



Cover Art
Other Minds by Meghan Brino

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The Streetcar

Mississippi State's Creative Arts Journal

Dear Reader,

In your hands, you hold the very best of Mississippi State University's creative arts community. The seventh edition of *The Streetcar* would not be possible without the collective efforts of a student body willing to promote, support, and share their work to a public willing to listen.

This volume is an expression of the emotional depth and compassion of Mississippi State students. Being the largest journal to date, the journal is arranged thematically and sectioned by quotes. Many of the works comment on cultural normalities, both positive and negative, that shape our interactions with ourselves and each other. Photography like "Home" and paintings like "Clamdigger" are respectful reflections of the unique heritages that converge in Starkville, Mississippi, while written pieces like "A Reintroduction to Form" and "Respectability Politics" remind us there is still change yet to come. With this in mind, please be aware that some of the content in this journal uses artistic expression to explore and represent emotional and physical trauma.

This year, our student organization experienced our own cultural change. We added new staff positions to support new events and to give voice to students from a wide range of backgrounds, from Finance and History majors to a number of Engineers. None of this was possible without the continued support of the Shackouls Honors College and the College of Arts & Sciences. We thank our faculty advisor, Dr. Eric Vivier for his persistent support and guidance. Additionally, we thank Kayleigh Few, director of the Writing Center, for making our Open Mics possible. Finally, thank you to our staff who gave of themselves to present you with the seventh volume of *The Streetcar*. Please enjoy.

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“In the star-suffocated sky, there is a great waiting silence.

She will know that I am a mother.”

— Jesmyn Ward, *Salvage the Bones*

Almost

Maeve Rigney

The lip-licking goodness of an unbaked pie,
The way an uninvented word rolls off the tongue
The feeling of unopened textbooks—
Birthday cards, voicemails
Unread obituaries
and essays,
and poems.

A hand that most nearly touches the small of your back,
The breath before an unspoken “I love you.”
A kite beaten down by strong wind,
Shaking fingers that barely miss a trigger,
The way a heart dies before it starts beating.



Slowly
Stone Vincent

Invidiosa

Will Textor

Spurn the spurner, repay the admirer, and, in one act, be twice revenged.

—Ovid, *Metamorphoses*, XIV.52-55

Once, a man sought the cure for longing
from the very woman whom he spurned.
He proclaimed that before he'd love her, instead,
leaves would grow on the waters
and seaweed would steep the palest hill
like hair.

She could no sooner harm the man
than she could douse the sun,
but envy is the thing, angel face, that sprouts
on the dark night of the soul.

And what's a man to a pot of charms?

An adder's fork? An owlet's wing?

The seething tides heel as she walks across the ocean,
abounding,

as if she trod on solid ground,
bare feet dry as mummy dust.

She reaches a moon-shaped pool
swathed in shadows.

Here is where her rival finds refuge from the bitter zenith.

Here is where woman ceases—behold the witch's heart:

wasted body, wretched squint, ivy-green breast,
come tongue soaked in venom.

When she gnaws, she is gnawed.

Here is where she wracks the pool
with monstrous poison,

where she mutters an incantation
until every life rings.

The water howls green,

swears she'll pay for it,

that her bones will reek and rot,

as baleful foam climbs to the surface
like leaves.





Krka
Meghan Brino



Soul Leader
Hanna Bewley

Abattoir

Will Textor

You awake in a forest ripe with gloom.
Corpse lilies bloom in droves
with breath so foul, it is visible.
A wispy claw curls for you to come hither.
Shrikes of every color rack branches
like a medicine cabinet, singing
pick your poison, pick your poison.
Pine needles tack a mixture of their prey
to tree trunks.

The Moon has spoken.
She has waned until all of her bright mercy
bled dry and dark.
You have counted years only because it was allowed.
The north star is gone from your sky,
and all others will follow suit.
Soon, no light abides to coax the night
against swallowing you whole.
Place your ears to the Earth,
and hear what she has to say:
Yours are the bones
for the sun to bake,
for the rain to sink,
for the wind to take.
For, it was only yesterday
that I saw the new moon,
with the old moon in her arms,
and she was cursing up a storm.

A Prolific Oppressor

Alyssa Avila

A single tendril stretches to initiate a sea of green.
Fresh saplings are subdued alongside even the wisest oaks.
Emerald leaves commence the suffocation and obliteration.
The verdant vining sneaks along the earth
Inexhaustibly engulfing everything it approaches while
Prudently concealing the casualties.
Here, Kudzu is king.

Veiled by the merciless vines,
The great oaks have nearly forgotten the sun's warmth.
They trudge upwards, battling
A snarled network of ravenous tangles.
The famished branches penetrate the lush armor,
As though emerging from the earth for the first time.
Victoriously, they bask in the sun.

Alas! The insatiable oppressor races to eradicate the competi-
tion.
Engulfing any chance of defeat,
The rapacious ruler swallows all hope,
And the landscape morphs
Into a glut of grotesque green forms,
An impenetrable necropolis.

Celebrating their latest bereavement,
Though the invasion has only begun,
The murderous leaves glisten,
Dancing in the sun.



Tree Vase
Lexus Giles

Bark of a Tree

Anne Marie Falls

She walks in the chapel every Sunday looking like that.
Her hair hangs down from her head like that of a poor man's
child

Clearly it has not seen a brush or barber in weeks,
But her husband does not seem to mind.

Her shirt stretches over her like a full face of make-up
It reaches up to her neck then down to her fingers
And her pants cling to her feet like grass clippings in the
morning dew

Even in the scorch of summer she is covered up like a family
secret.

But her husband claims he appreciates her modesty.
Her voice sings the song of a canary without a beak
She speaks softer than a cloud and less often than snow falls
in hell.

And when she does speak up, it's as if she is speaking for the
first time

I can't hear her even with my hearing aid

But her husband usually answers for her to save the
confusion.

Her hands shake like the wings of a hummingbird
But most weeks her husband will hold the hymnal, so she can
read the songs.

Her eyes stay glued to the ground as if she's studying it
And even when I talk directly to her she has trouble looking
in my eyes

Just like springtime without rain, something is not right with
her;

But that's not my business

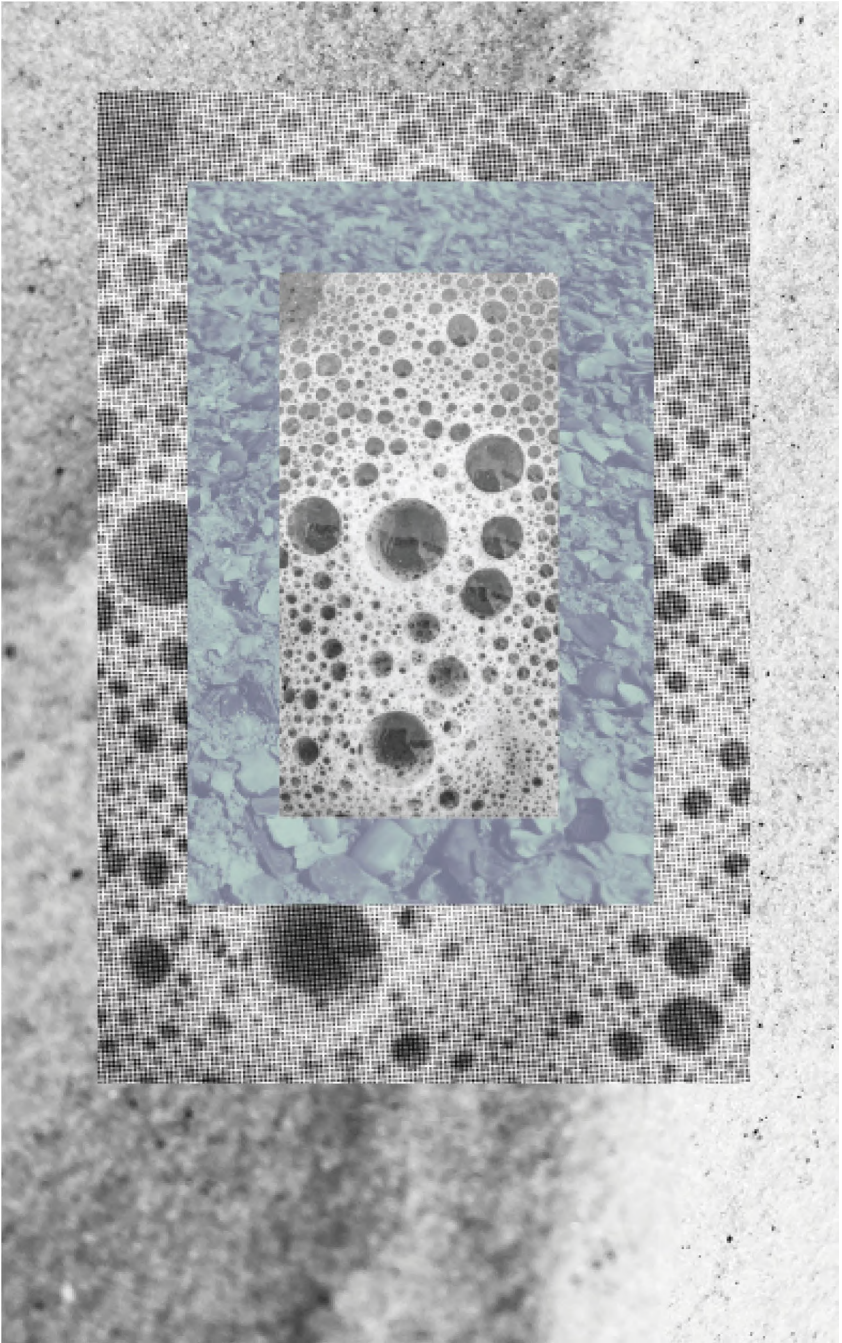
Her husband is always with her
like the bark of a tree.
He is wrapped around her, covering up something far more
beautiful on its own
He covers her in dark spots
It seems more like he is hiding her
What would be found if she were really seen
If her hair was put up
If her shirts didn't reach her wrists
If her pants didn't reach her toes
If her voice found its sound
If her hands were still
If her gaze met mine
What would be found
Underneath the bark of the tree



Girl With a Really Long Neck
Stone Vincent



*Girl With a Really Long Neck
but She's Upsidedown*
Stone Vincent

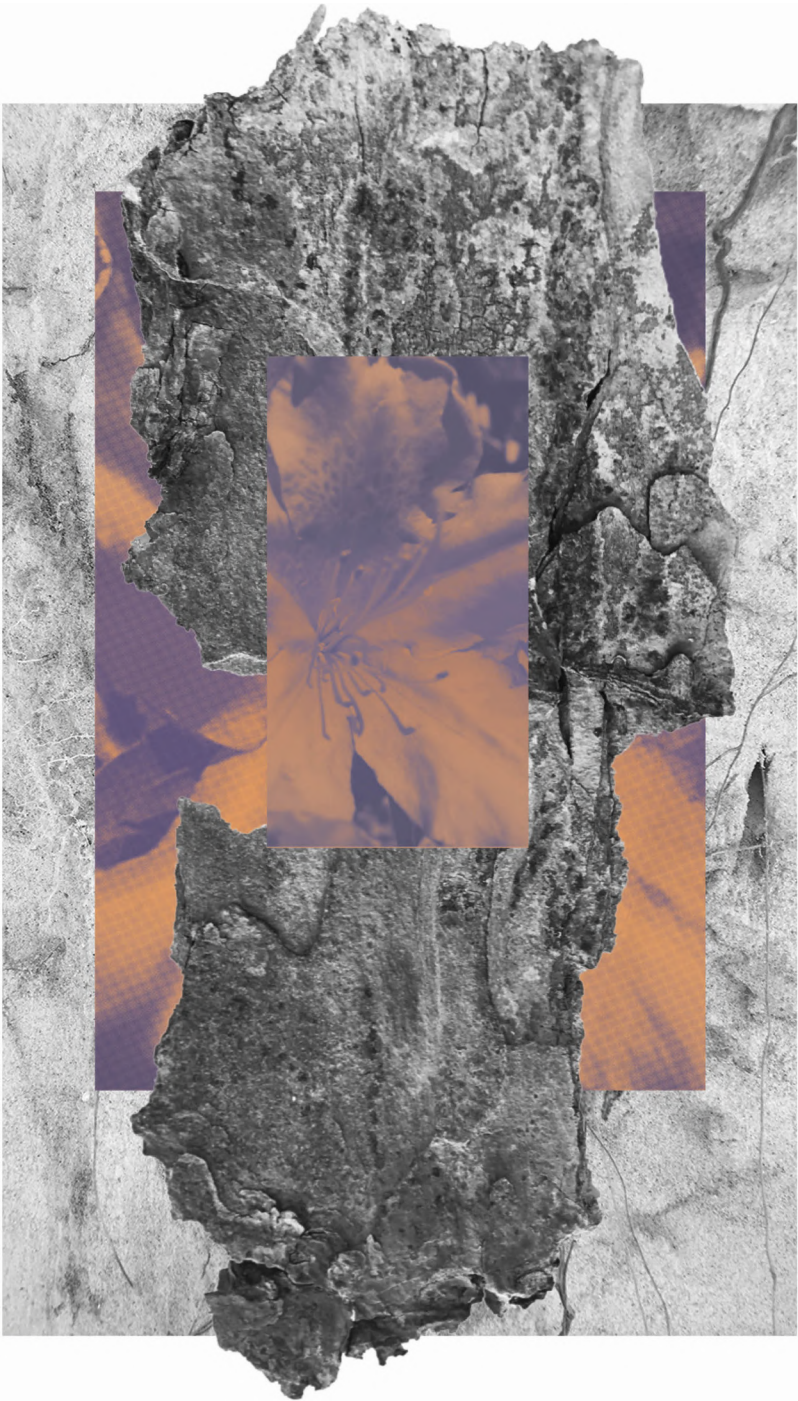


Nature as Design
Amelia Dalton

Divination

Will Textor

I'd like to think you sometimes catch a horsefly
smitten by your skin,
and recall when one loved mine equally,
when we counted bubblegum in a dish
to see who would jump first
into water so green, it puzzled—
the depths that couldn't be estimated.
I'd like to believe that, in conversation,
I rise on occasion
like those lake weeds
that caressed our toes
when we plummeted deeper than expected,
with their dead man's touch.
I'd like to know if you still take morning jaunts
in that little motor boat of yours,
if you still scout those swamp coves
as if there is something to be found,
if you could've sworn to see me capsized
to the waist, dowsing
for water moccasins.



Nature as Design
Amelia Daton

No Safety On A Body

Will Textor

Once he learned how to shudder,
a boy began his search for safety.
In a cavern of flesh, he lived with the bats,
slurping hot blood and the occasional peach.
Word got around that the rocks sold his secrets,
so, he couldn't stay.
From there he took off to the mountains,
chose a voluptuous peak strangled in fog,
where he could live out his days
learning to cull the milky weeds,
and see with his ears.
He was certain that safety lurked here,
somewhere here in the wizened air.
Up until one morning,
a gypsy cougar crossed his path.
It swore by its whiskers
that it could read the boy's fortune like prey:
the places it would lead, the people that would leave.
It snarled, snake-eyed that he would find nothing,
and be found, here and every place after.
So, the boy took cover in the eye of a storm,
where whirling night smeared star trails across the sky
like bed bugs—white guts rippling from the north star.
Then, he salted away behind mouths of the sea,
where lowercase u's strung together like paper dolls,
and the tides appended to popsicle sticks
bobbing in hitched motion.
Then, he stowed into the stomach of a trench,
where the only light shone from the jaundiced moon,
yellow as bile.
The only place left—he tucked into the loins of a tree,
behind leaves coiling into green smoke.



Nature as Design
Amelia Dalton

The Earth and Her Sun

Jane Kent

She made of stone,
and he made of fire,
burned through the night
as a brightly lit pyre.

He gave her flowers,
and she gave him gold,
they danced and they twirled,
the night young and bold.

Forgotten, they mused
as those lovers oft' do
of mornings and nightfalls
and days breaking anew.

~

It was not to last.
They knew this of course.
Their bones would grow brittle,
their voices grow hoarse.

She wanted to save him
and save him she did.
Magic and Madness
would take her rash bid.

She made of stone
an altar for him
filled crevices with presents
and light from within.

Of the old now come
upon it sat riches,
but what he wanted most,
she never gifted.

A sacrifice, gods envy
the cards, she had dealt.
Her loss would be vict'ry,
though one rarely felt.

Her blood spilled on over
the ridged, dark sides,
the stains ne'er to come out.
To the shadows she'd hide.

A death fit for warriors,
she had braved them all,
but he made of fire,
her name he did call.

He found her body
empty of her.
He vowed then and forever
the world would burn.



Softly
Stone Vincent

My Mother

Maeve Rigney

My mother was the rain.
She was not the kind of rain
that bleeds through poorly-plastered roofs,
and leaves mold circles on low ceilings.

Nor was she the kind of torrential rain
that destroys crops,
and knocks down tiny trees.

The rain of my mother is the kind
that leaves little puddles on the side of the street for kids to
play in,
that makes the whole world have that wonderful smell
of fresh earth and wet concrete.

And you don't care that the rain has ruined your clothes
And waterlogged your boots
because nothing matters but the sky.

Verena

Lindsay Pace

Her tiny hands slid through the warm earth and across her face. She brushed mud across her forehead, hiding all the youth she held. Then her button nose. Then, and especially then, her salmon cheeks. *Hide yourself, walk in three, do not look at them*, she recalled. Her parents warned her of the *Russische Soldaten*. Russian soldiers. They snatched little girls and spit on their teeth, jarred their rotting flesh against little, fragile bones, then made the girls wipe their heavy boots. While American girls were listening to Elvis, kissing boys and dancing, my mother was surviving East Germany.

Mother had many stories like this, like the time she stole rations and was punished with a week of hard labor. Or the time she refused to share her identity with sneering Soviet guards. Or the time, at twelve, she lied for three days about the Jewish woman in her closet. Or, best of all, the time she and my father left gatherings and holidays and scrapbooks and teddy bears to cower breathlessly inside of a supply truck going to the West side of Berlin. She lived the war. She breathed justice. And she was impossible. Every crease in her tired, ivory skin screamed out stories to me, her eager audience.

I was her only child, a well-intentioned plan brought to life one November morning in 1969. She and my father named me Verena, after the Egyptian saint whose every movement served the poor and needy until she herself became this way. More fitting for my mother, my name is a reminder to give to those who cannot take and to die this way in martyrdom. And so we practiced this. Together we boiled red potatoes and parsley on Sundays for hungry families. We employed Jewish survivors and returners at Kahler Gewürze, our spice factory, my father's inherited pride. We taught children to pray to saints and see God's goodness in our misunderstandings. My mother told me to love everyone, to tear my heart apart for Jews, to try and understand Nazis and to forgive

Russian soldiers for raping little girls. “*Aus Schaden wird man klug,*” she would say. Through damage one becomes wise. She had seen the war end. She had escaped to the West side. She had built a life for herself as a neighborhood saint. Now she waited for the East and West to unify, for the lifelessness of communism to revive with lighting color.

It was a shame that she died a year before it fell.

*

“Frau Kahler,” barked the Madame, “Today your spine is weak. Posture.”

Madame Basiner, a French ballerina, lifted her sharp, sallow chin a few inches higher. Her eyes barreled down her nose to peer at me in disdain, and like a twig, I snapped into position.

I was 18, olive-skinned and marvelous. That day marked three months at the Berliner Tanzeninstitut and four months without my mother. Back then, she had celebrated my acceptance into the prestigious program in bed, lungs filled with pneumonia, weeks before she left my father and I.

“I am going to dance in America! I can go to England! I can see the Eiffel Tower!” I beamed, spinning with my hands held to my heart, absorbing the velvet, magic moment.

“You are delicate,” my mother smiled. “And you will move heaven and hell from their seats.” She paused. “But don't leave the church in the village, Verena. Work for it.”

And that was that. In one motion she both celebrated and instructed me as she had done my whole life. Later, my father made a chocolate caramel cake to celebrate and we guzzled sweet, white, Berliner beer like lapping dogs. Our tongues fizzed. Our teeth ached. And our living room was a stage we danced on. From her cot, mother took photos, and we sang loudly in celebration, laughing the way you do when your lungs beat against your ribcage.

Then she coughed. He glanced at her, frail and buried beneath a cream, woolen blanket knitted in loose loops. His shoulders sunk like his body was wet dirt. Even the air abandoned us in that moment, everything stiff, surreal. Soft tears

rolled onto our linked hands and mother blessed us.

Collectively, we felt bone-deep that this togetherness would soon empty into gutters.

Mother would leave.

I would leave.

And we weren't sure which would come first.

*

“Time! You aren't in time!” Madame Basiner said, the inner corners of her chocolate brows cymbal-crashing together. Her lips became pencil-drawn, a graphite line so thin and light it disappeared.

My calves ached. I wanted to stop spinning, I wanted to rip apart my nude flats and torch them, grind them, stuff them into glass shakers and sell them from our shop. Seasoning for Madame Basiner. Salt for her food.

Behind me, a wall of glass displayed the bustling streets of West Berlin. Lush trees fostered shades of lime and forest and meadow, and white budding flowers sang for spring. Women wore mauve satin dresses and nylon stockings. Men had suits of grey, the kind with texture, and ties to match. It was altogether lovely, those streets and their people. And we were dancing right beside it all every single day.

I would not quit even though I wanted to. I thought of the street people, and I glanced at Martina, my Italian friend, attentive and loyal to Madame Basiner's instruction. Ever so slightly, her spine lifted as if pulled by fishing wire, a beautiful puppet. She closed her eyes and inhaled as the music began again. I fingered my Saint Verena necklace and followed suit, a martyr, a ballerina, an artist.

*

“Christ,” Martina crushed a cigarette, lit it, and rest it between her lips. “She's tough today. *A carne di lupo, zanne di cane.*”

I tilted my head.

“You must meet roughness with roughness,” Martina smiled. “We need to be as hard on our practice as she is on us.”

“Maybe then we'll stop suffering,” I joked.

“Please, God.”

I smiled. “But it's good to be distracted here. It's ... times are frightening, Martina.”

I lit a cigarette, flicked the lighter.

“What, with your mom gone?”

“No, I mean, yes — ah, *jein*. I mean, more so, the East. Two boys died this week trying to escape.”

And it was true. Three little boys, under six, played near the Eastern riverside, right beside the wall. The newspaper said they jumped into the river because their football fell in, poor babies, and they wanted to retrieve it. But the guards saw them as a threat, as faceless, nameless, ageless convicts trying to pass through to the other side. So they shot them in their heads until they sunk, until water became wine.

This is not uncommon. It hasn't been uncommon for twenty-nine years now. Imagine the day it became: imagine waking up to a border dividing your city, to being stuck on the developing half while your eldest son and his wife will suffer Soviet communism. To waking up in time to run to the other side — or to not run and regret it. Or to never see your neighbor again, to spend the whole of your youth wondering what television is, to having guards taunt you, to having to choose if you should birth your baby or save him with a coat hanger, because he will grow up in this miserable, grey chaos. Everything is determined by the government and hidden from its people, as if they are unworthy of knowing truth. In a state like this, everyone feels silenced. Whole lives have been swallowed up by these vertical slabs of concrete. People are very, very angry.

“*Scheisse*,” Martina said. Shit. “Didn't a man die last week? Trying to cross around the watchtower?”

“Yes, and a family. They tried to smuggle their baby, but it was crying,” I drew circles on the concrete with my toes. “The mom suffocated her by mistake, so the soldiers shot them in front of everyone.”

Martina's eyes became quiet glass. “This is why my

father didn't want me to study here.”

I nodded.

“But I just couldn't resist Basiner, huh?”

She crushed her cigarette with a gentle scuff, as to keep her shoes intact, and we returned to the studio where the West-side window gave light.

*

Martina introduced me to Mark first. A friend of a friend, he joined us one night at a wine garden in Spandau. He was an excellent painter, half-Ghanan, half-German, and he struck me as both interesting and divine. His mother, like mine, had escaped something. He, like me, loved fine arts. And he, like me, cared deeply for life.

“If I told you that Prince was coming to Spandau next month, would you go?” he asked.

“Are you kidding? Only if you dance with me to ‘Purple Rain.’”

“That's exactly the only time you'll pay attention to me, Verena. You and Martina will be wedged against the stage, grasping for the hem of his jeans the rest of the time.”

He stretched out his hands, palms curved into beggar's bowls, and curled his face into adoration, mocking me.

“Like Jesus!” I laughed. “I just want to touch the hem of his garment.”

And so we started with wine and moved to Prince. In *augenblick*, the blink of an eye, we loved each other. Everything was marvelous with Mark, from the way he wore his hair — relentlessly untamed — to battered denim and shirts marred with burn holes. He wore sandals made of rope, an icon of our hippie youth.

I needed him. Being away from my freshly widowed father terrified me. I called my father when I could and wrote him letters to reread in his loneliness, but it didn't feel like enough.

“*Meine Suss-Hase*,” Father would say. My sweet bunny. “Don't frown so much over me. You're troubling yourself. I want you to dance.”

I'd protest.

He'd protest.

And our calls would end with a promise of chocolate caramel cake the next time I'd come home, with an extra piece for Mark, if he would like.

*

“Well, I want to go, but I don't *want* to leave you, Verena,” Mark said, head resting on his fist.

“But, it's only for a month,” I said, resting my hand upon his forearm. “You'll be back by mid-November, which, by the way, is good for warm coffee together, hiding under blankets, and all of the other things we'll do to catch up.”

It was October 8th, 1989. By chance, Mark had been given the privilege of shadowing an artist for a month in Cape Town, South Africa, after another student decided to stay in Berlin. I had been ecstatic for him. He'd have a chance to explore his mother's heartland, to be in a place that has a history similar to Germany's. He would grow, he would change, he would dig up old roots, and here he sat, worried I'd be upset at the opportunity.

“Listen, Mark, as long as you promise to be back on the 11th —”

“Your birthday!”

“Then we'll be fine. Because if you miss my birthday —”

“Then I miss your dad's cake and you'd be very, very disappointed in me.”

“Absolutely.”

We haphazardly threw battered denim and burn-holed t-shirts and no hairbrushes into his bag. We kissed a lot, drank wine with friends, and sent him off in cheers no less than a week later.

*

“Poignant expressions. Pointed toes. Proper form. Repeat this,” Madame Basiner demanded.

Martina and I glanced at each other, breathless. Today had been excruciating *en pointe*, toes purpled, arches stiff. We

would perform this weekend, an early welcome to Christmas with a November showing of *The Nutcracker*. Every micro-movement had to be as perfect and untouchable as a glass prism.

Spin, kick, spin.

Allegro, arabesque, allonge.

We practiced eleven and a half hours, until exhaustion and hunger ate through to the bare bones of us. It was 7 p.m. We could leave. Before going, Martina and I massaged the knuckles on our toes, the bend in our knees, and thought of what we'd like to eat. Perhaps a hamburger, or pasta, or curry. We slipped sandals onto our feet and exited street side.

*

Stillness.

"Is it just me, oooooor..." Martina trailed off, staring ahead into a small crowd.

An unusual chatter lilted from curbside, where the mass of bodies multiplied exclamations. A light post flicked on. A cafe flung open its doors, and a man shouted to everyone.

"At midnight! At midnight!"

The crowd cheered and people scattered in all directions, kicking over trash cans and pummeling fists into sidewalk. A woman fell, breasts heaving in malicious sobs.

I grabbed Martina's arm and pulled her forward.

"Hello? Hello, can you help me?" I motioned to a man briskly walking by. I gesture to the crowd, bewildered.

The sun was hiding behind a navy-grey sky, air cold, people rubbing their arms and bouncing on their toes. Life was moving around us in little circles, encompassing everything, bringing vibrancy to tired bodies.

"You don't know? This is good! Gunter Schabowski! He, thirty minutes ago, said East Berlin can pass at midnight!" He is a beam of light, rugged, breathless in joy.

"Pass to here? To here?"

"Yes, the wall, it goes at midnight!" He threw back his neck in a fit of laughter, stomping his black loafer into ground.

For only a moment, Martina and I were dumbfounded, scrambling to make sense of a day I had only imagined. I screamed, violent joy barreling from my chest. Martina and I cried together, our knees knocking on cold pavement. I thought: *We just saw the war end on the street.*

*

Inconceivable happiness, incomparable joy, incredible history fills the world all at once. One decision. One interview. One journalist. One broadcast. One call. Two calls. Two hundred calls. Ten thousand people lined up. Billions of people worldwide keeping track. Textbooks are changing on their shelves. Grandmothers meet their grandchildren for the first time. Twenty-nine year olds can watch whatever they want on television. *This* is what it means to make history.

Two coins down a chute and I called Mark, no answer. I called again, answer. Tomorrow he will come. I tossed my sandals into bushes and Martina and I ran wild through the city, bare feet not flinching once. Somehow our bodies still carry us well after twirls and twirls. We ran and ran and ran and the pavement was cold and Mark was flying in as soon as he could and the war was over and the war was over and the war was over and the wall fell at midnight. Bare hands pulled it apart like warm bread. History became piles of broken concrete.

*

My knees, my palms were made of ash. The wall was everywhere on us: our scalp, our sweaters, our eyelashes. People beating it with picks and shovels. Martina and I have climbed through bodies, men lifting us to see the other end where our Eastern friends were crying. Broken bits of the wall in my pocket, people were clenching rubble in their raised fists. Beside me a bed sheet read "*Wilkommen zu Westberlin!*" Welcome to West Berlin! And this the anthem pulsing through us as one body: welcome. You are welcome here. You are wanted here. You are needed here.

An ocean of people crash through. We hug them, gave them our beer, cried with them, stroked their temples and say

I love you. The sky has bottomed out and liquor fell. American soldiers gave candy to babies and stockings to women and food to hungry people. Carts of bread and rolls line every corner. We kissed each other, all of us, and galloping through the streets. Some of us naked, most bruised from commotion. But everyone intoxicated with palpable hope.

*

I wasn't sure how it happened. Some blamed a press conference mistake. Others, a fed up Western guard. But we didn't care, because we knew then that we could call all of Berlin home, that Germany could be unified and work to kiss their wounds from the bottom up.

*

The next evening, I returned to my apartment and immediately walked into my bathroom. My eyes — my mother's eyes — were dull and red but my skin was golden, much like hers. I would have given my life for her to have experienced this. I would have switched bodies with her the day that we ate cake, or the day she was placed into a lacquered box.

I rested my back against the door, slid to the ground, and choked. I choked all of it up: grief, change, joy, insurmountable joy — my soul wretched it all up upon linoleum. The infinite tension released as I felt the gravity of life. How a moment can end 29 years of trauma. How you love someone in a matter of moments. How my mother survived all of the pain; how I survived all of the joy.

It was at this moment that a knock came upon my door. *Mark*, I thought.

“Wait!” I called.

My silver-knobbed sink screeched as I twisted its handles to release warmth. One last glance at my face. *I miss you, Mother.*

A cloud of grey powder rose when I placed my hands beneath the water.

This was the wall washing down the sink.

“I have the nerve to walk my own way,
however hard, in my search for reality,
rather than climb upon the rattling wagon
of wishful illusions.”

— Zora Neale Hurston,
Letter to Countee Cullen



Other Minds
Meghan Brino

Respectability Politics

Joseph Neyland

Stephon Clark, the unarmed 22-year-old killed by Sacramento police officers earlier this month, was shot eight times, ...[in] the back yard of his grandmother's house...with most of the bullets hitting him in the back... Clark [was] a black man and a father of two.

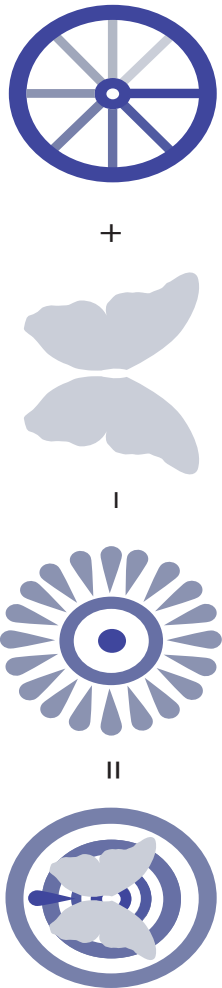
—Mark Berman, *The Washington Post*, 30 March 2018

Don't you just
Hate
when your mom tells you to wash the dishes and then you do
it,
like really Do It,
because you Know that
“Washing the Dishes”
really means
“Have the Kitchen Spotless”
and you somehow managed to turn a Dalmatian into a polar
bear,
Spotless
and you feel like your dad
did when you brought him stick figures you doodled,
and he beamed
down at you and ruffled your hair, so Proud
hands on your hips and the smell of bleach in your nose
but then
your ma comes in to inspect your handiwork and starts
Screaming
about how the Trash isn't Empty
but you Definitely took the trash out and you
Most Definitely
remember seeing her toss a Coke bottle in the Trash after you
took it out
(and that don't even go in the Trash, it goes in the Recycle),
but you
keep quiet

because telling her that won't help
because she is deafened
by the Power of her own words, and she's saying,
"How hard could it be to just Wash the Dishes"
but it really means
"How Dare You not fulfill every Law I made for you
even though I change them to my liking whenever I please"
and suddenly
for some reason
you think back to what the cops did to your dad
that Day in the backyard
and that's when you
Realize
that the world is a Kitchen
and you have to Wash the Dishes



Abstract 1312
Luke Townsend



Chaos Theory

Universe
The universe consists of all existing matter and space considered as a whole; the cosmos.

Randomness
Randomness is the quality or state of lacking a pattern or principle of organization; unpredictability.

Divination
Divination is the practice of seeking knowledge of the future or the unknown by supernatural means.

Chaos Theory
The Idea of Unpredictability
The Chaos Theory deals with complex systems whose behavior is highly sensitive to slight changes in conditions so that small alterations can give rise to strikingly great consequences.

Chaos Theory
Amelia Dalton



Charcoal
Natalie Bowers

Deus Ex Machina: The God Machine

Jane Kent

Generally speaking, the public has a relatively high bar for replacing something that works, particularly if there is a risk of failure, and especially when their children are concerned... When it comes to replacing something broken, however, the bar for intervention is much lower.

—Jack Schneider, *The Atlantic*, “The Disruption of America’s
(Broken) Education System,” 22 June 2016

Name me a big idea, she said, her mouth pursed in a trap
built for the titans of thought, the pioneers of progress.
Name me a big idea, she said, her eyes piercing slits
through the gaps in her lashes; the running belt churns.

Manifest destiny, I said, my hands resting on the table
sturdy under my fingertips, but something shakes under my
bones.

Radical feminism, I said, my knee bouncing a rhythm only I
can hear.
The song tastes like panic, the knife’s edge of red ink.

Try a different one, she said, her lips quirked in conquest.
She has me by the throat, she thinks, she has me by the hair.
Try a different one, she said, her eyebrow reaches the stars.
She has me by the wrists, she thinks, I only know one way to
think.

Bodily autonomy, I said, my eyes escape to the pipes in the
wall,
ruptured and exposed; the water stain spreading with each
second—
evolution, I said, pupils glued to someone else’s problem,
and I have run out of pipe, out of effort, out of script.

The God Machine, I said, my brows sewn together.
The pattern spells confusion but not like the books say it
should.

The God Machine, I said, my throat closed at its base;
repetition is for the insane, but I only know one way to think.



American Made
Hanna Bewley

Disenchantment

Dylan Bufkin

Everyone can agree that one of the big differences between us and our ancestors of 500 years ago is that they lived in an ‘enchanted’ world, and we do not.

—Charles Taylor, “Western Secularity,” *Rethinking Secularism*

I read antiquity’s old tomes and tales,
Which told of splendor lost to man and rot.
Uncertainty revealed divine travails
In all aspects which nature grew and wrought.

The world was wonderous with unknowns
Painted on every branch, and stone, and sea.
The sky was ruled by pantheons and thrones,
Upon which sat the lords of all that be.

This land of yore, overseen by untold
Amounts of deities, was dripping with
Potential. Every tongue spoke of the bold
Heroes, whose deeds inspired remembered myth.

How cruel science has stolen from mankind,
Enchanting certitude inside the mind!



State of Mind
Mary Ranie Miller

*Reform*¹

Reagan Poston

I drive through Reform,
tell it no,
a habit harkened from my grandma,
ever sneering
at the demand of change.
She is of static country,
of buttress trees,
of branches supporting,
well, everything,
tells me the good eggs
look like the sun.
And everyone else, dim.

One Sunday, we went to mass,
not to convert, reform, because, no,
but because she said,
for a woman who can't hear thunder,
the ritual is music.
The offering plates caught on candles,
passed and passed.
I gave my last five,
and she sat beside me,
chin up, lulled and nulled by the lights,
nails green and cracked to the quick
from splitting snap peas apart.

We'd spent hours combing the rows,
twisting at the stems,
blinking into the dawn
until our hands filled,
and we dropped all we had
into the same dented, metal tub
she'd bathed all fourteen
of her grandchildren in.

When I was four,
I dropped her left opal earring
into the sink.
It curved like a crescent moon
away from my face,
and I watched it circle,
stone catching light catching needle,
down into the drain.

Reform has a hurricane feel,
and the best farmer's market in fifty miles.
I tell it no, but roll the windows down,
tub in the back,
her beside me,
chin up, breathing in the green/gold air,
single earring catching the light.

1. Reagan Poston's work recieved second place in the 2019 Southern Literary Festival, Poetry Division

For Grandpa T

Brady Kruse

A cracked concrete driveway and a shitty orange hoop – that’s how it started. The kind of backboard where after every shot, a ten-second break was needed until the post stopped swaying.

And a shitty little me, emotionally cracked already – that’s how I started. The kind of kid that every time he wasn’t picked for kickball would slap himself in the face to “man-up” until tiny handprint bruises started to form.

I wasn’t strong enough to throw the ball to the rim. Even for a five-year-old, I was miniature. I bounced the ball best I could, my awkward hands attempting to dribble. But no matter what I did, I couldn’t help from bouncing the ball on the chat rocks that overflowed from the gravel road and shot my basketball in a random direction. I’d huff and puff as I chased the bouncing ball into the yard, blaming myself for not being better.

My grandpa eventually came out to watch; I had to impress him. No man in the world did I respect more than Grandpa T. He could make a free throw, he was good at basketball, he knew everything. He sat in his favorite chair and it groaned under his massive frame. He slowly stroked his red beard, watching intently. I grabbed the ball, mustered my strength, and launched it as high as I could. Not even close. Stupid me.

“It’s alright Alex-boy!”

I chucked another pitiful attempt. The basketball landed on a pebble and flew into the grass. I couldn’t help it; hot tears ran down my cheeks. I’ve always hated that about myself – the fact that I cry when I get frustrated. I covered my eyes as Grandpa retrieved the ball, I couldn’t let him see me.

But he didn’t care when I missed.

*

“I wanna play college basketball!” Eleven-year-old me ran into the kitchen, clad in Duke basketball gear, proudly wearing my new high-tops that matched Grandpa T’s. At sixty-five, he still played basketball. He laughed and stroked his now grey beard. He told me my shoes were “slick.” I liked that word. I was eager to use it.

Grandpa T retrieved his college yearbook and opened it. For the first time in my life, I saw him not as I knew him, but as a young man: he was handsome, strong, yet somehow, exactly as I knew him already. Vividly, I remember the yellowed pages that detailed his incredible basketball career. Massive numbers, scoring records, undefeated seasons, I was amazed. I knew I had to be like him.

*

A year later, kickball remained the dominant elementary school sport. I was never picked for a team; eventually, I stopped trying. I didn’t care anyway. I had basketball.

The blacktop was mine for the taking since nobody else wanted to play. My recesses were devoted to form shooting and layups, somehow alone on a full playground.

One day the kickball popped, ran over by a bus of all things. Ten kids wandered over to me.

“We want to play.”

Okay, whatever. I’ve practiced, I’m good. I can beat them anyway.

A game started and ended quickly. I lost terribly. As a victim of late-puberty, I couldn’t help that they were bigger, stronger, and faster than me. But that excuse wasn’t good enough.

I took off my high-tops and threw them over the fence. Immediately, I felt ashamed and imagined the hurt I would cause Grandpa T when I told him where my new shoes had gone. But I shrugged off the pain. I didn’t deserve them. I had to be better. Grandpa T would be disappointed.

*

“WHAT THE FUCK IS WRONG WITH YOU?”

Spit splattered my face when my red-faced coach decided he'd yelled at me enough. At seventeen years old, I contemplated the apparently horrible crime of shooting (and making) an open three-pointer considered sinister enough to be benched in a game; I had already put up twenty-five points. It was the district championship.

Standing six-four, lean, and strong, age had finally blessed me with the makings of a basketball player. As fate would have it, my coach thought differently.

The season started with so much hope. A summer of training, basketball camps, and weight rooms turned me from decent to fantastic, the scourge of pick-up games and open gyms across the county. Every coach in the conference knew my name. Yet, here I was, cursed with a dictator who decided no matter what I did, I was always somehow wrong.

We won a whopping four games that year. My teammates didn't care. They sniggered and laughed and basked in the awfulness – drinking before games, practicing hungover, because who gives a shit?

“Look at Alex,” they said, “What a faggot. He actually tries. He thinks he's better than us because he got lucky on the ACT and is going out of state. He'll be back soon anyway. Nobody ever leaves this town.”

I put my head in my hands as the final seconds of my basketball career ticked to a close. I had never even met a college scout. My heart sunk, and I resolved to never play basketball again.

The buzzer sounded. I couldn't look up.

Grandpa T was in the crowd. He always was. It didn't matter that he lived two hours away, he made every game anyway. I couldn't look at him. I had failed.

*

“I'm home safe. Sorry about the game. Your coach is an idiot. Keep playing, for me.”

A text dinged at 2 AM. I rolled over, still wearing my sweaty jersey. I sighed and looked at the hole in the wall I left

a few hours before, my hand still bloodied. With a feeling of duty, I set my alarm for 5 AM. The guys at the YMCA play for a few hours on Fridays before school.

*

“That coach is a damn idiot. You’re a great player. Don’t let him stay in your head.”

I never heard Grandpa T curse before. I was beyond shocked.

Even more surprising was that Grandpa T had driven two hours just to watch me play pick-up at 5:30 AM, and to watch me play horribly at that. Every time I stepped on the court, I remembered the laws imposed on me back in high school. I thought of my former teammates jeering and I re-lived my old coach telling me I was awful.

The bright lights hurt my tired eyes. I still had to go to school after this game. Nonetheless, I grabbed the ball from him and stepped back on the court. I wasn’t going to let him down.

*

“Holy SHIT! White boy can PLAY!”

I sunk another three and jogged down the court. I smiled – this was just too much damn fun. Even though I played every night, they’re always shocked by me. The college rec center had become my palace.

I opened my duffel bag, retrieved my phone, and texted Grandpa T – an update on my latest test, a video of me successfully dunking, and a play-by-play of the intramural championship game the night before.

My phone rang; Dad’s contact popped up. I answered and listened.

Nausea rushed over me. My legs shook, and I fell back against the wall. I got up, sprinted to my car, and sped home.

*

I called Dad for an update on Grandpa. He was forcibly taken back home again. It was the third trip to the hospital that week.

“Dad he’s not safe there.”

He knew.

Nobody could figure out what happened. One day, Grandpa T was Grandpa T. Happy, energetic, excited as always; cutting wood and shooting hoops. One night involving a pistol and a note later, he’s a hollow shell. A stroke? Alzheimer’s? Dementia? Eventually, they settled on major depression.

A quadruple dosage of antidepressants is all they allowed him. He told the nurses that he’s suicidal, that he’s scared. They listened, but his family didn’t.

Grandma was convinced that the family was going to fix him, that these doctors couldn’t help. They were all just idiots anyway. He’ll snap out of it, he’ll be fine. He doesn’t need help, he’s best at home.

I sent Grandpa T another text, but I knew I wouldn’t get a response.

I didn’t know what to do.

I grabbed my basketball.

*

“Grandpa it’s time to open presents!”

Grandpa T stared at me blankly. I brought the box to him and opened it, then acted surprised at the new basketball shoes that I knew I was getting. Snowflakes fell outside, covering the crappy hoop that had been there for as long as I could remember.

Grandpa T got a present as well – the exact same pair of shoes.

For a brief second, he smiled. I stared at him as long as I could, soaking in the expression I hadn’t seen in so long.

I blinked, and the smile was gone.

In that moment, I knew that I had just said goodbye to my Grandpa T.

*

I had been playing for six hours, and there was no stop in sight. Maybe I’d eat dinner, or maybe even do homework that night, but hey, I was too hot to quit.

I checked my bag. Twelve missed calls from Dad. One of my teammates yelled at me to get back on the court.

“Alex...I need you to sit down.”

I had never heard my Dad cry before. I broke my hand punching the wall.

*

The funeral was large. After all, Terry was known throughout the whole town. He had coached and taught for almost thirty years.

They did the best job they could preparing the body. He had lost almost all his weight. His once mighty build looked like a cancer patient.

There were still a few bruises on his neck. Still a little rope burn. Nobody ever thought to lock the tool shed.

I excused myself to the restroom. Hot tears flowed down my cheeks. God I fucking hate that.

I raised my hand on myself. Why didn't I lock the shed?

Slap

Why didn't I text him more?

Slap

Why didn't I come home more?

Slap

Why didn't I play better?

Slap

Blood dotted from the fingernail marks on my cheek. My ears were ringing, and my entire face stung. Good, I decided. I earned it.

I washed my face. I figured they were probably wondering where I was and stepped back into the parlor.

It was my turn to speak. I walked to the podium.

“Grandpa Terry loved his family, but quite possibly, he loved basketball even more.” The crowd laughed respectfully. “As a coach and lifelong educator, he often told his players that basketball was more than a sport, or even a lifestyle. To Grandpa Terry, it was comfort. It was hope. It was fellowship. It was learning and, today, it is his legacy.”

*

And so here I am, writing a story about a man that I can never do justice to, no matter how hard I try.

I'm mad at myself – I wish I could write better for him. I wish I could truly tell you what he was like. I wish I could make you feel the way I feel about him.

I think back to the gravel chat on his driveway, to the bigger kids at my school, to my terrible coach, to Grandpa's depression, to his battle, to the help he never received, and I realize that some things cannot be controlled no matter how hard I try.

But that doesn't mean I can't find hope. Grandpa T taught me that.

“I love you Grandpa.”

I'm going to go play basketball.



Culture Culture Culture
Bhakti Patel

We Found the Water

Reagan Poston

We found the water
in Double Springs, Mississippi,
stretched out across the bridge,
turned our palms to the pin-pricked sky.
She told me, “Ormer Borealis,”
And I saw the Aurora in our sky,
thrown to the heavens by her words,
hiding just behind the trembling treetops.

I don't know where she found the word,
Ormer, but it tumbled out
around the chip in her front tooth,
the trouble she'll never dig out of,
and I didn't know what it meant
because I had never dared to dream of
scooping up mother of pearl from foreign soils.
I didn't tell enraptured little boys
on the beach that the sand dollar doilies
I take from the tide are nothing but corpse,
and I think that's close.

We walked those two springs
and found a burial at sea.
A man fell from our bridge,
maybe by accident, but
since then, we do not drink
the water we find here,
the holy of the coursing springs.
There is nothing but corpse.

Tonight, I am a dragon with fire in my gut,
and I first learned what it means to be inevitable
in a fourth-grade letter sent home to Mom
when I giggled how starfruit tastes
like vodka. (I had never known vodka.)

My best friend learned
what it means to be accountable
in the sky and in herself, shrugged,
tells me, “We come under our own rules.”
And I don’t know where she finds the words.
Underneath the pebbles she tosses,
picks up, inspects, tosses across our bridge.
I tell her, “Aurora.”
And with a crown of stars above her,
she says, “I wish.”



Home
Ritabrata Santra



Clamdigger
Jinwon Kim

*The Unabashed Tourist Speaks with the
Native Mississippian in Line at the Civil
Rights Museum — after Catherine Pierce*

Kelsey Ming

This is so exciting, isn't it, the civil rights museum?
I've only been to one museum before,
but I love the history of it all.

It must've been so exhilarating to stand up for the cause.
I wonder if Rosa Parks knew what she was doing when she
sat on that bus.

Protests, riots, I even heard people would be sprayed with
water hoses!

I bet that was refreshing,
especially in this smothering heat.

I wish this line would move faster,
but I did hear everything moves a little slower down here.
See, I'm from Seattle and everyone is always in a rush –
maybe it's because we all have real jobs up there.

I'm honestly surprised I didn't see
any tractors in the parking lot.
All the farmers must be in the fields today.

Also, I'm starving.
I heard you guys fry everything down here – even pickles.
Maybe that's why Mississippi is
number one in obesity, huh?

Oh, you have a college degree?
That's interesting. I'm just glad you know
how to read. I'm sure the schools are
much easier and slower for you Mississippi people.

Are you closed minded like I've heard?

“When she abandoned herself, a little whispered word escaped her slightly parted lips. She said it over and over under her breath: ‘free, free, free!’”

—Kate Chopin, “The Story of an Hour”



Prideful
Bhakti Patel



Games

Will Textor

We're getting too old for these games.
We were never the boys with pop guns,
closing one eye and squinting down pointer fingers,
thumb curled into a trigger.
Yet, here we are, getting our kicks,
gunslinging.
Watch us shoot each other into ghosts
with nothing but wine corks
and a grudge against the Earth.
We were the boys sniping oxalis
offside the P.E. track,
counting karma on salt cellars at recess:
Blue tells us we'll be the sports star.
4 swears we'll marry the girl of our dreams.
But our lives unfold in contempt
of paper fortunes.
It's funny how we make up for lost time.
Taking aim with our pride,
beauty becomes the caliber.
Our words are murder weapons.
We've only got so many lives,
but enough rounds to shoot
the green off the grass,
firing rum-pum-pum-pum
and we all fall down.



Red Room
Trey Box



My God Loves Everyone
Bhakti Patel



Out of the Darkness
Bhakti Patel

Vicious Cycle

Jerneisia McGee

Mikah was a door I thought I could open,
but I never had the key.
I sat round-bell and swollen feet in the midst of my
frozen thoughts, I face defeat.
I told him, “We leaving!”

Mikah with his broken promises.
Mikah be like my father,
a somewhat gentle man, but in a snap he could see fire.
Fire he released on my mother
when his dinner wasn’t hot enough,
when she spoke out of turn,
when she said she was leaving.
He could make her whole world burn
and she would still return with those burns
believing his broken promises.

I could never be my mother!
Mikah saw otherwise.
He sense my hypocrisy.
They all keep screaming,
“Leave him girl, he gon’ been done killed you.”

I could feel the cherry wood splintered in my skin,
the glass that accompanied it,
the shaming of my bones, and the screaming in my belly.
I ignore them all,
except his promises.

We gon' make this family work.
My body hurts when I'm with him, but better that than my
heart.
Me, broken-down, broken bones, with a heart that ain't got
no walls,
with a me, that ain't go no self.
Praying that my baby girl have hers.
Praying she never believe in them promises,
and understand why I did.
I Guess I be my mother.



The Early Hours
Bhakti Patel



Out of the Blue
Hanna Bewley

Unwritten Stories

Hannah Kruse

You bought me popcorn five years, three weeks, and six days ago. Halfway through *Monsters University*, our buttery, salt-covered hands met. I blushed in the darkness because you were going to be my first real boyfriend.

You kissed me two months later, after helping me back my KIA down your gravel driveway so that I wouldn't hit the tree that "everyone always hits." We stood in the headlights and watched the moon until late into the night. I missed curfew, but I didn't care.

You left for college four years ago. Three months before that, in the early days of summer, I sent you a text. You always said, "No one should be dating someone from high school when they went away to college." I wept for nights afterwards.

You died two years, two weeks, and one day ago. Your old truck, the one we spent hours fixing up in the shop, became your coffin. You had just gotten into pharmacy school. You were 20 years old. The drunk driver lived. I still have nightmares.

Two years ago, your mother sent me a text message. A charred notebook was found in the remains of your backpack. We think you were writing about your life -- you'd said you wanted to write a book one day. The only surviving page was a list of people to include in your story. I was on the list.



Silenced
Lexus Giles

A Reintroduction to Form

Alexandra Hendon

Warmth rises up my back, engorging
the forgotten remnants of muscle
left behind,
sputtering into creation
when I touch my throat.
Rounded tributaries of my fingerprints
poised over pulse,
a sheen rising to the surface, notices
that I am relearning to touch with solace.

I have watched the pinkened skin of my hips rip.
Blending into deepened wells, spreading.
Expansion does not come without destruction,
and I have bled to become.

First, when I was nine.

Bulbous, indigo and burgundy
slipped from my body in clots.
A remembrance of the lives that are to come.
I wanted to push my hands inside, to pull out of myself
the origin of the world.
We all bathe in blood before we forget
that women's bodies mark the bedsheets with shit
from the endurance of creating breath.

Again, when I was twenty.

You turned off the movie of the pornstar
being thrown into the bathtub
facedown
blood coagulating along her hairline
because it made you want to break open
the line that runs along my front teeth.

High fevers as a baby scarred me before you had the chance.
They were already starting to curve backwards, you said,
and there was already blood on the sheets.

Every week I have needles inserted
into my arms, knees, feet
as a means of softening the ache in my hips.
When the skin closes itself around the needle,
swelling, reaching for the coolness of the metal
as it slips inside me,
I try to decipher the avenues of blood flow that lead
back to swollen pinkness.
I rummage through past hands,
black ink crossing off every touch
from years of forgetting that my body is not
a linear depiction of desecration.

I am waiting to have them removed.
When she slips each needle out,
I inhale the fortitude of your hands
splaying my thighs apart
hips ripping—
this is not what it means to expand.
I did not open myself, gaping
to the friction of you,
on purpose.

I am waiting for the needles to be pulled from my body
so I do not have to carry
the weight of you in my hips.
They say acupuncture is not a permanent solution
for pain.
It will not cure you.
I will spend every week
for the rest of my life
ridding my hips
knees

feet
of your impression.

Research shows sustained violence leaves an impression
on the DNA,
leading to illness in the lineage of women
in a family.

Will my daughter feel
the heaving of your breath
when she tries to turn
facedown in bed?

The joints in her knees straining
from a weighted body
like plaque sticking on teeth,
an irremovable calcification.
Will she dream of maimed hips,
insisting she feels an electrocution in her uterus?

I stand with one leg propped up on the toilet.
Algid ceramic edges itself into my toes.
Fingers open, I splay my folds apart,
one at a time,
scouring the ravaged to find a city built from silk.
I circle my fingers to pump blood to my clit.
This is how we survive.
This is how my unborn child will know I love her.
I reach inside and pull out the origin of the world.



Midnight Magic
Hanna Bewley



Rouge Cache
Hanna Bewley

Who's That?

Ty'Bresha Glass

“Who's That?”

I heard you ask my best friend as you
watched

Me.

She pointed a delicate finger in my direction

I started smiling.

Not on the outside, of course, because that's what
stupid, crazy girls do.

But I was, in fact, crazy
about you.

“Who's That?”

I heard your friend ask you in a weird way
as you led me away from the party you invited me to,
dressed in your smart

white jeans

I remember every detail.

The way you whispered,

“You're a pretty girl,

Just do it, okay?”

You told me it wouldn't hurt to have a little fun.

I told you no, but

you didn't really care for that answer.

So you had your fun.

“Who's That?”

I heard a girl ask in the hallway on Monday.

I smoothed down the sleeve of my
sweater

to cover the body that you wouldn't.

“That's the girl that slept with that one guy at Maven's.”

No I'm not.

In fact, I haven't slept at all.

I smoothed down my sleeve again.

“Your bruises are showing,”
That one demon yelled at me.

“Who’s That?”

I heard my soul whisper
As I shut the medicine cabinet

One

Last

Time.

I stared at the girl who stared at me.

“Who is that?” my soul whispered again.

I don’t know.

I don’t think I’ll ever know.

“Who’s That?”

A child asks their mother as they

Point a delicate finger

At my smiling picture in the newspaper.

“I don’t know,” the mother answers, “some girl from the high
school.”





Eurostile Café
Amelia Dalton

unsung anthem from unconscious lips

Maeve Rigney

skin like a crumpled paper ball

(no)

empty bottles reeking on end table

(no)

small eyes flutter: open, close, open, open

(no)

teeth stained by sour alcohol

(no)

ragdoll arms limp while,

(no)

his firm hands press on lead torso

(no)

mouth tastes of his grey tongue

(no)

gentle eyes flutter: open, close, close, close

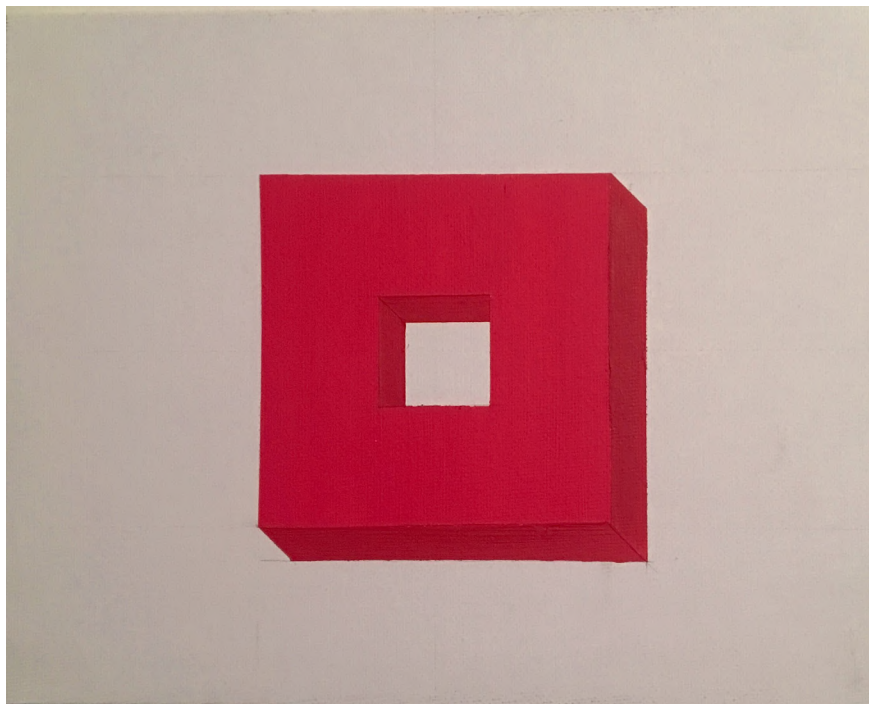
(no)

thighs stroked softly by dirty fingernails

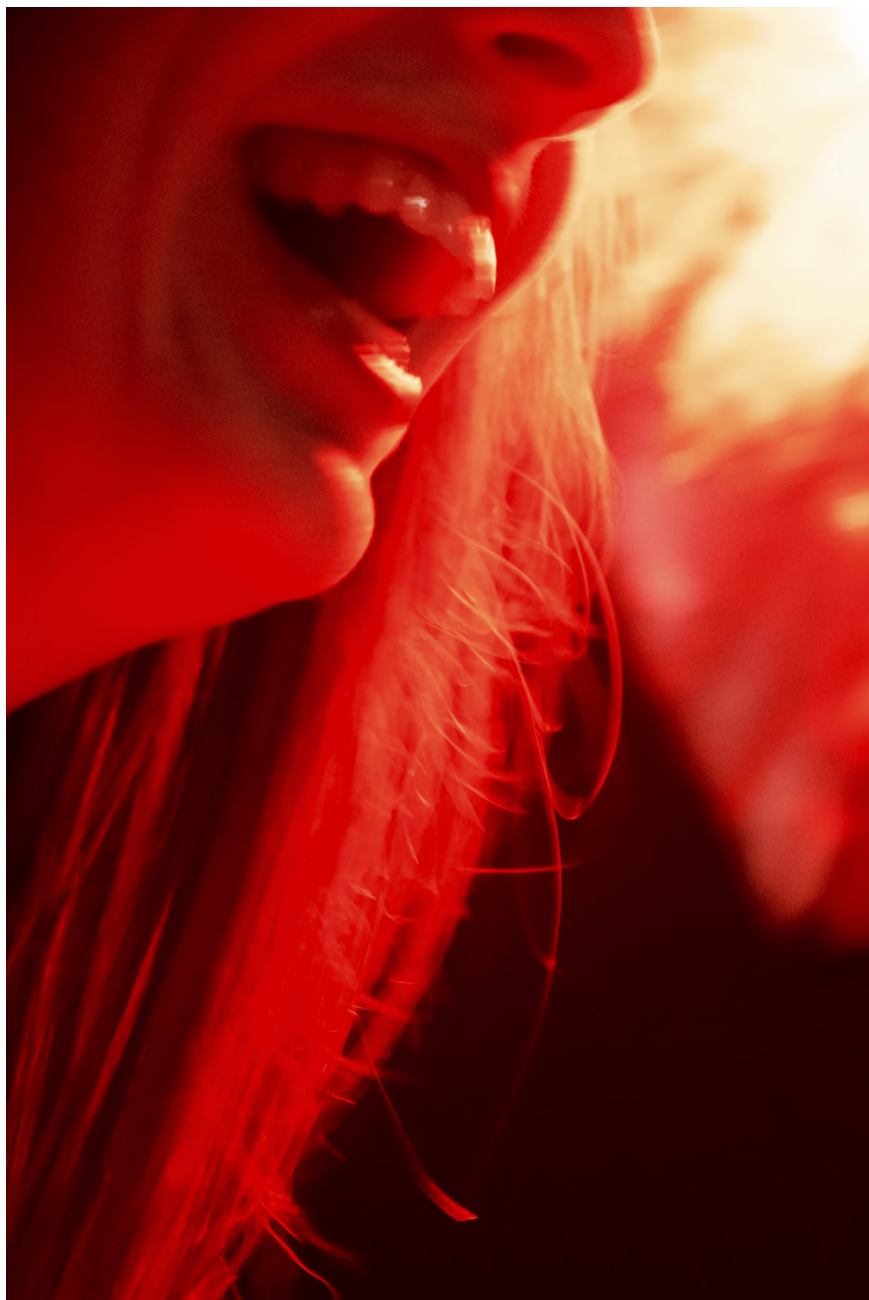
(no)

tiny words caught in the back of her throat

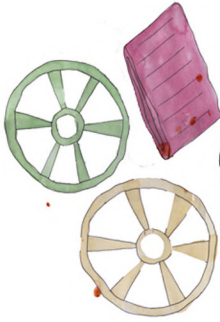
(no no no)



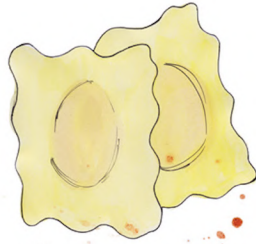
Square
Trey Box



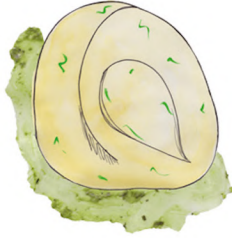
Ecstasy
Bhakti Patel



Rolelle
let's be honest,
nobody calls
them that.



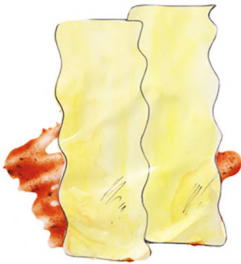
Ravioli Ravioli
give me the
formuoli



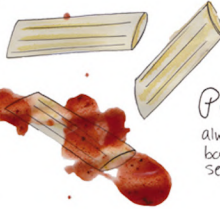
Tortellini
Stuffed with
cheese or spinach,
either way...
Bomb!



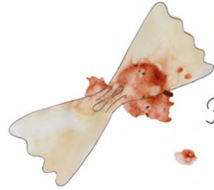
Conchiglie
Or as I like to
call them,
Shells!



Lasagna
aka...
Pasta
Casserole



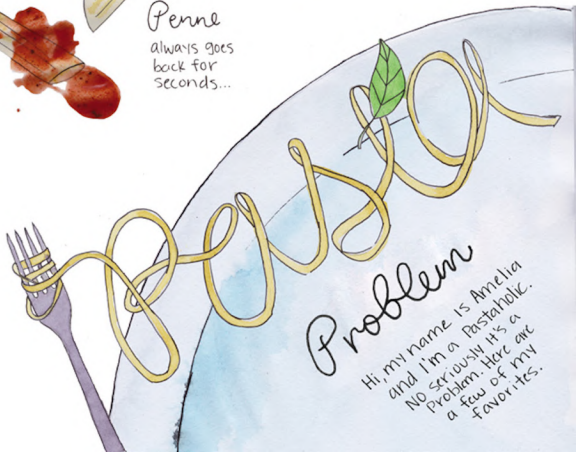
Penne
always goes
back for
seconds...



Farfalle
or
Bow Tie.



Macaroni
Gram's noodles
and gravy wouldn't
be the same without
these elbow noodles.



Problem

Hi, my name is Amelia
and I'm a Pasta-holic.
No seriously it's a
problem here are
a few of my
favorites.

Pasta Problem Amelia Dalton

Filed Under: Falling Apart

Rebecca Van Pamel

This table is a city.

A map creased and ridged and spread wide.

Salt shaker cities and pepper grinder towns,

Hostels built from turkey bones

And skyscrapers born from spiced apple treats.

Do you remember the beaches, glittering shores of seasoning,
oceans of grape wine?

This bedroom is a city

A cool, tranquil countryside village rolling over hills wide.

The bed, the dresser, the vanity, each held the memories of a
town.

You always said I had old bones

I always said you were a treat.

Do you remember the nights spent wrapped in a duvet,
drinking strawberry wine?

This home is a city

a bustling borough, diverse and gentrified and sprawling wide.

Each bedroom a universe, each kitchen tile a town.

Built up from drywall bones

Cheap coats of paint form an ammonia-scented treatise.

Do you remember when we painted the world, our cluttered
living room, in shades of wine?

This SUV is a city,

An incorporated, shining waxed township.

We drove the wheels into dust, across the West, hot and arid
and wide.

Do you remember, somewhere in Arizona, those vulture
bones?

You picked them out of the sand, held them in the sun as if
they were a delicacy, a treat.

We found that run-down desert diner, a real shithole, but they
had the richest wine.

This street is a city

A simple southern municipality, its borders not quite so wide.
Though charming, not large enough to bear the burden of
“town.”

Asphalt homes spread atop buried Confederate bones.

Each stop sign, each order to yield, with equal reverence I
treat.

Do you remember the potholes that dotted the road, the way
the tires would whine?

This prison is a city

Las Vegas, a bitter fucking desert, disseminated not so far, not
so wide.

Funny, you loved it here. This was our town.

Do you know that when you left, I felt something shift my
bones?

I can't say what it was, but it burned with a preternatural
treat.

These days, I do not eat. And I cannot drink you into oblivion
– you taste just like strawberry wine.

I spread the scattered, asymmetrical pieces of our life across
the living room floor.

Each holiday dinner spread across the dining room table, our
cluttered bedroom, our over-mortgaged home, each mile we
put on the car, our street, our city – they formed a quiet,
content world.

They and I, we are the same now: filled with hollow memories
turned sour in the bitter November cold.

The Love of My Father

Ty'Bresha Glass

When I was six-years-old,
before I even knew that the area
below my navel
meant something
special,
my father told me to keep it
sacred.
It was not for any man to abuse.

When I was twelve,
a boy from the high school saw me sitting,
knowing that his prey
didn't know
anything about the love
that a man and woman can express.
When I told my father,
about how he talked to me
I never saw that boy again.

When I was thirteen,
my mother congratulated me.
“Welcome to Big Girl World,” she'd said
tapping cigarette ashes onto the floor.
My father, however,
gave me soft smiles.
“Well, whaddya know,
my little girl isn't so little anymore.”

When I was fifteen, my
father
showed me what it was like
to be in a position
where you didn't know how to say
no.

“I’ve been waiting all this time,” he says.
“surely you wouldn’t disobey me.”
And that night,
my father showed me
all
of his love.

Now I am sixteen,
the baby that sits in my lap
will know a new mother soon.
And all I can hope
is that she never knows
the love of her father.

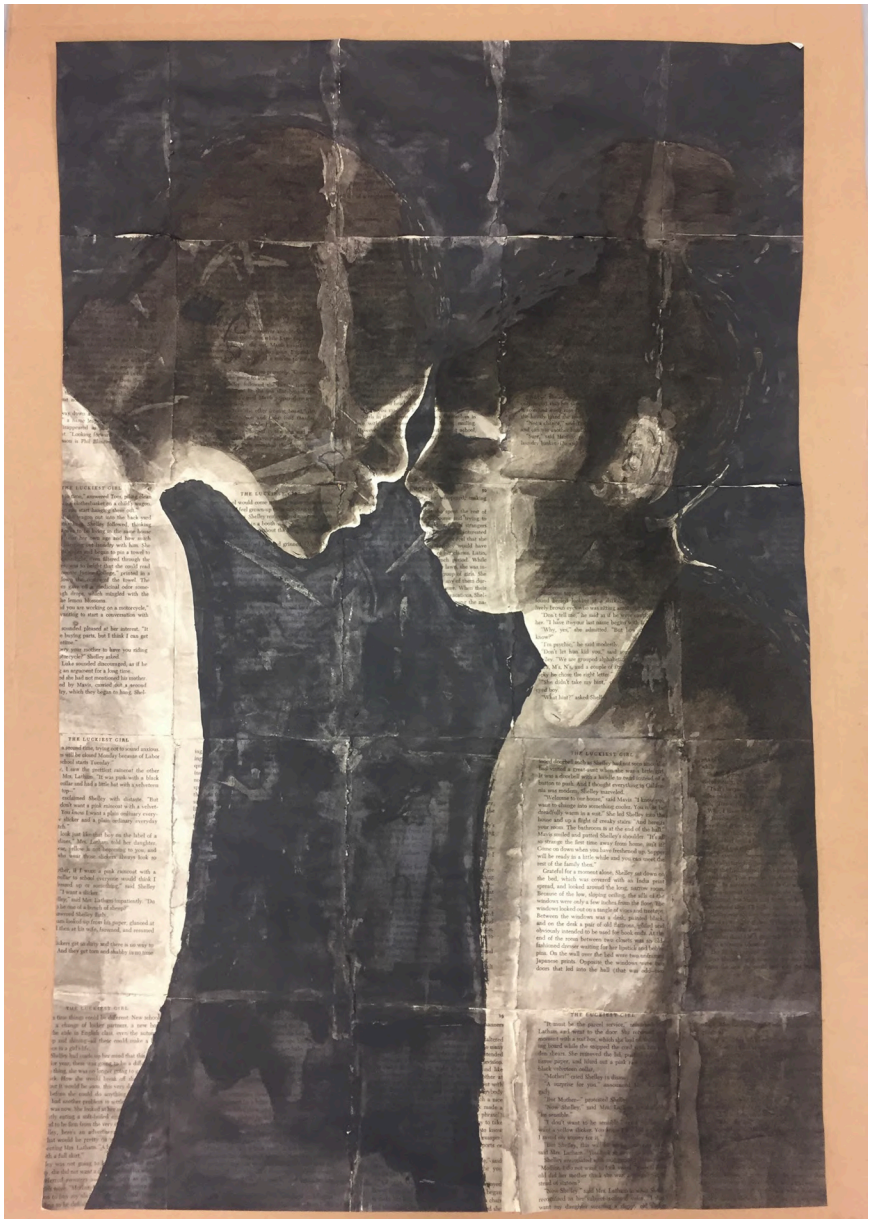


Tracing Myself Back to Me
Bhakti Patel





We Don't Know How Lucky We Are
Bhakti Patel



The Luckiest Girl

Jewel Jolly

Sleeping Bunny

Lydia Neuhoff

I was one in this photograph sleeping
in my high chair at my birthday party.
Stuffed with vanilla cake, and the frosting saved for later.
The birthday song sounds like a lullaby
as my bunny ears slide to one side.

My grandmother sits behind me
chatting away like the butterfly she is.
Her hair is curled and stiff with hairspray.
Her perfume is almost as loud as she is.
She tries to set my ears straight but

my grandfather snatches them off my head and pulls
a funny face for the camera. His blue shirt is
stained with frosting just like mine. My
grandmother only grew louder
as she swats his hands like a pesky fly.
“Don’t do that Larry!” she scolds

when I am one, and also when I will be ten.
My grandfather and I will be slappin’ Jacks
at the glass breakfast table, leaving fingerprint smudges
as the hard hits echo throughout the spotless kitchen.
As the hands hit harder, so will her words.
“Larry! Stop that shit!”

Then I will be seventeen at my grandfather’s funeral.
My grandmother’s lips will still be perfectly painted bright
orange
as she thanks everyone for coming
and reminisces with strangers of her hilarious husband.
“Oh how I love my sweet Larry,” she’ll lie.

Alternate Routes

Jace Poole

women
pass through my life
like oncoming traffic.
some come orderly
and flash their headlights,
as if to wave hello
to a distant memory,
while others swerve
a little too close
into my lane
going just over the speed limit.
catching me off guard.
causing me to choose:
swerve off of the road
in order to protect myself,
or let her
headlights
kiss mine
without knowing her intentions.
maybe she just didn't want
to drive alone anymore.
as my airbag deploys,
these seemingly empty highways
talk.
their mouths
filled with potholes
and
frontage road
gas stations,
hoping someone will walk in
needing a candy bar
or a conversation.



Hard Times
Amelia Dalton



Hard Times
Amelia Dalton

Black Girls Don't Cry

Jerneisia McGee

I frequently visualize my own death.
It's always easier than breathing.
I'm beyond suicide, my heart is thoughtful.
That's selfish, I'm selfless, so I will continue to sit in this room
and feel helpless.

I feel momentary happiness, my sadness always seems to last.
No one ever sees it, they only see me laugh.
We live in a world of illusions.
Everybody wears a mask.
If no one can see the pain, no one ever thinks to ask.

My elders said,
"Pray baby!"
I told them, I'm trying.
My momma said, "Wipe those tears girl, ain't no sense in
crying."
My blackness is a repellent to sadness.
I'm not allowed to feel it, because black people don't feel shit.
We have a different way of dealing.
I guess my melanin has the power of healing.

It's a level of power, I haven't unlocked yet.
I guess those memories must've blocked that.
I think I lost my ability when I was 3, when his hands
contaminated my wings.
When my lips were glued shut because my grandma told me
"Shh girl you saying too much."

The words, "what goes on in this house, stays in this house"
still send me into a fit of disobedience.
I'd open the window and let the wind carry my secrets, then

I'd open the door because what's in this house shouldn't live
here anymore.

I told God to erase my pain and take me with it.

I guess he wasn't in, my call he must've missed it.

But I will remain strong, I'm the back this world was built on.

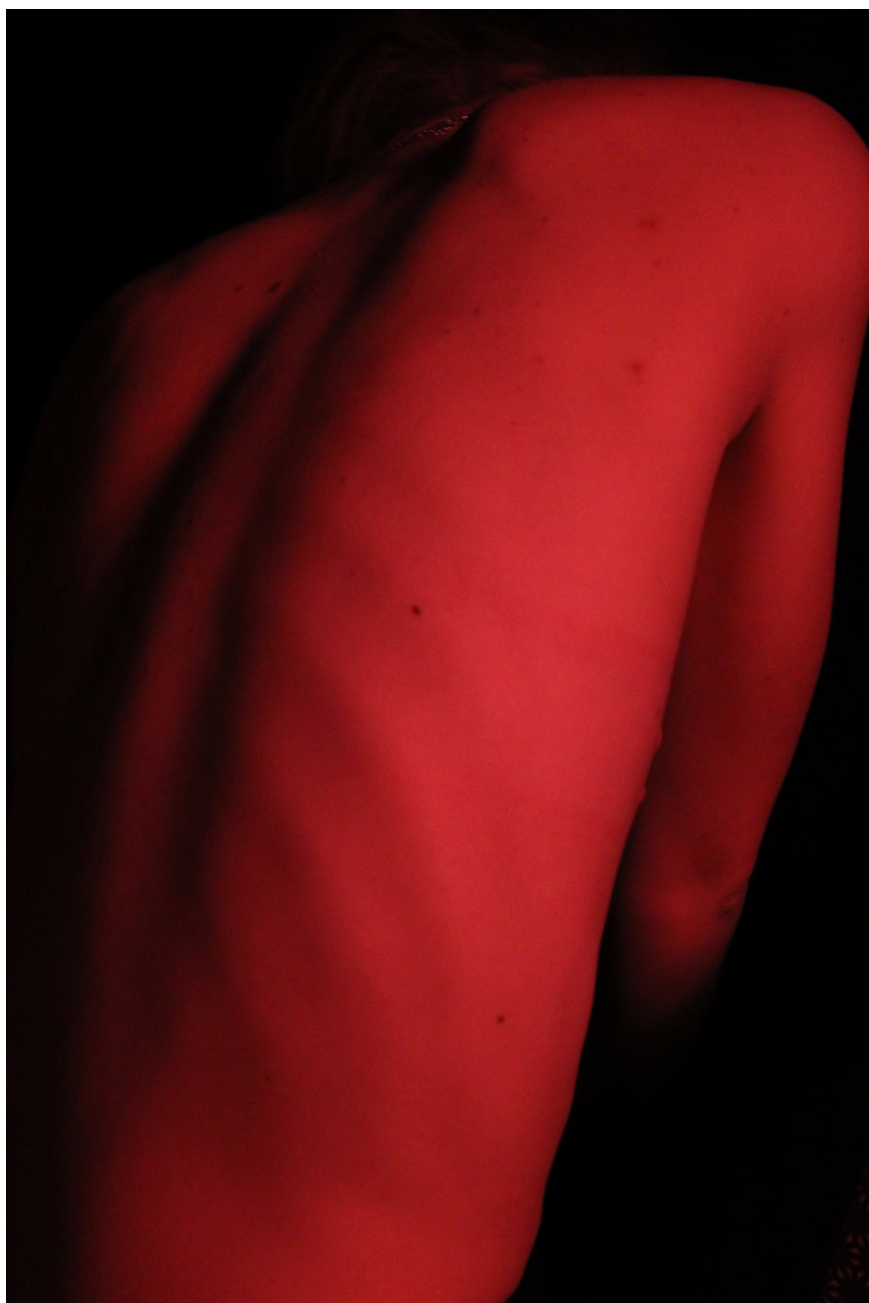
But I must admit, when I'm alone and that armour falls, this
black girl cries and wishes she could end it all.



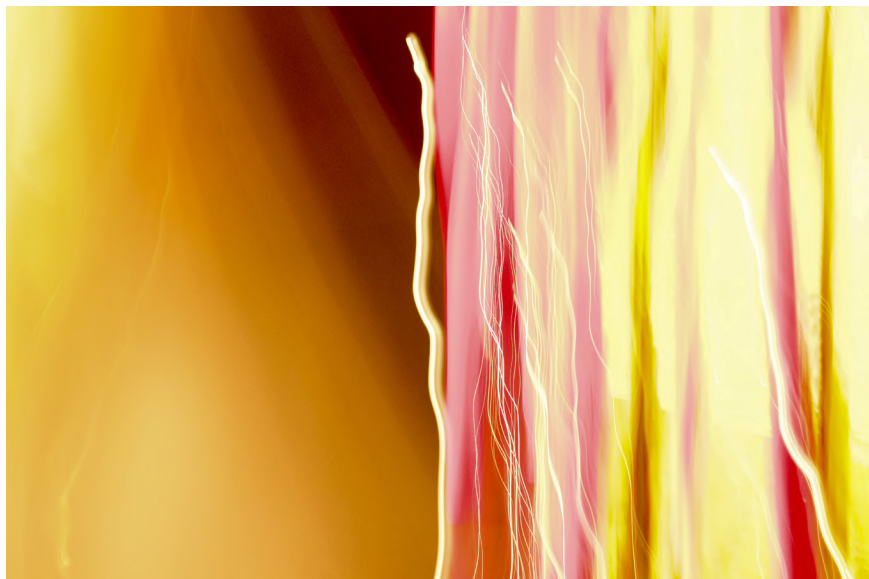
Hard Times
Amelia Dalton

“The excursion is the same when you go looking for your sorrow as when you go looking for your joy.”

—Eudora Welty, “The Wide Net,”
Collected Stories



Skin & Bones
Bhakti Patel



Glass
Trey Box

Safety Net
Jace Poole

it hurts
to reach inside my stomach
and dissect
each butterfly carcass
you so carelessly left behind.
i open their net
and commence spring cleaning.
but just as soon as
my passion hardens
and the feelings
stop rolling off of my tongue
i see a picture of you.
hidden cocoons rip
and the heartbeats
force the stitches apart.



Hozier Album Design
Amelia Dalton



Sleep, Don't Weep
Bhakti Patel

Dead Ringer

Jesse Reed II

My father has recently died. I mention this only because his death forced me to return to the place which I loathe beyond any other. My father was a Gravedigger; he had once tended to Scott's Hill Cemetery. My father and his before him lived on that nasty plot of land digging holes and keeping the grounds. Since adolescence, I've had a great distaste for his profession, much unlike my older brother. My brother felt great pride when he thought about the generations of Scotts before us keeping the tradition. He knew the job came with great social persecution and isolation, but he felt himself a martyr, taking the job that no one else would. I, however, looked out onto the field of gray fangs protruding from the dark soggy ground and felt nothing but bone-chilling disgust. It was never in me to care for the dead and we were all quite aware of this. When I was of age I left and never turned back, and all these decades later I was summoned. The letter detailing my father's death was brief but devastating. I may have hated his job description but I loved my father. I returned only out of respect for his life and guilt for my abandonment. Facing my brother after years of aversion was almost as difficult as putting the old man in the ground. Our reunion was staged in the office of my father's lawyer, where the reading of his will was held.

"To Hank the eldest son, I give the earnings I have accrued over a long life of thankless work. You were a loyal son and stood by me." The Lawyer spoke matter-of-factly from a small sheet of yellowed paper. Before Hank could interject, the man continued.

"To Samuel: you never appreciated our trade or the life I built for our family. To you, I leave the task of digging and tending to the graves. This is a labor you take with you until your dying day."

Both I and my brother reacted in equal abhorrence. We both erupted into howling and spitting not unlike feral cats.

Solemn sadness was now replaced by horrible rage and disbelief. But the Lawyer interrupted once more, for a final time.

“I tell all of my clients this. While notarized, your father’s word is not law. If you two truly wish to trade lots, this is up to you. You are his sole surviving heirs and can do as you wish. These are only your father’s last wishes; do with them as you wish.”

We left the office for the cemetery to give our father a send-off. We were the only attendants of his funeral. Grave-diggers live a lonely life. Dealing with the dead separates you from the living. Most avoid all association with men dealing in this trade. Neither of us spoke of his will, but we both knew that I would leave and never return. Hank would stay as he had before; these things did not need to be spoken. They were a given, like that the sun would rise again tomorrow and that the cock would roost in the henhouse. We dug our father’s grave together, Hank and I. I cannot lie, my heart was in unrest, and it hammered against my ribs as we lowered that box down into the earth. I could feel his two small eyes peering into my own, those two eyes looking through the pine box and into the guilt in my throat. His gaze set it ablaze and almost caused me to erupt into a coughing fit. Instead, I cried a silent sob. The sob of a son who knows he has no right to sob. The sob of a son who left his family and never looked back.

“Samuel, help me with this,” my brother finally grunted. I nodded obediently. He then promptly led me to a shed outside of our childhood home. Inside was a mess of spades and cobwebs.

“Over here,” Hank said pointing into a corner that contained a contraption I recognized well. It was a bell.

“How often do these bells toll?” I asked Hank as he finished constructing the bell and subsequently filling the grave.

“More than I’d like to admit,” Hank said back gruffly. His answer sent liquid ice into my spine. While not entirely common, premature burial happened enough to warrant

precaution. The precaution might save lives, but it sewed my fear. Every time I see the grave bells, I can only think of the hellish scenario it implies. Six feet underground, you arise. Only in consciousness do you rise because your pine box only permits an inch or two of movement on all sides. Immediately, panic sets in because, whether open or closed, your eyes only see, as in death, darkness. As you panic, you draw ragged, quick breaths. Unfortunately, these only hasten your demise. You manage to uncross your arms and, in natural instinct, you begin clawing at your prison. But instead of breaking away and liberating you, the coffin holds, and your fingernails break instead. When exhumed years later for relocation, the gravedigger would find your eyes and jaw wide in horror and fingers scraped raw to the bone. The bell is a means to prevent this.

Hank finished with his work and motioned for me to follow. I meant to make my exit. My gut was full of lead, and my instincts told me not to remain into the night. This place was ungodly, and I should have bid my brother farewell, but my legs carried me after him, and my guilt lifted my hands to drink as well. We drank deep into the night until the sounds of the birds faded and the songs of the crickets deepened. The liquor was brown, and our voices were quiet. My brother and I never had much to say to each other. I guess living in the land of the dead helped you to speak their language. As the hours grew longer and our stupors grew stronger, my paranoia became apparent. Every bump and gust of wind was a ghoul coming for my skin. I was never meant for a life of solitude amongst a field of horrors. My brother and father never gave me shame, but we all knew I had the stomach of a coward and that if cut I would bleed yellow.

My brother must have had the same thought because he smirked and said, "It's been a while since you've been home, aye brother?"

I took a swig and looked into his eyes, "Yes, and with every passing moment I am reminded why."

Hank looked as if he might laugh, but then his face

grew steely, “Well, father saw you fit to tend the graves,” he took another deep drink from his brown bottle, “He gave you the title I bled and sweat for.”

I wanted to laugh as well, but, like my older brother, my face grew cold too, “And the title you shall have. You and I both know our father’s is the final grave I shall ever tend.” As the words left my mouth, I was reminded of a saying my father had always repeated: “Don’t tempt fate, she has the cruelest sense of humor of all.”

Then, in that silence over the cricket song and the wind’s howl, both my brother and I heard the ringing of a bell.

The two of us shared a gaze, with neither of us showing a glimpse of humor or even fear, but disbelief. However, the fact that both of us had heard the noise without speaking a word proved it must have been real. Then again the bell rang. The brass bell swung steadily.

“Maybe it’s the wind Hank,” I almost pleaded, my stomach now full of that heavy putrid fear. My brother shushed me and lifted a finger to his mouth. And then, as if part of a theatre production, thunder cracked like a whip and rainfall hit the ground heavy and began a torrential downpour. Hank stood to his feet and looked into my eyes. He didn’t speak words, but we both knew he wanted me to stand with him.

I wanted to stand and help my brother, and to this day I pray to God to forgive my cowardice. I wish more than anything that I could turn back time and stand with my brother. Not only to avoid his fate but my own. Instead, I sat, my dumb mouth full of a heavy tongue and void of any words. Hank scoffed, and before he slammed the door behind him, he grunted, “Be gone by morning.”

The echo of the door was almost muffled by another crack of thunder, as if triggered by Hank himself. I turned back to my drink but sipped no more. With every passing minute, I paced past the door my brother stormed out of. Each time I passed it, I fully intended to charge into the rain

and search for my brother. The digging of a grave is hard work in the heat of day let alone in the midst of a tar-black rain shower. I inherited this job, yet I sat there like child sick with fear. I, again, reached for the handle of the door but hesitated, again, this time not due to my fear but a noise. The noise was familiar, and until I heard it I hadn't realized it ceased in the first place. The bell was ringing, but quite unlike before. It was no longer swaying rhythmically and steadily. Now it seemed as if it were being frantically abused. The clamor rang out above any of the sounds that nature was producing tonight. The bell called out, out to the only one who could be listening. I've prayed untold times about this night. I wish I could say I've come to terms or some sort of equanimity about what happened next. Unfortunately, I feel the same soul-wrenching guilt I did that night, and the following morning even more so.

I awoke that morning surprised I managed to even slip into sleep. I thanked the bottle, lying somewhere emptied until I remembered my brother. I looked around his small cabin and found nothing. He never came back. The warmth of the sun's rays along with the light that accompanied it was enough to lure me from my hole. I feared to even run my eyes across the horizon. As if in cruel response, it was unnecessary, because not a whole three yards from where I stood sat my brother. His body, leaning against a tombstone, was sopping wet, and his skin was sallow and grey. He had the appearance of a man long since deceased. I rushed to his side and grasped him.

"Hank!" he groaned in response. To my relief, he was alive, but in my haste to check on him I ignored the blade in his gut. Through a miracle like none other, my brother survived the night alone. He leaned towards me as if wanting to speak and I was quickly on my knees eager to hear what could have been my brother's final words.

"Wasn't no dead ringer...couple of grave robbers. I caught," Hank paused, his eyes squeezed tightly shut along with his teeth in a painful death grimace. "I caught them in the act. They left me for dead. I tried ringing for ya."

I could do nothing but look into my dying brother's eyes and cry a coward's lament. Sometimes I think he knew that I heard the bell from its first ring until it's last. Every clang was received and ignored as my brother lay out in the cold rain. Bleeding on the land he deserved to inherit, on the land he was promised to keep until his dying day. In a cruel way, he got what he wanted.

Unfortunately, my father's was not the final grave I would dig, neither was my brother's. As commanded, I took the labor of digging and tending to the graves and will keep it until my dying day.



Reality
Bhakti Patel



All of Our Heroes Fading
Amelia Dalton



puzzles don't need prozac

Rebecca Van Pamel

Someone once told me that
My bipolar brain was simply a puzzle
To be solved
Like Nine clean white sudoku squares
Each patiently waiting for that magic number
Or maybe the New York Times crossword puzzle
Sixteen across printed in neat sans-serif manuscript

I wish this were true
That my brain was a jigsaw puzzle
With Fifty-seven pieces fitted together perfectly
And sure, it may be a challenge to complete
But it can be completed, and I can wash my hands of it.

However

A puzzle doesn't need Prozac
A puzzle doesn't need Abilify
A puzzle doesn't need 5mg in the morning or 10mg in the
evening

A puzzle isn't impulsively manic
Or halting depressive
In unequal and unpredictable measure

A puzzle isn't alienating
Isolating
Clumsily undulating
Through hazy waves of alternating
Self-loathing and sky-scraping esteem

However

I halt to remind myself that
A puzzle cannot create
Nor destroy
In equal and fanatic measure
A puzzle cannot pour
Each of its jigsaw pieces into those it adores
It cannot foster friendship nor romance nor contempt

A puzzle cannot love or fuck or fight
A puzzle cannot breathe and live and die
But I can
And I do
And I will



A Leg Up
Hanna Bewley

The Katana

Joseph Neyland

I had never seen beauty that radiant. Not on television, and definitely not in person. Not even Mariposa Sanchez could come close, with her gray eyes the color of granite countertops and her quiet steps that echo on the linoleum after school when we walk to the buses. Fine, Mariposa is a close second, but nothing is brighter in my mind than the moment I got off the bus from school and looked across the street and saw her.

The katana was in the window of the pawn shop, and the sun setting behind me shone directly onto the polished blade. The sword parried a blade of light directly into my retinas, and when my vision cleared, I don't know how, but I found myself in front of the window staring at her. Her burnished gray blade was two feet long and had a tapered blood groove that faded into the blade an inch from the tip. The hilt was a silver rhombus, all sides the same length. The handle was intricately wrapped in deep blue cloth, the color of a thunderstorm at dusk, with a silver cap on the end. The scabbard was the same blue where the sunlight caressed the top, but the shadowy underside was pure black, so dark I couldn't even see my reflection. I could tell this was a real weapon, all simplicity and class. I fell in love.

I stumbled into the dimly lit pawn shop, cluttered with used and useless junk. There was an old box TV that wouldn't even connect to a GameCube, a singing fish plaque with no eyes that I had nightmares about for a week, and a set of golf clubs with a bent driver and a missing putter. I could see it was hard for the people who brought their belongings to this cemetery to part with these relics of an older time. To anyone else, though, these trinkets were a pile of trash, only good for collecting allergens. The katana was the only bright spot in the shop.

I was snatched back to reality when I smashed my shin on a box full of teddy bears, after which I promptly sneezed.

I shook the dust out of my brain and looked up to the old cashier chuckling at my antics.

“Watch your step, son; it’s a bit of a mess in here,” he said, sitting back in a creaky rocking chair. I have no idea how he managed to fit it back there, or how the chair managed to support his girth.

“Too little, too late, pops,” I retorted, flashing what I thought would be a smile but ended up as a grimace.

Pops grunted and shuffled in his chair. “Kids these days have no respect. The name’s Mr. Barnes to you, kid; I know you saw the sign on your way in.”

I had a mental image of my mother slapping the back of my head and whispering, What did I tell you about meeting new people?

I sighed, and put on my best main character smile, the one I use for staying up late on school nights and asking my friend Five’s parents if I could stay the night.

“Sorry about that, Mr. Barnes, but the only thing I could focus on is that katana in your window.”

Pops huffed an acceptance of my apology, and then shifted his attention to the window. “Oh yeah, I had a real wealthy looking man walk in late yesterday and offer it to me. Had the official certification saying that that there sword is a genuine ninja sword. I couldn’t pass it up.”

By that point, I was already staring into the blade again, a stonier gray than Mariposa’s eyes, colder than laying naked on the sidewalk in a snowstorm. She was a witty rebuttal in a lavish party, one that makes your opponent blush and his friends laugh. She was a freshly cleaned revolver in its holster, revealed on the cowboy’s hip as punctuation to his threat. She was a mother’s glare to her child when they were acting a fool in public, all business with a hint of steeled rage.

I whipped around and pushed a coppery curl out of my eyes. I could feel the sun through the window on my back, framing me in the center of the pawn shop.

“How much for it?”

Mr. Barnes rubbed his gray stubble and squinted at me

from the gray recesses behind the counter. I'm sure I was the most energetic character he had the pleasure of entertaining in a while.

“Why do you want it, son? What are you going to do with it?”

I didn't know how to tell him that I needed the sword, that it was a part of me already, that the moment I saw it I knew that it was me, and I was it, and this tiny cramped pawn shop was this stupid rinkydink town, and that I had to get it out of here. This wasn't the place for it. It needed a protagonist, and I was him.

The way I see it, there exists in the world main characters, supporting characters, and extras. I am undoubtedly a main character, with my skin the color of a warm oak floor, my hair the color of a newly minted penny, and my smile, crooked but sincere. The scar on my eye is the universe's proof of my worthiness. My friend Five is a supporting character, proven by his quiet but observant nature and his ability to either be a fixture in a room or disappear completely. We call him Five because someone counted how many words he said in a month and he averaged out at five words a week. Mariposa is an extra, but I still like her because she has features of a main character but the mannerisms of an extra, perpetually in the background. I told her that I had a crush on her one day and she looked at me with those carpet gray eyes and shrugged. Such extreme ambivalence. It's an art.

I guess I was quiet for too long, or Mr. Barnes could read the frustration in my furrowed brows and my right hand grasping for a way to phrase the thoughts ricocheting around my skull, but either way he nodded and asked, “What's your name, son?”

That was a much easier question to answer. My name is a beacon, the entirety of my personality and dreams and fears and power summarized beautifully in the letters my parents chose for me at birth. I feel my name when I say it, and I always smile when I am able to proclaim it.

“Jaren Clark Erickson, sir. Remember it well.”

I rushed home from Mr. Barnes' pawn shop, bursting through the door so violently the blinds rattled in the windows.

"Boy, if you don't quit busting in here like that," Ma yelled from the den, probably lying on the couch watching her home improvement shows. I noticed when I was very young that moms tend to leave the latter part of if-then statements blank, fueling the imagination.

I yelled back, "Hey, sorry about that," as I did the exact same thing to the hallway door and blasted into my room. Today was a special day, an anniversary. I dropped my backpack, grabbed the metal lunchbox with the materials from underneath my bed, and was out the back door before Ma could scream at me again.

As I rushed into the woods that bordered our backyard, I thought back to the event that made this day so special. Four years ago, in fourth grade, Roy Wilkerson had made a bet that I couldn't ride the neighborhood skateboard down Remorse Hill and make it in one piece. Remorse Hill was pockmarked with potholes and ugly gashes in the asphalt, a vehicle's nightmare. A month before, Taylor Thompson had broken his leg, nose, and spleen trying to ride down the hill. I thought he was going to make it, too; he had such a strong name. Either way, I accepted, and to make a long story much less painful, I came out of the ordeal with only one scar over my right eye that started just below my hairline and ended halfway down my cheek. I was the school hero for months, and that began my road to becoming a main character in the world.

I made it to my secret alcove in the woods, where twelve trees stand sentry around a near perfect circle of low grass and wildflowers. A rabbit scampered into the bushes as I entered, and a woodpecker observed me from his perch high up in a pine. I sat in the center of the alcove and unpacked my tools. A straight razor, a box of matches, rubbing alcohol, and a washcloth. Ma often commented on how scars usually

fade, but mine seemed to stick around. In response, I always attempted to blind her discernment with one of my more disarming smiles while I mapped the quickest route out of her eyesight. I sparked a match and heated the edge of the razor until it was the color of an August sunset. Then, before I lost my nerve, I pressed it to the scar on my face, the marker of my victory, the insignia of my resolve. Out of my left eye, I could see the woodpecker staring at me as I screamed. Nature is strange.

*

I burst into Mrs. Crankshaw's eighth grade Algebra I class fifteen minutes late, nearly careening into her desk where she sat grading papers.

"And what excuse is it this time, Mr. Erickson?" she said, her eyes searing into mine.

I managed to smile widely enough to crinkle my still healing scar.

"Same as always, Mrs. Crankshaw. Bus was late."

She took the time to scan my retinas for any hint of a lie, as she always did, and then huffed and waved me out of her presence and, hopefully, her worries.

I waded into the sea of thirteen-year-olds, giving out my customary greetings on the way to my seat. Picking a seat in a classroom is a strenuous task, but my choice was made easier by those who sat beside me. Five was in his usual seat, half of halfway from the back of the classroom, perfect for surreptitious conversations and other delinquency. Five looked up through his dark bangs when he heard the commotion I caused, as I usually do, and waved to the seat at his right. His backpack sat slumped in the desk, a sorry surrogate for my regality. I smiled and initiated our handshake before I replaced his bag in the desk. Palm of right hand, back of right hand, thumb hook into butterfly, wiggle the fingers, break. After a quick scan of the classroom, I asked Five the all-important question, the one I always ask before starting any class period.

"Where's Mariposa?"

Mariposa Sanchez usually occupied the desk to my right, where she either took notes or read whichever book she had stashed in her bag that day. She also took the time to stare at me for two seconds if I asked her a question, I assume to decide whether my question deserved a response. They usually did, even if the answer was only one word.

Five hooked his right thumb over his left shoulder in response, hooded eyes blinking from behind the mask of his long, straight black hair.

“Oh, she’s at home. She must didn’t get on the bus.”

Five shook his head in agreement, then traced a line from his forehead to his cheekbone over his right eye and sniffed.

“Yeah, bro, it’s fresh. I had the ritual yesterday; I’m surprised my ma hasn’t noticed.”

I spent the rest of the class period replaying the scene in the woods to Five, neglecting the epiphany I experienced in the pawn shop. Five braided a section of his hair while he listened, only stopping to sign some question or another in his signature manner. He’s the only one in the world who knows about what I do every year, and he was the one who suggested I pack a kit so that I would be prepared for the worst. I decided to save the story of the katana for when she and I were one, when she graced my palms with her splendor.

*

Every day after school for a week, I would hop off the bus and visit my katana in Mr. Barnes shop. I’d run in, the bell above the door jingling Mr. Barnes awake. After inspecting the sword to see if anyone had bothered her, I would turn to Mr. Barnes and ask for a price. On Wednesday, he finally grunted a reluctant “\$250.”

My face must have betrayed my financial situation, because Mr. Barnes raised an ash colored eyebrow and asked, “You ain’t got it on you, Mr. Big Shot?”

My face answered for me again, this time with an incredulous but exasperated grimace, complete with the nose wrinkle. Ma gave me this look a lot when I asked if I could

get a dog, to which the answer was always no.

Mr. Barnes chuckled and said, “Well, no one else has really shown any interest, son, so you’ve got time to get it together.”

I grinned and burst out the door, and I could hear Mr. Barnes yell, “Don’t be running out my shop like that, boy.”

*

On the following Monday, I hopped off the bus to check on my katana as per usual. I didn’t even look in the window before walking in, and the bell was barely done with its cadence before I noticed Mr. Barnes wasn’t in his usual spot behind the counter. I caught a blur of movement to my right and turned to see Mr. Barnes reared up to his full height, belly hanging over his khakis, with an antique Louisville slugger raised over his head. I had never seen malice so clearly as I did looking into his wrinkled, stubbly face.

“How dare you come back in here after what you did,” he yelled, brandishing the bat and taking one laborious step towards me.

“What are you talking about, Pops?” I had my hands up and was watching Mr. Barnes closely as I backed up slowly. “I just came to check on the katana like I usually do.”

“You know doggone well that it ain’t here.”

“What?” I looked over to the window display and all I saw was a rickety table with indentations in the dust where the katana stand used to be. My stomach ran up my backbone and did a backflip. I looked back to Mr. Barnes with rage and mourning in my eyes, and he stepped back tentatively.

“What happened to it? Who bought it?”

“Stop acting like you didn’t steal it,” he spat, the crease returning to his brow. “Just like a criminal to return to the scene of the crime. No respect. I trusted you, and you take from me. This is all I have left.” His voice cracked like my shin on the first day I walked in.

I took a minute to process what he accused me of, then tilted my head in disbelief. My scar burned as freshly as it did when I was sitting in the alcove.

“You think I did this? I came in here every day to check on my katana, and when you finally gave me a price, I went home to figure out a way to get the money. You know how many yards I cut this weekend?”

Mr. Barnes lowered the bat a fraction but raised it again when my voice got louder.

“Eighteen. Front and back. We don’t even have a riding mower. I pushed the stupid thing five blocks up the street so I could buy this katana, and you accuse me of this? I gave you my name. What kind of thief tells you their name? Comes in every day with a smile so you can get acquainted with their features?”

I was screaming now, and Mr. Barnes was sitting on the floor with the bat next to him, tired. I still had fire behind my eyes and under my skin, but I just looked at him and then blasted out the door, the bell jingling a sharp farewell.

*

I thought I was over the disappointment until Five punched me in the arm the following day after school. I looked up sharply, ready for war, but seeing Five looking back with furrowed brows through his dark hair, I sighed in relief.

“I have not been acting punchy today, Five.”

He raised an eyebrow and sucked his teeth in direct opposition to my statement. A bold statement for Five.

“I’m serious.”

“Mariposa.”

I was about to respond, and then paused. He was completely right. I hadn’t spoken one word to Mariposa today, and it was a rainy day, when her steps are much louder and her eyes sharper. I always compliment her on cloudy days.

Five saw the realization on my face and nodded. He waved his hand in a circle with his palm toward him, meaning, “Come on, spill it.”

I sighed and told him the whole story, from the moment I saw the katana in the window to the incident with Mr. Barnes yesterday. His eyes widened when I mentioned that the katana had been stolen, I assumed in pity for me.

After I finished the story, Five stared off into nothingness for a while longer, as if he was piecing together a mystery. He flinched back into reality, looked at me directly in the eyes, and then sprinted off to catch his bus. I thought I saw something behind his eyes, something rigid. I shivered and ran off to find Mariposa.

*

The next day, Five didn't come to school. I didn't worry too much about it, as he was prone to do miss about three days a month. The day passed normally: Mrs. Crankshaw yelled at me for talking, I traded lunch food with Jack, I walked Mariposa to her bus, and then hopped on my own.

When I stepped off the bus, the sun was slicing through the gray fabric covering the sky. As I was about to head off toward reluctantly toward my house, something glinted in the window across the street and blinded me. When my vision cleared, I was staring at my katana, in all its precise splendor, standing in its normal spot in Mr. Barnes Pawn Shop.

I blasted through the door, the sound of the bell causing Mr. Barnes to turn around and smile at me. The sun coming through the window warmed his face and made a mustard stain on his old polo shirt visible.

"Hey, son, how you doing?"

"How'd you get it back?"

Mr. Barnes laughed. "Never one to mince words, are you? Well, this young man here found the katana and returned it to me. Ain't that something?"

He stepped to the side to reveal Five, the sun framing him in the center of the shop. He was standing there in his quiet manner, shoulders back, head straight, feet slightly apart and ready for action, whether to fight or to run. He pushed his hair out of his face and smiled. It was a lot to take in, since Five never smiles and his teeth reflected the sunbeams as sharply as the katana in the window. I also had to process that Five's right eye was swollen shut, like a tender plum someone had squeezed in a fit of anger. His left eye was open and alert, though, and shone a cold and intense blue. It reminded me of

lightning in the nighttime, of the ice below the ice when the lake freezes over.

I may be dumb, but I'm not stupid. I know Five's older brother Six Shooter was the type of character to beat up your mother and make you watch, so breaking and entering would be a leisurely afternoon to him. I had never connected that to Five's frequent absences, though, and I wondered what he had to endure to get the sword back here. Perhaps he had a story of his own to tell me.

"So did you still want to buy the sword, son?" Mr. Barnes asked, snapping me out of my trance. He smiled at me like a benevolent king on his rickety throne, and suddenly the shop was a dragon's hoard of treasure, shining in the sun. I smiled wide, my scar wrinkling, and addressed His Majesty.

"I'll be right back."

With that, I burst out the door with Five beside me, the bell jingling a happy farewell to two heroes leaving the realm of a king.



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