



The Mercury
The Student Art &
Literary Magazine
of Gettysburg
College

Volume 2024

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2024

The Mercury 2024

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The Mercury 2024

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

2024

CYNDY BASIL | ELLIE BENTZ | ANDREW B. CASHER
ARCHER CASTLE | KATHERINE C. CORNET | HANNAH CROWLEY
DIPTIMAN DAS | LUCA ESPANA | CAMERON FLEMING | LAKEN
FRANCHETTI | GREER GARVER | ANTONIO GIORDANO | AINSLEY C.
GREEN | CASSIDY HAINES | ALEXANDER HANLEY | CHLOE E.
HANOUSEK | GEORGIA KIRKENDALL | JACOB KREBS | AUBREY
MANDICHAK | NOELLE G. MUNI | EMILY O'HARA | ELLA PRIETO
JULIÁN SÁNCHEZ-MELCHOR | ERIN SCANGA | NAT SCHNELLER
BETHANY SHIFFLETT | BEATRICE SLEVIN-TRIGO | THEODORE
SZPAKOWSKI | ALY LEIA WEIN | EMMA WYLAM

THE MERCKURY 2024



THE MERCURY

THE ART AND LITERARY MAGAZINE OF GETTYSBURG COLLEGE 2024

The Mercury

The Art and Literary Magazine of Gettysburg College 2024

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COVER ARTWORK: "You Will Be Okay" by Ellie Bentz

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 2024: Jennifer Clogg (Fiction), Hannah Rinehart (Nonfiction), Mikelyn Britt (Poetry), and Emily Ann Francisco (Art). The Mercury prize-winning titles are bolded in the Table of Contents. This year's winners are: **Georgia K. Kirkendall** (Fiction), **Hannah Crowley** (Nonfiction), **Julián Sánchez-Melchor** (Poetry), and **Diptiman Das** (Art).

PUBLISHING

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The Mercury would like to thank the Provost's Office and the English Department for their contributions. Another note of gratitude goes to magazine advisors, Kathryn Rhett and Rachele Salvini. A special thanks to all the students who contributed to The Mercury by sending in their work or serving as staff members. Staff readers invested a tremendous amount of time evaluating and selecting submissions, and we greatly appreciate their dedication. We believe that these combined efforts make The Mercury an eclectic publication that reflects the creativity of the student body of Gettysburg College.

The Mercury

Note: Prize-winning titles are listed in bold

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Growing

HANNAH CROWLEY

There is a tree growing in my bedroom back home. The trunk has fused with the aquamarine wall behind it, forming a stalk that reaches its branches to my ceiling, winding and extending across into every corner. It started out as a sprout when I was in middle school, a twig with a single leaf threatening to give way to the ease of gravity and fall to the floor. Now, the limbs, some spindly, others thick and hardy, reach far enough to tickle my nose from my bed on the opposite wall. Roots that were once tiny and wiry now snake beneath my navy carpet and break through the surface. Each passing year of my life brings new leaves, a stronger trunk, new growth.

All along the brown bark, scratches scar the surface of the tree's skin. Dozens, hundreds of lines of script carved in with a knife. Some are full sentences, others hearts with initials inside, or just a solitary word: *clarity is not glamorous; HC + AD; trying*. They range in age, some I scrawled years ago, others just yesterday.

But in the center of the trunk, years of growth and weathering have created a hollow, a nest to cradle and protect the thirteen notebooks sitting inside. Each a different size, color, and texture, they contain the details of my life, from the little jokes and memories to the biggest of my dreams, all scrawled in the same swirled, hardly-legible penmanship I've retained over the years. These notebooks lie at the very center of this growth, each page providing more strength to the branches, more stability to the roots, more power to claw to the sunlight coming through the windows. My journal collection is the heart and soul of my tree.

...

Maybe this is all a tad dramatic for a discussion of what are essentially my diaries, but if journaling has taught me anything, it's to embrace the mess that is the act of thinking and just write it down as honestly and unfiltered as possible. So, that is what I have attempted to do in all of my past journals, and what I will attempt to continue here as I gather my thoughts: writing honestly.

I started a journal for the first time in 7th grade for the same reason

many people do; I was struggling and didn't know how to change that. I was fighting to understand who I was and what I wanted. I knew I liked to read, write, and listen to music, but I felt lost coming to terms with the thought that that wasn't enough. Not enough for college, not enough for a career, and, as I thought then, certainly not enough to stand out from any other teenager around me. My waistlength blonde hair suddenly felt dull and straw-like, my thighs too soft, and my creative ideas too generic. It wasn't that I necessarily wanted to be popular or jaw-droppingly gorgeous, there was just an endless sense of questioning and losing my identity like I had never had before. It's difficult to pinpoint why I felt this sense of losing myself; maybe it was school, trying to fit in, or the constant stream of media I absorbed on the internet. Or, of course, maybe it was all just the teen angst that is destined to plague us.

All I knew was that I felt heavy lowness. It was an endless wave pushing me back and forth about how I should act, what I should want, who I needed to be to succeed. It would get to the point where I would have panic attacks lying in bed at night, staring at the ceiling and, even though I didn't know if I believed in God, praying that in the future I would feel okay.

It was a random day of the week that I learned about journaling. I had been scrolling on this, now deleted, app called Polyvore where you could post outfit ideas and hand-crafted aesthetic collages, very à la Pinterest. Somebody had posted a collage in pastel blues and purples about keeping a notebook around in which to store everything — from your greatest ideas to your deepest secrets — in one place to look back fondly upon when you are older. You could glue in random scraps of paper, tape in photos, write down playlists all to preserve for the future you, sort of like a scrapbook or a memory box.

Sure, I had kept a diary for about three weeks as a kid and inevitably forgot about it, but this kind of journaling seemed aesthetically pleasing to me, so 2015 Tumblr. In the world of the early internet, this aesthetic indicated a sense of “mysteriousness” and “depth” for teenagers, a romanticization of the idea of being “misunderstood,” angsty. Think of the tragic artist type. And, as a teenager having been raised on the internet, seeing journals filled with hastily scribbled thoughts, profound quotes, and analyses of song lyrics perfectly exemplified this idea of broken beauty.

I grabbed a blank notebook I had sitting in an often unventured part of my desk, took a black pen out of my pencil case, and laid my supplies before me on my bed. Immediately, the first page was too much pres-

sure, a silence I had to fill by myself, the first thing others could see. I flipped to the next page — that felt way less stressful. Stream of consciousness, the post had said. Just write anything you are thinking, even if it doesn't make sense.

“Maybe this will help.”

It was a release. Being able to spill out everything, every worry, every half completed thought, every ounce of internal dialogue to finally experience some silence in my brain. That was the first step, the first little twig, the sprout of the first leaf.

...

Over this Thanksgiving break, nearly nine years after beginning my first journal, I returned to the tree in my room, sitting beside my bookshelf on the carpet, my back pressed to the lofty trunk and the leaves fluttering above. My head was a jumbled mess, what ifs bouncing back and forth as I tried to make sense of the future, decipher what I want. With graduation looming, each possibility, each decision, felt like a complete finalization, a choice impossible to alter. Moving back home, moving with my boyfriend, finding a job, sinking more money into grad school; no decision seemed entirely correct or safe, and thinking about it sent my brain buzzing.

The best way to describe it was that I felt stuck, stagnant like dead air. No matter how desperately I wanted the refreshing flush of oxygen in my lungs, each breath felt stale, empty, and hot. With each push or pull I'd be affecting someone — my parents, my boyfriend, my friends — but for some reason I felt unable to move myself in the direction of choosing myself: what I wanted, what I knew would help me be happy, at least momentarily, rather than just trying to live up to the expectations around me.

The cool shade under the tree provided a solace, the bark a comforting scratch against my skin. Staring at the branches above me, I found myself facing my journals stacked one by one, and I ran my fingers across their varied spines. Maybe the best way to regain that sense of myself, who I am and what I want, is to return to that past girl and see what she has to say.

...

My first journal contains a variety of musings, from everyday thoughts to big world questions. I copied down random quotes I'd found on Tumblr and doodled raindrops falling around the words. For example, “People cry not because they're weak, it's because they've been strong for too long” from Johnny Depp. Maybe that one was a little dramatic (but younger me clearly did not think so considering I proceeded to also rewrite the quote onto a piece of printer paper and tape it to my bedroom door

for two years). On one page, I had used black and purple glitter gel pens to draw stars shining over waves of the sea, encompassing lyrics from a Wind and the Wave lyric: *My mind is an endless sea / Maybe if I am good to him, he'll be good to me.*

There were long, rambling scribbles wondering why I felt so scared and telling myself “this too shall pass.” And the more I flipped through the pages, the more it did. Existential drabbles gave way to games of M.A.S.H played with my best friends, lists of places I wanted to visit in the future, and fancasts for my favorite book characters. No matter how anxious or scared I had been, things had gotten better, a little more into perspective. With each page, I could feel myself breathe a little deeper, my lips grow a little smile.

Continuing to rifle through my journals makes nearly every moment of my life replay; every scrap of paper, every doodle marks a distinct time, a distinct me.

Journal three marks my first kiss at age 16. Glittery pink hearts border the page as I gushed about how my then boyfriend watched me perform with my band at the Hard Rock Cafe in Boston for the first time, and then proceeded to kiss me on a bench in the rain. Two journals later, this would be followed up by a ripped-up collage of this now ex-boyfriend’s Christmas card with a curly mustache drawn on him followed by a very, very long rant. In my defense, who sends their ex-girlfriend a family Christmas card after breaking her fragile heart?

Journal eight contains the trials and tribulations of college applications. It holds pros and cons lists, stickers from college visits, and endless deliberation with myself. I was constantly comparing myself to the hundreds of other students at my uber-competitive high school, obsessively checking Instagram posts to see where people got accepted to and why I seemed to get rejection letter after rejection letter.

“I am ENOUGH” I wrote in Sharpie, the message bleeding onto the next page. I continued: “It was surprisingly therapeutic just to write that. The cry came, but that’s okay. I will not give others the power to make me question my choices and hesitate making decisions.”

And then I got a little more intense with it:

“The Fuck? The Fuck Dude? Who in the burning fires of Hell said that you could have any influence over my mind and my actions? Cause *ahem* it CERTAINLY was not me. How dare you try to usurp my power from me?? NO.”

WOW. I mean, what was all that about? Usurp? And who was I

even talking to? But in all honesty, I'm proud of myself for motivating myself and for not censoring my emotions. One of the things I had to train myself out of when I began journaling was censoring myself. The thought of somebody finding my notebooks and perceiving my writings as inconsequential or unsophisticated once made my cheeks hot, and I worried I should hide myself even from the blank page. Now, I find myself immeasurably grateful and proud for the moments in which I ignored this fear and I wrote the most unabashedly and without shame. It is in these entries that I can most clearly identify how deeply I felt my problems and how far I've come in healing from them. There is a tangible power in those moments.

Journal nine contains a bittersweet mix of emotions. Embedded in the pages is a sticky note with the scribbled answers to ice-breaker questions that my peer in a breakout room (thank you, Zoom college) gave me during our first day of class in my freshman spring: my peer who a year later would become my boyfriend. But just pages later, in a small section that is now bound with a paperclip so that I don't even have to flip through it, are paragraphs about the moments when I most disliked myself: the moments when my body most felt like an inescapable cage, when the mirror was my worst enemy. The nights felt long, failure felt imminent, and yet each page is proof that I kept going. I kept going for pages and pages and notebooks and notebooks.

Holding the journals, they felt like physical manifestations of my past mind. The leather ones are worn with the oils of my hands, others have tear stains on the pages (that I deliberately smeared to *make sure* future me knew what I was feeling). In the moment, no matter how irrational my feelings or my thoughts felt, these journals proved that they were real and true, and each new page, each new book, was proof that I had been strong enough to overcome them. They are all a part of who I've been, who I am, and who I will become; they are all a part of my evergrowing tree.

It was like sitting there on my bedroom floor, I was able to hold her hand, to be alone with my past self, the truest self. Under the tree, the shield of my journals and most vulnerable thinking, the culmination of my development to adulthood, I saw my younger self for the person she was: a creative, curious young girl, stronger than she could have imagined. I gave her a small smile, hoping she'd sense that confidence, the understanding, and ever so slightly her lips gently lifted back.

...

It's been a long week and a half since break. And by long, I mean

I've broken up with my boyfriend, finished four projects, and binge-watched too many episodes of *Jeopardy* to count kind of long. And yet in that time I've also managed to write 25, maybe 30 pages in my current journal.

My current journal is square-shaped with a leather cover and a string that binds the covers together. The inside cover is littered with stickers I acquired over the summer, and many of the pages are stained with spilled coffee near the bottom of the spine. On the very first page, I traced out a quote that became my mantra. Over the summer, I saw Stevie Nicks perform in Nashville, and when talking about aging and life, she said this: "I would sit down and I would go like 'I am still Stevie.' I would listen to myself say that. And now, once in a while, I do the same thing, I put that bed on the floor, I sit down and go, 'I hope I am still Stevie.'"

For some reason this stuck for me. Looking back at these journals, I sit there and think, *I hope I am still that girl.*

Pretty soon, with the close of my time at college, I will return back to my bedroom, back to my tree, back to where the sapling first began. I will place this journal next to my others in the hollow of my tree. With that, the branches will grow a little longer, the roots a little deeper, and the leaves a little greener. I will look up from beneath my tree, noting each scratch and scar, and will think about how grateful I am. I'm grateful for every part of it: the love letters, the rants, the breakup explanations, each random thought. For every person who has been a part of it all.

I said it best in journal number nine:

"I never truly lost myself in the hard times, my mind and heart were just clouded...I still want to treasure my memories and the growth I've experienced."

Like I have so many times before, I will sit beneath my tree, and I will open a new spotless notebook, cracking the spine just a bit. The sun will twinkle between the branches, sending light sparkling across the blank page. The leaves above will dance, encouraging me to begin, and I will listen.

And with that, my tree will grow a little more.

Memorial

AINSLEY C. GREEN

The Japanese maple rooted in the back right
Corner of our yard lasted a few seasons. It was small and fluffy, all
Whimsical wisps of feathery crimson leaves. As my mother and
I dug up the earth to make a home for this tree, I couldn't help
But glance at the emptiness of the backyard. The breeze carrying a whisper
From our windchimes, jumbled notes of "Somewhere Over the Rainbow."
The fire pit overflowing with floating ash and dead branches, waiting
To be burned. Waiting to be acknowledged. The dusty patches of dirt
Where our rickety swing set planted its feet into the ground, the
Swing set we tore down as a family with our bare hands as it began to
Crumble to the ground, screws loosened with no care as we swung to the
Stars. Fifteen, I saved a wood piece from the scraps of the structure, the
Castle I ran to after leaping off the school bus steps at six years old
When my father painstakingly scoured the instructions all day to
Build it. And now it was gone. My imagination, my childhood,
My everything, or so I thought. The tree didn't belong there, but we stood
Back to admire our efforts; it was a pretty little picture, adorned with blue
Twinkling lights and surrounded by a rich coating of mulch and some
Peculiar flowers – bleeding hearts my mother called them.
A bench was placed in front of the tree, and on summer nights I would
Flee to the base of the yard and sit there, talking. Only the fireflies glitter-
ing
In the trees could hear me, especially when I reached out and captured
Them as they flew by. I used to chase the creatures for
Hours and hours when there were hours to spare. When there was
Simplicity and the yard glowed a little bit brighter through my youthful
Vision. Nevertheless, the fireflies trapped in my hands tickled as they
Crawled around, and I had to let them go. I said goodbye as they flew away
Leaving me in the eerie softness of the night. I love you, and I walked back
To the house, hoping my mother wouldn't ask where I was
Even though I know she did the same thing sometimes.
The tree never got bigger or stronger, and yet withstood the weather at its

Peak intensity. I wondered how the fireflies would survive.
And still, each July, they emerged again and hovered by my face.
Something switched, and the tree went rigid; the trunk turned gray.
Draining the color from the beautiful leaves and leaving them singed.
One by one, the crisp remains drifted to the ground pitifully.
This time the tree was at a point of no return, and so we dug it out of the
Ground. In the springtime, a bush and a new array of flowers were planted
In its place. The bench stayed where it was, creating its own divots in
The dirt the longer it was there.

Moth

NOELLE G. MUNI

I didn't save the moth.

I imagined helping him,
how he'd tell his moth friends
about how he spent a long
portion of his moth life in
my moth hospital, but ultimately
he made it.

And how I'd feel good
knowing how such a big impact
was made on his tiny moth life
with hardly any sacrifice of mine.

But I didn't help the moth.
I just watched his helpless
skittering and lopsided flapping on the
sidewalk and kept moving
imagining I was a hero.

The Lowest Point

ARCHER CASTLE

My heart slammed against my chest desperately, producing a deep, throbbing ache. My muscles burned with horrible heat, pushed to their limits by a walk not meant for the human body. My hands were crusted over with brown-white salts and throbbing with the feeble blood coursing through them. My feet, entombed in crunching, waterlogged sneakers, burned with water that gave no nourishment and warmth that punished. It was over one hundred and twenty degrees.

In times long past, a lake occupied this sweltering hellscape, but it died thousands of years before the first human was born. As the water that was once there was whisked away on blasted wind, evaporating almost entirely in the face of its surroundings, it left only the barest hints of puddles and its salt behind, coating the basin in sterile white where the lake once was.

After that, the basin was vacant for many years: locked in salty sleep. It woke only with the arrival of the Timbisha Shoshone, an indigenous group that lived nearby for countless centuries. They were entranced by the salt flats' alien surface, coated in crumbling hexagons, and with water that bitterly laughed at the idea of giving life. Only God could be found there, in that silence.

Before arriving at these flats proper, Mom and I had driven to the lookout point above the basin and surveyed the valley in its entirety to get a sense of the scale of the whole thing. We were tourists, after all. Why not take in the view? Beyond the salt flats were wide, sparse fields of brown sand, and eventually the rising of mountains, stretching past the mind's capacity to process distance, forever and ever until only the imagination was left to measure the miles. Instead of going to the designated observation balcony with provided ramps, Mom and I went the other way, clambering up a hill of loose rocks, dust, and stinging nettles.

I scabbled to the top, my fifteen-year-old legs pushing ahead, almost running away from my mother behind me who pushed labored breaths into the crisp, lonely air. Alone at the top for a brief second, I looked down at The Lowest Point in North America, watching the cars pass

on this road, and felt so impossibly small, as though I didn't exist at all. It was a religious sense of awe, brought about through the total absence in this small piece of the world.

Silence fell over me for the moment afterwards, filled by the miles and miles of barren vista, until my mother made it to the top as well. "This is why we go off-road, eh? Get to the real good stuff."

"I think this is the most beautiful thing I've ever seen." The words came almost unbidden to my lips, found their way into the world and wrapped themselves around my heart, still pulsing in reverie. At fifteen years old, I had seen many things, but this was beyond. We both took pictures for a while, enjoying the scene in our own selfish ways. An appropriate time after, when we were done with our stop, she looked over beneath sunglasses, baseball cap, hoodie-as-sunshield, and we began our trek down. I followed her, carefully lowering ourselves down the way that we came.

Back in the car, I put my feet up on the dash, held by the seat's cushion and a comforting breeze on the back of my legs that told me that I was safe. We filled the cool air of the rented sedan with wisping conversation of no consequence, the '115°' on the dashboard display reduced to an abstract number. We were passing time, volleying meaningless words as we watched the miles to our destination tick down, down, down. And then we were there. The Lowest Point in North America. Badwater Basin.

...

The National Park Service designates the hike that we went on as "easy to difficult depending on length... Do not attempt when it's hot!" When to attempt it then? In the dark, it still only gets as cool as 85 to 95 degrees when we were visiting. No, better to go at the peak of the heat, to brave the crucible, then to not go at all. And so, we left our silver sanctuary and stepped off of the pavement to experience the basin.

We were not alone there, to my surprise. I remember it being almost crowded. People of all sorts were around us, returning from their hike to nowhere or overtaking us to get to the center of it all. I kept looking at their faces for some sort of indication of what it was like out there, at the end of their journey. There was no indication I could glean. It was something that we would have to find out for ourselves, out on the salt flats.

Suddenly, after a half a mile of mostly quiet hiking, the other tourists seemed to vanish around us. In the distance, we could see moving dots impossibly far away—people in it for the long haul. Casting my gaze out into the wilderness, I felt a brief stab of envy for those hikers, voyagers borne by tireless legs across foreign seas of white salt and near-acidic puddles of stagnant water. I wondered what it would be like, alone out there.

What it would be like, to be surrounded by nothing and nowhere.

But our near-silent journey was over. We took photos yet again, fitting the world into hand-sized boxes, and I tasted the salt that thickly coated the ground. Though it felt like table salt, crumbling in my mouth, I knew it was something earthier, wilder. It was not safe to eat, and I was warned, but I could not resist. How could you go to a land where no life could be pulled from the ground and not suffer a little? Mom spoke up then, turning back to the parking lot that promised blessed respite, and sighed slightly.

“I think we oughta head back. The heat’s getting to me.” It was getting to me too, though I hadn’t said it out loud for fear of breaking the spell that hung over the Lowest Point in America. There was no release from its tyrannical grip, its assault on the eyes, the skin, the head, the heart, the spine. It was campfire heat, that flash of intensity that scares the intrepid away from backyard bonfires, but it was never ending. The world had warned us to pull away as we descended into the basin fifty miles distant, but we had not listened. Now, as we walked back to our car and its conditioned air, a peculiar feeling began to take hold.

The distance to the car seemed to telescope. Our limbs were heavy. I’ve told you of this feeling before, in the heart and hand, in the feet and muscles. As we trudged back to that lot, a mere 2,500 feet between us and salvation, I was uncertain. Despite the small distance, despite the other travelers going forward and back with us that could carry our unconscious bodies, I was not sure I would make it back to that parking lot. There was an urge that began to build in me, a calmness, a numbness. Soothing weight, a desire to sit, to lay down, to rest. I knew that I could not. Something rang in my heaving, hollowed-out chest then, from a place that I had not known existed before the hike. A deep, animal truth: to sit down in that place was to die.

It was like nothing I had ever felt, and nothing I *have* ever felt, this truth. It shocked through my limbs and into my thought-starved brain. It filled me, swelling from a place behind my heart into my entire being. The feeling was foreign, but I retroactively knew it was there all along, hidden behind layers of excess fat and comfort. Apotheosis. Revelation.

While before, there was intermittent chatter between me and my mother, now it was silent. Our bodies manned the walls of a bloody siege against the heat, a valiant, but lost cause. Despite losses, we were winning. The parking lot grew and grew. The road went from a thin horizon line to a feat of engineering and perseverance. The hikers were distant at our backs now, less real, somehow. Finally, to both of our silent relief, the car.

Silver flashing in the punishing heat, civilization-in-a-box. Frantically, we clambered in, and before we drove away, admitting to each other our fears of death, we made whooping sounds of relief, relinquishing our primal joy and releasing it back to the land which had been its genesis.

...

We drove away in heat even more extreme. The temperature on the dash climbed to 125, 130 degrees. It was almost beyond fathoming. Would our sneakers melt to the rock? Would our clothes catch flame, there in the sun? We knew that our skin would redden, blister, and peel, but how quickly? What could we risk? We decided not to check, and continued to drive, leaving the world of Badwater Basin far behind us. We were becoming ourselves again, feeling the air conditioning flow over our bodies, stopping for lunch and staving off our thirst with hearty salads and imported water.

We were talking and laughing, following the satellite triangulation of our phones to our next destination (the Manzanar National Historic Site) when my mother slammed suddenly on the brakes. As we skidded to a stop, I looked up to see what exactly was the matter. Our surroundings had changed since we had left the Basin, if not the heat; waist-high shrubs dotted the landscape, dark brown boulders interrupted the sandy ground, and unlucky insects yet again shattered themselves against our bumper. While mountains still ringed us, signaling that we had not yet left Death Valley, not yet, it was a kinder world that we had journeyed to. In this world, we had stopped in the middle of the road to witness a low shape lope across the road.

It was a coyote, of that we were sure. Small, but a coyote nonetheless. Padding across the road, it was almost comically thin, ribs showing beneath a windblown coat, twig-thin neck holding a head that seemed to weigh down the rest of its body. For a moment, it looked almost unaware of our presence, our two-ton intrusion. Suddenly, it stopped, and tilted its bobblehead up at us.

I took my feet off of the dash, and leaned in. It looked at our car with what seemed to be fierce disdain, eyes judgemental. Deep brown, with small dark pools in the center that dropped into infinity. In retrospect, it was probably looking at our car's headlights or the grill, but at the time, it felt like the coyote was looking at me.

It turned away from us after its brief pause, and lowered its head from our gaze. Moving towards the brush away from where it came, it moved off of the road, faster now, bounding into the wild landscape. With seemingly impossible vigor in its limbs, it ran into the brush, kicking up small piles of sand behind it. And it was gone.

In that moment, I felt almost as if I understood it. I saw its trail stretching back into the burning desert valley, and where it would go afterwards beyond all human sight. I saw it struggle to find food in this world of nothing-at-all, coughing up dust, searching desperately for shade, for water, for anything other than relentless heat. I saw it moving, never lying down, as it shambled onwards in search of something to devour. I felt its heart seize, like mine had on that basin, feel that urge to slip into quiet acceptance, and shake off its feeble mortality, shrugging off its bones, its muscle, its needs. I felt it disappear into the air itself, a heat shimmer un-touchable and untouched, a dot disappearing beyond a forbidden horizon. I had come close to that coyote, separated by a hundred or more miles, dying there in the desert at the Lowest Point in America. For a brief moment.

And then the car started again. We were driving, and I was jolted back to myself.

“Wasn’t that cool, huh! You definitely don’t see stuff like that back home.” My mother was accelerating us back to our journey, twenty, thirty, fifty miles now, screaming along gray asphalt to leave Death Valley behind forever. I nodded my agreement, issued a breathless affirmative. I put my legs back up on the dashboard, and closed my eyes.

...

Now it is a comfortable 75° outside, and I am walking through the breeze and the sky, slightly overcast. Clouds promise rain, and keep their promise later, but not now. Now, they hang, smothering and pendulous, providing cover from the bleak, autumn sun. Grass grows in abundance, deciduous trees sail upwards in a riot of colors, and all around me, life sings with abandon.

Suddenly, I am flung away from myself to somewhere beyond a flat horizon. I am far away from my body, tasting something awful without a tongue and feeling tingling pain without limbs. Then, just as suddenly as I was taken, I am again in my body not even having broken stride. When I return, for a few sepia-tinted seconds, in that place past my ribs beneath hurt and comfort, I run next to that poor animal, starving away in that unforgiving landscape, perpetually moments from death. I am blanketed by the comforting weight of the inferno without and the numbness within, surrounded forever by nothing but faraway mountains and the pitiless blue sky. In that moment, I can hear it far below: the ecstasy of terrible, final truth.

2019

EMILY C. O'HARA

I am in Bermuda feeling like
my parents paid a lot of money to watch the world end.
I run my fingers through the tranquil water and send microplastics scatter-
ing. This doesn't sit right with me.
I swallow down the feeling.

At night I watch waves crash against the beach
as moonbeams reflect against chunks of white plastic.
I wonder how many miles the fragments swam to get here,
each piece arriving like a message in a bottle.
I wonder how many more messages are on their way.

During the day I swim off the coast with the intention of collecting one or
two beer cans.
I find myself becoming a dot on the horizon,
taking off my sun shirt and using it as a makeshift trash bag. Each day the
men who work at the hotel go out in their boats to collect the Manawar
jellyfish
that are poisoning the ocean.
Their boats race by and I go underwater so I don't smell the exhaust.

This was the year the fires happened. They burned through
35 million acres in Australia.
They lit 7,860 candles in California.
Ocean temperatures
reached record levels of heat, raising the bar for any other year wishing to
claim the throne.
Around 9 million metric tons of plastic dived into the ocean.

Every night while I eat dinner the wind twists my hair into small knots.
It gets dark as I listen to the rhythmic sound of waves crashing against

hotel beach chairs.

When I was little
I believed in the ocean the way some people believe in God.
I would ask it for favors such as big waves or contentment.
Now I avoid looking at it while I finish my meal knowing that if I do I will
see moonlight reflect against yet another
plastic bag.

I collect scraps under the sun for as long as I can,
but eventually my legs cramp up and I swim back to shore.
I take my collection of plastic to the nearest trashcan and wonder if the
ocean forgives me.
The tourists on the beach, sixty-five and finally here, piña colada number
three in hand,
keep telling me “You’re not going to fix it.” And I respond silently,
adamantly,
“At least I know something is wrong.”

Fishing

ANTONIO D. GIORDANO

A fin flashed to my left and a Fish half my size poked its head from the ocean. Its beautiful scales caught the sun and bounced into my eyes.

“Help!” it yelled through gargles of water. Without a second thought I stabbed the Fish through the back, just below its dorsal fin, and hoisted it onto the wooden raft. It flopped for a moment, thumping against the floor. I stared as it shook and waited for it to speak again. Blood poured from its wound and soaked my raft. I grabbed my makeshift oar and raised it above my head.

“Wait!” it cried as I brought the oar down onto its head. I stumbled back and let out a cry. I grabbed my throat, passing over my shaggy beard, it was a sound I had not heard in what felt like forever. “You prick!” the Fish cried. “You stabbed me!”

“You’re a fucking fish?”

“And you’re a dick, you hit me!” The Fish continued to flop around, splattering blood across the planks. “You going to just stand there? Pull it out!”

I shuffled over, grabbing hold of the spear and putting a foot on the Fish. It squirmed as I struggled to pull it from the scales. In a spray of red and a fleshy squelch, the spear came loose.

“Thanks, I guess,” the Fish said. I stared at the Fish in bewilderment as it spoke. “The water, it’s suffocating.”

“You’re a fish.”

“You’re a man, so? Stop staring, you’re making me uncomfortable.”

I turned away and looked out to the sea. The vast blue reached out beyond the horizon; the sun shimmered off of its surface in every direction. The sky was a pure blue, featureless expanse that seemed to stretch forever.

“You’re far out,” said the Fish.

“I am.”

“How long?”

“I don’t know.”

“Months?”

“Could be.”

“Years?”

“Feels like it.”

“What did she look like?”

“I can’t remember.” I sat and continued to paddle. The Fish flopped a bit closer to me, placing its fin on my knee. I paused for a moment. “Jet-black hair. Curls. Every time I walked into a room I could smell her perfume, even if she had never been there...” I looked down at the Fish and realized what it was doing. I picked up the oar and stood over it. “Fucker.” I croaked out before bringing the paddle down on its head. I beat at it; with each crunch a new bit of bone or blood would shoot out onto the deck of the raft. I continued until its head was caved in and its brain oozed out of its contorted skull.

The body began to stink and I tried to push it toward the sea. Just as I got it to the end of the raft a pair of pink webbed feet perched on the heap of flesh. A bright white Bird sat on the Fish, its orange beak clicking softly as our eyes locked.

“You going to eat that?” the Bird said.

“You going to eat that?” I mocked, exaggerating a squawk. “Go crazy.”

The Bird tore into the Fish’s flesh, throwing back its head to engulf each chunk in one gulp. I turned my back to the bird and continued to paddle, my eyes scanning the sea for any sign of motion. I heard the sounds of the gruesome tearing stop and then the soft plops of feet on wood. I looked to my side and the Bird waddled up next to me. It stared up into my eyes. I turned back to the sea.

“My wife drowned,” it barked.

I slowly turned my head to the bird.

“Dragged out during a storm yesterday.”

“It’s been clear for days.”

“Doesn’t make it any less true.” The Bird glared at me and fluttered its wings. I mock swung the paddle at the Bird and it jumped to the edge of the raft. The Bird tilted its head and let out a squeak. “What are you looking for? I’m looking for my wife.”

“Nothing, nothing important.”

“Something to keep your mind off her?”

I ignored the Bird and paddled in silence. The sun began to set on

the horizon, going lower and lower until I could barely make out the features of the waves.

“She’ll be harder to find.” The Bird finally spoke again. “With the dark and all that.” Again, I ignored the Bird. “Did she ever talk much? Mine talked all the time, couldn’t get her to shut up.”

I chuckled, laying the paddle down by my side. “Yeah. Didn’t like the quiet.”

“Neither do I.” We sat in silence for a moment. The only noise was the quiet slosh of the water coming up onto the raft. “Why’d she go?”

“She didn’t, I did, and it wasn’t my choice.” I spoke. The Bird looked at me and cocked its head to the side. “Just, got separated. You can’t always pick when it’ll happen, it just does. Some things are out of our hands.

“Wings.” The Bird said, flapping his wings in front of my face.

“Yeah, wings.” I stared out at the sea. “We’d sit for hours. Talking. I can remember every little word.”

“So, why’d you let her go?” the Bird asked. I turned to look at the Bird. All I could see was its dark silhouette. I stood, gripping the oar as tight as I could. I reared it back, then loosened my grip. I dropped it and let out a sigh.

“I don’t know. Not our time?”

“Is it ever?”

I laid down next to the bird, my arms stretched behind my head. I began to laugh.

“What?” the Bird asked.

“I didn’t even hold her hand.”

“Your wife?”

“Not even close, bud, not even close.”

sunday

ALY LEIA WEIN

the beady sunlight leaks through the kitchen window.
i pull at my sweater and squint my eyes.
 you're even more handsome than in my dreams.

you put the kettle on and wait patiently for it to boil.
 you were always so much more patient than me.

“green or black tea?” you ask, in that lovely low baritone.
i tell you that black tea has more caffeine than green tea,
 and then you mark me with your kiss and stain me with your
touch.

i secretly want lemon chamomile or that peach-infused oolong you like,
but i say, “did you know that raspberry oatflower is my favorite?”
“what the heck is an oatflower?” you laugh, and reach for the sachets in the
cabinet.
 the morning looks good on you.

it highlights your dimples and that indigo twinkle in your eye.
 everything looks good on you.

i envy the way life comes so easy for you.
 i wish it could be that easy for us.

“loving you is effortless,” i wish you would tell me, but you never do.
 instead you say, “do you want honey in your tea?”

i ask for salt in my tea because it soothes my sore throat.
you squeeze fresh lemon and mince up some ginger, for fun.
“good for the immune system,” you remark,
 and then you lead us onto the porch to soak in the new day.

i sip my tea in silence while you read the newspaper.
i think it's so cute that you read the paper.
it makes me feel like we're an old married couple,
and not two young idiots in love.

you finish your tea first and ask if i want any coffee.
"i hate coffee," i remind you, so you bring me a second cup of tea instead.
i memorize the way your face moves when you smile,
and i try to forget what it was like before.

Verses

ANDREW B. CASHER

These darkened scrolls
Which cut through my chest
They are written upon with ink of blood
Watch them as they flow
With each beating of my heart

With each second
With each tremulous breath
I take a viscous step
Through the marshland
Toward my grave

Scream into a cup
Shake it up
 See if it echoes
 See if it echoes
 See if it echoes

Lift your hand
From the cracked rim
Listen close
There is no echo left
No one to send it back

Smash the hive
Curse the bees
Eat the honey
Spit it out
Then repeat

These accursed walls
Built from the ash of the ash of the ash

Conjured by The Consciousness
The God
Begin to close inwards
I am forgotten.

See if it echoes

Deliverance

ARCHER CASTLE

tw: body horror

Inside a church as black as pitch, so black, so black, a dark abyss,
Inside a church as black as pitch, the mouths demand their toll.

They squirm and scrape and masticate,
themselves, the air, and everything,
with teeth and gums and bleeding tongues
the mouths demand their toll.

Your blood is given, ounce by ounce, it pours like velvet, to the mouths,
which squirm and scrape and masticate
your blood, which you now give.
the teeth and gums and bleeding tongues
they drink your velvet blood.

your flesh is given up as well,
a customary gift.
A kindness, simple, fair and free,
as you yourself will soon now be,
as flesh is given up as well, inside a church as black as pitch,
to many, many, many, many,
many, many, mouths.

it tears and shreds and bleeds, your skin,
unwilling to be thrown into
the grinding mill, devouring all your gifts
which you now give.
the texture rich, the layers thin,
the rapid way that it gives in,
your skin,

within the church as black as pitch,
which houses, mindless, gnashing mouths
which squirm and scrape and masticate
your skin and very blood.

what next you give is bone, my friend.
the bone, and marrow too.
No need to be all squeamish now,
you've no way backwards anyhow,
so give up bone and gently bow, inside the black, so black, abyss.
so give up bone, and gently bow,
as crunching, snapping, ground to dust,
then far beyond, as just like us,
you give up bone, and marrow too.
The spongy nourishment goes through
the many, many, many, many,
many, many mouths.

They speak, the mouths, as wide they gape,
though silently they speak.
so quiet in these dark-hued halls
as noiseless, mindless altar calls
demand you now come forth.

then eyes go, muscle, heart, then brain,
then mind, then self, then just remains
the only thing to give.
your mouth.

It's just the mouth now, that they want,
and you must give it, to the mouths,
which squirm, and scrape, and masticate,
and name you kin and kind.
you give your mouth, and then you bite,
as next in line, so full of joy,
arrives a hapless girl or boy,
to now give up their blood.

their blood and flesh and bone and eyes, muscle, heart, then brain, then
mind,

then self, then finally their mouths,
to join the silent chorus dirge,
which from your mouth can now emerge,
as closing down, it has the urge
to squirm and scrape and masticate,
Inside a church, a dark abyss,
with many, many, many, many,
many, many, many, many,
many, many, many, many,
many,
many,
friends.

Celiac Disease: The Tale of the “Chip Dilemma” and Cross Contamination

LAKEN FRANCHETTI

I have quite a wide range of anxieties: spiders, losing the people I love, unfulfilled potential, getting called out in class to answer a question when my hand wasn't raised, disappointing people, failure, forgetting to turn my phone on mute before class starts, tripping in front of people, and Celiac Disease. That last one is essential. It has to be.

When my sister was a few months old, she ended up in the NICU. My parents had been struggling to find a formula that agreed with her, but what they didn't know was that her body was fighting against itself on the inside. Her body had begun to shut down due to the gluten that she was ingesting, and doctors had not yet considered Celiac Disease as a possible culprit. My parents were given a “liquid gold” formula that my sister could live off of (nicknamed due to the expensive price tag that came with it). She wasn't diagnosed with Celiac Disease until she was three years old, and doctors then credited Celiac as the cause for her near-death experience.

I was tested for Celiac in the third grade because I had started to show some of the classic symptoms: a bloated stomach and frequent bouts with constipation and diarrhea (which is obviously no fun). I was quickly diagnosed with Celiac, and we later found out that my mom was the parent who carried the gene, yet she only started showing symptoms years after I had been diagnosed. My dad's the only one who doesn't have Celiac. You could say he's the only “normal” one.

Celiac Disease is an autoimmune disorder, and it's estimated that 1 in 100 people have Celiac. When people with Celiac Disease eat gluten, their body activates an immune response that attacks the small intestine. This in turn damages the villi, which line the small intestine and promote nutrient absorption, so when the villi are damaged, nutrients cannot be absorbed properly. According to The Celiac Disease Foundation, eating gluten can cause the following symptoms: abdominal pain, bloating, anxiety (go figure), headaches and migraines, joint pain, nausea and vomiting, peripheral neuropathy, and more. Untreated Celiac Disease can lead to more drastic health conditions: heart disease, infertility, liver failure, malnutrition, seizures, and more.

Growing up, I didn't think much of it. I knew I had to be gluten-free, but the only way that ever affected me was when I went to birthday parties and had to bring my own food. No one else in my childhood friend group had allergies, so I was the only one carrying around a lunchbox at parties. My mom did her best to pack what everyone else would be having, so typically, my meal would contain a few cold slices of pizza (it never stayed hot, no matter how hard my mom tried) and a cupcake that crumbled with one touch. I didn't mind. I was still getting pizza and a cupcake like all of my friends, so that was enough to please ten-year-old me.

But, once I got older, I started to recognize the differences between my friends and me. They got to have delicious, fluffy pizza while I ate stale slices with a crust that became rock hard. My sister didn't know what she was missing out on because she was diagnosed so young, but I knew. I knew all about the food that I was no longer allowed to eat. Now that I'm twenty, I feel that some of that has faded away. I'm so accustomed to gluten-free meals now that I can't remember much about regular food and how it tasted.

Growing up also allowed me to recognize all the things my parents were constantly doing to ensure that my sister and I were safe. They had to make separate meals for us to take to parties when everyone else was provided with free meals, had to check with other parents to make sure we had food and snacks during sleepovers, and had to organize our 504 plans for school. There was another constant chore they had to uphold: checking the ingredients on all the items they were buying, even priorly known gluten-free products. This is something I like to call "The Chip Dilemma" because it's constantly happening with popular chip companies like Doritos, Utz, and Lays.

One week a bag of chips will be gluten-free, chips that have been gluten-free for years, so you would automatically assume there will be no issue when you decide to grab it again the following week. *Wrong*. Now the chips are suddenly not gluten-free because they changed their ingredients. And of course, there isn't a good substitute that fills the void of the chip that you so desperately wanted. Instead, you have options for a chip that crumbles too easily, is rock hard, or tastes too much like vegetables. The other fun thing companies do is remove their gluten-free certification off their packaging, but when you check the ingredients, everything appears to be the same. That's when you suddenly notice the small print right under the ingredients: "This product was made in a facility containing wheat." Some people with Celiac can stomach the small changes and move on.

Others, not so much. For my mom and I, we would be spending an unpleasant amount of time in the bathroom, and it would take a few hours for our stomachs to settle. For my sister, she would break out into hives, be sick for multiple days, and need about a week for her stomach to feel completely normal.

“The Chip Dilemma” is more so an annoyance than anything (although it does pose a threat if the consumer is unaware of the changes, which has unfortunately happened to me and landed me in the bathroom for quite some time). Something like cross contamination is an example of a higher-level threat. In the case of cross contamination, you have to make sure that none of the gluten-free food comes in contact with anything containing gluten. For example, you have to make sure that restaurants don’t put their supposed gluten-free fries in the same fryer as their breaded chicken tenders.

If they do, those aren’t gluten-free fries.

I follow some gluten-free “influencers” on social media. Aside from their recipe ideas and restaurant reviews, they often talk about their run-ins with cross contamination. Lauren, otherwise known as @eat.gluten-freewithme, made a video about how she found that a restaurant’s nachos, which had been labeled gluten-free on the menu, were not gluten-free as the chips were prepared in a fryer that contained gluten items. It’s what I imagine a bad date to be like. You’re really excited to see those nachos ever since you read about them on the menu, and now, it’s all you’re thinking about. But then you ask too many questions, and it all comes toppling down, and the nachos are revealed to be a glutenated jerk.

Lauren made the video to teach the Celiac community about awareness, and people began sharing their own similar stories in the comment section. As I was going through them, and laughing at the relatability of it all, I read one comment that was gaining some traction: “Don’t go out then.” This commentor then argued with people in the comments that Celiac Disease wasn’t a disability: “A disability is something that **DISABLES** you. The world doesn’t adapt itself to every person and this entitled mindset is what leads to suffering.”

Entitled mindset? We gluten-free people simply want a meal that has been advertised and labeled as gluten-free to actually *be* gluten-free! Quite frankly, I don’t think that is much to ask for! And no, I am not going to ostracize myself to my room and never go out into the world because I’m gluten-free. What kind of a life would that be? Yes, going out to eat with Celiac has its apprehensions, but I have to take that chance! I won’t give Celiac the satisfaction of encasing me into a bubble that I’m scared to

leave, and I'm not going to let my disability stop me from having a social life and trying new places.

Disabilities come in all different shapes and sizes. Due to mine, I have to protect myself constantly and make sure that the food that goes into my body is properly broken down and digested. Some people just brush Celiac off as a gluten-free diet, but it is so much more than that. I have to remain vigilant when going out to eat, and I always have to pack snacks in case what someone offers isn't gluten-free. I have to check the ingredients of all my food products, and I have to speak up when I notice that something isn't truly gluten-free.

At college, I watch the people who prepare my food in order to ensure that it's safe for me to eat. The pizza station has its own gluten-free crust that I personally think is some of the best pizza I have ever eaten. The salad bar is another safe option for me that I like, but the sandwich line, however, is a different story. I've had to remind two student workers to cut my sandwiches with a clean knife so that I can avoid cross contamination. One day, I happened to not be paying attention, and the worker cut my sandwich with a glutened knife. Luckily, their supervisor was watching and told them to remake the entire sandwich because it was now unsafe for me to eat. I found myself then apologizing to the worker for not paying attention to what she was doing. I apologized to *her*.

I shouldn't have to watch my food be made. I should be able to respond to a text or have a conversation with the person next to me, but I can't. I can't slip up because I can't afford to. On the inside, I was kicking myself that I let that happen to my food. My heart rate automatically picked up, and my palms grew overly sweaty, and I was itching to get my food and get out of there. Although the anxiety can get on my nerves, it's my survival mechanism. It's necessary for me to recognize my anxiety about Celiac because it prevents situations like the one I just described. I have to be cautious, and I have to stay aware, even if it means that I feel like I am sweating actual buckets.

And that anxiety is not going to force me into a bubble and not go out as that commentor had suggested. Yes, going out can be difficult with Celiac Disease, but it's manageable, and it's nothing that I should feel ashamed of or embarrassed by. My anxiety pushes me to recognize the dangers related to my Celiac Disease, but it also allows me to confront those issues so that I can eat comfortably and feel as normal as possible. Yes, "The Chip Dilemma" can be a nuisance, and it does suck when I can't eat fries with a burger at a restaurant, but I'm protecting myself.

I don't think that any of this means I have an "entitled mindset." I

simply want to be able to get through a meal without experiencing excruciating pain after eating. My anxiety helps me to make that possible.

My anxiety due to Celiac Disease is not an anxiety called to attention like when I see a spider or get a bad grade. This anxiety is always there. It has to be.

Memento Mori

ERIN SCANGA

You dwell on the banks of the Tiber
And I on the banks of the Styx.
You sit on the throne that I built you
And glance in the mirror, transfixed.

You're older than I am, dear brother,
Older than you allowed me to be.
But beneath your gray beard and your wrinkles
It is always my face that you see.

May your deeds be forever remembered,
And may my fate be wept for in kind.
For whenever your name is exalted,
Mine shall echo in ripples behind.

There were two boys who sailed down the river,
Two who suckled the kind she-wolf's breast,
Two who grew up to be only shepherds,
Until by the Gods they were blessed.

But those boys built only one city,
With only one man on its throne.
For I dared to contest your power,
And you struck my head with a stone.

So turn, King of Rome, to the mirror,
And look at both your face and mine.
Romulus, rule your fine city;
You will answer to Remus in time.

Mother

CASSIDY HAINES

Loud like thunder, sudden like lightning,
She speaks only to herself in a storm
Brought on by a bottle of fire and anger,
Leaving a trail of ruin, a barren wasteland in her wake.

She fills the kitchen with her thoughts,
A train with no track, unbound
By that same warm and bitter fix
That left her broken years ago.

She cries, dependent and vulnerable like a child,
And with each sip, she strengthens the tempest's cruelty and selfish winds.
She drinks and drinks, finally a shot from the river Lethe
As muddled dreams fade and the harsh reality of dawn rises.

She snares her daughter in the chaos of the night,
No place to hide from the shredding rains of blame and guilt,
Where any innocent word warrants a flood,
Any story brings riptides and competition.

In the mud where the storm blew away all life,
Her daughter grew ambitious daffodils and daisies
With hidden seeds that whispered encouragements
And the warmth of the sun to conquer the storm's shadow.

Fixing its damage, some more seeds created a field of sunflowers,
Not a storm in sight, growing with the sun's unconditional love,
A shield against the fury of the storm with clear skies
to help her live, not just survive.

Liberated by the sun's warmth and protection,
And surrounded by meadows of blooming flowers,

She closed her eyes, rose above the soil and storm, and became the moon,
Embraced the phases of life and the changing of the tides.

Despite the craters left by the storm,
The reflection of the sun's light forever empowered,
And each night away from the cyclone,
At peace, the moon shined brighter.

Familiar Flesh

BETHANY N. SHIFFLETT

At an embarrassing age, I still slept in my mom's bed. Instead of sleeping by her side, like a normal person, I chose a starfish-like way of latching onto her. My head rested on her belly while my tiny arms sunk into the rest of her stomach. Like I fit into a perfect mold. Thoughts of what lurked underneath the bed when my foot would dangle off were comforted by the squishy feeling of my mom beneath me. The death grip on her nightgown definitely helped too. I felt secure, the way the jiggles of her stomach while she snored felt like a lullaby.

I never knew anything different; my mom was my mom. That was until I noticed the small things, before I discovered who she truly was. Whether it was a Back-to-School Night, dance recital, or just walking through Kennie's on a random Saturday; I could see the stares. I was awoken by the sight of the forever empty seat next to her. Or how they used their eyes to scan her body before they ever met her face. I would start to hang my head down, only looking at our feet as we held hands. Inviting a friend over after school always introduced a look of disbelief, *that's your mom?* Our faces may have looked similar, but our bodies sure didn't. No one had to say anything to us, I could feel the presence of it. I caught a glimpse of other mothers, with their skinny legs, and small waists. None of them had bellies that spilled over their pants. *Why was I the cursed one? Why couldn't I just have a mom who looked like me?*

Field trips were always a confusing time for me. I was so excited initially when my mom wanted to join my class at the zoo or a museum as a chaperone. We could feel like everyone else. But once those days would come, I would sit on the bus chewing at the inside of my cheek. I already knew what the day was going to look like: a long trek to see the bear enclosure or taking the stairs up to the next floor of the science center; it always ended the same. A break, a pause, a breather. Whatever she called it, she needed to rest. I would look around at the other groups and see their parent's ability to keep going. Why couldn't she just be normal? I could feel the embarrassment paint itself on my cheeks as my friends kept asking why we were going so slow. I felt relieved when she said she couldn't go on field

trips with me anymore.

My mom's bed had not always been shared between the both of us. My dad never had been *there*, even if he was physically. Leaving us to Sharpie on the sunroom walls or put an entire tube of lotion in the water during bath time. One thing he did not budge on, however, was his domain over the bedroom while my mom worked. My mom had always worked night shifts at the hospital, leaving Bailey and me in the 'care' of our father. I was too young to remember a lot of the time before the divorce, but I do know that he was cheating. I can recall the mysterious late-night visitors sneaking in through the basement. Not necessarily what they looked like, but I can assume. My mom was at her heaviest at this time. Too busy working and caring for her young daughters when home to prioritize herself. Can't say the same for my father though, his 'wants' were the only thing he cared about. I guess he wanted someone to look the same as he did; slim and tall.

...

We always ate early, around 3 so we could have something before our dance classes. Bailey and I's plates were always loaded to the brim; pasta spilling out from the plate, or a mountain of mashed potatoes piled high. Mom always said we needed enough to fuel us during our six-hour lessons, and it did. I felt active and it showed through my ambitions to dance. I did every genre of dance available for my small studio: ballet, lyrical, acro, contemporary, jazz, and even hip-hop. I thrived off trophies, medals, and high scores at dance competitions. My legs lifted to the sky and leaps catapulted me across the room. As I looked at myself in mirrors that coated the studio walls, my smile grew wider. I always thought if I just kept dancing, *I would never look like my mom*. As long as I stayed doing these splits or aerials, or sucked in my stomach as we did pirouettes across the floor; *I could remain thin for the rest of my life*.

I could always tell when Mom started a new diet plan. While our bellies remained bloated, filled to the brim with our dinner, I would look across the dining room table to see nothing in front of my mom. Bailey would always ask if she was going to eat dinner with us before dance, which my mother always said she'd fix herself a container for work. I still think there wasn't anything in her bag when she left. Or if she got us food out, which was a rare treat, she would never get herself anything. I would yell at myself anytime I forgot about one of her diets, by asking if she want-

ed one of my nuggets or a slice of pizza. As if I was tempting her, that if she took just one bite, she would never lose weight. I was so selfish then; how could I think like that when my mom was hurting herself? Why did I think her actions were admirable, that these were the necessary sacrifices to be made?

Her *Weight Watchers* or *Nutrisystem* programs would never last too long. Once she lost around twenty pounds or fifty sometimes, it wouldn't be long before she would start eating again. Normally eating. Like, the average quantities of food you're supposed to be eating. But of course, when you have been starving yourself, anything feels a lot. When there was a rough night at work, she'd feed that pain with a bag of Lays. Binge eating was for her like a relapse is for drug addicts. And so, the weight loss journey would start over and over again. With every cycle, the aspiration to keep going slowly deteriorated.

In middle school, I was proud to show off my body. The tightest leggings and tiny crop tops did not leave much of anything to the imagination. And I was happily supplying myself as an object of attraction. I craved the stares this time, the stares were for me only. I got dressed in the hopes I would catch the glances made on my body walking from class to class. Older boys would want to talk to me and give me the attention I was so hungry for. When I would stare back at myself in those photos I'd send, I knew I was desirable. I felt a rush when hitting send, that my body was a prize to be won. All I could think was, *at least I didn't look like her*. When I got my first real boyfriend, I was excited to be more than just a good body to someone. I think I just wanted to feel as though I could be the "wife-material" my mother never was, AKA skinny.

...

Finances were something my mom never talked about with us until we got much older. With every birthday or Christmas, nothing felt amiss. It seemed like everything on my ten-page wish list or heavily circled toy catalog was there. I know now that wasn't easy to achieve. Even when my parents were together; my mom was exclusively the 'breadwinner', 'wore the pants', etc. My dad never managed to keep a job, and still can't. After the divorce, my dad took the fastest drive home to his own parents, leaving my mom with full custody, without a lick of child support ever being handed over. Bailey and I were lucky if we got twenty dollars in the mail. My mom is a Registered Nurse, and a supervisor over the entire hospital. Up and down the floors; moving from the ER to PACU in a matter of minutes for whoever needs her. *I can't believe how ignorant I was about the amount of work my mom did*. Basically, like a vampire, she would rise from her bed

at 2 p.m. and work from 7 p.m. to 7 a.m., for five nights in a row. Not only did she grind herself to a pulp for work, literally helping others, but she did it all while having sole responsibility for us. *She is so powerful; she has conquered more difficulties than I could imagine. I could only dream of being even a fraction like her.*

The summer before Sophomore year, I decided to quit dance. I begged my mom to let me quit sooner before the recital. But she said she already paid for it and needed to finish it out. Back then, I didn't really understand the way my new pointe shoes or costumes were more of a priority to my mom than a house payment. That my interests amounted to more than the money we had. I decided to stop dancing because, at even the practices, it began to feel like a performance. I no longer felt like I enjoyed it, that my reasons for being there had finally gone stale. Dancing for ten years straight to just suddenly stop, there was a drastic change. *Where was I going to spend that free time?* I had so much more time to spend on school and schoolwork. Today, it's still hard for me to relinquish myself from Dancer Bethany. I can't stop eating the same way I did when I was dancing. All those carbs were worked off within hours of rehearsals. *Why do I not know when to just let that chapter end?*

Four years together feels unrecognizable. I even look unrecognizable. Not just the transition from side-part to middle, but my weight too. When we went to Walmart it seemed like a normal occurrence, nothing felt out of the ordinary. His mother wanted us to look for pants for his little sisters, which I agreed to eagerly, to please her. As we walked through the aisles, the fall clothes had just been put out. So many cute sweaters and flared leggings seemed to flood my eyes. When I glanced over at the nearest pair of sweatpants, I sighed at all the extra smalls and smalls overcrowding the racks. I had already felt inferior, like I should attempt to suffocate my thighs into my own denial. He then noticed something in the sweater aisle, "This would be perfect for her!" he exclaimed about his little sister. As innocent as his comment was, I thought to myself at that moment, *has he ever thought that about me?* I don't get to wear his clothes like they are some cute, oversized hoodies like other couples. Just like his sister, he's slender and lanky. Practically his whole family are the same carbon-copied skinny people, the perfect family. We are literally the exact opposite. *I'm repeating history. Maybe he wishes he was with someone just like him, just like my father did.*

...

Our love for each other radiates in our conversations. Whether it is my bad test scores in math or mom losing a friendship of many years

(not dead, just a bitch), we use these times to bond. Our in-sync sobs ring together through the house like a choir, as I wrap myself around her arms. We park outside our fast-food chain, eat, and discuss whatever drama has ensued lately. These therapy sessions are almost like rituals for us, a way we can expel whatever tears we have been asphyxiating on.

If I could somehow manage to nestle myself back onto my mom's belly and stay there, I would for the both of us. When I would lay there and feel her love without hearing it. The innocence, the lack of shame I felt towards her. I resent myself for feeling that way towards my mom once I noticed how others looked down on her. She has done nothing but love me unconditionally my whole life, for me to feel ashamed of her during my childhood. I was so comfortable separating myself from my mom, and because I was thinner, I felt above her. I suffer to catch up to my past disgust with the fierce protection I have towards my mother now. I see myself in my mom too; the desire to feel loved, to feel needed. When I look into the mirror; all I see are the stretch marks on my hips peaking out past my jeans, and my stomach spilling over my zipper. I weep at the sight of the scale's number increasing as I tiptoe onto it. I tremble at the thought of my mom starving herself but consider doing it myself.

I treasure my mom's belly but look at my own, expanding, with contempt.

On How I Hope You Experience the World and Forgetting

CYNDY BASIL

For my Grandparents

Someone is moving
overhead.
Joists and wooden floorboards creak;
a bow vibrates against the strings
of an orchestra warming up.
Beneath the groan,
you can feel a familiar thrum,
the rhythmic percussion
of the someone's steps upstairs.
They are dancing.
You are certain
you know the moves.
Nearly falling in time,
swaying,
you can almost reach them through a haze -
it is not the damp haze of evening mist
caught in headlights,
but the haze of dust suspended in front the window,
As a house left vacant for the season
is aired in summer sun.
The atmosphere is filtered
through the fuzzy warmth
of an old record.
It spins
and so do you,
guided by hands
you know keep you safe.

Who Has Stolen the Kids Away?

JULIÁN SÁNCHEZ-MELCHOR

I thought I saw him,
at the corner of my vision.
The lanky fearsome demon
my parents professed
would rob me deep at night.
El Coco, El Cucuy,
with his clawed hands
that sweep the misbehaved
right off the street.
But it was just a lamp,
a tall dark post,
which my mind had morphed
into this apparition:
a lost lonely man.

Ama, I thought you said,
I could have sworn you said,
only bad boys and girls
get taken by monsters.
You promised.
You hugged my littlest finger with yours,
caressed my head,
and claimed, “there’s no need to worry.”
But Mother, I am worried.
Who has stolen the kids away?

I’ve been good.
I’ve been doing so well.
I feel happy.
I feel seen, and I believe
I’m someone to be proud of.
Yet night and night again,

with tears and breathy moans,
I desperately implore!
Why, Mother, why
are there still monsters
chasing after me?

I hear whispers that fuse with spirit,
form soul.
Innumerable imagined horrors
creep out the damages in my heart,
tap my spine,
then shred into my root nerve
swimming straight to my brain,
and in disability,
I (almost) crumble.

Ama, I know monsters
aren't real.
That I can comprehend,
so I must ignore my dreams
and my mind.
Reason suggest delusion
is just a passing nightmare.
Yet that doesn't end my sobbing.
Beyond the confines of my walls
the acts of our neighbors
are even scarier than demons.

Who has stolen my father away?
Locked him in a cell,
deemed him an alien,
and shipped him south-west,
yet he was born
American.

Who has stolen our sisters away?
An unfathomable amount of women
kidnapped, trafficked, and killed
year after year after decades after
centuries.
Who has stolen the kids away?

Sent them off to boarding school,
cut their precious black hair,
and buried them one after another
in a cold unmarked grave,
rotting away
unremembered.

Mother, as I grew, you warned,
“We are not assured to be together.”
I thought you dramatic,
but being close to grown,
I think I understand.
And still you say it
each time we sit and eat,
but please,
lie to me anew.
Say it will be alright.
Even though the innocent
have been stolen,
and the monsters have stolen
my innocence away.

I live in fear in my imagination.
We live in fear in our reality,
and I'm left to wonder.
Who has stolen the kids away?
Who has stolen the kids away?
Who has stolen...

Echo

ANDREW B. CASHER

The door swings wide
Open
And a darkened room is revealed
I cry out
But my echo is torn to
P
I
E
C
E
S
“Where are you?”
“Are you?”
“You?”
No, not anymore
I can hear the silence
It grows so loud
My mind is eaten
And in the dark and quiet room
I am buried by Gaia
Lying by my lover
Echo

The Questioning

BEATRICE SLEVIN-TRIGO

Can I hunger for a claim
on which I have no stake—
May I hunger,
for what needs no words?
Should my fingers
trace a phrase, a shape,
an angled alphabet against your jaw,
and thumb the pulse out from under
your cold skin,
that jitters with an immutable energy
I have never understood?
The flame casts no shadow,
but the wall feels the heat—
feels the flush of paint melting
only inches away from the blaze.
The night hears no silence,
like the silence humans do
after they have exhausted themselves
of all the reason that their pleasure imbibes;
Like the quiet that comes after
their little whispered facts,
spoken in the blushing dark with a universal certainty
that their words will bypass the moment.
There is no forever
that is kind,
And no comparative shortness
that makes forever mean,
Though meaner things have been said
throughout forever, all the same,
With less understanding
than people behind a door's private shadow,
clinging onto an impermanent present.

Would that I knew these soft sensations,
I would turn them, *turn* them;
Twist them around my wrist like a staircase,
and we would walk a flight down,
stepping on each other's heels,
clutching onto the railings—
And make my stairwell veins blue with laughter.

Door in the Trees

GREER GARVER

On the Southern bank of the Potomac, about halfway between Washington and the Chesapeake bay, there is an area of steep clay cliffs. The cliffs are majestic; they have been there for millennia, and contain the fossils to prove it. They aren't a straight drop, but instead undulate downward in bands of different colored clay hued in oranges, browns, and whites. At the bottom, the river touches a long, narrow stretch of beach which has been coaxed into existence by at least a mile of evenly spaced, wooden groynes. It was these cliffs that Luce was staring up at, drenched in August sweat, as she felt the muddy sand squishing between her toes. Before she had walked to the beach, she had been pacing back and forth in her small cabin, scrutinizing the white paint flaking off the walls. The paint was revealing the wooden logs beneath, and in a few places she could even see sunlight. She had made the decision to abandon the comfort of her one tiny air conditioner, and walk the mile to the beach, because she was sick of being confined by the cabin and felt that throwing herself forcefully into the water would be enough to snap her back to reality. The only reason Luce was still standing on the beach at all was because her plans had been spoiled by a tide of jellyfish. Luce didn't mind a few jellyfish, but on that day they were so dense she would have been covered in stings. Looking up at the cliffs - sliding sand, and scraggly bushes clinging to the side - she let her thoughts wander back to the cabin that had been her home, and hers alone, for the last four months. In three days, Sam would be home.

...

That night Luce couldn't sleep. The first three weeks after Sam left she had missed him, and for the last year she had been sure she loved him. She appreciated the effort he put into cooking vegetable pasta and that he watched whatever TV show she wanted to, but also had good suggestions of his own. He liked to swim in the river with her, even if he wasn't as strong a swimmer, and he never complained when she spent hours talking about a tree on a hike, or a specific interest they didn't share. They had never fought, because they had never had a disagreement big enough to fight over. The only memories she had were good ones.

The anxiety had started a few days ago. What felt like an insurmountable amount of time to spend alone, had been easy and fleeting. The anxiety she had anticipated in those first months had never materialized, but then a few days ago it all welled up from somewhere and hit her like a truck. She took a breath and looked up. The moths flitting back and forth in the peak of the ceiling, lured inside by the light coming through those taunting cracks, were frantic as they propelled their small bodies into the wooden beams. One hit itself so hard it tumbled down, landing next to her on the bed. It twitched for a second, and she waited, leaning closer. Was it going to be okay? She reached her hand towards it, and it jumped to life, flying back up to the ceiling, bound to repeat the same fate. How many more times might it fall, before it could find the same crack to fly out of in the morning light, or would it ever make it out of the cabin? Luce hoped it would settle down in a dark corner and wait until daylight, but she knew it wouldn't.

One night, five or six months earlier, she had been startled awake by Sam swatting, half asleep, at his face. When she turned over, straining her eyes against the darkness, she could just make out a giant moth that had fallen onto his forehead. It had been beating its dusty wings against his eyes and lashes as it tried to get away, and he frantically swatted it in groggy confusion. The memory made her smile, and for a second she missed him and the anxiety went away. But, after the moment passed, and the memory faded, the feeling of missing faded even faster. The moths seemed to be moving faster too, thudding back and forth in a state of ever increasing agitation. She shut her eyes and forced herself to relax, limb by limb, until the night overtook her tired body.

...

She woke up feeling like a small animal was trapped inside her chest. Every sound was amplified, and work was a blur of images that didn't make sense. As soon as it was over she found herself walking towards the beach again. The road to the beach wound through alternating stretches of forest and fields. Every time there was a field the path invariably traversed one side of it, so as you walked you looked out across the entire field. In the last field the road, after crossing the field, made its way through one small patch of forest before letting out on the edge of the cliff. In that last part of the forest the tall trees reached up and up on either side of the road, and then at the very top their canopies leaned towards each other and touched.

Looking towards this break, from the far end, the piercing blue sky appeared white and was framed by the gap. Everytime Luce saw it she imagined it was a door, a wonderful door that she could walk through and back again every day. Going to the beach meant leaving the forest behind, and that was the special door that let her through.

That day, she stopped and stood at the far end of the field and watched the door. She had tried to explain to Sam once what the door meant to her, what it meant to see something so simple and magical in nature, and to have the joy of walking through it as many times as she wanted, and coming back again. He just didn't understand, though. He tried, but he couldn't, and she couldn't make him. That afternoon she ran towards the door as fast as she could, and wanted to cry as she did it.

...

The following day was the day before Sam arrived. Luce went to the beach again after work. This time she sat staring out at the water. She barely bothered to examine the cliffs, despite the eagles that were swooping in and out of the trees. The far bank, Maryland, was a thin blue line, where occasionally little dots that were houses could be made out. It was narrow enough that if Luce squinted her eyes and used the slightest bit of imagination she could pretend it was not there at all, and instead she was looking out at an ocean. Sometimes she would even close one eye and hold out a finger horizontally across her line of vision, so she could just see water and sky. The ocean she imagined was vast. It stretched on past the entire state of Maryland, and ever farther after that, past other continents. She imagined it going on so long that it came back around and was behind her, and she was just on a little island of sand, all alone and feeling the warm beach beneath her. The jellyfish were finally gone so she waded out in the murky river water. It was hot, like bath water, and did nothing to cut away at the feel of the August heat. Nevertheless, she closed her eyes and floated on her back, listening to the drumming noise of the water in her ears. She stayed at the beach until evening, straying between the water and the sand. When she finally walked home the fireflies were coming out, and her heart was beating slower for the first time in days.

By the time she reached the cabin she had made up her mind. She didn't want to see Sam again. It didn't matter if she didn't know why. She was going to have to tell him, and try to explain, but she wished she didn't have to. It's hard to explain something you don't have a reason for. She only knew that if you don't miss someone you shouldn't stay with them.

Sitting on the living room couch the next day she rehearsed her

lines, and made sure every surface was meticulously clean, scraping away every moment from the last four months. Sam didn't need to know who she was. She tried to imagine how to explain that despite their last phone call, only a few days ago, where she had told him she missed him and was looking forward to him coming home, she didn't. The web of lies was one of her own making.

When she told him he didn't plead, he didn't yell, and he didn't try to hurt her. He only asked her why, and when she couldn't tell him he left. She thought she heard him then, cursing her out from the driveway. Only when he was gone was she angry. She wished it could have been consequential, and wished that he had yelled. Sometimes, in those first weeks, she wondered if she did miss him, or if she had, but she spent the days watching the eagles and the moths and their frantic movements seemed to grow slower as the days got longer.



You Will Be Ok

ELLIE BENTZ



Serenity

DIPTIMAN DAS



Rouge's MiniWorld

JULIÁN SÁNCHEZ-MELCHOR



Anthropoid

DIPTIMAN DAS



Reimagine Tradition

JULIÁN SÁNCHEZ-MELCHOR



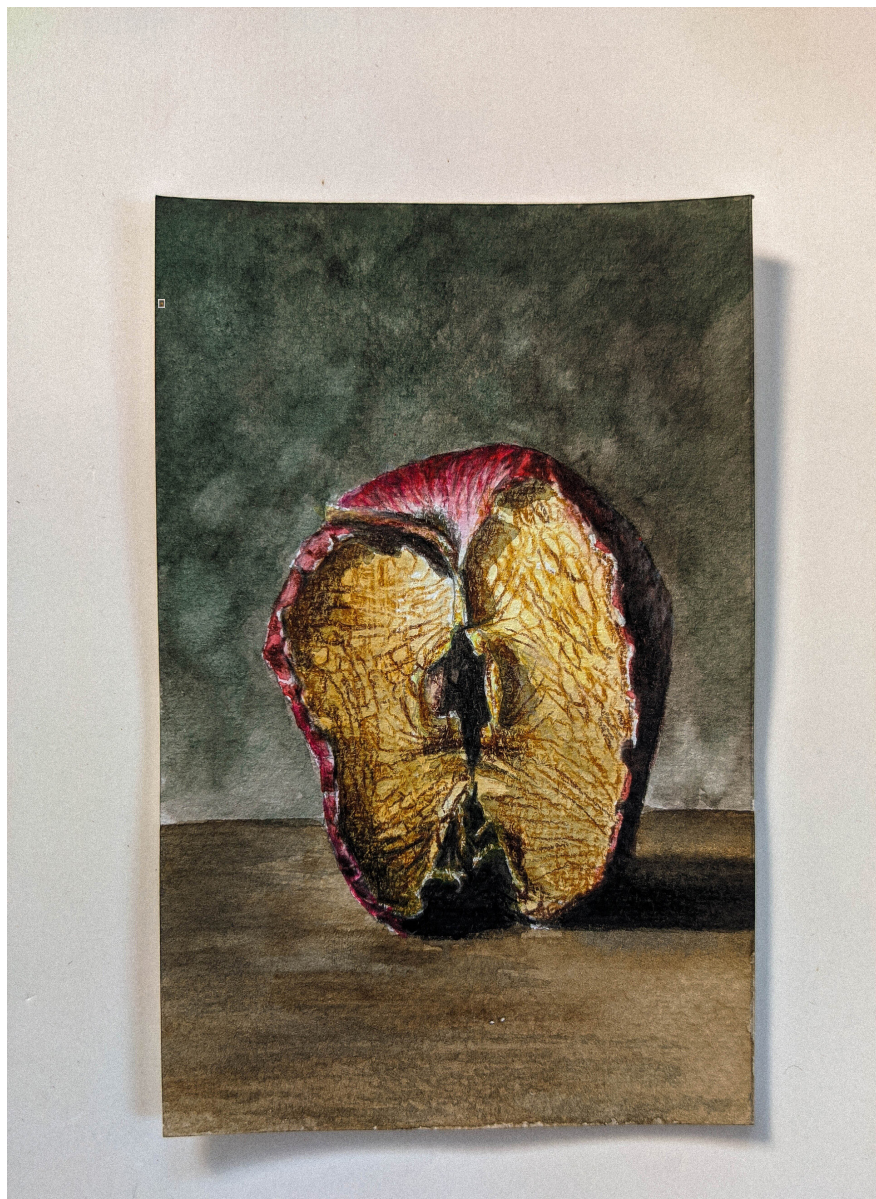
Mallam and Magajiyya Chronicles

DIPTIMAN DAS



Apocalyptic Skies

LUCA ESPANA



Decay

DIPTIMAN DAS



In My Head

ELLIE BENTZ



Of Years Past (Plank Gym)

EMMA WYLAM



Mr. Macaw

LUCA ESPANA



Blue Dome Blue Sky

LUCA ESPANA



Mary's Gold

JULIÁN SÁNCHEZ-MELCHOR



Agony

LUCA ESPANA

"I shall be
MISERABLE



if I have not an
Excellent Library"

—Jane Austen

I Shall Be MISERABLE

EMMA WYLAM



Philly's Girl

LUCA ESPANA

Unraveling Familiarity

KATHERINE C. CORNET

Three words shattered the warmth of a world Eliza had carefully curated.

It splintered the tinted glass of her apartment windows, forced the overhead lights to swing violently above, and made the water she had been drinking dribble down the corner of her lips suddenly uncontainable. The waxy feeling of the letter pressed between her fingertips was too smooth and perfect. Rose and amber wafted from the paper, the familiar scent of her mother's magic curling around her throat and lingering by her nose. It was overwhelming and overpowering. A stark reminder of everything Eliza had tried to forget. She reread the words, hoping to make it further than the first line.

"Come home, Elizabeth." The iciness of her mother's voice overshadowed her own. "Anton is dying, and he will not make it through the night." The words fell heavily from her lips and guided her shaky hands to her phone. Eliza picked it up and dialed a number she wished she had forgotten. Her thunderous heart blended with the dial tone, creating an arduous symphony. The crescendo as time stretched sent a sharp pain shooting through her head.

"Yes?" Her mother's voice cut through clearly, like an out-of-tune note. It forced everything to come to an abrupt end.

"I got your letter," she stuttered, trying to find more words to fill the air. "I can be home in a few hours."

"Good." Her mother had always been a woman of few words.

Usually, Eliza took comfort in this because it meant she wasn't doing anything worth criticizing. But now, she couldn't help but feel she wasn't doing enough. "Do you need me to bring anything?"

"No. Don't be late." Her mother interrupted.

Eliza's phone beeped three times and the call ended, leaving her in a room growing colder.

The house on West Hollow Street was exactly how Eliza remembered it. Dark wood brightened against the light that poured out from

the windows. The wind pushed against the branches of sturdy trees that brushed the grandiose arches. It was a piece of gothic perfection that throbbed with its own heartbeat. The thrum aligned with the pulse that emanated from the ruby in Eliza's bracelet.

During the car ride, Eliza had been toying with the idea of leaving again. Of disappointing her mother again. Of finding some way to hate Anton for the radiant sun he had become and the shadow he had created for her to stand in. Maybe then, she wouldn't have to stand in front a home she never loved. But even if she found a way to become comfortable with any of these options, Eliza was sure she'd find another way home. That is what Anton would call inevitable. A witch would always find their way back to their coven because the price of not doing so was deadly. And she had spent ten years deciding if that was a price she was willing to pay. The ruby pulled forward, wanting to reconnect with the home it lost. No longer able to put it off, Eliza walked up the steps, each one with a taunt of its own.

"Disgrace," one moaned.

"Useless," another creaked.

"Abandoner," the last one echoed.

The doorbell dared her to ring it. Once she did, the murmur of voices she could hear on the inside went quiet, and the door swung open. Her shoes slid on the buffered floor. Eliza was met with a frosty heat and the eyes of every witch in the room. She didn't know what to say; none of her words would be good enough to fill the perfect space. How could she address a room full of people she left behind? Everyone waited for her to say something while she struggled to find a way to blend back in. She opened her mouth to speak when an airy voice called out.

"Elizabeth!" It was enough to force everyone to return to their small talk, which Eliza was sure now included her. "Look how much you've grown." Her Aunt's frame enveloped her entirely as she was pulled into a hug. Bouncy, soft brown curls pressed into Eliza's eyes, and she could still feel the hands on her back even when they parted. "How have you been?"

"I'm fine, Aunt Priscilla," Eliza admitted.

"Really? You look like you've lost weight?" Priscilla snapped her fingers twice and waited until a silver tray floated between them. She picked up two cake slices and handed one to Eliza before popping the other into her mouth. "Eat this."

Eliza examined it. "Did mother bake this?"

"Alina bake something?" Priscilla laughed hard. "You haven't been gone nearly long enough for a change that big. She catered it from the small

bakery in town, the one your old friend works at. What was his name?" She pulled another cake off the tray as she tried to remember. "Cameron... Caleb... Calvin...?"

"Callum," Eliza said before eating her cake.

Priscilla shrugged. "Sure." She put another hand on the tray, feeling around for another cake and frowning when she couldn't. "Are we out already?"

"I'll go check to see if there's more." Eliza excused herself, scurrying away to be out of sight. Entering the kitchen, she was comforted by the sweet scent of strawberries and listened carefully to Callum's humming as he stood with his back towards her. He had one earbud in and a cigarette behind his ear. Just like her, he was blissfully out of place. A bright rose that managed to break through a blanket of snow. Eliza placed both elbows on the island and leaned forward. "I thought you hated baking."

Callum turned slow, like molasses, and squinted as soon as he saw her. He stepped forward and then stopped himself, his face going neutral as he avoided her gaze. "I used to. Things tend to change when you're gone for so long."

"I meant to call," Eliza said as she reached for another strawberry.

"Sure, you did." Callum gave Eliza a light slap on the hand and pulled the bowl away from her. "You just didn't have the time, right?" There was a ding from the oven, and Callum grabbed the oven mitt from the countertop. When he opened it, Eliza was hit with the smell of fresh strawberry shortcake. She closed her eyes, letting the smell take her back to the days she spent with Callum in the bakery, stealing treats and glances. The pan colliding with the granite of the island yanked her back to the present moment. Callum stared on, waiting for her to speak.

Eliza fiddled with the ruby on her bracelet. "I didn't know what to say."

"Personally," Callum said as he crossed his arms over his chest. "I like to start with hey."

"And what should I say after?"

He sighed and used the back of his hand to feel the top of the cake before grabbing a piping bag full of frosting off the counter. "You could drag me through small talk before bragging about how amazing your life is without me in it."

She winced at the comment. "My life is far from amazing."

"Then why didn't you call me." His voice was wavering. "Or write me a letter so that I didn't have to beg your family for the information that

proved you were alive.”

“Because it was easier for me to pretend you didn’t exist.” Eliza watched as his face dropped, something breaking in her. Callum adjusted the piping bag in his hand and tried to pipe perfect frosting while his hands shook.

“I see how you feel,” he said, trying to erase all emotion from his face.

“That’s not... Cal I-”

The door to the kitchen swung open, and Eliza turned her head to see her mother standing in the door frame. “What is taking so long?” In the ten years Eliza had been gone, her mother had only changed slightly. Her raven black hair had two streaks of gray, and the space around her mouth and eyes had finally become dusted with slight wrinkles. “I see,” she said, staring at Eliza and forgetting about Callum. “You’re being distracted.”

“Not anymore, ma’am,” Callum said as he placed his earbuds back in. “The next batch of cakes will be ready in five minutes.”

Her mother gave him a nod before addressing Eliza. “You haven’t changed.”

“Thank you,” Eliza said.

“That was not a compliment.” She gave Eliza a once over, finishing it with a harsh glare. Her mother opened the door, leaving the kitchen, and waited for her to step through. Eliza looked back at Callum, who was already halfway done with the frosting. She hoped he would look at her one more time, but her mother cleared her throat and Eliza knew she was out of time.

Eliza followed her mother back through the parlor, feeling the sting of eyes against her back. She kept her gaze forward, up the staircase where the lights of the party faded. Her mother stood at the top of the stairs, stepping to the side to let Eliza through. The door to her brother’s bedroom sat at the end of the hall, a vase full of dying flowers on the table near it.

“He’s waiting,” her mother said impatiently.

“You’re not coming with me?”

“I’ve been by his side every day since his body started failing him. Can you say the same?”

“I would have if you had told me.” Her voice was barely above a whisper.

Her mother scoffed. “It’s taken me a while to acknowledge I raised a failure. Don’t tell me I raised a liar, too.”

Eliza looked away. “That’s not fair.”

“Your family is supposed to come before everything. You are a deserter. Never forget that.”

“Moth-”

“Go,” she said, cutting Eliza off. “Do not keep Anton waiting any longer.”

Eliza made the long walk down the hallway, the ruby on her wrist growing in heat as she did. When she reached the doorknob, Eliza took a deep breath to steady her emotions before opening the door and closing it softly behind her. Anton was propped up on a flurry of pillows in the king-sized mahogany bed. He had gone painfully thin, appearing more fragile than a piece of glass. Anton didn't look right; he looked powerless.

“Hey,” Eliza said after overcoming her initial shock.

“You can get closer.” He smiled, the cracks in his bloody lips showing. “I'm not contagious.” Despite his physical appearance, Anton was still as charming as ever. He hadn't lost that part of him yet.

Eliza walked until she reached the foot of the bed. “What happened to you?”

“Magic. It always comes with a price.” Anton coughed hard, the force shaking his entire body.

“You've always been too ambitious for your own good,” Eliza said once the coughing had ceased.

“My ambition saved the coven. We lost a lot when you left.”

Eliza laughed. “You're the only one who seems to think so.”

Anton shook his head. “I'm the only one choosing to voice it.”

“How much longer do you have left?” She wanted to change the subject entirely.

“Who knows. If I suddenly became very unlucky, I might not make it to midnight.”

Her lips parted slightly as she tried to understand what she heard. Her older brother, her only brother, would be dead before the morning. The shadow she was forced to exist underneath would disappear with the sunrise. “Mother couldn't find a spell to help?”

Anton sat up straighter in his bed, adjusting the covers so they fell to his waste. “She did. It's why everyone in the coven is here. It requires all of us.” Eliza marveled at the intricate ink across his arms. He was covered in runes, each one symbolizing life in some way. A pit formed in Eliza's stomach as the metal of her bracelet hissed against her skin. “Do you believe in second chances, Elizabeth?” There was a shift in his tone. All the warmth he had been feigning left as his expression darkened.

Eliza took a step back. “Why?”

“Because this spell can give it to both of us. You get a second chance to support your family. I get a second chance to live.”

“What would you need me to do?”

He waved his hand, signaling her to come closer. Once she did, he picked up a small dish of black skin paint. “Untwist the cap for me.”

Eliza did as she was told. Anton dug his index and middle finger through the paint with steady hands. He grabbed her wrist, the pressure firm, and drew a straight line up her forearm. Then, he drew a shorter line extending diagonally from it on the right side. Anton didn’t have to finish for Eliza to know what he meant to draw. She pulled her hand back in shock. “What are you doing?”

“The spell. Give me your hand. I need to finish.”

“You’re going to draw a death rune on me!” Eliza worked to rub off the paint that was already there to no effect. “What is the spell going to do?”

“Trade your life for mine,” Anton said as if he were talking about something as simple as a candy bar.

Eliza was at a loss for words. “How could you ask me to do that?”

Anton sat up straighter. “I’m protecting you from a much worse fate.”

She couldn’t find the courage to look him in the eye. Leaving had left her with regrets and an insurmountable amount of guilt. But every time she thought about that night, she wasn’t torn up about leaving her family behind. She was worried about what might have happened to Callum. Callum, who had been there to comfort her every night when her mother called her a disgrace. Callum, who had distracted her with amazing deserts and stories so extravagant, it provided her with a temporary escape. Eliza hadn’t abandoned the people that mattered most, she had abandoned the person who meant the world to her, and she never apologized for it. Callum was left to pick up the pieces she had left behind, and she never thanked him for doing so. She couldn’t let herself die before then. Eliza turned around to leave, the door only steps away from her.

“Do you really think we’ll let you leave again?” Anton asked as if reading her thoughts. “This spell is your only way out.”

Eliza felt the burn of her bracelet. She knew what she had to do. “No, there’s another way out.” She unhooked the bracelet around her wrist and watched the ruby shake intensely. The price of leaving the coven would be deadly. But if it meant she could apologize to Callum, then it was a price

worth paying. She let the stone drop and slammed her foot on top of it, listening to the crack with satisfaction. Eliza could hear her own heartbeat in her ears, and she clutched at it, the sudden strength taking her by storm.

“You...you...” For the first time since she got here, Anton stuttered. “Get out.” She went to the door, opening it to a foreign hallway. A figure at the edge of the staircase looked like her, but Eliza couldn’t understand why. The face was a blur, and the memories were fading with it. They mumbled something. Eliza felt a sting on her cheek as the slap echoed. When she looked back to face the figure, Eliza couldn’t see them. She was losing everyone, her mind erasing them before her eyes.

Eliza flew down the stairs, stumbling into the kitchen but finding no signs of Callum. She noticed the door leading to the backyard. She walked out and found him standing next to a rosebush, earbuds in and a cigarette dangling from the corner of his mouth. She raced towards him, her own fear taking control of her movements.

“Cal?” She was scared to speak any louder.

He turned around, his face in high definition, the memories they evoked clear against the overwhelming static.

“What, Liz?” He dropped the cigarette and smothered it beneath the bottom of his shoe.

Eliza hugged him, tears filling her eyes and staining his shirt. “I’m sorry.”

He froze underneath her touch, but eventually, Eliza felt his arms press into her back.

“I really hated it here, Cal, but I never hated you.” She pulled him tighter.

“You were the only person who could stop me from leaving. The only one worth staying for.”

“I forgive you,” he whispered.

She felt her restless heart cease. When the hug finally broke, he stood there with the same warm smile he had always given her when they were kids.

“Do you want to get out of here?”

“I thought you’d never ask.”

Eliza interlaced her hand with his as he guided her to a car full of baking trays and leftover ingredients. She opened the door and slid in, finding comfort in the warm seat. Callum started the car, and as he drove down the streets, Eliza had no desire to look back. Everything she needed was in the car with her. Everything she wanted was on the road ahead.

My Dear Autumn

CHLOE E. HANOUSEK

Her lonely lips,
born of an unrequited love,
whisper to the trees.
Secrets only known,
by the falling leaves.
She paints herself with color,
stolen from laboring hands
of Summer's harvest.
Met with scowls
for this rapacity,
but how else
is she to be noticed?
Defined by darkness she sows,
and a sauntering cold
she herds from pasture.
The intimate undertaking
as the Bringer of Death,
Exhausts her,
exhausts Mother.
She sends Earth's children,
into the arms of Morpheus.
For him,
For her beloved,
For Winter.
But he only melts
for Spring.

Loving a Man When You Occasionally Still Feel Like a Little Boy

ALEXANDER HANLEY

His fingers are thick and rough
But he holds his pen like it's glass
Gliding it across his paper
As if any force would cause it to break.
When my eyes wander to the sharp veins
That protrude from his hands like roots
I wonder if he would hold my bony hands
In the delicate manner he holds his pen.

In the times he's driven to laughter
I have to fight myself from
Placing my lips on the deep lines
That shoot out from the creases of his eyes.
Could he feel the desire to do the same
With the soft skin that covers my face
Ruined by the bumps and blemishes
Long forgotten on his own?

Where thick dark hair spreads
From below his nose to his chin
With spots of gray beginning to sprout
Mine is adorned with a permanent fuzz
Thin, blonde, and almost completely invisible .
I concede that it's impossible for him
To run his hands through mine
In the way I ache to do with his.

If any lingering tokens of my youth repulse him
He does a perfect job of masking it
Clutching me tightly in his arms
Like a boy would with his stuffed dragon.
I let my head fall against his chest

And breathe in the clean scent of his sweater
It's here that I don't feel too small to be held
Only adoration for the man wrapped around me

What's In A Deadname?

THEODORE J. SZPAKOWSKI

At the end of the day, I just wanted
The name on my gravestone
Not to kill me a second time.

I didn't want to make my mom cry in the car
On our way to the courthouse, because
She wanted me to want her
More involved in the process.

I let her pick my middle name
Because we learned in AP Psychology
That people are more likely to accept changes
That they have a voice in.
I tried to make it as easy for her as I could.

I corrected and moved on:
"Theodore." "He." "Son."
I made jokes about it:
"Who's Jane? There's no Jane here."
And my mom said I was shoving it down their throats.
So I shut my God-damned mouth
and she wanted me to check in more frequently.
(I should admit, "Jane"
Isn't the name I was born with.
But I wouldn't let this poem exhume
A name resting undisturbed
Until her next weekly phone call.)

She calls me, but I'm not who
She really wants to talk to.
She's said she's "still grieving Jane,"
But there's no rock she can go to

With “Jane” carved into it.
You can’t die if you never lived in the first place.

A deadname isn’t the name a dead person has.
The name itself is dead. It’s gone—
But perhaps mine is more ghost or zombie than corpse.
It’s haunting me, chasing me
Showing up on my paperwork,
On my mother’s mouth.

She cried in the parking lot
While I waited in line with my forms
And she didn’t tell me she was upset
Until the drive home, when it was too late
For me to do anything about it.

She said she was grieving Jane.
She said she knew that using the correct name
Is suicide prevention for trans youth,
But that it didn’t feel like a reassurance.
The statistics were a threat to her.

I don’t want to die for a good while yet.
At least, I’d like to hear the name I chose
More times than the name she chose for me
Before I’m buried under either one.

It’s just that dying once is enough for me.
When it feels like being choked
Every time she gets it wrong,
I don’t want to be dying forever.

The Square is a Circle: A Music, Playlist, Thingy about Gender

NAT SCHNELLER

Overture by Rush

Nate Schneller, twenty-two-years-old, is a man. He has a frizzy, red-blond beard. His hair is short, blond, and curly. He enjoys film studies, videogames, and collecting plastic robots that transform in vehicles. Nate Schneller is in the process of being deleted.

Nat Schneller, twenty-two-years-old, is not quite a man. She has a completely clean shaved face. His hair is not too short, blond, and curly. She enjoys film studies, videogames, and collecting plastic robots that transform in vehicles. Nat Schneller is in the process of being recorded. She is a demo tape, waiting for a full release.

Name for You by The Shins

At the time of writing this, it's been around seven months since I started going by the name Nat. It's the name my friends use for me. It's the name posted on my dorm room door, next to a picture of Rosalina from the *Mario* franchise. I still use Nate with teachers and strangers. It's still my name, but it's no longer my primary name. I now consider Nate as a kind of "full name," like my government name, Nathaniel.

Going by Nat has been kind of an adjustment. I've had to get used to people calling me that. You wouldn't think so, it's just like Nate, but the E got lost from the group. But it *is* different. Not only does it sound different, but it feels different. It feels right.

Nat represents one of my first steps in messing around with my gender presentation. It's gender ambiguous, both feminine and masculine, which is perfect for me, because I'm thinking I might be both kind of male and kind of female. Along those lines, Nat allows me to have several "full names." It can stand for Nate, Nathan, Nathaniel, and, if I'm feeling spicy, Natalie. I enjoy having Nat stand for multiple things at once. It feels like quantum mechanics in a way, like how an electron is both a particle and a wave. I like the fun of that.

Nat just sounds better to me personally. I enjoy the -at sound better than the -ate one. I suppose that's the writer in me. I think the -at sound lends itself better to puns and nicknames as well. I can be Nat-Nat or O-Nat-ural or a bunch of other silly things. I never got good nicknames as Nate. It was always the Nate the Great or Nates (because my last name is Schneller). And despite a book series, Nate the Great never particularly struck me.

I have a final reason for choosing Nat and that's spite. When my parents picked out my name, my grandmother objected: "people are going to call him Nat and he won't like it." I had a rocky relationship with my grandmother. She was old and slow and kind of annoying. She would constantly ask me if I had a girlfriend yet. She was constantly making comments that drove my mother to fury, like something backhanded about her clothes or her cooking. I still loved her, but it's complicated. So, when I decided on a new name, I figured I would take the name Nat and make it mine. Take that grandma!

Ball of Confusion by the Temptations

Ok, can I be honest with you for a second? Writer to reader? I don't know how to move on from here. I want to expand, going from the personal experience of my name to a wider discussion of gender. But it feels like I've just finished eating a cheese stick and now I'm trying to eat a giant-ass burger like you would see on *Man vs. Food*. Gender is such a wide and expansive topic. They teach entire college courses about gender. I know I'm breaking a taboo here, but I need to lay this out, as bricks, so I can build a bridge to where I want to go.

So, changing my name has been the first step with playing around with my gender. I was Assigned Male At Birth (AMAB). However, now I've been messing around with using she/her pronouns in addition to he/him pronouns. I suppose I should try to explain my ideal gender presentation. I think I have a good idea, but I'm still figuring things out. Basically, I think I feel both male and female, which is referred to as bi gender. It's that, or I'm genderfluid. I don't know yet. Anyway, I ideally would like to look androgenous, presenting femininely but in a somewhat masculine way. Basically, a tomboy. Yep, I kind of want to be a tomboy. You can laugh if you want, I feel silly writing this.

Still though, I'm not one hundred percent certain what I want. There are days when I look in the mirror and go, "I look ok, kind of hand-

some even.” Then there are other times where I go “ew my beard looks gross and I’m so big and masculine and I don’t like it.” I don’t feel a major attachment to being a man. It’s always been kind of a shoulder shrug, like I guess I’m a man. I definitely don’t relate to the stereotypical manly-man-ness society often shoves down our throats. Sports? Nuh uh. Fishing? No thanks. Big muscles? Get out of here with that shit. To me, popular masculinity is just pure toxicity, a sludge pile. I don’t vibe with that at all. I’m sweet, squishy, and socially anxious. I can’t be a big mean tough guy. Yet with all that said, I still feel some connection to the idea of being a man. There’s a thin, silver cord, connecting me to manhood. Because I feel like there is a right kind of masculinity. The kind of manliness that’s tough, but gentle, like water, smooth and flowing one moment, strong and powerful the next. I guess I connect with the kind of masculinity that my dad has. My dad is gentle, kind, smart, and resourceful. I’d like to be more like him.

However, I also want to be more feminine. Maybe it’s because it’s foreign and exotic, but femininity excites me. The first time I got my nails painted, I felt such a sense of elation. I’ve had similar feelings of joy with growing my hair out long or wearing dresses. I highly appreciate the feminine and wish I could be more like that. So, in a way, I’d like to be like my mom, caring and sweet and kind. I understand these traits don’t need to be gendered, but I do associate them with femininity.

There still is the confusion of what exactly am I, but at least some things are certain. I like painting my nails, wearing dresses, and having my name be Nat. I may find I’m not exactly trans, but those things are certain. I’m at least gender non-conforming.

True Trans Soul Rebel by Against Me!

I think I couldn’t have picked a worst time to question my gender. Anti-trans rhetoric is at an all time high. Across the US, states are passing bills outlawing trans people the ability to do sports or go to the bathroom they wish to use. There’s been about 589 anti-trans bills introduced in 2023. Not all those bills have passed, but still I think that’s frightening. Right-wing pundits have made trans people, or what they call “gender ideology” a key issue. At the Conservative Political Action Conference, Michael Knowles, a host for the conservative *Daily Wire* media outlet, stated that “transgenderism must be eradicated.” Yikes. Some people are absolutely obsessed with Trans folks. Matt Walsh, a conservative commentator,

produced a film called “What is a Woman?” I haven’t seen it, but from what I’ve heard, it’s a transphobic pile of shit. Part of me wishes to watch it, because that would be fair right? I can’t be critical of something I’ve only heard about through video essays, right? And yet I know that film would be poison to me. Not because its right, but because its propaganda. It’s designed to leak into you, fill you to the brim, and completely wash over your brain. Nobody is immune to propaganda. So I still have not seen the film.

Over the summer of 2023, I had a job at a pool and patio store called Mt. Lake. It was a good job, paid decently enough, and wasn’t too difficult. My job mainly consisted of being at the pool counter and helping customers, but sometimes I had to help with deliveries. Mt. Lake’s delivery driver was a guy named Andrew. Andrew is probably one of the most politically conservative people I have ever meet. He was a total Trump fanatic and, naturally, had some things to say about trans people. He also happened to be a fan of punk music (In an ironic twist, he once played a song called “Teenage Anarchist” by Against Me! whose lead singer is trans). One day, we were driving, talking over the thrashing of guitars, and he said, “remember, a circle is a circle and a square is a square. A square cannot become a circle. You can write a story where a square becomes a circle, but that doesn’t happen in real life. Do you understand?”

“Sure,” I said, my blood boiling. Of course, I didn’t understand that kind of reasoning. Andrew didn’t know I was questioning my gender at that time. I desperately sought a counter in my mind to his idea.

Imagine you’re sitting at a table. There’s a rubber band and four thumb tacks laying on the surface. You stick the four thumb tacks into the table, in a square formation. Then, you wrap the rubber band around the tacks. The rubber band is now a square. Now, imagine you take the rubber band off. What shape is it now? Most likely, it’s an oval, not a square. It was a square, stretched and forced to be one, but it’s true nature is an oval. Do you understand?

Boys Don’t Cry by the Cure

As with most boys growing up, I was fed a certain idea of what men and women were. Boys rule, and girls drool. That was how I was told the world worked. I played along. I was in a boy scout camp once when I was younger. I saw somebody walk by and said, “hey, I thought there were no girls in the boy scouts!” They turned around and sure enough, it was a guy. I hadn’t said that to be mean. In actuality, I was confused, because I hadn’t considered there might be boys with long hair. I was embarrassed.

Then I was bullied for the rest of camp. Oh well, I think I kind of deserved that. Probably not. But the point is that I had certain ideas of boyhood and girlhood, but I didn't really understand them. Boys aren't supposed to cry. You see this all the time. Most times a boy cries, he gets told to "man up." I definitely didn't understand this rule. Crying felt important. So I cried, usually not around other people. But still, I cried.

I grew out of "boys rule, girls drool," on my personal quest to be as nice and caring a person I can be. I think some people never grow out of it. It just becomes toxic masculinity, which is still widely accepted in the world. I don't think I'm quite a boy anymore. But I'm also *not* a boy. I still have that silver thread. And I hope someday, people like me will be more accepted. Not just genderqueer folk, but those boys who don't fit the stereotype. One day, boys will cry, and not be penalized for it.

The End by the Doors

Phew that's kind of a depressing title, isn't it? I might change that eventually. I may even just cut this section (though if you're reading this, I guess I haven't). But I want to include some final thoughts. I hope you accepted this essay with an open mind, because if you did, then hopefully that means you accept me with an open mind. This gender stuff is confusing, I'm confusing. I'm not quite like other trans people, simply just a boy or a girl. I'm greedy, I want to be both, at the same time. I hope you're ok with that.

You know, many works don't thank their readers, at least not directly in the text itself. So, thank you, for reading this. This is one of the most personal things I have written. I hope there was something here worthwhile. Take care.

A Math Problem

CAMERON M. FLEMING

Two trains are moving from Iraq to Kuwait. One train is moving at 80 miles per hour, and the other train is moving at 60 miles per hour. The two tracks are parallel to each other, with one track being two times the length of the other track. The trains are being used by an American company to ship oil.

If, 30 miles from the first train, there is an explosive meant to derail the train and it goes off as expected, who will be blamed for the incident?

If insurgents are blamed, how will the United States Respond?

If Lockheed Martin makes 75 million dollars per fighter jet, how much do they stand to gain from US involvement in Iraq?

If 7,299 civilians die in a war between the United States and Iraqi insurgents, does it really matter if there were two trains moving from Iraq to Kuwait at all?

To Be (Native) American

JULIÁN SÁNCHEZ-MELCHOR

*America was born free, man divided it
And if to the centuries we go:
We are more American,
we are more American
then the son of Anglo-Saxon*

–Los Tigres del Norte, translated from their song “Somos Más Americanos”

My father said to me, “Son, please be proud,
burst with joy in being connected to a place,
and you may rest, sweetly, among the clouds.”

Tell me how? When I feel as if I’m not allowed
to denounce the public about the horrors that we face,
but my father said to me, “Please be proud.”

My trust I refuse to misplace, this I have vowed,
and once the Maker and I finally embrace,
I will wander, livid, among the clouds.

I ache from enduring isolation, even in a crowd.
I hate how pain is deeply rooted in one’s race,
but my father said to me, “Please be proud.”

Grateful I am to live, yet still I wish to scream aloud,
“Stop this violence! Us Americans, war could not erase.”
Though many now rest, unrecognized, among the clouds.

My race, not my nation, is American. Lord, how’d
my blood fall so far from glory and your grace.
My father says to me, “Son, of you I am proud.”
And I dream we may rest, in peace, *high above* the clouds.

Just Like Jesus

GEORGIA KIRKENDALL

Conner pressed his palms against the hard wooden surface of the bench and gripped hard. A sharp sliver broke off and lodged itself under his fingernail. He flinched, maintaining his grip and squeezing his eyes shut. The seat of the long bench was slightly tilted upwards, so that his sneakers dangled an inch from the floor, and he could feel each vertebra of his spine bruising against the tall backing. Conner took a deep breath, but the overwhelming stink of burnt coffee and perpetual dampness only made him more uncomfortable.

He sat there, on that wooden bench, for a long time. At least he thought it had been, what, fifteen minutes at least? Possibly thirty? Maybe they forgot about him. Maybe he could just, like, get up and leave, and no one would notice? No one would miss a fifth grader, surely.

Reverberating voices echoed from the cafeteria, just down the hall. Conner squinted through his crusty eyelids, peering at a large analog clock on the opposite wall. It took him a minute or two to read it, configuring the shorthand and longhand and counting the ticks by fives. He thought it said it was 12:48. Lunchtime, then. His stomach grumbled in confirmation.

Conner would have liked a chocolate pudding.

Instead, he continued sitting on that very wooden, very hard bench. Eventually, the noise from the cafeteria subsided, and Conner estimated that it was then recess-time. He didn't bother trying to read the clock again. "I'm going, I'm going, Sister, no need to get all up close and personal."

Conner heard a sneer outside the door of the office. He attempted to straighten up on the bench but fell into a hunch instead.

"You better keep that prissy little mouth of yours shut tight, Mary-Lou, you're on very thin ice," Conner heard Sister Margaret say.

The door opened abruptly, and Conner peered shyly upwards. His position at the current moment wasn't one that he'd like anyone to bear witness to. Especially not Mary-Lou.

The girl strode into the principal's office as if she were very used to the setting. She made a random little pirouette on the creaky floor, her black Mary Jane shoes scuffing the wood. Before Sister Margaret could

scold her, she traipsed over to the bench, Conner's bench, and plopped down, splaying her legs outwards and forcing Conner to squeeze into the corner. Her knee briefly knocked against his khaki shorts. Conner did not know that he could get more uncomfortable on that bench until then.

Sister Margaret harrumphed and strode to another door across the room, with the metallic plate stamped with PRINCIPAL THORNTON fastened to it. She rapped the door with her knuckles. And waited. She swiveled her neck back towards Mary-Lou every other second, giving her the stink eye. Mary-Lou swung her legs around and waved enthusiastically back at Sister whenever she turned towards her. It made Conner anxious, because it was very clear that Sister Margeret was at the point of combustion, and Mary-Lou was only fueling the fire.

And he had a tickle at the base of his throat and needed to cough really bad. But it was so quiet in that room and so tense, and he knew that if he so much as made a peep, Sister would be at his throat in a millisecond.

The torture went on for what felt like infinity.

The pressure built in Conner's lungs, into his windpipe. Another splinter lodged itself under his nail as he gripped the wood for dear life.

Finally, the door clicked open and, with one last menacing glance back, Sister disappeared from the room.

The cough exploded from Conner's throat just then. He buckled over and dry-heaved with his head between his scrawny legs. Mary-Lou pounded the palm of her hand against his back. He supposed it was to help, but all it did was cement his body further down into his seat. He would be picking splinters out of his body for days.

"Jeez, kiddo, you sound like my daddy when he's got the frogs."

Conner slowly sat back up, rubbing his back where she had hit him.

"The frogs?" he stuttered.

Mary-Lou nodded. Conner thought that if she bobbed her head any harder it'd pop clean off. All her actions were so vigorous and over-exaggerated, it was surprising she was still in one piece.

"You know," she said, "That saying when you cough. You've got the frogs."

Conner shook his head slowly. "I think you're getting it mixed up. They don't say 'the frogs,' it's..."

He trailed off, noticing that Mary-Lou wasn't paying attention to a thing he was saying. Her gaze was high on the wall opposite, where a miniature model of a crucified Jesus hung.

The cross and Jesus hanging on the wall of the principal's office was the pride and joy of the school. The sisters proudly referenced the bloody

Jesus to new visitors and students, who stared at the scene with adamant disgust and hanging jaws, while the nuns smiled on, as if gazing at a litter of puppies. Droplets of dark blood ringed Jesus' head, a crown of thorns like a torture weapon. The body of Our Savior (which for some reason had a six-pack) hung loosely, with his side torn open with bits of flesh hanging.

Conner felt guilty looking at it. Which he assumed was the intention of the thing, being placed as it was directly across from the torture bench for kids waiting for their doom, a meeting with Principal Thornton.

"I don't think it would be that bad, you know?" said Mary-Lou, still gazing up at the model. "Well, I mean, I know it would be *bad* and hurt a lot or whatever, but if I had to, I think I could deal with it."

"What..." Conner looked from the bloody Jesus to Mary-Lou and back again. "You mean being crucified?"

She nodded vigorously.

"What are you even talking about? Imagine getting your hands and feet nailed all the way through. And then having to hang from the wood for, like, however long it was."

"I could do it."

"Mmm." Conner crammed himself farther into his corner of the bench. This girl was psycho. These were the type of kids that really belonged here, at the principal's office. Not him. He was really starting to consider just up and leaving. Sister Margaret hadn't given him a single glance when she brought in Mary-Lou; no one would notice his absence with her being here. She commanded so much attention, sucked all the energy in a room, Conner was surprised he hadn't simply disintegrated into thin air by now.

Mary-Lou went on. "Like, if I really concentrated, I bet I could block out the pain. Detach feeling of my hands and feet from everything else."

She broke her stare from the wall and looked at Conner, sizing him up. He squirmed, another splinter piercing his skin.

"What did you do to get detention?" she asked.

Conner looked down at his lap.

"I didn't do anything," he muttered.

Mary-Lou slid up against him on the bench and pinched his shoulder.

"Liar liar." Her breath was crisp and smelled like candy-canes. "C'mon, spill it."

Conner twisted his hands together in his lap. He shook his head.

"Pleaaaaseee," she whined. "I'm bored. I won't tell anybody. Cross

my heart.” She pinched him again.

“No, I don’t want to,” said Conner.

Mary-Lou jumped off the bench and twirled across the floor to a nearby table, plucking a pencil from a small tin. She ran across the room back towards Conner, her shoes leaving more streaks of black across the floor. Standing in front of him, too close for comfort, she jabbed out an arm and grabbed his wrist, nearly jerking Conner to the ground. She poised the pencil over his palm.

“You tell me,” she drawled, “or I’ll crucify you.”

Maybe it was because he had been sitting, staring into space for so long, or the splinters had made him tougher, or for some other reason, but Conner wasn’t scared in the least.

“Go ahead,” he said. “Do it. I dare you.”

Mary-Lou’s brows furrowed in confusion. Evidently, she hadn’t interpreted Conner as the daring type. But she quickly smoothed out her facial features into a poker face.

“I would, you know. I would do it.”

“So do it. I’m not stopping you.”

“Okay. Okay, yeah. I’m going to do it.”

She stood there, still clutching Conner’s hand, her other grip on the pencil. It wasn’t a dull, stubby one, either. The lead point was narrowed sharply.

“Are you going to do it?”

“Yeah, I’m going to do it! I just said I was.”

Mary-Lou stared down at his hand.

“You’re not going to do it. I knew you wouldn’t.”

“Shut up. I’m doing it. You’re going to look just like Jesus, I promise.”

Conner laughed. Mary-Lou looked up at him then, her eyes hardening, her grip becoming vice-like. She raised the pencil up, lined it with the center of his palm.

“Wait, Mary-Lou, you aren’t really going to—”

“Three two one,” she raced under her breath, driving the pencil downwards.

Just as she was about to cripple a trembling Conner, the door to the principal’s office swung open. Mary-Lou spun around, hiding the lead weapon behind her back. Sister Margaret peered at her with obvious suspicion.

“What are you doing standing, Mary-Lou? What are you hiding behind your back? Show me!”

Conner, who was still sitting behind Mary-Lou, reached forward, grabbing the pencil from her sweaty palms, and sat on it. She raised her hands up in a sign of surrender.

“I’ve got nothing, Sister,” she purred.

Sister Margaret gave her signature scowl. “Get in here, then. Principal Thornton is waiting.”

“Shouldn’t Conner go first?” asked Mary-Lou, stepping aside to reveal the cowering boy. “He’s been waiting here far longer than I have,” she remarked sweetly.

Sister Margaret seemed surprised to see Conner sitting on the bench. He shrunk even further down into himself, the pencil burning through his pant leg.

“Go back to class, Conner,” said Sister Margaret. “I’m sure you’ve learned your lesson by now.”

He certainly had.

“Yes, Sister,” he murmured. He stood up and looked down at the bench. The pencil had rolled down into the corner of the seat.

“See you, kid,” said Mary-Lou. Conner raised his head to see her give him a wink, before following Sister and disappearing into the office.

Conner felt the gaze of Jesus hanging from the wall. A cold shudder went through him, and he quickly walked from the room, his eyes cast downwards on the black-streaked wooden floor.

The Dish-Doer

CYNDY BASIL

The wheels of the vacuum leave even tracks in the carpet,
rows of a garden in which she plants bulbs
to sprout, flower, and die.

A living room philosopher,
within the confines of her domestic sphere,
she watches her thoughts bloom and wilt.

At the sink, in battle with a stain like the rings of Saturn on a coffee mug the
front line of yesterday's teardrops slip between her fingers,
scalded by blistering water (because hot water kills more germs, don't you
know?).

Her mind wanders to her mother,
whose hands were impossibly accustomed to
the brimstone heat.

She asks herself to where it was
her mother's mind traveled
as she checked off to-do items
with the immediate efficiency
of an exploding star.

She knew exactly where her own thoughts ran to
when plied with enough laundry in need of folding.

She imagines a life, not without dishes,
but one where chores are interrupted
by the embrace of arms
strong enough to crush the fear
that her only company may ever be
the sting of lemon tainted bleach in her nostrils.

Of this escape, she is mildly ashamed.
Her defenses against loneliness
and the tempting dream of domestic bliss,
remind her much

of spring frost
that, in one night,
encases the world in ice
and thaws by breakfast -
eaten opposite an empty chair.
She asks herself
if God felt
lonely
as he watched
Adam entwine
with the rib
he plucked and molded
into the perfect partner;
if He too,
was a vicarious voyeur
keeping company
with His
creations.

For now, she ponders,
and finds comfort in the knowledge
that vinegar and baking soda,
will remove almost any stain
and that the housework is never done.
She is reminded why it is
cleanliness is close to godliness,
as dust spins in the chamber of the vacuum
like galactic debris
caught in the gravitational pull
of the world she's created.

To Your Portrait - An Ode to Mexico's Sor Juana

JULIÁN SÁNCHEZ-MELCHOR

The original history has lost, but
a resplendent replica hangs in a castle
time has converted into a museum:
a painting of Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz,
her head tilted three quarters, but her eyes
are shifted to the side, as if she were
looking right at me.

She is posed deep in her library,
dressed in the robes of a nun.
Her white hand placed over an
open white book. Writer's feathers
situated at the end of the table.
A heavenly shield rest just
beneath her chin. She is armed
with a plain large rosary.

In Sonnet, you wrote that a portrait
is but mere *colorful deception*.
Ink & Paint used for flattery,
pretending to excuse the years - the horrors.
Canvases become *cadavers*, because
we are dust, are shadow, are nothing.

My dearest icon, do you still believe that?
I am but one man, confused on what he is.
You, they proclaim the Tenth Muse,
the Phoenix of the Americas.
Yet, centuries ago, men dubbed thy,
"The Worst of All."

So awful, you dared to be, and

so men shouted, “wed or be wed!”
And thus, you ran away with God.
You dreamed, and you cried,
“the soul has no sex!”
Love, Liberty, and Truth,
you pleaded, belong to us all.

There is nothing you couldn't do.
No book you couldn't read,
No language you could not learn.
At three, you were literate.
You were a poet, a playwright,
published book after book.
You were a comedian, a critic,
a composer, a singer.
You were a romantic, dedicating
verse after verse to Maria Luisa,
the Vicereine of New Spain.
You were a philosopher, a theologian,
a woman who against her culture
was unbelievably brave.
Unstoppable flames create a draft,
create the breeze that fill your wings,
elevate you above the clouds, but
your active hands drop down,
implored to be grabbed because
you do not wish to fly alone.
You want to shift the land, so
we may all soar, reach new heights,
keep feeling, keep loving,
keep learning.

But you were sniped down.
Your work censored.
Your library stolen.
The Church forbade you
from ever writing again.
They told you,
“know your place,

shut up,
and
serve.”
You died like that,
in social disgrace.
Not yet fifty, then
swept away by plague.

In another reality, that may have been
the end.

You could have been forgotten, lost.

Lost!

And what would I do?

What can I do but be thankful that,
like a hatchling swaddled in fire,
you’ve risen since death.

You’ve become the subject of art,
the Muse that inspires.

Libraries built in your honor.

Your likeness laminated in banknotes.

Oh, the many statues I’ve seen of you.

You’ve become the face
of knowledge,
of literacy,
of the kind of love we
still die to defend,
of equality amongst
the sexes.

Still, we live, and still,
we fight the very battles
that consumed you.

Juana, your image does not pretend.

It is proof women can transcend.

Yes, we are ash, but I pray you see
how the shadow that you cast,
so bold and so grand,
could never be achieved
by the likes of a man.

To adore you, is not idol worship;
it is pride. We may not be kin.
You with roots in the Old World.
Me and Mine, victims of this
New World, but I dream of being
a true Mexican Hero,
as you've been for millions
and countless yet to come.
Because you are stardust,
are light, are everything.

Mona Lisa

EMILY C. O'HARA

They want to know what I am
feeling. Lined up to crack the code,
they decide if I'm smiling
based on everything they know about themselves and nothing they know
about me. They want to know what I am thinking,
and for some reason they suspect that I am in love,
as if my mind is anything other than numb with boredom, flaking away
like the paint that is my skin.

I spend my days daydreaming about climbing out of the picture frame and
letting my shoes *clang*
against the hardwood floors.
I don't know what I would do after that. I've never gotten that far.
They want to know what my voice sounds like but they never ask me ques-
tions about myself. If they talked to me I would answer them,
but instead they just stand there,
lost in the possibilities of what I might have said if I'd said anything at all.

Tacit, Tacet

JACOB KREBS

V.

We're on the three hour drive back home from college for Thanksgiving break, and you put on the playlist of songs you know I like, and I sit in the passenger's seat and watch the coniferous trees, the potato fields, the strip malls pass us by, singing under my breath the entire ride to my house.

You are silent.

IV.

It is the last choral concert of high school, and I am on stage as you sit down next to my mother halfway through the second piece, "A Boy and a Girl" by Eric Whitacre. You think I can't see you because the audience is a still sea of black and the stage lights are beating down on us, hot like a candle flame, and all of this would be true if you were someone else. I told you to come earlier than you normally do because I knew that this would happen. This is something that you do with everyone, so I know not to take it personally.

III.

You always hate when I sing in public. You think it's a breach of the peace that we need to maintain when we step outside. The summer before junior year you tell me that I break the social contract every time I sing near people who you think are trying to mind their own business, and I tell you I don't care about that and that you sound pretentious and that I don't really think people will care all that much and that if they do then they need to stop being so uptight. You respond by saying that you love the sound of my voice and that you would listen to it every second of the day if you could, but that I need to have empathy for you because imagine what it would be like if you were walking around with me and you just started singing and everyone else was looking at me. You'd feel embarrassed, too, right? I tell you I'll join in.

II.

I sing “Happy Birthday” along with everyone else at my fifteenth birthday party and you cannot believe it.

“It’s tacky.” You laugh. “We’ve been over this.”

“How you think too much. Yes.”

“No. *You’re* not thinking enough. You’re supposed to receive the song. Just like how you can’t receive a gift from yourself.”

“Yes, you can,” I say.

“How is it any different than just buying something?”

“Sometimes you need to celebrate yourself.”

“That’s narcissistic,” you say.

“I suppose so. Depends how you look at it.”

I.

Our choir teacher, Mrs. Davis, teaches the class how to harmonize, and it is going terribly. We are split up into vocal types for the first time, even though most of our anatomies are not developed enough to produce any noticeable differences in our voices. She goes through each voice classification and plinks out their parts on the piano and has them repeat back to her what they hear. My sense of pitch is naturally lackluster at my age, but I can still tell that most of my classmates have no idea what is going on. The real disaster begins when Mrs. Davis makes everyone sing together. We start off well, but about three seconds after the harmonies come in, almost everyone in the choir stops. Mrs. Davis’s hand is already placed on the keys to play the first notes again.

“I know you feel more exposed than when we sing in unison, but the first step to sounding good is to make a sound. We can work with sound. It’s harder to work with silence.”

Though it sounds only slightly better the second time around, there is something about the attempt that invigorates me. Some students are still silent, but some heed Mrs. Davis’s advice and continue singing.

I can hear your voice next to mine, you a tenor and I an alto.

I stop singing and absorb the sound.

Myself as a Movie-Watcher

CYNDY BASIL

In the empty air of a theater,
movie-voices play
loud but distant,
as if the vinyl screen before me
was some permeable membranea rupturable amniotic sac,
that might grant entrance to breathing
and beating world,
where human connection is condensed
into a two-hour plot.
The darkness,
out of which the softly illuminated
planes of faces emerge,
casts a shadow of intimacy.
Invested breath shifts
my back up and down
against the clumped velvet of
cinema seats.
Perhaps, if I were to reach out
to the screen ahead,
it would be made warm and skin-like
by light,
undulating movement barely perceptible
beneath its surface,
like shifting eyes
under the lids of someone fast asleep,
their dreams spilled
on the bone white stretch of fabric
by spinning film.
My own face is transformed
into that of the recognized stranger
who appears night after night
in the mind's subconscious musings.

I, like a lobotomist's pick,
creep through the corners of eyes,
poke the skull,
and nestle between the frontal lobe and thalamus.
There, I find salvation
in vicarious observation,
Drinking up offered bits
of someone else's life
and a large sticky-cupped lemonade.

I Have to Finish That!

AINSLEY C. GREEN

Cardigan

I hunted for something
Anything for my latest project
A hat – again. Amateur.
I reached into the heap of yarn in my bin
Stirring it up, feeling the fibers of wool and chenille
The occasional shock of cool metal crochet hooks
Amongst the tangle of potential they were meant to manipulate
I almost gave up and ventured to my dresser drawer, searching to its
depths
I found what I knew was the cardigan
The cursed cardigan, so far from what it was supposed to be.

Plush as a pillow when folded, dense with
Layers of stitches, strings looped with expertise
Deep green yarn plucked from an iridescent evergreen forest
I remembered realizing that sweaters were manageable like hats, in
crochet terms
The difference was small, the difference being time
And so, I thought, “I could learn that!”
Now, the cardigan had detached strands of yarn sticking out
The pockets dangling and yet to be stitched
I cut one piece of the yarn and ripped it to pieces, stitches disappearing
The yarn, wavy from being trapped in the cardigan’s conformity
I tied a new slip knot to start my hat
I couldn’t wait to leave the house wearing it.

Composition???

I was leaning over the piano
Posture atrocious, staring out the window
Recounting skips and leaps in a short melody I hummed from my heart
Trials of chords cycling endlessly, recordings played back, words attached
to each beat
Someone could hear it, love it!

“That would be cool if I did that,” I thought
Each time I heard a beautiful song
Or played a masterpiece someone else wrote

Even the birds were artists, whistling little tunes
As they darted limitlessly through the air
I blinked as they flew past, voices muffled by the glass
Their sweet whispers of lyricism clouded

It took months and years for the greats to write symphonies
Yet my thirty minutes felt pointless
I couldn't bear to kill my darlings, so I wrote
A few notes down in my journal and stopped practicing
For the rest of that day

Canvas (ASAP!!!)

On all fours, I crawled into the little closet
Flashlight cutting through the hovering dust
Miniature constellations lit up against the drywall
Claustrophobic
Tiny space holding so many missed opportunities
Glass beads scattered across the floor after my elbow bumped a precarious
shelf
Ringing upon impact and disappearing
When they should have been building a bracelet on my wrist
Origami paper floated down from the darkness
Creases got caught in the light
Distinctly protruding and waiting to be refolded into what it once tried to
become
A crane? A star? A fortune teller? I needed one desperately.

I grabbed a canvas leaning against the wall
The rough, white nothingness scratched my fingertips
Dust bunnies clung to the edges for dear life
As they were abruptly lifted from their slumber

I could still see the vision
flowers, blooming abstractly
a quote, dancing in gold ribbon-like script
i have to do that!

I never chose the quote
Never learned flower painting technique
No paint glossed over the agitated ridges of the canvas

It simply never came to be.

A Decade and Some Change

ELLA PRIETO

October 2009

My sixth birthday was the first celebration that was going to occur with my school friends. Before this, I had never truly made a friend on my own. They were either my cousins or the children of my Mom's friends who were forced to play with me. Upon entering kindergarten, however, I had the chance to make friends all on my own, so I swore my sixth birthday would be amazing with my brand-new friends. When the occasion finally rolled around in October, I only had one friend, and that one friend was made grudgingly. The girl, named Abby, and I shared a mutual friend named Paige, but Paige switched classes! Leaving me! Thus, Abby became my only "friend."

Nevertheless, my birthday had to go on. My mom got tickets for Annie at the Media Theater. I was so excited, I loved musicals and all the glamor that accompanied them. I meticulously chose my outfit: A black dress with a dashing red coat that had big black buttons on it. The coat was the main attraction, as I felt the red wonderfully represented Annie and her red hair. After getting ready, my Mom and I drove to get Abby, who wore a black checkered skirt with a pink top, a black sweater, and a matching checkered tie. I loathed to admit it, but I really liked Abby's outfit, especially the tie. Still, mine was better.

On the car ride to Media, I explained to Abby all the etiquette that occurred at the theater. You dress up in your best clothes, you do not make any noise when the actors and actresses are performing, and you stay in your seat until intermission if you have to pee. Abby, who seemed to be half paying attention, asked me if intermission was half-time. I was horrified and promptly answered no.

Finally, we arrived at the theater. My Mom shuffled Abby and me along to our seats, getting there early so we had time to just look at the stage and ask questions. The stage was ginormous, with a set built to showcase New York City. I was explaining to Abby that New York City was the setting of Annie when I felt my stomach hurt. I tried to shake it off, but I

persistently felt more and more nauseous.

I croaked out a quiet Mom before getting up and trying to run to the bathroom. My Mom jumped up and was right behind me as I tried to squeeze through people. I didn't even make it out of the theater. The nausea overcame me, and I turned to the side, throwing up all over an older man's shiny black shoes. I lifted my head with tears in my eyes, apologizing to the man and my Mom, only to see Abby standing there, having watched the whole thing. I felt the tears rush out quickly. Abby saw the whole thing. It was so embarrassing, she knew it was so embarrassing, and now she was going to tell our whole class that I barfed on this random man in a theater, and I would never have school friends! It was a disaster.

I was ready for Abby to laugh, braced myself for the impact, but she just asked if I was okay, because that was some pretty gnarly throw-up. I felt laughter bubble out of me, and soon Abby was laughing with me, and so was my Mom and the older man.

The Monday after my birthday, Abby sat next to me at lunch.

May 2016

By February of sixth grade, I realized Middle School sucked. While my elementary school friends and I remained close, they all seemed to have established other friendships while I did not, Abby especially. She played all these sports and knew a million older, better girls who I could never live up to. To add to those feelings of being a complete loser, I had no fashion sense, I did not know how to correctly style my hair, and maintained a hopeless crush on a boy who, in reflection, was a jerk. I even felt like I was losing friends rather than gaining them because everyone was so much cooler and prettier than me.

My Mom could tell how upset I was at my failing social expeditions, so she would constantly try to slide in events I should go to in our conversations, hoping I would be inspired to go socialize. One afternoon, I was complaining to Abby about the newest of my Mom's ideas, a running club for middle schoolers that also centered around emotional maturity and other lessons I thought I was too good for. In the middle of my spiel, Abby interrupted saying her Mom had mentioned the same thing to her. Thinking we were going to commiserate in our shared annoyance with our moms, I opened my mouth to further blab about how lame the idea

sounded. Abby, however, interrupted me and said we should do it.

Now on a different afternoon, Abby and I sat with four other girls in a Spanish classroom after school. We went through introductions and programming, and although things were a little cheesy, I found myself having fun. Day after day, week after week, Abby and I interacted with the other girls, running and making jokes. One day in particular will always stand out to me. We were doing a charity program that involved cutting up jeans so they could be reused. Naturally, I thought of all the other ways jeans could be worn, and soon enough I had a jean leg perched on my head. Never being one to simply stop at a crazy outfit, I decided I had to act as a pop star at an award show, like Britney Spears wearing a snake or Lady Gaga with her meat dress.

Soon enough I was prancing around the room, belting out high notes and spinning on top of chairs. Now, I tend to do little acts like this, getting caught up in silly ideas before reality crashes over me and I feel a wave of embarrassment flood through my system. At this moment, when I became aware that people were actually watching me, I felt an unbearable heat in my face and could picture just how red I looked.

When I felt the embarrassment come though, Abby suddenly hopped up with a jean leg on her head, and we were matching. We laughed and performed and did a photoshoot, and I thought to myself that maybe the rest of Middle School wouldn't be so terrible.

October 2022

In a similar fashion to Middle school, I entered college thinking I was going to love every second of it. By the end of my first week, which consisted of me crying every day, I realized that was not going to be the case. I felt overwhelmed, missed my Mom, missed my Mom's cooking, and didn't feel like I fit in with anyone. On top of all of this, I had to take Microeconomics for my Public Policy major, which I was dreadfully terrible at. As I chugged through the month of October, I thought I was getting better at managing college life. But then I went home for fall break and coming back to school felt like the end of the world. Then I had a Microeconomics test that I horribly failed. And then my professor called me into her office to ask what had gone wrong, which caused me to sob in front of her. Overall, not an amazing month. On the day of my embarrassing sob session, I walked back to my dorm feeling terrible, when I suddenly had the idea to call Abby. This was the longest period of time we had been away

from each other since we met, and it was taking its toll on me. She picked up within four rings, and the sound of her voice made me cry again. Suddenly Abby was tearing up too, and we talked about how much we missed each other.

While the sappy part of our call was amazing, what made me feel the most at ease was when we started to talk how we always had. She told me about her friends, I told her about the clubs I was doing, and suddenly everything felt like it was going to work out. Abby has the skill of making me feel the most at ease during chaotic moments in my life, and she is always there to do just that when I most need it.

During the call, I couldn't help but think of all of our memories, beginning in an October a decade and some change ago. I thought back to when we graduated high school. As we all went to eat special dinners with our families, Abby and I turned to have one last hug. It wasn't necessarily needed, we knew we were going to see each other later that night, but I think we hugged that last time to close the chapter of high school and our childhood. We closed that chapter, but we also opened a new one. As I sat in my dorm hallway with Abby's voice in my ear calming me down, I knew we had many more chapters to explore together.

Rock in the Storm

AUBREY MANDICHAK

On Thursday, Josie finished her storm spotter training.

On Friday, the weather stopped making sense.

It was 4:10 in the morning and Josie was standing in front of her tall dorm window, hands on her hips and watching the storm like the good midwesterner she remained, no matter how far East she went for college. The rain was streaking horizontally, directed by the strength of a wind that was forcing distant tree limbs into unnatural positions and holding them there like a mean older brother or a bully out to steal the tree's lunch money. Josie's parents had once told her that thunder was the sound of angels bowling. If that was true, then today must have been their championship tournament, heavenly bowling alleys filled with angels in lame shirts and bowling shoes on their A-game. Strike after strike with no regard for the people under the bowling alley trying to sleep.

Her roommate Diana came up behind her to water the plants on their window sill. "Shouldn't you be reporting this, storm spotter?" She asked. Diana had been in the room when Josie was watching the webinar that got her certified, cracking jokes about the presenter's less than enthusiastic teaching style. "Wouldn't want to disappoint Roger."

"I can't just report that it is raining, there needs to be some kind of danger or flooding or a tornado or something. Roger will forgive me."

Diana hummed and took the spot beside Josie, crushing the now empty plastic water bottle against her side. The two of them stood in the diffuse golden light of the desk lamp that was keeping the deep blue of the early morning storm away. "Does Pennsylvania even get tornadoes?"

"Average of sixteen per year." Josie knew some things. She knew a snowstorm was only a blizzard when wind speeds were over 35mph and visibility was under a quarter-of-a-mile, she knew what freezing rain was (when rain comes down in liquid form and freezes on contact with the ground), and she knew that Pennsylvania got an average of sixteen tornadoes per year. She was, however, not a scientist. She was a literature student who got B minuses on math tests and only sort of understood how convection worked. She was certainly not a meteorologist. She couldn't predict the

weather, she couldn't measure the weather, and, despite how it may seem in times to come, she couldn't create the weather. No, the weather would just follow her in its strange, unrecognizable form that delighted and despaired meteorologists for years to come, starting on this Friday morning.

“Josie, are those storm clouds green?”

When Josie was a kid, she watched meteorologist Tom Skilling on the morning news every day. He was kindly and passionate, he loved the weather the same way Josie did, with the added bonus that he actually understood how it worked. He explained low pressure systems and lake effect snow like a grandfather sharing his childhood stories. Josie's mother had told her that he was allegedly the highest paid weatherman in the country, which Josie thought was well deserved. Josie's father had told her that Tom Skilling had never had a romantic partner, that he was married to his job and the weather. She had heard people talk about priests the same way, and wasn't Tom Skilling a sort of weather priest? Maybe even the weather pope.

If Skilling was the weather pope, then Josie was a weather Jonah in a weather whale. She didn't realize that she was the catalyst until she and Diana hopped in Josie's old minivan after graduation and just started driving. The last year had been extremely eventful for Josie's career as a storm spotter. First those impossibly green storm clouds, then the rain of frogs (a natural phenomenon, but an incredibly strange one), then the four and a half feet of snow with an unmistakably pinkish tint, then the tornado that touched down right in the quad, uprooted a tree, and dissipated in under a minute. Then the gale that blew over all the chairs set up for graduation, the determining factor for Josie and Diana to decide they didn't really care about the ceremony anyway and ditching.

Three months and fifteen small tornadoes later, it became clear that, impossibly, the unexplainable weather was on Josie's tail. It was Tamara, the woman who always picked up Josie's calls to the National Weather Service, who put it together. Whenever some never before seen weather phenomena happened, Josie was always among the spotters who reported it. Apparently, she was a common name on the weather station bulletin board. Tamara meant it as a joke, laughing as she said, “Christ, Josie, that's your third this month! Have you ever thought you might be the problem?”

Josie later expressed the same confusion to Diana, tears in her

tears in her eyes as they waited in a gas station parking lot for the torrential downpour to end.

Diana had given most of her plants to the gaggle of underclassmen who worshiped her, but she kept one, a small succulent they had named Roger after the sullen meteorologist who had trained Josie to be a spotter. After Roger's fourth close call, the two had rigged a perch on the dashboard that would keep him secure and safe. Diana was by far the superior driver of the two, but even with her skills the conditions they drove through often left them fighting the wind or swerving through flying branches.

Diana was good at a lot of things. She had been hugely popular in college and involved in just about every way she could be. She was a star in intramural volleyball, a fixture in the campus community service group, and the gold standard for teaching assistants for years to come. She had left school with an English degree and a teacher's certification. She had intended to teach kids to read. Now, two years out of college, she was leaning against the hood of a stalled car in the scorching heat with her bad omen best friend in the middle of nowhere, waiting for roadside assistance.

"Why are you still here, D?" Josie asked, words soaked and heavy like they had been caught in a storm.

"You're my best friend."

"But what about teaching first grade, and buying a house, and falling in love?"

Diana took a moment to consider, then said, "Sometimes I think about all that, and then we get caught in another once-in-a-generation storm where the rain is coming down in sheets and the lightning looks like the end of the world, and nothing seems to matter anymore." The oppressive heat became heavier, and Diana watched as Josie seemed to buckle under it, "And then I look over to you in the passenger seat and you laugh and," she smiled a little, "I don't think I'd get that sense of being exactly where I'm supposed to be anywhere else."

The tow truck came before Josie could say anything.

It was their fourth year on the road. It felt unethical to stay in any one place for too long. They had developed a system to try and minimize the damage they could cause; avoid tornado alley at all costs (though Josie still managed to keep in touch with her parents and up to date with the White Sox, even if the team was still terrible), stick to the warmer states during winter to prevent the worst of blizzards, no matter how much they

missed snow, keep away from the coasts during hurricane season, and a host of other regulations that could be used to teach a very high concept geography course.

They picked up odd jobs and stayed in cheap motels for a month or two maximum before moving on. They would spend their evenings learning to cook in tiny motel kitchenettes and making their way through an old box set of Route 66 they had picked up at a yard sale. It was a comfort, what with its 60s tv show charm and Martin Milner's kind eyes and gentle smile as he made his own odyssey across the states. They never had to worry that Tod Stiles wouldn't make it out of this one, and most of his escapades could be wrapped up in the fifty minute time frame. They would watch as he made someone's life a little better and then went on his way, and then Josie would cry and Diana would cry with her. Because when Josie came to town she didn't get to solve small town problems and leave. Instead she brought potentially life altering unnatural natural disasters before hopping in her minivan and never showing her face again.

And then they watched Tod Stiles fail. The details don't matter. What matters is that Tod didn't know how to deal with it, knowing he had broken something he couldn't fix, and another character told him, "somehow it gets to be tomorrow."

Diana and Josie didn't cry after that one, as the wind threatened to blow down their motel. They sat in silence under the gray covers of their two twin beds and didn't look at each other. As the credits rolled, Diana gently repeated, "somehow it gets to be tomorrow."

The next morning they found a guy in town and had the phrase printed on a bumper sticker. They slapped it on the back of the van and drove away.

In year five, Josie got the call that her dad had died. Turns out not all disasters are slow and catastrophic for entire zip codes. Some are quick and quiet. Diana said they should risk it, go to Chicago for the funeral and stay for a night or two. Not long enough for Lake Michigan to flood the city, but long enough to say a proper goodbye.

Josie's mother had hugged them both for minutes at a time. Diana got to see The Bean and eat a Chicago style hotdog. Josie went to her first live baseball game in years and got to see the Sox lose in person. It was a reprieve for both of them, but by the fourth day the clouds were starting to gather and they knew it was time for them to go.

The morning of their departure, Josie woke up from a dream where she and Diana were on the road in a replica of Tod Stiles' convertible,

dressed up like it was the 60s and fully in black and white, the gray sky above them emblematic of a clear sunny day. She left her childhood bedroom, made herself a cup of coffee, and clicked on the tv. There was the weather pope himself, Tom Skilling, preaching the gospel of satellite images and doppler radars. She found him just as enticing as her dream.

“Hey, it’s the weatherman you like!” Diana said, as she joined Josie on the couch. The two women watched as Tom Skilling gave the usual seven-day forecast before breaking off into a tangent explaining the intricacies of an intense storm that would be coming to the city in a few days.

“It looks like Chicago will finally get some of the fascinating weather that has been hitting much of the United States for the past five years.” He said.

Diana leaned over to her best friend’s ear and said “I think he’s talking about us. The weatherman you like thinks you’re fascinating.”

Josie laughed. Of course Tom Skilling would find the weather patterns that characterized the worst parts of her life fascinating. The weather was fascinating! Tom Skilling and Josie both loved it for a reason. For reasons totally apart from her unique circumstances. For the same reasons she loved Diana, and her old minivan with its custom bumper sticker and succulent named Roger inside.

“I had a dream we were in Route 66.” Josie said.

“Which of us was Tod?”

“No, we were both ourselves, just in a 60s tv show convertible.”

Diana leaned forward, elbows on her knees as she said, “What if we did it? You and I, all the way down the route, stopping at every town we hit. This is where it starts, right?”

“It breaks all of our rules.”

“We’ll be smart about it, but I think we could use a goal. Something concrete to work towards. Tomorrow’s going to come anyhow, why not make it worth coming?”

Josie only took a moment to make up her mind. “Alright, let’s do it!” She took Diana’s hand as she said, “But I think tomorrow was always worth coming.”

Hematite Ring

BEATRICE SLEVIN-TRIGO

There seems little point in watching it scatter
after it has hit the absolute center of the filthy ceramic tile
with a singing note that's half-whistle, half-scream,
and splits so easily into so many pieces,
some terribly large and some too insignificant to find,
from a fragile little curl with no backbone,
made from the never-lasting imagination.

What do you even do at those times
with that foolhardy strain, do you admire
what was not yet hardy enough to be fractious glass,
nor generous enough to bounce and then break,
or not break at all, and defy all reason and promise;
or is it permissible to carry the fractals around
like they were made of gold,
which you could melt back into lovely shape,
to not let it be some commonplace refuse?

If it could be so, it would be,
but it cannot, so it stays
gritted between the grout and the footsteps to come,
glittering and gluttonous to be shuffled around.

Contributors' Notes

Cyndy Basil is a junior majoring in English with a Writing Concentration and Art History. She is co-president of Artem and an attendant at Schmucker Art Gallery. Her goal is to always be surrounded by and working with art.

Ellie Bentz is a Senior Psychology major with a Studio Art minor. She wants to become an Art Therapist after she graduates.

Andrew Casher is an English major and teacher certification student at Gettysburg College. His passion for the literary arts is what drives him to not only write but also teach English.

Archer Castle is a senior at Gettysburg College, majoring in History and English with a Writing Concentration. He currently resides in Gettysburg, PA, with four roommates and not enough wall decoration. His favorite color is crimson.

Katherine C. Cornet is a sophomore at Gettysburg College who is currently majoring in English with a concentration in writing and is a women's soccer player. She loves listening to music, reading a good book, or hanging out with friends in her free time. She enjoys writing prose in the fiction genre.

Hannah Crowley is an English with Writing Concentration and Classics double major who will be graduating in the spring. Currently, she is writing a fiction Honors Thesis, and in the future hopes to work in publishing.

Diptiman Das is from Bangladesh, and passionate about design and interactive media arts. He has also dedicated the last two years to studying architecture, which has broadened his creative horizons and sharpened his sense of design. His exploration of diverse creative outlets has deepened his love for voiceovers and art, viewing them as effective tools for realizing his conceptual universe and giving shape to my infinite imagination. He is currently pursuing Computer Science at Gettysburg College, actively honing his skills to merge technology with creativity. He thrives in combining all these insights, aiming to contribute innovative solutions to the gaming industry.

Luca Espana, from Sherman Oaks, California, is a Junior 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.

Cameron Fleming is an undergraduate History Major at Gettysburg College. Cameron has a life-long interest in history, which inspires a lot of her work. She is interested in programming and is learning game design in her spare time. She started writing in her senior year of high school, and has been heavily involved in her high school literary magazine before the Mercury. Cameron has been involved in many organizations both in and out of school, including the Junior States of America and the WCHS radio station at her high school.

Lanken Franchetti '24 double majors in English with a writing concentration and history. Her involvement at Gettysburg College includes acting as Nonfiction Genre Head for The Mercury, Editor-in-Chief for The Gettysburgian, and Editor-in-Chief for the Gettysburg College Chapter of Her Campus.

Greer Garver is a double major in History and Music, and a French minor at Gettysburg College. She plays piano, and enjoys gardening in her free time. She is currently a member of the women's music fraternity Sigma Alpha Iota, and works as a student conservation assistant at Musselman Library.

Antonio Giordano is a senior English with Writing Concentration and Political Science double major at Gettysburg College. He is from Southborough, Massachusetts. When he is not writing, you can find Antonio coaching for the Esports club, spending time with his fraternity Brothers in Alpha Chi Rho, or building forts in the woods of his childhood home.

Ainsley C. Green is a first-year student at Gettysburg College and is an undeclared major with a minor in music. She is very interested in the English with Writing Concentration major and has enjoyed many writing opportunities on campus in addition to the Mercury including writing articles for the Gettysburgian and Her Campus. In her free time, she also loves to read, play piano, do art projects, be outdoors, and spend time with friends and family.

Cassidy Haines is a sophomore with an English major with a writing concentration and a women, gender, and sexuality studies minor from Ocean City, New Jersey. She also serves as Student Administrative Assistant for the Gettysburg College English Department, Social Media Manager for The Gettysburgian, and Honor Council Chair for Tri Sigma. Her favorite place to read is the beach.

Alexander Hanley is a first year classics major that writes poetry as a form of therapy for his various neuroses and horrible taste in romantic partners. His other main form of therapy is a fizzy glass of Coke with plenty of ice.

Chloe E. Hanousek is from Syracuse, New York. She is pursuing a double major in Health Sciences and Women, Gender, and Sexuality Studies at Gettysburg College.

Georgia Kirkendall is a rising junior with an English writing major and neuroscience minor.

Jacob Krebs is a senior with a major in Sociology and a minor in Writing at Gettysburg College. He enjoys literature and music.

Aubrey Mandichak is a sophomore student at Gettysburg with a plan to major in English and Classics. She enjoys writing for fun.

Noelle G. Muni is a senior English major with writing concentration and a minor in art history at Gettysburg College. She recently presented her undergraduate thesis is on works of Octavia Butler and Toni Morrison. She enjoys engaging with art and literature across genres and time periods. Her favorite color is pink.

Emily O'Hara is a Gettysburg College senior majoring in English with a writing concentration. She grew up in many places and is passionate about many forms of writing.

Ella Prieto is from West Chester, PA, and is a double major in Public Policy and Women, Gender, and Sexuality Studies with a Writing minor. She serves as the Managing Editor of *The Gettysburgian*, the President of the Panhellenic Council, an It's On Us Fellow, and a volunteer for Casa Swim. In her free time, she loves to read and keep up with celebrity drama.

Julián Sánchez-Melchor is a Religious Studies major at Gettysburg College, class of 2024, focusing his study on Christianity, Indigenous Acknowledgement, 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.

Erin Scanga is a freshman from Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania who plans to double major in history and German studies. Aside from writing, she enjoys fashion, drawing, and cosmetics. She won a Silver Key in the 2023 Scholastic Art & Writing Awards for her short story "Frankenstein Goes to Build-A-Bear."

Nat Schneller is an English Major and CIMS minor. He is interested in all forms of writing.

Bethany Shifflett is 19 years old and grew up only 15 minutes away from Gettysburg! She has always had this intense passion for all forms of writing; specifically poetry. But, through her Intro to Creative Writing course she took this year as a freshman, she thinks creative nonfiction may be her new favorite! She plans to major in English with a writing concentration, and possibly minor in art!

Beatrice Slevin-Trigo is a sophomore 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.

Theodore Szpakowski is a history major with minors in public history and writing. He enjoys writing, playing Dungeons and Dragons, and spending time in the library—basically anything with an element of storytelling.

Aly Leia Wein is a senior at Gettysburg College, majoring in History and minoring in Writing and Civil War Era Studies. She loves Dr Pepper and woodsy-themed room decor, while she dislikes asparagus and Los Angeles traffic. Aly aspires to bake pies in a cabin in order to avoid late-stage capitalism.

Emma Wylam is a senior History and Studio Art double major in the class of 2024. They're also a double minor in Public History and Art History. Influenced by printmakers of the late 19th and early 20th century, their artistic work seeks to combine the flair of the art nouveau style with personal influences and reflections.

Judges' Biographies

Jennifer Clogg was thrilled to be asked to judge The Mercury fiction submissions a second year in a row! Jennifer graduated from Gettysburg class of '21 with a Double Major in Spanish and English with a Writing Concentration. She currently resides in Maryland, but is moving to PA this summer. For fun, Jennifer enjoys reading with her book club. She'd like to thank The Mercury and the authors for the opportunity to read these amazing stories!

Emily Ann Francisco ('14) is the Curatorial Associate for the Collection in Modern and Contemporary Art at the National Gallery of Art. She is also a painter, writer, and PhD Candidate in Art History at the University of Delaware. Emily is based in the Washington, D.C. metro area.

Hannah Rinehart graduated from Gettysburg College in 2023 with a major in English and a concentration in writing with mathematics and German minors. During her time at Gettysburg, she enjoyed her time as Editor-in-Chief of the Mercury Literary Magazine and as a student intern for The Gettysburg Review. Last summer, she participated in the University of Denver Publishing Institute in Denver, Colorado, and hopes to find a career in production editorial. She loves to read memoirs, Jane Austen retellings, and historical fiction.

Mikelyn Britt lives in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania where she spends her time writing and working as an early childhood educator. She has previously been published in The Mercury in poetry, creative nonfiction, and fiction. In 2023, Britt received the Virginia Woolf Essay Prize and was recognized as runner-up for the Stephen Crane Fiction Prize.

