



THE MERCURY

THE STUDENT ART & LITERARY MAGAZINE OF GETTYSBURG COLLEGE


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The Mercury 2015

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The Mercury 2015

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THE MERCURY

2015

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2015 cover artwork from “Magnolia Bridge” by Zoe Yeoh

THE MERCURY

HISTORY & PROCESS

The Mercury is a student-run art and literary magazine published annually in April since 1894 at Gettysburg College. All students of the College are invited to participate on the staff and to submit their work for possible publication. Editors for the next year's issue are elected in April by the entire staff. Submissions are accepted from September through December at cupola.gettysburg.edu/mercury/ and are reviewed and chosen anonymously by the staff.

EVENTS

The Mercury holds a publication reception 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. In 2014, *The Mercury* hosted its third Write Night, an opportunity for students to read their work in a formal setting.

THE MERCURY PRIZE

Each year, the staff awards a monetary prize to the best piece of work published in each genre, judged by alumni active in the fields of art and writing. We would like to thank *The Mercury* Prize judges for 2015: Matt Barrett '11 (Fiction), Nazli Inal '08 (Nonfiction), Ally Taylor '14 (Poetry), and Francesca DeBiaso '12 (Art). *The Mercury* Prize-winning titles are bolded in the Table of Contents. This year's winners are Danielle Dattolo (Fiction), Drew Ciminera (Nonfiction), Victoria Reynolds (Poetry), and Megan Zagorski (Art).

PUBLISHING

The Mercury was printed by The Sheridan Press in Hanover, Pennsylvania. We would like to thank The Sheridan Press, especially Kelly Freeburger, for their support. This is the sixth environmentally-friendly edition of *The Mercury*, printed on paper from sustainable-harvest forests with soy-based inks. Last year, *The Mercury* became part of The Cupola: Scholarship at Gettysburg College, an online, open-access repository hosted by Musselman Library. Our thanks to Lauren Roedner for making this possible.

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February

Victoria J. Reynolds

My mother wilts,
daffodil stem half split,
in the coldest parts of spring.
So pale, her yellowed fever -
thin skin rests against a cerulean couch,
the color mirroring the veins.
I am too young
to know she doesn't want to be touched,
that every jolt
pushes on the tumors in her chest
as I sidle up against her,
my warmth seeping through
to the disease that will rob me
of a childhood, my mother
aging visibly until
I cannot discern her
from the crevices
in the sapphire fabric.

Vignettes from “Pariah”

Danielle Dattolo

Rosebuds

Father’s always grinning now, a sloppy grin, the kind that bares both rows of teeth. And the corners of his mouth turn up until they reach his cheeks.

His cheeks are rosy—not like Mama’s cheeks that used to look like rosebuds—but a splotchy red. And when he lifts his head high enough for me to see, or throws back his head to laugh when Mama leaves the room, the rounded skin that hangs below his chin is splotchy too.

When Father and I walk home from the tavern, I pray. Mama says that God is always listening, and I hope so, and I hope that it’s not too late for Him. I hope Hannah is asleep, and that’s what I pray for when we’re out of earshot of Abraham Willet’s cousins, who drink with Father and who yell at him and throw empty bottles in our direction, all the way to Huntington Street. I’m not asking, all I’m doing is hoping, Father says. He’s scowling, like it’s a bad thing.

I still think Hannah’s cheeks look yellow. Mary and Elizabeth looked like that, Mama said, and their eyes did too. The three of them had Mama’s rosebuds, Hannah most of all. She’s getting some of her old color back. Sometimes, in the morning, I watch her pinch her cheeks, the way Mama does now.

Mama, whose eyes are always red; who doesn’t smile when I bring Father home, even though she’s the one who asked me to.

Debt

Everyone has their vice, Mama used to say. You can’t give the devil an inch.

We don’t have money to pay off Father’s debtors. I thought, if I left school, what had been dedicated to my education at Canterbury could instead fill the little oak chest in the kitchen cupboard, the one Mama set aside for those looking for money from us. I came home because we didn’t have any, and now there’s nothing but scraps in the chest. The one only Mama and I know about. The one I wouldn’t even tell Hannah about. But

he still found it.

Every day, he ventures to the tavern earlier and earlier. The boys from the schoolhouse haven't even been released when I see the empty chest, its brass latch hanging haphazardly. I don't want to go to the tavern again.

He was a self-made man unmade by drink, and this increasingly public knowledge unnerved Mama, and she said an arrest was all they needed, that the family's image would unravel if he was arrested. She wanted to keep sitting in the pew closest to the altar. Mama was concerned, should his condition worsen, we might not be able to return at all. What would become of his soul? It was the only matter she feared more.

When I find him in the tavern, the flap of flesh beneath his chin seems to hang lower than even yesterday. Folds in his forehead age him, as do his sagging cheeks and heavy-lidded, red-rimmed eyes. The tavern is not empty, but he sits alone. He can't buy much whiskey with the money from the oak chest, but it will be enough for him. It will be enough for him to put up a fight, enough so I must involve the bartender to restrain him while I convince him that Mama asked for his return.

Instead, I call him a wretch. I shout at him. The words taste venomous, like the acidic bile I disgorged after he left some whiskey out for me late one night, back when I felt esteemed to partake. I was ten.

I want to fight him today, but I don't want to make him come home.

Communion

After Mama's death, I stopped bringing him home from the tavern. His first arrest came a week later; his second, days after the Justice of the Peace released him. Reverend Lord called him to the church the following Sunday an hour before the congregation would gather. I was summoned, as well, but Hannah had to remain home. The reverend was clear: He would not partake in the Eucharist. He had been denied the Body and Blood of Christ.

You are not a man of moral standing. The goodness of your character has waned, and with the passing of your wife, may she rest in peace, you have increasingly and outwardly spurned God.

The words in my head, like echoes.

Public drunkenness will not be tolerated within this congregation. There is grace for your mistakes, but you reject it in favor of floundering in your own debauchery. You continue to live in your sin, and your arrests—your public scenes—show us no indication of atonement for your actions. You are not in a state of grace. You are not pure.

It's not real. All that Mama had prayed for, for our souls and our standing, has been released from his responsibility, renounced by his deeds.

May God show you the error of your ways.

Father

And Papa has passed. Dr. Lathrop convinced Reverend Lord to do the service. It took two days for him to agree. This letter will no doubt get to you late, but perhaps I will see you at the service. It will follow Mass on Sunday. He hasn't left us anything in his will.

I will be staying with the Lathrops until the funeral. Mrs. Lathrop has been kind enough to put me up in your room. She said I can leave when I'm ready.

You are in my prayers, Brother.

Yours,
Hannah

I'm glad I'm not there; I'm glad I didn't have to sit through his last hours, or hold the hand of a man that left us on our own, that left us subjected to the jeers of classmates and townspeople. I only regret that I can't hold Hannah, when I think of how she must be crying without much solace. Only the Lathrops are there for her in my stead, but I'm glad they are. I couldn't bear to watch her cry.

Even in death, he hasn't given us anything. He leaves me nothing but his debt.

Sustained

Drew Ciminera

It's not uncommon for a classical guitarist to study cello suites. In fact, transcribing cello suites has become a trend lately—many guitarists find themselves confronting Bach's six as accepted, if not required, repertoire. It's strange, though: the cello has such a wide berth of technical manipulations, while the guitar, though not devoid of its own particulars, is incapable of some of the cello's crucial abilities. Mischa Maisky can linger on a note for as long as he pleases. Better yet, he can make that note swell; he can crescendo and resonate in waves that push you to a rare and beautiful place, the point where the intellectual and visceral seemingly meet in a pure, unadulterated high. The guitar has its own gems, but it cannot do anything like Mischa's cello. You play a note on the guitar, loudly or softly, and it immediately decays.

I studied the suites once. When I was learning them, I wanted to recreate their charm in a way that was my own, in a way that could both entice and move the listener. So, in a lesson with my teacher, Dr. Hontz, I confronted a more conventional interpretation with one strange and rubato-filled performance.

"This sequence at m. 8: you're being far too flimsy with the time," he said. "That's not in the style—you're too Romantic. You need to play it more... direct."

I challenged him:

"I mean, that's how a lot of great cellists play it, right? Shouldn't we strive to imitate that as much as possible?"

He cocked his eyebrow behind his horn-rimmed glasses and then proceeded to show me a series of videos of guitarists who play it straight. He was right. So, I back-pedaled; though I adored the works, I questioned why we studied the suites at all—surely, they were more fit for the cello. Eventually, he gave me his somewhat paternal yet, more prominently, condescending half-smile:

"Drew, man, *yeah* a guitar is a lot different than a cello—but we did not choose the cello, we chose the guitar. *You* chose the guitar."

He was right and, with the thousands of times I've heard and re-heard that phrase and the thousands more who have heard and reheard it from him, I'm sure he will *always* be right: I had chosen the guitar.

In 2010, I spent a summer in Otis, Maine among relatives. My Aunt Lynn and Uncle Mark own a very old, somewhat dilapidated camp (it's a cabin, but they call it "camp") that my uncle inherited from his father. A few feet in front of camp, there was a dock that went into Beech Hill Pond—it's more like a lake, but it is only three square miles instead of some arbitrary number that some person in some place decided was the threshold to qualify for lake-hood. After an afternoon of swimming, I met my aunt and uncle for lunch on the porch. We ate sandwiches and shared a bag of chips as we looked out on the pond. I'm not sure how it happened, but, sometime between a few greasy chip bites and remarks about red squirrels, a topic surrounding my mother and my living situation with my brother came up. I remember my aunt reaching out her hand and touching mine:

"Honey, you know that we love you and are always here for you. I don't know why your mother planned things the way she did... but, had things been different, you'd be living with us and we'd be taking care of you."

My uncle nodded and my aunt smiled.

My aunt had and has a smile that, if you know it well enough, seems somewhat plastic. The smile wants to be sincere and maternal, but it always rubs you the wrong way. It's like a strange compliment to a statement that seems kind but has a speck of spite behind it. She loved my mother, her sister—but my mother wanted my brother to be my guardian, and I don't think Lynn liked that.

That same week, we caught and fried fish. I don't know why, but that day, I couldn't really stand anyone. I isolated myself and ignored most people around me—nothing too offensive from a grungy kid, but nothing terribly positive either. Towards the end of the evening, as Lynn and I washed dishes in the little nook of a kitchen, she looked at me and sighed:

"Drew, what the *hell* is up!? What's with the attitude?"

I furrowed my brow. "Wha-, I... it's been a rough day."

It had been more of a rough week, but she wasn't having it.

"You do realize that you've been acting like an ass for a while now, right!?"

"Well, I... I'm sorry. It's been hard."

I suppose "fuck you" might have been what I really wanted to say, but I just stammered.

It didn't matter, though—she was going to let it *all* out now. No plastic could hold these smile-worn lips.

"It's been hard for *you*? Yeah, well, it's been hard for me *too*! She was my sister!"

Sister—now, of all the words she said, that's one that meant something. Red hats shared from five to fifty; summer suns gushed and mar-

garitas tapped; journeys taken without a reason a la “Thelma and Louise”; churches and children shared with every Sunday morning; wry-smiled and petty reminders of a petulant four-year-old meeting her infant sister and remarking, “Take her back—she’s broken!” Yup—they were sisters.

“There are some nights when I just lay down and cry! When do *you* cry!? The way you and your brothers grieve... it’s wrong! It’s not human!”

She had stopped looking at me. She gave her full attention to the suds and the pan. My mouth was agape for a moment, and then it was closed. I walked away. I don’t think I cried, though.

My mother died on February 19th, 2009. I was fifteen. Before that day, she had spent a week with nurses and family at the support of in-home hospice. My mother’s siblings, all five of them, came up with their children and their children’s children. It wouldn’t come as a surprise to know that the time passed was more than uncomfortable; everyone was clammy and apprehensive, trying to keep busy when, honestly, there wasn’t much to do. People would talk, reminisce, sleep, play, or try to fix something—find a habit, rinse and repeat. No one wanted to walk or linger too close to where she lay, but—no matter what—everyone managed to enter the living room. There was always a person in the room watching her, but someone else would, at some point, walk in, and then, after a few minutes, would walk out. Afterwards, the house, as busy as it was, would have a soft, sometimes choked sob in the foreground.

My aunt came up to me at some point during this waiting period. I was practicing the second solo from Eric Clapton’s “Crossroads,” and rather poorly at that. She approached me as delicately as she possibly could:

“Hey, sweetie.”

I looked up at her and gave the most well-intentioned, half-hearted smile that I could muster: “Hi, Aunt Lynn.”

“How are you today?”

“I’m okay, I think.”

“Yeah. Yeah, I think that’s pretty good in light of things!”

We were both quiet. She sat down on a couch, paused, breathed in and out, and then smiled with an absurd giggle: “So, whatch ya’ playin’?!”

“Oh—nothing. I’m just fooling around with a solo.”

“Oh? Can I hear?”

I brandished a lick or two.

Her smile widened and her voice heightened, as if I were three and I finally put the cube in the square hole: “Oh, man—that sounds great! Look at you!”

I smiled a little bit and looked down at my guitar: “It needs some work, but thank you.”

“No, really, Drew—you’re so good! Are you practicing that for a reason?”

“Yeah— I’m playing it in a show with my friends.”

“Well, look at that! You’re becoming a rock star, you!”

I probably chuckled and mumbled some quiet, I-don’t-know-how-to-not-be-awkward thanks.

She paused for a moment again.

“Hey... maybe you could play something for your mom! I think she’d love it.”

I went a little pale. I didn’t know anything that did not require an amp and some ridiculous distortion. It would be a few more years before I met Dr. Hontz.

“No,” I said bashfully. “I don’t think I really know anything that she might like.”

My aunt nodded and her smile faded a little bit.

“You sure?”

“Yeah.”

She paused for a split-second more.

“Okay! That’s fine, honey.”

She stood up from the couch,

“Well, keep on keepin’ on. I’m going to go talk to your brother. If you need anything, you know I’ll be around.”

She gave a reassuring gesture, and walked away.

I eventually went into the living room and sat next to the bed. The only people in the room were my mother and an aunt and uncle from Tennessee. My mother lay there naked underneath loose hospital linens; her blue eyes stared blankly at the ceiling. I grabbed her yellowed hand and brushed my thumb against her drying skin. She grasped, turned to me, and almost involuntarily licked her dried, tired, and muted lips. It’s strange to say, but, if some Victorian (say, Charles Dickens) were writing, he probably would have crafted a lengthy paragraph aiming to present a mournful, mythologized, Christian comparison for my mother, as if she were some graceful and ever-beautiful angel from death-bed to Heaven. She was not an angel—she was a swollen woman, an extremely exhausted and aged “cherub.” She suffered a tumor in her brain and an arthritic body. Before, she suffered my father who, from his middle-age, suffered the deterioration of his own body and mind; she suffered the pressure of four boys with no father; she suffered through the loss of parents, friends, and ancient lovers; and, most of all, I think she suffered from her own seclusion. I wonder if, at the end of her long days, she looked away from her crime novel and stared at her swollen hands for too long; I wonder if she looked from her second-story window and thought about the distance between it and the first.

Imagining it all now, I wouldn't have blamed her. I definitely wouldn't.

When I spoke, I didn't have much to say, mostly because I didn't know *what* to say. I tried to wheedle some sentimental garbage from my mouth; I tried to mention a moment in which we looked at the stars together on Beech Hill Pond. If I recall, she, reasonably dissatisfied with what I'm sure was pretty shitty behavior, called me an ungrateful brat moments before our star-gazing. The best of times, I'm sure. Anyway, I don't think she heard much of what I said—I mumbled through my entire recollection. And she, of all people on this earth, was tired. She eventually loosened her grasp, groaned, and turned away.

Two months earlier, a home-phone rang quietly in the night. I awoke in a hot-sweat, though not to anything like I used to—usually, I'd wake up at this hour to the vixen scream of the red-coated banshees in the backyard who, fortunately, could never catch my unfortunately tracked, chased, and—above all—distraught cats. This wasn't that night, though. I walked downstairs and into the kitchen where the door to our backyard revealed a December storm. Mingled clots of snow fell in heavy mounds; a few cilia-tipped tufts of grass pierced the powdered surface before they were submerged and removed from the frostbitten scene. I looked to my left where the digital clock above the stove read “2:17” and then forward and down where the pale green light on the phone illuminated the dark and shook on the table with each quiet though unnerving buzz. I picked up the phone:

“Hello?”

The calm voice of my soon-to-be sister-in-law answered: “Hey. Drew? Is this Drew?”

I nodded my head to the ghost in the room: “Yes... who is this?”

“It's Lorie.”

“Who?”

“It's Lorie.”

My breath slowed down as I scrunched my face with my left hand:

“Oh—sorry. Hey, Lorie... what's up?”

“Hey! So, I'm sorry to wake you up and rush into this—but it is really important. Nick thinks you guys should come to the hospital.”

I removed my hand from my face. My pulse was becoming more apparent to me.

“I'm not trying to make you panicked—but we don't know what's up. Nothing is happening immediately, all of your mother's signs are fine... but Nick think you guys need to come down tonight.”

Again, another gesture to the ghost: “Okay.”

“Get your brothers up and leave as soon as you can. Your aunt and uncle will probably meet you guys here—I know the weather is hell.”

“Uh... okay.”

“Okay? Please call us when you guys are on your way.”

“Yeah. Yeah—will do.”

“See ya’ soon.”

“Bye.”

I went upstairs and woke both my brothers. We all prepared to go outside and shovel the driveway when my Aunt Lynn and Uncle Mark appeared in a teal van with four-wheel drive. They had been on their way over when Lorie had called. We all huddled silently in their van and drove up interstate-95 as fast as the snowstorm would let us.

When we reached my mother’s room, my brother Nick was sitting on an elongated and padded window-sill, looking out and away where the snow burdened the city. Lorie stood closer to my mother’s bed and looked down on my mother with sympathetic eyes as she, distraught, prostrate, and helpless, breathed in short and agonizing bursts. My brother and his fiancée rose when we entered. We arrived moments before the hospital staff moved my mother to a different floor.

She lay there sobbing between broken phrases:

“I... it’s... I know it’s...”

We lived on a hill, my family and I—we had seen flood after flood, leaf after sunken leaf beneath the flowing essence of some numinous eye and its sustaining prerogative for sorrow. I had only seen my mother cry three times—this was the third time. My brother and aunt looked at her. We were all looking at her—but my aunt and brother gazed with a greater anticipated grief than anyone there. Her first-born and her sister were the only people who spoke to her with any level of intimacy; they were her confidantes, the ones who knew all of her secrets. It was no secret, though: any nurse, doctor, or experienced human being could tell you that death’s approach is most easily foreseen by the person dying.

We huddled around her now. My mother sucked on a small wet sponge that was held by a plastic stick and re-moistened by water in a small white Dixie cup. My aunt would hold the stick and press it to her tongue, but the process was short-lived. My mother’s tears were dried, but her face wrenched with fear, despair, and final urgency. She had no more of the sponge; she needed to find a way to speak. My aunt stood by as my mother’s translator, the only one who could feasibly interpret each struggled syllable. She was giving out marching orders to each one of my brothers. When she came to me, the meaning was nearly impossible to find. “Go to Abbey Road,” was my aunt’s final translation. I was going to London that spring with the choir—and that’s the only time I planned on being there in my life. We all looked to my mother; she had said her piece and had calmed. Like good sons or soldiers should, we accepted our orders.

When the moment came, I, along with all of my brothers, stood at the foot of the bed. My aunt motioned for me to stand by my mother's head, but my oldest brother, an RN, was already there with a stethoscope in-hand. He pressed the cold head of the instrument against the top of her naked breast to feel a tenuous beat. Her face was pale; her mouth was open and sagged; her tongue was loose and her eyes were settled. My brother pulled the stethoscope away and bowed his head:

"I'm sorry, everyone."

An old man could have been coughing and swearing while he weed-whacked outside the window; all the ugly-faced, Napoleon-complexed lap dogs could have released their hell-born yelps at once; a whole fucking parade could have taken a short hour detour through our cramped living room—it didn't matter. The silence was unbroken for what felt like minutes. And then Nick sniffled. After that, you could have invited the old man, the lap dogs, and the parade to join our choir.

In 1723, it's assumed that Bach began to write his cello suites. His compositions came at a tumultuous time for the cello, at a point when strings, cello bodies, techniques, and tunings were becoming standardized. The cello was rich with warmth and resonant potential; its new design gave room for an experimental and particularly expressive approach. Four years after my mother's death, I went to her grave while the ground was covered in frozen snow and I played the prelude to the second suite. It's the only suite in minor, and its prelude is rife with something that I can hardly describe. It begins with a slow and melancholic arpeggiation of a d minor chord (the key of the piece), and then a panged diminished arpeggio that builds once and then again to a new loud and tortured height. After you can take no more, it recedes into the dim-lit and quiet sorrow of the original chord. The whole piece washes you as it moves in and out of keys, minor and major, humor after humor in a seemingly unending wave of melody. The final cadence is a struggle: it pushes until it bursts in one final and lamentful yielding of the d minor chord. I don't think Bach imagined his work being touched by a guitarist, contemporary or not: no, a guitar cannot sustain—no, they can only decay. But despite the frosted headstones and the fields that couldn't lift a note, I chose the guitar, and I played what my numb fingers could.

Casualty of War

Meghan O'Grady

Something awful is thrumming in my chest, not so much a heart-beat as a quiet buzz, vibrating just below my skin. Hmmmmmm, hmmm-mmm, hmmmmmm it goes.

"Alice. You came." Her voice doesn't sound shocked, or displeased. I nod, once, and make myself walk closer to the bars. "I knew...I hoped you would."

She looks small, sitting on her bed, hands tucked under her thighs and shoulders not quite hunched against the cold, but not exactly straight and tall either. The gray of the blanket matches the gray of the walls and floor, and her tan jumpsuit is doing nothing to brighten the place up. Her lips are the only thing of color in the place and they are patchy – bright pink in places where she chewed on them, pale and lifeless everywhere else.

"H –" My throat closes up on the words for no good reason. I swallow and try again, forcing the sounds out a little louder than seems necessary in the silence. "How are you, Marie?"

She gives a little laugh/sigh/hiccup that tells me more than it should. Her mouth smiles, but she doesn't move from her position on the bed. She has a habit of pacing when she's nervous and I think she's trying to hide it from me.

"How are you?" she asks, glancing up at me for the first time and then looking down. It's fleeting, but I think I can see a week-old bruise on her jaw. Not that it should surprise me – I was there when they grabbed her, and I saw the struggle.

I don't respond to her question, mostly because I don't know how. I am free and a hero and I am drowning in guilt and loneliness and I am wondering if I remember enough of her science to create the perfect poison and stab it in the neck of the judge. I glance behind me, but the door at the end of the hall is shut, and through the small window I can see the guard facing the other direction, giving us privacy. The other cells in this hall are empty – either because they are worried about Marie's safety or worried about what she would do with seven other cells of willing followers. Or else, death row is just not a very popular place.

"I brought you some orange juice," I say, reaching into my pocket and pulling out the small carton. It's barely four ounces – the most they would let me sneak in. I wanted to bring her an orange, her favorite fruit,

but there is no way to pass it through to her.

Her eyes light up and she stands slowly, walking gingerly on her left leg until she reaches the bars. The gaps are small – a crisscross pattern that leaves only one-inch holes. I poke the straw into the carton and offer the other end to her. She takes two greedy sips and closes her eyes in delight. I pull it down, out of her reach.

“Your ankle.”

I don’t say anything else, but Marie winces and looks down at her leg. “Yes. Well. They weren’t exactly gentle.”

“Should they have been?” It sounds harsh. I sort of meant it to. She presses her lips into thin, thin lines. That uncomfortable hum grows even louder in my chest. I think it says traitor, but I don’t know which one of us it’s insulting.

“Probably not.” She doesn’t ask for another sip of orange juice and I don’t give it to her. Instead, she hooks her fingers through the small squares and tightens her grip. I think she is reaching for me, but then I see she is just shifting her weight off of her injured ankle.

“I hated you for an hour,” she tells me, not quite making eye contact, studying my face in small, sideways glances. “I thought of all the ways I could punish you. You could be in the cell next to me.”

I know it’s true. They’re willing to put all of that aside because they want a happy ending to this whole affair, but if Marie starts raising a fuss, they’ll have no choice but to arrest me for conspiracy as well.

“Why aren’t I?” I ask. She blinks and looks confused for a moment, before she realizes what I’m asking.

“I only hated you for an hour. Then I hated myself. Of course you would tell. You always said...you were so very honest with me, even when you were lying. I realize that now. You were always just so...” she trails off, fumbling for a word. Normally, this is when I would step in and start throwing adjectives around until she found one she wanted, but this time I don’t have any idea what she’s trying to say. “...so very you,” she finishes, although she looks dissatisfied with her choice.

“How would I be anyone else?” I ask. I don’t want her to answer, but maybe I do, because the self I’ve been being lately is not someone I want to remain.

She laughs, and this time it sounds a little closer to actual amusement than before. She always liked to laugh at me. Except that usually, I was laughing too. “Exactly that. You are exactly that. I missed that. God – I missed everything.”

I want to tell her that’s it’s only been a week and she has no right to miss anything, but this week has been the longest one of my life so far, so I let it slide. I hold up the straw and she takes another sip.

"I'm leaving tomorrow morning," I admit. I would have thought that after revealing her assassination plan she would never trust me again, but apparently not because there is just as much betrayal in her face as there was a week ago, when the national police arrived at our door. Was it really only a week? It seems like years and it seems like minutes. The thrum in my chest was the same as it is now – the waiting for the hammer to drop, the lab doors to open, the bomb to explode.

"Why?" she finally asks, and I may be imagining it but I swear I hear her voice thicken with tears.

Because there is nothing here for me anymore. Because the people in the compound offer to buy me drinks or chocolates or fresh fruit as a reward. Because being here without Marie to laugh with seems pointless. Because my heart has forgotten how to beat. Because I can't bear to watch while she dies, and I can't bring myself to do anything to stop it.

"I think it's probably for the best."

She is quiet again, and she doesn't take the orange juice when I offer it to her. Finally she says, "I think I'm starting to hate you some more."

At least we have something in common again. "I couldn't," I start, but I don't know how to finish. I couldn't let you kill all those people. I couldn't bear to keep quiet. I couldn't figure out how to stop you on my own. I couldn't stop them from ordering you dead.

She reaches out with her fingers and just barely brushes against my hand, which is still holding the carton of orange juice to her. I move a little closer but don't try to touch her. She keeps her fingertips pressed against my skin. She is cold, and I am warmer, but growing less so every moment.

"You would have killed them all. Kids, Marie."

She stops trying to touch me and her head snaps up, angry and bright and more alive than I've seen her in ages. "They killed my family. They killed yours. I wanted them to know how it felt, to watch my younger brother, frozen, too scared by the guns to get out of the street!"

I know. I knew her story and she knew mine and we both wanted to feel something other than agony when we recounted it. And so the plan was hatched and I helped eagerly. But it wasn't until the poison gas was almost complete that Marie chose her target. And it was only then that I realized what it was I had signed myself onto. My family was dead and I wanted revenge. But letting a daycare full of children choke to death on poisonous fumes because their parents had been part of the war effort seemed just as bad as sending soldiers in to attack a city full of civilians because the president of the uprising was holed up somewhere inside.

"Those kids had nothing to do with it."

I begged her. I picked a hundred other places. City Hall. The Licensing Bureau. Gun stores. A military base. She would not be swayed

– the daycare center was the easiest target. It had fewer guards. It held the most precious objects. And the directors of the war would finally understand a little of how we'd felt the day their soldiers killed everyone we loved.

"They would have grown up just like them. There would have been more wars and more deaths and more orphans! Alice – I was trying to save us! To save the little girls like us!"

"By killing other little girls? The war is over, Marie. It's been over for three years. It's time to move on."

"He was my brother."

I don't know what I expected when I came here. I don't even know what I wanted. Marie will not be swayed, and even if she does change her mind, what good will it do her, a week away from execution? I should just let her die with her righteous indignation.

"I can't stop it." I tell her, after she has stopped breathing so hard, after we have both pushed back our tears.

"I know." She pats my hand again and I let her. Her hand that would have killed innocent children. My hand that is going to let an orphaned girl die.

"Finish your juice." She takes it in tiny sips, and I think that it does not taste as sweet to her as it did in the beginning.

"Thank you," Marie whispers.

"I wish," I say, but Marie just smiles a sad sort of smile. I don't remember her last happy grin. The wild one that made her look a little crazy and a little goofy, because her mouth was too big for her face. I didn't know it was the last smile I could enjoy when I saw it. For three weeks I agonized over what to do – how to protect the children and Marie. And so my last three weeks with her were ruined, and the weeks before that didn't seem special until they were already over.

I wish we hadn't made the bomb. I wish she hadn't picked the daycare. I wish our families hadn't died; I wish the war hadn't started; I wish Samson Hill hadn't decided to take over the world, starting with our city. I wish I could save Marie. I wish she would just die.

"Please don't cry," she whispers, her fingers making motions in the air as if to dry my tears, but I am so much taller than her and my face is so far away. "I'm not mad, 'Lis. Okay? I'm not mad. Not at you. Never at you."

"I'm sorry," I say, in a voice that sounds nothing like my own. I don't even really want to say it, because I'm not sorry for stopping her. I just wish it wasn't like this. I miss the Alice who saw Marie ranting and raving about war crimes and thought wow, someone who finally understands.

"Me too. I shouldn't have made you a part of it. It was selfish."

It's not an apology for planning to murder children, but in some ways it's better. At the very least, it's sincere. And maybe all I wanted from

the visit was for her to acknowledge that I was in an impossible situation. For her to tell me that I made the right choice, because hers is the only opinion that matters. But if she was selfish for including me, I'm being selfish now, for asking the girl I sent to death row to absolve me of my sins.

Thrum, thrum goes my heart. This is wrong. But it is the closest to right I've gotten.

"I'm sorry," I say again, and I drop the empty juice box and grip her fingers properly. "But I had to."

She nods and tightens her grip as best she can. We hold hands until the guard tells me that visiting hours are over.

Lamprocapnos spectabilis

Victoria J. Reynolds

You were born in August,
five months after spring cycles back,
and our favorite flower was the bleeding heart,
the “lady-in-a-bath,”
with its arching sprays
of heart-shaped buds
unable to pick themselves up,
like your neck and head in the last days.
Your head, a heady stem tipped forward
towards the earth we would bury you in.
It was spring ephemeral,
just like you, with your withering leaves.
You mimicked it, and
died down to your fibrous roots
as soon as summer fell away.
You disappeared by the close of the year
with snow falling onto our wooden floors
and a gold and ruby coverlet
pulled up over what was left of you.
I still dig in the garden,
hoping to find a root,
a rhizome, one bulb left of you.

The Fall

Valerie Nigg

I feel myself slip and the world stops. Brief moments are ingrained in my memory: the look of terror on my best friend's face, the gut-wrenching feeling of falling, the smell of pine from the trees above, the sting of the freezing water that I am now waist-deep in. I cling to the rock, its edges somehow both slippery and ragged. It rips open my hands but I don't notice the pain, using all of my energy to fight against the current that tries to sweep me away.

I've never been a strong person.

I go under and the deafening thunder of the waterfall is replaced by silence. For a moment I feel at peace, allowing myself to give in to the water's embrace. When I resurface, the roar seems louder than before and fear consumes me, causing an adrenaline surge as I get closer and closer to the edge. At the last second, I am whipped around, the plummet to my death postponed. I have been caught in some kind of whirlpool.

I bob in and out, around and around, disoriented and choking on water. Each time I approach the drop I think that I will go over, but each time I'm whipped around just before I reach the edge. It's torture: the suspense of my inevitable death, the dizziness, the water that slowly fills my lungs. I am denied the blessing of falling over the edge and being knocked unconscious by the rocks below. Instead I will be completely aware as I drown.

They say that your life flashes before your eyes when you are in a life-threatening situation, but that's not true. Instead you think of all you were unable to accomplish. I think of the soul mate I never met, the children I never had, the diploma I never received.

A splash and I realize that Victoria has fallen in. She slipped while trying to save my life, as I did while trying to save Tim, who fell in first. No. She can't die too. I am more afraid for her life than I am for mine and my tears mix with the water of the swirling vortex I'm caught in.

I scream, "I love you Victoria!" a final goodbye to my closest friend.

Instincts take over and I lose all humanity, consumed by the animalistic need to survive. I claw at the rocks, breaking my nails as the current pushes me past. I push my friends under in an attempt to propel myself to land. I hardly know what I am doing, don't register that I could be killing the ones I love. My brain has accepted the fact that I am going to

die, but my body doesn't stop fighting.

Suddenly, a freak current or perhaps the Hand of God pushes me out of the whirlpool and towards shore. Barely aware of what has happened, I instinctively start swimming and am surprised to find that I can now fight the current. I guide my friends to safety and collapse on the ground, assuming the fetal position.

I am not dead.

My friends are safe.

The nightmare is over.

I am granted another chance at life.

Battlefield Gothic

Anonymous

To the mailbox! she cried,
with mighty armour glistening;
a silver ring.

The engine turned, the beast pawed its mighty hoof with a rumbling that
shook the battlefield
and frightened the neighborhood cat;
the onlooker ran for cover in the safety of a rose bush.

Fix bayonets!
The headlights switched on.
Forward!
The enemy, a pile of leaves, was defeated.

Some victories have no deciding factor in a larger war.
She could slay terrible creatures with spatula and pan but would not quell
the rage of he who slept beside her,
settling instead to protect her children, the heirs to a liberal mindset and
some old books.
The dog was there to guard the house,
so instead she watched over their handwriting and compassion and health,
in both senses.

Up, soldier!
She pulled the blanket off.
Prepare for engagement!
I took the lunch she had made me and kissed her cheek.

The sounds of battle were mundane to us;
rabid curses, the shrieking tea kettle and her level voice,
always calm until he broke her.
She woke each morning to dress herself in his needs.
He did not mean to be a villain, nor did he want to become one;
but he was weak and could not fight himself.

Take cover!

Two white dinner plates shattered on the floor.

Retreat!

Her veined hands took my sleeve and dragged me to the car.

She would still be married when the year ended,
the battles would not again be so violent as they were.

The sick king, the mad king, my father would ease his iron grip and try his
hand at justice,

but still with echoes of wrath like a shuddering window frame, a door
slamming.

My mother in her armour slept on guard,
the cat crept out of the rose bush.

Another

Anika N. Jensen

"Another" stared up at her in italics, not for the first time that April. She laid the papers flat on the fake mahogany desk in front of her and lined up the edges, careful to keep a straight vertical line from her shoulders to her hips. Her producer taught her to place one hand on the polished surface, to lean forward just enough to catch the eye of the thirty-two-year-old watching from the weight room that didn't much care for local news. Her dress that day was black, practical, cut deep below her collar bones.

"Another." There was no need to read the script to know what "another" implied. It would be another dead child, another teacher or father or sociopath whose brief terror would be recounted and forgotten when the next shot ricocheted from newsroom to newsroom.

When she curled her hair that morning, she didn't feel the void that came with the news of another shooting. Driving to work against the black sky that was just beginning to lighten, she listened to Norah Jones, not the sound of a twin sister screaming.

"Another mass shooting devastated a small Vermont town yesterday."

As a teenager, she only knew Columbine.

"Police are investigating the possible motives of the perpetrator who killed himself and three others at a local high school."

There was Virginia Tech, then she lost count.

An intern approached her during a commercial break, a thin boy with headphones draped around his neck. "It must be hard," he said, handing her a water bottle.

She stood to adjust her dress, which clung to her body in places she did not prefer. "Not anymore." Her silver bracelet slipped from her wrist, a gift from her mother that had never fit. "It's just a routine. Same words." Another.

"Doesn't that make it worse?" The intern had a deep voice that hardly matched his scrawny form. "Repetition of a ghastly thing." She would have told him to go had she not noticed a blink of sorry curiosity in his eyes, the kind he might have had when passing a dead animal in the road: he wouldn't want to see its broken body, yet he wouldn't want to look away, either.

"It only makes *me* worse," she finally told him, a sad, self-depreca-

tory laugh escaping her full lips. She took a sip of water, leaving the cap off. "I have to look concerned enough to show that I care, but I can't stray from monotone." A sigh drifted out from deep inside her. "It's just a formula. Use your droopy eyes, but only a tiny bit. You need to be professional, still."

Afraid she was revealing too much, she studied the intern's face. He had deep ridges in his skin for a person so young, but no sign of disinterest or fright. He was leaning toward her slightly, one arm on the desk in front of him, intrigued.

She took another sip of water. "Sometimes I forget that it even happened. I'm just reading a script."

From the far wall, she heard a thirty second warning. The intern left, looking at her from behind a camera that hid almost all of him.

"We've been informed that the shooter had a history of mental health issues."

It was four o'clock and her shift ended. She swiveled in her chair while she straightened her papers again, overhearing words of melancholy and pity that swirled into the mix of deep voices and sad voices and those with little regard.

Her producer wandered over with stale coffee still on his lips. "Well done," he told her. "Well composed. You never break, I like that. I can trust you."

She tried not to stiffen when his hand lingered too long on her shoulder.

On weak knees she wobbled to the water cooler, where the intern was standing with his hands deep in his khaki pockets.

"I can't believe they make you wear those," he said. He pointed to her shoes, high and polished and black. "No one can even see them past the desk."

She laughed, and tucked an unraveling curl behind her ear. "I wear what I'm told to."

"A well-dressed storyteller," he called her.

"More of a paperboy," she said.

It was ten minutes after four and she had forgotten the four dead in Vermont. She returned to the desk before leaving, having tied her hair back with a rubber band, when the studio door clicked shut.

As the burdened footsteps paced toward her, she looked to the intern, huddled beneath a table across the room. She reached a hand up to her temple, puzzled to find beads of sweat on her fingers when she removed it. Her bracelet slid to the floor, but she did not bend to retrieve it.

The black barrel before her eyes did not seem deadly; she could have swatted it from her face like a fly in the summer. It did not hiss or growl, nor did it scream. It did not speak Columbine to her. There were no

whispers of politics in the gunman's ears.

She blinked for the last time, so slowly she could count each eyelash. Again, she looked to the intern, but saw only metal. Fear danced on her fingertips.

With a deafening blast, she became another news story.

Aromantic

Rachel Martinelli

I always found it difficult to sleep next to you.

The heat of your chest against my back
and your wet breath on my neck all trapped
beneath that fleece blanket was suffocating,
often unbearable when followed by a round
of frantic kisses and quivering limbs that
lasted longer than I liked and filled
the already thick air with salt and musk.

You wanted to consummate our love.
I just wanted to get off and be done with it.

You were my friend, so for two years I
willed myself to fall into the all-consuming
intensity of love's sun that you write
about in your poetry and that the world
can't seem to keep out of its mythos.

You were Pygmalion, I was your sculpture,
your frigid muse, and though your desire
was flattering to my self-conscious ego,
I could not feel what you felt,
desire what you desired.

You asked the goddess of love to breathe warm life into
this ivory body, but my blood calcified at her touch.

Every time you sat me down and told me that I wasn't
doing enough to make you feel loved, that warm smiles
over green tea and quiet conversations over long car rides
were meaningless if they weren't accompanied
by mindless kisses and romantic affirmations,
I would promise to try harder, all the while
wondering why my carnal blood had cooled,

why sex had become the nightly toll to prove
that I was capable of reciprocating the love
I was supposed to feel, a way to alleviate the guilt
I felt for not giving you what you said you needed.

I watched you chip off pieces of yourself and toss
them at my heart's window, attempting to gain entry,
unaware that the glass was two-sided,
that I was standing there the whole time
and just didn't want to let you in.

I searched my alabaster skin for faults, certain a part of me
broke with the collapse of my parents' wedding vows,
that my insides had crumbled into chalky dust ready to seep
through any crevice I didn't fill with kind lies and barren promises.
I thought I needed the hands of another to cover the cracks.

But now I can smile as I claw into my chest, tear out the rib
passed down to me from Eve and fling it back at Adam,
because I breathe easier when all of myself belongs to me.

Not My Favorite Memory

Isabelle Punchatz

“When I was four, my brother tried to choke the nanny.”

Alex stared at me, his mouth slightly open and a large bite of steak hung off his fork. “What?” he asked, shaking his head as though he’d misheard.

I shrugged and took a sip of my water. The fork in Alex’s hand found its way back onto the blue plate and he stared at me across the table. A kid screamed for ice cream in the corner; his mom tried to quiet him as Alex waited for me to say something else. A plate fell off the waiter’s tray in the distance, a soft curse echoing through the restaurant.

“You asked what family stories I hear about constantly,” I said.

Alex rolled the wrapper from his straw into a tight ball, flicking it at my head. It bounced into my water and I scowled. “I expected something a bit more, oh I don’t know, funny.”

“He was a problem child,” I explained. “Mom’s always said he has my dad’s temper. ‘Jared just doesn’t know how to control it,’” I mimicked her voice, waving my hand in the air like her, pretending it made everything okay. Like getting sent to the principal’s office every day in elementary school. Like getting suspended for three days in middle school. Like choking the nanny when he was nine.

“He seemed nice when I met him,” Alex said, confusion coloring his voice and his eyebrows drew together. He tugged at the collar of his black t-shirt, picking off a few errant strands of blonde hair. “Didn’t seem angry at all.”

“Therapy; since he was twelve,” I said. “Everyone kind of just laughs awkwardly about it now.”

Alex shook his head and cut up another piece of steak, dipping it in too much A1 sauce and tucking it in his mouth.

“He choked someone, Erin,” he said while chewing.

I shrugged a little, playing with the fries on my plate. I dipped one in the ketchup. “My dad stopped him before he really hurt her,” I said, repeating the excuse the whole family used. Jared had had her pinned against the wall when Dad pulled him off. Chris told me about it when I was ten and finally asked why she’d only been with us for three weeks.

“Still...that’s bad,” Alex mumbled.

“Heather was fine.”

I found myself in a crowded football stadium on a Friday night in early November, sitting on cold metal bleachers that my jeans did nothing to protect against. One of my last high school football games. I leaned on the fence at the top of the stands; my left hand held Diane’s right, hidden under a maroon and white Easton High Devils fleece blanket.

“Hastings is such an idiot,” she said under her breath. It was the same comment I heard every football game, not too surprising with the team’s losing record. “So glad he’s retiring. Maybe we’ll actually have a winning team.”

“Coach Pat thinks they’ll suck next year too,” I said.

“He’s your soccer coach, Erin. What does he know about football?”

I laughed and pulled my hat down further over my ears. A groan made its way through the crowd as Alex fumbled for the third time, and I knew he’d walk into class on Monday with his head down, possessively holding onto the one strap left on his backpack if this continued.

“Take him out of the game!” a man yelled from the other side of the stands.

“He’ll be running laps at practice,” one of the boys sitting two rows down told his friend.

“Love you, Alex!” Nicole shouted as she leaned over the railing with a seemingly genuine smile.

I nudged Diane’s knee and nodded at the hot chocolate she was drinking. With a click of her tongue and an exaggerated sigh, the Styrofoam cup was handed to me. I took a long sip, letting the warm drink slowly spread through my body to help keep me warm.

A cheer burst through the crowd minutes later as Alex managed to make up for fumbling the ball repeatedly by scoring a touchdown. The people in the Student Section stood up quickly, shouting and clapping as Alex fist-pumped the air. Diane screamed, hand slipping out of my grip as she started to jump up with the rest of the crowd.

“I was molested,” I said quietly. The words escaped without any prior thought like an innocent prisoner breaking through iron bars to find somebody to finally listen.

Everyone’s cheers grew silent like they’d heard my confession, and Diane stood frozen, legs bent awkwardly, half standing. Alex was still jumping on the field, the number seven stitched across his back covered in mud stains. Coach Hastings was bent over, clipboard tucked under his arm as he clapped loudly. Our fleece blanket was half on the ground, having been pulled off when Diane moved. I couldn’t hear the sound of peoples’

screams; I just stared at Diane, blue eyes meeting hazel.

“What?” Diane asked, breaking the trance and the sounds of the stadium rushed back in; the marching band playing our fight song, Coach Hastings screaming at the team for the next play, Diane’s boots squeaking as she shuffled her feet and sat down.

I could take it back if I wanted to, pretend Diane had misheard. Her face screamed at me to do just that, the desperation in her hazel eyes shining.

“I was molested,” I said again. I glanced around briefly, but no one was paying attention to the two girls sitting at the top of a stadium, bundled under blankets and scarves with matching maroon hats that read *Easton High* across the front. Diane tucked her ankle around mine, and I let the crowd fall into a blur again.

“I was eight,” I continued.

I felt the light brush of her thumb over my knuckles, the touch dulled by the ratty leather gloves I’d stolen from my mom’s closet earlier that day.

“Who?”

I swallowed and stared down at my knees, tapping them together repeatedly. “It doesn’t matter,” I said without looking at her.

There was a soft touch to my shoulder, fingers playing with the split ends of my thin hair. “It does,” Diane said, kissing my cheek softly. “Tell me.”

I sighed. “You can’t tell anyone.”

“I would never,” she promised. Her arm wrapped around my shoulder, one finger drawing both our initials through the layers of my clothes, her typical way of comforting me.

I took a deep breath and held it for a few seconds, letting it out slowly as I continued to stare at my knees. I didn’t want to see Diane’s face.

“Jared.”

I sat at the kitchen table, glancing up to watch as Jared cut up asparagus and snap peas to cook with dinner that night. My mom was folding the piles of laundry he’d brought home from college, and my dad was upstairs watching a hockey game, his voice travelling downstairs whenever he yelled at the screen. My mom was watching the same game, television angled so my brother could see it too while I continued to flick through the magazine in front of me. Every time there was a bad play, Jared cursed and chopped the food a little harder.

After throwing a snap pea that had fallen on the tile floor into the trash, his slender hands turned the dial up on the stove. I watched the alien tattoo on his shoulder twitch as he moved on to cutting peppers. I could

see the little indents in his shirt where his shoulder dimples were; I had the same ones. I took in the almost chubby cheeks from too much alcohol and the beard that was an inch too long. My parents pretended to be ignorant of the almost unnoticeable smell of cigarettes that wafted from him, but I knew better.

There was a two-day-old hickey at the base of his neck, briefly peeking out over his collar. Most likely from his girlfriend Danielle, but after the 3am phone call a week earlier, when Jared told me about being drunk (while drunk) and a barely-there recollection of having sex in a shower with some forty-year-old, the hickey could be from anyone. I stared at him, the magazine sitting in front of me forgotten.

My therapist knows all about you.

“Erin, can you get the chicken?”

I jumped at the sound of Jared’s tenor voice, automatically moving to the refrigerator.

“What are you making anyway?” I asked as I put the chicken on the counter. He had moved on from the peppers and was now cutting up an onion, brown eyes red around the corners. I smirked at the sight.

“Chicken cacciatore.”

The front door slammed open, a burst of cool air rushing through. A suitcase fell onto the floor in the hallway, and the door closed again.

“Chris is home,” Jared mumbled.

Chris walked into the kitchen with a messenger bag slung across his chest, black jacket half zipped up, and light brown hair sticking up at odd angles from running his hands through it one too many times. There was a wide smile on his face, teeth showing and dimples piercing the corners of his mouth.

“The prodigal son has returned,” he said while holding his arms out.

Jared scoffed while I laughed, jumping into his arms. He let out a slight oomph but held me tight, kissing my cheek as he ruffled my hair. Chris barely came home unless it was the summer. This past summer he’d gone backpacking through Europe with friends. I hadn’t seen him since April on my birthday. We hadn’t even known if he would be home for Thanksgiving.

Chris let me go and walked over to Jared. “No hug?” he asked, clapping him on the back. The corner of Jared’s mouth turning down was the only response.

Our mom came into the kitchen, immediately pulling Chris into her arms. “You need to come home more often,” she scolded but there was no heat behind the words. Chris shrugged; Mom always said the same thing.

“I’m stealing Erin. I need girl advice,” he joked, grabbing my hand

and pulling me upstairs. His room was a boring yellow, old posters of bands he no longer listened to hung on the walls and *The Complete Collection of Calvin and Hobbes* sat on his bookshelf in-between broken action figures and countless CD's.

"Who are you trying to woo now?"

Chris chucked his suitcase onto the bed as I sat in his computer chair, spinning around as he poured clothes out over his bed and the floor. He took his jacket off and threw it on the pile.

"No one," he said. "Just didn't feel like listening to Mom fuss again."

I hummed in response and stood up, pushing him out of the way to grab his clothes. "You know I hate it when you do this."

He held his hands up and sat backwards in the chair I'd vacated. "Not my fault you're a little neat freak about clothes," he said, flicking through his CD's, putting one into the old boom box covered in stickers. The distinct sound of Led Zeppelin came blaring out.

"How's everything with Diane?" he asked as I sat cross-legged on his bed, folding t-shirts and jeans. I shook my head as a random bra fell out into my lap.

"Good. She'll be here on Friday, so you can once again threaten her to not hurt me then."

Chris smirked and winked at me. "Gotta keep my baby sister safe."

I rolled my eyes.

"Have you told Mom and Dad yet?" he asked.

"No. I'll tell them when I graduate and am away at college and don't have to worry about a fallout, if one comes."

Chris laid down on the floor, crossing his legs at the ankle with his hands resting on his stomach. "They'll be fine with it," he said. I chucked an old teddy bear at his head.

"You don't know that."

"Yes I do. You're just scared to tell them anything serious." Chris folded his arms over the back of his chair. "They won't argue with you about Diane. They already love her."

As the door opened, I was overcome with the familiar scent of sandalwood. Grandpa Joe's scent still lingered in his office, preserving the memories of him seated in his chair, glasses perched on his crooked nose from one too many fights, as he scrawled away on some contract.

I stared at the wooden chair his father had made. It was often easy to hear the *tap tap* of the chair wobbling downstairs while I baked with Grandma. My dad told me how she would sing, only to hear the tapping and think it was Grandpa Joe coming down to tell her to stop.

Dust had caused the original rich mahogany floor to turn ten

shades lighter. Everything else in the room was wood, except for the tattered red chair. It smelled of ink and old age, and there was a faint hint of expired perfume, as though someone had accidentally knocked over a bottle. On the middle shelf of a bookcase there was an old typewriter. I used to sit on his lap, giggling at the sounds it made while asking why anyone would use it.

"I suppose some of us are just sentimentalists," he had told me, and at seven years old I didn't know what he meant. Walking through his office now, staring at a picture on his desk (Chris, Jared, and I throwing sand at each other) and pressing the rusted keys of the typewriter, Grandpa Joe made a lot of sense.

I felt a light touch to my shoulder, glancing behind me to see Aunt Megan. She wrapped an arm around me, a gentle smile on her face creating more wrinkles in her cheeks. "He'd want you to have that," she said, nodding at the dusty typewriter.

"Do you think he remembers me?" I asked. I'd been one of the few people Grandpa Joe still recognized, but now that his Dementia had grown worse and he was in a home, I worried I was just a lost face in the sea of people to him.

"On his good days."

I smiled sadly and walked to the kitchen, Megan followed behind. Jared and Chris were outside with Dad, cleaning out the garage full of boxes for things to keep, sell, or throw out. My mom was at the nursing home with Grandma.

Megan got us both a glass bottle of water, sitting across from me with a warm gaze. "How's the first year of college going?" she asked.

"Stressful," I said, earning a soft laugh from her. "I'm glad to have a break this weekend, even if it is to pack up some of Grandpa Joe's stuff."

The bracelets on her wrist jingled as she pulled her short hair into a ponytail. I watched through the kitchen window as my dad brought out a cardboard box, placed it on the deck with two other ones, and walked back into the garage. "How are Chris and Jared?" she asked.

"Mom's worried Chris won't graduate on time as usual. Jared's got some internship and is applying for grad school." *He's also drinking every-day, but Mom doesn't want to talk about it. It's 'not a problem.'*

"I always worried about him –"

'Jared was such an emotional child, always wanted to be near your mother and threw a tantrum whenever she gave attention to you or Chris. Almost killed Chris in the backyard when he was five. If Grandpa hadn't seen him swinging the mallet back... You were still growing in your mom. And when he choked the nanny...I told Sean that he had to watch that boy.' It was the same story every time.

“He’s calmed down a lot, learned to control his anger,” I said.

She nodded, the conversation just as familiar to her. She asked about Jared, I said he was fine. She told me about him as a child, and I told her therapy had helped. She judged my dad for sitting in therapy with him for the first two years, and then mentioned how she had worried he would hurt me or Chris.

He has hurt me; I always wanted to shout at her. I’d told her what happened two years ago. She acted like she didn’t remember.

“I keep on eye on him,” I told her at the end of each conversation. “And if he ever has kids, I’ll watch out for them, too.”

I sat in my therapist’s office, legs kicked up onto the table between us while I flicked a speck of dust off my jeans. The dried dirt on my black boots left a trace behind when I crossed my legs, tapping my knee as I rested the side of my face against the balled-up fist of my left hand.

Rachel was wearing a sweater dress today, black with a turtleneck that hit just below her knees. She had black boots like mine, although hers had a slight heel and were polished. Her blonde hair was pulled into a bun, and her clipboard rested against the throw pillow in her lap, ignored by her for the past twenty minutes of our session. A few pictures were scattered about the ceiling-to-floor bookshelves that adorned the wall across from me; random books, candles, and trinkets filled up the rest of the empty white shelves. I stared at the dog calendar hanging just over her head, the date for Winter Break slowly creeping forward.

“You just have to push through the next 48 hours,” Rachel said when I stopped rambling about final papers and the stress of sophomore year. Winter Break was just over the horizon, waiting to sweep me up in a storm of watching TV for hours on end while I laid in bed and ice cream wormed its way into my mouth.

“I’ve never told my parents,” I said after a minute.

Rachel just waited for me to continue, legs crossed. When I stepped into her office for the first time four months ago, I told her about my family – about the parents who worked too hard, the oldest brother Jared who had one too many emotional problems, and the middle child, Chris, who seemed to slip under everyone’s radar until he was making you laugh at the dinner table.

“Why not?” Rachel finally asked when I kept quiet.

I shrugged, tilting my head against the stiff back off the couch and stared at the ceiling. “What if it’s just a figment of my imagination?” I said under my breath. “Why cause a rift in the family if it didn’t even happen?”

“Do you believe it’s a figment?”

I want it to be.

"I was only eight, and my parents tease me for not having the best memory."

But I remember this. The pink sequined short-sleeved shirt with black diagonal stripes I had been wearing – my favorite shirt – and the long black shirt underneath to help with the cold weather. Black velvet pants had covered my legs.

"Jared's never brought it up. And I only remember the last time it happened."

I went along with it, barely remembering the first or second or third occurrence. Wearing my favorite outfit the last time, mousy brown hair curled for student picture day at school, I ran out of his navy blue bedroom, scared and disgusted.

"I didn't remember it for years."

It was the first time he made me go down on him. One lick in and I ran out screaming.

"What if he doesn't even remember it?"

I never thought about telling my parents at eight-years-old and scared because of my brother. I tucked myself into Chris' bed that night and hugged the teddy bear Megan had given me when I was born. I forgot about it until I was fourteen.

"Sometimes I really don't know if it was a memory or not. It's all fuzzy."

Except for the last time.

Rachel tapped her pen against her clipboard but never wrote anything down. I avoided looking at her, pulling my clean glasses off and rubbing them with the bottom of my shirt.

"Is that why you don't tell them?"

A complicated mess, that's how I referred to my family, a group of emotional people who simultaneously loved and hated each other. We were like any other family. Aunts and Uncles who came to every ridiculously terrible middle school play and a sole grandmother who baked cookies and tugged on Jared's hair when I was ten and he punched me in the stomach for annoying him.

"They might not even believe me."

"You think so?"

My mom won't. Her baby boy could never do anything so terrible.

"It's been ten years. My memory isn't the best."

No reason to make my parents fight while my dad believes his baby girl and my mom defends her baby boy.

"I don't need to be the one to ruin it."

The clock on the microwave read 3:23am. My third glass of Cru-

zan Rum sat in front of me, only a quarter of the way finished. Jared sat next to me, twirling his pointer finger around the rim of his second glass. We'd been here for hours, since Chris left to go visit some old high school friends and my parents had retired to their bedroom to watch late night TV.

"Have you ever seen 'Bored to Death'?" he asked, downing the last of his drink and pouring another.

"Is that a movie?"

He laughed, the sound warm and familiar, and brought his legs up to sit cross-legged on the granite kitchen counter. We had spent the last few hours perched here, talking about *War and Peace*, currently sitting on Jared's nightstand with a bookmark placed one chapter before the first epilogue. We moved on to arguing about television and movies, looking up actors and random facts, while drinking rum and occasionally making our way outside, scarves wrapped around our necks and jackets zipped up tight, for a cigarette.

"No. It was a TV show," Jared said. "This quirky, offbeat comedy. You'd like it."

"I'll make sure to watch it sometime."

He jumped off the counter and grabbed his pack of Winston's. I followed him outside onto the deck. He handed me one and I leaned forward as he held out the light for me.

"Thanks."

"How's junior year treating you?" he asked, breathing out the smoke slowly as I watched it dissipate in the air.

"It's alright, still don't really like the town."

"It sucks being somewhere you hate," he said, echoing his words from our phone call that week. "Chris doesn't get it. He loves where he is. He doesn't understand how draining it is to live somewhere you hate day in and day out."

"Sometimes it's annoying how happy he is," I said in agreement, finishing my cigarette too fast and grabbing another one.

"Mom and Dad or Chris figure out you smoke yet?"

"No. I'm successful in keeping it a secret, unlike you."

He crushed the butt under his foot, picking it up to throw in the trash. "You had practice with Diane."

I heard the sound of police sirens in the distance, probably some robber with everyone away for the holidays. Or maybe it was an ambulance or fire truck rushing to save someone.

There was a soccer ball at my bare feet as the hot July sun slowly descended and purple colored the sky. I kicked it against the side of the

house, rolling it up my foot and bouncing it on my knee a few times. The back door opened with a whine, still slightly broken from when I'd kicked a ball too hard against it as a kid. I looked up to see my mom waving me inside. With one last kick, I let the ball bounce off the wall and roll into the yard and left it as I went inside. Mom was sitting at the kitchen table, laptop open in front of her as she answered the hundreds of e-mails she got daily.

"We're going to Concerto Fusion for dinner," she said, fingers typing rapidly and I wondered if she's the reason why I could write papers so fast.

"Again?" I groaned. "We go there all the time. You and Dad go at least once a week, even when none of us are home."

"Your brother wants to go there," she stated as though that explained everything. *Well if precious Jared wants to go...* "And your father and I like it there."

"So? I don't, I *never* do," I said. It's not just that I didn't like sushi, but I was so tired of that place. There were dozens of restaurants in our town, and yet somehow we always ended up at the same one or two.

"You don't have to come out with us."

I laughed a little, more of an unbelievable huff than finding anything funny. "Of course. Leave your daughter behind to make your son happy." *I wish Chris was here.*

"Don't be overdramatic, Erin," she said, closing her laptop harshly as she looked at me. Her jaw was clenched, a clear sign that she was frustrated. All she needed was the slight scary shriek she got in her voice sometimes to complete the look.

"I'm not. I just think it'd be nice if you didn't exclude one of your children because of *precious* Jared," I spat the words at her, arms crossed as I stood there, hip cocked to the side and eyes squinted in a glare. "Just because he's your favorite –"

"Oh shut up," my mom interrupted with a wave of her hand, dismissing me. "I'm tired of this. Both you and Chris with your comments about me favoring your brother. Just stop."

"I'll stop when you stop," I shouted. I heard the floor creak upstairs. *Great. Dad will be down here any minute.*

"I love you all equally –"

"Bullshit," I was the one to interrupt this time. "It's always Jared this or Jared that. Whatever he wants, he gets. When he stopped eating red meat, all you cooked was chicken. When he doesn't want to watch a certain movie, we watch something he wants. We go to the restaurants he wants to, listen to his music in the car, it's all about Jared!"

I felt my chest heaving, breaths coming out in harsh pants and logically I knew I should stop. I could see the anger shining heavily in my

mom's eyes and heard pounding footsteps on the stairs. My dad rounded the corner into the kitchen, taking in my mom who had stood up at some point, arms crossed and a look of annoyance on her face. My fists were clenched at my sides, arms shaking as I tried to contain myself.

"What's going on?" my dad asked, stepping into the kitchen slowly and trying to gauge the situation. I ignored him.

"Newsflash, Mother. Your precious Jared isn't perfect!" I shouted. *He choked the nanny. He's cheated on every girlfriend he's ever had. He raped your daughter!*

"Erin, you need to stop accusing me of loving him more," she said, voice eerily calm but I heard the slight shake behind it, knew how hard she was working to control it. Maybe she was wrong; maybe Jared's temper came from her and not Dad.

"YOU DO!" I screamed. My eyes were wide as I stared at her. "You do! Maybe it's because he's like...an exact replica of you, just with boy parts, I don't know. But everything is always about *him*. You're even helping him pay for a second Masters, when you won't help Chris or me when I graduate next year."

"That's different," she said, stepping forward with her hands up, face suddenly soft. *What is this? Good cop, bad cop with one person?*

"Why? Because Chris and I said it was okay when you asked our 'permission'?" I asked. It was a few months ago when we were both home for Spring Break; Jared was working and couldn't come home. We'd both said it was okay; we were both lying.

"We just didn't want to fight you," I said, throwing my hands up in the air as I walked to the opposite end of the kitchen table. My dad was still in the doorway, watching us. I could tell he wanted to intervene, but he didn't. "And let's be honest Mom, you weren't really asking."

"Erin..."

"No!" I said, not willing to let her speak. *God, you're so annoying. Jared this, Jared that. Let's go to Concerto Fusion for the billionth time because that's where Jared wants to go. Fuck what Jared wants. He's not even home right now.*

"You're ridiculous. You act like Jared is perfect, and you baby him! You've *told* me that you worry about him more than the rest of us. Because why? Because he's *you*? Because he was basically anorexic in high school and you had to put stuff in his food to fatten him up? Because he didn't get good grades like me and Chris? Because he's your first born? I don't care what your reason is. I'm fucking tired of it. Your son is a fucking MESS, and you just ignore it because you don't give two shits what he does, because he's your baby boy and can't do anything wrong!"

"ERIN!"

I jumped back at my dad's yell, a rush of cold running through my body. My mom was standing with her hands on the back of one of the kitchen chairs, head tilted down as she breathed out slowly. There was a slight shake to her breath, but I didn't care. If it made her finally listen, finally look at Jared, then I would never shut up.

"Apologize to your mother," he said, voice hard in a way I'd never heard before. I didn't say anything.

My mom looked up at me, her brown eyes soft but there was a hint of frustration hiding behind them. "Erin, we don't have to go to Concer –"

"Oh shut up," I said in the same voice she used on me earlier, dismissing her the way she'd dismissed me.

"Do not disrespect your mother like that," my dad said, and the cold chill came back at the controlled anger in his voice.

"Fuck you," I said and stormed out of the kitchen, running upstairs and slamming my door closed. I flicked the lock when I heard my dad's footsteps in the kitchen, inching closer to the stairs.

Fucking Jared. I felt a tear slide down my cheek, and I wiped it off quickly. I paced the room, energy busting through me and I grabbed the signed baseball resting between soccer trophies and chucked it at my closet door mirror. The glass shattered immediately, and I keeled over, hands resting on my knees as I just laughed. I tugged at the hair on my scalp, and fell onto my knees, hands reaching out to steady me but they landed on sharp pieces of glass instead. I felt them pierce my skin, blood dripping down my arms and off my elbows, staining the tan carpet red.

The door to my room slammed open, the doorknob hitting the wall and leaving a hole as the lock hung off the door. I looked up and fell onto my butt, the glass piercing the skin there too but I barely felt it, body numb to everything except for the fear running through me. I'd never seen my dad look so angry. His face was a deep red, hands clenched tight at his sides as his chest moved up and down rapidly.

"Erin. Elizabeth. Cole."

He stepped towards me and for the first time in my life, I was scared my dad would hurt me. I heard the crunch of glass underneath his shoe, and he looked down at me, taking in his daughter who sat on the floor in front of him, glass sticking out of her hands.

"What happened?" he asked, voice suddenly soft as the red faded from his face.

I broke a mirror because Mom doesn't care about anything Jared does wrong.

"Nothing," I mumbled. He knelt down in front of me and turned my palms up, wincing at the glass that stuck out.

"You're going to need stitches," he said.

I can't do this.

"Come on, let's get you to the doctor's."

I don't want to go.

"And then we'll talk about your outburst."

Why? You'll say it was just a tantrum or me PMSing or some other excuse.

"And you can apologize to your mother."

Sure, as soon as she listens to me.

"Are you in pain?"

No. I can't feel the glass. I can't feel anything. I'm numb and your son is the reason why.

"They'll give you something there."

All I want is for Mom to admit that her baby boy isn't a perfect angel.

"Have you ever read *The Sunflower*?"

I looked up at Rachel instead of continuing to stare at my hands, tilting my head to the side as I thought. "It doesn't sound familiar."

She nodded and tapped her pen against the clipboard. She stood up a few seconds later and grabbed a book off the shelf, one that was hidden behind several others. There was a crack in the spine, and the pages felt worn as she handed it to me.

"It's about a Holocaust Survivor who finds himself in a precarious situation when a Nazi asks him for forgiveness."

"As if that would happen," I scoffed and threw the book into my bag, knowing Rachel gave it to me to read. It didn't sound like anything to concern myself with, and it would probably lay forgotten for weeks until Rachel asked about it again and I gave it back to her.

"It's a true story."

"Are you trying to tell me I have to forgive Jared?" I asked with one eyebrow raised.

Rachel shook her head and crossed her legs, leaning further back in her chair. The throw pillow was pressed against her stomach as her arms wrapped around it. *You'd think I'd be the one to need the pillow.*

"No. You don't have to forgive him, nor am I necessarily saying you have to even try. And maybe you'll read this book and hate Simon Wiesenthal and the other people who respond to his question of forgiveness. But, I think you need to find some type of peace."

"Why?" I shot back. "Why should I grant Jared that?"

"It's not for him, Erin," Rachel said.

"So basically, I'm ultimately *forced* to accept it, maybe even forgive it, in order to stop any more emotional damage. That's just peachy."

Diane was sitting on her bed, leg bent as she leaned forward on her thigh, foot arched up. Black polish covered both her toenails and skin, and I laughed softly at the look of determination on her face, eyebrows tucked together, tongue twisted around and slightly sticking out of her mouth as she bit it gently. I was at the foot of her bed, visiting for the weekend, with my back propped against the wall and legs stretched out, eyes darting between her and my computer.

“Why can’t you just paint them?” she asked, frustrated as more nail polish made its way onto her skin.

“I have to work on this.”

“Some girlfriend,” she muttered.

I threw a piece of balled up scrap paper at her; she flinched slightly and messed up her nails even more. She glared at me, blue eyes piercing, before huffing and switching to her other foot.

The cursor on my screen mocked me as it blinked, waiting for some spectacular thought on French painters for my senior seminar. I closed the empty document and opened my e-mail, sifting through messages from various stores and professors. My computer dinged, a high-pitched charm that I haven’t figured out how to turn off, with a message from Chris; pictures from Montreal. A family vacation that summer since, according to my mom, it’d been ‘too long since the five of us did something together, Erin.’

There was a candid picture of our parents standing outside the hotel, hands laced together as my mom rested her head on my dad’s shoulders. Chris had filtered it to be black and white with the message “35 years and counting.” A picture of me on Chris’ back came across my screen, the memory still fresh. Tired after a long day of walking and ankles sore, I had made him crouch down as I climbed onto his back. He carried me to the hotel like that, ignoring the stares we got in the elevator. There was an out of focus shot, taken by my dad, of Jared and Chris arm wrestling in the hotel lobby as I stood behind them bent over in laughter.

“I forgive him,” I said as I continued to click through the pictures. Diane looked over at me, nail polish dripping off the brush and onto the duvet.

“Who?” she asked, distracted as she walked on her heels (toes pointed up to avoid ruining her hard work) into the bathroom. She came back with tissues and a wet cloth, wiping up some spilled polish.

I closed my laptop and moved to lie down on my back, legs bent up. “Jared,” I answered.

Diane raised an eyebrow. “Oh?” She sounded skeptical. The tissues were thrown into the trash and the wet cloth into the sink, and she lay down with me, head resting on my stomach. I ran my hands through her

tangled hair, watching the various shades of red dance from the overhead light. “You do?”

I sighed, focusing on the feel of her rough hair against my hands. “Yeah. I understand it.” *I try to, at least. I need to. It’s the only way to get through each day.* “He was thirteen and probably just curious. I was eight and conveniently there.”

“To forgive him though...” Diane reached up and nudged my hand away from her hair, lacing our fingers together instead. She squeezed softly but I didn’t respond.

“He stopped when I ran out of the room. It’s fine.” *It has to be fine.*

She still looked skeptical; her dark hazel eyes stared up at me, mouth pinched like she was biting the insides of her cheeks. She seemed... disappointed, and my free hand brushed over her forehead, trying to lightly flatten out the frown lines.

“It didn’t ‘ruin my childhood’ or anything like that,” I said, trying to reassure her. I still laughed, played with friends, joked with my family. *And I managed to forget about it for six years. I was okay.*

Diane still didn’t seem convinced.

“I’m fine,” I said again. A lopsided smile spread across my face, but the tilt of Diane’s head and the one eyebrow lifted told me she knew it was forced. “He was young and experimenting, it happens,” I tried to explain to the both of us. “I’m past it.” *Believe me.*

“It doesn’t bother you?” she asked, playing with my slim fingers in her hand. I pushed my glasses back up my face from where they’d slipped down.

Chris never did what Jared did. “No, it doesn’t bother me,” I said.

Diane looked at me through squinted eyes. “But you talk about it a lot.”

“What’s your point?” I sighed. *I shouldn’t have said anything.*

“Doesn’t that mean it does still bother you?”

I didn’t answer.

The Year of the Apocalypse

Pamela J. Thompson

Back then I thought death was beautiful,
that there was an elegance in mixing the whimsical and tragic.
My mind was a forever field, an apple of chaos,
a child's closet after midnight.

The summer I learned to drive
my father let me go two hundred miles
on the highway in a car without brakes.
There's no good way to say that.
I remember the low grumbling
as I smashed my foot down
and nothing happened, just blankness,
a hollow weight in my chest.
I knew then he was indifferent to my death.
My life was just another insurance policy to cash in on.

When I returned to boarding school in the fall,
And saw you silhouetted against the blue mountains
and the warm setting sun,
I wanted to love with all the hunger and ache of a fever,
I wanted to hold you in the marrow of my bones
and innocently call the sky a window of marbles,
but I wasn't ready to be vulnerable.

On an afternoon in February I walked
through the tall weeds to your house.
You were my high school sweet heart,
though I didn't know what it felt like
to say *I love you* and mean it.
I was greeted by three wet noses,
who met me at the edge of your driveway,
and your mother,
who was waiting in the doorway
inside the gingerbread-brown house
at the end of the cul-de-sac.
She gave me candy hearts

and a pastel purple stuffed frog prince
because you were too embarrassed to love me
that way at school, a reminder that you
were two years behind me in everything.

Later that evening, I cried in the dormitory
because I didn't want to be a woman,
but my mother told the counselor it was
because my father raped me as a child.
The dark looks and pained smiles
I received from teachers on my way to class
burned magnesium white in my chest.
Therapist appointments, guidance counselor meetings,
approaching court dates—
I thought I would never convince anyone
but you of the truth. You who kept my secrets,
you who had visited the hellfire of my mind and returned.
You held my hand on the front porch
of my dormitory.

The day before, a prison fire in Honduras killed
three hundred and eight. But I didn't know.
I didn't cry.
Later that month a train crashed in Buenos Aires,
there were bombings across Iraq,
the Syrian Army killed hundreds of civilians,
and Al Qaeda orchestrated suicide
bombing after suicide bombing in Yemen.

My mother wanted my father in prison.
She wanted me to lie in a court of law
because justice was more important than truth.
Ten years of arsenic poisoning
that couldn't be medically proven
weighed in her blood like lead.
I wanted to forget my family life,
which had been daily attacks of biological warfare.
Each meal an unspoken battle ground.
I simply wanted
to walk to class beside you,
to smell your sweet sweat,
to run my hands through your hair
so that the oils would seep
into my skin and perfume them forever.

It was unreal to be dispersed across these planes;
My parents were divorcing,
You wanted me to love you,
It was twenty twelve, the year of the apocalypse,
and Everyone was saying it was the end of the world.
I drew a Mayan calendar for the class garment,
which was later pasted on sweatshirts and yoga pants
to be worn like a brand.
It was the false symbol of our generation,
our minds filled with dark images of asteroids and sun flares,
as the real world crumbled in much less mystical ways
all around us.

Eight months later I was in college,
and you asked me to visit you for a weekend.
I said yes because I still wanted to believe in fairytales.
I remember you said you loved me,
I remember you said you wanted me,
I remember you were jealous of my new college life,
I remember you were done waiting.
In the dark I whispered, *I will never say yes*.
You pressed me into the leather couch with certainty,
This is what it meant to own someone,
this was how a man became a man.
Beyond the walls of your parents' house,
a thousand miles away on a lake,
my father played a banjo and sang
old mountain bluegrass
to a woman who wasn't my mother.
Ten thousand miles away a fuel tanker
exploded in Saudi Arabia,
and I realized, sobbing *no* into your neck, that suffering wasn't
beautiful.

The Touch

Christiana Fattorini

Conflict

“Wake up *Mtota*! Wake up now! We need you!” she shouted, as the warm blanket was torn from my body.

“*Mtota... Mtota...* what does that mean again,” I asked with sleepy eyes, reorganizing the stacks of medical records that had served as my pillow.

“It means child, you child. And you need to get to the delivery room; we need your help now!” Leonida hollered. She grabbed her gloves and hurried out of the nurses’ station. I really did need to work on my Swahili, especially if I wanted to gain some respect here in Africa. I was tired of being known as the *Wazungu*, or “white girl.” I moved to this country to help others, not to be looked down upon as some crazy self-absorbed American. I was not in Tanzania to do Leonida’s bitch work. I wanted to make a difference. Now why was that so god damn hard to accomplish?

I pushed the door open to go help with whatever the midwife needed from me. A bed whisked by me, almost knocking me over.

“Julia, I need you to prepare the table. We need sterile gloves and a birth pack. Turn the incubator on too.” I ran into the labor room, reached into the cabinet and pulled down a package of metal and gauze that in theory would help the mother after labor. Setting the gloves on the counter, I glanced at the clock. 2:22 am. Let’s see, 8 hours ahead of home, my mother and father would be sitting down to dinner at the table; another meal without me. A wave of homesickness hit me... maybe I shouldn’t have left.

The doors swung open, just in time to wake me from my daydream, and in came the cart that I had almost collided with moments earlier. On it lay a crumbled-up ball that somewhat resembled a human being. The woman could not have been older than me, curled up in the fetal position gasping in pain. Blood was everywhere. The screaming wouldn’t stop.

“16 years old.... 6 months pregnant... first birth... someone found her on the back of a *dala dala*, bleeding out. Something has gone wrong!” Leonida said aloud, although I am not sure to whom.

“She was found on the back of a bus?” I was confused. “Why would this poor woman be using the public transportation system this late at night?”

“Because, *Mtota*, unlike in your country, we don’t have the *luxury*

of calling an ambulance. We have to get ourselves to the hospital or we're on our own." She laid the girl's shawl on the birthing table, and helped the girl lift herself to meet her blanket. She looked so helpless.

The midwife pushed me to the side as she moved to the foot of the table. Starting with finding the fetal heartbeat, she prepared the woman's body for birth. The woman needed more help than we could grant her. She needed help from Igbo, the African god of healing.

"The baby's heart rate is normal, but the placenta is detached, that baby needs to come out now, or they're both in trouble," said the midwife.

The girl looked at me in the eyes for a sign of hope. She wanted to know if she would be okay. We didn't speak the same language. I couldn't tell her that I was just as scared as she was. I reached her hand and gave it a squeeze of encouragement, as if my touch could possibly ease her mind.

Flashback

"You're taking your malaria medication, right sweetheart?" My dad was trying to fill the silence that had taken control of the car ride.

"Yes, Dad, and I even packed bug spray and a mosquito net just in case. I'm going to be okay, I promise you."

"Just please remember to call or text us when you can," my mother added.

"I will Mom. I just don't know how often I'll have access to the Internet." We had had this conversation a thousand times before, and I understood why. And today was the day. The day I had been so anxiously and excitedly waiting to arrive.

It couldn't be easy for my parents to let their twenty-one-year-old daughter take off and move to Tanzania. It was a foreign country, on a foreign continent. I was scared too. They wanted to know that I was going to be okay; but honestly, heading off to a third-world country, even I was wondering how life would be. I looked in the rearview mirror, and caught a glimpse of my father's watery eyes.

Mom opened the door and we all got out of the car. I had my duffle bag and passport. I was ready for my new life. Silence took over the space between us again. I looked at my mother and father with complete gratitude for this opportunity. They returned my thankfulness with looks of fear and sadness.

Dad finally broke the silence. "I just wanted to let you know that we couldn't be prouder to be your parents."

Mom cried.

I wanted to calm them, to ease the worries that were painted on their faces. I reached across the space that seemed miles apart, and grabbed my mother's hand, as if my touch could possibly ease her mind.

Plot

"I said the placenta is detached. She is dilated 8 centimeters. The baby needs to come out now. Julia, you need sterilized gloves, and I need your help with the delivery." Leonida's shouts startled me. She wanted my help? I had never even seen a delivery, let alone deliver a baby. I grabbed gloves, and put an apron on, ready for more directions.

The girl was writhing in pain, and I was struck with fear. Again, she looked to me for help. I took a breath, I could do this.

"*Sukuma*, push! Push now! Julia, grab a cloth for the baby."

I quickly grabbed a floral printed fabric that the woman had brought with her, in awe of what was happening.

"*Sukuma*, mama! Push, push!" The little girl who was just screaming, shriveled up like a prune, suddenly transformed into a strong African Queen, afraid of nothing. And then it happened... *life* happened. Blood was everywhere. Her legs, the table, the hands of the midwife. Nausea rushed throughout my body.

"Julia, the baby!"

Yes the baby... I took the cloth, and wiped down the fragile newborn. He breathed. He cried. I cried. I surrounded the baby with as much fabric as I could find, trying to create some warmth. Leonida tried to clean up the mother. Blood was everywhere, yet everything was somehow dripping with beauty. Out of instinct, I grabbed a pair of scissors from the birthing pack and handed them to Leonida. She handed them right back.

"Cut here; where my finger is. I need to give her Lidocaine for the pain. Tie the cord too."

Something within me took over. Something moved my hand to the cord and made the cut. Tying the cord, I separated the mother and child: the baby's first step to independence. The baby cried again. This time, the mother smiled. I picked up the child, and brought him to his mother's arms. She was at peace. I had brought her the serenity she craved.

Leonida worked quickly to remove the remnants that had once been the placenta that for some reason had ruptured before delivery. She motioned in the direction of the incubator. I took that as my cue to take the baby over.

I laid him down in the warmth of the small bed. His eyes were barely open. Trying to move the blankets around him, his little arms squirmed back and forth. I watched in complete astonishment for what I had just witnessed. These were the first minutes of his life. He was so pure and untouched by the world.

Not one individual or event had impacted him yet. He had the potential to grow up and become whoever he wanted to be. He could grow up and find a cure for cancer, or live the life of a performer. He could be a

teacher or a preacher. He could do anything.

The dim light flickered, and the wind blew in a cool breeze. I looked around at the medical setup that surrounded the child. The room was filled with tools that Americans used in the 1950's. The room smelled like urine and disease. The beds looked as if they had never been touched by disinfectant or bleach.

I looked back to the child, the innocent gift of life, and was suddenly overwhelmed with concern. How could this little boy grow up with such little opportunity? He deserved more than a dirty one-room house. I had committed three years of my life to eradicate these situations, but I felt so powerless.

"She's okay Julia, the mother's going to be okay," Leonida came up behind me, congratulating my work with a pat on the back. "Now let's show Mama what good she brought into the world."

I picked up the little boy in my arms. His warmth took over my body. I felt as if the weight of my world was in my arms. So delicate, yet so strong, the little boy moved his arms.

I walked over toward the blood-ridden table and bent over the mother. She was tired and weak from all of her struggle.

"Mama, look what we have for you. Your baby boy wants to see you," Leonida said gently.

The mother turned and looked up towards me. Tears in her eyes. I gently lowered the newborn baby boy into her arms. Almost instantly, he curled up and turned his little head towards her chest. She held him close without movement, while I watched in awe. Silently, I said a little prayer of hope for the boy and his mother. I wanted him to have a good life, and find success. I needed him to have all of that.

The mother looked away from her baby and up towards me. "*As-ante sana*. Thank you," she said.

I looked down at the mother and the new life that she had just brought into the world, with unease. The mother looked in my eyes as if asking for more help. I wanted to give them all that I had.

A smile filled my face, masking the heartbreak I was feeling inside. I looked back to the little boy, so precious, so deserving of a good life. He rustled his blanket again, this time freeing a tiny hand. I lent a finger to his hand, and felt a small pressure around it he held on. His touch eased my mind.

From Daphne to Fair Apollo

Pamela J. Thompson

When I was young I played in the woods by the river,
splashing my brown rubber boots
in the cold, grey water.
I pretended I was a nymph,
a daughter of Landon, the great serpent dragon
poised in far northern sky
all year long,
watching over me with fierce love and protection,
unlike my true father,
who spent the whole day locked away
in a room in the attic I wasn't permitted to enter.

I never thought of weddings,
instead I reached for my bow
and shot an arrow into the side of the house.
I was a hunter,
a tangle of blonde tied back by a loose ribbon,
a shadow in the rabbit's eye.
My face the face of a renaissance woman,
stolen from Raphael's *Young Woman with Unicorn*
my forehead high and wide, pressed out like the full moon,
my pale lips thin and downturned, my irises round blue-grey coins,
my body growing under me without my permission.
I wore the same clothes for years,
never noticing how they tightened around my chest and hips.

I never saw you look at me until it was too late.
I ran and ran,
but growing up by a river, one only learns to swim.
Eros shot you with love and me with hate,
a burden of lead buried deep in my chest—
too deep to be removed
so it poisoned me for a decade.
I called out to a father who would not hear me,
my arms reaching towards the heavens,

my hands yearning to grow out like branches, my fingers to leaves,
but no father, no god returned me to nature.
Instead you caught me hard in your rough arms
and carried me across your back to a bed I did not wish to lie on.

High Tide

Anika N. Jensen

The kiss wasn't unlike the very first had been. The alcohol hid behind his teeth and crept between his lips until she could taste it on her own: small drops of sin that pooled on her tongue and leaked down her throat. He had big hands, long and lean, and they held the back of her neck comfortably, not threatening, but a show of affection. She held her breath.

"That's enough."

He was at least eight shots in, had maybe found a rum and coke before she had driven him home.

"You should try to sleep."

Two sheepish green beads squinted at her in her pajamas, and a crooked grin began to spread like a ribbon in a breeze.

He held her even closer, wrapping her up in his heavy body, a sweaty blanket on a humid summer night. Tonight, there was no window that she could open to let the breeze in, only his smothering heat.

She rolled back onto her side, grateful for a few wide breaths, and tried to shut him out. She had loved him that morning, when he ate pancakes across from her and let her have his coffee, and that evening when they stood at the edge of the shoreline and waited to see how low they would sink into the sand with the tide rolling over them and pulling back, rolling over and pulling back again.

He rolled over now and pulled her back, his pores dripping with Jagermeister that stuck to her skin like ticks. He held his mouth close to her ear and whispered.

"No," she told him. "Not tonight."

"For me," he begged, a knowing grin plastered to his face. He tightened his grip around her waist, the back of her neck.

"Not tonight," she repeated. "Another time."

"But you won't do it another time." He hiccupped and rolled on top of her, his knees pinning her to the mattress.

She stared, denying him with all features of her face and all parts of her body. "Not tonight."

He was light, and she could push him off if she wanted to, could slam him onto the floor and tell him to fuck off because he had crossed a

big red boundary line.

But she was at his house in a dumpy beach town, and he could afford gas more easily than she could.

"You never do this for me," he whined, his bristly chin buried in her neck.

"Get off." She shuddered. He had paid for breakfast.

He had paid for everything from the beginning, a form of his conquest disguised as an act of affection or cheesy romance, and he could afford it like he could afford to service his '98 Le Sabre.

When he showed her a silver necklace on Valentine's Day, she begged him to take it back.

"I can't pay for that," she said, overwhelmed.

"You don't have to." He smiled and kissed her, and a hand crept low on her back.

He had paid for everything, and now he wanted compensation.

"It'll take two minutes," he whispered in her ear. His hot breath made her shudder, but she remained still. She could not hear the breaking of the waves anymore.

Like most young adults he was afraid to say "sex" when it was really happening, so he was sly and implied it with his mouth, his hands. She valued words, but he hardly used them, only whispered dirty euphemisms that slithered into her brain and poisoned her until she could not move to push him down. He was skinny, and on any other day she could have him on the ground in one hit, but she was in love with him, too. She remained still, for his grasp tightened with movement like a Chinese finger trap.

She had only seen him so bare once before, though she had stood before him many times, vulnerable and cold. His skin stuck to hers, dripping sweat where it didn't belong, and his breathing grew heavier, hotter.

A month ago she lay beside him with a panic attack lodged in her throat, struggling to breathe while he held her. Tonight, her breath was silent and smooth.

He kissed her neck and fell off of her, satisfied, and was already asleep when she sat up again. Her body ached, her head most of all. In silence she changed her clothes and cleaned herself up, tying back her hair which had fallen too far into her eyes. She left the room to wash her hands and found a blank face in the mirror across from her, a sheet of five months of poems that had been erased in one night, leaving smudges. Her eyes had no color, they had simply drained. Her lips were pale and cracked.

She waited a minute, drank a glass of water, and went back to the room to lie next to him.

He didn't know what had happened the next morning, had blacked out and only remembered good feelings. They ate breakfast in silence.

She met some friends that afternoon while he napped, and they tossed rocks into the ocean, talking about their plans to go clubbing that night and complaining about traffic. They talked about boys.

She laughed a little when she told them about her night, convinced that they might understand if it was humorous.

“He was so drunk,” she said and cast a stone into the sea. Her breath caught before she released it, and she felt dizzy for a moment. “He started doing that thing where he sings in German.”

Her friends giggled, but they stared at her, making sure she smiled when she looked back at them.

She did not go back to his house that night. He called late, suspecting something was wrong, finally reading into her body and the silence she inflicted upon him.

“Did I do something?”

He didn’t speak when she told him, and she thought he may have cried. He promised her that he would listen, that he would respond to “no” every time, that he would never drink in front of her. She hung up, not satisfied but able to live with herself again. She still trembled from the inside out that night, and she slept.

One month later she would descend the stairs in her friend’s house and find him with a bandana tied around his head and a drink in his hand.

In another six she would do it all over again, only this time he didn’t know her favorite color.

Graham

Haley G. Weaver

As the neon lights swept the crowd and the bass shook the floor, there was only one thing I was certain of: I was going to vomit. Unfortunately, being sandwiched between sweaty teenagers in the mosh-pit of the MGMT concert was one of the worst-case scenarios possible for my sudden need for space and a toilet bowl. I pressed my hands across my mouth and looked urgently at my brother Graham.

“What, you don’t like this song?” he shouted over the music. I shook my head, pressing my fingers deeper into my cheeks. “Wait, are you gonna—oh shit.” Graham grabbed my arm and forced his way through the crowd of drunk boys jumping to the beat, girls taking swigs from a light blue flask, grey-haired adults who looked out of place, and finally over to the trashcan next to the club’s backdoor.

“I don’t get it,” he said as I leaned over the black bin. “We didn’t even drink.”

I gathered my hair and tied it in a loose bun at the nape of my neck. “I think it was dinner,” I said.

“Dinner? Wait—you mean the lasagna? You’re sick from the fucking lasagna?” Graham laughed and pulled out his phone, aiming the camera lens at my head, which was deep in the can. “Do you mind if I show mom a picture depicting how you liked the meal she so lovingly prepared for you?” I took my hand off the side of the bin just long enough to give him the finger.

There was no way we would be able to reclaim our spot near the stage, nor did we want to walk through the swamp of body odor and beer in order to get there. We grabbed a table on the balcony and overlooked the concert.

“I’ll get us drinks,” Graham said. He was sixteen, though he could pass for twenty. He was already over six feet and he swam competitively, so his wide shoulders and developed muscles often played in his favor when he used his fake ID. He didn’t need it tonight, though.

“Ginger-ale. It’ll settle your stomach.” He handed me the glass and sipped a Pepsi. I studied him for a moment. His jaw flexed as he swallowed a gulp of soda and I noticed that his nose seemed more prominent than usual, causing his face to look angular rather than the round baby face he had sported for most of his life. There was the faint scar on his cheek from

years ago, in the Griffins' backyard where we zip-lined on the thin wire strung between two oak trees. I had been twelve and he had been eight: not old enough to be careful, but definitely old enough to believe we were invincible. Graham grasped the handles and swung through the air, a yelp of glee echoing across the yard. The wire snapped. I held his hand in my lap while Mrs. Griffin called 911. He had only been unconscious for a minute before opening his eyes. He bit his lip. It was obvious he didn't want to cry, but a tear trailed down his cheek. I wiped it away before anyone could see.

And now, here I was, the one being taken care of. I felt the faint stinging behind my eyes, that unstoppable itch that forewarned me of the waterworks about to take place. I took a deep breath, and blinked rapidly. *This is not something to cry over*, I reminded myself. The green lights faded to purple as MGMT's song "Kids" vibrated throughout the venue.

"Great song," Graham remarked. He stood up and leaned over the banister, nodding his head to the beat.

"Don't fall," I called out, only half-joking. The song ended, and the lights went dark.

We began the drive home in silence. It was comfortable, actually. The aftermath of the concert was setting in—it felt as if a thin layer of film had been stretched across the openings of my ears, diluting the shrill beeps erupting from the traffic around us. My feet throbbed from standing in heels. My stomach still ached. I ran my hand through my hair and exhaled. There was something strangely fantastic about the quietness, especially sharing it with Graham—nothing awkward or tense—just noiseless, almost peaceful. The whir of the tires against the cracked pavement, the low hum of hot air blowing out of the vents, the road curving from the dense urbanity of the club's location to the shaded homes of Charlotte suburbia—it was all too perfect, like something from the beginning sequence in a movie. *Too perfect*. I brought my knees to my chest and buried my head in the dark gap between my legs.

"Are you crying?" Graham asked. I blinked quickly, and a tear escaped, soaking into my black dress. I lifted my head and grinned meekly.

"A little," I admitted. I was a bit of an abnormal crier. I mean, yes, I bawled when I watched a movie involving the death of a dog and all the other standard sad stuff, but what really got my tear ducts going was realizing that the moment I was in, the beautiful piece of time that felt infinite now, would soon be nothing more than *that thing I did over Thanksgiving break*. I clutched the sides of my legs and pinched them. *Be here. Be in the moment. Be here.*

Pluto

Rachel Martinelli

But my disease grew upon me – for what disease is like Alcohol! Even Pluto began to experience the effects of my ill temper.

The Black Cat, by Edgar Allen Poe

It was his eyes that captured my devotion.
Cobalt blue and flecked with tenderness, they
caressed my body with translucent ribbons and
tied sinewy, silk bows around my pulsating heart.

We loved in whispers: in whispers and kisses and
those tranquil nights when he would run his fingers
through my obsidian hair and whisper, “My God, Pluto,”
while my throbbing chest vibrated with pleasure.

For years I followed him, a faithful beast hungry for
his affection, addicted to those blue pills that spread
warm deceits through my veins, unaware that my growing
dependency paralleled his swelling intemperance.

I watched gold liquid slosh behind his eyes, watched
them turn a dull, sickly green, felt their malice
slice my body with accusations and tear at my peace of
mind ‘til one day I turned away from their scorn.

I did not see the perverse rage my rejection caused until his
bitter knife left me with only one eye to view its savage appetite.
The viscous rust that flowed down my face drained the
gold swamps from his sockets and filled them with horror.

He wailed and begged for my forgiveness, so I gave it.
But my pale bones were stained crimson with dread, and cold
eyes would blaze anew each time I recoiled from their touch.
Yet, I still loved him, my mind blinded by misplaced nostalgia.

I never saw the gallows rise from our bed’s frame,

never saw his wretched, hangman's hands,
never saw his noose slide around my brittle neck
'til he pulled the life from my dangling body.

Freshwater

Rachel Martinelli

As I licked the pretzel-salt residue from my fingertips I realized that the heat of the sun was becoming more pronounced than the conversation. Not that there was little to discuss—the uncertainties we were packing for college provided sufficient small-talk material—I just found the sensation of sweat trickling down my hairline too difficult to ignore, and the cool promise of lake water beckoned me.

With an apologetic smile, I discreetly withdrew from the small circle of patio chairs and headed for the dock: just a quick stroll through Kelli's backyard. A stream of multicolor blankets and beach towels lined my path to the water's edge while the lingering scent of burnt-out incense drifted through the air. "Spirits By the Lake" was the title of the birthday party—a nod to Kelli's love of astrology and the supernatural. The day had been filled with aura readings (mine: a bright orange), spirit animal identification (a falcon), and tarot card predictions (drugs and promiscuous sex in my future). It was harmless fun—a relaxing end to my senior year.

I soon reached the wooden dock. I tiptoed along the rotting planks as my eyes skimmed across the stagnant water. An inflatable island floated at the center about fifty yards away. Some of my friends had already gathered there so I decided to join them. Though I had asked everyone not to dive into the shallow water (my first aid skills didn't cover broken necks), I figured years on a swim team and instruction on diving technique exempted me from my own rule. I took a few steps back, aligned my body, and leapt through the air.

That second after contact with the water has always been my favorite; that moment when gravity reverses: your body sinks through the air and then the remaining breath in your lungs pushes you back to the surface. I held still and allowed my body to glide, savoring the water's cool caress. An intake of breath later, I was making my way towards the colorful, plastic island.

It took only a few strokes in to realize that I wasn't alone. Directly in my path, about twenty yards away, were two floating heads. Ben's blonde curls were immediately identifiable and it was no surprise to see Dior at his side—the couple had been inseparable for months. I increased my pace and reached them within a few seconds.

"You guys done with the island?" I asked with a big, oblivious smile.

“We were going there, but Dior isn’t a great swimmer,” Ben replied with a grimace. “I’m trying to get him back.”

“Need help?”

I never noticed how silent Dior was during the exchange, how clouded his normally vibrant eyes were. I only noted Ben’s grateful face as I waded beside Dior, allowing him to grip my shoulder so that I could tow him back to shore.

We had only moved a few feet when Dior started to struggle. Still ignorant of the situation, I stopped and tried to calm him down.

“Dior...Dior it’s fine. Calm down...Di-”

Then I was under.

I’d always imagined drowning would be similar to hypothermia—ice spreading to your extremities—but it’s more like burning alive. The water that had relieved me of the sun’s heat was now searing my insides. Like fire, it exhausted all the air in my lungs—I would not float to the surface this time. I started struggling, frantic to yank free from Dior’s grasp, but my legs had no leverage, only open water. It was disorienting; I couldn’t see anything, didn’t know in what direction I was lashing out. I could only blindly writhe like a fish on a hook.

My mind leapt back to lifeguard recertification class.

“Always have your flotation device,” the instructor warned. “Never let a panicked swimmer get a hold of you. It doesn’t matter if it’s your friend. They will push you under to stay afloat.”

Was Dior going to drown me?

The violence in my twisting and jerking grew. Lifeguard training had not prepared me for this. I was off duty, wearing my black bikini instead of the red one-piece; had no flotation device; no whistle. A few hours earlier, my friends had laughed at the swimming rules I’d jokingly laid out and my insistence that I would not save anyone who disobeyed them. Suddenly, it no longer seemed funny.

I was near unconsciousness, but just as red flares were erupting behind my eyelids, a chance punch hit its target and the death grip loosened, allowing me to break free. I kicked and clawed my way to the surface. When I pierced through, I was overcome by a vicious bout of coughing as I expelled the liquid from my lungs. I took in a deep breath, and the crisp air chilled the fire that had been consuming my bones. My body numbed, but my mind suddenly focused.

I had to do my job.

I let out a blood-curdling scream to alert my oblivious friends still conversing on the patio, one that nobody could mistake for a prank. In attempt stay afloat, Dior was now grasping for Ben. I rushed back to his side so he could take hold of me instead. This time I was ready.

I went under again.

Keeping calm, I angled my body so my kicks would propel us forward. Meanwhile, Ben had grabbed hold of Dior's other arm. He pulled; I pushed; and we inched towards land. Every twenty seconds or so I resurfaced to breathe and check on our progress. I saw my friends scramble towards the water's edge then gather abandoned plastic inner tubes, then someone threw one that landed about ten yards ahead of us. A goal in sight, I plunged one last time, kicking my shrieking legs with the remainder of my strength.

It was enough.

The vise grip released from my shoulder, clinging instead to cheap plastic. I waded to the shallows where my weary legs could safely rest. Everything that followed was in a haze, as though it occurred beneath that murky lake. My friends surrounded us, led us inside the house where there were fresh towels and comfortable seats. Everyone was talking at once and my hypersensitive ears melded all the voices together into an incoherent mass of alarm and confusion; it was overwhelming.

Surrounded by that mob of concerned eyes, I felt as though I had escaped drowning only to die of exposure. Those eyes were dragging me back to those watery depths and, suddenly, I couldn't catch my breath. I had to get away.

"Are you okay?" someone asked me.

"I'm fine."

While everyone focused on the still silent Dior, I escaped to the bathroom. I locked the door behind me and leaned back against it. Only there, in that quiet isolation, did I at last feel safe. For a few moments, I just stood there. Then I doubled over and released a gut-wrenching sob as the fear and adrenaline poured out of my body. The rest of the world melted away as I cried in that tiny blue bathroom. I couldn't think about what might have been or how lucky I was. I could only stand there and drown in lukewarm tears, thankful for the harmless taste of saltwater.



Morning Commute

Photography

Megan E. Zagorski



Magnolia Bridge

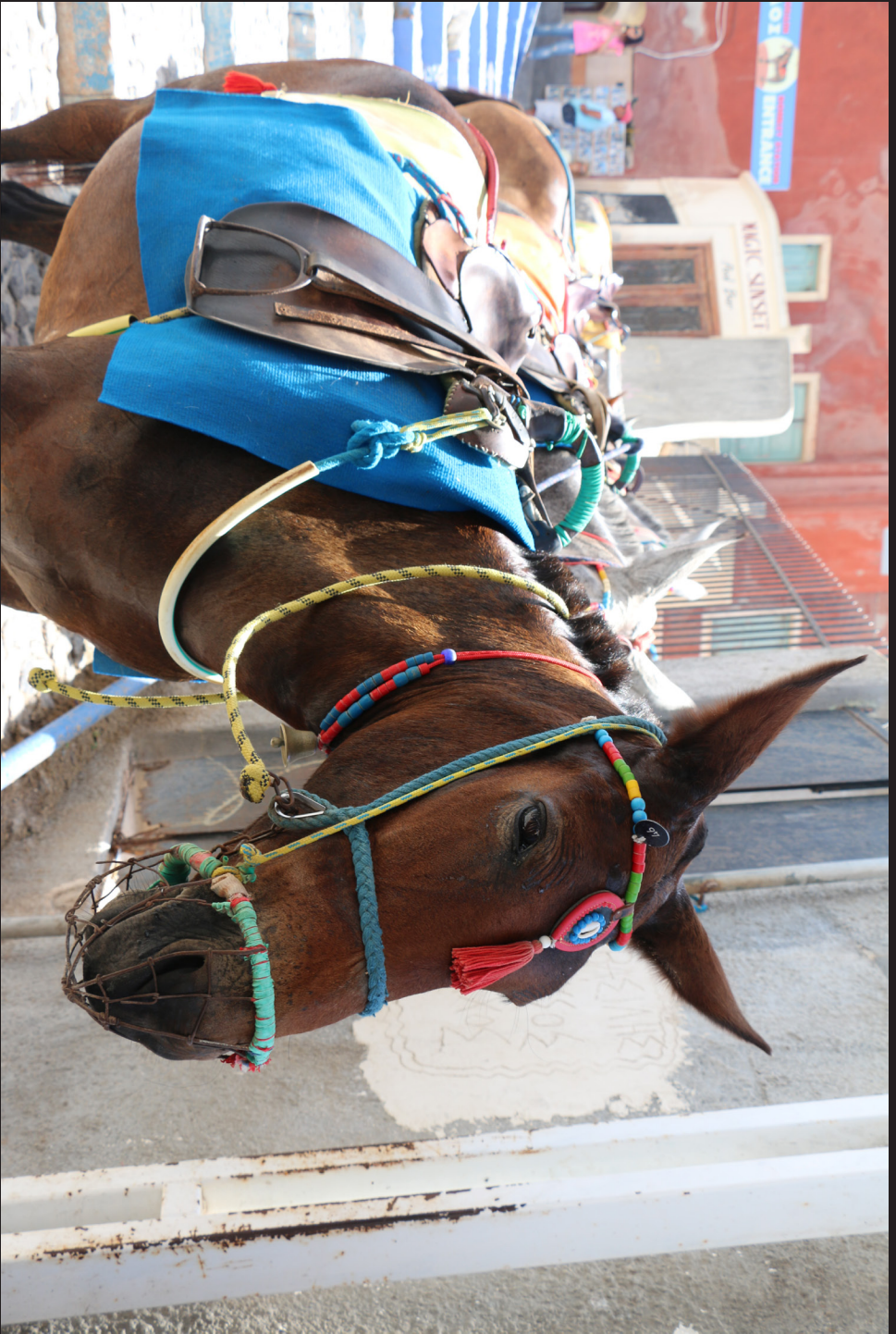
Watercolor on paper

Zoe Yeoh



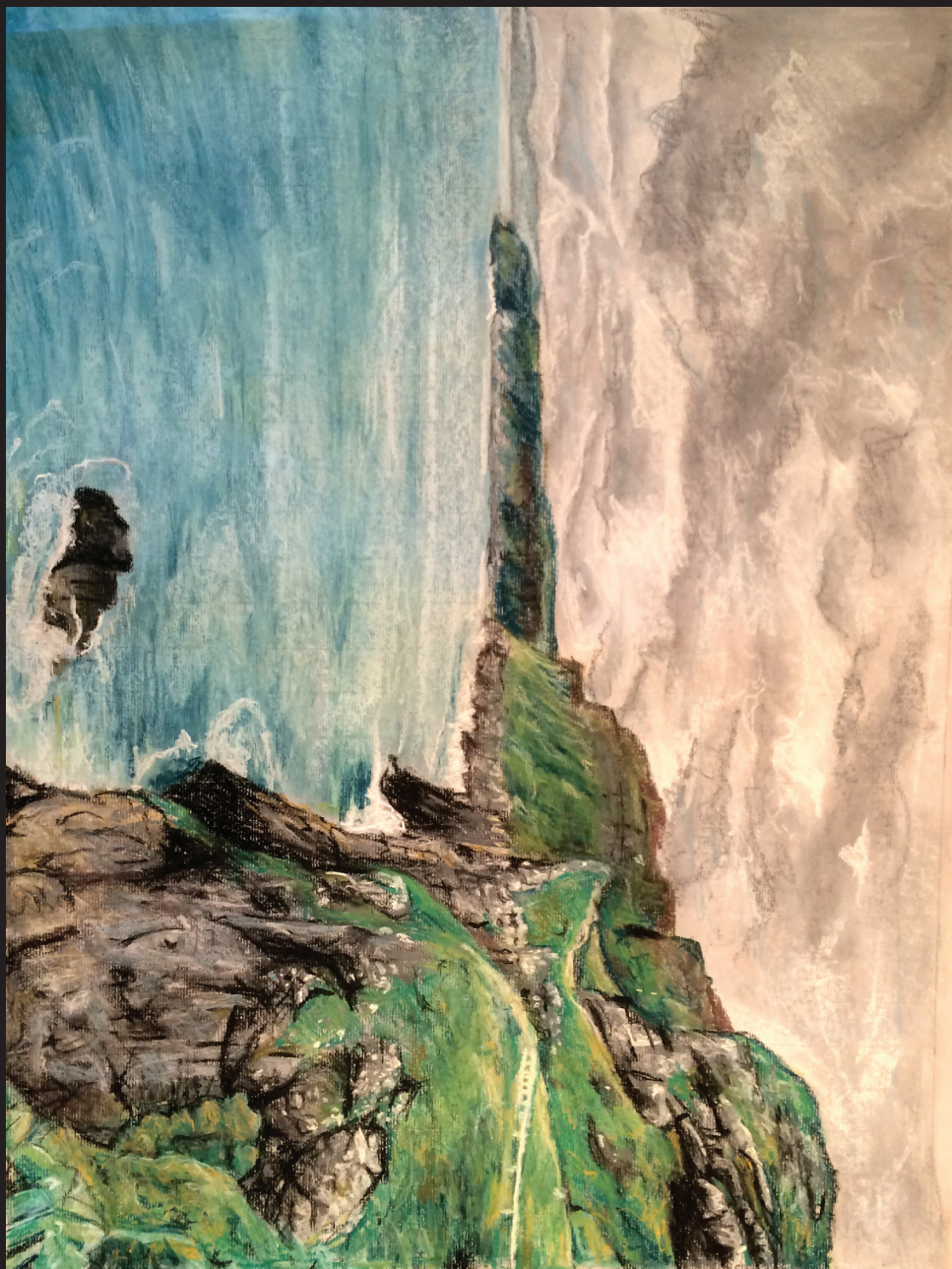
An Evening in Greece
Photography

Colleen Kolb



Donkey of Santorini
Photography

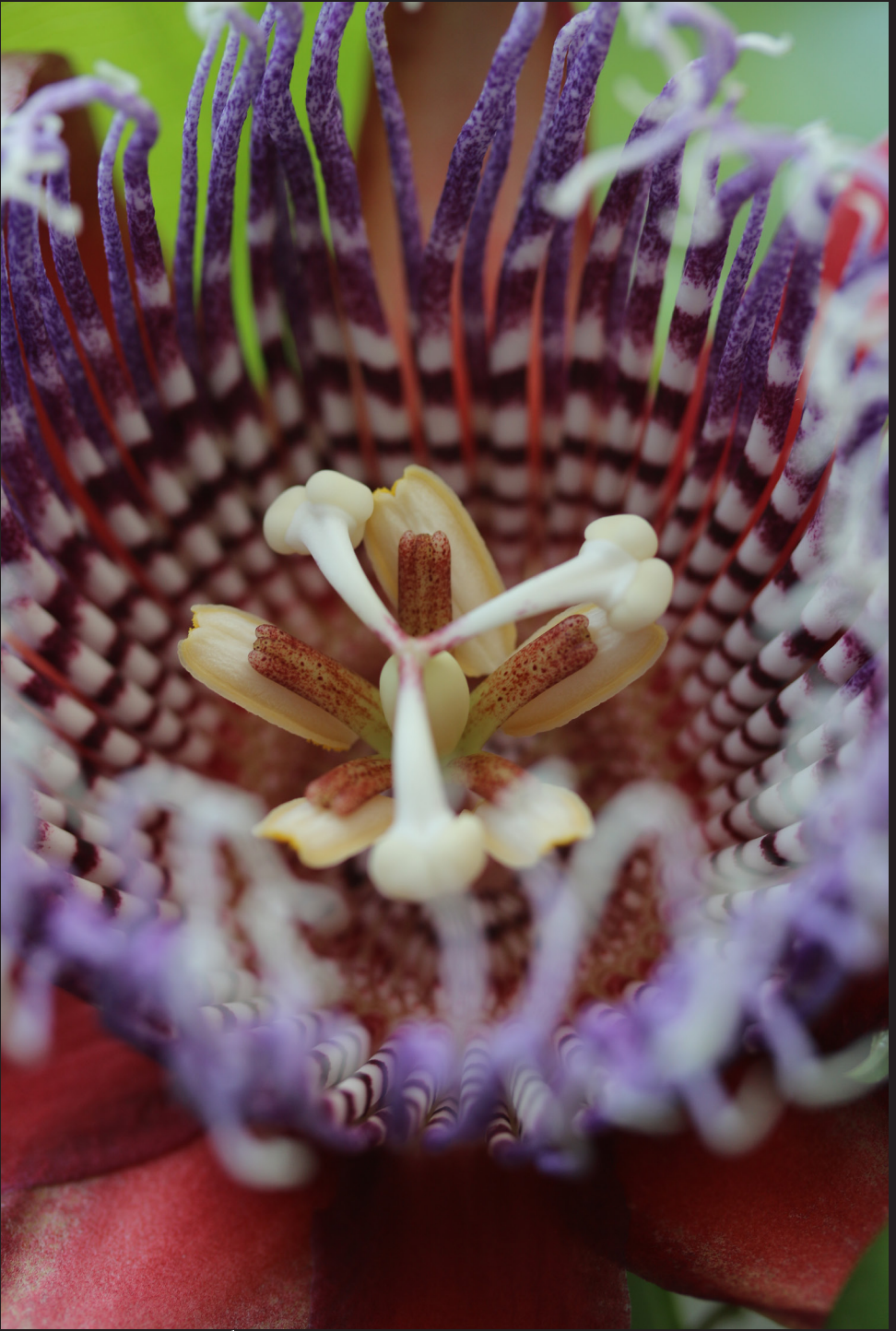
Colleen Kolb



Ireland

Chalk pastel on paper

Taylor Andrews



Passion Flower
Photography

Colleen Kolb



Misty Morning in the Amazon

Photography

Megan E. Zagorski



Bartering in Lake Titicaca

Photography

Megan E. Zagorski



The Duomo
Ink on paper

Taylor Andrews



Everlasting Wilderness
Photography

Erica M. Schaumberg



Downtown Detroit

Photography

Kelsey P. Cochran



Spring in the Ring of Kerry, Ireland
Watercolor on paper

Zoe Yeoh



Parisian Perspective
Photography

Colleen Kolb



Portrait of a Mop
Oil paint on wood

Taylor Andrews



Dawn
Photography

Erica M. Schaumberg



Placid
Photography

Erica M. Shaumberg

To My Father

Victoria J. Reynolds

I wonder how a man
as kind as you,
as selfless as you,
as willing to give
his entire life
to the essence of his dead wife,
looked into my face,
for twenty-one years
at what reminded him of her
etched in every expression I make.
I wonder how this man
took the beatings of the belt,
gritted his teeth through the application
of a cattle prod to his skin,
electrocution meant for animals
as gentle as he was
with eyes as wide as sunlight refracting.
The blows were dealt him by a father
who also managed to cry
when their favorite dog died.
I think now of how my father took
going to a hockey game
with his dad's mistress
for his fourteenth birthday
in the depths of winter;
how he took finding bruises
on his mother's arms and hands,
how he took all of that,
and still became
my kind and raw and honest father,
yet still a man too shy to tell me
about his adventure in Japan,
who never told me about sex
because he couldn't bear to see

the knowledge in my face,
who cried when my family
thought to give me to an aunt to raise,
who loves me despite my tendency
to fall into wanting to die
every other month,
and who still cries when he thinks too hard
about my mother
fallen in the hallway
the night before the day she died,
too weak to make it to the bath.

Poorly Drawn Earth

Victoria A. Blaisdell

The artist must have desired
to imitate God. *What an egomaniac,*
I think, as I picture him
lifting the blue piece of chalk
in his leathery hands, the piece
he neglects to realize is really called
robin's egg, and draws an
imperfect circle, more potato than
malleable gaseous matter, and scribbles
some light green landmasses
for recognition's sake.

This ironic masterpiece is titled
Poorly drawn earth, and I wonder
whether the Bible lies when it says
that God saw that it was good.
Perhaps on the seventh day,
God invented erasers or the delete
button, telling everyone He was resting
as He edited creation, becoming
the first artist not fully satisfied
with His work,

whether He regrets the too-calm
greenness of grass, the explosive yellow
of bananas, the variety of skin tones
and the divisive destruction thereby caused.
Maybe God makes up for blue skies
by painting orange and pink sunsets,
stars a way of apologizing for the claustrophobic night.

I do not know if the world is shaped
by its colors, each hue a pair of hands
pressing down upon humanity,
the color palette of eye color

or the divine crayon box for
shades of hair. Grass is defined
by greenness, but is greenness
defined by grass?

No, I think, as I scribble words
onto a page, knowing that I will never
be defined, not by poetry or
familial relations, by education
or occupation, by favorite coffeeshop
or least favorite food, by past
or future or present—I am
forever in the process of becoming.
There will always be more thoughts
than I am able to expel, more life
than I am able to breathe into others,
more love than I am able to fully
demonstrate.

All our lives, really, are just
poorly drawn earths, imperfect
imitations of the completeness
of divinity, ever-shrinking windows
into the expanse of eternity,
relinquished frustrations at our own
inability to articulate.

So we settle, again, for good enough,
as the artist did when he called
his own work poor, just as God did
when He realized that they would never
love Him enough, sitting alone amongst
all His most magnificent creations.

Gold Dust

Rachel Martinelli

Molly spotted the gold coin as she exited the elementary school bus. The polished surface glinted in the sun, reflecting beams of light into her round, hazel eyes. She reached down, picked up the coin, and nestled it in the palm of her hand, eyes fixated on the burnished gold glimmering against her olive skin. The front was imprinted with the image of a young woman carrying a sleeping child in a bundle against her shoulders; proud eyes atop prominent cheekbones gazed out over her right shoulder. Molly glanced at the reverse side: a bald eagle, wings spread mid-flight amidst a circle of tiny stars. She had never seen such a coin before, thought they only existed in pirate movies. Gold doubloons came from treasure chests buried in the bottom of the ocean—it had to be worth millions.

Mama would know.

Dry leaves and stray wrappers crunched beneath her mud-crusted sneakers as she sprinted down the uneven concrete, dark hair flying behind her, hands clasped in front of her, as if in prayer. She stumbled once or twice—eyes too focused on her precious cargo—but otherwise maintained her brisk pace until she reached the mint-green house at the end of the street. She stopped in front of the mailbox marked 8166 and peered inside its open mouth (the door had rusted off long ago).

Empty: Mama was home.

She glanced over at the makeshift gravel driveway.

Empty: Dave was not.

Molly pushed past the wire gate and walked up to the white columns that framed the porch. The years had rotted the wood and dulled the paint so that, even in the glow of the mid-day sun, the lively colors looked muted. She took the key from beneath the empty flowerpot and gingerly opened the door. Her mother often slept after early-morning shifts, so Molly locked the door behind her and tiptoed down the dim hallway: past the kitchen, past the living room, past Mama and Dave's room, and through the door to her bedroom.

The space was small and the furniture sparse (just a bed and a dresser). She tossed her Disney Princess backpack onto her bed and headed towards the lone window, plopping down in front of it. She lay completely still, staring intently at the ceiling even as coarse carpeting prickled the back of her neck. The room had been a uniform white when it

was first installed, but time had grayed the carpet's fibers and water damage had stained the ceiling, creating an array of yellow splotches that (Molly thought) looked like the hide of a sick cow.

She raised the gold coin above her head, stroking it between her thumb and index finger. Mama would wake soon, and Molly nearly vibrated with excitement. The many ways they could spend the money flashed through her mind. Mama could get a new sewing machine. Molly could get a hamster, or dog, or horse. They could move into a larger house, one with lots of rooms and three floors and a pool in the backyard, one that was theirs, not Dave's.

The sun gleamed through the window, encasing the coin in iridescent light. Molly could see the thousands of illuminated particles drifting through her fingertips. The dust had bothered her when she first moved into this room, but Mama told her that they were just tiny fairies floating through the air, ones that could only be seen in the sunlight, and that made it better. As her eyes drooped, and sleep slowly overcame her, Molly imagined that the luminous coin was a floor for the dust fairies to dance upon—a ballroom to laugh and sing and waltz across all through the night. These images lingered on her mind as she slowly fell into a deep sleep.

Light emanated from the intricately beaded diamonds sewn to the skirt of her ball gown. Molly spun around and laughed as the rays refracted, completely entranced with the cascading rainbows. Figures began to join her. Faceless forms with translucent, butterfly wings circled her, dim light pulsing from their chests. One held out its hand.

"Alice! What the fuck is this?"

Molly took the offered arm and was guided away from the crowd. The fairy took her in its arms and led her into a waltz. Her feet knew the steps. She giggled with delight, captivated by the fluidity in her partner's movement.

"Don't you start yelling at me, Dave. I'm not in the mood."

Molly glanced down at the floor and realized that a face was looking back: the woman with proud eyes: they were currently dancing across her upper lip.

"Explain this three hundred dollar charge on my card."

They danced across nose, cheekbone, forehead, and finally down sleek, golden hair. Molly let go of her partner, laughing and gasping for breath. The winged being drifted back into the crowd, and another figure came forward. It was Mama.

"That's from the antibiotics Molly needed. The insurance wouldn't cover it."

Mama's thick, brown hair was pulled up into an elaborate bun with a

few loose ringlets to frame her face. She wore a gown like Molly's: all diamonds and rainbows. She smiled, her hazel eyes beckoning their copies.

"I don't wanna be payin' for some other asshole's kid."

"I'll cover the 300 dollars."

"You should just send her to your mom."

"I said I'll pay you back!"

The light grew brighter. Everything was getting hot. Molly rushed towards Mama.

"When?"

"When I can."

"Well, I need the money now."

"Well, too fuckin' bad!"

Searing light filled every corner of the room. It was too intense. Mama disappeared.

"What did you say to me?"

"You'll just drink it all away!"

"Don't you disrespect me, you bitch!"

"Don't—"

It was burning her eyes.

"This is my house!"

"Stop! Please!"

Burning her skin.

"DON'T—STOP!"

Blinding, white light.

Molly woke. Above her was the crazed face of Mama: hair wild, blood dripping from her lip

"We're leaving, Honey. Okay? Don't ask any questions. Just stay quiet."

Molly was lifted into her Mama's arms, limp with fright. She didn't understand, so she stayed silent. Mama carried her away, unaware of the golden treasure left behind in the dark.

Lost Boy

Pamela J. Thompson

Movement One: October 1983

Peter imagined himself a child still
but his body did not agree.

We are young and we are in love,
He told his body over coffee.
He watched his black face crinkle in the shiny dark wood table,
his left eye framed by a wet mug ring,
only for an instant.
Two months ago the man had told him,
only as a courtesy,
that he was positive, and therefore expiring, Peter imagined
the man's life as a gradient of black and white against a tideless
ocean,
and it was, he said, *Probably too late for you, kid.*

He got on the wrong train on the subway,
but took the line all the way to the end, mentally carving his name into the
seats,
hands too weak for anything but prayers.
He thought he heard someone whisper, *Fairy*, as he walked past;
there was a blue-green flash across his mind,
it felt like an electric orchestra, a symphony of beautiful nonsense—
perhaps he was mythical. Perhaps he should be more afraid.

Peter went to the bathhouse,
this time simply to bathe.
He let the warm grey water envelope him
until there was nothing left on the surface.
Drowning was a possibility somewhere in the left corner
of his right hemisphere.

Wouldn't it be less painful?
But two hands,
they felt like angels, caressed his torso,
silk on silk,
bringing him back to life.

If touch could be healing, if it could be pure—
Maybe this could have been love.

Movement Two: Late February 1984

Visiting friends
who did not yet know,
who would never know,
was like becoming the anchor of a tempest-bound ship.
Each kiss reminded him of the infection,
a harbinger of Spring,
of Death in the valley.
Peter imagined himself a horseshoe crab
with magic blue blood,
with a life worth protecting.
But his body reminded him through the aches
and suffering,

*We are dying. We are poor,
we are what lonely white writers call beautiful, black, and tragic.*
No one was ever going to write a memoir about Peter,
about loving and losing him.
It was raining: from inside of the apartment
the world was a water color painting steeped in tea.

Movement Three: March 1984

Peter imagined himself meeting Death,
but it was only the illusion of his mistress—
needle in his arm, lying starfish
on a stranger's basement floor.
She whispered,
sweetly in his ears:

*I am a soft black film
covering the earth.*

*I am in the air,
I am in blood*

*I am the crack,
the pop of an artery
bursting as the bullet
passes through red flesh
into cold distance.*

*I am one plane
colliding, collapsing
on to another.*

Peter did not remember those thoughts.
All that mattered was amber colored light,
each golden hue a beam
traveling through his body,
warm honey in every vein
until, painfully, it wasn't anymore.

Movement Four: June 1984

Peter didn't want to die alone on a park bench,
or in a shelter
or in the hallway of a hospital.
Thoughts spilled like water from his trembling mouth—
Was there ever a crueler creature than mortal man?
He who sees and feels the suffering,
but raises the knife, all the same,
in his hand?

Dancing with the Dark

Lori Atinizian

The bathroom. My sanctuary. *I'll wash my face and let it all drown.*

I look in the mirror, sixteen, a virgin to the world. I take my shirt off out of guilt, and fix my unaligned sports bra. I am shot. I remember the pain that consumed my body half an hour ago and proceed to lift my bra from the side, sliding it gently. My skin is discolored on both sides but still hidden by the useless piece of clothing that did not protect me from him. Bruises of all sizes and diverse shades of brown design my skin. *I'll remember this tomorrow morning. Then the morning after.*

The warm hand continued to press against my torso, as I lay frozen in my bed. I jolted every time the hand discovered the spot that has always been my childhood secret. Each time, he'd lose the spot again, and press along the side of my ribs once more to find that hidden spot. And again, another jolt.

"Stop moving so much," he whispered.

I laughed, trying to keep up with the charade. This *was* a charade after all. The shadows hid us well, wrapping us in a solitary shield. My brother snored in the opposite corner of the room. The hand pushed harder. Harder.

This bruise was from that big push. I still feel the thumb pressing against my skin, but I know it's finally over. But it's not over. It can't be. His thumb is still painted viciously on my body like an abstract paint splatter that a crazed artist whipped onto the canvas.

"You know you can't tickle me if you push that hard, right?"

But his thumb kept pushing; my words scampering off into nowhere. When the heat stopped pushing, it grazed across my chest instead, to find another spot on the other side of my body. Pushing and pushing, my frame falsely danced under the covers in discomfort. The hand mistook this for a positive response, and pressed harder. *Stop. Harder. Stop. Harder.*

I am thankful that the bruised circles can only be found underneath a few layers of clothing. All I need to do is not look in a mirror until they are fully healed. Until I can't feel them anymore. What hurts the most physically hurts the least. I try to wrap my head around it, but nothing. There's not an explanation. I'm struck with confusion. That couldn't have been

tickling. Not there. Right?

The hand tired and wished to return to its original project. This time, it crawled under my sports bra, reaching in places that have only ever been left untouched, and it lingered. The world was too big for the happenings in a bedroom in the attic. The hand deviously found its way below my torso, searching, exploring, and finding warmth in the most unnatural of places. The tips of his fingers slid around, waiting eagerly for another response. I didn't give it to him, but the fingers were too keen to give up.

Words developed like saliva, yet snoring proved to be the only sound in the room. *Why are you doing this? Please, just stop, and I'll forget everything you've been trying to do.* So much saliva ready to spit out, but silence. Silence. The words were desperate to leave; yet my body lay paralyzed in discomfort, until finally it collapsed under the tips of the fingers, and the charade took on a life all its own.

I am proud of my actions, or at least, the best of what I could do. When I was little, I would often pretend to be asleep so I could listen to what my family talked about. Sometimes, I would do it so my dad would carry me and put me to bed. True protection wraps his arms and gently takes my shoes off and then replaces his arms with a warm blanket.

I attempted to recall my childhood mischief. False sleep overcame me, and my eyelids slipped into darkness. Confusion gripped the hand and pulled it away, finally. The owner leaned over my body, checking my face for signs of life. I compelled my breath to flow deeper and louder to confirm his suspicions. *In what world would I ever have to even think about dealing with this?* Apparently, this world. The world in which a hand of my close, 35-year-old cousin familiarizes itself with my body.

Only when he stood up and left the room did I eventually feel some peace. Both sides of my body throbbed, each spot reminding me of Horror I never wanted to meet again. A minute after he left the room, I wanted to cry, but I was left with a dry face. I was allowed only five minutes of peace by the time the door reopened. I resumed my sleep-like state. The springs in the bed next to me squeezed together. *Sleep.* I waited. I naturally flipped to my left side away from his body, so I could lay with my eyes open to watch the shadows laugh at me. Their protective shield was only a means of keeping me in, fighting against me, preventing my escape. The shadows snickered instead. I stared as they pointed and called me *weak* and *wasted*.

A roar resonated by my side. Each inhale led to another roar. Soundlessly, I removed the worn blanket and fumbled my way to the door. The light in the hallway pierced my dilated eyes, and for a second, I was blind. I let my eyes adjust to the walls around me, the stairway that leads to the main floor, the door I left behind. My foot found the platform a step below, and the next platform, and the next platform, until I made it to the

bottom. I needed silence away from the dark, away from the hand, away from the person I've looked up to my whole life.

The bathroom. My sanctuary. *I'll wash my face and let it all drown.* My bra and shirt fall back into place, and I'm ready to move on from the night.

Instinctively, I walk toward the toilet. Everything needs to go behind me. Everything. But directly underneath, my foot steps in water. *Must be from the sink.* But that wouldn't make sense because I'm standing in front of the toilet. Something is wrong, but before I could think it's anything other than water, I look down; it's not water. *Is that what it's supposed to look like?* The shrimp scampi my chef cousin made for my family resists digestion, and I'm certain I'm about to vomit, but my body *still* refuses to cleanse itself of the night. My body becomes weak again, and I start to lose my balance. I catch myself on the countertop by the sink, trying to pull myself together. I pull toilet paper from the rack and look away as I wipe the thick substance from the sole of my foot.

Alligators I Have Known

Taylor Andrews

Reptilian teeth against my throat,
the sound of doldrums, the smell of ghosts,
a taste for flesh marinated with hope,
these are the creatures that I have known.

Clawing caresses that cut to the bone,
the grunting heat, the ungentle grope,
To be eaten alive or to go on alone?
I climbed in your belly and made it my home.

Under the Sand

Ben Davis

"I thought it was gonna rain till tomorrow," I said as Bill nodded his head in agreement.

The forecast had called for rain all day, but it had surprisingly cleared around 3pm and the sky looked clear as ever as we walked out of the dining hall.

"I guess we can go through with it." He turned to me with a slight grin as we walked up the steps and around our seal. The seal meant everything to our fraternity. It had our letters, Zeta Beta Tau, and our fraternity slogan in Latin or some shit. It meant *together always*. As we walked into the chapter room, the pledges stood up. They always did when Bill, the Pledge Master, entered a room.

"Where the fuck is everyone? I said be here by 6:30."

"Dan and John are in lab and will be here at 7:00. Curran should be here any minute. He was at Kate's apartment," Ted, the pledge class president, said.

"Curran likes hanging out with Kate more than me, doesn't he?"

"I guess so, sir."

"Interesting. I'll be down at 7:00. I hope everyone is here."

I followed Bill up the stairs. Ted walked toward the pay phone on the first floor and called Kate's apartment to make sure Curran got to the house on time. Bill and I were roommates and had been since freshman year. Now, seniors, it was our last year to have fun, but we also had to worry about jobs after college. We were both economics majors and didn't exactly know where we wanted to go from there, but our parents definitely did: make money.

Bill and I walked into our room. My eyes immediately focused on our hermit crab tank. "Haven't switched Herb's water today," I said as I reached through the top of the tank for the mini water bowl sitting on the three inches of sand that covered the bottom of the tank. Herb liked to dig through it. As I brought the water bowl up to the top of the tank, it nicked the side and sloshed out of the bowl—five or six ounces of water, dripping toward the sand. The water soaked in, making its way toward the toy ball that Herb had buried under the sand. It started at the top layer, each spec of sand seamlessly transferring the water to the next, as it surrounded the

ball, almost suffocating it in wet sand.

“So, do we have five guys to drive them?” I asked, wanting to make sure Bill had everything figured out.

“Yea. Nick, Tony, Kyle, and us two. That’s five.”

“Alright. And you’re gonna blindfold them up here?”

“Yea,” Bill turned to me, “should be fun.” We waited till 7:00 and went downstairs. All twenty were accounted for, and we sent them up to our room.

“Who’s gonna be the lucky one?” I asked Bill, already feeling bad for the pledge of his choosing.

“Well, I think Curran had enough fun with his girlfriend earlier, so I’d say he’s the winner.” We walked back upstairs and Nick had already gotten them in their blindfolds. “Everyone grab your pledge brother’s hand and get the fuck downstairs.” I led the first pledge down the back stairwell to the parking lot. Tony and Kyle were already waiting with their cars on. I got four pledges in Tony’s car.

“Alright, you’re good to go. I’ll see you over there.” The sun was starting to go down, and the breeze was picking up. The temperature was high 60’s, and the clouds seemed to have faded into the sky. Not bad for a fall night.

“Last group. Get them in your car, and I’ll meet you over there.” Bill looked at me; the serious look in his face made me confident that he was ready to go through with it.

“You got the shovels?”

“All nineteen of them. Five in each car and four in yours.” And with that I got the last four pledges into my car and hit the gas. I drove slow; no hurry to get there.

“Keep your heads down,” I shouted back at them, making sure they were invisible from the view of a cop that may be sitting on the side of the road.

The beach was no more than a ten-minute drive from the campus. That’s part of the reason I chose Monmouth. I didn’t mind if it was a little chilly in September and October. I could sit on the beach any day as long as I had a joint in my hand. As we pulled up to the beach, Bill pointed to a parking spot. I turned off my lights to make sure we didn’t draw too much attention to ourselves. There were a few oceanfront houses that could see us, but it was doubtful anyone was there in the middle of the week in late October.

“Everyone gets one. Let’s go. Pass ‘em back.” Bill had already gotten the first four cars unloaded and, with mine being the last car, he was anxious to get everyone on the beach with the others. Curran was in front.

“You don’t get one. Just walk.”

I led them, once again, down the narrow path. The dunes on either side of us halted the breeze for a moment until we reached the wide-open beach. At this point, they probably knew where they were despite the blindfolds, as they were barefoot and could feel the sand between their toes. As I gripped Curran’s hand in the front of the line, I looked up and saw Nick waving us toward him. He was about halfway between the dunes and the ocean and all I could hear were the waves crashing down behind him.

As we approached, Bill had the other fifteen kids with their blindfolds off. “Curran, you keep yours on. Everyone else take your blindfolds off.”

As they slowly lifted them above their eyes, the pledges looked around, trying to get a gauge of exactly where they were on the beach. “Curran, lay down flat.” Curran lay down, chest toward the sky. “That’s how big his grave has to be. Start digging, and fast.”

The nineteen left started digging. I wasn’t there when they did this the year before, but I remembered from when I was pledging that the hole would only take about twenty to thirty minutes to dig. With nineteen kids digging, it went pretty fast.

Bill and I slowly walked toward the ocean, without a care in the world. Nick, Tony, and Kyle went back to stay with the cars, ready to call us if anyone pulled up to the beach, or may have seen some suspicious behavior.

“How you think he’ll do for a night under there?” I asked Bill, knowing Curran was one of the mentally weakest pledges.

Bill looked up at the sky, and then out at the ocean. “He’ll survive.”

I don’t know what Bill was thinking about during those twenty minutes that we were staring into the ocean, but if I had to guess it was similar to what I was thinking. This was our last time doing this. At this point next year, we would be working, hopefully, somewhere.

“I think they’re done.” I tapped Bill on the shoulder.

He flinched, startled, as he came out of his daze. It was almost as if he had seen Poseidon hovering over the sea. He turned around. There were two kids on their knees in the rectangular hole, scooping out the remainder of the sand and smoothing out the bottom. We walked back toward them.

“Curran, lie down in the hole.” Curran looked at me, helplessly, almost hoping that I would save him from Bill’s latest request. I stood there in silence, and Curran slowly crouched into the grave. “Lay the tarp on top of his head.”

Bill had been there when the pledges did this the year before and was the fortunate one in our pledge class to, well, get buried alive, so he

knew the protocol. The tarp would separate the loose sand from Curran's mouth, allowing him to breathe throughout the night. Bill looked down at Curran's face, covered with the tarp, arms resting along his side, and feet pointed up toward the clear sky. Bill took a shovel of sand and dumped it on Curran's face.

"Can you breathe?"

Curran nodded his head, and was able to let out an "uh huh."

"Bury him." Bill looked at the long, tired faces on the other pledges. "Hurry the fuck up." The kids began to burry Curran. "Don't pat it down. Just let it lie on top of him."

Bill wanted to make sure the sand around Curran wasn't too compacted. It only took five or ten minutes for the kids to put the loose sand that was in piles around the hole back on Curran.

"Back in the cars," Bill said. He walked over the sand where Curran was buried probably four or five feet below.

We would be back at 4am. That way, we could get Curran out before the sun came up and before anyone walked along the beach. Bill nailed two horseshoe stakes into the sand on either end of the grave. He nailed them in hard, making sure they could withstand any wind at night. We were straight up from the 23rd Street entrance to the beach, so they wouldn't be hard to find. When Bill and I got back to the parked cars, Nick, Tony, and Kyle had each already taken their four pledges back. Bill and I hopped into our cars. His car had four as well, and mine had the last three, with Curran left in the sand.

We drove back in silence and sent the pledges back to their rooms. "Be back at the house at 4am. Don't be late for Curran's sake." Bill and I walked back up to our room.

I glanced at my clock: 10 pm. I had to go to bed soon so I could wake up with Bill and the other drivers at 4am to go get Curran. Bill was already in bed, setting his alarm. I peeled our curtains apart and looked out the window at the sky.

"Still clear out there. Have you checked the news to get a weather report?" I asked Bill.

"Last one I saw was after dinner, but it said the front had moved through earlier than they expected and looked clear until the weekend." That was all I needed to hear. I brushed my teeth, set my alarm, and fell asleep on the top bunk.

CRACK! "Yo, get the fuck up. Get the fuck up." I had been rooming with Bill long enough to know his panicked tone of voice, but this one was different. This voice was panic and fear. "We have to get Curran the fuck out of there."

CRACK! "Holy shit, is it raining?"

“Yea, let’s go.” I jumped out of bed and threw my shoes on. I glanced at the clock: 2am. It can’t be raining, I thought to myself. The forecast said it was done. Bill and I ran down the back stairwell to the parking lot and got in my car.

I can still remember the drive like a nightmare I just woke up from. It was dead silent. All I could hear was the car cutting through the water-filled streets. Then a CRACK! I slammed on the brakes as we approached the parking spaces on 23rd street. Without a word we hurried out of the car, each grabbing a shovel from the back. We sprinted, our feet gliding over the wet sand, barely hitting the ground.

As we approached the horseshoe stakes that marked the grave, I looked at the rain coming down. It was sinking right into the sand. There were no puddles on the beach. Each drop sank directly into the sand, cutting through the layers, suffocating anything underneath.

Epidermis

Victoria A. Blaisdell

I see no significance
in the prints upon my fingers
nor the lines along my forehead,
and the sparse scattering of words
that fumble past my lips
have fallen on few.

Like the time my mother
pressed a mint into my young hand
and I sucked and swallowed
and I can still feel the panic,
the lump, the way I could not breathe
or speak; I think
I swallowed too many words that day
and they have trembled inside
ever since, afraid to come out
and face the world.

And my skin, like a wall,
keeps others out, and keeps me in
and I am afraid that you'll impress me
with too much pressure
and I'll burst, the seams of my skin
spilling out. So I sew myself up
each day, filling slowly,
spilling inward
do not drown
they all say.

But you poke pinholes,
like stars, those pinpricks of light,
and I come trickling out,
a steady stream of restlessness
and thoughts too big
to fit the world.

I don't believe that I was born
to be anyone's everything.
I was born to taste snowflakes
to hear the sound of laughter
to wrestle with doubt
and to relish in the cleansing perfection
of rain.

I see significance in the way
we are always children,
learning life as we go,
smashing walls
just to realize—
we all fill slowly
but we empty in one breath.

Playing House

Taylor Andrews

“Who we are has to do with where we are from. We have a tendency to identify ourselves according to the places in which we dwell.” – Janet Donohoe, “The Place of Home”

First

I’m remembering the house wrong—my father is clear on that. We had a sofa in the back room I keep forgetting about. I can’t see it at all when I close my eyes, and although I’m told it was brown, part of me is certain that, if it had ever existed, it had been beige, nearly yellow. There was also a wicker bucket chair that spun in sickening circles; I fell out of it countless times, its crinkly whisper crunching in my ear as it toppled down on me. This chair I remember vividly—peeling at the caramel-colored weaving, loosening the crisp wicker seams, swishing around in jerky curves as I watched TV. This chair would vanish after we moved. I would continue to expect it to appear in the new house, as tall and unsteady as I had been at that age, sitting solitary in the middle of the room.

I was twelve, just about to turn thirteen, when we moved. I got a camera for my birthday, and the first pictures I took were of that house, the last day I was inside it, certain that someday I would need to remember what it looked like. I can’t recall the color of the carpet in the bedroom I lived in for twelve years. I can only barely see the kitchen: a dirty stove and brown cabinets with whiny hinges, that long oval radio in the corner next to my inhaler. The bathroom is little more than one white tile that I could peel up from the floor, that I would have hid a key under if I were a (very ineffective) secret agent. It scares me how little comes back to me, how little can be restored in full. The pictures from my first real camera sit somewhere in the digital world, forgotten, the only proof of my childhood home, each one showing an empty room, each one a little blurred, a little crooked, taken by a child who was afraid to let go.

Nucleus

The idea of home in and of itself is an expression of intimacy, of familiarity. It is where we shed our outside expressions, our joviality or melodrama or charm, our social survival mechanisms in a sense, and can just be. The home is the place in which a person can create their own world,

a tiny ecosystem of things and feelings, accessories to life, all chosen and arranged in a way that is unique to the individual. Perhaps the most singular aspect of this home is the bed. The bed may be the most specific and personal object in our lives. It is a place that requires nothing from us. It is a place characterized by bodies in their most vulnerable and unpretentious state. The bed accepts no façade. It is a microcosm in the individuality of our home spaces; it is a fundamental detail of our personal ecosystems. It is the cell in the body of a home.

The ecosystem of my best friend is clean and blue. It is feminine, warm, bright; it is floral prints, novels, cooking tools, sea glass. Her bed is strict and smart, the sheets perfectly straight, even when she is under them. She smooths them around her body, tucking in her legs as she sits reading silently.

The ecosystem of my younger brother is characterized by clothes, trophies, lacrosse sticks, video games. His bed is stark in comparison. Two queen mattresses piled on the floor, a twin sheet half stretched over top, the pillow closer to the middle of the bed, the blankets swirled around abstractly, like a brush stroke.

My ecosystem is casual disarray, occasionally crescendoing to ecstatic chaos, and my bed is much the same. Flannel sheets, plump pillows, a desperation to be comfortable, while also nesting among piles of books, clean clothes, speakers. My bed will carry the entirety of my waking anxieties into my dreamspace.

While living with my grandparents for awhile in middle school, I began to develop tics, the way some girls were getting breasts and growing out their bangs. I fell in love with washing my hands. Perhaps it was because my grandfather was obsessed with cleaning, or perhaps it was because the house was so thick with tension I felt the need to control something. It was a reset button. It was safety. If nothing else, my anxiety about germs could be neutralized, and that moment of relief was enough.

It didn't become apparent, this love affair, for years. It didn't get beyond me or rule my life, so I've never considered it more than an inconvenient coping mechanism, but after a while I began to note how raw red my hands were. They cracked and bled through the winter, when the biting cold already weakened them, and they stayed a sensitive pink into the warmer months. My anxieties peaked once I came to college, and I became more and more concerned with germs as everything was unfamiliar and uncontrollable.

I fixed my every hope for safety onto my bed. I decided it would be the one place that was clean, the place I could keep the germs from me. The thing I could control. I changed from the clothes I wore out, even just to

class, if I was going to get under the blankets. If anything “dirty” touched it, or, god forbid, a blanket dragged on the floor, I would be sent into a frenzy. I recall specifically a sharp moment of panic when I realized I’d left my shower caddy momentarily on my comforter—once I realized it had touched the bathroom floor and then my clean place, I started to cry. I felt helpless. I balled the heavy blue blanket up into my arms and then into a washing machine almost immediately. I took a breath. I got back into control.

As my life got more and more chaotic, it became impossible to wash my hands the way I wanted—over and over, whenever I touched something that felt unclean. Years passed and slowly I cut down, and the back of my hands faded from their inflamed flush. I still scratch my face or adjust my hair with my palms facing out, relying on my knuckles, a relic of the years when my embarrassment of their bloody cracks kept them tucked always into sleeves. I still avoid sitting on my bed in my jeans when I can, though it’s become increasingly difficult to keep up with my own demands. However, part of me still attempts to keep it germ-free. To keep it my safe place. It is the one way I know how to make myself deeply and truly at home.

In Motion

“ ‘One never reaches home,’ she said. ‘But where paths that have an affinity for each other intersect, the whole world looks like home, for a time.’ ”

—Hermann Hesse

We were weekend wanderers, my family and I. We spent years drifting between open house signs; we were a flock of misfit birds, looking for a warm place to wait out the Buffalo cold. My father: loving and round and made up only of extreme emotions, good and bad. My mother: small, blonde, and sweet, often silly, often sensitive. My brother: then so young, with a full face and a shiny head of flat yellow hair and already more charming than anyone else I have ever known. The four of us ambled, looking always for a house that we could make a life in, one that wasn’t the brick-and-blue box with the spinny wicker chair in the midst of the choking and dirty suburb. I was nine, I was ten, I was twelve. I knew the words contingency and mortgage without understanding that they kept us from moving into the house on the top of the high hill with the big living room window, or the perfectly square house in the middle of the woods with the sprawling yard.

The idea of home, the feeling of it, endured through those years in our tiny house, and we brought it into our car. Weekend after weekend, Fall

Out Boy CDs played on repeat as we bounced around the county, searching for somewhere to settle. The space was crammed with relics of us, the nomads. Novels I consumed voraciously and Dramamine so I could keep them down. Hand-held video games for my brother, the high whine of the background music barely audible. Glossy magazines for my mother, her shoes off, mouth pursed. And always, always printouts, brochures, posters of beautiful houses we would never live in.

I yearn for it sometimes. I wish I could force the four of us into a car for that long again, in the hopes that we'd talk, focus, spend time present with one another for a few hours. I am nostalgic for it all, from the leg cramps to the stories of my parents as high schoolers, young and stupid and very in love. I do not regret us as a roostless flock. I believe we could have made any of those houses a home.

Shoebox

It was the first night I was really here, and it was bitterly cold outside. I had been in the empty, spacious house on the eerily deserted college campus for five days alone, but that night a dozen people flooded in, and I was Here. The tables were crowded to bursting, the people were loud, crushed side by side and spooning spaghetti into their mouths. The night was sharply frigid, the snow preparing to descend, and the winter smell of clean blue air was striking against the windows. Inside though, it was all golden-yellow warmth.

We were lined up and down the kitchen with every chair we could find, pulled from bedrooms and study rooms, all of us elbow-to-elbow. Two of the boys had boiled my spaghetti in a huge pot, the spaghetti I was saving for the week. But I couldn't mind, not when the trade-off meant all of us together. Here was a fresh salad, a round cherry tomato rolling down the floor. Everyone's faces sparkled with laughter. A fridge of glass beer bottles, our hands all clutching at one another to solve the riddles underneath the caps. A perfect, surreal glow surrounds this moment in time. It was pure and achingly beautiful in its newness—we hadn't had time to ruin each other yet. It was like a deeply saturated Norma Rockwell painting, an American classic, a collection of grown-up children around a table playing house.

Treading Water

"The ache for home lives in all of us, the safe place where we can go as we are and not be questioned." – Maya Angelou

The semester wore on, slow and absolute. The vicious-cold winter

had given way to that fragrant brown dampness of spring; the sweet smell of decay and the sharp yellow-white brightness of the sky were unwelcome. I hate spring. I have always found it fickle and ugly.

A friend, Andrew, and I were spending a night on the blue college couches—those faux-leather monsters that complain every time you move. I had left the paper to the last possible moment, and I was expecting a rude and exhausting evening ahead. In time, Andrew finished his work and retired to his room, smiling with soft concern.

An hour passed, maybe. It was 2 a.m. or later. I woke up angry, angry at myself for sleeping on that horrible, loud couch, angry for losing focus, angry for struggling through the spring like I had never been taught to swim, like I would always be half-drowning. Andrew was standing at the end of the couch like he'd been caught, grinning, pillow in hand.

"I thought maybe you'd want this."

And the vicious blue couch became my bed.

Abroad

My host mother's hair was in loose curls, and her voice sounded like brown leather. The tiny Italian apartment was little more than a few rooms jutting off a narrow hallway, filled with books, paintings, photographs, and a number of things quaint and charming. The laundry machine was in the small bathroom, and because there was no dryer, my socks and underwear were draped over the windowsill. It was a colorful space, a warm space, and it smelled strongly of rich, heavy food.

"One thing bothers me," I stuttered in broken Italian as Donatella and I sat at her small table for dinner. "There's no word for..." Here I struggled, switched into English. "Home. There's house, but not home."

"*Casa*," she said, her brow furrowed, not understanding. "*Casa* is both. *Tutte due*. House and home. Same thing"

"But they're so different. In English, a home is so different, so much more. How can there be no word for that?" I was beginning to sound judgmental, and both of us were frustrated that neither seemed to understand. This taxing barrier, this inability to communicate, would come to characterize my stay in Italy. I could never make the country home; I could never make Donatella's small, light-filled apartment home, because I felt so muted, suffocated by the language.

"*Casa*," she said definitively, "is home too."

I was uncomfortable with this idea, with this lack of distinction, until it occurs to me months later that perhaps to Italians, the notion of a "house" is the unnecessary one. Perhaps there is no need to distinguish. Perhaps they know better. Perhaps to them, every house is a home.

Lighthouse

It was pushing 11p.m., and I was bone-tired. Has there been a more appropriate phrase? The exhaustion permeates. When I walked in the door, a small group of my housemates were gathered in the living room waiting for me, a movie queued, hot cocoa brewed up and pressed between their palms. I was restless with joy. I could not sit among them and watch the foreign film because I was simply too happy, too relieved to see them sitting there harmonious and content. I made oatmeal cookies with instant oatmeal packets and someone's open bag of chocolate chips. I felt soft and whole.

The evening ended with us piled together like children, like puppies, on the couches. We were knotted limb to limb, laughing, playing MASH, telling stories. I have felt lost for longer than I could know, but I will always consider them my lighthouse.

Throughout the evening, I took pictures, near-obsessively. I have more than a thousand from the last few months. Of Halloween, of our picnics, of silly moments I am scared of losing. Of them together on the couch that night, one laughing mass. I can't stop taking pictures of them. I cannot help wanting to capture their light for myself.

I no longer take pictures of empty rooms.

The Eyes Have It

Julia Rentsch

A mere few years ago (feels like ages now, really) my only pressing problem was that even though I had a pretty good job and a pet fish named Luther, I was quite a lonely person. Nowadays, my problems have become many. There are times when I think I just can't bear all that's happened on my conscience, the same way a turtle couldn't bear to carry a pool table.

"Get a boyfriend, for God's sake," my mom had nagged when I told her about my loneliness.

"Don't worry, I'm sure there's someone out there for you," was what my lovely friend Betsy had said to my face (although I'm sure behind my back it went something like, "if only she'd stop dressing like an octogenarian.")

I knew that my life needed a bit of zest, like a new hobby or a new friend. Maybe I should do as mom suggested and go out on an odyssey looking for potential husbands, I thought, or maybe I should go take Betsy's advice and get a new look.

This thought process was how I decided to finally go about getting glasses, which was something I had been vainly avoiding for years. I never would have guessed it'd be an endeavor that could take me down a winding, convoluted path to a messy and ethically ambiguous triple life.

Everyone's probably seen TV shows about situations like mine—reality shows full of fake-tanned people with petty personalities and muscle-flexing tendencies that end up really belittling people like me, who struggle daily through what they're only pretending to. My life has been overtaken by the drama of multiple relationships, multiple people I depend on for the same support, the same care, but I can't bear to give up any of them out of sheer attachment. It's that old human vice, where the grass is always greener on the other side. I'm sure by now one can guess what it is that I have done, been doing, and can't stop doing. That's right—I have fallen into the lifestyle of having not one, not two, but *three* optometrists.

My first optometrist's name is Larry. I have terrible vision, so Larry and I were perfect for each other. I think he initially considered me to be a bit of a challenge, because despite my vision problems and related klutziness, I was reluctant to commit to glasses after having gone stubbornly on so long without them. Slow to adjust to this new person in my life, I at first saw him only sparingly; over time, though, our bond became strong. When

he looked deep into my eyes to conduct my retinal refraction assessment, it was like my very soul was naked and on display. And when we did automated perimetry together for the first time, my mind was blown like it had never been before! Soon the bare vulnerability became an addiction, and at every visit my pupils would dilate with eye drops and love.

With this new development in my life, I blossomed into a version of myself that I hadn't known existed—one that smiled at random passersby and was excited to wake up in the morning to see each brand new day. I could see clearly now, in more ways than one.

A few months later, however, the company I worked for underwent some internal turmoil and decided to move headquarters a few states away—I had to go, or I'd lose my job. I was heartbroken that I'd have to leave my dear optometrist, because no one could ever replace him in my heart. Desperate to hang on to the relationship I had steadily been building, I rationalized that I was only moving a couple hundred or so miles away, so making appointments was still possible. Of course I'd make the drive! I intended to stay faithful—he was the only optometrist for me.

But a few months after my move, disaster struck with a prejudiced blow. I came down with a rabid, raging, ruthless eye infection that attacked my sclerae until they were as red and watery as a sea of Hawaiian Punch and as itchy as poison ivy leaves in one's underpants. But it was definitely my eyes, not my underpants. I did not have genital warts, I had an eye infection.

Oh, the humanity! The urge became too strong; I had to see someone, anyone, immediately! And the drive to see Larry was just too far, when I was so desperately in need of care. So I did what only a few days ago had seemed strictly out of the question: I sought out another optometrist. At first I was scared and regretful (what if Larry found out?) but the instant I sat down in Sophie's office, I knew that this was meant to be. As she peered through her ophthalmoscope into my eyes, I was shocked to experience the same feeling I had experienced with Larry—to be the subject of her gaze was to lay bare my soul and let her carefully observe the very essence of my spirit. I decided to start seeing her.

You may judge and shun me, but I have accepted my decision. From that point onward, there was no going back to monogamy. My mind flashed back to the cheesy after-school specials I had watched in middle school and how they had insistently warned against this type of two-timing. At this point I felt was old enough and wise enough to ignore all that televised preaching. My situation was perfect—whether at work or away, I had someone who would care for me, give me what I needed.

Everything worked flawlessly for a while, and I wore my glasses with a sense of pride, like on my nose sat a secret symbol for the glamorous

life of intrigue I was leading behind closed doors. Not a single person at work guessed that I spent my time off the clock with two different optometrists, but I was prepared to lie if anyone were to ask—my secret would be kept safe at any cost. Yet I began to wonder if what I was doing was wrong, and my conscience began a slow burn inside me as if it were a case of acid reflux. It made my stomach ache like I had eaten too many waffles, and made my breath stink like those waffles had just melted in my mouth and stuck in my teeth. But I still never told a soul.

Day after day, like a blooming fire-poppy from hell, the secret burned within me. During that time I came to the conclusion that it was definitely immoral to not tell each about the other. I imagined richly dramatized situations in which I would arrive at each of their offices and reveal that I had been unfaithful. My fantasies quickly became more and more drastic, complete with vivid detail of how Larry might scream and cry, or how Sophie might give me a harsh ultimatum to choose between them. Soon I was so wrapped up in my worries, hardly sure of what conversations had actually happened and which I had imagined, that I was too fearful to face either of them. I would have to stay away from either eye doctor for awhile and try to rebuild my life in a more honest way.

But like a circus monkey chasing a banana on a stick, I yearned for what was just out of reach, just one phone call away—I craved another appointment. Just once more I needed to feel that connection with another human being, a bond deeper than an ocean trench, felt as my optometrists stared into the blue of my iris to check for defects. Besides, I had lately been getting sick and tired of wearing my glasses, feeling jealous of the fresh-faced girls who didn't have eye problems (or secret double lives). What had once been a symbol of glamour had become a weighty one of guilt. At that moment I wanted contacts more than I had ever wanted anything, and that included the Barbie dream house when I was six and the job I coveted just a few years ago that I now hold. But I was prepared to give it all up if I had to, just to feel that wondrous, life-giving connection once more.

But I still couldn't bring myself to face Larry or Sophie. Trust me, I tried—I even went so far one time as to get in the car, determined that I'd end this charade once and for all, and then drove to Sophie's office. But I couldn't get out of the car and walk in. I just couldn't bring myself to see the disappointment on her face when I revealed that I was seeing someone else. So I stayed for a while, a prisoner in the driver's seat, until I resignedly pulled out of my spot and drove away. I hope she didn't see my car.

This third time around, I absolutely hated myself as I frantically Googled other optometrists in my area. I wanted my glasses gone, and I regretted being so dishonest with Larry and Sophie, who were good people

who didn't deserve this kind of treatment and back-stabbing. But transcending it all I craved the euphoria that could reassure me that I was not alone in this world after all.

Finally, I found the perfect one. His name was Frank, and the internet said he was one of the area's foremost authorities on contact prescriptions. With trembling hands, I dialed him up. When the appointment was made, I relaxed in my favorite armchair and smoked a cigarette to calm myself down. I had never been a smoker before, but recently it had begun to appeal to me. Everything was going to be fine; I would go in tomorrow.

The next day I arrived at my appointment, early as I always was, to wait with bated breath next to the receptionist's desk. But the uplifting happiness and hope that usually accompanied a visit to the eye doctor was tainted. The world seemed to be closing in around me—I imagined Larry and Sophie and how much I had already been betraying them, and how I was about to do worse than I had ever done before. I owed it to myself and to them to just get up and walk out right now.

"You're up," said the receptionist, gesturing to me. Too late to back out now, I thought, and with a rush of heady, guilty pleasure I rose and ambled into the office.

Afterwards, I smoked another cigarette and reminisced sweetly about how Frank had tested my eyes for refraction errors, and the rhythmic whirr of the machine that spat puffs of air at my eyes. With contacts in, I felt freshly freed from the symbolic weight of my glasses. I could easily forget the contacts were even there.

A couple of days later, I went shopping at the SuperMart. Even today I still remember what I had in my cart: bread, cheese, paper towels, and Nutella. I remember everything because it was there in the dairy aisle that my fears were realized: I ran into Sophie.

"Wow, you got contacts!" Her red-lipped smile looked incredibly fixed on her face.

"Yeah, yeah I did," I replied, my heart jumping in my chest as I carefully studied a display of pineapples.

"They look good. Hope I'll see you for your next check up! It's coming up soon, you know. Plus it'll probably be a good time to do a little glaucoma screening too."

"Mmm hmm," I said in a high little voice. "See ya soon."

I knew it, I thought in despair; she hated me! Suddenly weak, I dropped heavily to the floor and slumped against a freezer door. The guilty rotten waffle taste was back in my mouth, but it had worsened to the stench level of a full English breakfast, sausage and all. It was like bits and pieces of everything had wedged and rotted between my teeth to create hellish cavities of malice and evil that ate right through my enamel until they had

poisoned my roots.

Maybe what I really needed was a dentist.

It's Not Something We Speak Of

Tucker B. Snow

Approaching the beach, he could see his hands trembling with nervousness. He was a long way from home and didn't know whether he would ever see the face of his beautiful wife ever again. Pvt. Gordon Snow looked over at his friends trying not to imagine the thoughts circling through each and every one of their minds. As the white sand came closer and closer, the wide-open ocean began to look like a dreamer's paradise but it was their duty and honor to fight for their country on this very beach. Pvt. Snow had no clue how long they would be there or how long he would last in this battle. However, the first line of the Marines could not afford to be overthinking every aspect of the attack. Their mission was to stay alive for as long as they could and to gain control of Iwo Jima. That would be a very trying task due to their unfamiliarity with the terrain.

The landing hit the beach and they opened the door to gunfire all around them. Gordon struggled to find his legs as he sprinted onto the beach. Mortars rained like hellfire down on the beach all around them. Pvt. Snow and his platoon found safety in a bunker for a momentary yet needed rest. He looked over to find members of his platoon badly injured. One with an unnoticed bullet in his arm, his adrenaline had kicked in. He called over to his buddy, asking if he was okay. There was no response. Gordon quickly crawled over to Tom but, before he got there, there was a noticeable gunshot wound to side of his head. In the first 10 minutes, Pvt. Snow had already lost his best friend in the platoon. A rush of helplessness came upon him as he struggled to find his bearings but he knew he had to push on.

Without another pause, Gordon rushed with his platoon out of the bunker further and further from the beach. They ran for their lives as gunfire continued to fly all around them. After getting to more cover they unleashed what seemed to be minutes of straight gunfire not targeted in a particular direction besides toward the trees. The platoon had to merely hope that their bullets were hitting the enemy and not just the ground.

As Pvt. Gordon Snow sprinted toward a tree for cover, he was struck by a stray bullet. Instantly, he screamed in pain but continued on to

the mossy tree. Gordon's arm felt like hot coals had been poured into the open wound; it was the most extraordinary pain he has ever experienced. He collapsed at the base of the tree. The ground was moist from the early morning dew still upon the ground. All Pvt. Snow could do was look and hold his arm in pain, until finally a thought came across his mind. He thought about the moment when he would finally be able to hold his wife in his bullet-wounded arms again. Suddenly, his pain changed to focus, to push on and thrive in this opportunity to serve his country.

Pvt. Gordon Snow felt the wet ground with his bare hands. As he looked down he noticed the moisture had soaked into his skin like water on a sponge. Gordon quickly brushed off his hands and climbed to his feet after grabbing his gun again. Another defensive positioning was taken behind the tree. More platoon members were constantly rushing by, some falling, some finding cover at the very next tree. Gunfire was the only sound besides the horrifying screams of the injured soldiers on both sides. An opera or piece by Beethoven would have been an ideal change of pace from these disturbing echoes of pain and suffering.

The death and destruction that captivated his mind was the most impactful and terrifying thing that Pvt. Snow had ever experienced. He had always imagined war in the past with the knowledge that he could always be faced with being deployed, but never had he thought that it would be even close to this horrifying or scarring. There were times when Gordon was protected by the tree where he felt that he could just close his eyes and float back into his wife's arms. However, the grim reality of soldiers falling around him drew Gordon back to this very dark reality, which was Iwo Jima.

Gathering himself, Pvt. Gordon Snow analyzed the different tactics he could use from his training to gain an advantage over the enemy. He tried raking through his brain for the perfect piece of training that could help him and his comrades on this mission. With no information forming in Gordon's hippocampus, he was left with relying on following the orders of his leaders in command. He looked ahead and saw many other American platoons proceeding up the brush-filled mountain. Men rushed up the steep slopes advancing further into enemy territory amidst the gunfire raining down all around them. Pvt. Snow was struggling to find the enemy targets he was supposed to be shooting at so he continued up the mountain until he reached a building where American soldiers were taking refuge as a base. Finally, he had a temporary respite.

The gunfire began to slow with every passing minute going by in this asylum. Mortars in the distance were coming to an end and inside this base there was a general feeling that this battle was coming to a close soon. As platoons made their way into the new American base, others went back

out to continue fighting the enemy until they had fully regained control of Iwo Jima.

My grandfather, Pvt. Gordon Snow, was on the first line of the Marines in the battle of Iwo Jima. He was one of those courageous men that went back out and fought tirelessly for his country and the loved ones he had at home. When people think of the battle of Iwo Jima, many consider the historical photo taken of soldiers raising the American flag after victory. However, when I think about it, I think about the ultimate sacrifice many gave during that battle and the mental toll it took on veterans who returned home.

This is a time in my grandfather's life that we do not talk about in my family. I learned this lesson the hard way one night sitting down at dinner. Looking over to his usual dining seat, I asked, "Grandpa? What is that tattoo on your arm? Were you in a war or something?"

Before he could even recognize that I had asked him a question, my dad leaned over and responded, saying, "Tucker, that's not something that we talk about with Grandpa. Someday I will tell you about it but please don't ask him about it, okay?"

I replied, "Okay, Dad. I am sorry."

That was it. That was the end of our discussion on my grandfather's war experience and I was trained to forget about it, which is exactly what I did. Years later, my grandfather passed away from cancer with every story he could have ever told me of his role in the battle of Iwo Jima. Had I missed out on hearing his heroic acts of bravery or of his fearlessness? My mind wandered as I tried to reason why he would want to keep these experiences a secret from his family. Maybe these were not times of glory? Maybe they were times of heartache and anguish? Without my grandfather alive to answer these questions, I thought that many would go unanswered, and therefore I dropped it until one night.

All I could see were his broad shoulders facing away from me. His head tilted down concentrated on something in his hands. I had never seen my father like this before.

"Hi, Dad. Is everything okay?" I asked.

He replied, "Of course, bud, I'm just looking through some of Grandpa's old things." I could tell from his voice that he had been crying when I realized what he was talking about. I moved closer to him and noticed all the metals and "souvenirs" from my grandfather's time in the war. There had to be dozens and dozens of things that he had collected throughout his years in the service. I had to ask, "Dad? Why didn't Grandpa ever want to talk about the war with us?"

"Sit down, son. Your grandfather never wanted to talk about the

war because it was not a proud time in his life. He did things that he did not want to do and had a hard time talking and even thinking about them afterward. But in my eyes, your grandfather is a hero. He fought on the front lines with the Marines in the battle of Iwo Jima. That is how I remember him regarding the war, not as someone who cannot talk or think about it.”

With every word, I could see how proud my Dad was of his father and how proud he was to be the son of this hero. The medals that my dad showed me were astonishing: the history, the stories that were embedded inside them. I finally understood why this was not something we spoke of in our family before my grandfather’s death and very rarely after. Gordon Snow may have kept his story quiet, but I will certainly be celebrating the heroic actions for years on end. A war hero’s tale is not one to be hidden in the corner but to be proudly told.

Drifting

Nancy Clark

Even as I dove into the water I knew I would never come out. Its grayness enveloped me, coating my skin and forcing my eyes closed. My feet melted into the fins that trickled up my ankles and fused the rest of my legs. The scales crept their way up my back, painting me bluer than the Aegean, and my dorsal fin burst from my spine, pushing against my skin and crashing through like bubbles bursting on the surface of a wave. My last breath of real air rushed past my cheeks as I exhaled and my dive slipped deeper.

I had been on the surface too long. The instant I hit the water the tightness of my sun-dried skin dissipated like a sigh of relief and the tan I had carefully earned was already fading from it. My gills had opened and were pumping air and water happily through my jawline, yet I still felt the starvation pangs crying from my lungs. They ached in my chest, begging me to open my mouth and gasp for air, but my lips pressed together unflinchingly. I sucked them against my teeth and let the pain endure.

The flashing silver of schools of fish obscured the drop-off where the sea broke open its floor. The trench stared at me, a gaping maw waiting to swallow me, or spit the fishbone city out, I couldn't decide which. Of course we needed to settle as far from the surface as possible. We could never be like Atlantis, nestled in a kelp forest with sharks patrolling day and night; no, we burrowed into the deepest trench where not even light could reach us. My tail still shimmered in the last refracted rays.

The sun would be setting soon. It would fall faster and faster through the sky, burning red like a meteor. Then the sea would swallow it, chew it to pieces, and she would spit out the stars to spark sailors' imaginations. The sailors were always her favorites; they were the ones who came and went of their own accord, no tide drawing them back, and so she pined after them until they returned to her.

I dove in.

A school of guards passed me as I crested the cliff. One's eyes, all pupil, caught mine for an instant. His neck was lined with shark teeth and a wound was still inflamed across his shoulder. He could kill me in an instant, at least underwater. But his eyes were hollow; they had grown lazy after a life of living in the depths, never having to adjust. On land he would be blinded by the sun and stumble on spindly, unused legs like a newborn

lamb. I flashed my fangs; he nodded, and I swam on.

The city sparked in and out of the darkness with bursts of bioluminescence. The rib cage of an ancient whale arched in the center of everything, leading to the great cave. Stretching from the sand to the darkness, the bones were tethered in this would-be oasis while everyone and everything floated around them. I drifted to them and through them, an instinctive tide drawing me in to the inevitable. Whispers bubbled around me; the abyssals were clustered in gossiping, tails curling together like twinned conch shells as they shot me looks that were entirely unsubtle. I sank closer to the spine and let my tail clip each vertebrae I passed.

I closed my eyes as I entered the cave. Not that it mattered; anything that glowed was forbidden from this last sanctuary of submarine splendor. My webbed fingers ran along the wall, which was smoothed and polished daily by dedicated servants so that it could not tear even the most delicate finnage. My forearm brushed what seemed to be a warm, fleshy bulge in the stone. I opened my eyes and in the last ripples of light could barely see the eye-less, squid-like man crouched before me. His tentacles anxiously pulsed against his rocky perch, making greedy sucking sounds.

“Tribute?” he asked. I skirted to the side and swam past him to the deepest darkness where the queen herself sat.

“Hello, Mother.”

When I opened my mouth to speak, the water rushed in, floating over my lips and washing my tongue in brine and mud, crashing against the back of my throat. I could taste the dirt stirred up by the queen’s ripples as she rose.

“Darling,” she purred, petting my cheek with her long, claw-like nails, “you’ve come home.”

*

“Of course, *they* will want a feast for you. They *always* want a feast, even for just spotting a migrating school of tuna.” I felt the water shudder as Mother flipped her hand the same way she had when she dismissed her attendants. “If I gave a feast for every fish they claimed was good luck, all the ships on the waves would be empty. Frankly, I thought you dried out ages ago. But somehow there’s still water in your veins; you can explain to me how you managed *that* later. For now, go get yourself cleaned up while I rest.” She swooped onto her throne, constructed of the jawbones of sharks that the greatest hunters had captured and brought her as tribute. “Send the captain in; we will need her best floaters to fetch us some sailors.” As I left, I heard her listing off orders. “No peg-legs, now,” she told the captain. “We need all of the meat intact.”

A school of abyssals swept me away to scrub the remnants of surface life from me. Their white faces, bleached from never leaving the trench, circled like sharks, one after the other, scrubbing at every inch of

me. They picked the skin that still clung around my protruding dorsal fin and plucked the hairs that peeked out from between my scales. Question after question streamed at me in the moans of baby humpback whales. They echoed off the rocks, off the whalebones, out of the chasm and into the world and back again.

“I’ve never seen so much skin!”

“How long were you up there, anyway?”

“Didn’t you leave five moons ago? How did you stay dry for so long?”

For a moment, my gills forgot how to work. They caught, seized, frozen shut, and my whole chest was suddenly hollow and collapsed like a sunken wreck with treasure still inside, somewhere. Then a bubble breached the blockage and I could breathe again. The abyssals continued their questions and I let them speculate their way through my silence.

How *had* I stayed dry for so long? It felt good to have so much water on my skin again. Spare days spent on the shore splashing in the waves had helped, but even then I had to sneak away at night to keep from cracking open. But I *could* sneak away. Even Gus, the innkeeper, only laughed when I came back sandy in the morning from sleeping on the shoreline. “You sure love the sea, dontcha?” he would chortle. Then his wife Margaret would come out and untangle some seaweed from my hair, hand me my apron, and lead me back to the kitchen before the sailors woke up for breakfast. The steam filling the kitchen helped me through mealtimes, and in the slow hours I would follow the sailors to the docks and let the spray wash over me.

As the moon drifted in the clouds I would sit with the landlocked sailors and we watched the sea wave at us, beckoning us home. They would point out ships cresting over the horizon and tell me about the tradewinds and the faraway England and rumors of sharks and sea monsters and mermaids, and when I giggled they told tale after tale of the watery sirens who sang to men who had been at sea too long before dragging them to their watery graves. Each story became more and more extravagant as they took my silence for amazement; with every word I could feel my chest crack open like the shells of the crabs Gus would catch early in the morning for the shipfuls of navy boys. They could laugh, like I had heard sailors before them laugh to me, and in my ears the sound turned into the gargles of my drowning prey.

*

“Darling, you look so lovely now that we’ve washed that tan away.” Mother uncurled her long fingers, stretching the shimmering silver tissue between them, and traced them along my tail. Her smile snapped to anger when she reached the edge. I looked down. The rocks and whale bones had

caught and torn my delicate finnage. I had barely even noticed, like how I had mindlessly chewed at my nails while waiting for pies to bake until Margaret brought me all manner of towels and rags to fold and keep me busy. But Mother's dorsal fin flared, intricate spines reaching from the nape of her neck to her lower back. She clutched a handful of my tattered tail, and as I tried to pull away the thin flesh ripped off and hung limp in her hands, draped over her perfect webbing.

I looked away from her and back past my own shoulder. It wasn't until Mother grabbed one of my hands that I noticed I had been wringing them together, pushing my teal webs until a few of them had split.

"Why do you do this?" The blackness of her pupils seemed to stretch through the rest of her face, leeching all the way to her creamy fangs. "Do you want to look like a scrounging treasure hunter with these ripped hands?"

"No, Mother." I could barely bubble out an answer. *Breathe. Just breathe. You remember how to breathe.*

She relinquished my hand and held my tattered tail in my face. "This is *not* how you respect the sea." *Or her queen.* "Ladies, trim her tail. Make it look delicate again."

The queen swam away and the abyssals returned to work, this time with razor-sharp knives that shaped intricate points into my tail fins again. I closed my eyes. At least on the surface you could cry.

*

Margaret had caught me lurking in the cove and calling to the drunken sailors that stumbled out of the pub. Thinking I was desperate for work she brought me to the kitchen; little did she know that she was saving her own customers rather than saving me. Even after months of working by her side I would catch myself watching her float about the kitchen; she was too graceful for someone on land; she had to be secretly swimming.

"Nah, lass," she told me once as we drained the last dregs of table wine. "Truth be told I never learned to swim."

"But, you mean... never?"

She shook her head, her bun coming loose and dripping tendrils over her ears. "I've lived in this pub with Gus for thirty years, right off the docks. I've poured ale for captains of the navy and pirate sloops alike. I watched my boys run out to the waves day after day until they ran out to ships to see where else the waves could go. But I have never, swear by the Holy Cross, never stepped a toe into the salt water."

One Sunday, when she and a disgruntled Gus returned from the chapel, I brought her to the cove. Behind the rocks I led her into the waves, and my golden hands guided her onto her back where the sea could cradle her. Without even a toe anchored to the sand she hung suspended and sur-

prised on the water that offered her and her husband and sons their livelihoods.

*

I stood beside Mother and a few of her select guards at the mouth of the queen's cave, careful to hold my hands still and display my newly polished finnage. The floaters arrived with a half dozen sailors in tow. Billowing shirts flapped like flags in a storm as they dragged them deeper and deeper. The bodies were dropped in front of my mother, but slowly each one began to drift skyward. The floaters tried to hold them down. The leader of them grew flustered as she tried to acknowledge the queen without losing her bounty.

"Sorry, your majesty. I only wish dead men stayed sunk."

Mother nodded, then took a trident from one of her guards. She speared the troublesome sailor in question, the golden points reaching straight through his chest and into the muck.

"That ought to hold him."

The blood trickled upwards where the men could not go. It drifted in curling streams, reaching and swaying like leaves in the kelp forests. The blood drifted up and I felt my throat catch. The last time I had seen blood was when the butcher was sick and Gus insisted on carving up a pig on his own. He had cut himself and come running into the kitchen with swine blood covering his arms and his own pouring out fresh from lord-knows-where. Margaret had struggled to wash him off, having me run buckets back and forth from the well, everything running off the back steps and pooling in the street.

A small smile crept across Mother's lips as she tasted the metallic notes on the current; I was just far enough away that I could barely smell it, but it was still as if it had dug its way into my throat, grasped my windpipe and wrapped my gills, pinning me under with those sailors. I could almost feel their blood mixing with my own, tightening my veins and coursing through to my still-beating heart. It was filling me, rushing faster and faster through my limbs and pulsing in my skull and all I could hear were their already silenced screams echoing through my chest. I could not watch; I had to escape their gargling cries. I rushed out to the place in the whale's arching ribcage to float where it might have once had a heart. The abyssals murmured like low tide over a rocky beach, but I let all sound drift from my ears.

I closed my eyes and pictured myself lifting out of the water, emerging to a rising sun. It would crest the horizon as I did, breaking the barrier between earth and sky. I always loved surfacing between tides. Feeling the ebbing water rip against itself as it crashed from its high. Churning with the flooding seas that rushed up to their full potential. Moving from the

frothing foam to the stones that pressed warm and round into my feet. The scales would drip from my legs along with the seawater, falling to the rocks and shimmering in the morning light. I could feel the warmth, feel the light. Away from the abyssals, away from the belly of the whale, away from the currents pulling me back.

With my eyes closed to the water around me, I was there.

My scales fell, one by one, flashing green in the blue-tinged water. They hit the ground, shed and abandoned. They settled into the bottom, their color suddenly flat. Legs emerged beneath them. My fins disintegrated and my toes tickled their way out of the dissolving webbing. I dropped onto the spine of the whale, feeling the whole of the bones under the soles of my feet.

With no sun to tan my flesh, it was left somewhere between gray and sallow. I stood for a moment, mid-transformation, neither shimmering nor glowing, water pumping through my gills with my feet firmly on the ground. Anchored.

I looked my mother in the eyes. For a moment I thought she might understand. Months ago I had awoken on the shore from nightmares of Margaret finding me with scales, of Gus bringing other floaters' tails in to boil for stew. The sound of the waves against the night had made me wonder which side of my life was a lie, which secret was the one pulling me into the drowning sea. I saw my gills reflected in the blue of the queen's eyes. They were fluttering, gasping, waiting for normalcy to reestablish itself. Longing for the rhythm to stabilize. The sun to rise. The tide to ebb.

"This isn't who you are," she said, glaring disdainfully at my feet.

"Yes it is." She understood me as much as she understood the way the sand clung to the waves. She knew me the way she knew how it felt to have the sun crisp her skin.

The water washed through my gills one last time before I forced them closed, and suddenly the shifting of my respiratory systems left it with nowhere to go. It was sloshed through my throat and chest as my tissues grated against each other like rusted gears before clicking into place. The saline seeped stingingly into my muscles and spilled into my still raw trachea. My lungs flooded and seized like a fish leaping and flapping on the deck of a boat and each muscle in my chest and gut spasmed wildly in an attempt to cough. I felt tumbled like the small children I had watched toppling in the crashing waves. Then I had laughed when their toes emerged before their heads, every inch of them matted with wet sand. Now there was panic and rocking and I sucked my lips tight against my teeth just to feel something solid. My nostrils flared as the last bubbles of surrendered air escaped and my jaw struggled to open but I held it closed. There was nothing to breathe here anyhow.

My chest fell forward in my empty coughs and my feet stumbled ahead to catch the rest of me. My toes caught on the vertebrae of the giant, ancient whale and throbbed in time with my ever-quickenning heartbeat, but my heels smacked harder, bone to bone, trying to stabilize themselves. My fresh skin felt the rough sand that had splayed over the ossified creature and somewhere under everything else my nerves pondered the difference between the smooth of the whale and the grating of the mud it had sunk into. I could see the abyssals rushing in, waiting to feed on my chaos and scandal. Perhaps they would spend the next millennia discussing how the daughter of the mighty sea queen, who had brought her people so far from the surface-worshipping Atlantis, had turned human before their very eyes. Wouldn't that be a story.

But as they rushed forward I saw that their eyes darted about with the same confused panic that filled my entire being. In every corner of my being I could feel my nerves surging with electricity like the beasts that brought light to the deepest caverns of the ocean, to our trench, to our darkness. And suddenly that's all there was: the darkness of the deep sea flooded my eyes and drowned the last of my vision despite my pupils' gasps for light.

The last thing I could make out was my mother waving her hand dismissively. "She'll change back," the queen declared. "She's a floater, just looking for drama."

The rippled waves from the converging abyssals threw my sea legs off balance and I fell. The ripples of darkness had washed through my head before I could land with my own spine in line with the whale's.

And then I floated.

The sun grew brighter as I drifted to the surface. The water brushed softly against my arms and legs that hung like clumps of seaweed in the surf. Then I was there, belly above the waves, and there was nothing but light.

Statistic

Michael A. Deleon, Jr.

I'm not sure how his mother felt when she realized that she had given birth to a hate crime

Had amity slipped from her lips? Had her olive pale skin converted itself to frozen porcelain? Had she forgiven her son for her biggest mistakes?

Here are a few tips for those who are afraid of becoming a statistic

One, when you leave your home set your timer so you can see just how long it takes for a lead pipe to break your cranium in two like the time when your mother said she was just trying to cure you

Two, do not allow society to turn you into their puppet because they will string you along the George Washington Bridge and dispose of you labeling your death a suicide, I'm sorry Tyler Clementi

They will force feed you outdated Bible verses and picket outside of your father's funeral with banners hissing "Thank God for Dead Soldiers" while they are pissing all over his cherrywood bravery

Thank you Matthew Snyder

They will toss you to the asphalt after punching you dry of all oxygen, rest in peace Sean Kennedy

They will walk you to a fast forward crime scene and link you to a cross after beating you senseless only for your body to be found eighteen hours later and mistaken for a scarecrow, but you are no scarecrow Matthew Shepard

You are beautiful

Three, carry a pistol between your teeth and shoot down all of the homophobic slurs that these fiends will release until you are deceased and they will have the nerve to drag their feet to your memorial site not knowing that you saw their faces in the knife you used to end your life

I am sorry

Four, understand that family can also be the enemy and your tweet about gay marriage rights is only a few retweets away from your loved ones arranging your funeral

Five, swallow all of the pride and optimism that you can to create a red velvet cushioning beneath your heart because finding comfort in love can sometimes be uncomfortable

Six, love yourself

Seven, love yourself

Eight, if you love yourself they cannot change your name from beauty to pain or gay to shame because we are all the same people
Soldiers are still being sent overseas when the real war is right here in our country

Nine, keep in mind that we should be intolerant of intolerance

Ten, it only gets better if we make it get better, we must become the arson that burns down their prejudice and we must be the unity that becomes their rude awakening

Because if we don't, all they will have to remember us is a candlelight vigil and how long before those flames burn out? How long before your mother cuts the umbilical cord that ties her to a hate crime? How long before you begin to live up to your new name: statistic?

Sweet Nothings

Danielle Dattolo

“Oh, a little cat eye never hurt anyone,” Amelia said. I considered her opinion on the matter authoritative and shut my eyes. Each of her eyelashes were individually coated in dark mascara even though she wasn’t going anywhere. After a minute or so, she stepped back and tilted her head before diving in and brushing a mascara wand along my eyebrows.

“What are you doing?” I asked with a laugh. My eyebrows were too blonde—I didn’t think it would look natural.

“It’s just a last little touch. I mean, come on, you’re giving me day-two curls to work with,” she said, tugging at my hair. “I’ve got to do everything I can.”

I looked up at Amelia, who had gone out with twice as many guys as me—but none of them half as hot as the one I was going to see. “Okay,” I conceded with a laugh. I knew I could trust her. She’d done it so many times. “You can do whatever you want.”

“Correct answer,” she said, jetting off to the rest of her makeup stash. “Want some lipstick? Are you planning on smudging it?”

“Whatever it takes, right?”

She turned around and winked at me. “Baby’s first kill. I can’t wait to hear how it goes.”

Don’t use a knife; it leaves a mess. Guns are cleaner, making the mess easier to hide on the killer, but the victim’s wound isn’t. And they’re loud. Poison is tasteless, undetectable, and untraceable: the perfect weapon. The syndicate’s specialty was a substance that mimicked the effects of drinking large quantities of alcohol too quickly.

That was precisely how I planned to kill Tristan Cortone: under the guise of a drunken night at Ray Kennedy’s house. His file had been slipped under my door earlier that week before my mom came home from work. Intel told me Tristan was eighteen; a senior at Razorback High; and had applications submitted to the University of Richmond, Georgetown, and American. He was the son of local politician Arthur Cortone, and the syndicate had to send a message that would ensure the elder Cortone didn’t

run for Congress. Politicians are familiar with our work, though not our faces, and the syndicate's message comes across pretty clear. That was usually how these things went—when you live in the DC/metro area, everything is political.

I also happened to know the bottom of Tristan's jeans were always tucked behind the tongues of his sneakers, and even though that made him look like a tool, he managed to get away with it. He was the goalie on our school's hockey team, with two championship medals to his name. On an important but unrelated note, his eyes were a beautiful, bright blue. His hair was kind of a muddy brown, but other than that he was pretty flawless—broad in the shoulders, and one of the tallest guys at Razorback. And he was the first boy I ever liked. We had Mrs. Fisher together in the second grade, and I liked him until the end of April. Any other time, I would have been flattered to be going out with him. I usually looked too young to attract much attention from boys, but the workouts in training had been kind to me.

He picked me up at ten, though he didn't come to the front door.

"So this is the Tristan, huh?" Mom stuck her nose out the door, spying his beat-up Corolla parked alongside the curb. "Quite the gentleman, huh?"

"Bye, Mom..." I kissed her cheek as I pushed past her. "I won't be back till late."

"Well, let me know if you need me to come get you," she said, holding the door open, one hand on her hip. "If anything makes you feel uncomfortable—if you feel unsafe at all—just call me, okay? Will Jax be there? Do you know anyone at the party?"

"No," I said. "He won't be there. And I have a bunch of classes with people who are going—I'll be fine."

"Okay. Well, you know to call Jax or me if there's any trouble."

As Mom closed the door, I popped the vial in my mouth. At the start of her career, Amelia created a pouch for the poison—a small vial, not much larger than a mustard seed—that can be transferred through saliva without the victim's knowledge. They swallow it and gastric acids break it. It wasn't a popular method within the syndicate—men and women alike had tried it, but most found it too personal. Jax was one of those not in favor of it. Amelia used it as her default. I only wished it was more comfortable; as we drove to Ray's party, the vial felt as big as a marble laying there, though it could only have been a centimeter in diameter. I didn't like it. I tossed it around my mouth. As I knocked the vial around, it landed at the back of my tongue, tilting toward my throat. I sat forward, tucked the poison back by my frenulum, and hoped Tristan couldn't hear my heart pounding. A panic attack would have been far from stealthy.

When we got there, Tristan leaned in and I closed the gap, pressing my lips to his. He tried that sooner than I had planned for, but I just had to get a few beers in him faster to disguise the kill. His breath smelled like the burger he probably had for dinner, and there might have even been some pieces left in there. I pushed him off before his tongue roamed any further.

"Are we heading in or what?" I asked Tristan, selling it with a smile.

Lay low after the kill. Then, report to your squadron. You must not contact anyone until your group has been debriefed.

"And then my cat ran away." Amelia's voice carried down the hallway of her two-story colonial, four blocks from the party. "I think he was eaten by coyotes."

I opened the door to her bedroom, which was always too pink and frilly for whatever mood I was in, and she pulled me against her before I could even cross the threshold, my arms hanging limp at my sides. "Lea, you're here! You did it!" she said, her words muffled against my shoulder. Something told me that Jax—I could see him sprawled out on her bed, eyes shut, hands clasped on his stomach—would have been even more grateful for my appearance.

"There you are, killer," he said, a smile ticking up at the corner of his lips.

"So, what'd you think?" Amelia asked. "Oh my God, you did smudge your lipstick. I should've given you some so you could reapply. Were you there when the cops came?"

"I transferred the poison in the car before we even walked into the party," I said, recalling my lesson earlier that month on how to relay information according to protocol. "I watched from the window but left before any commotion." Before he collapsed on Ray's kitchen counter, his eighth beer crashing on the marbled floor. Before Tara Gilroy could get him over to the sink while her sister Lisa called 911; he kept vomiting, and his eyes rolled back. I felt like I was going to vomit, too.

"Smart. Nice. Way to go." Amelia hugged me again, but it just felt like she was squeezing my stomach too hard. "This is huge. I'm so excited for you. Well, Jax, you got anything to add?"

"Congrats. You managed to not get yourself extracted," he muttered. "You'll live to get assigned another victim. Good for you."

"Ignore him. He's already over it," Amelia interjected, narrowing her eyes. "He's just jealous. God, Lea, you *seriously* smudged your lipstick." She dabbed at my lips. "Let me go get some more."

The hint of a smile playing on Jax's lips had disappeared. His eyes were trained on the ceiling, and he ran a hand through his dirty blond hair. Now that the wrestling season was almost finished, his hair was getting shaggy. I liked it better that way.

"So...how'd regionals go yesterday?" I asked him, sitting down on the bed at his feet. It was like all my organs sank with me. I picked at the edge of the lace comforter and ran my finger around some holes in the pattern.

"We went 2-2. We beat Lincoln 35-12 and Packard 37-18. But we lost to Washington and Rice... Lea, you look like you're going white. Are you okay?" He sat up, but I drew back as Amelia approached the bed.

"Be a little considerate if you're going to make out—I am in the room, you know. *My* room. Should I not give you the lipstick then?" she teased.

I shook my head before standing up, hoping Amelia couldn't see me blush. She didn't need more fodder for her tired third-wheel jokes. "I think I'm just going to head out," I said. Training warned you of emotional side effects. They mentioned guilt, shame, even exhilaration. I just felt sick.

When I went to sleep, I saw him. Tristan. I woke up at two in the morning, beads of sweat on my forehead, my whole body damp, my sheets cold. I was shaking. He was there in my dream. His eyes were black, his cheeks hollow. He was standing in my doorway. Just standing there. He looked gray. I couldn't go back to sleep.

"I got a call from the school," my mom told me when we sat down to dinner at our kitchen island the following evening. "They said you missed homeroom and first period."

I cut a chunk of chicken off and stuffed it in my mouth, proceeding to drag my fork around the plate, tracing the red swirl that led to the center, anything that prolonged my excuses. "I just had a rough night. I'm sorry. I fell asleep really late."

"I hope you won't be missing work, too," she said.

"I'm not working at Gino's until Saturday, Mom."

"Still, I can't let you go to any more parties," she said, tipping back her wine glass. On nights that she worked late shifts at the hospital, she only poured herself a small amount—"just enough," she used to say. "I don't want this to become a pattern. And I definitely don't want you going to any more parties where there's going to be drinking. I know what happened at the party! I know that's why you missed school! When were you going to tell me? Hm?"

I wondered if it was a rookie move, letting my mom know that I went to the party with Tristan. Amelia probably wouldn't approve. It would have been just as easy to tell her I was there with someone else. I just hoped it wouldn't get traced back to me. No one at the party knew I was his date, but my mom did. Was that enough?

"Mom, I wasn't there when it happened... I left early," I muttered. "I just had a bad night. I don't know what to tell you." I wouldn't make eye contact with her. "No need to worry about me."

"I don't want to have to worry about you, that's the thing," she continued, though I wished the conversation had ended there. "But some things are beyond my control... You know, when I talked to the school, they suggested counseling—"

"That's enough, Mom! I'm fine. Okay?"

"No, sweetheart, you'll hear me out," she said. "They offered counseling to everyone who knew this kid, and maybe you should look into it. You went on a date with him. In the attic, I still have the notes you kept from him in elementary school—you saved the valentine he gave you!"

It was a small, rectangular valentine's card, with a hole in the center for a cheap lollipop—I ate that and kept the card. I thought I was so special when he gave it to me, but everyone in the class got the same slip of paper, and maybe even the same flavored lollipop.

"Counseling might be something to think about," she sighed, breaking me from my memory. "Just talking to someone might help." She was right about that—but I wasn't going to talk to a counselor. Amelia never talked about her kills; that was one way to handle it. I thought Jax might be more open. "All right, honey, I'm leaving in five." She rose from her stool. "Think you can take care of all this?"

Jax drove to my house after his last wrestling practice of the season let out, not long after my mom left. When he got to the kitchen, he slid his racer jacket off, tossing it across the island. He scooped up the plates and glasses we'd used and walked over to the sink.

"I don't know what to do," I said. Jax turned the faucet on and washed the first plate. "I'm not sleeping," I muttered, pacing around the island. "And my mom thinks it's because I've been traumatized by a high school party where some kid died from drinking too much." When I reached the sink, Jax shoved a plate in my hands, throwing a towel at me as I paced away. "She's probably more scared about the drinking than the death, though, knowing her."

"Okay, relax," he interjected, churning out the other plate and one of the glasses. "Dry those. Obviously, your mom doesn't suspect anything, and you can't let her. You can't let her know."

I dropped off the dried dish and scooped up the remaining plate. “You *know* I’m well aware of that.” When I returned to the sink, the faucet was off, and he was glaring at me. I paused at the counter. He handed me the second glass.

“Just keep drying,” he said. “And don’t sound so bitter.”

“I’m not bitter,” I said, twisting the towel in my hands. “But, you know, I did just kill someone the other day, so excuse me if I’m not grateful for my job. I can’t *sleep*, Jax! I saw him last night! The last nightmare I had before that was about getting sick from someone else using my toothbrush! I can’t handle this!”

“I know, Lea!” he shouted. I quit pacing, my towel still inside the glass. “I know. I wish training better prepared us for it. They should tell you that you could be up as long as two, three nights in a row. That you’ll be missing school. That you’ll steal the liquor hidden away in your dad’s back room, and he hasn’t figured it out yet but, soon, enough of it will be missing that he’ll notice, because he’s drinking it too. Because you killed his only other son and it’s ruined him. What are you supposed to do when your dad finds out, huh? They keep assigning you people to kill so you have to keep drinking it all!”

“Oh my God, Jax...” I left the glass on the island and walked up to him. He was slouched in front of the counter. “I didn’t know that’s how you...dealt with it.” I shook my head. I wondered if it wouldn’t be long before I ended up that way too.

“I used to keep a black book,” he said. “I thought, if I ever needed to think about what I was doing, I just wanted to see names, not people. I started with Nia Rodriguez, an ambassador’s daughter; Amy Hartnett, the wife of Senator Billy Hartnett; but...I stopped after Jeff. He wasn’t a name. None of them were. Even still, I can’t sleep. I try not to think about them so I won’t have those dreams but...it doesn’t work. Training doesn’t teach you how to cope with it. Even if you follow protocol and you leave when you’re supposed to—even if you don’t watch your victim shake and convulse and die right in front of you—you’re still killing them. You know you’re killing them because that’s what you’ve been assigned to do. That’s what they’re forcing you to do. That’s how they roped me in—they picked me out of the crowd at a wrestling match. And I’m pretty sure Amelia helped them. I joined not long after.”

“Well, I never had a choice,” I said. I wanted to press my face into the towel. I wanted to scream into it. “You never let me choose!”

I wondered if he felt bad. After he killed Jeff, he came to me. He was crying, and for the first fifteen minutes, I couldn’t decipher a single thing he was saying. Still, he told me everything. He told me about them, about how they made him do it, and I didn’t understand at the time. After that, I

had to join, because no one outside the syndicate could know; Jax got me in. I told myself that maybe he thought he was helping me—that he was saving me from them and doing the right thing. Maybe he thought it was what he had to do, and maybe that's not so bad.

"God, this is sick," he groaned, running a hand through his hair. "Lea, you have to listen to me: They're not training you. They're controlling you—with fear, with a loyalty kill, with the threat that they'll kill you too... You just don't know it yet because they won't teach you that in training. But that's the only thing you need to know."

After Jax left, I laid in bed, dreading the moment my body gave in to sleep. When I finally succumbed, Tristan was there again, soaking wet and standing above my bed screaming. I awoke trembling, curled on my side, eyes wide open. I saw his outline in the dark, around my room, in the doorway. I pulled my knees to my forehead and pressed my palms to the sockets of my eyes and cried. I couldn't take it.

I just wanted to sleep.

Always check the kill. Even if you've witnessed the death, you can never be too sure. Removing any part of the body for evidence is too suspicious; attending the funeral of the victim is the best option. Another member of the assigned squadron goes to the service to keep the killer's cover.

Jax shrugged a white dress shirt over his head. He never unbuttoned it, and it was the only one I ever saw him wear. Three buttons pulled at the seam, leaving small gaps that exposed faint scars beneath. He pushed his shoulders forward; this sealed his shirt, but he couldn't stay like that through the entire funeral.

"How long have you had that thing?" I asked.

Jax sifted through hangers in his closet. "Um, I don't know, since my first funeral? Two years maybe."

"You left it on the desk," I said, holding up his suit jacket. "Seriously, you should consider investing in a new shirt. Just consider it. Or maybe you don't know how to properly wash it."

"It doesn't matter. I'm not going to need it much longer."

"Are you...getting extracted? What did you—?"

"I want out."

A knock sounded from the hallway.

"Hi, Lea," his mother said when she entered the room, dressed in a knee-skimming pencil skirt and a purple blouse with frills at the shoulders. Her rouged cheeks always looked even rounder when she smiled, and her

eyes squinted into lines. It made her seem so cheery, but her voice sounded flat. The bags beneath her eyes looked even more swollen than usual. “Nice to see you.”

“You too, Mrs. Hale.”

“Jax didn’t tell me if you were staying for dinner. I’m making *au jus*, if you’re interested. I don’t know when your mom wants you back. Are you going to that funeral tonight, too?”

I looked at Jax, who had folded his arms. “It’s up to you.”

“Oh, I’m not going tonight, but sure, I’ll stay. Mom’s probably heating up leftovers, anyway.”

“Great. I’m going to change and get started soon. Dinner should be ready in an hour,” she said, slowly pulling the door closed. “It’s always nice seeing that extra seat filled.”

When she left, I hopped up on the desk. “I’m pretty sure she says that *every* time I stay,” I said, turning to Jax. “I love your mom and all, but it’s so morbid! I don’t just want to fill Jeff’s chair!”

Jax cast his eyes to the gray-blue carpet.

“Oh, sorry, I didn’t mean...”

He shook his head. “Don’t worry about it.”

“You know it’s a terrible idea to leave, right? Training teaches you to remain with the syndicate as long as they employ you. Defecting will result in extraction. You know that.”

“Yeah, and what happens when they’re no longer interested in employing you? They’re just going to ‘extract’ you no matter what. *Training* isn’t telling you everything. Think about it... Who drops those files off to us? Don’t you want to know? It could be my Trig teacher, for God’s sake; I don’t know. What kind of agent decides who we’re going to kill that week, huh? They don’t teach you that in training. I’m tired of not knowing. I’m tired of them controlling us. After today, I’m done.”

Targets are distributed to the killer with one week to do the job. They are typically members of the opposite sex or someone close to the killer—the former allows for myriad opportunities to get near the victim, while the latter allows the victim to suspend suspicions, as well as supplying plausible opportunities for contact.

“I wonder if they have any sage,” Amelia said, taking up a booth with a perfect view of some hippie shop across the way from the pizzeria. Her dark brown hair was pulled back into a high ponytail, her makeup as flawless as ever. “It’s good. It’s a cleanser.”

"I didn't call you here for that," I said, tapping my fingernails against the laminated menu pressed tightly against my chest.

"Do I get to eat for free?" she asked. Amelia grabbed the menu and flipped through. When she got to the children's section, she found the crisp sheets of paper I had pulled from the manila file.

"I got it as I was running here this morning. I didn't think it could wait."

I knew most of the information in the file and had memorized the rest. Jackson Hale. Male. Eighteen. Senior at Razorback High School. College applications submitted to Princeton, Rutgers, and NYU. Height: Six feet. Weight: One-hundred sixty-two pounds. Parents: Jeffrey and Rosa Hale. Siblings: Mary Hale; Jeffrey Hale, Junior, deceased.

Jax was, by the syndicate's standards, the perfect target.

"Well, this sucks," Amelia said. "Hazards of the job, I guess."

"I knew there was something wrong with him, and then the other day he started talking about getting out—and now they're extracting him. And I have to be the one to carry it out! God, these targets are sick," I spat.

"That's what I thought when I was assigned Mammy," she said, her eyes still glossing over the file. That was her loyalty kill. I wondered if Jax was mine.

I sat down in the booth across from her, dragging my hands along the sides of my head. "Amelia, what am I supposed to do?"

"Well, just how much do you fear the syndicate?" she asked, placing the menu down and pointing at a slice of Greek pizza. "To go, please."

Extraction will result from failure to eliminate the intended target, abuse of information, homicide of one's squadron, treacherous behavior, and disregard of proper conduct. The target will be treated like any other—kill quickly; kill without mercy.

I wasn't surprised to see Jax at school the following day; he probably thought the syndicate wouldn't send a killer to take him out with so many other people swarming around. He was right: I wouldn't think to carry out the kill in between classes—but I made sure to corner him the second he moved to open the driver's-side door to his Grand Am.

"I need a ride home." I slid in between him and the handle. "My mom can't pick me up today so...can you take me?"

"That's not going to happen."

"Well...you know I can't exactly drive myself."

"That's right," he said with a laugh. "Killer still can't drive. Classic."

"Jax, what's your problem?" I scowled. "I'm getting there. Amelia's been teaching me on the sly."

"Do I need to point out your first mistake?"

"Oh my God, Jax, just give me a ride!" I folded my arms and kicked my heel up against the car. "I'm not going anywhere. And acting like this isn't going to help your case."

He grabbed the handle anyway, his forearm pressed against the curve of my back, his face inches from mine. "You know we're not supposed to be talking at school, right? What's gotten into you?" Killers weren't supposed to associate beyond the realm of a mission or the privacy of their own homes. Any kind of cavorting outside the syndicate could lead to suspicions, connections... Things that could get us discovered.

"Technically, it's after school," I joked. "Besides, you've already managed to get yourself extracted, so what's the harm?"

"You're not thinking of yourself in this," he said, his breath tickling my cheek. "I could get you killed."

"I know, but I need a ride—just this once," I said. "We've always got each other's backs, right?"

"In a life or death situation. That was the protocol. *Was*."

"This could be life or death."

"Go get a ride from someone else, Lea. I'm not required to do that anymore." He pulled the door handle, but I slammed it shut.

"Jax, what's the problem? When did you stop being my friend too? Just this once. I promise."

"All right," he sighed. "Someone's more likely to see you standing here than sitting in the passenger seat so just...get in."

"Are you scared?"

Until I asked, the ride had been mostly silent. His eyes kept flicking to his rear-view mirror. Amelia had delivered a new poison to me early in the morning. It would mimic a cardiac arrest. The vial felt more comfortable than it had the first time around. It was tucked safely beneath my tongue. I could feel it. I just had to transfer it.

I looked over at him, but his eyes were on the road, his neck craning to check his blind spot, his left foot tapping, his eyes back in the rear-view mirror. I thought about kissing him. I was going to kiss him because I wanted to. Because I thought I wouldn't get another chance to. The last time we kissed I was seven, and he was eight, and we had accidentally run into each other during coed soccer practice. Our teeth crashed together, and I didn't kiss anyone again until I was twelve because it hurt so much.

"Oh, Jax, my house is right here," I said, jumping up a little too quickly. "You always drive past it. Come on, you were just here."

"You're right," he said with a laugh. "I don't know why."

"Clearly you need to spend more time at my house than I do at yours." I caught his eye and smiled.

He put the car in park but didn't unlock the doors. It was a familiar sight, seeing him look over, lean in a bit closer. I just had to close the gap. I felt for the vial, but my stomach lurched. I couldn't do it. I thought, if I killed him, I'd dream about him forever, his eyes black as he stared at me. As he screamed at me.

"Why did you defect?" I asked. He leaned back in his seat. "You knew they were just going to extract you so...why?"

"Because of you—because of what they did to you. We grew up together, but... They've messed you up and...you've changed. I mean, Lea, you wouldn't even eat cookie dough off a baking sheet as a kid because you weren't supposed to." His face twisted in anger. "It's my fault, but they got a hold of you... I thought I could handle what I was doing, but when they brought you down too...I wanted out."

Because of me. "Jax, I'm still—"

"You're not the same, Lea. And you don't believe that. I know you don't." He caressed my cheek before turning his attention to my hair, running a finger along one of the curls and sighing. He'd never touched my hair before. I hoped it wasn't too frizzy. "Look, Lea...I'm leaving tomorrow. It's not safe here. You can come with me."

I could go with him. I could get out too.

If the killer should ever become the target, hide in plain sight. Hide in public. Hide where there are witnesses.

"You know, this probably isn't the time, but I hate trains."

Jax took my hand and led me on board; I was shaking, and my palm was probably sweaty. "And why is that?" he asked, handing me my bags when we sat down. "Is it because you're not in control of your own fate?"

"Something like that." That had to have been part of it. Killing Tristan unnerved me, but there was still something in the way I controlled his life—that I could have ended it any time I chose. I fancied myself the kiss of death in that moment. However, there was no one on board the train whose life I could control to make myself feel better; I couldn't even control my own.

I wasn't able to talk for the first few minutes the train was in motion. When the silence became too heavy, Jax sighed loudly.

"Why are you so quiet, Lea? Are you nervous?"

Someone who wasn't nervous would have said something witty. Or they would have just been honest.

"Yes."

But that didn't mean he could know the truth.

"You must be nervous, too, though," I said. "It's not like you're being any chattier."

He leaned in close and laughed. "Being free...it's a weird feeling. I spent so long wondering what would happen if we got caught, if I didn't do my job, what if, what then... Didn't you wonder what would have happened if someone caught us?"

"I tried not to. I thought it would've been worse to not eliminate the target."

"I don't think so. Well, clearly," he said, and his laugh sounded hoarse.

"Guess I feared the syndicate more than you did."

I kissed him. It tickled when his palm grazed my cheek, the tips of his fingers brushing the top of my ear and twirling loose strands of hair. I kissed him because maybe I thought that I needed a trademark, like the greats. Prickles rushed up my spine, like he was running his hands along my whole back. I kissed him because he should have known better. There, on the train, I finally knew what it was like to kiss Jax, and it was nothing like on the soccer field. His lips were wet, and his fingers moved to the nape of my neck. It didn't last long. It was unfair, like how short the sunset is compared to the dark.

Car Rides With You

Rachel Martinelli

I find the low hum of your car's engine to be a strange kind of sedative, lulling me to sleep even as my neck and back rebel against the discomfort of resting upright. It takes me to that place where paint-coated marbles roll behind my eyelids, spattering vivid reds and purples with each bump in the road, where I can hear your chest rise and fall to the beat of whatever song comes up on the playlist, and the faint brush of your hand against my thigh is the only physical connection between us.

As you drive us to the Outer Banks, a part of me longs to remain in this world where the distance between you and I is as tangible as the distance between where we were and where we're going. When I wake from this state and see your calm profile resting in the corner of my eye, I stay silent and close my lids once more because I sleep more comfortably in your car than in your bed.

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Victoria Reynolds is a senior at Gettysburg College. She is an English major with a Writing Concentration, and is an Italian Studies Minor. She is from Flourtown, Pennsylvania. She has a bad habit of collecting delicious teas and never drinking them.

Erica Schaumberg is part of the 2018 class at Gettysburg College. She was born and raised in Washington, New Jersey. Her earliest memories usually include having a camera in her hands. Erica credits her father for inspiring her to look beyond the window pane and enjoy nature to the fullest. Erica believes photography captures more than a moment, but a memory that can be experienced for generations. Photos make us remember who we were and where we have come from. Erica believes that it is important to photograph nature in order to preserve it for future generations.

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Allison Taylor is a member of the Gettysburg College class of 2014, and a first-year graduate student at Fairleigh Dickinson University. She is pursuing a Master of Fine Arts degree in creative writing, with a concentration in poetry, and frequently reads submissions for The Literary Review journal.