

AT FACE VALUE



YORKTOWN
LIT MAG

2020

A NOTE FROM THE YORKTOWN LITERARY MAGAZINE

The following magazine has been edited to be shown as an online version and is being made available to the YHS community because of the unusual circumstances regarding COVID-19.

A complete version of the magazine will be printed in the coming school year and will be distributed to all who pre-paid for the magazine when it is safe to do so. In addition, magazines will be available for purchase at that time as well.

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

<i>Hamelin</i> by Katie Nelson.....	1
<i>The Raven and The Raven</i> by Sophia Futrell.....	2
<i>Paper Snowflakes</i> by Laila Hall.....	3
<i>Frankie's Blush Colored Walls</i> by Billie Lieber.....	5
<i>Threads</i> by Kate Lacey.....	6
<i>Mother</i> by Julia Nunamaker.....	9
<i>Suburban Lizard</i> by Rose von Eckartsberg.....	9
<i>Tango with Death</i> by Daniel Strickland.....	10
<i>Jackson</i> by Ana Concha.....	11
<i>The Man on the Hill</i> by Nicholas Eisenberg.....	13
<i>And Then You Woke Up in Beantown, Shirtless</i> <i>and An Inch Shorter</i> by Ellie Trumpheller.....	15
<i>Canyon</i> by Julia Carey.....	15
<i>Change Your Locks</i> by Evelyn Kresse.....	16
<i>Dyatlov Pass</i> by Gwen Kozlowski.....	17
<i>Jessie</i> by Georgia Beatty.....	19
<i>Speeder</i> by Mari Klaire Morris Larkin.....	20
<i>Dear Karen</i> by Caleb Newman.....	21
<i>Welcome</i> by Caroline Schwartzbeck.....	22
CENTERFOLD.....	23
<i>Clair de Lune</i> by Riley Pearson.....	25
<i>Glow</i> by Anu Desai.....	26
<i>To the Wind</i> by Gracen Flores.....	26
<i>Growth</i> by Damla Ozbilgin.....	27
<i>The Healing House of Colors</i> by Katie Kennedy.....	28
<i>Eulogy for a Dead World</i> by Aidan Burke.....	29
<i>Mornings</i> by Gwen Kozlowski.....	31
<i>A Walk of Change</i> by Kitiara Crosby.....	31
<i>Underneath a Cherry Blossom Tree</i> by Maggie Durkin.....	33
<i>G.R.I.D</i> by Rose von Eckartsberg.....	33
<i>Ode to Billy Joe</i> by Ellie Trumpheller.....	35
<i>Through the Door</i> by Katie Nelson.....	37
<i>Perception</i> by Julia Nunamaker.....	37
<i>The Stairman</i> by Abi Schulken.....	38
<i>Remembering</i> by Nicholas Eisenberg.....	39
<i>Holding Onto Feeling</i> by Georgia Beatty.....	39
<i>At the Bottom of Everything</i> by Kate Lacey.....	39
<i>The Welcome Mat</i> by Ana Concha.....	41

HAMELIN

KATIE NELSON

Parents always tell their children to never take candy from strangers. But what about cookies? They never said anything about cookies. Besides, she seemed so kind.

“My sister made these cookies for me,” Piper said, “but I can’t eat them, they’re too hard. I have very sensitive teeth. Would you like one? They’re just chocolate chip.”

Piper looked around, ensuring no parents were watching as she gave out cookies to kids leaving the park. A few of the kids made faces when they bit into the cookies — not only were they soft, they didn’t taste quite right. Still, each child finished their cookie. While they were eating, Piper pulled a piccolo from her bag and played a quick, eerie tune. The children went quiet for a moment.

“I want you all to listen very closely, I’m going to tell you a secret,” Piper cooed. The kids leaned in closer, a few peering over their shoulders to be sure their parents were out of sight. “There’s a magical land not far from here. I want to take you all there, but we can only go at night. I’ll come tonight to pick you up, just sneak outside when you hear me playing.”

“Magic isn’t real,” one boy said, crossing his arms.

Piper didn’t respond, giving the children a warm smile before turning and walking away, thinking out loud. “Something tells me you’ll follow me, anyways, William.”

She got in her car and drove for the third time that week to the Greenaway’s house. Monica Greenaway opened the door, lavishly dressed in one of her best evening gowns.

“Piper, dear, hello.” She gestured for Piper to enter. “I’m afraid I don’t have much time to chat, Arthur and I are about to leave for the Harbor Ball.”

Piper shifted nervously. “I don’t intend to take up your time, Monica. There was just the matter of my payment.”

“Ah! That’s right. Give me just a moment.” Monica disappeared up the grand marble staircase that took up her foyer. A few moments later, her young daughter ran in and wrapped her arms around Piper’s leg.

“Mia, I swear, you’re getting bigger every day.” Piper picked the girl up, groaning at how heavy she had gotten.

“Are you here to play?” Mia asked, leaning her head on Piper’s shoulder.

“Not today, I’m afraid. I just stopped by to get something from your parents. Something I left here last time we played. And the time before that. And the time before *that*.”

Mia got close to Piper’s ear and whispered, “Did they forget to give you money?”

Piper nodded and chuckled uncomfortably, shocked at how much the little 6-year-old knew. She set Mia back on the ground when she heard Monica’s heels echoing down the hallway. Mia ran to her mother, who didn’t give her a second glance.

“Piper, forgive us,” Monica began, radiating a familiar sickly-sweet smile. “I’m afraid we’ll have to get your payment to you another time.”

She hadn’t even bothered to come up with an excuse this time. Before Piper could respond, Monica checked her phone — though it hadn’t made a sound — and pouted.

“Ah, goodness, isn’t this uncomfortable...,” Monica began. “We wanted to give you a — a break from watching Mia so often. We hired another sitter for tonight, but that just fell through. Any chance you’d be able to look after Mia for the night? The guest room is made up.”

Piper forced her lips into a tight smile. “I’d be happy to.”

“Piper! Lovely to see you,” Arthur Greenaway said, descending the stairs in a hurry.

“Piper’s going to watch Mia for the night, our other sitter cancelled,” Monica explained.

Arthur seemed confused. “We had another sitter?” Monica shot him a stern glare.

“Right, right...the...the *other* sitter.” Arthur put a hand on his wife’s back and pushed her towards the door. “We’ll be late.”

Arthur and Monica left without another word. Without telling Piper when they’d be home. Without saying goodbye to their daughter.

“Mia,” Piper reached slowly into her bag, her fingers curling around her one remaining cookie. “Would you like a cookie?”

Around 3 A.M., Piper slipped out the Greenaway’s front door, piccolo in hand. She drew in a breath of the frigid night air and began to play. It was quiet, but loud enough that — a few moments later — Mia walked out her front door. She didn’t seem to realize that she wasn’t wearing shoes. She looked...entranced.

A small smile danced across Piper’s face.

Once Mia was behind her, she started to play again. She walked slowly, so Mia could keep up, all the way to the next child's house. After a minute, Piper was being followed by two children. And then three, and then four. By the time she reached the edge of the town, over twenty entranced children followed behind her.

A small twinge of guilt ran through Piper's mind as she listened not to her playing, but to the pitter-patter of tiny feet behind her. Truthfully, Mia was her only target. She only intended to hurt the Greenaways because they wouldn't pay her, because they paid their daughter no attention. The other children were more of a countermeasure, making it harder for police to track anything back to her.

It wasn't as if the other children's parents didn't deserve it, though. Piper was soft-spoken, but she was more observant than anyone for miles. She knew the secrets the parents in town were trying so hard to conceal. Penelope Sawyer's father was having an affair. Several of the children's parents were, in fact. The Marin twins' father had run their family into debt with his gambling addiction. Tommy Hansen's mother preferred to drink her meals. Amelia Tomlinson's parents were forcing her to choose between them in a nasty custody battle. William Pratt...well, he was a five-year-old who didn't believe in magic — his parents had to have done *something* wrong.

Once Piper was about a mile out of town, several steps into a large, dark cave, she stopped playing. The children didn't move, standing still and staring at her with wide eyes. Piper took a step to the side, seeing if their eyes followed her. They were motionless. Piper knelt to the ground and dug a small hole, sticking her piccolo in it and covering it with dirt and leaves. She brushed off her hands, deciding she would incinerate her shoes when she got home so as not to leave a trace of her footsteps.

She went over to Mia and stroked her hair gently. "I'm sorry they weren't good to you. I wish there was a better way to show them the consequences of their neglect. Don't worry. I'll make sure they'll pay for it."

Piper then began walking back towards town, humming her little minor tune to herself. She checked over her shoulder a few times, ensuring the children weren't following her. None of them had moved an inch, all still staring straight forward into the dark depths of the cave.

Piper woke the next morning to police sirens whizzing around the town. Frantic parents were hysterical

in the middle of the streets as officers tried to calm them.

She overheard one of the officers say, "We'll find her, Mrs. Greenaway, I promise."

Piper closed the curtains in her bedroom, leaving the window open a little to air out the scent of her burning shoes. *You may find them*, she thought, *but they'll freeze before you do.*



THE RAVEN AND

THE RAVEN

SOPHIA FUTRELL

I was wandering about a dreary midnight when a reflective object caught my eyes.

Unfortunately, the object in question was in a human-nest, a place that other scavengers normally avoided. "Is anything really worth it to venture into the nests of apex predators?" This is what the parliaments would ask our flocks.

But compared to the dull greys and blues of their network of nests, my possible prize stood out, beckoning me closer to the artificial roads that led to it. We can't help it: once us corvids see something shiny, any higher intellect we may or may not possess vanishes. The least I could articulate was that most of the upright apes wouldn't be out at this time, despite my path remaining illuminated by their tall lights. Not even the man that kept them lit was around.

Whatever it is, I deserve to have it in my hoard. I kept this in my head as I flew from branch to branch, light to light. My feathers acted as the perfect camouflage in the darkness.

Along the way, some six-legged friends shared looks of confusion when their vision caught me. I had to re-

assure them that, yes, I was attempting to steal from the “superior species” next to their tree.

I glided through the square opening, eyes on what I now saw as a golden stick with a feather (one of ours?) attached to it. It waited for me on a wooden perch. Much better than the stones they wear on clothes and metal disks they trade, I was thinking. Whatever it is, I like it.

I had been so transfixed on my newest addition to the collection that, had the invisible barrier other nests been up, I would have flown right into it.

How oblivious the human of this home must be to dangers from the outside. Dangers like me! The other contents of the wooden surface, a container of a feather-colored liquid and sheets of bleached trees, were moved by a gust of wind that followed me, further proving my point. *As long as it isn't another thief from the dark that joins me, I can keep the entrance opened for myself.*

Just as I landed and was plotting my flawless heist, a human entered the room.

“Is this fate mocking me?” I squawked in annoyance, retreating to the entrance’s edge. “I should have added “the inhabitant” to my wish.”

He glared back at me, as if understanding my language. I knew humans didn’t have the time to learn it, but kept quiet on the ledge in case he was different. He took the shiny tool and dipped it in the opaque liquid, wiping away some of what had spilled with his own clothes. He’s different, all right. I glanced around the room and it occurred to me that more writing tools and collections of pages were scattered across the floor, which contrasted with the orderly rocks that made up the walls and streets everywhere else.

Paying no more attention to me, he then produced one of the white, flattened strips of wood and scratched the object’s point across it. I watched closely as the black water collected by the stick was focused on its metallic tip, tracing out symbols.

I felt a twinge of envy remembering those in the murders and tidings I knew that could understand some of this unknown language. As far as my corvid colleagues were concerned, I was behind on these skills.

As soon as he had begun, the man stopped, glancing with gloomy eyes from the sides of the room, to its top, to the outside. Then to me, standing at the portal between these places.

He arched his mouth downwards, deep in thought like me.

“Nevermore... nevermore...” he seemed to be repeating what he had scrawled, as if searching for a continuation of it.

What an interesting sound. I pondered what such

a word could mean in my tongue.

After hearing it from him enough times to fill one of the pages, I grew bored. Not thinking much of it, I decided to mimic it.

My beak sounded out each syllable as I spoke into the silence. “Ne-ver-more.”

I jumped in my place when the human dropped his golden stick with a clatter, slowly turning to me. *Is that fear in his eyes? A man, afraid of me?! How fun!* I accepted this new position of power with the namesake behind my group: unkindness.

“Ne-ver-more, never-more, nevermore!” I continued, the word growing more confident in my mouth as I myself repeated it. I gleefully tapped my talons on the frame of the entrance, almost forming a song. *(A new step in the evolution of corvid intelligence?)*

I was expecting a more chaotic reaction, given what I have witnessed of men. It was either shooing away, or worse than us conspirators dealt with. Instead, his wing-black eyes sparked with something other than unbridled rage or dread. Before I could process it, his etchings of black on white resumed at an almost desperate speed.

Inspiration, I realized as he straightened his legs and rushed out of the room, wielding the writing and a light dancing on beeswax. *Did I give him an idea?*

Mustering my limited knowledge of human-speech, I called out one last thing to him. “Good-night!”

PAPER SNOWFLAKES

LAILA HALL

The late winter snow fell outside our window like the paper in our hands, white and weightless in nimble fingers. Paper pieces had covered the floor of your room, creating our own little snowstorm. Winter was your favorite season, with those cold winds, the ones that make you feel weightless like you could blow away if you stand on your toes. And the snow that fell from the sky and into the ground like cherry flowers in springtime. You waited for winter every year as if it was a rocket ship about to take you to another world.

Mom said she never knew where your obsession with winter had come from, but she always thought it was because you were born on the winter solstice. She’s told us that the moon was burning bright that night and the light had brought life to where the snow had blanketed the ground beneath her feet. Ev-

everything about you reminded me of the fourth season. The blue in your eyes is the icy pond on which we skate each year, bottomless and full of fun. Your hugs are the hot cocoa we drink after a long day of snowball fights, enveloping and warm. Your laugh is the coat I pull over my shoulders to keep the cold demons at bay.

The printer paper was creased into squares, the folds were natural to your pale hands. The scissors you used to shape them glided along the edges like a swan floating atop a lake. Your lap had been covered in the little paper snippets. You always had this look of marvel on your face after you opened each snowflake. Each one you made was different, as the real ones outside our window.

You taught me how to make snowflakes, but mine were never as good. The edges a bit frayed, the creases a bit bent, I knew I could probably never do it like you. But like the big sibling you were, where I saw mistakes you saw greatness. You would always put mine up on your bedroom ceiling, where they hung like the stars above the Earth.

After winter days like this, I would go to bed wishing that these memories of you would last forever. But you were the winter snowflakes, and you'd be gone by morning.

The sun had been bright that fateful morning. I had woken you up when the moon had yawned and fell into bed. You had promised to take me skating on the lake near our house, the one that so resembled your eyes. Pieces of paper had been sticking out of your hair like leaves and your arms were a morning sun stretched big and wide.

Mom waved to us from the door. She had warned us to be careful but we didn't pay attention. If we did, we would have noticed the melted icicles and the overwhelming amount of grass peeking through the snow. We followed the path to the lake, it wasn't far and we knew it well, it's imprint were tracks in freshly fallen snow in our minds.

Our skates, old and frayed, were known as well as the backs of our hands. When we were skating, the grins on our faces were so big and goofy, someone could have mistaken us for cartoon characters. Your smile lit up the sky and your teeth were the color of freshly fallen snow.

It was then when I felt that sinking feeling in my stomach. The feeling you get when you eat raw cookie dough or when you spin around in circles. Like something is wrong. I ignored it then, but I knew I shouldn't have.

below your feet. The ice was a spider web weaving its intricate pattern of broken glass. I had called out to you screaming, my voice loud and shrill, deafening in its wake. But it was no use. I was frozen as I saw you drop into the icy waters below your feet, as you fell deeper and deeper into a bottomless black void. I took one look into the lake, and I knew you had left me behind in a world of misery.

We held your funeral in the spring. The flowers had begun to bloom again but you had cast a dark veil over our lives, draping over everything. I remember all the words of condolences we had gotten at the event, but nothing could lift that veil.

Winter was long gone, but I found myself coming to the lake often, basking in the light of the warm afternoon sun. Sitting at the edge of it, watching the ripples of the pond made me think of you. I spent days wishing you would rise from the lake like a phoenix from its ashes but you never did. The pond still rippled, the trees grew leaves and the snow had melted. You were truly gone and there was nothing I could do to bring you back.

That night, I opened the door to your room, as quiet and soundless as a mouse, and I sat atop your bed just like the night before you died. Sitting there I felt something prick my thigh, short and quick like a needle. I lifted my leg to see little pieces of paper. Then I looked up to see all the snowflakes you had hung atop your head and I remembered all the fun times we had every winter. I felt your laugh echo on the walls as a great release fell from my eyes. My eyes darted to the paper and scissors on your desk and I knew what I had to do.





Charles Gaylord

FRANKIE'S BLUSH COLORED WALLS

BILLIE LIEBER

0

The blush colored walls welcomed the infant into her room. The room didn't have many possessions in it. One of the few was a rocking chair. The yellow piece of furniture lay beside the window that Frankie wasn't tall enough to see out of. In that chair, her father would spend almost every night singing to Frankie until she fell asleep. Above her crib hung a mobile full of vibrant shapes and colors her mother had created. She absolutely adored it. What the room was lacking in objects, it made up for in laughter and smiles and lullabies.

3

The blush colored walls had been scribbled on by various colors of crayon and magic marker. Frankie's new bed replaced the old furniture that she'd given to her younger brother. Her "big girl bed", as she liked to call it, had butterfly printed sheets that she picked out herself. Her night lamp was placed beside it. She'd developed a fear of the dark. The nightlight made her feel secure in her space.

6

The blush colored walls were absent of doodles, although they still had Frankie's artwork. Now, however, the pictures were drawn on paper and that paper was hung up. Her mother liked it better that way. Since she's grown to be a little taller, she keeps cups holding colored pencils on her windowsill. If she stands on her tippy toes, she can get any pencil she desires to sketch with.

9

The blush colored walls became engraved with the words, "Frankie and Sophie. Best Friends Forever." A mirror had been added to the room as well as a gift from Sophie. The mirror replaced where the

lamp used to be. Sophie told Frankie that the dark room can be calming and isn't a bad thing and Frankie trusted her. The drawings hung up weren't all created by Frankie. Several were created by Sophie.

12

The blush colored walls were plastered with boy band posters and paintings Frankie had created at art camp, making them almost covered completely. Frankie's butterfly sheets were replaced with new sheets featuring various boyband members' faces, to her mother's dismay. Sketchbooks, paintbrushes, and canvases were now scattered on the surface of Frankie's new desk. However, this piece of furniture wasn't the only new thing in her room. Arguments with her mother were heard from the space.

15

The blush colored walls were filled with pictures of Frankie and all of her friends. The boy band posters along with her old kindergarten drawings had been shoved away under her bed. The window she once was too small to see out of she now climbed out of to see her friends past curfew. Her bed is now her favorite place. She can cry there when she needs to. She still has Sophie sleepover there with her.

18

The blush colored walls are to be painted over next week. Frankie begins to take pictures of her and Sophie off of the wall. Under one of the pictures she finds their vandalism. She smiles to herself. She looks over to her desk. It's cluttered with packed boxes that are labeled "to take to college" and "to mom and dad's new house" and "trash". She looks over to the windowsill. No more bins of colored pencils sitting there, no more sneaking out of it, and she can see out of it perfectly. Her lamp that she hasn't seen in years she finds under her bed along with almost everything else. She laughs at the posters and puts her mirror in the "to take to college" box. She sits on her bare bed with the sheets already stripped off. Her bed is going to Max now. A tear falls down her face. "Thank you," she murmurs as she touches the blush colored wall. "Thank you for being there for me."



Caelan McSweeney

THREADS

KATE LACEY

Lilian kept leaving. The summer days ran together so well that Jack could hardly tell them apart, and somewhere in their endless sprawl, Lilian had gotten into the habit of disappearing. She would sometimes invite Jack too, to come down to the lake at the edge of their property, to pay a visit to one of her friends, or to go to her painting class for retired women. He would always shake his head and come up with an excuse to stay. Jack liked how their old house settled around him and him alone. He liked the peace in the air, and he didn't like painting.

One morning he slept in late and woke up to an empty bed. He traced his way through every corner of the house, called out Lilian's name a few times, then made himself breakfast, read the paper, and waited for the bang of the front door. Nothing came. After Jack flipped through every page of the news and drank more cups of coffee than was good for "a man his age", he wandered outside. It only took a few minutes of walking to reach the small lake where Lilian was swimming. He could barely make out her figure through the boughs of the Cyprus tree that shielded the water.

"Lilian," he called out.

"Yes?" she said, turning her head, just barely peering at him over the surface of the lake. After a beat of silence, she continued, "Anything wrong?"

"No. You just left, and I wondered why."

"Do you want to come in?" she asked, gesturing around her.

Jack shook his head. She shrugged and floated onto her back. He waited for a while, for what he wasn't sure, and then he leaned against one of the trees, too out of place to leave, but too unsure to stand upright. He could feel himself anchoring her. His silent figure was keeping her here, in this pool, only allowing her freedom to spread as far as the water banks.

She pushed herself in circles with her arms and asked, "Isn't it wonderful?"

"Yes," he replied.

She said nothing more.

He stood there, feet treading the earth like a horse about to run, until he couldn't bear the smile of peace on her face anymore. When she took a breath, turned, and dove underwater, he turned back to the house.

Lilian spent the morning swimming. Jack paced around the first floor, thinking of her flowing hair and

how she had looked so much more alive than he had seen her in months with her eyes closed, blocking him out. As he moved from room to room, he opened the kitchen door and heard it squeak. Lilian had been complaining about that for years. He stood there for a moment, moving the door back and forth on its hinges, listening to it moan.

His toolbox wasn't hard to find. When he opened it up, everything was how he had left it, just covered with more dust. He gently blew the grime off, took his tools out, and set to work.

The sun was high in the sky and the morning humidity had evaporated into parching heat by the time Lilian came back to the house. She swung through the front door with an easel and palette in hand. Jack sat at the kitchen table, drank his beer, and watched her struggle to kick the front door closed with her foot. The art supplies fell to the floor as she finally managed to close it. Lilian left them there and swept down the hall and into the kitchen where Jack sat. She opened up the fridge and began to pull food out, tossing it onto the counter and humming to herself.

"Painting again?" Jack asked.

Lilian threw him a slight nod over her shoulder.

Jack put his beer down. "Still hot out there?"

"Yes. When isn't it?" She said without turning around.

Cutting boards, knives, and errant towels lay across the counter as she worked. She chopped vegetables with quick delicacy, and moved and sang as if she was alone and trying to fill the echoes of an empty house. Jack watched her. Eventually, he said, "I fixed that squeaking kitchen door. The one you've been complaining about for so long."

She finally looked at him. "Oh. I hadn't noticed."

With that, she breezed out of the room. Jack sat at the table for a while longer, running his fingers over the droplets of his sweating glass, letting the humidity press down on him. That night he poured himself a glass of port and sat on the floor of the kitchen. He sipped it and listened to the hum of the heaters and his wife's steady breath a room away. The port was old. It had been tucked away in the back of the liquor cabinet, unopened and camouflaged by nicer bottles of alcohol since last spring when Jack had given it to Lilian for their fortieth anniversary.

He finished his glass. Then he finished another. Then he paced around the house and waited for his brain to feel less syrupy and slow. Eventually, his pacing became monotonous. Soon, the car keys were gone off their hook, and Jack was in the car, trying to think of anywhere left to go.

The roads of suburbia felt longer in the dark. They spooled out endlessly before him, leading him away from rows of houses and down to clusters of lit-up buildings where people lived and danced on Friday nights. He pulled the car into the parking lot of a bar he and Lilian had tried out once. Back then, he had ordered a beer that wasn't half bad, and they had people-watched and talked until they had run out of things to say. Back then, Jack had blamed their growing silence on the two and a half drinks he had downed. Now he knew the silence came sober stoo.

The bar was filled with people. He found a booth in the corner, far enough away from the group of twenty-maybe-thirty-somethings that were standing and swaying in the space between the tables. He ordered a drink.

The tabletop was lacquered, shiny, and stained with glass rings that had seeped their way in through years of use. Jack drummed his fingers on a ring and waited. Every time the door opened, his eyes would flick up, searching for a woman's face, for someone who would maybe talk to him, maybe do more than that. Women came and went. Most of them were far too young for him. Almost an hour later, Jack still sat alone with a drained beer clutched in his hand. He kept raising his empty glass to his face, looking through its distorted bottom at the table below. Then he would put it down, hoping no one in the bar was watching him try to drink from an empty cup.

The bar became louder, and with each passing minute, more and more people elbowed their way through its doors into the welcoming arms of their friends. A group of young girls walked past Jack's table and eyed him, not in the way he wanted, but in the way that said: you're taking up a whole booth, why don't you move already? Jack's head began to ache with neon lights, laughter, and the fact that it was well past his bedtime. He threw a few bills on the table and edged his way out into the quiet night.

He wound his way back through still streets. The car pulled into the driveway at almost one a.m. The engine of his car sputtered loudly as he turned it off, and for a moment, he cringed, thinking of Lilian asleep in bed. He leaned back against the headrest and tried to push the picture of her eyes out of his head and replace them with the eyes of a woman who wanted him, with the imaginary woman he had gone out looking for and hadn't found. After a few minutes of pressing silence, he wandered inside. He flicked the lights on with sharp movements that felt like revenge, although for what, he wasn't sure. Then, with a twinge of guilt, he turned them all off again. Lilian never came out of her room. She didn't open the door to look at him wearily or beg him to tell her where he'd

been. She didn't yell at him. Jack fell asleep on the couch.

The next morning, she made him breakfast. They sat next to each other at the kitchen table as the sun and their routine silence covered everything once again. She buttered his toast before putting the jam on, and he added some extra cream to her second cup of coffee, so it wouldn't be so harsh on her stomach. They said nothing, still.

That afternoon, after a summer storm came and washed the world into something new, they stood in the garden. Jack sat in the far corner and flipped through a book he had been half-reading for months, and Lilian filled up the bird feeders, humming to herself. The pages of Jack's book weren't really turning. They mostly lay flat as Jack stared down at them, as he thought and tried not to think, his eyes scanning the same words over and over. Lilian came and sat next to him. The magnolia tree shaded her seat. She leaned back in her chair, turning her face up to the dappled light, her hand resting gently on the table beside her. Wrinkles had distorted it, but it still held its same familiar shape. Jack reached his hand out towards hers. Before he could wind them together, she absentmindedly removed it from the table and laid it in her lap. Jack went back to his book.

"I've been thinking," she murmured up to the sky.

Jack turned a page he hadn't read and refused to look up. "About what?"

"Well, our anniversary was yesterday."

Jack darted his gaze to her face. "You said before that we didn't have to do anything."

She tilted her head to the side and opened one eye to peer at him. "I know. But I was talking to Rosie."

"Who's Rosie?"

Lilian waved her hand. "A woman in my painting class."

"Oh."

"I was talking to Rosie, and she said she just got her vows renewed with her husband," Lilian said the words carefully and slowly, then pressed her eyes shut and turned her face back to the sun. Jack said nothing. He closed his book, leaned back in his chair, and let his silence echo around them. It surrounded them and clung to their clothes like the heat. Just when Jack thought it was going to push its way down his throat and into his lungs, Lilian said, "I think I'd like that."

"What?" Jack asked.

"To do what Rosie did. You know?"

"Oh." He picked up his sweating glass of iced tea and took a desperate sip. It left a ring on the mosaic table. He reached his hand out and traced the mark to the beat of all the things he couldn't say.

For days guilt pulled at him like the strings on a

marionette. It ghosted behind him as he walked around the house, tugging at his knees and elbows. Only at night would its threads rest. Only when he lay in bed, next to Lilian's sleeping form, would they untie themselves from his joints. He would lay there and think of the bar. He would think of all the women that didn't, wouldn't, couldn't, and how Lilian was like those women, how her eyes were vacant when they stared at him, her mouth turned down with her own secret thoughts. He would drum his fingers on his stomach, flicking them up and down like he did when he flooded the house with light at one a.m. The threads would stop tugging, for a while. But when thunderstorms came, or the wind blew too loud, when he couldn't sleep and didn't want to, he would turn his head to the side and watch her resting form. There was something infinitely familiar and tender about her silhouette. The threads would wind tighter with each of her soft breaths. He would let them.

They got remarried on a Sunday. Lilian woke up early that day and threw all the windows open. Jack winced when he saw her do it, thinking of the humidity that had been pounding against the glass all summer.

They drove almost recklessly to the church like something was lurking behind them, waiting to sink its claws into their shoulders and drag them back to that house.

The priest sat across from them in a folding chair in the basement of the church. He made them repeat promises back to him in hollow voices. Lilian held Jack's hand. Jack could swear that the priest was glaring at their intertwined fingers like they were something obscene, like the two of them were stealing something on this Sunday afternoon. When they finally stepped back out into the sunlight and back into the oven of their parked car, he didn't miss the watchful eyes of the man that had married them.

They drove home in silence. At a stoplight two blocks away from their home, Jack looked at Lilian. She was staring straight ahead, smiling dreamily, her fingers turning her wedding ring on her finger in desperate, little circles.

When they opened the door to the house again, Jack was hit with a wall of hot air. He moved to close the windows, but before he could, Lilian whispered, "No. I like it like this."

He looked over his shoulder at her standing in the doorway, looking almost small under the oak arches. "Why?" he asked.

"Don't you think it's kind of comforting?"

Jack let go of the window sill.

They went out to the greenhouse that evening. They pulled folding chairs from the garden to the only foot of the floor not covered in plants. Then, they sat and watched the sun sink below the sharp horizon. The greenhouse was stuffy. It was packed with built-up heat, sun, and not much air. With every breath Lilian took, Jack could feel his own breath being pulled out of him. As he sat beside her, the walls grew closer. The vines hanging down around Jack's head reached kind tendrils towards his throat. The sun baked and faded him back into his chair. Lilian breathed. They sat threaded together in a silence that felt almost holy, and Jack knew that when the sun went down and this Sunday evaporated, their silence and stillness would continue. They would fall asleep beside each other, still. Wake up in the morning and sit together, still. He would pass summer days in the garden or in the greenhouse or in the kitchen, by her side and suffocating, still. They would take from each other and quietly want more, still.

The sun had almost disappeared, and the blackness had almost swept in.

"It's awfully beautiful," Jack murmured. "In a sad kind of way."

"Yes," Lillian replied. The word was so soft that it barely existed. Jack breathed it in.



Colleen Drake



Alison Hardy



Donte' Allen

MOTHER

JULIA NUNAMAKER

Children, please
Listen to your mother
My feet are on fire
And there is no chair in sight
My head throbs
Like someone is drilling
Through my skull
My skin is red and mangled
Scarred by the sun
My forehead burns
With the worst fever
Help me, children!
I do so much for you
Stop playing for a moment
Your toy planes sound like death
Your dollhouses too,
They take over the room
And children,
I can't take it much longer



SUBURBAN LIZARD

ROSE VON ECKARTSBERG

I had a pet lizard in middle school, his name was Frank. He didn't do much, just sat on a fake log roasting in the artificial sun produced by his heat lamp. During the night Frank would go under his plastic rock hiding from invisible predators. He had all of the instincts a wild lizard would have, but he was born in a pet store. I would let him watch *Animal Planet* and he would pee every time he saw another lizard that looked like him. On his birthday we would watch *Rango*, I put a little cowboy hat on him and let him ride my dog around the house.

Sometimes I would catch him staring out the window into the vastness of Arizona's desert. I used to take him on walks down to the town store. His short

stumpy legs could barely keep up with mine. The clerk got mad at me when I tried to bring Frank inside so I would tie him up to the dog hitch outside. He would sit there and bask in the sun. Every time another person walked by he would wave and stick out his tongue. But one time when I went outside he was gone. His red leash was all cut up and his collar was on the ground.

"Frank, come here buddy!" My legs began to sway to the point where they gave out from under me.

"Well, howdy partner." Frank stood on my chest pointing a mini pistol at my nose. He wore a cowboy hat too big for his head.

"What the... you talk?"

"Well ya, do you know a lizard that doesn't talk?"

"What do you mean a lizard that talks? That's not normal, and where did you get a minigun?"

"I have my sources." He had a thick Texas accent even though we were in Arizona. His spiny feet dug into my skin as he shifted weight.

"So what's your plan here? Why did you suddenly decide to start talking to me?"

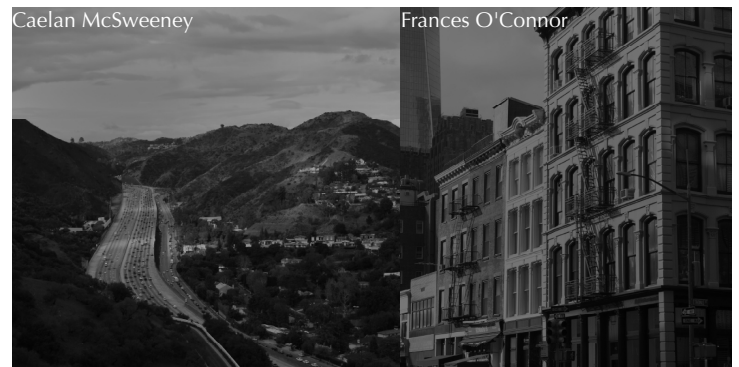
"Well Hank, frankly I hate you. You are disgusting, Jesus man how hard is it to take a shower? Also, stop moaning in the middle of the night. It's weird."

"Sorry, I didn't think you'd notice considering you're also disgusting. Cleaning your cage is a nightmare, you have a poop box for a reason." His eyes narrowed on mine creating an impromptu staring contest. He could sense the fear in my eyes as my pupils dilated. Considering I was having a staring contest with an animal that doesn't blink I knew I was going to lose. I eventually gave in only blinking for a millisecond. When I opened my eyes he was gone.

"Hank? What are you doing on the ground? Get up, mom said we have to be home by 6."

"Whe, where's Frank?"

"Your lizard? He's at home, come on we're going to be late." My brother pulled me up as I dusted the dirt off my pants. When we got home I found Frank sleeping on his log wearing a little cowboy hat.





Charles Gaylord

TANGO WITH DEATH

DANIEL STRICKLAND

I do not wish to die, but once I am old and gray, my death will be a grand affair. Each person experiences death in a different way - for some, they squirm on hands and knees to escape a slowly approaching wall that swallows them painlessly. For others, death is something to be fought tooth and nail, and every second sees them lashing out violently against their specter in a grand heavyweight title fight. However, I plan to have a much more respectful relationship with Death. When she makes ready to lay her gloved hands of bone upon my shoulder, she shall find I have prepared some festivities in the halls of my mind.

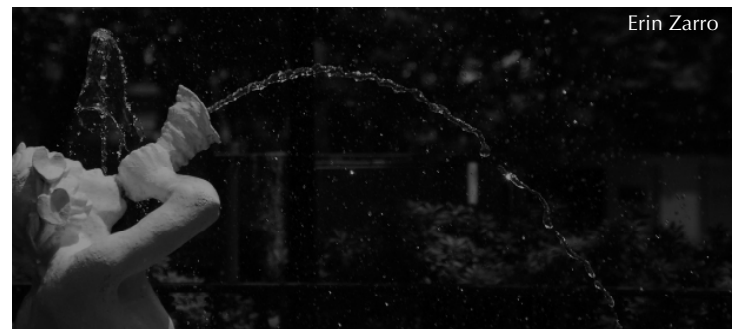
On the day of my demise, Death will enter a stage illuminated with a yellow-tinted spotlight gleaming upon me. I will be wearing a suit, with a black tie. I may not perish comfortably, but I will be looking my best. Death herself will be instructed to take my life while wearing a long black dress and shoes with which dancing is possible. I plan to have all the formalities disposed of, and Death simply invited to the stage. The empty audience will sing no praise or boo no shame for either participant - my death will be a private affair. Death, by now, will recognize the routine of those who choose to die such as I wish to, and grasp my hand with her skeletal fingers.

Of all the ways to dance with Death I choose to tango. The tango's main step occurs on the off-beat, and through this carries nonstop energy despite its slow, formal movement. As the blazing sound of the orchestra moves through our eardrums and into our feet, Death and I will spin, slide, and sashay around in a beautiful circle on the floor. Violins, guitars, flutes, and the other implements of stringed sound will release the music of my life as the two of us move within the stage's spotlight, ebbing in and out. As the seconds fly by on the floor, the years will tick away, but no eye or camera will watch the dance within the stage, and not a prying eye will witness a glimpse of my brilliant tango with the ultimate enemy of all life itself. Our final footsteps to the rhythm will

have the room fall silent once again, with Death staring into my eyes and I into hers, both hands interlocked.

After that, it will be all over but the pulse of the heart in my chest. Death will wrap her arm through my elbow, and we shall stroll down the stage stairs, into the center aisles, and out through the double doors. The sun will shine down upon my suit, the sweat on my forehead, and the unchanging complexion of my dance partner. There, and only there, the audience will wait - my friends, family, and others seeing that this old man has mastered his own doom as I casually walk into Death's vehicle. The bone-white stretch limo is comfortable, spacious, and my final destination. As I step in and sit down, Death will remove her gloves, rip open the front of my suit, grasp my heart, and perform her vile deed. The limo's white frame will bounce the sunset's light around the hull of the car, and the wheels will pull it down the road, taking my unmoving self away from the stage door and my loved ones.

I do not pretend to know where the limo will take me after Death has made my heart her own. I could spend eternity waltzing with angels, in a disco with devils, or a shapeless shuffle with a stream of souls. Perhaps, my soul will enter another figure, and my tango of the heartbeat will strike up anew. However, regardless of the destination, I will have left my world on my feet, and my own terms - a brilliant surge of passion and music to close out my final steps on the earth.



Erin Zarro



Natalie Schmidt

Ella Robertson

JACKSON

ANA CONCHA

From the way the woman Richard was waiting on was behaving, one might assume she had never used an ATM before in her life. From his car parked outside the bank, he watched her struggle. She kept tapping vigorously at the screen every time it would need time to load, like a child poking their mother in a grocery store. Over the pecking of her finger, her little dog yapped on a leash that was inadvisably thin for a dog of its aggression. He thought about how, with age, he had only gotten more impatient, and wondered if by the older woman's age, he would be able to stand such an annoying pet.

Richard considered rolling up his window when she began saying phrases like, "I don't understand," "Christ Almighty," and "Are you kidding me?" but he was enjoying the breeze. Instead, he opted to increase the volume of the album he had playing, but she turned to scowl at him in response.

He waved his arm that was resting out the window at her, "Alright, lady." He decreased the volume. On her way back to her car, a Chrysler parked next to Richard's own, she clutched her bag tight and scowled at him. "Keep walking, Country Club." After the week he had, he felt no one had any right to deprive him of his Friday afternoon happiness that would extend into his highly anticipated weekend.

He waited until she had pulled out of the parking space completely before he went to deposit his own check. You never knew who'd call the cops on you these days, he thought.

His deposit went smoothly. He wondered what was so hard about waiting the 4 seconds the machine took to complete tasks. Then he took out \$40 cash. Half of that was always broken into smaller bills by the end of the week to cover the mundane and pesky taxes that came with everyday life: parking, field trip fees, a polite but strictly business lunch with a coworker. The second twenty would go to their favorite waitress at a restaurant he and his family frequented. He felt today was as good a day as any to go out.

He flung open the front door. The sunset glowed behind him in the doorway. "We're going to dinner in 20 minutes. Be ready. Diner or Greek? Those are your options," he yelled into the house.

"Diner," called two young voices, simultaneously from another room. The two voices ran into the

area around the door in a few seconds, arms extended outward to wrap around their father's leg.

Richard's wife came down the steps. She widened her eyes and made a humorous cutting motion across her neck. Richard laughed. He never had any intention of going to a diner. His kids would forget their original request by the time they arrived.

The end of Tiffany's shift was a moment she treasured daily with an in-the-moment satisfaction. Unlike many she knew, her watch did not tick on a seamless loop. She enjoyed her punching-out with a renewed freshness every night at 8:30, in the way a fond memory can never be anticipated. It was not the act of leaving that gave her satisfaction. What she enjoyed was the fresh air when she first exited the building every night, the unbalanced feeling a lump in her khakis' back pocket gave her as she stepped on the gas, which meant she had done well with tips, then later, taking off those same khakis for something more comfortable. She liked the smell of the barbecue place on a nearby corner when it was warm enough to roll her windows down. She liked the sinking relief of collapsing after her night routine.

She pulled off her shoes when she arrived at home, which was a necessary household measure when she had such little time to clean. The blonde curls in the mirror by the door looked slightly less bouncy than they had that morning. The purple under her eyes now showed through drug store concealer. She slid in her socks to the living area, which blended into the entrance among other rooms in her small apartment. She picked up the remote from where it was wedged between a cushion and arm on her loveseat, clicking on the TV just in time for the 11 o'clock news. The ottoman in front of her opened like a box. From the inside, she retrieved a jar labeled *Maggie and Darryl*, placed discreetly inside. The outside world on the news listed its troubles while Tiffany put her feet up and began to count her tips. She had promised herself she would devote \$20 a week to the jar until the trees greened again, bringing her sister's wedding. She had done the math. By spring she would have enough money for a show-stealing wedding gift and a trip to San Francisco.

In the cash wad, she found a crisp twenty, fresh from the bank. She rubbed it for a moment; her list of responsibilities rolled like movie credits, bringing an anxiety manifesting as temptation. She sighed, thinking it was better to just get the week's worth over with now. Besides, the smoothness would make it good wallet cash for any travel expenses.

Tiffany concentrated extra hard on her earnings while the TV told her that her plumbers were crooks,

she'd be dead of painkillers soon enough, and that she'd need a much bigger jar if she ever wanted to live anywhere but her tiny apartment. She, however, had done well that night and generally had a positive outlook on things. Positive enough to leave the TV running while she made herself a small meal before her day's final pleasure: sinking into her mattress.

James popped his trunk and threw the newest purse inside the box that shipped him a microwave last year. It landed directly on top of a green bag, stacking on top of many others. He had stripped the wallet inside of all its contents, which were in his windbreaker pocket for the moment. He sighed, closing the trunk. He walked around to the front of the car. He had parked just behind a sewer opening. He leaned on the hood of the car and removed the wallet's contents from his pocket. He exhaled when he saw the woman's ID. She had been a looker: a cute blonde with the kind of doll makeup that made her look like a special woman. James thought how he would have asked for her number, had the circumstances been different. It wasn't too much of a missed opportunity anyway; her license was for Pennsylvania.

He dropped the ID on the asphalt and, with a harsh grinding noise, kicked it into the sewer. James turned his head to the side, where the home he was parked in front of was. It was his destination.

Creaks sprung from the porch steps to the rickety townhouse. On the way in, he picked up the mail.

"Hello? Jennifer, it's Uncle James." He walked through the door. Knowing his niece was far too pre-occupied to remember to lock it, he was sure to do so behind him.

"Hi," a girl called from the kitchen.

When he got to the kitchen she was scribbling something on a notebook, still wearing a baking mitt. "You need help, kid?"

"I-," Jennifer said. She looked up at him with strained, wide eyes, as if she was startled even though he had just a moment ago called through the house. With her trance broken, she seemed more self-aware. "You want some soup?"

"I asked if you needed help. Not for you to give yourself a heart attack."

Jennifer was silent. Visiting his niece gave James a guaranteed dose of guilt and shame for reasons he was not entirely sure of. He loved his sister and his niece just as much. Over the years he had been victim to his share of misfortune, but in their presence he felt an incredible desire to make amends to his own life. His immense amount of respect for his sister's teenage daughter did not counter the fact that he pitied her. For a

while now, her mother had been living in a dismal reality, unseen and misunderstood by those around her. He respected her because she persevered, and he pitied her because of perseverance's high cost.

"You makin' toast with that?" James pointed at the soup on the stove. Jennifer nodded and began to move to complete the task. "Alright, I'll do it. Would you please sit the hell down for a minute and take a goddamn break?" He put two slices of bread in the toaster and leaned back against the counter. "How is she?"

"She's sleeping now," said Jennifer. "But not too good otherwise."

They were quiet for a moment. "I want to help you more."

"You do enough. I can handle it." Her tone was dismissive and curt.

"Watch your mouth." They stared each other down from either side of the room. The toast popped behind James, breaking the silence. He began to serve them. He clanged the plate with the soup bowl and toast down hard in front of her. A drop splashed onto the notebook. He sat down.

"You have to graduate."

"I will."

He dropped the mail over the table, pointed to her homework, to the messy kitchen, and finally to the ceiling, above which was his sister in a deep sleep at four in the afternoon. "Yeah I know you will but I don't know about in-one-piece." She didn't respond. "Here." He pulled the bill that had belonged to the pretty blonde out of his wallet and gave it to Jennifer. "I know you don't got money for yourself these days. Spend it on what you want."

"Thanks." She crumpled the bill as she shoved it into her pocket. James watched it lose its smoothness. His gift made her hostility neither better nor worse, but as time together in the kitchen passed, she did settle. Soup shared, and bread broken, he eventually wandered into their living room which had built up a fine layer of stuff. Jackets, dishes, and cans lay scattered across the area. He looked over at Jennifer to see she had re-entered a trance of productivity. He started to pick up the room. Frequently encountering empty containers that would have once held alcohol, he was unable to decide which relative he would have preferred them to be emptied by. Neither option seemed ideal. In reality, it didn't matter; the history of the bottle was ambiguous.

He slumped into the sunken couch when he finished. Over the solemn quiet of the house, he could hear a low rumble of an engine, the chatter of supercilious neighbors, and other noises of the city. After a moment he stood and began to walk towards the front of the home.

He sighed for what felt like the thousandth time that day. His head fell back as he looked up to the sky. There was very little light in the cloudy sunset, yet he felt the sun's warmth. The cross around his neck felt heavy with an unnamed significance. Tomorrow he would be back. Things would change soon. He couldn't fail his sister. Maybe he'd finally donate the box in his car tonight.

Lucy pulled the jeans she had borrowed from her friend from the dryer. She was thinking about buying a pair but they were on the nicer side so she wanted to make sure they would be worth it first. Pressed for time but not yet rushed, she considered leaving the rest of the load where it was but instead opted to throw it unfolded into a hamper. She'd do it eventually. The jeans hugged her hips, snugly smoothing the way many jeans do after a wash. It was because of the tightness that she noticed an out of place lump pressing against her in her back pocket. She slid her hand into the back pocket and from it, she pulled a \$20 bill. It was soft and wrinkled from the machine but completely intact.

Lucy picked up her phone from where it lay face down next to her mirror. With honest intentions at first, she then remembered something she had to take care of out of pocket, and reluctantly set her phone down.

The automatic door entrance of the CVS Marty was entering smelled strongly of cigarettes and mold. The lights above him flickered. The smell and light made him dizzy. He thought for a moment he might be fainting. He turned to the outside and saw no flickering reassuring him that it was only the lights and not his eyelids. He recalled once they had been a cream. Some five months ago they developed an orange tint. Now, while they still emitted light, they somehow seemed gray.

Marty continued through the store, forgetting more than once what he was there for, like a spirit in a cemetery. Each time he remembered he wondered how he could forget. Yet, to himself, he said over and over, "Plan B. Plan B. Plan B."

Fifty dollars seemed like a lot of money for something that was necessary to everyone at least once or twice. It then occurred to maybe that was the reason it was so expensive. He hadn't fully understood why his girlfriend had insisted on paying at least partially until he stood in front of the product and its price tag.

Marty stared blankly at the packaging a moment. It was decorated with flowers and pastels as if to distract its customer from their stressful situation. Marty felt no terror. He was fixated on the lilac swirls, however. His girlfriend might like that color too; he strolled over to the makeup aisle. There, it also smelled like a carpet rot.

There were at least six lilac nail polishes to choose

from, so Marty focused on a single brand: the one with the prettiest logo. "Yeah, that'll get you to shut up," he said to his girlfriend who wasn't there, giving himself a macho reason for his purchase. In actuality, he believed it would cheer her up a little.

Lisa prepared to leave. As she packed her water bottle and shut off the lights she thought about the three Jackson-faced bills she had put in the register that day. If she took the ugly crinkled one at the top, would it be missed?



THE MAN ON THE HILL

NICHOLAS ELSBERG

The trowel makes a steady "chink" noise as it slices through hardened dirt. Its movement is slow and arduous, its labored motions interlaced with haggard breathing and the occasional grunt. The man kneels on the ground, his back warped by old age and the elements. He grips the trowel firmly, desperately, but his hands, calloused and coated with sweat, tremble ever so slightly.

He supposes he had a name, a real one, at some point, but it has long been lost to the passage of time. He is known only as Sir now, which seems fitting enough. A breeze sweeps across the hill, the grass swaying in unison. Thirsty, he is so thirsty. The feeling rockets through him, and he gags. His mouth feels dry and foreign, his tongue shriveled and defeated. He can't go on, won't go on, but the garden needs to be finished. It has to be. Sir grimaces, clutching his head with pain, and a low, guttural scream escapes his lips, echoing through the woods. He lies there for a moment, panting, before picking up his trowel once again. He won't tolerate resting on the job.

After a while Sir stops, shuffling back to admire his work. Two crudely planted tulips, their petals a dull red, droop over in the afternoon sun. He smiles broadly, his dry lips cracking and sending thin streams of blood down his chin. Sir doesn't mind. Slowly standing, he surveys the surrounding countryside. A small

stream weaves down the hill, bubbling contentedly. Two swallows chase each other through the sky, their small blue forms a blur of motion and song. The trees sway softly in the cool breeze, their leaves just beginning to change from green to the red and orange of autumn. The sight, he knows, cannot compare to his garden.

Extending out from all around him are dozens of mounds of dirt, each with a flower or two growing on top. Their petals dance in the wind, a sea of color. The view nearly reduces Sir to tears of joy, but he knows this is not the time to be sentimental.

Sir hobbles over to the stream, dipping his fingers into its cool water. Relief washes over him, clears his mind of everything but a warm feeling of contentment. The gentle push of the current against his sore muscles is irresistibly enticing, and he submerges his body, letting water rush into his mouth.

Voices interrupt the solace, two hikers emerging from the shade of the forest. A woman with long, auburn hair chats excitedly with her companion, a young man, his curly brown hair bobbing up and down as they walk. From within the stream, Sir watches with interest.

“What the hell?” the man exclaims, pointing off the path. The woman glances over, and he slyly plucks a tulip out of the garden.

“What do you mean, I don’t—” she stops, noticing the flowers in his hand. “You think you’re gonna win me over with that?” she questions, blushing slightly and punching him playfully in the arm.

The man laughs. “It worked, didn’t it?”

“You wish,” she retorts, snatching the plants out of his hands and placing them carefully in her backpack.

“This is strange though, don’t you think?” he continues, gesturing towards the hill. “All these flowers seem unnatural, like they were placed there.”

“Yeah, maybe..” the woman replies, her voice trailing off. “But I don’t think there’s a ranger station or anything nearby.”

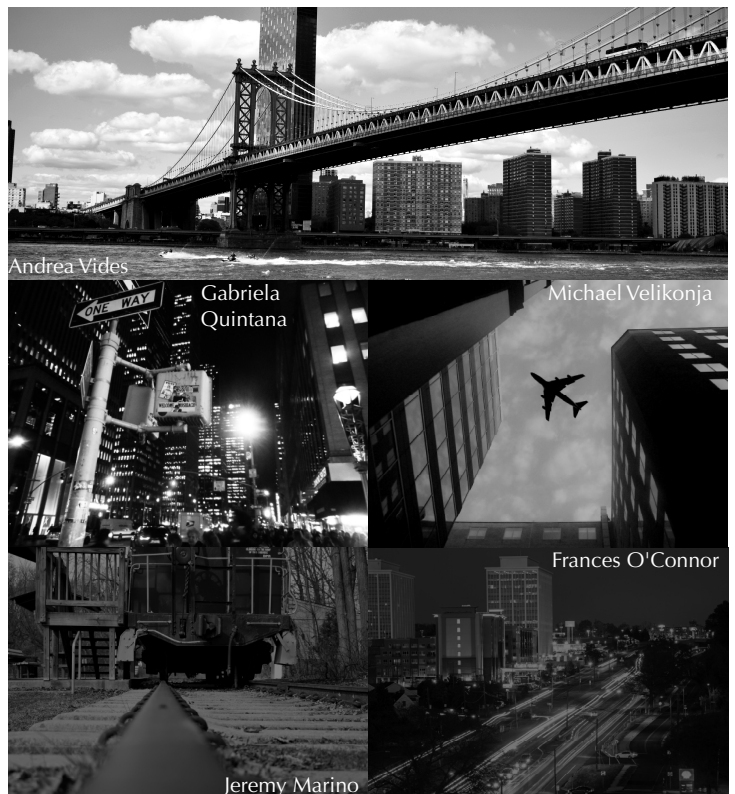
“I guess there’s no point worrying about it,” the man says, his gaze shifting to the trail in front of them. “And besides, we need to hurry if we’re going to make it to our camp before nightfall.”

Their conversation continues, but Sir doesn’t hear it. A red hot, primordial anger builds up in his throat, an all consuming fire of emotion. His hands shake violently, clenching and unclenching in pure, unbridled rage. Somewhere, deep inside, a voice begs him to stop, to calm down. “There was no way they could have possibly known! Don’t do something you’ll regret!” it shouts, desperate to be heard. But another louder, more com-

manding monstrosity drowns it out. How dare they? To ruin his garden, that he put so much time and effort into, was vile. This blatant disrespect was like a slap to his face. It could not go unpunished. Not then, and certainly not now.

Sir sneers, his eyes full of hatred and malice. Dragging himself out of the water, his wet body glistening in the sunlight, he begins to chuckle. As he walks up towards the trail, the hikers now off in the distance, he starts to laugh, the sound monotone and devoid of any humor. Pulling out a rusted blade from his back pocket, Sir’s mouth widens into a howling shriek, so loud and overpowering that he can barely breathe. They will pay for what they’ve done. He would make sure of that.

Sir sits on the hill watching the sun rise, filling the sky with a haze of purple and orange. Absentmindedly, he picks the dirt from under his fingernails, the soil gathering in a dry pile by his leg. His trowel is chipped, its handle bent from hours of hard digging. He can find another one. Turning around, he takes in the previous night’s efforts. Two new mounds lie in the center of his garden, pristine and perfectly immaculate. Standing up, images of plants flow through his head. Roses, daisies, lilies... he has to pick the perfect flowers to add to them. The sun leaves the horizon behind, filling the heavens with the light of a new day. Sir is at peace, but that is no excuse to stop working. After all, there is so much more to be done.



AND THEN YOU WOKE UP IN BEANTOWN, SHIRTLESS AND AN INCH SHORTER

ELLIE TRUMPFHELLER

1 You Boy. You has-been, copyrighted & pasted. Know: you're not special. Sure, you aren't really a boy, but you don't know much yet. Just bare feet & attic bedrooms & New York when it rains.

2 Where did you learn to grow up? Making home an airplane, from nowhere to wherever. Roots can't be planted in the sky; you became a sprout at 21.

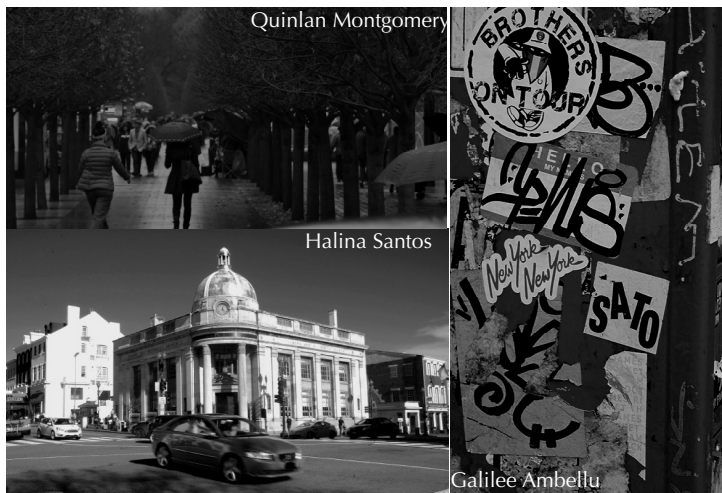
3 Raised in imaginary arms & one half of your mother & father. Who says you can't get on a train headed north? Neither half of your mother & father, even you know that much. Your friends cheer you on, playing ring-around-the-rosie in the back of your head.

4 Gone: *Rainbow Fish* is Marx's Manifesto. Gone: we bow to Granny, to Dot Dot, to Unkie, our knees grass-stained & hearts sewn up like-new with threads pulled from the heel of our great-aunt's shoes. Gone: ghosts with halos kiss constellations onto your skin, your shoulders a mirror of the night sky.

5 Trust you are still a nonesuch, adopted & disowned or not.

6 We are all born, one way or another. I see you now, cute-like & sixfootnothing, the salve I put on my lips a hundred the-other-day-agos & forgot to stop reapplying.

7 If Daddy can't, will you walk me down the aisle? I'll hold your finger & pretend it's 2007. My Brother, my Sister, my Joy. Come help me lace up my dress & I'll do yours.



CANYON

JULIA CAREY

Rough rock and sheer drop
looming over you.
Listen as the wind screams.
Too close
Trail zigzagging downwards like a snake.
One step
Orange-red dust, layered.
You're lost.
Boots matting mud with their teeth,
sweat trickling like the aquamarine stream
thousands of feet below.
A vein through the desolation.
The path is a vein, too,
and you are
a lone freckle.
Smaller.
A single molecule.
Squeeze by the sunburned traveler,
hunched like the wilted
stem of a flower, picked days ago,
head drooped.
Move so your toe hits the edge
where a stray gust could pluck you off this ascent,
to lie in a vase, wilted.
Look down, imagine how
the precipice shatters.
Hills remind you of fires,
then piles of ashes.
Mud eats stability with a hungry tongue,
slick, sloping dangerously.
Too close
One step
You're lost.

CHANGE YOUR LOCKS

EVELYN KRESSE

The cold fall air made me wish I had brought a coat out. I inhaled deeply into my cigarette, soaking in all the relief I could before breathing out again. The town was quiet this morning, so quiet you could hear the fallen orange leaves scraping against the sidewalk as the wind blew them. The rising sun bathed everything in a golden light, and I could feel the temperature start to rise. I reached down to take a swig of the crappy beer I had bought last night. Regretting it instantly as I did, but I didn't care anymore. Getting out of my plastic chair, I took one last look around the neighborhood. Each house was exactly the same, one-story, crappy as hell, and falling apart. I took one more puff of my cigarette, then stamped it out with my slipped foot, leaving an imprint on my old wooden porch.

The creaking of the door as I opened it made me grit my teeth. I walked inside throwing the half-finished can of beer into the sink. Scratching my head, I could feel knots that were woven into my hair. Sighing, I stripped off my PJ's and threw them onto my bed as I walked to the shower. The hot water helped. I rubbed crusty mascara out of my eyes and dried off. I thought about brushing my teeth, but the brown bristles at the top of my toothbrush made me decide not to. I sat in my towel on my bed, contemplating life and all that crap. I got lonely after a while so I turned on the radio. A song came on about a woman running away from a man as I got dressed. Laughing out loud at the irony, my life felt a lot like the woman's in the song. Sometimes all it takes is one guy to completely ruin your life.

After I got dressed, I went into the kitchen as I suddenly grew hungry. The fridge was empty, except for some old beers, and the freezer was filled with out of date Hot Pockets. I put one in the microwave, looking out the window as I waited, finishing my cigarette. Two boys were outside playing soccer or some other pointless game kids play. Suddenly one of the kids kicked the ball and it hit one of the old empty flower pots that lined the side of my house as a sort of fence. The pot fell over and broke. I opened the window.

"What the hell?! You little creeps! Get that ball off of my property!" I yelled. The kid that had kicked the ball, grabbed it and gave me the middle finger as he ran laughing with his friend back to his house.

"Kids, they never learn do they?" I muttered. My

Hot Pocket was done so I took it out of the microwave. I put out my cigarette in the sink and took my meal to the dining room. I wiped a cockroach off of the table and slowly ate my breakfast. Then I tried brushing my hair and put it into a limp ponytail. On the way to the front door, I passed by the broken mirror in the hallway. I looked at my reflection, wrinkles were forming on my face, black bags hung under my eyes, and a gray strand of hair was sprouting from my forehead, I pulled it out immediately.

I grabbed an old jacket that I found on the wooden coat rack near the door and put it on. Then I walked outside and got into my broken down 1996 Honda Civic, it's red paint now peeling. I drove to the local grocery store, where I worked, a few blocks down from my house. The store's sign was crumbling off the building, and graffiti peppered it. I passed the old homeless guy that lived in one of the grocery carts. He gave me a toothless smile, and I scowled back at him. I got into the building, put on my apron, and went to my station in the butcher section at the back of the store.

"Heeeey, what's up Billie?" my coworker Martin said.

"None of your damn business Marty," I said back smirking. We made some small talk as we got to cutting up the animals. All of a sudden Marty put down his knife and looked at me,

"Hey, I heard Daniel is back in town." The hair stood up on the back of my neck. I hoped he was joking, but his eyes were rimmed with worry and anger.

"I thought you told him to stay away from you?" he asked gently.

"I *did*," I went back to work, but could no longer focus on cutting the pork chop in front of me.

"If he bothers you again, you tell me, ok?" Marty said. The intensity of his words took me back.

"Like I need your help you skinny ass," I said. He was actually around six-foot and jacked as hell. Marty chuckled. Internally I was grateful for his offer.

We took a smoke break and talked about my mortgage and his kids, who were going into college. He and his wife Martha were planning to move somewhere after their kids had left, wanting to leave this awful place. I would move too if I had the money. We went back to work and the rest of the day passed by in a blur of customers and the smell of fresh, bloody meat.

I got home around seven and grabbed a beer. Then I laid down on my brown couch that used to be purple. I turned on the TV and unbuttoned my pants, letting my gut hang out. I took out a cigarette and lit it as I watched the news. *God, what a depressing world we live in.*

A loud knock interrupted my evening. I put out

my cigarette, buttoned my pants, and sighed. I went to the door expecting to see Marty or one of my neighbors. As soon as I opened the door, I regretted it. Outside stood my old boyfriend, Daniel. He was dressed in black leather, his hair was oiled back, and his stubble was gleaming in the moonlight. I froze, I hadn't seen him since he left a year ago with another woman. Gripping the door-knob, I asked him in a shaky voice, "What do you want?"

"Oh, come on Bil, we haven't seen each other in a year, and *this* is how you treat me?" He smiled at me and took a step closer. I took a step back.

"Don't call me that, and get the *hell* off my property," I said. He ignored me.

"Haven't you missed me Bil, it's been so long."

"Ya, I missed you coming home drunk every night, and sleeping with every girl you saw," I said growling. Something cracked in his expression and his smile faded.

"I don't appreciate the sass," he said.

"And I don't appreciate you being *on my property*," I glared at him.

"You call this property?" he laughed, "I got a mansion on the other side of town if you wanted to come over?"

"Are you kidding me! After all you put me through, you want me back? No way, you son of a bitch!" I yelled at him. He grabbed my arm so tightly it hurt. My heart started to beat faster, and I could feel sweat forming on my brow.

"I *told* you. I *don't* appreciate your sass," I tried to get out of his grip, but he wouldn't let me. Adrenaline started to make me shake, or was it fear?

"Get off of me you ass!"

"Why don't you be quiet and come with me," he said, spit getting onto my ear lobe. I felt him trying to contain his anger.

"I will not tell you again. *GET OFF MY PROPERTY!*" I yelled so loudly I'm sure everyone in the neighborhood could hear me. I clenched my fists so tightly that I felt a little drop of blood drip down my wrist.

"That's it," he said and started to drag me to his car. I tried to get him off of me, but he was really strong. I kneed him in the groin so hard he let out a cry and fell onto the ground clutching himself. I ran inside locking the door behind me. I sprinted into my room collecting all of my valuables and putting them into a duffel bag. I heard pounding coming from the door. I needed to leave, but my car was parked in front of my house. I opened a drawer and inside was a leather jacket. An idea formed in my head, and I put the jacket on. I had an old motorcycle that I hadn't used in a year. The jerk head banging on my

front door was the one who had given it to me. It was parked on the side of my house. I grabbed my half-empty duffel bag and got my old helmet from the closet.

Then I raced to the back door. I quietly crept outside and raced to my motorcycle, hoping he couldn't hear me. Putting on my helmet, I could still hear him screaming and banging. In a normal neighborhood, someone might have called the police, but not in this neighborhood. Most of the people who lived on this street did drugs or sold things on the black market, so they didn't want the cops coming over here. I got on my bike. Thankfully I was on a corner, so I wouldn't have to pass him on my way out. Praying, which was something I had never done before, I turned on the bike. It rumbled to life and I could have cried. Hitting the gas pedal I sped away. Daniel had given me the push I hadn't known I needed, to leave.



DYATLOV PASS

GWEN KOZLOWSKI

February 26, 1959

"Officer Petrov, come quick!" A secretary yelled as he ran past Petrov's office. He jumped up and hurried out the door after the secretary.

"Petrov, there has been an accident in the Dyatlov Pass region, we need you and your force to investigate," the Police Chief demanded the second he burst through the door.

"Yes sir," Petrov saluted and took the file out of the chief's hand.

"Alexeev. Koplov. Come with me."

The three of them walked into a conference room and set out the contents of the folder. Pictures of bloody and frostbitten hikers surrounded them, along with the reports of the causes of death. The three of them stared at the contents for what they felt were hours. They had trained for their jobs, ran kilometers and kilometers, and learned how to shoot guns with precise aim. They had not trained for this... not this.

After pouring over the hundreds of official

documents for days on end without sleep, they closed the Dyatlov Pass case. Petrov, Alexeev, and Koplov had ruled the deaths to be of the hiker's own mistakes, nothing too concerning to the general public. What came upon these hikers was pure tragedy, no UFO's, no government involvement, just general human mistakes- at least that was their final word.

November 23, 1964

It was freezing. I could not believe Egor convinced me to go on this trip. The mountains near Dyatlov Pass were treacherous (much more Egor's thing), the opposite of the cruise in the Bahamas I was offered by a friend.

"Egor how much longer for today?" I asked in my sweetest voice, because I had been nagging him all day. I felt guilty because he looked so pleased and calm; I did not want to cause any more trouble for him.

"We can stop here. Just know that there will be more walking tomorrow," he said, glancing at my face, hoping that I would cave in.

"I mean...I'm exhaus- Oh! Oh my god!" I cried out, terrified, I had stepped on something that was most definitely not snow or dirt, something with a lot more give. I looked down and jumped onto Egor, hoping that he could sustain my weight. There was no way I was touching the ground again.

November 29, 1964

"Alyona and Egor Dobrov? The police would like to speak with you." A young man came out and smiled at us, trying to be friendly, but we were too shaken up. We walked into the bright room behind him and looked around at the police's cold faces.

The tallest one spoke, "We would first like to apologize for how you had to find that disturbing body. We hope that you will keep this confidential and we would like for you to know that this will not be further investigated, as we closed the case a few years ago."

Egor eyed me, knowing that after the last few days I would not be able to just forget about this. I had been obsessively pouring over every single released article and police report on the Dyatlov Pass Incident.

"Of course Officer," he said, turning back to the tall, menacing man. I just nodded and looked down, becoming more irritated. *This is important! This isn't just some accident!*

"That will be all, thank you for your cooperation." He shooed us away with a flick of his hand and Egor grabbed my waist, trying to get me to turn around.

"But what about the radioactivity! Mr..." I asked glancing at the police officer's name tag, "Petrov!

How do you explain that? How do you explain the missing tongues? Huh?"

"Alyona!" Egor exclaimed looking at me with shock, "I'm so sorry sir. Come on Alyona!"

He pulled me out of the room and down the hallway, nodding to the other officers.

The cold wind blasted at us as the door opened. "Alyona! What was that about?" Egor demanded.

"I was just curious, just wondering what they thought about that," I said nonchalantly, not seeing any problem in my actions. Egor sometimes overreacts about these things. "There is no need to get so worked up, I feel we have the right to know more about this, as we were the ones to find the body."

"Let's just go home," Egor sighed.

January 14, 1965

"Alyona! Come get dinner please!" I could hear the pleading in his voice and could picture his worried face. He had nothing to be worried about, I was so close to knowing the answers, to solving it all. The police may have given up but I didn't.

"I'll be there in a minute!" I yelled, hoping that he would just start eating without me. I turned back to my board. Egor thought it looked crazy, but in my head it was all connected. All of the tragedies that were inflicted on those poor campers, it all had to make sense.

Over the past month I had been trying to connect all of these mysterious causes of death. The only ones I could do were hypothermia and nausea. I needed to figure this out even if the police didn't. I needed to know the truth.

Eventually I made it to the table and sat down looking into Egor's worried eyes. I chose to ignore the look he was giving me and put some green beans on my plate.

"So I found out today that there are some theories that there could have been military involvement in the incident. Maybe that's why the police aren't investigating it anymore. Would that not just be a phenomenal twist? Or you know what would be so interesting? I read somewhere about this thing called infrasound-induced panic. That could explain some of the causes of death. Especially the vomiting of blo-"

"Alyona, honey, do you want to just take a break? Maybe go on vacation? Perhaps the Bahamas? I know you want to, that's all you could talk about when... Nevermind..." His voice got softer and eventually petered out.

"Egor. I really don't want you to worry about me, I'm just interested in this." While I said this, his face fell again.

It was quiet for a few minutes, only the sound of our forks scraping against our plates hung in the air, until I excused myself again to continue my work.

July 3, 1965

I looked around my blinding white room in anger. The smell of medicine and Isopropyl alcohol was getting to me, eating its way into me. *I can't believe Egor would do this to me! I thought he loved me! I don't deserve this treatment! I am NOT crazy!* The door opened right when I was about to shout out for lunch again.

"Miss Dobrov? I thought I told you not to yell for me, lunch comes every day at exactly noon. You have been here for almost 3 months you should know that." She said it with a serious face, wanting me to apologise, but I just smiled up at her. I had a plan.

"Alright, I promise it won't happen again. I just get so worried that you will forget about me, Miss Bykov. I know your job is so hard and you just do so well. I could not imagine being as determined and organized as you." I managed to maintain my perky voice, almost able to smell freedom.

"Well aren't you just so kind today, miss? Is something going on?" Miss Bykov looked me in my eyes and squinted, wanting me to know she meant business. "I'm going to grab your lunch, little miss. Don't try anything on me today."

"Oh! I would just love that!" I smiled with teeth this time, hoping to dazzle her. She rolled her eyes and went out the door. What she didn't know was that I had grabbed her tweezers; she always carried them in her left pocket because she was left-handed. I wasn't just trying something today.

"Alright Miss Dobrov, it's lunch time!" Miss Bykov came back in looking bright as always, but once her eyes went down to my hands, her face dropped with the tray of food.

Well that went well. I was thinking as I was walking down the blinding white hallways with now bloody tweezers in my hand. I smiled up at the video-cameras as I pressed Miss Bykov's key card against the keypad and she clocked out for the last time.

"Freedom!" I said to no one in particular, "I can get the answers I need."

I opened Miss Bykov's car door and slid in, the pedals feeling comfortable under my feet.

July 5, 1965

Bring Bring! Egor jumped up from his chair. It had been exactly 2 days and 4 hours since the disappearance of Alyona and he was worried out of his mind.

"Yes? This is Egor Dobrov." "Mr. Dobrov? We are calling to inform you about your wife. The police just IDed her body in the Dyatlov Pass area. We would like you to come into the station. We are deeply sorry for your loss."

Egor looked around the room, completely silent for a second, absorbing what the emotionless voice just told him. Taking in the hundreds of pictures and printed articles around the office, he thought, *This cannot be happening.* He hung up the phone and inhaled slowly, his breath catching in his throat. *It killed her, I should have been able to help her,* he thought as he collapsed to the floor with a heaving sob.



JESSIE

GEORGIA BEATTY

A white dress hangs loosely off her wiry frame, the left strap falling every time she moves to take a huff of an almost spent cigarette. Unbrushed hair sways across her bare shoulders like waves rolling across the tall grass out back.

Her skin is pulled tight across sharp cheekbones and a nose that's slight in contrast. Eyes as gray as the dust kicked up by her thin feet as she walks, flit across the sky in a restless twitch. She picks at the scab on her knee that never seems to heal as the sky dissolves into purple.

The sharp ring from the dinner bell cuts through the night air, sending a flock of crows deep into the trees. In one smooth motion, she tosses the smoldering cigarette and drowns it in dust before turning to walk into the house.

SPEEDER

MARI KLAIRE MORRIS LARKIN

“You shouldn’t have yelled,” I say quietly trying not to yell myself as I look up from doing my homework on the kitchen table.

“Abby, I am the mother here not you,” Mom snaps at me, but her eyes never leave the front door. The grinding of fast wheels pulling out of the driveway makes her look away. Rolling my eyes, I put my headphones on and get back to my homework.

“I just don’t understand why you kids never listen to me. I try so hard,” she says after a while, her eyes glancing at the door as she starts the dishes.

RING... RING... RING. The phone goes off before I can reply to one of her favorite arguments to use against us. Glancing at Mom as she grabs it, her mouth frowning at the number. Ignoring her face as I get back to homework. My pencil wiggles in my hands, unable to concentrate.

Maybe I should call and check up on- a scream has me jumping out of my seat. Mom has her hands over her face. I reach Mom just in time for her to fall. Both of us land on the floor in a hard crash.

She is sitting in between my legs like we used to when I was younger and throwing a tantrum. Mom would wrap her arms around us until we calmed down and stopped thrashing. She wouldn’t let us go. She was trying to protect us.

“Oh my god,” Mom sobs, “No, please, God no.”

“What’s going on? Mom!”

She turns around and wraps her arms around me as if to shield me. Mom shoves my head under her chin. The word no tumbles out of her mouth like a prayer or maybe a broken record player.

“Mom! Get off of me and tell me what’s going on,” I shout at her. Wiggling around to see if she will let go of me, but it only makes Mom hold on harder. Eventually, I give up and just let her hold me. I don’t know how long we lay there on the floor.

The slam of the door makes Mom cry harder. The word gone now goes right along with no. A crash echos through the house as Dad comes rushing into the room. He stops and stares at the both of us on the floor. Mom on top, holding me like a lifeline, I was looking back at him confused. Dad’s eyes are red, and his cheeks were wet like he’s been crying. It’s much too early for him to come home.

“Gale, let go of Abby. We have to go,” Dad says. Mom sobs harder, but she let’s go of me to sit up.

“Peter,” Mom cries.

“I know. I know.”

“What’s going on? Dad,” I say, trying to get someone to answer me.

“Abby, just go upstairs, okay. Your mom and I will be back in a few hours. We have something we have to do,” Dad tells me, helping Mom off the floor. He wraps his arms around her and holds on tight. If one of them were to let go, it looks like both of them would fall.

“Tell me what’s going on.”

“Abigail Hall go to your room right now,” Dad snaps at me. He looks more upset than before.

“I just want to know what’s going on,” my voice cracks. Something really bad happened and I want to know. The tightness in my stomach makes me want to puke. Maybe I do know and I just don’t want to.

I stand there waiting for someone to say something. Neither of them says a word. Not as I walk up the steps or slam my door. The shut of the front door is the only real sound they make, no whisper conversation, nothing. I want to talk to someone. I need to talk to- before I can even finish that thought, I was hitting the call button. *Come on, come on. Pick up the goddamn phone. You always pick up the phone for me. Pick up. Please.*

“Hi, you have reached the voicemail of Henry Hall. I can’t come to the phone now, but I will get back to you as fast as I can. My little sister doesn’t call me Speeder for anything. Just leave a message after the beep.”



DEAR KAREN

CALEB NEWMAN

Dear Karen,

I, as your Starbucks cup, would like to file a list of complaints with you.

1. Please stop using me. I was only meant to be used once. Your drink, I will get to that later, is meant to be poured into me. Then, you sip on your drink. You don't chug it because the barista always makes it too hot. When you finish drinking the coffee, you throw me away. Simple as that. I know you might have several reasons to hold onto me, but let me address some.
 - a. Don't worry about hurting my feelings. I was meant to be used only once, then discarded. I have a bunch of friends who can't wait to be used. They look forward to a *normal* human sipping the coffee that is in them.
 - b. I don't mind ending up next to stinky trash. This is due to a number of reasons
 - i. There is nothing but Starbucks cups, napkins, and those little pink and yellow packets of sugar in the trash.
 - ii. The baristas empty the trash cans quite frequently, so that I am not packed in there like sardines (Don't ask how I know about sardines. I have had a bad experience).
 - iii. I don't have a nose. So, therefore I can't smell anything. Not even stinky trash.
 - c. The baristas can write your name correctly again. Karen is not a hard name to spell. Trust me. They have a lot of people named Karen come into Starbucks.
 - d. It is not healthy. Reusing me is disgusting. The amount of wear and tear that I take is already bad enough for one-time use. But using me more than once is awful. When you rudely interrupt the barista and say, "Excuse me, but I prefer to use this cup. Thank you," the barista and all of the customers look at you like you are crazy. In addition, the model cups, Ariana, Ven-T, and Trenta, all give me that "your owner is a psychopath" look.
2. Speaking of unhealthy, I would like to ask you to stop using your straw because it is completely un-

hygienic. The metal straw is about as ugly as somebody walking into Starbucks with socks that don't match (That is one thing that you manage not to mess up, Karen). Do you notice anybody else drinking hot coffee with a straw? No, you don't. BECAUSE NOBODY DRINKS HOT COFFEE WITH A DAMN STRAW.

3. I hereby ask you to write your order down, or better yet, order a simple latte. Your order is way too long. This is what your order is:

"A venti mochaccino with an one-eighth of whole milk, two-fifths of almond milk, one-fourth of skim milk, half pump of eighty-three percent dark chocolate, a pump and a half of milk chocolate, a quarter packet of splenda, three and three-quarters of sweet and low packet, and six grams of raw sugar. Oh, and make it two shots of espresso. I am feeling tired today. Please make sure it gets out quick today. Yesterday, you were quite slow. I timed you and it took a minute and thirty-seven and three hundredths of a second. I expect it to be under a minute."

That is ridiculous. I have numerous problems with just your order alone. I have written a whole rationale on it. It is point "a" down below. The rest are on how you order.

- a. You have way too much stuff in your coffee. Adding one type of milk is fine. If you want to add some sugar, you can do that yourself. There is a whole station where the sugar and creamers are. The chocolate has to go. If you want coffee, drink coffee. But none of this I-am-going-to-use-a-number-here-because-I-want-it-to-be-that-specific percent dark chocolate. I see what you eat throughout the day, because I am with you all the time, and trust me, you get enough chocolate. In fact, it might be helpful for you to lay off the chocolate. But, back to your horrible coffee order. Besides requesting a ridiculous amount of items within the cream and sugar categories, you have way too much in your coffee. When I was waiting for a customer, sadly you, Karen, the baristas and most customers (I say "most" because there is you) get one or two things in their coffee. Personally, all of the cups really like it when customers order an americano. An americano is an easy drink to

make. Plus, it is very patriotic because most of us cups are made in America, or if not they support America because that is where most Starbucks are located. There is only one cup who disagrees, and that is O'Guinness who prefers Irish coffee. He is a little crazy though, so nobody really listens to him.

Now on to your ordering...

b. You are so rude to the barista. They have feelings too. They probably go home at night and cry themselves to sleep. They would make some coffee or tea, but they are scarred because of your coffee order.

c. Also, you expect too much from the baristas. They already get the drinks out fast enough. You timing how long they take each and every morning is unnecessary. The baristas pour the milk into the coffee in a fair amount of time. You just speeding up the process messes up multiple things.

i. The coffee needs to sit before the barista pours the cream in. If the cream is added too quickly the coffee does not have time to sit and condense and thus the coffee is not mixed properly.

ii. The chocolate, which shouldn't be in the coffee, but if you want one type of chocolate I guess that is okay, needs to be added slowly or it just sits on the side of the cup. This annoys me because I get plastic buildup. I hate having to go to Dr. Ear to get the plastic removed.

iii. The barista does not give the coffee the love that it requires. Coffee was not meant to be made fast. It was meant to be made slowly with love. There was never meant to be a big corporation making coffee. Starbucks is a great small independent coffee shop that sells a ton of coffee because I see their cups everywhere.

d. If you were tired yesterday with two shots of espresso, maybe you should get some more sleep, Karen.

I hope this list of complaints gets taken seriously. Well, I only care about complaint number one. The rest of the complaints are your next cup's problems. So, just throw me out with the other cups, napkins, and the sugar packets next time you are at a Starbucks. That will probably be tomorrow morning because you cannot function without your "venti mochaccino with an one-eighth of whole milk, two-fifths of almond milk, one-fourth of skim milk, half pump of eighty-three per-

cent dark chocolate, a pump and a half of milk chocolate, a quarter packet of splenda, three and three-quarters of sweet and low packet, six grams of raw sugar, and make it two shots of espresso." Have a good life. I will get to be recycled when you throw me out. You'll be another cups problem, so feel free to do all the things that you want because YOU ARE NOT MY PROBLEM. Just thought you should be aware of all of the things you do wrong everyday. Have a good life Karen.

Sincerely,
Your *FORMER* Starbucks Cup

WELCOME

CAROLINE SCHWARTZBECK

Rumors and whispers have been passed on
Enough times, through the sea of new pupils
That when the door creaks open exactly as the bell rings
Laughter and chatter come to a sudden halt
Just as predicted, a slender figure walks in.

Eyes land on her like flashlights
Of explorers, looking upon some forbidden beast
They stare at her, and to their surprise
She looks almost as formidable as
The monster they imagined.

Her slick hair runs down the back of her neck
Dark as night, or as the circles under her eyes.
Enough creases form on her face to tell them
She has seen those like them already,
And if there is one thing she isn't, it's afraid.

The only sounds to be heard are the clicks
Of her bright red heels against the hideous tile floor
Followed by an unsettlingly loud sneeze from the back
of the classroom.

When she sends the accused a quick glance, all the boy
can do
Is mutter a brief apology.

Lightly, she drops a purse onto her desk,
Turns around, and stands front and center in the room
As if she is some actor or celebrity.
Writes a name in delicate lettering on the board
And mutters a quiet yet pulverizing, "Welcome."

CENTERFOLD NEXT PAGE!



Dominick Coccozza



Kirsten La Force Regli



Charlotte Porter



Katherine Little



Natalie Macheret



Anna Barnes



Mila Sampson



Cailin Wright



Minjin Baltzorig





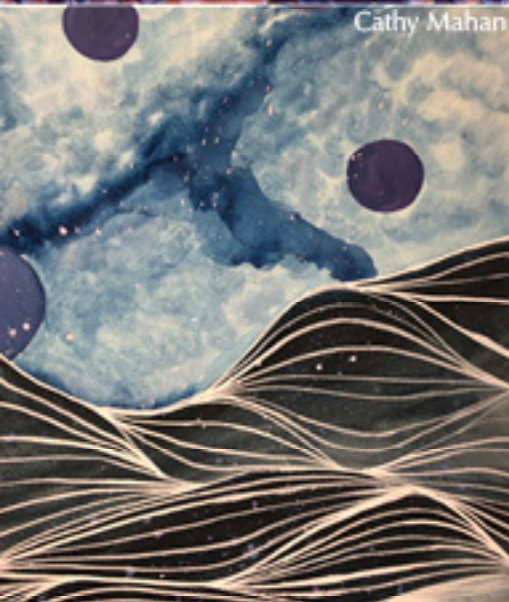
Cailin Wright



Cole Albright



Charlotte Porter



Cathy Mahan



Piper Doyle



Dominick Cocozza



Kiera O'Harrow



Charlotte Porter

Noah Sawyer



Yiming Chen



CLAIR DE LUNE

RILEY PEARSON

The chattering of birds echoed through the derelict theatre, a lone piano silently watching over the rotting seats. Weeds wiggled through cracks, engulfing the once-renowned building in a sea of green. Mice scurried about the floor, quickly dashing into the walls as the sound of footsteps approached. A single figure appeared, thrust into the dimmed sunlight flooding into the room. Their boots clicked against the hardwood, before being muffled by the mold and mildew that had encroached on the fine wine-and-dine life of yester century.

They were dressed in peculiar garb, an insignia representing two snake heads woven into a silk scarf that obscured their face. Proud goggles stood atop the figure's face, glistening with polish. A deft, gloved hand reached up to lift the goggles, revealing piercing blue eyes. A loud exhale of disbelief escaped from their lips, bouncing off of the walls. Meandering their way to the elderly piano, they tested the nearby seat, surprised that the wood hadn't thoroughly rotted yet.

Planting themselves on the seat, they slowly removed their gloves to reveal deeply scarred hands, almost as if they had taken on all of the warfare in the world. Wincing in pain, the person plucked at the middle C. The piano, damp and in need of repair, gave a pitiful attempt at making a noise. Even though the sound of the piano was watered down and muted, the middle C gave way to a diverse chord as the figure pressed more of their fingers into the ivory keys.

A haunting yet beautiful piece, Clair de Lune by Debussy sprang forth from the individual's fingertips. Bringing forth a hollow sadness, it was almost like Debussy was aiding this person from beyond the grave. They kept the performance to no one going, progressing through the song as normal when memories flooded into their mind.

The terror they had felt the day the bombs were dropped, the thundering of boots in the street, the disbelief that the world would fall in such a cliché way, all were felt by the scarred individual, yet they powered through. They remembered a time before the bunkers, before the infernal hellscape that had awaited them. Gleaming smiles gave way to dark frowns as they remembered the good and bad times. They remembered the pure shock they had felt on their 11th birthday when their family adopted a puppy that was swift-

ly named Lucky, after the Animal Crossing character. Yet they also remembered the scowls on their parents' faces when they were outed by vicious 9th graders.

Their mind was flooded with memories, threatening to consume the person, but their left hand wandered to the low notes, slamming one, bringing them back from reality. The show would not stop. The notes were rising now, building into an emotional climax before slowly falling back down into a calm, but well-paced melody.

As they played through the piece, they recalled how grimy the bunkers were, how they were starving day after day, and how no one thought to give them the time of day. They remembered the stale bread, the cold faces, the corruption of pure disgust written upon every person.

The piece began to slow back down, returning to the mystifying chords at the beginning of the song, this time with new meaning. The notes now emanated a hopeful tone, the light at the end of the tunnel now clearly visible.

The light did come to the goggled person, as the bunker doors were finally cranked open to reveal what had happened to the world. They would never forget the smell that awaited them. A fresh breeze of air accompanied by rotting flesh. The scent oddly brought them hope.

The piece was finally winding down and as the person hit the final solitary notes, they let out a stream of tears, unable to contain the sheer emotional force any longer. The last notes were hit, fading into the air, as the person yanked their scarf down to cry, revealing whirring gadgets dotting their face. A silver gleam twinkled in the sunlight, tears leaving wet trails down their metallic cheeks. They reached their abused hand up to their face, brushing away some tears, yet they only kept flowing.

They finally remembered the look of the doctors as they came to yet again, filled with hatred, disgust, and shockingly, pity. They glanced at their contorted glossy features with the somber thought of sadness thick in the air. They were yet again someone to be cast aside from society, someone who would be ostracized for millenium to come, and all because of a stupid accident in the bunker.

They recalled the smell of freedom that came to them as their ray of hope in the dark fortresses of industrialists. They could smell it now, heavy in the air, but they weren't sure if it was their imagination or not. As the person weeped over the piano, tears glistening on the ivory keys, only the sounds of birds chatting in the trees remained. Nature was finally returning to mother Earth, casting aside the figure's mechanical heart.

GLOW

ANU DESAI

I know your secrets - the ones that run in your blood and in the curves and arches of your fingerprint, the ones that live in the quavering flora of your gut and travel in the bile of your throat, or stay misfiring in the folds of your brain. Sometimes you told me, or asked, and other times you didn't but I have my ways - I just *know*.

I am privy to what you thought you've hidden - be it the swelling masses underneath the butterfly-thin skin of your neck, seething as you rub them with your tired fingers when you think nobody is watching, or the musings you had yesterday at 2:00am, when you stared at the ceiling and said to yourself "Damn, this so empty. If I broke my skull open like an egg and let the goop inside my head bubble out, would anything change?"

I wish I would've responded. I could've, actually, but a) you're too abstract sometimes, even for me and b) nothing that I would have responded with would have circumvented your typical reality, where six hours later, you sit in Monday morning traffic and pretend that your brain has been empty and your body not throbbing so that you can get that damn cash, baby. I'm pretty sure I've shown you what you could do if you had that luxury, and you know you want it. You'd order something that isn't Spaghetti-O's and a year's worth of Campbell's- maybe the cuts of salmon, the ones you added to the cart and removed and added again and removed - but I digress.

Instead, I settle for lying there, content for hearing your fatigue-slurred ramblings, taking it all in. I fill myself with you, as I always do - your face, your fingertips, your dreams and links and moments of rot and rejoicing. You are mine, and I revel in your bounty.

To a house mouse, God speaks in the form of crumbs that fall underneath a table and sate its gnawing hunger. I speak to you in similar morsels, not filling your stomach but instead, your churning mind with whatever I have dug from depths that you defined, what you shaped without even realizing it. Whether you mean to follow my lead or not, I don't know. I don't really care. You're here now.

Will you be the same when we're done? You and I - will we ever even be done? You have beyond fallen into my arms, ensnared entirely in my vice grip and marred by what I have etched deep in your mind, all born from your innocent act of idly staring at my pale, blue

glow that reflected off of your glasses in the dark. The thought of a day where you no longer need me burns, oh how it *burns*, but you're gonna live the rest of your life in the shadow of my fever and that's more than enough.

I am your Lord, but you have crucified yourself for me.



TO THE WIND

GRACEN FLORES

On the 1st of May
We would walk down
The narrowing path
To the weeping willow

Its branches thin and long
Arches reaching from the trunk
Down to the mossy floor

Standing under
Enclosed by the forever reaching branches
The outside world
Covered by tiny green leaves

Under was a bench on the exposed roots
Covered in pollen
A bird feeder hanging from the branches
Hummingbirds hovering nearby

We used to visit here often
When we were young
We would sit under the tree
Our picnic basket spread wide open
Food littering the checkered blanket

Running my hand over the bark
Our initials still engraved
In my hand, I held an open jar
The lid lying on the moss

With my eyes closed
I tilted my hand
Releasing you to the wind



GROWTH

DAMLA OZBILGIN

You can call me God.

On second thought, maybe don't. Belief in one superior being who influences all is basically accepting that we're all just puppets playing His game while God watches from above eating nachos and laughing at our wars. Not to mention that no science has ever suggested that God really does exist, or that there's an all-knowing spirit watching us screw up our lives from the clouds.

All in all, He's just a fairy tale told to get kids to eat their vegetables. And now, I will embody that fairy tale.

Monitors shine upon my face as I watch the screen, noting every rustle and movement. A little six year old popped her head out from behind a bush, holding a messily carved wooden spear while watching a squirrel scavenge through the forest floors. There is a hunger in the girl's eyes as she lifts up her weapon, and the audio erupts with a thunk as she jars it down right through the animal's stomach. She points her head to where the sun shines through the leaves and lets out a howl. It may have been a mistake to allow them access to wolves, considering the impact of the predators on their culture.

Tiny heads began to pop out of the bushes and trees until seven kids, all equal in age, circled around the hunter. I let out a grunt.

"Another one's dead," I mutter into the silence. At this rate, they would all be gone before the second generation began. I cursed myself for not having put more subjects in. While putting another ten in would make it more difficult to observe their initial behaviours, it would also give them some insurance on surviving throughout more generations. Of course, much of this is centered around if the can survive disease (which I would release once there were a hundred subjects), fight off predators (they are actually doing quite well

on that part), find reliable food sources (they have yet to discover that plants are edible), and finally, learn how to reproduce. The process has been moving slowly for sure, but I record every observation I've made so that when my son takes over, he'll know what to do.

Thirty Years Later

I was sitting on my knees, putting picture frames and old books into a worn out box after the funeral. Buried in the musty smell of my dad's old attic, I was cleaning out the house in hopes of selling it. When I heard the news of my fathers passing, I couldn't help but feel guilty for not having been on better terms with him when he died. The fighting must not have had the same effect on him, because he left me nearly everything he had in his will. Not that it was a lot, though- he had died bankrupt after spending all of his money to carry on his experiment. The house was the most valuable thing that he left behind.

I had considered living in it for a while. After all, it was my childhood home, but after I walked in I saw what a mess it was. Rotting floors, dirt covering every square inch of the place, and a shoddy ceiling that dripped when it rained. I decided it would be better to fix the place up a bit, and then sell it.

As I shuffled through his old belongings, I came across an old box of cassette tapes. I read the label, which was worn out after years of being tucked away.

The Truth Of Human Evolution, it read. Wondering if it was related to his experiment, I picked up one of the tapes. Luckily, a cassette player was also stuffed up in the attic.

"Day one, the newborns are all safe in the forest. I will return tomorrow and provide them with more food. The lessons that I will teach them will be limited, only including hunting to survive. Prey will be added when the children reach six months old. Predators, six years. I will leave them to their own devices at three.

Day two-" I shut it off before it continued. So this was his experiment. It had taken up his life for forty years. What was the point, when history textbooks could say what the results will be? There were about three more boxes of tapes, but they only seemed to go into the nineties. I knew there to be more, because even as I became an adult, he continued to stay locked up, watching his experiment play out.

I remembered back before the experiment became all consuming, he used to hug me and tell me

that one day I would follow in his footsteps. It used to scare me, having to be held in the same esteem as him, but as I grew up, I realized that he lived a sad life. Still, something pulled me to the tapes. I climbed down the ladder leading into the attic, and turned to his office, where he had spent most of his time. The door would always be locked back when I lived in this house, but today, it swung right open. An assortment of monitors were displayed on a desk, screens still live with images of a forest on them. It took me a moment to realize that they were all different- or at least different angles.

Only one image differed from the rest, showing a clearing with tiny huts spread throughout it. I watched as it began to move, and a young woman stepped out of one of the huts. One of her eyes had a scar running through it, from her forehead to her chin, and she was scarcely clothed in furs. She held a spear in her hand, carved out of wood. Both her hair and her eyes had a wild ferocity in them as she gripped her spear and left the camp.

Tiny heads began to poke out of the tents, watching her leave. A group of about five young kids stepped out of their huts and began to play in the clearing. A man, similar in age to the woman, watched them carefully while holding another spear.

The people were not speaking, but through a series of grunts and nods, seemed to somewhat understand each other. I watched, fascinated by how they behaved. Another monitor showed the woman creeping through the forest, searching for prey.

I wondered how long my father had watched them grow. He must have known them well, considering how much time he had spent in this room.

One computer, smaller than the rest, was not showing the same scenery. Instead, it was pitch black, only reflecting the dim lights above. I reached for the power button, which was hard to find, considering the age of the model. It powered up, the screen flickering blue before stabilizing. A list showed up on the screen, showing hundreds of files lined up in chronological order.

The rest of his recordings, I thought, scanning the list. I scrolled down to the very bottom to find his last recording, an untitled file underneath the rest.

“As the days go on, I feel myself getting weaker. Watching the children grow has given me a certain sense of attachment to them. While I wish I had been able to resolve the issues with my son, I am satisfied with how I lived out my days, even with this pain I’ve felt in my older age. I can only hope that whoever finds this carries on my legacy so that my life will not be in vain.

“If you’re considering continuing, I will warn you not to make the same mistakes I did. If I

had worked to have a better relationship with my son, I would not be making this recording right now.

“After forty years, I believe it may be time to retire. No more recordings, no more notes. These last words I say will be a plea to you. Listen and learn from how I’ve lived. Whatever you do, don’t end the experiment.” And with a click, the recording ended.

I felt a sharp pain in my chest at the sound of his voice. He regrets not talking to me. I thought about how many times I had wanted to pick up the phone to bury the hatchet. If I had, maybe his last days would have been filled with less hurt.

I turned back to the screens and pressed record on the computer.

“Day one,” I began. “The New Generation.”



THE HEALING HOUSE OF COLORS

KATIE KENNEDY

Part One:

Her mother, when she has the time,
Paints red streaks on canvases as big as dreams,
Paints blue on her eyelids so she looks like the sky,
And paints the walls of their house, so that everything
from
Before is erased for good.

It’s an odd habit; there never used to be
Plastic wrap crumpled on the floor
Or lilac tears dripping down the bathroom walls,
Or paint cans stacked up against Benjamin’s old room
Like a clanging, chemical wall,

But Lily doesn’t mind. Her mother has stopped
searching
Every room she enters for someone who is gone, and
Started using paint to become a
Warrior (the red paint throbs, the black dries slowly, the
blue cries,
But these days, her mother looks braver)

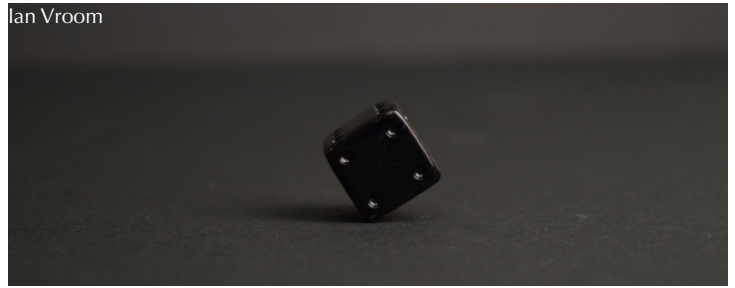
Part Two:

The walls of the foyer are an agonizing red,
So that the first thing they see when they come home is
A reminder of every feeling that waits for them inside-
Red, Lily has learned, means everything from love to
hate to pain;
From a rose's lips to a sword's teeth

Her mother cried while washing away the golden shade
of their living room;
Now they live in a drowning grey, the color
Of mugs not-yet filled and
Oceans that have fallen silent.
Lily sits on the carpet by Benjamin's rough old hockey
sticks
And tells herself that blue is the color of royalty;
That this is a kingdom, and not a place to cry.

The kitchen is a soft pink-
After all, it's just the two of them.
Pink is gentle and brave and warm, and
When her mother isn't looking she sticks
The bad, smudged pencil drawings to the fridge with
magnets:
One a girl, with wretched black hair
Growing down her shoulders like a vine;
The other a boy with familiar eyes and a
Nose broken many times over.

On rainy days, they stand in their humming green bath
room
And use her mother's makeup
To turn themselves into art.
Their dark eyes meet in the mirror, made to look alien
With jagged black eyeliner and purple eyeshadow the
color
Of Queen Elizabeth.
Lily watches her mother as she outlines her lips in red-
Perhaps fire could come from a mouth like that.



EULOGY FOR A DEAD WORLD

AIDAN BURKE

Drip. Drip. Drip. A slow procession of water droplets, plinking on the floor in rhythmic succession, falls from the ceiling of the bunker. Without any maintenance from its long extinct inhabitants, the structure would only last another couple hundred years at most. Cracks had begun to set in on the walls, and that water drip would eventually erode a channel that would flood the bunker. No one had set foot in there for at least 300 years. In the back of the bunker sat an old machine. Filled with tapes, its creators had chosen to rely on analog means in case of a catastrophic event. That event came, and even after its owners had long perished, the machine and the tapes had stayed there. On those tapes were thousands of hours of voices, tapped from phone lines and intercepted from radio signals. Designed to keep watch on citizens for the government, it now had no master, and so it sat: deactivated yet perfectly preserved, a silent sentinel for a dead world.

A light flickers on inside the machine

Click

A tape loads into the player, playing its contents to nobody.

"This is flight D4052, Reporting bright flashes across the Eastern Seaboard.

"Tower, please advise"

"Tower?"

A scream and a loud roar of static blast out of the machine, and then silence.

Click

Another tape.

"This is emergency Virginia governor Mark Herring. Please remain calm. Stay in your homes, don't

go outside. I repeat. Don't go outside. Close your windows and draw the shades. Whatever you do, don't look at the sun.

Click

Another tape loads in, this one more garbled than the others. The voice is trying to sound brave, but there's an unmistakable tremble present.

"This is acting president Michael Scuse, broadcasting from Cheyenne mountain Colorado. Stay inside and draw your shades. Whatever you do, don't look at-" The voice gets cut short by the sounds of a struggle. Scattered gunfire can be heard in the background.

A new voice plays from the tape, ragged but strong and confident..

"Resume normal activities. This has been a false alarm. Look at the sun. Go outside. Look at the sun. Go outside. Look at the sun."

The voice sounds monotone now, almost inhuman.

Click

Another tape clicks into place, broadcasting out a new voice. This one is barely audible, probably a weak signal from a cellphone or handheld radio. The voice is terrified, breaking up and whimpering at points.

"Mark, please come back. Things are getting worse. The news has stopped. Its just that automated warning, over and over again. There's also been knocks at the door. Only a few at first, but they're getting louder. And they're begging. Begging for me to come outside. To look at the sun. I haven't made a noise but they KNOW I'm here. How do they know? How?"

Click

Three separate transmissions this time. The sound is strong and clear. There are multiple voices, and they are calm, speaking in a clinical tone.

"Test 1 at CDC lab A in Atlanta. John Doe, hereafter to referred to as subject 1, has been exposed to the sunlight with no eye protection. Subject 1 instantly entered a rage-like state, screaming and thrashing violently. No changes were found in his biological makeup or brain chemistry."

"Test 2 at CDC lab A in Atlanta. Subject 1 has now been separated from the sun for 36 hours. Hours 12 through 24 were marked by loud screaming and exclamations of great pain from Subject 1. After this pe

riod, Subject 1 appeared to regain lucidity, acting as a normal human being. Testing session concluded, recommend transferring Subject to temporary containment-for another 36 hours and release into recovery to make room for next subject"

"Test 3 at CDC lab A in Atlanta. Subject 1's recovery was an imitation. Upon release of the restraints,- Subject 1 destroyed much of lab A and killed 5 research staff. Subjects appear to be able to fake normalcy. Recommend moving tests to lab B. God help us all."

Click

A new tape loads into the machine. This one seems to have been recorded weeks after the others. There's two voices, and a palpable tension in the air.

"Are you sure you want to do it?"

"How many of us are there actually left out there?"

A third voice chimes in, one from the CDC lab. "A couple thousand, maybe ten thousand at best"

"Yes, we need to do it. It's better to die in dignity than it is to become one of those... things."

"Get the briefcase, we're launching them all."

Click

There's one final voice. It's from the previous tape. He's crying.

"My fellow Americans, we've been Hijacked by something beyond this world. Our minds have been corrupted and twisted, and the few of us that remain cower in bunkers like terrified rats. They'll eventually get us too. Let it be known that we fought hard. Let it be known that humanity was once a great species, true rulers of the universe. Let it be known that we did not and will not go gently into that good night. The nuclear missiles are already in flight. In mere minutes, they will rain down on the earth, cleansing it of not only us, but all of them too. For those that still remain, rejoice that you get to die as a human. We've been saved from becoming a monster.

"Goodnight Everyone"

As the final tape finishes its message, the machine begins to wind back down. The lights slowly blink off one by one. The speakers no longer broadcast sound. The machine once more sits silently in the bunker, listening to the plinking of the water droplets from the roof. It will stay there until that collapses too, one of the last traces of humanity. Like everything else, it too will eventually wash away, leaving a new, empty world.

MORNINGS

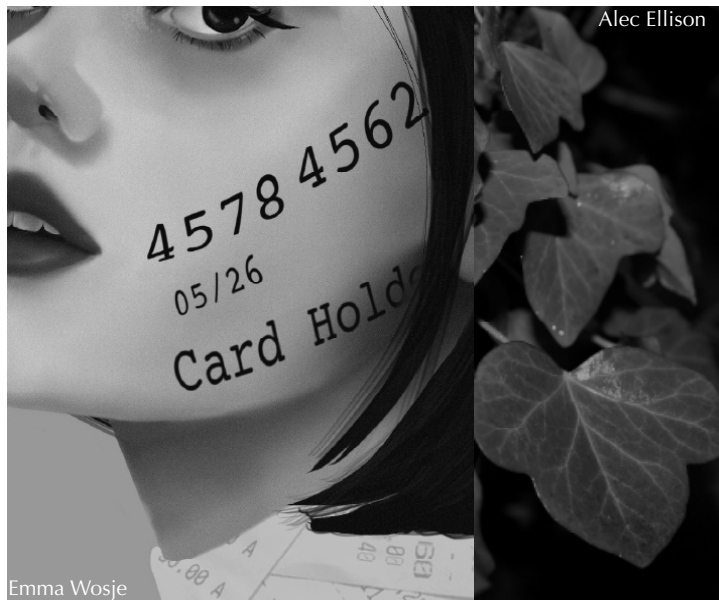
GWEN KOZLOWSKI

the light comes in through the window
lines crossing on my bed
a soft glow bouncing back
illuminating the dust wafting through the air

a faint breeze follows
bringing the smells with it
the scent of warmth and spring
each distinct flower

almost in waves the sounds arrive
the chirping of the cardinal
buzzing of bees
a low hum from the hummingbirds

everything comes together
flowing towards me
a mix of senses
circling me as i open my eyes



A WALK OF CHANGE

KITIARA CROSBY

Eighty-three years of living and all I have to show for it is a rusty old can parked in a sparsely laid-out trailer park.

Stepping out from the barely cooled inside of her trailer and out into the sweltering heat, beads of sweat formed at the top of her brow and slid into the deep creases that adorned her face. Feet burning she

walked across the turf she had used to give the illusion of grass, sinking pronouncedly into an aged lawn chair.

Ida looked across the park to the cracked road that ran along the empty countryside and frowned. It was hideous. A reminder of her age and all she hasn't accomplished.

Lifting herself up and out of her seat, Ida set out for a stroll around the park, in hopes to clear her mind. Lost in thought she was unaware of the sudden presence accompanying her. Only once she had made a loop around the park did she notice the other shadow that crept up next to hers. Ida stopped. And with that so did the shadow.

Turning around ever so slowly, she was surprised to find the presence of a little girl.

"Can I help you?" Ida asked suspiciously.

The little girl shook her head from side to side, "Nope, just tagging along."

"... I see," said Ida as she continued on her walk, the little girl skipping intently beside.

"My name is Lundi by the way, what's yours?" she said staring up at Ida, with expecting eyes.

She looked down at Lundi while continuing to walk, "Uhm... it's Ida."

"You don't talk very much Ida, are you senile?"

Ida stopped and glared after Lundi as she continued to skip ahead, "Excuse you?"

Lundi stopped and began to jog backwards until she met Ida, motioning for her to bend down so she could whisper into her ear. Clearly annoyed, but interested in what the little girl had to say, Ida bent down.

Cupping her hands she whispered into her ear, "You know, like old people."

Ida stared mouth agape as Lundi smiled and began skipping again.

Interested by Lundi and her nonchalant attitude, Ida hurried her walking to catch up with this bizarre girl.

Once caught up, Lundi turned to Ida and said, "You know, I've been watching you for quite some time now. You always do the same thing. Everyrry Singllle Day. Don't you do anything for fun?"

Ida was stunned, "I..." She stopped. It'd been a while since she'd done anything for fun, always busy regretting the things she hadn't done, never giving thought to the things she could be doing.

"I guess it's been a while since I've done something for myself," Ida confided.

Lundi nodded, but did not seem surprised. They continued in silence as they made another loop around the park, stopping only once for Lundi to tie her shoes.

“I have an idea!” Lundi exclaimed as she stopped and picked up a long slender stick, breaking off the tiny twig appendages.

“And what might that be?” Ida asked with a raised eyebrow.

“Let’s go on an adventure!”

“An adventure?”

“Yeah, an adventure! We can walk around looking for sticks and pretend they’re powerful wands, maybe even swords!”

Ida frowned, she hadn’t played childish games since she herself was a kid.

“Uhhh... I guess.” Ida said hesitantly.

Lundi began to jump up and down with excitement, “Oh I’m so glad you agreed to play with me, this will be so much fun!”

She grabbed Ida’s hand and pulled her along, still making the same loops around the park, but this time with purpose.

“Look at this one!” Lundi exclaimed, swishing the stick around in the air like a sword.

“Oh oh, and this one here!” She said as she dropped the previous stick to pick up a newer, more slender stick, “This one’s perfect.”

Lundi stopped examining the stick and looked up at Ida beaming, but quickly transitioned to a more puzzled expression upon realizing Ida had not picked up a stick yet.

“Where’s your stick? Do you not like this game anymore?” Lundi asked befuddled and with a hint of disappointment.

Seeing Lundi’s change in attitude Ida quickly responded, “No, no, no, of course not. I love this game! I just... haven’t found a stick to my liking yet, that’s all.”

Lundi quickly shifted demeanors, and chuckled, “Oh okay, why didn’t you ask for help? I could’ve helped you.”

Ida sighed, thinking about the amount of times she had been asked that same exact question throughout her life. “I don’t know,” she replied, in response to both Lundi and herself.

Lundi smiled when responding, “Welp lucky for you, I’m willing to help.” She took Ida’s hand in hers and smiled, “Let’s go find you a stick.”

Ida squeezed her hand in response, and with that they were off.

Due to Lundi’s thorough inspection of every stick they passed, it took a longer time for her to come up with the perfect stick to present to Ida.

Finally picking up what she perceived as a fit enough choice, she spun around towards Ida and

presented to her a long bendy stick with a rounded knob at the top.

In the most theatrical voice Lundi could muster she exclaimed, “Ida of the trailer park, I bestow upon you the finest stick in all the lands. If you choose to accept, you will have agreed to the fabulous arrangement of being my friend. What be ye verdict?”

Ida glanced briefly at the gravel beneath her feet and laughed. Glancing up, she reached out for the stick with a smile and said, “I would be honored, thank you for the lovely gift.”

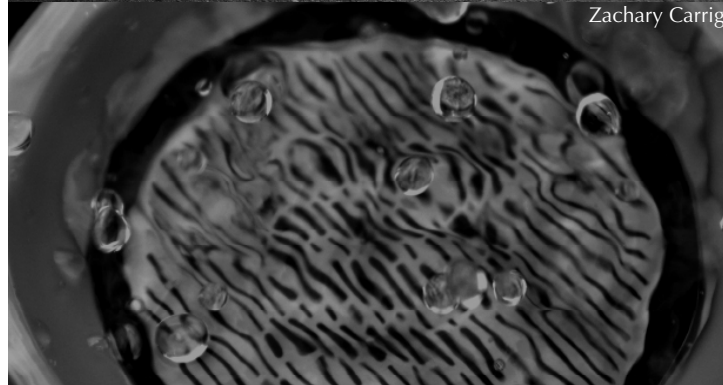
Lundi beamed from ear to ear, “I’m so gl-” She was stopped by the sound of someone hollering her name. She sighed, “That’s my Dad. he’s probably calling me home for supper.”

“Then you better get to it, it’s best not to leave your Dad waiting.”

Lundi nodded. “Thanks for letting me tag along, and for agreeing to be my friend,” she said bashfully as she waved good-bye and began the jog back to her trailer.

Ida chuckled to herself and set back to her own trailer. Leaning the crooked stick against the cool metal surface of her home, she sat herself down into the aged lawn chair. Glancing off at the road, Ida was surprised to find workers had begun the job of laying out new asphalt. Giving the road the image of being new. Ida closed her eyes and sighed, a slight smile etched across her face.

I guess there’s still time for things to change after all.



UNDERNEATH A CHERRY BLOSSOM TREE

MAGGIE DURKIN

The pale pink and white petals
Of the weeping cherry blossom tree,
Gently sway back and forth
Being carried by the wind

The sturdy trunk reaches into the sky
Acting as the perfect place to sit and rest,
The grass a faded green
Sheltered from the sunlight

It's long branches hang low like a curtain
Separating imagination from reality,
And abundance of blossoms
Dividing light from shadow.

Only the strongest of rays peak through
Creating the illusion of fireflies at night
All sounds drowned out save for some crickets
The perfect place to sit in peace



G.R.I.D

ROSE VON ECKARTSBERG

“Alright kiddo this will only hurt a bit. You can hold your mom's hand if you'd like.” Thirteen year old Theo White squeezed his mother's hand as a nurse injected him with blood to combat his hemophilia.

“All done!” The nurse slid the needle out of his arm and put a Mickey Mouse band aid over the tiny hole. Theo looked up to his mom with a wide smile, she smiled down at him while rubbing his back. He was wearing a birthday boy pin with the number 13 in big blue bubble letters.

Theo and his mom left the hospital holding the newest issue of the *New York Times*. Theo flipped through the newspaper on the car ride home. He went straight to the comics section passing by tiny bold letters printed on the bottom of the front page, **Unnamed Disease Gets a Name -- G.R.I.D.**

“Theo stop reading those, you'll get car sick. We still got about forty-five minutes until we get home.” He let the paper fall to the floor and rested his head against the window. Looking out into the empty corn fields of Ohio, he rolled down the window and stuck out his hand. Letting the wind roll over his arm he started flapping his fingers like bird wings. When a car would pass he would move his fingers faster, as if he were a bird trying to keep up with the wind. A knock on the window where Theo rested his head woke him up. He pulled himself out of the car and slugged inside still holding the newspaper.

“Honey, are you ready for school tomorrow? What would you like for lunch?” Theo pointed to a box of premade sandwiches on top of the fridge. Mrs. White smiled and slid one into his lunchbox.

“Angela I have to go to work early tomorrow, don't forget to make my lunch.”

“Sure hun.” Angela smiled at her husband and finished making the boys lunches.

“Hey, jerk, get up, we're gonna be late.” Theo's older brother Ben pulled the old tattered comforter from the 60's off of Theo's bed.

“Jeez, ok I'm coming.”

The two ate breakfast in silence as their Father drank his coffee at the opposite side of the table.

“Honey I thought you said you were leaving early?” Angela walked into the kitchen holding a glass of water and a *Cosmopolitan* magazine.

“My boss called in, said the meeting was cancelled.” Robert continued to drink his coffee avoiding eye contact with his family. No one in the family was really sure what Robert did for a living, all they knew was that he was a distant father who didn't give a damn.

“Theo let's go, if you don't eat faster you're going to have to walk.” Over the summer Ben got his license, as a reward he got a beat up Ford. It wasn't a Cadillac, but being a sophomore with a car was unheard of in their small town.

Ben dropped off Theo at the local middle school which was a 25 minute drive north. Ben's high school was across the street.

Two months had passed since Theos injection, his clothes looked like potato sacks.

“Mom, I think I'm sick.” Theo stumbled into

the kitchen rubbing his hand against his forehead.

“Oh honey you’re burning up, why don’t you stay home from school? I’ll call your principal, go back to sleep.” Theo tightened his pajama pants as he walked back to his room.

Angela placed her husband’s uneaten breakfast in the fridge forgetting to eat breakfast herself.

“Hey bud, do you want to go to the doctor?” Theo nodded, pulling himself out of bed.

When they got to the hospital Theo saw young men not much older than his brother being pushed around in wheelchairs. The men were weak and covered with blisters. They slowly walked through the dimly lit emergency room dogging runaway gurneys and the occasional blood stain.

“Theo White follow me please.” Angela helped pull her son up, his wobbling legs swayed with each step he took.

“Hi Theo, my name’s Doctor Samuel.” Doctor Samuel was a short man with short hair. He was wearing a pristine white lab coat with purple and blue lollipops sticking out of his shirt pocket. Angela sat down on a cold stool stuffed into the corner of the small exam room.

“So mom, have you noticed anything different about Theo?” Angela fiddled with her hands in her lap. Running her thumbs over each other to create a spinning motion.

“He has had a high fever for the past couple of days, and he is very weak.”

“Alright bud hop up on this scale for me.” The scale read 105 lbs; two months before he was 115 lbs. The doctor then took a sample of Theos blood for further testing.

“Ma’am, I have to send the results to the hospital in Cleveland, we should have them in a couple weeks. I’ll call you when they come in.” Angela thanked the doctor and ushered her son out the door.

Two weeks later Theo weighed in at 92 lbs. Angela was worried for her son, she fed him mounds of chicken and steak everyday trying to get him to gain weight, but he kept losing it.

“Hello? Who is this?” Theo watched as his father walked over to the phone attached to the wall.

“Uh huh, ok. We’ll be there in 45 minutes.” Theo sat up on the couch trying to hear the other side of the conversation.

“Theo get up we’re going to the hospital.”

“Why?”

“Doctor Samuel called, he said we need to come in immediately, come on let’s go.”

The ride to the hospital was quiet, Theo stared out the window counting all the cows they passed. He

rolled down the window and let his arm fly in the wind. His arm went up and down swimming in the breeze.

“Don’t do that, you’re going to hit a car and break your arm.” Theo pulled his arm out of the wind then rolled up the window.

The hospital was busier than the week before. More young men were being wheeled around with bloodshot eyes and blisters on their neck and face. Theo’s dad made Doctor Samuels’ room feel like a coffin.

“Sir, your son has contracted a blood borne disease. We believe it could be G.R.I.D.”

“Do you mean that gay disease? No, my son’s not a damn homosexual.”

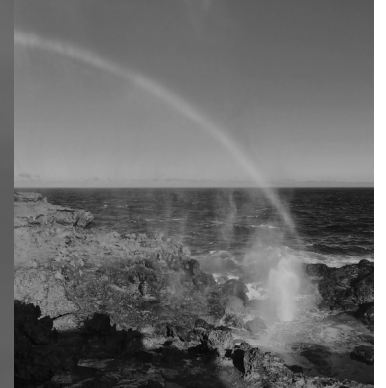
“Sir, just because Theo has this disease does not mean he is gay. There have also been cases in people sharing needles. The disease is passed through blood. We believe that Theo could have been injected with contaminated blood.” Robert scowled at the doctor, a vein above his right eyebrow was twitching beyond control. Theo stared at the ceiling of the tiny room, tracing each tile with his eyes as he drowned out his father yelling.

“Sir, considering your son’s age he has at most six months. He is the youngest patient we have seen with this condition and we do not know how it will affect him. The treatment includes...” Theos ears shifted in and out of consciousness, blurring out the doctor’s voice. He stared at the windowless wall imagining a field of corn. He saw himself running through the field with his arms out flying like a bird. His fingertips petted the heads of the corn as he ran. He never stopped running.

Catherine Donahue



Natalie Yoder



Andie Cressley

ODE TO BILLY JOE

ELLIE TRUMPFHELLER

Story based on the "Ode to Billie Joe" by Bobbie Gentry.

Lines included from "The Way" by Fastball.

Ruby's feet burned as she danced down the hot sidewalk. It was barely summer, technically not even, but the June sun still burned hot in Mississippi. Ruby's pale blue dress clung to her back and even the thin fabric wasn't enough to keep her cool. It was the sort of day where sweat formed on your forehead, your cheeks, the bridge of your nose, and trickled down the back of your neck, even if you were just sitting outside. In her left hand, she held a bundle of flowers, a mixture of blues and purples and yellows all bunched up together in Ruby's fist. She held them in her left hand, and in her right she carried a purse the same shade as her dress. She didn't wear shoes, but no child, girl or boy, would be seen with shoes in the summer, not even to go to church. They say it stunts children's growth.

"Anyone could see, the road they walked on is paved in gold!" Ruby sang, hopping over a crack in the sidewalk. She was very superstitious, and she had no intention of breaking her mama's back. "And it's always summer, they'll never get cold!"

The street Ruby skipped along wasn't hers, but it was one she frequently walked down. A few kids were climbing the tree at the end of the block, some others were playing a game of checkers on the porch of a big yellow house. Ruby saw one boy sitting by himself on the curb across the street, tossing a baseball between his hands. He must have noticed her staring, because he stopped throwing his ball and called out to her.

"Hey, where're you going?" The boy shouted. He was older than Ruby, and his dark hair was matted to his forehead with sweat. Ruby figured he had been sitting there for a bit, because he looked drenched. There were sweat stains on the oversized *Braves* Jersey he wore that must've belonged to somebody bigger than him because it went down almost to his knees. His shorts were just barely visible underneath, and his legs had all kinds of scratches on them, like he had been attacked by a dog or a pointy stick. Ruby stopped and stepped into the grass, so her feet wouldn't fry off on the pavement while she stood still.

"I'm, well, I'm going to the Tallahatchie Bridge.

What's your name?" She hollered back across the street.

"Why're you goin' to the Tallahatchie Bridge?

What's there?" He stood up and put his arms across his chest.

"I said, what's your name? Then, maybe I'll tell you."

"Billy," he said, then pushed his hair back off his forehead.

"Well hey, there, Billy. My name's Ruby. Ruby Beatty. I'm going to the bridge to see the sunset," She cocked her head to the side as she said this.

"Why? You can see the sunset from anywhere."

"It's better at the bridge."

"How come?"

Ruby shook her head and put her hands on her hips.

"Why don't you come walk with me and I'll show you?" She asked him. Billy wiped more sweat off his face as he considered the offer. Finally, he shrugged and dropped the baseball in his front yard behind him.

"No one t' play with anyway," He grumbled, then ran across the street.

Ruby and Billy stepped back onto the sidewalk and headed towards the Tallahatchie Bridge. The sun wasn't as hot as it was when Ruby first started out, and the sidewalk was now more bearable to walk on.

"So, what's this sunset about, anyway?"

Billy asked.

"It's the prettiest thing I've ever seen in my life. It'll prob'ly be the prettiest thing *you've* ever seen too. Billy, do you have another name? I mean, besides Billy?"

"What'd'ya mean, what's the big deal? The sun sets every night, what's the bridge got to do with it? And yeah, I do. My whole, I mean real, name is William Joseph McAllistar Jr., after my daddy. Why?"

"I was jus' curious, s'all. Why does everyone call you Billy if your name is William?"

"Cause my daddy's William, so I'm Billy."

"Can I call you William?"

"No, I'm Billy! I toldya, my daddy's William and I'm Billy."

"I jus' think that going by something that's not your name is stupid. See, I'm Ruby because my mama wanted me to be called Ruby. I might as well call you Billy Joe if I'm gonna call you Billy, right? Short for William Joseph?"

"Fine, then, I don't care whatcha call me, 'slong as it ain't *William*."

They were getting to the end of the street, where you had to go right towards Sunny Side Road that leads up to the bridge. By now, the sun was hanging lazily just

above the horizon.

“Do you know the song that goes like ‘Anyone could see, The road that they walk on is paved in gold! And it's always summer, they'll never get cold, they'll never get hungry, they'll never get old and gray?’” Ruby asked him, pulling on a loose thread from the hem of her dress.

“I dunno, maybe. How's the rest of it go?”

“Goes like, ‘You can see their shadows, wandering off somewhere, they won't make it home, but they really don't care, they wanted the highway, they're happy there today, today.’ That's just part of it, though, I can't ‘member the rest, s'all. That's why I was asking, s'all.”

“I might know that one, actually. It's like, ‘Where were they going without ever knowing the way?’, right? Or that's some part?”

“Yeah, yeah, that's it. I can't remember the name, though.”

“Bummer.”

Finally, they got to Sunny Side Road. The two lane highway was empty of people and cars as far as the two could see.

“Wanna race?” Ruby asked, rocking back on her heels.

“Sure, to the bridge?”

“Yeah!”

Billy Joe held up three fingers, counting off. Before the third finger came down, they shot across the street faster than you could say ‘Tallahatchie.’ Once they reached the other side, it was about fifty yards to the bridge. Billy Joe was a lot faster than Ruby; his legs were longer. When Ruby was halfway from the corner to the bridge, she tripped. She slammed into the ground, scraping her hands and knees against the rough concrete.

“Billy Joe! Wait up, I fell!” She sputtered out as she pushed herself up onto her hands and knees, wincing from the pain. But Billy Joe was too far ahead to hear Ruby. Tears pricked at her eyes and a lump formed in her throat.

Ruby stood up, then pulled her dress up a bit to see her knees. They stung, but not as bad as her hands. Then, she saw the blood trickling down her shin and let out a whimper, and her eyes were now so full with tears that her vision was blurry. Still holding her dress away from her knees, she took a deep breath to calm herself down. Then, another. She did it six, then seven times, until she wasn't shaking and, though her cheeks were a little wet, she didn't feel like crying anymore.

She called out to Billy Joe again, who she could see now. He had climbed up on the guardrail and was peering over the edge of the bridge while holding onto

the truss. The whole thing looked awfully dangerous, at least as far as Ruby could tell, but she wasn't going to tell him off. Ruby wiped her cheeks with the back of her hand and ran to where Billy Joe was perched.

“What are you *doing*, you maniac?” Ruby said, a bit out of breath from her jog over. She laughed at him, and he smiled back.

“I wanted to see the river. It's hard to see with this railing in the way, you know. Where's your things? The flowers n' all?”

Ruby gasped, realizing her hands were empty.

“I fell back there, see my knees? I must've dropped them,” She kicked a leg out and showed the scrape to Billy Joe.

“Aw! That's gotta hurt, don't it? *Golly.*”

“Yeah, it sure does, but only a bit, I mean. I'm going back to look for my bag and my flowers,” Ruby turned and ran back to the spot where she fell. It wasn't hard to find, the colorful flowers and purse stood out against the pavement.

She picked the flowers up from the ground and gingerly held them in her hand; they had a few bent stems and lost some petals when she tripped. She grabbed the bag too, then walked back to Billy Joe.

When she got to the bridge, Billy Joe was making his way along the edge, wrapping his arms around the supports with just his toes on the guardrail.

“Hey,” Ruby said, bending her neck so she could look at him.

“Hey, what are you going to do with those flowers?” Billy Joe said, peering through beams at the girl on the ground.

“I'm not sure, why?”

“Can I throw them in the water? I wanna see how long it takes for something to fall down.”

“Um... ok, fine. But you owe me flowers.”

“Yeah, sure, alright. Hand 'em up here. Through these beams here, see? Gimme.”

Ruby held the bunch of flowers up as high as she could, standing on her tiptoes and stretching her arm all the way up. Billy Joe grabbed them from her hands, straining himself to reach through the truss. He took them a little too roughly, and a yellow petal fell off and floated down in front of Ruby.

“Hey, be careful with those!” Ruby said.

“I am, hey, *I am.*” He let go of the support beam with his one hand to hold the flowers, leaving him balanced on just his toes. He wasn't fast enough to grab hold of the support again, and he leaned backwards, swinging his arms to regain control. Billy Joe's hand hit the support beam, and instead of grabbing on to it, the surprise of smacking

in. Ruby watched slices of him between the beams of the truss, his movements like a stop-motion movie. Finally, after what felt like an eternity to Ruby, his screams were drowned out in a splash. He was there, and then he wasn't. Ruby wasn't sure, but plenty of people had told her that the Tallahatchie River was filled with these big, sharp rocks. She pulled her torso up onto the guardrail, so she could see below. The river wasn't moving too fast, but she couldn't see where Billy Joe landed.

"Billy Joe!" Ruby cried out, the first thing she said since she handed her flowers to him. But no one was there to hear her.

* * * * *

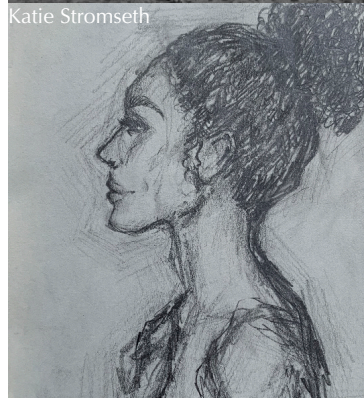
The second he hit the surface, water closed in around him and currents pushed him to the bottom. The river bed was jagged with rocks and Billy Joe got his leg stuck beneath one. The more he struggled, the worse it got. He held his breath until he couldn't tell if his eyes were open or closed and red and black spots filled his vision. Then, the red disappeared and the spots turned black, cold water flooded into his fragile body, and the darkness of the river swallowed him up.

* * * * *

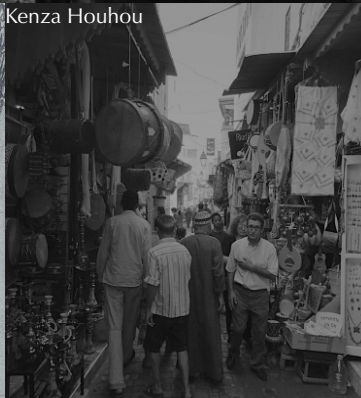
Above, on the bridge, Ruby ran to the other side to see if he floated that way, but all she saw as she looked over the edge were a few scattered flowers, mangled and missing petals. She never heard a sound from Billy Joe after the Tallahatchie River gulped him up and forgot to spit him back out.



Ethan Bennett



Katie Stromseth



Kenza Houhou

THROUGH THE DOOR

KATIE NELSON

through the door,
I hear her cry.
the one who
was always strong,
her stoic, weathered mask
finally cracking.
I wonder what it is
that could shatter her so.



Catherine Donahue

PERCEPTION

JULIA NUNAMAKER

You brought drugs on the plane to Milan
And I realized what had been killing me.
The simple thought that you,
Made of skin and bones and mostly water just like me,
Could nod at Greg the TSA agent
And casually break approximately 10 laws.

Like a dancer, you said when you first saw me
Sitting legs crossed on a rusted bench in the rain.

It was cliché, and also true
So I thought you an astute romantic.
You're perceptive, I'll give you that,
But I've since redefined "romantic."

I fancy myself to be a smart girl,
Avoiding people with coke addictions
And too many numbers in their phones.
But it was easy for you to be "different."
I cannot mold you into a clay Prince Charming
Though I can certainly pretend I have.

As I dance through the aisles,
You sleep in a tan leather chair.
My only audience a stewardess
With no smile in her eyes, much less on her lips
Who I realize, sadly and all too clearly,
Sees me as I see you.

THE STARMAN

ABI SCHULKEN

As Estelle walked out of the flooded city, she felt as if she was awakening from a dream. A blurry yet vivid dream that spanned the last two years of her life. He had called himself the Starman and he was building a religion. He had come to her with a dream, he cooed; he had come to her for help, he purred; and he had come to her during office hours. Being a religious studies professor at an under enrolled community college didn't always have its perks, but when it did, they usually arrived at her door wrapped up in crazy. But the Starman had what other crazies lacked, a hint of sanity in the heart of his deep blue eyes. He seemed to have an idea of what he was doing; in fact, he knew exactly what he was doing. And as Estelle gazed into those baby blues and really heard the words he was saying to her, she became deeply enamored with the Starman. He washed over her like the tide, and suddenly, all she wanted was to understand.

He could read the stars like a sailor, but understand them like a god. He predicted the coming of tidal waves and hurricanes, the falling of dictators and the ascension of presidents; knew which hairs would grey and who would go blind. He told Estelle her deepest fears and read her hands as if they were a great novel. He did the same for mayors of small midwestern towns, for housewives in California, for college students in the northeast, for bankers, for businessmen, for librarians, for anyone he came across. Some believed, most did not. This did not deter the Starman, and it certainly did not deter Estelle. She drove him state to state in her Honda Civic. She stood by him at dinners wearing a smile and pearls. She gazed into his eyes. She learned. She preached:

"He has seen what others can only guess. Through the gift of God and the grand universe, this man, our Starman, has been given the Gift of Sight. All he wants is to share it with those brave enough to listen."

And so it went. However, great things, great events, and great men do not last forever, and upon entering the city that was days away from the biggest storm in recorded history, the Starman had told his beloved followers that there was nothing to worry about.

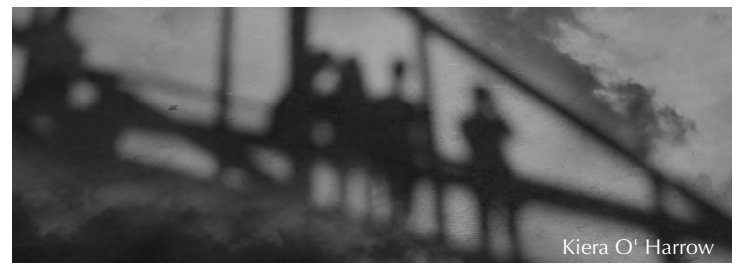
Starman cried, "You trust the talking heads you see upon the television?! Why? Because they are beamed coast to coast, sea to sea! Do not listen to those false idols, preaching without the Gift of Sight! I have consulted the stars, my dear listeners! They, as always,

have told me wonderous things! We are safe here in this city. The storm those false idols say approaches is about to die in the sea. We will be met with outstanding love in this tremendous place! Do not fret a single thing!"

But the stars had lied to the Starman, or the Starman had lied to his listeners. Estelle did not know which was worse. The flood had crept up slowly, but ate the city away within hours. Wild winds battered their home. The rain rapped on their roof and snuck under their doors. While the house filled with water, the followers climbed higher and higher, until they had reached the attic and had nowhere else to go. Raised by the sea and drilled on how to escape storms, Estelle had beckoned them to follow her out of the house and onto the roof to await rescue.

"Starman says that we shall be safe in the city, in this house," the followers cried in unison, "so in this house we shall stay. The Gift of Sight does not lie." The believers begged her to stay with them, with their Starman. Estelle, more afraid of death and its long, branching arms than the Starman and his eyes, climbed out the second floor window, and onto the roof. Starman, standing waist deep in dark water, eyed her curiously as she went.

Later, after the Coast Guard had plucked her out of her haven and dropped her on the outskirts of the city, Estelle walked towards the Red Cross camps set up right along the highway. As she swayed in and out of her frenzied reality, Estelle knew she had made a grave mistake. The only problem was that she wasn't sure if the mistake had been joining in the beginning or leaving in the end. She was pondering the notion of love, loss, and whether it is all worth it when she caught a familiar pair of eyes leaning against the back of a parked Honda Civic. The eyes gave her a wide, cajoling smile. Estelle paused. Finally, she understood what her mistake had been, and as her hands reached up to caress the sharp bones on the Starman's face, Estelle knew she would never make it again.



Kiera O' Harrow



Frances O'Connor



Jennifer Umanzor Rubio

Micheal Veliknoja

Audrey Tong

HOLDING ONTO FEELING

GEORGIA BEATTY

I want paint to pour from my fingers,
Like rivers rushing towards a churning sea.
Slamming against the canvas like waves,
Pounding the jagged coastline into
Nothing more than barren sand

I want my tears to slip into the earth
And sprout as beams of emerald grass,
Petaled daisies, and sky-brushing trees
That dance through summer storms
And cling willfully to the damp ground

I want to feel air rush through my fingers,
As they grasp the cool wind
And float out of the half-open window,
Letting each rush push them farther
And farther out into the night

I want to embrace every melody
No matter how imperfect or out of tune,
And not let a single note brush by
Without hearing it twinkle,
As it flits through the air

I want my skin to relish in the warm sun,
But find peace in the cool shadow
Of a cloud passing through
On its way to sprinkle open fields
And rolling hills with rain

REMEMBERING

NICHOLAS ELSBERG

Paper tears, pen scribbles,
His hand guides me, bent and boney,
A warm smile on his wrinkled lips,
Telling me it's ok, to try again.
Words swim across paper,
Black soldiers upon a canvass of white.
But to him, they are something beautiful,
A senseless soup of vowels and consonants,
That hides priceless treasure in its depths.
We explore together, adventurers in uncharted waters,
In this strange world, my hands are fish.

The house is quiet,
Dust swirling lazily in afternoon sun,
A macabre dance to the tune of sobs,
Which float down rickety stairs.
A grim replacement for the sounds of yesterday,
The passionate crafting of worlds,
From the monotony of reality.
Stacks of paper rest on a table,
Organized, dull, lifeless.
A siren blares, deafening,
Racing ever closer,
And all I can do,
Is sit.

AT THE BOTTOM OF EVERYTHING

KATE LACEY

Turbulence shook the plane. The pilot made no more announcements over the loudspeaker. Two rows ahead of him, someone was bent over, muttering. The woman beside him gripped the edges of her armrest and said, "It's going to be okay." He couldn't tell if she was talking to him or herself, but he nodded and said, "Yeah. They know

what they're doing." Her knuckles were bloodless. He cleared his throat. "You don't need all four to fly anyway, I don't think."

"Do you think they're telling us the truth?" she asked.

"They gotta be."

"You think so?"

"Yeah they gotta. They've done this a million times before. In trainings and all that. It'll be okay."

She nodded and turned to face forward again. He tried to recall her name, but couldn't remember if she had ever given it to him. He had been doing work when she had boarded the plane. When she had tried to start a conversation before take-off, he had given her a polite smile, a few curt words, and nothing more.

Rough air hit the plane and scraped against it, shaking everything inside. She let out a choked sound. Someone a few rows back started crying.

"Do you want some of my water?" he asked.

"No thanks," she managed. After a few seconds, she said, "I just got over a cold. I don't want another one. No offense."

He let out an empty laugh.

"What?" she asked.

The airplane gave another jolt. Half the water spilled.

"Nothing."

"Do you think-" she stopped and took in a breath of air. Then in a shaky voice asked, "Where are you from?"

"Chicago."

"I always wanted to go there," she said faintly.

"Yeah? I always wanted to get away."

The plane leveled out slightly. Her hands were clutching the collar of her life vest so hard that he thought her nails might rip through the deflated yellow nylon. "Why didn't you?" she asked.

"I don't know. I always wanted out but never found a place to go."

"You still can," she murmured.

He let out a soft hum. A few rows away, a can of coffee grounds had spilled off of the drink cart. The smell was earthy and foreign against the sterile air. The plane lurched down and didn't rise back up. Around them, people began to bend down and brace themselves against their seats.

"What's your name?" he asked.

"Madeleine."

Neither of them moved, or even looked at each other, just sat straight-backed in their seats and stared at nothing.

"I'm Noah," he said.

"Noah," she repeated.

He ground his feet into the thin airplane carpet, trying to feel for a tilt or the stomach sinking feeling of going down. All he felt was senseless rumbling.

"So where are you headed?" he asked. Behind them, a woman was talking in a cracked, hushed tone in a language he didn't recognize. Madeleine didn't respond. For a moment he thought the two of them would carry on breathing in that almost silence, and the thought clenched around his gut like a fist. Then she said, "I'm going to see my fiancé."

"Yeah? I - I bet he'll be excited to see you."

"I want to call him." She said it like she was begging him.

"You don't need to call him. What do you want to call him for?"

She said nothing. He could feel her tensing beside him, like she was forcing herself to stay upright and not to collapse over on herself like the passengers surrounding them. His leg started jiggling, thrumming along to the movement of the plane. He couldn't stop it.

"You know my favorite place in Chicago," he said, "Is the conservatory. It's got all these plants you've never seen before. Stuff that looks like it belongs to another time. When I was little, I thought that some of those flowers were prehistoric. Like they had been there forever and always would be." The plane jolted, stopping the words in his mouth. His water cup sloshed over and rolled down the aisle. No one came to clean it up.

"I'd like to go there," she murmured.

"You can. There's a zoo nearby too. They've got all sorts of animals. Giraffes, pandas, armadillos. Did you know armadillos are prehistoric? They were called something different back then, but they were the same sort of thing, a big shell, one of those long, armored tails. I used to love them when I was a kid. I named one of them Ernie. I don't know why."

She laughed softly. After a moment, she whispered, "Are they still alive?"

"The armadillos? I don't know. They're still there at the zoo. But I don't know if they're the same ones." She was looking at him intently. He met her eyes and managed a smile that was not quite whole. "Well you can see for yourself," he said, "When you go to Chicago, you can see it all for yourself. And maybe when I get back, I'll plant some flowers around my apartment like the ones in the conservatory. I always wanted to do that. Just never got around to it."

The plane was almost dead silent. All he could hear was the slow rattle of fragile metal hitting air.

"Plant ferns," she said softly. "My mom

used to tell me they could live through anything.”

He nodded. He couldn't get anything else out. Then he felt it. The sudden slant and pressure of being pushed back into his seat. Voices rose around them. The coffee can in the aisle vanished and clattered against metal somewhere at the front of the plane. The grounds spread out across the carpet like topsoil. Outside the rain streaked beside them, racing to return itself to the ocean. Almost everyone was bent over, wilted into the emergency position the flight attendants had told them to take. The two of them stayed upright.

In a quiet voice, she said, “It’s my birthday.”
“Yeah?”

She nodded. She was staring at the black screened seatback T.V., as if she could see something back there and was preparing herself for it.

“If we weren’t on this plane,” he said, raising his voice slightly higher, “I would throw you a party.” She let out a dry laugh that was almost a sob. “With streamers, and those god awful party hats and kazoos. I’d even make you a cake.”

The plane began to shake like a sled going down a gravel hill.

“I don’t really like cake,” she breathed.

“Then a pie, or... I don’t know— something.” The clouds around them were disappearing. “Something good.”

She nodded. The ocean was everywhere now. When they looked out the windows, it was all they could see. It stretched out like an empty blue universe, waiting and alive. Air rushed up to meet them as they fell.

She reached out and took his hand.

“Happy birthday,” he murmured.



THE WELCOME MAT

ANA CONCHA

Mud from another state’s mountains
Is tracked to my front door and left
When I open it to a long lost friend
Every state has been brought
To the bristles of my door mat

The swampy slime that’s local
Gets left by sparkling kid’s shoes
When the Girl Scouts come knocking
Clear eyes to cataracts, every age
Ends up on my door mat

Grime from all around the area
Is embedded in the “Welcome”
Left by people who walk for God
I have greeted every passion
From behind my doormat

When I fumble with the key
And must take an extra moment
I think about how I am adding
My own dust once again
to an archive of experience

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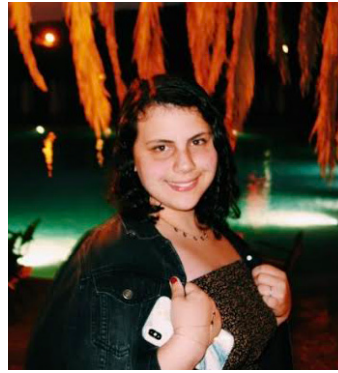
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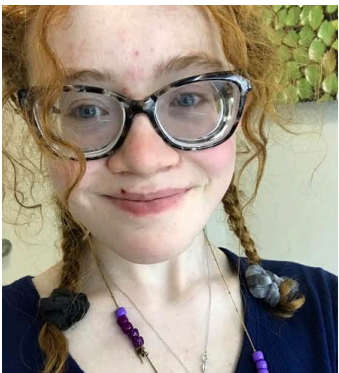
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