

QUIZ & QUILL

OTTERBEIN UNIVERSITY'S STUDENT LITERARY MAGAZINE | VOL. 101 | SPRING MAGAZINE 2020



QUIZ&QUILL



LIGHT ECHO

Madeleine Norton

QUIZ&QUILL

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Q&Q prides itself on publishing the highest-quality creative work. Therefore, every precaution is taken to assure writers' anonymity during the selection process. Only the advisor of Q&Q knows the identities of those who submit work to the magazine until after staff members' selections are finalized.

LETTER
from the
EDITORS

DEAR READERS,

First, we want to express to you how excited we are to be publishing the 101st *Quiz & Quill* spring magazine. We are honored to be the managing editors for the beginning of a new century of Quiz & Quill, and although this semester did not pan out the way we thought it would, we understood how important it was to create and publish our yearly spring magazine. Now more than ever, the literary community needs to be connected and appreciative of each other's work.

The 101st spring magazine is the turning point for a new century of Quiz & Quill and is laying the groundwork for years to come. We felt that it was important to have a new and exciting look to mirror the unique works by the authors and artists. We hope that this fresh start reflects ourselves as managing editors, as well as authors and artists within the magazine. While we are leaving our own mark on the magazine, we want to assure you we are thinking of the history of Quiz & Quill in every page we create.

As always, we could not have published this magazine without the help and support from our Editorial Board and Staff. Whether it's meeting in person or hearing their voices over Blackboard Collab, they all have contributed to the success of the magazine in more ways than they know. We are always thankful for their dedication to each other, as well as the magazine. Next, we would like to thank our faculty advisor, Jeremy Lloerence. We started this new journey together and can honestly say we would not have come this far without his leadership. Lastly, we want to thank our friends and families for the unconditional support throughout the entire year, especially during the recent pandemic stress.

Quiz & Quill would not be possible without all of the students who have taken the time to write, create, and photograph their pieces. We acknowledge and understand how busy they all are and cannot thank them enough for finding the time for Quiz & Quill.

WITH LOVE AND GRATITUDE,
KAITLYN AND EMMA
YOUR MANAGING EDITORS

- 10 **STARS**
Lucy Clark
- 11 **DUSK TO DAWN**
Mary Jackson
- 12 **CONVENTIONAL MEANS OF CURING CANCER**
J. R. Gill
- 14 **LIFE IS A COLD CUP OF COFFEE**
Marcus Hallam
- 24 **SOCIAL CONSTRUCT**
Madeleine Norton
- 25 **MOURNING**
Rowan Graham
- 26 **TURKEY**
CJ Meng
- 38 **MOON BUNNIES**
Mary Jackson
- 39 **VICTORIA**
Abby Giardina
- 42 **BIRD ON A WIRE**
Thea Hartley
- 43 **PLAYLIST OF MY LIFE**
Rowan Graham
- 46 **MAGNOLIAS**
Mary Jackson
- 47 **TO DANCE ON THE MOON**
Marcus Hallam
- 56 **WHERE I'M FROM**
Selena LaBair

WE ALL RETURN TO DUST	60
Wesley Strobe	
DEAD RODENTS	61
J.R. Gill	
ON THE CONCEPT OF DISTANCE	64
Katie Warner	
FALL	67
Lucy Clark	
THE CAPITALISM IN COSMETICS	69
Juli Lindenmayer	
COLOR IN THE RUINS	72
Thea Hartley	
FLESH-COLORED HUT	73
Madeleine Norton	
PLEASE, DO NOT RESUSCITATE	75
Katie Warner	
SOLO FLIGHT	82
Madeleine Norton	
THE WORST OF THE WORST TIMES IN VIETNAM	83
Maya Venkataraman	
STRANDED	86
Madeleine Norton	
WHITE HORSE	88
J.R. Gill	
THE COLD WAR	89
Kelsey Brown	
MADRE MARIA	90
Wesley Stobel	

STARS

Lucy Clark

I once fell like these orange leaves,
willing to sacrifice myself to beauty

I never learned to do it in
their graceful nature

the door behind me blinks its
invitation in big red letters, the
sticky scent of dough thick in the air

the brick pavement is quiet, save for
the rumble of cars and ticking of watches

the sun lights the earth now,
reminding the plants to grow,
reminding the cherubic faces on
the street how to blush

reminding me that this pain
is a gift

DUSK TO DAWN

Mary Jackson

Sunny skies catch
on the brightness of your smile
as everything else
fades away
except for me and you.

We are vibrant
in a way that makes it hard
for others to look
directly at us,
so we try not to let it show
in the light of day.

Eventually the sun will set,
peeking hues painting the sky
until darkness settles and
the rest of the world
calms.

We meet in the night,
staring up at the darkness,
making up shapes in the spaces
between the stars while we
talk of nothing and everything
as the night passes the time,
until day pushes it
back into hiding.

The daybreak urges us
to do the same and
we part ways
in the dawn.

CONVENTIONAL MEANS OF CURING CANCER

J.R. Gill

On February 20, 2019, I spoke with my papaw (July 13, 1950 - Sep 22, 2017), while hunting caribou far away from home. The northern plains were yellowing from the summer sun. The herd was moving from one small wooded area to the next as a single massive conglomerate. He led the way following footprints in stamped grass, I had no experience with the area and for some reason couldn't even remember the trails we followed to get out there.

Shortly before my papaw's passing, I began reading about Sigmund Freud's theories on dreams, his belief of the various symbolic images within dreams, and the potential usefulness of remembering dreams so a person could interpret them and find meaning. I found the subject interesting but couldn't be persuaded to believe any of it held truth. The only aspect I desired to learn more about was how to remember the dreams themselves. I had to prepare.

My brother for years held over my head his ability to remember every dream he had. He even taught himself how to lucid dream years before it became a popular internet phenomenon. He recited stories of grand journeys with warriors and dragons and his mind controlling the whole of it while still asleep. I asked him and the internet for advice. Formed my plan. Held my dead grandfather's hand.

Buy picture frames. Ask grandma if there are any pictures of Papaw maybe I could have. Set them on my desk. Take in his eyes every morning when I wake up. Every night before getting in bed. Notice each little hair of his beard. Change my laptop background. My phone background. He's smiling, holding a buck's antlers in his bloodied hands. He's sweating from a hard day working on the USS Decatur DDG-31. He's playing guitar. He wrote a note and left it in the medicine cabinet to be found when the hospice nurse cleaned it out.

Leaving dreams peacefully is an important step. An alarm will almost always erase everything that happened overnight from my memory for good. *Beep-beep-beep!* The sound of deletion. The circadian rhythm of the body can be tuned like an instrument and a great musician knows nothing will come without the practice of going to sleep and waking up on a consistent schedule. Even the middle of the night stirrings to go to pee need to happen every night between three-thirty and four. Stay consistent. Don't get up. Don't open my eyes. Stay consistent and recall what I had just dreamt before doing anything else. Hold the dream in my hands and spill it all onto a sticky note or my iPhone Notes.

The next morning I'll repeat the steps.

Remember this part. Remember to remember this part. Remember that the best advice I could possibly give someone is to remember. Tell myself over and over. Remember. Remember. Remember this dream. Remember he is long gone in this world where my feet are cold even though the heater is on, and the picture frames are gathering dust. Remember this dream because he might show up tonight. Often times like a friend I haven't seen in weeks.

The next night I'll repeat the steps.

I shut my eyes. My body goes missing. Eyelids heavy. I consider nothing.

I'm walking somewhere now. Papaw is next to me. I'm holding a longbow. It is nearly as tall as me. Quiver attached to my belt loop. I take in my surroundings. Our camouflage clothing. Trees in the distance. We walk on crunchy grass. The sun overhead, hardly any clouds in its way. I see the herd leaving the other end of the woods. They cross a gravel road, and we work our way around the woods to intercept their path.

I look at his calloused hands. His split fingertips. He walks fast like he did when I was a kid. I almost struggle to keep up with him. All the hard work has paid off, I realize. I breathe deeply and remember the treatment worked that is why he's here now with me. That's the only logical explanation. It was a tough couple months, but his hair has grown back black and gray pepper on his head and face. He chuckles like a jackal, high pitched but scratched from years of smoking cigarettes and pipes. His glasses perch nicely on his fleshy nose, not like when he was sick and his nose shrank down, and they hurt his face too much to wear. His chest is full and fits his shirt nicely. His boots are dirty as always.

I tell myself all this in dreams. John, don't you know? He's cancer-free. He's okay now.

The reassurance is nice. I smile. I wake up.

LIFE IS A COLD CUP OF COFFEE

Marcus Hallam

Characters: NORMAN, BOB, and JOHN.

(Open on a bland, soulless office work environment. Nothing is distinct or shows any signs of personality, not even a motivational poster can be found. NORMAN sits at a desk covered with stacks of paperwork. BOB sits next to him at an identical desk except there's barely any paperwork on it. He pretends to work but it's apparent that he has nothing to do.)

BOB
(Turns to NORMAN.)

Hey Norman, I heard you're finally getting a day off tomorrow.

NORMAN
(Doesn't look at BOB, continues his work.)

First time in four years.

BOB
Wow... I don't think I could last for that long without a vacation!
(Laughs.)

NORMAN

Yeah.

BOB

Seriously, though. I don't know how you keep chugging along.

NORMAN

I don't have a choice.

BOB

Ah yeah, I hear ya. Overtime can be a real killer.

NORMAN
(Turns to BOB.)

How much did you have?

BOB

Oh, none recently. But about three weeks ago they had me come in on a Saturday and it was just *awful*. Sure, it was only for four hours. But it just kills the whole weekend vibe, you know?

NORMAN

Yeah.

(Goes back to work.)

I know.

(Pause. BOB turns back to his desk for mere moments before facing NORMAN again.)

BOB

So what do you plan on doing?

NORMAN

What?

BOB

On your day off. Are you traveling anywhere?

NORMAN

No.

BOB

Get tickets to something?

NORMAN

No.

BOB

Seeing a movie?

NORMAN

No.

BOB
(Pause.)

So, what are you doing?

NORMAN

Nothing.

BOB

What?

NORMAN

I'm not doing anything.

BOB

So, you finally have a day off, after four years, and you're not going to do anything with it?

NORMAN

Nope.

BOB

But... why?

NORMAN

(Stops working and stares at his desk.)

Because the only thing I've wanted to do for the past four years is nothing. I want to lie in bed and watch TV. I want to shut off my phone and close the blinds in the middle of the day. I don't want to do anything because that's all my life has been. Doing things. Write this report. Write that report. Work overtime every weekend. Go on a business trip to Saltillo every month of every year and come back on a Sunday evening every single time so the cycle can start all over again.

(Pause.)

It's always Saltillo too. Never anywhere else. No other continents, no other countries. Nothing.

(Pause.)

I can't even change hotels. Or room numbers. It's Holiday Inn Express, room 206, second floor, third door on the right. Every. Single. Time.

BOB

(Pause.)

But you could at least see a movie or something, you know?

NORMAN

(Goes back to work.)

I sure could, Bob.

(JOHN enters with a confident stride, a cup of coffee in hand. BOB turns to face him but NORMAN doesn't.)

BOB

Good morning!

JOHN

Morning! How are those reports coming along?

BOB

Should have mine done by lunchtime.

JOHN

As timely as ever, Bob. Good work! How about you, Norman?

NORMAN

I... should have it done by the end of the day.

JOHN

Hmm, that didn't sound very convincing.

NORMAN

I'm working as hard as I can, John.

JOHN

Hmm, that didn't sound very convincing.

NORMAN

I'm working as hard as I can, John.

JOHN

Ah, but hard work isn't always fast work, now is it?

NORMAN

(Stops working, turns to JOHN.)

Are you telling me to half-ass this?

JOHN

No, I'm telling you that the deadline is coming up and you're building a house out of brick when straw will do.

BOB

Wise words, boss.

JOHN

It's the crosswords, I tell ya. Do one every morning and you can spout wisdom like that with ease. The secret is-

(Sips coffee.)

You do it in pen. Really stretches those brain muscles.

BOB

Amazing as always, boss. Guess I'll have to look into a New Yorker subscription if I'm going to have a chance at getting that promotion.

(JOHN and BOB laugh as NORMAN tries, in utter confusion, to contemplate their conversation before giving up and resuming his work.)

JOHN

See, Norman? If you have an attitude like Bob's then you might get these reports done faster.

NORMAN

If that meant I only had Bob's workload, then sure, that'd be true.

JOHN

Ah, come on. Nobody likes someone who can't be a team player.

NORMAN

(Grabs a stack of paperwork and points it at JOHN.)

Does this look like teamwork to you? I've got more work in one hand than Bob's had this entire week. So, really, he's the one not being a team player. Why can't he do some of this? Together, we could easily have it all done before tomorrow.

JOHN

Bob has his own fair share of work to get done.

Which he finished an hour ago.

NORMAN

(BOB slyly turns back to his desk and pretends to work on something.)

JOHN

There you go blaming the team again. It sounds to me like you're just making-excuses so you can get off earlier. Which is a bit *selfish* considering tomorrow is your day off.

(Pause. JOHN waits for a response but none occurs, as NORMAN is too busy staring in disbelief.)

JOHN

I guess there's no choice but to have you work overtime. Unless, of course, you'd rather come in *tomorrow*.

NORMAN

(Concealing his rage.)

No. That's... fine.

JOHN

Excellent! Well, I better let you crack to it then!

(Makes a whipping gesture, then exits.)

BOB

What a great guy. Work is so much easier with a good boss, you know?

(Pause. Chuckles.)

For a moment, I almost thought you threw me under the bus back there.

(Pause. Sorts through some of the papers on his desk for a moment, fully realizing he has nothing to do.)

I'm going to see how much coffee's left in the break room. Want any?

NORMAN

Yeah.

BOB

How do you-

NORMAN

Black.

BOB

(Chuckles.)

You've got it, *Mr. Overtime*.

(Exits.)

NORMAN

Dick.

(Pause. NORMAN stops working and places his head in his hands. Remains still for a moment before looking at BOB's desk. He walks over and examines one of the papers on it. He grabs the paper, walks back to his desk, then sticks it underneath a stack of paperwork. He sits down and a few moments later BOB enters.)

BOB
(Handing NORMAN one of the two coffees he's holding.)

Here you go, black as night.

Thanks.

NORMAN

BOB
(Sits at his desk and looks over his paperwork.)

Have you seen my report?

NORMAN

Nope.

BOB

I could have sworn I left it right here.

(Looks under his desk and around the floor.)

Where could it have gone?

(Stands back.)

You don't think it could have been shuffled in with your papers, do you?

NORMAN

It's possible.

(Grabs the stack of paperwork with BOB's report in it.)

Why don't you take a look?

BOB

(Grabs the stack and flips through it.)

No... no... no... Damn, they've got you doing a bit of everything, huh?

NORMAN

Yeah. Yeah, they do.

BOB

(Still flipping through more papers.)

It's like it never ends.

(Pause.)

You know, I could probably knock a few of these out for ya before my shift's over.

No shit.

NORMAN
(To himself.)

Hm?

BOB

I said thanks, Bob, I'd appreciate that.

NORMAN

No problemo. Just tryn' to be a team player, you know?

BOB

It's cold.

NORMAN
(Takes a sip of his coffee and looks mildly disgusted.)

Hm? Oh, yeah, there was only one cup left in the old pot.

BOB

So you gave the old stuff to me, then... brewed a new one for yourself?

NORMAN

Yeah, pretty much.

BOB
(Oblivious.)

Is that so.

NORMAN
(Sets coffee down and stares at it.)

Hey, can I have that stack back for a second? I... need something in there.

(Pause.)

Huh? Oh sure.

BOB

Thanks.

NORMAN
(Taking the stack from BOB.)

(NORMAN pretends to search through it for a couple seconds before grabbing BOB's report from the bottom, then hands it back to him. As BOB sifts through the papers, NORMAN crumples up BOB's report, dunks it into his coffee, then goes back to work. Lights dim for a few moments, then JOHN enters.)

JOHN

How's everything coming along?

NORMAN

Things are actually going pretty well. At this rate, we'll probably be finished in about an hour.

JOHN

Just in time for everyone to leave. Guess you won't have to work overtime after all, Norman.

NORMAN

Yeah... for once, I guess not.

JOHN

(Pause.)

Ah, now I remember why I came over in the first place. Bob! You never turned your report in before lunch.

BOB

It's the strangest thing. I could have sworn I left it on my desk this morning and now *poof*. It's gone.

JOHN

That's unfortunate. Just print another copy then and hand it in to my office before you leave.

BOB

Here's the thing... that was the only copy.

(NORMAN freezes.)

JOHN

Bob, I needed that report today.

BOB

I know, I know. I just-

JOHN

You really don't have another copy?

BOB

(Pause.)

No.

(NORMAN picks the soaked report out of his coffee.)

JOHN

Bob... how long did that report take you?

BOB

Two days, plus this morning.

JOHN

The most I can possibly extend the deadline is one day.

BOB

I can't do all of it in one. Not unless I have help.

(NORMAN squeezes as much coffee out of the report he can.)

JOHN

Everyone else is swamped.

BOB

There's got to be *somebody* available.

(NORMAN presses the paper against himself, trying to let his shirt soak up the coffee. He then places it on his desk and stares.)

JOHN

Well, we could have Norman come in- Oh, wait, it's his day off.

BOB

He told me he wasn't doing anything, though.

(NORMAN slowly crawls under his desk and curls into a ball.)

JOHN

Hm, well if that's the case. Norman?

(Turns to see NORMAN's empty chair.)

Hm, he must have gone to the restroom. I'll just send him an email then.

NORMAN
(Faintly.)

No.

JOHN

Hm?

NORMAN

I'm not coming in.

JOHN

I'm sorry, Norman, but there's no other way that report is getting finished.

NORMAN

Tomorrow is my day off.

JOHN

I realize that, but you've got to take a bullet for the team on this one.

BOB
(Finding his tarnished report on NORMAN's desk.)

Wait, is this...This is my report. What happened to it? Did you do this on purpose, Norman?

NORMAN

Yes.

BOB

What the hell . . . Why would you do that?!

NORMAN

Because I am the team.

BOB

What?

NORMAN

Because the *New York Times* has a cross word, not the *New Yorker*.

BOB

What are you -

NORMAN

Because I'm not going to Saltillo anymore.

JOHN

You're not going to Saltillo. Well, not until next -

NORMAN

Because I want to do nothing. Because I want to lie in bed and watch TV. Because I want to shut off my phone and close the blinds in the middle of the day.

BOB

It's just one day, Norman, and you aren't even planning on doing anything! Besides, after what you did to my report . . . don't you feel *responsible* for this?

NORMAN

Because I hate cold coffee.

END OF PLAY.

SOCIAL CONSTRUCT

Madeleine Norton



MOURNING

Rowan Graham

I cannot say what morning is
I cannot tell you
of its yellows and oranges
of its warmth and brightness

I cannot tell you how it blinds anyone
who looks too long in its face
or how it takes its sweet,
sweet time

I cannot ask the morning to stop
or start
it does what it feels it must
even when it seems unfair

I cannot see why
it must destroy another to exist
or pierce it like so many spears
I can only see when the morning ends

I can see how it fights
against its fading into the
Dark
I can see only the dark

TURKEY

CJ Meng

Scene One:

Open on two people, a man and a woman, sitting in a car. The man turns on the car, goes to put it into drive, but stops when the woman speaks.

OLIVE

Did you remember to pack the rum balls?

GRANT

Are you sure you want to bring them? I mean, aren't they more of a Christmas thing?

OLIVE

Not in my family.

GRANT

(Reaches into the backseat and grabs a box.)

Got them right here

OLIVE

Perfect.

GRANT

(Smiles, puts car into drive.)

I hope your family thinks so.

OLIVE

My family will love to . . . meet you.

GRANT

I hope so.

OLIVE

Really, Grant. Don't worry.

GRANT

I'm not.

OLIVE

They'll love you.

GRANT

(Laughs.)

You already said that.

OLIVE
Right. Yeah, well they will. Nothing to worry about.

GRANT
Really? Because now I'm thinking I should be nervous.

OLIVE
Don't be!

GRANT
(Laughs hesitantly.)
Okay.

OLIVE
(OLIVE looks out the window.)
My family can come across a little rough, but they're just trying to see what you're made of.

GRANT
What do you mean by rough?

OLIVE
(OLIVE keeps looking out the window.)

GRANT
Babe?

OLIVE
Hm?

GRANT
You okay?

OLIVE
(Turns to GRANT.)
What's your favorite thing about me?

GRANT
My favorite thing?

OLIVE
Yes.

GRANT
I have to pick just one?

OLIVE
Just say the first thing that pops into your head.

GRANT
Okay. My favorite thing about you is your heart.

OLIVE
My heart? Oh, you mean my boobs?

What? No, I mean your heart.

GRANT

My heart.

OLIVE
(Slowly.)

The way you love. It's so beautiful how much you care – how big your heart is

GRANT

Oh.

OLIVE

You don't see it?

GRANT

Not really.

OLIVE
(Shakes her head.)

Well, it's all I see. Even this – we've only been dating for five months and you invited me to your parents' house for Thanksgiving.

GRANT

That's because you don't have any family.

OLIVE

You really don't see it, do you? Olive, that's exactly what I mean! You opened your house for me so I wouldn't have to spend the holiday alone like I have for the past two decades.

GRANT

I hadn't thought of it like that.

OLIVE

I think I might love you.

GRANT
(Looks at OLIVE.)

Woah.

OLIVE

I know it's fast. You don't have to say it back, it's okay.

GRANT

(OLIVE opens the box of rum balls, starts to eat them.)

Are you mad?

GRANT

Why would I be mad?

OLIVE

GRANT

Because at the rate you're downing those, there won't be any left when we get to your parents' house.

OLIVE

(Chews, then swallows.)

I'm not mad.

GRANT

Okay.

OLIVE

I'm not.

GRANT

I believe you.

OLIVE

Good.

(Starts to eat them again, slower this time.)

GRANT

I said I might, if that helps.

OLIVE

Might what?

GRANT

Love you.

OLIVE

I think I left the stove on. Better turn around at the next exit.

GRANT

Okay, so you are mad.

OLIVE

I'm not mad!

(Stuffs two rum balls into her mouth.)

GRANT

(Amused.)

If you say so.

OLIVE

(Nearly chokes.)

It's just that no one has ever said that to me before. Not a boyfriend of five months anyway.

GRANT

(Nods.)

Okay. I take it back.

OLIVE
(Nearly chokes.)

Unless you can somehow make me unhear it, that's not possible.

GRANT

Okay. I did mean it.

OLIVE

Stop!

GRANT

Stop the car or stop talking?

OLIVE

Stop saying you love me!

GRANT

If you don't feel the same way, it's okay.

OLIVE

It's not that simple.

GRANT

Why not? Why can't a guy tell his girlfriend that he loves her while they're driving to her family's house for Thanksgiving?

OLIVE

Because ...I didn't want to know that.

GRANT

Ouch.

OLIVE

No, I didn't mean . . .

GRANT

I told you it was okay if you didn't feel the same way, I just didn't think you didn't.

OLIVE

It's been five months.

GRANT

I'm an optimist! You know this!

OLIVE

I didn't say I didn't feel the same way.

GRANT

You said you didn't want to know how I felt.

OLIVE

I'm not a goldfish, but thanks for the recap.

GRANT

What?

OLIVE

Goldfish ...they have like a ten-second memory.

GRANT

That's depressing.

OLIVE

What I'm trying to say is that I wish I didn't know that you love me right now.

GRANT

Why?

OLIVE

Because now I'm starting to reconsider a lot.

GRANT

Okay, I'm getting scared.

OLIVE

Which is more important? Family or a guy who says he loves you?

GRANT

Seriously? You're asking me that?

(OLIVE eats more rum balls.)

GRANT

Okay. Well seeing as I haven't had anyone to call family for the majority of my life and my cat hasn't exactly expressed his love for me lately, unless you count the daily hairball I find on my living room rug, I believe anyone who voluntarily says they love me is more important than someone who is essentially obligated to love me from birth.

(OLIVE keeps eating rum balls.)

GRANT

I mean, it's not like I have a lot of friends or even get out much. Last week I caught my landlord giving a tour of my apartment because she thought I had moved out.

OLIVE

Your life is a little sad.

GRANT

Hurtful, but not entirely untrue. Meeting you literally changed my life. In some ways, you give me hope.

OLIVE

Hope?

GRANT

You give me hope that there might be someone out there who could maybe one day love me.

OLIVE

Dude, you're killing me here.

GRANT

Am I really wrong?

OLIVE

I don't know. Look, I've had a lot of boyfriends, but you're frankly the first to get this far.

GRANT

Okay.

OLIVE

I changed my mind about you meeting my family.

GRANT

Is this where you break up with me? Because honestly that would suck.

OLIVE

No, I'm not breaking up with you.

(Puts the box away.)

There's something have to tell you.

GRANT

Okay.

OLIVE

I don't think you should be driving when I tell you.

GRANT

Why? What is it?

OLIVE

There's a rest stop coming up. Please, Grant.

GRANT
(Sighs.)

Okay.

Scene Two:

Grant and Olive sitting in now parked car.

GRANT

What is it you need to tell me?

OLIVE

My family thinks I'm bringing you for dinner.

Yes.	GRANT
No. Um, my family thinks I'm bringing you for dinner.	OLIVE
Are you feeling okay?	GRANT (Places a hand on her forehead, but OLIVE slaps it away.)
This is going to sound crazy...	OLIVE
Babe, I write a blog about the different clans of aliens. Crazy is my thing.	GRANT
Please stop talking.	OLIVE
Sorry.	GRANT
I can't do this.	OLIVE (To herself.) (Gets out of car.) (GRANT follows.)
My family...eats...	OLIVE
Stuffing with too much thyme?	GRANT
No.	OLIVE
Mashed potatoes without bacon bits?	GRANT
No.	OLIVE
Green bean casserole?	GRANT
You're literally just listing food.	OLIVE
Do they not eat turkey? I'm okay with that.	GRANT

OLIVE
(Quietly.)

You're the turkey.

GRANT

What?

OLIVE

You're the turkey, Grant.

GRANT

I don't understand.

OLIVE

For the past seven years, ever since I turned twenty, I have brought a boyfriend home for Thanksgiving.

GRANT

That's a lot of boyfriends.

OLIVE

None of them ever left.

GRANT

Are you trying to tell me you're into polygamy?

OLIVE

When I said I was bringing you home for Thanksgiving dinner, I meant you were the intended main dish.

GRANT

Say what now?

OLIVE

I was bringing you home so my family could eat you.

(GRANT opens mouth, but says nothing.)

OLIVE

But when you told me you loved me -

(GRANT interrupts.)

Thought I loved you.

OLIVE

When you told me that, I knew I couldn't go through with it.

GRANT

I'm going to be sick.

OLIVE

Yeah, me too.

GRANT
(Points finger at OLIVE.)

You have no right to be sick.

GRANT
(Dry heaves.)

You were going to eat me?

OLIVE

No, not me. I actually am a vegetarian.

GRANT

Oh, that's reassuring.

OLIVE

I'm – I'm sorry, Grant.

GRANT

Who are you?

OLIVE

Just a girl who finds guys who won't be missed for a while, dates them long enough that it's not too weird to invite them home for Thanksgiving, then -

GRANT

Stop! It was a rhetorical question!

OLIVE

If it makes you feel any better, I was going to make sure your cat got a good home.

GRANT

Let me guess? Christmas dinner?

OLIVE

Ew, no. Cats are gross.

GRANT
(Dry heaves some more.)

Is that why you were so concerned with my diet?

OLIVE

I didn't want my family to get sick.

GRANT
(Groans.)

I thought you were going to tell me you loved me.

OLIVE

Does not letting my family roast you not count?

GRANT

Wait. By roast you mean...

OLIVE

On a spit in the backyard.

Then no, not really.	GRANT
Oh.	OLIVE
Hang on. Does it?	GRANT
I don't know. Like I said, this is new for me.	OLIVE
Gotta say this is a first for me too.	GRANT
Now what?	OLIVE
I need a drink.	GRANT (Reaches back into car, returns with box of rum balls and a bottle of wine.)
That wine actually pairs really well with -	OLIVE (Quietly.)
Me?	GRANT
Well, yeah. According to my dad.	OLIVE
Cool.	GRANT (Eats rum balls, drinks wine straight from the bottle.)
Grant...	OLIVE
What, Olive?	GRANT
Can I have some?	OLIVE (They sit on the trunk of the car, passing back and forth the box and the bottle.)
I really am sorry.	OLIVE
Me too.	GRANT

(OLIVE's phone rings.)

OLIVE

It's my mom.

GRANT

What're you going to do?

(OLIVE send the call to voicemail.)

GRANT

Can I say something crazy?

OLIVE

You still love me despite everything?

GRANT

No. I pretty much hate you.

OLIVE

Then go for it.

GRANT

This is the best Thanksgiving I've had in a long time.

(Fade to black.)

MOON BUNNIES

Mary Jackson



VICTORIA

Abby Giardina

I wanted to see it one last time. Just for a few minutes. I begged my friend Kate to go with me Friday after work, and she agreed after hearing why it was so special. We went in the beginning of October the wind had just picked up a slight chill, nipping at our cheeks as we briskly walked downtown. The building was overgrown, with brown weeds sticking out of the concrete, the blue striped paint on the walls chipped and faded. A black trash bag covered one of the front windows that had been shattered, waving slightly in the wind.

The sign above the entrance read “Joel’s Diner,” and I remembered the way the red and blue neon letters used to light up against the sky in stark contrast to the ink black night or the vivid oranges of a sunset. I remembered the way crowds of teenagers would pile into the space, yelling and laughing as they stuffed their faces with french fries and hamburgers. I remembered the way my sister Victoria and I would walk in with our heads turned towards each other, immediately gossiping about what girls were there and which boys we wanted to talk to.

Victoria and I had what our mom called our “twin telepathy.” We talked the same way, moved the same way, we could always tell what the other was thinking. I was two minutes older (something I wouldn’t let her forget), and always felt a need to protect her. When we were at school or at home Victoria and I were inseparable, but when we were at the diner, we functioned as separate entities going off and mingling with different groups of people, flirting with different guys. We had a routine of sticking together for a few minutes before going different directions and meeting up again when the diner closed.

That diner was a safe haven, a place where we could all go to complain about parents and teachers and little siblings. A place where kids would sneak vodka in their sodas or stuff a stolen pack of their mother’s cigarettes into the pockets of their letterman jackets. It was the social hub of our teenage metropolis, our own nightclub where we could do anything we wanted until closing time. I had my first kiss there when I was 15. Junior year, Victoria lost her virginity in Ty Smith’s pickup truck behind the building. When something important happened to either of us while we were apart, the other could feel it. Not a physical feeling, just a sensation we would both have. Tingles underneath our skin, like something coursing through our muscles.

Those Friday nights at Joel’s are my most vivid high school memories. The sticky white chairs. The jukebox that played old 80s rock songs. We’d sit there for hours, drinking chocolate milkshakes and giggling with our friends to kick off the weekend. Afterward we’d drive around the outskirts of the city in our jeep with the top down, screaming lyrics to the latest pop songs on the radio and thinking that we would live forever.

It went on like that for four years, and then suddenly we were graduating and declaring majors at fancy colleges all around the country. I decided to go with finance. It seemed practical and allowed me to keep my love for numbers. Victoria chose art. It was the one thing I knew she was truly passionate about.

She was never a big fan of school, always doodling on notes and homework, and locked herself away for hours with her paints. I was the exact opposite, I could breeze through a calculus problem but could barely draw a stick figure. Everyone always said how much potential Victoria had.

The last truly happy night of my life was one hot sweaty Friday in July. We were heading off in a few weeks and everyone was cherishing the last few times together. When I think about that night now I can recall a few intricate details: Victoria's bright red tank top and her chipped blue nail polish. The new black sneakers I wore. I'd parted with Victoria with a squeeze of the hand like usual. She headed towards the counter, looking back at me one more time to wink.

A few minutes later I sat squashed in a booth with my friends, talking about the future and laughing until our stomachs hurt. It was reaching closing hour, and groups of people began to leave for the night. I ordered Victoria a vanilla milkshake in a to-go cup without a cherry. I waited for her by the jukebox like I'd done for the past 4 years. The faint tingling sensation traveled from my shoulders down to my fingertips. The initial panic quickly set in as I realized there were only a few people left in the diner and none of them were my sister.

I remember running into the parking lot to ask anybody if they knew where she was, but nobody had seen her since we both got there. She didn't answer her phone. I called her 12 times and it went straight to voicemail. I remember blowing through every stop sign and red light on the way home. I remember flinging open the front door and wailing to my parents, but I can't remember exactly what I told them. We stayed up all night trying to think of where she could've gone. My dad drove around town looking for her. By the time the sun rose he came back more distraught then when he'd left. I poured Victoria's melted vanilla milkshake into the sewer grate.

24 hours passed and we reported her missing. Witnesses from the diner were called in for questioning. We posted her picture on social media, put up flyers, had it printed in the paper. The police asked me the same things for days on end, looking for any motive Victoria would have to run away. She didn't have a boyfriend. She didn't drink or do drugs. I didn't think she would hurt herself. She was excited about going to art school. She was normal. We were normal. They found Victoria's phone in the diner bathroom - which revealed no suspicious activity. We checked her notebooks and journals, looking for anything that would give us a clue to where she'd gone. Nothing. After a few weeks, the case ran completely dry.

I stopped going to the diner. For a while, I stopped doing anything. Everyone else continued on with their lives. Kids still went to the diner on Friday, but friends told me that there was a different air about the place now no one had as much fun anymore. When about a year had passed, people began to tell us we had to move on. I didn't start my new college life in the neighboring state like I had planned. I could hardly bring myself to eat, let alone take calculus classes. After my gap year of lying in bed and thinking of different ways to kill myself, I went to college a few cities over. I buried myself in my studies, earning a Master's degree in finance. I found an unmatched solace in numbers, anything to stop me from thinking about the constant pit of loneliness eating away at my stomach. When I would come home from holidays and went out with friends, no one would dare mention the diner. When I moved back to my hometown after graduation, I avoided it at all costs. Just driving by it made my heart rise into my throat.

Ten years after the disappearance of my twin sister, I stood in front of the diner once again. Surprisingly, I didn't feel the resentment towards it that I thought I would. Joel's Diner had gone out of business three years ago and was under new ownership. I wanted to properly say goodbye to a place that held so many memories of my sister, something suggested to me by my therapist. I sat on the steps underneath the sign and looked at the camera, unable to force myself to smile. I ran my fingers along the glass door and gazed into the dark, empty space, picturing Victoria and our friends laughing on a Friday night.

"What are they turning this place into, anyway?" I asked Kate in the car.

"A bank." She rolled her eyes.

I laughed suddenly at the sheer irony of it all. I knew my sister would hate to see what her diner was becoming. I imagined her fuming at the sight of it, her eyes ablaze and cursing under her breath while I grinned at the way her nose would scrunch up in anger.

A few days later, Kate sent me a picture of the diner. They had taken the sign down and painted the whole building a dull gray color. In that moment, I felt something. Not a physical feeling, just a prickling sensation under my skin. The next day in therapy I explained what was happening to the diner. My therapist insisted that the feeling I had was me getting closure. The building itself was moving on, and I had to as well. So I tried. I tried to focus on the memories of Victoria had and pushed down thoughts of the way she had left and taken a piece of myself with her.

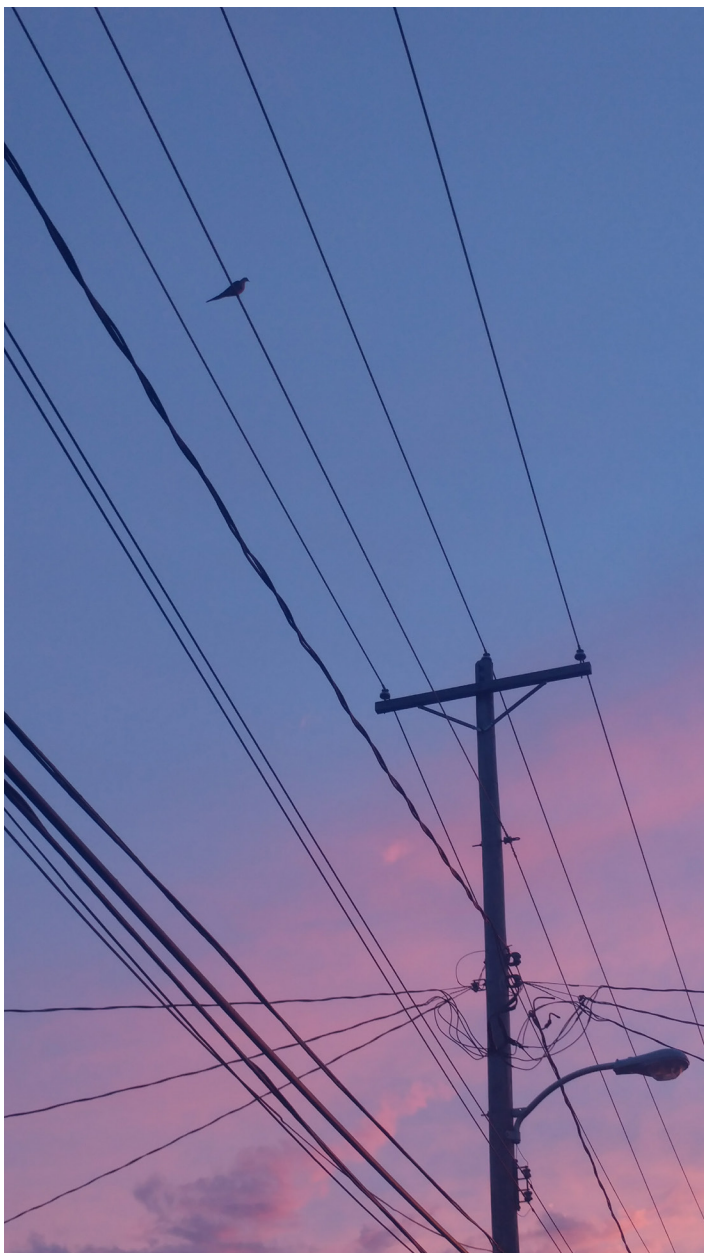
2 more years of healing later, marking 12 years since that hot Friday in July, I was traveling through Arizona with my boyfriend Jack, driving the dusty road between Tucson and Phoenix in a rental car. Just as the sun was setting we pulled into an old bar about 20 miles from the nearest drive-by tourist town. My eyes adjusted to the dim light and sat at the bar while Jack went to use the bathroom. I rubbed at my arms, they were tingling from clutching the steering wheel for so long. There were only three other people in the bar, sitting in the corner with their backs turned to us and whispering inaudibly. Two muscular looking men and a rail-thin woman with poorly cropped hair. She had a series of numbers tattooed along the nape of her neck.

After a few minutes, Jack came out and asked if I was ready to go. His voice cut through the silent air and the three people whipped their heads around to look at us.

For the first time in over a decade, I locked eyes with my sister.

BIRD ON A WIRE

Thea Hartley



PLAYLIST OF MY LIFE

Rowan Graham

Freak Like Me [Explicit]

“So shout if you’re a freak like me/Don’t apologize/They can’t hold you down/
You were born to rise”

One of my biggest rules in life, and one of the best pieces of advice I can offer, is to not let yourself be defined by anyone else. I have an innate, visceral reaction to the word “normal,” at least in the context of people. It’s such a loaded word; what the fuck does it even mean? So be weird, be out there, be the best you. Of course, this means you have to figure out who exactly you are, which can be difficult. There are a lot of things that help me define myself, and I continue to find more every day, but one of the most important has been music. Music is writing is art is expression is the ability to tell someone who exactly you are, to define your true self without having to put a word to it. I hate labels. They’re the fucking worst. They create this false sense of knowing based on your past experiences, but sometimes they’re necessary.

Sweet Child O’Mine

“Where do we go?/Where do we go now?/Where do we go?”

As I sit on the couch, belly full of turkey and potatoes and green beans, listening to some movie or other blare on the television, they call out my name, my family. Only it’s not just my name; it’s my father’s and his father’s too. So, when my family calls, we all answer. It’s numbing. The name is supposed to be me, mine, but it gets so muddled by the others. I’m part of a collective. It’s no longer my name, and I don’t want it to be. I want to have a name that can actually be me, not a legacy I’m expected to pass on – expected by my family, my friends, random strangers who learn my name. I keep thinking, “I can do this. I can keep ‘me’ clear.” But I can’t. That name isn’t me. I’m me. Nonetheless, I still need a name. It really makes you curious why choosing your own isn’t easier.

The Sound of Silence

“In restless dreams I walked alone/Narrow streets of cobblestone/’Neath the halo
of a streetlamp/I turned my collar to the cold and damp”

When I’m running, I don’t usually think. I let my thoughts wander, unattached from my brain. But when I am thinking, it’s about the quiet that comes with the high. The moment when all the pain leaves your body, as if leaking out from your legs and through your shoes, and you’re just running. Those times when everything fades away and all you can hear is your own

breathing, and the beating of your heart, and your feet striking the dirt. So when I take those couple steps, and the pain in my right leg refuses to say uncle, I'm not thinking about how this is my last chance to go to states and how I will never be able to run as good as I used to. In those moments, I'm thinking about my breathing, and my heartbeat, and the dirt. The worst part is it's not even my fault, just some bad genes and a fractured femur. I'm still a member of the cross country team if I don't compete in a single race or run at a single practice, right? I could say "yeah, of course I am," but that doesn't feel honest.

Sheep Go to Heaven

"As soon as you're born you start dying/So you might as well have a good time, oh no/Sheep go to Heaven/Goats go to Hell"

One day I'll tell the full story of a fine person I like to refer to as High School Me. He was a unique character defined by egotism, bitterness, and apathy. College Me is different; they're an optimistic person who just wants to enjoy life. For now, though, a brief excerpt on High School Me's death. Toward the end of his life, High School Me became interested in something called Wicca: a duotheistic, orthopraxic, earth-based, pagan religion. College Me still practices Wicca, and they self-identify as a witch, despite knowing what sort of connotations that label carries for them. One of the chief beliefs of Wicca, being an orthopraxic religion, is that your actions are more important than your beliefs. Essentially, what you say means nothing if you don't back it up. What we do matters now and here, not in some sort of afterlife, where a score is tallied like a great debate. Take that to mean what you will, but College Me believes that it means you should strive to enjoy your life and try your darndest to be a happier person. To College Me, that's what it means to be a witch. I won't say no to a pointy hat, though.

Dandy in the Underworld

"Cos he's a Dandy in the underworld/Dandy in the underworld/When will he come up for air?/Will anybody ever care"

I went to an interview one time and nearly lost my mind when I walked out. I realized I hadn't dressed up as customs would dictate. In all fairness, I practically already had the job, and I wasn't in a bathing suit, so it was all fine in the end. But still, customs dictated that I wear a button up shirt, a nice pair of slacks (or my best jeans), and my uncomfortable brown shoes. But I don't want to. I don't want to dress like "a proper gentleman," or my mother's son, or my brother's brother, or my grandmother's grandson. I want to dress like Me (whoever that is...). I like to paint my nails and have gay hair and wear a lot of wristbands and adorn my denim jacket with buttons proclaiming me to be a "feminist killjoy" and showing off they/them pronouns. So, what do we call that sort of look? Heck if I know. Queer neo-punk activist chic? I'm just tired.

Good Riddance (Time of Your Life) [Explicit]

“For what it’s worth, it was worth all the while/It’s something unpredictable, but
in the end it’s right/I hope you had the time of your life”

Hands down, this is one of my favorite songs. It’s simultaneously incredibly happy and sad, and damn if it isn’t inspiring. Sure, it has that reputation of being the song that’s played at every high school prom or graduation ever, but what’s wrong with that? Looking back on my high school graduation, well, it wasn’t the time of my life, but I wouldn’t trade it away for anything. I remember the day well, and not just because it was also my 18th birthday. I remember waiting in line to be called into the gymnasium, and I remember holding the phones for four of the girls around me because they didn’t have pockets, and I remember there was the one kid there that none of us had even seen before, so that was pretty confusing. But the thing I remember the most was the speech that Mr. Nemecek (Nem) and Mr. Bals gave: two middle school teachers that became an unstoppable comedy duo when paired up. They gave a lot of great advice that day, fielded from questions they had people text to them earlier in the day. They told us to remember to make some time for ourselves, and take college seriously if that was our path, and that they were very proud of the people we had become. Their best piece of advice was this: your best is yet to come. And yeah, I know that sounds corny as shit, but I don’t care, it meant a lot more than that to me. It meant that I didn’t have to keep being who I was that day, and that I could keep learning, and changing, and making decisions about who I wanted to be next.

Californication

“Dream of Californication/Dream of Californication/Dream of Californication/
Dream of Californication”

Despite what my father might tell you, “Californication” is not about sex and movies and California. It is about a world obsessed with being someone. For some people that means having a star on Hollywood Boulevard, and for others that means having people sing covers of your music on the radio. For Anthony Kiedis (lead singer of Red Hot Chili Peppers), it means navigating a world of plastic surgery and fake movie effects and teenage brides. That’s what Californication means. For me, the song is about how far we’ve come. The world has changed so much over the years, obviously not all for the better, but unlike Kiedis, I don’t think californication is default. I think that as we change and evolve, we also learn. About the world, yes, but also about ourselves. Whether we accept what that means, and all the labels, and everything that comes with them, is another matter, but I can say this at least: I have learned. And yes, I still use those labels, but I can’t very well walk up to somebody and say, “Hi, I’m the physical embodiment of Joan Jett’s ‘Bad Reputation,’ what’s your name?” Not if I’d like to have a second conversation, that is.

MAGNOLIAS

Mary Jackson



TO DANCE ON THE MOON

Marcus Hallam

CHARACTERS

KAITO – Japanese high school transfer student, freshman.

KIM – Senior high school student in Kaito's classes.

(An empty gymnasium-turned-dance hall is littered with streamers and balloons, by now deflated and resting on the floor. A table sits center stage and spread across it is a cheap, plastic sheet covered in countless stains from an absent punch bowl. The only item resting on its surface is a bowl of picked over pretzels. KIM enters, walking to the table and eats from the bowl. She drops a pretzel and crouches down to pick it up but stops. She lifts the sheet to reveal KAITO sitting under the table, appearing completely defeated.)

KIM

Kaito? What are you doing under there?

KAITO

Do not worry about me.

KIM

It's kind of hard not to when you're hiding under there.

KAITO

It is okay. I am fine.

KIM

Are you sure?

KAITO

Yes.

(Pause.)

Please, you do not have to stay here.

KIM

Is this about earlier?

(Pause.)

I'm sorry that I had to turn you down. It's just- I thought you knew that I don't date guys.

KAITO

I am sorry.

It's okay. I'm not mad at you or anything.
(Pause.)
You know the dance is over, right?

I do.

So, are you leaving?

I am not.

How come?

(KIM waits for a response but KAITO gives none, choosing to remain silent. KIM gets the message and starts to leave. Before she exits, KIM takes a moment to reflect before returning to KAITO.)

Look, I know this is all awkward right now but it'll get better. We'll both forget that this ever happened and things will go back to normal. It'll be okay.
(Pause.)

I'm sorry if I led you on in class. I didn't mean to. It's just- when I heard that a Japanese transfer student from was coming to our school, I knew I had to get close to him and learn all about Japan. I've always dreamed of traveling there. I wanted to know what it's like to live there, the food, the arts. Everything.

You were very interested in my culture.

Yes! Your culture! That's what I wanted to learn about. That's why I sat next to you on the first day and not, well...

And not me.

I didn't mean it like that.

How else could you have meant it?

I don't know! I just- I really thought you knew that wasn't my intent.

No, I did not know your intent was to see me as my country and not as a person.

That's not fair.

KIM

No!

KAITO

(KATO quickly gets out from under the table. In the process, the sheet gets in his face. Irritated, he tosses it to the side. The bowl of pretzels is launched, spilling its contents all over the floor.)

It was not fair to me!

(KAITO takes a few steps forward, crushing some pretzels as he does so.)

I- I liked that you listened to me. When I transferred to your school, I did not know anybody. I have transferred a few times so I was used to it. I never made friends because I knew I would not be with them for long. But you insisted that I be yours. You wanted to talk every day. It was...

(Pause, trying to find the right word.)

...comforting to find someone so interested in what I had to say.

(KAITO steps backwards, crushing a few more pretzels.)

But if you are only interested in where I am from, and not who I am, then it is for the best that this did not work out.

KIM

(Pause.)

Kaito, I didn't realize how much our conversations meant to you. On a personal level.

KAITO

I appreciated them, a lot.

KIM

I guess I just never realized that. If anything, I would have thought that I was annoying you.

KAITO

You were not.

KIM

That's honestly surprising. All I ever did was bombard you with questions about what it's like to eat at a real ramen shop or watch the cherry blossoms bloom. I figured at some point you'd want the weird girl who's always pestering you to just shut up already.

KAITO

That was never what I thought. I enjoyed the times we spoke together.

KIM

Even though I never asked about what *your* life was like?

KAITO

At the time, I suppose I did not realize that those questions were never about me.

KIM

I'm sorry, Kaito. I really am.

(Pause. Reluctantly continues.)

But, if you thought that I was only ever asking about you, then don't you think part of the blame lies on you too?

KAITO

I do not understand.

KIM

I mean, you never asked me anything. It was always kind of a one-sided conversation. We've been in class together for almost four months now, but can you really say you know me?

KAITO

I have never felt confident in speaking your language.

KIM

(Taking a step forward, on a few pretzels.)

Are you sure you aren't using that as a crutch?

KAITO

You do not know how difficult it can be for me.

KIM

I get that-

KAITO

Do you? I do not think in these words. None of them come easily to me. I have not spoken English my whole life, like you have. It takes an active effort to form sentences that you can say with ease.

KIM

I'm not saying it's not hard for you. I am saying that four months is a lot of time. Enough time to at least try to ask about my life.

(Pause.)

I mean, you put me in a really awkward position when you asked me out. I didn't just turn you down and think nothing of it. You threw a wrench into my brain. Like- it really showed that you didn't know me as well as I thought you did.

(KAITO hesitantly steps back, attempting to avoid any pretzels but still steps on several.)

KAITO

(Hesitantly.)

I did know.

KIM

Wait, what?

KAITO

I knew that you were not interested in men.

KIM

But- then why did you ask me out?

KAITO

I- I do not know.

(KAITO remains silent for a moment, but KIM doesn't budge in waiting for a response.)

KAITO

(Reserved.)

...because I wanted to dance on the moon.

KIM

What do you mean?

(KAITO takes a seat on the floor now dotted with piles of crushed pretzels.)

KAITO

(Pause.)

When I was ten years old, I was in love with a girl. One day I asked if she liked me. She laughed and said, "I like frogs more than I will ever like you." I came home in tears and my- my mother asked what was wrong. I told her and she said, "You tried to dance on the moon." I was very confused, so I asked what she meant. She said-

(Pause.)

"Being in love is like dancing on the moon. At first, it feels strange and awkward. Like one wrong step could send you tumbling down or flying so high you'll never touch the ground again. If you have the wrong partner, this will happen time and time again. But if you have the right partner you will find a rhythm. You will learn how to lift each other up if you fall, and how to pull each other down if you float away. Eventually, you will dance in perfect harmony, and it will feel as natural as breathing."

(Pause.)

I knew that I could never be the right partner for you. But I just wanted to see what it would be like to dance with you, just once.

KIM

It doesn't work like that, Kaito. There's no "just once." I know I gave you the wrong idea in class, but you can't just form a fantasy of someone in your head and expect them to change accordingly. There are some things about people that cannot change. This is one of them.

KAITO

I am sorry.

KIM

(Pause.)

We should probably clean up these pretzels now.

KAITO

It was my fault. I will clean them up.

KIM

It's fine. I'm pretty sure I crushed a few of them myself.

(KIM and KAITO begin placing, one by one, all of the non-crushed pretzels scattered about the floor back in the bowl.)

KIM

That was beautiful, by the way. What your mother said. She sounds like a wonderful person.

KAITO

She was.

KIM

Was?

KAITO

She passed away two years ago.

KIM

Oh. I'm sorry.

(Pause.)

I can't imagine how tough that must be on you.

KAITO

It has been...

(Pause.)

...difficult.

KIM

Do you want to talk about it?

KAITO

(Pause.)

My mother used to greet me every time I came home from school and ask me about my day. Now when I come back, I am only met with silence.

KIM

You miss talking to her?

KAITO

It is more than that. It did not matter what we talked about. It was that she listened to me. I could talk about anything and she would always listen. No matter how small my words were, she cherished every one of them.

KIM

Your mom really cared about you.

KAITO

Yes. She had a presence that always comforted me. No matter how many times we had to move, she could make anywhere feel like home.

(Pause.)

That is why it is so difficult without her. Where I stay now feels empty and cold. Every time I open the door, I am filled with dread. There is no comfort in that

place. Without her, no house ever feels like home.

KIM
(Pause.)

I'm sorry, Kaito. I didn't realize you were going through so much.

KAITO

It is okay. You could not have known.

(KIM and KAITO finish picking up the non-crushed pretzels.)

KIM

I think that's the last of them. Now, how to clean up this mess...

(KIM and KAITO both take a moment to think of how to address the piles of crushed pretzels. Eventually, KAITO picks up one end of the table sheet lying on the floor.)

KAITO

Could you help me with this?

KIM

Yeah. Good idea.

(KIM grabs the other end of the sheet and together they drag it back and forth across the floor, attempting to gather all the crumbs.)

KAITO

I should not have asked you out. I knew it was wrong but I did so regardless. I am very sorry, Kim.

KIM

It wasn't right. And I'm not ready to forgive you yet. But, at least you realize that now.

KAITO

I do not expect you to forgive me. I was a fool.

KIM

Look, I'm disappointed in your actions but I also realize that you're still going through some stuff with your mom passing away. And while that doesn't excuse what you did, I may be willing to move past this if you still want to be friends.

KAITO

Of course.

KIM

But that's only if-

KAITO

I will not ask you out again. I promise, I will be a better friend this time.

KIM

Good.

KAITO

(Pause.)

I am also sorry for not asking you about your life.

KIM

I'm sorry for not asking you about yours either.

(Pause.)

It's kind of funny how neither of us ended up knowing much of anything about each other.

KAITO

Yes, it is.

KIM

(Pause.)

Remember how I said this was a good idea? Well, I take that back because I'm pretty sure we're just spreading the crumbs out even further.

KAITO

It does appear worse than before.

(KIM and KAITO both stop sweeping, shake out the sheet, and place it back on the table. KIM looks around the room.)

KIM

I don't think there's a single clean spot left in this place.

KAITO

There is one.

(KAITO ducks under the table and takes a seat. KIM laughs before joining him.)

KIM

Did you used to do this as a kid?

KAITO

Hide under tables?

(Pause.)

Yes.

KIM

Why?

KAITO

I used to think they were a good hiding spot when playing hide and seek.

KIM

Was it?

KAITO

No. My mother always found me.

KIM

So, why do you still hide under them now?

KAITO

I do not know. It is comforting. Maybe part of me thinks that if I stay under here long enough, she will find me.

END OF PLAY

WHERE I'M FROM

Selena LaBair

My boyfriend Nick and I drove four hours to make it to my grandma's and Papa's house. I still include my Grandma in the title even though she passed years ago. It had been about a year since the last time I visited. Trips up North became fewer and farther between as I got older and went to college. This was the first time I had been to my grandparents' house without my parents. I wasn't sure how I'd feel, being alone, having to process the changes the house has been through without someone that knows what it once was like. Nick didn't know the anticipation of turning off Telegraph, knowing what good times were to be had right after the bend into the neighborhood. While he thought the trees were beautiful, he couldn't appreciate how magnificent they were to remember with young eyes.

He didn't know that you had to go to the back yard first, as you would most likely find my Papa in the garage, working on some project that only had importance to him, like repairing his favorite broom or mending his broken switchblade-like comb. The garage is a manifestation of the life my Papa has lived. The walls are lined with GM memorabilia from the plant my Papa worked at, models of cars he watched roll through the line. Pictures of my Papa's band with members that died years before. The Selena poster that has been there since she was alive. All the tools, perfectly put in place with his signature and the date he got it. My Papa has a serious habit of dating every item he has: wrenches, jackets, shovels, rulers; he picked it up during his time in the service.

In the past, I'd go to the back door of the house, peer in through the window to secretly watch my grandma shuffle about. She'd most likely be cleaning the last couple of dishes, wiping down counters or sweeping the floor. She always kept the house in perfect condition for guests and for each other. When I couldn't take my excitement anymore I would knock as I walked in, announce my presence, and wait for her famous high-pitched, "Hellooo!" Wrapped up in her arms, I'd smell her Wind Song perfume, a mixture of powder and flower petals, and feel her soft skin and her warmth. I'd pull away from the hug, only to wrap her up one more time because I missed her so much. I don't know why, but I would almost always cry as soon as I walked in. I was excited, I was happy, I was at home. The smells of home cooking would encompass me, menudo, tamales, rice, fresh tortillas, whatever it was. This house was filled with love, with life. All the things that it was were beautiful. This is where I'm from.

We pulled into the drive way and I knocked on the front door because my Papa's girlfriend thinks it's odd when people go to the back door. We wait. We knock again. I call the landline and hear it ring from the inside, no one picks up. We sit on the porch swing while I call my Papa's cell, he picks up, "Hi mijita, is everything okay?"

"Hi Papa, everything's okay. Are you home? I'm here at the house!"

"Oh that's wonderful! We're out at the diner right now for breakfast. Give us fifteen minutes, don't leave!"

“Of course not, I’ll see you soon. I love you.”

This would have never been the case had my grandma been alive. They rarely ate out, all meals, and especially breakfast, were eaten at home. My grandma would make my Papa eggs over medium, warmed tortillas, and light amounts of salt and butter as she was watching his health. On visits, my Papa would surprise me with sweet bread, conchas, and we would all share the little delicacies with milk at the table. My grandma would make coffee over the stove and join us with her house chancas and watch us eat her delicately made meal. But Maria doesn’t do that for my Papa. These are different times.

I drive Nick around the neighborhood as we wait, pointing out the paths I would walk with my childhood best friend, the lake my dad would walk me to, the houses that people have built over top of the original small, quaint houses that were. I told him about their long-time next-door neighbor, Ms. Kapsanis, who asked us to mail her my school picture to hang each year until she passed. I told him about the other next-door neighbor’s house that was where my dad grew up in, that his best friend lived in the house across the street from too. I told him about what it was like to live in this neighborhood with people that grew up and old together, only to eventually fall apart as my parents described. I told him about how much this neighborhood has changed but how much it has remained the same. The neighbors are still friendly, the people have just changed.

He admiringly watches me as I tell these stories, I don’t look at him because I know I’ll cry if I do. He doesn’t ask many questions, he simply listens, holding my hand while gently running his thumb over mine. As we sit at a park by the lake, I feel tears well in my eyes but they’re interrupted by my phone ringing. It was my Papa, he was finally at the house and so excited for me to get there.

We met my Papa at his house, we briefly caught each other up on our lives. I tell him that I’m here as a birthday present from Nick. Nick said he knew it would mean more than any present could on my birthday to bring me here to see family. My Papa was surprisingly impressed. We explained that we were going to visit for some time and then we’d drive into the city for a comedy show and tomorrow we’ll go to a Lion’s game. He was incredibly excited for us. He loves the Lion’s and anything Michigan. Anytime you bring Michigan up around him, he insists that you have to listen to his phone’s ringtone, the Michigan fight song. If you ever have the chance to sit with him and watch Michigan win, he’ll sneakily call his phone with the landline so it rings at the end of the game. My Papa told Nick about how my grandma loved to watch her Lion’s, how this small quiet woman would scream and yell in Spanish at the TV during each game. She considered herself a Methodist but on NFL Sundays, she was more of an NFC North kind of woman. Nick grinned at the thought of this little woman being so excited. Her pictures were scattered around the house, the few that Maria let stay up that is, so he could somewhat imagine what she would look like after a Michigan win.

My Papa doesn’t pay any regard to his girlfriend as he speaks of his late wife. They both know that the people they once loved are the ones they are waiting to spend forever with, despite how visibly annoyed she tends to get.

“Well go and show him around!” he tells us. So we move through the living room to the kitchen, where my grandma spent so much time. I bumped my head against the fan’s chain, it still hangs low like she had it. She was so small that she had my Papa extend the chain so she didn’t need to reach or grab a stool.

I reminisced on the tortilla lessons I had at the roll out island. I thought of the taste of butter that my great abuelitas would put on my lip to entertain me while I waited for dinner. I laughed at the thought of my grandma waking up at two am to make me noodles because I was hungry and she couldn't tell me no. The smell of coffee ran through my mind as I stared at the kettle on the stove, imagining my little grandma in her hair rollers, robe, and chanclas, shuffling about adjusting to the new day.

We moved to the basement and I sat down on the fourth step, putting my chest between my knees and peered to the room like I did when I was young. Back then I would sneak peaks at the musicians and listen to the sweet sounds of my Papa's magnificent mariachi band. I remember the boom in my chest from the drums and bass guitar, and the shivers in my bones from the full horns. The way I couldn't keep my toes from tapping to the infectious sound of the marimba. My heart swelled when thinking of my Papa's booming voice, the way his fingers would glide over the piano keys, or the way he proudly held his guitar on his upper chest.

Through the basement we went into my Papa's office. This is the musty holy grail of family memorabilia. Here he stored old family photos, miniature car replicas, old records, and, of course, a small antennae TV that he could watch old westerns on or whatever Michigan football was available. We sat on the green worn-down carpet from the 70s and I showed Nick my favorite photos. I took pride in the ones of my mom and aunt, ones where they had big teased out hair and leather jackets, leaning against their hand-me-down muscle cars. I adored the ones of my grandma in her youth, carrying her babies around. I longed to know what conversations were being had in the photos of my great abuelitas as they sat on the porch, sipping hot coffee, making hot hot salsa while smoking cigarettes all on a hot summer's day.

In sadness I looked at the photos of my parents' prom. They were longtime next-door neighbors, then high school sweethearts, then married, a family, and divorced some few years ago. My mom in her hoop skirt dress and my dad in his baby blue ruffled tux, looked like something meant to be. I told Nick about how my grandparents essentially raised my dad, as his father abandoned him and his mother wasn't around. They housed him, fed him, made sure he had proper sense. My Papa taught him all he knows about cars and hard work in that garage while my grandma taught him how to respect a woman and care for himself.

But these photos obviously couldn't tell the full picture. Photos aren't taken during sad or lonely times. I told Nick that in these photos, people are missing, smiles are faked. I pointed out times when my mother had lost babies, when my father left my mom, when my aunt was brutally abused by her husband, when my Papa left my grandma for months while he was on tour, when my father attempted suicide, when my grandma lost her first daughter in a car accident, all disguised behind weak smiles and tired eyes. It's amazing how helpful my Papa's habit of dating things was in times like these. His wispy handwriting let you in on the setting of the scene, it allowed you to know the day someone's heart was crushed, that someone was longing for someone else, that a surprise was just a few dates away. I cried hot tears as I looked through these photos and realized how little we truly knew about each other, the family's story, even my own. I wept in my Papa's arms when he came to check on us. I told him the changes all came so fast, I asked where my family had gone. He cried as he held me and said that life is full of changes, that he too misses the way things were but knows that life

goes on even as the one's most close to us end. We walked through more of the house, and I was right to anticipate the pain that would come.

Nick stood beside us with, tears in his eyes and pain in his heart. From our late-night talks, he knew how much it meant to me to be here. I had so much built up guilt for not coming sooner, for not being there with my family. It was in no way my fault that my family moved away, but I still felt that it was my fault for not being in touch with them. Nick knew that this was a crucial moment in my life and when my Papa pulled away from our embrace, he draped his arm around me. I wiped my tears in his shirt and he kissed my head.

We moved to the front porch to take a seat on the swing. Nick sat across from us in the large wicker chair. While we talked together, we didn't make eye contact. We were off in our own memories; Nick took in the scene while my Papa and I reminisced what the neighborhood once looked like, the people that lived in each house around us. In some ways, I think my Papa and I were waiting on my grandma to pop through the front door, telling us dinner was ready. My Papa told us more stories from the past, some I had heard before, some that were a surprise, some that he changed to sound more interesting. We sat together in the same spots we had years before, gently swinging, softly speaking. We talked through the light droplets of tears, my Papa's falling in pace with mine. But as much as the stories hurt to hear as I knew some of these things were no longer, I felt at peace with understanding who I was even more.

From this trip, I was reminded where I came from. I was born on the fourth basement step, nourished by the food by my grandma's hand, given heart through the arms of my mother, discovered how to walk from the experiences of my father, and learned to dance from the music that encompassed the house. This home was the birthplace for all the other homes that have come to be in my lifetime. This is where I'm from.

WE ALL RETURN TO DUST

Wesley Stobel



DEAD RODENTS

J.R. Gill

Winter 2014

Little black dots littered the bottom of the kitchen trash can. Stains of orange liquid found around the cabinet light. At night the rustling and skittering was loud enough to stir me awake. Winter in the country, especially the country I'm from, meant mice. Field mice, as my family's home was planted right in the middle of the fields. Corn and bean and alfalfa fields.

Winter in the country, especially the country I'm from, means death. Deer season. Duck season. Mouse season if you happened to live where I did. As temperatures dropped, the signs of mice increased. My family would be eating dinner together watching Jeopardy! and above our heads the tiptoeing would begin. Quiet at first. Louder and more confident when they realized we could do nothing to stop them.

But they didn't know what was to come.

After they had chewed a hole in the dog food sack, my dad went about purchasing, arming, and stationing seven mouse traps in the kitchen and laundry room.

What followed was a massacre. Thirty field mice would have their tiny necks and backs snapped in half across the month of December.

Come New Year's, not one mouse remained attached to life.

Winter 2018

I awoke as I do almost every night around 5 am to go take a piss. (Before bed I always drink a bottle of water. Couldn't tell you if it brings any actual health benefits, but I do it anyway.) The pressure in my lower gut alerted my eyes to open. My bedroom was pitch black as I lived in a basement. I grabbed my phone and flicked on the flashlight application. With my feet sliding gently across the cheap carpeting, I made my way to the bathroom. The cold tile flooring made me need to pee more, so I hurried across the room. I lifted the lid quickly and dropped it even faster.

"What the fuck?" Taking a step back, I reached and pushed the lid back up. Within the porcelain bowl right in the very center floated a dead mouse.

Eye open. Only half the head and front left arm above the water. My urge to pee had left me. I looked around the room. "What in the fuck is going on?" I asked myself.

I had lived in that basement for two years. Not once had an event anywhere near this perplexing occurred before. I stared down at the little thing. Unmoving

and looking me in the face with its ink-black eye, I questioned my existence.

I've questioned my existence on a couple occasions. After finding out Santa wasn't real in third grade. Concluding there was no god in fourth. Post depressive panic attack following my papaw's passing.

Finding a dead mouse in a toilet struck me with a similar bewilderment.

This bewilderment involved leaving the mouse and the bathroom. I walked back into my bedroom. Then turned around and walked back into the bathroom. The mouse remained.

My bladder's desire resurfaced and mixed with my existential dread. How did a *mouse* get in this toilet? There had never been any indication whatsoever that a mouse was living in the basement or first floor or outside the house or within a mile of the house. How did *this* mouse get in this toilet? I wondered about the life it had lived before this moment we had together. How did *this* mouse get in *this* toilet? Did it swim up the toilet? Is that even possible?

Winter 2010

I slid my wooden pencil through the thin white bars of the cage. Poking the guinea pig's side, I waited for a reaction. It never moved again.

"Mrs. Cook, the guinea pig is dead," I announced to the rest of my eighth-grade Advanced English class. My teacher's jowls dropped. She walked over to examine the dead rodent for herself. The rest of the class, numbering only thirteen, began to mumble and fidget in their seats. I had unintentionally unleashed a wave of anxiety over them. Each wanted to get up from their seats to look at the cavy's carcass.

"What a rude way to bring light to such a situation," my teacher uttered.

Summer 1992 Part I

There's luxury in the idea of seeing death. A feeling of gratitude for not being the one dying mixed with a perverse desire to taste the moment. Floating in a toilet, locked in a cage, bent over backwards under a metal trap, decomposition begins.

The atoms confined to the body finally get the chance to be free once again and travel far, far away. The last breath of a field mouse travels to Saturn's rings and farther. Past the dwarf planets. Into blackness. There it has time to rest, time to recollect and remember the feeling of living.

Summer 1992 Part II

In the dark of night, my father smacked a foot-long rat to death with a rake. Cornered the dirty thing after he and my mother had heard it rustling in the trash outside. Earlier that day a maintenance crew had been working on the sewage line down the street and likely freed the thing. My father would free it as well.

Allow the rat to exit the blip in time that is living and rejoin the vastness that is not. But in that moment, in that rat was me. For six and a half years the particles and waves of that rat traveled to the Ganges River and bathed in it, watched the coverage of the Oklahoma City bombing, and sat shotgun as Osama bin Laden left Sudan for Afghanistan.

These moments add up. As do the atoms. Moving alone at first, then slowly swirling together like a galaxy, like a dead mouse being flushed down a toilet. Swirling into the form of seed and pot and zygote and fingers and my first breath.

ON THE CONCEPT OF DISTANCE

Katie Warner

I knew about liminal spaces long before I knew the word to describe them. The distance between distances. The journey part of the journey. The place in which your existence can feel nothing but its own existence, where the knowledge of your own infinitesimal morality weighs a little more heavily on your chest bone. The day-long car drives or the airport layovers followed by long flights that most people dread, even if they're excited for whatever waits at the end of it. People don't know how to handle the waiting. They don't know how to travel from one point to another, even within themselves.

I've always found a kind of twisted pleasure in long car rides or flights, in staring out the window for hours on end, watching the world fly past me, my focus changing every second, the scenery never staying long enough for it to mean anything, to become significant. It's all temporary, anyway. But, for a split second, our universes collide, for a split second, we glimpse each other: liminal space to liminal space.

It seems to me that distances, in and of themselves, are a kind of liminal space, and there are infinite arrangements of them, as many different types of distances as there are people, or the stars in the night sky, or the trees you pass by in the physical manifestation of a single second out the glimpse of your car window.

Here and then gone.

And I wonder, for minutes, or maybe hours, whether or not the liminality of distance, of space itself, is something external, or if it's something I've been carrying with me for eternity, rooted deep within my own existence.

The unshakeable twinge of depression-laced anxiety that I've been trying to understand for years sits thick and heavy in my lungs, filling them like smoke. Smothering and suffocating. If I'm being honest, I'm unsure of how to describe this feeling in a way that resembles coherence—the feeling that comes from watching life sprint past you with no way of holding on. Knowing that every tree, every cloud that you glimpse is a second of your life you'll never see again and maybe that's a good thing. Maybe that's why I stare out the window, taking everything in with hungry eyes, trying desperately to make myself feel closer to something I'm only passing through on my way to somewhere else. Trying to sear it into my memory, to give it the attention it deserves, even as I can already see it becoming a blur in my periphery.

And I'm staring out my window—in the car, on the airplane, in my childhood bedroom, it doesn't matter where—and I'm thinking, not for the first time, about the ways that people can be liminal spaces, too. About the ways that we pass through each other on our way to the next person and the one after that and the next one after that one. And maybe some people are more liminal than others. Maybe some of us aren't meant to be someone else's something, for more than a moment, anyway. And when you've gone your whole life without ever being

anyone else's anything, it's hard to imagine yourself ever being someone else's something. To imagine yourself being the kind of person that people prioritize, that people don't leave behind, that isn't just a road stop on the way to anywhere else.

But the trees outside my window, the clouds I watch stream across wings made of metal sheets as I pass them in the sky, they don't seem to worry or to care about whether or not I'm staying. They don't seem to care about whether or not they are, either. The roots of the trees are dependent on nothing but their own structure and the dirt in which they are planted; the clouds more than content to bump into other clouds, exchanging pieces without sacrificing their stability. Their existence is entirely their own.

I think I should try to be more like that.

But I don't know how to stop being my own liminal space. I don't know how to make my existence about my own existence, about something more than just a span of time, a beginning with an eventual end. Because if a liminal space is the distance between a beginning and an end, between where you are and where you're going, then isn't your whole life just one giant liminal space? Our existence not so much about us, but about whatever comes before and after.

Deep in my core, I harbor a disconnect with my own reality. How do I come to terms with the fact that I, myself, am just a threshold for something else to pass through? I tell myself that I shouldn't get attached to people, that our individual liminalities will eventually drive us apart because everyone is always on their way to somewhere else, some other destination that will most likely never be the same as your own, because—you must remember—there are as many different types of distances as there are people, as many different types of liminal spaces as there are ways to feel like you're dying. When I travel, I live out of my suitcase because it's never made sense to me to settle down where you know you can never have roots. Arm-length relationships ensure I am easy to pack up, ensure that I am uprooted with minimal pain—they were never far beneath the surface to begin with, the roots. And this is a lonely way to live but I can't seem to stop. Anxiety makes too good of an argument for logic to dispute.

What I'm saying is that I don't know to fill my own voids. The location is irrelevant. My college dorm room, my childhood house, every hotel room I've ever visited. Within crowds of people, restaurants, movie theaters, in the car, on every plane I have ever flown or will fly on, the hill I go to in my front yard when I need to feel small, my bed as I'm staring into the pitch-black abyss of my ceiling, the feeling I can't place that's lingering in my own chest, my lungs. My body fills these spaces without filling them, and I wonder, again and again, if it is possible for silence to fill silence. If voids can fill other voids. If liminal spaces ever stop being liminal. Or if each liminal end always yields yet another liminal beginning in an endless cycle that there is no way to stop.

For a moment, I wonder if I even exist. The scratch of my pen on paper tells me I do. It vibrates through my fingers. It fills me with something other than the nothingness.

Being a liminal space feels like floating in cool water, like watching the world through one-way glass. And it's hard to pretend there isn't a black hole in the center of my stomach, sucking everything in and hoarding it in a way that forces

me to feel its chaos every second I spend breathing. It's hard to pretend my story is still about myself and not about the black hole that has become my center of gravity when I feel like the background character in my own life, like I'm not even the author of my own story, much less the person the story is about.

Between glimpses of trees and strands of clouds, I remind myself that there is no easy way to cure a self-procured loneliness; that I must learn to find ways to fill my own empty spaces, or else learn how to let other people help me fill them. Neither of these seems particularly manageable. I remind myself that there is no easy way to simply close up a black hole, either, to cut off something that has become such a part of you it seems twisted into the delicate strands of your DNA.

But outside the port window of a plane whose claustrophobic size I try desperately to ignore, I can see a rainbow spanning from one cloud to another. I watch it for as long as I can, and I can feel all the tension release from my shoulders, all the anxiety that comes from merely existing growing smaller and smaller, unable to reach me when I'm thousands of feet above anyone who has ever passed—and anyone who ever will pass—through me as though I were a ghost, as if my entire existence were mist and vapor. And I'm not saying that I've found an answer to my question about liminal spaces and the concept of distance and what it takes to make a home within your own person, but regardless of whether or not rainbows have distinct, reachable ends, it has to be going somewhere, and maybe that's all that matters.

FALL

Lucy Clark

I once fell like these orange leaves,
willing to sacrifice myself to beauty

I never learned to do it in
their graceful nature

the door behind me blinks its
invitation in big red letters, the
sticky scent of dough thick in the air

the brick pavement is quiet, save for
the rumble of cars and ticking of watches

the sun lights the earth now,
reminding the plants to grow,
reminding the cherubic faces on
the street how to blush

reminding me that this pain
is a gift

THE CAPITALISM IN COSMETICS

Juli Lindenmayer

I slam on my brakes. A fire-engine red Fiat zooms past me – I just barely miss a head-on collision with it. The middle-aged woman in the car stares me down; I, too, refuse to break eye contact. However, ultimately, she wins – she got the parking spot I was going for. I continue on, going to the farthest perimeters of the Easton parking lot. I didn't expect it to be this busy on a Thursday evening. I wonder what sales the stores are having to make people want to shop so badly.

"WELCOME IN!" is immediately thrown at me by a woman behind a cash register.

Cool air ever so slightly displaces the bangs on my forehead. It's cool, but it's not fresh, not clean; its aroma is filled with cardboard, foundation, pressed pigments and an assortment of women's perfume and men's cologne. It's not heavy yet still overwhelming.

Everything is pink. Ulta pink – a baby pink, a bubblegum pink, a girly and as-feminine-as-you-can-get color pink. Pink endcaps, pink signs, pink lettering, pink lipstick on models. What are the newest deals? What are the newest products? Would you like to take 20% by applying (but only if you get accepted – have good credit now? We're trying to change that) for an Ulta In-Store Credit Card? All promoted in pink.

"Oh, hi lovely!" Hannah awakes from her stupor, the automatic response fired at a figure making its way across her peripheral vision. I throw up a hand and a smile, and pass Ashley as she's doing a client's brows, marking them out in a dark brown pencil. I rush to the back of the store and nearly run completely over Taylor, almost hitting her with the door.

"Whoops, sorry!" It's 6:03 pm – after 6:05 pm, I am immediately marked tardy, and with no excuse, that could lead to penalty points – enough of those and I will be fired.

Luckily I make it. Now to gather everything I need: put on my name tag – Hello Beautiful! Prestige Beauty Advisor – grab a headset (and make sure it's charged. Click it on, and put it to station 2. "Can everyone hear me?"), grab a side bag – you have to remember the keys! You always forget and have to turn around, go back again. Customers get annoyed when you have to leave them. Next task: go out the door, to the left of the Salon and its eight black chairs, four on each side of an island divided by large mirrors, and get clean brushes: four to five foundation brushes, about three fluffy crease brushes (used for concealer, not for eyeshadow), a blush brush or two because you cannot forget that time where Evelyn needed one for a client and you didn't have one to give her. I'm ready.

I try to get to the front of the store where I manage prestigious cosmetics (the name brands everyone knows but no one can actually afford, sold at prices that are acquiesced but not rational), but not even a quarter of the way there I am confronted by a guest.

“Excuse me, do you work here?” I wonder if people ask this because it is expected, because it is polite, or if because they truly do not know if I’m employed here. But you never really go up to a complete stranger and ask that question. The whole point of me wearing all black from head-to-toe with a name tag and a visible headset isn’t to make it difficult for you to locate me. I wonder if management knows how much the attire doesn’t seem to be working.

“Yes, how can I help you?” – “I’m looking for microdermabrasion needles, do you sell them here?” – “I don’t know. I’ve never heard of them before” – “Well online it says you do” – “Well then I’m sure we do; we just recently moved the store around for new products, so let me ask really quick...Hey Bev, do we sell microdermabrasion needles?” I ask over the headset.

“Hey, girl! Right behind you!” One of my managers, Beverly, smiles brightly as she makes her way down the aisle towards us. She is exceptionally beautiful, with dark hair and blue eyes and tanned skin, a golden undertone. Tattoos done by her boyfriend, Ian, peek around the cuffs of her t-shirt. “Hello, how are you? Yeah, we do have microdermabrasion needles, we recently got them in, so that’s probably why you can’t find them. Follow me.” Maybe it’s a good thing I didn’t get to the front of the store; I turn around again.

We come to a low, small shelf, tucked away near the back of the store.

“Here they are!”

“Oh, okay. So I heard that before you use the needles you need to apply hyaluronic acid. Can you help me find that too?”

“So we actually do not sell pure hyaluronic acid – you can only get that over the counter with a prescription. However, we have products that contain a really high amount of hyaluronic acid. Hey sweetheart, could you show her Peter Thomas Roth’s Cloud line? And don’t forget to tell her about all of our special offers.”

I know exactly what Beverly is talking about. She wants me to ask the woman about applying for an Ulta Rewards Credit Card. Not only do employees have to ask every customer if they would like to apply for one when they check out, but as a Prestige Beauty Advisor, it is my job to push for them on the floor as well. No one likes to have to push people, and people do not like to be pushed to apply for credit cards – something they *know* will make their lives more stressful. If our store doesn’t sell enough credit cards, then our ratings tank – and that is detrimental enough where managers could get fired for it.

It’s easy to ask for one at the cash register. People often complain about a coupon not working because they want to apply it to prestige cosmetics, but it only works on mass. The vendors for prestigious brands like Urban Decay, Too Faced, Drybar, and DevaCurl don’t want to lose money from an Ulta coupon. It comes more naturally to ask there – plus, if you don’t, a pop-up on their side of the register screen asks them if they want to apply – it even shows the exact amount that would be taken off if they get accepted.

Working the floor is much more difficult to work it into a conversation naturally. It only really works if they mention a price or shopping here a lot – otherwise it just sounds like you’re trying to sell them something (even though

you are), and doing that would be rude. Even more importantly, it would ruin your chances of getting them to actually apply for one.

“Yeah, sure. If you will just follow me.” I take her over to the shelves lined with large bottles with even larger price tags. “Here is the Cloud line by Peter Thomas Roth. It has the highest percentage of hyaluronic acid sold in stores. It contains 75% hyaluronic acid and comes in different formulas, from serums to eye creams to moisturizers.”

She takes a minute to run her eyes quickly over all of the different choices. “What does the retinol line do?” She’s looking at retinol? I thought she wanted hyaluronic acid...and paired with microdermabrasion needles? I feel like retinol wouldn’t be the best thing to buy.

“Well, retinol is a material that reduces the appearance of fine lines and wrinkles on the skin, it –”

“I know what retinol does, I’m wondering what you can tell me about each of the products,” she cuts me off abruptly, slicing the air with her snarky, annoyed tone. The tension is also cutting.

I’m lost. I don’t know what she’s asking, what answer she’s looking for. I think I offended her, seems like she thinks I think she’s stupid. I wasn’t thinking that – still not thinking it, actually – now all I think is that she’s rude and disrespectful (and that’s putting it nicely).

I look at the products on the shelf – she hasn’t told me which one specifically she wants more information on. “Well, this is a retinol eye cream...”

I begin to read directly off of the container what it says it supposed to do. I can only expect that this will make her even madder, but I’m past the point of caring. What does she expect from me? I’m 21 – and I’ve been told multiple times I’ve been mistaken for much younger than that – I’m a college student working here part-time just to try and make money to pay for the education the school can’t afford to give me through either a financial aid package or from a federal work-study (going for an English degree at that), and there are thousands of products in this store – for skincare alone. Does she expect me to know everything about every single product just because I work here? Is that how it worked when she worked retail 500 years ago?

I guessed right. After I finish reading what each product did, there’s an uncomfortable silence. “Never mind, I guess I’ll just take it from here.” Fine by me.

Another woman has sneaked up behind me during my interaction with the monstrous woman. We communicate nonverbally. Our eyes talk to each other: God, what’s with her? So demanding, so rude. Honestly, I know, right, all in a day’s work – and this is just the first fifteen minutes of being here. I have another four hours to go. And barely making \$11 an hour, at that. Could you imagine if I had to support a family on that income?

She’s nice. I answer her question about a Lancôme foundation shade and I’m about to walk away when I get stopped by the same aggravated voice that has been dampening my mood since I first clocked in. “Excuse me?” I know who she’s

talking to. It's me. Sigh.

"Yes?" I, unfortunately, must walk over and attempt to help her again. The consequences would be worse if I didn't. I could lose my job, and I'm desperate for money. I'm going to college to get a degree because it's supposed to ensure that I have enough money to live comfortably. And college is unimaginably expensive. Crazy how much knowledge costs.

But now, the game she's playing has nothing to do with me. The tone that has been ever-present in her voice tells me that she doesn't actually want my help. She knows I'm incompetent – she's already decided that I'm useless. Now, she just brings me back to harass me. To hurt me and make me feel uncomfortable. Undermined. Beneath her.

"These products are extremely expensive – is there anything that has retinol that would be more affordable?"

Didn't you come here for hyaluronic acid?

"Yeah, we have a ton of skincare lines that have products that include retinol. Clinique is one, Murad is another; it just depends on what you're looking for. Clinique is probably the most affordable." Another lengthened pause.

I remember what Beverly told me to sell. "You could also apply for an Ulta Rewards Credit Card. It will take 20% off your entire purchase if you apply and get accepted."

"No, I do not want another credit card."

"Are you sure? You get double points for earning money off faster with every purchase," I ask again.

"No, I don't want one."

"It's especially great if you shop here often. People will –"

"I SAID NO!" she exclaims.

"Okay. Sorry."

The same snarky tone in her voice.

"That'll be all." And with that, she dismisses me.

COLOR IN THE RUINS

Thea Hartley



FLESH-COLORED HUT

Madeleine Norton

she built in the snow
a fresh flesh-colored hut
from her blood
and her bones
and her skin
and each little sparrow
whether plump tall or narrow
was called gently
from her
to come in

she cared for each sparrow
caressing his down
til their plumes
starred her cloak
limb to limb
then the sparrows would feed
and the sparrows would breed
til her house
filled up far
past the brim

needless to say
they got fed up one day
with their closeness
and tittering
shrieks
so they pecked at her thighs
draining tears from her eyes
leaving feathers
and dust
on her cheeks

they soon began shredding
fleshy holes in the walls
snapping bone
spurting blood
breaking panes
sparrows broke down the doors

sparrows tore up the floors
til nothing
was left
but remains

the sparrows soon swarmed
fleeing free from the hut
breathing cold
tempered air
through the trees
and she stood there alone
in the wrecks of her home
clumped in feathers
and soot
to her knees

as she started again
frozen ice formed her hut
leaving flesh
rotting fast
with the bone
so she let it become her
snow-wrought tundra to numb her
leaving her
in the hut
all alone

PLEASE, DO NOT RESUSCITATE

Katie Warner

There is a precipice, and I am as close to the edge of it as I can get without falling.

Sometimes, I sit at the cliff's edge and let my feet dangle as I listen to water collide with rock. Other times, I think about what it might be like to jump.

I know there are a lot of people who are afraid of heights, afraid of falling, who can all picture the way stomachs seem to drop and lurch for that brief, infinite, moment before they make contact again with the ground. My stomach seems to do this regardless of whether or not I am physically falling.

There is a pit of writhing darkness where my stomach should be. It prowls like a night creature, eyes glowing, seeing my every misstep as I hurtle across ground I cannot see beneath my feet, stumbling. I think about what it might be like to jump because I am wondering whether or not the darkness would stop. If it would bleed out onto the rocks with the rest of me.

I am aware this is a morbid thought.

I'm not saying that I want to die, not really. But I am saying that I want to stop existing in my current state. I want my stomach to be a stomach again. I want to stop feeling like I am going to vomit every time I go to the grocery store. Or stop for gas. Or make plans for lunch.

The problem, though, is not with my stomach. My stomach is just where the monster lives.

I'm sitting in the doctor's office and I can't stop my limbs from physically shaking.

My rational mind knows that everything is fine. That I am not in any imminent danger. That my breaths are enough. But the air doesn't feel like it's hitting my lungs anymore and I'm not sure if the way my arms are trembling uncontrollably is due to the chill from the AC or due more to the way my heart seems to have become a jack hammer in my own chest. I'm not quite certain what it is that it's trying to make break apart and crumble, but I think that maybe it's me.

My skin prickles up like goose-flesh and I try to rub it out of existence.

I don't know what to do with my hands, so I hold them in each other's grasp. A falsified stability. When that is no longer enough, I grab for my phone, scrolling through anything and everything for a distraction—from this place, from this situation, from myself. But this is not enough, either.

It feels like I might be falling but my feet are touching the tiles. Does it still count as falling if no one sees you hit the ground? I press the rubber soles of my shoes deep into the floor, feel the pressure run through my toes and upward. It doesn't do anything to stop the irrational panic rising in my chest like flood waters, like molten lava, like the collapsing of dying stars.

I start to become desperate for the doctor to come in. Because as much as I hate it, the anticipation is worse. The longer I sit here, the more restless I become. There is nothing else to listen to other than the voice that tells me all the reasons I should be afraid. I feel like a foreigner in my own skin; I am reminded that my body does not wholly belong to me. The creature in my stomach drags slow claws down my abdomen and sends chills up my spine.

My mother is cradling a de-potted plant in her hands, its roots exposed toward the sky.

I don't know how it happened.

The small succulent fits perfectly in her palm; its white ceramic pot lies empty on the table in front of her. My little brothers stand before her, looking guilty. If I were a painter, I might title the scene "Judgment Day."

My mother's voice takes on a frustrated tone that I am familiar with, but there is something else there, too. Something that makes her sound incredibly sad, but that is far too gentle of a term. I can't quite put my finger on whatever it is.

She wants to know how it happened.

My brother's voice pipes up, filled with regret. It was he who had dropped it. He says it was all part of a game they were playing, he and my other brother. I don't know what kind of game he thinks they were playing, but it doesn't matter, I suppose. The succulent is still lying in a pile of its own dirt, innards exposed at the scene of the crime.

I watch as my mother scoops up the dirt with delicate hands and places it in a ceramic dinner bowl. She rests the plant's body lightly on top. Later, she will moisten the soil with water and pack the plant safely back inside its little ceramic pot. She will place it back on the windowsill, where it should have been before my brother's small, impulsive hands displaced it. Before life and consequence.

But I can't stop seeing it lying in its own dirt pile. How vulnerable it looked disembodied. I can't stop thinking about the roots as they lay there, how small they were, how thin and fragile, like the veins running beneath the surface of my skin.

I can't stop thinking about what it must have felt like to fall.

I can't stop thinking about whether or not the plant knows. If it felt the equal but opposite reaction of the ground as it fell into it. If its roots felt pain like the nerves in my skin. If it feels different now in its little pot, now that all its contents have been displaced and replaced.

My brother's voice is a tentative question, as though he were afraid of the answer. "Will it live?"

Will it live?

I rehearse my story a hundred times before I leave. Think about the right words days in advance, edit them to perfection, recite them to myself before bed, in the car on the way there, in the waiting room as I sit alone against the back wall

trying desperately not to look as terrified as I feel.

Deep down, I know this is futile. I know the second I open my mouth to explain myself, the story, the practice, it will all be gone, the words will come out jumbled, wrong, too fast. They always do.

The nurse asks me a lot of questions while she takes my blood pressure and I wonder if she can hear the way my voice is shaking. I hate that I can't get a grip long enough to make it stop.

I'm cradling my injured wrist in my opposite hand and when the doctor comes in I try to catch my breath. He sits down in a chair across from me in a way that looks like we could be old friends.

By some stroke of luck or mercy, the words come out mostly how I want them to, enough to put me a little bit at ease.

He takes my wrist in his hands and begins to poke around between all the tendons and joints, trying to locate the cause of the pain that's been hiding in the center of my wrist for months. He doesn't find any, so we assume the steroids I've been on for several days must be working, must be doing their job to tackle the inflammation.

He tells me to baby it for the remainder of the steroids and for a good week after. The steroids get rid of the inflammation, but the wrist will still have to heal on its own, he tells me.

Walking out into the parking lot, claws that have been clutched around fistfuls of my stomach slowly start to loosen. My breaths gradually become enough for my lungs again.

There is a shallow creek in the backyard of my college campus.

Maybe not exactly the backyard. More like in the heart. It cuts the campus in half; runs between the main center of campus and the arts and engineering buildings a little further down. I don't come this way often, but, when I do, I walk across the small bridge that runs above the creek.

It is night and I can't stop staring at the glint of the moon on the water. The added light of the lampposts makes the water look like silk, like a soft embrace. I need someone to hold me.

The water is shallow, but deep enough to cover the large rocks and jagged branches that run beneath the surface; the water is murky enough to be deceitful, even in daylight.

It is the middle of winter and the air is biting my uncovered cheeks and fingers, but I don't care. I don't care because feeling the cold makes me feel something other than the chronic emptiness that I am becoming numb to. And yes, the cold is another kind of numbness, but this kind lingers on my skin, reminding me that I am alive.

I know the water must be freezing and I want to reach out and touch it.

That's a lie.

I know the water must be freezing and I want to throw myself off the edge of the bridge and fall abruptly into its depths.

That's the truth.

I'm not saying that I want to die, not really. But I am saying that I want to stop existing in my current state. I want my body to be a body again. I want to stop feeling like nothing, like an empty hole in my stomach.

So, I stare at the water, and I wonder if the shock to my central nervous system, the sticks and the rocks scraping away against my skin, would be enough to take away a too-familiar kind of pain. Would be enough to make me feel something else—anything else—just long enough to take one last breath.

The creature in my stomach is simultaneously drawn to and repulsed by this thought. It feels the pulling call of the water beneath our feet, and recoils, just slightly, just enough.

I am unsure whether or not it is crouching back in fear or shifting onto its haunches, readying for the pounce. I don't stay long enough to find out.

I tear my eyes from the water and sprint the rest of the way.

The creature in my stomach is volatile, ready to combust. It writhes and churns. It is afraid.

The nausea that has been settled in my core for hours is all consuming, deafening. It draws every aspect of my attention; we are playing with magnetic fields, laws of attraction. Snakes and snake charmers.

The terrible thing about logic is that it doesn't really matter. It doesn't matter that I know the creature in my stomach is afraid for nothing. It doesn't matter that I know the creature is lying to me. It doesn't matter that I know these things to be Truth. Because the creature is also a kind of Truth. Logic will not stop the nausea that is building enough that I think I may vomit. Logic will not stop the chemical reaction happening in my body, will not kill the adrenaline surges, will not level out my breathing.

On my phone, I am prompted to make list after list: *find five things that are soft, find five things that are red, name five animals that are fast, name five types of gemstones, name five animals that can climb, list five warm winter foods...* the lists keep coming and coming and coming. I fly through them as fast as I can, one after another, a constant stream. I do five of them. Ten of them. Fifteen of them. After twenty-five lists, the doctor comes in.

I'm flooded with both relief and a burst of fear- driven adrenaline that sends something cold seeping into my chest.

The doctor remembers me and I'm a little taken aback. He asks me if my wrist is still bothering me and I answer him anyway, even though we both know that, if I'm there, the answer is obviously yes.

He pulls his chair close to mine and takes my hand, begins pressing down again on the joints and tendons. I show him with my fingers where the pain has

been localizing, in and around my thumb. He presses down into the fleshy part of my hand, where the thumb meets the palm, and pain blossoms beneath skin and muscle. This is a good thing because the pain is indicative of the problem.

He presses it again to be sure and the pain deepens.

The wince I let slip on my face tells him everything he needs to know.

Another dose of steroids, but this time an injection. He promises me it will hurt and I believe him. His blunt honesty is enticing, and the creature in my stomach unfurls, just a little. A morbid part of me is looking forward to the pain, but I'd never admit that to anyone. I can barely admit it to myself.

He steps out of the room to ready the needle-syringe unit and I cradle my hand in my lap, my thumb still throbbing from where he pressed on it before. I try to make myself read the paper on the wall in front of me, about using cell treatment for osteoarthritis. I can't tell you anything more than that because, even though I read the whole thing several times, I didn't read it, not really. Not in the way that counts.

When he comes back in, I try not to stare too long at the tray, try not to watch it as he sets it down, try to take a deep breath, not that it does any good. The monster in my stomach does not respond to oxygen, just as it does not respond to logic.

He asks about my trip to France coming up in two days while he wipes my hand down with antiseptic, re-finds the spot on my still-sore thumb and marks it. I don't bother to try and stop the reaction happening in my stomach and chest.

He asks me if I'm ready and I give him my hand. The answer is half lie, half truth.

The numbing spray hits my hand like ice, but I don't mind the feeling. He says to go for as long as I can take the cold, but I don't stop him, I let the cold bite into my skin with a blank expression on my face; when I don't say anything, he just inserts the needle into my hand, into my thumb joint. The spray doesn't do much to numb the pain. I can still feel the needle penetrate through layer after layer of skin and muscle, as though I were cutting into mille-feuille. The needle stays in my hand for what feels like long minutes held in a short span of seconds as the nerves in my hand register the liquid being dispersed far too slowly beneath my skin.

When the needle finally slides out from its place in my hand, the hole it leaves starts foaming. I watch it for a moment before a band-aid blocks it from my sight. The creature in my stomach goes still, melts away like sea foam on water. Warmth seeps in its place.

I listen to him talk as he rotates my thumb back and forth, I assume to either help prevent stiffness or to further disperse the drugs or maybe both. I don't ask. I listen as he discusses the next steps, but I don't really hear him. The warmth in my center radiates outward, the feeling of sunlight on skin. I can feel the temperature in my body spike, heat flushing through my system, as though when all the adrenaline drained out of my veins it left hot springs in its wake. I'm trying to decide if I'm lightheaded.

He pauses to ask me if I'm alright and I nod, but I'm starting to sweat, and my glasses are starting to fog from the sudden increase in my body heat. He asks me again and the creature nuzzles my stomach lining until I admit that I am, actually, a little lightheaded. He chuckles and, for some reason, it puts me a little at ease. He assures me this isn't an uncommon reaction but makes me lie down for a few moments. He leaves and sends in a nurse with a damp cloth for my head.

Lying on my back on the examination table, I wait for the foggiest in my head to clear. The room is empty, but I feel vulnerable. I've never been good at needing help, never been good at letting people help me, never been good at accepting it.

By the time I get up to leave and start the walk back to my car, the numbness in my thumb is beginning to wear off, the pain beginning to set in. I can't help but purposefully move my thumb to send the pain flaring up my hand. It has an addicting quality, like a bruise you can't stop touching just to see if it still hurts. But, by the end of the day, my hand hangs useless at my side, the pain so intense I can barely flex my hand muscles without the pain being nearly debilitating, without feeling the needle impaling my hand over and over and over.

The creature in my stomach doesn't blink an eye.

Coming down the mountain is steep and terrifying. Coming down the mountain is strained knees and praying you don't slip and fall.

I'm not wearing the right shoes for this.

The soles of my shoes are flat and their ridges are shallow. They find little to hold on to as I make my descent. My feet are grappling for a hold, grappling for something to tether me to the ground. Gravity is only sometimes your friend. Gravity will keep you from floating away, yes, but gravity is hungry and it is jealous. It will not let go of you if you fall. It will hold on to you tightly, pull you down, down, down into its depths.

Where does gravity stop, I wonder?

Certainly, it will not pull me through the ground, but it will still hold my body when it's cold and decaying inside of it. Maybe my skin and bones will become a part of gravity one day, when I inevitably return to dust.

But I am not yet a part of gravity, and the feeling of the ground slipping out beneath my feet is enough to set the creature in my stomach stirring. It lurches when the gravel and stone send my feet searching for new footing, but that doesn't stop it from watching the ground below me with intense, knowing eyes.

I think that maybe gravity is lonely. Perhaps that is why it holds on to everything so strongly.

We come upon a part of the mountain that tapers off on one side into a steep ravine—me and the friends I am traveling with. Boulders and rocks adorn the ground below and I try to stop myself from thinking about how easy it would be to let my feet separate from the dust they try and fail to cling to and tumble over the edge. I don't want to tumble over the edge, but that doesn't make the idea of

the fall any less enticing.

Cliff sides tempt and call and beckon. They scream and don their warnings. I am both enchanted and afraid. I'm afraid of slipping in my slick shoes. Afraid of sliding into ravines. I am afraid to admit that I wonder what it would feel like to drop so suddenly, feel my bones shatter on rock. Have my roots exposed toward the sky.

A large rock group splits up the path in front of us. The dirt path is powder and I know my shoes will not hold. I don't dare step to the left side, the side closest to the ravine. But the right side will still be difficult to traverse.

My friends advise me to go over the large rock and I hesitate. But they arrange themselves in stations, one at the beginning, the middle, and the end. They hold my hand as my shoes slide like silk across marble over the rocks below me. I don't let go of their hands as I reach out to grasp the next one.

Down the rock and over we pass by a small waterfall that runs below us. I watch it with awe but I remain far too aware of the space that exists between it and myself. I ease my body closer the wall of dirt and rock and trees behind me.

I don't want to think about dying. I want to think about living. I want to think about how beautiful it is standing at the top of the mountain. I do not want to think about how far away the ground is, or how close I am to the edge. I don't want to think about heights.

But, in the gondola cars we took up to the top of the mountain peak and most of the way back down, we talk about falling. We talk about how far we would drop if the cables snapped. We talk about the fact that, at a low enough point along the way, we could probably drop and only sustain minimal injuries. I concur with the above statements. I don't want to think about what would happen if the cables snapped, but I do anyway. I have been the entire time, long before my thoughts found themselves falling out from between other people's lips. The thought pushes its way to the forefront of my mind like a bad habit. I peer out the windows and so does the monster in my stomach; while my eyes are busy admiring the view, the creature's eyes are turned toward the ground waiting far below us.

SOLO FLIGHT

Madeleine Norton



THE WORST OF THE WORST TIMES IN VIETNAM

Maya Venkataraman

It became clear to me that we were not going to get any help. Not any time soon. I looked at the grim expressions on the faces of the soldiers (*these were permanent expressions during this time*), and while I knew that had been permanent expression, there was something off. There was something off about this situation, about the area, about the entire nation. It had been like this for a while now, and in all honesty, I wasn't sure that was much hope for the future. Not right now, when I wasn't even sure if I would be able to see my family again (*I'm not sure if it was a blessing or curse that I made it out of there alive*).

Living in the South was hard, especially being from the North. We knew it would be different to what we were used to, but we needed to leave. The Communist government was getting aggressive, detaining families on fraudulent charges, and not allowing people to leave. I felt the physical relief of my family when we were able to escape. Still, it was hard trying to make a home for ourselves. Money was tight, and jobs weren't easy to come by, even for the men. When we first got to Saigon, we were surprised to see how different it was from where I grew up. It was a city, nothing like the countryside I grew up in. It was dry, with little to no greenery in sight. It was so different, but in some ways, it was better than living with the Communists breathing down our necks. Living in the camps that had been set up for the Northerners that fled Hanoi wasn't pleasant. Nothing about the situation was pleasant. My brother, Tan, tried his best to find work, but it was hard. It was hard for us Northerners to do anything really, everything was so different from the North. Even the way people spoke was different, it was like no one had proper time to even speak to each other. Some of the Southerners tried to be friendly, but others didn't even try. We knew what they thought of us, of the North. Not all of us were Communists though, but that was something some people just couldn't wrap their heads around, especially those interested in joining the military. Tan didn't want to join, but I think he knew it was inevitable. We weren't at war...yet.

"Nurse Nhi," I heard someone call, effectively disturbing my thoughts. I turned and saw one of the soldiers looking at me. I shook myself out of my reminiscing and made my way over to where some soldiers had gathered. I was on kitchen duty tonight, a decision I found myself being thankful for. With the looming danger, I felt as if I was making a larger difference keeping the soldiers fed, rather than tending to injuries. It was hard to try to help the wounded and end with worse results. I watched as the men devoured the food. It wasn't much, but still, there was a dash of pride in me for the men all looked like it was the best meal they had. During these times...it may have been.

There were a lot of different soldiers in the hamlet assigned to protect us. They were part of the ARVN (Army of the Republic of Vietnam), but not by choice for all. Some were doing it out of revenge, for their family members that perished

at the hands of Communists. Some did it for loyalty to their nation, believing that the Americans would be helping us get our nation back. Some did it because they had to. It was either join the South and fight the Communists or wait for someone or the other to come and take you. I didn't think it was easy being on either side. Living in the South, I heard a lot about how Communists and their supporters were treated. I heard stories of the torture that they were put through, whether they were actually Communists or not, it didn't matter. The South would not take chances, torturing some into confessing. The Americans were trying to help us, or so that's what we were told. I'd heard stories about them too. About how the soldiers would go into villages and destroy everything in sight if there was any sign of Communist support. Small villages have been burnt, leaders murdered, women been taken advantage of, all for being Communist supporters. But I knew better than to share what I had heard, especially since I was working with ARVN, who was supposed to have aid from foreign forces. In times like these, it wasn't safe to share what you'd heard about anything; it was unclear who was supporting who. It seemed that no matter where you were or who you were, everyone was against each other. It wasn't even clear who the soldiers were fighting for: were they here to protect those who lived in the hamlet, or were they here to track and find Communists supporters hiding within villages, or was it both?

The hamlet I was working in with Nurses Nhung and Thoi wasn't too big, definitely not big enough to hold off what we all knew was coming. When we had heard the bullets firing earlier, it sounded a little far. The other nurses and I knew that bullets can travel far and fast. We quickly tried to get the families, especially those with children, into their homes. It was the most we could do at the time. Being a nurse was hard; I never knew when I would just be sitting and waiting for something to happen, or when I would be sweating, stomach rolling from the sight of so much blood. What kind of nurse feels uncomfortable at the sight of blood? I do. I really do (*even to this day, I hate it*). The other nurses and I felt much better once the ARVN soldiers returned to the hamlet. They would be there to protect us (*or at least they would try*). The soldiers tried their best to reassure us that they had a handle on it, but one look at their faces when they thought we weren't paying attention was enough to tell us that the chances of us making out of this situation unscathed was extremely low.

After making sure the soldiers had enough to eat, I sat with the other nurses. We gave ourselves whatever was left over, knowing that we did not need it as much as the soldiers did. We ate in silence mostly, not knowing what to say to each other. I could tell that we were all nervous. We didn't know what was going on, not specific details anyway (*not that we needed them, it was clear what was happening, there was no way to miss it, not the sounds of gunshots*).

There was a large language barrier between us and the Americans. They didn't try to learn our language, so we didn't try to learn theirs, most of us anyway. In reality, what difference would it have made for us? They were the ones who had come here and tried to join our society, they should have been the ones to learn the culture. It would have been easier for them if they had even tried. Why they didn't think to try is something I've tried to understand, but I'd very quickly realized that it was best not to question what the Americans did. It seemed a lot of what they did was done without rhyme or reason, and to fully understand, I would have to choose a side, which is not something I was big on doing. Sometimes, I felt like I knew how the Americans felt about Vietnam by just looking at their expressions. Many times I could see the disgust on their faces, although sometimes I couldn't blame them. I'd seen how some of the locals had

treated them, even the Southerners. Little children would pelt rocks, and many people were openly distasteful.

"I have a bad feeling," Thoi whispered, but it was loud enough to stutter my heart. I tried to focus on my food, and not the curling of my stomach. There hadn't been much blood...yet (*that was to come later*). The few soldiers that had been hit had either taken a turn for better or worse.

"Help will come," Nhung responded, "they have to."

I don't think we were supposed to hear that last part, but there was no missing it. Not when the only other noises were the crickets and the occasional order from the Lieutenant. Thoi and I didn't make any move to respond or acknowledge Nhung's comment. Thoi and I watched as Nhung stood up after finishing her meal and cleared the plate away. My eyes continued to follow her, watching as she picked up a pot of tea and went to refill the Lieutenant's cup. I heard Thoi pick up my plate, but my eyes were trained on Nhung. I saw her exchanging a few words with the Lieutenant, and from the way Nhung's hand slightly shook as she finished pouring the tea, I knew it wasn't good. I stood up ready to try and find something to do, but Nhung stopped me and Thoi before we could do anything more.

"We must find a place to stay for a bit," she told us, trying to keep her voice steady. Thoi and I exchanged a look. The situation had gone from bad to worse in a matter of minutes. "Nhi, please go check on the soldiers, then meet us back here." I nodded quickly. It was all I could do at this point. I knew that the Lieutenant had been trying to get back up for some time now. I only prayed that some form of help from the foreign troops would arrive in time (*they did arrive, but not in time*).

I'll never forget that day. I was lucky to live. Many didn't. Back up came, but they did little to help us. It was hard to consider that the people who were supposed to be fighting for us hardly wanted to 'waste men' on helping our small hamlet. We lost a lot that day. We lost a lot every day after that. We continued to lose. Some say in the end, we won. But in reality, no one won. Millions of people died, including Tan. My brother died fighting a war that wasn't his to fight. Fighting for something he didn't believe in, not truly. My friends lost husbands, fathers, brothers, and sons. All fighting in a war with no true victory. For us anyway. The Communists have taken over, but what did they win? A destroyed Vietnam. A Vietnam covered with dead bodies. Ours and the Americans'. The North, South, the Americans, everyone. I'll never forget that day. I was lucky to live. Too many didn't.

STRANDED

Madeleine Norton



WHITE HORSE

J.R. Gill

“I think she’s been shootin up again.” Ma looked me dead in the eyes.

“You think?” I wasn’t prepared for this conversation. “She, she seemed okay to me.”

“I can see it in her eyes.” She took a sip from her coffee mug. The waves of heat radiated in front of her wrinkled face. More wrinkled than usual. New wrinkles carved by the anguish of a dope head daughter.

“You want me to talk with her.”

There was a shuffle from upstairs. She was awake. She’d be down soon.

“I want you to pray for her. Then talk to her. There’s a devil inside her.”

I wasn’t particularly interested in the first part of that plan. My sister and I weren’t anywhere near as devout as our Ma.

“I can do both of those things.”

“Thank you. If she starts gettin like she usta be than I’ll call the cops on her. I swear I will Eric.” I didn’t believe her. She didn’t do much to stop her the first time.

I found my own sister rag-dolled on the bathroom floor the first time. She’d slipped and banged her head on the bathtub. Went unconscious for who knows how long. Her arm was still tied up with hosing. The needle in the sink. I called the paramedics. Ma cried for hours and hours.

“Morning.” She said. Slippers on, not picking her feet up off the linoleum.

“Mornin.” Said Ma. She eyed her up and down.

“Good morning, Lizzie. How’d you sleep?” I asked.

She reached above herself into the cabinet and pulled down the box of Honey Nut Cheerios. Her hair was messy. I could see what Ma saw in her eyes.

“I had a dream.” She answered. “A white horse. Bright white. Hard to look at, was in the front lawn. No saddle or nothing. I had woken up from the sound of it clopping around. I went downstairs and out the door to it. Stroked its mane. It lowered itself down onto its front knees, and I got on.” She said this all without looking at us. Just staring into an empty bowl.

She continued, “The horse started off down the road. Just slow as could be. But it was dark, and I couldn’t see much of anything off in the distance. Its skin was like a flashlight and lit up the close stuff. On the ground there were wooden

crosses. Handmade out of two-by-fours and broken branches. Then, the horse started to sink into the ground. Real slow. Like quicksand. I couldn't get off it because then I'd be in the quicksand too. So I stood on its back and kicked off and grabbed onto one of the crosses. But it burnt my hand."

Ma had covered her face with the paper. She shook her head at me. I saw tears welling up in her eyes.

"So I let go of the cross and sank into the ground. Then I woke up."

"Sounds more like a nightmare don't you think?" I asked. The bacon and eggs in front of me had gone cold. The sun was starting to peer through the backdoor.

"I've gotta use the potty." Ma excused herself from the room quickly. She wasn't built for this kind of stuff. In her youth there weren't crackhead kids. Sure, some people smoked weed and everyone drank, but dope is different. She didn't know how to deal with it.

Lizzie poured her cereal and milk. She looked out the kitchen window and off towards somewhere. "Am I going to Hell?"

I cleared my throat, "Depends if you believe in such things."

"I'm not sure I do. But she does. And what if she's right? Then I'm going to Hell. Because I'm a fucking druggy."

"Now calm down a minute. You're clean. You're not a druggy."

"She thinks I've been shooting up again. I haven't. But inside me. Deep inside me. I feel this itch. It's getting stronger. I'm so scared, Eric."

The sun had risen up enough to start brightening her image. She was too young to be dealing with this shit. She was hardly old enough to start looking for a full-time job, but instead she had to deal with the idea of the damn Devil lurking in the shadows.

"Look sis, if you ever need anything. Come to me first. Ma isn't doing so well with this whole situation."

"I hope I'm not like this my whole life." She said. She spooned some cereal into her mouth. She spoke with a full mouth, "Should I go back to rehab?"

I looked at my little sister in the morning sunlight. The individual strands of her hair nested on her head. The purple under her eyes. The chipped fingernail polish.

"I think you should go back to rehab." It hurt to say.

Her body dropped a bit. She took a deep breath. She looked back out the window.

The sun was a white horse now. I ached for her. I hoped she'd find something worth living for outside on the lawn.

THE COLD WAR

Kelsey Brown

Dr. Suess' Butter Battle Book reflects the fear of nuclear fallout during the Cold War, how the arms race is nothing more than toddlers comparing toys and how the world would be a little better with a little more rhyming in it, and it also reflects my relationship with my brother.

He is America and I am Russia.

I say he is America because he has a business degree from Miami University and I say I am Russia because

I prefer to drink vodka when he's around.

It's about how the two of us can sit across the dinner table for years

and not have anything to say to each other,

but have a million thoughts about our career paths to share with our parents.

About how putting up our Christmas decorations always turned into a puppet war

with both of us fighting when he moved an ornament after I already hung it.

It's about how we were never allowed to really argue as kids.

About how our happy birthday texts—our only texts—become increasingly distant

how "Happy Birthday" really means

"At least I'm not a trashy little sister who forgets your birthday,

I'm just a trashy little sister who hates you."

It's about how he never played with me when we were kids.

and how our mom, who, much like everyone east of Berlin in the 80s, pretended that the iron curtain between us didn't exist.

MADRE MARIA

Wesley Stobel

As mother Mary's blessed tears / fall from the iridescent silken sky / to the
curving crescent moon / it pears and swallows / a transparent holy pearl / softly
gliding from the sky with / angel tears / into the bountiful pools / of baptismal
beauty / and wealth / A mother's gift to every child / of the world / a cry of joy
and hope / for the dollop / of clover cheeks / and dandelion hair / that graced
the God-created / by its innocent and / tender eyes of purity / Lost in the
wonderment / of life and God

AUTHORS
&
ARTISTS

AUTHOR AND ARTIST BIOS

Kelsey Brown is a senior double major in Music and Creative Writing. Next fall, she will attend graduate school for Arts Administration at Otterbein University and will continue writing poetry in her spare time.

Lucy Clark has been writing avidly since she can remember, and writing poetry has always been an outlet she relies on for expressing herself. She finds poetry to be a highly visual medium, and she likes to express the visuals she keeps internally through poetic narrative. Her submissions this year aim to reflect just that- the highly visual, narrative aspect that even short-form poetry can capture, the images and worlds they can simulate, even if just for a few handfuls of lines.

Abby Giardina is a freshman public health major from Powell, Ohio. In her free time she loves to write, Irish dance, and spend time with friends.

J.R. Gill – Filthy heathen. Folk hero.

Rowan Graham – Smash the patriarchy. Eat the Rich.

Marcus Hallam is an English Creative Writing major at Otterbein University, class of 2020, and has lived in Delaware, Ohio his entire life but hopes to change that at some point. He wrote and co-directed the play “Mundane Horror” for Festival 2020: The Underground Lab Experience, and wishes to write more absurdist work in the future. Prose and plays are his favorite forms of writing, though he respects and experiments with others as well. Except poetry. Poets are just lazy storytellers*

Thea Hartley is a Creative Writing major and Studio Art minor. From poetry to horror stories, photography to graphic design, she does a little bit of everything, and would be just fine with continuing on that way forever.

Mary Jackson is a junior at Otterbein University majoring in Creative Writing and minoring in Studio Art.

Selena LaBair's personal essay, “Where I’m From” was inspired by the work of her fellow classmates from Marion Correctional Institute. The men in MCI were brave enough to reflect and write about their lives; this gave her the inspiration to write about her own. Her essay came to fruition because of their assistance, insight, and patience with her.

Juli Lindenmayer - Major in English Literary studies and WGSS. Minor in film studies. Junior graduating in Spring 2021.

CJ Meng is a junior Equine Business Management major who studies psychology, writes stuff, hangs out with horses, and drinks entirely too much coffee.

* This is a joke, calm down

Madeleine Norton has been taking photos of things she finds interesting since she was 14 years old. She taught herself to edit based on photographers she admires, and loves to post her creations on Instagram for those to enjoy. Her works typically feature bright colors and a focus on lighting and light sources, usually of landscapes but often of people too. She believes beauty in the world is to be shared, and that photography can offer us a peek into the ephemeral moments in our lives. She approaches poetry with the same attitude.

Wesley Strobel writes for the passion of expending his soul and bearing it as a mirror for others. He loves to play with form and imagery to build art in his language. He studies creative writing and literature with a concentration in poetry but a great passion for all forms of knowledge and written/spoken word.

Maya Venkataraman is a senior Psychology and Creative Writing double major from Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia. While at Otterbein she was involved as an Orientation Leader, Resident Assistant, Admissions Receptionist, Writing Center Assistant and more. She is hoping to become an English Language and Literature teacher, and later professor, in Southeast Asia, post-graduation.

Katie Warner is a junior English Creative Writing and French Studies major with a minor in Film Studies

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SELENA LABAIR

LUCY CLARK

JULI LINDENMAYER

ABBY GIARDINA

CJ MENG

J.R. GILL

MADELEINE NORTON

ROWAN GRAHAM

WESLEY STROBEL

MARCUS HALLAM

MAYA VENKATARAMAN

THEA HARTLEY

KATIE WARNER

MARY JACKSON