The background of the entire page is a fine, light-colored grid. Overlaid on this grid are several abstract, three-dimensional geometric shapes. These shapes are rendered in a grayscale gradient, giving them a metallic or crystalline appearance. They feature complex, curved surfaces and sharp edges, resembling distorted spheres or faceted crystals. The shapes are scattered across the page, with some appearing larger and more prominent than others. The overall aesthetic is technical and mathematical.

ASTERISM:
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A Note to Our Readers

Picture this: six undergraduate students—four English majors, one History major, and one Psychology major—gathered in an isolated classroom on The Ohio State University at Lima’s campus, discussing the 20-30 new poems and short stories that arrive in our submission box each week. Before the weekly meeting, editors take the time to read the works and share their votes online. If votes aren’t unanimous, a piece is often projected from a computer onto a screen, to guide a discussion of its merits. On rare occasions, the group decides to discuss the poem or story again the following week. By the end of each meeting, most of the submitted pieces, unfortunately, lack enough positive votes to be accepted, but 5-10% make the cut.

We are passionate about the works we have selected for this second installation of *Asterism*. As undergraduate students with an interest in creative writing, we appreciate every submission we receive. It has been a joy for us to read and discuss works from fellow creative minds. Because we are undergraduates ourselves and accept submissions from undergraduates, we comfortably interact with both the writers and their writing. Laura Andersen’s “Starlight,” for example, gives a fresh perspective on the end-of-the-world scenario, where “Cresting waves reach up and pull the sun underwater”; Hannah Schotborgh’s “starry eyes” moves along the page with “the rough, tumbling ride / of shifting gears”; and Ivan Solis’s “Somewhere Warmer” follows the interactions of various characters in the past, present, and future tenses—“They met at a party. They meet at a party. They will meet at a party.”

Perhaps the best part of *Asterism* is that we accept English-written pieces from across the country and around the world. The 43 pieces that appear here are from 34 writers across the United States, India, Italy, and Australia, representing universities such as Lady Shri Ram College for Women, Elon University, University of Kansas, and John Cabot University. One thing we’ve learned from our contributors is that language can be utilized in countless, ingenious ways—something that we hope you’ll get a taste of with pieces such as “Approximations” by Tian-Ai Aldridge, where translation changes “I think about what it / means / to be happy in the wrong



/ language” to “thinking about the wrong / words for happiness.”

We feel incredibly lucky to publish the wonderful poems and short stories we have received. Our hope is for all of you undergraduate creative writers to submit to us in the future. Submissions for our next issue—an all-poetry issue that will include poetry of all types, including prose poems and spoken word poetry—will open in September. In the meantime, please enjoy all of the words, lines, and pages that our contributors have chosen to share with us and with you.

Jenna Bush

Katie Marshall

Ashley Meihls

Andrea Morales

Mattea Rolsten

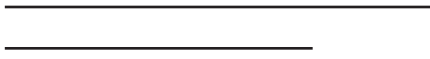
Jacob Short

Victoria Sullivan



Emma DePanise

Salisbury University



-273.15 °C

Scrape your fingernails across my glaciers, chip
away shards and wake warm watered valleys. I need
to hibernate because I'm free climbing the Kelvin scale
with no chalk, no handhold, but my eyes reach over
a peak and it's green and it's sun feathering
your face and it smells like tomorrow, like earth
worms crawling out of dirt when it rains.



HOLY MAN

He trusts me to hold him over this lake of molten oval, and I want him to be a holy man. I've only known holding someone afloat like performing a baptism.

(The knight sits next to the bishop on the chess board, he has only known friendship like those who absolve him of sin.)

He jokes *if I die, I die*.

(I haven't told him yet, but drowning during a baptism is a sign of evil.)

He asks me if he should go to confession for forgiveness. He wants to taste the Eucharist but I warn him about searching for holiness in a shrink.

(Truth is I don't know how to tell him I want him to take meds. I don't want him to think he isn't a holy man.)



STARRY EYES

the rough, tumbling ride
of shifting gears,
fears—
 symphony of rain
on the windshield
 humming back and forth

 we tumble
 through the puddles
flooding the streets,

sitting dazed—
 playing cool

 stave off
the hurricane— the cascade of
emotions bottled up
 hidden
 to keep us both safe



eyes meet
for a moment—

the familiar glance we give
in the silence of
unspoken words

i wish i could say—

i change direction,
head the conversation to
the language we both speak
the melody we both sing

please,
just another moment
of your company—

and then, from your house to mine,

i see

the distance hasn't changed.

i still remain

light years away.



Photo by Riley Klaus



BONES

Humans are born with 270 bones. By the time we reach adulthood, only 206 remain.

I²⁷⁰ ate my bones,
devoured them
one at a time
when I was²⁶⁸ hungry.

When all²⁵⁷ that filled
my stomach was emptiness²⁵³

When gnats and ants
had feasts, but²⁴¹ not me

When trash cans looked²³⁸
more²³⁶ like silver platters

I ate my bones.



When I²³² was hungry
for love insatiable

When father dissolved²²⁶
into²²³ black smoke

When mother was replaced
with two sunken²¹⁹ hollows

When lover became stranger²¹¹,
then enemy, threatening to consume

I ate naught but my bones. ²⁰⁶



BLINKER

It crushed his whole face. An accordionic twitch that caused every muscle, from his chin to his scalp, to fold into itself like the formation of mountains over millions of years. It starts in his eyes. First they close, then his whole face attempts to cover them up. He's always been convinced that if his face weren't bound by sinews or bone, the skin would simply peel off and fold over his eyes like a sleeping mask, restricting him from ever seeing again. Sometimes he even tries to replicate the spasm voluntarily to see if such an effect could be achieved by pure will. He never gets any results of course. After blinking in his seismic way several times he took a short sip of his coffee and checked his phone which had buzzed twice since he had sat down. The rule he made for himself was to never check his phone too eagerly, never to betray his surprise whenever it went off. He slowly wriggled the phone out of his pocket while maintaining his gaze on the street outside of the coffee shop. He looked at his phone with disappointment as the screen showed he had received an e-mail. The second buzzing must have been an illusion, he reasoned. It happened from time to time, in fact, it happens to most people. The e-mail was sent from an online store informing him that a DVD he had been viewing had been re-listed. He put the phone back in his pocket as slowly as he took it out. He found that oftentimes, immediately after checking his phone to find an unimportant notification, he would get a real message. A message from someone he wanted to hear from, saying



something he wanted to hear. This time, however, that seemed not to be the case and eventually the phone met the opening of his pocket and he was forced to wriggle the phone back into its snug sheath to not face the humiliation of admitting to the world how desperately he wanted to be contacted. He focused on the coffee inside the cup. It was no longer hot enough to produce steam but it still had islands of froth along the borders. He stared deep into the black liquid, waiting for some motion. Some release of energy. The froth slowly dissipated and his gaze lowered to the lip of the cup. Several bite marks indented into the cup revealed his habit of chewing at the soft cardboard without actually drinking any of the coffee. He thumbed the marks slowly until he reached the middle. He stopped his thumb over the indent and shifted from the pad of the digit to the nail, not quite fitting into the space. "Excuse me!" The first time wasn't enough to shake him from his fixation but once she repeated it his eyes darted up to meet hers. "Is someone sitting here?" She asked cautiously, her tone revealed that she believed him to be some sort of stranger. He could hear it in her voice and he immediately wished he had heard her the first time. Heat rushed to his forehead as he sputtered out a negatory answer. "Is it alright if I just take this seat then?" "Sure." His visible disappointment at her request was a perfectly shameful bookend to the conversation. She dragged the chair over to a table of women who looked and talked and acted and lived and thought of him just like her. He wondered if she had even, just maybe, considered sitting with him but quickly realized what a ridiculous notion that would be. He admitted to himself that even if she weren't with her friends she probably wouldn't have wanted to sit with him. He noted that, to be fair, nobody wanted to sit with anybody here. He tucked his chin behind his right shoulder and began the process of scanning the room, taking special and detailed note of all the people who were sitting alone. He counted about seven people but that wasn't enough to comfort him. No matter how many lonely people there were, there would always be that woman and her friends, their mere existence an affront to the culture of solitude established by the majority of the patrons in the shop. They were probably making jokes about him, they were probably making jokes about him and all the other lonely people in the coffee shop, all seven of them. He thought about how uninterested he was in that type of behavior and decided he was going to stop scanning the room before their table could enter his peripheral vi-

sion. He didn't want to grant them the satisfaction of acknowledgment. He swiveled his head back to his coffee and resumed his thumbing when he heard a giggle coming from the table of women. He told himself to resist but he could only take so much. He knew they were laughing because what he was doing was so strange and because he was so strange and he just needed to let them know that he knew. He wanted them to feel bad for laughing at him. He turned to look at them but they weren't looking back. He was astonished at how quickly their cruelty could shift from subject to subject. He wondered for a moment if he was, perhaps, overreacting when suddenly the woman who had taken the chair looked back. His lips curled instinctually into a half smile as he forgot about all the injustices committed against him. She looked at him for a reason. It was obvious to him now that she had no desire to be with her friends. They bored her just as much as they bored him and she felt connected to him because of it. His mind raced at the notion of the two of them escaping the ties they had. She could be rid of her stupid friends and he could be rid of... all of the nothing he had. He shook himself out of his trance but as he refocused on her he realized that she had, once more, engaged in conversation with her friends. He was wrong. Everything he thought about her was wrong. She wasn't there for him. In fact, no one was there for him. He swallowed loudly and began to reach for his cup. This time he brought it to his face with both hands and took a long sip. He placed the cup down gently and slowly guided his thumb back to its usual spot. Before he did he glanced at the other table, nervous that they might break into another laughing fit. When he looked, though, something was not quite the same as what he had seen just moments before. The women were still huddled over their own drinks, talking, except for the woman who had taken the chair. She was sitting slightly outside their circle now, fully facing him. He felt her eyes on him and tried to look away but found that their gazes had locked into themselves. He could no longer separate his field of vision from hers, in fact, he could no longer distinguish most things in his periphery. All he could see was the woman and all she could see was him. He felt his heart racing as he noticed that her face had taken on a stoney emotionless quality. Suddenly, her mouth creaked open as wide as it seemed it could go. Her chin doubled upon itself as it connected with her throat and her eyes rolled up as if to examine the brows that covered them. He didn't know if she was making any noise as he couldn't



hear anything besides a high pitched whine. He tried to focus on anything besides her but he found that he had become totally paralyzed. He watched as her tongue slowly extended out of her mouth. He may have found it almost funny if it weren't so deliberately targeted towards him. He had a hard time trying to make sense of this gesture but got the unshakable feeling that what he was witnessing was something vulgar and grotesque. They stayed like this, him staring at her, her mouth agape and tongue extended for what felt like quite a considerable time. Enough time for him to complete the process of wondering what was happening, what she was doing, and then finally coming to a conclusion on what her intentions were. He thought he knew what she was going to do but he prayed that she wouldn't do it. Though she didn't move for quite some time, the longer they remained frozen in their own respective positions, the more he became convinced that he knew what was going to happen next. Tears formed in his eyes as his worst fears were confirmed. With her tongue still protruding past her lips, she slammed her jaws shut with immeasurable force, immediately severing her own tongue. The bisected portion (at least half an inch worth of muscle) flopped to the floor and the gaps between her white teeth quickly filled with dark red blood. His paralysis was broken when she turned back to the table and joined her friends' conversation as if she had never left. He blinked. He couldn't believe what he had seen and yet, there was her tongue, lying on the floor. He blinked. He clutched the knees of his jeans with both hands, for comfort and to dry the sweat off of his palms. He kept looking at the floor to make sure that the tongue was, indeed, really there. He blinked. His hands found themselves clutching his cup for dear life. He put his thumb back over the bite mark to make sure it was really there, to make sure he was really there. He heard a giggle and turned to its source. He looked at the woman in wide eyed terror as she looked back at him and giggled uncontrollably. He blinked.



The University of Kansas
Trevor Bashaw

STILL WATER

stagnates		reflections
on hypoxia:	the oxygen	ripped
	from the waters	lungs
	death	blooms
but this	water is (not)	dead
this water is	rife	
	with	lascivious varicose
	butter cups	
	dandelions	
tingle grass		green with Sprite
	grass	sprouts
	sky	
	light	reflecting
in	shimmer	static



small flow

from here to there

glimmer ripples in a grass patty

mud thick mud

pause and

hear the toads rickets the crickets the croaks and the frogs stop speaking

when they hear

the poem



HEARSAY

I | Prague

I've never been to Prague,
but you told me a story once,
over sake and lamb,
lit by candles, which
reminded you of
nights standing in front
of a windowsill, naked,
waiting
for a full moon and clear sky.

The winter sky cleared in spring
so you clambered to
your red tile roof with an
apricot and bottle of wine
and sucked at the flesh,
and seed, and drank
under a starless night.

I asked if your neighbors saw.



You didn't care,
basking in the sun's reflection.

II | Venice

I don't know what your –
No.

I don't understand your
obsession with being
absent of clothes in
“exotic” places.

When I ask
you do not answer
with any certainty other
than that of another story.
You trail into another
dream of being
on the water in Venice.

Lying in the bay,
between the worlds of
Glass and of stone,
and pretend your
mind is at peace
for once.

Like the stars above,
you, or the tide,
never quite
leaves this
city, and its people,
alone.



III | Bangkok,

You always hated that word
you told me so whilst
aimlessly walking the
sea wall of New Hampshire –
wandering through the shops
and through your thoughts
wondering if today might be *the day*.

We never spoke of it like that
though, for years I
thought it had.
Obituary-less, unimportant
always how you wanted
or maybe, just how you
saw the world

Between the rounds of men
and drinks, and
drugs, that were
forced in to you.
Bangkok, always too
real.

VI | ;

I always found it weird
that there were never black
letters written for your
obituary when I trawled
the pages of pixels and
pulled pages soaked and
yellowed from traveling down
the east sea board, salt-
sprayed and wilting, like



you, I thought.

I retraced your final
walk a few months
ago, alone, just like you
but more alone because
you weren't here. The
shops were quaint and
empty but for the
sound of waves and
sea water as it mists
the cars along the
wall of stone and old.

But five days ago I
found that you still
exist. The bridge of
my dreams, of my
nightmares, one illuminated
by streetlamps and
stars and sees the
glow of city lights
from Seabrook and Salisbury —

I know we won't speak again.

But I'm happy.
Hello again, live free
and heal the scars
of knives and skin
and drugs forced
on to you,
goodbye.



V | Silence

...

You told me once
the path to healing
is long, hard, and
lonely. For we
don't share your
pain.

We sat quietly
together for what
would be the final
time at two
a.m. and looked
for animals in the
sky, pointing
miming, but never
speaking. I
think we healed
a little that
day, but it's
been so long ago —
before *the day*.
But, I mime it
back in my dreams,
always of you.



PARA MI ALMA

I call her Saturdays through Thursdays.
Fridays I keep for the miscellaneous things.

You are doing great, like always, do not stress, vas a estar bien.

She knows I want to go home,
because nothing cures the broken alma,
como comida de la casa
& these days I feel like a vaga,
comiendo en la calle
every night.

The way she used to tell me
Y que? No tienes madre o casa?
comes to mind
& I want to curl up in bed next to her sleeping,
my fingers in her hair like when I was five.

I make playlist called *para mi alma*
filled with canciones she taught me to love,
songs about love
songs that remind me of her love.

AMARYLLIS

From earth, I am
Fast grown, fresh bloom
All the green things
'neath your window.
We bloom in twos
Sturdy, bright and
Pining for you.
Unearth this moon,
My center, my
Soul, my being.
Alteo, oh
love take with this
Golden arrow
My heart and blood
Are yours, are yours
Oh call me this:
Amaryllis.



11:30 BLUES

Hayden just learned last week that when the big hand was on the 6 and the little hand was somewhere between the 11 and 12 this was called 11:30. It's his favorite time of day. He likes how saying 11:30 makes his tongue feel. He also likes to say "eleven turdy" when Mrs. Hanley isn't paying attention. It makes the whole class laugh. Last week, Alex said it too, at "two turdy", but Mrs. Hanley was right behind him! She made him bring a note home to his mommy! Alex is Hayden's best friend and he's the second tallest in the class after Hayden. He wears the same grey blue shirt that used to be dark blue with the hole right below the belly button. It was big enough for his two fingers to fit in. And blue is Hayden's favorite color. That's why his eyes are blue. Alex's favorite color is blue too even though his eyes are brown. But his skin is brown just like his mommy's so Hayden figures that was why his eyes aren't blue. The recess bell rings at 11:30. It scares Mrs. Hanley every time. Mrs. Hanley says recess doesn't start until everybody pushes in their chair.

Hayden loves recess. He's the fastest in his class. Alex tells people he's faster than Hayden. He beat him in a race once a few weeks ago, but Hayden has beaten Alex in a dozen races. Alex can never catch Hayden whenever the class plays tag. Which makes Hayden the fastest. Today the boys play tag like always. Alex is it, and he's right behind Hayden, and Hayden knows the only way to escape is to jump from the play-

ground platform they are sprinting down-if he takes the ladder he'll get tagged for sure. Even though jumping from the platform is against the rules.

There is no time to think. He gets to the ladder, and turns to see Alex's smirk melt into shock as Hayden throws himself from the very top. Hayden shrieks with triumph and fear. Wind slaps his face and rushes up his shirt and tickles his hair and Alex can't even catch him and he is still the fastest in the class and the ground is rushing towards him, or is he rushing towards the ground... and Hayden thinks about all of these things at once as he cuts through the air.

Until he slams into the ground on his chest. All of the air flies from his stomach as Hayden writhes gasping for breath. Tears and snot dribble down his face. He doesn't think he'll ever be able to breathe again. Panic wells in his chest. Black spots dance before his eyes, this is it, Hayden thinks as an arm slides under his back and pulls him into a grey blue hug. With a hole below the belly button. And Alex and Hayden just sit there like that for a few minutes until Hayden catches his breath. As Hayden wipes the snot and tears from his nose Alex tells him how stupid he was for jumping, and makes sure to point out that Hayden is it now anyways. Which makes Hayden laugh, and then wince as white hot fire rakes his chest where he had fallen. Noticing his pain, Alex tells Hayden that his mommy always kisses his owies, and that always makes him feel better. Hayden doesn't quite know what to do then, because Alex leans in and kisses Hayden on his chest where he had fallen. And then again right on the lips. Just a smooch. Not even long enough for the second hand to move on the clock in Mrs. Hanley's classroom. His breath smelt like the graham crackers they had for snack that morning. And Hayden asks Alex why he had done that, because boys only ever kissed girls. And Alex just laughs and asks if Hayden feels any better, and Hayden starts laughing too and his chest doesn't hurt quite as bad any more so he says he does. And they help each other to their feet, ready to play another game of tag. But Mrs. Hanley is standing right above them. She isn't doing anything really. Just staring. She has the meanest look on her face. Hayden had never seen Alex so scared. She doesn't say anything though. She just walks up to the two of them and grabs both of their hands and ushers them to the wall where they



have to stand for the rest of recess. After recess they have to sit in the time out corner for the rest of the day. And Hayden knows he shouldn't have jumped off of the playground, he knows how angry his mommy is going to be. Mrs. Hanley wrote a note to both Hayden and Alex's mothers, and tells the boys to give it to them when they get home. Hayden can't read the note because it's in cursive.

Hayden's heart pounds as he walks up the steps to his front door. He can feel butterflies in his tummy. What if he doesn't give mommy the note? Would she even know? But as Hayden pushes the blue door open, his mother is already waiting inside. She's always waiting for Hayden when he gets home. She has to stay at home because Hayden's daddy doesn't want her to have a job. And sometimes Hayden's mommy cries about that, but only when Hayden's daddy is at work. Hayden isn't sure what his daddy does at work. He just knows that he needs to wear a tie to go there. "I got a call from Mrs. Hanley today Hayden", she says, arms crossed. Hayden sees that her face is wet, but he can't understand why. "You have a note for me to read, is that right?" Hayden can't even look her in the eye. He pulls it from his backpack and stares down at his blue shoelaces and she skims the note. She is quiet for a long time, before she asks him to go sit in his room. After awhile he hears his father come home. Hayden's Dad isn't like the rest of the dads at school. He never plays with Hayden. Sometimes Hayden even feels scared of his dad, and wonders why that is. It makes him sad. He hears them talking in hushed voices in the kitchen. He strains to hear what they are saying, ear pressed tight to his bedroom door. Soon they start to yell.

"I DIDN'T RAISE A FUCKING FAGGOT ELLEN", Hayden's dad screams. He screams a lot. Hayden winces at the sound of a glass shattering against the wall. And again at the sound of the front door slamming shut. Dad doesn't come home again that night.

The next day at school Alex has a blue ring around his eye. Mrs. Hanley pretends not to notice. Blue like their favorite color. Finally he has a blue eye too. But he won't even look at Hayden with it. Won't even say hi. And he plays tag with Allen and Rick at recess instead. And Hayden cries under the slide and stares at the stupid platform above the ladder that he jumped off. He was so stupid for jumping. None of this would be happening if he had just climbed down the ladder.

Hayden's Dad didn't come home Wednesday night. Or Thursday

night. Friday he comes home and tells Hayden's mom that him and Hayden are going hunting for the weekend. But Hayden's mom begs him not to go. She starts to cry, and is holding onto Hayden so tight. It's even hard for him to breathe. But when Hayden's dad starts to scream she always just gets very quiet. That's what happened this time too. Hayden's dad loved going hunting and he always brought Hayden along to watch. He wanted Hayden to be a good hunter someday. But Hayden doesn't really want to hurt any animals. And he doesn't walk quietly enough. This makes Dad grumble and mutter to himself the whole time. It's 11:30 on Saturday morning. The sky is bright blue. Hayden's favorite. As they start out across the field towards their usual blind, Hayden notices he no longer hears his father's footsteps behind him. And out of the corner of his eye he sees his father standing 10 yards back looking directly down the barrel of his 12 gauge at Hayden. Hayden's heart starts pounding. He pretends like he doesn't see his father and he keeps walking. But tears start trickling down his face and he can't really walk anymore, he's so scared. He sinks to his knees and notices all of the flowers on the ground around him. Blue grey petals. He just wishes he knew what the word faggot meant.

Hayden doesn't know long he sat like that for. Crying to himself. The little hand on Mrs. Hanley's clock must have moved a lot though, because the sky is much darker now. A deep blue. Dark. Almost black. And purple too. Hayden has tried to turn around and look at his dad three times. But everytime he just started to cry and shake. He is so scared. But Hayden really needs to pee, and he doesn't want to go in his pants, so he musters his courage. As fast as he can. He peers over his shoulder and sees...nothing. He gets up as slow as possible. "Daddy?" Nobody answers. And as the sun begins to sink behind the trees and the clouds Hayden starts to cry again. He doesn't know how to get home.



SPELL IT OUT

With my fingers I'll raise
goosebumps, tracing letters across
his back to guess, as you did

to my sunburnt back, the night
we shared a queen on vacation. I'll trace
an *L* followed by an *O*

and he'll guess the rest. I'll stand
12 years old shaking your weathered
hand, when we vowed to never

leave out the *I*.

BLUE.

let's tie the sun to a string
and carry it like a balloon
create sunny patches
of warmth
brittle blue winter,
brittle blue smog,
brittle blue city,
brittle blue heart,
squeezing out butterflies.
coffee, french toast,
and more coffee
soft mornings
softer memories of
paled moments
that can blur 6 nights
into one night
of salted caramel cheesecake
that melts in your mouth
as your tongue slowly
rolls the chocolate chip,
and



i melt,
i melt,
i melt.
i am sick,
of this city,
and it's exaltation
of flimsy indulgence,
i am homesick,
i miss my kitchen
smells,
maach-poshto-malpoa-daab.
my house opens to a little stream,
to a printing press,
priyo café-paramount-presidency
sepia
red
unfortunate, blue and white.
door knobs open to
letter boxes,
that write back to me,
you might bleed me blue,
but you make me bleed colours
teal
turquoise
aqua
cerulean
cyan
sapphire
cobalt
indigo,
and electric.
electric, but
blue.



Susquehanna University
Deon Robinson

A MORTAL BOY NAMED BAKUNAWA

I.
I froze the sun
and ate it like a mint,
spilling

II.
blizzards from my breath
I've got a Moon sitting on

III.
the tip of my tongue,
or maybe it's a pill.

[No one said I was a reliable narrator.]



HONEYMOON IN YELLOWSTONE

I wonder where you and I'll be when Yellowstone blows,
when magma bursts through earth's shale crust and up,
out, over the grand caldera's steaming mouth.
Will I know rainclouds from billowing ash? Or
charred oak leaves floating along scorched wind from
cowbirds in the distance?

Maybe I'll be at school, Minnesota, and watch from a distance.
Wonder where you are as pendulous embers flash, blow
onto the cool glass of my windshield, fade from
garnet to black. I imagine Minnesotans might build up
a tolerance for volcanic winter, make soot-angels or
catch cinders like snowflakes in their mouths.

I'd rather you and I were old, dead before the eruption. Our mouths
dry and smiling, frigid lips full of dust. So short a distance
from the blast that our 20 gauge steel caskets would melt or
slide through deep, boiling soil. Tossed by tectonic blows,
we could bump, tumble, land together with our toes pointed up.
I hope it doesn't go this Christmas, as I look down from



the bubbled plexiglass of a United flight from
Fargo to Missoula. I bet the flight attendants would mouth
their concern at the waning oxygen supply and pop 7 Up
tabs and crinkle packs of pretzels to mask it. Distant,
fiddling their little winged badges, they'd make us blow
into complementary barf bags when the air dried up or

the cabin filled with smoke so we couldn't see our feet or
the turbulence sign— only a faint orange glow from
above. God. I hope that its quick when it blows,
that we won't have time to stand helpless with our mouths
open at hopeless newscasts. That there's no distance
between us. That your lips are cast in igneous or we're burned up

together. A balmy honeymoon in Yellowstone. Tangled up
in our nylon sleeping bags, bare bellies warmed by steam or
chambers of lava that bloat beneath us. The distant
rumble of earthquakes, shifting spruce roots not so different from
the sound of you snoring, my tangled hair in your mouth.
We'd wake for a moment, to dry, gasping gusts blowing

the tent flaps up. Then waves of heat. Again and again. Spit from
the caldera— our bodies, bison, Douglas fir— until it's mouth
is hollow. And as dust we could settle, wait for the wind to blow.



Mechanical surgeons
harvest hearts
and rip wires
after they scale
the tall white fence
trimmed with barbed
wire late at night
encompassing
the automobile morgue.

Swearing, a delinquent
ducks behind the shells
of crushed metal bodies
grinning bright in
moonlight and ushers
the girl to a broken
Blazer. They
kiss and laugh and
pile their clothes where
the accident occurred. Spilled
milk from the grocery store
still sour and dry
on the backseat.

USED OIL WANTED



THE CITY THAT BURNED

It was a Wednesday morning and being the 31st and all, I had an off from the school. There was a little chill in the air, October was officially over, and winter was upon us. All the chores were being done as usual- mother was cooking breakfast, father had gone for the morning prayer while my brothers were playing cricket. Later that day my father came along with our neighbor frantically asking us to turn on the TV. That time, we used to have a black and white Tecla TV, it was the first ‘technologically advanced machine’ that my father had bought for our family after saving his salary for almost two months.

As soon as we turned our TV on, it was blurring out noises- screams of crying while police statements were given out and politicians were being interviewed. We got to know how our then Prime Minister Indira Gandhi was assassinated just a few hours before, at the hand of her Sikh bodyguard. The news channel gruesomely portrayed the way in which her body was punctured by the bullets shot at her about thirty times. People were suspecting this event as a revenge for the attack on the golden temple that was undertaken a few months ago, under her leadership.

I would have given my own stance on the issue if I had known anything about it. Also, not many people would have taken a 13-year-old girl’s view seriously so I kept quiet. Perhaps it was the lapse of judgment on their part or ignorance on mine that we weren’t able to contemplate the serious-



ness of the matter.

More or less our family was quite indifferent to this event. Shocked- yes but they weren't gloomy, having never been the supporters of the Congress party. But they certainly had supported their good intent behind the operation to remove the insurgents from Punjab . For the entire day, we were glued to our TVs. Neighbors were friskily coming in and going out, again and again, pondering over the issue discussing the political future of the country as if the dominance of congress was somehow over with Mrs. Gandhi's demise.

Fortunately, by night the commotion was settled and for several hours there was calmness on the streets. But the very next day, there it was again, the chitter-chatter surrounding the entire colony, people discussing the recent attacks that had occurred in the neighboring town targeting the Sikh families. There was a somber environment. We had heard of a mob looting Sikh businessmen and picketing their shops but no one could have even imagined that this was being carried out on such a large scale. The public unrest was considered so insignificant by the police that it wasn't even being reported on TV. Many thought it was just a reactive, and more so, an appropriate outburst to the death of a beloved prime minister.

The whole turmoil appeared to be bigger than just random occurrences, like an organized riot systematically attacking the Sikh community. Even residential areas were not safe anymore. One of our neighbors talked about how her distant relatives were robbed in the name of vengeance. Consequently, we had a series of meetings that night in order to devise a strategy to keep out these radicals from our colony which as we heard, were armed with gasoline and iron rod. On looking above from the terrace, we could already see smoke coming from far-off places. It was a chilling view almost like a reckoning.

Appalling as it was to find no concrete news about the Sikh casualties on any media, the TV also seemed a little biased when it kept on broadcasting the same news again and again-Gandhi's dead body laid in a saffron-colored saree, her grieving son sitting next to her, members of their party shouting for revenge saying, "blood will be paid for blood."

The Congress sympathizers were manipulating the masses encouraging them to avenge their 'mother'. They were spreading stories about how violence was being committed on both sides, claiming that a train

had recently arrived from Punjab carrying dozens of dead bodies of Hindus. It was said that the partition atrocities were happening all over again but there was no tangible way of knowing what was true and what was just a rumor.

The politically driven agenda was slowly turning into a communal genocide. Still no curfew was imposed, no army was disbanded, no attention to this matter was paid or addressed by the leaders until the violence had become aggrandized. Many Sikhs were hiding in their home. Some have fled from the city, at least those who were rich enough to do so. Young Sikh boys were disguised as girls by tying their long hair into a pony to eliminate any religious identity which could have posed a threat to their lives.

In the following days, my school was closed down and later it came to my attention that it was turned into a refugee center for a temporary period given the condition of the city. My brothers had also taken an off from college as public transit were being recklessly pelted up by stones rendering the passage unsafe. The government had declared an official holiday for all the public workers including my father. So, for the most part of those events, we were confined to our home.

Pitampura was the place in which I have lived all my life. Though it was not a prominent district of Delhi, it was very dear to me. It was a relatively modern settlement largely housed by the middle-class people. On the downside, it was surrounded by a basti area which was comprised mostly of uneducated and the poor strata of society who were known to be easily swayed by the party leaders. They were a great threat to our colony given their steady record of engaging in crimes. This was a great opportunity for them to unleash their frustration on people that they truly hated-people that they worked for as servants, drivers, and cooks.

Up until then, there wasn't anything that happened which affected us directly. Soon enough a friend of my father had called expressing his concern as his son was recently beaten up by a mob and was in a very poor state. His head was bleeding profusely and his body was wounded. My eldest brother at that time was practicing medicine. On their request, he was sent to their house in Punjabi Bagh to look after their medical needs.



On returning, he gave the most horrifying of account of what was really going on in the larger part of the cities. He expressed in detail about the concern of the Sikh population; when asked by my father about whether he had written a police complaint or not, My brother told us that it was impossible to file a complaint because the authorities were not complying and were ignoring the issues at hand. Shockingly enough they had advised him to stay away from these matters as he was a 'Hindu' and it was not his cause to fight for. He narrated in great detail the atrocities that were being carried out- how young Sikh men were forced to wear a tire around their neck and burned on streets alive.

The news of a nearby mob came as swiftly as possible. We had to make preparation to guard our colony and prevent them from entering but in any case, we had given our Sikh neighbors a place to hide. The entire family of our neighbor Mr. Khorana, his wife and their two small children were kept hidden in our large cupboard. Two more families were also concealed in similar ways in different houses. But ours was the first in the lane that could have been easily ransacked.

Soon after an angry mob came in and made a havoc all over the place. They had a voters list in their hand so they already knew the target of attack. They checked the 'marked' houses but when no one was recovered from there, they looted it and burned it eventually. On asking about their whereabouts the housing union told them that they had fled to their village in Punjab without any prior notice. The mob had a hard time believing them. They shouted once again asking that "if anyone were hiding those Sikh families they would burn their houses as well."

Our family was scared to death, they could see the nervousness on our faces. They advanced to our houses and started making threats. But the senior members of the union attempted to convince them that ours was a respectable family which would never indulge in any conspiracy of this sort. The union, again and again, made claims that my father was a very good and a trustworthy man who was an active member of the temple.

After one hour of bickering and negotiation, the matter was settled and they went back on their way. We had a major sigh of relief. We collectively thanked the Gods- all of them. Now that Mr. Khorana's house and other houses were burned they had no place to live so we asked them to live with us for a few days until this issue blew over. They happily ac-



cepted this offer. But in this process, it was the whole neighbor's contributions that helped them to rehabilitate. They kept on providing supplies to the victimized families long after the crises was over. We all worked together to restore the peace in and around our residential town.

My brothers eventually joined the protests along with their other student friends demanding an appropriate amount of relief money to be paid to the victims and punishment to the perpetrators. From what I can gather, nothing stringent was done by the government. It had refused to institute any inquiry into the massacre on the plea that it would be counterproductive. It was the inaction on their part which has allowed such massacre to happen in the first place.

Even after so many years I can still remember the fear on our faces, anguish of the innocents that were burned, the chilling experience of indiscriminate violence and the utter horror of the infamous 'Sikh Holocaust'



AN AUBADE WITH SEPARATION

I would bend every hour of night,
Strain each minute's seconds
Just to slow the creeping sunbreak,

& those pearl-like stars
From dropping back
Into an immeasurable wall of blue

That unfolds into the morning,
Because the daybreak
Only comes to tear you away again –

When you're away,
I stumble to a cower,
Frigid & clay-like

In the absence of your hands,
& the subtle tone
Your breathing makes next to me,



Where the comforting feeling
Of your warmth is lost,
Replaced with the dismay

Of rolling over to find cold, barren ashes
& not your gentle cheeks,
Like pale roses plucked soon after winter's break –

I know that once
You are awake,
We'll argue again:

“Can we not do this again?”
“Don't do this again.”
“This again?”

Because unlike me, you've always
Loved the sun's rise,
Rimmed in golden-amber;

“It's like the rising of a phoenix, isn't it?”
You always say,
Trying to avoid the reality of our separation,

When you leave reborn & renewed,
While I stay here,
In the ashes you leave behind.

“It's like the rising of a phoenix, isn't it?”
You always say,
Before unfurling newly grown wings.



APPROXIMATIONS

Me

I would like to think
like mirrors, words are shaped
like molasses.
Do not tell me they are not,
even if you spoon-fed.
I never liked molasses anyway.
Do not assume that I'm looking.

~~

I fish hot felt from the dryer
and think about being angry
in the wrong language.
Someone upstairs
asks for their sweater.
I pretend not to hear.

I think about what makes things small.

~~

I'm questioning absorbents,
starting to worry



that dad was right when he talked
about brains.

~~

Mom and I,
We talk with the windows
down now,
and I think about what it means
to be happy in the wrong language.

I think about faces,
untasked by “sponges”
and “belonging.”

Mom translating Me

我想
像镜子，
文字像糖蜜一样被造型。
即使你用吃来喂我，
也不要告诉我他们不想
不要当我在找你，
反正我也不喜欢糖蜜。

~~

我在干衣机拿出热的占，
想诸生气的错语。
楼上有人问起他们的毛衣，
我也装作没听见。

我想著有什么可令事情变小。

~~

我正在在吸收中问，
开始为爸爸谈到大脑时担心他是对的。

~~



妈妈和我在开窗下交谈主，
正想主快乐意义的错语。
我想主面孔，
不为“海棉”和“属于负责”。

Me translating Mom translating Me

I think,
like a mirror, words have the same shape
as molasses.

Even though you feed me with a spoon
There's no need to tell me otherwise,
no need to tell me to look for you
besides I do not like molasses

~~

I took the hot cloth out of the dryer,
and thought about the wrong words.
Upstairs, someone asked for their sweater,
and I pretended to listen.

I thought about what could make things smaller.

~~

I am asking in absorption
I starting talking to dad about the brain.

~~

Mom and I were talking in the open window,
thinking about the wrong words for happiness.

I think about the face, not for “sponges”
or the responsibility of belonging.

CHARLES ALBRIGHT

The desk inspects me
through blank irises framed
by whorls of mahogany grain.
The book, too—
each “o” a staring orb,
each “e” a sly slitted iris.

When we dumped her in the river,
we couldn’t close her eyes—
still open when the police pulled
her from the murky water on TV—
brown, rich, almost
black, like cacao, like coffee, like
the cloudy figure in the corner who’s

actually just my chocolate coat.

I remember sliding my fingers
over clammy lids, but
they just snapped back open, like
she didn’t trust us not to kill her
all over again.



Chew on my liver,
and swallow a city.

My kidney squeezes your name,
like liquor.
My blood simmers to cleanse you,
to heal you.
Holy water.

You are empty,
Let me fill you.

My body is a volcano,
erupting.

Take a breath of me,
swallow.

BODILY TEMPLE

INSTANCES

5

It's 3:42 on a Saturday and
he loses control of his car
going left.

It veers out of the far-right lane at seventy-eight miles-per-hour
in slow motion.

He barrels over
a freeway divider
and into
oncoming traffic.

4

Its 11:54 on a Friday night
and he asks the bartender for a whiskey, neat.

His third of the night.

It will not be
his
last



3

It's 7:12 on a Friday evening and
his lights are off.
He walks around the sparse apartment
flipping light switches.
The lights stay off.

He goes for a drive.

2

It's 2:17 on a Wednesday morning and he checks his email.
He reads as far as
"We regret to inform you—
before he deletes it.
It's the fourth one he's gotten this week.
He knows how it ends.

1

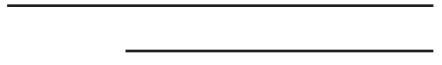
It was 3:42 on a Thursday afternoon
and he was in a meeting.
He had been up for a promotion the month before,
but Gary had gotten it.

Gary led the meeting
using figures *he* researched,

and as the suits from corporate
praised Gary's
hard
work

he

s
n
a
p
p
e
d





STAINED

My mom has been proposed to seven times. For the first two, I wasn't born yet. Once, she said yes, just for fun, just to see what the word tasted like in her mouth, but cut it off the next day.

None of the seven were my father.

"You have to string them along, wait until they're their most vulnerable. Then you cut them off," she always said.

When I was little, I admired her. In the second grade, I told a boy I liked him. I let him hold my hand at recess and kiss me on the cheek underneath the jungle gym. When he asked me to be his girlfriend, I stepped on his foot and ran away. He ended up crying, telling the teacher that I'd hurt him. I got called in to the principal's office, scolded for stomping on his toes. They called home, told my mom what happened. When she picked me up from school, she turned to me in the backseat and gave me a high five.

I'd gotten used to the string of men, the constant *nos*, by the time I was seventeen. I sat in my friend Elyse's backyard one afternoon at the end of the summer before our senior year. It was almost 95 degrees, that kind of Texas heat with no humidity when you can feel your skin sizzling no matter how much sunscreen you put on. Her mom was waitressing all night and we were stuck at her place, babysitting her four year old

half-sister, Bryn, and passing a fifth of Grey Goose that we'd stolen from the liquor cabinet between the two of us.

"Lyse! Lyse! Look!" Bryn yelled out from where she ran through a sprinkler on the back lawn. I looked up, saw her ripping clumps of the dead, brown grass into her hands and throwing them in the air. Loose blades clung to her naked body as she ran around.

"Should she be wearing clothes?" I asked.

Elyse shrugged, took a swig from the bottle and choked it down with lemonade.

"Not my problem," she said.

"She's cute."

This was the first time I'd met Bryn, who usually lived with her dad in Vermont but was here, with her and Elyse's mom, for the last few weeks of summer.

"She's annoying."

Elyse resented Bryn because her dad wanted her but Elyse's dad didn't want Elyse. She resented everyone for that, really. Sometimes I thought the only reason we were friends was because neither of us had a father.

"Want another?" she asked, handing me the bottle. I nodded and took it, readjusting myself on the blacktop where it had started burning the underside of my thighs.

"Your mom still with that guy? Marty? Think they'll have a kid together?"

I shook my head.

"They broke up a few weeks ago. There's already a new guy."

"Shit, Marty pop the question?"

"Hm," I nodded.

Marty had been the seventh to ask. The seventh to get rejected. His hair was wild and curly and I hardly ever saw him without some sort of musical instrument in his hands. He and my mom used to sit on the back porch and look at the stars while he played the theme songs of shows like Happy Days and The Golden Girls on a harmonica. I used to like listening to "Where Everybody Knows Your Name" while I did my homework in the kitchen, but that was as far as I got to liking Marty. I'd learned not to get too attached to the men my mom brought home, ever since Alexander.



Alexander had been the worst, because he was the best. He and my mom dated for almost an entire year when I was nine, the longest she'd ever been with anyone. He had two kids of his own and the four of us used to play kickball in the backyard while we waited for my mom to get home from work. Every Friday he would put corn on the cob with burgers on the grill with muenster cheese melted on top because he knew it was my favorite. He gave me a sip of his Miller Light when I asked for one and laughed when I spit it out on the table and he always let me pull his finger. We would sit outside until it was dark out and his kids and I would run around catching fireflies in little cages that he had bought us while my mom watched from his lap. I laid in bed after these Friday nights, exhausted from being up past my bedtime, and dreamt that Alexander was my dad.

Alexander asked me for permission. He sat me down one day in the living room while my mom was at work and asked me if he could marry her. My mom's parents died when she was little, so I was the one he thought should give the blessing. Alexander was the fourth to propose but the first to ask my permission, so I thought it'd be different.

I said yes and he had me and his kids hide in the backyard with a camera while he waited at the kitchen table he'd set with candles. When my mom came home from work and he asked, I had already started taking the pictures.

My mom was silent for a long time before she said no. I can still see the picture I took of her in my head, even though Alexander took the camera from my hands afterwards. She stood there, staring directly into the lense, directly at me, but her face was almost void of expression. I always remember it in black and white, even though it was colored.

I couldn't sleep for almost a month after that, kept up with dreams of an almost father and almost siblings. I would cry at night, purposeful long, loud sobs to be sure my mom could hear. I pushed my face against our shared wall one night when I couldn't sleep. I couldn't hear her quiet snores, so I knew she wasn't asleep.

"I wanted a dad," I said. My voice vibrated against the wall. I heard her get up, listened to her footsteps against the hardwood floor of her bedroom. She opened my door and stood there, a shadow in the threshold. "You already have a dad," she told me. I sat in the dark, my covers pulled up to my chin. It was the first time she'd ever mentioned him.

“Who is he?” I asked, my voice small and quiet in the room. She stood there for a moment, but I couldn’t see her face in the dark. She didn’t answer me and instead turned around, about to my close my door behind her.

“Why did you say no?” I called, my voice louder, stronger. “I thought Alexander was different.

She sighed, walked over to my bed and sat on the edge.

“He was different, Eve. That was the problem.”

I felt my chin quivering, but held my breath, tried not to cry.

“I said no because you were too attached to him.”

I never tried to get close to a boyfriend again, and she never tried to get me to be.

“Oliver just asked what we’re up to,” Elyse said, breaking me out of the memory with the change of subject. She waved her phone in front of my face. “He wants to hang out. What do you say? End of summer banger?” She lifted the bottle of vodka over her head, swung the remaining contents around.

“What about Bryn?”

We both glanced over at Bryn. She was on the ground now, naked and rolling around in the wet, muddy grass.

“She can occupy herself.” Elyse looked back down, resumed typing on her phone. “I bet you’d agree if he was with Braden,” she muttered.

“What? With Braden?” I asked, despite myself.

“Jesus, Eve,” Elyse laughed. “It’s like you hear his name and instantly lose your shit.”

I could feel my face turning red. I leaned forward, took the bottle from her hands and took another sip. It burned going down, but I ignored the lemonade this time.

Braden was Oliver’s cousin, and was staying with him for the summer. I’d met him at one of Oliver’s basement “parties” at the beginning of June. Only about six of us had gone, and Elyse was in the back room of the unfinished basement making out with Oliver when Braden walked downstairs wearing a pair of cowboy boots.

“What the hell are you wearing?” I asked.

“Just trying to fit in with the Texas culture,” he said. “Nice to



meet you too.”

I laughed and rolled my eyes, gesturing to everyone’s flip flop or converse clad feet hanging off the sofa.

“Good try,” I said.

He came and sat down next to me.

“Braden,” he said, sticking out a hand.

“Eve. Howdy, Braden.”

He didn’t take off those cowboy boots for the rest of the summer. At a pool party a week later, I convinced him to jump in after midnight, after everyone else had passed out on the floor. He stripped down, taking off everything except for the boots, and ran and jumped in, pulling me with him. He cornered me in the pool, pressed himself against me, put his chin on my shoulder.

“You’re the best part about Texas,” he told me, and I swore I could feel the temperature of Oliver’s heated pool drop ten degrees. I bit the inside of my lip, shivered.

“It’s not the boots?”

“It’s not the boots,” he said back before he kissed me.

Elyse didn’t find out about Braden and me until she walked in on us on the Fourth of July. The entire day had been racked with humidity—you felt like you were swimming through the air. Everyone knew it was going to storm, but we set off fireworks anyways. Oliver was in the middle of lighting a Roman Candle when the skies opened up, lightning brightening the sky more than the fireworks had done. Braden grabbed me at the clap of thunder, pulled me around to the front of Elyse’s house and into the open garage. He pulled a joint out of the back pocket of his jeans and wiggled it in front of me after pulling the garage door shut, then sat down and leaned his back against it. I sat down next to him, panting slightly from our run as he lit the joint, let the familiar scent permeate the garage. We were quiet for a little bit, just sat there in the warm garage, listening to the thunder and the booms from the fireworks.

“You should come visit me in Chicago,” he said eventually. I didn’t say anything. He passed me the joint and waited while I took a hit. I passed it back.

“I’m leaving at the end of August.”

I nodded, felt the pain of my ponytail rubbing against the garage,

digging into the back of my head.

“Or is this just a summer thing to you?” he asked.

I exhaled slowly, looking at the golf ball swinging from a string from the garage ceiling, there so Elyse’s mom would know when to stop pulling her car inside. I thought about my mom.

*String them along, wait until they’re their most vulnerable.
Then cut them off.*

I thought about Jason, the boy I used to make out with in the parking lot after school in the tenth grade. I’d never really liked him, but it’d still gone on for the whole school year. I hadn’t even thought to cut him off. I hadn’t cared enough.

I looked at Braden’s boots against the dusty garage floor. He moved them inwards, hit the top of them together in a rhythm. He put his hand up then, rested it on my shoulder, and I felt all of my muscles tighten.

“Is what just a summer thing?” I said.

“Eve,” he started.

“Shh,” I said, turning towards him and moving on top of him, facing him with one leg on either side. I kissed him, and finally he stopped talking.

His shirt was already off when the garage door started to open. Braden fell backwards and I on top of him as our backrest disappeared. We both looked up to see Elyse standing there, her face framed by the rain.

“Well, well, well,” she said, laughing. “What do we have here?”

I tossed the Grey Goose back to Elyse, then rested back on my hands, ignoring the burning on the palms of my hands.

“So, is he with Braden?”

She looked down at her phone, typing out a message. When it vibrated, she looked back to me, worry plastered on her face.

“What?”

“Braden left.”

“He—what?” I asked, sitting up straighter, rubbing the small rocks embedded in my hands from the concrete on my legs.

“This morning. He went back to Chicago. School starts earlier there, I guess.”



That night in the garage was the only time Braden and I had talked about his leaving. I guess he'd taken my silence as a no. I wondered if I'd meant it that way. I tried to swallow, but my mouth was too dry.

"Shit, I'm sorry Eve."

"I'm sorry Eve!" Bryn called, suddenly having tuned into our conversation. "Shit, I'm sorry Eve!"

"Shut up, Bryn," Elyse yelled at her. "Eve is upset."

I shook my head quickly, standing up and wiping the dirt off my back. My head felt heavy from the vodka.

"No, I'm fine. I don't care," I assured her. "I was gonna end it anyway. It's good that he's gone. I don't care." I stood up, too quickly, felt the Grey Goose swimming around in my head. "I have to go," I said, walking away.

"It's okay if you do, Eve," Elyse called after me. "If you care. You aren't your mom."

I didn't answer her, didn't turn around. I kept walking towards home.

When I got home from Elyse's, I laid on the couch with an episode of Rachel Ray muted on the TV while I listened to my mom and her new boyfriend's voices muffled behind her bedroom door, letting their talking drown the thought of Braden out of my mind.

"Jeremy, I'm sorry," she said.

Jeremy was thirteen years younger than my mom, nine years older than me. I tried to ignore the fact that he could be my older brother, that the age gap was bigger between Elyse and Bryn than between him and me, but it didn't help that he always wore backwards baseball caps and called me "dude" and looked closer to my age than my mom's. I wondered if he had mommy issues, then stopped myself. I couldn't judge. His hair was bright red and his skin was covered in freckles and when he smiled at you you couldn't help but smile back. Not because his smile was contagious, though. It was more like he always looked like he was trying too hard, and you just couldn't help but feel bad for him.

"I don't understand your reasoning," he said.

My mom had broken up with Jeremy a few minutes ago. They'd

walked in, home from dinner. I watched them walk into my mom's room, watched Jeremy close the door behind them. I heard the thump of my mom's heels hitting the ground and the rustle of his rain jacket and listened to her cut him loose through the thin walls. I was just happy she hadn't strung him along far enough for another proposal.

"Oh, Jeremy," my mom said. "You just aren't the one."

His face had to have been the same color of his hair by now. It was almost like I could see him through the wall. I unmuted the TV and turned it up, watched Rachel Ray make a hash brown casserole. She was chopping yellow onions when Jeremy walked out of my mom's bedroom. I looked at him, his face flushed. His hair was slick against his forehead with nervous sweat.

"Your mom's a bitch," he said before turning around and leaving, slamming our front door behind him.

My eyebrows shot up. I didn't expect such an angry response from Jeremy, of all the previous men.

"Did you hear that?" I called to my mom, turning the TV down. She walked out of her room. She was wearing a sequined dress, her hair in a high ponytail atop her head. She was barefoot. She looked impressed.

"That was the most opinionated he's ever been," she said. She stretched her arms out, yawned, rolled her head in a circle to crack her neck. She walked over to the fridge and grabbed a bottle of wine, sat down at the table and poured herself a glass.

"Join me?" she asked.

I turned off Rachel Ray and got up, shuffled over to the table in my sweatpants, my slippers sliding across the floor. My mom passed me a glass of my own, and I sat down on the opposite head of the table. I looked into the glass and swirled it, watched the red liquid splash up, threatening to spill over the edges.

"So what was that?" I asked. My head still hurt from the Grey Goose, but I took a sip anyways. "One month?"

"Mmm," she hummed, swishing the wine in her mouth.

"Did you even like him?" I asked.

She nodded. "He was fun. Made me feel good about myself."

"So you only stayed with him because you liked that he liked you?"



“Hey,” she said, pointing her wine glass towards me. “There’s nothing wrong with a little something to boost your self confidence.”

I looked at her, sitting across from the table. Her eyes were focused on the window behind me. She leaned on the table with her elbow, swirling her wine glass around and around.

“So that’s what makes you feel good about yourself? Making men fall in love with you, and then dumping them?”

She whipped her head to me, eyes narrowed.

“Where is this coming from?” she asked.

I sighed, put my head in my hands, massaging my temples with my fingers.

“I don’t know,” I said. I thought about Braden, sitting in the garage, practically handing me exactly what I wanted. And I just shut him down, because I didn’t know what else to do. “It didn’t make me feel good,” I mumbled.

She started to say something, but I lifted my head, interrupting her.

“How do you know it?” I asked.

“Know what?”

“When you’re in love. How do you know when you’re in love with someone?”

I didn’t know if I was in love with Braden, but I was scared that if I was, I wouldn’t even have known it.

She shifted her gaze from the window to look at me. She said nothing, put her wine glass to her lips and finished it off in one swig. I watched her intently, but still, she said nothing. I felt my stomach clench.

“Have you ever even been in love before?”

She fixed her gaze on her wine glass, tapped her fingers on its base.

“What about Alexander?” I asked. I hadn’t spoken his name in almost eight years, but there it was, hanging in the air between us.

She shook her head, but not as if she were saying no. It was like she was shaking the thought around in her mind, trying to figure it out.

“What about my dad?” My voice was quieter this time. I felt like the nine year old girl in my dark bedroom again, asking my mom about my father. “Did you love my dad?”

She looked back to the window, as if caught in a stare.

“I don’t know,” she said, still not looking at me, her voice so quiet I almost couldn’t hear her. I wondered what it was like, going from man



to man to man like that, never really knowing how you felt. I wasn't that second grader anymore, stepping on that boy's toes. I didn't admire her anymore. I thought about Elyse's words, that I wasn't my mom. But Braden's own sort of proposal had sent her words running through my mind, and I wasn't sure if Elyse was right.

"I'm scared of becoming you," I said, my voice trembling with each word, my hand shaking the wine glass. Red liquid dripped over the edges, dropping onto the table.

She finally turned from the window, looked to me instead, her eyes transparent, her face exactly like the expressionless void in the picture I took with Alexander.

"You should be," she said. She scooted out from the table then, turning around and going back into her bedroom.

I sat in the silence for a moment, looking after her. I tipped my head back, finishing the rest of my own glass. I turned around to look out the window, wondering what was going through her mind while she was doing the same, caught in a trance out there. All I saw, though, was my own reflection looking back at me, mouth stained red from the wine.



BLACK GIRL GHOST STORY NO. 2

every time someone picked at her body with their eyes
felt like they were enlarging
for her to notice
for anyone to see how her teeth, being made to grind,
windsongs that used to lull her to

her teeth
enough
not enough
undercut
sleep

the world had moved especially crushing
against her that day.
looming, overhead, underhead, betweenhead,
reminding her that her
was a target
too many eyes waiting to eat at the
of her gums after the growing, now grinding, teeth
after having grown large enough to break her jaw

the panopticon

skull
never unseen
recesses
fell away
apart

but despite the pall
overhead, underhead, betweenhead
there seemed to be less
shadows
picking at her body, folding around
less enough that the weight of head in palm
didn't make her bones

hanging
between teeth

her hands

shake



night folded around the less-shadowed
of her panopticon(ed)
and the girl laid her head upon hard wood floor to face the
and wait for her teeth to shrink or the ceiling to
up or down, away or against,
whichever came first, whichever came
so that she might see a little

sphere
body
ceiling
break open

but eyes had followed her
had crawled up the backs of her legs
and stuck themselves behind
so that all she could hear
was the memory of long shadows moaning
so that all she could hope for
was a sweet vine of the earth to
thick and sinewy around her neck
the sound of bone against bone inside bone
against hardwood floors
so flinching that it would feel like
a physical regret
for all of
it had seen unfold, and never wanted to impart on

never
freedom

home

her ears
still consumed
in sorrow

grow
and suffocate

a touch
a whisper
an apology
the horror
you



“THERE INTERPOSED A FLY—”

My grandmother always told me cats left home to pass on
That they'd do that in privacy, go out on their own
but the neighborhood tabby wasn't really ours
so I wasn't shocked when she came to die on our porch.

I remember the flies swarming in her eyes
in her mouth and on her genitals, torn open
by her last litter of kittens. I saw hundreds
of flies, that day, eating her inside out.

They invaded the house for a week after
slipping in between slams of the screen door
as we dashed outside to bring her our presents,
lying in a cardboard box like a manger,
we gave three gifts: blanket, brick, and shovel.

In the next days, we hung flypaper like wallpaper
I slept head under blankets, clutching a flyswatter
a constant buzz, always inches from my ear.

Today a fly was in my room and I sprayed it



with hairspray until it fell upon the dress
carelessly discarded on my floor last night.
I spray until the bottle is empty, until the chemicals
break down the fly's body, melt it into the fabric
and I toss a dress and a dead fly into the yard together.

Yet I feel its buzzing in my throat.

Jamie Stewart
Lewis & Clark College



NEW LIGHT

It is good to watch the weather late at night:
isolated in the room, the T.V. floating
in the dark and the photons tumbling.

Something as monstrous and normal as a storm
seems to demand a worship like never before
in High Definition.

A cumulonimbus, in crystal pixels.
This, now, is deadly.

WE ALL FALL DOWN

The first time Sam asked her who Katie was, she had just shrugged. She didn't quite know how to explain it to Sam in the first place, and in the second – Katie was *hers*. That's what it meant to be sisters – it won't be something Sam – who came from the menial race of brothers – would know anything about. Hers, intimately, personally, inescapably. This ended when Sam found her, sprawled on the floor of her room, crying.

“There's so much blood,” she'd said. “Why is there so much blood? Tell her to stop, Sam, please – she keeps cutting herself and spilling it on my sheets.”

Sam had looked at her funny, and Isabella had wanted to demand what he was thinking. Why didn't he find Katie? Why didn't he get her to *stop*? Katie was always making such a racket, always screaming, demanding, asking for food, for water, for something more – and always clawing at her throat, as if she knew something about Isabella that Isabella herself didn't.

Sam got used to Katie eventually – as did Isabella. There was no *shutting her up*, after all. She couldn't help it – the constant screeching wouldn't stop, and Isabella was not equipped to handle it.

“She used the knives again,” she told Sam one day. “There was so much blood.”

Sam looked at her, as her fingers tapped on the plastic table.

“So much blood,” she said quietly, contemplating the smears on her



fingers, that left fingerprints everywhere.

*

She always dreamed of the first thing over and over again – it was hard to remember her sister, you see. So in her dreams, she'd appear over and over and over and over again. She didn't know what point her sister was trying to make – but Katie never really had much subtlety that way. And the dream always started with a doorway – or a cliff, or an entrance.

And Isabella was always falling.

Falling.

Falling.

Falling.

Until Katie appeared again, her face smiling, telling Isabella that she had done well, that everything was going to be alright.

Katie smiled.

Blood dripped from her eyes.

*

“How is... *everything*... today?” Sam asked her.

“She used a rope this time,” sighed Isabella. “She’s over there,” she added unnecessarily, waving in the background. Katie’s body swung from side to side, as it trying to prove a point.

“Isabella... do you remember anything about Katie?” asked Sam

Isabella frowned. “I remember – I remember Mum and Dad loved her,” she said slowly. “I remember she was always loud – always, always, always. She took my favourite Barbie when we were six, I remember. I think her name was Violetta.”

“Anything else?” prodded Sam.

“Why was she so loud?” asked Isabella helplessly. “She always wanted *everything* – everything!”

“It’s alright Isabella, come on,” said Sam, patting her hand.

“She smiled so much – all her teeth, you could see them all, always _”

“I know.”

Isabella buried herself into Sam’s chest. “You’ll stop her, won’t you?”

Sam’s hand was hesitant on her hair.

“I’ll try.”

*

Isabella examined her nails. “It was a spanner this time,” she said.

“Yeah?” said Sam cautiously.

“I don’t know why she keeps doing it,” said Isabella, reexamining her nails.

“Isabella – you – do you –”

“What?” asked Isabella earnestly, looking at Sam’s worried face. Maybe something was wrong – maybe Mum and Dad weren’t well.

“Did Katie ever tell you *why* – why she does this to you?”

Isabella frowned.

She remembered the doorways, the cliffsides that she was always falling from. The entries, the break ins, and then Katie’s smiling face, over and over, saying words that sounded all wrong. “She used to say that there’s a threshold – to becoming stars or fire. She said hers was limitless. She said mine was limitless.”

“For what?” asked Sam.

“Mine for her,” said Isabella quietly. “And her for more.”

Sam didn’t say anything.

“But I showed her –” said Isabella fiercely. “I showed her. I showed her. There are *limits*.”

Sam collected his coat, leaving the room.

“Will you be coming to visit your sister again?” asked one of the attendants.

“Probably,” she heard Sam say. “Next week maybe.”

She wondered why Sam always asked all these questions – she found it hard to remember whatever he asked her about. Whenever she tried hard enough, she remembered Katie’s face, blood pouring out – *everywhere, everywhere, everywhere* – and a knife in her hand.

She sometimes wondered which threshold she’d crossed simply by placing a limit on Katie.



GIRLHOOD: AN ELEGY

Spring girlhood. Garden girlhood. Girlhood of the hand
always raised. The crooked-banged, the milk-mustached, the barefoot,
girlhood without pills, girlhood hunting dim summer evenings with
glass mason jars she filled with fireflies she, later—for the sake of
the free market of childhood—traded for Altoids fished from her father’s
pockets. Girlhood with wildflower mouth, split plum, of joy, girlhood,
her middle school fears, girlhood who would dye the shower red
with her hair. Girlhood of I’m gonna marry this one. Watermelon girl-
hood,
princess of seed spit, the rind cast over her shoulder, girlhood who grew
into the grand duchess of dirt and harm-armored ant armies left to devour
all
her unwanted: girlhood. Lit within like jack-o-lantern teeth, no seed, no
guts.
Girlhood, I’m sorry; I couldn’t wait to get out of your skin. The back
seat queen of her first love’s car. Girlhood fading finally into “gentle”
men. Girlhood who taught me the art of rebound. Girlhood of parking lot



hash.

Of confusion, a whiplash ballerina trying so hard to turn. His cackling
basement

his hands backwards on the body. Please. I don't want to. Girlhood hiding
sideways on the back of my tongue. Girlhood. Weasel fixing its mouth
to rabbit throat. Philomel's scream, the bloody maw of secrecy. Please.
Girlhood.

Falling limp. Of solid, black silences. Unravelling dusk. Girlhood still,
I glimpse her some nights cutting stars from the dark.



AFTER THE FLOOD

a worm, prophet
 and engine of the future,
tells stories
 in the dirt it breathes.
these stories
 grow up to be sunflowers,
tulip petals, wild
 weeds, thistles, and the
ivy that drapes over
 brick like a silk slip.

this worm in my hand
 knows nothing, that
is, everything that
 will be. his rings
are the rings
 of the old cedar
that just burned, throwing
 its ashes up
ward, cremating
 history, kissing



clouds it found
 in courtly love.
the farmer
 says they go back
to the ground, caskets
 for new life
in the next excavation
 of rain which guarantees
a thing cannot be imperfect
 if it was made with love,

and so with the audacity
 of a last sun
he holds laugh
 ter in his hands
and watches it wriggle,
 wind, unwind,
blow away
 his son
or what will be
 his son



There are two kinds of ~~understandings~~ pangs in this world.

There is dǒng (懂): authoritative dictionary glare; gears twist to lock. Lock padlock like gridlock like landlocked like meaning. That is sweet incense smoke wringing eyes and throat as I bow to unknown chants which sound important because it is a funeral and she is dead. A is for Apple. Apple is a fruit. Bite to fall. Doom myself to something innocent, against that writhing god in the lion dances.

Then there is míngbái (明白): that is where god lives. *deus ex machina*. That is hot unraveled sticky rice unfolded in the style of mother hands. Tian (天) is for heaven, Ai (爱) is for love. It is an erhu wailing its un-iambic answer.

The taste of durian is a pang: usually hated, because custard does not belong inside a sea urchin.

I do not have a god.

I eat durian to swallow pangs: direct loss to the destruction of something.



CHEMISTRY

The taste of his tongue was the tip of a battery,
electricity igniting every nerve.
You always imagined fireworks,
but never considered how it would feel to have them go off in your
mouth.
You swallowed his colors until your insides were
a blend of melted crayons,
barely feeling the burn before he lit you again.



LEECH

There was a pressure behind my eyes sucking them into my head and leaving my eyelids to droop low; I looked and felt perpetually tired. In fact, my whole body felt shrunken and weak...it was brewing, and that's when I saw him skipping towards me.

I wasn't surprised though because I knew he never left, knew he never could. There was something about me, he said, that was too delectable to leave alone. "It's a spicy kind of sweet, I guess," he said with a shrug, "But you're coated in salt, too."

"Coated in salt?" I asked.

"You cry too much." This was usually the extent of our conversations. He wasn't much of a talker.

What *was* surprising was the momentum with which he skipped to me. I watched as his knees flew him high into the air, one after the other in rapid secession. And though he hit the ground with force each skip, his strained smile never faltered. In fact, his cheekbones stayed unnaturally lifted, his eyes unnaturally wide. He was eager to see me.

There were three things I could do: 1.) welcome the Leech back as I would an old friend, 2.) sprint in the opposite direction with all my might or 3.) refuse to acknowledge his presence at all. I was torn between 2 and 3 when his weight collided with mine, plowing me into the grass.



I was six years old when I found him. He sat cross-legged on the floor of my grandma's swimming pool, waiting for me. From the deck, I watched his toothy smile waver in the water. When I dove in, his red figure blurred by the chlorine in my eyes, he outstretched three boney fingers and wrapped them around my wrist. His other hand grasped my forearm, and then he moved his hand from my wrist to my shoulder; he was reeling me in. As we came face-to-face, I noticed his eyes were completely white. They lacked color and pupil and soul.

Still smiling, the thing wrapped his arms twice around my waist. "Hello friend," he said into the water. "I've got you." He said it like a father at the time and, as we grew older together, he began saying it like a lover.

I could feel my heart beat in my brain. Out of breath, I inhaled the water in front of me. The thing had let me go and I bounced to the surface in a coughing fit. I spun in circles in the pool scoping him out. He'd dissipated.

He sat in the corner of my dorm room now twirling stray pieces of my hair left of the ground. With an index and thumb nail, he plucked a hair off the tile and gave it a sniff. Then, a lick.

I groaned and walked his way. "Dude, no, okay?" I yanked the hair from his mouth. "That's really fucking creepy."

He stared at me blankly.

"Don't do that. Don't make that face at me."

He blinked.

"No. You're a grown up, you know better," I grabbed my broom and began tidying the floor of anything else the thing may put into his mouth. "Freak." His boredom was my own fault and I knew that. There was more I could've done to prepare for his inevitable restlessness. Also, I could've straightened up the room.

I watched him closely as he stood up from the corner. He'd grown into a lanky thing. His skeletal legs ended where my shoulders began and when he finally sat again, this time beneath my bed, his legs collapsed tightly together the same way a folding lawn chair does.

"Comfy there?" I teased. The bed was set only three or so feet above the floor causing his neck to bend 90 degrees to the left. His lips firmed together in a line, annoyed. "I have, like, a chair," I said pointing

in front of my desk. “use your brain.”

“No, you.” He said, wrapping his arms around his shins and clacking his hooves together in protest.

I only saw him a handful of times between the first time we met and the age of 15. He never introduced himself by name, origin or occupation and so I called him Thing for a while. Getting older and developing a strong sense of empathy, I realized this label was demeaning. Now I call him the Leech, and for a couple reasons.

Firstly, he is an opportunist. Behind his wide smile hides his vicious and starving persona. When I asked why he chose me, he said, “You’re so tender and raw,” he said with a loving hand caressing my chubby cheek. “I knew you’d never outgrow your weak mind. And I’m not one to work harder than I have to chasing something else when I’ve already found you.” His words were offensive and I began to cry but only for a minute as I realized the exposure of emotion was synonymous with ‘weak.’ The next time he visited, there were no tears.

Secondly, when the Leech joined me for my first season of swim practice in high school, he latched on to me for what I didn’t realize would be years. He caught up to me swimming laps; he was moving almost mechanically as his limbs stayed perfectly straight with each yard he stroked. From behind me, he grabbed the ankle of one leg and then a calf and then a knee and, finally, a thigh. He was reeling me in again and I let him.

We met face to face above the surface. He looked around my face for a moment before he used one hand at either jaw to crank his mouth open. He bent down and locked his teeth into the crown of my head; his tongue drilled straight through into my brain. In a muffled voice, he said, “You and me. For the long haul.”

“Is this protocol? I feel like you don’t have to do this.” I said.

“You don’t like?”

“Just painful is all.”

“Fine,” In one fluid instance, he sucked his tongue back into his mouth and released my head from his bite. “I’ll act as your shadow then. Same result, different effect.”

“Result?” I asked.

He chuckled at me and placed a palm atop my hair. As we left prac-



tice together he asked, "Want to hold hands?"

"No."

He is the Leech because he eats his prey alive.

"I want to take you out." he said after a long silence.

"Cool, great," I said promptly standing up. "I've been ready for a while now." I joked.

"What?"

"What?"

"To eat. Let's get dinner," he said with a headshake of disappointment. "and try not to be like that."

"Like what?"

"Suicidal."

"I wouldn't be if it weren't for you. Literally, this is your fault."

"I'm just saying...it could be worse. Other's lives are harder than yours." He nodded his head and raised a brow with sarcasm.

"They why aren't you with them?"

"Oh, I've told you time and again," he rolled his eyes and placed a hand on my shoulder. "You're just so...," he gave my shoulder a squeeze. "you."

"I'd say it probably started when I was 6 or so."

"Mhm."

"I was..." I squinted, looking deep into the past. "swimming at my grandma's house. She had this above-ground pool."

"Okay." She'd been scratching out notes the moment I introduced myself.

"And he wasn't pedophile old. I mean, old enough. I guess maybe in his late teens." She nodded at her notepad. "So anyways, he molested me. Like, in the water in the pool."

"Molested you how?"

"Is that important?"

"Well, yes. Sometimes children are confused about different types of touch."

"I'm aware of the difference between a good and bad touch," I assured. "He touched my no-no square."

“Yes, well...” she inhaled. “Alright so, what was his relation to you?”

“He’s my cousin.”

“Right, okay.”

“And it never really bothered me all too much. I just never thought about it like I do now.”

“Why’s that, do you think?”

“I get in a pool everyday now, you know, for team practice. It’s kind of like having this event be a part of my daily routine. I get in the water, I taste the chlorine, I become that much more depressed.”

“And how’ve you been coping with this depression of late?”

I gave this question a thought. “I guess,” I stare at a loose thread on the carpet. For a second, I lose myself in its loop. “I just kinda live with him.”

“Him?”

“It.”

“Right, yes,” she scrawled a bit more with a Holiday Inn she probably stole from the hotel bedside table. *Good woman, I think. I, too, indulge in worthless freebies.* “I think this was a productive place to start. And, Margarette?” She wanted eye contact. I looked up from the floor. “I’m not here to be the ‘and how do you feel about that’ bad guy. It’s okay to ramble thoughts. In fact, imagine part of your brain has caught infection. Must squeeze out the pus before it can heal.”

“My brain is sick,” I pondered. I readjusted myself on the couch making the dreaded silence more awkward as the leather and my thighs made a *ffttttt*. “Is depression an illness?”

The Leech peered into the room through the crack beneath the closed door. I met his eyes and he mouthed, “Sure am.”

I watched him pick at the threads of the linen tablecloth. He was trying to work one of his pointed nails underneath one of the stitches and had been unsuccessful until clearing my throat startled him, jolting his finger forward.

“Thank you for taking me out.” I said. I watched his face a while; his cheeks were sunken in, his chin pointed to a fine tip. He was monstrous looking and always had been but somehow, in the lighting of the steakhouse which washed out most of his redness, he looked loveable.



“Sure.” He plucked the stitch apart in a sharp upward motion and then began prying at another thread.

“What are you thinking about ordering?” I asked. He hadn’t touched the menu. I began to wonder if he even knew how to read.

“Steak,” he said carelessly. “Rare.”

“Sounds good.” There was a pianist who sat across the room keying sounds which seemed completely random. Everything about him was disheveled; his hair was messy in a way that could’ve either been meticulously styled or bedhead, the cuffs of his shirt were undone, sleeves rolled up past his elbows, and he was sat far to the left of the bench. *Who’s that spot for?* I mused. *His own Leech?*

He was shredding up his last bite of meat, blood still dripping down his chin when he said, “Listen...” he swallowed. “I’ve been thinking a bit about what you said earlier. And I think you’re right.”

His vagueness scared me. “Explain.”

“If you’re ready, then you’re ready. And, if we’re being honest with ourselves here, there’s no uphill from this point on,” he took a sloppy swig of wine and shrugged. “So, on your cue, I’ll help...you know,” he drew a single finger horizontally across his neck.

“Die?”

“Yes! Die. The ole one-and-done.”

I shook my head and laughed. “No, man. That was a joke earlier. I was trying to be funny.”

“Oh,” he slid into a slouch. “Suicide isn’t a joke, you know.”

We were quiet for a long while. The waiter brought over our check and the Leech slid the bill across the table. “That’ll be for you.”

“I thought this was you taking me out?”

“I drove here.”

“No,” I said, standing up. “*I* drove here.”

“Alright, Margarete. Calm down.”

“You can’t tell me to kill myself *and* make me pay for the meal in the same night.” I said with a huff, still standing.

“Alright, I’m sorry,” he said. He reached for the bill. “Just kill yourself, I’ll take care of this.”

We’d known each other for years, from childhood to college, and he’d finally made his directive clear. He’d never been my friend; his pater-

nal and romantic ways masked the fact that he was only here, he'd only stuck around for as long as he had, to collect me.

I looked at him with an open mouth. "You've been controlling me."

"Well," he said, counting on his fingers to calculate the tip. "you're quite submissive."

My ears burned red. He smiled cynically, the same toothy, wide-eyed smile he gave when we first met. "Want me to leave you alone? Kill yourself."

"What kind of arrangement is that?" I said. The Leech was beginning to blur now as tears welled up in my eyes.

He huffed impatiently. "I dunno, Margarete. Don't overthink things here; I never ask anything of you so if you could just," he rotated his index finger. "Get a move on..."

"No," I grimaced. "No, no, no." I didn't care if he'd follow me out of the restaurant. "You're just pus." I didn't care if he'd follow me around campus. "You're an infection." I didn't care if he'd follow me for the rest of my life. No trade-off was more unjust than this.

"And you," he tilted his chin down and looked up into my eyes. "are not worthy," he began bending backwards now, up and over the backrest of his chair. He outstretched his arms to either side of himself, fingers sprawled on each hand. He looked upside-down at the diners behind him. "...of this."

My cheeks were now properly wet with tears. "Of Morton's?" I sniffled.

He snapped back into his former posture. "What?" he chuckled. "Of M-m-morton's?" he shrilled, dragging a finger from his eye down his cheek; he was mocking me. "No, Mars. Life. You are not worthy," he gestured around the restaurant again. "of all that surrounds you...the air, the people, the ambiance of normality." He grabbed his wine glass by its stem and gave its contents a final long sniff. His nostrils pushed hard on the rim while the length of his nose rested well across the bowl. I continued to frown at him as he dumped the last ounce or so of wine past his tongue and down his throat. His mouth was a drain for starchy alcohols and mine for hard pills.

My face was stiff with anger and dried tears. There wasn't much else for me to say. I had nothing clever, no witty retort. I gathered my things from the table, ready to storm out to my car, when I thought of a



last remark. I took two steps towards the Leech, thumped his forehead with a hard flick and said, “Fuck off.” the same way I’d react to any other pest scrounging off my body.

“*Rude.*” I heard him chuckle behind me.

MOTHER TONGUE



The University of Kansas
Rachel Atakpa

a barren woman watered her womb
with repentance for what she had done
to deserve her broken body
and her wedded forbidden

from the stroke of lily-soft fingers and
belly's silvery streaks

sprung a daughter whose fore-
mother name, division of nations,
built monuments on sand instead of
unfaltering strings of lamentation—

listlessness blooming in wetlands of mouths,
pining for exaltation that names lineage in the
bloom of battlefields.



kneeling beside freshwater vases painted with
portrait-stories of home—where a mountain ridge
christened grace longsuffering and cut fragility
with the consummation of truth—

the daughter of the un-barren woman pulls veils around
a matter of under-clouded darkness
reminding her that the always-wedded ring of sanctification
binding bodies with reverent blasphemy

would split apart the salient state of her unancestored
body and drive the desertion of rightful mercy
if she did not bend to the gasps of the wind.

REFUGEE BLUES

Listen to my suburban drama, now –
It's of critical importance.
Because I have fought one thousand battles
And been kicked
Into unknown countries
I am a refugee, darling.
Roomless
Familyless
Voiceless.

It's a battle we fight daily, we outsiders
Living with our Grandparents
Our Aunts and Uncles –
The milk does not belong to us,
The land is not ours.
The fire of bullets and words,
Why, it's the only way we speak.
It's not obvious, no –
Because when your home is bombed
They bomb your personality first
Denying it roots and origins



And then you exist in limbo.

When I shifted from Lucknow to Delhi,
From one someone else's home
To another someone else's home
I packed my world in a suitcase.
And my sisters were confused,
“How did you fit your life between the cover and the zip?”

Darling, I did not have the space to have a life
I did not have the space to breathe
My secret places were forgotten corners:
The glass house on the terrace,
The balcony of the eighteenth floor,
The rubber tree in the garden
Which was eventually chopped off.

And the world will rain,
Whisper
Touch my hands
My eyes
My face
And tell me that I exist
But I won't be able to see which part of me exists
Which part of me is allowed
And which part of me is just
Fighting
This suburban battle
In silence.

My bullets failed me, darling
The enemy was enormous and societal
And terrifying
The bombings killed me, darling.
They destroyed me until nothing belonged to me
Not the rain, not the trees, not the wind,



Not even the pain.

They claimed my tears and my smiles, darling,
They took me to pieces and tore me to bits.
Closed my mouth and asked me why I don't speak.

Darling, I have learned to speak when spoken to,
Exist when asked to exist,
Believe when asked to believe,
And so - when you share your story with me,
When you tell me bits of your life,
I will never deny you the pleasure
I am attentive,
I am endlessly kind -
Of your secrets being shared
My own stopped existing beyond the four walls of my mind.



FRECKLES

before, my feet smaller than they are now,
and my aunts used to play connect the dots
between the freckles on my cheeks.
they used a crayola, *Burnt Sienna*,
whose waxy constellations, silhouettes,
tickled my dimples like loose eyelashes.
but i did not laugh (i could not laugh
without the compromise of my face). though
their animal kingdoms contoured my bones,
the Milky Way's asterisms hugged my brow,
i could only picture my face, my face
like tv static or pins and needles.
i could have sworn that the whites of their eyes
reflected a face, my face, sacrificed
as a canvas to draw layered cobwebs.
the paths i mentally traced, tracking the
dull tip of the crayon, made no figures,
but chaos without a point of reference.

but, i was never the kind of child
to look at the clouds and see anything



more, or anything less, than puffs of white.

minutes and years later, i tiptoe to
the bathroom between pigs in a blanket
and prepackaged sugar cookies, to try
to connect the dots between hushed conversations.
the aunts have exchanged their crayolas
for cabernets, their games for gossip.
the greater gallery of my family
exists in lingering exchanges
and sideways glances that i am too terminally young
to trace, but they are more punctuated
than the freckles amidst my porcelain
aunts. i am an archivist with a white
crayon and white paper, with no numbers
to connect the secrets dotting the room.
every raised eyebrow, each crooked smirk:
a point in a picture i cannot not draw.

no museum has ever exhibited
a collection of connect the dots, and
no connect the dot has ever captured
the fallen shadow of a white cloud.



STARLIGHT

We've lived on the beach our entire lives.

Chipping pavement takes us down past weather-worn bungalows to the sand. To watch "The end of the world", as CNN has been calling it.

Our house is set far back, just out of reach of the waves. Peering out of a hillside that we don't dare drive up in the winter months.

We stretch out on the comforter I took from the guest bedroom, not wanting to dirty my own, waiting for the meteors to fall.

When we were younger, we'd slide out of our rooms and down the stairs. Down the then-freshly paved hillside to watch the stars. Our feet sticky with the tide, we'd track sand into the house for our mom to find in the morning. We thought we were sly because she never said anything about it.

The past week witnessed a mass migration to the most exotic places on earth. Lufthansa and Virgin Atlantic bumped up their prices on instinct, knowing that many who'd been saving for a college they'd never get to attend now had no use for their earnings. People had flocked to the beaches, the meadows, the mountains, anywhere out of the reach of light pollution, to watch the last meteor shower in history. Children are curled on blankets at the feet of their parents, sobered by headlines they'd seen over older brothers' shoulders, others galloping down the beach, too young to read.

The Fourth of July had generated a crowd similar to tonight. Only two weeks ago, the beaches were packed with those same children zipping along the coast, waving glowsticks and sparklers as their parents watched from towels, the tides sucking up any forgotten trinkets.

Mom had to fire three of her servers this week, when they all stopped showing up to work. She called them crazy. One travelled to rural Maine, visiting a friend who owned a bunker. The other two went to be with their families.

Cresting waves reach up and pull the sun underwater as the kids keep running. A couple next to us is drunk. They've been leaving beer cans in the sand, because the beaches won't be here tomorrow. We split a bag of the name-brand potato chips that Mom can never justify buying over the bargain brand, but we both love. Sour cream and onion crumbs tumble off my chin and mingle with the sand. We finish our food and wait for the impact that we had hoped would miss.

Tossing the bag behind us, we lay on our backs and squint at the moon. Tonight it's full and bright, stealing attention from the constellations at its back. Astronomers said that the world will end at 11:02. We have 5 minutes left. The moonlight catches on the surf, and as the kids quiet down, we begin to breathe in rhythm with the waves.

There is only one minute left when the shower begins. Children who don't understand the gravity of the situation have sat up, their heads tilted back. There is quiet "ooing" and "ahhing" from them, masking whispered "I love you"s from those who know what's about to happen.

You're looking down at me now. You stopped reading the newspaper when the calculations left a slim chance of survival.

You whisper a some joke about dinosaurs and asteroids to me.

I can't believe it's the last thing I'll ever hear you say.

At 11:02, we close our eyes and take our final breath. And again. After five long inhales, we open our eyes. The beach is completely silent. We look up at the stars. The Milky Way blinks back at us, with nothing to distract from us from its brilliance. Every airline executive is counting their money right now. Geologists and astronomers alike will awake to the new task of analyzing the dust that will drift into the atmosphere over the next few hours, and like smoke from a forest fire, produce some of the most spectacular sunsets ever seen. I'm glad I didn't bring my own comforter to the beach tonight. I grope for the potato chip bag in near total darkness. It crunches between my fingers and resounds across the beach.

The ocean is quiet now.

There is nothing left to create the tides.



MARY (REVISED)

my body, seventy percent
water, now turned to wine.

if He gave me a corkscrew,
ordered me to masturbate
it would feel about the same
as he makes me feel right now —
empty, holy, as a false tomb.

He wishes memories
into my mouth
presses Himself into me
watches me slacken,

lets go

produces a hollow Christ.



BECOMING A VEGETABLE

They taught me in Sex-Ed about ‘the birds and the bees’
used the phrases:

flowering,

blossoming,

flourishing

to describe the processes occurring
in my poor pubescent figure.

But they didn’t tell me
what comes *after* spring,
once the fat little bee brings
the golden gift, when the pollen reaches
the ovule and the seed is born, once it detaches
and falls (a little ways) from the tree,
when the sprout bursts forth
to soak up summer’s daylight,
once it grows fruitful, multiplies, and thrives.

They didn’t tell me I had to watch dusty leaves
fall from their heights, see mighty trees become dry
and bare as their bark stripped away, witness



the decay of the once grand oak, stoic and proud—
the autumn harvest in its prime
cut down by the reapers.

They never told me
about the winter that follows.
Stark white walls, sanitized bedsheets.
Manufactured sunlight
casting shadows on an elastic vein
that stems from a sack of liquid, sagging
on a metal frame, trails down to a frail limb,
roots deep into plastic-wrapped skin—
dry, pale, wilted.

They didn't tell me that your head
would shrivel up
like the husk of a peach pit, like the ones
you used to pluck from the yard
when you felt well enough.
Now the soft, plump flesh
has been eaten away.
Gaunt rifts and cracks are all that remain.

They never taught me
how to look into sunken sockets,
dried red-eyes that stare back, blank—
seeing only a stranger
slumped in the doorframe.



Photo by Riley Klaus



THE LIVELY DEAD BOY

Charlie is driving late and determined, for her husband is waiting patiently at home, though she finds along the way a boy of about the same age sprawled upon the edge of the road with his arms pointing west, one arm lying heavy over top his face, and she keeps driving, wondering if he is okay, but she knows her husband is waiting, so she parks her car underneath the carport and walks inside.

The following night Charlie drives home knowing her husband is even more impatient, the carport awaiting her. The boy is still there, only his arms now face east, so she slows down to see if his body is dilapidating, and it is not, for it looks livelier than most faces. She soon finds herself beneath the carport and again awake after such a restful night where Charlie decides she will stop for the boy, the poor dead boy. *Okay*, she thinks, *this is it. The boy is coming up.*

Only he is gone.

She still stops and stands over the area he laid. It is dark, and she lies down as he did. No cars pass. It is too late for that kind of thing. She knows her husband is waiting, but she feels right here, lying on the edge of the road, so she sleeps there for the night, and the blacktop cushions her head unlike her feathered pillow.

She finds the boy while driving home the following night. He lies where she did the night before with his arms above his head—she parks

and walks slowly toward the boy. *Wow*, she thinks, *this is him—the boy*. His eyes are open and silvery, hair curly and brown.

“Hello,” Charlie says. *Maybe he’s thinking of what to say*, she thinks. He continues to lie there, so she begins to poke his thigh. She knows he must be cold in that t-shirt and those tattered shorts. His Chuck Taylors sit loose on his sockless feet and tied to one another. She picks him up, surprised at his lightness. His body hollow like a rubber doll.

“Don’t worry,” she says, “I’ve got room.”

He sits in the passenger seat, and she plays “Ave Maria,” where she says, “You know, I’m not usually one for Bach, but I think tonight is a special night,” so he sits there. She pecks his cheek to feel his skin.

“I don’t know whether to go home or not—my husband,” she clenches her teeth, “What do you think?”

She continues on I-64, passing her exit.

Charlie figures the boy must be hungry, so she stops at a Bob Evans in Beckley, helping him out of the car and into the booth where the waiter asks if the bill will be separate, and she cuts the boy off before he can answer, “I’ve got this one!”

After following 64 to Richmond, she asks if he would like to go see a movie. They had spent the night in the car, so she feels a little irritated. *Busy day*, she thinks. “I need to make a quick phone call before I go in if that’s alright,” she says, so she goes ahead and helps the boy into his front-row seat where she later gets back to the theater to explain to the boy all that was said.

“I’m sorry,” she whispers. “How was the movie?” He just stares at the screen, so she quickly explains, “My marriage—it’s over!” She sobs onto the boy’s shoulder, and he sits there, patient with her, staying still and assuring.

“What should we do?” she asks and presses his face and looks him in the eyes. They are just what she needs—dim and kind, the same as they were when they met. She asks if he would mind staying for the second showing of the movie, and of course he obliges, but after several intense discussions following the flick, they decide it’s for the best to head back.

The drive is silent which is unusual for the pair. She drives to



her house, and after walking inside, notices that her husband has not quite moved out because he stands in the kitchen, unable to look at Charlie, holding a box full of silverware and other things—such as a stapler and speed square—he had added to their inventory.

The boy still sits in the car, though, unaware of the man in the kitchen. The old husband is gone before long, so the new couple discusses their new home, and she figures the new boy will want to make his own impression on the new place, and so she allows him to make certain changes. The walls, he says, are too light; the bedroom so plain; and such a sore sight is the carport.

Though, as Charlie surely knew, the boy cannot stay, and so he is just as gone as he was there shortly after the immovable changes were made to the home.



LOCATING

your flesh has been unmade, opened
across: the sea, paved roads, couch cushions
against: linen, the sky, your will

||: made
a body
against you
r will
o t in a coffin: ||

if your skin is cut
up one side of your body
and pulled away from
muscle and veins and bones and
laid over the ground
would it be as heavy/marked/planed as a corpse

would it burn and scatter away unto dust

if you were away, from muscle and veins and bones



you [could would] be flesh:

never unmade,
too soft to touch

too far away to touch,

but
you

are here:

not
here

never outside of your body,
always without
a seam

up one side of your body

away from your body

[you are there]

not here

SELF-PORTRAIT IN EXODUS 33:20

Yet when he wants to look at me,
to rest his cheek against my thigh

and peer into the pink tenderness,
to discover where my body

unbecomes itself, I can only assume
that it is true what they say about God:

it is impossible for a man to look upon
sublimity and not be ruined by it.

The splendor? Insufferable. How soft
and quiet it is, where this world begins.



SOMEWHERE WARMER

*“You’re living for nothing now
I hope you’re keeping some kind of record”*
-Leonard Cohen

They met at a party.

They meet at a party.

They will meet at a party.

He was the cousin of the best friend of the owner of the house. She was a dancer.

He said he liked dancing and remembered seeing her in something local written by someone Russian. This made her laugh and she said that he could have her number even though he hadn’t asked for it yet.

He called her and they had coffee and she told him about a movie that he had never seen and that she had seen far too many times. They saw the movie on the third date and he kissed her on the forehead and the birds on the trees had all flown somewhere warmer.



Life was good in the ways in which life can be good to young attractive people.

At the end of the wedding reception her third cousin twice removed on her mother's side threw up under the table and told everyone that Uncle Drew had done it.-

Uncle Drew was a recovering alcoholic and would eventually fall off the wagon after his second wife presented him with divorce papers. She would keep the kids and he would keep the dog. The dog would die three weeks after the divorce.

-After the wedding they moved somewhere warmer.

Their first son was killed chasing after a baseball when he was 8 years old.-

The woman driving the car that hit him converted to Christianity.

-The funeral was a somber event and not many people came. The few that did attributed this to the fact that they had just recently moved into their new apartment and had not yet made a great number of acquaintances.-

Uncle Drew attributed it to a lack of wine after the service.

-She read an article a month after the funeral that said that eighty percent of couples who lose a child divorce within two years. She immediately stopped taking birth control.

Two years later she was pregnant.

They named him Franklin after her father and grandfather and never spoke of his brother until the time when he asked who the boy in the picture in the box in the closet was.



When Franklin was six years old they got pregnant again and named her Alice, after his mother and sister.

Alice was diagnosed with a rare brain disorder which made her shut down at times and fall asleep. She was once found sleeping in the middle of a snow fort, nearly frozen to death, mumbling about popsicles. She had her left pinkie finger amputated and from then on was accompanied at all times by a woman named Tabatha up until she was fifteen. -

Tabatha was, as Franklin and Alice's parents referred to her, a "senior citizen". She had never been to school because she was, as Franklin and Alice's parents also referred to her, "less fortunate than us". Alice and Franklin would one day realize that their parents meant that Tabatha was old and poor and never understood why they didn't just say so.-

-On the last Friday of the last month of the year, their parents decided to go to the theatre (thee-uh-tur) "unaccompanied". -

Up until his twelfth birthday, in which he was taken to *Death of a Salesman*, Franklin believed that the thee-uh-tur was a place where children were prohibited entrance.

-On this particular night, Tabatha, who doubled in her position of caretaker as the occasional babysitter, had fallen ill-

with a coughing fit which would lead to pneumonia which eventually lead to her death three months afterwards

-and was replaced by her granddaughter.

Tabatha's granddaughter was seventeen and had already suffered two miscarriages, one just two weeks ago. Her boyfriend had cheated on her with her cousin, so she had taken all the birth-control pills in her mother's



medicine cabinet and downed them with orange juice. She bled for hours and when she was about to dial 9-1-1 she stopped bleeding and looked down into the toilet.-

She cried longer than she bled and then she flushed.

-“What’s a miscarriage?” Alice asked after Tabatha’s granddaughter told them that she had just had one.

“You’re a miscarriage, now go to bed; I have a massive headache and homework to do”

Franklin knew that he was in love with Tabatha’s granddaughter after he masturbated to her for the first time.-

This was fifteen minutes after meeting her and took place in the downstairs guest bathroom so that he could hear her talking while he came. It was all quite tender.

-“Pancakes are for breakfast”, Tabatha’s granddaughter mumbled sullenly, not even looking up from her cellphone, after Alice requested them for dinner.

“Tabatha always makes us pancakes before bedtime when she babysits”, countered Alice defiantly, sensing in her own childish way that some type of rivalry was forming. Her brother, the snake, seemed intent on taking the rival side,

“She’s right, pancakes are for breakfast. Don’t be stupid, Alice...”

Tears started to well up in Alice’s eyes and she hardly got through her rebuttal without breaking into a fit of sobbing,



“You love pancakes before bedtime, Franklin! You asked Tabatha to make them with blueberries last time!”

Franklin’s ears went bright red and Tabatha’s granddaughter, sensing that some type of family crisis was about to ensue, chose to avoid further conflict and caved in,

“I’ll make pancakes and then you go to bed, deal?”

“Alright, thank you very much Tabatha’s granddaughter!” Alice answered, heading upstairs to finish drawing a portrait of her gerbil.

The doorbell rang.

The doorbell rings.

Tabatha’s granddaughter has just emptied the pancake batter onto a skillet and dropped a blueberry into the center of the batter. She opens the door and her boyfriend stands on the welcome mat.-

The one that cheated on her, earlier.

-He’s wearing mittens instead of gloves and glasses instead of the contact lenses that he recently lost on a hiking trip.

“How are you?” he asks.

Tabatha’s granddaughter closes the door in his face. Franklin asks who rang the doorbell and she says “No one”.

“It must have been someone, otherwise you wouldn’t have opened the door” he counters.

“Sometimes doorbells ring themselves”



Franklin doesn't quite know what to make of this, because for all he knows it's possible that doorbells do, in fact, occasionally ring of their own accord.

The doorbell rings again four hours later when their parents arrive, and though Alice has fallen asleep hours earlier, Franklin rushes to the door.

"How was the thee-uh-tur?"

"Dreadful, but dinner was delightful"-

His mother started to use three-syllable words when she hit forty, believing that if nothing else would, at least her vocabulary would present her as a lady of certain distinction.

-“Tabatha’s granddaughter said that sometimes doorbells ring themselves, is that true?”

Franklin’s father steals a glance at Tabatha’s granddaughter, who barely gives an apologetic shrug.

“On occasion. It’s really late, you should be in bed” he answers. Someone asks Tabatha’s granddaughter if she needs a ride home.

“I’ll be fine” she responds which hardly answers the question. She wishes them all goodnight, winks at Franklin who will masturbate to her frequently throughout the following week, and heads out the door.

Her boyfriend is waiting for her around the corner.

“Would you please talk to me?” he pleads, following her as she strides on,-



pretending that there is no boyfriend hanging on to her coat sleeve.

-At the bus stop she must wait, but sits down between two obese women, leaving him no alternative but to kneel down in front of her.

“I am so sorry; I didn’t know that you were...” He stops because he does not want to say the word “pregnant” in front of the two obese women flanking Tabatha’s granddaughter.

A bus arrives but it is not the bus that she is waiting for. The two obese women, however, get up with great effort and get on the bus. The boy lets out a sigh of relief and sits down next to her,-

holding onto her hand like it’s the last piece of solid ground in a world that has turned upside down.

-The two obese women pay the driver their bus fare and sit down, one next to the other, leaving an empty seat between them so that their butt cheeks won’t touch on any rough turns. When they arrive at their destination they get off together and walk the two blocks to their apartment where their poodle, Bartholomew, is waiting for them, nearly starved to death.

Earlier in the day, Bartholomew was able to hunt down a rat which had been pestering him for the last week. Before he would wake up-

-Bartholomew was a late-riser,

-the rat would eat his half-a-can of Alpo that the two obese women left him in his bowl when they left in the morning. This left Bartholomew starving, and relying on only the half-a-can of Alpo that the two obese women would serve him when they got home at night. He has woken up early today and waits for the rat to appear, rearing its ugly head out of its

hole. The rat is nearly Bartholomew's size, but he reckons that if attacks it under the right circumstances the element of surprise will be of aid and there will be no great complication in the rat's execution.

When the two obese women enter the apartment the smell almost makes them vomit the fish tacos that they downed like wild animals at Hector's Taqueria earlier.

"What the frickin heck, Bartholomew!?" The first obese woman screams, swinging her handbag at the poodle. The second obese woman connects him with her foot, sending him yelping into the bathroom door.

They find the bottom half of the rat under the stove and the top half on a pillow like a grotesque imitation of hotel soap.

Bartholomew is left to sleep outside as punishment for the rat dismemberment incident.

He regrets nothing. He can still hear the rat's squeals as he pressed his jaw into its midsection and this fills him with joy.

Bartholomew is awoken twice by cars and once by a passing rat, which he imagines is scheming revenge for the homicide of one of his kind. The first car that wakes him is driven by a man named Jeremiah.

Earlier in the night, when arriving home from the late shift at the factory, Jeremiah's wife asked him for a divorce and admitted that she had been seeing someone else for the last five years.

Now he is driving to the house of his wife's lover with a loaded pistol in the glove compartment. Deep down Jeremiah has no real desire to murder the man, but he feels it is his duty as a husband, perhaps even his duty as a man, to show his wife how much he cares for her.



Even if that means shooting someone.

Still, his hands can't stop shaking, and the car swerves back and forth between the right and left lane.-

Jeremiah's grandmother once made a pecan pie and left it on the windowsill of their fourth floor apartment. This was when he was only seven years old, and reaching up for a piece of the pie he accidentally knocked it off the windowsill, towards the cold pavement below. He hid in a closet until his grandmother came back home from church wearing the black veil that she had worn since her husband's funeral. When she entered the apartment she was carrying the remaining pieces of pie.

"Wouldn't you know it, Jeremiah, but one of them damn pigeons must have knocked this pie from off the window... why you hiding in the closet, boy?"

One day she would admit that she had always known that it had been Jeremiah that had knocked the pie over. One day he would apologize.

-He stops by Fran's diner on the way to his wife's lover's house and asks for a piece of pecan pie.

"What you been up to Jerry?" The waitress asks with genuine enthusiasm as she props down the slice of pecan pie in front of him.

"Not much, Fran... Glass of milk would do wonders for this stale piece of pie, ya know?"

"Coming up. You seem on edge... is anything wrong?"

"Been thinkin' of moving. I'm sick of the city... I've lived here all my life, Fran... My lungs can't take the fucking smoke anymore, and I retire in



May, so... I don't know, my wife says we don't have enough cash to go anywhere nice, might as well stay here, but I'll be damned if I'm going to die run over by some Latino hood-rat cabdriver. City ain't no place for an old man"

"City ain't no place for a young man either, Jerry. Where do you wanna go?"

"Somewhere warmer, I guess. Maybe Florida"

"Florida's the waiting room for the afterlife, honey. That'll be two dollars fifty"

"I ain't dead yet" he says, pulling out his wallet "Keep the change, honey. You look lovely tonight"

He leaves the diner but hesitates to get back into the car. He reaches for his wallet again and pulls out a high school picture of his wife, the sun hitting the lens, and her hair partially obscuring her face.

"Beautiful..." he murmurs to no one but himself, and gets in the car.

This must be the place, he thinks, as he closes the car door and takes the steps up to his wife's lover's house. A woman opens the door after he knocks.

"It's really late" she mutters through a yawn "Who you looking for, man?"

"Does a Roberto live here?"

"Hell if I know, people coming and going as they please, step in, man, its cold outside"



“How do you not know if Roberto lives here?” Jeremiah asks as he tries to wipe his feet on the welcome mat without the gun moving in his pants.

“I imagine that Roberto must be some actor or a stage hand or something? There’s a whole troupe of them that rents the big room upstairs, and I’ll be damned if I’m going to learn all their names. They must be up, though, those people don’t sleep. It’s the only room upstairs, go ahead” she says, and mumbles, “Goddam squatters” to herself under her breath.

Jeremiah thinks about the name Roberto and wonders where he’s from. His wife gave him the name and the phone company gave him the address, but he knew nothing else of the man. He knew that he was younger than he was, and that made him feel awful. He hadn’t thought of the possibility of Roberto being young enough to have roommates though.

He knocks at the door of the room,

He will knock at the door of the room,

Which he will immediately regret, knowing it makes him come off as the polite pushover rather than the vindictive and violent husband which he will be trying to pull off. “That man would have kicked the door in and come in screaming”, he will think to himself.

Jeremiah is not that man.

A very young man will open the door.

“Are you Roberto?”

“No, he’s in the bathroom, come in”

Jeremiah will step into a large room lined with what seem to be a thousand posters, artsy sepia-toned pictures, and smoke from about ten differ-



ent bongos that adorn the room like some late seventies representation of what a chemistry lab would look like in the future. There will be about eight people in the room, all in their early twenties, all with either a drink or a cigarette or a deck of cards in their hand.

“You want something to drink, man?”

A blonde girl will throw Jeremiah a beer from across the room and it will smash into the wall-

,and a poster of The Grateful Dead,

-behind him. Jeremiah will stumble over to pick up the beer, but a boy with dreadlocks will hold him back.

“Chill, man, I got it”

“So, where do you know Roberto from? Or are you a fan? ‘Cause Roberto fucking hates fans”

Laughter will echo across the room, but Jeremiah will not know what they are laughing at.

Perhaps it is the gun, which he thinks is safely concealed in his pants, now clearly visible yet appearing to be a misplaced erection. Or maybe it is his barely concealed dismay at having found Roberto in this environment, in which he will surely not be able to murder him, let alone get away with it.

“No”, he will answer, “I’m a friend of Roberto’s mother... I came to give him a letter from her, but I seem to have forgotten it in the car. I’ll go get it and be right back”



As he leaves the house Jeremiah will wonder where his wife met Roberto. It might have been at Fran's diner, he reckons, it was close enough to Roberto's house and he knew that his wife went to the place often. He will stop by the diner on his way back home, but as he gets out of the car he will realize that it doesn't really matter. On top of that, he's actually quite full by now.

He will head back home, and in his own way, one day he will forgive his wife.

"Roberto can go fuck himself though", he will think.

Fran sees Jeremiah's car drive into the parking lot and then head out.

"Jerry must be drinking again", she will think.

It will be two in the morning by this point. She will decide to close up early and catch an early screening of a neo-noir festival being held at the Pantages theatre.

The theatre is far, but she will decide to walk, mainly because she hates taking cabs.

"The seats are always sticky, and the driver always tries to hit on you, and if he doesn't hit on you then he's a born again Christian seeking some type of redemption for all the coke he snorted in his youth", she will think. It's could though, and she's forgotten her overcoat at home.

She will arrive at the Pantages and realize that the film programmed for the night has been canceled because of a series of technical issues with the projection-

Rats have nibbled on the middle section of the film



-and she will flag down a taxi.

“Mind if we join in the Lord’s Prayer, missus?”

“Go ahead, I’m Jewish though”

“Oh...”

The taxi driver won’t say a word until they arrive at Fran’s apartment.

“Why are you out here, Bartholomew?” she will ask the poodle shivering on her welcome mat, “Did those evil fat fucks leave you outside?”

Bartholomew will look up, teary eyed, in response.

“Come in, then” she will tell him, as she unlocks the door and makes way for the streak of dirty white that rushes into the room and out of the cold.

She turns on the TV and switches to the news.

There’s a report about a cold front heading into the city and then there’s a report about some kids getting shot at school and a report about how the economic crisis is not expected to die down for another four years and a report about a governor that has been pardoned and a report about how winter will last more than summer next year.

And the world will come crashing down like it has before.

She will serve Bartholomew some left over pecan pie from the diner.



The dog will be wagging its tail, completely lost in the sound and moving images on the screen.

That's when she realizes that everyone's living in the future now.

That's when she decided to move.

That's when she decides to move.

That's when she will decide to move.



WHAT IT TASTES LIKE

I.
She woke that morning with a mouth that tasted like
Salted pennies, a bloody nose, and mud drying up in the
Sun the afternoon following a
Storm
Her joints ached and sounded like a broken swing set reminding
Her of a day she spent playing
Hide-and-go-seek with her brother but was never found and
The feeling of untwisting a too-tight knot while climbing out
The cupboard under the kitchen sink and not being able to get
The smell of windex window cleaner out her nose. She felt blue
Like the color of the cleaner not blue
Like the feeling but maybe it was blue
Like the feeling too.
A sort of clear
Almost happy blue that bubbled
At the top but stung if it stayed on your skin too long.
But she'd rather be pink than
Blue. She'd been pink the night
Before. Now her
Bed was stripped of its



Muscle leaving only a thin-boned
Mattress that looked
Mad at her. As she rose she wondered if she should
Make it but thought better of it because
That would remind of her dad who said
That a clean bed is a clean mind and she
Thought that was wrong.

II.

She told me she'd been molested but flicked the word off her tongue like rotten fruit with a sort of casual concern and punctuated molested with "I think" as if there were anything ambiguous about the theft of shine from sun. She didn't consider herself a sun but rather a dying star whose death would only be mourned light years later when all those who would have attended the funeral had already had their own. Molested— but she wasn't sure. As if there was nothing sure about the slipping of fingers like forceps into a flower's stigma to examine what it was that made it beautiful. There is damage in this sort of examination and the natural falling off of feather-like petals and the spreading of seed in places it doesn't belong.

III.

He visited
Her at school once and
Watched her from a seat by the teacher
While talking amiably about the basketball team
He reminded me of an accountant calculating
Her movements as numbers on a spreadsheet,
Halving the strings of digits that made up her hair.
Her head became cipher in which to dump all surplus.
He kept touching his lower lip and pulling it out from his thick
Head as if offering that bit of himself in compensation
For her practical use as a void, as an empty file
Filling quickly with all the facts he didn't want to
Pull out and organize. It was so much neater and
Precise, such better business to close the metal locker
Like the door of his mother's van he wanted to show her
Like the door of his mother's van he closed behind her.



IV.

She liked him and thought he was spring and summer, cool water rushing around her, or snapping at the surface as she dove in. Tanned skin and a sweet swim with a nice slim Camel hanging out the left side of his smile. He kissed like a vacuum and not just on lips but on neck, on ribs, on hips. He moved like a dancer when walking down long thin halls or like a wrestler in the last ten seconds of a match— neck bulging, sweat dripping, tight everything. He was a stressed strainer stripping sickness from she
Smelled sickness on she
Spread skinny limbs she
Didn't expect the feeling more like a knife than a
He told her he wanted to take her swimming in the
He slipped in quick and it stung like a bee and he

V.

They say when a star dies it makes a blackhole
That takes bits of the universe away but
Instead of galaxy navy blue puzzle pieces of space disappear one by one.
I think that's true for people too and death can be less than explosion it's
Inversion and spinning and the slow extraction of color, it's turning
Inside-out and waking up one morning to a bed that looks mad or with
A taste in your mouth like salted pennies,
A bloody nose,
And mud drying up the
Afternoon following
A storm.



YOUR HEART IS A RIBBON OF UNIMAGINABLE PROPORTIONS

I woke up this morning with a ribbon hanging down the side of my mouth
And, knowing it was my heart, I tucked it behind my ear for safekeeping.
But as I walked down the street it caught upon a twig
And pulled a foot of rope from my throat
Before I even noticed.

That night, with my heart wrapped around my torso, I got into bed
But when morning broke and I awoke, I saw that in my sleep
I had pulled my heart half a foot more and wrapped it around my head.
Worried now, I gathered up my ribbon
And tied it tight from my shoulder to my hip,
But as I went about my day the knots started to slip.

Despairing now that I was nearing the end of my rope
I began to tug and tug, just to end it all,
But as I pulled I began to wonder if it would ever stop,
Or if this was a magician's scarf—a ribbon with no end.
So, not knowing the answer but choosing to believe,
I got my scissors and neatly snipped the excess
And with my heart behind my ear I started my day again.

Featuring:

Tian-Ai Aldridge
Laura Andersen
Asalia Arauz
Rachel Atakpa
Trevor Bashaw
Becky Boban
Allessandra Brice
Karissa Chouinard
Tanvi Chowdhary
Brittany Coppla
Noah Corbett
Emma DePanise
Laura Dunbar
Gabriel Fisch
Tyler Gadaire
Adrija Ghosh
Danica Gligorevic
Parker Grubb
Deasia Hawkins
Ethan Heusser
Boone Jenkins
Sarah Renee Keller
Angela Kramer
Megan Lear
Jack McDonald
Bryan Miller
Dalton Monk
Shannon Piranian
Deon Robinson
Hannah Schotborgh
Ivan Solis
Jamie Stewart
Sukriti Vats
Elizabeth Wenger