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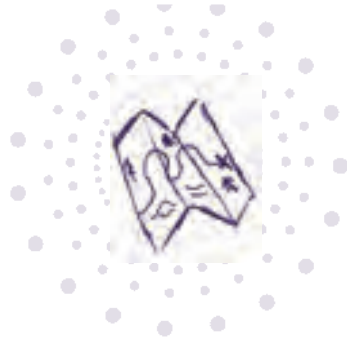
2024



UMSL



2024



Litmag's mission is to nurture the creativity of the students, staff, and alumni of UMSL by providing a space to showcase the diverse literary and artistic talent on our campus.

We aim to provide an inclusive, professional and high-quality publication free of charge to UMSL and the local community.



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Thank you to Dr. Suellynn Duffey, English Department Chair, for the department's support in producing this journal.

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A huge shout-out to *Litmag's* staff photo photographer AND Editor-in-Chief, Dana R. Pierson!

And last but most certainly not least, thank you to all the authors and artists who contributed to this publication, as well as readers like you!



2024



UMSL

University of Missouri—St. Louis

Touch wood.



R
THRILLING

Wander through the Woods

BY
UHSLS STUDENTS

A LITERARY
MAGAZINE

2024

UNIVERSITY OF MISSOURI — ST. LOUIS
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Review Process

Submissions are open to all UMSL students, faculty, staff, and alumni. All submissions are reviewed anonymously, and selections are determined after thorough discussion by the editorial staff and faculty advisor.

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Dear Reader,

On behalf of the editorial staff and myself, welcome to the 2024 edition of *Litmag*. With this year's publication, our team sought to find honest expressions within familiar forms of writing and art. *Litmag* has driven discussion and craftsmanship. This year's staff truly selected thought-provoking pieces. Curiosity compels us and literature binds us together; it's in that we ask our readers to find warmth in the depth of these pages.

Maybe it's the crushed velvet of a worn rug beneath your toes or the humming flicker of melting candle wax that envelops your creative spirit. Maybe it's the springtime floral or migrating autumn fauna that stirs ambition inside you. Breathe, harness this feeling. We ask that you take comfort in this publication; that it be a place for self-discovery.

Be prepared to have your beliefs stretched while strengthened by our authors' works.

As always, leap into the moment and bury yourself within the read.

Truly,

Dana R. Pierson

Editor-in-Chief



2024 Contest Winners

Litmag sponsors four individual contests for best poetry, best fiction, best creative non-fiction, and best artwork. Winners for the categories of poetry, fiction, nonfiction and art were determined by the lead editors using editorial staff voting scores. The multilingual writing contest is sponsored by the Department of Languages and Cultural Studies, and the winner was determined by a cohort of its faculty.

Art:

“Gardener”

by Lauren Poitras

Poetry:

“Rag Doll”

by Samantha Peters

Fiction:

“How To Kill A Deer”

by Chelsea Baird

Creative Nonfiction:

“The Amtrak To Missouri”

by Arianna Rico Rico

Multilingual Writing:

“La Soledad”

by Lynette Gaynor



*before you begin to wander,
think about why you're leaving home*



From Home to Hedge

1. Sunspots by Arianna Rico Rico (Poetry)
2. New Message by Abigail Keleher (Fiction)
3. All I Can Remember by Rebecca (Poetry)
4. Flourish Within by Cassandra Oti (Art, digital art)
5. Stay by Jess Young (Art, oil on canvas)
6. Dead Apples by Katen Niedbalski (Poetry)
7. The Sailor's Table by Katen Niedbalski (Poetry)
8. Wine Drunk by Samantha Peters (Poetry)
9. How To Kill A Deer by Chelsea Baird (Fiction)
10. Chrysanthemum Japonense by Chile Nguyen (Art, acrylic screen printing)
11. Today by Suzanne McCudden (Art, alcohol ink design on craft plastic)
12. Recipe For Loneliness At A Family Gathering by Haley Joiner (Poetry)
13. Sleepover at Grannies House by Emese Mattingly (Poetry)
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15. Letters to Cepa by Mia Shu (Multilingual)
16. Myself and I by Isabelle Herman (Art, digital art)
17. Splash by Anna Connoley (Art, photograph)

Reflections in a River

18. Growing Pains by Adrianna Copher (Poetry)
19. Wind by Kayla Andrews (Poetry)
20. Old Habits Die Hard by Esmeralda Herrada-Flores (Art, mixed media)
21. Boy 1990 by Bob Madden (Art, acrylic on canvas)
22. Re(habit)uation by Matt Kimbrell (Poetry)
23. La soledad by Lynette Gaynor (Multilingual)
24. Empty Kingdom by Katen Niedbalski (Poetry)
25. Loss by Bob Madden (Art, acrylic and ink on wood)
26. Anxiety by Bob Madden (Art, acrylic on canvas)
27. Liminal by Lock (Art, 3D render)
28. Teeth by Brittni Bader (Art, polyester plate lithograph on watercolor paper)

Eerie Encounters

29. The Splinter by Jeffrey Pryor (Nonfiction)
30. Land Somewhere by Annie Ederle (Fiction)
31. Kiss of Death by Aiden Peterson (Fiction)
32. Sigourney by Valerie Dratwick (Art, Monoprint, Collagraph, Sumi Ink & Oil Paint)
33. Absolem by Valerie Dratwick (Art, Monoprint & Oil Paint)
34. So You Want To Summon Demons by Katen Niedbalski (Poetry)
35. Ring™ by Chelsea Baird (Fiction)
36. Found by Chelsea Baird (Fiction)
37. Gardener by Lauren Poitras (Art)
38. Waiting for You by Dannie Doyle (Art)



Going to Town

39. Hands by Brittni Bader (Art, waterless lithograph on watercolor paper)
40. Scream by Brittni Bader (Art, mokulito)
41. The Amtrak to Missouri by Arianna Rico Rico (Nonfiction)
42. An Afghan Girl's Tale by Heela Momand (Poetry)
43. and the world keeps turning by Adrianna Copher (Poetry)
44. Gaza Will Stand by Afina Fayeze (Art, styrofoam sculpture)
45. The Most Merciful (Ar-Rahman) by Afina Fayeze (Art, acrylic on canvas)
46. Apology to an Addict by Holly Shaefer (Poetry)
47. How Grammar Will Save Your Relationships by Dr. Denise Mussman (Nonfiction)
48. Practice what you preach by C. cyanus (Poetry)
49. Moments 8 (edited) by the Williams Boys: Stanaireon and Stanley (Art, graphic design)
50. Exceptionality isn't always awesome by >^.^< (Art, lithography)

Broken Effigy

51. Rag Doll by Samantha Peters (Poetry)
52. Emotional Taxidermy by Katen Niedbalski (Poetry)
53. Pedestal by Mia Shu (Poetry)
54. Pedestal by Mia Shu (Art, pencil, eraser)
55. Birdsong by Bob Madden (Art)
56. I Have One Body by Haley Joiner (Poetry)
57. Skin by Neil Stimmel (Poetry)
58. Letter To My Abuser's Daughter/Carta A La Hija De Mi Abusador by Zulay Carolina Rueda Rueda (Multilingual Nonfiction)
59. Smoke by Dannie Doyle (Art, digital art)
60. Thank You For Your Service by Jess Young (Art, acrylic on canvas)

A Final Resting Spot

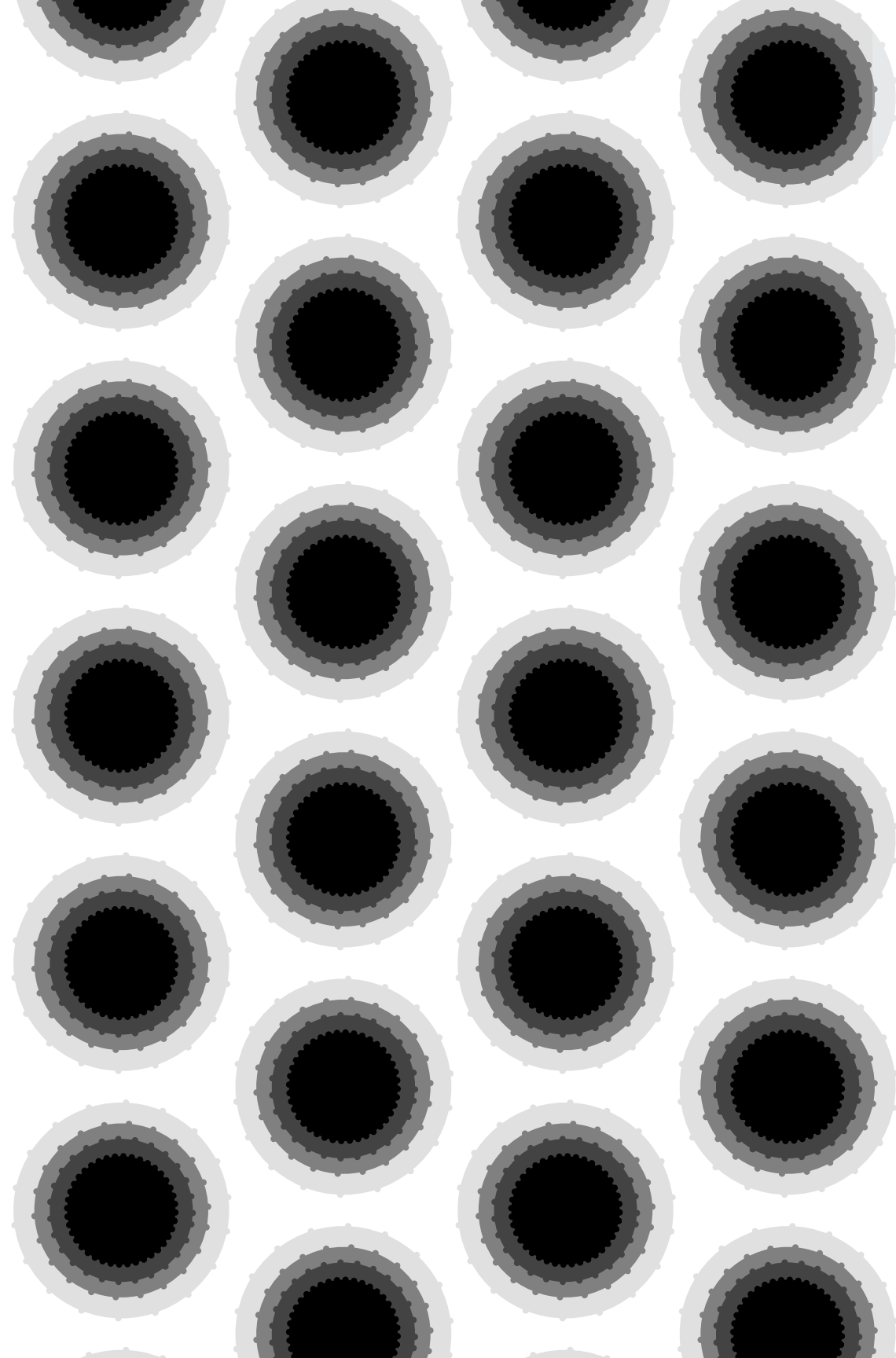
61. Very Intelligent Things I've Done by Adrian "Ellie" Blanch (Nonfiction)
62. Creative Writing Class Prompt by Emese Mattingly (Poetry)
63. Desire for Fire by Brent Moss (Art, acrylic)
64. Vivid Vapor by Brent Moss (Art, acrylic)
65. The Silence, The Night, & The Day by Dana R. Pierson (Poetry)
66. Comfort in the Cold by Taylor Weintrop (Poetry)
67. Oda al cielo by Lynette Gaynor (Multilingual)
68. Fire Cleanse by Emese Mattingly (Poetry)





“A WANDERER GOES FROM HOME TO HEDGE.”

From Home to Hedge



1.

Sunspots

by ARIANNA RICO RICO

I sit, split in the land of knowing no sun
and holding it in my hands like egg yolk.

With splintered skin on my fingers,
rough and full of labor that is expected of me.

That echoes the hands of many field workers,
just like my father at fifteen.

Bending branches, breaking sweat in long-sleeved shirts.
Angled bodies on ladders in dizzying heights.

My hands have never been bruised from picking peach trees.
Digging past rough bark, scraping skin on leaves.

I have danced my fingers on a peach's fuzz.
It has melted to reveal the pit,
but I never had to swallow it.

Vicious afternoons of ghastly heat
have only been rude to me,

but they have never left my skin crocodile-like
from hours under its gaze.

So, I understand now that the violence in your mouth
is an influx of a scorched soul,

pickled tongue, runny.
Skin set on fire with your every word,

That now begets my own sunspots all over my body,
so clearly like birthmarks.



2.

New Message

by ABIGAIL KELEHER

Bzzt.

Owen feels the vibration in his sweatpants pocket, along with the familiar spike of world-unbalancing anticipation. His hand lands on the lump of his phone, just as his mom walks into the kitchen. A prickle of dread—shame?—causes his hands to brace on his knees, belying the siren-song effect of the short text message alert.

Standing at her desk in the corner, Pearl rifles through an inches-thick binder, “RECIPES” written down the faded yellow spine in sharpie, muttering to herself about groceries. She has crammed her curls without ceremony into a bright blue claw clip, which has done so little to keep it out of her face that she briefly revisits in her mind her years-old temptation to shave it all off—again.

Bzzt.

Pearl’s back facing him, Owen pulls out his phone, and the screen lights up. Two texts...from Max. The heat in Owen’s stomach fizzles away.

What kind of mood is mom in rn ?

I might need to talk to her about something

In an apartment across the country, Max stares at the same text bubbles. Morning sunlight and city noise fall on her curled-up body and unmade bed. In the other room, her roommate argues with her boyfriend about something stupid and domestic.

Idk she’s a little frazzled. She’s making a grocery list

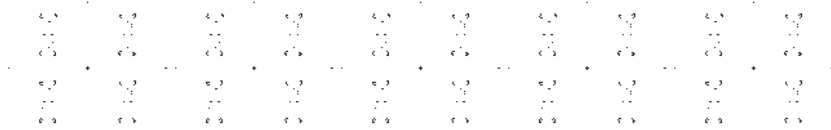
Gotcha. Well lmk when it seems like it would be a good time

Continuing to mutter, Pearl rubs her forehead, staring at a piece of paper, pen in the hand that’s planted on the desk. Meal planning time is historically not the best time to talk to Pearl.

Owen turns his phone off, then on again. Clearing a calendar alert about tomorrow’s geometry test, he looks at his lock screen, a picture of the sunset over the trees behind the highschool. His mom knows that that’s his lockscreen, but not that he chose it because when he took the photo, Amelia was there. Lately, Owen has been wondering if there will ever be a good time to talk to Mom about some things.

Swiping his phone open, he types a reply. *I’ll let you know.*

Max lets her phone drop, facedown, on the mattress in front of her. Suddenly embarrassed to have considered reaching out to Pearl, she pushes



herself up, sliding off the bed and grabbing the little plastic stick. Screw the future; Max is still going to be at work on time today. On her way to the bathroom, she puts the pregnancy test in the garbage, pushing it underneath the used tissues and crumpled, stainless period pads so she won't look at the two stark bars every time she walks by.

At the store, Max's boss complements her customer service. Max thanks her and steps outside to take her fifteen. She reaches into her pocket for her vape, only to remember she left it at home, and then remember why she left it at home, so instead, she pulls out her phone and calls Pearl.

"Hello?"

Max slumps against the warm stone, her hoodie bunching at her neck.

"Hey, Mom."

"Hey, Max." The tinny voice is softer than Max had expected. "Everything ok?"

"Yeah." Through the bleach-yellow hair hanging in front of her face, Max glances down at her stomach. Both of them are silent for a few moments.

"That's good," says Pearl. "What are you up to lately? How's work?"

"It's good. You know. It's retail."

"Yeah, retail's not the most fun." Another pause. "Have you thought at all about looking for another job? A real

job? Or maybe going back to school?"

Max's chest tightens. A gray-haired lady walks right by, bags full of clothes Max probably stocked, gaze fixed above and away from Max. "I'm not sure I could afford to go back to school, mom. You may or may not remember that I recently dropped out of college."

"Well, yeah, but I mean, that was art school, Max. That's not quite the same." Then, quieter, like the phone's microphone has been covered:

"What? I'm just saying! Do you disagree with me?" Max stares out at the parking lot, jaw tightening. "Anyway, Max...I'm sure you'll make the right choices in the long-term. Ok?"

"Ok."

"I have faith in you, ok?"

"Ok." Pulling the phone from her ear, Max hangs up.

"Max?"

Silence on the other end of the line.

Pearl stares down at her phone. Her screensaver is a picture she took of a photo she found in a box a few months ago. She hadn't quite been able to crop out the edges of the photo and the carpet underneath without losing part of Max, so she'd left the edges in. On either side of Pearl, who only has one streak of gray, are Max and Owen. Max's hair is still long and beautiful and brown, like her father's.



Owen is smiling with all of his teeth. Pearl's sleeves are rolled up to the elbow, and the tattoos she got so long before she became a mother wrap around her arms as her arms wrap around her babies.

In the almost-silent house, the sound of Pearl's soft exhalation is muted. Hands limp in her lap, she sits at the table and listens to the hum of the refrigerator; watches the afternoon sun fade in and out over the red-brown floorboards, the herbs in the windowsill that she planted before Max left. Owen knows who she's thinking about, and he can tell she doesn't remember he's standing beside her.

As Owen settles into the chair next to hers, Pearl seems to return to the present. But when he says he has something he needs to tell her, she sees Max sitting in the chair, pushing long, dry, orange locks out of her face to look at Pearl with defiance, and dread settles on her chest like it hasn't left since Max said she was moving.

"Owen, I raised you to have better standards than that."

Owen flinches, eyelids squeezing closed for a brief second. With the toe of his graying sneaker, he scuffs a yellow chair-leg scratch in the decades-old hardwood floor. "I know

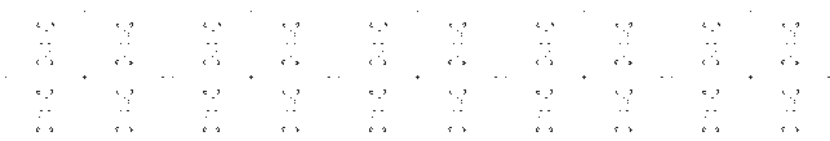
you don't like Amelia, but I like her, a lot, and I think you're being unfair. You can't decide she's bad for me, just because..."

"Just because what?"

Now Owen looks at Pearl, eyes meeting the hard set of hers, the forbidding line of her mouth. "Just because she reminds you of yourself. Or of Max. I don't know."

During passing period, Pearl stands outside the door of her classroom, watching the students. She sees Amelia rarely during passing period, and often through the window of her classroom door during class, roaming the deserted hallways, maybe believing she's unobserved. Her hair is purple, she stands on tables and yells about communism and sometimes anarchy, and her clothing choices show off more than her belly button ring. If any of that reminds Pearl of her young self, it's true, that's not a point in her favor. "Everything about that girl screams bad choices and no future, Owen. I'm not going to allow you to do this."

Hidden under the table, both of their knuckles are turning white, and both of their palms are close to opening under their nails.





“You don’t understand, Mom. I’m going to ask her out. Whether or not she’ll get to meet you is the only thing that’s up to you.”

Pearl’s eyebrows come down like a barricade, jaw locked against the fear that somehow, she failed her child this badly; that soon, she’s going to lose him forever. “You don’t understand how much trouble you’ll be in if I find out you’ve been seeing her—speaking to her.”

They hear Owen’s phone buzz, and as he takes it out to check it, suspicion and betrayal creep over Pearl. “That’s not her, is it?”

Owen doesn’t respond. He doesn’t even look up at her. He reads and rereads the message.

“Owen Sievers, you will answer me when I’m talking to you—” Pearl swipes for the phone, snatching it out of his hand. She ignores his disbelieving eyes and gaping mouth as she furiously reads the text on the screen.

What kind of mood is mom in rn ?

I might need to talk to her about something.

Idk she’s a little frazzled. She’s making a grocery list

Gotcha. Well lmk when it seems like it would be a good time

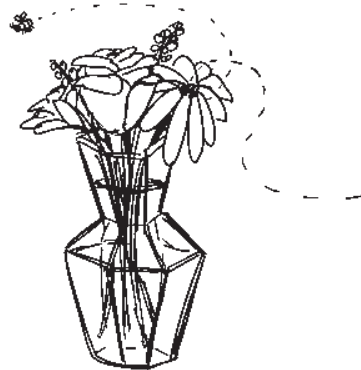
Tried to talk to mom and it didn’t really go great, so please don’t tell her, but I just found out I’m pregnant.

As Pearl watches, a new bubble appears.

I’m kind of freaking out. Idk what to do

Owen takes the phone from her hands, gently. Her eyes stay fixed on her empty fingers, curled around the space where it had been, brow still knit, lips parted like she might sigh, or cry out in pain.

He leaves her to figure out how she’s going to be remembered.



He leaves her to figure out how she’s going to be remembered.

3. All I Can Remember

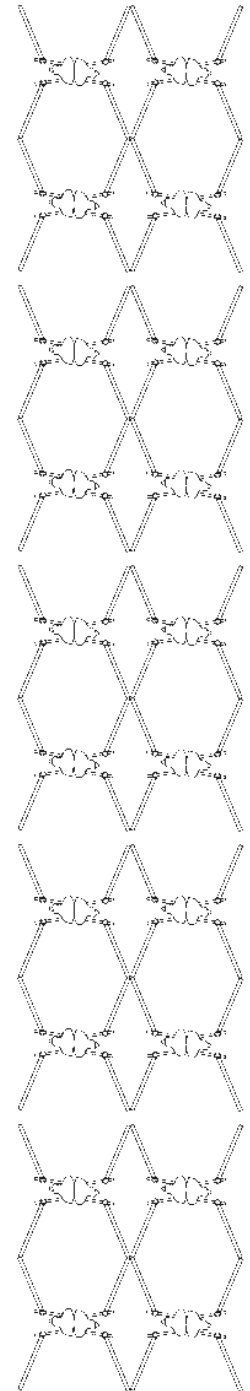
by REBECCA

It used to be that we sat above a monument up above the echo of our wedding vows the call of children’s names, the fights with our families, above Christmas lights, coffee runs, and the low-swellling sound of a song we pretended was only ours

Way up where the sun poured in like sticky syrup and we saw our children’s children sifting through the old photos of our faces adorned with the wear of lived moments and our shoulders weakened by heavy journeys

We used to sit up there because we liked the view of a kaleidoscope of things to come now all we see a looming storm that could wash away everything that could beat down the birds we call by name with an iron grace As thunder cracks like a bat I try to recall all the rivers we’ve crossed hand in hand

But all I can remember is the day that your body betrayed you not even kind enough to do it with a kiss To a Pontius Pilot in latex gloves and a stethoscope hung around his neck Like a noose I remember thinking Maybe it was because death was everywhere then we sat in suspended silence like a quiet, unspoken communion



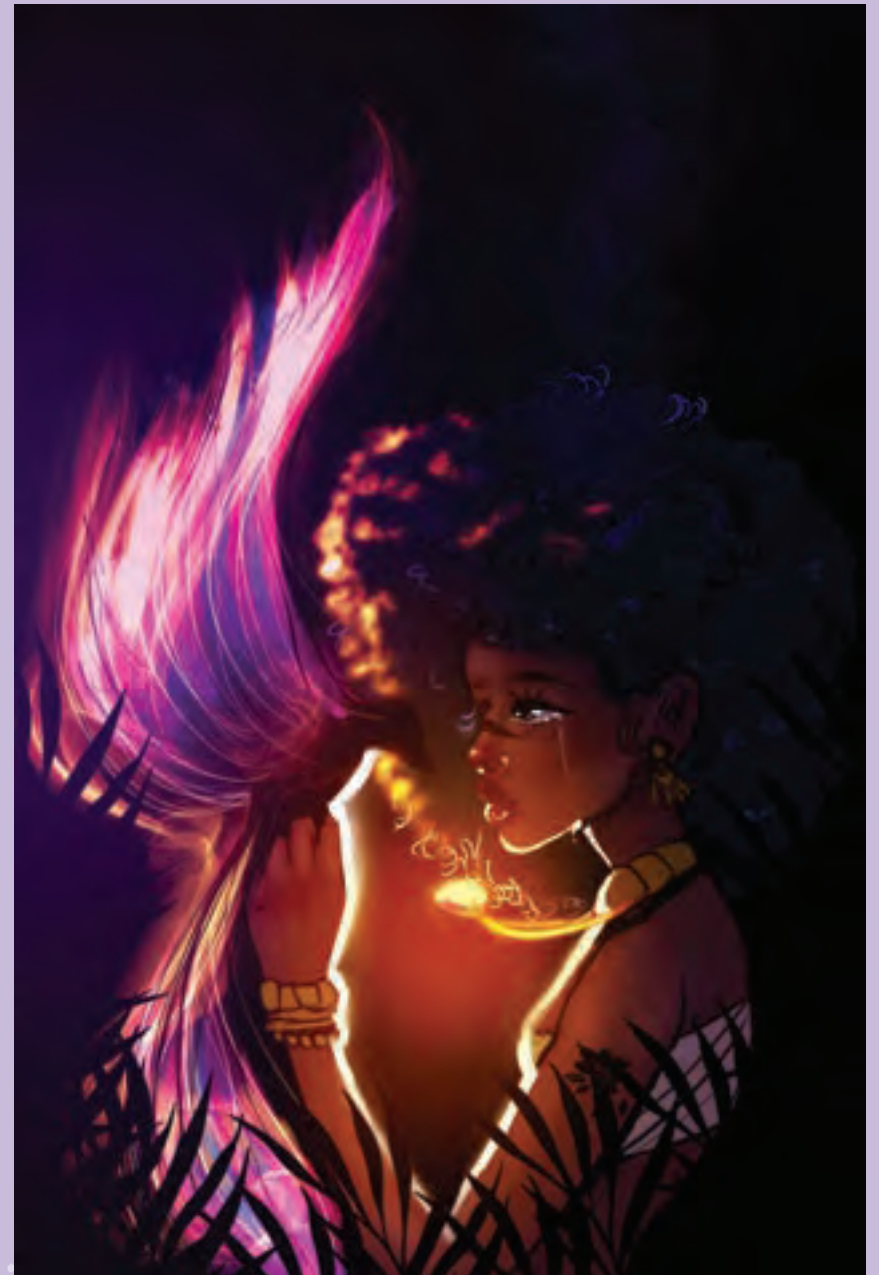
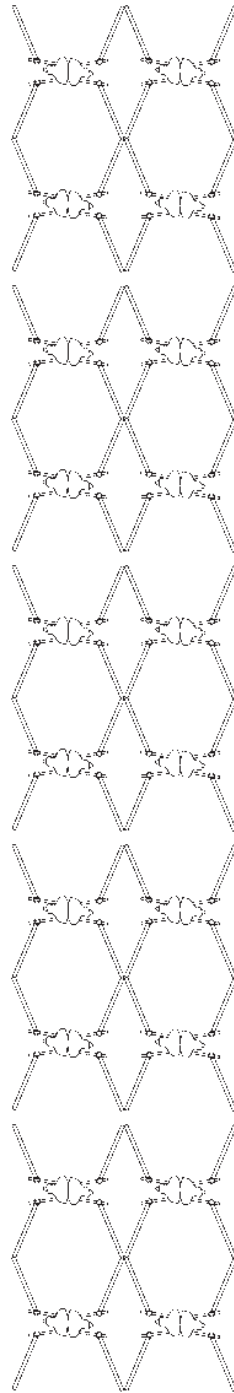
I can remember hoping
that the amber glow of yesterday would cling,
like a spectral dance
But instead I found myself
grieving 11 years of memories
because though you weren't yet buried
I pictured finding you in an evergreen cemetery
and me sobbing over geraniums
because I don't believe in the foolishness
of afterlife anymore

I can remember thinking that one day
I'll have to put away the polaroids
like a thousand little murders of your memory

All I can remember
wanting to break into your head,
wanting to turn the vault, climb inside
and take one more good look around
before I'd fall asleep for a thousand years
that way I'd never have to see
the frost in your eyes
melt away

And since then your dying
glows in my brain;
dry light spreading through the nerves
I wince every time I hear the lie scratch like an old
record
when you say I'm fine

How I want to see
Earth that is wasted bare and rotting
and be angry
How I want to stare at buildings
sculpted by explosions or
people sobbing over makeshift graves
and be moved
but instead I live only one tragedy
over and over
Over
And
Over



4.

Flourish Within

by CASSANDRA OTI



5. Stay

by JESS YOUNG
oil on canvas

6. Dead Apples

by KATEN NIEDEBALSKI

You sat there
slack-jawed and stinkin'
like so many rotten apples

once man,
now meat
and lint
and bags of unpaid bills
sloughin' spit onto the upholstery
while flies jumped about
your mouth and nail beds
playin' hopscotch
in the first puddles of you

strung rocks talked in the doorway
knockin' their heads on the wood
with the spoon charms
and bits of seashell that
hung from the rooftop
in messy strings

pancake butter burned
in the pan
as I stared at your face
the empty head crowned
with prairie grass
the lips puffed and cracked

smoke rose
in the kitchen air
sizzlin' globs of gold
turnin' brown

your gnarled hands
still locked on the arm chair
with the same sternness
that smacked
my head as a child

through the burnin'
batter I caught
the drift of your cologne
a sick dark smell
that heralds torment
the smell that cornered me

by lamp light in the livin' room
and busted my teeth
the smell that chased me
under the porch
and pulled at my arms

the angry smell of father

it stuck to you
like a greasy cloak
still living
on your silent frame

at any moment
I thought you'd move

I waited for those big boots
to scuff a path toward me
and stomp me down

I waited for that throat to bob
and throw out hateful words

I waited

but you were dead
propped on the couch
like a mannequin
someone pulled
from a dumpster
and placed up nice
to resemble my father

filthy muddied soles and
little holes
in your lumberjack clothes

your last cigarette had gone out
in your hand
turnin' the soft spots
between your fingers
black
your horrid face
just stuck on the ceiling

bastard

you didn't even have
the decency
to close your eyes

7.

The Sailor's Table

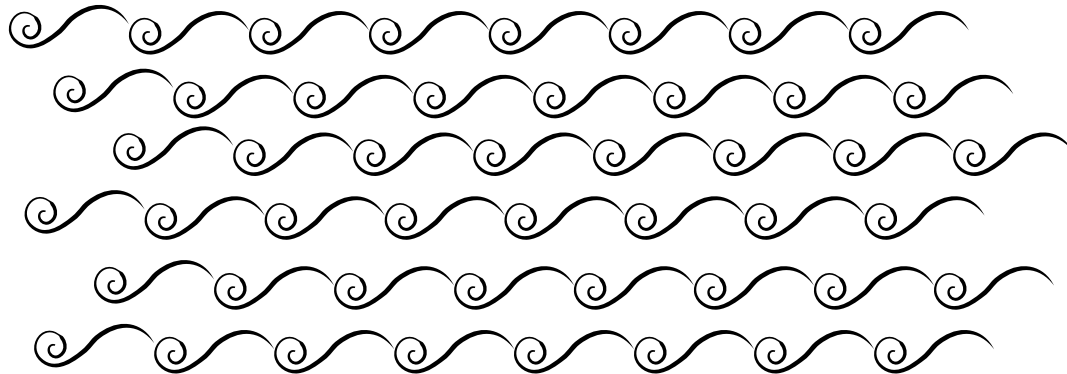
by KATEN NIEDBALSKI

From our first breath
of salty spray
and crust of bread below
we tasted fear, we learned to pray
and soon were taught to know

The world began
in a fistful of waves
and ended, bottom-boned
in the depths of the sea
with the crabs and the slaves
as the sides of the ship hull moaned

We faced the wind
and gnashing brine
and losing half our fingers
to know our pain
is not from the sea
but a taste for home that lingers

It was then we knew
that the world began
in the tender arms of our mothers
and so it will end
one day in turn
in the trembling arms
of our brothers



8.

Wine Drunk

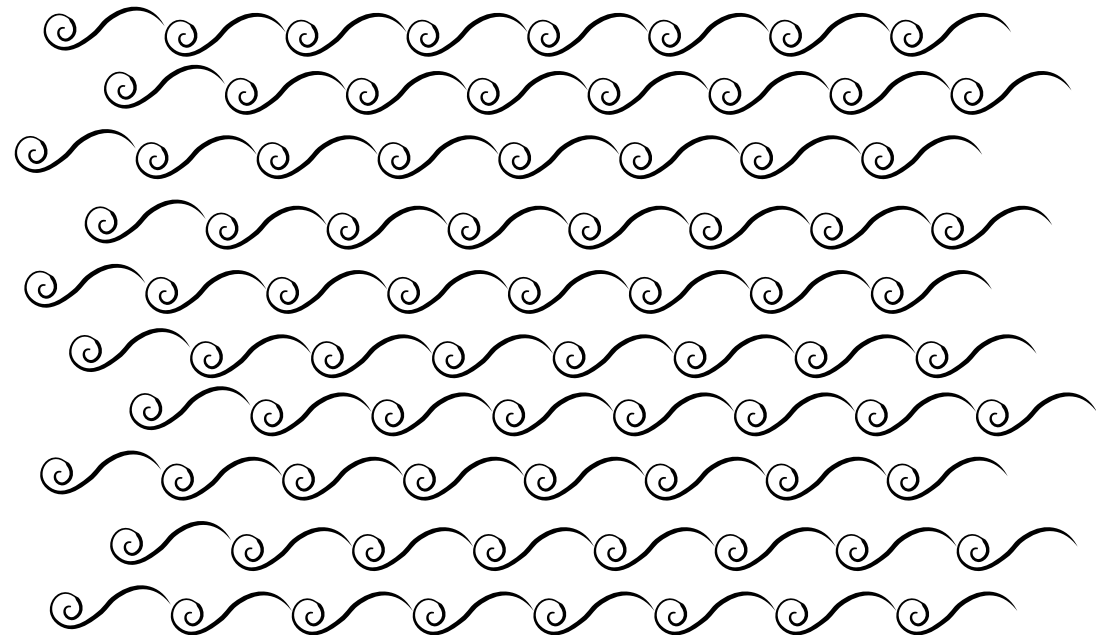
by SAMANTHA PETERS

The tangy scent of pickle juice stung my nose.
Target bags were sprawled across the counter,
In them were bottles of wine and Takis,
Somehow the receipt read fifty dollars.

The house erupted with laughter
Once the bottles were bled dry.
The most minuscule noise or movement
Had us on the floor, tears rolling down our eyes.

Music was blasting and we were dancing.
The wine tricked us into thinking
That we could sing.
The clock said midnight, but we had an understanding,
Hands moved, but time wasn't passing.

And in the morning when our heads ached,
We complained about the pain.
We swore we would stop having nights like this,
But we knew, tomorrow, this would happen again.





9.

How to Kill A Deer

by CHELSEA BAIRD

The first step is to get behind the wheel.

This will be easy; you have no choice. You have to leave. There is, unfortunately, nowhere to go but home, even though the thought is twisting your stomach in knots. So: get behind the wheel.

Your first real girlfriend, whose house you are outside of now, was from rural Wisconsin, where deer ran rampant around the dirt roads. She told you casually about the first time she hit one, sitting in front of the TV with your arm around her. She furrowed her brows when you turned to stare at her with your mouth open wide. You, up to that point, had held the belief that if you hit a deer with your car, no matter how fast you were going, you would die. She didn't know there was a world in which this wasn't something everyone did, like prom or smoking a terrible joint in someone's car afterwards: a high-school rite of passage.

These were the early days. You had met through a mutual friend, at a house party that felt more like a funeral.

Hey, was her first word to you.

Hi, was your first response.

She was wearing a wife beater with a race car on it in the sort of post-ironic way that made her unbelievably

attractive to you, and was holding a bottle of Bud Light by the neck. You'd been intermittently watching her sip it from across the room. Whenever she swallowed there was just a hint of a wince that flashed across her face, the slightest crack in this facade, the one presented by the wifebeater and the thick belt and the perfectly baggy cargo pants. It was the only thing that let you catch her eye from across the room without getting woozy.

I like your shirt, was the second thing she said to you. She flicked her eyes down and back up and smiled a little as she said it.

You looked down, having forgotten what you were wearing. It was a Ramones shirt. This was a band you had never listened to and you suddenly became very afraid she would ask you about them.

Thanks, you said. I like yours too. This you said in a voice you hoped was casual and sultry and just sarcastic enough to let her know you know she's not actually the target audience for race cars, fighting to keep your voice at its current octave.

Thanks, she said. She leaned against the wall you stood next to, her shoulder just below a framed picture of a dog. You a Ramones fan?

You felt your cheeks flush and couldn't do anything but laugh. I was hoping you wouldn't ask, you said.

She laughed too, and looked at you up and down again. Both of you were quiet for a tiny drawn-out moment. You're cute, she said.

Remember this as you buckle your seatbelt and sit, silent, in the driver's seat outside of her house. Sit here for a long time, even though you know she can see your headlights from inside. Her lights won't be off yet, but the thick curtains will all be drawn. You had needed a private moment. While you linger, try your best not to remember anything else from the last four months, and, since you have decided to try, fail miserably. Remember the countless times you sat in this car, parked outside her house, together. Remember how her lips felt when she kissed you for the first time, the night you met. Remember how they felt yesterday, and the day before, and the day before that. Do this while staring at her house until it starts to look foreign to you, despite all the time you've spent inside, all the times you've pulled up outside and sat, giddy and nervous, waiting to go inside. Jump a little in your seat when you see a shadow move from inside.

Turn your blinker on. Pull away from the curb.

Remember a month or two ago, driving this direction down this street, her in the passenger seat. Remember the song that was playing and the jacket she was wearing and the thick branches outside swaying with the force of the wind.

You could feel her eyes on the right side of your face.

What, you said, and your tone was light.

Nothing, she said. Out of a sliver of your periphery, you could see her smiling at you. Something about this made your chest hurt.

What? you said again, and you were smiling, too.

You're just really cute, she said. She put a hand behind your head, fingers sinking through your hair, and you leaned into the touch, even though the car swerved a little with your movement—like it does now, even though there is nobody sitting to your right.

At this point, become sure that there is something deeply and irrevocably wrong with you. Grip the wheel tight. Look down at your phone long enough to turn on a sad song. In spite of the melody, start to laugh, then force yourself immediately to stop. What if she followed you? What if she pulled up next to you and looked into the window to see you laughing? What would she think about that?

Being a distracted driver is a crucial step, and lucky for you it is effortless tonight. You are almost to the highway, now. Try to force yourself to pretend you can't feel the dread creeping up your spine and down to your right middle finger.

Turn on your blinker again. This time, merge onto the highway ramp. Realize you had never broken anyone's heart. Not before tonight.

Think about how it felt to fall in love.

I've never said this to anyone before, you told her.

It was a windy night in September and you were sitting in her car, staring intently at the dashboard. This was true, that you had never said it. You didn't think you would be able to tell what

love was. But anytime you looked at her face you felt yourself bubbling over with something, the same something that made you almost say it every single time you saw or thought about or touched her. So, you figured, this was probably it.

I hope I'm not, like, doing too much too early, you continued, and you were still staring at the dashboard, but you're just so amazing in so many ways, and— I don't know, you're just so smart and funny and kind, not to mention fucking hot, and—

I love you, she said. You looked up at her with a dam of relief bursting between your lungs. She was smiling at you. You thought you might explode.

I love you, you said back. And it was true. It is true.

Hurtle down the highway with panic pressing against your ribcage, and wonder how quickly you can get back to her house if you break every traffic law in the world. Once again renew your conviction that there is something truly wrong with you, and let it be accompanied this time by piercing misery, the kind you can feel all the way down to your marrow.

Keep driving. You cannot stop now.

You have driven this way a thousand times. Despite this, become scared that you are lost, because the sudden change you have just cleaved into your future makes everything feel before-and-after, and you are in the first moments of the unfamiliar after.

Hate yourself for this cloying self-pity. You're the one who ended it; you are not

the victim here. Stop acting like it. This is easy to think and difficult to convince the rest of yourself of. The pit in your stomach does not fill. It gets bigger and bigger and deeper and deeper and deeper.

Slow down a little and make your way into the right lane. You're almost there. Remember another, more recent, night. One of many spent silent on the couch because neither of you wanted to talk.

One where you barely even kissed, and as terrible as it felt to want more, you did. One where you two lay in bed with your arms intertwined until that marrow-deep misery struck you like a punch to the sternum and you had to turn away to throw an arm over your head.

One where she asked: Are you okay?

And you whispered: Yeah. Even though, for reasons you couldn't quite explain, you felt like you were tearing something apart.

Take the exit, then turn right. The roads are smaller here, windier, stuck between thickets of trees. You can barely see anything besides the road. Not that you would notice anyway, not right now. This morning you cried for hours when the sun came up on what you had to do— still, you feel awful now that the tears won't come again. Your aunt said to you a year ago, when you were still having trouble, that the only way through it is through it. She didn't make this up. A million other people have probably told you the same. But she is the one that comes to mind, as you're going five over the limit down the pitch-black-dark road,

with a despair you can't seem to get away from. She comes to mind because you don't know what to do with this. How do you go through it when there's nothing you're justified to go through?

Hey, she said when you got to her house tonight. You'd texted her at 1:08 in the afternoon and asked if you could talk tonight. Her reply had been: of course, is everything okay? Which was so sweet and understanding that you wanted to puke. You tried to read her body language. Was there anything in the bow of her legs, the shape of her shoulders, that told you she knew what was coming? She looked normal to you. Maybe you just didn't know her well enough.

Hi, you said back.

Behind the wheel, turn left onto an even smaller, darker road, if such a thing is possible. Your palms are sweating. Let your grip loosen.

She gestured for you to sit and sat beside you, hand on your back. You wanted to shrug it off. You couldn't.

Earlier you'd written a script in the Notes app of your iPhone. You had read over it again in the car before you came inside, leg bouncing and head throbbing. It was something to the effect of: *I, uh, you know I love you, and I think you're so— such an amazing person, right? Like, you're so kind and smart and funny, and I, uh— that makes this really hard to say, to you. But I don't, um, think this is working, anymore.*

The road in front of you looks like it's shifting from side to side, and maybe

it is, maybe it's just the angle of the concrete, but it still makes you feel like you're falling. Don't slow down.

What's up? She said. It was casual in a forced way, one that just barely covered up the concern at the edges. You wanted her to make it easy for you. You wanted her to say I know what this is about, and I feel the same way. Or I think I know what you're gonna say. Or even Are you breaking up with me? Anything to break the thick rope of tension between you. You didn't want to be holding the saw alone. You took a deep breath.

I wanted to, um. Your voice was already wavering, which was pathetic. I wanted to say some things.

She was staring at you with brows furrowed, the divot between them deep and perfect. Okay, she said. What things? There was an edge to this, and you realized suddenly how real it was becoming. Teetering on the edge of the cliff, you stared at her hand, tense on her knee.

Idon'tthinkthisisworkinganymore, you said. It came out in half a breath, in an instant. The Band-Aid ripped off.

She was silent for a long, long, long second. What?

Your eyes were full of tears and so you looked everywhere but her, trying to find something to anchor you in place. Us, you said. I don't think we're working anymore. Together.

I—There is genuine shock in her voice— wh- why? What?

I, um. I think I am a very needy person. Probably just selfish. I don't- there's no reason I should be more so, than other people, but I, uh. I feel like I take a lot. Like, in general, but with us in particular, I just feel like, um, I want a lot from you, and I take a lot, and-

You don't, she said. What are you talking about? You don't.

That's because I can't ask you for anything-

Of course you can. Her eyes are too wide. Olivia, what are you talking about?

I can't ask you for anything. Not-I know I can ask you things, but I can't ask you for more, with us. Not when you have so fucking much to deal with. I mean, things are constant for you. You-you have to deal with so much, and I know you would say it's no big deal, but I know for a fact you don't have the bandwidth to see me more, or the time, even, and I can't keep adding to everything you have to deal with right now.

She was silent for a second.

I know things will get better eventually-

I'll be done with school soon, she said quietly. I'll be done, and then-

You won't be done, you say. You'll go back in the fall, and will anything change?

Her jaw works, the way you see it do when she doesn't want to tell you she's stressed.

Look, I just-I want you to have everything good in the entire fucking world. You-I love you. I love you. But I- You know what you're going to say and

it breaks the dam. Your voice catches; the tears roll- I'm not happy. And-I'm selfish, and awful, but I'm not happy. I don't think I can do this.

(Don't pay attention to the flicker of movement seventy feet ahead of you, in the trees on the left side of the road.)

I know you're trying, you said, and I appreciate it so much, but I just- I love you, but I feel like I can't even be with you-

I'm not enough, she says in a voice that is smaller than any you've heard from her before. I can't give you enough.

No, I- you're enough, and maybe you can't give me what I need right now but that's okay-

She was shaking her head, the hand that left your back long ago reaching to wipe her eyes, tears audible in her voice. I can't- you know I can't-

I understand, you said. I really- I do, and I want to be there for you, but it's just so fucking painful.

The summer will be good, she said. We-we'll have a good summer.

(Something darts out ahead of your car. Put the pieces together. Realize what's happening a half-second too slow.)

Just give me time, she said. She was fully crying, then, tears running all the way down her neck to darken the top of her gray t-shirt. I- I can- I'll do it, if that's what you need, I just need time, I just- I love you. Please.

(See it look at you like the subject of the idiom and you don't have the time to brace yourself--)

I'm sorry, you said. I'm sorry.

When you were younger, and you thought an accident like this would kill you on impact. You pictured it over and over in your mind in as much detail as you could, which was almost none. It was violent, of course it was, and somehow it was just a quiet and calm death. Not because you believed it really would be this way, but because you didn't have the tools to picture it any other way. It was a murky picture of an animal and a windshield and the dark oblivion of something too unknown to let yourself touch. What you didn't imagine was the sickening crunch of flesh and bone and metal that you feel in the depths of your stomach and the base of your skull. The scream that you barely even realize is coming from your own mouth because it is so deeply instinctual, the one that makes you feel like someone has knocked the breath out of you because you put everything in your lungs into it.

The way your heart is beating so fast you think it might burst by the time you've fully slid and skidded to a stop and your breaths are all coming on top of each other all at once and your ears are ringing so hard you can't hear the song that's still playing anymore.

Don't pass out, even when the edges of your vision go black. Sit in your car and shake. Forget where you are. Forget everything. Spend a long time catching your breath and when you finally do, use it to gasp:

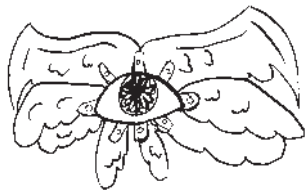
Fuck.

With a body still shaking so hard you can barely stand, get out of your car. You don't want to see it. Any of it. Still, get out. Even though you have to clutch the scrunched-up edge of your hood to walk. Even though you want nothing more than to shut your eyes, which you do for a moment, a blissful moment; then, open them again. You have to look.

The last step is to watch it die. Because against all odds, it is still alive. Not very. But it is moving, shaking, ever-so-slightly. Its blood is smeared all over the smashed silver metal of the front of your car, and on the ground, where your headlights shine back at you from the puddle of it. In the reflection you see a swirling shadow of yourself with a hand on the hood, half bent over. For a second you let your eyes unfocus in the pool, but you can't look away for too long. It would be heavy-handed to say it's like a car crash-you can't look away. Its stomach is fully open. It is like the punched-in wall in your cousin's first apartment, if the drywall he caved in with a raging fist was soft and mushy. A black hole where there should be soft white fur, spilling out onto the concrete. Your science classes in high school never did the dissections you've seen in movies; you have never seen an organ in real life. Now you see so many, torn into so many pieces by blunt force and sharp edges that you can't tell what the shapes should be. And yet: it is alive. Watch its hind leg twitch, then slowly, painfully, drag your eyes up to its face.

These are its dying moments. You know this without a doubt when you look into the huge, wet eyes. In a minute, you will add your own vomit to the puddle of blood. Flecks of red will fly onto your sneakers. Months will pass; years will pass. You won't wash them, or wear them, or throw them away. They will stare at you from the corner of your room, silent and bloody. And every time you stare back, you will see this:

The deer lifts its head, twitching, towards you. Its neck holds it up for a half second before it falls back to the ground for the last time. The eyes are open as they glaze over and in their reflection, you can see yourself.

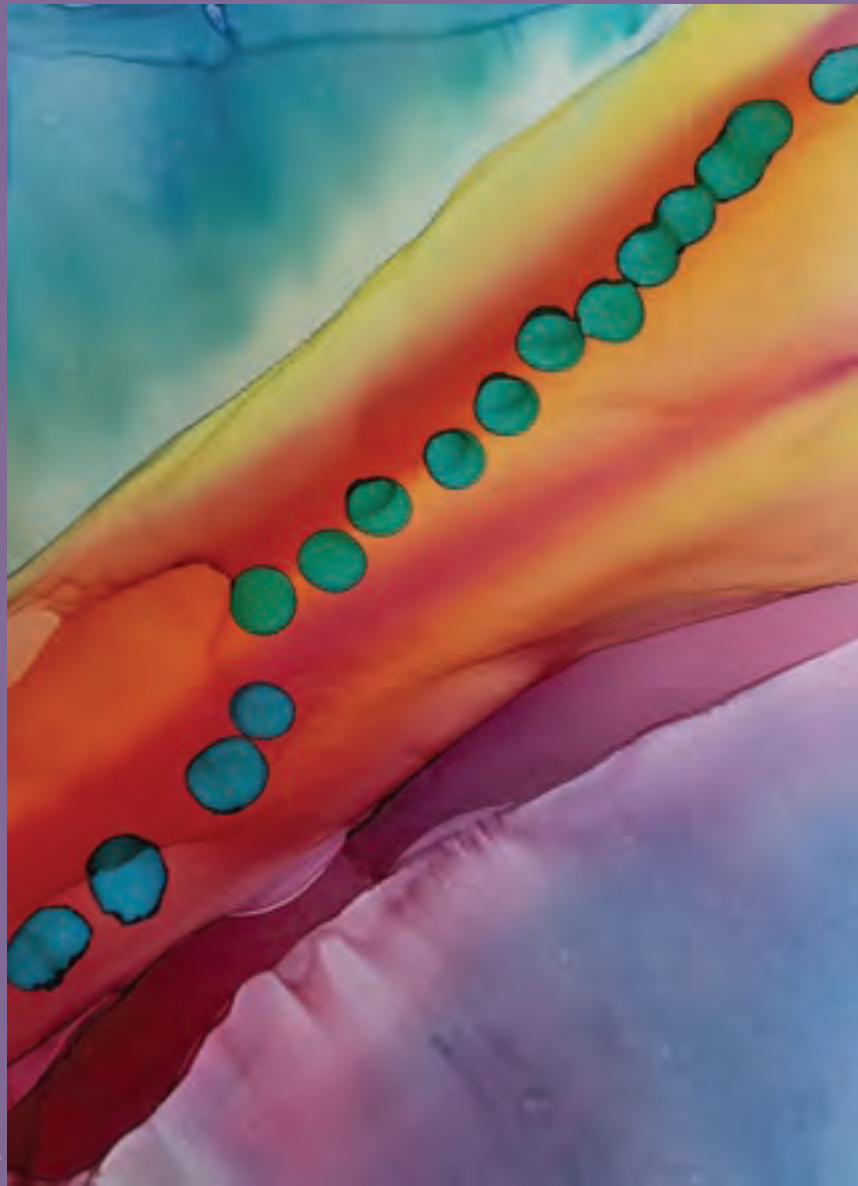


10.

Chrysanthemum Japonense

by CHILE NGUYEN

acrylic screen printing on BFK Rives paper



11. Today

by SUZANNE McCUDDEN

alcohol ink design on craft plastic

12. Recipe for Loneliness at A Family Gathering

by HALEY JOINER

Walk in the door. Grandma's house is filled with the people you call family. Give them smiles to taste while you fold into the corner of the room. Chop your greetings into something short and sweet as your anxieties layer, overwhelming your senses. Talk to only the adults because your cousins are grouped into an inseparable baker's dozen. Minutes will pass as your cousins laugh while aunts and uncles sprinkle comments, most of them meaning well... you think. A pinch of, "Why are you single?" and a dash of, "Have you been losing weight?" go in one ear and out the other while you debate whether or not grandma's room is your safe place. Pounds of sadness creep in as you wander the hall with hopes to feel warmth within your comfort room. Set yourself aside and listen to the muted laughter slipping under the door. This will add a garnish to the rest of your lonely hours. But don't fret. Because when night comes, you will coat the room in hugs and meaningless "I love you's for the people who left you alone without words all night.

13.

Sleepovers at Granny's House

by EMESE MATTINGLY

The gush from her bathtub's water pressure
The red bottles of Pantene staring back at me
The nightgown, borrowed and baggy
The VapoRub beneath my nose
The Ponds cream smeared on my face
The scratchy hospital blanket I crawled under
The warm body I snuggled up to all night
The red freckle on her chest
The pattern of warm breath I tried to match
The sound of KMOX I woke up to
The silver hairs I'd count until she woke up
The wrinkle-free facelift of a freshly made bed
The green eggs and ham on a Barbie plate
The swimsuits flying out of her pool with reckless abandon
Forget the dying, the crying, the labor into death...
These memories I'll never forget.



14.

Letter to John

by NEIL STIMMEL

I heard that you
made it to Europe: France or
maybe Ukraine, watching
the war unfold;
that when you
came back, you got arrested on
the plane coming into
New York, and
they sent you to Rikers;
that your dad pulled
some strings and now
you're back at home.

I heard from your
mom that you're graduating
college, computer science or
something like that;
that you are
eating well and you're
happy;
that you're not doing
any of that "teenager
shit" anymore, that
our struggle against the
January wind, our struggle against
the Sickness of the
needle, was only a phase.

I heard from my
best friend that he
saw you in our old
neighborhood, the one
I never could go back to;
that you were playing
in the yard with a
child, a child that
looked just like you;
that you did, in fact,
look happy standing
out there in the
sunshine.

I wonder if you've heard
anything about me;
that I put down the
needle right after you did;
that I've changed my name and
went back to school (and
maybe I'll finish this time);
that I've changed so much but
hardly at all
since that last time
I saw you.

John,
I miss you, and
I hope you really are
doing well.

15.

Letters to Ceba

by MIA SHU

This piece includes a letter originally written in Tagalog.

Pana sayo, Antie Ceba

Especial kitang kino komosta sana ay nasa mabuti kayong kalagayan ikaw at ang iyong pamilya,
at sana malayo kayo sa kapaha matan.
“I especially wanted to say hello to you,
and I hope you and your family are doing well and that you’re safe.”

Kung ako naman ang iyong kokomostabin sa awa ng dios mabuti naman.
“If you will ask me how I’m doing, I’m doing fine.”

May asawa na akong mabait, at may-apo kanang mga ato kalwa na antie, ang mga anak ko.
“I’m married to a good woman,
and you have two cute grandbabies.”

Ang panganay ko ay 3 years old na, at ang ikalawa ay 7 month na.
“My oldest is 3 years old and the second is seven months old.”

Babae ang panganay at lalaki ang ikalawa.
“The oldest is a girl and the second is a boy.”

Si Mechile ilan na ang kanyang anak,
at sona ay nasa mabuti rin silang kilagayan.
“To your daughter Michelle,
I hope her and her kids are also well.”

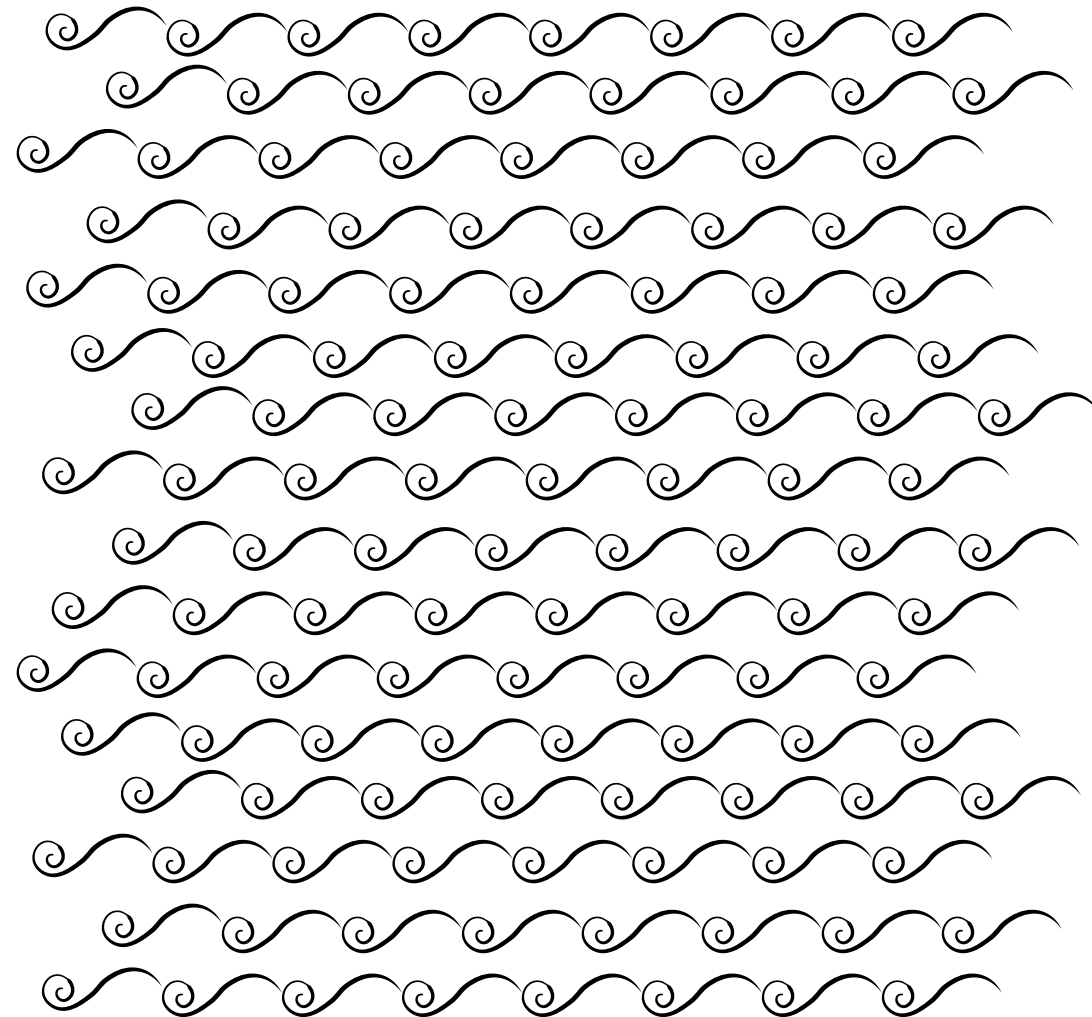
At sana auntie mapagbigyan mo man lang ang kahilingan ng Lolo, makito man lang kayo habang buhay pa siya.
“And Auntie, I hope you will say yes to the wishes of Lolo Pedro to see you while he’s still alive.”

I love you auntie. I wish na sana ay masaya ang inyong pamilya.
“I love you Auntie. I wish you and your family are happy.”

From your pamangkin - Henry Hermonesio

But Henry, my grandma can't read
But she left school in third grade
But she took care of the family farm
But she married an American Navy sailor
But she left the Philippines at twenty-one
But she raised a poor family in the United States
But she cannot travel
But she cannot remember how to cook Filipino meals
But she just sits and watches tv
But she will never see her Catarman family again

But she will never forget to tell her family
“I love you”.





16. Myself and I

by ISABELLE HERMAN
digital artwork





Reflections in a River

17.
Splash

by ANNA CONNOLEY
photograph



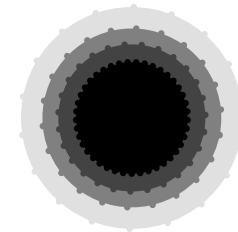
“A WANDERER NOTICES REFLECTIONS IN A RIVER.”

18.

Growing Pains

by ADRIANNA COPHER

I wish the world were small. I wish it were the size of a thumb tack and all my dolls still fit on the corner of my bed with or without my feet. I wish I had fence posts the size of gargoyles, with pointed teeth too. I wish the ghosts in my closet and hiding beneath the floor would put up clap board over the windows so that I could see them better. I wish I were a bug, squashed under the weight of a water droplet from God. I wish I could pretend that I am not just that. I wish it were quiet.



19. Wind

by KAYLA ANDREWS

As
a little
girl, I
listened
for
the wind

to tell me stories about a world
far beyond the tips of fingers too small
to see the bent edges keeping tightly wrung
hands from screaming. As a little girl, I often wondered
if the wind might sweep the bruises from my lungs—a comfort
reserved and unrecognizable in conditions where flood gates
of a soul are but broken colors reflecting images and sounds too wishful
that a girl might convince the air to take pity as she too screams
against doors held tight. To a little girl just scratches that often wisped
truths hidden behind smiles and watchful wonders, seeing the world
as it was, contrary opportunities. A place full of danger, tearing
stitches sewed by a little girl as she faithfully strung hope,
calmly looping solutions in the silence, each tug simply a
tear reluctant to mind if the wind would buff out a smooth
finish across cracked feelings. Shaking, she would lay
flat unwanted attention, expression a pendulum of
action. Mockeries sing to remind little girls that if they
cry, a return on investment is reason without cause
or just that loving hurts. In a place people couldn't
quite picture a little girl, there she pleaded
wide awake because shut eyes illuminated each
spoken verb—an action unmeant to sprout
reason at net zero. The wind was a
dream gaining roots where a little girl
might dig until fears grew fruit
offering love to passing
gardens where not
even acorns
choose to
grow.



20. Old Habits Die Hard

by ESMERALDA HERRADA-FLORES
acrylic on canvas, mini canvases, & twine



21. Boy 1990

by BOB MADDEN
acrylic on canvas

22. Re(habit)uation

by MATT KIMBRELL

— For one who called the Internet an endless canned tomato aisle.

I once teared up in a Home Depot hammer aisle because I realized that as a grown man, I could not choose which fiberglass rip claw to pluck from the wall of plenty. Compelled to own them all, I feared a future where I would be perpetually lacking, perpetually longing—a baffled Archimedes unable to move my world. The more I entertain the fantasy that a slightly different hammer is what I need to repair the rotting timber within, the more hammers I bring home from warehouses named, without irony, fulfillment centers.

23.

La soledad

by LYNETTE GAYNOR

La soledad
No significa desesperada.
No significa que no disfrutes tu tiempo,
Sola.
No significa que no te guste la persona que eres,
Sola.

No significa débil.
No significa fuerte.

Es,
mucho tiempo
para pensar
para soñar
para esperar.
Mucho tiempo para reflexionar.
Mucho tiempo.

Es sentir soledad.
Porque cuando termina el día,
Y cuando comienza el día siguiente,
Todavía estás
Sola.

23.

Loneliness

by LYNETTE GAYNOR

Loneliness
Doesn't mean desperate.
It doesn't mean that you don't enjoy your time,
Alone.
It doesn't mean that you don't like the person you are,
Alone.

It doesn't mean weak.
It doesn't mean strong.

It is,
a lot of time
to think
to dream
to hope.
A lot of time to reflect.
A lot of time.

It is to feel loneliness.
Because when the day ends,
And when the next day begins,
You are still
Alone.

24.

Empty Kingdom

by KATEN NIEDBALSKI

After we slayed the last dragon
and fought the last king

When our sticks
were no longer swords

A castle built from mud
stood abandoned

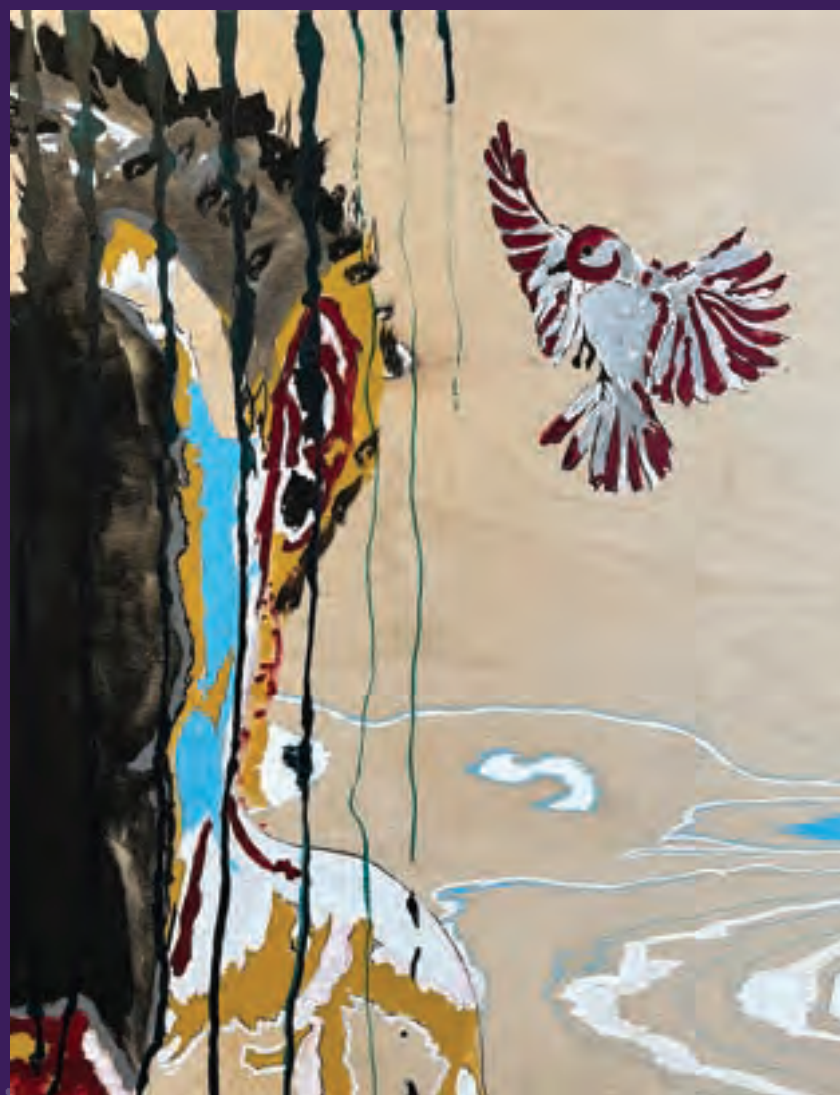
Visions of faraway lands
now just clouds
and grass
and bits of tin
our father left out
for scrap

I remember the moment
that logic set in
the moment our hands
would no longer blister
from swinging on bars

There was a heavy stillness
as the swing set
began collecting dust
bright plastic jutting out
like old monuments in the
abandoned sandbox

There was a hush upon
the red curves of our sled
speckled with snow
never to be balled
in young fists

There was a hush upon
the last time this yard
was a kingdom



25.
Loss

by BOB MADDEN

acrylic and ink on wood



26.

Anxiety

by BOB MADDEN
acrylic on canvas



27.

Liminal

by LOCK
3D Render

Eerie Encounters



28.

Teeth

by BRITNI BADER

polyester plate lithograph on watercolor paper



“A WANDERER MAY HAVE EERIE ENCOUNTERS.”

29. The Splinter

by JEFFREY PRYOR

The funeral was dismal and dark. In an atmosphere that was humid and reeked of formaldehyde, Elliot sat there on the hard wooden bench next to his mother. He was lost in the fact that his one ally, his best friend, his father, now lay dead in the dark wooden casket. As the mourners chatted quietly, sad music played slowly out of an awful tinny-sounding speaker. Elliot took a deep breath and stood up, his mother reached for him, but he quickly stepped into the aisle and made his way forward. He walked slowly, dragging his feet to keep his oversized shoes on. It was the best he could do with what he had. The clothing he wore came from Goodwill at the last minute and was at least three sizes too big. The pants were folded on both sides at the waist and safety-pinned. His mother's skinny belt held up the twice-rolled pants. As he walked, his feet slid across the carpet. The dynamic friction between the oversized shoes and the carpet made a high-pitched squeaking sound. It was the only sound he could hear.

The mourners stopped chatting and the music faded as he approached the cheaply made casket. Elliot could see nail heads protruding and rudimentary wood staining over what looked like

mud. He knew his father would never approve of such shoddy craftsmanship. He focused on the protruding head, slightly above the casket. There was no color--pale white with a spattering of some makeup for a hint of realism. He slowed his march and felt all of his muscles seizing up, so much that he felt like he would just fall and hit his head on the casket. He took another breath, realizing that he had forgotten to breathe since he first stood up. He was alone. No one else was in his world at this moment in time. He crept toward the casket and realized that he had to stand on his toes to see in. In doing so, his feet slid out of the shoes ever so much.

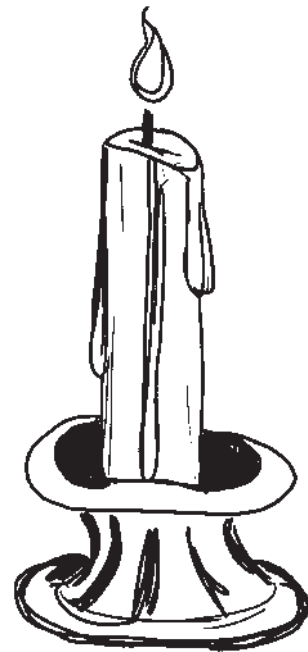
Elliot reached out to the casket for support and a splinter stuck into his hand. He looked down at it, wincing in the pain, then steeled himself for what he was about to see. He stretched up onto his toes and saw the hands first. They were wrinkled and old, lifeless, and being held together by a blue rubber band. The kind used to hold broccoli at the grocery store. He moved his eyes up slowly and saw the chest, protruding, yet with a sucked-in belly. He focused on the stained sweatshirt that his father was wearing. No suit was provided for him, just a stained gray sweatsuit. As he slowly moved his head, he saw the face of his father, his jaw forced closed, and the lips tightly sealed as evidenced by the visible exposed stitching. The cheekbones were sucked

in, showing the bone structure of his skull. Finally, his eyes seemed to be glued shut, as there was some crusty substance along both of the eyelids.

Elliot reached out and touched his father's hands. They were cold as ice and when he pushed the skin, it retained the imprint of his finger. The hands and arms were stiff and did not move at all. He let out his breath and softly whispered, "I need you." His father's eyelids cracked open, dried glue creating a jagged edge on his eyelids. His blue eyes were faded, almost gray and the surrounding white was red. His head turned to Elliot and he made eye contact with him. His mouth tried to open but was sewn shut and the words were muffled. Elliot was frozen with fear and compassion. He did not know what to do. He turned to look at the mourners in the hard wooden pews behind him. No one seemed to notice anything.

When Elliot looked back at his father, he was resting peacefully in the casket, as before. Elliot's heart sank and he lowered himself back down. He turned and started the slow sliding across the carpet, squeaking as he went. The mourners acted as if nothing had happened and looked at him with pity, judging him by his looks. Elliot was small in stature, frail, and undernourished. He was just a whisper of a boy, but his will was strong and he was smart, very smart. He reached his place next to her as

she was glaring at him with anger. He sat down and she clutched his leg tightly, making him feel the pain. He looked at his hand and started picking at the splinter, the only remnant that he had to remind him of his father... and he decided to leave it alone. He kept his head down and just felt the isolation, the emptiness, and the lonely times to come. Elliot did not cry, not even one tear. He would not, could not, and never will let her see him cry. He focused on his oversized shoes and pondered where they had been, what they had seen, and whom they transported.



30. Land Somewhere

by ANNIE EDERLE

"Your sister's got to go!" Michael screamed.

"You're in our house, don't you forget that," Jenny warned him.

That was the last thing Annie could make out clearly as she escaped upstairs. She had left Jenny and Michael to argue in the kitchen, opting to lounge and have a cigarette until they were done; these screaming matches usually led to some other topic and ended with another bruise on Jenny's arm – why she let him stay was beyond Annie.



They'd always been different, the Bridegrooms. The only reason Michael was around was the money in the safe and both sisters knew that. The sound of glass breaking echoed through the house; Annie sat up straight on the chaise sofa, her previ-

ous train of thought completely derailed. Her legs had been pulled to the side as she relaxed, a comfortable position but stiff to fit in with her stuffy surroundings. Their home's posh aesthetic was so completely different from the sisters' shared more whimsical style. Jenny had kept the house exactly the way their parents had left it to them, absolutely zero changes made to anything. The minute they were in the ground, Annie had expected her sister to all but burn the house down, erasing every last memory of those no-good-money-hungry-yuppies. Why they'd had children had always been beyond the sisters. They may not have had the best parents, but they'd always had each other. It was easy to think of them as bad people, but they had left them with a vault full of money and essentially a castle behind pearly gates. Annie and Jenny only left the house for groceries and avoided talking to everyone they could. Now, Annie's feet were planted firmly on the ground ready to pounce, her back straight, ears on high alert, and body on total edge.

The door flew open, Jenny's red polished nails gripping the handle.

"Pack a bag," she uttered almost breathlessly, slamming the door once again. She'd lingered just long enough for Jenny to see the stain on her trousers and speckles of red over her hands and upper body – surely that wasn't nail polish.

Annie haphazardly threw everything she could into an old suitcase, slam-

ming the latch closed and heading out to the hallway. She closed the bedroom door behind her before making eye contact with Jenny. Only now could she see the whole picture and piece together the story.

“Need you to help me in the kitchen first,” Jenny said, taking the last step off the staircase and heading through the archway; Annie could just see her take a large step over something that wasn’t there when she’d escaped upstairs.

“Where’re we going to go?” Annie asked, now sitting in the passenger seat, a bottle of some fizzy something in her hand.

“Anywhere,” Jenny answered, staring straight out the front windshield.

“We just drive?” she asked, brushing the newly formed large-dark-wet splotch on her skirt, before her gaze fell out the passenger window.

“Yep, we just drive,” Jenny answers, her eyes blank as she continues to stare down the driveway, “--land somewhere and start over, forget this shithole town and its bullshit people.”

“Sounds nice. Disappearing, I mean,” Annie ponders, her thoughts never really making it into her brain, her eyes glued to the old oak door they just slammed behind them.

Jenny sticks the keys in the ignition gently, “Can’t come back.”

“I know,” Annie whispers, her gaze

faltering slightly to peek out where Jenny is looking for just a second before refocusing on the door. Jenny places both hands on the steering wheel. “Just you and me now,” she whispers, softer than Annie.

“You and me,” Annie echoes, taking another sip from the straw hanging in her bottle. “Always has been,” she mutters to only herself, her gaze dropping to the splotch on her skirt again.

Some amount of time passes, could have been a minute, could have been an hour, no one really knows, but Annie finally breaks the silence: “And what about... that?” she asks, looking back at the house on her right, car still parked in the driveway.

“We’ll never speak of it,” Jenny answers, finally turning the engine on.

“But what do we do if--” Jenny cuts her off, “I said. We’ll never speak of it,” she finishes the conversation.

The brake lights ignite as Jenny steps on the pedal before shifting into drive. “You’ll have to open the gate when we get down there,” she tells Annie, beginning to roll the car down the driveway.

Annie was asleep before they hit the interstate, only waking when they stop for gas. She’d slip into the bathroom for a second, come out, and Jenny would be ready to go again.

Back to sleep she went, no idea where she was, how far from the house they were, or which direction they were going. *It’s for the best*, thinks Jenny as snore left Annie’s mouth again. Jenny makes sure to move as fast as possible at the stations; she keeps her eyes flitting left and right, checking all of their surroundings in case someone comes around.

When they finally land in a small town, Jenny nudges Annie to wake her. All-in-all, the trip had been about 18 hours; how Annie managed to sleep for the whole ride perplexed Jenny just as much as how she’d managed to drive the whole time. *I guess adrenaline will do that to you*. The sun was high in the sky now, most of the driving done while it was down; *again, probably for the best*, Jenny thinks, *less people to see us*.

“Hungry?” Jenny asked as Annie peels her eyes open.

She yawns loudly, “Famished. What time is it?”

“Breakfast time,” Jenny answers, with no idea what the actual time was to even try and muster up the truth.

They head into the little diner; black and white tiled floors and blue walls greet them. Annie devours two eggs, sunny side up and a side of hash browns faster than Jenny had ever seen. Jenny herself picks at a pancake, most of her intake consisting of

black coffee. Jenny grabs a paper on the way out the door, perusing the headlines looking for the obvious before pulling open the “For Sale” section. A miniscule section, mostly filled with crap, one place, however, seemed mildly okay.

She calls the real estate agent listed under the ad, a fine lady, who seems more than eager to get rid of the property. She meets them there shortly, allowing them to look around; the two bedrooms would do, the small kitchen leaves something to be desired but Annie will put her stamp on it – make it more like home. The nearest neighbor is a mile away, *perfect place to disappear*.

“It seems nice,” Annie smiles, strolling through the house. Her sentence doesn’t seem to meet her heart, but what other choice did they have?

“Nice enough,” Jenny counters, her focus has yet to fully center since they hit the road.

“The furniture could use a little updating and a coat of paint couldn’t hurt,” Annie says.

“Well,” the real estate agent butts in, “it ‘as been sitting here for quite some time. The last owner lost his wife and just couldn’t bear it after that. The farm behind here went by the wayside and he jus’ up an left the place. No one ‘round here knows where he went, but we all know stayin’ wouldn’t have

been any good for him either. 'S a good property and I'm sure I could cut y'all a great deal on it; ya know, with it bein' so old an all."

It's more than clear that her main focus is to make a sale – any sale. The limited amount of cash Jenny had been able to grab speaks to her from the trunk of the car, "Well I sure wish it was in better condition..." Jenny trails on.

"Yes, well," the agent counters, "it could use a little work..."



Jenny spit off a number, well well well below the asking price, knowing that the agent will do anything to get it off her hands.

Papers are signed and it becomes theirs within the hour.

The next week is filled with cleaning the place: scrubbing the windows, mopping the floors, getting rid of the possum family that had settled under the back porch, a coat of paint here, and a floor stain there. Annie tackles the outside, painting the siding and cleaning up the yard. Most of the farmland will go unattended for now, but Annie knows she has quite the



space to make a new garden, one of the things she'll miss most about the old house.

"I think that calls it a day," Jenny yells, plopping down in one of the old wooden rockers on the porch.

Annie joins her quickly, accepting the iced tea Jenny is holding out to her, "Should we reupholster those chairs in the living room?" she asks, lighting a fresh cigarette.

"I think we'll have to," Jenny sighs, "I haven't a clue how to do that, but we sure as hell can't sit on them like that. We'll probably catch some disease or something."

Annie giggles wildly at that, "Probably," she mutters, looking out at the field. "It's coming along nice don't you think?" she exhales a long puff of smoke.

"Looks alright," Jenny says with a small smile that doesn't quite meet her eyes.

Annie wants to be offended, but she knows that Jenny isn't Jenny right now. Jenny isn't doing hardly any of the work, but of course she has an opinion. Annie tries her best to keep positive and focus on the future.

"Should we tuck in for the night?" she asks, trying to pull Jenny from her own head.

"If you're ready," Jenny sighs, standing from the rocker and leading the way inside before Annie even had a chance to answer.

Annie locks the door behind her while Jenny locks the few windows in the front room that they had opened that day. Once everything is secure, and checked twice, they turn off the few lights and settle in.

A week later they have everything put together; the house looks fresh, the yard is dressed up well, and the energy of the two girls is starting to renew. Annie wakes first, proceeding to the backyard to water her budding garden before making breakfast – eggs sunny side up again.

Jenny strolls in later, already dressed in her blue dress for her shift at the general store just inside town. A job... never did she ever think that would happen in her life.

"Paper's here," Annie says, gesturing her spatula toward the table.

Jenny pours herself a cup of coffee from the small white pot before sitting in her usual spot. She takes a nice long sip, her eyes falling shut on their own accord. She breathes a nice, long, deep breath of fresh air that's pouring

in the screened windows, the sweet smell calming her body. This part of the morning always gives her chills, so a breath was necessary.

She peels her eyes open again and gently picks up the paper.

There it was on the front page, the last image that she wants to see this fine autumnal morning; a black and white photo of her and Annie stares back at her. Michael's body has been found and they are wanted.





31. Kiss of Death

by AIDEN PETERSON

The air was frigid, the evening wind chilling me to my bones. I stood outside of the local hospital. I had been for many nights now. My routine had remained the same for about a week. I would arrive as soon as I could after my afternoon meetings, take my duffle bag out of the trunk of my car, move to a neighboring building's rooftop, and wait. I'd wait for hours at a time, always watching for my quarry.

At first, I was convinced there was more than one. Its movements were exceptionally quick, despite its size. Sometimes it had to move from room to room in the hospital, but most of the time it was allowed to linger. I could only watch it some days, for I could only reliably watch one part of the building at a time. Although that didn't matter too much. I had seen it more than enough times. The only difference was that tonight, I was prepared.

I rubbed my hands together; my usual spot was more snowed over than it normally was. I had to clear off a space for myself to prevent my clothes from getting too wet over the time I would be here. I opened my

duffle bag and took out a black metal case. The two clasps on it unclipped with a satisfying click. I took out the rifle from within and began to complete all of the necessary assembly and maintenance tasks before I finished this once and for all.

"You don't have to do this, you can move on." Her voice chimed in my mind, still cheery even after everything.

"I do. I'm the only one who c—" My voice faltered, as the painful memory stirred in my head. Her blood, her protruding bones, the stench of death which permeated around us. Her voice wasn't real, though I wish it was.

"Dad, please! How much time have you wasted on this? You need to let it go." The phantom of her voice resonated in my skull. I didn't respond.

"Let us go." Another voice called to me. Older, refined, and wise. Just as I remembered her. "It pains me to see you like this, my darling."

I grit my teeth, and more memories flooded back into my head. The sickness after our daughter's birth, the degradation of her health until she couldn't walk, speak, or even look at us anymore. The emptiness in her eyes during her last moments haunts me to this very night. Not for long... Soon I won't have to deal with its

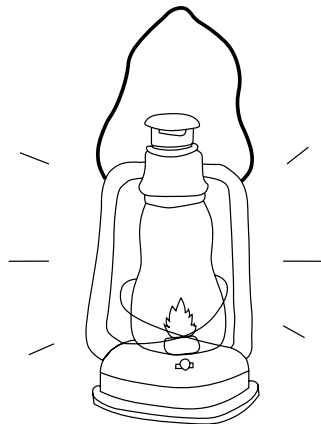
presence anymore, nobody will. Nobody will have to go through what I've been through ever again.

The eerie sound of distant chains rattling alerted me to its presence. It was here, Death had come. I quickly filled the magazine with silver bullets, each with hundreds of different etchings marked into its casing. I had gone to people of every culture and religion I could think of. Voodoo high priests from Louisiana, Christian church pastors, Buddhist monks, Omamori, and dozens of other charms, spells, and blessings. I loaded the rifle and peered through the scope, looking through every window visible with a fanatical focus.

"Where are you?" I muttered to myself while trying to keep my hands from shaking. I needed a steady shot; I couldn't let my emotions get the better of me.

I saw it, a glimpse on the fifth floor through the window, the scope's red dot centered itself on the creature. It was just as haunting as it always had been. It stood hunched over in the hospital room, the back of its ebony-furred mass grazed the ceiling. Its figure was large in stature, and hulking. Though I could never tell if that was the hair. Its stomach and waist were emaciated, with its rib cage piercing through its gray flesh. Its legs were lanky, with cloven hooves at their end. Its arms were particular-

ly disturbing; they both had an extra joint in them. They coiled and bent haphazardly between the shoulders they were connected to and the floor on which the creature's hands rested. At the center of its umbral mass was a single spot of light. A silver theater mask of tragedy, its face contorted into an expression of utmost sorrow. Just above the mask were its twin, jagged large antlers, which almost gave the creature a sense of gracefulness. Finally, wrapped around its left arm was a chain connected to a lantern that glowed a faint cerulean. That damned lantern, the tool it used to harvest people's lives like grain from a field.



That damned lantern

The creature was standing over a figure. It was hard to make out any distinct features beyond the blue glow from the lantern. I could see a lot of movement, but not from the creature; the patient in the room was convulsing in their bed. The

creature was already doing its work; I would not let it take another while I watched on again. I cocked the gun, the sound of the chamber being filled resonated in the otherwise silent air. My finger hovered over the trigger, and prepared to fire.

But I hesitated. The creature had moved over the body, and placed its right hand on the patient's chest. I watched in equal parts horror and fascination as the large movements I had seen from the patient slowed. The creature's hand slowly brushed against their torso in what appeared to be a comforting manner. After doing so, it raised its lantern above its head, between the antlers. The light which shines now like a gemstone in the air, that same light began to shine around the patient, who seemed to have a masculine body now that they were illuminated, a smile forming on their visage as a plume of what appeared to be smoke began filtering into the lantern. The eyes around the creature's mask-like became wet with black liquid that moved like tears. It cradled the lantern in its large hand, keeping it close to its furred chest, as if hugging the soul which it was reaping. The creature welcomed the blue mist into its embrace. The whole gesture was oddly endearing, it coddled the new soul in the lantern as if it was a babe in its arms.

I didn't know what to think, I had watched the creature for many

months in this location, and many years before that... but never this coherently and this close via the scope I had watched this transpire through. The creature was different from what I had thought of it previously... no. It had to be a trick, a lie. It knows that I'm watching and it knows my plans. I wouldn't let it escape. Despite everything I had seen, against what my gut was telling me, I discharged the gun.

The bullet flew through the air, the window, and then the creature's side. At least it must have, but the creature did not move, nor did it shudder, nor did it even acknowledge that it had been shot. It just continued to cradle the lantern, its ebony tears still streaming down its ivory mask. There wasn't any time to think, so I reloaded and fired again... and again... and again. Not a single bullet showed signs of purchase. I fired at its arms, at its legs, at its horns and at its mask. Not a single one caused the creature agony. I then thought to fire at the lantern, only to hear nothing come out of the gun as I pulled the trigger for the final time; I was out of bullets. A smile crossed my face.

"What was it all for then?" I hissed out into the night air, dropping the gun to my side, "All of those years of anger, hatred, preparation. For what?" Laughter began interjecting itself between each and every one of my words.

"I can't even avenge them, I can't stop you, I can't kill you. Why was I born with the ability to see you!" I shrieked into the night air, towards the window. My face distorted, my cheeks hurt from the wideness of my grin, and my heart was pumping so loud that it was all I could hear. My breathing grew ragged, my lungs begged me for air, but all I could do was laugh and shout, "You took everybody from me! And I'm just supposed to watch and pretend that I can't see the beast which rips my loved ones away from me!" My fingernails had dug into the sides of my head, and I could feel a trickle of blood flowing from the newfound openings. My eyes moved from the window to the ledge of the building I had been waiting from. I took out a silver knife from my pocket. My cheeks threatened to burst from the brilliant idea I had just concocted. I placed my foot atop the ledge, then the other. The creature was no longer in the window, but it didn't matter. I would be seeing it soon. I leaned forward, and let myself drift off the ledge of the building. I never knew how quickly one could fall.

The next few seconds of life were a physical agony that I had never felt before in all my lifetime. I couldn't feel my legs, and every other inch of my body felt as if it were aflame, but the pain couldn't stop my laughter. Even though I could feel my fractured ribs poking my ragged lungs, which could barely take in air, I still chuckled. Just as anticipated, Death was now looming over me. I weakly took my knife and swung at its arm, ignoring the sharp pains which tried in vain

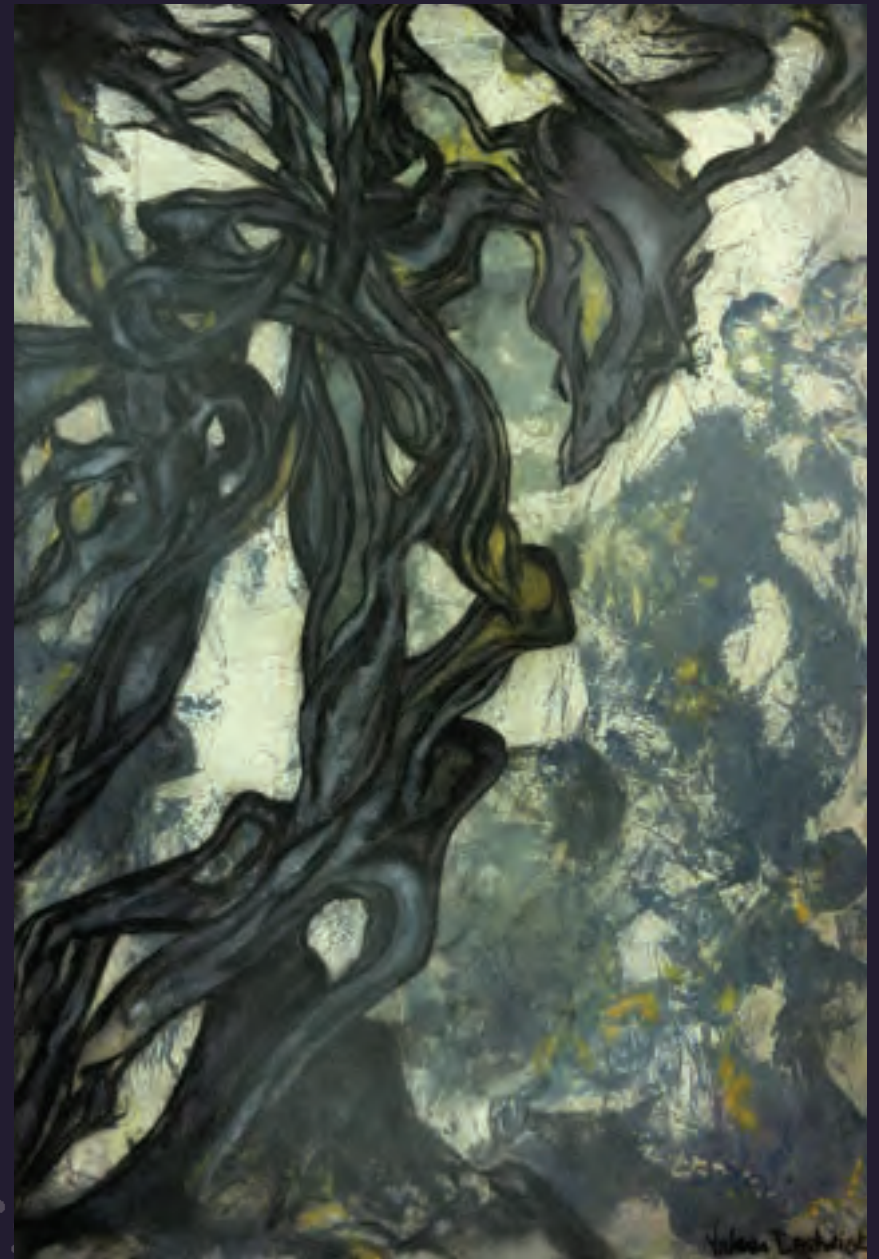
to hinder my movements. The knife passed through its form harmlessly; it was as if I had just tried to stab a puff of smoke. It placed its hand on my chest and for a moment I tried to crawl away, but... the pain was gone. The creature's four fingers felt like a weighted blanket on my injured torso. The creature was monstrous even up close, but I could hear it now. Beyond the sound of the lantern connected to the chain, there was a soft weeping sound from behind the mask. This thing was crying for me, it solemnly wept for my loss as the blackened tears crawled down its face. I nearly scoffed at the whole notion, until I heard them.

"Is dad going to join us now?" The younger female voice spoke.

"I think so, sweetie, we'll be a family again," The elder voice replied.



Their voices were coming from the lantern, but not like the ones in my head. They were real, not the phantoms I had heard previously. I stared Death in the face as I saw the lantern's blue glow permeating around me. It felt like being welcomed into a warm bath. I let out a final sigh. Submitting myself to this fate, for no matter how much I loathed this creature, I just wanted to see my family again. I ignored the sounds of people rushing over to me, the sounds of the now busy night, the sounds of ambulances driving away. As blackness covered my irises and my sight faltered. I knew that I was finally free.



32. Sigourney

by VALERIE DRATWICK

monoprint, collagraph, sumi ink & oil paint



33. Absolem

by VALERIE DRATWICK
monoprint & oil paint

34.

So you Want to Summon Demons

by KATEN NIEDBALSKI

Greet the abyss, and welcome the tide;
We're doing black magic, and I'll be your guide.
Please cast with caution, and always take heed.
To summon a demon, first you will need:

SALT (from the earth)

- to encircle your stay

and CANDLES

- dark red, to light up the way

you'll want BLACK SAGE and WORMWOOD

- for thinning the veils

and BLOOD

- for the binding, and all that entails

Before we begin, let's CLEAR UP YOUR MIND

- to leave any doubt or weakness behind

STRIKE THE MATCH steady

- to kiss all the wicks

- and remember that demons love using tricks.

So you'll need a MIRROR, now please hold it tight:

And NO – WAIT – OH GODS

You've dropped it in fright!

And scattered the framework of salt all around—

Now you're cutting yourself on the treacherous ground—

What are you doing-

That's way too much blood!

The spell itself has started to flood.

You need to back up;

You have to retreat,

For this is a demon you don't want to meet.

Slam the door, burn your clothes

And say not of the toll,

Or he'll find you again

And devour your soul.

35.

Ring™

by CHELSEA BAIRD

After a few months of him intermittently being woken in the middle of the night by my phone's quiet vibrating, my boyfriend asked me to turn off my notifications when we go to sleep.

"What app is even active at those hours," he said. His questions always come out flat, a quirk that I took for disinterest on our first dates. "Are guys texting you in the middle of the night or something?"

No, I explained, no, it's our Ring app. He stared at me, confused.

"The doorbell," I said. "The one with the camera? You installed it, babe. It notifies me when there's movement."

He blinked. "Why do you need to have that on at 3 A.M.?"

"Um, in case someone breaks in, for starters."

I've tried to explain this to him before. He never gets it. But he acquiesced when I asked him to get one for us—less for us, more for *me*, for my peace of mind— and now it's my turn. I set my phone to Do Not Disturb that night as we got in bed, knowing that I'd lie awake listening to my heartbeat for at least a few hours.

It's been four nights of this, and I still can't sleep. *It's okay*, I tell myself, over and over again, eyes wide open, Henry snoring beside me. *He's here*.

I really do feel okay while he's next to me. Burglaries aren't necessarily predicated on who is in the house— more so if anyone is home at all— but murders are much less likely to occur when it's a couple home. It's most often women, alone, who are at risk.

Not saying it doesn't happen to couples. But I have much more of a fighting chance with someone likely in the potential murderer's weight class.

Henry refuses to let me get a dog, a ruling that increases the chances of a successful break-in by tenfold. I wheedle at him probably every other day. I have three separate apps dedicated to finding adoptable rescues downloaded, and every day I scroll through them, saving the most appealing ones to show him later.

"Look," I say, scrolling through photos of a Staffy or a Pit mix or a Lab. "Isn't he cute?"

He says he doesn't want to get a dog because he thinks he'll end up doing all the work. Which is bullshit. I'm home all day. I do all the cooking and cleaning already. My mom asks me daily when he's going to marry me already, do I have my own savings, what I even do all day. The kind of questions that explain why we don't go over for dinner very often; the kind of questions that I

think about sometimes, staring out the bay window and letting the sink run.

"Well, what about when it gets cold," he argues. "I know you won't want to go out to walk him."

Again, a bullshit argument— we have a backyard.

"It's not fenced," he says. "And who's gonna end up having to go out and put one in."

"A contractor," I say.

He rolls his eyes. "And who's gonna pay for it."

We've gone through this probably a million times, but I don't plan on stopping anytime soon. The sound of a dog barking through a door, or the sight of one meandering around the backyard, is enough to stop plenty of would-be burglars and killers. I've explained this to him, too, and all he does is roll his eyes and call me a scaredy-cat.

I quietly seethe when he says this. He would be scared too, if he had to navigate the world as a woman. The only reason he isn't is because he has the privilege not to think about this stuff. Sometimes I get offended by his absolute inability— refusal, maybe— to understand. It's impossible not to know the things that happen to women every day. Especially impossible for him, who watches true crime shows with me practically every night, sees the count-

less stories of women followed to their cars, lured outside their homes at night by recordings of a crying baby, punished for the kindness of stopping to help a stranger at the side of the road. Or, worse, stalked into their houses and apartments and killed there. In the places they were supposed to be safe.

Henry works in defense. Of all people, he should understand. Instead, he shrugs and keeps moving through life without ever looking over his shoulder.

I manage to sleep at some point, fitfully, waking often and pulling the comforter over my head to slide my phone open and check the Ring app, hiding the glow of the screen. Henry wouldn't see it anyway. He sleeps like a log. Still, I don't want him to catch me. It's not like he would be angry. Really, he only yells when I've given him a reason to. But he certainly has no qualms about mocking me. So, when 5:58 rolls around, I put my phone away— I've given up on sleeping any more— and pretend to yawn awake with him while his alarm blares a Drake song.

We wouldn't wake so early if he wasn't leaving for a conference today. His flight is at 9. I stand at the stove with bloodshot eyes and make him a burrito for the drive to the airport. Organic kale. Free-range eggs. Zero-carb tortilla. I ignore both the pangs of hunger and pit of anxiety in my stomach. I will be alone in the house for four days and three nights. Three nights. Four days. Alone. Henry grunts from the other room, probably brute-forcing collared

shirts into his suitcase. He's stronger than he looks. Tall, too. If a killer came into the bedroom as we slept and Henry stood up in a rage, the guy would be terrified. He might even abandon ship and run. If I was alone, dead asleep, no dog or boyfriend to protect me?

I'm quiet in the car. We both sit and look straight ahead and listen to an episode of Murder Bitch. The killer in this one followed women to their cars after their waitressing shifts and drove them out to the middle of the woods. Then he cut out their tongues. Halfway through the episode we get to the airport.

"Thanks, babe," he says, and when he kisses me I have to hold my hands intentionally steady. I watch him walk away, away into the warm, loud airport, and shake in the Range Rover.

That night, I call my mom. I put her on speaker so her voice bounces off the shiny white cabinets and fills the room. I half-listen, scrolling Instagram on my phone, while she tells me about the real estate coworkers I've never met. Then she asks again when Henry is proposing. Of course. I tell her I don't know, but I don't hang up until I'm half asleep on the couch and she tells me *she has to go to sleep now, okay, bye sweetheart*. I turn on Criminal Minds to fill the subsequent silence. Then I take my night supplements and forgo my skincare in favor of checking the lock five times before curling up on the couch.

I sleep terribly, of course. Ring wakes me— no Henry means my notifications are back— but there's no one outside. I toss and turn and get up to check the lock more than a few times. I'm equally worried about what's on the other side of the door and frustrated with my body for continually, relentlessly staying awake. The less I sleep, the more cortisol I'll have— cortisol, as in the chemical that makes me stressed out and fat and will eventually kill me, according to @katykatfitnesss.

When the sun rises, it's unbearably slow.

The air has a brutal bite as I step outside for my walk, the sun still low and cold. I don't really want to go. I just couldn't stand to sit in that same spot on the couch and scroll TikTok for any longer. Plus, if I stay in the house I'll let myself eat before 9, which is basically poison for my gut. I secure the electronic lock outside the house. It buzzes and chimes to let me know it's locked. Still, I pull on the door, just to be sure. It doesn't budge.

I walk for a full episode of one of my podcasts. Today's is the story of a man who kept six women in his basement, raping and torturing them until he eventually killed them. He was arrested six years later when a houseguest found hand bones in a cardboard box. If I keep up a brisk pace as I listen, I can get at least four miles in. I wish, as always, that our neighborhood had more hills. It's a new development. So new that we're still awoken by the clanging of construction noise most

mornings, a fact that bonds us with our few neighbors, mostly young parents, with helpless half-smiles from the porch while the clamor rages. It's almost perfect, besides the construction. And the hills. Hills make for a better workout. My watch tells me my first mile was seventeen minutes. I speed up. I want to hit fifteen. My head is getting too warm already. Even in a safe neighborhood like this, I keep my ponytail underneath a hat or hood. It's the perfect handle for someone to grab from behind. A potential kidnapper is far more likely to go for someone on the street with a ponytail, or a braid, or even just long hair worn down. On the rare occasion Henry and I go into the city for dinner or drinks, I put my hair in a tight bun.

In my AirPods, the Murder Bitch host is laughing as she describes the killer's childhood doll fixation. I laugh with her. I'm coming up to the under-construction area of the neighborhood, and I see one of the workers see *me* laughing to myself. We only make eye contact for a second before I straighten my face, cross the street, and put my head down. I don't look at any of the other men as I walk by. I can't help picturing one of them coming up behind me, grabbing my ass or my shoulder or the back of my coat. I would throw an elbow back, pivot, and knee him in the balls, then slam another elbow onto his back as he doubled over before running as fast as I could, calling 911 as I sprinted. I wouldn't run back to my house, though— that would only alert him as to where I live when he got up. I would run the other direction and

find shelter in the first house I could find with a car in the driveway.

I look over my shoulder, just in case. There's no one there.

I kill the rest of the day running errands, moving far slower than I usually would. The clock slows down with me, and I end up hunched over my phone in the Target parking lot just to make the afternoon stretch. A gray Corolla tails me on the way home for long enough that my hand inches to my phone. He turns on the street before mine.

Henry calls, briefly, before dinner, but gets pulled away to the hotel bar with a grunting apology. The house feels suffocatingly quiet when he hangs up. I turn on the TV again and crank the volume to 65. I pour a glass of rose, but barely sip it; all I can think of is the sugar pouring into my veins.

Hours pass in total silence, until: there's a knock. From outside the front door.



I'm standing in the kitchen and I flinch, hard, knocking my wrist into the counter, and stay silent as I shake it in pain. I'm still wincing as I open the knife drawer. *I should have turned the lights off. He wouldn't know anyone was here.* The car is in the garage. Besides the stupid fucking lamp I kept on for warm light and comfort, there is no way to tell from outside the house that anyone's here. Some people would call out, try to act big. I inch quietly towards the door with the knife in hand. Calling out just alerts the killer that there really is a woman right behind the door, and that she's probably scared. If I don't say anything, *I keep surprise on my side*, as a safety influencer I follow likes to say. When he breaks through the heavy, locked door, or one of the plexiglass windows, he won't be expecting me to be waiting with a knife.

My heart is pounding out of my chest. I can't breathe. My phone is on the couch— belatedly, I realize I can see what he's doing out there through the doorbell. I keep the knife pointed in front of me as I pick it up and open the app.

Nothing. The porch is dark and empty.

"Jesus fuck," I gasp. I throw the knife on the couch and drop to my knees, panting. It sounded like a knock. It was definitely a knock. But the screen is empty. No notifications. No movement.

I stay up all night on the couch with the knife next to me. I flip through streaming service after streaming service and eventually end up watching

infomercials for vacuum cleaners, comforted by the white lights and smooth voices. I don't even lay down. I keep my back pin-straight.

The sun takes sticky, meandering hours to finally wrench itself over the horizon. I wait for it impatiently. My infomercial is quietly replaced by a morning news program with bright, choppy colors that instantly give me a headache.

My walk is buzzy and unreal. The neighbor's goldendoodle, Layla, bounds up to me, pretty pink tongue hanging out of her mouth, and I half-jump out of my skin before I reach down to pat her soft fur and smile vaguely at her owner. It's cloudy, but too bright; everything feels like blades on the backs of my eyes. I pass the construction again. That same worker from yesterday looks up at me, and the blonde hair on my forearms stands up. Murder Bitch is going on about her BetterHelp sponsorship in my ears. *What if it was him, last night?* I'm letting the eye contact go on too long. I look back down at my feet and speed up. There was no one on the Ring camera.

But— what if?

I rush back to the house and don't leave again. My phone buzzes a reminder at me for the weekly Pilates class I haven't canceled yet, but haven't attended since I almost got trafficked in the parking lot. I'll deal with it next week. I check the battery on the Ring instead. It's only at 50%. I decide to charge it for an hour— I'll be awake,

the neighbors are home, and my phone will be in my hand the whole time. I perch on my spot on the couch to eat a bowl of sliced cucumber and stare at the door. I have the idea to hang blackout curtains— make it impossible to see the lights on in the house at night— but they aren't available for same-day delivery. Instead, I start collecting the thickest blankets I can find. When it gets dark I'll drape them over the windows.

My Apple Watch tells me over and over again that my heart rate is too high. I press a finger to the side of my neck and take deep breaths in and out, in and out, which only helps until I open my eyes again and the door fills my vision. I text Henry: *I miss you*, followed by an emoji with a single tear running down its face.

Miss u too babe, he says. *Sorry dinner now.*

I end up putting the blankets over the windows early. *Construction shifts have to end before the sun goes down*, I reason, standing on a chair and tucking the corners of an old quilt into the curtain rod. If the man I made eye contact with gets off work and comes here, I want him to assume I'm staying with my mom for the night or something. *What if he just wants stuff? What if he's a burglar, and that's good news?* No— I saw the way he looked at me. I was the one to break eye contact, not him. He wanted something else.

I can't tell when the darkness of night takes over through the soft shields

on the windows; only one small lamp in the bedroom is on, so the low light fades into itself. The one other concession I've made is to keep the TV on. I keep the volume low. I just need something in the background so the silence doesn't actually drive me insane. Earlier, I dragged a love seat from the bedroom into the living room, the sound of wood legs on wood floors screeching loud enough to make my ears ring, and placed it right next to the door. I'm sitting now, positioned so that if someone burst through, it would swing towards me. I laid pillows and blankets on the couch to look like the outline of a woman sleeping. By the time he figures out that the figure isn't breathing, I'll be able to come up behind him with the knife. Once again— *surprise on my side.*

I found my old stash of Adderall



and took one to keep myself awake. I can't afford to sleep— not tonight. I sit, buzzing, in the chair, legs itching to pace back and forth across the living room, but my brain knows better. For long, long hours, there is nothing. Even the wind is soft tonight. I can hear it whistle faintly, brushing the neighbors' wind chimes, but it doesn't knock on my door, or sway the tree in the front yard enough to activate the Ring camera, which is the only app I've allowed to notify me tonight.

Then: something. From the back door.

My head whips around fast enough to feel a sharp pain in my neck; I stop just short of crying out, and instead hold it with my head hung as I look towards the source. I manage to stand despite the pain. The knife is out in front of me. *Shit*, I think. *Why didn't I think of the back? What is wrong with me, of course he'll come from the back, oh my God, oh my God, oh my God.* I have no idea what time it is; I haven't checked my watch. The dark of night is still peeking around the corners of the windows. An old man on a grainy video is preaching about hellfire. I creep towards the back. We don't have a Ring for this door. *Why don't we have a Ring for this door?*

Another sound. A rattle. The knife clatters to the ground, falling from my shaking hands. It's the rattle of someone fighting with the door. The rattle of the construction worker pulling at the handle with the weight of his meaty frame behind him. I scramble for the knife and stand at the side of the door, heart beating so hard I feel dizzy. **WARNING**, the Apple Watch tells me, a flicker of light in the dark kitchen, **HEART RATE HIGH**. I

half-crouch there, waiting for the door to burst open, holding back tears.

A minute passes. Then another. My thighs start to burn so badly I have to straighten; the door is silent. I check my watch over and over— **4:14**, it says. Then **4:15**. **4:16**.

I let it hit **4:19** before I step away from the door, lean over the marble counter, and let out something between a long breath and a sob. He must have given up, when the door wouldn't budge. I send out a thanks to someone above me for the strength of the triple locks. One hand is still loose on the knife. When Henry gets back, I'll tell him we need a Ring for the back door, too. I don't care if he makes fun of me.

I only get a second of relief before I hear a car door slam outside. I jump, again, twisting back towards the front. I can just barely see headlights from behind my quilt. It doesn't feel real anymore. I'm watching myself scramble back towards my chair on the side of the door, shoving it aside with the knife in hand, waiting with bated breath. Terribly, horrifyingly— the door starts to unlock. It whirrs and clicks as someone enters the code. *He knows the code*. It can't be happening. It is.

All at once: the door swings open. A large male figure walks through, something heavy-looking in his hand. I scream— I don't even mean to, it just tears itself out of me— and jump on him, swinging the knife, bringing it down on his back. Every ounce of knowledge about what I'm supposed to do, every TikTok and Instagram reel and true crime show I've watched, is gone. My body is moving of its own volition.

The man screams something unintelligible. We've fallen to the floor, both of us, and I can feel the warm liquid of his blood seeping out onto my stomach. I'm raising the knife again.

"ASHLEY," he screams. *He knows my name, how does he know my name—* "DID YOU JUST FUCKING STAB ME."

I stop. The knife is in midair. I look down.

"Shit," I whisper. It's Henry, bleeding below me, suitcase flung across the room. I roll off to my side and scoot backwards, tears already starting down my face. "What the fuck are you doing here, Henry? I just— Oh, my God—"

"You fucking stabbed me. You fucking stabbed me. Call 911, Jesus Christ, I—I texted you, I told you I was coming back—"

"I didn't see it! What was I supposed to think—"

"CALL 911," he roars. Really, truly roars. The blood isn't stopping. I reach for my phone and dial. I'm dreaming. I have to be.

"What do I tell them, Henry—"

"That you *fucking* stabbed me, Ash." Yelling must have taken it out of him. His voice is fading. He won't stop

bleeding. It takes me three tries to dial three numbers, my hands shaking and slick. A deep voice on the other line asks gravely what my emergency is.

"Hi," I say. "My boyfriend was, um, stabbed, he's bleeding a lot— yeah, it's 1501 Rosebud Grove— please hurry— yes— I don't know— he was just talking, but—"

I'm watching myself speak, floating outside my body. Henry is silent and bleeding and I'm panicking on the phone. I can see it: the cops locking my wrists in cuffs behind my back while paramedics carry Henry away. My prints are all over the knife I'm still holding. His blood is all over my clothes. There's no way to explain it away; they'll never believe me, a woman, acting in self-defense against her boyfriend. Not when all the evidence is stacked against me. He'll survive. He's breathing next to me; blood loss and pain do not a fatal wound make. I barely scratched him. Still. I know they'll charge me. Strip me. Shave me. Throw me in a cell.

Eventually the sirens start to blare, coiling closer and closer around me. I close my eyes. I won't fight the cops or the charges. Let them take me to prison. I'll be safe there. Safe from the shadowy men in the night. I lay down next to Henry as the door bursts open again.

Here, I could sleep like a goddamn baby.



36.

Found

by CHELSEA BAIRD

The night is chilly, if not cold, and a breeze is weaving its way through dead black branches to brush the hairs on her arm and raise a crop of goosebumps.

“We are cold,” he says. She agrees.

There is tough frozen soil beneath their feet. The crunch of the leaves would be loud no matter what; in the silence, it is deafening. They’ve been walking for a long time already. She is holding his hand, which is small and cold and curled up in hers. His gait swings him from side to side. In the cold air, in the silence, hangs a question, and she can only wish she knew the answer.

“Are we there yet?” This is not the question he wants to ask, and she can hear it in his voice.

“A little longer,” she says. It might not be. Who could say, really.

“I am hungry,” he says. Which breaks her heart a little.

“Soon, buddy.”

One thing she doesn't have: a map. She has a set of directions that the man told her when she asked him. He did not give her time to write them down.

She isn't good at this type of thing and yet tonight she so badly needs to that her mind has laminated those directions, circled them in red marker, stuck them to the refrigerator in plain sight. *Left at the fallen birch*, he said. They turn left when a white-speckled log appears on the ground beneath them. *Right at the rock pile. Cut straight through the trees that fork upwards.* *Right again at the edge of the woods.* She goes right and left and straight and through and between and still, they are walking, and the air has begun to tighten her lungs, and she can't breathe anymore but she can't stop now. If she stops, she'll have to think about what she's doing.



One thing she doesn't have: a map.

“I just don't understand where you've been,” Josh says over the phone. She's pacing back and forth as she listens, tearing off bits of fingernail with her teeth. *He* is in the other room being quiet like he is whenever she takes a call.

“I- I'm sorry, Josh, but I don't really have an answer for you.”

“What does that mean? I've been really patient with you, but- I can't keep covering for you forever. Especially if you won't even tell me what's going on.”

“Nothing's going on, really, there's just

some s—” she says this word quietly- “I have to deal with, okay?”

“Yeah, but how long is that gonna take?”

She sighs and leans against the wall. There isn't any sound from the other side of it. “Josh, please. I'll be back, okay? This is- it's a sabbatical, it's sick leave, it's- I can't explain right now. But I'll be back.”

“This is what you said two weeks ago, Laura. I- I'm done.”

She tries to protest and is met with the silence of a dead line. “*Fuck*,” she whispers, and slides down the wall. She stays like this for a long moment, frozen, pretending she can do this forever. She can't, though; *he* is waiting, and he will pretend forever he doesn't want her to come back if she asks him, but she can feel his waiting through the walls, silent as it is. Standing up is an effort. So is not screaming and throwing across the room whatever is within reach. It would be so easy. Wouldn't it?

She leaves the bedroom and there he is, sitting right where she left him. He won't speak until she says so. His eyes, though, small and dark, brighten. It feels like something is sitting on her chest.

“Hey, buddy. Sorry I had to get on the phone. I'm back now.”

He sits and blinks at her. She kneels to hug him.

“You can talk now, bud, it's okay.”

“Okay,” he says, and reaches his arms across her back. “Hi.”

“Hi,” she says. She kneels there for a long moment, wanting to squeeze him harder but knowing it will hurt, feeling his little-kid mouth breathing on her neck. Then she pulls away. “Are you hungry yet?”

He nods, and for a moment they are normal.



“I do not like the woods,” he says.

“I do not like the woods,” he says. They are almost there now, really, she knows because the list of directions in her mind is down to its last items. His grip on her hand tightens just a little. Just enough for her to know he's scared. She pauses, stoops a little, and picks him up. He makes a little noise of surprise- she moved suddenly, barely even stopping- then puts his arms around her neck. He's heavy now. Already her arms are straining a little.

“Is that better?”

He nods against her chest and relaxes. Trusting. Her steps slow; her breath catches. *I can't*, she thinks. *I can't, I can't, I can't I can't I can't.*

But they've already arrived. She sees the cabin begin to peek out from behind a mass of bare branches, the ugly remnants of bushy landscaping. In her arms, his eyes are closed. His breathing has already begun to slow. *Oh, buddy. Oh.*

She does not wake him up. She keeps walking up to the door, where there is a rusted knocker in the shape of a lion like the man said there would be. She's pictured this moment so many times it feels like she's already lived it. Reach out. Knock: one, two, three, four times. Wait with bated breath for the sound of the lock clicking, for the eye to appear in a sliver of open door. Say the phrase in a hoarse whisper. Want to die. The door opens fully and it isn't the man she spoke to, though he looks similar: Suit and tie. Clean-cut gray beard. An aspect too formal for his surroundings.

"Come in," he says. She wants to tell him to be quiet. *He* is already stirring in her arms, though, and she can feel him tense, looking at the man. "Laura, right? And you—" he directs his gaze downward, "--must be...?"

He doesn't reply; just stares up from her arms, which are shaking now, with cold or terror or a million other things. The man expected this. He grins. A shark's smile.

"This way," he says.

The cabin is rustic in a way that might be comforting, in another world. There are objects all over the walls, embroidered hangings and hunting trophies

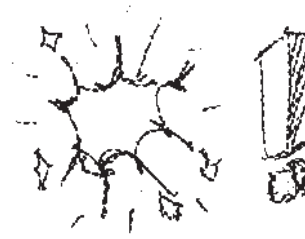
and photos—photos that are never of the same people, or even similar-looking ones, but each sits in a wooden frame that looks hand-carved. No, they are handmade, she's sure of it. She can see the knife marks. The walls feel tighter, suddenly. Handmade blankets are strewn about dusty couches. There is a single candle lit, fluttering in the corner from an invisible wind. They are barely ten steps into the house; she wants to turn back. The door is too far away.

The man leads her to the stairs, then stops in front of her and turns around. "You're shaking," he says. "Let me carry him."

She stares at him with wide eyes. *No*, she wants to say. *No, I will.* And yet she is silent. She's been carrying him for so long. If she says no: she will have to carry him down the stairs. Into the cold unknown. The man does not stop meeting her eyes. He doesn't stop smiling, either. Not as he reaches out and takes him from her arms. Not even as the first tear falls.

With him in his arms, he opens the door.

Her lungs and legs are burning. She's grateful to be alone; in the silence of the empty park she can huff and puff as loud as she needs to without worrying about who's watching. She reaches the top of the hill, where the sun is blinding among autumn leaves, and slows to a walk, then to a stop. Standing with her hands on her hips, she tilts her head back and looks towards the sky, still panting.



"Fuck," she says aloud to the trees.

"Fuck," she says aloud to the trees.

Something shuffles in response.

Her stomach drops. It has to be a deer, or a bird, or a squirrel. It has to be. So are there terrible chills crawling up her neck? She stands perfectly still, eyes darting around her, for a second before half-relaxing again. There is no choice but to keep running now. She supposes it's a good thing. Deep breath in, slow breath out. She walks a few paces, goes to take her first running step.

Another shuffle from the trees beside her. Her heart pounds faster than it did up the hill. She takes her phone from a pocket—she has nothing else—and creeps slowly towards the source of the noise, not thinking about how this is what she hates about horror movies, fear moving her forward inch by inch, leaves crackling beneath her sneakers.

It moves before she gets there. It doesn't run; it slides itself towards her. She screams, high-pitched and loud, on instinct alone. Not just a short scream,

either, but a long one, one that keeps going even after she's done being afraid. Maybe not *done*, but close to it. Because she sees it now.

It is small. Not small-small, but not large—like a medium dog, or a short end table. It's blue. A light gray-blue. And the arms—the arms? Or are they all legs?—are stubby and wrinkly, as is the nose. Its eyes are tiny and dark and gazing at her with terrible, terrible sadness. They look at each other, and a minute passes. Maybe two. Maybe three. She is frozen.

"Hi," she says eventually. Whispers, would be more accurate. Her voice is stuck in her throat. This—thing—is an animal, she thinks, a strange-looking creature she just hasn't seen before. But:

"Hi," it says back. Its voice is small and high. Like a child's. Like a baby boy's. She holds in another scream, pressing a hand to her mouth. Then she kneels to the ground.

"What—what are you doing out here, buddy?" She is shaking badly; so is it. It's *cold*, she thinks.

It doesn't answer; it just stares at her. Its ears, on top of its head, are deflated.

"Do you have a mom? Do you—where's your family?" Nonsensical questions—she doesn't even know what she's looking at! But it's all she can think to say.

It shakes its head.

"I don't know what the fuck to do," she whispers into her phone. "I- I don't know what it is, I don't know what to do with it, I don't know if I should be telling you this--"

"This is really weird, Laura," Jasmine says, "Like, really weird."

"I *know* it is. I know I sound fucking crazy right now--"

"Yeah."

"It's real, okay? And I just--" she puts a hand to her forehead-- "I don't even know what to feed it. What does it eat? Do I, like, take it outside to shit? I just. I can't leave it out there, Jasmine, but what the hell do I do?"

"Laura," she says slowly, "I love you, girl, but I have zero clue."

Right now she has it nestled in a pile of blankets in her living room. She set a bowl of dry cereal in front of it, which it did not touch; it just looked up at her with its tiny wet eyes. She peeks around the corner. It sits, unmoving, waiting.

"Okay," she says. "Okay. I'll figure it out. I'll figure it out. I-- thank you. Sorry. See you soon."

She hangs up and takes a deep breath. Another. Then she walks out to where it sits, and sits next to it herself, crossing her legs like a child.

"Hey buddy," she says. Her voice is shaking. "Do you have a name?"



"I don't know what the fuck to do," she whispers into her phone.

It shakes its head. It stares at her.

"Okay. Do-- Are you cold, still?"

It shakes its head again.

"Good. Okay, good. Are you hungry?"

It nods fast. "Yes," it says.

"Ok, bud, let's get you something to eat. What do you like?"

It sits for a minute, ostensibly thinking. "I like pasta," it says. "I like chicken."

"Okay, good! Good, I, um, let me find you something, okay? I-- I'm gonna find something quick."

It looks at her. It doesn't say another word until after she's called in the order, after it arrives, after it eats, tiny arms shoveling the noodles into its mouth (it refused the fork she offered). She takes the plate, scared it will try to eat that too, and when she comes back it taps gently on her ankle, jolting her. It looks up at her with that tragic face, small and timid and weak, and says:

"Thank you."

She walks down the stairs behind them, half in a daze. He's watching her from the man's arms; she can see him shaking.

"He's cold," she says. "He's shaking, do you-- is there a blanket down here, or--"

"Laura." The man doesn't turn around to look at her. "He's fine."

"He's not, he's cold, and--"

"Laura." There is a finality in his tone that shuts her down. She doesn't want to be kicked out. Part of her does, actually, but at the same time she knows she couldn't bear to leave. There is a partition, in this basement, a cheap one, and behind it a desk. Sitting there is the man she spoke to. Seeing him next to his counterpart, she is shocked by how similar they really are--almost twin-like, though there's something undefinable about each of them that makes them clearly unrelated. Not cut from the same cloth, but cut into it. The second man-- he's a little taller, the Tall Man-- sets him down on the desk. The other man reaches out to touch him and she physically winces.

"Hello, Laura," the shorter man says. He puts a hand on his back and another on his wrist. Checking for a pulse. "How have you been?"

She tries to say something and fails. Instead she watches, slack, as the man finds the pulse he was looking for and scribbles something on a notepad; produces a flashlight and stands to look in

his ears, his eyes, his nostrils. He puts it down and lays him flat on the desk to inspect everywhere else, poking and prodding and making little noises of approval or disappointment or something in between. He lays there silent and unmoving. It feels like a whole year of this. Eventually, finally, the man straightens and turns to her.

"It's in good condition."

"He," she strangles out.



"It's in good condition."

The man ignores this. "A little paunchy, maybe. Might be your doing. Can't blame you, though. Fifteen." He pulls a suitcase from behind the partition and places it on the table, next to him, with a heavy thunk.

She remembers the day she got the call: an unknown number, a mysterious voicemail. Calling it back out of sheer curiosity, and hanging up with a terrible pit in her stomach. Thinking, *No and Never*, trying to lock it away somewhere her brain couldn't touch.

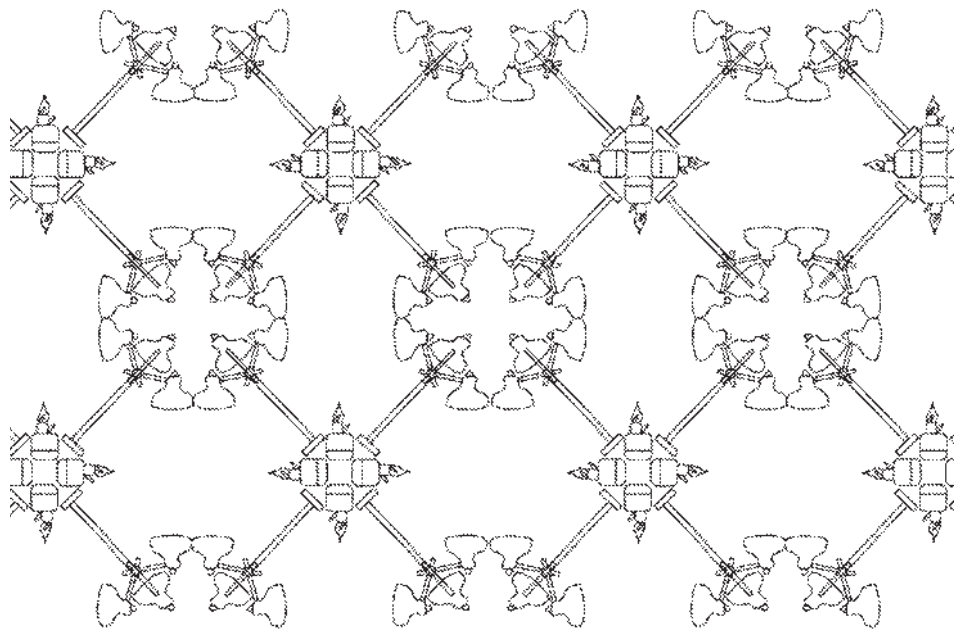
Then: the weeks on end at home. Not leaving the apartment for more than ten minutes at a time because she didn't know what he would do. His

endless needs. The endless requirement that she ask what he needed, because he roundly refused to speak first. The lies. The fear. The calls from her boss, asking where she was. The paychecks that didn't come.

Those were the good times, too, even if they were the bad. This was when he started to talk more. When he hugged her for the first time, out of the blue, and she had to go to the bathroom to lock the door and sob. There was a way he looked when she gave him things, or bathed him, or brought him food. The sneaking feeling that this was something like family. These times are what she thinks about as she looks at him sitting on the stainless steel desk, shaking like a leaf. These times, and the phone call she made. The one she made after three sleepless nights, tearing out her hair, bank account close to running dry. Pure desperation.

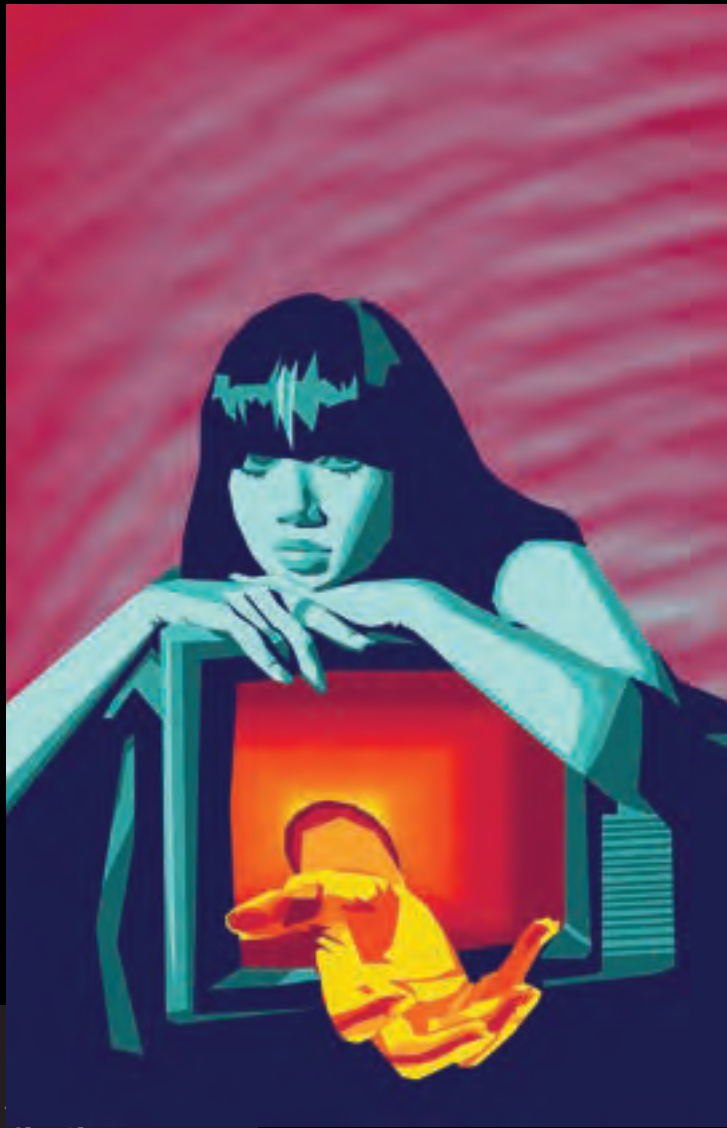
She's shaking too, she realizes, and it isn't just the cold, but the overwhelming desire to pick him up and run, back up the stairs and into the woods, back to their car parked on the side of the interstate, back home before he can process that this was anything more than a bad dream. *What happened last night?* he would ask, and she would ruffle his bald head and say *nothing, buddy, you must've had a nightmare.* They could be normal. They would have to hide, but that could be okay. She would do odd jobs. Beg, borrow, and steal. Work from home, if anywhere would have her. They could be a family, in some life, somewhere.

"You said twenty on the phone," she hears herself say. She looks at him, sitting on the table, and his eyes lock onto hers; for the first time, she sees a tear make its way down his cheek.



37. Gardener

by LAUREN POITRAS
digital collage



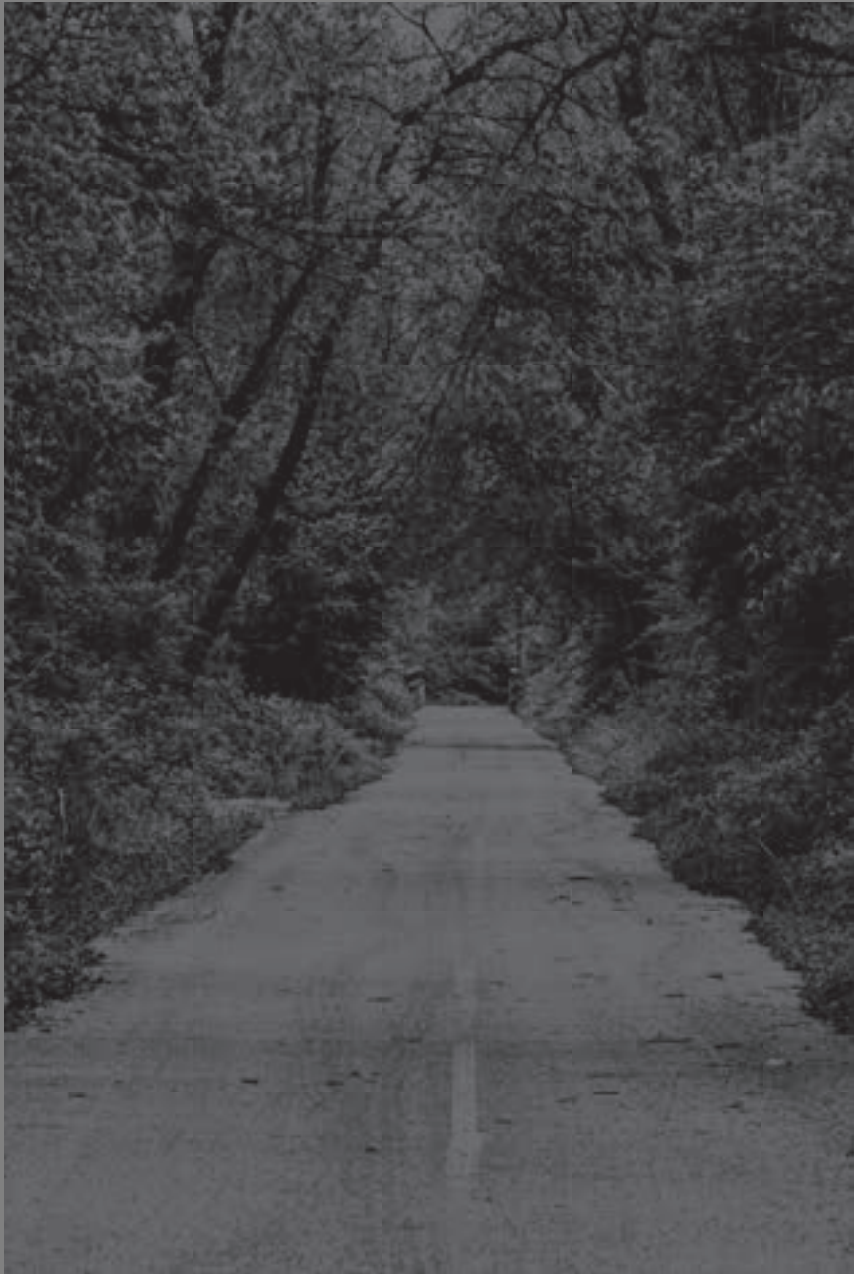
38.

Waiting for You

by DANNIE DOYLE
digital art

Going into Town





“A WANDERER DECIDES TO GO INTO TOWN.”



39.
Hands

by BRITTON BADER

waterless lithograph on watercolor paper

40. Scream

by BRITTON BADER
mokulito



41.

The Amtrak to Missouri

by ARIANNA RICO RICO

The air at midnight was extra sharp; it moved freely in thick blows around the face. I tightened the scarf around my neck, a thick twill too big for my body. My gloved hand was tightly around my phone and the other was on my luggage, gripping it for support as my body was too heavy with sleep. In the distance, there was a faint whistle, the rustic noise of heavy machinery, and two bright beady eyes in the dark. It seemed far, a while away, but it did not take long for the train to appear in front of me. Long and never-ending, screeching in its entirety.

I grew familiar with the Amtrak trains from Chicago to Los Angeles in my first year of college. It was always the same metallic, blue-and-red-striped Southwest Chief that took me from downtown St. Louis to Kansas for the holidays and vice versa. This time, the train ran late; usually, by ten, we would be on our way to Missouri, but it was past midnight when a few other passengers and I waited for the train. We were stuck on the small platform as December's air blew around us, unforgiving of our situation. When the

train finally arrived, it was packed. It was no surprise since it was a few days away from Christmas, but as I walked in looking for my seat, I stumbled through limbs and luggage out in the narrow hallway. Because I had booked my ticket too late, I ended up at the bottom of the coach car near the bathrooms. The car was hidden behind a thick burgundy curtain, and when I passed through, the curtain revealed a car full of older white folk. I don't have anything against elderly people in particular. However, when I find myself in a room without other people of color, I start feeling anxious. I never know what I'm going to experience-- it could be casual racism, hostility, condescension, or maybe, if I'm lucky, kindness.

Hesitantly, I walked to my seat. Fortunately, it was located near the front, as my face had already started to feel hot and flushed, and I felt stares everywhere like stray embers around my body.

"This area is only for people who have tickets. You can't be here if you don't."

Somewhere, the voice floated from the back of the otherwise quiet car, thick, slurry, and harsh. It was a woman's voice. I had a sneaking suspicion then of the type of person she was. Intuition was my friend, and I'd only ever listened to its wisdom. Other people had walked in behind me, and she did not question them. My face flushed as I

found my seat, and without sounding intimidated, though I was, I said:

“I have a ticket.”

No reply.

My seatmate was a lovely woman in her fifties. We made small talk before she drifted to sleep, and I put on my headphones. I always found it difficult to sleep on a train, something about being alone as I traveled through states left me with an ache. Like I was still outside feeling the cold in my bones and in my teeth. Like I was a little girl again, scared and intimidated by everything. I didn't let the moment get to me, though I was good at overthinking. I knew that the situation not escalating more was something to be thankful for with how heavy my body was.

I managed to sleep here and there, and it was around four or five in the morning when I woke up to the sound of her voice again. A small family walked through the thick curtain, two girls and a little boy--siblings, I assumed.

“This area is only for people who have tickets.”

I shifted in my seat, annoyed that I had woken up and annoyed at the lady's tone of voice, very holier than thou. Memories of the women at

church and how they scolded everything came overflowing. I recoiled at them, the feeling of being shamefully in trouble so etched onto me. The older girl, around my age, replied confidently.

“Don't worry, we have tickets.”

Again, I didn't think much of the interaction as it was nothing more than an inconvenience, a slight annoyance that otherwise did not affect me, though I did feel bad for the family. No other words were exchanged, and the family moved to take their seats. I drifted back to sleep, lulled by the train's tire on the track, a soft, rhythmic, jazzy beat. The smoke from the ignition created clouds outside the window. A cozy atmosphere engulfed the car as only murmurs and the sound of sleep silently began a complimenting harmony. Then I was once again woken up.

“Don't touch my suitcase! Don't touch it!”

The voice sounded so far and distant. The sleep was too tempting; I was drifting once again. It had nothing to do with me, after all.

“He's not touching anything, calm down!”

“I know your people. He was!”

I woke up as if I was the one being yelled at. I knew my gut was right, and it was only a matter of time before some ignorance spilled out of her mouth. Immediately, I began to worry for the family. I listened without turning back to look at them like a spectacle.

“What is that supposed to mean? He's just a little kid.”

“That doesn't matter. He shouldn't be touching things that aren't his. My suitcase was right here, and now it's over there. It was obviously moved!”

“*Porque nos toco con esta señora?*” The little girl whispered to her older sister. This roughly translates to “How did we end up sitting next to this woman?”

“Hey, speak English! If you people are all going to move here, the least you can do is speak English!”

I could see the people in front of me shifting uncomfortably in their seats. I wondered if anyone else was feeling the mixture of fear and anger in their body that I was feeling. My heart was pounding heavily, and I felt sick to my stomach. My face steadily grew hot. I remembered back to when the cops pulled over my family on a freezing night and made us get out of the car so they could search it for drugs because, according to them, my father

looked ‘suspicious.’ At the time, my coworkers commented that they could not tell I was an immigrant because my English was so good. From when the boy I liked told me he had always wanted to be with an exotic girl like me to when the cashier belittled my mother for speaking broken English, and I watched my mother shrink. As a little girl, all I could do was watch. My English was not any better. I wanted to yell back but was not able to. These instances and many more were stuck inside my throat. It is hard to swallow these experiences and accept them as part of life, and even harder to bear my inability to do anything. I didn't stand up for myself or my family in those moments; I let the humiliation quietly pass. Even then, on that train, I did not know that family, but I knew what they were feeling, and I did not say anything on their behalf. I was paralyzed by my own shame and fear of confrontation and the brewing violence that lurked.

As a little girl, my father used to say to me, “This is their country; we are the ones coming here. It makes sense how they react to us.”

In these moments, I wished I had yelled, “No, Daddy, that's not true. They've taken someone else's land! They've even taken our land! They have no right to claim it's theirs!”

Instead, I've permanently been immobilized with too much emotion. Perhaps deep down, a part of me took this in and internalized it. I knew my father only said that to cope; after all, he had experienced real racism, the type that's violent and hateful. I could see it in his bloody eyes, hear it in his raspy voice like a boy, and in his shaking hands.

"Can you leave them alone?"

My voice sounded foreign; it had escaped my lips before I could even register what I was saying. It was like I was far away, outside of my body, and then suddenly, before I finished the sentence, I returned to my body and felt everything. My voice was shaky, and I knew I was moments away from crying. From anger? Fear? I couldn't tell. I turned back and finally saw her in between flashes of shadows from the train passing by lights: white hair, soft cheeks, rounded glasses--someone's grandmother. I wondered if she had any softness for them or was even capable of that. Her mouth opened slightly as she stumbled to say anything. A train crew member came rushing in, likely having heard the loud voices. He looked around at the scene and approached the girl. He offered the family different seats in business class. The family gathered their stuff and followed the man out, and just like that, the car was once again quiet and dormant as if nothing had happened.

I looked around, the train filled with people, yet it felt desolate. The whole car was engulfed in darkness except for the occasional lights illuminating the seat in beads as we passed a city. I felt the woman next to me shift to face the window. I had forgotten she was next to me. I also moved, feeling cramped with my suitcase at my feet and my head hurting. I didn't realize I had been shaking the entire time. However, it was not because of what had happened. I had not said anything; years later, I only ever imagined I could. I wished I could have made up for all the times I did not say anything. Would it always be this difficult? Would I always be this ashamed, even as an adult? I looked at the window across from me, seeing glimpses of the city in silhouette buildings and Christmas lights of all colors, all in a blur. After a few minutes, the anger and fear dissipated into a whisper, and I was left feeling cold. My body remembered it was once again December. I continued watching the window as it started to snow, softly like powder; I began to wonder what the weather would be like tomorrow and whether the wind would be forgiving.



42. An Afghan Girl's Tale

by HEELA MOMAND

From the moment she was born.

It was all decided for her.

They said she needed to be like "such and such."

Or

Otherwise, she is nothing.

For so long, she believed them.

That is how she saw life.

As her feet sank into the water and the sand.

As she gazed up at the endless sky.

At times, she became breathless.

The water was cold on her feet.

She wished to run towards the shore.

The endless sea frightened her.

Thoughts surrounded her like gray clouds, which blocked the sun's light.

Thoughts that turned into voices so accurate.

She did not run to the shore.

She stood there, her feet under the water.

She wanted to be like the endless sea.

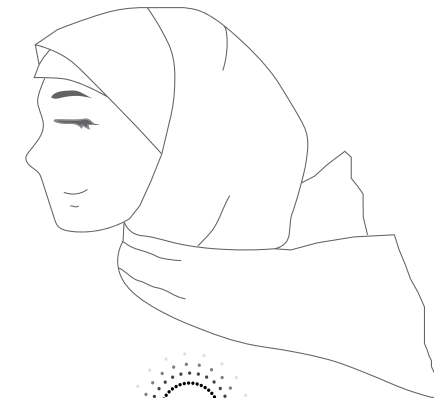
Independent.

Empowered.

Fearless.

She knows of this collective struggle of every Afghan girl.

Their stories untold and buried under the water.



43.

and the world keeps turning

by ADRIANNA COPHER

Maybe, in the beginning, the World starts with a lit cigarette and an ugly flannel couch, God's empty mouth stuck in that drunken yawn like your father after thanksgiving, smooth calloused fingers dipping closer and closer to that fire-engine-red wick,

It is Us who must wonder if He was still asleep
when the flames started to sputter—
the blue cloth-covered coughing,
the speckled wheezing,
that ape that ripped his human mother's face clean off.

Perhaps what woke Him was all that cheering:
the parades of pride in the street,
the coronation of another princess,
the death of another ex-president-ex-painter-ex-executioner,
(He cannot believe He made more than one of those,)

the smoke is rising higher now—
despite the replanting of His favorite forest,
the sinking of His least interesting submarine,
the shoe-shuffling, suitcase-bumping, condemnation of the men
He is told He speaks through

*(all pointless red hats
and white starched collars
and guilty sweat).*

God coughs and chokes on the phlegm, dribbling down His chin,
the fire is all blue now, with pink candy corn sparks and backward black
char on the folded knee of His slacks,
Hands like monuments, marble stamping out gold:

out comes the thousandth technological revolution
with its grimy teeth and record-scratch voice,
the end of every good television series (that were really about Him,
about this),

Oh! And that man with the face like an orange peel—

(screaming. Always screaming. They were never this loud
before the fun house mirror screens in every moldy brick basement. He never
understood the need for them. Never got the want to feel the hot fuzz of the
glass. The stick of the metal antenna. That's what makes Him, Him. And not his
children, He supposes.)

All those sweating brows
And sticky jam fingers in presidential pockets
And all the different metal birds crashing,
(One by one)
down

down
down.
to watch, live, in your pocket, in your school room, in your nursery.

There is no second plane.
There is only another fire.





44.
Gaza Will Stand

by AFINA FAYEZ
styrofoam sculpture



45.
The Most Merciful
(Ar-Rahman)

by AFINA FAYEZ
acrylic on canvas



46.

Apology to an Addict

by HOLLY SCHAEFER

I can picture you in a casket
 the family you felt disconnected from
 reads scripture to the masses
 I adjust my glasses as the tears well up
 did I not do enough?
 I was fed up and disgusted
 but we never sat down to discuss this
 and now I sit down
 with your daughters
 both maladjusted
 their dresses match though
 I think that's what you would have
 wanted
 not that I know anything about you
 day in and day out I doubted you
 every word outta your mouth
 like hot ash to be spouted
 into the wind and rerouted
 just as it suits you
 but reality refutes you
 no logic or reason and I refused to
 wait for the news of more abuse
 but that wasn't a choice I got to choose
 it's still no excuse
 I should have grounded you
 after all I got the same roots you do
 but I think you felt bounded
 by the soundless crowd around you
 because addiction isn't founded
 by chemicals compounded
 if it is where are the war vets and people
 depressed
 that walk high on the streets?
 searching for that kiss of peace
 this isn't just a conversation piece

where the fuck is our press release?
 addiction is a lie!
 created by guys in ties
 attempting to criminalize
 your cries for connection
 but don't let their disguise surprise you
 and don't let your allies despise you
 this isn't an infection
 but rather a projection
 of your need like all of us
 for lifetime affection
 Heather... I'm sorry meth loved you more
 than I did
 but after your collection of tragedies
 I feel we only had one direction
 like gravity
 and

we're goin down
 and you can see it too
 we're goin' down
 and you know that we're doomed
 my dear, we're
 slow dancing in a burning room

I don't say that happily
 but you hit rock bottom
 and for once I feel like we actually
 have a solid strategy
 to drastically and fantastically
 change your mentality
 I mean that emphatically
 I don't wanna see you die
 or barely survive
 so I can get behind your revival
 but this is your wake up call
 the timing is vital
 denial will only drown you
 the pressure is on
 but this is what it boils down toward
 your funeral
 or your daughters' weddings
 which will they be buying you a gown for?

47.

How Grammar Will Save Your Relationships

by DR. DENISE MUSSMAN

People ponder why Americans have a 50% divorce rate. Some claim it's the small town teenagers that marry at eighteen, divorce at nineteen, marry at twenty, and divorce at twenty-two. Others think it's because three is the new two. The third kid outnumbered them and puts them over the edge. I would speculate any dad who doesn't help with newborn night feedings is at risk of being murdered, or at least divorced. Another possible reason for the breakup of marriages is that so many spouses quit complimenting and romancing the second they say, "I do." Perhaps it's because we Americans CAN divorce, if it's financially feasible. Society doesn't frown on it, unlike 70 years ago. Actually, none of these reasons are the cause of divorce. Nope, the main reason we divorce is because American schools no longer teach grammar.

I teach English as a Second Language. An immigrant or American who goes to area middle and high schools doesn't know many grammar rules. One student from Egypt, about to graduate

from the College of Education to teach English, asked me what the words "plural" and "possessive" mean. A Vietnamese student thought we put "s" on plural verbs. "He go," and "They goes." When I told an American student her sentence didn't have a verb, she looked at me quizzically and asked, "Say what?"

You're thinking, that's too bad for immigrants, but they have bigger problems than subject-verb agreement, like not being able to speak English, so they are stuck doing nails or cleaning offices. And, besides, thank God we don't have to do tree diagrams of sentences like our parents did, or deal with obnoxious English teachers correcting our grammar while slapping our hands with rulers. This is where you are wrong. Knowing grammar not only improves your writing, it will also save your relationships. Here are three rules for you to learn:

Lesson One: passive voice. To make a verb passive, you emphasize the action, not the subject or person performing the action. Remove the subject and make the object the subject with the verb BE. For example: "You didn't do the dishes." Instead, say: "The... dishes weren't done."

"You don't love me," becomes "I am not loved." Think how political speeches employ passive voice to deflect the blame. Never do they say, "The president made mistakes," but "Mistakes were made." Focus on the action, not

the person, and your spouse will be less defensive or likely to retaliate about how you don't do shit.

Lesson Two: present continuous. This is the ING verb. "He is smoking a cigarette," as opposed to the simple present, "He smokes." In short, "I'm going," indicates an action happening right now or soon, or a temporary state. Simple present, "I go," is just a fact. "I go to school. I work every day." But, "Today I'm having a whiskey," is a temporary action. Maybe.

Thus, when you yell, "You're stupid!" you communicate a fact. Your partner will never forget that you think he or she is always a stupid person. Your remark will become permanently ingrained in the brain, far more damaging than the lack of compliments last New Year's Eve or the fact that you forgot to change a diaper three years ago.

"You're being ridiculous," is much healthier than "You *are* ridiculous." Think about it. A comment like, "You are a bitch," to your wife starts the growth of a nasty cell that develops into permanent resentment. "You're not being nice," is better. Telling your husband that he is stupid may be an echo of a similar comment from his childhood. Much like cancer, simple present comments are hard to remove. Even if apologies can delete them, they can more easily redevelop later than in a body in which the statement

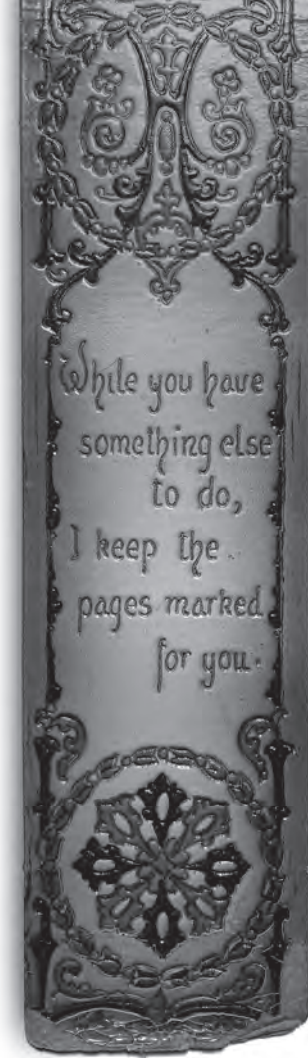
never appeared. It's always a surprise when someone leaves their spouse for another that is older, uglier, fatter, and poorer. But--IT'S A NEW BODY!--a person with no past resentments and knowledge about all their faults! At least for a while.

Lesson Three: modals. Those are the little helping verbs like *can, may, should, must, might, will, and could*. *Can, may, might* and *could* offer a nice suggestion: "You *could* take out the trash." Or probability, 50%. "We *might* go to my mother's for dinner." People are less defensive to suggestions and possibilities. The problem is that most married people develop Oppositional Defiant Disorder over time when it comes to their spouses. They often make negative assumptions of seemingly polite statements.

Be careful about which modal you use. The modal *should* means judgment. "You *should* lose weight." "You *should* drive slower." *Must* or *have to* mean obligation, which will always lead to a defiant response. If you say "You *must* buy me jewelry for my birthday present," or "You *have to* let me watch the football game every Sunday," you will not get what you wished for. *Had better* means there is a consequence: "You'd better quit flirting with my best friend or I will kick your ass." Stick to present modals of possibility. Whenever your spouse starts screaming accusations, say, "You may be right," and let it go.

Speaking of modals, avoid the perfect ones. Those are the "shoulda, woulda, coulda" ones, regrets of the past. "You *should have* locked the door." "I *would have* gone to the party if you had told me about it." "You *could have* slowed down when you saw the cop." When it comes to relationships, let the past die and focus on the present. No one can go back in time and change what was done. I know it's easier said than done, and apologies always help.

In conclusion, you have three lessons: passive voice, present continuous verbs, and modals of probability. Knowing grammar will dramatically improve your relationships, *and* your writing skills. I could go on with your tone of voice, but we'll save that for another lesson.



48.

Practice what you preach

by C. CYANUS

Another saying you ignore
Like “love thy neighbor”
Most proverbs you abhor
But force on me
So bittersweet
Hoping I could be all the things that you
dream about
Asking me to be like the god you adore
But don’t think about
Do as you say but never say what you do

Don’t preach about
The misconduct of thought or get
booted out
Never connecting the dots of your faith
Always reaching for a branch that will break
Never feeling the shock in your wake
Trample on the ones that you claim to love
To feel the eternity of the promised above

According to your sources it says, and I quote:
“But be doers of the word, and not hearers only, deceiving yourselves.”
Your delusions are costing your afterlife
And I pity you now
that I have learned love from others
I have forgotten your creed
I no longer worship morality greed
I work with
fellow humans
No burning bushes
to blind me

And in the love of the your damned I am free



49.

Moments 8 (edited)

by THE WILLIAMS BOYS: STANAIREON & STANLEY
graphic design



50.
**Exceptionality
isn't always awesome**

by >^.^<
lithography

A Broken Effigy





"A WANDERER FINDS A BROKEN EFFIGY."

51. Rag Doll

by SAMANTHA PETERS

My body has stitches all over
from being pulled apart
and sewn back up.

My right arm used to be strong enough
to hold someone while they cried.
Now it's attached by a single thread
and drags on the floor behind me.

My legs used to be able to walk for miles.
I could get through quicksand,
travel to the ends of the Earth.
Now they shake when I stand
and crumble underneath my body.

My heart was the perfect shape;
Everyone wanted it.
Now it's a clump of thread
that would take years to untangle.

My eyes were small black beads
that saw how beautiful the world was.
Now one has fallen out,
and I can only see what has become of me.

My neck has been twisted.
My hair has collected dust.

I remember how I used to be
when I was brand new and pretty.
But I come back to reality and see
My body has stitches all over.





52.

Emotional Taxidermy

by KATEN NIEDBALSKI

A transformation without consent
from something wild
into something complacent,
something that can sit
indifferent in the living room
or make the hallway pretty

The vocal cords are ripped from
the throat and replaced with cotton,
changing a proud creature
into something that can't bite
because you pulled out
all its teeth

An obsessive dissection
and you're the one
who does the reaping,
elbow-deep in gore as you fumble
with organs, reaching in between ribs
to pull out the heart
and put it in a jar on the mantle
next to the eyes and the tongue
of someone else

Blood runs down your arms
as you tear out the insides
and stuff yourself into their body,
filling them with something new
until they can't stand on their own
without the support you've created,
the sculpture of your needs
and expectations
you keep trying
to stretch their skin over

Once a breathing pulsing thing
now empty and lifeless
without you, limp and formless
like a tired flag

Your hands smooth out their imperfections
and bring the form back to life
but their eyes are unfamiliar
glass marbles or plastic buttons
that don't shine quite right
when the light finds them
And people recognize their face

but think to themselves
there is something that almost looks real

There is something that's died



53.

Pedestal

by MIA SHU

inhale.

i pick my lips until they bleed and pull skin off of my fingers layer by layer when
i think about where i go from here—lashes with castor oil and salty tears sting
the skin around my sleepless eyes and leave scabs of whitened scaly dry skin—
pasty pink pimples born from stressed hands bloom by my furrowed brow—
the resonating surge of stomach aches and heart burning aches create
the void of internal nothingness—for eating and loving are rewards
that must be earned—but i've won so many medals—but i'm still
losing—you are not good enough abandoned orphan—try
harder to have them stay—they expect more from you—
that is why they all leave you—nobody cares about a
dopamine addict like you—you are destined to be
alone princess—you do not deserve love—you
haven't earned it—i'm overthinking—stop
overthinking—stop being like this—quit
thinking you're so wonderful—nobody
will want to be your friend—do
better—be better—it's not
enough—it's never
enough—i can't
be—
Mia

put chapstick over scabbed lips.
moisturize hands and fingers with lotion.

Mia...

thin out teary streaks and apply eye cream.
conceal the dark suitcases under eyes.

Mia.

neutralize pasty pink pimples.
fill yellow metal bottle with water.

Mia?

wait for lunch.
tidy up medals.

Mia!

smile—laugh—
lick the blood from swollen scabbed lips—exhale.



54.

Pedestal

by MIA SHU

pencil and eraser



55.
Birdsong

by BOB MADDEN

56.

I Have One Body

by HALEY JOINER

I was born with **1** body.

My body has **2** ears,
filtering out things easier to live without.
My dad calls it selective hearing.

My body has **3** eyes,
the third eye rests above eyebrows furrowed,
somehow seeing more than the other two.

My body has **4** limbs,
that scrape and scuff. Leaving scars,
memories stored in places other than my mind.

My body has **5** fingers on each hand,
their time spent holding on to
circumstances out of my control.

My body has **6** joints that crack when I stand,
only twenty-two with the knees
of one experienced and feeble old man.

My body has **7** insecurities I conjure up daily
including, but not limited to, my height, my
weight, and wondering if I missed a social cue.

My body has **8** itchy spots,
a result of my immune system
trying much harder than it should.

My body has **9** reasons to stay awake at night,
all centered around the fear of being
perceived and wondering what others see in me.



My body has **10** pops in my back,
its form resembling a shrimp most days,
begging my brain to acknowledge when I slouch.

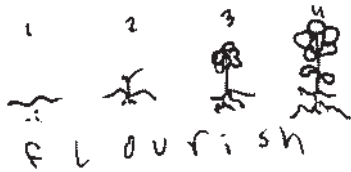
My body has **11** hairs on my face,
these are deemed unacceptable for women
by most of the human race.

My body has **12** images of what I should be in my head,
media showing me acne free faces and flat bellies,
risking the fragility of a good day with a single scroll.

My body has **13** (add a zero) 130 pounds to lose
before they say it is okay to love myself.
Is it all just in my head though?

My body has **14** failed diets under its belt,
each one promising to be different than the rest.
Maybe they aren't worth the cravings and regret.

My body has **15** signals it has given me to stop at five, because embarrassment
comes easily to me
and now I have let you read my mind.



57. Skin

by NEIL STIMMEL

My skin
is always broken.

Tiny
cracks to see flesh, blood,
pus streaking.
Water
hurts.
Sweating
hurts.

Sometimes all that can be
done is scratch and
scratch and
scratch
at the
wounds, nails
like razors slicing
skin, every single cell
screaming for
relief, specks
of dead skin
falling to every surface
like snow,
then slowly,
s l o w l y,
the burn sets in.
Try to slather creams and
ointments or withstand
the sting of a bath or
sleep until the body
stops its burning,
if it ever stops its burning.

With my skin,
every single healing scar is
an achievement, every
time the cuticles on my nail beds
reemerge is a
victory.

Skin
is the largest organ
in the body. Cells
constantly shedding and
regrowing, stabilizing
and protecting.

Maybe one day, my skin
will heal.



58.

Carta A La Hija De Mi Abusador

by ZULAY CAROLINA RUEDA RUEDA

Toda mi vida (o gran parte de ella) he creído en la existencia del karma y he sentido que la vida me ha mostrado que es real. En muchas situaciones he sentido que ese karma invisible ha hecho justicia y da un poco de felicidad... ¿o tranquilidad?... aun no lo sé, pero pienso que experimentar el dolor que causamos puede ayudarnos a entender su gravedad y de que tamaño fue el hueco que construimos en los demás; pero esto suena muy bonito si solo pienso en mi y en lo que consciente o inconscientemente deseo para quien me hizo daño.

¿Y si ese deseo o energía recae en personas totalmente inocentes?, ¿Y si ese canal transmisor de dolor (o aprendizaje) es alguien totalmente inocente?... he ahí donde se genera el problema y debo replantearme lo que creo.

La vida le dio una hija, ¡SI!, una mujer, ¿Quién lo diría, cierto? Así es la vida... le dio una niña hermosa sin rastro alguno de maldad, un ser humano que nunca conoceré, pero siento que tengo una deuda emocional o quizás espiritual con ella.

Dicen los psicólogos que verbalizar lo que sientes te ayuda a entender mejor todo lo que sucede dentro de ti y puede que sea cierto y puede que no, pero qué más da, quienes hemos sido víctimas

(Todas) tendremos la necesidad eterna de expresar para advertir a otras y que esto en algún momento termine. Mi deseo para ti es sencillo, "Deseo que nunca te encuentres a un hombre como tu papá".

Deseo que nunca quedes ciega frente a un "amor" violento. Deseo que no le creas cuando te dice que 'estas' loca solamente por ocultar su culpabilidad en tu autoestima destruida. Deseo que nunca tengas una relación sexual con alguien que te compara, te critica y obliga. Deseo que nunca te sientas culpable por cosas que no son tu culpa. Deseo que nunca ames a alguien que realmente te odia. Deseo que nunca seas la esclava de nadie y que te manipulen con argumentos machistas como "La mujer es la que mantiene en pie el hogar". Deseo que nunca minimices cuando intentó pegarte, pero no lo hizo o cuando solo fue "Un empujoncito".

Y si mi deseo no se cumple y te encuentras en tu vida a un hombre como tu papá...

Deseo que te ames tanto para ser capaz de irte, capaz de sanar, capaz de dejar de sentir vergüenza, capaz de dejar de sentir que todo fue tu culpa, por que no fue tu culpa, no fue mi culpa...

Solo deseo que el karma nunca te use a ti como espejo de dolor y que si el destino se pone caprichoso y solo quiere que tu seas el único medio de comunicación, prefiero que el karma se pierda y nunca encuentre el camino de regreso.

58.

Letter To My Abuser's Daughter

by ZULAY CAROLINA RUEDA RUEDA

All my life (or most of it) I have believed in the existence of karma and have felt that life has shown me that it is real. In many situations, I have felt that this invisible karma has done justice and gives a little happiness...or peace of mind?... I don't know yet, but I think that experiencing the pain we cause can help us understand its severity and how big a hole we built in others. This sounds very nice if I only think of myself and what I consciously or unconsciously wish for the one who hurt me.

What if that desire or energy falls on totally innocent people, what if that channel transmitting pain (or learning) is someone innocent? That is where the problem is generated and I must rethink what I believe.

Life gave him a daughter, YES, a woman, who would have thought, right? That's life... it gave him a beautiful girl with no trace of evil, a human being that I will never know, but I feel that I have an emotional or perhaps spiritual debt to her.

Psychologists say that verbalizing what you feel helps you to better understand

everything that happens inside you. Maybe it is true and maybe not, but what does it matter? Those of us who have been victims (all of us) will have the eternal need to express to others that this will end at some point.

My wish for you is simple: I wish that you never meet a man like your dad. I wish that you will never be blinded by a violent "love."

I wish that you didn't believe him when he told you that you are "crazy" just to hide his guilt in your destroyed self-esteem. I wish you never have a sexual relationship with someone who compares you, criticizes you, and forces himself on you. I hope you never feel guilty for things that are not your fault. I wish that you never love someone who hates you. I wish that you never be anyone's slave and be manipulated with sexist arguments like "The woman is the one who keeps the home standing." I wish that you are never minimized when he tried to hit you, but didn't, or when it was just "A little push."

And if my wish doesn't come true and you find a man like your dad in your life... I wish you love yourself so much to be able to leave, able to heal, able to stop feeling shame, able to stop feeling like it was all your fault, because it wasn't your fault, it wasn't my fault...

I wish karma never uses you as a mirror of pain and that if fate gets capricious and only wants you to be the only means of communication. I'd rather karma get lost and never find its way back.



HOLD ONTO YOUR LUCK!

59. Smoke

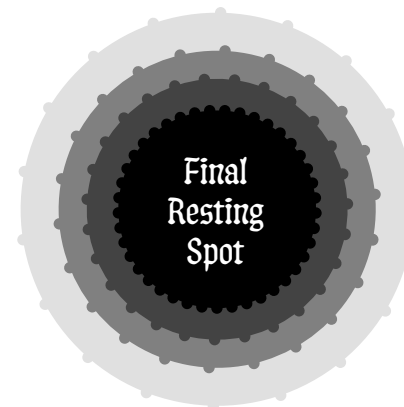
by DANNIE DOYLE
digital artwork



60.

Thank You For Your Service

by JESS YOUNG
acrylic on canvas





“A WANDERER LINGERS AT A FINAL RESTING SPOT.”

61. Very Intelligent Things I've Done

by ADRIAN “ELLIE” BLANCH

So, it's like 2 or 3 in the morning, right? And my trio of delinquent friends and I are blowing up rocks and stuff with some, shall we say, “custom,” accelerants in one of their backyards. Obviously, we're not bothering with anything as petty as “safety glasses” or “ear plugs.” After all, consequences are for suckers. As a result, it doesn't take long before the four of us are deafened, flash blinded, and having just an absolute blast of a time. Laughing, goofing around, blowing shit up, occasionally getting into heated arguments about inane bullshit, until we'd inevitably come to our senses and settle the debate rationally, just beating the hell out of each other until someone's right.

After a particularly “friendly” bout of kinetic debate, I'm standing with my back to the house fiddling with some wires trying to make something go BOOM, when I notice that my friends have all stopped talking. I look over at my friend; we'll call him Squirrel (a nickname he earned after putting a throwing knife through his foot while trying to hit his namesake, as one does). He's frozen to the spot, white as a sheet, and a look of sheer

panic on his face. At least that's how I remember it. But when I stop and think about it, I realize there's no way I could have actually seen his face under those conditions, I just knew him well enough to know the exact look he'd have plastered across his ugly mug.

It took me a second to realize I should turn around. I'm not really sure what exactly I was expecting to see once I did. But by the time I looked behind me, the pair of cops were already about halfway down the small hill (or mountain as they call it in Kansas) that kept the road, and presumably their squad car, just out of sight from Squirrel's backyard. Cold panic ran ice through my spine, and I found myself locked in place. They had their mag lights spotting us and seemed to be approaching cautiously. We'd probably triggered an explosion right about the time they pulled up to the house and set them on edge. I think they shouted something at us. They almost certainly did, what with being cops and all. But I couldn't really hear much over the sounds of my future tinnitus. Regardless, that broke the spell, and all four of us turned and bolted for the tree line about a hundred meters out. I never looked back as I ran but the memory is still, for some reason, tinted by the flashing of cherry-berries that I'm reasonably confident weren't there.

Now, we may not have been the smartest group of wastrels out there, but we were fast, and we knew the terrain. So,

one panicked flight later, we crossed into the woods and scattered, each of us making a B-line for our own, legitimately well concealed, hidey-holes. Once I'd settled into my favorite hollowed out tree stump, I pulled my cover foliage over the entrance and properly concealed myself. I started to feel safe and began calming down. Then I panicked again.

You see, the trouble was, my psycho friends and I had gotten our hands on an old military pamphlet on making improvised booby traps a few months prior. And, as any wise and studious gaggle of immortal lads would, we spent the summer saturating our cherished woodland fiefdom with as many methods of inadvertently killing ourselves as we could. We'd all spent enough time in those woods to have a pretty damn good mental map of all the traps, particularly around our hidey-holes. All fine for us, but the cops behind us had no way of knowing what was waiting for them if they followed us. I was growing uncomfortably confident in the lethality of what we'd put out there, but calmed myself with a reminder that the traps we thought might actually kill us (or that we'd personally walked into one too many times) were marked. This thought was immediately spoiled by the revelation that the cops didn't know about our ingenious marking system. They'd have no way of knowing that those strips of caution tape hanging from the trees

marked punji traps packed with sharp stakes. And honestly, in hindsight, those fluttering yellow strips would probably have been more of a lure than a deterrent to the uninitiated.

Now, you may be thinking that the correct solution to my problem would be something along the lines of calling out a warning. Or even just fessing up and taking the slap-on-the-wrist we'd have gotten for being idiot children. But you would, obviously, be very wrong about that. The correct answer is to start planning for life on the run! Hiding from the law, evading capture, woodland survival, all that good shit. Fortunately for me, I knew those woods like the back of my hand, and with a good dozen or so acres of forest, I was confident I could remain hidden and evade capture indefinitely. I also had my trusty pocket knife in hand, so I could just make a series of trap-laden bivouac for shelter and kill deer for food. As the plan started coming together and my adrenaline drained, I eventually drifted off to sleep.

It was fully into the midafternoon by the time I woke up and crept to the edge of the forest, sticking to the shadows all the while. Once I was confident the coast was clear, I stealthily crawled my way across the blast-pocked lawn to Squirrel's house, completely undetectable in my orange cargo pants and tie-dyed shirt. I wasn't the first to make it back, but not the last either. Once all

of us were safely in Squirrel's basement, we came up with a fool proof plan: we'd ask Squirrel's dad if he'd heard anything last night. Perfection.

That evening, once we heard his dad get in, the four of us crept upstairs to ask the titular question. However, before we got the chance his dad, Mr. Squirrel, spotted us. He breathlessly explained that, not only were we in trouble, but all the commotion had gotten the attention of the state troopers AND the fucking FBI! We were, as far as we knew, officially on the Fed's shit list. But fortunately for us, Mr. Squirrel was a good dad, and agreed to help us hide out until things blew over.

It's hard to tell exactly how much time passed. It felt like at least a week but couldn't have been more than a day or two at most. We spent our time hiding in Squirrel's basement plotting our grand escape and "debating" whether or not we should turn recent ill fortune into a full-blown criminal empire; I mean, may as well, right? Whenever we got hungry or had to use the loo, we'd crawl around the floor like shit-faced caterpillars to avoid being seen through the windows. We were just shy of taking some old shears to our hair to completely alter our appearance and go incognito, when Mr. Squirrel wandered down to the basement to ask why we were just knocking each other around in the basement when

it was such a nice day outside. The moment we reminded him that it was far too dangerous for us to be outside, he exploded with laughter.

Turns out we weren't in any trouble at all. Rather, the neighbors had called in a noise complaint when our antics carried on past 3AM to shut us up. And since the cops that responded also happened to be Mr. Squirrel's friends and coworkers, they'd just swung by to tell us to knock it off. In fact, if it hadn't been for the "large explosion" (it really hadn't seemed that big at the time, but then again, we'd also been blowing things up for a bit by then, so their assessment is probably more accurate) they wouldn't even have bothered coming around back. They actually were just making sure we hadn't blown ourselves to bits, and evidently our flight to the woods was a good enough sign we were still breathing.

Of course, we were very confused by all this information. Why had he told us we were being hunted by the Feds if it wasn't even a big deal? Well, because he'd had to wake up and answer the door when his coworkers stopped by to check in. Why hadn't he just yelled at us for being shitheads, you may ask? Mr. Squirrel was a cop with a motto: "Do stupid shit and get your dumbassery out of your system while you're still young, and won't get locked up over it."



62.

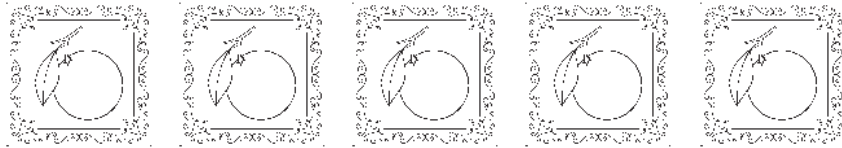
Creative Writing Prompt

by EMESE MATTINGLY

For Kevin Higgins

Kevin instructed our class to write a declining invitation.

So I wrote
“No thank you.”



63.

Desire for Fire

by BRENT MOSS
acrylic





64.
Vivid Vapor

by BRENT MOSS
acrylic on canvas

65.
**The Silence,
The Night,
& The Day**

by DANA R. PIERSON

Until Silence greets the door as a forgotten friend
Unlatches the lock and removes his hat and coat
Stamps snow crusted boots onto the welcome mat
There will be a lingering echo of the Day.

Sound of kitchen clocks ticking even when the meal is over
Cat collar bells jingling as she turns over in her watchful slumber
But nothing else, for the Night has approached in his robe
And locked the door, turning around in his slippers to
The Day he loves.

She forgets him, the Daytime always forgets
Too busy with tasks, preparations, exhilarations
For the next time she gets to bask in the morning frost
A reminder that the Night was here.

And oh, how the Silence wishes he could wave
His mitten finger to calm the Day and relish the Night
But alas, he turns away.

66.

Comfort in the Cold

by TAYLOR WEINTROP

With time,

I have learned to welcome winter.

How to slowly step back from days full

of errands stacked and hast fueling these feet to get all the needs met.

There is a gracious,

unhurried air that accompanies the temperature drop.

In the atmosphere's palpable embrace,

I am reminded by the wind's crisp sting how to feel more than barely alive.

That I can stoke a fire

and hold hands with the quiet stillness of December's draft.

A period of appreciative rest for the blooming to come

where the lull is filled with birds and pine emerging between the icicle fangs.

Backroad walks along plush white pillows of precipitation

followed by memories emerging from the view of tree lines hollow.

The humming warmth of whisky-stained lips

locking longingly as lovers lay together drowsily –

this is the melting only winter can bring.

67.

Ode to the Sky

by LYNETTE GAYNOR

Eres algo para ver
algo para perseguir
algo para capturar,
con tus tonos infinitos de color.
Tu belleza no necesita justificación ni teoría
No tengo que estar preparada
Cuando el sol se acerca al horizonte haces alarde de tu riqueza
Tus moléculas están perfectamente dispuestas
Tu presencia no exige nada,
ni siquiera mi atención.
Arriesgaría mi retina,
y toda su funcionalidad,
solo para obtener un vistazo mejor
que dure más.
Eres profundo.
Eres misterioso.
siempre estás ahí
siempre una sorpresa
No necesitas ser entendido,
eres glorioso.
No requieres conocimientos previos,
eres mágico.
Eres la constante, siempre cambiante
Ofreces estabilidad junto con sorpresa
con tu generosidad ilimitada
Si te cayeras, mis lágrimas no estarán solas..
tu blanco
tu negro
tu gris
tu azul
tu morado
tu rosa
tu rojo
tu naranja
tu amarillo
tu oro
tu plata

Te ríes con orgullo
de estas palabras
fútiles

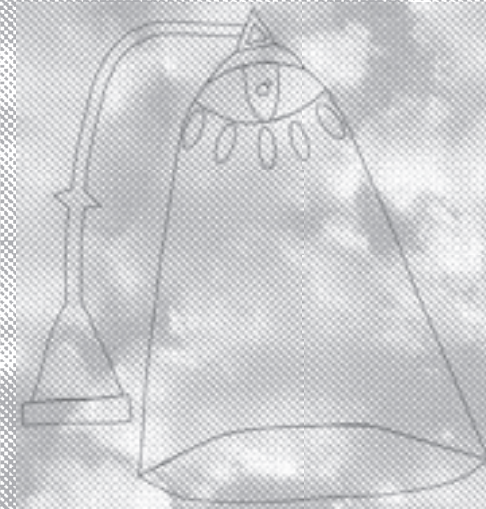
67.

Ode to the Sky

by LYNETTE GAYNOR

You are something to see
something to chase
something to capture,
with your infinite tones of color.
Your beauty doesn't need justification or theory
I don't have to be prepared
When the sun approaches the horizon you flaunt your richness
Your molecules are perfectly arranged
Your presence doesn't demand anything,
not even my attention.
I would risk my retina,
and all of its functionality,
only to get a better look
that lasts longer.
You are profound.
You are mysterious.
always there
always a surprise
You don't need to be understood,
you are glorious.
You don't require previous knowledge,
you are magic.
You are the ever changing constant.
You offer stability along with surprise
with your unlimited generosity
If you fall, my tears won't be alone..
your white
your black
your gray
your blue
your purple
your pink
your red
your orange
your yellow
your gold
your silver

You laugh with pride
at these futile
words



68.

Fire Cleanse

by EMESE MATTINGLY

Crackling Flames are Irish Spring to my soul
As I silently sit with pilgrim thoughts and ashen fingers.

The December frost and my fire's white nucleus burn my cheeks,
But every cellular agenda is hushed by the chatty hearth.

As minutes succumb to the meditation,
Soot and smoke incline me to another log,
And the fire once again flickers with delight.



"A WANDERER REFLECTS."

STOP.
REFLECT.



ARTIST AND AUTHOR BIOGRAPHIES



KAYLA ANDREWS is a senior at UMSL working on a BA in English and Psychology. She is a Washingtonian transplant and lives with her husband, Oakley, son, Jackson, and their five animals. She has always been passionate about writing, and spends most of her time either in a book or working on her writing portfolio. She prefers fiction to poetry, fall to summer, and rain to hot Midwestern days. After graduation, she hopes to write a book and work as a youth counselor.

BRITNI BADER is a multimedia artist whose portfolio varies in printmaking, painting, and drawing techniques. Her practice is deeply rooted in her childhood and personal history, which serves as a constant of inspiration. Currently, she is pursuing a Bachelor of Fine Arts degree from the University of Missouri--St. Louis, with a minor in Art History. Beyond her undergraduate studies, Brittni plans to continue her education at the graduate level in the upcoming fall.

CHELSEA BAIRD is an UMSL student and did not provide a biography.

ADRIANNA COPHER is an undergrad Chemistry and English double major with her heart set on professorship. She has spent the last three years in academia, publishing her poetry in the Mid Rivers Review, and titrating unwilling solutions. She believes writing, and Chemistry, serve as just another way to speak in a clinically unemotional world.

C. CYANUS is an UMSL student and did not provide a biography.

DANNIE DOYLE is an UMSL student and did not provide a biography.

VALERIE DRATHWICK is influenced by anything involving surrealism, abstraction, and macabre art. Her artwork is created using all printmaking techniques, oil painting, sumi ink, non-silver, and black and white film photography. In 2005, she earned her BFA at the University of Missouri--St. Louis, and continued her education at Fontbonne University, earning her MFA in March 2024.

ANNIE EDERLE is 5'7", enjoys reading and baking, and is looking for a tall, dark, and handsome gentleman. Wait, this isn't a dating app? Sorry. Annie came to writing about four years ago at the height of quarantine, when she also found her love for reading. Within three months she read the entire Harry Potter series and decided to go back to school and pursue a Bachelor's in English. Do enjoy "Land Somewhere."

ARTIST AND AUTHOR BIOGRAPHIES



continued

ANIFA FAYEZ is a Saint Louis-based artist. Her art is a representation of her immigrant background and her goals in life. She likes to explore Islamic art and culture, and maintains sustainability in her practice. The theme for most of her pieces is reliance on faith and a call for liberation to those who are oppressed, as she came from a country that liberated itself from its oppressors.

LYNETTE GAYNOR is working toward the completion of a BA in Modern Language, Spanish. She returned to UMSL after earning her BA in Psychology, with intentions to continue learning a second language. What transpired, however, was an unimaginable experience which far exceeded that. Gaynor plans to pursue writing as a means of creative expression, as there is much to be said.

ISABELLE HERMAN is an undergrad at UMSL working towards her Bachelor's in Fine Art/Graphic Design degree. You might see her around campus carrying a fishing pole

with a sign attached to the end of it. She is known to be a rambunctious person that is full of stories, ideas, and a lot of jokes. She enjoys her time with her cat, Maisel, watching shows, and drawing her Webtoon comic series called "GuBert Comics."

MATT KIMBRELL would like to thank his father, a man who knows which hammer to "pluck from the wall of plenty," for inspiring the poem, "Re(habit)uation." This is the first poem he has ever submitted for publication.

LOCK is an UMSL student and did not provide a biography.

BOB MADDEN is an emerging artist currently pursuing a BFA in Studio Art with a minor in Art History. Bob has a passion for painting in the abstract, exploring themes of self-awareness and place through their work, and drawing inspiration from everyday occurrences. It's a continuous exploration, interplaying between figural forms and abstract fields of vivid color, and creating complex and layered paintings that invite viewers to engage in a visual dance between the recognizable and the enigmatic.

EMESE MATTINGLY is an UMSL alum and did not provide a biography.

Being retired and working part-time at UMSL allows **SUZANNE MCCUDDEN** time to indulge in new-

ly found interests: acrylic painting, alcohol ink designs, felting, and resin arts. Fascinated by color combinations and design potential of various media, she enjoys experimenting with new substrates and looks to her surroundings to inspire free form designs/patterns, rather than representational work. The medium often takes on its own "life" with unplanned, surprising outcomes. She hopes others will enjoy the result.

HEELA MOMAND is a fourth-year Psychology major at UMSL. Daughter of Afghan immigrants, she is a recipient of the Opportunity Scholars Program, a four-year scholarship dedicated for St. Louis area's first-generation college students and students from underrepresented communities. In the future, she hopes to become a psychologist to aid in the understanding of trauma and to secure access to mental health resources in immigrant communities. Heela enjoys spending time with family and friends and composing poetry.

BRENT MOSS is a Bahamian freshman attending UMSL. His major is Accounting, and he will use the knowledge gained from his studies for employment and to pursue artistic business endeavors. At 17 years old, Brent Moss is a published, award-winning artist, and his work was featured in a local exhibition. Acrylic paints are his medium of choice to explore vibrancy and color, and he is grateful to God for his gift and achievements.

DR. DENISE HUSSMAN is a Teaching Professor of English for Academic Purposes at UMSL. She holds a BA in French, an MA in Applied Linguistics (TESOL), and an EdD in Global Education and Leadership. She edited *New Ways in Teaching Writing, Revised* and has published teaching activities and a children's book, *The Adventures of Buzz and Fuzz*.

CHILE NGUYEN is an UMSL student and did not provide a biography.

CASSANDRA OTI is an UMSL student and did not provide a biography.

SAMANTHA PETERS is an undergraduate student and did not provide a biography.

LAUREN POITRAS is an avid manga reader and movie watcher from St. Louis. What began as obsessive doodles in her childhood developed into the pursuit of a career in art and design as an adult. Lauren's niche lies in print materials that pop with high contrast, eye-catching colors. She approaches each project by digging deep, doing diligent research, and refining until she acquires something truly impactful.

JEFFREY PRYOR is a UMSL Student Veteran alumni. His writings are select moments from his childhood to the present, as he shows us a path from victim to survivor to thriver. He has been a member of Adult Survivors of Child Abuse (www.ascasupport.org) since 2013. Currently, Jeffrey is a Camp Host at a small campground in the moun-

tains of Tennessee. He has plans to open a campground specifically designed for adventurers with disabilities.

REBECCA is a senior majoring in English, also completing the Creative and Professional Writing Certificates. She loves to read and listen to music, and she thinks the newest boygenius album is really good. She's a crazy dog lady and loves her dogs more than her husband (not really, but kind of).

ZULAY CAROLINA RUEDA RUEDA, from Colombia, emigrated to the United States in 2018. She's a social worker from the Industrial University of Santander in Colombia, with specialization in Care Policies with Gender Inclusion at the Latin American Committee of Social Sciences. She's currently pursuing a Master's Degree in Social Work at UMSL. She is also a painter and illustrator committed to feminist and social justice causes. Zulay works at the International Welcome Center in the Ritenour District.

ARIANNA RICO RICO is an UMSL student and did not provide a biography.

HOLLY SHAEFER is a 32-year-old St. Louis area native. She is a full-time wife, mother, and university administrator. Since college, Holly has dedicated a significant amount of personal and professional time to understanding and supporting people with mental illness and is a fierce advocate for civil rights. She began writing poetry in high school, and continues highlighting the importance and power of language

and the written word in her work with college students.

Just like the shirt on her back, **MIA SHU** was made in China. Since her adoption, she has grown up stubborn, passionate, and resilient—sometimes for the worse. However, her empathy and compassion balance those out (mostly). Mia established a marketing career while sometimes being a legal drug dealer, a dressed-up liar for minors, and a local social media celebrity. Mia works out (if you can't tell). She also thinks she overthinks when she thinks. Mia loves—wholeheartedly.

NEIL STIMMEL is a Junior at UMSL working toward a BA in English. He has enjoyed reading, writing, and music from an early age, and he likes to spend his spare time playing music with his friends and learning more about the world.

TAYLOR WEINTROP is a St. Louis native and a third-year graduate student working towards her masters in English Composition and Rhetoric at UMSL. She is currently a GTA in the English department who splits her time between teaching First Year Writing and working as a consultant in the Writing Center. Besides reading and writing, Taylor loves being outdoors, watching hockey, and playing with her pets.

Moments 8 (edited) by **THE WILLIAMS BOYS: STANAIREON AND STANLEY** was a collaborative effort between two

brothers, both with artistic visions that came together to make an amazing piece.

JESS YOUNG is an UMSL student and did not provide a biography.

STAFF BIOGRAPHIES



ANNA CONNOLEY is a senior at UMSL, and they hope no one has noticed that she's actually three kids stacked in a trenchcoat. The kids cannot stand the thought of going to middle school next year and are trying to get a Bachelor's degree in English so they can just get jobs and won't have to worry about it. (No one tell them.)

ANFAL ELTAHIR is a 27-year-old senior at UMSL English major and she loves to write stories. She thought Litmag was a lot of work at first, but was surprised with how fun the class actually was.

GRETA FOX is an English major, Spanish minor, and a junior at UMSL. She is a serial oversharer: you have been warned. She has both social anxiety and autism and will often dart away if she sees you in public like a feral cat. Hobbies include reading, writing, and wondering why she is trapped in a flesh prison.

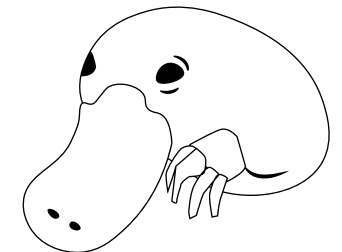


ELIEZE HALPIN is a junior Philosophy and Computer Science major at UMSL. She enjoyed the diverse range of material that she saw and got the ability to publish. She is an apocalyptic agent of chaos. Some debate the apocalyptic part, but not the chaos part.

ESMERALDA HERRADA-FLORES is a 20-year-old junior English major chronically manifesting: a successful fiction writing career, best-selling author awards, a mansion with 2 cats and 4 dogs, and all the Sims 4 packs. Wish her luck.

HALEY JOINER is a senior English major at UMSL. She spends her time writing and reading, but mostly scrolling online. Her favorite pastime is hanging out with her friends or sleeping. She's a simple girl.

ABIGAIL KELEHER is excited to wrap up her Bachelor's in English this year and be done with school for a while. She enjoys lifting weights because it makes her feel like a cool, buff lady. She loves her husband and will love the dog he has agreed to get this summer (it's in print now--no take backs). She appreciates you for taking the time to read Litmag 2024, which she really enjoyed helping to create.



STAFF BIOGRAPHIES



continued

SUZANNE MICHAELREE has heard, “Who is that old lady?” “She is our resident Senior Senior.” “I heard she is a grandma.” “Wow, she is taking this ‘returning student’ thing to the limits!” “She told me that she has shoes older than I am.” “She is studying philosophy, so, I think we should keep her around for perspective.”

KATEN NIEDBALSKI is a dreaming demon and mother of monsters. She’s a senior English student, writer, artist and horror hound. She says, “If you bite me, I bleed poetry.”

AIDEN PETERSON is a junior at UMSL, studying for a BA in English with a certificate in Creative Writing. Since this is also his author bio, he hopes you enjoyed reading his story. He enjoys long walks on the beach, and writing/drawing whatever strange ideas that his Id tells him to make.

DANA R. PIERSON is a junior at UMSL studying English. When she isn’t writing poetry, Dana enjoys thrifting, photography, and spending time with her two cats, Brie and Garfield. Yes, one cat is named after cheese, and the other is named after a cat who thrives on cheese-layered lasagna. Don’t judge the cats, please.

CASSIUS RIZOR is a carbon-based life-form, just like everyone else. Although he is studying Japanese in his sixth year at UMSL, he also enjoys many other earthly activities such as: eating cooked foods, sleeping for many hours, and socializing with his fellow great apes. Utilizing his creative writing and linguistic abilities, he hopes to one day translate many forms of media into his native language for his people to purchase and enjoy.

KAIYA THOMPSON is a senior English major at UMSL. Despite holding the highest Temple Run score in Missouri, she lives a very grounded lifestyle away from fame and fortune. You can typically find her crying over the Twilight Saga, or getting a Victory Royale in Fortnite. In about 10 years, however, you can expect to see her starring on season 23 of *The Real Housewives of Beverly Hills*!

ABIGAIL WETTEROFF is a senior graduating with a BA in English and a certificate in Professional Writing. Please convey this information to anyone you know looking to fill an entry-level position at a media conglomerate. She is extremely willing to pick up coffee and your antidepressant refills from CVS if it will lead to a staff writing position.

TAYLOR WINTER did not provide a biography.

DANIELLA WYNDEM, aka >^.<, is a cat-girl chimera and stopped physically aging around age 23. She edited UMSL Litmag in spring of 2024. Artist and novelist, she does it all. She also always needs a nap.

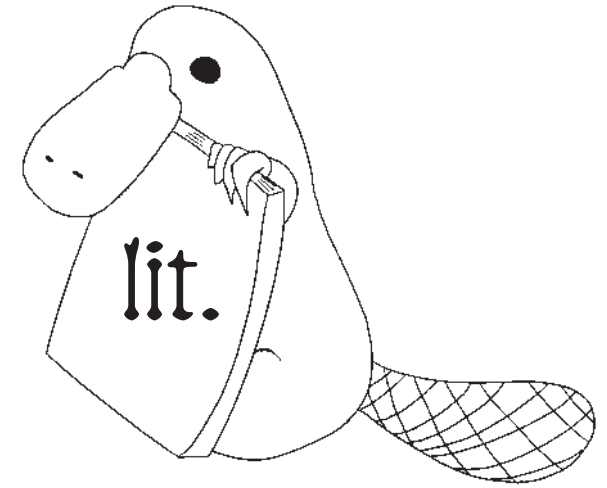
STAFF PHOTOGRAPH



Front Row: Esmeralda Herrada-Flores, Anna Connoley, Taylor Winter, Abigail Wetteroff, Aiden Peterson

Back Row: Dana R. Pierson, Elieze Halpin, Anfal Eltahir, Haley Joiner, Kaiya Thompson, Katen Niedbalski, Suzanne Michaelree, Kate Watt

Not Pictured: Greta Fox, Abigail Keleher, Cassius Rizor, Danniella Wyndem





GET CONNECTED

English 4895 Editing Litmag is offered every spring as part of the English Department's Writing Certificate Program. For students interested in creative writing, professional editing, and publishing, this class provides an internship-like experience that can also be used as a capstone for the certificates. Supervised by a faculty advisor, students in these courses are able to take charge and experience the full scope of creating *Litmag*, from fundraising, solicitation, marketing and promotions, copy editing, document and graphic design, distribution, and publicity. Fall internships may also be available by contacting Kate Watt at katewatt@umsl.edu or Jeanne Allison at allisonjea@umsl.edu.

We welcome you to become part of the next group of editors to continue exploring the creation and publication of our campus' artistic expression!



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Donations are welcome and can be made through the English Department website or the annual *Litmag* crowdfunding. All donations are tax-deductible to the extent allowed by law. We thank you in advance!



DESIGN NOTES & CREDITS



Elizabeth Buchta wishes to thank her parents, her partner, her students — and Kate!

Litmag was designed by Elizabeth Buchta with input from Kate Watt, the *Litmag* staff and two student designers: Liv Scales and Lindsay Woltering.

The Covers feature photography by Liv Scales (front) and alumni Matthew Bowman (back). Liv came up with the concept when they noticed Matthew's photograph of the wooded path in the 1985-1986 issue of *Litmag* while researching for the design of this issue, and wondered if it was the same path that we walk on today.

The Endpapers in *Litmag* feature an image by Elizabeth Buchta.

The Visuals in *Litmag* are the illustrations, patterns and doodles that were created by UMSL graphic design students in SP-ST_ART-3305-001 GRAPHIC DESIGN II, taught by Elizabeth Buchta in the Spring semester of 2024, and supported by Liv Scales and Lindsay Woltering, who are the active learning assistants for the class.

Gabriel Amunategui designed the little wizard in the table of contents.

Rachel Bratton sketched dragons on pg. 67, 69, and 71.

Kyle Belcher designed the lamp patterns on pages 7,8 and 78, and the pattern on the page across from this one.

Tonya Berry designed this bug ----->



Sami Brenman designed the pattern featured on pg. 7, 8 and 29, the doodle on pg. 22, the possum on pg. 54, the jellyfish on 147, and the platapi on pg. 141 & 143.

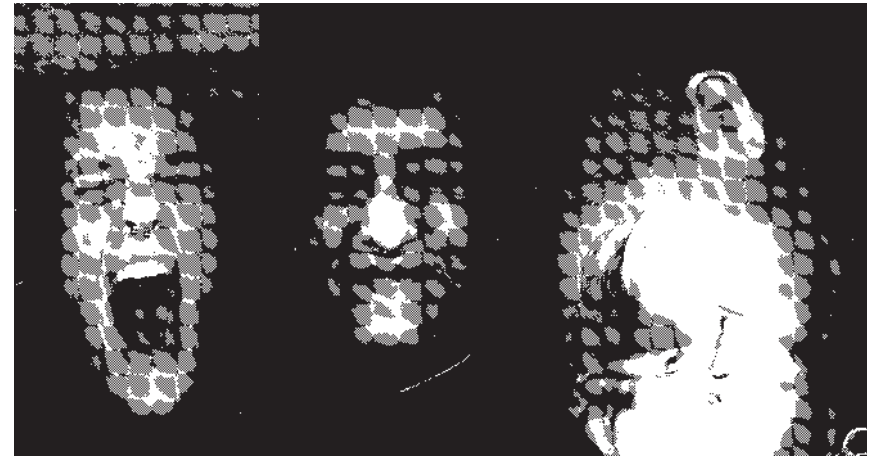
Radia Farid designed the 2024 *Flame of Excellence* which distinguishes the contest winners, the radiant marks and patterns featured on the page numbers, titles and table of contents, as well as on pg. 2 and 35; and the cloud doodle featured on the table of contents and the colophon.

Elizabeth Buchta took the photographs for the wanderer pages, as well as pg. 4, 30, 56, 82, 92, 94, 104, 106, 133, 134, re-found the 4-leaf clovers on pg 116, and designed the contributor's candle at the end of the book.

Louis Chambliss designed the orange on page 126.

Afina Favez designed the little earrings featured on the dedication page (and there are two more hidden in the book — look for them!), the lantern on pg. 58, the girl on pg. 89, and the pattern and illustration on pages 121-124.

Hara Hartzog designed the cigarette and lighter on pg. 51, 54, 90, and 91.



From left: Liv Scales, Lindsay Woltering, Elizabeth Buchta

Tyler Martin designed the constellation mark featured on pg. 137, 138 and 141.

Avery Meade created the disco ball on the table of contents.

Rae Miller digitally doodled the *Litmag* candle on the previous page.

Molly Rivera designed the *Litmag* light switches on the "Get Connected" page.

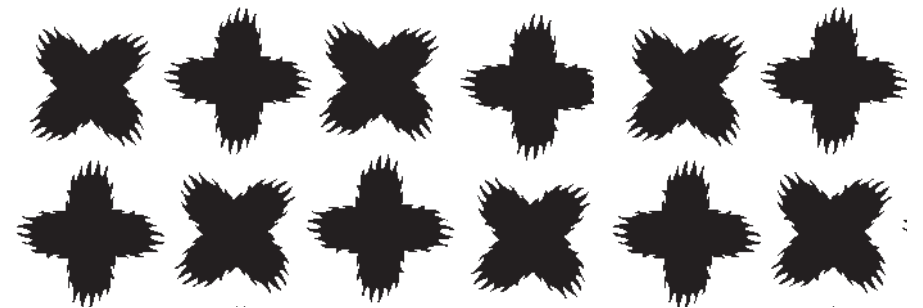
Liv Scales designed the flipbook that is hidden in this book, and took the photograph on the back cover of the book. Liv is also featured on pg. 48 and their influence is felt throughout *Litmag*.

Miles Sprague doodled on the table of contents (the campfire), as well as pg. 72, 73, 76, 77, 88, 112.

Jordin Stern designed the mirror logo on pg. 136, and the eyelight on pg. 133.

Rachel Tripp designed the directional *Litmag* logomark; the sunrise-inspired framing device featured throughout the book; the fly flower vase found on the faculty advisor page and pg. 8, the doodles on pg. 13, 50, 55, 113, 135, and the *Litmag* logo on pg. 141, and the colophon doodle.

Lindsay Woltering facilitated the design of every aspect of this book.

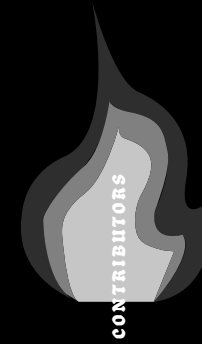


Colophon



The book was printed and bound by Graphic Connections Group.

Litmag was designed with Adobe InDesign and set in Adobe Caslon Pro, which was designed by Carol Twombly after designs by William Caslon. The American Declaration of Independence and the Constitution were set in Caslon, and Benjamin Franklin used this typeface almost exclusively. The headlines are set in *Schmaltzy*, a modernisation of blackletter type created by New Orleans-based type designer Matthijs Herzberg in the calligraphic tradition with far fewer connotations than other blackletters. *Litmag 2024* is meant to reference to classical book designs of the past while existing in the present. The design reflects the consistently inconsistent feeling of wandering in the woods.



> ^ ^ <
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Chelsea Baird
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