

GREAT LAKE REVIEW

SUNY OSWEGO'S
STUDENT-RUN LITERARY MAGAZINE

SPRING 2024

96TH EDITION

LIMINAL

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GREAT LAKE REVIEW

SPRING 2024

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STINGRAY SEASCAPE

BY HAILEE WADDLE

Located at 19 W. Bridge Street in downtown Oswego,
the River's End Bookstore
holds the release events for our fall and spring issues.

All of us at GLR would like to extend a special thank you
to everyone at our favorite independent bookstore, River's
End Bookstore!

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A NOTE FROM OUR EDITOR-IN-CHIEF

Dearest readers,

I would like to thank everyone who has helped keep GLR alive into its 50th year as we approach the club's true birthday this coming fall in November. I also would like to extend the deepest gratitude to the English Department for paying to print this, and to Professor Fordham for the refreshments. I am truly so proud of all my staff, our faculty advisor, and the talented student artists and writers who are the life force that keep propelling GLR to new heights. We would not exist without your passion for creation. I dedicate this book to all of you.

It has been a great honor and privilege to have been a part of such a dedicated crew of student creatives. To see everyone's drive for literary and artistic critique during our selection meetings, which have no doubt been tough and long nights, makes me feel an immense sense of pride and love. I truly feel that we have seen some very fine art and writing make its way into this edition. For many, GLR is the first place someone's work gets published, and we hope that inspires them to keep creating wherever they go.

The idea for the theme of this issue was voted on by the club. We all felt that it was a fitting title and theme because the transition into adulthood feels like an in-between space. I hope this edition is a comfort to all those who feel caught in-between in life. While I must graduate and move on, I will always carry GLR in my heart.

All my love + passing the torch,

Lauren Royce

GIRDLED BY HEAT LIGHTNING

BY ALLY GERO

My room is congested from a swampy Friday that I spent inside under the blue glow of my phone screen. The right side of my face leaves a faint sweat impression on my cotton pillowcase. This kind of day makes me want to sit completely still and let my skin rot into the fibers of my mattress.

I think about how I haven't talked to my family all day, as my mom calls me for dinner. She made sausage and zucchini, which I'm okay with skipping if it means I don't have to get up. The sun is going down and dusk is taking its place, bringing the cooler air that my damp skin has been panting for. I peel myself off of my bed to open the glass door that leads out to the porch. I leave it open wide with the screen shut to keep the gnats out of my room, but their hums still make it inside. My dad knocks timidly and redirects my attention from the bugs. My voice cracks from lack of use as I tell him to come in.

He peeks his head in and tells me, "I'm going to bed, Al, good-night—love ya, Kiddo." I roll my body to face him with the smile I think he wants and say, "Goodnight, Old Man— love ya."

He shuts the door just as timidly as he knocked. I listen to his unstable steps go down the hallway until they fade off and I can't hear them anymore. He is a creature of habit, like his wife and daughter, and promptly goes to bed at 9 o'clock after saying goodnight.

Once Dad has made it to bed, that's my mom's cue to head into the garage. Friday nights are met with Blue Moons or Yuenglings, depending on whether she has the desire to cut up an orange to pair with the Blue Moons or not. When I open my bedroom door to walk to the bathroom, I'm greeted with a smell of citrus coming from the kitchen. It's a Blue Moon night. She calls one of her friends on the phone and tells them about how her job doesn't appreciate her enough or how her in-laws are Bible-thumping freaks.

It's now ten-forty-something, and I've been rotating between my TV and phone, trying not to leave any room for thought. My mom violently opens my door, the idea of knocking never crossing her mind.

She says, "Al, come sit outside with me—there's heat lightning."

Her words get snared on her alcohol-soaked tongue, but she's still comprehensible. "I don't know Mom—I'm tired," I say, dissolving into my sheets, and trying to dismiss her.

She stops bothering with words and simply grabs my arm and pulls me off my bed, my irritation coming with. We walk onto the porch through my room and stand with sweaty feet. I can feel each winding line of the wood grain, and I begin mapping it out in my head. The air feels moist but cool. I look into the sky and see nothing, so I wait. The howls of the coyotes fill the silence between my mom and me. I begin to regret letting her bring me out here for nothing, but that thought is interrupted by a sudden burst of bright orange and purple flashing from within the clouds. Now I'm gawking, awestruck. I anxiously anticipate the crack of thunder, but it doesn't come quickly.

My mom interrupts the quiet. "Looks like God is throwing a fit," she says, laughing at her own joke.

I roll my eyes but laugh along because for an atheist she sure likes talking about God being angry a lot. We both stand completely still, fixated on the way the bolts are trapped within the clouds and how briefly the atmosphere is purple and electric. I look away and study my mom. She wears the flannel that she took from my closet a couple of months ago, glowing with every blaze of lightning. She seems like a giddy child again, pointing at the sky, looking to me for approval.

She faces me and asks, "Aren't you glad I brought you out here with me?" Her breath smells of beer and oranges.

I respond, "Yea, Mom—this is pretty fucking cool."

BABY PEACHES
BY HAILEE WADDLE



EDGE OF EQUINOX
BY KENNEDI PARSONS

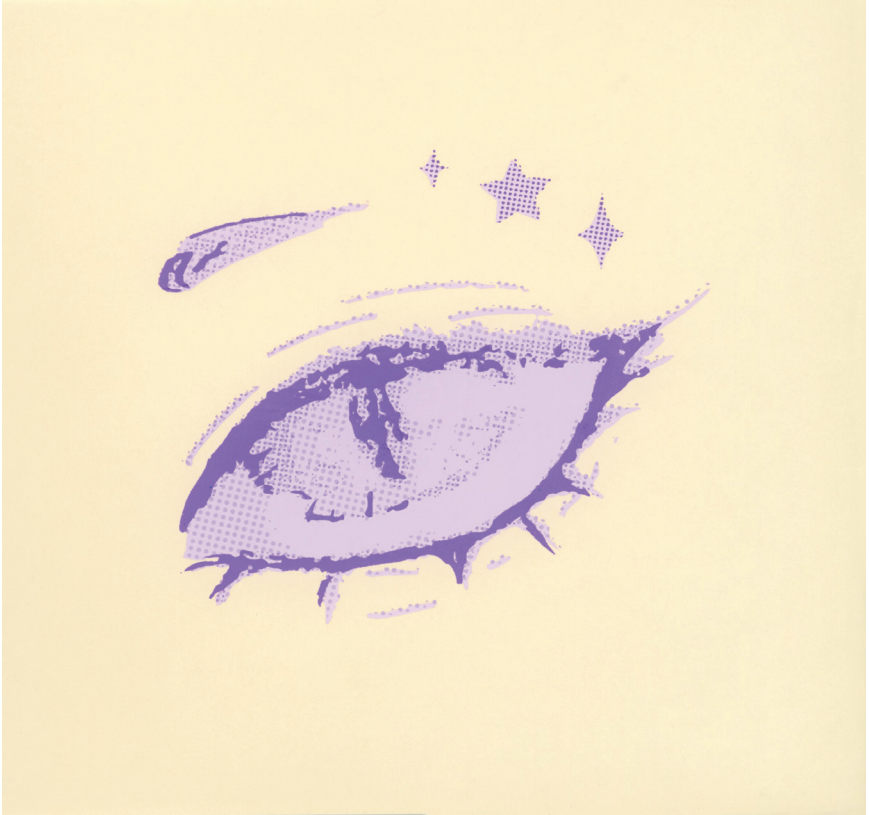
Sickly sweet, honeysuckle beads in tea,
steeped in spring; shards of blue melt with the jay.
Spitting rain runs sideways, flying debris.
Lawns puddle, dismal waters clouded gray.

A rebirth of sorts, chaos cries out loud.
Their echoes curl, baiting the rising sun.
Spiraling, fresh buds lie under the shroud
of a pending storm, unable to run.

Few mourn the old man, his violet death
honored with an abandoned legacy.
Purity vanishes with baby's breath,
its birth looked upon as an allergy.

Yet the cycle repeats, unwavering,
a promise of spirit worth savoring.

SEEING STARS
BY JAMIE BIGGERS



JULY 8TH
BY EMILY BOWDEN

Crickets calling me back to my body
as the song of night causes me to open my mouth
to the moon and ask how to love
the pieces of myself I only received from your glare.
Starlight glides along my memory,
Freezing me to the Earth, as I try to find the day
where the ice entered my veins and
I became split from free to caged.

I believe there are natural faults in people
through the clench and release of birth
like the rising tide.
Until a wave pushes me to shore and
I am without buoy
save for your cool skin and milk.
Our first stretch is the squeeze
from balmy darkness and one body
To the callous pressure of dirt and rock.

I am taking my first breath
on the same day you opened your eyes
and this date will always be
Two separate moments of the same time.
Mine: the day you were not my world.
Yours: the day I became it.
Together our moons merge to make a whole
I'm the sliver and you're the full.
And I realize I'm the same age as you when I entered this space.

Another crack appears now

As you run into my arms while I still yearn for yours.
Yet you've splintered yourself into four people and
Rest underneath our skin,
In our bones.
And I hope being first means something
as my fissures deepen to hold you tight.

A WORLD WITHOUT SUMMER
BY CLAIRE LEONE

I miss long, sunny days,
and how it used to bring us home.

Yesterday,
I sat on the dock without you.

I kept looking at the horizon line,
begged in my head to see you just one last time.

But alas, it was just not fated.

I miss the ocean,
And how you'd always tell me
to go to the wrong beach,
but I'd laugh and shake my head
and just enjoy going along for the ride.

I miss that beach,
and how I used to pet my hand
through your hair on the drive. Running
through the salt-dried pieces,
like I was trying to read the braille of your thoughts.

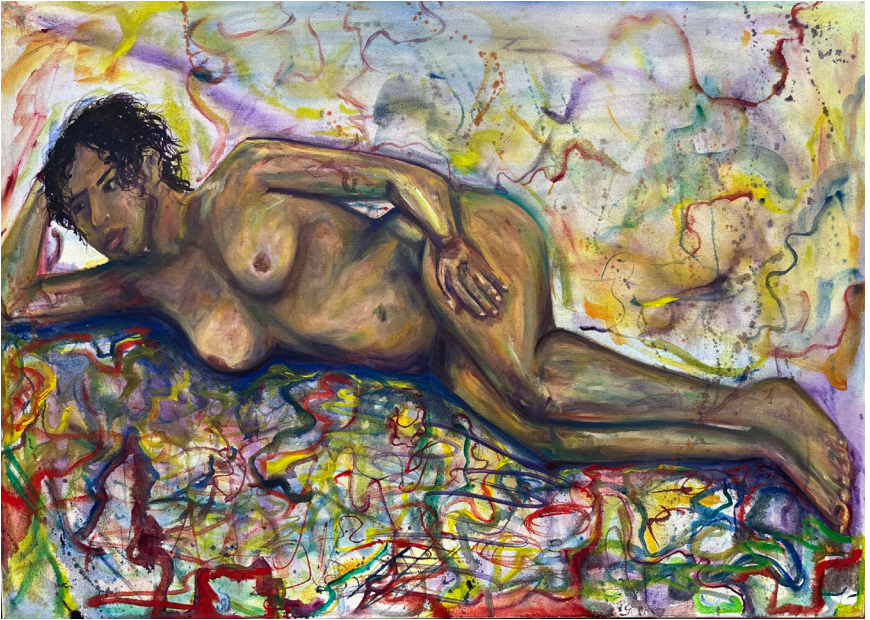
I miss the smile,
and how you used to give me one so big
it could have smothered the fire of even the stars themselves,
perched above us, leaned in like seagulls
to eavesdrop on warm August nights.

I miss that *you* of summer.
And how you'd always ask me 20 questions.

Pretended like you didn't know me enough to answer.
What's your favorite season?

Any of them, I'd say,
as long as I could spend it with you.

WOMEN NEED REST
BY TESSA MCCAIN



SOFT BODIES
BY ELENA EHRHART

He says he likes soft bodies.
Bodies like mine.
He likes a stomach with rolls
He likes my big thighs.

Doesn't he know
this is undesired?
I am not thin or fit.
I never have been.

He deserves a beauty, a model, a puny
woman with a flat belly and a Hollywood look-
not a flesh that spreads like pancake batter-
that's what happens to soft bodies like mine.

He says my body is that of a Goddess,
showing Greek statues with the smallest of fat rolls
Still, they are smaller than mine.
I will never look like that, no matter how hard I try.

My shoulders are too broad and
my ribcage too wide.
I have a growing stomach with no reason behind
He says he will still love my soft body until the end of time

though it is not beautiful,
expanding every day.
I despise the growth
yet to him, I am just the same.

He says my body is beautiful
and perfect in every way.
Maybe one day
I might feel the same

SENDING POETRY
BY KAITLYN WRIGHT

She lets me send her poetry

From pinterest boards and tik toks

I like when it's melancholy, when the words are flowery and form a bouquet

Some a message (your friendship means the world to me)

I read what she wrote too

"I'll turn it in just because you think it's good"

How soft and sweet it is that we exchange poetry

He lets me send him poetry

From books I bought and online sites

I like when it's romantic, when the words are like honey and drip along the page

Some just like us (you mean more than you know to me)

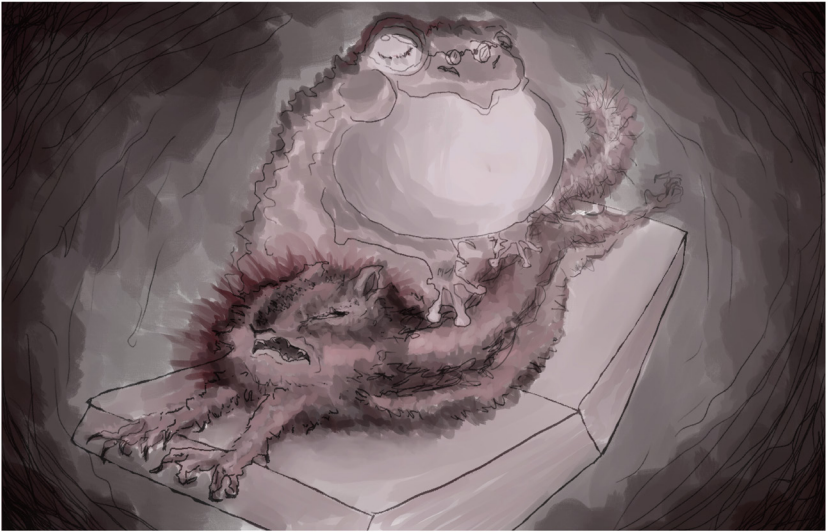
I read and trace his tattoos

"I liked that one, can you explain what it means?"

How soft and sweet it is that he reads poetry for me

How soft and sweet it is sending poetry

CHIPMUNK AT THE CHIROPRACTOR
BY CAROLINA MARIN



SUPERNOVA IN THE SOUL

BY KIMBERLY SUPLISKI

My grandma used to tell me about lights in the night sky.

She said they made shapes and pictures if you looked at them hard enough. She used to take walks every night and never needed a light because they were so bright. They would illuminate her steps and urge her to venture out in the late hours. They also kept the monsters away.

My great grandma remembers a lot of things, tells me and my siblings a lot of stories. Usually I can picture them all, I *believe* them all. But I don't think I can ever believe there was a time when curfews weren't enforced and there were no monsters lurking in the pitch black, waiting to slash your skin and tear your throat out.

No matter how many ways my great grandma tries to explain what life was like, I can't seem to take what she's saying as the truth. Maybe it's because she forgets to take her medications sometimes, or the old age is finally catching up to her.

I want to believe that there was a time I could be outside playing for longer, that I didn't have to worry about the warning sirens blaring and the curfew lights flickering on.

My great grandma says I'm a lot like her. She says she sees herself in me when I braid my hair with ribbons and stare off into the fields, as if I knew what it was like to lay in them for eternity. She also says I'm the only one who listens to her stories for what they're worth. That my grandma and mom never liked her stories, never asked her to tell them again and again. But I like the thrill of them, the way she puts her whole soul into them. I like that I can feel the energy in her words, practically seeing them shimmer.

Maybe that's what stars were.

But I'm not sure how that would keep the beasts away.

I've never seen the monsters, but I've heard their growls, the screams of others who didn't get inside on time. My mom has a scar across her torso from one of them. When she was younger my grandma locked the house and my mom forgot her keys before she left. When she got home she had to climb through the side window, which never locked, to get inside. She barely made it through before the beast swiped to try to drag her away to wherever they retreated to during the day.

I'm scared one day the sun won't be enough to keep them away.

I'm terrified that one day the sun will rise and they will still be hiding outside, waiting. My mom tells me to hush, my grandma to mind my mouth, but my great grandma shares the same concern.

The way she expresses true anxiety and worry makes her stories about "stars" more believable. Makes me think *they* are taking safety away bit by bit. That *they* are watching as we as a society become more frightful and follow every rule *they* set.

But then again, I'm a lot like my grandma, and sometimes I forget to take my medication too.

THE GROUND BELOW

BY CONNOR HUGHES

EXT. CHAOTIC, MUDDY, BATTLEFIELD, DAY, HEAVY RAIN

The screen is initially black, and the only sound that can be heard is heavy, fast BREATHING, and the sound of boots sprinting through mud. The first SHOT then appears, following a young soldier charging through a muddy battlefield.

This soldier is JOSEPH COOK, a 19 year old British conscript with short ginger hair and blue eyes. His uniform is tattered and muddy. His eyes are wide with fear, and his hands grip his rifle so tight that his knuckles have turned white.

He is charging forward through the chaos and mud of No Man's Land alongside a scattering of other soldiers in similar condition, when suddenly machine gun fire begins to tear through the group.

Joseph's eyes somehow go even wider and he throws himself to the ground in a panic as his fellow squad mates are torn apart. He lies there in the mud, hands over his head, whimpering unintelligibly. Heavy rain pounds down on him.

The ground is then rocked by an explosion close behind him, darkening an already dim sky and prompting him to scramble forward, forgetting his rifle in his panic.

He crawls forward through the mud as fast as he can, hyperventilating, eyes squeezed shut as he blindly searches for any sort of haven amidst the chaos.

He moves for what feels like an eternity before the ground under him suddenly gives way and he tumbles down into a trench. He hits the bottom with a groan, his fall broken by something squishy and wet.

Joseph takes a second to slow his breathing, trying to wipe away the mud from his eyes with his dirty sleeve. He feels something squishy underneath his hand, and looks down at it before letting out a strangled gasp and scrambling backwards.

The squishy thing was the bloated and muddy body of a dead GERMAN SOLDIER, his expression dazed and his face gaunt. Joseph simply stares at the body for a second before shaking his head, as if trying to shift his focus anywhere else.

He blinks several times to clear his vision, and looks around at where he's fallen. He has fallen into a roughly 15 foot long stretch of trench, both ends of which have collapsed due to the constant rain making the ground soft and muddy.

He's at one end of the trench, and he turns his gaze towards the other end. He sees another couple of German bodies there, most strewn across the ground and one sitting with its back to the wall, hunched and limp.

There are some items scattered around. A rifle on the sitting body's lap and a bayonet blade on the ground near him.

Joseph sighs and looks up at the grey sky, covered in dark clouds and peppered by explosions and gunfire. His eyes are a mix of despair and desperation, searching for any way out of this hell. He sits back against the muddy wall of the trench.

JOSEPH

At least I've got this moment of peace.

As soon as he gloomily comments, the German soldier at the other side awakes with a gasp.

WILHELM stares at Joseph with wide, frantic hazel eyes framed by brown hair coated with mud. His gaunt face stares, openmouthed, at Joseph for a moment, before he scrambles to snatch up the rifle on his lap and shakily point it at him.

WILHELM

“Wer bist du? Wie bist du?”
 (“Who are you? How did you-”)

Wilhelm pauses, whipping his head back and forth to see if there's anyone else around them.

WILHELM (CONT'D)

Feldherr? Ersnt? Heinrich?
 (“Commander? Ernst? Heinrich?”)

He freezes for a moment at the sight of the pale, bloated bodies near him. His eyes stare into their unmoving gazes for a moment as his lip quivers.

WILHELM (CONT'D)

Heinrich?

There's a long pause before Wilhelm forces himself to look away, as his hands shake on the rifle and Joseph remains frozen, his breath caught in his throat. Wilhelm calls out in a despairing and raw voice.

WILHELM (CONT'D)

Irgendjemand?
 (“Anyone?”)

Wilhelm grits his teeth and suddenly sucks in a pained breath. The rifle dips slightly as he tries to hold it steady.

Joseph looks confused for a second before realizing what caused the lapse. He notices the wound on Wilhelm's left thigh, a bloody gash that was almost certainly made worse by the mud that seemed to permeate every possible surface.

Joseph glances down at the rudimentary first aid kit on his hip, before looking back up at Wilhelm, whose hands are shaking more and more as he tries to hold up his rifle.

The rain has started to subside somewhat, the heavy pounding lessening into a steady but consistently light amount.

Joseph opens his mouth before closing it, and then opening again.

JOSEPH

I just-

Wilhem just stares at him.

JOSEPH (CONT'D)

... I just want to leave.

Wilhelm continues staring, before inquiring in a heavy accent, speaking in English for the first time.

WILHELM

Leave?

He slightly lowers his rifle before shaking his head and tightening his grip on it and pointing it back at Joseph.

WILHELM (CONT'D)

No leave. Not...

He hesitates as he tries to find the words before cursing in German.

WILHELM (CONT'D)

Scheiße. Du gehst nirgendwo hin. Ich- mein Feldherr wird wissen, was mit dir zu tun ist. Er wird es wissen.

("Fuck. You're not going anywhere. I- my commander will know what to do with you. He'll know.")

He nods, before repeating quietly to himself

WILHELM (CONT'D)

Er wird es wissen.

("He'll know.")

Joseph lies as still as possible, back pressed up against the slimy walls that kept him trapped down in the trench. He hesitantly opens his mouth again.

JOSEPH
Do you-

Wilhelm's attention immediately snaps back to Joseph.

JOSEPH (CONT'D)
Do- Oh, God. Do you... speak English?

Wilhelm blinks at this.

WILHELM
Englisch? Ist das was du mich fragst?
("English? Is that what you're asking me?")

He winces and shifts slightly, rifle still shakily trained on Joseph.

WILHELM (CONT'D)
English is.... Uh....

He grinds his teeth for a second, before snapping back to German.

WILHELM (CONT'D)
Schnauze! Du bist ein Gefangener, du hast keine Fragen zu stellen.
("Shut your mouth! You're a prisoner, you're not supposed to ask questions.")

Joseph perks up slightly at one of the words.

JOSEPH
Gefangener?

Joseph blanches upon realizing what he means.

JOSEPH (CONT'D)
Prisoner. Oh.

An explosion hits close to the trench, spraying a light amount of dirt onto the both of them, causing them to wince and Wilhelm to briefly move the rifle to cover his face before realizing what he had done and steadying the rifle.

WILHELM
Prisoner.

He says this with a small nod. Joseph's shoulders sag, and his head hangs.

JOSEPH

Listen, I- I won't even go back to the other side. I'll just wait until the shelling dies down,
and I'll...

He swallows.

JOSEPH (CONT'D)

I'll desert.

Wilhelm seems to realize what Joseph means, and looks at him with a scandalized expression.

WILHELM

Desert?

He sits up straighter and jabs the rifle in Joseph's direction, causing him to flinch away.

WILHELM (CONT'D)

Desertieren?

He leans forward, the pain momentarily forgotten as he grits his teeth and starts to snap at Joseph.

WILHELM (CONT'D)

Deswegen bist du hier, nicht wahr? Nicht irgendein tapferes Stürmen über das Feld, sondern eine verzweifelte Flucht. Du überlässt die anderen dem Tode, damit du dich den Rest des Krieges verstacken kannst!

("That's why you're here, isn't it? Not some brave rush across the field, but a desperate flight. You leave the others to die so that you can hide for the rest of the war!")

His voice steadily rises to a yell. Joseph can't understand his words, but his ashamed and scared expression shows that he understands the sentiment.

Wilhelm spits at him, before continuing in a quieter, disgusted voice.

WILHELM (CONT'D)

Ein Feigling. Das bist du. A coward.

("Coward. That's what you are.")

Joseph looks as if he wants retreat into himself, his lip quivering and his eyes tearing up. After cowering for a moment, his shoulders tense up and he looks Wilhelm dead in the eye.

JOSEPH

No.

Wilhelm looks confused.

WILHELM
Nein?

Joseph straightens up a little, his hands clenching into fists.

JOSEPH
I'm not a coward.

Another explosion hits near their trench, displacing more dirt. Joseph motions at the location of the explosion and continues.

JOSEPH (CONT'D)
I'm not a coward for not wanting to be blown apart, for not wanting to be ripped into pieces by machine gun fire, for-

He stops rambling for a second and takes in a deep, shuddering breath.

JOSEPH (CONT'D)
I...I don't want to die here, entombed in the mud. Where I can't even see the sky because it's been... choked by smoke.

Wilhelm stares at him, seemingly picking up on enough words to understand the gist of Joseph's rant.

JOSEPH (CONT'D)
Call me a deserter. I am. But I'm not a coward for not wanting to die in the mud for somebody else's cause.

He sits back against the muddy wall of the trench, wrapping his arms around himself and shivering. Wilhelm quietly sits in place for a moment, keeping his rifle raised, but looking downwards at the ground, his eyes drifting towards the bodies next to him.

WILHELM
Someone else.

He repeats Joseph's last phrase in a hollow voice, causing Joseph to glance up at him.

Wilhelm looks at him wearily before cracking a humorless smile.

WILHELM (CONT'D)
Mit Gott für könig und vaterland. Das ist unser Versprechen.
("With God for King and Fatherland. That is our Promise.")

Wilhelm hesitates before continuing in broken English.

WILHELM (CONT'D)

Cause. Cause to fight. As if.. with us. But there's none here.

Wilhelm hangs his head and lowers the rifle until it's laying listlessly in his lap.

WILHELM (CONT'D)

Just us.

There's a long, heavy silence between the two of them, only punctuated by the soft falling of rain and occasional bursts of gunfire and explosions from the battlefield around them.

Eventually, Joseph raises his head to look at Wilhelm, who looks like he's having trouble staying awake. He looks down at Wilhelm's leg, bloody and immobile. He chews on his tongue anxiously for a second before speaking up.

JOSEPH

I have, uh... something that might help. With your leg, that is.

Wilhelm looks at him with a confused expression.

JOSEPH (CONT'D)

It's a, uhh...

He reaches over to his hip. Wilhelm's hand tightens slightly around the rifle as he does so, but he makes no move to raise the rifle back up. Joseph detaches the small box from his hip and raises it up to show Wilhelm.

JOSEPH (CONT'D)

Erste Hilfe. It's a first aid kit. Not much beyond bandages and alcohol, but... it's better than nothing.

He opens it as he speaks and points at the contents, then at Wilhelm's leg.

Wilhelm looks pensively at the kit for a minute, hands anxiously grasping his rifle, before taking a deep breath and nodding.

Joseph swallows nervously before slowly getting up and moving across the trench, keeping low, due to the bullets still flying across the field above them. He kneels down next to Wilhelm, nervously eyeing the rifle and setting the kit down.

He takes a small cloth and some alcohol out of the kit and starts to clean Wilhelm's wound. Wilhelm winces and grits his teeth as the alcohol hits the wound.

He reaches for the kit without looking, and his hands stray close to a discarded bayonet blade on the ground. Wilhelm sees this and mistakes it for something malevolent.

His eyes go wide and he gasps, wildly swinging a fist at Joseph and hitting him in the face, causing him to fall backwards, confused and hurt.

Wilhelm shifts onto his knees, letting out a gasp of pain as he puts weight on his wounded leg. He straddles Joseph and starts to choke him while rambling in a manic voice.

WILHELM

Verraeter! Du wolltest nur nahe genug heran kommen um ich toeten zu koennen! Aber ich habe dich gesehen, Ich- ICH HABE DICH GESEHEN! FEIGLING!
("Traitor! You just wanted to get close enough to kill me! But I saw you, I- I SAW YOU! COWARD!")

Joseph GURGLES, looking confused and terrified, grabbing Wilhelm's wrists and trying to pry him off. But he's unable to move his hands, and starts desperately clawing at the ground around him.

His hand closes around the bayonet and his eyes widen. He swings it upwards, bringing it to Wilhelm's neck.

The blade stops, the point digging in, but not penetrating. Wilhelm freezes, his mouth open and his breath cutting off with a strangled gasp. There is a moment of silence, before he slowly removes his hands from Joseph's neck. He looks down at Joseph, his eyes pleading and yet confused.

Joseph wheezes, getting the air back in his lungs, before looking Wilhelm dead in the eyes.

JOSEPH

Not-

He coughs.

JOSEPH (CONT'D)

Not a coward.

He then moves the point of the blade away from Wilhelm's neck and throws it across the trench, where it smacks into a muddy wall and then lands harmlessly on the ground.

JOSEPH (CONT'D)

I'm just done fighting.

Wilhelm takes a shuddering gasp, and pushes himself off of Joseph, landing on his side and clenching his eyelids and teeth after landing on his bad leg.

He starts to cry, unable to look at Joseph.

WILHELM

Es tut mir led. Ich... Ich moechte nicht sterben. Don't want to die. Am... sorry.
(“I'm sorry. I... I don't want to die.”)

Joseph lies still for a moment, staring at Wilhelm, before pushing himself up with a wheeze and helping Wilhelm sit up straight again. He hesitates for a moment before hugging Wilhelm, both of them trembling and silent.

Shortly after, he disengages from the hug and speaks with a wry smile.

JOSEPH

Let's take a look at that leg, shall we?

Wilhelm nods with a weak chuckle, and Joseph gathers his kit again and continues cleaning and bandaging the leg.

The camera slowly zooms out, raising up from the trench to show the many other trenches around them, the scattered explosions and gunfire, the desolate land.

The camera fades to black, the only remaining input being the intermittent gunfire and explosions for a moment, before it goes silent.

PROJECT(ING)
BY KENNEDI PARSONS

six inch heels
lift up dirt
and grass
and history
and paint
and pipe cleaners.

sprinkled on the lawn,
craft projects
with 53s on their hoods
brought together
one night in june.

called up in tens
their giant shadows cast
judgment on the screen.

play-doh bodies,
yarn for hair,
popsicle stick arms
and pre-cut squares.

the glue is washable though,
right?

throw them in the spin cycle
after the color fades.

pick out the scraps
of fabric with glitter
still stuck to the frills.

scrub them clean
once the days get long.
mend their broken parts
with the tape buried
in the drawer
on the left.

it's stronger,
I think.
than the glue
we used that day.

PILLOW
BY TESSA MCCAIN



COLLEGE, MICROWAVABLE POPCORN, AND GOODBYE
BY WRENDOLYN KLOTZKO

More than anything else,
there are two things I remembered
my mother telling me before college:

Firstly,

How to make good microwave popcorn:

- 1) Open the package—all the way.
- 2) Push around the buttered kernels in the paper bag.
- 3) Only take out the bag after you stop hearing popping for fifteen seconds.

Secondly,

Quote,

“I have fulfilled my obligation as your mother.

Anything I do for you,
from this point forward,
is considered a gift.”

Unquote.

I have never burned
a bag of microwavable popcorn,
but this bag is extra salty
and a little soggy.
Maybe she is cutting onions back home?

FIGURES
BY TESSA McCAIN



THE EDGE OF OUR BEDS

BY ALLY GERO

Fortress-

We sat on opposite sides of the couch, pressed hard against the armrest, as hard as our little bodies would let us be. We thought if we could press hard enough, maybe the couch would take us in as a piece of its own forever. Emma curled into a ball of fear or anger. It's always hard to tell the difference between the two with her.

I'm twelve and she's fourteen, brace-faced, and spotted with acne that she tries to peel off her hormonal skin. I'm pudgy with growing pains and puffy cheeks. She has been on a four-year-long puberty rampage and our family has been cautiously moving around her.

I created a fort for my body under two large decoration pillows that lived in the corners of our couch, my sweat slowly being absorbed by the brown cushions as I kept my head above the pillows so I could hear everyone.

I probably started the argument with an off-handed comment about my mom's smoking habits; or maybe I even took it farther and danced on her newest pack and left it on the garage floor for her to find. I might as well have signed my name with an arrow next to it because Emma never cared about that stuff.

Or maybe Dad had been around her too long that day, and she sneezed one too many times. He always hated that. The third sneeze always seemed to make him the most furious. He told her she was being dramatic while she wiped her nose.

He stood on the stairs that led up to their bedroom looking down on the three of us, leaning his tall but skinny body on the railing, fingers interlocked. This was one of the arguments that had diverged onto a different path than the one we originally started on. Mom screamed to him about being too easy on me and that she's always the bad guy in the house. He yelled back that she's crazy and that he had the mental health facility by our house on standby. I looked at Emma making the ugliest face that happens whenever she cries. Her eyes sank into her face while her cheeks tried to push them all the way closed. Her mouth looked like melt-

ed face paint from a clown's fake frown. Her forehead scrunched hard, fighting the pressure coming from the apples of her cheeks. She looked back at me to make sure I was also crying so that she could do it and feel less embarrassed.

Mom and Dad traded loud insults about each other while throwing in a couple about Emma or me to check if we were still listening, but Emma had already gotten up and gone to her room. I followed her to the end of the hallway and knocked on the door she had just slammed. "Em, it's me. Can I please come in," I ask shakily.

She let me in, but we didn't talk, we didn't look at each other, we just sat on the edge of her bed trying to calm our breaths.

We Learn about Sisyphus-

She was the firstborn daughter with type A tendencies that she thought made up her personality. She kept her bedroom neat with lined-up stuffed animals and framed pictures of her friends perfectly leveled above her bed. She worked hard to be good at school. She studied religiously, and homework kept her up late. In sixth grade, she was put in the gifted program at school, meaning she took seventh-grade level classes as a sixth-grader and could brag about it at family gatherings, making sure I was in earshot of it. She took good care of the pets she had, fed them the right amount at the right time, cleaned their cages often, and loved them properly.

My pets always died prematurely or I stopped caring about them altogether after the novelty of having them wore off and I lost interest. Cleaning my fish bowl or changing the bedding in my hamster's cage taught me about Sisyphus and his boulder — except my boulder was my hamster that would lay in her own piss and squeak when I tried to wash it off her. "If I clean her, she's just going to get dirty again anyway."

Mundane things bored me, studying felt useless, and keeping a clean room was impossible. School came easily to me. I knew how each teacher wanted answers to be written on exams. Mrs. Edinger liked answers to have as much detail as possible so she knew if you could recite the material. Mrs. Magnan was favorable

of answers that were academic and well written. Mr. Thomas wanted creative answers that stepped outside of the box and pushed him as a teacher to think. I found that people tell you exactly what they want out of you in the first few conversations you have with them, and it is simple enough to step into whichever skin they prefer.

I think Emma was jealous that I didn't have to work as hard as her to have the same grades, or that I could lay in my bed surrounded by dirty laundry and stuffed animals strewn about with no order, while she had panic attacks at the dining room table under the fluorescent lights. I turned down gifted programs and avoided classes that were labeled "advanced," while she kissed the teacher's asses with perfectly moisturized lips.

Incoming Call-

She was 21 and I was 17 going into my freshman year of college. Her acne had cleared up and my growing pains became more metaphorical. I followed her to the same college she was attending as a junior with a major in elementary education and a concentration in English. I declared a major I couldn't give less of a shit about and lived with a roommate who felt that same way about me. My mattress topper was Emma's old one and the memory foam swallowed my bones and muscles while they were actively rotting in this sweaty 13 by 15 foot room with a broken AC system. The blue light from my laptop screen had been slowly burning into my retinas, taking all my hopes and passions with it. Leaving me with the ashes of a soul I didn't recognize as my own.

Emma lived a six-minute and forty-two-second drive from my dorm if I got all the green lights there. Her best friend at school had just gotten a new boyfriend and Emma spent most of her days stressing over school or smoking out her lungs till she was coughing up spit. It was her last semester. She was graduating a semester early because of the college credits she collected in high school.

She had never called me, but as I was lethargically working through an assignment in my dorm, she did. She had been crying, it was clear in the mucus of her voice, but she didn't admit to it. She just asked,

“Do you wanna come over, Alyssa bailed on me again and I need a break from this bullshit I’m working on.”

I told her I’d be there in seven minutes.

Her room smelt of stale weed and mothballs from the water damage that had been lurching down the wall next to her bed. I found her sitting in the center of her bed, alert to my arrival like a new dog. Her face was swollen and her eyes were still sunken from the crying she didn’t admit to.

“What the hell is going on Emma? Have you been crying?”

I saw her lips start to form into the melting face paint and her cheeks closing in on her eyes. I sat with her while she tried to slip words out between sobs about everything she was scared of. The list is full of fears I have, but don’t let myself acknowledge. This level of seriousness was one we tried to avoid at all costs so I blurted out,

“You forgot about how you’re scared of birds.”

“Oh my god Al, you’ll never let me forget.”

But at least she was laughing now, even if that meant a snot bubble formed out of her left nostril. The rest of the night we exchanged stories, anxieties, and middle fingers until I had to get back to my swampy dorm room.

Wrappers-

In 2018 I swallowed my first SSRI after the nice lady I saw once a week told me she was surprised I wasn’t drugged up earlier. But my mom didn’t like the idea of anything that wasn’t some natural remedy she found online to expel serotonin into my brain, and my dad thought I had been faking these past couple of years to get out of doing chores.

The first two weeks of my body adjusting to the “new me” felt long and foggy. My room stayed dark, smelt of sweat, and was populated with dust bunnies. Dinner and conversation didn’t interest me, so I slept instead.

Emma sat on the end of my bed shaking my legs under the blanket to get me to wake up. She didn’t use a gentle voice — she never does — but her face looked like she could cry at any moment if I didn’t sit up to look at her.

“What is your deal lately, Al?”

I had no answer for her, so she filled the silence with,

“Your room is a fucking mess.”

Before I could roll my eyes and dismiss her, she started picking up the clothes that have become a second layer of my floor.

“Jesus Al, this is a new level for you.”

She picked up the empty bottles of Diet Coke and bags of strawberry gummies and granola bars that I had been using as my only form of sustenance and threw them in the garbage bag she brought in with her.

I felt guilty lying there while she cleaned, but I couldn't find the impulse to move. She didn't stop talking while she picked up a shirt I stole from her and books that were unintentionally dog-eared. It reminded me of how paramedics talk to someone with a head injury so that they won't fall asleep and die. My head injury was more of a wiring issue and she made a shitty paramedic because I don't think they're supposed to insult their patient.

She asked where I'd like things to go as she wiped the picture of us I had framed and put it back on the shelf. My answers stayed dismissive and uninterested, telling her,

“I really don't care, just put them in my closet or something.”

She didn't. She put things where they were supposed to be. Books on the shelf against the wall, trash in the bag she held, and clothes hung neatly on hangers that she had color-coordinated within my closet. Organization that I didn't care about, but she did anyway. If it was for herself or for me, I didn't know.

When she was finished she sat with me again on my bed. Right at the end by my feet she tucked in tightly with my blanket. I caught her staring at me, but then she changed her gaze to my ceiling. While still looking at the ceiling, her hands resting on my legs, she told me,

“Al, not to sound corny, but it'll get better. But in the meantime, at least you can see your floor again.”

Sunflower-

Holidays at home brought up cobweb-covered memories,

and stories of fighting on the brown sofa. We'd make our way back to our childhood bedrooms and sit with each other. She looked the same as she did when we counted our breaths.

We went to my room and looked at the untouched gallery of memorabilia hung on my walls and sitting on my shelves. I saw her point to the photo that hadn't been dusted since she did it for me seven years ago. We were standing in front of the sunflower our mom grew in her garden. It was the tallest one she had ever grown, with a strong thick stem that grew to withstand upstate winds. Emma, in a blue tank top and matching flannel shorts, was standing, stretching her body to seem taller standing next to me. I was wearing the same outfit but in pink and my body was slouched from carrying the argument we had right before mom made us take the picture.

I couldn't remember what the argument was about, just that we had one, and that my mom took her side. My smile was missing a couple of teeth and any kind of authenticity. I remembered smiling sarcastically, so the picture wouldn't come out perfectly like they wanted.

Emma said, "God you were so dramatic this day," laughing. "You remember?" I asked.

"Of course, I have a copy at my house. It's one of my favorites of us, Al. It's the perfect image to describe us," she said smiling.

GUNKANJIMA SPEAKS

BY COREY MAHER, ADRIENNE LICATA, JULISSA MONTILLA, QUINN
PENS, RACHEL TAKACH, GAVIN FIACCO

Peace tore apart
this body
they called home. Peace
afterwar/d: the inverse of
that uncanny calm before
the storm (sailors stowing
gear, closing hatches, all ears
filled with an odd silence).

Peace.
The opposition of
progress. Who cares
about peace? Peace is a
sliver, a black crack between
skewed towers where
a bird, unseen, nests in concrete
dreaming of lost forests.

Peace
begs us to forget
even as grass folds like
bandages over
my torn ground. Rain soothes
melting crevices whole and
the bird calls to any creature around,
Who will bury

*the dead? Who will be left to
raise the flag?*
Silly bird, peace is
a story unworthy
of being told. Fortune favors
the bold, who know what was lost
can be rebuilt
what was paused

restarted by one
of the four babies born every second; by
those blissfully spared or
far away and
unaware. War is the human
constant, not peace.
Peace is fleet
ing. Fleet

as in *amphibious*
ready groups READY and
carrier strike groups DEPLOYED.
Fleet as in swift as a doe
leaving a void in the
periphery of your headlights.
Peace is a white
tail flashing then gone.

Peace is abandonment
my veins drained of the
momentum built during the war, when
production peaked and the miners' calls bounced
riskily off limestone walls slick with elbow grease.
"The Atlantis of the Pacific," they marveled
when I was still whole
before peace.

SUNDAY NIGHT AS A COLLEGE STUDENT
BY TESSA MCCAIN



OMENS OF DAEDALUS

BY ESFIR PIEVSKAYA

Your old but working-just-well-enough phone shows 3 A.M. Young eyes are staring at you through the canvas and massive layers of oil paint. *This boy still doesn't know what's coming.* You simply can't even look at the work anymore. You feel dizzy. You've made so many adjustments that it's a new painting at this point. And, yet, something is not right. You start walking backward, rotating your head like an owl, desperately trying to fix the neck pain and solve this "flying boy" problem as if you are an old scientist and not an immature artist.

The kid is floating in the bright blue sky among thickly painted clouds, with scarily detailed swan-like wings behind his back. His arms are as wide open as his childish smile; fakely pink skin next to his sad eyes makes it worse. *He is supposed to look happy with his newly gained freedom, but why doesn't he?* That's beyond your understanding. *Is it time to give up?* You reach out for your imported red Chapman and a heavy metallic lighter in the back pocket. Even after three cigarettes in a row and a cup of Irish coffee with your little white pill, Athena doesn't give the answer you are seeking. Finally, you decide the white walls of your tiny studio are too heavy. It's time to get out of that gods-forsaken room.

A vibration somewhere in the back pocket. Another message from the PR department. It's been two days since you "missed" the first deadline (for the first time at least) due to your grandma's "death", "unexpected family emergency" and many other cliché excuses. They want a photo of the final work to promote the big opening of your first solo exhibition. This painting is supposed to be the final piece, *the grand finale*, the cherry on top. And this cherry is unripe or maybe already rotten.

You just can't send that photo, just can't. *What if they don't like it, and they also don't see the joyfulness in the boy's eyes, what if they don't understand?* If they see it, they might realize that you are not something they expected, your works suck, and you shouldn't

even be called an artist. Definitely time for a break...

The darkness of the empty hallway is almost blinding. Innocent white walls with names of well-known artists screaming: “You don’t belong here!” Your own name hangs on one of the doors. It is still written in Sharpie with a smiley face next to it because you just moved in, and the proper sign hasn’t arrived yet.

You start walking through the third, top, floor of the small building that is for some reason considered to be a national gallery. Here are mainly private studios and supply rooms. Your studio is the smallest one, in the corner, but with the best view of the stormy ocean and with fascinating natural light. *Why would others ever put blinds down when they work?*

You take the stairs to enter the second floor where temporary exhibitions take place. Juries pick a young new perspective to dedicate the show to them. *This year they will be disappointed.* The space is still almost fully angelic white, there are piles of paintings and some trash around. This is where your big reception will be happening in a month if the PR department gets the photo eventually. You are standing next to panoramic windows, listening to piano chords in your headphones and the sound of crunching olive oil chips from a sad vending machine upstairs. You keep going through every object as if they are not yours.

Typographers already prepared texts on walls to put up the paintings. Some paragraphs tell about your life, some are simple descriptions of works. But the most massive passage is about your final piece, “The Flying Boy”. *Tick, tick, tick... They are still waiting.* “Oil paint on canvas. 7 feet x 10 feet. 2023”

“The artist was inspired by Bastille’s song ‘Icarus.’ This work is a closure to the whole collection...”

You are crossing the room and moving downstairs, hoping to get lost in European masterpieces and not your own head.

Athena’s alabaster eyes are staring at you. She is sublime and lofty like a goddess of wisdom and craftsmanship should be. You dream of a sign from her.

“Please, help me with the ‘Flying Boy!’ you whisper, falling on your knees.

But she remains as silent as she is perfect.

Eventually, you leave Athena to her solemnity and march through all these breathtaking monuments, searching for a very particular one. And then you finally notice a very sad old marble and stone man next to the panoramic window.

Here it is, the statue of Daedalus.

He is sitting alone, looking into the sky, trying to reach someone lost. There is nothing more heavy-hearted than a widowed parent. The monument is not nearly as godly-like as Athena’s, it’s very human-sized, which makes it even more sorrowful.

That’s the work that once inspired you. Rarely can you find Daedalus and Icarus separated. *If the dad has his portrayal of wistfulness, why can’t his son have an image of his brief freedom?* You get closer to the sculpture.

Now there is almost no space between your two faces, even tiny marble crystals in Daedalus’s eyes become visible. You are absorbing his grief and slowly following his gaze that goes outside. For a few peaceful moments, both of you are looking for answers in the restless waves of the ocean.

“Where is my boy?” asks a soft old voice.

What in Hades...

You turn your head back and meet Daedalus’s sight.

“Where is Icarus?” He repeats, looking outside again.

You are lost but don’t know what else to do other than to say something back. You take his hand, gently attempting to show him support.

“He went to fly.”

“I told him not to take those wings. They are not perfect yet.”

“Maybe they work well enough after all.”

“You are lying! He is dead!” He lets out a scream and suddenly turns his head back at you. There is no dust of previous

sadness in his eyes, only pure anger and rage. You can feel how his hand is squeezing yours and it's strong. You are trying to get out of his grip, but he only tightens it.

“He is gone! His ego killed him.”

He is pulling you closer. Your every muscle is shivering.

“No... no ...please. He still can be alive. Let me go!”

He starts moving. The ancient statue doesn't seem fragile anymore.

Your eyes are locked, focusing on his pure white pupils.

“He died from ambition.” He loudly whispers in your ear.

He is towering above you. Fear fills your heart.

“I am sorry. Just... just, please, let me go.”

“That's all your fault!”

You are not even sure if he is talking to you anymore. He is still holding your hand while your body is gradually kneeling on the ground. You glimpse back to Athena and pray. As if she will help you.

Panic is taking over. You have never felt so helpless and little.

He is raising his free hand.

In the end, you close your eyes and turn your face away.

The only sound is his palm cutting the air between you two.

And then you fall.

—

There is nothing but darkness and the sound of collapsing metal.

Then you start feeling a familiar cold stone under your cheek. You open one eye after another and see the floor of your studio and the stool lying next to you.

Shakingly, you are attempting to stand up. After a few tries you are back on your trembling feet.

What the fuck just happened? Was it a dream? Why did it feel so real? Did he hit me? Checking your right cheek, no sign of a hit.

You put the stool back in place and walk to the sink to wash your face with icy cold water, minimizing time with closed eyes. Ala-

baster eyes stare at you from the darkness in those brief seconds you can't see your studio. There is still a whisper in your head: "Where is my boy?" You are those thoughts away, meeting your very own eyes in the mirror.

A vibration in your pocket — 3 A.M., ignored messages from the PR department. *So that was a nightmare?*

You are trying to understand how long you were out and how it's even possible to fall asleep on a stool.

You give yourself another minute to just breathe in silence before getting back to work. You look at Icarus.

That's why your eyes aren't cheerful.

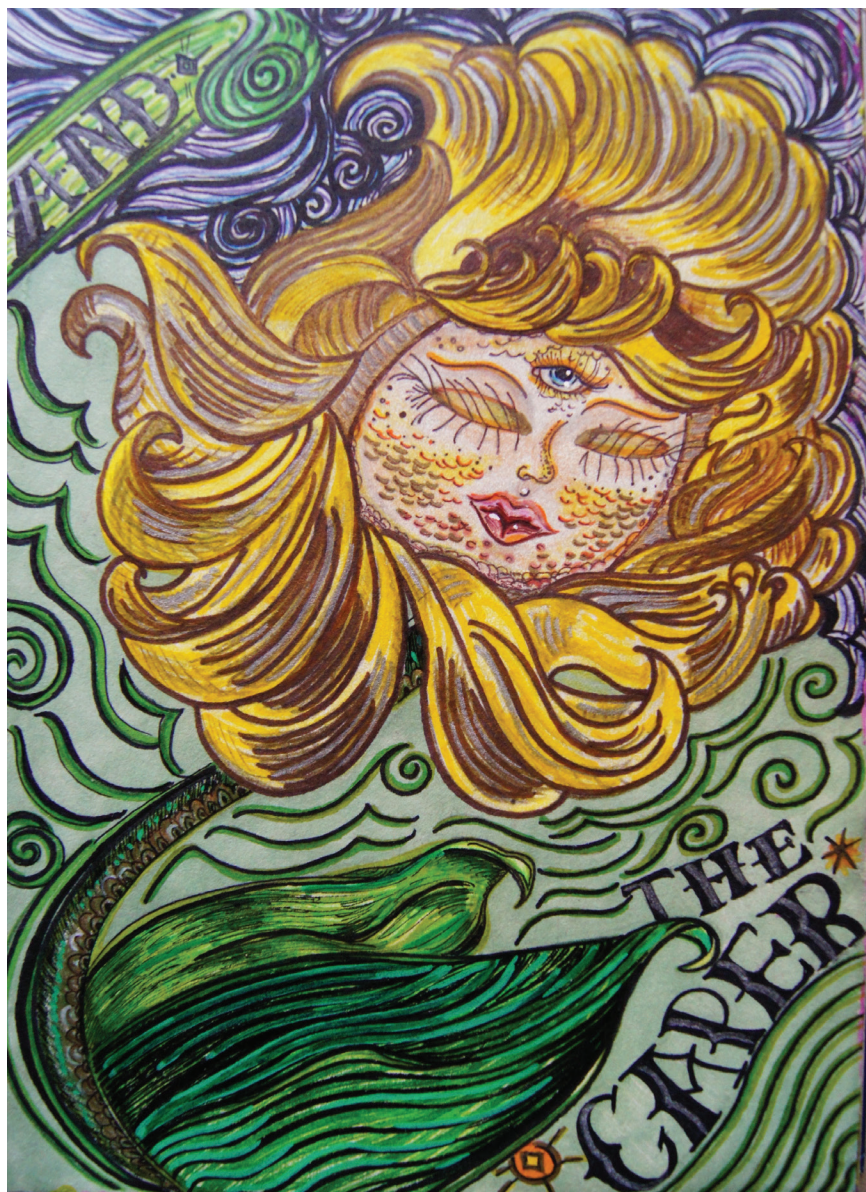
One step closer to the painting. "We'll make it work! You'll have your freedom!" *Even if it's freedom from falling.*

After a sip of your special coffee, this time, without the little white pill, you pick up a brush, put headphones back on, and start where you left the work.

One day, his eyes will be just cheerful enough, and the work will be done.

MYSTIC ILLUSTRATION (RIGHT)

BY SARA ALBANESE



GONE

BY AYSIA GARNETT

“Wake up,” my brother urges, shaking my shoulder. Nothing bothers me more than being awakened in the middle of the night, especially on a school night. *Whatever he’s waking me up for better be important.*

“What?” I mutter while my eyes are still closed, waiting for this conversation to end so I can go back to sleep. The room rapidly fills with silence, wondering why he isn’t answering me. I eventually open my eyes to look at him. Even though the lights are off, the moonlight streams through my window, allowing me to see my brother’s glassy eyes filling up with water and preparing to spill. “What,” I say impatiently, wanting for him to say what’s on his mind.

“Mommy passed away,” my brother says. His voice is faint, almost fragile, as if his heart is shattered.

This isn’t real. I’m still sleeping. I need to wake up.

“Okay,” I say in an emotionless tone, the only words that can come out of my mouth. I turn my back to him and force myself to go back to sleep. All I want is this nightmare to end, hoping that when I wake up my mother will be sitting at the foot of my bed telling me to wake up and get ready for school. But no, I’m still here.

Mommy is gone. Mommy is gone. Mommy is gone.

These dreadful words play over and over again like a broken record. I’m in a fight with my thoughts. Losing the battle. Attempting to stay positive with these words playing. But that hope I’m trying to hold on to is non-existent. I’m cycling through emotions faster than a race car driver. Torn between two conflicting feelings. One side, it feels like a malicious monster is reaching into my chest, grabbing my heart with their bare hands, and ripping it out. On the other, I wonder if it’s all in my imagination, playing a vicious game with me.

This isn't real.

“You have to get up,” my brother said as he stood at the edge of my bed. I get up and make my way to where my family gathers but each step is harder than the next as if weights are being strapped to my ankles. I stand in front of the kitchen, my body hangs over, arms hanging loosely at my sides as if I'm a zombie. Looking at my family hoping they will say it's just a prank. A cruel prank. Everyone stops whispering as if I have just yelled, they turn to me with worried eyes and ask me if I'm okay without moving their lips.

I look at my grandma and see her breaking down, groaning, in my aunt's arms, attempting to dry her face but it did nothing. All I can think about is how her only child had been taken away from her. How she had gone through 6 miscarriages and my mom is the one to survive. My aunt and my brother are crying with her, hugging, rubbing her back. You can see the pain she is in and nothing that I can say that will ease it.

She looks at me and sees my emotionless face. “You need to cry,” my grandma sobs. *I can't. If I start now I won't know if I'll ever stop. Hold it together. Don't let them see you cry.* My vision begins to get blurry, and my throat begins to tighten. I pinch myself to stop from crying, trying to be strong for my family so they don't have to worry about me. Hold it together. I feel my tears trying to break free so I start to make my way to the living room where no one is just in case if a tear escapes me they won't see.

Just hold it together till everyone goes to sleep. Don't show them you are hurting. Don't let them have to worry about you.

I sit down on the couch and a tear slowly drips down to my chin. I bite my lip and my fist tighten attempting to hold back the rest. *Why would this happen? I need her. I can't do this without her.*

It finally struck me like lightning.

I don't have a mom.

I begin to think about how my mom won't be there for my heartbreaks telling me it's okay. She won't see me grow; she won't be there to see me graduate middle school, high school or even college. She won't be there to see me walk down the aisle when I get married or even have my very own children. She won't be there when I just need her. All I can think about is how I'll pass mothers and daughters, and it will remind me of what I don't have, what I'll never have again. I'll be envious of anyone who can say they were just on the phone with their mom. I'll only be able to imagine what I will do to speak to mine one last time.

In the midst of my mind spiraling down this rabbit hole, I start to recall our last conversation. I cover my mouth with my hands with urgency. My body freezes, my cheeks heat up, and my heart falls. Racking my brain to determine if that's the last time I talked to her. *No that can't be it. I can't have said that. I didn't deserve her.*

I give up trying to control my tears, which start to fall down my hot face in a stream. The idea of my mom having me, a spoiled brat, makes me hate myself.

When she needed my help all I did was argue with her. All she asked me to do was clean out her bucket but I had to give her a hard time. I was angry with her for what? Why would I say something so hateful? Why would I ever say I hate her. If I just knew how sick she was I would have visited her. To tell her I love her and I'm sorry. Just to hug her one last time. I took her for granted.

The more I ponder about it, the more I despise myself. To think the last words I told my mom are hateful, the last words I utter wasn't "I love you". Little salty drops pour down my warm cheeks, causing my eyesight to be blurry. All I can think of is how God is punishing me and using this to teach me

a lesson. On the day I finally decide to visit her in the hospital, she is taken away from me.

I had no idea what was wrong with my mother; all I knew was that she was sick. She'd been in and out of hospitals for quite some time. I rarely went to see her in the hospital because she was never there for more than a few days. I finally planned to go see her this time since she had been in the hospital for a couple of weeks.

Nothing matters. I don't want to be here anymore. What's the point?

I feel robbed of my light, as if someone destroyed the fire that once shined so brightly within me. The thought alone of not having my mother crushes me. I slowly feel the darkness consuming me whole, with no escape. It's as if I'm alone in the dark, cold, vast ocean, unwilling to be rescued and content to plunge to the bottom. My whole life that I knew has been stripped from me with no remorse, like it's nothing. Everything that brings me comfort has left me despairing, leaving me stranded in an unrecognizable place.

As my father walks into the living room, I see him carrying the weight of the world on his shoulders. He walks slowly and uncomfortably as though each step is an effort. His shoulders are hunched forward, and his head hangs low, as if he's carrying a great burden he can't stand letting go of. His mouth is slightly wide, and his breathing is weak, as if he's having difficulty breathing. His eyes are puffy and red, with a blankness that's difficult to describe. It's as if all of the light has gone out, leaving only a hollow void. His eyes have a tiredness to them that tells me he's carrying a lot of pain. For a moment, he allows me to see him vulnerable, exposed, and hurting but it's not because he wants to, but because it's become too difficult to hide

The first time I see my father in so much agony and there is nothing I can do to take that pain away from him. The

love of his life is gone.

He looks at me and straightens up, a tear welling up in his eyes. He walks towards me with his strong long arms open. I get up from the couch that holds me captive and enter this warm blanket of security, wanting to stay here forever. He hugs me a little tighter. Without saying anything, I knew this is his way of showing me he got me and everything will be fine even though he isn't sure. It was his way of telling me that it was okay to let my emotions out of the bottle that I was clutching so tightly. I can feel my body gradually loosening that bottle from my grasp. A big sob escapes me as soon as I let go. I finally feel like everything I've been holding onto, from my agony to my hatred. I'm not sure what to focus on because I'm experiencing everything all at once. Despite the overwhelming feelings, I'm able to dump all of my grief onto him, and with the fact that he's battling to hang on to his own, he still appears to want to bear mine. I'm finally able to get some fresh air.

He let go, and staring into his teary eyes made me see that we each lost a piece of ourselves. We have this hole left in us that isn't visible yet you can feel it intensely. You know it's there and there is nothing you can do that will ever fill that emptiness. Her departure leaves us empty inside with no way of telling what the future holds for us. We only knew that we will have to carry on living without her.

I sit back on the couch and ask myself what the point of continuing on without her.

Seven years later as I sit on that same couch, no longer dwelling in my agony, asking myself that question. I now ask myself if everything I'm doing is honoring my mother. Though she isn't here in the flesh, I feel her presence. Her love.

If I listen hard enough I can hear her in my heart as if she's a whisper. I can feel her sweet but loud voice urging me to stop crying because she's right here next to me whenever I

yearn for her. Every time I go into her shoe closet, I can feel her asking me to stop since none of her shoes fit me. Whenever I have a nervous breakdown, I hear her soft voice instructing me to repeat Psalms 23 to myself. Every accomplishment, I know she's right there by me, telling me she's proud of me. The journey without her isn't getting any easier, but it's also not as difficult. I now use that pain and agony as fuel to achieve my goals and ensure that everything my mother did for me was not in vain.

The thought of her used to make my family and I somber, mute, and gloomy; now we share our memories about her. The ones that make us chuckle because of the amusing things she does and says. When one of us does something, we giggle and remark, "Mommy would have said..." We grew closer than ever before, bonded by our love for my mother and our commitment to keep her memory alive.

Though she's gone, she will always remain in our hearts.

THE WHITE WOOD CHURCH
BY WRENDOLYN KLOTZKO

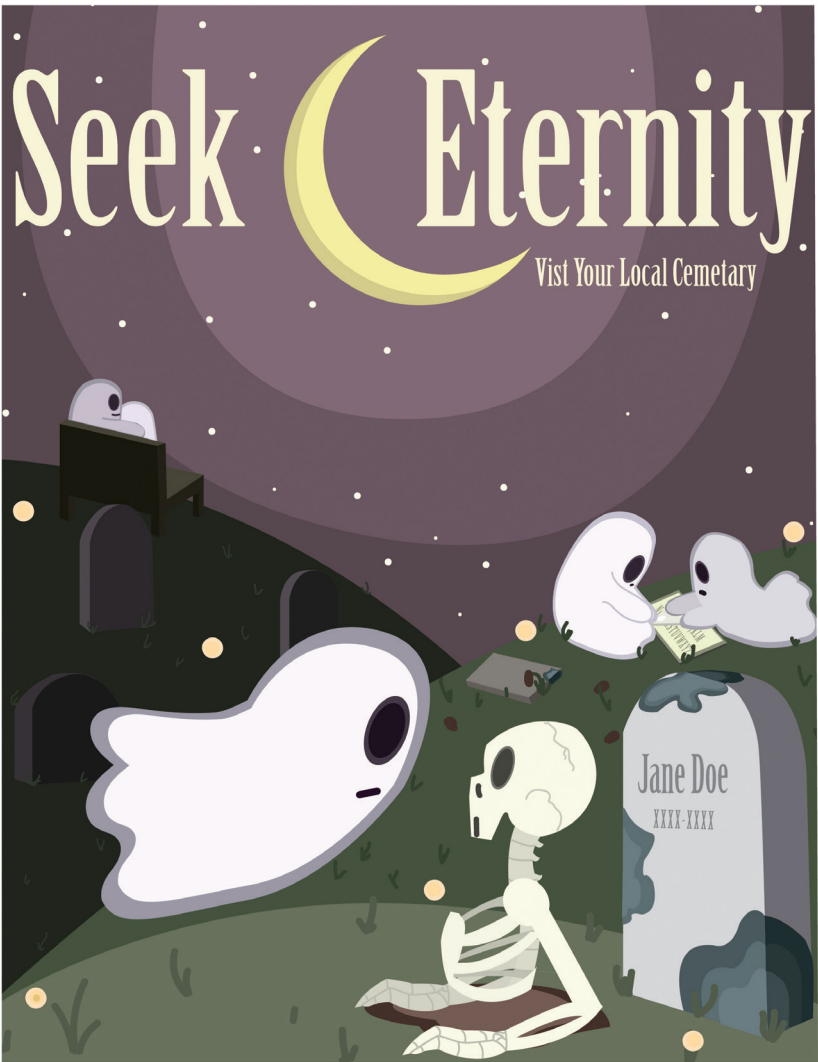
The birch sits amongst the red pine,
and its fingers all intertwine
with pious songs of card'nal birds
where they forget all of the words.

Their hearts leak out in a sharp cry
in wanting love before they die,
but sturdy sits the sacred birch,
who is now a grand, slender church.

The pasty tree is like moonshine,
a ray of light from the divine
whose pulchritude attracts the herds'
tributes that gild the trunk in herbs.

Although they are at the start shy,
they peer within the birch's eye
and watch the paper find its perch;
for they found the tree of their search.

SEEK ETERNITY
BY VERONICA JONES



A FAMILY AFFAIR
BY OLIVIA MURPHY

A Family Affair

(Lights up on a dilapidated living room. GERTRUDE ALLEN, a woman in her 60s, sits on the worn-in couch holding a photo album. She wears a cross necklace.)

(In the next room, PAUL ALLEN, a sickly man in his late 60s, lays asleep in bed.)

(There is a knock at the front door. Gertrude braces herself and rises, leaving the album on the couch. She opens the door, revealing MAGGIE ALLEN, a woman in her mid- to late twenties, bundled up for the cold outdoors.)

MAGGIE

Hi.

GERTRUDE

Hello, Margaret. It's... good to see you.

MAGGIE

Maggie. You know I've always preferred Maggie.

(There's an uncomfortable beat of silence.)

MAGGIE

Are you going to invite me in?

GERTRUDE

O-of course. Come in, get out of the cold. How were the roads?

(Maggie steps over the threshold into the room. She removes some of her layers as she answers.)

MAGGIE

Fine, Mom. It was just a long drive.

GERTRUDE

And, uh, where is it you were coming from?

MAGGIE

(Incredulous)

I sent you a letter, once I got a place. It had my address. You never even looked at it?

GERTRUDE

Oh, y'know, we've had incidents of local hooligans stealing the mail. I never saw your letter, I'm afraid.

(Maggie deflates. She moves to put her layers back on.)

MAGGIE

I should go. This was a bad idea. Give Dad my best—

GERTRUDE

Wait, wait! You can't come all this way not to see him. He... He doesn't have long left.

MAGGIE

Okay—okay—what does that mean, though? That he doesn't have long? Are we talking days, weeks, months?

GERTRUDE

...Hours, now, I think.

MAGGIE

Mom! You only called me two days ago. You waited that long to reach out?

GERTRUDE

When I called, I still thought he had a bit longer. But he's stopped eating, and he's usually asleep. The doctors warned that it's almost time. Look, I know these aren't ideal circumstances, but you're here now. Come into the living room and let's catch up. It's what your father wants.

(Maggie relents. She hangs up her coat and winter gear on a coat rack beside the door.)

MAGGIE

Can I see him?

GERTRUDE

He's asleep right now. I don't want to disturb him yet.

(Gertrude sits at one end of the couch. She gestures for Maggie to join her. Reluctantly, she sits at the opposite end, as far away as possible.)

GERTRUDE

How have you been?

MAGGIE

Fine. You?

GERTRUDE

My husband is dying.

(A beat.)

What do you do for work?

MAGGIE

I'm a software engineer.

GERTRUDE
(Clearly not sure what to make of that)

Sounds interesting.

MAGGIE

It pays the bills. And, y'know, the college loan debt. Even working full time when I was a student wasn't enough to pay the tuition.

(Awkward pause.)

GERTRUDE

I dug up this old photo album when you said you'd come. Take a look!

(Gertrude picks the album up and holds it out to Maggie. She slowly takes it.)

MAGGIE

Um. Okay.

GERTRUDE

Look how little you were. Oh, you were just so cute. And you absolutely clung to me—look, there! That was from the first day of Kindergarten and you were just devastated when I had to leave. Aw.

MAGGIE

Yup.

GERTRUDE

What happened to that little girl who needed her mom?

MAGGIE

She—you—nope. No.

GERTRUDE

What?

MAGGIE

Nothing.

GERTRUDE

Spit it out, Margaret.

MAGGIE

Don't you remember? We were so close—which is why I told you when I had a crush on that girl in middle school. You said, "That's a disgusting joke," and to never repeat it to anyone else.

GERTRUDE

Well. It was in your best interest. Middle schoolers are cruel.

MAGGIE

You were cruel.

GERTRUDE

Homosexuality is a sin. I didn't want you to go down that path.

MAGGIE

You still think that? Does Dad? Does he actually want me here?

GERTRUDE

Your father reminded me that we ought to hate the sin and not the sinner. He—we both love you, and he wanted to say goodbye.

MAGGIE

Okay, I'm not even gonna get into how shitty that sentiment is. Did Dad have anything to say about kicking me out? About never speaking to me again once I left?

GERTRUDE

He hasn't been in a condition to talk about such unpleasant things. What matters is we're together right now, and that we're family.

MAGGIE

I'm only looking for two words, Mom.

GERTRUDE

What?

MAGGIE

Are you sorry? That's all I want to hear.

GERTRUDE

No.

MAGGIE

Holy shit.

GERTRUDE

I couldn't allow you to engage in that lifestyle in my home. I don't regret our decision.

MAGGIE

(raising her voice)

Jesus Christ!

GERTRUDE

(matching Maggie's volume)

Do not take His name in vain.

(Paul speaks from his bed in the other room.)

PAUL

Maggie? Is that you out there?

(Maggie takes a second to collect herself then rises. She enters her parents' bedroom and goes to the bedside. Gertrude slowly follows behind her but lingers in the doorway.)

(It's evident as Paul speaks that the effort takes a lot out of him.)

MAGGIE

Hi, Dad. I'm here.

PAUL

Look at you! I like your hair. It's... different.

MAGGIE

Thanks, I guess.

PAUL

Were you girls fighting again?

MAGGIE

It was nothing.

PAUL

I do miss a lively house, but you two should play nice. It's good to have you home.

(Paul grows weaker. He coughs. He is straining to get the words out.)

Listen, Maggie. Gertie, you too... Come close. It's almost time. There's—something you need—to know.

(Heavy pause. He says something unintelligible, perhaps lost to a cough, before continuing.)

He is handpicking the balls.

(Paul dies.)

MAGGIE

...What? Did he say—

GERTRUDE

The balls. He is handpicking the balls.

MAGGIE

Who is? What does that mean?

GERTRUDE

I don't know! But we both heard him.

MAGGIE

It's not some reference? There's not some, like, inside joke you guys have? Or a recent topic of conversation that it could be related to?

GERTRUDE

No. I haven't the faintest.

MAGGIE

Give it up for dear ol' dad. Quite the dying words.

GERTRUDE

Rest in peace, Paul. Right. Well, I suppose I should notify hospice, figure out what happens next.

MAGGIE

Right away? Shouldn't we, I don't know, just be here with him a bit longer? Before everything else happens.

GERTRUDE

I... suppose. I ought to say a prayer for him.

MAGGIE

Well, I think there will be enough of that at the funeral.

(There's an awkward pause as they stand around the body.)

MAGGIE

Okay, maybe we don't need to hang around in here. Let's go back to the living room.

(Gertrude nods. The two get up and sit back down on the couch.)

GERTRUDE

You mentioned the funeral. Will you be in attendance?

MAGGIE

Am I invited?

GERTRUDE

Don't be like that. Of course you are.

MAGGIE

I'm serious, Mom. Will your priest be okay with having an openly gay person there? Will the other church ladies throw a fit? I don't want to be there if it's going to take away from honoring Dad.

GERTRUDE

There's a new priest. He's... open-minded. As for the church ladies, to hell with them. Paul would want his daughter there. If someone like Janet has an issue with that she can take it up with God.

MAGGIE

Wow, Janet. I haven't heard that name since—well, since I... left. She was the crazy bingo lady, right?

GERTRUDE

Yes. She seems to win every time. Paul and I always thought there was some funny business going on.

MAGGIE

Like how? I don't think you can cheat at bingo.

GERTRUDE

She had a way, I'm sure.

(There's a brief silence. Maggie is suddenly animated.)

MAGGIE

Mom! Who is the caller?

GERTRUDE

Pardon?

MAGGIE

Who's the caller for bingo?

GERTRUDE

It's... Oh, it's Edison.

MAGGIE

"He's handpicking the balls." Dad was trying to tell you! Janet is cheating at bingo, with Edison's help!

GERTRUDE

Goodness gracious! Those conniving little...

MAGGIE

I wonder how dad figured it out.

GERTRUDE

People were always paying visits and talking to him thinking he was asleep or stupid. Just yesterday Janet came by. I'm sure she let something slip, the old cow.

MAGGIE

What are you gonna do about it? Can you... report that?

GERTRUDE

I don't know. But one thing's for certain: she's not invited to the funeral.

(The pair fall into silence. After a moment Gertrude sighs and gets up. She grabs the home phone.)

GERTRUDE

It's time. No use dragging it out any longer. Paul's laid in bed long enough.

MAGGIE

I should get going. Here's my address—save it this time. I expect a funeral invite.

(Maggie rises and puts her layers back on. Gertrude pats her stiffly on the arm before Maggie exits out the front door. Gertrude dials on the phone.)

(Blackout.)

END

A FORMAL DAMSEL
BY CAROLINA MARIN



EXPECTATIONS
BY CLAIRE LEONE

Expectations:
eat through me like a
thousand snakes hissing, and
writhing, and wriggling, their grip
made ever more potent, their
jaws squeezing like a vice, their
fangs curl around me, acid burning in its wake
seeping into me,

I cry for help
with the last unshed tears I have left,
heads raised and ready-
poised to strike-
constricting me until my last breath
looking at me all from every angle
up and down
wondering where I've gone
and what I've done
to look like this,
the white of my skin
mottled red with their rage,
their weight on my chest
grows ever heavier,

I beg for a respite,
with my last dying breath,
but I know as their
eyes start narrowing with poise,
that I will be here
to the end, expected
to stay constricted
'till the day they decide to take another bite.

WINTER'S GAZE THROUGH FROSTED PANES
BY BRITTNEY FAHNESTOCK



THE CONSECRATED KIRK
BY WRENDOLYN KLOTZKO

The House of God lives
in these walls, but
to me, it is just a church.

The golden fire sun has its rays run through
the tall stained glass, dealing a shuffled
artificial rainbow on the floor. The towering windows act

neither as a sieve nor an aperture of God
to crusade the light in my eye.
The booming of the bells from above

sings and rings for all to hear, pushing music waves to crash
against the jetties of the ear. With the verberations of song
projected, the Lord whispers nothing to me.

The Eucharist tastes of brittle, earthy bread and
wine of sweetness and
slight tartness only subtly breathed atop it.

But, still, I am purely myself—
no union with the son of God—
tongue reminiscent of grape and wafer.

The smokey scent of frankincense dances about
the room in an elegant routine of
richness, woodiness, warmth. This aromatic aura

does not arrange an assembly with my presence
and the Holy Ghost. My fingers glide down glossy-coated pews,
following currents of the grain.

And across scritta paper, my fingertips envy
the smooth, thin pages—the ink lay on the paper,
ignored.

COMPOSING CROSSROADS
BY SARA ALBANESE



THIS IS WHERE

BY ALLY GERO

my father tied fishing line
around my loose canine and slammed the door shut.
Where my tongue searched for
its old plaything, but instead found
the taste of a silver coin.

This is where my sister's friend flinched
when pulling the trigger but fell anyway
into the icy creek behind his house.
Where his brother found him
saying *I didn't mean to*.

This is where the roadside memorials
grow like ragweed, but are dressed
in roses and cheap stuffed animals.
Where the roadkill joins them next
to the oil and stone for their own sepulcher.

This is where we collected frogs on sharp
wooden sticks, just to throw them back into the woods
for the coyotes to eat.
Where rabbit tracks pressed into
snow leads to a graveyard of family pets.

This is where a woman started three fires in her
trailer and blamed it on her survivor's guilt.
Where when we see flames, we bring out
old furniture to burn with it, leaving only the metal springs.

This is where deer hang from their hind legs
from a tree—stripped and displayed—in a front yard.
Where my father and I raised pheasants
just to release them for the hunters
in the Fall.

This is where my Mother raises her sunflowers
because it's the one spot the sun can reach.
Where I buried my lost teeth in the backyard
so only I could come back to them.

THE DISSERVICE OF A MILD FISH

BY JUNE DAWSON

I don't remember much of anything from my time in high school. It's like I read the SparkNotes of my own life without a single care for the details of it. I know it wasn't until my senior year I made friends who weren't my boyfriend; I was jealous of the people with friend groups and several people to lean on. I was too scared to reach out on account of the fear of rejection. I ended with a 3.7 GPA, at least, hardly challenged by basic algebra and science we learned each year. Yet, I remember nothing they taught me.

My teenage years were meant to stick with me forever, according to all coming-of-age media. But most of these memories are just snippets, mostly manifested by my physical senses. Haddock was one of those tastes that, though I've tried to get rid of, will always stick with me; a mild kind of fish with only a hint of a taste.

There was a particular thing about that meal; my boyfriend at the time loved it, and insisted on having it for dinner every Friday night when, traditionally, I would stay over. We spent almost the entirety of every weekend together, and most Fridays for 5 years, we'd eat haddock on his stained, crumby bed while watching whatever interested him at the time. And I hated it.

I never liked haddock, and I was repulsed by it even more over the course of those 5 years. The mild sweetness was so bland that it was easy to remember what I was actually eating; chunks of slimy, dead animal that had been sitting under a heat lamp for far too long to be enjoyable. And I still ate it, saying nothing as the gray skin wormed its way down my throat and made my insides twist.

We were 13 when we started seeing each other. We were the weird kids in school – queer in the literal sense, and apparently both so outcasted that we were meant for each other. As a hopeless romantic even then, I fell for him. Becoming official in the summer before 8th grade, we spent pretty much every day together. There's not much of anything to do at that age except watch YouTube and draw, and that we did - it all still felt like it was going so well between us.

“Looking at your art just makes me wanna... Ughhh, like I have so many critiques but I don’t wanna be mean.”

I swallowed back bile.

I figured it was something I should accept; *he* was the artist in this relationship, and *I* was just a beginner. Admiring his art, ethereal and dreamy as I saw it, I tried desperately to match his style, but *this* made it clear to me that I would never reach his level of skill. While it was so stupid of me to feel that way just because of an unsolicited comment, an abhorrent feeling stayed in my chest the entire night, and even the following day. Regardless of how it made me feel, I choked down the haddock that night, too, and didn’t complain about the lack of a side dish.

I’m still too scared of drawing anything, for fear it won’t ever be good enough. In 8th grade, we were clueless about style. It was around this time I was curious about fashion and what I felt comfortable wearing; after coming out, it was typically a pair of jeans and a hoodie. Nothing that stood out, and nothing that made me look too girly. There was only one Friday I felt bold enough to experiment with clothing.

I, a transmasculine person, wore a dress to school.

Everything was fine for the school day; only the night afterward made me question my choices. I hardly remember most of the remarks he made, except for the fact that it gave him “*second-hand dysphoria*.” I made sure to never wear another skirt or dress the entire time we were together.

“It just makes me question if you’re even *really* trans... And, well, I’m not attracted to girls.”

In my head, the rest of that weekend, I’d find any feminine features he might not like about me and wondered how I could fix them. I accepted that I’d have to make some uncomfortable adjustments to myself as I ate skinless haddock.

The skin was his favorite part.

High school consisted of some of the worst anxiety I’ve ever experienced, and it was obvious to anyone around me. I’d “shut down,” as my ex used to call it. I was quiet and stiff, shaking under my oversized hoodie and wishing I was invisible. It’s the kind of thing you can’t help but notice, and apparently the kind of thing he couldn’t ignore for long. I think we were sophomores

when he felt the need to point it out.

“It’s like... I know you have anxiety and shit, but it’s embarrassing.” He gave me an annoyed huff. “When we’re out in public and I’m talking, and you’re not really saying anything, people stare. *You* might not notice, but everyone else does.”

“Oh,” I could hardly croak out a response, “I’m sorry. Yeah, I didn’t notice...”

“Yeah. Honestly, sometimes it’s more like having a *pet* than a partner.”

Instead of having anxiety for no real reason other than my genetics, I worried about whether or not I was talking enough and how much people might be staring at us because of my negligence. That night, though, I just focused on filling up on my haddock and saving my tears for Sunday.

I stopped eating haddock in junior year – a decision I wished I’d never have to make. When I left him, he tried to guilt me into somehow staying friends after everything, sending several desperate texts and voice messages each day with claims of suicide attempts as a result of my distance. My empathy was his crutch. But, by whatever strength I still had left from my life before him, he was denied any more pieces of me. The last time I tried to eat haddock, I was reminded of that disgusting feeling I never liked or consented to that he forced on me, putting me through situations I may never write about.

With the hindsight of adulthood, I know better than to torture myself for the sake of someone else’s satisfaction. In the end, it benefitted neither of us. Our relationship collapsed regardless of the clothes I wore. And although I came out of it unsure of who I was and what I liked, still holding onto the idea that my opinions and interests were unimportant, I’m learning to let myself enjoy things without the worries of someone’s judgment. I became my own person who doesn’t eat fish with no side as a dinner.

CONTROLLED
BY CAROLINA MARIN



THE CHORUS LINE SINGER CONSIDERS IF LIFE IS MEANING-
LESS WHILE PERFORMING A SOLO
BY CLAIRE LEONE

My voice warbles out above the crowd,
one shiny, metallic wheeze
heaving an iron lung's last
breath. I am supposed to embody delicate,
yet I couldn't be farther than that.
I screech, like a tire on its last legs,
screaming to a halt, an
unstoppable crash. That's how I feel—
a million miles away from peace, serenity.
Trapped on a highway hoping someone,
anyone, can come save me
from this burning husk of my former self,
and this performance. I—
look out, desperate for
salvation, in the most unflattering of lights.
To the crowd of a thousand swimming eyes,
that all somehow seem to
enjoy wading through this performance, waiting
like sharks about to feed.
Washing me out, drowning
me, as my voice sputters and dies,
bleeding into the night.
What's the point anyhow, I wonder,
when I can no longer be
the youthful performer, they all demand of me
like a minnow, drifting dangerously
through an antagonistic sea.

THE BIRDS TOOK IT

BY ALLY GERO

It wasn't their names we remembered, but instead
their cowlicks, their sun-worn cracks in their faces,
the things the magpies took from them. Silver spoons,
lucky coins—their prettiest daughter.

The spot off Route 80 where kids would smoke
whatever the finches would bring them. There they wrapped
wild raspberries and black-eyed susans together to build a crown
for a head that no longer belongs here.

They drop their jaws and open their mouths, facing the wind
hoping it will make a song—or at least a hum. But the noise
will get caught in the black feathers of a raven before it can
make it through the trees.

Desire paths lead to the ski mountain where the kids
sharpen their tongues to the sound of white static
and they dream of bald eagles that can carry
them away in the grip of their talons.

But eagles haven't been here since the railroad
was built. The train that leaves and doesn't come
back, but they can hear the horn and feel the
rumble at their feet.

A magpie took my sister but left her song
echoing in the leaves. I wear the crown
with my mouth open, thinking I'll be the
lucky one. That mine will escape—
somehow.

FOGBOUND WOODLANDS
BY BRITTNEY FAHNESTOCK



THE FARM

BY HANNAH HAUSER

She spots it trotting down the street before her mother does. Her eyes follow it as it backs into the neighbor's driveway.

"Mommy, why is that car so long?" Frankie asks with a mouthful of cereal. She digs into the bowl in front of her for more.

Her mother glances up from a magazine. "Oh. That's called a hearse, honey."

"A her-w-se?"

"Mm-hm." She takes a sip from a steaming mug and flips to the next page of her magazine.

Instead of the bright-colored cartoon on the TV, Frankie observes the scene outside the picture window.

Two people wearing gloves step out of the vehicle and hike up the driveway. "Why is the hearse at Mrs. and Mr. Cooper's house?" Frankie asks.

Her mother presses her lips together. "Do you remember what I told you about Mr. Cooper?"

Frankie nods.

"Well, the hearse is here to pick him up." Her voice breaks. She winds her fingers around her mug.

"Where are they taking him?"

Frankie's mother studies her as the people with the gloves roll a cart with a large bag on top of it down the driveway. "Where do you imagine they're taking him?" Frankie tilts her head. The people with the gloves load the bag into the back of the hearse. "I think he's going to a big farm with lots of animals!"

"Mr. Cooper did like animals. Which ones do you think are on this farm?" "Cows, chickens—oh, and horses! Lots of horses."

The people with the gloves shut the back of the hearse and walk around to the front. A smile appears across her mother's face. "That sounds like a lovely farm." The hearse pulls away, disappearing down the street. Frankie twists her body back around and dips her spoon into her cereal bowl, scooping up leftover milk.

"All done?"

“Mm-hm,” Frankie mutters, handing over the bowl. “Mommy?”

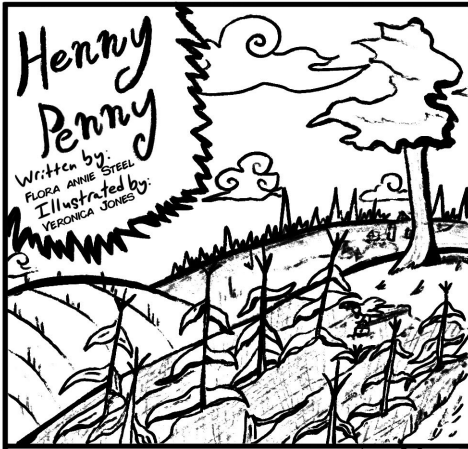
“Yes, dear?”

“I wish Mr. Cooper didn’t have to go.”

“Me neither, Frankie.” Her eyes become glassy as the bowl clinks against the sink. “Can we visit Mr. Cooper at the farm? So he doesn’t get lonely?”

Frankie’s mother runs her hand through her daughter’s hair. “I think that’s a wonderful idea.”

HENNY PENNY
BY VERONICA JONES, WRITTEN BY FLORA ANNIE STEEL







MONSTERS (FROM UNDER BEDS & BELOW)

BY CLAIRE LEONE

I had a conversation,
with them recently,
the monsters & krakens & sea witches & wraiths.

They all came up from the watery world down,
down
under.

They crawled and stumbled, limped and swam.
All to my called council.

I rang the bell,
and now they're here.
I sat them down, in whatever would hold them,

a folding chair, a chaise lounge, a cot, a mat.
I wanted to make them comfortable,
I just wanted to talk after all.

Dripping teeth, from gnawing bones,
my arm bones.

Bloodshed on aisle 9.

I wiped it up as best I could with the only
shower rag I had left,

wiped until my hands were raw,
and then I sat at their center,
on the floor the only place left,

and I looked up,
then I asked. Why have they stayed away for so long?

How I missed them, and I was just wondering why.
Usually my nightmares creep up on me unannounced,
usually unwelcome save for now.

Now here they sat before me, all like trained, sweet pets.
Now, I explain, I'm just wondering why:
Why now can I hear them- I don't understand.

Before I couldn't sense the claws coming out,
I refused to hear the thump of dragged too-loose joints
on my wooden floor.

But now I can hear again,
I finally stopped tuning them out.

I actually care enough now to try to make it stop.
I kind of missed it, y'know? The not knowing of it all.
When did I grow up,

when did I actually start to care?
I used to fear these guys,

but now, I can hear their footsteps,
I unclogged my ears.
But what does that mean for me?

Because if I can fight the imaginary,
the serpents & sirens & ghouls & merfolk,
then what's left to scare me,

what new peril
awaits me?

Then I reveal that's why I called them here,
to this council of dread.
I needed the enemies of my enemies

to defeat the next monstrosity,
that lies in the murky waters
and that which creeps underneath my bed.

HELIANTHUS
BY ALLY GERO



THE CONJUNCTION

BY JUNE DAWSON

The jacket I steal is covered in blood, indistinct chunks of flesh, and brain matter, but I can't bring myself to care. I wipe it off and put it on my shoulders, shivering while snaking my arms through the sleeves. The body it belonged to is surrounded by flies that had also demolished the half-eaten food, now moving on to the infected, rotting meat.

I stroll through the aisles with a ready hand on my crossbow, listening. It doesn't sound like the dead are too close yet. I still have some time to collect the remaining water bottles. Shaking off my bag, I unzip it and add to the weight on my back.

The dead's croaks suddenly grow much closer and louder. I rush to put my bag on once more and aim towards the door, expecting them to walk in.

Instead, a person runs in. They're panting, holding a bag that looks empty, and holding a measly pocket knife. It's clear they came unprepared.

The ignorance of some people these days amazes me.

My eyes train on them, though they're hardly a threat. Once they take notice of me, they become more fearful. Their face has various smears of blood and dirt. Some snowflakes remain unmelted atop their shaggy hair. The rotten smell that protrudes from them says enough.

Decaying arms break through the glass windows and pry at the wooden boards in front of it. The person ducks away from the door, screaming, and behind them, one of the dead bursts in with many following after it. Just in time, I shoot the one in front though I know nothing could possibly be enough to preserve my life. I have nothing and no one to say goodbye to. This is it. I'm just a number among the casualties.

Just as I expected.

A muffled gunshot sounds outside.

Someone is out there using a silencer. I don't have time to focus on it. One of them is right by my side, fighting for the sake of its hunger. I have little strength left, but neither does the dead. I'm able to keep out of its teeth, but not reload and kill it. My hopes are further diminished as the other person screams and I hear flesh tearing from bone.

"KALI!"

I look up to see the owner of the silenced gun. He's so beautiful that I almost don't notice him crying. It's hard to get a good look, given my circumstances, but his large build immediately entices me. I find my-

self further enamored when he looks at me. His jaw is sharp and threatening, but his gaze says that there's more to him. A fascinating life story.

I feel like I've been looking for him my entire life, and this is what I've been surviving for these past few years.

Bang.

The dead one that was attacking me falls limply to the ground, the brain matter splattering on my face just shy of my mouth. It squelches as it falls to the floor when I wipe it off. The man stares at me for a second... watching. Waiting?

Wiping his tears, he sighs and lowers his gun. He goes right back out the door, as if he was never here in the first place. My heart flutters. This was not only one of the first people I've seen in a long time (aside from the painfully unremarkable "Kali"), but the *only* one to do something nice for me in several years.

That was the nicest thing anyone's ever done for me.

He had every reason and opportunity to either leave me to die or steal from me, but he did neither. He used a bullet for me – they're not easy to get anymore, and need to be used sparingly. *And yet...*

I want to call out to him, ask to be allied and share what little water I collected. To have a partner in this time is far more rare than any kind of bullet.

I open my mouth to speak. Only a pathetic squeak comes out, and he's too far to hear it. The years of silence have caught up with me. But would this man even bother becoming my ally, anyway? Did he take an interest in *me* as I did him?

...

I take careful steps, remembering how to go completely unnoticed.

I decide to follow.

A coldness pricks my palms, rough bark scratching them. It gives me goosebumps. My stomach cries for attention, but not enough for me to take the risk of jumping down from my perch. I find myself selfishly wishing he would just notice me and offer something he didn't have to spare. I've forgotten the last time I had more to eat than a handful of berries.

I can only stare. It's nearing dark with the fire still unlit. My eyes have to strain to see his attentive stance. Despite his brawniness, he's qui-

et. Still. Discrete. We're similar in that way, aside from our builds. I don't know how he manages to maintain these days, let alone in winter. Perhaps he used to be a part of a successful group? It'd be the first time I ran into anyone like that. There's a possibility that it collapsed recently, hence why he's residing in the woods. His focus remains on a rabbit – thin, but still something. Sustenance.

He's quivering noticeably – nervous, I figure, since this is the only animal within miles. We both dread the idea of him going hungry much longer.

The rabbit stills... It sniffs something on the ground, back facing its hunter. He doesn't hesitate when he pulls the trigger. Only a muffled shot. Red seeps into the white snow, melting some of it in the process. Nothing I haven't seen before. And yet, he kneels in front of it as if he can't feel the coldness of the ground from the holes in his pants. From so far away, I can't quite hear what he says... Yet, his tone is so soft. Gentle. There's a dramatic fold in between his brows as he frowns. I'd pretend not to notice the tears streaming down his face if it wasn't something I understood. The act of killing for your own survival.

I temporarily shift my attention to the sky. Between the branches, I see a gradient of different purples and blues, from lavender to sapphire. It makes the air feel colder, yet calmer, as if I could ignore the nauseating smell of decaying bodies. I find myself crinkling my nose.

Below me, he skillfully restarts the fire, the rabbit just a foot away. There's a spark... a small fire that grows as he piles on more sticks.

I bite my fingernails, vaguely tasting wood, dirt and blood. As I hear him cough, I tear my hand away from myself. By now, I should know better. There's still a chance to catch it without being bitten. Even just a fever would make me meet my end.

How ignorant even *I* can be.

If I were any more delusional, I'd believe he did it on purpose, as a way to remind or warn me. Perhaps I'm not being as discreet as I thought – he might know I'm here and chewing on what's left of my fingernails. Or, even, he might want to ask me to join him formally, so we could go through this *truly* together. And, if I were lucky, more could come from it...

I wish I'd taken my chance that day instead of waiting and hoping endlessly up until now. We would've grown close in no time. *And he might've felt the same way*, I remind myself. It's almost like fate, how

“*Kali*” was killed at just the right time. Not only could I be their replacement – I’d be better. We’d find a home together, live the rest of our lives in peace.

There’s still a *chance*, if I could only bring myself to jump down. I stare longingly at his sun-kissed skin glowing orange-ish in the fire. The rabbit cooks after being messily skinned. My mouth waters. Aside from my obvious hunger, my only wish is to see his eyes, too, in the fire. They were a stunning light brown, and, if I remember correctly, had hints of gold. Yet, they were dull that day.

I could bring the light back into them, if..

To let myself relax in his arms and let him do the same. We’d both be safe for once. My desire to sit beside him and cuddle up becomes overwhelming. It’s a burning feeling in my body in contrast to the frosty air.

Perhaps if I say I was resting here before he even arrived... Could it be believable? My foot shifts regardless. It makes an echoing cracking sound against a branch and he flinches, looking around quickly. I retreat.

This is a *bad* idea.

Would he be safer if I stayed in his shadow? Would I scare him off entirely? *Would he shoot me?*

He holds his gun and I stay completely still. As capable as he’s made himself seem, I get the feeling he’s not got the best hearing. He can’t seem to identify where the sound came from, just as he hasn’t heard me following thus far. It nearly makes me sigh in relief.

Still tightly gripping the gun’s handle, he takes the meat off the fire. He’s watching his surroundings closely, taking gratuitous bites. My stomach grumbles softly at the sight and my body burns warmer. Seeing him nourish himself, and all the relief in his posture. I’d like to think there’s a way *I* can make him feel that way.

Footsteps and croaks sound from a distance.

While he stands and searches in panic, I keep a keen eye from my vantage point. With only the faint firelight, I strain to see. But I can make out a small flock of the dead coming from the south. Though difficult from my position, I refuse to give up on him.

They’re dead, but fast. *Smart*. I try not to focus too much on it as I aim.

I shoot the one in the front head-on. It collapses, limbs finally giving out and twisting in a position that would normally be unnatural. I thank my small deal of practice and reload. Another one is down before

he's running in the opposite direction.

Fuck.

I should be *glad* he's getting himself to safety. Part of me is, but...

He's out of my sight. Gone.

How will I ever find him? Is there even a way to do so without getting caught or killed? Or *both*? What if *he* gets himself killed before I can get to him? The stupid fuck probably would... I don't mean that. Do I?

The night is unreasonably and unseasonably hot thanks to my frustration. My face is probably red. There might as well be steam coming out of my ears.

I *will* find him.

I don't remember the days that have passed. If it even has been days. I barely find myself aware of anything at the moment. But none of it matters. He's safe, and back in my sight. I lean my face against the cool bark of my perch, watching as he cooks a pair of squirrels. Though, to me, they might as well be dirt. My appetite is nonexistent. I'm only glad he made it somewhere safely.

My stomach drops as I hear snow crunching. He's so quick to stand that it almost seems he was expecting something, but relief washes over me as I see a dog. A golden retriever with a thick, but patchy coat over a bony body. It wouldn't do too much good for food, yet, he beckons it over with a quiet whistle. The dog hesitantly approaches, bowing his head and panting. I think it's drooling. Its body points towards the fire, where the squirrels are probably finished. It looks like he's finally smiling.

He takes one of them off the heat and separates the meat from the bone. Though I expect him to eat, he reaches his hand towards the retriever and feeds it. It's *stupid* to do, really. If he had any kind of self-preservation, he'd get whatever meat and fur he could off the thing. There's no point keeping a pet in this life.

But, he... reminds me of that day.

It was in his best interest to either leave me to die or rob me. It'd give him more resources and save a bullet.

He didn't *have* to save me.

But he did. His selflessness is a virtue, and that's why I need him.

My chest burns.

With the bright sky burning my eyes as well, I decide there's nothing else I can do. Even if it's hard for him to understand, fate brought

us together, and helped me find him once more. It'd be a waste to just...

Watch.

I almost lost him indefinitely, and I'll never forgive myself for that. I can't let it happen again. We cannot be separated once more. For all he knows, we just happened to run into each other. A coincidence.

The urge overwhelms me and boils over.

I jump down from the tree.

I'm a good 10 feet away. I watch as the dog runs out of sight and he points the gun in my direction. I raise my hands, visibly unthreatening. My mouth opens. I try to speak, and yet, only a creaky shell of my voice escapes. I should've figured, but...

I still can't speak.

But, he must be able to see that I'm not here to hurt him because he doesn't shoot me. A squeak comes from my throat.

This is only the second time I've seen him up close. I can't help but approach. His face is just as gorgeous as I remember. His eyes, in the bright light, do have rich gold specks. His brows are bushy and his Adam's apple bobs in his throat. Everything about him is just so *perfect*.

"Back up." He says to me firmly. It's not gentle, like how he was with the dead rabbit. I frown, stopping in my tracks. My arms are heavy, but I try to gesture to myself. An explanation of my presence, pointing to the tree... Or, perhaps, he just doesn't recognize me? His expression is twisted – far too distressed for such a beautiful man. It's not right, but it doesn't feel like I can do anything about it. My optimism dwindles.

I almost cry, but it just comes out as a croak.

As I clear out my throat, he runs at me and I suddenly remember what it feels like to need to survive.

I don't have time to reach for my crossbow. He's much faster than the dead. I tremble... He almost knocks me to the ground, but I shove him as hard as my body allows me. His perfect shape is slammed into the tree I sat atop just a moment ago.

Blood splatters onto the bark.

I go cold and still as he lays limp. Rushing to his side, I see an alarmingly large wound on the side of his head, beside a sharp base of a broken-off branch. The tip is dripping in his lineage, and so much of it spurting out... No amount of pressure I put on it slows the bleeding.

I can't actually tell if he's dead or unconscious. I can't tell if I care now. It won't change my decision. I've already fucked it up. There's no fu-

ture in which we're together, and happy, no less. My life loses its meaning.
My hands shaking, I slowly grab his gun and point it to my head.
I pull the trigger.

...

Nothing happens.

I try again.

Nothing.

I check the mag and see it empty.

He already fucking ran out.

Staring down at him, it's evident that there's nothing left here for either one of us. My only chance was exhausted, and now I couldn't even die here beside him. My mind blurs and I question who controls my body. I'm burning hot.

His muscle is tender. My teeth rip it apart, veins stringing off and slapping my chin. I don't mind the rawness. Even if I did, I can't stop myself.

I feel my mouth dripping with blood, his flesh starting to slide down my throat. I'm sobbing. Tears mix with the meat.

The heaving of my chest nearly makes me spit him out, but I don't relent. I swallow fully, nearly choking. The dark arm hair once belonging to him tickles my tonsils as it goes down. I lean forward and take another bite.

RELEASE
BY ALLY GERO



I FEEL

ALL

