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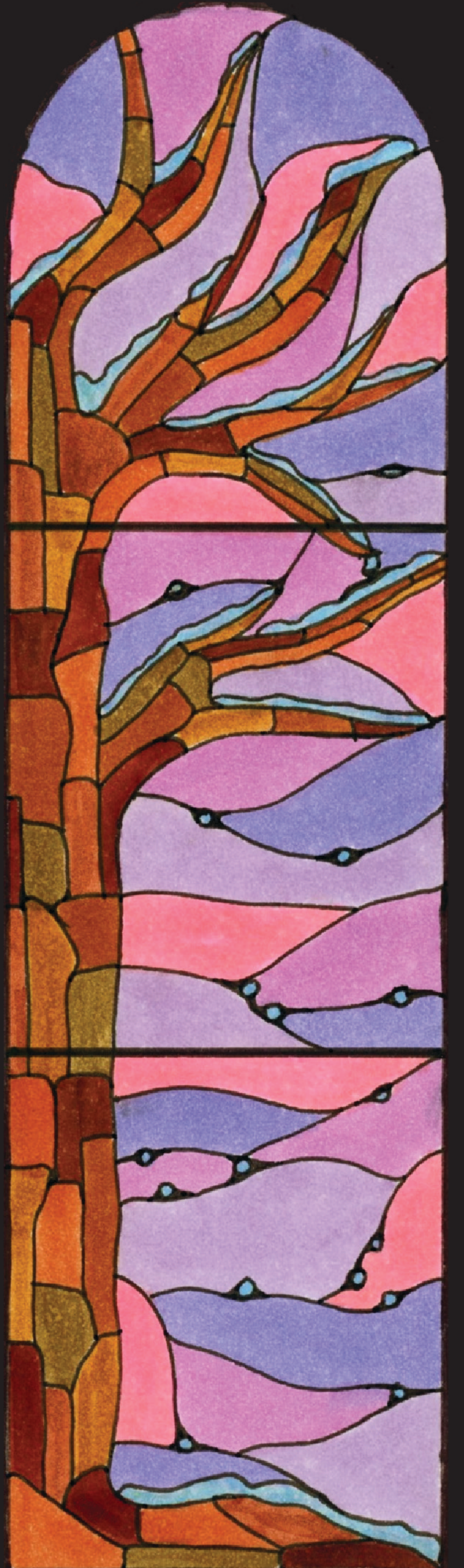


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Reflection
Gonzaga University
Spring 2024 | Vol. 65



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Reflection

Gonzaga's Journal of Art
and Literature

Changing Seasons

Volume 65

2024

Reflection

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Content Warning

Some pieces in this journal have been identified as containing material that may be upsetting to some audiences. These pieces may include alcohol/drug use; anxiety; blood; violence and death; depictions of childbirth; depictions of ableism, homophobia, sexism, and transphobia; gender dysphoria; medical content; pregnancy/birth anxiety; religious trauma; self-harm; sexual abuse; and suicidal ideation.

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Letter from the Editor

“Your specific perception of the universe and the potentialities that lie under your skin, your little imagination lightning rod that detects the ghosts of hitherto unrealized dreams, it is not replaceable...A lot of people harbor creative passions and have genuine inspiration and real dreams, and instead of watering them, they let them die. And I think that’s wrong.”

– CJ The X

Dear reader,

Well, here we are. You’ve elected to pick up this year’s edition of Reflection. Collected inside, you will find thirty-two pieces of prose, poetry, and visual art from Gonzaga’s students, faculty, and alumni. The courage displayed by each of these contributors in sharing their craft with you cannot and should not be understated. Opening oneself up to creating something personal (and finding the time to do it in such a busy world) is a leap that many young people have difficulty making.

Perhaps you’ve found yourself in that same place, dear reader. Perhaps you’ve had a poem or painting that you were too nervous to share with anyone other than your friends. Perhaps you’ve hidden scraps of poems in the backs of notebooks or buried half-finished short stories in the depths of your computer. Or perhaps you’ve held the idea of the next Great American Novel in your head, dreaming wistfully of the day that you’ll finally sit yourself down and write it out only for that day to never come.

The courage that the artists featured in this journal have shown is immense. At any point in this process, they could have given up, but they chose to stick it out, to have their creative fervor displayed to the world. I don’t feel that I am exaggerating when I say that is a triumph. If one of your pieces

is included in this year’s journal, I would like to thank you for putting up with the editing process and the gentle reassurance that your work is finally over. If not, thank you for bearing witness to the passion of your community.

And now, dear reader, we reach our call to action. I began this letter with a quote that has stuck with me for a very long time. Most of us go through our lives within the strict confines of the world that has been made for us by those who came before us. We work to earn enough money to live long enough to continue to work. And thus, the wheel continues to spin. However, the innate human desire to write, to speak, to sing, to paint, to draw, to jump on top of a rock and yell “I am alive,” that desire persists. It is a call that we all have an imperative to listen to.

Do you hear it, dear reader? If so, this editor humbly entreats you to answer it.

– *Gwendolyne Mitchell, Editor-in-Chief*

Considering New Year's Resolutions

Mackenzie Atkins

**2024 Michael and Gail Gurian Writing Awards Recipient
Poetry, First Place**

My mom taught me the dangers
of "I would be happy if only—,"
but she also handed me Paul Simon's Graceland
on Christmas morning (no wrapping paper);
she held the CD like it was breathing,
which, of course, it was,
and I think I would be happy if
I lived the way Paul Simon sings
in my hand-me-down '99 Camry as I drive home
from visiting home, cruise control smooth as the voice
that only stumbles when the old CD skips
like I did around the house as a kid, calling it dancing,
to Mom's music—the songs she'd heard on the radio
in her '84 Corolla in college—
Paul Simon singing like he's shooting the breeze
while he tricks a story into honesty,
singing like he knows you,
like he's listening in his own song.

N Division St

Miles Reitan

Look down.

Curbside Coors at the
corner of asphalt and concrete.
Crumpled mountain majesty,
cracked and sharp.
Cracked like white knuckles
that clutch torn-up blankets.
Sharp like the cold.
Torn at the seams like
eyes, red and splintered.
Eyes to walk by.

Look up.

Eyes that cast shadows

unmet.

A Teenager's Guide to a Cosmic Caper

Natalie Fortes

How to Have Your Head in the Clouds:

Create your own personal galaxy. When you seek out stars more recent than the luminescent echoes in the sky, the closest alternative is light streaks. First, you'll need a trusted friend with a keen eye to act as your navigator in your celestial escape. When the sky has blackened, soar beyond comets of red, yellow, and green to ascend into an infinity of gold shooting stars. To most directly reach this destination, hit lightspeed on I-90 for the duration of four breakup songs. As you sail among the cosmos of spacetime, allow the fleeting nebulas to sweep away your Andromeda tears.

How to Ground Yourself:

Witness a startling stellar death of red, white, and blue through your rearview mirror. No more comets, your personal galaxy has become nothing but dense black matter. Turn off your childhood throwback hits and present starry-eyed tears alongside your ID and registration. Re-enter Earth's atmosphere and apologize to the owner of the Audi-turned temporary spaceship. Next time, ask mission control for permission to launch. Nod silently and accept your father's month-long ban on space exploration. A grounded reminder that you're no trained astronaut, but at least you caught a short glimpse of what deep space has to offer.

Something About the Snow

Clio Tzetos

There is something about the snow
When you're seventeen.
There is something different
About the way it falls,
Harsher, sharper spears of white,
No longer gently drifting onto the frozen sidewalks.

I am not out playing,
throwing snowballs at my neighbors
as we run to the park.
I am out in a coat, with a scratchy scarf tied around my neck,
Being barked at by an angry dog
Who was left outside too long.
I am not quite a child anymore.

There is something about sleep
When you're seventeen.
There is something about the way we look forward to it,
Something about the way it is a reward,
No longer a punishment at the end of a day of play.

My head falls heavy onto the pillow,
Cold like a cloud of regret.
My mind thick like the scarf I wore so tightly
So tightly I held on to the feelings of youth.
I am not quite a child anymore.

There is something about school

When you're seventeen.
There is something about the fact that you're almost done.
Almost on to the next chapter,
To whatever comes after.

And yet,
we don't make ornaments in art class anymore,
we don't play recorders in music.
We don't imagine anymore.
There is no 'what if' or 'what do you think',
there is only what is and what has been.
We don't look forward to learning anymore.

I drag myself from bed instead,
The cold biting and the drive bewildering.
I am in charge of myself.
I am not quite a child anymore.

There is something about freedom
When you're seventeen.
There is something about the way you have so much.
You can drive and sign
and work and pine.

But you have lost so much.
You don't get to play,
or whine for the fun of it,
or say what you need to.
Because you're a grown up now.
I don't feel like a grown up.

There is something about the snow
When you're seventeen.
There is something different
About the way it falls
And the reasons you are called.

You are taller now.
And stronger,
and you hunger
for the clarity of childhood
when daytime was full of joy instead of panic
about what was to come.
You are wiser too, wise enough to know that the good old days
Have gone.
Wise enough to know that there is something different
About being seventeen.
You are not quite a child anymore.

But you are not quite grown either.

Amongst the Grey

Miles Reitan

**2024 Michael and Gail Gurian Writing Awards Recipient
Fiction, Second Place**

The night was more grey than it was black. Whatever stars might otherwise have dotted the Spokane night sky were rendered moot by a thick cloud cover, whose dull shades were reflected by the streets and the walls and the alleyway where Sean Ellis smoked and tapped two drumsticks against his thigh. He was thankful for the glow of his American Spirit, what little color it cast onto the concrete walls and the sidewalk around him. He inhaled deeply, leaned his head back against the rough concrete wall of Lost Lake Bar, and blew another thick cloud up into the sky.

He felt more than heard somebody slip out of the side door propped open to his left and looked over to see Josef Vincent pulling out his own pack of cigarettes. Lucky Strikes. With a nod, Sean tucked his sticks into a back pocket and pulled out a blue Bic lighter which he tossed to Josef. The exchange was silent, familiar. For twelve years now, they'd been handing different lighters back and forth outside of countless gigs. Sean might have smiled at that thought, if not for how little had changed in those twelve years—if he wasn't growing tired of smoking outside of hometown bars with an opening gig ahead and no sign of the third in their three-piece band.

Instead, he peered through thick-rimmed glasses at his bandmate. Josef was tall and clean-shaven. His cuffed blue jeans clung tightly to thin legs, but his white t-shirt and unbuttoned flannel were baggy. He stood comfortably in the light of their

cigarettes, seeming to shoulder the night sky.

"Whattaya think?" Sean asked.

"I think we might be down half a man."

Exhale. "Fuck."

"Yep."

"We have to do something about him. I mean, somebody's gotta say something, right?" Josef didn't answer. He let the question drift out into the night until it faded like cigarette smoke. Eventually, Sean checked his watch. "Well, 25 minutes til go."

They shared one last quiet moment and a cigarette apiece and then ducked back inside the bar where they were absorbed into blue hues and a loose crowd of tattoos, black jeans, and beer-stained band t-shirts. Unimpeded by the crowd nor the cross-armed security guard that stood by the side door, they walked across sticky floors to the stage. Theirs was the second of three bands that were performing that night, and the first had just finished packing up their gear.

Thin fingers squeezed Sean's shoulder, just hard enough to hurt. When he turned, his gaze was met sharply by the pale blue eyes of Jim 'Skelly' Sauter, the longtime owner of Lost Lake. Though Sean knew he must have been in his early fifties, the spotted skin and spindly figure (which Sean could only assume had earned him his nickname) made him appear twenty years older. He stood too close so that even in the dim lighting Sean could see the yellow on his teeth.

"Where is he?" Skelly demanded. Though he didn't raise his voice, his words pierced through the crowd noise like a needle through thread.

"He'll be here, Skelly. You know how it is."

"Yeah I know how it is! I know exactly how he is. I let you guys back here 'cos you said it'd be all smooth. Best behavior, you said. You were supposed to be on it. I swear if he's not here, on my time, I'll cut you guys out. You know I will."

Sean nodded his weary agreement. He did, in fact, know

that Skelly would be all too happy not to pay them. In reply, he could only shrug and say it again. "He'll be here."

In the time that they'd been talking, Josef had already set up his bass and amp onstage. He gave Sean a hand in hauling his kit, piece by piece, from where it had been assembled at the side of the stage to the center. As Sean finished tweaking, tightening, and adjusting the kit to his exact liking, he watched with appreciation as Josef grabbed the guitar, amp, and effects pedal that had been strewn haphazardly on one side of the stage, and began setting those up as well. Sean checked his watch. 18 minutes til go. It took another twelve for the sound guys to set up the mics and check everything. Three more for Sean to grab a couple bottles of water and one glass of beer from the bar. He handed one of the waters to Josef who stood with his bass in hand and set the other by the guitar. Sean walked with his own beer to the stool behind his drum set, sat down, and took a sip. Looking out, he saw a bar that was still half-empty but filled nonetheless with impatient energy and expectant eyes, glancing up from their conversations towards the stage where he and Josef were waiting. Among them, he saw Skelly's scowling face. Having caught his eye, Skelly gestured towards his own watch and held up one finger. One minute til go. The tension grew silent and thick as the in-house music turned off and the crowd's conversations sunk into murmur. Sean tried and failed, to keep his eyes off his watch. 50 seconds. 30. 23.

Suddenly, the side door swung open, and a figure lurched into the bar's blue glow. The security guard looked him up and down for only a moment before stepping aside so that he could walk up to the stage. He planted two hands heavily on either side of the guitar stand and with sudden and surprising grace, leapt onstage, knocking over the water bottle so that it rolled back into Sean's tapping feet. Max Vincent swept shoulder-length black hair out of his eyes to reveal that they were blood red, not unlike the guitar that he now swept up into his arms. Sean sighed in frustration as much as relief. He'd learned to

expect exactly this sort of entrance from his guitarist, friend, and Josef's older brother. Max gave Sean a wink and smiled in the direction of Josef before turning to face the crowd's glares. His shoulders tensed up. One hand lifted a matte black pick into the air with a sense of drama that somehow suited his bandmates even less than it suited the crowd. Without so much as a nod to Sean nor Josef, the pick ripped downwards and filled the air with a violent, struck-by-lighting guitar tone to signal the start of the show.

From where Sean sat, Josef and Max were almost indistinguishable. Never mind the fact that Max was half-a-head shorter and even skinnier than his already trim brother. Never mind his greasy mess of hair which stood in stark contrast to Josef's tight buzz cut. With the stage's overhead lights glinting off his glasses so that their two silhouettes were all he could see—not the bar, not the crowd, not Skelly, not the doorway that led out into a colorless night—Sean might have thought he was looking at two shadows cast by the same person.

They struck the same tip-toed posture, tucking their chins back down towards the microphones. As one, they would sway forward and back as if there was a taut string holding them together. The same vein would pop out of the sides of their necks when they strained to hit a note, and identical sweat-stains slowly darkened the backs of their shirts. The two alternated singing, but the band was at its best when they harmonized. Josef's smooth voice weaved in and out of Max's rasped words and gave each lyric a second meaning, like two sides of the same story somehow heard all at once.

Behind and between them, Sean couldn't help but to be caught up. He was, for two or three minutes at a time, nothing more or less than a coordinated frenzy of ears and eyes and feet and sticks, beating out of his kit a sound so big that it could fit all three of them, holding them together in the same stage-

lit little world. The only pause he allowed himself was for the moment it took to push his glasses back up his nose, before diving right back in. Even as one song came to an end, the light tsks-tsk-tsking of Sean's high-hat could be heard rising above the decay of that last note and swelling into the start of another.

If not for the smell of sweat and stale beer, Sean might have forgotten that he was in some hole-in-the-wall like Lost Lake. He just as easily could have been a high schooler again, back in Max and Josef's grandmother's basement, watching them scream and sing back and forth. Sean remembered how he and Max would steal sips of leftover vodka left unattended on cobwebbed shelves, how it'd eventually give Max the courage to pick up his guitar and play whatever he'd written most recently. He also remembered the unreadable look on Josef's face as he'd watch them, silently, cracking a smile only once Max's singing would start.

But in an instant, the stage lights shut off and Sean found himself back in Lost Lake Bar. It was time to tear down and collect payment.

Sean sat at the bar massaging his forearms. To his right sat Josef, and then Max, who'd had a grin glued to his face since the end of their set. He was spinning an almost-empty glass of beer between his hands, and kept slurring, "Man, that ripped. We brought it, every fuggin song. That's a good set, boys."

"That's right," Sean nodded. "One of the good ones."

Josef said nothing, but he grasped his brother's shoulder in apparent agreement.

The crowd, which had ballooned to near capacity for the headliners, was emptying out the front doors. A few of them acknowledged the trio, with a nod or a quick compliment and handshake. Skelly emerged from their midst and strode behind the bar, stopping directly in front of them. In his hands was a cash box. Its soft jingle caught Max's attention. "Hey there

Skel. Whattaya got for us, babe?"

Skelly ignored him and thumbed deliberately through the cash box until he pulled out a torn and faded fifty-dollar bill. He slid it across the bar, saying coldly, "Good show, guys. All yours."

Josef's grasp tightened around his brother's shoulder, whose face had begun to bloom. "What's this?" Max asked. "What the fuck is this?"

Sean agreed, "Yeah, Skelly, what am I looking at? We were promised five percent."

"And I was supposed to get a clean show, no problems. You're lucky to get anything."

Max inhaled deeply, and then replied, "Come on man, don't be such a fucking sleaze. It was a sold-out crowd and we kicked ass. Give us our money."

Skelly turned to look at him. He leaned in so that they were nearly nose-to-nose, and his mouth twisted into an unnatural smile. Every syllable was enunciated clearly, harshly. "You didn't sell out shit. If you think a single one of these people bought a ticket just so they could see some junkie fumble around and fuck up then you're worse off than I thought. You embarrassed me, my bar, your band, your broth—"

Max's hand shot up to grab Skelly by the neck. He yanked him over the bar, sending the beer glass shattering against the floor. They landed in a heap of swears, spit, and elbows. Josef tried to pull his brother off, but was shoved aside by the security guard who succeeded in lifting Max away. In his flailing attempts to twist and spin out of the guard's grasp, Will's boot-clad foot managed to connect cleanly with Josef's temple who hit his head against the bar as he collapsed to the ground.

For a moment, everybody stopped dead. Still. Breathless. Out of the corner of his eye, Sean saw Max shake off the distracted security guard and inch towards his brother. The rest of them were transfixed, watching in horror as a puddle

of blood gathered around Josef's unmoving head. It spread quickly, staining the shards of broken glass that surrounded him. Max kneeled in the glass and gazed down at his brother so that his hair fell in front of his face like a black curtain.

"Yeah. Yeah, he'd been drinking."

"No. Nobody meant for this to happen."

"Yeah, I'll be alright."

Sean could just barely hear his own voice through the tense throbbing in the front of his head. It sounded flat, lifeless, removed. Disinterestedly, he took note of the fact that the police officer had finished his questioning and walked off, at least for the moment. Sean looked over towards the stage, where Skelly was earnestly telling and re-telling his side of the story to another cop. Sean couldn't bring himself to listen in, but he didn't need to know what Skelly was saying to sense the vindictive fury in the way his head shook and jaw clenched.

The authorities had been quick to the scene such that Max was still at his brother's side when they arrived. He'd been dragged away to make room for the EMTs who'd carefully lifted Josef onto a stretcher and walked him out the side door. Josef still hadn't moved.

Now, almost without thinking, Sean followed the path they had taken out to the side alley. There, he watched the ambulance's taillights round a corner onto the main street, where its progress was slowed by throngs of curious show-goers who were still gathered out in front of the bar. Sean listened to its siren grow distant, slowly at first as it contended with the crowd, and then all at once. In its absence, he was met by the sound of muted sobbing. He looked down to where Max sat on the ground, back against the wall and head in hands. He looked small. Frail and alone. Haltingly, hesitantly, Sean took a seat beside his friend.

Sensing Sean's presence, Max sat up straighter and started glancing around the alleyway. He was fidgeting with his pick,

turning it over between his hands. His knuckles were bleeding. After a moment, he couldn't seem to stand the silence any longer.

"I didn't—this isn't—it wasn't supposed to happen this way. Not to him, y'know? Not to him." Words seemed to fall out of his mouth of their own free will, faster than his lips could fully form them. His voice was hoarse and desperate, begging Sean to look at him, to agree, to give some sign that he was listening. "I just—man fuck, FUCK—fucking Skelly man, and—and I don't know. I don't know what I did. I care about him—I—you know how I always cared about him, don't you? He's my brother, y'know, and it's—it's just—"

Sean stared straight ahead. A bone-numbing cold had begun to seep out of the concrete wall at his back, through his t-shirt and into his skin. It spread inwards and upwards until it seemed to soothe the throbbing sensation in his head. Suddenly, he felt hollow. Drained. He sat in the light of the nearby police cars and watched as the alley changed colors. Red. Blue. Red. Blue. He shook a cigarette out of its box and into his hand, but when he patted the pocket where his lighter had been, it was empty.

Sean's eyes drifted up towards the night sky. Still blank and dreary, it was exactly as he'd left it. Completely, comfortingly unchanged. He thought that, if he looked hard enough, he might spot a star, a glimmer amongst the grey. There was none.

The Troubles: An Irish Lament

Teddy Kleindl

Couldn't get out, couldn't get out, couldn't get out.
The soaring wall, oh how we fall, the bleating of crows, echo the call.
Couldn't get out, couldn't get out, couldn't get out.
Brother against brother, son against mother, highlight the flaws of
peace for all.

Couldn't get out, couldn't get out, couldn't get out.
Blacking out the sun, now the time has begun, blood on the hands of
those who run.
Couldn't get out, couldn't get out, couldn't get out.
Scything stalks of blooming flowers, ichor hangs from stretching
towers.

Couldn't get out, couldn't get out, couldn't get out.
The pattering of strafing choirs, neatly wrapped in twining wire.
Couldn't get out, couldn't get out, couldn't get out.
The crown of one isn't a crown for all, shed in light as the innocent
fall.

Couldn't get out, couldn't get out, couldn't get out.
At peace long lost now comes the hour, the marching of the men
who crumble in showers.
Couldn't get out, couldn't get out, couldn't get out.
The shrieking of the ravens' calls, feasting on those who are late to
the ball.

Couldn't get out, couldn't get out, couldn't get out.
A cardinal sits upon the pyre, knelling sweetly from vermilion lyre.

Couldn't get out, couldn't get out, couldn't get out.
Come sister, come mother, come son, come father,
For the dead long lost in the glimpse of power.

Couldn't get out,
Couldn't get out,
Couldn't get out

Venus, My Love

Kaelyn Wellman



Artist Description

Venus, my Love depicts the classic sculpture, Venus de Milo, receiving a "modern" makeover. The piece is a commentary on the evolution of beauty standards by which feminine people are constantly forced into elusive ideals.

Nine Lives

Rowyn O'Connor

**2024 Michael and Gail Gurian Writing Awards Recipient
Creative Non-Fiction, Second Place**

My girlhood is like Schrödinger's cat — a half-dead thing kept alive at my own expense. My body, it seems, is proof enough of this:

I spend hours in front of the mirror, preening. I bind my chest in the hopes that others will not misgender me, but they do anyway, and so I have begun doing it only for myself, to keep from crying over the pieces of my assigned gender that I don't want. But such affirmation is not without consequences. My posture is ruined from both leaning forward and binding to hide my chest. It takes my breath away. When I come home after hours and hours of cloth compressing my ribs, the time stretching into unsafe territory, I find the skin covered in acne and friction burns, my chest tender. These are common side effects. The small selection of knowledgeable doctors and literature on the subject demand that I take days off. If I bind for too long or sleep in a binder, I could end up with more serious injuries: broken or bruised ribs, a punctured lung, reduced lung capacity, or nerve damage. Someday, I will get top surgery, and the long-term physical consequences of binding will be clearer to the medical field and people who bind. As of now, I have a slipped rib, muscle wasting in my lower back, and chronic back pain, all an indirect result of gender dysphoria. Idiopathic, if you asked my doctors. Binding may be physically uncomfortable, but the emotional pain of dysphoria is worse. I choose binding over going at my chest with a knife. If bodies

were not associated with gender or worth, would I feel the need to change my appearance in such a way? Would I cringe at the pitch of my own voice?

I am not a woman, but I was raised and socialized as one for most of my life. As much as I resented my girlhood, I grew to accept the implications of it: I started to understand all of the ways in which I was too much. The physical changes brought on by puberty devastated me. I tried to starve them into submission; I tried to cut them out of me. Before I learned of trans and non-binary identities, I looked in the mirror and decided that if no one saw me as a boy, I could at least try to be what the patriarchy deems a "better" girl: smaller, quieter. I cannot renounce the thing that carried me here. I go to the store and buy period products covertly, like they are contraband. I used to bleed through my pants and shamefully clean up the mess. I still fill my speech with "excuse me" and "sorry." I have been told to smile, to cross my legs, to cover my midriff and chest. I know what it is to fear a man. I am prepared to grip my keys, sharp edge out, in my clenched fist; I mentally rehearse kicks to the crotch of an assailant. I have been whistled at. I brace myself for catcalls. My friends walk me home at night. Often, I still use the women's bathroom. I will always feel safer in women's spaces than men's, albeit awkward and unsure if I am even allowed to be there. As long as I am perceived as a woman, I will experience misogyny. I have no desire to be perceived as a man, only as a gender besides "female." Of course, such a perception is rare. For a long time, I mistook my envy of masculinity for attraction. I don't want to date men and I don't want the privilege and power associated with manhood; in the latter case, I would only add to the problem. I just want a different body. Perhaps body and privilege are impossible to untangle.

Though I loathe the gender binary, without realizing it, I built my gender expression based on traditional gender roles and within the confines of cis-heteronormativity. If gender is a

construct, what does that make me? Should I have a daughter, how am I supposed to explain to her that this mantle of “girl” did not belong to me, but by some twist of fate, belongs to her? That I am a feminist still?

It is an entirely different thought experiment, this life. As politicians across the country seek to criminalize and eradicate transness, I am learning to love mine. While they are planning Project 2025, I’m screaming statistics about trans suicide. I want to ask those politicians: do you know what it’s like to want to die? To hug your friend after they’ve tried? You already want us gone, but hating yourself is no way to live. It didn’t take transphobia for me to realize that. I’m trying to make peace with myself, with others’ observation of me — my existence as debated and hypothetical as a famous feline’s. If we are the cat, half-alive or half-dead, suspended in a box of your disbelief, then so be it. Trans people have crawled out of closets smaller than this. But we have always been here — whether or not you choose to see us.

It Won't Happen to You

Macy Wienecke

It won't happen to you
You know it could
But it hasn't

You wander down the street
Through the crowd of people
Chatting with your friend
And laugh at their joke

Then it happens to you
But you knew it could
And it did

You tiptoe down the street
Warily through the rush of strangers
Glancing behind you
As you start to hear static

It didn't happen to you
You knew it could
But this time it didn't

You jerk yourself from your pillow
Fumbling the sheets with your sweaty palms
Looking intently at your reflection
And take a deep breath

It didn't happen to you this time
But now when you dream
It always does

To Bleed

River Lasol

There is a house on 19th Street the color of a faded sunflower. White gables wrap around it like frosting. If you go around to the left, over the stepping stones surrounded by faded bark, and through the gate whose wood is splitting at the bottom, you will see some grass, a yellow shed, and then the wide blue deck. An old swing swings in one of the chilly breezes that starts to curve through town this time of year and the lavender along the bottom edge is starting to dry out. You might not know it, but inside that house, past the white dusty screen door, is a family.

If you were observing one certain day in October this year, you might've seen a short woman with an auburn pixie cut start in shock and look down at something on the deck. This woman is a mother. She gave birth to a child and you would see this child, on that same day in October, come out onto the deck in only their socks after the mother scuttled inside and informed them of what was happening to Penelope.

Penelope is not a person, she is not a part of the family. She is not the child's father. He's inside, probably downstairs in his basement office with the one grimy window. Penelope is not a myth, either. Penelope is a very real friend of the mother. Penelope is a praying mantis. And on this marvelous, gloomy October day she was giving birth. The child didn't care much, except that this family values curiosity. Wouldn't you have wanted to see? Wouldn't you have wanted to watch?

Penelope was a light green praying mantis and she was on a patch of chipped paint a few feet away from the lavender.

The mother and child were watching the praying mantis with shocked faces, the mother getting closer and holding an iPhone up to take a photo. The child stayed further away as if stopped in their tracks.

"Look at that!" the mother said in awe as her small white finger punched the picture button over and over, determined to capture the miracle.

The child did not seem to be witnessing a miracle. They looked distant, vulnerable, like you could knock them over with a flick of your pinky. The praying mantis was vulnerable too. Why was she on the deck? Why wasn't she safe in the lavender where she'd been living last week? Why was she giving birth here of all places?

"She's pushing out an egg sack!" the mother exclaimed. She was taking a video now and the child moved closer hesitantly. If you could see what they saw you would see this: Penelope's back end, just under her wings, was pulsating. A large mass of bumpy brown something was sticking out of her. And maybe if you saw that, you'd feel the same way the child did: stuck,

their stomach slowly filling with anxious worms, wanting to look away but not being able to.

Back and forth and back and forth the mantis wiggled. Nothing existed but the child and the mantis and that strange undulating, the struggle, the creation, the endless push and pull. Until, when the worms felt like they were beginning to crawl up their esophagus, they stepped away.



"It feels wrong to watch," the child finally spoke, their eyes still trained on the mantis. But what weren't they saying? That they wanted to watch until it was done? That they wished they'd never seen anything to begin with? That they wished their mother would stop taking a video of the many half-born fetuses still stuck inside their own mother?

"This isn't the best place to be doing this, really." The mother was in her own world, locked in a very different dance with the creature. Her mind was scheming, trying to come up with a plan to carry the mantis to safety. Perhaps on a shovel.

When the child went inside, hand to their stomach to calm the worms, trying to convince themselves that they were safe, the mother did not notice anything but the soft click of the screen door. The mantis wasn't where it started for me, though. That came much earlier.

Children are naturally curious. Every parent that has a Twitter account loves sharing those awkward moments when their kid asks them a question they don't know how to answer. Some people lie. Storks delivered you to our windowsill. Some people mask the truth. Mummy made you. Some people tell the truth more acutely. You grew in Mummy's belly and then I pushed you out. And some people find out that their child, having been quite logically taught by the first few years of school that curiosity is not always a good thing, has flouted your rules of not using the computer for anything other than games to google what giving birth is and is now laying awake absolutely scared shitless and promising whatever powers are in the universe that they will never flout a house rule again.

I eventually became aware that under my stomach is a pile of dirt. I imagine it as ashy and dry. But each month the rain comes and moistens the dull earth. The droplets pummel the pile until it writhes, contorting from one shape to the next, eventually left as a pockmarked flat disc. The pocks are there

waiting, waiting to be filled with seed. Waiting to grow something. Waiting for the worms to make their way up to the topsoil and soak up the fertilizer in their wiggly pink bodies. Please let me be of use, the dirt whispers. Please let me fulfill my purpose. I do not want to cause you any more pain. The dirt doesn't understand what pain means. Pain is not the crunching of my own organs inside of me. It's not the blood that soaks my bedsheets. It's the mass of shadows whirling around in my head that repeats over and over: I do not want this. I do not want this. Why have I been given this when I do not want it?

I also didn't want anyone to know at first. That familiar shame that periods seem to carry had settled like a devious cat around my shoulders. I didn't know what to make of everything that the blood meant. Didn't know how to understand that this was some sort of coming-of-age moment but one that I wished could move on or stop altogether. I remember the intrusive thoughts at twelve years old when it was late for the first time: Am I pregnant? That's impossible. But is it? There's so much science we don't understand. No, it's impossible. Yuck. Stop that. Shut up. Shut up. Shut up. Everything is fine... Everything was fine a few days later. Even with the pain and beginning to recognize my body at least it meant that I was free. I wouldn't end up like Penelope. Right?

From the first episode, I was in love with her. Not in a way that my confused, closeted self would've acknowledged as queer, but it very much was. Sybil Crawley was the youngest of three sisters, a young feisty brunette that often went unacknowledged and underappreciated. She didn't fit in with the rest of her family. They had petty squabbles over marriage and status, but she didn't mind getting into the muck to try and push the carriage out of the ditch even when it ruined her silk dress. She didn't mind lending her clothes to her maid so she could go to a job interview. She didn't mind giving up her

wealth to go live in a tiny house with the equally feisty Irish socialist her father didn't want her to marry. Sybil may sound perfect to you if you're reading this and that's because to me, she was. Sybil was one of the kindest, most selfless people I knew.

In season three she revealed that she was pregnant. Sybil's face glowed and she smiled often and she stepped lightly across the gleaming floors. I saw the way she looked at Tom. My Sybil was always looking at me like she knew exactly what I was thinking. She deserved some peace for once.

When she went into labor, I was understandably nervous. I'd never liked watching scenes involving birth, no matter how much they left out. But I couldn't leave now, not when Sybil needed me. I let the tense muscles of my back relax back into the soft leathery couch cushions and clasped my hands together in front of me. The village doctor was there, prepared with his tools if needed, ready to lend a comforting hand. There was another doctor too, new to the village, with a wonderful resume. And there was the whole family gnawing at their fingernails and telling her she was doing a good job.

"I wish there was more that I could do." Tom held her hand while Sybil was groaning on the bed. Her hand was damp and clenched tight enough for his bones to shudder.

"Just be here." She smiled that soft smile that won me over from the start. "We can lie back and look at the stars." Her eyes were like stars.

"It is my belief that Sybil is at risk of eclampsia," the village doctor said when he was examining her ankles. They looked swollen, painfully so, but I didn't know what that meant.

The other doctor said it was natural for her to be in distress considering she was about to give birth. The family is in the hallway, debating who to trust. But I shouldn't be here. Though I cringe at every moan and gasp and the sweat soaking her neck, I should be in there, with her.

Then the baby comes. What a little, beautiful baby it is. My

heart had been pounding but now it settled along with Sybil's own. She sat up in bed, drenched, holding her healthy little baby to her chest. And she smiled again. God, I loved her smile.

"I really do love you, you know."

An hour later, there's a rush to wake everyone back up.

Sybil isn't alright anymore. The doctors rush in, the family following after clutching at their nightgowns and brushing their messy hair out of their faces. My breath is catching in my chest. My sweater clings to my damp skin, it closes around my neck. And there's Sybil lying on the bed, but no, she isn't lying, she's gasping. She's gasping and gasping and staring out in the void while she can't breathe and her body is bucking around in the sheets. The doctors say it's eclampsia now. They could've saved her earlier. But it's too late now. I cannot reach to pull my sweater away from my throat, cannot move at all. My heartbeat is fast, too fast. And the family screams and yells and everyone is flapping their arms around.

But not Tom, not me. We sit on the floor by the bed and clasp her hand, her arm, we sob and sob and our chest is wracked with our unsteady breaths. My eyes are blurring and my chest shudders, so much that at first I don't realize when she stops.

I'm shaking her. My fingers dig into the soft fabric of her nightgown and I'm waiting to see her pale face turn, for her eyes to look at me. I cannot hear her breathe. My arms become heavy and she is still. I am glued to the couch, head fixed, arms wrapped around my own torso. My face falls. The world is dark around me, the only sensation is the damp sheets pressing against my forehead.

"Please wake up, love. Please don't leave me."

"Please wake up, love."

"Please..."

But Sybil didn't wake up.¹

1 Dialogue from Downton Abbey, Season 3 Episode 5



When I was a kid I loved playing make-believe. It was Barbies and Pet Shop and Polly Pockets and yes, even baby dolls. One time around Christmas I got a baby doll and she was properly life-sized. She had a pink carrier case and several different pink dresses. You could take her tights on and off. It was all so

very pink and so very cute and I so very much loved that doll. I'd carry her around the house, feed her from a plastic milk bottle. I'd needed drum beats cranked up on our speakers to fall asleep at that age. But I was gentle with her and I'd rock that doll calmly to sleep. I took care of her, like how my mother took care of me. I loved that doll. Why? Maybe because it was easy.

There was a girl at my high school who was pregnant during my sophomore year. I didn't ever know her name, didn't know anything about her other than that. But when I was eating alone at my favorite lunch table she often sat at the same one. And I remember not really looking at her, but thinking of her with disdain. That was just a cover-up for my own discomfort, wasn't it? I didn't want to think about the fact that she had a worm in her stomach or the fact that she was my age and was going to have to give birth. I didn't want to think about how she'd gotten pregnant or if he refused to wear a condom. I didn't want to think about the fact that ultimately, I was playing into the disdain she must've gotten from a whole lot of people in that school when that disdain should've been saved for the systems that had failed her. Just like the systems failed

Sybil. Just like they could've failed me. Another easy route.

A few months after finishing *Downton Abbey* my family was continuing on our period drama streak in an attempt to fill the gap. There were few period dramas good enough to truly capture our attention, but my parents were drawn into one called *Call the Midwife*. After the second episode, I was done with it. I distinctly remember racing out of the room, standing just outside of the living room door and watching my parents' faces: calm and collected, the light of the telly playing across their faces like dappled sunlight, while a woman screamed in agony. Each episode of that show features a birth, some more graphic than others. The amount of crying and pain and rushing about was so stressful. Why would anyone want to watch that? Why would I want to keep being reminded of Sybil? My best friend's mother made her watch the show, literally forcing her to for a while. She told my mum that she hoped it would deter my friend from wanting to have sex. I didn't need to see a single episode. I'd already had sex ed classes for that.

I was fourteen years old. I hadn't given more than a minute of thought to sexuality, hadn't ever been kissed in the way that supposedly matters, didn't really care that I hadn't. I was perfectly happy to keep singing along to *Hamilton* during lunchtime without actually saying the curses out loud, happy to play Uno with my friends at sleepovers, and talk about our favorite books. I was not quite as happy when it was spring because that meant it was sex ed time. I remember my science teacher, the one with fluffy bleached hair, somewhat regretfully pulling up the first PowerPoint presentation. I did what was expected of all of us: Listen. Don't ask questions. We were filling out diagrams, being shown a condom, watching a consent video about how it wasn't nice to pour scalding hot tea on somebody if they didn't want any.² And of course, then there were the

² <https://youtu.be/pZwvrxVavnQ>

photos.

When people ask me why trigger warnings are important, those photos are the first things that come to mind: grotesque depictions of STDs in HD quality. Every time Mrs. B clicked to change the slide, I flinched and turned away, fingers digging into the hard plastic chair beneath me. But the things I saw would be seared into my mind just from the second that I had been looking.

This fear-mongering is unhealthy, I think we can all agree. I could've been learning what attraction even meant. I mean, come on, isn't this supposed to be the basics? But no, it was silly videos of teenagers making decisions we all knew were horrible and we laughed at them because we could tell the teacher hated having to do this every year, and not laughing would've been much more awkward. Laughing was easy, too.

During middle school I often found myself studying the boys in my class. I would study the basketball shorts they wore, the thin cotton shirts, the sneakers, the short hair that curled around their ears. And I figured this must be what a crush is. But how could I have a crush on so many and all at the same time? And why did I never really care about talking to them? Doesn't having a crush mean you want to be around that person? Now I'm old enough to understand (usually) the difference. Now, I think that it was obvious that I was fascinated, even envious. Why else would I wear a button-up shirt and fedora to picture day? Why else would I start wearing the same combat boots to school every day? Back then I was just asking why and I didn't even know how to finish the question. But there were other signs, too, because it wasn't only the way I studied people. It was the way I refused to study myself.

I cannot remember a time in my life before the fog was there. But I didn't realize my vision was different for a long time. The cloud of fog extends from just below my belly button

to halfway down my thighs.

When I was sixteen, my mother and I were invited to a play that one of her friends had directed. It was called *The Vagina Monologues*. The name already made me nervous. I sat there in the audience, the youngest in a room full of mostly middle-aged women. And I did not belong. It's because I am young, I thought. But the stories in that play were sometimes of younger people than me. It's because I'm ace, I said. But I still didn't understand anything. I was too afraid to confront an answer that wasn't easy. The fog was so thick that day it came all the way up to my chin. I stared at the white wall behind the actors and wondered why I felt like an alien.

I started to question more after that day, I think. Or maybe living for twenty years has gradually filtered the air that cocoons my body and the fog has thinned. But it is still there. I don't know if it will ever completely disappear. I don't know why that makes me so angry. If I could see properly I'm not sure I would like it.

My mother's ex-boss Lisa got pregnant and it hadn't been easy, but she was glad of it. Her baby was huge, six pounds or more we would find out later. I remember my mother went to drop off some soup for her because she was having such a difficult time with it. A month or less out from her due date and she was still struggling with morning sickness. She was basically bedridden, though it's possible that my adolescent mind overdramatised the situation. For many people like Lisa, pregnancy can be a temporary disability. One time I met a woman whose belly was so swollen that she couldn't tie her own shoes. She had to sit in a certain way so she wasn't in pain. She needed help walking up stairs. I didn't blame her for needing help and no one should. But I've always felt like I needed too much help already. I wouldn't want to have to ask for any more. And besides, who would volunteer to go through what Lisa had? A year later, she was pregnant again. I cannot understand it.

What is it that I cannot understand?

The official name for the fear of pregnancy and/or giving birth is tokophobia. Tokophobia is specifically an “excessive and unreasonable fear.” What exactly about my fear is excessive? How much fear is too much? What exactly about my fear is unreasonable? Childbirth is painful and there are so many things that can go wrong. The sheer amount of women throughout history that have died trying to bring new life into the world is cause enough for anyone to fear. Does it really matter if I never plan to get pregnant?

There are two types of tokophobia that can officially be diagnosed. Secondary tokophobia occurs after someone has given birth, perhaps because of trauma experienced during the pregnancy and/or birthing process. But primary tokophobia occurs “before a woman ever becomes pregnant. The stimulus may be early sexual trauma, rape, early exposure to the facts of vaginal birth as occurs in sex education classes at school, or even watching videos of childbirth when very young.”³ It explained some things but not enough.

When I first saw pictures of my mother pregnant in our photo album, it disgusted me. And I’m trying to figure out now if I was just confused or if I was disturbed by the idea of the same happening to me. Was I disturbed by seeing my mother look different than I had ever seen her? Was I shocked by the fact that I had been inside of her? Was I scared of the simple idea of someone being inside of someone else? Maybe it was all of those things. Maybe it was more. And once I started thinking about what was behind all of it, the fear and the disgust, I couldn’t stop. Right now, I can’t stop thinking about Penelope. Why can’t I stop thinking about Penelope?

My family has a family friend named Nicolette. My parents

3 <https://www.news-medical.net/health/Causes-of-Tokophobia.aspx>

have known her since before I could talk, mostly as a client of my father’s. But when Nicolette couldn’t pay him back, she offered to deep clean our house every few months in exchange for his time. And so she did until she retired. The house hasn’t been quite as sparkly and clean since then, but it has also felt more peaceful. No one goes into my room while I’m out and moves my things around and rearranges my bookshelves or tries to engage me in conversation when I’m in the dining room eating my lunch and want more than anything to be left alone. But Nicolette seems to think that she’s a part of our extended family.

I recently saw a text exchange between her and my father. My father decided she should know that I’m queer, so he told her so. I didn’t care, but she acted like it was bad news, like my disruption to her narrative and my rejection of a ‘natural’ life path was somehow a personal affront. She acted like she really knew me. Who the hell do you think you are to care what I do with my life or who I love or how?

In a weird sort of way, though, I enjoyed seeing that text from Nicolette. It confirmed for me that I had successfully burst my way out of the congealed, suffocating, heteronormative bubble. And once you’re out it’s a lot harder to get back in. Once I was out, I had to deal with the harder questions, the

ones that didn’t have any easy answers.

I have often been told, “I felt like that too when I was your age.” There was, there is, always a tone of voice that makes me suspicious of an underlying assumption

that children cannot know things about themselves. I couldn’t have known I didn’t want children then. Can I still not know for sure now? I think I sure as hell can. I don’t know what I want, but I know it isn’t this.

Today 10:31 AM

oh my god i am in shock!!!! I can't believe it, i always pictured her growing up to get married and have many babies.

Birth is in our blood. It is how the human race survives. How everything survives. Even trees give birth though it's not the same way that we do. Seedlings grow and burst, they are carried away in the wind. How sad that trees do not see their children again. They are ripped away from each other.

"The first thing I did was pull you to my chest and I said hello."

My mother gave birth to me at home. Many people choose the hospital, but my parents being hippies complicated this like it complicated many things. I was born into a paddling pool. I was a small baby, born late. One of my parent's first acts was to get an astrology chart done based on my time of birth: approximately 6:30 in the morning. The astrologist said I would be a writer.

"I used to be terrified, but it was one of the most amazing moments of my life."

She was scared of the pain, of the responsibility, of the way that I would limit her freedom. Sometimes I feel bad thinking that I did. Then I tell myself to stop thinking that. My mother chose to keep me. Just like Sybil chose Tom. But did Penelope have a choice?

"I used to say that I'd never in a million years have children. But here I am."

I'm really nothing like my mother was at my age, except for that. I don't drink. I still live at home. And I do not want children. And even if I wanted them, I wouldn't in a million years want to make one. That is what pregnancy is, isn't it? A making, a mixing of different elements and cells and chemicals to form a fetus, a brain, bones, a whole human being.

I won't be continuing on our lineage. Won't be passing around my genes, won't be providing heirs. I am the woman in every period drama or historical fantasy novel that wants to be an independent certified girlboss and have control over her kingdom, her estate. But eventually, these women are whittled

down. The pressure is too much. If they can get pregnant, they do. Over and over and over again. Penelope did it, but I won't. And I don't know what happened to her, but I don't need to, because I know now what will happen to me.

Me? I will not be whittled, I will not be pressured, I will not be convinced, and I will not be changed. I will not take the easy route and I will admit the truth. It is as I have told you over and over and over again: I am not a woman.

Ache

Kaylene Kristofferson

Ache?

What even is ache?

A type of pain that cannot be intertwined into

A singular line of poetry.

Even if it were engraved into my skin,

I could not explicate to you

How scarce words would be a

Fiction to my Ache.

What even is ache?

Is it how my bones clatter against one

Another in January?

How the osseous matter

Seeks shelter as wintertide

Threatens a brumal peace at 4 p.m.?

No – these are purely fiction to my Ache

If an image could varnish the feeling

It would be comparable to

Possessing an unquenched thirst,

While drinking out of a broken glass,

Filled with Adam's ale,

Hot coals for ice.

I am the Manta Ray

Laura Erickson

**2024 Michael and Gail Gurian Writing Award Recipient
Creative Non-Fiction, Third Place**

Inspired by Sabrina Imbler's How Far the Light Reaches

At twenty feet tall with a wingspan of up to twenty-nine feet, the manta ray is one of the largest fish swimming in our oceans (“Giant Manta”; Giant Oceanic”). You’d never guess by the way this boneless creature glides effortlessly through the blue, but the manta ray is just as heavy as an elephant (“Biggest Manta”). Strangely, this creature that can weigh up to three tons manages to stay afloat, yet a car at the same weight would sink within seconds. The art of buoyant force and water gravity is truly a beautiful thing. My pondering of this, I’m sure, is reflective of my scientific intellectual lack.

I never truly realized how big manta rays were until I saw one. Not with my own eyes, as they usually hang around the tropics far from shore and I don’t have the resources—or desire—to strand myself in the middle of the Indo-Pacific. Naturally, my expectations were bound to be exceeded considering that my only encounter with the animal took place on a TV screen in 2008. The manta ray in Finding Nemo, who played the role of both teacher and school bus, didn’t look to be much bigger than a dinner plate—at least in comparison to Nemo and his classmates. After typing “manta ray size” into Google Images, photos of divers swimming alongside them abruptly changed my perception. Not only are they big, but they also happen to be the fifth largest fish in the world, behind four types of sharks (“Biggest Manta”).

The second my eyes captured the information in those photographs and sent it off to my brain, I realized how large the creature actually was compared to a human—someone my size with the same perspective of what’s big and what’s small—and I felt a tinge of fear. Even through my computer screen, somehow the vastness and oddity of this animal intimidated me, and I didn’t know why. After staring at it for a little while, the fear went away, and I started observing the little details in its wings and eyes. Fear turned into admiration—it just took a little time to get there.

Growing up, I was almost always the biggest kid in class. When I say big, I don’t mean fat—not to say that that would be worse, but it’s important to distinguish the difference. In a general sense, I was big-boned. I still am big-boned, but after puberty, I’ve grown into my skin and don’t notice it as much. I know some people say that being big-boned isn’t a thing and that it’s just an excuse fat people use to boost their self-esteem, but those people just don’t get it. Those people don’t have a core memory of going into JCPenny at eight years old and trying on all of those trendy hot pink fedoras with glitter and zebra and gemstones and sequins and rainbows and bows, just for none of them to fit your adult-sized head. Or, on that same trip, trying on every single pair of twinkle-toes in my size that everyone at school had except for me, just for my hobbit feet to be too wide for all of them. Or maybe that time on the school bus when I was sitting next to my best friend who I was madly in love with but no one knew and he told me that his brother called me “his friend with the big legs.” Or the day my middle school took a ski trip and the instructor was asking our group for our names and when he forgot mine and asked me to remind him, he said, “Oh, that’s right. The big one. That’s how I’ll remember you.”

I used to cry to my parents all the time and ask them why God made my legs so big. My mom would always tell me, “You’re big, but you’re beautiful.” I know she had good intentions and

I’m honestly happy she acknowledged it rather than saying the typical, “No! You’re not fat, you’re so pretty!” that I’d get from my size two friends when trying on homecoming dresses at the mall, but it still didn’t make me feel great, especially coming from my petite five-foot-and-three-inches mother who gave all of her small genes to my little sister. My dad would say, “You know how I know you’re my kid? You’ve got my calves!” I don’t think my dad got how it wasn’t a compliment for a girl to have calves that didn’t even fit into ankle boots, but like my mom, I knew he had good intentions.

I don’t think anyone was ever scared of me because of my size, but it was a barrier in a lot of my relationships as a kid. When playing truth or dare with my basketball teammates one night, the question “what were your first impressions of me?” came up and someone told me that, at tryouts, they were intimidated by me and thought that I was going to crush them. Perhaps it was a compliment for my strength, but that’s not something any fifteen-year-old girl would want to hear. And, no, I’m not friends with that girl anymore. I didn’t get into my first relationship until I was eighteen, which I assumed was because my size made me undesirable. I watched all of my thinner friends get asked to dances and football games and it just never happened for me—not until I lost forty pounds during COVID and then all of a sudden everyone treated me like an entirely new person.

With their relatively flat body and incredible wingspan, manta rays not only have the ability to coast through the water but also provide shelter for smaller fish. Often in photos of manta rays from beneath, you’ll see a couple of remora fish clung to their underside. These two creatures form what marine biologists call a mutualistic relationship (“A Tale”). The remoras suction their front-dorsal fins to the manta ray, almost like a natural seatbelt, and are instantly guarded by all lurking predators. They also get to hitch free rides all day

long and catch any crumbs the manta ray leaves behind—their mouths are nearly as wide as their body, so they're bound to miss bits and pieces of prey every now and then.

The manta ray doesn't mind the company of the remoras. Despite staying still and looking like a trespassing barnacle, the remoras actually do provide some benefits. During all of that time sitting back and relaxing while the ray carries them along, remoras pass the time by cleaning dead skin particles and parasites on its body. Additionally, remoras' bodies are streamlined, meaning that instead of dragging the rays down and preventing them from swimming efficiently, they act as a sort of weightless rutter ("A Tale").

So, in short, the manta ray is like a friendly guardian who just needs a little help maintaining good hygiene. Alone, the two would have a greater chance of falling victim to the circle of life—maybe not the manta ray, considering that it has virtually no predators—but certainly the remora ("A Tale"). Regardless, together, they make each other better. In the vast blue world, they can connect and form bonds that no other creatures in their circumstances would understand.

My little sister Gloria was born on November 23rd, 2009. As a five-year-old, I was old enough to have gained consciousness but I can only remember that day in pictures. There's a photo of me sitting next to her baby carrier reading her some Sesame Street children's book. She was only a few hours old and obviously couldn't understand a word, but the giant smile on my face said it all. I loved that kid from the moment I met her.

Some siblings tolerate each other, some hate each other, and some even kill each other. I don't believe that Cain and Abel were real brothers anymore, but even the Bible school version of the story still scars me to this day. Gloria and I, on the other hand, were inseparable. At the end of the day, we always had each other and never got bored. We shared a room until I started the sixth grade and every day after school or on

weekends was spent rotating between Barbies (our favorite), Littlest Pet Shops, plastic horse dolls we'd collected from the one thrift store on Vashon Island where we grew up, American Girl Dolls, Playmobils, stuffed animals, and our dress-up box. Of course, as the older sister who had authority, I got to pick which toys we'd play with most of the time. As the younger sister who looked up to me like I was an idol, she didn't mind. Sometimes I felt nice and let her decide.

Over the years, our sisterly bond never faltered, but as we each got older and things in our home life began to shift, the ways we relied upon each other changed. When I was around thirteen and Gloria was around eight, our parents got divorced. A sad but common reality for some, it was hard on us. My dad moved to Seattle—a fifteen-minute ferry ride away—and we only got to see him on weekends. I sort of knew why their marriage came to an end, but it wasn't until those first few months without my dad in the house that my innocent brain came to realize one of the biggest reasons.

There were a lot of reasons why our parents didn't stay together. Some of those reasons I know and most of them I'm sure I still don't. Even within that minority of knowledge I had, deciphering between whose confessions were truths and whose were lies was a daily headache. It was strange at first, putting on my big-girl shoes, taking responsibility, and standing up for myself. I hadn't needed to before. Everything changed that year. Homemade dinners with placemats, glowing taper candles, a freshly set table, and most of all, the five of us, were just a memory. Some nights I was the last one awake. I couldn't sleep unless I knew Gloria was fed and her teeth were brushed. It was hard not to feel somewhat guilty for being older. My childhood was pretty much over while she was just halfway through. Even though she had her own room at that point, she slept in my bed with me on those nights. There were a lot of those nights.

I guess you could say my little sister and I have a mutualistic

relationship. I protected her from the reality of the situations we faced in a somewhat broken home, or at least, I tried to. She was the little remora under my broad fins—right by my side, along for the ride, my companion through it all. She was an amazing listener. I had this twenty-dollar ukulele that always sounded awful no matter how many times I tuned it, but I spent a lot of time during those years writing songs with it. I'd write about our mom, our dad, our lives—and she'd always listen. She told me what I needed to hear. "You're so talented, Laura," she'd say. "I want to be just like you."

Despite their strong and dominating presence in the ocean, manta rays have a weakness. They can't stop moving. Not because they have an abundance of energy or need to travel from place to place in a certain matter of time, but because they will quite literally die if they don't. Due to the position of their gills on their body, when a ray stops swimming, the trajectory of the water flow changes and fails to fill them with enough oxygen ("Why Manta"). In other words, a manta ray cannot breathe as long as it stays still. I hate to add another Finding Nemo reference in this essay, but as Dory says, manta rays "just keep swimming."

It's bizarre to think that one could spend their entire life in continuous movement. The manta ray doesn't swim constantly—sometimes it glides slowly, sometimes it just rides the current. I'm sure the state of perpetual motion doesn't bother the manta ray, as it's been living this way for its entire life and wouldn't know any difference. Plus, they're built to be this way, so that's got to mean something. I still wonder, though, if they ever wish they could stop for a minute.

I was diagnosed with anxiety during my first semester at real college. I say real college because I spent my upperclassmen high school years taking running start classes online and graduated with my Associate's degree in 2022. When I first

arrived at Gonzaga last fall, I had never been so excited for my life to take off. Socially drained from the ramifications of COVID, I was more than ready to meet new people and experience new things.

Like most things I get excited about in my life, it stooped below my expectations. I had escaped the iron bars of high school but my social skills still sucked and I didn't know what the hell I was doing. I thought it would be easy, considering that we first-years were all in the same boat of being new and intimidated, but I spent those first couple of weeks devastated thinking there was something wrong with me because I went to the dining hall alone, surrounded by friend groups that seemed to appear out of nowhere.

I spent a lot of time on the phone with my parents and my long-distance girlfriend who no one knew about at the time as I was still in the closet. She was going to school in Chicago and was in a different time zone. They all reassured me that it would get better eventually and that I just needed to stick through it. I really tried to believe them. I don't want to get into the details of what caused my anxiety because doing so would take pages upon pages, but to keep things short, it got to the point where I had no choice but to come home. I withdrew right after midterms and began intensive therapy.

Never before in my life had I experienced panic attacks. The closest thing to anxiety that I knew was stage fright before a class presentation or the pit in your stomach that you get when you're caught doing something you know you shouldn't be doing. For about two months straight, I couldn't not panic unless I was distracting myself with something.

Upon my request, my dad took me to Joann Fabrics and bought me a beginner's crocheting kit that changed my life. I probably spent six hours a day sitting on the couch, bouncing both heels up and down while moving that hook in and out of yarn. It was simple, but it worked. Not much later after that, my girlfriend took me to Guitar Center where I fulfilled my

childhood dream of buying my own guitar. She taught me a couple of chords and the rest was history.

When I came back to Gonzaga in the spring of this year, my crochet hook and guitar were my sword and shield. As soon as the feeling of panic began to rise, I'd grab whatever one was closest to me and move my hands in whichever rhythm was needed, and soon enough, I'd forget about everything. Now, I can stop for a minute and take a deep breath when I need one, but there was a time in my life when stopping meant death. Stopping meant thinking too much about what my body was feeling, becoming so overwhelmed by the concepts of emotion and life that I couldn't breathe.

There have been times in my life when I was the manta ray. I've allowed my size to intimidate others, I've used my wings to shelter those in need, and I've kept moving to stay alive. Now and then, moments arise where I become one again, and it reminds me of the times when it consumed me so deeply. Sometimes the manta ray swims, sometimes it glides, sometimes it just rides the current. Different parts of life expect different things from us. Sometimes I swim, sometimes I glide, sometimes I just ride the current.

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Forgiveness in the Back of a Grocery Store

Micayla Herrmann

prelude:

it's fall again,
and i want to decay in the branches of the tree in my childhood home;
to find your hands again under the blue-light aisles of the grocery store.

and i am not drowning,
but if i was,
 i would find the surface i was reaching for
 to look too much like your name.

i want to ask if you reach for damaged fruit.
whether you love out of a sense of obligation;
 if you found love in the marrow of your bones,
 if you learned how to split them open.

i. i am eight shots into a bad decision when i think of your face.

i read that wanting burns you up from the inside out.
 if that's true,
 then i'm a construct of flames;
 if that's true,
 the first thing you did with these hands was light them.

you are the first person who told me you would pick up the phone,
and you are the only person i am begging her not to call.

i am a disappointment in the shape of a daughter,

and i open this hole of a mouth to whisper something
that sounds like your name;
but you can't hear it behind the row of secrets tucked
behind my tongue,
 and you can't hear it over the gap between
the words pressed in the back of my throat

(what is home,
if not the first thing you learn to run from?)

ii.

 i'm trying to find forgiveness next to the dairy section,
or lost between the rows of cleaning supplies.

i'm trying to find your love pressed against rotten fruit in the same
way your hands are pressed against this sickle of a heart;
 in the same way i learned that you gave me life,
 in the same way i fear you more than losing it.

i am waking up in the hospital,
three thousand miles away from you.

 the nurse tells me that loving me is your job.
 i am asking her if she would choose this:

i am asking if she thinks loving me is your duty or if loving me is
your choice;
 (i am asking her if she would want this)

you told me i could call you before i fixed everything.
i told you the only love i know is shaped like a driver's hand on the
passenger seat,
 and i do not know how to ask for comfort;

when you hold a stigmata of every hole in my heart
on your hands.

a lost son is called *prodigal*
a lost daughter is just called lost.

Two nuns get their ears pierced

Gia Hanselman

O my lord,
give strength to our holiest of holy brothers
to accept and learn to love
the silver splinter of sin
that hangs off my sister
and my own personal lobes.
For we hold harmony
in our heads rather than our hearts
and the sparkle that punctured a place permanently
can only be seen from below ground.
I turn to thee, my lord, and ask for guidance
for these are not sin,
nor lie, nor blasphemy.
They are mine and my sister's
little act of communion.
My ear, and her sewing needle.
You lie in the water that cleanses,
swells around me.
You lie in the blood and
you shine in my hoops
when it's sunny outside.
How can these priests,
hiding secrets in psalms,
declare us heretics?
The Claire's employee who sold me my earrings
told me I looked good.
I believe her.

The Tale of Solomon and the Ants: An Allegory

Antonio Campos

Many centuries ago, as our scriptures do tell,
Solomon, David's son, was king of Israel.

About his waist, he wore a mantle of diaphanous silk,
That could ferry him above his 'land of honey and milk.'
Like a flying carpet, he could ride this mantle with ease,
And command zephyrs to comport him wherever he pleased.

This mantle, being five miles long and five miles wide,
Allowed his entire court to float at his side.
And speaking with pride, the king puffed out his chest,
"Behold, I am Solomon! The best and most blest!"

But just as Solomon spoke, the wind ceased to blow,
And the mighty King of Israel was made to sink low.
"Return to me winds!" He cried with fuss and with fury,
"Return to me now; I command you to hurry!"
But the winds spurned the king, and dropped him without care,
Into a hellish valley, deserted and bare.

Nothing lived in this valley, save an army of ants,
And their queen recognized mighty Solomon with a glance.
She warned, "Lo, it is Solomon, the sinful King of the Jews,
"Make for your holes, my subjects! There is no time to lose!"

But Solomon snatched the ant-queen in his hand,
And, screaming in anger, made this demand:
"Who are you, tiny ant, to say I have sinned?"

"I am Solomon the wise, the greatest of men!"

He wished to throw down the ant-queen or crush her with ease,
But, she forced him to listen, and said, "Spare me, please,
"For, Solomon the Great, you know that I have not lied—
"There is no doubt in your heart that your sin is your pride."

And Solomon the Mighty, that giant among men,
Felt as small as the ant in that moment. And then—
Beginning to see the fault of his ambitious ways,
He begged for forgiveness and offered up praise,
For the tiniest ant who had taught the great king,
That arrogance is a sin and pride a foolish failing.

For his hubris, Solomon's penance was to venture,
To a far-away land where he must serve an indenture,
To beg for his food, and work as hard as a slave,
Until he learned the gift of humility that the ant gave.

Now, it was this same Solomon, I know you have heard,
Who built a great temple, commanding genies by word,
He had a magic ring and a staff of great strength,
And he erected his structure twenty-five thousand cubits in length.

He was a mighty man, and he became a mighty king,
His fist was like thunder, his wit like lightning.
Yet, for a lack of modesty, he once suffered that ignominious fall,
And if it happened to him, it could happen to us all.

The Weathered Throne

Patrick Janicek

Artist Description

On the dimly lit patio, an old chair stands in the embrace of shadows, its well-worn wooden frame revealing the passage of time in every delicate contour. The play of light and darkness accentuates the chair's weathered beauty, as if it holds the secrets of generations within its silent, timeless presence.



Dust to Dust

Malia Starita

"This is substance."
I say,
with my hands
buried in the earth
my wrists
crowned in briars
earthworms ringed 'round
my fingers
like precious jewels
reminders of
A Beginning
and An End
as I claw forth
in search of the heartbeat
the ancient pulse
that drives my hunger
to be closer
to be whole.

Carte Blanche

Kaelyn New

**2024 Michael and Gail Gurian Writing Award Recipient
Fiction, First Place**

"In my dream last night," Maria said, pausing to chew her breakfast, "you turned into a wallflower." The kitchen table wobbled for a moment, one of its legs propped up by a book.

"Hmm?" Richard mumbled, not lifting his gaze from the scribbled research in front of him.

"A wallflower," she repeated. "We were eating dinner here, and you just stuck your feet in the ground and grew into a wallflower."

"Huh," he said. "What do you think it means?"

"I don't know." Maria couldn't shake the feeling, though. She wanted a divorce.

~

She met Richard a decade prior, right before the markets and buildings collapsed. She was a part-time florist then, using flowers to fund her tuition, and what she liked most about him was how different he was from her. He was a tad older, engaged, and well-lived; she could tell by the torn edges of his leathery face and the ring on his finger and the swing in his step. Each time he stopped by Miss Perry's Plants, Maria felt like she could pick up pieces of him.

"My fiancé wanted them to be scarlet," he had said upon his first visit, a bundle of begonias under his arm, "like the old Grateful Dead song." Maria didn't get the reference.

"Most begonias are pink," she told him.

"Hmm," he contemplated. "Is there a flower that could

save us?"

Maria didn't seem to hear him. "I'm sorry?"

"Sorry." He paused. "A flower that screams I love you no matter what?"

"Wallflowers, probably," she returned, "but they're not in season." Richard asked where she learned the language of flowers and she told him from one of the few books she still had. He bought the pink begonias, adjusted the ring on his left hand so that Maria would see, and swung the shop's metal door closed behind him.

~

Maria liked making dead things look alive: making a bundle of snipped flowers retain their color, making the windowless apartment feel sunny by adding a lamp, making Richard believe that her love for him was breathing.

Richard left Shannon (the forlorn fiancé) after the affair. It was a whirlwind, and Maria couldn't pinpoint when it had even begun. He stopped by the shop every week to bag a bundle of bouquets with his loose change. At first, Maria thought he was trying to find the perfect flower for another woman. But soon, it became clear that the midday escapes to Miss Perry's and conversations across the counter were efforts to find something else.

"And what would your wife think about this?" Maria interrupted him after he asked her to get coffee.

"Fiancé," Richard corrected her.

"Fiancé, my bad." Maria smirked. "What would your fiancé think of this?"

Richard sighed and rubbed his forehead. "I think we both need a fresh start."

"So, you're splitting up?"

"Sure, eventually," he said. "The hardest part is leaving." Until then—until he could be callous enough to break Shannon apart in his hands—they would have to remain friends. Before he strode out of the shop, he dropped a flower at Maria's feet.

They became Very Good Friends. He walked her back to her dorm after her shifts and cracked open jokes like rusted cans of booze; they laughed about his age—he was six years her senior—and relished in the oddity of it all. Because they were Very Good Friends. The kind that could hold an embrace longer than they should've. The kind that could pull buttons off blouses in a public restroom and spend hours talking on a fire escape.

Finally, when Richard decided that the twenty-one-year-old florist had thoroughly driven him mad, he told Shannon. In telling Maria the saga of events, Richard said Shannon screamed and cried and threw things and apologized before rescinding her apologies.

~

Miss Perry's closed for good not long after Maria fell in love and Richard's engagement fell apart. "No one needs flowers anymore," the shop owners lamented. Maria handed over the shop keys.

She dropped out of college once the funds ran dry and dumped the farmer's almanacs, plant books, and hourly pay onto the street, opting to train as a mortician instead. She left the crammed Manhattan dorm that she shared with five other people, packing a singular suitcase and from there, she and Richard moved into a shoebox wedged between the corners of poverty. Even their combined salary, in all its five-figure-glory, couldn't afford them windows.

Richard was a Ph.D. student and he made so many promises. "Once I become a professor," he had told Maria after lugging his boxes of belongings up six flights of stairs, "we will be so rich." Maria stepped onto his boots in the bare apartment and kissed him like she meant it.

She regularly found him asleep at the dinner table—the splintering, wooden thing they had swiped from the middle of Orange Street—his face submerged in Kant or Camus or Hegel. Maria thought it was curious how many books Richard

kept; he collected them long after the bookshops closed. She advised him to give in and just buy the digitals (it was cheaper, anyway), but Richard insisted that he would rather be caught dead than reading from a screen.

"Sartre, on the other hand," he told Maria over dinner one night, shuffling through his research, "he argues that essence comes into being from our experience in life. We have total freedom, and we live in anguish because of that since we are responsible for everything."

"Like *carte blanche*?" Maria asked. "A blank slate, we can do whatever we want?"

Richard paused only for a moment. "No, not exactly," he said. "We exist as ourselves. We are responsible for the choices we make tracing all the way back."

Maria shook her head. "I don't get it." She didn't understand many of the things he said.

Maria thought Richard contemplated death more than she did. When she prodded at the corpses in St. Paul's Funeral Home, she mostly thought about life. She smeared pale, glaucous faces with makeup and positioned dead curls to fall on dead shoulders, but afterward, on the subway back to Brooklyn, she would imagine the corpses shuddering with breath. She imagined how they looked as children—scraping their knees on sycamore branches and the way their mothers etched their heights into the wooden doorframe. And by the time she arrived home each night, the bloated carcasses and bitter aroma was blotted from her mind entirely.

~

He never stopped biting his fingers, chipping them away to the bones. He called it a nervous tick, and Maria noticed it only after they married. He took hour-long showers to "decompress" after a long day without any regard for the water bill, for the financial crisis, for the paint that would peel off the walls in the steamed bathroom. He drank five cups of coffee a day to stay awake; the jitters and palpitations were the tolerable side

effects. "Once I'm a professor, it will all be better," Richard consoled her after she voiced her annoyance and concern. But he never stopped, and he never became a professor in the years that they shared.

She loved him, though. She thought she would forever. He cooked dinner every night while she cleaned. He helped her hang makeshift abstract art that she had splattered onto stolen canvases. "Just like Kandinsky," he said as he pinned Maria's blotches of blue, purple and black circles onto the wall. "They'll think we're rich with paintings like this."

He held her in her sleep, and she would dream about running away to Iceland or Sweden or Italy. "They still have bookstores in Sweden. You'd be so much happier," Maria told him about her musings in the morning. "We'd make better money, too."

"If I can't find work once I finish my dissertation, we should look into it," Richard said. But they never looked into it. In fact, they never really spoke of it again. They stayed stagnant and when the landlord raised the rent two-fold, Richard began teaching high schoolers history through a screen. It paid less than an in-person teaching job, but there were scarcely any of those left.

~

After she woke up from that dream, she couldn't help but feel suffocated by it all. Windowless walls. Embalming fluid. Unwavering adoration. She watched Richard's wallflower feet contort into mangled tendrils and plant themselves into her life forever. Maria asked for a divorce that night after googling "how to know if you've fallen out of love." Google said that indifference was a key indicator of something dead.

"What?" He was stunned.

"I think I want a divorce," she said again. At thirty-one, she still found trouble asserting herself.

"I don't understand." He was silent for another minute. "Please, we've been so happy." And for the first time in her

adult life, Maria watched a grown man cry. Really cry. A sob that wasn't stifled in the slightest. He burrowed his head into the crook of her neck and pulled at her shirt. "Please, Maria. Please, please, please. We can work this out. Please."

Maria cried and apologized before crying some more. What else could she do other than be sorry? "I am sorry," she whispered. "I am sorry, I am sorry, I am sorry."

But she wanted a divorce. Not because Richard would raise his voice and slam the doors—he was exceedingly gentle. Not because Richard was indifferent—he was nothing if not wholly in love with her. She just woke up that morning and decided she wanted one.

~

She couldn't help but notice the gray that salted his hair; it was new. The smile lines lingered on his face, too, splitting his complexion into quarters. But he wasn't smiling. And his eyes were sad. Maria packed a singular suitcase of her belongings and lugged it onto the street. She left the paintings and the table and the corner lamp. It wasn't so much a mercy as it was a painful reminder for Richard, but her arms could only carry so much.

"Be safe," he said, pressing his lips to the top of her head. "And let me know if you change your mind." Maria slid the ring off her finger, pushing it into his coat pocket. And there, with the suitcase at her feet—the same suitcase she had dragged from her college dorm—she tossed what was left of the love over her shoulder and left.

As she stumbled onto a bus with no destination in mind, Maria thought she might move to Positano and fall in love with a burly woman or a stocky man—someone who would spit bits of salted apricot into her mouth and caress her back on the sand. But the borders were closed, and she had scarcely enough income to feed herself, much less move across the world. Eventually, she moved to New Jersey after Atlantic City partially dissolved into the ocean. The rent was cheaper for

obvious reasons. She quit dressing up dead bodies once the corpses piled too high, opting to market herself as an interior designer instead. It was more lucrative than she could have expected; everyone worked from home. She whittled her dark hair off just above her ears, settled into a bedroom on the first floor of an apartment complex, and felt entirely new.

~

Aaron Lewis was something of a scientist, and what Maria liked most about him was how different he was from her. He was simple and easy and stable. And he was a scientist, but not the kind that toiled away in a lab all day. He worked on data, planting little numbers and figures into an algorithm to enhance automated answers. He didn't need to ask the big questions about life, nor did he care to.

Maria met him on a dating app nearly a year after moving. "Maria?" he asked, approaching her outside the restaurant. The night air was thick with fog or fumes or smoke; Maria swore she could taste chemicals in her mouth.

They exchanged formalities over dinner. "When I was in college, there wasn't anything like that," Maria said after he introduced his work.

"It really just means there's unlimited opportunities," he said to her. "Realistically, we can solve any world issue we want just by typing a question into an algorithm."

"You're making me seem so old," Maria laughed. He laughed too.

"Well, it really is the future," he said. "We don't need to do the hard lifting anymore. We can let the intelligence do it for us."

"Then who makes the money?" she asked him.

"The people who ask the right questions, I guess." Aaron was rich. Proper rich. Enough to own a penthouse at twenty-six rich.

~

Maria began making money of her own once she fell into

Aaron. She went to businessmen's houses and recommended designer corner couches and artisan decor. A painting here to brighten the wall, a sculpture there to draw attention. She took up cooking in her spare time, slathering dead meat with spices and sauces. Aaron said everything of hers was the best he ever tasted. And she called it love, though she began to forget if she had ever really known what love felt like.

"We should wait and see if New Jersey falls into the ocean first," Aaron said when Maria asked if he wanted kids. He rubbed the stockings on her legs. They had just returned from a party in the tallest building Maria reckoned she had ever seen.

"That's true," Maria giggled. "Imagine I'm giving birth and then the state just drowns. And anyway, I don't even know that I want kids."

"Huh." Aaron pawed at her skirt. "Really?"

"I don't know. It'd be kind of sad to grow up inside, don't you think?"

Aaron smiled. "I want whatever you want," he said. At this, he planted his lips on hers, sinking his tongue into her mouth.

In most of Maria's dreams, she was in Tokyo, picking apart cherry blossoms and counting the petals. She would spit cherry pits into the soil and lay on the ground until the tree grew straight through her. When the fruit fell to the ground in the spring, people swarmed to pick up the pieces of her and plant her somewhere else.

Maria noticed that Aaron lay stiff in his sleep. He also snored so loud it rocked the building's foundation. In the morning, Maria would have to shake him awake since the blaring alarms were far too quiet. When he was in a rush to get to work, which was most days, he would forget to brush his teeth, and he only partially closed the cabinets; Maria tripped over them on her way to the kitchen.

"I'll be able to take some time off soon," he told her. "We could vacation somewhere inland. Denver, maybe."

"I would like that," she said. He cradled the palms of her

cheeks in his hands. His work days grew longer, and he never brought up Denver again.

~

I know it has been years, the email read, but I wanted you to know. The email was from a name that was all too familiar, but the address was professional. Richard had become a professor after all, teaching introductory material to undergraduates in Syracuse—one of the last places with in-person lectures. Richard also had cancer. Kidney cancer, he wrote. And I am not asking for your pity. Maria pitied him anyway.

The train ride to Syracuse was well over ten hours given the multiple stops along the way. Maria stacked her suitcase on the luggage rack and settled into the seat with the biggest window. Aaron didn't understand.

"Please," he begged her before she left for the station. "You're the one who knows me best." The routine was familiar for Maria. She cradled his head and stroked the dirty blond strands sprouting from his scalp.

"I am sorry," she whispered. "I am sorry, I am sorry, I am sorry." She picked at the ends of her hair which had grown long and curly. She picked apart the relationship and her incessant cruelty rooted in indifference.

When she arrived in Syracuse, she pulled up the address that Richard sent her on her phone and ordered a driverless car. His estate was quaint and small, parked right outside of the city. He lived alone and because he lived alone, there was no effort taken to impress. The yard was gray, and the house's paint had fallen onto the concrete below.

"Maria." Richard opened the door when she knocked.

"Hi, Richard." She embraced him for the first time in four years and felt the same callused fingers slide across her back. He welcomed her in, and they sat on the same sofa that she had saved from the garbage and crammed into the old shoebox apartment.

"Do you want some coffee?" he asked.

"No, no," she smiled. "That was always your thing." He huffed a small chuckle.

"I know I don't look great," he said. Correct, Maria thought. His head was entirely barren, and his skin was snug to the bones. "The doctors think I will be alright, though."

Maria sighed in relief. "That's so good to hear!"

Richard said that he was on the tenure-track, but still didn't think he could pay off the cancer treatments. "I guess I failed to consider that they aren't even paying professors anymore." Richard smiled to himself. "But I'll figure it out somehow."

Maria told him that she had been rich with Aaron, that she left him alone on the steps outside of their building, that she still had dreams about being somewhere else.

"Do you remember when I first saw you?" he asked her. "You were in that little apron behind the counter, and I was picking up..." his voice trailed off.

"Begonias," she laughed. "Of course I remember."

And there, while the pair conversed in the dimly lit living room with one window and pale dancing sunbeams, Maria thought she could love him again. She thought that she could listen to his ramblings about dead men and learn to appreciate the way that he stuck to her like tape in his sleep. She thought she could let him do the cooking and she could go back to school and become someone else again. Richard fiddled with a book in his lap while she spoke.

Then she remembered the long showers; she looked at the bite marks on his fingertips; she heard the coffee pot boiling in the kitchen.

"Do you remember what I was telling you the morning I asked to split?" she asked him.

"No," he said.

"My dream about the wallflower?" Richard shook his head.

She could see it still—the way his feet warped into roots and planted into her. For a passing moment, Maria thought she could love him again, but in the next, she was entirely unsure.

For Nina

Zoe Schinko

Dear Nina,

I'd like to begin this with an apology. I'm sitting here writing this to you on the plane, in the aisle with my elbow brushing the stranger sitting to my right. There is a child behind me kicking the back of my seat, and every hint of turbulence is threatening the ginger ale on my tray table to spill all over my white blouse. Two meters away stands a flight attendant, her glasses fogging up from the steam of coffee she pours, wisps of hair framing her face. As she leans over handing a cup to a passenger, her teeth gleam like the engagement ring on her finger, and I wonder whether her smile is cordial or genuine. Whether she gives smiles like greeting cards; the same way you do. Whether joy is something that lasts. I'm writing this because all I want is for you to be happy.

...

We had spent the last day of August sitting at the edge of the playground, you in my lap; my mini me. Despite the shade from the oak trees, the heat was sweltering, and I could feel sweat running slick down my back. The summer had blurred into days marked by sunscreen lathered skin and iced glasses of lemonade that we held to our cheeks. The sun splayed its fingers across your face like freckles as I pressed my face to your dark curls and breathed. Your hair smelled like soap and Play-Doh.

To our right, a little boy was sitting on the swing, his feet trailing the woodchip-covered ground as he watched us. He had cheeks that old women liked to pinch, rosy red apple buds that flushed in the summer sun. His overalls were covered in grass stains and a streak of dirt marred his nose. For some reason, five year olds always looked sticky.

"Timmy," a kid shouted. I could feel the boy staring at you, his little hand gripping the chain of the swing. But Nina, you paid him no mind, head tilted back and lips parted, your eyes forever roaming an unmarked sky.

That evening I attempted to make gazpacho. The small radio next to the kitchen sink was turned to a Latin music station Mama likes, full of hip-swinging rhythms and a beat that invited you to dance. Licking a spoon, I cracked open the windows hoping for a cool breeze to enter the apartment. Below, the street lay in darkness, illuminated by a single flickering street lamp. Leaning my elbows against the windowsill, I watched as a tabby cat slinked into the alley across the street and wondered if it could hear your shrieks tumbling out the window.

Every night, you would rest your forehead against the wooden dining table and scream until a red flush had crept up the side of your neck. Tears streamed down your face, mixing with snot and sweat. It echoed like all the words you had thought to say but couldn't.

Mama was sitting at the dining table beside you, head in her hands, her patience as delicate as trapping wire — feeble and quick to break. Curls spilled over her shoulders, held together loosely by a flowered head scarf. People always say I look like our mama, Nina. The same wild brown curls, the same dust of freckles. But in reality, I think she's more like you.

"Ya basta," Mama tried to push the spoon full of carne asada past your lips and your screams grew louder.

"Dios mío, hija, what do you want?"

It sounded like she was scolding you Nina, but in reality, she was begging.

...

At college I am a different person. I drink coffee as if it were water and sleep is only a suggestion. I don't know whether my degree in English will bring anything other than an early carpal tunnel and an extensive knowledge of Emily Dickinson. But I love it Nina, I really do. The way I am more eloquent on paper than in person. And if you can't talk then I will.

The day I met Isaac was the first day of September at my friend Mara's party. He had dimples that marred his cheeks and a face that was always one second away from smiling. I could tell that he had been drinking by the way he leaned closer.

"You," he nudged my arm with the top of his beer bottle, "need to lighten up." My back was to the speakers — the shake of every beat licking down my spine, my fingers wrapped around a red solo cup.

"What?" I can feel the alcohol in my legs and it's making me feel wobbly.

"You look like someone is forcing you to be here."

He smiled, his finger wrapping around my belt loop pulling me with him towards the dance floor. I can feel a flutter in my stomach and maybe I won't think too much. Maybe this could be easy. And I'm selfish Nina, because I want and want and want. I want so much, I deserve to be deprived.

...

Do you remember that day at the grocery store? It was over Thanksgiving break and Mama had asked us to stop by the shop on the corner of Ashbury lane. As I had emptied our groceries on the frayed conveyor belt, I assessed our purchases. It was

an odd assortment that consisted of Tide Pods, skim milk, and animal crackers. The essentials.

Two ladies were sitting at the cash register. One had bright green hair, her face bored as she typed in the registry number of our Tide Pods on the computer beside her. The other was sitting on a stool farther back, her legs crossed, reading the latest issue of InStyle.

As she closed the register the lady with green hair glanced down at Nina. "That poor retarded child," she tutted, shaking her head as she handed me the bag of groceries. At the sound, her friend looked up from her magazine and down at Nina in her wheelchair, nodding sagely. "And she would be so pretty too."

I falter as I take the grocery bag, the plastic handle digging into the flesh of my palm.

I click your seatbelt into place and I sit in the front seat breathing heavily because they don't deserve to know you, Nina. You don't deserve this.

...

The first time a boy told me I was beautiful I stared at him until he started to back away.

No relationship I've had has lasted longer than two weeks and I don't know whether or not the problem lies with me. I don't know how to flirt, and I blush whenever someone looks my way. Yet Isaac didn't seem to notice. It had begun with him standing outside of the door, waiting for my class to end, and was followed by late nights with his shoe brushing mine underneath a table in the library. Isaac had placed himself into my life the way a comma nestles itself into a sentence. My coat had begun to carry traces of his cologne. His black sneakers had found a permanent spot besides my door.

Isaac, whose hair I cut with safety scissors in my kitchen

because he wouldn't shut up about needing a trim.

The boy who kissed me after a late night of cramming for finals and surviving on ramen noodles. I had driven him home and we had already parked in front of his house but I was still ranting about something stupid, my hand slapping the steering wheel. "Elise," he interrupted and as he took the collar of my corduroy coat, he pulled me closer until I was leaning across the console, and gently pressed his lips to mine.

Isaac, the boy who believed I thought too much and dreamed too little.

The boy I never told you about. But I wonder, Nina, if you had known. Those nights where we FaceTimed, I wonder if you knew that there was another person out of sight, sitting beside me on the bed. Whether you could see it in my eyes, how people can catch our attention and draw us in, shift our direction of sail. Whether you suspected that I was drifting away from you.

Like you, when Isaac's mad he screams. He claws at his hair as if he wants to rip it from his scalp.

I was sitting on the counter with a bowl of fruit loops in my lap. Isaac was at the kitchen table, the light of his computer illuminating every angle of his face.

"You don't understand," he said, breathing heavily through his nose, "It isn't fucking working."

I sat the bowl down beside me.

"I'll lose my scholarship, I'll have to go back to fucking Illinois in the—"

"Isaac," I reached for him, "Stop, stop, just stop."

"You don't get it do you?" He stood up and ran a hand through his hair. "You just don't get—"

"You don't know—" It happened so fast Nina. The ache in my cheek expanded, the silence swelling between us like a balloon. His hand was still raised, his chest rising and falling rapidly.

I turned my back to him, placing my bowl of froot loops in

the sink.

“I think you should go.”

Say something. Please, please just say something.

For the first time since I'd met him, Isaac said nothing. I stood completely still, staring at the sink until the sound of his receding footsteps faded.

I was alone again. My roommates weren't home yet, but I didn't really want to talk to them anyway. I just wanted to go. So I grabbed the car keys by the side door and left. I didn't take my coat, the snow crunching under my boots as I hurried to my car, using the sleeve of my sweater to wipe away the frost that had settled on the dashboard.

And I drove and drove and drove. I drove until I was low on gas and my fingers were cramped around the wheel. I hadn't bothered to turn on the heater, and I could see the fog of my breath haunting the air.

By the time I stopped, it was so cold my toes and the sting in my cheek had grown numb. You could see all of Spokane: brick folding into brick, smoke curling around chimneys, neon lights blazing amongst the snow.

...

It's finally winter again. I got back on a Tuesday night and as I stood in the doorway, setting down my suitcase, I took in the apartment: the light yellow walls, the kitchen cabinets that will forever smell like coffee grinds, your red ballerinas that are still placed carefully beside the door. Everything is still the same. I've come home and I'm every version of myself that you remember.

I am sitting on the couch, with my feet tucked under me, absentmindedly picking at a loose thread on a cushion. On the small side table the radio is playing Johnny Cash. You're sitting on the floor, shoulders arching forward and back like the wings of a butterfly. Swaying, shaking, a palm pressed

against the floor as if you're trying to steady the ground. Your other hand is wrapped around a white serviette as you mimic wiping the floor, looking up at me in mock exasperation every ten minutes. You can spend hours pretending to clean other people's messes.

With a lack of ease, I lift you, wrapping my arms around your delicate frame, until we are nose to nose. At the age of five, your limbs have slowly become more slender. Your feet are dangling, and it hits me that these are no longer the legs of a child but those of a girl.

We sway and your eyes lighten up in recognition as Johnny Cash sweeps into the chorus. We sway, left to right, every beat directing our movements. You wrap the serviette around my head, giggling as the cloth covers my eyes.

“Am I a ghost Nina?”

I wrap my arms tighter around you and your nod dissolves into a crow of laughter as we spin and spin. I sometimes feel like I'm a ghost to myself, Nina. But I know I'm nothing but present to you.

We are twirling and my hair is in my face and my nose is pressed to yours. But I guess that's joy, isn't it? It flickers unbound like the candles we light in the heart of December.

A gleeful shriek and we spin and spin and the skirt of my dress balloons out.

The song fades out, yet still we dance.

Lake Arthur and Anamnesis

Tara Hollander

I.

They are lovers.
What else is there
but deciding it is so?
Shall I say it aloud,
will rhyme suffice to uncloud,
 must a meter of alliteration mark the
 match?

What is more suitable
than the mind?
I think
and it is so.

I think
they are not twinned
but Branta balance.
A watchtower for the yard,
a moon for the rippling night.

A strain of the same,
Grace and Gratitude,
who is the humble servant?

II.

I'll miss them
I wonder if they'll miss me.
Neither of us will quell with the others
existence for much after
parting—but,
perhaps, if I return,
Tomorrow and the next,
I may break both our hearts.

I'll watch time undo doubt,
watch the tensions ease
and tethers tighten.
Webbed.

I'll watch the fade of fall,
fledged,
and carve a cavity of absence.
For some mystical reason
or metaphysical manifestation of
memory I'll miss you.

I'll miss the slope of your neck
tucked in,
a caress others neglected to notice.
I'll miss the brown of your
eyes
only visible in intimate locality,
a hue reserved.
I'll miss the summer days,
the idleness that had a place
and held your name.

I'll remember the way it was,
lose the thought,
and wait for spring.

III.

I'll see lovers
on the roads that I walk
With the warm hand
I hold.

Call it Self-Sufficiency

Kaelyn New

I tore my chest open, and the sawbones prescribed a psychic
To mend the emptiness between my ribs,
Broken arteries that breached my skin,
The blood clots rooted in my own indifference.
I could only shrug and say, "I can't feel the pain."

She asked if I was sorry for breaking that boy's heart.
She asked if I had called my parents at all.

Tactile

Sage Steele



Artist Description

Nature is full of unique textures. Tactile is an exploration of this phenomenon, recognizing trees as canvases that tell stories of weathering, growth, and resilience. Captivated by the interplay of light and shadow on the bark's rugged terrain, I strive to convey the essence of its organic journey. Textures, whether rough and coarse or smooth and delicate, invite viewers to connect with nature. This close-up of a tree is an opportunity for an imagined material experience with a two-dimensional object. When looking at this image, I hope one can know what it is to reach out and feel their skin against the bark.

Swimming with Salmon

Olivia Hinds

I am submerged in the South Fork of the Salmon River, near McCall, Idaho alongside four other Homo sapiens. My body is decked out in a full 7 mm neoprene wetsuit with gloves on my hands, booties on my feet, and a snorkel mask fitted with a J snorkel mouthpiece. This gear is enhanced with elbow pads to prevent the holes in my wetsuit from allowing the cold water to seep the heat from my cells. As I crawl up the river, fighting tooth and nail against the powerful current, using every calorie of energy I have to struggle against the water, I realize how strong and impressive the salmon are that travel here. I'm experiencing a small transect of the journey that the fish have traveled for months in order to return to the exact spot that they spawned years before. They're using the Earth's magnetic field as a guide to orient themselves, returning to the same patch of gravel they were laid in as an egg within a nest or redd. They were deposited there by their mothers, who died upon completing this task, sacrificing their own bodies for their offspring's survival. They have not eaten since venturing from the ocean full of food to freshwater. They have no interest in it. Their only goal is to mate and die, giving back to their species and many more as the nutrients of their bodies feed the river and the forest.

As I slowly lug my body through the water, gripping wet rocks to keep from getting pulled downriver, I discover myself in a large emerald-blue pool. It is about twenty feet deep, and I see dark shapes starting to materialize around me. They shoot from above and below, zipping around all sides, appear-

ing about a third larger from below water through a mask than they would from above. Some of these fish are over 40 inches long, only a few feet shorter than myself. I am effectively surrounded and overwhelmed by the amount of movement occurring around me, especially in the dark below. The glinting scales which dart in the cold darkness illustrate a wild ruggedness. I'm in their primal home, closer than ever to their birthplace, with a simultaneous feeling of awe and terror building in my stomach. Their iridescent forms circumscribing my own just inches away with such calculated precision causes me to wonder if my presence is just another hurdle in their way.

In my summer as a biological aide, I have never seen such an abundance of massive fish. There are no hatchery-bred hogs here. We are upriver of the weir that traps and prevents the hatchery fish from finishing their journey in the running water, resulting in only wild chinook salmon (*Oncorhynchus tshawytscha*) around me. There are at least 14 surrounding me, representing an incredibly endangered species of fish that used to live in abundance and in respectful reciprocity with the native peoples here. The Nez Perce still hold oral stories of historical salmon runs in this river that held so many fish that the swells caused by their fins made the water look like it was flowing upriver in the way I was trying to move now. Diving down, I encounter more fish with one resting in the eddy of a rock, its dorsal fin moving slowly back and forth. It stays still, allowing me to observe it from above. We see each other. It is stunning, glistening with shimmer and silver. I am struggling against the forces of nature, endeavoring to stay in a fixed spot to observe such a magnificent fish, getting swept down river as the current violently circulates downstream and having to fight to retrace my steps.

As the aquatic creatures dart past, I can see the scars on their bodies, telling of the difficulties they faced to get here: sea lions, nets, anglers and hooks. The stories of their struggles are laid out on their bodies, but I could only describe what I am

witnessing in what the Japanese aesthetic would call wabi sabi, seeing beauty in imperfection. We constantly hear about the fishes' trials and tribulations, how we as humans have put so many barriers in their way: physical ones like dams and habitat loss, or environmental problems such as overconsumption and water pollution. In the modern day, we're told that it seems hopeless to be a salmon faced with countless obstacles, but little do we hear of their success stories. Today, I witnessed one such triumph. Me, a human, one of a race contributing to their demise, witnessing these indomitable fish's resilience as they go on to reproduce and continue their species' survival in spite of the harms they've faced in getting there.

As they passed downriver, my job was to identify them and measure their size with the length of my outstretched hands. But all I could do as they whipped around me in the center of a whirlpool was contemplate how incredible, fragile, and temporary life is. I'd been lucky to see some pretty exceptional things on this job: anglers acting as stewards by advocating for the health of the fish and water, Idaho giant salamanders moving effortlessly between slippery rocks, bull trout huddling in the shelves on the sides of streams, and lamprey miraculously surviving after reintroduction by the Nez Perce. I thought about how I appreciated my crew, the people I had become so connected to over the course of the summer. They always accompanied me in the water, experiencing the same wonders and difficulties. Together, we navigated through thick vegetation and bushwhacks, struggled with putting on soggy and smelly wetsuits, and faced the shock of submerging ourselves in 11-degree Celsius running stream water early in the morning.

I was enchanted by the sculpin I saw scurrying on the bottom of the river floor, the verdurous algae accumulating on top of rocks and feeding the insects of the river system, and the curious and bug-eyed juvenile chinook, lining the sides of the stream as small translucent fins brush against hundreds of oth-

ers in a vision of hope for their future. I cherished it so much, but with the passing of the summer and the transition of the salmon into decomposing bodies, it was gone.

A year after this experience, I stand now frequently on dry land, working in another piece of Idaho's wilderness. For 8 consecutive days at a time, I find myself immersed in the largest wilderness complex in the lower 48 states, spanning a total of 3.6 million acres. Today, I woke up at 3:45 a.m. in pitch darkness to start boiling water for my new crew. As I sit and reflect in my solitude, I can hear wolves howling in the distance. I face different difficulties this summer, from hiking 24 miles in a single day to navigating over 2,000 logs in another. I am lucky enough to touch trees, using the traditional hand tools of a crosscut saw and ax to clear logs out of trails, sheltering in 100-year-old pine smelling wood cabins, and roaming rugged areas and gorgeous ridgelines in the Selway-Bitterroot. After a long and sweaty day of manual labor, I crave the post-work hot afternoons for the time I get to be in the water. I sit beneath it for as long as my body can withstand, feeding flies to the trout circling around my feet, singing to myself, and contemplating how lovely it is to feel the H₂O molecules swirling on my skin.

I know that our time on this Earth is temporary. The only constant we can rely on is knowing that our lives will change, and it is vital to be present and carry experiences on with you as you complete your own journey. I am grateful for every moment out here on my personal journey, but I will never spend a day where I don't think about swimming with the salmon.

The Robin

Malia Starita

With dawning, citrus breast
the robin descends from a nearby pine,
his song bright with the season,
the tenor of his voice
splitting the frozen ground
for the buds buried below
and rousing the marmots
to shake the fat of winter
and partake in their seasonal mischief.
The forest takes note,
it is time - it breathes
beginning its rhythmic ritual.
There is much to do,
and so little time
but everyone plays a part.

My feet carry me across the grove,
as I purse my lips, eager to join the chorus.
But the Robin's gaze flits to meet mine.
Excuse me, he sings,
you enter stage left.

Ten Degrees of Separation

Miles Reitan

**2024 Michael and Gail Gurian Writing Award Recipient
Creative Non-Fiction, First Place**

1.

I never used to care how close my home was to Columbine High School. Its presence in my life was obvious, uninteresting, peripheral except for those few friends who went there. It wasn't until I moved far away that it became mine. I used it. I learned to map out my home relative to the landmark it provided, so that people who have not felt the sweaty teenage heat of the Columbine gymnasium or walked its fluorescent white halls, could nonetheless have somewhere to trace me back to—some tragedy by which to remember my name and face. Only with time and distance did it become relevant to the question 'Where are you from?'

2.

I am from Colorado. I am from the eastern edge of the mountains where they begin to flatten, first into foothills, and then into yellow grassland paved over by freeways. I am from Littleton. I am from early morning drives on I-70 West, stuck in mountain-bound traffic. I am from the suburbs. I am from the gold '03 Acura MDX that was my mom's and then my dad's and then my brother's and then mine, with its dents and torn-up seats and broken speedometer to show for its years and miles. I am from sunshine that glints off snow in December,

and bakes the dirt dry in June. I am 7,328 miles away from the place that I am from.

3.

I left my parents in Denver, outside of airport security. They both had tears in their eyes. I was a shell, empty of the muscles and tissue and feelings which I might normally call upon to either move or stay put. Instead, I was moved by a bustling crowd and the pitiless sense of airport urgency, which pushed me into a half-hug with mom, then dad, and pulled me down an escalator towards security and the other side of the world. By the time I looked back, they were already gone.

4.

Sitting on a shelf in the University of Auckland Library is a small white book with the words "The First Migration" stacked on its cover in simple black print. Its boring, academic outer layer conceals rich stories inside. It tells of ancient peoples, exiled from their homes and forced to head east into the empty and unforgiving expanse of ocean. The lucky ones paddled canoes. The unlucky swam alongside them until they either fell off the end of the world or landed on some haven, like the one where I now sit and write. Somehow, there was no mention of the pale American kid who, a few thousand years later, would sit comfortably in an airplane, thousands of miles above that cold killer of an ocean. Where they once stared at the horizon in the hopes of sighting land, I watched whatever I'd remembered to download off Netflix.

5.

I am loud, like an American. I speak only English, like an American. I listen to country music, like an American. I

am fascinated by rugby and bored senseless by soccer, like an American. I say soccer, like an American. My sentences fizzle into the soft static of vocal fry, like an American. I am not like other Americans, like an American. I refer to inches and miles and think 32 degrees means freezing, like an American. I had to fly here to be told what it means to be an American. I have been here only a few months and will not be staying much longer, like an American.

6.

In Auckland, the birdsongs seem loudest in the dark. Not only at night, when the whistles and the chirps bid me to sleep, but also in the shade of the surviving patches of forestland that dot even the heart of the city. In the shadows of strange, twisting, foreign trees and great palm fronds I find what feels like an older, more permanent Aotearoa that seeps through the cracks in the otherwise concrete city. It is in these shadows that I feel furthest from home. They are a welcome change from the grocery store aisles and the classrooms where I fall into a familiar world, made up of columns and grids and lines of people who might belong to anywhere at all. There, I might not know I was on another side of the world if not for the accented voices using interesting new words like 'muesli'.

7.

The only thing hanging in my bedroom in Auckland is a piece of lined notebook paper filled on both sides by neat handwriting. Somewhere back in the state of Washington, my girlfriend pulled out that piece of paper from a well-organized school binder, grabbed a pencil from her desk, wrote "Dear" at the top and "Love" at the bottom, and sent it on its way. It must have traveled at least 7,200 miles before I ever saw it. She put more of herself and more of her world into that letter

than could have fit into the two-by-four inch screen of my cell phone. It has been 107 days since we last saw each other in person. I have not written her back.

8.

Before coming to New Zealand, I rarely found myself in ocean water. Home is a highland desert, surrounded on four sides by a continent's worth of land. An hour's drive west has only ever taken me further into the high and dry peaks of the Rocky Mountains. Now, a similar drive in that same direction brings me to a sparkling black sand beach in Muriwai or Piha where I can spend a given weekend watching white-tipped waves crash in on themselves and wondering about the lives of tanned locals who walk easily, in and out of sight. By now, I have spent more time watching the waves of the Firth of Thames or the Tasman Sea than any that reach the shoreline of the United States. Sometimes, I try to understand this great sea in the smallest terms possible, as a collection of miniature water droplets. How many among them once fell, years or centuries ago, on the peaks of the Rocky Mountains? Which of them rushed down to the Colorado River and washed across the ocean only to meet me here?

9.

I still sometimes see this place as an outsider does. My tongue still stumbles clumsily, excitedly, over exotic pronunciations. Kia ora. Whanganui. Māori. Karangahake. Waitomo. Aotearoa. This world, which is so real and in front of me, can nonetheless take on the surreal tint of travel, as if it were a life-sized scale model on Google Maps. Whatever this adds to the excitement of my being here, it detracts from a simple, beautiful reality. New Zealand is real. Although I may not exist here in the solid, permanent way that I exist in

Colorado or the USA, New Zealand exists nonetheless.

10.

It cannot be collected. It is not a photograph or a list of crossed-off destinations that I can fold into my pocket and bring home. And yet I am faced now with the challenge of taking some part of it back with me. In memory, or else in the changes they have wrought in me, I will carry the waves, the palm fronds, the clean air, the grassy hills dotted with cows and sheep, the thick forests, the faces, the ferry rides, and the birdsongs back home so that they might meet me again in the place that I'm from.

Oregonian Soliloquy

Mazie McNamara

**2024 Michael and Gail Gurian Writing Award Recipient
Poetry, Second Place**

I've dabbled in dudes from California,
my Northern exotic a fetish and foil

to fill that gap they call
vitamin D deficiency,

they like me on their couch, in their orbit
for an autumn night or two

smirking at how I handle smoke
and drink coffee black

like they do, but only while camping
on the West Side for the weekend,

and maybe they even picture me there,
pretty in Patagonia by the fire,

tent staked in the runoff of summer,
stupid daydream for their sober weeknights.

I'm scared I can only be the sun
for someone who's never seen it

and to be honest, I thought the Bay
was pretty cloudy but I've only been

stranded at the San Francisco airport
and started routing through Seattle.

So I'll wait in your doorway instead,
my sweater caught on the strike plate,

not the sun, just a flickering porch light
and the teasing California moth.

Ready for Harvest

Connor Koenigs

Artist Description

Shot a bit north of Spokane in mid-October, this photograph conveys the dismay and decay of the summer-surviving sunflowers.



Triptych of a Midwestern Laze

Inés Marquez

prologue.

first, a stage.

[EXIT: LEFT, RIGHT]

go beyond the edge of where you know how to *be* —
fresh-cut suburban grass will do,
or that bench in the brick-laid park,
and better still, the porch of a place that used to be home.
somewhere you won't feel the time, but see it still move.

second. a sky.

one of those all-american fever dream kind of blues.
gentle enough to remind you of your favorite pair of jeans,
bright enough to call to mind a glass bottle in the lakeshore sun.
it must have no beginning or end,
spreading cool and open.
it will not soften the heat,
but you'll dip fingers and toes in its hope anyway,
gleefully, foolishly, recklessly.
the clouds will be a clean linen you can only imagine the smell of,
and they will drift, and drift,
and not take you with them.

once you find yourself here,
rest.

scene.

the cicadas shimmer with
rise

rise
rise friend and birds chirp whistle tones of
up
up
up
friend

mothers call to children,
children call to themselves,
the dj of the hour calls to everyone with the newest sweepstakes to
get a lucky listener the hell out of dodge between the yacht rock hits,

the players of the sweetest summer symphony

eventually,
you will hear, not listen.
let it wash over your ears,
and you will stay.
you were born in this moment, and you will die here in another,
years still away, or closer than you see.
you can stand to sleep for one of them.

sun will pry your shoulders open and lay your arms down,
place its sticky fingers in your chest and around a ribcage
with lover's care and holy violence,
and c r a c k
slowly — justabit more — more —
until you are inside out and spilling,
overflowing with what has been offered,
and your legs melt into the ground, and there will be nothing left,
and you will not mind.

epilogue.

hours might pass.
and maybe
you live your entire life here.

you never get up,
because it's just too damn hard,
and, really, you have everything you need here,
so maybe the corn rises to lick at your knees before it goes,
the tomatoes and beans swell to wilt right off the vine,
and the snow, then the rain, and eventually the weight of graveyard
dirt will come to take you away,
as your bones sink to the bottom of the world with not so much as a
rattle,
and on your way down
you meet your children, their children, theirs,
and every god you've ever prayed to when you were just that
desperate,
every pet you've ever left behind, waiting at the door for you to
come back,
and you find joy loss love everything that means anything

or maybe.
you awake with a burn,
and the phantom cold of sweet lemonade,
kissing your tongue from a dream you already forgot.
simple as that.
so, you keep moving forward.
because someone is calling you in for dinner, there are taxes to pay,
and the sun is going down,
and before it comes up you have an entire life yet to live.

you will be miles or days or years ahead before you'll remember this
again.
but it will remember you,
and the midwestern laze will do nothing
but welcome you home.

Midnight Heat (1983)

Hannah Hopkins

Summer opens before you as an eternity with warm days and
nights and bright blue skies. Fall is only a speck on the horizon.
Everything is in stasis. Everyone in my neighborhood keeps
their windows open from sundown to dawn. Lately, I sleep
alone – fitfully. It is always too hot and memories return to me.

Before, the other homes emanated a noisy buzz of TVs
and conversation. Except for that old house, rundown and
uninhabited. I remember there was a song drifting from a top
floor window. It played only in summer from that old house.

The house's paint was peeling and it could easily be mistaken
for one of the many abandoned houses in the neighborhood.
No one seemed to live there. Its deck rotted. The busted front
door had never been replaced. No one cared about it. And yet,
two windows were always angled open, glowing with a light
in each. No shadow ever passed by the windows to shut off the
light, nor the song.

The crystal-clear sound of a mournful trumpet gradually faded
into a slow piano melody. The androgynous vocals were the
star of the ballad. It evoked a picture of a pure love for someone
who is not beautiful but still loved.

The song played all the way through and ended. It cut through
the TVs and conversations from the other homes. On my nightly
walks, the song rang out at 8 P.M. It was always on time. But in

other seasons, the house folded into itself, windows closed and lights off. This summer ritual remained hidden within those decaying walls.

Awake in my stuffy room, I confess that the song reminds me of you: it was briefly with me and then gone. It possessed an unexpected intensity like our connection in early summer. I wasn't expecting to meet anyone, and then there you were. That warm evening; How many words did we actually say to one another? How much more time were we together before you left? And you were the one who left.

What happened? Two people, afraid of being alone, of the possibility of being loved. At night—it felt solid for a moment.

I reached out for you, but you were elsewhere. A brief glance, a connection was made but nothing else after that. Any progression towards something more was stunted. Maybe we lacked time. Maybe it was all down to fear.

The justification doesn't matter. That is the nature of relationships that are ephemeral and short. There was nothing much there to start and so nothing much to build on. When you left without explanation at the end of summer it was expected. Your path was elsewhere. I never asked, and you never said.

Now I sleep alone. Each night of heat and humidity and stuffiness folds into the next.

I wake and the changing of the seasons sneaks up on me. I need time to figure it out. The stifling heat that had been my constant companion now recedes. I could not bear it before, but now I miss it. The song no longer plays through the windows. You are now gone. I am no longer transported back to a place of lukewarm memories.

As fall arrives, I walk past the old house expecting to hear a song that never plays. I stop and wait a while longer, hoping to catch the trumpet notes if I stay a while longer. My eyes wander across the home, towards what once might have been a garden. I see new blooms of chrysanthemums planted by some gardener long ago.

This transforms the old house. Despite the rotting deck and peeling paint, I realize a previous owner once cared for and loved the place; as more than a house but as a home. Perhaps a new owner will watch over it once again.

The seasons move forward. So do I. No alternative. I move forward, slipping into crisp days with leaves crackling under my shoes. I look up at the blue sky and imagine a new start. I walk towards the future.

Insomnia

Kaelyn New

the flashing red lights contort the haze,
slinking down the narrow street.
blinking. it echoes like a scream.
Stop. You are driving too late.
it's time to go home and collect
the fat cat from the living room couch,
to fall asleep holding her.
the dancing reds confront the dewy blue of day.
Now, go. You have work in two hours.
there is no one else on this street,
no one would dare hop in the driver's seat
so early in the morning.
*Are you drunk? Are you sleeping? Why wait here—
Where rush hour regulars will screech their brakes
At the sight of a lone car stalling?*
i'll stop to watch the fog call
its thick tendrils off toward someplace else.
i'll sit until a cop runs my plates and
passes a ticket through the cracked window.

The Last Party

Gia Hanselman

"Bro, for the next video we should find three-piece suits at a thrift store or something, slick our hair back and recreate scenes from *The Godfather*, and then, boom, cut into us skating in our suits with mobster music in the background!" shouts Yeah Yeah from the other side of the mini-mart, with about three things of powdered doughnuts in his mouth.

"Okay, what scenes should we do then? Not the Fredo and Michael Corleone betrayal scene with that big gay ass kiss in it," Tin Man, Yeah Yeah's twin, says at the cash register. His uniform shines underneath the fluorescent lights of the Quickie Mart. I laugh and jump over the counter right next to Tin Man.

"I know it was you, Fredo. You broke my heart. You broke my heart!" I yell and kiss Tin Man forcibly on the lips. Tin Man shoves me over the counter and attempts to hit me in the face. He's too slow, so I dodge it with ease. Yeah Yeah yells out of ADHD excitement and claps his hands.

"Don't try that shit on me, I swear to god!" Tin Man sighs. The other guys laugh alongside me. There was nothing like upsetting Tin Man. It was so rewarding since he's such a hot head.

"You know what scene I like," Rat Face says with a mouth full of Hot Cheetos. "I like when the godfather is like 'I'm gonna make an offer you can't refuse' and pets his damn cat like a motherfucker. That shit is gangster for real." Rat Face has dust all over himself. His lisp putters out crumbs which spill onto his hoodie. Greasy fuck. Rat Face is the ugliest

guy I've ever seen. The door opens and the little bell rings, It's Ernie.

"Angel Eyes, do you have any more flyers for the party on you?" Ernie asks. Ernie is the leader of my little friend group. He had to be the leader since he was the oldest but there was more to it than just that. Born to be a leader, his baggy jeans and dirty sweat-ridden shirts look like garbs of suave royalty. Although being the best skater was also a part of his reign, I try not to bring that up since it hurts the guys' feelings. I'm not even allowed to film anyone else half the time the crew is together, it's all on him. The number one reason he is the leader over everyone is because he planned all of our schemes for money—which were mainly throwing parties. The second reason could be his swagger.

It's always all on him. Rat Face was a great skater too. I filmed him the most after Ernie, but the guy's nose was all mangled from breaking it so many times. Teeth overlapping each other like they were fighting one another. Rat Face is dating Maria who is angelic to say the least. Maria, Maria, Maria. I don't know what she sees in him. I'll film Rat Face all day long if Maria is in the shot. Maria is far better than him. I dunno why she doesn't dump him.

"Yeah, I got a couple of flyers." I walk outside the mini-mart and meet him. Pulling them out of the middle pocket in my overalls, I hand the business card-sized flier to Ernie.

"Thanks Angel Eyes," Ernie says with a warm smile. My real name is Orlando but the guys have called me Angel Eyes since I'm big into movies and made a recreation of my favorite scene in *The Good, The Bad, and The Ugly*, which is like an old western film for a skate video competition. That's where we all met. Old movies just make sense to me. Ernie says I have an old soul; that's why we get along and why he believed me to be the guy they needed to film their skate videos. We've been best friends ever since. When they first met me I was just a kid, now I'm a senior in high school. Ernie was a dropout

when I first met him. Rat Face graduated on time but didn't go to college. The twins dropped out last year during their senior year. They are just a little older and it worked out that I was a filmer. Sometimes Ernie would call me out sick and pretend he was my parents so we could film skating videos and plan out parties like we are doing today.

Ernie puts his arm around me and we walk over to a group of about seven girls.

"Hey, how are you guys?" Ernie says as if he already knows them. The girl in the front, who is wearing some rock band shirt, looks puzzled at Ernie.

"Um, good?" she responds. I start to walk away since she's hesitant to talk to us, but Ernie grabs my shoulder and pulls me back.

"We have this party happening later tonight, it's gonna be at the abandoned fireplace shop on Broadway with all the graffiti around it. Free booze, tons of drugs if that suits your fancy, live music, and it's gonna be filmed. Tons of people are coming, you should too," Ernie says with a smile. Jesus Christ, if I was a girl, I would be in love with Ernie. I could never be that smooth.

"Sure, we'll go," says a girl with poofy-dyed green hair and five face piercings. The girl wearing the band tee shirt nudges her friend and gets red in the face.

"What's your name?" Ernie asks the band tee girl.

"Alma Claire," she responds.

Ernie smiles as if he is already in love with her. I can see him singing her name in his head. He moves his arm away from my shoulder and out in front of her to shake her hand.

"My name is Ernie, it's nice to meet you."

Alma Claire smiles with her whole mouth. Ernie was the smoothest person I knew. There was a tenderness to Ernie like he loved everyone who ever came into his life with all his heart as his life depended on it. When he and his high school girlfriend broke up he went to a dark place, he drank every

day. Ernie never made it anybody's issue though which is the right thing to do, I guess. He used to say me and him weren't the dating kind, too focused on the grind and the art.

"Yoo-hoooo, yoo-hoooo! Oh, Angel Eyes! Yoo-hoooo, yoo-hoooo! Ernie!!!" sings Yeah Yeah from his truck along with Rat Face, Maria, and Tin Man.

"Sorry ladies, that's our ride, but you guys should come. It's gonna be a great night," Ernie says as he touches the back of Alma Claire as we leave the alternative girls.

Ernie opens up the passenger side door and pulls Tin Man out of the seat. Smacks him in the face and sits in the passenger's seat. I know my place and migrate to the cargo bed with Rat Face and Maria. Tin Man sits in the back seat along with all of our party gear.

"Hi, Orlando, how are you?" Maria says in the sweetest voice. I think if she and Rat Face weren't together, I would be desperately in love with her. Her brown curly hair smells like vanilla in the wind—no, cinnamon.

"I'm good, Maria, how are you?" I say with a voice crack since I say her name like a prayer. Maria, Maria, Maria. The most beautiful sound I ever heard.

"I'd be better if I was allowed inside the car, it's too cold and Rat Face won't give me his coat," Maria says and moves her beautiful eyes over to Rat Face.

"Maria, I'm not wearing anything underneath my hoodie! You just always want me naked, is that it?" Rat Face says with his crooked yellow teeth smile and big ass gums.

"Yeah that's it, I just want you naked," she says and gets on all fours in the truck and crawls towards Rat Face and attempts to disrobe him. I laugh.

"Do you want to sit in the car, Maria? I can make some room in the back seat for you?" Tin Man asks. No surprise, Tin Man is in love with her too.

"No! No. I'll be fine back here. I want to be with Rat Face." Maria answers almost aggressively. I see Ernie's face

in the rearview mirror, his brow furrows. Moving through the neighborhoods past my high school, the sun is out. The light on my camera reflects a light over Ernie's face on the rear view mirror, casting a shadow over him.

"It says it's gonna rain later," Yeah Yeah shouts from the driver's seat.

"Weird, it's so pretty out today. I don't ever want it to end!" Maria says as if she were in a Hallmark movie. I never knew if Maria said things ironically or if she was serious. She had the kind of voice that always sounded like she was telling a joke. But she was right; it was a weirdly beautiful day in the rainiest city.

"Angel Eyes, can you film me right now in case it starts raining?" Rat Face asks as Maria gets off of him and sits next to me. I pull out my baby, my DSLR camera which I got from my AP government teacher. Ms. Griffith says I have "greatness" in my film abilities. However, that was before I stopped showing up. I don't think she would give me another camera since I've stopped filming anything other than my friends skating or the parties we throw. I used to film video essays for all my school projects. And it doesn't help that when me and my teacher were uploading videos to her computer she saw a video of me doing a keg stand.

Rat Face stands up in the back of the truck and I start filming. He jumps out of the car onto his board and begins doing tricks in the middle of a neighborhood road. He dodges and skates off of the cars we pass.

"I'm putting on some music," Maria says. Ugh, Maria has a shit taste in music. It's all sad sad girl music about periods and hunger and shit like that. I mean, cool I guess, but not the vibe. Like it was never the vibe, ever. After a second, she settles on some song that all those girls with piercings and daddy issues listen to. But that's Maria, Maria, Maria. Maria Maria with daddy issues and can't hold a job to save her life. Ernie calls her a beautiful failure.

"Turn that shit off!" Ernie barks at Maria. Maria falls silent for a second and then plays the music even louder. There was weird tension between these two ever since a couple of parties ago. I bet they hooked up or something, but I'm not a snitch. If Maria had hooked up with me, I wouldn't tell anyone either. If anything, I would pray for it to happen again. We continue skating and driving all around Northeast Portland. We passed homeless camps, dispensaries, dog parks, and artisan coffee shops. Ernie once told me he wanted to show the real Portland and its problems in our skate videos. Nobody talks about the stuff happening here and when they do, it's all fake.

"Hey, Angel Eyes, what class were you supposed to be in right now?" Ernie yells from the front seat. Ernie could be the only person in my life I truly admire. We're the closest out of the group even though he's the oldest and I'm the youngest. At this point I spend the night at his house more often than I do at home.

"Government," I echo back.

"With who?"

"With the teacher who called you a distraction when you posed as my father at the parent-teacher conference!" I say with a laugh. It was true, Ernie did pretend to be my father at all my parent teacher conferences for the last three years. Mrs. Griffith, my AP Government teacher, was the only one to see through that illusion. Honestly though, nobody would have showed up if Ernie didn't.

"If she gives you an absence for this, just give it to me and I'll forge it for you, okay?" Ernie's brown eyes tilt upwards in the rear view mirror, into the light again.

"Okay, Ernie."

...

We get to the old abandoned fireplace store, Yeah Yeah parks the car, and we all roll out with our gear. The entrance of the store is through a hole and up a ladder. Large graffiti tags coat the sides of the store. Portland graffiti has its own breed

of art. On the fireplace shop, there is a little bit of everything. Gang signs, logomania stuff, and there is social justice conscious graffiti about pro choice stuff, and little anime characters which Yeah Yeah does for fun. Years ago, before I was even alive, this building was a centerpiece of old Portland. Rich families always got their furniture and fireplaces from this store. Now, it is host to homeless people and the parties of the youth. Ernie throws parties here anytime the police raid the store of all the homeless people who create their camps there. Police never bother us though. It probably helps that Rat Face's dad works for the Mayor and doesn't want us to get into trouble.

Ernie and I do a walk-through of what he wants filming in all the rooms, Maria and Rat Face are on drinks and decorations, and Tin Man and Yeah Yeah are on the cleanup of any needles on the floor and helping the bands set up. There were endless rooms in the abandoned fireplace store, but Ernie planned it so there would be only three rooms in use. The room with the mosh pit and where the bands would play, the room where the drugs would be consumed, and a room for us to do skate tricks. Other rooms could be used as hooking-up spaces as well as the bathroom. All of the extra rooms were connected to these three central rooms, that way Ernie could make sure everything was under his control. Ernie wraps his arm around me and takes me to a different room. We put all of our bongs and weed into this room and make it sort of the drug room.

"You know what could be cool for our next video, Ernie?" I say timidly. Turning his body towards me, radiating his brown eyes closer into my face, he looks at me with a genuine earnestness.

"Yeah?"

"Maybe we could do a trick where I am filming you while I am on your shoulders or something? Unless it sounds stupid or something," I say doubting myself. Ernie lifts my head up with his large hands and kisses my head.

"I love it. Why didn't you say that sooner, dude?" Ernie

says and pushes my head away from his lips. To be honest, I don't know why I didn't say anything sooner. Sometimes Ernie reacts badly to criticism or new ideas. He was the director, the controller, the one with all the grand schemes. There was always a worry that if I said the wrong thing, he would leave me and wouldn't be my friend anymore.

"I don't know. Just thought of it, I guess," I say instead. We go back into the band room and a guy named Pound Dog is in there with his band. According to Pound Dog, his whole body had been covered in tattoos since he was twelve years old.

"Did it in Juvie and it didn't hurt either," Pound Dog once told me at a different party we hosted at an abandoned farm on Sauvies Island. This beast of a man was the connection to any and all harder drugs. A doorway into trouble, Ernie never let me get too close to Pound Dog since he was bad news and "majorly sketchy." Weirdly enough though, when I decide I actually go to school, Ernie and the guys hang out with him. It never made perfect sense to me why I couldn't be around him.

"Angel Eyes! My favorite high schooler!" shouts Pound Dog from across the room.

To me, Pound Dog always looked like a tubby version of a failed rapper since his hair was always so bleached. He shakes the top of my head. Insanely sweaty, Pound Dog sort of rubbed his body on everything and everyone around him. "A perverted pig personified" is what Maria calls him behind his back. I see Tin Man on a random bench looking defeated and Yeah Yeah basically chugging what looks to be some form of lean in a Gatorade bottle. Pound Dog greets Ernie and whispers something in his ears then puts some white pills in Ernie's pocket of his dickies. Ketamine most likely. We all loved that stuff. Ernie probably wouldn't give me any though. I hear Maria Maria Maria's voice from the other room.

"Orlando! Take me to the bathroom!"

"Coming!" A voice crack falls out my mouth. Ernie starts laughing and pushes me as I run to her side. I direct her to the

stairs up to the upper level of the building which is where the bathroom is.

"Yeah, so it's up this way." Not everyone is allowed to go upstairs since it was a major safety issue because it had a lookout to the entire dance floor. Lookout meaning a giant hole in the ceiling. I did a ton of filming up here to get cool shots. We move and squeeze ourselves through different booby traps Yeah Yeah and Tin Man set up a while ago so nobody goes up there. There were more stairs up to a different floor too, but Ernie said it was just storage. Nobody but him should be up there.

"Thanks for taking me up here! Sorry for making you but none of the guys ever want to help," Maria says with a heavy breath. She had a deviated septum, a bad one according to Rat Face who sends videos of her snoring to our group chat.

"Oh yeah it's all good, I don't mind." Should I tell her I would literally crawl to the depths of the Earth for her right now? Probably not.

"Those guys always ditch me," Maria says. They all ditched her at the nude beaches on Sauvie Island after one of the previous parties. Ernie had said something to Maria and she went on a long walk and he convinced everyone to leave without her. She had to walk home. I felt bad but Ernie said she had it coming. We get to the bathroom and she walks in. Turning back towards me, I am greeted by a smile.

"Aren't you coming in?" she asks in her sweet deepish voice. Maria Maria Maria wants me in the bathroom with her? Oh god yes.

"Lock the door, Orlando," she barks at me and drops her mini skirt as she hovers over the toilet and pees. Immediately, I turned around. She laughs like she knew I would do that. I can hear her strong stream of pee. It sounds yellow in color if I had to guess, I shouldn't say that thought out loud though. I'm always saying the wrong thing.

"You can turn around now," she says and I follow suit.

Yellow frilly underwear flashes before my eyes. Her back leans on the wall as she sits on the bathroom floor. I sit beside her. She takes out a little baggie with a big pink-wrapped joint. Lighting it, a loud heavy breath flows out of Maria's mouth. With the joint pursed into her lips, Maria undoes the long laces on her riding boots, then throws them off her feet. We smoke the pink joint, I put my head on her shoulder. She rests her head on top of mine and plays a song on her phone. Lyrics seem to sink into our skin. Another sad girl sings from Maria's phone. Maria's breath gets deeper. I turn to look at her. She sits in a pool of tears.

"Isn't this song everything?" Maria says with a tinge of laughter. She wipes her face with the dirtiest fingernails I've seen on a girl.

"It's beautiful I guess." Frankly, I didn't think much of the song enough to listen to the lyrics.

"This shit just moves me to pieces."

"Oh yeah?" I reply.

"I would do anything to feel this kind of love, the singer just feels all of it, you know?"

"Doesn't Rat Face love you like this?" I ask her, puzzled. They've been dating for three years. Maybe this is finally my opportunity to plead my case? I obviously wouldn't actually, it would ruin the friend group.

"He knows nothing about loving something," Maria says bluntly. She takes a long hit of the joint, holding it like a cigarette. My eyes turn to meet her.

"What about me?"

"What about you?" She coughs out.

"I'm his friend. What does that say about me? I know loving," I say and mean it. The words sort of flow out of me, like my heart is beating through my mouth. I do know loving, I love her, I love Ernie.

"What?" She asks.

"I know loving!"

"I heard that, dipshit/ Who have you loved then?" Maria says in a mildly condescending tone.

A silence falls on me, there is a beat of time and then Maria asks, "Ernie? Is that all the love you know? Ernie?"

"Ernie and I are brothers. You could never understand the kind of love Ernie feels for me. It's blood," I say firmly because it's true. Maria scoffs and drops her head between her arms.

"He's bad news, Orlando. You should stay away from him," she says. They always had some beef with each other.

"Whatever, Maria."

"Don't 'whatever' me. I'm just trying to look out for you. Jesus, kid, you are blinded by these guys," Maria says and rolls her eyes.

"You are dating one of them?!" I exclaim a little too loudly.

"Well, I'm no good either," Maria says and rubs her legs together.

"Maria, don't say that. I'm sorry for getting upset. You are amazing and I never meant—" I begin to say. She pats me on the back, reassuring me.

"I'm a character in a movie to you. To all of you."

"I would like to know more though," I say and inch closer to her, maybe a little too forward.

"Orlando, you have too big of a heart for your own chest."

"Thank you," I say with a smile, laying my head back onto her shoulder.

"It's not a compliment. It'll wreck you with every fiber of your being."

"Maria Maria Maria," I sing quietly and lean on her head. She remains still, then jumps up and leaves. What the fuck? Did I do something wrong? Oh god, does she know that I love her? That last comment was too obvious. Or worse... I crossed a line with my head. No, I've done that before, and she did it to me too. Fuck, is she gonna tell Rat Face? I leave as well and see her now helping set up. She smiles at me. So, I guess everything is fine. I go find Ernie.

As everything gets set up, more and more people come and we start pre-gaming for the rager. Filming the tables being brought in for the rage cage and other drinking games is my main job for now. I always forget how much effort goes into these parties. All I do is provide some videos. The other guys do even less, all they do is get people to come. Ernie plans everything out and schedules all of it. The other boys are just manual labor for Ernie. I see Rat Face duct-taping malt liquor bottles to Pound Dog and Yeah Yeah's hands.

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Time passes and we enter a point in the night when we get drunk. Very drunk. Like if someone were to ask how I am doing, I would respond with an animal noise. Either a bark or a growl. Maybe even a howl, who knows? The night is young. Tin Man, Yeah Yeah, and Rat Face start skating off fallen-over fireplaces. Rocking back and forth feels good. At least I'm not an embarrassing drunk like Rat Face who has puked on himself three times this last year. Bleh. Ernie has been dancing with the Alma Claire girl very intimately in the band room as the bands warm up. She has changed out of her band tee shirt and into a corset top like all slut girls wear. Ernie and the other guys probably went to the back and snorted something since I can see it in their eyes. Shadowy void-type eyes.

I make my way to the room where all the bands performed which has big, long rooms with high ceilings. Pound Dog's band "Medusa Slayer" is playing. He winks at me on stage as I film clips of the band. Should I wink back? The mob of people listening and head-banging to the music had tripled in size and there were at least two hundred people in the building. It is prime time people-watching. There are girls in rave gear, guys wearing skirts, tall most-likely nonbinary Amazons, classmates from my high school, and college dropouts turned hustlers dancing amongst one another. Sweat is dripping everywhere and the heat gets to me. Flying alongside all of these beautiful people, it's hot. Has it been an hour in the pit? Or have I been

here for days? Whatever man, I feel good. Sexy and good. Good and plenty. I see Ernie again without the Alma Claire girl but with a different one with an eyebrow slit. His pupils are as big as grapes. He grabs me and greets me with a hug.

"I love you, brother," he says in my ear which follows with a kiss on the cheek. I hug him back and repeat what he says to me and kiss him on the lips. Ernie laughs like I told him the best joke in the world.

"Dude! You Fredo kissed me!" Ernie squeals with laughter.

"Bro, I was telling the guys about that scene and they looked at me like I was stupid!" I responded. Nobody understands my references like Ernie does.

"No but Orlando! Angel Eyes! You are my brother! I love you so much! I'd do anything for you!" he screams over the music. Truly an emotional person under the influence. I see Yeah Yeah in the corner of my eye and start shouting for him. Ernie and I link arms and start shouting and yelling for him. We are like school girls squealing for our friends. Skipping over like the school girl he is, Yeah Yeah comes closer to us.

"Is she yours?" Yeah Yeah asked Ernie, motioning to the eyebrow slit girl he was with.

"No, I'm just renting her!" Ernie says and laughs. The girl looks at Ernie with confusion and she says, "What?!" Ernie then grabs her face and licks it from top to bottom. The girl, shocked and somewhat embarrassed, walks through the mob of people away from us.

"What the fuck! Psh, you're ugly anyways!" Ernie yells in the girl's direction. My chest starts pounding. I look at Yeah Yeah shocked and say, "What the fuck did Ernie just say to that girl?" Yeah Yeah ignores me and laughs it off.

"Have you guys seen Maria?!" I yell over the screaming music whilst also realizing I haven't seen Maria in what feels like two hours. Ernie blows a raspberry in my face and says, "Maria is a whiny bitch who can't take a joke!" His hot spit on my cheek. He goes into the crowd and starts dancing with a

mob of random girls.

"I saw Maria in the bathroom earlier. Methinks she and Rat Face got into a fight or something," Yeah Yeah tells me, then turns to some girl and begins talking her ear off. I go into a drug consumption room and walk through a cloud of smoke. I find Tin Man and about ten others on the ground in a circle, passing around a bong and boxes of pizza. Like a cult leader, Tin Man claps his hands and greets me with a bow.

"Have you seen Maria?" I ask them.

"Yeah, she's over there," he says and points to Maria sitting on an old abandoned couch. I go up and scare her. She turns around and our eyes meet. Bloodshot eyes full of tears.

"What's wrong?" I say and sit down. She wipes her eyes and clears her throat.

"I'm fine, I just don't want to work on these parties anymore, that's all," she says, holding back her tears.

"What do you mean?" I ask. She has literally worked on the last five parties we have thrown together. I don't understand why she feels this way.

"I'm just tired. I dunno. Don't you worry about me, Orlando. I'll try to still see you," she says with a half smile and then hurries away. Calling her name with no answer, I don't know if I should follow her or not. Maybe she and Rat Face finally broke up and my chances with her are finally going to happen, but I don't think so. There is something truly upsetting Maria.

"That was weird," I say to myself. I mean she has been acting so fucking weird today with all the blubbering. Maybe she is just unraveling like Ernie always says she is.

"Can I snag some clips of you guys?" I ask Tin Man, whipping out my camera.

"Bruh, no more videos. It's time you have some fun!" Tin Man yells at me and throws a piece of pizza at me. I dodge it and shrug.

"Don't shrug at me, little boy! You're already drunk, just keep your camera filming on that fireplace!" Tin Man says

and points to a fireplace with a glass window in it. I set my camera in there since I am not in the right headspace to keep my camera safe on my arm.

"Make sure to keep it filming since Yeah Yeah and I want to do skating videos in here later!" Tin man barks at me. I roll my eyes, turn the camera on, and sit next to him.

"Do you want some?" Tin Man asks me and hands me a pipe. I nod and take a hit.

"Do you wanna do something stronger?" Tin Man winks at me.

"How much stronger? Because I can't do ketamine again, Tin Man..."

"Angel Eyes, nobody wants you to either. You shit your pants last time!" Tin Man laughs.

"I was thinking something like this?" Tin Man continues and pulls out a different pipe filled with something else other than weed.

"Wanna try a little bit of this?" Tin Man asks and I nod, then he hands it to me. I smoke it.

My gulp slows down for a forever second. My eyes widen, and I see the party upside out. Tin Man's body transforms into an oak tree, blossoming into a forest. Trees are thick and tall towering above me. I begin to run through the forest, past a pond. I hear my name.

"Orlando," a voice whispers, as if it lives in my ear. Twitching, I walk closer to the river and keep hearing the voice. It's a woman's. It reminds me of my AP Government teacher's. The voice is comforting like a pillow.

"Are you in there, Orlando?"

"Are you in there, Orlando?"

"Are you in there, Orlando?"

I enter the water with all my clothes on. Then, like how an hourglass turns over, the pond flips on its side, spilling the water and its contents into the forest.

"Orlando, are you in there?" the voice asks. This time it sounds like Maria.

"Maria? Is that you?" I call out as I float on top of the river in the trees. My hands get hot. I look down and they're on fire. Flames touch the trees which then begin disappearing. Now in the desert, I'm holding a gun in my hand. In front of me are my friends. Ernie is dressed like an old fashioned movie cowboy with all the regalia.

"Are you in there, Orlando?"

"Are you in there, Orlando?"

"Where are you Orlando?"

"Shoot me Orlando!" Ernie says, but it's not his voice saying it, it's Maria's. I shoot him in the chest without realizing it; he and the other boys explode. I run towards them, trying to save them, but they turn to ash. The sand soon sinks and funnels me down into my high school classroom. My AP Government teacher, Ms. Griffith, hands me my DSLR camera and kisses me on the mouth. When she pulls away, though, it isn't my teacher but Ernie. He kisses me again and I try to break away but he shoves his hand on the back of my neck and frenchs me into oblivion.

I see a bit of the party again. The bongos, the smoke, the stoners. My hearing is gone except for Maria's voice saying

"Are you in there, Orlando?"

"Are you in there, Orlando?"

"Are you in there, Orlando?"

"Are you in there, Orlando?"

Tin Man stands above me, laughing. Shit, that was a crazy trip. I can't hear anything he's saying nor can I move. He pulls me to the side, setting me up against the fireplace where my camera is.

His lips read, "Stay here and sober up a bit, jackass."

I try to nod my head. Maybe Tin Man didn't give me something normal. Whatever, he once told me cocaine was medicinal so I guess shame on me for listening to Tin Man. The

stoners who were just in there have all left, leaving me staring blankly at a wall.

"I'm going to get Ernie to take care of you," Tin Man says and leaves. Ernie pulled me out of my first K-hole, he could pull me out of whatever I was in now.

I close my eyes and wait to feel mobile again. I begin thinking about what's gonna happen after this party. Obviously, the boys and I will have made around two grand and relish in the rewards of it. I'm guessing my cut will be around 200-300 bucks. Plus extra money since Tin Man drugged me and Ernie will kill him for it. Rat Face has work tomorrow at Safeway, the twins are off to church with their mom. My mind wanders into what our next steps are for the crew and clean up.

A blood-curdling scream interrupts my thoughts as the sounds of running feet echo down the halls. Opening my eyes, I slowly get up from my seated position to look out the door-frame. I look right and see nothing. Then, I look left and am greeted by a naked screaming girl running down the hall. From what I can see, she has mascara running down her eyes and her lipstick is smeary. Everything is blurry. However, it's clear. It's Alma Claire girl from this afternoon. My head, still settling back into reality, sees her in a spotlight, but she's so fuzzy all I can focus on is her bright stomach and her outie belly button. Running into my body, she keeps running, running from something terrifying. Screams continue to echo down the hallway into the room with the band. I hear laughter as she runs through the room especially Pound Dog's obnoxious laugh in the background.

The music dies down and I hear murmurs from the other room. It was safe to say what they were murmuring about. The terrified naked Alma Claire. My eyes peer at the door into the room with the bands and look left again. Standing in front of me was Ernie. His pupils are gone.

"You have to help me get out of here," Ernie says and looks at his feet.

"Ernie, you don't look so good," I say and grab his shoulder. He shakes my hand off of him and fully embraces me.

"What's wrong?" I ask.

"I can't—" I have never seen Ernie like this before. Out of shock, I laugh.

"What's up?" I ask with a smile. My reaction is no good since his dead stare intensifies.

"I can't be here!" Ernie yells. He begins banging his head on the side of the wall. I take his hand and move him into the room to sit down.

"Ernie, breathe. Is there something following you?" I say and hold his head with my arms. I pause. I pause for more than I should. His big eyes look up at me. Never have I seen him so afraid. Something is clearly wrong. I get back up and look down at the hallway which is coated in red gooey slimy transparent substance. My hand glides across the floor, lightly patting the treacherous mystery goop. Returning to the terrified Ernie, I sat back down with him. He was like a little boy and I was the guy pretending to be his dad in this instance.

"Was there something chasing you? I've seen rats in this building? Was there a wild animal or something roaming around?" I say very delicately. Hands holding one another, his hot breath heaving into my side. Ernie is terrified.

"Now, what happened to make you feel this way?" I ask. Ernie doesn't say anything. Could a coyote be in the building? I've seen them in my neighborhood before.

"Ernie, you have to tell me what happened to make you so upset so I can help you," I add. He remains silent.

"Okay? Did you at least see Alma Claire running around the party naked a second ago, maybe whatever was chasing you was chasing her?" I say trying to perk Ernie up into saying something. Ernie burrows his head back into my body.

"I am sorry!" Ernie shouts into my side. Wrap my arms around him. I try to make him feel close to me as he has constantly throughout my life. I hear a few steps. Tin Man, Rat

Face, Yeah Yeah, and Pound Dog walk in.

"I knew he had that dog in him!" Pound Dog yelps and lets out a few barks. An animal is the culprit, it must be if even Pound Dog is saying something.

"Fuck off, Pound Dog, go bother someone else!" Rat Face yells loudly enough so his veins pop out of his throat. Pound Dog shoves Rat Face and walks up to Ernie and dumps small white pills onto him like rain. It wasn't ketamine. It was a substance I had never seen before.

"Woah, woah, woah, what is that?" I ask. Ernie falls even further into my side and more onto the floor like a dead body, green and rotted.

"Rat Face, go fuck yourself. Some of us don't have a Maria!" Pound Dog says as he leaves the room. Rat Face smashes the pills into dust around Ernie. Yeah Yeah is dead quiet. I have never seen him like this. He's a church mouse. Shell shocked and beaten like whatever animal must have been chasing Ernie and Alma Claire. Yeah Yeah has a newly acquired black eye, along with a quiet whimpering. Tin Man has a red face. Something is so clearly wrong with him. Thoughts and questions about what is going on and why everyone is so sullen enters my head. Even more so, why was Alma Claire naked?

"Get up. The party's over," Rat Face says. I wonder if Rat Face knows what is going on since he is so calm right now. Maybe he found whatever animal had been chasing the pair or he and the guys had to capture the thing that bit Alma Claire.

"I said, get the fuck up!" Rat Face repeats this time with clenched fists and more spit.

"W-Where'd she go? Is she go—" Ernie begins. The first words he has said since "I'm sorry."

"What are you guys talking about?" I interrupt and the faces of my friends look through me like I am glass. Yeah Yeah looks at me for a second but lowers his eyes to the floor.

"Was there a coyote upstairs or something?" I add. Yeah Yeah looks at me and shakes his head no.

"She won't say anything," Tin Man says, his face getting redder and redder like he's going to explode. She won't say anything? What does that even mean? Why does it matter if Alma Claire says anything? And about what? Ernie breathes in and out. He shivers and slowly sits himself up a little.

"She won't say anything." Rat Face says declaratively like whatever he is saying is fact. She won't say anything? Those four words seem to mellow out Ernie in a way which feels inhuman. The frightened boy from moments ago is gone. Ernie sits up with his arms crossed.

"How much did we make?" Ernie asks. I looked at him in shock. Wasn't he just in the midst of a panic attack? Looking back at the red substance which coats the floor of the hallway, I feel something wet on my hands. Below me, I am greeted with drippy, thin blood on my sneakers and a hand with bloody particles. My face is redder than Tin Man's. It is redder than red.

"Almost 4000 minus around 1500 for the bands," Rat Face responds like nothing is wrong. Movie references come to my head but the shock hits me in the face. A thought enters my mind and my stomach gurgles. Then my knees shake. I begin to feel my insides. My body flinches in a beat with my heart.

"Good, good, cut my share between you four for having to deal with this," Ernie says with remorse. The gurgling, shooting pain goes from my stomach to my head. What is the blood from?

"Is there anything else we need to know about, Ernie?" Rat Face asks with a frown.

When I asked the question if this was an animal, Yeah Yeah shook his head. My ears hear their words, but my heart is hearing my internal voice. Thoughts are obsolete and the spotlight image of the naked Alma Claire is stuck like a loop of broken film in my brain. Jagged memory. The fuzziness of her running down the hall clears. I see the blood running down her legs and her body covered in bumps and bruises. I smell it too.

This wasn't some wild animal. This wasn't an accident.

"Oh!" I say out loud as my hands shoot up to cover my mouth. Shutting my eyes, I see Alma Claire's spotlight again in slow motion. Again. Again. Again. No longer fuzzy or blurry. I can see her hair torn out on the sides. She's covered in bruises. The spotlight glows on her skin like a ghost. Then, Ernie. Turning to face Ernie, I scan his body to see if he is harmed. I see fingernail scratches on his arms, but that's it. Ernie is unharmed.

"Angel Eyes's camera, probs. It filmed this entire interaction and probs got her on the film," Tin Man says. My eyes return to focus on what is happening in the present. Air isn't working anymore. My eyebrows are on fire. My body is melting into the ground even though I am standing up straight. I look at Ernie in disbelief. Ernie wouldn't. He couldn't. He's my best friend. He and I are all we have.

"You were filming?" he says like he already knows my answer.

"You were filming?" Ernie says again and gets close to my face. I can hear his heavy breath like he was thinking out everything that has just been happening, like my betrayal is bigger and scarier.

"Ernie, I didn't, I—" I mutter out. My heart stops only as my mind wonders if he is actually mad at me now when he did that to Alma Claire.

"You're so broken, Orlando. You don't pull this shit!" His eyes expand into redness and his neck stretches.

"I didn't do anything. I just did what you wanted me to do. What did you do?" My rationalizing fails me as Ernie's rage has turned away from himself and onto me. Narrowing eyes with a sneer. He had always been kind. He had anger issues, sure. I can't believe my eyes.

"Why can't you protect me when all I do is look out for you, all I do is watch out for you. For god sake Orlando, what would you do without me?" He comes face to face with me. Rat Face

and the other guys say something, I cannot hear them. Sounds fade and all I can feel is the pounding in my chest.

"Ernie. What did you do to her?" I yell back. It's sad. He's right. Ernie had given me so much. Past, present and future is wrapped up in this person, he has always been there. We were just holding each other a second ago and now I am face to face with someone who looks like they are about to smack all the love out of me. Immediately, my so-called brother's fist came to my face.

As I fall, he grabs the camera and smashes it into the ground. He grabs it again, then throws it onto me, breaking the camera off my own body like he was more mad at the camera than me. How lucky I am to just be hit and not turned to dust like this camera, like Alma Claire. I remain motionless. A puddle of tears emerges in front of me.

"I'm sorry, Orlando, but that shit is low-key shady as fuck. Don't be filming shit I don't know," he says as I watch from the ground, eerily quiet like he will burst at the seams, full of shame. Bruised lips pucker in front of my eyeline. Swollen.

"I'm so sorry, Orlando, I'm so sorry. If anyone finds out, I'm ruined. I can't go away, I got to protect you and the guys and we got to move to LA and make movies, just you and me, and I'm so sorry," Ernie's back turns against me, full of shame.

"What did you do, Ernie? If you tell me, I can help. We can figure this out, but we have to tell the police," I say as small tears form in my eyes. Rat Face speaks up, "The fuck did you say? Then we all get in trouble!" The other boys rattle off other excuses, but I cannot listen to them right now. A new thought emerges into my brain and it's the end of the world.

"How many times have you done this?" I scream out again with all of the air in my lungs. The body I used to call an extension of Ernie's shakes with every fiber of my breath. The fireplace store shakes a little too.

"Earlier in the night, Maria left in a rush. Why'd she do that? Rat Face, why'd she do that?" Rat Face shakes his head,

rolls his eyes and echoes the same sentiments as before.

"You will get us all in trouble," Tin Man says and pushes me back onto the ground. The bullied face of Yeah Yeah cowers, then helps me up.

"If you ever tell anyone about this, I will never forgive you," Ernie sneers out his mouth. My body shivers and flinches. He takes me by the hand.

"I would kill myself if you hurt me like that. You are my brother," Ernie threatens and my eyes melt off my face.

At this point, my heart has detached from my body. We all left together in the truck we arrived in. Still swollen, intimidated and weak. I hate him. I hate my so-called brother. I hate my friends. At this point, I just want to hurt someone. The police would get us all in trouble because of the parties. Ernie did that to her and probably did something bad to Maria too. There are just so many thoughts in my brain which I just want to silence. Just earlier today, we were all together, all smiles. How dumb we must look now, the illusion combusted.

"Ernie, how could you do that to someone?" I whisper from the backseat. Ernie turns around and hits my already broken face and I fall harder into the seat. The guys drive me to my house, not Ernie's. No cars in the driveway. Typical. As Ernie stops the vehicle, Rat Face turns and faces me, "I'll text you when I hear the all clear from my dad. For now, we should lay low."

I exit the car and stare at the side of Ernie's face. For the first time, I am seeing it clearly fully in the dark. As they leave, I pretend to go inside, but I don't, instead, I skate back to the abandoned fireplace store.

...

The sun rises as I get there. It's still raining and my whole body is soaked with rain alongside blood and mud. Ernie and Yeah Yeah will come in an hour or so to clean up the mess. The mess was smashed bottles of booze, red solo cups, scattered pills, and dirt coating the floor. An unopened bottle of tequila

is my savior, and I begin chugging it. I go to every room in the large store. Bottles and cigarette butts are the sole remnants.

As I make my way to the very top room, I am greeted with a cookie-crumb trail made of what I presume is Alma Claire's blood. Ernie is an idiot. Evidence is still everywhere. Alma Claire's blood for starters. Even the stairs up to the higher storage spaces are dusted with white pills and glistening with Alma Claire's blood. I enter the top floor of the furniture store. I go into one of the rooms and as I suspected, the trail ends, and in there lies a small puddle of blood next to Alma Claire's underwear as well as a pair of pants that were ripped at the crotch. The room is dusty like an old book, but there is a distant tinge of something rotten in the room. The scent coats my nose like paint fumes. I pick up Alma Claire's underwear. It's the same kind of frilly mess as Marias except ripped up like it had been shredded.

Instinctively, I vomit. This room is directly above the three main rooms of the store that we used. Looking around the room, I find someone else's secret: about twelve needles with a blue cookie tin with a belt and three more filled needles inside. Another little baggy of dark black goop lies beside the filled needles, leaking and somewhat boiling. It's all too much.

If someone were to find my body if I overdose, the newspaper headline will read, "Boy with two black eyes found dead and alone in an old abandoned fireplace shop." Maybe someone would make a movie about the boy found there.

The pain escapes my body as I lie there on the ground, exhaling the night away.

For a moment, I am free. It's delicious.

I Know the End

Brady Hippler



Artist Description

For me, this picture captures a moment of melancholic solitude. My thoughts are influenced by both the season and time of day. Taken on a fall night, this is a time when I am at my most existential. The start of the new school year, and the changing in temperatures and nature all make me contemplate life, moving forward, where I will end up, and what I want to accomplish and be before the end. Night provides quiet, darkness, and a view of the stars, all of which create an atmosphere that promotes thinking about the universe and my place in it. I would say I'm a happy person, but it's especially during this time of the year that I grapple with difficult ideas that challenge me to stay optimistic. I named this picture I Know the End, inspired by a song from Punisher by Phoebe Bridgers! It's an album I've been listening to this fall and was the album I played while taking this photo. It contains many themes and ideas that I have been grappling with recently. Unlike the title suggests, I don't know what the end looks like, and that thought is one of my biggest fears.

Contributors

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Mackenzie Atkins is a senior human physiology major and Spanish minor. She performs with GUTS Improv Comedy, and her best party trick is juggling limes.

Antonio Campos

Antonio Roman Campos graduated from GU in 2023 with degrees in civil engineering, English writing, English literature, Catholic studies, and philosophy. Although he now works a day job as a civil engineering consultant, by night he dons his cape and mask (not really) to become an award-winning author of mystery, horror, and adventure stories. He has published over two dozen pieces of fiction, nonfiction, and poetry, and his first solo book, *Pygmalion's Curse and Other Tales of Mystery, Horror, and Suspense* will be coming out in 2024! Be sure to check out his author's website at antonioromancampos.com to learn more.

Laura Erickson

Laura Erickson is a junior majoring in English with a minor in journalism. She grew up on Vashon Island which is a small island near Seattle, WA. Laura finds a lot of inspiration in music, particularly rock and alternative, and she also loves to sing and play guitar. Some of her favorite artists include Pink Floyd, Fleetwood Mac, Neil Young, and Phoebe Bridgers. When she's not studying or working, she loves spending time with family and friends, crocheting, doing yoga, and going to concerts. Laura hopes to someday be either a music or arts journalist, an author, or a professor.

Natalie Fortes

Natalie Fortes is a senior at Gonzaga University studying marketing, English, and public relations. Deeply inspired by

romanticism, her works often center around themes of nostalgia, identity formation, and vulnerability. She credits her father's impressive literary talents as the root of her writing passion. She aspires to use her work as a tool to understand and express complex emotions that can often feel overwhelming, hoping to provide comfort and a sense of belonging to those who share similar experiences. Her favorite words are paradigm, saudade, and 戦え.

Gia Hanselman

Gia Hanselman is currently a senior at Gonzaga and is majoring in English and minoring in film. A self-published artist, Hanselman created her digital magazine series "Geeg Magazine" which can be found and read on her Instagram @geegerzzz. Currently, she is working on her very first short film which will be released in April.

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Micayla Herrmann is a freshman from Hawaii and is majoring in nursing.

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Olivia Hinds (she/they) is a senior at Gonzaga double majoring in environmental studies and research biology who has specific interest in data analysis. She was raised near Boise, Idaho, and enjoys climbing, trail running, and skiing. Their experience includes working on a snorkel crew survey team with Idaho Fish and Game, trip leading with Gonzaga Outdoors, researching salamander courtship gland morphology, and being a Wilderness Ranger in the Selway Bitterroot Wilderness Area.

She is passionate about science education and bridging the gap between academia and communities in response and has a future goal of getting involved in wildlife management.

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Tara is a senior at Gonzaga University, majoring in biology and English. She gives difficult stories the space and structure they deserve so as to dive deep into their truths.

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Teddy Kleindl is a senior at Gonzaga University majoring in psychology and minoring in criminology. She is originally from Bozeman, Montana. In July 2023, she attended Gonzaga's Literary Ireland study abroad trip. While in Ireland, she learned about the Troubles, a 30-year conflict that involved the Protestant Unionists and the Roman Catholic Nationalists. Through this poem, she hoped to capture the feelings and tragedies of these conflicts and inspire the reader to want to learn more about this topic.

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River Lasol is a senior majoring in English with a minor in dance. When not writing, they can usually be found watching Star Trek or attempting to cuddle their obnoxiously fluffy cat.

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Mazie McNamara is currently a junior at Gonzaga majoring in English with minors in women & gender studies and public relations. She was born and raised in Oregon.

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Kaelyn New is a senior from Castle Pines, Colorado, and is majoring in English writing and political science with a minor in women, gender, & sexuality studies. When she isn't writing or studying, she is probably cuddling her cat, Salem, or making music with her best friends. She loves fog, dark clothing, and staying up late. She hates driving alone, touching paper with wet hands, and planes. After she graduates, she plans on picking up something that inspires her and tossing it around for a bit. In the future, she would like to attend graduate school for one of her fields of study. She would like to thank the wonderful faculty in the English department for making her time at Gonzaga all the more worthwhile.

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Rowyn O'Connor is a sophomore majoring in English with a writing concentration and minoring in psychology. They are also pursuing a Secondary Teaching Certification. Rowyn is from

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Miles is a third-year psychology student from Littleton, Colorado, with minors in statistics and writing. He is curious. He is interested in the combined abilities of science, art, and language to explore and express the human experience.

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Malia Starita

Malia Starita is a third year law student at Gonzaga University School of Law hailing from San Diego, California. When she's not studying, Malia is either romping around a local cemetery with her camera, writing poetry, or reading poetry by her favorite poet, Mary Oliver. Malia also enjoys being in nature and birdwatching, both of which are common themes in her poetry. She has published with *Reflection* previously and is excited to be back sharing some of her new work!

Sage Steele

Sage Steele is a senior from McKinney, Texas, majoring in English writing with minors in history and art history. Her writing interests focus on free-verse poetry exploring a plethora of topics. She also is a photographer, finding joy in capturing the seemingly mundane.

Clio Tzetos

Clio Tzetos was born and raised in Portland, Oregon. Throughout her life, she has spent her free time training in classical ballet and other forms of dance, reading, enjoying nature, and writing poetry and short stories. While in

highschool, Clio had the opportunity to perform her original poetry in the Literary Arts Youth Poetry Slam where she placed in the top ten regionally two years in a row. Now a freshman at Gonzaga University, Clio has found numerous ways to nurture her writing while on campus and has forged valuable friendships that only fuel her creative energies.

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