

The Red Jacket

Spring 2023



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Temptation of the High Priestess

Yesenia Pineda

Underneath the darkness of the blood red moon
And those thundering goat hooves,
We lay here
In the ropes of sin.

Entwined with the forbidden fruits of Mary's forthbringers.
Underneath the robes and the scorn of the sun,
We lay in romantical ropes
With temptations that lead me to damnation

Oh Mary, sweet like berries from the vine.

There is no need for red wine,
When all of you can be simply divine
That temptation and damnation
Leads me away into these dark chambers.

Where it is you and me,
Where the blood flows
And the temptation grows,
Such moves and such a steady groove.

My sweet little Mary,
How the holiness has left you in the clutches of temptation
And has left you so wary
For damnation never seemed so sweet.

Until it is just you and me in the sweetness of my false priesthood
And with blood as dark as rich red wine,
From that great mighty vine.

It's just you and me.



Purple Landscape
William Metelko
Digital illustration

step away from the glass

Eleanor Smedberg

Stay at arm's length.

Don't call me by my name.

Not at first.

Don't ask me what I want.

I'll tell you I don't. Want.

We've been here before. Wanting

so big and so honest and against the rules.

There are rules about this.

I'm sorry I'm an animal.

eyes and teeth and things.

I don't want to be a monster

and a person is too much of both to be

safe.

I hope you understand.

I want. But I won't.

Tell you. Sorry.

We've been here before.

Good People

Marqace Bean

Where have all the good people gone
It seems as if they have been gone so long
We sit and we wait, for the world to get better
Wondering where the good people have gone
Or are we the ones for whom we wait?
We are the good people, and we didn't go anywhere:
We just no longer believe it is our responsibility to care

The Backrooms

Marqace Bean

A beige flower-patterned carpeted floor
Amidst hallways without end
A dream that I cannot wake from
Is a nightmare that I must forever live in
I wander the endless halls
As I walk on the patterned carpeted floor
Trying to find my way out of hell
Praying there is an exit or at least a door
A door to a better place is the hope
As I walk in this endless loop
I walk in one hall and out another
Leaving any hope of escape I have, torn asunder.
I soon begin to feel the grip of thirst and my stomach clenches in hunger
Wondering now, how long I've been here
And whether or not I will ever again get to see my mother or father
But my prayers are soon answered, and my hopes once again restored.
As I stumble upon a long narrow hallway, and I see at the end: a door.
I run so fast that it seems like my feet aren't even touching the floor
But fear once again grips me, and my hopes turn to ash
As every time I get closer to the door, it moves further back.

Have I Wasted a Decade...?

Otto Neil

I should've expected the worst when I realized the HR guy was in the room as I walked in.

I was tense and nervous walking into the principal's office, almost as if I was a student at this school again. But no, even as a man I was terrified to sit in front of him – at least right now. The same man who hired me, the same principal from when I was a student here. The hollow pleasantries the three of us exchanged were a blur compared to what the principal said next.

“So, Javier, we're here today in response to the lessons you've been teaching here. I know I told you to... take the last few days off from school, but in that time, I had, uh, several meetings with your department chair and the head of service. And eventually I had to discuss the issue with the bishop's office...”

My heart was sinking. He wasn't making eye contact. This was a long wind up for exactly what I dreaded.

The principal continued looking down. “We have come to the conclusion that you are unfortunately not a good fit for our school, and it would be best if you continue your career elsewhere.”

“So... no... you're firing me?” I croaked out weakly.

“Javier, I'm sorry, but I've gotten dozens of parents complaining via email—”

“But we could work something out! I thought the point of this *suspension* was so I could work on how to fix my lessons moving forward! You gave me that worksheet from the Church to give to my students, then you gave me packets of reading to do while *suspended*, I thought the point was to 'fix' things moving forward?”

“Javier, I'm sorry,” he repeated himself again, trying to sound sympathetic. “But we saw the slides you presented. The discussion questions you made. The comments you let your students post. There's so much that's blatantly anti-Catholic Church, and the bishop said—”

“I'm opening up the floor for conversation! These students are *agreeing with me* by the way, I'm not forcing them to rebel, they're already not on the Church's side!”

“Javier, the students might just be agreeing with you just to please you, you don't know—”

“I literally have students who have admitted to me they're a part of the LGBTQ community!” I realized I should never give their names, so I quickly added, “Or they have family that's a part of it, or their own parents, you know? I'm not saying anything evil—”

“There are clear slides where you present the Church as in the wrong, and like I was saying, the bishop's office said we need to separate entirely instantly.”

“But I haven't seen the parent's emails, and the kids agree with me, and I haven't talked to my department chair, and—”

“They... do not want you to still teach here. As soon as possible.”

The slow realization dawned on me. I was naïve... but...

“Wait... so I don't even get to finish the school year? But it's the middle of April, it's right there...”

The principal continued in the same grim, sympathetic tone. “We, here at the school, have come to an agreement though...”

“I can finish the year?”

“No.”

“Then is someone else co-teaching with me?”

“No.”

“Am I transferring to another department, like History or English? Can I be a substitute?”

“Javier, I’m sorry, but the agreement was to pay you your check until July and list you as on administrative leave. And then we just don’t renew your contract. So you’re not fired. You can read about it on the paperwork here—” The HR guy leans over to try and pass me papers.

“No... no... so you still want me to leave right now?”

“Yes.”

“But what about my ideas, I can transfer departments, I’m sure I can teach English or History just as well as Morality and Ethics, and if you want me to get another degree, then I’ll be a substitute here in the meantime, or at least I can just sit in the classroom until May then—”

“Javier, I’m sorry, but—”

“No! Just talk to the students! Please just talk to them! They’ll tell you I’m one of the best teachers here, they’ve told me to my face. They *COMPLAIN* about the other religion teachers, they—”

“We can’t consider the complaints of students if those teachers were following the archdiocese curriculum—”

“The curriculum is a joke!” I threw out without thinking. I realized I’m sinking myself and this could be causing other people—no, my friends and colleagues—problems, but I felt the adrenaline urging me to continue. “They laugh at this curriculum in our department room. I was told from the beginning that it was more of a guideline and I can do what I want. Did you know that? That my department chair told me that? You observed me—and so did she, multiple times!—and never once was the curriculum brought up. And now you’re saying this thing we laugh at and ignore is the reason why I’m being fired?”

Finally silence fell on the principal, like I just said something that hurt him, and in that moment, I hoped it did, more than I was worried about the backlash I might’ve caused my department.

“That may be so... but the parents raised real concern about your lessons on sexuality and gender identity—”

“Talk to my kids.”

“Excuse me?”

“I said talk to the students. Give them a survey. Put them all in a room and talk to them.”

“We... could do that... but I don’t think it’ll change—”

“Here.” I said, pulling out my Hail-Mary-play, reaching into my bag to give him proof. “These are Thanksgiving and Valentine’s Day cards from my students to me. I didn’t ask them to write them to me. They chose to. Look at all of them. There’s real emotion and care put into those.”

He only takes a moment to shuffle through the flimsy paper notes those teenagers chose to be vulnerable on. I see it's not helping enough, so I go to my phone.

"Look, while you kicked me out these past few days, my students emailed me a video saying they missed me." I fumbled with my phone, trying to open the email, only to get a network error. The video of those girls saying they hoped I would come back soon gave me resolve during these past few days, but now I was begging the video to play and get my point across. No luck. Network error.

I returned to my seat with the letters and the useless phone. A silence fell on all of us. I was running out of pleas, and I didn't care about this HR guy still trying to hand me papers.

"Please..." I weakly said. Tears were coming down now. "Easter is literally around the corner. Isn't this supposed to be about forgiveness? This whole religion? Second chances?"

Another silence. My own tears might've confused me but maybe the principal teared up too.

"Javier, I can talk to the bishop's office again, but I really wouldn't get my hopes up."

I knew he wasn't going to. I knew as soon as I took those papers from the HR guy, still just awkwardly sitting there, this issue would be resolved. There would be no need to talk to the bishop's office again about me.

Last chance. My last chance.

"I... this school... here was the reason why I wanted to become a teacher. I devoted a decade of my life since coming here to become a teacher. I was... inspired to put my students first. Their needs. And I struggled... so much... to come back here to teach again. And you hired me, you cried when I explained my devotion and my struggle. I just... all I did was... it was the needs of the students that I put first. I care so much about them, and you could talk to them too, these issues matter to them. They wanted me to talk about them... they needed someone to tell them things could be okay. Please... let me at least finish the year with them. And you don't have to tell the bishop's office. You even said you're still gonna pay me anyway, so let me be here, in this school, with my kids. I... I won't talk anymore about controversial topics. I won't say anything about being fired. I just... wanna be there with them at the end. Please."

There was no mistaking it this time. He was in fact crying. For what though? HR guy had his head down now, staring at the papers he was trying to hand me.

The silence lasted a lifetime. The silence tortured me for the years I spent to get here. The silence was threatening to take away what I cared about most in the world.

"Javier... I'm sorry but..."

The rest was a blur. The apologies. The paperwork. Clarifying my email was cut off this morning... can't even go back to replay my kids' final message to me. The explanations of what legally happens now. If I talk about this publicly. The end of it all. I can't even tell if I even said this out loud, but it was like I was forced to speed through all five stages of grief in this godforsaken office.

In that moment I felt what I never believed in, an out of body experience. Half of me was reading the paperwork, realizing I had no time to go to a newspaper or anything without walking away from the money that I sorely needed. Wondering if a paper would even help. That half was finally listening to the HR guy while wiping away my tears. But the other half of me drifted elsewhere.

The chapel. It was right nearby this office, one of the first things you see as you walk in the school. I was in 9th grade. My religion teacher at the time said something. Something. I could never remember, but I remembered the feeling. Being a teacher is all I ever wanted since then, especially back here at the same school. The other half of me was in that chapel right now, breathing in the stillness of it all.

All of a sudden, we were all standing up, my mind melding back together in that office. My chest was hollow. Eyes dried out. Why did I just shake the principal's hand as he wished me luck elsewhere? There's no way the bishop's office didn't keep a record of my name. How was anywhere supposed to be different from here, the school that shaped me, the school that should've cared for me? This should've been the least likely school to fire me without a second chance, and yet...

I turned out the door. I can't remember what the last thing I said out loud was at that point. But I wanted to leave something meaningful behind. Something, anything I could say that mattered.

I looked one last time to the principal. I don't know what my intention was. To hurt him? To fight back? To show I still care? To impress him to rehire me? To say anything at all to let him know this was unacceptable? That it can't end like this? That it *won't* end like this?

"My kids aren't stupid."

"What was that?"

"My students. They're smart. They'll figure it out. They'll know what you did. They'll know the Church was involved too. You can't just have a teacher give a unit on LGBTQ+ rights in a Catholic school, force him to pass out someone else's worksheets that contradict what he just taught, then suspend him without explanation, and then replace him for just a month and think no one will realize what happened. They will. Especially when I don't come back next year. And when the students realize, then it's on you. You've done way more harm for their faith than I ever could have."

Silence. For the last time between us.

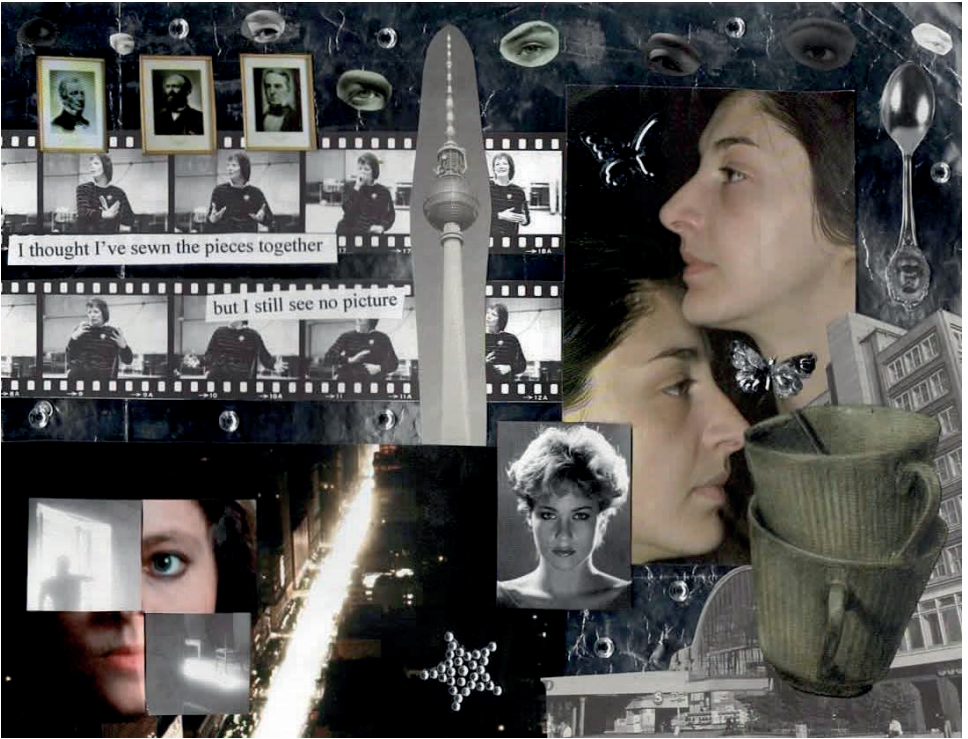
"We'll just have to see how that turns out," he said. Tired. Defeated? Done with me.

The door closed and I faded away.

The chapel greeted me one last time as I walked toward the exit. Doors were open. The silence floated around it without students around. I really considered stepping back in there, to the place that changed my life this past decade, one last time.

Funny enough... I never once took my kids down to that chapel. We stayed in our classrooms, with our desks in circles, ready to talk and debate the next problem. Some days, not a lot of days, but some... I didn't even have to say anything. My kids shared their... opinions... feelings... gossip... jokes... confusions... their truths on their own. And I just listened.

So, I left the chapel behind, hoping that I was taking what really mattered with me.



Loose Threads
Nadya Al Arief
Mixed media collage

Cyclus
Audrey Ze

At 90° it all feels new and makes you crave the thrill

At 180° you start to get restless and can't get enough of it

At 270° you're in so deep and you don't even realize it

At 360° you're stuck but you start to get comfortable

Instead of setting yourself free, you choose to do the round again

Cyclus; life is full of endless cycles...

Astronauts

Stella Biles

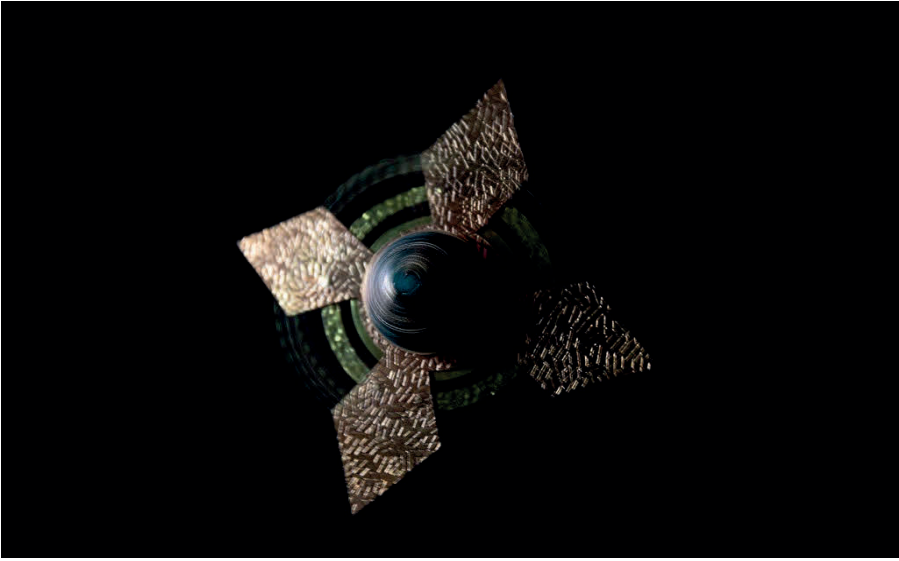
The sounds in my yard
They calm themselves in light
And the sun stands guard
Until the rest of them rest at night
Now I wanna feel safe
In an autumn embrace
While soft breezes flow
And I'm invincible

There's nothing I can do
To stop the trees from dancing in their rooms
Moonlight falls like an astronaut
And suddenly nothing really seems like a lot

Now I wish I was an astronaut
Leaving behind everything I forgot
I could ignore the sounds in my yard
Then the sun won't have to stand guard
Cause we know it's the only star that hides at night
The sun will not rest until it's seen the light

So there's nothing I can do
About the helicopters in my room
Waiting for the astronauts
While my stomach is in knots

There's nothing I can do
To stop the trees from dancing in their rooms
While moonlight falls like an astronaut
Suddenly nothing is really a lot
Until I'm safe
In an autumn embrace



Night Traveler, A Dreamer's Guide
Jessica Hunter-Hinsvark
Copper, brass, steel



Hoofbeats
Jessica Hunter-Hinsvark
Iron horseshoe & nail, horsehair, copper wire & chain, paper, felt, chrysocolla,
glass, matte African turquoise, fossil coral, matte opalite

dear october
Britney Isaacoff

dear october,

i don't bother to talk to you as much
maybe because it is and will always be
a waste of time.

you were once someone who
gave me the biggest smile when you texted back
especially after hours or days
i would think that's okay
because if he wanted to, he would.

now, i look back and know that
it was never special to you.
i was never special to you.

it was just the illusion
that you do care for me.

you said you like me but not as much as i do
and i knew that from the very beginning

that's okay though i didn't mind.
i still don't.
for you would always have a special place in my heart
no matter what.

the number of times i try to forget,
delete the memories,
and move on.
you still somehow appear
in my mind.

i'm happy though
even if it did take me a very long time to accept that
this is how it will always be.

even if in another life,
we wouldn't be together,
the universe has proven that.

but i hope that in every life, we can always be friends.

sincerely,
september



Folded Up
Kat Mussenden
Digital illustration

Sour Eyes on Standby

Jaida Anekwe

They watch her with sour eyes
As she walks by with a certain stride
That, try as they might, they cannot decry
because she holds on tight to her pride
In a world that will fetishize
her face, her body, and her everyday life

They watch her with sour eyes
As she stands quietly to the side,
Because despite their mouths that lie
She knows of her true worth inside
and she continues to live radically by
simply continuing to thrive
while they wait on standby
for her demise

They watch her with sour eyes
But what they do not realize
Is they will wait and watch for a long time
Because if she falls she will not cry
Her days of struggle won't see the light
She takes her fears and makes them hide
Because if she stumbles just one time
Her failure will have no alibi

Standards
Susan Boroskin

The reflection of me,
Shows a version I see,
Not of who I am,
But of who I hate to be.

When strolling around,
With my gaze on the ground,
I vehemently avoid,
Judgment abound.

Whether of me or you,
Both are judged, it's true,
Conscious or not,
Thoughts are see-through.



Bird Bath
Raemont Afable
Oil paint on canvas

How Hard Could a Haiku Be?

Allan Bernal

*Dreary, rainy day
After a long, sleepless night
No words come to mind*

Is this anything? I ponder at my computer, eyes wearily asking to go back to sleep.

Count the syllables again

FIVE

SEVEN

FIVE

But is that it?

Quick search on my computer, multiple articles present themselves.

Traditional haikus reference the seasons... never taught me that in school...

“*Dreary, rainy day*” – does that count?

Frustrated.

The examples I read are simple, yet...

There’s beauty within just those syllables

FIVE

SEVEN

FIVE

It seemed so easy, to try and capture meaning so quickly

But beauty?

Why do I write horror? Why do I draw horror? Why have I avoided poetry?

Because I’m better at making things that unsettle, things that are rough

Things that aren’t supposed to be beautiful

Because I’m not beautiful.

Should I still try to be? To redefine my style, myself, with just

FIVE

SEVEN

FIVE

Or should I embrace my ugliness, create an imperfect horror haiku and stand by it...?

*The poor pets cry out:
“We are hungry! Feel unloved!”
But she’s three-days-dead...*

Is this anything? My brain resets.

Minutes pour by, like the rain against the windows.

Is all poetry like this? Trying to grasp at something beautiful? Just others use more than

FIVE

SEVEN

FIVE

If that’s the case, all the poets, all the beautiful people:

*I long to be them
Envy seeps into my heart
Like frost in autumn*

No, this is nothing. I’m certain of that now.

When I write horror, when I draw ugliness, I want to share myself with others.

But if I leave the haiku like this, out of spite and envy, wouldn’t I be making myself even uglier?

Tainting the reader like a poison?

I now know this:

Even if I do not find beauty in myself

I never want to make the world itself uglier with my art

So I’ll leave the haikus alone for now

And trust someone else to plant the seeds of beauty

And maybe they can manage to do so, with or without

FIVE

SEVEN

FIVE



I'm Not Sad, I'm
Thinking
Santiago Campero Antezana
Buff Stoneware clay #153

Silent Notes
David Quintanilla

Art to me is our truest expression.
And if our life is a story, each piece of art is a lesson.

Each masterpiece forged, to see mine through your eye.
When I don't know why you laugh, and don't know why you cry.

But with each heartfelt connection both strong and diluted
There are parts of each tale that are
Lost, or just muted.

What happens then, to the truths that only I know;
The short stories I opened, that I alone closed;

The notes in the silence,
The strokes painted over,
The details, the vibrance,
Just begging for closure?

From my most jubilant blunder,
To that trance of serious strokes,
A sound of defiance like thunder
Comes from the drafts that came close.

I'll try not to be frantic, to explain all the parts that they missed,
With good timing and patience,
They will work through those gifts.

Because every once in a while,
One of those moments will show,
Their masquerading manners
A big part of that flow.

When my pieces are complete,
And they never truly are,
I see that the most minute detail
Is best seen from afar.

After the breaths that I've borrowed,
Once I think my legacy told,
The void of these small human moments
Completes the story of my soul.

A Slice of Orange
Jasmine Hall

A slice of orange, a simple request
One made every morning by the elderly man
Always alone, tote bag in hand, to order the same breakfast
Eggs, coffee, and the essential slice of orange
And yet, every day, the orange is forgotten
He returns his breakfast, for it is not what he ordered
And though the server rolls her eyes, the cashier stifles a laugh, and
the cook glares his way
He waits, unperturbed, for the orange
No one knows his reasoning

Why he counts his days in orange rinds
Why he insists on only a sliver
Why he will eat the incorrect dish with no complaints, as long as the
orange accompanies it

Maybe it's the color it adds to the plate
Maybe it's the illusion of scarcity that makes the fruit so sweet
Maybe it reminds him of brunches in Paris
Maybe it's reminiscent of the clementines shared with schoolmates
Or maybe it's the one thing his wife never forgot, even as she started
slipping away

Whatever the answer, his order remains the same
Eggs, coffee, and a slice of orange



Morning Cup
Jasmine Hall
Oil paint on canvas

I can smell the past

Rebecca Sylvers

I could smell the past on the wind at the bus stop, the way that cigarette smoke landed on the asphalt like ashes of my time at the Occupy Pittsburg movement.

I could smell the past, like I was back in my tent, waking up. I walked past the busy people and floated back to a different time. A time elegant and different, where a beautiful boy told me to stop and smell the roses, as an afterthought.

He was a beautiful man with long, dark hair and a mischievous grin. I smoked weed with him under a bridge. We listened to a mom and her child bicker in their tent somewhere to the side. They were just lying there, with their eyes bright. They were who they really were, before society told them to be something else. Genuine living was obsolete, even then, as our ashes fell to the ground and the man told me about his dream to have his own spaceship, and fly to outer space. As if there, in outer space, the things that tormented him would fall away.

I could smell the past as I walked through Shady Grove station. All of the busy people, their different stories weaved into the tapestry woven by God. I was high on the buzz of doing good in my language classes and I went back to a place where I was a different girl, new to activism. I loved the taste of coffee. I loved the frigid air and the electric blankets that kept me warm when I slept outside in Pittsburg winters, even though I did not have to.

The beautiful man was my first love. He taught me to live in my pain. As I walked to the bus stop, I sat by a lady wearing a bonnet and a warm winter coat. I wondered what her story was. She was looking at her phone, busy like a bee wandering around a strange forest.

And the ashes fell, and landed where they may. There was a red fire warming me up. I could remember echoes of an old dream, to become a shaman and to walk through this world with honor and hope. I was to be a steward of an old man's dream. I could only hope to walk, my heart wide open for the Great Spirit, hoping He—She, Them, in whatever form They may grace us with—would pick me, shine Their Great Light upon me.

Pick me, I screamed. Pick me for a great journey, to travel under a star-lit sky. I would go somewhere else, that was for certain. And one day in the future, I would smell today.

Far Away Before Too Long
Henry Spevak

The sun rose up this morning
The preacher spoke his peace
The road home has a turning
 Before we'll be released
But we'll be far away before too long
Raise our glasses in a toast to song
 Follow in the path of family
The Holy One that's made for Thee



Mountains
William Metelko
Digital illustration

I'm Even Closer

Jesse Levine

One last day I'm even closer
Closer than I've ever been before
What a marathon I've been running!
I took a water break a long time ago
Yummy Little Pills
They'll steal your whole life away
Put you down
Leave you behind
With nothing left
Just dreams that are fading away
Who wouldn't be tempted to take the coward's way out?
But Jesse doesn't go down easy
I can't go quietly into the night
In January 2020, my life started again
And if I had to, I'd do it all over again
Well, I'd probably not take introduction to linguistics
I HATE SCIENCE!
Whatever
Back to being better
There's a blue robe waiting for me across the finish line
By the end of 2023, it fits
But I can't promise I'll ever make it through a poem without causing a ruckus
Cheers to my future
One last day I'm even closer

Before the Harvest

David Quintanilla

When Pride presents his oh-so-important role
And Hate justifies his opposition's toll
And Apathy and Denial shrug at the hurt they "haven't brung"

Then Pride inevitably wanes, as the delusions pass
And from that void, Self-Pity calls "I'm free at last
But our ship's as good as sunk cuz I'm the worst."

When Death tells you that "life's just... there"
And your cells get tired of food and air
And Self-Preservation pleads desperately towards your heart:
"3 parts numb and one part sharp"

When these vices grab ahold,
and try to fight,
and begin to feed,
Solutions cannot be sold,
so shine your warmest light,
And you'll find the seed.

Mother Nature Show Me Healing

Jaida Anekwe

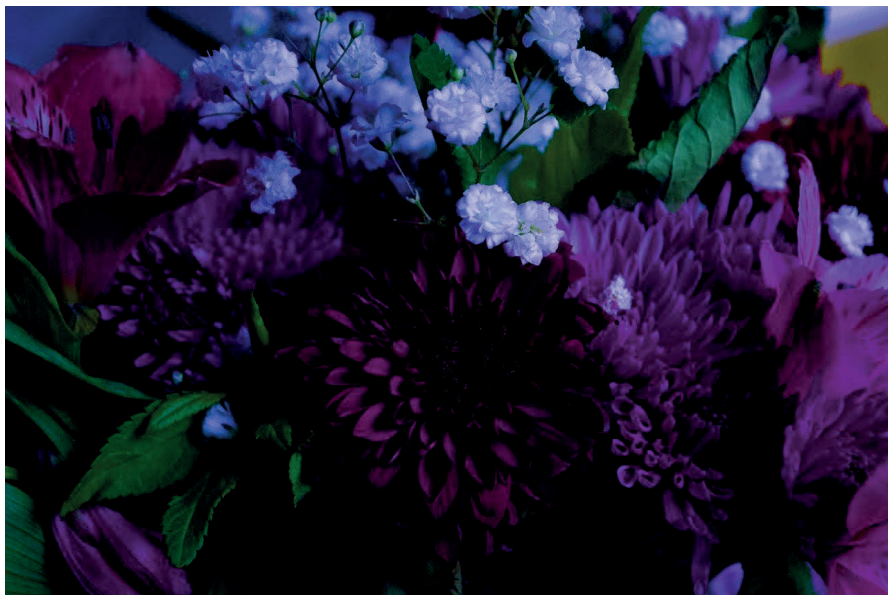
Mother Nature show me healing
Use your tears to wash mine away
Help me so I may cease my weeping

In your breadths of green are the secrets to flourishing
I'll watch the trees for hours as the wind sways
And intertwine with the roots of your seedlings

You set the pace for perfect growing
As the sun and the moon come each day
Your watchful eye keeps life ever turning

And just when hope seems fleeting
The creatures of the night come out to play
To clean the mess of morning's bleedings

All I have within me is vast unfeeling
but you can show me the way
To discover life in its truest meanings
through nature's guidance I've been needing.



Beauty Bouquet
Emily Solorzano
Photography



Lovely Spring Rain
Emily Solorzano
Photography

To the Person I Used to Be
Jason Delcid

Dear Jenifer,

I remember our first experience with this big world.
How you held us tight and swore to protect us from whatever came crashing.
I wished that nothing could harm us, but who were we kidding?
Of course, you couldn't protect us from everything that tried to destroy us.
There are still some scars on our bodies.
I still visit the grave that I built for you.
I see your spirit dance around in the opened field with the dark pines singing
while the moonlight hits you just right.
I'm sorry that I stopped visiting your grave for a while.
Sometimes when I see you, all I can see is the painful memories of someone
that I never wanted to be.
As I stared at you, all I could say was I'm sorry.
I'm sorry for the late night tears, I'm sorry for the days where I couldn't even
look at your face, I'm sorry that I left you alone most nights...
I never thought that it would end up this way at first.
With a gentle embrace of full acceptance, I cry.
Someone once told me about creating dreams that were left behind and it was
her.
From the broken dreams that she once dreamt I created new ones for myself.
With that gentle embrace I hold her back tightly.
Thank you for the foundation that you left me, thank you for the cheerful
memories before the world hit, thank you for the protection that you gave me,
and thank you for existing so I can.

From,
Jason Delcid

Ps. I never stopped loving you.



Bike Ride
Jasmine Hall
Oil paint on canvas

the eyelash burglar

Neha Jehangir

Everyone that walks through our lives has an impact. We tend to shift all of our focus on the “big people” and forget about the significance of the “small.” We lose ourselves in the “He said, she said” of the world. We don’t realize that the big people stay too long. They have an immediate impact on our memories, experiences, and senses.

I used to wish on eyelashes because of someone big; I still think about them all the time. But the memories, the ones of them and I, are tainted because the people that occupy so many corners of my mind tend to make a bigger splash when they take their final bow. I’ve forgotten what it’s like to remember the little people. The kid in my fourth-grade class who announced to the entire world he had to get shots at the dentist—the kid in kindergarten who used to give us hugs and trade *Sillybandz* at recess—the girl who ate lunch with me in elementary school and then sat next to me in chem last semester. These little people who had larger-than-life impacts on my personality were lost to the cracks in the three pounds of pink matter monopolizing my skull, replaced by tricky tormenters and sticky eyelash burglars I *almost* plead to forget.

They’re a fickle thing, memories. If we just stopped, stopped thinking about the significant people, if we started listening more and talking less, maybe, just maybe, we’d leave a little legacy behind in someone’s memories. So to the people I wish I had never met, please file your way to the door marked “EXIT” in glowing red. This is your final performance, and I wish you hadn’t made it one to last a lifetime. To the people I have forgotten, thank you for all you did. Thank you for your smiles and kindnesses, greetings and goodbyes, and the drawer I reserve for you in my head.

I guess what I am trying to say is that I put my “big people” on a pedestal, carrying all of their weight and all of mine. We love hard and then hate harder. But those little people, the ones I let go, the ones I think about when I race past the only place with a decent latte or taste the sour twinge of artificial green apple. Those people renting those crevices, clinging to those ignorantly blissful moments, are the ones I should really hold on to. So for my first wish upon an eyelash in a good long while (and hopefully my last until there’s one worth wishing on), I hope to forever be a little person in your life and that you fade into the smile you once were in mine.

Pinocchio
Madeline Graham

As a child I didn't understand Pinocchio.
He wanted something he had no reason to.
Sure, he was wooden but
that didn't seem to matter.
He could walk,
he could talk,
what more did he need?

It came to me all at once,
years later in a student pub.

She smelled like cherry blossoms and
wore a white shirt and
ordered a drink and
laughed when I said I'd pay for it
(but I wasn't joking).

He came up to her while we were dancing
wearing a polo shirt and pressed slacks and
I knew I should be happy for her
because she'd been talking about him
for weeks and weeks now.

I watched the way she
smiled easily,
smiled automatically,
smiled like she meant it as he
put his hand on her waist.

And suddenly I understood what it was,
to wish you were a real boy.



Unsent Letters
Nadya Al Arief
Mixed media collage

City Dwellers with their Midwest Minds

Ellie Orzulak

Her eyes averted; they click to mine suggestive before an unwarranted thought: *u can tell the age of a person's kids by the trash in their backyards*
She's committing small town anecdotes to a Sunday night,

There's a little hill with a hallowed Quaker church, her next target in babble/

fucking hell, lets attend a service

And We had never fallen in stride before

And It's only a little cold there in May

Tumultuous conversation

I knew what we held, just fingers in our sleeves,

I'll be sure 2 see you when it's safe-

/Okay/ - I'll Be sure to use an inflection

I can't remember ever studying too hard

After all, the first of us did falter

And honestly, I never needed someone to teach me how to spin a narrative, Too used to dismissing ur sin

The ability to connect through manipulation, past the point of tolerance... My heart beats regularly still

She goes back to kicking rocks in the street

We work around it

To be fair, she's a nuisance on i95

Yes, ur new friend's a bad driver

And I've never committed to something before a moment's notice So don't call me when ur tired because I hate the static

Canwerollthewindows downnnn i know this air well

Tumultuous conversation

And although I love to watch you pine, please stop betting on horses

Waiting to see if two dozen cats could take a bull

Going back to training bras and bounding up the stairs

Made a high stakes switch and wallowed in being scared

I've never met someone else who could also tell just by glancing into a car, *intellect, or asshole.*

Pretend Games

Stella Biles

Tag, you're it
Throw one in the basket
H-O-R-S-E
Boys are full of shit
And girls are full of it
But out here we are truly free
Let's play pretend
I think you're my best friend
It's just us, and the rocks, and the trees
If we stay up
We'll never grow up
We can be guided by the stream

We'll live in our attic fortress
We'll dedicate ourselves to saving the princess
We're the noblest men
At least when we play pretend

What type of bridge
Will we cross today?
And over this ridge
We won't be lead astray
Just past this rusted pipe
We can run away
With a clever stride
And our castle made of clay

We can go wherever we wanna go
Be whoever we wanna be
Even when our path is covered in snow
The forest knows it's just you and me
I'll love you til the very end
I'll always remember how we played pretend



Pugsly
Raemont Afable
Oil paint on canvas

On the Balcony
Carlos Claudio Aparicio

This is when I want him the most
When I need his arms around me
To close my eyes in silence but feel him

The lights in the horizon
But your embrace is safe
The darkness is not scary

You tell me you love me
Softly into my ear
I hold onto your arms
I tell you I love you
I love you
I love you

The shining lights
We are here somewhere
You and I
I will love you forever
Perhaps you will love me back

One day
Somewhere
Somewhere

(Play me out like the jester) when you can't muster the patience
Ellie Orzulak

And where depth overruns daily ambition I don't ever feel like turning the tv off
We sit backs against expectations and he doesn't say a word.

And if anything corroded, just let me know

His promises untenanted he doesn't say a word.

And if anyone's committed, don't tell me a thing

My hands have been shaking since that trip and he doesn't say a word.

Stand around scratching at love, but,

To be with an artist is to hold your hand out underneath wet paint-

I mind it a tad bit.

Writers are the best when they're honest, so an alcoholic writer is lauded-

I've gotta get out, that's all too clear:

But gas is expensive cars move too fast they're expensive use up more fuel than I can provide too expensive so I crashed mine and forgot about it like a lineman fried off his perch-

I mind it a tad bit.

I hear the crash at night when I can't sleep,

And it breaks my back when you make promises you know you can't keep

Over-indulgent capillaries take blood meant for the brain and reroute it towards my heart, which acts like a teenager with a trust-fund and a resentment for puritan ideals.

I feel a bit like a fish out of water,

I've tried to reason with friends on the lam

And I need you more than I want you, but I'll want you for all time

And my family has never been one to languish, yours was always better at that

But some things don't pass along, some things can't

So I spend a lot of time at my window, too much time watching the rain pass

Sometimes, when the fog doesn't dissipate, it'll resemble you

But water runs, its bodies more malleable than we'd like to think

So before I can grab hold of your head it moves to another storm system, miles away

And there it'll stay, I know.

I mind it.

STAND STILL

Eleanor Smedberg

Hold still

I shed my skin in the driveway well after the sun goes down.

Stand still

Back so straight it aches. Focus is torn between pain and productivity.

Stand down

We're not going to fight today. We're not going to say anything at all.

Sit down

Face is red and hands are cold I am quiet but not at rest.

Calm down

Grey things roll through shapeless.

Calm down

I'm only comfortable on fire.

Calm down

The prisoner has escaped and they took the cell with them.

Calm down

We are not alone in this room.



I hate this
place
Stephanie
Lalmuanpuii
Digital illustration



SOS
Gabrielle Hogue
Mixed media collage

Who Pushed Humpty?

Susan Rodgers

Scene 2

(Lights up on the Wolf house. It is a door CR, facing L)

RED

(Red DR is texting and saying the texts out loud)

Hey, King. I'm at their door rn. I'll update you later.

(King sticks out a thumbs up from offstage L. Red knocks on the door. Harold Wolf opens it. He is holding a coffee cup)

HAROLD WOLF

Morning, Red.

(Harold takes a loud sip from his cup)

What can I do ya for?

RED

Hello, Mr. Wolf. You and your family are under investigation for the murder of a Mr. Humpty Dumpty. What were you doing last night at around 7:15 PM?

HAROLD WOLF

Last night was Rocky's 12th birthday party. As you can see, the children are still here.

(He opens the door so Red can peek in. A breakfast cacophony is heard from offstage: "May I have more eggs?" "Um, Mr. Wolf, I'm a vegan" "I'm A vEgAn" & laughter. The kids' voices can be a sound effect.)

My husband is making breakfast.

OSCAR WOLF

(From off stage)

(Shushing the kids) Shhhhh! Harold, who is it?

(Oscar walks to the door and stands behind)

Oh, morning, Red! Did The Boy cry wolf again?

(Oscar and Harold look at her expectantly. Red nods. They all nod.)

ROCKY

(From offstage)

WHO'S AT THE DOOR? DID HE CRY WOLF AGAIN?

HAROLD WOLF/OSCAR WOLF/RED

YES!

OSCAR

(Jokingly, to Red)

So what did we do this time?

RED

Second degree murder, I'm afraid.

ROCKY
(Still offstage)

WHAT DID WE DO THIS TIME?

RED
(To Rocky)

SECOND DEGREE-

OSCAR
(To Rocky)

EAT YOUR EGGS HONEY!

(Oscar closes the door behind him and Harold goes off to help the kids)

(To Red)

Now, I don't know who this kid thinks he is, but this has gone way too far and I don't want him terrorizing my family any longer.

RED

He may be put in the dungeon for lying, but if he's tried for the murder he *will* be beheaded-

OSCAR

I was just thinking I could talk to his guardians, okay? He's being tried for the murder?

(He opens the door again and we hear the kids playing: "He cheated!" "I did not!"
"Yeah I saw him looking!")

Harold! Once the guests go home I think we should take some eggs to the dungeon.

HAROLD
(To kids)

Quiet down please!

(He enters again)

Red is there anything else we can do? Do you want some eggs?

RED

No no thank you, I'm fine.

OSCAR

It's no trouble, really. Are you sure?

RED

(Already walking away)

Yes, I am. I got to go, murder investigation and all that. Bye!!!

(They wave and close the door)

RED

(Texting out loud)

Wolves have confirmable alibi. Heading 2 crime scene.

(King off L gives another thumbs up. Lights down)



Solace
Faith King
Oil paint on canvas

Content Warning: This piece discusses sensitive topics

Brake

Madeline Graham

There are several things that you must take into consideration, when reviewing the case of Carolina Cassidy.

It will help set the scene to note that she did not really need to leave her car, when it broke down in the bayous of Louisiana in the midst of a terrible August storm. It was a wet time for the bayous, the summer of 1957, and the influx of water had caused some problems in the car's electrical system. But her fiancé, Harry, had warned her that her brake lines may be rusting. He kept telling her he'd replace them, but he hadn't found the time to do so before her trip down south to visit her parents, a trip he had not wished to accompany her on. It was a reasonable assumption to make, that she might have a brake problem. Not wanting to risk driving with no brakes in the storm, Carolina had decided to try seeing if anyone was about to help. Had she waited a few minutes and attempted to start the car again, she may have been successful. We will never know.

It is also important to be aware that Ruby Morris was not a Godless hermit, or an antisocial reject. She was certainly not a cruel woman, despite what the headlines would say. She had very good reason for keeping to herself, and had done a brilliant job of keeping to herself for decades. Still, when Carolina knocked on her door at scarcely 8 in the morning, soaking wet and carrying her heels, Ruby couldn't bring herself to turn her away. She opened the door, and invited her inside. She didn't know anything about cars, she told Carolina, but Carolina was welcome to stay and wait for the storm to stop. It couldn't last more than a day or so, Ruby reasoned.

While it may seem damning that Ruby asked about the ring on Carolina's hand almost immediately after sitting her down at the kitchen table and making her a cup of tea, you ought to know that she really did do it in good faith. Who doesn't want to talk about their partner? It was only when Carolina's response was less than enthusiastic that Ruby gently asked if everything was alright. Carolina assured her it was. Living a life of isolation, Ruby's ability to read other people wasn't exactly rock solid, but she could tell there was more to the story than Carolina was saying. She didn't push it, though.

While some may be uninterested in the mundane happenings of the day she spent with Ruby, I believe them to be vital in understanding the intricacies of this case. Ruby had an extensive library, and offered Carolina the run of it. The two of them sat for a time, then left to cook lunch, an easy companionship having formed between them as they sat in the library, reading separately but

together. They chatted about this and that as they cooked, and even once they had finished lunch they remained at the kitchen table, laughing and talking. They were similar, they found. Smart. Questioning of their places in society, as women. Carolina had never met a woman like Ruby. She did not seem afraid of the world, Carolina thought. It crossed her mind that the woman *did* seem afraid of herself. She banished the thought, and after a few more turns the conversation began to slow. The silence was broken only by the heavy rain on the windows.

Aren't you lonely here, all by yourself, Carolina asked out of nowhere. *Yes, I am,* Ruby responded. It seemed the natural thing to do at the time, to reach out and grab her hand. *I am lonely too,* Carolina said. *I am so lonely too.*

The two of them did not leave that kitchen table until the sun began to set, and Ruby suggested that Carolina move to the dining room while she prepared dinner. She did not have much, she explained apologetically, only some ingredients for soup. *That's more than enough,* Carolina replied. *More than enough.*

I think it an interesting detail that Ruby served the dinner wine in mason jars, having no proper glasses. She did not have company often. In fact, she had not had company in over two decades, not once since she had moved into this lonely, isolated cabin in the woods at the age of fourteen. The jars were different sizes, and slightly different shapes. Carolina thought they were beautiful. Made for each other, even. It must've been the wine in the jars that made Carolina more willing to confess, or it may have been Ruby herself. We will never know.

I'm afraid of him sometimes, you know, Carolina said quietly, twisting her engagement ring as she did. *Sometimes I think that he is not a good man, not really. I am so alone there.*

You should probably acknowledge that Ruby leaned in first, at that point, but Carolina met her approaching lips with such enthusiasm that their teeth clinked. Can you fall in love in only one day? Only the poets can say for sure, I suppose, but I know my opinion on the matter.

This is where things begin to seem rather fantastic. But they are the God-honest truth, I swear it.

You must know that Ruby did her best to warn Carolina, she really did. Her initial plan had been to lock the woman in the basement just before nightfall, but she couldn't bring herself to do that, not now. And so she stood in front of the woman as she sat on the bed and gripped her hands very tightly and said *Listen, honey, you must not leave this room. Do you understand? No matter*

what happens. Not to use the bathroom. Not to get a glass of water. Not if there's a fire. You must not leave. Do you understand? Tell me you understand. Do you understand? Good, good. Promise me you won't. Promise. Good.

To Carolina's credit, she really did mean to keep that promise. But she woke from a terrible nightmare, you'll understand, to find herself alone in a strange bed in a strange room. She was confused. Disoriented. She could still smell Ruby's perfume on her own skin. It seemed a good idea, at the time, to go looking for the woman. She had not known Ruby long, but the woman could make things better, that she knew. She would go downstairs, and find Ruby, and Ruby would make it all better.

I am not sure if I can properly describe what Carolina Cassidy saw in that kitchen to you, at least not in any language humanity will understand, but I will put forth my best effort. Ruby Morris stood hunched over the table, her fingers gripping it so tightly that chunks of the wood crumbled in her hands and fell to the floor. A sort of glow surrounded her, or perhaps it is better described as a haze—her body was blurry, somehow. Her blue night dress had begun to tear down the seams, revealing her back. Her *back*- it wasn't a woman's back, not anymore. The skin was covered in hard, gray scales, and it strained desperately to accommodate her rapidly expanding muscles.

The terror in Carolina's voice was palpable as she asked *Ruby, oh Ruby, what's going on?* The expression on Ruby's face when she turned around and saw Carolina was the most terrible thing Carolina had ever seen. Her face wasn't entirely human anymore, but Carolina could still see the deep grief in it, the intense regret, the desperate pain. Ruby had become a terrible beast, a demon of Biblical proportions. *Why didn't you stay upstairs, Carolina, God, why didn't you just stay upstairs?*

Ruby's final words to Carolina as she began to raise her claws seemingly without any control over the motion, her voice becoming less and less human, more and more beast, are a very important piece of this puzzle. *Forgive me, Carolina, please forgive me, I can't help it, Carolina, Jesus, Carolina, I can't stop, I'm sorry, Carolina,* and somewhere in the back of Carolina's mind floated the phrase *forgive them, Father, for they know not what they have done.*

And surely it is significant that, even as the monster Ruby had become plunged a sharp claw into her flesh and ripped her still-beating heart from her chest, Carolina's last thought was not of her childhood, not of Harry, but of the woman's soft lips on her own, mere hours before. That ought to count for something, I would hope. Perhaps not, though. What her last thought was could never and will never make Carolina Cassidy any less dead.



The Bee
Jasmine Hall
Oil paint on canvas

Unconditional
David Quintanilla

Out of a fear that I was loved no more,
My only goal was to be adored.
So, with every waking moment, I'd save face.

To build that mask, I broke my soul.
And my lifeless flesh just played a role.
I was ironclad in a suit; a suit of truthful lies.

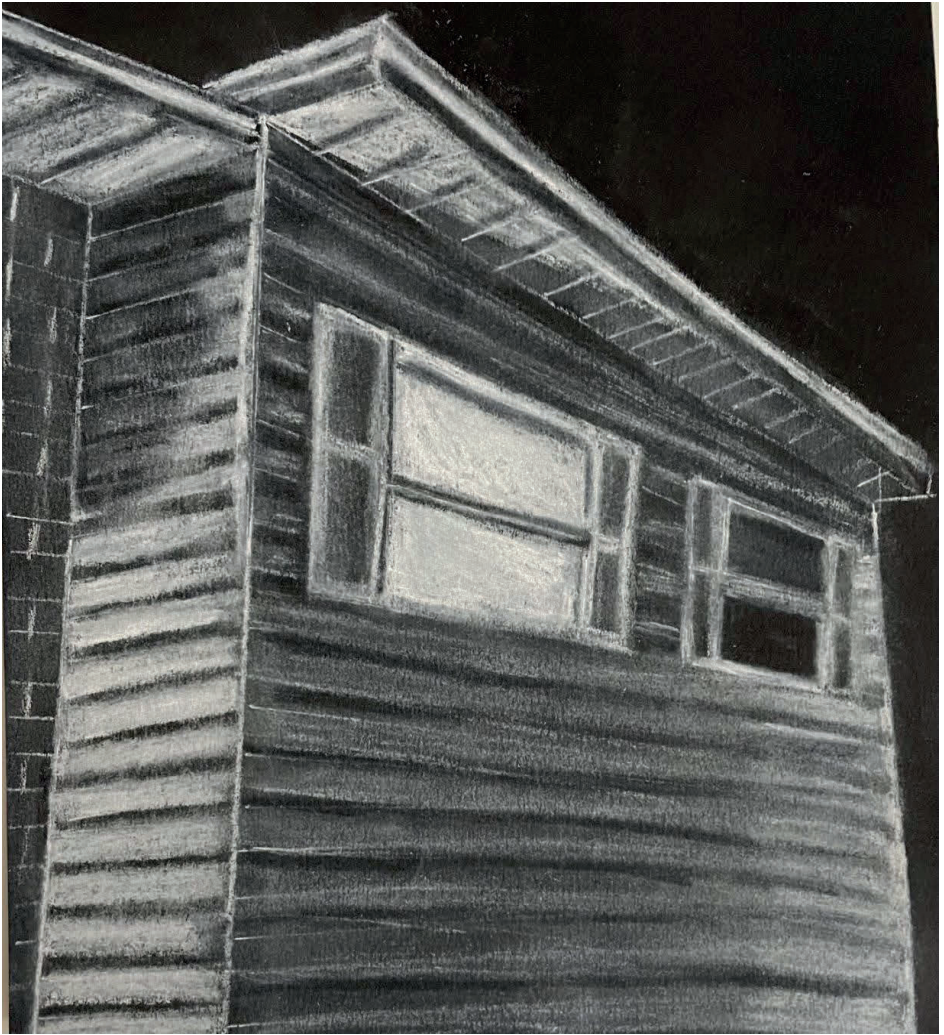
I wore those plates through storm and storm
And so became attached to my fitted form,
Until I knew, I had to let it go.

With great effort, I peeled it off.
My skin was raw and my heart was soft.
And my pathetic attempts would ache in every bone.

Far less elegant, but much more true,
I hesitantly tried to be like you,
Who accepts even hatred as pay for endless love.

I was pushed away, and seen as false,
And cast aside, and finally...lost,
Until at last, I glimpsed that gilded hue.

Now when I watch the skies, I am finally proud,
To say my heart's four walls have toppled down.
I have been blessed with more than just a start.
Starting now, I will pour from a boundless heart.



Outside Looking In
Jasmine Hall
White charcoal on paper

Content Warning: This piece discusses sensitive topics

The Fire in the Woods

Gerald Blair

I was driving with the top down. The fall breeze was cold on my face, but my hiking jacket kept the rest of me warm. I was very excited to see my friends. We had this camping trip entirely planned out long ago. Finally it was time to enjoy the outdoors. My friends were already there. I would be meeting up with my girlfriend and a couple other friends from school. The trip would be minimal hiking, maximum relaxation. This was going to be a good trip.

I drove down the thin road surrounded by trees. I was getting deeper and deeper into the woods. Paranoid, I looked over at my glove box. A handgun was in it. I had recently purchased it in preparation for the trip. My friends absolutely hated guns, but it made me feel safer. It was for protection; bears were known to be in the region.

I kept driving slowly along the gravel road. I arrived at the miniscule parking lot. My friend's car wasn't parked there, which was odd. My anxiety settled when I saw my friends sitting down near a tent not far away. I honked to signal them, and they waved. That was a relief. I parked my car and looked over to see them all still seated. That was weird. I thought they would be a little more enthusiastic to see me, especially my girlfriend. I took the final opportunity of being alone to open the glove box. I put the handgun in my backpack quickly and discreetly. I planned on keeping it very safe. I was going to cling onto that backpack like it was gold. I put the top up on my car and turned off the engine.

"Hey guys!" I yelled to my friends. Still, they seemed a little down. As I approached, my girlfriend, Shelly, stood up and gave a slight smile.

"It's good to see you," is all she said. I hugged her, and my friend Abraham stood up. He seemed happy but abnormally calm. I gave him a couple fist bumps. Jim stood up next and greeted me.

I asked them where their car was. Shelly explained that they parked about a mile away. She said they wanted more of a hike, which didn't surprise me. Jim was an exercise nut, always taking fitness too seriously. We all sat quietly around the fire pit. The burning fire was weak.

"So... I gotta admit, I was expecting you guys to be a lot more energetic." I chuckled.

"Just tired," Abraham responded. I looked around at the camp. There was an awkward amount of silence.

"Well, show me around the camp. Give me the tour!" I excitedly asked. Shelly took a minute to guide me around. Later before sunset, they all guided me downhill to where the stream was. They showed me where the food and clean water was stored. We grabbed dinner and headed back up.

As the sun went down, the fire was our only light. The bright flames emitted their color onto our faces, highlighting us. I was relieved to finally see some energy go around while we ate. My friends were much more talkative now.

I crawled into the tent as we readied for slumber. I set my backpack down in my corner. My girlfriend was putting more wood on the fire. I didn't have much time, so I quickly reached my hand into my backpack to feel around for the gun. I had to keep track of my belongings. I already knew it was in there, but it was good to just check. I was shocked when I reached inside. The gun wasn't there...

I checked all the pockets this time. I pulled out a spare hoodie, some loose pieces of paper, but no gun anywhere. Christ, what if one of my friends had it? I knew I was the only one that understood firearm safety rules in the group.

Shelly entered the tent.

"What's wrong?" she asked. I was in a panic, I realized my face illustrated it. I asked her if she'd gone through my backpack at all. She said no. She became curious as to why I was concerned. I didn't say much, but my heart was racing with fear. I kept my cool, and we laid down for the night.

I waited for what seemed like hours in the dark. I didn't know what happened to the gun, but one thing was certain: I wasn't falling asleep until I had it.

When I heard some light snoring, I slowly crept up. There were only two places I'd store that gun: my backpack and my glovebox. So I took my keys out and tiptoed to my car. The dead leaves were like bubble wrap beneath my steps. I carefully put my keys in the car door. As soon as I unlocked it, the rear lights popped on. They brightened the dark woods as if God's spotlight was shining down onto the tents. I prayed it wouldn't wake them. I opened the glovebox and to my surprise the handgun was still in there. It was a relief, but I wasn't satisfied. I SWORE that I had already put the gun in my bag when I first parked. No matter, it was late. I retrieved the firearm and began the walk back to the tent. I kept my hand in the bag, clutching onto the cold steel.

In the morning, we all got up and revived the fire. Now I was annoyed to see my friends cheerful. While we ate breakfast, all I could think about was the previous day. I wasn't concerned with what happened at night. Instead, I was fixated on the moment I arrived at the campsite. I PUT THAT GUN IN MY BAG. I kept playing through the vivid memory of it. I arrived, I parked the car, I saw my friends sitting down, and I put the gun in my backpack. I was sure of it. But I was distraught between my better judgment and the thought of my friends playing a sick prank. I felt like I was going insane thinking about it. In the end, I came to the conclusion that one of my friends took the gun out of my bag and put it back in the car.

Suddenly, I heard a bizarre scream from far away. I instantly turned to face the direction of the noise.

"Please tell me you all heard that too." I said, still staring into the distance.

"Of course, we heard it. How could we not have?" Jim said. I looked back at my friends, I could tell we were all spooked.

Later that day, I took a little walk around camp with my girlfriend. We talked in private, and I felt the urge to tell her everything about the gun. But something sinister inside me felt resistance to do so. Normally, I was very honest and upfront, but I was frightened. I asked my girlfriend what her thoughts would be on leaving early. She quickly rejected the idea, explaining that this trip was important to her, that she needed me to stay. She seemed stressed, so I tried to calm her down with

a hug. I may have lost my honesty, but I would never want to let her down. We grabbed some large wooden branches for more firewood and headed back.

We all sat down around the fire. It seemed like there was nothing to do but stare into the flames. My mind returned to when I arrived. I kept going over my memories. Everything was so clear and vivid. I knew I wasn't insane, but the silence began to eat away at my mentality. I could hold it in no more. I took a deep inhale.

"So, who went through my backpack?" I asked aloud. My heart rate pounded like hell. Immediately, Shelly sighed and buried her face in her palms. She was very sad, and asked me to drop it. My friends claimed their innocence, but I could feel my tension rise.

The sun began getting close to the horizon. Only a couple hours of daylight remained and I, along with everyone else, seemed miserable. I tried to think about what was going on. I couldn't completely decide on whether I ruined the camping trip, or if there was something larger at play. The only thing that actually happened was one abnormal scream in the woods. It could have been an animal, or another camper playing around. Everything else that happened was entirely my own doing.

Daylight was thinning. We sat around the fire yet again for dinner. The fire was our everything. It was our lifeline in the wilderness. Its flames gave our faces color in the dim environment. Before I had the pleasure to begin eating dinner, we heard another loud noise. I latched onto my bag. The noise sounded like a roar! It roared again, this time it sounded extremely close. My friends were greatly frightened by the loud noise.

"What is that?!" my friend yelled.

"It's got to be a bear!" I shouted. At this point, I feared for our safety. I had a duty to protect my girlfriend. I reached into my bag. I grabbed onto the gun quickly but carefully. I made sure to keep my finger off the trigger until I was ready to shoot.

As I pulled the gun out, my friends gasped.

I pointed the firearm in the direction of the roar and cocked the slide. My friends insulted me for bringing a gun.

"Really?! You're gonna judge me at a time like this?!" I snarled back, maintaining my eyesight down range.

Shelly clutched onto the back of my shoulder. She started crying.

"Don't fight! Why can't you just be obedient?!" she yelled. I was so confused. I was so angry. I continued my aim into the woods, scanning side to side. We stayed there for a moment. The silence returned, and I waited. Then I saw it. I saw the wicked creature move into my line of sight thirty or forty yards away. I only had seven rounds, but now seemed like the time to expend one of them. I fired off a single shot. I couldn't get that good of a glimpse of it. The gunshot echoed and bounced around the many trees surrounding us. I assumed it was a bear, but after seeing it for that brief moment, I wasn't sure. I was doubtful that I even hit it.

"Was it a bear?!" I asked. I lowered the weapon, and looked back at my girlfriend. Her lips trembled, and a tear rolled down her cheek. I could see the parking lot in the background.

"MY CAR!" I screamed. My car wasn't there!

I sprinted over to the gravel parking lot and everyone followed. I went to the middle of the lot, where my car was minutes ago. I fell to my knees, screaming like bloody murder.

“WHAT THE HELL IS GOING ON HERE?!” I finally snapped. My girlfriend cried and yelled for me to come back to the fire. She wasn’t making any sense, but she begged me to rest by the fire.

“Where’s your car?!” I desperately asked Shelly. She just shook her head no. I asked and I asked, until I demanded. She looked into my eyes. Then, she quickly glanced to the right, further down the road, out of fear. I nodded, and I began walking to the road. She clutched onto my arm, begging me to stay.

“WHAT THE HELL’S HAPPENING, SHELLY!?” I yelled.

“It doesn’t matter! You won’t listen! You never listen!” she sobbed back at me, shaking her head.

“What are you talking about?!” I replied. She just hugged me, sobbing. Filled with anger, I pushed her further away so I could see her eyes.

“TELL ME!” I screamed. It was getting concerningly dark now. I had to act quick. Shelly and my other friends returned to the fire. The flames shone brightly against their saddened faces. Tears rolled down their faces, but I refused to join them.

“I’ll come back for you.” I said. I began sprinting down the gravel road, gun in hand. I was going to get to the other car, or at least find some damn help, but I was not going to sit still. All I could hear were my loud footsteps on the loose gravel. I heard the same roar again, but much farther. It was almost pitch black outside, but soon a life saver came into view. I could see other campers. I saw a bit of a tent through the branches, and they had a fire going as well. I announced myself and began a hasty approach. I was suspicious when I saw how familiar the tents looked, and was horrified to see the faces of my friends who I had just ran away from.

“No...no...” I quietly muttered as tears formed in my eyes. They stared blankly at the fire, barely acknowledging me. I cried, and I wept. I could see that my girlfriend was clearly trying to hold herself back from having an outburst. But she remained still, looking into the flames of our only light source. I was not ready to give up. I jogged back to where the road was, but the road was no more. My heart was pounding so hard it sounded like it was going to explode. I decided to go to the stream. I could follow it in hopes of finding help, or anything for that matter. I ran downhill as fast as I could in the dark. When I felt a branch smack into me, I just toughened up and kept going. I tripped on the uneven terrain and fell to the ground, losing my grip on the handgun. It fell into the blinding darkness, and I desperately felt around in the dry crackling leaves. I heard the roar close behind, and I decided to ditch the gun.

I continued downhill and all of a sudden my feet splashed into the water of the stream. The dim moon barely provided light. In the stream, I noticed a car almost identical to mine. The front engine block was completely submerged. The car was covered in mud, and the paint was all chipped and worn off. As my eyes adjusted, it looked more and more like my car. It almost looked as though it had been there for decades. Unsure, I ripped open the door and found all of my usual belongings inside. I heard faint laughter in the distance, and I cursed it. I opened

up the glovebox, praying for my weapon. I yanked it open, but it was empty. I closed it, and tried again. I prayed as hard as I could, opening and closing the damn thing repeatedly. I opened it one last time, and finally the gun was there. When I exited the car, I heard the beast's twisted noises. All of a sudden, dozens of light sources started popping up from within the woods. They were other fireplaces. Some were a few yards away, others appeared to be miles away. I started running to the fires, praying I would find my friends. There was one roughly a hundred yards away. I decided to try that one. My entire world was complete darkness now with the exception of the distant fires.

“HELP!!!!” I screamed as I ran through the night. I got closer to the fire, and I could see my friends sitting by it. I slowly walked up to them, sobbing.

I looked at them, and all of a sudden they looked terrified. I heard a rustle behind me, and then I felt the heaviest breathing flow down my neck. It was like an elephant taking big exhales inches from me. I turned around to face the beast, and I saw two bright red eyes spaced several feet apart. I stumbled backwards, closer to the fire. Closer to my friends. I raised my weapon, and pointed it directly at the wicked thing. It was only a few feet away. For a moment, we stared into each other's eyes. The gun in my hand was like an ancient power that fueled my spirit. I was not going down without a fight. I fired the gun directly into the beast's head. One round, two rounds, three rounds. I unleashed a few deafening shots, and the creature just faded away into the darkness. After the gunshots finished echoing, the devil's laughter was the only remaining noise. I looked at my friends, silent tears streamed down all of our faces now.

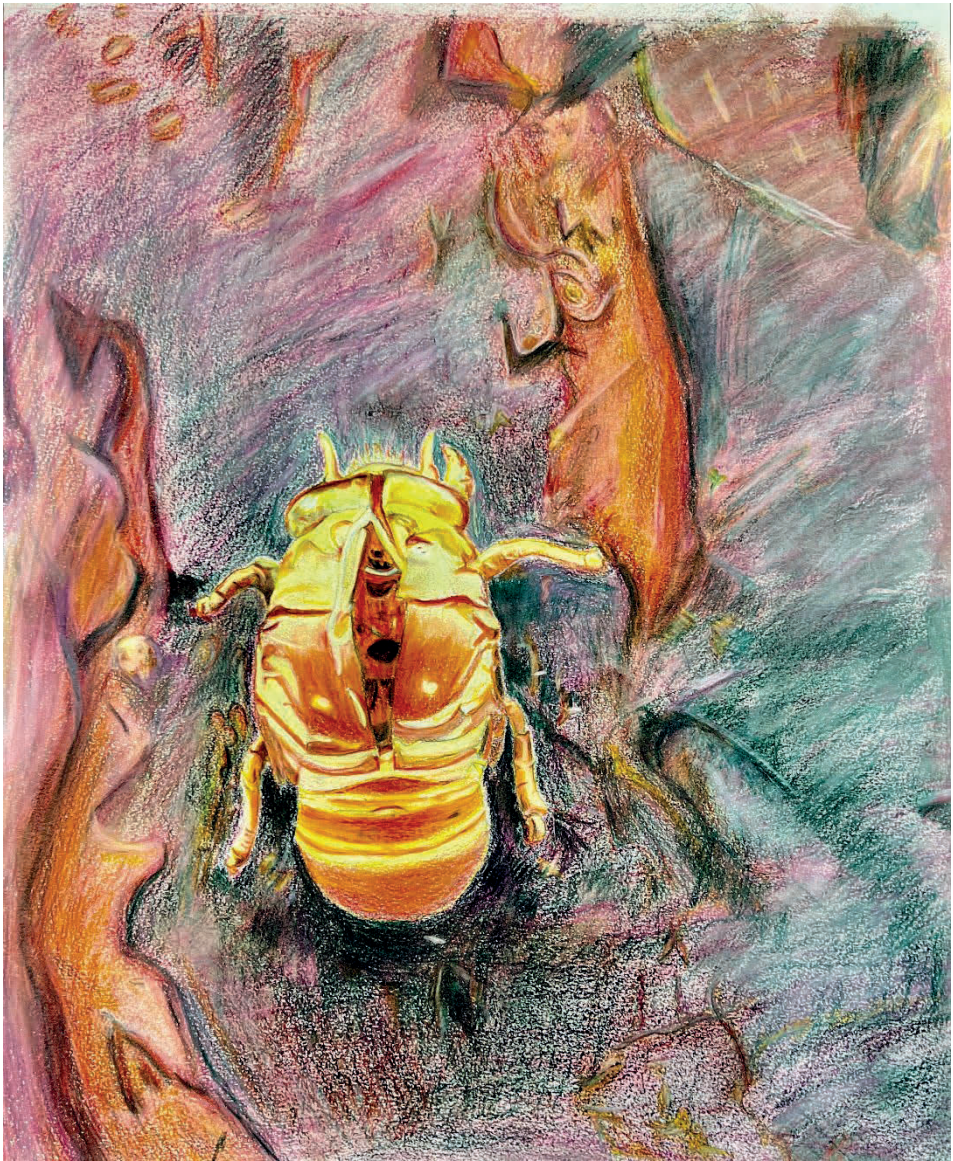
I watched them closely as I sobbed for forgiveness. The fire was our only light. They wore dark clothes, so all I could see was their bright faces.

“Why can't you be obedient?” my girlfriend whispered with tears flowing down her face. I watched closely as their faces began to slowly vanish from thin air.

“No...no...” my broken voice softly begged. They disappeared, and the fire was the only thing that remained. The fire's light no longer revealed adjacent trees. The fire was my everything, my lifeline. But it was too late, and I watched the fire quickly sink lower towards the ground. The flames died off, and the red hot coals began losing their color. Within seconds, I was trapped within total darkness. I reached one hand down to where the fireplace was. The once burning red hot embers were now ice cold.

The devil's laughter grew louder and louder. The sound came from all around me. As I felt the beast's breath on my back, I weighed my options. I raised the gun up to my own head.

I was driving with the top down. The fall breeze was cold on my face, but my hiking jacket kept the rest of me warm. I was very excited to see my friends. We had this camping trip entirely planned out long ago. Finally it was time to enjoy the outdoors. My friends were already there. I would be meeting up with my girlfriend and a couple other friends from school. The trip would be minimal hiking, maximum relaxation. This was going to be a good trip.



Cicada
Yuthaphong Angsuworaphuek
Colored pencil on paper

Content Warning: This piece discusses sensitive topics

My Sweet Anna Bird

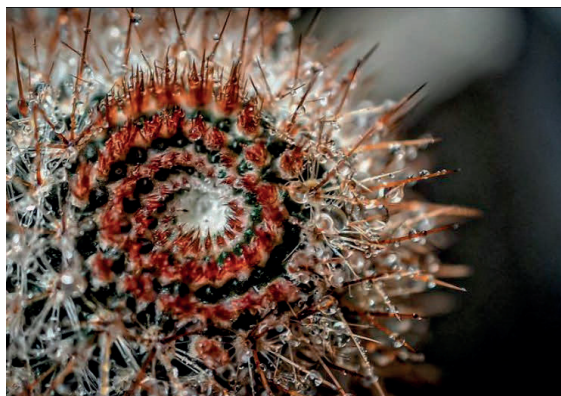
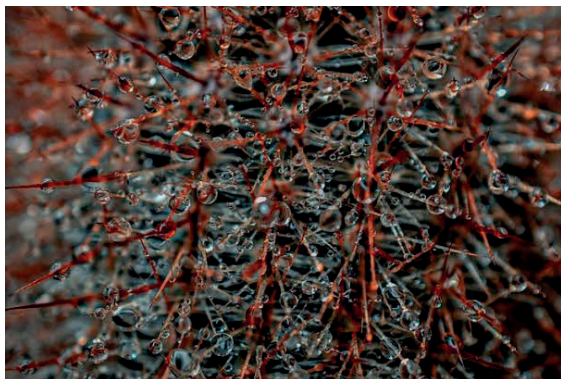
Grace Worth

As I stood underneath the kissing tree, waiting for Sweet Anna to arrive, my hands trembled with anxiety. I had passed a note to Sweet Anna from my AP chemistry class saying to meet me here, under the infamous kissing tree. I know she'll show up, she has to. She's the only girl in class that doesn't think I'm weird. Plus, she's as sweet as a freshly picked strawberry in summer. As she walked up, I greeted Sweet Anna with a wide toothy grin, taking note that she had switched her side part to a middle part and changed her once tickle-me pink nails, to a champagne pink hue. I once read in a popular teenage magazine that women like a dominant male. With that thought going through my head, I boldly told her that she was now my girlfriend. With her smile disappearing, she kindly said that she was in a relationship already and walked off, even though I knew she was single.

As I tried to comprehend what had just happened, my gaze fixated on a small songbird pecking at the ground. It started up with its wretched song of love that ached my heart. As it sang, my blood boiled and an unruly rage came over me. I snatched the bird off the ground with my hand, squeezing its small feathery body in my palm. As I grinded my teeth in rage, the bird said "I love you, Ethan" in Sweet Anna's voice. Taken aback, I loosened my grip on the bird, letting it stand unassisted on my hand. Again, in sweet Anna's voice, the bird said "Yes, I'll be your girlfriend. Let's go to your house". I grabbed my backpack off the ground and started home, talking to my Sweet Anna bird the whole time. I found out so much about her. What her favorite movie, ice cream, and color were. Boy, am I a lucky boyfriend.

As I got to the door, I hid her sweet little body in my sweater pocket so my mom wouldn't see. After all, I wasn't allowed to have girls in my room, especially one that loved me as much as she did. When I got to my bedroom, I took Sweet Anna out. I don't know what got into her, but she started frantically yelling "Help!". My heart started to race, and I didn't know what to do. I heard my mom call "Ethan, is there a bird in the house?". With that, I grabbed Sweet Anna bird by the neck and snapped it between my index finger and thumb, so she'd shut up. "Must be outside a window, mom," I called back.

The following afternoon, I excitedly walked home from school to talk to my girlfriend, Sweet Anna. As I stepped through the doorway, I heard my mom exclaim "Phew! What is that smell coming from your room?" I replied with a laugh, "Probably just my dirty laundry". My mom didn't believe me and walked into my room, searching for the source of this foul smell. I soon heard a blood-curdling scream coming from my room. I rounded the corner of my doorway to see my mom standing in front of my cupboard labeled "*My Trophies*". The cupboard was wide open and showed all my girlfriends on their labeled pedestals, including the newest one, Sweet Anna bird. Next to her was Giggly Laura bird, Emo Brittany bird, Clever Jenny bird, and my first love, Shy Katie bird. They all laid lifeless on their pedestal, waiting for me to come home to them. However, today, they unfortunately had to meet my mother.



Rain Macro Series
Carlos Claudio-Aparicio
Photography

Father
Olivia Keller

He carried me on his shoulders and held me as I cried.
He watched me play, full of pride.
He picked me up from school to get ice cream.
He kissed me goodnight and listened to my dreams.

He signed my forms and checked my grades.
He bought gifts and took me to Christmas parades.
He hugged and cuddled me, with all his might.
He said he would be back and then left in the night.

He returned years later when I was much older.
He was not welcome back at home, but he was closer.
He took me to eat, and we would go to shows.
He seemed to care, but only brought sorrows.

He lied and deceived, to get what he needed.
He got his way when tensions grew heated.
He went behind my back and through my stuff.
He needed all the power, he felt like a handcuff.

He said he loved me, with every bit.
He said it was for the best, and never quit.
He silenced my voice, so I couldn't be free.
He could not see; he was breaking me.

He felt me slipping away, so he pushed harder.
He denied and made excuses, but I got smarter.
His tricks and bribery were not working, he was stuck.
He knew I could not be controlled, I finally struck.

I took my things and left in the night.
I left for good, without a fright.
I ignored his cries and tried to hate him.
I hate myself instead, for the love I gave him.

Ghost stories
Eleanor Smedberg

There are things you're missing out on.
There are people I want you to meet.
I look a little more like you now
not on purpose, it just happens.

You're everywhere

And when it gets colder and more familiar and
I meet people that remind me
of how I remember you
it's haunting.

I had to block you

Great, yeah, you like ghosts. That doesn't
mean I admire your commitment to the
cause.



Guard

Sara Valenzuela

Black ink, drawing paper, carved Shina plywood

Content Warning: This piece discusses sensitive topics

The Room the Dogs are Scared of

Allan Bernal

To whom it may concern,

The following is my, Nikolai Kozlov's, confession. I will not shy away from the brutal nature of what I've done, but before speculating about any motives or feelings of mine, you may read this letter to at least understand why I feel no remorse.

Three decades ago, I was born in a worn-down brick house in the woods, far from town. In that brick house, there was a dusty spare room, empty save for handmade chairs and tables. But around my fifth birthday, my mother grew ill; her health never recovered after giving birth to me. My father moved an old creaky bed to that room so it could become her personal resting space. Whether sleeping apart was for his benefit or hers, I still don't know.

My mother's slow transformation into a malnourished collection of bones wrapped in skin terrified me. Her wheezing gasps for air crept underneath the wooden door, urging me to run from her. And so, I retreated, not even there for when her body finally collapsed in upon itself. After she died, my father went on a furious rampage to empty the room, with his own hand-crafted furniture being flung out, the crashing sound of the old wood giving way to his anger. Their marriage seemed stable at best, neither overly loving nor spiteful, so my father's fury exceeded what I thought he was capable of.

When my mother was alive and earning money in town, my father would invite me to spend time with him outside, gathering firewood or tending to the garden. I would've appreciated these outings more if my father hadn't punctuated them with complaints as to how I, a five-year-old at most, wasn't strong enough to keep up with him. He cheered when I lifted a log heavier than I was, but he turned his back to my instant pain and exhaustion from doing so.

These outings with my father ceased after my mother died. She was my source of education, so without her, I had nothing to do but try to read the books in the house. As the months went on, my father spent most of his time in the spare room and basement. He kept me away from him while he toiled, but our meals began to grow sparse as we had no income. With little happiness in my days, I became increasingly introverted, retreating away from a world I didn't bother to understand.

The dull siccence of the house was broken when a man came over with my father one day. I watched from a distance as they brought several dogs into the house via the basement door. I was stunned; we never had pets before and with no warning we now had several.

I ignored my father's command to stay out of the basement and I ran eagerly downstairs. To my surprise, at the bottom of the creaky stairs, I came face to face with a cage that stretched all the way to the ceiling. My father and the stranger were pushing the seven or so dogs into the cage as some barked and bit at each other.

Suddenly, one ran toward me. At this age, the dog was nearly as tall as I was, and before the leash could yank it away, I felt its breath viciously close to my face. I fell backwards onto the stairs, my mind frozen with fear.

My father laughed as he pulled the dog into the cage. “Don’t get too close, Nikolai, or you’ll save me the trouble of buying food for it!”

“It sure would be one less mouth to feed, Pyotr!” laughed the man next to my father.

I retreated swiftly back to my room, the sound of the barking and the two men laughing overwhelming me. The spare room mockingly loomed over me as I passed it to go to my room, taunting my small hope that whatever my father was working on was in any way something for me to enjoy. I went to bed and felt tears about to fall down my face.

I didn’t realize my father had followed shortly behind me, and before I cried, I turned and saw that he was holding a box.

“Niko, I’m sure I missed a birthday along the way, so I paid Sergei down there a little extra for you.”

He slowly turned the box onto the bed, and a small puppy came tumbling out. Its fur was short and gray, and its tail was wagging fast as he stumbled toward me. He climbed gingerly onto my lap and tried to stand to lick my face.

“Is – is he mine?” I asked nervously, my hands unsure of how to hold the puppy.

“You can follow in your old man’s footsteps now. Name him too, that’s your job, not mine.” And with that he turned to leave as the dog kept trying to climb on me to lick me. With his back turned, my father paused.

“Both of you stay away from that room there,” he said gravely, his hand gesturing down the hall toward the spare room. He walked away before I responded, thus ending the longest meaningful conversation we had in a while.

His name was Bean Boy.

My days went from trying to read complex books to all of a sudden caring for Bean Boy and playing with him. My father took interest as well, teaching me how to clean up after Bean Boy and then showing both of us how to play tug of war. “Don’t hold back, Nikolai, he’s gotta win it for real,” my father would say when we played.

My father never taught me the names of the other dogs; perhaps he didn’t name them. I stayed inside with Bean Boy as we watched my father from the window. He would run with one dog chasing behind him, then switch to tug of war using logs. Whenever a dog wandered toward the woods behind our house, he would yank its leash back. Bean Boy’s small tail wagged nonstop, but he never barked; I would pet his head tenderly every time I saw a dog yelp from getting choked on its leash.

Only one dog was allowed out of the basement at a time. I never laid a hand on the other dogs, their powerful jaws frightening me. However, Bean Boy didn’t share my fear as he always wanted to play with them. The same dog that lunged at me that first day enjoyed chasing Bean Boy and me. It too had gray fur like Bean Boy, but he had patches of white on his face like a mask, and when he chased us, I feared it felt more like a hunt for him than play for us. I frequently scooped up Bean Boy and

ran to my father for safety. That's why I called this dog Ruff – a fitting name I thought.

As Bean Boy and I slept in bed each night, we noticed a pattern. My father would leave the house with just one dog, with Bean Boy and I watching from the window above. We would fall asleep before they'd return, and after the first few times, I realized my father was in a good mood the next morning at the breakfast table. He would count up money as we ate, but as I shared my food with Bean Boy on my lap, my father's dogs were nowhere to be seen.

"Where's the dog you left with last night?" I finally asked, my curiosity finally overpowering my timidity.

My father didn't look me in the eye as he responded. "Resting downstairs. Let it be Nikolai."

I never ventured downstairs; truthfully, I was scared of Ruff, and I believed he could rally all the dogs to bark at me if he wanted to. So, I took my father's word and let the dogs rest.

I was shocked awake one night to hear my father returning home. He shouted something and I heard him thunder upstairs. I heard him go into the spare room, slamming the door behind him. I kept my ear pressed to the door, too nervous to leave my room, and Bean Boy sniffed under my door. Suddenly I heard a dog cry out like I had never heard before. I grabbed Bean Boy and hid under the covers the rest of the night. I forget if tears came to my eyes that night, but I remember Bean Boy's attempts at comforting me by licking my face before curling up next to my head.

My father was not in a good mood the next morning, evident by his choice of beer for breakfast. I said nothing of what I heard, and shamefully I didn't look at my father, instead focusing on Bean Boy chewing with his mouth open.

Because of the rotation of dogs, it took a while for me to finally see that one of the dogs now only had three legs. It was moving slower and more cautiously now; stunningly, it was even scared by Bean Boy's naïve growl asking to play.

"What happened to his leg?" I asked.

"Wasn't a good leg. I did it a favor." Again, no eye contact. And foolishly, I let the matter go, too timid to risk my father's anger, and worse, too scared of his dogs to earnestly care for them.

Not just once. Not twice. But for every single one of my father's dogs, this pattern repeated.

And I didn't do a single damn thing about it.

That night started like any other – Ruff was chasing Bean Boy and I again, his hobby unchanged even after losing a leg, but this time I ran upstairs to my room, daring to rush up the stairs instead of going to my father. I dared to peek back at Ruff, but he stopped chasing me when he reached the top of the stairs. With Bean Boy still in my arms, I cautiously walked back to see Ruff just standing there, staring at the spare room, eyes unblinking. As I walked closer to the room, he became agitated, making growling noises, his single front paw starting to scratch the stairs. With a glance toward me, almost asking me not to open it, Ruff whined then ran away back downstairs.

That was the last time I looked into Ruff's eyes alive.

I turned around toward the door, with Bean Boy's attention now diverted to it. His small tail beat against my chest, almost like a drum urging me on. It only now dawned on me that none of father's dogs ever came upstairs, and I decided to see why this room had the power to save me from Ruff. The door was heavy but unlocked, and with a push, it creaked open.

A dull light flickered from above, coming from a lamp dangling by a cord. Gone was the bed my mother must have drawn her last breath from; instead, a metal table dominated the middle of the room like an island. The smell of blood stung my nose, staining not only the floor around the table, but also on the garden shears in the corner of the room. Rusted chains laid dormant next to the shears, and a large dirt covered trash can loomed in the corner. Bean Boy jumped out of my arms and ran toward the trash can, happily sniffing something there. I chased after him, but not before he grabbed a large bone in his mouth, longer than he was. I snatched it out of his mouth, trying to leave in a panic.

As I grabbed Bean Boy and left, I saw a wood carving, etched with great detail to display a phrase, hanging above the doorway. I didn't focus on it then, but soon I would be reliving this night in my head over and over. Eventually the carved words became clearer, and it became apparent it was my father's own woodwork. Perhaps he stole the phrase from one of the dusty books I read in the house, remnants of a life he used to live, but of course I never asked. The illness that plagued my mother can't compare to the irreversible damage the damned phrase must have wrought upon my father's psyche.

"What Doesn't Kill Me Makes Me Stronger"

Safely in my room, under the covers with Bean Boy, I refused to think about the room. The ominous feeling could not leave me as I skipped dinner with Bean Boy, much to his whining disappointment. Before I knew it, night fell, with my father leaving with a dog again. I cuddled with Bean Boy, with him squeaking muffled barks in his sleep.

We heard my father return with a joyous exclamation in the kitchen. I forgot my fear of the room and went downstairs, Bean Boy following close. My father was drinking from a bottle with a large pile of money nearby. I didn't want to be around my father as he drank himself to sleep, so I turned away. As I headed back upstairs, I saw a figure through the window approaching the house. He seemed to be carrying something in his hands, covered in a dark blanket. I soon recognized him as the stranger from months ago, Sergei.

He let himself in the door as my father failed to lock it behind him. He towered above me with a grim expression on his face. Bean Boy went to go stand up against his leg, trying in vain to lick his face.

Sergei looked down upon me and spoke. "Tell your father not to leave his fuckin' mess behind," he said, dropping what he was holding.

It was Ruff. He hit the floor with a dull thud. He was covered in blood and gashes, his white mask ruined.

"Wh- wh- what-" I stammered.

"Finally got his fucking payoff. We all thought it was a gimmick at first, Pyotr and his little crippled underdogs. But all it took was a bunch of out of towners to fall

for the trick and bet high against the son of a bitch. Good for Pyotr,” he spat without an ounce of affection. And with that he turned and left into the night.

I fell to my knees next to Ruff and saw he was still breathing. And from there I just stopped moving. I sat there for at least half an hour, listening to the dog wheeze, my mind flashing back to the sounds of my mother behind the door. At some point, Bean Boy understood that his “brother” was not moving or responding to his attempts to play, and the puppy began licking Ruff’s face.

How naïve! How fucking naïve I was! On some level I always knew my father was hurting the dogs in some way, and now I knew that room was clearly connected to them losing a leg. But I thought – no I hoped – that my father and his dogs could remain in a separate world from Bean Boy and I, that I was allowed my own life and happiness. However, now, with Ruff dead in front of me, I realized every single dog in this house was at the mercy of my father, and I knew I had to do something about it.

I dashed down the basement stairs and opened the basement door leading to the backyard, the dark woods visible from the house. My heart was thrashing against my chest as I fumbled the nearby key toward the lock, the last step almost complete. And with a sudden click and swing, the large cage was open.

“Go!” I shouted, my adrenaline giving me the authority to command them. Without hesitation, they all rose on their three legs and bolted out of the house, heading straight for the woods.

But... how careless... Bean Boy with me the whole time, and in his excitement, he chased after his brothers. I ran helplessly after him as Bean Boy’s wagging tail moved further and further away from me than he had ever been.

But Bean Boy’s love for me pulled through as he turned around to look at me. I could feel myself about to call for him, but the house exerted its dark pressure on me. If Bean Boy was to stay with me, how could I possibly prevent my father from turning him into his next fighter? If I was naïve before by ignoring the dog fighting, then how could I let myself be naïve again and assume my father thought Bean Boy was off limits?

The tears came instantly, and instead of calling for Bean Boy to come back, I shouted “Go!” – or at least I tried to. I couldn’t bring myself to say such a thing, and all that left through my sobbing was a hoarse whisper. Bean Boy looked at me for the final time, tail still wagging, and then he followed his brothers into the darkness.

That was the last time I felt loved.

Considering why I’m writing this to begin with, it should come as no surprise that my father did not take kindly to my action that night. As soon as my father found out and grabbed me in a rage, I lost all hope of growing up decently. Through my tears and shouting, through his drunken fury, as he dragged me upstairs, I was losing the only hope of being someone else, someone who wouldn’t grow up to mutilate his father into pieces.

You see, my father simply wanted to do me a favor. To make me stronger. Now, when you see me in person, with the eyes of a killer and my own leg missing, maybe you agree and consider me stronger. On that night, my father knew of no better way to force the weakness out.

And so, my father took me into the room the dogs were scared of.



Foxy
Alana McCarthy Light
Paint on cardstock

Content Warning: This piece discusses sensitive topics

Concrete

Alana McCarthy Light

Reflective sound barriers bounced noise off the sides of the whiplashing superhighway that emerged in December of 2070. Following the Last War, a community of burnouts hid within one of the roadside walls. Outside, the rush of commuters orchestrated a blend of distant beeping, creaking, and screaming. The sound barrier, a concrete fence conducting its business invisible to those focused on their travels, warranted the vagabonds to practice introspection.

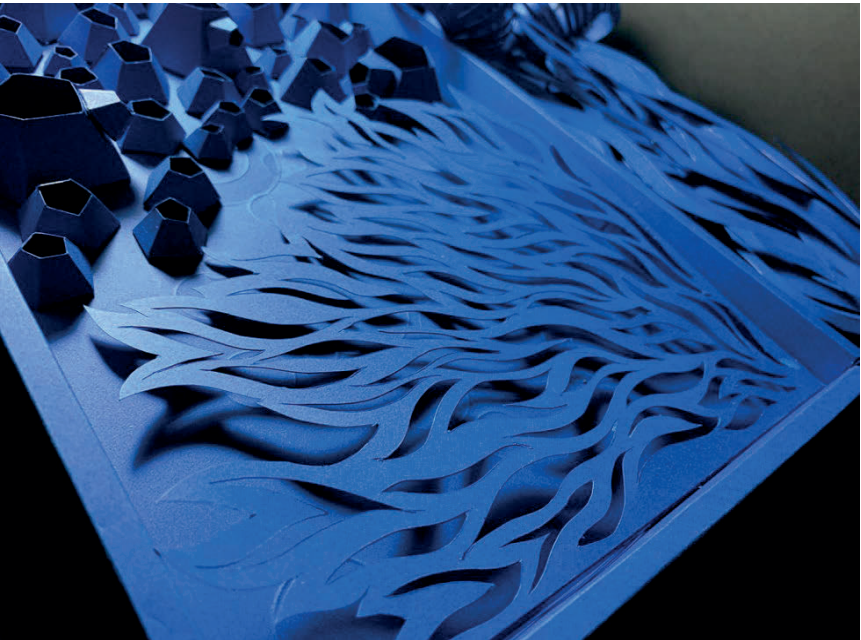
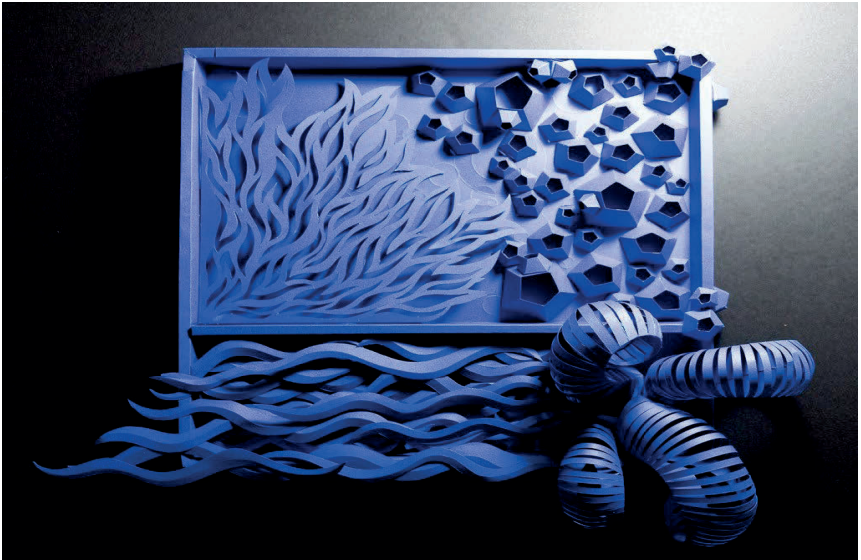
Vamoose, a sensitive writer who settled within the haven one week after its conception, amused the lean, mean, poor, and war-torn bunch through leading discussions on life after war, as the population settled rarely dispersed from their oasis. Prior to serving, Vamoose wrote a self-help book that sold thousands of copies online. Vamoose followed an unconventional philosophy of valuing inaction for the sake of grace and wrote his book about such. After he spent his earnings on arranging his own motivational speaking tour, he joined the army as a medical writer; his tour, nor career, did not come close to matching the success of book selling.

Today's session grew rather aggressive. The rhetorician posed an unpopular question: "What if we took a trip out of the sound barrier?" which led into a shouting match. One construction man living in the concrete enclosure suggested a scenic hiking trail an exit away. The outrage abased his idea. Another member of the population, a welder, kept fiddling with his non-pierced earlobe.

Suddenly, the industrial ambience of the superhighway ceased, at least in Vamoose's ears. He began remembering a time during the war where he got so intoxicated on a patient's painkillers that he thought he had no ears. After throwing a can of green beans at the nearest group member upon this reverie, Vamoose knew they would not have a trip. Vamoose regretted using the term "trip" but abhorred the words "getaway" and "vacation."

Vamoose pressed his hands together as the memory crashed and the tide of life happening flowed back into him. He felt tension in the cramped room as the conversation shut down and Vamoose combed his fingers through his vulture black short hair. He knew he could not make any of the people feel a certain way, especially if he could not control his own emotions. Vamoose stared at the concrete and it stared back at him.

Finally, a tow truck driver, in such a rush, crashed himself into the sound barrier as acid rain deluged. Everyone involved died.



Inundated
Jessica Hunter-Hinsvark
Cardboard, cardstock, glue

The Frontlines of the Forgotten

Anonymous

You are born with no guaranteed responsibilities besides fighting for your survival. A burden you owe not to mother nature, God, or even yourself, but one you owe to your ancestry. You are the result of millions of years of natural selection. You are at the cutting edge of biological perfection. Hundreds of thousands of people have lived and died to spread the bloodline that you were eventually born into. The unnamed ones from far in your past are coursing through your blood and battling by your shoulders. You stand tall at the forefront of the forgotten. You walk through life alongside your forebears with power. You fight upon this battlefield of life with a tectonic rage, passion, and pride. You are at the center of the universe, at the brink of time, with a responsibility you take deeply personally.

Reaction System

Rifka Handelman

You walk. They could have found a car or truck without electronics, but you'd said not to bother—it's only a few miles anyway. The helmet creates a bubble of dead air around your ears, but you can still hear the sounds of crickets and songbirds in the autumn air. They molded the boots to your feet, so you feel as though you walk in a pair of your own shoes. Being the only volunteer like this seems to have its perks. A government pension, medical care for all the cancer your body's going to produce, and nice boots. Probably psychiatric help too—you overheard one of the medics talking about how you have a death wish.

You didn't bother to explain that it's not a death wish—it'll take years for your painful death, probably. But that medic had been polite and conversational, without a hint of pity or asking about your family or friends, when he'd handed you the anti-emetics and watched you choke them down, so you'd been nice in return.

The anti-emetics are for any bodies you might see. Your suit can't have any electronics, so it's just layers and layers of radiation shielding packed together as tight as the technicians could force it. Plus the best air filter that money and government secrets could buy, so it's best if you don't gum that up by hurling. You're likely to see bodies—if you don't, something far stranger is going on. But an absence of a death wish doesn't mean a life-wish, so whatever happens, you'll be fine. That's why you volunteered, isn't it?

You keep your pace measured, though your burning curiosity pulls you forward. Your postdoctoral supervisor would have been giddy about this. Not just a nuclear disaster, not just experimental fission-fusion techniques, but one that shuts down any cameras that come near it. All they can tell from satellite imagery is that the building itself seems intact. You'll be the first to lay eyes on it. That supervisor would have been jumping up and down like a little kid at this chance, and part of you wants to too.

It's strange how unaffected the surrounding landscape seems. You remember, abruptly, seventh grade biology. Closed systems versus open ones. You understood the difference, but it seemed to you that nothing could be a closed system. Everything takes up space, moves, gives and takes with the environment around it. A river feeds the plants around it, exchanges amphibians at the bank, drinks from the rain.

Perhaps it had been a matter of *how much*. At that point, you were fond of—or perhaps compelled into—envisioning the darkness leaking out from under your skin, forming tendrils and tentacles that choked your friends to death. Superimposed across their face you would see bulging eyes and dying gasps, from a tentacle around their neck or a poisoned thorn in their vein. You would shake yourself out of it, literally shiver yourself away from the vision, and remind yourself to pull that darkness under your skin and imprison it. Close the bad parts of the system, be closed *enough*.

You can't listen to music—no electronics—but you're finding a reflective emptiness in the silence of the helmet surrounded by the whispers of the grass. In front of you, the power plant comes into view, a silent structure of metal and concrete. You pause. Here's something strange—a vivid flower among the grass. You familiarized yourself with local flora and fauna in the weeks leading up, and this is something you've

never seen before. You have the urge to pick the flower and take it with you, but you control yourself.

You don't see anything else unusual until you come to the building itself. You turn left towards the maintenance door that only needs a single key to open, and you realize the ground is subtly sunken-in. There's a shallow slope that falls to the concrete wall, and it's uneven, like hands grabbed at it from the inside and *yanked*. Tiny plant roots poke out of the cracks and holes in the ground.

Oddly, this makes you feel a little better. What has happened inside has affected the outside. But you can still put the key into the maintenance-door's lock and step into the building itself, the hallway that will lead you to the reactor room. It's a consistency your organized mind appreciates.

You're met with a body. A woman dressed in a mechanic's jumpsuit, her body sprawled on the floor. She's facedown, so she looks like she's sleeping, but her back doesn't rise or fall. You still nudge her with your boot—as you ought—and of course, she doesn't wake.

You realize how long it's been, and that her body ought to have rotted by now. You inhale and smell only the scent of the air filter, but that's all you would smell—from the way her flesh sprang back after your touch, you know her body's intact. Too intact.

Your stomach flips and your gag reflex rises, but the drugs suppress your urge to throw up. They don't suppress the fear that you drop into like a missing step. You're frozen. Irrationally, your mind babbles. It tells you how this dead woman looks like your best friend from college. She doesn't really, because dead people don't look like anyone, and it's not like you can see her face. She looks like your friend who you—

With a firm hand and a touch just gentle enough to work, you calm the fear and the memories. You pull your shoulder blades towards one another. You focus on the silence around you, and continue through the hallway.

It leads you to a landing on an unlit staircase, and you remember what they'd instructed you—go up, up to the catwalks, to get a lay of the land. No telling what's below. Probably nothing but radiation and dead equipment, but only probably.

When you step out onto the metal walkway, your footsteps get less echoey in the opened space. You look above you to the skylights in the ceiling—unbroken and letting the sun through, the electric lights next to them dark and dead. It lets you see the next body, slumped against the railing, another technician. But since you calmed the fear of the first one, this one has—will have—less of a grip on you. Or at least, you'll keep the fear safely underneath your skin. You pass the body by and get a good look at the complex.

Below you, at ground level, are the arms and cranes and lifts, wheeled metal carts. The sunlight from above clashes strangely with the blue light from the Cherenkov radiation in the water, and you can't tell what colors things are. You know the physics of this, have studied it for years, but it's not quite making sense. You can make out bodies, in a strange pattern—and you feel yourself go still. It looks like they tried to run from the reactor. You want to vomit again, and the sensation pools in your body like dirty water, coating you in residue.

You could leave. This is strange and unsettling, and what you've seen would be enough for them. They could send in someone else. You see the stairs that will bring you to ground level.

As you take the first step, you remember. You were in her car, sitting in a parking lot, just talking, and she'd taken her hair out of its bun. As it fell over her face, you looked away. You put every single ounce of effort you had into remaining perfectly still and calm, into not observing the way it tangled with the necklace draped across her collarbone, and to keep talking.

You're at the bottom of the stairs and you realize that like the ground outside, the floor is uneven, like it's decayed or been pulled at. You weren't privy to what they were doing here, you only know that it was experimental and new—and dangerous—and none of your years of research offer up any hint. The bodies point out, and you fight against them, a battle of death and life, and you pick your way toward the reactor pool, blue and—undulating. It's *moving*.

You can't calm it this time. Meaningless words bubble to your lips, a subvocalic murmur of fear that you can't externalize as fast as you generate it, the way the words *can I kiss you* burst out the second she couldn't hear and left behind a silence so profound you fell into a buzzing void of noise.

You stumble towards the reactor pool. You feel it in the air, in the ground that you realize is shaking, the desire and fear. It doesn't speak words or feelings, just pushes the buttons of your endocrine system until you feel every emotion at once, without room for a single thought. It's *so loud*.

The death-water, ready to unravel your DNA, closes over your head.

She said, "I've been avoiding you."

You said, "Why?"

She said, "I know you're in love with me."

You knew she was going to say that and you still experienced the roar of water filling your ears.

She said, "I don't love you back."

You said, "I know." You said, "You read every feeling I have like an open book." You said, "I know if you loved me back, you would know to tell me."

The reactor fed on the thing, and when it got to be too much, the something awoke. It didn't know what to do, once awake. It scabbled and scraped at the innards of the world, breaking the skin.

She said, "It took me a while to realize."

You said, "I tried to keep it inside."

She said, "It doesn't go away."

You said, "You think I don't know that?"

She said, "Yeah, I guess you would."

You keep your mouth closed, your eyes shut, as you sink through the water. The water pokes itself through the seals in your suit. But the radiation's been there all along. There's no such thing as a closed system, not really. Just closed enough, enough for a few more years of life. It all ends the same anyway.

She moved as if to hug you, and the last time you'd hugged her like you didn't want to let go, and she stopped. She said, "Goodbye." It echoed through the walls of you and couldn't get out.

Snow Dream
Theodore Frantz

Cars crashing together.
Twisted metal. Broken frames.
The highway littered with small shards of
something greater whole.

No one stares.
Here, cars crash
like the sun
rises.

Daily, BAM!
Here comes an end.
The next, the next,
the next...

4a.m.
Winter is hard
outside the window. The sky
is empty. I think the stars
forgot me. It's
okay.

...

I think I might
be rotting here. Or,
maybe, I already did. Is there
really any difference between
my breath, the wind, the
soft rush of
snow...

All of it blends. Ice
melts and mixes with road
gravel and mountain soil and
crumpled up litter before partially
refreezing. It makes mud.
Everything is mud.
Nothing grows.

Maybe everything else
is rotting with me, too. Maybe
everything else is already gone.
I wish... I wish something
could have stayed.

Anything, anything...

Look.

The snow sticks. But
the house next to mine
left the porch light
on at night.

In the hallway,
through the crack
in the black out curtains,
I can see that light, blinking
hi, hello, we are here, too.
Maybe the night is long.
The sky is wide.

But we
are here
too.

I know that
I'm haunting you.
I'm sorry.

But can't you feel?
The hotel parking lot
was engraved in my skull.
A wood etching that I'm trying to
scratch out, but the gouges just
keep going deeper, deeper,
deeper, and still...

There's a
hole in my head
that's leaking nicotine

and sea salt. Can't
you hear it?
Listen.

It goes:
drip, drip, drip.
Cancer equals love. Or
something. Hold your breath
if you don't like it, because
The windows will
stay shut.

It goes:
something about love.
Or, maybe, something about drowning.
No one's told me what the difference is.
I ask, but people only tell me that
no one ever drowns.

So.

Drip, drip, drip.

Enough on drowning.
Spring again. Spring... God.
Again. I want something
just to grow.
Please.

Sometimes...

I like to think
that they would keep
that light on
for me.