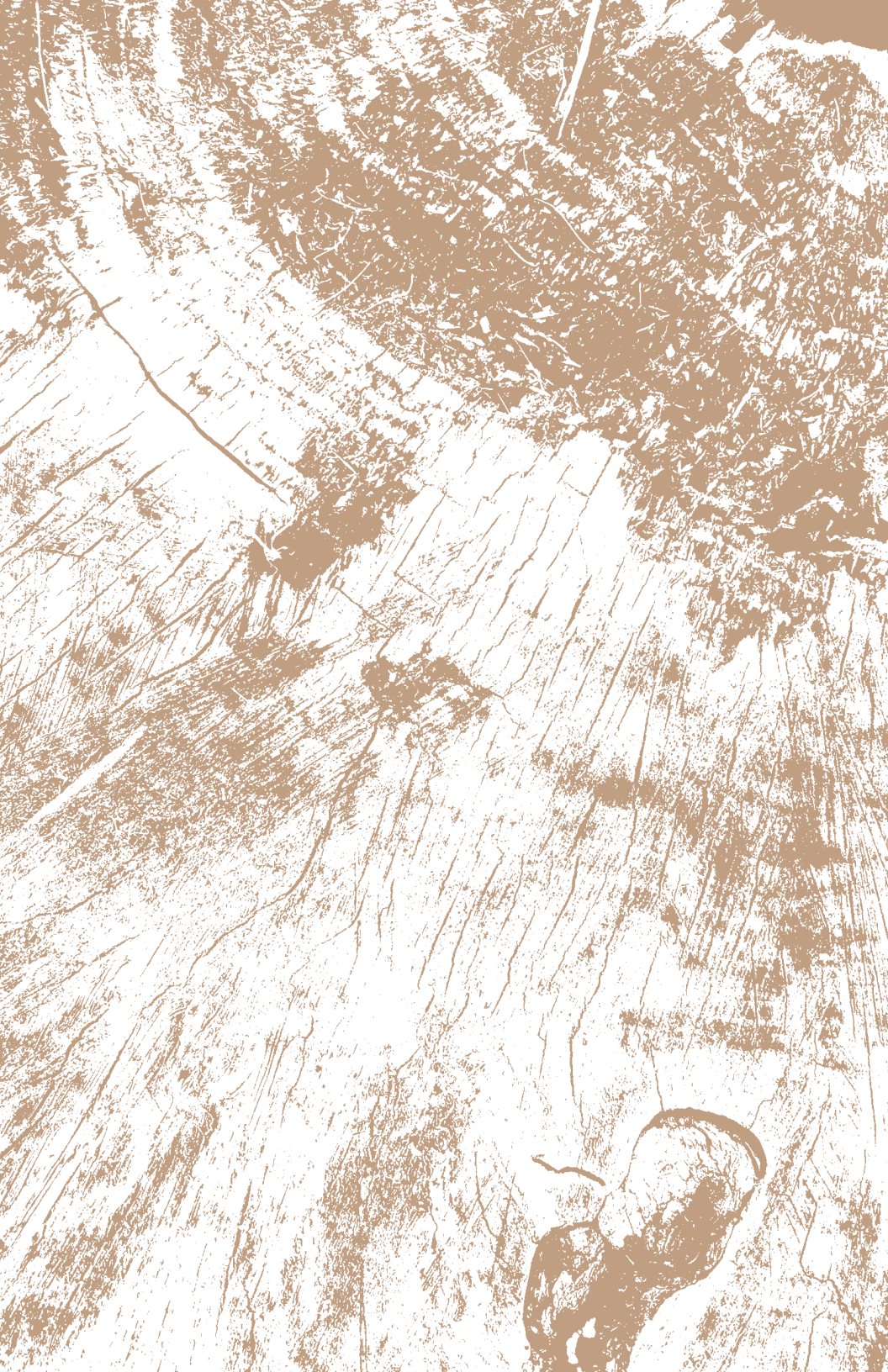




The Unbound Journal is run exclusively by undergraduate students and annually publishes the prose, poetry, and visual art of students at the University of Oregon. Submissions are selected for publication by editorial board members.

We receive funding from the Associated Students of the University of Oregon and the English Department.

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Editor's Note

Tonight, on the eve of this journal going to print, I revisited the *Editor's Notes* from Unbound Editors-in-Chief who have come before me. I'm not sure what I expected to find—perhaps the magical inspiration that blesses writers from time to time.

As I read, I watched as a brief history of the University of Oregon as experienced by Unbound unfolded before me. I revisited the journal's founding 17 years ago. I saw the journal grow and morph from an online publication to a printed booklet and back again. I witnessed its survival of the pandemic, as students met online to write and review creative work. I watched as the journal grew back from the pandemic low—issue by issue, year by year—like a sapling from a stump, into the Unbound we have the privilege of enjoying today. I was reminded of Unbound's purpose at our university: to serve as a sanctuary for creative readers, writers, artists, and anyone else who wants to slow down and think.

This year brought more of that same attention and care and, with it, more encouraging growth. We received more creative pieces from more authors than last year. More students volunteered their time to edit and design the journal, organize the club, and attend events. Again, our advisor, Dr. Corbett Upton, supported us and urged us to achieve. Again, our editors met in the evenings and on days off, week after week, and poured over typescripts, laughing and debating and critiquing until this year's journal took shape. Again, students from across the University of Oregon offered their creative work for consideration. And, again, we were blown away.

Whether you're a student, faculty, or staff at the university, a community or family member, a supportive friend or fan of the arts, or someone who stumbled across a small booklet and is now confused why the spine is holding together so well despite the misleading title of *Unbound*, I hope you find within these pages something that kickstarts your imagination and sparks a conversation.

From an evening with the last cowboy to the tale of Judice of Flanders, from an escape from a nursing home to a painting of a two headed fox, students at the University of Oregon have been hard at work honing their craft. I hope you enjoy reading this year's edition of Unbound as much as we've enjoyed making it.

With much gratitude,
Nathan G. King

Mission Statement

Unbound seeks to foster the development of all students at the University of Oregon, regardless of major, by serving as a platform for outstanding creative expression. Unbound Journal is committed to the belief that publishing a community's literature is a crucial component to sustaining a vibrant culture. We publish prose, poetry and visual art that tests boundaries and comes from a place of passion, regardless of medium or approach. Our editorial process values quality as the paramount criterion. Each submission receives feedback and critique from our staff of student editors.

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Thank you to Cooper Brush (page 40), Grace Frangante (page 47),
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contributing artwork to this journal.



Michelle Nguyen

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If I could write a poem about Jerusalem

Danielle Richard

It would be

and the white stone walls
the cold question of God—

could it be easy if I did
believe.

I do.
Like dark hair and salt

came the quiet, the shiver
nausea a song in the shell

of the ear.
Warmth in spite of this from sun

and bleached ground.
Like linen,

sinking and rising
on the line,

and a folded note, insistent
in the palm.

TOYS

Frankie Diller-Beardsley

It was quiet the day they broke into the store and smashed the windows. They came and they took the waters, the TVs, the dolls, and the celebrity magazines talking about how some Ben divorced some Jen, again. They didn't leave a thing and never brought them back even though we asked nicely. Our cashiers didn't stop them because the cashiers joined in too. We decided we'd fire those cashiers, then cover the broken windows with cardboard.

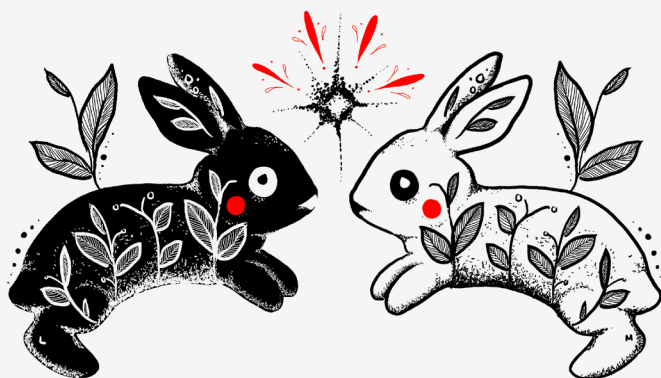
We were asked to describe the 'anarchists.' We remembered one man with bruised cheeks grabbing packs of protein bars and talking about the Garden of Eden, life starting anew. We thought if he really wanted a new life, he should've checked out the hygiene aisle, because he smelled like piss, and his teeth were yellow and green. But we didn't say that to him. All we did was stand there, a gun or two to our heads as the hourly intercom recording talked about a 30% discount.

We got our brooms and cleaned up after. Boss says, except for our 15-minute lunch period, we're on company time, and company time is the most valuable time, company time is what makes or breaks our promotion. We cleaned up even though Boss was dead, we don't know why they killed Boss, they were shouting something about 'landlords next' and we thought silly Them, bosses and landlords can always be replaced. We made the aisles spic and span like the guy promises to do in the commercials, but they were still so empty, we realized how white and lonely everything felt. So, we restocked the aisles, we asked for more stuffed animals and toy trains for the kids, because kids want to buy everything and whine if they don't get it, which is good for company time. But the kids didn't want to come in here anymore after what happened. We didn't know why. The toys even lit up.

We found the anarchists in their camps taking over the street where they were burning everything. The police had given up and were evacuating people by then. "Please stop," we asked. The anarchists were wearing togas and flower crowns. They told us to join them and take off our uniforms. We politely explained how if Boss doesn't pay us, we can't eat, and since they killed Boss, they have to reimburse us somehow. We wrote them a bill for how much they owed. They tore it up, then started popping bottles of champagne. They seemed to not have a Boss.

We went back into the store. Well, there was no 'we.' It was just me now. I was sad my coworkers left me. I liked hearing the stories about their wives

and children and parents who thought they were a failure for working at a store at their age. I liked the stale muffins Boss gave us in the breakroom when we hit our sales goal. I sat in the deserted aisles and played with a toy train, making it run on the circular tracks, back and forth, back and forth, while the anarchists sang outside. Someone had to be clocked in. It was all I could do.



Michelle Nguyen

Dissection B: Perpetuating Your Corner of the Garage

Indigo Duvall

I. *South*

My grandmother,
broken oak shelves,
a 1978 GMC navy painted rig,
elk antlers (a lot of them),
expired canned pears canned beans and potatoes,
two refrigerators,
a cooler for hunting,
a redwood hand-hewn canoe in the rafters.

II. *East*

My aunt,
old yellowed photographs,
crumbling postcards,
goose-down sleeping bags,
surveying notes in your handwriting,
birthday cards from my siblings, my cousins and I,
pieces of your sailboat,
Remington rifle cartridges,
red suspenders.

III. *West*

My mother,
many notebooks,
many compasses,
many old tears,
piney Forest Service backpacks,
bags of pocketknives and multi-tools,
MREs you never needed,
obsidian shavings,
Harry Belafonte and his Troubles,
calendars.

IV. *North*

My finally tired Grandfather,
We buried your compass, it comes
Up in cherry blossoms.
Without you we are
All lost, corner markers
Down in the roots and dirt.

Madison Yarbrough

Inside it smells like *Missing Person*,
 which she says smells like my hair.
 The air tastes clean and weightless.
 An open lipped smile brushes off
 the rocks in my shoes—I can float now.

It feels like belonging,
 like not being afraid of how much space
 I'm taking up. There's a drawer for me
 and a drawer for her in the
 bathroom. Apples for both of us,

blouses for both of us.
 My blanket is the knitted one,
 hers is heated—
 neither one of us wears them alone.
 The socks I keep in her closet slip on her

/our tile floor. They're perfect
 to dance in, to spin her around
 while she's trying to cook. I don't feel
 too big in the bed, too burdensome
 to hog the blanket. We take

our turns rolling over with it
 and returning it while she
 /I whisper or snore gently.
 The walls are concrete,
 but she decorates them to her liking

and privilege. They deliver
 their own kind of pleasantries.
 It's a place of warmth and
 genuineness where I'm just the right size,
 and she's just the right amount of perfect;

a place glued and holy where she
 /I can cry and she
 /I can scream, and the walls
 will echo back all the same—
 for our ears only.

got anything to eat

Abigail Beckstrand

i walk up to a goose
get rubber on the grass
ask *how can i live like you*
it says *i don't know*
got *anything to eat*

if i were a better woman
i would quit my job to save each worm
drawn by drums onto concrete

my cactus never sings
little monk in his ceramic pot
he prays for a teardrop pinch

tissues just make me cry harder
crushed daisies in my hand
weeping prodigal sons

the sky will not claim me
my lamp scaring the stars off
and parching the clouds

you kiss me on empty
drought dragging on
ask *how can i hold on to you*
i say *i don't know*
got *anything to eat*

Father Dearest

Emily Kavanagh

Dear Dad,

~~*I'm so glad that you reached out.*~~

Vincent scratched it out. He leaned his elbows onto the coffee table, chest tight. Every breath he tried to take didn't make it to his lungs. His heartbeats were an unbearable tension inside him, ready to snap.

~~*I'm really happy to hear from you.*~~

~~*Thank you for sending this.*~~

He crumpled the paper and threw it on the floor. What was there to say? It had appeared in his mailbox with no explanation. He thought there was no relationship left between them. His dad had cut it off, leaving him behind with only confusion and pain. But it hadn't been up to him, really. He had reached out to Vincent despite his circumstances.

Dear dad,

I'm grateful to hear from you.

He put the pen down. Finally, a first sentence he could stand. The rest of the response still loomed ahead of him. He bounced up from his spot on the floor. He went to the kitchen, the tile cold on his toes, and poured himself a glass of wine. He took generous sips as he walked back to the table. He couldn't bear to look at the paper until his nerves were settled. The late afternoon sun shone through his crooked blinds like a beacon, mocking his growing affinity for nighttime. He looked at the pen. It had a sharp, defined tip; it was a specialty one he had bought for his drawing. He knew he had to read his father's letter again, for clarity's sake.

Dear Vincent,

I know you won't be expecting this, but I wanted to speak to you. It wasn't easy, as you can imagine. But luckily, I came across a place that rents post boxes on a monthly basis. They won't be able to trace it back to me, if it came down to it. Enough about that, though. I decided to write you because I didn't like the note we ended on. I was too harsh—I'm worried I've made everything worse for you. You already went through so much just to find me.

This brings me to my first question. Have you left that man, Tarquinn Zao? I know it's a difficult decision to make. He does care for you, but remember, he has centuries of practice in making himself appear exactly as he wants. They all become masters of manipulation, molding the wants of humans to their own, even if they don't realize it.

Second, how is your mother doing? I hope you see her often. I know we had our differences, but I still think of Silvia as the love of my life, at least that part of it. She truly deserves happiness. I bet her cooking is still wonderful too.

Lastly, you must know Lilly is buried in Florence. Next time you are here, I would appreciate it if you could leave her flowers. I don't really have the chance to.

Remember that I am still here if you ever need me.

*Love,
Dad*

P.S. The post box will only be in my name until the end of the month. Please try to get back to me before then. I'm going to check it when I can.

He stroked the coarse paper. It would remain their last physical connection until he could get it together and answer. Then, as far as he knew, their ties would be forever severed. Immortality was a prison for his father, not a bid for freedom. He picked up where he had left off:

It must have been difficult to find me, and I appreciate this endlessly. And I don't think you were harsh with me. We were in a very tense situation. The sharks were circling, so to speak. I don't know what kind of closure I was hoping for—I was so sure that you were dead. I don't know what would truly help me move on, but at least we both know the truth now.

I'm still with Quinn. We've made a lot of compromises for each other, but I can see why you're concerned. It isn't as if I've forgotten. I'm just torn, because there is real love between us. The time I've had with him has meant a lot.

Mama is well, and I do see her almost every week. She's as big a part of my life as ever. She really is my greatest supporter—a lot of her savings went into paying for my university. All those drawings I used to do actually led to my career now. It hasn't been easy to break into the fashion industry here, but she's always a shoulder to lean on.

I'll definitely visit Lilly next time I'm in Florence and make sure she's provided for. You know how I felt about you finding another woman after mama, but she loved you

and never deserved what happened to her. Of course I wish I could see you too, but I understand how things are. I hope that one day, we can both recover from our respective pain, but I know that is easier said than done.

I'll keep you in my heart and thoughts, as I always do.

Vincent

His hands shook as he folded the paper into thirds. He rushed to his desk and found an envelope under a pile of sketches and a check from Quinn he had refused to cash. He placed the letter inside, then took it out, reading it over again. Why was he hurrying? This was his father's final gesture before embarking on a lifetime of silence. Ink had smudged over his fingers. He rubbed them against each other, letting the darkness sink in. Tears gathered in his eyes. Who else but Vincent mourned for a life that would never end?

He left the unsealed envelope on his desk. He stared at the framed magazine covers on the wall above it, the models' eyes boring into him. Only one of them was wearing a design by him, but they were all from the first fashion season he had taken part in. The sketches scattered around his desk were far less polished than the finished product, but he always got there in time. His mind was everywhere but his art. It hadn't been much better even before the letter came. How long was he going to teeter on the edge of burn out?

He decided that getting dinner on the stove would quell some of his nerves. He stood up and busied himself in the kitchen. What he needed was a night to breathe. After that, he would send off his letter and try to take his emotions in stride. He knew there would be no way to hide it from Quinn, though. He was a glorified open book to him, often feeling more like a plaything than a lover. He knew his father was right; his life was better off without Quinn's meddling. When Vincent wasn't working, he was usually with Quinn. His nights were so monopolized by Quinn's affections that the thought of being apart from him, and his embrace, had become almost unbearable. He would never have known the truth about his father and where he hid without Quinn's help either. He wasn't dead, but ashamed of the nature forced upon him. Quinn acted as a guiding hand that revealed the dark underside of the world.

He poured himself another glass of wine, resting his forehead on the cool counter. He held himself there for a beat, putting his mind to the rest of the cooking he had to do. He stood back up, filling a pot with water and turning on the flame underneath it. The last gasp of sunlight streamed in. Nightfall meant so much more to him than it used to. He usually wanted the day to fade quicker, so that his time of waiting would end. Now, he wished the sun would linger, as it did in the zenith of summer. It was only a matter of time

until Quinn came calling. If not that night, then the next.

He sat down at the dining table, a painting he had made in his university days on the wall above. Despite his recent entanglements, his life did remain largely static. He worked on his designs, slipped out to see friends when he could, and hoped to God his sanity stayed intact. He ate quickly, not having realized how hungry he was. He twisted his fork in his hand, growing more antsy. The secrets he kept had a way of digging into him. He couldn't talk to anyone about what had really happened to his father except for Quinn, who despite his best efforts, would never understand the depth of Vincent's pain. Everyone else still thought his father was missing, presumed dead. Little did they know he would outlive them all, in the depths of an old Florence building surrounded by the beings he had spent so much time trying to hunt down.

He stood up, going to the portable stereo on his desk. He needed to drown out his spiraling dread with something truly comforting. He didn't search through his collection of CDs long before settling on Caterina Casselli. It was one of his mother's old favorites, part of a wave of 60s pop darlings. He always enjoyed her soaring vocals against the lively instrumentation. It evoked many forgotten glimmers of childhood in the Milanese flat he and his parents had shared in his earliest years. He switched the music on and opened one of his desk drawers. He found the unopened pack of cigarettes where he had left it a week before, bought in a fit of melancholy. It seemed it hadn't taken long for him to be in such a state again.

He picked up the stereo and the pack. He needed to take a bath, to surround himself with warmth. As he went down the hall to the bathroom, the CD kept playing. He put down the stereo and turned the faucet of the bathtub, waiting until the water steamed before putting the stopper in the drain. He sheafed off his clothes, grabbing an ashtray and lighting a cigarette as he went in. He inhaled deeply, looking up at the ceiling, the paint peeling at the corners. The window was cracked open and he heard the sounds of the street below. Milan was forever destined to be his city. He had only ever left it for a few years in his youth with his father for London. He let his eyes close, the motion of breathing the smoke in and out becoming a rhythm. A nasty habit, but one he didn't want to resist any longer. On his list of sins, it was on the lowest tier.

Eventually, he ground the cigarette butt out and leaned back, putting his hands behind his head. He debated having another, but was content to relax in the water. It always scared him to know how little he was in control. His life had been manipulated by unseen hands for so long, but now he knew they were there.

The CD was coming to an end. He knew it well enough to know the second to last song was on. He decided to let it run out. The warm water against his skin was like a cocoon. He sunk his head underwater, all worldly

sounds dampened. He liked the soft pressure of it, the absence it made him feel. He came up before he felt short of breath; he was in no mood to play with death. He floated in his own sea of contemplation, while thinking about almost nothing at all.

Faint footsteps echoed nearby. He opened his eyes, searching for the origin. The bathroom door was open, allowing for a line of sight almost to the front door. He heard the door handle jiggle, then turn; he'd left it unlocked. He sat up, worried at first, but he knew who it was in an instant, just by the clack of his boots on the floor.

"Vincent?" Quinn called out, above the din of the music.

"I'm in the bath!" he responded, though made no effort to do anything about the music. He looked around for a towel, realizing he'd completely forgotten one. "Fucking hell."

"Am I bothering you, darling?" Quinn's voice came from the living room.

"Um, no." The last song began fading. "Actually, could you grab me a towel?"

Quinn laughed. "Did you forget one?"

He sighed. "Yes."

"I'll be right there."

Quinn appeared in the doorway. The ratty towel clashed with his carefully curated appearance. His black hair was styled immaculately as always, and he wore his usual combination of a silk shirt and black pants. His many rings glinted. Vincent was pulled in by his arresting gaze, mind going momentarily blank. Then, he regained himself, standing up and grabbing the towel from him, which he wrapped around his waist. Though he was sopping wet, Quinn pulled him in, giving him a quick kiss.

"I should have called," he said, stroking his hand down Vincent's cheek.

"It's okay," he replied, looking away, balking at how easy he'd fallen back into his arms after everything on his mind.

The sleeves of Quinn's shirt grew damp, and he pulled away, smiling. "I'll let you get dressed."

"Yeah thanks," he said, going towards his room. "I'll be right out."

Vincent dried himself off as quickly as he could and threw on a new t-shirt and jeans, his old ones still discarded on the bathroom floor. He wondered what Quinn was making of everything so far. Vincent had told him before that he only took baths when he needed to decompress. That could be for many reasons, but lying wouldn't be worth his while. He had learned obfuscation was a far better trick to use on Quinn. He patted down his hair, still wet. In no time, the curls would spring back up, only a shade or two lighter than the brown of his eyes. He took in a deep breath; Quinn had to understand his dilemma. His devastation about his father was a path they had tread before.

He opened the door, finding Quinn in the living room, standing over his desk, the very last place he wanted him to be. In his hand wasn't either of the envelopes, but the check. Vincent heaved a sigh of relief, which Quinn took for annoyance.

"It will do you no harm to just take it," Quinn said, quirking an eyebrow.

"I don't need it," he responded. "I'm not as much of a starving artist as you make me out to be."

"That's not what I meant to imply. I just want you to be secure is all, if the commissions ever slow down."

"They're not," Vincent said, smiling sourly. "And you do so much already, I'm not trying to sound ungrateful."

"I know." He sat on the couch. "I promise this won't compromise your pride."

Vincent chuckled. "I'll try to leave enough to spare."

Quinn crossed one leg over the other, beckoning for Vincent to sit. "How was your day?"

He took the spot next to him. "Fine, but uneventful. You?"

He smirked. "I woke up two hours ago."

"Ah, of course. How have those been, then?"

"I woke up, took a shower, thought about what to wear, and then got dreadfully bored and decided to see you." He rested a hand on Vincent's knee, testing the waters.

Vincent shifted his weight away. "I'm going to get some water."

"What prompted you to smoke?" Quinn asked, his fingers tightening on him.

He froze. "My friend left some here a few nights ago. I didn't want them to go to waste."

"You expect me to believe that?"

Vincent grimaced, knowing the dam was going to break. "Old habits flare up when I'm stressed."

"About what?"

"What do you think? You flung money my way for no reason."

"That's not true."

"Obviously, because you do everything with such clear purposes in mind," Vincent said, his sarcasm carrying a sharp edge.

Quinn's eyes flashed. "What's really bothering you?"

Vincent crossed his arms. "Not everything I do has some kind of meaning you can read into."

"I'm inclined to disagree. I can tell you're taking something out on me."

Vincent stood up. "Watch it."

"Or what? You'll freeze me out, ignore my calls, then take me back when it suits you?" Quinn said, leaning towards him.

Vincent felt his heart spike with rage. "You want the truth?"

"Yes," Quinn said, mouth set firmly.

"When you hand me money like that, it makes me feel like your rent boy."

Quinn's face broke into confusion. "What?"

Vincent glared at him. Misdirection had worked its charm. "It's like you're paying me to stick around. That's not the point of all of this."

"No, of course not. What is 'all of this' to you, then?" He flicked back his hair, eyes narrowed in return.

"I don't know sometimes," Vincent said, beginning to pace. "You're always the one who gets the final say."

"Haven't I done everything you've asked? I thought we already made our compromises."

"I don't always take your words as gospel," he said, more venom creeping into his tone. "We're never going to be equals."

"I have made every effort to remedy that imbalance." He stood. "It seems I've caught you in a mood."

"It's not a mood!" Vincent yelled, stomping his foot on the floor.

Quinn sighed, taking a step back. "When I was by your desk, I saw an envelope with a Florence return address."

"What?" Vincent hissed, surging towards him, "I knew you were snooping."

"I didn't mean to, but I know what I saw." He put his hand out, which Vincent stopped short of. "What did he say to you?"

"Of course you looked through my things on purpose, I'm not stupid," Vincent said, glaring down at Quinn's hand until he put it down. "He told me that I shouldn't be seeing you, that all you know how to do is manipulate me into what you want."

Quinn frowned, searching for the right words. "Of course your father wouldn't trust my intentions, but he doesn't know me, or what we have."

"Does he have to?" Vincent said, voice cracking.

Quinn stared on, silent, words failing to come to him.

"There's nothing else to say, is there?" He rushed past Quinn and gripped onto the edge of the desk, chest heaving. Everything on the desk began to look worthless and devoid of meaning. He swiped his arm, most of his books and papers falling on the floor. His father's letter landed on top of the pile, blank side up. He watched it fall, cursing with red-hot fury.

"You need to calm down," Quinn said, his voice low and resonant.

Vincent felt the command reach deeply into his mind, coaxing him out of his anger. He stumbled backwards, the world slowing around him. He blinked, trying to come back to himself.

Quinn was utterly still, a statue in the low light. His dark eyes shimmered, pulling at the strings of Vincent's sanity. His expression was an inscrutable mask, perfected to show nothing.

"Don't do that," Vincent whispered, head spinning.

He rushed out of the room, back to his cigarettes. Once he grabbed the pack, he leaned partway out of the window in his room, holding onto his lit cigarette for dear life. He exhaled the smoke shakily, feeling Quinn's presence come up behind him.

"Such a predilection doesn't suit you."

"Fuck you," he said with resignation. He watched the ash fall into the alley below. He looked back at Quinn, smarting with annoyance. "Do you not like the taste?"

Quinn scowled. "It's not healthy, is all."

He took another drag. "Really, it doesn't add flavor like alcohol does?"

"Enough of that."

Vincent blew smoke in his face. "Next time you drink from me, do tell."

He waved it away. "I was led to believe there wouldn't be a next time."

Vincent shrugged. "As long as you don't use mind tricks like that on me again, maybe we can call it even."

"That wasn't right of me," Quinn admitted. "I can't deny it, I do hold power over you. Yet, you are always good at standing your ground."

Vincent rolled his eyes. "And what does that really do?"

Quinn took Vincent's free hand. "I can be an arrogant, conceited creature but you have plenty of valid concerns."

"Well, thank you for the reassurance," Vincent said, yanking his hand away and grinding out his cigarette on the windowsill. He looked out at the moon, a crescent hung high in the sky. A breeze was in the air, tickling his face.

"I can leave," Quinn said softly, following his gaze. "It was wrong of me to come here in the first place."

"No, stay," Vincent answered, his posture easing slightly. "We've gotten it all out, haven't we?"

"You're still upset; there's no reason for me to overstay my welcome."

"But there's something I've been wanting to ask you. I guess I've been hesitant because it's so personal," he said, walking past Quinn and sitting at the foot of his bed. "Have you ever...made someone into what you are?"

Quinn shook his head.

"Why not?"

"I promised myself to never do it. It didn't seem right to make that decision for someone, like it was made for me."

"Right," Vincent said, face softening. "But, you could ask, couldn't you?"

"I would have all the cards, whether I offered the choice or not," Quinn answered, still hovering by the window.

"Come here," Vincent said, laying back.

Quinn obliged, hesitant as he lay down next to him. Usually, they fell into each other's arms in an instant, but Quinn left space between them.

"I've wondered for a while if that's what your intention has been with me all along, but it isn't."

"No," he said, hair spilling across the duvet.

"You've been here for almost two years now, spending your nights with me. That must not be the most exciting thing on offer for you."

Quinn chuckled. "I've chased excitement many times, but I usually find myself emptier than before."

"Story of my life."

"Then imagine having that many times over," he said, sighing. "It grows to be an intolerable cycle."

"I see you through so many different lenses," Vincent remarked, propping himself up on his elbows. "You hold all the cards, as you said. But you trip over yourself to make sure we're happy together."

Quinn looked up at the ceiling. "I'm not capable of being one thing, never have been."

"Then why are you trying so hard to do that for me?"

Quinn's eyes widened, his face defeated. "If I sand down my edges, you know I'm being dishonest. If I don't, you see my darkness."

"I've come to terms with that already." Vincent sat up, looking down at him, "but I don't like the ways you use it against me."

Unable to avoid Vincent's searing stare, he lifted his chin in indignation.

"Come on, you know it's true. For all the thrill it offers, it still scares me."

He nodded, relenting, putting out his arms to Vincent. So much for distance.

He settled against Quinn's chest, his heartbeat featherlight. He didn't want to leave the confines of his room, where he would have to confront the messes he had made. He could choose to ignore it all, for a time. Quinn stroked his fingers through Vincent's hair and kissed his forehead. It was hard to keep his eyes open.

But the letter. He had to send it in the morning, or whenever he could stand to wake up. There was so much left unsaid, but he couldn't bear to express it to his father. Lies by omission. That was the way it had to be. His father had become an abstract construction, a hole in his life, long before he had gone missing. He closed his eyes, too exhausted to pretend otherwise. Quinn's hands still caressed his side, cool lips against his cheeks.

A bar of late morning light fell on the floor. Vincent stared at it as he woke up. If he had dreamed, he didn't remember any of it. He sat up and felt Quinn's weight at his side. He was in a deep sleep, eyes closed to the daytime world. Quinn wasn't a part of it, yet Vincent treaded between both. One hand dipped in darkness, the other in light. He'd have to choose eventually.

He got dressed, stumbling around as he couldn't open the curtains for Quinn's sake. When he was done, he closed the bedroom door softly, eyes squinting in the light. Leaning his elbows on the kitchen counter, he looked

out the window. He watched as the world came alive. People walked to and fro, with backpacks and briefcases alike. He'd have to catch up with them if he wanted any semblance of a productive day.

He made himself some instant coffee, burning his tongue as he tried to gulp it down. The morning daze began to lift little by little as the caffeine worked its magic. It reminded him then of a different taste, and the sensations it gave him. Even just a few drops of Quinn's blood, which he gave in exchange for taking Vincent's, made him euphoric. It gave him a buzz that nothing else held a candle to. It was rich that his father wanted him to leave. He had willingly thrown himself into a spider's web, never to escape its bonds again.

His objective from the night before came back in a rush: he had to mail the letter. Even if he was supplying his father with half-truths and lies, it was for the best. He didn't need to make his life even more miserable. His only child was in love with the kind of being he had spent his life trying to kill. The cruel irony of it all wasn't lost on Vincent.

He walked back to his desk, everything still scattered around it on the floor. His cheeks burned in shame. He had been so careless in his rage. He crouched down, picking up the nearest pile, the one the letter was on top of. There would be time to deal with the rest of the mess later, but he knew the image would haunt him until he cleaned it up. His emotions had become far more volatile. He couldn't deny that he had always felt things deeply, but Quinn made him more frayed at the edges.

He licked the envelope shut, placing it on the desk. Then, he went back to the kitchen, where his coffee had begun to cool. He downed the rest of it, thinking about the day that lay ahead of him. Nothing was on his docket, other than the letter. But he knew it was going to take all his willpower. He had climbed the wall. All that was left was the dive afterwards.

A breeze came through the open window, tousling his hair. His stomach rumbled; he had nothing good to eat for breakfast. Another reason to force himself to get outside. He splashed water on his face and began putting together a bag of things. The letter, his sketchbook, wallet, keys, sunglasses, and regrettably, the pack of cigarettes and a lighter. They were his way of untangling the anxiousness he wrapped himself into. The nicotine rush itself had little effect on him. It was the motion, breathing the smoke into his lungs and out again. Maybe it would kill him someday, if the consequences of his other actions didn't come for him first.

He stood by the front door, hesitant to go beyond its threshold. Depending on how long he stayed out, Quinn might not even be there when he got back. But he was deluding himself. Of course he would be. He was always waiting.

He turned the knob and walked down the hall. He paused, going back and locking it, then went on his way again. When he was down the stairs and

outside, he slipped on his sunglasses. He only went a block before reaching his favorite cafe on the corner. The workers were familiar with his customary routine of pounding espressos and sketching out ideas, often for hours at a time. He was almost sorry to disappoint them that day.

He got an espresso and a pastry and sat out front, just watching everything around him. It only took him a few minutes to have them both. Just one cigarette, then he would mail the letter. He lit it and gave a nod to the old man who was sitting at the table next to him. They were both regulars but had never spoken more than a few words to each other. As he had hoped, the cigarette gave him a needed sense of calm. The faded red awning above him cast a pink glow on his hands. They were shaking, ever so slightly. Quinn had once told him that the only moments he ever saw Vincent completely peaceful were when he was deep into a drawing.

He dropped the cigarette butt on the ground, then thought better of it. After he brought his dishes inside, he threw it in the trash. He clutched his bag tightly. His pace grew even quicker, his heart catching in his throat. He almost tripped over a crack in the sidewalk but righted himself and trudged on.

Before he knew it, he was standing face to face with a bright red postbox. He took out the envelope. It looked so small and mundane, but it contained secrets worth a lifetime of sorrow. Unbidden, tears welled in his eyes. He grabbed the handle, placing the letter in the tray. He closed it, hearing the letter softly land inside. He stared at it blankly, shivers coursing through him. What was the truth buried inside his mind? Not so deep after all. He had wielded his pen as a tool of deceit, not wanting to cut the threads of their fate apart with anger. The words he thought of were different from what he had written, locked away within him.

“Goodbye,” he said, his voice catching. “I hope this is enough.”

Dear dad,

I feel sorry for you, but before all of this happened, I didn't exactly miss you. Maybe the idea of you—that I didn't have a father. You left mum and I in the dust as soon as you could. You fucked off back to England like the life and love we shared meant nothing to you, which makes it funny that you said she was the love of your life. Lilly only fed your obsession and she hardly cared about me, yet you chose her every time.

I was never a priority in your life. I know you only took me in because mom had to beg you. You were too busy chasing your white whale. All of your theories may have been true, but at what cost?

So I'm with your enemy, which is now also you. What do you really care? It's too late for me and too late for you. I was only ever your son in name.



Evan Sonne

My Father Was God By Yehuda Amichai

Danielle Richard

And “So Long Marianne” by Leonard Cohen and “In Your Eyes” by Peter Gabriel

And *Graceland* and Steve Winwood and *The Big Lebowski*
and the times I’ve written poems about him
and the way they all became odes.

No, I won’t set free the body nor the man
when life goes on its way,
though I know his journey comes for him—
my father is the ground
that grows the black cherries.

And I know the water which changes direction
the tide which comes but saunters off,
and the way I wish for all to stay the same.
My father is a lake without ripple.

And I couldn’t tell you why
they pulled up the Japanese Magnolia,
despite its pink and white petals, I couldn’t tell you either
why the neighbor killed himself or why
I gave up so much time,

but I know my father
is the oak tree bending in the wind.

I know the sound of him at the door
and those easy footsteps
in the hall and the voice both happy
and complaining

and my father
is the oak tree bending in the wind,
my father is the oak tree bending,

my father is the bend.

San Francisco Jazz

Sabrina Simoni

It's been six months since we moved into Ms. Benson's attic,
the place above town where the wind snaps and bites
and squeezes my hands stiff. The kids at school
made fun of my stutter again
but Lionel is playing saxophone
on the corner of Noreiga and 41st—
when he scats and skips between beats and sounds
it's music.
He watches me from down the block as I pass
that one gas station—the one that has those needles on the ground
where people go to yell with a rasp
ugly and mean.

Cars rev when they see me begin to part the crosswalk.
This orchestra of a city never breaks.

I have to pull the green door towards me before I turn the key.
Ms. Benson always keeps her hallway light off, so I run scared
to the steel spiral staircase.
It's a loud and disgruntled symphony of hurriedness, nothing like
Lionel.

Mother will be home just before the Marin fog rolls over the hill,
she'll knock three times.

Our bed is in the kitchen and so is our bathroom,
my brother's feet sleep at our heads.
Mother says we are packed like sardines.
Snore fill a room so small
I dream I'm front row to that old singer
Ms. Benson plays on vinyl.
She's nothing like Lionel.

The ski-bum gets caught in the Cat of the system

Malachi Murphy

All the ski-school are in a line, joined together by the nylon rope they hold as they get ready to go down the bunny hill. From where Jonah holds the rope at the back of the tow, his instructor's voice is little more than the sound of the skis sloppily cutting their edge into the packed snow. Jonah sees a snowboarder flying down the slope toward him. The mountain is moving the firs despite the clear blue sky, and a lump of snow just fell off one nearby with a crash. In his distraction, Jonah's own little skis are pulled under him by a groove in the snow, and he falls awkwardly in the open space between his legs.

The instructor stops the small convoy and tells everyone to hold still. At the back of the line the little boy cries out. The instructor clicks out of his skis, stands them upright in the snow, and trudges up to the boy. Behind them all, the snowboarder carves the smooth curve of the bunny hill into a pile of shredded powder which moves through the air in an equally gentle curve and falls finally onto the ski instructor as he approaches the boy.

With his ski instructor freshly frosted, Jonah forgets his cold, cramped position and giggles at the flurry. He looks up to see the snowboarder, who just powdered his teacher like a donut, holding out his ungloved hand to him.

"Come on up kid; I can see your problem."

Jonah finds his hand in the cold tangle of his body and reaches out to this new figure. He is pulled up onto his skis and stares at the man in wonder. The man squats, and flicks the bindings off his back boot.

The snowboarder gestures to the thing below his feet, knocking on it for effect. "It looks like your board got cut in half by some twisted devil. It's supposed to look like this, see?"

He is cut short by the instructor, who pleads to him after finding his voice and brushing himself clear. "Hey, Elijah, I'm in the middle of a run with the tikes, please don't make this harder for me, man."

"Just showing him the way of the truth, is all." Elijah gets up from his squat. He sends one last smirking glance to the boy before he straps back in his boot and rides off like he only understands the snow to be one way.

Jonah looks down at his skis. They once belonged to the chaste glimmer of his father's uncommon joy. And yet, now all he could think of them was broken.

With his right foot out of his back binding and pressing onto the stomp pad, Elijah carries his speed from the run into the flat-pack snow around the lodge. Loads of weekend warriors are clunking around in their bright plastic

ski boots and messing with their gear in front of the lift. It's one of the games Elijah must frequently concoct: how can he make it to the lift in the least moves possible? He is making hot time and not even skating with his back foot, when a face appears out of the mix and says his name clear.

"Eli!"

He turns from his game and yells back through the crowd "Lord? What's the word?"

Hadad makes his way through the awkward crowd and gives Elijah an embrace. "Ah man, I couldn't tell you. I was wondering if I was gonna see you up here today." He mumbles before letting go of his embrace.

"Oh ya. Today and everyday till May." Elijah says while looking away at the lift. He throws his hand toward the lift, starting to skate off to join the growing queue, as he looks back at Hadad.

"Keeping the spirit alive?" Hadad asks, skating along behind.

"The spirit keeps me alive. Here, or anywhere, with snow: That is Heaven man."

His companion nods silently and wonders for the third time today if he locked his BMW x3 parked all the way out in the overflow lot.

Elijah dispels the silence and ventures to ask whether or not they should do a run together. "*Off-piste?* You got your warm-up in yet?" He asks while miming out a game of rock-paper-scissors with the lift operator as they both come to stop on the chairlift's waiting pad.

Hadad grabs the chair as it swings around the contraption to them, the lifty preoccupied with his newest victory against Elijah. "Yeah, I'm warmed up."

The lift rocks deeply backwards as Elijah jumps onto it in a play at a fit. "No horsing around up there; I'll call the owner on you, you know!" The lifty shouts after them with a straight yet mocking tone.

"Watch out man! I'm not trying to go home early on my ass." Hadad exclaims as they are pulled slowly up the mountain.

The buzz of the diesel generator and whir of the rope on its wheels fades behind them. A certain self-deprecating seriousness comes over Elijah. "Lord is sensitive today. You never jumped off a chair?"

"No, and I'm not looking to do it, now. I came up to have a break and a good time. It's not that serious."

Elijah does not pay close attention to his chairmate's words. Instead, he peels the back off a large sticker and scoots himself as far to the end of the chair as he can. The chair approaches a black pole which stands in a row along the procession of steel rope on the way to the peak of the mountain. Elijah pushes his body out and over the side of the chair, upsetting its balance and pulling it down at an angle; he presses the large sticker onto the pole and returns to a sit. The sticker shows a raven holding a black diamond.

"Still bombing the poles, I see."

“Why are you here again?” Elijah responds.

“I was just saying, why do you have to be so reckless? You know Eli, I thought it was such an occasion to actually find you up here but I’m just not sure, I—”

“Maybe that’s the problem. You don’t relate, man.” He kicks his left foot, now and always latched to his board, out and into the next black pole in the row, creating a sharp echo. “That’s the simple joy in boarding though, you don’t have to relate, we just have to ride.”

Hadad clutches the chair when dismounting and nearly brings the two of them down on his way off. He finds his foot on the board and skates down the gentle curve of the chair exit into the bright sun of the peak. It all strikes Hadad as the landscape of a dream, obvious in his mind as something he knows but almost completely undistinguishable in detail. His partner quickly straps in and is looking over the side of the hill without any groom in excitement. A brief but deep terror grips Hadad’s mittened hands as he struggles to put his right foot in its binding.

“I’m going down; you ready? I’ll show you the nice run I’ve been doing through the trees on the north side.”

“Alright, let’s do it.” And he takes off behind Elijah, misjudging the snow and quickly realizing the slopes haven’t gotten fresh fall in days. Each turn is an incredible effort in the choppy, frozen over pack of the woods. Reaching Elijah’s deep carved path, Hadad finds his board smoothly sliding where the other just carved through. He focuses all his effort on following the delicate trail left behind and fails to recognize any of the obstacles around his path. Elijah uses his path to dip between two overhead tree branches hanging over a small gully, from which he is propelled into an opening below. In Hadad’s inattention the tree branch smacks him loose of control, and he falls straight down into the lightest pack of snow in the gully’s bottom. His left hand, outstretching for support, ends up crushed below his reckless weight and speed.

Elijah speeds through the gully and waits on the other side of the opening in a snowy meadow with a hard packed snowball where he notices no one is following him. Breaking out of his bindings altogether and sticking his board into the snow, he trudges back up his path. He hears Hadad screaming before he sees him, and his fear is momentarily awoken. When he finally looks at his partner crumpled in a delicate mass, his fear leaves him in a wave of laughter.

“Oh man, that’s a nice looking tumble. And I thought I was going to be the one to get you. Leave the mayhem to nature, ya?” Elijah says through a smirk.

“Fucking help me out, I think my arm is broken—”

“Didn’t you say you warmed up? Must just be out of practice.” He pulls a flip phone out of his pocket and turns it on. “Looks like I get service right here, probably because we didn’t get too far from the peak. I’ll just call ski

patrol, then.” The number is one of the few entered onto his phone, and the voice on the other line recognizes him as soon as he speaks. Elijah exchanges a few niceties first, and after hearing the wailing behind him, is reminded of his purpose. The volunteer behind the line hangs up; Elijah sits down and pulls out his flask.

“*Lord*, first swig for the broken bones?”

“Fuck no, man. What the fuck.”

“Thought I’d offer.” He says before holding the flask upright and letting the alcohol patter down into his mouth and around his lips. A frosted quiet accentuates the emptiness of the meadow below them. Elijah scans the mountains over the trees. A piercing whine is interrupting his focus, the power of the peaks pointed at the sky in defiance is diminished with every passing second.

He begins to talk to drown out the soft whimpering of the man crumpled in the snow beside him. “You know, there was a troop of settlers, thought they could make the journey into the valley shorter by passing right below this very mountain,” he begins. “Before this ‘new’ path, the others came through the gorge, I believe. Apparently, the government gave the first set of valley folks money, quite a lot in old-day money too, to blaze a path for the next set to come through nice and easy. Well, we are born of a lot of quitters and will-not-quit-eithers,” and he takes another swig from his flask. “The troop found the path to be a big old burn, leading like a trail of apocalypse up into these cascades. All the trees and things the valley folks burned to build this trail they then left there, just abandoned halfway through. The troop had no choice at this point, they had used up most of their resources to get to the mountains, and they knew the valley must be close. They found themselves stuck where the highway now runs, you can see right down there, at the bottom of the mountain. It was getting scarily close to being a Donner situation, when the folks from the valley made it to them in a big caravan full of supplies. I assume they all got wasted right then, all together, looking around at each of the emaciated kids and gaunt women, obviously no more animals, and thinking to themselves, ‘I would never.’”

Elijah smiles and looks across the white expanse from below them out to the horizon of smaller hills and peaks in the distance, reanimated with the quiet after his voice.

“Oh, and the poor guy’s face was screwed up like he’d never imagined such a thing could happen to him.” The flask passes from Elijah’s bright pink hand and into a gloved one. The gloved hand flicks the flask up and over top the face of a young woman in a red vest with a Swiss cross.

“I couldn’t handle the screaming when they picked him up and put him on the sled,” she responds after bringing her flasked hand down and wiping with the other across her mouth.

“Yeah,” Elijah murmurs, “no self-respect.”

Elijah and the woman with him sit in a warm, damp shack. The sound of skiers outside is subdued, and the bright mountain sun seeps through the cracks in the old wood. He gets out his pipe from his backpack and prepares to inaugurate the name of the place. “You want some, Asherah?”

“Of course I do, but I’m technically volley until close today.” She says to him without irony. In their ritual, he hands her the greens for the first smoke.

The small twelve stone firepit is unlit. Smoke from the glass pipe is funneling out of a hole in the roof. They cough together, and feel their bodies melting in the warmth of the confined space.

“Some people just don’t understand your life, Elijah, you have to let them figure it out or leave them behind, I think.” Asherah says after catching her breath. “It’s just like with me; my folks think I’m wasting my time, but it’s so opposite. My time is best spent doing what I want, right?”

“Okay, I don’t think this is just what we want. It’s a moral position. We shouldn’t be out there processing the Whole Mess for others when we can get out of it for ourselves, I think.”

“It’s all morals with you, I think.” Asherah smiles wide and knows it. Elijah is chuckling to himself and not meeting her eyes.

“Speaking of morals; have you heard about Fort Eli in the north parking lot? Recently anointed with blessing from owner Wiper.” He smirks before blowing the remains of the pipe bowl out into the dirt around their feet.

“Tim did not bless your snow fort.”

“Called out. But it hasn’t got plowed yet, and I’ve made it through about the week. Anyway, I call that blessing. And I think that blessing could be doubly proved if you stopped by to check it out.”

Asherah renders his insinuation liquid between their banter. “I’ll consider it. I was going to go down to town for drinks at Big Mountain tonight.” She gets up, recognizing her new state has allowed the time to slip by, and tromps to the weak door of the smoke shack.

“You know where I’ll be. See ya later, Ash.” Elijah calls to her as she puts on her ski’s. Earnestly, his thoughts are about his backpack shovel and a tabletop jump he was building on a run down the west face.

With only two hours to the day’s close it is decided within him that, with the conditions of the day, the jump must be perfect. From his boots to his beanie his body is newly limber and listening to the crunch of the freezing snow below his board. The journey down the hill from midway would be quick if he didn’t throw himself against every corner and wall of compacted snow he found. When he makes it to his previously built tabletop, expecting to find it frozen over from last night and ready to be approached with full force, it is gone. It looks like it got groomed right over.

Of course it wasn’t his only spot. But the bitter resentment of a perfectly missed opportunity weighs on his previously light feelings. Each successive

jump he visits only further annoys him with its discrepancy to the figured splendor of his lost one. And, of course, there is no park for him to revel in at this podunk ski hill. They demolish his builds and give him nothing in return.

The bright sun of the day falls below the expanse of mountains on the west, shading the ski hills' eastern face. The sun's last glimpse can be seen pasted on the tip of the hill, reflecting light off the lift at the top down to the parking lot, where Elijah sits in a folding lawn chair with a silver can of beer, taking it in. Behind him, the sun has been out of sight for almost an hour, the lodge's lights have been bleeding out into the lot, and he has had a pair of sunglasses on the whole the time.

Dark clouds are visible around the periphery of the mountains, and he prays in his folding chair for the snow to come down thick and soft and powder all the world. The look of the big round clouds is the best thing he thinks he has seen today.

When the glimmer of light off the lift on the peak erodes, he takes off his sunglasses and looks to the sky in its deep indigo. He has decided to get up early for the incoming powder day he knows will come. It will be the last day of the resort's week, the last day to figure out a place to crash in Oakridge, or else convince Tim Wiper to let him sleep in the lodge till Wednesday. Tomorrow night's problem, he figures, and gets out of his chair and ducks into his snow fort.

From the perspective of the visitors preparing to go home all around Elijah and his parking lot snow fort, dropping their gear into their rigs and changing in the shelter of their ajar car doors, it looks quite like an igloo. The rounded, spherical shape seems thick and likely to keep warmth within. The last few stragglers, after taking up as much time warming up their vehicles and chatting with their friends as is allowed, leave the parking lot in the dark.

The lights pouring from the wide lodge windows first illuminate the dense flakes of powder as they fall out of the night. There are far more flakes than those sitting in the lodge bar expect, and they happen to bring up the state of the parking lot for the Sunday visitors over the final glasses of the evening. It is unlikely, yet not impossible, that the groundskeeper that sits at the bar, looking out at the white outside the window, will remember what he talked about the night before. If he wakes up at six to fire up the Sno-Cat, will he need to put on the snowblower, and will he have time?

In a final act of inebriated forethought, after he has made his way back to his RV on the south side of the lodge, he sets his phone's alarm for five-thirty.

The clouds bear a weight none of the people around the ski resort expect, and snow falls silently as they sleep. Only the groundskeeper's persistent workmanship prepares him for a thick snow the following morning. He can't remember why he awoke at five thirty, but he rises out of habit into his morning stupor and finds himself locked into his RV, snow pushing against

his door. It takes him nearly half an hour to shovel his way through to the relative protection of the open garage. Pulling the snowblower attachment for the Cat out through the dark of the morning, he thinks that a snow like this hasn't hit the mountain in years. It is little thoughts like these he no longer meaningfully reflects on, but simply lets pass through him without regard. While his new Tucker Cat warms up, he drinks his coffee out of his green thermos in the driver's seat. In front of him, he sees the snow piled so high that the overhang of the garage could be no more than two yards away from the surface of it. In fact, he doesn't believe he has ever seen the snow so deep on this mountain.

The blower fires up and the groundskeeper drives the tracked vehicle out into the onslaught. Snow churns up in big gusts around the Cat as he makes his way to the parking lot. Each blade of the blower shovels up snow into the turbine of the machinery and spits it out either side in spray which coats neighboring trees. The morning dark is splintered by the spraying snow and dim hum of the Cat's diesel engine.

When the light of day reveals the red stained Douglas firs along the north parking lot's edge, the mountain closes on its day of beautiful snow. His name is passed around the lodge like a phantom, and a ceremony is held soon after. The snow sits vigil, uncombed and unriden gleaming powder on all faces of the resort.

The ski lot is open and icy when the lodge reopens after a week off, and the new procession of visitors thinks only of the lost week of perfect white.

Ol' Liz has got a problem

Dimich

I knocked for two eggs,
though I should've known better
than to ask Ol' (14-B) Liz.

I've stayed past my welcome,
though I don't think she minds it

as the hour calls for eating,
and she's hoping for someone to dine with.

"Go 'head and take a seat"
can be much harder than she thinks

when the table is an amassment
of every-night guests

that flatten down on chair cushions,
always ready to feast.

The coupon books are kind enough
to offer up their place,

between assorted stale gumdrops
and scavenged back alley crates.

She's gotta let it rest, I can't do much for her.
"C'mon, you can eat!"

like I'm her prized pig
with an unappeasable gutter.

Foam hair curlers join us
with unfree hands,

pushing aside return receipts
that'll never get the chance,

and as she holds two glasses—
alike, though not quite twins,

"Make way for fudge sundaes!"
that dribble down their bases,
sealing fine wood with rings.

Judith Twice-Dowager

Parker E. Price

A ballad regarding Judith of Flanders (c. 844-870)

*Judith twice-dowager, Judith twice-queen—
Born to an emperor, wed to a king—
A woman determined to set herself free—
Judith twice-dowager, Judith twice-queen.*

Judith the princess, the eldest of ten,
Who counted her years as eleven-and-one,
Was met in the palace by two foreign men—
King Noble the Wolf and his elf-counseled son.

Between the two kingdoms a treaty was signed
While Charles's daughter was holding back tears—
Young Judith, the powerless, looked up to find
Her husband a man who had four times her years.

As the first Saxon queen with a crown on her head
The news of her wedding soon sparked a revolt—
After two years of fighting the old king was dead
And the rebel was crowned as King Noble the Bold.

*Judith the dowager, Judith the queen—
A widow already, aged only fourteen—
Again forced to marry a West Saxon King—
Judith the dowager, Judith the queen.*

Young Judith was left all alone in the castle
As Noble the Bold was defending the land.
Many a Viking did he meet in battle—
Alas, he was slain by a Norwegian hand.

Now that her fortunes had taken a dip,
The dowager took her own fate in her hands—
She packed up her things and she purchased a ship
And she set sail away from those West Saxon sands.

Upon her return to the land of her birth
Her father, King Charles, was startled to see
His daughter, and since to him she had no worth
He sent her away to the convent Senlis.

*Judith twice-dowager, Judith the nun—
Ignored by a father who wanted a son—
Bored at the convent and wanting to run—
Judith twice-dowager, Judith the nun.*

One day at the convent arrived a young knight
Named Baldwin the Iron-Arm, known for his skills;
Betwixt he and Judith 'twas love at first sight—
The couple eloped and ran off to the hills.

When Charles had heard of the runaway lovers
He raged at his daughter and gave a command
That bishops and innkeepers and anyone other
To Judith and Baldwin shall not lend a hand.

Left with no choice but appealing their fate
Judith and Baldwin fled south down to Rome.
The bishops looked on as the two pled their case
But all Judith's words were for Pope Nick alone.

*Judith the supplicant, Judith the brash—
Confidence carrying her through the clash—
The pontifex found she was more than his match—
Judith the supplicant, Judith the brash.*

"He's known as the Iron-arm, slayer of Thanes;
Hearthfires everywhere hear of his skill.
King Charles' edicts do not affect Danes—
If Christ won't accept us, then Thor perhaps will!"
Pope Nicholas felt himself fill with the fright
Of Baldwin the Iron-arm taking the axe—
He welcomed the couple back into the light
And ordered King Charles to give them some tracts.

And so did her father belatedly grant her
Some farmlands to plant and some pastures to graze—
Judith and Baldwin would call their home Flanders
And there they'd be happy for all of their days.

*Judith twice-dowager, Judith twice-queen—
A daughter, a wife, and a mother of three—
She threatened a Pope and she walked away free—
Judith twice-dowager, Judith twice-queen*



Cooper Brush

Crystalline

Abby Kohler

Clara had only ever known trees, hills, rivers. She wasn't used to a flat landscape with the sky close enough to reach up and touch it. Where the gap between God and humanity closed. She thought such communion only happened atop mountains, or out on the open ocean. But here, in this place with small hills and flat plains for miles around, what was left of nature seemed to sing.

It all... glittered. On the tips of each tiny blade of grass, dewy rivulets suspended in the soft dawn light. Ridges of leaves held their shape, imprinted with careful asymmetrical patterns that glowed like starlight. The few remaining trees bent so low to the ground, trembling branches twinkling in the sun; it was hard to distinguish them from the crystalized grass.

Before, it would have been beautiful. But Clara tightened her grip on the ax and set to work chopping at the nearest crystallized tree. Maybe she could get through to the flammable wood underneath, build a fire before night fell.

As the ax connected with a rough diamond branch, its metal toe shattered. With it shattered Clara's chance to enjoy the warmth of a fire.

Tears stung her eyes. Here was hopelessness, a sensation she had felt before, but borne anew with yet more cruelty. Her friends and family ripped away in a devastating and entirely unprecedented weather event. Everything she had ever known.

She dropped the ax. The new natural world had a bite to it she didn't understand. A bite that, before the fall of the diamond rain, wouldn't have been possible.

Now, even the sun poisoned the planet. Radiation reflected off this flawless, prismatic desert that hadn't always been a desert. It all stayed frozen, unmoving, like an old photograph. She guessed that the sheer number of diamonds and crystals compressing one another from each subsequent diamond-storm had formed the rough, jagged landscape before her.

There was but one thing that remained consistent throughout this nightmare: the sky. On clear nights, Clara saw swaths of stars denoting every possible constellation. Each sunrise and sunset took her breath away: vibrant, swirling hues of pink and orange and blue. Without the pollution of cities, the only barrier to the expansive beauty of the universe was the planet's clouds.

And according to Earth's laws before, it was all impossible. But Clara could not afford to resent this new world for its unnatural feats. In order to survive, she had to accept things as they were now; she could not yearn for how her life had been in the past. Any other thinking would lead her to thoughts of her parents, her brother, the city she had once called home....

Clara thought, not for the first time, of how her death was inevitable. She

had been lucky to endure each storm as it came thus far; lucky that she had escaped the city without being crushed by its rubble; lucky that the poison of these jewels hadn't consumed her. It was only a matter of time before her luck ran out. This was a notion tempered by the idea that, should Clara meet her end, she would find eternal rest. She would no longer suffer in a world destroyed by the paradoxical ego and ignorance of humanity.

Clara flexed her hand, the one with veins of crystal crawling up her arm. Patches of her skin had a sickly, purplish hue to them. Ridges of crystals poked out from underneath her fingernails and just below her wrist. She twisted her arm so the opal sheen of her veins reflected the sunlight. The change had been gradual. By her count, it'd taken almost two months for the crystals to overtake her hand, wrist, and forearm. Should Clara count herself lucky for that, too?

She pushed down her sleeve and grimaced. With every movement, she could feel the crystals shifting like a thousand tiny blades under her skin. She wondered how many others had gone through this. How many had the chance to watch the slow victory of the jewels consume them over the course of days, weeks... months. How long had they lasted?

Between the infection and her continued struggle to find food or water in this barren landscape.... Well, Clara was no scientist, but she was confident she didn't have years left.

She kicked the ax. It skidded across the ice-rink-like field as Clara slumped down against the crystalized tree. In the early days, she'd tried to avoid making contact with the diamonds if she could help it.

But it was far too late now.

Clara couldn't change the past. All she could do was keep fighting to survive. After all, there was still hope that she could find other survivors. There was still hope that this unprecedented storm of jewels hadn't consumed all of Earth. She refused to believe that she could be the only one left. Despite everything, she wasn't dead, so why would the whole rest of the world be?

Clara leaned forward and stretched. Her muscles were stiff, like she'd sat on concrete. She tried to swallow; her throat was too dry. She reached into her bag, for one of the water bottles she had rationed. Before she retrieved one, she knew what she would find. Empty. All of them. She heaved a bone-weary sigh, got to her feet, and started walking.

She walked for miles every day, searching for some sign that human civilization wasn't completely gone. The soles of her shoes were almost worn out, but the endorphins of the long walks lessened the gut punch of total isolation.

Clara wished she'd been one of the people who prepared for every apocalypse. It would've been nice to have a sanctuary to retreat to, in case the diamond rain ever returned. Except for the ax she had discarded—far south of her now—she hadn't found much that wasn't covered by crystals.

A shimmer caught her eye. She startled and bent down to observe it. Running water?

She pulled an empty bottle from her bag, her hands unsteady. It seemed too good to be true. Wait. She pulled back. Maybe it was too good to be true.

A shudder passed through her. Heavy gray clouds blocked the sun, but that didn't mean the water was safe to drink. Was it better to drink possibly irradiated water than to die of thirst?

But she was doomed already, so why not? She filled the bottle and gulped down the water. It was cold. Fresh. Full of... minerals. She stifled a laugh. Most everything was full of minerals now. Soon, she would be too.

And then Clara really wasn't laughing. She glanced down at her hand, at the silvery veins that had almost reached her elbow.

She'd been infected from the moment she cupped her hands to catch the first drops of the accursed diamond rain. Her chest had swelled in giddy excitement like a little kid on Christmas as it landed in her outstretched palm. She imagined building a fortress out of this treasure, and of adorning her head with a crown of prismatic stalactites. It was like living in a fairytale. She had held onto that jagged gem with her bare hand. Cool to the touch. It lacked the smoothness of a cut diamond; all of its flaws were laid bare. But just as Clara turned the jewel over, the tip of her pointer finger had nicked one of its sharp inclusions.

Crimson drops beaded onto the purple stone.

The cut had stung for a moment—just a moment—and Clara had thought that everything would be okay. She thought that she could return to her normal life, unscathed. She thought she would joke about it over coffee with her friends; maybe fashion it into a necklace as a birthday gift for her mother.

But that tiny cut had never healed. In a matter of days, it began to sprout purple crystals. Even after she threw the poisonous jewel away, even after she had taken to covering every inch of bare skin, the infection had only gotten worse. Her normal life was gone forever.

Some fairytale it was, she reflected now, staring out at the landscape. Hers was now a world of deadly diamonds and contagious crystals of every color. Glorious sparkling shapes that had infiltrated a planet and blighted people who never had the chance to fight back.

Clara settled down next to the stream, her eyelids drooping. She didn't mean to fall asleep. But it'd been days since she had allowed herself respite. As she lingered in that delicate state of semi-consciousness on the rock-hard ground, she found herself missing the tattered mattress in her old apartment.

She bolted awake when a distant crack split the air.

Clara lifted her head and squinted out onto the horizon. The crystal valley was bright, even under the light of a waning crescent moon. She shouldered her bag and looked out on the horizon to the east, where the

sound had come from.

She rubbed her eyes a few times to confirm what she was seeing. And there, not one-hundred feet from where she stood, was a figure. Were they real? Clara stepped closer.

The figure drew closer too. Slow, cautious. Scraps of mismatched clothing clung to every inch of their skin. Clara could see a weary face streaked with cuts and bruises.

Someone was here. Someone was right here in front of her. Something more potent than relief washed through Clara. She stepped toward the figure, hesitating.

A man. Tall, with broad shoulders. He moved with a pronounced limp, she noticed, as he got closer. He looked older, roughly twice her age. His eyes were bloodshot. A long, rust-colored beard poked out from underneath his face mask. How could he be here?

For a moment, they just stared at one another.

“I thought... I thought I was the only one,” the man said. His voice was strained. “I’ve been all alone since it started. My family... my town...”

The man reached out his hand. Clara stretched out her own hand tentatively. Even through his gloves, she could feel the warmth of his palm. Tears sprang to her eyes. It had been so long since she’d felt the contact of another human.

Then his eyes flicked down to her arm, where the sleeve had pulled away and exposed the crystal bruising.

“You... you’re infected,” he rasped, pulling away from her. “Get back!”

“I’m—” Her own voice caught in her throat, the sound testament to its disuse. “I didn’t—”

Eager diamond veins itched just beneath the surface of her skin. They felt the weather change before she could. It started as a soft tinkling of gemstones no larger than a dime descending from the sky. But Clara knew it wouldn’t stop there. Every time the diamond-storm came, the drops got bigger. The ones that had destroyed her city had been the size of saucers.

“RUN!” Clara shouted. She looked around, frantically searching for cover. This landscape was flat, for the most part, except where forests and cities had been transformed. A few hundred feet ahead, there was what looked like a barn and a farmhouse propped against each other in a crystalized triangle. As the droplets grew larger, she bolted toward the sanctuary.

One of them hit right behind Clara, as she dove into the cavern formed by the two buildings. It slammed into the ground like a spear. She gasped — the diamond droplet was almost two feet long, and its shape made it look like a sword. As she caught her breath from the ground, she turned around.

But the man wasn’t as fast as her. His limp made him slow, and blades descended all around him. He couldn’t dodge them forever. Clara locked eyes

with him. He reached out a hand, desperate.

“Help me!” He wailed. “Don’t let me die here!”

She hesitated, just for a moment. Did she have enough time to save them both?

Crack. Another diamond blade dropped from the sky, impaling the man’s outstretched palm. His screams echoed off Clara’s crystal cavern.

The shard grew larger, splitting into fractals. Lime green geodes burst free from his skin. The fractals dug into his arm and climbed up through his veins until they reached his chest. Crimson blood spattered against the green, and his body spasmed violently. The crystals dissolved into his flesh and began to reshape him.

Clara forced herself to look away. She squeezed her eyes shut and clamped her hands over her ears, blocking out the horrible sights and sounds as he changed. His screams turned into desperate gurgles. But she stayed frozen for long enough that the world began to get bright again against her eyelids, and the furious diamond rain had subsided. She couldn’t stay like this forever. She had to face the world if she wanted to survive another day.

Clara slowly opened her eyes, blinking back tears at the blinding light of the crystals. Before her, a lime green crystal lattice lanced through with blood glistening under the rising sun.

But it was a new day.

One man had survived, and that meant there would be others. So Clara would find them, no matter how long it took. Even if she had to walk the whole planet over.

* * *

Ode To Velvet Hangers At Coat Check

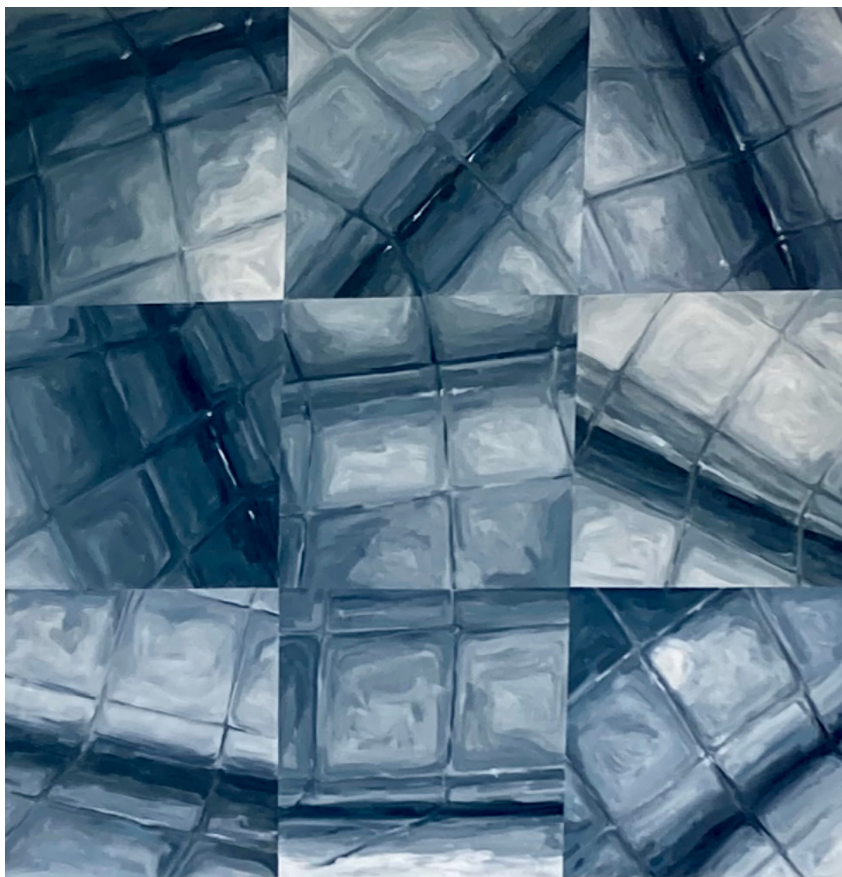
Dimich

Oh, your bickering.
At the ruffle of the coat-check girl
you clank against your friends,
tussle till you tire,
and truce to a swinging pant.

Damned rugburn shoulders—
they've made you rough
for the sake of clinging
to the heavy-pocketed coats
of established guests.

You hook in place
of their each warmed blade,
smoothing down the hairs
of your velvet dress,
till a ticket is traded back
and a dollar refolds
in the plastic
cheese-puff tip jar.

How relieving,
that five o'clock whistle:
to shed that scratching thing
from your bust, and go back
to clamoring with your buds.



Grace Frangante

#1f1514

Alisha Acireno

you said you hated the color of
your eyes
brown like
sidewalk shit
postmortem bananas
crusted blood
bathtub scum
eigengrau that paint
behind your eyelids that refracts through your hair when a
train passes by and you think
too much

and say how my eyes are so pretty in comparison

catalana creme brulee
tigers eye
plum branches
just after the green
branches
my winter coat's seam pressed to yours
walking through
nakano broadway

and i couldn't find the words to
say it then but i
thought them something grander
than anything like
age-stained kyoto temples and
my cluttered desk in oregon so
many miles away
shoyu marinade dripping down discount chicken skewers dripping
down our hands like
god blessed us broke kids
and love

yes

i think they were the color of love

when you stared at me that night in january
dodging street lights as we linked arms
sitting on stone benches even though
we shivered

and the cold killed so much
softer in the park when i heard you
say
nothing
at all

how i said nothing at all

forgetting how to kiss you

so i could look a little longer

‘Cowboy, Pass By’

Sebastion Erhan

The last cowboy can be found in a nameless bar somewhere in Nevada City, California. He stands at the bar and drinks Old Overholt neat and watches football without really watching it. The night rolls on and one of his companions at the bar pokes fun at his clothes in the way of a man who doesn't really care one way or the other but who's had a bad night and wants to take it out on somebody else. The last cowboy accepts the invitation with a wordless jerk of his chin towards the door. The faint jingle of his spurs can be heard before the door rattles shut on cheap hinges.

You ain't taking your rings off, says the other man.

No, says the last cowboy, I ain't.

He steps forward and just hits the other man and it's clean, you can hear his nose crunch and then he grabs him by the shoulders and throws him onto the ground and then you can hear his spurs jingling again because the last cowboy is kicking his opponent in the face. He kicks him again and again and the man can't even scream because his mouth is filled with his own blood and when the last cowboy is done his face looks less like a face and more like the kind of meat you might buy from the local butcher, and he isn't moving.

The last cowboy turns around and walks back into the neon light of the bar. There is fresh sweat beneath the brim of his hat but when he raises his glass the amber liquid inside remains steady. He downs it in one and then orders another. When the policeman walks through the door he turns around and then looks back at the cracked TV that always plays the latest game. The bartender stands like a statue beneath it.

You killed him, says the policeman.

I guess I did, says the last cowboy.

You're going to have to come with me down to the station.

I don't aim to do any such thing.

I ain't asking.

I don't much care.

The policeman has his hand on the butt of his gun, and he starts to draw it. Resting on the seat before the last cowboy is a coach gun and he picks it up and points it at the policeman and the wood is smooth in his hand and the steel barrels gleam dully in the light of the bar.

Easy now, says the policeman.

The last cowboy's finger trips the trigger and the gun leaps in his hand and the brains of the policeman are blown out from the back of his skull and splattered like modern art across the wall which is darkened from decades of cigarette smoke. The last cowboy breaks the gun open and dumps out the

spent cartridges and slams fresh ones into the breech and snaps the gun shut again and pushes through the door and leaves. The warm night air is slightly greasy and it mingles with the acrid smoke in the wake of his passage. In the cracked asphalt and faded parking lines of the bar lot he swings his leg over a 2015 Indian Scout painted a lustrous purple so dark it could almost be called black. He crams his hat firmly onto his head and the engine turns over and when he hauls back on the accelerator he is reduced to the roar of the bike and the brilliant white of his headlight in the dark.

The SWAT van howls into the trailer park and the last cowboy hears the gravel spitting from beneath the tires and he stands up from where he has been sitting and buckles on his gun belt and puts on his hat and grabs the coach gun from where it has been resting beside the door. The trailer is lit only by the flickering glow of his TV screen and the lit diodes on his CD player and Ray Charles fills the cramped and dirty space with the sound of piano. At the sound of boots in front of his trailer he flicks on the lights and throws open the door and is met with the blinding glare of a spotlight. He can't see but he raises the coach gun to a little below chest level to account for the two steps leading up to his trailer and he waits.

Put the gun down or I swear to God I'll shoot you.

Shoot me then. The last cowboy spits. You ain't got the balls.

I swear to God, calls the SWAT officer. I don't want to but I swear I will.

I heard you the first time, says the last cowboy, and he points the gun in the direction of the SWAT officer's voice and he pulls the trigger and he hears the man cry out and then the rest of the SWAT team opens fire. It feels as though he's been struck by a hundred fists and the last cowboy crumples backwards into the yellow light of his doorway and he twitches once and is still. A solitary river of blood trickles down the crumbling steps and gleams in the moonlight and the fringe on his chaps stirs sorrowfully in the midnight breeze and Ray Charles pipes music into the silence.

Still Born

Madison Yarbrough

There is nothing I have not said
nothing I have not spit in ink on
a page quiet and unforgiving I waste
my time breathing in fog to gag on
the rephrases of my grievances I choke on
the redundancy bubbling at a constant
boil within me tasting of navy salt
drying my tongue and forcing me to
open and feel the burn on my lower
lash as the thick steam of a stagnant
existence pours out into blankness
meant for someone more
defined than I.

It stares back at me
the things I have thought thought
thought and nothingness has slipped
the knife under the table to slice
my mouth wider in grotesque desire
for triumphant articulation.

What leaves will once again sink
in the living room water where
it will be born still where it will
speak for me and it will
hold my incapable mind
folding it and mushing it until it is
silent and agreeably misunderstood.

angel-kin

Rose Ruhnke

dripping, ripe. the fruit of a plum tree.
with well-practiced hands, i turn into angel-kin.
i make myself so good he'll have to eat me.

some tempting pearl—washed in from the sea.
blush like a bruise. it hurts, falling from heaven,
dripping, ripe, the fruit of a plum tree.

anointed by perfume, a batesian aphrodite,
deep in the orchard. follow the scent of jasmine.
i make myself so good he'll have to eat me.

spider-leg lashes—brittle, grasping, feathery.
star-dusted eyelids, cosmos from a tin,
dripping and ripe. the fruit of a plum tree.

petal lips, painted sensuality,
a sweet forbidden prize. *sin, adam. sin;*
dripping, ripe. the fruit of a plum tree.
i make myself so good he'll have to eat me.

Ripen

Anna Liv Myklebust

I have a mango that I want to
eat, and I wait for it to ripen.
Every day, and every hour,
I wait for it to be perfect.
So I can be happy, and enjoy
my life, and its tangy taste.

I go lay on my bed,
then sit on the couch,
and end up cross legged
at my desk in an uncomfortable
chair, uncomfortable with how
things stand.

With you, and me.

I move the mango next to me,
on my desk, because maybe I am
lonely, and I hope it will symbolize
my growth and share secrets of
how I can make things better.

For us,
because I have grown.
And you have
not.

And I see that this is fruitless
indeed, because you are not
a fruit, and have no intention
of changing for me.

So I stare ahead, and I
sit cross legged at my desk.
In an uncomfortable chair,
uncomfortable with how
things stand, and wait for
the mango to ripen.



Evan Sonne

Pavement Ends

Ian Ahlberg

We were driving down a road without another car in sight. My sister and I were alone in the middle of the desert, sand clinking against the side of our dad's 2003 Blue Chevy. The truck bed was empty, but piled in the backseat were boxes of our dad's stuff. Mainly old VHS tapes, vinyl records, and a handful of beer bottles he collected, stuff my sister and I felt we should hang onto. Our windshield was caked with yellow and green spots from dead insects. The past two hours had been spent in silence, listening to our Dad's CD collection and admiring the dry heat of the desert.

"Onyx, 10 miles ahead. You want to stop?" my sister asked. She had one hand on the wheel, the other hanging out the window. Her sandy blonde hair blew softly in the wind as she kept her eyes pinned onto the asphalt. The sun was out and shining on the road, but all I could see was pavement and sand.

"Yeah, let's stretch our legs out," I replied before gazing out the window again. The desert slowly populated with fences lined with wire that encircled around empty fields. One house with withered blue paint was close to the road. It was littered with empty glass bottles and rubber tires. More houses and wooden shacks decorated with rusty farm equipment appeared on the horizon until we saw a sign posted on a stake in the ground.

Onyx Population 242 Elevation 2748

All Onyx had was a gas station at the center of town. It was constructed entirely out of wood except for the rusty metal gas pumps. They had a blackboard sign with the prices written out in chalk. Inside the gas station my sister bought muffins for breakfast, which we ate over the hood of the car. It might have been the lack of sleep, but it felt like the chocolate chip muffin was reviving me. I was too tired to drive this morning, but with my newfound strength, we headed back out onto the road.

Last night we decided to stay in a motel in the middle of nowhere. It was so hard to sleep because of the constant headlights from cars entering the parking lot that pierced through the thin stained curtains. The pillows and sheets on the bed felt dense and rough. Every single minute I spent lying in that bed I felt weaker as the walls moved in a little tighter. I remember waking up to the smell of coffee and the sight of my sister curled up on the desk chair. She had her head between her legs with her hair up. Even if I wanted to get more sleep, the dripping sound from the coffee machine felt so loud.

"We should only be an hour away." My sister told me, rolling her window down. The warm air blasted my face before I could respond.

“Any turns or do I just follow this until the road ends?”

“Until the road ends,” she replied, placing a new CD in the player and shifting her body so she could peer out the window. She seemed content in the passenger seat curled up, staring out the window. Driving didn’t feel too overwhelming in the empty desert. Half of the cars we saw were rusty skeletons of trucks abandoned on the side of the road, left to be consumed by the desert.

I looked into the rearview mirror, and, for just a second, I saw an apparition. The figure of Dad in the backseat, at the end of his life: when he was so skinny the bones in his face were visible through his wrinkled skin.

He only passed a month ago. The last time I saw him was during Christmas, in room five hundred and fourteen. He was happy to be with us, and I think it was a good distraction for him, even if we had to celebrate in the hospital. I tried to replicate his famous recipe for pecan pie, and despite everyone liking it, I don’t think it turned out right. Even from his hospital bed, Dad couldn’t resist parenting me.

You can’t let the crust get too brown. It should look more like honey, golden.

For Christmas, I got him a book full of landscape pictures of plants and flowers from the southwest. He enjoyed looking at all the pictures and telling me about all the different wildflowers and cacti. He knew which plants were edible, which were medicinal, and which were hallucinogenic. When would one plant bloom and flower and for how long? Which insects loved which plants and why? He had so much knowledge reserved in his brain, lying on his deathbed.

At Christmas dinner, surrounded by cheap tinsel, plastic ornaments, and beeping medical equipment, my sister asked our dad an important question.

My only regret was not buying a picture of the wildflowers in the desert. They aren’t as pretty near the cities. You have to isolate yourself. No city lights, no cell service, no radio. There the flowers bloom unbothered. Wild and untamed, Natural beauty. I saw them a couple of times in my life, but I wanted something in the house. Something to look at when it was rainy so I could take myself back there.

We spent the rest of Christmas dinner sharing and telling stories about our mother before she died: the time she cried after dropping my sister off at daycare for the first time, how she insisted we could never go upstairs with shoes on, and how Mom cried the first time I pulled the car out of the garage by myself.

You two were great children. Those days were the best. Every day both of you made me smile. I loved playing with and cooking for both of you. I miss that.

Our time with him was only occasionally interrupted by the noise of chatty nurses in the hall, but it was almost like Christmas at home. Just with the sounds of medical equipment and industrial lighting, and instead of being in the living room gathered around a Christmas tree, we were circled around Dad, bound to his hospital bed.

“Do you think Dad was ready to go?” My sister asked, finally shifting her body forward again, no longer gazing out the side window.

“I’m not sure. But it feels right,” I replied.

“He watched his kids grow up and become adults. He outlived his wife. I don’t know if he had much life left to live. Other than seeing the wildflowers again.” She brushed her hand over the vent where the cold air blew. “Do you think there was something else he wanted?”

“I have no idea. I wish... I wish I knew.” I let a tear pool and form at the bottom of my eye before allowing it to slowly drip down my face. My sister patted my shoulder gently. I let the tears slowly fall out of my eyes for the rest of the ride. All the rocks and sand looked the same through my glassy eyes. She grabbed a tissue from her bag and handed it to me. I wiped my eyes, stuffing the tissue into the cupholder between us.

The tallest thing I had seen for miles was a lone Joshua tree, reaching out over everything else in the desert, struggling for its survival. That was until I saw a yellow sign posted up on a wooden pole on the side of the road.

Pavement Ends

A rough gravel road was all we had in front of us. I kept the car moving as the crunch and grind of pebbles beneath the wheels grew louder.

“How far do you think we should go?” I asked the passenger. Her eyes were fixated on the expanse of the desert in front of us.

“Until we find the wildflowers.”

We slowly glided across the gravel waiting for any burst of color in the toned landscape. My mind was becoming numb driving on the path. The shrubbery of the desert slowly became a part of the path I was driving on. My thoughts wandered, questioning what my father had ever even done for me. Or what I had ever done for him?

The day after Christmas was the last time I spoke to him. He was sleepy and grappling with the side effects of his medication. I leaned down across the hospital bed and hugged him. Before I left, he beckoned his hand motioning for me to come back to him. I placed my head beside him so that my ear was close to his mouth.

Son, you know I love you, but I wish I was dead.

I didn’t know how to respond to him. I think he smiled when I took my head away. Or maybe it was just the look of relaxation on his wrinkled face. He didn’t look sad, he never really looked sad. I turned my back and left the room.

I followed the neon red exit signs on the ceiling until I reached the elevator. The bustle of shifting papers, quiet conversations, and beeping

machines of the hospital grew louder and louder until the doors of the elevator shut. Then it was just me. Me and the gentle hiss of the elevator shaft. No calming music, just the ding of arrival once I got to the bottom floor. Cold air from the outside stung my ears when I stepped out from the sliding doors. I looked up at the fifth floor one last time before leaving the parking lot, passing the sign for the visitor and patient parking.

“Do you see it?” she asked, her hand pointing towards a patch of orange in the distance. I changed our course until we were close to the family of blooming poppies. An orange spot in the brown dusty sea. I parked the car and we both looked at each other before exiting the vehicle.

Together we walked towards the wildflowers, my sister carrying our father’s urn in her arms. We arrived at the edge of the wildflowers. They were slowly blowing in the wind, displaying their colors to the world. It was quiet and calm, just the gentle sounds of the air blowing by as the vast blue sky consumed the horizon.

“Do you want to say anything?” I asked. She was hugging the container tight to her chest, allowing the wind to blow her hair in front of her face. She stood motionless before turning her head to look at me and then back out onto the field.

“I miss you, Dad. I think that goes without saying. I remember the first time you took me camping and we were in the woods. And we ate beans that you heated over the campfire. We ate them with plastic forks. Wrapped in sleeping bags we slept in the truck bed of your Chevy, looking out into the night sky, unable to see the stars through all the tree branches. I tried really hard to fall asleep, but I couldn’t. I woke you up. Crying in the middle of the night whining about a nightmare I had about a family of ferocious bears. And when I asked if we could leave you didn’t hesitate. You packed up the whole camp, without my help, just you and your headlamp, as I watched from the passenger seat, locked in the car. Petrified in fear, afraid of the bears.”

She paused to wipe away a tear from falling down her face and to brush her hair back into place.

“You drove us all the way home, over four hours of driving with no sleep. You didn’t unpack anything when we got home. You just slept for the rest of the day. I think I thanked you at the time, but I want to thank you again. Even if I lied about the nightmare and the bears. I am grateful you took me home. That meant a lot to me.”

My sister bent down and kissed his container. She stood standing in the wind letting it envelop her as she squeezed the urn. She looked out of place standing in front of the wildflowers. Her sandy blonde hair blew around in front of her face waving in the wind more than the poppies. She was the tallest thing in sight and commanded everything around her.

After staring out into oblivion she turned around and extended her arms,

presenting our father to me. I took him into my hands and stepped forward, out towards the field of wildflowers. I hadn't planned on saying anything. It just felt like the right thing to do at the time: to ask my sister if she had anything to say. But now that I had him in my hands, I did not have anything to say. I had no words or thoughts. I couldn't think of anything worth bringing up or anything that could come close to encapsulating all the things he had done for me.

"Hi Dad, I miss you too. I wish we could watch a baseball game again, that would be fun. Eating hot dogs and singing during the seventh inning. I hope you would like that. I know I would. I also wish I could try to make you pecan pie again and try not to char the top this time."

I stopped for a moment. The wildflowers were still gently swaying, responding to the wind. I looked at my sister who was focusing on the wildflowers below her with tears pooling at the bottom of her eyes. Watching her cry was heartbreaking. It made me want to cry too.

"I don't know what else to say. What should I say to him?" I asked her. I felt helpless.

"Share a memory or something. I don't know. Show that you loved him. Show that you cared." She responded as her voice was breaking. I didn't know if she was crying over him or the fact that I couldn't say anything about him. How was I supposed to capture everything my father meant to me in just a few words spoken in front of a patch of orange wildflowers? I took my eyes off the wildflowers and rested them on the horizon.

"Umm. You took me fishing when I was eight. I had fun that day. I can tell people now when they ask me if I have fished before, that I did it once with my dad. We only caught one fish, and it was tiny. But I still had fun. And even if we never did it again, I have that memory to look back on. I can tell people that my dad did something for me. He took me fishing."

I took a deep breath and allowed the silence of the desert to engulf my thoughts. I tried not to think about anything, but I couldn't. I wanted to go back home. I wanted to have another Christmas with him, one not in a plastic hospital room. I wanted to tell him I was sorry. I felt like I had so much to tell him.

I stood still until I was ready. Removing the lid, I dug my hand into the urn, sprinkling some of his ashes into the wind. My sister came next to me and did the same, releasing his ashes as they blew onto the poppies in front of us. I wanted to tell him that I loved him.

We stood there crying together staring out as the horizon vanished in our tears.

"Are you ready to go back?" She asked me. I nodded my head. We went back in silence, only the crush of pebbles beneath us.

I was happy to see the back of the metal sign and the return of a paved

road. I forgot how quiet asphalt could be. My sister inserted another CD to fill the silence, and we continued down the same empty road we emerged from.

We passed through Onyx again, this time with more insects splattered on our windshield. While my sister got gas, I scraped off the colorful smudges on the glass. We left Onyx leaving a cloud of dust that engulfed its sign behind us.

Onyx Population 242 Elevation 2748

I Can't Stop Thinking About Being Your Bitch

Alisha Acireno

Like when I used to

dress in the body of a woman five years older like how
you could've seen me if I was any smarter one night in December we
got bored of the stick up everyone's ass and got drunk outside a seven-eleven
and when I left the bathroom you mistook me for an unbled lamb as you slurred and
called me beautiful but you said that night with my
knees brushing yours that you never believed in God so I
let myself think you'd make something holy of me

We weren't sheep or purebreds but you and I were both mutts half-here

half-other corner of the world we had four passports to our name and
a knowledge that no place would ever keep us in the yakitori joint we could've
called home you took the cartilage in your teeth and crushed it with your power
I asked you why you liked the crunch and you told me *Because I'm a dog*
your eyes grinned and oh how I longed to kiss the top of your head
walking want along the velvet of your ear

Winter made us infants as we got closer like a pack of icicles we

cuddled in the park and the night was clutched by rigor mortis you
left booze on the concrete steps and I sipped on plum wine not knowing you
hated the smell of it so I didn't let me kiss you
you told me your mother's betrayal how your brother only loves you
and the man you had to be at sixteen you said you sold silver on the street
and the chain around your neck turned into a holding kennel but you
were always so beautiful even as you turned to lock the door on me

You stood me up for two whole hours but as you stepped off

the train I knew I'd wait for you forever so we walked around
the night market and waltzed among the lightbulbs falling slowly
as even the stations shut down and as the busker let his doved guitar
flutter through the zero-Gs you leaned in to kiss me but I said

Not here we'll look out of place

you put your mouth on mine anyway and I was allergic to fireworks
but

the warmth
If I should forget all else

With flashed canines you said *But we're not really Japanese* and laughed when I stuck
my tongue in
your mouth

tracing the leash that bound us I thought with living in your coat we'd be
warm enough but
you wanted more and I never saw it coming you
wanted to sweat you wanted me cornered you wanted gasping heat and someone to
die in
but darling I was so scared I wasn't used to shedding I only knew
how to be terrified and it was you who blessed me with joy but it wasn't enough it was
so soon and so
you shook not from love but from disgust as you saw a traitor in me too so when we
left you kissed me again
it felt like goodbye but I didn't know until I asked you to wait for me

for months I cried and cried for you but I couldn't remember your smell I lost faith in
what I

thought would never put me down like a hound kneeling to a lonely shed

Now and then I stop by Nakano station and that Tokyo bar

I hate that even now I'd let you pillage me in your room though you'd
send me out

and I still know where you work and how you sleep through the day stretching on
sheets I'll never

get to drool on but I think I'm just saying that I'll stay after all this too has abandoned
me

I will wait for you at the station because I only know how
to forgive you

Because I only know how to be your dog

Dear Childhood

Morgan Seymour

You are one of those porcelain cow creamers
White, with soft brown spots
Curled tail, a handle
You've got a cherub face
Each feature a featherlight touch the color of a flower
And I would beg to use you on weekend mornings, when I had cereal

Your cool skin is surely sweating from running through green pastures
Your tail waving about, swatting at flies
Little hands lift you gingerly
Tipping you to look over Cheerios
Honey milk flows from your lips
Like a curtain of silk

Your green pastures
Are now white and dusty
Buttermilk oceans and dust bunny clouds
Pearly sand and powdered sugar hills

I can see your flowery face
Behind my eyes
Behind the coffee cups
Alone on your shelf
Dust covering your eyes
Like a spring jacket of fuzz
With no one to blow it off



Michelle Nguyen

Razorblade Lipgloss

Zayne Clayton

During my first attempt to return to the world of the living, before I realized it wasn't as easy as everyone made it out to be, I decided to apply a new tune of lipgloss that had been sitting under my sink for who knows how long. It had been given to me by someone I didn't want to think about. I released it from the thin plastic keeping it sealed and new. I squeezed the sides, puckering my lips to meet the opening. Before I could stop the sweeping motion of my hand, I felt it slice suddenly against my bottom lip, leaving a thin angry line that looked like the opening to a new mouth. I waited a moment for it to start speaking. Then I screamed.

I sat on my bathroom floor staring into the tube. In the middle of the translucent gloss shone a thin, silver blade. If I looked at it from certain angles it was invisible, lurking in the hidden corners of the pink cylinder, waiting for an unsuspecting user like myself.

Holding toilet tissue to my bottom lip, I retrieved my phone from the bathroom counter.

3 Missed Calls from Brenda.

1 Missed Call from Mom.

5 Texts from Brenda: *Just checking in! Seeing if you want some company?*

2 Texts from Mom: *Honey, I was reading an article this morning about grief and I really think you could...*

1 Text from Michael: *almost home.*

But, of course, that last one couldn't be real. I cleared my screen and began to search for other people who had experienced the same thing with *If Looks Could Kill Cosmetics*: a name I now berated myself for not taking more seriously. They were known for selling ultra-cheap, yet effective products from skincare to makeup. There were even rumors of them branching out into the haircare world.

The further I researched, falling deeper and deeper down the hole, finding nothing but praise or empty feedback about the stickiness of the formula, the more convinced I became that it was up to me to inform people about what they did to me.

My first instinct was to check in with the company directly. Their website was a 2010s pink and black aesthetic with ribbons of colors twisting their way around each page I came across. I felt dizzy with each misdirect I clicked on. I filled out a complaint form. I tried to engage in their live chat only to find out it was a bot. I resorted to calling their customer service line where I waited on hold for forty-five minutes just to be tossed to someone in another country whose English was hard to understand. They told me they'd open a

ticket concerning my issue, but there was nothing else they could do to help me. They said I'd hear back in a week. I hung up on them.

No one seemed to understand the urgency of this. There was a *razor blade* hidden in the brand-new tube of lipgloss I opened, and everyone was treating me like I was off my meds.

Knowing I would get no results dealing with disembodied voices, I got off the floor, put on the sweatpants that were the most presentable and headed for the store.

The CVS loomed in front of me, garish red splashed upon a sea of gray cement. The darkened winter sky added to the dread that rested all around me. I parked crookedly, my front left tire kissing the spot next to mine, but I didn't bother to fix it. This wouldn't take long.

I approached the counter with all the gusto of a small-time law attorney looking to make their way in the world, "This lipgloss was purchased here and when I tried to use it this morning, it cut me."

I emphasized the word cut in a way that stuck my lip out to display the scab that was beginning to form.

The worker typed docilely away at their phone and didn't bother to look up when they said, "Sorry, ma'am, we don't carry a razor blade lipstick, but we have lots of other shades in our cosmetic section."

"No no, there's a defect in a product you're selling."

"When was the item purchased?"

"Well, I'm not- I don't quite- It was a gift," I managed to say, "Or part of a gift. In a way. Regardless, it doesn't matter."

"Do you have a gift receipt?"

I shook slightly, feeling my confidence wane. "What are you talking about? I'm telling you this lipgloss sold at your store has an actual razor blade in it somehow— look!" I sputtered, pawing through my bag for my nemesis.

She glanced over, eyes half open, and gum popped between her teeth. She watched as I failed to produce my evidence. I looked up, heat rising in my face. We locked eyes and I could see the glint in hers shift from boredom to irritation, to pity, and finally, once we'd stared at each other long enough, discomfort.

"Can I speak to a manager?" My voice was low, betraying my shame.

"I am the manager," she stated flatly.

"Oh."

"Sorry, I'm due for my fifteen." She put up a "register closed" sign and walked out of sight.

I was left to wander the aisles until I got overwhelmed by the colorfully organized way the store shouted at me. I found myself in the cosmetics aisle where I broke open a package of nail clippers and started to dissect every other tube of lipgloss from *If Looks Could Kill*. But one after the other failed to produce anything more than the clearish, flowery-scented goo that stuck

to my fingers. I tossed each one aside into a pile where the gloop sluggishly poured out onto the floor, making the walkway a hazard. People scooted by me sideways, trying not to catch my eye as if I might pounce on them like a wild tiger.

Suddenly it was like being a child again, working away at my project, practically leaving my body and feeling my sense of shame float away. I could even feel a smile working its way onto my face, and though it had no joy to it, it was something that hadn't happened in weeks. With each tube that lacked a sharp metal point, my sanity slipped further away along the floor.

Once I, dissatisfied but not dissuaded, was done with *If Looks Could Kill*, I attempted to move on to the other glosses because, perhaps, it wasn't localized to them but part of something bigger. But a tall man in black slacks blocked my way. He had his hands on his hips, staring down in disgust. They'd sent the CVS security guard to stop me.

What happened next, I don't remember clearly. Later, as the security guard and a police officer held me until I calmed down, they recounted my actions in painful detail. Apparently, when I was confronted in the aisle, I dodged away from the security guard and started to run. He chased after me, tackling me at the knees. He had to drag me out of the facility yelling and cursing. Then the part I do remember: Looking at the same worker who'd blown me off, watching me be dragged away, and saying to her, "You did this! You!" Her face turned pale and sickly. The corners of her mouth drooped like dead flowers, threatening to touch her chin. I couldn't tell if she felt some responsibility for me, this insane woman tearing open cosmetics in a CVS, or if she was so overwhelmed with pity that she became afraid for me, the strange, crazy creature who wandered into this store.

They let me go with a warning, a \$200 fine, and a suitcase load of embarrassment.

The smell of defeat was on me, heavy and musky like a wet, panicked deer cornered by a wolf. I stood in the doorway of my two-bedroom apartment, really looking at it for the first time in weeks. The shoes piled up by the front door, mostly mine but at least one pair that wasn't. As I stood there, staring at the shoes and coat he forgot to wear that night, I could remember what it felt like to know he was just around the corner, lounging on the couch or chopping onions in the kitchen. A breath away from cradling me in his arms.

Holding back the bank-well of tears that wanted to fall, I managed to gather the shoes and coats together and shove them behind the washer.

No fight this big was won boo-hooing at the front door.

I had to take this fight to the people. I decided to post about my experience on the freeform website, Seaddit, which allowed community members to ask for recommendations and share their own experiences on just about any topic. Sometimes people shared information that wasn't theirs

to share. Last year when someone drowned in the YMCA pool, I found out from a Seaddit bystander. They stole that story from the person who drowned, from the deceased family.

This story was wholly mine.

“Hey there s/beautyfanatics community. I’m sorry to say I’ve come on here to share a story of pain and fear that does not seem to end. This morning while I went about my regularly scheduled beauty routine, I was feeling the fresh wind of excitement about opening my brand new tube of If Looks Could Kill’s Glass Hearts lipgloss when, to my repulsion, I felt it CUT INTO MY BOTTOM LIP. I obviously recoiled in horror and saw there was a sharp blade sticking out of it.

I have attempted to contact the company about these issues. I even went to CVS, which btw was another extremely upsetting experience that resulted in them THROWING ME OUT. But that is for another time :)

Honestly guys I’m looking to see if anyone else has had this experience or knows someone who has and how they got justice? Any comments or recs are appreciated!

Love and light, beauties <3”

Within a minute of posting my plea, it was taken down for violating community guidelines. I tried to tweak it and post it twice more, but each time it was taken down.

Only once did it stay up long enough for someone to see it and all they replied was:

“*lip gloss.”

I felt myself descending further and further into despair when my account was frozen due to “suspicious activity.”

That’s when I knew this corruption went above *If Looks Could Kill* and CVS.

I had to buckle down and do some research on how pioneers before me had exposed such deep-seated conspiracies. I cleared my coffee table of the clutter. The leftover funeral programs, drafts of the obituary I’d written before finally settling on the least personal one that I’d prompted AI to generate, and finally the thing I’d been unable to look at for months.

Gently, I lifted the urn from the table, heavy with the bagged ashes inside. I carried it to the bathroom counter and left with only the lipgloss in hand.

The next three days were a whirl. I slept on the couch, eating through my stores of canned beans and bulk rice that I’d bought under my mother’s suggestion in case the world was to end. I guess there are lots of ways the world could end.

I was in the middle of watching a video of an influencer saying, “The new *If Looks Could Kill* Glass Heart lipgloss is my soulmate and I don’t say that about any other products”—even though she had, in fact, said it about three other products on her page and I’d only scrolled back two years—when the knock came lightly, fluttering through the door.

Her knock was so familiar to me. The same one that preluded the blonde, perfectly coiffed, curly head that would poke through, too shy to say exactly what she wanted but bold enough to make her presence known.

I'd been ignoring her for over a week now, she wasn't going away and I couldn't afford to have the police knock down my door if I didn't at least let her know I was still alive.

Throwing the door open, I was struck by how intense the light was as it flooded in. I'd kept my curtains drawn, needing to focus on my goal. I licked at my bottom lip recalling the sting.

"Hey, Cass." Only two people in the world called me Cass. Well, one person now. My sister's eyes dimmed with despair at the sight of me, but she was able to keep the bottom half of her face paralyzed in a smile. I wondered how she did that.

"Hello," I said, leaving the word to hang there from a string.

Brenda was dressed in a powder-blue babydoll dress, and she swished it involuntarily while she stood in the doorway. She was grasping a clear bake-a-lite pan in her arms. She saw me looking at it and let her mouth open in surprise like she didn't know how on earth that had gotten there.

"Oh, right," she giggled, covering her mouth with a freehand. "I brought you this. I was making some to bring to the homeless shelter downtown. They just LOVE my tuna casseroles."

She blinked her large eyes at me, rounded with dusty pink eyeshadow that matched the large blush strokes on her cheeks. I refused to react, letting her roaming orbs fully take in my self-negligence.

Finally, I stood to the side allowing her to walk into the apartment.

She didn't say anything when she caught sight of the dishes stacked precariously in the sink, nor when she noticed the colossal clutter of laundry, trash, and other random items turning my apartment into a makeshift hedge maze. But she did suck in her bottom lip and let her eyebrows knit together. Her shoulders tensed in a stunted shrug.

I breezed by her to sit on the couch, the cushions weak from the constant strain of two bodies sitting on them everyday for seven years.

She stood across from me like she was going to present something, perhaps the casserole. "So—" she began.

"You can leave the dish on the counter," I said.

She glanced at the island counter, the dishes had begun to stack themselves there, too, along with the books I had yet to reshelve and some of the notes I'd made about my razor blade case so far. She walked closer to me, finding a clearer spot on the coffee table, and placed it down.

The pungent stench of cooked fish hit me head on over the familiar sweet scent of musty clothes and molding fruit

"So," she started in again, "how are you?"

I balked at her deep seriousness in that moment. My sister had always

needed to put on her seriousness like a prosthetic nose. She couldn't conjure concern like this naturally, but she'd seen it enough in movies so that, to the naked eye, it might almost seem natural. But my memories of us as young teens, her blankly staring at me while I tried to deal with my inner turmoil even then, stood out whenever she played make-believe in this way.

In my heart of hearts, I wanted to seek out a softness inside me to respond to her. She was trying, right? But all I could find were sharp edges.

So I stared at her stupidly.

"I'm great."

She tilted her head, letting her mouth pull tightly into that physical manifestation of, "*sure you are, hon.*"

I pushed myself up from the couch. "No really, I've even started a new project."

Gathering my notes, I began to lay out for her the plot I'd uncovered. I guided her to sit in my now vacant spot, allowing me to practice presenting my discoveries to my first attentive audience member.

Brenda sat there, watching me gesticulate while showing her what I had discovered. She never interrupted. She watched blankly as I became more and more animated, the clues making sense now that I could show them together. *If Looks Could Kill Cosmetics* and CVS had planted razor blades in certain tubes of their new Glass Hearts lipgloss in order to inject the recipient, from low-income areas only, with a new virus in a play at population control. It made complete sense.

"And I haven't even told you the best part," I said, kneeling down so I could look my sister in the eye. I was breathing wildly and the smell of my own breath began to bother me.

"Michael was the one who bought this for me."

The first genuine reaction from Brenda. Her mouth opened and her eyebrow dipped down with concern.

"Cass, you're not saying—"

"They got him! Somehow it nicked him and that's why he's"

She shook her head, not looking me in the eye. She didn't believe me.

"I'll show you," I told her.

I raced to the bathroom and grabbed the lipgloss with a pair of tweezers so as not to further expose myself or Brenda. I looked down the opening but no matter what angle I turned the tube, I could not spot the razor blade. Suddenly, the creature in the mirror, the one with bloodshot eyes and long disheveled bronze hair that fell in its face, caught my attention. The witch sneered at me from the reflective glass, sending a burning cold, sticky ooze running through my gut as I stumbled out of the bathroom.

Abandoning the tweezers, I brought the tube to her. "They've taken it. They must have known you were coming here."

"They?" She asked.

And I stared at her because I knew she thought I was crazy, but then I wept for her, for how small her mind must be not to grasp what was really going on. I made my way to the kitchen island where my computer sat.

“I’m just trying to understand, Cass.”

I slammed my hands down on the counter. The marble felt cool against my sweating palms. I didn’t look at her when I said, “My name is Cassandra. Not Cass. *Never* Cass. *Cassandra!*”

C-C-Ca-Cass-Cass- Cass!

“Cass! Can’t you just use that lipgloss?” He’d asked, “Does it really matter?”

I didn’t respond. I’d stayed huddled in my anger, in my childish pouting. The lipgloss didn’t matter. It was deeper than that, it was his complete lack of knowing. He knew nothing about me, down to the smallest, most basic detail of my favorite lipgloss brand. I needed to punish him.

“Cass, come on, don’t be mad at me.”

Silence gathered between us, threatening to suck our universe into it.

And so, he went back to the store, went back to fix it because he hated nothing more than silence.

If I’m honest, I don’t remember what the brand was I said I liked.

The feeling of Brenda’s hands on my shoulders brought me back. She was trying to still my spasming shoulders. I hadn’t realized I was crying.

“I’m so sorry Michael’s gone, Cass,” she whispered, trying to keep the tears from her voice. Like she had any reason to cry. “But this— this *stuff* isn’t going to bring him back.”

“You don’t understand.”

“Okay. Help me understand.”

Turning to face her, I considered what that would be like, telling my sister how it was my fault my boyfriend died. How, because I was so intent on throwing a tantrum over lipgloss rather than saying what I was really upset about, while driving back to the store he— *No*.

Nonononono!

No amount of false pity in the world could convince me now. I must have known. I wasn’t being petty when I sent him back to the store. I knew that there was something deadly wrong with that innocent looking pink tube. I must have had a sixth sense.

“Just leave,” I said miserably, “please, Brenda, just go home.”

“Cass-”

“For fuck’s sake, stop calling me Cass!” I screamed, needing to escape her.

This time my anger landed where it needed to.

Brenda gathered her pan along with her dignity and made for the door. “If you keep going like this, you’re gonna die, too, and not from some weird cut you got from your lipstick.”

“Lipgloss,” I muttered but she was long gone.

I looked at the tube of lipgloss in my hand and thought of how small it looked, how very small—the wink of an ant.

I thought of how Michael’s voice trudged through my nightmares, causing me to wake violently in the night, the smell of my own sweat forcing my mind into bitter alertness.

Sometimes he was saying those last words, “don’t be mad at me”; other times I was with him in the car, and we skirted along the icy roads as he tapped his fingers along the steering wheel, closed mouth singing to his favorite songs. I stared at him through the dream veil, unable to lift my arms and cup his face in my hands.

A sense of inevitability expanded in the car, and I knew I wasn’t supposed to see what happened next because I wasn’t there. He was alone in the car when it hit that patch of black ice. He was alone when the car flipped. He was alone in the ambulance and while they performed surgery at the hospital. And because I was not family, and his blood relatives were too estranged to care, he was alone when he died of sepsis from an untreated infection.

I placed the sheaf of notes next to me on the coffee table and opened my computer, typing with renewed vigor.

No one said it was my fault. And now I knew that it wasn’t. It wasn’t my fault. It wasn’t my fault. *It wasn’t my fault.*

It was the lipgloss.

My Dear Mrs. Budd

Bryce Jones

“She picked wildflowers. I went upstairs.
Her murder was mundane as bleach removes behavior.

I think of cleaning as the restitution of blood to its
normative state of unseenness.

‘The process of revision, which is part of the process of composition,
[vanishes] into the finished piece.’¹

I restored the house to benign neglect
Its presence is not deictic of her death.”

When every mothered piece of news is near to absence—
and photos in the evidence are cancered through
with yellow lesions
the past is a faint vesicant to memory.

I’ve failed to invoke your daughter’s ghost as
varnish for the loss.²

1 Banfield, Ann. *Unspeakable Sentences*. Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1982 (272).

2 The desultory silence of writing—whose words are the sediment of absence—each attempt at meaning is less than the loss that beckoned the sentence.

Where their bodies are a language of acousmatic sound, the ghosts make animals of air.
I’ve complicated their presence with the weather of my speech.

Evergreen

Abby Kohler

I stare out the old cabin window, past the brittle paint cracking off its sill.
My father laughed when I said we should paint it a deep seafoam green,
but he helped me every step of the way.

When I pry up the flakes with my fingers, I hear echoes of his laughter.
Is this world mine?

Perhaps it once was... back when this cabin didn't smell of rot — back when the
greatest worry I held was which game to play in the forest outside.

Outside, where enticing fiery light westers in the navy blue dark,
spilling oranges and pinks for clouds to spin upon —
just like cotton candy at a distant carnival.

Something whispers in my ear, beckons my heart.

My father's laughter fades as I race out of the derelict cabin, like the heedless
youth I once was —
race out of the overgrown yard covered in the dew of early morning,
and burst into the forest.

Daisies push up from the ground,
nudging verdant clovers aside for a view at me.

Sunlight trickles through the dark and ancient place
thickets of great oaks pressed too close together.
Tiny dust motes dart in and out of the light.

A humble deer lowers its head to graze, eyes blank, indifferent.
Curious corvids tilt their heads, feathers rippling against a soft breeze.
How long have I been walking now?

A branch catches my sleeve, rips a gash through thin fabric and
a tiny trail of red drips onto the mossy floor below.

I do not belong here. Not anymore.

Hot, bitter tears spill onto my cheeks as that truth settles like a rough stone in
my gut.

Myself, a clumsy human.
They, the forest the sky
the deer the birds the cabin —
This world isn't mine.
Has it ever been?

Title (a long way's away and burning)

Luci Williams

It's watching a body not a person with me at a distance far enough away to not be seen. In the fire is light out of reach untouchable & burning away. Paper from birthday cards and scissors cutting through cloth through salty water. Something is in front of me eye to eye but it's speaking words in tongue that I answer not answering it's talking and not me. We are at a table then a couch then a movie all without walking all at once but separate times separate moments disconnected & free to wander so far away out of sight not be brought back or return with no herding shepherd to command them back to me. Born at a distance away further now, haunting flesh & blending in with it. Paper is so flammable in my hands in the fire past beyond me trapped here but still moving still burning. The sun is so bright burning my eyes hard to see it in front of me squinting looking back like it knows I'm not there like a secret revealed as it runs away after the movie, horrified.



It's watching [redacted] me [redacted] far [redacted] away [redacted]
[redacted]. In the fire is [redacted] paper from birthday cards [redacted]
[redacted]. Something is in front of me eye to eye but [redacted] not
answering [redacted]. We are [redacted] free to wander
[redacted] out of sight [redacted] with no [redacted]
[redacted] command [redacted]. Born at a distance [redacted], haunting flesh
& blending [redacted]. Paper is [redacted] still burning. The sun is [redacted] burning
my eyes [redacted] looking back like it knows [redacted]
a secret [redacted], horrified.



[redacted] watching [redacted] me [redacted] a [redacted] fire [redacted]
[redacted] Born [redacted]
haunting [redacted] & [redacted]
still burning [redacted] my eyes [redacted] a secret
[redacted]

American Heroes

Henry Hamilton

The blinking lights that encased Daniel within the drenched environment made him feel like he was inside the stomach of a great beast; around him, saliva pouring down in small globes of rain. What had happened was simple—the back wheel of his car began hobbling a couple miles back and he didn't have a spare. He was on the side of the road in the middle of Washington, about halfway to Portland, halfway home from work. Over the years, the iconography and molasses during the drive had congealed within him, deadened him. The same walls of hillside stone, the moss-covered trees that were toward the sides of the road, even the fog lined river that snaked through the grass and foliage; these things just served as reminders that he never really *looked or felt* anything during these drives. These things exclusively existed as images that flashed in a window. Now this sudden opportunity of desertion presented itself with aliveness. A sign for a motel showed brightly from down the road. He got back in his car, hoping it could clunk its way towards the hazed light.

"What is your name, Sir?" the woman at the front desk asked. She was wearing a green button up short sleeve work shirt. Her nametag said: "Jane. My favorite movie is *Lost Highway*." Behind Jane was a black and white photograph of the motel, underneath the photo it read: "Mountainside INN, 1950." It was a romantic photograph.

"Ulysses," Daniel said. "My name is Ulysses S." Jane looked at him and blinked.

"And your last name?" Jane asked, her eyes glazed over like ice.

"Grant," Daniel said as he looked at Jane's face, "like the hero and president."

"Alright," Jane replied as if it wasn't an uncommon occurrence to deal with a false man under false names. Daniel grabbed the keys and made his way towards his room. The interior of the motel was wooden, stylized like a winter resort cabin. His room was covered in bleached orchid wallpaper, and the toilet had carpeting above the lid. It took Daniel no time indeed to figure that he would prefer to spend the rest of his night in a bar with a drink in his hand.

One could say the bar Daniel found himself in was quaint, small, maybe even charming. But the air hung with deep intention, and the patrons looked at you with a lacking of purpose, like fleas roaming without sight. He sat drinking whiskey and beer and felt the alcohol fuse within his bloodstream. Here was Daniel and it was that time of night where drinking was beginning

and would continue.

Amidst this drunken genesis: The Portland Trail Blazers playing on a small television hitched behind the bar.

"This is them. Losing. But this is them and I love them," Daniel said aimlessly, hoping to catch the barman's attention.

"That's right, that's right," the barman said as he washed a glass with towel.

"See, I like this team," Daniel leaned in against the bar table, "I used to coach. High School ball. I'm not about these schemes or plays. Just give me man to man. Who's going to score more? Who's got more guts? That's my philosophy. That's basketball." The barman nodded, and Daniel nodded back indicating he wanted another drink. He wasn't sure how much time had been allotted, he was in his state of comfort—middle of nowhere, in the darkness.

"Who are you?" a voice asked. The voice came from the right of Daniel. The woman who belonged to the voice was middle aged, like Daniel, and was wearing a blue knitted winter sweater and was holding a beer. Daniel lifted his head up from the bar, a piece of peanut was stuck to his face. He adjusted his eyes towards her.

"My name is Grant. Ulysses S. Grant," he said through a dewy mouth. She moved closer and sat next to him.

"I've been watching you here all night, Grant," she said with a smile, "you're pathetic aren't you."

"I think we all are," Daniel whispered, waving his hands with simian movement, "isn't that what I'm supposed to say?"

"Where is your family?" she asked.

"Well," he said, "Not here."

"Abandon them. Abandon your family," she said. Daniel looked around and noticed the bar was nearly empty. He looked back at her.

"Who are you?"

"My name is Eleanor Roosevelt."

"Right," Daniel laughed and burped, "I like what you're doing."

"Do you have any kids?" Eleanor asked quickly.

"Yes. I have two," Daniel said, "I don't trust the idea of my family."

"I don't think you should trust your family. Abandon them," Eleanor said as she took a swig of beer.

"Maybe my wife, maybe my daughter. I can trust them. My son, I cannot. I see right through him."

"And what do you see, Grant?"

"I see a boy who hasn't got the ability to dribble a basketball. Not an athletic bone in his body." Daniel looked at Eleanor as he awaited a response, but she only gazed at him blankly through her eyes of dreary glass. "Even when he was a boy. A little, little boy. He would just look at me," Daniel

carried himself within a grandeur as he spoke, “he would look at me like he was questioning me. Like he was secretly this fully developed adult, masquerading as something I created. I didn’t make him, not that boy.”

“Don’t you want to ask me if I have a family?” Eleanor asked.

“Well,” Daniel said, “Do you?”

“Yes, I do.”

Grant was half naked as he took pulls from the whiskey bottle in his hand and jumped up and down on the motel bed in boyish epiphany. Eleanor appeared from the bathroom, she too half naked, and jumped on the bed. She grabbed Grant’s face and gave him a kiss. She took a pull of whiskey.

“I love carpeted toilet seats. I love the wall’s in here. The orchids,” she said as she wiped whiskey from her mouth.

“I got something to say!” Grant screamed. He pointed the whiskey bottle at Eleanor like it was a gun. “We go downstairs and tell that girl at the front desk we are going to take all her money. We tell her if she doesn’t comply, we blow her head off. We tell her ‘My name is Ulysses S. Grant, and this is Eleanor Roosevelt, and we are American Heroes!’ That’s what we do next.” Grant fell backwards onto the bed in a dead heap of his own outrageous laughter. Eleanor was hysterically alive alongside him.

“Grant, I—”

“Wait. Before you speak again, turn off the lights. Please. And we will sit here in darkness and talk. We will sit in darkness.” They both stared at each other and kissed again, this kiss went on for a long time.

At some point during the night, Grant found himself looking at Eleanor while she slept. She was sleeping with her mouth open and took collected, small breaths. It was the same way his wife slept. Grant looked around the dimly lit room. Everything was entangled and warped: the television was silently playing an old black and white film; the bedside lamp was flickering, and the whiskey bottle was shattered on the floor. He was back inside that great beast, and around him all was contorting itself. Grant was home.

Porcelain Jawbone

after "Poor Artist's Cupboards" by Charles Bird King

Rowan Eckhart

A stagnant cluttered outcove,
filled with forgotten trinkets.
Crowded and crammed, the bulk falls out
like pages ripped from a spine.

Pearl adornments are
nothing more than cheap shell.
The gilded edges have calcified,
threatening to crumble at a touch.

Food is left to rot, as there is never
enough time for a leisurely meal.
Instead, metallic ink spills across my tongue.

Fraying fingers, cracked nails,
we unwind into art.

A pooling puddle of wax, we drip—
off the edge of vision.

Hungry for more,
we gorge on all in reach.
Yet, porcelain chips at the slightest pressure,
and I fear the inevitable crack of teeth.

Ozymandias

Parker E. Price

Beneath the Theban Hills a ruin lies
With pillars reaching up into the air.
The structure, under watchful granite eyes,
Has stood for thrice a thousand summers there,
Since long before those Diodoran reeds
Recorded words that grace these stones no more:
“My name is Ozymandias, my deeds
Shall echo through the annals evermore.”

Above this faded epitaph, the guard
Is split in twain, beheaded, broken, marred,
While thrice a thousand miles over sea,
Atop a pristine pedestal, the scarred
And stolen upper half of Ramesses
Stands tall for all of Albion to see.

In her nature

Dimich

Juno's triangle body had never sat so still
as it did below the trembling limbs
of almond-tree isles.

From weathered red steps,
we giggled at her attention.
How cute. A fault in domestication—
that craves a taste other than kibble.

Her gun-barrel snout
followed prey as it alternated
between bouncing branches;
adjusting her aim at each chance
the weightless life might slip to surrender.

With no response to calls of dinner
and commands we forget she has will to deny,
an untimely scatter was a smudge of ash,
and sooner than landing
she pierced that little neck,
rattling squeals to silence.

WHAT IS DESTRUCTION?

Indigo Duvall

Warning me again: I've played myself
Left with a grey dirty river lacking hypnosis.
Being allergic to lavender makes this city worse.
Watching my watch tick off seconds,
A personal grenade counting off my escape.
Inhaling the stench of sour milk, the scent
Of Roseland Theater where twitching noses
Have queued up for the Slump God.

You like Portland?
Engorged pond of white queers,
Where caring for the weight of bees
Is as hard as caring for bodies lining shit streets.
But somewhere a turntable spins, candles lit
I tell you: lift the needle up.
Tiny ringed circles age you so deeply.
The needle is my fingers,
More dull so you get less scratched.
Water as diamonds stumbles into the bathtub,
Where an unscented foam rises up.
Topsy, the clock strikes nothing, you say.
Watch me pick up the next song.

The Rash

Mateo Reynaud

I biked seven miles to the nearest Pharmacia two weeks ago, nothing there for poison ivy. Most of the route was through a series of tree-coves, and so I was hurtling through the dark, shoved into the kind of blind faith Pitigliano demands. A dulled, yellow light hugged by a ring of plain flies signaled I reached the Pharmacia. Wide-eyed in the shop window, I was a creature of the deep sea. My stomach was heaving out of my yellow swim trunks, a combination of water and sweat dripping, skin smarting with the rash.

A Eurovision cover of ‘Dancing in the Dark’ was playing in the store. The man at the counter was my age, twenty-five or so, with a mustache shaped like a caterpillar and dark hair that brushed his shoulders. Affixed to his crumpled shirt was a nametag: Omar. My squelching entrance barely earned a glance, but when I approached the counter and asked in my stunted Italian if they had any ointment, his eyes lingered for a moment on my bare chest, hooking on the crooked pink scar from my top surgery. “No,” he said, his interest waning as he turned to hit his mint-flavored vape.

The rashes on the insides of my thighs chafed as I cycled home. At the time, I didn’t mind it. I explained it to you more eloquently once. It’s just that I enjoy my body like that: a nice, clean machine, purposeful, full of feeling, easy to understand. The roads here at night force me to remember. There’s really nothing else to do but pedal and listen to the creak of the gears and think. So, the roads kind of remind me of you.

When I got back home to the farm only the whistling dog was left outside. Its dark eyes gazed mournfully at me through blonde eyelashes, the concave of its stomach barely hidden by spokes of pale fur. I called for him to follow, giving him ample space from my bicycle, which I had observed frightened him on a few occasions. Our feet were quiet beneath the earth, our eyes unobstructed by light, save the glow of the farm owner’s bedroom window in the distance. My bare feet began to twinge, which now I know was the least of it, but I plodded on, past the fields of carrots and turnips sleeping in the dirt. My bedroom reminded me of home in the States—its walls sloped in the same shape that I used to hang band posters on when I was seventeen. Plus, it was next to the chicken pen, so it wasn’t unlike living with five brothers.

The dog leapt onto my cot, with its sweet blue sheets. Solitary living arrangements: the perks of being someone the owner didn’t quite understand. I was a boy, yes, but in a way that was foreign to her, so she put me in my own little room to sleep in, away from the other farmhands and upper middle-class WWOOFers looking to escape their upper middle-class misery. Do you

remember when we were in that cot? It was too small. I remember crying, and also how you could barely hear my crying because nothing in Pitigliano is as loud as the insects at sundown. I was surprised, at first by the fact that I was crying for the first time in years, then by how you held me, a real embrace, without another word. I know you don't really like to do that.

By dawn, my skin had really begun to itch. I'd placed old woolen socks on my hands at night to keep from groping at my own skin. When I woke, I rigorously examined my face, the backs of my knees, my thighs, armpits, collarbone, with the small pocket mirror I kept on my nightstand by the washbasin. The small rash from last night's swim had grown into what I could only describe as welts—a swarm of them—everywhere I could see. Worse, it was a Sunday, which meant that it was our day of mandatory service in the stuffy village chapel that the farm owner, an eighty-year-old woman named Carlotta, forced us youths to attend.

"What's the matter with your face?" she barked in Italian as I ambled to take a seat in her sweltering van, probably as old as she was. I squirmed.

"I don't know. Something's wrong with my skin."

I gestured to my face and bare legs to emphasize, but Carlotta only shot me a look of disdain from the rearview mirror. A fly landed on my left cheek. The other farmhands glanced at me, but continued chatting away, not pausing to say hello. This was alright. I ate one nectarine and dozed with my head against the glass as we ambled past Little Jerusalem, and I dreamt of the corner of your mouth. Again, I fell asleep in sermon, as the pastor preached of abstinence and faith. The scar on your left arm.

So, the rashes never went away. Every morning, I examined them, pressed down on their centers and watched them blanch. They had grown in size and appetite, and none of the strategies I had concocted in the beginning to keep from itching worked anymore. They weren't just annoying anymore; they were painful boils that sprang up randomly on my skin and disappeared just as quickly. The sores spread to the bottoms of my feet, keeping me from walking. They grew inside my mouth, keeping me from eating. And the burning, oh my God, the burning kept me from sleep. Most concerning to Carlotta: the rash kept me from working. For days I stayed shut in my little room with the sweet blue sheets. Carlotta had taken to creeping slowly into my bedroom at dawn, bringing me pockets of cheese, religious pamphlets, juice—anything to rouse me from my hours spent either lying listlessly or studying my affliction. She grew frustrated and switched tactics on my eighth day of unplanned strike and brought in the town doctor (a marvelous expense) who examined me and declared that I was perfectly fine. So, it was a mystery.

The farm had no connection to the internet (the payphone in town worked half the time), and so I biked ten miles to the train station, hopping on a route to the city to use a library computer.

Nothing made sense. I had decided to self-diagnose myself with stress-induced hives, mainly to keep from going crazy. I know what you'd say: What fucking stress? Your parents have a second home in Aspen.

I began to make bicycle pilgrimages to the Pharmacia nightly. The ride to town was the only time I could think, and the thought of getting a beer or food made me sick. I bought items that I pretended to need (nail polish, gum, laxatives once in a panic), which never fooled Omar, who seemed to never have a night off. I was being stupid, I know. The welts still came and went with fervor all over my body, so I took to wearing long cotton shirts and pants, accepting my fate in the hundred-degree heat of Pitigliano.

Omar sort of looks like you. On the thirteenth night, when I was pretending to need teeth whiteners, he refused to accept my crumpled ten euro note. Instead, he asked for my name.

I told him the truth. Secretly for weeks I had been poring over lists of names, ones that felt like standing in the sun or being on fire or being baptized or being able to breathe without sneaking off to the bathroom. My body negotiated with my name under the fluorescent lights. Remember what I told you? Even when I am alone, I preen and flex and curl my shoulders and stalk about. I am careful not to cross my legs or get too excited when I speak, to avoid its shrill. I hate it but you already know that.

Omar pronounced my name wrong, but I didn't care. I was too distracted by the bridge of his nose, like yours, the darting of his black eyes, like yours, his silver chain tight across his neck, like yours. That mouth, like yours, saying my name.

Before we had sex, I took my testosterone shot in his bathroom. My feet burned against the cool tile, and I winced seeing my skin without clothes. The bathroom stank of piss and beer, and of incense used to cover up piss and beer. Quickly, I slipped the needle into my stomach, careful to wrap the used syringe and needle in a wad of toilet paper before tossing it in the loose garbage bag under the sink. I didn't notice him watching until I glanced up and saw him in the mirror. His eyes were strange, fixed on the spot of blood on the left side of my stomach where I had injected the testosterone. I kissed his mouth before I got to thinking.

We were finished on his bare mattress after twenty minutes. I thought about how you watched me in a way no one has before, a careful way, like you were thinking. Omar told me about his ex-boyfriend back home, before he fled and began working nights at the Pharmacia. I was making sympathetic noises, naked and sweating in his arms. My body, smooth machinery: biking for hours, stooping over the sleeping carrots, sweating on a bare mattress, leaning in for a kiss. As he talked, I imagined his mouth as your mouth, but it wasn't right. His hands were as big as yams, and his bathroom stank of piss and beer.

We ate frozen chicken delight from the bag together, quietly, on the sofa

while watching Jeopardy, which Omar swore was the secret to his English acquisition. I think you brought out the worst in me, but I never wanted you to leave.

My rash hasn't gone away. Sometimes, it fades for an hour or two, but it always returns, splotching over the hands that held you, my eyelids, my elbows and legs and feet. Due to stress. Maybe so.

Remember what you said to me? You said, please don't do anything to yourself. I wouldn't know what to do without you.

It would be embarrassing if you didn't remember, but I think you do.

I wish you were here.



Evan Sonne

bacterium mentality

Abigail Beckstrand

i think every bathroom is haunted
the way every mouth is haunted
by boluses and baby teeth

daily shrines to scraping and flushing

don't ask for an exorcism
i'm a poet
not a priest
i forget to pray
when chewing up sage

you lost your real teeth
forever ago
only headstones remain
if they told you that in grade school
the quarters would look like hush money

i used to cry
now i spit
flinging dna like rope
fluorescent map of my soul
outlined in drain catacombs

i think every mouth is haunted
the way every church is haunted
by a thousand clasping hands

a deafening chorus of *i am still here*

Isolated Faith

Madison Yarbrough

Moe Road used to be bumpy,
Lying proxy to the black-spotted
Heifers who grazed,

Believing in dirt and grass.
They didn't know their fields
Were just empty lots

To be drained by the new people.
Moe Road was an old, abused faith,
A God carved by the cars that have

Always been, the ones known by the
Put-put-put of their engine—not like
The ones that *hmmm-ed*, controlled

By the new people. Moe Road kept
Quiet and hidden, thanks to
The tall reeds between the gates

And the far off swings. Lush with
Place and belonging,
Autumn danced with spring

Danced with the breeze. It was
A place no one cared to
Tame, until one of the new people

Came and took a scythe to it.
Moe Road grew two solid yellow lines
When the children grew tall enough

To skip their bouncing souls to school.
Small shoes could balance
Between the lines at first,

Until the new people
Beeped so loud their wild-
Colored lunch boxes found their pace

Jumping over the sidewalk cracks instead.
Moe Road became 'main street'
To the new people. Lost were the backyard

Cows when Mr. Cassillo was forced
To sell. A man with faith unwavering,
He raised the living in holy tradition.

His granddaughter, Mary Jo,
Got a puppy to make up for the loss.
Mary, with barley hair and eyes of

The harvest; the girl who grew
With the breathing crop. The
New people stole Mary's gaze,

And then her puppy was hit by
The *hmmm*, and the *hmmm's*
Drowned out the *put-put-puts*.

Comfort Zone

Indigo Duvall

My small cocoon should have hewn itself in half by now.
Gouda cheese and biscuits slide down my mouth, youth dripping
Where the spoon can't follow.
It grows overwhelming.
I determine the ways to crawl out
Of an inexcusable anomaly, overlapped with the
Mourning song the skin cries.

You Google why there's no coupon for half-off self-transformation.
Pristine, I say, and you tell me
Out of your mind! with angsty pouring words,
Killing my jokes like this is Troy.
You tell me how the word
'Pristine' is
A eulogy.

The cocoon breathes out, cling-wrap thin.
Count your human curses:
The view from halfway down,
Screws holding it all together,
Scraping out ten-year-old wounds,
Scooping out mounds of memorabilia.
Your lady fingers litter my ribs.
Or if you want to name it,
The shell.



Michelle Nguyen

Tiger Lily

Champe Scoble

what will we say to you in hospice?
flicking flies from our cheeks
in the hot summer garage
watching life relapse

standing in silk strands
of morning light
the yard covered in lilies
with your farm dogs and sons

words loose like ash
filter anticipated and shrill
like the ping of a homerun
waving us down the baseline

the pacific ocean meets us
where we shuffle in grief
through hot sand that brands us
with the loss of our mother

instead of speaking we

drive our hearts to stillness
drill for the love of your body that can travel
drip courage to continue on like the faucet after you—
draw pictures of the last time you'll ever see us
drown in the sin of moving on

missing you in the iron dusk
where you're still alive in front of us
holding our attention like buttoning our shirts
missing you while you're dying

West Coast

Alice Judge

Gerty's fingers started to shake last month, but that did not stop her from crocheting one sweater a week for her newest compatriot in rebellion against age—that's what she liked to call her nursing home neighbors. Someone sent them all here, to this cold sterile corridor marred by lilac couches and far too much floral. They might as well have sweaters. Gerty threaded blue yarn around a nine-millimeter hook, using a double crochet stitch for a loose knit. She brought the yarn up and around the back of the hook before poking it through the row below, pulling a loop back through, and dragging the two above it on the hook back over. She counted after measuring Jane (the newest addition to their hall). She needed at least twenty rows of thirty-two stitches across to make the front panel.

The doors to the nursing home opened, indicating visitors. The white walls echoed the metallic clank of the locks up the hall from Gerty as they shut behind them. A line of six leather-clad men strutted towards her; their boots jingled with each step. Gerty angled her head to see the motorcycle gang walk up to Shauna, the night nurse's desk. The shortest of the bunch asked for someone (Gerty couldn't make out the name, eh, maybe her hearing was going with her motor skills). She got back to the sweater.

The men disappeared up the hall. Shauna stomped up to Gerty and poked her on the shoulder. Gerty jumped, "What, Shauna?" Her hair bounced with her jaw. It hung in something between a bob and an eighties mullet, the tight curls distorting her age.

"What are you still doing out here, Miss Gertrude?" Shauna's hair on the other hand, was slick back into a tight ballet bun: immovable.

Gerty grumbled, but collected her yarn into the sling sack she acquired in her twenties and brought everywhere since. She shuffled further into the corridor. Floral wallpaper changed to sailboats ten paces in, and she turned into her wing of the home. Her rooms were first in the wing: thirty-one and thirty-two: Gerty's apartment and her stuff room. All of her things were packed in boxes when her daughter Aubrey forced her to leave behind her island paradise for this prison. Gerty's one condition: her stuff. She brought every letter written to her, every book she ever read (or might someday), and every dress she ever wore (aside from a few hand-me-downs for Aubrey) tucked away just across the hall from where she slept.

As Gerty entered the wing, Ruth's door creaked open. She always seemed to be around, waiting for Gerty to get back. "Gerty, how's the sweater coming, love?" Ruth lived in England for most of her middle-aged years. Gerty could never forget it because she slipped in and out of a British accent and still styled her hair like Princess Diana.

“Ahck! Damn Shauna kicked me out of my chair again. But it’s coming along. I think it’s going to be perfect for Jane, really make her feel welcome around here.”

“Did you see her visitors pile on in? She was on about it tonight at dinner; How her sons were comin’ with his chaps to vis’t.” Jane’s room was up the hall from Ruth and Gerty’s. The two looked that way, their grey hair flipping behind their ears. Six pairs of leather boots were lined up along the wall. It was a no shoes space. A shadow moved against the wall and Ruth pushed Gerty into room thirty-two to dodge its glare. Before Gerty could react to the invasion of Ruth in her stuff-room, she spotted Rory, curled up in the far-left corner with a headlamp strapped to her head. It forced her dense grey waves into two bubbles: one above the band and one below. A U-Haul box was next to her, its contents strewn across the floor. Her cheeks were wet.

“What are you doing here again Rory? Hack! Curse this place! Now put those back where you found them,” Gerty made her way through the room. She normally stayed in the front corner with the books and the dresses, leaving the written memories to gather dust at the room’s edges.

“Gerty, sweetheart, you have to find her. You loved each other so much.”

“Absolutely not. You did not read those,” Gerty’s cheeks flushed red as her gaze dropped to the letters in Rory’s hand, dated way back to sixty-three. Ruth stood back, by the door, and let the scene play out before her.

“Give them back Rory! Right this instant! And both of you, get out!”

Music rushed through the walls, interrupting the drama in Gerty’s tone. Shauna sometimes gets carried away at night. “Demons” by Imagine Dragons played through the walls of the nursing home. Something about the song settled the rising fury in Gerty’s abdomen. She joined Rory on the floor and allowed her fingers to find purchase on the name she had refused to even think in years, dragged her fingers over the letters:

F.R.A.N.C.E.S.

Don’t get too close, its dark inside, that’s where my demons hide

“What happened to you two?” Rory asked, taking advantage of Gerty’s sudden good mood to nurture her hopelessly romantic fictionalizations.

“Life; I learned you can never stay somewhere too long, and well, she could never leave,” Gerty mustered.

The door swung open and whacked the wall behind it. Ruth attempted to catch a pile of boxes that toppled over. Shantell burst into the room, whipping her bob in tow. Her sequined top flashed in the dim light of Rory’s headlamp. “Ya’ll will never believe what I just heard from those men in Jane’s room,” her heels clanked in tune with her Transatlantic accent, orchestrating ‘Shantell’s Personal Melody’ “They got motuhcycles outside. And one of them told me—lil ol’ me—I could get a ride.”

We are still made of grace, this is my kingdom come

“Shantell, you want a ride from every man that visits this place, and

these were the first to bring motorcycles.”

“Gertrude! That was so vile, god I prefer you in writing.”

“Oooo letters. What do we have here?” Shantell flicked the page out of Gerty’s hand and held it up (where she couldn’t reach it). She jumped for it. “Gerty! You romantic. Who would’ve thought you could have someone writing to you like this?”

“Give. It. Back. Shantell.” Shauna’s music stopped and with it went Gerty’s temporary tolerance for this conversation. Shantell passed the letter back, only after reading it once or twice.

“Gerty, we have to find her. What if she is still out there, waiting for you?” Rory’s heart spoke for her. Ruth peaked over Gerty’s shoulder at the letter as the door swung open again, and Sheila poked her head in.

“Hi guys, what’s up?” Her dyed platinum hair was tied back into two braids. She wore bright red cowboy boots that thunked on the wood floors.

“Oh em gee Sheils! We are going to find Gerty’s long lost lover! I’m going to go pack my bags, inspiration has struck, and boy do I have a plan.” Shantell was halfway out the door before Gerty stopped her.

“We cannot just leave and go find her. First off, that door out there is locked. Second, I haven’t spoken to her in years, I hardly know where she is or if she even wants to see me anymore—”

“How will we get out?” Ruth interjected, dropping the accent like it never existed.

“Don’t worry about it. Pack your bags and meet in the hallway in fifteen minutes.” Shantell ignored the confused glares. “We have to make it out before Jane’s visitors or we’ll lose our rides, girls!” She continued out the door and down the hallway to room number thirty-five.

Gerty reached for the others. “You guys cannot be serious. We can’t listen to Shantell. Steal and ride motorcycles? C’mon, Rory, this is real life, not a romance novel. It’s my life actually.”

Sheila placed her palm firmly on Gerty’s shoulder, blinking her doe eyes down at Gerty: “So go live it.”

The three remaining women filed out of the room, leaving her to pack. This was exactly why she needed her stuff. The emerald-green pack from her backpacking trip in her fifties was tucked underneath a box labeled “‘70s disco boas” (in Aubrey’s handwriting). She fished the pack out and threw in three denim dresses (all different washes), a cardigan (she made it in her first week here), and a pullover sweater (she made about ten years ago). Gerty threw in a few final items, including some cash (from her secret shoebox), and her mahogany pocketbook.

As she packed, she felt watched. It was as if the letters had grown eyes and stared her down. Unable to resist, Gerty slid her fingers through the U-Haul box. It was filled with dated section markers and all of the letters that Franny wrote to her: from 1962 to 1997. She picked three and tucked

them into her yarn sack. Gerty let herself imagine the lighthouse. She caught a glimpse of the Douglas fir maze leading up to its doors before she was knocked back to reality by Rory's shuffling back into the room. She stopped in front of the bookshelves and chose Nicholas Sparks' *The Notebook* as her road trip read.

The two women left Gerty's stuff room and made their way to Ruth's door. When Gerty moved in, she memorized each woman's room numbers in case any of her things were to 'go missing.'

Before Gerty could knock, Shantell walked out of her room with Sheila, "Oh thank God you're both ready. Perfect! Now we just need Ruth," Shantell pushed Gerty to the side, knocking on Ruth's door. It opened to her in its frame, a chestnut leather duffel at her side. Shantell shared the specifics of her plan. A clap of thunder broke the ever-present silence of the space.

"A sign from the universe!" Sheila bounced on her heels as the words left her mouth. The women tip-toed up the hall in a line, marching like ants in the direction of the common area where Shauna sat behind her desk, playing music. She bounced her head to the beat.

Just a young gun, with a quick fuse, I was uptight, wanna let loose

"Ok. You guys know what to do," Shantell whispered the words with a nod and rounded the corner. She walked with her usual purpose: hands slinked tight to either hip as they washed back and forth. Once she was about five feet from the desk, Shantell let out an elaborate screech. One of her heels slipped to the side, and she went down. Her body was completely still, aside from the constant movement of her lips as she screamed: "Help me! Somebody help me please!" Her voice possessed the belt of an opera singer.

"Miss Shantell? Miss? Are you okay? What are you even doing out here right now? You should be in your room." Within seconds, Shauna hunched over her.

"No, it's my leg! There is something wrong with it, Shauna," she let out another screech, "I came to tell you." Shantell reached down to the same leg she dragged in the fall, wincing.

"Why not use your call button, they're there for this exact reason; now let me get some help—"

"No, please don't leave me here! God, don't let me be alone!"

"Okay, Miss. Okay. You're okay. I won't leave you, but you need to calm down. Let's relax," Shauna continued on her typical soothing speech: one each of the women had heard numerous times—never to any of them, but to the other folks (the ones that really needed to be there).

Shantell tipped her head around Shauna and winked to the other four women. They shuffled past the scene, one-by-one, Gerty last. She swung down and scooped the badge from Shauna's belt loop on her way past. Shantell threw the back of her arm across her forehead and let out a dramatic sob to ensure Shauna's distraction.

The four women crept up the corridor towards the large metal doors at its end. Less than an hour ago, Gerty refused to even look up and see the doors open; in a few seconds, she would see them from the other side. They waited for Shantell to finish her performance and join them. The music was still playing from Shauna's laptop.

I was dreaming of bigger things and wanted to leave my own life behind.

After some extensive breathing exercises, Shantell realized her leg was "actually fine" and hobbled back to her room. Shauna looked at her watch and just as Shantell predicted, the clock hitched past 7:50. She went in the direction of Jane's room—visiting hours were over. Shantell waited for Shauna to disappear behind Jane's closed door before tiptoeing out of her room and stealing four out of the six pairs of boots from the doorstep. She raced up the hall, abandoning her red heels for the grippy socks underneath.

Thunder, feel the thunder

With Shantell on her tail, Gerty willed her hands up to the key scanner, holding Shauna's lilac badge there until the small red light blinked green. The sound of metal locks opening shuddered through Gerty. She felt the chill on her nose before she saw the bikes. Shantell was already on her way, choosing the slickest of the fleet, and hopping on. "Here. I grabbed these for us," Shantell threw boots to everyone but Sheila, "I knew you would prefer your own Sheils."

Sheila bent over Shantell's bike and Rory thought she was bowing to her until the bike roared to life. Sheila had hotwired it. "Sheila, where did you learn to do this?"

"Oh, a couple of years back the world gave me this skill." Sheila finished on Shantell's bike and moved on to the others. Gerty and Rory opted for the bike with a sidecar so that Gerty could crochet while Rory drove, and Rory could read while Gerty drove. Gerty agreed to drive the first leg and flicked the radio on. Of the fleet, theirs was the only bike with speakers. No stations came through, but there was an iPod duct-taped to the aux cord, so Gerty pressed play. The screen lit up, displaying the song title: "Believer" by Imagine Dragons.

First things first Ima say all the words inside my head

I'm fired up and tired of the way that things have been

The song exuded at unprecedented volumes despite Gerty's best efforts to find the controls. Gerty revved her engine in tune with the pre-chorus of the song. She swerved from the bike's power, running over the grass island on her way out of the landscaped lot. The other women followed. Shantell pulled a wheelie and cut Gerty off, pulling onto the road first.

You could be a believer

They drove in a row, their grey hair tying them together like kindergarteners holding a rope, or witches flying across the sky. Rory couldn't decide which story she liked better, so she racked them both in her memory

as she cracked the spine of Gerty's never-before-opened copy of *The Notebook*. It was difficult, but she settled into the rhythm of Gerty's driving. Her hands shook, causing the bike to nudge in either direction, but the large set of the wheels made them both confident her arthritis would not cause a wreck.

They drove North until Ruth blinkered right and pulled off the interstate in the direction of gas. They filled up every pump in the small-town station.

"We should find somewhere to stop for the night, it's getting late," Gerty stood on the edge of the parking lot, looking out on the land before her like a sailor at sea. "There. I see lights."

"Oooo and I see bikes! Let's go check 'em out." Shantell's eyes lit up. They did not steal the keys to the bikes, just the boots, so Sheila knelt before each bike, hotwiring them again. The music came with the engine of Gerty and Rory's bike,

Don't hold back

"If you say so Mr. Bike," Rory let her breath wash over the words while Gerty tucked her short limbs into the sidecar.

I don't ever wanna let you down

The small dive was illuminated by a bright L.E.D. sign reading: "Jeremiah's BullFrog Brewery, Biker Bar, and BnB." A green frog leapt over the words. They parked their bikes in a long line of others, careful not to knock them.

Shantell led the charge, throwing open the saloon doors. Every head in the place turned to them, like they were the first fresh faces seen here in years. There was a jukebox in the corner. It played the same song as the iPod.

'Cause after all, this city never sleeps at night

Gerty almost forgot they were, in fact, five wind-tattered elderly women costumed by backpacks and motorcycle boots. Even Shantell's hair (which Gerty had never seen in anything but a perfectly smooth-and-tucked bob, hitting right above the top of her shoulders, but right below the bottom of her chin) was skewed in a multitude of directions. Shantell hesitated before tugging her chin up and continuing towards the bartender.

Don't look back

Eyes chased them to the bar where Shantell slammed her palm down, making Gerty and the three bald men to her right jump.

"Five rum and cokes and two rooms for the night." The bartender looked them over, scanning them from head to toe before moving his mouth.

"Coming right up!" he smiled, before yelling to someone Gerty couldn't see, "AYE YO PAM! GET THE NORTH AND SOUTH ROOMS READY!"

They found a booth in the back corner of the bar while they waited for this Pam. It took longer than any of them preferred. Rory slumped in the corner, her eyes hardly open as they rotated across the book. She was only twenty pages in; Gerty's driving wasn't particularly easy to be distracted

from. Ruth had already fallen asleep, her head tucked on Gerty's shoulder. Gerty controlled her movements as she crocheted, careful not to wake Ruth. She was finishing up the last row of the front panel when a woman about their age swung through the saloon doors opposite them. She beelined for their table.

"Must be Pam." Gerty straightened up. The woman's ankles snuck out from her cut-off capris, and Gerty could not take her eyes off of the strong muscles bulging from her calves.

"Hi girls. I'm Pam. I have the keys for the two rooms y'all asked Jeremiah about? If you want to follow me, you can bring your drinks."

The women were slow to react but followed. Gerty did not have the energy to argue about rooms or to contemplate the journey they were just beginning. She drifted off in a queen-sized bed beside Ruth. Her dreams were painted with memories of Frances and motorcycle rides.

Gerty woke up at 5:45 AM, a little earlier than usual. The alarm clock on the nightstand blared its bright numbers at her, dying the room red. She rose, careful not to wake Ruth. Gerty never saw any of her compatriots asleep before, that stayed behind numbered doors. She grabbed her yarn sack and shuffled back out to the bar. It was empty aside from Pam brewing coffee and polishing glasses.

"You're up early hon," her voice reminded Gerty of honey, each word getting caught halfway up her throat, "Can I get you a cup of coffee?"

"That would be excellent." Gerty sat a few seats down the bar to distance herself from conversation and started crocheting. Pam flipped on the radio. Gerty appreciated the company the music brought to the bar's morning hush. She abandoned Jane's sweater for two hats: one for Pam and one for Jeremiah. She started Pam's hat with light blue yarn. Gerty packed a few extra skeins, just in case.

Hush my dear

Gerty used fisherman's yarn; it had a tight, rope-like feel as it raced through her fingers. She started the hat with a magic circle: created a slip knot, but did not pull it tight, instead looping the yarn over the hook and pulling it through, chaining one. She attempted the first stitch: pushing the hook into the magic circle, pulling up a loop, yanking another loop into the hook, and pulling the two old loops over the fresh one. Her fingers shook aggressively at this point. She squinted to make out where to poke next.

Trust me darling, trust me darling

From there, she crocheted six stitches into the magic circle before pulling it tight. Gerty set her yarn down. Her eyes darted to the sack. The letters inside felt as if they were glowing, like they would burn if she didn't take them out.

I am a man of three fears

The first letter was in a dark tan envelope with a Canadian stamp in its corner and a red lighthouse wax seal that had cracked over the years in storage. Gerty was careful to do no more damage as she slipped her fingers into its fold. She made out the date first: November 7, 1962.

Dearest G,

I miss you, but I hope your trip is splendid. I can just picture you out there on the open ocean, pulling sails and tying knots. It always amazed me how stable you could stay on a ship. I was always tee tottering this way and that. Now, I avoid going out on the ocean altogether. Have there been any storms or swells in your path? I've checked the weather reports when the paperboy makes it out here, but that's gotten less and less often since Grandma Ginny's death. It's like the whole island forgot someone is still out here.

I don't mind it much.

At Least they still bring me my mail. I make the trek into town now every two weeks instead of every four. Without you and Grams extra arms I can hardly carry enough supplies back to last myself long. Maybe I should find myself an assistant... or a mistress? (Like grams always joked about—someone to leave all this to, someone to teach it to at the very least.)

Most days I spend watching the ocean from the upper deck of the lighthouse, keeping the radio on at all times, like Grams insisted. I found it unnecessary then, but now that it's just me here I like the company of the noise. Sometimes I wonder if you'll recognize it here when you make it back, or if the ocean will have eroded so much of the rocks that the shoreline will shapeshift.

I know you'll recognize me no matter how time erodes my figure. Sail around the world, once or twice, and then come back to me.

Franny

Did this count as soon? Gerty didn't know. She could finally say 'Yes she was coming home.' Gerty wished she could tell Franny now, could see the shoreline, could see everything she swore she would never miss. With thoughts of Frances steadying her hands, she went back to Pam's hat.

I can't be what you want me to be

Gerty placed two stitches in each stitch bordering the magic circle to increase the hat's circumference. She had already committed Pam and Jeremiah's head sizes to memory and finished both of the hats before any of the other women woke. Gerty appreciated the time spent alone in the bar, with yarn running over her hook and Frances' words between her fingers.

Once the pack was up and ready, they scampered outside to the row of bikes. Gerty was the last to leave the bar, delayed by her gifts.

"We should really get some helmets. It's against the law to ride without them," Sheila shared her knowledge.

"Well it seems there is no shortage of those around here." Shantell motioned to the parked bikes with helmets resting on their seats. Her bob was once again, pristine.

She reached over to the bike beside her, and plucked the helmet from its seat, disappearing behind the mask of a motorcyclist. One by one, they scouted the bikes and stole the helmets. Ruth was the last to go. She shuffled over to the bike at the row's end and reached for the helmet. Her foot caught on a crack, and she buckled forward. The other women held their breath. Ruth caught herself on the seat of the bike, pushing it ever so slightly to the side. It crashed into the bike beside it. Promptly, the others pulled their bikes out of the line, as the rest dominoed down. Sheila hotwired them quickly. Music came from the sidecar bike.

Fallin' too fast to prepare for this

Trippin' in this world could be negative

Gerty was aboard what once was Ruth's (single-rider) motorcycle when the bar doors swung open. The parked bikes were in a pile on the pavement. Ruth shuffled to Rory and crunched her lanky limbs into the sidecar. They peeled out of the lot, waving goodbye to Jeremiah's and hello to the new smell emanating from their stolen helmets.

Everybody's searching its vulturous

Gerty's bike rattled over the bump between the parking lot and the road. She made out the sound of bikes, starting up behind her. The set of the motorcycle she drove was much narrower, she did most of her steering with a lean, rather than with her hands. Three bikes caught up with them as they turned onto the Interstate on ramp. They tailed Rory and Ruth in the larger and slower bike. Shantell and Sheila gained pace, and cut off an eighteen wheeler, losing track of their pursuers. Gerty imagined quiet Rory under that yellow helmet, and took the lead, speeding up, and willing her to follow. Gerty wove, Rory and Ruth followed.

I do whatever it takes, because I love the adrenaline in my veins

The chasing motorcycles engines faded into background traffic, and the women returned to their formation, their grey hair now caged by helmets. Passing cars could hardly tell they weren't a real motorcycle gang.

The pack wound through the rolling hills of Northern California. The green fields glowed and made it almost impossible to tell where one hill stopped and another began. Gerty felt her palms still on either side of the handlebars calming from their tense grip. Looking at the women in front of her and in her small side mirror, Gerty breathed easy on her bike and let the hills carry her.

About an hour North of signs for San Francisco, Gerty cut in front and blinkered onto a highway heading west. They drove another hour before the redwoods peeled back on The Pacific. The four bikes rolled into the lot and cut their engines. Rory's was the last still on; the women enjoyed the company of the music, even if none of them would admit it.

Now take it in, but don't look down

"This, oh, this is marvelous!" Ruth climbed out of the sidecar to stretch her legs, "it looks just like Brighton Beach! Have we just time traveled?"

Gerty chuckled in response, appreciating Ruth's nostalgia. She opened her bag and pulled out five sandwiches from Pam. She passed a sandwich to each of the women. "They're from Pam. Lunch on the beach?" She skipped down onto the rocks. They clinked together with each of her wobbly steps. Gerty couldn't remember the last time she heard the waves rushing, or smelled salt on the wind—It was as if the world were filled with salt and sea and possibilities. She felt the weight of the second letter in her pocket, like an anchor.

They plopped down in a circle at the halfway point between the lot and where the waves crashed. "Is this turkey?" Shantell's face upturned in disgust, "You know I hate Turkey, Gerty."

"That bird died for you Shantell—Eat it!" Sheila deadpanned. Shantell met her with an eyeroll but took another bite. Rory read *The Notebook*, now three quarters of the way through. She chewed her fingernails as she leaned over the book. With everyone otherwise occupied by their own ocean-inspired whims, Gerty reached into her pocket for the second letter: this envelope was a pale white, in contrast to the first's dark tan. It was new. Gerty smiled and tucked her finger under the dust covered blue wax seal, with a stamped cursive F. There were flower doodles around the seal, as if they were growing from the words inside. Gerty eased her hands through the envelope's folds, and into Franny's words. The date read July 22, 1974. Her handwriting was different from the first: more scraggly, like she was in a rush, or wrote less often in the seventies than the sixties.

Dear Gerty,

Boy, was it a winter up here. I hardly got any rest between all of the storms that came through. I hope you've been keeping safe. I dare to even hope you've been staying off the water in the danger season. But I know better than to bet on it.

The whales came back a couple of weeks ago. Like clockwork each year they come back, and I look for your little sailboat out there trailing them. I've come to think you'll never make it back to me. The world is just too large for you to come back to someplace you've already been. Maybe someday that will change, and your sails will again, fill, whisking you back to me. I can't imagine a day without this lighthouse, without the waves lapping against their shores in that familiar rhythm. It would be like forgetting Grams, and you. Can you remember what the lighthouse looks like? Can you imagine me upstairs, sitting in Ginny's chair at the radio and pulling the lever of light this way and that?

I hope you can, and I hope someday you see it for yourself. If the waves don't take me first, I'll see you at the end.

Frances

Gerty didn't remember what she wrote back to this letter, but she knew it would be different now. Toeing the line between past and present, she reached into her sack for a pen and paper and wrote a new response.

Frances,

It is just the end of June now, and I wonder if the whales have come back to the island already, or if they are waiting to make their arrival with me in tow. I hope to beat the waves on their mission to whisk you away. I'm sorry it took me so long, but I am coming home to you. I'll be there, maybe even before this letter.

Gertrude

Gerty laid her letter on top of Franny's and tucked them back into the envelope. She pulled out Jane's sweater and began the back panel. Her fingers were steady. They sat there for a while, the sound of the ocean rocking between them like a lullaby. Shantell laid flat with her shirt rolled up—nursing her tan—while Sheila wandered back and forth with the washing waves, letting them spill over her ankles before backing away slowly, and then chasing the undertow. Ruth watched the landscape with an awestruck look across her face. Rory was completely enthralled in Nicholas Sparks' love story, forgetting she witnessed one of her own catalyst.

When they made it back to the lot, Gerty stuck with the solo bike, opting for the freedom it afforded her in comparison to the structured ride of the other. With the engines came the music:

I'm breathing in the chemicals

The sharp smell of gasoline filled the air around them. "We should stop in town for gas. I also have to run into the post office, and I saw a library next door on our way in." Gerty looked at Rory. They nodded and boarded their bikes, flanking Gerty to the post office. They pulled into the lot. Gerty shuffled inside to send her letter while Rory skipped down the wooded path to the library. Shantell, Sheila, and Ruth waited outside, the big bike's engine still rumbling for the sake of music.

I feel it in my bones,

"I've been thinking about what I'll do after this, and I'm leaning towards acting—I mean, you guys saw my performance back there," Shantell raised her eyebrows as if to simulate a face-lift she never got.

"Hey! If you shoot for the moon, even if you miss, you'll end up among the stars," Sheila relayed a quote she saw over a stock photo once, positive she came up with it. Shantell had clearly never heard it before because she tilted her head to the side and brought a hand to her heart in response.

"You sure do got a knack for that," the accent bent Ruth's words into oddly contorted shapes.

"I'm thinking I'll keep riding. I love this thing," Sheila patted the seat of her bike. Ruth chuckled as she stretched next to the music bike.

I'm breathing in, shaping up

Ruth stood up straight, a lost look overtaking her expression. "Where are we?" She looked around, trying to make out any signs or scenery she recognized, but the world no longer resembled Brighton Beach or the Southern California shores she knew.

Deep in my bones, straight from inside

"Ruth, we're going to find Gerty's long lost lover, remember the letters? We left yesterday on the bikes," Sheila motioned to the motorcycles, "and stayed at Jeremiah's last night. Remember the turkey sandwiches?"

Ruth looked around, her eyes darting between Sheila's calm expression and Shantell's scared stare. She wasn't sure who to trust, but then she ran her tongue over her teeth—"Turkey!"

I'm waking up

She remembered the beach and the bar and the bikes, "Thank you for that Sheila. I'm sorry, it is not normally this bad, but I was in there for dementia. It flares up enough for my sons to want me off their hands." Ruth's tone was completely different now, and the accent (which reminded them all a little bit of royalty) was diluted.

On her way out of the post office, Gerty stopped in her tracks. She didn't need to ask the women outside if they were ready; they weren't driving any further tonight. "So, I was thinking it's getting a bit late. The woman inside was telling me about a room for rent above the library. Want to go check it out?"

The others nodded, and they made their way up the path to the library. By the time they found Rory inside she was already bonding with the librarian. "Oh thank God you guys are here. This is Noah!" she winked at Gerty as she said the name, The Notebook in her hand, "He says there is a room above the library. He rents it out, but they're between tenants. Maybe we rest here for the night?"

Gerty nodded and followed Noah to a set of stairs behind the circulation desk. The women trudged up them. Rory dropped her stuff off and returned downstairs to the library. A few hours later, when Gerty's stomach grumbled, demanding food, she rose and made her way downstairs. At the bottom, in the dim light, she made out Rory and Noah lying in the children's literature section. They were on their stomachs, matching forehead lines just inches apart as they read separate books.

Gerty raided a mini fridge behind the circulation desk until she came across a small tupperware of pasta. She heated it in the microwave and snuck back upstairs when it was ready.

"Guys, I think Rory is in love!" Gerty started talking the second she closed the door at the top of the stairs, waking up the other women.

"No way! The romantic has finally found her romance," Sheila swooned.

"We must make her stay here with him, they're bloody perfect for one

another,” Ruth perked up from her spot on the sofa. The room was a small corridor, not much larger than a hallway with two sofa’s mirroring one another on the near end, and a king sized bed squeezed into the far end.

“You’re right Ruth, she must. Let’s give her till morning, see if Mr. Noah can work some magic of his own on our girl,” Gerty giggled, “but for now, I stole some dinner for us.”

“Gerty: a thief! I never thought I’d see the day,” Shantell smirked, “glad I could teach you a thing or two.” Gerty rolled her eyes, proving her point further. They all huddled in a circle and passed the tupperware of ziti pasta around with a single fork, like teenagers with a bottle. Rory never came to bed that night.

The next morning, Gerty was the first one up again. She started on a hat for Noah and brewed some coffee from the small pot beside the microwave. There was no sign of Rory until about 7 AM. She walked into the library, one hand clasping Noah’s, and the other holding Gerty’s copy of *The Notebook*. They wore cardigans that were clearly knit by the same hand.

“Good morning Gerty! Can we talk before the others come down?” Rory led Gerty over to the floor pillows in the sitting area, leaving Noah to prepare for opening. “I’ve never met anyone like him Gerty, not my first husband, or my second, or even my third—and you know how much I adored my third husband. It’s like he came straight from the pages of the book,” she held up the now worn paperback, “I think I am going to rent the room y’all slept in last night and work here, with him. This is what I want to spend my time doing, not locked up in that awful home.”

“We were all thinking the exact same thing, Rory. I saw you guys last night, and it’s undeniable. I owe you everything, you got me this far. If it wasn’t for you, I would’ve spent the rest of my life hiding from those letters. At Least now, I have a chance of seeing Franny again—”

“You will see her again Gerty, I know it.” Rory reached for Gerty’s hands. The women clasped each other tight.

“You deserve to love again, just as much as I do.” Tears streamed down their faces, getting trapped in their smile lines as they collapsed into a tight hug. Noah flicked the radio behind the desk on.

One more day, we’ll spend together, let your eyes look upon me for the better.

They made their way to the stairs and filled the other women in. They all crowded into a group hug. Shantell was the last to join, but once she did, her head lulled onto Rory’s shoulder, and she squeezed the tightest. They left one of the motorcycles with Rory, in case things went south. This put Gerty back on the sidecar bike, but she didn’t mind. Sheila hotwired the bike and it played the same song from inside the library. Gerty turned back one more time to wave to Rory—she stood in the doorway, waving enthusiastically with Noah at her side.

I'll be your West Coast

The three remaining bikes wove through the redwoods, up the Oregon coast. As they passed another lighthouse, Ruth reached her hand up to Gerty's knee, and rested her fingers there, tracing swirls where her bones met. The small touch comforted Gerty and kept her driving until they reached the northern coast of Washington. When she removed her helmet, the air filled her up with the smells of Frances and her little lighthouse. The waters looked calm today, just as Gerty hoped.

She went to find a sailboat at the marina, while the others looked for food in town. Gerty struggled to believe that in just a few hours, she could see Franny. She ran from this love for the past fifty years, and now she would face it. Sitting on the dock in front of a boat with a sail about three times her height, Gerty pulled the final of the three letters out of her sack. This was rationing like Gerty had never practiced before. She took far less care or patience with this envelope, hardly noticing the grey tint of its paper, or the lack of wax seal. It was dated November 7, 1997.

G,

This letter is short, and it will be my last. I have bribed the newsboy to write it for me. My hands shake too much to go on writing, but I hope someday to speak to you again if that is not too much to ask. No one will take over the lighthouse after me. The waves will wash it away with me inside, the way we always said we would go out together. I'm glad you lived, Gerty. I really am. All I ever needed was this lighthouse, the ocean, and you. I'm only missing one of the three.

I love you Gertrude, I always have, and I hope someday I can tell you that to your face. Either way, I'll wait for you here; dead or alive, I am never leaving again.

F

Gerty knew immediately the handwriting was a stranger's; how could she forget this letter? She tore it open like it meant nothing. Her spiral was interrupted by the sound of her friends' steps approaching on the dock.

"Ready for your next crime Gerts?" Shantell poked in between Gerty's ribs. She rose off the dock slowly and grabbed a sandwich from Shantell. "PB and J this time, something everyone likes," she muttered as she handed it Gerty's way.

"Thanks. This is the boat I'm thinking," Gerty motioned to the one she chose, "No locks on the ties or tracking system."

"She's a beaut, but I can't leave my bike. I just love it. I heard about an old folks' ride along gang back at Jeremiah's. I think I'm going to check it out."

"That's amazing Sheils, you were born to ride that thang," Shantell hyped Sheila up, before continuing with her own consolation, "I also cannot get on that boat. First of all, I get terribly seasick, and second, if I have learned anything this past week, it is that I was born to act. I mean you

guys saw me back there, the whole way through, I was great. I owe it to the world to share my talent. I'm going North to Vancouver—I've got an old film friend up there," she shrugged, but smiled. The women all possessed a new enthusiasm for their futures, because their lives were not over anymore. They were free.

"I'm so happy for you guys! Thanks for getting me this far. I owe you everything," a boat drove by, interrupting Gerty and playing that same song:

One more day we'll spend together

"Ruth, will you come with me? I understand if you go North with Shantell, or back South with Sheila, but do you want to see The West with me?"

Oh I know I'm worse for weather, but my love I won't give up.

"Yes, as long as you'll have me love," The British accent was back, but Gerty didn't care; she wanted British Ruth just as much as she wanted any other Ruth.

I'll be your West Coast honey

They hugged goodbye one last time. Sheila and Shantell walked back to their bikes, and Gerty jumped onto the boat, landing with a thunk. Ruth shuffled to the edge and Gerty helped her down, leading her to the safety of the cockpit. Gerty hadn't been on a boat since the late nineties. She familiarized herself with the knots that used to be second nature to her. The years of crochet were a divergence from this nature of knotting. Gerty found a compass, got them off the docks and out to sea, and began wayfinding, tilting the sail this way and that to angle them towards the peninsula where Frances was—dead or alive—in that lighthouse.

The boat had speakers—which was insane to Gerty, in her experience if you wanted music at sea, you'd better bring an instrument.

I'd change my ways, if you would stay

The boat rocked Ruth to sleep with the lullaby of the waves. As Gerty sailed, she entertained her anxieties. What if she sailed up to the lighthouse and its flights were not on their running track across the sky? What if the ocean was dark? If she got there, and Franny was gone, the doors would be locked, and the locks would be so eroded there would be no picking them. Gerty would knock and knock on the metal door until her knuckles bled, knowing there was no one inside who could answer, knowing Franny was the last keeper of light. She would stay there, even if Franny was dead behind that door, Gerty would live the rest of her life on the other side, separated from the love of her life by a couple of years, and a sheet of metal.

"There. I see lights," Ruth interrupted Gerty's spiral, pointing to the lighthouse on the horizon. A single tear dropped from Gerty's eyes. She let herself smile. When they reached shore, Gerty's legs were shaking more than her hands. It was almost dark out, and Gerty was shot back to memories of the first time Franny found her—lost at sea. Gerty felt her heart pick up

each time the light struck her, every one... two... three... Four... five... six seconds.

Oh my love please don't give up

The two women began their hike to the lighthouse. The last time Gerty made this walk, she easily slung her limbs from rock to rock, moving her body in skipping strides. Now, she moved slowly, taking breaks every few steps to catch her breath and check on Ruth behind her. The sun had completely sunken below the horizon by the time they reached the steps up to the lighthouse's door. Ruth paused.

"Ruth, what if—"

"Don't. The only way you will ever know is if you knock on that door," she interrupted Gerty, holding her by the shoulders and pulling her into a tight hug. "We came this far. Go get her love!"

Gerty walked slowly to the door. The lighthouse was a pale shade of white the last time she saw it, but it had been repainted red (clearly a while back because it chipped away, revealing what Gerty remembered). She lifted her arm to the door, knocked, and waited.

Gerty had lived without Frances for sixty years, but these few seconds stretched longer than eternity.

Ruth watched from the bottom of the steps. She hoped, prayed, wished, manifested (did anything anyone ever told her would make something come true) and willed the door to open in front of Gerty. The clinks of old locks unlatched. The door creaked aside, revealing a stout old woman—it had to be her.

"Gerty?" Ruth heard her ask. Frances' voice came out scratchy, like she had not spoken in years. Gerty replied with a nod and pulled the woman into a tight hug. They fit together like puzzle pieces; Gerty's head curled into the nape of her neck, Frances' fists clenching the fabric of Gerty's sweater. When they split apart, Gerty turned back to Ruth, and motioned for her to follow into the cylindrical space of the lighthouse. Inside, music was playing.

I'll be your west coast honey

Ruth looked up the spiral staircase at the two women, love slapped across their faces like little kids, and smiled at her future.

I'll be the sun. I'll be the waves. I'll be the one you love the most.

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