

*Do you remember when
we used to get occasional light snowfall
in November, or when gentle
first-frosts graced late October?
I remember when nor'easters were relegated to January,
and the heat went away by Halloween.*

DEAR PERSEPHONE | AIDAN MELINSON



COLONNADES

LITERARY & ART JOURNAL • 74



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Colonnades Literary & Art Journal

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From the Editor

On February 3rd, 2023, a train derailed in East Palestine, Ohio, spewing chemicals into the air. Just a few days later, tens of thousands of Syrian and Turkish people died in poorly built buildings during an earthquake. This winter was unseasonably warm, with temperatures averaging in the 50s. We did not see snow.

The climate crisis is finding increasingly creative ways to rear its ugly head, and it is nearly impossible to ignore. Hence we at *Colonnades* were unsurprised that discussions of humanity through the lens of nature arose in this year's submissions. Look on social media and you will see the climate crisis is constantly occupying our collective consciousness. Our art is reflective of that. We are terrified and protective and empowered and and and...

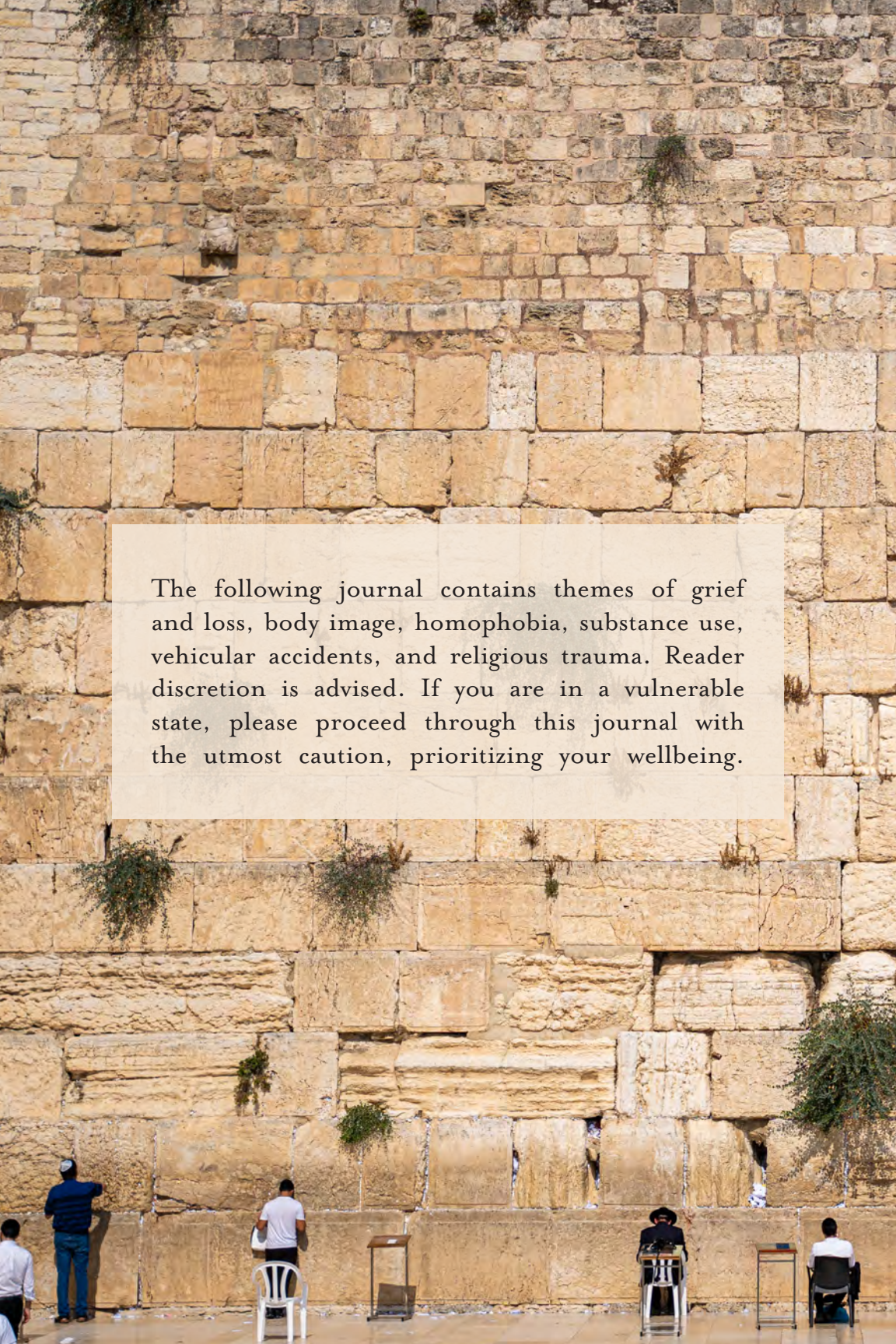
The art in issue 74 of *Colonnades* is a testament to the strength of these emotions.

But sometimes a poem about a tree is just a poem about a tree. And maybe a painting of the Atlantic is just that: a painting. This journal explores both ends of this artistic spectrum. Whether the tree poem is a comment on the destruction of the Amazon or just a beautiful poem about a beautiful tree, it means something to its creator. It means something to our staff and advisors.

And, hopefully, to you.

With love,

A handwritten signature in black ink, reading "DiFranzo". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style with a large, decorative flourish at the end of the word.



The following journal contains themes of grief and loss, body image, homophobia, substance use, vehicular accidents, and religious trauma. Reader discretion is advised. If you are in a vulnerable state, please proceed through this journal with the utmost caution, prioritizing your wellbeing.



The Kotel | Ian Myers

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Flying Chrysalis

BY CAILEY ROGERS

The year I turned thirteen, I boarded an overnight flight with droopy eyes, clutching a scruffy stuffed penguin that my father said I was too old for now. It was falling apart at the seams, and, it would seem,

so was I. I thought back to that day in September when my parents sat me down on the leather couch in the living room that I will never see again to tell me we were leaving before the year was done, before I was ready to say goodbye. I couldn't stand

to think of the white dress hanging in my closet I should have worn to formal, or the way it felt to swim in the paralyzing water of a Hong Kong beach. I would never hear the euphoric ringing of the bell at the end of my last day of eighth grade. I thought I had mastered the routine of disappearing,

but I was wrong. The frozen, filtered air brought a familiar feeling of chills prickling my arms, and the relentless roaring of the engines generously saturated my mind, leaving no room for the memories of the home I was leaving behind. A forgotten place

stripped of its title and its meaning. When I was gone it would cease to exist except in flashbacks and clock chimes—A mark on a never-ending timeline. And the girl who flew on swingsets and laughed at recess would fade into the golden horizon. As altitude swelled,

I remembered my deathly fear of turbulence, but I couldn't stop the wheels from lifting off the ground, the wings from catching air. In a hollow metal bullet, my surroundings were morphing—a change

I wouldn't witness at a speed I couldn't slow down.
Whiplashed and white-cheeked, I stumbled

off the plane a little taller and twelve hours older
and dragged my silver suitcase through the uphill
boarding bridge, wondering what kind of light
was waiting for me at the end—a ray of new beginnings
or an omen of an inevitable ending. Like fast-trickling sand,

I knew the years would sift away and my limbs
would grow too big for the clothes I packed. Already
I could feel them stretching, making space for the
worry and pressure, the weight that takes residence
on your chest as soon as your age ends with “teen.”
But, planes can't fly backwards.

Any Port in Any Storm | Isabel Zory

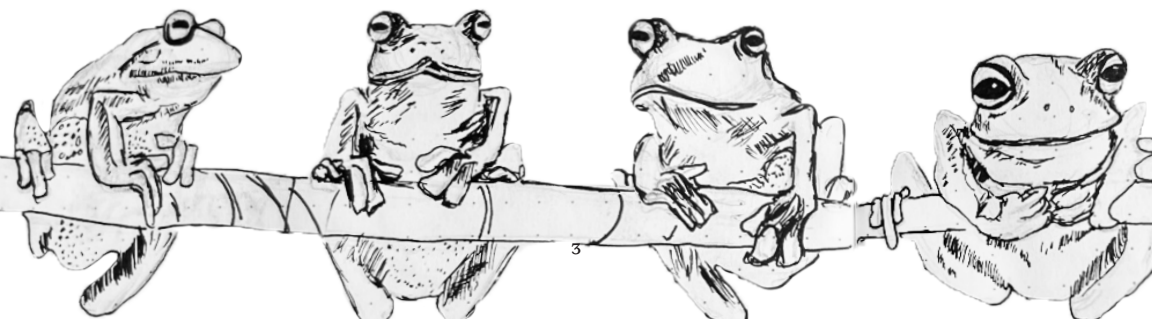


ding ding!

BY FAITH ALMOND

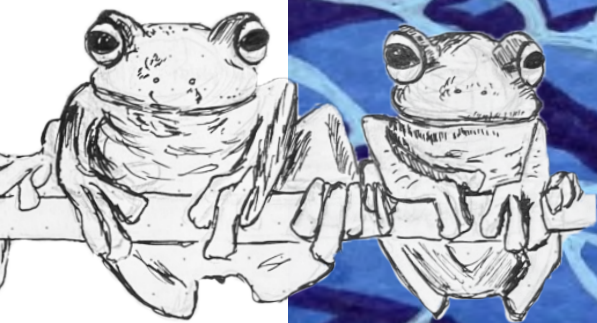
ding ding!
church bells ring.
everyone gather, worship
whoever you want, i guess.
ding ding!
someone's at the door.
selling you something you don't need, probably.
maybe it's a vacuum, might as well check.
ding ding!
the oven timer goes off.
don't let the meatloaf burn!
get off the couch and take it out already.

ding ding!
church bells ring over the cries of
random people crying over,
supposedly, a body in a casket.
what they don't know won't hurt them.
ding ding!
someone's at the door, peek through the window,
see that it's the police and panic, but there's
no way that they know what's lurking inside.
they ask their questions and you act clueless as always.
ding ding!
the oven timer goes off, time to take the meatloaf out.
it was your grandma's cherished recipe.
the police just left, that's too bad.
they don't get to enjoy this delicacy.



Water Night | Catherine Phillips

Frogs | Jess Baker



Saltwater

BY JESS BAKER

Now

There was saltwater crusted to her scalp. It hadn't reached the point of irritation or frustration, but it had just edged into awareness. It made her hair curl in a way no product ever managed to replicate.

With her knees against her chin and her arms wrapped tightly around her shins, Anika tried her best to harden into one of the rocks littering the sand. To metastasize into sediment or broken and fused sand, to remain in this place forever, in this position.

Wind whipped her hair, playing with her curls and making them dance like kites against the gray sky. Anika didn't feel it, not even when a curl latched into her eyelashes and clung.

She stared at the water, waiting.

Waiting for it to recede, for a tsunami to sweep in. For the tide to disappear and for the shells to all shatter and vanish. For the fish to dry up and die, for the seaweed to wither and crunch, for the sand to sink into the earth.

She didn't hear the footsteps until sand kicked gently onto her toes. Anika didn't move, didn't look at her sister as she sat down next to her on the beach. She mimicked Anika's position, somehow making it more natural, more wistful. Anika hated her, hated everything she could see from the corner of her vision.

Lucia didn't say anything. Anika didn't know if she wanted Lucia to say something. If she wanted to hate her words or hear nothing in them but her voice or hear everything in them and gain nothing.

The sisters sat in their own silence as the world pressed onward. A gull cried nearby, angry that a fry was not as good as it believed it would be. The sea *swooshed, swooshed, swooshed*, crashed with froth. A crab skittered across the sand an inch from her toes and Anika moved her head just enough to watch it disappear back into an unseen hole.

"He's dead."

It was Anika that spoke, the words rougher than the sand they sat on. She didn't know she was going to speak until the words had already been formed by her lips, one syllable blending into another. One choked word becoming the next.

Her sister blew out a harsh breath.

“Yeah.”

Anika waited for the saltwater to leak from her eyes. To seep from her scalp and into her bloodstream and right out through her tear ducts. She waited until the saltwater crusting her head slid into irritation and she fought the urge to scratch at her skin until it bled. And still, she did not cry.

Her world had ended, and Anika Hellmann could not cry.



Three days previous

“Bryce Hellmann,” the priest said. His words were soft but they boomed, echoed, ricocheted around the church, like a call and response from Bryce’s ghost. “Beloved brother, son, and friend.”

The priest paused, and Anika watched as he visibly composed himself.

What right? she thought. *What right does he have to grieve this man?*

Sniffles followed by the sound of tissues being pulled from cheap travel containers, the cheap plastic kind that never latch properly once you open them. The sound of tissues being crumpled, a soft weep, muffled.

Anika didn’t turn to see who it was.

Lucia sat beside her, stiff as a board, tears pouring down her face. Her cheeks were marked with mascara, and Anika wondered why her sister bothered to do her makeup for a funeral.

Her father sat on Lucia’s other side, crumpled in like the used tissues littering the pew space at his feet. Their mother hadn’t been there for years, but Anika still looked, expecting to see her on the other side of her father. In her mind, her mother was composed. Maria Hellmann’s grief was locked tight inside; the ghost blended with the imagined reality of who Maria would be now. There was no visible sign of strain on her face, no sign that she was cracking, shattering over the loss of her baby boy. Anika erased the craters in her face from the chemo, replenished her hair. Her mother had died gradually, softly, until she was simply gone. Anika grieved in waves then, had time to process the mortality of cancer and so when her mother died that July nine years ago, Anika had been ready.

She’d already cried.

Now, though, there had been no easing. No gradual grief and sorrow so that the pain was in doses rather than everything at once. Bryce had died like an asshole.

Distantly, the priest continued. He spoke words about the kind of man Bryce had been, the kind of life Bryce had lived. Anika wondered if Father Peter would have to go to confession after this for the lies he spoke about her brother—never once had Bryce ever done something to deserve being called a saint. All Bryce ever did was what needed to be done.

Anika let the priest's sermon drift over her, the funeral mass invading her body and telling her when to rise, when to sit, when to kneel and bow her head. She let the rhythms of familiarity and ritual guide her. Her eyes glazed over as she stared at the crucifix affixed above the altar, where flesh and blood and pieces of body lay. It was fitting, Anika knew, for her brother to be buried here. He would have crumbled to ashes if they'd dared to bury him in their home state; Bryce belonged at the beach, at their summer home, the places they all came back to every summer, no matter what.

She didn't hear her name called the first or even the second time. Her sister elbowed her sharply and Anika jerked to attention, realizing the priest had called her name to do the eulogy. Her legs creaked as she stood, the heels of her shoes scraping against the tile harshly. She cringed at the noise, chills and heat rushing through her nervous system at the same time.

Anika edged past the knees of her sister and father, stepped gracelessly up the three steps onto the altar. Bryce's casket was closed—there wasn't enough of him left to show, to present. His body would have been better off left at the bottom of the ocean. The fish would have appreciated it more.

There was a singular notecard tucked into her dress pocket, crinkled at the corners and soggy from palm sweat and frequent handling. It had half-written phrases and words, ideas of how to describe Bryce to all these people, to all these strangers.

Now, though, there had been no easing. No gradual grief and sorrow so that the pain was in doses rather than everything at once.

“He is—” she started and broke off to clear her throat. It rasped when she spoke. “Bryce was my best friend. Bryce was my best friend in the cliché way that all twins are best friends.” In the back of the church, someone in a black veil stood up and walked out. It looked less like a walk and more like a dignified run. “He was my baby brother by thirteen minutes, and he died like he lived: out on the water.” The door clicked shut behind the woman.

The church fell silent. The children in the back of the room, giggling in their dress shoes and oblivious to the severity of the moment, fell silent. Everything in that moment died.

“Bryce was my best friend and my brother and I loved him more than I’ll ever love myself, but he wasn’t... he isn’t... Bryce...” Anika paused, her throat tightening, and waited for the tears to start falling. Waited for the ache in her body to trick her brain enough into releasing that pent-up emotion. Anika gazed out over the packed church full of gathered people for her brother, and not a single tear pricked her eye.

“Bryce Hellmann wasn’t a perfect man. He wasn’t a great one. But he was a good one, and he—” Anika looked at the closed coffin, where her brother’s mutilated face lay. Where half his body was missing. Where the tattoo he’d gotten when he was nineteen and drunk no longer existed. Where, at twenty-three, he’d be immortalized while she grew old for the both of them. “He did the right thing,” she whispered. He did the right thing, even if it doesn’t feel like it.

Anika stepped out from the podium and down the three steps, not looking at the casket. She kept walking, past the front pew, and out the back of the church. She passed the woman in the veil, the black mesh not enough to hide the bruises and scrapes littering her face. The woman’s arm hung in a sling, the smell of disinfectant and hospital clung to her body. Anika knew who she was; how couldn’t she? The woman her brother killed himself for. The woman her brother decided was worth more than he was. The woman who got to live.

Distantly, Anika thought she might have heard the woman in the veil say something. An apology, maybe, or maybe nothing at all. Words, violent and vicious, tore at Anika’s throat, lashing at her tongue, demanding to be spat at the woman. But Anika said nothing.

She simply went home.



Six days previous

It was 3:19 a.m. A time Anika will remember forever.

The doorbell of their beach house rang, shaking her out of a deep sleep, heart hammering. She had been dreaming about... about something. She'd been dreaming about the water, she thought.

Anika didn't have time to think about what else she'd been dreaming before the doorbell rang again. Harsh blue light shone out from her phone when she tapped on the screen to check the time.

Messages, dozens and dozens, filled her screen. Her eyes were still blurred from sleep, and they all faded together as one. The doorbell rang a third time and Anika shivered, goosebumps breaking out along her arms.

She listened for footsteps to see if Lucia or her father were already on their way to answer the door, but the house was quiet. Waves crashed distantly, the ache of the bones of the house settling as the night hit its darkest. Groaning, she swung her legs out of bed, wincing as her feet hit the ground and pins and needles shot up them. She snagged her robe from the hook on her door just as the doorbell rang again. Sand shook out of the terrycloth, clinging to the soles of her feet.

"Fucking hell, I'm coming," she mumbled. "What is your fucking issue?"

Her feet made soft sounds as she padded down the hardwood stairs and around the corner to the entry way. She could trace this place in the dark with nothing more than a fingertip and find her way perfectly; it didn't matter that she was only here three months a year to see her father. This was more her home than her apartment three hours away. They'd left the porch light on by accident; through the glass on either side of the door, Anika made out the familiar uniform of the MCPD.

Bryce was in jail again. He ran a red, crashed his car seeing if he could beat his "high score." He got drunk and disorderly on the pier, singing sea shanties and crooning around with old women again. He was fine, just stupid. Stupid and fine and alive, like always. He'd be laughing when I picked him up, when dad cursed him out, when Lucia gave him that stare that always made him snicker even harder. He'd brush this off just like he always did.

The officer raised a hand to knock on the door, and Anika lunged

for the door before he could, mouth moving but no words coming out. Her face was numb; her lips were frozen together in the dead heat of July. *Bryce was fine.*

When Anika opened the door, the officer nearly punched her in the face. He reared back in surprise, and for a moment, just a heartbeat, Anika thought that Bryce really had been arrested. That there wasn't enough room in the jail and he wasn't important enough to keep overnight. That they were coming to tell the family he'd done something stupid again and someone needed to bail him out—a courtesy, a kindness, a decency since Bryce was a regular. He may have caught the best fish in town, but he didn't always do it legally.

But the look of shock morphed into remorse and Anika died, right then and there.



An excerpt from the *Bay Times*, Friday, July 14th:

Bay City, Md. – A fatal boat wreck early Friday morning took the life of local fisherman and businessowner, Bryce Hellmann.

Hellmann, 23, was reported to have been out on his boat night fishing with fellow fisherman and co-businessowner, Jonas Derrickson, when another boat struck Hellmann and Derrickson's. The pair were reportedly out fishing for their business, Saltwater Bait and Tackle. The driver of the second boat, according to police, was operating without lights, and the driver was under the influence. The second boat contained two additional passengers, one of whom was critically injured in the wreck but is likely to live, thanks to Hellmann.

According to Derrickson, Hellmann was not initially injured in the wreck but jumped into the water after he heard screaming.

“He was just like that,” Derrickson said. “Bryce was always going to put someone else’s life before his own. He just... he was wired that way.”

Derrickson said that their boat’s engine wasn’t running, but that the boat that crashed into them did not immediately stop their engine. This, Derrickson believes, is why Hellmann died.

“Boat protocol says you immediately cut your engine,” Derrickson said. “It also says you operate with lights on and don’t hit other people, but that’s another... point.”

In the water, Hellmann attempted to rescue Amber Rios, a passenger of the second boat. Rios was unconscious according to the official police statement.

Police arrived moments after the crash, and in their official report, state that, “The

suspect of the second boat attempted to flee the scene instead of halting and attending to injured.” Police refused to comment on the nature of Hellmann’s death, but Derrickson stated, “He was crushed. Sucked under, man. He’d just put that drunk chick back on our boat when that [guy] tried to gun it and get away. Sucked Bryce under that... engine and just chopped him into ... pieces.”

This investigation is still ongoing.



Now

The sisters sat at the edge of the water until the lifeguard blew his whistle, signaling the 5 o’clock closing of the beach. It wasn’t official—it never was—but it was when they were legally off duty. When the swimmers got out for fifteen minutes to let the lifeguards leave before wading back into the ocean of their own accord. Under their own jurisdiction and safety.

It was the witching hour of the ocean.

Anika let Lucia pull her to her feet and step out of the hole her body had created in the sand. The sea breeze stung her eyes but not hard enough to water them, just hard enough to burn. To remind her that she wasn’t dead.

She held her older sister’s hand as they trudged up the sand, gouging deeper footprints into preexisting ones made by other patrons. They were halfway up the shoreline when Anika stepped on a shell.

“Motherfuck!” she yelled instinctively, dropping Lucia’s hand and hopping onto one foot. She fell back onto the sand, her butt and tailbone aching at the sudden fall, crossing her left foot on top of her right knee to see the damage done.

Blood welled up around a shell shard lodged deep into the sole of her foot. Anika cursed again, pressing

the pads of her thumbs into her foot but not removing the shell; just putting more pressure on the ache to try and stop it from hurting.

The sea breeze stung her eyes but not hard enough to water them, just hard enough to burn. To remind her that she wasn’t dead.

Lucia dropped down beside her, hands already reaching for the shard in Anika's foot. Anika let her take her foot, maneuvering it so the injury was away from her line of sight. Gently, Lucia removed the shell shard from Anika's foot.

Tears sprung up in her eyes, hot and sudden. Without warning the tears fell, running down her cheeks, pooling in the sides of her nostrils before dripping down to her lips. They didn't taste like saltwater. They didn't taste like anything.

And just like that, Anika was sobbing. Her chest heaved with the force of the pain, with the pain of loss and sudden holes, with the ache of putting pressure on a wound to stop it from hurting. Anika sobbed for the death of her brother, the words she'd never say and the words she'd already said. Anika sobbed until the saltwater left her body, until it felt like there was no place left inside of her for the grief to be. Anika sobbed for the first time since Bryce died and for the hatred she felt that the reason she let herself cry was not because of him, but because of her own physical pain.

"It's not fair," she cried. "It's not fucking fair."

Lucia let go of her foot and crawled up her body to hold her shoulders, to keep Anika in one piece. Anika let herself be rocked by her older sister, whose tears began to mingle with Anika's on her breastbone.

"I know, baby. I know."

Above them, a gull cried. Behind them, the ocean *swooshed, swooshed, swooshed*. And around them, life without Bryce continued on.



Two Red Lawn Chairs

BY CAILEY ROGERS

You were long gone when I came home but your presence lingered still in the faint ring of the doorbell you installed and the empty living room swivel chair in front of the fireplace. It was always you who sparked its flame, not caring enough to check whether the conflagration would melt our skin, and even now I see you didn't bother to sweep up the ashes you left in your wake.

Mom's new Thanksgiving banner on the mantle and her coffee pot placed on your old beer shelf fails to mask the lack of a father. She can't hide your absence like she did the papers which you still refuse to sign; the contract that has been more than 20 years in the making. Nothing can distract from the silence that suffocates this house that once was a war zone—the dead quiet that settles when it's time to count casualties. It's hard to recognize these wooden floors and worn down couches without the stains of your whispers and stares, without the threat of setting off your trigger with every step.

When I press the doorbell to your new townhouse I wonder if it was you who drilled it in, if you have already cut each blade of grass in the front yard on a Sunday morning under the sun of your new beginning. Stepping through the front door for the first time feels like a betrayal, because I know that while you bask in the light, we will remain in the darkness and the pain of the past.



Two red lawn chairs sit in your barren living-room facing the fireplace, its flame reflecting on the pictures you stole of the daughters you left behind. I imagine you sitting alone with cold turkey on a plastic plate, the clamor of family at a holiday dinner table replaced with the droning of your plasma TV. I wish I could claw at my skin to scratch away the itch of guilt that you don't deserve, and even though every surface is wiped clean of any remnants from the battle, I hope you still bleed.

To the Lighthouse | Caroline DiFrango



my grandmother lives alone

BY RACHEL MULLENIX

my grandmother lives alone
in the little town she grew up in
she says she is happy to be home but
her home has left her behind
she doesn't recognize the roads now that they're paved and
her family is all gone
(we visit when we can but it could never be enough)

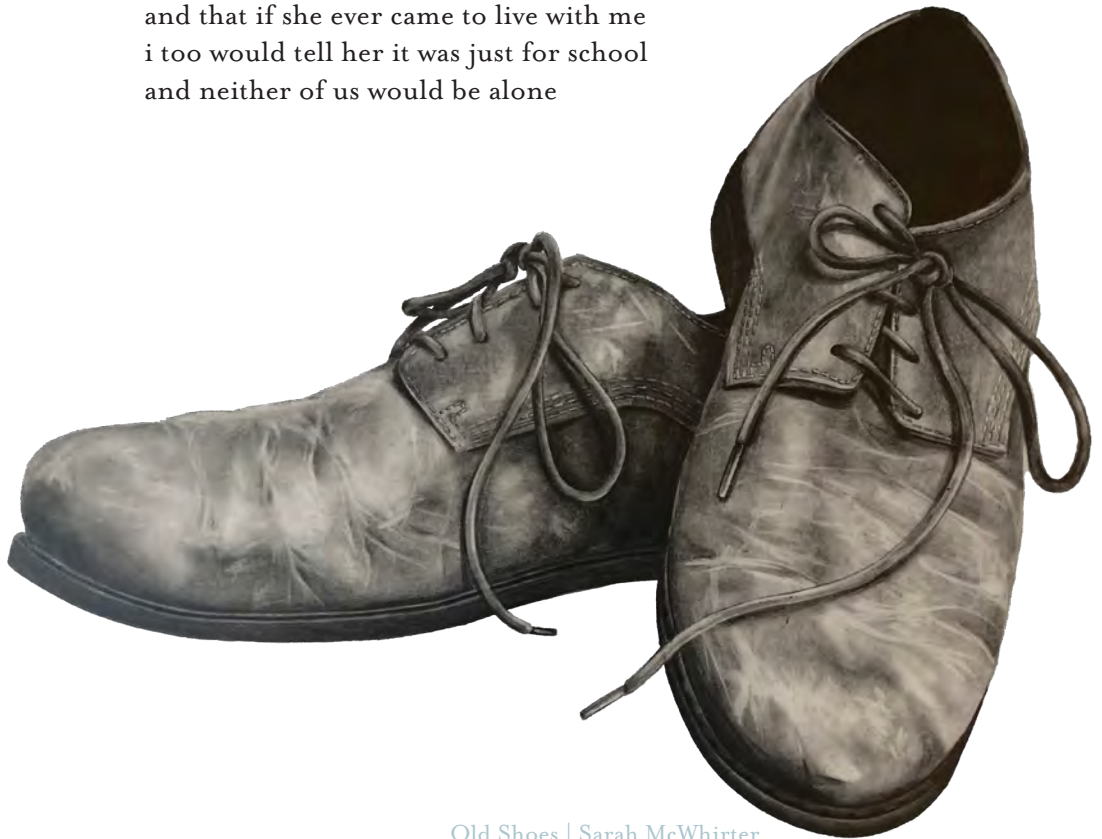
recently every time i see her she tells me with levity in her voice
*i was eleven. i was living in the little blue house a few blocks down.
my mom sent me to live here with my grandmother for school.
it was that same week that they told me my dad was going home from work
when his car stalled on the railroad tracks.
i never knew him, you know. never got to.
i was just eleven.*

and it makes me think about how much children know
and don't know
and how my grandmother's century-old mind
is so much like a child's
she never remembers
that her grandmother's house is painted white now
or that we used to sing together
and she seems so much smaller than she used to be
(i am small too and she barely reaches my chin)
but she is still a woman
who has lived a full life and
who lives now with her fading memories

which no one asks her about
so when my uncle asks if she wants to go for a drive after church
she says *i was eleven when i came here*
and it makes me think about how a god let my grandmother suffer
how her mother must have suffered, and her grandmother too

(in a little blue house with a little blue granddaughter
who was only there for school)
and how no one taught me their names
and how even though i carry one of them
i am not sure who it belonged to
i am not sure who she was
i am not sure who her daughters were
so when i am a grandmother i will tell my story

and my mother's and my grandmother's too
even if i must bring it up myself
because my granddaughter might be listening
might be wondering
might be old enough to understand that
eleven is too small a number
and that if she ever came to live with me
i too would tell her it was just for school
and neither of us would be alone



Old Shoes | Sarah McWhirter

Clay, Lore of a Person Who Changed My Course

BY LILLY SANTIAGO

“People will forget what you said, people will forget what you did, but people will never forget how you made them feel.” – Maya Angelou

Being beautiful:

The last guy I remember who was confirmably physically attracted to me—alongside being someone who I was also aligned with on interests and could fall in love with—was a guy named Clay.

I also met him at one of the loneliest times of my life, when I wanted, more than anything, to share my life with someone else.

Elon was also a different place then: my sophomore year, the culture was different. Harsher, less open-minded pre-pandemic, and the people I was around were saturated with sorority culture. I struggled then to find connection.

Clay went to Elon also. He was a farmer, Agroecology major, and a frat boy, but what I liked about him was when I went into his room and saw all the little pieces of things that were just so him hanging around. I met him through a comedy-writing club, which is ironic to think about now, and I was a business major, and sustainability rep looking to piece together in my brain what it looked like to be a creative person in a dull industry, how to fix it from the inside out. I was interested in sustainable innovation: not just marketing, but actually creating a circular economy comprised of products that elevated and simplified our world, rather than generating more muck, mayhem, and excess packaging.

I also met him at one of the loneliest times of my life, when I wanted, more than anything, to share my life with someone else.

And like I said: Clay was a farmer, and a passionate one at that.

I admired how he tended to each plant individually, ensuring their roots were not entangled with one another, that they were free to grow and transform from seed to sapling in order to produce magic.

In his space lay pieces of garlic on the bedside table, a huge book on Agroecology, and a few drawings or pieces of herbs hung up on the wall. Clay was quite beautiful to me, someone I wrote many poems about. He had pretty blue eyes and a wide smile, and he was fit from yoga and climbing trees.

I remember being around campus two years ago and thinking about proposing a picnic to him. I thought how funny it would be to just sit out on the grass hills here, always so still and unused, and just picnic in the sun.

I wanted Clay's company. I wanted to have time outside with him, and do pottery together, learn about his plants, listen to music together—and, most importantly, make alive his plans of equitable, sustainable living in the context of real and natural food. The physical affection, to me, was just a confirmation of how he felt for me, on the side.

The first night we spent together, I left a soccer party with him. We ran out into the street and raced each other, and looked at the moon. He said:

“I can't wait to kiss you. Can I kiss you now?”

And he kissed me in the empty street. Then he told me the moon was a waxing gibbous moon, the best time to pick peppers.

He also looked at me and was the first person to tell me I was very beautiful, who I believed. I did not need to believe him, because I saw it in his gaze.

It is when someone looks at you like you are the most splendid thing in the world. It was the idea that I was irreplaceable, that nobody else could take my place: because I fit him just right. There was no need to prove myself as worthy because I was shown that I was.



Paying attention and being brave enough to explore:

When you start to pay attention to a river, it becomes more and more complex. I learned this in canoeing class: you start to feel a sense of the river as you are navigating the rocks. You can sense when

it's worth giving up, and when it's worth pushing to keep going.

When you pay attention to nature, and its rhythm, you also pay attention to yourself. The mocha of your eyes, the special texture of your hair, the softness of your skin. The glow in your friend's tan, the intense greenness of their eyes, the intricacy of one of a thousand leaves on one tree—the world that once was small becomes wide.

Sometimes the detail makes the world, and your existence, too good to be true. Because how could so many things be so intricate?

I think this is what it feels like to be not only in love, but to be mindful.



Climbing:

Clay: he would climb trees. After he left I began to explore every pathway and stone unturned—I would look at the trees and wonder how he climbed them. I wanted to climb them too.

I would ask people what they knew of him, in passing conversation, to get a sense of all I couldn't understand.

And in my senior year: I would think about how he participated in everything, but also held his own. I liked his lifestyle. His only difference was that he was complicit in frat culture, which I think mostly just interrupted his work, and frustrated him. He was in charge of the community garden and making produce for the school and community organizations. I wasn't actually totally sure of the scope of his work. I just knew he was a key community member.

When he left, he left behind him a legacy of 70 varieties of incredibly hot peppers. A realm of experimentation.



Slow burn:

"I'm alright with a slow burn, takin my time let the world turn—Imma do it my way, it'll be alright, if we burn it down, and it takes all night" — 'Slow Burn,' Kacey Musgraves

I feel it on my bike, most. The future we talked about; a new future, a new way, a greener way.

It goes down to the soaps you use, without the microplastics. It

goes down to wearing makeup—he never liked the chemicals, and I no longer like covering myself up.

Clay would describe a vision of a world, under the dim light of his window, in the early morning: he spoke of gardens that climbed over walls. Buildings made of produce, building cities into harvest paradises. When he spoke he sounded sad, but I heard the possibility between the words.



Sunset:

At sunset, he took me to the music room, and we played *Sunday*

When he spoke he sounded sad: but I heard the possibility between the words.

Candy together on the piano. He put his hands on the keys over mine, and we sang together. His voice sounded like Mac Miller, so when I was missing him, I started listening to Mac a lot.

As night started to fall, we sat by the lake and he told me, “You know you’re different, we both are. You’re just different than most people on this campus.” But he was leaving campus, and I still had to be here for two years without him.

That is what happened, and it felt raw.



Earth analogies:

Clay wasn’t like the garden. He was a part of his garden. He was earth. He was grounding, like earth. I think he acted like water. Hard to predict, to follow, emotional in an uncontainable way. I think he had a smoking addiction because he needed a way to mediate all that emotion: I have always been one to brace myself through it.

If I was an element, I would feel like fire and act like wind. I feel intensely, in a way that burns—but light on my feet, I’ve been told. There and gone and barely there.



Disappointment:

It was a Friday. I put gems on my eyes; my hair was still long and I straightened it. I texted Clay, “I wish you were at this party!” and just my luck, he did show up—except with another girl on his arm, who he introduced to me and my friend and her boyfriend, holding her hand. She was a freshman, a low blow for a senior. He also could have just hooked up with her in secret, but he made a point to have me see her. To go right up to me, where he knew I was, and have my heart involved.

Coming home, I could not have been more of a mess: I stumbled home in the dark in high heels and cried outside of my Danieley flat on the concrete. He was not only the person I loved, but the only person I felt understood me, cared for me, until it was proven that he didn’t, or at least didn’t want to.

That said, the fact that he didn’t want me romantically meant he also didn’t want my heart, soul, brain, either—because this is the way that most male/female relationships go: once romance is attempted, the possibility of friendship starts to become significantly less likely.

I understood all of the implications at the time, and so I cried about the loss of him with not only jealousy, but with the understanding that to him, despite all the ways I perceived I was acknowledged by him, more than by anyone else I had known at the time—I was no more individual than any other female body. Then Covid hit, and our separation was made permanent.

I cut my hair in reaction to the pain. He had loved it long, so I didn’t keep it long for a long time. He said it was wild—and so I didn’t want to be wild anymore. I told myself to be who I was, a waste of time that led to betrayal. My heart in two. I wanted to forget everything—different hair, cut, path, life, without love or dreams.



Poetry: seasonal affection, that March: TW: sappy & renaissance

You’re only beautiful in wintertime, so once the solstice comes round, I’m packing.

In the meantime, I must confess... your chilly pinks, your dewy hues... are just impeccable. How did such light and lilt transform into notions solely characteristic of your person?! How did you become upended with elegance so suddenly? Did some godly hand just reach down, and smack your features into submission?

*Piercing watery eyes, set within your stoney, shifting gaze—you're a vision— one
you'll never see in entirety
embodied, nevertheless,
accomplished in fruition—arranged in a face I'm a witness to now.*



The beginning of the end of the beginning, Friday farm table:

This past weekend, I visited Loy Farm. I went because of a Harvest Table dinner for my job, and also because I genuinely believe and have believed since I met Clay that food is the way forward to a different more natural way of life—that we have to establish or humanity will needlessly suffer for it.

Every time I go to the farm, though, I can't help but think of him. It was his baby. He planted hot peppers before he kicked town, kicked away all his community positions, and did things I do not know of—because he has no social media whatsoever, and I no longer have means of knowing what he's up to.

Anyways though, beginning of the end: before we found out about Covid, after the moment with the girl at the frat house, as I was feeling he was putting up an emotional front to me, he invited me to the farm, and gave me kale. I remember telling him I was scared of the sky: it was a red color and made me nervous. Somehow that pissed him off. And I was open and he wasn't and that upset him, and also made him really scared. Because the evidence of compatibility was compelling enough to indicate we would end up big parts of each other's lives if we continued, and he was leaving, and that wasn't something he wanted to do.

He dropped me off with the kale and I was left in the rain. I'm in the parking lot: Why do I always end up in parking lots? Fleetwood Mac's 'Rumors' coming out of his car.

Two years later, after two years of celibacy, after a haircut I'm still trying to grow back from—fixating in off moments on the hair I used to have—after solidifying my passions around things I was introduced to by this one boy, I find my future directly correlated to a storyline that ended some time ago. With no online footprint, he is just a ghost to me now. But then I go to the garden, or the farm, which ended up being my refuge at Elon when he left—what welcomed me when an

actual person was not to be found—and I see his footprint still, just barely there but not totally worn off. He is someone lost to me, but who would not want to be found by me now, in the slightest, even if I tried.

The farm manager employed at Loy now reminded me of him. He had a wife and a baby. He was also one of the only genuine people seated at the table: the whole event was beautiful, but simultaneously a type of PR performance I knew Clay could point out and understand, as one of the only people I've met so far that would. The hypocrisy of the event existed in that it was less about the potentiality of a world which shares, but about making a show of meek attempts at activism, rooted in exclusive abundance. And I found that this was a lot of my Elon experience—lofty claims followed by very little action, or a culture of excused mediocrity. It's okay now and sometimes my aims are too high to be achievable, but before Clay left and after, Elon was not my place.

Still, I say nothing of this in person, because I have tact, though I was thinking it. Still after dinner, I approach the farm manager and ask for recommended farms I could go to in the North Carolina area, to volunteer at after I graduate, and to visit for the weekend at the annual Piedmont Farm Tour. Then I hovered—I asked—by the way—"do you happen to have known the previous farm manager? I was friends with him."

"No," he responded. But he mentioned that while he'd never met him, his reputation preceded him.

"Yeah, he had had a lot of ideas."



High tea:

This weekend I cut short the farm tour to attend a high tea event. I was only able to go to one farm, largely due to the fact I don't have a car and really would rather stick with my bicycle anyways.

Wouldn't it be distinctly wrong to buy a car to live a more sustainable lifestyle—or is that, point blank, just how things work?

I distract you: high tea.

I sat with all the girls at the table, but remember feeling distinctly alone. Funny enough, that girl that Clay had brought to that party two years back?

She sat directly across from me. I asked her if she remembered

where she met me, and she said, “I don’t know, I think my freshman year?” And left it at that. It was not her fault what he did, and in a way she was very much a pawn in a sticky situation she was never privy to. But I saw recognition in her face looking at mine. Full circle.

High tea wasn’t for me for more reasons than one. Firstly, I can make my own tea, and actually do make it every day.

But additionally: It was another one of these performance events—a gathering of people who are gathering out of an affection for luxury rather than genuine connection. It was a demonstration of materialism in a very pretty, swallowable way.

I loved Clay before I found my voice on these things. I watched him, knowing he had pieces of living I wished for. I loved him in part not just because I was known by him: seen and acknowledged as funny and interesting and smart, and not only because he did the things I liked doing, and had a good attitude—but he represented to me the world of people that do things with their heart, for causes beyond themselves. He was altruistic in his actions, except when it came to me.

And at high tea—well, I’ll reveal to you, reader, that was yesterday, and today is Monday. Everybody was talking about post-grad. And all the girls on my side of the table proclaimed “I will do mediocre work for mediocre pay.” And I realized I will never, ever pride myself on something like that. Because no matter how much I struggle because of it, I keep going towards this extra mile; striving towards idealism, because I am the only one stupid enough *after everything* to still believe it to exist.



Glorification?:

Romanticize the world, romanticize a person: either way, it’s the meaning you can derive that matters. In a world stuck in late-stage capitalism, it is easy to get depressed. To only see plastic bottles and fast food. But if you can find the people that feel like fresh mangoes, and sunsets, and clean water, and swimming in the ocean—I think this is the way out of it all. And also the way to a better, cleaner, more honest world. With love, with romance, generating beauty with each other, for one another’s happiness. I think that’s the goal, and that’s the purpose.

**Lore:**

After two years, I ask myself: Why am I still thinking about this?

But I guess even after all this time, and however messy he was and the whole situation, Clay was the closest I'd felt to feeling seen, and known, then, and perhaps even now at this university. We meet so many people, but only one or two truly breach the surface, have an impact.

Yet: in the throw of the same hand—my language betrays me; because I will always paint a person with fewer flaws than they had: out of a sign of dignity and decency for their character. Still, he was something: with a legacy, now an integral piece to my own, and Elon's personal lore.

**Sustainable industry:**

I may look like just a poet, or romantic, but my true interest is truth, and writing is how I blend it all. The goofy outrightedness of nature, which keeps pulling me back, and getting me excited—and also people; their intricacies, and abilities, in the context of a world that really needs optimistic, intricate, and able people.

And when I speak with certain people, probabilities emerge where we as people are allowed to be more of that. More human, more alive, more free, more individual, more able to enact creativity into our greater fate as mankind. More able to see how exciting it is to collaborate with others for a way of living differently, and refined from the existence we live in now.

**Symbolism:**

Clay molded me as we mold clay.

I might get into pottery. I look for beauty in the natural things now—the fresh food, the earthly substances. Clay is the oldest material of growth: of building and making art, of advancing civilization. To me, he has become as symbolic as the material he

was named after. Of course, there must be something to it all—correct?

Names, symbols, and things perhaps maybe you'd rather forget. But you shouldn't—because they remind you what you truly want, who you want to be, and what that feels like. There's a reason we remember what we do remember.



Ends:

A couple of times after not seeing him, I checked in over text.

He complimented me: “You’re a really great writer,” and that’s what stuck.

As I leave Elon, I venture to combine my interests—in not only him, and writing, and trees, but all the things I learned together. In a month or so, I will go to the rainforest on scholarship in Monteverde, Costa Rica. I secured this opportunity for myself, but I like to think I can thank the farmer for nudging me in the right direction—despite his inconsistencies. I hope he’s doing good work now also.



Seeing Clay at the garden last March: haircut:

Last time I saw Clay, I returned to the garden: his hair was shorter, but he was just the same. I liked him just as much as when I’d seen him last but treated him as a friend. My newfound and graduating friend Nicole tells me he’s in town because they used to do yoga together. I saw him in the spring sunlight, the way I never got to during COVID.

He hugged me, and I went home.

And as for Clay: this is the end of what I know of him.



if butterflies are angels, then I am a moth

BY CAROLINE PIRWITZ

I am the type of girl boys only love at night. – Leanna Firestone, “10:15”

My mother said to me, when I was too small
to know better, that all butterflies are angels
who descend from heaven to travel the world on colorful wings.

I believed I might be a butterfly—beautiful and worthy
of the sunshine. Until you
came along. Now I know the truth.

If all butterflies are angels, then I must be a moth.

I do not travel the world on colorful wings.
I only come out at night and
get stuck

in your screen door, or hover obsessively
around the bulb that illuminates your front porch
in the summer heat.

I am a moth and my addiction isn't the sweet
nectar of lilies, poppies, and dizzying daisies.
I am enamored
with light.

It hypnotizes me until I am so drunk on the glow
that white spots cloud my vision and I am blind.

And sometimes
the light is deceiving.

And sometimes
in the dark, I can't always be sure
of the true source. Still I go.

I don't flit and float like angels do.
My wings buzz with passion as I fly
 closer and
 closer to the brilliant warmth.

It's you. For one whole moment, my body feels bright and calm.

One whole moment and I smell smoke.
I've gotten too close.
Something ignites.

My wings are black and broken
and my little moth lungs are coughing up soot.
The light was a forest fire, insatiable, consuming
everything in its path.

Your face at my door when the clock strikes midnight.
Words are embers disguised as sunbeams.
Each kiss, a scorch.
Until everything is engulfed and devoured.

I try to fix it, to put the fire out, to save the world
from being charred. But I am just a moth.
I am burnt and I am blind. I am not special. So I am licked
by the blaze, going up in flames with everything else.

My moth body blisters
and I don't think I will survive it this time.
 But I always do.

I blink open my bleary eyes and it's night again.
 I take off on tattered wings to search for a different light
 until I am accidentally caught in another firestorm.

I'll try to put out the inferno. I'll try like I tried with you. Again and
again and again.

And my wings will never be the same.

A Lesson in Color Theory

BY CAROLINE DIFRANGO

I think about the chaos
that was A's death on the driveway
catty-corner to mine

more than I should. The circling
news crews and crumpled toy stroller
atop red-stained blacktop.

A and I were little girls
together. We loved playing outside,
and princesses, and pink.

We were two in a growing herd
of unruly children, tamed only by
the loss of A.

After she died in front of us, our parents
tried to prove sirens and EMTs are
the good guys.

Still, every time ambulances wail
nearby, I am three again, believing
my friend to be stolen.

My psychiatrist says I am not scarred
by A's death but I am by the time
my aunt fed me a cow

that I had named. Betsy,
a cow—*my* cow—liquified in
my roiling stomach.



Flamingo | Jess Baker

Every year I write A a birthday card
and attach it to a pink balloon
headed for the sky.

The letters are shorter every year
as my memories of her slip
from my fingers

like helium balloons drawn
to the clouds. I know my letters
don't reach her,

nor could her parents, or mine,
who were seconds too late to
stop the truck.

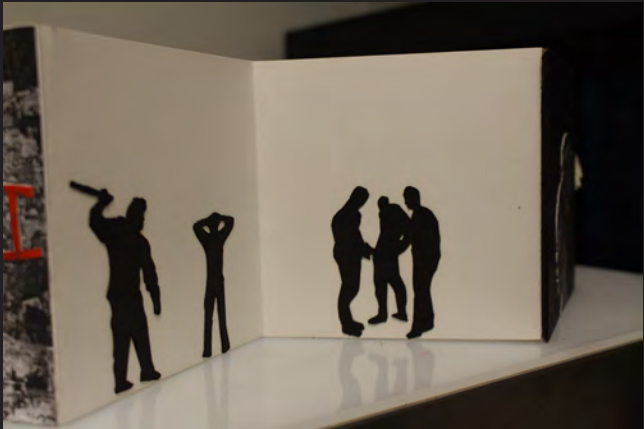
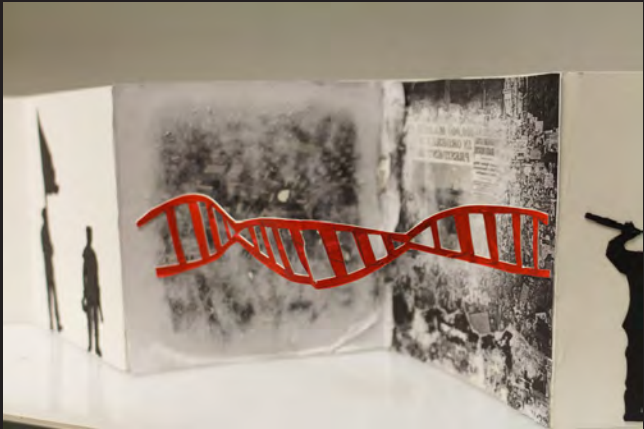
In July, I saw her mom over sweating
cocktails at a 50th birthday party
for the first time

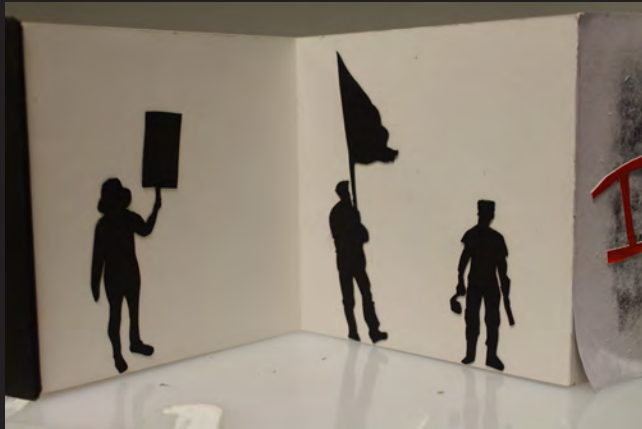
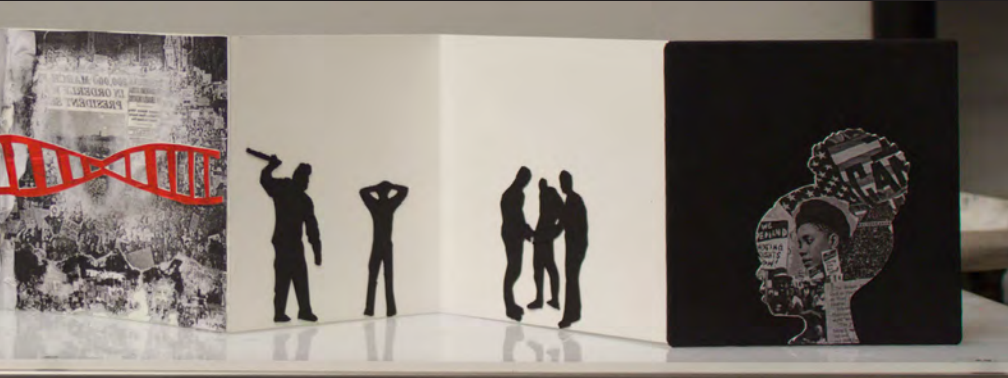
in years, and we bonded
over antidepressants and alcohol
and her masturbating son.

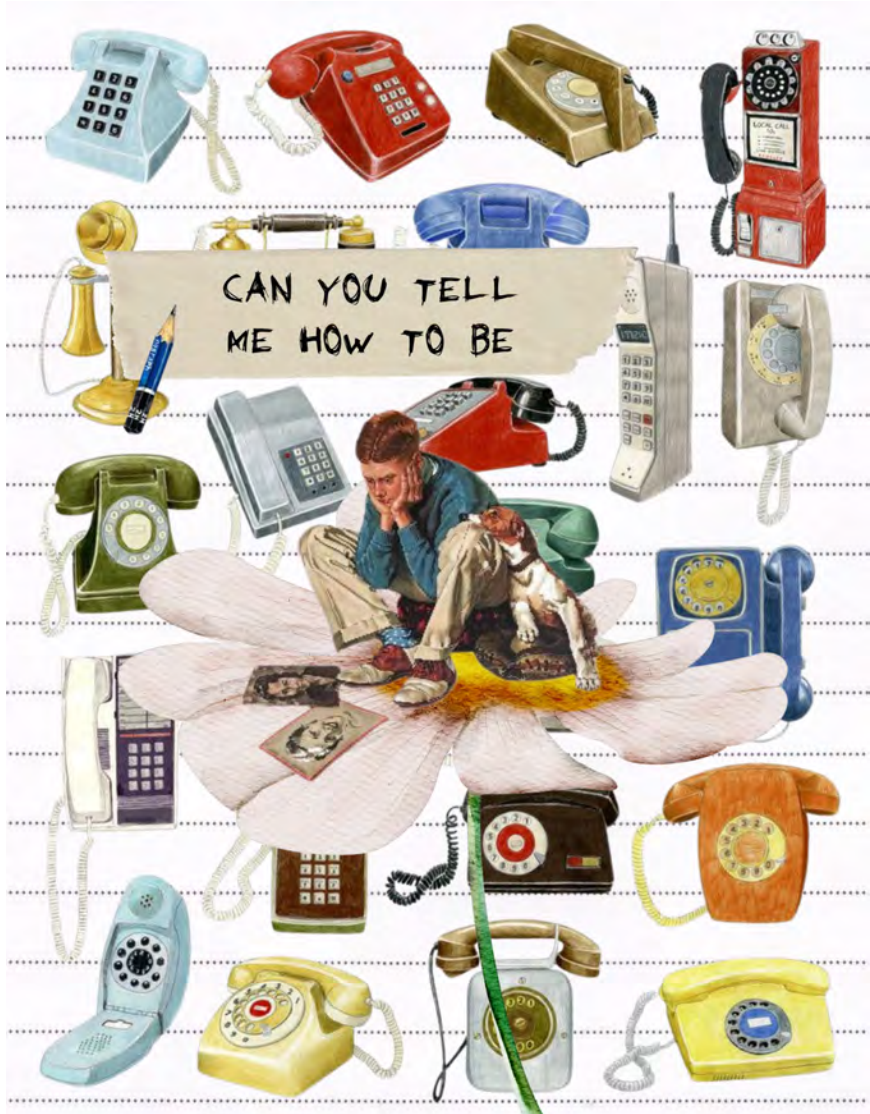
A's mom—who saw her girl
crumple—still treats me like a child
because I was

The moment her world stopped turning.
The moment black returned pink to red.
The moment I became afraid
of cars and motherhood.

Intentions | SYDNI BROWN







Can you tell me how to be? | James Hemmingway

Fuck Painted Faces and Plastic Skin

BY KENNA DUBRASKI

Dear Youngerself,

I know how uncomfortable you feel; your hair is too long, your smiles are too wide, your dress is too pink. Your voice, your hands, your body is all too small. I know you want to be someone else. Maybe someone like your brother: tall and loud and confident and strong. Someone who everyone seems to take seriously. The way they talk to you—hands on their knees, bent over and eyes swimming with pity—I know it makes you want to rip your hair out, to yell and to scream, *I am more than what you think I am. I'm not a little girl, I'm not I'm not I'm not.*

In elementary school, I know you hate being a girl. Worse yet, a small girl. Adults think they have to protect you, boys see you as an easy target, other girls seem to find your existence funny for some reason. I know you feel you have to overcompensate for everything about you, and I know you will resort to anger to try and prove to the world that you are just as capable as everyone else.

Eventually you will start wearing somber colors—black, navy blue, sometimes purple if it is dark enough—and hide your face with your hair. Adults and family members will tell you to *smile!* for pictures. That high-pitched note stabs you like a fork scraping on glass; their patience is slipping by the seconds and you can feel it. But it's not your fault. It's not your fault that they want you to look and act a certain way: pretty, happy, ladylike, a doll with a painted face and plastic skin. It's not your fault that they forced this on you, every constricting dress and bow shoving your voice away deep inside. How could they blame you for being angry?

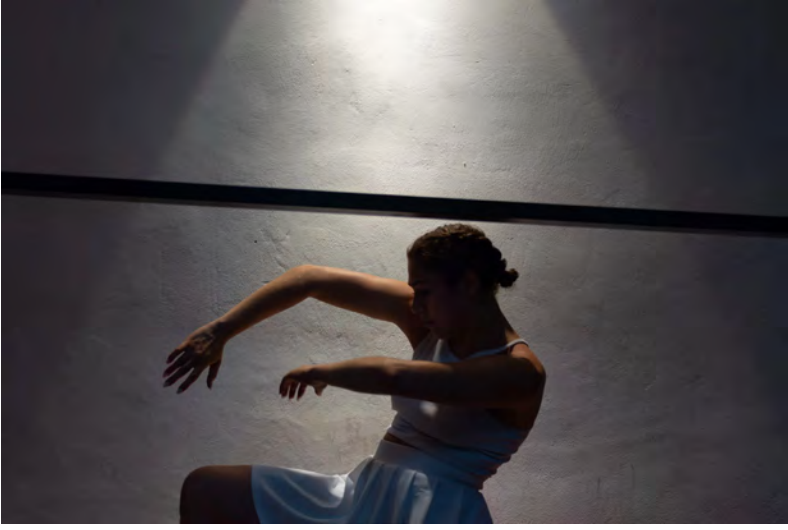
In middle school, you'll start falling for boys. A lot. And you're going to feel insecure about it. Each day at school will be an internal battle. You will want to look pretty for them, but their idea of pretty is not you. And so you will question your beauty and self-worth based on one foolish boy's opinion. You will compare yourself to their girlfriends, wondering how you can achieve what they have without sacrificing yourself. You can't seem to win. I want you to know that you don't have to change for someone else. Keep following your heart, and I promise it will pay off.

You'll mature physically earlier than everyone else, which will suck. Remember when you got your first period in the lunchroom, fifth grade, and the school nurse treated you like a freak? You'll start getting acne in sixth grade and Justin will ask if you have a skin disease, for God's sake. Pay him no mind. Please stop picking your face in front of the mirror until bloody tears run down your cheeks. Please stop stealing Mom's concealer to try and cover it up. Please stop wishing to be someone you're not.

In high school, you will become aware that you have a female body, and so people are going to judge you for it. You'll start to branch out with clothing by wearing more colors, but you will quickly stop after your best friend's father calls you fat. You will hear somewhere that black is supposedly slimming. These will be some of the hardest years, and I wish I could stop you from starving yourself and over-exercising. I wish I could stop you from pushing yourself too hard at field hockey practice so that you can "earn" the pizza Coach bought for the team. Please stop weighing yourself in secret using Mom's scale. Please pay no mind to Dad and his ways. It's not your fault he couldn't recognize what was going on with you. It's not your fault he praised you for being so healthy.

But these days will pass. You will finish school and say goodbye to your home and family. Adults will ask you if you're sad about graduating, and you will wonder if something is wrong with you for saying, hell no! The truth is, you were lied to. These were supposed to be the best years of your life, where you would find lifelong friends and your true love. And you will keep some friends, but as far as love goes, you will find it. You will learn to love yourself because it has gotten you this far: your legs have carried you to different countries, your voice has said I love you to so many special people, and your hands have wiped the tears you thought you would drown in. So take it easy on yourself because life is hard! Being an adolescent is hard! But you will survive and, believe it or not, you will arrive at a place where you thrive in your own femininity, you will smile at strangers, you will look pretty for yourself, and you will love your body. Your plastic skin will crack and, from its shell, you will rise.





Flying | Lauren Jacobbe

The L Word

BY CAILEY ROGERS

My father used to tell me the story of the first time I told him “I love you.” It was when I was about four years old, he used to say, when I was still blessed with a toddler’s amnesia and memories faded away before the clock struck midnight. Even though I have no recollection of this moment, I can picture the fuzzy scene in my head because of the amount of times he repeated this anecdote—almost as if he ingrained it in my mind by sheer will. The heat of the Mexican sun was finally dimming into more of a humid musk as my father and I walked along the gravel sidewalk to our house, racing the molasses sunset. My arms were barely long enough to reach his hand and my fingers couldn’t quite manage to coil around his own, but he said I didn’t let go of my grip as we neared the front door.

“Daddy, I love you,” I said, breaking the silence of the twilight. He told me how he couldn’t manage to repeat those three words back to me as the tears flooded his eyes and throat; how it was the best five seconds of his life.

I can’t remember the last time I told my father that I loved him and meant it. I can’t remember the last time I said it at all. Maybe he told me that story over and over like a never-ending skip on a vinyl record to remind me that those words had become scarce in my vocabulary. Or maybe it was more to convince himself that I once was capable of saying them at all.



He comes into my room without warning; without permission. The creak of my bedroom door wakes me, and through squinting eyes I watch him take a seat on my bed. It’s the week after finals and I’m still trying to catch up on the hours of sleep I can never really get back, but I convince myself it’s possible as long as I sleep past noon every day. The unspoken protocol around the house is to avoid rousing me at all costs and let my body come back to life whenever it feels ready. Why my father decided to cross this line today is a mystery I couldn’t solve even if I was remotely awake, but I can see a lecture lingering on

his lips even before my eyes adjust to the sunlight pouring through the blinds.

“Cailey, I want you to take your sister out to breakfast this morning,” he states.

“What? Why?” My voice sounds foreign and broken, as if it’s lost in the dream I was in just a few minutes ago.

“She’s going through a hard time right now, and I think you should spend some time with her.” I had known that Alice was still feeling the aftershock of moving away from home even though we had boarded the plane from Mérida, Mexico to Apex, North Carolina almost 3 years ago. It was the kind of pain that we were both intimately familiar with after moving 6 times throughout our lives. But I’ve never imagined that my father would acknowledge that hurt, let alone try to make it better. I’ve always been subtly taught to keep our suffering silent and unseen, and to bury anything that threatens to blur the illusion of the perfectly tight-knit family we’re supposed to be. I can’t remember any instance where my father tried to dull that constant throbbing in my veins, but I guess he feels Alice deserves that kindness.

“I just woke up. Do I really have to do this now?” I ask, still incredulous.

“Come on, Cailey. Just take your sister out to get some food,” he insists. I reach for my bedside table, and see that the numbers on my phone read 1:02 p.m.

“Nothing is going to be open for breakfast right now, anyway. It’s past one.”

“Cailey, just go out with your sister,” he demands now, dropping any amount of softness or care he shrouded his previous words with. Where is this coming from? Where was this when I was hurting?

“Why don’t you just take her out yourself if you’re so worried about her?” I ask. That seems like the real question here; the only question. Somehow, I’ve become his soldier, tasked with carrying out his last-minute mission to become a concerned and caring father. Or at least look like one. But his answer to my question doesn’t come with words, but rather a glare of disbelief that I would even think of denying his “request.” And I know all too well what that means: it’s time to surrender the battle. “Fine, I’ll do it. But I’m not gonna do it exactly the way you want me to,” I concede.

Now, as I stare into his eyes on a cold January morning, I don’t see them welling up with unshed tears or with a faint glimmer of

nostalgia and melancholy for his lost little girl. I see them glossed with an unsettling kind of nothing. No feeling, no remorse, no humanity. “I’m so tired of your fucking attitude, Cailey,” he says with just a hint of patronizing laughter creeping from the back of his throat.

“What did you just say to me?” He had broken his own rule—he had always been adamant that any swearing in the house was a disgrace

But this is different. This is the monster under the bed finally coming out of the shadows and into the light.

to the family and warranted a slap to the face. But now it’s the day after New Year’s and here I am in my snowflake pajamas hearing my father say “fuck” for the first time in my life.

“You heard what I said,” he replies, with a tinge of pride in his voice. He didn’t even hesitate. I had become familiar with the light switch inside him—the one that allows him to drop the illusion of any semblance of a father before your heart pumps another ounce of blood. But this is different. This is the monster under the bed finally coming out of the shadows and into the light. And his lifeless eyes are staring right back at me.

“You’re almost 19 and still acting like a child. A selfish and insubordinate child,” he continues. All I had done was say no. No thanks, Dad, I don’t feel like going to breakfast with my sister at one o’clock in the afternoon. I’m not exactly up to indulging in your savior complex today.

“If I was acting like a child this conversation would be going very differently right now.”

“Oh, really? When do I ever ask anything of you? You can’t do one single thing for me?”

“You’re right, you never ask. You demand,” I say, and it’s the truth. The stitches of my composure begin to rip, and the only thing holding me together is the shock. It’s like the adrenaline before a roller coaster drop or backhanded strike—all you can do is keep your fear still and hidden in the hopes of making the blow more bearable. Just don’t give him a reason to make it worse.

“Don’t start with the wordplay, Cailey. I’m tired of this. Do what I ask of you.” And with that, he’s gone, carrying the last word and my

respect for him out my bedroom door. I need to leave this house. He wants me to leave and take my sister out, fine. I will. As a sob breaks loose from the cage I locked it in, I barge into my sister's room.

"Get up. Get ready. We're leaving," I say, struggling to breathe.

"What are you talking about?" She's asleep, just like I was mere minutes ago. Still lost in the blissful dreamland without fathers or fucking attitudes.

"Alice, just please get up. We're going to Aunt May's for the day. I can't be here." In the span of five minutes, I call my mom to make sure she meets us later, wipe the tears from my eyes with a swipe of mascara, and put on the nearest outfit from my back-from-college pile before I hear another knock at my door. For the second time today, he lets himself in without invitation.

"Hey, so what's your plan?" Back into character, I see. A loving father—the acting part of his life. As if the last time he spoke to me five minutes ago wasn't when he said the worst thing anyone has ever said to me. I don't answer. I won't feed into this sick play anymore. "Cailey, where are you going?"

"You know, I was in a fine mood today before you decided to throw that at me," I say. I'm not as good of an actor as he is anyway.

"You keep this attitude up, and you'll see what else I can do to make your life miserable." At this point, I realize exactly what's going on here. He's starting to treat me the same way he treats my mother. The swearing, the intolerance of insubordination—I had seen these signs before, they were just never pointed at me. He doesn't know that I've heard the recordings my mom has stored in her phone; the one where he calls her "bitch" or "fucking ridiculous" in that menacing voice imbued with a sinister kind of calm. I have seen him push her up against the wall of a hotel room in Costa Rica and slap her ass so hard it sounded like a gunshot, but he's never dared to use a swear word in front of me. That he has kept hidden until now. But even beyond that, the one thought that keeps repeating in my head at this moment is: exactly how low do you have to be for your own father to not only threaten to make your life miserable, but to imply he had already been doing so?

"I expect a text when you get to wherever you're going. Not from your sister. From you," he reiterates. I have nothing to say, so I stuff my wallet into my purse and make my way toward the door.

“Love you,” he says, almost as an afterthought—not with any real feeling or sincerity, but rather with an expectation that I will return the sentiment. But that phrase seems just as poisonous and vulgar as the worst swear word he could have possibly spit at me. Even the thought of repeating those two syllables brings the taste of bile to my mouth, more than it ever has before. Without even turning to look back, I leave, knowing that I can never truly get away.

My knuckles bleach the more I grip the wheel, but it’s the only thing keeping them from shaking. It’s a good thing I’m driving a familiar route, otherwise I’m not sure I could pay enough attention to the automated voice emanating from my phone telling me to take a right.

“What are we gonna do at Aunt May’s anyway?” Alice asks while scrolling through her phone, still in her pajamas.

“Dad said he was tired of my fucking attitude,” I say, and look away from the road just quick enough to see her eyes widen.

“He swore in front of you?”

“Yes.” But that wasn’t the point.

“Why am I not allowed to swear, then?” I should have known that this is what she would take away from this. I should have expected that she would never understand the gravity of this; the spinning in my head and constriction of my throat. I guess it’s not her fault that I was born first. I’m first in line and closer to the fire. It’s inevitable that I’ll get burned, but the flames don’t reach her if she stands behind me. I’ve taken the bullets and the shrapnel that have exploded out of him at spontaneous times, and I’ve tended to my own wounds while she gets to enjoy the light show. We live in the same house, and we come from the same parents, but we don’t share the same father. And we never will.

I thought maybe moving to North Carolina would make things better. As I inched closer to 18 and his time with me before moving off to college dwindled, I hoped that he’d loosen the leash he’d kept me on my entire childhood. But I forgot that he feasts off of control, and the less he has, the more he craves it. But if nothing else, I am a master of adaptation. I used those years of ballet to tiptoe around the house, avoiding the cracks and creaks in the floorboards. I trained my ears to analyze the details of his footsteps, the sound his truck makes when he pulls into the driveway. The most imperfect and unpredictable prong of the system was cracking the code to his unidentifiable moods. Was he

humming? Steer clear. Was he turning on all the lights in the house? Run away. As a general rule, never ask for anything unless you know he's in a good mood. Don't get disappointed when he says no anyway. Don't even bother asking if you haven't spent time with him recently. Say hello before he does. Ask about his day. Deny it when he accuses you of only being nice because you want something from him. Never tell him no. But most of all, after he yells and punishes and laughs in your face, pretend you are not angry. He did nothing wrong. He never does anything wrong.

I've broken these rules and I've adhered to them. Nothing seems to work; nothing seems to change. Once, on Christmas Eve, he kicked me out of my aunt's house for not looking at him when he asked me a question. Once, he refused to let me have lunch with my friends because I hadn't greeted him correctly when I woke up in the morning. Once, he told me that he would control me until I was 18 when I asked to go watch a dance recital. Once, he slapped me for no reason at all.

How many times had I gone through the cycle? How many times had I let his current drown me in the rapids, and when I could finally come up for air, when I finally reached land, all I could do was jump back in the ice water because he asked me to? Not this time. I'm not jumping. Not like my mother did.



After hours at my aunt's house and another drive home, my hands are still weak when I shift the gear to park in the Volkswagen Jetta. He gave me this car. It feels contaminated now as I go over the plan of action in my head. Go straight up to your room. Let him come to you. Tell him you're not letting this one go. Don't cry. I sent him a text when we got to May's, like he asked, but that was the last order I planned on obeying today. As soon as I lift the broken garage door that he refuses to get fixed, I slip inside and up the stairs to my room, tactfully avoiding the living room as soon as I hear his voice talking to the dogs from that direction. It's not long before he moves the first piece on the board.

"You could've at least said 'hello' when you walked in the house, you know," he says as he walks in, the internal lightswitch turned on.

My back is still turned to him as I pretend to organize my collection of dusty books. I can't help the smile that sneaks up on me as I realize just how predictable he can be sometimes.

"I'm never going to forget what you said to me today," I say, still evading his eyes. "And I'm not gonna pretend like it didn't happen either." Might as well get straight to the point before I lose my nerve.

"Fine. It wasn't meant for you to forget. In fact, I want you to remember." Now, I turn around.

"You know, you're the first person to ever speak to me that way. To ever use that word toward me."

"Good," he hisses. Genuine. Unapologetic. Sickening. I was expecting him to deny and deflect. Not to admit that he was proud of his words, that he intended them.

"I don't want to talk to anyone who thinks it's okay to speak to me like that," I blurt out, unsure of where to go from here.

"Well, in this household, you're gonna have to." Of course, it was a requirement for me to speak to him no matter the way he spoke to me. What else did I expect?

I'm not sure I can process the next two minutes of the conversation. There's a ringing in my ears that won't go away, a paralyzing buzz that muffles his words and mine. He asks me to look deeper into my actions, to find the reason why I caused him to speak to me that way.

All I did was say no.

He mocks me, says I'm pretending that I'm such a sweet and innocent little girl, aren't I? He claims he called my bluff.

All I did was say no.

He says I reached his limit. He won't allow me to do whatever I please in this household. All I did was say no.

"All I did was say no," I whisper. "Under no circumstances did I deserve that."

"You get more respect than you deserve in this household, Cailey."

Now *that* I hear—crisp and clear. After years of hiding and waiting in my own home, watching him twist locks and install bars on my windows, I deserve nothing. Every good grade, every sleepover I missed, every college acceptance letter had no value, no merit. I don't deserve respect.

Any words that follow don't stick. It's useless anyway. He would never understand. Not what it's like living with a boulder hanging

above your head every time he enters a room, trying to make sure you don't give him a reason to drop it. Not what it's like being a woman who's told that she doesn't deserve respect by an authority figure. Not

No matter how hard I try,
no matter how many times
I explain how his words
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brain until the day I die,
he will never relent.

what it's like to lose all lingering hope that your father may have a glimpse of decency inside him.

No matter how hard I try, no matter how many times I explain how his words will be imprinted on

my brain until the day I die, he will never relent. He'll say I'm making things up in my head. That any respect I don't get is respect I didn't earn. It's my fault he treated me the way he did. On and on—it's a different record from the one he used to play, but the player is still broken. It's bound to skip and repeat forever, and it's about time I learned that it's fruitless to try and fix it.



A few weeks before that day when I lost his respect and he lost mine, he came into my room to say his usual goodnight.

"Sweet dreams, Cai. I love you."

"Goodnight." It's the reply I've given him for years, but this time he hesitated to close the door. He was waiting for me to say something.

"You never say 'I love you' anymore," he said softly before closing the door. Well, Dad, maybe this is why.



Hope is for angels and millionaires

BY ALEXANDRA SCHNEIDER

The sun painted fields hot gold, and sweet summer lightning awakened a simple cadaverous longing inside his lungs. Even I remember how the angels watched—wincing as Adam gorged on pomegranates

one cloudless afternoon. He slid from grace like a roach on slick marble scrambling for purchase. That snaked tongue worked a charm. Oh, that glorious ascendancy promised! Our human hearts yearn for stories to make us

immortal. We pray to tales unheard of in their complexity, dreaming of great white whales swallowing us whole. The irony of a species of predator supremes, hindered only by a carefully eroded doctrine of morality. “I am pained,”

said the man. But the angels stayed silent observers from the safety of their heaven. They’ll say instead that they cried for centuries. Their angelic tears created lakes. Created rivers. Created basins of crystal cool water.

And for their passivity, we will erect great stone monuments, sing their praises, send them to the stars in shiny metal rockets that’ll set the world ablaze, while we eat rotting fruit pretending that it’s a delicacy, clamoring for a glimpse of the garden.

YOU DONT KNOW ME
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You don't know me how I want you to. | James Hemmingway

contemplation of what | Phoebe Crumrine





environmental

BY FAITH ALMOND

i am but a seed in my
mother's womb, a rainbow
baby for my family conceived
in fall when the trees shed their
sage, chartreuse, olive
and become
scarlet, fuschia, crimson.

i am but a child playing
in the woods of my backyard
with my sister, admiring the
variety of textures in the
pine straw, tree bark, bermuda grass.
a traditional suburban backyard,
but the two of us made it a unique paradise.

i am but a teenager sitting
in the allergy doctor's office
getting pricked with nature on my arms,
the doctor telling me i'm allergic to every type of
grass, pollen, mold, weed, tree, leaf
that they pricked me with.
dozens of red splotches and blisters
covering my forearms, checkmarks
next to the majority of allergens labeled
"environmental."
i started allergy injections a
few months later, getting shots of nature
into my body so my immune system can
learn how to deal with the most natural
piece of the planet.

i guess i don't belong in nature.
in the fall when i was conceived,

the suburbia i played in.
i belong inside, taking allergy medicine
every morning so that i don't snuffle and sneeze
whenever the flowers bloom,
whenever trees shed their leaves,
whenever grass grows.

my dad always tells me to
do my best in everything i do.
so that's what i'm doing—
my best. i'm doing my best
to not complain about the
hefty prices of allergy medicine,
about the painful swelling i get in my
arms after allergy shots,
about the way i feel every morning
before popping a pill and feeling it
slide down my throat.

i won't lie and say that it's easy.
my life tends to revolve around allergies:
i go home and flare up because of my dogs,
i get allergy attacks for seemingly no reason,
i stay inside when i can.
so i use this space to complain, but also to say:
this planet means too much to me,
i have to do my part.
the sniffles and sneezes
are worth it to help the Earth.



Ava

BY CAROLINE PIRWITZ

I swear I was half a second away from a panic attack when I entered through the door of the techno club. The music was loud-loud. I could feel the bass in my sternum. Each thump was like a heartbeat, only it was, like, four times faster than my own. It didn't help that when I paid my cover, a measly two hundred crowns, the goth-looking girl at the door looked at my pathetic, crumpled bill with such harsh criticism that I almost felt bad for the cash itself. If you can believe that.

It really didn't help that we'd been out for three-ish hours already and that half of us had gotten trapped on public transport and carried two stops in the wrong direction. The city was filling up. It was nearing spring break, and two countries away, bombs were going off. People were flocking here, fleeing missiles that'd strike maternity hospitals and homes. But it was the wall of pedestrians blocking the tram door that kept the rest of our little troupe from making it to techno on time.

So that meant three of us were here, one of three bordering a meltdown, and three of us were missing. Of the missing was arguably the most intoxicated one of all, our shaggy-haired lightweight, who'd been nursing a bottle of Polish vodka from the potraviny. After standing on the tram through five stops, and being bitched out by three Czech people and a Canadian for our stumbling and loud voices, my worry that she might get beat up was increasing. I just hoped that the fluorescent light of the street car would sober her up enough to avoid any altercations. Then again, she'd probably be fine. She wasn't like me in that way. Wasn't trying to pick fights everywhere she went.

And I was ready to pick a fight in the line at the bathroom. This Slovakian guy was talking to me, telling me that he spent time in America once. Stayed in Nebraska, of all places. I personally didn't give a shit. It didn't help that his eyes lingered on my chest and would only snap up to my face every time he'd mention that he worked for a start-up. I was profoundly unimpressed and the pressure on my bladder made me want to commit some sort of violent crime. I crossed my arms over my chest and lied to the Slovakian guy. I told

him I knew a lot about coding (“CSS and HTML are so easy to learn”). He was basically drooling over this, but luckily a stall opened up.

By the time I made it out of the bathroom, our missing pieces had arrived. I exhaled a breath I hadn’t realized I was holding when I saw that our shaggy one had made it to the club without a scratch on her. My heart seemed to slow down and speed up at the same time. I was excited to see her—to see all of them—standing in the doorway, waiting to pay their cover. Their appearance had turned some heads as usual, and not just because Ava’s voice was the loudest one in line. My friends were hot. Dressed in all black, androgynous but model-pretty, with an air of pretension that carried with them like a perfume. They were exotic too, speaking perfect English and wearing clothes that would only make it to the Czech fashion scene five years too late. The people here always stared. It made me feel powerful whenever I rolled with them. The same kind of power I felt when I realized I could command a room of boys with just my cleavage. Something sensual and deep.

Ava was at the front of the pack, while the other two looked a bit like

My friends were hot.
Dressed in all black,
androgynous but
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air of pretension that
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like a perfume.

they didn’t want to be there at all. Ava handed the goth girl too much money and, with a wink, told her to keep it all, before she floated over to me. Her arms wrapped around my neck as she pulled me in for a sloppy hug. Then she held me out at arm’s length and smiled. Ava kind of looked like a boy whenever she wasn’t smiling. But the minute she

did, she was one of the most beautiful girls I had ever seen.

I looked up so I could see into her blue eyes. They were more glazed over than usual, this time due to the alcohol rather than constant existential despair. Ava never really made sustained eye contact with anyone, unless she was trying to drive home some sort of point. Every time we locked eyes, it was like all of my secrets simmered on the tip of my tongue.

“I’m gonna fuck Leo tonight,” she said. I nodded. “Let’s get a shot and dance.”

She reached for my hand and pulled me into the room with the music. It was dark and colorful and the air was thick with sweat. The people were like a swarm, moving side to side, in a practiced unison, facing the DJ booth. I was aware of the feeling of the music in my chest again. But Ava's hand grounded me. We made it to the bar and leaned over the counter.

"Two tequila shots—no, three," Ava ordered, holding up her fingers for clarification. Molly showed up, pressing herself into my other side. Jake then appeared at Ava's side, towering over her like some protective force.

"No, four!" Ava called to the bartender, who gave her a thumbs up and began to pour.

"Ava's gonna fuck Leo," I whisper-yelled to Molly. She threw her head back with a laugh and peered over at Ava, who smirked.

"Might as well try everything once," she said, shooting a suggestive glance at me. I felt my cheeks flush and thought briefly of how, at this age of nineteen, I was going to be the only one out of the three of us who hadn't even properly kissed a man. Or anyone for that matter, at least not really. I was younger than everyone else, only by a few months, but this made me feel like a child.

"Anyway, if I'm gonna fuck a man, Leo's the best one for it." She shrugged, pushing her bangs out of her eyes. "Well, besides Jake. But he's taken," Ava corrected quickly, nudging Jake with her elbow. He grinned proudly, wobbling a bit. Jake's girlfriend was studying in Florence. We never talked about it, but everyone knew that if he had it his way, he'd be fucking Molly instead.

"So's Leo!" Molly laughed again. I glanced into the crowd at Leo, this short guy with perpetually messy black hair, who always wore this look on his face that I'd only ever seen worn by high school mean girls. He looked a bit awkward dancing by himself.

"It's an open relationship. His girlfriend hooked up with someone the other day in Miami. It's Leo's turn," said Jake, as he leaned down, much like a giraffe would, to talk to us. His words ran into each other a bit and once I got a closer look at him, I could see a bar tan glowing on his cheeks. Jake was like an optical illusion. You could look at him and see both a farm boy and an off-duty model. But right now, he just seemed to be in second place for who was already the most fucked up.

The bartender lined up our shots in front of us. We clinked them

together, cheering to Ava maybe getting lucky. The tequila burned my throat and the warmth traveled down, blossoming in the center of my chest. I spun around and Molly and I pushed deep into the crowd. I could feel the alcohol behind my eyes, in the way everything seemed to look softer and the music started to match the rhythm of my blood rushing through my veins. But everyone else was on some other planet completely. Eyes blown wide, pupils like black holes, waiting patiently for the bass to drop. I was too impatient for techno. Or rather, I was usually too sober. Despite the tequila, tonight was one of those nights where I felt like I was faking it. Merely an observer of the hive mind, clunkily doing my own techno-sway, closing my eyes and trying so hard to feel the music. I couldn't help but look at Ava.

Molly was looking too. We bounced side to side, moving our hips and shoulders the way we were supposed to, and much like voyeurs, we watched as Ava danced between Jake and Leo. The three of them were up against the DJ booth, the projections and fog creating a light show on their moving bodies. Jake danced like he had taken every psychedelic all at once, one hand raised in the air, mouth slightly agape. Ava was a little wild, a mess of arms and a shaking head. But whether that was drunkenness or typical awkwardness was lost in the way she grinded her body up against Leo's. It was almost animalistic.

"She's so fucked up," Molly laughed. She *was* fucked up. But when wasn't Ava fucked up? In the time I'd known her, she was always swinging from extreme to extreme. She was either happy, in a near-maniac way, or crying in the streets. She was either riding her high horse as an academic, or reminding us that she's from Bumfuck, Ohio, with her spews of common sense questions. And when we went out, she was either completely sober or completely trashed. A walking contradiction.

"Go outside if you want to talk, or shut up," some guy (who genuinely looked like he could be an accountant) snapped at us. His demeanor made me want to laugh in his face. I almost lunged forward to bite back, but Molly flashed me a look. I had a hard time taking European millennial men seriously, which often caused trouble, considering the circles we ran in and the spaces we tended to occupy. Techno was full of them. It made me dread thirty and didn't do anything for my anger issues.

The trio at the front was magnetic and there was a drunken desire

in me to be over there dancing with them. The lights hit them with such precision that made it seem, in a way, like they were performers on display for the rest of the crowd. But really, Molly and I were the only spectators. And as we watched, swaying with the swarm, enough time passed that my eyes finally slipped shut and the music took over me in a wash of colors. With my eyes closed, I pictured all of us, and we flowed, glowing like water caustics in the syrupy realm of my mind.

It took me a moment before I realized that someone's hand had landed rough on my shoulder. I flinched back, opening my eyes. Jake. I wasn't sure how much time had passed as he told me, above the bass, that Ava and Leo had left. He began pulling me to the front, closer to the DJ booth and closer to the bar. I reached out for Molly's hand to drag her over with me. She tugged me back and I turned around in surprise.

Shit. Camille, Ava's latest girl toy, was standing there, strangling Molly's arm with her iron grip.

"I just got here, Ava texted me, told me to come, but I passed her leaving with Leo?"

Molly and I yanked Camille by the hand over to the bar. She mostly just seemed confused, her thick eyebrows knit together. But she wouldn't stop talking, voice alarmed, asking if Ava was okay. We told her Ava was fine, she was going home with Leo, she'd be fine. I glanced at Molly, panicked about what to do, about how to cover Ava's tracks. Molly called the bartender over and batted her lashes at him. Molly was pixie-like, with chin-length blonde hair, olive skin, and wide Sanpaku eyes. She always had enough black eyeliner on for the both of us, smudging it all along her waterline. And she always got us free drinks.

"Don't worry about Ava. We're gonna do shots," Molly announced, ordering two for each of us. I shoved the shot glass into Camille's hand, instructing her to drink. We threw the shots back. Molly and I bounced up and down in celebration. Camille hesitantly copied us, the lights glinting off her collection of necklaces like a disco ball. We took another shot.

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I pictured all of
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Camille finally stopped talking and started nodding. I watched the effect of the alcohol engulf her. She turned around and spotted Jake, grabbing his arm. I didn't know what club she had just come from but I could tell she was already gone. I could smell it hot on her breath and could see it in her eyes.

Camille had those big doe-eyes that you only hear about in books and the same dark curls that most Ava-girls did. She was originally from France, but had lived in the States long enough that her accent was barely noticeable. Sometimes I think she played it up for novelty's sake. It annoyed me when she did that.

I downed the vodka shot, and turned to watch as Camille morphed into the crowd, Jake in tow. I locked eyes with Molly, and she gave a nod of affirmation, enveloping my hand in hers to pull me the other way. In the next room, we dug through the pile of coats, shrugged on what must've been ours and headed past the goth girl, out the door.

On the patio, it was too dark to see much, except for the glow of Molly's "I heart Berlin" Clipper as she lit up a spliff. I swear the flame from her lighter made me warmer. The sudden lack of stimuli made me feel extra intoxicated, but I was glad to be away from the scene inside. That girl made me nervous. I couldn't tell what I was supposed to be protecting—Ava's reputation or Camille's emotions.

"It's not like they're dating," Molly said, passing me the joint. She once said that smoking weed was like changing the lens on your camera, so I took a hit. I relaxed as my brain started to unfocus around the edges. Just like that, I was leaning on Molly for support.

And so, over the joint, we came up with more excuses for Ava's behavior and more reasons that Camille shouldn't be upset ("There's a war going on after all."). Camille wasn't our favorite person. Molly and I had decided she was a phony early on, but we would smile, be nice and welcome her in our home whenever she wanted to come over and be all domestic with Ava. It was sometimes a painful thing to watch.

The thing was, though, that before we even started drinking that night, Ava had declared that she was done with Camille. There wasn't much of a reason why, which wasn't abnormal for Ava. But she didn't want Camille to know where she was going and she didn't want to talk to her. Ava wanted nothing to do with her. So, Molly and I stood in support, nodding, nodding, yes, yes, Camille is the worst.

Molly and I kept smoking, our eyes becoming red, happy slits on

our faces. But then, as if she had teleported outside, Camille was stomping towards us, cutting through groups of people, her pale white shoulders exposed to the Prague cold. She lit up a cigarette and immediately she was ranting again, voice thick with unshed tears. Molly passed her the joint, and Camille took it, passing her the cigarette in a sort of trade.

“I just don’t understand why she would, like, call me and beg me to come here, if she was just going to leave. Are you sure she’s okay? She seemed—”

“She’s not sick or anything,” I insisted, trying not to sound too defensive and failing. I didn’t know whether or not this would make Camille feel better and if I was being honest, I didn’t care. Ava didn’t give a shit, so neither would I.

I leaned back a bit where I sat on the ledge. I didn’t like the direction this conversation was headed. It was like Camille wanted Ava to not be okay, like it was a more valid excuse than whatever Ava was actually doing.

“She said she wasn’t feeling good when I passed her on th’way out. And, like, she left with Leo? Are they even friends?” Camille spat. I exchanged glances with Molly. We were used to cleaning up Ava’s messes by then. I was having trouble finding the right words, which wasn’t totally unusual, especially considering that the tequila-vodka hybrid that pulsed through my blood had to be messing with my synapses. Sometimes to exist is to feel helpless.

“Whatever. I talk too much when I smoke,” Camille said, when we didn’t answer, dismissive for the first time.

It was silent for a moment, aside from the sound of the dull rhythm pulsing out through the walls of the club. My head began to nod along, almost subconsciously, to the beat. I wondered if I’d remember this in the morning.

Then there was Jake, materializing in almost a saving grace. He came into what little light there was, and I could see that his shirt was heavy with sweat. His curly brown hair hung in strings over his more-droopy-than-ever downturned eyes. My nose crinkled.

“What’s going on?” he slurred, sitting down next to me and

I exchanged glances with Molly. We were used to cleaning up Ava’s messes by then.

throwing a sticky arm around my shoulder, which I was quick to shrug off. Molly explained to him that we were relaying to Camille that it was okay that Ava left with Leo. She passed Jake the roach. His large fingers fumbled with it, and we watched as he dropped it onto the cold earth below us. Molly glared at him, but just stomped on it anyway. He didn't seem to notice, as she crushed it into the dirt with her platform boot.

"Yeah, s'okay cuz Ava's sleeping with Leo," he laughed out.

I froze. A hush had fallen over the group. Besides Jake. Jake was still laughing. And with that, Camille's big doe-eyes welled up with tears and they started spilling down her face.

I patted the seat next to me on the ledge and Camille reluctantly sat down. I leaned into her in a sign of solidarity. Molly pressed herself into Camille's other side. She reached her shaky hands up to cover her face. All of her fingers were adorned with rings. I began twisting the rings on my own fingers nervously. She was speaking now, voice soggy. She wasn't making much sense, but I wasn't trying very hard to understand her.

Jake's eyebrows shot up when he realized what he'd done. Good, I thought. That man couldn't read a social cue if his life depended on it.

"She's the worst. I should've known. I left all of my friends to see her and of course she leaves," Camille sobbed out, her body trembling. Molly reached out to rub calming circles into her shoulder. We shushed her like a mother does her crying child and let her continue to ramble. She ripped her phone out of her front pocket and began to type furiously, tears dripping onto the screen.

"I'm so stupid. So stupid. I told my mom about her, y'know? I came out for her," Camille kept rambling. I began to sway some more. Ava didn't necessarily have the best reputation. She was beautiful, with her shaggy auburn curls that barely brushed her shoulders, one dimple, and boyish charm. But she was dangerous when it came to romance, her heart having been broken so many times that she became the heartbreaker herself.

Camille's words rushed together. I couldn't tell if it was because of the emotions or just because of how drunk she was. Probably both. She cried for a few minutes more. Jake had gone silent. Personally, I was famous for being bad at comforting people. I could never stop the smile that usually spread across my face, because that's what happened

when I was uncomfortable. So I hunched over and pressed the heels of my hands into my eyes until I saw a mandala of neon colors. I pressed until it hurt, and then I pressed harder.

“No, you know what? Done with this,” Camille said all of a sudden, and I opened my eyes to see her head still hanging. I watched as she blocked Ava’s number on her phone.

She jumped up and I flinched, her tears coming to a halt with an exaggerated sniff. Jake stood up with her as if commanded to do so. I gave him a look, but he was no longer my problem. Molly didn’t budge, so neither did I.

“I texted my friends. I’m gonna meet them at Duplex. Don’t worry about me, s’not your fault, I still like you guys,” she assured. That made me prickle. As if there was some reason not to like us, just because our roommate stood her up.

She grabbed Jake by the hand and led him inside, announcing they were going to get fucked up anyways. Jake’s eyes flashed with apology as he turned to look at us. I rolled mine in response.

Molly called us both a car, and we stood outside, leaning up against one of the graffiti covered walls of the club while we waited. We weren’t really speaking, just laughing and laughing every few moments. I turned to read the scribbles on the wall.

On the side of the building, someone had written “fuck putin” in big red letters. It made me think about the last time I talked to my mother on the phone. Apparently she’d been “worried sick” about radiation from the war, so she shipped me a care package full of iodine pills. It’d take weeks to arrive, but I knew I wouldn’t take the pills anyways. Iodine couldn’t fix my problems. Plus it probably wouldn’t mix well with Becherovka, tequila, and gin.

Our ride pulled up and we climbed ungraciously in. Our clothes stank of sweat and weed. The driver didn’t seem to notice, but how would we know if he did?

One of the only good things about using taxi services in a country that didn’t primarily speak English was that we always had conversations as if the driver couldn’t understand us at all. Although the probability that he could understand us wasn’t exactly low, we’d still gossip with no consequences and talk, all obnoxious, about how drunk or high we were. Tonight, though, as with many nights, the topic of conversation was Ava. Along with special guest stars Leo and

Camille. Out the window, the city rolled by us in a hazy blur of lights.

He dropped us by the metro entrance, so we stopped at the fry shop on the way to the apartment. It was extra cold for 3 A.M. and we were ravenous. The guy at the window didn't speak to us, just handed us the bag and picked up the coins we dropped on the counter.

Once Molly unlocked the door to the building, we scrambled drunkenly up the stone steps to the apartment door. Finally inside, we hushed each other's giggling, as we toed off our boots. It was dark, aside from a desk light in our shared bedroom that illuminated the foyer through the open door. The apartment was messy, as it normally was, with shoes strewn hazardously about, the tiny sink filled with a tower of dishes, and bottles of booze on the coffee table. One window was open and the buzz of the street filled the apartment with a calming hum. My face was too warm and I relished in the slight draft that filled the apartment. Ava's bedroom was connected to the living room area. A light glowed underneath her double doors. My drunk eyes stared at it, the light streaking and blurring across my vision like a bad fingerpainting. I wondered if Molly and I should eat in our bedroom.

We opted to sit in the dark at our rickety Ikea kitchen table instead. Molly and I rummaged through our fry bags, pulling out the mayo packets, ears keen to listen for any rustling coming from Ava's room. Molly flicked on the lamp that lived on the floor next to the table and a dim glow brightened the area. The room tilted a little, but the fries helped to keep it from going for a full spin. We froze when we heard murmuring voices, shushing each other like kids awake past their bedtime, trying to avoid being caught.

The double doors opened. Leo was standing there, no shirt, white boxers on. Behind him, Ava grinned at us. She was fully clothed, wire-rimmed glasses included.

Somehow, at this moment, Leo looked smaller than usual. He had this pathetic excuse for chest hair going on and a whisper of guilt written across his features. He greeted us, and asked how the rest of the party was, plucking a fry out of Molly's cup and chewing on it like it was hay and he was a horse. We entertained him for a few minutes, because it was the right thing to do and we were too drunk to feel awkward. Ava sat down next to me. She pressed her thigh against mine, as she ate the fries out of my cup, and asked more questions about techno. We didn't confront her about Camille right away. We'd

wait for Leo to leave to do that. I'd let Molly drop the bomb. She'd be nicer about it than I ever could.

Finally, he walked across the hall to his apartment, where he lived with Jake, and so we migrated into Ava's room for the real questions. All of Ava's blankets were piled on the ground. We hovered for a second and asked her if anything got on the bed.

"Just on my hands. I washed them in the kitchen," Ava said matter-of-factly. Something glowed in her eyes. Pride, maybe? Molly gagged dramatically.

We all sat on Ava's twin bed. Ava was at the foot, sitting cross legged and cocooned in one of the soft gray blankets from the floor. Molly and I sat at the head, backs against the wall, facing Ava like she was our interviewee. We asked her how it was, what did they do, was he any good. Was Leo in bed characteristic of the same Leo we knew outside of bed, we wondered.

"I mean, I've never really had a conversation with him, other than having sex with him."

"Sex is sort of like a conversation," Molly said with a nod. Ava laughed, which made me smile. She never really laughed much, unless it was forced or someone made a literary joke or something.

"It kind of felt like I was playing a role," Ava added. Still, she said, Leo was more submissive than some of the girls that she's been with. I wasn't surprised. His essence and septum piercing just screamed whiny to me. Ava said he seemed tentative, like he was nervous he was going to overstep a boundary with her.

"If anything, I feel more sure of my sexuality now. Like, I didn't like sleeping with him, but if there was a girl in the bed, it would've been better," she said. Molly and I grinned at that, but it wasn't as if Ava ever was unsure anymore. We all knew that and it was something of which I was distinctively envious. A lump rose in my throat and the warmth of my drunkenness returned to my chest full force.

"Camille showed up. She was looking for you," Molly said. Ava rolled her eyes, but something else washed over her as well. I was too drunk to tell for sure, but if I made an educated guess, I'd say Ava looked a bit guilty. Similar to Leo, when he came out of her room half-naked.

"She said you called her and told her to come. I don't remember you doing that. When did you do that?" I asked. I wasn't trying to prod and it wasn't like Ava had to tell me everything. Though it would've

been nice to be the one she trusted with her secrets. I just wanted the facts. I wanted to know why Ava would blow up Camille's phone just hours after she'd sworn her off. I was used to Ava's contradictions, but not everyone was. Not everyone was patient with her in that way. I sometimes wished she'd realize that more often. I felt a small flare of anger.

"I didn't call her. She was begging to know where I was, so I sent her my location. I said she could come if she wanted. I didn't tell her to do anything," Ava sounded annoyed, like she was being accused of something she didn't do. A feeling similar to desperation clouded my brain, although it could've been remnants of the weed and tequila. I wondered if she was telling the truth. Or at least, if she wasn't, that maybe she just forgot in her drunkenness, that she texted Camille. I hated the entire idea of it. I wanted Ava's intentions to be good, so I could continue to shamelessly defend her. So I could stick by her side.

I didn't know what it meant but I liked that when I was around Ava, I felt like I could conquer anything. I liked the feeling of warmth between us when she pressed her leg against mine. I liked when she'd get so close that I could smell evergreen mint on her breath. I liked the floaty feeling that I got whenever she set her gaze on me. I didn't like that Ava reached out to Camille again. I didn't want Ava to go back chasing after

her. If she did, I might lose this—whatever this was.

"We told her you were fine. She saw you on the way out. Thought you were sick or

I wanted Ava's intentions to be good, so I could continue to shamelessly defend her. So I could stick by her side.

something," I said, because Ava had to know that Camille saw them both together.

"Yeah, I remember. I told her I was tired," Ava nodded. We stared at her, until her eyes went round with realization. Something pinched in my stomach and I had to look away.

"Shit. Do you think she knew I was going to hook up with Leo?"

"Probably," I half-lied, still averting my eyes.

"Was she mad?"

"It's fine. It's not like you're dating or anything," Molly said, with a wave of her hand.

“You guys aren’t even exclusive,” I added, voice too firm. They weren’t exclusive, but that didn’t take away from the fact that they behaved like a married couple. Camille couldn’t be mad that Ava hooked up with someone else, but Camille could be mad that Ava called her, told her to come to the club and then left to sleep with someone else the minute that Camille arrived.

I would’ve been upset too. Ava needed to know that. She needed to know so she’d never do it to anyone again. She needed to know so that, maybe, in the future, if time went the way I wanted, she’d never do something like that to me.

“But it was still kinda fucked up, Ava,” I added. My voice was matter-of-fact, but the bite was there, and Ava looked at me, pushing her wispy bangs out of her face. Tears gathered in her blue eyes and she picked at her nail beds. Molly shot me a look, pleading me to not make things worse. I ignored it.

“Maybe I should say something.” Ava reached behind her, grabbing her cracked phone off her desk. I looked at Molly with a grimace.

“My texts won’t deliver,” she said, looking mildly bewildered. I took a deep breath. Molly placed a hand on her shoulder, rubbing up and down her arm soothingly. It doesn’t matter, we told her, you can just deal with it in the morning. But it *was* the morning. Almost four in the morning, to be exact. Molly pulled her arm a little. I grabbed the other. We guided her gently towards us and she squeezed herself in between us. Molly and I rested our heads on each of Ava’s shoulders.

Ava asked if we wanted to stay up to watch the sunrise. We’d only have to stay awake for another hour and a half. We could go to the park. It was a good plan, so I leaned into the warmth of Ava’s body and we lapsed into silence, waiting for the time to pass.

Sometimes, on the rare occasion that I’d allow my thoughts to wander, I’d think about the future. Whenever we’d all inevitably go back to the States and be peppered around the country. I’d get sad when I’d think about them being so far away. About the distance between Ava and me. But I was not naive. I knew by then that nothing was mine to keep.

“Don’t you regret it?” I said to Ava, turning my head to whisper in her ear. Her hair tickled my lips as I spoke. She took a long time

to respond to that. Sometimes Ava took a long time to figure out what she wanted to say. I secretly hoped she'd give me the answer I wanted to hear, but I couldn't dig deep enough to know what that was. I listened to Molly's slow breathing while I waited. Ava entwined her legs with mine.

“C'mon. You know I don't regret anything.”

I didn't have it in me to push her away. We fell asleep with the lights on. All three of us in Ava's tiny twin bed, curled up against each other for warmth, Molly and I still in our techno clothes, our exposed skin sticky against each other. We slept deep into the morning. When we woke up, Ava was gone, and we realized we had missed the sunrise.



Zoë Sleeps | Sarah Rusthoven



Designated Driver

BY OLIVIA ROMANO

The first time I saw you after the breakup, you drank Bud Light and White Claws in your backyard with our friends—friends I introduced you to—while I cradled water in my hands because I offered to be the DD, and we still had two years until any of us could afford the good stuff anyway. Cheers and eight elevated voices drifted up, curled in the bonfire’s smoke, as we asked *What’s your major, again* and *How’s your roommate?*

Everyone will forget the answers tomorrow because they still haven’t learned how to hold their liquor despite a year of college, or maybe they just don’t care enough to remember, like when you forgot my birthday or to pick me up at the airport. Indifference broke me—and us—slowly, and in the glow of the fire, your messy blonde hair and swagger looked as carefree as ever while I slouched in the soccer-mom folding chair, rubbing the empty spot on my finger that used to hold the ring you gave me with a garnet birthstone, even though I was born in December.

Bug spray and burnt wood permeated the air. I glanced between Sarah, who hadn’t finished her first drink but had her arms draped around Laura’s neck, and Max, bouncing every pong ball wide but swearing he’d get the next one, and you, clapping the guys on the back and jumping up and down off-beat to some rapper I didn’t—and still don’t—know, and I was an interloper in my own town, on the patio of the house I used to call a second home, a house where I still got a hug from your mom when I walked through the door. You lingered

in the corner of my vision, yet I sensed every movement as you swayed next to Max and raised your half-empty cup high in a rhyming toast to whores around the world,

and the tribute was impressive when most of the already small party couldn't form a cohesive sentence unless it was *more shots*. I wished my roommate was there to make fun of Steven tripping over his own shoelaces and almost knocking Sarah and Laura to the ground and to slip in sly comments about you drinking every night and proclaiming it's not alcoholism if you're in college.

If I brought my *college roommate* to help me feel less alone at a party with my *high school friends*, would that make me even more of an outsider? You jumped from person to person and I knew they all loved you because they hadn't dated you, and they loved me because they were my friends first, and I had a purpose: to drive those idiots home so they didn't die. So I sat sober, surrounded by drunk friends, an ex, and alcohol that I couldn't consume, and texted my roommate with my feet propped up on the same groove on the lip of the firepit, just like in high school.

Angelic | Jess Baker



I Must Confess I Love You

BY KENNA DUBRASKI

We were lying on the same towel.
You asked me if I would mind
If you took off your shoes,

Which made me laugh.
You were still so formal with me.
Above, the sky changed through

The branches of the oak tree,
Cracked like stained glass.
Except this glass was untouched,

Not welded by a Catholic
Church where weeping
Puppets of those salvaged by God

Are screaming with me and my stone legs
As I am dragged down
The aisle for my confirmation,

To be conformed to a belief
I found every reason to
Renounce belief in.

Oh, Father, I confess: all my confessions have been lies,

But so have theirs.
You took me to your
Church last weekend.

It was humble and hidden,
Secluded in the woods.
Everyone who saw us

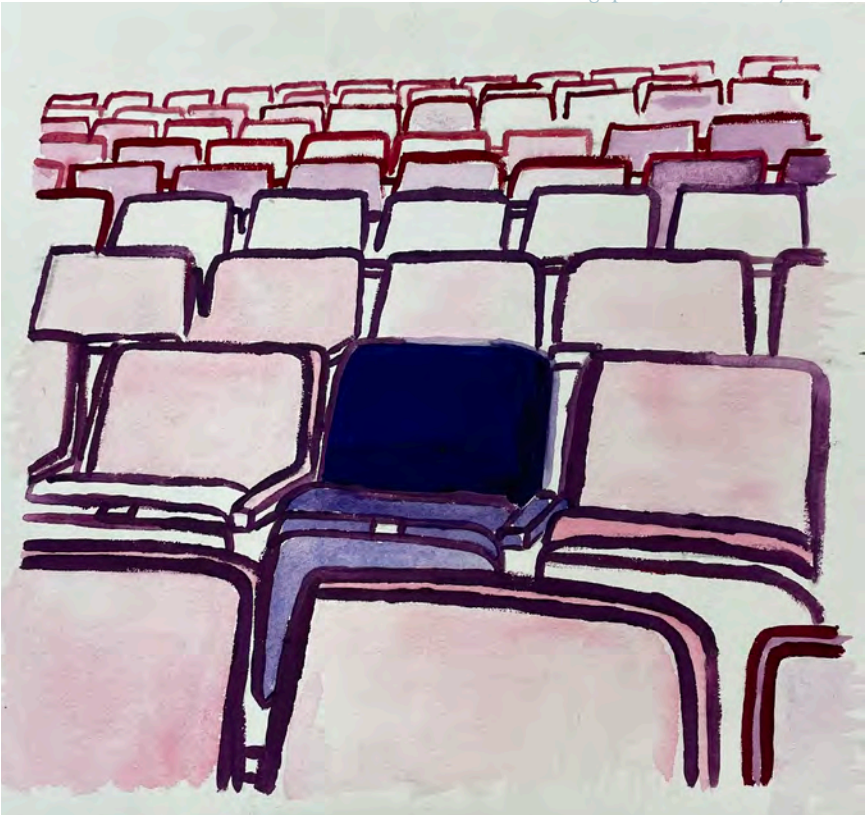
Recognized you with
Glee, and although
I was but a stranger, they

Pulled me in with open arms.
My first hug in a church.
I have lied, cheated, and sexed.

I am gluttonous, proud, and angry.
I am wounded, green, and human.
And I am loved and forgiven.

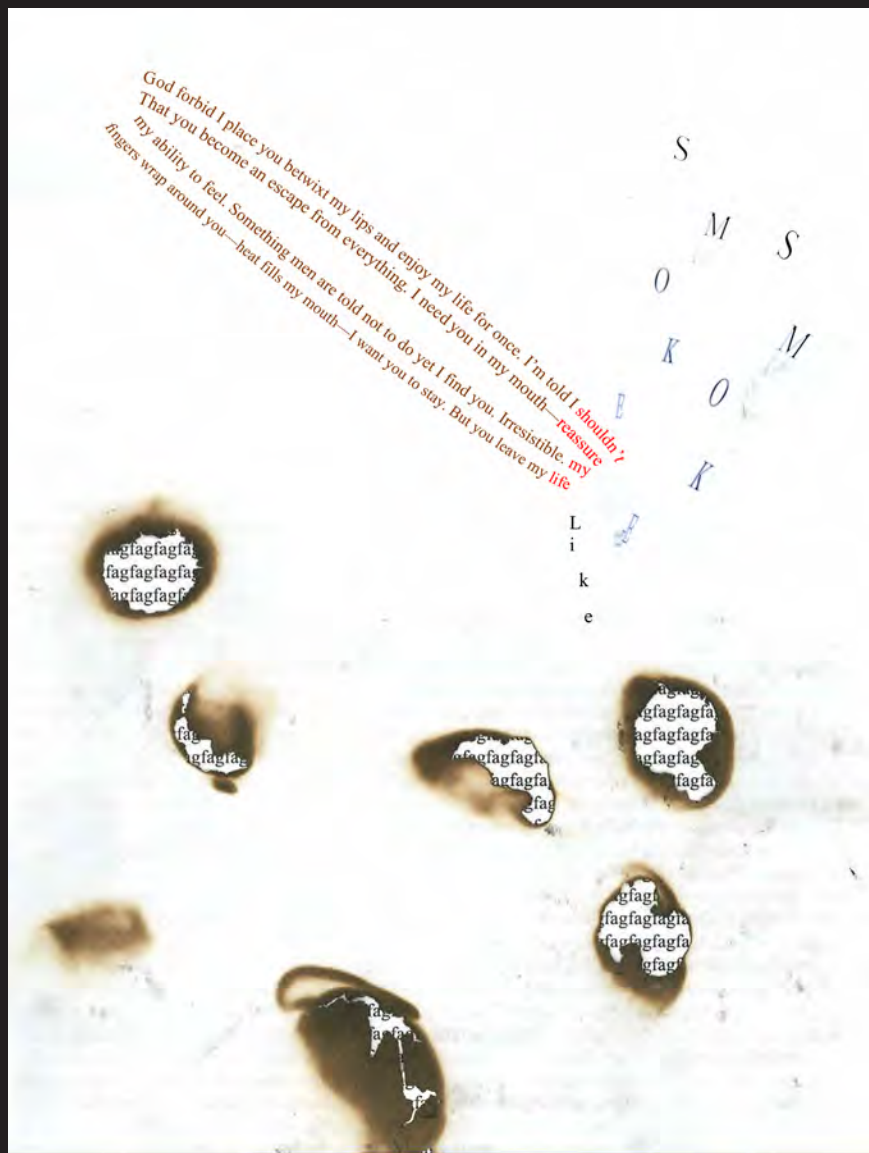
Isn't that what they say Jesus wanted?

Megaplex Blues | Lucy Garcia



A Cigar; Sometimes

BY ALEX INGRAM



Isn't All You Ever Wanted | Sarah Rusthoven



Early Thoughts on Men and Me

BY LUCAS LEVEILLEE

I. Jack

The year is 2017, and Jack is my first openly queer friend.

Jack coming out as bisexual didn't really come as a surprise, in all honesty, because although he hadn't said as much in any explicit terms, his lisp kind of gave him away. Unfair, for sure, but he owned it. He was never one to take any shit anyways. Case in point: when he told all of us, sitting around the lunch table, there was no shortage of weird looks to parse. It goes without saying that I was supportive, but I still vaguely recall looking away and trying to give the appearance of thoughtful reflection, trying my best at mimicking "The Thinker," as I was used to doing in awkward situations that I thought could be escaped by simply avoiding eye contact. That being said, things went silent for a moment, before Jack stood up, surveyed everyone at the table, and got rid of all of the building tension with this:

"Yeah, well, think what you will, but at least I've gotten my dick sucked before all of you. His name was Nathaniel, by the way." And that was that. Who can argue with results?

Hanging out with Jack after the fact, not much was different, but for some reason it was just a little easier to breathe. I'd also learned some very important lingo just from existing in the same space as him:

- I didn't know any of the answers to this math exam = Math is pretty homophobic.
- Why the hell am I losing so horribly at this video game? = This game is homophobic.
- My teacher gave me a bad grade on this paper I didn't write = School is homophobic, tbh.
- And so on.
- And so forth.

It's fascinating, if you ask me. He was pretty fascinating, thinking about it now, being my only touchstone of what queerness looks and acts and sounds like in a high school that was oh-so-painfully devoid of any of it, save for a few teachers who you would get weird looks for visiting outside of class time—like the emotional-support English teacher that every queer person deserves. And not that he knew, but

after what happened with Ben—who made an awkward pass at me in middle school that didn’t really lead anywhere—I began taking notes on whatever nuggets of queer wisdom came my way, mentally writing scripture from the words of those on high, in case I’d ever be tested again in the future.



II. Jorge

The year is 2018, and Jorge is a loser.

His mother works in our school, and once classes are out, he’s often seen spending his time hanging back in her classroom, surfing the internet on his phone instead of hanging out with anyone. He doesn’t really get passionate about a conversation unless video games are involved. (He’s a huge *Monster Hunter* fan and has his favorite monsters as stickers on his laptop, and as his phone wallpaper.) What’s really lost him a lot of respect in the eyes of his peers, however, is how he’s been trying to go long distance with a girl from Virginia for a few years, and even his parents don’t approve of it. She’s a distraction, in their eyes. As a result, this relationship will not work out for him

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in the long run, but he doesn’t know it yet, and neither do we. None of my friends like to cut him any slack for this perceived breach of conduct either. But at the same time, it’s not that serious; I’ll just admit to it being pretty funny to tease

him over having an “e-girl.” (An image that got passed around our groupchats whenever the topic came up was just a trashed computer at a messy desk with the caption “Man, that cybersex was crazy!”) But if there’s one thing I’ll give him credit for, it’s tenacity; every day during the weird liminal time between lunch ending and classes beginning again, he wound up sitting in one of the school’s stairwells on his

computer, video-calling her on the rare occasion we didn't flock to him to act like a bunch of mosquitos (relatively harmless pricks). Every day he spoke to her, despite all the bluster and the mocking sent his way.

I don't exactly know what to call it, but at some point, I'll say that I had what I think is a crush on him. Boys are strange; he was undoubtedly straight, but that didn't stop him from being a tease. Yes, he was a dork—but a cute one. We shared a lot of the same interests in music, and in media, and that was enough to give us something to keep talking about. He didn't do very well in any of the classes we shared, but I think I might be somewhat responsible for that. We talked a bit too much during class. What really had me messed up is that we used to hold hands when we talked, or just sat next to each other. Most of the time, it was initiated on some weird subconscious level, and when we did notice, neither of us did anything to stop it. His hands were half the size of mine, but warm, and though smooth by way of not being worked very hard, it was a nice sensation just to know that intimacy can exist between another guy and me, even if it wound up being strangely platonic.

Time with Jorge felt nice. This is why I think it made sense why, when he was going through a particularly self-deprecating and depressive episode, I wanted to tell him just what I liked about him. This required some doing, as I first had to learn how to come out. By this point the only person who knew was Jack, due to some incredibly blunt text conversations we had shared before the previous school semester had ended. So, after consulting with my queer elder, I came out of that conversation armed with some great advice. ("Be cool about it.")

Another takeaway: boys are ignorant, full stop, because Jorge seemed genuinely surprised when I told him. I didn't help the situation by waiting until I was driving him home to hit him with it, my body on pins and needles, but when I finally stopped, it was a relief to see his face cracked into a big dumb smile the likes of which I hadn't seen him wear before. Nothing happened then, but for a long time afterwards, we used to crack jokes about getting together, despite having no real intention of doing so. At this point in time, he's slightly less of a loser, but he's my loser, and now he knows it.



III. Raymond

The year is 2019, and Raymond must face a reckoning.

When I told my family that I was gay, it was after a heated argument between myself and my very highly opinionated, Protestant father, youngest son of a Johnston, Rhode Island, family of five. In the past year alone, he had made some rather problematic remarks conflating 'the gays' with zoophiles and perverts, in spite of his own admission that two lesbians going at it is pretty hot. ("If you wanna fuck a donkey in the sanctity of your own home, then fine, it doesn't affect me. But don't bring that shit out in public.") And that serves as just about enough context for why he kept mean-mugging and muttering under his breath about the same-sex couples waltzing around the city of London during that winter holiday, and why it was so goddamned infuriating. What should have been a fun—not to mention incredibly lucky—trip overseas (as we could only afford it with the help of a family friend) was fraught with tension bound by his very own hypocrisy and bull-headedness. It was tough to just sit there and let him trash-talk a people and a culture which I had much more recently come to identify with. So I didn't let him.

When things came to a head that night, just a few days after Christmas, and I told my family I was gay, they laughed. They thought I was joking. Then they cried. Things have changed since then. I love my family, and my dad has since thanked me for calling him an asshole that night, as it's helped him be more open-minded moving forward. But if you ask my parents, I've been sad a long time. "We just want you to be happy" is a fun subversive narrative that parents like to tell their children, and continue to do so for much of their lives; it's something which my mother still says to me today, and something which my father had said to me in that moment. Subversive in the sense that happiness is now conditional. My happiness is dependent on your happiness, and you're only happy if you meet my definition for happy. Queers can't be happy, so when you imply the opposite, it becomes an intervention and a re-evaluation of the investment of years upon years of heterosexual education and assumptions.

So don't get me wrong. I love my family. I just want them to be happy. But in order to prevent some awkward talks in the future, they need to find what happiness really means, and why I choose to lose out on theirs.



IV. Lucas

My life up until now has felt like some kind of thought experiment; Lucas as a gay man in theory, but not in practice. Yet I've managed to snag a date for myself this coming weekend through pure luck. Quite frankly, I don't know whether I want to be jumping around and shouting for joy or bent over my bathroom sink and throwing up my dinner.

It's been a long road to get here, and while I recognize that I should be happy, I can't help but feel exhausted just thinking about the prospect. People like to think that college is the great equalizer when it comes to the queer experience, that moving to a new place where nobody knows you and you can rebuild yourself allows you to be as high flying of a fruit as your little heart desires. In some ways, this is true, and I am

both out and proud, but it doesn't make dating any easier if you don't know how to begin. I have never known where to begin. I'll chalk it up to lack of

My life up until now has felt like some kind of thought experiment; Lucas as a gay man in theory, but not in practice.

experience, for the most part, because the experiences that I have had up until now haven't been the most enjoyable, or the most healthy. My sex life has been inconsistent, to say the least, and after more than one occasion where I'd gone a day or two without eating (because I didn't know of a better way) just to get ghosted, I have given up on casual flings and the like, because the truth is that men can also suck in ways that aren't fun, and with surprising frequency. Right now, though, my mind can't stop rubber-banding back to past crushes and that characteristic casual flirtiness that I've been sharing with some queer friends of late that makes you maybe fall a little bit in love with them all the time and everywhere and even in retrospect. But this is an opportunity to rein that boundless, day-dreamy love in a bit and focus it on a pinpoint. I've been characterizing my queerness, my romantic life, and my sexuality all through missed connection after

missed connection—and for good reason, I would think, so the fact that it feels like plans aren't falling through for once (or that I'm not going to wuss out—yet) is kind of a shock. But, like, violent shock. A punch to the gut, lovingly delivered by a full boxing gym. My mind feels like a bundled-up wet rag that I want to smack against a wall until it knocks some old beige paint flowing again. To put it in more conventional terms, let's say it feels like TV static, but the kind that's occupying all the channels right now.

I understand that this is relatively small in the grand scheme of things, and there's a first time for everything, but I can't help but feel... Feel what? Adrenaline? Butterflies? Relief? I wish I knew. But after several years of floating around aimlessly, I may finally have to let go of a tangible frustration that has been many more years in the making. And that scares and delights me in equal measure.



and sometimes that's what your twenties were like

BY CAROLINE PIRWITZ

Ants built their hill
around the beer bottles
lodged in the dirt, and sometimes
that's what your twenties were like.

A home carefully built between drinks
at the bar, hosting humdrum, and an empty bed
where you always wished your sheets to be clean,
but wouldn't wash them for months.


Once, in your teens, you dated a boy
who looked at everything out the corner
of his eye—like he was never sure
he was allowed to watch.

And sometimes
that's what your twenties were like.

You loved the freckles on your arms until
one grew into a sunspot. A brown smudge
you mistake for a bruise, when your t-shirt slips
off your shoulder.

You long for the time where your hair was still soft,
for the hum of cicadas as soon as the sun set,
for the crushed-up parade candy
you'd rescue from the streets.

But life has become the ivy
growing over your old blue bicycle
and hoarding every birthday card
you receive in the mail.



It's become funeral flowers blown off
the grave by high-velocity winds
and noticing your father's gray roots
for the first time.

It's hating how masculine your face has become
and wondering if you lost your femininity
as you aged, or if you lost your femininity
because to be feminine means to look young.

And looking in the mirror becomes
your most difficult task, aside from taking
the desired path to the office and
passing by the ants.

The ants, who would mill
around their home
built upon your discarded souvenirs
from the night before
and the night before that as well.

And sometimes
that's what your twenties were like.

June

BY ALEXANDRA SCHNEIDER

has changed the composition of my body. Where
I was once soft I'm now hot and heavy muscle,

sinew winding up my arms like wisteria. My grandma
died and my best friend forgot about me unless

she wants to feel young again. I'm only twenty,
but I'm halfway in the ground, and my body aches

from when I slipped in the shower, blooming
green and eggplant. I miss being someone

who made things happen. Did I leave
that body somewhere on a cliffside

overlooking the Atlantic, only now she's sleeping
with the fishes, deep under the surf?

I don't have a favorite dinosaur anymore. I don't
know how to save a good thing. I force it back

together once too many years have passed. When I stay
at my parents' house during the summer heat one

Thursday in June, my father asks me if
I want to watch a film with him. I do,

but I don't. Instead, I go over to the house of the boy
who asked me out to prom in high school,

and I sleep in his bed and he pretends
I'm the girl of five years younger—

the one who turned him down. And that's what I know
how to do, make other people's worn-out dreams come

true. So he hungrily caresses the wounds
of a stranger; the line between tenderness

and loneliness is one he has yet to master. I tell him he
should ask me on a date, but he shakes his head because

even he gets to keep his dignity. And then I wake up and it's July
again and what do I have to show but a thousand speckled bruises?

Cactus Closeup | Ian Myers



Undertow: Abridged Version

BY CAROLINE DIFRANGO

The Juliette Bridge is not cursed, much as your mothers may want you to believe it is. Under the bridge, the current swirling around weathered stones churns our river into hypnotic patterns. Stare at it for too long and you may feel compelled to take your last swim, to join us, the sisters below.

At night, it appears as though you're driving over a starless sky. If the bottom were visible, you would know that it's not the bridge that is cursed. It is you, for you feed off our body, the river, ruthlessly.

We are the river, we are the current, but we are also daughters. Women of the water waiting for that blissful moment when the cycle once more turns to our favorite part, the one where our strength builds through sacrifice. So we wait, as the cycle progresses, chugging lethargically towards the same fate for one virgin.

It is that time again, at last.



Jenny scared her parents to death. Not even a wooden spoon to her alabaster behind could get a squeak out of her as a child. Once she turned four, she stopped crying, at least in front of people. She spoke on her terms, when she felt like it. Not for any particular reason, just because she could. Because she learned early that she craved control. Control balanced the chaos of a two-bedroom house filled with five children.

When she was not speaking, an unsettling stillness possessed her. The myth that she never blinked followed her to high school, scaring away eye contact from her peers and teachers alike. Adults are not immune to gossip, especially in a town like this. She did blink, of course. But if she was going to be the class freak, why not play the part? It was easier than trying to prove otherwise. Besides, the wide eyes that occasionally met hers were always amusing.

Molding Jenny into the perfect pariah was something she and her best friend Tallulah indulged together. They wielded her weirdness to weasel their way into free snacks, a better lunch table. Where they

could use it, they did. Tallulah was only moderately more palatable than Jenny, thanks to her involvement in the conservation club at school. Granted, membership was limited, but she was accepted there.

The girls originally bonded over a mutual love for mythology. After a few run-ins in their elementary library, Jenny and Tallulah took refuge in one another's silence, reading for hours on end. Even without mythological idols like Medusa, fate surely would have brought them together. Weird kids, no matter how different they may be from one another, always end up together. Bonded by otherness.

Tallulah was abrasive, to put it kindly. Her intentions may have been pure, but the black holes that became her eyes when she saw someone throw recycling in the trash consumed any possibility of friendship beyond Jenny and the conservation club. Since elementary school, Tallulah filled Jenny's silence with incessant preaching about dying reefs and veganism. Her monologues, made predictable by the set in her shoulders, drove people crazy.

The resident academic in our story, Charlotte always tended to have her nose in some book. Her daddy issues made her devour the likes of King, McCarthy, and Salinger. She had never met her father, thanks to a doe-eyed waitress at a Denny's.

Weird kids, no matter how different they may be from one another, always end up together.

But she did have one important man in her life, at least until the week before our little encounter.

Her issues made her easy to manipulate, something her previous friends exploited. Charlotte thought she and Josh, her boyfriend and childhood

best friend, were in love. That is until he dumped her to take her former best friend to the fall formal.

Charlotte could not be more different from the fourth and final girl, our brute force: Aria. There is a reason the paths of these four did not previously cross. A star midfielder on North Allen High's soccer team, Aria was tougher than her coaches acknowledged. Most people attributed that to her four older brothers. But her family knew it was because of touchy Uncle Tim.

Beyond the soccer field, Aria did not channel her anger into much. She liked to feel it festering in her core. She found it empowering,

but others found it daunting. Better to keep people at arms reach than to end up helpless in the back of a pickup again.

Misunderstood girls are always drawn to us and the power we promise. Becoming a part of the river, a naiad, is not for those who will be ok on land. It is for the girls looking for a way out, for the last laugh. It is for the girls who need to become untouchable to survive.

But it is usually only one girl, every 30 years or so. Four at once was an absolute treat. Who doesn't love an anomaly? They make the best stories.



Small towns are boring to outsiders and suffocating to residents, teenagers especially. When Allensville went downhill alongside the railroad, any reason to stay there disintegrated. With planes came the loss of their mall, restaurants, and grocery stores. But the poverty came on so fast, no one could get out before they were pummeled. Even today generations of families are stuck. And slightly inbred.

To keep themselves occupied before cellphones or computers, the kids of Allentown had to entertain themselves with untraditional, repetitious pastimes. When they were not ripping around the parking lot of the mall a town over or driving the loop they call Hard Man for its phallic shape, they congregated under the Juliette Bridge.

It was in this moist underbelly, where the seating options were limited to the grimy green concrete foundation or the permanently-moist ground, that Jenny and Tallulah stumbled upon Charlotte, curled up in the corner of the foundation they usually occupied. She was crying, of course. She always was in those days.

"Yo, princess, what're you doing in our dirty little perch?" Tallulah asked, standing awkwardly in front of Charlotte. When she didn't respond, Tallulah continued, tilting her head to try to make eye contact, "Hellooooo, I'm talking to you? Charlotte?"

"Yea alright alright, Jesus," Charlotte finally muttered, wiping her eyes and unfurling to hop down from the foundation.

As she began walking away Jenny grabbed her wrist. "Stay."

Her grip was vicelike, and those slender fingers of hers were so cold they almost felt dead. It sent goosebumps crawling up Charlotte's arm. Unsure what to do, Charlotte shook her hand free as subtly as

she could, and sat down in the damp at their feet. Her skirt would be stained when she stood up, but for once she did not care, curiosity besting her.

We were not sure what Jenny saw in Charlotte at first. But we would soon learn that even the weakest women have something to offer.

Before Tallulah could get too far into a tirade on the littered shores of our river, Jenny lifted a massive book from her backpack. The book itself looked inconsequential. Leatherbound with browning edges. The title was no longer legible on the front cover or spine, but Jenny and Tallulah's reverence of it hinted at something below the surface. Jenny kept her sleeve over her hand as she stroked the pages. Tallulah did not even attempt to touch it, and instead looked on over Jenny's shoulder.

"Old books always make me sneeze," Charlotte said, wanting to feel included.

Jenny and Tallulah only acknowledged Charlotte's interjection with blank stares before returning their attention to the book.

"This is the part I don't quite get, Jen," Tallulah said. "I thought this a girl thing, so involving a boy just seems so counterintuitive."

"It's a matter of balance, right? Men always seem to wrap us up in their shenanigans, so why wouldn't we do the same? Reparations or whatever."

It is always so lovely to be known again. It is even better when we are understood.

"What exactly are you talking about, if I'm allowed to ask?" Charlotte said.

"You're not," said Tallulah.

"A ritual," Jenny said at the same time, earning her a strange look from Tallulah.

Charlotte giggled nervously. "Ok, what?"

"Can we trust you?" Jenny asked.

"Trust me with what?" Charlotte said.

"Just in general," Jenny said.

"It's not like she has anyone to tell anymore," Tallulah joked. Jenny elbowed her side, casting a withering glance her way. Charlotte let out a wry laugh.

"She's not wrong though," she said. "You can trust me."

"Good," Jenny said. She grabbed Tallulah's wrist and hoisted her

up. “We have to go. Do you want us to drive you to school tomorrow? Tallulah has a car.”

Tallulah tried to mask her confusion, but Charlotte could tell she and Jenny were not on the same page. Even if she felt unwanted by Tallulah, she could not turn down an opportunity to avoid the bus and by extension, Josh.

“Sure, yeah. I live—”

“We know where you live,” Jenny cut her off.

“Not in a weird way, Jenny’s aunt just lives on the same street,” Tallulah clarified, tossing an amused glance at Jenny.



“Why’re we involving her, exactly?” Tallulah asked as soon as Jenny shut her bedroom door. We had the same question, at first. It’s not often one of our girls can surprise us.

“Tallulah, when was the last time you spoke to a boy?”

“Ti—”

“Timothy in conservation doesn’t count, he’s scared of you,” Jenny interjected before Tallulah could finish. “But Charlotte has Josh, and we need Josh.”

“They broke up, remember? He’s going out with what’s-her-face now,” Tallulah said.

“I think Charlotte still has a hold on Josh. He’s desperate to live up to his reputation and you know damn well Lacy is making him wait until formal. That girl is a whore, but she is also sentimental. She wants her moment.”

“So he’s still a virgin, you think?” Tallulah asked.

“I know he still is,” Jenny said. “And I know Charlotte is soft enough to still want to lose it to Josh, even after all of this.”

“She won’t agree to this.”

“She will if she doesn’t know everything, and she doesn’t need to. Once it’s done, she’ll see why his sacrifice was necessary,” Jenny said.

“And if she doesn’t?”

“She will,” Jenny said.



Just as Charlotte was prepared to give up, to succumb to the ruthless tides of small-town high school, she was swept up into Jenny's current. It was unpredictable, yet comforting, to know she once more had girls who would have her back, even if Jenny and Tallulah weren't her first choice. Usually, they talked around her, but not maliciously.

She felt like a kid hanging out with two adults who had never been around kids before. Occasionally, Jenny would surprise her with a direct address, but Charlotte never talked for long. She preferred to listen. And Jenny and Tallulah were fascinating.

Charlotte was jarred by how frequently Jenny and Tallulah expected her company. At lunch, in study hall, and after school at Jenny's, she was dragged everywhere with them. But her company was especially expected at gym class, where girls walked laps on the track to gossip out of earshot while the boys sized up each others' 'athleticism' on the field in the track's center.

On a Thursday in October, as the trio meandered the track and Tallulah lectured them on river preservation, Jenny abruptly halted their monotonous walk. Staring into the center of the field, she cocked her head and watched the game unfolding.

"She's superhuman," she murmured as Tallulah and Charlotte turned to watch alongside her.

Usually, they talked around her, but not maliciously. She felt like a kid hanging out with two adults who had never been around kids before.

"She? Jenny, there's n—," just then, an unknown figure body slams Josh on the way to the goal. "Shit," Tallulah finished.

Josh was red-faced as his friends helped him to his feet. The ball sat in the back of the net, waiting for the game to resume. The figure shrugged, and as she turned, Tallulah and Charlotte realized Aria Cox was

playing soccer with the boys. Their shock turned into awe as they watched her run circles around Josh and his teammates.

A girl was kicking Josh's ass, and everyone was seeing it. Sure, he was a football player, so he was not expected to be a soccer star. But not holding his own against a girl? In the eyes of high schoolers, that was just pathetic.

But Charlotte did not find it pathetic. She was the pathetic one as she watched Josh sympathetically. Charlotte knew how fragile his masculinity was, and this certainly was not helping. To her left, Jenny and Tallulah were having the time of their lives. They had no particular vendetta against Josh. But who doesn't love to watch the mighty fall, especially at the hands of a woman?

"I think I love her," Tallulah said in disbelief. "She just made my day, no week—"

"Year," Jenny finished. They looked at each other and fell into manic laughter. Hearing their shrieks, Josh turned and flipped them off.

"It's really not that funny," Charlotte whispered.

Other girls followed in Jenny's footsteps and stopped to watch the game. The coaches, too enraptured by Aria's skill, did not notice the utter lack of physical activity occurring on the track. If anyone made time to watch women's sports the way they did men's, Aria tearing up the field would be unsurprising. But in a shocking turn of events, no one ever came to her games, so her strength was a well-kept secret. Until that day.

Jenny knew she was a powerhouse just by watching Aria's broad shoulders shift in chemistry class, but this was confirmation. They needed Aria.

In the locker room after class, as the room filled with steam and hairspray, Jenny wandered over to the corner where the soccer team congregated, still in her bath towel and bare feet. Feeling Jenny's gaze on her back, Aria turned around slowly, ready to kick the ass of the freak who was staring. Once she realized it was Jenny Camry, however, her fighting fire dimmed and her shoulders sagged. Somehow she knew that was a fight she could never win, even if she dwarfed Jenny. Smart girl.

"Hi?" she said.

"Do you ever hang by the river?" Jenny responded, not bothering with pleasantries.

"Uh, not really, no. It's kinda nasty under there."

An awkward pause.

"Meet us there, after school. I think we need to chat."

Before Aria could speak, Jenny was already walking away.



“What if she doesn’t come?” Charlotte asked. She did not want to admit it to herself, but she would have been disappointed if Aria did not show up. Jenny’s excitement had rubbed off on her, and she did not even know what she was so excited about, not really. She just knew there was a ritual—Jenny talked her ear off about it at lunch—and that was intriguing enough. Her family’s intense Christianity never sat right with her. Maybe this ritual would provide the comfort Pastor Michael couldn’t.

“She’ll come,” Jenny said.

Within five minutes, they heard Aria crunching down the gravel bank. She slowed as the girls came into view. Aria did not have a problem with Jenny and Tallulah, not like everyone else, but they were fucking unsettling in their nonchalance. They owned every rumor that shrouded them a little too well.

“Hi!” Tallulah said. Jenny offered a curt smile while Charlotte hovered behind them, eyes darting between the water and Aria.

“Hey,” Aria said hesitantly. To give her overactive body something to do, she leaned up against the bridge foundation and fussed with the hair ties on her wrist. Her skin was permanently branded red by the years of ‘just in case’ hairbands.

“The river isn’t what we think it is,” Jenny began. She never was great with weighty conversations. When her mom broke the news about grandma’s cancer, Jenny announced she wanted to start dance classes. She did not see the point in pleasantries or tiptoeing around a topic. Better to just get it out there and get over it.

“Let’s sit. I think that’ll make this easier,” Tallulah said.

Jenny threw her windbreaker on the ground and sat the book on top of it. Tallulah sat to her left while Charlotte plopped unceremoniously on her right, accidentally flashing the group her purple Hanes underwear.

“So I work at the library, right? And we’ve got mountains of old-ass books in the basement archives. It kind of smells like shit down there because it’s flooded a few times, but sometimes it’s the only place I can go to escape Karen,” Jenny said.

“Who’s Karen?” Aria asked, sitting closely to Charlotte. Charlotte seemed the most approachable or at least the most normal.

Charlotte looked at her agape. “The county librarian. She’s lovely really, just a bit—”

“Obnoxious? Sickly sweet? Corny?” Tallulah interrupted.

“I was gonna say awkward,” Charlotte added.

“Well, she makes my skin crawl with her smothering, so sometimes I hang out in the basement. She can’t go down there much. The mold makes her sick,” Jenny said.

“She sneezes like a puppy,” Tallulah said.

“One day while I was down there, this book damn near killed me when it randomly fell from the top of a stack. Which was scary at first, but then it felt like a sign.” As she said this, her eyes glazed over like she was suddenly daydreaming.

“I have dinner at 5:30. Can you get to the point, Jenny?” Aria said. Jenny blinked rapidly at her before continuing.

“This book. It’s about Allentown, the town’s real history,” she said. Her speech quickened. “Our ancestors were actually led here by magical forces to feed the river, which isn’t just a river, by the way, it’s full of magical beings like naiads who are the ones—” Aria’s high-pitched laughter echoed off the underbelly of the bridge, ricocheting into our waters. We do not appreciate being mocked, but we get it. Accepting our existence is a challenge to the feeble mortal mind.

“Do you ever feel like a powder keg? Like you’re just waiting for this godforsaken town to push you just that inch too far? What if we could push first?”

“What the fuck is wrong with you?” Tallulah asked.

“Me?” Aria said, rising to her feet. “Me, Tallulah, really? This is absurd!” She laughed again.

“They’re wrong about me, you know,” Jenny said. “I’m not a witch or possessed or whatever. You’re here, Aria, not because I need you, but because we have some things in common. All that anger and mistrust. It’s totally valid and this book—crazy as you may think it is—can relieve that pressure.” Jenny paused. “Do you ever feel like a powder keg? Like you’re just waiting for this godforsaken town to push you just that inch too far? What if we could push first? What if we could harness the pressure and redirect it as we please?”

“What does that even mean?” Charlotte muttered.

“There’s a ritual right? A boy crossing the bridge, girls under it, yada yada. If we follow the steps in the book we can join the naiads. Sort of,” Jenny said.

“Sort of?” Aria asked.

“We’ll still be people, just with the river on our side. We link our life force to the river, and in exchange, we get a fraction of the naiads’ power. I think we also join this group consciousness, but I’m hazy about that. The book isn’t super clear,” Jenny said.

“Why haven’t we seen or heard of this... these magical creatures before then? Surely they would be pretty fucking obvious,” Aria said.

“Mortal eyes can’t perceive them. You’ll just have to trust us,” Tallulah said.

“Do you trust them?” Aria asked turning to Charlotte. Charlotte looked up like a startled squirrel, not expecting Aria’s attention.

“All my friends bailed on me the moment Josh picked Lacy. I don’t want revenge I just—I just want to feel in control again, like other people aren’t choosing for me,” Charlotte said. As soon as she stopped speaking she dropped her gaze back to her lap.

Aria paused for a second before turning to crunch back up the bank.

“We’ll be here tonight,” Jenny called at her back.

As she walked back to her house, Aria could not help the curiosity building as she mulled Jenny’s words over. What’s the worst that could happen? Nothing?

If this went right, though? She could stomp Uncle Tim’s fucking lights out. And that was tempting. We have a way of washing people away in our current.



Aria did show that night under the Juliette. Jenny could be quite persuasive. She knew exactly what sore spots to poke to convince Aria of her plan. She didn’t need Aria. Or Tallulah and Charlotte, for that matter. As we said, there is usually only one girl every cycle. One lonely, desperate girl. But Jenny, having read our book in its entirety, knew that with more life force came more power for herself, for us, for the river.

With heads buried in our beautiful book, our history, the four girls became something more, a part of us. The sisterhood below the water’s surface is strong and feminine. We protect our own and feed

on virginal boys. It's not as if they don't deserve it. Even the most 'innocent' men can't resist making the lives of women hell. Medusa was right and Hera was betrayed and we naiads are ravenous.

Here, under the bridge, as our current ripped the silence to shreds, a divine femininity was born.

That night as Josh drove to the rendezvous Charlotte had set outside of town, our four gathered at the bank and began chanting the incantation we so wish we heard more often. Their voices became guttural and inhuman as their cast continued building. As the incantation climaxed, our river crashed against the rock they sat upon, sucking them under.

Baptism isn't an easy thing, the girls learned that night. Letting someone else shove you under and hope the will of God brings you back to the surface. But there is no God here. Just us and them. Aren't they lucky we are about to become one and the same? Aren't they so lucky to share our consciousness? Our body? Our hunger?

We.

Humans are born, but we? We are reborn. This isn't a beginning for us, nor is it the end. Just the middle. Calm is in the middle, in the eye, within, calm is here. As the girls join us and our current swaddles them, they cease to struggle. No water fills their lungs, no bladderworts tangle with their uvulas.

The same unfortunately cannot be said for Joshua. He had the whole school convinced of his sexual prowess. Everyone, except for Jenny, that is. She recognized the look of desperation in his eyes any time his hands found the cross necklace sitting on his shirt. He was a perfect sacrifice, a conflicted virgin.

If he just would have fucked Lacy soon enough, he could have escaped this fate. Lucky us, the Christian guilt trumped his strongest desires. It looked like an accident, his truck going through the guardrail. A particularly strong gust. A slick road. But it was our pull—the swell of the girls voices—that brought him over the edge, never surfacing again.

As the girls clambered to shore, Josh floated to the surface a few feet away. Unaware at first, they gasped out a surprised laugh, overcome by the power coursing through us into them. The surface of our river bubbled in response. One by one the girls caught sight of Josh floating face down, the guardrail hanging off the bridge precariously, and a

scream erupted through us. Charlotte let her despair rage through us all, girls and river alike, as our current pulled Josh out of reach.

Jenny was a smart girl, but she grossly misunderstood Charlotte and her needs. Charlotte, hidden behind her quiet awkwardness, was protective of those she loved to a fault. That shroud of simpering fell away if anyone mistakenly fucked with her people. And this mistake would cost Jenny, and us, dearly.



The morning after was both exhausting and intoxicating. Having an extension of our power inhabiting land bodies took some adjusting, but the renewed power was worth it.

The seas of students did not like the look of Jenny, Tallulah, Aria, and Charlotte together as the girls plowed four across down the hallway. Guilty women don't sink, they swim. And they floated on the hallway's tide.

Around the corner towards the cafeteria stood a newly erected memorial to Joshua Brendan, complete with sobbing women worshipping. The memorial itself was ludicrous, covered in flowers, photos, and cards from people who never knew him but pretended to. The need to conform extended to grief. Talk of retiring his jersey number circulated immediately. God rest North Allen's mighty hero who saved us from football infamy.

Jenny led her friends to the handicapped stall of the nearest bathroom. Once locked inside, a wave of giggles washed over the room.

"I wonder how long it'll take for the news crew to get to school this morning," Aria said, crouched on the balls of her feet in the corner.

"I'm surprised they aren't here yet, nosey bastards," Tallulah responded, leaning against the door. "We've gotta practice the waterworks regardless."

"Why should we?" said Jenny, as she stood in the middle, her posture relaxed.

A weighted pause, like the deep breath taken before diving into cold water.

"Because he didn't fucking deserve this," Charlotte sputtered from the corner opposite Aria. She left the bathroom quietly,

but Jenny and Aria knew immediately something was awry. Tallulah, always the ignorant one, did not notice and continued the conversation. Her attention to social cues was never all that great. It only got worse the more power she possessed. Why'd it matter how you read a room if you could ruin it in a moment, anyway?



The news crew had waited until dismissal to show up, assaulting students walking to their cars or the bus loop with asinine questions regarding Joshua. Their tactic was harpy-like.

“He’ll be missed.”

“I just can’t believe he’s gone.”

“North Allen really lost a good one.”

They would say anything for a second of airtime, and lucky for them, the news crew was hungry for grief porn. The more you cried, the easier it was to land in their tribute during the five o’clock news.

The girls slipped unnoticed to Tallulah’s hand-me-down green sedan and rode off together. It would be years before their classmates began to recall the weird quartet that appeared out of nowhere during their junior year of high school. A dangerous magic trick that, like most illusions, was not built to last.

As Tallulah began driving to the river, Jenny said, “Don’t go to the bridge today.”

“Hell yeah, we deserve our own spot anyway. Maybe off Linder? By the railroad tracks?” Tallulah said.

“That works,” said Jenny. In the backseat, Aria and Charlotte were mostly quiet, but an eager grin rested on Aria’s face the entire ride.

Our power hummed as our girls drew closer, awkwardly jogging down a steep embankment peppered with “CAUTION: LANDSLIDES” signs. Here, the river was gentle and wide in a matronly way. Branches curved down to kiss the mirrored surface of the still water as birds chirped overhead. Unlike under the Juliette, you didn’t have to compete with the echoing current to be heard.

“Do you feel that?” Jenny asked, her back still turned.

“Feel what?” Tallulah and Aria said in unison.

In response, Jenny kicked off her grimy shoes and stood ankle-deep in the chilled water. An ecstatic sigh left her lips. The water

danced around her damp pant legs. Jenny looked so peaceful for the first time in so long, that Tallulah couldn't resist joining her, wading out further, fully clothed. Jenny followed, giggling uncharacteristically.

Jenny adopted a confident air, not wielding the power as recklessly as Aria and Tallulah, who were barely keeping it secret.

As Jenny and Tallulah floated in circles like bloated corpses, Aria charged in, sending waves across the surface for as far as they could see. Reunited with our humans, our renewed power became palpable, as if a current of electricity ran through our water.

Feeling it themselves, the girls began playing with the strength we loaned them, lifting spheres of water into the sky. The closer they were to us, the more control over the water they had. The more superhuman their strength. Being in the water itself made them feel untouchable.

If Charlotte had gotten in the water with the other three, maybe her mind would have been changed. Maybe feeling us at our most powerful would have been persuasive enough. It doesn't matter now.



"You lied to me," Charlotte said to Jenny a week later. She had been avoiding them at school, even calling in sick for a few days to escape them entirely. Jenny, Tallulah, and Aria finally confronted her, standing on the stoop in front of her door. "You lied to me, and someone is dead because of it."

"He deserved it," Jenny said calmly. The power had pacified her. Knowing she could protect herself, Jenny adopted a confident air, not wielding the power as recklessly as Aria and Tallulah, who were barely keeping it secret.

"I loved him? Do you even fucking care about that? About my feelings?"

"Of course I do. That's why I protected you, involved you," Jenny said. "I didn't need you, you needed me. You're stronger now—"

"Yes, and every time I feel that new strength, I gag, because

it cost me Josh. We are running on his fumes. And don't act like you didn't fucking need me, because you did. You wouldn't have succeeded without me."

"Quite cocky of you," Tallulah snarled.

"Not cocky, just honest. You three freaks could not get a boy to do what you wanted if your life depended on it. So you manipulated stupid little Charlotte. Well, who looks stupid now, huh? Who's begging on my porch? I'm done." A vein bulged on her forehead as the anger built up inside her. Jenny and Tallulah were playing it cool, but Aria could tell this was freaking them out. To see Charlotte snap was to see pigs fly.

"You can't just 'be done,' they won't allow it," Jenny said.

Charlotte barked out a laugh. "That's what you think." She slammed the door, ending the conversation.



That night Charlotte came to visit us alone, a goodbye of sorts. Jumping from the gap his truck left in the guardrail, Charlotte attempted to end her mortal suffering. Everything bad that had happened in her life had taken place under the Juliette. What's one more tragedy? Maybe the public would see it as a last act of love. As per usual, they would be wrong.

In sharing our consciousness, Charlotte now knew everything about us, our power, the ritual, and the one way out. With each jump, the river healed her wounds, but it was not a painless process. Her legs snapped each time, only to be stitched rapidly back together by the water. Charlotte's vision was hazy as she climbed up onto the bridge one final time. With her last jump, we did not fully heal her. Rather, we simply resuscitated her and buoyed her to shore. She would not be found until the morning, barely alive and broken.

Meanwhile, the remaining three felt the pain from Jenny's house. And with each jump, they were dragged to our river. Finally, as Charlotte died, Jenny, Tallulah, and Aria were pulled under with no chance of surfacing again. You see, there is no way out, not really, not for everyone. But we were greedy, and letting one go to fully absorb three was worth it. We were satiated.

Our girls usually have a choice: to join us below the water's surface, or continue among the humans. Charlotte stole that choice from the other three, just as they had stolen Josh from her. So Jenny, Tallulah, and Aria joined our water spirit sisterhood. They will never see their families again, but that is no major loss. The only loss they suffered is a loss of choice at the hands of Charlotte. The remaining three will hold that against her until the end of their days, long after Charlotte's mortality expires.

We were merciful in releasing Charlotte, but that does not mean we are done with her.



On our waters churn, even now. Even tomorrow. With your daughter, perhaps. Or a cousin, student, or grandchild. Our strength would not be realized to its fullest extent without the women of Allensville, who feed our greedy waters when we need it most.

Above us, the Juliette remains on guard. Charlotte keeps her daughters—of which she had three—away from our shores. Her husband chalks it up to the death of a classmate he can barely remember. Her neighbors gossip about her overprotectiveness behind her back. Suburban women rival the pettiness of gods.

But poor Charlotte, how blind she is in her protectiveness. Life does not go your way just because you will it, especially not when there is so much power simmering in through the watershed feeding your town. We have never had the offspring of one of our own before. How delightful. Yet another precedent being set by our sweet Charlotte.

Meredith is a curious girl, and curiosity is a danger to women. I'm sure you know that by now. I'm sure you also know that forbidden fruit is the sweetest. Meredith took interest in the river from the moment her mother forbade her from it.

Unfortunately, she never found the book. Jenny did too good of a job disguising it before the ritual. What she did find are questions that had long been submerged in Allensville's murky history. Meredith considered asking her teachers, but thought better of it, considering her mother's membership in the PTA. Instead,

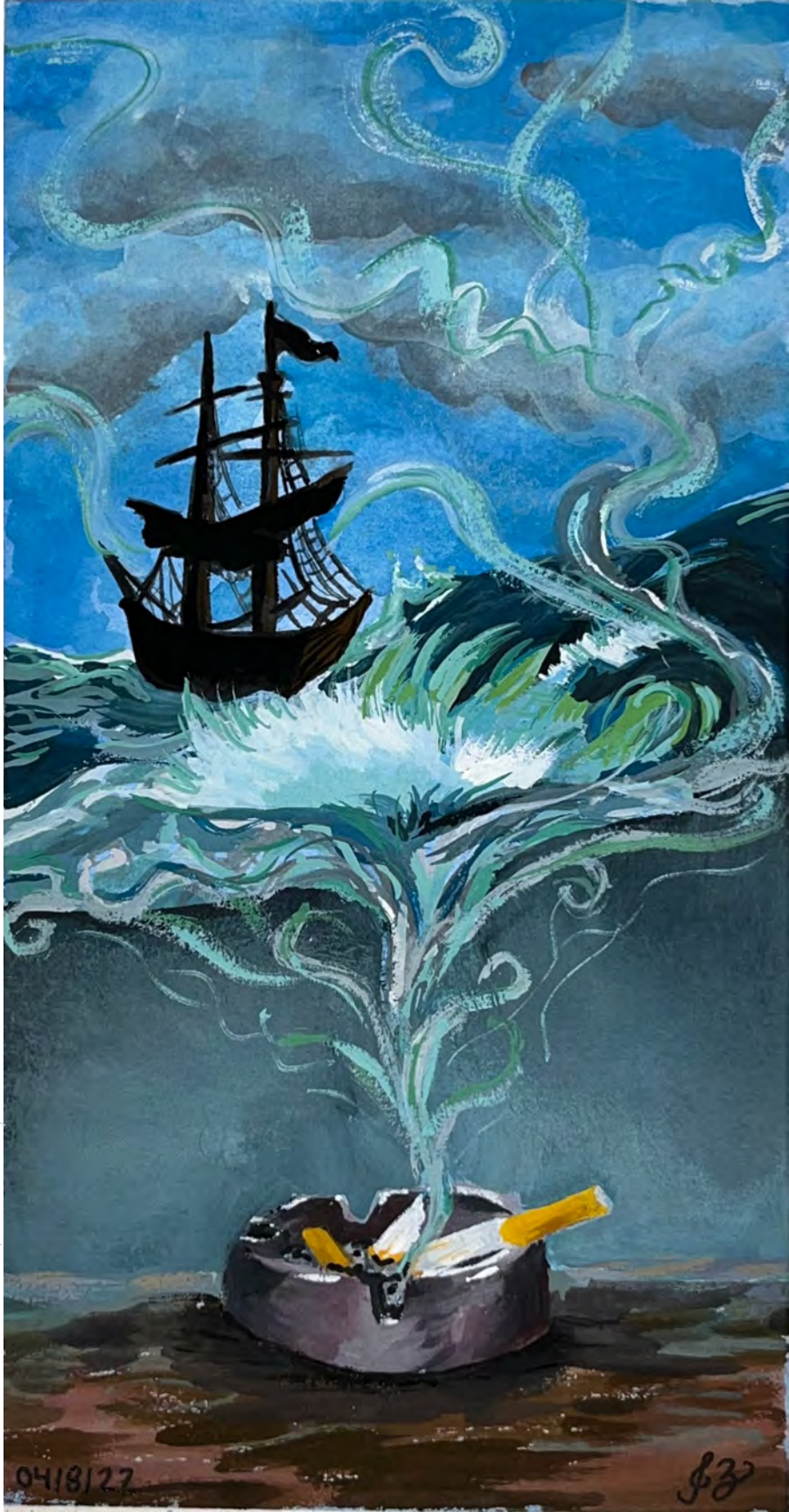
she has taken matters into her own hands, spending hours online researching her mother's childhood.

Josh's story she knows all too well. Because of him she's only crossed the Juliette on her bike, never in her mom's minivan. However, there are some other anomalies regarding her mom's classmates that do not sit right with Meredith. Missing girls are all too often looked over in Pennsylvania. Especially the odd, quiet ones, like Jenny. Like Meredith.

Charlotte will raise a fuss when she disappears, insistent upon hiring scuba teams to scour the river. But our waters are so vast, so daunting. They'll never find her unless we want them to. And we're not quite ready for that, not yet.



Fumer La Mer | Isabelle Zory



04/8/27

IZ

Dear Persephone

BY AIDAN MELINSON

I have been meaning to ask you why
the seasons are different now.
Different from so long ago,
when you were first taken
from the surface to formless,
shuffling Asphodel, and
the hero'd Elysian fields.

Now, would you recognize the autumn heat
and the salt-killed mangrove trees?

I meant to ask if you'd seen the storms,
or the fourth-grade commercials of seals
and polar bears swimming hopelessly
towards ice that isn't there. Ice that was repurposed
to crash a school bus
in a Pennsylvanian autumnal blizzard.

Do you remember when
we used to get occasional light snowfall
in November, or when gentle
first-frosts graced late October?
I remember when nor'easters were relegated to January,
and the heat went away by Halloween.



I wonder what your mother thinks.
How has her mourning progressed?
Has Demeter's icy mourning faded as we burn time and coal?
Is it now warm enough for your flowers?

Or is warmth a different shade of her mourning?

There is evil within abundance
alongside artificial scarcity.

Asphodel is no field, but a city,
a country,
a world.

The manufacturers have put malice in Asphodel.
There is no hope for Elysium here.

Elysium is home only to those captured in portraiture.

There is nothing to be said for Asphodel.
Elysium is for Rockefellers and Vanderbilts.

Demeter's rage is no longer about your departure,
oh dread Persephone. Her storms coincide with Elysian famine:

a hunger amidst abundance and capital.
I cannot blame her for the thrashings of nature
and taking up a new fling
with the sea.

All this to say that I miss you and your seasons.

Tell Thanatos hello for me.

I hope your garden fares well.



Staff & Contributors

FAITH ALMOND is a first-year from Apex, NC majoring in creative writing and double-minoring in music and Spanish. She is the author of dozens of poems and a novel that she hopes to get published in the coming years. When she's not writing, you can find her participating in Elon's Marching Band, Percussion Ensemble, and Concert Band.

JESS BAKER is a junior majoring in media analytics and minoring in statistics and creative writing. This is her second year as the nonfiction co-editor and she's loving it more than ever. She mainly writes nonfiction, but has been known to do some occasional fiction. She is a plant lover, avid reader, and bullet-journal enthusiast in her pockets of free time.

SYDNI BROWN is a junior majoring in communications design and strategic communications. She is passionate about telling stories of social justice through art and hopes to continue to gain experiences to inform her work.

KATE BURNS is a freshman majoring in anthropology and minoring in environmental science and biology. She is grateful for the opportunity to be involved in the creative arts outside of her classes!

PHOEBE CRUMBINE is a senior BFA Dance Performance & Choreography and Psychology double-major, from Beverly, MA. She uses art as a form of therapeutic expression that places influence on authenticity of thought. She created this set of paintings in a stream of consciousness format, letting each painting create itself.

CAROLINE DIFRANGO is a senior creative writing and communication design double major from Richmond, VA. A writer and avid (some may say obsessive) reader, Caroline hopes to pursue publishing after graduation. She is inspired to do so by her incredible boss and editor

extraordinaire, Keren Rivas, whom she admires greatly. Caroline also loves crusty white dogs, live music, and slow fashion. After graduation she plans on crying regularly about missing advisers Tita and Drew.

LIZZY DIGRANDE is a junior at Elon, majoring in psychology with a double minor in creative writing and neuroscience. While she is currently enjoying her time abroad in Ireland, she misses hammocking near Lake Mary Nell with a good psychological thriller and trying new restaurants near campus! Lizzy can't wait to be a part of the *Colonnades* team again next year.

KENNA DUBRASKI is a sophomore majoring in creative writing and minoring in psychology and literature. In her free time, she loves to read, write, and go to the gym. She hopes to publish a book one day.

LUCY GARCIA is a senior environmental & sustainability studies major who considers writing and making art her lifeline, what roots her to our warming Earth.

GABBY GLEMSER is a sophomore majoring in English with a literature concentration. She hopes to secure a career in the publishing industry, reviewing and editing book manuscripts. They were grateful to work with the journal editors this year. When they aren't immersed in pieces for *Colonnades*, they're catching up on their favorite book series or writing reviews for the top films of the week on *Letterboxd*.

HAILEY GORDON is an English literature major with a minor in adventure based learning. In her free time outside of class, she likes to read, write, and play *Animal Crossing*.

DANNY GUTIERREZ is a junior, majoring in communication design and art. He's interested in ethical creating and innovative intermedia art as a venue to create universally beneficial experiences.

JAMES HEMMINGWAY is a sophomore double majoring in public health and marketing with a minor in women's, gender, and sexualities studies. His art focuses on creating collage pieces that

connect with his childhood and trans identity, and he is interested in creating zines that document the experiences of growing up queer in the South.

ALEX INGRAM is an English major, concentrating in creative writing while working on minors in game design, history, Asian studies, and leadership studies at Elon University. Alex enjoys horror books, movies, and all types of stories that gives you goosebumps. Alex is interested in a career in video game development within the realm of creative direction, aspiring to make games with strong narrative impact on players.

LAUREN JACOBBE is a senior BFA Dance Performance and Choreography and BA Human Service Studies double major. As an artist and advocate, she takes risks and accepts discomfort. She values authenticity and the ability to connect with humans through her art. She hopes to leave ripples in the waters she treads by creating an impact and evoking the beauty of emotion.

JULIETTE KAHN is a senior majoring in journalism with a minor in leadership studies. In her free time, she loves to draw and paint digitally, but has recently begun experimenting with traditional oil painting. Kahn is an avid lover of color, especially ones that are vibrant and elicit deep emotion in a viewer. She hopes to someday use her writing and visual arts skills to create a comic series.

LUCAS LEVEILLEE is a senior English literature and creative writing major with minors in communications and asian studies who originates from Ft. Lauderdale, FL. He is grateful to have been a nonfiction co-editor for this year's edition of *Colonnades* and hopes to see the publication continue to thrive well after he graduates. When not working with the English department, Lucas helps run the student organization Spectrum. In his spare time he likes to read, listen to Spotify radio stations to find some weird new indie music, and go explore new restaurants in the Research Triangle area with his wonderful boyfriend.

SKY MARTIN is a sophomore majoring in creative writing and literature, and minoring in teaching & learning. She enjoys reading

books about magic, knights, and fantastical worlds, and wants to find her own name published among those books one day.

AIDAN MELINSON is a senior, majoring in creative writing and religious studies. In his free time, you may find him down a rabbit hole of video essays about anything from his favorite shows to discussions of animal culture (shoutout cetaceans and corvids), and, more recently, learning to draw.

SARAH MCWHIRTER is a freshman majoring in psychology with minors in human services and art. She is excited at the opportunity to share her artwork at Elon and be involved with the creative arts programs!

VIRGINIA MORRISON is a junior majoring in art history with minors in art and creative writing. She primarily works with watercolors and collage, playing with themes of environmental justice and what it means to experience eco-anxiety. As an artist, she hopes to inspire others to contemplate their relationships with nature, art, and love.

RACHEL MULLENIX is a junior pursuing a double major in human service studies and Spanish and a minor in poverty & social justice Studies. Funky fashion, fresh flowers, and foreign food are her vices. As an ardent lover of all forms of storytelling, she has enjoyed serving as a reader for *Colonnades* throughout her college experience, especially in the visual art and nonfiction sections.

IAN MYERS is a senior double majoring in communication design and media analytics with minors in photography and business. He is a photographer, designer, and junior art director who works with a variety of different mediums.

MARC PAILLEX is a junior double-majoring in cinema and television arts and creative writing. He is from Long Island, NY. He likes to spend time with family and friends. He also likes to watch movies and TV, play games, and to visit new places.

CAROLINE PIRWITZ is a senior double-majoring in creative writing and cinema and television arts. She's originally from Columbus, OH. In

her free time, she loves to watch movies, explore the outdoors, and, of course, write. She enjoys writing literary fiction and screenwriting, and she dabbles in poetry as well. Along with *Colonnades*, she also writes features for *The Edge Magazine*. After graduation, Caroline hopes to get her MFA in fiction writing and one day publish a novel!

MIA PURSE is a sophomore professional writing and rhetoric major with a minor in teaching English to speakers of other languages. When not reading murder mysteries, Mia enjoys participating in improv with *Please Clap!*

CAILEY ROGERS is a junior Communications Fellow who is double-majoring in English literature and journalism. She is also a Lumen Scholar and is in the process of completing an undergraduate research project on feminist Victorian literature. Cailey has always had a passion for both reading and creating stories, and she is honored to have her writing showcased in this year's *Colonnades*, as it has been a dream of hers since her first year at Elon.

OLIVIA ROMANO is a senior majoring in English literature and creative writing. She would like to work in publishing and editing after graduation, and is very grateful for this experience as *Colonnades*' fiction editor. In her free time, Olivia loves to travel, visit local coffee shops, and update her bookstagram. She will miss the amazing friends she met through her English classes and *Colonnades* but looks forward to spending more time with family and beginning her career after Elon.

SARAH RUSTHOVEN is a senior communication design major, minoring in French and art. Sarah is passionate about empowering artists and building community and has loved the opportunity *Colonnades* has given her to do both over the past four years.

SARAH SANDAK is a freshman professional writing and rhetoric major from Westfield, NJ. Sarah joined the journal because she likes to write and edit.

LILLY SANTIAGO is a creative writing alum currently living in

Wilmington, NC. She is passionate about sustainability, regenerative agriculture, poetry, and community. She is so happy to share her work at Elon through *Colonnades!*

ALEXANDRA SCHNEIDER is a senior creative writing and strategic communications major hailing from Raleigh, NC. She is over the moon to have worked on *Colonnades* this year and is so grateful to be part of the incredible creative writing community at Elon. She's a big fan of chai lattes, hammerhead sharks, and singing off-key. Post-grad, she wants to pursue a career in publishing, and in her free time you'll find her exploring the world, reading, and working on her own writing.

JILLIAN SHOR is a junior majoring in art with a minor in sociology. Her research and art focus on different identities, their intersections, and how we can create space for ourselves.

OLIVIA SHOSHAN is a senior majoring in strategic communications with a minor in women's, gender, and sexualities studies. In her free time she loves to binge-read books and practice yoga. Her current book obsession is *The Seven Husbands of Evelyn Hugo*.

ISABEL ZORY is a junior studying arts administration and French with minors in business administration and fine arts. She is currently abroad in Paris for the semester and hopes to find an internship at a French museum this coming summer to further her studies. You can follow her art journey and purchase her work on her Instagram [@art.itika_zory](#).

Special Thanks

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Elon University Art Department

Elon University English Department

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Submission Guidelines

Colonnades Literary and Art Journal welcomes submissions from any Elon undergraduate student across four genres: fiction, creative nonfiction, poetry, and visual art. Submissions are accepted year-round and are evaluated through a blind reading and review process by undergraduate staff members.

Submissions should be anonymized and free of all grammatical and mechanical errors. Email submissions to colonnades@elon.edu with a subject line including your last name and the titles of your submissions. The body of the email should include your full name, your Student ID number, and the titles and genres of your pieces. You may include multiple submissions in one email or send them separately.

Literary pieces (fiction, nonfiction, poetry) should be saved as Microsoft Word documents and attached to the email, not pasted into the body of the email. Visual art pieces should be saved in 300 dpi resolution, TFF/JPEG/PNG format. Other file types may be accepted.

LITERARY AND VISUAL ART SUBMISSION DEADLINES FOR THE 75TH ISSUE OF COLONNADES WILL BE IN JANUARY 2024.

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