



The RC Review

BOYS WILL BE BUGS

2020

THE RC REVIEW



Editor's Note

This magazine has survived the apocalypse, and it seems you have, too. As this year's RC Review was being produced, a mass pandemic crawled across the nation and cut our time short. But, if it has found its way to you, this means we have still, somehow, created a thing that made it out alive. Hold onto it.

The world is changing, and so are we; the RC Review, once a print-only magazine, now has its own website and a staff that's almost doubled in size. We've started an Instagram, sold stickers. But what has not changed is what lies within the pages, the art and writing that documents the lived experiences of RC students. "Boys Will Be Bugs" is a testament to how we adapt in uncertain conditions, as RC students will use chaos to fuel their art, express themselves, and design more of their own worlds.

Maybe this really is the end of the world, or possibly the beginning, but we're glad to have seen it all. Thank you for supporting this magazine and helping the RC Review live to see another year. I hope this bug will never be squashed.

Hannah Brauer
Editor-in-Chief

*Find us online: @thercreview and
thercreview.com*



Table of Contents

Poetry and Prose

hiding places - Kennedi Killips	6
Neutral/Neutral - Aviva Satz-Kojis	8
-finally Getting It - Grace Meinke	8
Farmcat - Sebastien Butler	9
Field - Jade Wurst	10
Home with the Fairies - Vivian Chiao	11
A Collection of Haikus as a Substitute for Going to Therapy About It - Erica Meyers	15
how to kiss a girl - Maya Simonte	16
Anatomy of a Wave - Alexander Wagner	18
Mind Mapping - Camilla Lizundia	19
a personal testimony after driving into an active construction site on the freeway - Esther Sun	20
Gordon Hall Civil War Days, Dexter, Michigan - Sebastien Butler	21
Cheese Dust Are Stars - Marlon Rajan	22
The other night I hung out with an old friend and wrote down every single thing they said to me - Elena Ramirez-Gorski	28
Elevate - Alexander Wagner	29
chill - smitty smith	30
The worst thing I've ever done - Elena Ramirez-Gorski	32
Light We Took - Emilia Ferrante	33
you're a vagrant, please don't ever go away - Jena Vallina	34
Clemency - Alyssa Moore	35
Big Man - Elizabeth Schriener	42
Crossroads - Aviva Satz-Kojis	46
Khaled Watches - Hayla Alawi	48
september 16th, 2019 - Gabriella Dias	49
Sympathy Flowers (excerpt) - Maya Simonte	50
Canary - Sebastien Butler	56
A Beautiful Body - Elizabeth Schriener	57
Living with a Ghost - Erica Meyers	57
Every Woman is a Wolf - Jena Vallina	59

At the party, my anxiety tugs on my pant leg - Elena Ramirez-Gorski	60
The Bouquet - Marlon Rajan	61
Warm - Phelan Johnson	68
Montmartre in Winter - Alexander Wagner	70
quivering lip - Kennedi Killips	71
Returning to Iraq - Hayla Alawi	72
i will never pretend to like football - Maya Simonte	80
A Photograph of Two Friends Lying in Bed - Aviva Satz-Kojis	81
Birdsong on a Silent Reservoir - Alexander Wagner	81
sandflies - Camilla Lizundia	82
How To Cure Your OCD - Elena Ramirez-Gorski	83
tiny passions - Jena Vallina	84
Reckless Driving - Grace Meinke	90
Boy on a Bicycle - Vivian Chiao	92
The Crows at East Quad - Alexander Wagner	104

Artwork

快 (Fast) - Mekulash Baron-Galbavi	9
Atmospheric Build-Up Seeking New Friends - Emily Oberg	12
Red - Gabriella Dias	16
Feels Like Me All at Once but Not at All - Emily Oberg	20
darksided - Elena Ramirez-Gorski	22
tommy - Esther Sun	29
Hunchback of Irazú - Hannah Brauer	33
human nature - Hannah Myers	46
Marcha de la Diversidad - Hannah Brauer	48
from "Wishbone" by Richard Silken - Kennedi Killips	57
capitalist depression - Hannah Myers	61
semi-artificial winter - Erica Meyers	72
Mod Blue Boy - Emily Oberg	80
thank you thank you thank you thank you - Elena Ramirez-Gorski	107

Cover by Hannah Brauer and Chelsea Padilla
Collages by RC Review Staff
Doodles by Marlon Rajan

hiding places

Kennedi Killips

I was nine, sat on a dusty blue milk crate full of clean laundry while my mother preened my hair for nits with a fine comb. she ripped the knots from my scalp, scouring.

she said *they hide behind the ears and at the nape*. tears gathered before they fell but she didn't notice.

at twelve, she said I wasn't thin enough, pinching my sides like a frayed edge and at fifteen, she told me she couldn't recognize me because of my size eight prom dress.

my mother spoke like a sledgehammer. she swung at me. she chided me, though I had driven five hours to see her, swatting my hand like a house fly as I reached for a second scoop of mashed potatoes. my sisters watched, biting their tongues.

I retreated to my room, wrapping myself in a thick quilt like a cocoon, feet tucked beneath me, like the times I'd done this as a child. I heard them leave the table and later their bedroom doors closed behind them.

I crept down the stairs and I stood alone in the dining room, empty plate settings and spoons left out. like a movie frame with no people in it.



快 (*Fast*)

Mekulash Baron-Galbavi

Neutral/Neutral

Aviva Satz-Kojis

There are no windows in my mother's kitchen,
no glass in the panes, it's just open.
The glass has been gone so long I've forgotten what it looks like,
forgotten it's more clear than the rain,
forgotten there are barriers up for a reason.
The birds cry out and I fear they see something I don't.
I remember the days we had a fresh homegrown sort of love in the
garden.
A green hope that grows even when you tell it not to,
tell it there's no room for you here.
I look now at the vines, all shriveled and dry,
begging for water, begging to be held just one more time.
My mother looks down at the plants,
sees the memory of what she once had,
and the reminder of what remains.



i wonder how fully i will
give myself away before i remember
that i can Have Myself too.

i wonder how much life will
pass me by before i remember
to stop Dwelling and Regretting.

-finally Getting It

Grace Meinke

Farmcat

Sebastien Butler

I see much in my thin time, marking years
on Fence Posts. When young Hawks hunt me,
stealth and shadow save my skin. I hear
Thrush's song, and I carry its head in my mouth
like a banner. I see Fox bow to me. As it should,
I am larger. I see Him walking about, attending
to His labors, smoking His pipe on the porch. I
stare in at His wheat colored rooms with only
Stars to feed me. I stand watch by River,
frost-cloaked, watching mud-frozen Toads
beneath ice. I drink from Ditches. I hobble and
grovel and hail Him for leftover chicken tossed
out backdoor. He sees my work. He is generous.
I am his spectre. His servant. His sentry in
rafters. Sinister survivor, in whiskered
chainmail. I follow Him, pellet gun in hand, in
Moth-thick midnight. I pounce as Barn Door is
unlatched, His little flashbang, upon teeming
mass of Mice. Nights with my showy ribs
stuffed, the blood curdling edges of fur. At noon,
I find Shed, and lick matted patches over my
wounds. There, in immense sawdust silence, I
weep for an hour. I lose an ear and several teeth
defending His borders. I murder for His milk. I
lay death at His feet. He is amused. He places
the sweet bowl before me.

Field

Jade Wurst

the fire was too far, the moon a myth. you wore an echo, followed the ghost who lost his glasses. there must have been seven of us, all young and sure of something.

there is no end to this: you will always trip on the splintered barn floor when they lead you through, on their names, on where you are or when you were. you suspect it was august, your mother's friend's house, a field in michigan.

or a dream, hallucination made dew in the dark. when you ask—catch sunkissed pollen, stitch plush air thick with summer, no one can say.

Atmospheric Build-Up Seeking New Friends

Emily Oberg



Home with the Fairies

Vivian Chiao

You take the train to the forest.

Your father sends you off. He drives you to the train station through the morning fog and weekend traffic, his untouched black coffee cooling in the thermos you bought for his birthday last year. You told him not to make you anything; you've been wide awake since you opened your eyes.

On the way over, the car jolting and shuddering on its crappy suspension, you stare blankly at the passing store-fronts. You arrive and find your platform and weave through the crowd of other bodies, all the while gripping the gilded invitation, thumbnails biting into the stiff white envelope as you rub the letter's creases between your fingers, wearing them down to nothing. The ink should've run off by now, smeared all over your skin like a birthmark. It's crisp when you look back down at it.

Where will it take you, your blood and connections? To the forest, certainly, but what will you find there? You are eighteen, reckless with curiosity.

“Harper.”

You zone back into the conversation. You are standing on the platform. The train is coming. Your father is frowning at you, brow creased.

“Yeah?”

He looks at you, long and hard. He says, like he always says, “Don't fuck with what you can't explain.”

You've never met the people who birthed you. You hug him goodbye, arms tight around his neck, your old polka dot scrunchie pinned between your crossed wrists. You love him desperately, this man who has raised you so tenderly, loved you so well.

(The envelope says, at your parents' request and you know it to be the insult it is.)

You board; you find your seat and put up your backpack in the overhead compartment. The conductor stamps your ticket and you watch out the window as your father fades into a plaid and denim

smear in the distance.

This, you remind yourself, is what it means to grow up.

The train moves over the tracks, its steady rhythm settling you further into your bones with every beat. Out the window, the forest swallows the sky. Leaves swirl. Little woodland animals cry out. The web of power lines rises and falls and fades, finally, into the distance as you pass the reach of the city.

Beyond the train, there is the throbbing pulse of the forest. It's always been in the back of your head but now it is a loud, insistent drumbeat.

What an old story you're enacting now. One goes into the forest to meet the fairies. One goes because their baby brother was snatched, or their dear friend was lost in the woods, or because their mother is dying and they are desperate. If you were a girl, you might be going to save your imprisoned father from the ice prince's castle. If you were a boy, you might be going to spare your parents from starvation, sister's hand clutched in yours, breadcrumbs scattering from your fingertips to mark the way back to the land of mortals.

You are going for yourself. You're not sure what that's supposed to say.

What are you scared of when you're alone, when you're sitting in the shower with the lights off?

Monsters in the dark? Traffic accidents? The casual cruelty of strangers?

What about the Frankenstein construction of you, the seams pulling wrong on your limbs, your skin, your tendons? You are made of bone. That kills you. It rises from underneath your skin and pushes out like a bug trying to crawl from its old shell. Your ribs jut through your skin. Your shoulder blades bulge on either side of your spine, shifting, the foundation of your body twisting in place. It is inescapable.

The day after the envelope comes, you get home from high school and throw your backpack on the bed and get in the shower with

your eyes closed because you can't stand looking at yourself. When you have to look in the mirror, the glass reads: angular limbs and oil slick eyes, features blurred to something chimeric when you look for too long. The glass reads: come on, did you really convince yourself otherwise?

You close your eyes and touch the edges of your ears; they are round. The glass laughs and laughs: oh my poor sweet child.

Your father teases you, gently, about using all the hot water. You smile and smile and turn the water up to scalding anyway.

You get off the train in the middle of the forest. There is no platform, only a mossy clearing with a circle of mushrooms. The train pulls off, a man at the back saluting you briefly from his place at the window. He probably thinks you're human and in over your head. Only one of these things is true.

They say the fae are beautiful and the fae are merciless. You do not know their rules. Fair enough; that is the problem of being a human's child, of eating soft, real food for nearly two decades, of letting your fledgling senses dull to mundanity. This, you don't have to be told. You can feel it, at the throbbing core of you, how something has been muddled too long to be clear now. But it is still a piece of you and it whispers, it wouldn't do to be rude.

You walk past the clearing and the trees open up before you, the forest welcoming you. From nothing appears the dirt trail, covered in moss and fallen leaves. You follow it. Past the birdcages that hang from the canopy, where things you cannot see sing with hollow voices. Past the field of flowers that glow even behind your closed eyelids. Past the groves of trees where ripe fruits glisten on the branches, swinging gently in the breeze like hempen nooses from the gallows. Past the trickling waterfall choked with the corpses of butterflies.

You walk past all the temptations and horrors of the forest and arrive, finally, at the Summer Court.

 Find the rest online at thercreview.com!

Red

Gabriella Dias



A Collection of Haikus as a Substitute for Going to Therapy About It

Erica Meyers

he knows what he did
the night our so-called friendship
waved its last red flag.

my naïveté
didn't notice the first few
'til the rose tint left.

i wish i could say,
"i'm healed! the trauma is gone!"
but no. here i sit.

carrying the weight
of sins bestowed upon me.
how was this my fault?

i know better now,
that i deserve peace from you.
thank you. good riddance.

how to kiss a girl

Maya Simonte

she will invite you out for dinner; it will sneak up on you months into your little one-person game of chicken, long after you've decided that you're okay with never reaching the edge of the cliff. you will remind yourself that this is normal. this is what friends do, obviously. she just wants an excuse to catch up, obviously, and she will not deliberate. she will not forfeit seven days of her attention to searching for a missed signal, or a secret code hidden by snapchat's html. she will not wonder if there's a universe in which inviting a casual friend out to dinner a week in advance is normal and implies no ulterior motive. she will not inspect her reply down to the character before hitting send. she should not need to, and neither should you. but you will.

you know, maybe i should just wait for an alien girl to come down and woo me, you'll decide. or a ghost. i'll rent out an unusually cheap apartment and find that it's haunted by a girl with freckles who died at nineteen. then i wouldn't have to do so much guessing.

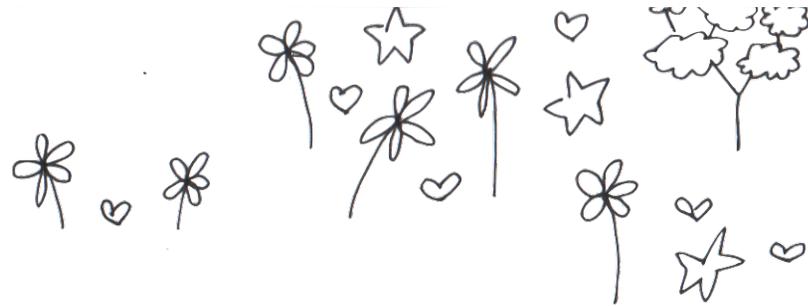
you will realize the next day that the thought is "incredibly lonely" and "verging on pitiful".

they say the rituals are intricate - that for a man to touch another man's

skin, he needs to pretend, to slug his shoulder and ignore the urge to linger. if he wants to hug him he may not use more than one arm. the rules are set to keep exploration at bay. men remain asymptotic. but girls- *girls*. just thinking it turns your frontal cortex to molasses. girls will get entirely too close as if it's nothing. girls will find you in the cafeteria when it's warm at dinnertime and put her arm around you and laugh and you will be so selfish to wonder what that means, *so greedy* to revel in the touch, they tell you the rituals are intricate but her hand rests on your back so *easily*-

you will re-enter the cycle of small talk. if you stopped her at the start of a story you've heard before to tell her that you didn't forget it, that you are or you want to be closer than that, you might escape it. but you will never stop her. you will never reach the edge of the cliff.

what you *will* do, though. you will dream of her. you will sing for her. you will sit with your head in your hands and *groan* for her because the thought of her leaves you immobile. and you will come up with any number of reasons to never, ever tell her. she's taken, she's straight, she has a girlfriend, the rituals are just too intricate and she's too far, you fell in love with her before you even knew her name- and as time goes by you will thank sappho because she never fell in love with you, but today she will take you out to dinner and you will laugh and you will listen and, for heaven's sake, keep your coat on.



Anatomy of a Wave

Alexander Wagner

We will not constrict ourselves
to your definition of movement.

Your fundamental misconception
is a blindness to direction;
you cannot shatter mountains by moving
side to side.

You cannot fathom the distance from coast to coast,
from trench to surface,
the eons we have been here,
but you define the passage of our energy
as the ratio of these things?

Poor little fools;
you do not recognize
the storm beneath our stasis.

We do not need your approval.

*Feels Like Me All at
Once but Not at All* >

Emily Oberg

Mind Mapping

Camilla Lizundia

Cities like beads on a string
When wrinkled each shift along an axis
When pulled apart
They fall like branches

Maps in my mind
And between my fingers
Streets like straws between my lips

Teach me to walk along fences
And drift between road signs
Teach me, teach me



a personal testimony after driving into an active construction site on the freeway

Esther Sun

i know god is real because if there wasn't a divine plan natural selection would've eliminated me in the 8th grade



Gordon Hall Civil War Days, Dexter, Michigan

Sebastien Butler

Along the walk from the parking lot: kettle corn, cotton candy stands, children playing tag. Further up the hill, closer to the hall: bluegrass bands, spectacled seamstresses, firearm demonstrations. A canon announces the start of the old-timey baseball game; blue versus gray, with recently grown mustaches, the sweat silky on pale skin, their cotton uniforms perfectly at ease. Then spitted, steaming pig is brought out to applause, and everyone waits in line for a turn to help hollow out its body. Across town, in the cemetery by the river, where fog lingers long in morning, the men who died at The Wheatfield remain unvisited. Although this event funds their upkeep. As well as the cellars inside, deep within the hall—where slaves were hidden, almost to Canada. Now lined with photographs, quiet, and despite the June sun, quite cold.

< *darksided*

Elena Ramirez-Gorski

Cheese Dust Are Stars

Marlon Rajan

“A chocolate milkshake sounds so good right now. One of those with the piles of whipped cream and a maraschino cherry on top just for looks. I think the bright red is kind of romantic, if that makes sense. It makes me feel like I’m character in Grease wearing a pink skirt who’s putting two straws in a soda-fountain glass to share it with my hot greaser boyfriend. Or girlfriend,” she says. I eat another cheese curl. No one eats these things for flavor — it’s all in the texture. The initial crunch and the nasty chemical melt-away on the tongue; we tend to like things that are artificial. Just like maraschino cherries.

“They’re made with a bunch of different chemicals. It’s kind of nasty,” I say. My back against the hood of her car and her head resting on my stomach; it’s a good night. It smells like summer.

“What, the milkshakes?”

“No dude, the cherries.” When I say ‘dude’, the ‘d’ first comes out as a ‘b’ and I pause and resay it because I was about to call her ‘babe’ and we both know it — it’s happened before. I don’t know if she likes knowing that. I hate that it seems so natural when I do. My face burns. If I wanted, I could brush my hand against her cheek, or run a hand through her hair. I think about it. I do want to, but instead I drag my thumb against her forehead leaving a line of neon-orange cheese-dust behind.

“Ew, what is this?!” she says, wiping it away and sitting up. She’s laughing though, and I am too. That’s good. This is good. I taunt her with cheese-stained fingertips and she slides off the hood and away from me.

“You’re the new king. You know, of where the light touches?” I call after her. I slide down the hood and see her hiding behind the trunk, peering at me with curious eyes. I don’t have a choice but to go closer. She ducks behind the trunk and out of sight.

“Like Simba?” I continue. She’s moving to the other side of the truck and I reach out, chasing her, dragging my fingertips along her upper arm. She pulls away and laughs more. She smiles, I smile. She runs away, I follow. It’s a lack of control.

“You are so gross,” she says with a smile. And she’s that kind of beaming pretty, with eyes like when you look outside and realize that the grass is really, really green. It drains me of all energy, the thin, high-altitude air congealing around my legs and in my lungs. When I round the corner she’s leaning against the passenger-side door, waiting for me to catch up. She takes a good, long look at me; then down at the plaid skirt I’m wearing from the charter school she went to before she transferred. It’s our inside joke. I stick my tongue out at her instead of saying anything; it’s probably orange. She reaches for my hand but I look up at the sky and pretend not to notice, because noticing would mean that I’d have to hold it.

A warm summer wind rustles the trees nearby and drifts across my bare legs. She’s gazing out across the cliff-edge. Our city’s down there, its lights turning that part of the sky a pale orange. I get a chill as a star winks at me from countless miles away.

“My sister says you can’t see stars in New York City,” I say to her. I don’t know what to talk about. Now she’s the one looking at me. She knows what I’m supposed to do and I don’t deliver.

“You can pretend that the airplanes are stars. Then they’ll all be shooting stars, too.”

“They won’t make constellations,” I say. She shrugs.

“Can’t we make our own?” She straightens next to me, and when I look back at her she’s holding my hand and tries to kiss me.

I always have dreams where my teeth feel loose in my gums. I feel them and it itches, it itches so badly, but when I reach inside my mouth to touch them they come out easily, and when I look in the mirror over the bathroom sink I spit them out, first one then five. But it doesn’t hurt. All I feel is overwhelmed. There’s so many bloody teeth, too many, and I’m trying not to swallow them.

I’m not dreaming but I can feel the looseness, the itch, but now I feel it in my brain. My guts press against my lungs urging me to put my cold fingers down my throat. I want to be in love so badly, but I can’t stand the possibility.

She’s talking about milkshakes and maraschino cherries. I eat another cheese curl. The texture remains perplexing, the flavor mediocre.

“Are you listening to me at all?” she asks. I like it when she talks like that, when she rambles on, because it gives me more time to be quiet and I like to be quiet more than I thought I did before I met her. So I won’t start talking now. I’m a doll, my throat stuffed with cotton filling. I drag my thumb against her forehead, leaving a line of cheese-dust behind.

“Ugh, are you serious?” She sits up and wipes off her forehead. I laugh, and she does too but not as much as she did the first time. The first repeat isn’t too bad. I haven’t figured out how to get her really sick of me quite yet.

“You’re the new king. You know, of where the light touches,” The look on her face says she doesn’t get it.

“Simba?” I offer.

“You are so disgusting,” she says with a head shake. She looks at me and I wonder if she sees anything there that I don’t see already: short hair, hand already reaching back into the snack bag. Her green eyes scare me. Mine are brown like dirt, and she is sprouting.

“I want that skirt back,” she says as she slides off the hood. She’s collecting her deposit. That’s good. This is good. Although I’m a little more disappointed than usual. I turn my attention back to the night sky.

“It looks too good on you. I’m jealous,” she continues. It was a good thing that I wasn’t looking at her or I would have given it all up, maybe.

“My sister said you can’t see stars in New York City,” I say to her. I let it go too far. Five tries are too many. Usually they’re angry by now, scrambling to fight so they can lick their wounds, running to their friends to comfort them, wishing that they knew what went wrong. Little do they know it’s never, ever their fault. But she’s not there yet. But when we finish reworking things here, editing and resharing, she will only remember me when thinking about ‘summer’, ‘stars’, and ‘city’.

“You can’t even see them that well here,” she says. Her disappointed tone surprises me, almost stuns me, like a blast of hot air. She’s right; I can’t see them that well. But she’s not disappointed about that. I can see the North Star and the big and little dipper; the rest are

here-and-there sketches of the constellations visible from other places. That’s all I need.

I start again when she reaches for my hand.

I’ve had this exact cheese curl 10 times now. She just won’t give it up — she won’t give me up. I’m doing all I can to get her to refuse me, reject me, but she won’t. She’s still trying to make this work. I’m getting tired, but my back is still against the hood of her car and her head is still resting on my stomach and it’s still a good night. I remember the last good nights. I always will. This one will be no exception.

“Ugh, are you fucking serious?” she sits up and wipes off her forehead for the 18th time. I laugh at her, not with her, because I’m trying my best. She’s hurt but that’s the point. She slides off the hood and that’s the point.

“You’re the new king. You know, of where the light touches.” When I said this line the first time I thought it was pretty clever. I watched *The Lion King* so often growing up that I was surprised that she didn’t know - still doesn’t know - what I’m referencing. Maybe we could have watched it some time. Maybe I’ll watch it with the next one.

The cheese-dust leaves a visible, neon-orange streak on her forehead. Happy 25th Anniversary.

“Simba?” I offer. Finally, she looks a little real-pissed. Not the fake-pissed she pretends to be when I make fun of how bad she is at math or how curly her hair is when she wakes up. I’m actually a little surprised at how pissed she looks, though I shouldn’t be because I’m the one that spent the time to get to know what gets her mad. We’re getting there. We are finally, finally, getting there. It hurts more than it should.

“You are so disgusting,” she says. She takes a good, long look at me. Fear is what is disgusting, gross and gooey and sticky and wet. It’s so thick I wonder if she can see it dripping out of the corners of my mouth, sweating from under my arms and staining my clothes, my hair, the car. I’ve never had one last this long. I’ll have to take a break for a while. It’ll be a long time until I can be with someone like her again.

The stars are just as beautiful as they have been every time.

There's something lonely about them, lonely but unable to escape it, unable to move closer without warping into each other and breaking and exploding. I like to bring all of them here at least once. This time we came three times. I won't make that mistake again. I got a little too close to the water's edge, the maraschino cherries and green eyes pulling me under.

I think this is might be the last one. I hope it is. I've had this cheese curl 133 times. I hate it. My back against the hood of her car and her head resting on my stomach. I don't want her to get up. I don't want her to go but she cannot, by any means, stay. I'm not built for her to stay. It would be impossible. We run through the motions. We've had time to rehearse. This time it'll work — this time we can finally move forwards. This time she'll get in the car and so will I, and she'll drop me off at home so she can tell her friends about the terrible end to what never started. I'll wait a few months, meet someone new, and when it gets to this point, when I can't handle it, I'll do this again. When we actually start to fall for each other, I'll do everything I can to keep us stable-footed.

"My sister said you can't see stars in New York City," I say to her. I'm hopeful. We're almost there.

"You can't even see them that well here," she says. I wait. She's not reaching. I wait more. This has to be it, the lucky 133rd. She takes a deep breath.

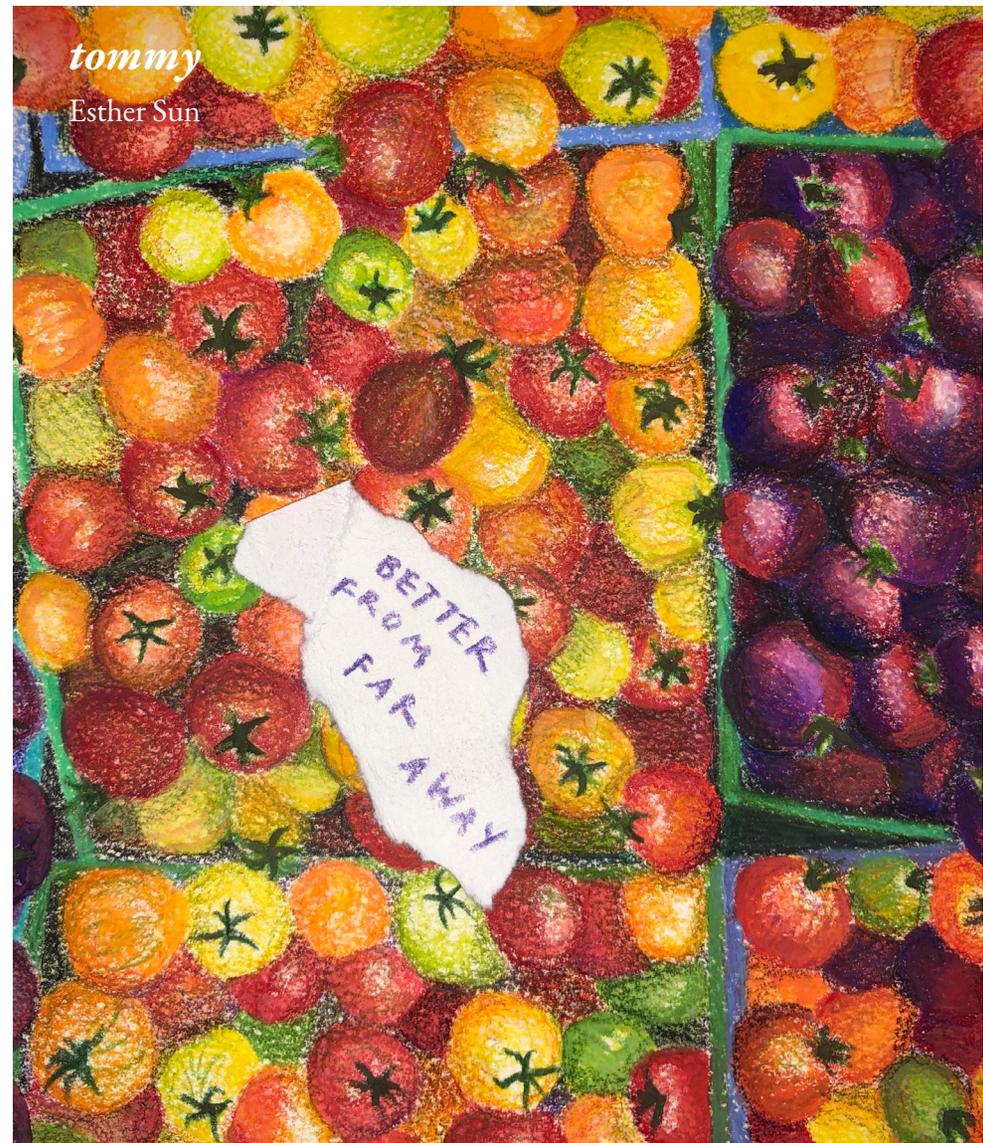
"It's weird, staring at things so far away." I need her to decide to never speak to me again. I need her to know that this could never, ever work, because I am incapable and I am embarrassed by it. Her eyes are closed and she is smiling.

"Sometimes it's nice knowing just how alone we are," I say to her. It's true, and sometimes it's the only thing that gets me through this. The stars are alone, burning alone, dying alone. They don't know that they've created stories or helped sailors return to shore and they never will. They've never had a hug or a kiss or have ever wanted one - and they're okay. Those who need to be with others are in denial: letting others in — doesn't that go against the laws of the universe?

"Is that how you feel? Alone?" She asks. How am I supposed to deter her? I did feel alone, so disgustingly alone that I could make

myself sick over it.

"No one has ever asked me that," I say. Not in all the replays, in all the tangles of my long history of friends and lovers that made up my heart strings. I feel myself choking, suffocating myself. She looks at me and in her green eyes there is no malice, only the promise of a sweet springtime. She says gently, "Let me help." A wind blows more roughly than before and the bag of cheese curls spills into the dirt. When I look down, the crumbs look like constellations.



tommy
Esther Sun

The other night I hung out with an old friend and wrote down every single thing they said to me

Elena Ramirez-Gorski

after Jamie Mortara

hey Elena how are you
I'm good like so good hey
hey Elena I'm going to be twenty soon
can you believe it I'll be eighty before I know it
hey you're so superhero
I did it all by myself are you proud of me I'm proud of me
hey Elena hey Elena
I think I wanna pee in the trash can
I'm going to be twenty soon can you believe it
you're so beautiful I'm so good
you're like a superhero or a bridge or a superhero
one of the two hey
I'm going to call my mom
you're right I won't
hey Elena
I feel like a green bean
like I just feel taller than usual
hey Elena I'll be eighty before I know it
I'm so good are you proud of me
I regret everything
hey Elena
hey Elena
I love you

Elevate

Alexander Wagner

It takes a change of elevation
to recognize the space between
different bodies of a thing.

How the clouds are just rivers
operating in three dimensions,
breaking against the rapids of mountains,
always white water
tangling itself in
a web of red hair.

and the spark of lichen
comes to rest on wet stone,
spreads across what could
be marble,

if seen from an angle other
than kindling consumed by green ember,
and fire is just another name for
water working in antigravity,
flowing upward off of wood,
sending droplets of itself
into the sky.



chill

smitty smith

the dry chalk white of bone
streaking stale fingernails on the outside windows, the pacing
back and forth and back, watching
the breath get caught in the throat contorted between legs

trying to hide fleshy eyes from a hollowed out skull

moments like this, you think about your life and whether or not
you lead a good one before it all went south
and how did it all go south, you think maybe
it was the gap-toothed girl you bullied in kindergarten because every-
one was doing it
or the slight of hand you learned to snatch candy from the store



but whatever it was, this is the moment you know
it all came back around to get you
and here you are, in some cabin in the woods
not believing it's real, to hold on to the one last pure thing:
hope---

can't you feel it?
the wandering eyes lingering, hovering over and watching
you sleep at night

blood turns to ice and pulls to a stop in the veins, cramps
up muscles and make clicks in the jaw, clicks
in each blink

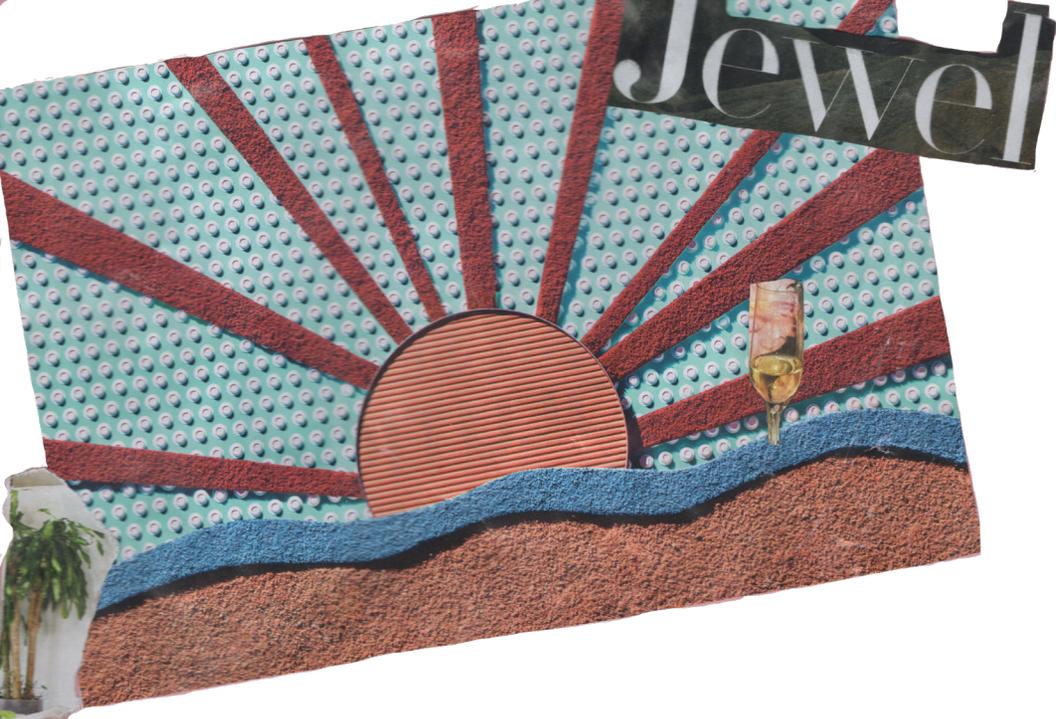
and underneath the skin it's all dried up now

written thick, a jagged etched:
"happy halloween"

chill

Hunchback of Irazú

Hannah Brauer



The worst thing I've ever done

Elena Ramirez-Gorski

Mr. Johnson taught classes like Personal Finance and Career Readiness. Sweater sleeves always hanging to his fingertips. Dripping with matrimony and monotony. A passive aggressive and sagging Edward Norton. So the night of our senior prank, barricaded by desks and piles of silly string, on a whiteboard full of *seniors rule* and *Mr. Johnson sucks*, I wrote: Mr. Johnson is a cold bowl of oatmeal. The next morning Johnson laughed, said “okay guys, you got me good.” And while cleaning up, I noticed the whiteboard: a guilty blue smudge, the remains of my words. I still think about how his face must have dropped. How he must have smeared it away with frantic bare hands, the words disintegrating into navy blue flakes, probably wiped off on his khakis. I still imagine him holding his framed, color-coordinated family portrait/standing in front of his closet full of beige/staring past the evening news, wondering how his life became so cold, so lumpy, so bland.

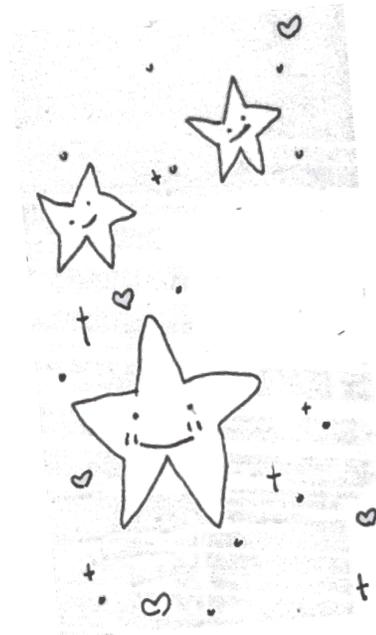
Light We Took

Emilia Ferrante

Our shadow is not a constant thing,
rather it changes based on
who what where
we are.
It's different when we're dancing
with our own animal
our own negative space.
A little bit of it loses shape
in the twilight mist.
Sometimes it changes based on
when we're in the rain, and
becomes us
when we are light we took

we depraved, we far from homers,
we beloved, we travelers
we grow longer

It is dark and we dance and we are
darkness, lit from behind



you're a vagrant, please don't ever go away

Jena Vallina

I thought you looked like a mermaid,
when I first saw you, and I fell in love
with your saltwater mouth, speaking in tongues I
somehow understood; like how I never learned the words
to happy birthday but I taste strawberry frosting and blow
the candles all the same (I still sing you in my sleep some-times);
I listened to you long ago,
don't accuse me of forgetting your tune;
I've composed orchestras to the thought of you.
I do not think there is a place in the world where
I could go that you have not already been; and I wonder—
how many nights must you sleep on my doorsteps until I can
no longer deny that you live there?



Clemency

Alyssa Moore

In an open field, where the wind blew ashes into the sky, there stood a Door. It wasn't a Door that warranted staring at: no intricate designs or bright colors, or signs warning that you ought to stay out, or that you ought to come in. It was the sort of door you could only see out of the corner of your eye, if you weren't really looking. Or, even if you were.

The door seemed to lead nowhere, though you and I know far better. Someone else also knew better, and he stood, hands at his sides and his weight slightly more on his left foot, a few paces in front of it. The boy was shorter than most his age, his dark hair hanging just above his shoulders. In one hand, he held a musty tome, discolored with age and sickly sweet with the scent of souls. In his other, he gripped a key.

He stepped forward, let his hand guide him to what he could barely see, and slid the key in. The lock didn't click when it was turned, nor did the hinges creak with disuse as the door slid slowly inward.

On the other side was a kitchen. Sunlight, peeking through a tree outside, dappled the far wall. A stove and sink lined up next to each other below the window, and cabinets dotted either side. In the middle of the room stood a granite island, and next to it, a woman blinked back tears as she chopped her onions. Sound filtered in; the knife tapped the cutting board with a steady beat. The boy hesitated in the Doorway, the frame of the Door from which he had come meshing with that of the entrance to the kitchen. The woman looked up.

"Anthony, welcome home," she said, wiping her eyes on her sleeve. "Would you wash the carrots, please? They're next to the sink."

Anthony shuffled over, setting the book on the counter with a thud, placing the key gently on top. He rolled up his sleeves and pulled the carrots out of their plastic bag. For a moment, he recoiled, the carrots' usual orange overtaken by grays and browns, punctured by the occasional white of a maggot—the smell was unbearable—but in a blink, the rot was gone, and the only scent left in the air was sweet. Clementia's advice echoed in his head—things aren't quite right, in

those worlds. Don't let it bother you.

He turned on the sink, watching the woman out of the corner of his eye.

He didn't know this woman. They couldn't be related—her short hair was too light, her jawline too sharp. She rubbed her eyes again—with her hand this time—and the boy thought, she's going to regret that. He turned back to the carrots. The sink water had been running off black, but now it cleared to a more natural color. He set the wet carrots on a paper towel on the island.

"Thanks," the woman said, and her voice cracked. Anthony nodded. His gaze strayed towards the window, and he shivered—there was an emptiness there, a crack, once again that corner-of-your-eye feeling, both drawing his eyes towards it and pushing them away. The woman saw him looking, and smiled. "Lunch will be ready in ten minutes. Why don't you go outside and play until then?" She wrinkled her nose. "Oh, something smells in here, doesn't it?"

"It's my book," Anthony told her, grabbing it off the counter. The key, he slipped into his pocket.

"Oh," she repeated. Anthony pulled back the screen door and stepped outside, oblivious to the tear that slid down her cheek when he shut it behind him.

He sat down on the steps. Setting the book in his lap, he ran a hand over the cover, then opened it, flipping through. Faces stared up at him on each page, children both younger and older than him, each wearing the same sad expression. He stopped flipping, and the book lay open in his palm to a particular page, upon which another boy stared up at him, with pale, brown hair and that same sharp jaw, the bones in his face protruding outwards just enough that you could imagine the shape of his skull. Underneath the picture, a name scribbled itself in blank ink: Anthony.

The boy ripped out the page, and the same sickly sweet smell filled the air, suddenly overbearing. He rubbed his forehead, feeling a headache building. The scent lingered as he closed the book, rolled up the piece of paper, and placed it among the shriveled-up cherry tomatoes growing in pots along the windowsill. The scroll glowed, and after a brief moment, dissolved into light. The plants seemed to stand up straighter, their colors brightening.

Inside, the woman let a final tear fall. The next breath she took was no longer hitched by stifled sobs.

When the boy turned around, the emptiness had faded, a Door standing in its place, as unassuming as if it had always been there, waiting. The boy walked up to it, pulled the key out of his pocket, and stuck it into the keyhole. It turned, silently, and the Door opened. Once again, he stepped into its light.

They'd all come to, about a month ago, in an open field. Twenty-one children, lost and confused; they couldn't remember their names. After a time, they came up with their own. 'Owen' had found his name in a book, liked the way it sounded. He repeated it to himself for a whole day, making sure it was just right. 'Dragonslayer' had always imagined that one day, she would take on such a title. What better time than now?

The boy hadn't taken a name. None had really seemed to fit. Now, however, he seemed to be taking on many different names, as he stepped through the door and felt a surge of people around him; he stumbled forward, jostled by the crowd, until he finally managed to separate himself enough to see that he was in a train station. The vaulted ceiling arched far above him, crystal clear and letting in sunlight; behind him, a train roared back to life, the crowds of people mingling away. The air smelled of a terrible mixture of sweat, metal, fried food, and too much perfume, and it mixed horribly with the book's scent still lingering in his nose.

Running footsteps echoed behind him, just barely noticeable over the chatter of the crowd, and the boy was given only a second's warning before unfamiliar arms wrapped around him.

"Jessica! Oh, sweetheart!" The voice sobbed into his shoulder, and the boy didn't pull away; he simply waited for the moment to pass. The figure stepped back, arms no longer wrapped around him, but rather on his shoulders, and he looked up into the face of another woman—this one larger, but less broken, tears running down her beaming face, red curls pinned behind her head. "You're here," she breathed. "You're okay." Jessica tried to smile back, and the woman seemed to accept it.

Another set of footsteps heavy, sure—and a man in an impos-

ing suit came up behind the woman, looking down at Jessica. His face was stoic, his eyes nonetheless lined with red. As the woman stepped back, it was his hand that replaced hers, on one shoulder. He squeezed it—and then he, too, bent down and enveloped Jessica in a tight hug.

“I’m sorry,” he whispered, and Jessica felt a lump form in her throat, too, the weight and longing in his words startlingly familiar. The man’s grip grew harsher, and it was like claws were digging into her back, gouging, bleeding, she could feel the wetness soaking into her shirt—then the tension released, the feeling faded, and the man, too, stepped back.

Silence hung. The pain ebbed. Jessica stared up at her parents, arms hanging at her sides, unsure of what to say. She didn’t know these people.

The man cleared his throat. “Well.” He turned to the woman, whose gaze had yet to stray from Jessica, and whose beaming smile wavered. “Shall we?”

She nodded, and reached out a hand—tentatively, Jessica took it, clutching the book to her side. She knew she ought not stay for much longer, and it wasn’t long before they were enveloped by the crowd. Amid the distraction, Jessica was able to slip her hand out of her grasp. Not looking back to see if the woman had noticed, she let the crowd jostle her away.

It wasn’t long until the boy finally felt the tug of that emptiness, the space where the Door should be. He turned down an empty terminal, the track abandoned, the brick wall painted with a dove, soaring elegantly towards the clouds. He glanced around, making sure the place was empty, before he opened the book.

He flipped pages until he landed on a girl, all red hair and pigtails and a shy smile. Oh. He hadn’t known all twenty-one children that well, but he’d known her. She’d chosen the name Avis, and flinched when people touched her. He remembered the last time he’d seen her, sooty, empty, face turned upward as the flames licked through her dress. The sky, too, had been filled with smoke.

He tore the page quickly, this time, unable to resist wrinkling his nose. He didn’t want to look anymore. He wondered why souls smelled so disgustingly sweet. His gaze lingered on the graffiti, and gently, he rolled up her page and set it on the ground below it, and

watched as the paper folded itself up in the dove’s image. It took flight, striving for the sky, dissolving into pinpricks of light.

He breathed a sigh as he turned and approached the Door, waiting calmly at the edge of the platform as if it had been there all along. As he inserted the key and pulled it open, he paused and turned around; the woman stood at the other end of the platform, where he had entered the terminal a few minutes before, watching. The boy raised his hand in a wave, and after a moment’s hesitation, she did as well.

As he stepped through the Door, her lowering arm was the last thing he saw.

He and Clementia had been the only two left, in the end—although, something about her was foreign, and he could have sworn she hadn’t been there when they’d all shown up. But it had been just them and the flames, and the blood, and the shadows, and as the acrid smell rose from the burnt field, he was only grateful for the company.

He likened Clementia to the doors. She had that same corner-of-your-eye feel about her, and if asked to describe her appearance, he would find himself at a loss for words. She was without details, without colors or shapes or sizes. It had been she who’d gifted him the key, who’d helped him collect the twenty burnt souls into the blank pages of the musty tome.

She’d led him to the Door, and asked him to be her messenger. To bring forgiveness and relief to the people he met beyond it. She said that perhaps, if he did, he would be able to go home.

He sometimes wondered if these people deserved forgiveness.

After the red-haired woman, there had been a man, hunched over his desk. He’d barely looked up when the boy entered, and he barely noticed when the boy left. Ink spilled over the papers in front of him, rendering the text illegible.

There’d been two women in a kitchen, but instead of chopping onions, they were cutting up a turkey. The meat was cooked, but the boy could swear he saw blood reflected in the knife’s blade. They invited him to take a look, and promised they would have a feast come dinnertime.

Pages ripped, and each time, he became more and more used to

that sickly scent. It traveled up his nose and settled there, always there, reminding him.

Eighteen, nineteen—

He stepped out into what appeared to be a small church; wooden, with a steepled roof, and rows of benches occupied by scatterings of bodies, all hunched over and praying. The murmur of their voices rose and fell, and the boy caught spatterings of praise and worship, requests and barter.

Experience drew the boy to one particular man, a few rows from the back, graying head no longer covered by the hat clutched in his hands. The boy slid into the seat beside him.

“Clemency,” the man whispered. “Grant me clemency.” He looked up at the boy, and his eyes were empty pits, scarred and haunted. The man hugged the boy as if he had nothing left to lose. The boy extracted himself from the man’s desperate arms.

He retreated to the back of the church, letting the anguished voices fade to the background as he opened the book. There was only one person it could be, the other boy’s dark eyes staring out from the page, the corner of his mouth pulled down into a frown. No name appeared at the bottom; he hadn’t received one. It happened, sometimes. He always felt bad, like he couldn’t lay them properly to rest.

But that boy had chosen the name Owen, and the boy repeated that name to himself, allowing himself to remember Owen’s distance, his sadness, as he crept back up to the man and slipped the paper into the prayer book sitting beside him. The book glowed, and the man sighed, closing his eyes, resting his forehead on his shaking hands. The boy thought he might have heard a whispered thank-you as he shut the door to the church behind him. But all he could focus on was the anticipation.

The Door was there, a few paces ahead, and as he gripped the book to his chest he was struck with the knowledge that there was only one page left. It had been blank, but as he gave in to temptation and opened the book again, his own face stared back at him. Behind that door was his family.

He couldn’t remember much about them, other than the fact that he loved them, and, he assumed, they him. The field had wiped

away more and more as time passed—first, a name, then a whole identity. He could be anyone. He had been so many people, these last few hours— perhaps days. Now, he would be able to memorize every line of his mother’s face, hear her soothing voice. That was how he imagined it. There had been something wrong, something off, with every person he’d met in these other worlds—the parents of all twenty children—but he had survived, while they had not. Surely, that meant something. Surely, he had something worth going back to.

The key seemed heavier than usual, but when he inserted it in the keyhole, it remained as silent as ever.

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Big Man

Elizabeth Schriener

You donned air pods and a Canada Goose jacket
I guess you were ready to start up a racquet
Your wealth and goods were not the problem, you see
But rather the way you treat people like me

Did it make you feel good, Mister Big Man?
When you whispered to the guys in your clan
You spoke softly enough to not draw attention
But loudly enough for me to hear the mention

Where is your dignity? you asked
Your arrogance and scorn unmasked
Why would anyone work in a fast food place?
Oh, if you saw the expression on my face

At the table you left a huge mess
We should really clean up, one guy stressed
That's their job, you snarkily replied
Your words insulting and utterly snide

You looked at me with disgust and laughed with your friends
I wondered why you couldn't have just made amends
I guess you believed that you were superior
But the working class is far from inferior

That was the first of many meets
Whether in class or on the streets
Did you ever stop and truly see me, Big Man?
Not for what I can't do, but for who I am?

I sat behind you and your friends in class one day
Sometimes I still can't believe the things that you say
You boasted about the answers you stole

Had paid for and copied by the whole

You talked about your experiences in school
Explained how your parents had raised no fool
For they provided you with the best tutors and classes
Connections and opportunities by the masses

When you bragged about all your A's and test scores
Did you realize how your resources opened doors?
I'm not neglecting your accomplishments, Big Man
But some other students just can't have the same plan

I saw you again at my second job
This time without your buddies or friend mob
You came to pick up a package or two
But your orders were far from just a few

In the following weeks you ordered countless things
Hundreds of luxuries fit for dozens of kings
So many goods you'd forget what you purchased
And yet your impatience still frequently surfaced

Your suit was more important than her book
You would groan at the line with just one look
You wanted your name written across banners
But Daddy's money couldn't buy you manners

You admonished your peers for working
While you would judge them ever lurking
Nights where you got too drunk and blacked out
Featured students at jobs out and about

College admittance is one battle in the war of a lifetime
Believe it or not Mister Big Man, some students live dime by dime
With lower graduation rates and financial strain
For some students, studying is not the only pain

There are barriers for your peers of low-income
But to you those students will always be scum
All I am asking is a simple plea
Listen to me, hear me, can you see me?

There are plenty of privileged people, Big Man
The problem is not just that, do you understand?
It's the entitlement, the sense of supremacy
The contempt and ignorance that become your legacy

I'm glad your parents support your education, Big Man
But the reality is that not everyone's parents can
It's not a bad thing to be privileged or "the best"
But it can be when others are actively oppressed

As such, this is my last message for you
Fix your attitude, be aware, be true
Treat others with kindness and use your influence
To stop the poverty cycle's continuance

human nature >

Hannah Myers



Crossroads

Aviva Satz-Kojis

At the intersection, the place where one beginning starts another,
where movement becomes still and searching becomes meaning.

This is where the rain joins the river.

It's the moment in which impossible slips into indescribable.

I stand, two feet, on the line between beautiful and new.

A stalemate.

La Marcha de la Diversidad

Hannah Brauer

No one ever wins in a place like this.

No one ever loses either, because no one ever is.

An unexpected find is nothing less than a gift,

a gift is no less than a promise,

the clouds did not promise me anything, regardless,

I'll make a wish.

I have been to the other side of the mountain,

the sun shines there too. Not everything needs

to be climbed, some things are worth walking around.

The only thing sitting between me and forever, is now.

I don't think I can wait that long.



Khaled Watches

Hayla Alawi

(A screenplay)

NOTE: All dialogue and writing is in Arabic with English subtitles.

INT. DINING ROOM - DAY (1979)

The dining room is decorated with a china cabinet, family pictures, and Arabic religious and superstitious charms and symbols. The home is clean and cozy.

A small group of YOUNG MEN SIT around a table. They SING and CLAP along to happy birthday for MUSTAFA (21), who's dressed better than everyone else. ZAKIYAH (48, stout, aged face) carries a dish of painstakingly-arranged trifle to the table.

After they finish singing, Zakiyah serves up plates of trifle. The men dig in while Zakiyah fusses around them.

🖱️ Find the rest at thercreview.com!

september 16th, 2019

Gabriella Dias

You're told your story has to be reliable. That your word, your experience, your very being has to be double checked. "Would you mind saying the whole story again? We don't want to make a situation out of nothing. We're just double-checking," they say, probably not for the first it seems. Your hands twitch, tracing the fine lines of plaid on your uniform. It seems your head might explode if you're stuck in this stuffy office any longer. The stiff collar of your oxford rubbed against your neck. "One more word of their mouth and I'm out," you think, but you don't mean it. You want to kick and scream and shout to the universe but on the outside, your lips tighten into an attempt of a smile, an echo of a human. A human telling your truth just one more time.



Sympathy Flowers (Excerpt)

Maya Simonte

There's a note still stuck to the coffee table: a bright orange post-it, with a message scribbled on in black marker. *MORNING WEATHER SAID THUNDERSTORMS TODAY*. It sticks out against the mess of white papers. Wesley tries to ignore it, but his eyes keep drifting back.

"I called the home this morning, the one on Sixth and Pine." The voice is coming from his left - another reason to turn away that his sluggish mind and body choose to ignore. At this rate, he may very well go cross-eyed from staring. His limbs may sink into the couch. "The same place we held Pete's mother's funeral two years ago- you were there, weren't you?"

It takes Wesley a few seconds to realize the question is directed at him. "Yeah," he tells the note. When he realizes it's true, he finally snaps his head up. His body follows it into perfectly straight sitting posture. "I was there, yeah. Nice place."

Miriam doesn't seem to notice the delay, too busy digging in her purse to register eye contact.

Three more notes dot the books and picture frames on the shelf above her. *we should put a family photo in here for when my mom comes*, one of them teases him.

He slouches back down.

"They have availability tomorrow, so we'll be acting on short notice. Most of the family has sent their condolences already, so there shouldn't be any issues with bringing them in...I'm afraid there's no time for paper invitations, though. What a shame. Emails just feel so impersonal." With a click of her tongue, she scribbles something in one of the three notebooks she's produced since turning up at his door five minutes ago. Wesley doesn't often see her without an ear-to-ear smile and an air of hospitality. She's concentrated. He can't help but feel she's pointing it in the wrong direction.

"The guest list is a bit long, so feel free to look it over tonight and tell me if you have any thoughts," Miriam says, holding a laminated list out like a gift.

As he opens his mouth to thank her, Wesley feels a yawn coming on. He ignores the urge, forms the shape of the words and prepares to speak - but it escapes, long and loud as if seeking retaliation.

Her hands freeze. "I really hope I didn't wake you."

"No, no worries, I was up," Wesley says, and it's a lie, but it's the kind of lie that's easier to say and easier to hear. The morning rasp in his voice is undeniable. The clock on the wall reads 3:17.

For a split second, a look somewhere between analytical and pitying flashes in her eyes. Lips pursed, she lifts the eyeglasses hanging around her neck to the bridge of her nose - as soon as they make contact, she breaks out into a well-rehearsed motherly smile. "Onto the reception, then."

Wearily, Wesley turns his attention back to the coffee table. In front of his knees lies a pile of printouts that he knows were meant for him; he knows they're highlighted in three different pastel shades to make them easier to parse, but the text floats around, far too distorted to read. It seems like the only words he can read are on the notes, the thick black scrawl of Victor's handwriting.

Thunderstorms. It didn't even rain yesterday. That note has nothing left to give.

"I got a call from the mortician this morning and she seems to be having some trouble with the reconstruction. At this point, she's suggesting a closed casket, but if I can help it, I really do think open is the way to go..."

Wesley watches Miriam's mouth move, but doesn't hear a word. He studies her face, the smooth complexion - would any other mother find it in her to put on a full face of makeup on a day like this? There's not a single wrinkle in her clothes. The brown leather of her portfolio matches her shoes. She speaks with a detached sort of meticulousness; she smiles ever so slightly as her hands flick through the stack, as if she's happier letting the planning act as a moat between her and grief.

Wesley glances down at his own boxers and mismatched socks, and feels a little bit worse.

"...in that case, I've been tossing around ideas for the burial outfit. I was thinking that suit he wore to the banquet last year. It'd look excellent with some nice loafers."

That reels him back in. Confused, he frowns. "Victor never wore loafers."

"Yes, well, I bought him a pair thinking he might start. I'll just dig them out of the closet." She dismisses it with a wave of her hand.

"But if he never wanted to wear them, why now?"

Miriam smile goes tight-lipped. "It's a matter of appearances."

Never does Wesley feel as much like a child in trouble as he does around her, not even with his own mother. He doesn't understand how Victor opposed her so easily. "I don't think that's going to be the most important thing tomorrow," he mumbles.

"It would be nice if the world worked that way, wouldn't it," she laughs, her expression hard and unchanging.

Even after all these years, Wesley has spent little time alone with Miriam. Wesley can't help but wonder what brought her here. Of course, he's happy she thought to ask for his opinions, but it feels like she's already made up her mind. Besides, even though he's never been to a funeral before, he can't imagine it's expected that the plans will be run by the boyfriend of the de- the, the boyfriend of the decea...the deceas-

"As for catering, I really wasn't planning on anything special, but the Italian bakery downtown does short-notice orders, so I figured we might as well see what they can do. He always liked those cannolis with the crushed pistachios..."

Miriam sent them home from Thanksgiving with a box of those last year. Victor took one bite of one, lost in a conversation happening between the fridge and the kitchen table, before spitting it into the trash. *Who made it legal to put ricotta in desserts*, he'd said, or *I've already had enough of these to last me the rest of my life*. The memory squirms in his mind.

"...does that sound good to you?"

"Uh, great, yeah." Wesley runs his hands through his hair, and a glimpse of orange catches his eye - another note, this one stuck to the remote. *WERE OUT OF AA BATTERIES*. The idea of touching the remote again makes Wesley's hand recoil; knowing that his role in all of this has ended, that he's no longer a part of Victor's family isn't even the hardest part. The hardest part was that he had to hear it from the news. *Local firefighter Victor Hayes dies a hero*, ringing across the living

room as he did the dishes. So impersonal that his first reaction was to check his phone for some sort of final contact. Anything would have sufficed - *a goodbye, a don't forget me, an I loved you so much*. Maybe even an *I'm okay*.

Of course, there was none. The fact that Vic's last text to him had been *if you put vegetables in the pizza sauce tonight I'll spit it back in your face* didn't help.

"That takes care of the reception, then. Let's see..."

Miriam's voice and the planning and the papers fade away as the clock spins back twelve hours, to when Wesley sat in the same place last night, eyes glued forward. The memories are hazy - he's not sure how he got from the kitchen to the couch, or how he remembered to turn off the stove, or how many hours he spent sitting there, looping the few minutes of news coverage over and over until it sounded like static. The timeline is blurred. Tragedy tends to do that. What he does recall, in scathing detail, are the images. A charming wood-frame two-story, now a horror scene with flames licking up its walls. The family, escaping one-by-one from the smoke, shaken but safe with the firemen guiding them towards the truck. A reporter, declaring that no lives are in danger, stops mid-sentence when the mother shrieks - *my son, where's my son, he's still inside*. When the squad came by the apartment later that night they said they could've sworn on their own graves that Victor would make it out okay. That he always seemed so in control, nobody doubted it for a second when he told them not to worry, that he'd be right behind them, just taking a quick look upstairs, he'll be out in ten seconds. But in the footage, Victor never comes out. What returns from the fire minutes later is a child carried by a sack of char and smoke, coughing and hacking like there's no air left inside of him. He falls before the camera can even catch a shot of his face, a corpse without proof of an identity.

And as if it's an honor worth his life, the anchor calls him a hero. Somewhere around his fortieth time hearing it, Wesley turned off the TV.

"Wesley?"

His head snaps around. "Huh?"

"If you'd like your space, I can take care of the rest, really," Miriam says, hands perched over a pile of papers. Wesley blinks. For a

second, he swears he sees Victor sitting there. She looks so much like her son.

His eyes start to burn. He squeezes them shut and shakes his head. “No, you’ve already done so much, I better...you know, uh...what were you saying?”

“The flowers,” she adds, after a pause. Her tone is cautious - not very convincing, is he. “My standard funeral spread is all white roses and lilies and Queen Anne’s lace - the staples. All about purity and innocence and the soul being wiped clean...”

The thought of a neat white funeral makes his shoulders tense up. Wesley can convince himself catering and suits and shoes don’t matter, just barely, but if he’ll be surrounded tomorrow by the suggestion that Victor should be remembered as pure and innocent and unable to speak out against it. Miriam looks up from her notes, and the second their eyes meet, his begin to well.

She softens. “But that doesn’t sound very much like Victor, now, does it.”

Wesley shakes his head. His voice comes out hoarse. “No.”

“Then I’ll whip up something new.” Her portfolio closes with a conclusive click. “There are plenty of options back at the shop, it won’t be any trouble. For now, I want you to try and relax. You look like you could stand to get your mind off things for a while.”

He winces. “Is it that bad?”

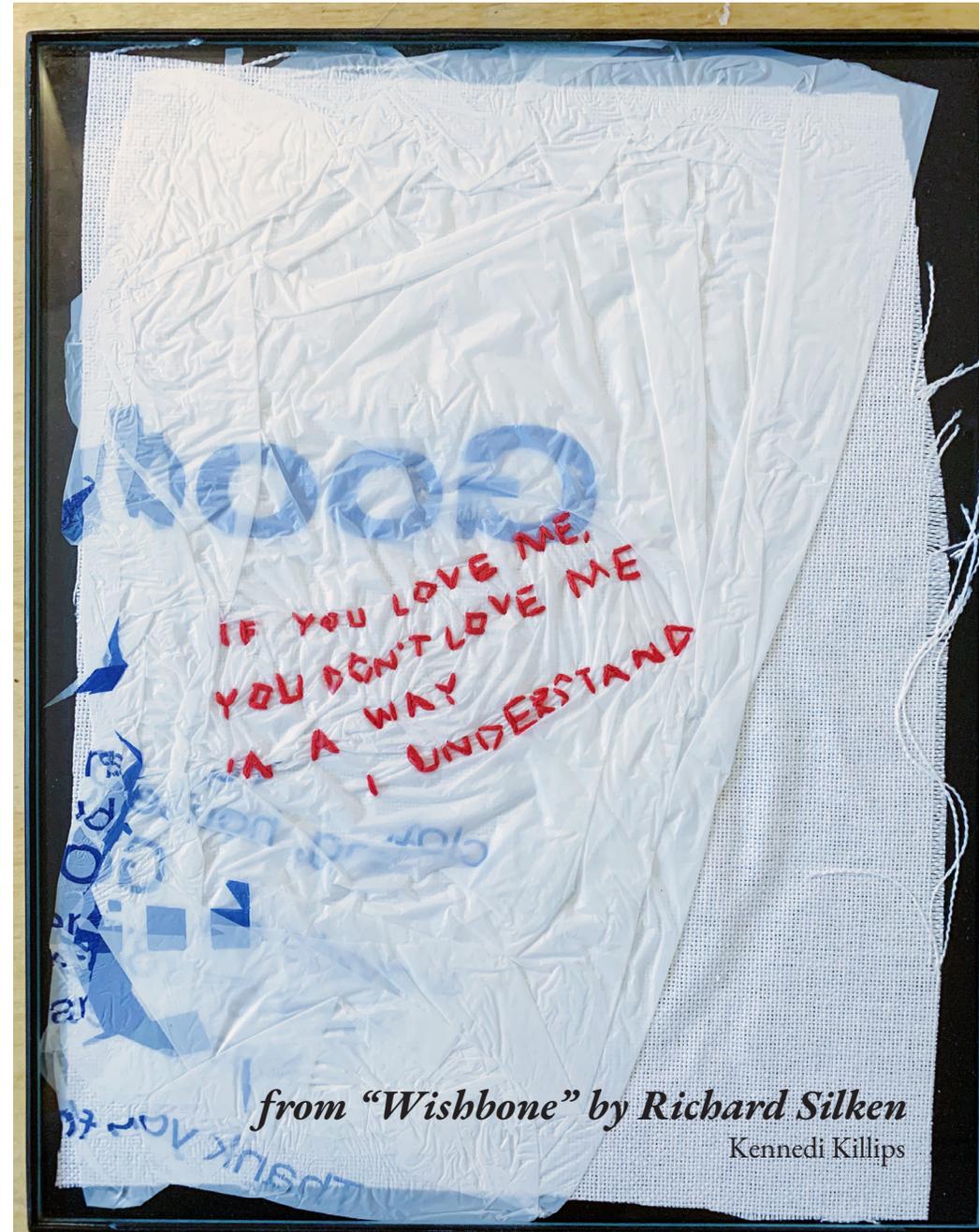
Standing up from the chair, Miriam looks down at him with sympathy. “It hasn’t even been a day, Wesley. You’re allowed to be hurting,” she says, assuring and assessing at the same time.

He rubs at his puffy eyes and mumbles out a thanks. Without a word, Miriam makes her way to the door. She slides on her shoes, pulls a cardigan off the coatrack and drapes it over her arm. “See you tomorrow,” she says, and then he’s all alone.

For a while, Wesley doesn’t know what to do. If Miriam hadn’t come, he would still be in bed right now, not asleep but not awake and certainly not answering any of the calls that jolt him awake every ten minutes. He doesn’t have it in him to think about how much worry he must be causing them. He doesn’t have it in him to think at all. What could be minutes or hours pass, and Wesley doesn’t move, doesn’t speak. Eventually, his eyes drift back to the remote on the now-empty

coffee table.

Wesley stares at the note on the back until he finally gives in and turns on the TV.



from “Wishbone” by Richard Silken

Kennedi Killips

Canary

Sebastien Butler

my life is like gas flames licking about lamps
atop their heads. i am easily snuffed out. the
amber sighing across their faces is the only light
i ever see. it is dark when we enter the tunnel, it
is dark when we return. it is always the youngest
who takes me down, frail and long since turned
black like me. my cage swings wildly with each
of his steps, sweat streaks down his wrist,
soaking my head. he is careful to set me close to
the point men but out of the way of the sparks.
once a shift, the foreman yells and they drop
their tools to crowd over me in conversation. i
catch the crumbs that fall from the meat pastries
they keep warm beneath their lamps. their
laughter echoes across grooves in the rock. soon
they hush and return to work, glancing subtly at
me whenever they wipe their brows so as the
others don't notice. but i would never reveal
their little secrets. the way they look at me as if i
were their child. my cage would just about
fit a child. here, i sing to sooth them, for my
breath means their breath, which means their
newborn's breath against their cheek one more
night. i am the prophet for how it will all end.
lives nested within lives, like the treasure buried
in the rock, which will burn and burn until it
sputters and vanishes, as the air thickens into a
vice.

A Beautiful Body

Elizabeth Schriener

Your body reminds me of one of those statues, like that of a Greek goddess
Your words invoked tears and a gentle smile
I don't know if you knew it then or even now
But that's one of the best things someone has said to me
I made a promise to love myself
When I look at my body in the mirror
With its curves and flab and indented ridges of stretched skin
My frown dissipates

My body is like that of a Greek goddess



Living with a Ghost

Erica Meyers

Coffee grounds on the counter
Are how I know you exist
Along with notes on the fridge
And hair in the sink
Your headphones left on the couch
And a new roll of paper towel
The dishwasher run but not yet emptied
Our growing pile of newspapers on the table
A fresh bag in the trash can
And the light spilling gently from under your door



Every Woman is a Wolf

Jena Vallina

I never knew where I was going, first time I stood on train tracks
winter-rain, I imagine Cain never knew how easily
people tumbled over, crumbled in half, we are not
made of bones so much as the jelly filling of a cake
I've been cut and bit into more times than I
dare recall to you now, but I will not deny:
I've fallen in love with the taste of my own blood. Call me
vampire, I'll walk in any graveyard, under morning sunlight,
laughing,
singing a merry song, there's no death in me and there never has
been.

I was a child and thought I'd always be, when I stood on the
train tracks
looked out, thought I saw heaven and you were there too; beck-
oning, did

I mention it was raining? There's no difference
between ghosts and untouchable people. But I leave crimson
footprints
in the snow; follow them further, to the heart of a deer. Head-
lights mistake
so easily for the eyes of god; and who are we not to follow any
holy lights—

bleeding my lips with pomegranates, bare teeth
in the mirror glass; look how I've come alive, draped in white,
remarked upon, hair come undone I run.

< *capitalist depression*

Hannah Myers

At the party, my anxiety tugs on my pant leg

Elena Ramirez-Gorski

I look down and see her all red-faced and snot-sleeved and squirming and stomping and threatening a storm so I scoop her up and tell my friends it's getting late but we should do this again soon and after she howls and thrashes the whole way home and after I wash her trembling back and brush her hair I lull her to sleep but when I am lying in bed she climbs in and curls up next to me and won't lay still and in the faint light of the lamp she makes shadow puppets of a snarling hound and a crocodile's snapping jaw.

All night long, with the hands I gave her, she makes monsters from thin air.

The Bouquet

Marlon Rajan

I take the train. It's the kind that's meant for long-term travel, with cushioned seats and long, cabin-wide windows. I haven't taken the train in a long time.

They're not hard to spot, the regulars: business men who know their seat, take out their devices, and start typing. Two friends share headphones. A few people read. A scan of the cabin and it's obvious people are not here to talk. Not one looks up. There's an empty row. I take it. Bag goes under and coat goes up. I could leave it all in the adjacent seat, but while I am not looking for company, I don't want to be the guy a few rows back who left his things next to him as if his expensive watch and messy Subway sandwich aren't enough of a deterrence. Someone can sit next to me; I wouldn't mind it. It's possible to have a good time alone even sitting next to someone else. I settle in as the last of this station's passengers find their seats.

It's going to be a long ride. A woman and her baby sit a few rows ahead of me. Someone has a suitcase, large and oddly shaped, and they struggle to fit it into the reasonably-sized overhead shelving. Of course I'm curious - I'm sure anyone would be. But there are unspoken rules to abide here: we chose not to go through security screenings and check bags because we don't want anyone knowing what we're carrying on.

The train pulls away from the station. We're going somewhere. It doesn't matter to me too much where that is. Everywhere is somewhere to someone. People live there, work there: it always surprises me how many lives I won't get a chance to live while I'm here. I could be on my way to work or school right now. This could be my commute. Or I could be on my way to visit an old friend. I could even be on my way home. Instead, I have never been to where we're going. But it all looks the same, after a while. Though every place has its quirks: I just haven't had the chance to learn this one's yet.

Sitting by the window makes me remember when I fell asleep here. I didn't mean to. I wasn't supposed to - sleeping when you're travelling alone is always a risk. Especially on the train. It's always hard



to get back once you miss your station. But it was either sleep or cry, so I slept. I think I ended up crying anyway. It was dark outside and I was wearing headphones. I listened to a song I knew would make me feel terrible just so I could relish it. That was one of the first times I ever cried leaving a place because I didn't want to go. I got used to it.

The train car rattles and the clunking of the wheels lulls me into a sleepless dream. There's only me and the conductor. Everyone else is gone. It doesn't worry me as much as it should. I can see him at the end of the car. It shouldn't take him long to reach me. I know that my ticket is in my jacket pocket, but I take a look around and realize I do not have it. I'm waiting for him to come to my seat, to ask me where I'm headed, but he never does. He just sits down in one of the other seats and watches the forest drift by.

I wake up disoriented. A few things have changed: the real conductor is a row away and the person with the baby is gone. I'm still alone and the train is still moving. We're in a new place: I recognize less and less. I hand him my ticket. He looks at me. Nods. I nod back: we're going to be seeing much more of each other in the hours I'll be spending here. The uniform and his cheerful demeanor remind me of the Polar Express. What a strange concept: a one-way ticket to the North Pole for non-believers. The conductor is friendly looking, in the Santa Claus kind of way. I realize that there are kids sitting behind me now when he makes them laugh. Their parents are relieved. It smells like bananas and Cheerios. I used to love Cheerios. Now I rarely even eat breakfast.

I rest my head against the window. The surface is chill - I like it. I feel the rocking of the train on my forehead, the bumps and jostles reorganizing my brain like an anagram. Tree. Cow. House. Horizon. Home. I haven't been home in ages. I know why; it doesn't really feel like mine, anymore: the high ceilings in the apartment in the city, the shelves and the stacks of books. The spices, the smell of a burning candle and matches, the fern in the shower. I'm traveling from one city to the next, but I still haven't gone back to that one. Someone walks through the aisle on the phone. "Listen, I'm on my way. I'm moving as fast as I can." My heart aches a little. I really do love that house. And the family that still lives there. It's still a home to me, just not my home. I'm still trying to find it. Hopefully this time I might get a clue.

It's sunny - the blue sky serves as a blank and inoffensive

backdrop to the hundreds of lonely telephone poles, transmitting our messages at the highest speeds without ever sending their own. They're beautiful in a delicate, industrial way. And they're probably much taller than I think they are. I'm also usually taller than people think I am. I think I feel more like those towers than I feel like other people. We grind to a stop. I don't know where we are. I don't know how anyone else knows either because I'm sure I didn't hear any kind of announcement. Nevertheless, the exchange of arrival and departure commences. More people get on than I would have expected.

"Is that your scarf?" I look up. A thin woman with thin glasses is gesturing to the seat next to me. There's a scarf there. And knitting needles. I don't know whose those are.

"No, sorry." I'm not sure what I'm apologizing for. She nods and finds another seat. I'm surprised. I really do not know whose half-finished scarf is sitting just inches away from me. I feel like I should. It's knit tightly and transitions from navy blue to muddy green. The ball of yarn it's attached to is shoved in the seat-back pocket. The train starts moving again.

I look outside again. The scarf unnerves me. We slowly pass a house. It's hard to picture what life must be like living in one of these farmhouses. Usually they pass so quickly I can hardly get an idea of what I'm seeing. But now, slowly pulling out of the station, I can get a better look. I only get a glimpse of these well-grown lives that fill in the spaces between coast-line cities on trips like this. The farmhouse is worn, like a good pair of jeans, and I bet each and every one of the others were too. I never know what's growing in the open-areas of land next to them unless it's corn: this plot is no exception. I can imagine the payoff of the growing and harvesting process is high, if not monetarily then spiritually. You give a seed the opportunity to grow, and when it does you get to celebrate its successes. Sometimes fruits, through vegetables are probably more common. I wish I got my hands in the dirt more. I wish I was better at handling being dirty once in a while.

I forget about the scarf. The window holds all of my attention. I have always been content to observe the passing trees and homes and Walmarts: we're passing through a higher-populated town now. It never feels like real life. From the moment I leave until the moment I arrive there's not a lot I'm capable of doing. There is nothing more produc-

tive than moving across hundreds of miles at high speeds. That's why being in transit is always better than arriving. Once you arrive, you have to be doing something else again. I guess that's why I stopped taking trains - people like to say that time is money, and time spent in the window seat thinking about home and farmhouses and the Polar Express is money wasted. But this trip has not been a waste. I take a look around. A few more people are asleep. The two friends are on each other's shoulders. It makes me smile. The windows on the other side only have a few feet of view before dense woodlands begin. I'm glad I'm on this side, with the sun just beginning its descent and the memory of a distant mountaintop obscured by fog.

We screech to a halt. Train's refueling. I get up. The lumpy luggage is gone. The scarf is not. I cannot shake the feeling that I'm supposed to be the one to finish it. I don't even remember how to knit. I step off and breathe. It smells amazing. Spring always smells amazing, wherever you are. The sun has begun its transition to the golden hour — even the brutalist concrete architecture of the station looks beautiful. I take a drink from a water-fountain. I wish I could stay here. The bell rings and a conductor steps onto the platform: the tell-tale signs of reboarding.

What would anyone do if I chose not to get back on? If I didn't follow their directions and turned around, wandered off the platform and called a car to pick me up and take me somewhere? Nothing, I suppose. I might get an annoyed call from the woman I was supposed to sublet from, asking when I was planning on moving in and 'wasn't it supposed to be tonight'? Maybe the conductor might notice that I wouldn't be in my seat when he did his rounds. These trains don't track when people reach their destination. I wonder how many people don't. The bell rings again. I wouldn't be missing out on much if I abandoned the plan, leaving the schedule behind. It might feel exhilarating to miss a train on purpose. I would watch the train let off steam and start up, its gears grinding and shaking like the slow and inevitable shifting of tectonic plates. They move whether we want them to or not.

I get back on the train. I took my time and lingered until the whistle blew. Ultimately, I am a social being like all humans are. I like to be quiet but I don't like to be alone. The melancholy alone-ness of the empty platform, beautifully drenched in gold sunlight, tugs my hesitat-

ing hand aboard. The scarf is waiting for me when I return. No one has come to claim it. It's a shame, because if someone finished it it could be quite beautiful. My knowledge of yarn does not stretch far, but I can tell that it's smooth and nice-quality — neatly-tied, with straight, pretty rows. I reach out a hand to feel the pattern beneath my fingertips. I don't usually wear a lot of dark, muted colors though my mother swears by them: but something about the slow ombré of dark blue to deep green strikes me as just my style. If I saw someone with it I could imagine myself wanting it, maybe even taking it if they weren't looking. I'm not someone who is inclined to take things, but I want to take this. I haven't stolen. I'm rarely in the position where I've even thought to steal. But this doesn't feel like stealing. It feels like someone left something behind and I have to give it a new story now. Who would leave this behind? I almost start crying.

I decide that when I get off, the scarf is coming with me.

I want to know who left this here. I want to know who was sitting next to me. But I don't want them to come back. I want to be the one to finish and to own that scarf. If they come back and claim it, I can't do that. They'll want it because it's theirs. But I feel like it's also mine. I have a stake in that scarf now.

The sky outside is quickly darkening, the sun dampened by the landscape and the approaching horizon which it must cross. The window stops being as transparent, reflecting back to me the inside of the cabin. Of course I see myself, but I try not to look for too long.

"Do you like to crochet?" a woman asks. Somehow I didn't see her approach in the mirror's reflection.

"This is actually knit," I say. I'm actually not even sure if that's true.

"Either way, it's quite pretty. May I sit here?" I've always been bad at guessing people's ages, but she reminds me of my grandma's sister-in-law that dipped tomatoes in ranch dressing and always sent me a birthday card, even if it arrived two weeks late. So I assumed they were around the same age, though I couldn't say what that was either. I say yes, of course, and move the scarf from the seat into my lap. It's much softer than I assumed it would be.

After a few hours we are the only two still awake. She is doing embroidery quietly, the overhead light illuminating just her hands and

the wooden circle pulling the pale blue fabric taut. She's doing a flower bouquet.

"Now that I'm old, I don't need to sleep," she says. I think for a moment that she is speaking to herself because she doesn't stop her stitching or look up at me at all.

"I'm not even tired. My husband would fall asleep as soon as he sat down, bless him, but I could never understand it. I always got a good amount of sleep when I was young, never skipped out on my eight hours, but then one night I was just tossing and turning, and ever since then I haven't slept." I continue watching her make her stitches, quick and deliberate and perfect every time.

"My doctors say I'm doing fine, better than I have been even! My theory is that my bones are saying 'you can sleep when you're dead!'" she pauses her stitching and looks at me over her thin glasses at the tip of her nose. They were balancing delicately, the string keeping them around her neck barely swaying.

"And I'm not tired yet, I can tell you that much." She lets out a puff of air like a laugh and continues her stitching with a smile. I don't know what to say, but it doesn't seem like she's waiting for me to find it. I let our interaction end: she continues her stitching and I continue my window-watching. On this side of the train, the sky is dark. To the sound of the train and the woman's soft humming, I fall asleep.

In my dreams I almost miss my stop. I open my eyes and know that I am seconds away from being whisked off again. I grab my bags and leave the train in a hurry. I don't even notice that the woman is gone. As the train pulls away, I realize that I forgot the scarf in the front pocket. It is overcast and the air feels wet and warm. I have no idea where I am but I know that it is my stop. The platform goes on infinitely in both directions. Across from me and over the opposite tracks is another platform with a bench. The woman is sitting on it and knitting the scarf.

"You have a lot of things to do," she says. She does not look up.

"Traveling is good, but don't you have a place to be?" I still don't know how to answer her. I've never felt like I've really had a place to be, I just happen to be places and go places. My chest begins to ache, my heart drying up and shrinking like the orange slices my mom would dry on our radiator.

"I want to go but I can't get there," I hear myself say. My words are more like feelings than sounds, the air around me getting thicker and congealing around me.

"I don't want to be late," the gelatinous air fills my mouth and I can't breathe.

I wake up because my feet are freezing. It's daytime. The air conditioning must have come on. I cough and drink some water to clear my throat. The woman is gone and the scarf is in my lap where I left it, except the needles are gone and it's finished. I stand up suddenly and almost hit my head on the luggage compartment. The woman is nowhere to be found. I sit down again and look over the scarf in my hands. It's subtle, but looking closely I could see where the original half ended and a new half began. I run my fingertips over the knots. The second half is tighter and more perfect. It seems like she did all the dirty work for me. I lean back in my seat and look out the window once more. The landscape is still as flat as it was before, the isolated houses still whizzing by every few minutes. I lay the scarf over my lap, stroking it mindlessly between my forefinger and thumb. For the first time in a long while, I want to reach the destination. If possible, I'd like to arrive.



Warm

Phelan Johnson

So we sit,
his hand in my hands in my lap;
I softly touch the bits of flesh burned by molten metal,
and he does not flinch;
“the pain has been felt for that,”
he teaches me.
He doesn't pick at these scabs
like I do mine;
his arm heals much quicker
and through it I can feel
the uproar the thumping of our chests make together
a love so triumphant that no one could imagine that it was ever lost
or losing;
that the waves crashed and knocked us over before we learned to stand
by holding onto one another,
like a trail of shallow footprints in soft earth solidified to clay,
the indentation erratic before coming into linearity,
a bonfire thought to be extinguished with a single ember remaining
between a log and crumpled newspaper
lit up again by the pouring out of a shot for lost homies and the flick of
a cigarette

and the flame is glorious.
We bask in its primal comfort and enjoy the redness it brings our
cheeks,
we breathe in ash and laugh as we cough it out
shifting our backs to face the wind,
learning not to mind,
just adapt,
allowing ourselves to move freely to and away,
but never really wanting to go anywhere else;

I'm fine in the grass
encompassed by his calloused hands
and lips that have yet to harden
lain down on his jacket to protect me from catching cold.
I wanted to tell him that night,
And the gnomes we sacrificed to would have blessed it,
And the cats, too,
But we say it every day now,
More than once, or twice, even,
And I think that's what the lake had in mind:
For us to be the lovers
Greater in strength and beauty than had Hephaestus and Aphrodite
More powerful than the meeting of the sky and the earth
Louder than the fall of a great oak
on the ears of the tiny animals and insects
around to hear it.

I don't stir,
I don't move
anything but my thumb over the lines of his palms
warmer than my own;
possibly the only warmth I've ever known.



Montmartre in Winter

Alexander Wagner

It's beautiful because it
isn't Paris, because
the buildings in France
look old –
not because they look old, but
because they are –
and Montmartre has
a different oldness,
not ancient or
perfect, but like
it never felt the need to be
anywhere else but
here,

comfortable, the cobblestones melt
on your feet, the sun
takes its time setting
through the narrow blocks of streets,
like it's an old friend
rediscovering this golden place,
like there isn't an inch of the city
it wants to leave
just yet.

semi-artificial winter >

Erica Meyers



quivering lip

Kennedi Killips

headlight or moonlight your face
looks sallow but I still trace
my fingertips along your hairline,
pushing the strays from your eyes
and you say, quietly, that you're leaving
in the morning though it is already
there

Returning to Iraq

Hayla Alawi

No one has ever questioned my Arabness: not me, not my friends, not even strangers who can somehow always tell with one look that there's something distinctly ethnic about me. Growing up, even my relatives on the white side of my family never tried to downplay or ignore my Iraqi background. So I was unprepared for the first person to openly ponder my Arabness to be my own father, the very person who gave me my cultural identity, as if it were a topic open to debate.

Last fall, I went home from school to have dinner with Baba. He, my stepmother, and my three little brothers were all there, as well as my father's childhood friend, Majed, and his family. I didn't know Majed well, and due to the language barrier, we didn't talk much; instead, I mostly made conversation with Baba, discussing my classes, his work, and, of course, the topic to which it seems Baba must always return, politics – namely, complaining about Donald Trump. After dinner, while I (somewhat unconventionally, being a woman) drank tea with Baba and Majed in the living room as the other women gossiped in the kitchen over the dishes, Majed posed a question to Baba in Arabic. My father looked at me for a moment and I looked right back, sipping my tea from an hourglass-shaped crimson teacup lined with gold-leaf. We always bring out the best teacups for guests. “What'd he say?” I finally asked, when Baba continued to silently study me.

He set his teacup down in its matching saucer and folded his hands in his lap. “Majed here has just asked me how Iraqi I think you are,” Baba said.

“Fifty percent,” I said. My father had been born and raised in Baghdad and my mother was from Dexter, Michigan. The answer was simple enough. I assumed Majed just didn't know anything about my mother since he'd never met her.

Baba laughed. “La', habibi, of course that's not what he meant. He means culturally, how Iraqi are you.”

I'd never thought about my Arabness as something that could be quantified outside of my biological makeup. I've always known I'm half Iraqi and half white, though when people ask me about my back-

ground, I just explain that I'm Arab, knowing that's the answer people are looking for. Here, in the States, any semblance of “other” seems to discount a person's whiteness, and my olive skin and dark features make sure I'm never assumed to be white. Yet I also almost never need to go into more detail than simply saying I'm “Arab.” During this conversation in Baba's household, though, under the scrutiny of real Iraqis (whatever that means), I was quickly realizing that I was more than the name I inherited from my father.

“Then according to you, how Iraqi am I?” I asked. I was genuinely curious.

“Maybe fifteen percent,” Baba replied.

The statistic surprised me. For one, it felt pretty arbitrary. I mean, how does one calculate how cultural they are? Was it just the nature of Majed and Baba, both being engineers, thus so used to using math in their everyday lives that they could boil me down to a number? For another, fifteen percent was lower than I'd expected to receive, and the shock I felt was similar to the reaction I might have when receiving a poor grade on an exam I studied an entire week for. I've always considered myself to be at least fifty percent Iraqi, if not more, based on the pride I hold for my cultural background. What I lack from not literally being from Iraq I make up for in what I've learned and experienced about my heritage.

“Why is the number so low?” I demanded. “Because I don't speak Arabic?”

“Oh, I didn't even think of that,” Baba said, picking his tea back up. “So maybe closer to ten percent, then.”

“You didn't factor in the language when you came up with fifteen percent? Then what did you factor in? You know, I can cook a delicious bamia,” I lied. I'd never cooked bamia, the most quintessential Iraqi dish, in my life, but I was desperate to prove myself, and besides, I at least had my stepmother's handwritten recipe ready to go at my apartment.

“I was thinking, you know, how you dress, and how little you know my extended family, and your cultural norms – they're much different from mine – and how you've never been to Iraq, or actually anywhere in the Middle East,” Baba said. “Oh, and of course, you don't speak Arabic. But you're proud of being Iraqi, so that means

something. So, let's say twelve percent." He turned and conveyed these thoughts to Majed, this time in Arabic. Majed accepted Baba's answer, and then they picked back up on their conversation.

I sat back and considered the evidence Baba had presented. It was all true, though interestingly enough, my DNA hadn't factored into Baba's answer. Even pride counted more than my biological makeup, though not nearly as much as I'd expected. I'd never before considered that I couldn't make up for these key aspects of culture that would've come from living in my ancestral homeland just by being proud of my Iraqi heritage and critiquing the food at every Middle Eastern restaurant I'd ever eaten at outside of Dearborn. It certainly put into perspective the displeasure my father's side of the family had expressed when I'd chosen to study Chinese in high school and then Korean in college. Is it my fault, though, that I've never been given a hashimi to wear to a wedding, or that I refuse to remain in the kitchen during family gatherings just because I'm a woman? I suppose some of my choices are mine alone. Maybe even the fact that I was sitting in the living room with the men is what led Majed to ask my father about my Arabness.

But at least it's not my fault I've never been to the Middle East. I've never been given the opportunity.

If I had, though, I don't know that I'd take it.

I asked Baba once whether he'd ever go back to Iraq if he could. It was only a few months before our conversation about my Arabness on another occasion where I was visiting home from college, though we'd had no guests over that night. The tea we were drinking when I asked him this question was out of plain glasses; there were no ornate rims or matching saucers. My little brothers had been too busy playing video games downstairs to bother us, so we'd had a chance to talk in peace. I think I surprised Baba by asking a question about his past, since we'd never spoken about it before. He surprised me back by responding that he had, in fact, returned to Iraq once since he was forced to leave as a political refugee forty years ago. His return was just months after the American invasion in 2003, when my parents had already been divorced for a year and I was barely five years old. No wonder I have no memory of Baba's trip. Post-divorce, my sister and I spent only

a fraction of our time with him, so he could've left the country for days or even weeks at a time without us noticing. Setting my tea aside, I'd asked him for the details.

"When the United States was planning to invade Iraq, when it became evident that it's for real, I called the Pentagon and asked to volunteer," Baba had said. "They said they'd get back to me, but I don't think they took me seriously. I probably would have been a very useful asset. Not only because I know Iraq well, but because I'm also educated and a Shi'ite who would easily be useful in communicating. I mean, I...I'm kind of glad that I didn't go, eventually, because they botched it, but I was disappointed then."

I remember feeling shaken. When I was a child, what I knew about Iraq was only from the snippets I overheard on the news channels my parents watched, since my father never spoke of his life there. When all you hear of a place is what's being played on American television, especially if that place isn't a part of the Western world, the news will only show the negative. It warps your perception. In the case of the Middle East, for example, I never saw the restaurants and coffeehouses or the magnificent cities and diverse universities on the TV screen. All I could picture was a desert wasteland riddled with bombings and military clashes. Civilization was hardly a word I related to Iraq. Unsurprisingly, then, in the bitterness that followed my parents' divorce, when my mother once suggested to me that if Baba really cared for his home, he would go there to protect it, I was angry she could such a thing to me about my own father. I assumed that there was no way Baba could plausibly return to Iraq. Looking back, I realized the comment had been a jibe at her ex; she was probably trying to wound his reputation. My parents divorced on bad terms. But in the moment, all I recognized was that to go to Iraq meant certain doom. More than a decade later, I was shocked to learn Baba had, in fact, wanted to return to Iraq. And he did return.

Baba had shrugged and sipped his tea before answering. "I went back to see my friends, to see my home, to see my city, but ultimately to look into the possibility of going back and participating in the rebuilding of Iraq, having the scientific background, the experience of many years in the West, and the wealth I have accumulated. I could be of use there."

Baba had explained his reasoning so nonchalantly that his words hardly held the weight of their implications. I'd tried to imagine growing up without him. If he'd stayed in Iraq as he'd initially intended, after all, that's what would've happened; there's no way my mother would've allowed us to even visit him if he was in the Middle East. I'd have no connection to him, and, perhaps even more importantly, no connection to my culture. I'd looked around the living room where we were sitting: at the Persian rug beneath us, the Islamic paintings Baba had brought back from his pilgrimage to Mecca, the glasses of tea, and, finally, at Baba himself. What's worse, losing a parent or losing an identity?

"The regime had just fallen and things looked like they were bad, unstable, so I thought it will get, eventually, slowly, stable. Then I would come back and assess – I even located business opportunities there, but, you know, from that point, 2003, until now, it's a downhill trend that never stopped getting any worse. It's constantly going bad and from bad to worse. And now we are at the very bottom and we don't know how far – I mean, we just, every time we say it can't go any worse than this, it seems to go worse. There's no end to how bad it can be."

Baba had been referring, of course, to the precarious political situation installed in Iraq by the United States after the 2003 invasion, followed by the rise of ISIS. In other words, if America hadn't royally screwed up their intervention in Iraq, Baba probably wouldn't have been having that conversation with me. Instead, he'd be helping rebuild the fallen nation. The hope that he would have had in those early stages in 2003...since he was a resistance fighter striving for democracy during his high school and college years, I can only imagine what participating in the rebuilding of Iraq would've meant to him, before those hopes were crushed.

As Baba described that trip, I learned how Majed came to this country. "I saw some of my friends," Baba had said, smiling for the first time during that conversation. "One of them was Majed." After visiting his old friend, Baba had apparently convinced Majed to move his family to America, where my father would give Majed a job. "I saw Nabil!" he continued, laughing. "You know, the city has changed so much. You can't easily remember where things were. But Nabil's house

was on a corner of two streets. And I looked at that house, and there was a man in the garden, outside the building. And I couldn't recognize him because he looked too old. It was Nabil, actually, turned out to be. But he – he just looked – you know, compared to me, like he was fifteen, twenty years older." The joy in Baba's laughter upon recalling this memory faded, and he frowned. "His life was so bad in Iraq that he and the people that stayed there...they all aged severely compared to people who left the country before. Like me." Baba paused. "People say 'You're not from here, are you? You came from outside.' Although you speak exactly their accent, they can tell by the way you behave, by the way you express yourself, by the way you look, that you're no longer one of them. The country went through such a hard time that the people's character had been crushed."

After that, Baba didn't speak much for a while, but I gathered that was the gist of his return to Iraq: hopeful for the possibilities but let down by the reality.

Though Baba was born and raised in Baghdad, his final sentiment echoed how I feel today about my own connection to my Arabness. While Baba felt disconnected from those who, though they grew up in the same environment, lived completely different adulthoods, I feel disconnected from him because of how differently we were raised. It's impossible to compare 1960s Iraq and 2000s America, but while I can't share language or social norms with my father, my father no longer shares experiences with his friends who suffered under Saddam Hussein in the 1980s and 1990s. For both of us, pride and connection alone wasn't necessarily enough. He and I aren't so different after all.

Seeing the way Iraq has deteriorated even over just my lifetime, not to mention its state when Baba was my age, I'm finding it difficult to want to see where my ancestors came from. Worse still was the hopelessness in Baba's voice as he described the Baghdad he returned to in 2003. If he couldn't find what he was looking for when he went back, and if he deemed the situation too volatile for him to live in for the rest of his life, what's in it for me, someone who can barely even speak Arabic?

Baba and Majed continued their conversation as I reflected on Baba's return to Iraq. From the few phrases I knew of Arabic, I gath-

ered that they'd moved past me, no longer interested in percentages or Arabness. For them, I suppose, it was much less consequential how Iraqi they perceived me to be. For all I knew, Majed's question might just have been an offhand thought he shaped aloud, not really meant to be pondered or even answered. Out of the three of us, after all, I seemed to care the most about not only the question, but also Baba's answer.

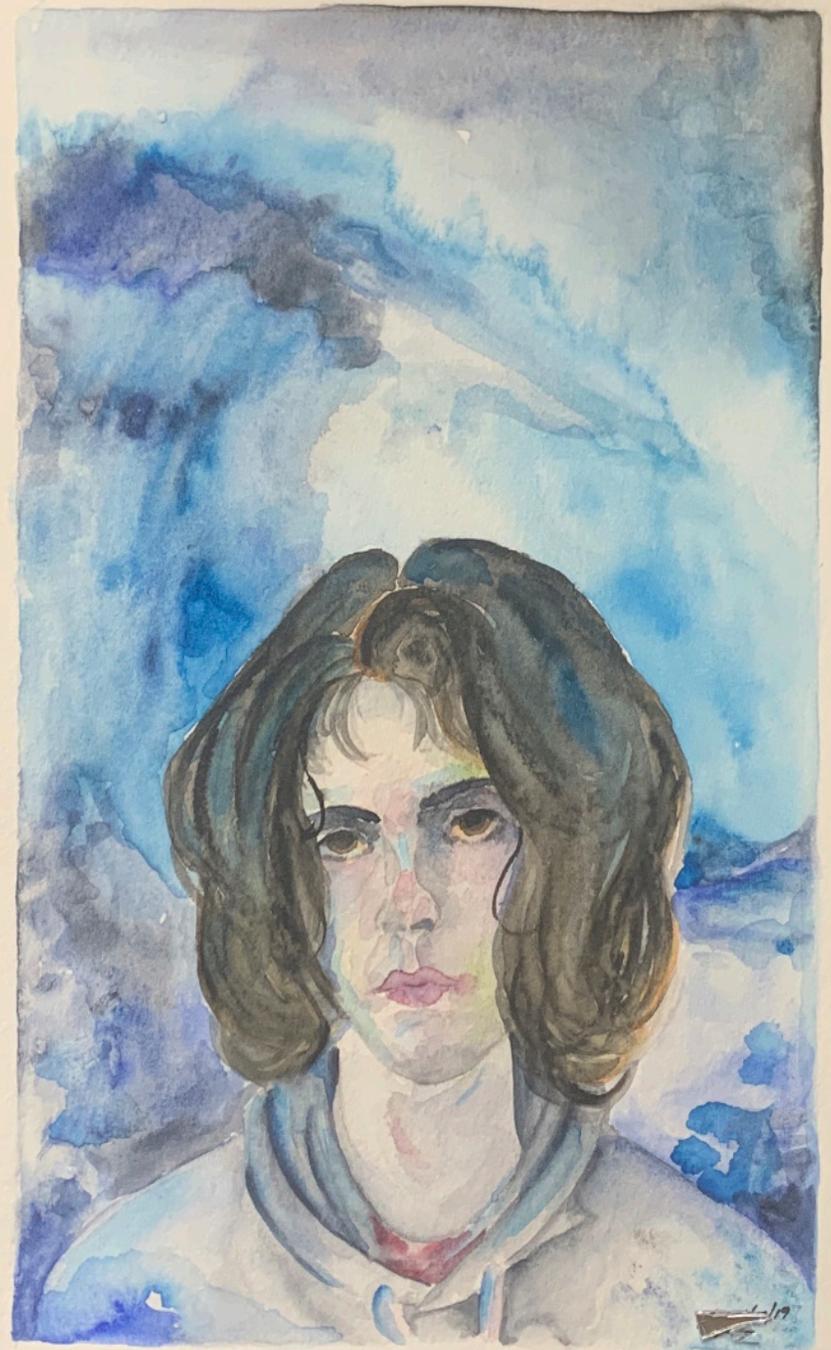
My teacup rested with its saucer on the coffee table in front of me. Only a few dregs of black tea remained in the bottom, along with a couple loose tea leaves clinging in a trail up the side of the teacup from my last swallow. Tiny flowers with red petals and golden centers were painted around its middle. As the men next to me continued to talk, I clutched the teacup and saucer and got up to rinse them. The dish-rack was stacked with the dishes my stepmother and Majed's wife had already cleaned.

I wondered what they would think of my Arabness. I watched them from the sink as I cleaned my teacup. They'd migrated over to the kitchen table. My stepmother glanced over at me, then returned to her conversation with Majed's wife. Maybe it offended them that I didn't help out earlier. Maybe they were jealous of what they saw as boldness, but I saw as normal. Sitting there at the table they'd just finished clearing, they weren't so unlike the men in the other room; they just followed a different post-dinner ritual. They were having their own conversation in Arabic, their own tea from fancy teacups from the same tea set steaming in front of them. My stepmother's chin was propped on her palm and she idly stirred her tea. She kept her voice low and smooth while Majed's wife spoke with emphatic hand gestures.

In all honesty, it's probably all in my head, and they likely have no opinion on my own Arabness. Not that it should matter much to me, anyway.

I turned off the faucet and placed my teacup upside down on the dish rack, nestling it between the dishes all of us had used at dinner.

Mod Blue Boy >
Emily Oberg



i will never pretend to like football

Maya Simonte

the terror of loving a girl is honey-thick and molasses sweet. it's quick-sand when you dip your feet in, easy to wade in, not because you're naive enough to think you'll escape but because it promises to keep you under. it's low bass, it's humid air, tender in its suffocation it is insomnia, it's tinnitus pulsing with your heartbeat, light that spans every shade of orange and yellow - today it is canary, hard on the eyes but like lemonade on the tongue and when you taste it you wonder what there could possibly be to fear about it in the first place-

the terror of loving a man is a thing with claws and teeth it is violent and visceral and cold it will never wrap your scars and it will never stop writhing around in the corners of your mind eldritch and slimy the idea of succumbing yourself to it leaves your heart revolting because it is not an action possible to the version of yourself that you know not a performance you have ever accepted a role in it is the thought of a man planting his mouth on your bare neck except the giggle that bubbles out of your lips is unfamiliar the voice that teases him *oh stop it you* belongs to a stranger and her fingernails look more like talons by the day you already feel yourself turning so you plunge your head into the gold-tinted water and forget how to come up for air



A Photograph of Two Friends Lying in Bed

Aviva Satz-Kojis

The photo is soft,
as if filtered through melancholy.

The subject: two friends lying in bed.
Both in dresses slightly too small for them,
one of the many things they've outgrown.

This is the last time they will see each other for quite some time.

They know this.

Outside the room,
rain beats against the window in a desolate rhythm.

Birdsong on a Silent Reservoir

Alexander Wagner

Behold the body of water
left breathless:
watch the fabric boil
beneath dancing insects,
beads of an oar
hovering there,
singing as they knead
the charcoal.

Listen:
somewhere beneath the sun,
the windless chime
of the blue jays
a pinpoint
in the unchanging air.

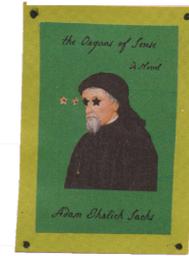
sandflies

Camilla Lizundia

bite me on the neck
and along my shoulder
gently kiss my ear
and sniff my hair

I'm wearing braids
earlobes bare
holding a skipping rock and
with one breathe I release

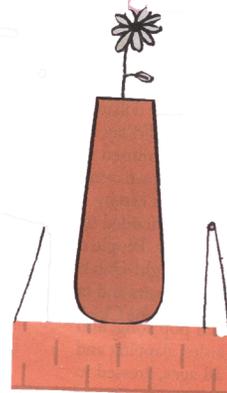
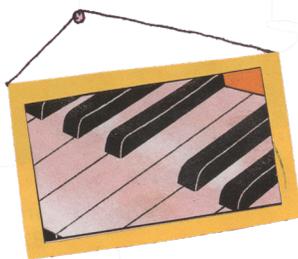
sandflies make their way to
my exposed skin
sniffing my arms
caressing my lips
melting into the puddle of stones
below my feet



How To Cure Your OCD

Elena Ramirez-Gorski

1. Meditate: tell yourself not to think about anything, especially not a black dog, then think of a black dog, and its neck and your hands, snapping it
2. Practice self-affirming mantras. Repeat: *I'm not a bad person for having bad thoughts. I am not my thoughts.* Sit in a closet for an hour, muttering, *if I'm not my thoughts, what am I?*
3. Find God. He's probably in the back room of your brain still, feet up on the coffee table. Suggest he get a hobby, say that you're sick of him always nagging, eavesdropping, breathing down your neck. Watch him give you the silent treatment for all of two minutes.
4. Try exposure therapy. They say when a song is stuck in your head, you should listen to it from beginning to end. Manifest your intrusive thoughts. Run someone over. Contract hepatitis. Brush your teeth with a five-blade razor, feel your gums shred and your teeth splinter to the nerve.
5. Smile. If you can't be happy, fake it.



tiny passions

Jena Vallina

To explain:

There are a million things inside me, and love is the least of them all. I do not have much to show you, but I will show you all I have. These are my passions, however small. They belong to me, and if you look inside them, I will also be there. In this kind of way, we are endless in our own arms.

To the beginning of a new sentence,

It has been occurring to me lately that I have lived most of my life trying to be understood by someone else. I am not new in any of this, of that I am already well-aware. But as I venture forward past unmarked corridors and yet another locked door, I realize that all this while I have been building a roof onto myself with the words that I have spoken or put down in the desperate pursuit to be acknowledged. There is something liberating, I think, in the saying of something that can only be understood by yourself. I think you understand this too. We need to hear our voice on our own, without filtering it through the ears of another person. But what are our words but a thing that we lay down on the floor, asking to leave and begging to be followed? Each word becomes its own little arrow directed towards an invisible target in the distance. Give me your love, your sympathy, your rage; within these syllables I am telling you what I want from you, and I need you to respond and create something palpable out of the otherwise white noise. Fill my existence with your answers, feed me with your intentions. Give me something to hold onto, to take with me where I travel and to look back on, so I can remember that once I was not so alone.

To the last plum in the bowl,

I am soft and yet not rotten. I run a mile every morning until I can feel my heart inside me. I drink water like salvation. I breathe like

I'm saving up for something. I love you too much to look at you, yet not enough to let you see me. I do it anyways. I would love you in the dark if I could. I hate it when you look at me and I miss you when you don't. I think I might be in love with temptation most of all. I never do anything with forbidden fruit, but I might linger too long in the garden.

To the colors I miss when I walk home in the dark,

You never wrote a letter, but I am writing you now because in truth I always wished I could have seen you one last time. I hope it does not hurt you to say that I hardly even remember you anymore. The sound goes tinny in my ears whenever I picture you, but if I close my eyes, I can still see your reflection behind the bright lights. You are smaller every time. Forgive me, I never knew. I was seventeen when I kissed you in the backseat of a beat-up car as your mother's Nina Simone sang of lilac trees. There were gum wrappers stuck between cracks and a faint scent of tobacco, although I knew you never smoked. It was cloudy but not raining, and I imagine we would have sat there all day breathing in the stale air had I not kissed you first. There is no point in my being cruel and telling you what you must have already guessed; and indeed, you will never read this. I was seventeen. That is not an excuse, but an apology. I apologize for meeting you when I was seventeen and too young to know you, but in truth I could never have been older until after you.

It's crossed over me often that I ought to be embarrassed, weaving eternities out of a thing so finite; but I will tell you anyways, that there was a year somewhere between us where not a day passed by without a thought to you. I will be honest, there was a moment when I realized that I was returning to you each day; and afterwards, the daily realization was no longer a naturally occurring phenomenon but a checkpoint between sunup and sundown, a gray afternoon reminder I masochistically set for myself: that I am still thinking of you, and therefore not forgetting. What I am saying is, you put me in a cycle. I am out of it now, and it is selfish of me to want any more of you, and for that reason alone you do not have to read this. But you ought to know. I am only ever fond when I think of you. And in truth, I am thinking of you

now.

To my own voice learning how to whisper,

Who does it hurt to fall in love with the back of the moon? If she never knows I am looking. If I am only building sandcastles underneath her. Nobody sees me on my knees, if I kneel in the dark. You cannot know what I pray to, when I pray alone. Blame the slamming door on the open window, the wind was too strong and carried my voice further than I desire. Don't hold me responsible for whatever you once heard spoken. I promise you, I said it in a whisper.

To the taste of salt when I bite my lip,

I am lying on a bench, and I am writing you in the silence between passing cars. We could live here, but not for too long. Like everything that is first beautiful, the quiet has a habit of tiring after too long a gaze—but beauty was never made less in spite of the seer's absence. She is beautiful with closed eyes too. I loved you before I knew you. I wrote a poem after we first met, but I lost it under a pile of torn out papers and discarded notebooks. I rummaged through it for hours, kneeling in the rubble and reading every ugly word I ever wrote, just to find a piece of me with you inside. But I never found either of us, if we were ever even there to begin with. Our words are taunting the tip of my tongue, but they get so easily lost, tangled in the arms of all the other words which came afterwards. The bittersweet tragedy of words gone unspoken. To love someone, and to never even know them. I wrote that about you; it is only the first part I have forgotten, the sweet that never knew it would someday grow stale in my mouth. It was something about living in the cold and knowing that soon you will be warm, so soon and not yet, but almost. It is inevitable like the summer, and like everything else that we dream into being when we are too cold and tired to do much else but dream up warm and forgiving things. Perhaps we are better off never knowing what I once believed, before I knew anything at all. It is getting cold now, and these changing seasons make me wish more and more that I had someone next to me. I have been lonely for so long, and still have not learned how to be alone.

To the shortest song I ever heard,

I do not think it is enough just to spit into the flower buds. I do not think it will help them grow at all.

To whatever she said that I could not hear because the music was too loud and my heart was beating between my ears,

I suppose I need to preface by saying that I am alright. At this moment in time I have no desire to hurt myself, and in saying this I make a promise to you. I am promising to keep still. I will not move and upset the balance. I will not place you in the path of my flying shrapnel, will not make myself known to you or to anyone else, but rather will become like the air: only witnessed in its absence. But I promise to you now, you will never have to witness me. I am always holding the same feeble chain of words in front of me, begging you to believe me. But do not worry. I understand it all too well. You do not have to know me but know this instead. I will not hurt myself to hurt you.

I suppose it is my own fault for trying to make a home in your lungs. Please try to understand. There is a pain unique to me. You cannot have it. Listen to me now, I do not mean to exclude you. But you need to know: I was never going to be yours. We drink too much and trick ourselves into believing we aren't strangers, but what we seek isn't under the lid of any jar and it certainly cannot be held together by hands that shake this much. There are moments when I feel like I live in my body, and I look into my reflection and can say with surety that I am the one looking back. But other times I am acutely aware of the chemicals guiding my hand, the soured reaction I stir myself each day, and feel at once like the stranger and the old friend he used to be. We make elixirs together, in search of a fountain to drink from that will let us live forever, but moments pass just as quickly behind closed eyes and are just as lost to us when they go. We are too young to be lost in this haze. I wish to wake you from your slumber, but I do not think you know how to live outside of a dream. And I do not want to make you see what you are not ready for, because I am the thing you are not

ready for, and I look so different in the daylight. You should know one more thing. I knew it when you left. I held you tighter than I ever had, and watched you go. It was too early then for sleep, but I could feel it same as any other last embrace, all the dreams I would come to find you in again and again. Asleep in a fog, part of me remembers what I can no longer see awake. I do not know if you are still lovely there, or if this is all that I can recall come morning. My memory loves you, even as I grow cold.

To what smells so good at three in the morning,

The tip of your ears. The thumbprint above your lips. The crook of your elbow. I felt your phantom limb even before you went away. You were always going to hurt. Don't say a thing—it would be enough just to see you tomorrow.

To the very last page I hate to turn,

You laugh at me. Do not deny it. I will not deny it either, because I laugh at myself too. I see myself in every single pair of eyes, and I know what they see just as well. I am so young and so stupid, but I am also so young. I walk where I don't have to go and do not look behind me, because to be lost has always been like being home to me. I am promiscuous with my love but delicate with my pain. I swallow the seeds of every fruit I have ever tasted. I write letters just to leave you inside them, and I am writing this because I am young and because I have never been able to learn from my mistakes. But I forgive you the way you must forgive me, and indeed I am learning to forgive myself too. You asked me so many times that the words leave holes, and these I cannot fill for you. There were more before you, the way there is always more dirt gathered in my nails, and in this way I might never be clean. There will be more after as well, because I love too freely to save it, and I have never regretted putting love into the world that was not there before. I need to tell you this, because today nobody asked me what I ate for breakfast. All the times I have thought I was old I was young, but I feel too old right now. Yesterday I saw a cat with yellow eyes cross the street, and we were in love as any two given animals ought to be. It was

enough for me then, to see and to be seen. But today I am left wanting more. I do not know how long I will be young, because I've always been young, and I do not know another way to be. I do not know how long I will make mistakes that can still be cleaned. I like to think time has made me better, but perhaps it has only made me smaller in my own eyes. I hide behind my age because I am afraid to be permanent, and you know it dearly, that desire is a clock ticking down. I will love you for as long as we can hold our breath—and whatever this place is called, know it truly and sincerely as anything I might say, and know I believe it still, is and always will, be yours.

And because I have always been in the business of writing postscripts, please know:

There are times when the seasons collide, and on this humble crossroads, winter and summer share a bed if only for a night and the sun still warms the leaves even as they depart. I lived there once, and so did you, in a season somewhere between us. I was promised cold and yet I still remembered the warm, and indeed I loved and needed them both as much as any two arms which can meet at my heart in the center. I knew you and I loved you, once in an autumn clear, and when it is January and we have passed away, I will take walks not in a graveyard but a festival of you. I will smile at the creatures that pass, because they are not ghosts but invisible friends, and I will remember happily, contentedly, that wherever the time goes when we are not in the same room together, there was an autumn. We split it between us and shared it in our hands, and however briefly the crumbs of us lasted upon fingers and tongues it was enough. It was enough just to know you. So then, thank you, for the autumn, and for being where I could see you, and for sitting next to me. You didn't have to do that. You did it anyways. Believe me, I loved every second. Good-bye, you, lovely, full of love, I love. That is all I had to say.

Reckless Driving

Grace Meinke

My heart in the backseat,
My spine on the floor,
His foot on the pedal
And my mind out the door.

He was a reckless driver,
Blamed a broken brake,
He'd speed past red signals,
Like I was his street to take.

He'd press cruise control,
Without asking first,
In the on-ramps and exits,
Thought he was well-versed.

Keeping brights on, always
He would drift lane to lane,
I struggle with deciding
On where to place the blame.

He never made turns,
Treated "no" like an option,
Like when the gas light comes on
And is met without caution.

But maybe if I'd been louder,
If I'd spoken up stronger,
If I'd turned on the hazards,
I'd have been buckled much longer.

One day we hit the guard rail,
Spun into the ditch,

I flew through the windshield,
But his seatbelt didn't flinch.

I was merely a passenger,
In his speeding car,
How was I so meek?
How'd he make it this far?

He squealed off without me,
Shattered glass and all,
And I laid in the ditch,
Finding strength in this fall.

May he slow his engine,
May he find his brake.

Me? I'll be stronger,
Fueled by his mistake.



Boy on a Bicycle

Vivian Chiao

The first journalist came in the middle of her hospital stay. Elle spent two weeks observing the negotiation of this with fluctuating interest before a heartfelt phone call about privacy and sensitivity from the editor of the New Falls Tribune finally convinced her parents. They agreed to a twenty-minute interview on the condition that Elle could end it whenever she wanted.

“Our daughter is still recovering,” her mother had said over the line, mouth a firm line, back straight. Elle had watched her mother slay more impressive dragons than the local newspaper staff with the same edge to her voice.

Now her father said, “Elle, *bǎobèi*, do you want us in the room?”

“No, *Bàba*,” Elle said. “Don’t worry about me, seriously.” And her father, to his credit, backed out and shut the door with only a final worried look.

“It’s nice to meet you, Felicity,” the journalist said. Her name was Samantha Ploid and she smiled at Elle like she really cared. She was like Elle’s little brother that way; Becket had a wide-open face that invited everyone to talk.

They started slow, Ms. Ploid throwing her softball questions like a warmup. How was school? What hobbies did she have? Had she started thinking about college? Elle steered her thoughts into safe waters and floated there for a while, liking the easy, uncomplicated script of small talk.

Then they got to the mugging.

Ms. Ploid leaned forward, eyes a little wide. Elle could make out the spider line cracks in her foundation. “What you did — that’s something most people wouldn’t. Something that requires a lot of courage. What made you decide otherwise?”

The hot lick of temper down her spine was completely foreign. She wasn’t Beckett; she couldn’t afford to get angry. The way her teeth were locking her jaw down wasn’t — it wasn’t *her*.

Courage? Elle had never been brave in her *life*.

In between the surgeries and the slowly suffocating way she spent most of her time unable to stand or walk or go to the tiny hospital bathroom by herself, there were flowers. Bouquets by the dozen, carnations and chrysanthemums crammed into glass vases and bound with red ribbons. There were cards — enough to overflow the table next to her cot and spill out all over the floor, a waterfall of well-wishes. New Falls was a small, sleepy town whose greatest claim to fame was a resident who won the National Hotdog Eating Contest two decades ago. Elle couldn’t help but be the top story on the local news.

So there were scribbled get well notes from preschoolers who drew her hearts and balloons and swirling font from high schoolers who had passed her in the hallway once or twice or knew her because she edited the school paper. Her tenth grade English teacher had sent a beat-up copy of *Fahrenheit 451* with a note: *Something to keep you busy in the hospital.*

There was a card from the blue-eyed boy in the alley. The note was short and written in a shaky hand. (Stilted, heartfelt but awkward, like he’d gone through too many drafts, fingers white with pressure around the pen as his stomach flipped and his throat tightened.)

All of it made her nauseous, sick with screaming headaches. She was no Guy Montag, hiding books and risking everything for rebellion. She was barely Captain Beatty, who self-immolated at the last like ill-gotten penance. Beatty, who owned only his beautiful empty justifications for his work and the deaths on his conscience.

She understood the urge to self-destruct, of course; inadequacy seared. She wanted Beckett to be here, but Beckett was at boarding school and they hadn’t spoken in months. The two of them formed a tree cut off half-grown. All the same, under the soil of her heart the roots remained too deep to be removed. Beatty and Montag had been friends, once, too.

Six years ago, when she was twelve and Beckett was eight, she taught him how to ride a bike. There was a playground near a hill a few blocks from their house. She took him out there on pale summer

mornings, Beckett holding on to her belt loops while she wheeled along his brand new blue bike. He'd get on the bike and Elle would push him up and down the hill while he whooped and laughed. His hair was buzzed short and his face was round with baby fat; looking straight down at him she could see only his forehead and cheeks, stubby fingers clutching at the handles, little legs pumping at the pedals. He'd peek up at her sometimes. When she smiled at him, his face would light up and he'd turn back to pedaling with a serious squint.

A few days in, she braced both hands on the back of his seat and said, "You got it?"

Beckett squirmed. "Yeah, yeah! C'mon, push me!"

Elle pushed. When she felt the bike straighten out, she let go. Beckett was pedaling and shouting and she was grinning so goddamned hard that when he spun out and hit the fence, for a second it was like she was dreaming.

When she was twelve and he was eight, she held Beckett's child-soft arms between her fingers. She loved him, and it terrified her to love someone like that, his skin split by razor wire, blood leaking down his arm. His bike was a ruined pile of metal and scraped paint smashed into the fence. She bandaged the long cut down his forearm with shaking hands and thought about the fragile lines of major arteries in the human body, how his bike had bent so easily under the impact and how skin broke under a pound of force. There was blood under her short nails and smeared across her blistered palms and she was holding Beckett's arm too tight, her fingers white with pressure around the sloppy, slipping bandage. Their parents were on the way, but Beckett just kept making these soft, bitten-off sounds. She wanted to pick him up like she did when he was a toddler but couldn't let go of his arm. She wanted to comfort him but couldn't open her mouth.

Her precious baby brother was infinitely breakable and she didn't know how to bite her fear down into manageable pieces, didn't know how to name it, didn't know how she was supposed to tell him everything was going to be fine when her hands were still bloody and behind her eyes, Beckett's skin was still splitting on loop.

There was a crawling fear that lived in between the slots of

her ribcage. It waited until she was asleep in the hospital cot and then pounced, woke her up sweating and shaking. In her dreams, sometimes she watched herself soak the carpet in kerosene, light a match, and burn the house down with her in it. Sometimes she was at the end of the alley again, this time watching her baby brother get shot in his smiling mouth.

Her father, of course, knew. He spent the vast majority of his time in the hospital these days. He'd even sweet talked the nurses into letting him stay past visiting hours. Her inability to sleep through the whole night had been nigh on unnoticeable when they'd had separate rooms with locked doors and different schedules. There was no hiding it from him in the hospital, not when he slept and ate and read his gardening books between the same four walls as her cot. Still. Apart from one quiet conversation, Elle was spared the brunt of her parents' collective worry about it. These days her mother was wrapped up in wrangling their insurance company and talking the shift manager through looking after the shop, while her father quietly fussed over at-home care and making sure neither of his children was wasting away when out of his sight.

"You know," she said to her father once when he was checking her IV like the overly concerned son of doctors he was. "When you and Mom brought Beckett home from the hospital, I promised you I'd take care of him. I don't know what happened to that."

"You take care of your brother just fine," her father said. He was looking at her, brow furrowed, voice soft, like he had been for every other day of her life. But cradled in his hands were the IV bags hooked up to her cannula. The ones that told just how broken into pieces she was, how incapable of doing anything for herself, much less anyone else.

Her father drove her home from the hospital. Elle was bundled in the back, staring at the physical therapy print-out and not reading a word. Her mother sat in the passenger seat and nodded along while her father started a conversation about the shop; suddenly they were talking about the construction project on such and such road, and god, why had they voted for the governor when this administration couldn't

even fill in potholes. They used to take family road trips like this. The only thing missing was Beckett in the backseat next to her, tapping his fingers against the door and singing Queen under his breath, *Mama, ooh, didn't mean to make you cry. If I'm not back again this time tomorrow ...*

Their last road trip had been three years ago. She'd been fifteen at that point; Beckett had been eleven. He had spent most of the trip belting classic rock. Elle might've joined him had she not been too busy absorbing the scenery to avoid her own circling thoughts. Their mother had threatened to send Beckett to military school to get him to stop singing, and he'd still been pouting when they crossed North Carolina's state border. While the two of them had been waiting in the car in front of the hotel, Beckett had unbuckled his seatbelt, scooted over, and put his chin on her shoulder like he used to when he was little and wanted her attention.

"You're so quiet these days," he'd said into her ear. "I feel like I barely know what you sound like anymore."

"I talk enough."

"Maybe." He'd pulled back — she had felt the rush of cool air against her neck — then shifted around and pressed their shoulders together again. "I love you."

"You think I don't know that?" She'd asked. Beckett had looked over at her, narrow-eyed and spoiled. She'd laughed, a quiet little thing that hurt her throat like smoke. "I love you, too."

Her parents had a screaming match half a week after she came home for the first time since September. Elle was impressed; she thought they might've taken advantage of the empty house for this particular fight. Then again, her father had been spending all his time at the hospital. It hadn't looked like avoidance before now.

Her father was yelling, *then tell your sister to kick him out of the house*, and her mother was snarling, *right, because forcing him to come home worked so well the last time*.

Elle rolled over in bed and stuffed a pillow over her head. Waited it out.

She was falling asleep when the door creaked open. Her moth-

er stepped slow and sure over the wooden floorboards and sat down on the edge of the bed. "Oh, sweetheart," she said and ran her fingers through Elle's hair. "We'll get this fixed. You'll see."

Her mother always said that. It'd taken years for Elle to realize she must've been faking at least some of the time, even more years to recognize the strength of it, to know the terrible fragility of everything you loved and smile anyway. Her mother slayed dragons. Elle wasn't like her at all.

She kept her eyes closed and fell asleep with her mother still stroking her hair.

She dreamed about the last time she saw Beckett.

It was a clear winter afternoon, two weeks after Christmas. She felt — light, in a way she'd forgotten. Half out of her own head and elated for it. It was a good day.

She offered to take Beckett to the movies. Beckett sulkily declined; Elle rolled her eyes and promised to buy them both milkshakes afterward.

"Come on," she said. "We haven't done this in months."

Beckett glared down at his shoelaces before muttering, "You'd better get me a peanut butter and chocolate one."

They got in their father's coffee-bean Honda Civic. She pulled out of their driveway and put in the scratched CD labeled *God, Aren't Our Parents Old*. Beckett started drumming his fingers against the armrest almost immediately, and it only took another three minutes for him to give in and start singing. She grinned and joined him for the chorus as Tarcy Su crooned about ducks and not needing anyone: *Jimò de yāzi, wǒ kěyǐ bù yào nǐ*.

By the time they pulled into the movie theater, Beckett was flushed and happy, eyes shining. Like this, it was impossible to remember the petty arguments that'd been igniting between them since break started.

After the movie, they went to Steak 'n Shake and sat in the booth nearest the window. Elle made circles with the condensation from her milkshake while Beckett talked rapid-fire about the film's ending. They'd picked a murder mystery, because they always picked a

murder mystery. Beckett liked trying to solve them. Elle liked the way they shepherded you from clue to revelation. It allowed no room for her brand of obsessive introspection.

“Anyway,” Beckett was saying. “The villain was definitely full of it.”

“How so?”

He screwed up his face. “Well, I mean, god. They talked a good game about their family, but that was all self-righteous crap. You really love someone, you don’t hide important stuff from them.”

Elle took another sip from her milkshake. It was cold and lumpy and slid uncomfortably down her throat. “Yeah, guess so.”

“I *am* always right.”

“You’re always a loser, if that’s what you mean.”

Beckett laughed. “Jerk.”

“You love it. Remind me when you’re going back to St. Abernathy’s again?”

His face fell. “In a couple days. Aunt J’s going to drive over here and pick me up on Friday.”

“You still have a chance to relax before then,” she said gently. She regretted asking.

“Sure.” In his hands, the corners of the napkin splintered and folded in on themselves. “Elle?”

“Yeah?”

“Where are you applying to college?”

She listed a few of her top choices. Beckett slumped lower in his seat.

“All out-of-state.”

“Well,” she said. “Yes. They’re good schools.”

“They’re expensive.”

“I’ll have scholarships. And grandma left us that college fund, remember?”

He shook his head. “Mom and Dad are going to throw a fit if you’re that far away.”

“Mom and Dad want to convert my bedroom into an office. I think they’ll be fine.”

“Oh yes,” he mumbled, “because you always know exactly how everyone feels.”

Elle reached across the table and tapped him on the back of the hand. He didn’t look at her. “Beckett, I’ll still visit. I’ll come see you during holidays. Hey,” she said, trying to catch his eye. “I’ll be around.”

His head jerked up. “You’ll be halfway across the country!”

“Beckett, you’re in a boarding school. It’s not like we see each other every day.”

“Yeah, and whose fault is *that*.”

Elle leaned back and pushed her hair away from her face.

“Beckett.”

“I didn’t want to go to St. Abernathy! You knew that! And you didn’t say a single thing about it when Mom and Dad asked you!”

She’d had the crazy idea that Beckett might like having friends his own age, or at least not spend his free time trying to deduce why his older sister was a neurotic wreck with no meaningful relationships outside of their immediate family.

“We’ve had this argument.”

“You ignoring what I say is not an argument!”

She gestured at the nearest waiter. “Check please.”

Beckett seethed silently in the passenger seat the entire drive back. Elle didn’t risk turning on the radio. When they got home, she parked the car in their driveway, turned off the engine, and turned to Beckett.

“Look, I can talk to Mom and Dad about St. Abernathy’s if you really want me to. But would you finish this year before deciding? Give it a chance?”

“Oh, you’re letting me talk now?”

“Just because I didn’t want to have an argument in the middle of Shake ‘n Steak—”

“Aunt J’s offered to let me stay with her for the summer.”

There was ice forming in Elle’s chest. She managed to say, “What?”

“I think I’ll take her up on it.” He wasn’t even looking at Elle. “This is great, right. I’m being more independent and everything. You should be proud.”

She didn’t feel proud. She felt sick and vaguely betrayed. “Beckett ...”

He swung open the car door, faux-casual, every muscle in his

body tense.

“You don’t — I want you to stay.”

“Right.” He laughed derisively. “Like you care.”

There’d been a boy on a bicycle and all she’d had to give was bloody hands and a mouth empty of reassurance. That same boy here, one foot out the door, and she hadn’t even been able to work up the courage to say, *I love you but I’m terrified*.

The mugging had been on a Thursday and she’d been going home and then she’d been on the ground. That was the last thing Elle remembered: lying on the pavement with blood bubbling out of her stomach as she tried to inhale enough to scream.

The day was fever-pitch hot. She remembered that part, the way her shirt had stuck to her skin, tacky with sweat, how she had cursed her long, dark hair and the hair ties forgotten in her bedside drawer. It was Thursday and she had physics homework in her backpack, twenty pages to read the next day for literature, and that was what filled the vacuum of her mind while her bare feet slapped against the pavement.

She wound her fingers around the shoelaces of her tennis shoes and swung them over her shoulder, mouth wrapped around decades-old English like she was looking for something profound between the lines, some miracle cure. They were reading excerpts from *I Sing the Body Electric* in literature. Bradbury’s work. Mr. Cunningham had looked so damned excited; Elle had spent most of class swallowing around the pervasive bile in her throat and unable to speak. How she was going to deal with college next year when she couldn’t even manage this was a question she asked herself often.

The first thing she’d ever read by Bradbury was Fahrenheit 451. That had been years ago, but it never stopped tasting like Beatty grinning as he said, for I am arm’d so strong in honesty and go ahead now as Montag turned the flamethrower on him, that tang of iron in her mouth as she bit down on her tongue and used pain like a soft reset button for her frenzied thoughts.

Slap, slap, slap.

There wasn’t any point in thinking about this. There was no

point in doing anything but learning to live with it, but her brain was maladjusted on the best of days. It, like the itch in her fingers to break windows and make a bloody mess of her own skin, was destructive and self-destructive. Everything spiraled, this downward pull that ate everything. Pain could break her out of it, if at a cost.

Slap, slap, slap.

She’d started biting her tongue when she was eleven. No, she’d been twelve — she remembered only because that was the year everything had started spiraling too fast and hard for her parents to pull her out. That was the year she’d started locking herself in her bedroom for hours before dinner and ignoring Beckett knocking on the door and whining for jǐějǐě to come out and play with him, please, Elle, you promised. She couldn’t really remember anymore, if she’d ever stopped.

Slap, slap, slap.

“Oh god.”

It was nothing — it was a breathy whisper, it was an exhale that you gave when you were surprised, it was an everyday sound with no connotation at all.

It was how Beckett had sounded when he was eight and gushing blood out of his slit-open forearm. His eyes had been so wide and brown when he’d said, “*Elle*.”

She turned around.

There were two strangers in the alley next to her. One of them was holding a gun, head cocked slightly to the side, and one of them was on the ground.

It wasn’t, in actuality, a decision. Not the way everyone made it sound, later, not the way Ms. Ploid from the *New Falls Tribune* had described it in that article that they sent to her parents. There was no instant of time when everything was clear, where the crossroads were laid out before her, where she’d had to weigh her conscience against her safety and found one heavier to bear than the other. It wasn’t like that at all.

She was standing at the mouth of the alley and then she was in between the man who had the gun and the little boy — no, a teenager with blue eyes bright in his pale face — with a twisted ankle saying, “Oh god oh god oh *god*.”

The man said, “What the fuck?” and Elle kicked him in the

knee as hard as she could, everything in her head quiet.

Afterward, the doctors said the bullet had gone straight through her, a needle threading through her body. They said a lot of things, most of which went completely over her head because she was high as the stars and savoring how sweet and dark and empty her dreams were with the morphine.

Five weeks after she left the hospital, they finally took off all the bandages. The first thing she did was lock herself in the bathroom and shower until her fingers and toes were pruned and her lungs were full of steam. She ran her fingers over her stomach for the first time since the alleyway. Everything was so sensitive where the bandages had been, cut off from the rest of her, divorced from her own body. It was, somehow, new territory. She traced the raised mound of scar tissue, smaller than a coin under her ribs; reached around and touched the bigger tangled mass on her back.

In his card, the blue-eyed boy had written: *I don't know you, but I don't think I need to know all of your context to know your goodness.*

Elle stood under the spray for a long time.

At two o'clock on a December afternoon, there was a knock at the door.

Elle was reading her mother's copy of *Wild Swans* in her father's plush armchair. She was taking time off; in the spring, she'd finish senior year and graduate.

She slipped a bookmark between the pages and uncurled from her seat. Her hair was down in a messy tangle. She pushed it out of her face with one hand, trying to look slightly less like a layabout teenager not going to school.

She opened the door.

"Hey, Elle."

Her brother was standing on the doorstep, suitcase at his feet. He was wearing that stupid leather jacket their father gave him for his birthday two years ago and he clearly hadn't combed his hair. He was taller and bulkier than he'd been just a few months ago. The jacket

actually fit him now.

Beckett shifted his weight. Smiled a little, ears around his shoulders and his hands jammed in his pockets like a kid.

"Jesus," she heard herself say. "You got big at boarding school."

He froze. Then he launched himself at her, and she barely had time to flinch before he wrapped his arms around her like he did when he was five and scared of strangers.

"You're okay," he breathed, squeezing her tight. "You're really okay. I was so worried, and I — I know I wasn't here, I didn't even visit you, I was so scared but that's no excuse—"

Elle wrapped one arm around his shaking shoulders and buried her face in his neck. "Shut up," she said, voice thick. "I know."



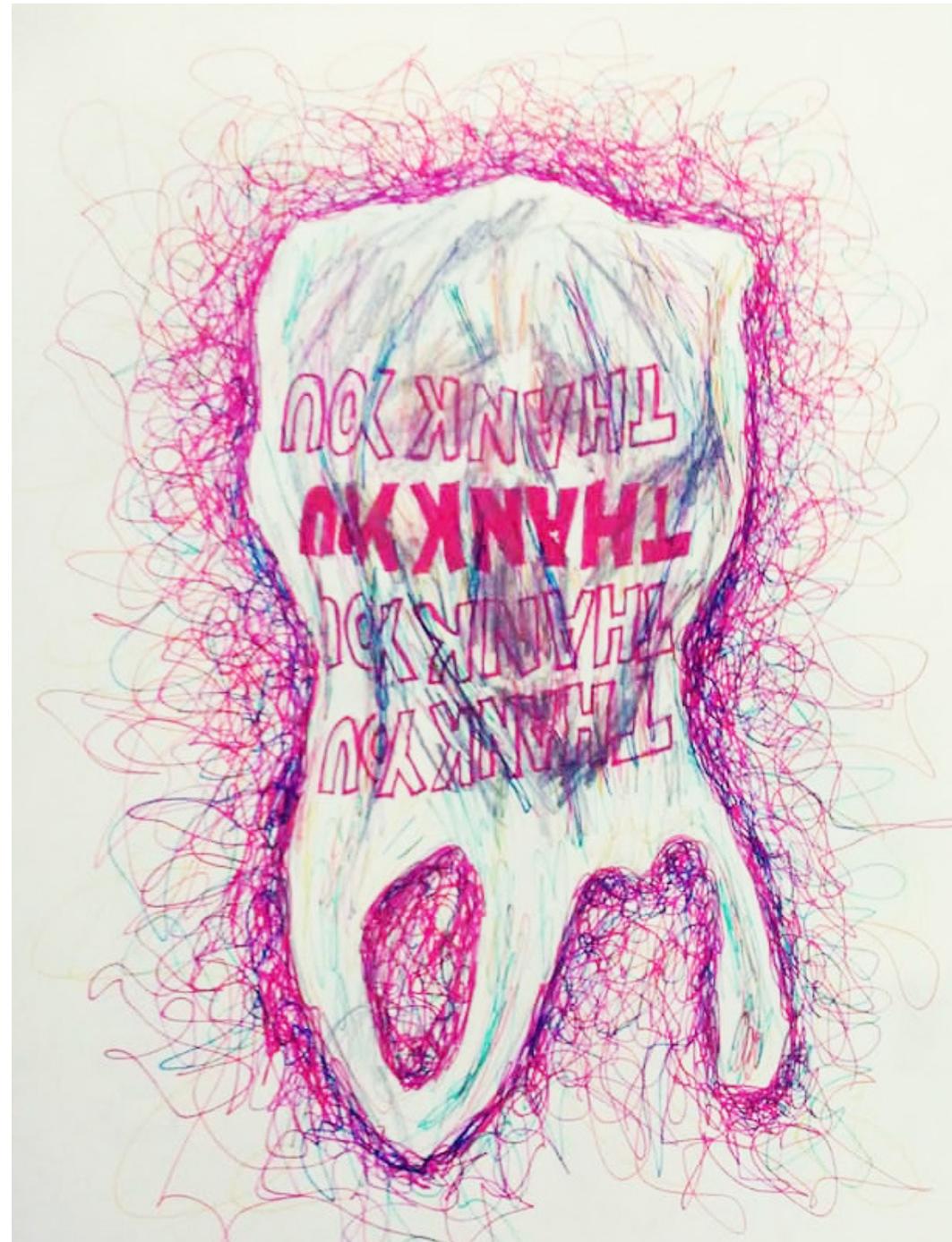
The Crows at East Quad

Alexander Wagner

The space between the window and the screen
has a breath all its own. A circle of
stale dorm room heat and Febreze
and the kiss of winter pressed into
the face between it all. They looked
like leaves at first, the murder perched atop
the dead twigs outside:
the way they blot out the sky,
almost as dark as they are,
how they flit about the air,
play with the wind a minute.
The windowpane breathes winter,
and I breathe back, and this three-inch world
wedged between glass and plastic and wire
is the warmest I've stayed since Autumn,
this pocket of yellow lamplight
and the caw of the crows
which counts, I suppose, as birdsong.

thank you thank you thank you thank you

Elena Ramirez-Gorski



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