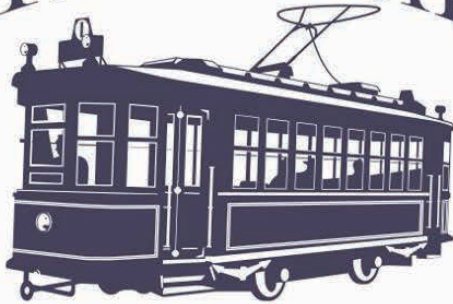


THE  
STREETCAR



*Mississippi State University's  
Creative Arts Journal  
Est. 2013*





The Streetcar

# the streetcar

volume 8

Volume 8 Spring 2020

Cover Art  
*Reflection* by Emma Carr

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To have work considered in future volumes of *The Streetcar*, undergraduate students enrolled at Mississippi State University may submit their work online at <http://thestreetcarmsu.com/submit>. The submission deadline for Volume 9 will be in winter 2020.

Dear Reader,

Thank you for picking up Volume 8 of *The Streetcar*, a journal produced through hard work, thoughtful critique, lively discussion, and, above all, a love for the arts.

This volume is an expression of the highest quality works of art that Mississippi State University students have to offer, carefully curated by an editorial staff. These pieces speak to how we connect deeply personal experiences with the wider, colorful world. Pieces such as “On Paper” and “Sink Seascape” are a testament to the ability of our students to depict the intricacies of our world through visual art. The captivity of a captured moment is illustrated through pieces like “6:07am” and “Salisbury,” among many others. Other pieces, such as “Don’t Like,” “How to Light a Firework,” and “When Did You Know You Were Gay?” function as commentaries on growth and social change. As the journal gradients from black and white to color, we hope that you will find yourself captivated by the moments our students captured through visual and written artistry.

This year, our student organization discovered bigger and brighter ways to bring the arts to the wider campus community. *The Streetcar* hosted events that brought together creative writers, poetry performers, comic artists, and stand-up comedians. In addition, we engaged with other campus organizations, academic departments, and members of the Starkville community to reach a wider audience of students and artists alike.

Lastly, we are indebted to the unconditional support from the Shackouls Honors College and the College of Arts & Sciences. We thank our faculty advisor, Dr. Eric Vivier, for his kind guidance and encouragement. Additionally, we thank Kayleigh Few, director of the Writing Center, for funding our Open Mics and finding ways to connect us with others in the Mississippi State community. Most of all, thank you to our staff who gave their time, care, and hard work to produce the eighth volume of *The Streetcar*. We hope you enjoy this journal, in all its color.

Joy Cariño and Rebecca Van Pamel  
Editors-in-Chief 2019-2020

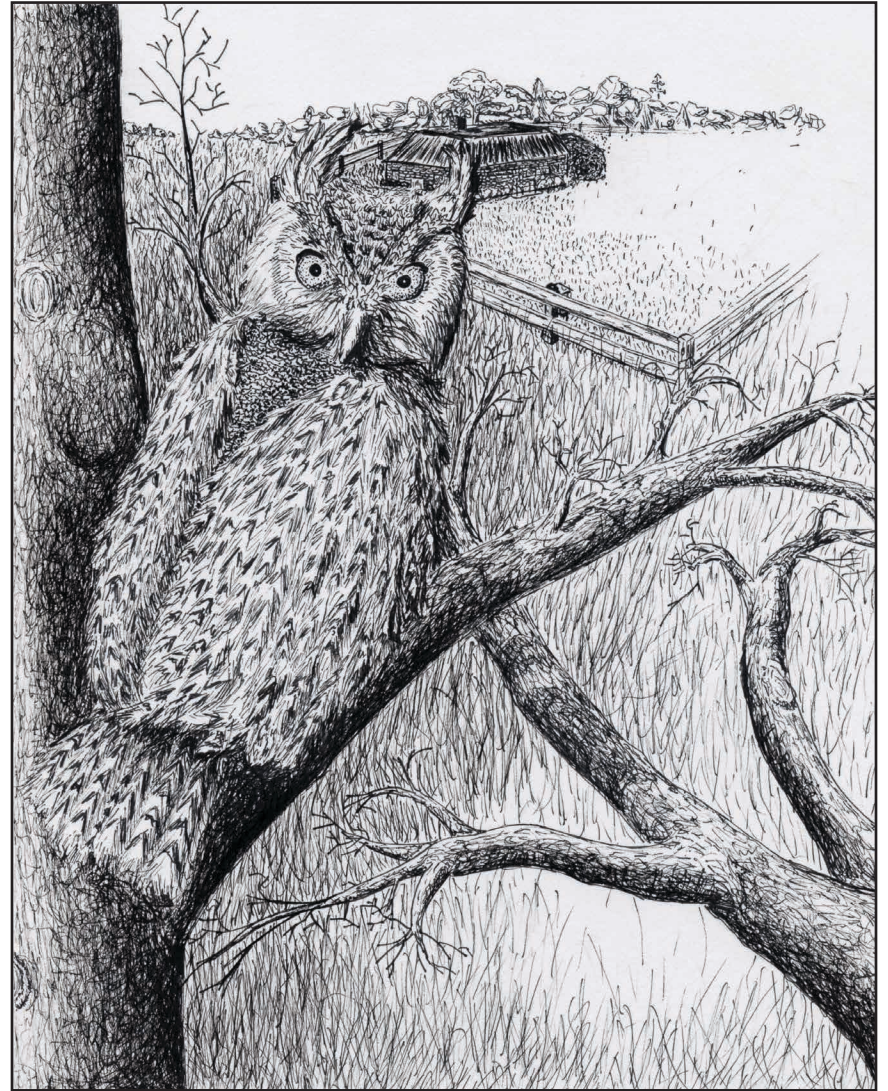
Brady Kruse and Ruby Titus  
Editors-in-Chief 2020-2021

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DR. T.J. ECKLEBURG



I get this question all the time  
They want a moment or a day  
Where I could definitively say *I'm gay*  
But I can never find it  
I can never remember

Was it in kindergarten when I was best friends with the *girly boy*?  
Or when I kissed a boy in the backstage of a beauty pageant?

Or did it start with the  
*Oh, he's cool*  
*I like hanging out with him*

Is it about sex?  
Because maybe it's puberty  
Or is it about love?  
Because that is forever or never  
I'm not quite sure yet

Was it the day  
I stopped affirming  
*I can't be gay*  
*I won't be gay*  
And started saying  
*Now, what do I do with this?*

Or was it the first time I kissed a girl?  
*Come on*  
*You have to kiss your girlfriend*  
And so I did  
Wet lips on dry lips  
Two books pushed together on a bookshelf  
Hands clapping  
A dog's nose on another dog's butt

Or was it the first time I kissed a guy?  
I mean really kissed him  
It was like trying to hold wet fish  
That you just caught  
Still alive  
Slipping and sliding  
And I had to stop  
Do you have to like kissing wet fish to be gay?  
I don't know  
Maybe

Or was it the moment  
When other people whispered  
Wondered  
*Have you heard?*  
*Let's keep our distance*

Was it when my relationship with my father  
Slipped away  
Day by day  
When small talk turned into talk  
When homophobia turned into a phobia of me

Was it when my mother told me  
*I'll always love you*  
*No matter what*  
*You can tell me anything*  
And I said,  
*I love you, too*

Was it when she died?  
And I realized  
I've got this life to live  
No time to waste

Was it when I read the books  
Watched the movies  
Felt the songs and poetry  
Of men loving men loving men loving men  
Loving men

Was it when I learned about  
Harvey Milk and Bayard Rustin and Karl Ulrichs  
And Ruth Burks  
Who found the words  
Who changed the question

*When did I know I was this thing unknown to me?*  
*When did I know I was gay?*

WHEN

DID

YOU

KNOW

YOU

WERE

GAY?

## SMOKE SHOW



*Payton Selby /// Photography*

## CHOREOGRAPHY

There is something beautiful about choreographed violence. The careful but swift stroke of a blade, or the purposeful placement of a hand on the ribs or a foot in the mouth. The efficiency of pain. The meaning inherent in each movement. It suggests a higher level of existence, one that allows us to be fully present with ourselves, with no regrets from the past nor reservations for the future. To exist completely in sync with one's body and soul.

Real fights are nothing like that. Not in the slightest.

There is nothing sharp or crisp or clear about violence. Everything is a smear of motion and adrenaline and color and breath, and there is no room to really think, and trying to make space to think puts you at risk, so an attempt is made at giving in to your animal instincts, but they are too dull, too sleepy, and your higher self cannot sacrifice itself to this prehistoric clarity, this slumbering demon. Real fights are quick, too, less than a minute, with the victor decided in an instant and, if both parties survive, argued about.

Honor is an afterthought.

I got into a fight once. At Chastain Middle School, in 7th grade. I was among the shorter half of the grade, but I made up for what I lacked in height with speed, dexterity, intelligence, and a fair amount of lower body strength. Girls liked to comment on my apparently shapely figure, and braver ones would take the liberty of slapping my butt on the way to class. A swift lesson in consent. Even now, it happens from time to time.

Anyway, I was a short, peanut-headed nerd with terrible eyesight and jacked-up teeth, and I was blessed to go to a school where the stereotypical stratification of students did not apply. I was afforded some level of notoriety due to my innate ability to provide correct answers, and my ma always told me I never met a stranger, so with a smile and a joke I managed to make it through school fairly unscathed. I learned early on that people remember when you help them out in a bind and that they had a hard time resisting a smile, crooked teeth and all.

I took Kung Fu classes the entire time I was in middle school, and I was enamored. My dad raised me on a healthy diet of comic books and trips to the library, so I was already predisposed to the idea of physically fighting evil with just my skills and wits, like Shang-Chi or Iron Fist. I believed, like most people do, that I was better than I was. That being said, I wasn't bad at all.

The fight happened in PE, near the end of the school year. Instead of our usual running drills or whatever sport we were supposed to be playing, Coach Stringfellow, who was shaped more like a balloon than a string, had allowed us free rein while he relaxed in his surprisingly sturdy chair. Half of the boys had pickup games going at either end of the basketball court, and the rest of us sat scattered across the bleachers with

*Joseph Neyland /// Essay*



our friends yelling and laughing. A normal day. Usually I'd be with my friends Viviek and Jaylen, both nerds like me, the former Indian and the latter rotund. Today Viviek didn't show, so I sat talking with Jaylen while we waited on the class to end.

Not too far over were Jared and his henchman Antonio. I know what you're thinking, and I swear to you, this is the best word to describe him. Jared was taller than the rest of us, roguishly handsome, and his telltale smirk always preceded either a well-timed joke, a caustic taunt, or some feat of athletic ability. I was certain he ranked higher in the proverbial food chain than I did. It would be easy to say he was a bully, but he wasn't.

He just did what he wanted.

This day, he apparently wanted to spray me with water from a spray bottle he had separated in order to make it a more effective weapon. A slightly impressive feat of engineering, now that I think about it.

Having dealt with my fair share of teasing my entire life and recently having learned how to verbally retaliate with insults, I politely asked him to stop.

He didn't.

I put my hood on and attempted to ignore him. Jared kept it up, with Antonio sniggering in the background like a demented meerkat.

After a few more minutes of this, I remembered a conversation between my friends and I on the new policy on fighting at school a few weeks back.

"Yeah, apparently if you don't start the fight, they won't suspend you," Jaylen said.

"Really? Well, I mean, that makes sense; you shouldn't get punished for defending yourself," I said, or maybe Viviek did. "I don't know what my parents would do if I got in a fight."

I was yanked back to the present by another spurt of liquid hitting the side of my face, and in that split second, a decision was made.

Jaylen had a great time describing the fight to Viviek when he got back, laughing in fits as he described me chasing Jared down the bleachers thunderously, getting picked up by Jared, and me subsequently slapping the dog piss out of him. Jared drops me and we square up officially now, and Jaylen recounts how Jared pulls my hood over my head and I launch a few blind missiles before I am picked up again, this time by Coach Stringfellow. I find it surprising that I didn't struggle as Coach carried me away to the principal's office.

The correct use of Kung Fu requires a clear mind and calm appraisal of the situation at hand. This is very difficult to accomplish with obstructed vision and rising annoyance, so my forms were less than ideal. I didn't even get to use my butterfly kick.

Somehow, as I am being hustled out of the gym, I see my glasses

on the wooden floor.

Coach brings Jared in, sits him down next to me, and asks what started all this ruckus. We tell him as a unit, with me starting the conversation and Jared being surprisingly truthful with his details. As we're explaining, I come to the realization that I wasn't even mad when the fight started, or during the fight. I don't even really care now that it's over, either. This entire time, I can't tell a beaver from a bullfrog because my glasses got knocked off during the scuffle, which is probably why I couldn't pay much attention to the two police officers that came in at the beginning of our joint confession. I relay the loss of my bifocals to Coach Stringfellow, who brushes past the information like a comb-over.

I don't remember if the cops introduced themselves when they came in, but I do remember them scolding Jared for squirting potentially dangerous liquids at my eyes, and I definitely remember them telling us that they were going to put us both in handcuffs.

"We're going to put you boys in handcuffs now, is that alright?"

Stupid questions deserve stupid answers, but I didn't have the mental dexterity to provide one at the moment.

Apparently, Jared didn't either.

Handcuffs are superiorly uncomfortable. The mechanism is similar to a zip tie, so that it can be tightened at will but cannot be loosened except with a key. I situated my hands behind my back at the cops' request, and the metal kkkkkklik-ed closed onto my bony wrists, and I spent the rest of my time in the handcuffs trying to find the least uncomfortable orientation. I couldn't.

While we waited for the officers and Coach Stringfellow to contact the front office and then our parents, Taylor Tucker brought me my glasses and put them on my face for me, seeing as I was incapacitated at the moment. She was taller than I was, skinnier, and her shiny smile full of straight teeth was usually preceded by a hilarious statement and followed by her own raucous laughter. She reminded me of a chipmunk. I had always thought she was cute, but after that day, she was an angel. I hope she's still as joyful as she was.

I still wonder why we were handcuffed. We were cooperating with the officers, we were obviously not going to fight each other again, and we were twelve. I still got my shoes from Payless. Jared, for all his blessings in the height department, still didn't come to above the officer's shoulders. And even after that, why did they walk us down the hall to the front office?

Why did they make the handcuffs so tight?

In the front office, Jared and I sat across from the police, who informed us that our parents had been called and that they were on the way. Tears marched to the edges of my eyelashes and, amazingly, parachuted down my cheeks and to my shirt.

There is no accurate description for how preposterously

inane attempting to wipe your eyes with your shoulders is while you are handcuffed. Top ten least favorite experiences of my life. Do not recommend.

I glanced over to Jared, slouched in his chair, hands behind his back, his signature smirk now a soft scowl. I remember thinking he seemed simultaneously accustomed to this, but also out of his depth. Like a fisherman wrestling with the Big One, or a cook serving a new dish. Comfortably worried. I suddenly felt ashamed to be crying, which probably didn't help me stop crying at all.

The police began to make conversation with us, describing how they had just decided to visit the school on a whim and were called to help administer the punishment of two students who had gotten into a physical altercation. They told us their names and inquired about where we stayed and what grade we were in, and later about what our parents would think. This was probably an attempt to get me to stop crying, and it worked up until that last part.

Finally, my parents arrived, both of them, which worried me even further. My mother, a teacher herself, often reiterated to my sister and I how much trouble our behinds would be in if she ever had to take off work and come up to that school because we were acting a fool. I understood immediately that I had taken a shower in gasoline and jumped into a volcano.

My mother took one look at me in that chair, her twelve-year-old son with his arms handcuffed behind his back and the tears still drying on his face, and the features of her face accelerated from quiet shock to confused fear to a calm, rational anger in the time it takes to sneeze.

The police officers greeted my parents cordially, with a smile and a handshake, and asked them to take a seat. Before they could think to say anything else, Ma interjected.

“Why is my son in handcuffs?”

I have seen that look on her face too many times. Since I was a generally good kid, a fact which my parents reminded me of time and again, I was thankfully not the recipient of said face too many times. It reminds me of a sphinx, sort of, if a sphinx was alive and breathed dry ice, with her tapered scowl insinuating that any answer you give to her question will be an overwhelmingly stupid and disproportionately inadequate one. She is nearly impossible to look in the face at times like this, a modern Medusa, her sentences envenomed.

The cops knew this look as well as I did. Their wives had probably given them the same look on many and varied occasions. In less than a minute, I was out of the cuffs and rubbing my wrists like a convict on *Law and Order*. While the cops left us in the room as they went to notify the school that we could leave, Ma hissed at my dad, “Why did you let them handcuff your son?”

I'm not sure what she really expected him to do honestly; he had

about as much power as I did in that situation. Confined to a certain set of movements, limited in how exactly he could maneuver his son out of a place that he would do anything to never see him in again.

I don't remember his response.

When we got home, I asked if I was in trouble. Ma, the disciplinarian, replied that I was only grounded for the duration of my suspension: three days. For a kid who didn't own any video games and read books like fish drink water, this was the easiest punishment ever.

A little later, Ma reminded me of a conversation we had before I got on the bus one day a few weeks earlier. Apparently, I had asked what would happen if I got into a fight at school. She told me, like a good parent and teacher, that if I was being bullied, then I should tell the teacher or her. I completely understood that and told her as much. She then asked if I was being bullied, and I told her no, which was the truth. I still wanted to know if I would get in trouble for defending myself.

She thought about it, sighed, and looked at me. I don't remember exactly what she said, but it didn't really matter. What mattered was that she knew.

She knew before I did that I was looking for a fight. She knew that I wanted a reason to be angry, because I had barely ever been exasperated and never been truly angry in my life. That I was searching for an excuse to snap, to feel that righteous heat of rage, that I was waiting on the day that I could take some power for my own, like my heroes, like her. She knew from her own experiences that fights are nothing like you think they are, but you learn everything about yourself in those moments. She knew I was going to have to fight and wrestle and gnaw and scream bloody fury into the world for it to cough up a grain of salt. And more than anything, she knew that her small black bifocaled son, with his books and his bright friendly soul and his sheepishly crooked smile, needed permission to be angry.

She gave me that permission.

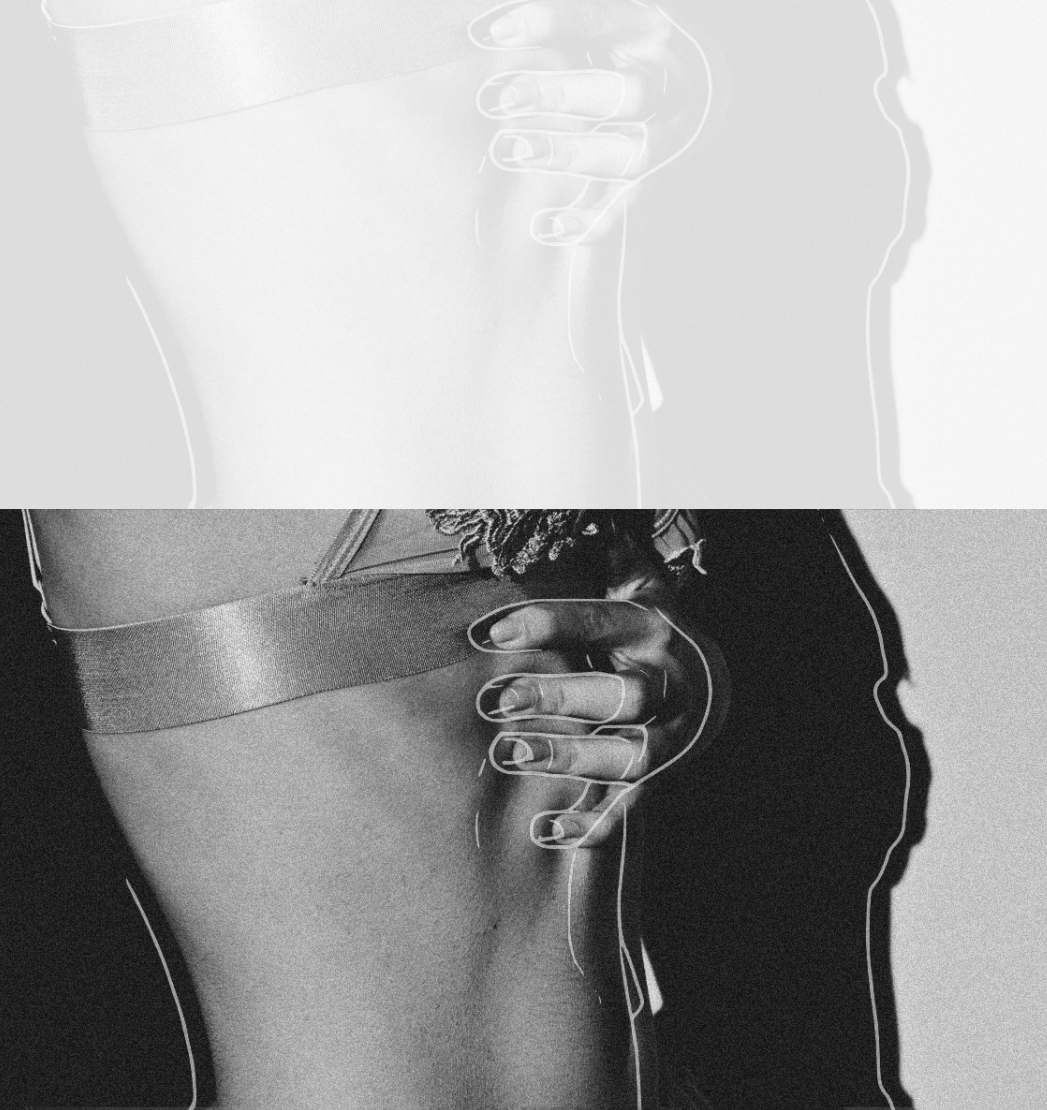
I still haven't given it to myself yet.

I went back to school the next week fearful of retaliation from Jared and ridicule from my classmates. I was welcomed by neither, as my classmates made a few good-natured jokes about my altercation and Jared didn't bother me at all for the rest of our stint in middle school. He did flunk 7th grade, though.

Still, as he lifted me up in the middle of the gym, before I slapped the taste out of his mouth, I do remember him laughing, as if we were brothers, as if we were dancing a duet and I was reaching for a rose.



WEIGHT OF THIS WORLD



## HE LOVES ME NOT

## HOW TO LIGHT A FIREWORK

1. Tell her she should stay home.<sup>1</sup>
2. Challenge her intelligence.<sup>2</sup>
3. Doubt her abilities.<sup>3</sup>
4. Judge her appearance.<sup>4</sup>
5. Criticize her opinions.<sup>5</sup>
6. Disregard her sacrifices.<sup>6</sup>
7. And then
8. Watch her flicker to extraordinary heights.
9. See her spark change.
10. Feel her radiate warmth.
11. Hear her ignite.
12. See her illuminate the sky against the night's canvas.
13. Watch her paint the world with unrestrained flashes of color.
14. Envy the trail of light and hope she leaves behind.

- 
1. This firework is not intended for indoor use.
  2. **WARNING.** Read instructions carefully and thoroughly before initial lighting.
  3. Do not place firework in an object of containment. This will prevent its ability to ignite effectively.
  4. **NOTE.** The outer covering is susceptible to weathering and damage. While the firework may appear unharmed, the inside contents may also be damaged.
  5. This firework must have a proper base. Unstable surfaces are not recommended. A strong foundation will ensure proper ignition.
  6. **HAZARD.** The risk of injury is high should these warnings be disregarded.



COMPANION



CURIOSITY

## SOCKEYE SALMON

Snout swirling upright, you fling yourself homeward.  
Olive caudal jerks you upstream, upkicking sprinkle  
even wilder than the current of its launch—  
current that skins shins and splits tibia.  
You slug through thickening rush and grizzly jaws,  
sucking in stream and forcing out another meter of jolt.  
Millions of brothers headbutt and bulldoze,  
all born among rocky crag.  
They swell over onto the bank  
and squirm desperately back into the water.  
You fix your eyes on fuschia pearls and flush madly to them  
like blood bringing salvation to oxygen starved muscle.

Tight nitrile tugs back my February skin, and I push  
scraped cuticles into glove tips. I'll only see your  
sharp red though fluorescent buzz and fogged goggles.  
You come to me sunken into soggy tin tray.  
I plunge my hands into the specimen bucket,  
rifling through your brothers' bodies.  
I flip you over with a cheap hope that the other side  
will dazzle me, but I'm met with more gray.  
Gloved fingers prick your teeth, and you spit up formaldehyde.  
My tweezers pick away at gray matter  
and slide down the ridges of your spine.  
I want your gold rusted eyes to scream of victory  
and the tail that propelled you miles upstream  
to slash at my hands. But you're  
pierced and pinned against rubber sponge.  
I slide the scalpel into your gut;  
a spritz of preservative hits my lip's corner.



## ODE TO POPART

## A CHILLY SPOONFUL

I long for a treat so smooth.  
Do I dare go out, through the heavy showers, for a treat quite frothy,  
Eager for a taste of chocolate?  
Searching for a goodness creamy,  
In pursuit of a churn so thick,  
Really, tell me of a place still open in this weather frozen,

Extending its chilling services for my stomach that is aching, frozen,  
As hunger takes over. Such a smooth  
Finish will I taste with this delight, thick  
Ropes of flavor and a layer of frothy,  
Overwhelming sweetness, mixed with a cool, creamy  
Sample of chocolate.

To be satisfied, I pull in to order. I tell the crackly speaker, I need more  
than a piece of chocolate.  
Yogurt nor pudding will suffice, for I am set on the frozen,  
Fresh swirl of cocoa creamy.  
Round I drive through the rain, away from the voice sounding smooth.  
Open goes the window. A drink sits on the sill, fizzing, frothy;  
My order is wrong, lacking some ice cream thick.

Where is my treat, sir, are you thick?  
Enraged, I send back the substance void of chocolate,  
Not accepting the cup of liquid, with frothy  
Droplets of carbonation, un-frozen.  
Yellow quite mellow was that drink, its smooth  
Syrup bubbling over. Such a disappointment that my creamy

(Reasonably simple) dessert was, in fact, not made creamy.  
I wait with a promise of return, the time stretching, thick,  
Granting no mercy. I am asked to drive forward, to wait for my smooth  
Heavenly indulgence. The chocolate  
Treat nags at my senses, its cool, frozen  
Nature begging for a spoon to scoop away the first bite. A frothy

Orange cream soda is delivered to the hands of a driver behind me, and  
my irritation, a frothy  
Whipped mix of frustration churning in my stomach, subsides when at  
last, the creamy  
Paradisiac is to me awarded, and my server, now savior, walks back  
inside. Frozen  
Layers in the cup trap the end of my spoon—a tragedy to my heart—thick  
Enveloping chocolate  
Around the plastic smooth.

So wait I must, to scoop my whipped, frothy treat. Wait to taste the thick  
Enriched pockets of creamy chocolate.  
Thankful it's at least frozen for the drive, I race home for a chilly spoonful  
so smooth.

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HALLWAY

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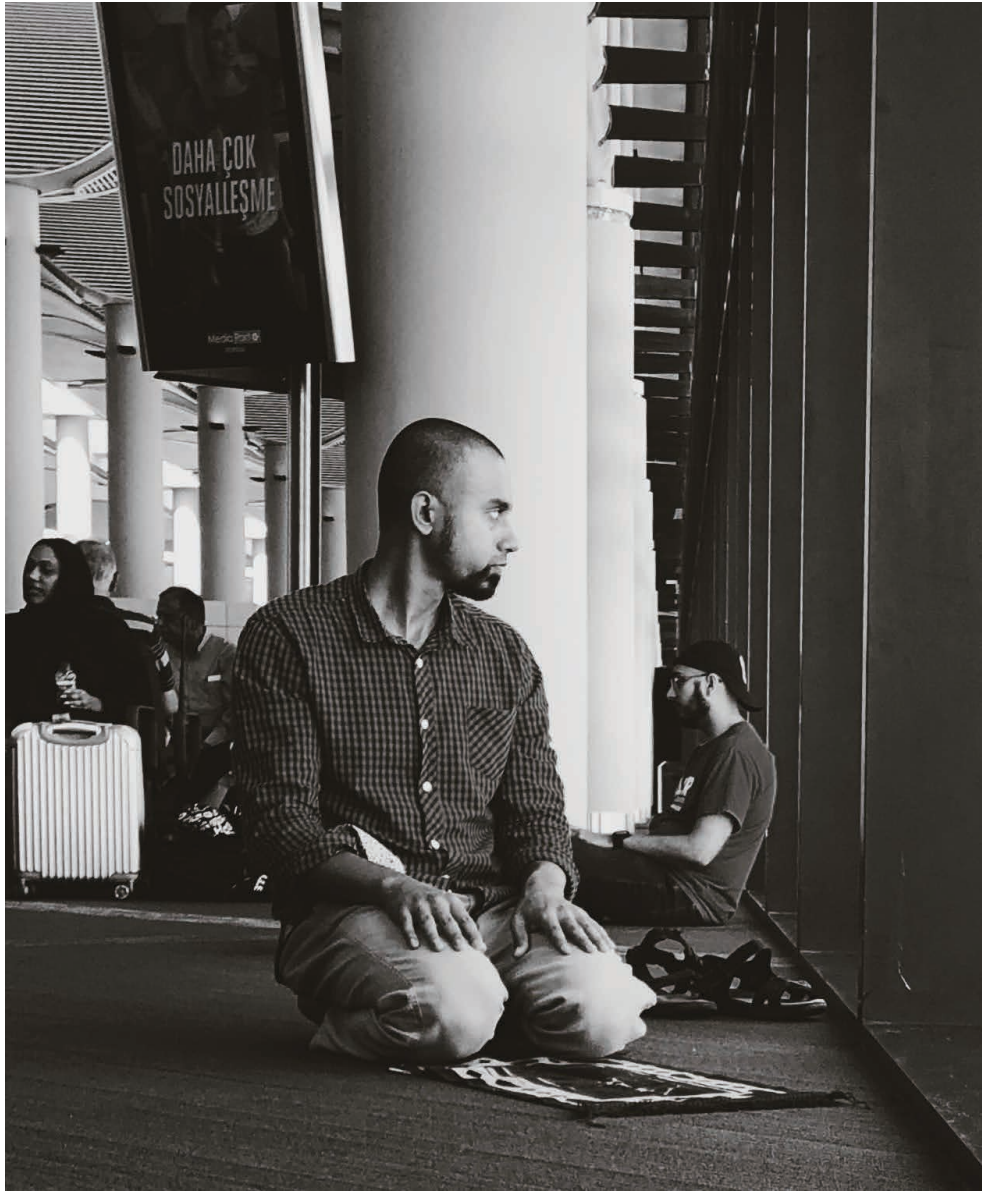


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KEEP CLEAR

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AS-SALAM-ALAIKUM

SOMBER



When I heard the crash, I guessed what had fallen. My first thought was, You did it on purpose. David leaned around the doorframe to the living room. He wasn't wearing his glasses. "I'm so sorry, Nora. It was an accident."

"It's okay," I said. I got up and walked to the kitchen. Sky-blue shards stained the tile. I toed one of the fragments. The winding design of white vines, hand-embellished with burnt orange zinnias, glinted up at me in twenty different pieces. A puzzle without a solution. The mug had been a gift from my mother, a memento from her trip to France when I was twelve. David stared at me. I went to the closet to get the broom. He didn't mean it, I thought. He didn't mean it. Not today.

I slid the mug into the trash and turned to David. "Are you ready? Have everything?" My suitcase was already standing by the door, metal pull bar extended.

"I should, yeah. Let me just check and make sure." He ducked into the bedroom, and I heard a bag being unzipped, then zipped again.

David reappeared in the doorway, his suitcase rolling behind him. "All set." He offered a smile. I wanted to return it. "I'm really looking forward to this weekend, you know," he said. "The track should be beautiful this time of year." Table talk. Coffee talk. A whole year of marriage, and that's how it sounded.

"Me, too," I said. "Happy anniversary to us."

David drove. After five minutes, I gave up arguing. He treated the three hours from Ithaca to Saratoga seriously, mapping the trip like an assignment from Dr. Richards. His supervisor, one of the premier clinical psychologists in New York, was the only person he deferred to without argument. The only person whose ideas mattered. Who had changed him in ways that I don't even think he saw. She inflated his ego, that's for sure—David knew he was special, maybe even lucky, that she'd chosen to guide his PhD. And, while I didn't like to admit it, Dr. Richards was lucky to have David, too.

We dropped our stuff at the hotel and changed. I pulled out my green sundress and tried it on in front of the mirror, tugging down the hem so it covered my knees. My hair was already frizzy, my eyeliner smudged. I looked tired. My mind wandered back to the mug, back to last Thursday's fight, back to the week before that, at the clinic. I blinked hard and shook out my hands.

"Hey, Nor? Here's your book. I know you haven't been reading much lately, but I saw it on the nightstand and thought I'd pack it, just in case."

"Oh." David handed me a hardcover missing its dust jacket. *Pride and Prejudice*. My favorite classic. "Thank you, David."

He smiled at me, his face honest, and ducked into the bathroom. I flipped through the book, fingers tracing the yellowing pages. I opened to the inside cover. *For Nora*, read David's neat script. *Happy six months*. Still David. Still Nora.

The track should be beautiful this time of year.

It was Saturday, August 25, the Travers Stakes. The busiest day of the Saratoga horse racing season. There was something about the crowds, about the chatter and the body heat, about the throngs of women in their hats stuck with flowers and feathers and veils and, among the eccentric, precarious horse figurines and fake turf. They were exotic birds soaring by on silk wings, squawking about their husbands' new jobs, their children's new schools.

I followed David as he wove through them, wondering if I looked fancy enough to be there. Fuck it, I thought. I didn't wear hats.

The weather was almost balmy, not at all what I'd expected. The sky was iron. The clouds bowed inward, a storm's eye. I looked for the sun but saw only a watery blur. I stared for a few seconds and blinked slowly, but the light was too weak to leave an impression. That was always my favorite thing about the sun—how it burned so white and hot that when you closed your eyes, you could still make out its shape, a staticky starburst of bright red on black.

For once, my weather app had been right. Thank God for my umbrella. I had a feeling that more than a few of the bird-ladies would later be swooping, shrieking, into the stands.

David looked back at me. "You want to head over to the paddock?" He was already facing forward again, already assuming I'd say yes. I studied his back, his straight posture. He hadn't walked like that in undergrad, when we'd first met in Gender Studies. He'd been a leaned-back, feet-propped kind of guy, always late to his seat, just left of mine. But I'd seen enough. The way his eyes focused on the professor, the board, his notebook, so sharp that I thought they'd cut through. The easy personality that framed his intelligence. We were the same. Above all else, we were two minds—our friends labeled us a power couple, words that shaped how I saw us, too. At least, back then, when both of us still shared the spotlight.

Now, five years later, we weren't even in the same show.

I nodded in reply, then remembered he couldn't see me. "You know that's my favorite part."

It was the truth. I loved the paddock more than anything else about the track—maybe even more than the race itself. Sure, the Thoroughbreds were awe-inspiring from afar, their speed and power raw enough to transcend distance. But seeing them up close was a privilege, an event that felt forbidden, almost sacred.

We approached the fence that bordered the paddock and headed for an empty space along the rails. David slipped off to buy us cocktails. The tiny arena was ringed by trees, towering oak and sumac that threw pale shadows across the dirt. I watched an acorn bounce off a woman's hat. She didn't notice. Red and white dahlias lined the posts, looking dull without the sun. The air smelled electric and heavy, undercut by manure. I set my arms on the outer fence, leaning into the smooth white boards. There were two fences to separate spectators from the horses. I stared at the layer of dust in between, imagining what would happen if I ducked beneath the rails.

After twenty minutes, the horses started to emerge. I checked my watch. 10:03 AM. David hadn't returned, but I figured he was stuck in line. The first rider approached. My mind quieted. The jockey perched proud as he was led around the track, occasionally waving at the crowd. Small and lithe, he half-sat, half-crouched atop a big bay colt. I checked the program in my hand, matched his blue and orange silks to the brightly colored square on the page. Luis Saez, on Exterminator. I'd never seen either of them.

As Exterminator passed, flanks black with sweat, he met my eyes. I was always so intrigued by horses' eyes—so unlike the eyes of dogs, which were nothing less than human. Capable of sadness, of joy, of hope. Horse eyes were more like goat eyes, or sheep eyes—all oblong, horizontal pupils, flat black bars that only ever watched me for a beat before shifting away.

A whinny came from the direction of the barn. Half of the colts in the ring answered, some dancing in place, trying for a jog. Hands were quick on the stud chain. As they passed, all shades of chestnut and bay and black, I thought about what I would do after vet school. I was in my fourth year, but I still hadn't settled on a specialty. I had considered equine medicine before—I mean, half the girls I knew had pledged allegiance to horses by second grade. I admired horses. I had nothing against them. But I liked seeing horses how they were supposed to be—quick and whole and strong. Seeing them otherwise, seeing them die, felt like witnessing something profane.

Then again, I didn't know if I could handle small animals, either. My ambition of becoming a surgeon was looking more like a fantasy, a pipe dream I'd never achieve. Not after what had happened. David had reassured me afterward, but it wasn't hard for him to stay optimistic. He was only a year away from earning his PhD, and he'd just been guaranteed a spot in Dr. Richards's prestigious clinic. In the beginning, I was truly happy for him. We celebrated that night, bought his favorite takeout and nice champagne, a mismatched pair. But when he kept talking, not for days but months, the feeling changed. He wasn't just bragging on himself. He was asking how on earth I could stay in the race.

David had always been a frontrunner, fast out of the gate. Head of the pack. I felt myself lagging, watching everything pass—David, my classmates, my entire life—while I stood in place, anchored to the track, the only spot of clarity amid a long blur. I was falling behind, I knew it, but I thought I could see past the dirt kicking into my eyes. Past the odds that spelled 100-1. That I could pull ahead in the home stretch, a spectacular feat, close twenty lengths and end up swaddled in roses.

Damn it. Damn me. I checked my watch again—10:39. Where the hell was David? The horses were halfway through their parade around the paddock. I fiddled with my umbrella as I watched more colts jog by. Joel Rosario, a Derby winner, on Genuine Risk, odds 20-1. A leggy sorrel, frothing at the mouth. Not the favorite today. Ryan Moore, on Gato del Sol, odds 8-1. A shining black colt with a big head. Well, if a long face meant better odds—why not. Irwin Rosendo, on Catholic Boy, odds 2-1. Catholic Boy looked anything but meek. He half-reared, yanked his chain, and skittered left into the fence. I was close enough to hear the hissed *mierda* as Rosendo jerked his leg out of the way.

The second to last was a dark gray colt. He didn't try for a trot or toss his head. He was quiet. Silver dapples bloomed over his back, then draped across his hips and ringed his hocks. He was small, but his waist tucked up gracefully, almost wasp-like, and I could see each muscle as it rolled beneath his hide. He held my gaze. When he blinked and passed by, saddle creaking, I unfolded the daily racing form. The jockey was Manny Franco, looking sharp in spring green and egg yellow. I knew him, but I didn't remember from where. I skipped over to the colt's stats, assessing the numbers that spelled out his history, reading his name. Bright Future. Odds 70-1. Almost impossible.

I wasn't a better. But he was my horse.

I spotted David at 10:46. He was flushed in the face and neck, talking with a woman in a gauzy dress. In his left hand was an untouched cocktail. I squinted. Maybe a mint julep. About time.

As they approached, I looked the woman up and down. She was about our age, maybe a bit older, with too much makeup and too little fabric. I didn't recognize her.

"Nora! There you are!" Like I'd thought about moving. "I'm sorry for the wait. I was standing in line for drinks when I ran into Grace. I've mentioned Grace before, right? We went to high school together." His words sounded more fluid than usual. God, was he tipsy? David had always been a lightweight. Had he really blown me off for that long and gotten drinks with someone else? The umbrella stabbed itself into the ground.

I heard my voice. "It's okay."

Grace extended her hand. "So nice to meet you," she said, flashing a row of small, straight teeth. Nice teeth, I thought. Bet you still wear your retainer and everything.

I said it was nice to meet her, too, then lifted my drink out of David's hand. His julep was three-quarters empty. I didn't ask how many he'd already had. He and Grace chatted and laughed, debating whether or not Ms. DiAngelo had actually had an affair with a classmate their senior year. I tuned out. David was a flirt, no doubt, but he didn't have motives. He never worried me. I didn't want to talk, and they didn't bother to aim the conversation my way. I kept my eyes on the horses. The remaining colts finished their circuit and filed into the barn, tails disappearing one by one.

"Did we miss them all?" asked David, brow furrowing as he turned to look after the horses, then at me.

"I guess you did," I said. "Don't worry, David," I offered, rubbing his arm. "There's always the race." Not that he cared about the paddock. Or even about the Travers. To him, horses had no dimension. The colts were flat black numbers on a newspaper page, past wins and ranks and odds. I didn't understand how he could see such fluidity, such dynamism, and come away with the impression of inanimate objects. Were we even looking at the same thing?

To me, whether on or off the page, horses always breathed.

"So what else have you been doing these days?" Grace's voice broke in. I stirred my drink, enjoying the tink of the ice as it rounded the cup. David launched into a spiel about Dr. Richards and how he was almost finished with his dissertation on *The Effect of Freudian Psychoanalysis on the Psyche of Modern Man: A Meta-Analysis*. I mentally sighed. He hadn't covered that already? Once, psychology had been my favorite subject. After we married, I began to avoid it. I no longer looked up articles in my free time. The very mention of Freud had me searching for escape.

David used to say it was a good thing, the way couples wore on each other. That the beating of waves against rock was what made the beach, those swaths of such delicate sand. No one ever talked about what was changed, what was lost—whether there had been some value to the rock that came before.

Who we, who I, had been before.

I checked my watch again. 11:04. A little less than an hour until the horses would be loaded in the gate. The weather was holding for now, but I felt the air becoming stiller, almost solid. It'd be a sloppy track for sure.

"And Nora?" Grace leaned around David to make eye contact with me. "Excuse me for not asking sooner. What do you do?" I finished a sip of my julep and was about to respond when David waved a hand in my direction and spoke.

"Nora's a fourth-year vet student at Cornell. Top of her class. She thought she might specialize in surgery, for small animals," he began, taking a sip of his own drink. "That is, until a few weeks ago. Dog died

right on the table. Tough business, but she bounced right back, huh, Nor?"

Grace looked at me, then at David.

I didn't move. I didn't think.

What did he just say?

David smiled at me, squinting slightly. Hadn't I told him to wear his glasses?

Goddamn it. My throat shrank. The space behind my eyes seared. Goddamn David, goddamn him. I was already remembering, living it again—

The little brown mutt, a terrier mix, belly up in the center of the suite.

My classmates, lounging in a loose arc, watching my hand as I picked up the scalpel.

The smooth incision into freshly shaved skin.

The snipping of flesh, the tying of suture, the shining pink guts on the tray.

And then, the sea of blood. Underneath the intestines, some abdominal abyss—a vast, uncharted ocean I'd failed to see.

And the fall of her temperature. And the furor that transformed the room, my classmates, the doctor, shoving me aside, calling for gauze, dialing the oxygen, yelling my name.

Seeing me, backed up to the doorway. Each one a witness to my mistake.

Who fucked up something so simple? Second-years did surgery. I'd logged hundreds of hours in the teaching clinic, performed dozens of spays and neuters. I didn't make mistakes. That wasn't me. Never. But now—a burst artery, and I hadn't even noticed. Its undoing was mine. How was I supposed to go forward, how could I trust my hands again, my mind, everything I'd always relied on my whole life, I was a failure, a fucking *failure*—

Grace and David glanced at each other. I smiled hard. "I'm going for a walk." I was moving halfway through the sentence. I thought David called my name, but I didn't really hear.

I was crying. I dodged parents with toddlers in tow, bird-women in their big ugly hats, stupid-looking men in suits and ties. I could only think about the dog on the table, the look she'd given me, eyes so human, right before she went under. How her body had bucked and then gone still beneath my hands. I stopped in the middle of the path and pressed my fingers to my eyes, pictured digging straight into their sockets and tearing them out.

I focused my breathing. Wiped my face.

Felt the pressure in my chest.

I was so slow-burning angry I was calm. I was not a failure, no matter what David thought. What had he said last Thursday, in our most

recent fight? *You can do better, Nora. I know you can.* Not sarcasm, not spite, but pity. I heard it, thick as venom, in his voice. I'd said things, too, sure, but I didn't need his goddamn pity. He wasn't better than I was. He wasn't better than me. Some husband. Fuck him for thinking that. Fuck him for marrying me.

Fuck him.

David, who thought I was inferior. David, who was God's gift to Earth. David, who was saving to rent a studio, a place to work away from home, away from me. David. His goddamn studio.

I closed my eyes. Had we always been this way? What had changed?

I opened them and looked at my feet. I glanced up at the sky, heard the first peal of thunder. Out of the corner of my eye, I saw the betting stands. I started walking.

I didn't think, stepped straight up to the counter. I still felt calm. I sensed some part of me watching my body from afar, some self that was disturbed by what it saw. I told it to go fuck itself and tapped on the window.

A worker, a kid no more than eighteen, looked up from his phone. "Ma'am?" He didn't even put down his phone. Jackass.

"I want \$10,000 on Bright Future," I said, pulling out my card. "To win." Almost half our collective savings, David's savings. His studio.

The kid stared at me. "Bright Future. You sure?"

I considered telling him to swipe my goddamn card and hand me my stub. "Yeah. I'm feeling lucky." He took the card, swiped it, asked me to sign. I pictured David's face as I took the pen, his condescending eyes and knowing smile.

I signed *Nora*. Hesitated for a second before writing *Greer*, our surname. His name. Even that wasn't mine.

The kid handed me the stub, and I turned for the paddock.

David rocked off the fence when I came within eyeshot. Grace was gone. "Nora, I'm sorry for what I said." He waited for me to return his gaze. "I wasn't thinking. I really didn't mean... I shouldn't have brought it up. I'm sorry."

I looked at him, really tried to see. David. My husband. His gray eyes, still so piercing, were filled with concern. His mouth, the faint bow of his lips, turned down at the corners. His face was open, honest, nothing hidden—all of his thoughts, his feelings, his judgments in view. So what was I missing?

I nodded. The anger had turned into something else. The feeling was no longer scorching my chest, right under the skin. It was everywhere, a numbness that kept my fingers tight on the umbrella.

"I don't want to think about it. You know, if you just—I wish you would pay attention, David. That's all." My voice came out flat. "But it's okay."

"I know. It was wrong of me, and I'm sorry. I wasn't thinking," he said again. I looked at his hand. His julep was gone. I realized mine was, too—I must have left it on the betting counter.

"It's okay." A year of *It's okays*. When had it stopped sounding like two distinct words? Even now, it dissolved and disjointed, leaving fragments of noise that floated past my ears and made no sense.

"All right, then. Let's go get our spots." David kissed me on the cheek, then started off in the direction of the stands.

I inhaled slowly. A raindrop landed on my shoulder. Shaking open my umbrella, I followed.

I was never a sitter. Not as a kid, when my father first drove us to Saratoga, and not now. The only way to watch a race was standing up—pressed flat against the fence, hands gripping the rails, eyes glued to the far-off bend.

My watch read 11:57. I craned my neck to get a glimpse of the horses as they came down the track, a caravan of damp brown hues. The fence was packed, people behind and to the sides of me clamoring, laughing, leaning closer. The rain came down at a steady pace, making it harder to see, but I spotted Bright Future at the back of the line. He stepped carefully, head down, quiet. I hadn't studied his history. He might have been a mudlark, built for speed on sloppy track. I wouldn't know. Why hadn't I looked?

David shifted, readjusting his arms on the top board. He stared across the dirt into the rain. I followed his gaze. The storm swayed sideways in crests and troughs, its droplets bright against the lights of the main screen. I watched them hit the wet track, now a smooth swath of brown, sculpting upside-down cupolas of mud.

It already felt like a dream, a past life. Had I really done that? Had I blown our money—David's money—on a roughie? The longest odds I'd ever seen? Was I that angry, that bitter, that cruel? That stupid? I glanced sideways at David, who was holding his phone in one hand, his umbrella in the other. Checking his email.

I wasn't angry. I wasn't sure I was sorry. I just felt ill. My back and armpits were soaked with sweat, and I could feel tiny rivulets rolling down my hairline.

David put away his phone. "So, you have a feeling about who'll win? I know we don't normally bet, but I put a hundred on Ortiz. It was going to be a surprise if he won, but what the hell. You got a good look at his horse earlier—what did you think?"

I felt my head go light. It was my chance. My only chance. Better now than later, now than later.

"I... Actually, I didn't pay much attention to him earlier," I said. Could he tell I was holding my breath? "And..." I swallowed. "Well. No. No, I don't know who'll win."

“Then wish me and Ortiz luck. Could be our big break.” David smiled and reached for his phone again.

I opened my mouth, thought I might faint. “David,” I started, “I—”

The loudspeakers crackled. The announcer’s voice wavered over the stands at almost auctioneer speed. The horses were being loaded into the starting gate. The main screen bloomed with a live feed, still visible through the rain, zooming in on the colts as they filled their positions. David wasn’t listening, had re-pocketed his phone. He was leaning on the fence, eyes on the TV. He looked excited, expectant. I wanted to run.

“Jesus, would you look at that bastard,” he said. Catholic Boy was in position 4. Or, he was in front of it—he was rearing again, sidling away from the gate, Rosendo clinging like a flea to his back. I watched the handlers scatter, then return, then half-pull, half-shove him through the gate and slam the door.

I couldn’t do it, couldn’t tell him. So stupid. Was I that petty?  
So fucking stupid.

The remaining colts walked to take their positions. I was breathing hard. My eyes were watering. Bright Future was last. I watched his form on the TV calmly step through the gate, his jockey adjusting his goggles as they latched it shut behind him. The race. A miracle.

The rain fell louder, harder, a steel veil. I squinted at the screen, counting the seconds until the gate sprang open.

One—  
Two—  
Three—  
*Briiiiing.*

Whoever said horses run wasn’t seeing them right. They flew down the track, their legs setting off explosions of muddy water, flak that painted the jockeys’ faces and silks dark brown. Bright Future almost didn’t appear to move, not really. If you focused on his body, blurred out the churning of his legs, you saw that while his hooves slammed the dirt, he stayed in place.

The colts’ muscles shortened and pulled and stretched like pistons working to turn an engine. The jockeys hovered low over their necks, colors smeared by the rain, slim extensions of a man-horse machine. Bright Future was near the back of the pack. I watched his figure seethe across the screen, so completely dynamic, so still.

My palms were wet. I wiped them on my dress, leaving dark smears across the cotton. People were cheering, screaming, waving their racing programs, the few without umbrellas completely soaked.

I glanced at the clock. Less than a minute left. The horses were rounding the far bend, their shoulders slanting down and in, living vessels of centrifugal force.

The announcer’s voice rang out, breaking over the raw-throated

cheers and roar of rain. “And now it’s *Bright Future* moving up on the outside! Would you look at him go, coming up on Tenfold now, Trigger Warning falling behind, Catholic Boy still in the lead—”

A smile. A wild flash of hope. I tried to stomp it out, to crush the expectation, but I could see Bright Future, I was watching him, his bright silver coat now a blanket of mud, his four legs moving, moving, moving, even as he somehow stayed.

He was only four lengths off Catholic Boy. The clock read 1:48:26. The frontrunners were tiring, all of the horses were tiring, all but Bright Future. He was truly moving now, his stride much longer than his body should have granted, legs driving hard at the dirt, chest starting to eclipse the lead horse, drawing even, staying even, clearing open space—  
Holy shit. Holy *shit*.

My heart in my chest, in my mouth. Bright Future was doing it, he was passing Catholic Boy, passing us, he was actually going to—  
Down.

His head jerked and he was sliding headfirst into the mud, a slow-motion slip that looked natural. He was so close I didn’t have to watch the screen. His dive, first so gracefully slow, accelerated as though someone had hit fast-forward, his momentum catching on the muck and sending him and Franco wheeling, hind legs over front, Franco flying clear, Bright Future in the air, a godless whirl of limbs and mud, his entire body flipping, back slamming the dirt, twisting over on himself and sliding, sliding, sliding down the track.

Staying down.

I felt myself crying. Everyone gasped and went silent, watching to see if he’d get up. I heard the sound of the ambulance, followed its blinding red lights onto the track. Franco was stirring but on his back. Bright Future didn’t move.

Catholic Boy crossed the finish. I didn’t even see.

“Oh, my god.” David’s right hand was hanging, shocked, at his side. David. Gone. That money. My life. Our life. I was breathing normally, standing still, but tears were sliding off my chin, one by one. I couldn’t stop them, and David was turning to face me, the rain still battering our umbrellas, the reflections through the fabric throwing dark constellations across his cheek.

“Nora? Are you all right? I’m sure he’s fine. I bet they’re getting the vet out there right now.” How did he know I cared more about the horse?

What did *I* know—about myself, about us, about anything?

David embraced me. I felt myself meld to his body—a natural response, familiar, unconscious. He rubbed my back.

“David, that’s not it.” My voice was too quiet. It sounded roaring loud. He leaned back to look at me.

I reached in my purse and pulled out the stub. A small white

ticket with light black ink. Stained by stray raindrops, wilted and smudged. So thin it was almost translucent.

A paper anniversary.

“What’s that?” David reached for it, pulling away. Emptiness settled in place of his arms.

He squinted, bringing it close to his nose. He always refused to wear his glasses. How many times had I told him to start, that it was important to see clearly, to stop pretending and insisting and believing it was okay when it wasn’t, when it *wasn’t*, when he wasn’t?

David met my eyes. I couldn’t read his face. I wasn’t breathing. He stared at the ticket, then at me. People were jostling around us, murmuring about Bright Future. He was obscured from sight, surrounded by veterinary staff, but it was obvious he was still down.

I wasn’t crying anymore. I watched David. My head felt empty. The rain chilled my ankles.

When I looked back, he was standing where I’d left him, facing away from me, out toward the track.

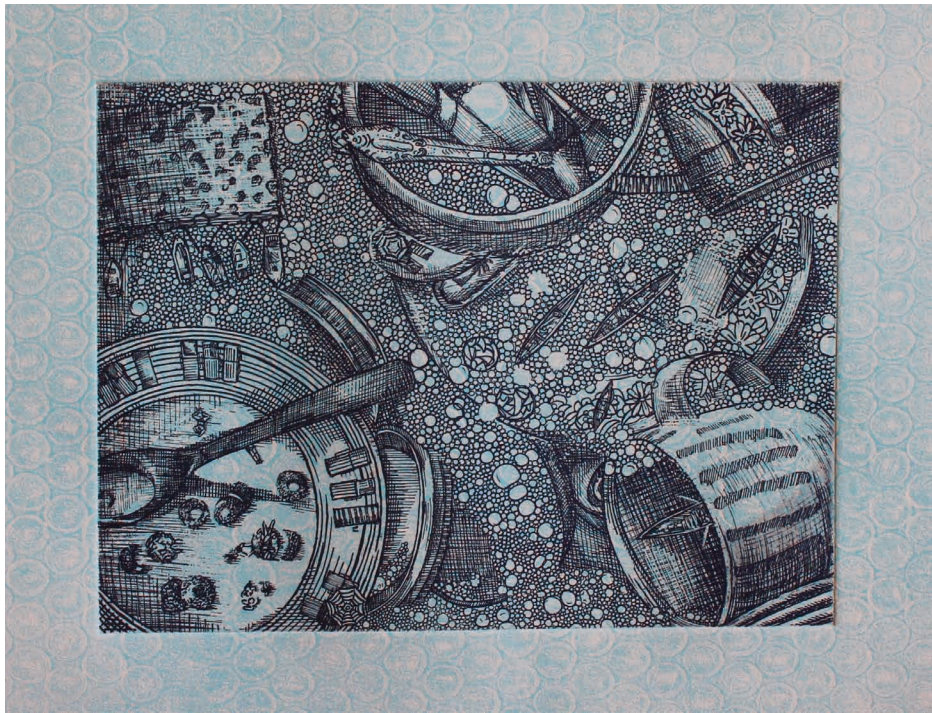
I saw the flashing of ambulance lights, the enormous dark tarp they’d thrown over Bright Future. I heard David’s words in my head.

“It’s... It’s okay, Nora.” His face, so honest, so sad. “It’s okay.”

“No, David.” My own voice, then, over the rain. “It’s not.”

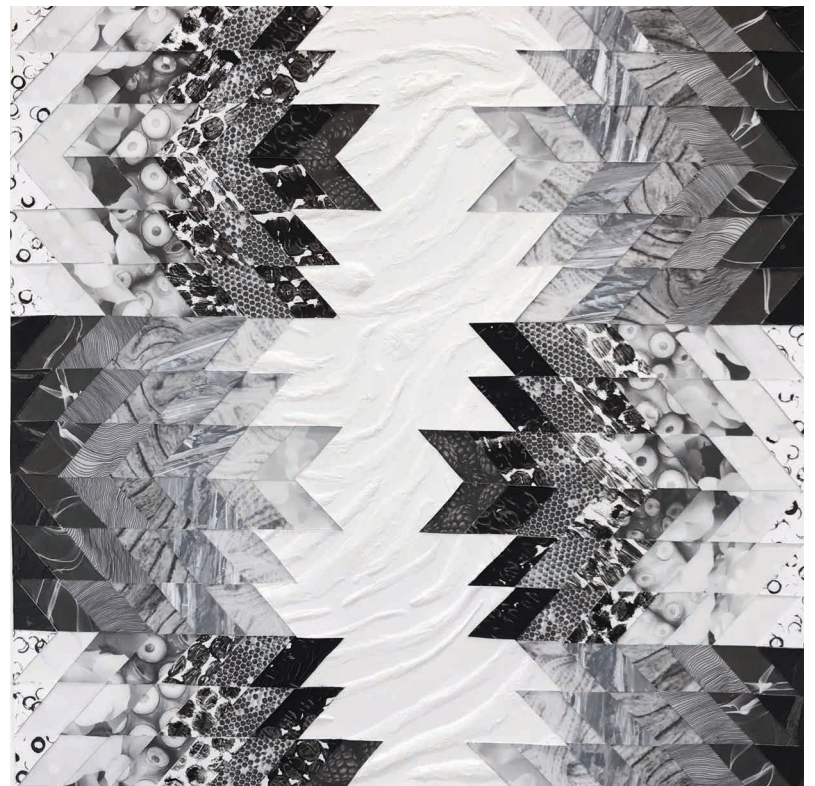
MONARCH





SINK SEASCAPE

OMBRE





## DIRT DAD

One, two, three folds on your forehead,  
The Mississippi July sun won't stop you  
From clearing the kudzu leeching the life out of your granddaddy's farm.  
It's an oak, look see, she's beautiful  
and older than you and me combined,  
You said. One day she'll be as tall as those 100-year-old pines,  
And I wanna watch her grow.

So, you dug your thick heels straight into the mud and  
Pulled. You panned for gold with  
A rhythmic cut and pull of the mud, desperate  
To get every creeping root until the pile grew  
Beside you, growing as you monkeyed  
From limb to limb, detangling  
Parasitical vines from its healthy host, risking your life for hers.  
And you sat and watched it burn,  
Sitting with your knees pulled in and arms loosely crossed  
Around your legs, a beer dangling between your fingers  
You watched it burn and dried yourself  
In the heat of your labor.



## ROADSIDE

## Us



## DON'T LIKE

*Inspired by the song of the same title by Keith "Chief Keef" Cozart*

Niggas hate stereotypes.  
The monolith is a myth.  
But since they have assumed us into togetherness,  
I can pass my brother for the first time and nod to him knowingly.  
I can see the scars on his genes, the crown in his curls.  
Obvious.

Niggas hate the woods.  
Too many trees.  
Our parents taught us to never stop for anyone in the woods at night.  
We know they're still giving out hemp necklaces.  
Feet twitching in the air means that they're dancing in heaven.  
Obvious.

Niggas hate water.  
Water in the ears is the easiest way for us to communicate with our ancestors.  
Too much noise, screams.  
Sharks didn't use to follow ships before they got a taste for humans.  
Water works just as well as rope if they ain't got any.  
Obvious.

Niggas hate gunshots.  
Actually, niggas really hate guns.  
Keep your enemies closer because your friends may shed their skin.  
Hollow points do a root canal on his chest cavity,  
and they don't care who they chew.  
If you leave home without it, you may not make it back.  
Obvious.

Niggas hate the police.  
Niggas don't mind fireworks because real niggas can tell the difference.  
The police can't.  
You think they would've trained for this.  
Pigs with no chitlins is useless.  
Obvious.

Niggas hate new stuff  
because the last time they gave us something new  
it was crack,  
and before that it was 40 acres and a mule  
(and we ain't even get that)  
and before that it was a one-way all-expense paid cruise to Satan's outhouse  
with matches for toilet paper and complimentary gasoline drawers.  
Obvious.

Niggas do like to run when they see other niggas running  
because Harriet Tubman came back for each of us  
so we could be our own Harriets  
because ain't no telling what manner of evil is chasing us now  
and Chief Keef ain't get exiled from Chicago for us to die like this  
our own Dante Alighieri  
we can ask why we're running later  
but for now our feet are screaming  
freedom and glory to the pavement  
honor and power to the old ways

Real niggas can't die  
because we breathe for each other  
the ancestors keep their feet on the backs of our demons  
and their hands on the soles of our feet  
lifting us out of the pit  
whispering  
that's that shit I don't like

## MOON LIGHT



# 15 WAYS OF LOOKING AT A ROAD

I

The cracked, crumbling road  
served as a sudden horrific reminder  
of the forgotten crumbly cookies  
left in my oven to burn.

II

The sun-baked asphalt warms my toes  
and my heart  
as I walk, barefoot, down the road  
to my favorite minimart  
for a fresh lemonade.

III

Deserted. Barren.  
A road neglected.  
I knew we shouldn't have turned left.  
I can feel the decay as we drive through the bleak town.  
Wood particles flurry through thick air.  
Foundations sink into the mud.  
Our back tires blow out.

IV

I cannot remember which road we took.  
We passed several hills overwhelmed with lavender stems and  
blue blossoms.  
It was windy, and I could feel the car  
swaying with the breeze.

V

The windows were down, and you were playing with my hair.  
I remember your hands, soft, only  
as a mother's could be.  
Dad kept his eyes on the road.  
Except for that one moment.

VI

The radio blares. Ninety-Five Three Gorilla, The Best Station Around.  
The road is racing outside my window.  
I'm an animal, in a cage, in the zoo,  
while everyone passes.  
Blurs of color that never fully focus.

VII

I eat a spoonful of Cinnamon Toast Crunch.  
The milk sloshes in my bowl  
when we hit another hole in the road.  
Somehow my aunt manages to hit every one of them,  
and the mornings on my way to school  
start with stained shirts.

VIII

The gravel is sharp and gritty against my cheek.  
The glass fragments in my hair  
prick my scalp like a thousand ant bites.  
A warmth trickles down my neck  
and my lungs burn. My eyes  
are wide open, fixated  
on the white cat scampering back into the forest,  
leaving its baby snake dinner in the road.

IX

Start.  
Stop.  
Start.  
Stop.  
My little brother's foot on the pedal  
is infuriating. I'm not sure  
if we'll ever get more than three feet down the road.

X

Her smile was infectious.  
Sweeping her hair into a high bun  
to put on her helmet,  
she throws a leg over the seat,  
revs the engine, and takes off.  
My Honda Rebel  
was made for the road but  
unprepared for her.

XI

The lapping waves reflect  
an orange sunset.  
Seafoam peaks trip, topple over themselves, and  
roll back into the mother ocean.  
After reversing out of my parking spot  
and crunching sand into my tires,  
I cruise along the coastline one more, one last time.  
Before the sandy road  
meets my windshield.

XII

My horse trots indifferently,  
taking her own path and  
ignoring the clearly marked road to town. She huffs,  
content, as I stroke her brown, blonde mane  
and lightly tap my spurs into her side.  
She gallops.

XIII

The road is bumpy to the point of spilled coffee and  
even though I've never been on a roller coaster  
I'm sure I can count the last thirty minutes  
of this undulating bus ride as close enough.

XIV

Clouds of dirt swirl up behind my tires,  
forming a dusky trail. The road  
is littered with the yellow and orange of fall.  
Three deer leap in the woods alongside my Jeep, and I smirk  
as one of the babies takes an innocent tumble  
headfirst into a mound of leaves.  
My windows are down. The birds chat.  
So much gossip at this early hour.

XV

The intersection is our home.  
On green, we stomp in one big, watery puddle.  
When the light is yellow,  
I quickly jump with my little sister  
into the next victim.  
Water splashes her knees and  
the edges of her pale pink dress, making  
a temporary dark magenta.  
The light is red, and we stand still, laughing,  
holding our stomachs, before collapsing in the empty road,  
her hair sprawling into another puddle.  
Mom will definitely make me responsible  
for giving her a bath tonight.

## STUCK IN A WELL



# AN EVERYDAY ORCHESTRA

Each day I wake thinking,  
Today will be filled with music.  
The alarm, though monotone and piercing,  
a heavenly trumpet.  
Raisin Bran cereal poured into white ceramic bowls,  
maracas and a rainstick.  
The percussion spoon clinking against the bowl's curve,  
a xylophone solo.

I pack away my breakfast instruments,  
and with a final chair squeak across the floor,  
march away to brush my teeth  
in rhythm to the waterfall faucet  
and dishwasher pulse.  
Today will be filled with music.

On each walk to the city square  
cars clatter over loose manholes,  
footstep taps flatten broken glass,  
train tracks rattle rat-tat-tats,  
dollar-store wind chimes clink and crescendo,  
and food truck fries crackle in cooking oil.  
Today will be filled with music.

I settle in at my favorite bench at the park,  
shaded by maple trees that sway to the sound  
of rollerbladers gliding over curved sidewalks.  
To my right sits a cellist pulling strings, serenading,  
singing swells that ripple into a nearby lake of swans  
floating across the water's sky-blue surface.

I remember that time forty years ago  
when I took my love to the orchestra  
to hear Saint-Saëns's *The Carnival of the Animals*  
for our fifth date in three days.  
She held my hand for the first time during the last movement  
while the timpani boomed and violins swooned.

I miss the way she jaywalked,  
dancing light and lithe as a flute,  
across an intersection just to be near  
a plastic bucket drum ensemble  
that played and made the ground pulse.  
I miss how each Monday  
she would sing, "Thank you!"  
to the food truck outside our apartment  
after she ordered her workday lunch  
of fried pickles and French fries.  
I miss how we would take her acoustic guitar  
and my dollar-store maracas  
and spend Saturdays here, at our favorite park,  
laying under the maple trees,  
her strumming and singing every hit on the radio  
and me wanting to hold her hand  
as tightly as I held those maracas.

Though I can no longer hold her hand  
or hear her morning musical hummm,  
each day I still wake thinking,  
Today will be filled with music,  
like every day before  
when my heart trembled like a plucked harp  
each time I heard her voice.



## ICARUS

*James Karlson /// Photography*



## HOUSEPLANTS

Yesterday, I was yanking greasy hair from a reddened scalp, noticing houseplants doing the hard work of surviving, leaning into the sunlight leaking from between the blinds. I need my sunlight, need to lean into it maybe. I know that it is hard work, leaning into the sunlight every day and worse and worse and worse on cloudy days.

The thing I notice about those houseplants is that they droop and drop low when they're missing out on the sunlight. Leaves hanging, brushing the soil in their decorative pot on a wedding-white windowsill.

I am sorry when I see my houseplants low, and I'll rush to water them and maybe I'll adjust the blinds too.

If my leaves drop low, will you still water me then, adjust my blinds? Maybe you'd move me downstairs, where the lighting's better, or even install a plant hanger into the ceiling so the cats can't reach me. Or maybe, you might put me outside on the front porch. Let nature take care of me, leave me to sunshine and rainwater, inconsistent in their intervals. Inconsistent in their intervals.

I'm not a gambling woman, but I'd bet you'll leave me. Up to chance. Hell, maybe my leaves will lift, greener still. Get just enough water. My decorative pot and I will shine in the sunshine that bathes the front porch.

This is not outside of the realm of possibility. But baby, I think it is more plausible that my leaves will crumble under your footsteps as you cross the porch to your sitting chair.

COLORS IN THE CHAOS



SPLIT, HRVATSKA





# SOARING



# ZION



## CARCINOMA

I could've encased myself in iron,  
or maybe just skip a couple of gin kisses.  
You would've slithered up my ladder anyway  
until you found a crack in the rungs.

Immediately, you seize the controls, and my ribs  
start pushing their pale shell.  
No one is going to scratch your progress  
into the doorframe with a pocketknife,  
so can I be the one to eat tonight?

I curse white blood for its pitiful resistance.  
Immunity's incompetence urges me to try  
slugging back every new-age poison that I can stand.  
I gouge my veins, hoping that you'll show yourself.  
Show me your phlegmy envelope,  
so I can tear you out with my teeth.

But you wrenched a visceral boulevard  
to your filthy mass months back.

Weren't you in my liver yesterday?  
Today, I feel your warm scum scarf on my windpipe,  
and your cuddle tugs a gag that I can't choke up.

You're a cockroach that lives under my wall  
and squirms out when I'm close to forgetting.  
I want to feel your chitin crack under my palm.

I fall asleep knowing  
that you'll crawl under my pillow and lick my neck.  
And when I'm eating dirt dinners,  
you'll soak up what's left.  
I could have been the sweet pink of a sugarbush,  
but now not even kudzu will curl over my putrid gravestone.

## SHELLS



## 2 WEEKS FROM CLOSING

I let my fingers splinter on the plywood that covers the old bookstore  
Blockbuster, Build-a-Bear, and Payless Shoes,  
until I reach the mall's faint pumping centerpiece.

Water gurgles in the top of the fountain and surges  
over the bowl's curved edge, splashing on statue heads.  
The alabaster sculptures stand on coin flooring.  
Manes of stone cascade down the marbled breasts  
of Venus, Nemesis, Persephone,  
burned by the neon pink of the food court sign.

I step through red and white checkered tile peppered with fake  
palm trees and plastic chairs. The large boards with pictures  
of silverware still linger of the food stands.  
I grab a soda from a register zombie  
and suck in the static air of a place outside time.

My knees crack quietly as I get up and walk across the hallway  
to the boarded corner arcade.  
I approach the arrested window and scan for fissures in the wooden  
panels.  
I pick my cracked cuticles and wish that I could take a square  
of the arcade's zig-zagged carpet to tack into my wall next to pictures of  
old friends.

Maybe they would want a piece too.  
The mall isn't closing until the fifteenth, so maybe  
I should send a few texts and come back next week.  
We could box-cut a dog-door sized hole through the thin plywood border.  
We'd slip in for busted skeeball machines. We'd roll around  
in coin dispenser riches and collapsed tile asbestos dust.

We used to share smokes against school bricks, and we always talked  
about and chickened out of skateboarding through the mall.  
There's no more security to outrun, but maybe that was the fun of the  
idea.  
Maybe the cigarettes tasted best with careful looks over the shoulder  
and lighters hidden in jacket pockets.

## BUSINESS OF FORGETTING

How do we go about this business of forgetting?  
Of surrendering life to the concrete chemical reactions occurring under  
our hair lines?  
Perhaps we should desert the sentimental, clinging only to the present.  
The way my great grandmother looks at her old frocks—  
Appreciating the seamstress's handiwork, or the sunny shade,  
Disregarding the small dot of blood along the zipper,  
Where the thimble failed to protect her mother's calloused fingers from  
the silver needle.  
Pointing out the full skirt, with its potential for a glorious spin,  
Overlooking the small snag in a pleat,  
Where a branch bid its goodbye as she and her sister scampered down,  
giggling all the way.  
Running her fingers down the shimmering cobalt buttons, telling me  
they'd look nice with my eyes.  
Never mind the missing one at the bottom,  
Where she'd snipped it off in a fury years ago for a last minute "some-  
thing blue."  
She holds them all dear without ever knowing why.  
After all, it's only cotton—  
Mere fabric, to be eaten by moths and faded with sunlight.  
And they're only memories—  
Mere events, to be yielded to the clutter of our humanity and lost with  
time.

## ROOM 116

You grin and I think  
of a cat, neck snapped, draped across the stairwell,  
a small thing crushed well before I was born.  
I look outside the window, out and onto the courtyard.  
Other patients mill about, unseeing but not blind.  
Somewhere, an orderly croons, but I cannot make out his words.  
“This is a good place.” Is this a promise, or a threat?  
You stand in the doorway to my room and  
your checkered shirt clashes  
against the mauve curtains so I look away.

You do not ask why I rip the bulbs from their sockets  
and scrape at the kitchen linoleum.  
In a white room, the clinician hisses.  
All I can hear are his eyes, white as eggshells, speaking to me.  
I refuse to hear that interlocutor, that rat bastard,  
and you shake my shoulders in his office because  
your face is shining.  
I scream, it was never the fault of the wax-and-oil seraphim,  
those trapped against our bedroom wall.  
You wring your hands until the skin peels.

I tear them from their fixtures—they should be free.  
I line every houseplant up, arrange them adjacent to the windowpane,  
and I stare until every chlorophyll and carbohydrate  
is accounted for. At this, you nod.  
Wires extend the length of my body.  
I cannot hear the nurses with no teeth.  
I whisper, “There is lightning in my skull.”  
I have never seen a cat, vertebrae shattered, against  
cream-colored carpet, but it is not difficult  
to imagine it.

## EXHALE



# How You SOUNDED IN JULY

You flopped onto your bed,  
arms enfolding the pillow.  
On your side  
the line of you was a horizon.  
No,  
not splintered or sharp—more like  
a smooth and soundless dive,  
an ink trail spilling  
down your shoulders  
to your waist  
to your hips.

My fall  
was just as swift  
and just as still.

You watched me as I lay on the floor.  
“Beer eyes,” you called them, your whorls of brown and green.  
I painted the space  
above your head, dreaming  
in tune with the tick of our watches—  
two hands chasing themselves  
around separate tracks,  
out of sync.

We met out of time.

I pictured your life inside those walls—  
the moments existing,  
the eons between.

All of  
the days bleeding gray, your window swung wide;  
the nights sighing violet, stars fast in the glass.  
Dim cracks in the plaster,  
a glimpse of the truth—  
your world  
in dark sounds and mute hues.

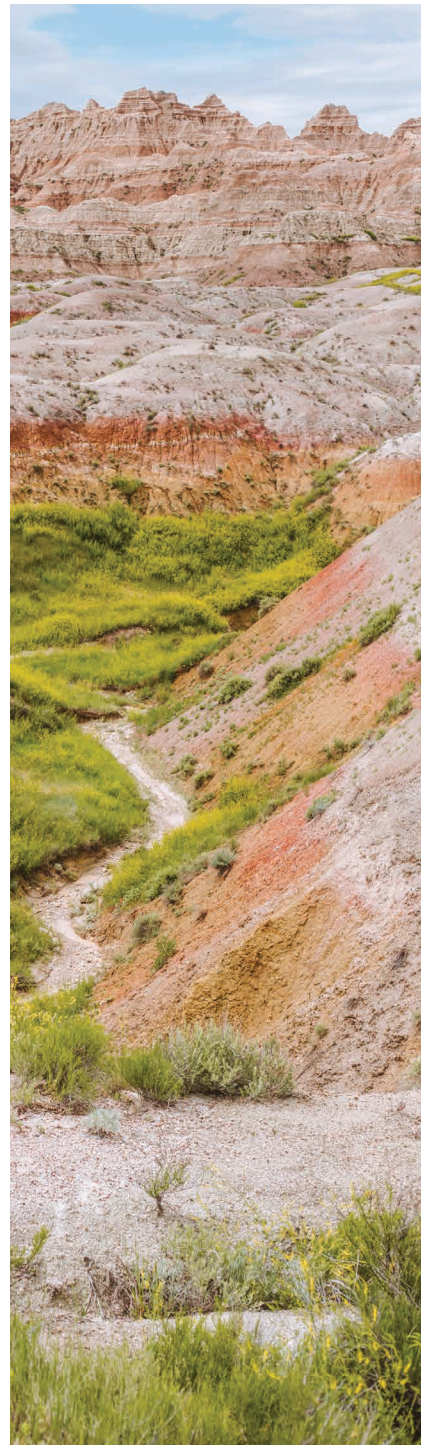
Now silence holds

the murmur of your thoughts  
the quiet of your face  
the echo of your hand on my arm.

When a voice in my head tells me  
all things must end,  
it's still yours.



## BADLANDS 3



## BADLANDS

Buster was Uncle Derek's dog, his faithful companion since childhood, bought for him by my Grandpa Dean. Buster, from what I've heard, was a good dog, and Derek naturally loved him very much. I imagine my sentimental Grandfather glowed with fondness towards Buster. As Derek grew older and eventually left for college, Buster transitioned from Derek's dog to the family dog, accompanying Grandpa to feed cows or bail hay, a consistent joyful presence at Grandpa's house when family and I came to visit.

I was young and innocent, fresh-faced and excited as any infant could possibly be. I especially loved Buster—he was my favorite aspect of Grandpa's. Of course, in my selfish, immature perception of the world, Buster, I decided, must love me as well. Thus, against all his rebellions and protests, I adopted Buster as my own, forever destined to be by my side and I at his as long as I was at Grandpa's house.

Buster was a good sport and took his enslavement in stride. He shuddered as I pet him, whined as I pulled his tail, and barked when I chased him around, but he endured all the same: a certain, strange kind of care. He knew I enjoyed myself and, as an extension of Derek and Grandpa's love for me, endured.

Around the time I was one, Buster, now old and mostly blind and deaf, bent over to eat. In his vulnerable position, I approached him. Buster, who had demonstrated so much endurance and patience, who had tried so hard to be kind, in one rush condemned himself and rendered his efforts pointless. In a confused, hungry flash, Buster snapped.

I have a scar on my lip. I often romanticize it—I think it makes me look cool, rugged in a way. But, in moments of sobriety and remembrance, the price Buster paid for that scar and the ones on my forehead, nose, cheek, and temple is apparent. I condemn myself for tarnishing Buster's memory and priding myself on something so grave—a mark that should be held with gruesome memories and regret—yet find myself doing it all the same.

Mom, Dad, and Grandma took me to the hospital. Derek was at school. Grandpa Dean stayed behind and tamed the dog. He penned Buster back and, being a thoughtful, moral man, I imagine his mind already tormented him for what needed to be done.

Derek and I were told that Buster was hit by a truck. In hindsight, I don't understand why I believed it for so long. And so, I dirtied Buster's legacy by telling stories about a "mean old dog who got what was coming for him" around campfires and when asked about my scars. Age has granted me wisdom and consideration, and, eventually, I deduced Buster's true fate.

Grandpa Dean took Buster to the barn and shot the dog.

Grandpa Dean watched one of the things he loved the most die and, more so, was forced to play the blameful roles of judge, jury, and executioner to an innocent, confused animal. To no fault of his own nor

Buster's, Grandpa Dean looked the dog in the eye and fired his father's old .22, in one fell swoop sacrificing his conscience to rid the world of possible danger. It's a gun that I've fired many times on many visits to Grandpa's. I don't think I'd like to anymore.

I think of Buster's story often now, of my actions inadvertently leading to Buster's death, the hurt on my uncle, and the blot on my grandfather's conscience. I feel something when telling the story, yet I can't quite figure out what it is. Satisfaction? No. Guilt? Not quite. I often say that when I know what Buster's life means, I'll be a truly wise man. As I get older, I come closer and closer to the reality—the story is about Buster, but the true story is Grandpa Dean.

Grandpa Dean is a funny, kind, light-hearted man, a prime example that the strongest people often wear the best of masks. On the surface, Grandpa Dean couldn't hurt a fly, but when the world demands the fly, Grandpa Dean will take the mantle. It's an unwanted, painful, nasty task, but Grandpa Dean does it all the same. Why? Because he can endure. But truly why? Because he couldn't sleep letting anybody else shoulder that burden. He fought in Iraq because someone had to; he tends to his cows because someone needs to; he will carry the world on his shoulders simply because a dog bit his grandchild.

I frequently tell myself "once more unto the breach," empty words stolen from *Henry V*. Their borrowed meaning and imagined context light a fire in my gut and spark a passion to perform. For a fleeting moment, I am King Henry, boldly carrying the load and proclaiming my might.

But I've never entered the breach; on that day 18 years ago, Grandpa Dean did. The breach is an ugly place, spewing regret and darkness and leaving the stench of remorse on whoever crosses through it. Many think themselves worthy, but very few actually are. I pretend I charge valiantly and romantically into it, but the truth is

I never shot the dog.  
Grandpa Dean did.

## FOR GRANDPA DEAN

SOMEWHERE IN CALI



PLAYFUL IN '96



# CELEBRATION



She lay in that hospital bed all dressed in death.  
Her eyes adorned with memories,  
Her chest swaddled down with time.  
I never knew her name, but the women called her mama  
As they reached for her bare form  
Where the sheet had fallen in our disimpassioned attempts  
To bring her back from the mournful wail of the machine.  
My hands had cupped the middle of her chest.  
Pushing down to ebb the flow of time,  
My elbows too bent because the bed was too high.  
We brought her back four times,  
But each time she teetered just beyond the brink  
Until some man in a coat with a smirk on his face decided her permanent  
fate.

Did I neglect to mention how they all laughed and sang “Stayin’ Alive”  
And encouraged me to try to bring this woman back to life?  
Her life in my hands as they sang and laughed and had to remind each  
other  
That this was someone’s mother  
Left in the nursing home to wither away  
Until death took one long look at her time worn face.

I do not know if there is a lesson to be had  
In the laughter of the nurses, or the wailing cries of the daughters  
Or the mournful wail of the monitor  
Or my elbows much too bent  
Or the doctor’s cocky, cold smirk when he said her family put her on  
The “do not resuscitate” list.  
I wonder at my ability to wear a doctor’s sterile mask  
Because when I become that cold, smirking doctor  
And apathy has settled as deeply into my chest as time had settled into  
hers,  
Then maybe I can manage to look sympathetic  
While comforting her two girls.

## MY FIRST DAY

## ON PAPER



## WHAT IT FEELS LIKE TO REVISE

Words T  
U  
M  
B L  
E

from the page in forgotten  
heaps  
on the  
floor.

Like dirty laundry, they are piled high,  
waiting to be cycled through the wash with a scent booster.  
You need more sensory details, They say,  
We want to feel it, smell it, hear it.  
Can you give Us something like that?

~~Okay, let me get an eraser—  
for my self confidence,  
and I'll come back later—~~

A cap of detergent should be enough.  
Thirty minutes later, the blinking lights signal they're done.  
How about these lines?

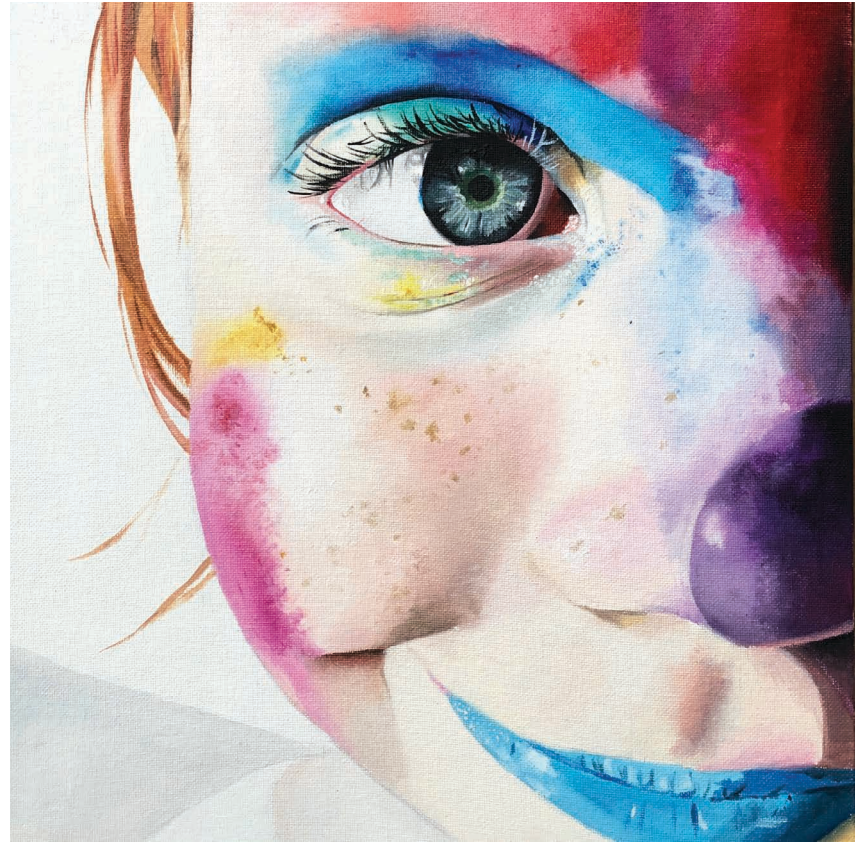
The insecurity is crippling; I weep ink onto the page;  
my heart trips over the ball point bullet that strikes out my words  
in red;  
fear of failure perfumes the air, filling my lungs until they swell  
too, too tight;  
the pop of my fingers releases a pressure in my hands, the pres-  
sure to produce  
perfection; every clack of the backspace is deafening, but it calms  
me—  
I can create again.

I give Them some time to think about it.  
Then  
cumulus clouds flood my chest with doubt;  
the weatherman said it would rain today.  
It pours so hard on my heart that I consider opening my umbrella,  
but They finally speak. They say  
it would be nice if—

I close my eyes to keep my rib cage from collapsing  
—we could publish your name...  
We want everyone to know who wrote these words S

P  
I  
L L  
I  
N  
G

onto the page in liquid prose  
to make a confident stain, refusing to be dissolved even on the highest  
wash cycle.  
I toss in a dryer sheet, the fused fibers solidifying my hope, my revision.

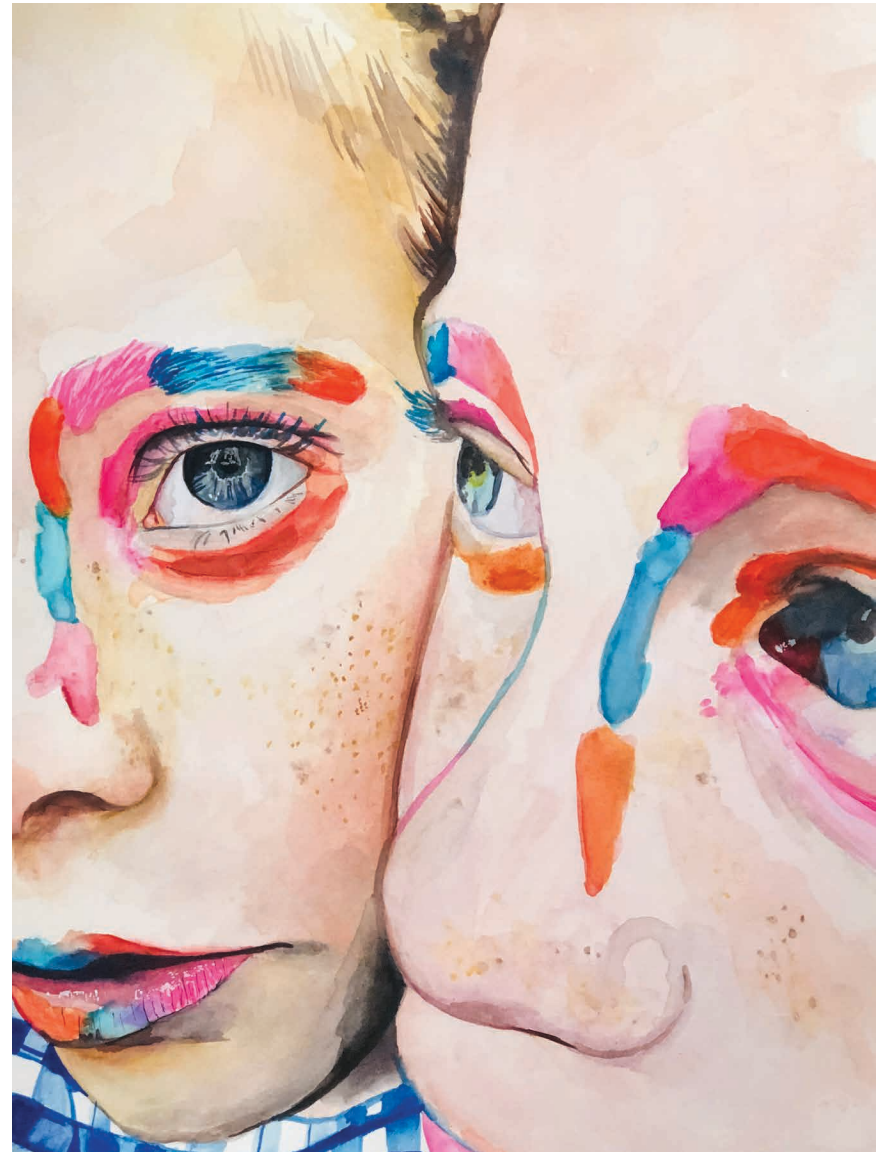


FACE COLORING



LEOPARD

## REFLECTION



## DEFIANT COMPLIANCE

Defiant Compliance  
 At what point does rebellion become the norm?  
 Defiant Compliance  
 When do I stop the uprising and start to conform?  
 Defiant Compliance  
 The best parts of my personality have become a stereotype  
 Defiant Compliance  
 I'm the perfect example of whatever you think I'm like  
 Dyed hair, ripped black pants  
 An image I stole from every innovative soul  
 Unimpassioned, copy-pasted rants  
 I think I learned that on a YouTube tutorial  
 Shirts with logos of bands I don't even listen to  
 Smudged eyeliner that I stole from Panic! At the Disco  
 Formulaic plans to be original  
 Punk is a fashion trend, we all dress like a funeral  
 Defiant Compliance  
 At what point do I recognize this lie I'm living?  
 Defiant Compliance  
 At what point do I realize I'm not trying to stand out,  
 I'm just trying to fit in?



## CHEAP

You hear yourself with five movements of delicate strings  
and fluid woodwinds that bathe listeners in bliss.  
Your voice is like sweet cream pouring over  
waiting tongues who lap up the luscious syrup.

But you're the piercing shrill of an overdone pop song  
at a sixth-grade talent show audition.  
You're the drag of a fork against an empty plate,  
scratching scraps into the mouth of a stray dog.

You call yourself *carpe diem*, fine wine,  
and a thorned rose with a sweet scent.  
You're stumbling through fields of lavender,  
dancing gently with stuttering butterflies.

But you're the heavy odor of cigarettes  
in the seat fabric of an old, dingy Civic.  
You're a sneeze, cheese whiz, and earwax.  
You're wet, mushy food in the sink, and you're throat phlegm.

You gaze into the night and see yourself—  
a dazzling constellation.  
You're piles of polished gems and stacked treasure.  
You're ancient texts and the Pacific.  
You're a sunset and spiral staircase,  
Descending elegantly for those who may stride your steps.

But you're lent and show-drain hair.  
You're reality TV and toenail clippings.  
You're grease-stained sweatpants and a tramp stamp.  
You're a passed pipe at a music festival.  
You're a worn toy on the floor of a daycare,  
covered in drool and teeth marks of young children.

You imagine yourself as a pineapple.  
Jagged exterior, sweet inside, with a crown  
you describe yourself, giggling at your wit.

But you are a hormone-pumped apple.  
Your disgusting chemical mush is harsh on the tongue, and  
You'll burst as I chuck you into hard bricks.

## FRUSTRATED



# HELIOS BEGS PHAETHON TO RECONSIDER

after Aimee Nezhukumatathil

*Upon the demigod Phaethon, son of the now-deceased Oceanid Clymenae, meeting his father Helios for the first time and asking him to drive the chariot of the Sun as his birthright and proof that Helios is his father.*

Think of the coarse waves you stampeded  
and crashed through to get here, your feet pebbled. Or even  
after running to meet me, with the grass blading  
dull and marching across your sole. Do you  
believe you've had enough of that warm friction, child?  
Do you think flying is anything  
but a severing of connection? No wonder  
I drowned in love with your mother, her  
heart filling my lungs with needles,  
my pores with thread. I need you  
and your rooting heels on this Earth, boy.  
Don't let me forget how she pressed my fingertips  
to the underside of the continents. I won't know  
which planet is home, or why.



ANGER

# MEDUSA THE MAELSTROM

*In which Medusa is raped by a powerful client, Poseidon, and is silenced by her boss, Athena. (A #MeToo story)*

He'd been watching her for weeks  
with swelling delight. In smooth curves,  
she snaked around the boardroom  
refilling the coffee and  
taking notes for Athena in blue ink,  
the i's dotted with little hearts.

She'd never held his gaze longer than it  
took to smile and ask how he liked his coffee.  
Always espresso with extra foam, like white  
capped waves at the beach where Medusa's  
mother was bitten by a stonefish. Her final  
moments spent swollen, skimming the sea surface.  
At Athena's office late one night,

he found Medusa—with her Caribbean-  
blue eyes and honey-blond hair—  
bending over a filing cabinet. He engulfed  
her, a hand silencing her scream.  
“Tonight, I'm taking what's mine,” he hissed.

She couldn't walk after he ebbed away,  
a current that threatened return—  
to drown her at the slightest sound.  
Morning came to stop the sickening swell.  
Athena, robed in sunburnt shades, listened as  
the story spilled out like waves against rocks.  
Her pursed lips and a fiery glare said it was Medusa's fault.

Athena hid the story in the pleats of her skirt,  
telling Medusa to never speak of it. Rumors spread like wildfire.  
In the kitchen, in the bathroom, at the lunch table, always:  
“Medusa made that up” or “She's looking for attention” or  
“He'd never do that. I've known him for years.”  
The suffocating shame, a boa constrictor coiled around her throat.

He lapped around the office, his cool demeanor  
sustained by the sweltering heat of spiteful conspiracy.  
Close behind him, Athena blazed across the office  
with her new assistant, spitting sparks that burned Medusa's  
character to ashes. The pariah sat alone in her cubicle,  
the sparks fanning the flames underneath her.

She filed a police report, reservation stinging her  
like a viper. The policeman laughed as the story  
spilled from her lips with a hiss. She left him,  
venom coursing through her veins.  
Medusa's eyes had turned to indigo, her hair to hissing flames.  
She was a maelstrom, ready to eradicate the system standing in her way.



# HUNTING LILIUM MICHAUZII IN BROOKHAVEN, MS

*Thwack!*

Trickling sweat burned as it mingled in shallow scratches, carved into my skin when my guide pulled back the anise branch and released its taut catapult arm into my blinded face. At least my glasses didn't slide off that time, along with my crimson drops of sweat, and disappear in the tangled underbrush between the poison ivy vines and into the spongy leaves. If I had had to stop and search, I would have been left behind, abandoned in the thorny, tick-infested wilderness of Brookhaven.

My glasses slipped to the edge of my nose, and I adjusted them with the back of my thumb, smearing the lens with red-tinged sweat in the process. I wondered why I had agreed to this mission.

I had hiked with my guide before, and I knew that he would do this. However, the allure of undiscovered plants was too strong. I pressed on with a shovel slung over my shoulder, bearing a backpack bursting with the loot we had already collected—*Asclepias*, *Clitoria*, *Lobelia*, and *Malaxis*—and pockets jingling with the keys to the vehicle which I had driven up the dirt road as far as the old beige minivan could go. I pressed on because I knew how little all that meant to my guide.

He strode undeterrable, garden shovel and black bucket in hand, bursting through thickets the dogs avoided, rock-jumping across billowing streams with no thought to his phone, trampling through brambles in khaki shorts, plucking ticks from bubbling blisters he got from serrated *Rubus* tendrils, swooping rose thorns and flicking them into brooks, waltzing up fallen trees that spanned deep ravines, and kicking through hemlock stands. And, if I and my keys got lost, well, he could hike from Brookhaven to Jackson, no problem.

He would find the plant.

Our situation reminded me of the movie *Wall-E*. My guide was the cool and determined EVE, while I was Wall-E, the klutzy sidekick who couldn't help but get in the way or lost. I paused to rearrange my glasses, and instantly, he slipped out of sight. I ran to the willow sapling where he had last stood. Pushing a leafy elm bough from my face, I halted, moaned, and leaned against the elm, but not because of the searing tips of pine straw embedded in my socks or feet that ached from shrunken shoes.

The forest floor fell twenty feet: we had reached the Kees river, a peaceful tributary only fifty feet across at its widest. Its steep farther side rose from gentle, tugging currents, glistening in some parts treacherous and sandy white, in others backstabbing clayish-orange. It bristled with roots as secure as an eight-year-old's teeth. We would have to wade

across the swirling muddy current, and I grimaced at the thought of silty water flowing through the fabric of my shoes.

I looked down and saw him descending the bank, my view framed by crossing elm branches. Desiccated willow-roots quaked at his sandaled feet as pebbles rolled like dice into the stream.

"Watch out for water moccasins!" he called as I took a meticulous first step before losing my foothold and skidding down the slope.

Just as I rose to my feet and sledged to the pebbly outcropping where my guide stood, thunder rocked the river. I stood glowering at the sky, the fabric of my hiking boots caked with coarse, moist sand. Clouds lolled our way like a zeppelin wrapped in lightning tethers, though only an hour ago the forecast had read no rain till half past six. I asked him once again for what we were looking, and he replied in his pretentious native tongue, "*Lilium michauxii*."

I repeated the question.

Sighing, he answered, "A Carolina lily."

We waded to a sandbar, clambered a shaft of driftwood to the shore, and scaled the twenty-foot bank to the spot we had stood two months before: a gully with a forty-year old pine gracing one side and an even older tulip tree towering proudly on the other. A Christmas fern nestled its dark green fronds between bare roots, partridgeberry dotted the ground with cherry-hued fruit, and a withered jack-in-the-pulpit stalk slumped between two sticks, but pine straw and aromatic magnolia leaves smothered even the poignant anise bushes.

My guide scrambled up the incline and leaned heavily on his shovel, staring intently at the poison-ivy speckled ground. He sidestepped to a wispy plant and ran his fingers over its smooth, whorled leaves. Planting his shovel in the earth, he began his sacred dance: he jumped, kicked, twisted, and in one swoop the clump of loam plopped in the cup.

He held it to my eyes: the Carolina lily, whose pumpkin-bloom had yet to extend a scrawny neck, its fiery glory hidden in an unassuming green like the sunset that we would never see. For just then, a mounting wind forced the willows to their knees and furrowed the placid waters of the river as bloated thunderheads blotted out the sky. I suggested that we hurry back, but my guide did not respond. He leaned silently against the tulip tree, smiling and cradling the black plastic pot.

# YOUNG ARTHUR CONSIDERS HIS KINGDOM, INK ON PAPER

Clouds only move  
when you aren't watching them.  
All the neighbors have dogs  
but us.  
People only do what they should  
when you're watching them.

And I watch.  
Not so high as ambition,  
but not so low as regret.  
My feet caress unfinished wood paneling,  
and up here, on this floating fortress,  
this second storied cockpit,  
I am high enough to win staring contests  
with the trees, surrounded  
by such familial shades of brown.  
I am statue, guardian, totem, golem.  
Knight.

Here I sit, tongue  
in cheek, sword  
in scabbard,  
with sunlight that is less  
of an embrace and more  
of a mindful hand, resting,  
showing solidarity, a signal  
of presence, a reminder  
that we are both here  
to watch.

Then a slipping breeze like a shiv  
sharpens between the shoulder blades,  
not startling enough to make me  
shiver, but just enough to spark  
that simple instinct  
to act.

I see an innocent Shiba Inu and  
his incorrigible animal,  
all legs and an oversized college t-shirt,  
desecrating my temple. I cease my silent prayer  
and unsheathe my double-edged sword.



## THE FALLEN STAR

## SALISBURY



## INNOCENCE

# SERENITY



6:07 A.M.



# Wow!

In the middle of deep space, an ancient, solitary ship orbited a black hole. The solar-sails were tattered and the metal hull pocked with the remnants of countless battles. Its lonely pilot, Qzztashrrr, sat on the bridge and stared at his monitors. He tried to search for anything to persuade him otherwise, but all answers confirmed his worst fear: he was the last of his kind. In fact, he was the last of any known spacefaring race. He sighed and carefully typed out a message, hoping above all else that there would be anyone or anything left who could read it.

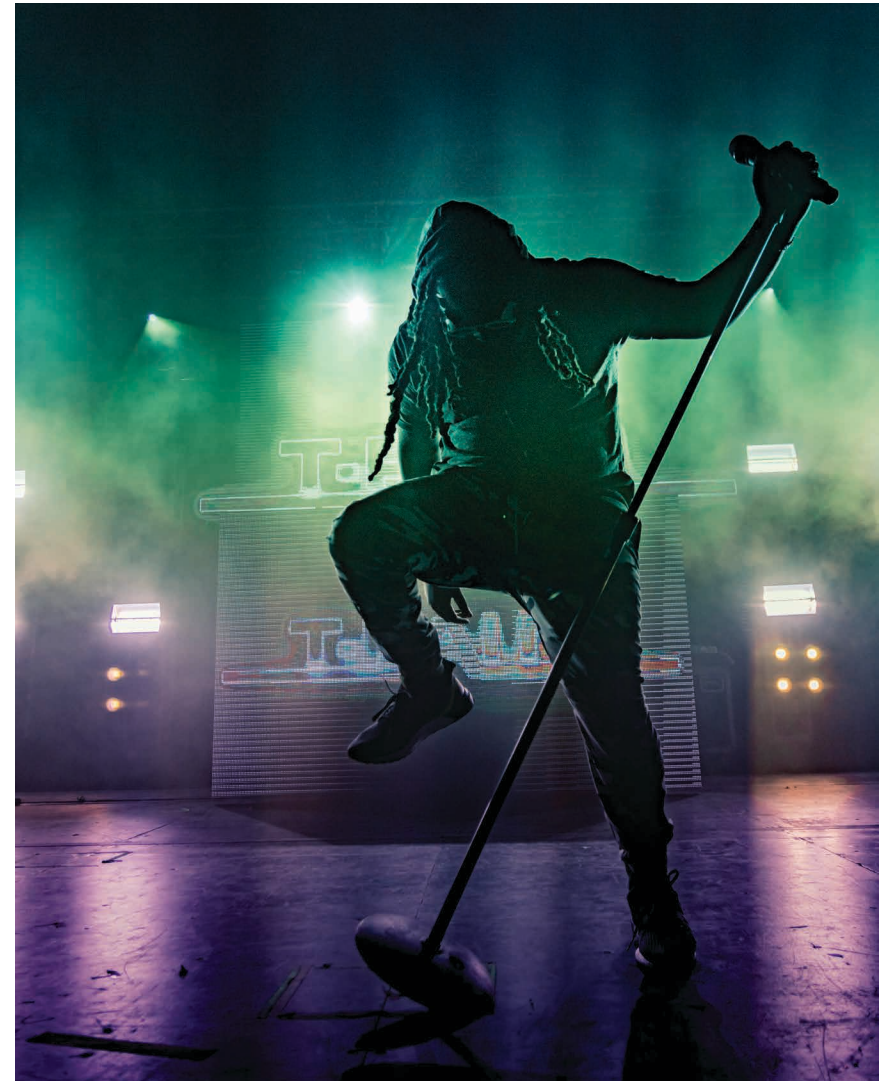
“To anyone reading this: I urge that you do not fall the way we did. We were once a galactic empire, but we fell to ourselves. We slaughtered, enslaved, pillaged, and raped countless civilizations until there was nothing left to consume but ourselves. So, if you are reading this, save yourself from your vices. As the last of my kind, I now join my brethren as observers. To whoever reads this, I wish you good judgement. I die now.”

Qzztashrrr pressed the send-on-all-frequencies button and then injected the euthanizing serum into his scaly flesh, softly warbling his species’ customary death song. He slumped onto his desk. The last member of a proud, ancient race had finally succumbed. All direct knowledge of his culture and history faded with him.

1000 light years away, a small blue world turned its Big Ear towards the stars, hoping to find signs that it wasn’t alone. An intern lit a cigarette as he casually looked over a steady string of printed data. He suddenly noticed a pattern of high numbers and letters amongst the usual ones and twos: 6EQUJ5

“Wow!” the man wrote, circling the cluster of digits. There was no way of knowing what they meant, but he assumed they were likely just an anomalous pulsar or something to that effect. Everybody did.

# T-PAIN



# HIGHWAY 45



# BLUE TIDE



A BUG'S LIFE

## TO BECOME A SLEEP

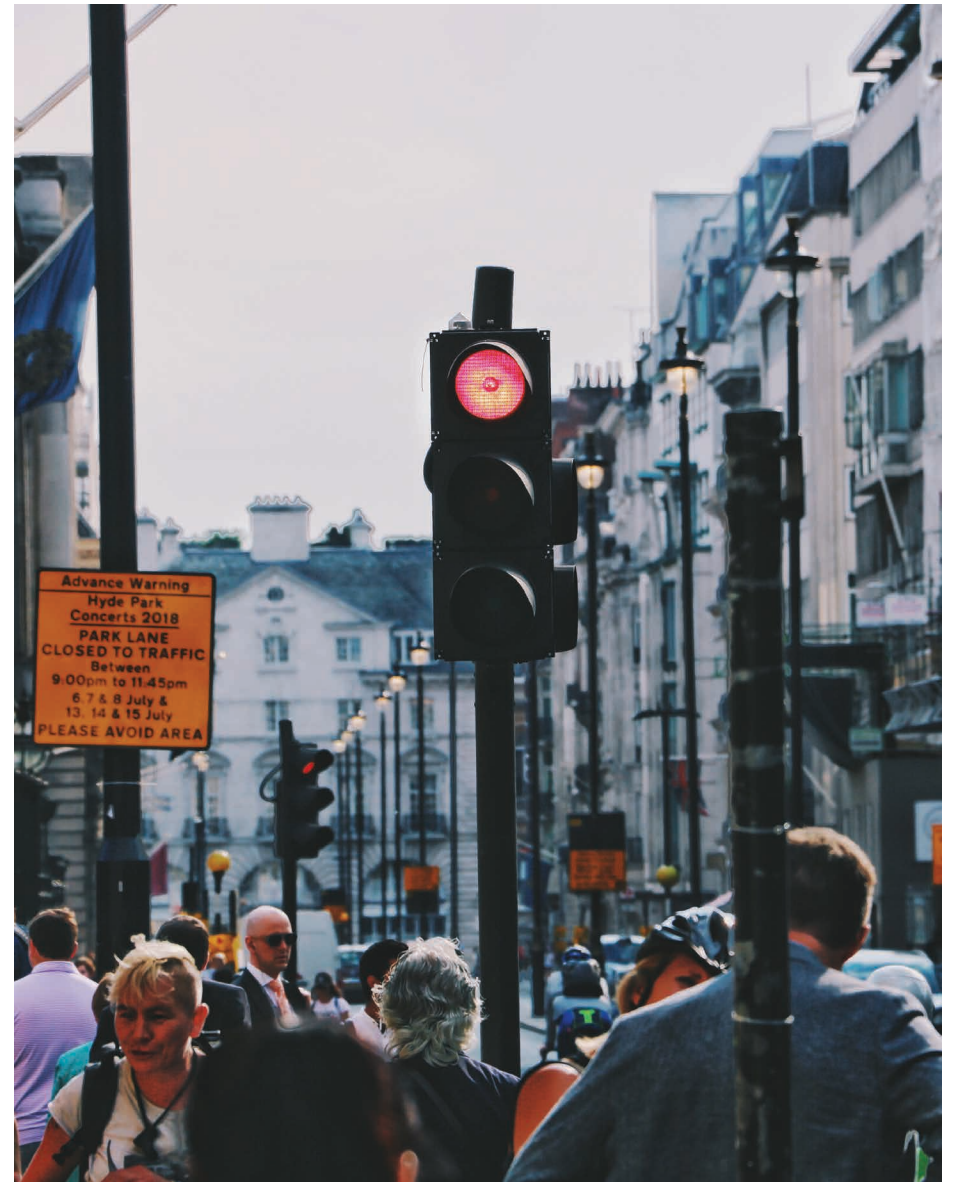
What do I owe the day? To wake up well-rested, alert, ready to attack the tasks set for me?  
What obligation do I have to the morning?  
What has the day done for me  
that I should feel the need to relish in it? I didn't ask for any of this,  
this endless cycle, this whirlpool  
of things to be done, with the sirens reaching for my ankles.

Who is going to love me more than my bed?  
More truly, more correctly? More unequivocally?  
Who is going to shield me from the pointing blades of life's routine,  
the bayonets of responsibility's firing squad?  
Let my pillow kiss my left cheek like the Cupid's bow of an angel,  
and let my comforter caress my right  
more carefully than the carpenter's fine  
sandpaper on the curve of the table. The fuzz of my blanket  
reminds me of that old animal warmth, those times  
we used to huddle together for heat, like bears  
in the winter, like demons  
in the cold,  
alone in our companionship.  
I've been away from that for too long.

And let Sleep, oh gloried and tender Sleep, our holy patron goddess,  
she who weaves dreams like flower crowns and rests them on the  
foreheads of our souls,  
let her come to me in the darkness and place drachmas on my eyelids.  
Youngest daughter of Night, littlest sister of Death, unafraid  
to walk and commune with me in the brightest of spaces,  
in the middle of the day and speak  
to me of the beauties of her family.  
Here, she says, is a taste of the Styx,  
of that Death my brother metes out so carefully,  
of that immortality that Achilles flailed in as a child,  
of that abyss that becomes my mother.  
Taste, she says, cast off the sobriety of life and become drunk on it,  
fill yourself with that abyss, fill that abyss with yourself.  
Let, she says, those handles the gods have placed upon you  
become slippery, ephemeral, obsolete, nonexistent;  
let them break and escape yourself.  
Become the wave and the particle, she says,  
play limbo with the horizon.

# I DROVE TO THE MOON AND TALKED TO GOD

He told me everything my father failed to.  
He told me what love is  
and how to determine its validity.  
He told me the importance of appreciation,  
myself included.  
He taught me how to constantly bloom  
out of the concrete we call depression.  
He taught me how to vanquish  
threats thrown from below.  
He said equality exists,  
we are just searching for it in the wrong way.  
He wanted to know where I store my dignity.  
Who was my messiah?  
He told me it is normal  
to want to die (sometimes).  
He told me so much,  
I was left questionless.  
After a loosely gripped handshake  
and a final swig of Jameson,  
he stumbled out  
and drove back home.  
With the burning blue neon sign  
forming a crescent overhead  
and wandering white star headlights  
making their own constellation  
in his rear view.



RED LIGHTS



# CONTESTS

## Best of *The Streetcar*

Best Prose - "Odds" by Meghan Brino

Best Poem - "Carcinoma" by Nate Gentry

Cover Art - *Reflection* by Emma Carr

## Sir Maxwell Macleod's Comic Contest

In October 2017, the Shackouls Honors College Writer-in-Residence Sir Maxwell Macleod, a renowned Scottish journalist and comic-strip writer, collaborated with *The Streetcar* staff to host a comic writing contest for Mississippi State University undergraduates. The winner of the contest was Julius Wade, a freshman biological sciences major.

## 6 Word Short Story Contest

In January 2020, *The Streetcar* staff hosted a contest on Twitter and Instagram in which MSU students and faculty created stories with only six words and posted them with the hashtag #TSC6Words. The following tweets were winners based on number of likes and staff favorites.

"Dogs: Perfect creations, for imperfect people."

– Dr. Regina Hyatt @DrReginaHyatt

"Tomato ketchup saved my spaghetti sauce."

– Joy Cariño @joycarinyo

"The secret to creating suspense is..."

– Mary Ranie Miller @maryranie

## WINNING COMIC



JULIUS WADE

# STAFF BIOGRAPHIES

## **Joy Cariño**

*Co-Editor in Chief*

Joy is a senior from Starkville, Mississippi and an English major with a minor in Linguistics, pursuing a TESOL certificate. Her academic interests include sociolinguistics, language acquisition, various social sciences, and storytelling. Joy loves writing poetry, traveling, playing piano, and having in-depth conversations with friends. A quote that has had lasting impact on her life is “A baked potato is not as big as the world.” –Betty Friedan.

## **Rebecca Van Pamel**

*Co-Editor in Chief*

Rebecca is a senior from Huntsville, Alabama studying English with a concentration in Creative Writing. Rebecca’s academic interests are largely shaped by her creative ones: she is dedicated to the craft of poetry, short fiction, and the promotion of the arts in underrepresented communities nationwide.

Rebecca is also interested in twentieth century American fiction and poetry. Rebecca’s career aspirations are to teach creative writing to at-risk students as a method of liberation and self-expression, and to give a few cats a good home in her lifetime.

## **Brady Kruse**

*Fiction/Prose Editor, Editorial Staff*

Brady is a Computer Science major with an English minor from New Haven, Missouri. His academic interests blend programming with writing, using science fiction and philosophy to discuss computer science ethics with a side order of Tolkien and Anglo-Saxon history in his free time. He loves playing basketball, reading classics, and collecting records. He is a lover of storytelling and a huge believer in the Mark Twain dogma: “I can remember anything...whether it happened or not.”

## **Ruby Titus**

*Editorial Staff*

Ruby is a second-year English major from northern Virginia who is also pursuing a Creative Writing minor and, hopefully, a French double major if her schedule aligns properly. Her hobbies include fiction writing, reading anything that sparks her interest (especially biographies about musicians), and listening to new music.

After graduating, she hopes to pursue writing in some form and work in the music industry. She loves *The Streetcar* and the creative community it fosters.

## **Maeve Rigney**

*Poetry Editor*

Maeve is a sophomore English and Political Science major from Madison, Mississippi. She is getting a minor in Creative Writing and a minor in Asian Studies. Maeve’s academic interests include international relations, contemporary poetry, and Qing Dynasty Chinese literature. In her free time, Maeve enjoys visiting thrift shops, writing poems, and being a Dungeon master. Maeve’s favorite poem is “The River” by Mark Leidner.

## **James Karlson**

*Art Editor*

James is from the coastal city of Gulfport, Mississippi. This is his second year on staff, and he is a sophomore applying for the Graphic Design concentration under Mississippi State University’s College of Art, Architecture, and Design. He is a comedy and science enthusiast who loves to laugh and gaze at the stars. James is also a poet and water colorist with his head in many clouds. If he can land an occupation that allows him to learn, discuss, and create whether that be a comedian, artist, journalist, scientist or perhaps all four then he will be very happy!

## **Zoë Maddox**

*Website Manager & Production Assistant, Outreach Team*

Zoë is a Freshman International Business Student, aiming for degrees in Finance (concentration in Risk Management and Insurance) and German. She loves problem solving and wants a career that lets her travel the world. She has interests in reading, writing, skateboarding, and water sports. She loves working on *The Streetcar* and can’t wait to continue working with its amazing staff.

## **Trevor Wycoff**

*Graphics Designer & Production Assistant, Outreach Team*

Trevor, from Dothan, Alabama, is a sophomore Music major with a concentration in guitar, pursuing a minor in Journalism and Business. He loves all things music—listening, playing, and conversing about it. He is into all forms of self-expression, and encourages all to be as true to themselves as possible. A quote from his favorite song of all time, The Smashing Pumpkins’s “Mayonaise,” is his heart’s triumphant scream— “I just want to be me.”

## **Brayden Stokes**

*Event Coordinator, Outreach Team*

Brayden is a senior majoring in Computer Science from Vicksburg, Mississippi. His real passion is in social work and psychology, and he hopes to pursue those fields in graduate school. He loves writing poetry and fiction and listening to podcasts about politics, true crime, and real-life stories. His favorite quote from a story he’s never forgotten is “There are people who can never go to Fantastica,” said Mr. Coreander, ‘and others who can, but who stay there forever. And there are just a few who go to Fantastica and come back. Like you. And they make both worlds well again.’”

## **Bhakti Patel**

*Event Coordinator, Outreach Team*

Bhakti is a junior Psychology major from Oxford, Mississippi. Her passion is photography and she believes that photography is one of the most powerful art forms to convey a story. She enjoys traveling, going to concerts, and spending time with her friends and family!

**Riley Cutler**

*Social Media Manager, Outreach Team*

Riley is a sophomore Biological Sciences major who is also minoring in Art. She grew up in a motley of places but when asked, claims she's from Northern Virginia. Her passions range from, you guessed it, art (both spectating and creating) and human anatomy/physiology. When not frantically studying, you may find her lost wandering campus, reading nerdy books, sketching random objects, trying to find cute animals to pet or making spontaneous trips to get her Target fix.

**Madison Kendall**

*Copy Editor, Editorial Staff*

Madison is a senior from Vicksburg, Mississippi and an Industrial Engineering major with a minor in Mathematics and Business Administration. Madison's hobbies include playing board games, cooking adventurous recipes, exploring new places, listening to podcasts, baking bread, and reading. She also loves road tripping with friends, whether it be for a concert or just the fun of the time spent together.

**Tarah Burrows**

*Copy Editor, Editorial Staff*

Tarah is a senior book lover from Gulfport, Mississippi and an English major with minors in Creative Writing and Spanish. Her appreciation for the beautiful art of language is leading her to a career in the publishing field where she hopes to help aspiring writers achieve their dreams and share their work. She loves watercolor painting, baking for friends, writing poetry and short stories, and feels especially compelled to explore the wondrous and stimulating possibilities of science fiction.

**Mary Ranie Miller**

*Editorial Staff*

Mary Ranie is a pre-med Biological Sciences major who is also double minoring in English and Psychology. She aspires to someday become a pediatrician and travel on global missions. She enjoys Fleetwood Mac, writing poetry, thrift shopping, reading in her eno, shadowing doctors, connecting with old friends, and sipping green tea.

**Sinclair Portis**

*Editorial Staff*

Sinclair is an English graduate student from Birmingham, Alabama. She got her undergraduate degree from Troy University in Multimedia Journalism with minors in both English and History. She has written and worked for various newspapers including Birmingham Times and the various newspapers of Starnes Publishing. She has a strong interest in writing fiction and reading the works of her peers. She would like to work in the book publishing industry after graduation and to be published herself one day.

**Dustin Smith**

*Editorial Staff*

Dustin Smith is a junior from Columbus, Mississippi and an English major with a minor in Film Studies. His academic interests include Southern Gothic literature, queer theory, film theory, and philosophy. Dustin enjoys watching movies, traveling, listening to music, and discussing life with anyone who will listen.

**Caitlan Sutton**

*Editorial Staff*

Caitlan is a junior Biological Sciences (Pre-Vet) major and a Mississippi native from Clinton. Her career goal is to become a large animal veterinarian specializing in equine sports medicine or equine surgery. Though she loves science, she has a great interest and appreciation in spreading and perceiving art such as poetry, paintings, and photography. When she heard about *The Streetcar*, she knew right away that she wanted to be on staff to help share student creative art around campus.

**Rachel Dykes**

*Editorial Staff*

Rachel is a senior majoring in Biochemistry from Birmingham, Alabama. Ever since she was a child, Rachel has always enjoyed learning - no matter what the subject! However, her true passions lie in English, history, and science. When she is not studying for a test, you can likely find Rachel going for long rides in her car, listening to her favorite music, or working in her garden. As for her future, she dreams of a life full of travel, family, and many, many dogs.

**Ethan Blessike**

*Editorial Staff*

Ethan is an English major from middle-of-no-where Byhalia, Mississippi. He is into comics, movies, games, music, and any dog within a 100 mile radius. If he can organize his scattered thoughts, he will throw them into a novel one day.

**Allyson Espy**

*Editorial Staff*

Allyson is a sophomore Software Engineering major with a minor in Japanese. Her professional interests include UAV's, programming, and the litigation law of software. Allyson is from Clarksdale, Mississippi, and likes to write, bake, and study languages. She firmly believes the most important part of life is to have fun.

**Sarah Grace Dulaney**

*Editorial Staff*

Sarah Grace is a sophomore pursuing a Microbiology major and Sociology minor on a pre-med track from Vicksburg, Mississippi. She tends to view science and the arts as two sides of the same coin and adores discovering earth's beauty through the lens of both biology and art. She enjoys all things medical, writing stories and short plays, 1920s novels, and cats.

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Thank you for your unwavering support of *The Streetcar*. The College of Arts and Sciences not only financially supports the mission of *The Streetcar*, but actively connects student artists at MSU with the journal, increasing both the quality of and quantity of our annual submissions.



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THE WRITING CENTER

Without the aid of The Writing Center, *The Streetcar's* beloved Open Mic Nights would simply not be possible. Thank you to the staff of The Writing Center for creating an engaging, supportive space for students to showcase their talents.



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The Shackouls Honors College is a dedicated sponsor of *The Streetcar*, with a staff and Dean, Dr. Christopher Snyder, who have supported, since its inception, the journal and its staff. We are incredibly grateful for your continued support.