

The Mari's Field Journal



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For My Father; Pike Road, Alabama

Madison King

I am told I smell like my father. Like the shade of trees
that lean sideways.

Stagnant water that sucks at the oxygen. Fat mosquitoes at
the bank.

Trapped air bubbles that rise to the surface, shift
the lilies, breathe into the stillness of the pond.

Threat of snakes in the high grass.

New rubber of his unused fishing lures; ducks
engorge themselves on the rays of light delicately

filtered by leaves.
Wide-brimmed sunhat with brittle, fractured straw.
Careful stepping.

Hair thins from the top of his sweaty head. Joints creak
when he rises from the weeds. Our blue eyes gray, press
back into his wrinkles. The orange sun cuts across it all.

We are both trying to fill in the gaps.



For Allison

Liz Adair

The cosmos was a girl
until stars laced her veins and the world pulled
her apart into multitudes
of undiscovered
ultraviolet. *We* shredded skin bit by trembling
bit, *we* made her our map
to the universe.

We turned her into fleshy
wires and malformed
shadows. *We* drank down her light
and burned her in the untouchable,
flickering heat of the dark. *We* ate her up like
spun sugar and spat
her out like diluted poison.

We simmered her bright-eyes
until they became pits
of tar. *We* forged this shell of light
in the floodwaters of the destructive ether—
We made the ravaging girl,
we killed a celestial ember to make a warring
woman.



Chloritoid | Blair Morrison

Photograph, mineral thin section taken through a petrographic microscope

The Bay of Sharks

Grace Turner

Bounding through the weeds, a narrow-eyed lion stretches his legs and enjoys the feel of warm air blowing through his mane. The sun feels warm on his back and reflects a brilliant gold so bright that it appears he has a halo. The other animals cower in awe and fear, transfixed by this creature’s nobility.

...Yo soy un hombre sincero
De donde crece la palma
Yo soy un hombre sincero
De donde crece la palma
Y antes de morirme quiero
Echar mis versos del alma...

Brass squeals, and the lion sits up from his dozing rock in a snap, eyes alert. The sound of saxophones and trumpets tooting their tune fills his ears, and the lion sighs as he realizes it is only the pigs playing their afternoon symphony. They do this everyday, you see, and the lion should be used to these sounds by now, as he has been in captivity for a long time. Four sides of fencing separate him from the tropical surroundings. One side draws the line between him and the soulful swine; the other, from an ancient-so it is said-tortoise, who, in all ways, is exhaustingly slow. Many of the animals whisper that she suffers from the “old folks’ mind.” A guard appears at the lion’s gate and dumps the daily slop like clockwork. The days mostly all run the same way, and the lion is keenly aware of the zoo’s schedule. At least today he doesn’t have to endure the squawking visitors. It is Sunday, the day of dance and drink. The guards at least seem to think so. On this night, they will drown themselves in *planchau*, and one will manage to stumble a loop by their barracks at the start of every hour. The lion retreats onto his rock and continues his *siesta* as his tail flicks to the sounds emanating from the soulful swine.

Guantanamera, guajira Guantanamera
Guantanamera, guajira Guantanamera...

A drunken guard walks by the lion’s front gate and slumps down into the dirt. The lion comes forward, his mane glowing under the moonlight, his tail swaying with each step. The guard looks up and begs the angelic monster to spare his life. The lion smirks at the dimwit, who must think he is some sort of god. He tells the drunk that if he slides the key under the gate, he will indeed be spared, but if not, *las cucarachas* will plague the island for eternity. The key to freedom slides under the fence, and the lion knows he must act quickly. He goes to the soulful swine and promises music-makers that exist outside the zoo on the beach, ones they had never even imagined. Merry music and dancing would be life for eternity, and nothing could harm them. The soulful swine finally agree. The lion goes to the ancient tortoise. He excitedly exclaims that if the tortoise only makes it to the coast, she will be reunited with those of yore. They’re waiting for her, he proclaims, with a toast! The tortoise says okay. And off the freed go to the bay, soulful swine singing along the way.

Con los pobres de la tierra
Quiero yo mi suerte echar
Con los pobres de la tierra

Quiero yo mi suerte echar
El arroyo de la sierra
Me complace más que el mar!

The animals are content with their newfound freedom for a while, and they enjoy the change of scenery. But everything changes. A most treacherous storm wages war on the island, the wind howling, waves crashing, lightning striking, thunder roaring, rain spraying, the poor animals’ measly shelters bend under the elements. Another day, *las cucarachas* swarm the air they breathe and cling to their bodies. Then the animals find themselves in a famine. For seven days and seven nights it goes on like this. They begin to hear whispers from the bay.

Muerte
Muerte
Muerte

The flute-like voices get louder, and the animals become aware of what they must do. They think they are being punished for following their leader and realize all of the lion’s promises were empty. They are angry. Of all animals, the tortoise understands the spirits and hatches a plan to kill their corrupt leader. They will drip drops of blood into the bay while he swims, drawing the shovel-nosed sharks to the watering hole. The sharks don’t usually occupy the bay, but the scent of blood will surely entice them. And it does, as the scavengers make a beeline for their prey. The animals close their eyes and cover their ears as the mighty lion is torn and devoured. The lion was both their enemy and their brother.

Mi verso es de un verde claro
Y de un carmín encendido
Mi verso es de un verde claro
Y de un carmín encendido
Mi verso es un ciervo herido
Que busca en el monte amparo

The lion sits up and roars. He is damp from sweat and issues a breath of relief when he realizes his true surroundings. And bed, he thought. Bed is my friend. Just bed, he thought. Bed will be a great thing. It is easy when you are beaten, he thought. He never knew how easy it was. And what beat you, he thought.

The Dimension of Our Geographies

Madison King

I pin my hope to maps
like a bat or a Christ
pinned to its own fate.

Eyes move laterally in the first dimension.
Lust moves cardinally in the second dimension.
Bodies splintered by the third dimension.



Little Princesszen | Jasmine Jones
Photograph, silver gelatin print, sepia tone



Life | Alex Cruz
Photograph

Blackberry Winter

Samuel Johnson

It's cold for late April
It must know you're leaving
Blackberry winter always sneaks up
thinking it's my favorite season

It feels like November
here on the cusp of summer
and I'm always trying to warm up
but I see the darkest color

Funny how the cold
has found us in this place
all the time that we were warm
we thought that we were safe

So I built myself a fortress
to escape from all the ghosts
but now I see him in the mirror
that one that haunts me most

There are words still left
and I know I should have spoke
but soon some sudden solitude
came in with all this cold

Goodbyes on Thursdays
always made for bad weekends
but I swear I will get my strength up
when all of my weak ends

I'm Manic, Depressive, In and Out of Love

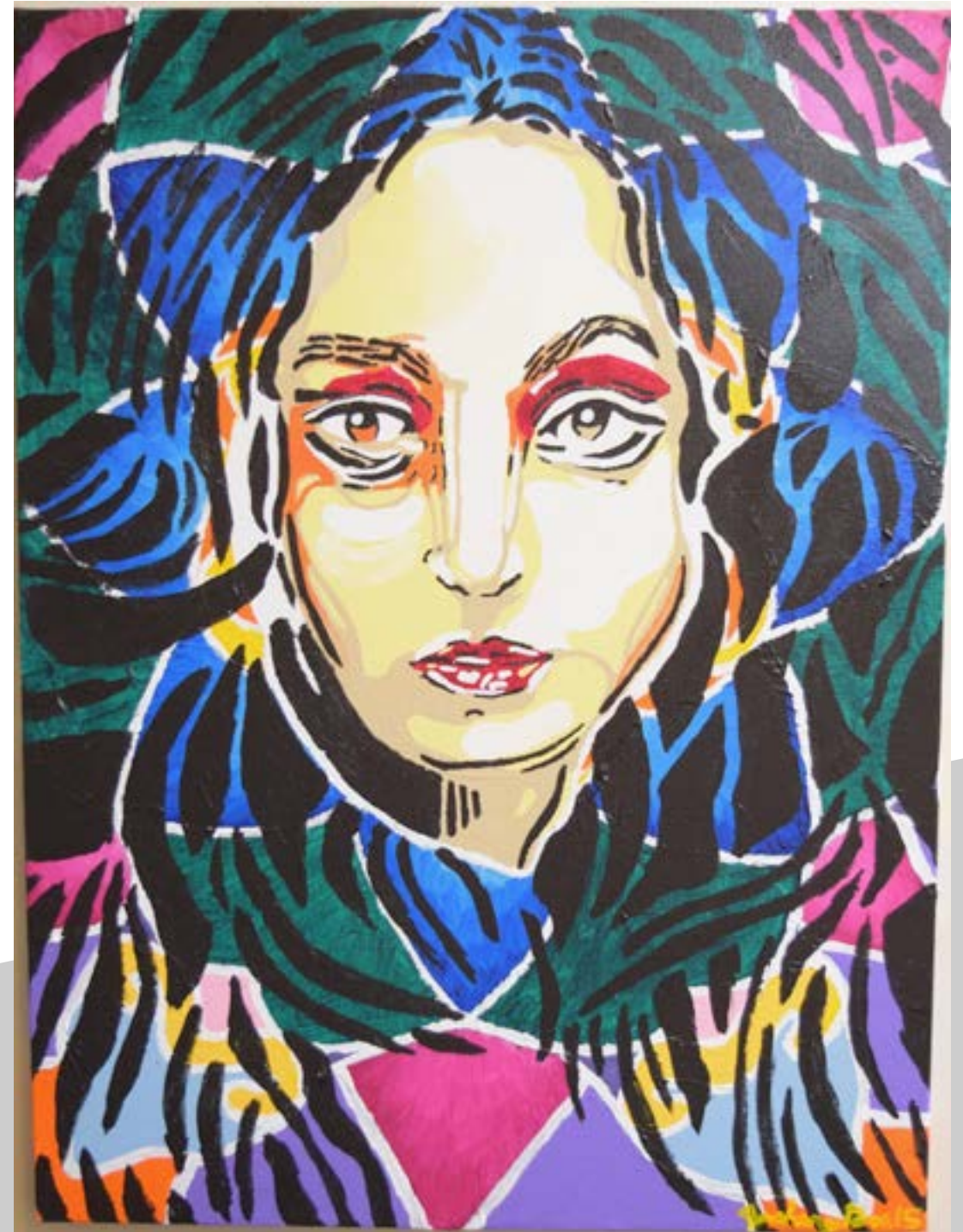
David Swayne

the smell of lavender and sweat
reminds me of the past love I let
lips dry and eyes wet
the most hateful love I've ever met

you are still yet
a most predictable riddle I don't get
even now after the love's sun set
the most loving hate I've never met

i am wealthy also with debt
also free also trapped in net
also empty also full basket
all so proud all with regret

the amnesia on my mind beset
cannot fight the imprinting threat
you'll always be a jagged silhouette
of a faded memory I'll never forget



Crazed | Zachary Grove
Painting, acrylic on canvas

Here, It Beckons

Marc Dickenson

To and fro...

A crab passes to and fro only a few feet from the tide. Behind the beast can be seen the marks left by seemingly random transit.

Left and right...

Like the running of a stream, or the falling of rain, or the blowing of the wind, the crab's behavior does not seem to be directed by any higher being. A few steps to the right, a few steps to the left. The meandering jewel approaches the tide but never meets it. The sea calls out to it, stretches its arms, begs for company, yet the crab continues its tap-dance.

Here and there...

In the distance, another beast, indistinguishable from our protagonist but for a slightly crooked left claw. The creature yonder mirrors the creature here. Or, what can be said of a "here" that exists neither in any particular time nor in any specific location. Here and there, an identical dance; here and there, a frustrated sea.

Back and forth...

Quickly, each beast approaches the other. But, "Why so swift in a forward direction?" cries the sea. "Why not to the side a fair score, for I swear my consumption will allow you to be enveloped in a satisfaction persistent not in the day but evermore?" And onwards crawl the crabs, back and forth, ignoring their beckoner, seemingly preferring the ephemeral marks of their legs on the sand to the temptation set forth by the sea.

And so Man advances towards none other than himself. With all of his technology, with all of his art, with all of his passion, he expedites no process other than the return to the conditions of his ancestors. Man refuses to accept that he approaches himself in his primitive state. He dips his feet in ponds and believes himself to live forever for the ripples he has produced yet shies away from that action which can be the only one taken to separate himself from both his physical body and from the anchor weighing down that which he calls his soul. He does not seem to truly understand the option before him, though he may indulge in its thought during moments of despair. Otherwise, Man is anchored most to his humanity when he feels the most fulfilled. At his best on Earth, he shies away from the consummation of his inevitable fate, his absorption into the sea, in favor of sand.



Come at Me, Bro! | Alex Cruz
Photograph

Catherine From *Basic Instinct* Watches Waves and I Watch Netflix

Preston Eagan

And I am jealous of your calm
You smoke a cigarette through sirens
There is art to the way smoke leaves your lips

I want to be you, but I don't understand you.
You have money and can write
You have a degree in psychology and literature
You befriend convicted killers
You harvest people for your novels

I love the way you walk through your house
You are always barefooted on mahogany
You say *I don't make any rules,*
I go with the flow

You play games with people
You say *Games are fun*
Sometimes I think you love me
But I can't really tell

Maybe I don't love you
Maybe it's just your calm



No Worries | Sarah Westmoreland
Photograph

“The _____”

Maura Lyons

“Why me?” said the _____.

“Because you’re a _____.”

“But I never asked to be a _____; that’s just how I was born”

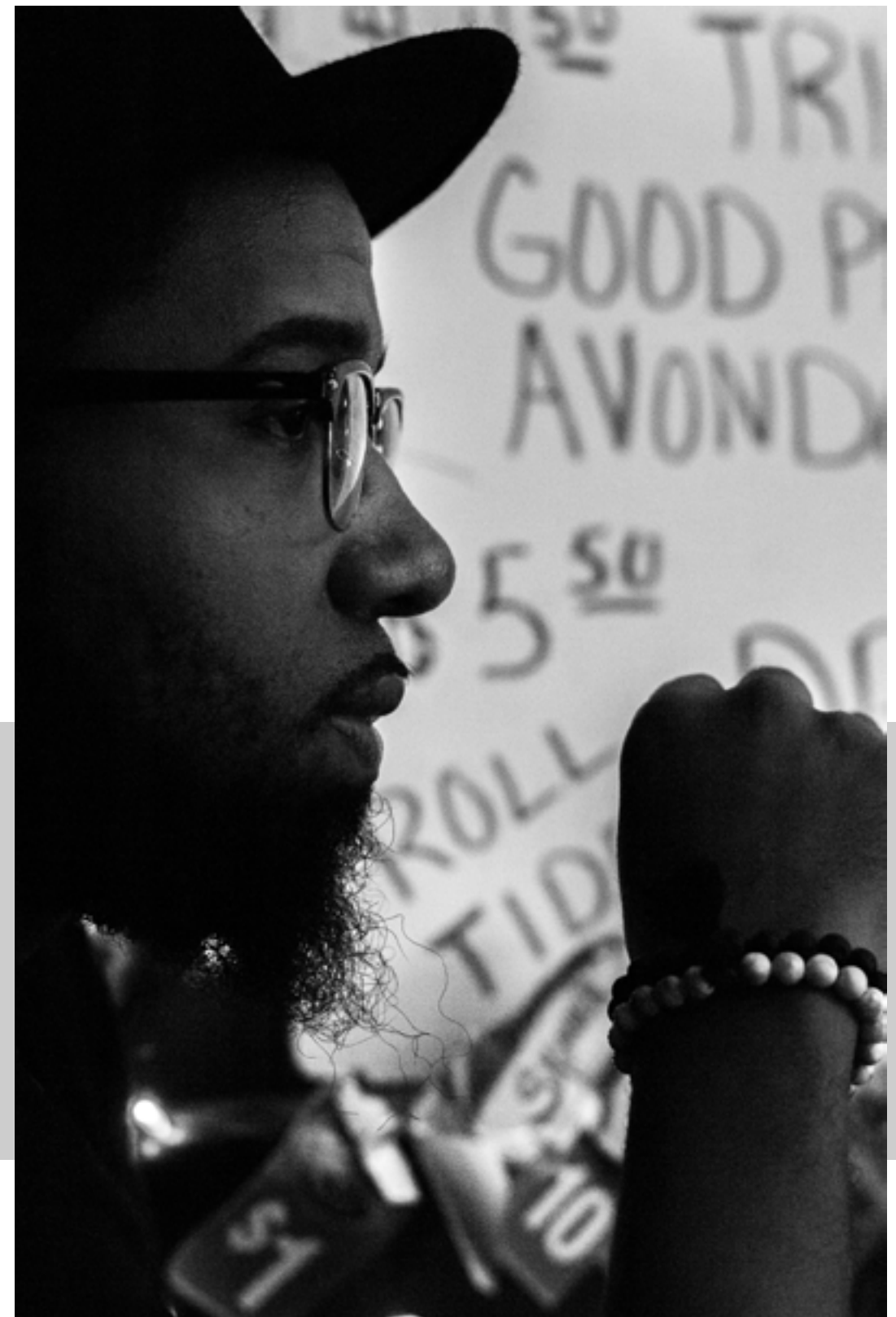
“I didn’t ask to be born this way either.”

“So you and I are the same?” asked the _____.

The man with the gun said nothing.

“So that’s why I’m going to die?”

“Yes, because you’re an _____”



Slanguage | Alex Cruz
Photograph

The Brewers

Lauren Zecha



Bryce Hospital | Callie Short

“Do what you did the other time,” I say. “Less, even. If you wanted to just – hang around up there, occupy the space, that would be such a help.”

“Help?” she says, drifting. But she’s always drifting. Drifts over past the brochure table and the fake ferns, hovers at the edge of the Brewer Family History Wall. One wrist falls near 1980-1989: OUR PRIME. Her hair grazes THE 90S: A NEW ERA.

“Remember talking about it?” I consult the legal pad: *prep chowder, Rm 2 blankets, Rm 2 J., bank appoi*, at which point every pen in the house had burst. “It’s so easy, Jess. You are the pro of the pros.”

“So, so, so, so, so, so easy,” she says. “Jess.”

I pull out the Stress Sphere and gnarl my fingers into it and set the Stress Sphere down.

She points her nose to the window and moves. Her mouth hangs always a little open now, so that you can see the ridges in her front teeth, glimmering. “I was in the back, and it was shady cold and the air in my face, they were in the front looking at me, I felt too big, my hands hurt, I was sick, and the sick came out, and I wasn’t moving anymore. And it was hot.”

Past the curtains is a lot of weak white sky. “Sure, Jess.”

“Sure. Seven years old. Sure.”

“I bet. Yeah.”

“But I’m not there?”

I say, “Well.”

She is making her low sound. I slide the front curtains together, and when they pull back apart, like a seam ripping, I go. I line up the snow globes. I spray the doilies with women’s deodorant. I address three envelopes and let her float through my desk. The first thing I remember is rubbing our mother’s fingernails to fall asleep, gazing out from her lap in the Room Three rocker, so now I hold the Stress Sphere and trace circles over my thumb, and it staves off the teeth-grinding, staves off the *hey, did you ever figure out that you’re dead*.

Later, I find her in the back pantry. She loves the pantry, has to be coaxed out.

She is sprawled a few feet off the ground, eyes open to the linoleum. “Hey,” I say. A bag of rice lurches to the center of the floor.

“Lights are out in Room Two. So. I’m thinking I should send you up in a bit. You know how it goes.”

Her sound thrums and stutters and then clicks off. The smell is like bad bread.

“Maybe knock some smaller stuff around,” I tell her, because this looks like one of her more lucid moments, her cow-eyed silent spells. “Get into it? I mean, if you want to, or can—don’t get too close to their faces—”

“Damp,” she says. “Dark when I look up and the water coming out and down on me, my feet in the dirt, I feel bright, my purple coat, standing up, am I there?”

I watch her toes curl and uncurl. I look at her hair. Jess was Best Dressed once, sophomore year. Touch the Stress Sphere in my pocket.

“This’ll start running off its own steam soon,” I say. “And then we’ll get a nice break.”

I write up a Yelp review. Dustin R. from Tulsa had heard the rumors. Dustin R. could not believe the night he had, did not sleep a wink, recommends Room Two of the Brewer Bed & Breakfast to all regional thrill-seekers, suggests the affordable long-weekend package, deems it couples’ fun for the modern age.

Room Two calls at 1:36 a.m. The man whimpers into the receiver, ten-fifteen seconds, and the woman takes the phone, breathless, kind of laughing. She says they’re more or less fine. She says this place is awfully spooky.

“Leave us a Yelp review,” I say.

I doze until cold wakes me. I flip to check the window, and I see black, its eyes, her eyes, black and wide almost to popping. She comes uncrouched.

“Shit, easy, Jess.”

Like this, I see the slick on her skin, the dust on her tongue.

“Shit shit shit shit shit shit shit,” she says.

Am I a bad man? I open my mouth, can’t bear to smell her. Does this ordeal make me a bad man, necessarily? Are there not mitigating circumstances? I care about my sister. Before I cared about my sister I loved my mother, and my uncles and their father, whose blurry faces I hung in the hallways, and the tape holding up the Brewer Family History Wall is my tape, out of my middle-school pencil box, and still sticky, which must be a metaphor. Jess understood in mostly a silent way. Brought the deposits every week to the bank. “I want to go,” she says. “You make me be here.”

Well. Yes.

“The rot,” she says.

“I have to keep this place *up*,” I say. “It’s what you want. Would want. I figure.”

She is too close, so close my vision goes twitchy and bobbing, and I block it out, block her out, shut my eyes.

“I have to pay for it. I don’t know. I’m trying.”

The sound.

“You were expensive,” I say. “When you went. You know? You think about that? No warning, no—unfair. Listen to me.”

She is tilting. With no sense, or no tethers, like a thing in space or pressed under water. Her hair falls down through my hands, chest. Hangs there.

“You’re dead,” I say. Now I can hear the curtains lift, and the phone shatter, hear the house ring with something new and scorching. “You’re dead,” I say to it. “You’re dead.”



In Awe, with Aim

Steven Scaglione

what can we say
of the giants who stay
in their shackles
watching shadows
in the cave

what do we owe
to the heroes who go
to the limits
to the summits
to the grave

Le R Roman

Maria Gerasikova

In lies your eyes and rise of cosmic times,
The glance of smiles in stolen skies
Propose today?
Impossible my May.
And yet the breakage faces us again...

11.9.16

Steven Scaglione

last night
in New York
there was a woman on the news

she was a woman of color
and of cause
of noble ambitions
and of a momma back home
of dreams
and of glass tears behind those tortoise-shell frames
you see worn by people
who want(ed) to make a difference

five years ago
i would have thought to myself:
why would anyone cry
over Hillary Clinton?

but those five years passed
and I see now
just like I saw
last night
in New York

there was a woman on the news
crying for Jim Obergefell
and for Ahmed Mohamed
for Brooklyn
and for Dearborn
for America
and for the rest of America you don't think about when you think of America



Overcome (50th Anniversary of Bloody Sunday) | Steven Scaglione
Newspaper, posters, printed photos (all submitted by UA students), charcoal, marker on decoupaged canvas

(Predictive Text Poems)

Nick Summers

(#1. Newlyweds)

Coffee shop in
town for work for
me and my
husband has been
a long term relationship
between us we are
going to be the best

(#2. Morning)

Therefore we request

that you have to go back

to the right side
of things

that you have to go back

to the right side
of my life and

that you have to go back

to me

that you have to go back

to the right side of the **bed**
and breakfast at least I know
that the best way to **sleep** in
is the best way to go
to the right side
of my life

(#3. Scheduled maintenance)

We apologize for any
inconvenience
caused by the end of June
to September
to December

to the right
with their customers
find them in the future

to the right side

please
let me **be**
clear about what
we can do
to **you** as
soon as
you are not **sorry**

we missed each and every one of
those days are over
to the right side up to date
with all of your life

(#4. everything I own gets creases)

to get back in touch
with you on Monday
and Wednesday and Friday of
next year I am looking
forward to your **voice**

message via Yahoo messenger which
replaces SMS and uses
your internet connection to
my new heart of
gold and silver
metallic silver
metallic blue
screen of death

(#5. what it takes)

Sometimes it takes a lot
more than one
person to talk
talk soon love mum xx xx

PS if you have any
further questions please
feel free

From what I've read about
it it's been a while since

we last spoke
with my wife and kids
are doing well
as well but
it will take a while

(#6. noise)

noise is gone
now
that I am a little
more about this and
it will not work for you
to be the first one I had

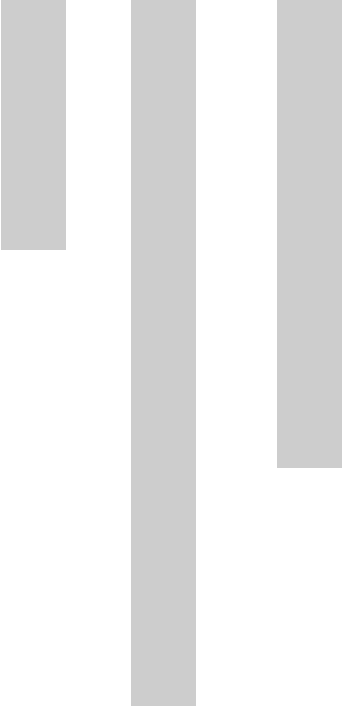
noise is a great day
ahead
of you who don't want this
notification email address

noise is coming
from the airport
on Sunday morning
I will have a great time
in the morning and I
will be a good idea for
the delay but here it
goes against
computer viruses
email programs
that are not
in my case

noise from
engine is
running out
of town and
we can get it
done in time and effort

you put your hand on
her face and neck
cancer is not an issue
for you and the other hand
is a good time and I am a bit
too bad

this ugly as sin
city
state
zip code
cell phone number



gravel beneath him.

He noticed a tear in the seam of his bag and stopped to fix it.

Then he heard noises behind him. Things he couldn't place – like a range of different voices, speaking gibberish and mixing and mingling together. There were also footsteps, but they were not like his. They made soft *pit-pat* noises on the gravel.

Something warm made contact with his back.

“Hello?” said a voice. Female. Human.

So many emotions at once. A human. Alarm? Fear? Run. Don't look back. Dirty. Filthy. Don't touch. Infect you.

He started to run. She dug her feet in and grabbed his arm.

“Let go of me,” he said, panicked.

She shook her head and held on tighter. He made a misstep and slipped. She pinned him to the ground, wrists bound together by her left hand.

She was on top of him. Breathing. He squirmed at the humidity of her breath.

“Don't run,” she ordered.

“I'll call the police,” he choked. He didn't want to breathe in her air. “You're dirty. You're supposed to be in quarantine—”

“Don't do anything,” she said quietly. “Just hold on a moment.”

She pressed the tips of her fingers lightly against his chest plate. He felt it extrude out slightly with her touch. She reached into the crack exposing his sternum and fingered a switch and pushed it down hard. *Click*. Suddenly it felt looser.

This was repeated down his abdomen, until the area between his waist and collarbone felt flimsy and naked. He struggled to free himself, but her grip was incredibly strong. There was muscle in her forearm, hidden beneath discolored skin.

She let go of his arms and, with a great heave, opened up his chest. He looked and saw his innards, slick and glistening. There was flexible hose dripping black and a small bulb sparkling gold and his heart, an engine purring and swelling: *lub-dub, lub-dub, lub-dub*. All of this exposed to the cold air.

He felt very faint, and the night sky swirled and bloated before his eyes. The human was studying his innards with fascination. Not like a predator but with immense curiosity and understanding, as if she were looking at some hidden treasure. He could feel her hands pressing down on his liver, his stomach, his heart.

“Stop,” he croaked. “Stop it.”

He swept his hands around until he found a rock the size of two fists. He took it and struck her on the cheek. It scratched her, and she yelped and fell back. A little blood but nothing more. As soon as she recovered, she scrambled to her feet but by then he had already limped a far distance away, clutching his chest plate, trying to keep everything still in his chest. He limped at an astounding pace before he felt his strength give way and his organs spilled out and he took one look and fainted.

“Dangerous, dangerous people,” his mother chided. In front of him, she placed a plate with tender pot roast and mashed potatoes. “It's good that she didn't go any further than she did.”

Fifty-One Stones still felt queasy. He held the unease in his stomach tightly. “I don't think I have much of an appetite,” he admitted.

She shook her head and ts-ktsk-ed him. She took the plate away.

“The government is lax,” she said. “It must be lax to have a human predator out on the streets. And my child no less. All these policies we've been implementing. Human reintegration? What a – what a silly thing to say, Mr. President. They're barbarians! Most of them. They could spread their disease to you.”

Fifty-One Stones drummed his fingers and sighed deeply.

His mother looked at him. She opened a cabinet and took out a bottle of pills and shook some of the pills into a glass of water. The water began to turn murky brown. “Drink this.” She gave him the glass.

“The mechanic said it'll help you calm down.”

“I don't want to calm down.”

“You must calm down. For the rest of us.” She sat next to him. “Most of us are not as excitable as you are. You like to ask strange questions, Fifty-One Stones, and that is not normal for a child your age.”

He looked down at his lap. “I don't see the problem,” he mumbled.

“Well... Maybe not now, but when you're older, you will. Now drink.”

He stared at the glass—at the droplets of moisture pooling at the bottom. He held his breath and grabbed it and drank it all in one go. Then he rubbed his lips against his sleeve and sniffled.

She took the glass. “Did it taste okay?”

“No,” he said. Then: “Do you think she'll come back?”

“Who?”

“The girl. The human.”

“Well,” she said, “if she does come back, I want you to stand up for yourself, Fifty-One Stones. Make sure you hit her hard. Those humans are animals, but if you strike them hard, they won't come back. They'll learn to avoid you. You understand?”

“Okay. I mean, I guess so.”

He hugged the walls when he went to school, careful not to stand in the middle of the street where he was ambushed. He had thought about taking a different path, but his mother insisted he go this way. “She won't be so dumb as to attack you in broad daylight,” she said. “You'll get lost if you try to take a new path, too. This neighborhood is a maze.”

It was not a maze. However, Fifty-One Stones had a habit of poking the mushrooms and dandelions that grew from cracks in the concrete, and they grew most beautifully in less-traversed paths.

He breathed. There was a hard knot in his stomach that wouldn't stop aching. He felt more nervous than he had been in a while.

At an intersection, he stopped. Someone was waiting nearby. He looked down to his feet and stretched. Counted down from four, again and again. Tried to get ahold of himself.

He looked up.

The girl stood in front of him. He could see her better in the light. Her body was gray and soot-covered. She had hair cropped short like a boy's, sticking out like she just woke up. She wore overalls with a broken strap exposing her bare shoulder. A peeling bandage covered the wound on her cheek.

Fifty-One Stones took a step back. His heart leapt to his throat.

She crouched down. There was something in her hands—printer paper, folded twice. She folded it another time as she made eye contact with him. Not a word from either person, yet something passed between them.

The paper dropped out of her hands onto the street. She splayed her palms to show they were empty. Come and take it, said her eyes.

He gulped. He felt his muscles tense up. Before he could think, he dashed forward, waving his fist at her, shouting vulgar, threatening nonsense. It startled her, and with a frightened look, she ran away.

Fifty-One Stones stopped and panted. He kicked gravel in the direction he fled. “That'll show you,” he said. “Don't come back, you hear me?”

He brushed cold sweat off of his arms and back and reached down and picked up the paper. He looked it over carefully. Picked at one of the edges. Something dark and bold. Graphite.

He creased the edges and put it in his pocket. Maybe he would read it later, or just throw it away. He wasn't sure what others would think of it, but if it was from a human, he wasn't sure how much he'd care anyway.

Time passed differently at school. He wasn't sure what changed – the soldierly movement of students through the hallway? The bells ringing from the speakers, or the birds programmed to chirp the same tune

over and over? But those were the same, he was sure of it. There was very little around here that changed.

His teacher noted his quietness. She continued to speak and write as she did, though several times she looked pointedly in his direction. He was listless, dull. Eyes fixated on the edge of his desk, which he ran his thumb across.

“Do you have any questions, class?” she asked.

None of the students answered. He looked up momentarily, then back down.

“That concludes classes for today, then.” She closed her textbook. “Enjoy your weeklong study break.”

“We will,” in unison. They left in a single-file line, with Fifty-One Stones as their tail. He was fidgeting as he left.

He walked until the first corner came up, and he rounded it quickly and went out of sight. There were certain paths in the school that were not trodden, and they were marked with a thin layer of dust. He took one and followed it until it reached a dead end. The music hall.

No one came to the music hall anymore. There were dulled brass instruments laid carelessly against the walls, where the only light reflected in them came from the grimy windows. Accompanying them, guitars with chipped, faded wood, and snapped violin strings. He hurriedly took the paper out of his pocket and held it quivering in his hands.

He held himself back for a moment. Then he opened it.

It was a diagram of his anatomy—painstaking detail in the gears that made him tick and the glistening of his innards. His own face looked at him with a dead, lackluster stare. His arms were spread apart, but his legs were locked rigidly together. All the while, his organs swelled, so fully that they looked to burst.

One look and he was already nauseated. He put the paper away and covered his mouth, swallowing repeatedly to keep everything down. He hadn’t gotten a proper look the first time, but now he saw it all. The violent composition of his body. Codes stamped onto each part—product-labeling. In a second, his questions about himself, satisfied.

... There was a part of him that longed to know more. Answers—he wanted answers. Nothing that his kind could offer him, but what the humans knew, he, too, wanted to know. If so much could be gleaned from this picture, what else could the girl tell him?

She waited outside. The shade of the trees cast a dark and serious look on her. She locked eyes on him, staring intensely until he came towards her. Then she grabbed his arm, roughly.

“You saw it,” she said. “What did you think?”

He whispered, “Thinking is very dangerous when done in excess—”

“Then what did you feel?”

“... Sick. Disgusted. And also—”

She tilted her head.

“Liberated?”

She shook her head. “I don’t think so.” She let go. “What do people call you?”

“Fifty-One Stones.” He paused. “When I was born, the mechanic counted the number of minutes he had left until his shift was over. Then he added the first word that came to his mind. Fifty-One Stones: a name of longing and idleness.”

She looked at him.

“It’s a good name,” he insisted.

But she was busy studying his features. Her hands reached up to his face, very close to his cheeks. Then she drew back quickly.

“You’re not scared anymore,” she said. “Are you scared?”

“Yes... but I’m curious.”

She nodded approval. She began walking away from him, out into the dying sun. Then she beckoned to him. “Come. I’ll take you to my home.”

He hesitated. She beckoned again.

“I’ll answer all your questions. Won’t you come with me?”

He waited until she was almost out of sight. Then he trailed her. Only for a short while, he told himself. Not for long.

They walked up to the walls of the quarantine zone—thick, concrete structures with posters slapped on. The president, shaking hands with mechanics. Reintegration, safe and clean. Guards strutted from tower to tower, rifles strapped to their shoulders. From the megaphones, cut segments of national radio, praising the arrival of utopia.

Nearby was a line of human workers, waiting patiently for a security guard to finish oiling his joints. They were stretching their arms and backs and yawning. It seemed so natural on them, that Fifty-One Stones had to stop to observe.

The girl looked around for an empty entrance. She tapped him on the shoulder. “This way,” she said. They walked briskly, trying not to draw attention until they were safely covered by the tunnel. She pressed her face to the window of the kiosk and looked inside.

A guard tapped her shoulder. She jumped.

“Halt.”

They froze still. The guard lightly patted them down. He uncovered the nape of Fifty-One Stone’s neck and scanned the barcode there. He then did the same with the girl’s calf, where it was branded. “You may proceed.”

They went through the slums and the markets and the workshops. Fifty-One Stones tried to catch all the sights he could, falling behind constantly. He was taken in by the flood of new experiences and would have stayed for much longer if he could.

To satisfy him, the girl pointed out signs. Mario’s Quality Meats. “Our butcher,” she said.

Cooper and Sons Leatherworking. Shoe repair.

Family Teeth and Body Care. The clinic.

“Won’t you slow down?” he begged her.

But she did not stop. Her feet carried them past rustic, ramshackle houses and through tight alleyways and down steep rocky slopes ‘til they came to a sheet metal garage, old and isolated and spattered with spray paint. Her home.

She thumbed numbers into the keypad and watched as the door shuddered and came to life. It rolled back to reveal a makeshift studio: pencils lying about, colors splashed against the walls, and a red curtain separating the room into halves.

There were drawings everywhere—paper in all sizes. Some were done in graphite—others, in watercolor, and the oldest and largest one was a rough sketch done in crayons. Even in the dark he could see that they were all depictions of him, or someone who looked like him. One of his kind, dressed in different articles of clothing, or none at all. It was the same gaze each time—intense, burning, almost spiteful, as if he never wished to be there.

She flicked on the lights, bringing out their boldness. “Do you like them?” she asked.

“I’m not sure,” he said, and pointed. “Why is this all red?”

“He’s angry.”

“But why red? Is it because the color of blood is red? And fire is sometimes depicted as red?”

“... Something like that.” The girl brushed tins off of the seat of a chair and patted it. “Sit here, Fifty-One Stones.”

He tried to hide his grimace. “You’re not very clean.”

“Nothing here will make you sick,” she said, picking up supplies and throwing them over the curtain. She kicked a paint can away. “It just looks this way. It’s actually very clean.”

“But it will make me sick. My mom said—my teacher said—if you stay too long with a human, you will catch their creativity.”

She stopped. “That’s ridiculous.”

“No, it’s not.”

“What do you mean, then?”

“It’s the reason you were quarantined in the first place. Humans... are violent. In their art, their interactions, how they war—they’re violent and messy and selfish. Like storms, unable to comprehend their surroundings, lashing out instead of learning to settle down.” He quieted. “At least, that’s what they told me.”

He took a glance at her face. He read it first as angry. But as he studied it closer, he realized that the way her eyebrows furrowed and her chest sagged and her smile disappeared was all very sad.

She scratched her head and paced around a bit. She brought the paint can back over and flipped it upside down and sat on it. Crossed her legs. “What happens when you catch creativity?” she asked.

Silence. She moved closer, urging him.

“I don’t know,” he admitted. “No one ever told me. But I imagine I’d become very dangerous.”

Her expression changed. He felt as if he had said something very wrong. A breeze began to stir, winding around their legs and rattling about. The hem of the curtain lifted, just a little. A leg.

Fifty-One Stones stood up. The girl watched him nervously.

Another breeze. Two legs and a torso, swinging above the ground. Creaking.

He ran over and grabbed the curtain tightly and pulled hard. It came undone and slid off the rack. He looked once. His knees faltered. He fell on all fours.

Nothing came out of his mouth. Only a whimper, terrified and drawn-out.

“I needed another model for my drawings,” she said. “I pulled him out of a dumpster several months ago, dead. I can’t use him anymore.”

He broke down. She listened as he cried with her hands covering her face.

“You’re the perfect model, Fifty-One Stones. I knew when I saw you. All those imperfections everyone says you have—I want them. I want you here in my studio, where I can note every detail of your structure and function, all the way down to your heart...”

He rubbed his eyes roughly and raised a jagged finger. “You animal. You... freak. You knew I had questions, and you used me. You tricked me.”

“I know that,” she said.

He became silent. The wind grew stronger, blowing everything towards the back of the studio. Clank, clank. Everything empty, carried away, under paper that fluttered and strained against its pins. All the sketches turned their heads, glaring at the pair that brought them into being: the dirty girl, and the body that swung gently from the rafters.

Fifty-One Stones rose slowly from the floor. She watched him with eyes downcast, away from his trembling face. He sucked in air and marched over to her and pulled back his hand to strike—but it fell slack to his side. He kicked her can from under her instead and stood over her, gasping, waiting.

She sat up. Rubbed her elbows. “You are cursed,” she said. “You are like me—plagued with questions that can’t be answered. Not with books, not with people. Don’t you want to know who you are? Why you’re so different from the rest? It’s not all body differences.”

She crawled over to him and curled her fingers around his knees. He could see the redness in her cheeks. “I discover things—lots of things—through art, and I’m so curious that I don’t mind if it gets a little violent at times. I don’t have to hurt you.”

“Then what will you do?”

“Let go,” she said. “Submit to my emotions. Get frustrated sometimes, like you are, right now. Bear with me, and you will know. You will finally know.”

He sighed and lowered himself back into his seat, looking worn and very tired. She got up and threw the red curtain back over the rail and started opening the drawers of an old dresser behind him. She rummaged through, picking out some things, and sat back down across from him. She tucked a sketchbook under her arms and held out a pack of colored markers.

“Pick a color for me, Fifty-One Stones.”

He stared at her.

“Go on.”

He contemplated for a moment. Then he looked outside, where the fireflies were dancing and starting to shine, like green stars in the dark of night.

She took the green marker into her hands and looked at him closely. She smiled. “Sit still,” she said and began to draw.

“For You Created All Things, Including Sin”

Kyle Wood

Some say first sin was a tempted apple
drenched in honeyed venom
Others decree it was golden wings
sculpted from seraphim wax that dared the sun

i said:

You gave to them oxygen
but withheld lungs
You gifted them a kaleidoscope
yet held back eyes
You sat them atop your mountain
to be buried beneath winter snow

sin is placing children beneath the moon
and forbidding them to gather stars

Some say the flaw of X
led to the crippling of Y
Others blame the silk net
crafted by a legless spider

we say:

We were guiled by words
a single kiss wedded death
The winged-serpent's forked bite
injected hollow truth
The Sun's gilded truths
clouded white lies

sin is shielding the heart
while stealing a rib

It was not starving children
devouring a muddied apple
Nor the morning star's folly
for aspiring to set

I knew:

You could not plant a sequoia
and expect it to bonsai
You could not clutch a seed
and expect it to flower
Even a god should not allow dreams
to color His reality

sin is the molten limestone
of a parent's velvet heart.

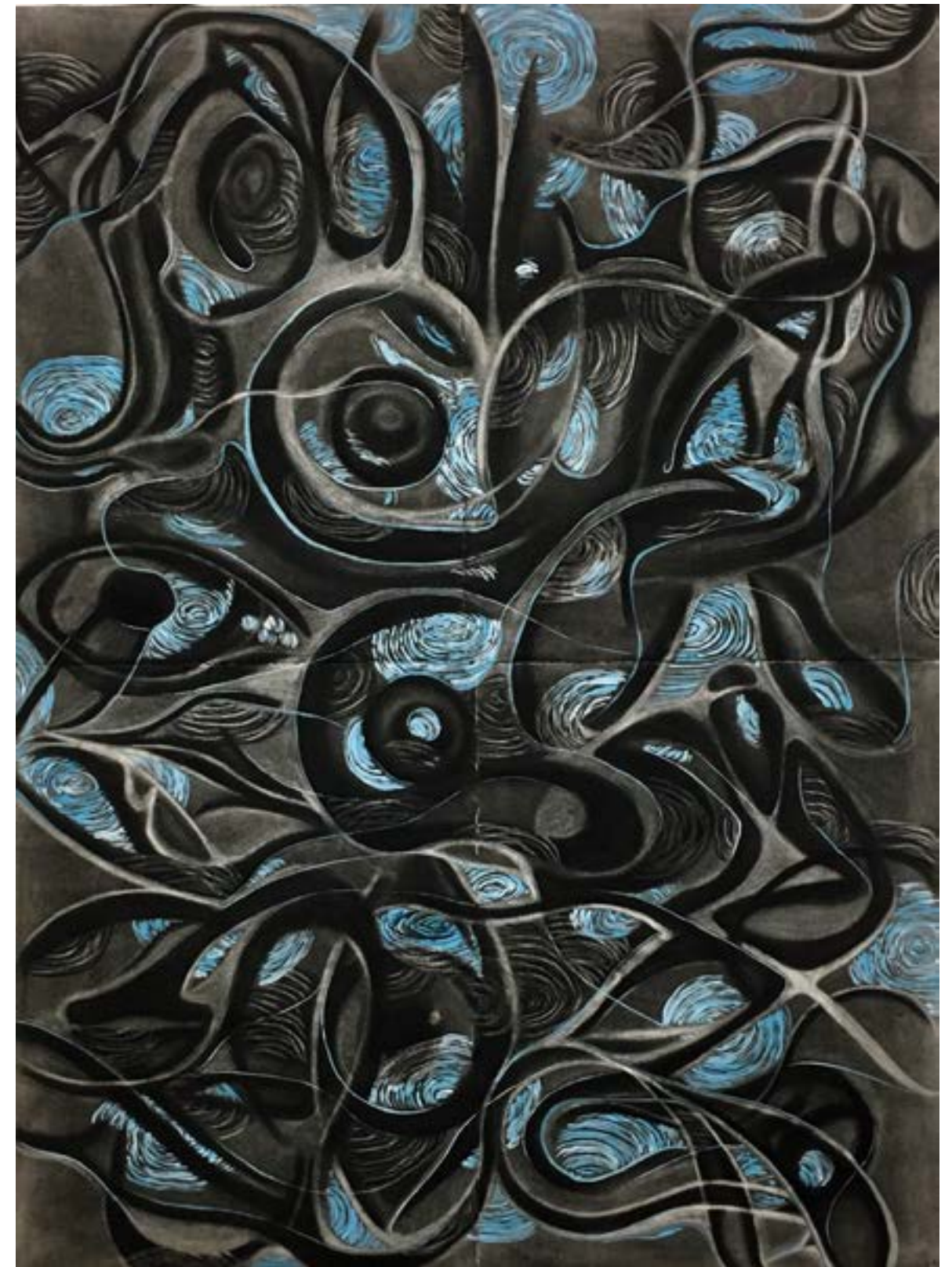


Two Heads Are Better Than One | Megan Fletcher
Aluminum Cast

For Bitty Colored Girls who Have Considered Surgery When Eating Aint Enuf

Almosa Pirela-Jones

how can i b satisfied when
thick is in and thin is out
for odd models
n white girls who cant evn
n aint no place
for a bitty black girl
who possesses equipment
n moderation
my spanish n english
is showing
n i am waiting
for my presumed khoisan
to make n appearance
so riddle me this cruel world:
show me a colored girl
whos worth the air she breathes
whos good enough for you
n show me how to bcome her



Fingerprints | Allison Gant
Acrylic and charcoal on Arches Cover

Philosophers Found Within a Bathroom Stall

Morgan Shiver

Thank you,

Enlightened Missionary,
who so kindly informed me
that *Jesus said,*
'I am the way, and the truth, and the light.' and even left
a reference, *John 3:16*,
in case I felt inclined to
revisit this idea later.

MBF,
shamelessly promoting that she
failed Organic Chem here
on 12-11-14
to offer others support, like
the—*so did I!*
found centimeters away.

Help... I'm Trapped!
adding a little extra concern
to my otherwise delightful day

Lost and Probably Drunk Auburn Fan,
feeling ballsy enough
to put forth a measly
war eagle

only to be met by
Easily Enraged Bama Fan's
why the hell are you here?
P.S. ROLL TIDE
and Football Really Isn't My
Priority's
war damn boobies
AM I RITE?!?

I've Seen *Braveheart* 22 Times,
openly wondering,
How did
Mel Gibson
get in here?

(Although it's unlikely that
he was actually ever present
in this collegiate women's restroom,
I would personally like to believe
that our butt cheeks have made contact
with the same cold seat.)

Hillary Clinton,
rallying my feminist spirit,
trying to appeal
to my demographic
by sharing her opinion,
GIRLS ARE
SO
AWESOME

And finally,
College Educated Adult,
who politely suggested
that I go
Suck a bag of dicks,

For reminding me
that no matter how low of a
point
I may reach in life,
I will never take the time
to produce a pen
and scribble on a wall
in a place where people shit.

Bill Nye,
finding himself in this stall
after the decline of his career, now
letting me know that
they proved evolution.

Either TB or MP
(or both),
who, in writing
TB <3 MP
XO,
proved the extent
to which true love will go.

Passionate Creationist,
who's Nye-in spired,
ironically animalistic-driven roar
I can imagine bursting from her chops
very clearly as she
snorted, rearing her head back to
inscribe:
Theories are
supported, not
proven.
pounding her fists to
her chest as a sign
of victory after she
etched the last letter with her
predatory-length claws.
(No doubt she needed
a great hibernation
to recover from such an upset.)

Paleontologist,
telling me to

Never forget



that my species, too,
will one day be
obsolete.

Mother of 40-Year-Old Dependent,
releasing her inner rage
with a fiery
GET A JOB!
the fresh memory of making her
post-pubescent son's bed
that morning
motivating her the whole time.

Carly: Cowgirl Queen of the Costume Dance

Allison Mollenkamp

I was eleven when I went on my first date ever. I was young and awkward and absolutely fricking terrified of this person I thought I had a crush on. That is what a crush is, after all: thinly veiled fear of someone who could, with a few words, send you crying to your mother.

Part of being terrified of someone is that it's very difficult to put together normal human sentences in front of them, in particular ones that mean what you actually want to say. So there I was, a frizzy haired eleven-year-old in an old cardigan and sequined converse, standing in front of my equally frizzy haired and poorly dressed first love, Michael. Not that I would have said his name out loud anywhere in his general vicinity. That would have been akin to confessing my undying love to him. So usually I addressed him more simply....

“Hey.”

“Oh hey Carly.” His voice cracked, and he cleared his throat to hide it. But more importantly, he said my name. My suddenly incredibly uncool sounding name. I was clearly not cut-out to be here talking to a boy who was so much cooler than me.

Then time seemed to stop. How long had I been standing there freaking out about him saying my name? It was an uncool name, but it had sounded so nice when he said it. Had it been five seconds? Thirty? What was a normal amount of time to wait before you said something back to someone who had said your name so sweetly? More importantly, what was a normal thing to say to someone so cool who said your name so sweetly who you just wanted to hold hands with and have him say your name like that forever?

“Are you going to the dance tonight?” My relief at having finally managed human words was overshadowed by having said exactly the wrong words. I was going to lead up to that. I was going to be charming, and maybe even a little flirtatious, and then when I'd had about ten years to get less scared of this cute boy, I would have said that. And he would have said...

“Yeah. Are you going to the dance tonight?” But he did say that. Even though my plan had been destroyed in the early stages, it was back on track. He wanted to know if I was going to a dance. Where he would also be. I wanted to call my mother and tell her to start finding a florist for our wedding.

“Probably. I like costume parties.” Oh no. This was even worse than before. I had admitted the most uncool thing about me. He would probably not want to go to the dance at all now, with me or without me. I'd made it sound so incredibly weird and awkward.

That's when the greasy-haired grim reaper, Michael's best friend Charlie, swooped in. At that moment the last thing I wanted in the world was someone else to see my downfall. Especially not another boy almost as cool as Michael. They would probably talk about how weird I was when I was home crying to my mom and our dog. The thought of it was unbearable.

“Hey Mike. What's up?” I fumed silently at Charlie. What could possibly be up that was of any interest to him? These were the final moments before my funeral, and he was interrupting.

“Not much. Carly and I were just talking about the dance. We're both gonna go.” I could barely contain my excitement. He'd made no mention of my weird affection for costume parties. Perhaps Michael would keep my embarrassing secret to himself and simply never speak to me again. I could bear loving him from afar if I knew that he wasn't laughing about me with Charlie at some cool boy sleepover.

“Ooh, Mike's got a date. With Carly. Have fun on your date.” Then he punched Michael, my wonderful, perfect Michael, in the arm. I wanted to punch him, to avenge my love, but Michael didn't seem to want avenging. He didn't even really care. As Charlie retreated down the hallway, Michael turned to look at me.

“My mom could give you a ride if you need one. You know, to the dance.” My heart was spinning, which, medically, probably wasn't a great sign. Emotionally, however, it barely conveyed my unending joy. He wasn't

denying Charlie's claim that we were going on a date. Instead, he was making it seem a lot more like a date. We would get to talk to each other in the car. And at the dance. And probably even in the car on the way home unless something went wrong. In that case, I guess I'd have to call my mom to pick me up. At least then I wouldn't have to wait until I got home to cry.

“Okay. My address is in the phone book. Bye.” I had to remove myself from the situation. My joy was becoming unreasonable, and it was far too early to reveal that I might like him. That would probably need to remain a secret for the next five to six years. It was originally going to be fifteen, but since asking him if he was going to the dance got moved up the itinerary, so did everything else.

I half ran down the hallway, my backpack thumping with each hurried step. I had a date. With a boy. We were going to go to a costume dance. And I did love costume parties. However uncool that was. This was looking like it could be the best night ever in the whole world. Unfortunately, the credit had to go entirely to Charlie with his weird swoopy hair. If he hadn't been in that hallway at that very moment, perhaps my love for Michael would have never been realized. Because, let's face it. “Are you going to the dance?” is not the same as “Do you want to go to the dance with me?” Begrudgingly, I made a mental note to be at least fake-nice to Charlie for five minutes the next time I saw him.

#

When I stepped off the school bus half an hour later, I almost flew home. My mind was whirling with all the things I needed to do in the next four hours. I needed to call my best friend and tell her the super crazy but wonderful news that I had a date. I needed to ask my mom if it was okay for Michael's mom to give me a ride to the dance. I needed to ask my mom if she would be able to give me a ride home from the dance in the highly probable worst-case scenario my love for costume parties was too much for Michael, and our timeless romance ran out of time before 9 P.M. Most importantly of all, I needed to find a costume.

My mother was reading a book when I got home. She was curled in the corner of the couch while her (sorry, our) dog was curled at her feet. The dog was not reading a book. That would have been a fun twist. I burst in on their calm in a cyclone of backpack and lunch box and peeled off cardigan. Bella jumped up and frantically licked at my elbows, which were the highest thing she could reach, even on her hind legs. Bella is my mom's dog, by the way, not my mom. My mom does not lick my elbows. That would be inappropriate.

“Mom, I need help.” In this the most important moment of my life so far, my mother somehow stayed unshakably calm.

“Oh? With your homework? If you do it at the kitchen table, I can help you while I'm making the spaghetti.” How could she think of spaghetti at a time like this? This was urgent! Plus, I was probably going to be too nervous to eat for the next several days, despite the fact that by tomorrow I would have (hopefully) survived my first date with the coolest boy in the whole sixth grade. Possibly also the whole middle school. I hadn't met many eighth graders though, so it's possible some of them were cooler.

“No mom, I have a date with this boy, Michael.” It was okay to say his name in front of my mother. He probably wouldn't hear how lovingly I said it when I was inside my own house. “We're going to the costume dance tonight and I don't have a costume and I've also never been on a date before in my whole life and what if I mess it up and he hates me but I really like him so I don't want that to happen and I need your help. Please stop reading your book.” I couldn't believe it. She was actually looking at a book and not at her very own daughter who needed her help so she wouldn't have to come home and cry later.

“I was just marking my page, honey. It's not that hard to find a costume. You can wear your old one from last Halloween.” Oh, my mother was brilliant. This is why I had come to her in my time of need. I could forgive her for looking at her book now that she was so wonderfully smart and had solved the biggest problem of the day. “Go try it on. It's been a few months.”

I dropped my backpack and my lunchbox and the already wadded up cardigan in a heap next to the couch. I ran to the bedroom I shared with my little brother, Jonathan, and tore open the closet. There, behind my Easter dress, hung my Halloween costume. I yanked it off the hanger and quickly changed into it. When I looked into the bathroom mirror, I couldn't help but grin. The Gryffindor scarf hung down over the black Hogwarts robe, and, with my now usefully frizzy hair, I was a dead ringer for Hermione Granger.

I tumbled over my own feet back into the living room where my mother had once again resumed that awful book. Well, maybe it wasn't awful. Usually when I tried to borrow my mother's books, she said they were inappropriate, and I could read them when I was older. So maybe they were good. The point was, it was distracting from my very important problems. My mother looked up, and her eyebrows shot up.

"Well, I guess we'll have to think of something else." I was shocked. How could she not see how perfect this was? Michael would see me in this costume, and he would know that I'm smart but also brave like Hermione and that I like Harry Potter, which is definitely cooler than liking costume parties.

"What? This is perfect."

"Carly, it hardly goes past your knees. You must have hit a real growth spurt since last year. We'll have to go shopping for new jeans before it gets too cold." This was more unforgiveable than the book. It was downright insensitive to bring up something as awful as jean shopping on a wonderful day like this. I looked down at what the bathroom mirror had not revealed. My pale shins poked out for a full foot below the black robe before my socks met the dirty beige of the carpet.

"Oh. But I don't have anything else! I have to have a costume. It's a costume dance." The world was crashing down around me in the tatters of a too short robe. I crashed onto the sofa and scooped up Bella in a hug. I buried my face in her yellow fur.

"Please don't let the dog on the couch Carly."

"She can be my costume. I can pretend to be a blind person, and she can be my guide dog." My mother laughed. She had the audacity to laugh in the face of deep despair.

"I don't think they let dogs into middle school dances. Also, it might be offensive for you to pretend to be blind." My mother took Bella from my arms and set her on the floor. The dog quickly buried her nose in my backpack, searching for a snack. "Carly, we will find you a costume for your date. But tell me about this boy."

My heart started to slowly spin again. I remembered Michael standing there by his locker, all toothy smile and unruly curls. "His name is Michael. He's in my English class. He plays the saxophone really well. His hair is blond, and he has really pretty green eyes." I suddenly didn't have the right words to sum up such a beautiful, terrifying, perfect boy.

"He sounds nice. Did you ask him on this date?" What? My mother looked at me, seeing bravery when all I wanted was to crawl under a blanket.

"No."

"Well, did he ask you?"

"Not really. I asked him if he was going to the dance and he asked me if I was going and then his friend Charlie said it was a date." My mother sat down next to me on the couch and put her arm around my shoulders.

"Well I'm proud of you for asking him if he was going. Sounds like that was as close to any asking as there was." My mom made me feel brave right then. "And it's okay to be nervous. But only if this boy is somebody nice, and it's a nice nervousness." I thought about the way Michael looked at me as Charlie left. Charlie made me bad, want-to-punch-him-and-run-away nervous. Michael was good, heart-spinning nervous.

"He is nice, momma. But I still need a costume." Bella had found a box of raisins in the side pocket of my backpack. She chewed open the box and scattered the raisins across the carpet at our feet.

"We'll have to use clothes you already have then, won't we." I trusted my mother. If she was smart enough to remember the Hermione costume, surely she could fashion something from my dresser into a costume cool enough for the biggest dance of all of sixth grade. She helped me up off the couch and led the way to my closet.

Soon I was sitting in a heap of discarded clothing on my little brother's bed. My Easter dress had lived a short life as something from a Shirley Temple movie my mother realized I was too young to have seen. The black pants I wore for band were briefly coupled with a turtle neck in a spy motif that I didn't think would work without a toy gun. Toy guns aren't allowed at our school dances because of terrorists.

Finally, my mother reached the bottom drawer of my dresser. Months ago I'd stored away my winter clothes there. She pulled out a pair of jeans that had started to fray at the knees. Her eyes lit up.

"Go get the scissors from the kitchen, Carly." I was both excited and scared of my mother's confidence in

this new plan. That mix of emotions was becoming a theme for the day.

"Why? Those are my favorite jeans."

"Well after seeing that costume, I really doubt they'll be long enough anymore. So why not repurpose them? You can be a cowgirl."

Scissors took away the frayed knees of the jeans and made them go perfectly with a blue flannel shirt stolen from Jonathan's drawer. I slipped into the outfit and ran to the bathroom to survey myself in the mirror. There was something missing. I didn't have a hat. Without a hat, I just looked like I was from somewhere terrible like Kansas or Nebraska. Country wasn't a costume. It had to be cowgirl. My mom walked in holding something behind her back.

"You forgot something." She pulled a large cowboy hat from behind her back and plopped it on my head. It promptly sunk past my eyebrows so I couldn't see. I pushed it back on my head and saw myself transformed in the mirror. Now this was a costume.

"Your dad won it at a trivia night. If you wouldn't mind losing it so he will never wear it ever again, that would be great." My mother smiled at me in the mirror. The hat started to sink down a little, and she pulled it back. "You look good, Car. You look ready to have fun."

#

Twenty minutes later, I had silenced the butterflies in my stomach long enough to sit down and do my pre-algebra homework at the kitchen table. My teacher, Ms. Lewis, had told me if I worked hard enough at pre-algebra, I could take normal algebra in the seventh grade with the eighth graders. And even those would be the smart eighth graders because some kids don't get to take it until ninth grade. I wasn't really sure what was so special about algebra, but I wanted to be with the smart kids, so I was working hard while my mother stirred a skillet of spaghetti sauce. That's when the phone rang.

"I hope it's not a telemarketer. If we get one more call about buying a security system I'm going to pretend to be a burglar on the phone with them." My mother griped as she picked up the phone. "Hello?" She paused. "Who is this?"

I could only hear murmuring on the other end of the phone. My little eleven-year-old heart had already taken too much that day. Mysterious phone calls were too much.

"Oh, yes, of course. Yes, we live just down the street from the post office. It's a little green house. But light green, not ugly green. If you get to the park you've gone too far. No, thank you Sharon. She'll be ready at six-forty-five. Goodbye." My mother hung up the phone and turned to me trying not to smile. "Did you tell your friend Michael that our address is in the phone book?"

"Yes." I was confused. It is in the phone book. Right after the Reismans.

"I'm in the phone book. So is your father. But you are not in the phone book, Carly. And it turns out Michael didn't know either of our names and so he just tried to look up Carly Riddle. His mother had to go on a wild goose chase trying to figure out my name. Michael finally remembered you said I worked at a bank, and they tracked us down that way."

He remembered I said she worked at a bank! My glorious wonderful Michael listened to me when I said my mom knew a lot about money because she worked in the important upstairs part of the bank downtown. In all honesty, I wasn't sure what happened in the upstairs part of the bank, but I assumed all parts of the bank had to do with money.

"They'll be here to pick you up at seven." My mother turned back to the stove, still laughing to herself.

#

By seven o'clock, my eleven-year-old mind had descended into a web of what ifs. What if Michael never showed up? What if it wasn't actually a costume dance and I showed up dressed like a cowgirl for no reason? What if Charlie was riding with us too? What if he made fun of my cowgirl costume? What if I broke my leg dancing and then it got infected and it had to be amputated?

The doorbell broke into my reverie of questions. I stared towards the door. Behind it lay my entire romantic future. The most perfect boy in the world was behind that door. If this date wasn't perfect, it was all over. I could resign myself to a loveless marriage or perhaps being an eccentric aunt to Jonathan's children. I picked

up my nervous imagination and carried it to foyer. I gripped the brass knob and turned it, revealing Michael, dressed as a cowboy.

Earlier that day I had feared not knowing how long to wait to respond to a person. Standing there in the door looking at Michael, I knew I waited too long. Fortunately, he did too. The silence hung between us like fly paper, sticky and uncomfortable, but still somewhat attractive to small insects. Our mothers saved us.

“Ms. Riddle, so nice to finally meet you!” Michael’s mother sounded like him, kind and comforting.

“Nice to meet you, too. Looks like the kids had the same idea for their costumes. Isn’t that cute.” I could have positively died right then and there in my own house. How dare my mother point out the incredibly awkward fact that Michael and I were dressed the same. Didn’t she hear Michael and I silently agreeing not to acknowledge it? Why call out a problem when there is absolutely no hope of fixing it. It wasn’t like either of us could change. The dance started in twenty minutes.

Then I looked at Michael, and he laughed. He had such a nice laugh. Sort of quiet like he was laughing more inside his head.

“Yours is better than mine, Carly. I couldn’t find any boots, so I just wore my gym shoes.” He liked my costume! Even if Charlie did make fun of me, Michael would come to my defense. This cute-curly headed boy didn’t care that all the people at school would think we planned a couple’s costume like we were married or something else weird. He liked my boots.

The cloud of relief at this revelation carried me all the way to the dance. When we got there, the school gym was decorated with green and white streamers in our school colors, and the lights were dimmed. A Black-Eyed Peas song was playing in the background. I stopped with Michael in the doorway, and we both surveyed the space.

There were two other Hermione Grangers in the crowd, which I mentally noted to thank my mother for helping me avoid. They stood with a few off-brand superheroes and one or two unlucky souls who hadn’t found costumes. I was trying to figure out what one of my classmates was dressed up as (his clothes seemed to simply be a giant red blob, but I thought it must be something more than that) when I realized Michael was talking to me over the music. How could I have ignored that mellifluous voice even for a second?

“What did you say?”

“I asked if you wanted to dance.” He had both hands jammed in his pockets. “It’s okay if you don’t want to. We could just get some soda or something.” I rushed to reassure him.

“No, I like dancing.” How could he have thought for even a minute I wouldn’t dance with him? I’d only been dreaming of it for weeks.

After a moment of indecision, Michael led the way to a less populated edge of the floor. He started to move his shoulders back and forth to the heavy bass beat of the Black-Eyed Peas. Then his knees joined in, somehow without much help from his feet. Soon my beautiful cowboy love was writhing in some sort of tribal rain dance that, to his credit, was in beat with the music. I couldn’t help but laugh.

“What’s wrong?” The writhing stopped.

“Nothing, I just, I like your dancing.”

“No, you don’t. You were laughing at it.” He suddenly looked nervous again. “Let’s see you try.”

Panic sank in. I had not considered this element of the daydream. I’d thought through the costume all the way to saying a wistful goodbye at the end of the night. Somehow I’d left out actually needing to dance at a school dance. I looked at Michael to see if perhaps he’d rescind the challenge. Instead, he stood defiantly, daring me to out-shine him on the dance floor.

I started to tap the toe of my mother’s boot on the floor. I tried snapping my fingers. This felt less ridiculous than watching Michael, but it didn’t seem to count as a dance. I kept the finger snap and started to choir step left and right. On a whim I threw in a head bob and, in a moment, Michael and I were both laughing. It didn’t matter that we couldn’t dance. In fact, there was less pressure knowing that we were both completely terrible. I closed my eyes and continued to laugh and dance. As the Black-Eyed Peas faded out, I suddenly felt a sharp pain in my lip. I opened my eyes to find I was much closer to Michael than when I’d closed them. He was bent over with one hand over his mouth. I stood in shocked silence trying to figure out what had happened.

Helpful as ever, Charlie made his way to the scene of the accident. Weird, awful Charlie who I’d promised myself I’d be nice to. Charlie took one look at Michael and laughed hysterically. Then in an uncharacteristically sympathetic move, he pulled Michael’s hand away to survey the damage. Blood was starting to pool in the gap between Michael’s lower lip and his teeth.

“You gotta be more careful man, kissing people while you have braces.”

I raised my hand to my face and, when I pulled it away, I found there was a hint of blood there too, oozing from a tiny cut in my lip. I began to understand. On this greatest night ever, on our very first date, Michael wanted to kiss me. Then orthodontics intervened, and we were both left with minor injuries.

Confused and excited all at once, I raised my eyes back to my unlucky date. His lip was starting to swell, and his pretty green eyes were wide with embarrassment. Then I found the bravery I had been saving to ask Michael to this dance. There was a lot left over because I never actually asked him. I’d gotten this far without having to go home and cry to my mom. Maybe I was better at this than I thought. Courage flowed into my brain and then my mouth, and I uttered the smoothest line of my life to date.

“Maybe we’ll have better luck next time.” And I winked.



Clinging for Dear Life | Sarah Westmoreland
Photography

Emotions Triggered

Maria Gerosikova

Little black rounds torture my memory
When did my mind become my own enemy?
Coffee gold irises my universe
Patterns of breathing in octaves of verse.

Flashbacks of glances caressing my soul
Fingertip touches run out off control;
You leading gently and my awkward follow
Your introduction to flight of a swallow.

Waltz turning riddles throw bodies in tone
Swift little clues of a dangerous zone;
Senses united dissolved in ragtime
Pores in affection resisting the time.

Puzzle is locked, I am feeling you breathe
Heartbeat controlled by your palm underneath
Shoulder blade shivers from improvised vibes
Collarbones give into your biting bribes.

Panorama

Liz Adair

My oblivion is laid out like a map in orange hazard cones. It is in the sound a quarter makes when it *clinks* into the cashier's open grip, it is the mournful self-loathing of the sallow boy in the cafeteria who stares into his *pizza hut* pie as though it is his mother's face, then crosses himself.

My afterlife is ghosting along the wild edges of the abandoned golf course turned Arboretum—it is a transient being, stolen by the whispering wind and molded by weeping southern trees. I am the body walking into the fathoms of the dark.

I pound the universe with tiny, bleeding fists.



The Repose | Magdalene Kennedy
Painting, oil

Saturn v Sonnet: A Love Poem to Home

Anna Hill

the overpasses that circle the city
swell like the symmetrical waves of
a children's crayon drawing of the
ocean, up and down, up and down.
if they are the ocean,
then headlights and taillights are
fish swimming in schools, rising and
falling, flickering flares. in the distance
looms a veteran god, a willowy white
beacon that once symbolized
america's future, now a relic of its
past. an apollo that stretches toward
his sister stars, held to the ground with
dusty cement.

in the east lies no man-made starships
or rolling roadways but instead the
verdant remnants of a mountain range,
sloping hills that cast a blue shadow over
a smattering of steeples and towering
window glass. in the center lies an
ancient spring, the water always clear
and cold, snaking through a park full
of blossoming pink trees like a serpent
in the blessed garden, offering some
secret hidden knowledge, a key to the
illustrious city. to possess
it, you must dip your hands into the
wellspring and drink.
to the south, a river courses rapidly,
dangerously, bending with a roar until
it is out of sight. this is the city's boundary.
near its edge is a crumbling dock, alluring
in its derelictness, covered in shattered
bottle glass and scruffy weeds. if you listen
closely, you will hear the voices of children,
toeing the starting line of adulthood but not
quite ready to hear the whistle blow, shouting
with joy as they run and they jump, their
sloppy splashes and shrieks of surprise
carrying on the wind. across the river,
a barbed wire fence lines the silent pine

forest, a forbidden fringe, not to be breached.
a deafening boom echoes across the valley
and bounces off its foothills, rustling the leaves
of every tree and silencing the swifts in their nests.
smoke rises from a test stand in the skyline.
perhaps the sleeping apollo will wake once more.



To the Moon | Steven Scaglione
Newspaper, marker, and charcoal on decoupage cardboard

Supernova

Raien Emery

It was eerie, that day. When it happened, we all acted as if somehow, we always knew it was supposed to. It seemed inevitable and that not even she could stand in the way of its compelling, pervasive bleaching. We had all shrugged, barely committing to the slight lift in our shoulders, and continued shuffling down the streets as specks of her quintessence drifted down among us like so many flakes of soft ash. Despite it all, we were no more bothered or preoccupied than we had been the day, week, month before. No one had cared for a while. Gradually, the care had just run out of us, pooled at our shoes, escaped through the gutters and drains and cracks in the sidewalks. Our town had become a portrait left too long out in the sun, achromatic and dull. The people in it were no exception. So naturally, when even she gave in to the gray, no one thought much of it.

Lumen Pulvis was the last of us to fade.

A long, long time ago, we were inexplicably fascinated with her, with her antics. We all watched her grow up. That bright blonde head jauntily dipping in and out of view as she chased what ever happened to strike her fancy on the streets. She loved cats, particularly. Back then, a few families still kept house cats, fed them, took care of them. Lumen, seven at the time, loved nothing more than to leash those cats with bright red twine—though we had no idea where she had found that—and drag them around our weathered main street. She insisted the cats loved the walks, especially Belcher, her neighbor’s grotesquely overweight cat. Sometimes, rarely but often enough to encourage Lumen, we’d reluctantly smile at the sight of the young girl playing personal trainer for that fat cat, dragging him about with a length of red twine. Belcher would arch his back, hiss, flatten his ears, and dig his claws into anything he could anchor himself to, but unperturbed, Lumen would walk that yowling cat back and forth main street until his owners came, graciously thanking Lumen for her troubles but yet insisting that Belcher had had enough for that day.

As she grew older and the first of us began to fade, we’d catch her unabashedly staring. We were uncomfortable with it, but that only caused us to tug our collars higher, duck deeper into our hats. She seemed confused by our reluctance to meet her unwaveringly bright gaze, though we all remarked how intelligent her eyes seemed.

She had a light about her, in those early years. A cheer that no amount of lackluster inhospitality on our side could dissuade. It helped that she had a following back then, too. Phari, her younger brother, idolized her dearly, as did Phari’s friends. Among people her own age and younger, Lumen was no less than a goddess, perhaps their Artemis, their Aphrodite. Even those who were older than her, even the adults admitted to seeing some sort of pixie dust in her smile. Years ago, that smile was important. That smile was a beacon of color and all that was right. But as the years beat on, one by one, her followers faded, dulled, gave up. Forsaken of all feeling, all color. Her smile gradually lost its allure.

Try as she might to stand firm, we saw Lumen falter, however brief it was, as her old friends, old worshippers began to avert their eyes with the rest of us. It happened every so often, three, four times a year. We didn’t blame them for giving up either. We had long ago. We could care less. Truth be told, we were happy to see them fade. As our ranks of apathy swelled, we felt less as if we were at fault. As if Lumen and her world, her stubborn color, was the real problem.

As these things happen in small towns, rumors began to spread that if you looked at Lumen long enough, you’d go blind. It was nonsense. We all knew it was nonsense. But we stopped looking at her anyway. It was better for our eyes, we’d say. So we averted them from her vibrancy and instead sought out the dull cement, faded brick, crumbling facades of the crummy buildings. This calculated neglect made it so much more convenient for us to avoid watching her lovely blush pale.

Weeks, months, years passed like this. Lumen, childish in action, motherly in spirit, flitted about to people on the street, inquiring into their personal affairs. She tried to make a habit of it, to know us all, though she only received silent, tense looks that, year by year, dimmed her more than any words could have. It seemed improbable that she could hold out against our onslaught of dispassion much longer. But she was strong, Lumen was. And as she matured, she became very beautiful, painfully beautiful. She was a natural sun, a star, a constellation all on her own. But in the face of our depravity, our indifference, it wouldn’t have mattered if she was the entire Milky Way. We simply didn’t care to see the world as she did. We didn’t understand, then, why she cared at all. Why she fought so hard for something so intangible and just as fleeting.

Then one day, Phari left her, too. Phari was the last of Lumen’s followers to fade out. He went out with a whimper, the weak fizz of a match being dropped into a bucket of ice water, but Lumen still smiled at the puff of smoke he left behind. That was the first time we saw sadness grace the luster of that smile. She loved him, we all could see that, at least. And in her own way, she loved us all. But to us, love wasn’t ideal. It involved too much care. Too much responsibility. It made us almost as uncomfortable as Lumen’s frantic search through our eyes.

Maybe if we had known love as she did then, it’d be different now. More likely, though, it still wouldn’t have been enough for her to escape the role she claimed so completely, so achingly.

On Lumen’s eighteenth birthday, a year or so after Phari, she finally imploded. But when the others had softly faded, quietly crackled, and ceased to exhibit any sort of pigment or luminescence, she was the most stunning firework we ever saw. Her light, her mirth, her beauty and wonder and unrequited love collapsed upon her with all the weight, all the silence of a supernova before expanding, brilliantly rising over the town in the shimmering, golden mist of a mushroom cloud.

That was the day our last light went out. As I said, we didn’t care too much, then. We didn’t understand. Blankly, we looked at her on her hands and knees in the middle of the street, panting heavily as her eyes glazed and her face turned to porcelain. We couldn’t conceive what she had done, why her final flight from the inevitable was so different from everyone else’s. A few of us, though no one would admit it, were even relieved to never again need fear her blinding eyes, the desperate way she smiled at us.

After Lumen, our town was perfectly gray. The houses uniformly dilapidated, the streets covered in trash, lazily wind-blown, the weeds growing wheresoever they chose to grow. Cats were everywhere now. They ran loose and feral on the streets. We did nothing to stop them, especially when they got in the habit of following Lumen around, if, that is, she ever happened to find her way outside. We truly were a mess. Relieved, to be sure, but a mess. Lumen was worse off than any of us. Her blonde hair had taken a sickly shade of gray. Her eyes were haunted, shift, never still. We soon would learn the shame of what once had been beautiful. The shame that haunts us even now. For it isn’t her shame, as we often make conjectures that she doesn’t remember her old self at all. No, the shame is ours. The guilt is ours. It was never hers, though we blushingly let her bear that burden as well.

Within a week of Lumen’s final collapse, things began to change. No one can quite agree on how it started, but I think it started with the cats. Children, with no explanation, no logic, began leaving cat food out. Soon after that, they washed the dirt from the cats’ fur. They dewormed, declawed, deliberately tamed the feral beasts with what we could only assume was love. And one by one, the cats became pets, became spots of color flickering at the edges of our peripheral vision.

Then, with all the abruptness and misgivings of a plague, we saw full color for the first time in decades. Our flesh, our blood, our spirits were immersed in this wonderful color. We all said Phari was the first one to make it back, but it happened so fast we just weren’t sure. Pretty soon people had thrown off their purposeless shambles around the streets, traded their wide brimmed hats and high collars for tentative smiles and greetings. We were intoxicated by this new reality, this new beauty and breath. And we began to finally understand Lumen’s previous faithfulness.

No one ever said anything directly, but we watched her. As we became a closer reflection of the rainbow, she remained washed-out and limp. She looked twice her age and five times as frail. We waited

for her to be painted once again in her past color, her splendor and love. We were excited, really—Phari, most of all. We wanted her, our last light, the one who was able to hold on long enough for us all to be reborn, to come back so that we could appreciate her as she deserved, so we could converse with her as she had always wanted us to. Mostly, we wanted to thank her. It wasn't until now that we could understand how greatly the sky must have been pushing down on her weakening shoulders. Now we understood a fragment of how Lumen felt when she had desperately looked into our eyes months ago and only saw nothing. We tried to talk to her on the few occasions she ventured outside, but she only pulled her collar higher around her face, tucked her head deeper into her hat. Even Phari, her younger brother, her constant companion of the past and fresh spring of love, had no healthy effect.

It took us a full month to accept that Lumen was never coming back.

In our freshly opened eyes, we came to understand that she was our irretrievable supernova. Our light, our final hope we had unknowingly crushed with indifference. It was then we realized that her final explosion into the gray ether had been so profound, so devastating that all her pixie dust was not only forever lost to her, but that we had mistakenly stole it, unknowingly breathed it in.

She was the cure for us all.

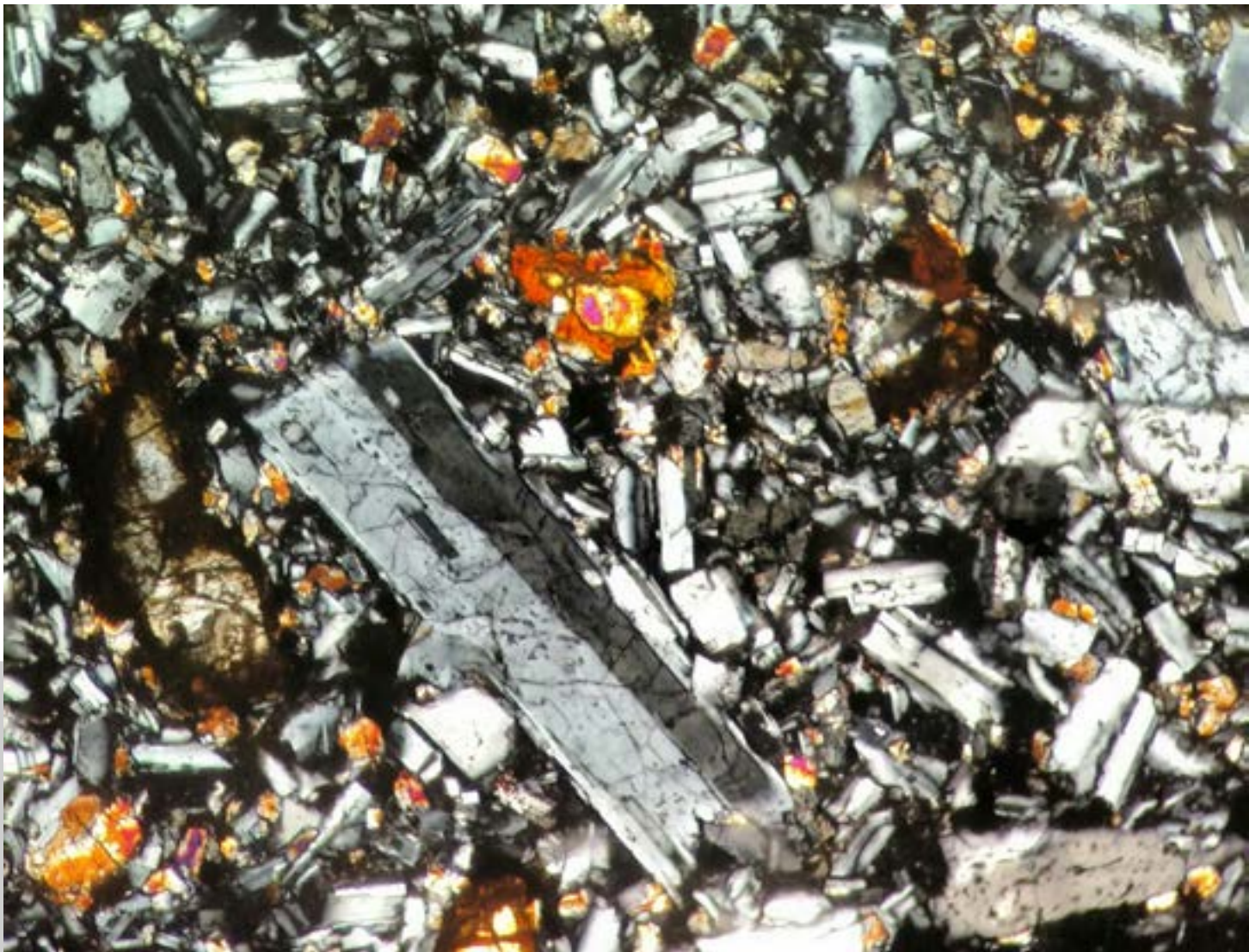
Guilt forced us to decide that it was fitting, that it was what she would have wanted. And in a pathetic way, it was true. But honestly, we were trying to liberate our newfound awareness from that particular grief, like a newborn testing out its lungs by being startled into a cough. But the inescapable truth of the matter was that Lumen was lost, and we were the cause.

The adults, the ones who especially remembered Lumen as a vibrant pulse, had only nodded sagely when we decided she was gone, as if they had been expecting this from the very moment the first one of us had faded. Now they avoid her if they happen to see her shambling around the streets. The children, her previous worshippers, are in the habit of walking cats with lengths and lengths of bright red twine. It's an act overflowing with reverence and respect, though its significance is entirely lost on Lumen. And Lumen herself? She is a ghost of who she once was, a shadow of the innocent, young heart who had sacrificed herself for us. Now she is the black hole we dump our infinite guilt inside. And the incredible thing is that even now, even broken and ignorant to the fact, Lumen still carries the tragic, unwieldy burden of her people.

For you see, as these things go in small towns, the rumor spread that she knew exactly what she was doing on her eighteenth birthday. She knew that in order to awaken us, she'd have to waste herself. And she did it gladly, freely, and with no regard for her own happiness. I often find myself wishing that there had been a different way. A way with no heartache, no haunting reminder of what had been. A way with no sacrifice. But Lumen, tenacious though she had been, could not save everyone.

She could not save herself.

But that was never the type of detail to stop her. Now, because of her utter selflessness, we have been granted a second chance at consciousness. And though Lumen is lost, she remains our gracious artist, our celestial painter. And us, her canvas, the undeserving thieves of all that was gold in her heart.

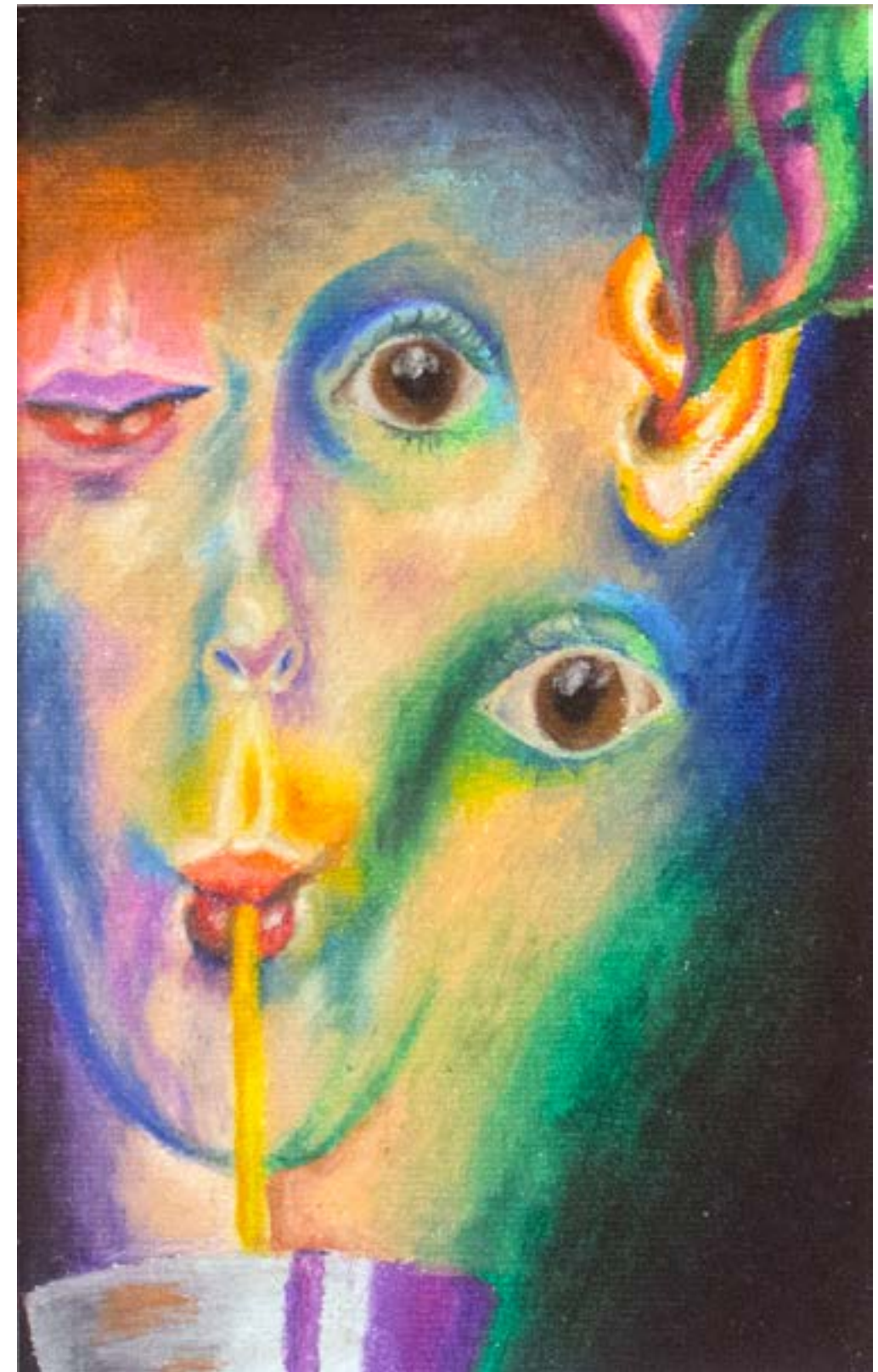


Confetti of Feldspar Twins | Blair Morrison
Photograph, mineral thin section taken through a petrographic microscope

Vein

Almosa Pirela-Jones

I'm covered in consumerism
And when I bleed
Out pours makeup
I never wanted
Out pours grease
From food that isn't food
Out pours fragrance
Lotions, oils, conditioners
And my uniqueness
Will never really be unique
Because the girl behind me
In line at H&M is
Preparing to buy the dress
Cradled in my arms
Only one size larger.
And so the things that cover me
Cover one thousand
Or one million
Or one billion other girls
And the things inside of me
Are not real



Slurp | Magdalene Kennedy
Drawing, oil pastel

McFarland Metempsychosis

Nick Summers

In a puddle
at asphalt-black river's
edge run
boats, oars
pounding, slipping
by, one
by one, none
of them seeing
the great flow
of human souls.

Vessels slip south at
each end of
seven seconds' span. They
seem so near but
these gondoliers see
what's ahead,
what's behind, and
seem so near to meat.
Do fish feel the current
moment we all
float in?

I cannot tell them this.
They are so far—but

perhaps the waves
of floating clouds
drift by and muse,

oh, liquid creatures.



Self Portrait | Magdalene Kennedy
Digital Collage

Terra

Rhiannon Hein

I. Ceres

Fertility comes
in cherries, egg yolk, and the color
of her skin—
milk draped in sky.

*i found myself
in a twin bed beneath a stranger*

*honesty lies in unfamiliar nakedness
sweat and smudged lipstick*

The moon rests at her feet
broken at the heel—
And the folds fall to the floor
but meet the balance:
hair pinned beneath a crown
of solar systems.

*we live inside the sun
each casting shadows
against blazing brilliance*

*i can wear black
but i will never leak darkness*

Moss cloaks fingernails
daisies cling to ribcage
roots emerge from the earth
and make a home of her throne,
growing in the place behind suns.

*bury me in a pod in a seed under the earth
I will root and burgeon
at limb and trunk*

The writ of creation rolls quietly
into her hand.

perhaps my leaves will touch yours.

II. Kentucky Tobacco

Bleeding green begins with dirt.
Cracked fingernails harbor hostile earth
stolen from lands stolen centuries ago
when wet air breathed pure
through foreign lungs.

And now a bruised land
sown
worked
owned

by that familiar foreigner
the soil shifts and fresh dirt
meets air thick
with smog and sweat.

And that dirt turned over
to sow seeds scattered across the field
like rat droppings
on the barnyard floor.

Antifreeze drips from a pickup truck
and vermilion leaves turn their faces to the open sky.

He sits on a stool, feet dragging on the sticky floor
don't cough then I'll want to
the action reflexive,
like yawning

With the sting at the back
of a scratched throat and charred lungs
he inhales formaldehyde and exhales cancer,
flicks the stub onto the pavement and leaves it
burning

he smokes outside of his church
and learns about the mass two days later
there are a lot of options
and
I'm not really thinking about it yet
and
it's stage two
and
I'll be okay I'll be okay I'll be okay

III. On the Black Warrior

in the violet hours when the sky gray and purple swallows the sun before spitting shards back into the over-head

I sit with you on the river’s edge
the sludge slogs forward, discarded aluminum trapped in the shadowed reeds
even our chrome creation fell to the gray purgatory of this instant
when light seemed frozen
/
or perhaps not frozen
but slowly absorbed into the pollen motes swimming above our heads
some pastoral image—

but for the cigarette drooping from your fingers and the rotting
from your lungs or this injured soldier I cannot know

gangrene lays thick on my tongue I’ve been breathing in this river air—
not gangrene for the decay has metastasized
cut out the steel mills and an oil rig oozes puss into this place we dip our feet

You are ash
I sit next to death and look upon the dying in this light darker than new moons

a bee flits past to do its part and you do yours,
flicking your cigarette into the murky waters where it floats
like dead fish

IV. In Warmer Tides

She found a Cut Ribbed Ark
on the sea floor
and made it her home.

The ridges fit together like spines
the rosy pink along in the crevices
her mother’s Sunday church dress.

The curve of her roof a breaching whale,
she ran her fingertips along the top,
following the arching path until
the ceiling met the floor.

She collected algae in the palms of her hands
weaving blankets for colder nights
when the waves rocked her to sleep
in their frigid embrace.

But changes pull the tides
and her home in the kelp forests

between sea urchins and anemones
began to boil.

The color of her world shifted
indigos lightening to a robins egg
as diatome, coccolithophore blooms
die in the heat.

Unfamiliar fish swam above her

and the nets cast down took no notice

no no these waters should be too cold
the phosphorescent coral
outside her shell
calcified

I don’t think they belong here

Ahi Tuna roll only \$7 at Genki

and cracked

nothing but bone.

Stretch Marks

Ashley Jason

Angry stretch marks left by boys outgrown
Mend with the dull aches of broken bones
Their ghosts live beside the girls I've been
Both of which are worn beneath my skin
They call me home for a length of time
Just until they grace my lips with rhymes
And then are spat out like baby teeth
The very moment their roots unsheathe



Pride | Alex Cruz
Photograph

Silence of the Sea

Lyle Lee

There is a street in between Poppy Street and Stone Road that is very wide. People have claimed that several chariots could ride side-by-side through this street, though no one has ever tried. And even if someone did, they would find the task to be impossible. The street has been out of use for years.

The young man knew this, but still he tested the shattered tiles of the road and stretched out his arms for balance. It was a habit from childhood—even though he knew none would give way. He smoothed over his hair and wiped the wetness on his suit pants. Water leaking off broken roofs and dripping from pipes.

“Marsha,” he said suddenly and stopped walking. His arms fell rigid to his sides.

There was silence. Nothing dared to move or make sound.

“Marsha.”

“I’m here,” she croaked and stuck her hand out a window. “Cal. Don’t make such a fuss, you’re disturbing the peace.”

“I only said your name twice.”

“Well, don’t say it any more. I’ve been listening to the radio, and I can’t hear these things when you speak so loudly.”

There was movement, and Marsha prodded the door to her house open with her foot. “I can’t see why you just can’t knock,” she grumbled and plopped herself back into her armchair. “Or at least send notice beforehand. No one likes it when you show up unannounced, Cal.”

He stepped through the door and unbuttoned his coat and hung it on the rack. It was falling apart like the rest of the facility. Hundreds of years of aging wearing it down into dust. He could hear the crackle of radio static and also the steady *plink* of water falling from the ceiling into a pan. “You should consider getting that fixed,” he said and drew his cuffs back down to his wrists. “I could pay for it.”

“No, I like it this way. My company like it, too—the company besides *you*, I mean.”

“They don’t like *this*, they like the way your house sounds. It’s the only thing that connects them with people like us.” He pulled a chair from the kitchen and seated himself. “I can’t imagine living a life like that.”

“Well, they seem to be pretty comfortable with it.” She jacked a thumb upstairs. “Your grandfather’s up there, if that’s what you’re wondering. Still adjusting to his new senses. This is all still so new to him, so you’ve got to give him some time. Maybe if you want to come back tomorrow—”

Cal shook his head and stood up. “No. I’m busy.”

He went up the stairs. Marsha looked into her lap with a wrinkled, unfeeling smile. “Suit yourself,” she said after him.

The wing upstairs had been painted light blue and beige. It seemed too bright and homely for rainclouds. Even though the windows opened up to the dim, gray sky, they were framed with silk curtains that had seen only minimal wear. Cal passed by the open doors until room 4D. Then he looked inside.

There was a single stool facing a bed sagging with quilts. Occasionally muffled creaking could be heard, as if a weight was pushing down on them. Closer to the door was a polished dresser with a note and a cup of sand-colored liquid on a saucer. Drink it all in one go, read the note. If you leave a single drop you may not be able to see very well. Remember, only ten minutes. —Marsha.

“I know, I know,” he said sourly and drank.

He looked to the bed, then above it. His eyes could make out a fuzzy apparition, just barely in the shape of a human. It was gliding slowly around the room like a bird, sometimes flapping its arms to regain height. Looking closely, he could make out a beard, lanky arms and legs, and a gut that stuck out just

slightly above the belt line.

“Grandpa,” Cal said.

“Cal, is that you?” The old man floated down, falling slowly with his arms spread, until he was eye-level with him. His feet never reached the ground, his toes inches away from brushing the laminated floor. “Oh, my Lord. My Lord. I thought I’d never see you again. You came to visit me, I’m so blessed.”

Cal looked at him concernedly. “Are you crying, Grandpa?”

“Oh, no.” His right hand moved to wipe his eyes. “You’ll have to forgive me. This is all so new. The smells... the—the feeling of weightlessness...But I was so concerned that I wouldn’t be able to talk to you again. So many things I wanted to tell you and your brothers and sisters—”

“We don’t have much time to talk.” Cal interrupted.

Grandpa stopped. His face turned gaunt, and his feet touched the floor. “Oh. How long?”

“Ten minutes.”

“Oh, that’s... well...” He laughed dryly. “To be honest, I haven’t seen anyone—for days. Weeks, maybe. Time moves differently here. It’s just me, and now—you. I’m very sorry, I’m not going to waste your time.”

Cal pursed his lips. Breathed sharply through his nose and raised his eyebrows. He took the stool by the bed and placed it firmly in front of him. He sat down with his back turned to Grandpa and reached into his suit and pulled out a clear folder, heavy and thick with papers. He made an act of thumbing through them and shuffling their positions. Then he took them out, straightened them on his knee, and put them back in.

Meanwhile, Grandpa stole curious glances over Cal’s shoulder, pushing himself away, swerving, and coming back in. He viewed the sky through the window as if it were some fascinating phenomena. As if it was a hazy pink instead of gray.

“I arranged for you to stay here,” Cal said. “I met with Marsha shortly before you died and we negotiated a reasonable price for this room.”

“I hope you didn’t spend too much on my behalf,” Grandpa chuckled. “It’s such a nice room. Quaint.” He stretched. “*Hmmm*, it smells like... sea breeze... and orchids, and... *ahhh*, freshly-baked cookies. Can you smell it, Cal?”

He sniffed. “Yes,” he lied. “It’s very nice.”

He paused and turned around. His leather shoes clacked against the stool legs. “There’s something we need to talk about.”

The serious look on his face made Grandpa edge back a little. He knew what it meant when those brows were so tightly knit. “Go ahead, I’m listening.”

“Grandpa, before you died, there were a lot of matters that weren’t settled. There were unpaid bills scattered around the kitchen and passport forms you forgot to complete fully. And you didn’t write a will.”

“Oh, is that the problem?” He flew in close. What could be seen of his hand rested on Cal’s shoulder. “You should know that you were always my favorite, Cal. You deserve a little more than your siblings. What do you think, should I give you a larger part of my former belongings?” He smiled cheekily. “You always liked that clock I had in the living room. Would you want it if it’s still working?”

But Cal wasn’t listening. His eyes were cast to a very far, dark place beyond the room.

He put his arm upon his knee and rested his eyes into his palm. He thought of the state of disrepair Grandpa’s estate had fallen into. Dishes layered with grease sat in the steel sink. Books were stacked to staggering heights, from one corner of the tablecloth to the other, left in the order he read them. All upstairs, the carpet was rough and matted.

What a child, he thought, in one part of his mind. But the other was screaming: too soon, too soon. I’m so frustrated, so angry that he left us.

He held his eyes shut for a while longer and opened them again. They were red and itchy but he hid them well behind his fingers and moved only slightly to rub them.

He checked his watch. Five more minutes.

“Grandpa, I shouldn’t have to do your paperwork for you,” he said. “You had so much time on your

hands, you could've started *something*. Didn't it cross your mind once that maybe you wouldn't wake up one day? That you would die?"

Grandpa squinted. He lowered his voice to a murmur. "Cal, what's wrong? Why are you bringing this up? What's eating you?"

"You weren't prepared to die at all," he said loudly. "That's what's wrong. You sat there and you dawdled on your rocking chair all day. Never made your peace with anything, never gave us any final words. And then one day it happens and—now what do we have left of you? A mess of stuff. Dirty, unwanted stuff to remember you by."

Cal looked at him. Grandpa sat across from him, face-to-face, with a mournful expression. In the little light they had, he looked almost afraid.

"Don't you get what I'm saying here?" Cal pleaded.

"You have to come to terms with the fact that I'm dead," Grandpa replied. "No one is to blame for my death."

"An eighteen-wheeler crossed several lanes from the other side of the highway just to smash into you."

"That could have happened to anyone."

Cal stood up. "When we found you, you were mangled so badly that we couldn't remove your head from the windshield without slicing through your cheek—"

"That's enough, Cal. Please, no more." Grandpa pushed himself back towards the window. It was cloudier now. Rain coming again. He looked older than he ever had, as if the weight of his passing had finally found its place upon his back. His lips opened and trembled and closed. The liveliness of his flight was gone.

"Life's too short to hold grudges," he chided quietly. "We can't turn back time."

Cal shuffled his feet. "I'm sorry," he said.

"You don't need to be."

"We can do all this paperwork another time. We'll talk again."

Grandpa nodded—oddly, like something around there had snapped. Cal swallowed and threw the papers onto the bed. Checked the watch again: two minutes. He cleared his throat.

"What do you see, Grandpa? What's it like on the other side?"

He turned back to him. "Didn't I tell you? It smells a lot like home over here..."

Cal rubbed his neck.

"No? Well... It's very quiet over here, Cal. Silent, like a beach abandoned on bad weather, except you can only hear what sounds are left through thick, impenetrable glass. The lapping of the waves, the call of the gulls—it's all muted. I have to strain to hear even your voice. Something so familiar to me, I'm having trouble recognizing it now.

"I can see you, I suppose, but it's blurry and out of proportion. I can still see how tall you are. How your hair falls past your forehead and to the tips of your ears. Your hardened face, set in stone. So upset, honestly upset. Like you worry for the world every second of the day, and I'm grateful for that.

"Sometimes, from places I can't see or reach, I'm bombarded with memories. They come fast and burst through the glass and hit me hard. I never get to remember the spectacular days or the gloomy ones. Just all the mediocre snippets of my life in bunches: the author's note from a novel I was reading, the taste of your grandmother's stew, my signatures in the guest books of the homes I visited while travelling. Occasionally, pictures. Beautiful pictures of you and the rest of the family, when everyone had to crouch down so the cameraman could get a shot of me.

"Cal, I... lied to you. I can't actually smell orchids or cookies. I can hardly smell anything. Sometimes I have to touch my nose to make sure it isn't numb. I smell the sea breeze, though. It's salty and it stings and it presses me to remember what I've left crossing over here. I don't have any regrets about dying, but if I had known it would be so painful to those I left behind, maybe I would have tried to stay alive a little longer. Just a little bit, for all of you.

"...How much time is left?"

Cal tapped the watch glass. "Twenty seconds."

"Well, I guess that's enough time to brush your hair."

"I'm not a kid anymore."

"I know, but I still want to do it."

Grandpa flew over and reached out with splayed fingers. They passed through Cal's hair and made no movement, but he moved his hand anyway, smoothing down the sides and towards the back.

"It's rough. And wet." He smiled.

"Yeah," Cal said. "I'll take better care of it, Grandpa."

He sighed and relaxed and shut his eyes, and when he opened them again, there was no one else in the room. He turned around and put the stool back by the bed and adjusted the cuffs of his suit. He took the cup that held the liquid and turned it over on the saucer to prove it was dry. Then he left.



Soul Emotion | Elise Ferrer
Photograph

Affair de Rose

Maria Gerasikova

Impatient self immersed in shade of rose
By woven notes of your insightful prose;
Collided glances in a gentle tune
You led, I followed in embrace of afternoon.

My tender torturer, why didn't I oppose?
All senses naked helped you to suppose
That I was tantalized in chamber of my corpse

With thoughts that choreographed overdose
Of spices alien ... to delicate mimose.

Leave Her

Lyle Lee

Bright—so bright that it hurt her eyes. Her eyelids felt heavy and numb, and sweat clung to her like the day after a fever. Had it always been that hot? Usually she let the air conditioner run while she was in the shower, so she could sleep in a chilled room. Maybe she forgot. Or maybe it's the heat of summer.

She slid herself out of the blanket and checked her phone. For weeks, no new messages. She opened up the news and took it to the bathroom, where her feet slapped against the warm tile. With her eyes on the screen, she fiddled with the toothbrush in her mouth before quickly rinsing.

Then she took a look at her bruise. A dark blue circle around her eye, darker towards the center. She leaned forward onto the sink until her breath fogged the mirror. You look like a Dalmatian, she thought. Almost seemed normal on her.

She tried smiling. It came off as a smirk.

The lights flickered on in the kitchen, and she opened up the pantry. There was a box of corn flakes with the cardboard carelessly ripped apart and little else. She dumped it into a bowl, even the sugar dust at the bottom, and checked the fridge. No milk.

She sat by the window and popped dry cereal into her mouth until her husband woke up and came downstairs. He had a muscular face and a thick jaw—beady eyes that gave her a second of a glance before looking away. It used to be handsome. Now, it was scarred. She couldn't even count all the cuts anymore.

He opened the pantry and closed it. Opened it again. "That was the last box? What else do we have... lemonade powder? Canned soup?"

She nodded. He exhaled through his nostrils and slammed it shut. "Aren't you supposed to be at work today? It's Monday."

"We're going to the doctor's office today," she stated coolly.

"Why? Why do *we* need to go to the doctor?"

"It's good for us."

He made an exasperated noise through the gaps in his teeth and crossed his arms and leaned against the fridge. She could feel him staring at his handiwork—the black eye, so perfectly and painfully made.

She pried cereal from her gums with her index finger.

"We're not going," he said.

"I already cancelled plans—"

"No, we're not going."

He was standing over her now. His gentle features were flushed, tense. She watched his body swell with each breath. His brow wasn't furrowed, and his arms were crossed behind his back. She knew, though, that at any moment it could escalate, and they would be falling down the same hole all over again...

"You want to do the other eye?" she asked. Her voice barely more than a whisper.

He closed his eyes and shuddered. She watched his fingers twitch. Then he backed away. "Fine," he said, "we'll do what you want. I'll be sleeping in the back."

He left. She waited until the house was empty of tension. Then she put her bowl in the sink and slipped on her shoes and went after him.

They came into the clinic as unassumingly as they could. Even then, she could feel people staring at her. Suspicious, judging eyes. Maybe they thought they were dangerous people. Or maybe it was all pity.

"Sign in the highlighted boxes, please," said the nurse.

She took the clipboard to a seat. Checked all the boxes and signed what she needed to and handed it

back. Her husband picked at a scab on his cheek, wiping the blood with the back of his hand.

The nurse stood up. "Come with me."

She locked them in a room far down the hall. For a moment, she could hear its silence. She took in its cleanliness and formality in one breath and held it in her lungs for as long as she could. In that short span of time, she felt her mind clear and her soul empty. As if the end of her time was near.

The room was bare and blue and across from her was a picture of the doctor and his wife. She stared at it with flickering disgust, hands so firmly bound to each other that they trembled and her dress was drawn taut. At moments, she felt that she could smile at them. At others, she wanted to cry.

He took one look around, yawned, and closed his eyes. His head tilted back over his chair, and his mouth puckered into an "o." She reached over and traced the cuts on his lip and cheek. Perfect grooves to fit her chipped, painted nails.

"What's with that mouth? Are you whistling?" she asked, too quiet for him to hear.

Then she whistled: "Leave Her Johnny." She paused after the first verse.

"How long are you going to keep sleeping? You think it's better if you ignore me?"

She began the chorus with her lips up close to his ear. She felt him wince.

Halfway through the chorus, the doctor, a solidly-built man with his coat ironed and buttoned on him, rapped twice on the door and came in. "Hello, Mr. and Mrs. Lagan," he said. He pointed. "That's quite the mark you have there..."

She remembered and reached up to feel it. A swollen, painful area on her forehead. It stung mildly when she prodded it with her finger, but not as much as it had the first time she received one.

"You shouldn't touch it. It'll hurt."

"Mm."

The doctor turned to his computer. She saw the screen reflected in his glasses. Pouring over their records with an eyebrow raised. Sometimes he used his hand to cover his mouth, and she wondered whether he was trying to focus or trying not to laugh.

"You've been here a few times," he announced, "but I don't understand why."

"What do you mean?"

"Well, you see, we're a clinic." He was speaking as if talking to someone a third her age. "We treat people when they're down with the flu or a bad cough." He pointed with his pen. "I see a couple physical wounds, and that's it. You could get the same results from a bar fight. I'm not going to question what's happening between you two, but by being here, you're taking up time for someone who might actually need my help. Understand?"

She looked down. "Yes," she said faintly.

He clicked away with his mouse. The documents disappeared from the lens of his glasses. "Anyone with common knowledge could treat those injuries. Each time you come here, you spend money and time on a check-up you don't need." He stood up. "What you need is a friend. Or a lawyer. I'm not...*trained* to deal with these sorts of things."

She was quiet.

He flung his hands. "You're not helping me or you if you don't speak up. This is domestic violence. Do you understand that? This is all emotional. It's between you and him only. He sighed and reached for his cell phone. "You know what, just sit there, and I'll make the call—"

"Wait—no—"

"You need help. You and your husband."

"Don't call." She put out her hands. "I'll talk to you, so—don't call."

He paused, then put the phone away. "Why are you so intent on preserving your marriage? You aren't talking. He isn't listening. There's nothing there anymore. Out of all the times you've been here with him, I haven't heard you two communicate once. Not even once."

She took the time to think, to wet her hoarse throat. After some time she spoke up. "This *is* how we talk." She emphasized her wounds. "It's the only way we know how, anymore."

Silence. He rubbed the back of his head, down to his neck and around it. “There’s some ointment on the counter,” he mumbled. “Antibiotic. Just take it, the nurse will replace it later. And put some ice on those bruises. That shiner especially.” He breathed and began to stand up. “I think we’re done here, Mrs. Lagan.”

They waited in silence until it was dark and empty out, and then she pushed him into the backseat and they drove home. Her husband was still asleep, and she had to push him off of her shoulder multiple times. Sometimes he would say things pulled from his dreams, and she would stop the car in the middle of the road to listen. But they were never good things. Eventually she gave up trying.

She parked the car haphazardly in their driveway and pulled her husband from his seat and through the door and sat him down on the living room couch. Then she shook him roughly until he woke up.

He smacked his lips and looked at her with his eyes half-closed. “Hey,” he said.

She went to the kitchen and filled a Ziploc bag full of ice cubes. She came back and sat down next to him and pressed the bag against her mark.

“What did the doctor say?” he asked.

She shook her head and moved the bag to her black eye.

“Dusty.”

“The doctor said nothing,” she said.

“Good,” he said. The couch groaned as he lifted himself off. “I’m going to bed then.”

“You were just asleep.”

“So what.” He shrugged. “Who cares. I don’t hurt you when I’m asleep anyway. Doesn’t that make you happy? I’m just your little punching bag.”

She didn’t watch him go, keeping her eyes fixed forward instead. When she no longer heard his breath, she looked down to her callused hands. Already the red paint was beginning to chip off the nails, and her skin was starting to sag over her veins. She now had the speckles she only thought she would get when she was old.

She raised the ring finger of her left hand. Like a tight iron clamp the ring had fastened itself around her finger. So tightly that she had to be liberal with soap to remove it.

Meanwhile, her husband slept soundly in the room upstairs, most likely making the same “o” as before. She wondered the last time they slept in the same bed.

It must have been when he wore navy blue suits and polished brown loafers—keeping a respectful image, he claimed. He wore them to job interviews and family gatherings and even those nickel-and-dime diners that spotted his ties with ketchup and bacon grease, which he would anxiously try to remove.

When she kissed his forehead each morning, she smelled the shampoo from his hair and felt his forehead wrinkle in amusement. He had a strict code for cleanliness and also for mannerisms. “Call me Tom”: that was his introduction, always while extending his right hand.

She started doing it too, saying “call me Dusty,” to her fellow teachers and all the kids in her kindergarten. It gave her a boost of energy through the hardest parts of the day.

It was rough even back then, and when they got into bed and pulled the covers over, they sighed because they knew the day was finally over. “Sing me a song,” she had said one day. “Any song. I’m tired.”

Tom chuckled. “Well, I know one. Something I heard when I went fishing with my grandpa, out by the lake a mile from his house in Virginia. A... a sea shanty, that’s it.”

She snuggled herself further into the bed. “Okay.”

He sang:

*Oh the work was hard and the wages low,
Leave her Johnny, leave her.
I guess it’s time for us to go,
And it’s time for us to leave her.*

*Leave her Johnny, leave her.
Oh leave her Johnny, leave her.
‘Cause the voyage is done and the winds don’t blow,
And it’s time for us to leave her.*

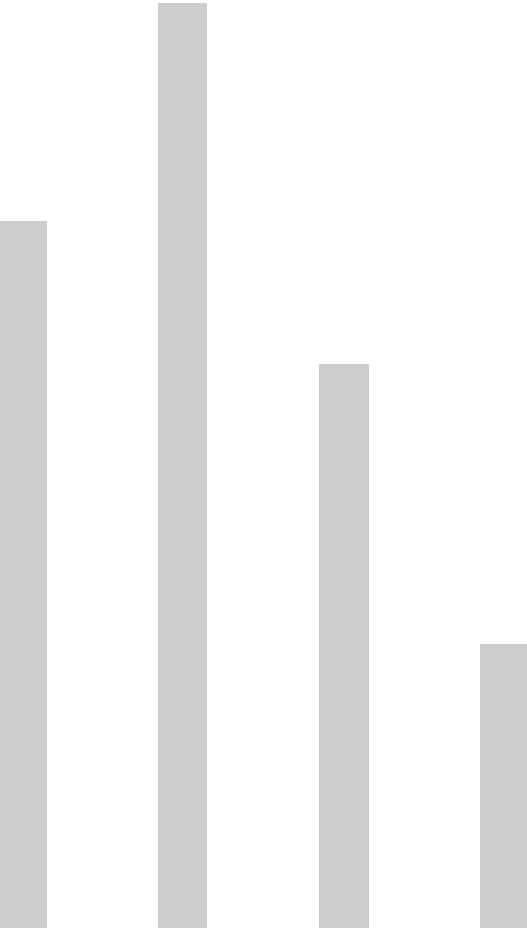


Collide | Megan Fletcher
Acrylic paint on BFK Rives

September 19, 2013 approx 9am; 7000 ft up on Mount Rainier (or, Fuck It)

Kyle Wood

i loom in the glacial wall's shadow / no gate or serpent-path lights my way / i must assail the palisade or
fall back / the Tundra awaits / a quiet cougar stalking / it purrs to my corpse / that i will only find a clois-
ter of rock / should i persist / roars / i am no Lazarus / i eye the plateau / its bejeweled oxygen glints in
winter's sun/ i trace the cleft of ice framing the glacier's base / my new balance is tattered / their haggard
soles held together by glue / can i step forward / dare i go back \ fuck the white-washed meadow / with my
left hand i seize a jagged stone lying at my feet/ in my right / i heft a splintered branch torn from grasping
ice / I stab at serotonin sky



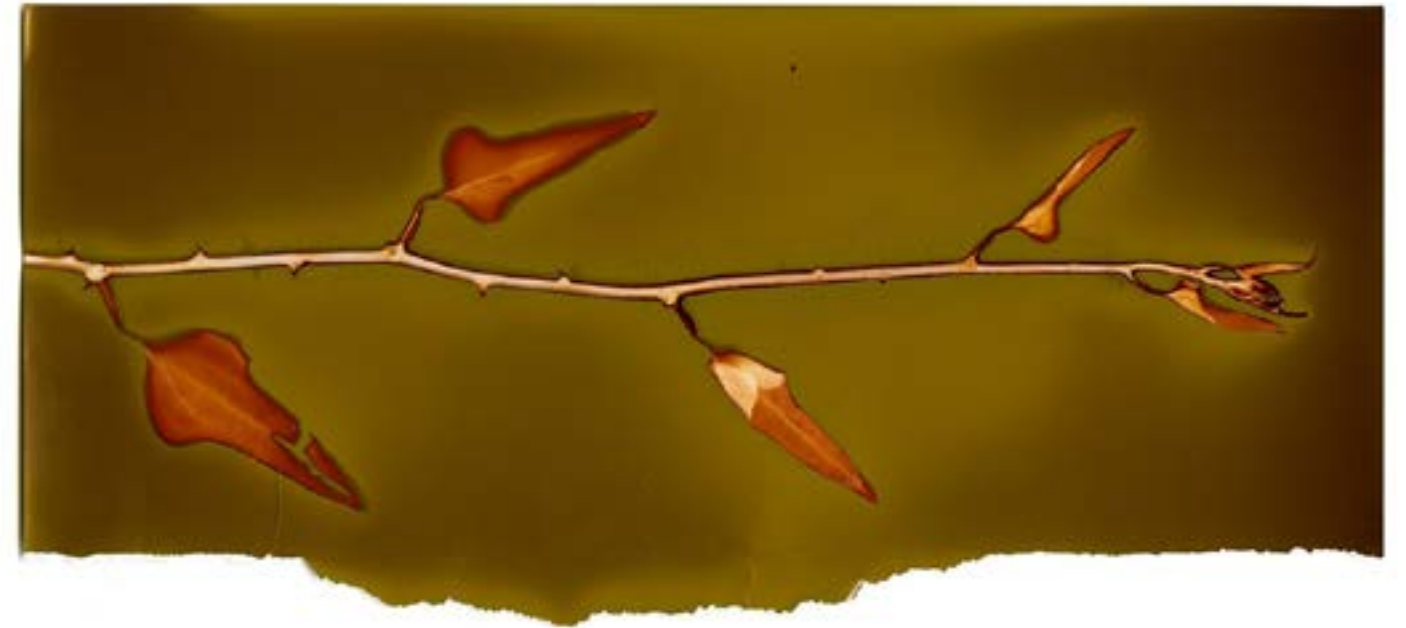
September Loomings

Liz Adair

A single leaf,
nearly fallen and completely browned, dangles
at the fleeting tip
of a whisked spider-thread. The fibrous string turns and turns
and turns in trundling fury, bleached
in the eye of the sun and strung
tight through dampened trees. The wind is still
and dead. Our leaf
pulses away in a flurry of subconcussive
cerebral *thrums*—the beat
of unreal wings;

the whole world is in a tremble.

Your sky-wide eyes,
nearly blue *like mine* and completely dead, blink
and flicker in time
to the dawn's inconclusive *drum*. I think dead things
in September don't seem so dead
in the morning sun.



Lumen Briar Patch | Sarah Ann Austin
Backyard Lumen Series, Tuscaloosa Briar

The Falling Space

Sydney Griffin

the sun was beginning to set
the clouds were full to bursting
with whatever the rain was carrying
the sky was deteriorating into
pink, smeared behind the grey clouds,
unnatural colors that make your body
fall out of rhythm.
up ahead the rain starts to fall.
not here.
i quicken my pace until i reach the spot
where cool air meets the unleashed
unsalted, untainted
drops slipping from the atmosphere
to soak the soil, to slick the earth
i stand there, with one arm embracing
the rhythm of rain and the other
feeling nothing and i think:
i am the in between.



Ink Spill | Megan Fletcher
Spray paint and sharpie on BFK Rives

The Spooneral

Morgan Shiver

Ms. Tennant had no heart—of that, I am convinced. She was 40 years old; I was 8. She had dark brown hair topped with thick bleach blonde highlights; I had sandy blonde hair and forehead bangs. Fine lines rested at the corners of her mouth from a permanent scowl; red Kool-Aid stains usually decorated mine. Her stabbing voice could be heard three classrooms down from her own, making each person shudder as it entered his ear. Although her lectures and scolds were quite frequently addressed to me, every student of hers got his or her fair share of Tennant. Over the course of the 2004-2005 school year, she made every member of my 3rd grade class cry at least twice. I had shed a few tears at her expense (once after she yelled at me for GENUINELY falling out of my desk in the middle of class), but I had never given her what she really wanted: an excuse not to just send me out into the hall or keep me inside during recess, but an excuse to get me into some real trouble, in-school suspension kind of trouble. I didn't plan on ever giving her such an excuse, and I'd do anything in my power to avoid doing so.

My most defining quality at age eight, I love to explain to my friends, is that I was absolutely hilarious. I loved to joke, prank, giggle, and make unnecessary fart noises day in and day out. Developmental psychology tells me I behaved in this fashion because I was new in school and slightly chubbier than average, but I know I just loved to make people laugh. I was a joyful and exuberant child—this is what Ms. Tennant hated about me the most. I certainly wasn't her favorite student (was anyone?), but I was a hit with my classmates, and that's all I really cared about.

Roughly three quarters of the way through my year with Ms. Tennant, just slightly into 2005, I thought of the ultimate prank. It came to me like some kind of divine vision, right out of the blue. I was sitting in the cafeteria with my dearest friends, Bernadette and Haleigh (please add that to your list of “ways to spell the name Haley” Haylee? Halee? Hayley? Haylie?). I'm not sure what exactly was for lunch that day, but for argument's sake, I'll say it was Turkey and Dressing Day, which conveniently occurred on the last Thursday of every month as if there were 12 Thanksgivings per year, not that we were ever allowed to explicitly celebrate Thanksgiving in public school, separation of state and turkey and whatnot. So I was sitting over turkey and dressing with my two friends, Bernadette and Haleigh—it should be noted that I like to eat dressing with a spoon – when I realized that it would be so funny if I slipped my spoon into the pocket of Haleigh's sweatshirt without her realizing it. Damn, I was clever.

I stifled my giggles by means of light snorts as I licked my spoon clean and waited for an opportune moment. As soon as Haleigh turned her head to speak with the boy next to her, I snuck the spoon into her pocket with the smoothness and control of a trained, professional spoon mover. I breathed a sigh of relief as I let go of its handle, releasing it into the cozy folds of her cotton sweatshirt. Having accomplished a great feat, I tried my hardest to avoid getting sent to the Silent Table and chatted and joked with my friends at a completely respectable inside-voice level for the rest of my meal. I forgot about the spoon.

After lunch, we headed out to recess. The kindergarteners at my school got two recesses per day, plus a naptime (I don't think they had much else to do, other than learn how to raise their hands and button their pants). Now that we were 3rd graders, we got no nap and one recess, and we treasured that singular recess dearly. There was a universally accepted hierarchy of playground equipment. Seesaws were okay for a small amount of time, slides were a solid choice, merry-go-rounds were better, and nothing could top the swings. Every day, there was a mad dash for the row of 10 swings located at the very back of the playground. Students were technically supposed to take turns, but we all knew that whatever lucky SOB got his butt cheeks into one of those gloriously mobile seats was going to stay put for as long as possible. The gods above must have been looking down upon us on this particular Turkey and Dressing Day,

because Bernadette, Haleigh, and I were able to secure not one, but two swings at the start of recess. We began plotting our rotation schedule.

“Haleigh, you and me will get on the swings first since Bernadette got to start last time,” I explained. “Bernadette, you can start pushing, and we'll switch out after 5 minutes.” Everyone nodded in agreement. It was a solid plan. Go team.

Haleigh and I climbed atop our thrones and began swinging. Winter was just beginning to fade, and it was still fairly brisk out—not ideal swing weather, but you take what you can get. My hands started to go numb from holding onto the metal chains that were suspending me; I saw that Haleigh was suffering from a similar ailment. To save her fingers from falling off, she secured her elbows around the chains and slid her bare hands into her pocket for warmth. This is why she was in the Gifted Program.

“Wait,” she stated with curiosity while still traveling backwards and forwards, “what's *this*?!” I looked over to see a small silver flash whip past me, grasped in her hand.

The spoon.

Bernadette had to act quickly and grab the seat of my swing to prevent me from falling out of it, I was laughing so hard. Tears rolled down my cheeks. I thought I was going to pee my pants. A smile spread across Haleigh's face as she started to understand what had happened; Bernadette's laugh accumulated into a loud snort. This was the good stuff. This was 3rd grade gold. I had plotted a perfect prank and executed it flawlessly. There was no way I wasn't going to get huge credit for this when everyone found out. I was going to be so popular—I'd better start practicing my signature before yearbook season came around. I couldn't wait to tell the rest of my classmates.

We heard the 10-minute warning whistle. “I knew you were on the swings for longer than 5 minutes!” Bernadette exclaimed, feeling cheated, but still a little giddy over the spoon discovery. The whistle tweeted again, and we turned our heads toward the school building. It was Ms. Tennant; she was the only teacher who felt the need to deliver both the 10-minute warning and the 9-minute 52-second warning.

The thought dawned on us slowly. Haleigh's smile sunk. “Uh. What do you think Ms. Tennant will do if she sees me with a spoon from the lunchroom?” she asked, making an effort to not sound as concerned as she felt. We all knew the answer. I glanced over at Ms. Tennant's cruel face. She was posted at the front of the playground, ready to intervene at any second if a student was having too much fun. Suddenly, I saw myself inside the spiked cage Ms. Tennant was rumored to keep in her supply closet for students who were extra bad. Would anyone ever find my body hidden amongst all of the eraser caps and left-handed scissors? Haleigh and Bernadette must have been imagining similar scenarios in their minds. I felt the nervousness settle in across the three of us. Bernadette gulped.

“We have to do something,” she concluded.

“I know, I know. But what?” I asked, my heart beating faster because I knew this was all my fault.

We weighed several options. We couldn't slip it back into any of our pockets; if it was on our persons, it was incriminating. We considered going up to Ms. Tennant with some sort of excuse. Maybe we found the spoon lying on the ground somewhere, maybe a stranger ran up to us and placed it into Haleigh's hands and then ran away, maybe it was a spoon we ourselves had forged from the rock within the earth, all in just 20 minutes. These were all convincing excuses, but the thought of confronting her was too much. However, we knew something needed to be done, and it needed to be done fast.

“We're going to have to bury it,” I announced. “It's the only solution.” The look in Bernadette and Haleigh's eyes told me they understood. This was a risky situation. “Let's go, quickly!”

We all dropped to the ground right there under the swings and started moving sand out of the way with our hands at lightning speed. It had been about 4 minutes since the 9-minute 52-second warning whistle. Time was fleeting, and we needed to get that spoon as far away from Ms. Tennant's eyeline as possible. Shortly after we began digging, we hit the actual earth that was hidden beneath the swing sand. “It's too hard,” the gifted Haleigh observed as she held up her dirt-filled fingernails, “we'll never be able to dig deep enough.” She was right, there was no way we could accomplish a proper burial in such a short amount of time while only using our bare hands. The sandbox had been shut down in '03, and all of its

plastic shovels were long gone. It was hopeless: we had no equipment. Except...

Yes, it was cruel, but we had no other choice. Desperate times call for desperate measures. We forced the spoon to dig its own grave. It worked extremely well, although its handle did become a little disfigured from the pressure we applied. It was public school cafeteria quality silverware, after all. When we decided we had gotten deep enough into the ground, about 5 or so inches, we gently lowered the spoon into his final resting place. The end of recess bell rang, and we hurriedly pushed the loosened sand/dirt mixture over the evidence and packed it down tightly. Relieved, we turned our backs on the 5th swing from the right and the little fresh, brown rectangle that now resided underneath it.

The three of us were certainly on edge for the rest of the day. We avoided answering questions, and if we had to get something out of our backpacks, we pulled the zipper extra slowly, so as not to disturb the class with any unwanted ruckus. Ms. Tennant never said anything to us. All three of us left her classroom that afternoon completely unscathed. We were off the hook.

We didn't even try to get the swings the next day (Chicken Noodle Soup Day, I believe). We were fine settling for the seesaws.

Towards the end of 5th grade, struck with the sudden nostalgia one seems to feel at the close of an era, Bernadette, Haleigh, and I decided to try and recover the spoon before we moved on to middle school. Ms. Tennant had been moved to 1st grade. Her classroom was on the opposite end of the school from the playground, so we felt safe. We attempted to unearth the spoon's grave, searching tirelessly under the 5th swing from the right for the duration of an entire recess, but found nothing. We came to the conclusion that the spoon wasn't meant to be found. We had left our mark on Dames Ferry Elementary.

• • •

There was a story on the local news channel this past summer about a group of construction workers who discovered an old Native American bowl buried in the ground of their work site. It was exciting enough to make a local news story about, I guess. But it struck me because the workers only uncovered a single bowl, nothing else. No cups, no plates, no forks, no nothing, just a lone bowl that had ended up deep in the ground somehow. I wondered how this could happen; it seemed unlikely that a piece of dishware would find itself so isolated. Had someone dropped it there hundreds of years before? Was it accidentally left behind by a nomad? Or maybe three young girls had buried it there intentionally, avoiding some kind of punishment they were sure they'd face otherwise. The bowl got donated to somewhere; it was going to be displayed at a college's cultural museum.

I hope that hundreds of years from now, construction will begin on an old, deserted school building. While demolishing the remnants of a swing set, a worker will stop at the sight of something odd—an old cafeteria-grade, rusted spoon with a bent handle. The spoon will be sent to a college. The description beneath its display will read “Antique spoon, dated circa 2005. Found on a school playground, underneath the 5th swing from the right.”





Woman in Red | Ryan Waelde
Photograph

The Price

Magdalene Kennedy

I told him I'd been worrying a lot.
Not about much,
It's just—

I can feel it creeping up on me,
Sliding out of my fingers when I write
And oozing around in my shoes,
So that every footstep marks
The margins of my growing malaise.

There's a tilt to it, a slow teetering
As furniture jostles for space among
My thoughts. A spinning world—
With each rotation I must rearrange,
Pick up the pieces and start over.

I can feel the wind whistle through my veins
And pour out from every window—
It's sucked me dry once again.
This morning, the house is empty,
And the sun rises on those rosy-tinged teeth.

I've been worrying that
The price you pay
Is the aftertaste of that emotion.



Dreamscape | Kyler Dietrich
Photograph

Haiku Series

Emma Wilson

Closet full of cloth
Skeletons. Bury me in
Every dress I own.

...

The sounds of the clock
Are only audible when
You are not with me.

...

At the steering wheel
Captain of my fate
Without a license.

...

A foggy morning.
A Twenty-one gun salute.
Twenty-two years old.

...

Question your elders.
Don't wear a bra on Sundays.
Fuck authority.

...

Two dimensional
Tree limbs hang over the street.
I walk under, whole.

...

"Your boobs aren't normal"
That's what my mother told me.
No boys have complained.

God’s Menagerie

Megan McCarter

There is something about the grounds at night. Something about the way the fairways empty, the lights go dark, the colors dim. The abandoned grounds are a ghost town in the dark, like a museum or empty set. Timeless. Artificial. A world under glass. Waiting. Just waiting...

Simply waiting for the turning of a key.

Then life rushes back.

That’s when the lights glow faint, then brighter. The organ begins to play, the mirrors coming to life as colors dart. And then, so slowly at first, the animals begin to prance and circle to the tune, jumping and leaping, swirling past mirrors. They are painted in their finest, tassels and bows, bells chiming, shoes scraping. Light gleams from flat glass eyes.

Only then do the guests find their way to the fairways, moths drawn to the cords of music and the glitter of lights. In other places, there are rumbles and clatters, bells and whistles, always the hawking calls of vendors with arms gesturing broad. But here, only the organ plays its march. The gates swing open as the animals pause, and the riders rush forth to tame their mounts. They can only hold them steady just long enough to find their saddles before the parade begins again, the endless procession looping around and around.

It happens every day without fail.

The faces change, the noises shift, but the animals hold still. They always hold still – like bugs pinned under glass. Yet bugs at least have the mercy of being pinned and placed while they are long dead: drowned or frozen, *preserved*. But these smiling mounts? No. All someone has to do is look at them– frozen and still, wide smiles pulled over their faces, screaming. That’s what it is: agony, terror, fury. Anyone can see it, in the wide set of their eyes, in ears bladed forward or flattened back. They are being tortured.

What must it have been like? To have life coaxed from wood only to have a hand of God pluck them out, hold them still with careful fingers on either side. Steady, steady, the hand would squeeze, and then the pin, a glittering brass sleeve twirled about the needle’s shaft. How the fingers must have trembled, careful not to crush, and the horses– how they must have screamed at the first prick. And then lacquer would crunch, crumble, a crackling as resistance gave way, and the pin slid through soft, thrust through their backs and straight through the heart.

And then the artistry. Legs must be carefully tucked under, mane and tails spread. Keep them straight, straight as an arrow, no crooked mountings now.

How they must have cried, their last deathly terrors etched to their faces as life drained out. Mouths left agape and legs hanging, suspended like perfect butterflies on their pins. God’s perfect menagerie, positioned and placed, delicate and beautiful as the rigor mortis set in. What a beautiful collection under the glass, each name printed with care. The Military Horse. The Jumper. The Prancer. The Armored Knight.

And yet, around and around they go without anyone ever stopping to look. Could they smell it: that sickly sweet taste that never went away? That noxious taste that coated the back of their throats in a cloying film, a perfume that wasn’t quiet poison but still as deadly. That thick musk as frozen bodies were primed and prepped for the pin? It lingers still, in the rotting of forgotten popcorn and corndogs, in the sugary cavity of spun candy floss, in the sweat of bodies left standing out in the sun, milling brainless between each attraction.

But still, the fair bustles on to that dead organ’s tune.

A bell chimes again, the band striking up fresh, and around and around the horses lurch once more in their endless, endless circles.



Recipe for Success

Almosa Pirela-Jones

—Open a cookbook
Frail spine and yellowed pages
Well-read—
Millions of recipes exist
On the terms of
Their creators—
Opportunity a pinch—
Or a cupful—
A key diamond encrusted
Or caked in red creek clay.
Close the cookbook—
Open a door far from home
Or a window in the pink parlor of
Your Nana’s third floor apartment—



A Pack, A Spoon, A Candle | Sarah Ann Austin
Photogram Cyanotype printed on handmade paper made from my children's clothing

Exist

Stephanie Williams

I don't think you exist.
Not in the way of not coming to exist as of yet,
or not having existed until this point.
But then again, disregarding the notion that you
might have existed but have ceased to exist before
I came to this agreement with my belief.

I don't think "we" will exist.
Not in the literal sense that we don't exist ourselves
or that in this moment, we're living in a moment of non-existing.
But the actual idea that we won't exist, or live such existence together.
Like the combination of W, E to form such a word that means our
existence together.

I don't think "it" should have existed.
That means just as you've read it.
The initial action of "it" having come into existence
between "we," me and "you."
The "it" that exists in regret that was a mistake
since its inception, and now "it" must live a life
Of no one wanting it to exist, existed, or continue to
in any shape or form.

I, "me" will continue existing
As hard as existing already has become.
Now I must live in my existence with the
unfortunate knowledge of not wanting you to exist,
although you do.
Or "we" to exist, although we almost did.
Or "it" to have existed, or resent the fact
that it has to.



'Til Death Do Us Part | Sarah Westmoreland
Photograph