

GREAT LAKE REVIEW

SUNY OSWEGO'S
STUDENT-RUN LITERARY MAGAZINE

REQUIEM

95TH EDITION

FALL 2023

GREAT LAKE REVIEW

FALL 2023

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A WATERCOLOR HUMMING-BIRD
BY NATALIA LÓPEZ MENA

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,

It is with great pride that we share the 95th edition of our journal with you. We named this edition of The Great Lake Review “Requiem” because it felt right, and honestly it’s a word that doesn’t get enough attention. I will not try to sum it up for you, because I want you to read it and see. Things are a bit different this time as this is the first entirely online edition of GLR. We have been through a great amount of turmoil, but that never meant we couldn’t still put together this beautiful piece of student-made art for your reading. There are many thank-you’s to be said. First, I cannot thank my wonderful staff enough for their tenacity and commitment to selecting the best pieces for this edition. Without them, I do not know where I, or GLR, would be. They exhibited much greater tolerance for stress than I, who panicked multiple times throughout the semester about how we could possibly pull this off without our usual funding.

I want to thank my staff for sitting through meetings, my rambling, and the general melodrama of it all. To Vanessa, our treasurer, thank you for stepping in and helping us to the best of your ability. To Halle, our vice president, thank you for choosing us and organizing our messy files. To Ally, thank you endlessly for juggling multiple roles and wearing numerous hats while passing knowledge to me. To Maddie, thank you for deciphering my incoherence during meetings. To Amanda, thank you for making us all look fabulous and professional on our social media. I love each of you so very much for piloting this ship with me.

To my amazing section heads: Gabbi, Jon, Ashley, Nikki and Emma, you all did a wonderful job. I am proud of all of you! And of course I cannot forget the general editors. It was beautiful to hear how seriously you all handled each submission and each other with care. My heart swells because of your dedication.

And most of all, a thousand hugs and thank-you’s to those who wrote and shared their hearts with us. We asked and you all delivered. We are so honored that you chose to share your work with us, such an intimate and personal exchange makes me tear up. More hugs still to the faculty at SUNY Oswego who have supported us along the way– our faculty advisor professor Fordham, Dr. Frazier, Dr. Donnelly, and the entire Creative Writing and English Departments who have sworn not to let us drown. We love you, I love you.

-Lauren Royce

THE ENDING LIBRARY

BY ADRIENNE LICATA

The tapping at the window was beginning to bother the archivist. With each clack against the glass he held his pen tighter, until his knuckles turned white and his characters were curt and stilted. After every paragraph or so he would throw a glare toward the window, as if sheer tenacity could stifle the incessant noise.

He suspected it was a branch puppeteered by the icy wind, helplessly beating against the panes time and time again. Sometimes, however, it sounded to him like a long, pointed talon, scratching slow, deliberate lines over the glass. But he could not see into the black night.

The candles flickered low as the archivist finished his transcription. A perfect dot of deep India ink concluded the final sentence, and the archivist blew carefully over his work. He closed the book he had been copying from, the disintegrating spine crackling with age, and felt a sense of solidarity with the old tome as he rose, his aching bones protesting. He bore the book with reverent hands to the shelf where its brethren leaned on one another in piles of failing bindings and crumbling pages; a retirement home of sorts. He was pleased to see the numbers growing, a result of his tireless work.

Where the old book once rested, high within the library's labyrinthine shelves, the archivist would later place his facsimile. The night's work, however, was far from over. On a table near the window he loosened the jig that compressed his freshly-bound pages while the glue set. He allowed himself a moment to breathe in the scents of leather and paper, then returned to his desk, replaced the candles, and began a new transcription. This one recounted a traveler's journey to Scotland, from castle-laden Aberdeenshire to the rugged Isles. He strove to capture the lively rhythm of the lettering.

The skittering, scratching tapping at the window carried on just as the archivist did. He tried to ignore it, completing one chapter, then the next.

As he turned the page to begin the third chapter, Arbroath Abbey, he saw that the paper was, inexplicably, filled. Spindly figures were scribbled in green crayon: a smiling face with spikes of hair, a girl in a triangle dress, what appeared to be a cat. A child's drawings.

The archivist huffed and grumbled as his gray eyebrows crept down his forehead. Had he forgotten to lock his study? Perhaps he'd grown too accustomed to the empty halls – visitors came less and less these days. It seemed a shame, although he enjoyed the silence. He would not forget again.

With sparse dots of glue, the archivist sealed together the ruined pages, smoothing them with a bone folder until he was satisfied that no

trace remained.

He could not resume his writing until the glue dried, so the archivist piled some completed transcriptions onto a rickety wooden cart and ventured into the dim hall. The ceilings vaulted high above, lost in shadows impenetrable by the flickering lamps. He entered the maze of bookshelves, navigating by a system of signs and markings only he could fluently read. In the half-light the shelves seemed to tower into the heavens, and he often had to fetch a rolling ladder to put the books where they belonged.

At last the cart was emptied, and the archivist began the long journey back to his study, with only footsteps and a squeaking wheel to break the silence.

Then, just under the ever-blowing wind, he heard the hints of a melody. Something swinging, bright, and familiar, muffled by walls of wood, as if someone had put on a distant record. He stopped in bewilderment. A visitor at this hour?

A shadow moved ahead of him, a silhouette displayed against the shelf by a glow of light around the corner. He heard a soft laugh like falling water. The shadow dissipated and gentle footsteps began to retreat.

“Wait,” the archivist wanted to say, but his lips moved soundlessly.

He left his cart and rounded the corner. A flash of golden fabric broke the tedium of shelves. He followed it, followed the patter of heeled shoes, the chestnut glint of hair, the whisper of a laugh, too proud to run but urgent in his pursuit. As he persevered, the music grew louder. He heard a crooning voice but could not make out the words.

The archivist broke out of the shelves and there she was, her hand on a slightly open door. Her smile was red lipstick and her eyes were cornflower. The golden silk of her shawl and headband shone like the stars.

Before he could conjure any words she grabbed his wrist and pulled him inside. The room was alive with twirling bodies and light and music. Ladies in long, colorful gowns danced with men in smart black suits, skirts and shirrtails in constant motion. Laughter rose over the orchestra’s lively number.

The archivist could barely wonder how all of this had arisen when the golden woman took his hand and drew him into the crowd. He hadn’t danced in years, yet his feet remembered the act. Faces around the pair blurred as they swept and spun. All the while he stared at the woman in wonderment, astonished by the smile on his face and the way the aching had faded from his limbs. He felt as if he could dance for years and never tire. They carried on like night and day, each song striking up a new dawn and fading into a tender dusk. The woman’s eyes were every color of the sky.

The reverie was shattered by three splitting sounds that echoed

through the library, impossibly loud. The music carried on, the dancers whirling in carefree bliss. The archivist stopped and the woman's skirts swished with belated movement. Her mouth arched mournfully but she let him go. She watched, the singular stillness in a jubilant sea, as he hurried to the door, back into the quiet dimness.

The gunshots had sounded so near, but no one stirred amongst the shelves. He hastened toward them, wary of being out in the open. The books sat neatly, undisturbed. The archivist heard nothing but his own quick breath.

He turned a corner and a looming face appeared before his own. Wide, white eyes sat within sunken cheeks painted black with mud. A steel helmet protruded over a lined forehead, and ripped fatigues were crusted with dirt and something darker. He smelled of sulfur and metal and sweat. The soldier stepped back and raised his rifle.

The archivist ran. He fled deeper into the maze, hoping to gain shelter within the twists and turns. Ragged breathing and thudding footfalls sounded behind his own. Every few moments the rifle would fire, tearing through paper and wood. The archivist's pace was slowing, any trace of previous vigor gone from his limbs. With every step his bones felt heavier and blood rushed louder in his ears.

He smelled the coppery tang before he felt it, a bullet ripping through the flesh of his torso, the bang reverberating within his skull. He crumpled to the ground, his fists clenching in agony as his blood flowed onto the hardwood floor. He closed his eyes, submerging himself in darkness, and waited for death.

But it did not come.

The archivist guided a hand to his chest. His shirt was not slick with redness. His fingers felt for a wound but his papery skin was unbroken. He slowly raised himself onto his elbows, eyes darting about. The air was still, the silence broken only by the muffled murmur of wind. He was alone.

Alone, for who would be in the library at this hour? He might have laughed, but a strange feeling nagged at him, the sense that something was amiss. He stared for a moment, the shadows solid beneath his gaze, until the feeling was gone.

In front of him sat his empty cart. There was work to be done, and here he was, dallying on the floor. The archivist stood, brushed himself off, and began wheeling the cart back to his study.

The tapping seemed to grow louder through the following nights. The archivist shut the curtains tight, yet found it was in vain. The scratching was relentless. He began to feel the sound skittering over his skin, grating at the base of his neck. It was difficult to concentrate on his work. After each sentence he would glance sideways, head still bowed as his eyes roved over the curtains. Eventually he could not bear to look at them anymore, so he threw them open, revealing the dark glass once

again. If the noise was not there, his breath would catch until it resumed. It was the constant ticking of a clock. It was his companion. It was watching him work. It was trying to get in.

He found more drawings. They spread across the margins of books old and new, scribbled green renderings of smiling people, animals, buildings, trees, suns. Gluing together the pages was costing him precious time, so he began to rip them out. He watched them smolder in the candle flame with almost obsessive satisfaction.

As he shelved his transcriptions, he'd sometimes see flickers of movement across the shadowy passages and freeze, listening intently for something—ragged breathing, the click of a safety being disengaged. But there was only giggling, the rifling of paper, the scratch of a crayon. Books would be strewn over the floor, drawings littering their title pages. In empty spaces on the shelves he would find spinning tops, toy trains and cowboy figurines.

How he could have ever wished for visitors, the archivist did not know.

A handwritten sign appeared on the front desk: *No unsupervised children*. Then, a second sign, added as an afterthought: *Firearms prohibited*.

Tonight, upon searching for spare ink bottles, he'd discovered a record player gathering dust in a forgotten storage closet. An unmarked record still remained on the turntable, the only one he could find.

The archivist lugged the thing to his study and set it spinning as he worked. The music was grainy and strangely familiar, a melancholy drawl of a saxophone, or perhaps a violin. He found himself humming along, almost drowning out the ceaseless tapping. After a few minutes the record's age overcame it, and it skipped, a single descending line in an endless somersault.

He rose from his seat, lifted the needle, and began the song again. The candles bared their wicks as the wind pulled the night along. In the absence of the damned scratching he fell into deep concentration, the pages before him seeming to fill themselves. His cart brimmed with transcriptions as aged books found their final resting place. He stopped resetting the record, and the same refrain warbled over and over.

A scream jolted him from his stupor. Shrill, caustic, bitten off. The pen fell from his fingers with a clatter. He waited, listening.

A gunshot, so close that the inkwell rattled on his desk.

The archivist rushed into the hall.

At one end was the soldier, black smoke spilling from the barrel of his raised rifle. In the shadows his teeth flashed and his eyes were lucent with rage.

At the other, scarcely visible behind the front desk, cowered the woman. Her lips were faded petals and her yellow dress was crumpled and fraying. But it was her. The soldier stepped closer and fired again,

ignorant of the archivist's appearance. The bullet disappeared into the darkness and the woman gasped. The soldier neared the desk, aiming haphazardly, his footfalls echoing louder than the shots.

The archivist was frozen.

Then the rifle edged over the desk and he heard the woman's breath catch. The archivist darted forward with more speed than he thought possible, ramming into the soldier and pitching them both to the ground. The soldier was younger and sturdier, yet the archivist held on, wresting at the rifle. The metal burned and the smell of blood and mud was sickening. The soldier's arms slackened all at once and the archivist seized the gun, lurching to his feet. With impossibly wide eyes the soldier stared down the barrel of his own rifle. The sneer that scarred his face morphed into a grin.

"You are not welcome in my library," hissed the archivist, before he pulled the trigger. The woman still gripped the desk with bloodless hands, shrunk into herself, a trampled daffodil.

"You're safe now," he meant to say as he crouched before her, but he realized he was still holding the gun.

She skittered away from him, staring through frantic brows, and the memory of her laugh dimmed into nothingness.

He went to lock the rifle in the storage closet where he had found the record player. The dark metal and sulfur stink seemed to suffocate amongst the reams of paper and misplaced ledgers.

When he returned, the woman was gone.

The next night, as the archivist hunched over his transcription, he saw that the door to his study was ajar. He scowled, finished his sentence, and shifted to stand. On the floor beside his desk was a child, seated cross-legged, a green crayon waving in hand like a charmed snake. His paper bore a drawing of an old man in a chair, with a frowning mouth and downturned eyebrows. The child did not look up. The archivist stared, grumbled, failed to think of a sufficient chastisement, and reluctantly returned to his work.

Then came the clack of spinning tops against the hardwood, so much like the tapping on the glass. He could ignore it, he told himself. He'd had enough practice.

But something was eating at him. It wasn't the noises behind him, the interspersed laughter, the whirring of wooden toy wheels. It wasn't the scratching at the window, which seemed louder tonight.

It was the silence. The noises that were missing. The record player was still. The candle flames did not crackle. The tip of his pen scraped inaudibly over the paper. He felt every empty inch of this yawning library. He knew that people used to bustle about its halls, scour its shelves, repose in its nooks.

Those that remained disappeared around corners, leaving behind faint scents or unwanted objects. They did not know him, he did

not know them. He often wondered if they were there at all.

He hadn't moved the soldier's body, but the hall was clear.

The archivist made himself focus on the work before him. He realized he did not know what he was writing. He picked up the old book, but could not find a title. The author's name was a dark smudge. The chapters did not make sense. They were two words long. They spanned hundreds of pages.

The child mimicked the sound of an explosion and gave an excited laugh. The archivist turned. Toy soldiers littered the floor, lead figures cast in various states of torment. Some were missing limbs or pieces of their face. Others wore gas masks and covered their heads with bubbling hands. The child marched one along absently, engaging in battle with whatever lay before it. He led it into a trench of ripped-up drawings.

"Get out," muttered the archivist. "Can't you see that I am working? Out! No children allowed."

The slight smile fell from the child's face.

"Get out, you impudent boy!"

The child scooped up his toys and ran from the room with a quivering lip.

As he faced his desk again something ground and scraped against the glass with more vigor than ever before. He knew that at any minute the window would shatter. But his work was not finished.

He picked up the pen and wrote. He did not need to look at the old book anymore. The ink flowed from his pen in black, unceasing streams, the white of the paper overtaken with every stroke. Soon it would disappear entirely. He was not writing words. He had never written words. His pen moved of its own volition, repeating the same lines, circling back on itself, scribbling and scratching. Back and forth. The pages filled as they always did. The books on the cart were teeming with scrawled lines and they would soon join their kin on the towering shelves, in the library without words.

The archivist smelled smoke. It seeped under the door and billowed upwards. It crowded out the air from his lungs and snatched greedily at his throat. In the distance he heard the splinter of collapsing wood, the thumps of leather hitting the floor. He put down his pen.

The doorknob burned his parchment skin and the hall was a blazing orange ruin. Flames consumed the labyrinth of shelves, and the ceiling was a roiling stormcloud of ash. In the back of his mind the archivist thought to call out. He had a faint feeling that someone had been here, in his library. Someone had once wandered the shelves, and now they were out there again, with no escape.

But perhaps he had imagined them.

The fire was menacing towards him and he could not breathe. Around him, rafters fell and fractured on the floor. The grand marble

archway at the library's entrance was the only unburning thing and he ran towards it, choking. He fell against the cool stone and his face was reflected in its burnished surface. Tears were streaming down his wrinkled cheeks, drawing lines in the layer of soot. As he stared into his own, wide eyes, the whites jarring against the black ash, he was reminded of the smell of blood and sulfur and death. His face was older, burdened with time, but he had stared into it before. And it had stared back, grinning.

Outside the library, the frigid wind blew harsh flecks of ice against his singed body. The sky was dark and vacant. The archivist ran into the empty night as the library burned. He ran until he did not remember there being a library, or being its archivist. And when he could no longer run, he collapsed into the snow and forgot what it was to remember.

The halls of the facility were an eternal stretch of oatmeal-colored wallpaper, uniformly severed by unadorned doors and square ceiling lights. The halls were made for slowness, for pretending at progress. The carpets absorbed every murmur or groan. The air smelled of ammonia and waiting.

In the common room, time-worn hands plunked at piano keys. A boxy television flickered with static. Wood clacked softly as a bishop captured a pawn.

The old man sat in his chair at the window, staring out at the weak winter light.

That's all he seemed to do, the nurses would whisper to one another, smoothing their starched aprons. Stare. They talked to him in passing comments, pleasantries, but his eyes were still, his breath unchanging. No visitors came to see him, no family questing for a spark of recognition, no old friends from the war. The nurses did not wonder why. It was as if nothing in the world could breach the void in his mind.

And so the old man sat, and he stared, watching as the branch of a gnarled oak bent in the wind to tap against the glass.

WHERE I'M FROM
BY KIMBERLY SUPLISKI

A dresser filled with spare change,
Yankee candles and Tide.
Carpeted wood-floor hallway
muting my running feet.

Little maple tree guarded
by two perfect sitting rocks.
Circle of flowers surrounded
by stones
the greatest
balance beams.

Breaking bread at Christmas time
and thick hair.
Otto and Maryanne.
Loud fights and playful insults
fair warnings and beautiful old soul.
weekly church visits and Sunday bests.

Carmel and Poland,
cream cheese and crackers.
My father putting his hand in a fire pit,
and running games
of red-light-green-light as the sun set.

I am from years depicted
by pictures on foam boards.
The garage walls plastered
with warm memories
and roots buried
in a home.

WHEN TO SAY GOODBYE.
BY NATALYA KELLY

My favorite necklace was fused with memories
These plastic beads bonded through friendship.

I once wore this necklace every day and the colors faded.
Swaying around my neck hitting my collarbones,
A badge of honor.

A gift from you.
Your love hung close to my body,
Seeping through the necklace and into my heart.

Now lingering among dozens of necklaces
Beads and wires that flow between the past and present.

This necklace is frail and fractured, this necklace.
The only longevity to such an inevitable end.

FIRST DATE
BY AMBER PAIGE



GIRLS JUST WANNA BE FREE

BY NATALIE GLOSEK

Oh my god, we get it. If I have sex before marriage, I will become a cheap whore who lives in a shack. I can't believe they're making us watch this right before lunch. On grilled cheese day of all days. My stomach is begging me to feed it, but I continue to shush it with water because learning about purity is more important than hunger. The girls around me are intently listening to the princess and king on stage. "Your knight was coming so soon, and you could have had this life if you had just stayed in the castle," the king says in tears. *Oo I see what you guys did there. Putting the title, "Stayed in the Castle", in the last line. Nice touch.*

The camp director is bringing to life a classic story in the Independent Baptist circle. Princess is promised a Knight in shining armor. Princess leaves castle for servant boy and goes out to the village. Princess realizes the grass isn't greener on this side, but it is too late. Now she is stuck with servant boy as she watches her Knight go to the castle to discover she has left. A very scary tale that is meant to instill fear into all the girls at the camp to never touch a boy unless you have a ring on your finger. And boy did it scare us all.

After the mini play is over, the camp director has someone play the piano as he pleads with us to 'stay in the castle.' With tears in his eyes he says, "Please girls, these teenage boys have only one thing on their mind. Wait for the right guy, a good, Godly man. And if you have done impure things, come up and repent to Him. He is waiting for you." Girls with puffy faces and streaks of tears on their cheeks all flood to the altar to pray with another female counselor as the boys on the other side sit there half asleep.

...

"GIRLS ARE THE GREATEST! GIRLS ARE THE GREATEST!" We are screaming as loud as we could. Girls are running up to the platform, their dresses dragging along the floor. *Now, I would love to get up there and cheer more, but personally if I move my legs in any fast movement they might fall off from the game we played earlier.* The camp director is standing on top taking in the cheers. He stands there like a dictator.

The boys on the other side are screaming "BOYS ARE THE BEST! BOYS ARE THE BEST!" *Yes, you guys are definitely the best! Your side of the auditorium smells like a zoo because the concept of a shower is insane to you, but yes you guys are the next leaders and pastors of our churches. Can't wait!*

"Ok, ok," he says and we all quiet down obeying his command. "That one goes to theeeeeee...GIRLSSS!" Screaming is flooding all around me. "Ok, I need one girl from each team to come get camp cash." *Please don't pick me to go up. Please please please.*

I heard my name. "It's your turn to go up," one of the camp counselors said. *Well, fuck me I guess.* I put on my smiling face and walk up to the stage. I lift my skirt up so I don't trip, waiting behind another girl getting cash for her team. "What is your team name?" the camp director asks the girl in front of me. She answers and I standing an inch behind her could not even hear her. *Oh boy she's about to get it.* "What did you say? Speak clearly so I can hear you."

The girl said it at the same volume. *Girl, I can't even help you with this one.* "What is your name?" he asks her again as he grabs the mic from the stand and shoves it in her face. She answers and says her team name. "Thank you, you can go down now. Apparently it's hard for kids to speak clearly these days." All the counselors laugh like they all have this big inside joke that us campers will never understand. He smiles and laughs like a stand up comedian who just made the whole audience laugh. *God, I want to slap that smug look off of your face.* But nope, I accept the camp cash and say my team name nice and loud.

...

"Is my dress long enough?"

"Hey, can someone pin my skirt?"

"Should I put a tank top under this shirt?"

I hear all these questions being asked as I am sitting on my bed during girl's free time. Makeup bags, straighteners, blow dryers, and toothbrushes are all laid frantically on the sinks. *Church service is the fashion show of camp. Girls, bring your best dresses because this is when the boys may be looking for their future wife!* Girls are in the bathroom cluttered around the small mirror space.

"Should I wear this dress or the peacock skirt?" I hear Ruby's voice from across the room.

"Rue, honestly I love that dress. It fits you perfectly! Like look at you in that dress. All the boys will be looking at you!" I shake her shoulders and she laughs.

"Oh I know, rightttt," her voice is sarcastic and dry. I laugh and lay back down on my bed. Rue joins me on her bed next to mine. "Ok but I don't know if I can wear this because it hugs my 'you know whats' and what if a picture is taking and my mom sees."

"Dude, if someone takes a picture, I will personally grab their camera and delete it." Ruby lets out a forced laugh, then quickly quiets down.

"I think I'm just going to wear the peacock skirt."

"Ok, you look great no matter what." I smile at her and she tries to smile back. She grabs her clothes and heads to the bathroom to get changed.

...

Banners of stars hang from the ceilings and Bible scriptures are also scattered everywhere. Shitty cutouts of the earth are taped to the wall, the blue painter's tape clearly visible. Knockoff Star Wars battleship wallpaper is by the platform. *I thought Star Wars was "evil" and we shouldn't watch those wicked movies, but hey what do I know.*

Plastered on the wall is the verse of the week, "The heavens declare the glory of God; and the firmament sheweth his handywork." The camp staff all have their annual "camp t-shirts". This year, they are bright orange with the verse written in giant black letters. Later in the week, the camp director tells us he made the shirts bright orange so when you're in public you will stand out and

show people that you are a Christian. *Yes everyone! Please look how cool I am wearing an orange Christian t-shirt telling you how to get to heaven!*

“Hellooo Campers!! Welcome to this year at Camp! As you can tell the theme this year is ‘The Heaven’s Declare The Glory of God!’” *Can you not just say “space”?*

“I chose this theme and specifically this Bible verse because it clearly shows that the Lord made everything. You think that the stars came from nowhere?!? You think the sun is the perfect length from the earth by accident? Nothing is by accident, and I could show you fact after fact that there is a Creator. And that Creator is God.” *So I understand that God is great, but I have heard this speech a million times and I just got off of a 4 hour bus ride so maybe let us go and sleep?*

It’s down to the last few. Megaphone man is going up to everyone still in and taunting them. Making jokes about their names and trying to get us to mess up and get out.

“When I say the word G-O, you need to go to the main deck and hit the deck and then back to poop deck.” He pauses. And Pauses. “Man the Bills are doing good this year.” *He’s trying to distract us.* I hear the infamous words telling us to run. We all run. *What am I doing with my life?* My skirt is hitting my legs back and forth making a swoosh sound. I almost slip, but keep my pace. I can’t beat the boys though because they literally train for these games the whole year it seems. I get some camp cash for placing.

...

It’s the last night at camp. We’ve listened to at least a dozen two-hour messages this week, but the last one is always the longest one. *God, my back is filled with knots. Can I hire a professional masseuse to give me a massage while this preacher is yelling in my ear? I promise it won’t be distracting.* I take a glance at the girl’s watch beside me. 9:30 PM. *I could cry. We’ve been sitting here for three hours. We are not going to be learning anything new. STOP PREACHING.*

One girl by me is taking notes vigorously, getting every verse and word this preacher utters, while another girl’s head is bobbing back and forth trying to stay awake. “And if thine eye offend thee, pluck it out, and cast it from thee: it is better for thee to enter into life with one eye, rather than having two eyes to be cast into hell fire,” the man reads the verse. “You need to get this sin out of your life.” Spit is forming in his mouth. He grabs a sip of water.

“It is better just to get it out right away. Guys, if it is pornography, it is destroying you and you need to get rid of it. Girls, maybe it’s a boy you’re talking to or music you’re listening to. It says in the Bible that it is better to pluck one eye out instead of bringing two eyes into hell. So yeah, it will hurt to remove this in your life, but you need to before it destroys you.”

I am sweating. I can’t stop thinking about it. I would join in talking about boys and how cute one was. I would have an interaction with one and suddenly we were destined to get married and have 5 kids. I would play along, making it seem like I wanted nothing more. It was getting harder and harder to play this part though. I had feelings for girls before I even knew what “gay” was.

The feelings grew stronger. I thought I could push it away, a desire I would never act upon, but then I fell in love and that was something I couldn't resist. I didn't understand why I couldn't love. Why was my love a sin?

"Come up and repent your sins." I swear he looks right at me. I practically sprint to the altar and approach my counselor asking if we could go into the hall.

"So, why did you come up to the altar tonight?" her tone is sweet and gentle. I feel in this moment I could tell her anything and I will be ok.

I'm choking back tears, but they come out as I begin to speak. "I have sin in my life that I need to get out." I begin to confess a lot, but I can't say I am gay. I know it would be too far and I won't be safe. Her eyes search me up and down. It's like she can tell I'm holding back.

"We all make mistakes. You just need to ask God for forgiveness. And take steps in your life to change. It'll be very hard at first, but trust me, if you put him first in your life, you will not regret it." She begins to read other versus from the Bible. "Why don't we pray now?"

"Dear Jesus, I'm sorry for this sin that I have in my life. You are so good to me, and I know that I need to make steps in my life to change." *And I'm sorry I'm in love with a girl.* She hugs me. My face is soaked from my own tears, but I feel safe. I can be accepted into the community again. Sure I can't be myself, but at least I'm loved right?

...

I am eight years old.

My cheeks are burning. Either from the fire that I am sitting inches away from or the fact that I'm talking to her again. It is the last night of camp and they had put on a fire for us all to sit by and sing and tell stories. *Finally, a normal camp activity. But I don't care about the fire or the guitar playing. All my attention has been devoted to her and the story she was telling me and only me.*

The first time I saw her that week was at game time. We somehow both got out at the same time, and she began to talk to me. I told her my name.

"My mom has the same name!" she said and suddenly I was hooked. I told myself I wanted to be around her so much because her father was the main speaker of the week and her mom and I had the same name, not because of her pretty hair and her kindness towards me.

I felt every emotion she felt. When she smiled, I smiled. When she was upset about something, I was upset and wanted to take away her pain. That one week of camp was devoted to her. *Crazy how much you can feel at such a young age.*

I needed to stay in contact with her. I planned and planned to ask her for her address so I could write to her, but I always chickened out, afraid she would reject the idea.

That campfire night was my chance. I was ready, but I didn't want to stop her from talking. *Please keep talking and smiling at me.* I missed my chance. The next day, she was gone.

I went home and found which church she was from. I begged my mom

to let me send a letter to the church, hoping it would somehow reach her. The letter was sent, but she never saw.

Camp was where I discovered I was gay. Camp was where I learned to hate being gay. Ironic, isn't it?

...

We're giving everyone hugs as we load onto the bus. I hear people saying they'll miss each other and to keep in contact. I'm wearing my camp shirt and my long jean skirt. My cheeks and nose have been kissed by the sun, actually smothered because I'm bright red. It wouldn't be camp without a little sunburn.

"Hey, we're sitting together right?" Ruby says, holding her pillow and backpack.

"Yes, of course." I sit by Ruby who has already made herself cozy by wrapping herself up in a warm blanket and laying her head on a pillow.

"Good year for you?" I ask Ruby.

"Yeah it was. I feel like I made some good decisions I'll stick to. How about you?"

"Same."

"It's so hard to do the right thing though. Like I know that waiting till marriage and not drinking and reading my Bible everyday will make my life better and I know what the right thing to do is, but it's just so hard. Like I just want to go out with a boy and listen to music sometimes. And wear pants and makeup. I would just feel so much better about myself. And like I have no one to talk to about these things besides you. People only know the fake version of me. The face I put on so people don't suspect anything from me. I know how to play the part of good Christian girl."

I don't know how to respond. I want to tell her, show her that we can get out of here and be ok. That it's ok to live for yourself and not for Jesus. That there is so much out there in the world. We don't need to be in fear of sending our future children to hell just because we don't raise them in church. That we can be ok away from here. That we aren't bad people if we love.

"I don't know if I'll be able to stay in church." That's all I can say.

"Yeah. I don't really have a choice though."

STOP
BY KYLEIGH O'HEARN



WHERE THE HELL AM I SUPPOSED TO BE LOOKING?

BY REILLY JONES

I'm five foot seven, maybe eight on the
right day.
And I stare eye to eye with my eyes of mine.
When they're met with...
What's her name?
From the thing...
In passing I think but
my eyes never
leave hers until they lock with mine.
A dodgy smile follows.
Where the hell am I supposed to be looking?

Ding!
In the elevator the floor is interesting.
Scuffs and scrapes and vomit I think?
My eyes move when
a someone whispers,
I'm not really listening but,
The noise caught my attention is all.
Eyes lock again
Though they're not my friend
Cold eyes I'm met with.
Where the hell am I supposed to be looking?

The screen at work, and
The screen on my time off.
The ground is less effective, and
The sky seems too high.
Straight ahead is a robot, and
Straight back one gets lost.
But when met with some eyes
I'm staring I think.
Where the hell am I supposed to be looking?

DIRTY SLEEP (IM TOO TIRED)

BY ELI KUBILUS

every day
I make my bed
with dirty sheets though
every morning I
boil water meticulously
tender palms dancing with heat
around the pot
lusting thoughts of
searing prints on metal,
erasing them
so the skin is smooth
and the grooves are burnt
to steel—

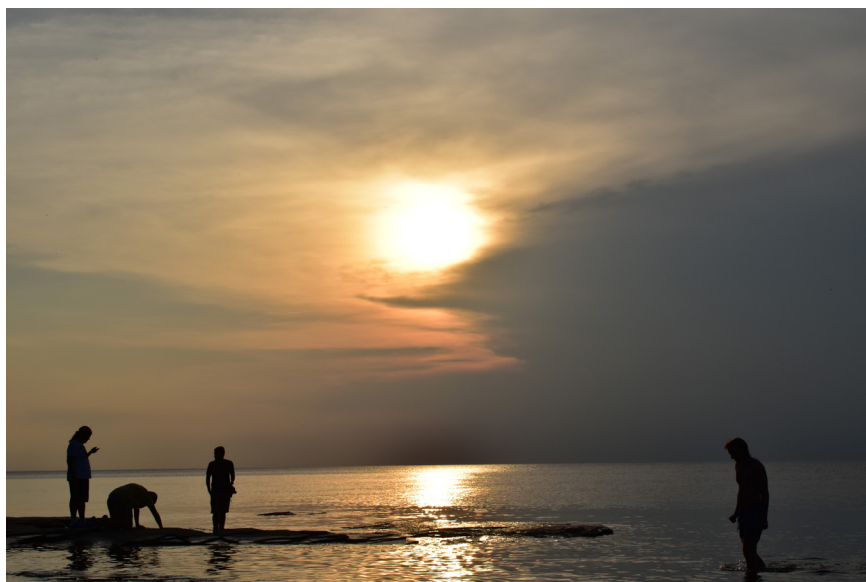
and once the water rages
churns around all bits of itself
in endless froth, I bathe
try to
sing off all thoughts
of you, scrub at my flesh
until its raw— red and
bleeding and small sores
take the place of your
fingers and even when
im sure
every ounce of me you
touched is gone, even when

the flakes of skin shift to
pile upon pile and flesh
gives way to muscle, nerve
and there is nothing
left for me to clean

I still feel goosebumps
of your breath
on my neck

and every night
I make my sheets
with dirty bed.

SUNSET LAKE ONTARIO
BY REBECCA EARLEY



DEAR SUICIDE
BY CHARLIE BURTON

Dear Suicide,

I was in the elevator last night.

Everyone else got off on the fourth floor.

You got on.

You'd been hanging around all night, staying at a distance, shouting at me, trying to get me to notice— you have to get pretty noisy for me to care anymore, after all. But there we were on that elevator, and you crawled up on to my shoulder and started whispering your bitter little sales pitch into my ear. Suddenly, you could be as quiet as you wanted.

“They don't care they'll never care you're stupid and worthless and fat and ugly and they could never care everybody likes you until its not convenient then they don't care and they'll never care.” And then you paused. “Bet they'd care if the next time they saw you you were face down on the sidewalk. You're up on the eighth floor. Good drop good drop. Force that screen out they'll notice they'll care. Splat. They'll remember. Splat.”

I ignored you, of course. God, I've gotten good at that.

But I could barely sleep. I didn't shave because I didn't trust myself with a razor while you were around. But you didn't get me.

You hear me, fucker? You didn't get me!

Some part of me wishes I could understand you. Figure out what makes you you. Why are you here? What happened in my life that let you nestle right up there in the soft of my brain? Maybe then I could get rid of you. Maybe then I wouldn't have that thought “I wish I had a gun in my mouth right now” while I'm sitting in Starbucks or walking to class anymore. Maybe then I wouldn't spend any more Friday nights sprawled out on my floor, cheeks damp, body so stiff it's like I'm going through deathless rigor mortis.

But I don't know that I'll ever be able to understand. And honestly, I don't know that I'll ever be able to get rid of you. I don't know if you're a part of me, or if you're just like a virus I caught somewhere. But there's no surgery to excise you from me, no chemo to poison and shrink you, no priest that can exorcize you. There's just the ever-constant roiling ocean of good and bad days that are totally beholden to your whims. And I think you're stuck somewhere deep inside me, in

my heart or my brain or my very soul. I hate you so much, I hate everything you've ever tried to do and everything you've ever done to me. But you're a part of me. You live in my ear, you hide behind my eyes, you dig through my bones, you course through my blood.

So if I hate you, does that mean I hate me? Do I hate myself for letting you worm your way into my life, to infect me and spread through my heart like mold?

Maybe.

But that gives you too much power, doesn't it? Because if I hate myself then your little promise sounds a helluva lot more convincing. And that makes me hate you more, which makes me hate me more, and on and on and on until one day I stop winning.

And I can't stop winning.

So if hate for you makes me weak, then what? The reverse should be true? Loving you should make me strong?

That's the stupidest fucking thing I've ever heard.

I can't love you. You've taken so much from me. So much time stolen, so much confidence lost. You take and you take and you take and most of the time, the only thing that I get is tired.

But maybe it doesn't have to be one or the other. Maybe I can live with you, live with the fact that you only make me stronger. Maybe I can live with the fact that you'll never go away. It's all maybes. But I'm not going to let that bother me.

You've got such a hold on me. But I'm not going to let you control me. I can't stop you from speaking, but I can stop myself from listening. From caring. It's not easy, but it's worth it. Because you know what else you've given me? The little gift you've handed over even though I'm sure you hate that you've given it up.

Every day I wake up and I know today could be the day you could get me. And that's scary. Mortifying. And I love that it is. Because every time I get scared of, I'm reminded that I don't want you to win. I spend every waking moment trying to figure out why I should keep going just to shut you up, and even though that can be downright exhausting...

I love it.

The sound of lake water splashing against rocks, the singsong chirping of migrating birds, the way sunlight beams through the slits of window blinds.

The taste of chocolate. The touch of a warm blanket on my skin.

My family.

My family.

I look for reasons to keep going, and I find them. Again and again, I find them.

Your mission is to make me think I hate life. But instead you just keep reminding me why I love it. I love it so much because you make me fight for it everyday. You did this. You did this. And that's why you can't win.

I love my life.

And I know that because of you.

So thank you. Thank you for making me stronger. For forcing me to keep going. Thank you for reminding me of how truly wonderful the very act of existing is. Thank you.

Now go fuck yourself.

Sincerely,

Me

AUGUST 17
BY TESSA MCCAIN



TO BATHE YOU

BY JENNA CURTIS

I took the role unnaturally
My words bathed you
Rid you of impure agony

I took the role unnaturally.

I cleansed you of your wounds, as you cower
Only for me to unintentionally scrub them clean
You bleed red lies of abandonment
Fleeing from fidelity

I cleansed you of your wounds.

I am the dirt that your shoes step on
I am the white lies that you tenderly whisper as we close our eyes
I am the duplicate of you, who you cannot bear to reflect on
I am filled with dirt, you are filled with improper purity

I am the dirt.

Now I quiver with deception
My hands are tainted
Stained, dirty
and even filthy

Now I quiver.

Deception drips
Out of the water
I am forever stuck
In the same place
you once were

Deception drips.

HOMEBOY

BY MAURA McCLOSKEY

I saw my wife five days ago.
She turned to me in the early morning chill, stubborn determination in her voice to win the very discussion she had started.

“I don’t miss him.”

“Yes, you do,” I replied, holding one of her hands while she gestured accusingly at me with the other. “Don’t say something cliché, like ‘I’ve always missed him.’” She threatened me with the fiercest glare she could muster. I did not feel deterred. “You’ve always missed him. You always will.”

“I have never missed him,” she insisted, which prompted me to ask, “Not once?”

“Not once in my whole life,” she retorted.

“Not when he missed your tenth birthday, the one you curled your hair all night for and painted your toenails for?” I asked. The light in her eyes flickered, she choosing not to face me any longer and shuffle uncomfortably in place. “. . . No, not then,” she mumbled. I persisted. “Not when he stopped picking you up from school and made you ride the bus?” “Especially not then,” she proclaimed, wrinkling her nose at the memory of snow flurries and coats never thick enough for the chill of the wind.

“You didn’t miss him when you turned sixteen and danced alone during your father-daughter dance?”

“Definitely not— I remember being angry, though.”

“You didn’t miss him when you graduated high school, or when you celebrated getting into your first-choice college, or when you moved into your first apartment?”

“No—! No, I . . .”

I hadn’t meant to corner her, yet when I did she heaved a sigh, pushing her head against my shoulder and resting her eyes.

“God, I did, didn’t I?”

“You did,” I confirmed her fears, softening the blow with a kiss to her temple.

“You always did.”

My hand in hers was the victim of her anger overflowing, she having squeezed so tight I thought she would tear through the mitten. “But he was awful,” she spat, trying to vocalize the venom she had built up. “He was the worst person you could have ever met, and I hated him, and I hated never being good enough for him, and I hated. . . I hated being the thing he hated.”

Losing her spark just as quickly as she had blazed through it, I squeezed her hand in mine and nodded to the patch of earth freshly spread at our feet.

“And yet, you missed him. That’s why we’re here, isn’t it?”

REMIND ME TO BUY MORE SHINGLES

BY ELI KUBILUS

You nest in my head like Bats in the attic
that I've let in and continue to keep there—
Hanging in shadows from rafters tucked high
in heavens, and silent but I still feel you:

Breathing, seeing, living, and I
am just as quiet, my breath held as not to
startle lest you flight off, finding some hole
in my roof I did not know to account for
when I trapped you there, the odd crack that
I forgot to patch up, and make your way out
of my home until I am alone in my mind.

It's miserable here when I'm lonely—
The door is locked, key lost and
cave of ceiling is just out of reach, nothing
to do but swing my torch in search of
your swarm dangling from my scaffolding,
a pathetic plea to anything who will listen for
even a glimpse of leathery wings cocooned
taut around body.

I've never so badly wanted
to hear the wailing screech of another
living being before I knew the absence
of your voice, shook with silence echoing
through beams as if they were my
bones, each wave bouncing from one
bowing thing to the next until I
can no longer take it and must
swallow the sound up,

it's lump sobbing in esophagus but
even the gnawing throb of throat is
ecstasy in a crawl space this empty.

WATERCOLOR PEACH
BY NATALIA LÓPEZ MENA



SUNSET FILM
BY REBECCA EARLEY



STRAWBERRY DANCE

BY JESSIKAH RUSSELL

Her locks of scarlet hair billowed in the wind as we approached the field. The serene hues of green reflected off the grass onto her fair skin. It was a beautiful sight. She couldn't help but dance about as she led me up the crest of the hill to her favorite spot. The one place where she felt at home; her center of the universe.

The last time we were here, I was much more cowardly than I am today. I took too many things for granted, especially her. But, today marks the day that I make up for my past mistakes. Today, I'll finally start the future I've always wanted with her.

When we were younger, we both were foolish and, I especially loved shallowly. Back then I was far too loose with my love for her and let her walk away from me before I realized how much her company meant to me. It truly was my biggest mistake, but now- Now, I can make up for that.

Years have passed since then and the time has made its mark on our skin. I never forgot her; the memories we made still haunt my dreams. I never understood how much of a gift she was and how much I adored the way she effortlessly lit up a room until she was gone. But, now she'll finally know how I feel; how I always felt.

"What are you waiting for? We're almost there!" I watched as she bolted up the final stretch of the hill, following close behind her. Once I reached the top of the hill, I stopped dead in my tracks. There she was, spinning in the field of flowers, her beauty radiating with the vivid around her. I couldn't help but smile at the pure happiness that poured from her face. "Where should we set up? There are so many good spots to choose from!" She broke the silence while hopping in place, eagerly swaying the basket in her hand. I approached her and guided her focus to a smooth spread of grass under a willow tree. "Perfect" she whispered with a grin.

I pulled the blanket out of the basket, flicking it to spread out over the grass. Following that, I placed our hors d'oeuvres out around us as she sat down, eyes notably glued to the container of strawberries.

"Want some?" She nodded her head as a wide smile spread across her face. I placed a few freshly washed strawberries onto a plate. She gleefully took the plate and soon after plopped one of the berries into her mouth. I watched as her familiar smile returned to her face as she closed her eyes and swayed in bliss.

I've always called it her strawberry dance because whenever she ate strawberries she had the same reaction. It's an adorable sight to witness. Sometimes I'm even tempted to sway with her, hoping to feel a fraction of the joy she was radiating.

"Thank you for inviting me here, by the way. It's so nice to be back." She grabbed another strawberry as she looked at me once more.

"Of course! I mean, we were both already in town... I guess I was right to assume that you were also feeling nostalgic." She nodded her head as I

laughed. That smile gets me every time.

We each took a breath as we continued to look out at our surroundings. I could hear the birds singing a hymn in the distance, as a breeze swept through, blowing our hair into our faces. She giggled as she tried her hardest to move her hair away from her eyes. Against her best efforts, small strands of hair still managed to slide back into her face. I turned to face her and swept a strand behind her ear. Her gaze softened as she looked at me.

"Y'know, I did love you all those years ago." She froze as I continued to look at her.

"But you- You said-"

"I know what I said... I was stupid and didn't know what I had until it was gone. I'm so sorry for what I did."

"I still don't understand... why now? Why tell me now after all this time? I mean... we barely know each other anymore."

"Well... let me ask you this. Is your favorite color still green? But not just the green you'd see on a lime, the green you'd only see if you entered the forest as the sun was starting to set?"

"I mean, yeah... but-"

"What about your favorite band? Do you still find it impossible to choose just one because every artist is unique and can't possibly rank them against each other?"

"...Yeah."

"What about strawberries? You still do your strawberry dance so, they still have to be your favorite fruit."

"You... still notice that?"

"How could I not? You look adorable whenever you do it. Plus, you haven't left my mind since we graduated. It's always been you and your cute little strawberry dance ever since then-"

"Really? I thought you didn't want anything to do with me... especially after graduation."

"Well.. that happened so long ago. There's no point to dwell on it now. We're here together now, so we might as well enjoy it, right?"

"True..." She looked back out to the field. We both sat in silence for some time. Nothing about it felt awkward; it all felt perfectly placed and comfortable. In the distance, flowers swayed as another breeze swept through the field. "Honestly, I think I still love you too..." I felt blood pour into my cheeks as she turned to me once more.

"You... what?"

"Yeah- I miss what we had. I miss our adventures... I miss... you." My face continued to blush a deep red as I turned away, trying to hide how shocked I was.

"Hey... look at me. What's going through that head of yours?" She reached towards my face, turning my gaze back to her as she cupped my cheek.

"I- I don't know. I just wasn't expecting that, I guess." She let out a soft laugh as she smiled at me.

"God, you look so cute when we blush like that." Her voice was hushed as she rubbed her thumb on my cheek.

"Thank you..." I nestled my face into her grasp. "I know I never told you this, but you're gorgeous. Literally, no matter what you do, you always manage to look incredibly beautiful." As soon as I said that, her hand dropped and she laughed even harder. She turned away while covering her mouth.

"You haven't changed- You're still so corny."

"I'm glad you like it, 'cause at this point I don't think it'll ever change." I shook my head as I smiled at her.

"Good, never change it." She grabbed my hand, returning her attention to the field. I squeezed her hand, focusing on the flowers with her.

"If we continue, do you promise we'll be forever?"

"Forever." As soon as I said that, she wrapped her arms around me in an embrace. Her fruity perfume wafted up to me, making my head fuzzy. She still wears the same perfume she wore years ago and just like back then, it immediately calmed me. We sat there for what felt like hours in complete bliss.

This was it, I knew I made the right decision. Forever and always, my darling, right to eternity.

DOGHOUSE (SEALED WITH UNCERTAINTY)

BY ELI KUBILUS

in the moment feelings deep-kept
slipped between our breaths barely
to our knowledge like spring dew stippled
on bare skin & raced down
our twining vine limbs which were
sheened in sweat of blanket
 heat & a humid lust
that cast dreams of wrong time ;
 wrong time always even as you
clutched my hand to your throat
fervently & gulped for my spit against
 your lips & begged, when i loosened
my grip, for more
 wrong time even as you writhed
beneath fingertips traced across
your tender back & whimpered
when they slipped beneath your
 shirt & plead,
 when i pulled away, for me not
to stop. i roll over wrong

time wrong place wrong time wrong
place wrong person wrong time wrong
person wrong person wrong
person for you because
even though it wasn't "wrong" it
also wasn't "right" & i
can't help but think about your teeth
 scraping against my neck or
your fingers pushing through my hair or

JACK-O-LANTERNS, SALAMANDERS & FALLEN LEAVES
BY KIMBERLY SUPLISKI

After Juan Felipe Herrera

Jack-o-lanterns, salamanders & fallen leaves
Cars rolling, log mushrooms blooming little thieves
Rusted can of chock full o'nuts
Costume party tied up in a neat little box
I want to be on the back of the bike
The boy cries about losing his sword
Knocking on doors but it's all for show
Take me back to the time where we would grow

PRESENT
BY KYLEIGH O'HEARN



SHEDDING SKIN

BY OLIVIA MURPHY

When my twin sister died, I knew Mom wished it were me. We'd be eating breakfast and out of the corner of my eye I'd see her look at me with that intense gaze. I wasn't sure if she was scrutinizing me for flaws or trying to see if maybe, by squinting her eyes, I would turn into my sister. It wasn't hard for her to pretend; we'd been identical.

I knew she was happier when I was away at college, even now, four years after my sister died. I thought being practically an empty-nester would be hard on her, but I'd been wrong. She liked when I went away and she could imagine my sister was with me at college. I could feel Mom's excitement that I was leaving at the end of every break when she diligently helped me pack. Even now before the spring semester, when there was only one suitcase to prepare, she was here.

Mom sat on the floor in front of my suitcase and I handed neatly rolled shirts down to her from my bed. I passed the final item down when the suitcase was packed tight with just a small gap at the end. It was the one frivolous thing I bothered to take back and forth on my short winter breaks: an old snake plushie. Despite its age, the snake's yellow stripes were still bold. They were a warning sign.

Mom smiled as I handed Snakey down. It made the wrinkles around her mouth more pronounced. Her whole face was wrinkled, especially her forehead; she'd shriveled up when her dear daughter died.

"I'm glad you still have this. I think your sister would be happy it was still getting some love," she said. She petted it once and I snorted.

"I think she wouldn't give a damn. And don't pet it like you're five."

Mom's face flushed red and finally she put it where it belonged in my suitcase. I'd swear I could hear her teeth grinding. She shut the suitcase with a thunk and it sent a gush of air at my shins as I swung them from the bed to the ground. I lifted my feet and planted them on top of my luggage, pushing down so Mom could easily zipper the suitcase all the way around.

In a few hours Dad would lug my stuff down to the car and throw it in. We'd speed off to the airport, and my parents would rest easier knowing I was gone.

I glanced down at the phone and, seeing that it was almost time to go, walked to my bedroom door. I turned the handle and had opened it a crack when I heard Dad's voice downstairs. I froze. My hand was still on the knob but I didn't dare move, didn't even breathe.

"Baby, stop. What if she heard you?" His voice was careful, contained. Dad was always in control of a situation. Even when the police came knocking and told us they'd found my sister dead from a stab wound and her wallet emptied of all her cash and ID, he had been calm. Someone had to be or no one would've been able to hear the officer over my mother's howling sobs.

Now Mom laughed sharply. "It wouldn't matter. She doesn't care what we think."

“She’s grieving. You know what a big heart she’s always had—of course the death of her twin would change her a bit.”

“A bit? That is practically a whole other person up there.” Dad sucked in a breath like he was about to speak but Mom continued on, “She doesn’t have any friends. She’s about to graduate from that fancy schmancy college but she has no plans for after and she’s never been able to keep a job because there is something so clearly off about her. It’s just like...”

“*Don’t say it,*” Dad snapped.

“It’s like with Amelia. You take one look at her and know she’s wrong, somehow. It wasn’t like that at first, but every time Claire comes back from college she seems more and more like Amelia.”

My mom began to cry. Not the big, animalistic shrieks like when my sister died, but a pathetic blubbing. She sounded afraid.

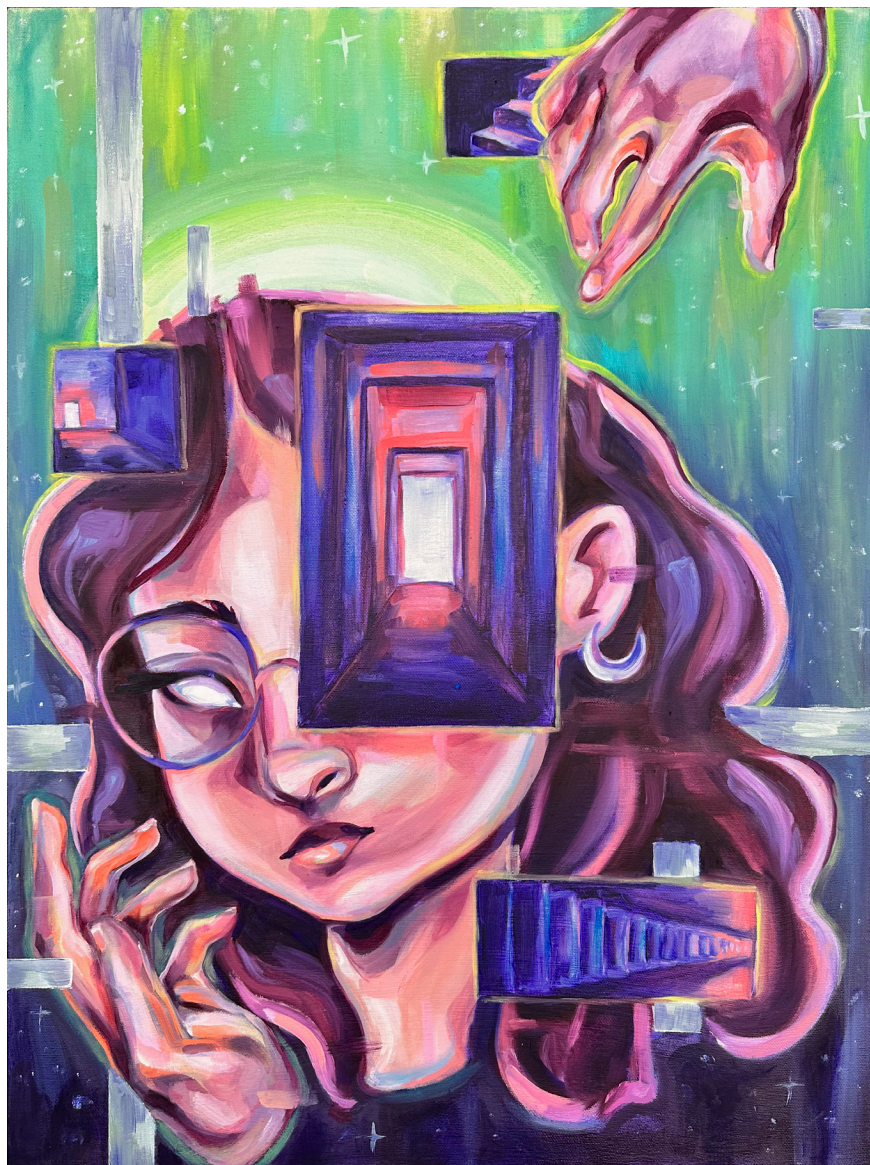
I released the doorknob and it turned back into place with a click that silenced my parents. I plastered a smile on my face as I walked down the stairs and called, “Dad, help me with my suitcase?”

Once I turned the corner I could see him standing there in the kitchen, stone-faced, while Mom and her hunched shoulders faced away from me.

“Oh—Mom?” My voice oozed with concern like a snake’s venom. I put one gentle hand on her back then fully embraced her shuddering body, like the good, loving daughter Claire was supposed to be. Doing so made my skin crawl, but Mom was right: I’d been letting the mask slip for too long.

Playing nice was a pain. If you asked me, I did Claire a favor.

IN BETWEEN
BY ADRIENNE LICATA



FOR PEANUT BUTTER

BY GWENYTH WHEAT

For peanut butter as the cure for hiccups,

You can't open your mouth. Let the peanut butter clamp and stick your lips together. Pretend everyone knows the delicacy you hide.

Grief works this way. Filling cracks on a soft pink surface, tightening the chest, making breath an appetite to swallow

with a thud, to sit and churn. Glue forcing your body to pause. A sensation you hate to crave but you grab the jar anyway—

a love between you and remedies: peanut butter for hiccups. Sprite, Saltines, and The Price is Right for a stomach ache. Chicken noodle soup,

chamomile or lemon tea for strep throat. A notebook and fresh flowers for grieving childhood. A yellow sweatshirt with sailboats for the days

you honor your aunt. The evening pairs with you and her talking through walls about romance, the madelines in the kitchen, the life

within the Little Library at the end of the Street. Your aunt predicts her death. Nothing soothes the knots. You ask the rain that knocks

to come in and wash your stomach, shoulders, toes, fingers. You make a pb&j, draw Seattle gloom, go to movie matinees, play

board games, collect your sisters' laughter, find scents of sweat baked into soccer t-shirts, smile at the sound of cans popping open.

Counting your breaths on the way home, you forget how long you need to hold in your air for the hiccups to subside. Your aunt smiles

knowing the age she will stop gasping for air. She beckons for you to watch everything turn to daffodils and thank the trees

for their number of rings told her how many years she could enjoy these silly things and laugh without clutching her chest.

ODE TO THE SHRINK
BY CHARLIE RICHARDSON

Our old friend!
How generous she is,
to paint fingernails a beautiful blue hue
and compliment the violet
blooming beneath our eyes

Hearts race as her love spears us in the chest
bodies shake with excitement at the thought of her loyalty.
Shakes, shakes, shakes!
shaking like a leaf!
No need for worry of friends, doctors, lovers
True friends are inherited from Mothers, Aunts, Grandmothers

How she cares!
Meticulously count and track every move. Each morsel of food.
Provide the comfort of a coiling bowel.
No time for essays, careers, or breaths
when she needs to mold our visage, our waist, our breasts.

How can we part?
We are nothing without you
How you love when we shrink!
shrink, shrink, shrink!
Shrink into the shriveled shell of our psyche.
Shrink time and brain matter.
Omit the needless details to the Shrink.

Aided us in fits of rage, egged on each merciful mouthful
Her hugs so tight, they leach the iron,
gifting generous bruises to match our eyes.
She was everything.
Armed with her battalion of scales and tape.
Barely scraping by

Our dear friend, our love, our undoing.
Without you, I can finally breathe.
Without you, I welcome change.
Without you, I am a someone.
No longer will I shrink.

THE WALK HOME
BY OLIVIA MURPHY

(Lights up on a street in the evening. JO sits on the curb, the sign for her middle school next to her. Jo is a tween wearing athleisure and a backpack. She is tapping aggressively at her phone, clearly frustrated.)

(MR. SMITH approaches. He wears a colorful button-down and slacks.)

MR. SMITH

Hey, Josephine! You still waiting for your ride?

JO

Oh, hi, Mr. Smith. Yeah. I'm sure my mom will be here any minute.

MR. SMITH

Do you want me to wait with you? It's getting late.

JO

No, that's okay. She knows rehearsal ends at six.

(uncertainly)

She... she knows. So she'll be here soon.

(Mr. Smith checks his watch.)

MR. SMITH

It's 6:43.

(There's an awkward pause. Jo jumps to her feet and puts her phone to her ear.)

JO
(into her phone)

Hi Mom! You'll be here in five minutes? Okay... Okay, no worries. See you soon.

(to Mr. Smith)

That was my mom. She just got caught up, uh, helping our elderly neighbors. She'll be here soon, so you really don't need to wait.

MR. SMITH

Well, that's nice of your mother to help a neighbor. You're sure you don't mind waiting alone?

JO

Yes! I promise I don't mind.

MR. SMITH

If you insist. See you tomorrow at rehearsal. Take care!

(Jo smiles and waves as Mr. Smith exits. As soon as he is off stage, the smile falls from her face.)

(Jo takes out her phone and taps aggressively at it once more. She stands, holds it up in the air and waves it around, then sighs and puts it back in her pocket.)

JO

Stupid phone. There was no point in Dad getting me one if it's already stopped working.

(Jo steps off of the curb and onto the asphalt. Her arms are crossed.) (Jo leaves the school. She continues onwards, the scenery changing as she makes her way down the road.)

JO

Mr. Smith is nice and all, and I know he means well, but I wish he'd leave me alone. He's too nosy. I'm scared one day he'll call my mom and, just... That won't end well for me, now, will it?

(There's the sound of a car approaching and slowing down. It honks lightly. Jo glances behind her.)

WOMAN #1
(from offstage)

Hey, you! Hold up!

JO

Oh no... What does this lady want?

(There's the slam of a car door. WOMAN #1 enters and Jo comes to a stop. She glances around, nervous, considering a possible escape. To flee or not to flee?)

WOMAN #1

Hey, you. What are you doing out here?

(A beat.)

JO

Walking home. My mom's expecting me, so I should really go.

WOMAN #1

Your mom knows you're on your way home?

(Jo takes a few steps back from
the woman.)

JO

Yes! I just called her, so she's expecting me any minute. If I
keep her waiting any longer she'll get worried. I'm gonna get
going—

WOMAN #1
(interrupting)

All phones stopped working 40 minutes ago.

JO

What?

WOMAN #1

Every phone in the world has stopped working. They just went...
kaput. Emergency broadcasts are all over TV about it.

(The woman holds up her phone, its
screen black.)

So, you didn't call your mom "a few minutes ago."

JO
(speaking faster as she goes)

Fine, so I didn't just call her, but she still knows when to expect me home by, so if you try anything, she'll—

WOMAN #1

Whoa, whoa! I didn't mean to freak you out! But I saw a kid walking alone when it's going to be dark soon, so I was worried. Do you want a ride to your house?

JO

I'm not getting in a car with you! Do you think I'm dumb? Leave me the hell alone, lady.

(The woman holds her hands up in a “I mean no harm” way. She backs up a bit.)

WOMAN #1

Okay, okay. I get it. Just be safe and get home quick. No one knows what's happening with the phones yet, so everyone is a little on edge. Good luck.

(The woman exits. We hear the car's engine come to life and the sound of the car driving away.) (Jo resumes walking, faster this time. It's properly sunset now. She rubs the sides of her still-crossed arms, like she's cold.)

JO
(mimicking her dad)

Let's get you a phone, Jo. You're old enough now, Jo. I'm totally not 55

trying to buy your forgiveness for leaving, Jo.

(speaking normally)

Lotta good having a phone is doing me now. How on earth does every phone just... stop working?

(Jo walks for a few more moments. It is now dusk. The bright yellow light of a streetlamp fades in overhead.)

JO

Crap. It really is getting late if the streetlamps have come on. Y'know what's dumb? I want Mom to get mad at me for being late. I want to walk in and hear her go, "Where were you, young lady? I've been worried sick!" The fantasy doesn't make any sense—she's the one who didn't pick me up—but, I don't know. Sometimes I like to imagine.

Or, actually, here's a better fantasy. I walk in, and her eyes go all wide, and she's like, "OMG! I totally lost track of time. I'm so sorry!" ... That might not be totally unrealistic right now. If the phones aren't working, maybe she really did lose track of time.

(Jo steps off the road, onto the strip of grass upstage. She picks up a rock. She hurls the rock as she continues speaking.)

JO

Who am I kidding? She just doesn't care.

(The streetlamp goes out, a red arc of light flashes across the stage from right to left, and we hear the sound of a car crash as

(Jo stumbles back until she falls.

soon as the red light is gone. It is cacophonous—metal on metal, explosive, horns honking.)

(Jo stumbles back until she falls. She looks from stage left back to where she had been walking on the road. She realizes she almost just died.)

JO

Oh my god. Oh my god. Someone... someone help!

(There are moans and shouts from the wreck offstage. A MAN and WOMAN #2 stumble on stage, leaning on each other. They are disheveled and mildly injured. They collapse on the grass beside Jo.)

JO

What happened? How did you crash? Are you okay?

MAN

We... we were just driving, and then it was like the car had a mind of its own. We just lost control and went straight into oncoming traffic.

(Jo flits around them, unsure of what to do. She freezes and looks up.)

JO

The streetlamp.

WOMAN #2

Wh-what?

JO

The streetlamp went out right before you crashed.

MAN

What does that matter?

WOMAN #2

Is it a power outage?

JO

Maybe? So phones aren't working, the power is out, and your car just went haywire?

MAN

There's something seriously fu—messed up going on.

WOMAN #2

Hun, why are you even out here? It's clearly not safe right now.

JO

I'm trying to get back home.

MAN

Then you should keep going. There's nothing you can do for us here.

JO

But... If we can't call 911, I don't think anyone is coming for you. You're both hurt. And the other car... No one has gotten out of it.

MAN

Like I said. Nothing you can do. The fire department is only a few miles away—I think I'm okay to walk there and find help.

WOMAN #2

What about me? My leg... it really hurts. I don't think I can walk very far.

MAN

Stay here. See if you can help anyone in the other car, or knock on doors to see if anyone else can help. But either way, kid, you need to get home. Your folks must be worried sick about you.

JO

Okay. Good luck. I'm-I'm sorry.

(The man and woman hobble off and Jo continues onwards.)

JO

Look at all this... It wasn't just one weird crash. There's cars abandoned all down the street. This is insane.

Is this the apocalypse? A terrorist attack? Maybe something is actually wrong at home. Mom was doing okay for a bit. She picked me up on time every other day this week.

And last week, even though she'd forgotten, she picked up when I called. Rehearsals were the only reason she'd agreed I could have the phone—not that I think Dad would've cared if she said I couldn't. He would've told me to just hide it when I went to Mom's house.

Wait. Up ahead.

(Jo squints.)

JO

Crap. That can't be...

(Mr. Smith enters on a bike. He is wearing a helmet. He dismounts and removes the helmet.)

MR. SMITH

Josephine! I was so worried!

JO

Uh, hi Mr. Smith. What are you doing out here?

(Mr. Smith is panting, trying to catch his breath.)

MR. SMITH

Because—you said your mom called. When I got home, and my husband told me the phones weren't working, I got nervous. Then the power and Internet went out. I kept thinking, what if your mom wasn't there yet? Then I tried to start the car—and nothing. It had a full tank of gas. I don't know why it wouldn't turn on, but... So then I knew your mom couldn't have picked you up, not in a car at least.

JO

Mr. Smith, you didn't have to come all this way back. I'm almost home. Not even a mile left.

MR. SMITH

Well, perfect. I'll just walk you the rest of the way, make sure everything is okay, then head home. No biggie.

JO

No! I mean, you don't need to do all that. My mom's probably out, helping the neighbors still. They're... elderly.

MR. SMITH

Jo... If the timeline my husband told me is right, I'm assuming your mom never called. Maybe she is with your neighbors, but I have no reason to think that's true, and she still needs to know you're home safe and sound.

(Jo bristles but walks again. Mr. Smith joins her, walking the bike beside him. They walk facing towards the audience.)

JO

Don't you have your own kids to go be with?

MR. SMITH

One, a newborn, but he's perfectly content with his other dad. I'm more concerned about you right now. To tell the truth, I have been for a while now. You were waiting an awful long time one night last week, too.

JO

You saw me waiting?

MR. SMITH

Your mom pulled up right as I was leaving. It was 6:30.

JO

She's just... forgetful. If it hadn't been for the—everything going on—then she would've picked up when I called and come and got me.

MR. SMITH

Are there other things she forgets?

JO

Like what?

MR. SMITH

To buy food, pay bills. Pack you a lunch.

JO
(snippy)

I'm twelve; I don't need her to pack my lunch.

MR. SMITH

Well, lots of your classmates do. I'm just saying, does she forget other important stuff?

JO

No. She's fine. We're fine.

MR. SMITH

Okay. If it's ever not fine, you can tell me. I've known you a few years now, so I've noticed things are different in your life lately. And that you've changed, too. I just want you to know I'm here if you need someone to talk to, or I can help you set up a meeting with a school counselor. Just something to keep in mind.

(Jo sniffles and looks away. They come to a stop.)

JO

We're here. And... thank you. I'll see you at school, I guess, if things go back to normal.

MR. SMITH

Of course. Take care, Jo. Goodbye.

JO

See ya, Mr. Smith.

(Mr. Smith exits. Jo pulls a key out of her pocket and opens the door once he's out of sight.)

JO

Mom? You awake?

(There is a heavy silence.)

JO

PB&Js for dinner again, I guess.

(Blackout. End of play.)

BREATHE
BY KYLEIGH O'HEARN



PATHWAY
BY REBECCA EARLEY



FRIEDRICH NEEDS A THERAPIST

BY ESFIR PIEVSKAYA

I find myself gazing out of the window, it's the end of April, so the sky isn't dreary grey anymore. I'm imagining walking next to the river shore now. I desperately need to go outside. I glance around, trying to find anything more interesting than this conversation. For instance, my old diplomas or some fidget toys haphazardly strewn about my office, or even the vintage clock I've inherited from my grandad, he used to have them in his own office before his death. I can't... This man is driving me insane. I kill myself if I hear one more word about this girl he is obsessed with. Maybe, I am not supposed to say that even in my head since I am a therapist, but I just can't. Why did I even decide to help him?

When he entered my office for our initial session I thought I was blessed. I finally got my own client! I didn't have to deal with any DBT groups for spoiled teenagers or pathetic AA meetings anymore. It was a moment of triumph after all those sleepless nights in my old dorm studying. Friedrich was the only person that agreed to work with someone of such a young age. Later on, I learned he chose me only so his mom would stop asking him about his mental stability. He wanted an "easy" therapist. Nevertheless, I didn't care. I was convinced that I could help Friedrich, even if he didn't know he needed help.

Our first sessions were remarkable, he seemed to be such a deep thinker, like someone with whom you would like to end up in the kitchen during the party talking about life and smoking cigarettes. He always speaks so highly, I used to find this quality amusing but now see it as pretentious.

We started by exploring the purpose of life and how men should be more comfortable with embracing their emotions. And now our sessions are just him paying me, so I can listen to his

odas to Evelyn. *Lord, how I hate this woman for ruining me a good client.* I've never met her and don't even have the wish to.

"Friedrich, have you ever considered that perhaps your ability to manage life should not be dependent on another person?"

I desperately was trying to change the topic. I frankly believe it is not healthy to be attached to anyone like that, especially to a married woman.

"Don't ever utter such a silly notion! She is the reason I am still breathing. I forgive you since you are my close comrade."

"I am your therapist. You literally pay me."

"That is a small nuance I couldn't care less about"

"That is flattering to know. However, unfortunately, we are running out of time. Are you comfortable with wrapping up today's meeting here"

"Yes."

"Please, don't forget to keep up with your self-check journal and try to write down anything besides your thoughts about Evelyn. This journal is supposed to be a way to track your mood swings and sleeping patterns. I'll see you next week. Have a good day!"

Have an excellent day, dear James!"

And after that, he leaves the office. I am trying to put something we've talked about today into my records, but I give up after the third sentence about Evelyn.

I am already in a foul mood today and knowing that Friedrich is coming to our weekly meetings made me feel even more down. *Respectfully, I don't want to hear about the love of his life, aka a married woman with kids. But well I am professional, so here we go.*

"Good evening, Friedrich. How have you been?"

"This week was quite perplexing, to be frank."

"Could you elaborate?"

"Well, Evelyn was as breathtaking as the first sunny day of spring. But her husband is just not a human being, I am pretty convinced of it."

Nothing new to me. What am I going to stare at today?

"We fought about whether suicide is a sin. I was arguing this is not."

I decided to stop him there. *Maybe after all this session will not be pointless.*

"Could you tell me more about your thoughts on suicide?"

Every thoughtful creature has ever contemplated the end of their life, the end of struggles. I am no exception."

"So you are considering taking your life away?"

"I am merely saying that I view nothing bad in death. That is a stigma our society has that death is something dark and dirty. I see death as a way to start anew."

He was saying that without looking in my direction. He was somewhere else at that moment. I became concerned.

"What makes you feel that there is sometimes no other way to deal with life other than death?" "Evelyn's wretched husband convinced her that she should leave me. And there is no life without the only person you love."

"What made you think it was him?"

"My lovely Evelyn would never cut me off."

I am about to say something bold and highly unprofessional with the hope it can help because this guy is delusional.

"Friedrich, she had never shown you the same love you gave her."

"These are the words of a madman."

"Have you even kissed her?"

"No."

Have you ever stayed in her house for more than a few hours?"

Yes".

"Was it when you agreed to look after her kids?"

"Yes, but she trusted me her kids."

"Was that the time when she and her husband went to a concert?"

"I believe so."

"And what else happened that night?"

"I overheard their conversation. He was saying she was feeding me with the pipe dream of our future together. He made you believe our love was not real. Afterwards, she visited me and told even though she enjoyed my company, I couldn't go to their residence anymore. She kissed me on the cheek and disappeared."

“How did that make you feel?”

“That I have no control over my life.”

“Friedrich, I am going to ask you again. Do you have thoughts about killing yourself?” “I am already dead, but even that cannot stop me from seeing her again.”

“You cannot force someone to love you.

“I don’t have to, she loves me and we are going to run away from her dictator-husband.” After that, he keeps venting about why her husband is terrible, but Evelyn is innocent. Then he left my office. And I am still replaying our conversation in my head trying to figure out that man. I started to feel bad for Friedrich. He is a truly sensitive soul and maybe would make a genius writer if he writes as he speaks. Evelyn simply uses him to spice up her marriage. —

Today Friedrich is running late. That is odd of him, he is always on time. And then I got a message from him.

“On my way to free my love.”

I exhale loudly and text him back reminding him about the mandatory at least an hour cancellation notice.

That just proves there is no progress in therapy. He is still obsessed with Evelyn. —

On a Saturday night, my home phone rings.

I hear a soft woman’s voice, she is a police officer. She is asking me about Friedrich when I saw him last time, and if I know where he is now. I tell her everything I can. All those questions raise a concerning feeling in my gut. Friedrich’s last message is banging in my head. Right before the officer is about to hang up I ask her what happened. I got a flat answer that his mom couldn’t reach out to him and called the police.

Since that very brief conversation, I have been restless. So I decided to go over our sessions’ records aiming to find anything slightly useful.

This morning I already dialed the police number on my phone.

“Hello, how can I help you?”

This time it was a deep man’s voice that was on the other side.

Good morning, I am calling because I feel I may have some useful information about Friedrich’s disappearance...”

“The case is closed. Have a good day!”

“Wait! I am his therapist, I am entitled to know what happened.”

“He took his own life. Sorry. Have a good day.”

I’m left speechless...

The next day I receive an invitation from his mom to the funeral.

I am debating if I even have a right to go there. I failed him. I did try at some point. But then I just stopped. That is not what professional psychiatrists do. I couldn’t stand him when he was talking about Evelyn, but still, I got touched by the guy. There is something special about him. There was something special about him.

I decide to go to the funeral. I have to face my failure. *Lord, I cannot call him this way.* He wasn't my project that didn't work out. He was a person, a person with a lot of feelings. —

I step into the church. I spot his mom with my eyes. She looks defeated. He talked little of her, but I knew she loved him deeply. She was the one who realized he needed help. Help I failed to give him.

I can't be there any longer, that was a mistake. I don't deserve to be there. As I leave I notice, there aren't a lot of people. An interesting matter is that Evelyn is not in the church.

I am angry, so I go to the bar I saw on my way here and get wasted.

I wake up hungover as hell.

I stumble to the kitchen, open my laptop, and start sifting through my spam folder—just a regular Sunday routine.

And I see all those journals Friedrich wrote. I thought he just ignored my assignments. *Maybe he was trying to feel better.* That's when I noticed his latest entry.

“I thank you, James, for your heartfelt sympathy, for your advice; and I implore you to be calm. Allow me to bear my affiliations alone. Despite my wretchedness, I retain the strength enough to endure. I hold in high esteem the faith - you know I do.”

I start crying. He did write as beautifully as he talked.

BLUE HOUR

BY NATALYA KELLY

I sat in the insistent silence.
Waiting for my ears to burst
From the tenacious feelings
That I can not escape once,

The sunsets, and the sky
Is not yet dark, but a deep
Dreary blue. The kind of
Blue that closes the door

On the possibility of today.
The melancholic feel of
A day's end. The Blue
That forces stillness.

The hour right before
The sun rises. Another
Night lost to the futile
Thoughts of the day

Before. I watch the deep
Blues, transform to a
Soft yellow. And with
The rise of today.

The rumble of cars
Getting ready for
Work. The sizzling
Of Breakfast being

Made in the kitchen
I listen, both as

The day ends and
Morning starts, but

I am stuck in the
Passing period.
The sorrowful
Blues and the silence

It fuels. Just for a moment
Renders grief. Disguised
In nostalgia. The tender
Feeling of understanding

The only permanent thing
In my life, are fleeting
Moments and the passing
Of time. Those little moments

In between the blues.
Where I feel the hollow
Shadow of the day's end.
The empty dreams of tomorrow.

I SEW SNAKES
BY ELI KUBILUS

In the deepest pits of Love –
 There, in the belly
 of that glorious
tender beast
Which we all yearn for yet run from
 for good reason—

When She gets too close She
Gulps you down Her slimy constricting
 maw lest you writhe
 from Her grasp before
Boulder teeth clamp closed, severing
 your connection with reality—

It's here you'll find me,
Chaining links of fabricated serpents
 to appease My Dear,
Haunted by the vacant hollowness of Her
capacious cavern and the way
 his voice echoes throughout
It if you listen close enough—

As if he were ever here too,
 and it wasn't always just
me, alone, with the sickly
Syrup touch of Love dripping
 from my fingertips,

UNTITLED
BY KYLEIGH O'HEARN



CLOSED DOOR PROMISE

BY EȘFIR PIEVSKAYA

Yells. Noises. Pure chaos. Ear-piercing screams. Headache. And the fucking closed door. You are seeking the feeling of refuge from the closed door. Why do adults blindly believe that feeble shield actually helps? You are a kid, not a dumbass.

You huddle by the door, eavesdropping on big children solving their problems “wisely” and “in an adult way”. They think they are the ones with all the answers. And yet they are so oblivious. You keep listening to their gutter cries and the deafening shattering of furniture.

Your fragile world is mercilessly collapsing.

Everything lies in ruins in your vivid imagination, you are already packing your bags. Subconsciously, an absurd list of pros and cons forms, forcing you to make the heart-wrenching decision about which parent to stay with. You really don't want to do that, but the weight is unbearable.

At last, parents come out the door, rather than fly out. Each rushes to pack their belongings. But what about the brothers? You are going to your bedroom to wake them up, telling them we are okay. Their innocently hazel and still sleepy pairs of eyes are staring back at you. You hug them, trying not to leave your own tears on their pajamas. Parents emerge to the room and choose you or them, while you are pretending that you don't know.

You see each other twice a week, chat from time to time, and eventually life drifts you apart.

There is a crack in each one of you, which is forbidden to even mention. Painful to acknowledge, too painful to heal.

Your dad's smile has faded into a distant memory. But, hey, there are no financial issues anymore - fewer people to take care of. There is fleeting comfort in your daily ice cream treats and weekend cinema trips. You are a lucky child. The others have been working since the age of fourteen. Your mom has the dust of poorly paid work and eternal exhaustion, no matter how hard she tries to smile. She dedicates her life only to her two boys, and yet they are not the lucky ones.

As time sweeps you forward, you are strangers to each other, mirroring your parents. Everyone has their own family and life. Mom turns to faith for solace, and Dad gets together with an old friend of his. The world returns to its place, but not the same.

You, a small child outside the closed door, cry every day. Then eventually tears dry up. You move on and forget about the haunting darkness inside, an ever-present reminder of what's been lost.

But no. Mom steps out from behind the closed door, and commands you to go to bed maintaining the smile that says "Everything is fine". Dad will do the same thing tomorrow, now he is driving around the streets in search of peace of mind. On the weekend, the entire family will go to your grandparents', where laughter flows as if "nothing ever happened". You watch like a hawk, alert to those fleeting moments of discord, yearning desperately to mend what's been shattered.

"Everything is fine" is an old bandage on a wound that has festered from events that have never happened. But in your mind, everything has already played out, and it's all about the desperate yearning for the safety that a closed door promises.

Everything is fine, everything is fine, everything...

NIGHT SHIFT

BY ABBY BLAMOWSKI

FADE IN:

EXT. INTERSTATE HIGHWAY - NIGHT

The stars dot the sky in a beautiful array on the horizon of the INTERSTATE as Blondie by Current Joys PLAYS loudly in the background.

A 1970's FORD BRONCO speeds down the ghostly empty highway, running away from the sunset.

INT. ANNA'S TRUCK - NIGHT

ANNA BARLOWE, 22 year old college student, grips the steering wheel of her truck until her bloody knuckles are white. A dulled diamond ring sits on her left ring finger, the diamond cracked and stained with blood.

She wipes tears from her warm eyes, but they continue streaming down her face. A purpling bruise sits on her left cheekbone.

ANNA'S PHONE BUZZES ON THE SEAT NEXT TO HER.

She doesn't hear it over the music, or her own

thoughts.

BEGIN

FLASHBACK

INT. FINN'S APARTMENT - NIGHT

The apartment is dimly lit and extremely messy. We hear MUFFLED SHOUTING from the other room.

Upon entering, two figures are using excessive hand gestures are arguing.

ANNA

This is always the case, Finn!

Nothing ever changes!

A hand comes careening towards her face. Upon

collision...

END

INT. ANNA'S TRUCK - NIGHT

...BOOM. Anna slams her hands on the steering wheel in frustration.

2.

2.

ANNA
(shouting)
God fucking damn it!

Anna's incessant sobbing continues as a SIGN reading "Waffle House - Next Exit 90!" reaches her tired eyes. She catches her breath a bit, and in a split second decision she merges into the next lane to take the exit.

EXT. WAFFLE HOUSE - NIGHT

The Ford Bronco pulls into the parking lot, shutting its lights off. Anna exits the truck, and pauses to stand in front of the door for a brief moment.

She tilts her head up towards the fluorescent SIGN above the door, reading with tired eyes, "Two for one special! Only \$6!"

Anna sighs and pushes the CREAKY door open. The bell JINGLES.

INT. WAFFLE HOUSE - NIGHT

ELEVATOR MUSIC plays softly in the background. Anna takes a seat at the booth farthest from the door and twiddles her thumbs. Her lip trembles.

A WAITRESS, mid 40's, motherly, approaches the table Anna is seated at, startling her from her thoughts.

WAITRESS
Hey baby, what can I get you tonight?

She smiles sweetly at Anna, pen ready to scribble her order down. Anna hesitates.

ANNA
Oh yeah, hi, um ... just a waffle
is fine.

WAITRESS
No sides or nothin'?

ANNA
Uh ... I'll take a coffee too, I
guess.

WAITRESS
Sounds good sweetheart, I'll have
that out for ya in just a minute.

3.
3.

Anna swallows thickly and rests her head in her hands, staring down at the speckled table.

EXT. WAFFLE HOUSE - NIGHT

AN OLD BLACK PICKUP TRUCK ROLLS INTO THE LOT, PARKING RIGHT NEXT TO ANNA'S VEHICLE. THE LIGHTS SHUT OFF.

HARRISON FINCH a man in his late 30's, tall, lanky, and brooding stalks towards the front door.

The bell JINGLES.

INT. WAFFLE HOUSE - LOBBY - NIGHT

Harrison takes a seat at the front counter, removing his black overcoat and placing it on the stool next to him.

He flicks his hand, and the Waitress places a MUG of black coffee in front of him, like a routine.

Anna doesn't notice him, nor the Waitress placing her order down in front of her.

WAITRESS
Everything okay, baby?

Anna's head snaps up, taking in her surroundings.

ANNA
Oh yeah, sure, sorry ... thank you
again.

The Waitress offers her a caring glance before walking back to the kitchen.

The noise prompts Harrison to turn his head, watching Anna unwrap the silverware. He stares back down at his mug for a moment, turning his head back toward Anna.

Harrison sighs and rises from his stool, grabbing both the mug and his jacket. He turns on his heel and heads over to her booth.

Anna reaches for the syrup, but stops when Harrison sits down opposite her in the booth. Confusion is apparent on her face, but Harrison just glances inside her coffee cup.

HARRISON

Black?

4.

4.

Anna hesitates for a moment, but goes along with the conversation anyway.

ANNA

Yeah, I actually find the sugar
kind of gross.

HARRISON

Interesting choice for someone your
age.

Anna glances up at him, taking in his features. She furrows her brow.

ANNA

Do I know you from somewhere? You
look awfully familiar.

Harrison meets her gaze.

HARRISON

I don't believe we've met before,
no.

ANNA

(nodding)

Sorry, I must have the wrong
person.

Harrison waves his hand in the air, signaling the Waitress. A moment later the Waitress is at his side, refilling his coffee cup.

HARRISON

Thank you, Diane.

(to Anna)

She's a real doll, isn't she?

ANNA

Yeah, she's pretty nice. Do you
know her or something?

HARRISON

You could say that, yeah.

He winks at Anna, taking a sip of his fresh cup.

HARRISON (CONT'D)

Say, what happened to your face
there? Looks like someone threw a
nasty punch.

5.

5.

ANNA

(defensive)

Who said it was a punch? Listen, I
don't wanna talk about it. I'd talk
about anything else. Literally
anything.

Harrison holds his hands up in defense.

HARRISON

Fair.

Anna reaches for the syrup. She pours it all over her waffle.

HARRISON (CONT'D)

You didn't peg me as a syrup kind
of girl. Is that your usual?

Anna raises an eyebrow at him.

ANNA

You don't know me, dude, what does
that even mean?

HARRISON

You're right, I don't know you at all, really. Why don't you tell me a secret?

ANNA
(defeated)

What, do you want money or something? Here, I have a few singles--

HARRISON

No, no -- keep your money. I just want company. There's some strange comfort in confiding in a stranger, isn't there?

Anna glances around, noticing that the Waffle House is empty besides her and her newfound confidant.

ANNA
(sighing)

Fine, yeah I guess ... you wanna know a secret?

She pauses. Harrison gestures, encouraging her to continue.

ANNA (CONT'D)

My mother's an alcoholic. I usually just lie and say I don't know her.

(MORE)

(MORE)

6.

6.

ANNA (CONT'D)

ANNA (CONT'D)

I guess it's not entirely a lie, I don't know who she is anymore.

HARRISON

I think a lot of people wish they didn't have to deal with people in their lives. Or the difficulties they give them, rather.

ANNA

Doesn't that make me selfish?

(scoffing)

People who love their mothers lose them. To awful things, like cancer, and I sit here wishing I didn't have to deal with mine.

HARRISON

I don't believe so, no. On the contrary, I think a lot of people would agree with you. People are difficult beings - say, what's your name?

ANNA

I need her, especially now, but she just doesn't care, maybe she's the selfish one. It's Anna, by the way.

HARRISON

Harrison.

Anna nods curtly in acknowledgement, digging back into her waffle.

ANNA

(sighing)

Sorry, it's... been a long day. It just gets to me sometimes, you know?

Harrison nods quietly, glances down at his coffee, and swirls it around. He takes a sip.

HARRISON

You know, plenty of people struggle to put their love on display. Those kind of intense feelings, they make us vulnerable.

Anna's breathing is shallow as she tries to remain composed. She places her fork back on her plate.

7.

7.

ANNA

I guess, yeah. She just... she doesn't realize what this does to me.

HARRISON

Well, that's what makes us all human, isn't it?

ANNA

Yeah, yeah... you know, Harrison, I have a question for you this time.

Harrison raises his eyebrows, motioning for her to continue.

ANNA (CONT'D)

Do you think some mistakes are too terrible?

Harrison furrows his brow, pondering her question for a moment.

HARRISON

People are generally forgivable, no?

ANNA

People can be...

HARRISON

Well there you go, then. Mistakes are forgivable, so mistakes are repairable. What truly matters, however...

Harrison leans in and begins speaking in a lower voice.

HARRISON (CONT'D)

...is what a person chooses to do after their mistake is made. That, Anna, is where true character lies.

Anna stops at his words and meets his eyes.

ANNA

You really think so?

HARRISON
Truthfully, I speak from
experience. I'm an imperfect human,
but hey, I still lived to see
another day.

Anna nods tearfully as her hands start shaking subtly.

8.
8.

ANNA
What did you do, Harrison?
Harrison takes a deep breath, meeting her intense gaze.

HARRISON
My brother and I... you could say
we always had a tough relationship.
Head butting, disagreements, the
whole nine yards. One argument in
particular lasted a bit longer than
usual.

He glances up at the clock hanging above the kitchen.

THE CLOCK STRIKES THREE O'CLOCK.

Harrison chuckles before continuing.

HARRISON (CONT'D)
He passed away, thinking I was mad
at him. I was too headstrong to
admit where I was wrong. What I'm
trying to say is you can't buy back
time, Anna. Move forward before
it's too late.

He stares intently at his half-finished cup of coffee.

Anna's breathing picks up, silence heavy in the air. The waffle house is quiet
except for the looming TICK TOCK of the clock.

ANNA
(shakily)
I... uh-I have to go to the
bathroom.

Anna scoots out of the booth and scurries to the bathroom, nearly tripping over her own feet on the way.

INT. WAFFLE HOUSE - BATHROOM - CONTINUOUS

Anna's breathing is rapid and shaky as she clamors into the bathroom. She leans on the porcelain sink, her skin nearly matching it as a sheen layer of cold sweat covers her face.

She stares at her reflection in the mirror, taking special notice of the multicolored bruise on her cheekbone.

BEGIN FLASHBACK

9.
9.

EXT. APARTMENT BUILDING - NIGHT

Anna stands outside of the rickety door to Finn's apartment, tears streaming down her face.

FINN, 22, college student with unruly curls, visibly stressed is running his hands through his hair.

FINN
Just get the fuck out, Anna! I'm so
sick of this!

Finn SLAMS the door in her face.

A door down the way CLICKS shut a moment later, causing Anna to turn her head.

Harrison is standing outside of the door next to Finn's, and offers Anna a small smile.

Anna turns and stomps her way back to her truck. She gets in the truck and SLAMS...

END FLASHBACK

INT. WAFFLE HOUSE - BATHROOM - CONTINUOUS

...HER FISTS DOWN ON THE SINK.

She turns the faucet on, filling her cupped hands with cold water and splashing it

on her face. Another deep breath, and she rushes out of the bathroom.

INT. WAFFLE HOUSE - LOBBY - CONTINUOUS

The bathroom door SWINGS open as Anna ruffles through her bag. She pulls out a crumpled TEN DOLLAR BILL on her walk back to the booth.

She tosses it down on the table, turning on her heel to rush out of the Waffle House.

ANNA

Hey, Harrison - thanks for listening. I-I gotta run.

HARRISON

Why are you in such a rush, if you don't mind me asking?

Anna dismisses his question, pretending she didn't hear him.

10.

10.

The door swings open and closes behind her...

...THE BELL JINGLES

CUT TO:

EXT. WAFFLE HOUSE - NIGHT

THE FORD BRONCO BACKS OUT OF THE PARKING SPOT, BRAKES SCREECHING AS IT SOARS TO THE EXIT.

INT. ANNA'S TRUCK - NIGHT

Anna speeds back down the interstate, typing "Home" into her phone's GPS. She remains stoic, deep in thought for the entirety of the ride. She reads the sign stating, "Lewisburg Exit 83" and takes the exit.

CUT TO:

EXT. FINN'S APARTMENT BUILDING - NIGHT

Anna parks her truck and takes a deep breath. Leaning her head back, she gathers her thoughts.

She exits the truck and heads toward the sidewalk. Anna glances over her shoulder and notices RED AND BLUE LIGHTS reflecting off of the walls.

ANNA
(whispering)
Shit.

Her walk slows and she creeps closer to the brick wall. Peering around the corner, she sees COP CARS, AMBULANCES, CRIME SCENE TAPE, and FORENSIC EXAMINERS crowded outside Finn's apartment.

She quickly spins around, pressing her back against the wall, squeezing her eyes shut.

Composing herself, she rounds the edge of the building and walks calmly toward Finn's apartment that is now a crime scene. A look of concern is now painted on her face.

SHERIFF JENSEN, 40's, stern, turns his head as he sees Anna approaching the scene. Her presence garners the attention of several others.

11.

11.

CHATTER is heard among the crowd of people, but it quickly hushed as a body bag is being moved out of the apartment.

Anna falls to her knees sobbing upon seeing the body bag. Officer Jensen bends down, placing his hand on her back in an attempt to comfort her.

SHERIFF JENSEN
Breathe for me please, miss. It's
going to be alright.

His words fall on deaf ears as Anna continues her wailing.

THE DETECTIVE walks over, holding a small EVIDENCE BAG in hand. He taps the Sheriff on his back, asking him to stand up.

DETECTIVE
Sir, we investigated the apartment thoroughly. No murder weapon was found, but the medical examiner did find a diamond fragment lodged in the facial wound. We believe it was

his fiancé. An APB has been issued
for a ten mile radius.

Sheriff Jensen nods, slowly turning his head down toward Anna. Her crying has become quiet, and her face hides in her hands. She is completely still.

The sun is rising on the horizon, painting the sky a mosaic of pastel pinks and yellows.

Anna raises her eyes to meet Sheriff Jensen's gaze.

A BLOODIED AND DAMAGED DIAMOND RING ADORNS ANNA'S LEFT
RING FINGER.

FADE OUT.
12.

MOON DAUGHTER
BY LEIHANA ABU-SBAIH

hidden in grasses
with eyes colored like goldfish
she sharpens her claw

pretty bird awaits
revered in her downy gown
beneath willow bark

soft whiskers quiver
pearly threads in breath of spring
a rustle in the thistlebrush

twittering-

satiated once more.

GROOVY CAT
BY TESSA MCCAIN



COUNTRY CLUB WITH GRANDMA

BY JODY WOOD

Grandma stroked my long-tangled hair with her sterling silver brush.
Licked her thumb as she wiped the dirt from my face.
Expected me to wear a pink frilly dress and scratchy laced socks,
Small white gloves and matching patented leather shoes.
Big ribbons placed strategically in my hair.
Everything I hated. Fancy dresses, brushing my hair and anything pink.
All pointed out the importance of the day.

We stepped outside to take a photo beside her favorite lilac bush.
Pose upon pose, grandma trying to capture the innocence in my face.
When we drove to the Country Club my eyes were full of sunshine
Feeling the approval of my grandmother

I was instructed to smile,
Look pretty,
Act like a lady.

Sitting alone next to the pool table,
I sipped on my Shirley Temple, digging in the glass for the cherries that sank to
the bottom, while I fought with the ice.
I heard my grandmother's laughter as she drank her martini,
Suitors lined up to light up her Benson and Hedges.
I picked up a pile of raffle tickets that were there to keep me company, knowing
that if I grabbed a winner, it would be all hers.
My crossed legs, barely long enough to hang off the edge of the seat.
I sat up so straight and proper until my shoulders ached.
But my smile was still too big to contain.

Grandma looked back at me and winked.
I never realized I was her bait.

HONEY POURER
BY HAILEE WADDLE



