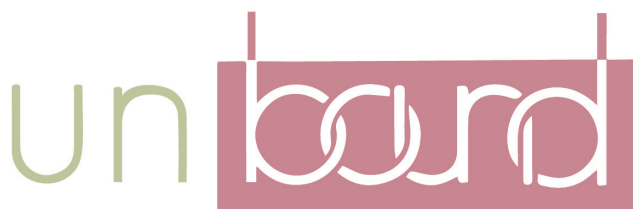


UNBOUND

VOLUME XI ISSUE II





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Unbound Journal is run exclusively by undergraduate students and biannually publishes the prose, poetry, and visual art of students at the University of Oregon. Submissions are selected for publication by editorial board members through a double-blind review process.

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LETTER FROM THE EDITOR

It's funny how time seems to fly by and now as winter gives way to spring that effect seems more apparent than ever. It seems as though we were just ringing in the New Year, awash with positivity and hope even through the rainy winter term days. Now, some of that hope is still around but it is clearly a time of uncertainty and unrest on many levels. I, for one, feel this uncertainty daily. The days feel both incredibly long and yet stressfully short.

As the flowers on the trees begin to bloom and the sun begins to shine more than it rains, we can feel a bit more of that that hope through the uncertainty. I genuinely believe that experiencing creative work from others is a way in which we can hold on to that spirit of new beginnings. This issue hopes to bring that creative experience straight into your hands. While there may be some dark tones to some of the pieces, they are still written by people around you. They are works of the heart from students here at the University of Oregon and instill within them that creative life. All they ask is that you listen to them.

For many of us here on the Unbound staff, this is the first issue that is in print, a tangible testament to our mission. We want to share the voices and creative work of other students who have worked hard on their craft. This issue showcases some of the best creative work of your fellow students on campus. It has been our greatest honor to publish these works and we hope you hear the message they send.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in dark ink, appearing to read 'Olivia Atmore', with a stylized flourish at the end.

Olivia Atmore
Editor-in-Chief

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Some of the pieces in this issue deal with violence and/or gun violence which may be triggering for some.

Unbound is and always has been a platform of creative expression for the students and we have made the decision not to reject a piece simply for its subject matter. We have opted to leave these pieces without individual Trigger Warning markings so as not to take away from the creative integrity and message of the pieces. Please bear this in mind as you read forward and practice self-care if needed.

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AND SO WE BEGIN

SAM CEISLER

Ever seen beauty, Beauty?
What did they sell us?
The door keeps getting smaller
But at least the sun is shining
Spring passed on a 72 degree
February day
We put a picture on the internet
Followed it all with a drunken shower
And I was still recovering when I caught my flight
What a shame we're not the same

Keith and Kenny, Richards and Rogers respectively,
John and Joe, Coltrane and Cocker respectively,
It seemed they had it figured out
But so did that damned horse Coltrane
That fidgety horse in the third stall, from high school, from that job on the farm
Was it a farm?
That damned ornery horse, and that woman who liked to ride him
In Audis and fresh coats and pressed breeches
Their polished hooves clicking against the mats
While I slip soundlessly
Horse shit in the soles of my Chippewa boots
I, the new American. The same as the old American. The Quiet American. The Ugly American.
They, the new Englishmen, the new Englishwomen, and their ornery bloody Horses.
In the winter I had to break Coltrane's buckets when they iced over
The illegal grooms and I working barehanded
Gloves drying in the vents of the barn heater
And after work I'd go home to a warm shower
The Middle Class High School American

Have I gotten older or am I imagining the time?
I think I must not be
Years of love and sacrifice pass by the wayside so quickly when
One doesn't want to show up to sister's birthday party smelling like cigarettes and
One doesn't want to be without enough tobacco to last a day and
One who decides their purposeless life should have purpose and proposes to excel and
Doesn't lose themselves asking God for answers in whiskey dens globally and
Trapped internally, the minutes seem to fall away
Don't they?

And so we begin,
As the sun rises again
In this finally Spring
In this perpetually Winter
In this endless Summer
Allow me to dance through fields of endless bounty
Allow this appetite of mine to sate itself
Are you listening?
Allow me to begin
As once again I ask

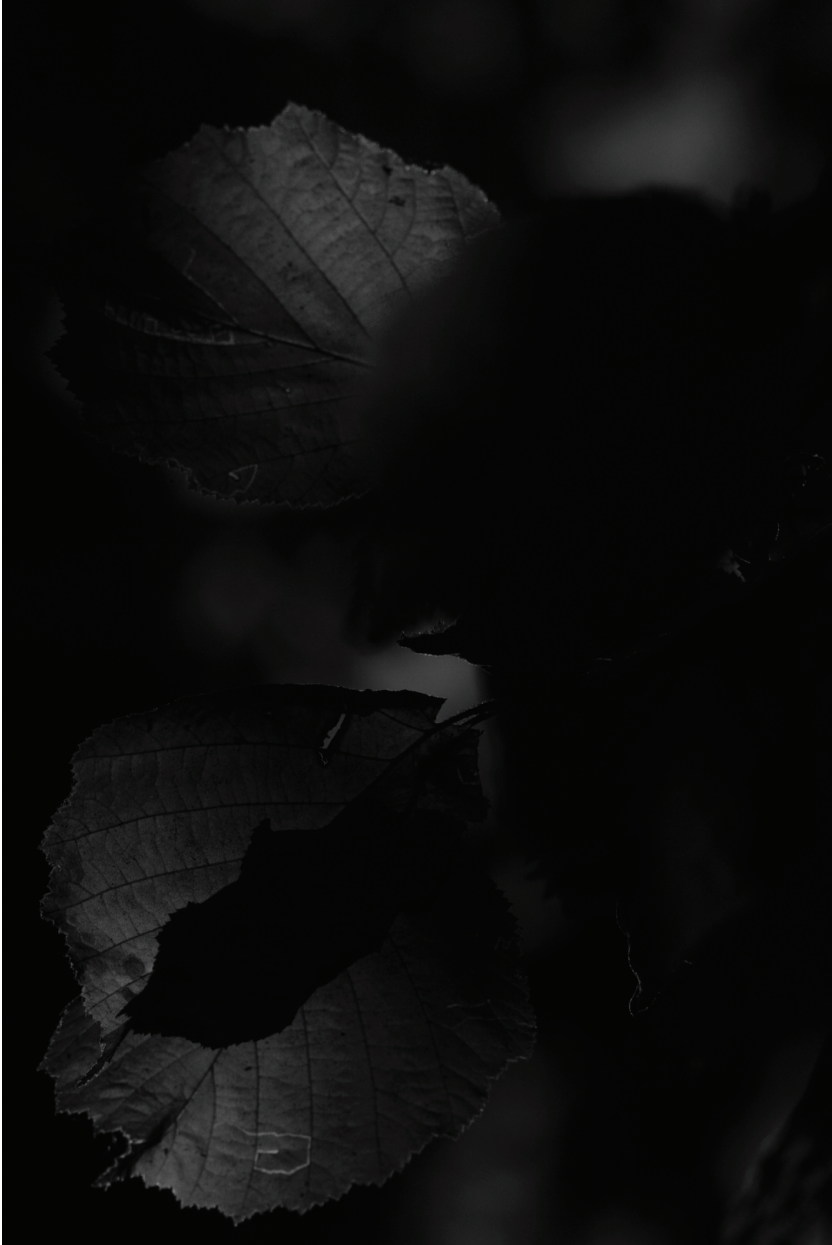
096.I-P, 2019 FROM *BY LIMIT*
NATHAN ALEXANDER WARD



096.2-B, 2019 FROM *BY LIMIT*
NATHAN ALEXANDER WARD



096.3-P, 2019 FROM *BY LIMIT*
NATHAN ALEXANDER WARD



Quincy promised himself he would feel better if he puked. It had easily been more than a decade since he last threw up but he was sure the combination of Bacardi, guilt, and lox he had brewing would be more than enough to refresh him in the ways of regurgitation. *Who serves booze at a bris?* he thought as he leaned on the far wall of the Synagogue that faced the parking lot, trying his best to subdue his stomach with breaths that were as futile as they were deep. He shut his eyes and felt his stomach stir and when he opened them everything was spinning and he saw stars as he stumbled through the staff parking lot, past station wagons and sedans, squeezing his stomach, suddenly severely sweaty, shuffling and swaying until he stopped at the street opening, leaned on a wall for support and spewed right there on the sidewalk. Quincy heard the voice before he opened his eyes.

“Yo, son! Are you fuckin’ serious right now?”

He straightened himself and opened his eyes, expecting a cop or some disgruntled street vendor upset at him for being sick around his stand but instead found himself alone, being stared down by the painted eyes of a Big Pun mural. It depicted a full body shot of the late rapper in a fly-ass, creased khaki button up shirt, pants, and hat combination that was contrasted with the blue, red, and white of the Puerto Rican flag that he was proudly waving. Quincy looked up at Pun’s face, which was visible from the streetlights but not totally clear, squinted and then took his phone out and shined it on the painting. He noticed the artist had pursed Pun’s lips, efficiently giving the hardest rapper out of the Bronx a duck face, which made Quincy smile. The grin weathered a bit when he read “1971-2000” written in white just above and a little left of Pun’s head. *Mad young but that was still seven more years than Roxie got*, he thought as the smile faded and the nausea returned. This time the breathing worked and he calmed his stomach while he stared at the mural and decided he should probably get back to his nephew’s bris before somebody noticed he was gone. He couldn’t be in that room anymore, not with his parents, and not with Miss Mendez. A wave of nausea rolled through. It had only been a month and there was no way she could’ve known but Quincy felt like she knew she was speaking with the man who sold her daughter the pills that killed her when she greeted him with a sad smile and

a hug hours before. She didn't know but that didn't stop Quincy from taking several shots of the rum his sister-in-law's family had smuggled into the Synagogue.

"Fuck is you staring at, *pendejo*?"

He blinked then blinked again. Yo? he thought, *nah, I'm just faded*. He turned his phone's flashlight off, pivoted around and walked a few steps back toward the parking lot.

"You really just going to yak on my sidewalk, stare me down, and then just fuckin...leave?"

Quincy turned back around and Pun continued.

"Yes you, you fuckin' cornball, c'mere" the painting said.

Quincy walked back toward it, dumbfounded and doubtful.

"Pun?" he asked.

"Pun?" the painting parroted. "Yes, stoopid, you stood there and stared at me for like five minutes, I know you know who I am."

"Yeah, I know who you are"

"¿*Qué lo qué* then, motherfucker? Why you pukin' in front of my shit?"

"Oh...shit" Quincy said realizing the mess he made. "That's-yo, sorry I don't usually drink Bacardi and it-"

The painting guffawed.

"Bacardi! *Bru-tal!* Okay, I guess they need some good shit in 'em to really see Pun, y'know?"

The painting beamed. Quincy shifted his weight and realized he could see his breath when he exhaled. The painting appraised him.

"¿*Qué lo qué, Corillo?*" the painting inquired. "What's the matter with 'ou? What's wrong? Your aura it's all-"

"My aura?" Quincy asked.

"You know like what I fuckin' mean! Open up! Whatsthematter? Huh? ¿*Tu compañera chingar alrededor?* Huh? What? I wanna know! C'mon, *háblame*, motherfucker!"

Quincy exhaled and looked down at his feet. He didn't own any dress shoes and hoped the pair of black Air Force is he wore that night would be taken as charming and casual but knew it was only another part of him for his parents

to scoff at.

"What is it?" the painting prodded. "You're wearing fuckin' slacks with sneakers bro, something is not right."

Quincy looked at the painting's feet. The artist hadn't been as detailed in this area, and Quincy thought they looked like two loaves of uncut bread. He looked up right into Pun's painted face and then looked all the way to his left.

"I'm a bad person, Big Pun" he said. "I sell drugs."

The painting nodded.

"Sometimes I sell them to my friends. And I know they have problems and I know that they're sick and it's not right to sell them shit but..."

He trailed off. He had tears in his eyes. "It's fucking hard out here. I know it's fucked up but I'm broke! I'm fucking broke, dude! I didn't know they'd do that to her! I never would've sold them to Roxie! She told me she knew what she was doing with those! That she had shit ready too! She said they sold Narcan over the counter and that she went and stocked up because she didn't-"

The painting cut him off with mouth made flatulence.

"Sorry," the painting said. "I do that my with kids when they be cryin' and all the hysterical with the snot bubbles and the tears too, bro, breathe, breathe."

Quincy took some breaths. The painting continued.

"Okay, so you sell drugs? There's worse people out there. You're doing what you need to, you not going to get a fuckin' Sainthood but who will? You know my moms was a junky from the time I was thirteen till *Capital Punishment* dropped? That shit hurt every day. To see your moms like that? And then, to see her out, y'know? And to see how they saw her, y'know, that shit hurts you, 'cause they don't know she's sick or that she's your moms or your whatever they see a dope fiend and not the person underneath. But you have to realize, son, that's on them. You wanna help but you can't sometimes. Sometimes it becomes them, bro, and that shit is sad but it happens. What you sold her she went to buy from you and if it didn't come from you, she would've gotten it somewhere else. How could you have known what would happen?"

Quincy looked at the ground and shrugged.

"I didn't know they'd kill her." he said.

A cab drove down the street and the brightness from its headlights briefly blinded Quincy.

Asshole, he thought as he watched its brake lights flare up and fade as it stopped and turned at the corner. He looked back and the painting had a duck face again.

“Pun?” he asked.

The painting stared back silently.

When he finally got back to the festivities, he found his family in a screaming match with their in-laws, matching Yiddish curses with Spanish ones, apparently somebody socked the mohel. Quincy, choosing to capitalize on the commotion, grabbed his coat, and caught the train home.

He regained consciousness sometime the following afternoon and felt relatively fine until he checked his phone. Tucker had texted him, twice. Quincy was introduced to the drug dealer and aspiring rapper at a party three years before and hated him from the moment he met him. This initial distaste was inspired by Tucker’s insistence on spontaneously spitting his often off-putting rhymes. The first time Tucker met Minnie and Quincy as a couple, he waited until after he was sure they were together in order to introduce himself with his arm extended after he quipped “*Oh, hi. My name’s Tucker/Your girl seems lame but I’ll probably still fuck her.*” Quincy despised this person and kept working with him exclusively because Tucker was, in Quincy’s experience, the simplest minded and amazingly naive drug dealer he had ever met. As he pulled on a pair of jeans and inspected a t-shirt with a sniff, Quincy remembered what Tucker asked him the first time he bought from him, “Hey, uh, man, I’m pretty new at this. Can you actually like tell me how much these go for?”

Quincy thought he was fucking with him until a week later he looked Tucker in his face and told him he only made \$400 off selling all sixty odd pills he had bought the week before, and the dumb fuck actually believed him. Quincy smiled but it quickly dissipated when he was counting the cash he kept stashed under his bed in an old Air Maxes box, along with his gun and ancient photos of him and Minnie, and he recognized one of the twenties Roxie had paid him

with. She had written a Kanye chorus along the edge of the bill and Quincy had to turn it clockwise to read: *We in the streets playa, get your mail/Only two places you end up, either dead or in jail*. She had done some version of this every time she bought from him ever since Quincy told her a portion of her proceeds flowed back to Tucker. She knew he liked old Kanye. “You think he’s cute? Ew! You such a fuckin’ weirdo!” he screamed when he found out why.

Before he left, he looked for a second at the spot where she confessed. He could still hear his friend faintly reply with a fully flushed face, and a frown that was forming into a smile “Q...fuck off” before they both lost themselves in laughter.

He was on the train nodding to whatever he was playing in his headphones when something caught his eye to his left, there she was. Roxie was down train, staring directly at him and making her way through the patches of passengers, in his direction. Quincy blinked, rubbed his eyes, and literally pinched himself. It did nothing to lessen her pace. She got a hair’s length away from his face and Quincy didn’t see Roxie in those eyes but they were Roxie’s familiar coffee colored corneas. She leaned in, put her mouth near his, and said, softer than he ever heard someone speak, “Hi Q. Say hi to Tuck for me, ‘kay?”

He nodded a few times and she kissed him on the cheek. When she took her lips off there was a pill the size of a dime stuck to the spot with her saliva. Quincy felt it fall off and lost it when it left his peripheral. Roxie blinked at him and then jerked once, then again, and held eye contact with him until she bent over and to her right, her stomach clutched the same way his was the night before, and vomited more pills than Quincy had seen in his entire time dealing. He watched, unable to look away until the train jerked hard to a stop and he had to catch himself on a rail. When he looked back all he saw was a lone chalky oval resting carefully where Roxie had been. Quincy picked it up by pressing it with his finger, brought it close and saw in fact it was an Oxycontin pill. He eyed it for a minute, looking back from the pill to the spot it came from when he heard someone clear their throat. He heard them clear it again. He looked finally when they cleared it practically in his ear, turned, and saw it was a cop. Neither of

them said anything, the cop gestured with his face to the pill. Well? Quincy put his shoulders and eyebrows up and extended his arm toward the officer, offering it to him. The cop promptly smacked the shit out of his hand, "Get the fuck out of here! Picking up shit off the floor on the train, fuggin' take a hike, you fuggin' bum!"

Quincy got off the train and walked the block and a half to Tucker's building in a daze he didn't realize he was in until he jumped at the noise of the building buzzer letting him in.

Quincy could smell the weed from outside Tucker's sixth floor apartment. That was another thing Quincy hated about Tucker, the dude was just reckless. He decided to take the stairs instead of the elevator, he needed a few minutes. Plus the last time he was in this godforsaken building, Quincy had seen Dominick and Romero, two of Tucker's "nephews", what he called the middle and high schoolers who moved dime bags for him, pissing on the elevator buttons. He regretted his choice anyway as soon as he swung open the staircase door and was assaulted with the scent of fresh shit. He gagged. *Chinga tu edificio, Tucker*, he thought as he plugged his nose shut and took the stairs two at a time. He climbed all six flights and came out sweaty and gasping for fresh air. Quincy walked down to Tucker's place at the end of the hall, wondering why it smelled so much stronger than usual and saw when he got to the end of the hall they had the door open to the world. He walked through the door frame, into the living room and found Tucker sitting shirtless on his couch, surrounded with Walgreens bags and a few other local dealers Quincy recognized, all watching *SpongeBob* and passing around an ice blue bong. "Y'all really smoking with the door open?" Quincy asked.

"We have a fan goin'" Tucker replied looking at the television.

"Where?" Quincy asked, already annoyed.

Tucker gestured with the least amount of movement toward the window, which was shut and had a box fan blowing air into the glass. Quincy exhaled through his nose, "Yeah, I don't know what you think that's doing but, it isn't. I could smell y'all from outside, you're gonna get the cops over here."

"We won't," Tucker said.

"How do you know?" Quincy said.

Tucker shrugged, "If you know, you know."

Quincy exhaled again and shut his eyes. "Why'd you get me here?"

"Oh." Tucker said, perking up and then rummaging through the mound of plastic bags before him. "Oh this..." he said, looking up, "This is Oreos, Wayne, can you hand me that one next to you. I think there's drugs in there."

While he searched, Henrique, a small time dealer who mostly sold to his yoga students after classes, asked Quincy how he was. "I'm fine." he answered "How're you Henrique?"

Henrique frowned. "Bad mane. I had to take my cat to get put down yesterday. She was sick, she couldn't walk at all."

"Oh, sorry man, that sucks." Quincy said.

"Yeah but," Henrique said, smiling suddenly, "She must've known we were taking her to vet, right? Cause all of a sudden she starts MOVIN', right? Like she hadn't in years and we're all running around the yard trying to catch this fuckin' cat, right? All while like bawling and shit cause it's mad sad, right? And the thing makes it into the street and POW gets ran the fuck over by a city bus, man! Shit saved me whatever the vet was gonna charge!"

The whole room laughed.

"Here" Tucker said, springing up from the sea of bags with a sack of pills.

"What?" Quincy asked.

"What?" Tucker asked back, just as confused, "it's been a week, right? Week and half? Shit. Couple, actually"

"I'm, uh, actually good on re-ing up for a minute, man." Quincy said.

"Por que?" Tucker asked and formed a shit eating grin, "It been slow out there for you, Q? Having trouble?"

¿De verdad, Cabrón? "No." he said "I'm thinking of taking a break."

The room stopped and the only noise came from Spongebob screaming he was ready, which Tucker muted. "What you mean, Q?" he asked.

"Stopping, actually, y'know?"

"Since when?"

"Since Roxie died? Fuck you mean? Number one, our friend died, Tucker. Are you aware of that? Because of pills she got from-"

"Ah!" he said "got from you"

Golpearlo. Sólo una vez en la cara. "Tucker," Quincy said slowly, "I only sell shit I get from you and if-"

"Oh Jesus!" Tucker shouted and rolled his eyes "Q's all in his feelings over Oxie Roxie, getthefuckoutofhere, man, okay? I'll hold these here, y'know, actually for a few days, but not forever! So, you think you'll come out this...funk? I dunno? By then? Make some money? Huh?"

"No, Tucker."

Henrique, Wayne, and the other dealer whose name Quincy didn't know tracked the exchange between the two. Tucker chuckled.

"No? C'mon, Q-"

Quincy nodded, not looking him in the eye, "No, man."

The smile Tucker had faded.

"I wrote a few rhymes about Oxie Roxie" Tucker said "Wanna hear?"

"No."

"Hold on."

"Tucker-"

Quincy wanted to leave but didn't quite make it to the door before Tucker reappeared with one of his composition notebooks that had "rhymes" written in smeared pen on the cover. "Listen!" he called out to all four of them in the cramped living room. He cleared his throat. *"Did it really shock me when we lost Oxie Roxie?/ Nah, she set a pace like she was trying to end it all. Flying off forty to the face, all laced with Fentanyl-"*

"Tucker!" Quincy shouted, upset this had upset him, "Stop! Fuck!"

Tucker laughed at him and made it clear everyone else in the room should laugh too, which they did, hesitantly. "Aw, what's wrong? Does Q miss his *amiga*?"

Quincy couldn't look at him, his lip trembled.

"Tucker," he began without looking at him, "Did you know what was in those pills?"

He laughed and looked to the other dealers, "How the fuck am I-"

"There's testing kits, Tucker! They're five dollars for five at them at the fucking counter at every fucking bodega in the city!"

"Oh, I'm just supposed to—"

"YES! You're supposed to, you dumb fuck! So shit like this doesn't happen! You know they go after dealers when this happens, right? For fuck's sake, Tucker! They track it! They find out!"

"There's actually a reward and shit. Is like five grand or something if you have just information that helps them. They just want that shit off the street" Henrique said, too stoned to register the shouting.

Tucker walked over to Quincy, tossing the rhyme book on the couch. He had one hand in his pocket, and went to put the other on Quincy's shoulder, who rolled it and stepped back, cautiously. Tucker laughed.

"You got something for me, Q?" Tucker asked him.

Quincy stared at him.

"Don't you owe me like, shit, like? Like half a grand?"

Quincy nodded. "Well, you got it?" Tucker asked.

Quincy shook his head. "Word? Because, this what I got" Tucker said as he pulled out a pistol from his back pocket and pointed at Quincy.

"Whoa, Tucker man," Henrique said, putting his hands up.

Quincy looked at the gun's barrel and then at Tucker's eyes. "Now, you don't have to keep working for me, that's fine. I can find a million people who'll sell dog food to junkies, smilin', understand? We can move on. But what we're not going to do is have you leave like you don't have five hundred of my dollars in your pocket, *claro*?"

Quincy nodded and reached for his wallet in his back pocket.

"Ah!" Tucker said, startling him, "*despacio*"

Quincy took the wallet from his pocket, opened it, and took everything he had in it out and handed it to Tucker without looking away from him once. Tucker took it and threw it toward Henrique, also without looking away, "Count it!" he shouted.

Henrique bent over and quickly began shuffling the bills, counting them in Spanish to himself, until he looked up, "Is five hundred."

Tucker smirked and put the gun down. Quincy didn't take his eyes off him as he loosened his shoulders and opened his arms up for a hug, pistol still palmed in his right hand. Quincy watched him. Tucker let his arms and his smile fall, "Get the fuck out here then."

Quincy ran home without stopping, got inside his apartment, bolted it shut, and immediately went under his bed, grabbed the Air Maxes box, and emptied it on his bed. The gun fell with less grace than the old pics or green bills he had. He picked it up and held it in his hands. Quincy had only shot it at a gun range once with Minnie. She made him get it registered and everything. "If them gringos are going to send you away," she said, "they're not going to do it on some *mierda* gun charge."

He looked at a black and white polaroid he had in the box of the two of them. In the photo he was kissing her cheek and had, just before he pressed click, blown a raspberry near her ear which always made her smile lines and teeth show. He turned it over and smiled when he read her handwriting, *Siempre te amaré, mamaguevo*. He sat on the bed, holding the gun and photo in his lap with their faces over the cool metal. He studied her face in the photo and then his own and realized he missed her. He had loved her from the first time he saw the back of her curly head in their seventh grade earth and space science class. Her family had just moved from D.R. and she was allowed to start school right away because her English was good. His smile deepened when he remembered what happened when the teacher introduced Minnie to the class. "Yo, like the mouse?" some voice had asked and gotten a few snickers.

"Yes, just like the mouse *mamaguevo!*" she said and turned half around "What the fuck is so funny about it?"

Everyone was scared of her. She could switch between Spanish and English as quickly and effortlessly as all their mothers and she swore more often and viciously than all of their fathers. She got into fights frequently and was almost completely friendless when she found herself alone in detention with Quincy one afternoon. He couldn't remember why he was there, skipping probably. They sat on opposite ends of the classroom, facing each other, and were told by a

teacher to sit there and practice telling time while he went out for a smoke. Quincy obliged until the door shut and he looked to Minnie who was already watching him and who looked away when their eyes met. He grinned, got up and walked over to her. "Hi." he said to her and gestured to the seat to her left "Do you mind if I sit here?"

She eyed and then laughed at him. "Go ahead" she said.

He took a seat and introduced himself and offered her a hand. "I know who you are" she said.

"No, I know but like you don't *know* me, y'know, not yet," he said, and winked.

She thought he was corny as shit but when the teacher came back in from his smoke break he found them both sharing their first kiss, and the two of them were inseparable from then until Quincy's second sophomore year of college when he started selling. "*No vine a joderme con esa mierda, Quincy, podría haberme quedado en Samana si quisiera ser una puta de traficantes.*" He remembered her screaming at him when she found the scale and the pills.

They split up but remained friends for the rest of the time she was in school, occasionally slipping back into something that felt familiar to love but she always snuffed it before they ever really got back together. They tried to keep in contact after she graduated, but she became a teacher. She had a knack for languages and was teaching ESL, Spanish, and French, at their former high school, and didn't have a ton of time to hang out with her Oxycotton-slangin ex-boyfriend. He tried to think about the last time he saw her and couldn't think of when it was. He put the photo aside, stared at the gun, and decided to call her. The phone rang for a while and Quincy was worried she was screening his call and she wouldn't answer. He heard a click.

"*Hola, mamaguevo*" she said.

He laughed. "Hi."

"What's up?" she asked.

"Um, nothing, sorry, I just missed you I guess? I had a...weird day."

"Noisokay, are you okay?"

"Yeah, I mean," he exhaled "What's up with you?"

"I am trying to figure out this passport shit."

"Passport shit?"

"Yeah."

"What for? You don't need one to go to D.R., right?"

"You do need one to go to D.R., because it's another country," she said and he could hear her smile, "but I am going to Japan soon, so, yeah."

Japan? "You are?" he asked.

"Yup, gonna teach English, and Spanish, and yeah."

"When did this all...happen?"

"Um, I dunno. I got into the program like six months ago?"

"Do you speak Japanese?"

"Yeah I picked it up, it's mad fuckin' hard but it's interesting."

"Wow" he said.

¿Qué lo qué, mamaguevo? she asked.

"Uh," he said, then exhaled and laughed once, "You know, um, Tucker? From like the neighbourhood, I guess?"

"Yeah" her tone changed "Your, uh, your drug dealer. Or the guy you-"

"Yeah"

"Yeah, him. What about him?"

"I think I have to, like, kill him? Y'know?"

"What?"

"Well, yeah cause-

"Quincy."

"No, listen there's like a real-"

"Quincy."

"Minnie-

"Quincy, shutthefuckup! You're not-what, what are you talking about?"

Quincy took the phone away from his mouth, closed his eyes, and exhaled. "Um, is...complicated."

"Complicated? *¿Tienes cucarachas en tu cabeza?* Just don't fuckin' kill nobody! JE-sus!"

They sat in silence for a minute listening to each breath over the phone.

"I don't sell drugs anymore. I quit."

“Okay.”

“I don’t! Honest.”

“Good for you, what’chu want a galleta, *pendejo*? You’re not supposed to sell drugs in the first place.”

“Quincy?”

“Yeah?”

“I know you were with Roxie when she died-”

“Whoa, yo-”

“Her sister told me you were the one who called the cops but you weren’t there when the paramedics showed up.”

He pulled the phone away from his ear, afraid to hear her continue but ready for whatever she said.

“Yeah” he said.

“I know it wasn’t your fault. I know you were just trying to help her out. Okay? You don’t need to go and ruin your life over this, okay? You didn’t know what was in those pills did you?”

“I-”

“Quincy? Did you?”

“I knew I should’ve checked and I didn’t.”

“You didn’t kill her. Okay? She was my sister in every way but blood and I miss her every day but you didn’t do this to her. Okay?”

He could hear the H-train pass near her apartment and his wistfulness peaked.

“You know I speak a little Japanese, right?” Quincy asked.

“Do you?”

“Yeah, *Un Chin*” he said.

She exhaled through a smile. “Really? What do you know?”

“Uh, I know...that”

“You’re full of shit” she said and he heard her start to laugh.

“No! I know they answer the phone with the like, it’s like one thing twice?”

"You mean *moshi moshi*?"

"Yeah! And, uh, *sakura*, right? That means Cherry blossom, y'know?"

"Yes. It does, did you get that from *Naruto*?"

"I did get that from *Naruto*!" he said and they both laughed.

They sat quietly on the line again together.

"You could visit if you wanted" she said.

"Is there anything there for me? I'm gonna go see the Hello Kitty Memorial or whatever?" he said.

"Just please don't kill anyone, Quincy."

"Minnie-"

"I have to go"

"Oh."

"Yeah, this place is gonna close and it's way uptown."

"Uh, yeah, okay, sure." he said "It was good talking to you, Minnie."

"Yeah, you too."

"Quincy, *Cuídate mamaguevo*."

"Yeah, I will. You too, Minnie."

"Good-bye."

"Bye."

The cold silently and aggressively came for each of the senses in the miserable morning air. Exhausted street lights left on mixed their lumination with the smog and dimly displayed a copper color above morning commuters. Frost found its way onto front windows and was felt in the bones of all those who chose to bare it. Quincy hadn't slept a wink, rushed a shower to stay awake, and ran out the door with his hair still damp. *¡No salgas con el pelo mojado mijo!* His Abuela's voice echoed in his ear, *¡Es mala suerte!* The cold made his still wet hair stiff and his nose and exposed earlobes stung when he stepped out onto the street. He exhaled brief baby clouds that smelled like listerine and evaporated before he could get a clear look at them. The air was sharp and hung heavy in his lungs. The sidewalk was still slippery despite being doused in sand and kitty litter that crunched on the caked concrete with each cautious step. There wasn't

a soul on the street smiling. Some shuffled back and forth to the bodega for a smoke or snack but by and large the block was bare. The night before Quincy swiped the keys to his Tio Moshe's stationary '87 Saturn that had been parked across the street from A.J.'s Grocery and Caribbean Cafe for months. The car wouldn't start without a jump but Quincy just needed a spot to wait and watch for Tucker and knew he couldn't make it no more than a few hours max without swishers and one of A.J.'s meat pies. He checked behind him to make sure no one saw him as he swung the Saturn's door open and cringed at its high-pitched cry, crawled inside, and slammed it shut.

Inside the Saturn was somehow colder than the street. Quincy futilely and furiously rubbed his palms, and failing to find comfort in the friction, sat on his hands. He shut his eyes and shivered, and shouted "SHIT" to himself. He recalled his rudimentary plan. It had to be quick. He knew, no matter how cold it was, Tucker always copped a loose Newport for the walk back to his apartment and sparked it as soon as he stepped out of A.J.'s. All Quincy had to do was spot Tucker, slip out and at shoot at him until he was dead. Simple enough, he supposed. His leg bounced. His pulse was bananas. He caught his own eyes in the reflection in the rear view mirror. Eyes shrunk, unshaved, his features still scorched crimson from the chill. Adjusting the mirror, he noticed how damp his hands were and wiped them on his jeans before greeting the gun's cool metal with his hands in the front pocket of his hoodie. Going over the rises and falls in the metallic ridges with his thumb, thoughts matriculated to Quincy's mind. He wondered if Tucker knew it was his last day. *Nobody but his customers will miss Tucker.* The cold stung his eyes so he closed them. He dug in his pocket and pulled out the polaroid of Minnie cheesin. His head was down he spotted someone moving toward the bodega. Quincy slouched down the steering wheel and squinted to see. He waited for the figure to walk into the clear between cars and saw it was Miss Mendez, Roxie's mother. He relaxed but remembered why he was there and gripped the gun along the grooves on its handle. She made her way into the store and Quincy wished she would be before she saw anything.

He didn't have to wait forever. After what was actually around ten minutes but felt like hours, Tucker appeared walking on the street toward A.J.'s. The

fool was swinging his arms and was still sucking down the smoke from a cigarette butt he tossed toward the street before he pulled open the bodega's door, slipping slightly before stepping inside. This was it. Quincy just had to wait for him to walk out the door and it'd all be done. Quincy watched the bodega's door. It was broken and didn't bolt shut right, so rather than bare the cost of repairs, A.J. just had it swing. In the summer this was fine but patrons complained of feeling "fucking freezing" in the colder months such as these. Covered in stickers advertising the lottery, cigarettes, and chipwiches, the bodega's door flew open. He could see A.J. watching the D.R./Argentina *futbol* match on his black and white ten inch he kept on the shelf above the machete behind the register.

Quincy could feel his heart attempting to beat its way out of his chest. The bodega's door swung open and Quincy swallowed and sprang out the Saturn. Pulling the gun out he jogged halfway across the street and saw it Miss Mendez who had left. She saw him, smiled, and waved. He didn't believe it was for him and looked behind him to the grey sky.

Quincy saw just a flash of fuchsia. He had to strain his sight to just barely make out the handful of rose and snow colored blossom directed by the wind. He moved forward to meet them and was just barely able to catch a couple in his hand and watch them melt in the center of his palm before he could get a proper look. He raised his eyes to the sky again and his jaw fell as watched the clouds flush and before his eyes fill with flower petals. Pink cherry blossom petals dancing obliquely in their descent. Feathery, funny-colored, flurries, fluttering with fervor, gently kissing the Flatbush street. Watching them reminded Quincy of falling in love. Some got lost for a second or so in the illumination of the street lights. They were tumbling, spiraling, plummeting toward the pavement, either melting or merging to form tiny cold rose-colored clumps. A gust of wind gave rise to an enormous eddy of blossoms that engulfed a bystander who screamed "Ah! Bumbaclot s'no!"

He was hypnotized until he heard the bell from AJ's door. He turned around and saw Tucker. The two stared at each, Tucker on the sidewalk, Quincy in the street. Tucker nodded at Quincy who hesitated before nodding back. They stared at each other for a second before Quincy took off in the opposite direction.

She wasn't his first visitor. His mother had been twice a week since his sentencing seven months ago. She told Minnie she thought it was important for him to have visitors and to know what was happening in the world. She went through security and it struck her how long it had been since they last spoke. She buried herself in her work her first few weeks in Fukuoka. Her roommate, some Australian-*pendeja* from Sydney, who was a serious alcoholic, seemingly always had people over, forcing Minnie out and about. She tried calling him a few times to no avail and after their last conversation didn't know what to assume. She checked the local news station for reports of a shooting and didn't find anything about him. Her heart fell when she opened Facebook and saw his mugshot side-by-side with Tucker's on New 12's feed in after a drug bust. She hit his sister up and got the address to send him a letter and it took four days for his response to cross the pacific. They went over it all in writing, Roxie, then back when, then now. He had her give the money he got for turning Tucker in to Miss Mendez as soon as she got yesterday. He had two months left if he behaved himself, five if not. He told her they sent Tucker upstate to the real prison. When she was signing her name on the visitor sheet she saw him moving at the end of the hall behind the glass. Quincy's mother said she didn't like to see him shackled and Minnie knew why. He met her at the booth at the end and studied her for a second before pulling the seat out, sitting, and smiling. The glass was smudged but she could see he had shaved, something his mother specifically noted he hadn't done for their visits. She took the phone off the hook and held it close enough to hear but not right on her ear.

"Moshi moshi, mamaguevo."

FOR PETER

TWILA NEIWERT

I go to Good Friday,
you dark, solemn church service
Always, I have loved how they turn down the lights
let low the voices
and watch quiet drift up from the floorboards
through pews
I sit on the long bench
hearing silence gather at my feet
hearing heavy rain
and the soft shuffle
of a person three pews over,
lost in the dark.
Candles extinguished,
It becomes difficult,
I sit while the bell tolls,
bowed head,
I think about Peter,
headstrong apostle.
I thought you foolish,
when I was little,
I thought you a coward
for turning your face away,
for being unsure,
and now, I am sorry.
Go, Peter, step out.
Go walk on the water.
I would fear the sinking, too.

CALIFORNIA

TAYLOR GINIECZKI

Two twin mountains of muscle
Line the length of your spine: borders along the length of I-5,
Taking me home from southern heat
To northern forests filled with your
Open-mouthed laughter. The sound
Trickles down your jaw and dissolves between your lips,
Where a shy smile greets me —
At first Mojave-dry before cracking
Crooked from corner to corner and
Warming every row of the sunlit cypress grove
That you set aglow
As I come back home.
Our golden state,
Your golden eyes,
My heart that beats for the heat of beach sands
And the heat of your hands
Lifting me toward the sun.

AGAIN

JENNA COMSTOCK



As children, Ari and I used to play this game where we would make up whole new planets, whole new worlds that someday we would inhabit.

(It's gotta be warm and sunny all the time, I would say. It's gotta have art and culture and pretty houses, Ari would agree. It's gotta have animals, and other kids to play with, and water parks, and nice families, it's gotta have nice families – families with both parents, parents who love each other and love their kids.)

(The last part was always the section I added.)

As we eventually grew up, Ari and I both found our made up worlds. Hers was San Diego. Mine was Albuquerque.

I tilted my head back and let the New Mexico sun warm my skin as I leaned back against the side of my beat-up car. It was evening—the sun was playful. I checked my watch. Ari's flight should have landed a bit ago. She was probably waiting for her bags.

I watched as more and more passengers filed out of the airport. The sunport, as the city called it. Albuquerque International Sunport. It was fitting. A ponytail full of bright golden hair caught my attention and I couldn't help the smile that spread across my face.

"Liz!" Ari shrieked, dropping her bag and breaking out into a sprint. I took a few steps towards her but she tackled me with a hug, causing me to stumble backwards.

I laughed, wrapping my arms around her and savoring her hug for a moment more, before shoving her off. "Go get your bag you heathen." She stuck her tongue out at me but retreated to grab her fallen duffel.

"I missed this car," she told me as she climbed in the passenger seat and chucked her bag in the back. I smiled and patted the dashboard fondly.

(We had road tripped to Albuquerque together in the old thing, screaming our favorite lyrics as off-key as we could, laughing about how many armadillos I would probably see in my new state. Spoiler alert: they aren't as common as we thought.)

("Maybe you'll see a UFO," she had joked.)

("Maybe they'll finally abduct me and take me home," I agreed.)

(We had cried the whole way to the airport when it was time for her to catch her flight back to California.)

The engine of my near ancient vehicle rolled over multiple times before roaring to life. Ari immediately jumped into catching me up on every detail of her life before I even pulled onto the freeway, and continued seemingly without taking a breath for a long part of the drive. I didn't mind. I was content just listening. Until she fell silent.

I glanced over at her and saw her chewing her bottom lip—a tell-tale sign that she needed to say something. I waited patiently as we drove.

“I wasn't sure if you were even going to pick me up,” Ari finally said. Her voice was gentle, quiet. As if she wouldn't have blamed me if I hadn't.

“Of course I was going to pick you up. Are you kidding?” My eyes stayed glued to the road.

(I hadn't been sure I was going to pick her up either.)

Ari shrugged, twirling her golden hair around a finger. “Well I mean, you haven't been answering my calls recently. Or my texts. Or my emails.” Her voice was still mild. I didn't reply.

“When I called and told you I booked a flight to come see you and didn't hear anything back, I assumed you got a new phone.”

(“Or didn't want to see me.” She didn't say it, but I knew she was thinking it.)

“I've been busy,” I finally said after a long, horrible moment of silence.

“For three years?” Ari asked jokingly. There was still no hint of anger in her voice. Guilt flooded over me. I glanced at her but she was looking out the window. I returned my attention to the road, watching the Sandia Mountains hold true to their namesake and turn more and more pink as the sun lowered itself behind the horizon.

~

I woke up to the sun glaring directly through the windows onto my face. A bead of sweat stuck to my forehead as I groaned and pulled up the blanket to hide from the harsh rays. My neck had a horrible, pulsating pain in it—probably from sleeping on the couch all night. I had let Ari have the bedroom.

(I pretended like I let her have it because I was a good friend, but now I think it was out of guilt from the conversation we had in the car.)

“Good morning sleepy trash gremlin,” Ari called from the kitchen. I wrapped

the blanket around my head and body to resemble the outfit of a Catholic nun and sat up, glaring at her.

She had her long hair up in a ponytail again and was dressed in running clothes, making breakfast and humming along to a song that played through one of her earphones. Of course she already went on a run. And of course she still managed to look like a freaking angel.

I rolled my eyes and fell back down onto the couch. "It's Saturday. Why are you awake this early?"

"It's ten o'clock Liz. That's not early." I heard her open and close the fridge. "Besides," she paused dramatically. "I already made coffee for you."

That got me up. With the blanket still wrapped around my body, I shuffled into the kitchen and sat down at the small, round table. Ari placed a steaming mug of coffee in front of me and I took a deep breath in, savoring the smell. "You're an absolute godsend."

"I know," Ari said without even looking at me as she poured herself a cup. She turned and faced me, leaning against the counter, biting on the corner of her bottom lip. Before she even opened her mouth, I knew she was going to ask something.

I didn't want her to bring up my lack of communication again, so I sighed and said, "Yes, I just woke up like this, I know that it's unnatural to be this angelic in the morning but it's a gift." I dramatically pulled the sheet tighter around my head and gave Ari my best model face.

"Can we please go to an art museum today?" Ari blurted out, unfazed by my ridiculous act. "New Mexico is known for having some of the most creative art museums in the country! Really, it'd be disrespectful to your home if we didn't go." I blinked once, my only sign of surprise. Relief filled my body. Even though I didn't understand art the way Ari did, I would happily take her to an art museum. Anything to avoid the conversation I knew she would try to bring up again.

"Yeah, sure," I agreed, shrugging. I tried to be nonchalant about my relief. Ari made an obnoxious squealing noise that caused me to choke on my coffee.

~

Two hours later, we were pulling into the parking lot of the art museum that

took Ari a ridiculous amount of time to decide on.

(“There’s just so many!” she had exclaimed, looking genuinely overwhelmed as she rubbed her face with her hands.)

(“Maybe just pick the cheapest? Or the closest? Or the least boring looking?” I had suggested from where I laid on the floor across the room, reading. The last one had earned a thrown shoe in my direction.)

For how long it had taken her to choose, I was a bit taken aback by what I saw when I pulled up to the destination. It looked like an abandoned building. But not just abandoned—no, this building looked as if it had gone through an apocalypse, survived, and went through a whole other apocalypse just to really give it the dilapidated is-this-where-I-die kind of look.

I parked the car and looked around, frowning. “Are you sure this is it? We must’ve taken a wrong turn somewhere.”

“No, this is it!” Ari insisted, her eyes bright.

I gave her an incredulous look. “You’re joking, right? There’s not even any signs or indicators telling us that this is even a business, let alone an art museum.”

Ari laughed, dropping the sun visor down to check her makeup in the mirror. “Look at all the cars, Liz. Why would there be so many cars at an abandoned building?” She shut the visor and opened the door to climb out of the car.

I stared after her, my mouth gaping open. I scrambled out of the car after her. “Uh, I feel like that’s a very valid question that we should definitely address before barging into what could be a crack house.” But Ari was already taking pictures and ignoring me, per usual. I took a moment to look around, noticing more than just the alleged art museum now.

Scattered throughout the parking lot were large sculptures made out of random material. A fifteen-foot tall spider made of tires and metal stared at me through kaleidoscope eyes. A giant wolf stood a few yards away, made of pieces of scrap metal, like a poorly constructed robot. Ari was taking pictures of both the metal creatures, saying something about the design and beauty. I didn’t get it. But I didn’t get any art.

“Come on, let’s get our tickets,” Ari decided abruptly, spinning on her heels and marching towards the entrance with that signature air of confidence I had

always

(loathed)

envied growing up.

“For real?” I asked, jogging to catch up. “How about we go to one of the more well-known museums? Like, I don’t know, maybe one that gives literally any indication that it’s an actual museum?” Ari just laughed.

I felt a little more at ease once we were inside and it was proven not to be an abandoned building. The walls were all black, including the ceiling and floor, with splatters of neon paint everywhere, everything glowing eerily from multiple black lights. The worker who sat behind the front desk stared at us with his hands folded neatly on the counter, his smile wide and unflinching. My general sense of ease that I had gained since going inside evaporated entirely when I saw him. I couldn’t tell what about him made me feel so thrown off until we got closer and his features became more apparent.

As he grinned, I could see that his too-white teeth were filed into sharp points. Every single one.

(It was like staring into the smile of a shark.)

His eyes were a piercing, unhuman blue. I told myself they were just colored contacts. His long acrylic nails looked honed enough to cut someone and were painted an electric blue that almost matched his eyes.

“Maybe we should come back some other time,” I whispered to Ari.

She laughed at me. “Oh no you don’t. There’s no one here besides us,” she gestured to the empty room save for the two of us and the creepy thing sitting behind the front desk, “which means that this is an ideal time to be here. You are not backing out of this Liz.”

As Ari bought the tickets, I thought about what she said. She was right. There wasn’t anyone else in line to buy tickets, despite the full parking lot.

“Ari, for real though, I’m getting a bad feeling, I think we should-“

“You’ll be fine Lizard.” I rolled my eyes at her stupid nickname for me. She gave me her infamous puppy dog eyes. “Have I ever steered you wrong?”

(Once. When she convinced sixteen-year-old me to go try and find my deadbeat mother. I left for the road trip excited, full of life, ready to find my mom and have a whole

family again. I returned with a black eye and three broken ribs courtesy of a baseball bat wielded by a drug addict I didn't recognize.)

"Fine you horrible witch," I grumbled. She flashed me a victory grin. The desk demon waved one of his hands towards a dark hallway, the first movement I had seen him make. One long acrylic nail pointed ahead.

"Good luck," he whispered and then giggled, a sound so horrible it sent chills down my spine.

"This place started based off an old story about a family who supposedly got murdered here, in this very house, all except for one boy, who escaped. Apparently, it's like a 'choose your own adventure' kind of deal," Ari whispered to me as we made our way down the pitch-black hallway. Oh good, so naturally she had chosen this one. "I heard that it takes people hours to find their way out." I felt like it was taking hours to get down this one damn hallway. I voiced this to her and she just laughed.

I opened my mouth again to ask her if she had heard the creepy laugh of the front desk attendant, but promptly shut it when the hallway opened up to reveal the outside of a large, two story mansion. The night sky hung above us, stars glittering, and the chirping of crickets filled the air. The atmosphere was moist and sticky. I closed my eyes, shook my head, and opened them again. The mansion was still there. We were no longer inside but... outside? At night?

"Holy shit," Ari breathed, her face lit up as bright as the day she saw the Grand Canyon for the first time. "Art is incredible."

Art? I tilted my head, frowning at the house. I didn't see the appeal, but I guess it was cool that even though I knew that we were inside a building and it was in the middle of the day, for a moment I was second guessing all of that.

Ari abruptly started forward, startling me out of my thoughts. I followed as she took the front steps leading up to the porch two at a time. She slowed down as she walked through the doorway and into the house, marveling at everything with wide eyes.

The entrance of the house led to a short hallway. The left side was a wall, covered in papers with random words that seemed to be written by a child. On the right, in place of a wall, stood a huge glass aquarium. I paused for a moment and

bent down, looking inside of it. Dozens of brightly colored fish swam around with a scuba diver figurine standing at the bottom and an open treasure chest beside him. I admired the aquarium and all the fish for a moment before recognition flashed through my mind. I frowned. "Hey Ari, didn't your parents have an aquarium exactly like this growing up-" I turned to look at Ari.

And stared directly into a pair of burning red eyes.

I shrieked and jumped backwards, thumping into the paper covered wall behind me. The creature, which looked like a human covered in dark gray paint, smiled at me with the same pointed teeth as the front desk assistant. It crouched down and slid backwards in a slithering movement, maintaining eye contact the entire time.

I watched as it expertly backed through the dark gray living room, expertly avoiding all of the worn-down furniture. Until it paused in front of a great fireplace, winked at me, and then slithered back into where the fire would have been lit. And disappeared.

I could hear my heart beating aggressively in my chest.

(I decided in that moment I hated all the employees there.)

"Liz!" I heard Ari shout from somewhere inside the house. "Hurry up!"

I cleared my throat, willing my body to stop shaking. "Coming!" I called back. Shooting one last glance at the fireplace, I peeled myself off the wall and hurried towards the sound of Ari's voice.

The inside of the house was extraordinarily disorienting. The walls frequently changed heights and the floor was covered in patterns that made me very grateful I wasn't on any drugs. The dining room ceiling looked as if it were melting, causing the too-familiar looking chandelier to hang above the table at a horrible angle.

(Everything inside the house seemed to tug at some deep memories in the back of my mind.)

I finally found Ari in a kitchen that was purely white. Everything was white. It gave me the feeling of fluorescent hospital lights. Ari was standing next to a woman who was also wearing all white, her snow colored hair slicked back away from her face. She smiled at me and I was relieved to see that she had normal

teeth.

“Welcome,” the woman said, dipping her head towards me. The words were warm, but the tone was not. “Are you ready to choose your path?”

“Is there a path that leads to the exit?” I asked sweetly. Ari elbowed me in the side. “She’s ready,” Ari assured the woman.

“Wonderful.” The woman made a broad gesture with one of her arms. “This house is your beginning. This house is also your end. In it you will find four different paths you can initially choose. Each path will take you on a different journey, with more choices awaiting you, and more paths to take. On this journey, you will have one goal. Make it out before The Boy catches you.”

I blinked. “I’m sorry, before the who catches us?”

“It’s just part of the exhibit,” Ari nudged me, grinning. “Remember the family I told you about? The theory is that the boy who escaped was the one who murdered them all.” I stared at her. She sighed and tried again, “Think of it like a haunted house with actors designed to scare you. Except with better decorations.” I rolled my eyes and waved at the lady to continue.

“The four different paths you may choose are as follows: the closet in The Girl’s room, the basement under the stairs, the washing machine down the hall, or the fireplace in the living room.”

An image of the creature disappearing into the fireplace flashed across my mind. “The washing machine,” I blurted out. Ari frowned, annoyed that we didn’t talk about it first.

(I knew the look because it was one I had given her too many times in my life.)

“Very well. Good luck on your journey.” The woman stepped back and pointed to the hallway beside her.

I eyed her warily, half expecting her to sprout wings or bleed from her eyes or something. She just smiled at us politely, devoid of emotion. Somehow that seemed more unsettling.

I latched onto Ari’s arm as we followed the hallway into what must have been considered the laundry room. Everything in it was black – a complete contrast from the blindingly white kitchen—except for the dingy, rust covered washing machine.

Ari stared at the machine. Something like hesitation flashed across her face. I was about to latch onto that brief emotion, tell her it was okay if she changed her mind, if she wanted to leave, but it was gone before I could. She gave me an award-winning smile. "Ready?"

"As I'll ever be." I eyed the door of the machine, unsure of what we were supposed to be doing with it. Ari didn't have such questions. She grabbed the handle and pulled without hesitation.

The washing machine door opened into a cramped all-white hallway. Ari started forward immediately, bending at the waist and crawling to fit.

(I wondered why she was so confident about what we were supposed to be doing. Maybe she regularly crawled through washing machines.)

I followed her at a more cautious pace. The door shut behind us, fast enough that I could have sworn it was slammed. An audible click rang out next. Apparently there was no going back.

The hallway was cramped. We had to crawl for the first half, but it slowly opened up until we were able to stand at full height again, me sooner than Ari. Fortunately, it wasn't as long as the initial one. We rounded a corner and it opened into a large dome-style room, still pure white. Five large electric doors lined the walls. We both yelped and stumbled back as a holographic screen popped up in the middle of the room.

The screen read:

CHOOSE A PARALLEL UNIVERSE

Following the words were the numbers one through five. "Are there no descriptions or anything?" I asked at the same time Ari shouted, "Five!"

A door opened. I gave Ari a pointed look and she shrugged. "It was only fair," she said as she walked towards the open door.

(Ari and I, seven years old. Her holding my torn family painting, the rip going right through where my mother and I stood on the paper, separating the two figures. "If I can't put my dog in mine, then you can't have your mom in yours," Ari told me, handing the half with my dad and me back. "It's only fair.")

As we emerged into our chosen parallel universe, I found myself satisfied with Ari's choice. It was beautiful. It was the magical forest in every child's imag-

ination, the one that they all hoped was real, out there somewhere and alive with fairies. Giant trees cascaded towards the sky, so tall and thick that I couldn't even see the

(ceiling)

sky through their leaves and branches. Large colorful mushrooms sprouted all over the ground, which was covered in a plush moss. Magnificent flowers sprouted out of the moss all around. I was careful not to step on any.

"Come on!" Ari called, laughing as she ran, spinning around with her arms out in a moment of childlike innocence and bliss. I couldn't help but smile. I ran after her laughing, forgetting in those moments of joy about my uneasy gut feeling that still hadn't left.

"Holy shit, Liz, come look at this!" Ari's voice shouted from up ahead. I picked up my pace and caught up to where she was standing in front of a door carved into a tree trunk.

"Did you try and open it?" I asked. Ari pulled on the handle and the door emitted a loud groan before popping open, showing off a spiral staircase going up the trunk. The inside of the tree had a width that was probably double my wingspan, I guessed. It was large enough, apparently, to fit an entire spiral staircase. I looked up, trying to look for where the stairs ended, but they trailed off into darkness.

"This is so cool," Ari whispered, more to herself than to me, as she grabbed the railing and started up the staircase. I started to follow, but then paused to shut the door behind me. We followed the spiral staircase for a while, trudging along in the dark in silence. I started to make a joke about how out of shape I was, when I heard a soft groaning noise. A noise that sounded exactly like the one that occurred when Ari first opened the door to the stairs. A chill ran down my spine.

"Ari," I whispered. "Did you hear that?"

"Hear what?" she asked and I immediately hissed at her to be quiet.

"Someone is in here with us," I whispered. She stopped. I stopped. I felt my heart beating against my chest. Silence.

And then the unmistakable sound of footsteps pounding up the stairs.

“Run!” I screamed and Ari didn’t hesitate, bounding up the steps with her long legs, eating up two, three at a time. I kept up as best I could, but I was shorter than her and in way worse shape.

We reached the top and Ari burst through the door, into a dark blue room filled with brightly colored fake coral. I immediately slammed the door shut behind me, looking around wildly for something to barricade it. “Find something!” I screamed at Ari. I didn’t look at her, focusing all my efforts into keeping the door shut. I heard movement behind me as Ari scrambled to find something. The footsteps grew louder. I could hear them even from the other side of the doors. “Ari!”

“Help me push this stupid thing!” Ari ground out, her voice shaky from effort. I weighed my options for a split second. There was no way my small frame was going to be able to keep whatever was in the stairs out.

I shoved off where I stood and sprinted over to where Ari was pushing a giant metal scuba figurine. I gritted my teeth and together we shoved the scuba man in front of the door. Not even a second after he was in place, a loud *thud* rang out from the impact as something collided against the inside of the doors. An almost inhuman shriek of anger followed shortly after.

I backed away from the door and Ari grabbed my arm as we stared at it, wide eyed and breathing heavy, waiting for the second impact. It never came. We waited there for what felt like hours. The scuba figurine stared at us through the big metal X in the front of his mask.

I finally broke the silence. “What the hell was that Ari?” I shouted. I was livid. But Ari was... laughing. I ground my teeth together in irritation. “What about that was funny to you?” I snapped.

“Oh come on! That was cool! It was so real!”

(So real.)

I rubbed my temples with the heels of my palms. I took a deep breath, calming my nerves. I tried to give her a smile, but it came out as more of a grimace. “So that was The Boy.”

“That was The Boy,” Ari agreed. That was just an employee playing his role, giving the guests a fright. Right?

I must have voiced that thought, because Ari said, “Right.” I looked at her, studying her face. She was genuinely unafraid. “And, good news, this must mean we’re kind of close to the end,” she told me. “Like in video games, it always gets more intense right when you’re about to win. So let’s just keep going.”

“I’m never letting you pick what we do for the day ever again,” I grumbled under my breath, but Ari just laughed. I took in our surroundings. Dozens of brightly colored fish hung from the ceiling. It felt like we were inside an aquarium. A deep sense of nostalgia filled my chest.

(Ari and I, twelve years old. Me, sitting in Ari’s parents’ fancy living room. Ari, at the table doing homework while I stared into the giant aquarium her family owned.)

(“Your parents are gonna be mad at you if you don’t do your homework,” Ari told me in that haughty voice only a middle school aged girl could accomplish. I didn’t answer—I knew better. I watched the fish dance through the water, dodging the brightly colored coral. “Well,” Ari continued from the other room, “your parent, no s.” I wondered what I looked like to the fish. I wondered what the inside of the aquarium looked like. “Liz,” Ari demanded, upset with my lack of attention. “Don’t you want to make your dad happy and do your homework?” I tore my gaze away from the fish tank and stared at her, devoid of emotion. I wondered what it would be like to have a different friend.)

I spotted a tunnel to our right and mentioned it to Ari, who nodded. We walked towards it together, slowly, silently.

I wondered what would happen if The Boy did catch us. *Ha! Gotcha! Tag, you’re it!* Somehow I doubted that’s how it would go. But in haunted houses, the actors weren’t allowed to touch you. I hoped that rule applied for here to. Maybe he would just scare us, make us scream a bit, and then we’d all laugh and continue on with our day.

The tunnel we travelled in fit well with the initial house. It was dark, with just enough light to be able to tell that the tunnel itself was wonky and disproportionate, changing drastically in width and height and shape every few feet. It was giving me a headache.

Until the small bit of light started to reduce, finally going away completely. And we stood in the pitch black, the sound of our breathing our only company.

Ari broke the silence. “Are we still in the tunnel?” she asked. Before I could

answer, the room brightened, but just barely. We were standing in the middle of a dome-style room, from what I could gauge in the dim light. At the very top was a projector that cast down beams of lights in a row through the center of the room.

The way they were lined up made me feel as if I was standing inside a prison cell, each line of light a thin bar.

"It looks like violin strings," Ari murmured, almost too quiet to hear. She reached out to grab one of the lights, as if it were a tangible object. Her hand sliced through and a loud chime sound rang out. I stepped back, bewildered.

(Ari and I, thirteen years old. Christmas morning. Ari, showing off her brand-new violin that her parents bought for her. It was shiny, untarnished. Beautiful. She was beaming. "What did you get Liz?" she asked, tossing her golden braid over her shoulder and pointing her nose to the sky. "Surely nothing better than this." Crescent moons of blood dotted my palms for days afterward, courtesy of my fingernails after balling my fists too tight.)

Ari looked at me with wide eyes, grinning. She plucked another "chord" and the same thing happened, with a higher note this time. "Amazing." She held her hand out and ran down the line, producing a beautiful roll of musical notes. It seemed that The Boy had already been forgotten in her mind.

While Ari played, I walked along the walls of the room, looking for the next exit, praying that it wasn't a dead-end room. Did they have those? I hoped we wouldn't find out.

The farther away from the violin lights and the center of the room I got, the harder it was to see. Running my hand along the wall to make sure I didn't miss something in the poor lighting, I thought about what Ari said about us probably being close to the end. Until my hand brushed against something sticky.

I recoiled my hand quickly, stepping backwards towards the light.

I stumbled over to the music lights and reached my hand out to see what was on it. Dark liquid coated my fingers. I gagged, coughing, and held my hand away from me.

"Liz?" Ari asked, her voice coming from somewhere behind me. "What's wrong?"

"We have to go," I told her, trying to push down the swell of panic that was building in my chest. I hated this place. I hated this place so much. I crouched down and wiped my hand on the floor, trying desperately to get rid of the stickiness. *It's fake*, I told myself. *It's a cheap trick*. It didn't feel like a cheap trick.

"Okay, okay! What happened?" Her voice sounded far away. Still unafraid. Still calm, collected. Still

(arrogant)

confident.

And then the lights turned off.

I stood up abruptly, spinning around. "Ari?" It was too dark. The room was pitch black all over again. "Ari!" I screamed, the panic overflowing now.

Silence.

Then a childlike giggle.

The lights turned back on and I saw Ari, suspended in the air with two large arms wrapped around her.

(I remember breaking my arm when I was a child. It was the forearm. The bone had snapped clean in half. The sound was horrible, like the sound that occurs when you jump on a large stick and it breaks with an audible crack that seems to echo on forever. It sounded like that.)

And right there in that moment, staring into Ari's terrified blue eyes, all the sounds in the world stopped. Except for that unmistakable crack of human bones as the man holding her squeezed and her ribs gave out.

I screamed. The lights turned off. I heard Ari sobbing through the darkness.

The lights turned on again and she was now laying on the floor, her golden hair spilled across the darkness. The person, who I know saw to be a large man with no hair and wild golden eyes, stared at me, tilting his head in an inhuman gesture. He flashed me a smile. His pointed teeth were too white. He giggled again and Ari let out another sob.

The room went black once more. The lights continued to do that, on and off, on and off, showing me flashes of Ari as her body was continually mutilated over and over again.

I was frozen. I didn't know where to run, how to help. How to escape.

(Ari and I, sixteen years old. “Why didn’t you run?” Ari asked me as she brought me a Ziploc bag full of ice. She sat next to me on the front steps of her parents’ house. I didn’t answer. The ice felt cool on my swollen eye.)

I had always said that I would do anything for Ari. I would have bet my life on it.

(“She probably didn’t mean to do it,” Ari continued gently, placing her hand on my shoulder. “She’s your mom – it was probably an accident.”)

But there, in the moments she really needed me, I was proven over and over again as a liar.

(It was probably an accident. I looked at Ari’s unbruised face and anger surged inside of me. My black eye, my broken ribs. Probably an accident. The tears welled, but they didn’t fall.)

I didn’t do anything for her. Instead I stood, listening to Ari scream my name as her bones cracked over and over again.

And then there was silence.

The lights returned. Through them, I saw Ari’s eyes staring directly at me, unmoving. I saw one of her legs bent at an awkward angle. I saw a pool of blood beside where her arm should have been connected to her shoulder.

And I saw the man with golden eyes and sharpened teeth standing over her, grinning at me with a bloodstained mouth. He waved at me with Ari’s dismembered arm. Two of the fingers were missing from her hand.

And then he winked.

That was when I finally moved. And I ran away.

I still don’t know how I escaped. The way out was a blur. But when I finally stumbled out of the front doors and into the hot Albuquerque sun beating down on the parking lot, I remember I was crying.

I remember that the sun was blinding. I remember there was a continuous ringing in my ears.

(I remember there were no cars in the parking lot.)

And as I curled myself up into a ball on the cement ground of that deserted lot and cried, I remember a horrible feeling creep over my body. A feeling suspiciously like relief.

IDEAL
TWILA NEIWERT

what an absolutely ideal night
for being lonely,
moon a sailing ship,
half-curved and tilting in the darkening sky —
be careful, I want to warn —
and piled clouds upon clouds
and rain, sheets of it,
and you, absent.

When David entered the café, Gladys stood and extended a hand, which he shook.

"Hello, David," she said. "It's good to see you again."

"It's nice to see you too," he replied.

David sat down at the table and unbuttoned his jacket. She studied him as he did so. Then, she marked something down on the clipboard in her hand. David felt his face flush. He knew that his suit, which he wore only a few times a year, didn't fit him very well. Her professional jumpsuit, on the other hand, looked perfectly natural.

"How has your day been so far?" she asked.

"It's been good," he replied. "How about yours?"

"Mine has been pleasant too. I woke up early and got a few hours of work done—not for my job, I am studying for another degree on the side."

"That's interesting. What degree?"

"Finance. It is going to advance my career."

"Wow, that's very forward thinking of you."

They fell silent. After a few seconds she made another note.

"Well," she said, "now that we have greeted each other, I think it's time to get started. I hoped to have a little more casual conversation first, but this will do."

"Sorry," he replied.

"Don't apologize," she said, writing on her clipboard again. When she was done, she looked up and cornered his gaze with hers.

"This test is modeled after one used to diagnose psychiatric disorders," she said, "but I find it does just as well at determining relationship compatibility. It's very simple. I will give you a word. All you need to do is answer with the first thing that comes to mind. Just to warn you, your answers should all be serious. This is not the time for jokes. Are you ready to start?"

"Sure," he replied.

"Good. I'll start off easy. Water?"

He hesitated and she smiled, clearly trying to be encouraging, but the effect was arachnidesque. "Go on," she said, "there aren't any wrong answers. Just say what comes to mind. Water?"

"Drink," he replied.

"Very good. Food?"

"Eat."

"Green?"

"Grass."

"Dog?"

"Pet."

"Family?"

"Love."

"Good," she said, making a note. "Next, flatulence?"

He paused, surprised. "Crass?"

"Yes, yes, I'm sorry about that one. I have to have it in as a test for immaturity. You'd be surprised how many 'men' still buy into potty humor. Anyhow, moving on. Saving?"

"Difficult."

At this she eyed him again. "Do you have any savings?"

"Some," he replied.

"Some? Well, we can talk about that later. Next, trust."

"Essential."

"Love?"

"Everything."

"I disagree," she said, smiling, "but I appreciate the sentiment. Very charming. You're doing fine. Just to warn you though, things are going to get a little harder from here on out."

"Alright," he replied. Attempting to look relaxed, he leaned back in his chair until the front two legs of the chair came off the ground. The glance she shot him belied that she was not impressed. He lowered himself back down hastily.

"Continuing on, then," she said, "intimacy?"

"Important."

"Yes. Lies?"

"Unhealthy."

"Of course. Cigarettes."

"Want...no. Bad, bad."

She shook her head. "It seems foolish to keep smoking with all the research out there proving how damaging it is," she said.

"I know," he said. "That's why I quit."

"I would have preferred you hadn't smoked at all. They say that smokers, even if they have given it up, can pass cancer risks down to their children."

"I'm sorry. It was a poor choice, and I know better now."

"Don't apologize. Drugs?"

"Unhealthy."

"Good. Drink?"

"In moderation."

"That one was forced. Drink?"

"Enjoy."

"Children?"

"Someday."

"Politics?"

"Tiring."

Gladys frowned. "Do you know what we get when people start thinking politics are tiring?" she asked.

"Yes?"

"Rule by communists. Do you realize how many lives are at stake? Do you really think it's 'tiring'?" She was almost shouting.

"No, I guess not," David said, and he scanned the café for witnesses, shrinking inwards in embarrassment.

"Good," she said, "But you should also realize that it isn't very attractive when you change your opinions to agree with mine. Any partner of mine would need to have his own convictions."

"Sorry," he replied.

"I keep telling you, don't apologize so much. It makes you look weak. Work?"

"Hell—no, opportunity," he replied.

She shook her head again. "Future?"

"Worrying," he burst out.

At this she set down the clipboard. "I've heard enough, I think," she said.

"That's all? You didn't even ask me about my interests," David asked. On his own time, he wanted to share, he was learning Spanish.

"That isn't necessary," she replied. "The deeper things are more important when gauging compatibility. Interests change. People don't."

"I see. Well," he forced a smile, "that was quite the experience. How did you come up with it all?"

"I appreciate your interest," Gladys said, "but I apologize, I don't think we're quite right for each other. If it's fine with you, I should get going. I have some more studying to do."

"You're basing my odds entirely off a word test?" he asked.

"Yes, it saves so much time. And in the end, I think it turns out to be

more accurate than other methods. It's easier just to do things bluntly. One last thing—would you like a word of advice?”

“Sure.”

“In the future, instead of asking a woman out on ‘a date,’ come up with a specific outing. It makes you look more competent. If I hadn’t had to pick the location, I might have gone a bit easier on you with the questions.”

When she was done speaking, she turned and left.

OLD COAST

TWILA NEIWERT

Sand-speckled, windswept constellations are forming
in the rolled cuff of my jeans,
grit against my scalp and scoured skin.
Cold wind off curling wave,
sweeping sand into spirals, eternal,
older than water.
If I smiled, glittering mica,
sea-ground shell,
pulverized once-sea-creature
would stick to the lines of my teeth
outlining the bone curve
in loose silver.

This was the first performance. Mikhaila was nervous; she slipped up on her fourth scene at almost every practice. *But tonight will be different*, she assured herself. *Tonight will be extravagant*, she assured herself. Like nothing ever seen before.

The artists filled her chocolate-fondue hair with beaming roses, petals echoing past their own edges. She stared at the mirror, entranced by her own cheekbones and glimmering smile. The artists had done a wonderful job.

They placed delicate feathers on her back, creating resonating wings that reached from her spine to the Victorian ceiling above, grasping at the sprawling spirals carved into the marbled pillars that drowned them.

Arms outstretched, delicate, pristinely white gloves absorbed her hands and soaked up the rest of her arms. *So perfect, so pure*, she thought. She stared at the mirror, intimidated by her own eyes and cascading hair. *How delightful!*

Her lips were submerged in crimson color, begging for attention. The artists draped shawls around her elbows and calmly wrapped her body in make-up. The audience wasn't ready. It would be the show of a lifetime.

Awaiting the debut of Mikhaila, the audience was patient. Like the shepherds, they watched the curtained skies dappled with floral stars in hope of their savior's appearance. Flourishing red curtains pulled tightly over glazed white pillars. Cherubs glided past the edges of the stage, garnished with precious lyres and flushed cheeks. Their gentle eyes watched sentinel over the crowd below them.

A man with a stringent jawline sat in the front row. He had reserved this entire row to himself. *Brilliant*, he mused. His impenetrable eyebrows gazed over the audience surrounding him. He felt suffocated. *When will it begin? Where is Mikhaila?* He was here for her. She was his favorite performer. He never missed her acts, her songs, her scenes, her shows. He adjusted his hair. *She'll want to see me*, he smiled. *I should look my best for our rendezvous*. He had planned it all out.

The bursting bouquets of white lilies, cream-colored roses, and amaryllises waved to the onlookers. The thin aisles choked the viewers, buried inside their grasp. They all waited. They knew it was coming. They had planned it all out. The energy in the room was the calm before the storm.

The dark theater accentuated the stunning detailing of each corner of each side, the prim white trim that tied down the walls. The audience was decorated with extravagant hats combusting with feathers, flowers, fanciful frills. Some hats adorned swooping swans, diving down towards the adjacent onlookers. Their wings stuck tightly to their sides, bound to the extreme ambit of the

brim. Women wore trifles in their hair and gloves accented with tender blooms stitched in a shy pink.

In a glamorized explosion, the curtains were ripped apart from the sides, exposing the vulnerable womb inside them. A wooden stage blossoming with soft clouds and angels, extras stuck together while singing hymns.

*“Leave we all this worldly mirth,
And follow we this joyful birth;
Transeamus.”*

The audience was dead silent. Each eye was glued to the sensational overstimulation blatantly bore to them. Not a word was muttered, not a breath was uttered. Time froze as heels clapped on the stage. The man in the front killed the silence, murdered the reticence with a jagged breath. Eyes closed, he exhaled softly.

Mikhaila was here. As she entered the stage, souls stared at her in awe, in patience, in unsatiated curiosity. Her heart seized and her mind flared in fear.

*“For in this rose contained was
Heaven and earth in little space;
Res miranda.”*

Now was her moment. It was all coming together. One single slip-up, one mistake, one folly and she'll be sent to Mephistopheles. She was struck by the powerful silence that welcomed her. Where were her ovations? Her applauses? She was the most beautiful woman in the world, exposed before their plebeian gazes. *Pearls before swine*, she cursed to herself. The floral halo on her capitulum blazed like a placid conflagration. The cherubs smiled at her, the audience frowned at her. Her wings trembled and her lips were carved in stone. Her dress flooded beneath her, dancing in white lace and golden trim. The hair she once admired so proudly became a prison binding her face to her body.

Just as she thought it was all over, a man smiled at her. A man with dense eyebrows, in the front row. He was handsome, stark, cleansed. His hands lay folded on his lap, and his eyes remained enslaved to her presence. The welcome she felt so deprived of arrived. She could begin now.

The roses in her hair flickered.

The man with the eyebrows stood up in a concise and precise motion. His arm bolted from off his lap and a blaring sound emancipated the audience from crippling silence.

His bullet flew at astounding speed towards Mikhaila and before she could run, before she could think, before she could even breathe, it met her sternum in a fated embrace. Like lovers long lost, they fell into each other and became one.

Her body choked and fell back slightly, her wings in shocking peace. The cherubs screamed, their lyres shattered and their eyes broke. Like Lucifer's Tongue, the blood flowed from her chest. It sprayed everywhere, the fountain of youth finally found. Her gloves were stained with life as her body tumbled like an angel falling from Heaven, deprived of Divinity.

*"Alleluia, res miranda,
Pares forma, gaudeamus,
Transeamus."*

The audience stood up. The throats hollow, their eyes freed. In excitement, in astonishment, in amazement, they screamed. A standing ovation. They clapped till their hands bled, shouting, "Beauty! Beauty!" The hats ricocheted off their heads, waving about like flags in the living air. "Amazing! Brilliant!" They beamed like hopeful children, praising seraphim and glorifying God. They exalted in her pain, they exulted in her death. Blood tarnished the snowy floor and terrified the flowers. It mixed with Mikhaila's roses and the audience shouted, "Beauty! Beauty!" Mouths wide with admiration, they praised, "Like nothing ever seen before! Truly a brilliant sight!"

There is no painting as beautiful as Mikhaila, laying there and swallowed in filth.

The audience became one in their exultation, begging for more.
"A perfect performance! *Encore*, **encore!**"

THE TEN GOLDEN FRENZIES

KAYLEE NELMS

(A play on Biggie Smalls *ten commandments* and the bible's also.)

eat your hairy broccoli, only the greenest of peas, the zucchini linguini, the most gargantuan squash, the epitome of healthy and stealthy; avoid mashed frenzy
bite your tongue, whole foods and the health gurus have already won, participate in their vitamin craze, their fat rage, their livestrong frenzy

parks, narks, small sparks within the tall oaks nurtured by tidy blokes in high coats and lumbar boots, no kahoots, blend in with the ordinary frenzy
obey the golden state law, do not find yourself in the bear's claw. do not play, stray from disarray or you will pay in the broken rule frenzy

pretend you're really okay, say hey to auntie kay, pray for May - horse camp hay make me happy, captain o' captain, where is the frenzy
the night is scary, so is the tooth fairy, the boys who get too hairy, even the prairie and the unsanitary; discretionary frenzy

don't be psychotic or neurotic. pathetic. never sympathetic, be apathetic to the vagabonds, buy bonds, only kiss the blonds; reputation frenzy
be what they call critically sane, drape yourself in plain, eat only the red and whitest of candy canes or they will drown you in the insane frenzy

hide outback from the wild and the whack; any slack and daddy will crack. smack, smack, luscious track of impressive frenzy
superlative cake for mommy's little snake. keep raking the golden leaves and devouring all of the prestige. honor frenzy

don't lick the toad. take the high road. they have you in a steady mode; never unload,
only implode with droopy mundane and convention frenzy
let D.A.R.E. scare, take care, don't impair with beer or sulk in the devil's hair - only
seep into their fear and adhere in the government's frenzy

enroll at stanford, become a frat rat, you're up at bat - don't choke, don't smoke, don't
let the bad girls evoke you into the broke frenzy
the degenerates are hazy, crazy, enfolded in menace; become a moral dentist, dental
hygienist, baptist; anything in their white teeth frenzy

praise the lord. indulge in the bored and accord. sulk in suburbanite stench, use the
right wrench, sit on the germfree bench - ideal frenzy
yellow house, red blouse; however could you live without lululemon, lemonade, an
accolade. work your way up the affluence frenzy

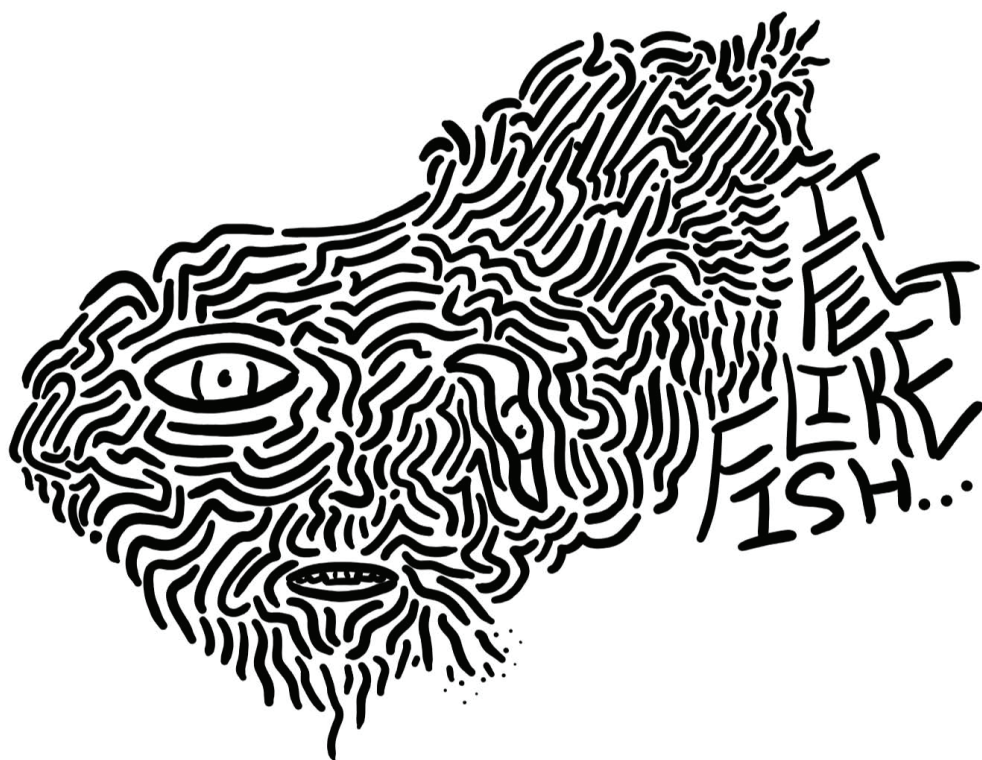
buy a principled dog, not a hedgehog, marry the best-dressed, not the hog, try not to
breathe in too much california smog, perfect frenzy
make the white sheet match with the double driveway's concrete; do not accept defeat,
make the houses conceit compete in the supreme frenzy

assimilate into what their monotones told you was great, hide in your unvarying fate,
and try not to hate the banal frenzy

as they will admonish what will astonish, chastise the immoral eyes, never realize, only
disguise and comply in what they call their holy frenzy

IT FELT LIKE FISH

KADEN MILLER



GONE!

TAYLOR GINIECZKI

How it must feel to be honey,
When the wax walls of the
Hexagonal cells melt
And free you from
The comb and
Then the
Hive.