



YOU

Letter from the Editors

To our readers,

This magazine is about You. Yes, all of you. The freshman who just figured out where her classes are, the mechanical engineer with the heart of a poet, the sprinter who struggles to balance track and school, and the rest of you who make up this community. This magazine was made about you for you. It's about your friends and family, your neighbors, and even the occasional dog. We've collected their stories and images here, and we hope you can find bits of yourself in them.

Yours,

Hoda Fakhari
Anjali Chacko

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Editorial Policy

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is chosen through blind voting and panel review. All works presented are created in total by UIC students who are of undergraduate standing within the course of the 2017-2018 academic year. They represent only but a small portion of all UIC writers and are not necessarily associated with the UIC Honors College.



Pure

by Uliana Solovieva

Ascension

by Madeline Kremenec

My light hazel eyes peered up
 over the top of a hard book cover
 that had been dropped a few times,
 with slightly torn pages from careless readers.
 I locked eyes with these familiar
 dark leather brown halos.
 With that look, it was like
 a novel that had been kept shut
 for so long finally
 got a gust of wind to flip through
 all the pages.
 The memories rushed back in.
 I wished to jump back to page 56,
 where our story just started to get good.
 Yet, that page was water logged.

The next chapters had few legible remains.
 There were mornings spent at brunch,
 nights spent watching Netflix
 while I fell asleep in your lap,
 attempting to match each other at parties,
 our first Christmas
 But the soft I love you's written in black
 started to fade against the eggshell stock.

Still, I refused to look away from my favorite novel yet.
 The story had begun,
 the first chapters written,
 but that gust of wind shown light brightest
 on the pages toward the end that remained empty.
 I locked eyes with dark brown orbs,
 hoping to write the rest of our story together.



Horizon

by Neelima Borade

Wilting

by Anastasiya Loos

A rose is adored when in bloom,
 encouraged when unfolding,
 welcomed when a bud,
 and rejected when she wilts.

We respect her beauty
 and bask in her sweet scent,
 but we forget that she is mortal.

My mother was born a rose.
 Growing up, at times
 her punishments would prick me
 and I'd feel pain, if only for a matter of seconds,
 before she picked me up and I felt
 the softness of her cheeks once again.

In present time, regardless of her perfume,
 she carries a sweet scent about her,
 a flower always in bloom.

My mother is not an athlete,
 but she stands tall and graceful,
 a ballerina always ready to perform.

My mother is a rose and I had forgotten of her mortality.

I have not heard of roses
 engaging in cannibalism,
 self-destruction,
 weathering themselves away,
 and yet, my Mother's body is at war
 with itself; her very beauty is
 the source of her pain:
 my mother is wilting,
 wasting away.

The kitchen counter lies covered in medical bills,
pink ribbons coat health booklets,
the question of everyday is
what did the doctor say?

It seems she is at the doctor's
more often than at work;
when I ask how she's feeling
she tells me she's okay,
but I recognize the fear in her eyes:
she doesn't know...
Nobody knows what will happen.

My rose lived a strong and healthy life,
but roses are only mortal and begin to decay.
Now it is my turn to go the garden
and tend my flower.
This year has brought me pain
and rains of salt, but it has also
returned my green thumb:
I develop a closer bond with my mother each day
and together I plan to nourish her stem,
so that one day I'll go to my garden
and forget there was a time that she did not bloom.



Cattails

by Tasqin Zehra

The Man You Didn't Help

by Abigail Kremer

Remember when you were boarding that train? You saw a man that needed help with a newly mandated Ventra card. He couldn't figure out how to use it, and teaching him would have wasted less than thirty seconds. He called out to you in a crowded station, and you just walked away. You pretended you didn't hear him, you turned around, and you walked away.

You didn't even stop to think about what he was asking- why he was asking. You didn't even think about what he was missing by being late to his train. You couldn't even stop to feel sympathy for this poor man because you were too selfish, and you couldn't spare him those 28 seconds it would have taken to help him. You'll pay, you'll pay; this is what God says. Even worse than that, he believed you. He really, truly believed that you hadn't heard him, so he thought nothing of it. Would you like to know why he believed you?

He was blissfully in love. He was having a great day. He had just gotten a pay raise and he was to use it to put a down-payment on an engagement ring for his girlfriend of two years. It was she he was going to see.

It's a shame that he was wrong. It's a shame that you really did hear him and could have helped him. But you didn't.

It was 5:02 pm when you were on your way home; nothing could possibly be worrying you. It was 5:22 pm when the man you didn't help was on his train. Now his brow is wrinkled in worry.

He and his soon to be wife were to meet where they had their very first date. This had become a bit of a routine for them. They would walk into this old, well-washed coffee shop, and sit in the very last table in the back of the shop, bathed in its warm light. He would order two coffees, one black, one mocha with extra sugar.

They were to wait outside for each other at 5:30 pm, but it is 5:22 pm right now. He might barely make it still. The man thought this wouldn't be a problem; he was actually a bit early when he left. But, don't you remember, he had a problem.

He was blatantly ignored by you, and had to search the train terminal for ten minutes before he finally found help with his new Ventra card.

It was 5:30 when you got home because the buses were running late, as usual. You were just finally jamming your key into the lock of your front door.

It was 5:28 pm. The man you didn't help was worried now. He

would now, no doubt be late. "No matter," he thought, "She's always a minutes or two late, and I'm always a minute or two early, it will just be a bit different this time."

It was 5:29 pm when the train came to a screeching halt. A voice buzzed the train car to life, "We are experiencing slight technical difficulties. The train may be stalled for 10 to 15 minutes."

The man you didn't help grumbled in frustration. There went that happy thought.

It was 5:46 pm when you were sitting, watching the evening news, wondering about how on earth some people hurt other human beings without a slight malicious afterthought.

It was 5:58 when the man got off his train.

Now, the coffee shop where the man and his beautiful girlfriend were to meet was not in the best neighborhood. Drugs pass through the hands of criminals in the shop daily. *But the coffee there is like no place else*, the man thinks, *surely the place can't be that terrible*. He was rushing down Chicago streets; he was panting like a dog with sweat trickling down the nape of his neck. It was 6:00 pm as he turned onto the coffee shop block.

The man's future wife was not worried however. She didn't think anything of it. Actually she didn't think at all. Can you guess why my dear?

She was outside the coffee shop waiting for her beloved significant other when a 2004 SUV malfunctioned. The driver of the SUV lost control of the vehicle and drove directly into a young woman wearing a pleated yellow skirt waiting for her beloved, killing her on impact.

The man you didn't help's heart fluttered the moment he turned the corner and red and blue flashing lights met his eyes; his soul was crushed like the woman's lungs. An inhuman cry erupted from his lungs as his reason for living breathed her final breath.

As the man's soul was ripped apart and set aflame, yours was being nourished, as you laid on the couch with your fiance while watching movies that lulled you to sleep.

The man cried on the way to the hospital, in a silent ambulance.

And you? You were completely unphased. You were just fine. You even read the newspaper article that was written the day after the tragedy occurred. The tragedy that you caused. "Woman Killed in Freak Accident." You thought it was horrible. You didn't read the entire article though. You were too busy being a selfish person as usual. You got bored halfway through. Even if you had read the entire article, you wouldn't have known that this horrible incident was caused by you.

You are the one to blame here. It was your selfishness. It was your ignorance that killed a beloved woman. You'll pay, you'll pay, this is what

God says.

You were left undamaged from this incident. You went throughout your entire life without receiving the full repercussions for your actions.

The man was left a hollow shell of what he once was. He tried living the rest of his life, but your actions made such a luxury nothing but whimsy. For six months he sought treatment. Psychologists, therapists, and so many pills did little for him. His aching heart collapsed into a black void that couldn't be filled.

He ended it all by driving head first into a commuter train. He'll pay, he'll pay, this is what God says.

You noticed your commute was delayed.

Is this you? Who's to say. The all-knowing man in the sky has that answer right? Just food for thought... Think about it the next time you have *better things to do*. An eternity of damnation now, all because you are ignorant you.



The Girl Outside of the Train

by Gregorio Illner

The Party's Over

by Ronald Josh Ytem

The party's over.

My only company is somebody I never wanted to meet
again.

He doesn't talk, only gawks and mocks
and marks every second that passes that I haven't said a word.
Or heard a word directed to my ears.

My beer gets less heavy as the label gets less legible.
I'm terrible at prepping plans with future friends and
Handshakes and awkward hugs are goodbyes I've gotten too familiar with.
I wish for forty seconds more of people on my side of the door.
Or to take time and silence that sound,
tick.

tick.
and ground time so it can never fly next time I am distracted by my distress
of loneliness.

But now, the party's over.

And I'm beating my chest
I guess I've become senile
See the scars of an agoraphile.
I'll be in the corner of the coroners closet.

as far as I'm concerned,
That's where I've always been.
All these bodies of forgotten friends.
Watching my bridges burn
has been my only sin
since I was born, and reborn, and reborn again.
Goodbye.

Please stop me from burying my talents for an unknown wealth.

The party's over.



lights, camera, inaction (stop staring
straight through me)

by Mahal Schroeder

How I Feel About Myself Some of the Time

by Seraphina Violet Cueller

So you're like this mountaineer type fella, right?
Like Bear Grylls,
but more climbing rocks, less fucking with animals.
You've hit the biggest mountain of your life.
In fact, every mountain you've ever climbed has been at the base
of this goliath.
Fuck that, you are the Magellan of Mountains.
Except you can't hike mountains to circumnavigate the globe,
but still you're like Magellan-level good.
So you're climbing this mountain that was touted as an impossible feat.
Fuck that noise.
You're doing it.
Prove the sons of bitches wrong.
You're up real fucking high in this bitch.
Like on a cliff face.
You look up and squint and barely see where it ends.
Stare up long enough and it looks like the cliff is giving way to the face of
God hanging in the stars.
Then again, the human brain is well acclimated to making patterns out of
nothing.
You're up super high on this cliff and your face is numb from the chill.
Your nose is .2 seconds from falling off.
So it's going well.
You're awash in exhaustion and the rock under your right foot straight up
disintegrates.
So you look like the offspring of a squid and a noodle right now as you are
clinging spread eagle to this cliff face.
Let me tell you, you are clinging on as hard as you can.
Then something snaps.
Like you just cannot anymore.
So you don't
You just let go.
You're falling.
When you're falling it's not romantic,
it's not like a dream.

You're just dead ass falling.
So you hit the ground and you are comatose.
Not like in a normal coma.
Everything within you hurts; the only escape is sleep... or drugs.
The best solution is drugs that induce sleep.
Your brain is foggy and you can't understand the world around you.
You're not sure if it's because you can't comprehend the world,
or you just don't want to because of how maliciously it's torn apart the
seam of the fabric that used to hold you together.
You know that your bones are broken from the fall and you should
probably hit up a hospital,
but somehow all your limbs can still move
even though your brain is telling you that they are all broken.
That's when you find out the god awful truth.
Doctor walks in and is like, shit bro you're good to go.
You don't feel good to go,
In your mind, all your bones are snapped.
In your mind, you should be dead
at the bottom of a perilous mountain,
but actually you are just laying on your kitchen floor at 4AM weeping.
You never fell from a mountain.
People said you were climbing a mountain.
They told you you were climbing a mountain because it was easy for them.
If you were this glorious adventurer off climbing mountains,
then no one, including you, had to justify why you have no friends.
Great adventurers don't have time for small, genuine interactions.
If you were special, it supplied the base argument for all the boys
who fucked your body and told you that you were too important for them.
The great adventurer never existed because everyone made up the
fake ass mountain
So you would feel special holding your glowing participation trophy.
While everyone else was getting degrees and keys to houses and
exchanging vows,
You were clutching to your fake ass mountain.
A mountain created out of pity as a half assed attempt to befuddle the
inept nerd you didn't have time to deal with.
So they left you in a corner reaching, hand after hand, grasping on
smooth walls,
climbing your great illusion and letting the world think you are an idiot.
It wasn't heroic.
Fooing you doesn't make you feel beautiful.

You are an explorer who never got the honor of meeting failure.
At least if you failed in the real world,
there would be a tangible monster to die under.
Right now, you're the psycho bitch hanging in a corner unable to even
scream to herself.
The blatant disregard for you shows itself in their underestimation.
But maybe they are right.
Then the only mountain you've earnestly built is the gross overestimation
of yourself.



Icarus

by Samantha Tupas

The Creator of His Earth

by Tyler Benavides

Pandemonium is but dust between the pages of a lost paradise.

Not for fear of God,

For God does not dare enter upon the luscious green

More divine than Eden.

Graceless, no,

Existing harmoniously

Within His sacred autonomy.

Across the vast church of the earth

His home blooms in full;

Heaven found in the reflection of the forest

In His eyes.

A soft whisper

Of Latin roots

Seeps between His lips:

Meu Coração.

An embodiment of His natural beginnings,

A presence encompassing

The sweetness of Original Sin

Creates a relative of an Eve of legend

Once His finger

Traces the veined porcelain

Of Her.

A holy love

Dug in the lands They were borne from,

A welcome entity within His world

For although He is never separated from the earth

That shares His very soul

So generously,

She is but a gift in return.

Love as pure

As the light that caresses Their faces.

King of the spanning green,

His Queen of His being,

So delicate in Their union

To conquer what vast callings

Await in His world.

I Brought You a Dog

by Abigail Kremer

The familiar tune of the doorbell greets my ears. I think it's that little ding-dong-ding sound that gets stuck in my head. I was sitting on the floor of the hallway between my door and my living room. I haven't been so good lately.

I don't think most people sit on the floor of their own home next to a large empty bottle for hours on end, just to stare at the wall and trace all of the possible patterns to be made in a faded polka-dot wallpaper. There's another insistent ding-dong-ding and I turn my gaze from the eventful, elegant, and intricate wallpaper to look at the door. I don't answer it. I just stare.

"Calico, open the door," words call from behind oak.

I wonder who that is... I should answer. But I'm just fine sitting here.

"Calico please just open up."

More words. Am I going to answer? I'm not answering for a reason; I'm pretty sure that's true.

"Calico... I have a dog."

Before I can think, I'm off my butt and I open the door, slightly winded, searching desperately for the puppy I was promised.

I look up at the young man who opened the door with my sad, betrayed eyes.

"Where's the puppy?" I ask.

"I lied" is the answer I get.

I slam the door in his face. I knew that boy, what was his name. I know his name. I don't want to think it. Too much work...

I go back to intently staring at the wallpaper. I trace an elephant, a cat, a dog, the young man getting cut in half... another dog.

Who in their right mind jokes about having a puppy? Quite honestly, I'm not dog obsessed, but if there is one, it just makes me so happy. But he didn't have a dog and my hopes were let down. What else is new?

I'm not sure how much time has passed. I don't know, I can't tell. There's another ding-dong-ding. Then another. Then I'm assuming he just holds down the button.

"Calico... I got the puppy."

I say nothing.

"Calico come on. I didn't drive all the way to the animal shelter and adopt a dog just for you so I can be ignored. Please just open up."

"You lied to me!" I shout.

There are a few moments of silence when I hear a snuffle behind the door. Next, I hear scratches against the oak.

Slowly, I open the door to find a calico colored dog with brilliant blue eyes staring up at me.

Silently, I pick up the puppy and turn away.

"You can come in. Don't try apologizing again," I turn away from sad puppy eyes to play with the bright one in my arms. Looking back I say, "You can sleep on the couch."

I start playing with the puppy. Its eyes are so pure. I lift up the puppy and look. His. His eyes are so pure. I hold him like a child.

"Calico please, please look at me. I didn't mean--"

"I'm naming him Lunchbox."

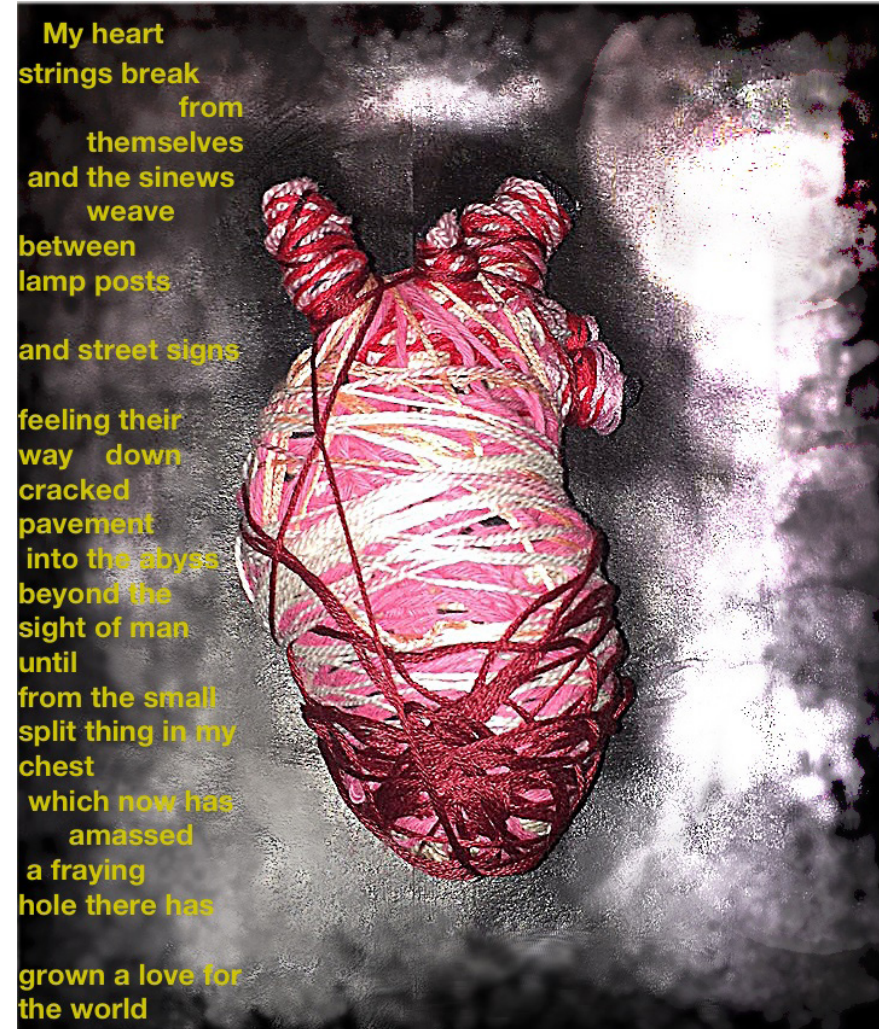
"Calico, I love you."

Those words... mean something. They stop me in my tracks.

All I can do is turn away from the door and start heading upstairs. At the final step I gather up the courage to speak without a cracking voice.

"...I loved you too."

It's quiet when I climb up the last step.



Heartstrings

by Seraphina Violet Cueller

baggage

by Nick Malone

I spent the night before I saw my first love for the last time watching 9/11 conspiracy videos and Shawshanking through a wholesale-size bag of shredded Chihuahua cheese until I felt like I had to throw up. Once I felt my stomach start to bubble and squirm in protest, I hoisted my MacBook and shitty body out of bed, went to sit by the toilet, and got to Googling.

“Rigor setting in on a dead horse.”

“Drone bomb victims.”

“Voluntary sex slaves.”

“Drinking liquified animal fat.”

No. Better.

“What comes out when you get liposuction?”

No. Better.

“Has a doctor ever drank what came out after liposuction?”

No. The best.

“How fat do I have to get to qualify for liposuction?”

My stomach came to rest more quickly than I'd expected and instead of getting to vomit undigested cheese in a warm bliss, I fall into one of those sorts of sleeps that feels like you didn't sleep at all, but instead watched the hours tick by while you blinked over and over and prayed for the sun.

I met Liam like how people meet in porn- chance brings two strangers together and they wind up

fucking just to- what? Pass the time? Have the story? Risk getting caught for either the inherent turn-on of sneaking around or the inherent possibility of a threesome? Whatever our motivations were, I was fifteen years old watching anime in a stranger's basement bedroom when I lost my virginity and had my first kiss in the same span of fourteen minutes (I counted.)

At the time, I was only out to my closest friends- not that the rest of the world couldn't have guessed, given my bored valley girl drawl and insistence on wearing neon blue chino pants- but right before we kissed the first time, we came out to each other. His parents were as Type A as they come, and the A was for Asshole, while mine barely batted an eyelash when five-year-old me demanded posters of both the Spice Girls and Britney Spears to display above my bed. Yet somehow, when we fucked, he seemed more level-headed, more sure of what we were. Regardless of how much I enjoyed it, how much I loved talking to him and how impossible it was to get him out of my mind, I ran off and tried sex with a girl because I'm a slow learner. It should go without saying that I gave Liam a call very shortly after a brief stint of hooking up with an aspiring teen B-movie actress named Ashley whose nails I painted after we fucked.

At this point, I should mention that Liam was turning 21 when we met. I made a habit of getting

dropped off at a friend's house most weekends, then texting him their address so he could pick me up to go out and spend the night with him.

It was fun until it wasn't. I woke up one day with a radio static in my head that deafened me and created a pounding in my temples. I wished I was one of those people who remembered nothing, but I remembered everything. I sobered until it subsided and realized I'd lost him. Two years ticked by, marked with random missed calls, drunken voicemails from someone I barely recognized on anniversaries of our Firsts, or times when he wanted to blame me for not being able to walk in a straight line. I had no desire to save him, no drive to watch the good parts of him that could sometimes be heard through crackling phone lines circling the drain.

But something clicks in me that I don't expect to on a Friday night. The refrigerator buzzing turns out not to be a big enough buffer between myself and thoughts of imminent death and all the ways it could very well happen to me. I scroll through my contacts to find him how I left him- a cropped photo of him in a hat that I bought while he holds a dead trout, and a number illuminated in blue, because I don't date people with Androids.

Wanna come over? I type.

His response is almost instant.

I thought you weren't talking to me anymore.

Shut up. I'm bored.

Why can't you ever just say horny?

Because that isn't what I mean, and that word is gross. I'm bored and I'm gonna lose my shit if I have to spend another second alone in this house.

So, I have to be a babysitter?

Yeah, but you might get to fuck the baby.

Okay, that's gross.

I know, I'm REALLY sorry. I regretted that the second I sent it.

Lol, I'm on my way.

I recite along with the commercials between TV court cases while I wait for him.

“If you or a loved one have been diagnosed with mesothelioma, you may be entitled to compensation,” I whisper. I'm deeply engaged in a case in which a mother sues her own son for refusing to pay her back on his moped loan. The son insists she said it was a gift, but I can't think of any mother in her right mind who would bankroll an adult man getting a moped.

I hear the familiar rumble of his old station wagon getting louder and louder. When the knock on the door finally comes, I play it cool.

“Come in,” I shout. My phone vibrates.

I've never been in your house b4.

Come and get me.

I lift myself off the couch, walk over and press my forehead to the cold wooden door for a moment, taking a deep breath. I open the door and there he is- towering a good head over me, a short military

crew cut, a small mouth curled into a smile, arms behind his back.

"Hi," escapes my lips.

"Hi," he says, and pulls two pre-rolled blunts and a condom from behind him, smiling wide. He walks past me with a quick kiss on the cheek before diving onto the loveseat in front of the TV.

"Why do you think I don't have my own condoms?" I can't keep from smiling at seeing him in my house for the first time- he seems violently out of place, like a cable guy overstaying his welcome.

He laughs a little. "Wait, you mean to tell me that you haven't just been *waiting around* for me this whole time? That you just *couldn't* move on and just *needed* to be in my arms?"

I pull his hair hard enough to make a point, but just light enough to show that I don't actually care as I take my seat. "You're an asshole, and that thing is ribbed. I don't have a vagina, that is *not* going inside me." I reach over and take an unnecessarily long hit before plopping my body down on the couch and wondering if I made myself seem too heavy. He smiles at me anyway.

"What should we watch?" Liam murmurs, landing his feet on the ottoman, absentmindedly clicking through the guide. He drapes his arm around me and it feels foreign and familiar at once.

"Keep scrolling," I say, sliding in closer to him. The best thing about being high is your superhuman focus on any and all television

screens. The worst part is that if a home invader had come in at that moment, there is no shot in hell that I would've noticed.

I grab his thigh and he jumps. "Ooh! That one," I say, my eyes flickering.

"Jesus Christ, you fucking scared me. This?"

"Yes! Oh my god, you're gonna love it."

"What is it?"

"Okay, so every episode, there's an eligible bachelor or bachelorette looking for love and there are three contestants with three pieces of baggage filled with super fucked up things about them, and the bigger the bag, the more fucked up it is, and if the bachelor can't take their baggage, he sends them home. Whoever's baggage he *can* handle wins a date."

Liam processes for a moment. "Okay, I think I get it. What would your baggage be?"

"We dated for almost two years, can't you just guess?"

He smiles. "I mean, I could, but I want to hear what you think yours are."

"Okay, that's fair. Do I get to hear what you think mine are after?" I ask, wiggling my eyebrows at him.

"Don't you want to hear *my* baggage?"

"Not really, no."

"You're totally only half joking and that makes it *so* much worse," he says mockingly. He clicks his teeth at me. I wriggle in my seat.

I pause for a moment, letting my brain tinker and turn. "Alright. I think that my littlest baggage would be that one time... I was all alone, it was really late at night, I totally had my door closed, and I said the N-word with a hard R."

"Holy shit, why?"

"I don't know, just to see how it felt, I guess."

"Did you like it?"

"Not even a little bit. Nobody was even there and my skin was like, crawling. I went online and donated five dollars to the NAACP afterward."

"You're kidding."

"Check my bank statement."

"I don't think I want to." He takes another hit and inhales sharply. "What's your medium baggage?" He asks, coughing.

"I guess it's probably that sometimes I lie and say I'm only 17 so guys with teen fetishes will have sex with me."

"Guys with teen fetishes? You mean pedophiles," he winces.

"I mean, to be fair, you were one of them."

Silence between us for a moment. I break it.

"It's been a really long time since I've seen you look this healthy."

"Oh. Thanks, I think."

"It's a good thing. You look like how you looked when we first met. Being clean took, like, five years off your complexion." I offer a laugh.

"More like a hundred," he says,

twirling the remote around in his hand, staring at the screen. "Coke made me look like a corpse, not like someone who's just too old to be wearing a drug rug." He looks at me almost blankly. "After the last time that you decided you weren't talking to me-"

"You mean the last time you ripped a line and abandoned me at a party where I didn't know anyone?" I interrupt, angling my face down to glare at him. Not in a mean way, we've talked about it already. Just in a way that reminds him where we stand.

"Yes, that time. I swear to God, in those couple months, my eyes were so sunken and grey and like, Angelina Jolie-esque that a group of like, four high schoolers asked me if I had any *PCP*. I was in a *suit*."

I choke a little on the smoke. "I want to think that isn't funny. Really, I do."

"Dick."

I pause. There are a few reasons I called him over here. "Have you seen Chris lately?"

His face twists. "Really?"

"Yeah," my voice dips into a whisper.

"Please don't do this. I really don't want to go there today. Let's just hang out."

"Okay." I wait. "Do you want a beer?"

"Sure."

I hoist myself off the couch and head to the fridge. I take two PBR's from the back row so my mom

won't notice they're gone. I realize that all the people from before he got clean are probably on his black-list now.

"Do you ever think really ugly things?" Liam calls suddenly.

I return with the beers and take my seat back on the couch. "I mean, yeah, obviously. I basically just told you that I gave being racist a trial run. What do you mean?"

"Like, sometimes I think about killing myself after I turn 60 because I don't think people are capable of smelling good after that."

I snort and tilt my head to face the ceiling. "There *have* to be some exceptions to that rule."

"I have never met a person over 60 that I wanted to smell," he says, almost somber, almost resolute.

I stare at the ceiling fan until it turns into one big white UFO, napalming us with little specks of dead skin.

"Well, I mean, as long as you're just thinking it, I guess that's not so bad."

"Okay, but I don't always just *think* bad stuff. Sometimes, when homeless people ask me for money at the train station, I pretend I'm deaf."

"What the fuck, Liam."

"I'm serious. I start speaking fake sign language and I've done it so many times that it's just second nature to me now. The other day I did it with earbuds in."

I turn back to face him.

"I mean, that's fucked up, but I

know a girl who pretends she's pregnant so she can get a seat on the bus every time."

"That's not the same. She's a woman, she has to lie to stay alive. I don't have any of that going for me. I'm white, I'm a guy and I have a decent job. I literally always have singles to give. I just really like getting a Coke before my train ride home." He looks down at his hands like a guilty toddler.

"You don't have to be Mother Teresa just because you're white. Get your Coke, just don't pretend to be deaf while you do it."

"I guess so."

The whirr of the fan washes over both of us until it begins to sound like the roar of a great ocean.

"Mother Teresa sucked by the way." Liam mumbles.

"Yeah, I just feel like it's a little tone-deaf to point out the little bad things when she did so many *good* things," I counter.

"Do you really think that secretly baptizing people on their deathbed is just a little bad?"

I shrug a very dramatic shrug. He raises an eyebrow.

"Also, tone-deaf? You do realize you're wearing a blue bandana. Like a Crip." He tilts his head downward and raises his eyebrows in judgment.

"Are you serious?" I scan his eyes for any trace of a joke. "Gang members don't wear bandanas on their head like fucking Rosie the Riveter. God, you're suburban," I

sigh, lifting myself off the couch and toward the kitchen.

"So you don't think that stuff makes me a bad person?" he calls from the living room. I stand in front of the open refrigerator for a moment, thinking not only about the question, but about whether or not he'll think my life has fallen apart if I bring back a giant carton of pizza Goldfish along with my beer.

"No, I don't think that thinking old people smell gross makes you a bad person," I call back, closing the fridge and deciding against the snacks. "I mean, I'm glad you don't work in hospice or anything but I don't think it makes you *bad*." I go back and join him on the couch and lace my hand in his.

"Do you remember when I first started driving and I made you come to the gas station with me every weekend because I was so afraid I was gonna blow up?" I ask.

"And you realized I was wearing a wool sweater so you made me *ground* myself on every type of material on the car, and then *still* made me walk all the way down the block?" He shakes his head at the thought. "Static electricity really isn't that powerful. I don't know why you watch videos about science. You hate science."

"I know," I mumble, and lay my head on his chest. "It's not science I hate. I think it's just God," I say into his shirt.

"I know, babe. He made rules

no one likes. We gotta roll with them, though."

"Fuck physics."

Time inches by like a glacier, we pop beers open with a snap and fizz like clockwork. My head rises and falls on his chest and our legs intertwine, taking root in the torn up paisley loveseat that I picked out from Ashley Furniture when I was thirteen. If I'd known he was going to see it one day, I would've picked something different. I would've made the more grown-up choice, something burgundy, something leather. I trace the hem along the side, watching my index finger rise and fall. I glance up and notice him staring down at me.

"What?" I ask. I smile and hide my eyes behind my hands, then part two fingers to stare back at him anyway.

"Why'd you call me over here?"

His face is stony, serious.

"I didn't call you, I texted you. I'm a child of the Internet, this isn't Wuthering Heights." I smirk up at him, swiping at the tension in the air with all I have. He doesn't move an inch.

"You're an English major, do you really think they had phones in Wuthering Heights?"

"You know what I meant."

"Fine, then. Why did you *text* me over here?"

"I mean, you said yourself, I can never just say hor--"

"No, that's not it. We've been laying here for hours. Why did you

really call me over here? I know there are other guys you could've called if that was it."

"Well *that* is the most flattering bullshit I've ever heard in my life."

"You're smarter than this."

My heart races and I feel like I can't break his gaze or something very bad will happen. If I lose the staring contest, 9/11 will happen again. If I lose the staring contest, my mother will die. If I lose the staring contest, I will gain fifteen pounds.

I pull myself off of him, never letting my eyes leave his. He's right. I am smarter than this.

"I'm really lonely, okay?" I feel my voice break and I shake my head a little. "You made me really lonely. I stopped needing to impress you, then I took a step back and realized how exhausted I was and now I'm scared to impress anyone else."

He says nothing. His face doesn't soften.

"I only know how to impress you. So now, no matter where I am, I feel alone. I am alone."

"You wouldn't have to be if you didn't want to." His voice is clear and cold.

"Thanks, that's really helpful." I scoff and break eye contact, fiddling with my cuticles while I feel the burn of his glare.

"You know the best version of you."

"*I know*," I say, a little louder than I'd intended. I flick my eyes back up. I can hear both of our

breathing.

I just want to feel something.

My lip quivers and I can't make it stop. I sigh and feel tears well up in my eyes. I wipe them away quickly and defiantly.

"Do you want to know my biggest baggage?"

"Sure."

"I got raped and you let it happen."

"What?"

"You heard me. And everybody thinks I'm fucking crazy because I don't care. And everybody thinks I'm stupid because whenever I think about you, all I think about is how you're the only person in the world who understands why people with Tourette's are so hot. Or how much I like sitting across from you at Denny's, knowing you're gonna order a short stack with a dish of *plain blueberries* on the side like a fucking serial killer. Or how much I like hearing your shitty, loud car outside my window at three in the morning because I *know* your dad gave you money to fix the muffler and you bought hibachi for us instead. Or how I *never* want to see you happy with somebody other than me. Or how I never feel like a person, and *always* feel like a joke about a person until I'm with you. But I don't get to say those things, because those are stupid things to say. And now all I feel is fucking... stupid." I inhale, trying to get the tears to climb back up my face and into their ducts. I swallow my sobs until they sit in my

stomach in a calcified deposit that I can get sucked out for a doctor to drink.

"And now you probably think I'm stupid too," I choke out. "I can't even think of any other words."

I feel the heat of his stare start to cool. He puts his hand behind my head and runs his fingers through my hair, gliding with a tender gentleness, scanning my face. He makes a little frown.

"I didn't want to hurt you. I still don't want to hurt you," he says.

"I know."

The only thing in the world that moves is his hand through my hair. We sit there staring at one another for just a second too long.

"I just wanted to feel everything. I just wanted to feel safe."

"You're smart. You've always been smart." He tilts his head a little, like a puppy. "You know you can only have one of those."

"Yeah."

He clicks off the TV, pulls my head toward him and kisses me. He tastes like citrus gum and Carmex.

"It was really nice to see you," I whisper between kisses.

"It was nice to see you too."

We go upstairs and I choose.

Laying on my side, I take a deep breath in and feel his arm draped across my chest, our naked bodies rising and falling in a steadfast calm. We work as one, each a well-oiled cog in the other's machine. I don't think about anything, but I feel

something, so I say it.

"I love you," I whisper into the blackness. "You don't have to say it back if you don't want to."

The room spins like one of those tunnels that make you dizzy at a carnival. The room spins like how he spun me around on the dance-floor when he snuck me into his band's first show. The room spins like the universe, outward forever, further and further, shrinking our heartbeats into the deafening silence of space.

"I love you too."

I feel my face cool, draining of its reddened life.

"Okay."



Unapologetic

by Madeline Krmenec

Drive-In Love

by Darius Vinesar

Chrome glints in the sonorous air,
 An air vibrating with the pangs of drive-in love.
 Shades of lipstick bloom among
 The nimbus clouds of popped corn.
 Oh lips were kissed, necks held,
 Veins on legs traced like a map on a road trip.
 They smiled at each other in their cars,
 They danced when Chuck Berry came on,
 Teenage weddings, in the stroke of a batted eye,
 'Twas a cherry red '53.
 Again, the pangs of drive-in love.

Home

by Anastasiya Loos

Grass strokes my naked knees
with little flicks of thin fingers--
cold and smooth;
sunlight rays stream summer warmth
and kiss my forehead brown,
 lips imprint themselves too.

The twittering of the birds tiptoes into my ears,
but my eyes are blind;
I'm looking at the blue
eyes that hold the yellow sun,
 the green grass,
 and black opals
that look into my own.

Home
is not a house
 or an object to call *mine*:
blue eyes painted with flecks of yellow and green are
Home. I am looking at the front door.

My head rests upon skin and bone,
but this beating heart is my lullaby,
singing sweet dreams to relax my eyelids
while a chin dozes atop my kissed forehead.

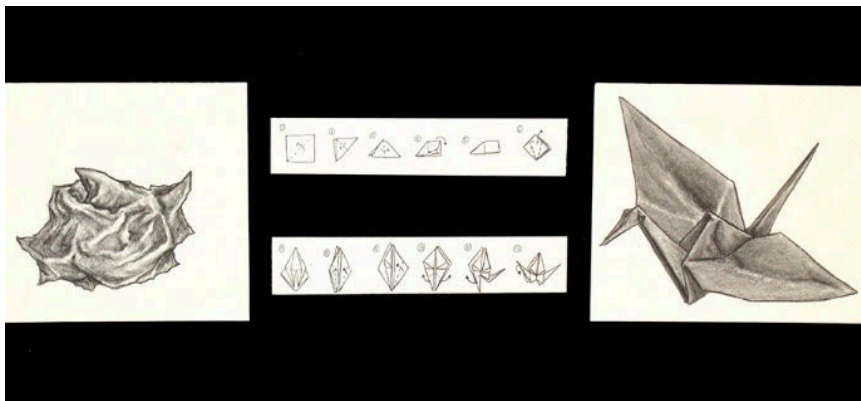
Wind ruffles the chattering leaves
that sway to wave and words murmur
into my ear simultaneously, with the hand
brushing loose strands of hair behind my ears.
The air grows chilly and arms embrace
Me
 in place of a blanket.

I'm safe within these arms:
monsters cannot touch me,
 fear cannot conquer
 my conscious and pain is but a dream
 from forgotten time.

The sun dives to slumber
and the moon rests high above us
upon its pedestal,
 overseeing this house being built;
crickets call out to each other
beneath the quiet stirring of oak trees
and we are still here in this field--
vacant of people, illuminating essence.

Stars beckon games of hide-and-seek,
spotlights on you and I within this vast expanse
of field, but our eyes
play with each other,
 winking in unison.
Our hearts thump with the chorus
of nightfall in this fabricated garden;
we are percussionists, leading this night song.
 Fingers caress hands while feet gently rub
 against chiseled calves.

This is my bed, this is my
pillow, my blanket, my sanctuary.
This is my nightlight, my guardian
Cradle. My neck softens, my lashes flutter,
and I dream of never leaving.



Same Instructions, Different Siblings

by Mahal Schroeder



What Do You See

by Shannon Park

That Was You

by Brody Ford

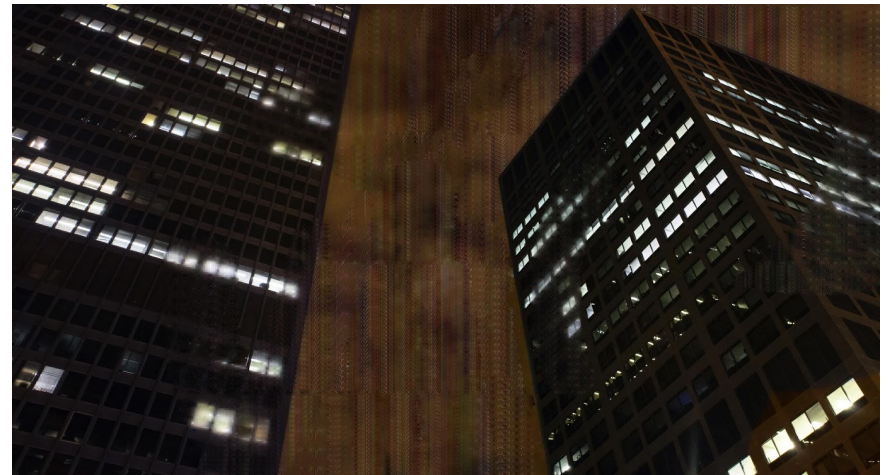
Running, running, running. Night had come and like those before it, the skies were shrieking. This time I could barely see them, save for their blinding light piercing through the fog. My heart was racing as I sprinted through back alleys and behind buildings; I pushed people aside, I did anything I could to escape their gaze. I eventually ducked into an underpass, and the spotlight beamed a few blocks down. I must be safe. That was when I heard the deafening bass roar of one of the planes coming towards me. They'd found me. This was it. My heart was pounding harder than it maybe ever had. I started running again, sprinting, my chest burning and my appendix about to burst, but fuck, it was all I had. All I could do was stay in motion. I looked back and couldn't even scream when I saw that hulking thing coming towards me.

I bolted upright, out of breath, my heart pounding out of my chest. I looked around, re-orienting myself. The light from my phone was blinding. 4:21 am. I was okay. I was safe.

You killed someone. You did that. That was you.

I tossed and turned for a while before resigning myself to stumbling out of bed and pacing around for a little. I sat by the window, rolled a cigarette, and stared out to the city before me. Night was at its depth, yet the concrete menagerie was bright with its familiar orange hue. The city had never felt as intimate and lonely as it did at that moment. The suits of the day were gone. Absent, too, were the crowds of the night. Yet, life survived. For those awake, the city was truly theirs, and the true character of the metropolis revealed. From those working the night shift on Roosevelt to the faceless high rises behind them, everything had a role. Through my window, I could see it all.

I managed to get back to bed, and figured my mind would be right in the morning. It didn't matter how long it had been. I'd never be allowed to forget.





Footsteps

by Gregorio Illner

Me and the Devil Blues

by Jackson Krause

Do you see the fire, mama? It rises up out the manholes, out the vents, and stickies the asphalt under my feet. I go home and I track black tar on my floors, and my skin burns like I'm eight years old, too close to the stove. I can see the flames and feel the heat from the floorboards. When I close my eyes, I see the old Crossroads.

I know I told you about it last month. I started singing their regular lineup, every night but Sunday. I sing Johnson and Wolf from a stool, and let the music blind me. When I dream, I picture the doors, I see the stage, I smell the alcohol and some rotten egg stench behind the drums. I never find out what it is.

She don't burn like everything else.

She's surrounded by flames on all sides but never burns -- I see shadows dancing round and round the building, lit by yellow light, the only lights on the whole street. I see fire belch up from the long grates on the ground. The dogs circle around me and wait for me -- when I wake up, I still see them. Walking across the walls, in the swirl of my coffee cup, in my face in my reflection. They wait for me to leave, they follow me to work. The dogs and the flames and the heat, driving me fucking crazy -- pardon my French.

The old man Sam Simmons told me not to sing there. He does jazz at the Jackson red line, and good jazz too -- begging dollars from strangers when he used to get hundreds. I see him every other day, and when I saw him last, he scolded me. That old bar, he said, it remembers you. Something underneath it waits for you. Changes something inside of you. Burns you up and spits you back out.

Sam's got half his face chewed up, burned up it looks like, and he told me, there is evil at the Crossroads. I don't know if he's seen it. Some old blues singer went missing from there a few years back, he said. Vanished after a show and never seen again. Maybe he sang Me and the Devil Blues, too. Maybe we summon something when we do.

Now it ain't no ancient bar from back in the Capone days or nothing, it opened six years ago, after some old restaurant got torn down. It's got red wallpaper and black booths, framed photos of Buddy Guy and all the others, and a stiff curtain between you and the back room. I sang for weeks and everything was fine. Remember when I stopped by, and you'd made that roast? It came apart like butter, and you sang in the kitchen. Do you remember what I told you?

I came into work two weeks ago and sang Me and the Devil Blues. I made it half the way through before everything went red, and all the eyes in the audience turned pitch black. They still went about their normal business, and I kept singing. Then their faces all twisted up in front of me, stretching out and in until their skin ripped away and their bright white skulls sang along to the music, but I kept singing. The room started spinning, and red and orange and blue swirled around me, mixing together like liquids and paint. The shadows crept in from the sides and swam in the colors, black tar dogs skipping around, all blurry. My own music stopped sounding right. It changed pitch, got deeper and slower, until my voice just stopped. My throat felt rough and painful and on fire and my voice left my body, then. And I passed out there on the stage.

Maybe there is evil in the Crossroads, mama.

The owner, Lily, she was the first thing I saw when I woke up, waving a bar menu over my face. I think I left you another message that night, I thought I told you. I think I called you. I don't remember. The shadows followed me home. They won't leave me alone.

I remember, I remember I was the only one on the bus that night. I heard voices on all sides of me, but nobody was there -- the bus kept stopping and the doors kept opening, but nobody got on. I got off and the bus driver's face twisted down at me, he smiled at me and dog teeth stuck out -- and I ran off as fast as I can. I can see his face in my head as I tell it to you, clear as the day two weeks ago.

I don't know what's happening to me. I don't know what to do. I'm so scared, but I can't leave, not when they're out there, waiting for me, watching me, with growling stomachs and maws, stinking like rot and fire. They'll chew me up and spit me back out, dead.

Shh! Did you hear that?

I can hear them. They're outside my bedroom door. The hellhounds. The hellhounds. I'm gonna die, ain't I? The hellhounds following me. You know what they say about Robert Johnson? He sang about it too, he sang, "I went to the crossroad, fell down on my knees -- asked the lord above, have mercy..."

Beep. The mailbox is full and cannot accept messages at this time. Goodbye.

"Shit."

"Darrell? You home? Your back door open." Sam stands in Darrell's dark kitchen. He looks down and sees black footprints on the floor, out of line with each other, wobbly, leading away into the dark of the living room. It's humid and quiet and just after midnight, and Sam can smell something pungent, something like rotten eggs. It's unmoving in the air and fills his nose, and it doesn't let go. Sam coughs into his shirt. "Darrell?"

Dishes are piled high in the sink, and a crowd of empty food cans sit beside them. The apartment is long and open and lined with windows, street lamp light glowing into the connected living room. Sam follows the footprints to the end, where a record player sits on a small table in the corner. There's a record still under the needle. The humidity turns to heat as Sam walks a little closer, and he sees a Robert Johnson slip on the floor, and yellow eyes from behind the table.

There are shadows all around him.

They creep in the corners, under the windowsills, and on the ceiling. They creak the floorboards and rattle the pans in the kitchen, faint and barely noticeable. Sam sees them now, everywhere, making up the darkness in Darrell's apartment. They've been here the whole time, he thinks. Sam makes a sound in the back of his throat, a hum, and stares at the fuzzy shadows on the walls. He feels in his pockets for something, and pulls out a rosary. He hugs it to his mouth.

Underneath one of the shadows, sitting on a loveseat, is Darrell's cellphone. Sam picks it up, quickly, backing away again from the shadows. It has no password. Darrell has eighteen missed calls from his mother, four

from Sam, and six from Lily.

Sam tosses the phone back on the couch. He follows the drunken footprints into the hallway, where thin scratches rip up the wallpaper. The prints and the scratches all end at Darrell's bedroom, where the door is closed, and Sam can see waves of heat floating off it. It prickles at the skin under his jacket, makes him sweat, makes him pull his shirt up over his nose to block smoke that isn't there. "Darrell?" he calls, quieter. He pictures the flames, but doesn't touch his scar.

His throat feels wrong.

Sam coughs, the back of his throat tight, scratchy, wriggling, moving. He coughs into his hand until he feels wetness, a solid lump, a humming, a buzzing, and he watches bees squirm in his palm, wet and bloody on the rosary beads. He shouts and drops it all to the floor, backs up against the wall, and breathes rapidly through his nose -- one, two, three.

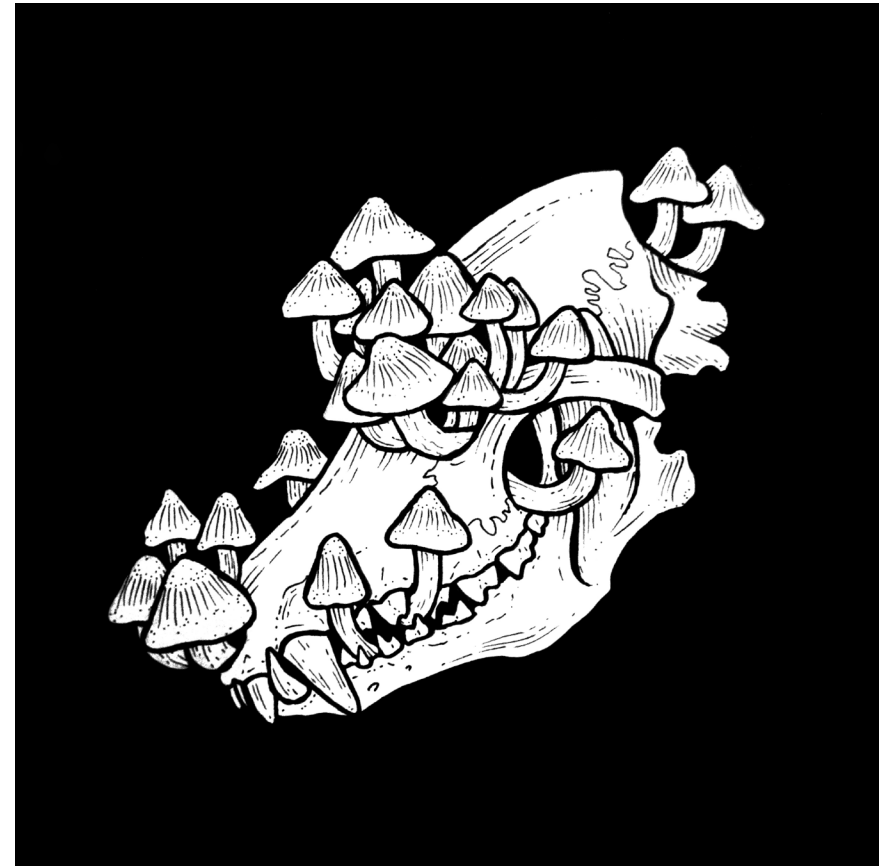
Darrell's a stupid fool, he thinks, and pushes the bedroom door open. The shadows, the black dogs, they don't follow, they don't pass the line. They stay out and around, away from the bedroom.

There's a thing in the center. It's crouched down next to the bed, hidden from the light of the window, just a figure in the darkness. The floor is black and sticky, and steam rises up and off it. The air is thick and the thing is growling, Sam realizes, and then it's standing, and then the light pulls its face from the darkness.

Darrell is in the room, but Darrell is not in the room. The thing, the growling thing has Darrell's body and the face of a dog. It has black matted fur and yellow eyes, and a rancid sulfur smell that grabs Sam by the throat and buzzes in his ears. The thing snarls. It has curling tusks that stick out every which way from its body, one from his forehead.

Sam holds the rosary to his chest, wrapped tight around his shaking wrist.

"Boy, I told you not to go to the Crossroads."



Growth

by Jackson Krause

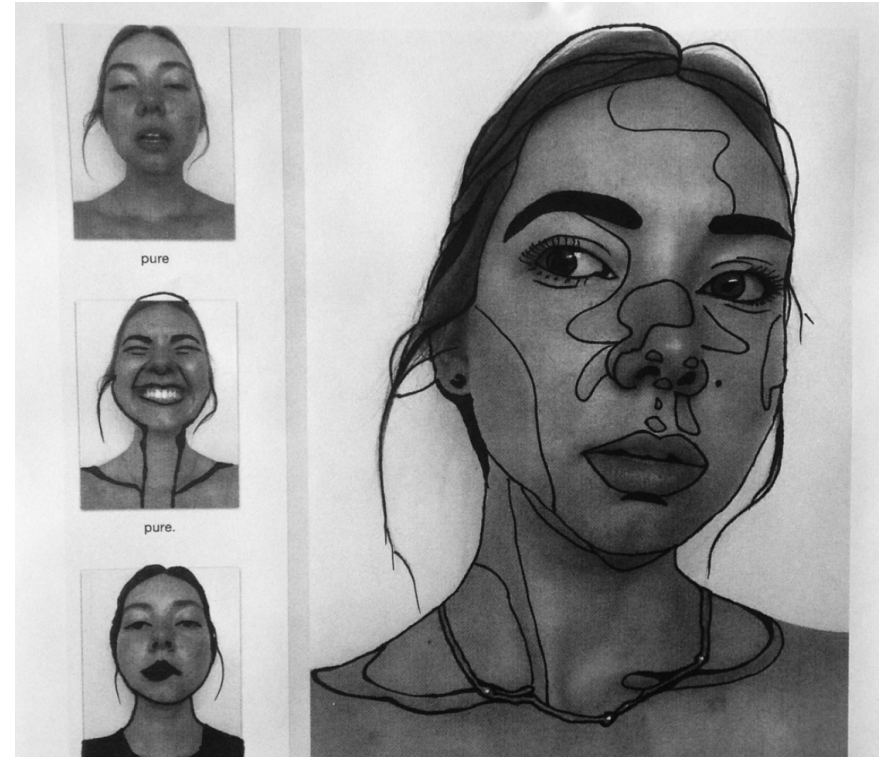
Serenity's Cavern

by Uliana Solovieva

Lamenting the past, as I've looked in the glass
I see without sorrow the ends will not borrow
Of my greatness's loving folklore.
Rewrite my story anew, wishing that could be true
But the moments are flowing beyond time and space.
They let me erase the willing disgrace that has cast a dead iron of hope.
I'm chained to my mystery, I'm chained to my fate
Without it, my consciousness starves with regret
Of the loving chains that once kept me afloat.
Conundrum appears as clear as day,
At sunset, I yell for my freedom, the yearning of winds
But with sundown I weep with the urge to be chained.

The mystery cavern appears inside,
It glistens with tales that I've kept silently shut,
For master or freeman it seems to repent,
The crawlingly speculative force of rebel.
I want neither virtues nor motions inside,
Rather, fathomed abolishment of what I have found.
To leave all at once, to glee as do winds of joy,
Wherever one steps, the cavern lets low,
For a minute or two, just to give me a break,
And then it collapses with burdensome weight.
Up or below, within or without,
The cavern I hold I is sacred with doubt.

The glistening cavern with tales I've repressed,
Bubble surmountably through fabrics of breath,
I'm left with observing - the worst action to those
Whom life hasn't taught serenity's premise.



Pure

by Uliana Solovieva

Mermaid

by Darlene Ymson

Harold woke to the sound of his beeping alarm. Its monotony droned for several minutes before he mustered the strength to pull himself up to sit and dangle his feet at the side of the bed. His protruding potbelly was the first thing he saw before his feet, and he sighed at the sight of its roundness and weight.

He heaved himself up to get ready in the bathroom, once again sighing at the sight of his potbelly. He stared at his receding hairline, and pulled at the patches of gray-brown hair before letting the strands run through his thick fingers. Pouting at the sight of their fineness and dull color, he hopped in the shower so he could at least feel better about being clean.

After drinking a quick cup of coffee and scarfing down some toast, he rushed into the cold December morning. Harold's gaze only met the ground and the streets ahead, avoiding the eyes of fellow commuters and the homeless. Walking past dark store windows and closed restaurants, he would glance at his reflection, taking note of the thickness in his chin trying to hide itself in his jacket and his big cheeks that were as round as a snowman's head on his stocky body. Despite his face and neck, he thought to himself that, even though his black coat had slimmed the shape of his potbelly,

he didn't look good enough. The red hat that concealed his patchy head did nothing either.

He descended into the subway below to take the White Line downtown. The off-white tiles of the tunnels reflected packets of brightness from the grimy yellow light, and Harold paid no attention to the blobs of himself on the walls. In the train, he was sandwiched between fit and stylish twenty and thirty somethings. This made Harold squeeze himself inward to not only make more space but to hide. It would only be seconds of comfort before the train lurched and his belly would bump into the young woman in front of him. Luckily, her eyes were too glued on her phone to notice.

At B Street, he shuffled off the train with many of the yuppies who were less than eager to start the day. After taking his time going up and out of the subway tunnels, Offices Incorporated's towers of glass and steel stood before him with superiority and pride. Harold entered the middle tower to begin his day at work.

Harold typed reports about finances, meetings, and other important things that anyone else in the office could do, but chose not to. He was one of those employees who started as an intern and went up a couple steps to what he was now. He had been at it for 20 years and counting, and for many times that he could count, he thought of quit-

ting because the job really seemed pointless to him. Typing reports and barely speaking to anyone except to ask about the weather and the next meeting was the only human sound amidst the quiet clicks of keyboards and the occasional phone ring.

Harold sighed after finishing two reports. He turned off the computer screen to stare at his round cheeks and his thick neck and chin. He was angry at its gross curvatures and the sickening way it folded as he looked down, and he forcefully squeezed and pulled at every part of his face in the hopes of taking it off. It was 11 am.

At lunch, Harold took a bite of his leafy vegetarian sandwich hoping that it would bring him satisfaction, but to no avail. He slammed the sandwich down in frustration on the crumpled paper bag it came in. He took a sip of water and looked around. Sitting by the tall glass windows of the Offices' café was a slender, beautiful lady with soft legs, a black pencil skirt teasing what was underneath, and a white button down that was opened to tease her breasts. She had a barely noticeable sharpness to her cheekbones and less than round cheeks that seemed to slightly compress inward, almost giving her that supermodel face. Her bright red bob stood out from the rest of her appearance, giving her a pop of color, and Harold looked closely to notice that she had bright cerulean eyes. Harold was so

surprised that a woman as beautiful as her was sitting by herself. She didn't seem to mind, however, but like Harold she had a displeasure for the veggie sandwich. She took a bite, gagged a little bit, then put it down.

Harold did not hesitate. He took his food and water and immediately sat next to her.

"I don't like it either," Harold said.

"Oh, hello!" she replied and smiled at Harold. Her voice was light. She added, "Yes, I really wish they made vegetarian sandwiches... not taste like vegetarian."

Harold laughed loudly. This caused the other people in the café to glance at him with raised eyebrows.

"What's your name?" Harold asked.

"Betty. A pleasure." She extended her hand and Harold shook it. Some men at the table nearby were whispering and laughing at Harold, but he did not notice.

"I'm Harold. How long have you been working at Offices Inc.? I've never seen you around."

"About 20 years. I do the 'important things' like type reports about finances and meetings."

Harold chuckled, "Me too. It's a drag, isn't it?"

Betty returned the chuckle, "No kidding! I started as an intern and I rose up a little bit to where I am now."

Harold gasped. "No way, me too!"

Betty laughed, "It's like we're the same person or something!"

Harold paused and his smile faded, which caused Betty's smile to fade.

"We are not the same person."

"HAROLD! There you are! What the hell are you doing? Your lunch break ended 10 minutes ago!" His manager yelled from across the café. "I wanted those reports at 11 sharp, remember?!"

Harold jolted and ran back upstairs.

Once he arrived at his department, Harold trudged back to his cubicle to find Betty spinning around in his chair.

"Betty!" Harold whispered harshly. "What the hell are you doing at my desk?!"

Betty replied in her normal voice, "You forgot to send those reports, so you better send them."

"Betty, get off my chair." Harold's voice rose to normal volume.

Betty raised her hands and stood up.

Harold sat down and asked her, "How did you know I worked in this cubicle?"

Betty replied, "It's easy. I work in this same cubicle."

Harold raised his eyebrow in confusion. "You mean 'worked,' right? Because I work in this cubicle now."

Betty shook her head. "No... I work in this cubicle."

Harold was confused. "Okay... If you work in this cubicle then send the reports for me."

"I can't, the computer screen is off," Betty replied.

Harold answered. "It's easy, you just press this button and—"

"Harold, who are you talking to?" said his co-worker Brad. He peered over the divider, because he knew that Harold rarely made phone calls as part of his job.

Harold stammered, "Oh, uh, I was, uh, talking to Betty."

"Who's Betty?"

"She's right--" Harold pointed to where she was standing but she was gone. "She was um, right on the phone." He pointed to his phone. "Yeah I hung up."

Brad nodded slowly, raising his eyebrows in doubt. "Right... Okay, well if you need another cup of coffee or something, let me know. After typing all day, these reports can get to your head, ya know?"

Harold laughed half-heartedly and replied, "Sure, thanks Brad."

Harold sent the reports but turned off the computer screen. Betty was sitting next to him, and Harold silently stared at his old, fat reflection with sorrowful eyes. He resumed pulling the fat on his face until his face was pink and the workday was over.

Harold left the office at 5 pm. Once again, he would glance at store

windows to see Betty in almost every window, wearing the same outfit she wore at work, and each time he walked past Betty would stare at him through the window. She seemed to be in each store at once, haunting Harold with her youth, beautiful face, slender body, and head full of crimson hair.

Harold plopped down on his couch at home and stared at his reflection on the blank TV screen.

"Wanna watch TV?"

Harold wasn't surprised to find Betty sitting next to him. "Betty, what the hell are you doing in my house?"

"I live here."

"Oh, BULLSHIT!" Harold screamed. He stood up and began to pace, running his fingers through his fine hair.

Betty stood up. "Harold, you need help."

"No I don't. I'm fine."

"No you're not! Look at you!"

Harold didn't want to look at himself. He already what he looked like. He didn't respond.

"Look, Harold, I can help you."

"No you can't!" he screamed.

"No, you can't..." Harold began to sob.

"No, Harold... don't cry. Please don't cry." Betty touched his shoulders in comfort only to retract her hands when Harold shrugged them away.

"Harold...you need to do something. You can't just sit here

and mope about your weight, your appearance. You need to exercise, change your diet. I'm sure you'll feel better about this, believe me."

Harold snapped. "Do you realize how many times I've been to the gym?! Tried all these stupid fad diets and counting carbs and calories, push-ups and runs through the park and shit and I've never lost one pound! Never gained one single strand of hair! Never gained one year of my youth back!"

Betty dropped back down to the couch, defeated. "Wait, I don't understand. Why would you think like that? You were doing so well... why..."

She gasped.

Tears welled up in Harold's tightly closed eyes, and for a moment Harold sobbed without speaking. Many tears streamed down his face before he yelled with anger and aggression through his teeth,

"I FUCKING HATE MYSELF!"

"No..." Betty whispered.

Harold ran out the door and Betty chased after him screaming not to do it. She cried and yelled pleading Harold not to do it, that everything would be better, everything would be okay. She screamed "Harold, stop!" an infinite amount of times without end.

He rushed through the streets of the city not giving a damn about the people he bumped past, the accidents he almost caused, the near misses and curses that were thrown his way.

Harold slowed down when the planetarium came into view, and the endless blue lake that surrounded its borders.

Betty grabbed his arm, which caused Harold to stop. "Harold, please don't do this. I can help you. People are around to help you. Brad can help you. Your manager can help you. Please, anything but this."

Harold shook his head, crying uncontrollably.

"You can't help me Betty. You don't exist."

Betty cried, "Yes, I do. I exist for you Harold. Just please, let's go home, talk things through, make things better."

Harold turned around and looked Betty in the eye.

"I can't."

He walked backwards, away from Betty, until his feet were at the ledge, with the freezing winter water sloshing below.

Harold turned around to stare at the water below him.

Betty sprung out of the water to meet Harold at the surface. Her fish-tail was swirling beneath the waters to keep her afloat.

"Harold, I'm telling you, you can't do this. Turn around and go home. Try something new, see a professional. What you're feeling now,

it can be fixed, just please, make life better for yourself. This isn't the right way."

"It is to me."

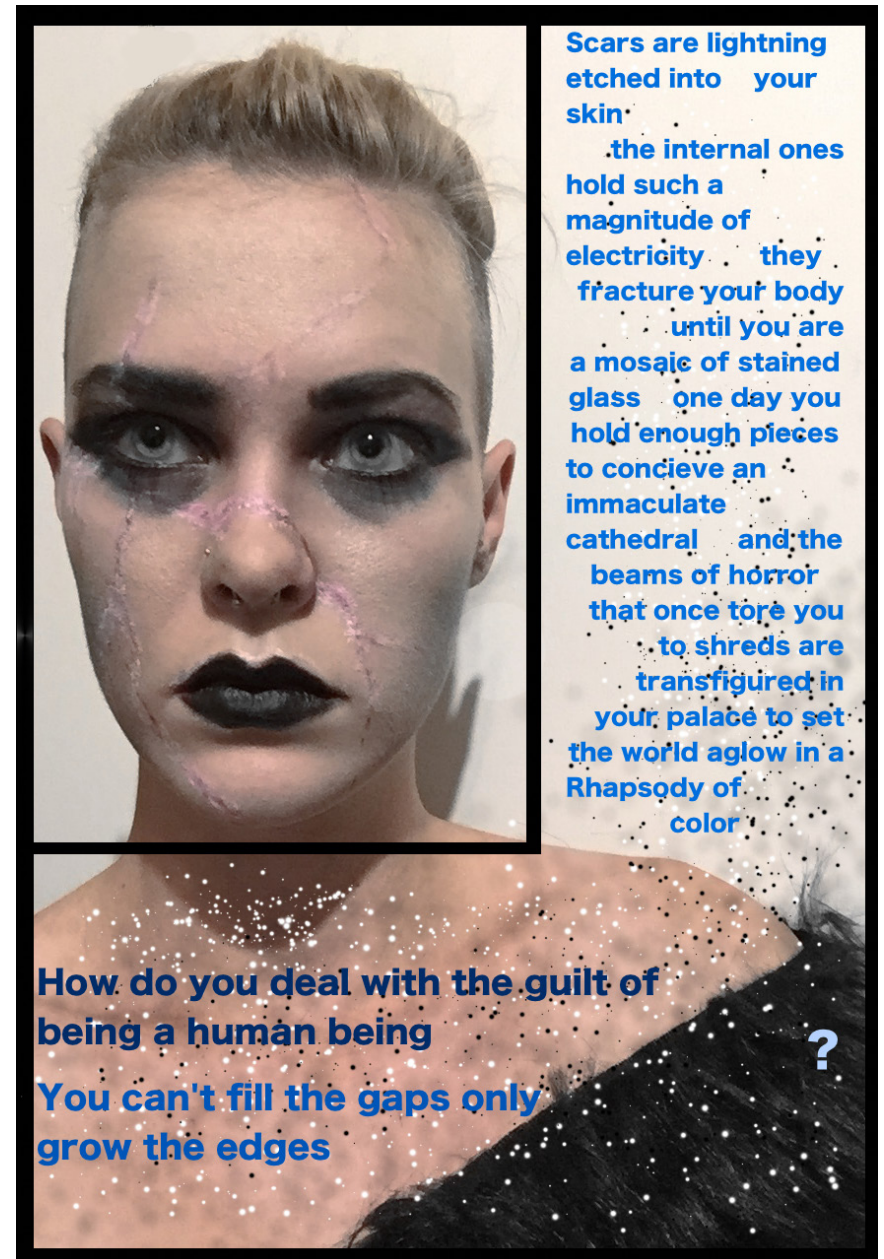
Harold dropped into the lake without hesitation. Betty tried to catch him but missed, and she struggled to pull him up to the surface of the water to save him. Harold was too strong. He kept punching and hitting Betty to leave him alone, to let him die in the cold, merciless abyss of the lake.

"Harold, please! Let me help you!" Betty screamed in the water.

Harold punched her and endless bubbles escaped his lips as he began to seize and choke. Betty let go and helplessly watched as Harold's body struggled to hold on to its last breath. His complacent eyes were the only sign of peace.

Betty cried as she watched Harold suffer, then cease. She watched as his lifeless body drifted away, far from her embrace, comfort, and support. His body rose to the surface so the whole world could finally notice him.

"Harold... I'm so sorry."



Scars are lightning
etched into your
skin
the internal ones
hold such a
magnitude of
electricity they
fracture your body
until you are
a mosaic of stained
glass one day you
hold enough pieces
to conceive an
immaculate
cathedral and the
beams of horror
that once tore you
to shreds are
transfigured in
your palace to set
the world aglow in a
Rhapsody of
color

How do you deal with the guilt of
being a human being
You can't fill the gaps only
grow the edges

?

Scars

by Seraphina Violet Cueller



Lady in Red

by Diana Rapolti

The Mother We Share

by Kayla Toulabi

They pull on her arms,
like monkeys swinging from a tree.

Her arms snap,
only then do they step away.

But then they are back,
yanking at her feet.

When her legs stop working,
she will think her suffering is over.

But I know.

They will tear her apart,
and use her as firewood to warm their homes.

With the ash she will twirl away,
and on a dark Sunday they will claim how they loved her so.



Umbrella

by Tasqin Zehra

An Ode to Your Sleep

by Tyler Benavides

Blessed be the night sky
 That stretches over your head.
 Each star a winking glint
 Within your eye,
 Their dust accumulating
 Between your lids.
 My hands glide silently through the air.
 A gentle, yet playful caress
 Of the most delicate curls
 I ever did lay eyes on.
 They fumble down your pillow,
 Almost touching my shoulder.
 So close
 I am to you.
 Marveling at the surroundings.
 How they rearrange themselves
 To honor you.
 Soundless breath borne from slumber
 Floats from your lungs.
 I think I'm holding mine.
 Lest I break the spell
 Of whatever magic
 Is happening here.
 A twitch and a grunt and a roll
 Your arm forms a bridge
 Over my body.
 A shield keeping me from harm's way
 And that is love.
 In your unconscious state,
 Instinctual without thought
 You build a home
 From the depths of your dreams
 To keep the warmth of the fire inside
 Our mingled bodies

The Mountain and the Sea

by Liridona Ashiku

On the morning after his twin brother's death, a hollow cave formed on the left side of Jacob's chest. It was barely there, a minor inconvenience at worst, but as time passed, the hole grew, and so did Jacob's indifference to the world around him. His brother, James, should not have died, but his smile was not everlasting nor was his will to live. So, on the night of the last full moon of the year, he downed a bottle of scotch and walked into the nearest lake with a pocket full of stones, hoping for paradise once he let go of his last breath.

Of course, James was smart enough to do this on the outskirts of Simple City because no one died in the center of town, and maybe, just maybe, he could be forgiven. Well, pity for James spread through the residents like a wildfire, and they made sure to pay their respects in public. Yet, behind closed doors they shuddered at the boy's selfishness and blamed the parents for being blind to their child's intentions. The parents themselves fought over who was to blame, for his mother loved her son and knew nothing more than to protect James even after his death, while his father saw a weakness in James' final act.

"Maybe he deserved to die," his

father said, "maybe he lacked the will of God, so he could not survive the trials and tribulations of life." He then turned to Jacob with a stern look upon his face. "You were never meant to be a twin, my dear son. You are now an individual."

It was a warning to Jacob to not make the same mistakes as his brother had. His father, much like everyone in Simple City, was a disciple of God, so he was not keen on Darwinism, yet he was a firm believer of the survival of the fittest. In his eyes, Jacob had so far won the game of survival, while his brother had not. With a final glare upon his family, his father turned to leave for prayer with his obedient wife on his heels. Jacob never thought to disobey his father before, but in that moment, he felt an uncontrollable amount of resentment towards his father because maybe his brother was never meant to live this life; at least not this life of pain at the hands of their father.

Lisa dreamt of catching fireflies in the clear dark sky. She meant to put them back up as stars, so there would be light, but with every touch, a shock would render her body useless. She lay there in a clearing under the sky, staring at the fireflies swarming above her motionless body. She never found such blinding light to be so beautiful and fulfilling, but one by one the bugs fell, their lights dimming until complete darkness overtook the silent world

around her. It was not a fearful experience. In fact, she felt still and at peace, but no sense of happiness was in the dream, just acceptance that beauty is fleeting. She sighed, and the world sighed back, but it was not silent like hers. It was loud, like a rumble under her bare feet.

Since when did I take off my shoes? And why does the grass feel rough against my back? And when will the shaking stop?

"Lisa!" Her eyes snapped open to find herself at the foot of her bed, with her little sister shaking her by her legs. "Let's go! We're late!"

It took a moment for her to realize that it was Sunday, and her mother was expecting her soon for prayer. She got ready in appropriate clothing for that holy morning and made her way to the public square, where almost everyone would be gathering to pray in unison. She took her place in line, where people were assembled like stacked dominoes. This was her favorite time of the week, where everyone would be a united front with a common goal. She raised her arms when everyone did and began to mutter the words of her own prayer. Most people choose to follow the same type of prayer such as blessing the city, the people, and those in need, but Lisa had her own prayer, and she made sure not to say it too loud. One by one, the people around her closed their eyes, with only the quiet sounds of prayer getting lost in the soft breeze. They never noticed that

Lisa always kept hers wide open. She looked at Simple City from her place in the public square, squinting from the sun's beams and from the colors of the houses. They were all delicate shades of yellow, green, blue, and pink, surrounding her on all sides, from the houses to the shiny cars, and even the clothing of the people around her.

Lisa loved Simple City, but Simple City never quite loved her back. She was too quiet and too curious for a girl, which made the elders look down on her. She also took her faith seriously, so those of her generation thought she was too uptight for them. The worst thing about her was that she could never get anything right. Her social cues were a mess and her clothes were never the right shade of whatever subdued color her friends were wearing. She was an outsider to a place she wanted to call home, but she tried so hard to fit in.

It had been over a year since James' demise and Jacob was turning twenty-one. His friends promised him that it was the age of new beginnings, but everyone knew what the real meaning of being twenty-one was. He would soon be a husband, and his parents would make sure of it. It did not matter that he grew his hair out a little too long, and he wore black on most days. His parents' wealth made him the man for many ladies, so he picked the most unappealing out of them all:

Lisa. The last time he saw her was when he found his brother and her working on some type of science project. Lisa was always in a state of disarray from her clothes to the way her hair could never stay tamed, but his brother found her charming, and she put up with James' ramblings.

"I want to marry Lisa," Jacob said on the morning of his birthday before his parents could even suggest someone else. His mother's mouth was wide open, and his father looked as if he ate something sour.

"Her?" his father asked. Jacob did not even have to specify who he was talking about. The whole town knew about the wallflower that was Lisa.

But they did not really know anything about her.

"I do not want to marry him," Lisa complained. Her mother pulled on her hair as she roughly combed through it.

"Lisa," her mother said, in a tone that suggested that it was best not to argue with her, "Jacob is a smart and kind boy who would be a good husband to you. Besides you are now going to turn eighteen soon, and it is the prime time for reproducing."

Lisa's face turned red at the idea her mother was suggesting. In their faith, Lisa would soon be too old to bear healthy children, so she must start soon. She could not tell her mother that she felt disgusted at the thought of laying with Jacob

because her mother would question her and Lisa had no secure and helpful answers.

"We will be going there now for supper, and it will do you well to behave." Lisa nodded, of course. She may be odd, but she was not an idiot. She knew what was expected of her, and she would deliver.

Or at least she tried. Jacob's father merely sneered at every polite gesture, while his mother did her best to soothe his soon-to-be fiancée's nerves. Jacob just watched, as he always did. Once upon a time, Jacob was a doer: the captain of many teams, a proud prodigy in his school subjects, and a true faithful servant of God. That all changed when James passed, and Jacob began to question His existence after all.

"I want her," Jacob said later that night. His father's permanent scowl deepened at his son's request.

"No. You will marry Bethany or Abigail from the—"

"No! I will marry Lisa or I will marry no one!" Jacob's burst of anger was followed by silence before a loud thud was heard, and his mother ran into the room to aid her son. Instead, she was obstructed by his father, who looked down at his son. Jacob was speechless; he was on the ground with his lip split and his cheek swelling, but it took a moment to feel the pain.

His father cleared his throat before speaking, "Alright. You will marry the girl," he began to leave the

room, but turned back once more, "and do not interrupt me again."

Jacob watched his father's back recede from the room, and his mother rushed to cup her only son's face with unshed tears still burning in her eyes.

"I'm fine," Jacob said, trying to reassure her, but she never believed him. Beatings were not new, but Jacob managed. It was James who had a tender soul, but Jacob was made from dirt and rocks. He was unmovable, just watching life pass him by.

Simple City had two mottos. The first one was that everyone should strive for perfection and never settle for less. The second one was that happiness was arbitrary, and people should instead look for peace and satisfaction. Therefore, Lisa never felt the true meaning of happiness or excitement until she met Delilah.

Delilah, much like Jacob, skipped the weekly prayer, so Lisa only saw her at school. She never thought much of her until one day she walked into class with a bright green streak in her soft hair. It was a neon green, something you would see on warning signs, not in someone's hair, much less in Simple City. That day everyone had something to say to Delilah, but none of the comments were compliments. Lisa felt pity for the girl, yet that pity turned to jealousy once she saw the way Delilah shrugged off the criticism like it was nothing more than a

fly on her shoulder. From then on, Lisa never stopped thinking about Delilah.

"She lives with her grandma on the edge," her friend told her after she asked about Delilah.

"The edge of what?" Lisa asked, feeling as if she was missing something, but her friend just smiled at Lisa, not bothered by her naivety.

"The edge of Simple City, silly. Her parents were taken by the Cleaners when she was young, so now she's staying with her grandma. People say her grandma is just as weird as her."

"What made her parents get taken away?"

"Some say they stopped praying. Others say that they were doing sinful things."

"Sinful things?"

"Like drugs and mindless sex, you know?" But Lisa did not know, and she did not understand. She always thought everyone was the same in Simple City. How could she not notice that although Lisa was odd, Delilah was absolutely eccentric? Her untamed curls were cut short to her chin, and she always wore bright colors from violets and reds to actual white, which was unheard of. In the eyes of the people, Delilah was a wild card, and it was a matter of time before she would be taken by the Cleaners as well.

When her parents told Lisa about the Cleaners for the first time, she was only six. Her father spoke in a light tone to make the situation

easier to understand for her, but her mother leaned close to the young girl, wanting to terrify her because it was necessary for her to understand the seriousness that lay in the shadows of Simple City.

"Darling, they are the ones who make sure that everyone serves a purpose in the city," her father tried to explain.

"What's a purpose?" she asked, her voice squeaking in confusion as she held her blanket close to her heart.

"Well, they need to make sure everyone does their job, so nothing bad will happen."

"What's the job? And what kind of bad will happen?" Her father scratched his eyebrow, wondering how to phrase something so heavy to a young girl, while her mother sighed with impatience.

"Everyone needs to work, make money, support their families, but also have time for God," her father finally said, intentionally not answering her last question, but Lisa noticed this.

"But what will happen if they can't do all that?" Her mother stepped in, taking the girl by her shoulders, crouched down, and pulled the girl forward, so they were face-to-face.

"Lisa, why would they not be able to do their jobs? It is simple enough. You work, you cook, you have a family, and you pray. What is so confusing about that?" Lisa always feared her mother, but her

curiosity was a pest that never went away.

"Then why do we have Cleaners? And what do they do to people they take? And, like, like, like..." Lisa trailed off, not knowing exactly what she was trying to ask. It was beyond the capacity of her six-year-old mind, so her mother took advantage of that.

"Bad people do bad things that go against our religion, our traditions, and our lovely city's rules, so we have the Cleaners take these people away for good. It does not matter what happens to them, and as long as you are good, you will never need to find out. Understand?" Lisa looked over to her father, who nodded back to her, so she turned back to her mother and nodded as well. "Okay, then. Goodnight and sweet dreams."

Her mother did not kiss her or tuck her into bed. She just left the room in the stiff manner she was always in. It was Lisa's father who stayed behind to hold his daughter until she fell asleep. As she began to lose consciousness lying on his chest, she heard her father mumble.

"Some things are just not meant to be understood."

It was common knowledge that Jacob never went to public prayer, but his parents believed that he at least prayed in the private comfort of his room. This was a lie because Jacob had not prayed since the night of James' death, when his brother

had just disappeared and it was not known that he was drowning in the lake that was just a three mile walk from their house.

Jacob prayed for his brother's return and for the chance to apologize to his brother. He always treated James like he was below him, but in fact, he was simply jealous of James. James felt things so vividly. He would find his brother with books surrounding him, just eating up the knowledge and the experiences of each book. His brother spoke in rushed breaths and nothing could stop him when he was in the mood.

"Jake! Jake! Jake!" James screamed into his ear, startling Jacob and causing him to jump.

"What? What is it?"

"You have to see this!" James pulled Jacob to a giant book that lay wide open on his bed. He saw pictures of large buildings and statues, but James was specifically pointing to a mountain. His brother offered no explanation, just an excited smile.

"Okay? What is it?" James' eyes widened before he shook his head in disbelief.

"It's Mount Everest, Jake!"

"Umm... okay? So?"

"So? So?! So, we have got to go!"

"Go where?"

"To Mount Everest, you idiot!" Jacob just stared at his brother, realizing that this was just one of James' moods where he wanted to do idiotic and reckless acts for the sake of "living," as his brother would say.

"No."

"And why not?"

"We wouldn't last a day, Jamie. C'mon be smart." James huffed in frustration, not understanding Jacob's disapproval. He began to pull at his hair, so Jacob grabbed his forearms. "Jamie, stop." Jacob never raised his voice, but James lip quivered, not liking that he was being chastised by his brother, who was in fact younger than him by nine minutes.

"I'm going to go for a run," James said with a sigh. Jacob looked to find James with a blank stare and thought that meant that James was done being childish. He could never have understood that in that moment, James was on a teetering tight-rope, trying to grasp for something to hold on to. James wanted an escape; it did not have to be Mount Everest, but James needed to leave soon. However, he would not go anywhere without his brother, and in his mind, he saw that Jacob would never leave Simple City, so James would never leave either. This would not do.

James went outside to run, and with each step, the rope he was balancing on shook until he reached the lake, and finally, his feet gave way.

Lisa had made a mistake. She lay on her side in the grass, with Delilah behind her, just running her slender fingers through Lisa's hair. It was soothing her to sleep, like her father used to do, but Lisa could not let

herself fall asleep. She needed to stay awake and aware, but Delilah began to sing of a faraway island in the middle of a sea, where it was warm and sunny, but never blinding. In her head, she began to imagine this island, and the grass beneath them turned to sand. The warmth radiating on her back from Delilah's body became the sun shining down on her, but it was not burning, just lightly laying on her like a blanket. She felt herself tugging that blanket closer to her heart, and in return the blanket kept hugging her. A light breeze touched her face, over her eyelids and onto her lips. Lisa sighed, for she was more than content. She was happy.

And that made her terrified.

The next day she woke up in her room, not exactly remembering how she got there, but as she went to school and saw Delilah on the steps waiting for her, she knew none of it was a dream.

"I love you," Delilah said with no hesitation. Lisa just stood, shocked to the core. Everything was still for a moment: her body, her world, her heart. Then, everything began to move again. Everyone passed the two, only sparing them a glance of wonder, seeing the two odd girls together, but no one heard neither Delilah's words nor Lisa's beating heart. It was a caged bird pounding against her chest. It needed out, so when Lisa opened her mouth, she half expected her heart to fly right out. The other half

of her expected nothing, just more awkward silence. Instead, what came out surprised both Lisa and Delilah.

"I love you, too."

"Oh? Um...okay!" Delilah then smiled. It was a rare smile. Simple City residents smiled close-lipped, but Delilah proudly beamed both rows of teeth to Lisa, and she loved her smile too.

"You will marry Lisa next month." Jacob's father said in a final tone, so Jacob nodded. "Your mother already has everything planned. It will be a beautiful wedding." Jacob nodded again.

"Oh, Jacob. Please speak," he heard his mother say from the other side of the dinner table. It was a long off-white table meant to seat up to six people, but there was only the three of them. His parents on each end and him in the middle. James would sit across from him, but that seat was now vacant.

"Thank you, mother, for all your hard work." His mother gave him a close-lipped smile.

"There is nothing I wouldn't do for my baby boy."

"Do not coddle him," his father sternly said. His mother looked down at her untouched plate, and Jacob could see her struggling to come up with another topic to fill the silence.

"Your fiancée seems to have no interest in planning her own wedding. What an odd girl, that one." His father loudly dropped his

silverware on his plate, the clattering echoing in the dining room. Jacob waited for his father to say something, but he just glared at everyone around the table before going back to his food.

Jacob knew his father disapproved of Lisa, especially now that it seemed that the girl had befriended the town's personal burden. He could never understand the hypocrisy of Simple City, for it preached equality and love for one another, but those who stood out were treated as heathens. To Jacob, Delilah was just some girl who wore different clothes and was not very ladylike, but besides that, she never harmed anyone. In fact, she was a kind-hearted girl, who believed in helping others and seeing the best in others. It was that childlike ignorance that made Jacob admire the girl, yet pity her because he knew that would be her downfall.

Delilah's grandma died in her sleep four nights before, so Lisa allowed Delilah to sneak into her room for the past three nights. The funeral was yesterday, but it was nothing special. Delilah's grandma wanted to be cremated and spread across the nearest sea. The request confused Lisa because it would take awhile to get there, and it was not like Delilah was leaving anytime soon. Or so she thought.

"Run away with me," Delilah said out of the blue. The two were sitting in their clear field, eating their

ice cream cones. Before that, there was no speaking, just comfortable silence as Lisa licked her vanilla ice cream and Delilah pulled at the dandelions, leaving her sherbet ice cream to melt in her hands.

"What?" Lisa asked, more out of habit than actual confusion. She heard Delilah, but it could not have been right.

"I said run away with me," Delilah repeated before continuing once she saw that Lisa's dumbfounded expression had not changed, "I've got nothing here anymore. My grandma's dead. My parents are who knows where."

"You've got me," Lisa mumbled, feeling insecure that she was not enough.

"Yeah, and that's why I want you to come. Seriously, Lisa. What do you think will happen when people find out about us? Relationships here are only meant for those procreating, and we together cannot do that. Plus, you're engaged, and I don't want you to be anymore."

"Delilah—"

"No! Listen. Your mother's terrible to you, your father has stopped defending you, and your sister is still too young to know any better, so it's like you are alone too, right?" Delilah hit it right on the nail, for Lisa always felt so lonely at home, but she could not just leave.

"I love Simple City," she argued.

"No. You love your religion and how it unites people, but you can find that in other places too. Let me

take you to the first sea you and I have ever seen. Please.” Delilah’s voice shook with desperation, so Lisa nodded more to soothe her than to actually accept the proposal, but that is not how Delilah saw it. “Okay! Good! I’ll meet you here tomorrow after the sunset, and we’ll get going.” Delilah smiled her bright smile, and Lisa felt happy, so she nodded again.

The morning after came and went, and when the sun gave Lisa one last wink before disappearing behind the horizon, she was ready for the adventure of a lifetime with her lover. Her parents were out, most likely making some visiting rounds before the wedding, so everyone would think that the bride actually cared about her wedding. She did not, but her parents sure did. This wedding would secure them financially and socially, but it meant nothing to Lisa, so she crept down the stairs and towards the front door, ready to dash from her house. As she began to open the door, she heard the floor creak and a voice.

“Lisa?” It was her younger sister. She was around thirteen, so she was beginning to understand the pressures of society, but she still was a happy child. It was rare for someone in Simple City to stay naive for so long, but Lisa was happy for it. Plus, Lisa was not blind to the fact that she most likely contributed to that from how much she protected her sister from the outside world.

“Where are you going?” her sister asked. She was not worried, just curious, and that made Lisa feel worse. Her sister thought she would be right back, and a knot formed in Lisa’s stomach at the realization that she would be abandoning her sister.

“I was thinking I would go out for a walk.”

“With a backpack?” Lisa felt caught, not knowing how to answer.

“Umm... I have to drop some things off at a friend’s house before I come back.” Her sister nodded with complete trust and the knot tightened.

“Okay. Goodnight,” her sister said with a yawn before going off to bed. Lisa watched her go, knowing that it would be last time she would get to see her sister. Lisa did not know what lay beyond Simple City, but she knew those who leave never come back. She also knew that her leaving would most likely cause harm to her sister. Without Lisa’s peculiar reputation to distract the gossips, her sister would be open-season for them, especially once ties with Jacob’s family would be broken off. Her family always struggled with acceptance because they never had enough money or a clean enough reputation. Lisa always saw herself as the black sheep of the family, but she now saw that they were all the black sheep of the city. In fact, that made her the savior because her marriage to Jacob was their only hope.

Therefore, with a heavy heart,

Lisa closed the door to her escape and dragged her feet to her sister’s room before wrapping herself around her sister’s body, causing the knot in her stomach to dissipate. Her sister shifted to face her before snuggling into her shoulder.

“What happened? You didn’t leave.” Her sister mumbled into her neck. Her voice raspy from lack of sleep.

“It wasn’t the right time.”

Their marriage was in the public square because the joining of two families deserved a Simple City celebration. Everyone smiled with closed lips and polite small talk filled the gaps between the soft music playing in the background. It was the only time it was acceptable for a woman to wear white and a man to wear black, breaking the pastel color-code. The wedding was in fact beautiful, just like Jacob’s mother had planned.

Everything was perfect, except for one small flaw that most could ignore, but not Jacob. He sat at the high table with Lisa beside him. Two elderly women stood near them, their voices carrying as if they wanted the two to hear.

“Did you hear?”

“About Delilah? Yes.”

“She tried to leave. Poor girl.”

“Poor, dumb girl more like.

What did she expect?”

“Maybe she thought she could leave?”

“Probably a thought her foolish

grandma gave her. I don’t understand why considering that was the same mistake her parents made.”

“They tried to leave?”

“Yes. They loved each other more than their faith.”

“Oh no!”

“Oh yes! Foolishness seems to run in the family. Can’t say I surprised.”

“Well, the Cleaners got to her, so we won’t be seeing her again.”

“Can’t outrun the will of God.”

“Anyways she was quite the eyesore that one, with her colors.”

It was at this point Jacob shut their voices out, turning instead to look at Lisa. She had a pained expression, like she had been stabbed.

Lisa actually felt a cut with every word the ladies exchanged, and death by a thousand cuts was worse than one stab wound. She felt resentment towards the women for blaming every misfortune people faced in Simple City on the will of God, and she felt the need to voice it, so she did to Jacob at least.

“It wasn’t God who did this. It’s them. All of them from their words to their clothes to their blind acceptance of the mistreatment of others not like them.” Jacob was surprised that Lisa was speaking to him, so it took him a while to register her words.

“Why do you say that?” he questioned because he was curious for the first time in a long time.

“Do you blame James’ death on God?” It was a sudden turn of con-

versation, but hearing his brother's name out loud created pain in the hollow cave that gaped from his chest.

Yes! He wanted to scream, but with every ticking second, he knew that was not true. His anger was directed towards those who played God, and in Simple City, everyone did.

"No. I blame myself for not helping my brother. I blame this city and its people for poisoning him, and most of all, I blame my father because he's the worst of them all."

"How so?" Now she was curious.

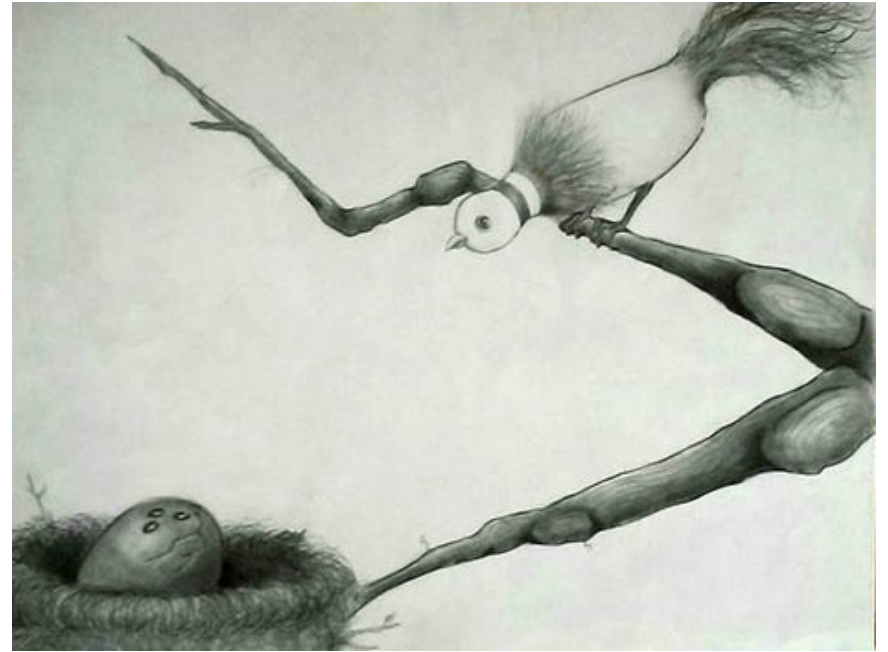
"He believes that the strong will prosper, but he is the weakest of them all. He wants to be just like everybody else. He wants to be adored, but everyone hates him, including my mother and me." With every word, the hole in his chest filled up, covering the cave with more dirt and rocks. It was still there, but he felt a little more whole again.

Lisa watched the corner of Jacob's lip curl up in slight smile. It was barely there, but it did not feel forced, so Lisa smiled back, showing her teeth and the crinkles around her eyes.

Jacob's eyes widened at the unfamiliar sight of such an alluring smile. He was overwhelmed by a wave of emotions caused by her. This was quiet, odd Lisa, always predictable, but here she was looking happily surprised by Jacob's confes-

sion. It made a burst of excitement erupt from his chest.

"You're odd," he said once he recovered from the riptide that was Lisa, but his words held no bitterness, just wonderment for the girl he chose to marry. Lisa nodded, noticing that her new husband had bright green eyes that lit up as he stared at her smile.



Madonna and Child

by Mahal Schroeder

A Failure in the Eyes of Zeus

by Tyler Benavides

Let's knit our brains together
Holding one needle each
A process of weaving
An equally powerful sum of thought and emotion
A volcanic display of strength
As one
The best parts of ourselves
Reflecting what it means to be human
Complimentary
Supplements, like a bodily deficiency
We never knew we had
Until we touched
Sensing an artful glow of what
Solidity in every aspect and part
Would entail
Are we becoming the masters of our own universe
In a method that only so few
Have discovered
A sort of fall over the veil
Before hitting the ground
Levitation
Our heads parallel with the floor
Several feet off the ground
Floating ever upwards
Into all of the light
That we have ever absorbed
Through our eyes
Out of the black abysses
The inside out of a black hole
It blinds
Our home is within one another
Inscribed in our brain matter
The lightning force that shields us from harm
That leaves us indescribable
A blanket over our beating hearts
Gentle heat
We are protected

Our one entity
Fragmented from the wholesome strands
We so patiently, calmly intertwine
Having ripped the insides of a spatial vacuum
And forced its contents to shine
In the gazes of all
We are alive
My breath is the soil you needed
To take root in
To nurture and to care
Symbiotic means to an end
You, a requiem, for my senses of desire
Life in all its misgivings and wrongdoings
The scales in which the universe finds balance
Rest on our melding shoulders
Rulers of a kingdom
Destined to manifest
Through our eternal energy
Like a river flow from my mouth into yours
Now tied
We will never die

When all is no more

We will float on



Sunset

by Tasqin Zehra



Looking Forward to the Future

by Mahal Schroeder

all fags go to heaven

by Nick Malone

The first grade perv was named Zachary Cordova. It wasn't that he was ever mean to girls, like boys who like you are supposed to be, but that he was just *super* handsy, and those hands were always covered in hot Cheeto dust. He had spiky blue-and-blond hair and T-shirts that said things like "EAT. SLEEP. RAWK. REPEAT" and "WILL TRADE PARENTS FOR VIDEO GAMES" (the latter of which *really* shows a profound lack of self-awareness on the part of both six year olds and the people making these shirts). Making girls squeal and run away was his vice- he'd sidle up to Sally or Becky Anne or Nina and say things like:

"You like my *bawwwdy*?"

"Let's go somewhere we can be *alooooone!*"

Or, my personal favorite, "Do you know what *SEX IS!?*" often paired with a gap-toothed smile and wocka-wocka arms.

I was forced into a playdate with Zachary once and it all made sense- his Playstation had games where girls in bikinis played volleyball and people shot guns out of cars and said "*Fuck you, kike!*" whereas my dad had to have a thirty minute talk with my mom before he would let me buy the clean version of the new

Britney Spears album.

Regardless, I somewhat unwillingly assumed the role of the Protector of the Girls, the guardian angel who liked the things that girls liked, and sort of talked like a girl too. Girls felt safe with me, away from Zachary's Cheeto-tinged advances, and I felt safe with them. They didn't want to play baseball when they came over, they wanted to pretend stuffed animals were getting married. Some of them even guest starred on my under-the-bed radio show, which had recently expanded to include collapsible blanket studio walls and a very comfy bean bag chair from IKEA.

Zachary strolled up and wiggled his fingers like he was casting a spell on My Girls, and they shrieked and squirmed and buried their faces in the crook under my arm. *This is what being a boyfriend must be like*, I thought to myself, and checked my fingers for Cheeto dust before I vomited in my mouth.

~

When I was nine years old, I grew an affinity for reading things that I shouldn't have been reading. I suppose it was better than what some other kids do to rebel at that age -*reading*, what a badass- but I was determined to learn about things on my own. My mom tried to have the birds and bees talk with me, assisted by a colorful book featuring a fat couple with ludicrous amounts of pubic hair that went on a date, took a bath together, and then copulated

in a way that was all smiles, almost goofy. I was not having it. I sprinted into my room and shut the door, completely uninterested.

"You're going to have to learn about it someday, and the computer isn't going to tell you the right stuff!" she called upstairs.

Fine, I thought. If the computer was wrong, then the book with the hairy Italian butcher and the lady who inspired the phrase, "it ain't over till the fat lady sings," was most certainly wrong. I had seen the sorts of things that were sex before, and that was not it. My best friend in the third grade class, who had recently taught me the word "cunt" behind the bushes at recess, was of the school of thought that sex came down to peeing in or on someone's vagina. This seemed to be the most reasonable explanation I'd heard thus far.

It started off innocent enough- I was at an advanced reading level in school, and I struggled my way through every book that hinted at giving me the insider knowledge I needed to decipher sex.

Cold Mountain. Mountains meant boobs, and boobs meant sex. Nothing there.

1984. Surely someone born in 1984 was old enough to know something about it. Not much in the way of sex there either.

Moby-Dick spoke for itself.

Then I stumbled upon *Tropic of Cancer*.

My jaw dropped as I read,

knowing that I had found the truth about everything.

It was a nightmare. Lizards and bats shoved up the ass, ripping off pubic hair and pasting it on the chin of a friend, chewing up and swallowing parts of someone's vagina, in public or in private. It remains unclear what "come" is but there is a terrible lot of it. After a good fifteen minutes of frantically searching for the stork that eventually delivered me, I closed the book and knew that I could not tell the friend who thought it was just about pee. It was about so much more than that. Sex was about pain.

~

"Do you want me to choke you?"

"What?" He asked, through a grunt of pleasure.

"I don't know if you're into that, but I mean, do you want me to choke you?"

His hand cradled my face and tilted it to meet his dark eyes as his head lifted slowly off the pillows.

"Look at me," he said.

"Do I have a choice?" I said, half-laughing, my hand gliding up and down his thigh, not wanting this to end, not wanting to have ruined my first time.

"I'm serious," he said, squinting as he stared directly into my eyes. "You don't have to do anything you don't want to do."

"I know," I said, shrugging off his earnestness. Who knew the next time I would be able to practice the

make-or-break skill of having real sex with a person?

"Hey," he said with an urgency I'd never heard out of him before. He was always so relaxed, so nonchalant about what he wanted from the world. Things came to him and he accepted them as they did. What a crazy thing.

"I really like you," he said, his voice soft again.

"I really like you too! What's the big deal?"

"Come here."

I do as I'm told and come and join him, feeling the rusty cheers and squeals of the futon ripple through my joints. We share a moment of silence with our faces mere millimeters from each other. I can't tell whose breath is whose. We lie staring at each other for a moment too long.

"You're shaking," he declares, draping his arm over my shivering body and pulling me in, matching up our limbs.

"Yeah, I'm just really nervous that my breath smells like dick now."

He kisses me over and over, mumbling and laughing, "Shut the fuck up!"

I want to stop my mind from running off the rails but it feels like little bolts of lightning are bouncing off the plates in my skull, zapping synapses and flooding my brain with chemicals, like my nervous system is hosting the Puerto Rican Day Parade.

"Don't you want me to finish? I

mean, don't you want to finish?"

I stare right at him, inquisitively, almost frustrated.

"I want *you* to relax. And I am not gonna stop kissing you until you do."

He keeps his promise.

"Better?"

I take a deep breath in, survey his room and begin searching his eyes for the catch.

"Yeah."

"You should come over again tomorrow. And you should call me tonight," he says nodding, as if speaking to a toddler or a deaf foreigner.

There is none.

"Seriously. I get it," he says. I feel like he really does.

~

In the seventh grade, every Friday after school, we walk to the grocery store and get a package of raw cookie dough and two Shasta colas for twenty-nine cents each. Once everybody has their goods stored away in their backpacks, we get on our bikes and pedal as fast as we can to the park with the plastic turtle and the sandbox in the middle. We have a special tree there that is only structurally sound enough to carry the bodies of eight middle schoolers, so each of us has a dedicated spot. Caroline is in gymnastics, so she goes all the way up to the top branch, which we all secretly think is a little much. Michael likes to be in control of the cookie dough because he usually buys it- he is the only

one of us with a job. He walks two Pomeranians and one Newfoundland, never at the same time. Benny sits on the bottom branch because he is afraid of heights, but he's probably my favorite of the bunch. I'm somewhere in the middle, and my girlfriend, Mazie, sits next to me. Michael and Caroline are also boyfriend and girlfriend, but they fight a lot.

"Truth or Dare?" Jennifer, the only blonde in our group, pokes me and wiggles her eyebrows. She talked to me earlier in the day- Mazie and I have been boyfriend and girlfriend for two weeks. It was time to hold hands and she was gonna make it happen.

"Dare," I say, ignoring the blaring sirens going off in my heart and the sticky lagoon of sweat forming under my arms, which has only very recently started to smell bad.

"I *dare you* to hold hands with..." Jennifer pauses, which is a really good disguise to make sure Mazie doesn't catch the trickery, "...Mazie! For fifteen seconds."

All is silent in the tree.

I turn to Mazie and shrug, clenching my teeth and flashing a look that probably reads somewhere between having just chomped on a canker sore and actively shitting myself. She sort of smiles and takes my hand. The countdown begins and I do not squeeze or show any interest in her, or her hand, whatsoever.

"...Three, Two, One! *Awww!*" goes the chorus.

Later, I walk Mazie home and we do not hold hands. "I'll see you tomorrow?" I toss at her, and she nods. She understands that what I really meant was, *Thanks for letting me sweat in your palm.*

~

Something about seventeen made me feel invincible. The world was so big and beautiful that it seemed all but impossible for it to be against me. I was full of this wild energy that made me want to dance, and be seen, and play it cool. Shoulders back, eyes harsh, arms up to the ceiling of every room like I'd been electric since the second I was born.

My mom would drop me off in front of my friend's house and I'd hide in the backyard until she drove away. I'd round back to the front and perch myself on the front steps, waiting for Matty to roll up in his steel blue station wagon with rust on the fender. He'd jump out, open the door for me and blast the White Stripes on the highway, sing to me like we were the only people in the world. His voice was my favorite thing about him. It was my favorite thing in general.

"*Hello operator!*" he'd scream. "*Can you gimme number nine!? Can I see ya later?! When ya gimme back my dime!?*"

He'd drive us into the city and we'd ride the trains all night until we found just the right hole-in-the-wall pizza place or donut shop to satisfy our sweet tooth, then we'd run around again and keep on satisfying

it. He held my hand the whole way and I felt my love for him start in the top of my head and spiral all the way down my spine with a *plunk* at my feet, like a gumball machine.

We dove into bars on Halsted where they played live blues and the median age was 50, sneaking through the back door and standing tall, leaning on the bar like we were regulars. We swiped half-full gin and tonics and slammed them before anyone saw. He swung me around on the dancefloor and we did the twist and we slow danced like grown-ups- his left hand on my waist, mine on his shoulder, our hands clasped together leading our bodies as one on the right. We fooled around in the bathroom stall while the line stretched down the hallway, our eyes wild with drunken delight. We didn't mind a crowd. I never stopped smiling.

It came time for me to go back to my friend's house where I slept over as a decoy to lead my mom off my trail, and we sauntered through the Blue Line tunnel, his arm around me, planting messy kisses on my neck and pulling me in tightly. Our legs criss-crossed over one another, stumbling and laughing through the fluorescent light.

"We get it, you're fags!" gurgled a brown-haired man in a Cubs jersey, walking behind us, brown-paper-bagging a 40oz of Corona. He was stumbling even more than we were, propping his limp, thin body on the filthy walls of the tunnel.

"Suck a cock, I don't give a shit, but don't make it my business."

I turned to Matty, smiling big and bright. I loved scaring them.

"I'm *done* being polite! I'm fucking tired of being *nice!*" he hissed, spilling his beer for the rats.

I leaned forward and kissed Matty on the mouth with gratuitous tongue. I reached down and groped him, took a pull out of my flask and passed the shot into his mouth, making sure to keep eye contact with The Guy Who Is Done Being Nice. My face drips with sweet, dark gold nectar and I spit at him. He swings his arm at us somewhere between aggressively and dismissively, and returns to rest in his delirium. Those poor people.

I sit across from Matty on the train back home. He's drifting in and out of sleep, taking breaks from passing out with his head resting against the glass divider to open those sweet eyes just barely at me, casting a Face saying everything that I always wished somebody would say without saying anything at all.

He says *You and me together makes being alive real*. He says *You are not dirty and you are not broken*. He says *I do not have to do research to know how to like you*. He says *You can get most things you want if you just ask*. He says *You can take your time*. He says *You make me feel warm and that is most of what matters*. He says *You are sex and you are love, even if who comes after you may not be both*. He says *We have been through so much to get here*.

The world beneath me rushes and rumbles, gliding with a silver fluidity that begs to be heard. All fags go to heaven, even if we can only have it on Earth.

~



Moody Windy City

by Gregorio Illner

white people didn't create classical music I did

by Tatiana Rodriguez

I am thick boiling blood
I am snarling teeth and razor blade lollipops
I am metallic noise and white light
I am Beethoven

I am liquid gold
I am hardened honey candies
I am melted in your pocket
I am Debussy

I am glitter glued guts
I am romanticized pain
I am cherry depression
I am Satie

I am lavender buds
I am bed bugs
I swarm
I am Mozart

I am hot pavement
I am the stiletto that gallops across it
I am the sun that hates white skin
I am Chopin

I am a river of cold lava
I set fire to a meadow
I plant violets next to the garden of flames
I am a sinner
I am Tchaikovsky



Ace of Swords

by Jackson Krause

Hey, Stand Up

by Abigail Kremer

Hello darling,
How are you today?
Amazing, beautiful
You're my love

Hey my dove.
Where are you?
Oh well stay safe
I miss you!

Hey sweetheart,
Let's go out today
Yeah-- I'll buy you
Anything you want!

Hey my sweet song,
I love you so much
Just thought I'd call to say
Just how much I love you

Hello my heart,
Where are you?
Why didn't you tell me?
I'm at your house; I miss you

Hey baby,
Clear your plans Friday,
I'm taking you out to eat
My treat

Hey adorable girl of mine,
I love you more than anyone
So much it hurts me
I won't ever let you go

Hey babe,
Can you help me out?
I need some money.
What do you mean?

Hey liar,
I bought you everything
All you wanted
You owe me!

Hey darling,
I'm sorry,
I didn't mean that.
It's my fault I didn't save up.

Hey sweetheart,
Where are you?
I need you.
My life isn't complete without you.

Hey beautiful,
You got my message?
Where are you?
What could you be busy with?

Hey liar,
You're not really busy are you?
Just ignoring me...
You don't love me do you?

Hey baby,
You finally answered!
Out with friends?
They're more important than me?

Hey sweetheart,
I visited you at work.
You weren't there; did you schedule
change?
Why didn't you tell me?

Hey my love,
No one will love you. I mean-
No one more than me.
I'm the only one for you.

Hey baby,
Who were you with?
Jacob?
Why were you with him?

Babe really,
He's just a friend?
I don't trust you.
How would you feel if I hung out
with girls all day?

Hey hoe,
I told you to stop talking to him.
Why are you still?
What the fuck do you mean just
friends?

What the hell?
I don't believe you.
You're a fucking cheater.
Everyone told me you were a slut.

Hey bitch,
I'm outside.
Just fucking open your door.
I just wanna talk.

Hey sunshine,
I bought you flowers,
And some more makeup
I'm sorry.

Hey baby,
How are you feeling?
I bought you ice cream.
School will be fine tomorrow.

Hey come here,
Why aren't you wearing makeup?
Why'd you think I bought it?
Cover that shit up!

Babe, listen.
Everyone will think I did that!
You really want to ruin me?
Wow, I didn't think you'd be such a
terrible person.

Hey beautiful,
School's finally out.
Think of it,
All summer just with me.

Hey listen,
I want to spend all of it with you
Not any friends
Just you and me.

Hey baby
I'm here again.
Come outside.
Or do you not love me?

Hey love,
I brought you flowers.
Why won't you open up?
I'm sorry I hurt you...

Hey whore,
Just fucking answer me.
You piece of shit.
You just want to hurt me.

Hey slut,
This is how you repay me.
Leaving me?
You're gonna be such a whore.

Hey bitch,
You think you could get rid of me?
I'm outside
Don't fucking ignore me.

You're such a slut.
Even Jacob won't love you.
Even after everyone sees
Those pretty pictures I took.

Hey pornstar.
That's how everyone will see you
now.
With those pretty pictures leaked.
Everyone will think you're fucking
ugly.

Hey skank.
Hey twat.
Hey bitch.
Hey whore.

...

He leaves in totality
After a long, long time.
She heals in untotally
After a long, long time

...

Yes judge.
I would like to press charges.
I couldn't before, I couldn't face him
But a year has passed, and I think
I'm ready

Everything is here judge.
These are the voicemails he left me
Here are the pictures of what he did
to my face.
These are the pictures of the scars
he left me

This is the receipt for therapy
And these are the receipts for broken
windows
These are all my medical bills
What? No. I don't have pictures of
him doing it.

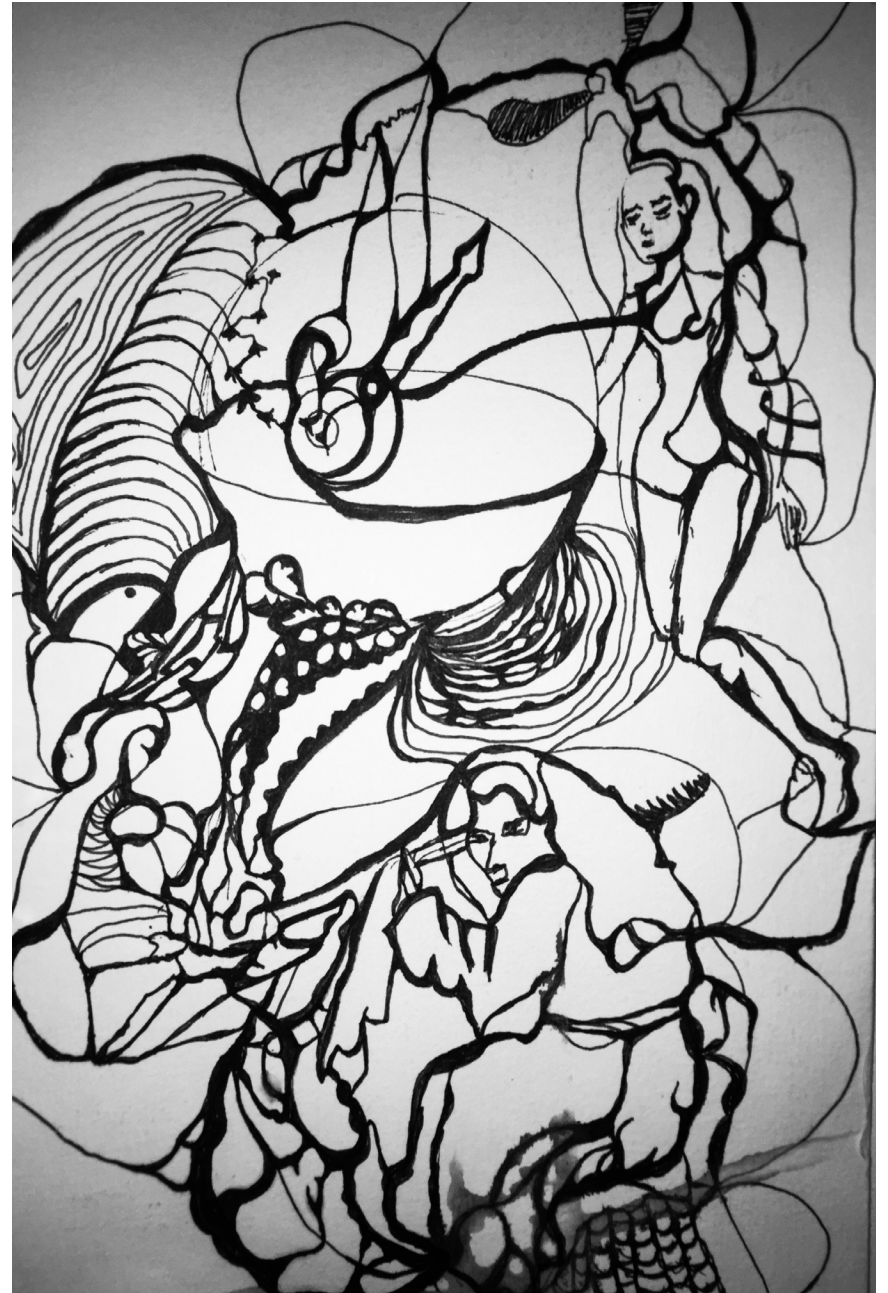
What do you mean, Judge?
It's not proof?
The voice mails are proof, right?
They're not?

Judge, I don't mean to be rude, but
How could I have taken pictures
While he was beating the shit out
of me
I couldn't see!

Judge you are ridiculous.
It's been a year...
It's been a year there's no DNA left!
I can't do anything to him?

Judge, this is what you're saying
I will live my life knowing that
there's
A predator out there waiting to beat
More poor girls like naive me.

And yes Judge,
I understand the laws.
I don't disagree...
He still hurts me.

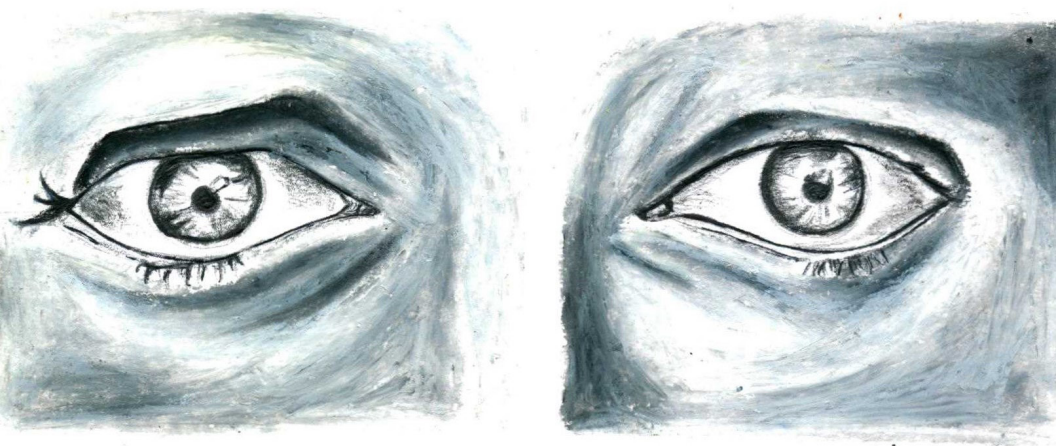


Pure

by Uliana Solovieva

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RED SHOES REVIEW

Spring 2018