



The Mercury
The Student Art &
Literary Magazine
of Gettysburg
College

Volume 2023

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The Mercury 2023

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The Mercury 2023

Author Bio

The Mercury is dedicated to showcasing undergraduate creative written and visual work. It is entirely run by students, and has been in publication since 1893.

THE MERCURY

THE ART AND LITERARY MAGAZINE OF GETTYSBURG COLLEGE 2023



The Mercury

The Art and Literary Magazine of Gettysburg College 2023

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HISTORY & PROCESS

The Mercury is a student-run art and literary magazine released each April. It has been published annually since 1899 at Gettysburg College. All students of the College are invited to submit their work for possible publication. Editors are elected annually by the entire staff. Submissions are reviewed and selected anonymously by the staff each year during winter break.

EVENTS

The Mercury usually holds a publication reception each year and participates in campus events such as the Activities Fair, Get Acquainted Day, and co-sponsored events with Sigma Tau Delta, the English Honor Society.

THE MERCURY PRIZE

Each year, the staff awards a monetary prize to the best piece of work published in each genre. We would like to thank our judges for 2023: Jennifer Clogg (Fiction), Maddie Nieman (Nonfiction), Lauren Hand (Poetry), and Natalie Orga (Art). The Mercury prize-winning titles are bolded in the Table of Contents. This year's winners are: **Georgia K. Kirkendall** (Fiction), **Noelle G. Muni** (Nonfiction), **Noelle G. Muni** (Poetry), and **Lauren A. Chu** (Art).

PUBLISHING

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The Mercury

Note: Prize-winning titles are listed in bold

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The First Poem I've Written in 7 Months

HANNAH CROWLEY

I have been beautifully frozen for the past seven months.
Lying still and silent,
No longer tossing and turning.
But I am not cold.
My bones and flesh are not solid,
There is no frost on the tip of my nose,
And the wind still runs through my hair.

When people describe love, it is full of heat, speed,
And burning.
There's the desire to run through a field
Or dance in a storm.
But they hardly mention the stillness and freezing.

Never in my life has my mind felt so calm,
So at peace.
It's created a tunnel vision, caressing my brain
And soothing my thoughts to drown out my ever present
Preoccupation with time and self-doubt.
Never in my life has my heartbeat slowed so,
turning my racing blood to the languid flow of a river,
An antidote through my veins.
Never in my life have I been so compelled to just be.
Not to plan or achieve or impress,
But exist in my skin and my heart for the first time.

Never in my life have I been so peacefully,
Beautifully, gratefully frozen.

My Longest Friend

MIKELYN G. BRITT

The first story I wrote was about a little eight-year-old boy, not much older than me at the time, who was taken on a spaceship to the Moon in the middle of the night. That is where he found a new friend, a green alien with a round belly, soft features, and three snail-like eyes. The pair played all sorts of games, some from Earth and some from the Moon. By the time the little boy made it back to his home on Earth, the sun was starting to rise. His mom came in to get him ready for school. The boy jumped at the chance to tell her about his new alien friend and all the new games he learned. His mother was pleased that her little boy had such an active imagination and that his dreams were filled with such wonder. That is when the young boy learned that not everyone has the gift of seeing.

When I wrote the story about a little boy and his alien friend, I wasn't too different from them. I was a little girl living in the suburbs of Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania in a working-class family with six siblings. To say that sometimes I felt unseen was an understatement. Aside from my family, I did not have many friends. I wasn't very good at getting out of my shell just yet. So, I turned to storytelling. I could have as many friends as I wanted in my imagination—just like the alien.

Dad loved to read. Mom loved to write. I felt comforted those mornings on the porch on our wooden rocking chairs. *The Magic Tree House* sprawled on my lap, a notepad nearby with some hurried ideas written in orange crayon. Dad would put on his glasses, which he only wore for reading and driving despite his terrible vision, and page through a WWII book. Mom was seated to his right, engrossed in the newest John Grisham novel. I wrote through the love I felt.

As I grew older into elementary school, I found expressing myself got more difficult. Mom and Dad had overlapping battles with cancer. I lost myself in the grief of their absence. I craved being the one doted over and worried about. It was me that stayed up all night with nightmares and anxiety over the state of my parents. I wrote get well soon cards in the waiting rooms of chemotherapy centers and by hospital beds. I lost my imagination.

I was moved to a new school. My family could no longer afford the tuition of my private schooling, so I transferred to the neighborhood public school. Friends were much harder to come by as the new kid, so I went back to my stories. I tried to find the happiness I was lacking. I wrote a story about a small princess. She lived in a magnificent castle with her family and had hundreds of friends. She liked to draw, read, and write just like me. Her family was together. Her parents were healthy. She went to bed with a full stomach and dreamed of cotton candy. There were no hospitals in her kingdom. No need when everyone is safe and healthy. I wrote and wrote, but nothing ever came true.

Then we moved to a new town the next year. The landlord of our house was getting tired of renting and wanted someone to buy the property. Well, we certainly didn't have the funds to pay for it. Not when red overdue envelopes took up most of our countertop. Dad was in the height of his cancer treatment and they threw us out. The only place we could afford to live was out of my hometown. So we packed everything up and left. I wrote stories about a great big mansion with dozens of bedrooms, a movie theater, a bowling alley, and a pool. The fridge was stocked with lemonade and pop. The freezer was full of ice cream. And every night the family sat down for dinner, together. Our new home looked a little different. It had holes in the floors and leaky ceilings. There were only two bedrooms so Mom and Dad converted the garage downstairs into the master. Dinner happened when it could, with one or two chairs being empty. Dad promised it was just a transition house until he got better.

Dad passed away soon after we moved. We donated a book in his honor to our local library. The same library I would drag him to on the weekends begging for the newest copy of *Dork Diaries* and maybe a new kid's cooking book to try out some recipes. My brain was too filled with grief to have room for creativity. I put down my pen, threw away my notebook, and walked away from writing. I spent five years without so much as writing in my diary.

High school is when I tried again. I bought a pretty journal, a whole packet of gel pens, and made a new playlist to get the creative juices flowing. Everything I wrote was filled with hatred, loss, and grief. I wrote about self-hatred and depression in sparkly pink ink. A white notebook tainted with the stories of absolute misery. I understand that as writers, we always leave a piece of ourselves in our writing. I did not want to feel this hurt anymore.

College is when I returned to the stories of love. It was the first time that I would ever be away from my family. The 201 miles did come with

the tug of some heartstrings (or the existing umbilical cord as my friends like to joke about for Mom's and my close bond), but I also felt my first taste of freedom. I was learning what it was like to finally not be in a town where every corner has a painful memory. I took my first breath and felt my heart start to beat again.

The floodgates had opened and it was all I could do to find some paper, be it a receipt or a napkin, and start writing. I wrote poems in the margins of my astronomy notes. I wrote about a group of friends navigating the ins and outs of Greek life. I wrote about what love might feel like when reciprocated. I wrote and I wrote and I wrote until my fingers were numb.

March 2020: the start of armageddon. At least that's what it felt like. The creeping feeling of hypochondria crawled up my spine, whispering in my ear that this was the end. Paranoid cleaning and regular testing for fevers became my routine. I watched over my mother—who did not seem to match my sentiments on the outbreak—praying for her protection. I could not lose another.

Quarantine gave me a lot of time to myself, which wasn't always easy. The immediate healing that I thought came over me when coming to college seemed to be a glimpse into the future rather than a complete transition. Anxiety, as I learned, lives in you, the treatment is what matters. In collaboration with my therapist, I started to write about the hard times again. The memories that were so painful that I repressed them for a decade started to resurface. Tears mixed with ink over the pages of my journal. Working through emotions instead of repressing them is when healing actually begins. My story is still being edited.

My semester abroad, I am reminded of the feeling of freedom from my freshman year of college. I never thought that I would be given the opportunity to travel, let alone come to a whole new country across an ocean. I never left the east coast before coming to Bath. My first flight was on January 23, 2022, when I came 3661 miles to have the experience of a lifetime. And not just my lifetime. My family and friends eagerly wait by their phones, knowing I should be coming back from a trip, excited to see the pictures and hear the stories. Gratefulness radiated through my bones every morning.

Creative writing with a fresh group of faces, rather than zoom boxes or my own reflection, felt new. Different, but not in a bad way. Insecurity filled my lungs until I could not speak during workshops. The cure was in the very room. It was knowing that all of my peers were just like me. We all started writing for one reason or another, found it encouraging or comfort-

ing, and wanted to share it with others. It's beautiful to have such an innocent craft presented in humble settings. Students from all over America come together with a British tutor to hone the craft, at least to a degree of improvement. I have learned a great deal from those Tuesday meetings and will cherish the stories I have read from kids filled with so much potential.

I write poetry to my Mom to let her know I miss her. I write stories about love. I write letters to my Dad. I write for myself.

Letter from Campus

BEATRICE SLEVIN-TRIGO

There's a lone lamppost standing by the sidewalk,
That flickers brokenly with a droning crackle,
Its flaking neck bent downwards in a slump,
So that its sole white eye can fix onto the floor.
It only sees whatever happens below it:
The tops of heads and sneakers,
The leaves scraping against the ground,
And flecks of shimmers in the concrete.
It doesn't even know what the sky looks like—
A pathetic and pitiable existence.

Did you know, that if you light a fire under the clouds,
The stars come out?
They don't like the smoke of the sunset,
So they crawl out from the black,
Blinking and bleary-eyed.
They look out silently from their reach,
And listen without words
To the spluttering chatter of the lamppost
That is crying to be noticed.
The stars watch the scene in exasperation—
Watch the futile elegy performed
In buzzing monotone and exhausted flickers
Until the light of day comes back
And the white eye closes,
Without even knowing
That it had an audience at all.

Did you know, that the pond at the back
Is empty at night?
All the birds have gone to sleep by then,
But there are still ripples in the water

Where they had played in the afternoon.
All is silent, no movements are made,
And the pond is very black—
Nearly still, nearly nothing in the dark.
Still, as the tips of my shoes
Blur against the crunching leaves
As I walk around the void,
I swear I can hear something chirping.
Something warbling to be seen,
Like an insomniac bird,
Or a stuttering lamplight
With no company.

Fairy House

HANNAH CROWLEY

My fairy house has grown old
Sitting atop my bookshelf
In my childhood bedroom.

The tree stump base and twig roof
Coated in a fog of dust,
Yet still standing strong.

The moss carpet is no longer green,
Chestnut rocking chair too fragile to sway,
And sea glass pillows in need of fluffing.

Yet, each night, in spite of this decay,
I open my windows just a crack
In hopes that a pixie may wander in.

I dreamed of holding that little friend in my palms,
Sharing secrets and pastries with blackberry jam
Until the wee hours of dawn.

They would tell me about princesses and mermaids,
A world of cotton candy skies and magical possibilities,
So much sweeter than my reality.

I left that creature felt blankets for cold,
Polly Pocket snowshoes for winter travel,
And a warm place to call home,

Hoping they'd protect me,
Offer solace from the cold and darkness
Of the outside world.

But to this day, they remain untouched,
And each night, staring up at the stars,
I pray for a friend to appear.

Creepy Crawlies

GEORGIA K. KIRKENDALL

Everyone has a phobia. Most common among them are the fear of the tiny: critters that skitter and jump. It's irrational to fear such a tiny, insignificant, squashable thing. No one's skin crawls at the reminder of interactions that could actually result in death. The mortality of a person is not thought to be at risk every single day in the car on the commute to work. You never see someone shriek at the sight of global warming statistics.

There is something just... sinister about the life of a tiny organism. The itch of its thin legs pricking at your skin, disturbing the fine hairs on your forearm. Spiders leap, termites bite. They could be anywhere. And anywhere almost always means they are on your body and they will get under your skin and crawl through your organs and infect your blood and and and oh god! Get it off!

This phobia isn't that irrational, after all. No one can recall why exactly these little critters cause such an itch, such unease, but there is an explanation for it. You see, creepy crawlies are on rare occasions lethal, as proven with the case of Jimmy Thompson.

Jimmy was the second-best member of his boy scout troop, Eagles 60012 of West Virginia, second only to Mark Raymore, who everyone agreed was just an awful, bullying scud with terrible acne. Booger-picker too, but with a wicked talent for sailor knots. So really, Jimmy was quite a high-ranking kid to hang around, and when Jimmy participated in camp-fire nights, it was sure to be a time not to miss.

The flimsy boys would scramble onto the creaky school bus outside Spring Mills Middle School, knobby elbows striking out and bony jaws jutting forward, chicken-fighting for the worn leather of the farthest-back seats. Lunch boxes tossed outside windows, playing hot potato with geeky Erik's shoe, until at last reaching what can only tentatively be called 'campground,' 20 minutes outside town. Two nature preservation shacks quiver in the faint wind, and more beer cans cover the ground than grass. Yet! This is wilderness for troop 60012, and to set up camp in this wild, wild world, is to live like a true Eagle. Nay, a true Man. For this time, the very first time, the boy scout troop is camping alone, without troop leader Mr.

Havens, a balding middle-aged man who teaches math and picked up the troop gig to earn pocket money for his bi-weekly sixpacks.

“I call middle ground!” crows Mark, thrusting his rotund belly through the screaming bus doors, jabbing his sausage-fingers into the kid in front of him, who falls from the bus steps with a resounding flop into deep mud.

“No fair, you got middle ground last time! Mr. Havens said me and Erik get it this time, right Erik?” Skimpy Sam makes a meek attempt at rallying his tent-buddy, but Erik only shrinks into his *Star Wars* hoodie.

But Mark was already driving his tent poles into the soft earth of the coveted sleeping spot, relatively perfect ground with no anthills or roots that so often drive up into your spine.

“Aww, don’t mind that rugger, Sam. Raymore’s just a wimp. Won’t go near the woods, cause he ‘fraid the boogie man gonna catch him,” Jimmy pats Sam on the back, and helps the two underlings set up their sleeping ground in the only other available spot, along a ridge of trees and prickly bushes.

The Eagles participate in numerous enticing events during their camping trips, such as frog-catching and the subsequent dare-ya-to-kiss-the-frog activities. Most games involve little critters; the boys squat in the pungent mud, prodding at tadpoles and tearing slimy worms in half. But the greatest time to be had is at night, when the air drops and your skin chills, and nothing feels better than the half-hearted warming of a temperate fire crackling to life. The boys gather puny sticks and sappy leaves, and huddle in a circle too close to the flames, eyes watering from streams of smoke.

Troop 60012 was a relatively tame group of middle-school boys, Mark excluded. Being so, they generally allowed everyone a fair shot at telling a creepy story or leading a song whose pure amusement was born from the sheer number of profanities it included. Yet as the night wore on, the boy scouts became antsy, ready for the real show of the night.

Voicing the group’s shared wishes, and blatantly interrupting Erik’s tale of Han Solo destroying a death star (quite unoriginal, really), Bram, a kid with a free soul and permanent holder of *Most Trips to the Principal’s Office Award*, said, “Shut your trap, Erik! I wanna hear what Jimmy’s gotta say. Give us a scary story, ol’ Jim! Like the real good one last time, about the werewolves.”

Jimmy at first resisted, the most courteous little gentleman there ever was, but caved to the succession of pleas from his fellow troop members.

“I heard of a kid who was the nastiest kid around. He was so gross, people all throughout town could smell his stinky scent all day, every day. When he touched food, it rotted. His clothes were always slimy. No one knew why he was so nasty—his parents took him to many doctors, but they had no clue either.”

All the boys in the troop were drawn into Jimmy’s story, leaning forward continuously throughout the speech that by now their knees dug into the dirt and their eyebrows were at serious risk of being singed by the campfire.

Jimmy continued in a whisper, “but there was a rumor that this kid was the descendant of the boogie man, and one day he would transform into a horrible monster that was even more nasty and... EAT EVERYONE UP!”

As one, Jimmy’s attentive listeners collapsed in fright at his shout. Erik, who practically fell into the fire pit, yipped when his hoodie sleeve started smoking, on which Sam dumped the dregs of his Hawaiian Punch.

There was a brief period of stunned silence, broken by the guffaw of Mark Raymore. He hefted himself from the ground and wiped his hands on his already filthy jeans.

“You posies so stupid as to fall for that? That ain’t no story- no such thing as boogie man. What a stupid lot you all are. Tell ‘em, Jimmy. Tell them how you just are a big fat liar, and there’s no boogie man. No b-boogie man.” Mark’s voice stuttered, his body slouched, sweeping his gaze behind him, into the deep forest repetitively.

Jimmy shrugged, a slight smirk on the corner of his lips. He was enjoying Mark’s unease and wasn’t about to put the big bully’s mind at ease. “S’far I’m concerned, Mark, it is true. Apparently, the boogie man is alive today—there’s been sightings on this very campground.”

Mark visually shook, his head sweeping back and forth now with increasing violence. “N-noo. That’s n-n-not true. Shut your trap, Jimmy! Just shut up!”

Jimmy’s eyes were alight, his demeanor demon-like. “Oh, yes, I can assure you, Mark, it’s real. And do you know what the boogie man likes to eat the most? Do you, Mark?”

The screws had come apart in Mark’s joints, and in the dark night he seemed to crumble and shudder. He moaned through his hands, covering his face, “Pleaseeeee, noooooo.”

Jimmy was ready to pounce, fully grinning now. “Jimmy, maybe you shouldn’t—” Sam started to talk, but Jimmy ignored him, triggering Mark with his final tease.

“It eats fat booger-eating bullies JUST LIKE YOU!”

At this, Mark collapsed to the hard ground, convulsing. The boys looked on, entranced and frozen in shock. “Mark?” Bram whispered, scooting away from the tumbling shadow, “Are you alright?”

Mark gave no response, except for a deep moan that seemed un-human, unnatural. His breath staggered, and the hairs on the arms of the troop rose in union upon the faintly audible sounds of popping. Ppp-pwap-pwapsh.

In the faint flicker of the campfire, the boys witnessed their minds playing tricks on them. For that couldn't be really happening, could it? Mark's skin couldn't be bruising from the inside out, and there definitely wasn't anything pushing up from within his pudgy body, was there?

But the longer they watched, mouths agape, the less able they were to convince themselves that what they were seeing was just some sort of trick of light. For something was happening to Mark, oh yes it was, and whatever it was, it was really, really bad.

Before the troop had time to react—to break from their deer-in-headlight syndrome—the body writhing on the ground (the body that used to be Mark but couldn't be called a name anymore, it was so unnatural and foreign) tore back its neck and released an ear-piercing scream. Simultaneously, the bruises that mysteriously formed on its body bulged even more so, until the skin tore apart in a sickening squelch, letting loose white, globous masses. They squirmed like massive worms or lice, building in frenzy with each passing second.

Finally, adrenaline kicked in and the boys launched to their feet, backing away as the smell of rotting flesh met their noses. The scream that was so gut-wrenching a moment before turned even more horrendous as it quieted, replaced with the sound of suffocated gurgling. Sludge oozed from the mouth of the beast, its eyes rolling back into whiteness and bleeding green tears.

Again, troop 60012 was captivated by the scene, watching this real-life horror film coming to life before their very eyes. In terror, they watched as the body trembled, more blob than person now, and steadily rose in height. The white forms flailed, green and brown muck constantly secreting from the holes which they emerged, until the appalling thing towered above the boys, seeing them with no eyes, sensing them with no senses, preying on them with no mercy.

Here, here it was! The boys exchanged frantic glances, realizing it at the same time. This was the boogie man!

The boys scattered. They fled into the forest, screams trailing in the

air behind them. It was pitch-black by now—it was almost comedic how the troop members hit trees head-on and bonked into one another, acting like headless chickens. Except it wasn't very funny, not in the broad daylight of the next day.

For when the school bus came to pick up the boy scout troop, there were no boys to fill its seats. The wind rasped through the torn plastic of collapsed tents, spotted with insect guts and human blood.

The next time you feel the hairs on your arms being disturbed, or a slight itch against your scalp, my suggestion to you is to scrub yourself raw with soap and burn your clothes, or risk the fate of Mark Raymore and Troop 60012.

Great Tree

ANDREW B. CASHER

Dewy grass and lilies sprung sing your praises
When the ice of winter melts away
And through cracked earth comes the most pleasant of smells
From honey to rose, soil and rain
You are my Great Tree, my Yggdrasil
Envelop my world and I too
Will inscribe your every breath a gospel
Upon the barks of trees and the clays of the Earth.
Breathe into me, let me feel what makes
Your divine consciousness yours
When I am overjoyed, let my warmth nurture you
And when melancholia wracks my bones
Let my tears strengthen you yet
For life is worth living under your shade and upon your roots
I wonder, can you feel this?
I silently weep with joy for you.

Not One to Blame

BEATRICE SLEVIN-TRIGO

Silas started it.

That's all anyone needs to know. Silas started it. Mister Garner's lush Victorian-era garden was now steeped in an inch of water. The verdant summer grasses were brown with mud. The lawnmower gurgled and pattered electrically at the edge of the backyard, and the roses that his wife planted ten years ago—bless her soul—were now ruined and would never rise again from their watery grave. We were suddenly thankful that Miss Garner hadn't been buried in the backyard, but we knew very little about my neighbor, so who were we to assume that he didn't dump his wife under his beloved topsoil like he did with his little dog? Sparky's grave was probably water-logged too—although we weren't inclined to bless his soul, because he bit Mary's ankles a year ago and she had to get stitches for it.

My neighbor's garden was flooded. And Silas still held the hose with a manic grin on his face, as if he had always wanted to do it and only now found the balls to. Mary stood beside him, dumbfounded, frozen. We were only meant to take care of my neighbor's garden for a week. I left Silas alone for one moment, and he broke everything. Garner was coming back this evening—we were going to be killed.

Mary clapped her hands over her mouth as if the totality of the situation just struck her. "It's your fault," her voice spluttered from behind her fingers, like a muffled radio.

"He had it coming anyway," came Silas's proud reply.

He squinted at the lace-covered windows as if to challenge them. Garner was my next door neighbor, a quiet, half-blind old man that couldn't be more than sixty. Silas, who was anything but quiet, blind only in thought, and no older than a fool, lived straight across from him, and swore up and down that the old man's milky eyes were fixed on him at all hours of the day. Garner stares all day out that window, Silas said with a sneer. Staring at me, he insisted. I never took it seriously because Garner could barely see two feet in front of him. I thought Silas was only feigning his hatred, just to be funny, just to pretend that he had some sort of rivalry going on to make his life interesting. Garner never even said anything

to merit it—in fact, the first time he talked directly to us at all was to ask us to tend to his beloved garden while he visited his grandchildren. His voice creaked and rasped as though it had not been used in years, like a century-old drawer unlocked for the first time. I was eager to close it, to stop that grating noise and pick up an easy job for all of us. Now I wished I hadn't. Garner's only hobby was that garden. Probably his only friend, too. It would take months, years even, to get it back to the way it was before his wife died.

I lunged for the spigot at the side of the garden and twisted it until the running water stopped. Silas scoffed and threw down the hose, and it bubbled underneath the water. I had half a mind to hit him—I started to shake uncontrollably as I considered holding his face below the inch-tall flood until he stopped gurgling—but as he threw up his hands and stepped to the side, I pretended he had an ounce of remorse in his empty head. I always had to pretend with him, even back when we all were little kids growing up on the same block—now that we've started high school, nothing's changed. At times I wondered if the only reason I let him come by was because I pretended to enjoy his company. One could certainly pretend that his jokes were funny, but I never could tell when he wasn't telling one.

And I couldn't pretend with Mary, unless it was to pretend that she wasn't there, which she always was. She chewed at her fingernails as she walked around the perimeter of the yard, every step a painfully audible slosh. We would have to either steal buckets and dump the water out or dig a gutter through the front yard to guide the flood to the road. Either way, we weren't getting paid. And we all knew each one of our households well enough to know that the grief wouldn't stop at our wallets. At one point or another, neighbors and family friends became family ties, Garner included. To our parents, this would be the moral equivalent of pouring bleach into grandpa's tea. Mary would get her phone taken away for sure—her folks were too high strung, too proud, to let this kind of thing slide. I'd never be able to look Garner in the eye again—not out of shame, but because my parents were going to snap my neck when they got back from grocery shopping. And Silas... would probably be fine. A slap on the wrist, perhaps, but not nearly enough to choke him out of his habits. His parents were either simply too forgiving or simply didn't care.

I pressed my palms against my eyelids to block out the sight in front of me. I wished that I could have blocked out my ears too, because Mary started to mutter nervously under her breath. That's all she did, twisting at her ponytail and mumbling as she paced around like she was about to be put into a straitjacket. It started to get on my nerves, and I removed

my hands from my face. Silas stood beside me with his own hands in the pockets of his khakis, observing the destroyed garden just as calmly as if he were standing on the beach and watching the waves roll. Underneath his sharp nose, he smiled like he was running a campaign—somewhere deep in the recesses of his cavernous mind, he was trying to spin an excuse. For himself, of course. Why would he ever think of us?

I couldn't stand it. I stormed away from the backyard to sit on the sidewalk. Silas followed and called after me, but the moment he saw Max walking on the opposite side of the street, he shut up and ducked away from view. Anyone would have recognized that blonde mop, that kickable, twelve-year-old nag that lived at the edge of the neighborhood. But Max didn't recognize me as he ambled down the street. I watched his bandaged knees bounce as he walked, the way his hands swung at his sides. His grubby fingers were curled around a fistful of crabapples. He made his way into the backyard of a house that was not his, and after a few silent moments, the pained screech of a cat rang out. Max emerged again, wild and laughing, hands empty—and ran all the way back to his own house, chased by the pissed-off tabby that he had tortured for the third time this week.

As far as I knew, nobody liked that kid. He ran over everyone's feet on his bicycle. His parents definitely had a separate account to pay for every glass he's broken. I would have wagered that he knew how to destroy everything he touched, right down to the concrete foundations of his ivy-dappled house with the duct-taped windows.

In fact, I knew that he was capable of destruction.

Out of the corner of my eye, I saw Mary emerge from the backyard, soaked up to her ankles, and I knew she could tell what I meant to do the moment I stood up and stumbled across the road. She opened her mouth to protest, but promptly closed it as I rummaged through Max's front yard. Silas, bless his stupid head, only caught on when I dragged Max's green-and-black bicycle through the street, all the way to Garner's house, and dumped it just beside the unraveled hose. Silas grinned, and his eyes and nose scrunched in impish appreciation.

My hands shook as I placed the evidence that would absolve us. Max deserved it, I had to tell myself. We didn't. Max still had a future, and his parents didn't care. Or maybe they did, even if they turned a blind eye. Perhaps this would be the final straw for him. Suddenly, I wondered if he acted out for their attention—or to release the stress of living with them at all. I never considered why he did the things he did. I barely even stopped to consider why I was saving Silas's skin once again, even though I could have easily thrown him under the bus. Every time I thought about leaving

him to fend for himself, I was sure he'd wriggle out like some sick sort of fish, floundering until someone else caught him and threw him back. Why was I the one who had to reel him in? There was no place for me to act higher than him. I was no better than he was.

Mary put a comforting hand on my shoulder as I stepped back. I pretended that I was doing it for her neck instead of his; I pretended like I was still a good person. Silas, as always, didn't seem to care for what would happen at all. He put his hands on his hips and nodded approvingly as he looked around, and then gave the bike a little kick. My stomach lurched, and my face flushed—I never hated him more. Yes, I hated him, that was it. Hated how he wormed his way out, and hated how he burrowed his way back in. Hated how he roped us in to build himself scapegoats and excuses, hated how he never apologized for anything in his life. Hated that he never seemed to consider the penalties, and hated how Mary enabled him in her silent way and let him do whatever he pleased. I think I hated her too, by association—but I had only enough space between my teeth to grind Silas's image to dust, and bite down on my own tongue for long enough to guarantee that one day, he'd know exactly how malicious of a person he was, and how cowardly of a person he made me.

Within the hour, we heard Garner's car rumbling down the street. The moment he stepped out, his grey hairs thin and his grey eyes wide, we thought he'd go into shock, or at least disintegrate into dust. We were good actors, we really were—we had to be, to be Silas's friends. We put our whole hearts into acting confused and outraged, as if we had just arrived at this mess too. But my outrage was real, because the moment he spotted the half-submerged bike, Garner immediately started towards Max's house without another word, and Silas smiled.

The Market

KELLY SMOLIK

It's Corn Day.

The sun is blazing in the mid-afternoon heat. The back of my shirt is already drenched in sweat. The kitchen's AC huffs away as we continue to open the glass door dividing the kitchen from the market. Simultaneously, the sliding doors around the market's perimeter trap heat inside like a coffin. On a day like this, we're lucky if the fridges stay at 40 degrees.

Corn Day, though. A great reminder that it can, in fact, always get worse.

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Two pallets of corn are forklifted behind the market's shed. For the next two hours before closing, our ragtag team of three women – a high schooler, a college student, and the owner, a middle-aged mother of four – are gifted the task of shucking, stacking, and stuffing corn. *Stuffing corn* into any and all crevices of the already-full fridges (Corn Day also means you're bound to play fridge Jenga with boxes of produce and baked goods).

The three of us rotate between shucking, dragging the corn-stacked wagon to the fridges, and manning the cash register. Sherrie starts wailing – singing, some might say – along to the music more than usual and Grace continues her Corn Day collection of finding the baby corns amidst the normal-size ears. The voices of Trace Adkins, Luke Bryan, and the amalgamation of all other Y2K country music continues to roar back to us from the market. I always love to ask Sherrie if she thinks “Country Girl (Shake it for Me)” will encourage her customers to buy more local tomatoes or whoopie pies. She laughs with that eyebrow raise only mothers can perfect.

Amidst our heat-exhausted irrational jokes, though, there are Corn Talks. Sherrie asks about my boyfriend and the courses I'm taking next semester. She continues to lovingly heckle me to consider driving two hours home every weekend to work here during the school year. *Don't you want to see all the pumpkins and cider this fall?* Perhaps, but my car's gas tank might not want to.

Eventually, Sherrie gets swept away by customers to the register, and Grace drags the wagon of corn to the fridges. I'm left alone with the corn and things turn vicious. I'm ripping a leftover piece of husk from the ear when a string of husk slits the skin of my thumb mid-tear, like a searing paper cut. I wince, slightly from the pain but mostly from the embarrassment of the corn attacking me, as a tiny stream of blood surfaces. Thankfully, the blood only wells at my thumb and spares the piles of ears.

I abandon the corn and start rinsing my thumb under the kitchen sink's hot water. The blur of blood won't stop leaking from my thumb. The slit is only a tilted line on the outer edge of my thumb's pad. The skin flaps back and forth with a tiny throb of a sting.

"Oh, what happened?" Sherrie asks as she bustles through the kitchen's screen door from helping a customer.

"I was trying to get out of corn duty, obviously," I smile over my shoulder while waving my thumb in her direction.

Sherrie rolls her eyes with a grin on her face, as she ducks under the butcher block table to pull out the First-Aid kit.

"It kinda won't stop bleeding though."

Her head pops back up. "Well, yeah, what are you even doing over there?"

She critiques my lack of pressure on the area, as I try to defend that I was cleaning the area before applying pressure. Soap and water and all that. Apparently, my system is flawed.

"Well, you gotta stop the bleeding first," she says as she unwraps a Band-Aid. She's midair about to wrap it around my thumb when she stops.

"I probably should've asked you if you wanted my help with the Band-Aid, huh?"

We laugh.

"Please, finish the job."

She wraps the Band-Aid around my thumb.

...

For the rest of the day, I'm demoted to dishwashing duty to separate me from the feisty corn. In the sink, there are spatulas poised in blenders. Patterned mugs leaning against unwieldy baking sheets. Spoons floating in mason jars. This is where I used to always be stationed while the rest of the kitchen hustled with chaos back when I first started working here. Sherrie and the girls would flit around the room dodging each other in the cramped kitchen while balancing all the ingredients for a sandwich in one

hand and a mug of coffee in the other. I would only hear the echoing squeal of the espresso machine and the sizzle of a crepe being flipped, machines I didn't know how to use. Everything I did back then was "wrong" in some way, which was partially because my parents sequestered me away from the kitchen at home, leaving me clueless on basic tasks, and partially because Sherrie is a self-proclaimed micromanager. Meanwhile, though, my fingertips would crinkle at the sink and the water would soak the front of my shirt just like they are now. Back then, the only danger was the sting of hot water pouring over my fingers.

Now, though, my fingertips daily endure the prick of heat from shots of espresso and freshly made crepes. Last year, I sported a Tennessee-shaped splotch on my inner arm from a hot tray of chocolate cookies. Even now, the seemingly simple task of husking corn left me with a crescent of skin fluttering off. I know how to run the register, bake off cinnamon buns, and even grind espresso beans for customers, all in the ways that Sherrie likes. She taught me her ways but also taught me to believe in myself to do tasks. I learned the confidence of how to figure things out myself.

All day, though, I missed finishing off the corn. I missed gathering with the seemingly random group of us ladies that became a kind of family for me. I missed feeling the unifying exhaustion under the sweltering sun. I knew, however, that another Corn Day awaited.

A Love Letter to the Soulmate I Haven't Met

Yet

KATELYN OGLESBY

I miss you, the way your fingers
press into my pulse and hold me,
like I'm a flower whose petals
could tear off so you have to
cradle me in your hands.
I miss our silent conversations,
hand motions across a room
and we're outside without even
opening our mouths,
the way you know what I want,
what I need,
like I'm pressing morse code
into your skin,
but our hands aren't even touching.
I miss your skin against mine,
your heartbeat against my palm,
the rise and fall of your chest,
the way you look when you're sleeping,
shadows on white sheets,
the lids of your eyes when they're closed.
I miss the print of your shoes in the sand
on the beach by where I grew up
when I took you home to meet my friends.
I miss the shape of you in my passenger seat,
pointing out the trees on the country roads
to my parent's house and the glimmer
in your eyes when you see why I've
grown to love this place so much.
And I miss the smile lines on your cheeks,
the effortless way you laugh
like no one's ever made you cry.

I miss the way your arms fit around me,
like I was made for your body,
like my home is the skin beneath your collarbone,
the blood in your veins,
the way your lips press into my hairline.
I miss you, but I've never met you,
never touched you,
never heard you say a word.
Someday I will though, and all of this,
all of this will be worth it:
the missing, the wanting,
the longing, the yearning.
Someday, I'll learn what it feels like
to know you as much as I love you.

Where We Parted

KATHERINE C. CORNET

The bullet in Colt's arm was enough for him to know that this had been their worst robbery. The rain fell in sheets onto the roof of the car.

He could feel the blood rolling down, sticky and wet, making his nerves worse than they already were. His eyes flickered between the road in front of him, the rearview mirror, and Beau. Beautiful Beau who was cradling the duffle bag full of money, cigarettes, and a cheap bottle of bourbon she snagged before the robbery close to her chest. Beautiful Beau who had taunted the police. Beautiful Beau who killed that officer with no signs of remorse on her face. Her hands didn't shake under the weight of her gun and the screams did nothing to wipe away her smirk. Looking at her now, he could see the smeared blood on her cheek blending in with her deep red lipstick. Water from her deep brown hair was dripping onto the sides of the jacket he let her borrow.

"Colt, watch it!" she screamed, a free hand gripping his forearm. He swerved out of the way of the oncoming truck. He cringed at its closeness, afraid of how much damage it was going to cause to their stolen car. Metal screeched, sparks flew, and by the time they had passed it, he no longer had a mirror on his side of the door. Beau hit the dashboard of the car, laughing with every bang as Colt took deep breaths in an attempt to calm down. When it didn't work, he let out a string of curses that had no place being together. That only seemed to make Beau laugh even harder. Normally, Colt found everything about her endearing, especially her haunting laugh. So why did it piss him off so much tonight?

"You think this is funny?" he finally managed to ask after he was more relaxed.

She tilted her head to the side, her eyes gazing up at him. "Careful, your southern accent's coming through. I might start to think you're mad at me."

He didn't speak. She turned to face him.

"Are you mad at me?" Her voice was feigning innocence. That he knew.

He rolled his eyes. "What you did was stupid."

“I was protecting us. You know that.” Her fingers trailed his arms delicately. She fiddled with the fraying strings of his jacket, stopping right where the bullet had pierced him.

“I don’t believe you.” He gripped the steering wheel tighter. Silence fell onto the car.

She shrugged and turned back to the road ahead. “Then don’t.”

“You’re not gonna try to convince me?”

“Baby, you are as handsome as you are stubborn. If you think I’m lying, nothing I could say will change that.”

Colt opened his mouth to say something but thought better of it. He didn’t want to start another fight right now. Instead, he looked at the mirror one more time and when he was sure the distance between them and the police was good enough, he could finally feel himself relax into the seat.

“Are you cold?” Colt’s adrenaline was calming down and he was starting to notice just how uncomfortably his cold, soggy clothes clung to his skin.

Beau shrugged. “Yeah. Do you know how to get the heater to work?”

The car wasn’t exactly the newest. Every knob was the same black color, and nothing stuck out to him as being the right one to give them heat. “I’ll just pick one.”

He turned the knob second to the left too fast and cringed at the voice that filled the car.

“Tonight, detectives are stunned by the escape of the criminal couple that hit Jones Central Bank this evening.”

Colt turned the volume down so low the voices of the anchors on the news could barely be heard. After a few moments, even those whispers were starting to get on his nerves, and he went to turn it off. Beau put her hand out to stop it. “I wanna hear it.”

He licked his lips, as if doing so would wipe away the guilt roiling in his gut. Hearing his crimes on the news always messed with his head. Every station, no matter what he chose, was quick to berate them for everything they stole, but when it comes down to it, who needed the money more? A trust fund baby with deep pockets or a shelter in danger of closing? When he thought about it, they were practically philanthropists, keeping a small percentage of what they stole and giving the rest away to those who needed it. But what Colt’s come to realize is that journalists are great manipulators. And no matter the good that followed, he would always be a villain.

“I don’t want to hear them talk about the person you killed.”

“Just for a few more moments, please.” Beau jutted her lip out slightly into a pout and looked at him with her bold brown eyes. Colt hated it when she did that. How could he say no to a face like hers, even when smudged makeup threatened to ruin it. He didn’t respond and moved his hand away completely instead.

“—couple had shown no prior murderous tendencies before their robbery, but tonight they’ve left behind a casualty. What are you thinking Lindsey? You look upset.”

“It’s nothing Stephen. I just hope they know they’re gonna get what they deserve.”

“Well, police will continue to—”

Beau turned the radio off herself. “They didn’t even talk about me. I mean what do other people have that I don’t?”

“A conscience.” Colt felt a sharp pain to his already wounded shoulder. “What the fuck, Beau.”

“I just wanted to see if I’d feel guilty about it.” She placed a finger on her chin, pretending to think about it for a second. “Nope. I feel nothing at all. Maybe I don’t have a conscience.”

Beau pulled the bottle of bourbon out of the duffle and took a few sips. Colt opened his mouth to speak but was cut off by the sputtering engine. The line pointing to the gas was teetering on empty, and the car was slowing down. He turned to face Beau, whose head was tilted toward the roof of the car. Her eyes were closed, and her signature smile played on her lips. She would be no help in this case. Colt kept an eye on every sign that passed, until he finally spotted one, advertising a motel two miles away. The chipping paint and broken lights of the sign let Colt know that practically no one stopped there if they didn’t have to. This was going to suck in the morning when they needed a new car to leave but for right now, it’d keep the police off their trail.

He checked Beau’s mirror, making sure there were no other cars coming their way, then looked at the rearview mirror to make sure no one was following them. Then he turned down the exit and followed the road signs until they got there.

...

It didn’t take Colt long to find something good enough to wrap his wound in. There wasn’t a first aid kit in the room, so he ruined a couple of good towels and sheets to get the job done. With a cigarette hanging from his mouth, he went at it, hoping that all the crime shows he used to watch

had some truths mixed in. His pocketknife was sharp enough to cut through the blankets after a couple of tries. When he finally got the bullet out and wrapped his arm in a torn blanket, everything was starting to feel a little bit better. That or he was starting to lose it from all the smoke in the room and the alcohol Beau had convinced him to drink. Letting her do that, he realized too late, was a mistake. The drinks started to taste more and more like he needed some answers from Beau. Why did she have to shoot the officer? Why did she have to choose one of the more popular banks in the area? More importantly, why the fuck did she care more about the cigarette in his mouth than the bullet that was lodged in his arm? He had meant to ask at least one of those questions, but he asked something else instead.

“Do you love me?” He hadn’t meant to sound so hopeless. So desperate.

She grabbed the cigarette from his mouth with her lips. It glowed a bright orange as she inhaled and when she exhaled, Beau blew the smoke into his face. Then, she pushed the lit cigarette into the wooden table and listened as it burned out. “I love us. The things we do.” Beau moved his arms from where they were and sat down in his lap. “We’re better than Bonnie and Clyde.” Her fingernail traced the stubble growing on his chin. “We’re cuter too.”

Colt grabbed her wrist gently, moving her hand away so she had to stop. “But do you love me?”

“Us, you, it’s the same thing, isn’t it?”

“Say it then.”

“Hmm?” Her head cocked to the side.

“If there’s no difference then say that you love me.”

“Okay.” She repositioned herself so that they were facing each other and pulled his chin down so that he was looking her in the eye. “I...love...” Her lips were so close, and he leaned towards her, only stopping when she was pulling back. She smiled then brought her lips to his and kissed him. Colt let her. And for a second, he imagined that she really did love him. That she really cared for him in the same way he did for her. He broke the kiss and watched as her brows furrowed. Usually that worked. Colt would let her kiss take over everything and any argument that could come from it would wash away.

He pulled back from her, surprised that she didn’t lean in further. “It’s not going to work this time.”

“This was never a problem before.” Beau hopped off of his lap in frustration.

He raked a free hand through his hair and sighed. The uncomfortable seat groaned as he got off it. "It's a simple yes or no question."

"Fine! I—" The doorknob rattled, cutting her off before she could continue. Colt didn't turn his body to face the door. Instead, they both froze, unsure if they had really heard it or if it was in their imagination. The doorknob rattled again more visibly this time.

"Great choice," Beau whispered harshly, "This motel doesn't seem so dead to me."

Colt didn't have anything to say. What are the chances, that on the night they needed to stay hidden, to disappear, is the night where they are moments away from being caught.

"Hurry up, Donnie!" came a bubbly laugh from the other side of the door. Thunder boomed and she screamed, causing whoever she was with to laugh in response. Colt raced to turn off the lights and hid behind the door. He was expecting Beau to follow him, but she never came.

"I'm trying," Donnie's voice barely carried over the rain. The door opened, almost hitting him in the face and slammed shut.

"It's pretty dark in here, Shelly. See if you can find the lights." Donnie said. There was a pause and Donnie spoke up again, "Found it."

When the room filled with light, both Colt and Donnie stood in shock. Beau had a gun pointed right at Shelly's head and a wolfish grin on her face. Shelly whimpered but couldn't get any words out. Colt needed to do something, but his knife was still on the table next to the bloody towel and what was left of the sheets. He had a feeling Donnie noticed it too.

"Stay still or your wife dies," Beau said.

"Nobody needs to get hurt. You can just let us go and we'll leave here. No one has to know." Donnie put his hands up to show he meant no harm.

"Except you've seen my face, and I'm pretty sure you recognize me from the news."

Donnie shook his head no. Shelly's eyes weren't on him anymore, they were on Colt. Donnie turned his head, only to meet Colt's fist. He fell to the floor while Shelly screamed.

"Shut up!" Beau brought the gun down on Shelly's head. She waited for both of them to look at her before she spoke again. "Take everything out of your pockets." When nobody moved, she cocked the gun and took the safety off. "I'm not gonna ask again."

They took out their phones, wallets, and Donnie added car keys to the mix. Colt picked them up, keeping his eye out for any sudden movement. He put the wallets and one phone on the table but kept the other and

the keys in his pocket.

“What are you doing? Smash the phones,” Beau said. “We can keep one, as a burner. Just in case.”

“They can use it to track us.” She paused for a second too long and shot right at their feet.

Donnie jumped and Shelly screamed; she had blood dripping down her face from where Beau hit her. “Or were you thinking about just killing them now? We could even call the cops just to taunt them. Imagine how deflating it would be for them. To know they could have prevented this if they stopped us at the bank. *FBI Most Wanted* here we come.”

“We’re not going to kill them,” Colt said. He turned to the couple. “We’re not going to kill you.”

“We’ve got to do something. This way, no news anchor will even dare to gloss over the things I do.”

“You’re crazy!” He shouted. He could see it in the way she stared the couple down. Like a predator ready to attack its prey.

“That’s what you love most about me. Isn’t that what you always tell me. You weren’t lying to me right, Colt? You’d never do that to me, right?”

He stuttered as he tried to come up with the right words to say. “I’m...going to the bathroom,” is all that would come out.

Colt splashed some cold water on his face and stared at the mirror. He didn’t recognize himself anymore. Things had gone so wrong. So, so wrong and maybe it needed to end. He pulled the man’s phone from his pocket and slid to the emergency call. His heartbeat was so loud and thundering he felt his ears pulsating to it. What could life have been like without her. Without her wolfish smile, her Cheshire cat eyes. He wouldn’t be in this mess that’s for sure. He wouldn’t be holding on to the hope that the girl with a monstrous grip on his heart won’t shoot the couple who managed to stumble into the wrong place at the wrong time. But he also wouldn’t have met the only person who seemed to speak his language. Who knew all his inner thoughts and deepest desires. Colt typed the numbers slowly. 9. 1. 1. If he hadn’t met Beau, life might be boring, an unassuming puzzle he had no desire to solve. Yet, Colt knew deep down, that he’d also be free. He took a deep breath, looked at himself one more time, and hit call.

The phone rang once. Twice. And before he could hang up, he heard it. “911, what’s your emergency?”

My Emergency? He thought. *I’m in love with a murderous socio-path who can’t love me back.* Colt punched the mirror in front of him. Glass fell from it like rain, painted with his blood. He sucked in the air through his teeth.

“Hello? Are you okay? Should I send an ambulance to your location?”

“I.” He paused, holding the phone in his uninjured hand. “No. I’m sorry I shouldn’t have—” The gunshots went off before he could finish.

“Sir! Are you alright? Sir....Sir!”

Colt let the phone drop from his hands. Everything he did felt like slow motion. He turned the knob to the bathroom door slowly. Standing in the middle of the room was Beau, pointing her gun at the couple. Their bodies laid on top of each other, their blood was pooling out around them.

“Why did you do that?” Colt was in disbelief.

“He charged right for me.” Beau smiled.

She was lying to him. That he knew. Because if Donnie really launched for her, his body wouldn’t be under his wife. Colt didn’t think he could outrun a bullet if she decided to shoot him too. But if the police were on the way, he’d be as good as dead. So, he bolted, and he kept his head low as the shots began to fire. Colt didn’t look back when pain started to shoot through his left shoulder. She chased him outside but did nothing else as he got into the car. Beau only stared him down. He fiddled as he got the key out of his pocket to unlock the door. Once he did, he opened it and froze, staring at Beau. This was it. His only chance to make it out of this alive. Should he ask her to join him? Would she join him if he asked?

She leaned against the door to the room and shrugged. Then, folded her arms across her chest. Even in the pouring rain, Colt could see the challenge on her face. Beau was daring him to leave. Maybe because, deep down, she knew he never would, not alive. He could never part from her and remain whole. But tonight had showed him that, even fractured he wanted to survive. And right now, he couldn’t survive with her. He slid into the car and drove off. The only thing he heard was the pounding rain on the roof and Beau’s monstrous scream.

He didn’t know how long he was on the road for. His fingers had gone numb, and his eyes were burning from the lack of blinking. Colt could only stare forward, only focus on the road ahead of him because if he didn’t, he’d turn around and go right back to Beau. Music was droning on in the background, but a new voice broke through his thoughts.

“Wasn’t that a hit folks? Before we move into another great song, we’d like to let you wonderful people in on some breaking news. After responding to a 911 call, police found the bodies of three people in a motel room. An older couple and what appeared to be one half of the crime spree couple Beau Richards. Police are unsure of what went down or where her accomplice Colt Andrews is, but they will continue to look. Now back

to—”

Colt turned the radio off. Then he screamed and banged on the steering wheel as the car began to swerve. Didn't he know that could have happened? Hadn't he known that once he left without telling her what he did, she'd end up in that mess? Colt took a deep breath. He glanced at the rearview mirror like he had always done whenever they had stolen another car. Then to her seat. He almost screamed again when he saw her.

She was paler than before. The moonlight shined straight through her. Instead of smudged make-up and stringy wet hair, Beau looked perfect. Everything was exactly like the day they first met. Except for the red bullet hole at the side of her head. Colt couldn't help but stare. He found himself paying more attention to it than the road.

“Together forever,” she mouthed.

He could do nothing but nod, unable to talk back. He only stared at her, even as the sound of a horn filled his ears. Even as headlights filled the car.

Forty-Nine Shades of Green

ALY LEIA WEIN

chartreuse snatches my cinched waist from behind
drawing me closer to their touch with bated breath and coercive luck

sage lights me a somber blaze in their stone-adorned hearth
pouring me a warm cider with a wild splash of cognac

olive comforts me with freshly-dried linen and hand-knit wool
stroking my sepia-toned locks with an unusual tenderness

forest explores me like a broken compass searching for its true north
pointing me home and losing my faith within the same celluloid film of
time

emerald dazzles me with a spectacle of novelty and delight
stamping envelopes with pop rocks and mailing me bouquets of fireflies

hunter reminds me of forest but holds themselves with a certain maturity
and serenity soothing the turbulent sea that wrestles within my shrieking
bones and petrified limbs

kelly greets me with a saccharine gradation oh so foreign to my wanton
skin grasping slowly at my tethered heartstrings and inviting the outside in

moss pierces me with an omniscient look that tears my muscle fibers apart
stitching me back together with a yard of baker's twine and a drop of fate

jade disturbs me with a candor so terrifying I have to succumb to youth
pleading with the mystics and poets to erase my memories of our affair

mint surprises me with levity and joy that toils overtime to heal my scars
offering up a sweet escape from the burdens that life has bestowed upon
me

aquamarine saunters into my world with a refreshingly poised cadence
forcing me to reexamine the paradigms that have shaped my color theory

there may be fifty shades of grey, but legend says that there are forty-nine
shades of green and I've tasted at least forty-eight of those brilliant colors
and hues

The Dreamer

MIKELYN G. BRITT

7:05 AM

Dull chatter rings outside the door,
voices muffled in the lingers of sleep.
Visions of the night return in stages.
Your laugh echoes. Your smile blinds.
Reality is cruel.

8:30 AM

The alarm blares through my bones,
dragging me back to consciousness.
I mourn us and these are the only
moments we share anymore.
And so I go back to you.

11:11 AM

Sunrays pry my eyes open
and here we are again.
Feelings of fondness and joy
are traded for yearning and regret.
Five more minutes.

12:19 PM

Embarrassment rolls through in waves
as I realize I have spent another morning
dreaming of you.

And I am reminded of a lullaby

*A dream is a wish your heart makes
When you're fast asleep
In dreams you will lose your heartaches
Whatever you wish for, you keep.*

how I love

MARISA CONNERS

I love you, so I memorize you
you love pineapple on pizza and hate peanut butter
it cuts me to the core when I forget, offer you peanut butter, when your
boyfriend corrects me
I should know you best

you were obsessed with horses for years
I cram as much of you into my mind as I can
pushing out Spanish conjugations and the intricacies of American bureau-
cracy in favor of everything you are

I memorize your face so well it shocks me to see your older self staring
back at me
instead of the kid I remember
I expect you to remember everything about me, too
crushed when you forget small details
because I would never
but then again, not everyone loves the same way I do

the way your hair curls at the end
the freckle on your wrist, just under your palm
the soft snores you make at night, the ones you claim never happened
how you've grown into that chin and those eyelashes

drinking in every detail like it'll keep you from changing
growing away from me
finding yourself
not knowing that I already found you a million times, that all you've been
is already contained in my mind

I love you, so I memorize you
and I memorize everyone I love

Stardust

GEORGIA K. KIRKENDALL

Three, two, one... a production member cues for my entrance, but I don't bother even glancing his way. I feel the rhythm in my chest, a crescendo that pulses and burns with varying intensity. I charge the stage.

Most everything beyond that is blacked out—there are bright, orangey spots dotting my vision and my breath rushes in my ears, before fading to allow a fierce stream of applause come through. I hold my position with an agonizing grace—my toe itches, and a bead of sweat slips into corner of my eye. The luminous red curtain draws shut and I allow myself to fall apart.

The vultures are on me before I can begin to compose myself. In a twisted manner, they put me back together according to their own ideologies. “Oh hon, oh hon, just well done, really really well done.” The repetitiveness and over-emphasizing of the glam squad—they have the audacity to call themselves by such a name—washes over me. They whisk my frail and exhausted form to my stage room and go about stripping me of my confinements.

“Did you hear how Claude went berserk when she wasn't promoted to soloist, just completely berserk?”

My pointe shoes release from my feet with a sickening squelch, and I try to ignore the blood.

“Oh yes oh dear yes—although I just can't imagine how she thinks she can ever get anywhere with the state of her fouetté—I mean I cannot understand it!”

My tights crumple into a wad on the floor.

“Not to mention, even, the physical state Claude's in. She must be almost 50 kilos by now.”

Gasps and chitters swell my brain.

“Nooo, really? Are you sure sure?”

“So sure sure. I saw her eating a cheese cracker the other day.”

“Gramps better not hear about this. Forget about being promoted from corps de ballet—that poor girl will be gone in a heartbeat.”

Gramps is the “fond” nickname we at Paris Opera Ballet use to

refer to the director of dance. He is a mean, stern, and paunchy man, and I have only glimpsed him in person two times, both of which he seemed to be frowning into nothingness, as if it all wasn't enough. No, never enough. Gramps was always demanding more, and us dancers immediately and most willingly gave all he asked for. Why? For the remote possibility of becoming Danseuse étoile. To be Danseuse étoile was to be above it all: 180 personalized dances a year, at the pristine Palais Garnier. No more frilly costumes—to climb that high in the hierarchy of ballet was to be respected, and to be remembered.

I wish I could say that I have a whiff of self-respect, unlike all the other bun heads, not to give in to the whims of Gramps, but I must admit—when Gramps calls, I answer like a trained dog. He has a fierce leash on me, and I pretend that it's not there. Because with my submissive attitude, Gramps has granted me the title of Sujet, a soloist. While I may be one rung below the revered Danseuse étoile, my position is still one of rarity and great envy. Yet, as Gramps can tell, I have my sights set even higher.

“Sylvie, darling, darling, you aren't seriously going to eat that atrocious thing, are you?”

One of the glam squad, I can never tell them apart, narrows his eyes at the éclair in my hand, which I had unconsciously picked up during my reverie of becoming the star of Paris Opera.

I quickly drop the pastry on the floor and sweep it across the room with my foot.

“That's what I thought.” The squad beams at me in unity, their thick makeup creasing in the wrinkles of their faces. They scare me with their ugly pristineness. Suddenly their faces turn stony, and I turn to the door to see what magnificent force could have silenced these chatterboxes.

Gramps hovers in the doorway, his fists shoved into his Louboutin trousers. His mouth is downturned in the corners, and his icy eyes make the squad quiver. His gaze slides over to me, and I feel the blood drain from my face.

“Mademoiselle Guillem, I would like a word with you.” Gramps looks at the glam squad, whose mouths hang open. “Alone.” Immediately, they scamper like frightened field mice, abandoning makeup bags in their haste to escape.

I sit frozen on my tiny stool and paste what I am hoping is a smile on my face. Only when Gramps enters the stage room do I realize he is not alone—his entourage of secretaries and security flank him, and I suddenly feel claustrophobic. I begin to stand, but Gramps gestures for me to stay where I am. I gaze up at him and his troop, who stare back with an oppres-

sive silence.

“I watched your performance this evening, Mme Guillem.”

I don't know how to respond, and I sink into myself. I feel as if I am a tiny child, judged by these powerful and shrewd adults. My body becomes awkward and disproportionate.

“It was... your usual.”

I resist the overwhelming urge to fidget.

“You have an elegance and, say, demeanor, that is valued in our community. Although, of course, far from perfect. Your form is wanting, Mme Guillem.”

I nod my head vigorously. “Yes, of course, I apologize, monsieur.”

Gramps considers me. In his contemplation I can feel that he is not looking at me, Sylvie Guillem, but at what I could afford him. His image as director is of utmost importance. To consider each dancer individually would be a waste of time. Instead, he sees revenues. He sees reputations. I try not to take it personally.

“Mademoiselle Guillem, I would like...” he seems to struggle over his words, as if it pains him to tell me. He grunts. “I would like to offer you the position of Danseuse étoile.”

“Oh—”

“Wait.” Gramps raises his hand, and I obey. “The Paris Opera Ballet is prestigious, and with good reason. You know this. I need a Danseuse étoile, yet I do not have a dancer deserving of this role. You are the closest Sujet to it, and when you make the necessary adjustments, I will grant you this role. Are you willing to do this?”

I give a slight inclination of my head, tentative. If I move suddenly, I fear that all this will blow away, like a dream ruined by awful reality.

Gramps gives another grunt, this time of satisfaction. “That make-up crew of yours is abysmal. Your face was positively red while dancing. I need it to be white, like death. First thing, we'll let go of them and hire a new team.” He snaps his fingers, and one of his attendants leaves to fulfill his orders.

“More importantly, I need you to lose weight. Look like you belong here. What are you at now?”

“43 kilos, monsieur,” I say, rounding down.

Gramps frowns. “You can only be 38, at most.” He moves towards the door. “I will visit you again after your performance in a month. If you are not improved,” he turns at the door and chains me with his eyes, “I would suggest searching for employment elsewhere. Good day, mademoiselle.” And he is gone, his crew of advisors hurrying after him.

Heat blazes my cheeks as a torrent of conflicting emotions washes over me. To be both gratified and ashamed within a singular moment leaves me dizzy and at a loss. In the distance, I can make out the shrieks of the glam squad as they receive their unfortunate news. For a beat I feel sorry for them, and hate towards Gramps, but then the back of my mind dings.

I'm going to be a Danseuse étoile. I'm going to be a Danseuse étoile.

Best to shed unnecessary weight. Both in the figurative and literal sense. My regimen becomes strict immediately. The amount of *elevés*, *relevés*, and *rond de jambes* leaves me exhausted, and still I push. I barely eat, and the kilos are shed like my tears. I become dizzy often. Once I fainted during practice for my solo, but thankfully no one was there to see it. I buy cream after cream in vain effort to tame my raging foot sores and rashes attributed to the extreme cover-up used by my new makeup team. By the following month, I embody the hopelessness of the lead, and I know I am ready for Giselle—a play of passion and ultimate sacrifice.

There is no other dancer more suited for the title role.

Three, two, one... my body whips through the air, and I submit to the natural force of the ballet, of the Palais Garnier, of the fervent audience. Again, brightness dots my vision, only this time I cannot control it, and I succumb.

People are smiling, everywhere, all about me. They think I am so elegant, so pretty. My illusion strangles me, and instead of pirouetting, I want to scream.

“Look!” I wish to screech at the onlookers, “Just look at me! Can't you see I am fading away?” I am turning to dust, and no one cares. Fading to dull nothingness, to be swept aside, to be blown away with only a faint exhale. But no one listens, they just watch with silly little smiles.

From a distance, I see a ballerina dancing perfectly, on the perfect stage, with a perfect form.

That is not me. I am over here, in this dark, dark corner, a faint pile of dust. Blow me away so I don't have to watch that poor ballerina anymore. She and I, we are nothing but tainted air.

And then it is over. The curtain is drawn, a deep red of forbearing, and this time I don't hear the applause that must be resounding throughout the Palais. Nor do I hear the shouts of “Etoile!”

All I hear is my heartbeat, thrumming in my gut and behind my eyes. It whispers to me in a desperate plead. I nod to myself in assent.

I will flee the death of that beautiful, blazing star.

Calloused

HANNAH CROWLEY

“*Well I’m a long tall Texan, I ride a big white horse,*” Mimi sang. My grandfather, Deedah, sat at the piano with me on the bench beside him, and echoed: “*He rides from Texas on a big white horse.*” His weathered fingers flew along the keys of the reddish-brown, wooden spinet piano, an instrument that has always been a part of my environment and, in a sense, my family. It doesn’t have a name, it can’t think or act on its own, yet it holds photographs of our relatives all along the top and helps us share emotions where words cannot. Deedah cannot read sheet music; instead, the piano pulls it out from within him, from his heart to his fingertips to our ears. “*Well I’m a long tall Texan...*”

My family always plays music. Deedah jumps on the piano almost every night to play an old tune whether people are listening or not, and yet every time we sing together it is new and exciting. I was only five or six as I bounced to the beat beside Deedah, but I already understood and appreciated the tradition that comes with my family’s music. Despite the autumn Massachusetts breeze drifting in through the window, I felt warm and cheery in our home as the melodies of my grandparents wrapped around and hugged me, making me laugh when my grandmother smiled over at me.

By the time the moon was high that night, my young body was exhausted, and my dad took me upstairs to bed. I was being a difficult child, whining and flopping around as I wanted to stay up like the adults, so Dad decided on a lullaby to help put me to sleep; he chose “Thunder Road” by Bruce Springsteen. To this day, I still have the memory of how my imagination created images as my father sang, “*The screen door slams, Mary’s dress sways*” and “*There were ghosts in the eyes of all the boys you sent away. They haunt this dusty beach road.*” In my mind, a woman in a white dress stood on an unpainted, wooden porch, the wind blowing her hair in a humid heat. Literal ghosts floated in the pupils of a man driving down a dark desert road. As my dad sang, the lyrics of Springsteen caused my dreams to seep into my reality as I slowly drifted into sleep. Before I took my last conscious breaths, I couldn’t help but think, I hope I don’t forget this. To

this day I have not.

...

Third grade brought me the first opportunity to emulate my grandfather's talents: I decided to pursue the flute. When my music teacher played it, the sound reminded me of bluebirds, fairies, and magic. I felt it brush across my cheek and swirl around me, reminding me of Barbie movies and the theme "Hymn to the Sea" from *Titanic*. The first time I was able to make the sound of a foghorn on the mouthpiece in the school band, the fire was only further ignited.

Scales, sharps, and sheet music soon took over my life, linked in every fiber of me. Each song I learned triggered my senses and painted scenes across my mind, images of storms, romance, and battles. Being able to create something from my own hard work was enchanting, and recreating gorgeous melodies made me feel a part of something bigger than myself, something spiritual and historic. I was following in the footsteps of so many artisans before me, and could only hope to contribute to their legacies. While my relationship with God was unstable, I was certain the flute was what angels sounded like.

I continued with my flute by my side for the next eight years, eventually leading the jazz band, playing in musical ensembles, and helping run the music honors society in high school. At times it felt like a chore, like when I would get frustrated if my fingers didn't do what I told them (if I have to go over this riff one more time I swear...). But this didn't stop me from continuing on and filling myself with music.

...

Okay, you just have to tell her, my soon to be thirteen—year—old self thought as I stood in the kitchen. Mom suggested makeup lessons as a birthday gift this year, as I was becoming a mature young adult in just a few days. But, I had other ideas. While my dream career just a few months before was a baker, I was now determined to become a professional musician, a singer-songwriter composing powerful music to tug at the hearts of the masses. I convinced myself that the one way to break into this career and set myself apart from others would be to learn something new: the guitar. This would make me seem more gifted, more qualified for this kind of stardom. This would make me stand out. Cause no other famous musicians play the guitar, right?

It's not that big of a deal, right? I know it's expensive, but it's what I really want, and it'll help make me a mark. As soon as I saw my mom's car pulled into the driveway, I was standing by the front door, bouncing on my tip—toes in anticipation of her response. She walked through the door, arms overflowing with groceries, as I blurted out in one hardly intelligible sentence, “Mom you know how I said I wanted makeup lessons for my thirteenth birthday well I changed my mind I don't want to take guitar lessons please.”

She stared at me for a moment, recovering from my word vomit, and just said, “Okay?”

The next week I stood before a small brick building, “Marblehead School of Music” written in gold letters across the front, with my grandfather's acoustic guitar from the Air Force, still smelling like gasoline, in my hand.

“I'm Adam!” the man with the bun and finger tattoos told me. “I'm gonna be your guitar teacher,” he said with a grin. I tried to smile back, but I think my anxiety twisted it into more of a grimace. I was unsure of myself; this was the first time I had learned a new instrument in three years, my first string instrument ever. Starting middle school that year had brought with it new insecurities. Suddenly, I was concerned with what set me apart from the pack. Where others began excelling in certain areas, whether that was math, art, or social interactions, I coasted by in the background. Sure, I was a flutist, but what once came second nature to me suddenly required more practice as the music became more challenging. Some kids in the band could master a piece in a matter of days, but for me, I needed more time. What if this one didn't come as naturally to me as the flute once did? Maybe I'm just going to make a fool out of myself.

Throughout the lesson, my focus shifted constantly from the zebra carpet to the Bob Marley poster to his encouraging smile. I was shaking as he instructed me how to place my fingers on the worn strings to form my first chord.

“Now, I'm not going to tell you what to play. We'll play what you want and jam out together. What do you want to play?” I had to think about it for a moment, what kind of a performer I wanted to be. Memories came flooding back to me; I thought of the moments of seeing my grandfather sing and play ballads to himself. I saw myself on stage in the future, playing for thousands of people who had tears in their eyes, and wondered if this image could one day be a reality.

Time is nonlinear. It is flowing around us at all times, the present becoming the past, and the past bleeding into our presents. The smallest

sensation can trigger time travel; a smell, a color, an object, or a sound, and suddenly you're thrown years behind into an old memory or a future desire. Music is in every part of me —past, present, and future. I'm constantly floating in a space of sound, carried on the backs of chords and harmonies through every moment of life. Since childhood, it has been a complicated and ever-present best friend. It knows me too well, calls for me to be brutally honest with myself, bringing back all details of my life to the forefront of my mind. At times, it makes me feel like I'm dancing through life. At others, like I'm crawling, fighting to move past a wall of thoughts. It's clingy and raw and inescapable, but I can't imagine having it any other way.

"Ed Sheeran," I said, thinking of his acoustic tone (would I give the same answer today? Maybe, maybe not). Nonetheless, after learning "The A Team," I practiced for months in the privacy of my bedroom, still unsure about sharing my amateur skills in front of others. My abilities were still developing, making me self-conscious when comparing myself to the kids who excelled at the guitar. Despite my aspirations, I had never sung in front of anyone before, and the longer I held it off, the more daunting the idea became. After I let a short melody escape my lips in front of Adam, our lessons became about cracking open my shell, and eventually I relented.

I essentially had to be forced into playing in Adam's spring concert nearly six months after my first lesson. Performing One Direction while wearing my favorite bright blue sweater in front of a crowd felt unlike any performance before. While there were glimpses of memories with my grandparents encouraging me to sing along with them, here, I was alone on stage and frightened to my core. But as soon as I strummed my first chord, I felt like I was releasing a breath I had been holding for who knows how long. After months of doubt, maybe I could actually make this performing thing work.

...

"I'm starting a band with a few other musicians, and I want you to be a part of it."

I had been playing guitar and singing for two years at this point, and while I logically knew I had some talent in these areas, I couldn't help but second guess myself in every area of my life. Joining a band like this meant more work, more uncertainty, more learning, and more comparing myself to others. Even though my career goals now strayed away from musical performance, I still put myself under the pressure of being the best, of

living up to the potential I once had and needing to prove myself. Whereas performing with my family felt unrestricting and unthreatening, I needed to be good enough to deserve to be in a band with other accomplished musicians; I didn't want to be the reason that others were judged or embarrassed. But, as soon as my parents heard of Adam's idea, I was enrolled in lessons with the band.

Despite the unexpected joy this group brought me, I needed the most musical growth out of us, which was difficult for me to come to terms with. I would make mistakes where others wouldn't. My fingers would be on the wrong fret or my harmony would be too flat, and immediately my cheeks would catch fire. Even though I knew my bandmates were joking when they would respond with a "what was that" or laugh after a screwup, I couldn't help but take it to heart. Visions of performing soon turned to nightmares with crowds laughing and pointing at my failures; I believed this was how an audience would react if I made a clear mistake on stage. And when I finally did, my voice cracking right at the climax of Corinne Bailey Rae's "Put Your Records On" during our first performance together, it felt as though all of my fears were brought into reality. All eyes were on me, and in a band of only four people, there was no more place to hide.

...

"*I don't want to wait anymore, I'm tired of looking for answers,*" I hummed to myself, trying to force the chords of "My Silver Lining" into my brain before I went on stage. I was at the opposite end of the room, the "Hard Rock Cafe: Boston" sign a glowing beacon behind the current performers. This was my third time playing this venue, and regardless of the fact that it was just a small bar, the enormity of it all never got easier. My band was counting on me, I couldn't forget the words mid-song again. They're all so talented, it barely looks like they even have to try, I thought about the band playing before us. "*I try to keep on keeping on.*"

We'd been practicing for this show, the music school's Summer Showcase, for months, the fingerings ingrained into my hands, as evident in the calluses on my fingertips. But, even though we had been performing together for a few years now, this happened every time; the second I saw that stage, the moment I saw someone else go up there and crush it, I lost all feeling in my body. My hands went numb, my mouth dry, and my mind filled with nothing but dark, swirling clouds. Before I performed, I couldn't help but remember all my screwups, all the flat notes and wrong chords from the past. Remember that time your voice cracked when you tried to

hit that high note? my mind teased as the memory burned behind my eyelids.

How can I not? I responded to myself. *I haven't practiced enough. I'm leaving for college next year, I should be making the most of the time I have left with them. I've been practicing for how many years and I'm still not as good as them.*

From the moment I stepped on the stage until the second I left, I'd completely blacked out, not a thought entered my mind. I no longer had thoughts of screaming crowds or my family's laughter or the images of the lyrics. I just wanted to play the music and leave before I could make a mistake and draw attention to myself. I got on stage, my hands shaking and breathing shallow. I just tried to look down, ignore the crowd and get through it. My face was blank as I trudged through each song. While the crowd applauded for me, a stiff and uninterested looking musician, tears danced in the corner of my eyes. My voice had cracked, just like I feared, and I wondered, do I want to do this anymore?

It hurts to question something you've loved for so long. It's shameful and crushing, like a sudden boulder lodged in your lungs, and I couldn't tell if I felt embarrassed for even considering it or finally admitting it to myself. At this point, I didn't know who I was with or without the music.

...

It's been two and a half years since I've performed on stage. Like everyone else, the pandemic stopped my world, and suddenly all my responsibilities came to a halt. I was too caught up in questioning the future, questioning who I was becoming, to continue pressuring myself. I lost my schedule and took a break from thinking and doing anything, including performing music. Listening to music was still a constant part of my life; I could never leave it behind even when it felt like it was mocking me. But if I'm not forced to feel that anxiety of performing again, that pain in my chest, the dryness in my mouth, and the tremors in my hands, why would I willingly put myself through it?

To this day, I cannot listen to videos of myself playing. I can't listen to the songs I used to perform without thinking about where I went wrong. I now struggle to find the harmonies that my band would once practice over and over again until we got the tones just right. My guitars collect dust along their cases from where they sit across my bedroom. My fingers no longer have calluses, I don't know if I can still read sheet music, I don't even know if I remember my own voice, and I'm disappointed in myself for all

these things.

As the time's gone by, I find I have no excuse for the neglect of my instruments. I've never felt more like myself yet more terrified of exposing me than when I'm playing. In truth, I'm just scared of myself and what will happen if I do perform and show myself to the world: will I succeed or will I prove my worst fears correct? Music is both my best friend and my biggest fear. As I come to terms with this, I'm trying to reconcile with it again. Forcing myself to remember the good times, the times with my grandparents, with the music school and jamming with my band—it's painful at times, but I'm starting to feel its warmth again.

...

At 2 AM Monday night, I played my first song in nearly a year on my boyfriend's guitar. It was tucked away in the corner, and he encouraged me to pick it up, to play at an open mic night. For the first time in months, I picked up the instrument, not to test myself like I once would have, but just to experiment. I just wanted to see what would happen.

As I started playing, the frets immediately fell into place. He started singing "Sweet Creature" by Harry Styles, but it was really "Blackbird" by the Beatles. Clearly it wasn't perfect, but I wasn't frustrated with myself for it not sounding identical to the original. My hands weren't shaking like they used to. Seeing his smile makes me start to remember why I wanted to do this in the first place. I just laughed and let the memory soak into me.

#weightlossjourney

MIKELYN G. BRITT

The clock starts. Little me
watches *The Biggest Loser*
with my family while doing
push ups during commercial breaks.
I was too young.

Next came the early 2010s.
The highlight of Tumblr
eating-disorder-core. I
spend my time looking over
Thinspo, wishing to be her.

Highschool: Dates were nonexistent
in the life of a plus size student –
or morbidly obese as my doctor told me.
Morbid was skipping meals.

Body positivity instagram
posts fill my modern feed with
self-love posts and fulfilling
lives. Guilt racks my big bones
and I pray for a different body.

Tears spill over my full cheeks
in the harsh fluorescents of
the Target fitting room. A
pair of jeans fitting snugly,
stopped by my thighs.

And I remember the little
girl whose mother would be
waiting around the corner,

asking if she needed a bigger
size. The floodgates open.

“When I’m skinny,” I laugh, my
friends join in. And I feel it again.
Why do I wait for my life to start
based on the numbers of a
scale? The clock doesn’t stop.

Composed Amidst Feverist Delirium: Ill
Again

ANDREW B. CASHER

I envision the veins around my brain
And all the colors seen all look the same
I am the ill idyllic, bumbling fool
I am unwound, like wool fresh off the spool
I drink from crystal glass, but quenched I'm not
Cold like tundra, yet Giza flaming hot
Conscious, not corporeally bound yet
Trumped still by the flowing and anxious sweat
That drips from brow to cheek from cheek to chin
And as a mortal I know I won't win
I'll reign immune to lose my crown once more
And sick, I'll write more poems from my floor

The Very Blood in My Veins

MIKELYN BRITT

I have long since lost my focus at work. The twitch begins in the early afternoon, just as the ponies take their places on the starting line. I take hurried glances behind my shoulders before switching the tab. Five more minutes. I wait to place my bet. I don't like them to know what I'm thinking. My eyes lift to the large, white clock above my cubicle, the second hand slows at my gaze. My knee bounces under the desk as sweat pools under my arms. Footsteps echo up the row. I exit the jockey tab and open an existing document; a letter to the company after my return from rehab, a promise of cleanliness and progress.

"Theo," a booming voice sounds. "How's the endorsement coming along, son?"

"Good, Mr. Burke," I respond with a quick nod. "Should be done by the end of the day, sir." I feel gravity lifting out from beneath. My mouth feels full of cotton.

"That's what I like to hear," he laughs, large stomach shaking obnoxiously. Burke's a family friend. He's the only reason I'm still working at this shithole. A good word and a heavy wallet from my father, no doubt. "How's the old ball and chain doing?"

His question passes through me without any contact. My eyes look beyond him and meet the clock face once again. The second hand sped up since I've last looked. It's nearly half-past one, two more minutes to the start of the race. The image of racehorses blurs past my eyes. The rainbow assortment of silks race toward the finish line, fighting for the gold.

"Kid?" Mr. Burke says. "Hey, Theo." My nerves jolt awake, the horses race out of my mind as my surroundings settle into focus.

"Oh, sorry, sir," I say, straightening in my chair. I hurriedly tug at the knot of my tie, my hands are shaking. "I didn't get much sleep last night with the new baby and all."

"Ah, I remember those days. I only lived on coffee and Redbulls for the first two years of Polly's life."

Guilt creeps up my spine. I should be spending my nights with my colicky baby, but I've been going to Gambler's Anonymous meeting down

at the church, or that's at least what I've been telling my wife. Aubrey has to know that I've been going to the casino every Tuesday night. Hell, I've been skipping lunch breaks to run to the corner store to get scratchy lotteries. Aubrey's the one that got me into rehab in the first place. Her growing belly, adorned with her sister's old maternity clothes; overalls and cinched dresses. Her hands full with ultrasound updates or paint swatches for the nursery. One Tuesday afternoon, two weeks before my release, a phone call rang through the clean white halls. "It's time," said Aubrey. Her labored breathing rang through the receiver, my own echoing in my chest. She had our firstborn alone in a cold hospital room. A nurse cut the umbilical cord. The midwife took pictures of a blushing mother with the new light of her life. A taxi drove Aubrey and baby Liza. I held my daughter for the first time during the following visiting hours at the center. Ten fingers and ten toes. Her eyes shone with naivety, matching my own. An expected feeling of love bubbled through my heart. Now, I'm gambling away her college fund.

"Well, I'll let you get to it. Can't wait to see the baby at the luncheon this weekend."

I laugh politely, glancing again at the clock. The race has begun. Shit. I haven't even placed my bets yet. Fuck.

...

Coins weigh heavy in my pocket, clinking together with each step. The carpet pools with orange, red, and purple hues, easing my eyes to gently unfocus. My hands ache as I release my clenched fists. I take a deep breath, filling my lungs with neighboring cigarette smoke, the familiar burn warming my blood. I'm home.

"Excuse me?" an older man interrupts my stroll to the tables. "It's my wife and I's first time, could you show us the ropes?"

"Maybe point us to your favorite slot?" the wife adds with a shy grin.

They share a glance and laugh with each other. They must be playing hooky today and want to have some fun. My shoulders tense. Despite others' experiences at the casino, I come to be with myself, my true self. All other conversations surround cashing out or asking for a refill of my whiskey and coke. I glance at the roulette table to find it sparse of attendants. The night is still early. I take a deep breath.

"Sure," I say. "Follow me."

A slow trek with the pair's aching arthritic joints leads us to the

very last room. The penny slots. I explain the basics: low bet, use most of the lines and they could win a little cash.

“And your favorite, sweetie?” the elderly lady asks.

I crack my neck with a quick jolt and my body goes rigid. I have a thing against sharing trade secrets. When I first started, I didn't even like to tell the attendants which machine I won on. I scan the room and catch a glimpse of old reliable. The machine's older than the very building it's sitting in. Erotic graphics of exotic, half-naked women cover the exterior while the mechanics show spinning fruit and gold bars. I've never won more than twenty bucks on it.

“You'll want to go to that one in the corner,” I say with a grin creeping across my face.

A series of thank yous erupt from the couple as they waddle to their rebellious afternoon slot machine. The journey back to the roulette table feels comfortable and meditative. A soft smile plays on my lips as I sit on the short velvet stools. A chuckle escapes as I glance back at the couple, pulling out their coins. Now the fun begins.

A quick \$30 bet on black, and I await the results of the roulette screen. The ball spins around the red and black circle at a dizzying speed. I feel its hypnotic effect. It lands.

“Red!” calls the artificial dealer on the screen. His electronic smile sends rage through me. My ears heat up, and my shirt collar is wet with sweat.

No problem. I pull out another coin.

Lost.

Another coin.

Lost.

And another.

Minutes turn to hours, and my pocket is no longer heavy against my leg. The electronic dealer does not falter. My fist tightens against my side, my nails dig into the soft flesh of my palm.

Aubrey must be home by now, greeted with dark rooms and emptied drawers. A burglar maybe, but she knows better. Liza bounces hurriedly on her walker bumping into barren walls in an empty room; her own toys sold to a new mother in a town over. The cash burnt to ashes for the neon communion of my church.

A scream sounds to my right with a celebration of a jackpot. My skin is on fire. I scratch my neck as the itch travels through my body. My leg bounces unsteadily, and what's left of the coins chime, an alarm of misfortune. The elderly couple walks behind my chair with cheers following

close behind them.

“Oh, Honey!” the grandmother cries. “It’s him — the young man who helped us to the machine.”

“Please, let us buy you a drink,” her husband follows. “You just won us a fortune!”

My throat is too dry. I stare at the grandmother’s eyes, they twinkle with the light of the first win, and all I want to do is slap the innocence out of her. Only a moment passes before I have a rum and coke in my hand. They laugh and share how they will be spending their prize.

“A trip to the Bahamas!”

“No, first the grandkid’s trust funds.”

My knuckles turn white with my grip on the glass. I take a shaky breath. My heart travels to my throat, my face burns, and tears threaten to drop around my cheeks. The buzzers, the drop of a coin into a slot, and the clack of high heels make my ears ring. I can’t think. I can’t breathe.

Before I know it, I am standing over the elderly man. His eyes hold an empty stare at the ceiling and his chest is still; a halo of blood circles his head. Broken glass shards glitter against the neon carpet. My heartbeat pounds in my ears, and the screams return. My hand aches. I look down and find glass embedded in my palm. Dark blood trickles down my pale wrist, falling to the carpet and staining the neon yellow carpet strips. The mystic air blows away, the curtains of magic lift.

I wake when cold metal tightens around my wrists, and I am hit with muggy Florida fall air. The automatic doors open to reveal a pair of medics wheeling a black body bag down the entrance. His wife struggles to walk even with the assistance of a paramedic. Sobs wrack her small frame; she loses her strength. I look toward the sky, unable to watch her violent grief. Two stars appear south of the moon, and I’m reminded of my girls. I pray they forgive me. God doesn’t hear me.

My stay in jail stretches with my sentencing repeatedly postponed. Aubrey and Liza don’t come to court. I don’t expect them to. I’m inevitably found guilty of murder in the first degree despite my lawyer’s best efforts of trying insanity based on a gambling addiction manic episode. I got twenty-five years and state-issued counseling. The judge says I’m one lucky bastard to see the light of day. My luck has long since run out.

Not a day goes by that I don’t hear the laughs and screams. My eyes burn with the images of his lifeless body. Still, I sit and imagine my release: flashing lights, beautiful bar ladies, and most of all, the winnings. It’s the very blood in my veins. Roll call breaks my daydream, and I am back in my cell, staring at the cold gray cinder block walls. The barred windows have a

way of messing with time: days turn to weeks, weeks turn to months, and months turn to years. My hands ache as I stretch to unclench them. Blood pearls over my palms from my nails breaking skin. Red shines on the stained orange cuffs of my jumpsuit—twenty-three years of scars built on these palms. Pale pink indentations mark my fall. That very last night. I can still feel the glass in my skin. It's the only thing I feel anymore.

Parole releases me on good behavior and the promise of seeing a psych. Good behavior is questionable. Sure, I didn't get in any gang fights and I even worked well in the laundry room, but nothing about me is good. I don't even remember how it feels.

My jeans hang low on my hips. A metal gray 1998 derby shirt flows loosely on my body, picking up the low tide winds. I timidly walk across the pavement, not able to shake the feeling of reprimand for being outside the gates. I'm out. I'm out. My possessions are given to me in an expandable cardboard box: my wallet, a few casino chips, and a picture of baby Liza.

I extend my arm and call for a taxi. The motion feels foreign in a body used to confinement. The yellow cab pulls along the curb; the driver doesn't blink at being outside the gates, he must do pick-ups here all the time.

"Where to?" the driver asks.

"300 Florence Avenue," I say without missing a beat.

After a quick drive, I arrived home.

The neon lights warm my face. Cigarette smoke fills my lungs, and the familiar buzz creeps through my head. My heart starts beating for the first time in decades.

Codes of Dress and Stress

THEODORE J. SZPAKOWSKI

When I was a kid, I wanted to be president. I didn't realize how much there was in between first grade and the presidency, but it didn't matter. I cared so much about everything. I wanted to be able to make those opinions known, so naturally I needed to occupy the highest office in my country.

My mom, always more pragmatic than me, decided I should start with issues a little more manageable for my age. I hated my school's dress code. The handbook required white, light blue, or navy collared shirts and navy or khaki pants. But, according to my mom, the rules were even more specific than that. I thought that the best thing to match navy with was navy, but apparently I was wrong. So I had to plan out my outfits carefully to avoid being left with just two navy items. I thought that wearing light blue and navy looked strange together, which added another layer of stress—I could only wear my navy pants with white shirts and I had to have khakis to match with the others. Then, when I got home, I'd have to pick out a whole second outfit of “play clothes.” It was a lot of work for a six-year-old, and I was not pleased.

So, I did what any first grader with undiagnosed autism, a love of writing, and arguably too much time on his hands would do... I wrote a letter to the superintendent. I clearly stated my reasoning for why we shouldn't have a dress code. I was very impressed with myself. First step to president, right?

No. I had not yet learned that presidential candidates need to start with power to get anywhere. The superintendent wrote me a nice letter and made no changes to the policy.

...

Three years later, things were changing. My parents had decided that I would not go to middle school based on where I lived. Those urban schools weren't safe. I could either go to a charter school in a different part of the city or to the public middle school in a suburb about a half-hour

away.

There were many differences between the two. But the one that stuck in my ten-year-old head was the dress code. If I went to the suburbs, I could wear anything I wanted. Anything! That was unimaginable freedom in my mind. Just open up my dresser and pick out a shirt and pants? A T-shirt, even? Jeans? Or I could go to the charter school, and if the shoes I wore were not completely black, I would be given a Sharpie to fill the white parts in.

I chose what I thought was freedom. I chose the suburb. And then I proceeded to be bullied for the year and a half I was there, so was it really freedom? Back in that superintendent's letter, he pointed out that the differences in people's clothing, without a uniform policy, could cause issues. Was that what was happening to me? I didn't notice any differences between what the other kids were wearing and my own clothes. But then again, there were many differences I hadn't caught yet.

I moved schools again, partway through my sixth grade year. Again, no uniform. There was a dress code, but at first I didn't pay much attention to it. Then, in my freshman year, a girl I admired started the conversation about the inequities in the dress code at our high school. The features targeted there—thin straps on shirts, necklines that could expose cleavage, sheer clothing, short shorts—were overwhelmingly found in women's clothing. Yet the stores and sections that targeted girls my age had almost exclusively that type of clothing for sale. How could these high schoolers be expected to wear clothing that wasn't being sold to them?

It turned out that not having a school uniform didn't mean you could just pick any two clothing items, after all.

I never wrote a letter to my high school superintendent asking him to change the dress code, but I did write a newspaper article about it. Why prevent students from wearing spaghetti straps, a low neckline, or shorts that don't reach the fingertips? The most commonly cited reason is potential for distracting other students, although other concerns like professionalism also exist.

...

Working in food service, my uniform was intended for a different purpose. The polo shirt and khaki pants created a cohesive look around all of the staff. The hats or hairnets and gloves protected the food from contamination. Nonslip shoes or shoe covers protected us from a fall. The apron literally tied together the rest of the uniform and protected it from

spills.

Protection. My dining hall uniform was partly about conformity, like every other uniform I've worn. But it was also supposed to be about creating a safe environment.

My work uniform would have fulfilled all of the requirements of my high school's dress code. No cleavage escaped my polo shirt, the sleeves reached halfway down my forearms, and the pants more than cleared my fingertips.

I left that job because of the uniform, to put it simply. Not because it was too much. No one handed me a Sharpie for the logo on the shoes. No, this time, the uniform wasn't enough. I was still a distraction to one of the men around me. I didn't slip on the kitchen floors. No hair made it into the food I served. No food got on my apron.

But I wasn't safe. So I left.

When I must visit my old workplace, I question what I'm wearing. I wonder if I can make myself unrecognizable somehow. But what I was wearing was so normal. A navy polo shirt and khaki pants: practically what I wore as an elementary schooler, just with an apron added on top. What more than that could be expected of me?

I was just following the rules. I wasn't trying to take over, get some high office, become president. I just wanted to get my eight dollars an hour. And still, that was too much to ask.

...

As a child, the dress codes in my life were written down so that I could follow the rules by the letter. As I become an adult, I've learned those dress codes are the least common. Adults are expected to just know what's acceptable to wear.

When my public policy professor was a young Southern lawyer, she was held in contempt of court for wearing a pantsuit. I don't know the details of it, but I'm imagining neatly pressed navy, perhaps with a pink blouse underneath. I do not think she's opposed to dresses or femininity, but rather to a lack of options. She was warned not to wear pants again after the first day; she refused, and went to jail for it.

I'm not sure much has changed since then. My aunt became a judge last month, and she spent the days before the investiture trying to find navy pumps. She had a pair, but they hurt her feet. In the end, she had to wear them anyway. Flats or dress shoes were not an option—it had to be pumps. She couldn't find a single comfortable pair in the state of Maryland. This

was a day she had been working for since she left law school, and she had to do it with aching feet. Because she was a woman, and being a woman meant she was expected to wear a dress and pumps. That's not written in the state constitution; it's just how it is.

I wonder if the women on the Supreme Court have to wear pumps every day. Does having the highest office in their profession save them? Or are they just as uncomfortable?

Last summer, it was this unwritten dress code that I stretched to the breaking point. At my graduation, I was a guy in a dress. The impact that such a statement could have made was greatly lessened by the fact that only four people in attendance knew I was a guy at the time, including myself. What meant more to me was not wearing a dress to convocation. Again, few people knew I was a guy, but I was one of them. I found a way to fit between my longing for masculinity and the feminine expectations that surrounded me. Temporarily.

By December, the rubber band I kept stretching had snapped. Instead of seeing if I could extend femininity widely enough to fit myself in, I gave up on it. People say quitters never win, but I've never had a greater victory in my life—not even the Junior History and Social Sciences award I worked so hard for in high school. That victory was expected of me. This victory is one that was never supposed to be mine. Others may hate me, but my happiness turns their taunts to cheers. These days, I build my own dress code, and rule number one is no dresses. I am balancing the clothing I have in my dressers with the boundaries of weather, comfort, and masculinity. I have been preparing for this since first grade, making sure I wore the white shirts with the navy pants and the navy shirts with the khakis. The tightrope is just higher now, and the audience bigger.

With all the emotions I've felt about my clothing restrictions, this is the first time I'm grateful—because I'm the one who's in control. I decide what I can put up with—whether I want to look as masculine as I can or just get comfy in sweatpants and a tee.

Clearly, I'm not going to be the first woman president the way I'd imagined when I was six. A woman president would need to learn to walk in heels and I am far too clumsy for that. But I've realized I don't need control over my country to be happy. I just need control over my wardrobe.

The Sword

RIVOLIA CHEN XIAO-YU

I am a sword purer than frost, luminous
For gallantry, honorable duties, and enlightened learning.
With the spirit of a dragon, for the Holy Land I fight
In my splashing blood, now become jewels from sacrifice,
As I sing my battlesong in the voice of a phoenix, transcending
My life into a dance, echoing, with shooting stars, the eternal.
I am a spreading celestial glow of learning and courage
Cutting through and dismantling the phalanxes
That serve the gangsters who brutalize and are against the people—
A magnitude as wide and lofty as the heavens,
An imprint in the profundity of the ages;
My chivalrous soul is a sharpening blade
Praying to spend all my reincarnations as a warrior,
Roaming for such ideals: the victory of cultural-spiritual China
And such impassioned battles!

Traditional Chinese Original:

劍

蜀山有劍較霜冷，重義輕身護六經。龍戰九州凝碧血，鳳鳴萬古舞流星。
長霓破陣擊民賊，浩氣橫空貫汗青。敢挾丹心磨利刃，生生任俠慨然行。

Eréndira

JULIÁN SÁNCHEZ-MELCHOR

In the heart of Michoacán,¹
they tell stories,
tales of a Siren.
The classic story
of a woman who feeds
off the souls of men.
However, there is no
mystery.
We know who this
lady of the lakes
truly is.
For the Sun and the Moon,
the very gods of the land,
granted her
eternity.

See the white dots of
the night sky be mirrored
across her visage,
for she doesn't just inhabit
the water, she is the
water.
Her falling hands drag
a mist over the
earth.
It is time to hide.
It is time to prey.
Here comes a boy,
a blossom of her people.
Mijito,² go no closer.
Haven't you been warned?

¹ Michoacán - Mexican Southern State connected to the Pacific Ocean

² Mijito - term of endearment meaning "my little child"

Eréndira drowns
bad men.
Even in the dark,
She can see.
His skin is tan,
but his eyes are green,
like the devils that
only knew slaughter.
However, tonight,
the boy is safe.
He is not yet
but tomorrow, Eréndira
may be enraged,
as the boy becomes
just another man.

Is she just a legend?
Nothing more than a
fairytale to stop
children from wandering
around alone?
No, it is more.
Though details get added,
even half a millennia later.
Eréndira lived, a woman
of the Purépecha,
a princess even.
Who do they say
she was?
The heiress who killed
herself in the absence
of her foreign love.
Or do you believe she
was a warrior princess,
the pride of the land?
Yes, picture her like this,
a beautiful tactician.
Una morena que
arrastra los blancos.³

³ “Una morena que arrastra los blancos” translates to “A brown girl who fights the white men”

No matter the account,
the narrative ends
in tragedy.
She was captured
by men who thought
they owned her,
thought they owned
all the brown folk
residing among
the “New” World,
and unconceivable
torture awaited her.
The “true” history
likely ends here.
But the people,
the brown folk
say otherwise.

They claim she was
hidden away,
given an ultimatum,
to submit, to renounce
her identity,
and marry the Spanish
general who was
infatuated with her.
They left her
with her thoughts,
only a few days
to willingly say yes
or be taken by force.
Her isolation
was guarded,
men stationed all across
the mountain, ensuring
she had no escape.
And so, she wept,
and prayed, and
pleaded for

freedom.

The celestial bodies
that govern the
atmospheres took
pity.

They empowered
her cry, and a
flowing ecosystem of
rushing water
spawned from her
grief.

And the Gods morphed
her body, so she may
live forever within
the water.

Maybe, the lake's
origins are
merely mythical,
but her tears,
those were real.

How can she stop crying?
When the war has yet to end,
when her people have been
torn apart, split in two.
When our women are
still constantly stolen?
Her tears will never
cease, as we
are still treated like
our ancestors because
we never stopped
being them.

Lycidas Hath Fallen

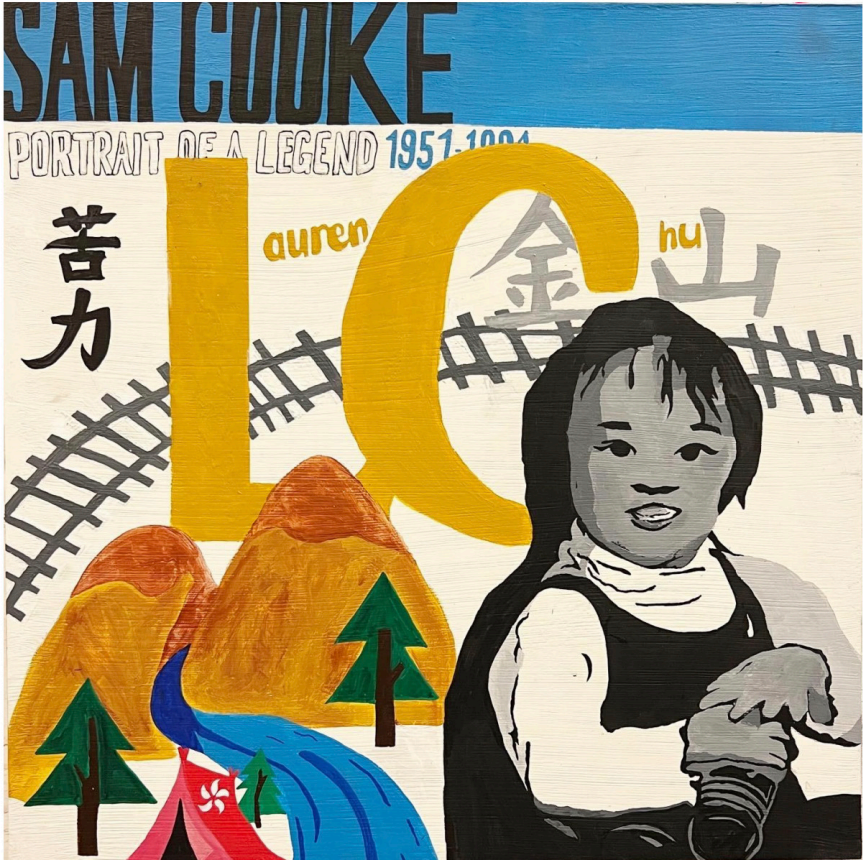
RORY J. WAINWRIGHT

Lycidas tumbled to the ground
Back arching, elbows aching, skull cracked like broken bells clattering in
the night sky
His eyes rolled to his brain, reaching for the scorched air, the rays of liquid
fire revealing bone, revealing palm—
To keep him from crashing into 100 Galilean Seas and psalms
Waves crashing into splintered glass and shards of shells, sharp enough to
cut stones, cut skin,
Dripping in sweet red nectar, gallantly thin
Staining pages of crumbled book bindings,
Ripping flesh and fantasy from the moon's blindings
For Lycidas must choose.
His body rose at the feet of Satan—
Steaming breath fanning over his papery face.
Shall he choose the garden over molten beams of ripe tangled streams—
Lycidas must become one with shackled wrists and tar-stained screams
For it is better to reign in Hell than rule in Heaven.
Eve's snake runs cold over his skin,
Scales gleaming decorated with darkly chosen sins
Shining like the shackles of gun metal chained around his raw wrists
For Lycidas hath chosen,
The watery depths of his own demise,
Seeing twinkling lights shine like showers in the water-colored navy sky
The red skin of the apple was tainted with rot,
Worms trickling over the edge of his charred-stained lots
The only option waiting at his planted feet
Hath Hell has gained another follower,
To part the sea of gushing fears
To jingle the rust of Peter's solemn Keys
God has lost a saint today
For Lycidas opens the doors of Hell
Waiting for those who enter at the sound of the chiming bells.



My Mexican Heart Unravels

JULIÁN SÁNCHEZ-MELCHOR



Series I

LAUREN A. CHU



Series II

LAUREN A. CHU



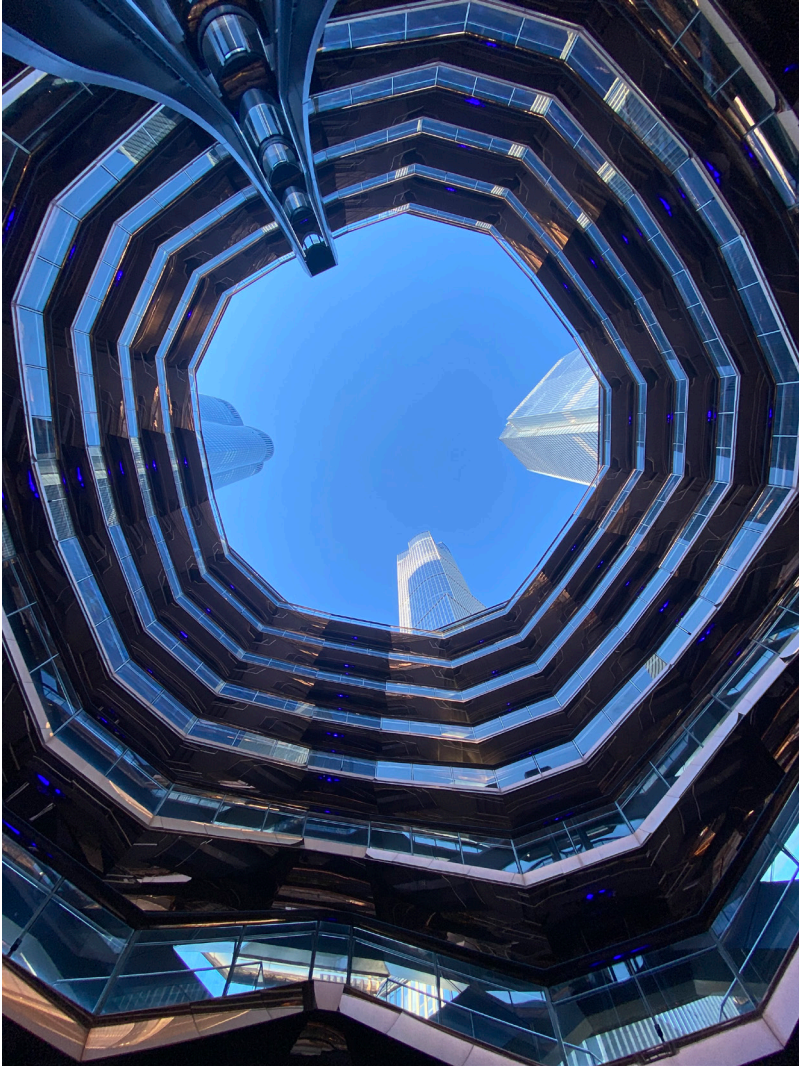
Series III

LAUREN A. CHU



Brooklyn Bridge at Night

CHRISTOPHER PAREJA GARCIA



Hudson Yards (2020)

CHRISTOPHER PAREJA GARCIA



I wish the mountains and sea could touch.

MARY PETER E. RIGG



Hazel Eyes

LUCA ESPANA



Comical Abstraction

ELLIE BENTZ



Requiem (Still Life)

EMMA L. WYLAM



Seaside

LUCA ESPANA



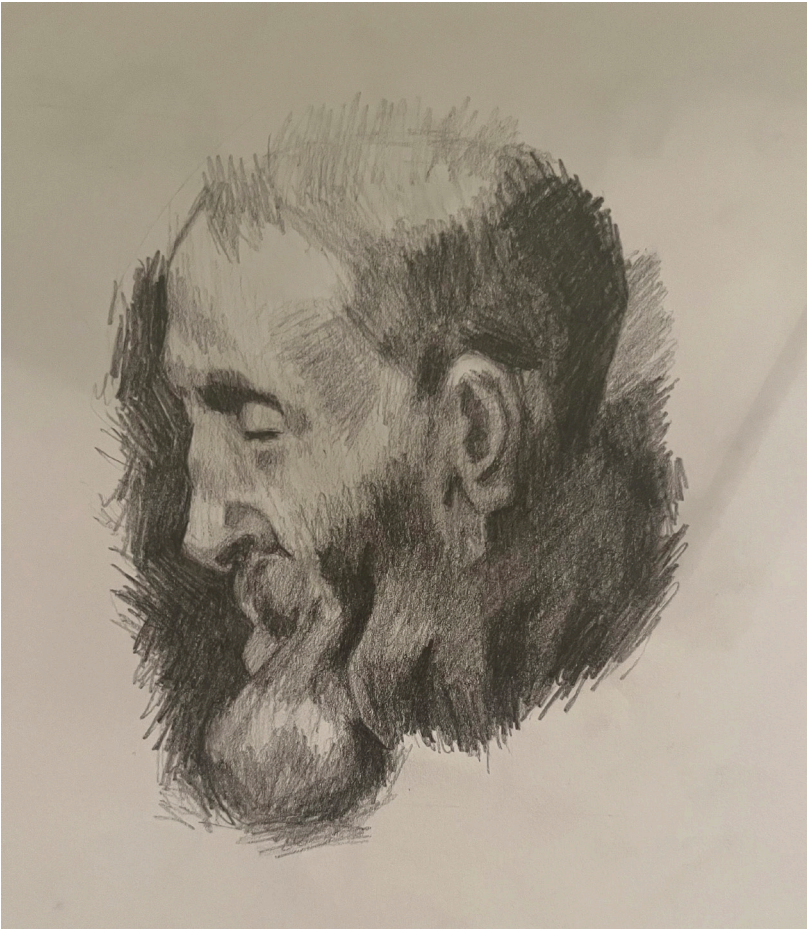
Eye Study

HANNAH N. PREBLE



Gentle Giant

LUCA ESPANA



Study of Rembrandt

HANNAH N. PREBLE



Sunlight in Florence

HANNAH RINEHART



Godly
LUCA ESPANA

The Torment of Lady Daffodil

RIVOLIA CHEN XIAO-YU

Within my melancholic meditations,
The half-scattered lotuses were pink and white
Amidst green princess bamboos;
Beneath swaying, thin clouds sunken in sorrow
Fragmented branches were twisted.
I remember how, when thinking on my flesh's upcoming separation
From hallowed China, my profuse, dense grieving
Flowed into tragic rivers, infusing my impassioned heart
From which I recite my traditional lines echoing medieval heritages.
It was several years after a gangster against people
Seized an enormous earthbound power and wealth complex
Combined with a position—keeping a tight grip into the present.

My words resembling pearls and jades were interconnected
By my sorrowful contemplations; after my banishment, from the remote
I gazed at the south of China, the Light, the Blossom, and the Magnitude
While upholding my beauty; my tender-voiced sobs were interwoven.
My fine face was paled by my fervent troubles
And I felt like an aloeswood incense on immolation;
My slender shadow was similar to a phoenix wounded at her wings.
Densing autumn small frosts have dyed my dark hair
While my embroidered dress quivered in night blows.

From indomitable soul that has been as cleansed and pure as rivers in the
wilderness
I have been weeping blood while my flesh suffers from nose-bleeds:
My anguish has ensanguined all leaves in my vision—
Their glow has intersected with yellowish autumn branches.
Above the orchids hills, ghosts cried within luminous, flowing moonbeams
While my heart drenched in my torments knotted more agonies
And twined me in pains. Various flowers that once bloomed in splendor
now wither

While my pure tears followed; the fading green leaves shriveled
As does my flesh webbed in illness.

Who has ever consoled me—

A young Confucianist warrior banished from China, the hallowed land,
Because of the current bloodthirsty gangster against people and his impact.
My beauty resembles spring apricots, and I have been weaving
My traumas into my chantings—he hues of my tears
Have imprinted and dyed the embroidered silks of my lapels.
Every year, my torment and physical infirmity intensify
As I pause myself in my prolonged, lonesome standing
And envy—in vain—birds soaring southwards
To their native lands.

Original Traditional Chinese composition began in 2021 CE, using exactly
the same meters, rhythms, and form as those of Liu Rushi's (1618–1664
CE) “Ballad of Lotus-Gathering.” Traditional Chinese original and English
translation finalized in 2022 CE.

Traditional Chinese Original:

水仙怨 用柳如是〈採蓮曲〉瑤韻。

殘荷粉白妃竹綠，流雲慘淡殘枝曲。沅湘淒冷楚情濃，斷腸聲繼三十六。
珠璣字字怨思牽，望郢悲歌嬌咽連。美人憔悴蜜香消，瘦影偏如折翼鸞。
迷離秋霰染青絲，羅衣瑟瑟夜風吹。貞魂澄澈如江水，斑竹恨血映枝黃。
蘭皋鬼哭月濛濛，愁心漸結千千網。繁華零落清淚從，墜綠支離瘦骨同。
誰念無眠天杏子，襟頭淚色染羅綺。年年愁病苦相加，延佇空慕南歸雉。

Lady Eleanor Davies on the Death of Her Husband

NOELLE G. MUNI

Lady Eleanor Davies (1590–1652) was an English prophet and poet. She began receiving her prophetic visions in 1625 after caring for George, a deaf-mute child who claimed to have prophetic visions of his own. She came to prominence as a prophet after she predicted the death of her first husband.

I couldn't see the unseen until George came.
God granted my own children a way of sensing
the physical, their immediate surroundings.
God did not grant George this kind of sense.
God granted George a more intimate sight.
The kind that is unmoored, not anchored by
the physical, or immediate surroundings.
Otherwise completely speechless, George
would sometimes share his insights with us.
He'd tell us what he saw, what we'd all see later.
Until George came, I couldn't see the unseen.
Once George came, I could see it all.

I tried to warn them of what was coming.
The sleeping rising from the dirt,
As Daniel prophesied before me,
A message to the dragon and his angels.
I tried to warn them.
He stopped me, my husband.
He seized them from me, my visions,
Wrestled the papers from my death-gripping
hands, tore them limb from limb as he
ripped them from my fingers.
Their ashes coated the fireplace, ink bleeding
Across the burning logs. I wept.

I wept. In the flames I saw him, the inside of
his head, the pulsing of his blood
spilling, bursting, pouring: red, red, red.
The pounding of his skull, the pulsing of the blood.
He's dead. He's dead. He's dead.
He does not know it, but he's dead.

Impending, impending, inescapable dread.
He does not know it, but he's dead.
I tear my clothes. I try to tell him what I know,
try to warn him of what's to come.
He does not listen. I remind him every night.
We gather at dinner, I wear my funeral clothes.
He does not understand, it's not his fault.
I miss him. I cannot see him without seeing his
death. Apoplexies.
The days count down. I try to tell him, but
I can't stop the tears.
They fall, they fall, they fall.
The next day, he is gone.
According to God's plan, it seems,
as in the days that follow, when
people hear of my vision, how it came
to pass, they believe.
They know I can see what's yet unseen.

Watched

NATALIE M. DOLAN

He awoke with a jolt, but that was nothing new. His mind had taken to startling him from sleep, although he thought that by now it should have adjusted to the feeling of being watched. It was constant, after all; the Big Eye in the Sky never blinked. Through the semidarkness, he could just make out the far corner of his room, where he knew a miniscule camera captured his every move, a microphone caught his every word.

He couldn't see them, of course—that would defeat the purpose entirely. Some bugging that would be! Then everyone would know, everyone would believe, foolish beings that they were, trusting only what they could see. As it was, the precious few people with whom he had shared his discovery had given only a slow nod or a noncommittal *huh* or, best of all, a *Do you really think they would be watching you?*

He laughed into the silence, cherishing his derision.

Of course they would be watching him. Why wouldn't they? They had to keep tabs on all their precious little social experiments. *Let's watch the people run around, watch them bump into each other and crash into walls, let's see what they do.* Why else would humans, extremely selfish beings that they were, set up governments that offered support and security to millions of strangers? Why would humans, if not funneled deliberately into each other's lives, deign to work together to build a society for the common good? No, human beings were not so kind.

But *him*, oh, he was sure he was specialty viewing now, a primetime slot at Big Eye in the Sky Productions. Because he knew, knew the truth, and now *they* knew that he knew, which had been confirmed for him just yesterday. Or was it earlier today? A dark curtain covered his window, hiding from him any inkling of the time.

Well, whenever it was now, it had been late morning when he had presented his boss with the biggest story she'd ever see: the truth about the government's surveillance. He'd thrown everything down on the editor-in-chief's desk—all his evidence, his observations, scraps of overheard conversations, confidential sources. And what had she said? "You sound like another conspiracy theorist. Confidential sources? Personal accounts?"

No one will buy that. Stick to reporting real news.”

A *conspiracy theorist*? He had uncovered a massive system of oppression under the guise of free will, and his boss had lumped him in with the flat-Earthers? After all the work he had put in, hours of unpaid overtime, all in the name of truth. In the name of freedom, real freedom, not the façade that they lived in. Clumsily crafted propaganda, and the public swallowed it hook, line, and sinker. Including his boss, it seemed.

So he'd quit.

And how happy he'd felt, how free, even knowing it was all a fabrication! Walking out the doors of the office building into the bright sunshine diluted by ever-present city smog, a box of his belongings in his arms, grinning widely—*too widely, perhaps, because a woman passing by with red hair and a pink jumpsuit stared a second too long, uncertainty–discomfort–fear morphing her face, then hurried along, surely, he thought, to report him and his knowledge of the system's true dealings—she was a spy, of course she was, they had known he was onto them, and they couldn't have a glitch in their precious little social experiment, oh no—but he couldn't have a glitch in his discovery, either, couldn't risk failure at the task he faced, the one that only he could complete because only he knew the magnitude of it: hadn't his boss as good as told him, when she told him to drop it, that he was correct—her insistence that no one would believe him was a desperate cover-up for the truth, that SOMEONE would believe him, because humans, mindless lemmings that they were, would believe anything they were told—his boss was in on it, of course she was, he saw that now, and she must have alerted her superiors about the breach, and now he would be captured and silenced if he did not act quickly, act now, run after the woman, she mustn't stop him, he mustn't fail.*

All at once he'd found himself chasing after the woman, weaving through passersby who turned to stare after him. Her hair and outfit were a beacon across the crowded sidewalk; she was still walking at her brisk but steady pace, unaware of his quick approach. She had just begun to turn at the startled cries from scattered pedestrians when he tackled her to the ground.

Then, a blur of shouts, wrestling, arms restraining him, and a sudden darkness. Some sort of tranquilizer, he assumed, and during his unconsciousness they had brought him ... where? His apartment, he had thought, but now he glanced around and saw that these were not his walls, not his bed, not his room. Or were they? The men who had sedated him, brainwashed lackeys that they were, had surely taken him home, where they could observe his every move from a safe distance. Had they installed

the fluorescent lights whose outlines he saw through the dimness, tied these straps that bound his arms to the bed? He laughed because they weren't necessary. He wasn't going anywhere. He knew that, and they knew that.

That was alright. He would wait. He would wait and hear their explanations and smile when finally their lies unraveled at his feet.

Paranormal Activity

ALY LEIA WEIN

I belong with the ghost hunters now
Because I search for you in every crowd
And scan each being for your genteel eyes
Yet I find that as I live I am looking for the dead
And that the whisper of your sweet memory stains the world no more

Your ethereal soul is not incarcerated in soil
Nor entrenched in a sarcophagus of soot
But it has evaporated into the thick night air
Every spark of laughter and ember of contentment
Catalyzing its dissolution like a lover on borrowed time

I look for you in the mirror and find only a shell of myself
I wait for you in the grass and see only a shadow of a girl
Too scared to accept that the man she adored
Is no longer with us
No
Is no longer with her

But the greatest tragedy is
That he is still as alive as the spirits allow
But dead in her heart
To remain a eulogy to innocence and youth
An elegy to summers past and parted
A lament to ashes of happiness

From when phantom lips crossed paths
And heavy limbs knit themselves into a tapestry
One for the ages and two for the hearts

A Slice

AIDEN LUDKA

The sun is cascading into my bedroom when I wake up. It's the most beautiful reminder that I cannot afford curtains! Some mornings I sit up and pretend to bite the beams tickling the wall beside my bed. This makes a good replacement for breakfast, which most times consists of a long drive. I know sunbeams would taste gorgeous if they could be bitten. But they cannot. So I ready myself for work.

The dishes never have time to clean themselves, just like the fireplace never has time to sweep itself bare. So there is a festery dish smell in the kitchen, and trickles of black breath in the living room. Every Morning.

My Sweetheart says he doesn't mind. But I bought this house so we could live somewhere clean. I see by the crinkles around his eyes that he doesn't feel clean. I want everything to be a smooth block of ice that never dirties. For him.

Before we leave for work, Every Morning, I kiss my Sweetheart on his cheek, and I hold his chin between my knuckles like a tee ball I'm prepared to clobber with my big fat bat of affection. He kisses the back of my hand. It makes my brain *buzz*. Sometimes I say "buzz" out loud and make a face, and he laughs to himself, and I know it's not really because it was funny.

I drive away from our house and, Every Morning, I almost hit some neighbor pet with my car because I am watching my Sweetheart step airily into his own car through my rearview mirror. Like a frozen cube, he slides around in my mind until I arrive an hour later at the Apple Slicery.

The factory is called "Lambast & Forgo's Spiced Apple Slicery," and some people who respect the title but wish it was shorter call it "L - F - SAS," and some people who don't respect the title and hate it for being so long call it the Apple Slicery.

I stand by a conveyor belt that someone painted dry-tongue pink a long time ago, and when an apple comes rushing down the line, I jostle my App-o-chop-o-matic around it just in time to worry it into 17 even slices. By the time I can wonder whether my Sweetheart's Every Morning commute went well, the next apple has come racing towards me, and I wrap my

App-o-chop-omatic around that one, again and again and Again.

I do this for as long as it takes to fill my Carrier Quota, which is composed of 7 Jar Quotas, and each of these is maybe 40 apples, and if an apple races toward my head at 20 miles an hour and leaves a bruise, do I get to sit down for a minute? Manager says NO.

It's exhausting work, and now that I'm working overtime, the "exhausting" has started a transition into "grueling." But I need the overtime to pay for the house. Even with two paychecks, we're always needing things we can't get. The ceiling of my sunspot room has started to drip something yellower than sunbeams. And stickier than sunbeams. And it smells like yogurt. And the other day, my Sweetheart's toilet began to froth like witchcraft and activity, and it spilled all into the living room.

Fixing takes money. Money takes apples. And apples takes overtime. So I keep my conveyor belt busy.

Today, though, a tight knit of coworkers is gathered in the break room, stomping and chuffing like hungry horses. When I approach, I see that Benny Licke has a new attachment to his arm that everyone else is turning this way and thus way. It looks like an App-o-chop-o-matic: concentric metal bits, divided pie-like into a dozen and a half knives.

"Yup," Benny says ripely, catching a glint of light in his new appendage, "it helps me slice twice as fast. And the company paid for it themselves." He smirks smugly. "Those L - F - SAS bigwigs really know how to invest in their best assets."

"Did it hurt?" someone asks.

"Only when they chopped off the hand and sewed in the big metal part. But now I hardly feel it."

He smugs smirkishly. I can't get it out of my head.

Hardly notice it. Twice as fast. App-o-chop-o-matic. Curtains. Toilet. Ceiling.

...

I pull into the driveway with only one hand on the wheel. He's going to love it.

Most evenings, my Sweetheart has arrived home hours earlier and taken himself straight to a wet bedtime—thanks to the ceiling drip. But today, I catch him making dinner over our combustible stove. He spies me through the big kitchen window and comes rushing outside like a lamb.

"I'm making twice as much now!" I tell him as he leaps into my arms. "And I'm paying for all of it. The toilet fixing today, the ceiling drip

tomorrow, the—”

He yelps. Still so like a lamb.

Looking down at his pillowy sweater, I see a tangle of frayed stitching. Filthy. He looks at me. His eyes are repulsed. “What is it?”

I turn the metal this way and thus way on my arm. The sun has crawled out of the sky, and in this light, my new App-o-chop-o-matic looks like dull grayness. Its beaten metal looks tumescent on my skin. “I’m an investment,” I tell him. He sets his hands over his eyes.

I go to cup his chin, but dart away when I see my fixture no longer fits there.

With empty resignation, he lifts my arm to his face. He kisses me on the back of my new digit. Looking up, I see a red cross of blood blush from his lips.

Sun

HANNAH CROWLEY

Have you ever been close enough to touch the sun
Without being burned by it? Let me tell you about this brightest star.
I have been so close to him that my skin should be scarred,
My fingerprints melted, and my sight covered in permanent sunspots,
Yet all I feel is a gentle warmth flushing my skin,
Holding my heels and tracing my spine.
He is a giver of life, essence to my survival, my photosynthesis.
He is an eternal noon, eliminating any shadow
Of self doubt I may drag behind me.
He is a flame, melting the icicles that sat in my hair
And the frostbite on the tip of my nose,
Leaving a soft pink in its wake.
I pity those who will never allow themselves to look into the sun,
Who shield themselves from his rays I so desperately
Crave to wrap around myself.
Even if he did scorch my skin the way some fear,
I'm not sure I would want to cover myself from him.
So, let me tell you this about the sun: he is love.

Think of Me

BEATRICE SLEVIN-TRIGO

Could it be
That you could find me here,
Hiding behind the trickling grains of thought
As they plink against the glossy, transparent walls
Of your glass head?
Would it be funny, do you think,
If you dug your hands in your ears and plucked me out,
Like I was only a little-legged earworm,
Or a crawling, skittering idea,
Ready to be tossed over your shoulder?
It's only me, clinging to cerebral veins,
Scraping at the spirals in your brain with chalk,
And etching new neural pathways in the slimy pink.
Only me, making homes out of notions,
A future from a synapse.
Would you find me?
I'm only pretending to live comfortably here.
I'm only playing house in your mind,
For fear of being forgotten
Or getting lost in your many thoughts,
Of which I number only one.

Craft Elements

EMILY C. O'HARA

Characters:

Leah: Blonde. So blonde that you'd assume it's box dye but it's not (at least she says it isn't). She wears tinted sunglasses that make it look like she just got back from the funeral of her dead husband who she definitely killed (vehicular manslaughter). Leah gets decent grades and studies psychology. Her dad left when she was a kid which she uses as an excuse for almost anything. Once her mom picked her up from her semester abroad with a sign that said "Welcome home from rehab, Leah!" and it was funny but I had to pretend that it wasn't.

Ally: When I met Ally she was rarely on the ground. I liked her better drunk than sober because I liked the way her eyes lit up after a couple drinks and she'd float away from me, her words somehow still reaching me despite the apparent distance between us. She told me her mom died and I felt sorry for her but it turns out this was only a metaphorical death, which she later clarified. Ally gets either terrible or perfect grades with no in between and is an English major. When I was first getting to know Ally, she always seemed slightly out of reach, one shelf too high for me, even on my tip toes.

Setting:

Frat basement. First weekend of sophomore year. Beer on the floor. A game of pong that no one, not even the players themselves, seemed invested in. Too many guys. Sweat. Stickey speakers and choppy, throbbing bass notes.

Then separately from this, separately from the rest of my life, there was Ally and Leah. My eyes landed on Ally first, radiant and approachable, though too pretty for me not to rehearse what I was going to say. Even then, Leah seemed distinctly cold. A statue; perfect and unreal. You cannot simply approach someone who is everything you've ever wanted to be, because they will see through you the way you wish you could see through others.

They were to me what I can only tragically refer to as *the real girls*,

something I had only ever been able to masquerade as but had secretly not given up on becoming. They took up space and would continue taking up space with their fully formed personalities and intriguing pasts. I, on the other hand, was a blank piece of paper, a journal with only a name written on the cover. I was a collage of *almost's* and *what if's* and I was determined, before even talking to them, to become whoever they wanted me to be.

Flash forward:

Sometimes when I walk up the steps to my building or see our names stuck to the door of our shared room I wonder what sophomore year me would think if she knew I was rooming with Ally. A wave of pride, I assume. A feeling of victory that she would want to revel in. I, however, never think too much about it because then I would have to wonder if I replaced Leah or if I am simply haunting the space she used to fill.

I remember what Leah said to Ally when we ran into her one Saturday night, her hand pressed against Ally's cheek like she was supposed to be whispering.

I never see you anymore.

Ally laughed, a careless, drunk laugh.

I could hear myself saying those same words. I could see myself reaching my hand out as far as I possibly could, and still grabbing onto nothing.

Plot:

It was her birthday and I'd forgotten to get her something as a downpayment to assure another year of friendship. So naturally I dug through my drawer and found a pair of white earrings with silver lining and thoughtlessly shoved them into a bag. *Here Leah*, I said, *I am giving you a part of myself so that you'll want to keep me in your life, as a jewel dispensary if not a friend.* She had this look in her eyes when I gave them to her as if my simple present was proof of unhinged levels of investment.

It would be days before I remembered my mom had given me those earrings as a fourteenth-birthday present.

It would be months before I fantasized about breaking into Leah's room and ransacking the place, just to get them back.

What was the last straw between Leah and Ally? I get the sense Ally was holding a lot of straws, like a bouquet of plastic flowers, until one day there just weren't any left.

Theme:

If someone didn't put a lot of thought into it they would probably say that names, like words, do not change. But names are not like words, because they are always redefining themselves. Ally and Leah were originally synonymous with hope. Soon their names split apart and I was left with two very different words. There was *Ally* who walks with me after class and *Ally* who invites me out on weekends. Then, once Leah was cut out of the picture with scissors, there was *Ally* who introduces me to all her friends, *Ally* who is listening attentively while I tell her things I thought I would never say out loud, who is going on trips with me and never getting bored of me and out at night with a flashlight helping me find the pieces of myself I thought I'd lost forever.

And then somewhere off-screen there is Leah. With her hair blonder than ever and that same indiscernible expression that made me feel like she was looking down on me despite being so much shorter. *Leah* who never once wore the earrings I gave her. *Leah* who promised to look out for me then let her guy friends walk me home. *Leah* who told people I was hitting on her every time I gave her a mild compliment, who made me feel like a puzzle piece that was never going to fit.

I used to wonder if I would still walk up to them at that party if I knew everything that was going to happen afterward. The question never took much thought. I was then, as I am now, walking up to them over and over again and accepting the cost of that decision in advance.

Starved

ALY LEIA WEIN

It does not hurt to be hungry
When you have spent your whole life starving
It hurts to be hungry
When you have tasted moments of happiness
Pieces of love
Bites of joy
Sprinkles of community
And for once in your existence you feel full
Only to wake up the next day to a growling soul
In need of being fed

Conversations by the Yellow Fire Hydrant

HANNAH RINEHART

Sometimes, if I was lucky, I was able to catch the older kids running by my childhood house and play with them. The taller boys and girls—already in high school—whizzed by like the traffic that used Ross Road as a cut-through to the busier roads in front of our neighborhood. I watched these taller, lankier teens dart across my street to get to Reba Court even as a truck crested our hill. Their belief that their bodies were indestructible was something I wished I had.

Durham Manor was an expansive middle-class suburban community where some kids lived in smaller, one-story brick houses on one end, and kids living in the newer end with two story, brighter homes. But we all played outside together: in the sunshine, by the community basketball net in Reba Court, and in the Pit.

I was the oldest child in my family and had no clue how to play with kids older than me. I didn't even have older cousins. If I was in the right place at the right time, though, I could find myself playing basketball with Peter, and he would lead me to play with the groups of teenagers. He and I were both in sixth grade. Peter was younger than me by six months, but he was the youngest of three—one oldest sister who liked to drag him around by the ear, laughing, and one older brother who threw basketball and lacrosse balls at him a little too hard, laughing. He knew how to get and keep older kids' attention.

Being some of the younger children in our neighborhood, my younger brother and I were often babysat by older girls from down the street. My favorite was a girl named Eve. She was tall and had straight blond hair, and had large, squared, black glasses. She gave the best hugs. She looked like her mother, Sarah, who was friends with Mom. The majority of the mothers from Durham Manor knew one another and chatted in their uniform circles every school morning down the hill at the yellow fire hydrant. At the beginning of the day, that's where we all played while waiting to be picked up by our equally yellow school bus.

After school Eve and her friends, all the high school boys, and girls, could be found running from the corner with the yellow fire hydrant to

the Pit. That was what everyone called the water runoff, the giant field of grass sunken in, behind two rows of homes and met a forest on its other side. Four steep hills with two gutter pipes on either end of the field. It was the best spot in the neighborhood for touch football, freeze tag, categories, even sledding in the winter. I have a handful of memories there, and they all include Peter—running around, pulling on my hair, weaving around high-schoolers hips.

Peter was really close with an older boy named Reese. He was Eve's older brother by one year, and he had the longest brown hair that swooped past his eyes, and big teeth and an even bigger smile. He was just another one of the loosely behaved boys that ran around at Halloween with a skull mask drizzled in fake blood who hid under the truck in his driveway to grab at ankles. He was a boy who lived like every teenager in every other neighborhood. He was a brother to Eve just like any other brother.

I was in science class when I first heard of the accident.

“Did you hear? Over the weekend two high school boys drove into a tree after drinking at a party,” whispers reached me. They continued to say that they both were students at the high school we would eventually go to. I was confused, but those words stayed in my mind. It wasn't possible that they were anyone I knew. I only knew a handful of high schoolers out of the hundreds that could have been the ones responsible.

When my mom got home from work that afternoon, she approached me quietly, which was abnormal. She set down her bulky black purse on the table in the foyer and turned to me, sitting on the couch. “Honey, there's something you need to know,” she said.

I wished I could say I was as devastated as Eve, or as Peter was, but I could say that I felt completely shocked. Out of all the odds in the world, one of my neighbors, one of my kid neighbors, not an adult, not a parent but a child, died that day. Reese and one of his friends from another neighborhood weren't here anymore. I helped my mom bake a dish of lasagna for Sarah and her family and didn't ask Eve to babysit for a while. I gave her a big hug at the funeral. She squeezed my little body so tightly it hurt, but I wasn't going to pull away from her. I made a mental note to hug my brother as tight as that when I went back to him and Mom. I hadn't ever realized before that I could lose him like Eve lost Reese.

Weeks later, one afternoon after the high school kids got dropped off, me, Peter, Eve, two of her friends, and Peter's older brother were standing at the yellow fire hydrant. Peter suggested running to the Pit, but Eve just said, “I don't want to go there. I'd just see Reese.” Her friends stayed quiet, and we all nodded.

Instead we took turns seeing who could balance the longest standing on its yellow, stubby arms. Eve had stretched her arms out real wide and closed her eyes against the blaring sunshine.

Abroad

ALY LEIA WEIN

some people drown in the depths of a watery grave
[like that wretched ophelia but i prefer pine trees to willow branches]
yet i drown steeped in a crowd of flesh and blood
at a seedy bar where i hold my wallet close and my inhibitions closer
*[/loneliness/ a feeling of being unhappy because you have no friends or
people to talk to]*
to feel alone standing shoulder to shoulder with others
or sit thigh to thigh with them on a stained couch in a godforsaken
fraternity basement
is a worse fate than to feel alone when you actually are
the relentless current of my compatriots who look like me only on paper
*[there were at least two other brunettes but the first one was prettier than
me]*
rushes down my throat and clogs my trachea, lungs, soul
insinuating that the myriad of goosebumps on my pale skin are curated
by the scars of my past rather than the chronic intolerance of the present
tense

What You Learned from The Purity Princess

NOELLE G. MUNI

She was very wise, the Purity Princess.¹ She knew lots of things about God. You don't remember anything she actually said or what she sounded like. You remember that after the Purity Princess finished speaking, you got to go up and meet her. You sat on a very public throne, which made you very uncomfortable. Eyes on you. She put the Miss New Jersey crown on your head, which made you even more uncomfortable. More eyes on you. You didn't like when people looked at you. Snap, flash, alright here's your bookmark. My what? The Purity Princess gave you a bookmark. It had all the steps for how to be just like her.

¹ The Purity Princess was sent by God to teach you how to be. Your mom took you to see the Purity Princess when you were in third grade, just the right time. That was the first year they taught you about your menstrual cycle in school. It seemed like a lot of the other moms had the same idea; the pews were filled to the brim with the girls and their moms. They all seemed really excited. You put on your best excited face, too, though Gramma always said it wasn't very convincing.

God's Princess is beautiful from her head to her toes. All that she wears is Special...

*Her **Gown** is of the most beautiful white², because she has been covered by the blood of Jesus and she is pure before the Lord.*

*Her **Gloves**³ are for working to bless always in talent, ministry, school, worship or play - All that she does is given back to the Lord in Praise.*

*Her **Earrings** remind her to listen daily to wisdom from her parents, leaders and from the Lord.⁴*

*Her **Necklace** helps her to keep the wisdom she has learned in her heart; her **Crown** is for the wisdom she has learned and is using that wisdom⁵ to make decisions in her life that bless the Lord.*

² You were wearing blue jeans that fit weird, a cobalt blue t-shirt, and a white sweater with knitted details that went down past your knees. You smile awkwardly for the photograph and are wracked by a sickening, spiraling internal dread.

³ The only gloves you ever liked to wear were adult-size Grinch gloves with extra long, spindly fingers. You don't remember having any talents. At school, your band director told you to never play the saxophone again because you would never be good at it. At church, you were too shy to be in the choir and too meek most of the time to play with the other kids. It didn't seem to you that the meek were inheriting much of the earth.

⁴ You got your ears pierced when you were five as a reward for not whining for an entire week. It was a reward for learning to shut the fuck up.

⁵ The wisdom you've gained is mostly about what to avoid. You avoid wearing anything too tight so no one can tell you're going through puberty. You avoid showing your lanky arms in the hope that your Gramma won't notice that you're too skinny and force you to sit at the table until the roast beef is gone again. You felt sick all night.

*Her **Shoes**⁶ lead her to follow God's path, that leads to everlasting life.*

*Her **Shaw** is a covering of prayer, for she prays always⁷ and without giving up.*

*Her **Heart** is unseen, however it is the most important part, for it is the part that blesses God the most when she uses it to love the Lord with all her heart⁸, soul, mind and strength.*

*Like all Princesses, she has a Prince Charming, but He is one that will never fail or leave her. He is **Jesus** her Savior, and if she lives her life as the Princess he has called her to be, someday, she will live **Happily Ever After** with Him in Heaven.⁹*

⁶ You wore cowboy boots to school every day. They were always just a little too big, but they were the only shoes you ever felt comfortable in. That was until your gym teacher assumed you could teach the class the "Cotton Eye Joe" and all of your classmates turned to look at you. Eyes on you.

⁷ Your mom would let you wear her shawl (even The Purity Princess makes spelling mistakes) on special occasions. It was a black pashmina shawl, so it matched basically everything and was the softest thing you'd ever worn. You felt safe in it, closer to your mom, hidden in the shadows. You suppose that could be like a form of prayer.

⁸ Your heart was always beating against its cage, trying to ooze out from between the bars. The ribs bruised your poor little heart, and every time it pulsed it ached. Your mind was perpetually racing, running, sprinting, summer-saulting over itself. It probably learned to do those things where you did (gymnastics). You summoned all your strength just getting outside. There wasn't much left over to forfeit to God.

⁹ You're very happy for the Purity Princess that her Prince Charming will meet her in Heaven. Happily Ever After does sound pretty nice. But you don't have a bloody gown, or a "shawl," or the heart of a lion. You have shitty, ill-fitting jeans, Grinch gloves, cowboy boots, and you're so so so so so so so afraid of everything and everyone all of the time. If Jesus was calling somebody to be the next Purity Princess, he was going to have to choose one of the other girls.

Animal Planet

EMILY C. O'HARA

Sharp words work to trample each other in the next room over. There are two voices. The first, her dad's, is deep like an earthquake. The second, her mom's, is high-pitched and dry.

Meanwhile, small, pudgy fingers reach for the remote, increasing the volume of the animal planet raccoon documentary. Up past sixty, then seventy decibels.

We almost had lab raccoons instead of lab rats.

How do you think that makes the rats feel? Almost, almost, almost. "Maybe I'll leave, huh?" her dad taunts. "What would you do then?" "Leave and go where?" her mom says, choking back tears.

The sound of glass hitting the floor contaminates the air. An accident maybe, but probably not.

Raccoons do not mate for life.

Sometimes her mom's mascara runs and smudges under her eyes like a mask. Usually, when her mom cries it is not because of what is happening but because of what did not happen even when she was certain it would. She never had a vision, because as a devout Catholic her mom was not one to test fate, but she had a feeling.

This man standing in front of her, threatening to leave her with a five year old and a waitress's salary was the same man she used to feel in the air before it rained, the calm before the storm. He was the same man she used to taste in her coffee or think of when she held her breath too long.

And here he was now, proof that following her heart was the worst of all her bad ideas.

Back in the family room, the Discovery Channel exits with the promise of returning soon, and commercials colonize the screen.

On occasion, the girl likes to see how long she can hold her breath during commercials before her body decides to save her.

"Fucking Wendy's, Shelby! You're mad that I got Wendy's?"

"Because I made dinner for the family! I spent money and I spent all afternoon—"

The girl breathes in and does not breathe out.

A heaviness settles in her chest as she adjusts to a world without air. Everything becomes quieter somehow, like tossing under the waves. Flashes of barbecue sauce, then blue cheese. Lasagna so good your parents won't get divorced. Ice cream. Not just any ice cream. This ice cream has eyes and a nose and a mouth. It speaks through the screen.

"Bennington's ice cream is better than the best—"

She gazes up at the television from her place on the polyester carpet, eyes wide.

If she had a talking ice cream cone, she wouldn't eat it. She would keep it safe from anyone who would, fighting them with her bare hands if she had to.

Raccoons can be aggressive.

She would keep an icepack in her lunch box and take it to school with her when kindergarten started next week. She would be friends with the talking ice cream cone. Best friends. They could watch Animal Planet together on weekends.

She takes a deep breath, oxygen blooming in her lungs.

"Amanda honey?" Her mom calls from one room away. "Amanda, get in the car, we're leaving."

The girl does not bother asking where they're going. She knows they will not be going far.

They drive through the sunset, past cornfields and collapsing barns. Past couches on the side of the road and dogs tied up on short leashes. Eventually, her mom swerves the car into the 7/11 parking lot. Her manicured nails turn the key in the ignition until the engine's rumbling grinds to a halt, windows down, out of breath as if she ran the whole way here.

"Are you alright?" the girl asks.

"I never thought it'd be me, you know? I never thought it'd be me who ended up here."

"At 7/11?" she asks.

She can tell from her mom's expression that this was the wrong answer. She does not guess again.

"Can I go get some ice cream?" she asks instead.

"Sure, sweetie, sure."

Her mom fumbles with her purse. She hands her a five-dollar bill. She tells her to bring back the change.

Her mom remains in the car as the last remaining specks of sunlight go down the drain, her gaze fixed on some far-off point. If she squints hard enough she can see herself in California wearing a white sundress, lounging by the pool. She can see herself twenty-three and starryeyed, hun-

gry for all the days she had yet to devour. No husband, no kids. No past, no future.

“Where’s your mom, kid?” the teenager at the cash register asks the girl.

“In da car. Outside.”

“Can I help you find something?”

The girl nods. “Ice cream,” she tells the cashier. Not just any ice cream.

Once the ice cream is paid for she steps away from the counter, ripping the Bennington’s wrapper off. She stares down at it. No eyes, no mouth. Sleeping, probably.

“Wake up,” she tells her ice cream cone. “Wakey, wakey.”

The cashier looks deeply concerned.

The ice cream cone does not open its eyes. She was beginning to get the feeling it did not have eyes at all. She could feel the truth creeping up on her, one crack in the glass, then another. Her and the ice cream cone weren’t going to grow up together and go to the movies or the beach. The ice cream cone was not going to be her friend, it was going to be an ice cream cone. Hot tears tumble out of her eyes as she stumbles toward the door, leaving the mini freezer and all its broken promises behind.

Night air stings her damp cheeks as she enters the parking lot, ice cream in hand. She does not want to get back in the car. She doesn’t know what she wants. To be alone, she decides. Or maybe to be seen.

A rustling catches her attention, a noise coming from the dumpster at the edge of the parking lot. She stares straight ahead, transfixed.

A raccoon.

He creeps out from under the dumpster into plain view. His eyes are brown and honey-like. Large and forgiving.

She wipes her tears away with the back of her hand.

“I know all about you,” she tells him.

The raccoon stares back like he knows all about her, too.

Scribbles from that Night / Can People Tell I don't Smile the Same Way?

HANNAH RINEHART

It's too cloudy for a sunset
Too much a pretty day to wish my bones
Were growing flowers above a buried wooden box

Too dark to see the waves
The flash of a camera
The shaking of fingertips

It's too nice to sit in a bathtub
And watch the ripples never cease
The shivering, the chaos, the rise
Of pruney fingers to my eyes

Seeking that photo
Seeking freer waters
The seafoam pooled in the sand by our toes

My mind is not calm
These waters haven't stopped

I wish your smile was in that box.

All this happened, more or less

NOELLE G. MUNI

Aunt Judy's house never changed.
It was built by her father, years and years ago. The wooden paneling is all original, the swordfish on the wall was his biggest catch. Aunt Judy's house was teeny-tiny, just those two rooms, two bedrooms, and a bathroom that didn't have a shower (you had to go outside for that). The only big thing in Aunt Judy's house was the swordfish. It was huge, and blue, and supposedly stuffed, but it didn't look very soft to me.

I tapped it once when everyone else was asleep. I climbed up onto the couch, reaching my little fingers and rapped against its shell. Knock, knock, knock. Sounded empty. Not stuffed, just as I suspected. Things got complicated after that, though. I knew the swordfish at Aunt Judy's house wasn't filled with stuffing, but maybe there was something else in there. He was big enough that something could surely live inside of him. Maybe he's a Russian nesting fish and there are an infinite amount of smaller and smaller swordfish inside. Oh! Or maybe the tiny men who live in the tiny lighthouses on the shelves meet inside the swordfish for parties or Christmas. Or Hanukkah. I don't know what the tiny lighthouse men celebrate. They could celebrate anything.

All these years later, I wonder if maybe the swordfish has Uncle Larry's ghost in it. On second thought probably not. Afterall, Uncle Larry liked to watch the Phillies on TV, and the swordfish is facing the wrong way to watch TV. The street outside of Aunt Judy's window isn't very exciting to watch and I don't think Uncle Larry would like

being cramped inside a fish for very long.
Though I suppose ghosts could also be very, very small.
I don't think Uncle Larry's ghost would like being in there
even if he were small.
I haven't seen any wires going inside to hook up a tiny TV.

Five years before he fully died, Uncle Larry died on the
operating table, a clot in the pulsing tubes that
fed blood to his brain meant they failed to get the oxygen
to his brain and he died there. Aunt Judy was upset because
the doctors and nurses didn't bother to check his DNR,
which is a piece of paper that says if you're dead you want to
stay dead. Whirring, whirring, whirring,
then the snap, the crack of a rubber band,
the release of the pent up electrical surge.
And he was alive again. Or at least half of him was.
Not the half of him that could laugh
Or speak
Or move
Or drink water
Or eat food.

Just the part that could watch TV. Uncle Larry, though he had
to have his food blended and couldn't drink gin, would wear
his Eagles hat and sit under his Phillies blanket and watch
the game. Then, five years after that, that part of him died too.

Uncle Larry watched the TV all the time, so when we would
visit, we'd be stuck watching whatever Uncle Larry was watching.
This was the game, if a game was on, or it was Hallmark movies.
He really liked Hallmark movies, even though they're all the same.
Sometimes, if we were lucky, he'd find an old movie on TV that he
deemed worth watching. One time it was *Jaws*. I wondered while
watching it if this movie was the reason that Uncle Larry never walked
down the block to the beach with us. But then I remembered that
Uncle Larry would sometimes walk to the bay with us, so then
I wasn't so sure. One time it was *The Birds*. I was horrified
by that movie. But I felt better when Uncle Larry explained to me that
real birds don't act like *The Birds*, and that I didn't have to be scared
of made-up birds. He was good at grounding people, deflating
the balloon in their mind that filled up with worries.

One time I was walking back from the bay and refused to wear shoes. I stepped on a tiny cactus. The soft ball of my foot was filled with lots and lots of teeny-tiny needles. You could hardly see them. I hobbled into Aunt Judy's house, weepy-eyed and snotty-nosed. This was in the time before either half of Uncle Larry died, and he sat me on his TV watching chair. With tweezers, he carefully picked out all of the needles one at a time. Even the made-up needles that were only hurting me because I believed they could. I was always someone who was scared of made-up birds.

But Uncle Larry is dead now. And I know his ghost isn't living in the un-stuffed dead body of a very old swordfish. But I'm not going to check. If he is in there having a non-religious winter celebration with the lighthouse guys, I wouldn't want to interrupt. It's easier to think he's in there, too. Sometimes made up things aren't scary. Sometimes they help us through things that are.

Contributors' Notes

Ellie Bentz is a junior psychology major with a studio art minor. She loves to draw and paint.

Mikelyn G. Britt is native to Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania. Britt is a member of the Gettysburg College's class of 2023 where she is majoring in English with a writing concentration. She is also the Opinions Editor of the school newspaper, *The Gettysburgian*.

Andrew B. Casher is a junior studying English and education at Gettysburg College this year. He frequently writes poetry and short stories and also has self-published one novel.

Rivolia Chen Xiao-Yu (March 19, 2000–), is a Chinese Confucianist warrior and professionally a poet, author, scholar, translator, and an organizer of cultural-spiritual China activities. She studies, analyzes, and follows Chen Zi-Ang (659–700), a medieval Chinese poet, author, scholar, twice-prisoner, and a martyr. She also studies, analyzes, and promotes the Chinese Confucianist warrior psyche (such as the contributions of Huang Zongxi, a Confucianist warrior); in addition to appreciating and manifesting cultural-spiritual China.

Lauren A. Chu: My name is Lauren Chu. I am a senior from Wayne, Pennsylvania, majoring in English and studio art and the art genre head editor at *The Mercury*. I am also on the editorial board of *The Gettysburgian*, and am a dancer and social chair for Zouave Dance Company and Divine Dance Ensemble at Gettysburg College. I enjoy writing, working out, dancing, drawing, and spending time with friends and family in my free time.

Marisa Conners is a first-year Eisenhower Scholar planning to major in public policy and women and gender studies. In her free time, she loves to read, listen to music, and take long walks around town. Marisa is also a proud member of the Bullets Color Guard, Zouave dance group, and the Amnesty International Club.

Katherine C. Cornet is a first-year student at Gettysburg College and a women's soccer player who is currently majoring in English with a concentration in writing. She loves to write prose in the fiction genre.

Hannah Crowley is a junior at Gettysburg College studying English with a writing concentration and classics. Reading and writing are her favorite hobbies and a way for her to connect with others. She hopes to work in publishing and one day be able to share her own novels with the world.

Natalie M. Dolan '23 is a music major and writing minor at Gettysburg College. Her passion is exploring different ways of storytelling through both writing and musical composition. She specializes in short fiction and poetry.

Luca Espana, from Sherman Oaks, California, is a sophomore at Gettysburg College majoring in political science. An avid photographer, he has worked in various roles on campus including Athletics Photographer & Photo Director for The Gettysburgian. A member of Model United Nations and Eisenhower Institute participant, he has also enjoyed writing poetry in spare time when not writing for Gettysburg Connections, a local newspaper for the town of Gettysburg.

Christopher Pareja Garcia is a street photographer from New York City. He has been taking pictures since his sophomore year of high school and currently takes photos as a hobby. He takes most pictures on his iPhone and a Canon EOS Rebel T7.

Georgia Kirkendall is a first-year at Gettysburg College, who is struggling to make decisions other than what book to read next. She is an avid writer, tree-hugger, and dog enthusiast. Georgia's taking life day by day, with a paperback in one hand and a jar of peanut butter in the other.

Aiden Ludka: My class year is 2024, I'm studying environmental science with a minor in political science, and a fun fact about me is that I ate worms as a child until a socially unacceptable age.

Noelle G. Muni is a junior with an English major with writing concentration and art history at Gettysburg College. In addition to writing for and working on The Mercury, she writes for The Gettysburgian, works at the Schmucker Art Gallery, and enjoys engaging with art and literature across genres and time periods. Her favorite color is pink.

Emily C. O'Hara is currently a junior at Gettysburg College. She grew up in several places, never staying in the same state for long. She enjoys

writing in a variety of forms, especially songwriting and screenwriting. Her favorite aesthetic is dark academia.

Katelyn Oglesby '23 is an English with a writing concentration and political science double major from San Diego, California. She now lives in rural North Carolina. This year, she has served as Editor-in-Chief for *The Gettysburgian*. She is also a member of the Eisenhower Institute Fielding Fellows and Secretary for the service fraternity Alpha Phi Omega. She can usually be found perusing books in the Musselman Library browsing room. She hopes someday to be a published fiction author.

Hannah N. Preble, from Dublin, Ohio, is a first-year at Gettysburg College majoring in history. She has a deep passion for art history and world culture, and she tries to learn more about them through her work.

Mary Peter E. Rigg is a studio art and Spanish major. They like reading and knitting.

Hannah Rinehart is a senior English major with a writing concentration at Gettysburg College. She loves her position as Editor-in-Chief of the *Mercury* and hopes to continue working in the editing and publishing world post-graduation. She studies mathematics and German alongside literature and writing and spends her free time reading with her cat, Bumble, on her lap.

Julián Sánchez-Melchor is a religious studies major at Gettysburg College, class of 2024, focusing his study on Christianity, indigenous acknowledgment, and writing. In his work, he writes to capture the joys and struggles of his life as a queer Mexican American of indigenous descent. Julián has incredible pride in being a person of color and in his heritage. His art also reflects how his life has been shaped by Schizoaffective Disorder, a disability containing the symptoms of schizophrenia and bipolar disorder.

Beatrice Slevin-Trigo is a first-year student double majoring in English with a writing concentration and business, organization, and management. Writing has always been part of her life, and she hopes to become a published novelist in the future.

Kelly Smolik is a current junior at Gettysburg College, where she's studying English with a concentration in writing, and psychology. On campus,

she works at Musselman Library and plays the flute.

Theodore J. Szpakowski is a sophomore history major with minors in public history and writing. He enjoys writing along with playing “*Dungeons & Dragons*” and spending time in the library—basically anything with an element of storytelling.

Rory J. Wainwright: My name is Rory Wainwright. I am an English major with a writing concentration from Akron, Ohio. Writing has always been my passion, especially pieces about interpreting religion and art. Poetry is my favorite genre, with drama as a close second. I also enjoy writing about Greek Mythology and the action of play writing. I plan to graduate from Gettysburg and attend a graduate program of my choice to become an environmental writer, and to continue to write poetry in my free time.

Aly Leia Wein is a junior history Major, with writing and civil war era studies minors from Los Angeles, California. On campus, she has been involved with The Gettysburgian as the Director of Photography, the Office of Communications & Marketing as a Photo Intern, The Mercury, Schmucker Art Gallery, and Hillel. In fall 2022, she studied abroad in Bath, England. Prior to coming to Gettysburg, Aly was a figure skating journalist and photographer, covering international skating competitions and interviewing Olympic, world, and national level athletes as the founder of Edges of Glory. Aly loves musical theater, Disneyland, and woodsy wallpaper.

Emma Wylam is a junior at Gettysburg College. She is double majoring in history and studio art and minoring in public history. They find inspiration for their art from experiences and their day to day life. Experimentation with different painting styles and printmaking are their current interests in terms of direction for their art.

Judges' Biographies

Jennifer Clogg (*Fiction*) graduated from Gettysburg with a double major in English and Spanish and a concentration in writing. She is originally from Gaithersburg, Maryland. She was so honored to have been asked to serve as an alumni judge for the fiction section of the Mercury! Since graduating, Jennifer now works for Carahsoft Technology in IT Software Sales. In her free time, she loves reading with her book club, writing her own fiction stories, and spending time with friends.

Maddie Nieman (*Nonfiction*) '21 graduated with a B.A. in history and English with a writing concentration. During her time at Gettysburg College, she enjoyed working as an office assistant in the English department and serving as Managing Editor for The Gettysburgian. This past summer, she interned at the Princeton University Press in their Acquisitions Editorial Department. Currently, she works for the Bucks County Historical Society as a docent at Fonthill Castle.

Lauren Hand (*Poetry*) is a proud graduate of the Gettysburg College Class of 2020 and former member of the Mercury, originally from York Pennsylvania. She is currently a J.D. Candidate at the Penn State Dickinson School of Law, where she intends to graduate in May 2023. Lauren loves poetry.

Natalie Orga (*Art*) graduated from Gettysburg College in 2021 with a major in English, a concentration in writing, and a minor in studio art. During her time in college, she served as the Editor-in-Chief of the Mercury, the editorial intern for the Gettysburg Review, and a contributing writer for HerCampus and the Gettysburgian. She published mostly fiction and visual art, but also enjoyed journalism. Now, she is the Associate Editor of Delaware Today Magazine, writing about local news, businesses, people, arts and culture, history, the environment, and more. She continues to make and sell her artwork (mostly paintings) on her Etsy shop, Creations by NatCo, via her instagram, @natcat_creates, and in local shops.

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2023

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