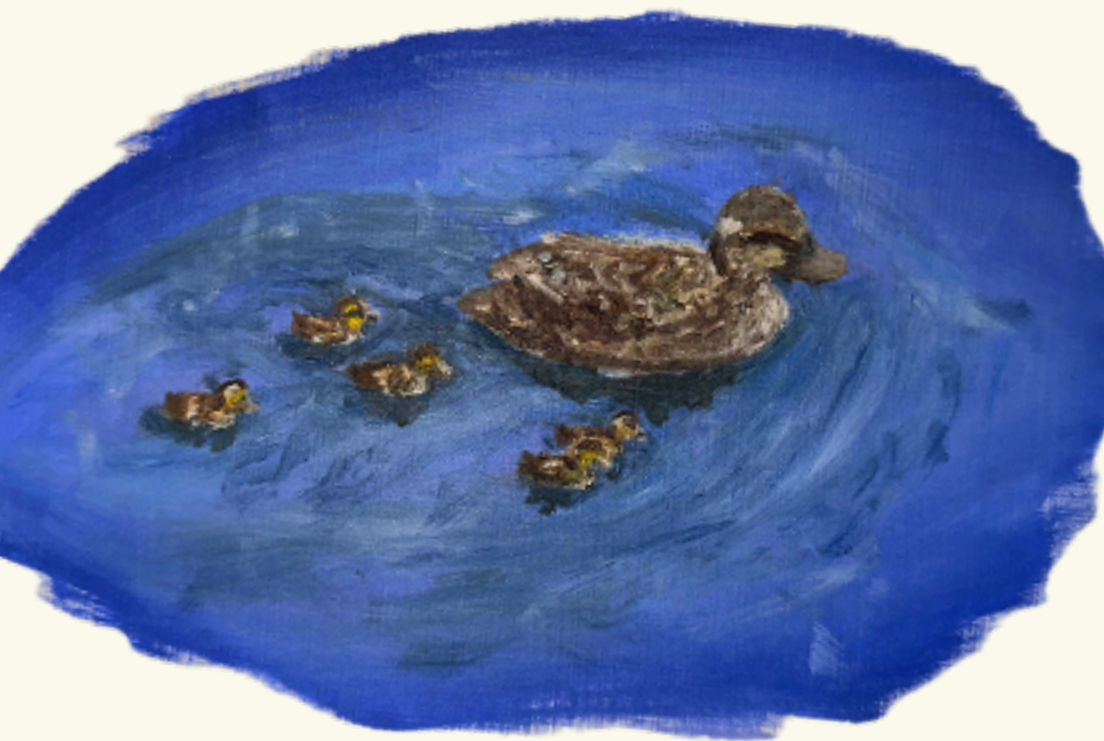




lumière

issue 11



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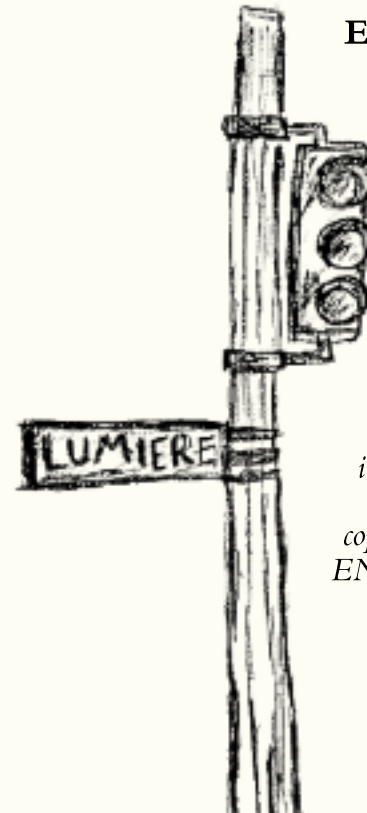
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MISSION STATEMENT

lumière is here to be the flashlight of your literary and artistic shenanigans. If you've got some wonder, tantalize our eyes and oil up our brain gears; help us showcase your super-duper, unique expression, passion, awesomeness, and authenticity. Our goal is to produce an inclusive and diverse platform that illuminates the creative work of MassBay's students, faculty, staff, and members of the larger community.

Letter to the Editor

One for Me, Just in Case

by Gabriela Moreno

I decided I wanted to be a writer during the fever dream of what I generously refer to as pre-puberty.

To be specific: I had just finished the second installment of the Harry Potter series (*Chamber of Secrets*, in case you were wondering, the one with the giant spider which, for the record, was completely unnecessary) and I had to face two of the worst possible scenarios: (1.) I had missed my Hogwarts letter. Considering I was already 13 at the time, the owl was clearly not coming. I checked. There was also no customer service number anywhere in the books, which felt like a significant oversight on Dumbledore's part. Or, (2.) I was a Muggle.

I sat with both options for a reasonable amount of time, and the second one, the one I reluctantly chose to believe, was the one that stuck. Which was fine. Mostly. I was fine.

Here is what being fine looked like:

After facing my own version of the "Santa's not real" debacle, where my hold on a magical world faltered and I shattered it on my own, in my purple-painted bedroom with one broken window (from that time I convinced myself I could do artistic dancing by using belts and accidentally smashed the window), I had a decision to make.

I could grieve Hogwarts. Or I could conclude that if JK Rowling (who I will not be taking questions about at this time) was also a Muggle, then even as a Muggle, she had created magic, because there was no other explanation for what those books did to me. To be swept off my feet, carried away into a world completely different than mine, and made to feel. That was no ordinary feat. That was not Muggle shit. That was real wizard shit.

So on a random Tuesday, at the ripe age of 13, I announced: *Mom, I want to be a writer.*

I didn't know what to expect. Maybe part of me hoped she'd smile the way she would have if the Hogwarts letter had actually arrived—that particular brand of proud that only magical news deserves. Instead she looked at me the way people look at someone who has just said something both sweet and catastrophically naive, and said:

"Be prepared to be broke like me, then."

I know. I know. The broke artist speech, delivered to every wide-eyed dreamer since the beginning of time, usually by someone who loves them and is terrified for them in equal measure. Tale as

old as time, but when you grow up hearing, "Work with what you love and you'll never work a day in your life," you start paying attention to the things you love. I loved writing. It seemed simple enough. She had a point. Money, as it turns out, is very useful. I did not have any.

Here's the thing: when you grow up poor, you learn from a very early age that money is the solution to all of one's problems. At that age, I already understood that if we weren't poor, my mom would have hugged me and bought me a beginner's guide for aspiring writers. Found the only creative class my small town offered, probably held in someone's living room on Saturdays.

And maybe, depending on exactly how un-poor we were, I'd have gone to a private school. Where all I had to worry about was to study all day so I could get into a very good college for Creative Writing. Then, my natural talents would emerge like a flower that had been watered, sun-bathed, and cared for her entire life until this very, very moment: blooming precisely on schedule, as flowers in rich soil tend to do.

I'd get a job at a publishing house. Something small, something tasteful, an assistant, maybe, with a tote bag and strong opinions about fonts. I'd be surrounded by creatives until my best friend encouraged me to finally submit that one story I'd been working on. In my spare time. Which I'd have plenty of. Since I wouldn't have to work for money.

I'd spent hours a day practicing for interviews I'd give about the book I was about to release while washing dishes. I learned English, on my own, all for this: to be an international bestseller someday. I'd be sitting across from Ellen DeGeneres (when she was still considered "cool"), and when someone asked me, "What do you do for work?" I'd simply say: I'm a writer. An author. A storyteller.

But the more I told people, the clearer the message became: to be a writer, you basically had to be the Michael Jackson of writing. The undisputed greatest. A living legend. Preferably already famous. Anything less and you might as well not bother. Nobody said this outright, of course. They just got that look. You know the one, and I was none of these things. I was a kid from a small town in São Paulo with a broken bedroom window and a banged up Windows 98.

So I adjusted.

I was never overly ambitious though. I didn't need to be the next JK Rowling with her seven book deal, motion picture, a whole line of overly expensive merchandise, and an army of die-hard fans. No, I was content with having at least one good story to tell. I'd adjust my expectations diligently: one story I'm proud of, with my name on the cover. One I can spot at the library or a bookstore and say: hey, that's me.

But I grew up poor. That means that in my public school there was never creative writing—in fact, my literature teachers made sure to squash any creative liberties I ever tried, my essays needing to be perfectly divided into five cohesive paragraphs or nothing. In addition, that summer my mom had arranged for me to start babysitting my cousin after school for a little money, so she didn't have to spend the little she had on futile things like that sweatshirt I liked or the books I so longingly stared at in the one bookstore at the mall. I knew every title in the window by heart because looking was free.

After that summer, at 13 years old, I never stopped working.

I'm not telling you this so you can feel sorry for me. This is not an exclusive story. It's not even the worst version of itself, but you asked me what creating means to me—and for you to truly understand the answer, you need to know where the question was born. You need to know about the broken window and the five paragraph essays and the one bookstore at the mall. You need to know what it costs to keep a dream alive when nobody around you has the resources to help you keep it.

So. Where were we?

As time passed I ate books like air, always being the first to raise my hand for a library run and proudly walking out with a thick book with no pictures at all. I studied how writers told their stories on my own, finding patterns and tropes before I even knew they weren't accidental.

And finally, I decided I wanted to write my own story.

It was a silly thing involving a main character who was just naturally good at everything. Unforgettable laugh. Good hair. Enormous house. Many, many friends, all of them hot, popular, and at least a little bit in love with her.

But she was in love with Sam. Sam, who was taller than all the other boys. Sam, who had a dimple and a curl that kept falling over his eyes, giving him this habit of brushing his fingers through his hair, slowly, repeatedly, with the kind of casual confidence that only boys named Sam seem to possess. Sam, who caused a major and sustained storm of butterflies in my main character's heart every single time he did it.

I was 13. Sam was everything. It felt like literature. It felt like an F in Literature.

Even then, 13 years old, writing a story I knew wouldn't make the *Times* bestsellers, I came back to that Windows 98 every single day. With the eagerness and seriousness of a child convinced they would someday go to the moon. Nothing was as serious as this. Not school. Not babysitting. Not the very practical concerns my mother had been trying to install in me since that random Tuesday.

This was *mine*. Not mine like a hobby, mine like a door. A door to a world I had built myself, brick by brick, where I made the rules and I knew every corner and I could stay as long as I wanted. My playground. The one place nobody could tell me to write in five cohesive paragraphs.

I will never forget the feeling of having a story to tell for the first time. The ecstasy of re-reading a scene and seeing it in my head so clearly, like being there. The characters—my characters—being fleshed out right in front of my eyes. My fingers punching the yellowish keyboard of that Windows 98, the fumes of the computer burning through my lungs and pushing me down and down into the spiral: the tornado that is to create. I became addicted to it. To the simple act of creation. To the immense, delicious tension of feeling my horizons expanding inward, to places I had never seen but that brought with them the constant ache of homesickness that no sleepover had ever threatened me with.

I realized it then: this too was magic.

This became clearer when I had my first heartbreak. Not the classic school crush, but the gut punch it was to get home from school with a storm in my stomach and a tornado of ideas in my brain only to find out that my mother had taken my very old but capable computer in to be fully wiped. It was as though she had reached into my world and pulled my characters out by the roots and disposed of them with a shrug. My mom, who was overworked and overwhelmed, could not understand the urgency only a 13-year-old attaches to a computer.

But like any heartbreak, we get over it while simultaneously swearing to never fall in love again, and after three days of silent treatment towards my mom, I eventually found my way to writing. Turns out, for me, to write was as vital as to breathe.

By the time I had to declare a major, the pressure to make money had only expanded: larger and louder with every passing year, the way debt does, the way doubt does, the way everything does when you grow up poor and the world keeps reminding you that passion is a luxury and rent is not.

I went with Law. Everyone said, "If you like to read and write so much, you'd make a good lawyer." At seventeen you don't really know what a lawyer does, but my mom had that glint of pride in her eyes, the one I had been looking for since that random Tuesday, so maybe this was growing up.

Turns out, the Brazilian Constitution was the single worst text I had ever had the displeasure of encountering. I say this with full respect for Brazilian democracy and absolutely none for its syntax.

It was hard to make peace with that. If I was a writer, shouldn't I be able to push through anything? That could only mean one thing:

I was never meant to be a writer. I filed this conclusion under facts and moved on. Psychology. Digital Marketing. Preschool teacher. Each one a very sincere attempt to find something that felt like magic without the inconvenient vulnerability of actually making art. Each one confirming, quietly and without drama, that none of them gave me life the way writing did.

None of them were magic. Magic is a delicate thing in the ever-constant busy hands of an adult: we can't afford to believe in it once we figure out that writing okay poetry for your Tumblr won't pay for food, or your little brother's anxiety medication. So you bury it. I buried it thoroughly, methodically, with adult logic and adult disappointment. I filed the writer under delusion and moved on. An ego thing. A way to overcompensate being giftless in a gifted world.

Yet still, despite the war I waged against my writer, there's a particular stubbornness to a dream that won't die: it doesn't announce itself, or beg; it just sits there in the corner of every wrong career you try, watching, waiting, occasionally clearing its throat.

When I found out my poem had been chosen to be published, I called my mom. Sobbing. She had told me, on a random Tuesday when I was 13, to be prepared to be broke. She wasn't wrong about that. But she couldn't have known that one day I would be calling her, unable to speak, because someone had chosen my words out of a sea of others and decided they were worth keeping.

I called her again when I found out the poem had placed third in a competition. *I, who had never won anything at all, had won something with the very thing I loved the most. I, who would have traded every compliment about my eyes or my nails or my smile to hear just once: your writing changed something in me.*

In these moments, sitting with the silence of it, I can't help but feel the weight of every version of myself it touched. Not just this one, but the 13-year-old at the Windows 98. The 15-year-old publishing under someone else's name. The 18-year-old who learned that the most honest parts of yourself can be turned into someone else's punchline. All of them, somehow, in that phone call with my mom.

If I had never submitted it, would I be writing this to you now? Would I know, the way I know it now, what writing means to me?

And now that I know, what will I do with it?

And then there was the matter of holding it. I walked into the packed cafeteria at MassBay, shyly, clumsily introduced myself, and asked if I could get three copies of the magazine. One for me, one for my mom, and another for me—just in case I lost the first one.

I was teary eyed and shaking. The weight of the magazine in my hands felt realer than anything in a long time. I flipped to page 15.

There. My name. *"Ah, the American Dream," by Gabriela Moreno.*

It might seem silly, crying like that, under fluorescent lights, foldable tables and hors d'oeuvres, surrounded by people completely unaware that at that very moment, a 13-year-old was seeing for the first time that she had created something real. That maybe, even when I'm gone, this magazine, with my name on it, my words on it, my world on it, might be washed ashore someday. And someone who is wondering if there's any good at all in believing in magic might, for a second, ask it twice.

Not a writer-writer. Not the Michael Jackson of writing, sitting across from whoever replaced Ellen. Not the *Times* bestseller list. Not even the library or the bookstore.

Page 15. Hey. That's me.

And maybe, somehow, I might still be magical, after all.





View of Pleasant Mountain from Moose Pond
by Cat Glidden

Hydrophobia

by Leo Fitzwilliam

“Bye.”

“Love you.”

You close the door, flip the lock, and I am left to face the brisk October dawn alone. I begin the short trek to my car.

I loved yesterday, even though I wasn’t at my best. Even though I clung to you like a child when we walked through Stop and Shop so I could pick up Hot Pockets and a bottle of coffee for the morning.

“Can we hold hands?”

“No,” you said, grabbing mine.

I even liked the seedy little Dollar Tree we popped into. The one where everyone kind of kept their heads down and darted their eyes away as if an armed robber would barge in at any minute, and we’d have to take cover behind the carts and loose shelves cluttering the aisles. Every day with you felt like an adventure, and adventures are so rare now. It made me fall in love with this pretty little world you live in.

I remember that first day I drove down, the open Atlantic playing peekaboo around every skinny duplex flanking the waterfront. Being so close to the water was like coming face-to-face with the edge of Oblivion. A brief, panicked instinct surged through me: to race up the nearest mountain as fast as my crappy SUV would let me. But we managed to pick the one comfortable day that week, so I let it wash over me, like a gentle wave lapping at the shore. And the water winked at me playfully, welcoming, with its dark, sparkling eyes.

Like you do, in my dreams.

I knew I’d eventually have to overcome my fear of water. You told me you wanted to be a marine biologist when you were little.

Downtown, surrounded by buildings of patchwork brick. Cobblestone pavement that was so useless, you said, so impractical that they only did it for one block. One of the many snapshots of New England that I rarely get to witness, but still somehow feels like home. We ducked into that bubble tea shop you promised to take me to because I had never had bubble tea before. They’ll probably never sell the banana pudding one again, but I’d drive the forty-odd miles just to check.

One of my favorite moments with you was walking to the little ice cream shop you worked at. Such a beautiful route you get to walk, despite the dark tavern at the end of the block, where you said

the cops get called every other night. The salty breeze lapping at my cheeks, the dozens of warm lamps lining the path. I wouldn't mind living here if it came down to it.

Then, on the mountain of rocks tumbling down from the walkway overlooking the cove, watching a ship dock over a mile away, the next town over. You had a strawberry shortcake sundae: fluffy yellow cake, luscious whipped cream, and velvety strawberry syrup that looked so sweet that the typical tartness actually surprised me. Who knows what I got? You made the better choice.

And you opened up just a little bit more. You told me why even just talking about weed made you anxious and why your dad wasn't in your life anymore, why you couldn't answer some of my questions when your mother was around. And you had to pretend we were talking about something else when we made it back to your place because your stepfather was smoking on the front porch.

I decided then that, if this were it, I would suffer tsunamis for you.

I play it all back as I round the corner towards my vehicle. I love this time of day, but now it feels even more thrilling: the early morning chill wafting in from the sea, gripping me firmly by the arm; the world tinted indigo, turquoise, as the sun begins to approach the horizon; the streetlights towering above interrupting the blue with a hazy spray of orange.

I could get used to this.

My car is right where I left it, where you said you had never seen anyone come out or go in, so it was okay to park there. I go to put my drinks in the cupholders, but I quickly realize I'm missing something. I left my coffee in your room.

So, I text you, and you don't answer.

I call, but you don't pick up. It was five in the morning, after all.

I briefly consider finding a rock to throw at your window—like they do in the movies—but I don't know which window is yours. It could be behind the fence, but besides, your AC is still wedged in there. I almost work up the nerve to shout up to you, but I don't want to wake the locals. I don't want to meet your crazy upstairs neighbor you told me about who got her son taken away by DCF every month or two.

But maybe I should have. I could have seen you one last time, because I think that *was* the last time.

No more balmy, late summer nights; no more fun local food. No more hopes of moving to L.A. and making it in the industry together.

"But we can still be friends!"

Why, so I can watch you float away on a romantic cruise with someone better as I drift endlessly, alone, in an ocean of fruitless fantasies? I'd rather drown.

And you even wondered why exes never stay in touch. Even after you threw me in the same chumbucket as your parents.

A song came on once, not long after: "If I'd known you couldn't swim, we would never have gone in." That's when I realized you were the buoy, and I was so afraid to drown that I held you under.

I know it rained the other times I came over, but I think you saw a hurricane where there was only distant thunder. Now, I have to mind the great distance between us as we stay just outside each other's periphery. I don't have time to play by the ocean anymore or get over my lifelong fears. I'm too busy in my landlocked world, my back turned towards the sea, gazing over the mountains at the *real* cities just beyond the Berkshires.



stuck.

by Stephanie Coyle

I saw you everywhere:
in old, green Toyota hatchbacks,
the futon in your basement,
poorly hung backyard zip lines;
plywood treehouses,
pianos,
violins;
dirty white sneakers and that faded red polo shirt,
tall, lanky teenage boys with pooka necklaces,
foxlike eyes,
a smirk.

I was stuck.

in the culmination of limerence;
the years I hunted you in hallways,
the constant bump between classes,
in the angling of my body
so you could see what you wanted,
all that I thought I had to offer.

I wanted you for years,
so I pushed the boundaries of your girlfriends
when they weren't looking,
even when they were.
I brushed your hand
because you let me.

I wanted you even when you
hurt my friends,
took off her clothes when she said no,
showed no remorse for getting what you wanted
with saccharine smiles and softly pitched excuses.



When I finally had you, I was
victorious
delirious
overjoyed
and so were you
for all the wrong reasons.
Your wide smile that didn't sit right,
nimble fingers that worked quicker than my mouth,
a push to the bed without even a kiss,
silence when I begged for just a glance,
convenient deafness and
indifference to my tears
when I told you to leave.

I finally said goodbye,
but I felt bad enough
that I took the train to see you
one last time.
You took my backpack and stormed off
through Copley and the Esplanade
almost too fast for me to follow,
a last attempt to bind me to you.
You finally sat on the wall
outside of the Boylston stop,
feigned tears illuminated by the AMC lights across Tremont.
You asked me where I was sleeping,
showed a flicker of irritation when I had somewhere to go,
and the next morning
bought me pancakes and offered to pay
as if you could change my mind.
You laid with me in the grass in Copley Square
while we watched frisbees fly through dappled sunlight.
When my train arrived, you cried.

I still didn't know if your tears were sincere
but mine were.
I cried all the way back to Providence
but didn't let myself feel your absence
after that.

Then—

the pus pushed through the scar
I thought long healed.
You wormed your way back into my subconscious,
even though I pushed you down for years.
I tried to untangle you,
tried in vain to scrub you from the folds of
my memories.

I got high once
and I thought about you,
how you treated me
like a nuisance,
unimportant.
I made the mistake of asking you,
25mg deep;
I told you I felt worthless
so you said you were sorry
but that you looked back on us fondly.

Fondly?

My brain didn't understand
but my body did.
It realized,
long before the world had formed.



Oblivion



by Nasta Martyn



View
by Kimi

Tomorrow I will upload all those videos to that flash drive
 I'll delete all my photos and erase myself from online
 I'll pick up one of those unread books
 that just keep stacking up

Tomorrow
by Dani Joseph

I'll quit my job
 I won't give them a warning, just won't show up for my shift
 I'll delete Slack and block their contacts
 I'll text my boss it isn't working between us
 It's me, not her

I'll throw out all the expired things
 food,
 makeup,
 that can of soup from 2018
 I'll replace it all
 or most
 Whatever I can afford with this week's pay

I'll leave the north
 Take a train to to the south and enjoy the heat
 I'll get back on the train and end up right where I began
 and remember that heat intolerance is not something to mess around
 with

I'll drag them to rehab
 Pretend to need it
 Attend the meetings, follow the steps
 I'd recover from the addiction without them

I'll go back to church
 Cut my hair and become an altar boy
 Spend my days
 Standing
 Sitting
 Standing
 Kneeling
 Sitting
 Kneeling.

Tomorrow I will go to work.



Looking In

by Zoe Anderson

visitor by Emilie Frechette

Our bodies are meant for seasons
These feelings are just visitors
Most things are fleeting
But some things, some things
Stay

I still think of what you did
It's strange to me
That time has passed
Because a part of my heart went dormant
It hasn't beaten since

(Is that piece a token for you)

And to know that I have never even touched you
How unfair is that

(Was it really that bad
If I miss it)

Our bodies are meant for seasons
And winter has come around,
I see your face in every strangers
(I wonder if you even remember mine)

These feelings are just visitors
But you have overstayed your welcome
Cracked skin
Stretched over a welcome mat
The door is right there
But you recline further into the rocking chair
Smile
And stay

(Even your memory has power over me)



No I Didn't

by *Bennett Herlihy*

Character 1: No I didn't.

Character 2: I saw you.

Character 1: Like hell you did. I wasn't even there last night! (Beat.) (In the tone of someone who realizes they've just done something stupid) You, uh... you didn't say anything about when you saw me, did you...

Character 2: Aha! I knew it!

Character 1: (Defensive) Fine, what of it! I didn't do anything wrong, what business is it of yours what I do in my free time?

(Both characters pause, motionless, for a few seconds.)

Character 2: (Turns to look through the fourth wall) Hey buddy, how about you focus up and advance the storyline instead of sitting there doing nothing?

(M...me?)

Character 1: (Turning their head to look the same direction) Yeah you, who else is writing this?

(I...you can see me?)

Character 2: I can see all kinds of things, pal. Why don't you quit hiding in the stage directions and come talk to us like an adult?

Playwright: Like this?

(Characters 1 and 2 both jump back, shocked)

Character 1: Give us a little warning, Jesus! You scared the hell out of me! No "The Playwright enters STAGE LEFT", no nothing, just straight into the dialogue? What is this, your first time?

Playwright: Well, uh...kind of, yeah. I wrote this thing in middle school that was an adaptation of the tale of Herakles, but—

Character 2: Yeah? Did you call everyone "Character 1" and "Character 2" in that, too? What kind of hack can't even come up with a name? Hell, you didn't even do an At Rise!

(AT RISE: Character 1 and Character 2 stand in the middle of a room. They—)

Character 1: "In the middle of a room"?

Character 2: He's a rank amateur! This is ridiculous.

Playwright, losing his temper: Y'know what? Screw you. Both of you! I'm doing my goddamn best here, alright? [anger begins to give way to sadness. THE PLAYWRIGHT is visibly fighting back tears.] I know it's a work in progress but you don't have to be so fucking mean about it!

[THE PLAYWRIGHT sobs. CHARACTERS 1 and 2 look awkwardly at each other for a moment, then look back to THE PLAYWRIGHT.]

CHARACTER 1

[To CHARACTER 2, whispering]

Well now I feel bad. Poor guy.

CHARACTER 2

He does seem like he's putting a decent amount of effort into it. Hell, he's even started formatting us correctly!

[Both characters pause uncomfortably]

CHARACTER 1

I mean, it definitely feels like an improvement.

CHARACTER 2

Should we—

CHARACTER 1

Yeah, probably.

[The two walk over to THE PLAYWRIGHT.

CHARACTER 2 reaches out to put a hand on his shoulder, hesitantly]

CHARACTER 2

[Gently]

Look, I'm sorry for yelling at you. Honestly, this isn't even that bad, all things considered.

[CHARACTER 1 shoots CHARACTER 2 a look.
CHARACTER 2 responds with a shrug, as if to say
“Well what the hell do you want me to tell him?”
After a moment THE PLAYWRIGHT looks up,
tears still in his eyes. He sniffles]

THE PLAYWRIGHT
You...you mean it? You're not just saying that?

CHARACTER 1
‘Course she isn’t. Hey, look at that! A pronoun!

[CHARACTER 2 looks
down at herself, almost as if seeing
herself clearly for the first time.]

CHARACTER 2
[Somewhat bemused]
Huh. I like it. She. Her. She/her.
[Slowly, as if feeling her way around the words]
Sheee... Herrr.

THE PLAYWRIGHT
[Wiping his eyes, beginning to perk up somewhat]
Y...you sure? I can change it, if you want.

CHARACTER 2
Nah, it’s growing on me.

THE PLAYWRIGHT
[Turning back to CHARACTER 1]
[Sniffle] Do uh...Do you want to pick yours, or...

CHARACTER 1
[Thinks for a moment]
Hmmm... Can’t say that I have much of a preference, personally. Maybe
just they/them for now. Score you some diversity points.

CHARACTER 2
So, what’s my name?

PLAYWRIGHT
[Sniffle] Oh yeah, I guess you guys do need those...

CHARACTER 2
How about... Charlotte? Sounds kinda fancy.

CHARACTER 1
Yeah, you do kinda have “Charlotte” vibes.

CHARLOTTE
I feel like you’d be a— Whoa. There it is. Huh. Feels weird.

CHARACTER 1
My turn, my turn! I wanna be named...Parker! Yeah, that sounds right.
Parker.

PLAYWRIGHT
[No longer teary-eyed]
Parker and Charlotte, huh? Well, nice to meet you, I guess.

PARKER
Alright, wise-ass. You’re not off the hook yet. Where’s my At Rise?

CHARLOTTE
[Clears her throat]
You mean our At Rise.

PARKER
[Rolling their eyes]
Yeah, yeah, whatever.
[Turns to look at the PLAYWRIGHT]

PARKER (cont.)
Come on, get to it! Guy thinks he’s so fancy because he can put (cont.)
after a character’s name...

*[AT RISE: A small, heavily-furnished room in an apartment building. The walls
are covered floor to ceiling in posters for concerts, movies, and all sorts of other assorted
decorations. A richly-patterned rug covers the floor, and a comfortable looking couch
and matching arm chair sit on either side of a small coffee table. PARKER, a
thirty-something of vague and indeterminate gender, lounges on the couch across from
CHARLOTTE, a woman in her late 20s, who stands next to the armchair. They
are arguing about...something.]*

PARKER
Alright, credit where it’s due. These are some pretty nice digs. Gonna be a
pain in the set designer’s ass though.

THE PLAYWRIGHT
Actually I think a lot of this would fall to props. Or set deco or something,
depends what kind of operation we’re looking at.

[PARKER makes a dismissive gesture]

CHARLOTTE
[To THE PLAYWRIGHT]
So what were Parker and I arguing about, anyway?

PARKER

You had just caught me in a lie about not having done...something or other, or being somewhere I wasn't supposed to, or something.

CHARLOTTE

No shit, genius, I was there. I want to know what I saw you doing.

THE PLAYWRIGHT

[Hesitantly]

Promise you guys aren't gonna start yelling at me again?

[Beat.]

CHARLOTTE

You had no idea what it was going to be, did you?

THE PLAYWRIGHT

[Defensively]

Listen, I didn't have a whole lot to go off of, okay? This playwriting shit is hard, and I do my best work when I have a structure to work within!

[CHARLOTTE puts her hands up in a gesture of surrender]

CHARLOTTE

Alright, alright, there's no need to get mad about it, jeez.

THE PLAYWRIGHT

[Frustrated, rounding on CHARLOTTE]

Well if–

PARKER

[Jumping to their feet, cutting him off]

I'm a superhero!

[Beat. CHARLOTTE and THE PLAYWRIGHT look at PARKER, confusion evident on their faces.]

CHARLOTTE

THE PLAYWRIGHT

You're a...what? You're a...what?

PARKER

[Excited]

I'm a superhero! That's what you saw! I was fighting crime or something and you happened to see me mid-escapade, and you recognized me! I don't know, my voice, or the bottom half of my face or...something!

CHARLOTTE

[Extremely skeptical]

A superhero. You?

PARKER

Yeah! Think about it! It draws the audience in, there's all sorts of intrigue around secret identities and tragic backstories and stuff, it happens before the show starts so we don't have to do any fight choreography or anything...

THE PLAYWRIGHT

Huh. I mean, I don't...hate it. I'm no good at designing superhero costumes, but I can probably just leave that up to whoever puts on the show...

PARKER

[Excited]

Exactly, you get it! It's perfect!

CHARLOTTE

[Still not convinced]

A...superhero.

PARKER

[Offended]

What, you got a better idea?

CHARLOTTE

I don't know, what about...

[Pauses to think]

What if you were cheating on me? Or you told me you hated partying, and that's why you never went out clubbing when I invited you, but I saw you at a bar getting shitfaced and flirting with strangers?

PARKER

You'd rather I be an adulterous liar than a kickass crimefighting vigilante? That's kinda messed up, you know.

CHARLOTTE

I mean, when you put it like that...

PARKER

Going once, going twice, going three times... Sold! Superhero it is! I'll be...The Magnificent Flying Squirrel!

CHARLOTTE

[Rolling her eyes, sighing]

You are so goddamn lame.

PARKER

Excuse you, flying squirrels are awesome! Did you know they glow in the dark?

Bullshit.

CHARLOTTE

PARKER

Swear to god! There are three species of flying squirrel native to North America, and all three of them are biofluorescent!

CHARLOTTE

[Confused]

Bio...huh?

PARKER

They glow under ultraviolet light, dummy.

[CHARLOTTE turns to look accusingly at the PLAYWRIGHT]

CHARLOTTE

You gave them that dumbass name so you would have an excuse to look up fun facts about flying squirrels, didn't you?

THE PLAYWRIGHT

Other way around, actually. I needed the script to run a few minutes longer, so I added a bit where you two talk more about the name. This is actually the first I'm learning about it. Apparently there's all sorts of glowing mammals, and scientists have no idea why they—

CHARLOTTE

Alright alright, I get it, flying squirrels are a land of contrasts.

[Beat.]

A Simpsons reference? Really?

[THE PLAYWRIGHT shrugs apologetically]

CHARLOTTE

[Exasperated, but not unkind]

Just get out of here already, we've got a script to read. Kind of.

[THE PLAYWRIGHT disappears back into the stage directions and the lights fade to black. When they come back up, CHARLOTTE and PARKER have returned to the positions described in the AT RISE. They are once again mid-argument.]

PARKER

No I didn't!

CHARLOTTE

I saw you!

PARKER

Like hell you did, I wasn't even there last night!

[Beat.]

PARKER

[In the tone of someone who realizes they've just done something stupid]

You, uh... you didn't say anything about...when you saw me, did you...

CHARLOTTE

[Triumphant]

Aha! I knew it was you!

PARKER

[Defensive]

Yeah, so what? I'm a grown adult, I can do what I want! What are you, my mom?

CHARLOTTE

[Incredulous]

A grown— You're a superhero, for christ's sake! My roommate is the...

[She pauses, as if trying to make herself continue]

CHARLOTTE (cont.)

[Exasperated]

The...

[PARKER gives her a look]

CHARLOTTE (cont.)

[Humiliated]

The Magnificent...Flying Squirrel.

[The lights fade out once more. As they disappear from view, PARKER and CHARLOTTE can be seen giving a wink and a thumbs-up to the PLAYWRIGHT, once more safe behind the fourth wall.]

PARKER

[Disembodied voice]

Told you it was cool.



Goldfish Shouldn't Live in Bowls

by Brooke Richey

I read online that fish don't like to live in bowls. The rounded walls create a sense of insecurity and stress the fish out. After reading this I could not help but feel guilt over my childhood goldfish; won at a fair, kept in a large glass bowl. I never even named it—the excitement of having a pet was lost quickly when I realized the fish did not do much besides swim.

The guilt I felt upon reading that a goldfish in a bowl was doomed to a life of stress was so overwhelming that it landed me in the pet store. I peruse the wall of glass. The tanks are keepers of a variety of fish, a variety of colors, some seeming so unnatural, I am amazed. But I am here to make things right, so I ignore the vibrant blues and pinks and greens darting around and settle in front of a tank of yellow and orange.

I tell the employee—a girl who does not look any older than my 16 year old sister—to give me the ugly fish. She laughs, but immediately knows which one I am referring to. Muted yellow, almost a sickly pale brown, reminding me of my jaundiced grandfather. I hesitate when she hands me the bag containing my new pet, its life and comfort now resting in my hands. The spontaneity spurred by guilt was catching up to me, but I already purchased a tank—a 10-gallon glass box—colorful pebbles, a couple plastic plants and even a miniature sunken pirate ship for the fish to hide in. The last thing needed: the fish to call it home.

I set up the tank in my room, on top of my dresser. The employee told me I need to acclimate the fish first and suggested I buy a water conditioner. I am going to give this fish the best life I can. I add the conditioner to the water and watch as the blue liquid disperses. I put the bag, still containing the goldfish and water from its previous tank, into the newly conditioned water just like the employee had instructed. One hour later, I deposit it into its new home. I watch as it darts into the pirate ship to hide and I feel a sense of pride. I am doing right by this fish.

Goldfish are easy to care for. I feed it flakes in the morning and clean its tank once the water turns murky enough to apply a green filter to the jaundiced yellow. It grows a little bigger over the next couple months and that must be a good sign.

Cleaning the tank becomes a chore. The fish spends most of its life hiding. I don't even notice it is dead until I see the food flakes left over from days floating on the top, soggy and crumbling, succumbing to the green murk. I don't know what I did wrong. I had read that goldfish could live for over 10 years. Mine barely lasted a year and a half.

I use a pair of tongs to find the fish. Floating on its side stuck under a plastic leaf. I drop it down the toilet, watching it swirl down. Later that night, I find myself trying to figure out what went wrong. I gave it a better tank. I spent my own money furnishing its world. I did everything the pet store employee had told me. I even learned what it meant to acclimate.

Laying in my bed, mourning, I look up “goldfish care” for the first time and I feel the guilt constrict my lungs as I read. All of the things I had neglected. Goldfish need a filter, and I didn't even name it.





Mountain Girl
by Kimi

Ramen at Echigo Kawaguchi

by Matt Walsh

There was no conductor to politely correct me, so I buzzed across the countryside in a Shinkansen like a dragonfly over a rice field, leaning back into the blue cushion and listening to the woman selling bento boxes from a cart behind me.

My ticket was still in my hand forty minutes out of the city when the obasan sitting next to me poked my arm with her umbrella. I didn't catch what she said, but I nodded anyway. She looked at me doubtfully, but then she was distracted by the vendor passing her a steaming cedar box.

The obasan pointed at my ticket and the bento vendor nodded, then spoke to me in English.

"The longer you ride the wrong train," she said, "the more expensive the return trip." She smiled. I laughed out loud, looking at my ticket. She placed two coins in the old woman's hand and pushed the cart into the next car.

The train entered a tunnel, and there I was in the window, my white hair rising in a tuft from my head. I realized I'd been thinking about Sasha again. It was common, my drinking buddy had assured me (an Australian, a chemical engineer) to think more fondly of one's marriage on the other side of it. But this was *revisionist history*, he'd said.

We were ninety minutes from Tokyo when I stepped onto the platform. I couldn't read the characters for the town's name. I wandered away from the station, down an alleyway of vending machines, lanterns, and sliding doors.

A heavy rain fell, and the villagers opened their umbrellas. The rainstorm consumed me, but I just stood there. I tried to imagine a world where it was right for Sasha to leave me, but I couldn't let it in yet.

I stood there being drenched for a moment, then I ran to a noodle shop with bowls of plastic ramen in the window, chopsticks suspended midair. I sat at the counter with the other salarymen. We slurped our noodles together without talking and listened to the rain.





Sophie's Lake
by John Donato

Connect

by Emilie Frechette



This photo was taken the split second before the fox jumped away. In the grassy fields of Colorado, the fox frequently basked in the sun. As the sun was going down, the fox jumped on the fence of a nearby farm, freezing. This flash of intense eye contact made me feel like two creatures were really seeing each other – and connecting.



When the World Stood Still to Watch the Little Anglerfish

by Sophie Cornwell

There was a moment—
however brief—
an angry world held its breath while

we looked to the line where God split the blue
into sea and sky.
And in the quiet
we watched her, so much smaller than us.
Together, silently, we said,
How beautiful she saw sunlight, even once.

Maybe she was chasing warmth,
or maybe she was looking for a kindness
that doesn't lurk at the bottom of the sea.
Or, perhaps, she knew her end was approaching,
and she didn't want to be alone in the dark
when the light she'd made her whole life
flickered out.

Maybe she needed to know there was
good waiting for her at the surface.

If I ever get to Heaven,
my first question will be
if the little anglerfish found what she was searching for
on the other side of where God split the blue.

The Stage of Judgment

by Lucress

A bright light cascading down every feature,
Creating shadows on the face,
Defining every wrinkle and crease
Not allowing for any expression to slip away.

Absolution lies in the faith of those who watch.
Perception: the line between prosecution or resurrection.

Let the show begin!
What is today's genre?
Mystery, comedy, thriller?

The art of deception
Lies in every calculated movement,
Where only the heart knows the truth.

Innocence and guilt collide;
The hunt between truth and lie.
Alas, the show must go on.
Equal justice under law,
Duress under survival.

Absolution is within your grasp,
Yet it lies at the mercy
Of those who lust for drama.



Opera by a Gas Station

by Lauren Chung

Let me go back to the day I sat on the passenger side of a black rental car, Christmas music playing as you pumped gas into its door. Engines starting and dying at the four-way stop in front of us. Through the car's window, I saw a man slip a purple bag into another man's jeans. They did this at the corner of a barber-shop, against the white-painted bricks with black lettering that read:

HOTDOGS

I imagine the two having lunch together now. Opera playing as they laughed in their cotton t-shirts and faded jeans. Spit coming out of mouths filled with crooked and stained teeth because they were worn men. The pale husks removed from yellow corn. I wonder where they are now. Do they still meet at that same barbershop? Tell me they're okay at least. Tell me I'll see them through the car's window, together on the sidewalk, laughing. That I'll roll down the window and hear opera coming out of their mouths.





Adoption *by Kimi*

Dinosaurs' Tears

by Reya

My dad taught me to ask questions. To seek the very essence of the world, to learn more than I spoke, and to read about more than just what I saw.

My mum taught me to listen. To feel. To understand.

She held her palm, wet with the salty ocean water, against my cheek, and said to me: "These are the dinosaurs' tears, the storm that swept the ark, the rain that fed the lands we hail from."

She told me to listen to the world, for it was far older than me, and her, and me and her combined, and me and her squared. She told me to immerse myself in that ocean water, to bathe in sunlight, to find home in the aching branches of a tree.

To know that one day, we will be nothing but food for the cycle of life can be scary. And yet, in it I find relief.

For then, I too am the salty spray of the sea on rocks, the floating dandelions frozen in air, the earthy smell of land after rain.

If so, am I not a beautiful thing?

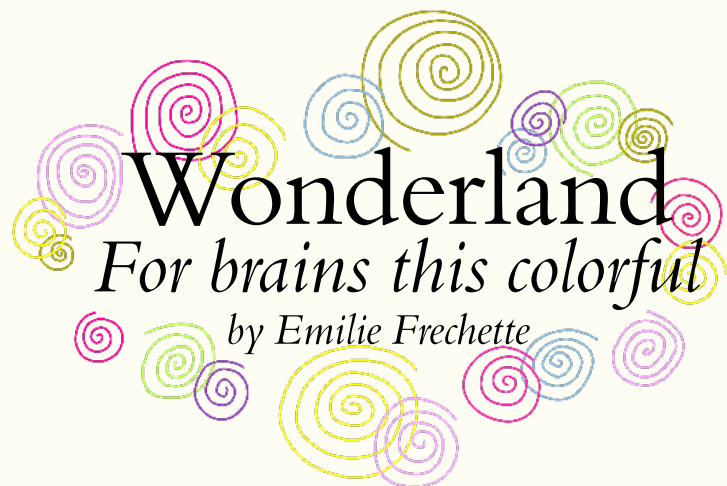


All at once, two are one, but either are none



by Nathan Desmarais

This work means a lot to me as it comes from a place of deep frustration and dissatisfaction. In this digital work I tried to express the mental fragmentation resulting from my own gender identity crisis. As I grow as a person, I have become fundamentally differentiated from the “me” of the past, yet my physical reflection invokes contradiction. As a result, social interactions have become a mangle of strings, pulling my sense of self in all directions. Existence outside of a box exponentially pulls identity back into the old norms, assumptions, and labels of society. Attempts at inclusion and acceptance make a lot of distance, but do not account for systemically traditional routines encountered in daily life. What I am called, referred to as, how I am interacted with—these experiences reflect external perception. The short glimpses of my confident identity are consumed and spit back at me in shreds, pasted back together into a crude collage that leaves me with a constant question: Is that me? Is that who I am? I exist between the worlds of social-assumption and self-questioning, a conglomeration of identities that seek to pinpoint a location that does not exist within specificity.



Isla's brain works like this: in spirals.

It starts with black. Imagine the infinite depth of space; an endless place found within.

Then, the first firework bursts, colorful and dazzling and all-consuming. It spreads across your consciousness, taking up what feels like every inch of your being, but it is only a singular atom out of 7 octillion in the body. The firework bursts, then crackles, then fades.

That is usually where it starts and where it ends.

Now imagine this: The firework shoots off, and its arms fall in ringlets and loops. They are iridescent, sparkling, and beautiful.

Once the loops begin to fall, there is no end. There is no fade to black.

Millions of fireworks can go off at once. And with the fireworks, come the spirals. Tiny tornadoes that can get tangled with one another, collide, create their own explosions down the line. Tendrils of internal sensations.

They are endless. They are spectacular. They are all-consuming. Nothing is linear in Isla's brain. Nothing is logical.

They are fascinating, from a creative point of view.

Living with this brain and all its colors is a different story.

Nothing feels beautiful when you are trapped in these spirals. When your life is controlled by them. When you are stuck inside them, helpless to the unruly loops that are never-ending, repeating over and over and over and over and

Spirals. Isla's brain works in never-ending, torturous spirals.

She was both at the eye of the storm and in its depths all at once; a part of her knew that these loops were irrational, but a stronger part was so wrapped up in the tornadoes that she didn't have the brainpower to withstand anything other than the turmoil she felt within.

Over and over, loop after loop, spiral after spiral.

This is how Isla's brain worked.



Hands gripped the edges of the porcelain sink. Isla's hands. She found it crucial to connect to her body at times such as these; the spirals either had her trapped in her own mind, or were so overwhelming that Isla disengaged, and learned to float above them, above herself.

Looking in the mirror, she found it difficult to comprehend that the girl in it was *her*.

She spoke her name. The girl mouthed it, too.
She tried to smile, and the girl looked like she wanted to die, her teeth bared.

She went to pull her hair out, show herself a version she would recognize, but both herself and the girl stopped, looking horrified.

I'm not crazy.



Sixteen Hours Earlier

Isla can honestly say that from the moment she wakes, to the moment she falls asleep, she is controlled by her thoughts. She can still function (she isn't *crazy*) and if you looked at her nothing would seem amiss.

She is a young, healthy girl with long blonde hair and a dazzling smile. She is a little shy and a little confident, a contradiction of sweet and bold. She has impeccable style, the only thing that might stand out if you passed her by on the street. But other than that, she is completely ordinary.

From the outside.

Between the two bookends of consciousness, sleep is her break.

But sometimes, the spirals find her in her dreams, too, and the book never closes.

All this to say; there is never a *true* break. Even when her sleep is dreamless, was a sweet pause only another form of torture? Would it be better if she had no reprieve at all?

Her alarm is going off, but she doesn't need it. She woke up already dizzy, like she'd been twirling in place for some time. Cold sweat drenches her back. Isla closes her eyes, trying to dig up the dream so she could dissect it, but most of it eludes her grasp, leaving her with a sick feeling in her gut. One she knew like the back of her hand.

Contaminated.

Contaminated.

Contaminated.

Contaminated.

In her mind's eye, she could see the contamination as easily as if a UV light was flicked on. She could see colors others couldn't.

Frozen, she considered her options.

She could take the easier, emotionally destroying option: showering. Not that she had the energy for that, but if the terror she was feeling right now could be numbed by the repetition that her spirals loved so much, she would do it. She would do anything for that peace. She would have to get up now; the showers were as

unpredictable as the loops in her brain and there often wasn't a way of knowing how long they would take.

She could shower to wash away the contamination, the invisible paint, but even moving an inch would be spreading the colors.

She thinks of every step it takes to get to the bathroom. Every door handle she would have to open, faucet she would run, shampoo she would touch and then all the colors that would be smeared. In her attempt to clean herself, she would contaminate everything around her and that thought made her chest *squeeze*. She could wash down the shampoo and body wash bottles in between each use, use a dozen clorox wipes on the doorhandles and light switches and faucets

Red and blue and purple and pink and yellow and orange and every color she would scrub off off off off off

Her alarm was still going off. Isla pressed the button. She would have to wipe down the button later.

Contaminated.

The word stretched and condensed, swirling around her. Imagine that firework, with all its endless tendrils falling. If the firework occurs in her brain, then the loops must fall around her body. The tendrils wind down her limbs, tightening, until she is paralyzed by her own thoughts. She is nothing but a puppet, and right now her puppet master was using the strings to strangle her.

She couldn't think. She couldn't speak. She couldn't move.



Spirals and loops and ringlets and
It was 6 am and Isla wanted to go back to sleep.
She wanted to go back to sleep and not wake up
She somehow made it to the bathroom, smearing colors on
everything she touched and everything that touched her. She washed
her hands over and over and over, her arms, her face, watched the
colors swirl in the drain, drowned out her thoughts in soap bubbles.
The smell soothed her; it was a clean scent, one she related to
decontamination and lilacs.

She could feel the spiral releasing her; sometimes that happened.
Sometimes it didn't. She didn't have to shower this morning, but the
relief wasn't imminent, because nothing was permanent.
She didn't make the rules, she just played by them.



Isla got ready for the day. It didn't really matter how she did it.
How many times she did it. Over and over, rewash, retouch, redo,
rethink. She was constantly nauseous from dancing around the
spirals that threatened to tangle around her. But that didn't matter;
Isla got ready for the day.

I'm not crazy.
"Morning, honey,"
Isla glanced up from her phone, finding her dad watching her in
the blue lighting emitted by the refrigerator. She was in the kitchen
now; she didn't turn on the main light so she didn't wake anyone
up, and hopefully, avoid conversation.
"Did you sleep last night?"
These kinds of conversations.
"Yes."
"School today?"
"Yep. Then a shift at the Brew."
"Therapy?"
"Oh, yeah. After school, then work."

She checked her phone again. It was already 6:47 am. Ellie was
running a little late, but for Ellie, that was on time. She put down
her phone and met her father's gaze.

"What about you?" She didn't have to ask; he was always
working.

"Just going to the station."
Isla nodded. In the odd lighting, she convinced herself it was the
shadows that caught on his wrinkles, eyebags, highlighted the gray
streaks in his blonde hair.

He looks old.

Guilt swamped her. She was a large part of the reason he worked
so hard, unable to retire. She was the cause for those gray hairs.

I am a burden on the family.

I am a burden and

I bet he wishes I was never born.

Isla swallows. "Some may say you work too hard, Dad."

He smiled. Then sobered. "Did you really sleep?"

Isla bristled. "Yes."

"Okay, okay, sorry. I'll get out of your hair."

That guilt crashed over her, again. He is concerned for her. She
knew this, but still hated it. She wished sometimes that her parents
could just pretend, like she wanted to. But instead, their worry was a
constant reminder.

I'm not crazy.

"Wait! Here," She presses the button on the coffee machine
behind her, stopping the stream of dark liquid. Hands him her travel
mug. "Take it. You look like you need it."

"You sure?"

"Yes, Dad. Just take the coffee."

He did, careful not to touch her hand as he took the mug from
her. He was afraid of her spirals, didn't want to be the reason that set
her off.

"You look good."

Isla smiled. "I know."

He rolled his eyes, took a sip from the cup. "Didn't get that
confidence from me, I'll tell you that." He went to hug her, but then
caught himself. There was nothing but the hum of the refrigerator,
the drip drip drip of the coffee from the machine for a long moment.

"Kay. Love you, kid. See you after therapy? What time?"

Internal sigh. "Twelve."

Her phone dinged.

Here!!!!

"Ellie's here. Love you! Tell mom I love her, too, when she gets
up!"



She wasn't the only one who could be contaminated; anything
could contaminate her, in turn. People, places, things. Any noun.
Anything.

If Ellie were a color, she'd be a deep shade of pink, bordering on
fuchsia. Loud and beautiful and vibrant and unapologetic. Getting in
Ellie's car, after five years of friendship, was still a struggle.

That internal UV light, illuminating pink fingerprints and
smudges and stains, all around the car.

"Hey," she turned and smiled at her friend.

"Morning. Dunkin?"

"Always."

"Okay, I think you'll really like this song. I was listening to this band last night, and this one reminded me of you."

"I'm intrigued." The first thing Isla did when she got out of bed was wash her hands, eliminating the contamination that she encountered in her dreams. But what if she didn't use enough soap, wait until the water was warm enough to actually kill off these imaginary germs? Then, every step she took afterwards, washing her face, getting dressed, dabbing on makeup, every step she did afterwards would spread the contamination all over her. And she would have spread over each object she touched; hairbrush, toothbrush, faucet, light switch, coffee machine, backpack, door knob, phone, everything. Did it matter if she was now contaminated by her best friend's presence? Which contaminating subject was worse?

She turned to watch her friend sing along (how she already knew the lyrics, Isla couldn't say) her stacks of bracelets on her wrists, her long brown hair in a loose braid. Ellie loved loudly; she was naturally outgoing with an effortlessly cool vibe that pulled you in. She was fearless and a little loud sometimes, lived with absolutely zero regrets that Isla knew of, and pursued what her heart wanted to pursue. She was full in every way Isla was empty. Jealousy sometimes coiled in her stomach at how easy it seemed for her to exist, how she would never have to sit with the thoughts that plagued Isla.

But that wasn't fair. Ellie also had things on her plate that Isla never had to deal with, either. That guilt, again. She was looking down at her palms.

You're a bad person.

Bad person.

Bad person.

You're contaminated.

You're contaminated in ways you can't get off

Contaminated

Bad

Bad

Contamina

Her friend suddenly turned to her. "Did you like it? It kinda has this vibe where you're floating through space, right?"

"Sorry, I wasn't really listening."

Ellie nodded, eyes flickering to Isla's hands, which were now in tight fists. Unlike her father, Ellie wasn't afraid of Isla's messy thought spirals. She would never understand, not fully, but she didn't walk around eggshells when around her. Sometimes Isla

wished she would; it was a double edged sword. "Thanks ok. I'll text it to you later. Listen to it tonight."

"I will."

Along with the million of songs Ellie supplied her, she also gifted her with the kind of friendship that could only be forged through time. She may not be in Isla's brain, but she had been around it enough.

I don't know why she puts up with me.

I'm a bad person.

Contaminated and bad, why is she my friend?

I wouldn't want to be around me

I bet she wishes I was never born it would be easier better for her and for everyone

"What do you want?" They were in the drive through line at Dunkin Donuts.

It is a twenty minute drive to their local community college they both wound up going to. The rest of the ride there, Isla tries really hard to listen to the lyrics of the songs Ellie played. But she was thinking instead of everything Ellie touched in her own car, imagined pink smears of color on the steering wheel, button for the window, dial for the volume, gear shift, her left leg when she dripped a bit of coffee on her jeans, all of her rings that Isla knew she never took off, everything she touched was

Contaminated so contaminated I'm contaminated

Isla sits with her hands in her lap.

Isla makes sure that her hands were no longer in fists.

She takes a sip when Ellie takes a sip.

She talks and laughs and nods along.

"What classes do you have today?"

"Just English and then Computer Science."

"Blah."

"I know. But English is good."

"You good with your ride home?"

"Yeah." No.

Ellie gives her an encouraging smile. Isla hadn't noticed she had parked the car in the student parking lot until now. "How are you feeling today?"

"Oh, you know. Still crazy."

Ellie's smile widens. "So nothing out of the ordinary."

Isla found herself smiling too. A genuine one. "Nope."

"Well, you look amazing. Text me what shampoo you use. Your hair looks voluminous, as always."

You just have to wash it 27 consecutive times.

"Never say that word again." she deadpanned.

Ellie smacks a kiss to her fingertips and blows it towards her friend before throwing open the driver's door. It was the most physical contact she had with Ellie in years.

"Kick today's ass, Isla."

"You too."

Three minutes later she realized she forgot to ask what classes her best friend had today.

I'm a bad friend.

A bad person.

Contaminated



Isla made it through her classes with the appearance of ease.

She opened her computer and took notes.

Isla raised her hand once.

She didn't encounter any triggers or

Contaminated contaminated contaminated contaminated con

Here was the thing. Isla can't think of the words that were the reason behind the contamination. She couldn't voice them, not even a whisper in the storm of her mind. The words themselves were triggers, little mine fields, and when she stepped on them, explosions went off. Fireworks. Spirals.

Then she was done for.

Those are the rules.

Here is an exercise: Do not think of a chocolate chip cookie.

What are you thinking of right now?

You're thinking of what you're trying so hard not to think of: A chocolate chip cookie.

So no, she didn't run into any triggers at school today. But it took every ounce of energy to forge those walls, to keep it that way.

Her mind was constantly split between protecting itself and appearing like it wasn't. She was trapped in an intense game of chess while trying to make it appear like she was mindlessly playing checkers.



"What are you thinking about right now?"

What a question. Despite the frequency of this question asked, Isla never quite knew how to answer it. What was she thinking of? What was she not thinking of?

Another attribute of the community college, aside from the fact that

she could live at home while attending, was the walking distance to her therapy office. She could drive, but that was a layer of anxiety Isla avoided at all cost.

Isla answered the question the best she could. "Everything

If Dr. Gearty, her therapist, was a color, she'd be lavender. Along with the soothing color, she had steady eye contact and poised posture. She was chamomile tea and probably a cat lover, a calm voice and rare smiles.

Dr. Gearty's favorite response to Isla was silence. It was a gentle prompt for more, but left Isla feeling so lost. She had just told her what she was thinking of, what else did she want from her at the present?

"And how are you feeling today?"

Tired.

Contaminated.

Crazy.

"Tired."

Dr. Gearty stared at her solemnly. Isla stared back.

Therapy usually went like this.

How could Isla be open with a perpetual stranger when she couldn't be open in the privacy of her own mind?

"I'll see you next Tuesday."

Therapy usually ended like this.



"Did you eat today?" were the first words her mother asked her when she got home.

"Coffee!" Isla supplied. Her mother was one of the only people who wasn't contaminated, but that didn't mean she wanted to talk to her.

Once, her mother and her had been close. She recalled a time when every Sunday was a trip to the library. Her mother was the color green; they would sprawl out under the oak trees and read the stories Isla had picked out. She would paint dazzling tales and Isla would get lost in them, her imagination blooming. It was something both her and her mother shared; they had always had creative minds, and Isla's father was the onlooker, entertained by their antics.

Her mother was still green. But even the oak trees in her memory shed their leaves for a season. It felt like her mother was in that barren winter, devoid of a part of herself.

Or maybe what was missing was a part of Isla who saw her that way.

She ran to her bedroom.
“You ate your coffee?” her mother yelled through the door. She was changing into her uniform, which was really only a T-shirt with the Brew’s logo; an animated coffee bean.

“Yep!”

Isla wasn’t late, she just really wanted her mother to think she was. She opened her door, and found her still on the other side.

Replacing her whimsical side was a persistent anxiety; while her father had grown weary, her mother had grown more persistent.

“Will you eat something at the Brew?”

“Yes.”

“You feeling good enough to drive?”

“Yes.”

A pause. Then, “How were your classes? Was Dr. Gearty helpful?”

Her mother’s concerned questions were just the same as her fathers this morning, but she could stand them even less at the present moment.

I’m a horrible daughter a horrible

“Both fine. I have to go. Love you.”



Isla had fallen down the rabbit hole. She tripped, and instead of hitting hard concrete, the ground vanished and she fell headfirst into a secret portal. She closed her eyes as her body was turned over and over, the adrenaline the only thing keeping out the cold, cold fear.

It happened at work, when she became contaminated.

It didn’t matter how; nobody would understand if she could even explain, anyways.

She just *was*.

Her hand accidentally brushed a customer as she handed them their drink. *A pumpkin cold brew with oak milk*, Isla thought numbly. One second she was holding her breath and doing everything to prevent something like this from happening and the next she was free falling

Isla found herself in the bathroom, scrubbing her hands.

Contaminated contaminated contaminated contaminated contaminated

Isla walked back out of the bathroom.

She turned off the light.

Isla made her way back up to the counter, a smile on her face, walking up to the customer who had been waiting in line. “Hi, welcome into the Brew, what can I get for you today?”

She took orders.
She made drinks.
She laughed when her co-worker made a joke.
She helped close down the café.
She clocked out.
Isla appeared perfectly normal.



The seasons were changing. It was only 4pm and the sun was already falling to the horizon; the bleak November promised an early winter.

Isla dreaded the nighttime.



“Haven’t you seen this movie before?”

Her bedroom door cracks open. It was her father, still in uniform. She knew he knew she’d seen it before; she also knew he knew it was *Alice Through the Looking Glass*.

“Yes.”

Isla responded to his questions. She was so, so, so tired. The kind that sunk into the marrow of her bones, the kind that wouldn’t go away even if she slept for a week straight.

If her father was a color, he’d be light blue, fading into gray.

The door eventually closed.

She watched Alice on screen adjust to the whimsical, strange world that she had fallen into.

When she was little, *Alice in Wonderland* was her favorite story, favorite cartoon. She shared the girl’s blonde hair and wild imagination, though had no clue how much the fairytale would apply to her life later on.

She has to become as crazy as the world she’s fallen into. She doesn’t make the rules, but she still has to play by them.

Isla cried.



Showers were the hardest part of her day.

It was being locked in a tiny white room and being locked in a kaleidoscope of colors.

Colors only Isla could see. She scrubbed and scrubbed, as if she could physically clean the thoughts off her body.

That's exactly what she thought she could do.
Ellie and her vibrant pink. *Contaminated.*
Her father and his withering blue. *Contaminated.*
Dr. Gearty and her stable lavender. *Contaminated.*
The customers' all-consuming black. *Contaminated.*

Imagine this; everyone has a hula hoop around them. Inside their hula hoop is the essence of their being, each their own unique color. Now imagine when you're talking with someone, those two hula hoops intersect, a venn diagram, making their own shade. Then you walk away, and those hula hoops separate, remaining their original colors.

Isla's problem was that any time her circle intersected with another, she took on that color. She wasn't able to separate herself from others. Her therapist had a theory that this was the root of it all.

She stood bare under the faucet, dropping her head, watching the colors swirl around her feet. Did it matter what caused this insanity? Did anything matter at all?

Contaminated
Humiliated.
Contaminated
Tired.
Contaminated
Angry.
Contaminated
Isolated.
Contaminated

Crazy.



Hands gripped the edges of the porcelain sink. Isla's hands.
Looking into the mirror, she found it hard to comprehend that the girl in it was *her*.
Her skin is scrubbed raw.
Her pupils were so dilated they swallowed up her blue irises.
Her hair clung to her face, her neck, her back, dripping.
Her left pinkie was bleeding, her fingernails cut short in a frenzy.
The shower was the hardest part of the day. She was completely colorless.

Without her expertly applied makeup, her dark circles were clearly visible. Without her jean jacket and converse with flowers painted on them, she was bare. Lifeless.

For this breadth, she wasn't contaminated.
She was *controlled*.
She stood before her reflection. How could this broken, sick girl be *her*?

She spoke her name. The girl mouthed it, too.
She tried to smile, and the girl looked like she wanted to die, with her teeth bared.

She went to pull her hair out, show herself a version she would recognize, but both herself and the girl stopped.

She was hanging on, by the threads of her thought spirals, and one day, one day soon, she would snap.

If Isla were a color, she'd be whatever her OCD picked for her at that given moment.



Isla's brain works like this; in spirals.



Bug Bites

by Jacquinn Sinclair

A blue light zaps bugs from summer's air in the yard at night while he bastes chicken and ribs, unbothered by the bugs' burning lives. A crisp pop at the end of a short sizzle, like an egg fried in hot oil. He was like a father figure; he taught me about life: how to cook, how to drive a pickup truck, and how to bait and cast a line. We spent countless hours on the banks of rivers waiting for the fish to offer themselves up. The fish, snagged by his hook, lay sideways like me, on the bed while he groped the hope out of me. Singed like bugs meeting the bulb. On the porch, I sit trapped in the moment, remembering, running my feet through the grass. Inside, I turn off the blue light from the safety of the kitchen. Deliberate. Proud. Let him get eaten up for a while; it's the least I could do for now.



Florida

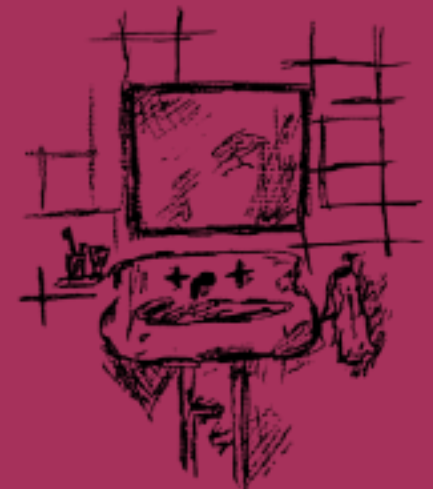
by Dani Joseph

From this angle, if I squint and tilt my head a little to the right, you almost look like that scrawny little 14-year-old again. The definition in your jaw fades a bit, rounds it out. The shadows make your eyebrows look as unruly as they did that day in the bathroom, warming the wax strips up between our sweaty palms. I had to practically pin your arms down and force you to take the strips after the scream I let out during my turn. It really wasn't that bad but you were always a wimp, made it too easy to spook you.

You went to brush some stray hair from my eyes and for some reason your hand lingers near my face. At some point, you find my mouth and push the tip of your thumb in without asking. All I can taste is the dirt from the backyard in Florida, still stuck under your nails.

You don't say anything, but the pad of your thumb presses down against my tongue, the way doctors do with wooden sticks.

I think you're expecting something more from me, that I disappointed you by lightly biting down.





Before I Knew You

by Brooke Richey

Before I knew you, I was so productive and organized.
 I did my laundry every week.
 I did the dishes as I made them.
 I took out the trash as soon as it started to smell.
 I went to bed and woke up at the same time every day.
 I went for walks regularly, and I drank plenty of water.

Before I knew you, I didn't smile much
 and I cried more than I laughed.
 I swept and mopped every other day.
 My hair was falling out and my body was getting smaller.
 My bed was always made and my eyes were dull and my head ached.
 My room was clean and I would lie awake at night
 wondering if I would be alive tomorrow.
 Wondering if I wanted to be.

Now, I can never find clean socks.
 The dishes get done when it's dire.
 The trash is always able to be shoved down a little more.
 I wait to go to bed until you get home from work.
 I go for walks when the weather is nice and I drink plenty of water.
 I laugh more than anyone in the world.

Now, my body exists to be loved by you.
 My thoughts exist to be shared with you.

Our room is a mess and I lay in our bed in your arms, and have to
 grapple with knowing that I do not get to live forever by your side.
 Knowing that one lifetime with you will not be enough.



Succession

by John Donato

The Painted Woman

by Victoria Sanchez

His plumped hands clamped around the paintbrush so fiercely that his fingertips flushed with streaks of red, stiffening as though the thick paintbrush wood was fusing into his bones. The brush was no longer a tool but an extension of him—an artery, a conduit—through which he transformed into something beyond this astral plane; he imagined himself not as a man but a god, one of astounding creations bent to his will.

The old mahogany floor of rich reds and browns beneath him lay as another canvas for droplets of oil paints that seemed like small portals to his worlds. The lifting planks screeched beneath him as he shifted his weight, smudging the paint beneath his thick bare feet; annihilating the portals. Ritualistically he swayed like a thick bamboo stock, creating soft strokes on the canvas. His creation lay idle on the canvas as she sat directly before him—her silhouette bowed and curved in the exact submission he demanded. The vibrant greens and ghostly whites he blended glowed like feverish light across the field of lilies in which the woman knelt. Her knees pressed into the ground, indenting the rough soil; she was rooted there, anchored by obedience, swallowed by the bed of lilies surrounding her. She could not rise. She could not move. Like a marble statue forever she remained in a frozen posture of devotion.

Her thick unruly curls frantically twirled in the wind he painted around her, with strands lashing hungrily at her face, sticking to her long nose slick with tears. Everything about her radiated a silent agony that he enjoyed and savored. When he finally stepped back from the canvas, he held the painting. His breath unsteady as he gawked at his creation with a grotesque hunger for the broken creature. Warily he collapsed, his thick body pooling into the old wooden chair, like thinly packed meat bulging against thin wrapping. With a lazy and sluggish determination he dragged the chair toward the small stand where he kept his cup of whiskey brimmed to the top. His plump hand engulfed the glass entirely, and eagerly he brought the pungent brown liquid to his narrow lips. The acrid liquid pooled down his tangled beard as he gulped, never once looking away from his creation. But the more he drank the more the image contorted and warped. The woman in the painting wavered. Trembled as she rose, gripping the thick glass in his palm.

“This c...can...can’t be,” the man said, sputtering and slurring his words together like mush in his mouth that he could not contain nor control.

Her knees, once pressed into the hard soil of rock and lilies, were raw and crimson, streaking her legs and staining the ground beneath her. In one firm hand she held a cluster of lilies ripped from the earth by their roots. No longer did she kneel, but she stood, her long silhouette now walking closer toward him in the painting, growing taller with each step.

The man's face grew long and his body poured to the hard floor from the wooden chair. On his knees he begged and pleaded for mercy.

“Forgive me, for I am no god.”



Specimen in Suspension

by Sara Itkis



Heretic's Prayer

by Gabriela Moreno

I have resorted to believing in aliens. I pray for them, even.

It starts the same way every night. My hands go first, a fine tremor, barely visible, like something small is trying to escape through my fingers. Then my breath, which forgets its rhythm and catches somewhere behind my sternum, a sob that won't complete itself, that just sits there, half-born. My body knows before my mind does. My body is always the first to confess.

Late at night, when the walls are too close and the dark is a specific kind of loud, I pray. Not on my knees. Not with folded hands or bowed head. I pray the way drowning people pray: horizontal, eyes open, staring at the ceiling like it owes me something. I pray with my jaw clenched and my chest caved and whatever dignity I have left sitting in a pile on the floor somewhere.

What a stupid thing, you'll say, to believe in such nonsense. And I agree. I do. But you're thinking of stupidity as a choice and not accounting for the particular intelligence of despair. How precise it is. How it dismantles every reasonable alternative first, methodically, before it leaves you here: hands shaking, breath snagged, talking to something that probably doesn't exist.

That's not *stupidity*. That's what's left.

I tried god first. Of course I did. But the god I was given was too small. Too specific. With a gender and a history and an opinion on who deserved what, he had been handled by too many human hands, passed down through centuries of men who used him to mean whatever they needed him to mean. War. Ownership. Silence. By the time he reached me he was worn smooth, like a coin that's changed hands so many times the face on it is unrecognizable.

I couldn't pray to that.

What I wanted—what I have always wanted, I think, without knowing the word for it—was something older. Something that existed before the temples and the texts and the very human need to put a name and a face and a set of rules on the divine. I wanted the thing underneath all of that. The original.

She doesn't have a name. Or she has too many: Isis, Gaia, Iemanjá, the unnamed thing my ancestors might have whispered to in the dark. She is not kind exactly, not in the way we mean when we say kind. She is something more indifferent and more intimate than that. She is the earth before we named it. The body before we were ashamed of it. The dark that existed before we decided it was something to be afraid of.

I tried to pray to her, and maybe I got close. Maybe on certain mornings, standing barefoot on cold ground, feeling the particular

silence of early light, maybe that was her. Maybe she was there and I was there and for a moment the distance collapsed. But she couldn't save us either. Or she could, and has chosen not to, which amounts to the same thing when your hands are shaking at 2 a.m.

So I went further out. I pray to aliens now and it is in these circumstances that I finally understand my mother.

My overly religious mother. My mother who will not eat before a blessing, who keeps a Bible on every surface like a first aid kit, who would look challenges in the face—job loss, illness, the particular cruelty of other people—and say, without flinching: *Deus proberat*. God will provide.

I used to hate that phrase. I used to hear it as surrender. As the sound of a mind closing. I was young and certain and I thought faith was what you reached for when your thinking had failed you, when you weren't brave enough to sit with the truth that nobody was coming. That we were alone. That the universe was indifferent and vast and we had better make our peace with that. I was so sure.

Now it's 2 a.m. and my hands won't stop and I'm praying to extraterrestrials, so.

I was wrong, of course, not about her god, I don't think I was wrong about that, but about her. About what faith actually is. It isn't stupidity. It isn't weakness. It's something that grows in the specific climate of desperation, like moss, like anything that only needs darkness and enough time.

She wasn't failing to think clearly. She was surviving and now I am doing the same thing, in my own ridiculous way, and I think if she could see me she might not laugh. She might just nod. She might say: now you understand.

Each night I close my eyes and I manufacture my own second coming. I can't tell you what they look like. That's the point, I guess. Every time I try to picture them they dissolve at the edges—not because my imagination is failing me but because I think, somehow, that's not correct. That whatever they are, they exist outside the vocabulary of faces and bodies and forms we've spent millennia carving into stone, painting on ceilings, printing on church fans. They are not that. They are something for which we do not yet have a word.

What I know is the light. A brightness that doesn't hurt. That's the first miracle: a light you can look directly into without flinching, without your eyes watering, without turning away. A light that lands on you like recognition. Like being seen by something that has always known you were here and was simply, finally, close enough to say so.

They come bearing things we lost. Or things that were taken.

Knowledge that got buried under centuries of power and greed and the particular human talent for destroying what we don't understand. Remedies. Not cures exactly, something older. The understanding of why we got sick in the first place. They touch the earth and the earth remembers itself. They touch the water. They touch us.

And we are—briefly, completely—forgiven. Not absolved. Not let off. Forgiven. There's a difference I can feel but not explain. Absolution is a transaction. Forgiveness is a door opening in a room you'd forgotten had doors.

I know this won't happen. I know it the way you know a dream is a dream even while you're in it: that specific grief of beautiful things, the way longing and loss arrive together, inseparable, one hand holding the other. I know they're not coming. I pray anyway. I think that might be the most human thing about me.

In my prayers, I tell them about my love. I tell them about the earth: the specific green of light through leaves, the way cold water feels like a second skin, the sound of wind doing its ancient, indifferent work. I tell them about animals, which have never once disappointed me. I tell them about people, and here I have to slow down, because people are complicated, because people are the reason I'm awake at 2 a.m. with shaking hands in the first place.

I tell them about my wife. My mother. My brother. My friends and their children, who are small and soft and still believe the world is essentially good, and I cannot bear the thought of them finding out otherwise.

And then... I make myself say the others.

My enemies. You probably have your own list, the weight of these names, how they sit differently in your chest than other names, how just thinking of them can change the temperature of a room. I make myself think of them one by one. I make myself hold them there, in the prayer, like holding something hot.

And I try to love them. I try. I want to be precise about what that trying looks like because I think honesty is the only currency that might mean anything to beings who can see straight through you. It doesn't feel like warmth. It doesn't feel like forgiveness, that door opening in a room with forgotten doors. It feels more like... surgery. Like reaching into a wound and trying to change its shape from the inside. It hurts in a way that might be the point.

I will my compassion toward them. I imagine their childhoods, the specific conditions that manufactured them into people who could do what they did. I try to find the place where they were small and soft, like my friends' children, before the world got to them. Before they decided to become what they became.

Sometimes I almost get there. Sometimes I don't.

These beings made of light, they can see straight through the performance to the gap underneath. How a person can want to love and fail at it simultaneously, fully, with their whole heart.

I bleed a little. I try again. I hold the names.

That has to count for something. I'm *asking* it to count for something.

I resented religion for a long time. I still do, but resentment requires a kind of energy I'm running out of. What's left after resentment is clarity. The cold, flat clarity of someone who has looked at the situation without blinking and found no comfort in the understanding whatsoever.

We will always need to reach for something higher. Not because something higher exists, but because we are built with the reaching already inside us, and there is no surgery for that. To be human is to be insufficient and to know it. To stand at the edge of your own smallness and feel the vertigo and reach anyway.

I try to convince myself I am divine. I try with the seriousness of someone who suspects they are wrong. Because if I were divine (if any of us were) am I not complicit? Am I not, in the end, the very entity responsible for every atrocity committed in his holy name? Every man-made blessed war. Every body broken in the name of something sacred. Every starved child. Every abused woman. If I am divine and I am watching and I am doing nothing...Isn't that the oldest crime there is? Is anyone watching? Is anyone there?

And yet here I am. Dust turned flesh. Insufficient and unexcused. A god who watches and does not act. A god who doesn't believe in her own divinity, standing at the brink of extinction, unable to save even herself.

Camus said the absurd is born of the confrontation between the human need and the unreasonable silence of the world. I have screamed into that silence. I have reasoned with it, bargained with it, tried to seduce it into answering. The silence remains. It has always remained, and somewhere in the middle of all that screaming, I caught a glimpse of myself.

This ridiculous, insufficient, dust-turned-flesh person. Lying in the dark. Praying to aliens. Trying to love her enemies with shaking hands and imperfect results. Trying to find a river she cannot prove is there. Trying, and failing, and trying again, because stopping feels like something she's not ready to name.

We are so small. I mean that tenderly. We are so small and the silence is so large and we keep asking anyway—generation after generation, in every language, in every posture, with every name we've ever invented for the thing we cannot stop reaching toward.

I am one of them. And I find—here, at the end of all this, at 2 a.m. with the dark and the silence and the aliens who are not coming, that I cannot be cruel to her. This person. Me. Who is doing the most human thing there is.

Praying and hoping that *love* is enough.

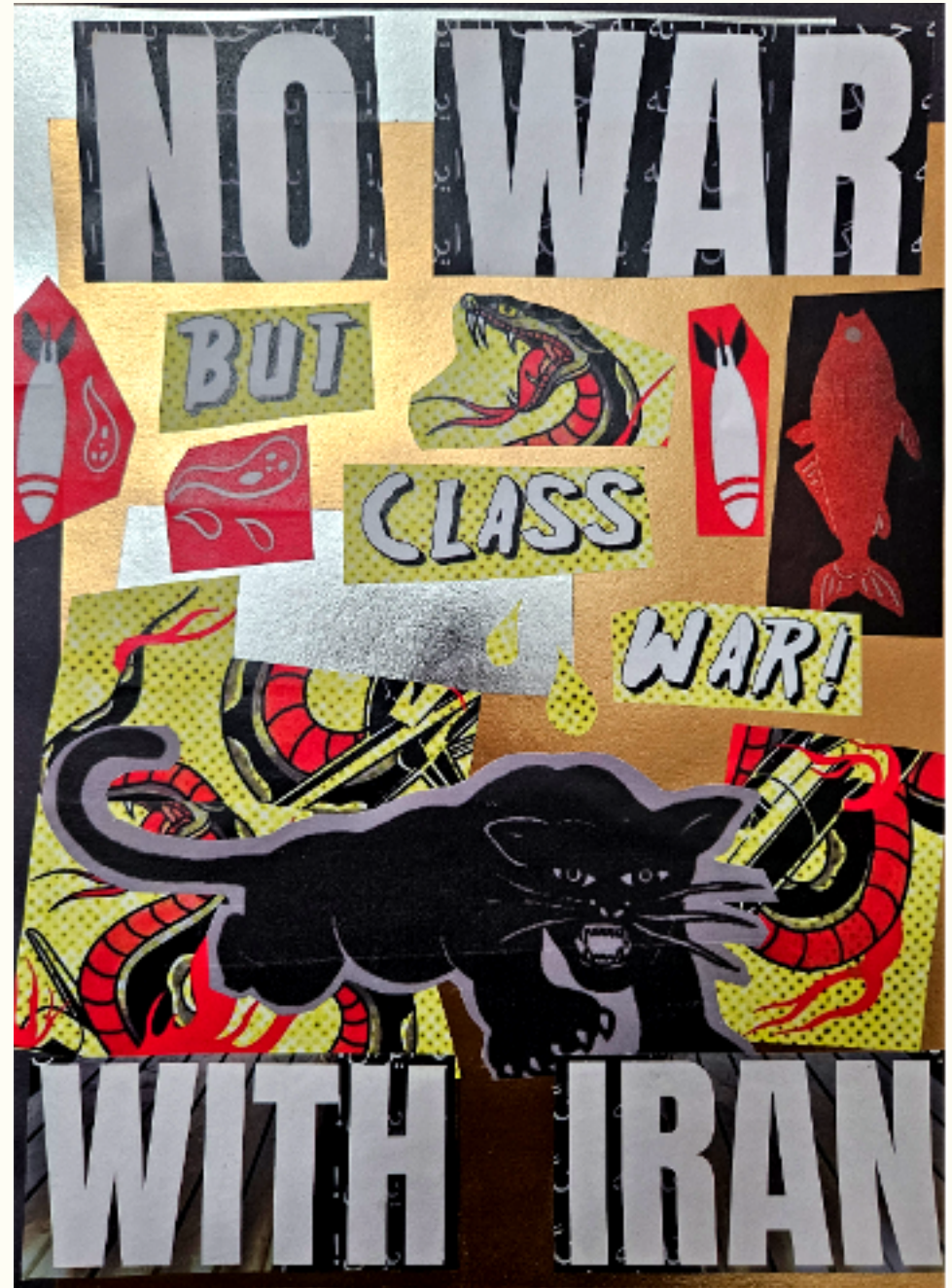


SEEING RED

by Leo Fitzwilliam



Based on the electoral map for the 2024 US Presidential Election. When I first saw the map after the results were announced, all I saw was a smear of red across a vast majority of the country, and that made me...feel things.



The Head of the Snake
by Sara Itkis

May I feel safe in my body, this time?
May I fall asleep without the fear
of my mind shutting down,
Misfiring,
failing,
dying?

And may I trust my heart to keep beating, this time?
May I not be afraid of each pulse
stuttering,
giving up
being my last?

I want to see the morning,
Please, this time,
At least tell me I'll see the morning.

I'm terrified I'll go before I can
Tell them what to do.

How will they know
to bury me under a willow tree,
So I can help it grow
beautiful and strong!
And help it
decades,
centuries after I've
Met my end.

How will they know
I don't want their prayers?
The solemn grief of a sermon,
Buried in a wooden box
Doing nothing to help,
would haunt me
For the rest of time.

So may I fall asleep tonight quickly, this time?
dreaming of love,
creation,
Beauty?

I don't ask for much, I think.
If this is all you grant me.
I will be satisfied.

And yes, I promise to let them know
tomorrow.

I Should Probably Write a Will

by Adrien Jewell



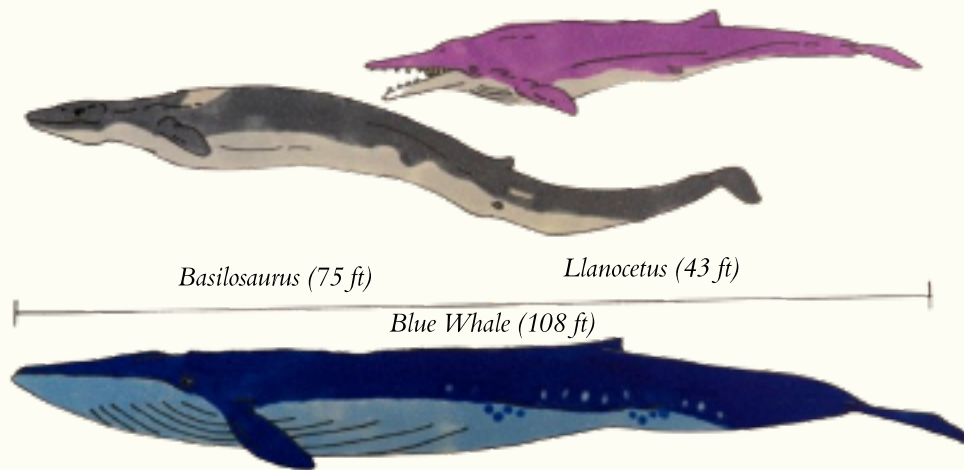
Lady Memories

by Para

This is a painting of someone deeply close to me. It was on a drive home from a night out with her where I saw two deer outside. I've always sent her bugs and explained them to her and the most recent one was a Japanese lady beetle (a ladybug dupe but invasive!). The drawing is her taking a nap on the drive home and the scenery behind her while her memories we've shared play in the back, like a dream.

Evolution of a Whale

by Owen Miller



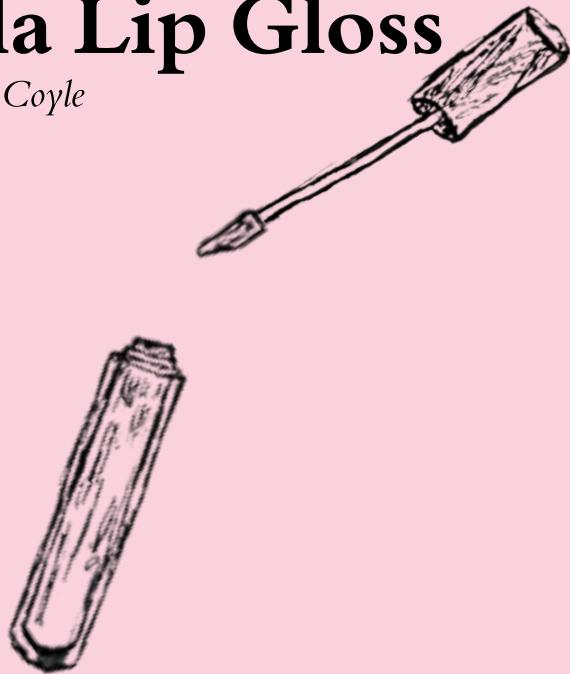
Animals in Spring

by Owen Miller



Vanilla Lip Gloss

by Stephanie Coyle



“Did you know lobsters pee at each other to flirt?” Kasey said to her friend, Celeste.

“Nobody cares about stupid lobsters,” sneered Allie from behind her, making the rest of the class snicker.

The teacher had stepped out to make copies of the homework, leaving the seventh grade classroom to devolve into chaos.

Kasey bit back the urge to call her a bitch. “Nobody cares what *you* say, you ugly ass coelacanth!”

Allie sent a withering look to her two best friends, Jenna and Cherie.

“What the fuck is a coelacanth?”

“Maybe if you actually read a *book*—”

“Okay, quiet down,” said the math teacher as she returned to the classroom.

At lunch, Kasey and Celeste sat at the far end of the cafeteria, far away from the popular kids.

Celeste was muttering to herself, tapping her fingers together with her eyes closed.

“How many digits are you up to?” Kasey asked.

“Shut up,” Celeste snapped, but then stopped tapping. “Fuck, you messed me up.”

“Sorry,” Kasey said with a grimace. “So?”

“One twenty,” Celeste sighed. “I’m definitely going to place last.”

“No way,” Kasey said, pulling out her sandwich. “Plus you have three more months until Pi Day.”

“It’s not enough time,” Celeste insisted. “I’m not going to win. The boy who won last year memorized over five *hundred* digits.”

Kasey sighed and prepared her reassurance speech, but someone interrupted them.

“Hi Kasey,” said an unexpected voice: Jenna.

Kasey looked up at Ali, Jenna, and Cherie standing behind her. She exchanged a suspicious glance with Celeste. There was no reason for this interaction to be happening, between the most popular girls in school and the weird kid who knew too much about marine reproductive systems. The idea that they had anything to say to Kasey was laughable.

“Hi,” Kasey said slowly.

“I’m having a pool party and a sleepover on Friday night,” she said. Ali and Cherie smirked but remained silent. “Do you want to come?”

Kasey’s jaw dropped. “In December?” she asked, trying not to let her brain malfunction.

“We’d use the *indoor* pool,” Ali said, rolling her eyes.

She looked between them. “Seriously? *Me*?”

"Yeah," Jenna said. "Jack Carlsen and his friends are going to come swim, and like..."

"Like...?"

"His friend Cam Wilmington thinks you're cute," Jenna said. "He still thinks you're weird, but he said you had a glow up."

Kasey's heart hammered in her chest, her mouth dry and her tongue like a big stupid shoe.

"Cam said he wants to talk to you. And then I was thinking we could give you a makeover for TikTok."

Kasey couldn't speak.

"Anyway," Jenna said, "Send me an Insta message and let me know by Thursday, okay?"

Kasey said nothing as the trio turned and left. She turned back to Celeste, whose face was frozen in disbelief.

"Was that real?" Kasey asked.

"You definitely aren't going, right?" Celeste said. "*Right?*"

Kasey wanted to agree, but the idea that Cam Wilmington thought she was cute was stuck in her brain. He was quieter than the rest of his friends, though he still hung around the biggest jerks in school.

"Kase," Celeste said, realizing Kasey was actually considering it. "You *can't*."

"Okay but what if I keep on the lookout for whatever bullshit they're planning?" Kasey said.

"Cam does *not* like you," Celeste said, sensing the root of Kasey's indecision. "This is just a shitty prank."

This made Kasey angry; she knew she was weird and she didn't have a lot of friends, but she didn't think she was ugly. And if she was vigilant about this supposed makeover, she could make sure they wouldn't turn her into a clown.

Maybe she had a chance with Cam. She had to find out. So Kasey pulled out her phone and navigated to Jenna's instagram, and sent her a message.

★

"You have everything?" Kasey's mom asked.

"Yeah," Kasey said, nervously glancing at her phone, doublechecking the address Jenna sent her.

The trio of popular girls ignored her the entire week. And Celeste was icing her out too, thinking her decision to go to the party was a completely stupid idea.

Kasey's stomach was in knots as they stopped at the guardhouse before driving through the neighborhood. She gawked at the huge mansions with sprawling, manicured lawns, some of which had

gushing fountains.

"Jesus," Kasey's mom muttered. "What's this girl's name again?"

"Jenna Franklin."

"What do her parents do?" her mom asked, but Kasey shrugged. Kasey's mom turned into a long driveway and stopped in front of a towering front door. "You ready?"

Kasey didn't know what to say, so she nodded even though she felt like she was going to throw up. She grabbed her bag, got out, and rang the doorbell.

An older woman, presumably Jenna's mother, opened the door and smiled at Kasey. "Come on in, everyone else is in the kitchen. I can take your stuff."

Kasey waved awkwardly as her mom drove away. Once she stepped inside, she followed Jenna's mother into the ornate kitchen, accented by shining copper appliances.

"Hi Kasey," Ali said with a saccharine smile as she approached. There were six other girls, all of whom she knew from school but hadn't ever spoken to. They all greeted her, though it was clear they were just talking about her.

They can't embarrass you if you don't let them, Kasey reminded herself. She made herself smile before she sat down. She was quiet as the girls picked at the food and started gossiping about someone Kasey didn't know.

"Do you girls want anything else?" Jenna's mom asked as she returned to the kitchen, "I made a carrot cake."

"That's okay, mom," Jenna said. "We're gunna swim soon."

"When are the boys coming over?"

"Soon," Jenna said. "Jack said—"

The kitchen door swung open and an older man walked in; he was dressed in a slate gray suit with golden hair swept to the side. He had a phone pressed to his ear and was muttering something before he said, "Anyway, I'll call you tomorrow with the metrics."

"David!" Jenna's mother said happily, rushing over to kiss him as he hung up. Kasey watched them embrace and glanced at Jenna, who stared at her parents with an odd expression.

"I didn't know you were coming home this weekend," Jenna said.

"My big board meeting was rescheduled," he said. He made his way over to her and gave her a kiss on the top of her head. "How's my Jenny girl?"

"I'm good," she said.

He smiled and then looked over her friends before he spotted Kasey. "You're new," he observed, surprising her. "What's your name?"

"Kasey," she said, and offered her hand, squeezing tight like her

dad taught her to.

“Good firm grip,” David said with a grin.

Kasey glanced at Jenna, whose face was inscrutable, but once Jenna noticed her looking, she smiled up at her dad.

“Hi Mr. Franklin,” Ali said loudly, her head tilted to the side with a strange, Cheshire-cat smile. “What an unexpected surprise!”

Jenna threw a passing glare at Ali before she stared down at her lap.

“Always gotta see my girls,” he said, ruffling Jenna’s hair, though Jenna didn’t look up.

“I bet you still have a lot of work to do,” Ali said.

“Yep, a few more hours,” he sighed. “Well, off I go. I’ll be in my office if you need me.” He gave his wife a passing kiss before he left.

“Okay, let’s go change,” Ali said. “Thanks Mrs. Franklin!”

She led the group up the staircase, Kasey following behind, wondering why Jenna wasn’t leading the way.

Ali sat Kasey in front of a vanity once they were in Jenna’s room. “We’re gunna do your makeover now,” she decided, “Then we’ll swim with the boys after.”

“Won’t that ruin the makeup?” Kasey asked.

“You don’t actually swim,” said Cherie. “You just sit there and look pretty. Duh.”

“Did you bring a bathing suit?” Jenna asked, and Kasey nodded. “One piece, or two?”

Kasey felt a flush of humiliation; she still used her suit from fifth grade with jumping dolphins on it. “Um, one piece.”

The other girls giggled with laughter and Kasey fought the rising heat in her cheeks.

“That’s okay,” Ali said with another strange smile. “Jenna has a yellow bikini you can borrow. You’re not that fat so it should look good on you.”

Kasey frowned. “...Thanks?”

“Jenna, go get it.” After a beat of silence, Jenna went to her closet and returned with a yellow bikini, handing it over. Kasey looked down at the scraps of fabric, already anxious.

“Makeup time!” Cherie announced; she pulled out a round cardboard cake from her bag, which opened into several layers to reveal makeup. Kasey looked at the bright eyeshadow colors and the tiny reservoirs of different lip stick colors and circular pallets of blush and bronzer.

Cherie grabbed a few clips from the vanity and pinned back Kasey’s bangs. “First, I was thinking we could—”

“Wait,” Ali interrupted. Her head was tilted to the side again as she stared at Kasey in the mirror. “Jenna, you do the makeup. Use your stuff from Sephora.”

Cherie frowned. “But—”

“Jenna’s doing makeup,” Ali said again, this time, her voice harder.

Jenna and Cherie both looked surprised, but they didn’t say anything in return.

“Okay,” Jenna said softly. She switched places with Cherie and opened a few drawers on her vanity, pulling out the relevant accoutrement.

“Give her your glam look. Take a before picture so we can add it to the TikTok,” Ali said.

Kasey sat still as Jenna took a photo of her. To her surprise, Jenna turned the phone around so Kasey could review. Kasey didn’t think she looked bad, because her skin was clear and her hair wasn’t frizzy, but she was definitely plain looking.

Then, the girls got to work. Ali supervised while Cherie and another girl, Kayla, did Kasey’s hair, and Jenna focused on her face. After a while, they stepped away and let Kasey see herself; she gasped at how beautiful she looked, her hair shiny and smooth, her eyes smoky, face contoured, cheeks glowing with highlighter.

“Woah,” Kasey breathed.

“One more thing,” Jenna said, and retrieved a small basket. It had several tubes of lip gloss in it; she selected a muted rose color, holding it up to Kasey’s face. “This works with your undertones.”

“Actually,” Ali said slowly, “You should do a different one.” She rummaged through several tiny drawers on Jenna’s vanity, and then pulled out a white tube that read *Vanilla Birthday Cake*.

“How about... this?”

Kasey watched as Jenna stared down at it, looking vaguely ill.

“This... this one is expired.”

“I’m sure it’s fine,” Ali said.

Jenna clutched the tube. “I don’t know if—”

“Put it on,” Ali said, almost a snarl. Then again, she gave Kasey a sweet smile. “I heard Cam likes a scented lip.”

Kasey was uncomfortably silent as Jenna applied the lip gloss, her hand shaking slightly.

“Okay, let’s do the TikTok. Cherie, Kayla, teach her the dance,” Ali instructed. “Make sure she’s in the middle for the reveal.”

As Cherie and Kayla started explaining the dance steps, Kasey anxiously learned the simple dance routine. She stumbled a few times, but she ignored the laughs each time she tripped. Eventually she memorized it and Ali retrieved a tripod from Jenna’s closet.

“Do we like, sing or whatever?” Kasey asked, as Ali set up the camera and the girls got into formation around her.

“No, I edit in music after,” Jenna said, her voice unusually quiet. Ali hit record on her phone and got into place with the others.

“Kasey, just hold the pose at the end for a few seconds and then I’ll stop the video. Ready? *One two three four!*”

Kasey tried her best to stay in sync with the others, until the last moment where she became the center of the group and spun around as instructed. She stayed still until Ali moved and they all relaxed.

“It looks good,” Ali said as she reviewed. “Kasey looks nervous but I think that will add to the reveal.”

There was a knock at the bedroom door before it opened; “The boys are here,” Jenna’s mom said. “They’re in the pool already.”

“Thanks, mom,” Jenna said.

Several of the girls began to pull off their clothes and Kasey started to panic. “Um, can I get changed somewhere else?”

“You can use my bathroom,” Jenna said, gesturing to the door across the room.

Kasey went in and locked the door, changing into the yellow bikini. She tied everything more tightly, but she still felt more exposed than she wanted to be, even though she was mostly flat chested.

But maybe Cam will talk to me if I look sexy, she thought. She examined her hair and makeup, angling her underdeveloped body in the mirror; she was almost tempted to take a photo, but decided against it.

When she came out, the others had already changed.

Ali looked her up and down and smirked. “Perfect. Let’s go!”

The small gaggle of bikini-clad girls hurried down the stairs in excitement, Kasey following close behind. They took a left past the kitchen and opened a door, and a draft of warm, chlorine-scented air hit her nose as they went down a few more steps. Kasey could hear the boys already shrieking and splashing. They turned a corner and she saw the large pool, the deep end complete with a diving board and a slide.

Kasey followed suit as the girls sat on the lounge chairs as the boys got out to greet them. There were eight of them, all of whom she recognized, but hadn’t ever spoken to, even Cam Wilmington. She was silent as they chattered; no one seemed to notice Kasey, which was both a relieving and a disheartening feeling. One by one, the girls waded into the pool, leaving Kasey alone and confused. So, she sat at the edge and dangled her legs in the warm water. She wanted to swim, but she kept thinking about her hair and makeup and didn’t want to ruin them. Not that it really mattered; Cam hadn’t looked at her once, so Ali was probably lying anyway.

After a while, Ali got out of the pool and started to shout. “Okay wait! Let’s play a game! Everyone get out.”

It took a few minutes, but finally they were all out and toweling off.

“What’s the game?” asked Jack, rubbing out the excess water from his hair.

“We’re gunna play Sardines,” said Ali with a little smirk. “Kasey, do you know how to play?”

Suddenly they were all looking at her, and Kasey felt herself shrink as she shook her head. Eyes roamed her body as she stood there awkwardly in the yellow bikini.

But... Cam stared longer than everyone else. Maybe Ali *wasn’t* lying.

“It’s where one person hides and everyone else looks and then hides with them. The whole inside of the house is fair game,” Ali said. “*Right, Jenna?*”

Jenna shifted her weight, but nodded.

“So let’s make the first sardine... Cam,” Ali said. “You have five minutes to hide. Go!”

Cam wrapped a towel over his wet suit before disappearing up the stairs.

Ali set a timer on her phone before chatting with the other girls. Kasey was deeply confused.

Why did it seem like Ali was in charge of everything when they were in Jenna’s house?

When the timer was up, Kasey reached for a towel to wrap around herself just as everyone else had.

“You’re not wet, so you don’t need a towel,” Ali said. Kasey draped the towel around herself anyway. “I said you *don’t* need it.”

Kasey hesitated before reluctantly putting the towel down. She wrapped her arms around herself and followed the group up the stairs into the kitchen. They broke off into little groups to discuss where to look, but Ali approached her.

“We’ve played this before, and Cam usually hides on the third floor. There’s a bathroom at the end of the hall with a huge linen closet, it’s the best hiding spot,” Ali said, her voice almost a whisper.

Kasey was suspicious; “Why aren’t you going to look there?”

“Because I’m not the one Cam thinks is cute,” Ali said. “Anyway, good luck!”

Ali turned and beckoned to Jenna and Cherie, and they disappeared out of the kitchen with everyone else. Kasey stood there, feeling stupid, and decided that checking on the third floor certainly couldn’t hurt if she paid close attention to her surroundings for any ill-intended prank.

She slowly ascended the carpeted stairs, shivering as the air got colder. The third floor was silent as she arrived, but she went to the end of the hall, where Ali said the bathroom was. She knocked softly and went in, gazing at the deep soaking tub, a spacious rain shower, a separate toilet room, and a slatted door that was likely the linen

closet.

When she opened it, she was surprised to see how deep it was. She investigated, but despite the nooks and crannies, Cam wasn't there, so she turned around and left.

As she was coming out of the bathroom, another door opened and Jenna's dad David stepped into the hall.

"Hi Kasey!" he said.

Kasey was immediately aware that she was only wearing the bikini and wished she had kept the towel on, embarrassed that someone's dad could see her in a bathing suit definitely not meant for her.

"Hi," she said sheepishly, "We're playing Sardines. I hope it's okay that I'm up here."

"Yeah, it's totally fine," he said.

She smiled awkwardly at him, wondering where she should go next to look.

"Did Jenna do your makeup? It looks like how she does hers," David said.

Kasey nodded, bewildered that David knew Jenna's makeup look. Her own dad barely knew what her eye color was.

"I saw Ali's TikTok of your before and after," David said. "You're going to be a gorgeous girl soon. You already are."

Something uncomfortable squirmed inside of Kasey, but she didn't want to be impolite. "Um, thanks?"

He smiled, lifting his head slightly. "Did she give you that vanilla lip gloss too? I always loved that smell."

"Uh, yeah," Kasey said.

David nodded and leaned on the wall, his large frame taking up most of the hallway.

"Did Jenna ever tell you she did some modeling when she was younger?" David asked, and Kasey shook her head. "Her aunt is in fashion so we took some pictures here and got them submitted to magazines. Do you want to see some of her prints?"

Again, Kasey didn't want to be rude, since the possibility of hiding with Cam was a very high priority.

"That's okay," Kasey said, wondering how she could politely excuse herself.

"No worries," David said. "We could always take some modeling shots of you in that bikini. I'm sure Cam Wilmington would like them."

Kasey stopped thinking about the game for a second. Cam did stare at her in the yellow bikini. Would he like the pictures? Would that make him more likely to ask her out? Would a model shot of her in a bikini with her hair and makeup done make her popular?

"Okay," Kasey said.

"Cool," David said. "I have a dark room and a studio off of my office. Let's go there."

Kasey followed him down the long hallway to another door. To her surprise, David pulled out a key and unlocked the knob before the door swung open. The dark room was bathed in a soft red glow, and she could see another door with light shining through under the crack.

She took a step in—

"Kasey!" Jenna's voice said sharply.

Kasey turned and Jenna was standing on the stairs, her expression panicked. She glanced at her father before her face broke out into a sweet smile. "I saw Cam hiding in the laundry room. You should go hide with him."

"But your dad—"

"He's busy," Jenna said flatly; she rushed to Kasey and seized her wrist. "Come on, I bet he'll kiss you if you guys are alone."

Kasey gaped as Jenna dragged her towards the stairs. She glanced back at David, who stared at them before he closed and locked the door, returning to his office.

True to her word, Jenna brought her straight to the laundry room. She ushered Jenna inside and mouthed behind the dryer before silently shutting the door.

Kasey's heart was nearly exploding out of her chest, but the desire to have a boy kiss her, hell, look at her, was enough of a driving force. She made a show of peering around the room and then acted surprised when she spotted Cam.

"Hi," he said. He shuffled over so she could get beside him.

She wracked her brain for some small talk. "No one else has found you yet?"

"I guess not," Cam said.

They were silent for a long time; Kasey struggled to think of something to say, anything, that could land her a kiss.

"Who do you have for science?" she asked eventually.

"Miss Renner," Cam said. "You?"

"Mr. Goode," she said. "I hate him."

"Yeah I heard he's really mean," Cam said, and she nodded.

"Miss Renner is pretty nice. But we have that kid Tyler Jackson in our class."

"He's so annoying," Kasey said, and then hesitated before she added, "Even more annoying than me."

Cam laughed but didn't disagree. Eventually he said, "You look really pretty with that makeup on."

Kasey was officially dead. She swallowed the dry knot in her mouth as her heart threatened to explode out of her chest.

"Thanks," she struggled to say. "Jenna did it."

“Ali says she gave you vanilla lip gloss too,” Cam said, looking away and then back again. Kasey touched her lips, forgetting all about the makeup there. “Oh. Yeah, she did.”

“How does it taste?”

“Vanilla-y, I guess,” Kasey said. She gave her lips a little lick. “Yeah, vanilla-y. It’s nice.”

“Can I try it?”

Kasey was confused for a second, wondering why Cam wanted to try vanilla lip gloss, but then it hit her: they were alone.

He wanted to taste the lip gloss.

Cam wanted to kiss her.

“Okay,” Kasey squeaked, and promptly had a heart attack as Cam leaned in, placing his mouth gently on hers.

When he pulled away, he licked his lips. “It does taste good.”

Kasey smiled, blushing furiously.

They were silent for a few more minutes but they kept looking at each other. She was working up the courage to ask for another kiss when they both heard yelling from down the hall, and stood up at the same time.

They followed the sound to the living room, and saw the rest of the group standing around Jenna and Ali, who were yelling at each other.

“How could you do that!? You’re so mean!” Jenna screamed, tears were rolling down her face. “Why do you have to ruin everything?”

“Oh *sorry* I had a good idea!” Ali shot back. “You’re the one who ruined it, you fucking loser. No wonder I have to tell everyone to come over here! No one actually wants to be friends with you! Especially not after your dad—”

“*SHUT UP!*” Jenna screamed, before she fled up the stairs to her bedroom.

Jenna’s mother came out of the kitchen. “What’s going on?”

“Oh, Jenna’s just having a moment,” Ali said with a sickly sweet smile. Her mother frowned before hurrying up the stairs, presumably to Jenna’s room.

Ali turned on Kasey immediately. “Way to go, *freak*.”

“Me?!” Kasey exclaimed.

“None of this would’ve happened if you didn’t come.”

“*You guys invited me!*” she cried.

“Yeah but no one actually thought you’d like, show up,” Ali laughed, and the other girls snickered. Even some of the boys laughed, and when Kasey looked at Cam, Ali cackled.

“Wait, do you think Cam *actually* likes you?”

When Cam stared at the ground, tears rose to Kasey’s eyes.

Ali started to shriek even harder with laughter. “Oh my god she’s

going to *cry!*”

Kasey was rooted to the spot, but managed to keep her tears in long enough for Jenna’s mom to come downstairs with bags and jackets.

“Jenna’s not feeling well,” her mother apologized. “Sorry guys, but you’ll have to call your parents and go home.”

“We can just go to my house across the street,” Jack said. When Jenna’s mom left the room, their eyes all shifted to Kasey. “Not you, though,” he added.

More tears rose but Kasey fought them down as they laughed. This time, she wasn’t stupid enough to look at Cam when they filed out the front door.

She crumpled into the nearest chair once she was alone and burst into tears, humiliated by how stupid she was. Did she really think she was smart enough to navigate a party made to embarrass her? Did she really think she was good enough for any of the popular kids? For Cam?

She wiped her face and licked away the salty wetness on her mouth, hating the sickly sweet taste of the remaining vanilla lip gloss. She smeared it off her lips, wishing she had never had a taste of it in the first place.

A close-up photograph of several pink, bell-shaped flowers with green stems and leaves. The flowers are set against a solid black background, which makes the colors stand out. The lighting is soft, highlighting the delicate texture of the petals and the vibrant green of the foliage.

In the Marsh
by Kimi

Blood, Dirt, and Daughters
by Maryam

They were everywhere. In my garden, in my house, in my mind, in my heart. Walking on the paths carved by their mothers. I saw this carved on their faces that love doesn't come without compromises. It drains and sucks and feeds on you and your blood. I've seen them bleed while wiping someone else's tears. I've seen them wear smiles like one wears masks. I've seen them never learning to deny, and never learning to stand up, even when forty lifetimes pass, and even when forty autumns shed their leaves to clone their naked emotions—hidden so well beneath dirt. Sometimes they get too close. Often trying to drag me to walk behind them. But I've seen when they walk on paths led by nobody, they walk like water making its way to the sea.

Moscow Mourning

by Steve Waller



A bridge on the Moskva
an unknown rainy day
We met by chance

Staring down
the water beneath, on
the railing you danced

We played all day
You taught me Pushkin
I quoted Twain
Then books on Trotsky
I showed you Crane

The streets begged us
devoured by lust and time
Threw us into romance

You wanted rubles
I counted dollars
We settled for renaissance

You ached for babies
I sought scholars
We fell on silent response

We stayed up all night
I read Steinbeck
You talked Tolstoy
I yearned for passion
You craved a playboy

You passed Barysnokov
i walked with Fosse
No applause no response

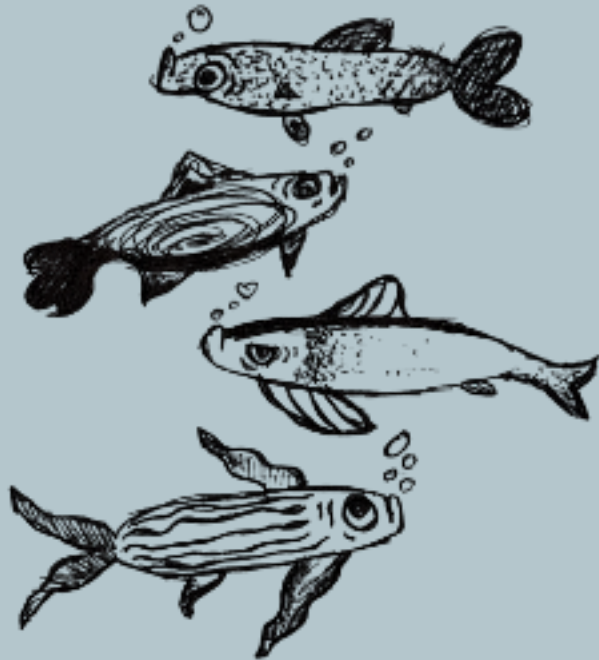
Sunrise brought caviar
and vodka with coffee
To each we fed wants

An empty bed
a morning note
a pillow of ache
The Moskva called
to fix its last mistake



Why We Don't Eat the Fish

by Michelle Barclay



CHARACTERS

JEFF (FATHER), a simple, rural man in his 50s

ELLIOT (SON), a slightly modernized version of the father, in his late 20s, early 30.

SETTING

A small, lakeside dock, yards of blue fabric stand in for water

ELLIOT

Everything's ready. I got a mattress for the crib you built and Emmy got some bumpers and whatnot to finish it up.

JEFF

[Adjusts his fishing line, keeping his eyes on the surface of the water.]

Not long now, right?

ELLIOT

[Shifts a little nervously]

I hope not. Emmy hasn't been sleeping, so I haven't been sleeping.

JEFF

Oh, there's just more of the same after, you know?

ELLIOT

[Sighs] So I've heard. *[Looking to his father's face.]* Dad, with the baby coming and all, I've been doing a lot of thinking.

JEFF

They have pills for that these days.

ELLIOT

[Looks back out over the water. Pauses.]

I've heard that too. Listen, I know this sucks, and I feel shitty even bringing it up, but do you think . . . do you have any idea where I might find Mom?

JEFF

[Inhales sharply through his teeth, his eyes never leave the water.]
You've never asked that before.

ELLIOT

Honestly? I never wanted to know before. She left me. It didn't matter where she went after, did it?

JEFF

Oh, I don't disagree with you. When a woman takes off, it doesn't matter which direction she goes. You oughtta let her leave.

ELLIOT

Did you just let Mom go?

JEFF

I wasn't given a choice, but I would have if I did.

ELLIOT

[Looks again at his father's profile]

I suppose that would have been fair, Dad. No matter how much you love someone, no self-respecting man wants to keep a wife he had to chase.

JEFF

Oh, don't be fooled, kid. I chased her plenty of times, and I did wanna keep her . . . until I didn't no more.

ELLIOT

[Reels in his empty line, keeping the rod in his hands even after it's in]

Well, where did she get off to when you'd chase her?

JEFF

You won't find her there, El. She ain't in those places.

ELLIOT

Do you know where she is?

JEFF

Why do you wanna know? What's having a baby have to do with having a gone Mom?

ELLIOT

[A little defensive] Lots.

JEFF

I'm not trying to shove you off, boy. My Ma left me the natural way, as you know, and I don't have any way of knowing what you're thinking or feeling other than you telling it to me straight.

ELLIOT

[Shoulders relax; he places the rod on the dock next to him]

I'm a little ashamed to tell my kid its grandma left me. *[Pause]* No, it's more than that. I'm pissed that my kid doesn't get a grandma. Emmy's mom died ages ago and mine may as well have. It's not fair. I know she was never going to be all baked pies and knit socks, but she was better than nothing.

JEFF

Was she?

ELLIOT

[Defensive again] Dad.

JEFF

[An edge in his voice] No, I mean it, El. Was she better than nothing? Was your life better with her than it was without? Because, that's not how I remember it. I ain't trying to hurt you, but that's the damn truth. She was mean, and not just to me. I'm sorry I let it go on as long as it did, but she never hit ya, so-

ELLIOT

Alright, I get your point. Maybe I wouldn't even let her be in our lives if I found her. Maybe I just want to cuss her out and let her know what she's missing. Maybe I just want to see her face so I can remember it. Maybe I want to make sure I'm not like her, that I won't leave.

JEFF

Oh, hell. You ain't gonna leave! *[JEFF turns to look at his son and nudges him with one elbow.]* You don't even let Emmy go to get a flu shot alone since you know she's pregnant. Get off it. Leave?

ELLIOT

[Urgency in his voice, hands clasped between his legs, like he has to hold them still] Okay, maybe I won't. Probably I won't. I got it in my head I need to find her, and that's what I'm aiming to do, Dad. Can you help me?

[JEFF stares at the water, his hands clenched on the fishing pole, unmoving. He's silent for a good moment.]

JEFF

[Jaw clenched] It may be that I can.

ELLIOT

[Voice much softer, sympathetic] I would be very grateful, Dad. I mean it. I know it's a big ask. I know you don't deserve this, and she doesn't deserve me, but I can't help myself.

JEFF

You might wish you could.

ELLIOT

[Nods slowly]

I know.

JEFF

Before we get into it, I want to make it crystal, kid. This road doesn't lead where you think it does. You're gonna know things I never wanted you to know, things I've kept from you most of your life.

ELLIOT

I get . . .

JEFF

[Interrupting] No, you don't get it, so don't even say it. Let me finish.

[ELLIOT nods]

JEFF

Even though it's not going to take you where you think it is, I'm willing to tell you a story about where you'd find your mom. I just need to hear from you that you want this, knowing that it will change how you feel about both your parents, about your life, forever.

*[ELLIOT waits. Appears to think.
Stares out over the lake at the far shore.]*

ELLIOT

Alright, Dad. I'm okay with that.

JEFF

'member I said chased Mom?

ELLIOT

[Nodding] Mmhmm.

JEFF

Most of the time it was to the bar or her Ma's house. Sometimes, she wasn't alone, and the house she was in wasn't her Ma's, if you catch my drift.

ELLIOT

Damn. Sorry, Dad.

JEFF

I'm not. It's been a damn long time, and, don't hate me for saying it, she did us both a favor. Anyway...

*[JEFF sets down his fishing pole, line still in the water,
and takes two beers out of the small cooler to his left,
handing one to ELLIOT, takes a sip of his]*

She eventually got to running around with a guy we knew in high school, a "bad guy." You might remember Mike?

ELLIOT

That guy who was always trying to sell you his stuff?

JEFF

[Surprised] You remember that?

ELLIOT

He sold us Sadie.

JEFF

Oh, right. She was a damn good dog. Can't believe she lived that long. Anyway, that's the guy. He was a small-time hustler, trying to make a deal out of everything. Got to be annoying frankly, but he would drive your mother places I wouldn't, so she started running with him when she was running.

[JEFF takes a long sip.]

Well, she used to tell me that she hated this place, said I smelled like the fish and that the fish tasted like shit. So, I only ever came down here by myself or with you. I paid a guy to keep the pests out, the faucet dripping in the winter and the grass mowed in the summer since we couldn't get down much.

ELLIOT

I remember being here a lot.

JEFF

That's after Mom left.

ELLIOT

Oh, right.

JEFF

That summer, you were with my parents for a week since we couldn't find your Mom, and I had to work. They said they'd take you over for the weekend too so I could have a break. I took it, and I came down here with my tackle box and a backpack.

*[JEFF closes his eyes, turning his face a little up to the sun.
ELLIOT watches him, respectfully quiet.
JEFF opens his eyes.]*

JEFF

When I got here, there was a car in the driveway, Mike's car. I wanted to be angry. I knew I should be, but I was just tired. Tired of chasing her, tired of cleaning up her messes, tired of not being able to just fucking fish in peace.

[ELLIOT tenses, fidgeting on the spot.]

JEFF

It was the last time she'd ruin a visit to the lake. It was the last time he would be a thorn in my side. I walked into the living room with my tackle box. The house was really quiet, and I was a little surprised they hadn't noticed me come in, until I saw them. Both of them, sitting upright on the couch with their heads at this weird angle against the back. They'd been dead for a bit. I don't know how long, but they were cold, even in the heat. It didn't smell or nothing, but I knew they were gone, gone. The vomit on both their chins and the crackhead shit all over the table was evidence enough to how it happened.

[JEFF looks at ELLIOT, pausing his story]

ELLIOT

Wait, Mom was a crackhead?

JEFF

Not that I knew of, but Mike partied harder than anyone I knew, and Mom wasn't afraid to follow the leader when it came to a good time. I imagine he got her into it and she never had a chance to get out.

ELLIOT

Am I the only person who doesn't know this?

JEFF

Nope. You're the only other person who does.

ELLIOT

[Surprised, confused] What?!

JEFF

Well, I didn't want you growing up with what I'd just seen in your head. I figured I'd carry it for both of us. I mean, they'd ran away together. There was plenty of evidence of that fact. Why not let people think they just kept running?

ELLIOT

How would they think that, Dad?

JEFF

Whelp. I parked my truck in the pine grove, away from the road, and waited for night. I filled a bucket with all their bullshit and some rocks and put their clothes and such in the trunk of his car. I tied cinder blocks to their bodies and dumped 'em out of your Pa's canoe. And, I'm not ashamed of it.

ELLIOT

Wait, I know Mom didn't have family, but what about Mike?

JEFF

Oh, I sold his car to a janky old lot a few counties over, told 'em I was Mike. Far as anyone knew, Mike sold the car to buy smack and took off with my wife.

ELLIOT

Fuuuuccck, Dad. That's kinda crazy.

JEFF

Oh, yeah? *[A little angry]* Crazy how? Someone'd have to bury them anyhow, and I saved his poor Ma from having to pay for it, and saved you having to know your mom died on a couch in a house she hated full of some poison shit a rat-ass scab gave her, and she did it happily, leaving us in her dust.

ELLIOT

[Lets out a huge sigh like he's been holding his breath] I guess that's fair, Dad. You know you're going to have to do double grandparent duty now, right? Bake pies? Darn socks?

JEFF

I'll buy socks and your aunty can bake pies. I'll build a fort, if you'll let me.

ELLIOT

[Looks at his father, puts his hand on his shoulder]

I'll let you.

[Drops hand and looks back out over the vastness of the lake.]

Dad?

JEFF

Hmm?

ELLIOT

Is that why we don't eat the fish we catch?

JEFF

Sure, that and they taste like shit.

THE END





Transparency
by Caitlin Bardorf

You always sucked at games
you were insecure about it, too

told me I should go easy, sometimes
cuz you deserved to win
but if I made it obvious, you'd be so upset
that I had listened

and yet you were sweet. So sweet in fact
that I hated the thought
of seeing you.
Too hard to be near. Bad taste

You're a master angler, you know.
an anglerfish, that is
everywhere I went I could see you brightly
even after you left, and it drew me away

From safety, you came to sate
my desperation.

I supped of your syrup
your sweet, sweet ipecac.
The emptiness you blessed upon me
Felt So Full

I thought it hurt but how can one
really remember? Memory is such a fickle...

For your transgressions, your wandering lust,
the blame is all for me. me. me.

You were always great at games, you played them
so effortlessly that I wasn't sure you knew

You drove me insane
like a gas leak
the fuel of your angler's lantern
fled from every bite wound

Embrace me in a towel and hide me
in the woods. Don't bury me.
Decay feels better that way.

your light in my endless darkness;
a lure is just a guide
leading to an end unfavored

Sweet, Sweet Lights
by Aurelia Rodriguez-Cooley



From Silence, She Bloomed

by Karla Monterrosa



My hands once moved without doubt. I reached for paper instinctively—but pain distanced me, until even my own hands felt like strangers.

So I returned to them. Through each curve and fold, they remembered before I did.

Piece by piece, I was rebuilding—not who I was, but who I am becoming.



In relearning my hands,
I made myself again.

Caribou

by Dani Joseph

“Have you ever been to confession?”

Rosemary was scrunched up in the passenger seat of the car with her knees pulled up to her chest and her shins squished up to the dashboard. She spoke without looking up from her phone. She extended an arm out behind her, feeling around for her water bottle that had fallen to the ground when the brakes were slammed after a close call with a rogue muskrat. Corbin's right hand rested on the wheel, and his left arm hung out the cracked window, bouncing with every bump or rock or hole on the road. He cocked his head to the left, simultaneously arching a brow and shooting a confused glance at the girl in the passenger seat.

“Huh?”

“Confession, like at a church. You go in and sit with the priest and tell him all the sins you’ve committed. Well, my priest sat behind the wall, but you basically just tell him how sorry you are and that you’re not going to do it again and beg God to forgive you.”

“I can’t say I have, Ro. What do you mean you spoke to a wall?”

A grin found its way onto his face and the cloud that had been blocking the sun rolled away, allowing rays just as the grin had. He used the hand from the steering wheel to turn down the music the pair had decided upon, eager to absorb whatever came out of her lips next.

“Really? That is so sad, I am so sorry for you.” Her voice quivered slightly as she continued. “I think that may have been my favorite part of going to church. That or the pizza they would give us during Sunday school when it ran through the evenings. Oh, that stuff was so good, you have no idea.” She dropped her gaze down to her lap, locking in on her nails. She had painted them white the day before but less than 24 hours later they were chipped and uneven. Some were jagged, sharp, angular edges. The skin around them was no better, a bloody, raw mess. She scoffed when she noticed the imperfections. She brought her fingers to her mouth and started gnawing at the already open wounds, tearing bits of skin off with her teeth. She felt like a wild animal whenever she did, a vulture ravaging the bloody corpse of a moose, ripping flesh and pulling tendons.

“When was the last time you went? To confession, I mean. Not Sunday school.”

Rosemary sucked air in through her teeth, throwing her head

back against the headrest as she shut her eyes in thought. Her hands moved and she began to rub the blood from her fingers onto the window.

“Fuck, I don’t know, ten years, maybe twelve? I think I was still in middle school. A while.”

“Do you miss it?”

“I don’t know. I guess, yeah. It was nice to talk to someone and know that whatever I said, no matter how fucked up or gross, or horrible and immoral it was, I’d just be heard and not immediately turned into a villain, or a victim. Maybe I was just a poor helpless thing or a horrible dick but I wasn’t there to be ridiculed. The whole concept is kinda messed up when you really think about it, but god was it nice to feel absolved of guilt even for just a minute.”

Rosemary stretched across the center console and grabbed the wheel with both hands, turned it as far to the left as it could possibly go, sending the car skidding towards the river.

Corbin slammed his foot onto the brake pedal and shifted down hastily. The car rolled slowly to a stop. A light fog developed on the front windshield from the warm breath coming from the gaping mouths of the two.

Rosemary swung the door open, pulling to get out while still buckled. She undid the buckle and all but fell out to the cold ground, then she scurried across the road and quietly knelt down.

Corbin followed a few minutes after, needing a moment to process what just happened. He approached Rosemary, who was fully hunched over. Her body shook and Corbin could hear quiet, distinct hics. In front of her was a juvenile caribou. Her breathing was labored, each deep, quivering breath a clear struggle. She had been shot a few times, and this seemed to be as far as she managed to drag herself before collapsing. Hoof prints in the snow led off in the direction the caribou was facing, where her herd must’ve left her.

“Someone shot her.” Her words slurred together as her saliva spilt out of her mouth and mixed with snot dripping from her frosted nose. “He wanted her to suffer.” Rosemary reached a hand out and over the animal's snout but froze for a moment when she heard Corbin whisper a pathetic plea for her to ‘wait.’ The caribou's eyes opened, saw the hand hovering before her, and slowly closed again. Rosemary took this act as permission to stroke her nose. She slid her hand from the fur between the baby's budding antlers down to the soft patch above her nose. The act elicited a soft grunt, prompting a weak smile to spread across Rosemary's wet face.

“Corbin, go get the rifle.”

He swiftly turned back to the car, offering no protest. He knew why she asked for it. He would have suggested it if she hadn't. He rummaged around in the trunk of the car and listened as Rosemary cooed and whispered to the baby caribou. He heard her voice quiver and crack, and with each affirmation, he truly couldn't decide who her words were meant to comfort: the caribou or herself?

She started reciting something, what sounded like an incantation to Corbin. He found the rifle wedged deep beneath a pile of Rosemary's belongings. His feet moved slow, he caught himself dragging them as he made his way back to the girls.

"Do...do you want me to do it?"

Rosemary was curled up in her seat, knees flush against her chest, her white shirt now stained pink. Ripe, metallic blood circulated in the air of the car, stronger each second.

Corbin tried to get the blood soaked shirt off of her, offering up a warm flannel, a baggy tee, a sweatshirt. She refused them all. A wet red mark appeared on the window when she pressed her forehead against the cool glass. Her ears still rang from the rifle being fired so close to her. Elevation changes left her head spinning, the pressure only highlighted by the persistent hum of tinnitus. She had zoned out, staring ahead at the unending plains of snow.

She couldn't get the image of the caribou out of her head. She had done it. She took the rifle, whispered a prayer loud enough only she and god could hear it, pressed the muzzle flush against the fuzz spot between her antlers, and fired two rounds. Her body went limp and gave out, causing her to collapse atop of the now motionless corpse. Trails of blood formed tributary channels, and soon all of the white snow surrounding the two became a deep red. She instructed Corbin to retrieve an origami flower from her bag, which she laid next to her. She silently returned to the car.

"My dad took me hunting for the first time. I think I was maybe seven or eight. It was around the time I was getting ready for my first communion."

Rosemary's eyes had been closed and she had been snoring for two hours when she finally spoke again. Corbin, unaware that she had woken up, grabbed his heart, accompanied by a small yelp. He acknowledged the statement, waiting for Rosemary to continue.

"I guess you wouldn't know what I'm talking about, you know, agnostic and all. It was after the first time I went to reconciliation.

It's the second of three steps to becoming a 'real' Catholic. I always found that so funny, how a child could be so impure and 'in need of moral cleansing,' and then you eat the little cracker and drink some wine and boom! You're suddenly two thirds of the way to Catholic. The girls, we got to wear these beautiful white dresses and if you were lucky some kind of a headpiece. I wore a veil. We looked like little child brides, lined up and waiting to walk down the aisle. Some of the boys wore white suits, but most of them wore regular black ones they already owned."

Rosemary shifted in her seat and Corbin offered his hand. She began poking and prodding and squeezing it, and Corbin chuckled before realizing she was doing so in a serious manner.

"Anyways, he had told me some bullshit about how it was about time I finally learned something useful. I mean, I spent my days doing normal seven-year-old girl things. I never understood why he insisted I learn how to hunt. We didn't rely on it for food or anything. He hunted for sport and he knew how uncomfortable I was around guns because of my mom. He took me out into the woods behind the house. I had to lay still on the ground so I wouldn't scare anything away."

"Tell me," Rosemary said. "*What god would do something so cruel?* I stopped praying after that."



Aerial
Photography
by Julio Aguilar

Interview with Julio Aguilar

by Dani Joseph & Brooke Richey

How long have you been doing aerial photography?

Since 2018, when I moved to Florida for a year. I was given a secondhand drone by my uncle, who couldn't figure out how to get it to fly. As a child, I had a passion for aviation so I immediately got airborne and loved the feeling. One day I was injured at work. After surgery on my shoulder, I couldn't lift anything heavy. I really just flew my drone all day and learned what I could.

How did you get into this type of photography? Have you used any other mediums of photography?

I have always had a passion for wildlife and aviation but the two really never mixed. I began volunteering at an animal sanctuary where I specialized in reptiles, mainly alligators, crocodiles, and venomous snakes. The owner of the sanctuary was also the curator of an alligator farm about a mile south. He offered me a job wrestling alligators for tourists. I worked on the farm from 1999–2008. My job was to help facilitate the safety of nature documentary crews while ensuring the safety of the animals they were filming. After a while, directors were handing me the camera and asking me to shoot the more dangerous close-up shots. I made a name for myself doing that and eventually, my



boss encouraged me to buy my own camera and editing gear to license footage off. I think I filmed stock footage for a week, posted it on YouTube (in its early days), and after a week received a call from National Geographic asking if I'd be interested in licensing footage. To this day I still license footage for Nat Geo and other networks. Part of my production work also involved me being in front of the camera as either an extra with a guard dog, wrestling or handling crocodilians and setting up shots for the crew with smaller animals. From 2001–2005, my team and I were featured on "Miami Animal Police," which aired on Animal Planet. I then began getting requests from production crews to travel with them as a wildlife cinematographer since I knew my way around dangerous wildlife but could still compose shots.



Wingaersheek Beach is considered to be one of the top beaches in New England. It has the clearest, blueist water I've seen since I have lived in Massachusetts. It also has some really cool rock formations that look even cooler when the sun hits them in the morning.





Saint Cloud, Florida, where I lived for a short time. I enjoy photographing unusual places with a new perspective. From the ground, those cars were literal junk. From above, they looked like organized chaos. Pieces of machinery with stories under their hoods, road trips on their tires, and likely adventures we'd never know about.



Framingham between rain showers. I always loved trains as a kid and was always curious as to what they carried on their containers. Just like the car junkyard, the trash in the containers looked like organized chaos. It is also a stark reminder to us as humans, that are trash ends up in unexpected places which harms our planet.

My stepfather was an aviation mechanic at Miami International Airport. On the weekends we'd go out to Homestead, which was just fields and swamps at the time, where we'd meet up with a group of WW2, Vietnam and Korean War veterans who flew RC planes, gyros, and ultralights. I would often help (or at least try to help) my stepfather in building the RC's and got to know the group really well. One of the guys took me up on an ultralight where I figured out quickly that I was not fond of heights and would therefore never want to actually fly an aircraft. But building and flying little ones was still cool.

Between my RC/aviation passion and working with wildlife behind the camera—a drone is a flying camera. It was a no-brainer. How often are two paradoxical passions combined into something that can become a career and is in demand?

Do you travel specifically for shoots?

I don't travel specifically for shoots unless they are paid, but I always have at least two drones on me at all times even when I drive through Boston. I also make sure that when I am on vacation, I travel with a few different drones.

Where do you find inspiration?

I find inspiration from people. People that drive past the same boring sites every day and take them for granted. You can look at a salt marsh from the ground but by air it tells a completely different story. I find inspiration from my family and try to set a high bar for my kids so that I can set them up for success, creative success.

I wasn't allowed much creativity when I was growing up. Leaving home and finally being able to explore my creativity was like uncaging a wild animal. My wife also sets the bar pretty high. She finished college and obtained a master's degree; I on the other hand am taking the longer path to success. I also find inspiration from other fellow drone photographers and creatives as well as paintings by Van Gogh (hence my Instagram handle, drone_van_gogh).



**Scan to see more of
Julio's photography**

Apocalypse Meow

by Zoe Dissanayake

I knew something was wrong the moment the birds started screaming.

Not the usual chirp or squawk, but a panicked, high-pitched shrieking that scraped against my ears and made them flatten instinctively. It was the kind of sound prey makes when it already knows it's too late. Birds are stupid, but they are not *that* stupid. If they were screaming like that, something had already gone very wrong.

Humans ran past my window, waving their arms like fools. Some carried strange glowing boxes, shouting into them as if the boxes could shout back. Others just ran. Running without purpose is a very human thing to do. Cats, on the other hand, run *only* when it matters.

I stayed on the windowsill and watched.

I did not understand their words. I never have. But I understand tone. Fear has a smell, a rhythm, a shape. It makes movements jerky and unpredictable. It makes creatures louder than they need to be.

The humans were very loud.

Then the sky turned the color of bruised lemons.

I tilted my head. I have seen many skies: gray, blue, the soft orange of late afternoon that warms the fur just right. But this, this was wrong. Sickly. It pulsed faintly, as if something enormous was breathing behind it.

And the smell. Burnt toast, yes, but sharper. Chemical. Bitter. It coated my tongue even through the glass.

Below, one human tried to open a car door. They yanked and yanked, shouting at it as though the machine had chosen to betray them. The door did not open. The car did not move. The human screamed.

I blinked slowly.

Cars always betray humans. This was not new.

Still, I slipped down from the sill and tucked myself under the couch. It was not fear, exactly. More like... adjustment. One must always be prepared for the world to become inconvenient.

The ground shook. A deep, bone-thudding *boom* rattled the walls. Something shattered somewhere nearby, glass, probably. Humans love glass. They put it everywhere and then act surprised when it breaks.

More screams. More running. Then fire.

From the small gap beneath the couch, I watched flickers of

orange reflect against the walls. Fires popped up like mushrooms, sudden and multiplying, devouring whatever they touched. The air grew thicker, heavier. Even inside, it tasted wrong.

My humans hadn't come home in days. This, admittedly, was the first real problem.

They were inconsistent creatures, prone to leaving at odd hours, but they always returned. Always filled my bowl. Always complained about "work" or "traffic" or "the economy", all things that seemed, frankly, like poor excuses for not prioritizing me.

But now? Nothing. No footsteps. No jangling keys. No irritated sigh when they saw I had knocked something over for entertainment.

I walked through the house once, just to confirm. The bed still smelled like them, faintly. The couch held their shape. One of their shoes lay tipped over near the door, as if it had been kicked off in a hurry.

I nudged it with my nose. It did not move on its own.

Unhelpful.

At least they had taken Scout with them. I shuddered at the just thought of him. He is loud, clumsy, and convinced that my existence revolves around his happiness. He follows. He licks. He *wags*. Constantly. He also eats everything, even things that are not food. Once, I watched him eat a sock. A whole sock. No hesitation. No shame.

So yes. Good riddance.

The bowl was still empty. I licked it anyway, just to be certain. Nothing. Not even a respectable crumb.

Unacceptable.

I waited one more day. Then another. Hunger sharpened my patience into something thinner, more brittle. The fires outside burned lower, but the sky stayed wrong. The air stayed wrong.

No humans.

Fine.

If the humans were not coming back, then I would simply have to do what they clearly could not: survive.

I slipped through the Scout-sized flappy hole in the wall, a humiliating contraption installed for his convenience, and stepped outside.

The world hit me all at once.

The smells were overwhelming; smoke, chemicals, something metallic and sharp beneath it all. The ground felt warmer than it should. The usual city scents, garbage, food, and other animals were still there, but twisted, amplified.

Different.
 Interesting.
 I padded across the cracked pavement, tail high, whiskers forward. The street I had only ever watched from a distance stretched out before me, unfamiliar and full of possibility.
 Rats scurried along the edges, their movements frantic. Now *that* was something I understood.
 I crouched low.
 Patience.
 The rat darted left, then right, its tiny heart beating so loudly I could almost hear it. Fear makes prey sloppy. Sloppy makes them easy.
 I waited for the moment and pounced.
 My claws met fur. A brief struggle. Then stillness.
 Efficient.
 I carried my prize back to the porch and ate slowly, savoring it. Not as good as the soft, processed pellets my humans provided, but acceptable. Fresh. Honest.
 Survival, after all, is an art.
 From my porch, I watched the rest of the world unravel.
 Humans stumbled through the streets, fewer now, their movements slower. Some carried things. Others dragged them. A few simply sat, staring at nothing, as if waiting for instructions that would never come.
 One human tried to lift something that was very clearly on fire. It fell on him. He screamed.
 I flicked my tail, mildly entertained.
 They never learn.
 Days passed. I mapped my territory carefully, expanding outward in measured increments. A yard here. An alley there. Always returning to the house before nightfall. Not because I feared the dark, please, but because the unknown demands respect.
 The first night I stayed out too long, I learned why.
 The quiet deepened. Not empty. Not peaceful.
 Every sound carried further. Every movement felt louder.
 Somewhere in the distance, something howled, not like a dog, not like anything I had heard before. It rose, cracked, and then stopped abruptly.
 I did not investigate. I am not foolish.
 Other animals began to appear.
 A raccoon, bold and greasy, who eyed me with unnecessary confidence.

“This is mine,” I told him, with a low, steady growl.
 He hesitated.
 Good.
 Then he left.
 A pair of crows perched on a broken streetlight, watching everything with unsettling intelligence.
 “Something has changed,” one of them croaked.
 “Yes,” I replied, grooming a paw. “Obviously.”
 “The sky is wrong.”
 “Also obvious.”
 They tilted their heads in unison, as if trying to understand me.
 Birds.
 “Where are your humans?” the other asked.
 “Gone,” I said. “Irrelevant.”
 The crows exchanged a look.
 “Not irrelevant,” one muttered.
 I ignored them.
 Humans had always been a convenient resource. Food providers. Door openers. Lap warmers, when they behaved correctly. But they were never essential.
 I was essential.
 Still, that night, when the silence pressed in and the distant howling returned, I found myself sitting a little closer to the door than usual.
 Just in case.
 The nights grew quieter in a way that made my fur prickle. Not peaceful, never peaceful. Just... empty. The kind of silence that suggests something is missing. Or something is waiting.
 One evening, as the bruised sky dimmed into a deeper, more unsettling shade, I heard a familiar sound. A bark.
 Loud. Sharp. Incredibly annoying.
 I froze.
 No.
 It couldn’t be...
 Another bark, closer this time.
 “HELLO?!” a voice shouted, unmistakably canine in its enthusiasm. “HELLO?? FRIEND??”
 I sighed. Scout burst into view from around the corner, tongue lolling, tail wagging with enough force to power a small machine.
 “YOU’RE ALIVE!” he barked, skidding to a halt in front of me. “I’M ALIVE, TOO!”
 “I can see that,” I said coolly.

He circled me twice, sniffing aggressively.
“I THOUGHT YOU WERE GONE! EVERYTHING IS
LOUD AND SMELLY AND ALSO ON FIRE!”

“Yes,” I said. “I can see that.”

He sat abruptly, panting.

“I MISSED YOU.”

I stared at him.

“I did not miss you,” I said.

He grinned anyway.

“OKAY!”

“Where are the humans?” I asked.

His tail slowed, just slightly.

“I don’t know,” he admitted, rather excitedly. “We were in the car, and then the car stopped, and then there was yelling, and then I jumped out the window, and then there was a loud bang, and then I ran, and then I couldn’t find them anymore, AND THEN I FOUND YOU!”

“So you did. Maybe you should go back and look for them.”

“Oh, I couldn’t tell you where I left them! I just ran and ran and ran and ran and ran AND THEN I FOUND YOU!” His tail began wagging faster again.

“Can I stay with you?” he asked with a grin.

“No.”

He wagged harder.

“Great!”

I closed my eyes.

This was going to be a problem. He doesn’t have a single thought behind his eyes. He’s never going to leave me alone.

Still... two creatures hunt better than one, even if one of them is incompetent.

“Fine. But stay out of my way,” I said finally.

“I WILL TRY!” he said, immediately tripping over his own paws.

Yes. A problem indeed.

But as we sat there, watching the broken world under its sickly sky, I realized something I had not expected. Maybe it was because Scout’s panting was so loud, but the silence felt... less heavy.

I flicked my tail.

“Do *not* slow me down,” I warned.

“I WON’T!” he said, already distracted by a passing smell.

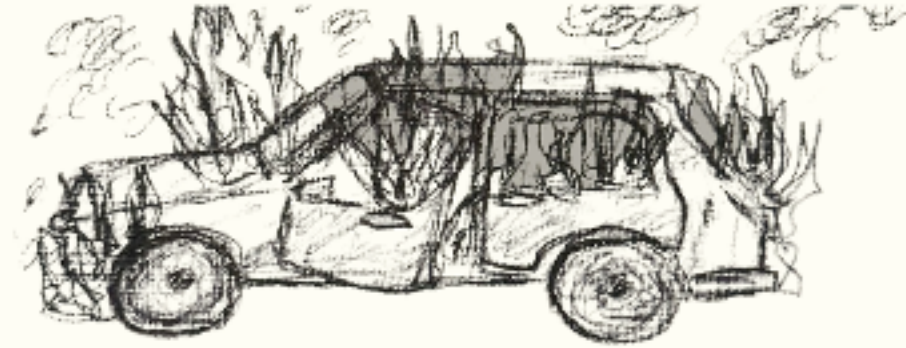
I sighed again, but did not leave. The world had changed. The humans were gone. The sky was wrong. But I was still here. And

now, unfortunately, so was Scout.

Fine. We would survive.

After all, survival is an art.

And I am very, very good at it.



Frequently Asked Questions

Who can submit work to lumière?

Anyone, and that includes you! It's our practice to ensure that at least 70% of the work in the magazine has been created by students, but we also find it important to publish work from faculty, staff, members of the community, and anyone else who hears our call.

What types of work are accepted?

You can submit your poetry, short fiction, prose, short plays, lyrics, artwork, photographs, and other creative work.

Do you pay for published work?

Unfortunately no, but we'll mail you a copy of the magazine if you need one, and we cover the cost of submitting work to a variety of contests.

How can I submit my work?

Go to lumiere.litmag.com and click "Submit Your Work!" at the top of the page, or email us at litmag@massbay.edu.

How are submissions reviewed?

First, our submissions manager removes all identifying information from the submission. The editorial team looks for work that is original in subject and style, showing the world something new, or letting us see something familiar in a new light. We highly value attention to craft, no matter what the medium. We evaluate work based on technical accomplishment and impact.

Does the magazine staff edit submissions?

We reserve the right to crop and enhance art submissions, to copyedit, and to make minor changes to maintain consistency across the magazine, but we highly value the integrity of the work we receive and will not make substantive changes. We promise not to change your ending.

Can I publish my work

anonymously? Yes! When filling out the website submission form you can choose to have your piece published anonymously or with a pseudonym.

When's the submission deadline?

We accept submissions all year round and publish annually at the end of the spring semester. The deadline for each issue will be announced every spring. Submissions received after the deadline will be reserved for the following issue.

Is AI work accepted?

Per our submission guidelines, all submissions must be the creation of the applicant; therefore, AI-created or assisted work is not accepted for review.

Is fan art accepted?

Our goal is to accept works that are unique and unfamiliar to the audience. While fan art is considered a type of art, it is not exclusive to the artist and is therefore not accepted. Also, without the appropriate licenses and permissions, fan art may be considered an infringement of the copyholder's right to publish that work.

Who creates the magazine?

The magazine is primarily developed by the hard-working students of EN202: Advanced Writing; however, any student at MassBay is welcome and encouraged to join the lumière staff. If interested, please contact English Professor Matt Walsh at mwalsh@massbay.edu.

How can I view the magazine?

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