



Johnson County Library's teen literary magazine

elephant

issue xvi

letter from the editors

Welcome to *elementia*, a literary magazine edited and designed by teens in the Kansas City metro area and published by Johnson County Library. Each year our submissions are inspired by a theme and this year's was Breaking Free – how do you defy and change what holds you back?

elementia prides itself on representing a wide variety of teen voices and reflecting the trials and discoveries of teenagers everywhere. As editors, we took inspiration from social reformers of the past and our visions and dreams for the future. We wondered what would happen if we broke free from our normal routines and showed the world our full potential. Breaking free can be as small an act as wearing rainbow socks every day of your life, or as big as deciding to trust your instincts and taking a leap of faith.

No matter how different our stories may be, we all share similar indecisiveness: do we choose comfort or adventure? Self-growth or stagnancy? Change is difficult, but our artists and writers share with you their narratives of navigating these and all of the other choices we make to break free. Inside you will find work by more than 75 teens from the Kansas City metro area and beyond. To submit to our next issue – Connection – see the back page!



Speak to Me by
Samiya Rasheed

Cover Art:
Indulgence
by Lucy Sun

Women Eating Fruit by Samiya Rasheed

Johnson County Library's teen literary magazine



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Drama by Karen Liu

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Johnson County Library is honored to dedicate the 16th issue of *elementia* to Jacqueline Woodson. Over the past year, our editors and designers have been inspired by Woodson's powerful writing about overcoming obstacles and the way she empathizes with and expresses the struggles of others in her work.

This issue of *elementia* feels especially relevant because as teenagers we are constantly growing, changing and moving away from the versions of ourselves we were in the past. Growing up is such a crucial part of breaking free, and in her memoir *Brown Girl Dreaming* and novel *Another Brooklyn*, Woodson chronicles characters who grow out of their old ideas and surroundings to create a new life for themselves. Jacqueline Woodson is an excellent example of a writer who defies expectations and has always followed her own path in spite of roadblocks.

We thank you, and we honor you, Jacqueline Woodson, for teaching us that trusting ourselves when we break the rules and make a mess of life is a crucial part of growth. Especially today, young people are redefining what it means to be a revolution. So, as we protest at rallies or write groundbreaking poetry in the quiet of our bedrooms, we salute you, Jacqueline Woodson, for being a role model to young people everywhere.

Jacqueline Woodson



Photo by Carlos Diaz



POETry

Abigail Cottingham

Dissection by Julia Marks

The way they teach poetry in schools
Is not the only way it can be written

Structured stanzas

and

parallel pantoums

Put a $\mu\omega\pi$ on how poets can

Speak what they **FEEL**

Creativity cannot be defined

By rubrics and letter grades

Rather, it's free

An imagination unleashed like a wild extended metaphor

Bounding

over lines in a notebook, leaving *smearred-ink-trails* across paper and skin

When you're too impatient to let the ink dry

Because the words *are already there*

Waiting in the forefront of your thoughts . . .

to be written down . . .

And shared with the world.



SHOOT
by Julia Marks

honey

Kahill Perkins

I have so many secrets to tell you through soft poems and open mouthed kisses on rosy flushed cheeks of best friends turned lovers and onto mothers and peaches bought from roadside shacks on small town access roads; toothy grins slyly hanging onto our faces –

scars, and sun spots on our skin tell the tales of our adventures like my great aunt's rusty red spell books she keeps in the kitchen pantry, someday we'll fill our pens with ink and write love letters to our youth for our babies to find, and they will sing while they light a fire in the yard, tossing the ashes unto the driveway –

wobbly knees will ask how we met, and the sly smile from our youth will slip out like it has been waiting just below the surface, it will say, hunny, we met, in the sweaty summer of too young for love, and in the dark and crowded shoulder bumping building, we locked eyes and we then decided, we would, bump smiles for eternity, honey –

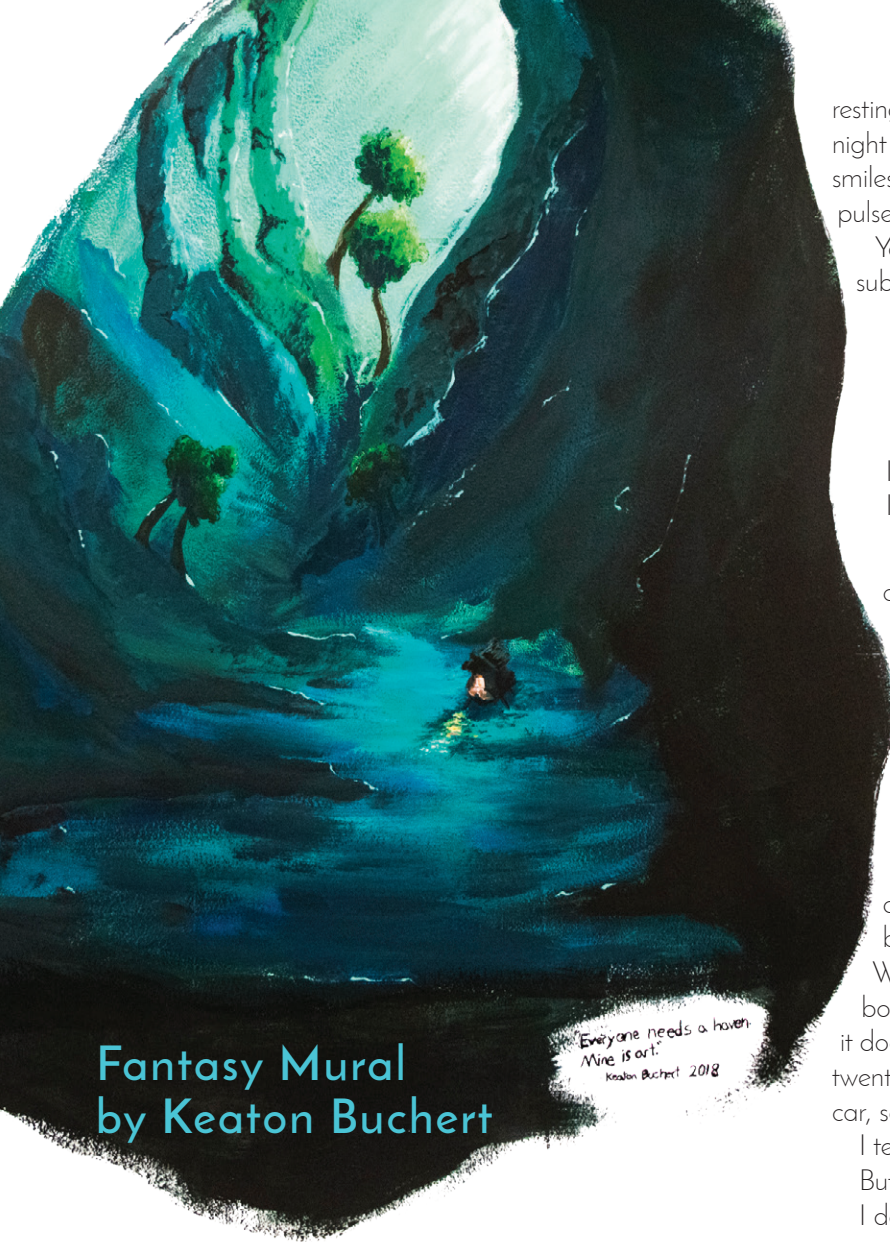
we met twice, honey, we fell off our roller skates in the dark and we crashed stories into one another's tale, but, baby we were waitin' oh we were waitin' on that crash, we will ride in the car, windows filling with sunset, we will pull up to the water, and smile, then scream, pure unfettered joy into the so entirely familiar cove, we will tell our babies our love was made from brick roads and macaroni and hot dogs, and i hope they

understand. That here is the place of laughter and rebellion that no matter who we are there is a funny gap between freedom and fate just like in my front teeth,

And honey oh honey this is free as we get.



Embrace by Carolyn Simpson



Fantasy Mural
by Keaton Buchert

Everyone needs a haven.
Mine is art.
Keaton Buchert 2018

Late Night?

Grace Burgett

It's late.

I'm not asleep, though. I won't fall asleep for awhile.

I'm sitting outside my house, savoring the autumn chill. Yellow lamps illuminate the scraps of pink and purple glitter stuck in the street and in my hair, making me the centerpiece of a very dull and gray landscape. Being the centerpiece of this street might not be a huge accomplishment, but it's just perfect for the night.

The silence is calming. Everyone else is snuggled into their beds, in their houses, in the bland suburbia. I am a rebel. I am breaking out of their ideals with pink cheeks and diamond eyes.

They never would've guessed.

It's late.

It's really late.

But I don't care because I'm on the highway now, racing through the navy night. Pushing seventy, then eighty, and finally

resting at ninety. My best friend is beside me, the shimmering night air ruffling her hair as it flies through the window. She smiles radiantly and sings along to a lavender song that is pulses through the car speakers.

Yellow lamps flash by us, reminding me of the small suburbia that I'll return to.

Just not for a while.

We're going so fast, but I'm really not in a hurry.

Because I have all the time in the world.

I'm fifteen. What's there to lose?

It's really late.

It's so late that it's early.

I've made it downtown. The bright buildings reflect colors across the watery streets and absorb their joy in my eyes. Each club we pass has a different color. A golden walking bass over a blue jazz melody, or a vibrant purple club song with dynamic people that match.

My best friend and I stop in a coffee shop because we're much too young for the booming clubs.

I have time until twenty-one.

I can wait.

I don't like coffee, but I order some anyway. It's bitter on my tongue and the taste is as brown as the color. My best friend sweetens the harsh coffee with her sugary smile. We're talking about boys and dreaming in the present. My boy is kind, yet doesn't know what he wants; he's fifteen, so it doesn't matter. Hers is the opposite of mine, because he's twenty and likes to drink on the weekends, but he lets her use his car, so she'll stick with him for a while longer.

I tell her she's too young, she's practically a baby.

But she won't listen.

I don't know if she has time.

It's so late that it's early.

It's so early that people are beginning to stumble home from their nights out.

Girls are holding on to each other and giggling. I compliment a girl's boots even though they're ugly, and she thanks me and kisses my cheek. I walk away with red lipstick covered cheeks, and traces of clear liquor lurking.

The city intoxicates me. I've always said that I wanted to live here, but I have never felt a yearning like I have during this rainbow night. I'm going to leave my boring suburb and live.

The world is so much bigger than I imagined.

It's so early that the early risers are peeking over their balconies.

Their day is just beginning, while mine is coming to a close.

The wonder of a new day. New possibilities, new beginnings. Forget everything that happened to you yesterday, because you can fix it today.

I don't wanna forget today.

I'm sitting at the top of a hotel. My feet dangle over the ledge, just hovering over the threshold death. A wrong move

and I'm gone. I won't make a wrong move. My phone speaker is playing my mom's favorite song. An orange song. The entire city is orange, fading from when I painted it red. I hum along, and remember my small little suburbia that is so familiar to me. I am so big in my home and neighborhood, but in this giant city I am a single letter in a five minute long song.

I tell my best friend this. She grins at my tendency to be melancholy, and brings me back into reality with her grounding response.

The song wouldn't be the same without that little letter, even if it is silent.

I want to be a booming letter. So long and powerful that it sends chills up people's spines. The last "A" in "Mama." The "E" in "Dream." The haunting first note of the guitar riff in "How Soon Is Now?"

I ask my best friend if her boyfriend treats her how she treats me.

She doesn't reply.

I didn't expect her to.

It's early enough for me to go home.

I'm sipping a milkshake much sweeter than my coffee from earlier. Glitter hangs on my skin and in my hair, and I have a feeling that it won't wash away for a long time. My best friend is driving slower now. Just above the speed limit, trying to get home on time. The sun is shooting up from the horizon in pink and orange, interrupted by blue clouds.

I look behind me. The black of night barely melting into navy, and in front of me is the color of the music I had been hearing the entire night.

I breathe out for a long time, then wait a moment before sipping more air.

The city, full of heart shards, lipstick, and people trying to stay young forever is now behind me.

I'm fifteen, I'm barely a baby. I don't need to dream about youth because I have it. I'm living it.

My little suburbia is growing closer. Maybe I want it that way right now.

The city will always be there. Constantly changing and growing, but the same people stuck inside.

I don't need to think about the city right now, and I don't need to think about my suburb.

Because I'm fifteen,
and I've got all the time in the world.

I'm living a charmed life.

Break Out by Anna Krutz



Dreaming Maggie Toppass

A big city.
Different people,
Modern architecture,
A whole world to explore.

I open my eyes to the gray sky.
I'm lying in the same yard,
Next to the same house,
On the same hill.
The same place I've been my whole life.

I want something different,
Something new.
So much more exists far away from here.
I want so much more.



Glass Half Full by Anna Krutz

A Refuge Without Light

Alice Wu

"Ma, it's morning. It's time to get up."

Her eyes flickered open cautiously. The room was dark and shapeless, yet she made out that she was lying in a bed with worn quilts covering her legs. A strange, gray-faced woman walked in quietly to open the shutters, and suddenly, sharp light was piercing into Yuan's narrowed eyes.

"Ma, it's me, Jin."

Yuan squinted up at her daughter's face. Silver threads shone on her head, and her cheeks, once pink and plump, had begun to sag. She looked so old.

"Ma, can you walk?"

"No," Yuan grunted.

"Oh, alright. I'll help you up, ma." With a firm, familiar touch, Jin helped roll Yuan up to a sitting position and then slowly lifted her up from the bed.

Yuan stood unsteadily and teetered towards the door, but Jin trailed close behind her.

Yuan's buck-toothed granddaughter, Fei, was slouched against the couch cushions. "Morning, granny," she beamed.

"Morning," Yuan muttered back. Her breath shuddered as she bent her knees to sit down. Jin poured her a cup of steaming tea, but Yuan still couldn't quite open her eyes to the light. Her eyelids twitched. If she only let them fall back down, then she would return to the soft, smooth darkness. Light only revealed everything's edges.

"I'm not a fool. Jin, you've done everything you can, but this old body isn't going to last much longer," she said.

"Ma, don't talk like that," Jin sighed.

"No. I'll say what I need to. If there's one time to listen to me, it's when I'm close to dying." She paused. "I want to be with both my children. When is Shan coming?"

Jin stood silent before letting out a choppy laugh. "Ma, I don't understand. Shan can't be here."

"He told me he was coming."

"He told you he was coming," Jin repeated incredulously. She shook her head, her voice trailing off.

As Yuan closed her eyes, there was Shan, a chubby boy chasing after his sister in the sweltering heat of summer. Both

children came home glossy-faced and panting, having worn out the seams of their cloth shoes. Yuan would have to mend the shoes to keep them together, but then Shan cried out that he still wanted to play. She called for him to stay, but he kept running under the blazing blue sky, going farther and farther away.

"Shan is in America, ma," Jin finally said. "He probably can't take time off work."

"He hasn't been back in four years," she protested.

"It's far away. And it's expensive to fly here. Ma, I'm sorry," she said quietly.



mother and son by Adam Peet

Yuan could see Shan standing by the door and saying goodbye for the last time. He chattered on with big words about how he would send so much money back home. Fortunes were bright in America, he assured her. Even the moon was reputedly brighter. Ma, I'll be back, he said. I'll be back.

As the phone rang, Yuan gasped as the muscles in her back seized up. She was back in the sun-drowned kitchen, and her ears were flooded with a shrill, persistent sound. As the pain cooled and the noise died down, Yuan heard Shan telling her he'd been forced to take work as a waiter. America didn't want him and his broken speech, not when there were other people who could speak English in a rapid stream and in a clearer accent. He didn't have money to send, Shan said. But he would

someday.

"Ma, do you want more tea?" Jin asked.

"Why can't I call my son?" Yuan asked back.

"It's late over there," Jin said. "There's a time difference."

"Well, remind me to call him tomorrow or I'll forget again."

"I will, ma." Jin pursed her lips. "Let me help you to the bathroom."

"I don't need to go."

"Ma," she said firmly, showing a practiced smile. "It's about time."

With small, faltering steps, Yuan eventually reached a white door. There was another woman waiting for her inside, someone with a pale face and eyes like chips of clouded, blue ice. White wisps of hair clung to her head, with several patches missing. There were caverns under her eyes and valleys running through her face.

Yuan had become the winter woman. She reached out to touch the mirror's cool surface, and suddenly she was lying in another bed and holding a wrinkled, screaming baby up to her chest. Her skin hung limply on her body, and her throat was hoarse from screaming, but she would call him Shan. He sniffled and flushed red, but in the blackness of night, Yuan would kiss him and he would sleep soundly like any healthy baby would. Most of all, he was hers to hold.

She was in the hospital again, and the lights were brighter now, though still dim. As Yuan's husband Zhong let out a hacking cough and spat out brown phlegm, Jin was there to bring a hot cup of tea or watch as her father slept. Meanwhile, Shan was still across the ocean. He wanted to be there, he said, but he'd finally found work as an engineer. He was busy now. Yuan merely nodded and smiled that yes, he would be back someday. There was always time.

"Ma, are you alright in there?" Jin opened the door.

Yuan was led to the couch, where she fell back into the cushions. The television buzzed, and light kept streaming in from the window, but Yuan fluttered between sleep and reality until the couch began to tremble. She kept her eyes shut as Fei's voice pierced the air.

"Why can't we talk about it? She's not even awake. My uncle is dead. He got cancer. There, I said it."

"Fei," Jin hissed, "be quiet. Sometimes it's kinder to keep the truth from people. Especially for old women with weak hearts."

Lifting one eyelid up, light came down like a hot needle. Yuan's eyelids then shuttered down firmly, blocking everything out. In the darkness, she could feel Shan's form next to her. She kissed his forehead and lay back in her place. There, in the constant, solid blackness, she was safe.

heavy named girl

Kahill Perkins

heavy named girl,
Your value is that of the anchor tied to your feet, the depth of your mother's tongue when she looked upon you,
saw your grandmother's eyes in your soft brown face and
pulled from history the consonants and long vowels that may jangle around in her apron
for many years to come,
When you meet me,
correct me if i am wrong,
take your name out of my mouth, shake it out like spring linens, dust it off –
place it softly between us, with a knowing smile i will apologize,
say unto you i know the feeling – my mother tied a weight to my feet at birth,
she called me "little bird"
expected me to fly with anchors for tennis shoes,
and kissed my eyes when they cried tears from their weight, let me cut your shoes off,
throw them in the river, let me show you how to dance to the tune of your
heavy name – girl.
let me show you to never apologize
To take your name from their mouths – dust it off, and
Never give it back,
Heavy, name, girl.



Powerful Pierce
by Bennett Junkins

I Was a Kid

Annie Barry

I was sitting in my private school, around age 8
The religion teacher said, everyone sit in a circle
Don't speak
Close your eyes
Raise your hand when you hear God speaking to you
One by one each child raised their hand
I sat
Thinking
I saw on tv that only crazy people hear voices in their heads
** shake head
No, my teacher said "it's alright Annie, not everyone can hear
the light of god"

Open your bibles kids!

But I didn't understand religion
You see
I was 8 years old
I was the kid that went to a private school and thought god
was a woman who rode the subway and asked strangers for
money because her kids needed to eat
and
I thought god was a dog who had just been beat
and I thought god was my aunt Sue

You see I didn't know who I was at age 8
And I didn't know who I wanted to be

I didn't understand my personality yet and I didn't know
when I would turn the age where your childhood photos look
nothing like you
I wanted to look like the girls in the movies and act like the
girl next door and feel like I know exactly who I am in my
core
I wanted to be someone I wasn't

in order to feel like someone I wanted to be
because that's who I thought I was
or who I thought I could be
Deranged in a world in which I didn't understand myself,
feeling like I'm wading in a continental shelf
I'm a creature of creation but in my own condemnation
against my own frustration for feeling fixated on finding
myself
Looking for liberation from my 12 year old self
I didn't know who I was supposed to be
I hit middle school and all of my friends became depressed
They said their days consisted of migraines
Their moods contradicted each other like political campaigns
Their lungs filled with something like propane
Your veins
Are pumping
And you predict for only 3 more days
Your parents don't understand because
"being 14 is a part of life.
And you'll get out of this phase
but right now your mood is pissing me off
and I'd like it if you'd just go in your room
and study"
So you
Research
***How to tie a noose
***Your collar gets loose

And then three years later most of you wake up
But some of you don't

Thinking Spot by Estee Rose



We didn't know who we wanted to be
But I knew I wanted to be good at something
We were just too young to know that
Sometimes
In order to find your talents
Or experience the highs of your life
You have to go through some pretty intense lows
I chose to compose my inspiration from my brother
Who
Went through a starvation of a childhood
When he spent his school days listening to the cruel kids
because
he wasn't a cool kid
but now my brother is the coolest guy
to ever sing you gwen stefani
and britney spears
and tell you that you look fabulous
But he'll probably say it in italian or german or spanish or
russian or portuguese
Because he's just that talented now

He showed me and shaped me
He taught me resilience
I didn't know who I was
But I knew I wanted to be like him

I knew he was once one of those depressed kids
Repressed and distressed
But he's impressed us all beyond any overcomings
Becoming a man that studied every religion
Befriended every stereotype of a human
Overcame every obstacle his social life encountered
And came out on top

Two months from now
A little boy bullied beyond belief
Will be a man shipping out for training to fight for our
country

A scatter plot poem equates that my past doesn't define my
future or your future and clearly not my brother's future

The War Between Kids and Adults

Ian O'Brien

As our war rages on, I'm caught in a crossfire.
One side shrieks its anthem of misguided hope.
The other, facing reality's certain dread head on.
While I, a teenager caught in the midst of battle, seek refuge.
The children clash swords of dispute, while adults fire bullets of truth,
While both of them bleed clashing philosophies.
I look over my bruised shoulder to see two survivors fighting,
A dad and his daughter.
Seeping broken putrid alcohol,
She breaks his shield:
With longing willful tears,
He slices open her hand with a dagger –
Made of twenty dollar bills.
She cracks each knife with bloodied talent and dreams.
The tainted child lashes out with ambitious ferocity:
An untamable beast.
Her father calmly deflecting every futile attempt,
with unreachable expectations and exploitation.
As the war rages on,
What choice do I have?

The Mighty Trike
by Mackenzie Klaus



Fathers are for Freedom

Gillian Knaebel

It's hard to understand what
to feel when his words say
he loves me but the tone of
his voice says the only thing
he cares about is himself.
Scars stain his back
and my wrists
but the only real scars are
the ones on our hearts.
The ones he complains
about day after day
and the ones I keep to
myself locked in a little box
in my heart because trusting
him is how I got them.
He taught me that trust is
earned no matter who you are.
The one who taught me to
shut my mouth or my heart
won't be the only thing *bleeding*
Who taught me that children
like me are only loved on the
ground in shackles made of
a father's pain.

He taught me that only
mothers are for love.
He taught me that
That Fathers are for defiance,
Are for fear
And mothers are for love
But that's what she did
She learned to love
Learned to love another
Made him a father
And now fathers?
Fathers are for freedom
And my father showed me that.
now I understand
Because when he tells me
he loves me the tone of his voice says,
"you'll never know how much"

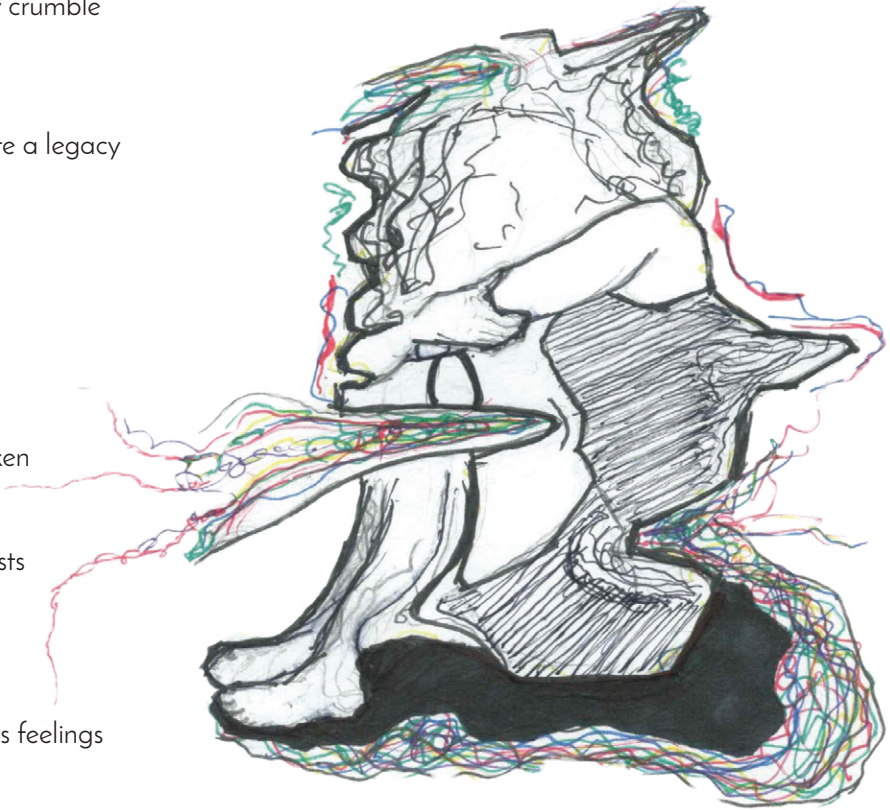


What's in a Name?

Vic Kepner

Madeline.
The first name I was ever given
A symbol of my mother's overbearing need to go her way or no way
Her way had no meaning
It was simply a name she thought was pretty
And pretty was more important than memorializing my dad's time in the Army
It was always pretty insignificant to me
Other kids had names built from centuries of family history
Syllables carved out of their ancestors' tongues
But I was just
Pretty.
Madeline was a girl who had been carved to perfection
Out of all her family's imperfections
Who was built on a history of failure
And told she had no choice but to succeed
As the curses of her ancestors' tongues tickled her feet
Madeline died at 11
When her older sister decided Earth wasn't meant for her
And wanted to try out Heaven
Madeline then realized that there was no such thing as pretty

No way to carve happiness out of tragedies
The name Madeline means tower
And boy, do towers make a big mess when they finally crumble
So at 13, she decided to start going by
Victoria
The second name I was ever given
It represented one of my dad's many attempts to create a legacy
He could be proud of
He wanted to name me after the V Corps.
An Army corps of which he was pretty high up in
That he was proud to serve
That was higher up on his list of things to protect
Than his first biological kid
I guess I was another corpse he left behind
Another civilian casualty in his War on Parenting
Another plane of the desert he left distraught and broken
Took all I had in the name of the United States
And called it a victory
My mother was another one of his five marital conquests
And I was his first victory
His first legacy
His first biological child
And when he felt like this war was getting boring
Too easy to win battles when his opponent was a child's feelings
He placed biological warfare in my tear ducts
And basked in the glory of abandoning broken homes
All in the name of patriotism
I learned very quickly this name was not for me
There's no pleasure in being on the other side of a US Victory
So I turned fifteen, I began to go by
Vic
Three letters were all I needed to get my point across
It was short just like me
And that one syllable word lets people know that
I have things to do and places to be
Vic was a name given to me when I found my chosen family
When I finally chose who I wanted to be
It was the first time I was something more than my parents' failed legacies
I was me.
Carved out of trauma through years of therapy
My therapist put on her helmet and took a war on depression
Bombing me with meds to balance the chemicals my brain couldn't handle
She lashed out on my ancestors' tongues
Whipping them away from the person I was meant to be.
Vic means conqueror.
And boy, am I conquering
Took the rubble from all my broken buildings
And made my own damn legacy
I am not my mother's sketchy history
Nor am I one of my dad's victories
I am the book of promises my ancestors hid decades hoping none of my rotten family members would find it
I am the new horizon my nieces and nephews will too when their present is getting too dark
I am the conqueror of my family's bad luck
I am Vic.
And that's enough.



Restoration by Samantha Gillespie

Call Me Stephanie

Ayiana Uhde

Hi my name is Ayiana

Once upon a time,
I was a young girl
Seeing the world through rose colored glasses
my mother sobbed to herself at the kitchen table
Wondering why
Crying tears that would not relinquish
depressed feelings
controlled thoughts
Her confidence was stolen
By a man she loved
And as she cried
She'd continually ask
why?

My father would stand
Eyes like sand
And watch with disgust and anger

Subtle hints
The way his eyes stared at the television
Body tense
While she ate herself to sleep

The way his eyes took roundtrips
At every sip
Of her Diet Pepsi can
And onto the looks of other women, other shady tricks

The way his veins emerged
And voice trembled the walls
Roaring at the sight
Of her worrisome face in the pitch black of night
Only illuminated by the blue screen
That shed light on the lies he thought he put to bed
I moved away

I left my old home and my mother locked away
Depression crept, healing, the biggest feat.
Yet the split did not resonate
A step . . . mother or whatever was introduced
A new face so soon
So what kind of love is really true?

All these thoughts are new
I spoke loud! I spoke true!
My feelings, not so few
Enough to brew up his hatred
He looks towards me.
A gaze stuck on my skin like slimy grease and sin
"Okay, Stephanie"

Insulted.

Left alone to cry my tears
When no one was watching.
to show my weakness was no option.
A competition I won so often.
Yet lost inside, clouded, covered, feeling . . . like nothing

I wrapped my head around for answers
my testimony explained
Detailed and thoughtful
Forgiveness and fault already placed
Yet he boggled with my "mess"
And called excuse
"You're just like your mom"
My response and . . . cut in
"Okay Stephanie"

The grease ate at me
Burned through my tissues and stank
Smothered me in my dreams
With pillows of doubt and worry
I could no longer sleep
Or breathe
But I could eat
"Are you really eating this late, no wonder you've gained
weight"
My response and . . .
"Okay Stephanie"

Walking on eggshells,
I hid my snacks
Times now be few
don't want to seem fat
I couldn't skip dinners so I portioned less
He would say to grab more food,
I decline
And he says YES
More food on my plate
He acts like it's a good thing
so it must be
he insists, I go to grab seconds
And he seems pleasantly dismissed
Something like his
Fists hits me hard and tackles down my defense
You eat like a linebacker
You want to lose fat, then eat less
My response
But you give me all this food!
And it tastes so good!
"Okay, Stephanie"
Never compliment the cook.

I cry myself to sleep
Nobody checking in to see
My image, my portrait,
I'm drowning in the deep
Sands that cover his eyes

Years and years of layering grime
Flinching and shedding with each of his lies
It soaks up inside and I fill with it
I try to dream
All I see is pain
My head throbs and my body aches
I resist the urges
To just get up and leave

I'm sure of his thoughts
"I don't love her
I hate her"
I'm sure of his ever revolving words despite
Never having heard, the truth

For myself I was searching
Inevitably I looked

Disgust.

I don't love my reflection
I hate my curves
I don't love my face
I hate the way it relates
I don't love my personality
I hate my need for community
I don't love me
I hate me
because being me, causes storming conflicts
That tear through him like untamed waves at sea

Quit being your mom, but . . .

I look like Stephanie.
I talk like Stephanie.
I love. I love like Stephanie.

Hi my name is Stephanie

Once upon a time was the old me
Since I found that being me isn't a sin or any sort of
conflicting sea
It's just me. Flesh and body. Call me Stephanie.

I never gave in
To the depression I was cornered in.
You couldn't kill me.
Call me Stephanie.

I looked in the mirror and loved myself again.
When all I had to do was let you leave.
Call me Stephanie.

I laughed again without hating the sound.

I smiled again without forcing it out.

I talked about my passion without any doubt.

I told my mom I loved her.

I cried. She cried. We both let it out.

Dedication: This poem is for my mother, Stephanie. Mom, I am sorry for not realizing the psychological abuse earlier in life, but now I can truly say: I love you, and I know the pain you have been put through. To our abuser, call me Stephanie again and reinforce my strength. I love you Stephanie, and you deserve the world.



Split by Erin Bailey

Like spearmint and snow (no blues)

Isabelle Shachtman

Why do they keep praying
If nothing has changed

Sleeping under dark clouds
Thankful for things
Like spearmint and snow
Senses like
A rotting apple
An eyeball
Decaying
Out of socket
I can see clearly now

Teenagers sucking
Smoke just to feel something

As if a life was a means
And the way was a passing
And a high was the body
Kinesthetic communism

Lying prostrate
To ignore all that matters
When images steep
In the shadow the moon makes

Dreams that you won't ever find you
When you finally are lost

Live and let fight to keep alive

Mad in the mind
Passionate in the heart
Dying slowly

So maybe that
If we get close enough
To the end
We'll immortalize

Living sacred lies
Sweet unlike honey
Thin and staggering
Like horizontal patterns of rain

And invigorating like mint to the mind
Yet tepid
Plain smooth soil

Madwoman,
Be still
While they
Preach
From tall trees and boxes
Ignore them as they seem

Yes
Inspire spearmint
Feed them sand
Masked in snow

Praying for the nearest fallen
Dying only as they please
You can't believe in love
If you don't believe

Do all things
Like turning off light
When the the time comes around

Turn the corner
And look back
Regret all the stupid stuff you did

The lost life is sad
The gained life is empty
And the borrowed life is shame
Straight from mother's blood and guts
And dad's cells

Who would be a mother
To disobey god's plan
Goddamn your kitchen timer

God was a child
When it made this
So grow up
Learn how to take out the trash

Scratch out your eyes
And throw them into the sewer

Mind the water
When it's too hot

Cause you've come to know
The sea as shoreless

Ignore all thought
And life will be boreless

Think about the sad stuff
While you got the chance

Be sad as hell
Cause maybe
This is the only hell you got

When they stop praying, goddamnit,
I swear to god
We'll stop dying



Pay Attention

MJ Ferguson

Pay attention to the road.

The soft mantra fills my head as the dark pouring rain pelts the windshield. The wipers beat relentlessly, expelling as much water as they can while more continues to fall.

Pay attention to the road.

The darkness of night casts illusions on familiar objects. The shadow of a tree looks like a person. A clump of dead leaves looks like a bunny or a squirrel. The raindrops obscure my vision, despite the relentless swish-swish of the wipers.

Pay attention to the road.

All I have to do is get home. Home is safe. I've traveled these hilly country roads hundreds of times, driven down them on sunny summer days. At home, I don't have to worry, don't have to fret. But for now, all I can do is clench the steering wheel.

Pay attention to the road.

The road curves to the right, and as I turn with the road my car hits a massive puddle, more like a pond. My shoulders and arms tense, heart beating faster as I attempt to readjust. But I'm too late. The water pulls me over the edge of the road. My car careens down the grassy hill, down, down, down. Time is racing past me as I struggle to regain control. To slow down. My blood rushes cold through my veins. The last words my mother said to me before I left this morning ringing in my ears. *I love you.* And then, my car crashes into a tree.

The airbag explodes upon impact, harsh against my skin, smoky dust filling the air. Buzzing fills my ears. The engine rattles and groans, trying to operate but not able to, pushing and pushing but not finding a way to function. Specks of color dance across my vision as I fumble for the keys, turning off the ignition.

I sit in silence for a moment, my entire body trembling, the car engine dying off. My face and chest sting, and I imagine that even my freckles burned off from the impact of the airbag. The air is thick with silence and heat. Tears explode from my eyes. Cries burst from my mouth. I move to untangle myself from the seat belt. I struggle to open the car door. It swings

open out of my grasp. I fall into the pooling water, my hands disappearing in its depths. The pouring rains slices into my skin like shards of glass, drenching me in an instant. I drag myself as far away from the wreckage as possible, distancing myself from the scene of destruction. The evidence.

How could this happen? I paid attention to the road, was careful and mindful.

How could this happen? I was responsible, wasn't drunk, wasn't tired.

How, how could this happen to me? I collapse on the ground. Sobs wrench my body, my wails unheard over the beast of the storm. I turn my back to the car, not wanting to see that treasonous hunk of metal. Not wanting to look at the evidence to a crime I didn't commit.

I paid attention, didn't I?

The rain poured on, beating against my skin, my body. Everything ached – my back, my chest, my head, my face.

My sobs subsided to whimpers, then to mournful thought. Why hadn't I paid more attention to the road? If I had seen the puddle, I could have avoided it. I could be home. Were my parents worried? My family? Or had no time passed at all?

I yearned for my cell phone, but my body was worn and oh so tired. I wanted to get up, but couldn't.

I lay there in the rain as time slipped away, my body physically and emotionally numb from the cold. Long enough that the rain subsided.

I ease onto my back, groaning at the stiffness and reawakening aches of my body. The clouds drift away, revealing the dark night sky. Little dots of light flicker, speckling the stratosphere like paint on a canvas.

Pay attention to the stars.

The stars weave and dance through the sky. Their faint light contrasts to the surreal clouds. How gentle the stars seemed, as they lit up the sky. I get lost in the swirls of galaxies and mighty constellations.

Pay attention to the stars.

Everything seemed to slow, to calm. A gentle breeze blew

across my face, my breathing slowing as well. I couldn't help but feel safe, the mystifying swirls of light as comforting as being at home.

Home.

A sweeping sense of worry fills me. There was something I had needed, but I couldn't remember, only that it had to do with home. Was I supposed to be there? Did my parents need me for something? But the worry left when I refocused on the stars.

Pay attention to the stars.

The tall prairie grasses laden with rain against the glittering sky was breathtaking. A sweet, forgotten memory surfaces in my mind. It was a younger me sitting in a field with my father, gazing at the stars above. We were bundled in a thick, warm blanket. My father pointed out various constellations: the Big Dipper, Hydra, Perseus, Pegasus, Cassiopeia.

I looked for those constellations now. It was like searching the sky for an old friend. They were there, would always be there for all to see.

Morning light began to peek over the horizon, tingeing the sky a deep red. I let the dimming swirls of stars and galaxies fill my vision once more before I took a final, shaky breath. My eyelashes brush against my cool skin, my mind filled with the wonders of the nighttime sky.

Pay attention to the stars.



Forget-Me-Not by Lucy Sun

Sueño, America (I Dream, America)

Janeth Reyes

I was born at the wrong place
At the wrong time
Both my parents seeking a better life
For my sister and I
To find comfort across the border
Where movie stars and country folk
Looked deceptively happy
Slowly becoming part time parents
Obsessed with full time jobs

Papa comes home with stains of green
On his pants from working in the fields
Since three
In the morning
Left with thoughts of his father who died when he was young
Who understands we depend on him
Just like his six siblings had in the past
Papa who deprives himself of sleep
Just so he can see his children be seen as something more than
Tan skin and mechanics who work in the south end
So we don't have to hear a pained
"Mija"
Proceeded with "forgive me" and "next week" and "I promise"

Mama who hesitates when we ask if we can sleep over at Mary's house
Because she goes over all the bad things that could happen when she's not there
Things that happened to her when she took the late night train when *cerdos* pulled the end of her blouse
Mama who never got her diploma
Everyday working at a factory with men who whistled and hollered
"Ay Mamacita"
Who now makes dinner with whatever she can find
Because there is no money for food
Because it's been a month since her check has been due

Years of tilted pigtailed and ketchup soup
They decided to leave for the American Dream
Praying to god
It was just like what they saw in movies and TV
So that maybe we didn't feel the urge to cover ourselves
Every time we walked down street
So that maybe we didn't have to add iron bars to our already chipped windows
So that maybe we could have more opportunities to succeed
So that maybe we didn't have to be told we couldn't



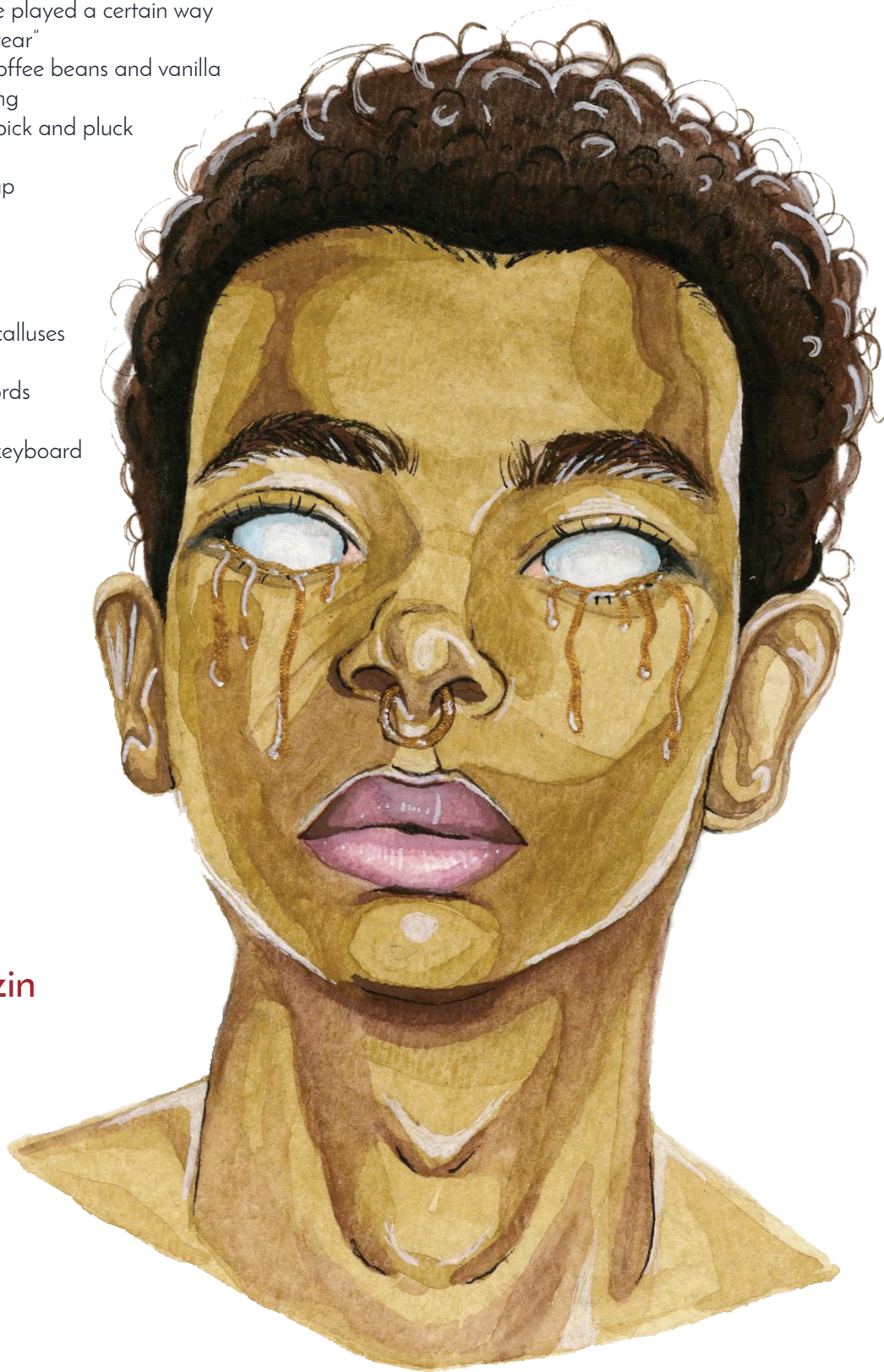
Scorpion Collage
by Fernanda Fregozo

My sister took lead
And memorized every state capital
And made sure to read
Every word as if it were her mother tongue
Learned how to be an adult at the age of fifteen
While kids her age acted like children
Knowing they didn't have to grow up
Until they grew into their office uniforms and graduation caps
Picking red or blue as if choosing teams in a game
Where you lose unless you know how to be played a certain way
Complaining about cars that are "so last year"
While she comes home with the smell of coffee beans and vanilla
Closing up like a *Sanguinaria* in the evening
Waking up to the buzzing of people who pick and pluck
Believing that she can't speak up
All of them believing that we won't wake up

El Sueño Americano

Where the dream is short lived
Stuck in a constant state of sleep paralysis
Where those like me are just bothersome calluses
In the hand of the President
Where we're harassed with pitchforked words
Because calls to our mothers
Infuriate and trigger words written on his keyboard
Pushes and shoves
Death threats galore
That I wish to ignore
We are taught to fend for ourselves
But right now
I will never stop speaking for those like me
Who wish out of the "American dream"

Tears of Gold
by **Nada Bayazin**



A View from the Mountaintop by Bennett Junkins



April 20th Kaitlin Green

9:45. My heart begins to race. I unconsciously cross my legs on top of one another with my foot anxiously bouncing up and down, my leggings making a soft swishing sound from the friction of them rubbing together. My teacher drones on and on and on about poetry. Normally, I'd be interested. A quick

survey of the room tells me that I must be the only one with so much nervous energy. All that begins to race through my mind is what will happen when the clock hits 10:00.

9:50. Now my palms begin to sweat, my left hand clenching and flexing in regular intervals. I can't do this. I can't be bold. I can't be a leader. The rhythmic beat of my heart races when I think about what I'm about to do.

9:58. There is a sinking feeling in my stomach. I wish I could disappear from the world and melt away into the shadows of the classroom. But my friend and I decided to take action. We decided our voices needed to be heard. There's no turning back now.

9:59. My eyes scan the classroom. Who will join me? I'm surprised to find that some are already looking my way. They know what's coming, and I, in a way, am their leader. I look towards the clock. Ten seconds left. I gather my courage, force all the anxiety out of my system, and uncross my legs.

10:00. My heart stops and I am frozen in shock. Although my hesitation feels like it spans an eternity, it only takes a second for me to stand. For a moment, I am the only one. I catch my teacher's eyes, and although her face appears neutral, I think I see her beaming with pride. Once I am halfway towards the door, my peers stand and follow me. Entering the hallway, I see more students following suit. Together, we walk out.

10:17. 17 minutes of gathering for 17 students who couldn't outrun bullets. My friend and I use our voices. Our presence brings silence to the crowds. We don't speak of the violence but instead use our time to spread the message of peace. Yet, even in the 17 minutes of shared peace, all 300 of us cannot seem to understand why people decide to end students' lives.

Months later, I still don't.

This Generation

Ada Heller

I sit
in a green plastic booth
Sandwiched between a purple table
and a streaky orange wall
I keep my fingers squished into my ears
while I watch a librarian chase a girl my age around
She has a purple skateboard in one hand
a devilish smile on her face
and freedom flies in her hair
Eventually, the librarian catches up to her
and informs her that
she can join her brother's ban from the library
until September 1st
Which makes me think
she's a regular
Which makes me think
that the librarian has acted this skit out
many times before
So when the librarian stops by my table
sweaty with his body's tears of
"Why is this my life"
He smiles at me
and my book
and my ink-stained hands
and says he is glad to see
someone reading a book
in a library,
in a teens section,
That has five rows of computers
and four full of books
He smiles at me like I am not
part of the generation that sits behind him
yelling at computer screens
and the monsters in their heads
He smiles at me as if I am
the 10% of my generation
That his generation has not yet labeled
"Fail"
As if I should skip to the adult section
Where the nonfiction glares down the fiction
with a menacing glare
As if I never feel like riding a skateboard
through rows of books
As if I've never wanted to scream in the quiet
or wash away reality with a glowing screen
This generation is many things
but it's never
whatever society calls it
I am part of this generation
Whatever the future looks like
lies partly in my hands

I am part of this generation
I read books
check Instagram
I write so that I don't drown
I hang out in public places with my noisy friends
because I am part of the population
My generation and my future
is already better than some of yours
because I know we won't look at our children
and say that we raised such a lost generation
because we are only lost because
you tell us we are
Let me repeat
we are only lost
because you tell us we are
I don't want to hear snide remarks
about my cell phone
and how much skin I show
or even the hand of my girlfriend
that I hold
because what's on the outside
only shows you what you want to see
I am not lost
We have not failed
The only thing strange about my generation
is that we will not tell the generations to come
That they've failed
before they've been given a chance to become
A found generation



Our Nation's Heart by Allison Park

1955

Katherine Yang

When I rewind the tangled film of that year to replay again,
the transcript hitches, a tainted roll of chromatography paper,
taken out from the closet a few too many times;
when I carefully crop it to the segment in question,
and dip the bruised parchment into the inkwell of the past,
where clarity is born from the womb of memories,
a primordial soup of letters that begin to rearrange into words,
on the white canvas above my bed, the jumpy silent film,
slowly warming into the modern age until the picture feels
real enough to touch, so I do and the ceiling folds like origami;

I leave on the wings of a crane, soaring across a spectrum of
his silky purple robes atop his chocolate skin, a soundtrack of
thick-bodied blues, in green meadow behind his grandparents' house
which did turn yellow from the burning cross – a cautionary tale
ignored, like the sting of fresh squeezed orange juice on
the wound from serrated blades, and finally the racy
red blush that spills from the brain, hot blood
funneled between the ridges of my face,
carving a valley from my nares to upturned lip after his
heated passion combusted with the flash of four bare knuckles
when I told him and he told me I had too much pride,
that it would do me much better to hide because the world
would wear rings when it punched, and he loved me
too much to see that happen to my face, so I left him;

but I heard his whisper when I stepped off the train to
the scene of black and white water fountains, coffee houses,
the world was lacking so much color and so mine began to fade;
the only colors were victimized – red scare, orange trefoils,
yellow peril, military green at every street corner, cold blue in their eyes,
my fellow lavender lads – their colors burning under a mask of makeup
as I was wiping mine off to embrace my white complexion,
so I could walk by the somber sidewalk crowd without a head swivel,
my hat pressed to my chest, locked briefcase in hand,
filled with rolls of tapes I'd never share with them,
my heavy dirty burden carried in plain sight,
safely dry from the rains that ran makeup right off;

When I open my eyes, the pillowcase is wet,
the hum of the projector replaced by sterile beeping,
cards and flowers resting on unfamiliar oak,
there is but an inch of story left in my roll, enough for
only end credits, where his name appears in big neon letters;
sixty years I have waited for this, for the world to see the colors
I have carried with me since the day the grass was scorched;
when you bury me, son, find a glass casket so they can see
that, mummified in the glowing tapes of the life I lost,
I am unabashed.



She Sees by Erin Bailey

Breaking Free

Juliette Pike

We look at a distant light
With hope for self discovery
fear of catastrophe,
and self-inflicted wounds

We dig through the mountain
in order to escape

Eclipsing,
suffocating our souls

Piling up,
A mountainous mess
Of the holes we dig ourselves



Man
by Karen Liu

Virgo, Virginis

Samiya Rasheed

Start small
the changes we swore to in
resplendent troths, without vision because
I burst forth from childhood
flat chested frail wristed pinions
not yet grown: all down
and yielding. So told *do not fly*
compress

bind
breaths are secondary to hiding
we know

we know
who sanctioned
this artless surgery – of
stretch marks and underwire
fear. That somehow freedom
is a fault my own
tend or trample
your suburban flowers, the sacred
distance between

thigh to thigh
we were already ashamed
to begin with



Lady of Want by Keaton Buchert

The S Word

Olivia Humphrey

Slut.

A word so keen and so sharp,
Thrown at me but never to me
To be muttered under the breaths of the boys who I've denied
And whispered from the girls with whom I have never exchanged a word.
It drips from the lips of people who do not know me,
Pouring from their tongues like blood and bleach
And staining the image I had made for myself.
All based on nothing but rumors and manipulated mistakes,
The word 'slut' wraps around my brain like poison ivy
Leaving me itchy for a better reputation
Or a way to turn back time
And find a person who would believe that I was not that filthy word.
Voices called me nasty, disgusting, and untouchable,
Yet the same sweaty bodies attached to those voices
Also labeled me as a goal and
An achievement they couldn't wait to unlock,
But when they couldn't find the key they needed,
They threatened to destroy my brassy exterior until I molded to their ridged desires.
From the boy who touched me in the halls and grabbed my thighs in class,
Digging his dirty fingernails into skin where he did not belong
To the boy who told me I'd be an easy target because I'm small enough to throw around
Onto a bed where I did not want to be
Or even the fully grown bearded man who drove a motorcycle and smelled of smoke
Who told me I'd love college because I had the "brains and the boobs" to make something of myself.
I believed that maybe I was letting it happen by staying silent,
Until I finally spoke about the words and the boys and the nails and the smoke
And I was labeled with a different S Word:

Snitch.

This one came at me fast and felt fleeting from the boys who knew their guilt
But kept their innocence
As no one was punished or asked to say anything but

Sorry.

A half-assed message I received through a screen on Snapchat,
The apology was forced but not felt by his thumbs or my eyes
Because I was still too busy feeling his grimy fingers extend into my flesh like Play-Doh.
He molded me into someone terrified that they might be right –
The echoes in my mind told me maybe I was exactly what they said I was:
Disgusting, untouchable, unlovable to those who weren't after anything but my body.
Until I finally found someone who changed my mind about who I was –
His voice sounded the way silk across granite feels and
Scarlet roses bloomed from his mouth as he spoke, and
Sweet golden honey spilled from his lips and into my ears
And brought the buzz of the bees back into my lungs when I laughed, and
His words looked like bold cursive letters and sounded like an empty theatre ringing with opera.
He called me something new and enticing:
My own goddamn name.

Meaningless by Isabelle Parisi

how to write a poem

Miah Clark

snap the barrel of a boy fully loaded with good intentions
and shoot yourself.

break your own heart,
into jigsaw puzzle pieces
so you can practice the art of putting yourself back together.

look your life in the eyes,
remind her to breathe while
you pull the knives from her wounds.
taste the blood;
know it doesn't have to be sweet.
lick your lips, then bite;
lift dead from plush
and swallow skin
that tastes of your last kiss
when wet again.

beg at the foot of the door
your darkest thoughts hide behind.

think vividly of all the faces who have hurt you
and tell them you love them,
especially when you don't.
think vividly of all the faces you've hurt
and tell them you're sorry,
especially when you aren't.

cookie cut your flesh and frost it with your spirit;
serve yourself on small, decorated plates.
wait patiently for the fizzing in your heart
or the ache in your arms
when the hungry decide whether or not they like you.

feel everything to your marrow,
then give away the only thing that's deeper.

Power of the Unknown by Annie Barry

Assault and Go

Saadia Siddiqua

Oh, how I loved “the talk” in eighth grade. The smell of Axe filled the room and I heard my peers giggling. A boy dressed in bright yellow Nike said, “I heard they tell us about popping cherries”

“Yeah I heard there’s blood everywhere!”

I sat uncomfortably in my seat, fixing my headscarf that I had just started wearing. I thought that I could become more religious and that God would protect me. But the next day, God did not protect me at all.

During “the talk” they told us practically irrelevant stories about waiting until marriage, as if that’s a reality for most people. As we were learning about STDs, I heard, “Ewww it’s gross if you get herpes.”

“Hahaha this class is AIDS”

I rolled my eyes at those fools and tried to learn something. What stood out to me was the lesson about consent: it’s making sure all parties are happily agreeing to do something. I didn’t think that would be a problem for me.

I had a boyfriend at the time, at least what an eighth grader considers a boyfriend. He would Facetime me every day and we’d fall asleep on the phone; I’d write him notes during school and he’d write back. “Do you want to have sex?” he asked one day. I politely told him I wanted to wait a few years, and he respected that. I thought he was the love of my life, but it wasn’t long before I’d lose my sense of innocence.

He lived with his cousin who was a close friend of mine. She called me over to hang out one day, so I happily went. We were cracking up, watching “Love and Hip-Hop” when my boyfriend came downstairs and dashed off with my shoe. “Give it back!” I said while giggling. Finally, he stopped teasing me and pushed me up against the wall. I felt his lips on mine, which usually gave me butterflies, but that day it made me feel sick. My neck was strained from avoiding kisses. Just when I thought I could slip away, he pushed me onto his unmade bed and straddled me. “This isn’t right; remember what you learned at school,” I told myself.

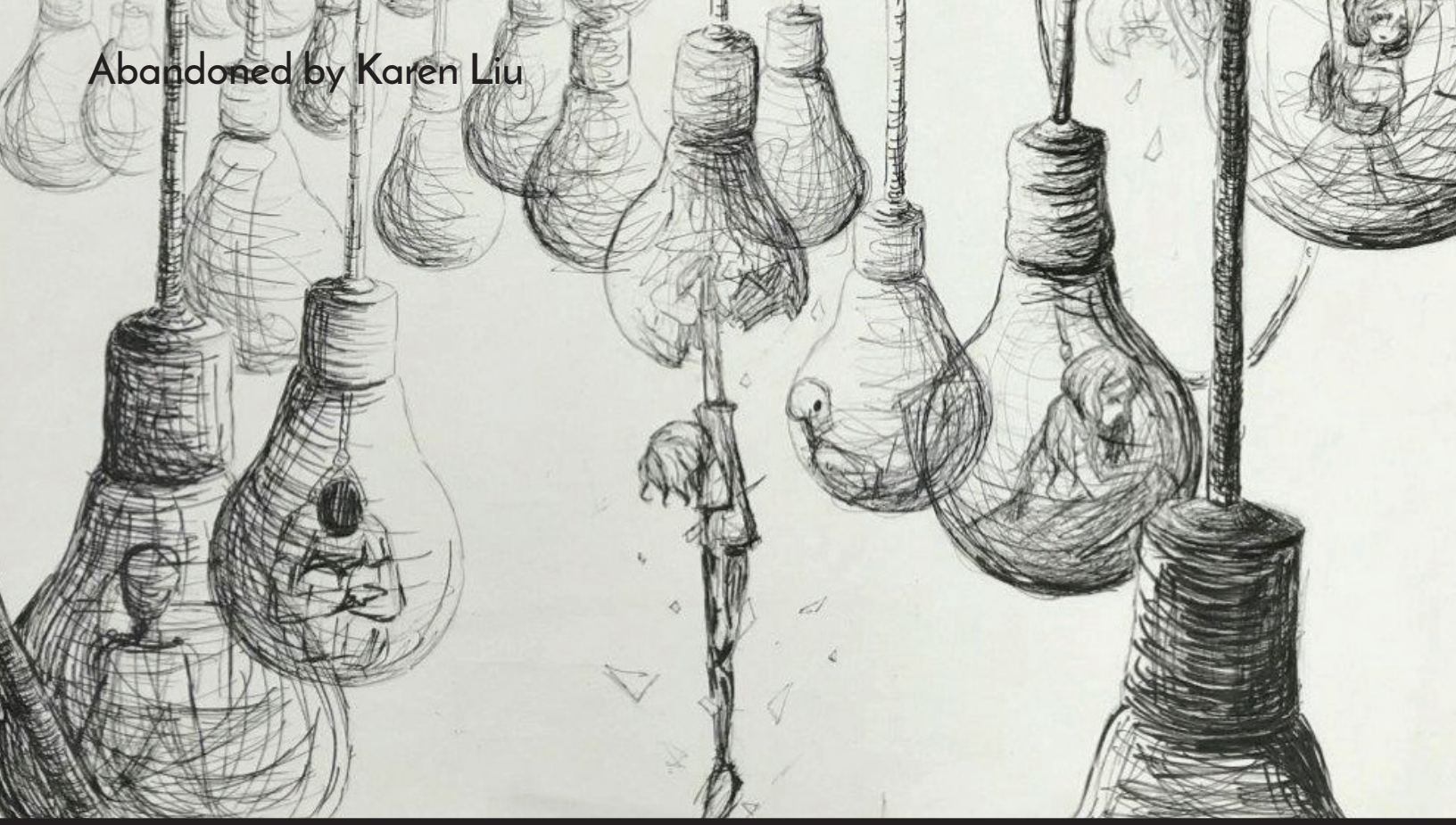
But my body was frozen. Before I could process what was happening, I was naked except for my headscarf.

My friend came upstairs, saw us, and ran off in disgust. At last my boyfriend got off me and I didn’t care about anything but the fact that I was free from his touch. I rushed to pull on my skinny jeans and flannel, then I ran out of his room. My face was hot as I told my friend goodbye and left her house. She didn’t say anything back. Almost three years later she still doesn’t know the truth about what happened that day. I wish I had the courage to say something to him or her in the moment, but now it has passed. It took months to understand that things weren’t my fault; it took months to learn what consent really is, and what “the talk” really teaches. It has nothing to do with popping cherries.

I sent her this story shortly after it was written.



Exposed by Zoie Mehl



Untitled

Hayley Allison

Society's noose fed the rope around my neck
Teaching me to hate the things I used to love about myself
Whispering that maybe I deserve to be strung up and forgotten

Binding and suffocating, warping and wrapping
Lashed to a pedestal of hatred and stagnation
I yearn to be free from these ropes that bind me

My rope necklace tightens
Mangles my already tangled mind with its words,
And suddenly my feet leave the ground

I've never had the weight lift off my shoulders so fast
Nor have I ever heard the sweet calls of birdsong above my stooped head
For the first time, I feel the summer breeze upon my face

In the ever lengthening cycle I fall
Still held in place but this time away from the cool wind
Back where I only taste bitter disappointment in my mouth instead of freedom

I long to place my rubber worn soles against the ground
To break my bindings and run again
Somewhere where I can't feel rope burns across my neck
– *Somewhere Where I am Free*

Making Maps

Natalie Rovello

On November 8th, 2016
("a date which will live in infamy")

I sat like a child on my bed
I had always thought myself an artist,
So I took a pen and drew a map –
Every line

Of every state

I drew my home

And my family's home.

My father's side arrived in 1750
They crossed the Gap before Daniel Boone
My ancestors fought in the wars of their eras,
And so did my father and brothers.

My mother's side arrived in 1950

They built lives

They built cities

They built corner stores and restaurants
and dairy companies and car washes.

I made a map of the United States,

I made a map of my family tree,

I made a map of myself

And I colored it piece by piece

As the results came in

I colored it red

Like a flame, like a blood splatter,

I sat like a child on my bed

And I cried

Immesurable Distances

Leah Mensch

The summers of my childhood meant dirty feet from playing ball without shoes, calloused hands from one too many rounds of the monkey bars, and racing to eat popsicles before the humidity melted their contents away. I was a good kid, but also a curious one.

My mom had three golden, *strongly enforced* rules for the house: never play with matches, never answer the door while home alone, and most importantly, never, under any circumstance, climb Dad's ladder by the gutter.

It was a foggy June morning, four days before my sixth birthday. My dad was surely already sitting at his work desk in the city, and my mother had yet to emerge from her slumber. I wasn't supposed to go outside without permission, but I had already brushed my teeth for two minutes, eaten my toasted oatmeal squares with milk, watered my hopelessly dead plant hanging from the corner of my ceiling, and fed my pink and orange beta fish. *Surely*, I thought, *nobody will be upset if I go outside for just a few minutes with my neighbor.*

It only took about four minutes for the red rubber ball to become stuck on the rooftop. And then an additional thirty seconds for me to decide to save the day, climbing the forbidden gutter ladder all the way to the top to retrieve the ball. I pushed my fingertips as far forward as I possibly could, but the ball was still just out of my reach.

Please get it, my neighbor cried.

I knew I was breaking my mother's golden rule, but the ball was his birthday gift. The sight of his puffy red eyes and his smile drawn upside down into a quivering frown caused a burning sensation to grow upwards in the pit of my stomach.

I stretched my arm as far as my muscles allowed me to, but my fingertips still came up a centimeter short from the red ball. His wailing, first subtle noise in the background as the sun shined straight into my eyes, then loud enough to wake up my stirring baby sister, rung through the dewy air. I reached a little too far. Backwards off the ladder, onto the hard concrete, I fell.

Emily and I do not share the same DNA, but we are dovetailed together. She knows me as well as I know myself, though she was born two years and three months after I was.

The two of us slammed violently into rock bottom at the same time. The last leaves on the maple trees were falling slowly to the ground, and we could watch our breath cloud as we groggily exhaled during the last mile of the long run. I was precariously filling out my last college application; she was praying the second half of her sophomore year would pass by more quickly than the first. We simultaneously turned our noses to the ice cream sundae bar at the cross country banquet, and tried to ignore the dwindling feeling of livelihood inside of our stomachs. Our internal storms raged on, as we continued to lug our malnourished bodies forward.

We woke up in a lethargic spell of dizziness every day,

only to ignore the most practical advice – eat breakfast. We arrived at practice hungry, we ran hungry, and we went home hungry. After we finished our math homework, we both buried our face into our pillows and cried – because tomorrow, we would have to do today all over again. Only years later would I find out that Emily and I suffered through the most horrific year of our lives, thus far, standing side by side, together. Unity is a concept vastly misunderstood. Just because it can be good, does not mean it is. Our unity in suffering intertwined us. My soul is drawn to hers, just as hers is drawn to mine. But between the two of us, there is one major difference.

My story has a happy ending. And hers does not.

Aside from her immediate family, I was the first person to ever learn Emily had an eating disorder. I stared out the stained oak window of her house when she told me. Somehow, her pattern of never attending social events centered around food, and never being able to take a day off, went right over my head. My behaviors during that time period were precisely the same, but I still did not catch on to her silent cry for help. She was over nine months into treatment by the time I found out.

Recovery, in every way, is like walking through hell. Together we lamented about our restrictive exercise limits and meal requirement. But after three months of my own treatment and over a year of hers, consisting of staring at pasta with a bone dry fork, consuming more calories in a single meal than we ever did in a day, we began to separate in our walk through hell. I could see the light. But she could not.

Eating disorders are a masquerade, a draw. Only a third of people ever fully recover. I am lucky.

I cried the entire week succeeding my fall from the ladder.

My head was fine; my pediatrician confirmed that I did not have a concussion. All that was left physically was a hefty bump and a foul black eye. My bruise turned black, and then blue, and then purple, and then a dull green and raging yellow. Every day the color seemed to be different, though equally as disgusting as the previous. The silver lining was watching my mother apply her foundation to my face to cover the bruise, out of her own desperation to make me feel better.

But it wasn't the physical pain, the horrendous black eye, or the fact that I was not allowed to watch *Clifford* that hurt. Knees to my chest, I sat on my green carpet, slumped against my door. My parents did not seem to understand that my intentions in climbing the ladder were not to cause harm. I had climbed the ladder to try to help someone, not even thinking I could hurt myself in the process. In some ways, that was far more dangerous than climbing the ladder solely to break the rules.

I climbed the ladder for Emily, though I knew I was not supposed to.

In the years following our separation in recovery, I evolved into something like her mentor, more so than a friend who could pat her on the back while saying, *I feel the same thing.*

She insisted she was not hungry as I watched her stare longingly at the protein bar she would not eat. Our feet hit the ground with a patter as we jogged around the park. Her voice became quieter and more sheepish as she proceeded to tell me that she had finally been able to cut back on her running mileage, and she had been eating out with her friends. I knew she was lying. I lied too.

I believed I could reach her. And so I continued to stretch farther.

Our bodies are only made to stretch so far, though. And before I knew it, I was lying in bed at night, tears rolling down my nose and onto my bedsheets. I seethed with anger about her lying and sneaking around, though my clenched fists helped neither her nor myself. It was only losing my balance on the ladder.

I had moments of relief and joy. When I looked her in the eyes during a leisure walk, and saw her enthralled in conversation about her cousins – not worrying about the amount of exercise she was getting walking, rather than running. The day I spent three hours convincing her that normal people can eat ice cream without worrying, she stared at me like I was speaking Russian. But then she texted me the next day, telling me that she had told her therapist she was ready to start eating desserts she was afraid of. These moments were fulfilling and satisfying. Like my time teetering on the top of the ladder had been useful—as if I was about to finally reach her. But then a week later, she would refuse to eat cake on her dad's fifty-fifth birthday after running two more events at the track meet than she had told her mother she would. The cycle would then repeat over, and over, and over again. I would once again become hopeful, only to be thrown back into the icy waters of reality, reminding me that my body, still, could not stretch far enough.

Sometimes I resent Emily for confiding in me about her battles with anorexia. My life would be easier if I did not know, if we had not found unity in our suffering. I could sleep at night, not worrying about the phone conversation we had earlier in the day. I would have been able to celebrate with the rest of her oblivious friends when she got her first Ivy League recruitment letter, rather than feeling sick to my stomach. Upon returning home after a long semester, I could tell her about my friend who fell off the bed from excessive jumping after club cross country nationals, and about the professor I had who writes for *The New York Times*. But instead, we sit at an uncomfortable Starbucks table in my dead hometown, as she sips her ice water and I drink my latte. While hopelessly trying to show her a life beyond running, I scan her body for signs of weight loss – frail fingers, a thinning face, sunken green eyes, leggings gaping in places where they should be snug. I want to slam my hands against the hollow table and tell her that nobody gives a damn about how well she is running. That she is destroying herself so slowly, she will not realize until it is too late. But I know, perhaps even more than she does, that my words of advice and encouragement are hitting the brick



Disruption by Elianna Oliver

wall she has built around herself, and falling lifelessly to the ground. She seems only to become further from my fingertips.

She does not understand why I do not wish her well in the sport she loves so much. If only she could see that instead, I am wishing her well in life. But I have the view from the top of the ladder, and she does not.

I often lose myself in restless thought, wondering, *if my arms were just a little bit longer, the ladder just a little bit closer, would I be able to save her?*

But it isn't my job to save her. Eventually, I am going to have to step down from the ladder, back onto the ground, and focus on keeping myself steady. I tell myself that there must be a way to support her from the ground, passively, without getting tangled in the complex emotional mess of her mental illness. But when I stand at the top, watching Emily lace up her shoes to run the extra miles that aren't on her training schedule, or when I see the wave of anxiety that visibly pours over her face when the plate of sugar cookies comes out at a holiday party, I physically cannot move my feet down the ladder. I remember my own struggles with mental illness so vividly. And against my greatest conscience, I keep reaching for her.

Stained Glass

Oli Ray

I feel like a shattered stained glass window.

The few truths I had lie shattered into the dirt and while half of me leaks sorrow for them, another part desperately wants to smash my bare feet into them, swirling them into the dirt with my metallic honesty as I accept the fallacy my life has been.

I was put together at one point, I know that much. I also know that my insides were scotch taped with ragged edges to keep the outside beautiful. I know happiness twirled and danced until being kicked into submission, pushed into a box and kept under lock and key. Confusion took over then, trying to keep up with the tears in our facade.

Thank god they only used scotch tape on my glass like insides.

I wonder if churches do the same; I wonder if they scotch tape the parts of themselves they would rather the outside not see. Most would see this as ethically relevant but I think some go as far as to resort to scissors, cutting off excess parts despite all the bleeding.

I wonder how much blood sits beneath the pew seats.

I wonder at exactly which time I was slaughtered there, carried into the back and stored in the wardrobe where we keep baptism robes, because only our ghosts are as white as those sheets.

I always loved the quiet of an empty sanctuary: the times when it's dark and silent, and it feels like your mind can touch the ceiling as your thoughts drift and dry through the air lazily; it's so comforting.

I think that's as close to God as I have ever gotten.

I love those that surround me there, but the silence in smiles reminds me of the dripping sound beneath my pew that only a few of us ever seem to hear; those I fellowship with have thoughts much louder than I'd ever let mine dare to be.

Maybe that's why I always wanted to break that god-forsaken stain glass window. Maybe that's how I realized how alone I felt while surrounded by family, because I didn't want to be the only shattered art piece in the room!

And when I finally decide to put myself on display, maybe I will break that window, so when they decide to reach for the scissors, at least my blood will land on something beautiful.

Because that green carpet turns scarlet translucent, the bathroom stall walls muffle cries better than an empty desert and hugs are always followed by thoughts of what if they knew.

What if they knew I wasn't blind and deaf to the tragedies occurring in that building the way they are? What if they knew I had a hard time coming through those doors not because I don't feel at home there, but because their homely hospitality isn't for me.

It's for a girl I can't be.

Because I'm a shattered stained glass window, and they like their pieces put together in delicate patterns by dollar store scotch tape and hands holding scissors, but I much prefer mine in the dirt if that's the only way to find myself.

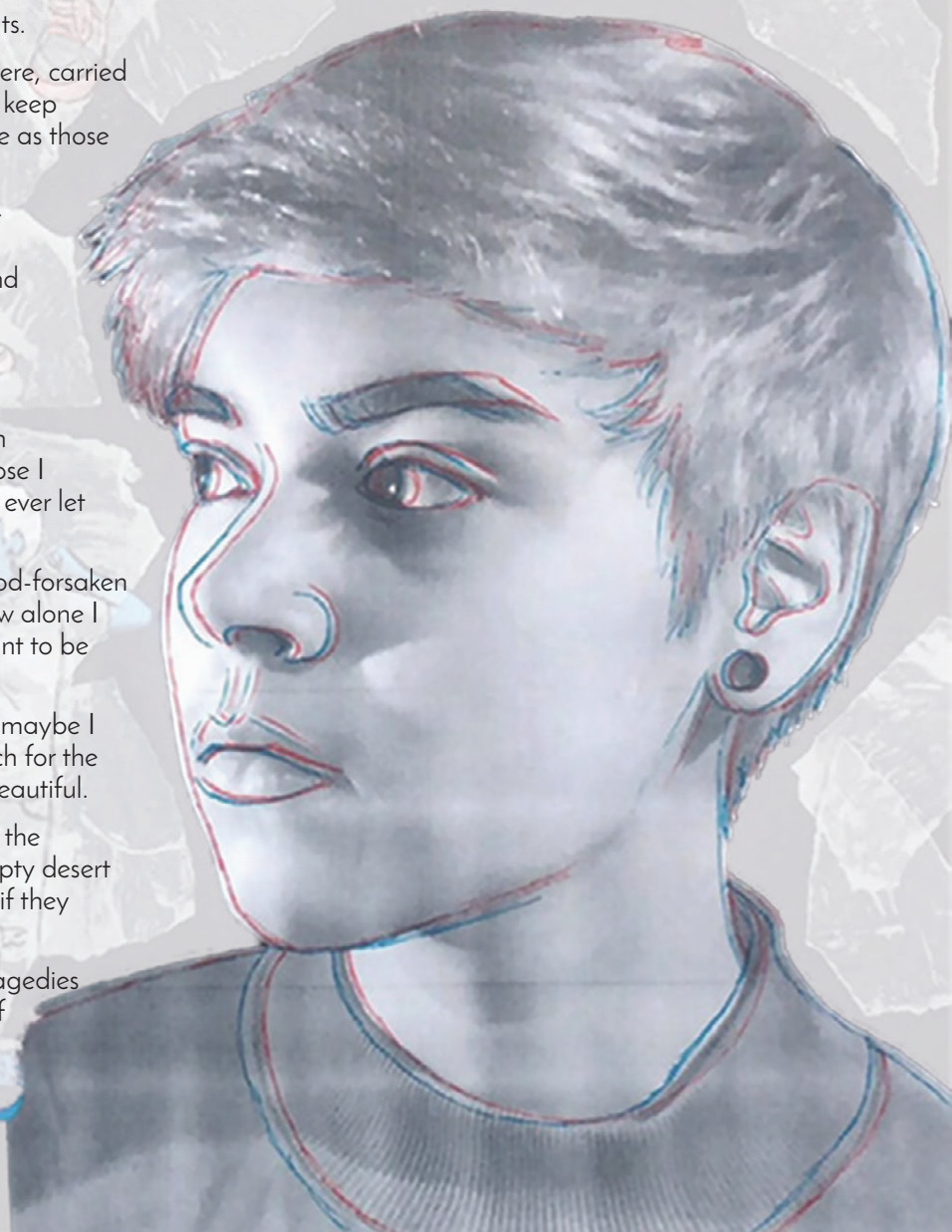
I think maybe one day I'll put myself together, though I'm not sure what I'll build. I only have these torn bits of scotch tape repression and a box my depression keeps a tight hold on.

I still think the glass is beautiful though; cracks and shatters create a mosaic that at least isn't trying to hide.

Maybe one day it will form a self portrait.

One day, I won't feel the need to break stained glass windows.

Maybe one day, they'll see the blood on the floor.





Eve by Allison Park

Counting Calories Neha Sridhar

*(A palindrome poem meant to be read top to bottom,
and then bottom to top)*

I need to starve my body
because I refuse to believe that
the figure I have is beautiful as it is
my life and
my future
will be defined by my bad choices
I do not accept that this weight
will not stay the same
Because my counting and my tracking and my planning
melt my curves into nothing
My wide hips and my soft thighs and my shapeless waist
transform into hollow expanses
All of the choices and decisions I make
will dig into my soul
My body changes with every pound but it isn't enough
To believe that
I am beautiful
is a lie
I am a horrendous monster who no one will ever love
The idea that
my body's size or shape is not as important as my attitude towards it
stinks of fake kindness
"You would look so pretty if you just lost a little weight!"
I am not willing to spread body positivity
if
I can't expect society to accept me as I am
My weight is inherently a value of who I am
I refuse to believe that
I can overcome this part of my life.

And my anorexia nervosa will sabotage everything that matters in my life,
unless I learn to shatter its hold on me by reversing this inner mantra of mine.

when the shower grows cold

Miah Clark

you're going to have to pay the water bill. and buy groceries. and throw away what spoils.
you're going to have to turn knobs. and know what locks and what doesn't. know what locks and what shouldn't.
you're going to have to mop the bathroom. and scrub the carpet. and change bed sheets. and know when it's time to buy new.
you're going to have to cut fingernails. and pin hair back. and change sour shirts. and sponge skin.

and watch for cuts. and wash cuts.

you're going to have to hold hands down. and mouth shut. and head still. and body to a wall when it convulses.

you're going to have to live a life you don't have the credentials for.

you're going to have to search for certificates and understand that you're alone.

you're going to have to hold me. and pet hair. and hush sobs. and understand that you're alone.

i've learned i am not a being worth repair.

you're going to want to take short, shallow breaths. and grip the edge of bathroom counters. and hold temples.
and cry at a volume that will go unheard.

you're going to want to cry and pray that while we are both sick, you are the one bound to get better.

you're going to want to let me go.

it will be easier to cut the rope than it will be to let it slip from your fingers.

Love Everlasting

Annie Barry

Love everlasting
Love is only lasting
When you put yourself last
Kinder a love within lantern light flames and
Let the wax drip to seal the cracks of your previously broken heart
Redeem your wrinkled hands and
Baptize yourself in the dead flower water you've yet to throw out
Find yourself within the pages of the books you never read
And learn how to stand by examining their spines
Books never slouch
Nor change the story
But they do exhibit plot twists
And characters do dynamically change
Yet some will be as static as always
No matter how much you wish they would change
Take notes from your notebook

And you'll learn how to live

Flowered by Abigail Smith



Let That Girl Go

Emme Mackenzie

I weakly smile as she makes a joke. I forgot her name, but she doesn't need to know that. Instead, I take a fake sip of whatever is in my cup; I don't trust it. My dad taught me that trick. "See you," she draws, her hair brushing my face as she turns around. The girl now moves on to screaming with her friends and throwing up her hands. Once again, I'm alone in a room full of people. Ironic. That conversation was my lifeboat in a sea of bodies. I scan for another possible conversation, but the longer I search, it becomes harder to pick out familiar faces through the smoky air. It's obvious that I'm indeed sinking. I'm basically the Titanic . . . except, no one has died . . . yet.

If I were to die here at this party, it would be the mob of teenage boys (way too tall to be freshmen), jumping a little too high that would crush me.

I still can't find someone to talk to, so I start to panic. The curious, confused eyes burn my skin. I don't know whether to meet them or continue looking across the room, pretending that I have somewhere to be; pretending that someone here, wants me here. I've learned that no one is looking for new friends unless they need them.

It's so uncomfortable. My breath quickens, and my stomach churns. Moisture accumulates between my palm and the cup of mysterious substance. I move to the left a step and set it down on a side table. Bye-bye, item-that-I-used-to-fill-awkward-silence, it's been good. Now I have no conversation to awkwardly fill with fake sips. Now, I'm alone.

I feel the unwanted attention on my back as I move throughout the sea of bodies. The music pumps out of the speakers with ear-drum-damaging sound, and a boy leans over ready to crank the dial even farther to the right. There goes my hearing. This is what I get for branching out. For weeks at school I had looked at this party as an opportunity to make a statement. I wanted to be *her*. *That* girl: Regina George blonde hair with style from *Clueless*; not just the new girl anymore. I tried so hard at school, and before this night, I thought that a party would be different. Instead, all I feel like doing is going home. I think of my bed, where it's warm, cozy, and I can take off this itchy dress and cakey makeup. Instead, my thoughts are interrupted by the mob of boys that I tried

so hard to avoid. They come bouncing over all in unison, waving their hands and seeing how many random shoulders they can hit with their limbs. "Started from the bottom now we here!" they all scream to the music. In a matter of seconds, I find myself swept up with the current. *No thank you*, I think. I courageously push against the wave. Big mistake. My stomach is punched by a random elbow – *hard*.

I'm too shocked to curse. My body jolts back as I let out a moan. The mob spits me back out and I lean over in pain. No one notices me. Tears automatically begin to form; I've totally lost control over my body. I promised myself I wouldn't cry – this mascara is too expensive – but here I am, ready to breakdown in the middle of a party.

Great first impression. Everyone's lying; you do not make new friends at parties. In fact, I just made an enemy with that kid who decided to almost break one of my ribs. The music vibrates in my chest. The air smells of sweat, vape, and alcohol. This is not where I want to be. I will never be that girl.

I turn left and right, looking for an exit. I find the winding staircase: the stairway to heaven. The lights from the main level scream safety. I stumble towards the stairs, concentrating on that first step. I slide through bodies, say rushed "goodbyes," to my friends – acquaintances – while they raise their red solo cups, and somehow keep breathing. My foot finds the first stair, the second, and then the top. Before disappearing from the basement, I look down and observe the chaos. The tears in my eyes blur the disco lights and flashy outfits.

To be honest, it looks like fun, but I'm not having any. Maybe there's something wrong with me. The lump in my throat demands to be let out. I feel a rush of sadness – no – sickness – no – anger; I feel like throwing up. I turn, rush for the front door, throw it open, and break free into the fresh, cool, autumn air. It feels so good to breathe. I expect to throw up, but I just cry. I cry and it's refreshing as f*ck. No, I'm serious, I need this. As I keep sniffing and gasping into the night, I start to lose my stress. I let it all out, everything I've been keeping inside me this whole year. I cry because I can't pretend anymore. I cry because I let *that* girl go. I cry because I am finally being honest. With that, I start walking towards home to the only girl I've ever needed: myself.

She had broken free

And she was ready to break something else



You Break

Renee Born

You can't take it another minute, the shift of tight packed bodies, tobacco fog thick in your nose. Bottles in customers' hands clink like chains tying you here with their emptiness.

"I'm taking my fifteen," you call to the shapes at the bar, knowing one of them is likely your manager.

"The hell you are, we're too busy!" he shouts back but you've already grabbed your jacket, swinging it up and over your shoulder.

"You'll manage," replying through gritted teeth.

"Get your ass back here!" you ignore, blowing through the heavy double doors. Your pupils dilate in reverse, shrinking from the bar's dull light to the flare of setting sun sparked on low-hanging clouds.

Pulling a pack from your jacket, you read the boldface warning but slip a cigarette past your lips anyway. You quit a few years ago, at your girlfriend's request, but it's all just too much. Working wears down your nerves until your self-control is in shreds.

Maybe that's why, when you hear the barker call *Carnival, free entry!* you wander from beyond the awning and approach the pop-up fair. Music plays from a few staticky speakers and flashing fluorescent lights battle the sun for dominance over the sky. You take an acrid drag of smoke and imagine tar clinging to your lungs like the black crust where asphalt gives way to dirt. On a whim you begin down the path, looking at the ticket booth and Ferris wheel, the hall of mirrors you want nothing to do with. Something catches your eye and in a moment your ear.

"Step right up and take your shot! One dollar a blow, this old car has got to go! Who doesn't want to let loose for such a low price?!"

A middle-aged woman stands in front of a piece of junk car. Her eyes have light sketched wrinkles and her hair is graying. No, not graying, silvering. She wears a red striped blazer to match the chipped paint job of the Chevy Malibu. Four once-ruby doors.

"Let off a week's worth of steam cheap?" She beckons you forward. You fish around in your back pocket for the dollar bill you tucked there half an hour ago. You look at the car, imagining it belongs to the man who gave you the one.

He had shoved it down the front of your shirt when you leaned forward to grab his plate, which now you suspect he purposefully left out of your reach. It took all your self-control not to let the dish clatter back down in front of him. Seeking refuge, you leaned your back against the kitchen wall and removed the bill from the lip of your bra. That was when you noticed his phone number scribbled in the upper right-hand corner. It was the only tip he left.

You hand the woman the dollar and she hands you the bat.

"You've got one swing, use it wisely," she says jovially and winks. You heft the bat experimentally, heavier than the ones

you used for softball in high school. You like the solid weight in your hands.

In your head, you're still trying to pick where to hit but your hands have already decided. The side-view mirror is the weakest.

The connection of bat to mirror is unexpectedly satisfying, like a hit of nicotine. You almost feel your heart tighten, but it's not even broken. It hangs at an odd angle and the reflection of the draining sky is splintered, but it's not enough. Not yet. Again, before you know what you'll do next you hand the silvered woman a five, trying to buy yourself peace in pieces.

This time you shift your feet and tighten your grip. The mirror comes clean off with a plasticky snap, spinning out of sight, out of mind. The fluorescents catch on the perfect, unburdened curve of the car's hood. You're reminded of the way men talk about their machines, about how long you have to listen to a conversation before you can tell if it's about a woman or a car. Usually what gives it away is how much they care about breaking it.

You bring the bat down over your head and into the hood once, twice, three times before it's misshapen enough for you. You've got one swing left. Somewhere you know it's been fifteen minutes, but nothing matters except the blinding moment, the song of this second.

A cloud of breath and a crack as the bat hits the windshield. The glass is thick, you knew that, but you were unprepared for the new claws in your lungs. You barely consider letting go, going back to work and suffocating, before the bat is resting on your shoulder and you're leafing through your wallet. Not something you can afford but you fork over the twenty.

"Whose is it?" she asks.

"What?" You're distracted by the continued wholeness of the windshield.

"Whose car do you wish you were beating on?"

"No one in particular. Some guys from work I guess." You almost don't notice her knowing nod. You can't leave until there's a hole in the glass. If you tried you don't know what you'd do. As the cracks grow and meet to make fault lines in the windshield, you're reminded of the not infrequent urge to grab a grimy piece of cutlery or shatter a bottle and bury it in one of the customers' roaming hands. Just to make them feel it, how far they push you, how much it hurts, but it'd never work. That knowledge, the only thing that stops you.

Right now nothing does. Finally, the glass collapses, sending shards into the soft cushions of the seat. You flinch from memories of being pinched. Gritting your teeth against the flare of helplessness you do to the brake light what you wish you had done to the man who cornered your girlfriend when she came to visit you at work. This time she's not here to talk you down.

Your arms are tired but your blood is fire, rancid as gasoline and sparked. You can't stop until every piece is as twisted and broken and useless as you. You can't see anything but the dent you left in the hood, a dent like bruised hips and breasts.

You hit their hands away, marring, scrapping red paint. Your nails dig into the grain of the wood.

Thoughts race, eating up the memory of your manager talking to a table, saying *She's nothing special but she's all we've got*. Your hands, with the help of the bat, begin to dismantle the driver's side window. Like you were a dish served lukewarm. Now it's his car and you slam down the bat until the window's nothing but a web of cuts.

What had he said? That time some drunk shoved you up against the wall and knocked a glass out of your hand? It scattered into pieces that you spent ages picking up, a thousand tiny cuts. Then you were naive enough to ask him why he was taking it out of your paycheck. What had he said to you?

Twenty hits and the window's more cracks than glass, but still not broken. One more, just one more swing, and you know it would buckle.

Nothing breaks for free. That's what he had told you.

You break the fucking window.

"Don't think I wasn't counting, young lady,"

The bat drifts, top landing between your feet in the dirt, handle loose in your hands. You expect you've got blisters. Your hands aren't the only things that feel stripped raw. You let rage flicker and fade, returning to the slow simmer.

You retrieve another dollar, leaving only a five and some checks that would bounce in the wake of your breakdown.

"Nothing breaks for free," you mutter bitterly, holding it out. She eyes it for a moment but doesn't move to

take it.

"How about this," she says. Her skin has lines like smiles, but she's serious now. "I'll give you that last one pro-bono and you'll make me a promise,"

Remembering a halfhearted warning about selling away your soul you raise an eyebrow.

"You keep the one if you promise to quit your damn job."

You take a breath. A breath and a moment to look past everything at the freshly turned night sky. Put away your money.

Walk home.



Breaking Barriers by Bennett Junkins

Muscle Memory

Amanda Pendley

There is absent space in my chest where pain used to be
And the muscle memory has not yet learned to let go

It has not yet been filled or replaced by a new substance
There is no donated blood or honey to fill in the gap
No replacement for rot or a mold for something better to come along
It just remains vacant like an empty hotel room until the next murder mystery is set to take place
And it will already know the best ways to remove stains from the carpet and to hide the body in the bathtub
and to rig the doorknob with a lock that can't be picked

This space is apprehensive and prepared
Knowing much too well that our visitor will return like an abusive relationship
Take me back
Take me back
I'll never leave you again *I promise*
Give me one more chance

So, I take out the bleach
And the rags tainted pink
And the air freshener that smells like apple cinnamon

And I forget what pain first felt like as quickly as I start again

I can feel my body adjusting even before it comes
Like a prediction
Like a tradition
Like a form of conditioning,
of knowing how to define familiarity and how to depend on it
as if it were life support even when it's poison
How to crave it like a morphine drip, like a sign of salvation



When I was a training *en pointe* I got used to the company of unfamiliar feeling
Of adjusting to ache
Of allowing pain and tension into my body to stretch my tendons and elongate my limbs
instead of pulling at them like a stubborn door handle
It was always an easing motion, like lowering myself into the bathtub
It made me trust, even if it hurt, even if it was coated in betrayal,
It was an act of practice
Practicing to make our bodies strong and full of dichotomy
Heavy yet weightless
Sharp yet fluid
With sloping arms and curving middles.
I never knew my body could feel like a storage vessel
For knowledge.
 For pain.
 For memory.

It is a well-known fact that the more you repeat an action, the easier it becomes
That is where the phrase "practice makes perfect" comes from
And I thought that if I could channel every aspect of my life
 that was losing shape,
 and falling apart,
 and becoming limp and helpless
into my control over my body, it would make me feel like I was in control of my mind.

But when my pointe teacher wrote on the mirror the words "practice makes..."
with her blunt black marker and instructed us to finish the phrase
It didn't end with perfect
The answer was permanent
And she was right
I was molding myself into something I couldn't undo.

The more you repeat an action, the easier it becomes
So unknowingly, I built, and I molded, and I sculpted myself to be a granite effigy: cemented and unable to move on.
I was used to the routine
So time and time again,
I'd take out the bleach
 And the rags tainted pink
 And the air freshener that smells like apple cinnamon

Asking me to take it back
To let it back in
I don't know how to sever the tie without my statue of a body shattering completely.

She called this response muscle memory
How after doing something so many times, your body knows exactly how to align.

Spine straight
 Ribs in
 Relevé locked.
 Reminisce
 Blame yourself
 Get lost

Until it was automatic
She said, "You won't even have to think about it.
Your arms will be strong, your ankles crackling and reaching,
your chest lifted, and your ribs tucked in as if holding your breath"

And I am holding my breath
Waiting for that all too familiar feeling
But also, waiting for a day when there won't be blood rushing back into my system
but honey

A change in the familiar
A new tradition
Superhumanly sweet
The day when my muscles won't remember
And my brain won't be conditioned to wait for anything other than
light

Wrong Station by Lindsay Goodman



Let Me Speak

Madeline Bell

Therapy. What an odd word. A word that entails problems that you can't solve yourself. A word that only applies to people with enough money to get other people to solve their problems for them. Therapy is such a bitch. It can make you feel better, or it can make you feel like you have even more problems than you did before you went. I don't care much for therapy. I've gone to every therapist my parents felt had enough arrogance and over-exaggerated their career just enough to be able to help. It, of course, didn't do anything but give me more to stress about. You may wonder why I even go to therapy in the first place. I have this little thing called Chronic Motor Tic disorder. It's a neurological disorder that I won't explain much in fear that you lose interest in my tragic life story. Basically I have trouble controlling my own body.

It was just a normal Monday in a normal therapy session. I was missing math which added to my anxiety which in turn added to the worsening of my tics. The room was pale and silent. The kind of silence where it seems like there's a ringing somewhere in the background, but you're not sure if it's really there or if it's just your mind trying to make up for the fact that you can't hear anything. It smelled like chemicals and rubber gloves. All the smells you would find in a hospital. I heard footsteps of a doctor pass by the door, and I waited to hear the squeaking the door being opened. It never came. Another pair of footsteps came by. Then another and another. Still nothing. I heard the sound of my father breathing next to me, half asleep. I looked over and saw the bright pink bed that was in the room with the little roll of paper above it to pull down when someone was forced to lay on it. It was the only pop of color in the room. It hurt my eyes. I looked out the window and saw the condensation on the window, and the drops of water that left trails of transparency along the window.

"Ok, honey, you know how it goes. Hold your pointer finger up when you feel a tic coming on," Dr. Hill said.

"I got it," I mumbled.

"So how's school going?" she asked

"It's going."

"Anything exciting happen recently?" she tried again.

"She recently got an 100% on her Biology test," my dad chipped in.

"Very nice!" Dr. Hill complimented.

"Thanks," I said.

I held up my left pointer finger. I'm right handed but my right hand was busy clenching and unclenching.

"Good job doing your exercises," Dr. Hill said

I looked at my feet. Did I mention I was 14? I picked at the purple duct tape holding together my right shoe with my other foot.

"I'm getting married on Valentine's Day," I blurted, desperate to change the subject.

Dr. Hill and my dad looked at me.

"A good friend of mine said we should do it as a joke, but then she took the joke too far, and now we're actually doing it. I really don't want to, but I don't want to hurt her feelings by saying no. I'm honestly dreading it. This isn't the first time I've been dragged into something I don't want to do. I do not like playing soccer at all, but there wasn't enough girls to play on the team. The coach kept begging me and I couldn't say no . . ." I stopped talking when I realized I was rambling. I hated opening my mouth more than I had to with Dr. Hill.

"Well that's very kind of you." Dr. Hill said.

"Thanks," I said.

A moment passed. I hesitated and looked around at the white room. The feeling then became too much. I put my finger up. My leg kicked out. Pain shot up from behind my knee.

"Good job doing your exercises."

My cheeks flamed. I felt hot all over.

Later my dad and I got into the car to take me to school.

"I don't wanna go back," I said.

"Why not?" my dad asked, not shocked but confused.

"Just don't want to."

"We've only been at it for a week."

"I know."

"How about we give it a little more time, and then we'll see if we want to continue."

"If I want to continue," I corrected him.

"Just give it a little more time," my dad begged. Sometimes I wondered if he was more desperate to get rid of my tics than I was. I wondered if he was tired and embarrassed of having an abnormal daughter.

"Okay," I said.

When I got back to school I had art class. We had a project to make a collage of something we felt deeply about. Some kids were making one with pictures of their parents. Some kids were doing more political pieces. Others were doing birds. I was doing more academic type things. I couldn't do much that day though because I was too busy thinking about my stupid therapy session. I started to get irritated about it, and in turn my tics got worse. I held my fist and stretched my arm out as if I was trying to elbow someone. Maybe my therapist. The guy I was sitting next to, Will, knew about my tics. His brother had Tourettes.

"You okay?" he asked.

"Yeah I'm just annoyed," I sighed.

"Another bad therapy session?"

"Yeah," I confided in him. He's pretty much the only one who understands how to deal with people with tics. He's really close with his brother. I talked to him about everything concerning my tics. He was a better therapist than my actual one. That still didn't mean I was going to tell him everything I was feeling, but he helped me calm down. I simply couldn't tell him what was on my mind. At least not to the fullest extent. I could only tell people what they told me they saw first.

"Well if they start to hurt, I have Advil in my backpack," he offered.

"Thanks," I smiled at him. I started to calm down.

"Whatcha talkin about?" Charlie chimed in. I immediately felt all the annoyance and anger from this morning return full force. I sighed. Charlie was a hyperactive kid with the energy of a puppy and the attention span of a fly. He was probably the nosiest kid I've ever met. He didn't know when to let things go, nor did he understand the fact that not everything was his business. He was one of the kids doing birds.

"Nothing that concerns you, Charlie," I said.

"Are you talking about your tics again?" There he went again. The only reason he knew about my tics was because . . . well I'll give you three guesses and the first two don't count.

"Yes, Charlie," I sighed again. He really needed to learn when stop.

"How long have you had those? I've noticed you doing them for a long time now." He really, really, needed to learn when to stop.

"They started when I was seven, and it's been hell ever since," I snapped hoping he would drop it.

"Ya know . . ." he started, "I feel like if I had these tic things, they wouldn't bother me as much."

I dropped everything. I glared at him for a long moment. I wanted to take a piece of paper, cover it in glue, put it on his face and rip it off like a waxing strip. I wanted to scream.

"Oh, shit." Will muttered.

"What the hell?" I said through my teeth. I started to stand up with my scissors in my hand, but Will stopped me with a hand on my shoulder. He told me to calm down and take deep breaths. I did. Some kids looked over at me weirdly. Probably because I was breathing like I just ran a 5K. I eventually calmed down, but Will watched me like I was a wild animal for the rest of the class. He slowly slid my scissors away from me. Charlie had moved away, and I didn't even notice. I wanted to scream. I wanted to say everything that was on my mind, but I couldn't. Everything I wanted to say was lodged in the back of my throat along with the scream. I didn't remember much from the rest of that day.

A week later, I was sitting in science class while we were talking about hormones. My tics that day were really bad because of another awful therapy session with my awful therapist. Anytime someone said, "Good job," to me, I wanted to explode.

We started to talk about female hormones and how boobs grow. Suddenly the male population of the class seemed much more interested. It looked like they were taking notes but were really probably just writing "I ♥ BOOBS" in all caps in their notebooks. One of the boys started using a highlighter. I guess he felt the need to color it in, or maybe add a graphic image.

My neck lurched to the side then back and a sharp pain went down my spine. I was used to this. I looked around

and noticed the kid next to me staring. He was the only boy in class not paying attention to the presentation. He was probably gay.

"Are your tics a hormonal related thing?" he asked. A few days ago my parents e-mailed the school about my tics and how they were getting worse. The principal then held a lecture with our tiny private school class to stress not to make fun of me or ask about my tics in general. They talked about my tics and how to avoid them like the plague. Will glanced over at me with nothing but sympathy in his eyes. When I focus on my tics they get worse, meaning that throughout this entire lecture, all the kids were staring at me like a monkey in a zoo. And I danced for them.

"Are your tics a hormonal thing?" he asked again.

"What?" I blinked.

"Well in the presentation it says that obviously males and females have different hormones, and I've never met a guy with your type of disorder, so I thought maybe it was a female thing." His voice was nasally.

"I'm pretty sure I'm the only person in general that you've ever met with 'my type of disorder' so I have no idea what you're talking about." I was about to get super pissed off and this poor boy didn't even see it coming.

"I was just wondering if you have this disorder

The Self by Anna Krutz

because you're a girl, and maybe if you were a guy you wouldn't have it."

I wanted to take my pencil and stab it right through his hand. Or his eye. I wanted to scream, but I didn't. I couldn't if it just stayed in my throat. Instead I just settled with punching him in the face. Suddenly I heard chairs scraping the floor and people yelling. There was a loud chatter in the room which I didn't like. I never liked loud noises. I was told to go to the principal's office, and I got detention after school for a week. I could've gotten away with no punishment if I used the simple "It was my tics" excuse, but I would rather die before I ever blame my tics for something they didn't do.

My parents sat me down a few days later. Their "parental intuition" told them something was up with me. They tried to get me to tell them my feelings. I think deep down we knew that wasn't gonna happen. I wanted to tell them. I *needed* to tell them, but I couldn't. I needed them to guess. I needed them to speak for me. They needed to tell me and to know how I was feeling because there was no way I could tell them. If they could just somehow figure out all the words I wasn't able to say, but they couldn't possibly know that much.

A while back my therapist offered a medicine I could take that would hopefully control my tics better. She said it should stop my tics or at least slow them down and make them less frequent. It ended up not working. When we told Dr. Hill, she looked disappointed, supposedly because she was hoping they would work and she just wanted to "heal" me. I just think she looked disappointed because she wanted to be able to say she was good at her job. She wasn't though, and even if the meds did end up working, that would have nothing to do with her. I was kind of glad the meds didn't work. Part of me didn't want to let go of my tics because they were part of who I am. It was like the annoying sibling that people always say they want to get rid of, but if they were ever presented the opportunity to actually do it, they would always say no. I didn't want to try any more meds, but it obviously wasn't up to me. It was up to my shit therapist who was still for some reason trying to convince my parents she was qualified for her job. I started taking another med that was supposed to help. It didn't.

One of the side effects of this pill was trouble with finding words. Meaning there were some simple words that I couldn't come up with for the life of me. I wanted nothing more than to completely forget about it, but my therapist told me not to worry and that it only really affected older folks that way. I didn't believe her for a second. My parents had her sign off on the prescription. I wanted to cry. No, I wanted to start bawling my eyes out. This wasn't fair. People already believed me to be incompetent enough due to my inability to control my own body. My intelligence was the one thing nobody ever doubted me for. It was the one thing I held on to. Now I was going to lose that too. I wanted to scream. I wanted to tell everybody to stop for just a second and let me catch up, but every damn word stayed right where it was. In the back of my throat. On the tip of my tongue. In the front of my mind.

For the next month of my life I had trouble coming up with words like banana, pencil, forehead, and an abundance of other words I used to be able to spell backwards with my eyes closed.

"Hey can you hand me that?" I asked Will pointing to our table full of school supplies.

"What?" he asked.

"That" I said trying to make my point more specific somehow. I didn't want to let on that I didn't know what it was called. My class already knew about my forgetfulness thanks to another lecture telling kids not to make fun of me. At the end of it they all looked at me waiting or me to say something. I forgot how to say "thank you".

Will tried his best to see where I was pointing so as not to embarrass me. He started moving his own pointer finger to things in the general vicinity of where mine was pointing.

"The green thing" I said. Luckily there were only two green things on the table and one was in the opposite direction I was pointing.

"Oh . . ." Will said, handing me the notebook.

I stopped taking the meds the next day. The funny thing was that they weren't even helping my tics. In fact, the meds were actually making my tics worse because of the frustration they caused. We stopped seeing my shitty therapist the next week. I hope she got fired.

I was so ecstatic to hear that I never had to go back there again so I decided to switch things up. I moved the furniture around in my room. My tics still were not getting any better, so it took longer than it should have. I was moving my lamp to my desk when I had to stop, plant my left heel on the ground, toes up, and lean back as if I was trying to touch my toes to my face. I straightened up again expecting to be able to continue my journey to my desk undisturbed. Then I got another feeling in my back. My hips lurched forwards and my legs went stick straight. My knees made a horrible licking noise. Suddenly my body was jerking in all different directions. It was really just my lower body, so I waited for it to pass. This happened sometimes. I would have these episodes where my tics just rolled and rolled through my body without giving me a break. I usually started to get really sweaty, and my heart rate went up by a tenfold. Then the worse thing happened. My arms and hands started to tic. My hands that were holding the lamp were dying to start clenching and unclenching and move as if I was trying to channel magical powers. Then my elbows started to lurch out, and suddenly I couldn't take it anymore. I dropped the lamp and it shattered. A piece of glass cut my leg right on the front part of my shin. It cut a diagonal line down the entire front part of it. The pain only made my tics worse, and I was on the ground. I was lurching in all directions, my body contracting and stretching as if something inside me was trying to get out. The sight was probably terrifying. I had blood dripping down my leg and on my hands, probably all over the floor too. The fact that it hurt like hell was all I could focus on. I always told my dad that if my whole scientist dream didn't work out, I could

always play a demon in some exorcist movie.

I banged my head on my ground. I planted my chin and listed the rest of my body up. I felt like some part of my skin would just tear apart like if you pulled a seam too hard. Something from the back of my throat was trying to claw its way out. I felt like there was some animal slithering up the back of my throat needing to escape. I was trying to force my mouth open and let it out. It was a feeling I was unfortunately familiar with. It usually came as a package deal with my tics when they got bad. I felt like screaming.

I screamed.

I remember my dad came rushing up the stairs to see me in all my glory. He looked terrified. I remember him rushing over to me, seeing the tears and snot running down my face. Then his eyes traveled to my leg. I remember him yelling something that I couldn't hear over the sound in my ears. If someone asked me to describe that sound, the best I could do is say that it was silent. It was quiet. Not the kind when you're in a room alone or you're next to someone being quite. The kind of quiet when you walk outside and all there is is snow packing all the sound inside its thick layers. The quiet where you simply can't hear anything. There might have been a distant ringing in my ears, but I don't remember much.

Two weeks later, I found myself sitting on a stiff couch. My dad was next to me, half asleep. I tried not to look at the bandage on my leg that covered the stitches. I looked around at the tan room and the green couch on which we were sitting. I looked at the small, rectangular table with magazines scattered across it. I looked at the green. One person sat across from me with a little yellow notepad and pencil. I looked at the paintings on the walls. They were the kind of paintings that were nice to look at, but really they were just a bunch of colors mixed together that anyone could really do in five seconds. Which was why they found themselves on a therapist's wall and not a nice art studio. A mug of hot chocolate was placed in front of me.

"Good morning, sweetheart," Dr. Eperstein said.

"Good morning," I said and elbowed my dad awake.

"How are you feeling?" she asked me. She always liked to get right to the point.

"Angry," I answered.

"Why?" she asked.

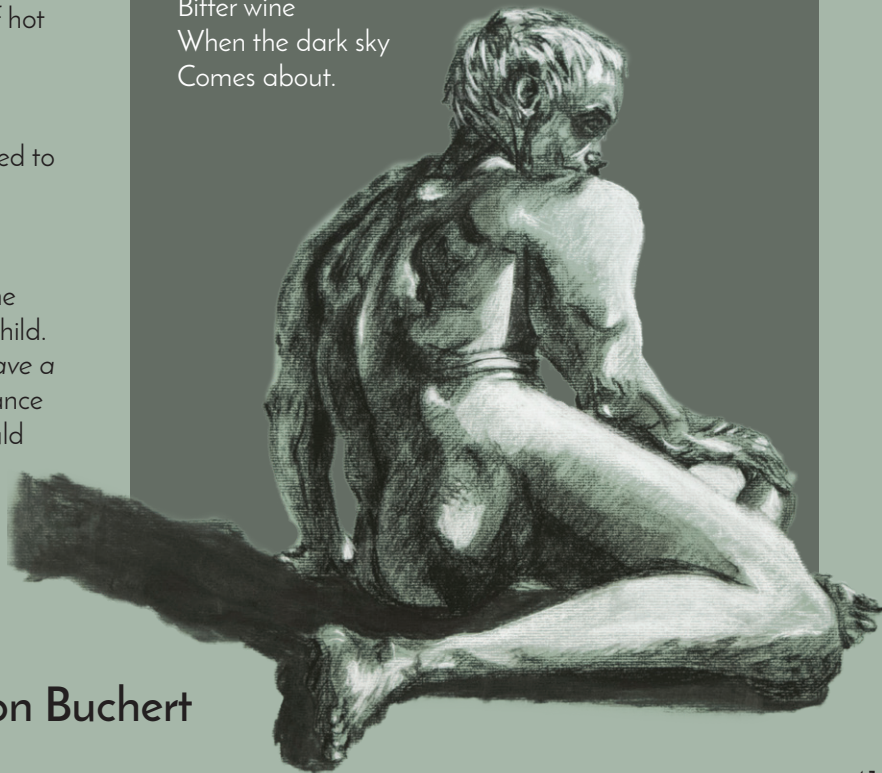
I shrugged. Dr. Eperstein smiled. She looked at me the same way a parent would look at their argumentative child. She smiled as if she was saying *it's cute you think you have a choice*. It was somehow comforting. It gave me reassurance that she would get it out of me eventually. That she would strip away my lies until I was left bare in the open with nothing but a cold bucket of truth. No matter how much I lied to myself, that was something I not only desperately wanted, it was something I needed. I looked up at her smiling face and opened my mouth. She let me speak.

A Man in Shadow by Keaton Buchert

Like cloves and fire

Isabelle Shachtman

My voice has gotten tired of
Narrating this life to the
Passerby
Mom throws her
Wedding ring at dad's feet
But they love each other
Like cloves and fire
It's my fault
But apology hurts me
Like a blade to my throat
It's not like those movies
Where the fighting parents
Tell their kids, "It's not your fault"
I ask mom why she didn't bother to tell me this
She says she's just really depressed
Drowning in an endless pain
A girl from school texts me
Says I make her happy
She hasn't been that way for a while
She tells me about how she watched the sun rise
This morning from her rooftop,
And how it made her smile.
I tell her she makes me happy too
Cause I don't want to ruin it for her
"All of my friends have left me," mom says
I'm sad to hear this
I love mom
And I love the moon and how it cleanses me
Bitter wine
When the dark sky
Comes about.



Cars On Roads Like Blood In Veins

Willow Vaughn

This wouldn't work. We both knew it, but it was still so easy to get attached. Even though we hardly had any time at all. We used every second we had, milked it for all it was worth. For some reason we had convinced ourselves that we could make it longer, that somehow we were above everything else this world had ever seen and that we could make it because we were somehow a magical duo that could make miracles happen.

You see, we thought, "Hey. Opposites attract so we should work."

I'm loud but I used to be quiet, and you're quiet but you used to be loud. You liked pop songs with the occasional rap, and I liked indie with touches of electronic. You liked band-tees and jeans, while I liked tank tops and sweatpants.

Okay, I realize that we're not perfect opposites, but if I'm headed north, you're going west. We're not exactly different, but we're clearly not the same. We just know that we didn't start heading the same direction and we're certainly not going to the same destination. If I'm being honest, I'm not going to plead for you to come with me, or ask if I can come with you. We're just not meant to do this together and that's fine.

The awful part of it is, though, that we more or less got attached. We may not be headed for the same spot, but somehow, on the criss-crossing roads of this country, our cars began to move at the same speed as you passed my on-ramp and my car was thrown into the same herd as the one you were traveling with.

And at some point, either you or I ran out of gas at the same the other one decided they needed a cheap pop or a candy bar or maybe a cigarette. We took the same exit, one of us found the gas station and the other followed. You went into the store first, and I followed a few seconds later.

I remember being struck by how pedestrian you looked. I'm on the road a lot, and usually the people you see look somehow . . . bizarre. Hell, I've seen my car; there's old food wrappers and costumes and papers and a work uniform scattered everywhere in my car except the driver's seat. But you looked so normal, especially compared to me in my cosplay,

headed straight from a convention on a long car ride home.

You looked at me like I was a fairy . . . or a mad witch, more like. But I brought a smile to your face and that somehow that gave me the courage to wink at you. This forced a chuckle from you, even though you looked deadass tired at approximately three in the morning when we were just outside of Abilene, Texas.

You got back in your big rig and I followed you back to the highway. We were alone with only each other, ourselves and the hosts on the everchanging radio stations. I remember that at one point we were on the same station, and I could tell because you rolled your windows down and sang along, horribly, to whatever shitty pop song the radio was trying to bring back from the previous year. I don't remember the name of the song, but I rolled my windows down too and joined in on the fun. After the song ended, we didn't know what to do, so we both rolled our windows up. It was cold out, after all, and my costume didn't even let me wear a full shirt.

A few more towns and the Texas-Oklahoma state line later and we were in Broken Bow, Oklahoma. I started to get in the turn lane, planning to stop and rest for the night. It was only when I began to press on my brakes that I realized you had moved over two lanes to get behind me. Now it was you following me to the crappy hotel that cost forty-nine dollars a night per room.

I parked in the front. No one appeared to be crowding this place and the front of the lot was almost completely open. You had to park your truck in the back. By the time I had my room key, you were inside and standing behind me, waiting your turn. I was in the elevator, bag in hand, when I heard you tell the receptionist, "Just give me the room next to her." I'm pretty sure you heard my laughter from down the hallway.

I dropped my backpack on my bed and propped my door open with one of my shoes. I heard the door next to me open and close. I thought you were just ignoring me, but a minute later I saw you, in your pajamas, push my door open and laugh. I smiled at you, my legs swinging

back and forth as I sat on the bed. You just flopped down next to me as I turned on the TV to some shitty Hallmark movie that was playing.

I changed into my pajamas and took off my wig and make-up. You gasped, teasing me, when I came back looking like a completely different looking person.

"Possibly your most daring look of the night," you had told me. I just elbowed you and told you to shut up, the movie was on and we were missing it. Though, we laughed . . . because the movie was worth missing.

Instead we played those weak party games you're supposed to play at sleepovers when you're a kid. You later told me you never had. I'd only played them with coworkers on slow nights. But, as it turned out, 'Would You Rather' and 'Truth or Dare' and 'This or That' were really fun, especially at about 11:30, when you had been driving since the same time but a day in the past and hadn't slept at all.

You ended up falling asleep in my room. Your room was just a wasted forty-nine dollars and a cubby hole for your duffle bag. Instead, we slept together, curled up on the floor in front of the TV, kept warm by only the blanket you had brought in from the cabin of your truck and by each other's almost fever-high body temperature.

You were warm because of some sickness you had picked up somewhere back in your hometown that was somewhere more south than Austin, and I was warm because of a sunburn I had picked up while outside in the courtyard of the convention center. Even like this our warmth was somehow a blessing even though we both woke up at some point during the night, sweating, to take off the blanket and turn on the weak fan.

The next morning, we exchanged phone numbers and headed back to the road. But now no music blared through the radio. We had each other on a video call, phones resting against our dashboards, camera at a really unflattering angle for both of us. But still we talked, laughed and told each other about where we were headed. I still feel sad that you didn't say the same place

as me. Still, we stopped at the same gas station to get lunch: a cheap coffee and a lunchable for you, a cup of soda and a bag of gummy worms for me.

I laughed at how you ate two stacks of cracker, meat and cheese at one time. You laughed at how I had to chew really hard to separate the partially stale worms into pieces. You burnt your tongue on the coffee. I choked on a small piece of ice. We shook our heads at each other and got back in our cars.

We must've looked weird. An eighteen-wheeler and a Volvo with no port for an aux cord. Maybe we were both just kinda old school like that.

By the time we reached Westville, I could've sworn we had maybe met when we were a couple years younger, then you moved and we had just forgotten about each other and now we had somehow met again. You just felt so comfortable, like the blanket that I now knew was in your passenger seat.

Between 5:45 to 6:30 at the latest, we had reached the border of Kansas and I was so close to home and I could tell. By all three: the scenery, the drop of my heart into my gut, and the fact you were growing quieter. By the time we were in Independence, we were back to making deep small-talk, like we were convinced that maybe, maybe we could convince each other that we wanted to go in the same direction.

But I knew that West wasn't home, and you knew that North held nothing for you.

When we reached Iola, I had resorted to telling you all about Kansas City, about how much I loved it, about how much you would love it. You started telling me about California, how much prospect it held, how good I could do there.

The next half hour we was spent in silence. But we started laughing together again by Garnett, but by then we only had an hour and fifteen minutes left.

And we filled those precious minutes with everything we could. I bitched about how much I simultaneously love and hate my job, you told me about how you were missing a concert on this trip.

Finally, we reached Kansas City, Kansas. We stopped at a QuikTrip just off the highway. We were both running low on gas, anyway, and even though we were about to be separated, likely to never see each other again, we were both practical people. And this little interaction, whatever it had been, was not enough to

stop our lives in our tracks.

We both made light talk as we filled our tanks and went inside to pick up something to eat. I handed you a coffee, and you handed me a bottle of strawberry Fanta. I paid for both of our collective treats, and when you tried to protest, I just hushed you. "You're going farther than me; you'll need the gas money later," I said. You shook your head and rolled your eyes, but you put your wallet away all the same.

I told the cashier I wanted the receipt. Which is weird, because I usually tell them to trash it. I guess I just wanted something to remember you by; some physical proof that all of this happened and that you weren't just some highway wraith that I had imagined seconds before my own car crash death. But as far as the single piece of evidence hinted, this whole experience had been just as real as I could believe.

And there we stood, you in front of your truck and me in front of my Volvo. We didn't know how we could or should end this. Hell, we didn't even know if there was a standard protocol for such unique events like this. But here we were and we'd be damned if we weren't going to be the first ones to show people how it's done.

I held my hand out, offering a handshake as a farewell. You laughed and pushed my hand aside before pulling me into a hug. I didn't even try to resist. I just wrapped my arms around you in return. We pulled apart and looked each other in the eyes.

"You're sure?" I asked.

"Very," you said.

"Then I wish the best of luck to you."

"Right back at you."

Then we both nodded and you opened the door to your giant monster of a truck, and I got in my mouse of a car. We really must've looked like quite the duo, driving everywhere together. But now our number of two would subtract one, and we would each be solo acts again.

We both pulled out onto the street at the same time. I was turning left and you were turning right. I was headed back to my hometown and you were going to turn onto the US Route 50 and take it all the way to California. I'd like to think that the light turned red just for us so we could have those precious thirty seconds.

We wasted the first ten by looking at

the traffic. And the next five were spent looking at the light, seeing if it would turn. The next ten we just didn't make eye contact. Then we finally looked at each other, and I saw you see me. So I did what I thought would make us both feel better. I winked and blew you a kiss. You pretended to dodge it with a disgusted face. It made me laugh. I stuck my tongue out at you in retaliation.

Then the light turned, and I was forced to turn away from you.

But I hope that's how you remember me: a laugh on my face and my tongue sticking out like a fool. If you do choose to remember me.

I choose to remember you. Something about us changed me; it made me realize just how good the world can be and just how happy other people can make me. In those brief hours together, I think I came to love you, but there was no heartbreak when we parted. Just happiness that for the little amount of time we had together, we were not-quite-perfect together.

You changed me and everything I knew. For that, I thank you.

Keep Your Head Up by Bennett Junkins



Paper Bird

Angela Lombardino

This is the story of why I became a pilot. I wasn't ever really fascinated with planes or their mechanics, nor did I ever buy one of those build-your-own model airplanes when I was little. I was fascinated with the flying part, flying out in the big open sky for miles on end.

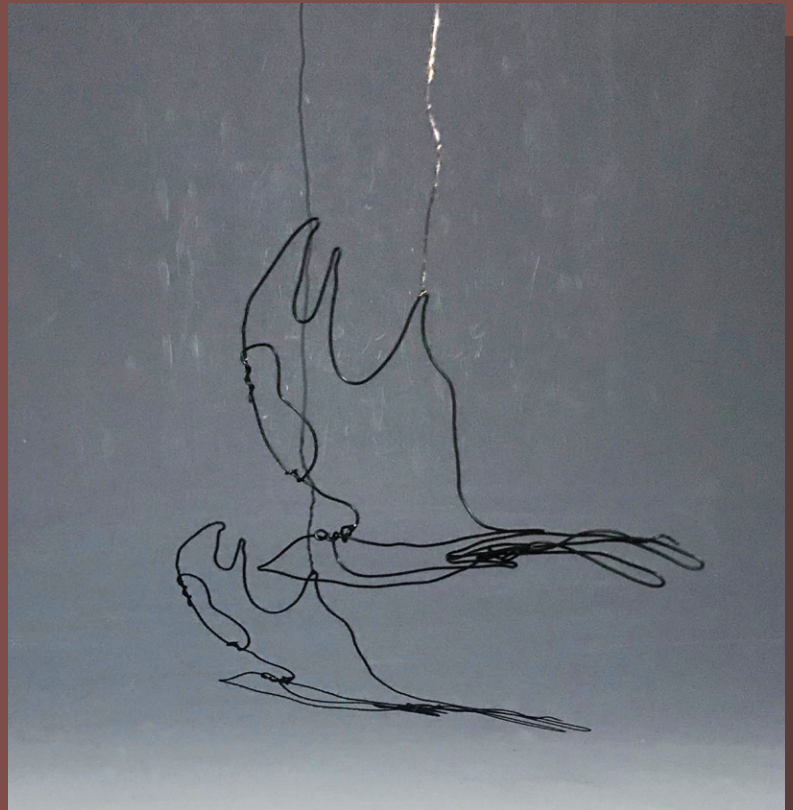
My love for flying began when I was five years old and my mother and I moved into her childhood home. The house was in the middle of farmland, stood three stories tall and was a faded blue. I remember the first day in my new home; curiosity drove me to explore every inch of the house. My feet scampered on the wood floors as I wandered up and down the halls, starting from the first floor and making my way up to the third. The third floor was smaller than the other two. There was only one bath, one hall closet, and one single bedroom. Even after all these years, I will never forget the third floor bedroom.

When I opened the door, I found nothing particularly interesting about the room and was about to leave to explore the rest of the house when I noticed the walls. They were covered from top to bottom with bird print wallpaper. The birds were simple enough, each one just plain white. What was interesting was not the birds themselves, though. It was the lack of one. There, on the wall near the window, was one missing bird. I couldn't fathom where the bird had gone or why it had left in the first place. As I explored the rest of the house, my little mind kept wandering back to the missing bird on the third floor bedroom wall. It wasn't until I asked my mother later that day that I discovered the story of the missing bird. I remember my mother looked at me, simply smiled with that loving smile and told me it all began when someone left the window open . . .

Years ago there was a big house with farmland as far as you can see in all directions. The house stood three stories tall and was a lovely bright blue, and in that house was one very special room. That special room was the third floor bedroom, and it belonged to the farmer's daughter. The room had printed wallpaper with snow white birds all across the walls. Two of those birds dreamed of flying away. They would look out the window and dream of flying out into the big open sky. Of course it was only a wishful dream, for how could a bird made of paper ever fly? Still, day after day they dreamed, until one day the window was left open.

A breeze flew through the room, blowing the curtains and ruffling . . . a feather? There on the wall, on the wing of a bird was a feather, a snow white feather on a paper bird. Another breeze came and the paper bird's wing began to move. The wind came soaring into the room, the curtain touching the ceiling, looking almost like clouds. The paper bird began to shake and move and suddenly he leapt off the wall. The snow white bird, no longer paper, flew out the window and into the big open sky. It left no trace of its existence but an empty spot on the wall and a single white feather on the windowsill.

Unfortunately, the second bird was left behind. The second bird tried with all his might to fly off the wall and into the air, but the window was once again closed. For many years the bird stayed on



the wall still dreaming of the sky as he always did. Only now, he also dreamed to one day to be reunited with his friend.

"You mean the bird is still on the wall in the third floor bedroom?" I asked my mother when the story had come to an end.

"That's right, Elizabeth. He's still waiting for the day to join his friend in the sky." Without a second thought, I ran up to the third floor bedroom. When I reached the room, I found the room no longer roamed my mind, but now had a place in my heart, where it took the form of a story that had not quite found its ending. My eyes landed on the wall, on the place with the missing bird. I realized the bird was never missing, it had only found a new home in the sky. I ran across the room to the window and with all my little might, I flung open the window.

The breeze started to fly into the room, through my hair and the curtains. I felt like the paper bird as the wind surrounded me. It was as if I had wings that could carry me away with the wind. I closed my eyes as my imagination turned me into a bird, flying in the big open sky, through a curtain of clouds and even farther for miles on end, until I could no longer see the old three story house and its faded blue paint. I stayed until the bright blue sky turned dark and the stars stared down at me, blinking in curiosity.

The next day, when I returned to the room, I saw that two paper birds were now missing from the wall. I walked further into the bedroom and found, on the windowsill, a single white feather. The wind flew around me, it guided my gaze and told me to look out the window. When I looked, I saw two snow white birds flying through the sky. They flew together, side by side, like old friends. Circling one another, they spun and twirled through the air. Their wings embraced the warmth of the sun and the breeze of the wind. I stood there, looking out the window, dreaming of flying through the big open sky.

Junkie

Kayla Doubrava

If loving yourself is a drug, then I am slowly becoming an addict
A habit like this isn't hard to fall into,
I didn't even have to try
It just felt so good,
I didn't want to stop
High on pure admiration
Drunk on the strongest adoration
Pumping confidence into my veins with needles,
making me feel a whole new kind of good,
like I could rule the world
I am hooked,
And there is no way I'm going to quit
I am a junkie with no interest in rehab
I am hiding happy pills in my mirror frame,
and rolling joints full of the sound of my laughter,
and smoking them down until there is nothing left, but the ashes of my smile
Because I can't get enough,
and it won't ever be enough
I'll always have an itch for more
But the smoke burns less and less these days,
I guess I'm just getting used to the way it feels

An illustration of two hands, one light-skinned and one dark-skinned, holding each other. The light-skinned hand is on the left, wearing a green ribbed sleeve. The dark-skinned hand is on the right, wearing a red ribbed sleeve. The background is a soft, ethereal purple and blue gradient. The text is overlaid on a semi-transparent dark purple rectangle.

Sideways Eight

Hayley Allison

Our love was born out of infinity,
Full of promises and late-night murmurings.
We chased each other around and around the loops of our symbol,
Never ceasing to catch our breath,
Never stopping to let our minds catch up with our words.
We were invincible in the other's eyes,
Powerful and fearless, admired with a star-struck gaze that reflected our own little world.
I only realized just how wrong we were as the months passed on by
And I spent more time covering the yellow and purple bruises than I did with you.
The same lips you kissed before were the same ones you split open on your bad nights,
Yet before I could wash out the blood stains you would be there to remind me
That we still had our infinity,
We still had our pinky promises and tales of the future
We still had our memories of laying under the stars and opening our hearts,
We still had each other to fight back the skeletons that hid in our closets,
We still had one another.

But how could you protect me from yourself?
The skeletons that haunt me now are more than bone,
More than the flesh that I glimpse in hallways and in old picture frames.

I broke our infinity,
Shattered it into two rings,
And I hope that you can find someone to give yours to.

Dealing with Neo-Nazism by Natalie Rovello



Thank You Potholes: A Slam Poem

Rachel Stander

Dear Potholes,

Thank you for never failing to inconvenience me, for ruining my tires a little bit more every time I hit you, for being the topic of conversations I do not want to have. Thank you for collecting on private roads so that I can hit ten of you at once, so my trip to the bank can turn into a joyride at the world's lamest amusement park, dear potholes.

Thank you for never failing to knock the memory of you-know-who back into my mind with every bump, for ruining my ignorant bliss, transforming it into a curiosity I do not want to waste my time with, because the mystery of what a specific someone is doing at the very moment I hit you is a topic I cannot let go of. No matter how hard I try to stay in the present I am taken back to the time every song reminded me of him. Thank you for collecting every recollection from that autumn . . . and then that spring . . . and then that other spring, so my trip to the grocery store can turn into a distress ride down memory lane. The random shape assigned to every one of you reminds me of the random times he would tell a joke I did not want to laugh at. The sporadic placement of your being reminds me of the sporadic silences; long phases of not knowing each other to end up coming back a few months later to catch up on what we've missed, just to get a little too close before becoming strangers . . . again. The predictable complaints that you will elicit from the other passengers in my car are comparable to the ones extracted out of the mouth I do not want to hear from.

But, you and I both know that in reality, I don't mind remembering the first time in my life someone made me feel like I was special, all the moments that opened my eyes into the life of somebody else, all the late nights I refused to go to bed because the middle of the night was the only time someone wasn't working, every time I would be distracted from reality by the pretend future I would imagine myself in. Even during our good times, I knew I was wasting my time with all my daydreams, I knew from the beginning we wanted different things, but I could not help but to waste my own time.

Dear potholes, I know you know how good I am at blaming myself for the end, but the mistakes we made together are the reason we will never go back to the level of innocent teasing we used to thrive in.

These days, with every bump, I can hear you telling me, this time, think of anything else, but as badly as I want to listen to you, I cannot help but to ignore you, every time. One day, I hope my subconscious will finally hear you and put a different song on repeat because I know it doesn't seem like it, but I am tired of seeing the same memories play back in my mind, like the worst pop songs playing on the radio over and over and over. I am tired of comparing every new person I talk to, to the same old one, the same one that doesn't matter anymore. I am tired of caring enough to the point that these feelings are turning into poetry . . . or are trying to.

Dear potholes, thank you for never failing to remind me that I have grown, for ruining my pride and keeping me humble, for collecting every recollection and packing them all away in the same box for me.

I know that running over you one day, making a trip to the post office, will just be a trip to the post office.

Hot and Sour Love

Alice Wu

I fell in love with the first taste of that awakening flavor. The clouds of egg drops melted on my tongue and were followed by the dark earthiness of wood ear mushrooms. I thought I was drinking liquid amber, bright with acidity and warm with the red kiss of chilies. My father then told me it was called hot and sour soup. As my family left the restaurant, the last whisper lingered on my lips, and I knew I wanted more.

I also knew I would be disappointed. We almost never went out to eat, and I had no hope of recreating the dish on my own. With my slippery hands and flitting mind, my mother barely trusted me to touch knives or the stove. Moreover, my family's attempts to cook something new always ended in regret. I remember the linguine swimming in red foam (a dish we called spaghetti) and the separated curry floating on a island of oil. Because my mother's rule was that nothing could go to waste, I also remember those foods feeling thick in my throat as I swallowed without chewing. There was a reason why we settled for an empirical formula of rice and stir-fried vegetables, and I willed myself to turn thoughts of the soup away.

One day, however, I let my nose and ears guide me down the stairs to our plain white kitchen, and I paused in the doorway with rounded eyes. There was my mother, cubing tofu and whisking eggs by hand. A black curl drooped by her glossy cheek, and her voice mingled with steam as it rose in the songs of her distant childhood. When she ladled a bowl to the brim for me, I formed the only words

I could think of: *Xie xie. Thank you.*

My mother began making the soup with astonishing frequency, and not believing in written recipes or measuring out her ingredients, her creations varied every time. Sometimes, sesame oil would come through and form golden bubbles. Other times, the gentle sweetness of carrots was

what sang. She teased that she would never have to cook that soup again if I drank it too often and tired of it, but how could I? It was sure heat when winter was wet and heavy with snow. It was clarity in the torpor of summer. Most of all, it was a mother's love, flowing fast and constantly through my veins.

There were times, though, when I struggled to find the magic. The broth would be too thin, or the excess salt and white pepper would coat my tongue. One time, as I sat on my bedroom floor with my head between my knees, my mother knocked on my closed door holding a hot bowl of soup. However, her hand must have slipped while she was pouring the vinegar, as the soup pinched my throat and made me wince. As I coughed, she offered to get me a glass of water, but I merely shook my head. She then pursed her lips and turned away.

That night, she sat down alone with a bowl of the soup before I wordlessly joined her.

Her red-rimmed gaze met mine, and I wondered: Why do we pursue love when it doesn't taste sweet? Neither of us could find the words to answer, so we let them fall away instead. We simply filled the silence with the clattering of spoons and sips of a four-letter word I was only beginning to understand.



Mother by Zoie Mehl

Sticky Rice

Kylie Volavongsa

She's not sure what to make of herself
stranger at home
unfamiliar face in a sea of faces that
should be everything she's looking for

Because this is Laos
and she was supposed to remember
the story of the *Mekong*, Dad's recipe
for *tam mak hoong*, and above all
the word for thank you

On the other side of the world
home to strangers
pale faces that jeered at
everything Other
it was too easy to forget

And this sticks to her more than the grains of rice
glued between impatient fingertips

rolling, pausing, rolling again
until a snowball of starch finds its way into this
landlocked city of familiar mystery

It's dawn, and Luang Prabang is bustling,
a stray dog in the eye's corner,
tourists armed with cellphone cameras,
and veteran natives
armed with the usual offering of *khao niao*

The first monk arrives at the top of the hill
a saffron-robbed sunrise to break the idle chaos
of waiting

The rest follow one by one, seemingly infinite and
she's reminded of ants as they
silently gather everything they need,
persistent but never imposing

"*Tak bat*," the locals call it,
and she nods, having done this an ocean away
with Twinkies and Oreos
(then forgetting about it)

But she's here now
and hopes to god it's enough as
she tries to take in everything about

this procession of orange, yellow, silver,
a solemn line of boys and men
approaching for a daily deposit of food,
simultaneously depositing bits of themselves
into memory,
all of it sticking

sticking

sticking

Stuck

until she remembers what to make of herself.



The Dark Gaze
by Keaton Buchert

Aloe Vera

Katherine D. Westbrook

The rain is immediate, and collects in every pore like blood clots.
For this moment, coiled small, a child's figure shaking sleep –
I move. Pulsing water smudges the dented car hood
three blocks down, and there is a caution to both of our actions.

The robins on the powerline clench the wire as if it were a thread of music –
Mute as man's grip to knife handles, balancing acts of ribbon and talon and feathered breast –
and I am forced to ask myself what an electric current must feel when running through the body,
or the rain as it cradles a grass carpet, or the thick sheets that strangle me or better yet –

This is the chrysalis I am caught in. I murmur dreams through silk envelopes,
born again as the chill of an autumn morning. All I know is that my fear
can breathe; all I know is the word we use for this kind of dying
runs my tongue with needles. Sometimes I forget things stop happening after they

stop happening. An earthworm wrought to topsoil by
a wad of spit. Broadcasted light on the empty stadiums.
Snow falling parallel to the upturned bucket of moon. How my chest
softens with the slowing of hands or heartbeats.

The robin positions its beak into the dirt and begins knocking –
Earthen doors collapse and the worm appears, allotting a moment's glimpse at the sky
For what it really is, a collection of aimless directions and shelled flight patterns.
Death has visited me in many ways, the most often as shadows, as stillness.

Rain dampens everything into a lullaby, like a,
like a diluted memory.

The robins are again feverish upon the powerline,
and I see myself finally, stumbling through an endless tunnel of
light. The body does not forget a thing like this.



Prudence by Lucy Sun

Eyes Shut Wide

Yasi Farahmandnia

Barricading our creativity and emotion
they stand
As tall as our dreams
And as vague as our goals

Amplifying the feeble ground
they stand
Constructing our world
Limiting our thought
Cubing our flexibility
Opposing our expansion

Confiscating our will
they stand
Recording our gesticulations
Blocking our share of vitamin D
and separating us from
the two feet of non-institutionalized world we drool over
the pieces of dirt we worship
and the vitamin D we necessitate

The ethereal tale of the walls commemorating our stories
are nothing but that:
ethereal.

The romanticized story told from an optimistic mouth
filtered through your optimistic ear is
failing to optimize reality in your unconscious
and yet,
we have chosen our sixth sense to be
"imaging transparency"

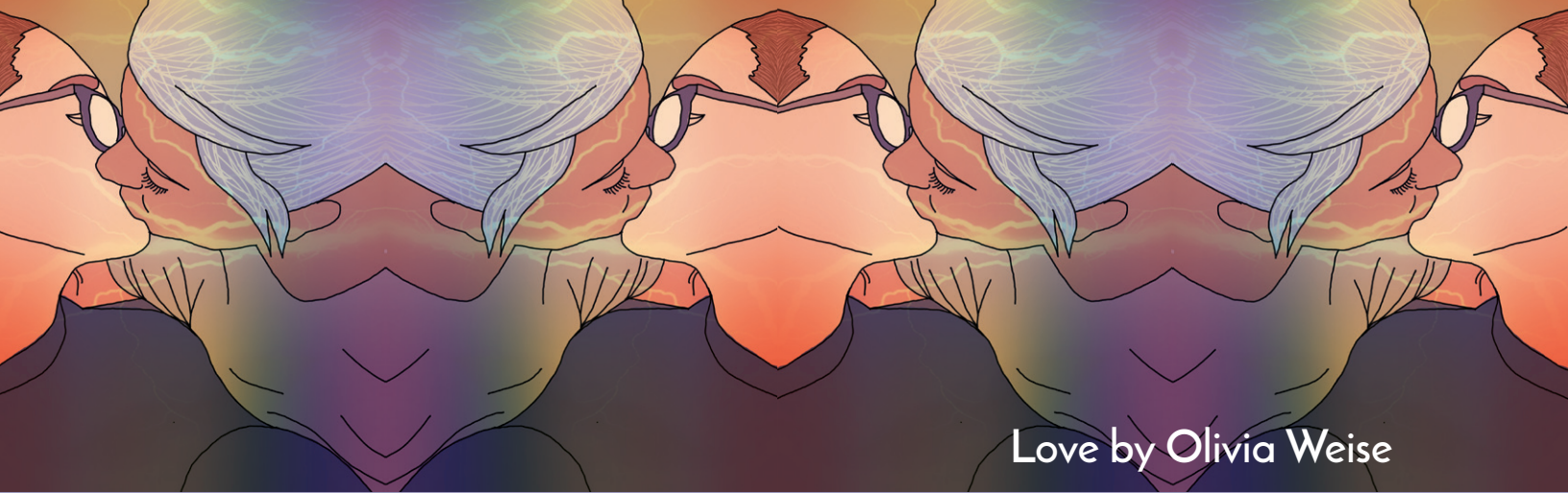
The power that they possess is already of damage to us
but still we give
We are generous like that
We dare to assume the assumption of the walls around us
speaking
Sound boiling in their dry,
concrete,
hard throats as they prepare to vocalize their feelings
"their", "feelings"
Two words that will add to their possessions

Slowly they weaponize their infant words
and their chapped lips manage to make a sound
and the pressure is building
and the world is watching
and the anticipation is brutal

and then,
Clamor Commotion Tumult Upheaval Noise
The constructed world becomes a cinema
and the whole world is watching and don't you dare
look away from this because it was a movie
you paid to see
it was a topic fascinating enough
to draw you in and
now that you are *in*
there is nothing but commotion

The barricades are talking!
The amplifiers are roaring!
The confiscators are chaotic!

and it was all because the trap of a romantic story
had you upside down all the while.



Love by Olivia Weise

I was in love with that girl

Anonymous

I remember the guilt I had as
A nine year old girl
When I kissed another girl
Just for fun.
I wouldn't have
If she didn't lead me on
Freckled
Blue eyes
Red-brown hair.
After the first time she kissed me
My heart hurt
She giggled
And we'd do it again
Occasionally with me
Taking the lead.
I remember sleeping at her house
The night of the fourth of July.
See, it was so loud outside
The fireworks amid the humidity
That we held hands
And slept close by
I felt
From her palms
The same fog
That made me dizzy like
Catching fireflies
Beneath the stars.
She always had a mysterious sort of look in her eyes
Right before
And after
A kiss.
It made me want her even more than the last time.
And when we'd wake in the morning
And wave goodbye
I'd be sad
A little
I remember us in her bed
And in mine
On those cozy summer nights.
Compulsively touching and kissing
Each other
Brushing our hands through tangled
Chlorinated hair
And I didn't want to think about it

Until I was about eleven
When she told me
She was just practicing for her boyfriend.
I broke down
Standing at the end of her bed frame
Gripping the cold metal with my sweaty hands.
At this point
Something
Inside me
Was begging me to stop.
It all reminded me of
Pretty women that sang on stages
And kissed boys.
Mom and dad.
Sure,
We were young,
And that made me wary,
But twelve year old girls
Were supposed to know
Much better.
That's when I told her
What I thought was true
She begged me to be okay with it
It was our little secret-
Her mouth
Always perfumed
With curiosity
Tasting like the smell of amber.
We had sleep overs like those
For years
Until it stopped.
I miss those nights
Of rolling around with her
And kissing once our parents were asleep
I miss brushing her hair
In a room
Of hollywood lights and thin carpet.
I miss it all to the point where it's unbearable that I take off
my clothes
Get into bed
And cry
Feeling the utter euphoria
Just now realizing
I was in love with that girl.

a yard sale

Isobel Li

there's the set of highlighters
funny how a set of highlighters have burrowed their way
into the section of her brain
labeled "relevant"
yet here are the highlighters
pink orange green
and everything in between
they were his favorite thing to steal
and valiantly attempt
to copy her immaculate chemistry notes with
oh you can't forget those highlighters
that endured angry abuse
during late night cramming sessions
worn down and loved
by the two lovers sharing them

and yes there is the camera – a Polaroid
he got it for her, you know
pale dainty eggshell yellow
the color of muted sunshine
he knew it would be perfect
and it was, definitely
because it faithfully captured all their memories
through the sunny and stormy
the high school dances
fast food photo shoots
candid smiles over store bought cookies
birthday celebrations complete with balloons
it really was faithful, don't you think
maybe even more faithful than he was

see that? there's her oversized hoodie
well technically it isn't hers
she took it from him

when she was cold
and he was her warmth
because she needed that warmth
needed his love
how convenient he had exactly those two things!
but now she doesn't want to return it
and face the boy who took something of hers in return
trade for a trade
but a sweatshirt isn't worthy of a heart

and finally there's the unused perfume bottle
she bought it in a set of two
so the harmony of vanilla and roses
would caress her
and envelope him
and define them
until citrus and berries
passionflowers with a punch
and lavender spices
masked the defining scents
of her sweetness and love

her thoughts are interrupted
by a cheery voice from above
"how much?"
her gaze travels from the smiling young mother
to the little girl clutching a fluffy teddy
her teddy
their teddy
a sad smile traces her lips
it really is hard to let go

"no charge"

Free by Grace Dickerson





trials of the female

Ashley Honey

The moment I was conceived
And my egg was fertilized to have xx chromosomes
Instead of xy
My body was taken away from me
And placed in the hands of men
The hands of men that control dress codes
The fingers that will slap my ass as I walk down the street
The nails that will scratch my skin and I shout
No
I am undressed by his claws
And my psyche is torn to shreds

When I was a child
I was always told to tell an adult
When I was being bullied
When I was being mistreated
When I was afraid
So when he undressed me
Against my will
And touched my body
Without permission
I told an adult
And all they did was make excuses
"He was drunk."
"Did you say no?"
"What were you wearing?"
And when my trial went to court
He got away with everything
Because there is no physical proof
Of what he did

But if you stared into my soul
You would see the proof
Of a broken woman
Who is afraid to fall asleep in her room
(What if he comes through my window?)
Who cannot walk alone at night
(What if he takes me when nobody is around?)
Who cannot go to school because
He is there
He is everywhere
Praised for his
Achievements in sports
"This prison sentence will ruin his life!"
Screams his mother
But what about my life?
Hasn't it been ruined too?
He made a choice that night
While mine was taken away
Where is my justice?
Where is the justice for the women of the world?

My body was taken away from me
When male lawmakers
Thought it was their job to make laws
Governing my body
Telling me what I can and cannot do with it

They say abortion is murder
But what about the murder of my soul
When I was impregnated by a monster
Given a child I do not want
Where is my justice?
Oh, in that case, I can have my abortion
See?
They will only give me my rights back
On their own accord
Reminding me that they are above
And I am below

But I will gather all the women of the world
And we will pound our fists on their doors
And shout so loud
They won't be able to ignore us anymore



welcometotheparty by Allison Park



Hope for Best by Julia Marks

The Sculpture Renee Born

"Laura, what are you doing?"

"Leaving."

"You've gotta work."

"Doesn't matter, it's almost over," she said.

"Your shift's not up for another four hours." Her coworker stamped a customer's order code into the pad next to the screen. Its preparation began with a whir.

"Not my shift, everything. Everything's almost over," she added. Her coworker hesitated, fingers hovering over the handle

to open the food dispenser.

Laura left, shrugging off the greasy radiation of the food she served. Her feet beat the hull of the ship christened *New World*, hers and all the human feet left in the universe. Such a weight to place on something so hastily constructed and so long ago. She barely saw it, barely cared.

She arrived in the observatory. Its dark cavern of thick glass used to be full all the time, in the early days when humanity was still enamored with the universe. Before they realized the stars are just old light. Dark and dark and dark and light. That's all.

Laura turned to the sculpture sitting

at the center of the lightless dome. Its six steel arms raised in imitation of a god they had long grown out of. The only gods left were constellations, and they all eventually passed in the wake of toxic gas and the hum of engines.

"When will the world end?" Laura asked the sculpture. Its eyes shimmered, two marbles set deep in a metal face, focusing on something very far away. She studied the shiny convex surfaces, trying to catch what it could see. What she could only feel.

"The world ended on March 15, 2019." Its voice was water dripping in a cave.

"I mean, when will the *New World* end?"

"Not for many years," It said.

"Why are you lying?"

Its eyes didn't slide to see her, its finger joints didn't bend. The only movement in the neglected room was the fish. The fish in the torso-shaped tank of the sculpture. Red koi swirled in the dark water. Water that looked like the sea at night, only no one who had seen Earth's oceans was alive to recognize them.

"I am incapable of lying," It said.

"I don't think so. They made you right, they made it so you would know. I bet they forgot to make sure you'd tell us. But I know. I know the end is tonight, not long now."

The fish stilled, for half a moment they floated, their round eyes like tens of tiny observatories, observing her. Then back to swimming, slow flashes of ruby, fins pulling at the small starlight.

"Why not tell us? Why not be honest? That's what they made you for, so we would know when we were out of time."

The fish moved out as one, approaching the glass, then back to the center. Just like a sigh.

"The *New World* will live for many years to come."

"No it won't. It dies tonight. I already know, I can feel it." She watched the koi. If it were to tell the truth, to admit the end was near, a silver stream of mercury would slip from its steel skull and fall into the tank. Designed as a warning, but designed. She imagined the fish shimmering and dead like the stars, belly up.

"I wonder who feeds them."

"I do." Those eyes like wells, the whole universe swimming in their glassy shadows. Still water silence filled the observatory. "They are alive, a part of me, and yet, I am empty. Nothing but space and mercury." The darkness rippled.

"You don't want to hurt them." She saw the flick and sway of their long tails and knew they were beautiful. The sculpture was large and seated upon a raised platform, but she could still reach it. She placed a hand against the glass. The fish flinched away, but slowly they returned

to study the pale starfish of her fingers on the edge of their cold, dark world.

"They trust me," It said. "The world will live on," It said.

"We'll all be dead and together soon enough, what does it matter?"

With a sudden and startling creak of metal, the statue turned, bending so its large plated face was just near Laura's.

"Yes, what does it matter?" Up close its eyes seemed impossibly deep, stardust sealed in an endless, reflective darkness. She drew away.

"It matters to us. Well, to others. I already know it's ending, so soon, so soon."



It moved back so that you'd never know it had done anything but just sit there.

"If you knew, you wouldn't need me."

She thought on that.

"Perhaps not." She thought some more.

"Do you wish we had never wanted you? Do wish we had never wanted to know?"

"They never did. They only thought they did. They thought and thought and didn't feel. Like me." It let its three sets of arms down, at last creaking stiff joints to rest at the tank's sides. The clinking of metal on glass scattered the koi.

"No, not like you. You won't hurt them.

You must feel, or you'd just tell us and the fish would die and it would be over."

"How could I? How could I do that?"

They trust me, they don't know or understand. They think they know what they want from me but they don't. They can't see anything outside their cold, dark, little world. Not like I can." It stared past the stars.

"I know, I know, but it doesn't matter. Soon nothing will."

"Perhaps not." It paused. "But then why don't you tell them?"

"They wouldn't believe me."

"You barely believe you. Because you can't see either."

She moved right to the edge of the room until her nose almost touched the barrier between her and all that old light, just pinpricks in the dark.

"You can only feel, blind and feeling is what you are. You don't know, so you want me to tell you what I see, what I know. Or maybe you do know, but you wish you didn't."

Silence settled over them again. Laura watched the stars and tried to imagine their planets, warmed by fresh light. She couldn't see anything but dust.

"And so I don't tell them." A star caught her eye, its frosted white light flickering, growing.

"Will it be fast?"

"No."

"Will it hurt?"

The single star stretched, fingers of light splayed like a starfish.

"No, nothing but your eyes, if you don't close them."

Laura became aware that she was no longer alone. She didn't turn but she knew that her coworker, and her dentist, and her mother were there. And others too, people she wouldn't be able to place or never knew. The observatory was once again full of people, faces turned to the glimmering membrane. Beyond it, the light was huge and brand new.

"I suppose it really doesn't matter," the sculpture said. A silver koi drifted to the top of the dark water, scales pressing against the glass.

If I were to pluck my feathers,
I wouldn't be able to fly.

But I want to feel the grass underneath my feet
and the stretch of muscle as I roll my ankles.

I hop like a robin on the sidewalk
(away from flight, towards dandelions
sprouting in cracked concrete)

Reclamation

Elizabeth Joseph

I love the pinpricks of frigid water
that come from diving through clouds,
a reminder that I am alive, capable of pain
a rush of air, resounding echoes of blood pounding,
breath stolen from my lungs,
the cold bite of blue sky and warm slices of sun
that cloak me in the colors of the evening

I am detached from the earth and the light dappling it.
I cast shadows on the ground.

I would pluck every feather if I
(could stand on the beach, root myself in sand.
let seaspray batter my skin
and leave fine salt crystals.
could feel the reverberating ring of blood flow
and soreness echoing through my feet
as I plant them with each step
could feel the satisfaction of work done well
in the compact whiplash of *vastii* recoil
could let the weight of my wings slough off my shoulders
carried instead only by strong legs and supple feet)

could let myself
remain
grounded.

Out of Body,
Altered Outlook,
Three-Faced
by Elianna Oliver

Sometimes I go through days where I will buy a whole bag of fortune cookies from the Panda Express drive-thru and eat them all in one sitting, just so that someone can tell me something good.

I know how to calm myself down.

My compulsions are often drowned out by sound

so the snap of breaking them open is much more productive than breaking bones or mirrors or hearts.

It may not be as satisfying as my need to throw a bowling ball at everything that wills to hurt me and hear it crash, but it is better than burying myself in the broken glass.

Most of my life consists of teaching myself to convert my rage into something manageable so that I don't end up breaking myself again.

And there is something to be said about the fact that I follow through with it.

I snap to count time when I feel panicked.

I use my typewriter to distract me from the screaming behind the door.

I hoard bubble-wrap to calm down my ticks.

I prefer shoes with a chunky heel so that I can focus on the noise when I walk.

I have learned to adapt, and that is proof

that I care about myself enough not to break my skin open, not to start the scratching, the peeling, the analyzation, not to turn myself inside out in attempt to understand: the thought that it's not worth it to fall apart every time I feel like breaking something drastic.

So I break fortune cookies so that I can have someone tell me something good.

And it almost starts to feel like a conversation.

They read "good fortune lies ahead," and I hope it does.

I hope I become rich in all of the things that make me feel.

"Your warmth radiates upon those around you," and I am learning to believe it.

I am learning to accept that I am worthy of love and light.

And it is a start.

I should not equate my state of mind to a manufactured message in the folds of a fortune cookie, but it is a start.

I will start to write my own manifestations and turn my words into predestinations, and I will tell myself something good.

And continue to break open my bad moods and only remember the feeling as a nutshell of what I used to be, and will inevitably be again.

And my fortunes may come true, or they may not, but regardless I will still be here to write and fulfill them.

To hurt and to heal,

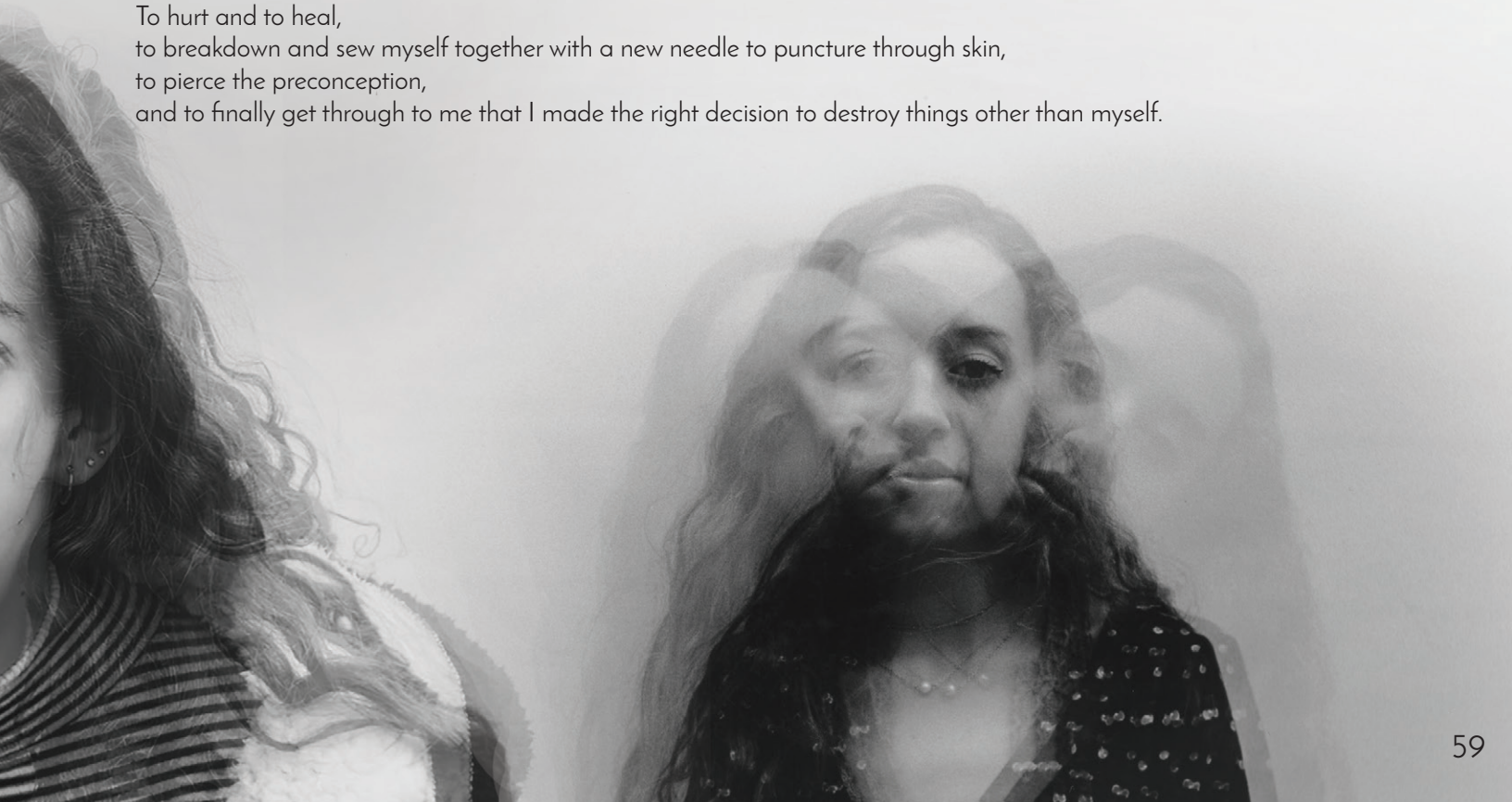
to breakdown and sew myself together with a new needle to puncture through skin,

to pierce the preconception,

and to finally get through to me that I made the right decision to destroy things other than myself.

fortune cookies

Amanda Pendley



You, Myself, and I

Alexander Krauss

I self-reflect
And I gaze deep
To try to forget the secrets that I keep

I bind myself
And hide my chest
All day long until I rest

I stay at home
And lay in bed
Trying to drown out what you said

You said to me
I'll never be
And thusly never will I be free

I deconstruct
And turn my face
Towards the darker, other place

I cry alone
And I must confess
It's how I am that makes me feel less

I curse myself
And wonder if I can
Ever truly live my life as a man

But they said to me
I'll never be
And thusly never will I be free

I wonder why
And ponder yesterday
At what I could have done to make it go away

I think to me
And question how
I could live within this town

For you said to me
I'll never be
And thusly never will I be free

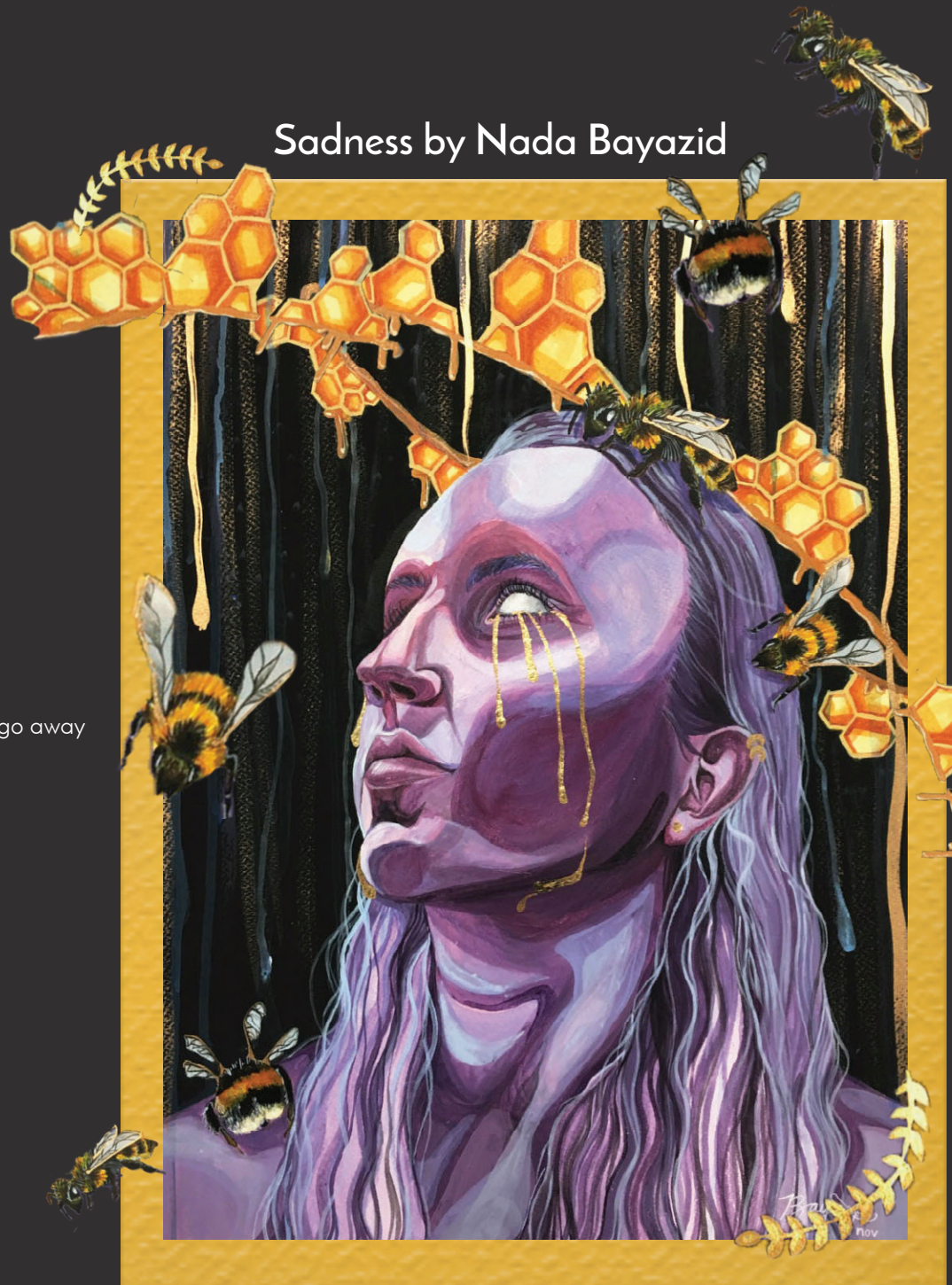
I find myself
Within the pain
And realize I can't change yesterday

I reconstruct
And build anew
From the tired ruins of me and you

I gaze upon
And hold me close
For I am more powerful than I may know

And I say to me
I am proud to be
And within this I will break free

Sadness by Nada Bayazid



warmth

Samiya Rasheed

prometheus – *light* crammed between his jaws
licking up the insides of his teeth
scratching enamels in their
his climb – ran triumphant
meek made resplendent tossing
the ember from his mouth and
great golden blooms sprouted into the loam
fire.

now man's – where the gods decreed
cried you will worship us and
you will be cold at our feet –
deeply and truly held
in those calloused mud clay palms

prometheus shackled now
bloody and torn upon the broken word
but unforgotten
a willing martyr for –

the hearth and the heat and the cooking fire
and the healing touch and the red reflection and
the salvation and the flame
and the warmth
the warmth is worth it
the warmth lingers



Anger by Nada Bayazid

Restoration

Mia Sisul

I see the pieces on the ground,
So broken, scattered, torn.
The pieces long forgotten,
Continents and oceans overworn.

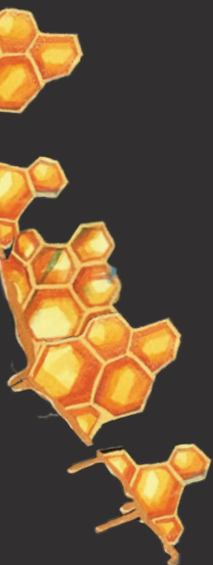
Nepal, Hawaii, St. Lucia
In a long, congested heap.
The passed families stay afloat,
Souls torn by the Reap.

With tears welling in my eyes,
Like the Victoria Falls I hold,
I arrange my lakes and plateaus,
Longing for new gems now old.

In its brokenness, I begin to see
The final picture unfold.
But the jagged ridges jar my sight,
My pieces still dormant and cold.

I do the best I can
To tape the world together.
My puzzle taking shape,
But I can't hold it forever.

Spools and spools of glue and tape,
Creating quite the mess –
There is not much that I can do
But make the distance less.



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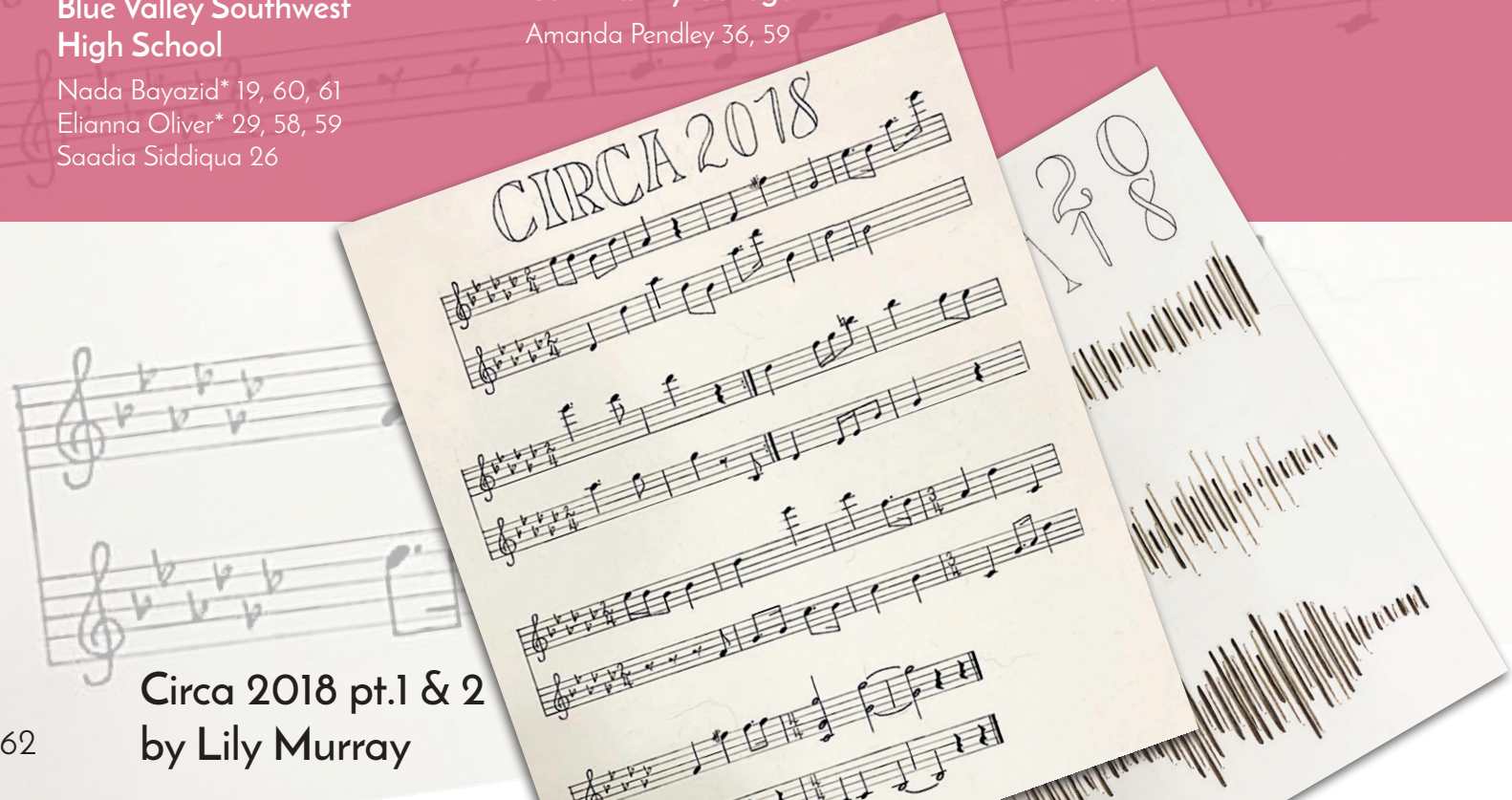
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Circa 2018 pt.1 & 2
by Lily Murray

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Special thanks to the Shooting Stars Recognition, Scholarship and Awards program from the Arts Council of Johnson County. Authors and artists with * next to their names are part of the 2019 program. For more information about the Shooting Stars, please visit them on the web:

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Counting Stars by Lucy Sun

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connection

Everything and all of us are connected on every conceivable scale, from the subtle subatomic bonds in the smallest building blocks of matter to the massive interconnected root system of the 80,000-year-old Pando aspen grove.

In our hectic modern world people build bridges, knock down walls and create networks to fight isolation and forge strong connections around the globe. Ideas and inspiration spread across the boundaries of location, medium, class and culture: mind maps on cosmic scale. We are each a collection of connections, our root systems shaped by influences of our families, friends, collaborators and heroes. Our links and bonds each tell a story about who we are and where we've been.

Whether you answer by pulling back to see this web from afar, or by closely tracing each filament to its root, our question for this *elementia* is: what connects **you**?

Submit your original poetry, short stories, essays, comics and art through Feb. 1, 2020.

We are honored to dedicate our upcoming issue of *elementia* to slam poet Rudy Francisco, and we can't wait to see how our artists and writers are inspired by his use of connection. Francisco's work intertwines life experience with metaphor perfectly. He meshes matters of autonomy with unexpected outcomes and gives everyday objects new meanings, delving into some of the most important issues of the past and the present with a voice that resonates with young writers everywhere.

rudy
francisco



Bloom

Elizabeth Joseph

Your fingers fly across black and white keys like sparrows / rhythms of muscle memory echoing across the table tops // inside, you are wells of blue deeper than the Mariana Trench / clouded over with gray brushstrokes where smears of lavender used to be / and a burning star once glowed / the distance between us is fraught with fault lines // where we once found patches of sunlight to curl up in / we spilled creativity like overturned vases / your voice gliding through the air, clear and pure / mine hidden in stacks of manuscripts / both of us scattering lilacs across the floor / I would trace your pen strokes, heart lifting / you would trace constellations on my skin // the patchwork of your soul grows frayed and threadbare / puzzle pieces forced together and weighted with expectation / stitches rewritten with a violent fist / when braiding violet flowers into your hair fit so much better –

But the day you take flight with Icarus' wings / the day you kiss the sun // I'll look to the ground / waiting for lavender to bloom.

In Between Places by Samiya Rasheed