity are specific, you have admitted that there exists the trap of falling into the “clichés of identity politics” when any writer interested in identity attempts to write over it. Do you have any advice to aspiring poets/writers that want to confront these issues? How does one avoid the “clichés of identity politics”?

You avoid clichés about identity the same way you do about love, loss, the moon, whatever you write about: you read what others have written; you examine yourself, your thinking, your assumptions with the fervor of a drill sergeant; and you take nothing for granted.

A cliché doesn’t only come about through laziness on the writer’s part—it can also be the product of not recognizing or realizing where your ideas about yourself (and others) come from, how they’re “made.” This is probably the easiest trap to get caught by when it comes to writing about identity, about self, about anything.

This year’s R2 is especially interested in the idea of “dwelling” (dwelling as home, habitat, culture, also as a state of contemplation and especially retrospection). Do you feel that your work is in conversation with this idea in any particularly interesting way?

A poet dwells. Before, during, and after the writing of a poem, I dwell. I mean this in more than just the contemplative sense of the word. The poem is the place where the ideas, the questions, the ‘truths’ that a poet is after reside. It’s the place where the strategies and techniques come to inhabit. The poem itself becomes a place—it’s temporary, sure, but every dwelling is temporary, really. We leave our homes every day, but we return, and when we do, we also always bring back something with us (groceries, a bad mood, or some good news). A poem is a lot like that.

**THE POEM IS THE PLACE WHERE THE IDEAS, THE QUESTIONS, THE ‘TRUTHS’ THAT A POET IS AFTER RESIDE.**

Also, simply, I spend a lot of time reading poems, everyday. And poems ask us to stop when we read them. They demand we read carefully. They ask us to pay close attention. The result, usually, is that we end up thinking and feeling something of consequence. In the best-case scenarios, a poem gives us something meaningful to keep. These days, with up-to-the-minute news, nonstop Facebook updates, Tweets and Tweetstorms, a poem can serve as
respite from the distractions coming at us from every which way. Isn’t that a place worth dwelling?

“PICK UP EITHER THE ILLIAD OR THE ODYSSEY—IDEALLY BOTH. I’VE READ THESE TWO EPICS MORE TIMES THAN ANY OTHER BOOK, AND EACH TIME I COME ACROSS SOMETHING NEW. EVERY TIME, THE POEMS KNOCK MY HEAD OFF.

In one of your past interviews you write that your poem “Usage” is “ecstatic about life especially in the face of so much opposition,” which has personally stuck with me since having read it about 2 weeks ago. Are there any favorite quotes of yours that you’d like to share? Any recent tidbits of writings that you’re still mulling over today?

Thanks for reading my poems, by the way, and for this interview.

So, I teach a course called “The Human Situation.” It’s a yearlong “great books” course, taught by almost a dozen professors—we read books from antiquity in the fall, modernity in the spring. I’ve been teaching this course for over ten years, and if there’s one writer everyone should read, it’s Homer, whom I read for this course every fall. Pick up either The Iliad or The Odyssey—ideally, both. I’ve read these two epics more times than any other book, and each time I come across something new. Every time, the poems knock my head off.

I also love the poems of Philip Levine. I decided to become a poet because of his poetry. He died a few years ago, but he left behind some of the most unforgettable poems of the twentieth century.

On my bedside table, I’ve got old and new books—I mean books I’ve read but am re-reading, books I haven’t read yet, books recently published, books that have been around for a long time: Chickamauga by Charles Wright, Dreaming the End of War by Benjamin Alire Sáenz, Thousand Cranes by Yasunari Kawabata, Inger Christensen’s alphabet, and Zach Savich’s new book of poems, Day Bed (he’s coming to Rice, to give a reading, in March), and Hume’s A Treatise of Human Nature.

As for quotes: my go-to writing quote—for students—comes from fiction writer Fred Leebron: “Writing is a war of attrition. Don’t attrish.”
A good way to end may be with a quote from Alan Watts, who was responsible for popularizing Buddhism in America: “Life is a game, the first rule of which is that it is not a game. It is deadly serious.”
JAKARTA
by Mascha Lange
in late hours we memorize the shadow and the outline —
this winter is too warm and I no longer feel
hand on hands, or unintentional. It’s fine
to think about the hours we conceal,
now it’s been over and over sixty days
and I’m only less knowing of words.

when the monsoon comes it stays
at least a while, and when the calling of birds
returns it comes alone — you seem to know
these movements; you seem to know the ease with which
they’re longing for departure, and to know
the river is to know the lack of air.

I stand only less knowing: I stand
with over sixty days written in the sand.
FERTILIZER
by Vidya Giri
PIG, AN ESSAY

by Sonia Hamer

When my grandmother died, my father bought a pig. A year and a half in, I can see that in a way I bought the pig, too. I gave him the idea, helped him carry out the deed. I thought I was joking. Half joking. Wanted to seem as if I was joking. Bad jokes carried too far are our primary mode of communication. If you can really call that communication. As far as the mysterious, electric conduction of that thing we call understanding goes, well. Our jokes are about as useful as a pair of rubber gloves. The blank was flesh now, running on its nerve.¹ Imagine taking all the things you've never, never said and sculpting them into a space the shape of a pig.

My father is leaving to buy the pig. He asks me to come along. We look alike, my father and I. Dark hair, dark eyes. Short bodies made even shorter by a tendency to curl our shoulders forward and wrap ourselves inward as if we are trying to hide from an angry, angry world. I am living at home for the summer. For almost two years, I have been struggling with bulimia. My symptoms began during my first semester of college. Things are better than they have been, but how much does that really mean? My mother and sisters are out of town. The potbelly farm is about twenty minutes outside of Baytown, Texas. ‘Farm’ in this case means a house with a special concrete enclosure for the pigs attached.

As we step down from my father’s truck we see her, the woman, the breeder of pigs. She is blonde, tiny. She is holding a shiny nylon rope like a leash. Harnessed to the end of the rope is a miniscule piglet. He is running back and forth on the short green grass, screaming his tiny little head off. Perhaps this is a bad sign. But when the woman picks the pig up, he calms. She shows me how to hold him; “Be sure to hold down his tail,” she says. “Like this. That way he won’t poop on you.” Ever dutiful, I hold the pig firmly, making sure to press my hand hard against the hairy pink ass. Even so, I cannot help but imagine the pig forcing his warm, smelly fear directly into my tingling palm.

Before we transact, the woman gives us a short tour of the farm. She shows us the other pigs, full grown, so we can have an idea of the things to come. The enclosure resembles a pavilion at a public park—a concrete slab with an imposing corrugated roof spreading dutifully overhead. No walls, only a low, encircling wire. Inside, the bright, musty smell of hay mingles with the nitrous stench of pig shit. Ten pigs, maybe, meander across the concrete floor, all of them the size of small dogs. When they see the woman, they run, snorting, circling around her like

¹ Thom Gunn
disciples at their master’s feet. Each pig is round, bristly, with pouches bulging out to make them as wide as they are tall. Their cheeks curve outward in the same way, quivering beneath the canny fervor of their eyes. And their noses. Their noses are like fingers, wet and probing. One male, old enough to have lightning bolts of gray streaked across his otherwise black face and sides, pushes past all of the others. His brow is fat and impressive, hanging down in a prickly fold to obscure his brilliant black eyes. This is the piglet’s father, the woman tells us. Hard to imagine that such a small thing will one day grow into this behemoth.

Imagine, now, that three and a half months have passed since my grandmother’s death. We have buried her body in a plain pine coffin marked with a single, six-pointed star. We have worn our kriah ribbons and stopped seven times, poured a shovel-full of dirt each on the freshly opened grave. We have had the shiva and lit the candle and said the mourner’s kaddish all grouped in a circle with tears still wet on our faces. Life has gone on. We are bringing the pig home. Six pounds, five ounces. Eight inches from snout to tail. Our pig is the perfect pink piglet, a potbelly bred to stay friendly and small. His hair is bristly and translucent, his skin pale rose like cherry blossoms. He has elfin ears and a straight little tail and thin, tapering feet like clicking high heels. On my lap, he nestles close as we bounce along in my father’s truck. His nose, pressed into the crook of my elbow, is filmy and wet. My father wants to name him Osama Pig Laden. When I ask what my mother will think of that name, what she will think of the pig at all, his face spasms with a transparent guilt. So, he hasn’t told her, then. I won’t tell her, either. I tell myself it is because I am detached, amused, but really it is because I don’t want to betray this adventure with him. My father lets the secret slip that night over the phone. My mother, two hundred
miles away, is not pleased. “We can’t call him Osama Pig Laden,” she says. We call him Pig, instead.

The pig, it turns out, likes to eat. He eats pig food, dog food, people food. He eats bits of plastic and grass and ants and anything that falls onto the kitchen floor. A tiny little thing, he falls on every meal, screaming, as if he has not been fed in days. He eats and eats and eats without shame or remorse. For Pig, there is no need to punish himself. He eats first and asks questions later. Or never, really. When I watch him, I do not feel envy but rather disgust and fascination. Is this what I look like, I wonder? Eyes glazed, mind focused on making a total eclipse out of the task at hand.

When a female patient begins treatment for an eating disorder, some of the first questions asked concern the patient’s mother. How did she talk about your body? How did she talk about her own? How when what why did she eat? Eat. That word still sends worms crawling out beneath my skin. And the answer is yes, when I was a young child my mother was overweight. Like many women, she disparaged herself constantly—her body, her intelligence, her very self. “I’m sorry,” were words always at the back of her throat. But somehow, when I think about the warping of my self-perception, I think just as much about my father. The manic, long-distance runner, the man terrified of aging and death creeping slow and uncontrollable in his body. Because as much as my mother apologized, I could also see something very fierce in her. Some knowledge, some force which kept her grounded amid the onslaught of day-to-day life. My father, however, had a different sort of fight. Walking through the house, muttering to himself. “I’m a bad person,” he would say. “I’m a bad person, I’m sorry, I want to go home.” Anger, exhaustion, migraines, wiping him out. Disappearing him, making it an imperative to keep a

“A TINY LITTLE THING, HE FALLS ON EVERY MEAL, SCREAMING, AS IF HE HAS NOT BEEN FED IN DAYS. HE EATS AND EATS AND EATS WITHOUT SHAME OR REMORSE.”

At some point, Pig has learned that he can use his nose to knock over the trash can, so we put a brick in the bottom. He learns to open the cabinets and pull out the contents, leaving them strewn across the floor. We cover the house in baby locks. He learns to tear up tissue paper and untie shoes, so we put the giftwrap up and watch our feet. He is a precocious little pig, fierce and intelligent, learning with all the fervor of a child at play.
perfectly quiet house. Inside, it seemed, he was missing something. Something which could make life more than a grinding, endless onslaught of draining demands.

But I cannot see inside my father. I can only see what leaks out. And what I see is guilt, self-hatred. A sense of persecution which pastes itself onto the world without. My mother is apologetic, but secretly sure of herself. My father is defensive, but his anger only shows the quaking depths of his insecurity.

In the end, though, neither of these visions is true. They are simply caricatures, composites I have created from the tainted, fertile ground of my own mind and memories.

I am eating. I am eating too much. As I realize my fear, I hear the tiny click of delicate hooves. The pig snorts gently as he walks towards me across the tile of the kitchen. He knows I am eating. He wants to be eating.

Impossible to ignore those beady, dissatisfied eyes. What, you eat all of that yourself and don’t have any for me? Reflected in the sparkling liquid of his intelligent irises, I begin to eat faster and faster, spiraling down once again. My body is a witch. I am burning it.

Every day, the pig is growing. Bigger and bigger. He has gotten so big now that he has begun to chase the cat. Periodically, two  

blurs will run by, one pink and one tuxedo. The cat will be silent, and the pig will be squealing. It is a game for the pig, I think, but not for the cat. When I watch my father with the pig it becomes easy to picture him as a young child. Excitement animates his face in a way I have never seen before. He is delighted, bashful even, around his latest pet. Often, he will stand with his arms crossed and watch the pig eat, enchanted.

February 19, 2016. The day after my grandmother’s death. She has left a binder filled with about one-hundred vignettes to be read after her passing. The first page is a letter explaining the binder, leaving it in my care. Sitting on the floor in my grandparents living room with the unmade hospital bed for company, I begin to read. My grandmother’s life, familiar and strange, unfolds before me. I read about her childhood, floating through the grim ghosts of the Holocaust. I read about her father’s death, her mother’s remarriage. My grandmother was twelve, thirteen. I read about her step-father, the things that happened to her inside of his house. At the base of my skull, a secret, tightly wound, begins to unfurl.

Even now, it is hard to think about. Impossible, almost. For most of my life I did not remember, except for the sliver of awareness that came in the moments when the emotions exploded and my brain short-circuited and I lay in the dark sobbing, “I’m
sorry I’m sorry I’m sorry,” only half sure what I was so goddamn sorry about. I do not remember how old I was. I do not remember if it happened more than once. When I tried to tell, I could not. When I try to talk about it, I cannot.

A revolution, some call this moment when the news is drenched with the downfall of famous men. No, it’s a witch hunt, say others. A red scare. I think of Judith Herman, a psychologist who observed that the study of psychological trauma is only allowed legitimacy when it can depend on the support of a political movement to counteract the ordinary social process of silencing and denial. In these moments, victims are allowed to come forward. Their stories are heard for the sake of a political cause. And then, eventually, the active process of bearing witness gives way to the active process of forgetting. Repression, discussion, and denial are phenomena of social as well as individual consciousness.3 Or, as the writer Dorothy Allison put it: we are leavening to the salt-crusted fear of this society that only wants to read terrible stories on paperback covers at a distance.

It is the end of 2016, the middle of my winter break. My father is dressed for work in pressed khakis and a striped dress-shirt. We are both drinking coffee. Mirror images, each of us wrapping a hand around the mug and an arm across our chests. We are talking about things neither of us wants to talk about. But I am compelled, pressed forward by an unknown force I will not recognize for several months. They are urgent, these stories.

“Well I just don’t think it’s a thing the way some people make it out to be,” he says. “More of a he said, she said type deal. Women angry and trying to manipulate men.”

I don’t know what to say. A force inside me pushes words out of my mouth, words which burn me. It is a dangerous thing, this unending hunger for approval. “I guess,” I say. “Some of the time, maybe. But not as much as you think.” Can I ever scrub these words from my mouth?

“And all of that stuff about domestic abuse, adults molesting children,” he goes on. “I don’t think that really happens, either.”

“How can you say that?” I say. My mouth, formerly so weak, has grown a new fury for itself. “Go take a look at grandma’s journals,

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3 Judith Herman

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if you really believe that!” My father pauses, sends a puff of air flying from his nostrils. Anger. Inside me, alarms go off. I cringe, but hold my state. “Well, I.” He forces his hands downwards, every line of his body screams with tension, with fury. “I. Well. Just forget it.”

“No.” I will not I will not I will not forget. “What were you going to say?”

“I just, don’t. I don’t necessarily believe that really happened.” He looks up at me, defiant. “Ok?” Inside of me, a deep sadness opens. A fundamental rejection. I can feel my mind scrabbling for a foothold in its rigid spiral downwards.

“What do you mean?”

“I just don’t necessarily believe you should take everything she said at face value.” Can’t believe her, I hear. Won’t believe her. Tears begin to slip down my face. I hate myself for this. It feels as if someone else is crying, not me.

THE WORSE MY DISORDER,
THE MORE PANICKED I AM,
THE TIGHTER THE CIRCLES.

“How can you say that?” I ask.

My father is surprised, unsettled, but still angry. “She just exaggerated a lot, y’know? Made a big deal out of tiny little things.”

“Like what?”

“I don’t know.”

“Please.”

Exasperated hands. “Like when I was a teenager, she would always make this big deal about dinner. God forbid we weren’t on time to dinner. Or cleaning the house. She made such a big fucking deal about cleaning the house.”

My mouth falls open in shock. Tears continue to stream from my eyes. “You don’t believe that her step-father terrorized her because you had to be on time to dinner?”

“It’s more than that.” My father shifts uncomfortably. There is a silence. I continue to cry. My father looks away. Not me, I think. Not me, not me, not me.

My father’s words left me furious. How could he let his adolescent anger be so blinding? How could I let his disbelief be so defining? That jerk, that dick, that fucking piece of shit. His thoughtlessness, I felt, was feeding my silence. His unresolved bullshit was eating a hole in my stomach. He was selfish. He couldn’t see a thing outside of his own head. All day, my rage left me breathless, leaking and shaking as Pig’s delicate toes clicked across the floor.

But maybe I am not being generous enough. After all, I knew my grandmother too. And from my father especially, she could be . . . demanding. The anger inside her was wrapped up tight, but when it erupted, it terrified. My father was expected to play by her rules, or else risk a very specific type of emotional fallout. Surely there are things she did that I will never know about.
There are parts of my father’s experience I will never be able to imagine. And though I can empathize with my grandmother’s insecurity, her unyielding need in the face of a world that had never given her enough, I can also see my father’s side of things. A child, burdened with an emotional responsibility no child should have to bear. A man unable to trust himself, unable to forgive himself for his need to escape. I don’t wonder why my father feels so persecuted. It’s just that, although I love him, I can’t quite forgive him, either.

My father and I have never spoken about my eating disorder. He doesn’t know about the event. We don’t talk about how I go to therapy, or how I take anti-depressants. We don’t talk about the fact that he takes them, too. We do talk about the pig, though. We talk about how big he is, how much he’s grown. “He’s just so cool,” my dad says, and I agree. Pig is safe to talk about. Pig is easy, Pig is known. And Pig isn’t hard to read. When he’s hungry, or angry, or scared, he lets you know. He head-butts the door and nips your feet and screams his little piggy screams. Sometimes, when he’s either excited or terrified, he pisses. Takes a great flooding leak right on the floor.

There’s a news story I once read about Lulu, the pot-bellied pig who saved her owner’s life by lying down in traffic. As the story goes, Lulu and her humans were vacationing on Presque Isle, a finger of land which protrudes into Lake Erie. (I remember spending summer days on the beach at Presque Isle State Park, which is actually attached to the City of Erie by the aptly named Peninsula Drive.) But one of Lulu’s owners was out fishing when the other had a heart attack. Lulu cried big fat tears and pushed her way out onto the street. She flopped down in traffic and refused to move. When the obstructed drivers came to get Lulu’s owner, they realized she was having a heart attack, and the woman was saved.

It is a curious story, full of strange actions which take the place of words. A pig so distressed that it forces an uncaring world to stop. I doubt that Pig would do the same for one of us. But I suppose he has already saved us, albeit in a slightly different way. Getting Pig, I guess, was our own way of flopping. A cry for help and a life raft, all-in-one package so strange that no one involved stood any chance of interpreting it.

I can’t remember a time when I felt safe in my flesh. I can’t remember a time when I felt right. For as long as I can remember, I have been at war with my body. I have pinched and prodded, sucked in and shaved and screamed at my reflected self. Too thick, too broad, too fat. Just a little more, I tell myself. If that line were just a little different, that curve a little less soft. If I were thinner, prettier, quieter, smarter, then maybe I would feel ok. The worse my disorder, the more panicked I am, the tighter the circles.
Every moment becomes an onslaught I cannot escape. Every second feels like living through it, I will disintegrate. My plans, my binges, my violent, heaving purges, these are the only things which keep me together, keep me from flying apart in the bright, licking flames of existence. I cannot breathe. I cannot think. I need all of this to be turned off.

There is a string between the mind and the body. If circumstances demand, that string can be cut. The mind floats up, up, and the body remains. Dissociation, my therapist calls it. For me, it feels more like sinking backward, curling up in a dark place somewhere at the back of my head. Retreating, I pull back until there is nothing left of ‘me’ but a small, hollow voice. It can watch, it can scream, but it cannot do a thing about this body which it has given up. Limbs, no longer my own. I am possessed. I am frozen.

Binges are like this. But that is not how I first learned the trick. No. Long ago, I learned it. As a child, faced with things she did not understand. And here is the thing, the thing about that unfurling twine which so long ago I snipped. When the mind floats away, it must eventually come back. And when it comes back to the body, it rarely fits. The snaps and catches which once anchored it have warped. They rest just out of place, out of step. The mind and the body can no longer connect. Like a face drawn ever so slightly wrong, something does not fit. And all of me writhes in the difference.

My father and I are walking alone. Hiking up a large, rocky hillside at Garner State Park. I pick up sticks and throw them off into the dry, whispering woods. My father trudges ahead, clouds of dust swirling like wandering thoughts. We have always felt safer in the silent concentration of physical exertion. Quickening my pace, I catch up to him.

“Why can’t you believe grandma?” I ask him.

“I don’t know,” he says. “I guess because I don’t think of her the same way as you do.”

“Why are you so angry at her?”

“I don’t know,” he says. I can tell he is irritated that I am bringing this up again, but I do not shrink, though my body wants to. I think of my sisters.

“If one of us came to you and said something happened.” I flail for an example which lies far from my truth. “You know, at school or something. Would you believe
us?"

It takes him a long time to answer. "Yes," he says. "I would."

My grandmother wanted so badly to protect us. My sisters. Myself. "If you’re ever in a situation you don’t like," she told each of us. "If anyone is ever pressuring you to do something you don’t want to do, then you call me. You call me and I’ll come get you." When I went back for my sophomore year of college, her illness had progressed so far that she could barely speak. Nonetheless, she struggled and struggled to open her mouth. Two words, she forced out: "Be safe." I cry and I cry because I cannot tell her that those words are so many years too late. I cry for her secret. I cry for my own.

Imagine taking all the things you’ve never, never said and sculpting them into a space the shape of a pig. My father, for example, often says that he loves the pig. He has said this since the day we first brought Pig home. He still says it, a year and a half later, now that the pig is the heaviest member of our family, a prickling pink mass of cunning and fat. "I love the pig." But he does not touch it. He does not pet it. Now, as always, my father’s preferred interactions with the pig are two-fold. He likes to feed it, watch it eat. And he likes to pick it up, just to prove he still can. Whenever the pig is picked up, it screams in rage and fear. The voice of Pan himself, pouring from a pulsing pink throat.

Pig is angry. So am I. The difference, though, is that I am terribly, terribly afraid of my anger. On occasion, it leaps forth, pouring out of my mouth and attacking the people who least deserve it. Losing myself, I scream at my boyfriend, my sisters, my mother. I box myself up and shut myself down and freeze them out. Just imagine, for a moment, looking into the eyes of the people you love most. Imagine ripping at them, tearing at them. Half because you know you can. Half because you are desperate, aching to be hurt back. A many-segmented worm, my anger is curled inside of me, chewing at me, releasing a bitter anesthetic so that I cannot feel its corrosive bite. Sometimes, when I look back, I think that the only reason I threw up was to force this creature out.

These days, when I see the stories of sexual assault and harassment and misconduct on the news, one of two things happen. The first is that the stories seem far away, indistinct. They have nothing to do with me. The second thing that happens is that they rush forward from the page, grab my shirt, and scream at me. *This is you, this is you, this is us. It’s happening again! It’s happening again! It’s always, always happening and in this world, there is no escape.* And I think, in some ways, that is true. The very ideas of male and female are built to exist on a sliding scale to violence. If you can’t see that, can’t see the forces of power and coercion built into heterossexual desire and self-perception, then I don’t stand a chance of showing you. Go read some fucking Toni Morrison. And
if even she can’t convince you, I’ll still talk to you. I’ll still try my best to build a bridge with you. Because your disbelief can’t destroy me anymore. Your need for silence can’t send me to the bathroom to torture myself. Because I know, now. We’re all warped. We’re all twisted into painful, broken shapes by the things which came before. *What we learn in crafting the story of our lives is some way to love ourselves even in the midst of our horror. To forgive ourselves our broken, hurt places, an appreciation for the muscle we have created in order to survive.*

It is 3:43 P.M. February 18, 2016. I ask my father to come with me, over to my grandparent’s house. My grandparents have always lived within walking distance. My father agrees to walk over with me; whatever his resentments, he has been ever the dutiful son.

Often, when bodies shut down, their final breaths come in a labored, irregular pattern. An apnea, it is called. Between the exhales and inhales, things catch. Things stop. Then, from deep within the chest there is a gasp, a bursting back into life. Not one death, but many. Sitting beside my grandmother’s face, staring into her eyes without blinking just to let her know that I am there; I am the first one to notice what is happening. In her mouth, in her chest. Awareness dawns. For a moment, every breath she takes becomes her last. Her eyes float upwards, to a point behind my shoulder, and I become convinced that she is looking for my father, her son. I try to call him over, but I cannot open my mouth. The grandmother I know: Beneath her kindness she is angry. My father does not understand this anger. All he understands is that she took it and poured it into him.

When the nurse tells us to say goodbye, my grandfather kneels before her and cries. He tells her that they will meet again and says the Shema for her lips which can no longer pray. My middle sister and I cry and kiss her, tell her goodbye. My father stands behind us, immobilized. I know that if my grandmother is in there, all she wants is for him, her son, to say that he loves her. I feel him standing behind me and I know that he cannot. Paralyzing tension rolls off of him in waves. I know that these are his own hurt places, tearing him apart.

I am sitting on the ground in the backyard, watching the pig. He has tripled in size since we brought him home two months ago. His tail swings as he picks his way across the grass, snuffling and contented. Looking at his happy backside, I cannot help but smile. A pig in the yard, what would my grandmother think? Around me, a sudden breeze stirs. The trees wave. She would be amused. Beside me, my father stands hunched with his arms across his chest.

“*I love the pig,*” he says.

“*I love him, too,*” I say. And I think, maybe, he understands.
CONTRIBUTORS’ NOTES

ALICE LIU constantly worries her life is too short to pursue all of her passions—how can she save humanity from ecological disaster if she can’t even learn to ollie, or properly mix skin-tone paint? She stifles this worry by re-watching Bojack Horseman for the fourth time instead of pursuing her passions.

ALISON LIU runs on bad coffee and cat gifs.

ALLISON YELVINGTON keeps a bullet journal and is her best self in the sunshine.

ANA PAULA PINTO-DIAZ is a sophomore English and VADA major. She usually ‘hydrates’ by drinking coffee, really likes art shows and poetry, and thinks adding white to her outfits makes them colorful.

ANNA JORGENSEN narrates the stream of consciousness of inanimate objects and will make you sympathize with a boulder.

ANNABELLE CROWE prefers Dungeons and Dragons to real life, especially during midterms.

ARELI NAVARRO MAGALLÓN is a walking mass of creative urges that are barely satisfied by her attempts at directing them into outlets such as collaging, writing, and crying. This is all held together by dry shampoo and espresso. She dedicates this, her first publication, to her parents (los quiero y aprecio tanto) and to little brown girls.

CHELSEY WEN likes hoarding fruit from the servery and loves dancing when nobody’s watching.
ELIZABETH RASICH is a huge proponent of porches, rocking chairs, and Saturdays. She has a love-hate relationship with the internet.

GINNY JEON’s feet are so small she still shops for kid-sized shoes. I just want to be average, she says.

KATHARYN HERNANDEZ applies the precision she learned as a scientist to her artwork. To escape from chemistry problem sets, she frequents the museum district to look at pretty things.

KRISTEN HICKEY spends a lot of time studying animal bones and has determined that wild boar skulls are definitely the worst. Don’t @ her.

LENNNA MENDOZA always thought she would be better at tying her shoes by this point. Oh well.

MACKLYN HUTCHINSON is the first documented American with anaphylaxis to fenugreek. The only movie that’s ever made her cry was a space documentary.

MASCHA LANGE loves to explore the world and follow the sun. She came to Houston for the hot weather, and was reluctant to leave after one too short exchange semester. A perfect day she would spend reading at the beach.

MATT PITTARD is wanted for thought crimes in seventeen states. He maintains his innocence, arguing that he has never had a single thought in his entire life.

MEG BRIGMAN loves to travel on Rice’s dime and pretending like her camera doesn’t make her an obnoxious tourist.
MIRANDA PROCTOR is an English and Psychology major whose love for nachos and books can not rival her love for quoting Nacho Libre. P. S. It’s all in the accént.

MARCUS TIERRABLANCA has no idea what he’s doing most of the time and loves being outdoors.

NAMTIP PHONGMEKHIN spends too much of her time at Rice daydreaming, eating pesto, and taking night walks in the quad.

SONIA HAMER enjoys playing D&D and petting other people’s dogs. She spends most of her time looking for her glasses, which she often loses.

SUNNY LIU from LA is as basic as it gets when it comes to açai bowls and dogs. When she’s not busy making her green smoothies, you might find her reading, hiking, and baking (all with her dog, of course).

SUZANNE ZELLER is a crop top connoisseur and ramen enthusiast. Her favorite crop top says “RAMEN” across the front.

TAMMITA PHONGMEKHIN discovered her love for acrylic painting in high school and enjoys creating artwork based on sceneries she’d like to see and places she’d like to go to.

VICTORIA OLIHA spends her days telling people she does not like ice cream, and then waiting for them to calm down several hours later.

VIDYA GIRI’s existence is questionable although soft mumbles have been heard from a distance saying something about giraffes, glittery bass music, and chrysanthemum honey tea.
KEYA MITRA is currently an associate professor of creative writing and literature at Pacific University. She graduated in 2010 with a doctorate from the University of Houston’s Creative Writing Program, where she also earned her MFA. In 2008, Keya spent a year in India on a Fulbright grant in creative writing. Keya’s fiction has appeared in the Bennington Review, The Kenyon Review (in 2011 and 2015), Arts and Letters, The Bellevue Literary Review, The Southwest Review, Slush Pile, Best New American Voices, Ontario Review, Orchid, Event, Fourteen Hills, Torpedo, Confrontation, Aster(ix) and the Journal of Commonwealth and Postcolonial Studies. Her nonfiction has been published in Gulf Coast and the American Literary Review. One of her short stories has been selected as one of the “Other Distinguished Stories” in Best American Short Stories 2017. She has completed two novels as well as a short-story collection and memoir.
ABOUT THE AWARDS

R2’s annual writing contests are sponsored by the George G. Williams Fund. The contests are juried by professional, non-Rice-affiliated judges. This year’s judge was Keya Mitra. Each of the recipients is awarded a monetary prize as well as recognition. Many thanks go out to the generous donors who support Rice’s undergraduate creative writing endeavors.
2018 AWARD WINNERS

FICTION

1ST PRIZE - THE LAST ONES by Victoria Oliha
This story, centered around the incident of an African-American woman slipping on a banana peel, takes place in an alternative reality in which African-Americans have been run out of town. The retelling of the incident by an onlooker and details he chooses to include or omit while he shares it with his friends is chilling, as is the subsequent examination of racism.

2ND PRIZE - BLOODLETTING by Alison Liu

CREATIVE NON-FICTION

1ST PRIZE - PIG, AN ESSAY by Sonia Hamer
The skillfulness with which the author weaves together these narrative threads—the grandfather’s death and purchase of the pig, the shiva following the grandmother’s death, the narrator’s struggle with bulimia—is truly astonishing. The author explores complex issues surrounding self-hatred, body dysmorphia, complex family dynamics, and death with humor, insight, and profundity while managing to make Pig a compelling and memorable character. Bravo.

2ND PRIZE - STEP TWO IS RETURNING by Alice Liu

POETRY

1ST PRIZE - CONFESSIONS OF A HAMMER FILM MONSTER by Annabelle Crowe
This poem beautifully explores the cultural perceptions of immigrants as “the others” and relative monsters with insights and nuance. The description of all that cannot be seen in the chapel—including the temple ceilings and the cryptozoology museum thought to exist in the basement—also speaks to the idea of “immigrant” as a culturally-invention monster.

2ND PRIZE - OFFERING by Lenna Mendoza