

*Gonzaga's Journal of Art,  
Poetry, & Prose*

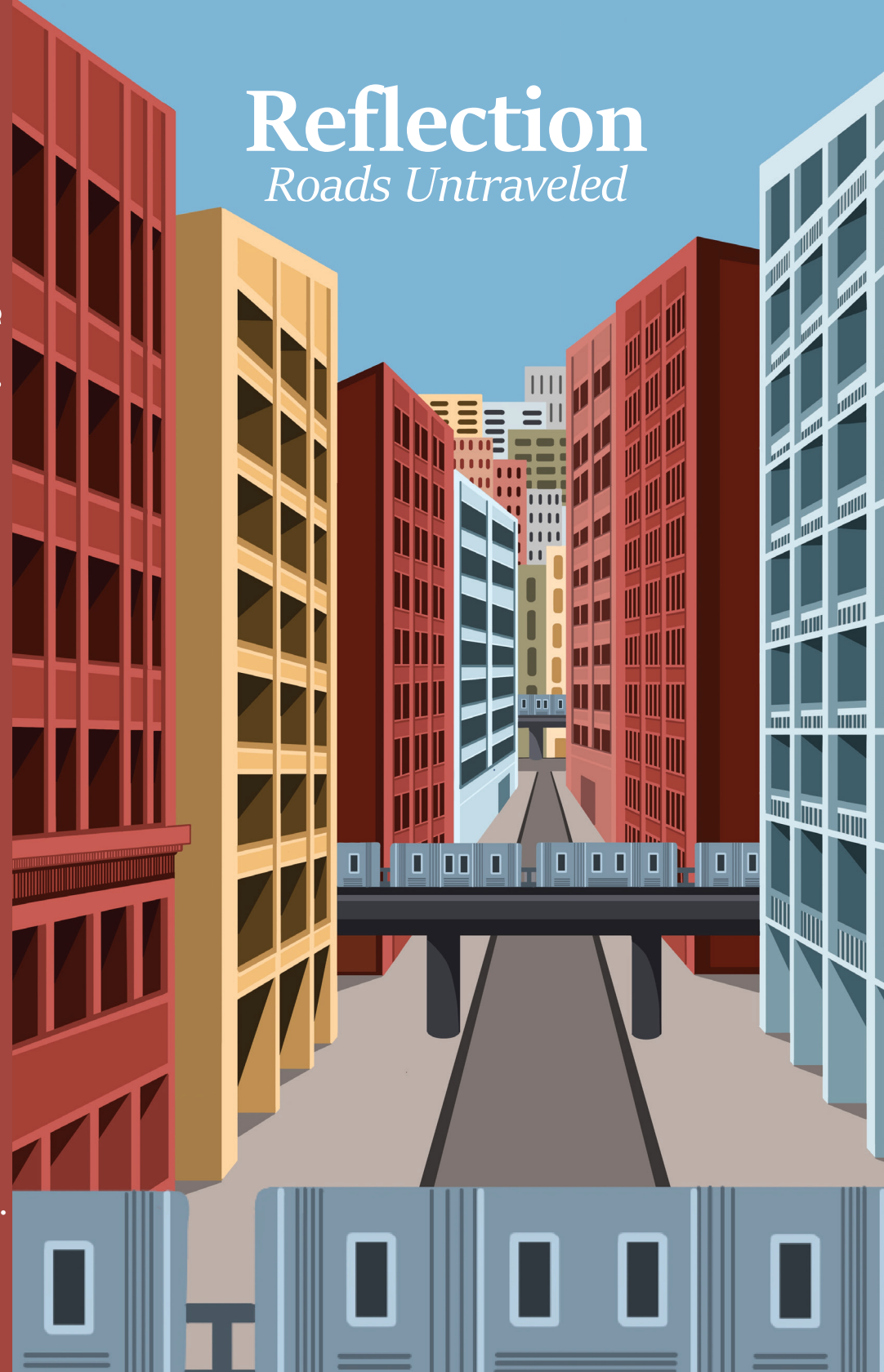


# Reflection

*Roads Untraveled*

Reflection 2023

Vol.  
64



# Reflection

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Volume 64

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***Reflection* submissions are evaluated and selected anonymously.**

# Reflection

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Volume 64

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*Some pieces in this journal have been identified as containing material that may be upsetting to some audiences. These pieces may include alcoholism and drug use, neurodegenerative disease, violence, blood, religious trauma, depiction of death, suicidal ideation, domestic abuse, drowning, racism, medical content, and mental illness.*

# Acknowledgments

Our team could not have produced this book without the help of Joanne Shiosaki, Jeff Dodd, and Morgan Sheerer. Thank you for your generous help and guidance. Additionally, our appreciation goes out to the readers of the Michael and Gail Gurian Writing Awards committee, especially Dr. Tod Marshall. And to Russel Davis and the staff at Gray Dog Press; thank you for your continued support of Gonzaga Student Media. This is only a fraction of the individuals who helped to produce this year's journal. To all who have touched this volume in one way or another, we thank you.

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# Letter from the Editor

Dear Reader,

I am so honored and excited to share this volume of *Reflection* with you. The experience of crafting this journal throughout the past year has been incredibly transformative and uplifting for me, and I am so grateful to everyone involved who has made *Reflection* possible. I hope that the care, consideration, and dedication exhibited by my incredible staff and our contributors in crafting this journal is palpable and that you can share in that same passion and love as you witness the pieces held in the following pages.

When crafting this year's theme for *Reflection*, *Roads Untraveled*, I envisioned it as an opportunity for our contributors to both contemplate the pivotal events that had shaped their lives up to the present and to look ahead to the infinite potential paths their lives could take in the future. As the year progressed, the theme evolved into a more comprehensive understanding of how an untraveled road appears in relation to others. Not only were our contributors reflecting on their past, present, and future places within the world, but the underpinnings of each piece were rooted in several analogous subjects including family, identity, loss, and connection. *Roads Untraveled* shows the intersecting and parallel journeys taken by these artists and cements a powerful undercurrent of shared experience and kinship between the artists, their works, and you.

I believe that art is one of the most powerful tools for connecting with others that we have the privilege of using. The opportunity to head such a wonderful publication and see so many outstanding pieces of prose, poetry, and art from the Gonzaga community has been a true pleasure, not only due to the quality of the pieces, but due to their capacity to connect with their readers and inspire introspection, emotion, and growth. So thank you, truly, for devoting your time, attention, and care to reading our journal. I hope that by bearing witness to the art that follows, you too may find a spark of connection with the world around you and a thread of possibility of where your own road may lead you.

*Meagan E Graves*

Meagan E. Graves

*Editor-in-Chief*

# Lagoon

---

## *Malia Starita*

Her glossy, rippling body  
lies back,  
Her limbs fed  
by the see-saw rhythm  
of ocean tides.

Her limbs are sprawling,  
lackadaisical,  
cushioned by salt marsh grasses  
speckled with egrets  
who tread softly against Her skin  
careful not to leave a ripple in their wake.

On the ocean breeze  
She sings,  
Her voice entwined in the chorus  
of the marsh wrens,  
the chittering cicada songs,  
and the dancing hollow skeletons  
of rustling reeds.

I sing with Her  
but in hushed tones.  
In this place,  
with Her,  
it is best just to listen.  
If you sing too loud,  
you'll miss  
the salt marsh  
hymn.

# River Reflections

---

*Emma Accardi*

At night the dead come down to the river to drink  
Their lips shrivel and burn at first touch  
They had long forgotten they cannot drink fire  
or absorb lost hope  
Rippled by boats weighed down with  
saliva-coated gold coins  
and final wishes  
Their teeth rattle like windchimes  
bones fastened with prayers  
hair draping like rosaries  
hungering for something  
Other than inferno  
Or the taste of their own defeat

# Five Plates

---

*Raegan Bowyer*

There used to be five plates at my dinner table. One for each family member: my mother, father, older brother, older sister, and me. Dinners were the highlight of my day. The kitchen would fill with music as my parents prepared the food. During meals, my siblings and I carved doodles into the surface of the dining table. We also wrote messages to each other about plans to stay up late to play games such as *Oblivion* or *Spore*. After completing my homework, I would curl up next to my father on a chair in the upstairs TV room to watch episodes of *Star Trek: The Next Generation*.

When I was in fourth grade, there were only four plates at my dinner table. While I was in elementary school, my father was diagnosed with pancreatic cancer. Back then, I did not understand what the diagnosis meant. I thought that he was very sick, but I did not know why. My father passed away from the cancer. Initially I did not understand why one of the seats was left empty and it reinforced the loss I felt. My mother tried to explain why I should not set out five plates anymore, but she was dealing with her own grief and pain. As a result, she sent me to camps where I could connect with other children going through a similar experience. The camps helped me feel less alone and they allowed me the space to process my emotions.

While I have fond memories of my father, most of them are blurry and faded. I remember hiking along dusty trails with him and laughing when cold water smacked me

in the face while going through a rapid. My father loved the outdoors, so he would organize rafting trips down the South Fork of the Boise or the Middle Fork. On calm stretches of water, he would let me practice using the oars of the raft which made my arms sore. I remember falling asleep to the sound of chirping insects and the crackling campfire in the background.

I am reminded of my father when I see Clive Cussler novels with yellowed pages and broken spines. He was an avid reader and so am I. As a result, some of his books were passed down to me. My mother gave me his gray OSU hoodie. I do not mind that it has worn-out sleeves and that the seams are coming apart. When I put on the hoodie, I feel like my father is giving me a hug.

In high school, there were five plates at the dinner table, but this time in a different arrangement. My grandmother came to live with my family in Idaho. She previously lived in Oakland, California, but originally had immigrated to the US from China. At the table, she sat across from my brother while my mother was at the head of the table. Every year my grandmother looked forward to celebrating the Lunar New Year. On the day of Lunar New Year, she gave me and my siblings *lai see* which are lucky money envelopes. We also wore red outfits to dinner since red is considered a lucky color. Cooking was a major component of the celebration preparations, so my grandmother would spend most of the day in the kitchen with my mother. My mother would get ingredients from the local Asian market to make Chinese dishes such as Hong Shao Rou and Nian Gao. For one Lunar New Year celebration, my grandmother taught my siblings and me how to make egg rolls. She patiently demonstrated how to properly fold the wrappers so the filling did not spill out. Then, she watched us do and provided feedback. Cooking in the kitchen was chaotic because we turned on the fan



while using the wok, so it was difficult to hear people. Additionally, my grandmother primarily spoke Chinese to my mother, but my siblings and I did not understand what she was saying. Therefore, we were not sure how to help in the kitchen.

My grandmother passed away this summer. Even though I am sad that she is gone, I enjoyed learning to cook from her. Before she passed away, my grandmother told me more about growing up in Shanghai. The conversations I had with her encouraged me to learn Chinese while I was in college. I took Chinese 101 and Chinese 102 my junior year. They also made me want to revisit China, so I could connect with distant family members.

Now there are usually two or three plates at the dinner table at a time because my siblings and I live in different states. Furthermore, we have different schedules, so I usually only see one sibling at a time. My sister enjoys teaching me how to make different types of food. Over winter break, I made several Chinese dishes! I also like to flip through the massive binder in the kitchen to learn recipes that have been passed down. Family dinners do not happen as often as they used to, yet I always look forward to them. When the entire family can come together, each of us makes one dish to share with the others.

# Before I Die I Want to Live Series: City

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*Tori Lopez*



# Confession

---

*Tori Lopez*

They told me I was born in sin,  
kicking and tearing into the world, a fallen angel,  
your favorite daughter, anointed in grace.  
The baptismal candle burning  
as it guides these unholy hands, wine to cool my tongue,  
three white dresses to save my soul.

When I was made, was it in love? Did I deserve a soul?  
I was taught this passion was a sin.  
I didn't believe them, but I bit my tongue,  
tasted the blood. Your obedient daughter, your precious angel.  
A confession and incense burning  
my throat, my fingers crossed as I knelt with grace.

Shrouded in doubt I prayed for you to grace  
me with the presence of a soul  
that was worthy to be saved from the burning.  
To not believe is sin  
enough to make an angel  
weep, yet I let these perjured pleas fall off my tongue,

Imagining myself as someone better, with a tongue  
of fire descending upon me, filled with wisdom and grace.  
Instead I am the exiled angel.  
Your morning star with too heavy a soul,  
longing to be seen beyond this sin,  
to find that the burning

inside does not cause pain. Burning  
to taste acceptance on my tongue,  
to speak no more of sin.  
Donning red roses, I'm showered in my own kind of grace.  
I'll be the one to absolve this soul,  
so that when I look in a mirror I won't see an angel,

I'll just see myself. Reborn angel,  
I'll now be baptized in fire. Burning  
candles of adoration at the altar in my soul.  
Let my tongue  
worship what has always been within. With grace  
I'll rejoice in this righteous sin.

And you can send prayers for my soul, for your prodigal angel.  
Beat your chest for my sin, try to smother the burning,  
Yet from my tongue I'll sing praises for my wicked state of grace.

# Abstract Flora

---

*Kaylene Kristofferson*



# Church Blossoms

---

*Garrick Bateman*

**2023 Michael and Gail Gurian Writing Awards Recipient  
Poetry, Third Place**

The children bent their palms  
and bloodied them on the blossoms—  
those palms, smelling sweetly  
were already likened to the cross.  
So sin hung like pollen above the pond  
where we gathered after mass.  
There was blood there on the blossoms,  
so scarlet and so secret.  
It came from my nose, which I held  
in my hands. It smelled like pennies  
not peonies, not like spring or sacrament.  
It smelled like my nails painted  
or my hair wore long, in spite of the  
warmth. I was taken by a priest,  
whose collar I bloodied. Of the other boys,  
He told me to forgive them.

# When Everything Becomes

*Brianna Covert*

**2023 Michael and Gail Gurian Writing Awards Recipient  
Creative Non-Fiction, Honorable Mention**

I'm not very good at sleeping anymore and I don't think my meds are working, or maybe they are working but just not enough to avoid the suffocating guilt I feel after spending a night with Kay where I pretend to sleep instead of actually sleeping. **You don't need to feel this way.** And then he falls asleep and his chest heaves big sighs against my back and I am wide awake and then I feel guilty after all because I am not asleep like he is.

His breath settles across my neck and pools in the space above my collar bone. I match my breathing to his, **comforted by the darkness that blankets us** comforted by the thick darkness, broken only by the ~~occasional passing headlight through the window.~~ But I am still not asleep like he is. So, when I roll over, still taking heavy breaths to trick my body into trance, resting my arm across his chest, I am choked by guilt when he holds my hand while I am fake-sleeping. I practice my breathing and think about him holding my hand while he thinks I am asleep until he falls asleep again and I am left alone to breathe however I want.

Am I fooling him? Is there a dishonesty when he kisses me in the morning and asks me how I slept and I say *really well*, but I actually slept so very little? And when I ask how he slept and he says *great* through a long stretch, and I know he's telling the truth because I was listening to him sleep next to me—am I guilty for that too? For not meaning to lie, but lying anyhow?

I'm not meaning to lie, I'm not meaning to lie, I'm not

lying. I just don't know what else to say. I don't know how to say that I'm so bad at sleeping and I'm still getting used to sleeping with you and even though our bodies fit so well together, and your heavy and effortless breaths make me feel so calm and warm and happy and safe, I still can't sleep. I still can't sleep. Guilty.

We lay facing each other in the morning, our eyes closed against the early amber light filtering in through the blinds, tossing stripes along our bare skin. I run my fingertips across his chest. He trails his hand over my back. I think I could fall asleep.

But of course, I don't.

I haven't slept in months, nearly nine, defeated by an illness the doctors can't name. Tests, diets, medications, suggestions and shrugs. The bags beneath my eyes deepen in color, **a sharp contrast** to my otherwise pale and drained skin. I press ~~the heel of my~~ palms into my eyes until the blackness turns into a burst of luminescent fireworks. ~~There is release.~~

"You may experience dizziness for the first few weeks, but these should help you sleep." I look now at the hot pink pills in my hand, four sparkling diamonds, before swallowing them dry.

Tiredness is heavy. It fills ~~even~~ my fingertips with lead, ~~but my head with air~~. Daylight is dizziness, morning ~~servicing simply/only/merely as~~ a reminder to mark a blue slash across another box on the calendar hanging on the fridge. But it means nothing to me anymore, the sunset and sunrise merely a marker of time in the incessant blur of days.

I sit in **my morning** class, my shoulders hunched over my desk ~~thinking of everything else~~ **all of the time**, ~~this wandering of the mind~~. The fluorescent lights smirk against the beige walls, casting a melancholic glow over the students shaking rain from their coats. I catch my



reflection on the screen of my laptop, black from inactivity, ~~a glance that startles me~~: my eyes have sunken into my face, coddled by dark, puffy circles. I want to stare longer, pinch myself even, but the professor begins to lecture, pacing between the projector and the whiteboard, her heels padding against the thin carpet. She scribbles something down in purple and I scribble it down in blue, her hair swishing against her shoulder, the pink fabric taut from her reach. ~~I watch~~ the hem of her pants sway against her ankles.

I want so badly to sleep, to regain my consciousness of day, release myself from this apathy. If I could simply sleep and stop thinking and stop thinking, stop thinking. The professor pauses in her lecture, and I realize she has asked the class a question. I pretend to write in my notebook until someone raises their hand. *Think, think, think—*  
Nine months. Nine months without sleep.

The inscription on the back of the photograph is written in neat, round letters, and reads, *Here's me and the baby! I'm kinda chubby but it's coming off.* ~~She (Mom, My Mom, The Woman/A Woman)~~ stands facing the camera, her mouth slightly open, a strand of loose hair rests over her face. Tucked in her arms is an infant, **its** mouth also open. The next photo reads, *you and Daddy helping me blow out my candles on my 24<sup>th</sup> birthday.* She is sitting now, her lips puckered as she exhales against twenty-four candles drooping over the sides of a chocolate cake on a crowded table. The infant sits on her lap, **its** shoulders pushed into **its** cheeks, staring at the twenty-four flickering flames.

I flip to the inside cover of the small scrapbook, the corners of the pink and yellow pages soft and crumpled from twenty-two years of thoughtful fingering.

*To Brianna; I hope this book will help you remember what life was like in the impressionable first few months of your life. You were the best thing that ever happened to your mama! I love you so much darling!!*

~~There is nothing at this time I would want to remember. That's when it all got bad.~~

Mom and Dad were in love. It was sloppy and sappy and **young**—but pitched: a pale woman with trimmed hair beside a towering man, his expressions hardened by his ragged and callous exterior, the hair just below his bottom lip silvering. But they seemed to fit, this woman and this man—this woman without a family and this man long independent of his. Perhaps that is why they clung to each other.

Gene rolls an unlit cigarette between his lips, gazing at the trailer park across the street. He brings his cupped hands to his mouth, flicking a lighter until it catches flame, so he can take a deep breath, the murky smoke licking at his teeth. He returns the lighter to his pocket, exhaling now from his nose, the motor oil on his fingers staining the cigarette.

He leans against the front of Dave and Joanne's shop, *Northwest Custom Cycle*, a brick building with barred windows, nestled into mossy foothills. Gene, having first met the couple nearly twenty years ago, had been invited to work with them as a mechanic, repairing and restoring and building choppers. He brushes something off the front of his shirt. They'll grab drinks again tonight, the same bar they always frequent.

Gene flicks ash onto the sidewalk. Across from him, a woman leaves the trailer park on a bicycle. She stops at the edge of the road, only the tips of her sneakers

touching the ground before she pushes off again, the thick, black tires throwing gravel behind her. Gene watches as she pedals towards him before turning away again. She tosses a glance at him. He stares.

This has been their routine for weeks. This woman—Laura, he'd learn later—leaves the trailer park, sometimes walking but mostly atop the frame of a bulky bicycle, while Gene smokes outside on his breaks. She makes her way towards him, always peeking through a sweep of blonde hair before turning her nose back to the ground or often behind her other shoulder, or turning away completely—and Gene watches, always through narrowed eyes. He's curious. He likes the way she shifts her weight back and forth on the bike, throwing her body over the handlebars, her shirt riding up exposing the skin just above the waist of her jeans.

Eventually, they begin exchanging smiles and nods when Laura passes by, their eyes lingering on each other a little while longer each time. Eventually, Gene stops her, “We should grab dinner.” Laura is still the first to break eye contact, rolling her lips between her teeth and biting the inside of her left cheek. Eventually, she says yes.

It's little things at first: a flannel, a blanket, a toothbrush. Quietly, Laura moves in, her belongings shoved into drawers alongside grease-stained denim **jeans**. She takes photographs off the walls, rehangs the curtains, places the rolled-up rug against the dinner table so she can scrape the couch along the floor. She'll lay down on the couch afterwards, one hand thrown over her stomach, the other resting on the floor, and laugh into the stale air.

It's like this every week: a violent redecorating during the long hours that Laura spends alone during the day, but she finds solace within the walls of the **small** house. She likes the sound of the river slapping the rocky shore and the shade from the fur trees. Sometimes, when it

rains, she'll sit on the porch and watch pools collect in the branches of the dense pine, sucking in the damp air.

There is something about small towns **that turn everything into just that, everything**—and in this small town in particular, cut off from the world by a forest of collapsing mountainside trees, it was easy to feel like the world only extended as far as your vision. It was easy to feel like anything was everything.

Before the Washington skies churned gray, the couple walked along the train tracks, Laura holding onto Gene's freckled shoulder as she balanced on the slick rail. She giggled, her face turned up to the sky. Then she'd look quickly at Gene, her eyes radiating, and jump down, skipping between the sleeper boards, running with her eyes closed, her arms out, her chest turned towards the sun again. It was almost as if she could fly. He could see it too: a sudden weightlessness, her toes lifting off the ground. He almost joins her, but instead he grabs her hand and gently pulls her back down to the ground, the tips of their shoes just kissing.

It was moments like this which made Gene feel that little floating feeling in his stomach like he used to when he was a kid. She made him good, and he knew it. He was kinder and gentler when she was around, happy even. And then they'd fight. Venom frothed from their lips, fists slammed into kitchen counters, fingers struck through the air. The small, collapsing town suddenly felt suffocating and their everything would be too much. This isn't the everything they wanted.

Laura screamed and cried, clawing at her face, pushing chairs onto the floor. Maybe she just liked the noise, something beside their voices to join the chorus. And maybe Gene didn't like the noise, which is why he left. Grabbing his keys, still pointing and yelling, and driving to the

bar where he'd drink. A shot. Another shot. A drink. *Someone turn up the music!* Another drink.

Gene would come back home to Laura, both heavy and silent, but she would hug him and kiss him, her lips trailing on his neck. He would hug her back, his frustrations lost with her quiet gasping as he pressed his tongue past her teeth, their hands moving slowly against each other's bodies. Outside, it began to rain sideways.

In the morning, Gene showers his regrets away, ignoring the embarrassment settling in his stomach. For all of the times she brings out his best side, she brings out his worst side. Maybe this is how love is supposed to be, completely and entirely revealing. There is nothing they won't know about each other. ~~There is no nakedness that will not be concealed.~~

This becomes their new routine, even during the pregnancy.

A nervousness settles around them, but they let it settle in an untouched corner of the house where the dust gathers into balls, so they can make room for excitement instead. Gene calls his sister, then his brother, then his parents. All of them feign the excitement that the couple made space for, gathering the nervousness for themselves. It seems Gene doesn't remember Laura's promise: an inability to get pregnant, a disinterest in having kids, not wanting kids because of how she grew up. A conversation nulled in vague details about abuse. They pass a joint between them.

He tells Joanne but she's unimpressed, "That girl's trouble."

"And I want to find out for myself," he looks at her, baring teeth through a sideways grin.

Gene and Laura fight later. "I told you I wanted to tell them," Gene is angry again. He flexes his hands against his thighs, his jaw clenched. He looks at Laura, her lower

lip popped out, arms crossed over her chest. He gives in, choosing not to leave for the bar tonight and instead they hold each other, that nervousness receding further into the corner.

It was Laura who would run up and tell Gene's friends about their pregnancy. She gushes about how great of a mother she is going to be, "I'm going to be the best!" And spins in circles, her laugh echoing off the concrete walls of the shop. But later, when she is alone, holding a corded phone in her hands, the faint buzz emanating from the earpiece, that nervousness begins to grow ~~like the baby she carries~~. She puts the phone back onto the wall. It clicks into place. Laura starts asking for more money. "I'm not rich, goddamnit!" But Gene gives her the money anyway. It feels like a plea for both of them. Oftentimes she comes back with nothing, the money just gone, but with **the baby on the way**, she's begun to buy clothes and furniture for the nursery: photos for the walls, stuffed animals for the crib, a knitted blanket in baby-boy blue. The river hums its lullabies while Laura learns nursery rhymes.

"You've got to get a job," Laura pouts again. "I can't afford all of this shit." She sighs, avoiding Gene's eyes. "Besides, you're gonna look like a blimp if you keep sitting around all day." She rubs her stomach. The baby hasn't kicked yet.

Laura starts waitressing at Denny's, the one by the highway, frequented by travelers and high schoolers that drink from their parents' liquor cabinet. It's the highway that reminds Laura of the world outside of her small town and when she's awake at night she thinks about it, this outside world. She presses her knee into the pillow between her legs, exhausted but unable to sleep, the highway replaying in her mind. She, like nearly all pregnant women, is unable to sleep. *Nine months*, she'll chant to herself, *nine months*. The highway roars by.

Laura was a creative, an artist. And when there was no one to share her pregnancy with, she shared it with the paper, scribbling love notes on napkins, sharpies on wax paper, sketches with crayons. Her work echoed her elation. ~~She was high.~~ But, as the back aches worsened, so did her mood. Her drawings become frivolous, rushed. She screams at Gene, “I fucking *hate you!*” She grabs a stack of artwork and throws it across the room, the papers fluttering to the floor between them. “It’s stealing my art!” Laura falls to her knees gathering the pages into her fist, “It’s stealing my motherfucking *art*. I can’t do it anymore.”

Gene wants to yell again, raise his voice, but he’s quiet instead. He stands there and watches as she throws her work into the trash, shoving both of her hands deep into the bin. She screams while she cries, “I hate you so much.” And then she gathers herself and leaves. This time, Gene will be the one waiting at home, waiting for Laura to come back. He starts pulling the artwork out of the trashcan, straightening the pages gently. He is silent. The embarrassment and confusion and nervousness begin to wrap their arms around his waist, resting their chin on his shoulder and humming into his ear, *if that mockingbird don’t sing, Mama’s gonna buy you a diamond ring.*

Laura leaves more frequently now. She’s quit her job, tired. She’ll leave, sometimes in a fury, sometimes solemnly, and often when Gene isn’t even around. He’ll return to an empty house, the furniture and the décor left all in the same place. The emptiness is consuming. They go days without seeing each other. When he can’t wait any longer, echoes of the voicelessness creeping into his dreams, he’ll find her.

There is something that has made Laura this way, Gene is certain. He is certain he can make her not this way, make her the way he needs her to be. And when the baby

comes, he is certain ~~he can change her~~ **she will change.**

But for now, there is no emptiness, no arguing, no quiet so quiet it morphs into a physical pain. They are together—the three of them, this family. Gene receives congratulations, aggressive pats on the shoulder, “Life as you know it has changed.”

“Good,” he’ll say.

For now, they were able to put their relationship on a shelf, a shelf that, although gets dusted, gets dusted only rarely. The baby becomes their everything in that small town **threaded with trees and streams**, severed by a highway. They didn’t need to care about each other in the same ways anymore. But as time went on, they fell again back into the same rhythm.

Gene holds the delicate infant to his chest, inhaling the sweet smell of newborn skin. His hair is undone from his usual braid, **swishing** now against the top of his boxers. He thinks he may finally understand what love is, all contained in this child. The baby hiccups. He bounces his knees, lightly swaying his hips. It is when he puts the baby down, full of this new and delicate love, that he holds Laura and loves her too. She is frozen.

For Laura, love is a tremendous and crushing weight, a suffocation. She too holds the baby to her chest, a heavy doll, and feels this impossible thing that she thinks she may really want. **She can love but cannot be loved.** So, when Gene turns his affection to her, she does what anyone who suffocates does: she goes some place with air, lots and lots of air.

Gene returns to work, visiting Laura and the baby on his breaks. At home he washes the dishes that Laura says she’ll do, changes the diaper the baby has been squirming in all day, folds the wrinkled laundry. There is something safe in expectation, each knowing the other will only scowl while the baby sleeps, the river muting their already



hushed tones. But the safety in routine makes some itch.

There is something about Laura which entangles people, catches them, so it was easy **for her** to grab the baby and leave, finding strangers to stay with. They feed her and give her money and coddle the fussing infant, “Oh! Those cheeks!” Laura’s nervousness recedes far enough into the corner that the house simply consumes it, so when Gene, having neatly placed his wrenches and ratchets in the red toolbox after wiping off the grease, drives home and opens the front door, he knows immediately what is wrong.

The dim and pale yellow light is left on in the kitchen while Gene, one hand on the steering wheel the other resting on the metal handle of the gear shifter, drives. He drives fast. The winter rain pelts the windshield of his pickup truck, the wipers squealing against the glass. He turns up the music. His breath shakes.

Gene always finds Laura. Sometimes she is nearby, within the same town, but other times she has crossed state lines, driving to the highway in the wide, four-door Mercury Gene bought her, the baby sleeping to the radio static in the car seat. Laura looks at the baby in the rear-view mirror. She drives fast too, but with the window open just enough to make her hair whip around her face, just enough that for a few seconds she can’t see the road, just streaks of headlights coming towards her.

When Gene finds her. She’s clutching the baby to her waist, her eyes wild, but somehow unseeing. She does see Gene, but through heavy eyelids. She hears him too, *you fucking bitch*, then he says something about money, something about a house. His arms are moving everywhere. She doesn’t really notice the people around her leave, some getting up close to talk to Gene before bending beneath his threatening stare, but she does notice how the couch cushions shift on either side of her. She notices the

weight in her arms. *The baby*, she remembers.

Hunched over, her body is sharp and angular. Not long before she was worried about the weight she had gained during the pregnancy, asking Gene to buy her fish tacos after work every week. But now, now she thinks she is beautiful again. She likes how her skin flexes over her ribcage when she raises her arms, her thin arms. When she is alone, she likes to look at herself, her clothes a pile on the floor. In the mirror, she lets her eyes wonder over her body, twisting and stretching, touching sometimes too. Gene used to touch her like this, used to make her feel beautiful like this, but now his touch is distant.

Gene grabs the infant from her, his rough and stained hands raking against her skin. And then he is gone. And Laura is left alone.

Laura will have been collected by Gene, brought back home with the baby. It is like this for a long time: this tracking, this hunting, their newest routine. Laura likes the rush of leaving and the rush of being found. She bounces the baby on her knee, her accomplice. *We are in this together*, she thinks.

Gene drinks more often now too. It is easier than having to think about Laura, think about Laura in his home with his baby. Or think about Laura not in his home, but still with his baby. The bar suddenly feels cramped. Outside, the mountain blends in with the darkness of the sky. It is easier than remembering he still loves her.

For years Gene would keep Laura in his life, looking into the speckled blue eyes of his daughter, promising her a mother **for when she grows up**. But Laura would leave again. This time without the baby. Gene will pay for the places she moves into and the damage deposits when she moves out, finding a new room which she can decorate. It didn't matter to her that she shouldn't paint the walls. **Nothing mattered to her but everything.**

She still spends time with the baby, the baby which grows into a child, but doesn't feel the same rush when she leaves anymore. She feels dull, a dull resentment which she turns onto the child who doesn't know what it means when Laura says things like *you're the reason I'm unhappy* and *I love you*.

And Laura does love the child, the child who looks so much like her father, whose eyes disappear into her cheeks when she smiles, but it overwhelms her. Laura doesn't understand the heat in her stomach when she hears the child laugh and doesn't understand the dizziness she feels when the child reaches up to clutch her hand when crossing the street. It was always easier to be with things that didn't love her, which is why she chose the drugs and chose the sex and chose the simmering self-hatred that left her **electricified. That**—that she understood.

The child will learn to accept “your mother loves you, just in her own way,” but will never understand what that way is. She'll learn—learn when she is no longer a child—that maybe her mother *did* intend to love her, really tried and really wanted to, but just simply couldn't. Maybe she was capable of loving, but just not capable of loving in the right way. All that love she had, maybe it was just suffocated, buried beneath addictions and illnesses and fears. Maybe it was easier for her to not love at all. Simpler. Maybe that was how she learned to breathe when there was no air. Maybe then, when she threw her arms back and the sun pulled that strange and foreign feeling to the surface, maybe then she would finally be able to fly—and there would be no one to pull her down.

Maybe it was only ever love that suffocated her.

Darkness is revealing. I find it easier to be honest when I can disconnect myself from my body, wading into a place where I **only** hear myself speak, watching as my lips form the words that will settle into a distance between us.

Sometimes I close my eyes against the darkness, suspending the boundaries of my body, ~~imagining myself as becoming part of the blackness, this all-consuming thing.~~ It is easy this way, to dissolve into nothingness. ~~I am nothing. I am nothing. I am n—~~

Through closed eyes I find Kay's body with my hand, gently holding his face ~~in my palm~~, pressing my forehead against his chest, just above his beating heart. He is warm and I sink into his skin. ~~I am everything. I am everything. I am everything.~~ We breathe together, his chin resting on my head.

Our voices are soft when we speak: relaxed, tired. His shoulders shake when he laughs, a gentle rocking accompanied by a soft exhale. It is a beautiful sound, his laughter. I open my eyes, abruptly returning to my body. Moving my head onto my hand, I look at Kay, sharing the space with him instead of the blackness, the darkness, the nothingness I am learning to let go of. We talk, our voices weaving between each other, our voices mixing, blending, becoming. Kay looks down at me and I smile at him before closing my eyes again.

“How many kids would you want?”

My eyes still closed: “Oh, I don't know if I want kids.”

# October's Tree

---

*Hannah Ehly*

I've spent the last two Octobers in the same city.

Every year with a different tree  
Outside the window, I call mine  
This year will make three.

I take a second every morning  
to take stock of the patches of green  
that were replaced with orange  
right before my eyes.

Before I know it, all the green has become orange  
Until there's nothing left but a lonely trunk  
And time has taken its inevitable toll.

Yet I still watch the bare trees,  
Wondering if reminiscing  
Or wishing upon candles  
is enough  
to bring the leaves back,  
Long after they have been raked away.

and I'm the only one who  
seems to remember the joy and warmth  
that time has replaced with bitter loneliness.

I never realize how much has changed,  
until the leaves start to change too.

I've spent the last two Octobers in the same city.

Falling in love with a different girl  
Somehow the leaves and I always  
end up falling at the same time.

I wonder if there's something in the air  
Maybe it's the soundtrack of falling rain,  
The smell of freshly baked pumpkin bread,  
The warmth of chai for two  
And birthday candles spent wishing  
The leaves never say goodbye.

Or maybe it's the desire to feel loved  
before the darkness settles in.

I'm starting to wonder if  
I spend too much time watching trees,  
Giving all my love in hopes  
I will get even a fraction in return.

Using the tree as a countdown:  
I must convince someone to love me  
before the last leaf falls.

Or I'm destined to have wasted yet another October,  
Leaving myself doomed to be  
as lonely as the tree branches  
once all the leaves have said goodbye until the spring.  
Every year I inevitably mirror  
the bare lonely tree by the time  
the leaves return to the trees,  
just in time to fall in unison once again.

I've spent the last two Octobers in the same city.

This year the tree outside my new window looks similar.  
Familiar enough to remind me of the last two  
Octobers spent hoping out my window.

But this year something has changed.  
The air still smells like rain and pumpkin bread.

But this October  
I've decided to view the leaves  
as a sign of how I've changed  
How you must lose and say goodbye  
to parts of yourself to change and grow.

I'm no longer wishing upon a falling leaf,  
like a shooting star  
Begging someone else to love me.

I'm no longer using every birthday candle  
wishing and begging someone to  
love me the way I love them.

I'm no longer drifting in the wind,  
like a weightless lost leaf  
hoping someone catches me and calls me theirs.

This October  
The leaves look the same but I do not.  
This October  
I've changed how I look at the trees.  
This October

I've changed.

However, I'm still going to fall in love.  
The first leaf of the season  
Has already fallen,  
And it's the cycle of nature after all.

I even have someone in mind.  
They have so much love to give,

They love pumpkin bread,  
The first rain of the season,  
A cup of chai for one,  
wishing upon falling leaves,  
And they deserve to be loved back,  
for once.

I've spent the last two October in the same city.

Wishing upon trees and  
Falling in love with women  
I no longer call my own.

So, I've made the decision.  
Hoping and wishing is not enough.

This October, I'm going to fall in love with myself.



# all the great writers swear on killing your darlings,

---

*Marianne Nacanaynay*

so I looked at what I held dear,  
my eyes dragging the room,  
bow heavy behind my back.  
in my clean sweep I watched

you float around the party  
telling everyone how pretty you are!  
sunlight melting your teeth,  
bones figuring your outline  
while fire scorched  
me darker from the inside out. I

pulled my arrow back  
and with a hung  
breath,  
shot.

you gasped and pointed  
and screamed at me,  
the soft brown girl in the corner. I  
think I see you still smiling  
as you rush to my side  
and console me as I die.

I let my blood seep through the cotton  
blend of my shirt, relax my impaled  
chest on my own defense.

isn't this what you wanted, though,  
when you schemed my execution?  
my breath of fresh air,  
stolen in blinks by my own hand,  
my sense of self—

I loved her,  
so I killed her;  
marooned in the final banality of homogenous peace.

# In the Dead of the Night

*Hayley Nigrelle*



# L'Appel du Vide

---

*Delaney Taylor*

**2023 Michael and Gail Gurian Writing Awards Recipient  
Creative Non-Fiction, First Place**

The sidewalk under my feet was cracked. Weeds grew through the solid rock, soaking into the concrete like a virus. I was only able to see these sprouts in sporadic flashes of light from the cars zipping by on the road before me. My feet hurt. I had been wearing heels at the party all night, and the alcohol could only numb the pain so much. But I wasn't going to sacrifice style for comfort. I don't remember walking out of the house. It was late, and I think I got confused. I was tired. My house was just across the street; I could see it from where I stood. Our jack o' lanterns sagged in the damp air—carved too soon and left to rot. My friends were still inside... when did I leave the house? When did I end up alone? Another car whooshed by, pulling at my skirt like a hungry lover. Wanting me. The street seemed bigger than I remembered. Only hours before it had been a short jaunt, barely even a block away. But now... now it was a superhighway. An ocean of cement that stretched on into forever. I was tired. I wanted to go home. All I had to do was cross the road. To get to the other side. Another car. Then another. Flying by in a blurry dizzying rush of neon lights and metal. I took a step forward, the edge of the sidewalk under my boot. Toeing the line between taking that stride. I could have done it. Passed through the veil from that curbed path and into the road. Into the unknown. Into that rushing, whooshing, endless potential.

There is a phenomenon that some people experience. That itch, that mosquito bite that you just can't reach at

the back of your neck. Humans are curious creatures. We thrive on the ‘what-if’ and feed on the possibilities like vultures. We theorize what we cannot finalize. The French call it *l’appel du vide*. The call of the void. That sick curiosity about what would happen if you just let go, if you gave them that little push over the edge. You dismiss it, saying that it’s ridiculous, that you would never do anything of the sort. But there it simmers. Every time you are cutting vegetables, visiting canyons, or finally closing your eyes to sleep—it sits, waiting. Waiting for an opportunity. The void isn’t suicide. *Le vide est inoffensif*. It’s just a question, a feeling of uncertainty. What if I jerked the wheel to the side? What if I leaned too far over the edge of the rail? What if I stepped out, just to see what happens? We never would, of course. Just a passing thought.

I never liked heights as a kid. My parents would sometimes take me to Seattle, just a ferry ride away. A black building stood above the rest, a foreboding obelisk of man’s desire for greatness. It was the tallest building in the city. Onyx glass and metal girders rose like a monolith amid the brickwork and stone. I hated heights. I didn’t want to go up there. To take that elevator ride that never seemed to end. To step out into the windowed observatory and stare down in stricken horror at the beautiful metropolis below. To have my breathing quicken, catching in my throat like a stray piece of rice as I pressed my back against the plain white walls. I was surrounded by nothing, open to the elements just inches behind that mirrored wall. My father laughed and my sister rolled her eyes as my mother approached the window with her camera. I wanted to cry out, to shout at her to be careful. But the words wilted on my tongue. It was safe. It was safe— it *had* to be safe, right? A tourist trap would never allow the possibility of danger. But there it was. That nagging, scratching feeling. *What if... what if the glass broke? What if you just fell down down down to the streets below?*

*Wouldn't that be fun?*

According to psychologists, *l'apel du vide* is the mind's natural reaction to that uncertain chance of disaster. Sometimes it's called the 'high place phenomenon'. A stress response is created to protect the body from harm. It isn't a death sentence; it's a lifeline. The mind wants to live, to keep existing in this world. The feeling of throwing yourself from that cliff *you know* will never happen. It's a shock, a jolt to wake yourself back up. You hyperfocus on your surroundings so that you don't do anything stupid. Anything you might regret. Because you would regret it, in the end. That's what they always say.

I nearly drowned when I was 6. I don't remember it much. My parents always recall the tale with the hurried panic of a caregiver that doesn't want to dwell on the fear of the past. We were walking along the beach of some other country, the sun heating the sand beneath my soft feet into a supernova. It was a riptide, or an undertow, something like that. It swept me from the sands and into the salty spray. It happened so fast. Rolling and rolling as the sky inverted around me, I was pulled deeper into the ocean. Into that dark brine that only moments before had been a picturesque backdrop to my evening. I was calm. How strange is that? I remember that calm as the cold water slashed against me. Maybe it was because my brain hadn't processed the reality of the situation. The golden light filtered through the water around me, like fairy lights in the rain. I couldn't breathe...but maybe that was okay. That gentle pressing against my nose and lips was comforting somehow. The sand was a pillow on my back, the ocean a lullaby my mother used to sing to me. And then it was gone. I was snatched from the waves, blinking the salt water from my burning eyes. My parents scooped me up and took me back to the hotel, fussing and tittering over me. I don't remember much else.

There is a place that I sometimes go. It's been years

now; I'm all grown up. But I know that the room is still there. Not a real place, physical in the realm. An almost place. It's dark there, in my almost place. I stand alone in the blackness, small and cold like a shivering animal against the winter's wind. Sniveling drivel and snot and tears, pathetic as pathetic can be. I can see myself reflected, a distorted mirage of mirrors that are made of pure mercury. My void. The mirrors whisper to me words that I have heard from stories and tragedies and people who have it far worse than me. They call to me in that inky space, my almost place. I suppose that could be *the* void. The never-ending mutation of a carnival hall. My mirrors reflect myself, and I hate what I see. I cannot shatter them. They may splinter and crack and break into glittering fragments like stars, but they will never be ground to dust. The call will still hum, like a worm wriggling in my ears. Perhaps others could hear it too. The gentle song of death and the almost place. The melody of melancholy.

**Void** /void/: (adj)—unoccupied, vacant

**Void** /void/: (noun)—unfilled space, gap

**Void** /void/: (verb)—to empty, drain; to empty, evacuate

There aren't many words that can serve as three separate grammatical pillars. For a word that means nothing, it is rich, full to the brim with significance. The void is empty, yet the void is everything. Four letters the longer you stare at, the less sense they make. Void. Void void *void*. Vuoto, vacío, 空所, vide. Of course it started with the French. A concept as abstract as the notion of nothing—très français. The earliest usage of the word dates back to 1300 A.D. Did they hear it then? The singing lullaby of nevermore. *L'appel du vide*. Did they feel that same urge to jump, all those lifetimes ago? Did this one word, that small sound made from behind the lips and between the teeth, hitch in their minds too?

In high school, in a class I cannot remember by a teacher whose face has melted into the sands of my mem-

ory, we learned about atoms. The molecular makeup of the things around us that binds the world together. Protons and neutrons locked in an eternal embrace with the buzzing electrons like a typhoon around them. That is all it is. The universe is comprised of a dance of microscopic specks. But what else is there? Between the ions and electricity and all the things that matter to matter, there is an emptiness. A vacuum. It isn't air, it isn't energy. It's just...nothing. Our reality is made of emptiness. But in that emptiness, we find solace. We can touch, feel, and see the world. I am flesh and bones and blood and dreams. I can hurt, I can breathe, I can laugh and sing and scream so loud. I am not a vacuum. I will not drive my fist into the wall to let it pass through, intangible. My skin would rip, and I would bleed. And isn't that beautiful? The majority of existence is a void, yet we cling to the scraps of facts that we exist here and now. Because if we let go, then we maybe become lost to it. Lost to the space between atoms, that vacuum we breathe our flicker of life into.

**“An urge to jump affirms the urge to live.”**

Thrill seekers. That's what we call them. Adrenaline junkies, fear fanatics, daredevils. Those that defy all natural laws for that rush. The void calls to them, and they listen. Skydiving, cliff jumping, parasailing, free gliding into the abyss. This isn't a modern trend. Tiptoeing the line between stupidity and bravery is an innately human trait. Tightrope walking between the Twin Towers, staring down to the street a million miles below you. The air would whip you side to side, threatening to tilt you over and send you screaming to the pavement below. There would be no safety systems involved. Just the wire under your feet and the world out in front of you. Would you do it? Would you risk everything just to prove that you could? What would be the point? You wouldn't be the first. It isn't even possible now. The rubble has long since cleared and the sky has healed. Why even try.



*Do it.*

*No one will care.*

*You'd be doing everyone else a favor.*

*Stop crying, you're not even bleeding yet.*

*Stupid. You're just a stupid, stupid girl. That's all you'll ever be.*

*You're not special. You're not different. Just one in eight billion.*

*They won't even remember you.*

*What have you ever done that would make you feel unique?*

*Do it.*

Yellow and pink. Two of my favorite colors. The colors of a winter's day sunrise, the blush of the sun just barely dusting the cotton-candy clouds. A bumblebee bumping into a blooming bud, pollen dashing across her back. The colors of my medication. One time a friend told me that I was only invited on a trip if I was on my meds. We were going to celebrate New Year's. It was a tradition. I haven't spoken to them in a while. I shake the amber bottle, the colorful pills jostling about in the plastic container. The lid is hard to get off. Childproof. I haven't been a child for a long time. I pry the white top off, tossing it into the sink. My phone pings cheerfully, reminding me that it is time for my happy pills. I tip the vial out onto my palm. Meds spill out, scattering across my hand. Too many. I only need one. I stand in that dingy bathroom, looking at my palm. One, two, three. Seven, eight, nine. More than enough. If I take them all, would that fix me? No, that would be silly. Silly silly me. The little pills roll around on my hand, the strawberry lemonade of the pharmaceutical. Don't do it. Don't. I blink. Don't be silly. I take the bottle and tip the pills back inside until only one is left between my fingertips. The moment slips away, and the void recedes back to her home. I will forget about this memory. I will forget

until the next time. Until the void calls my name again.

When confronted with a situation where a person believes themselves to be in harm's way, there is a choice that the mind makes. It is not a conscious or deliberate choice. It is embedded in the person's biology. The choice about whether to fight or whether to take flight. Run and hide like the coward you try to not be, or fight and die like a stupid storybook hero. In a situation like this, the body's sympathetic nervous system goes into overdrive. It pumps the body with adrenaline, gushing forth like a spurting wound from the adrenal glands. The heart pounds, slamming against the ribcage, threatening to snap the fragile bones. The breath quickens. The pupils dilate, focusing like a camera lens. But this isn't a movie. It is a moment. A moment to decide. The skin might pale or flush, and the hair across the body will prickle and stand on end. The person will tremble. They will shake. Paralyzed with fear at having to decide. But they do not have time to be afraid. They must move. Will they run, pathetic and afraid? Or will they stand their ground, arrogant and ignorant? They cannot stay frozen. They cannot watch the cars blur past on the street, feel the biting air on their bare arms, standing on that cracked sidewalk. They must decide.

The void is a child. She sits on the monkey bars at recess, viewing the world from above. She feels like a queen on her iron throne, but it is only an illusion. A trick her mind plays with her. She closes her eyes and leans back, feeling that pull of the earth in her blood. She hangs in the air, her world inverted. As she opens her eyes, the eyes that were the only thing she thought she was pretty for, she sees the sky stretching below her. A canvas of icy gray that reaches into forever. She feels weightless. If she let go, let her legs slip from the bars, she would surely float up to the clouds above her. She would soar. But she feels something else, something that twinges in the pit of her

stomach. She tries to ignore it, that odd, uncomfortable pang that shoots through her. If she lets go, if she floats away, she will never come back. Falling forever into the endless atmosphere of rain and stars and dreams. A hollow victory. The void wouldn't satisfy. She'd be lost among the dying suns, alone and emptied.

# The Bad Date

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*Zoe Schinko*

Van Gogh and I had a coffee date.  
He stood me up,  
blamed it on earache.

The next day he berated me on the phone,  
about how I was throwing my youth away.  
I could see him gaunt, like a skeleton,  
a cigarette clamped between his yellowing teeth.

The smoke coming from the phone was stifling,  
so I left the cherry red receiver on the counter,  
and went to go paint my nails.

***Inspired by Skull with a Burning Cigarette by Van Gogh***

# Chess Night, Coeur d'Alene Hotel

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*Jim Hanlen*

We play chess in a banquet room,  
never a quiet room on Friday nights.  
The electric bass level of the guitars  
vibrate and shake the dance wall,  
separating dancers from players.

When we start playing blitz,  
enthusiasm in our room rises.  
Chess slang is ripe for puns:  
two pigs on the seventh win,  
who let the orangutan loose?

Squeezing a whole game  
into five minutes – of course,  
means mistaking a bishop for queen  
– and we checkmate ourselves.  
Our minds race and we take

a breath, we play in earnest.  
Again, another heart stopping move.  
We take ourselves seriously.  
One player steps out to smoke,  
another, a waxed crew-cut player,

slips over to the dance room.  
More players turn down their kings.  
Those hungry for more,  
the very serious, move to Denny's  
bringing out their queen and pawns.

# Addiction

---

*Krystal Bates*

You are my addiction,  
Bitter, dark, yet oh so sweet  
But only for me

Time after time, your hex takes control  
Reminding me of the moments we stole  
Please don't keep me in this hell

Every day I crave your presence  
Yet so rarely I can afford the fee  
To have you here with me

A few hours of satisfaction  
Slowly diluting reality  
Every second is worth the price

The headache of watching you go  
The anxious shake of my hand,  
Unsteady now that you're gone

I know, the poison you leave behind in my veins  
The obsession that always sets in  
Making me run to your heated embrace

Tall, dark, and bittersweet  
You are my addiction.  
My love, my life,  
My coffee

## Seeing Through Sleeping Eyes Series: **Vision**

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*Lucian Cosson*



# Salmon Creek

---

*Gwen Mitchell*

## **Entry 1: 8:00 PM PST, 05/10/2022**

*[Recording begins]*

Okay. Okay, I guess this works. Let me just...put this down somewhere flat. *[Muffled thumping noise. McLoughlin clears throat]*

Hello. My name is Samantha McLoughlin and this is my...audio diary, I guess you could call it. Huh. I'm still not really sure about all of this but you said that this would be a good idea. To better "understand my internal thought processes," right?

*[Pause]*

God, this is so weird.

Well. I have no fucking clue what to start with.

*[McLoughlin inhales sharply]*

Maybe we could just talk about why we're doing this, huh?

Okay. Hmm...you've got this.

*[Pause]*

Um...well, I suppose the beginning's as good a place to start as any. My name's Sam, like I said, and I'm a private defense lawyer at Hamilton and Associates, a firm in Tacoma, Washington.

A couple weeks ago, I had a...nervous breakdown. Large client in the area, this big corporation called Invega International, got sued for false advertisement and we got called in. Was a pretty open-and-shut case. I was lucky that it landed on my desk. I was excited. Maybe, um...a bit too excited. Got myself worked up about how high-profile



everything was. I mean, damn. They had my name on TV and everything. I even got letters sent to my home address saying...well, they weren't saying the nicest things to me. You already know. We talked about this last session.

*[McLaughlin sighs]*

I still don't even know exactly what happened. The only thing that I can remember is falling asleep in my apartment in North End and then waking up at work on Eva Meyers's desk. You know what the reports said: I came into work at 3 AM, made hundreds of photocopies of important work-related documents and then just passed out. God, you should have seen the look on Eva's face. It would have been funny if I wasn't completely mortified.

Doc, you called it a "parasomnia-related fugue state." For the record, I have a condition called acute parasomnia that causes me to sleep walk. A lot, actually. It's motivated primarily by stress. I get up and go about my routine, doing...well, doing a lot of stuff. I've started tying a bungee cord around my front door while I sleep to make sure that I don't wander off again. You said that that might work, right?

Anyway. Word got out quick about the whole situation. I still did my job, of course, and Invega managed to earn a pretty tidy defamation settlement, but...everyone at the office has been treating me differently ever since. Messing up a big case is fine, that's something I can recover from; if all your clients think that I'm going crazy, then there's not a whole lot that I can do about that, is there?

I think my boss, Mr. Hamilton, understood that as well. He's been looking out for me ever since I passed the bar. When I asked for a week of sick leave, he didn't push back. He smiled that sad smile of his and he signed off on it.

That was about the same time I started seeing you, actually. And now...here I am, sitting in my apartment alone, talking to myself. Because that's not crazy at all. You told

me that this would be an easier way to get my thoughts down. “Make my internal world external to better reduce fugue-instigating stress.”

I don’t know how relaxed I feel at the moment. Hopefully, I’ll sleep a little bit more soundly.

Imagine that.

[Pause]

Oh shit! There’s stuff coming up. That’ll fill some time.

Today was supposed to be the day that I moved back into the office, but, sly devil that I am, I found a way out of it. Old Mister Hamilton – Doc, please don’t tell him I said that – was looking for someone that could represent the firm’s interests at a meeting with Avista Utilities in Spokane. They’ve been having a bit of a difficult time with a lawsuit filed by one of their independent contractors and they asked for an H&A associate to be on-site for consultation.

The second I heard about it, I volunteered. I mean, it’s basically an all-expense paid vacation, right? I get a free ride out through the Cascades to see the beautiful PNW sights and all I have to do is look after a little independent contractor case! Hell, these are the kinds of cases that we studied back in school. It’s gonna be the easiest paycheck that I’ve ever made.

Course, the other partners hemmed and hawed for a second, trying to find a polite way to point out the elephant in the room. “Can’t you see? You’ll be sending the crazy woman!” Hamilton came to the rescue again; fuck, he practically gave me the green light all on his own. It’s not like anyone was going to tell the founder of the firm no, right?

Now I’ve got the trip to look forward to. I’ve got the travel map ready on my phone, the luggage is packed and ready by the door, the car’s got a full tank of gas. Everything is set and ready to go!

[Pause]

You know what? I think I'm going to get something else recorded while I'm on the road. There's something about the hills that just brings out the poet in me. Nostalgia, I guess.

Anyway...I guess I don't have too much more to say. Suppose this is goodnight then, Dr. Lawson. Wish me luck.  
[Recording ends]

**Entry 2: 3:37 PM PST, 05/11/2022**

[Recording begins. The sound of driving is evident in the background]

You know, I know it's been said a lot already, but the American wilderness has got some great views. I mean, yeah, in the cities, you've got your Golden Gate Bridge and your St. Louis Arch and your Empire State Building and whatever else. But...once you get away from it all...and I mean *really* just get away from it all...

I told you I wasn't born in Tacoma, right? Grew up in a little town called Red House in New York. It's...well, it's not much to write home about, honestly. If you picture a small town, you've probably got it down to a tee. Still...it always felt bigger than anywhere else. There were fewer buildings, yeah, but it was just...more open, y'know? It didn't feel as...claustrophobic.

That's not to say that I don't love living in Tacoma. When I was a kid, I always dreamed about getting out of there, making something of myself. Now I'm doing that, I think. It...still, it....ah fuck, I don't know what I'm saying. It's so hard to drive and talk, you know?

God. I know that you can't see it, but the lighting out here is just spectacular. The way it filters through the trees is just — Jesus!

[A loud, muffled thud. Tires squealing against asphalt]

Shit! Shit, shit, shit, shit! No!

[The sounds of tires rolling over dirt. Another squealing crash accompanied by a hissing whoosh]

Oh, Christ. Ow. Wha-? Wai...wait...wait! No! Fuck!  
[*The sound of a seatbelt being unlatched. A car door slams shut. Muffled curses. A twelve-minute pause. A car door is pulled open and slammed shut again*]

Okay. Okay, it's not that bad, Sam. It's not that bad. There isn't any blood on the hood so that...Oh shit.  
[*The sound of hands fumbling with the phone. Recording ends*]

**Entry 3: 11:13 PM PST, 05/11/2022**

[*Recording begins. McLaughlin is audibly distraught*]

Okay. Jesus Christ. You have no idea what a shitshow the last eight hours have been.

You should have seen it. Every tire just started skidding all at once, like boom! I checked them and it looks like all of them went flat, all at the same time. Absolutely no clue what happened there. Maybe there was something sharp in the road or...or like a bad pothole or something? Whatever it was, I still skidded off the damn road and slammed face-first into a fucking tree. I'm lucky I'm not dead. Thank God for airbags, am I right?

[*Pause*]

Ugh! I looked away from the road for just one second. Jesus!

[*Pause*]

Anyway, after I turned off the last recording, I tried to Google the closest town or towing company or something, but guess what? We are all the way out in the boonies here, so no cell reception and no data. Not even Verizon wants to be here. It's-

What the fuck? Did you hear that?

I could have sworn I just heard something. It sounded like...like an animal scratching at the walls. *Jesus*, is there an animal stuck in there? Shit. I should...I should probably tell Andrea about that. I wonder if the microphone picked it up?

Oh god, oh god, oh...

[*Pause. The sound of heavy breathing*]

Um...uh...where was I? Oh, yeah. Um...so no service, no Internet, no nothing. From there, I guess I figured that my best bet at rescue was to hole up and wait for someone to come along. I wasn't that far off the road; if someone was driving by, they would definitely spot me. So I took out the roadside kit, put a space blanket under the windshield if it decided to shatter, and waited.

I'll tell ya this, I severely underestimated just how long that would take. I could have sworn there had been more cars just a couple minutes before but all of a sudden, that road decided to turn into the most deserted stretch of asphalt in North America. The sun was practically setting by the time anyone found me.

Luckily enough, that someone was driving a tow truck. I swear that I almost started crying when I saw his rig. I waved him down and told him what had happened. He frowned and came with me to look over the car. Said that the wheels had really been ripped to shreds by something —go figure— that I was lucky that the tires hadn't exploded. Told me that tire explosions can be pretty deadly. I can't imagine that he's seen too many of those, but he seemed serious enough about the possibility that I didn't press him for qualifications.

He called himself Orville and told me that he runs a towing company up in this little town nearby called Salmon Creek. He offered to tow what was left of my car out to his junkyard for storage. I told him that I didn't have anything to pay him with, but he waved me off before I could finish my sentence.

"I'm off the clock. Anyways, don't cost nothing to help a stranger," he said. The way he said it sounded off at the time, like his eyes were shining just a bit too bright. At first, I thought he was making fun of me for asking to pay,

but...I dunno. I didn't exactly have a lot of options when it came to roadside saviors, so I decided to swallow my judgment and go with this creepy guy.

We hooked his winch up to the bumper, I hopped in the truck, and we were off. I tried making a little conversation and before I knew it, Orville was giving me the full rundown on the town, just about anything I could think to ask. He said that Salmon Creek had been a fledgling town since the old Gold Rush days. People on the way up to Alaska had used the creek as an outpost before traveling off to Seattle and then the Yukon. Some folk decided to stay around and the town started to grow. The fishing industry started picking up steam here, bringing more and more people with it. That all changed in the 70s; apparently, some Canadian company built a hydroelectric power plant just north of the border that destroyed a huge chunk of the salmon population. Ever since then, the town's just gotten smaller and smaller.

That was the Salmon Creek that Orville was born into. He saw it all transform into a ghost town in just twenty years. Jesus. When I was growing up, Red House was *already* in the middle of nowhere. I'd feel bad for him if he wasn't leering at me the entire way there.

The sun had set by the time we got to town and I'll tell ya, Orville was not kidding. The "center of town" (if you can call it that) is one four-way intersection with a gas station that looks like it was designed back in the 50s. A deserted police station, Orville's junkyard, and a little pioneer-themed motel called the Golden Knot Motel & Bistro. It all felt eerie like I was gonna see a ghost pop out and yell "Boo!"

I asked him where the rest of the town was and he just laughed. Said that a lot of the buildings had been either scrapped by the townsfolk or just sold off. I asked him what townsfolk he was talking about and he just stayed silent.

I asked him why the motel was called the Golden Knot. He just chuckled to himself for a little bit as we pulled into the parking lot and said that he didn't really know, that it'd been named that for as long as he could remember. Lost to time, he said.

[Pause]

I don't know if I trust him. Maybe it's just truckers being truckers, but this guy...I don't know. Regardless of how nice of a guy he is, I'm still locking my door tonight.

As soon as we parked, I grabbed my luggage from the trunk of what used to be my car and dragged them to the front desk. The lady at the front desk introduced herself as Andrea and helped me sign in. I paid for the night and she started searching through her desk for the right key, chatting up a storm all the while. She seems...nice enough. More genuine than Orville, I think.

What did she say?

[Pause]

Oh! She told me that she and Orville have been married for the past thirty years and waved me away when I congratulated them. Couldn't hide her smile though.

She also said that she and him are the only people in town. That turned my head a bit. Asked her how it could be called a town if there were only two of 'em. She looked a little confused and said that calling it a town was more an old habit than anything.

I was kinda taken aback by that. I wonder how long those two have been here? I know he grew up here but her...I don't know. It's all weird, all of this.

[Pause]

Doctor, I don't know what it is, but this place is bringing back some serious déjà vu. The forest, the buildings, everything, it all...it looks like back home...or one part of it, at least. Back when I was little, I had a friend named Bailey. She and her family owned a farm way out in the

middle of nowhere. I used to have my mom drop me off at her house for full weekends. It was just the two of us hanging out with the livestock, talking about what we wanted to be. She always said that she wanted to be a farmer like her parents. I always used to say that I wanted to get rich. She would make fun of me for that.

I remember that there was this old billy goat named Mr. Fuzz that always strayed away from me, snorting and stamping at the ground, his eyes all wide and untrusting. Bailey would always try to lure him closer with apples and pears, talking to him in a low kind of voice.

“Don’t worry about Sammy, Mr. Fuzz,” Bailey would say, “She’s perfectly safe. I promise. You have nothing to worry about.”

He never took the bait. Always standing there, looking at me like I was a predator or something.

Bailey and I grew apart as we got into high school and I never saw either of them again. The last thing that I heard about either of them was from the newspaper, of all things. Apparently, Mr. Fuzz had gotten loose one night and charged at a couple on a hiking trail that ran near Bailey’s farm. I don’t remember if either of the people died, but they ended up having to put the old goat down because of it.

[Pause]

Turns out that it’s not just Andrea and Orville here. She told me that there was this other guy here named Wilbur. Younger than both of them. Moved up from California a few years back. A real Chris McCandless type. In search of nature or some such. Went off into the woods, made himself a stone cabin, and has been living out of it ever since. Andrea said that he comes into town every couple of weeks to pick up supplies before heading back out. Said that he hasn’t been around in a while. Andrea seemed worried by that.



[Pause]

Just another weird guy, I guess. Tacoma has those in spades.

I asked Andrea if I could use a landline to call the hotel that's waiting for me in Spokane. Unfortunately, the phone lines out here get cut at night by the phone company. Something about "protecting the connections from degradation." I didn't argue with her about it; it was too late to be arguing with old women in rural motels. I just took my key, thanked her and her husband for their kindness, and lugged my stuff over to my room.

And that's how we got here. To a motel room in the middle of nowhere in the middle of the night.

[McLoughlin sighs]

Anyway, it's getting late. I should be getting to bed before my eyebags get any deeper. Or before a ghost comes and grabs me in the middle of the night. Don't have a bungee cord to wrap around the door so I think I'm just going to have to prop up a chair and hope for the best. Either way, this is goodnight, Dr. Lawson. Wish me luck.

[Recording ends]

**Entry 4: 4:35 PM PST, 05/12/2022**

[Recording starts. Heavy breathing can be heard]

So, bad news and good news.

I called up Avista on the hotel line this morning and told them about the delay. They were not fucking happy to hear that. Not happy at all. Apparently, some of their contractors had gotten wind that I was assigned to the case and went to the media with it. The news has been running stories calling me "unfit to work" and insinuating that Avista was irresponsible for working with us. Meanwhile, Avista's fucking furious. Said in no uncertain terms that if I did not find a way to Spokane soon and handle this shitstorm, then they would be forced to terminate their contract with Hamilton and Associates.

I called up headquarters and told them the situation. They tell me not to worry about any of it, they'll send someone to take care of it, they'll fly out Eva Meyers this evening and she'll take care of all of it, just focus on getting home and then we'll discuss all of this, nothing would come of this, that accidents happen to everyone.

I'm gonna be honest...this...I can't help but feel like the world's falling apart all around me. That was my second fucking chance and now, I was going to blow it because some Fed forgot to patch a goddamn pothole. Now, I get to wander back to the firm and I...I don't think that Mr. Hamilton's gonna be able to cover for me after this. Fuck!

God, you should have heard how smug that asshole was. I could almost hear the smirk on his face. Like he knew that I was never gonna be up to this. And the fact that they picked Eva Meyers of all people. That fucking viper! Hell, they're all vipers, just watching for me to slip up so they can watch me fall.

Shit!

*[Pause. Sobbing can be heard]*

I told Andrea last night.

She was up at the front desk, ringing up a bunch of different folks. Apparently, Orville is not around right now and she was checking with a bunch of his friends from out of town. I felt a little bit guilty, but I felt relieved when she said that. Nothing against the guy, it's just...he's just...the way that he...nevermind. I don't know what I was gonna say.

Either way, I told her about the noises I heard last night, the weird scratching things. She said that it was unlikely that there was anything in the walls but there might have been something dragging up against the outside wall of the motel. She went outside with me and we took a look.

Running up along the walls of the motel just beyond my room were these long, smooth grooves. It looked like

sections of the wood had just been cleanly carved out of the back wall. She frowned at it, said they didn't look like anything a predator would make. G guessed that it was probably just a deer or something like that.

"A wild buck," she called it, "or a demon woodcarver."

She chuckled good-naturedly at that. I answered in kind.

I think she was lying to me. Those definitely looked like fingernail scratches to me.

I won't lie: that was definitely a relief to hear. I spent last night tossing and turning, dreaming about all kinds of wild animals burrowing their way into the room while I slept. The thought of all of those feral eyes watching me...

I thanked Andrea for her help and went over to the junkyard to learn if there was any way to salvage my car. True enough, Orville wasn't there. I shouted his name a couple of times but he didn't answer. I thought about hopping the fence into the yard to continue my search but the padlocks and the barbed wire made me think twice about that plan. After about an hour of waiting and nothing to show for it, I walked back to the motel.

I've been up in my room trying to get work, but I have the feeling that that is just not going to happen. The second I opened up my laptop, my mind wandered back to those scratching noises that I'd heard against the back wall. That and wherever the hell Orville is. Every couple of seconds, I would catch myself looking over at where the noise had come from. I can't help but feel that those marks were...too smooth for a wild animal like a deer to make.

Right? Am I just being crazy? I don't...

[Pause]

Fuck. This whole place feels off. It's just...it's just like back in Tacoma. Even though there's no one around, it still feels like I'm being watched wherever I go.

Eventually, I just got fed up with all of that and went

down to ask Andrea if there was anything to do here. If she was offended by that, she masked it pretty well. Told me that there was this old hiking trail just a little ways from here that has this gorgeous view overlooking the “famous” Salmon River. Though it’s more like the Salmon Stream, she said.

I’m heading there now before it gets too dark out. A little nature’ll do me good. That way I can get away from this fucking place. Breathe, you know?

*[Recording ends]*

**Entry 5: 8:43 PM PST, 05/12/2022**

*[Recording starts. Heavy breathing audible]*

Oh, God. Oh, God. Okay...okay. Diane, something just happened. I don’t...I don’t know how to describe it exactly but I’m going to try my best.

I was walking down the trail and I started to hear the river that Andrea was talking about. I walked down to get a closer look and...there he was.

God, my hands won’t stop fucking shaking.

Whoever he was, it didn’t look like Orville. This guy seemed younger, bigger. He must have been the Wilbur guy that Andrea was talking about. He looked like he was wearing normal clothes, I guess. T-shirt, jeans, sneakers. The only thing that was off was...

Diane, he was wearing a goddamn goat skull over his face.

There were these budding horns, little stubs more than anything. They were covered in these brown stains. He must have tied it into place with some string so he could wear it like a mask. The teeth had all been pulled out along with the jawbone, a long tangled beard poking its way through. And his eyes...his fucking *eyes*...they were the most piercing green I’ve ever seen. They looked like they were practically glowing at me.

When I saw him, I screamed and jumped about a foot in the air before stepping back to the trail. He didn't even move a muscle. Just stood there on the riverbank watching me. Stood so still that I could have sworn he'd stopped breathing.

I'd like to pretend that I stood my ground against the weirdo who was staring at me in the woods. Unfortunately, lying would kind of defeat the purpose of these logs, wouldn't it, Diane?

No, I took off running down the trail as fast as my legs could take me. Every once in a while, I would throw a glance over my shoulder. I kept seeing the yellowed bone peeking out at me from behind trees, bobbing along in time to his footsteps.

Fuck. I've been holed up in the motel room for the past few hours. I've got the door locked. He looked pretty fucking strong, so I barricaded the door with the desk that came with the room and I locked all of the windows.

*[Unsteady laughter audible]*

There's no fucking way I'm sleeping tonight. Fucking Christ...

*[Pause]*

Shit. I don't know if I should be talking this loud. I don't know how thick these walls are or how good his hearing is. Andrea seemed to know the fucking guy. Was there...blood on his horns. How much of this shit is she in on? Maybe...maybe the three of 'em lure people like me to this fucking town just so they can...

*[Pause]*

Diane, there's something that I've gotta tell you. When I was driving...shit! When I was on the road and I spun out, I...I'm sure that I hit him. Wilbur or whoever the fuck that person is in the mask. I saw him before! He was just standing in the middle of the road and I...I couldn't see him and I panicked and I swerved but he didn't move and

I heard this thud but I didn't know if it was him or a deer or if I was just fucking seeing things...!

[Pause]

Whatever the hell is going on, I'm not letting this shit die with me. Tonight, I'm going to hide the phone under the mattress. That way, maybe there'll be something left behind if...if he gets through the door.

[Pause]

If you found this phone here, call the police. And... please tell Bernice and James McLoughlin that their daughter loves them very much.

[Recording ends]

### **Entry 6: 9:08 AM PST, 05/13/2022**

[Recording starts]

Diane, I am still alive! I repeat, I am still fucking alive! Whoo!

God, I thought I was a goner.

Y'see, I had this dream last night. More of a night terror, really. It felt like I was awake, but I couldn't move my body and there was this weight on my chest that was squeezing all of the air out of my lungs. I could see myself in my room and there he was, standing at the foot of my bed, looking at me with those green eyes.

[A slow inhale and exhale]

Then, he...he got closer. He bent down near the bed and whispered to me. It was this weird phrase repeated over and over and over again.

"The goat sits in its pen, hemming and hawing in fear. The vipers slither here and there, biting off what they can. Pray the goat breaks free."

It was the oddest thing in the world, but I couldn't help but feel like there was something else then. I know it was just a fucking dream but...it feels like a part of me is trying to tell me something.

Then I woke up. The room was empty and the doors and windows were exactly how I left them, just like in the dream. I checked the windows to make sure that I was in the clear and, sure enough, I couldn't see another living soul out there. Orville still isn't back and I couldn't see Andrea anywhere. Maybe they're hiding out somewhere, waiting to jump me, to get me for what I did.

[*Pause*]

Diane, I am going to get out of this. I don't care what Hamilton and Associates or Avista or Eva Meyers or anyone else have to say: I'm getting the fuck out of here. Not back to Tacoma, I don't...I don't know if I can go back to that. No matter how nice Mr. Hamilton is, it's not gonna make up for all of the bullshit back there. I don't know if I've just been thinking about the past too much, but...I think Bailey was right to choose what she did. All these people, it's not...I can't do it anymore.

Here's the plan. I'm gonna hop over that fence into Orville's junkyard and see if I can get my hands on something that works. Hopefully, it'll have enough gas to get me the fuck out and then...well, I guess this is goodbye.

Diane, thank you for everything that you've done for me this past week. For all of the times that you reassured me, kept me on the straight and narrow. I wouldn't have been able to come to the realizations that I have without you. Thank you.

Well...I'd best get going before that skull-faced asshole decides to show up for real. I'll send these to you the next time I get an Internet connection, I promise.

I suppose this is Samantha McLoughlin, signing off for the last time. I wish you the best of luck, Diane!

[*Recording ends*]

### Addendum

On 06/06/2022, a missing person report was filed

with the Tacoma Police Department by Alfred Hamilton (57) for one of his employees, Samantha McLoughlin (29). After being given access to phone records, TPD traced a call from McLoughlin from Salmon Creek to Spokane. State authorities were informed of the lead and were dispatched to investigate.

Upon arrival and after a thorough search of the town, the Washington State Patrol was able to locate McLoughlin's car in a lot listed under the Salmon Creek Towing Company. WSP was able to locate and recover insurance documents but no other clues to McLoughlin's whereabouts.

These audio logs were taken from a cellular phone left on the side of Interstate-90, three miles west of Liberty Lake, Washington. The person who discovered the phone in question, Edward Kilkelly (36), found it while using his metal detector. After gaining access to the audio logs, Kilkelly drove to Salmon Creek as WSP was performing preliminary investigations. Upon arrival and questioning, he was ordered to surrender the phone to state custody and obliged.

During the search, the remains of two individuals were recovered. Orville Patrick (53) was found hidden underneath a car in the Salmon Creek Towing Company's scrapyard. His wife, Andrea Patrick (56), was found stabbed to death in the lobby of the Golden Knot Motel & Bistro. Near the scenes of both crimes, a goat skull taken from the motel's lobby was found with what has been confirmed to be both of their blood on its horns.

The TPD has reached out to Doctor Diane Lawson, McLoughlin's therapist. Lawson has confirmed that McLoughlin suffers from an acute case of parasomnia, a condition that causes people to perform any range of actions while they sleep. When asked, she confirmed that this condition can, in some rare cases, manifest erratic or even



violent behavior.

As of 09/25/2022, Samantha McLoughlin's whereabouts are unknown. Due to the potential risk in pursuing a suspect with McLoughlin's condition, she is to be considered dangerous and potentially armed. Her information has been forwarded to federal authorities and the search is ongoing.

Additionally, a further investigation was made into the location of the individual referred to as "Wilbur". A stone cabin similar to the one mentioned in McLoughlin's logs was found a mile northeast of Salmon Creek. Inside, the remains of Wilbur Cassel (24) were discovered.

According to best estimates by the officers at the scene, Cassel had passed away several months prior due to exposure to the elements.

Aside from the corpse, the cabin was empty save for a small journal left discarded on the floor. A transcript of what was repeated within is as follows:

*The goat sits in its pen, hemming and hawing in fear.*

*The vipers slither here and there, biting off what they can.*

Pray the goat breaks free.

So far, WSP attempts to determine the origins of this phrase have been unsuccessful.

## **Before I Die I Want to Live Series: Abandoned Bus**

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*Tori Lopez*



# Road Kill

---

*Malia Starita*

The long ribbon of asphalt  
outstretched before me  
lays like a tarry scar  
cut deep,  
deep  
into  
the flaxen earth.

Along the hide  
of the great black snake  
Nothing's breath  
brushes along my  
spine—  
a reminder:  
you are alone here.

Here, I am reminded that  
Death has the same gaze  
across all creatures—  
that cloudy absence,  
full of an echoing  
and resounding hollowness  
that holds you tight in your place  
unable to look  
away.

I hold the caribou's gaze,  
it's head heavy with Death

on the asphalt  
and I am grappled  
by the void  
and welcoming of the tightness  
in my chest.  
It deserves to be mourned.

I am not alone in this.  
The woman on the side of the road  
is carved of the earth,  
her dark eyes vibrant in the haze,  
glinting sharply and full.

She only nods  
when our eyes briefly meet,  
then raises her knife  
blade to flesh  
and mourns.

# It's Night

---

*Michele Pointel*

and the earth puts on  
its cloud coat,  
its face washed by  
gentle rains

blue streams run unhindered,  
forging melodies

the rugged rocks  
sing songs of strength  
taught by the wind

It's night

and the firefly once in my hand

has flown to the skies  
and rained down  
aurora

# Big, Funny Man

---

*Jovonna Gonzalez*

I lasted in dance class for about a month. Maybe not even quite that long because there is no photographic evidence of my sister and me side-by-side post-recital in matching tutus or tap shoes. Enamored with my own reflection, I spent the majority of my brief career gazing at myself in the mirror while I made up my own unique choreography. Lost in my own world, full of twists and turns, and awkward jerking movements— I was the embodiment of “stiffy”— the affectionate nickname I had somehow earned as a five-year-old. A stark contrast to the gentle, amenable nature of my sister who hardly even resembled a relative with her green eyes, dark, thick curly hair, and fair skin.

As the legend goes, it took my dad one trip to dance class to realize this was not the venue for me. The mirrored walls of that studio were smothering my shine, not amplifying it so he rescued me. Car concerts and dashboard drumming would become the dance studio of my youth as I swapped out leotards for knee pads, weathered leather gloves, and airbrushed helmets emblazoned with my name. I became a softball player— an athlete and competitor— but I found my reflection again, daydreaming in left field, plucking weeds, making wishes, and dancing with my shadow. Always a creative problem solver, a MacGyver of everything from home improvement to hairdos when he used to send me off to school with what we called a “party” in my hair, my dad soon had me covered in clunky gear that swallowed up my then small frame and declared “she is a catcher”— solidified by the backyard dodge-ball style drills.

With a mask obscuring my vision and a ball flying at me, there was no time for self-adoration as scraped knees, sun-bleached hair, and truly odorous socks became the hallmarks of my summers— I was a catcher. And my father was my coach. And everyone else’s too.

Coach G, Mr. (Gonzalez), my dad, slowed every family outing with his local celebrity status. Stopping to grab pupusas across from Allan Witt park on the way home from a game? Could easily take an hour. Stuck at the YMCA watching atrocious youth basketball while my four-eyed little brother bumbled up and down the court? The whole afternoon. Gone. Late for a movie? Kiss the first half goodbye while dad chatted with a former student, player, or friend as I gobbled down a nauseating portion of the popcorn. I, often mortified, took shelter behind his towering frame, but understood his magnetism because it was what drew me in. It is what made our family of three blossom into a family of four almost overnight.

The wedding pictures reek of the late ‘80s and early ‘90s as my mother clung to permed hair, oversized shoulder pads, and mall-walker hairdos— a term my Aunt Nancy always used and one to this day I do not understand. Still, with my bangs freshly teased, coiffed, and placed atop my forehead and sprayed into permanence, I waltzed down that aisle with little understanding of the significance of the day. I knew my mom was there in white with heavy beading to contrast the ornate green taffeta gowns my sister and I both wore— gowns we would later use to play dress up with my brother. As I stood there, looking up at my parents, at the big, funny man whose hands reached out to hold my mom’s, I attempted to ignore the hushed but urgent command from the first row: “Jovonna, sit down!” I turned back to see my sister, smugly positioned between my Nani and Papa Honey, with a smirk on her face and the knowledge of her favored position at

that moment. Begrudgingly, I retreated to join them but refused my Nani any satisfaction. I climbed into my Papa's lap for refuge and turned my attention back to the altar, disappointed to witness whatever I was witnessing from such a far distance.

You see, we never did anything by ourselves. We were not that type of family. From the moment we became one, we were inseparable. No practice, no grocery store run, no trip to the bank was done in isolation. Instead, we would pile into one of the many vehicles we cycled through when I was a kid— a too-small minivan, a more luxurious commuter van, or an almost seafoam green Plymouth Breeze with a broken seat only propped up by a bucket— and together we would go.

For me, I was a velcro baby. Attached to my mother from the second I exited the womb on June 24, 1988— coincidentally the same day my sister entered the world just three years before me. I had no time or patience for anyone but my mom. I was not curious about the world around me and did not want to be passed around and cooed at by strangers. As I got older, that attachment only extended as far as my sister who became my translator and defender of my muddled speech and shy tendencies. They were enough.

At the time, I didn't know my biological father or the man who would become my dad. My father, as reported to me by his parents and sisters, was always away. Working. Busy. I honestly don't remember but it made no difference to me. He was the same as any other stranger I had resisted as a baby. When I did see him, his sunken eyes, chalky skin, and lanky figure terrified me. I did not understand his unnatural movements or the constant smacking of his mouth and lips. As I learned to read I would recognize my own name tattooed on his wrist, in a big looping font and I felt guilty because I felt nothing. This man, this person,



permanently inked my name into his flesh and yet I knew nothing about him and maybe more importantly, he knew nothing about me.

With age, and time, I came to understand my biological father's demons— ones I'm grateful don't haunt me— and ones I feel indebted to. It is because of them that there was room. So, when that big, funny man came around, when we had left and it was just the three of us, together, cruising around town in my mom's red Thunderbird, the position was vacant.

Now, youth league softball is a cutthroat game. Favoritism runs rampant. All-Star game selections are all down to politics and rivalries run as long as they do deep. Dug-outs overflow with spit, sunflower seeds, and the sound of teenage girls dropping their voices down an octave to achieve the harsh rattle of a seasoned smoker as they chant, scream, and boo their way to victory. Songs passed down from one generation to the next as a rite of passage — my sister taught me these call-and-response cheers that echoed through the countless car rides to tournaments up and down the state:

*We don't wear no mini skirts*

*All we wear are softball shirts*

*We don't drink no lemonade*

*All we drink is gatorade*

*We don't play with barbie dolls*

*All we play with are bats and balls*

As a competitor, I hated to lose and so did my dad. We were not “for the love of the game” kind of people. Oh no. We were “for the love of winning” kind of people. We were “for the love of being the best” kind of people. I'd rip my flesh open sliding into second, lose a thumbnail, or take a pitch to the back if it meant a win for my team. When I was nothing more than a loud-mouth freshman, playing shortstop to my sister on the mound, I did not hesitate

when she took a line drive to the forehead. The loud crack off the bat and subsequent thump as that bulbous yellow sphere made contact with her face paralyzed most. Audible gasps were heard from the stands— from my poor mother no doubt who was guarding her car from foul balls but I played it. My sister would have done the same.

For the record: it was just a minor concussion and I got the out.

When the “Flaming Hot Cheetos,” a make-lemonade-out-of-lemons team name that came as a result of the unlucky draw of bright orange jerseys, found ourselves down a few runs, in a late-season game, tension was high. I was constantly looking to my dad— if not for signs to call a pitch, then when stepping out of the batter’s box to pick up a likely fictional and nonsensical signal. He didn’t see the point in all the secrecy. If he wanted me to bunt, he’d just yell it; his theory was that “they still had to play the ball” and honestly it worked:

*Everywhere we go, people want to know,  
Who we are, so we tell them.  
We are the Cheetos,  
The mighty, mighty Cheetos!*

The specifics of the game elude me now but what I do remember is that my dad was inevitably ejected. Tossed out. Expelled. Not the first occurrence of its kind and definitely not the last. A warning from a ref, a stern word from an umpire, and a look of frustration from a line judge were all part of the routine. Ironically, my father himself was an umpire and referee— calling games on rare tournament weekends when my siblings or I weren’t on the field ourselves or spending Saturday mornings mediating the contentious world of Pop Warner football to keep us in new cleats every season. When an ump would crowd me behind home plate and I would get lippy (clearly I outgrew any whisper of timidness by then), the chances that

old blue knew my dad were pretty high. Don't be fooled by my mother's sweet demeanor though because she has also been thrown out of middle school gyms all over Northern California. All in the name of our honor. Of defending ourselves and most importantly, protecting us. Protecting me.

Still, watching the ump signal to my dad to leave the dugout, to banish him from the stands, was deflating. Our team, a bit frazzled admittedly, tried to regroup and slowly built momentum late in the game:

*Who wants a rally rally rally rally*

*WE want a rally rally rally rally*

*Who wants a rally rally rally rally*

*WE want a rally rally rally rally*

It was rally time. Hats turned inside out, visors on upside down kind of rally time. The kind of time where you dig down deep, find the raspiest voice your 12-year-old self can muster, and wage psychological warfare on your opponent with relentless noise from the dugout. As we started our push, and the sunset on a warm day and turned into a cool summer night, from the depths of left field, we heard a battle cry:

*“RALLY BLANKET!”*

I craned my neck to see down the left field line and there he was. My 6'3" 240 pound father— built like a tortilla chip— with incomprehensibly broad shoulders, bow-legged knees covered in surgery scars from his own athletic ventures as well as failed attempts to correct his pigeon-toed feet, and toothpick legs, teetering back and forth as he ran up and down the line:

*“RALLY BLANKET!”*

Laughter erupted in the dugout, in the stands, and on the field although a noticeable silence came from the umpire behind home plate. With his booming voice buoying us up, we began again:

*Who wants a rally rally rally rally*

*WE want a rally rally rally rally*

*Who wants a rally rally rally rally*

***WE want a rally rally rally rally***

Earlier when I had vomited directly into my mashed potatoes upon hearing the news that my mother was pregnant, that I would have a brother, I didn't imagine this. This scene of my father rallying in left field or my mother in the stands, my sister behind the dugout and my once ignored brother playing near the bleachers. As he shook the blanket more violently, as he twisted and turned, bellying his call, I saw his name printed across those broad shoulders. I saw the same name that stretched across the back of my own fluorescent orange tee. He was in left field, he was on my back, he was right there with me.

Years later we would sign a bunch of court documents I did not fully understand and we took a poorly lit, awkwardly staged photo with a judge to commemorate what had been true for over a decade. This was my dad and now I had a piece of paper to prove it.

It was his name I wore on my back - his name that adorned every jersey, sweatshirt, or class shirt I owned. It was his name my students would know me by and the one that would be printed on every diploma, certificate, and check I received. But it's not just his. It's ours. Not just the family of four we became but the family of five we grew into— the family of ten cousins, four uncles, three aunts, and one beloved matriarch.

You can guess how it all ended. We won the game. The rally blanket, in reality an old throw we kept in the van at all times just in case we decided to have a picnic, go to the beach, or wound up somewhere chilly on one of our many "come along for the ride" adventures of my childhood, became legend too. Much like my dance moves.

# Eye to Eye

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*Brianna Covert*



# Consider the Jellyfish

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*Meagan Graves*

**2023 Michael and Gail Gurian Writing Awards Recipient  
Poetry, Second Place**

Consider the jellyfish: a creature unspooled and  
Floating in the first blood, the earth blood, the  
Sea. Consider the jellyfish and its tentacles, dancing  
Like ribbons or rope, waving with mindless grace as it  
Drifts directionless along currents deep within the  
Blue. Consider the jellyfish and the Medusan sting  
Clinging to the tentacles' ends, as much a shield as  
A weapon. Consider the jellyfish and its umbrella-  
Mushroom cap that pulsates for heartbeat propulsion.  
Consider the jellyfish and that when we witness it,  
We feel the need to humanize and think that the  
Cap must be its head. Consider the jellyfish and its  
Mindlessness. Consider that the jellyfish still knows  
Something that we do not about the nature of being  
— About being nature, primal and simple and free.  
Consider God. Consider God, in heaven, floating atop  
Clouds made of cyclical water that revert to the  
World Neptunic. Consider God's unknowability, God's  
Mystery, God's power and grace and silence. Consider  
The jellyfish. Consider the jellyfish and its longevity —  
A remnant of 700 million years as the rest of us  
Transformed into a version distorted and strange.  
Consider the jellyfish, unknowing and alien and exquisite.  
Consider the aquariums we stare at them in, swaying  
Hypnotized and cryptic, and consider the fact that we  
May be the ones trapped behind the glass. Consider God.  
Consider the jellyfish. Consider that if there is a God,  
God and the jellyfish must be almost the same.

# “See you at the store tomorrow!”

*Michele Pointel*

*for Dad (1920-2022)*

Somewhere  
between the country road night mist  
and tomorrow,  
my father is driving to his destination.  
He knows the beds and bunks where they sleep,  
where the clothes are kept,  
are only 40 miles away.

His final exam is tucked in the pages of his textbook;  
he’s already finished two four-page booklets.  
First aid studies.

He tells me I should come see  
the beautiful trees and landscape in Missouri.  
“It’s so like Wisconsin,” he reports.

My sister said he woke up in Arizona, but announced soon  
after  
that he was all done with Kaukauna.

“Honey,” he requests through the phone, in a voice talkin  
to someone not me,  
“every once in a while, check the mail downtown,  
would you, honey?” I agree.

He’s still 10 miles east along the highway,  
though they don’t call it a main road. He has 40 miles to  
drive,

and needs to get going.

“Dad, you need to go to bed now,” my sister guides.

After discussion of tomorrow’s plans,

he promises from Alaska,

connected with me across miles of states of memories:

“See you at the store tomorrow!”



# So Much Glass

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*Garrick Bateman*

**2023 Michael and Gail Gurian Writing Awards Recipient  
Fiction, First Place**

Gramma stood beside the window and held the husks in her hands. Every year, she would shuck the corn and all us cousins would shuck it with her. And afterwards we tell her thank you for letting us work with her. That was Gramma, though. Loved the work, lived for it. Always said we were supposed to be grateful for it, for the opportunity to do work and to do it good, and to know that we had hands that were strong and that were healthy and that could peel the husks so nicely, and that could get the sweet corn ready for the boil. Above all, be grateful that you had the chance to do the work. Still, I can see us all there, still, standing where the door is let open, and the wind is coming up through the wheat, and the windmill is grouching with all its heart, and the sun is getting thinner in the sky, falling to that place where the telephone wires sink into the yellow sea, and where someone else's house, way out there in the grain, sets on a light, and smokes from the chimney.

The year she started forgetting the word for "ice" was the last year she shucked the corn. It was cold then—November. And from where we stood, beside a little fire burning in the driveway, we could see the way the roads were painted over with all that frost, could tell from the way the sky looked back up at itself in the ice-mirror asphalt. Gramma stopped and went and leaned up against the side of the garage door. She put a finger to her temple and looked at me and then at Isaac and then looked back at the grain, the blue skies and the way they were being

drunk up on the frozen roads. "I hope your grandfather gets back here all right," she said. "All this glass on the roads. So much glass."

"What glass?" Isaac said. He was older than me by a little. Still is older than me, though he feels less like it now. At the time he was sixteen, and I was three years his junior. He said that I was his favorite cousin, and he was prone to shaking his hands through my hair in a way that sort of hurt, but that people said was loving. That he insisted was loving. That day, he was wearing a little mustache, and he had undone the top button of this Thanksgiving flannel, so that you could see his collarbone. He must have seen it somewhere in the movies. He was drinking a root beer from a glass bottle, and his thumb was covering up the label so no one could see it wasn't real beer. "There's no glass."

Gramma let her shoulders go limp, and she came back to the side of the trash can and discarded one of the corn husks she'd been futzing with for so long now. "It's just all over the road," she said. "It's bad weather. I just hope he's driving slow is all. Driving okay."

"I hope so too Gramma," Isaac said. Him and I shucked the corn.

A little while later, Daisy and Eddie came outside and they swept up the floor of the garage with brooms that stood above their heads when held straight. They were the younger ones, the ones everyone still called kids. Daisy was Isaac's brother. She was seven and she didn't talk much. Even at the dinner table, she would have her head stuck inside the pages of a book that she was too young, by any right, to be reading. Dad thought she was funny, but he thought it was funniest how upset it made Gramma when Daisy read at the dinner table, thinking she was clever by hiding the book behind the long ends of the tasseled tablecloth.

Eddie was mine—my little brother. He was nine, and he was as loud as Daisy was quiet. And he always had dirt on him, no matter where he was or what he'd been doing, there was dirt somewhere on his clothes. Gramma always thought that, if she made Eddie clean enough things around the house, eventually the state of mind would rub off on him, but so far she'd been proven wrong time and time again. Because Eddie kept coming back to her house and trailing dirt on the linoleum. Which Gramma would make him clean up an hour later.

Once those two were done cleaning, they came to help with the corn. Which there was a lot of. They did it quietly for a while. But then Eddie got tired of all the quiet and he started talking about something, though I didn't listen much, because whatever it was he was saying, I knew it'd be said again tomorrow, on the car ride back home.

When Eddie finished talking, Gramma looked up again and then looked out the garage door and over at the roads. I suppose that she had no words for Eddie just then, or if she did, she was letting them go, out through her breath and into the clouds. She had a familiar look on her face, and she squinted her eyes up real tight, as if she were seeing something in the distance, out there in the grid of dirt roads that checkered the countryside. But there was nothing there, unless you counted the long grass. Or unless you counted the telephone wires; they stretched on for miles. "I hope your grandfather gets home all right," she said. I wondered if I should tell her she had already said it before. "It's dangerous driving on glass like that."

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It was Easter the next time we saw her. The lawn had been just cut for the first time that year, and the smell of green was coming in through the screen door. Mass was in the morning, and Aunt Evelyn made sure that Isaac buttoned his shirt all the way up to the top button because *Christ, if the Lord sees you like that in his house, the*

*Father will be sending you to confession.* He'd shaved the mustache by now, which everyone agreed (though, not in front of him) was a good decision. Daisy and I had gotten to listen in on that conversation, because the curtain of beads that separated the kitchen from the sunroom, where we were sitting on the tiles below the windows that overlooked the garden, was not good for keeping quiet talks.

Daisy was reading, but I could tell she stopped when they started talking about Isaac. And I think she might have smiled.

"He's got a girl he's seeing now, did you know that Ma?" That voice was Evelyn's. She was Dad's sister. She was tall, she often wore high heels. And she smelled strongly of perfume, though she frequently changed which perfume she preferred. When I was little, she'd been a drinker, but she'd gotten off of that now. But still, she scared me, in a way. I couldn't say why, but she did. "Been seeing her a couple months now."

It got quiet a while. "Who is that now, dear?" That was Gramma.

"Isaac, Mom." She sounded upset. Adults sounded upset a lot. I didn't know why that was, but they just did. And about things kids never seemed to get upset about. "Your grandson, he's got a girlfriend now. Isn't that good?"

"Oh yes, that's right." Her voice was strained. Like she was lifting something. "He's a good boy. You should be proud."

I stopped listening. There was something about the way they were all talking that made my heart start to drum. Something that felt like hurt was hanging in the air, and it was letting in through the curtains. Instead, I went and turned on the television and looked out the window at the garden and counted how many honeybees I could see landing on the tulips. "You know," Daisy said, "our parents don't like each other."

I stopped counting. I had counted seven honeybees.

“What do you mean?” Her eyes were still on the book as she went on. “I hear them talking sometimes,” she said. “When they think I’m asleep, I can hear it through the walls. They talk about your Dad. They call him Lou, but I know that’s who they’re talking about.”

I shook my head. “I’m sure it’s nothing.”

Daisy shrugged. “I don’t know. I just know I hear them say bad things about him.”

“If that’s true, then what sort of bad things do they say?” I asked. But Daisy didn’t know. All she knew was that she had been hearing Dad’s name through the walls, and that the way her parents said it wasn’t a happy sort of way. It must have been that adult sadness sort of thing again. Kids were good at picking up on that, on when there was badness around. Even so, I didn’t know what about my dad would make Aunt Evelyn sad. I had never known them to fight, and at Christmas time, they were the ones who would read the prayers aloud together. And on Thanksgiving, we’d play football with the families, and Dad would be our quarterback and Evelyn would be Isaac and Daisy’s, and we’d play out there beside the cornfields until the light got low and the grass got hard below our boots. There wasn’t much sad about that.

A while later, we all piled into Grandad’s minivan and went to church. It was a small chapel, a white dot in the middle of a lot of nothing. But it had a lovely red painted door, and an only slightly crooked cross that stood as a proud shepherd over all the crop around. It was the place where Mom and Dad had gotten married, and Evelyn and her husband too. Gramma had told me, and this was when I was younger, that one day I’d get married there too. I asked her what would happen if I didn’t want to get married, and she’d pinched me by the ear and had told me that that sort of lip wasn’t going to be tolerated near God’s house.

It smelled like incense in there, and the palm leaf

crosses from the week prior were dried and husking over the doors. Well mass went by as mass tended to go by, and I spent it looking frank-like out the westward window, where—if you squinted through the stained glass—you could see the place where they were starting to build a wind farm. I sat there beside Isaac on one side and Gramma on the other, and we took one another's hands during prayer, and Gramma didn't seem to know just the right way to hold mine. For half the Our Father, she sat there, looking at my fingers, as if she wasn't sure why I'd left them there for her. When I tried to put my fingers through her own, she batted my hand away to my side and knitted her eyebrows together.

And she didn't say a word of the prayer.

When mass was over, we went to stand out on the lawn. The grass here was planted grass, planted in the sort of way that it looked as though it should have been photographed for a glossy magazine. Meadows that looked like this did not just happen in Illinois, and if you could have seen this place the way birds do, it would have been one bright green pupil in some sort of swath of gray. Still, it was nice. And in the warm and gentle sun, it felt kind on sandaled toes. For a while, some of the adults stood by the doorway and smoked cigarettes and watched the young kids play a game of red-light, green-light beside the koi pond. Isaac and I had decided we were too old to be seen at play with the younger kids, but the adults had decided we were too young to situate ourselves by the doorway, in the hanging chandelier of cigarette smoke. Instead, we sat somewhere in between, with our legs crossed under us in that green grass. Too young to go hear what the adults were saying but too old to scrape our knees on the limestone circle that bounded the fountain.

We sat beside one another and ate pastry braids off of paper plates.

“Do you think Gramma’s at all...different?” I asked him.

Isaac looked at me sorta funny. He hadn’t noticed there was icing on his lips. “What?” he said. “Has no one told you?”

“Told me what?”

“Shit,” Isaac said and he looked away. Cursing still didn’t sound natural coming out of his mouth. It sounded like he was forcing himself to say it, to sound like he knew more about things than he did. “Gramma’s dying. She’s real sick.”

I frowned. “She doesn’t seem sick. She’s walking all right.”

“No,” Isaac shook his head. “Not sick like that. Sick like...like some of her wires upstairs aren’t working so right anymore. You know what I’m saying?”

I didn’t really, but I had a feeling that Isaac would make me feel stupid for not knowing, so I agreed with him. “Right,” I said. “I didn’t know she was sick like that.”

“That’s because your Dad don’t know what’s best for anyone,” Isaac said. “Especially Gramma.”

“What do you mean?”

He got frustrated all over again. His hands went over his knees and he hugged his legs up into his chest and stuck out his lips in a way that might have been pouting. His eyes, which were two perpetually widened blue droplets, turned up the hill and remarked upon my father, standing there in smoke and stupor. “My mom wants to send Gramma away. Some place called hospice.”

“Like a nursing home?”

“I guess,” he said. “Something like that. But your dad won’t do it.”

“Why’s that so bad?”

Isaac stood up now. He walked a ways and I walked with him. We went around the back of the church and

stood underneath the light of the stained glass. There were ribbons of colored light running wetly down the limestone, all the way to the ground, where they were licked by the waving grass. Whatever was going to be said now was something Isaac was certain he didn't want anybody else to know he was saying. "Have you seen the bruises on her arms?" he said. He said it so quietly that it nearly whispered away onto the wind, where my ears couldn't catch it. "They're faint now, but they're there."

"I didn't see them."

"She crashed the car." He paused, and maybe he wanted me to say something, but I didn't. "About a month ago, apparently. She went right through a stoplight, and someone clipped the back of her car. My Ma told me that she was driving and then she just...forgot where she was. Forgot she was driving at all. Didn't know to take her foot off the gas and just went straight on through that red light. And you know, had the car hit her just...a second earlier, I think it would'a killed her. It would'a hit her door and she'd be dead."

I thought about it a while. "Well what if she gets better?" I said. "Why do we need to send her someplace when we could take care of her ourselves?"

"You sound just like your dad," Isaac said, and even when he said it, he had no idea how much he sounded like his mom. He had no idea how much *I knew* he sounded like her. "She's not getting better."

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When I had been younger, Gramma and Grandpa had lived down the road. It was a bigger house then, with a garden in the front, and one that hung from the window, and it had two floors—this was long before Grandpa's hip surgery, and before he carried that cane, the one that made him sound like a pirate when he walked. On the weekdays,



Eddie and I would stay with them, get watched by them while our parents were away in town, working jobs we knew nothing about. Whether or not Gramma would have ever admitted it, I knew I was her favorite—even then, I knew. At the time, I had been her only granddaughter. This was before Daisy had been born. She looked at me the way the sun looks at its flowers. Those were her words, and she had such a way with them, a way with making words pretty.

We gardened together, in the spring and summer months, and she taught me all about the growing things, and which things grow best when and where and with how much love (there was such a thing as the right amount of love, according to Gramma). Her favorite were carnations. My younger self, who had not yet learned that there are times when it is best *not* to say something, had told her that I found carnations tacky (which I did), and I remember it was the first time I saw that it was possible to hurt someone you loved, even if you didn't mean to do it. And I didn't. And she forgave me, and we carried on tending to the growing things, just as we had before, and we saw carnations bloom in spring, and we smelled basil leaves together in summer, and got dirt beneath our fingernails and wore it on our clothes and took it with us wherever we went.

And when we went somewhere together, people knew, by the dirt on our fingers and on our slacks, that she was mine and I was her's. The last summer we gardened together was when I was eleven. I was just starting to get old enough to start being embarrassed by how much time I was spending with my grandmother and not with people who were my age. I was starting to even resent the looks people gifted us when we went somewhere together in public. Those looks seemed to ask—*isn't that girl a little old to be mothered? And isn't that woman a little old to be*

*doing any mothering?* And sometimes I even brushed the dirt off of my slacks so that nobody would see. That was the year of the snapping turtle.

We had tried tomatoes that summer, and we got a harvest of them, but some were small and were too firm, and some were large, but had soft skin that broke too easily. Some were just right, but not enough. And it was made worse by the fact that the garden, every night, played host to a hungry visitor. We'd wake, often at first light, and would go and stand by the front window and would watch the copper wind gauge sighing over the lawn and robins fetching walnuts from the grass. We'd have breakfast. She would have coffee, and I would request to smell it once or twice, and then hand it back because I couldn't force my tastebuds to forgive its blunted bitterness. I'd drink orange juice out of a plastic cup she'd kept from the 50s, and we'd share a flapjack or two.

And then, as became our routine, we went to measure the damage.

Every morning, we'd become accustomed to it—we'd walk along the footpath, and we'd see, suspended from the wire cages, half-consumed tomatoes still strung up to their vines. It was always the bottom half of them that was eaten, so that we knew that whatever was doing the eating, was looking up at the tomatoes from underneath. The plundered fruits looked like bodies, the way their tomato-intestines hung out their opened ends, being gathered by a steady, restless breeze. If it was a good morning, we'd only lose one or two. The bad mornings saw that number doubled. Well, Gramma and I made it a mission of ours to catch the turtle that was doing it. At first, we'd been certain it was a raccoon. If there was something eating anything, Gramma said, it was a safe bet to assume it was a raccoon.

It was only after doing a little reading online that we

discovered that turtles were prodigious garden pests.

Sadly, none of us knew where to start with catching a turtle.

Gramma had bought traps. Those spring-loaded ones that you lured things into with bits of cheese or bread or fruits (if they were an animal that ate fruits). The one thing we knew, for certain, that this turtle liked to eat was tomatoes. So, tomatoes it was. Gramma and I went to the farmer's market and bought a half-dozen of them, the biggest and roundest ones we could find, and we set them in a bowl just far enough back in the trap that, even with a long neck, you couldn't reach them without setting it off. One day drifted by and there was nothing. Another night. And then another. And we were growing more and more surprised with each day because, while nothing was setting off our trap, nothing was eating our tomatoes anymore either.

But nonetheless, we kept the trap out there, kept letting it sit and collect cold and frost, and kept letting it thaw into the grass in the morning, and kept watching it curiously through the parted curtains at night, when it was met only by moonlight, hoping to catch a glimpse of a visitor, but none came. Eventually, it got late in the summer, and the tomatoes that were left on the vine were small and weren't worth the time, and so we collected up the box-trap and set it in the garage.

It was time to let go of old grudges.

But the very next morning, we woke up, shared our breakfast and let the windows open, and when we went outside, the tomato plants were scattered in a dozen shredded pieces. The vines—or what remained of them—were left as severed limp limbs flaccidly hung like untied shoelaces over the wire cages. There were tomato seeds starting to bleed into the dirt, but none of the actual fruits had survived the night. The plants were dead. And even if

we had wanted to catch the turtle that had done it, there would have been nothing left for the trap to protect. It was all gone. And so that was that.

Or rather, we thought it was. Until just a week later, Gramma pulled her car out of the garage, with myself in the passenger seat, and we rolled over a snapping turtle that had been taking advantage of the sun in the driveway. It was dead by the time we got to it, half its body still under the wheel, the rest of it flattened to the pavement. Gramma and I buried it next to the garden, and said a prayer for it to become fertilizer, to lay its bones into that soil, and to become a beautiful carnation one day.

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A week had gone by since Easter. At home, the skies were blue and forgiving, and even in mid-April, we were starting to sweat ourselves out on the sidewalk. There were dandelions growing in the yard, and Dad was taking allergy medication already—there were clouds of pollen in the air the size of your fist, he said.

I'd been thinking a lot about what Isaac had said after church. I'd been thinking about my Dad and about Evelyn and about whether or not they really did hate each other. Daisy had seemed to think so. Isaac too. It even seemed like Isaac hated my Dad himself. I'd been wanting to ask him about it since that very day. Since the moment Isaac had even brought it all up. But it took me a week to actually do it. And the only reason I said it was because there was nothing else to say. When he drove me to school, he got quiet. And I hated it being quiet and knowing that there were things he was thinking that he wouldn't tell me. Not unless I made him to.

I didn't bother prefacing it with anything. What would have made it easier to say? Or easier to hear? Nothing. "Is Gramma dying?"

He didn't waste his breath trying to dodge the words.

“Who told you that?”

“So she is,” I said.

The radio had been going softly behind all our words. But now Dad turned it off and rolled down the window, so the car felt less like a coffin. “Evelyn doesn’t always put things the right way,” he said. “I don’t know what you heard—”

“It wasn’t Evelyn.”

“All right,” he said. “All I’m saying is that it’s more complicated than that.”

“So why don’t you want to send her to hospice?”

“Because—” and here I think he got upset. He got that look about him, as if his collar suddenly felt too tight around his neck, or as if his skin had exploded in hives, or as if someone had pressed their toe into his gut and all the air went right of his chest cavity and through the window. And he did not blink. “Because she’s still alive and she’s still my mother. And...and be-because I don’t know, you just don’t give up on people like that, you don’t...she’s still your grandmother.”

He didn’t usually stutter like that. “And she wouldn’t be if she were—”

“It would mean things are different,” Dad said. “It would mean she wouldn’t get to be in that house again. And she belongs in that house. That’s her house. You know? And she’s got a right to be there. A right to be where she’s comfortable.”

We rode the rest of the way to school in silence. Even though, I could feel he wanted to say more.

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Nothing much more was said until it was come summer already, till July had dripped into the calendar books and the grasses had run wet in the rainy months, till each dew-drunk blade was hung with a heavy green head. As

for every holiday, the fourth of July saw us back at Gramma's house. Well, when we got there, she was already sitting out on the porch in a wicker rocking chair, her hands wove together on the top of a white bannister. In front of her, the garden, which had lain barren the last two summers, was crowded over with sunflowers, each taking turns for their chance to present their flat-snouted faces to the day's unclouded sky.

I got out of the car, and so did little Eddie. While he was already dashing in through the open garage door and toward the back patio, where he had caught the familiar smell of frankfurters sweltering on the charcoal grill, I made to wave at Gramma. I wanted to ask her about the garden. But when I started to wave, I noticed that she wasn't quite looking at me. Rather, she was looking past me, over my shoulder. Her eyes had found rest across the road, where—on the side of the highway—a tall white billboard was standing up against the matted sky. It was of crude make, its fragile wooden supports already splintering themselves, and its top-heavy head already being upset by the insignificant, yet unremitting wind. It had not been there at Easter.

From where I was standing, I could not make out what the billboard wore on its face; the sun was swallowing it up in one, singular white dot. When I stepped up to the porch and into the shadow the many-leafed awning cast, I could finally turn back to see it. It was for a grocery store, a few miles down the way, and it had a lovely glossy image of a bag of apples on it. But it hadn't been there before and now it was there, and it was growing its roots there in the ground, cementing itself into the soil, even as, at that very moment, the wind threatened upon it.

As I stood there, another car came up upon the house and shut itself off on the side of the road. Evelyn got out first. She was wearing a pair of heart-shaped sunglasses,

and even though they masked her eyes, I could tell that she was squinting out at us with disapproval. It was the look she wore most often, a look that I'd become familiar with. Isaac got out after her. He dogged behind her as she walked up to the porch, as though he was trying to hide his body behind his mother's, despite the fact that he was a clear head taller than her by now. As he got closer, I could see there was a dark spot below one of his eyes, a bruise that had started to heal, and then darkened again just at the last moment before it disappeared. It was purple and sagging and had stitched his eyes red with grief.

I pointed to my own eye when he approached. "Piss off the wrong person?"

"Fight at school," Evelyn said before he could.

Isaac said nothing.

"And how are you Ma?" Evelyn said. Her eyes knelt down to look at Gramma, to look at the way she sat with her mouth open, looking out on the highway. "It's a nice day, huh?" I didn't know why Evelyn always talked to Gramma like she was dumb.

Gramma looked back at Evelyn, slowly; perhaps it pained her. "We'll have to be going inside soon, then, Donna," she said. Donna was Gramma's sister, ten years gone by now. Ten years underground. "It's nice weather, but the water's almost boiled."

Evelyn helped Gramma up from her seat, stood her up with her back straight and her hands cupped into her daughter's. "It's not Donna, Ma," she said, and she lowered her sunglasses. Her eyes, like her son's, were red and sore, her eyelids hanging low enough that they nearly kissed close. "It's Evy."

"Right," Gramma said. She faltered a moment. Her lips coiled into a thought, but words came up short and nothing came out.

Aunt Evelyn helped her through the front door, and

they went off somewhere in the house, where the grown-ups were congregated, and where Isaac and I could not follow. Isaac and I went around back, and we were quiet for a while. “So,” I finally asked him when we were sat, frankfurters in hand, watching over the back fence, our bare toes in the long grass, “who really gave you the black eye?”

“You ask a lotta questions,” Isaac said, even though that was only the second question I had asked him that day. “People aren’t gonna thank you for that.”

“I know it wasn’t a kid at school,” I said.

Isaac stood up and went out to the fence and hung his arms over it. “It’ll heal up in a week or so anyway,” he said, as though that were an answer. The message was clear. He didn’t want to talk about it. But there was something he did want to talk about. “Did you notice Gramma calling my mom Donna?”

“Yeah,” I said. “I did.”

“She’s getting worse.”

“She still might get better.”

Isaac made a noise. “You’re still not seeing it right,” he said. “You’re still not seeing it right.”

The day drew on in haphazard celebration. We were all mimicking a good time, but everyone’s eyes, secretly, were drawing down on Gramma. They were making note of her every move, of every word that she forgot, of every story that she told twice over, of every name she miscalled someone. It was a fake-happy and it was the first time I was really noticing it—all of it. The practiced laughter, that sound that rang off the lofty ceilings. The hand drawn smiles that exhausted so quickly and tapered off at the end, as if the smile itself had become ashamed.

Still, we kept our traditions. We lit firecrackers in the driveway, took photographs on Dad’s old film camera of us drawing our names with sparklers. It was a melancholy,



honeydew day. All the trivialities and sensations of holiday and all the grief and heavy-heartedness of adult life. Every moment of blissful release, every lit firecracker, every charcoal-blackened frankfurter was a sobering reminder that all of this was ending much too fast and much too soon. And as the sun started to sink lower into the sky and withdraw behind the frightening, beckoning arms of the lofted windmills, it became harder and harder to ignore the way in which things were changing. The start of things new. The start of life that would be without Gramma. Because it hardly seemed like she was even there.

I mean, she was there. In a plastic lawn chair, with her sandaled feet enjoying the grass and her glassy eyes, lensed under two sunlit discs, addressing the distant sky. But she wasn't. It was the first day my grandmother ever felt like a memory. The image of her, the body of her, but not the spirit. She didn't say much, and when she did, it was stories she'd become stuck on like a tack. Stories that we'd hear for months and months after that, stories that cycled and recycled around her brain till they weren't much else but noise that filled vacant gaps in the summer days. That was Gramma. She was nothing but memories up there. Memories, and losing count. The day ended at the doorstep.

I was waiting outside and the car was strutting an idle along the road's gravel shoulder. Mom was already inside, but Dad was saying goodbye to Evelyn. He was in the front room that overlooked that garden, sat on the couch with his knees bent outward and his head hung discreetly from his shoulders, as though it had grown heavy and cumbersome. I sat out front, there in wicker, enjoying the cool wind and I listened to the words I could make out, the ones that carried through the screen door and fell to the patio ground.

"How much longer do you think?" he had asked.

It was the first time I'd heard him say it. Admitted that it was ending. Admitted the road only had one end, one horizon.

"I don't know," Evelyn said. She still had her sunglasses on. But the corners of her eyes, the bits of skin that stuck out even so, were red. They'd been red all day. She'd been drunk all day. "Not long enough."

"No." Dad shook his head. "Too long."

Evelyn didn't say anything. She took my father in her arms. I wonder if she smelled like wine.

"I'm ready," Dad said. "I'm just ready for it to come."

And in that way, the fourth of July came to an end.

I don't know much about death. I don't know how to get ready for when it comes. I don't know how to live with it, to let it stick in my heart, or to be okay with it. But the days have continued to drip on. And well, it's come November again now. And they've finally put Gramma in a place where people go when they are waiting on dying. Waiting for it to come and trying to be comfortable in that. She has a window that her bed sits along, and it looks out at all that Illinois grain, and the land is gracious enough that it does not mind her view with hills and valleys and rises and falls. It just stretches out flat from end to end, from where blue becomes yellow, and where windmills now grow instead of grass. It's getting cold now again, and she can see the roads from that window. Sometimes Dad says he's grateful for it. Everything is turning out for the worst, he thinks, and he's glad she won't take that with her when she goes. Wherever she goes. We've found out about Isaac's bruises. He gets in fights with his girlfriend. They hit each other. Sometimes real bad, real bad enough to leave marks that the family will see at holidays. Evelyn's drinking still. But Gramma won't have to know that when she goes. She won't know Isaac is a hitter. She won't know about her daughter, about the drinking. She'll just know that winter is on its way, that she's seen it com-

ing up over that open stretch of cold, where the growing things are beginning to wilt, and the roads are reflecting the skies in their cheeks, and it looks like so much glass.

# Remember Me

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*Devon Maxfield*

Have I told you  
of the pet raccoon I adored  
when I was young?  
We are squeezing lemons  
for our sugar juice  
and I look at your hands:  
Young and Full of Opportunity.  
I fumble with my own:  
they are unrecognizable and weak—  
someone else's.

Have I told you  
of the platoon boys I dated  
when I was young?  
We are melting chocolate  
for our cherry snack  
and I pick flour from your hair:  
Healthy and Full of Life.  
I leave mine disheveled:  
it's been misplaced, that same vivacity—  
long forgotten.

# Proteja Les Niños de Guatemala

Hayley Nigrelle



# Vodka

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*Sage Steele*

Music pumps through the house, loud enough to be heard over conversations, the door that keeps opening and closing, and the occasional clatter of a ping pong ball hitting a table before bouncing to the ground.

The music should be a final straw in a sensory overload, but its steady beat is grounding me as I sway my hips, catching the eyes of my friends who are busy in conversation. They bob their heads to the beat with me before returning their attention elsewhere.

I know two people here. Three if you include the host who gave me a hug despite the fact that I've never met her. But I was the one who wanted to go to a party.

After a few minutes my friend comes to me and I take a swig of his vodka. I feel a sting in my throat, not from the drink itself but from bitter memories that it stirs up: a man, a gun, fears I try to suppress.

Vodka tastes like broken relationships, its flavor slices through my body denigrating my organs. I see Mike, his hands holding a glass of this baleful drink—the only liquid he consumed. I hear his verbal abuse and loud snore that was a telling sign of his drunkenness. I remember that summer.

After years of my stepfather's alcoholism and a drawn out divorce, my mother was healing. She began a new relationship with a man who drinks Miller Lite from a bottle, unintentionally providing a safety net in knowing it would take triple the drinks before he is a drunk as Mike's usual. It was refreshing to see a healthy relationship where

two people supported each other. Calling after work with questions of how one's day went. Taking out the trash without being asked. These were small moments that added up to make me trust the relationship's goodness.

My mother had been divorced for a year and Mike was thousands of miles away in a different state, but we were starting to realize that you don't just divorce an alcoholic. You married and subsequently divorced their bar friends as well. Rather than allow my mother the happiness of this new man, Mike's friends created a complex system of rumors about my mother and her new partner. News of my mother's relationship traveled north to Mike.

This man in his mid-fifties with no purpose and no relationships left in his life responded by getting in his car and driving from Ohio to Texas. Part of me wishes that in his perpetual drunkenness and his fourteen hour drive he would have crashed, ending the years of hardship. But he didn't. He made it to my hometown, inaugurating his arrival with an act of vandalism.

My mother's office covered in yellow spray paint. "Thief." "Monster." The bright paint stood out against her dark windows, making the words glow like neon signs.

Our suspicion of his arrival was confirmed with this act, bringing on a week of dread as we tried to predict his actions and whereabouts.

First he would see old friends. Spread a version of a story where he was the victim. But what specifically would he say?

We waited in apprehension until one former friend of Mike finally came to us. At the very least Mike wanted to shoot out my mom's tires, at most he wanted to shoot her. I'm still not sure which was scarier, the fact that Mike wanted to kill my mom or that he told multiple people a plan and only one thought it appropriate to warn my family.

With evidence of vandalism and threats of death, my mother went to work on obtaining an emergency protective order. We sat in her office, the windows recently cleaned of paint, pulling together all the information needed to present to the judge. With the blinds closed, acting as our pathetic shield we worked, flinching every-time a car drove past the window not knowing if it could be Mike.

As my mother worked, I sat thinking about the previous month. I was in school panicking about going home. After years of stressors in my family I expected the worst. I sensed something would happen.

A few weeks later, sitting in a faux leather office chair with my mother, all I could do was laugh to myself. Of course this would happen, I wasn't even shocked. The first weeks of being home and my mother has a threat on her life. It wasn't funny. And yet, I still wanted to laugh at my life's absurdity.

That week, I acted as if everything was normal, but anxiety overshadowed all aspects of life. Walking the dogs and looking over my shoulder at every corner. Locking the door, then double checking the lock for good measure. Coming home from work and walking up the stairs, but announcing myself so that no one thought me an intruder. When we learned what hotel he was staying at and I realized I passed it on my way to work, my eyes would linger, scanning the parking lot for his white Cadillac—a car bought for him by his parents when he had moved back to Ohio.

Continuing as normal wasn't an act of apathy. Routine was the only thing I had control over. I couldn't stop Mike, and I couldn't stop my mind from thinking the worst: imagining my mother's funeral or what it would be like to have a gun pointed at me. What if I was the one to find the body? Bodies? Is this a murder-suicide situation or would



he live, satisfied with his actions?

I had no sense of control. So I went to work, smiled when guests came and spiraled when I was alone. I worked as a receptionist, but my weekend job was waiting tables at a pub, Mike's usual place and my mother's still frequently visited spot. By the time the weekend came my mother was granted an emergency protective order and Mike was served before leaving town without fulfilling his death plan.

My adrenaline was crashing right as my shift at the pub began. I couldn't handle the stress anymore. I had spent days in fight or flight and my body was done. That shift I had tables in opposite corners of the restaurant as I raced back and forth refilling drinks and taking orders. It kept me occupied enough to ward off a panic attack, but I kept looking at the door expecting Mike to walk in, gun in hand. My body was shutting down but the fear I had been trying to ignore remained. All I wanted was to calm my nerves. I needed a drink.

But I didn't drink. Now it's months later, I'm at a party, the music blaring—my friend handing me the bottle.

Right now I am comfortable. I have been happy for the past few months rather than my normal depressive state. Happy enough to ask my friends to go to this party. The fears of drinking, of becoming a belligerent beast, living in a haze aren't on the forefront of my mind because I know I'm not drinking to cope.

Just one sip, so timid I probably take less than a shot. I'm not transforming into an alcoholic, my biggest worry is not true with one gulp.

But it is with this sip I know I have a long recovery. Most people don't catch a wave of anxiety after one drink or get hounded with flashbacks—instead people praise alcohol for its relaxing abilities, something I'm not experiencing even as the vodka settles in.

At my happiest, I am unsure if I will ever be able or want to drink. Here I am, sober, hips swaying, head nodding to the music. I know a certain truth: I hate the taste of vodka.

# A Reckoning in June

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*Marianne Nacanaynay*

I stand in the kitchen,  
watching salt spill from its cardboard cylinder  
onto linoleum squares. A thinning  
granular stream, tapering off into a pitiful  
lump on the floor.

A crowd gathers behind me, voyeuristic  
and panting, their tongues  
swinging from their gaping  
mouths.

*Look!*

They make a mimicry of me,  
their coaxing digits  
pointing at the mess as—  
*Clean it up! Clean it up! Clean it up!*  
glee ices their chants.

I sink to my knees, my chest  
heavy on the cold ground. [I  
want to rip their teeth out.]

A brunette runs over,  
*Oh, no, your hair!*  
and moves my head  
to the other side of the salt.  
She pushes my ear to the floor  
and holds me there as she studies my face.

*Is this a good angle?*

Everyone nods, happy they can all watch  
as I start to lick it away.

It sticks to my lips, and I look up  
at the group as they start passing  
cups of water  
between each other. [I want to scream.  
I am dying and they are sharing life.]

*You are so brave*, a blonde says, tearing up and down. So  
*brave*.

She takes a picture.

I shut my eyes.

The white flash is loud.

*Can I take another? You're blinking in this one.*

She takes a video so she can screenshot her favorite  
frames.

When I finish my meal, two men

[I don't want them to touch me,  
do not touch me]

pull me up by the elbows,

dusting their hands off

on their khaki shorts

once I've stood.

I suffocate in their embrace

as they celebrate my menial skill,

showing me the photos they took

when I was at my worst.

I will die in their arms,  
and they will make me their martyr.  
Then, they will tell all their friends  
of how they watched my take my dying breath  
and were just happy they could be there  
as I made history.  
[I did not make history. I never will.]

My body is still warm  
when they throw me away  
to look for their next hero.

# Seeing Through Sleeping Eyes Series: Wander

*Lucian Cosson*



# Generations

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*Samantha McKiernan*

Her gray, unassuming door gently opens. You almost keep moving past it. The aromas of gingers and jasmines fill the air, drawing you to enter. Inside, the room is filled with fresh dish towels, clean stove tops, pre-made lunches, a tidy refrigerator. The blinds are shut and the curtains drawn. A single light struggles to illuminate the room. This light never seems to be turned off. Open the drawers and you will see perfect origami plastic grocery bags, a spotless row of Tupperware lids, tins of sorted rice, and hundreds of tea bags. You hear steps that shuffle to grab you a soda with a straw or perhaps a rice ball. This room belongs to my grandma, a small but mighty woman from Yokohama, Japan.

Her daughter's door opens now and your eyes struggle to adjust to the bright space after the dimly lit room from before. An organized makeup bag sits on its side, atop the bathroom counter. A curling iron rests, still hot, so you check to make sure it's unplugged. Pictures of a family line the walls; they're smiling, so they must be happy. A peeled tangerine, half-eaten, lays forgotten too. She bustles around the room, a mascara wand clenched in one fist and a room-temperature coffee in the other. It's the owner of this room, my mother.

This next one I know well, with walls once stained a regretful color combination of orange and blue only before I painted them over in lavender after I graduated high school. Well-loved stuffed animals—my dear Monkey in the middle—line the windowsill, while an out-of-tune guitar

collects dust on one side of the room. A pile of cleats, rackets, and jerseys fall into a graveyard of over-ambitious, half-finished art projects. Stacks of books and handwritten journals, ranging in topics, strewn across the floor, a refuge for the bookshelves overflowing titles. These collections of words from me and my favorite storytellers were the only voices ever heard in a house so silent.

These rooms belong to the women in my family. And for generations, they have remained unopened. My attempts to open them have failed due to my own fear of unraveling; my fear of learning something about myself and my family that I was too stubborn to understand. Keeping these doors closed has created misunderstandings about my own identity and in my relationships with the women in my family. Together, we are finally pulling open the doors. We have agency to grasp the ways that society has failed to properly promote relationships between women, particularly mother-daughter relationships. By opening these doors, we are able to forgive and break down the walls that have harmed generational relationships. Humanity rapidly moves from decade to decade, whether forward or backward is for you to decide. The experiences of women from different generations create an unsolved tension between their individual personhood and their identities as mothers and daughters.

When the bomb hit Hiroshima, Japan in 1945, it sent my grandma and her siblings to a safe haven in the country with hardly anything, not even their parents or a true understanding of what was happening around them. They were removed from their home for fear of being in the big city of Yokohama. Over a pot of tea, my grandma will recall eating a slice of sweet potato for both lunch and dinner. Hardship shaped my grandma. As I picture myself at



her dinner table, I see images of food that is never left unfinished. I see my grandma finishing her food completely and hear myself complain about the taste of it. Everything has a purpose and needs to be consumed, whether it be the skin of an avocado or nub of ginger. This anticipation and reality of literal scarcity is something that is a narrative present in the lives of my grandma and my mom. For my mother, it was the array of outward pressures as a result of war and immigration that shaped her own mother. My grandma's young adult experience was formed by a family and mother that was unhappy with her choice to move to the United States. There were few times that she ever heard from them after she left. This experience and treatment of Japanese people in America is something that formed my grandma's relationships, success, work, and family. America became her home, but it did not welcome her in the same way. My own mother's focus is filtered through a similar, yet different lens. A lens that feels the repercussions of a space that made her mother an outsider.

The United States' focus on material and physical appearances has silenced the inner emotions and mental health struggles from woman to woman. As my mother navigated her first-generation American experience, these ideals were unknowingly adopted. Ever since I was little, it has always been about appearances. How can I present well for the different moments in my life? For my mother, this means that I must dot my cheeks with blush or curl my hair into my face. This expectation of being a woman who is "desirable" for the public eye is something that echoed in my head as I chose my outfits for the first day of school or picked a dress for prom. Physical appearances pressured my mother because of the American beauty cul-

ture that she was trying to uphold on her own. My mother's generation and the standards it placed on her, carried over to pressures that she placed on her own children. This pressure to promote outward perfection, silenced the truths of what lies inside each of our rooms. That was kept neatly locked up. My mother is a product of the way her generation told her to be, as well as her mother's impact on her as an immigrant. When stepping into the rooms of my family, empathy is crucial.

People are a product of the generations that come before them and the generations that come after them. In order to uncover this, questions must be asked and stories need to be told. The space that women have occupied in history has been minimal and constricting. These small and domestic spaces not only harm every woman, but have also hurt the relationships that they have with each other. The ideals of motherhood have led to misunderstandings between self and misunderstandings in one another. Opening these doors has not been easy. It has required a recognition of the barriers that society has placed in front of relationships between women. It means choosing a stance of support, rather than disagreement with one another. But by committing to opening the doors, I have been able to see the ways that women, mothers, daughters, and granddaughters are made to close doors on one another. They are pinned against one another by a society that fails to recognize their power when moving together. In recognizing my power, I have moved past blame and expectations and refuse to allow society to hide our stories from one another. Our stories and the stories of generations of women before us are now being told. As they should be.

# **Chester Creek at the Senior Center**

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*Jim Hanlen*

Old people walk here to stay sane.  
They look over the bridge and see  
How life runs out from under them.

I know my kids were loved.  
My wife painted our water blue.  
I did the best I could.

This bridge is not a place to smooth  
Things over. That was another time.  
See how mercy and love carry us out.

# Sand and Snow

---

*Mackenzie Atkins*

**2023 Michael and Gail Gurian Writing Awards Recipient  
Poetry, First Place**

You can't eat sand.

He shifts the phone, and I glimpse the IV.

No one has sandball fights.

He didn't text me about the recurring chest pain

Sand doesn't fall from the sky.

until he took a taxi to the hospital.

I've never heard a Christmas song about sand.

An hour ago, he fainted.

We should write one.

An hour ago, I was chatting with coworkers.

You can't build a sand fort.

The doctors are coming back soon.

Maybe a sandcastle, though.

I almost slip on the icy sidewalk

I bet you could make a sand angel.

while I search his pixelated expression for pain.

Sand doesn't melt into puddles.

I lift my voice over rush hour traffic,

If it does, I think that makes glass.

and he hears me at midnight.

Frosty the Sandman?

We compare the desert sand that blows over his city

Was a jolly, happy soul.

to the fresh snow over mine

Sand remembers footprints

to cope with the Atlantic Ocean between us.

just like snow.

# Where the Dust Settles

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*Sheron Ruffner*





# Reflection Staff

## **Meagan Graves**

Meagan Graves is the Editor-in-Chief of *Reflection*. She is a senior from Portland, Oregon, and is majoring in English Writing and minoring in Communication Studies. She spends her free time performing in the GUTS Improv Troupe, Discantus Treble Choir, and the Boone Street sketch comedy troupe.

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Olivia Sandvik, a second-year from Spokane, Washington, uses her surroundings to foster her creativity and curiosity. Currently pursuing bachelor's degrees in English Writing and Public Relations, she aims to forge a career in the publishing industry. She often writes sci-fi and fantasy stories and has had poems win Behind the Vision's writing contest.

## **Patrick Gillaspie**

Patrick Gillaspie is the Prose Editor for *Reflection*. He is a senior majoring in English Literature.

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## **Zoe Schinko**

Zoe Schinko is a second-year student majoring in Biology and Psychology.

## **Sage Steele**

Sage Steele is a second-year student studying English Writing and minors in History and Art History. Her writing focuses on poetry and creative non-fiction essays. She has loved working on the *Reflection* staff as the graphic designer where she can create a visual-verbal connection with texts that allows for an engaged reader experience.

# Contributers

## **Emma Accardi**

Emma Accardi is a 5th-year Civil Engineering major from Hillsboro, Oregon. As a kid, she wrote, illustrated, and bound her own stories, which now reside in a plastic box in the attic of her childhood home. An avid proponent of the arts, Emma participates in theatre and choir as well as writing. On the daily, Emma enjoys watching cartoons and daydreaming about having a cat (Landlord John if you see this please let me have a cat).

## **Mackenzie Atkins**

Mackenzie Atkins is a junior Human Physiology major and Spanish minor. She loves second-hand poetry books, funky socks, cheap pizza, and skyline silhouettes.

## **Garrick Bateman**

Garrick Bateman is a senior from Fort Collins, Colorado, majoring in Environmental Studies and English. After graduation, he hopes to be able to use his writing to speak on behalf of our shared natural world.

## **Krystal Bates**

Krystal Bates is a senior History major who was born and raised in Spokane Valley. She has a deep love of reading and writing.

## **Reagan Bowyer**

Raegan Bowyer is a senior Biology major with a research concentration. She is from Twin Falls, Idaho. Raegan is one of the secretaries for the Asian American Union. She is an avid reader and will happily give people book recommendations.

## **Lucian Cosson**

Lucian Cosson is a senior from Issaquah, Washington, studying Political Science, Communications, and Film. He loves hiking and stargazing.

## **Brianna Covert**

Bri Covert is a senior studying English Writing and Art. Eye to Eye Art description- Medium: Screenprint Exploration of a family portrait; depicts myself and both my parents.



## **Hannah Ehly**

Hannah Ehly, or as their friends call them, Ely, is a junior at Gonzaga University from Tacoma, Washington. They are double majoring in Political Science and Communications Studies. Ely really loves the fall and sad poetry. Additionally, they would like to thank their lovely friends for their constant encouragement and love.

## **Jovonna Gonzalez**

Once an introvert lost in a world of her own making, now a gregarious extrovert with a love of stories, Jovonna completed her undergraduate studies with a dual degree in English and Education. From there, you could find her in front of a room of high schoolers, armed with nothing more than an expo marker, and the hope that these kids would come to appreciate the stories she sought comfort in her whole life. Now, after a career navigating the sloppily lined desks of her classroom as well as different cultures, languages, and cities, Jovonna finds herself on a new adventure. Since completing her M.A. in Organizational Leadership at Gonzaga she hopes to leverage her skills to work in a dynamic environment where she can press fingers to keys to craft a story while working on the fine details of ushering a project from conception to completion. In whatever she does, she hopes to serve her community with a booming voice, sarcastic wit, and the desire to make things better.

## **Meagan Graves**

Meagan Graves is a writer from Portland, Oregon, and is a senior completing a degree in English Writing and Communication Studies. She explores the themes of home and connection through poetry, prose, and playwriting. Meagan's poetry will be featured in Washington Poet Laureate Rena Priest's upcoming anthology *I Sing the Salmon Home*.

## **Jim Hanlen**

Jim Hanlen graduated in 1970 with a degree in English and a teaching certificate. Drs. Franz Schneider and Fran Polek encouraged his writing. Workshops from Richard Hugo and William Stafford shaped his thinking of poems.

### **Kaylene Kristofferson**

Kaylene Kristofferson is currently a sophomore majoring in Psychology with a Criminology minor, hoping to pursue therapy as an occupation. Besides her love for the sciences, she also finds it crucial to take some individual time for oneself and do something genuinely enjoyable. Self-care is important for any college student, and sometimes it is possible to find new intriguing hobbies. Kaylene has always had a love for the arts. She has been painting since she was about six years old and hopes to share some inspiration. She finds art to be an escapist vacation the mind takes in order to make sense of its surroundings. For Kaylene art is one of the best ways to convey emotion through raw expression.

### **Tori Lopez**

Tori Lopez is a senior from Orange County, California. She is majoring in English Writing, with a double minor in Film and Italian Studies. She enjoys living, laughing, and loving.

Art Description: Taken on a 35mm film

### **Devon Maxfield**

Devon Maxfield is a senior from Spokane, Washington, studying Business and minoring in Writing. She loves ravioli. She hates pickles. She has no idea what she's doing. And she will drop everything to watch *Star Wars: Episode 3: Revenge of the Sith* with her husband.

### **Samantha McKiernan**

Samantha McKiernan is a senior English literature major from Gig Harbor, Washington. Her piece "Generations" was written for Dr. Ciasullo's Women Writers course and was based off of Sylvia Plath's *The Bell Jar*.

### **Gwen Mitchell**

Gwen Mitchell is a junior at Gonzaga University. She is happily engaged and living in Juneau, Alaska. She has also asked for it to be made known that she is, in fact, creepy, kooky, mysterious, and spooky.

### **Marianne Nacanaynay**

Marianne Nacanaynay is a senior Communication Studies major with a minor in Writing. She is a content intern with Walker Sands and a graphic designer for *Spires Yearbook*. Outside of school and work, she spends her time baking (she's currently trying to perfect a focaccia recipe, so if anyone has any ideas, please let her know).

## **Hayley Nigrelle**

Hayley Nigrelle is a senior Art major at Gonzaga University from Seattle Washington. During her time at Gonzaga, Hayley has primarily been studying printmaking and painting. Her work has been featured in shows in the Spokane area. Hayley's driving goal with her work is to express the innate ability art has to resonate with a viewer on a personal level or as a new experience.

Proteja Les Niñas de Guatemala description:

Relief Linocut with hand-painted embellishments

In the Dead of the Night description:

Relief Linocut

## **Michele Pointel**

Michele Pointel is a graduate student in the Master of Arts in Teaching English to Speakers of Other Languages (MA/TESOL) Program at Gonzaga University.

## **Sheron Ruffner**

Sheron Ruffner is a Gonzaga University student and Staff member.  
Art Description - Digital Photograph

## **Zoe Schinko**

Zoe Schinko is a sophomore at Gonzaga studying biology and psychology, with a minor in writing. In her free time, she loves to write poetry and short stories.

## **Malia Starita**

Malia Starita is a second-year Law student at Gonzaga Law School. When she is not preoccupied with legal writing and studying, she loves to write poetry. She draws a lot of inspiration from nature, specifically nature in the places she has lived in throughout her life. She is California-born and has lived in both the Southern and Northern regions of the state where both have influenced her work greatly— from the salt marshes to the redwoods crawling with banana slugs. Washington has been an adjustment for Malia and her writing, but Washington is slowly worming its way into her nature-based narratives. Malia is very excited at the prospect of sharing some of her work with those at Gonzaga and hopes to share them with the world one day.

### **Sage Steele**

Sage Steele is a second-year student from Texas studying English. Her writing focuses on poetry and creative non-fiction essays.

### **Delaney Taylor**

Delaney Taylor is a Junior English Major with a Writing concentration. She is from Bainbridge Island, Washington, and has been writing since fourth grade. She has written many stories and poems, but other than sharing her writing with her mom and begrudging roommates, this is her first published work! She enjoys spending time with her friends, watching old 90s sitcoms, or just hanging out with her Yorkie, Monty. She is so excited to have won first place in the Gurian Award contest and to be included in *Reflection* :)

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# Reflection

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