About Grub Street

Grub Street is an annual publication funded by the Towson University Provost’s Office. The staff is composed of undergraduate Towson University students who review all submissions through a blind-review process.

To keep up with the latest Grub Street news, visit our blog at www.grubstreet.weebly.com, like us at www.facebook.com/grubstreet.towson, follow us on Twitter @GrubStreet1952, or follow us on Instagram @grubstreet15.

To contact Grub Street’s editorial team for any matter other than submissions, write to grubstreet1952@gmail.com.

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Submission Guidelines

Anyone is welcome to submit. Please limit your submissions to five poems, two prose pieces, and five works of visual art per issue. Any submissions in excess of these limits will not be read, and only previously unpublished works will be considered for publication.

Please limit your word documents to .doc and .docx files, and please remove all identifiable information from your document (your name, email address, etc.).

Visual art should be at least 4x6 inches and sent as a .png, .raw, or high quality .jpeg file type with at least 300 dpi and a size of at least 1 MB.

Visit us at www.grubstreet.submittable.com to submit your work. As of 2014, email submissions will no longer be considered for publication.

It is assumed all submissions are original creations. Please credit your sources. We look forward to receiving your work and wish you the best of luck in your literary and artistic endeavors.

Questions not addressed in these guidelines may be directed to grubstreet1952@gmail.com.

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Grub Street, London, 18th C.

Home of butchers and foreign manual laborers, Grub Street was not a fashionable London address. In his Dictionary of 1755, Dr. Johnson noted further that it was also a place “much inhabited by writers of small histories, dictionaries, and contemporary poems, whence any mean production is called grub street.” Hard living, hard drinking, half starved, Grub Streeters turned out biographies before the corpse was old, poems during the event they were watching, ghost-written speeches and sermons to order, and satires to deadline. First draft was final copy. They walked with pistols or swords to defend themselves from creditors and angry satiric targets.

Yet however poor, low, and scorned, they were the first fully professional writers to whom “publish or perish” was not a hyperbolic metaphor. Forgotten today, they nevertheless throw a long shadow on us. With them the modern periodical press can be said to have been born with its interest in live events and lean prose. Their plagiarisms led to copyright laws, their defamations to better libel laws. Their work encouraged a free press. Their writing to a newly but barely literate public doomed the long, ornate aristocratic romance in the hard language of realism. Their work helped to produce a mass market of readers. Freelancers no longer under pressure to praise patrons, they show finally that a writer could be independent.

—H. George Hahn
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Bildungsroman

[bil-doo ngz-roh-mahn; German beel-doo ngks-raw-mahn]  
Word Origin

noun, plural: Bildungsromans German, Bildungsromane  
[beel-doo ngks-raw-mah-nuh] (Show IPA)

1.  
: a type of novel concerned with the education, development, and maturing of  
a young protagonist.

2.  
: a novel about the moral and psychological growth of the main character
Editor’s Note

Luke Herlihy

One of the few things that we, as human beings, all share is the phenomenon of growing up. It is inescapable. It is inevitable. No matter how fast we run, or how hard we try, we may never escape the process.

Though, ultimately, we all end up in the same boat, the voyage we take to get us there can, and will, be drastically different. While some of us exist on rafts, others are lucky enough to be on yachts, others still are in constant motion, trying to keep their heads above water. We ride out any tides or currents that may influence us in one way or another, while the crashing waves continue to send us under.

While compiling this year’s journal, we decided that this progression of growing up resembles good literature. It tells a story with twists and turns that you’d never quite expect, yet you can feel yourself sitting right in the thick of it.

From the discarding of our innocence, to the understanding of the inequity surrounding our world, we glimpse reality. Eventually, we move through these rigors and end up in a world of utter chaos—and we learn to become okay with that.

In this year’s edition of Grub Street, we found ourselves telling a story. Though it may be a compilation of pieces given to us from all over the world, a natural progression began to shape itself. These works—by different people—were telling an uncannily similar story, almost begging for us to take notice.

Beginning with the innocence of Gumper, we move steadily toward its loss with pieces such as Sex, Write it and Charcoal Lips. Hidden beneath the rhetoric of Wittgenstein in the Woods,
we begin to develop an understanding among different ways of living, leading us to *van gogh is a bipolar restaurant*—which forces us to question the little drop of stability we may have retained at the end of our journey. We’d like to believe that these works come together to tell such a story because we’re not such different people after all. We’d like to believe that we’re all rather similar, in fact. No matter the situation, we can all communicate with one another due to the one defining attribute we can all relate to and share: our humanity.

I must thank everybody included in this year’s *Grub*. This issue would not be the same without each and every one of you on board, working as hard as you all did. A very special thanks, however, must go out to Professor Harrison, José, and Katie. Without the three of you by my side throughout this process, keeping me sane and sharing this time, this journal just would not be.

Lastly, and very importantly, however, I must note that *Grub Street* would not exist if it weren’t for our contributors. Year after year, you provide us with submissions second to none. It is an absolute joy reading through and viewing every single piece that we receive, knowing the quality and dedication that comes along with them. It was such a difficult choice making the final decisions for this year’s edition. Every single piece was read, and re-read with extreme care and attention—mostly, because we just couldn’t stop reading them. We encourage you all to submit again in the future, as every single submission we receive only aids the *Grub Street* name.

So, again, to all of you—thank you, thank you, thank you.
Orange Man

Ibrahim Harris

Oil on canvas
I’m cold. It’s cold. Hearing the leaves break under my feet is such a hauntingly powerful sound. Looking to my right, I see the tall, crooked tree that was once closer to us than anyone or anything. It’s still there, you know. Still engraved in its trunk is “BLAC ’06.”

It’s not home anymore. The water runs shallow; I can still hear our chanting, though I know all that’s left is the sound of the wind. It’s chilling, but nothing has left me colder than you.

When we promised to be by one another’s sides, no matter what, no matter the crime, I held my word. You two left me, cold.

Six years old. How many people can say that in the midst of all the changes life has taken them through they have stayed best friends?

The branch is gone, you know the one. It reached across the river so we could pull ourselves out of the water. The beautiful, mountainous rock; it’s graffitied now. Spoiled. The sun doesn’t warm Gumper like it used to. Maybe it was never the sun.

We laughed. We played. We swam. We dove. We learned. We chanted our names. We claimed this place our home, then we left.
“Hey, we’re jumping off the cliffs at the South Shore!” Randy’s voice echoes off the walls as he bounds up the stairs, taking two at a time. “You comin’?” he asks. He peeks into my bedroom. “Or are you gonna be a wuss and miss it?”

A lump the size of Texas constricts my throat. I just sit on my bed and stare blankly at my older brother’s rapidly disappearing form. Thank God he leaves as fast as he arrived. I swallow hard. Loudly releasing the breath I’ve been holding, I work another shell onto a thread of hemp.

“Hey, Sugar!” Dad calls up the stairs. “Mom, Rob, and I are heading to the cliffs to watch.” He waits for an answer. “Come on down, and let’s go!”

I don’t have a choice. I slog my body off the bed, pull on my swim suit, and wiggle into a pair of shorts. When I look in the mirror, I see a blonde Violet Beauregard from Willy Wonka getting pudgier by the second. Ugh.

My expression in the mirror reminds me of the end of seventh grade. In gym class we all had to be examined for the 1975 Presidential Award in Physical Fitness. Yeah, right. It’s mandatory in public school, as mandatory as communal showers and ridiculous girls’ gym uniforms with billowy yellow bloomers that just make your butt look enormous. Everyone (except me) wanted the badge so that their moms could sew it onto their uniforms to display to all of us losers (and by all of us, I mean me) who couldn’t measure up.

I remember the final test. A rope hung from the metal beams in the school gymnasium with a few sparse knots in it. We would be timed as we scurried up that rope and ultimately applauded as we rang the bell that dangled from the apex. I would have to go first, with Amon for a last name. But another rope was released, and now it would be a race between two climbers. Great. I just love a good competition.

When I was little, I barfed after every car ride because I had motion sickness. Shouldn’t I be excused? The rope could swing back and forth and I might, you know, lose it. No such luck. So, wrapping both hands around the first knot, I pulled with all my upper body strength, my face red with extreme effort, but I did not feel my feet lift off the ground like
the girl who was racing me. She glided up that rope like a slithering snake and rang the bell so fast I breathed a sigh of relief, having lost so quickly. I released the rope as all eyes turned to face me, and our gym teacher yelled, “Amon, go!”

I wanted to sit down and cry, but everyone was whispering and giggling and pointing and laughing out loud, shouting, “What a weakling!” So I got mad and scrambled up that rope just to get it over with. I rang the bell twice for good measure as my classmates applauded.

Okay, that’s not how it happened.

I do remember thinking that I would get some height right away if I jumped as high as I could and grabbed the next knot. Then I could grip the lower knot with my feet and at least give it a good go. So jump I did, and my hands grasped the rope with all my might just below the next knot. Simple physics dragged me to the ground in a sort of sped up slow motion.

I’d like to say that I won my battle with that splintery demon, but after a few more tries my bored classmates begged for their turns. My resolved gym teacher sadly made a mark next to my name that looked to me like a giant X. I still have little slivers of rope stuck in my palms from my struggle with that beast. Gravity sucks when you are trying to grow up.

Absentmindedly, I rub my palms together as my eyes refocus on my reflection. The heat of the day is beginning to warm up my room. I scowl at myself. There is nothing I can do about this ugly one piece bathing suit. At least it covers most of me.

It is almost noon. It took all morning for the New England fog to burn up and rise off the water surrounding our summer paradise on Squirrel Island, Maine. The Thomas Cottage, our home for the month of July, stands on the highest point on the island, and I notice a small waft of mist lingering outside my window. I hope that it will settle there and end this dilemma, but as if God Himself is urging me to go, rays of sunshine melt the remaining vapor right before my eyes.

Dad appears in my doorway. “Let’s go, Sugar!” Reluctantly, I walk through the house. He drapes his arm over my shoulder as we walk out the side door and meet Mom and my little brother, Rob, in the yard. Randy had already raced ahead to the cliffs.

Rob is jumping out of his skin. “Can I jump, Dad?” he asks for the umpteenth time. At almost ten, he is too young, in my opinion, to sacrifice his life, or a limb, to the ice cold Maine waters for a cheap thrill. Not to mention the huge rocks below that are only visible during low tide. The song “The Tide is High” begins to sing mockingly in my head.
As we walk along the winding paths and suspended bridges to the South Shore, Rob scampers ahead and then runs back like our black lab, Max, always does when we take her on a walk. He will probably cover twice the distance before we even get there. I desperately try to concoct a legitimate reason why I cannot jump. At twelve and a half, I haven’t started having my period yet—that’s the first thing that comes to my mind. I could lie, but Mom would know. Somehow Mom always knows. I ate a big breakfast, so I can’t excuse myself as sick, unless...I ate too much and can make myself throw up. Behind me Mom and Dad chat about whoknowswhat and constantly tell Rob to calm down, they will decide if he can jump when we get there. No one tells me that a decision will be made upon examination of the height of the cliffs as to whether or not I will jump. I have no choice. It doesn’t matter that I’m afraid to jump. I am expected to jump. I will be told to jump. Not jumping isn’t an option.

Dad pulls the end of my long blonde hair. It flows all the way down my back, and I can actually sit on it. When he grabs the end, he accidentally gooses me. I whirl around to see him beaming at me. "Hey, Sugar," he says. "You nervous?"

See what I mean?

As we near the cliffs, several boys are standing on the higher ridge looking over into the waves crashing into the little jetty. Now I actually do feel nauseated. Dwight, Gary, and Jamie holler hello when they see us and point to the lower ridge—for wusses I guess. Someone tells Dad that it’s about a thirty foot drop from the low ridge. I stand behind a stick-like shrub to hide my undeveloped pre-pubescent shapelessness as Mom pulls out the Polaroid to catch my pre-flight expression. Rob walks to the edge and glances over just as Dwight catapults off the higher cliff and flips right in front of us before diving into the water.

Rob turns and his expression looks, in my opinion, like he might vomit. Without saying a word, he walks all the way to where the higher ridge begins and plasters himself against the rocky wall. No one even notices but me. Everyone is applauding and waving at Dwight who is climbing up onto a rock.

Echoing around me, I hear people say things like: “Okay, only one at a time unless you are holding hands;” “Don’t do anything you wouldn’t do off your diving board at the pool;” “Dwight is gonna stay down there to pull you out if the cold water cramps your muscles and you can’t swim.”

“Being twelve means seeking flight, without fully understanding that falling comes before soaring.”
WHAT? Are you kidding me? Incredulous was one of my spelling words. I feel incredulous, like I am being sacrificed to the gods of stupidity.

However, Randy is eager to go off the lower cliff first. He waves for Mom and Dad to come closer and watch him jump. Of course, he will climb back up and go again and again, probably even graduate to the higher ridge by the end of high tide. Rob barely looks, but I can tell he wants to go. I stand still behind my prickly shelter, watching as a couple of girls I don’t know show up with their curvy bodies in bikinis and beautiful smiles. Neither of them are wearing glasses. Neither of them will have to hand their glasses to their Mom and jump into the great unknown without being able to see where they are going IF they ever emerge. They giggle and walk away because I am invisible. I have been for about a year.

Well, I wish I were invisible. At times anyway. Like when Mr. Dillbury sticks his pinky finger in his nose and then flicks the contents across the music room during choir practice. Last year during our Hallelujah Chorus rehearsals, he would hide behind the music stand where he thought we couldn’t see him and wiggle that finger back and forth way in there. But I felt luckier than usual because as a second soprano I stood higher up on the bleachers, only three rows from the top. It wasn’t likely that he would be able to hit me from down there.

I was wrong. Hit me he did. Right through the heart of a budding adolescent, even if it wasn’t with a booger grenade. We were singing at the tops of our lungs and right in the middle of rising to hit the high notes in “Wonderful! Counselor! The everlasting Father!” Mr. Dillbury made a sour face and yelled over us all, “Amon, you’re flat!” I deflated like a balloon zipping to the floor as its air escaped.

Yes, the entire room of at least a hundred students gasped before they burst into uncontrollable laughter! What else would a bunch of twelve-year-olds do? Everyone (including me) looked at my chest. Yes, my flat chest! I am pretty certain that moment will never cease to haunt me.

Dingleberry (as I dubbed him from then on) tapped the rim of the music stand with his conductor’s wand over and over. He instructed us to begin where we left off, and around me, voices rose to Heaven. I glared at Dingleberry while I wrapped my arms across my absent adulthood and moved my mouth...
with the words. Thus began my lip syncing career. If I couldn’t shrivel up and blow away like a spent balloon, I would just fade out, vocally disappear, and blend in without anybody ever noticing me again.

The bikini girls still don’t notice me. They are too busy noticing Randy as he perches on his tip toes on the edge of the cliff and pushes off, launching himself more forward than down. It looks like he is suspended in air a moment before he simply disappears below the rim.

Mom gasps as her firstborn son vanishes, and she inches toward the edge to see that he has landed safely. She smiles and waves to him before she turns and gives me a knowing look of warning: eyebrows raised, eyes wide, eerie grin. Even Mom expects me to jump.

The bikini girls want to go next. They causally walk up to the edge. One looks over, but she backs away, shaking her head. She tells her friend to go first. She wants to think about it a while. Sure. That makes sense. Consider the consequences of your actions before you act on them. What’s the saying? “Look before you leap.” Well, that won’t work to get me out of this. Dad will only say that the leaping still follows the looking.

Randy appears, walking up the trail from the caves below. Everyone rushes to him and asks, “How was it?” He shrugs and says, “No sweat,” and grabs a towel to dab his face.

Other boys jump and Jamie and Gary both fly from the upper cliff, head first in flamboyant swan dives. The one bikini girl stands back as her friend finally goes alone. She jumps with a shriek that brings more memories of Willy Wonka. She sounds like Verruca Salt when she dropped down the tube, a bad egg. All the way down we can hear her until a small splash silences her and the crowd laughs. I shudder.

The timid bikini girl approaches me with a genuine smile. “Hi,” she says, “I’m Jenny. Are you Randy’s sister?”

I think: “Yes, I am Randy’s sister. I have been my whole life, and I will be forever. That’s my other name: ‘Randy’s Sister.’”

I just nod.

“I’m nervous about jumping,” she says. “Are you?”

Again, I simply nod.

“Well, I’ll go if you go,” she says, smiling anxiously. “We could hold hands and go together. That would make me feel better.”

Rob and Mom are standing as far away from the edge as possible. I pretend to mingle while talking with Jenny and wander closer to them. Mom laughs and says, “No, Rob, there aren’t any sharks in there!” Oh God! The music starts repeating in my head: Du dun, du dun, du dun dun dun…”Don’t go in the water!” Before we drove the thirteen hours up Interstate 95 through eleven states to get to our island getaway, we all went to see
the movie *Jaws* the week it came out. Rob is convinced that a shark is waiting down there and will only be seen after he jumps, with its mouth wide open to catch him in its razor teeth. This seems like a promising escape, for *him*. He’s only nine, not *twelve*. Like me.

I know being twelve should mean looking ahead to the future with wonder and perhaps a little dread. To me, though, it means constantly glancing over my shoulder and discovering more and more of my childhood slipping silently away with absolute determination.

Dad waves me over to the edge of the cliff. Something propels me toward him. He puts his arm around my shoulder and whispers in my ear, “You don’t have to jump if you don’t want to.” He smiles at me and winks.

“There will be other summers.” But there won’t be other summers. Not when I’m twelve.

And somewhere inside me I seem to know that being twelve is standing on the cusp of tomorrow, like an eaglet perched on the rim of its nest, testing the breeze as it blows against its feathers. Twelve is me on the edge of a cliff, scared to death of both jumping *and* staying put.

Jenny stands beside me. We both look down and Dwight waves, beckoning to us. “Do you wanna jump?” she asks.

Being twelve means seeking flight, without fully understanding that falling comes before soaring.

I take her hand. You bet I want to jump. It’s high time I did.
Daniel Flannery

Night in Wyoming, Delaware

My friend talks about still nights—
Not paved over like parking lots over woods,
But desperately painted to hide that they’re paper.
Blue rain hangs in the air, still as the moth-eaten sky.
Between violent strokes of blue and black,
Idle drivers suck in cigarette ends and taillights,
Cough up gasoline that swirls around their feet.
A dreary Van Gogh where every brushstroke,
Abandoned pickle truck,
Trembling, needle-eyed stargazer,
Rotting cabbage patch,
Mud field now developed housing now cement memory,
Threatens to spiral, blend,
Burn fanatical yellow and smoke.
At the edges, the night curls, chars, and disappears.
Ben Giuliana

Apathy\textsuperscript{1}

The sea dances with the tranquil
sheen of a mirror. Demons prowl just beneath this placid threshold
and spindles of sunlight
breach the water. Deeper and deeper the sea floor sinks
until the blue cloth,
wrinkled with the spindles, fades to a black ink.
Here the true demons, the behemoths
of the past, riddle the floor undisturbed
by those playing only on the surface.

\textsuperscript{1} Apathy is knowing more
about the surface
of Mars than the
bottom of your own sea.
When remembering long-ago lessons of furiously pumping legs to keep her head above water,

the thoughts are not of the pretty little girl in the camp pool with the teal and beige hand-me-down bathing suit pumping furiously without a struggle.

What comes to mind is the woman she has become.

Pumping furiously while struggling, barely maintaining her head above life.

Keeping it above water was easy.

B.A. Rutter

Just Can’t Float
The numbing water was a threatening shade of green. The towering waves were crashing onto the shore with freight-train force, sending spray and sand through the air. Thick, gray clouds suffocated the sun and a breeze whistled through the air, brushing the back of my neck.

“Watch out for Will,” they said. “You know how he gets around the ocean. Thinks he’s the king of the beach.”

I scanned the shoreline and found him after a couple of minutes, his neon green bathing suit sticking out in the dark water. Something wasn’t right. His boogie board washed up on shore, and he bobbed up and down with the current.

He disappeared under the water.

“Will!” There was no answer. I called louder, but still no answer. I walked closer to the water. “Hey, what are you doing out there?”

The wind whipped harder, blowing my hair into my eyes and mouth. As I picked the sandy strands and tucked them back into place, a giant wave crashed at my legs. It knocked me off balance and into the cold water. I stumbled back up to my feet before another wave landed on the shore.

It wasn’t just another wave. Will crashed to my feet, face first in the sand, the severed boogie board cord still strapped to his wrist.

My throat went dry and my body froze. I wanted to move, but I felt like my feet were cemented in the heavy sand. I bent down and tried to turn him over, his body heavy and limp. My heartbeat started. It rattled against my rib cage with every pulse.

I started screaming.

... ... ...

There was nothing on TV. I flipped through the channels three times over, searching for a midday program that wasn’t a talk show, soap opera, or the news. After the fourth time through, I stopped on a news station and threw the remote on the cushion next to me in defeat.
“Reports are coming through that the fourteen-year-old boy who capsized a small boat in the inlet earlier this morning has drowned. Police say the boat capsized after hitting a rock, and the boy was not wearing a life jacket. Other reports say the pending storm may have caused the inlet water to rise and become choppy as the wind speeds began to increase.”

I picked the remote up and clicked the power button.

I walked into the kitchen. “You know, this is why I don’t watch the news,” I said. “There’s always someone dying, or getting in a car accident, or getting mugged. Or someone drowning.”

Beth, my older sister, was drying a plate as she stared out of the back window toward the ocean. “I know,” she said. “Those stories make the news. Nobody cares about the positive stuff. It’s too boring.”

“Maybe some people need a little boring in their life.”

She didn’t say anything, and I thought she was finished talking. She was normally more of a thinker than a talker.

“Do you miss having fun?” she said.

I looked at her, puzzled. “I do have fun. Paul and I do a lot of fun things. You know that.”

“You know what I mean.” She looked out at the water.

I thought we had an understanding. She told me she felt the same way.

“Beth, you and I have fun. We’re careful, and for good reason. I know you know that.” She still had her back turned to me. “What’s the problem?”

“Never mind.”

I picked up a towel and started drying another plate. I couldn’t figure out where she was coming from. She was the older sister, the careful, watchful one. I knew she still felt guiltier than I did some days. She had invited me and Will to tag along on that beach trip.

I thought about the boy on the news. I wondered what he looked like as he struggled to stay afloat, his water-logged screams fading into the ocean noise. Nothing to hold on to except a few boards from his broken boat. What was he thinking as he fought against the whitecaps? Am I going to die? Can anyone hear me?

I thought about his family. I could imagine their pain when the paramedics shook their heads, apologizing for what they couldn’t do to save their child, their only son. Bitterness and guilt would fill their hearts. Some of it would never leave.

The back screen door opened and slammed shut with a loud bang, causing me to drop the plate onto the tile floor. It broke into pieces, littering shards of glass everywhere.
“Did someone just drop something in there?” Paul was still standing in the back doorway, but his voice carried, enough for me to hear. I bent over to pick up the bigger pieces before I swept up the remaining glass splinters. The plates belonged to his mother.

I couldn’t pick up the pieces in time. Paul hovered over me.

“What happened?”


He made his typical yeah, right noise, a mix between a scoff and a snort. I hated that noise.

“Ellie, you don’t drop things. You’re just about the most coordinated person I know.”

“Maybe once in a while I do, like when you come barreling through the door.”

“I didn’t know barreling through the door would make you so skittish.”

I didn’t respond.

Paul kneeled down, but I didn’t look at him. I kept picking up the pieces of glass, watching for the sharp edges. It amazed me how something whole could break apart into so many pieces. They would never fit back together.

“Are you going to tell me what’s wrong?”

“Nothing,” I said, meeting his eyes. “I was thinking about something, and then you scared me when you came in. The plate slipped out of my hands.”

He stood up and began to walk toward the back door. “I’m going back to the beach. Rob’s still there. Come and join us when you guys actually want to enjoy yourselves.”

I found myself on the couch later that night, flicking through the channels again. The others were outside, drinking on the back porch. They had one of the windows open, and I could hear the Rolling Stones, Paul’s favorite band, playing through the speakers. I could also smell the saltwater, and it made my stomach turn.

“Ellie!” Paul shouted through the open window.

“Yeah?”

“Come outside. Please.”

I thought of what Beth said earlier about having fun. They sounded like they were enjoying themselves, laughing and singing along with the music. Back at home, there would be no question. Here, I felt vulnerable.
“There she is! She finally decided to join us.” Paul stood up as I walked outside. “I didn’t think you wanted to have fun this week.”

I forced a laugh. I saw a line of beer cans balanced on the porch railing and figured the guys had finished off a twelve pack.

“Ellie!” Rob, Beth’s husband, raised his can and finished off the beer. “We didn’t think you’d make it to the actual vacation. How’s the channel surfing going?”

“It’s fine,” I said. “You’d be surprised what you can find on TV.”

I looked at the ocean before taking a seat next to Beth. The bone-white moon shone down on the water, and I could hear the eerie sound of the waves slapping against the sand. It was entrancing but screamed of something daunting.

“I’m glad you decided to come outside,” Beth said. She put her hand on mine and squeezed. “My heart was racing when I first heard the ocean, but I feel better now.”

I nodded and put on a smile. I was glad she was able to gather herself because I knew I couldn’t. Not after seeing Will washed up on shore the way he was. The ocean was not a friend to me.

“I still don’t feel good. My stomach’s all twisted up.” I took a deep breath. “I’m doing this for you. I’m trying.”

“I know.”

No one said anything for a few minutes, and I started to relax. The Stones still sang in the background, masking the crashing waves. I even hummed along to the few songs I could tolerate.

“Ellie, how have you been?” Rob asked, breaking the silence. “Beth told me you’re applying for graduate school. Nursing, right?”

“Yes,” I said, “I want to help people.”

“Don’t we all?” Rob laughed as he cracked open another beer. He was light-hearted, a good match for Beth. He had seen the ups and downs of our family and stuck through even when the pain seemed to swallow us whole.

“I think she’s going to be in over her head with grad school.” Paul stood with his back to us, facing the ocean.

“Why?”

Paul turned and leaned against the porch railing. His eyes were bloodshot, and he had
another beer in his hand. I wondered how many of the first twelve he had polished off himself. “She had a hard time with undergrad. Changed her major three times. Couldn’t pass entry-level biology the first time. I basically had to teach her myself.”

I felt my face getting hot and my eyes widening. Paul was smarter than me, but he had never once complained about the way I passed undergrad.

“Paul—” Beth started, but he cut her off.

“No you really know why she wants to become a nurse?” He started walking over to me, and I knew what he was about to say. He was going to twist the knife. “Because she couldn’t save Will.”

I felt like I had been punched in the stomach. I thought about Will’s lifeless body at my feet, the way I wasted precious time just looking at him, trying to understand why he was lying there, face first in the sand. I remembered screaming for what seemed like hours before anyone back at the house could hear me. I didn’t even consider mouth to mouth. Will was dead long before the paramedics arrived.

Rob stood up, standing in between me and Paul. “What the hell is wrong with you? You’re talking about her brother, you know.”

Paul didn’t answer Rob. He looked straight at me. “It’s been three years. Three damn years, Ellie. When are you going to accept what happened? You can’t do anything about it now, and you know that. You might as well get over it and live your life.”

Part of me knew he was right. I had regrets—and guilt—that I didn’t want to hold on to for the rest of my life. I wanted to let go.

He didn’t get it. He didn’t watch his brother grow up, protecting him all of those years, only to fail when it mattered the most. He didn’t have to think about his own younger brother stuck as a seventeen-year-old, never graduating from high school, never going to college. He didn’t have to pack up his dead brother’s clothes and drive home that weekend with an extra seat in the car. And he didn’t have to face his parents who swore up and down they didn’t blame him but still wore faces that read, how could you?

“I don’t need this from you,” I said, staring back at Paul. “I didn’t even want to come here.”

I walked inside, slamming the screen door on the way in.

Paul slept on the couch that night.
Nobody asked me about going down to the beach the next day. They left me alone in my room. I pulled open the window shades and looked outside. The sun was beating down on the sand, and there were dozens of yellow rental umbrellas set out. I could see kids running, some playing volleyball closer to the dunes. I could hear them screaming. I couldn’t see the water.

One hour of TV turned into three hours of searching the channels again with no interest in what I was watching. I kept thinking about what Beth said, and then about what Paul said. There was a pit in my stomach when I replayed Paul’s words over and over in my mind.

I knew he had a point. He acted like an ass about it, but he had a point.

Before I had a chance to think twice, I grabbed my MP3 player and headed toward the back door. I didn’t think about fear. I thought about Will.

I noticed the bright sun from earlier had started to fade behind a dark layer of clouds, but I kept walking, my feet sinking into the hot sand. I put my ear buds in and turned on my favorite album: *Quadrophenia*, by The Who. I remembered going to a Who concert with Will the winter before he died. He had bought me a copy of the album for my birthday two years earlier and told me that someday, we’d see them play it live. We did.

I hadn’t listened to it since he died. The album was about the beach.

There were fewer people on the shore because of the dark clouds rolling through, so it was easy to find Beth, Paul, and Rob sitting close to the water. I took a seat in the sand next to Beth without saying anything.

“I know,’ she said. ‘Those stories make the news. Nobody cares about the positive stuff. It’s too boring.’”

his beat-up boogie board. His motionless body thrown down by the surf.

“I guess it was just time to come down here.”

“That’s good.” Beth put her hand on top of mine like she did the night before. “You know Will would want you back out here again. He’d never want you stuck inside.”

I let her words sink in. She was right—Will would hate to see me inside, channel surfing instead of enjoying the beach. He knew I wasn’t much of a swimmer, but he always had a way of dragging me down to the water anyway.

Then I saw a flash of neon green bobbing up and down in the water.
“What is that?” I said, my body frozen, my eyes fixated on the ocean. It looked like a boy, maybe sixteen or seventeen, lying on his back. He floated with the current, rising and falling as the waves crashed on the shore. His body disappeared under the water.

It looked like Will. I knew it couldn’t be. There was no possible way.

“I don’t know—”

I had already tuned her out. My heart beat picked up, making my chest hurt, and my hands and legs started to go numb. I staggered to my feet but struggled to keep balance.

“There’s a boy out there!” I shouted. “He’s not moving.”

“Are you sure?” Beth stood up to look over the waves.

“Yes! Can’t you see him?”

I was thinking ahead—or backwards, really. I remembered how I couldn’t save Will before, how I had frozen up. I wasn’t going to make the same mistake again. I was going to save the boy.

The dark green waves continued to roll, colliding with the sand and sending specks of foamy spray tumbling through the air. It roared and charged at me. I leapt into the air, missing being thumped by a wave.

I knew the boy couldn’t hear me. The deafening sound of the waves was too loud, too forceful. I had to go out into the water to save him from the rising current. I stumbled through the sticky sand and barreled into the crests of the waves, still shouting for the boy, almost yelling myself hoarse.

The water was warm and heavy and punched me in the face with every swell. I couldn’t breathe, and I couldn’t see where I was. Everything was hazy, like looking through a dirty window. The boy was nowhere to be found.

“Will! Where are you?” Salty water choked me with every word I screamed. I spit out a mouthful, my throat and eyes burning. I didn’t even realize I was starting to call the boy Will. I was too absorbed in the moment. There was no feeling in my legs or my arms as I tried to paddle around. I didn’t know where to find the bottom.

A giant wave curled in front of me, and I was sucked underneath of its current. I’m going to die, I thought, as my head started to sink below the surface of the water. Will and I are going to die out here.

“Ellie!” I heard, snapping me out of my trance. I looked up and saw another wave headed right for me. I held my breath to swim under before it could slam me to the ocean floor.
It was quiet under the water, though up above it sounded like a freight train colliding with a building. After a few seconds, I came back above the surface.

“Over here!” I heard the same voice call. This time, the voice was less distant, easier to understand. I turned toward the sand and saw Paul and Beth running into the breaking waves, Beth’s gray shirt and white Bermuda shorts almost soaked through.

I swam toward Paul, and he gripped my arm, leading me back onto the shore. It was hard to get my footing in the wet sand, my body still numbed from the adrenaline rushing through it, but I kept my balance and made it to the dry sand.

Before I was surrounded by Paul, Beth, Rob, and a lifeguard, I stole one last glance at the ocean. The waves crashed onto the shore like they always had. The dark clouds still hung low on the horizon. And there still was the nagging feeling to go save Will.

I felt something different, something I should have noticed earlier. Something people had been trying to tell me. There was nothing I could do to save him. There was no way to change the past. The unforgiving fact still remained the same: my little brother wasn’t coming back, no matter what I did. He would never escape the waves.
Tell me about the dream where the airplane goes down
and you are holding my hand.
How it was very early in the morning, and I was testing
out each word that I could think of
until we forgot we were dying.

Tell me how the earth was rising to meet us,
how it was just getting to be light, and Korea
was unfolding below us like a map,
and you said, “Look, look
how beautiful it is,”
as you pointed at Bukhansan Mountain.

Here we are in the thick of it. The lights are low,
and you know that I am weak and endless.
Take my hands; tell me again
about destruction, how it is beautiful, how in the end,
the sky inhales deeply, like an ocean, to swallow us.
The postcard from London. The heavy sleep that wrinkles the sheets, the homemade bread you attempted when I was out. Here are those things.

Here is a drawing of our faces like clouds. Here is the mug I cracked last summer, and the trashcan you wouldn’t put it in. Here is your list of favorite songs, and the books you wrote our names in. Here is the phone number you lost. Here is a sock you lost. Here is the light you lost when you found me.

Here is the photo of your mother. Here is your closet box, your secret keeper. Here are all the secrets I never tell you. Here are yours, too.

Here is the stone you picked up on a walk, and the melody you hummed on the way home. Here is the very last train you missed on our anniversary. Here is the blue from the sky on the day you shaded my eyes from the sun. Here is the not-her, the nothing, the not-a-thing thing. Here are the scissors you used to snip the threads of forgetfulness: dirty dishes, her picture, the bike you left rusting by the garage. Here are the words you scattered about me: glass ornaments. Here is the push and the pull of all the last words. Here are all the things.
Kyle Hemmings
Sugar Dune

She feeds her son red licorice on Sundays, so he will not go elsewhere & ask for sweets. He might develop a fan base of unloved mothers with unwashed feet. She cannot warn him enough that sooner or later everyone becomes a victim of their own avarice. When the brittle mother stops breathing in beats, becomes too transparent for this world, he reduces her down to sugar, collects her granules into urns. Each granule is a monad that he would like to live in, or he keeps a tablespoon of her in his pockets just in case he’s too weak to mouth full sentences or turns angry in dry winds. He will go through a hundred sugar-coated girls who wear opaque stockings. They pretend to be somebody else and wear their own delusions like fishnets. The one he marries lives in a dune by the sea. She is as crazy as he is during his sugar rushes, his nightmares of women turning colorless, floating toward bleak weather, pleading with him to knot them to him. The dune-wife tells him *we must make this hole deeper so the sky cannot find us, so the reporters will not make up stories. People will crowd us out.* He loved her because her home reminded him of the white sand of his childhood mixed with the void of its silence.
Gears of Time
Glen Banks
Photograph
Each morning, she tries to repair the boy using whistles, wake-up calls, a rattling G.I. Joe doll with eyes as plastic as his. Still, he won’t quite wake up. She knows that he inherited some of her obsolete parts: the springs too stretched, the rusty gears, the leaking of mechanized voices across the placenta. To be drowned in absolute need.

To detach & admit nothing. The past? Just an elusive present that keeps ticking. She would reattach him to her belly button if it could make him rise & blink. Not like the toy soldiers that she threw out. They were only donations & they made her hands feel like sand, caused her to pant as if her breaths sifted back & forth through impossible particulate masks.

The mother & son live over an Italian bakery on West 6th. At sunrise, she imagines tasting the ricotta in the fresh-baked cannoli or the fruits in the panforte. She imagines how even after life stops, delivery trucks will continue to double-park & window washers will still lose their keys. It’s a neighborhood that rises & sinks with its own secret timers.

At night, she hears the footsteps of the baker’s wife after she closes shop. Or the shots fired, when she shoots an assailant in the foot. The almost-adult mugger addicted to powdered sugar & deep-fried balls of dough.

Kyle Hemmings

Springs, Cogwheels, Chocolate Truffles
Brennen Mayer
A Healthy Sense of Worth

Saving my desires for someday.
Oh that’s some dream—when
her aura pierces half my
shadow, carrying entranced
sentiments, a longing that greets
me when I look into the deep, rich hazel
of her eyes, disguising itself as lighthearted.

I’m told,
“Listen to the wise men
who spoke in tongues of old.”
Yet, the allure of her presence,
something which these wise men
have no riddle, rapidly speeds my exhausted heart.
An urgency that leaves breath to task and punishment.
The mountain range of my brain, a steep ridge
with a rippled plane like pond water after
the cast of a stone, races with thoughts of
her and thoughts of me and how.
A Freudian dream and Dr. Carson masterpiece,
that after, loses touch with every thought of her.

The sentence of meeting her acquaintance,
prisoners guilty of guiltless crimes. My heart
and head become inmates in her silhouette, of which
I wish to never break free.
Jaso Bolay  
Dry Rub

Red in the face Aimee couldn’t stand the heat of you.  
She said it made her skin excessively dry. At least that’s what you told me that night you invited me in.  
You were wondering if your apartment was too hot, if I wanted the A.C. on, if I was comfortable, if I wanted a seat. A bed. You.  
But I told you, “I am not Aimee with an i and two ee’s.”  
I only lotion the parts of my body that will be showing, mostly the ends of my limbs: my elbows down to the tips of my fingernails, the dusty caps of my knees to the knuckles of my toes. Everywhere I begin, I leave dry and whiting, and on the days that I forget to do that little, my hands fray between the stems of my fingers, looking as though I just dug them out of the snow. They shiver into an arthritic coma. I cannot wait until I am perfect.  
And on bright summer days, when the only thing that brings forth my laziness is the fire of the sun, I sit directly beneath its rays for hours at a time, just to upkeep my perfect tar complexion. There is nothing more absolute than feeling one thing and knowing three things, and I say to him again as he gestures me towards a bowl of chocolates that used to make her fall asleep, “I am not Aimee with one i and two ee’s.  
And two things I will never complain about are the heat of any room or the dryness of my skin.”
In *The Book of Margery Kempe*, a fifteenth century Christian mystic writes about her life and experience of divine revelation. A glaring issue in this text is Margery Kempe’s battle against her own sexuality. She believes that she has offended God by enjoying the lust of her body and tries to convince her husband to become celibate with her. In later passages, she describes orgasmic-like encounters with the voice, or spirit, of Jesus Christ, who speaks about his love for her and desire for a physical union between them. This is one of the first pieces of writing in English by a woman that we can find. A disturbing read, the book embodies the sexual repression that humans bring upon themselves and each other. Just 50 years ago, it was still taboo to acknowledge that women orgasm. Society still dips sexual experience in an ascetic, puritanical coating, hoping no one will acknowledge what’s underneath. Even the entertainment industry records sex through an unrealistic, idealized filter. Men and women inherit the phrase “lost my virginity,” as though it’s been stolen from us, misplaced, or lost in a bet. In no sense of the word did I “lose” my virginity. I simply exchanged one state of being for another.

I always promised myself two things about having sex: it must not be in high school, and must be with someone who respects me and treats me with care. I didn’t love the man I chose for my first time, and I didn’t want to. Sex doesn’t have to be about love. Why not indulge in the high, in the thrill, of simply feeling good, of being close to another person? For a few months I was close to a playwright with smoldering brows who dragged behind him fetishes and other baggage—under the mutual agreement that there would be no emotional attachment. And, actually, that was nice. He was a good boyfriend and I was happy while it lasted. He provided me with good conversation, good sex, and people to hang out with on the weekends.

I made my exchange while “Alice’s Restaurant” played in the other room. The late afternoon sunlight glowed through the cracks in the blinds, casting a sharp blaze across the bed. I noticed the clumsiness of removing clothes, the too-loud crackling of sheets, the nerve-wracking length of a
circumcised penis (penis, write it), and the gentle touch of a man that would break my hymen but not my heart. Am I allowed to write about that? Must I sugarcoat healthy, passionate, sometimes awkward sexuality? It won’t always be like the movies, but that doesn’t lessen the experience: it’s real. We were both counselors at a summer camp. We spent many evenings engrossed in talks. Music, books, travel, Israel, future plans. I found once again that affection, a connection with another person, was worthwhile in itself, though I was not in love, and though I knew I would not see him again after the summer ended.

On a night off, we went for a walk around West Stockbridge, Massachusetts, a tiny town that seems to be only three blocks wide. We took turns asking each other questions about our childhoods. As we walked, his arms around my waist, he told me about his Intelligence job in the Israeli army (not in detail, of course). A “mobile shop” appeared around the corner. I had heard there was a mobile shop near the plethora of stores selling antiques, but I hadn’t visited because I assumed it was a cell-phone store. But when it came into view, I saw a cottage-like structure with mobiles hanging in the windows and all over the porch. It was not a windy night, but a gentle tinkling could be heard vibrating down the street. Without hesitating, I ran up the stone walkway, and brushed my hands across the mobiles. The sound was magical. A dark, starry night and eight mobiles gently chiming together. I smiled and he smiled and we kissed to the chiming.

We ended up all over a motel room that night. “Look in the mirror,” he said. I opened my eyes, surprised for a moment at how far

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“Sex can’t make love, but we can.”

In real life, there was no blood, but great pain. Pain so great that I clung to his shoulders and whimpered; that he stopped, carried me to the bed, and brought me a glass of water and a piece of frozen chocolate. I didn’t love him, but I shared a few months of affection with another human being, which is powerful in the face of so many reasons to shrink from humanity.

According to some psychological research, each time you recall a memory, you are refreshing it, like a computer page. With every click, the memory is built from scratch, and little things start to change. By the time you’ve had a memory for a few years, it theoretically looks very different than it was before. That idea never bothers me more than the mornings after. Sometimes I try not to think about them, not to relive those moments, because I don’t want to sully the image with the discrepancies of time. I can’t stand to lose that blurry image.
away I’d been. But there it was, the blurry image, the one I hope stays branded in my mind forever. Eyeglasses strewn on the bedside table, a soft-focus filter framed the scene. The glow of the lamps painted the picture in warm oranges, our skin so young and healthy. I could tell my hair was mussed up and I could just see a pink flush across his cheeks. I felt we were so beautiful in that moment, him standing there, athletic and tan, me, with my legs wrapped around him, feeling so very content. So very beautiful.

I was raised to keep Kosher. No meat and dairy in the same meal. No crab cakes, no bacon. No candy made from gelatin. But I quickly realized that chicken tastes good with Parmesan cheese. And simply because it tastes good, I decided I would eat it. I don’t believe it is necessary to deny myself pleasure in the name of ascetic values. I will not fast for any holidays. I do not need arbitrary rules to make me temperate. I will indulge in pleasure. Why must I control my primal instincts, why must I make them decent?

Sex feels good, too. This makes a lot of people uncomfortable, but it is a conspicuous fact we must acknowledge. The biological purpose of intercourse is to propagate our species, but out of a list of eight reasons for having sex, recent studies show that reproduction is people’s least frequent motive.¹ Methods of birth control—safe, effective, and not so much—have been dated from the first millennium BCE and throughout history. These practices include talismans, amulets, and potions; non-penetrative sex, or “outercourse”; premature penile withdrawal; fertility-awareness; extended breastfeeding; male condoms, and female condoms and sponges; contraceptive foams, creams, jellies, film, and suppositories; diaphragm and cervical caps; hormonal methods including ‘the pill,’ ‘the implant,’ DMPA, and the IUD; and vasectomies and sterilization.² The ancient Chinese women who drank lead and mercury were clearly intent on having sex for pleasure, not for procreation. People want to have sex and, especially in modern times, “be fruitful, and multiply” is advice we don’t have to take. And why not indulge? Sex is associated with physiological benefits such as a higher immune system, lower blood pressure, better bladder control, lower risk of heart attack and prostate cancer, pain relief, and improved sleep patterns. Emotionally, sex promotes intimacy and leads to stress relief, relaxation, and higher self-esteem and body image. I have not scrutinized the methodologies behind the many experiments that boast these results, but I can at least testify to the emotional advantages of sex.

He sits on the couch, and I perch in his lap, facing him. His fingers absentmindedly curl the edge of my shirt, and my hands smooth

the hair on the back on his neck. I love him. I want to be with him for the rest of my life. I’m telling him about an article I’m writing in which I rail against eBooks. My argument does not focus on sentimentality, but I worry that my feelings for real books are not rational. He says, “I think you’re biased against eBooks because they threaten something that you enjoy. You grew up reading paper books and some of these paper books became a big part of your life. As a result of this, when you see eBooks threatening the continuing proliferation of paper books, you take it as an attack against who you are as a person. EBooks aren’t attacking books, they’re attacking you. If eBooks win, then a part of you will be taken away.” I blink. This is so remarkably insightful. I trace circles over the back of his neck, lean in and kiss him.

Warm melting words drip from my brain down my spine:
Words melting, melting in my mind.

Sex can’t make love, but we can. Sex, on its own, doesn’t make a relationship good, but it acts as an intensifier, painting intimacy gold, letting it shine. If you do it right, it is empowering. It fosters laughter. It can be slow, intimate togetherness. Or an instinctive storm. It is a base, animalistic urge that we can weave flowers into, or not. I let it be what it will be. I happily indulge.
Amy Fant

Dark Blue

Or Prussian blue, like a bruise, like the
color we painted our first living room—this
is how I see you when I see you as color.

You're an expert at being so sure, I said, as you reached
easily for Blue Macaw among the rows
of blues. That day we brushed and brushed,
you waiting for disaster, blue on the ceiling,
a knocked-over can, broken chairs that
shouldn't be stood on. No, that was me.

All that fear and doubt, mine. I wanted
the room blue—no, golden—no, the colors
I found when you pushed the curtains
back that morning in Addis. You remember—
you saw the warmest morning yet and called
the day certainty. Certain we should be there,
hailing a cab to the Medhane Alem, Selams
rolling effortlessly from your tongue. I saw
nothing but danger, but you were certain,

like now. How can I tell you that I am a trap
I fell into? That even when you're wine-full
and reaching, I am counting on disasters.

I am always something else: a building on fire,
the ark that sees you treading the flood.
Clear is a Color

Shannon E. Wagner

Drips of cold wet clung to me, all over me, so it was no longer cold. The dry parts were cold. But not a thing was dry. Even the sun swam.

My fingers looked like white shriveled grapes, pressed to the ledge. I looked down at my flickering toes against the grainy wall; the water and sun played with my feet.

I blinked with my eyes under water. It burned beneath my lids.

Long slugs of hair circled on the surface; my Medusa shadow falling over my bent legs. I was a creature hanging from the white wall of this giant chlorine bathtub. I was a land creature clinging to my land.

The man in my mother’s life stood, half encapsulated, next to me. The heavy water thickened the space between us instead of wrapping us together.

I swung to his tree. The hairy thick branch of his arm sunk and I plunged under with only a gasp of air.

The wall.

I realized this water could stay completely still, while dragging me to the bottom. He stretched his arm between us casting me out into the water and I clung to his hand—a collection of dried grapes.

I was a land creature, hanging from a branch, floating in a wet sky that held me all around.

His hand slipped away and the stillness began to drag me down. Groping and kicking, pulling and pushing, somehow I was let back to land. Sinking is not swimming. Flesh is not land.

I clung to my steady wall and with one hand I slipped under the surface. I floated in the stillness, and wondered how water could be so mean while appearing so calm.

But then, I did not know that humans do not have only one face. I did not know that clear was a color. I did not know a smile could be cruel.

He reached out to me.

My head fit in his hand, and his hand grabbed my head and shoved it down.

My only land left was dead land, drowned by the water—white concrete beneath my feet.
We both had no air, and it could no longer save me.

Anything under water seemed dead or barely alive, even sound.

No one could hear me screaming.

Surely they could see I was dying. But clear was a color.

The life in me tightened into a twist then disappeared into the water that surrounded me. Anything that left me it took.

His hand lifted and my mouth shot to air.

It hurt me, everything hurt me. I didn't want the wall, yet I pressed my whole body to it. My arms shook as I pulled, then pushed myself onto the land that was not friends with water—land that stood alone.

Again, on the sidewalk of the pool I whipped around furiously to look at him, with red eyes; salty tears and burning chlorine painted my face.

Surely he could tell I had been dying. But he smiled.
Sophie Brenneman
An Exercise in Erosion

With a diet of strained smiles and small-talk, she shouts herself destructive, cups her secrets under knuckles, feeds a sickness instead—measures success in her careful construction of hunger’s heavy shape.

Where success, here, means to win by losing, (See also: An incessant collection of nothings, totally tally marks of days when nothing was added)—

Where construct, here, is the subtractive process of creation (See also: Excavation, or to make by removing earth; an exercise in erosion, a wood-whittler’s body of work)—

Where shape, here, is the container that collects the recommended daily dosage of disgust to be discussed and then digested (See also: The contour lines of connotations, which suggest that hunger and emptiness are not synonyms).
You stand in the frozen foods aisle, shivering. Rocky Road was your go-to flavor in the two months it took you to get over the first boyfriend you ever had. Mint Chocolate Chip was Grandma’s favorite, so it only seemed natural that in the year and a half after she passed, you consumed at least a gallon a week. Break-up number two meant Cherry Vanilla—Häagen-Dazs only. It was a particularly indulgent time in your life and after three weeks of $4.95 pints, you decided it was in the best interest of your wallet to move on. There was Cookie Dough, then Pistachio, then for a day, Butter Pecan—until you realized you hate Butter Pecan almost as much as you hate the teacher who gave you an F on that midterm for not being “quite creative or interesting enough.” Sure, you didn’t completely fail the course, you ended up with a C-, and the teacher got fired not long after for dating one of her students.

You wonder if they ever get ice cream in jail, and if so, what flavor?

Then there was Vanilla—safe, delicious, easy to come back to. You can eat it as is or dress it up all you want: hot fudge, sprinkles, whipped cream, and a cherry on top. But no matter what, when it all gets taken away, there’s just vanilla. Boring, ordinary, never returns your phone calls even though you both promised to stay best friends through her cross-country move, Vanilla.

Afterward: Coffee. Also safe, also ordinary, but as a kid, you hated it. So with one less best friend of ten years by your side, you got a little desperate. You hung out with people you never thought you would. Turns out, you still hated Coffee and the group of people in school who were “popular” because they decided they would be the popular ones.

All of those flavors were out. Two people and an unknown amount of time has passed, all wondering why this pretty girl in a party dress is standing in the freezer aisle, at three a.m. on a Wednesday.

And you still can’t pick a flavor.

Somehow you managed to be “average” sized for the better part of your education, despite your inability to talk about your emotions with anyone but Ben & Jerry. Junior year, when your soccer team made it to the state finals, you ate the healthiest you had in months—years even.
It wasn't that you had to stop yourself; you just didn't feel the need to stuff yourself with dessert by the heaping spoonful every night and day.

With college scouts looking at you for potential scholarships, the pressure should've led you back into your old habits. You stayed on top of things though, and it wasn't until you pulled your hamstring during the first game of your senior year that the flavors of Baskin Robbins, Edy's, and Turkey Hill crept back into your life.

“Excuse me, miss.” You jump at the sound of a woman standing next to you. “It’s 3:55. We’re closing in five minutes.”

You can't help it—the tears erupt from your eyes, and there's no stopping it. She gives you a puzzled look, and it reminds you of the time you broke your leg when you were ten. You jumped out of the tree in your backyard, trying to land in the pool, and your mother didn't believe the lie that you “sneezed and fell out of the tree.” She bought you Strawberry Shortcake ice cream for the first week of your recovery before telling you that you would “get soft” eating all of that ice cream and sitting around.

Fat. She meant you'd get fat.

Sherbet was a low point. The type of low point that follows your mother telling you that you’ve gained weight. A lot of it. “Who is going to fall for a girl who gained her freshman fifteen before she was even a freshman?” But Sherbet didn't have nearly as many flavor options, and you missed the heaviness of Ice Cream—the weight of the cream, the thirsty feeling it left in your mouth once you polished off a pint. You were always a bigger fan of the “cream” part than the “ice” part, and Sherbet was lacking that.

Maybe your mother was right though, because it was only after you dropped those fifteen pounds, then another fifteen, that you met Gelato. Rich. Family owns a yacht rich. Family doesn't understand why their son brought you, a girl who can't even afford Häagen-Dazs, on their Italian vacation, rich. All the Gelato in Italy didn't make that trip any less awkward, so when you told him his family “wasn't worth going up a pant size,” he was less than thrilled.

Ice cream was attached to every part of your life. Some people turn to smoking. Alcohol. Adrenaline. Ice cream was your vice. Ice cream was there when your parents divorced and your sister studied abroad, leaving you to pick up the pieces of the broken home you grew up in together. Ice cream was there when you changed majors three times and colleges once. There was a certain comfort in diving into a fresh container and the feeling of your spoon sliding into the ice cream a little bit easier each time until it was so soft you had no choice but to scarf the rest down before it melted.

“I just need a minute.” You look straight ahead. “I don’t know what flavor is right for me.”
Lunch at Suicide Bridge

Mycala Worley

Charcoal
The Hotline
Glen Banks
Photograph
Jaso Bolay

Charcoal Lips

I used your heart to keep me warm
because everything under my blue sun
doesn’t matter and everything under your
hot yellow sky is the beginning of matter.

I’ve learned from you to soak my lungs
in a tub of rubbing alcohol. I’ve forgotten
from you, to inhale only what I can ingest.

Your charcoal lips said they loved my
sapote seed colored iris as though my
microscope eyes dreamt you here
and threw you there, against the glass
lens as I squinted simply to watch you
shatter into tight splinters.

My pupils are the spilled marbles that
you trip on.

You soaked your pen in my coffee bean
curdled palm and let me perspire
in the ink of your carbon black and
titanium oxide.

I allow in your toxins because you
refuse me any air to my lungs.
Grub Street’s 2015 High School Creative Writing Contest

Grub Street congratulates four young artists for the 2015 High School Creative Writing Contest. Dylan Landis, winner of the 2014 O’Henry prize, selected a 1st place winner and runner-up in poetry and prose. The four winners are:

**Prose:**
1st place Winner, Brionn Kelly of Western High School  
Runner-up, Jackie Hamm of Rising Sun High School

**Poetry:**
1st place Winner, Carrie George of Bel Air High School  
Runner-up, August Napolitano of Bel Air High School

Over 50 Maryland high schools had the opportunity to participate in this year’s contest. The Grub Street staff read each piece and selected six poems and five prose pieces as finalists. The staff then sent those works to Dylan Landis, who judged them without knowing the name of the young artists or their high school affiliations.
I heard a hard knock at the door. I jumped up and looked out the window.

“Who is it?” my mother shouted. I could hear her all the way in my room, which wasn’t much. My brother and I shared a room with one full-sized bed, which was lying on the floor with no sheets or pillows. We had our clothes in big, clear, plastic trash bags that sat in the corner of our room. There was a TV, but it was missing all the buttons so we had to stick a pencil in the holes to control it, and Seven had a game system that our mother had stolen for him. He played it almost all day. We didn’t have much in there, but that was really all that could fit in that room anyway.

“Social Services, ma’am. Please open up,” the lady said.

“Who are you here for? What the hell do you want?” my mother shouted again.

“We’re here to see Ms. Rhonda Blue, the parent of Dallas and Seven Blue,” the lady said.

I peeked through the hole of the screen in my window. I saw officers accompanying the lady at the door. My brother was playing the game; he tunes everything out when he’s playing the game. My mother sighed as she got up to open the door.

“What?” she said, opening the door an inch.

“Ms. Blue, we have received several calls informing us that you have two children that you are not fit to raise,” the lady said.

“I take care of my kids, and I always have, so you can get out of my house and go about your business,” my mother replied.

“Ma’am, we have evidence that you are an unfit parent to these children, and we have to take them away, to a group home.”

“I take care of my kids. They are mine. If I didn’t want kids, I wouldn’t have had them. You are not taking my kids,” I heard her shout at the lady. “Dallas, Seven, come down here!”
When she yelled our names, I thought to myself, *Oh my gosh, what’s about to happen to us? What did we do now?*

I hurried to the steps, but Seven continued to play the game, so I ran back into the room and shook him out of his trance.

“Seven, come on! Mommy wants us.”

When we got to the bottom of those creaking steps, we saw the officers. I looked to my mother for answers. Seven clenched my hand in fear of the officers standing in our unwelcoming living room. It was where my mother did drugs most of the time. She never allowed us in there. He was six years old, and I was only ten. Seven was short, skinny, and afraid of everything. He always ran to me to save him. He didn’t have any friends, and he didn’t go outside. All he ever did was play the game. I was tall like my dad, who passed away two years ago. I never went outside either. There weren’t any kids around my age. My brother and I spent a lot of time with each other. We had no idea what was about to happen to us.


I couldn’t answer her because I was so afraid to tell the truth. Seven clenched my hand harder and began to cry.

“It’s okay, Seven. Stop crying.”

“Answer me, girl, they’re trying to take you and your brother away from me!”

The officers grabbed my mother, and the lady told Seven and me to go with her. We went to Social Services and waited for the social worker to fill out paperwork. Seven was still crying, and I had been thinking about where they were going to take us. I saw my grandmother walk into the office and pull the lady to the side. I don’t know what she did or said, but ever since that day, Seven and I lived with our grandmother. When I was a senior in college and Seven was just being accepted into NYU, my grandmother passed away. I then moved into a two-bedroom apartment with my best friend, Candice. It was hard growing up without my mother, but I was happy my brother and I weren’t split up. Candice had been around for almost five years. She was my friend since high school, and we did almost everything together. We were sitting on the couch, watching TV, when my cell phone rang. I looked at the caller ID and didn’t recognize the number, but when I answered, the voice sounded familiar.

“Hey, sweetheart.”

“Mom?” I asked and then looked to Candice, shocked. I hadn’t talked to my mother since my grandmother’s funeral, and we didn’t speak many words to each other there either.
“Yes, Dallas, it’s me. How are you?”
“I’m fine, Mom. How are you?”
“I’m good. I’ve been trying to get in touch with you, but Seven just told me you had a new number.”
“You talked to Seven?”
“Yes. He told me so much about you.”
“Where are you?”
“I’m in a halfway house.”
“Are you clean, Ma?”
“Yes, baby. That’s why I’ve been trying to get in touch. They’re letting me go soon, and I wanted to know if I could come stay with you until I get a job.”
“You have to get a job. I will not allow you to use me.”
“I understand,” she said.
“Well, when are they letting you go?”
“Two weeks.”
“Okay, well, I’ll see you in two weeks then.”
“Okay, baby.”
I stood.
“You okay, D?” Candice asked.
“Yes, I’m good.”

My mother didn’t say that she missed me or anything. I wonder if she’s trying to build a real relationship with her children or if she’s just trying to use us. Even when we were younger, she used us. She thought we were her servants. She made us cook, clean, and take care of each other while she did her dope. I’m not going to let her take advantage of me anymore.

“Are you sure you’re okay?” Candice asked.

I snapped out of my thoughts and nodded. I left the living room and went into my bedroom. I snuggled under my covers and started to think about her all over again. She always yelled at us. I don’t think she knows how to love, to be honest. Whenever she had any money, she never bought us anything. She used it for drugs. She stole everything we owned. That’s how Seven got his game system. I’m glad I didn’t turn out like her. I aspired to be like my grandmother, independent and hard working. I’ve despised my mother for a long period of my life because she never tried to do the right thing for us. I fell asleep still curious about her phone call.
The weekend approached, and when my mother arrived, she started working with Candice at Nordstrom’s rack as the security. Once she started collecting checks, things started lightening up. She was doing good, looking good, and feeling even better. I was so proud of her. I offered to help her find an apartment for herself. Seven helped, too. He came into town, and we found the perfect apartment for her. It was a spacious one-bedroom apartment on the second floor in a nice quiet neighborhood. She got the apartment, and she loved it. After she had been on her own for a couple of months, she stopped calling me. We usually called each other almost every two days, but she hadn’t called in a while, so I called Seven to see if he had talked to her.

“Seven.”
“Yes?”

“Have you talked to Mom?”
“No. I haven’t talked to her in weeks, have you?”
“No, that’s what I was calling you for.”
“Let’s go see her.”
“All right, be at my house at three o’clock.”
“Okay, I love you.”
“Love you, too.”

When Seven got to my house, we headed up to my mother’s apartment. The drive there seemed so long. I was scared to see what she was doing. I didn’t want her going back down that path again. She was doing so well without it.

“Do you remember which complex it is?” Seven asked.
“Yeah, it’s right here on the left.”

I hurried to park, and we ran up to the second floor. I knocked on the door. No answer. I knocked again. No answer. I banged on the door as hard as I could. I used my spare key to get in. Seven trailed behind me as I walked in first.

“Oh my God! No! No! No! Mom!” I fell to my knees.
“Dallas, calm down, it’s all right. Calm down.”

I couldn’t stop crying. She was just lying there, stretched out on the living room floor. The whole house smelled horrible, like she had been there for weeks. There was a dried-up substance coming from her mouth. She had OD’d.

“I can’t believe it, she was doing so well. Why did she do it?” I sobbed.
“Come on, let’s call a coroner and get out of here.”
I awoke to the sound of gunshots, the bullets falling from the sky, raining down on bodies and the earth. The storm made the walls shake violently, forcing the pictures to fall down off of them. The wind seemed to scream out a warning that I already knew far too well. I could hear the glass shattering, and I knew that the cruel storm had already claimed many of its victims. Eventually, I was able to drown out the booms and wails, at least enough to fall asleep.

When I opened my eyes the next morning, the rain had stopped, and the sunlight shone through the uncovered window. I jumped out of bed, grabbed my bag, and headed out the door. It was my day off, my first in weeks, so I was excited despite the chaotic night we all just had.

I always enjoyed walking down that street, but that day I especially liked it. The cracking, wet pavement seemed to glow, mirroring my happy mood. The air smelled of wildflowers and rain. When I came to the main part of town, I saw more and more people that I knew. I waved and greeted each person with a friendly “hello,” but nobody said anything back; I didn’t expect them to. They weren’t really able to speak words—at least not to me. Their lips would move as if to form words, their smiles widened in recognition, but I never heard a sound from them. That didn’t bother me, though, because they were my friends, just the same.

The sound of a bird in the distance drew my attention back to my plans for the day. As I turned to walk down another street, I began looking for my home away from home. I saw the old motel sign and smiled. This place, broken with time and wear, was the only place I could be alone. Many of the rooms had broken windows, and every now and then I would step on a piece of broken glass, but I was willing to endure the pain to have this little sanctuary all to myself.

I found myself standing, almost reflexively, in front of the familiar door. I turned the cold, metal door knob and stepped into my perfect, peaceful world of solitude.

Slowly, I walked across the room, and when I got to the small desk in the corner, I took off my bag and laid it on the table. I sat down in the creaky wooden chair and sighed, turning to
look at the window, which was stuck open. I noticed it was getting dark outside, and a few gray clouds were beginning to gather in the sky.

Another war was going to begin soon. I had seen many of those storms, with their wet bullets and clouds like gun smoke. I knew the damage they could cause. The bullets of rain would land on people—on friends. They hurt them. They shattered some, and warped others, distorting them, and causing certain, irreversible pain and horror. Sometimes the rain even brought in new friends to wash them away and drown them like the others.

Strangely, though, the storms never had this effect on me. I was terrified of the rain—afraid I, too, would become like so many of the others that I had begun to know. One time, although I was very frightened, I dared to venture out into the storm. The rain hit me rather gently. It only made my body wet, not broken. Still frightened, I ran inside, screaming.

Before, I was so afraid and thankful to be alive that I had not questioned what had happened, or what had made me different from the ones around me. However, the more I thought about it, the more I realized it was a question that needed to be answered.

I reached into my bag and pulled out my notebook and a pen. I began flipping through the pages, glancing at my notes and my sketches, remembering everything I had documented. I felt very close to discovering the key to what made me so different.

I realized that there were so many strange similarities between all of the town’s citizens. I noticed they all had the same dark brown eyes, and the same shaggy blonde hair. They even wore the same faded green, long-sleeve shirts.

It began to rain. It started soft and light, then grew until it was pouring. I jumped up, rolled up my sleeves, and reached an arm out of the window, feeling the drops hit me one by one. No pain, no change—not at all the same as everyone else.

I yanked my arm back, reached up, and pulled down the window. To my surprise, it shut, and I found myself standing there but no longer alone.

I was facing a stranger—a man who looked like all the others. His face was twisted with frustration. I saw that the rain had hit him and how it had changed him. I was not afraid, though.

I reached out to touch this man—to know that he was real—but all my fingers touched was the cold, slick glass of the window.

I was looking at him. He was looking at me. I saw that his arm was saturated with drops of water, but I also realized that he was okay. But this could not be! I was the only one the rain didn't affect.
I glanced down, and on my arm was a drop of water. I looked at the strange man as I wiped the water off. He, too, wiped his water off. That is when I realized what I think I had known deep down was true the whole time. These people, all of them, weren’t people. They didn’t have thoughts or feelings or concerns. I had truly been alone this whole time because all of my friends, my neighbors, or the strangers that I saw on the street were never people at all. They were just me. They were all just me this whole time. They were, and still are, nothing but reflections of myself that I had given unique personalities to in the midst of my insanity, born of my loneliness.

I sat down at the table in the creaky old chair and picked up the red pen slowly. I wrote, “I am completely alone,” and closed the notebook. My motel is not the only thing that has a vacancy. My life, as I have discovered, is much like this rickety old motel—vacant.
Dylan Landis, author of *Normal People Don’t Live Like This* and *Rainey Royal*, is primarily known for her intertwined short stories and their meticulous, beautiful prose. Landis’ works of fiction have appeared in the *O. Henry Prize Stories 2014* and in *Bomb, Tin House*, and *Best American Nonrequired Reading*. She has also won a fellowship in fiction from the National Endowment for the Arts.

1) How did your writing process change going from *Normal People Don’t Live Like This*, a book that shifted focus from character to character, to *Rainey Royal*, a book that gave most of its attention to a single character?

I wrote the books in vastly different ways, but it’s because I used to be a perfectionist, too mortified by my early drafts to show them to anyone. With *Normal People Don’t Live Like This* I wouldn’t seek help from readers till the writing was as polished as I could get it—and that could take nine months for a single story.

Then I had a conversation with the writer, Pia Ehrhardt, who said she seeks feedback on her earliest drafts. We published a conversation in the New Orleans Review in which she said, “Story drafts aren’t sacred things, and sometimes they need to be roughed up, turned on their heads, which keeps the process exciting and improvisational and hopeful, at least for me.” I loved that. It seemed so freeing. So for *Rainey Royal*, I would send the draft of one story to a reader while starting another story, and when the draft came back with comments I’d start revising while sending out the second story. I had drafts flying back and forth, and many readers on my team, to whom I’m hugely grateful.
Here’s the other big difference: I wrote *Normal People Don’t Live Like This* in five perfectionistic years, and *Rainey Royal* in sixteen months. There could be other reasons, of course. Rainey was such a compelling character for me. Also I was going through a hard time, emotionally, and writing that book was my life raft; I wrote all day, every day. But I bet my method had a lot to do with it.

2) As a character in *Rainey Royal*, Leah has gotten older since we first met her as the main character in *Normal People Don’t Live Like This*. She is more settled into herself while still holding on to certain anxieties from her time at school. How was it different for your writing self to spend time with this Leah than the one you knew so well from *Normal People*?

Leah had to grow up and deepen if she was going to thrive in a second book. Because Rainey wasn’t going to stay interested in a perennial bundle of neuroses. And neither was I, and neither was the reader. I always found Leah interesting—she notices everything, she has a scientific mind—but once Rainey gave her a makeover and she got a shot of confidence, the risk-taker inside the shy girl broke out and she became particularly intriguing to write, because she wedged herself into conflict. She got involved with an exotic dancer. She jeopardized her job. She tilted the balance of power between Rainey and herself. I found all of this intensely alluring to write. It comes down to the difference between a character who’s smart and observant but essentially reacts to things, and a character who takes action, makes choices that have consequences, and drives the plot forward.

3) What quality does Rainey have compared to someone like Angeline Yost (another character who appears in both *Normal People Don’t Live Like This* and *Rainey Royal* and who catches both Leah and Rainey’s attention) that compelled you not only to write more about her, but to give her an entire book?

Rainey and Angeline come from damaged families, and both burn with anger. That’s where the sisterhood stops. Because while both also have artistic drive—Angeline sings—Rainey’s passion seems more complex; she makes complex visual art. Also, Rainey burns with intellectual curiosity, which Angeline lacks.

So I was dealing with depth as well as drive—and that gave me a character who not only had agency, the urge and the power to act, but intelligence. She’s spiritual, though not religious;
she’s fierce, but also afraid and vulnerable; and she’s prone to outrageous risk-taking. All of these qualities were implicit in *Normal People Don’t Live Like This*, but it took the writing of *Rainey Royal* to plumb them and tease them out. I feel like I’m describing someone real here, someone magnetic and a little intimidating, someone I’d want to follow around with a notebook. Which is essentially what I did.

4) How much did you already know or have in mind regarding Rainey after *Normal People Don’t Live Like This*?

Starting out, I knew only two things. First: Rainey’s father, Howard, was a jazz musician who put her in harm’s way, who would send her, at thirteen, to a concert at night in Central Park with his best friend, who was almost thirty-nine. And second: her mother, Linda, had abandoned the family. That’s a lot of information. What I needed, to start the new book, was a crucible, a troubling situation in which she could be caught. Rainey states it up front: “There’s always a man, right? So there’s always a problem in the house.” This is a reference to Howard’s best friend, who I decided had to live with them and intrude on Rainey’s room at night. And what I learned as I wrote was the texture of Rainey’s daily life, the sound of her thinking, the quality of her art, the precise type of passion that drove her.

5) How did a closer focus on Rainey change what you knew about her?

It helped me uncover her twin talents: sewing and art. She needed those, because a character’s work and her passion make her immediately interesting. Rainey’s sewing tied her to her absent mother, who taught her that skill, and her art sprang from a deep interior compulsion that propelled her through the book.

That closer focus also let me see all the details of her life—and the details told me so much about her, and that tightened the focus even further. But honestly the details didn’t change what I knew so much as underscore and layer it. For example, I saw early on that Rainey’s father’s ex-girlfriend had painted her room pink when Rainey had wanted black walls. Those black walls, the ones in her mind, drove home to me the intensity of her dark streak. I realized too that she loved milk, and I associated that with her absent mother and a yearning for maternal love—I’m not a psychoanalyst’s daughter for nothing.
6) Religion is a recurring motif in the novel. Did that motif arise from something you discovered about Rainey or from some other place?

I’m Jewish, but when I write, my religion falls away, and I’m profoundly moved by the power of Catholic motifs. They’re rooted in history, they’re powerful, they point us to the parts of human experience that are at once beautiful and hopeful and sad. My hope is that these images and icons lend the work an undertow. When I saw how badly Rainey needed protection, it seemed natural to have her search for a patron saint. When she’s stirred by how tenderly her friend Tina cares for her grandmother, it seemed right for her gaze to fall on a picture of the Immaculate Heart. These images touch on a mystery that is larger than life, and I try very hard to make my fiction rub up against that once in a while.
Carrie George  
Salvation in Three Parts

Part 1  
Forget them.  
Scorch memories in bonfires  
and bury the ashes.  
Dig demons out from under your skin.  
Paint your fingernails with their blood  
And shoot fire from your fingertips.  
Fill in the holes they left with soil  
and sunlight. Let rose bushes  
bloom from your pores.

Part 2  
Feel lonely.  
Turn pillows into puddles  
and splash around in your misery.  
Talk to yourself  
until your throat is dry and your ears bleed.  
Tie old photographs to your chest  
and let your heartbeat swell  
with regret. Let your eyes sail oceans  
of nostalgia.  
Cover your pain with cheap foundation  
and carry on with your week.

Part 3  
Save yourself.  
Extend bony fingers to the sky  
and climb ropes until you’re face to face  
with the sun, suspended in the clouds.  
Sing to the birds like those pretty girls in  
movies.  
Swim backstroke through the air  
like gravity never stood a chance.  
Fill your lung with atmosphere  
and scream to the soil below,  
“I belong here.”
The afternoon you decided
to set light to the story we had inscribed
into wooden benches and tunnel walls,
you called me on the phone.

A distant television hummed into the receiver,
soap operas speaking the words you kept buried
under late night bed sheets and uncut grass
before you even spoke.

When you stapled the dictionary pages
into your brain and articulated the truth
with a clarity that rivaled radio waves and
mail order confessions of our love,
I knew I could not ask you to repeat yourself.
You were not a distant alarm clock,
you were a fire alarm blaring into midnight halls,
your order was to leave.

So in passive obedience I let the line go dead,
heard early-risen crickets at my windowsill and
folded my legs onto the espresso-drip carpet
that was still littered with your dirty clothes.
I felt free, but stranded,
a moth determined to break through the door,
but too distracted by the burning bulb above.
I remembered the day at the amusement park
we stood near the water,
in the splash zone, fully clothed.
We felt the aftermath, but
never took the fall.

If you had tried a little harder
to see the glory and not the end,
I may have never found myself
driving around in humid fog,
changing my number before
you left tear stains on the flyleaves
while the last sentence continued to dry.

But now I’ll sing that glory for the man
who knows your number like he’s wearing
contacts with it carved in the lenses.
And were he ever to forget, I could only suggest,
“Well, it started with a nine
and possibly ended with a four.”

Now your summer-grass eyes have been overwritten
with the hollow depth of my own, so when I look in the mirror,
I find an image of success, and
though I may feel alone I know that I am not.
I never loved you as much as I’ve learned to love myself.
We have cultivated soft smelling blankets and slobbery stuffed animals and quilts that our grandmothers made. Soft indents stream around the bed like a dull cutting barrier. In sleep, we are vulnerable. Pure relaxation. Unclouded rest. The only thing that can wake us up is the fear of pissing our pants.

It’s amazing what you can tell about a person by watching them sleep. Watch their faces form gaping Os and squishy cheeks. Pay close attention to what they cling to. Observe the nature of the drool puddle.

When I came home for the mossy Delaware summer, I was 18. My mom asked me if I knew anything about the heroin epidemic. She asked me what kind of feeling it extracted, and why in the world anyone would want to do it. She asked if I knew anyone who did, anyone that I wouldn’t expect.

I dreaded my first day at the barbecue restaurant. Last week’s dirt was still lodged in my throat.

This was around the time that I stopped watching movies because they made me think about unhappy things. It was around the time when I craved sweet smelling skin under my cultivated blankets. It was around the time that I lost my desire to see the sun rise.
**Sleep [sleep] – verb**

1. To take the rest afforded by a suspension of voluntary bodily functions and the natural suspension, complete or partial, of consciousness; cease being awake.

Tattooed fingers punched the buttons on the cash register. Skin stretched around his mouth to reveal sharpened teeth. Beady little rodent eyes. This would be my boss.

Foster Victory—small time rap god, New Jersey native, painkiller enthusiast.

At that time, the restaurant featured two new platters and its youngest crew in years.

Smoked stink painted the dying brick walls as a dirty hand reached for a french fry. Our bright pink shirts suggested cheeriness. Our dry lips suggested otherwise.

According to the Delaware State News, the neo-addict is young, ripe, and ready to die.

Trevor dragged his feet across the crumbs on the carpet as he was forced to train me. This is how you run food. This is how you clean bathrooms. Have you ever rolled a blunt? That’s how you roll silverware.

My brother would come home every day from his early shift and plop down on the bed. He’d lie in his swirling vortex of ugly plaid sheets, flipping through several hours’ worth of Cracked.com articles. He wouldn’t bother to shower. He preferred to let the day’s onion and smoked meat stench to spread around the room and infect all of his possessions. When he drove me to work for my night shift, he would order a burger and fries and let the whispering fiery meat stink of the walls seep into his skin.
They called him the Trout at work because of the way he gracefully and unrelentingly mouth-breathed. He worked at the restaurant as a manic dishwasher. When he laughed, his face blew up like a tomato. Red, with taut skin that looked easy to pop.

I took quizzes from Prevention, AA, Psych Central, Healthy Place, and Psychology Today.

“A person who is depressed often has feelings of guilt, worthlessness, and helplessness. They no longer take interest or pleasure in hobbies and activities that were once enjoyed; this may include things like going out with friends or even sex.

*Insomnia, early-morning awakening, and oversleeping are all common.*”

**Sleep [sleep] – verb**

*2. To be careless or unalert; allow one’s alertness, vigilance, or attentiveness to lie dormant.*

Heliophobia is the fear of the sun. This is often mistaken for vampirism.

This phobia, like all phobias, originated from a traumatic experience in the past, such as a severe sunburn.

A tall, gaunt shadow looked at me, scoping me out from behind the fryer. We never got a proper introduction. This was Trevor’s brother, Speiser. His lips dried together. His veins danced close to the surface on his arms. Pink flecks like purulent paint were splattered across his skin.

I glanced over, and he looked away. Back to the same stain in the same spot on the same tile.

Bayley and Trevor trained me together, like parents.

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1 Psych Central
She had bright eyes that radiated like a familiar fog light.

I never had to work before 4:00 p.m.—we were all, except for Trout, blessed with the night shift. As the sun started its reckless spiral down, I poked out my tender reluctant fingertips and gathered my smeared work clothes.

That summer, Bayley, Trevor, Spieser, and Foster occupied a house together, sleepwalking through the chaotic halls.

I only went there a few times during the day. I sat alone with the dogs on the sofa and waited for someone to emerge from behind the rusted doorknobs. Thick curtains diluted the light. Shadows discoed across the dusty floor.

**Sleep [sleep] – verb**

3. To assume, especially at night, a state similar to the sleep of animals, marked by closing of petals, leaves, etc.

Bayley’s cheeks flashed like LED lights. If I could have poked them, I imagined they’d be hot, hot enough to scorch my hand. Forks and spoons bounced together in her hands as she folded them like tired babies swathed in clean sheets.

Bayley and I made early morning plans every day that we never kept. We were always supposed to go to the Goodwill, or the flea market, or Port Mahon. Every day she apologized for sleeping through our plans but bought us a thundering bottle of wine to make up for it.
“Try to avoid ‘self-medicating’ with comfort foods and alcohol. Alcohol is a depressant that can worsen your symptoms and make it hard to sleep. Depression can also make you more vulnerable to alcohol abuse. And overeating may trigger mood swings and weight gain that will only make your health—and your depressive symptoms—worse.”

I stuck with conviction to my sleeping pill drinking habits.

Bayley is really good at making plans—she wants to graduate with a degree in business management. She wants to run a restaurant (and marijuana dispensary, Trevor would add, every time). She wants to make it through the week without spending all her money. She wants to get Trevor to stop doing drugs.

The handbook mandates that all employees must arrive 15 minutes before their shift. This rule was rarely followed, enforced, or remembered. Trevor was supposed to drive me to work. His house is five minutes from the restaurant. He was X amount of pills deep. He has this face that he gets—one that everyone knows. His eyes were opaque and milky, the tremble of his lips dried and cracked. I used to call them lizard lips. He rambled around the house aimlessly and nodded when I asked if he was ready. He walked back to his room, and I was too afraid to follow him. A few minutes later, I heard from Speiser that he was not ready anymore.

“The number of Delawareans touched by heroin addiction is staggering. Last year alone, there were 7,590 admissions into state-funded treatment facilities—the second highest admission rate in five years.

But those numbers do not even cover the people who fall between the cracks, struggling to overcome the disease, teetering between relapse and self-treatment. There are mothers and fathers wrestling with how to tell their son or daughter they really need to get some help. Sons and daughters watching their mom or dad trying to make ends meet while feeding an addiction.”

Trevor always made the best fries, and the best conversation.

2 Prevention.com
3 The News Journal, October 21, 2014
It was like someone had licked my eyes, sealed them like an envelope, and they had failed to reach their recipient.

Some force—not gravity, but more unnatural, more abhorrent—was weighing me down. Thick guilty vapor tinged the air.

Monochrome summer rain pressed down on my hot skin and urged me to stay in bed.

My mom let me sleep, most days. I guess it seemed like I was still catching up on lost sleep.

One time Speiser asked me if he could use my bag as a pillow and fell asleep for 20 minutes at the front of a roaring crowd of people. When he woke up, he was covered in footprints. One time, when we all built a fire, he stayed inside to play music alone, and I could see his silhouette coloring the window. One time the boss drove to the house to wake him up for work. One time he drank so much that he pissed himself.

Kant’s philosophy dictates that each human action must be universalizable. I wonder what the world would be like if we were all unconscious. All lying still, unaware of the tingling fingertips and the white parts of each others eyes.

This is what Trevor was striving for.

Amid the sour breaths of summer air, we all sat and drank. Taking shots, blowing smoke, cooking up, breathing fire. The dishes piled high around us, and it seemed for a moment like sticky utopia. It doesn't do it justice to say that we were happy—we weren’t. We hummed. Or at least in my head we did—we resonated. Loosely oscillating together, wrapped in a static purgatory with dripping blue walls.
Their house had plenty of windows, but they hung psychedelic tapestries over them instead. I guess this was supposed to assist transcendence.

I decided I would start running again. Health magazines told me that running releases chemicals that help battle depression.

Running released racing beads of sweat that tinted my sheets.

On his best days, Trout flailed and giggled like a child. He’d plop down on the couch, wriggling like a bug. He yelled across the living room, which is flooded with the kind of smoke that only comes from a reasonably priced, five-dollar bottle of Riesling—stinking, sweet, and undeniably fleeting. Within 20 minutes the whole bottle was gone.

Bayley and Trevor’s bedroom was decorated with little trinkets from thrift stores and the shimmering smoke of incense. They had one crack of sunlight, just over the bed, where they closed the curtains so that daytime couldn’t filter through.

Foster was an up-and-coming rapper. Foster was going to leave this place. Foster had a daughter. Foster talked a lot about suicide and robbing banks.

Every day he would scream at Speiser to come outside back behind the restaurant, to stand by the truck and smoke cigarettes.

“I need to speak to your supervisor.”

*I’m sorry, sir, but my supervisor is currently taking Percocets in the back stock room, where the cameras can’t see him.*
Stagnation [stag-ney-shuh n] - noun
1. The state or condition of stagnating, or having stopped, as by ceasing to run or flow.
2. A foulness or staleness, as one emanating from a standing pool of water.
3. A failure to develop, progress, or advance.
4. The state or quality of being or feeling sluggish and dull.

At the round table, we sat tapping piles of tired ash onto the furniture without trouble. Whistling smoke encircled our heads as our naked feet scuffed the cracking wood of the floors. Our faces shifted around like clay models melting into lumps and curling smiles. Wine spilled over the table. A deserted sandwich laid half eaten, open like a casket. We warned everyone not to step on the heaping puddle of dog shit under the chairs.

“It’s insane … this, this … dope thing. Everyone here is turning into blue bags, walking around, ready to burst.”

I don’t think anyone knows exactly how long Trevor has been using. I don’t think he is inclined to stop.

Sleep [sleep] – verb
4. To lie in death.

Picture Trevor in one year—maybe even in six months. Just another blue bag, a sack of bile bursting open at the seams on the dusty hardwood floors. Picture slime spilling out of the needle in his arm—puss crusts over it, stuck in its place. His eyes roll back, and you can see his teeth, big and white and almost round, jolting around and grinding on his lips. His tongue is
moldy, his dog licks his face. “Food?” Not now, Spartacus. His smile is nearly audible from space. His ulcers are boiling like lava. Nothing is more important than his sleep.

I have always loved the feeling of passing out. Lulled by the grass in uninterrupted haze, everywhere is safe. Nothing matters now but cold, rolling slumber.

I love whiskey, Bayley loves wine.

Wine hangovers are very bad, and in my opinion, it is best to sleep through them.

The AA website told me that I was an eighteen-year-old alcoholic. I reached for the painted bottle and planted my lips on its opening, giving it a passionate, dangerous kiss. Nyquil drinking habits make everything light up with anarchic beauty, streaming along with dizzying grace.

There have been times when consciousness and unconsciousness have clashed brutally, and the only solution I can offer for this is to ignore these times.

Bodies crashed like ill-behaved cymbals in the night, littering our filthy landscape.

When I woke up my feet were tender, crimson and swollen from shattered glass. I did not know how this happened. Two nights later I drank a bottle of wine and watched Bayley struggle to light a fire. Trevor was inside, high again, sitting, alone, staring at the wall.

I tried to unglue my eyes and peel my stained face off the lingering pillowcase.
Fear [feer] – noun
1. A distressing emotion aroused by impending danger, evil, pain, etc., whether the threat is real or imagined.

I fear vomiting. I fear crying. I fear thrashing around relentlessly. I fear smashing my face open on the bathroom floor. I fear unforgiving cascades of blood that come as a surprise. I fear weakness. I fear vulnerability. I fear hands and knees to the tile floor. I fear candy-coated liquid bile slipping out of my throat.

I fear rumbling idiocy. I fear forgetting.

I fear not being drunk enough to feel anything.

This fear leapfrogs over all the others.

Oversleeping is an involuntary action. Shutting the blinds is not.

Fear is a primal reaction.

Among the most common fears in the U.S. are death, spiders, being alone, the future, and the unknown.

“People go to great lengths to avoid pain. And that avoidance, ironically, may be a cause of chronic pain.”

Heroin blocks signals to the brain that allow an individual to perceive pain, creating an overall feeling of well-being and euphoria.

“The user will get a dry mouth and his or her skin will flush. The user’s pupils will be constricted.”

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4 Association for Psychological Science
5 Riverwoods Behavioral Health System
He will feel heavy and dopy and may fade in and out of wakefulness. Heroin users may nod off suddenly. Breathing will be slowed, which is how an overdose kills.

When awake, the person's thinking will be unclear. They will tend to lose some of their memory. Their decision-making and self-control are likely to deteriorate.”

I wonder what the world would be like if we were all unconscious. Sometimes I think that we already are. We make the excuse of being blind to Trevor's vampirism. I wonder if maybe all we did was turn our heads.

Antihistamine drinking habits woke me up, and they put me to sleep. They kept me safe in a coma, a slumber, a trance.

**Sleep [sleep] – noun**

5. The repose of death.

Freud writes of a death drive—the human instinct towards self destruction, death, and the inorganic. This is what ultimately motivates us all.

I fear waking up. I fear moving. I fear working. I fear being trapped in a state of full consciousness.

None of these are on the list of top ten fears, but I like to imagine that they are shared by someone else.

Feathering blankets cover me like a cocoon I can't escape. I can still see the sun, but I can't feel the sun.

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6 Narconon International
7 Psychology Today
Nicole Belcastro
Cubic Zirconia Dreams

I found myself cold even with layer on layer
wrapped around my neck, and the pressure was surely building
and building until the sky was overtaken with crystal dreams that were falling
and collapsing upon me like broken glass.
I had my umbrella to shield me from the fallen dreams
filled with empty promises, but the sky was raining
disappointment and failure, and my umbrella developed holes of
misconceptions and lies of what I wanted for my future.
When the storm of fake diamonds was over
I was left stepping on what I used to believe in.

Jeffrey Alfier
Southbound Express to Bay Head

The late day’s last departure. You sleep
against the window, jolted awake
as you hit the track’s expansion joints.
The train slows, coasts by Elberon station.
Someone at the platform’s south end
stands under the rind of a thinning moon.
You don’t know a soul in Elberon,
nor anyone this far down the seaboard. Still,
you strain to catch her face through the glass.
Lucid Dreaming
Paige Rowley
Photograph
The trip between Rockville and Chinatown was dragging on. I had to catch myself from falling asleep on the train. The gentle swaying of the tin-can metro car was lulling my tired mind to sleep. The familiar screech as we went in and out of tunnels, the musical chime of the doors before they opened and closed, and the raspy gurgling sound of the conductor over a loudspeaker that hadn’t been serviced since the eighties were like murmurs of a television set that would soothe me to a deep, childhood slumber on sugar-filled Saturday nights. I used to sneak downstairs after my parents had gone to bed and watch late-night cartoons or play video games. They never said anything in the mornings. My dad would just look at me and laugh. “What, you couldn't make it upstairs?” He was always saying stuff like that.

The car shook as we came out of a tunnel in Bethesda. I forced my head upwards and eyes open. Air. I needed air. I mean real air—not that stifled ventilation coming through small openings in the top of the cabin. It was tainted by its surroundings, like the hairspray wafting from the lady sitting next to me. My eyes moved around the cabin as I surveyed the interior. I’ve always wondered who picked the colors, if anyone ever picked them at all, or if they were incidentally found on the upholstery and carpet when the city bought the materials. Each colored seat looked as though it meant to be a color it was not. Almost-theres and could-be-dyed-with-Gatorade yellows made a nauseating spectacle for my weary eyes. If Crayola had a collection of rejected colors, this is where they would end up. The walls could have been just-trying-to-clean-your-car-with-mud white.

My drab surroundings bore a hunger in my soul—the infrequent but compelling desire to relate with a new face. It’s the inevitable dullness of environment that has brought up society. We try so hard to be self-sufficient, but something keeps us from enjoying life alone. Something draws us to one another. This cosmic pull dragged my pupils around the train as I looked from occupied person to occupied person. Everyone was busy with one thing or another: phones, books, games, naps, thoughts, crosswords—anything to keep their minds off this ugly trip.
I almost gave up my search and was reaching into my suitcase for a book when I heard a muffled chuckle coming from the front of the car. Looking up from the suitcase, I felt dizzy as I found the source of the sound. Sitting in the uppermost bench facing me was a burly man in his forties or fifties with thick, curly black hair and an equally thick and curly black beard. He was smiling and looking at his hands, completely bemused. I looked down, following his gaze, and saw that he was twiddling his thumbs. That’s right. The man was chuckling to himself and twiddling his thumbs, going around in tight little circles, time and time again, sometimes stopping midway and going in reverse. Other times, he’d laugh and tap the tips of his thumbs together as if there was nothing else in the world of interest. My legs picked me up and carried me to the bench where he sat.

“Excuse me, sir?”

He was grinning. His teeth were like one of those perfect white fences surrounding one of those cozy, suburban neighborhoods. He didn’t answer, but he didn’t strike me as crazy—at least not in the dangerous way.

I asked him again, “Excuse me, sir?”

At this, he looked up with an illuminated expression, keen and aware, so attentive and compassionate that it was almost as though I was looking into the face of a different man. He was no longer smiling but surveyed me with brilliant green and brown eyes. Those eyes looked like the dirt and grass I longed to lay in. I felt embarrassed.

After five seconds of him looking at me and saying nothing, I stumbled out the words, “Nice day, isn’t it?”

The weather. For all my inquiry and thought and summoning of courage, I went up to the man and asked him about the weather. I planned to ask about his thumb spinning and then use this common pastime as a spring board into broader human issues, but something about his gaze washed away all of that. I didn’t want to talk to him like I could ever remember wanting to talk to anyone. I wanted him to talk to me. He turned his head, and the two biospheres shaded by their giant bushy brows looked out of the metro car window. He surveyed the sunrise making its way over the dull suburban landscape. It’s funny to think about now, but at the time, I was sure he could see something I couldn’t.

Then he spoke. “Nice? It’s a gorgeous day!”

My mouth fell open a little without me realizing. A shock ran through my tired body and lit up my feet.
The stranger took in a deep breath and, swelling with life, continued, “Yes! I would call it a more gorgeous day than at least yesterday. Although I wasn’t on this train yesterday, so maybe it was this gorgeous yesterday, but only on this train.”

Words and sentences came out of his mouth in quick, electrifying sputters. Everything he said sounded important. Each syllable was fascinating.

“And what about you, businessman? Did you ride the train yesterday morning?”

I was having trouble adjusting to the man’s strange voice. It was deep and bellowed with confidence, but the words glided into my mind like rain down a window. He was King Arthur, and I was Sir Gawain. For some reason, I felt a twinge of guilt for drinking so much the other night. It was a party, though. What else was I supposed to do? I shoved the thought away, but the feeling stayed.

“Yeah.” I hesitated a moment. “I did.”

“And was the day this gorgeous?”

“Umm, I think so.”

“So that must be it!”

He laughed and made the car sway a little more. We reached a stop and the loudspeaker hissed the destination.

“Friendship Heights.”

After this came a chime and the opening of the doors. People poured in, and a few trickled out. Another chime rang, and the doors closed. We were moving again.

“Sit! Sit!” he ordered, and I did.

“My name’s Edward.” I held my hand out. I normally introduced myself as Eddie, but I started to like my real name again.

“Edward... Edward.” He rubbed his chin. “Nope! Never met you before. Good to meet you. I’m Frank.”

His hand was a boulder, but he shook primly with an almost aristocratic gentleness that contradicted his gray corduroys and blue t-shirt. I had regained some composure and was going to ask him about his thumb spinning when he started again.

“If we had met before I would remember, believe me. I don’t think I’ve forgotten a single name in my whole life. I can tell you all the kids in my first grade class. Isn’t that something?”

I didn’t say anything. Not because I wasn’t interested, but because I genuinely agreed with him and couldn’t understand why.
“Of course, it was a small class—only eight kids, really, and one of them was always getting sick.”

I chuckled at his retraction.

He became grave and said in almost a whisper, “It’s not a bit funny.”

I was quiet again. What could I say? I wasn’t laughing at the kid, but I felt as though I had done a great wrong. I didn’t feel the guilt that hits us on the head over and over again like an embarrassing moment or inexcusable action, but something else, something more peaceful and heavy at the same time. An affected conscience, maybe. I could see a hurt in his eyes as he stared at the smeared and shiny pole in front of us.

“I’m sorry,” I said.

“Sorry?” He paused for a moment. “Oh, you mean for the kid? Yes. It was very, very sad. Our class tried to do all we could to include him. He was so bright! He was able to keep up even in the hospital.”

Again he was chipper and lively, as though I had never offended him. I began to think he really was crazy, but then his mood calmed, unshaken by any words spoken or heard. His expressions ranged from deep thought tinged with remorse to a smile as wide as a silo is tall, but beneath all of this, I could sense a great warmth and security. I felt bad for thinking he was crazy, so I tried to keep the conversation going. I really did care about the kid.

“What happened to him?”

“Not sure. I moved at the beginning of second grade to Connecticut.”

Here Frank fell silent. Profoundly silent. I started to feel a creeping feeling of dread and realized that it had been growing in my chest since I had sat down. A weight was pushing on all sides. I shifted a little in my chair and thought about getting up, but something kept me still. From the second I saw him spinning his thumbs, I wanted to get off the train for good. I had always hated this commute and its destination, but I had always figured everyone else hated it with me. But when I watched Frank take joy in such a trivial activity, I longed for something beyond my job and my friends. I envied his joy. I envied his happiness. I had secured so much in my life—a decent wardrobe, an apartment overlooking a park, a couple of girlfriends here and there, plenty of recognition at the office. I was even set to secure a promotion soon. But when I saw that overgrown cherub laughing for the sake of it, I wanted to be a child again. I wanted to be more than a child. I wanted the train to open up on all sides and dump the whole lot of us into a glowing valley full of green fields and shining blue rivers. There we could say
hello and goodbye and shake hands and part ways and go about without the dreadful weight that was growing heavier and heavier on my torso with each breath. I was suffocating.

I couldn’t move. For each pound of pressure that sitting next to Frank had added on, a thousand more came with the thought of leaving. His presence kept my body from imploding. My mind fluttered with guilty thoughts I couldn’t understand, but somehow I understood that I had to sit there—I was destined to sit there—next to this odd and friendly passenger. I had to say something. The weight was becoming unbearable.

“So, where are you headed?” I asked with a slight shake in my voice.

“Not sure yet. I was planning on riding the train back and forth a few times. I like the adventure of it. Sometimes a sign will catch my eye, and I’ll get off and wander wherever I feel led. Other times I’ll meet someone like you. It’s an adventure.”

_Riding the Metro is an adventure._ I was taken aback, and the pressure on my chest started to lift.

“I can’t see much adventure in it,” I said.

“Ha! You’re not looking at it the right way.” He threw his palms upwards as if to insist I take another look around the cabin. “You see this? This is the world we live in. This is the magnificent and beautiful experience of life.”

The weight was growing weaker and weaker while an absurd and unsophisticated agreement rambled in my head. _Yes, Frank, it went, it truly is magnificent. The Metro really is beautiful when you think about it._ I caught myself in the thought and rejected it. The weight returned, but I could not allow for such an inane idea. What could be more absurd than finding beauty in a mass of steel and vinyl barreling through concrete tunnels?

“Beauty?” I retorted with the authority that had won me my greatest sales and promotions.

“The only beautiful part of this trip is the moment you get off. There’s more beauty in depression. There’s more beauty in a war zone, or a riot, or a fistfight. At least something happens in conflict. Nothing happens on the way to work. Commuting is the opposite of life. There’s nothing but bored and tired people growing more bored and tired by the day. If this is your beautiful experience, I’d hate to see what you call ugly.”

... with an almost aristocratic gentleness that contradicted his gray corduroys and blue t-shirt.”
I was surprised at the intensity of my voice and the rapid beating of my heart. Frank’s last statement made me want to stamp out everything he said and bury it underneath the cold ground. I waited for a retort, but he gave me no reply. Instead, he surveyed me with thoughtful eyes, glossed over by what looked like pity. I didn’t want his pity. I didn’t need his pity. The world was the way it was; there was no getting around it. I opened my mouth to continue speaking when he touched my elbow and sent a profound peace into the depths of my chest. My stomach lurched.

“I see how you suffer,” he whispered and looked at the floor.

We kept silent for a while. I gave up trying to catch his eyes and looked around the cabin. I inhaled deeply. A few men in suits were murmuring in front of us. They were young, as young as I used to be. I sat and thought about those days when I ironed my shirt every morning. A flashing memory of stealing a few shirts from the Gap a few weeks before popped into my mind. I didn’t need the shirts, but I’ve always enjoyed the thrill. It’s not like they were worth a lot of money anyways. Besides, fifteen dollars for a shirt is outrageous. I pushed the thought aside and looked at the floor. Humming under my feet, the pale yellow carpeting reminded me of my first apartment in Rockville. It hurt my eyes.

Janelle used to like me then. That was before I dumped her for the third time. I could never like her the way she liked me, but she was okay with it. At least she said she was. Maybe I shouldn’t have kept that going so long. I’ve never really thought about how cruel I could be. She was so kind. Too kind, maybe. Definitely too kind for a guy like me.

At that moment, sitting on the right of a pensive, inexplicable, and enigmatic bear of a man on the Metro train to DC, I felt the first wave of genuine sadness I had felt since before I turned twenty. I was overwhelmed by rush after rush of sorrowful feeling and strained my face to hold a flood of tears from pouring out. My head was dizzy. Each second required a titanic force of will to keep myself from bawling. I had to be at work within the hour, talking to clients, talking to bosses, dealing with paperwork, and here I was on the train car, about to have a breakdown with a complete stranger. I started a pathetic sniffle and caught the attention of a little girl with big, golden eyes standing in front of her mother across the aisle. She looked at me like she knew—like she knew I stole those shirts and drank too much and led a girl on for two years. Frank turned to me with the look of a sympathetic bulldog and spoke in a near whisper. I listened as if each word were a precious jewel lodging its way into the diadem of my tired heart.
“There are no secrets, Edward. Not a single one.”

I didn’t understand. I couldn’t understand. Through my tears, the Metro resembled tremulous gelatin—waving and distorted. Tears welled up and dropped and welled and dropped. I told him I didn’t understand.

“Blessed are those who mourn.” He gently touched the back of my head and another surge of agonizing remorse flooded my body. I clenched my abdomen and convulsed. The men in their suits were still murmuring in front of us, but they seemed to be looking over their shoulders. I was making more noise than I had wanted to make. Frank grabbed a small backpack and stood up with a graceful swoop. He stepped over my knees and squatted in the aisle next to me. There was a glow around him. I felt a glow around me. I struggled to contain my faltering voice.

Without looking up at him, I asked, “What’s going on? What is this?”

He laughed. It was the most peaceful, serene, and beautiful laugh I ever heard from a man. It soothed my dusty mind and lifted the great pressure that I’d forgotten I had.

I’ve often sat here at my desk trying to remember what exactly the laugh sounded like, but I’ve never been able to reproduce the particular pitch, timbre, expression, and sheer personality. Sometimes I think it couldn’t have been human. It was too pure, too kind. I looked up at Frank’s face and took in his features as though I was seeing him for the first time. There were no stereotypes, no judgments, and no expectations. Frank’s face was a pure sculpture of wonderful stretchy stuff covered in bristles. It changed its shape in astounding fluidity as he replied, “This, my friend, is an all-consuming fire.”

With a reassuring shake on my shoulder and a brilliant smile, Frank stood up and exited the train, leaving me weeping and laughing and contemplating all the way to my stop. The Metro was beautiful, and I was on fire. The whole world was on fire.
Under Concrete Sunlight

Gillian Collins

Oil on canvas
Vietnamese Woman
Jasmine Harvey
Graphite pencil
Rachel Naomi

La Leche Mamita

She did not breast feed you, nor bleed out her Georgia O’Keefe flower, so that you could package and sell yourself like a cardboard juice box, in order to scratch arms with needles, or fill lungs with empty sorrows.
¿ENTIENDES?

She taught you, if a man ever offers you six coconuts for free, assume he wants to crack open your shell.

Still, it took 21 years, a nine-hour plane ride, to understand———
Sun is fuerte, your Sol is strong.

So you start scribbling words real fast, like you’re trying to erase something your mother knows.
encantaba

guanábana

Norteamericana

Ecuatoriana

vamos a la playa
cut the maracuyá

¿Oh you in South America now?
¿Oh you cultured now?
¿Oh you saved now?
¿Oh you ascetic now?

Así es girl.
This time say it with a dragged out I. Giiiiiiirl you gringa enough to have forgotten where you put your mother’s tongue. Chopped it off with a damn machete, scooped out milky white lush, boxed that coco water, milk, and oil, sold your insides, and your outsides for 2.99 to men in America.

Spanish Translated
¿ENTIENDES? (Do you understand?)
Fuerte (Strong)
Sol (Sun)
Así es (That’s right)
Pink Satin Mountain

Brandon Voelker

My mom was a real fag-hag, so when she finally revealed she was HIV positive, I always joked she was a ride or die kind of girl. She never did laugh at that. I figured she was scared, and she should’ve been because AIDS did get her. When it did, I pretty much stopped talking to David. He still stocked the pantry with Krimpets and peanut butter, but I didn’t eat any of it. I was usually with Dasha. All she had to offer were pickles and milk, but I considered it a Russian thing and politely declined: *bitch, you're sick.*

Dasha was from Perm, a large city on the western side of Russia. Her biological mother was around there somewhere, but Dasha had lived in Home Sixteen. It was an orphanage the authorities placed her in after they found her digging in trashcans for dinner. She never forgot those days scrounging for food, or the nights falling asleep beside a mother whose legs were stretched over her head, all of which she could have been grateful for had she known about the men in the home. She was saved around seven, but her adoptive parents were strict Methodists who didn't let her out of the house until she was seventeen. I didn’t know if Russia or America was why she had seen over fifty guys by that point, or jumped out of moving cars, or always drank until she cried, but she never made too much of a fuss about it. It was always a good laugh for her.

She lived in an old house on a few acres of land bordered by woods. When the weather was right, we’d take a narrow path down to a large oak tree that had fallen over a brook. We’d sit there on the middle of the trunk, our feet dangling just above the trickling water. It’s where I smoked for the first time, but usually we’d just bring a bottle of something and pass it back and forth. Dasha took me there the afternoon my mother was cremated, and since we didn't have any alcohol, I knew she had bud.

“Oh, looky,” Dasha said, shifting sideways and digging into her shorts. “Here, you first.”

“Nah, I don’t want any,” I said.

“Oh, come on.”

“No. I’m not in the mood.”

“That’s fine. We’ll just sit here and talk. Love it. Gosh, what a beautiful day.”
“Totally.”
“It’s a sign?” She waved the blunt in the air.
“Dasha, I’m not smoking.”

She sighed, lit the blunt, and inhaled. She held her breath for a moment before letting the smoke disappear into the foliage, then placed her hands beside her on the log. After that, we were both quiet—the woods too—until Dasha started laughing.

“What?” I asked.
“Remember?” Dasha said, then her laughter transformed into that familiar cackle.
“What?” I repeated, now grinning.
“Remember when I told you I tried jumping outta the hotel window?”
“If only your mom had bought that pet spider for you.”
“Right?” I looked at her, but her eyes were closed. “I love this. Sitting out here. I get vibes.”
“Uh-huh.”

We listened to the water dribble past. I would have sat there beside her for the rest of the day had she not insisted on getting food. I straddled the log and raised myself up, then walked across. When I turned to check for Dasha, she was still standing above the middle of the stream, her arms extended outwards for balance. She took one step forward, then stared at me.

“You good?” I asked.
“Yeah,” she said and continued forward. When she neared, I reached my hand out to grab her, but she stumbled backwards, her arms waving, and then crashed into the water. She sat there with her mouth open, her arms propping her up, her knees pointing towards the sky. “Who does that?” I was laughing. “Who does that? Don’t scare me like that.” Then she was laughing too.

“Always my fault,” I said.

I helped her up the ridge. Before we were back at her place, she had her pants off telling me we needed to drink. I agreed—reluctantly—because the only alcohol our budget allowed was the free stuff I could nab from David’s collection. I had wanted to avoid him. After my mom’s death, after she actually did die, I felt an overwhelming resentment towards him, a man I had once called uncle.

That wasn’t when I had stopped calling him uncle. That had happened some years earlier when I found out there was no real blood between us. My mom had told me that much after revealing her diagnosis. *There’s one more thing, Jamie. Uncle David, he didn’t—I was… He’s not my brother.*
I waited for her to explain, but she never did. She just stared at me from the other side of the kitchen table until I got up and went to my room and slept. But considering the first confession, I understood. She had to explain him to a six year old somehow—I had never lived with a man before, not counting the one I found lying on the bathroom floor of our old apartment—and that was the most normal explanation. Anyway, it happened a few weeks after that, I’m pretty sure, when David came home with his buddy and barged into my room.

“Jam. Jamie. What’re you doing?” Uncle David said, one hand on the doorknob for support, the other gripping a bottle. “Your mom’s being terribly boring.”

“Can you guys not right now?” I said.

“Like, can you, right now?”

“No.”

“Well, sorry, but you can’t kick your uncle out.”

“Please. You’re not my uncle.” The man I didn’t know started nodding. He was on my side, I thought.

“No, you’re absolutely right. I’m definitely more like an aunt. Do you know what I mean? A good apple martini in this hand, a cigarette in this one.” He sat on the edge of my bed and crossed one leg over the other.

“Uh, okay?” I said, my hand hanging limp before me.

“It would be easier though,” he said, ignoring me. “I’d have a husband. No, wait. They’re fat. No,” and he smiled at the man, “I definitely prefer this.”

“That’s beautiful.” I rolled my eyes. “Bye now.”

“So?” Uncle David said, turning to his friend.

“Yeah. I think you’re right,” he said.

“Get the hell out. Seriously.” Uncle David jumped from the bed and pushed the man from the room. When he turned back to close the door, he tried to catch my eye, but I didn’t look.

“Sorry, Jamie. We’re just messing around is all.”

“Uncle David, please.”

“Okay, okay,” he said, closing the door.

And the next morning, Uncle David became David. It was almost a joke at first: Hey David, long night? and David, your hubby leave? He laughed of course, but with a queer, humorless smile. Still, the previous night was as good a reason as I would get. It was the first time I noticed others watching me, and I became self-conscious.
I drove home alone to get the alcohol. When I pulled up to the house, I left my foot on the brake. I stared at the trimmed hedge before the brick porch and the shutters freshly painted red to match the new wooden door. It all seemed dull, duller than it had ever before.

I shifted into park and shuffled across the grass, then let myself quietly into the foyer. I listened for David—his car was out front—but the entire house seemed paralyzed. I jogged downstairs and grabbed a bottle of whatever, then ran back to the front door. With my hand on the knob, I froze. David still hadn't called my name, hadn't made any noise, so I glanced up the stairs. I almost called him when the overhead floorboard creaked.

“Jamie, that you?” David asked.
“Yeah.” My grip on the bottle loosened. He was fine.
“You home tonight?”
“No.” I waited for a response, but nothing came, so I added, “Dasha’s waiting for me.”
“We can get Chinese if you guys want?”
“Nah,” I said, but I had already closed the door.

• • • •

“Hope you like Pinot Grigio, bitch,” I said, dropping onto the edge of Dasha’s bed.
“Just one bottle?” she asked.
“We can take a shot or two. Your parents have something around here.”
“We’ll have to be careful not to leave any fingerprints on the dust.”

I drank until the lines started to blur, and I had to drink more. Of course, Dasha was drunk by then, too. She had pushed her hair over her shoulder and bent her legs beneath her, her hazel eyes glossy. She glanced at me, up from her phone—she had been messaging Mike, or Johnny, or whoever—and I looked away, pretending I had someone to message myself.

“Look at this guy, Jamie,” Dasha said and tossed her phone to me.
“Uh, he looks like a druggy.”
“Well, he can be my drug daddy anytime.”
“Girl, that guy’s future is jail.”
“No, he’s a good guy. It’s like, you know, I don’t know. Yeah.”
“Exactly.”
“Jealous?”
I snickered and took another sip of wine. Then we were dancing, just the two of us in the basement, beside the old sofa and kitchenette, and ringing the neighbor’s door and running, and walking beside the stream, and lying side-by-side on her bed. She turned to me, propping herself up with her arm, and squinted. I breathed her in, and I’d like to say I remember a scent of warm citrus or soft floral—very gay, I know—but the only odor was from that pussy, from that stray cat she took in, but never bathed.

“You love me,” she said, finally.

“Some pillow talk.”

“I’m serious. You’re in love with me.” She was standing over me now.

“You’re dumb,” I said, “like really, really dumb.”

“Seriously?” That always got her, the girl who told me I needed to be more researched.

Not for my college studies—she never believed in any kind of establishment, our government especially—but for my own enlightenment.

“Yes. You’re a complete idiot.”

“Not too stupid to know when someone is obsessed.” She grabbed her phone from the nightstand and locked herself in the bathroom. For a while, the only noise was the low buzz that came from her muted television, but then she was saying my name, and something about going back to Russia because she didn’t belong here.

“Dasha,” I said, “Dasha, come on.”

Nothing. I stumbled towards my shoes and threw them on, then grabbed the empty wine bottle and marched to the car, slamming the door on my way out. At first, I fumbled with the keys, but then the car was open and the engine was running and my foot was on the gas. The engine flared, but my car didn’t move. I smacked the steering wheel, my phone already dialing.

“What’s wrong?” David asked.

“My car won’t let me come home.”

“What?”

“Can you come get me?”

“It’s two o’clock in the morning.”

“Okay?”

“Where’s Dasha?”

“She looked old in this photo, so much older than in the first.”
“She’s a bitch.”
“Christ. Don’t drive. I’m–”
“The car won’t let me.”

I don’t know how he found me, but I remember the headlights in my rearview and crawling into his jeep. He didn’t ask any questions, he didn’t say anything on the way home, and by the time we pulled into our driveway, I felt sober. But in the kitchen, he pulled out two shot glasses, and I couldn’t say no.

“I want to show you something,” he said.
“Tomorrow.”
“No. Look.” He removed the lid from an old shoebox on the counter. I hadn’t seen the box before. It was filled with sticky, orange tinted photos, and I grabbed one from the top. I didn’t know anyone in it.

“Oh, stop it with the attitude. Look, your mom’s in this one.”

The picture showed my mom with her arm around some man’s waist, and beside her stood David, his arm around some girl’s shoulder. They were underneath a large oak tree whose branches rose out of frame, and behind them sat a small white house. Everyone was smiling, but my mom looked the happiest. I hated thinking that too, because I was comparing her to the corpse we had just burned and put into a tiny jar and placed on the mantle.

“Who are the other two?” I asked.
“An old boyfriend and girlfriend of ours.”
“Is that?”
“God no, I don’t have any photos of him. Besides, we’re only about eighteen here.”

“I’ve seen a picture of my father before, you know. Mom showed me once.” I thought he was lying because he didn’t know.

“Yeah, she told me.”
I should’ve known better.

“You’re in this one,” he said, handing me another.

My mom was seated at a picnic table in a red floral dress, her hand resting atop her protruding stomach. And even though I knew she had me at twenty-five, she looked old in this
photo, so much older than in the first. Her face, though subtle, was sunken and her arms, thin. If I tore the photo in half, I wouldn't have guessed she was pregnant at all.

“She looks kind of,” I said, and I struggled with the last word, “old?”

“She does not. Every guy wanted her, and I hated her for that.”

“Mhm.” I threw the photo back into the box and walked to my room. There was nothing else I wanted to see.

The next morning I found David making breakfast, but I poured myself a glass of orange juice and told him I wasn't interested. I sat on the couch in the living room and closed my eyes—the sunlight streaming in from the windows was bleaching the room—and listened to the burner click off and the fridge open and close and the pan clink into the sink.

“Jamie? It’s done,” David said.

“I already told you, I’m not hungry.”

“Well, I already made you a plate.”

I groaned and moved to the table. I thought about thanking him for the ride home the previous night, but I was already sitting there eating his breakfast. When I finished—and I was fast—I tried to put my plate in the sink, but he wouldn’t let me.

“No sausage?” he asked. I rubbed my temple, then sighed and grabbed a link. “So what happened last night?”

“Nothing,” I said.

“Hey, I had a girlfriend once.”

“Girl.”

“Well, I’m just not sure anymore.”

“Good,” I mumbled, partly because my mouth was full.

“It’s just, I had a girlfriend, and now I have boyfriends. But—”

“Stop.”

His lips pursed. “Get the dishes, will you?”

A weird silence followed me over the next few days. I hadn’t talked to Dasha, and I still wasn’t talking to David much. But it was summer and I wanted to be standing beneath a tree with my arm around someone, so I asked David if he wanted to grab dinner. It wasn’t him I wanted to be near, but he was all I had. An hour later, we were on the deck eating and drinking.
It was humid, but the neighbor’s evergreens shaded us, and there was a good breeze. David asked again what happened with Dasha, but there was nothing to say. I said nothing, and he walked into the kitchen. I heard him rummaging through the baker’s rack before he returned with a stack of pictures.

“I picked out all the ones with your mom,” he said, tossing the photos in front of me.

The first few must have been from the same day they were standing beneath the oak tree because David’s girlfriend was wearing the same frumpy green dress. After those, there was one of my pregnant mom lying flat on her back, her hands at her side, her stomach a pink satin mountain. There was one towards the bottom of her with the hollow face, but she wasn’t pregnant. The photo was nothing particularly special, but the man beside her looked familiar.

“Who’s he?” I asked, pointing.

“I don’t know.”

I looked at him.

“He was just some guy interested in your mom.”

“I think I’ve seen him before.”

He shrugged.

That night, I laid down to sleep on the edge of a buzz. I thought of the man in that photo, and of my mom and David’s relationship, but mostly of Dasha. I imagined her somewhere in Perm, walking alongside the Kama River. The air was chilled, and the grass crisp with frost, but the sidewalk was empty. Though she couldn’t speak Russian anymore, or remember exactly where the orphanage was, she was headed there anyway because she was determined to find something, or nothing. Either way, she’d finally realize why I’ve always envied her.

I wondered then if she was right, if I did love her. I mean, there was that one night, that one drunk night, that one drunk night when our hands crept over each other’s bodies. But the experience wasn’t satisfying, and she was gorgeous, with a fit, perky body. Whenever we went out, guys were always staring. That’s how I noticed. I turned to my side, then I was on my back again, then my phone was in my hand, and I was calling her.

“Oh, hey there,” Dasha said.

“I’m sorry. I don’t really think you’re an idiot.”

“I know, but I think I am. I keep messaging Joe, but he never responds. Great job, Dasha.”

“He’s a loser. Gosh, can’t you see I’m, like, such the perfect guy for you.”

“I shouldn’t have said that.”
“It’s fine.”

I had meant us. That we were fine. Because we would always be fine. But I wished I could have said we’re fine. Because it—the idea that I loved her, that it seemed possible—was not so fine. But she already had us laughing, and she had agreed to come over the next day.

David was cooking dinner when Dasha arrived. He had insisted on making something—don’t worry, Jamie. It’s a surprise—but I knew he was broiling cheap steaks because the house smelled like damp neoprene. I showed Dasha the pic of David’s old girlfriend to distract us.

“No wonder you’re gay,” she said. David frowned.

“Should I tell him about your, uh, standards, then, Dasha?”

She glared at me.

“Don’t worry, Dasha. Dinner’s ready, and I don’t want to know who you’ve slept with.”

We said little while we ate, the silence broken mostly by the scraping of silverware against plate. David did try to keep a conversation going, but I had the feeling we were all thinking of my mom and how she wasn’t there, how she would never be again. I ate what I could, then slipped upstairs with Dasha and told her about the man I recognized in the photo. Despite what David had said, I thought it might’ve actually been my father, and we decided to search my mom’s room for the pic she had once showed me of him. The only thing we found were her antiretroviral pills, which only made me feel like a grave robber because she never let me see her medication. We thought about checking the basement too but decided on wine with David, instead. Eventually, some guy came and picked up Dasha. She was drunk. I couldn’t have stopped her if I could have admitted something I didn’t fully understand. I felt alone.

“I’m still thinking about that guy in the photo. Did Mom date him?” I asked David.

“No,” he said, pausing. “Sort of. I guess. Yeah. But he was always strung out on heroin, and your mom knew her priority. She got over him and moved away.”

“Moved here?” I asked, then I remembered. “David, there was a guy I found lying in the bathroom of Mom’s old apartment. I mean, I was just a kid, but I think so. Was that him?”

“Okay, yeah. Yeah, he was on something, nodded off.” His words had slurred together.

“Did my mom do drugs?”
“I did, I know that. It made everything seem easier.”
“But what about Mom? You just said that guy did heroin.”
“Oh, I don’t know, Jamie. Were you born a heroin addict?”
My mouth went dry. David hadn’t said no. “Just answer this, and I’ll stop. I promise. When did you know your status?” He stared at me, his face stolid, then cleared his throat. But he didn’t answer, and I knew the truth.
David wasn’t hiding HIV medication in a shoebox in his closet. He didn’t need those pills because only my mom had the virus. But he wouldn’t admit that, just like he wouldn’t admit my mom was ever on heroin. Maybe it’s how he convinced her to move, under some promise I’d never have to know anything, like how she must’ve used a bad needle. Of course, he did it for her own health more than he ever did it for my own. I imagined there were never any secrets between them. Perhaps, too, for reasons neither could understand.
David was still staring at me, but it was my mom he saw. Maybe the one from the first night we had moved in, but I didn’t know. It didn’t matter. I joined him and listened for her, for that buoyant laugh that careened from her mouth. The only thing I heard was a phlegmy wheeze.
“I’m beat,” I said, rising from the table.
“Two queers and an orphan, and the parties already ending?” he said.
I nodded. “Night, Uncle.”
As I undressed for bed, I tried not to think of Dasha or the boy she was with. And yet, I knew—knew because she was no different than the rest of us—that she had gotten lost in that creek behind her house and was headed downstream towards the bay, pushed further, by that awful force, into the Atlantic Ocean and towards the Kama River, towards Perm. No one ever knows immediately that it empties into the Caspian Sea, which is really just a lake. A lake. So I drifted to sleep reassuring myself of one simple fact: I must swim, I must swim, I must swim.
Sophie Brenneman
Folding Hands (A Ghazal)

We made our own god from sheets of used paper,
a deity from folded squares, a gospel in newspaper.

Fingertips turned black from transferred inclinations,
pushed planes onto their backs; black-eyed bruised paper.

We put our faith in lines erased, sang scripture in our segments,
gave god the name of our bad habits; bottoms-up booze paper.

Repeating tessellations sobered our methods and our missions,
dogma-creased diagonals undizzied our confused paper.

We sacrificed our names in the folds of steps one and two,
cross-legged, we sat on impossible ground, hummed as we reused paper:

Sophia, a hymn to wisdom, we turned flatness into form,
swallowed our conceit and signed our sins away on truce paper.

Paige Rowley
I’m Sitting on a Couch the Color of Blood Oranges

positioned so that my corduroys don’t meet with the coffee stain on a mismatched cushion that once belonged to another chair. Stale Camel smoke permeates the air around me as I search the room for any semblance of meaning. You were there, but too drunk to notice that I wasn’t. I am glued to the citrus couch, wondering if thrifted furniture is full of sour seeds. I peel myself away, pushing through bodies in search of you—seeking the person you used to be, but finding hollow skin and acidic lips that try to meet mine.
Richard King Perkins II
Naked Polaroids

I lost them in the bottom of a Weber grill, still beckoning and chipped as bad nail polish.

Semi-preserved placards keeping current all virtues advertised beneath Sedgefield’s and gauzey tops,

the spiritual bowls of Murano glass in wine red filled with expectation.

I didn’t intend to make less of them; taken outside of intimacy, the effects of foreplay

still visible, nipple-clench speaking like an empress atop recumbent forms of flesh.

Strange in the sudden impact of light their hair and eyes could seem so lifeless.

It was easy to understand their raw dishevelment and reticence, like the permanent stockade

in the old town square, a punishment by shaming; a visual trial of body, a sudden and perpetual

yanking of soul.
Peter V. Dugan
The Preserve

the poem
boxed in
imprisoned
by craft
structured words
brick and mortar
iron bars

discarded
a worthless clock
ticks
remembrance
of the past
thoughts
on the future
a waste
of the now
halt the pace
relax the tense
stand naked
natural
and open
a distant vista
a rustic scene
behind
an invisible moat
the audience
feels at home
safe

familiar

comfortable
blends in
with the landscape
the chasm
spanned
and
the poet hides
deep
within
the underbrush
Juxtaposed
Sophie Brenneman
Charcoal on paper

Talk to Strangers
Sophie Brenneman
Charcoal on paper
Odds are Stacked
Sophie Brenneman
Charcoal on paper

Pennsylvania Layers
Sophie Brenneman
Charcoal and graphite on paper
Wittgenstein in the Woods

Graeme Carey

Solomon’s eyes, having been sealed shut overnight with dried rheum, cracked open to reveal a gray sky with dark clouds swirling about. His mouth hung open and felt as though it had been covered in plastic wrap. He tried to lick his lips, but it was no use; he was completely dried up. An intense inner malaise set in the moment he became fully conscious. Waking up in the middle of a brewing storm made him want to curl up and fall back asleep, but he knew that his brain wouldn’t permit it.

He rolled onto his right elbow and stayed frozen for a few seconds while all the blood from his body rushed to his head. He reached over with his left hand and draped his palm vertically across his chin, nose, and forehead. His touch was cool against his hot, febrile skin. He pinched a chunk of his scraggly beard between his thumb and index finger and extended the hair out as far as it could go, which he figured to be about two inches. He hefted himself partway up and tucked his knees into his chest while hugging his legs. A sharp, cold wind attacked him from all angles, and a sweet smell in the air augured imminent rain. He hugged himself tighter, tucking his face between his legs, not so much to protect himself from the wind, but to get as small as he could, and hopefully, he thought, if he squeezed tight enough, to disappear altogether. With his eyes closed, he felt like a kid in a game of hide-and-seek trying to will himself into invisibility, but it was no use; when he looked back up, the clouds were still stalking overhead, and the trees around him were bending violently in the wind, and the leaves were singing their pre-storm song.

He’d been sleeping on a small cliff, uncomfortable, but at a height that permitted him to look over the land at the endless rows of trees that ran off into the vague distance before stopping altogether as if on the border of the earth. He raised himself up, unsure as to whether or not his legs would be with him that day, and tottered on the spot while the wind did its best to keep
him unstable. He took notice of the fact that he didn't feel as cold as he had the previous day. He couldn't decide if this was a good thing or a bad thing. He bounced on the balls of his feet, both shaking the cobwebs out of his system and gauging his physical state, before descending the cliff.

When he got to the bottom, he swiped the dirt from his sleeves and pant legs, a futile act. He raised his arms out before him and scanned his clothes as if examining a foreign body into which he had awoken. His gray sweatshirt was drooping. It was ripped on the right side of the collar and covered in a dark layer of dirt, old and new. His blue jeans were deeply faded, spotted with holes and glazed over with a crusty layer that cracked each time he moved. He tried to refrain from checking his feet, but what little willpower he had left was not enough to subjugate his curiosity. He looked down to see once white sneakers that had turned greenish black.

He scanned from left to right and checked his surroundings. He saw trees upon tall trees in a pine-covered forest. The dull gray light from the sky peeking through the leaves washed out everything in bleakness. He thought he saw a fog crawling across the horizon in the distance, but it might only have been his failing vision. He sucked in a big gulp of air and held it for as long as he could manage before exhaling deeply. His lungs felt scratchy and dry. His breath smelled putrid even in the open, pine-rich air. With his eyes closed, he took a few more deep breaths, holding and releasing. When he opened his eyes again, he was clearer of vision, but the melancholy still had its fangs firmly clamped in place. He slowed his breathing to listen, not for anything in particular. He thought maybe he could hear running water somewhere to his right, but it might have only been the wind. He raised his head straight up to stare at the small bit of sky visible through the crack in the forest roof and considered what to do next. He lowered his head before his practical contemplations turned into morbid metaphysical ones. He started walking.

He crossed through the woods at a languid pace. The air was damp and each breath he took produced small plumes. The image of himself taking a long drag on a cigarette popped into his head, causing his breathing to become even more labored, and before long, he was plopped down with his back against a tree and his legs spread out before him. With his head lolling to the side, his eyes closed, his mouth hanging open, and his hands dangling palms up, he resembled a dead body. The only sign of life was his rising and falling chest.

He rolled over to his left and grabbed something from his back pocket: an old pack of cigarettes, crumpled, soggy, and long empty of its contents. Gently, with his thumb and index
finger, he pulled open the packet, raised it up to his nose, and inhaled. Just a trace of tobacco beneath the smell of wet paper, dirt and pine, but to Solomon, it was the richest smell in the world. He raised his right hand and put his index and middle finger up to his mouth in a smoking gesture. He inhaled as if savoring it. When he was done, he flicked the invisible butt among the pines. He pulled himself up and lifted his leg in a motion to stomp out the cigarette, but he stopped himself at the last second and slowly eased his leg to the ground. He decided that if the fake cigarette should somehow come to fruition, he would want it to be lit.

He kept walking, convincing himself that the sound of water was getting stronger as he went along. He kept his eyes down at his feet, not so much to watch his step and avoid obstacles, but because he didn't want to look ahead at the trees that seemed to go on forever.

He heard a snapping branch somewhere to his left. He turned with a sudden lucidity to investigate. He blinked hard through the blurriness trying to bring his vision back into focus. He pressed his eyes open so that he looked like a deranged animal. Hazy shapes in the distance, dark-clothed and shadowy-faced, darted past. He froze a moment, feeling the blood leave his fingers and toes, and dropped flat to the ground. He crawled on his belly and tucked himself beneath a nearby fallen tree. He closed his eyes and wrapped his arms over his head. He tried to slow his breathing, but it was no use; a trembling fear took the place of a trembling hunger and exhaustion. His ears began to throb with each heartbeat. Solomon was left in complete darkness with only the sound of his struggling system to let him know that he was still alive.

He began to count back from one hundred in an attempt to cut off his surroundings and make his world as small as possible. He focused on the numbers as they popped into his head—100, 99, 98—then tried to imagine that they were the only things that existed. Those descending numerals appeared and disappeared in the middle of a black void—97, 96, 95—but before he could finish counting down to zero, an anxious somnolence set in. He drifted asleep.

When he awoke, a light rain was tapping on the leaves and the ground. He worried that he had awoken into the blackness that had helped put him to sleep before realizing that the sun had set.

He crawled out from under the tree and lifted himself up on stiff legs. The blood rushed to his head with dizzying effects, and the forest around him, dimly illuminated by a pale blue-gray
from the hidden moon, appeared to sway from left to right with Solomon as the fulcrum. The sparse raindrops made him conscious of his thirst. He tilted back his head, closed his eyes, and opened his mouth with his tongue extended. There was nothing except teasing little drops of water that only heightened his sense of dehydration. He held out his cupped hands like a beggar asking the sky for nourishment, and after just a few impatient seconds, he lifted them to his mouth, tasting nothing more than the dirt off his skin. He fell to his knees and groped at the ground looking for accumulations of rain, but it was mostly dry. He stopped what he was doing, hunched forward with his hands on his knees, and listened to the rain gently trickling down around him. Eventually, he came to feel as though he could hear every individual raindrop taunting him as they landed just outside his periphery.

He started walking in the direction that he had been headed earlier. Before long, his feet gave out from underneath him. His arms, too weak to brace for the impact, splayed to the sides of his body like an animal on ice, causing him to land straight on his face with his nose catching the brunt of his weight. He wiped his face with his sleeve. It was slick with blood. A dark, syrupy stream flowed from his forehead, sliding off his nose and pooling on the ground. He blew out of his nostrils, and a cloud of red mist hovered in the air, glittering with the moon’s light like some sort of violent galaxy. He might have laughed at his own misfortune, only he was no longer sure if he knew how to manipulate the muscles in his face to perform such a task.

Solomon kept walking because there was nothing else for him to do. Eventually, the ground beneath him began to change until he was wading through a morass. The trees grew thinner and then vanished altogether. Up in the distance, he saw a wide patch of light, glimmering like a fallen moon. He picked up his pace until he was running. He fell, picked himself up, fell once more, and got up again, going faster each time. He sucked in cold air and wheezed out through his blood-clotted nose. His tongue began to tingle with anticipation.

When he got to the edge of the water, he dropped down hard on both knees. He bent forward and took tentative laps at the cool water and then dunked his whole face in and took big, hearty gulps. He pulled his head back and watched as his dripping face made dimples on the water. The surface slowly settled, and the moon, like an iridescent and disembodied skull, revealed itself. Just beneath the moon, as if wearing the lunar glow as some kind of coronet, was a rippling visage, emaciated, gory, and grave. Upon seeing the face, Solomon jumped back and fell on his ass. He turned, ran back to the tree line, and cowered behind one of the trunks. When he looked around, he saw no one. He tiptoed back to the edge of the water.
Staring down, he realized that he was the face in the water. He jumped back again, but out of a different kind of fear—a fear of what he had become.

On his hands and knees, he leaned forward to study his reflection, cautious as though the person in the water was a separate being. His hair was long and unruly, clumped together in spots and sticking out in all directions. His beard was patchy and wiry. A line of blood ran down from the middle of his hairline and appeared to split his face in half. But most frightening of all were his eyes: feral, bloodshot, and too big for their sockets. He watched as the water flowed through and distorted his face. That anti-Solomon stared out from underneath the water as if in a desperate plea to be pulled out and saved. He wished that it would pick up and float away with the stream.

He stood up. Whose arms are these? he thought to himself. They were so thin that they were completely hidden beneath the sagging sweater, just a pair of bony hands jutting out from the sleeves. He saw traces of himself, but for the most part, he was unrecognizable, a hollowed out version of his former self, almost whittled down to the bones. He waved at his reflection, and a chill shot down his spine, for what he saw was a stranger waving back. For a moment, he was not alone in the woods. Before leaving, he bent down and scooped up another handful of water. He tried to avoid touching his reflection, but it was no use, it stared right back at him as he raked at its face.

He fell back into the trees with his legs tucked in, and his arms wrapped around his torso. He leaned back and fell asleep in no time. He dreamt that he was upside down in the passenger seat of some strange vehicle, spinning vertiginously through a garish forest. Neon pink and blue leaves rustled against a swirling backdrop, with no sense of a start or an end to it all, and lurching trees seemed to shoot past him, narrowly avoiding collision. He tried to turn his head to the left to see who was at the helm of the vehicle, but he couldn't move. He was frozen in place with invisible hands wrapped around his head to assure that he only looked forward. He felt his jaw open, wider and wider, the muscles in his face straining and snapping with the unnatural flexion, until his lower lip curled under his chin, and out from his mouth came spewing a nauseating effluvium.

When he opened his eyes, he was curled up in a pool of his own vomit, shaking with an inner chill, and sweating from the morning’s low-hanging sun. He crawled onto his hands and knees and vomited more black and yellow bile tinged with specks of red. He collapsed on his back as his muscles seized from the shaking caused by the dehydration. He stared straight up at the
sun, that bright and flaming hole in the sky. He considered for the first time that perhaps Hell wasn’t beneath, but that this was Hell, and the sun above, the portal to it. A fluffy cumulous—like something straight out of his preterit childhood days, when he would sit in the backyard and stare up at the summer sky and pretend that it was all that existed—drifted across and covered the sun.

Solomon, supine in the cloud’s penumbra, felt his senses drift back to him. His shivering began to subside. Two days in a row, he had awoken feeling sick, be it mental or physical, and he wondered if it wasn’t merely the start of a much longer trend, and, if so, whether he even wanted to wake up in the morning at all anymore. But such thoughts were pointless and usually the result of prolonged stasis, so he hefted himself up once again and set to walking, this time past the water.

His stomach felt like a concave hole where his torso used to be, and it growled audibly. He was so lightheaded that he experienced a floating, disassociated sensation as he walked. It was as if his legs were operating without his willing. He paused for a moment to stare off into the distance, and, as though through a transfer of energy, the earth around him began spinning in several directions.

He tried to remember the last time he’d eaten. He had convinced himself that he didn’t need food to survive, that his stomach would adapt and shrink, and he would stop feeling so hungry all the time. He didn’t know how long he could go without water, and he didn’t know that it was possible to feel any more dehydrated. His visceral thirst had somehow evolved into a full-bodied yearning. He could handle the pain. He could cope with it for the rest of his life simply by detaching himself from it. What he couldn’t deal with, what he was sure was bound to make his head explode into a million pieces all over the forest, was the solipsistic consideration of the pain, as if it were the only thing in the world that existed and, therefore, the only thing in the world that his mind dwelled on.

He knew that if he was to stop and rest his head against one of the trees, the thought of his pain would completely consume him, wash over every cell in his body like a rapidly multiplying virus. He just kept walking forward, farther and farther into the woods, even though he didn’t know where he was headed or what might greet him on the way. Walking, at the very least, kept his pain purely physical as opposed to mental. He walked, that is, until he pushed his way through a thick patch of branches and, falling onto his stomach on the other side, he looked up to see a man sitting atop a large boulder with his legs crossed. With his head bent forward and
a small lock of dark hair like an electric bolt drooping over his face, the man scribbled into a small notebook.

Solomon closed his eyes and rubbed them with the bottom of his hands. When he looked back up, he was sure that the figure on the rock would prove to be a mirage or hallucination of some sort. But he was still there, now with his chin resting on his left hand, lost to thinking. Without looking up from his notebook, he addressed Solomon.

“Who’s there?” he said, with a thick accent that Solomon couldn’t place and without any sense of shock or urgency in his voice.

Solomon opened and closed his mouth several times, trying to accumulate enough saliva to speak. It was then, placed in the position of having to respond to someone else’s question, that he realized he hadn’t spoken in ages. He hadn’t had the need to form words or verbalize his thoughts since before he had entered the woods, however long ago that may have been. All of a sudden, the simple task of speaking seemed so daunting and foreign to him that his mind began to scramble as though it had been presented with an unsolvable math equation.

The man on the rock looked up at Solomon with a puzzled look on his face. “I’ll say it again. Who’s there?”

*Solomon,* he tried to say, and when that failed, he attempted to mutter, *me.* But that too would not come out.

“You know, it’s rude not to respond when someone asks you a question. Especially a question as rudimentary as: *who’s there?* A simple name would suffice. I’m not asking for your life’s story.”

A million responses fluttered into Solomon’s head. He tried again to state his name: *Solomon. Solomon. Solomon!* He was screaming it in his head, but for some reason he couldn’t say it aloud. His mind reverted back to his early school days, sitting in the back row of the class while all the students repeated in unison after the teacher, “Subject-verb-object. He-ran-home.” That eerie drone of twenty or so kids speaking as one, that listless choir of studious repetition, played over and over in his mind as he stared up at the man on the rock and tried to speak but could only manage to open his mouth.

“Oh,” the man said, raising a finger in the air to indicate a realization. “Perhaps you do not understand me. Perhaps you do not even speak my language. How can we determine whether

“The sparse raindrops made him conscious of his thirst.”
or not you understand what I am saying?” He lowered his finger and began tapping it against his chin. The finger shot back up, and he said, “I’ve got it. Common symbols. I will ask you to point toward a specific thing. This will give me a better understanding as to whether or not you understand me than if I were to simply ask you because it’s possible that you could nod yes without understanding. For all I know, you could just happen to nod at the precise moment that I ask you whether you understand me. Coincidence or chance could mislead us. And we can’t leave anything to chance. I have no intention of spending my time talking to someone who cannot understand me. Now, what shall I ask you to point at?”

He scanned from left to right, oscillating his head back and forth several times as if there were an abundance of options, when in fact there were only trees.

“Perfect! I’ve got just the thing,” he said, looking back at Solomon with a curious smile on his face. He was like a mad scientist preparing to perform an inconsequential experiment on a helpless lab rat. “Okay. Here we go. If you can understand me, then point at a tree.”

*Simple,* Solomon thought, *I can do that,* and a wave of optimism flew through his body at the idea of being able to communicate with this person, to connect, and perhaps even to find a way out of the woods. He turned around and studied the trees. *Which one should I point at?* They were all more or less the same. Nothing immediately stood out to him. His heart rate picked up the longer he took to pick a tree. *Just pick one already. A tree is a tree.* He heard faint rustling behind him. When he looked back, he saw the man uncrossing his legs and preparing to get up. He panicked at the thought of this person leaving, at the thought of being alone forever, lost forever, so he threw his hand up, with his index finger extended, and pointed at a tree.

“Ah ha!” The man on the rock became excited. “You do understand me!” He lowered himself back down. Just before his rear touched the rock he froze, and hovering in mid-air, he said, “But wait, there is, of course, one problem with this supposed confirmation of comprehension, isn’t there?” He lifted himself up and continued. “There is still the very real possibility that this is all just in my head, that I imagined you pointing toward the tree, imagined you and the tree altogether, in fact. In that case, I don’t think I much feel like talking to someone who is possibly not even real.” Without saying goodbye, he turned and descended the opposite side of the rock, out of Solomon’s sight.

Solomon sensed that his last hope of getting out of the woods was fleeing him. He ran around to the other side of the rock. By the time he got there, the man was well off in the distance, moving effortlessly through the trees with his notebook in hand. Solomon tried to yell.
He opened his mouth as wide as possible in the hope that the words would come pouring out: *Wait. Please stop. Come back. I’m lost.* But still, nothing. He caught his toe on a rock and went down hard. Instead of crying out in pain, he just laid there. Why scream when you can’t talk? And besides, who would have heard him? When he looked back up, the man was gone.

There is a distinct resonance, like a drawn-out humming, to a place, no matter its size or contents, which has suddenly been emptied of other people. It’s as if a perfectly closed-off environment has been vacuumed of everything, including its air, leaving only the monotonous hum of emptiness. A hum that is actually not real at all but simply in the head of the individual who is left alone—in essence, a private sound. And it was this private sound rising to a deafening crescendo in his head, coupled with a pain in his arm, that Solomon was left with while he rolled around in the dirt with neither plan nor hope, as the near-off trees served as new borders for his ability to look ahead into the future. The walls had closed in, and Solomon was left stranded in the present, nothing existing ahead or behind him, just one-second lifespans for him to curl up into.

He walked on, feeling more than ever that he was getting nowhere. He felt that each tree he passed was actually the very same one, and etched upon it was his name—Solomon—and hundreds, thousands of carved vertical lines indicating the days that he had been lost in the woods.

With the sun nearly set and his legs feeling like they might buckle and never work again, he found a small clearing atop a short cliff and flopped down on his back with his arms and legs spread out in supplication to the coming night. His heaving breath produced small clouds of mist in the sky, momentarily blurring his already fuzzy vision of the stars. They were becoming increasingly visible as it got darker, each one popping into existence like light bulbs in far off windows. And when he slept, he had neither dream nor nightmare. All levels of consciousness had shut down. When he would wake in the morning, it would be without a sense of dread, without a sense of the malaise that had been following him around like a second layer of black clouds, and, least of all, without a sense of optimism. He would awake only with the feeling, less an urge than a physiological requirement, like some fatalistic itch requiring scratching, that he must walk. And so he will.
The Man who Walked to Work in the Snow

Michael Clough

On the day of Edgar’s funeral, the earth revolved around the sun, the moon cut its path, and the stars remained beyond the fragile reach of man. Attendance wasn’t as favourable as his wife had hoped, but it was a work day, after all, and that had to be taken into consideration. She counted seven in all. They gathered around as the coffin was lowered into the ground. They took her hand and said that Edgar was a good man and that everyone would miss him. CEO Baxter sent his apologies. Here were the proceeds of their collection: eighty-two dollars, a standard wreath, and a silver pen with the company logo on the shaft.

“Whenever you write with it, you will think about him,” Baxter’s secretary said, pecking her cheek. “You will be reminded of the contribution Edgar made.”

The pastor stepped up.

“Edgar was a good man,” he said, shifting his gaze towards the hole. “Loved by all. A good family man. A good honest man. You know, if there were more Edgars in this world, for certain, it would be a better place. It’s the Edgars of the world who we have to thank. Edgar was a man of great industry and resolve, a man of commitment and responsibility. And imagination, too. Yes, I say that Edgar was a man of imagination, a long time ago, in his day.”

The sky darkened, and the stars could be seen hanging in the sky, beyond the fragile reach of man.

Before all that, there was the death of Edgar.

*Good morning, Edgar. And welcome to your last day of drudgery.*

As was customary, after yawning and stretching, Edgar climbed out of his soft, warm bed in which his wife was snoring gently. He went to the bathroom to make his ablutions.

Left: *Welcome Home* by Glen Banks, Photograph
The weather had turned bad, with snow patterning the windows, the wind billowing. With the seat as cold as ice, it took an effort of will to make the necessary movements. Once the task had been accomplished, as was usual, he made an inspection. Only then did he brush his teeth and take a shower.

“Bad out,” Mrs. Edgar said. She had appeared—as she always did—to attend to his breakfast, a pinafore tied to her waist and a spatula dripping hot fat into the frying pan.

Edgar had on his workday suit. As always, he removed the jacket and hung it on the back of the chair before sitting. “Never missed an ordinary day,” he reassured her. “I’ll be at my desk an hour before my blessed colleagues, no fuss. I have a stack to get through, serious business, and a spot of bad weather won’t get in my way.”

“Says on the radio that the trains are stopped. The buses, too. How on earth will you get there? You can hardly walk all that way in a blizzard.”

“Where there’s a will, there’s a way. Now please, bring me my breakfast. I have the clock to watch.”

“Dangerous, Edgar, and in all likelihood, the office will be closed. There’ll be no one there. You remember two years ago? The weather was bad like this, and not even the caretaker made it in.”

“I made it in. On time, too. Couldn’t see why the others hadn’t shown resolve.”

“You were lucky, Edgar. You got a lift on that snowplough, if you remember. He wanted to bring you home, but you wouldn’t have it. Said if he hadn’t come past you’d have frozen to death. He had brandy in his flask, but you refused to take a sip.”

“Not on a work day, no. You can’t drink on a work day. Imagine it, turning up at the office with fumes on your breath. What would CEO Baxter think? You’d build a reputation in no time.”

“But no one was there, Edgar. No one turned up except you. Not even the caretaker.”

“And lucky I did, too. There was a stack of work that day, what with the absence of less reliable souls.”

“And what thanks did you get for it, Edgar, what thanks? You’ll take a stack of work to the grave, Edgar, to the very grave.”

He would hear no more of it. Life must be as regular as clockwork; the weather was a blip, that’s all, and he must pay it no heed. He forked two eggs and three slices of bacon into his mouth and chewed diligently, and loudly, and then gulped it all down with tea.

“Good breakfast, Mrs. Edgar. Exactly as I like it. A man needs a good breakfast on a day like this. The fuel of industry is breakfast, the fuel of industry.”
The wind howled. Beyond the door, there was whiteness and cold and death. “Look at it, Edgar. Just look.”
“Bring my warm coat, the black one with the hood. I’ll call when I get there.”
“Edgar!”
“No more!”

He pushed hard on the door, with the snow against it. It was an inconvenience, that’s all. Perhaps if they’d had children, it would have been different. Perhaps he would have returned to bed and afterwards, gone out to build a snowman with them. Perhaps they would have pelted him with snowballs. They would have made an igloo and laughed together in its warmth.
But Edgar had no children.
It was a shivering wasteland of high-banked snow and frozen, impassable roads. He walked out into it with his usual workday resolve.
*How is your last day on this vast, trembling planet, Edgar? How is it?*

It was a task getting anywhere at all. The wind was wild, and he had to move pincer-like from lamppost to lamppost, steadying himself as he reached each landmark, wiping the hard-beating snow from his spectacles and taking a breath. Twice, he had to duck behind a wall; otherwise, the blizzard would have blasted him off his feet. It was that unearthly bad.
At last, he reached the bus shelter. It was true, then, what Mrs. Edgar had said: there would be no buses and no trains. He wiped down the plastic casing and scrutinised the timetable. The cold whipping through his bones made him think he should return home and call the relevant people for confirmation. If Mrs. Edgar was right, then he’d remain at home for the morning, at least, and if he got in at all, he could work long into the night.
But it was a foul notion, one born out of a weakness of will and a lack of responsibility. He wiped his watch, which had clouded over with condensation, and saw that if he made good pace he’d be at his desk by the requisite hour, if not earlier. On it there was a stack of work—reports to write, letters to reply to, accounts to be checked, calls to be made—and it would be a blessed disgrace to let these clients down and bring the company a bad name.
An image of the great man himself rose up in Edgar’s mind. It was as if CEO Baxter was right there with him, glowering and demanding to know why he hadn’t made it in. What was all this with looking for the number of transport and idling off to the cosy warmth? It was a bit of white stuff, that’s all, just an ordinary bit of snow. *Be emboldened to the day, Edgar. March on.*

Edgar pulled his hood tight around his frozen face and clawed his way through the vast, shivering whiteness.

*But now the day turns bad. How many hours, how many minutes, how many seconds have you left on this revolving orb? Count them, Edgar, do the math. Three two one, three two one, three two one.*

He trudged onward, step after laborious step, until the snow was up to his knees and felt like a wrench on his chest. It was not a great distance, four miles, and on a good day, he could make it in less than an hour. He’d done it in fifty-seven minutes on the day the workshy union had gone on strike, bringing near bankruptcy to the city. He had grumbled all the way, cursing the indolence of the herd. But today he could only blame the elements, the wretched blizzard that had turned everything to ice and solid whiteness.

Once he’d left the suburbs, there were fewer landmarks, and for all he knew, he could be heading in the wrong direction. The wind was buffeting and lifting the snow toward him. The sky was turning black in promise of a deluge. He had to keep trudging on because that was the way of salvation. He had made his decision, and he must keep to it, no matter where it led.

With his hood drawn tight, condensation forming on his spectacles, he could barely see anything at all. He imagined he was walking through a freezer swinging with carcasses. Strangely, they were not pigs or cows but his old colleagues, the skin stripped from their hinds but recognisable all the same.

“Oh, God,” he cried. “Oh, God, oh, God, oh, God. It’s the cold getting to your brain, that’s all. You have to urge the body on.”

The horror of a missed day! The horror of tasks gone unaccomplished! The horror of letting down the company, of being unfulfilled!

Thoughts of turning back had occurred to him. It took an effort of will to push them from his mind.
Edgar had never missed one day, not through illness, not through the death of a loved one, not for anything. Even when they buried his consumptive mother, he’d only been an hour late, but he remained long after all the others had gone, catching up and putting in an extra bone of graft.

He’d trudged three and three-quarter miles without seeing another soul. There was nothing but cold, blank whiteness, and he shivered within it. Exhausted, he sat on what he supposed must be a wall but could quite as easily have been a mound of snow. His knees knocked, his teeth chattered, and he pulled his coat tightly around him in the hope of salvaging some earthly warmth.

Only now did he begin to realise his predicament. When you are climbing a mountain, stopping before reaching the summit drains your strength, all the adrenaline goes, and you are left aching, breathless, and unable to continue. He began to cough hard as his lungs struggled to inhale the frozen air. His frosted spectacles resembled an intricate spider’s web, and for a moment, he imagined himself within it, being pursued. He tried to stand, but the blizzard had other ideas. It howled his name, “Edgar, Edgar, Edgar,” and forced him back down. “You will not take another step,” it screamed. “This is your destination, Edgar. The place where you will take your last step, where your soul will be whipped into eternity and be gone forever.”

The clouds momentarily shifted, and as the life ebbed, he could see the six-storey brownstone building in which he’d spent so many hours toiling at his desk. There were no lights on, for the caretaker had remained at home, thinking that no one would be foolish enough to make the trek.

The blizzard continued its assault. It seemed to have inveigled its way inside him, flipping off the memory lids, and laughing as they clattered down into the hinterland. Here he was as a boy. Imagine it—Edgar a boy. Yes, it’s true. How could it not be? Edgar had to begin somewhere. A baby being rocked in arms. A toddler investigating the mysteries of the world.

And he had hopes and dreams—a boy slapping rainbows of paint across a broad canvas. A natural talent, they all said. Imagination, insight, originality. Follow this through, Ed.

“Before all that, there was the death of Edgar.”
But no, such a course would have been foolish and irresponsible when a desk awaited him, with its stacks of work to be got through and the telephone to answer, dring, dring, dring.

_Ah, Edgar, dear dying Edgar, your breath has become deathly short._

_What did all those stacks of work amount to, all those reports you worried over, all those files that had to be kept in order? This blizzard has one last surprise. As your life ends, you will stare hard at the brownstone building in which you travailed, and you will not remember at all what you did in there. Was it stocks and shares? Was it mergers and acquisitions? Or were you selling flat-packed furniture, the carcasses of cows?_  
_You are gone, Edgar. Gone._

Mr. Edgar is dead, no more, farewell. And now at last the blizzard lifts, and out of their quiet suburban homes, hundreds of children run, pelting each other, building snowmen with carrot noses and trilby hats.

_This hat is yours, Edgar. The blizzard carried it on its icy breath._

The stars hang in the sky, beyond the fragile reach of man. The earth revolves around the sun, the moon cuts its path, and goodbye, Mr. Edgar. Goodbye, farewell, and be gone.
Door Leads to a Garden

Brittany Abell
Photograph
A Contemplation to Fall

Shannon E. Wagner

She wore a light blue dress, one that wrapped itself tightly around her chest and waist, but flowed and rustled in the wind from there down to somewhere below her knees.

She toed the edge of the drop, crushing one delicate flower with each step sideways. She stood still, for a moment, as if to steady herself, with half of her jutting out away from the open expanse. She leaned her face and shoulders in, attempting to peer further into the profound expanse.

A gust of wind whistled its way up to her and flushed her in the face, blowing strands of hair up to the trees. It smelled fresh and had a sweet scent she only barely recognized.

She felt herself tipping in after it; but then jolting back, flinging her arms forward and up, pushing against the wind, pushing her back away from the edge—her feet crushing flowers with each step.

Her chest yearned for what she had felt and on her arms and knees she crawled back to the edge, lay down on her stomach, and stretched her neck out over the whispering drop.

The whistling was softer, but the same breeze tickled her face, filling her with the honeyed scent.

*What was there?*

The light breeze became a gust of wind, and it threw her dangling hair up into the sky. As if with direction it moved around her neck and around her ankles. She closed her eyes wishing for it to seep through her skin.

*What was there?*

Suddenly she felt very alone.

The grass felt rough beneath her knees. And the air around her seemed thick and dry.

She had been walking away from her home that evening. Not to any place specifically, but away from her home.

She had trudged up this hill many times, to just be with herself.

But that night she had been walking away from her home.

There was a wide field, void of any trees, that lay at the top of the hill. It was there she would sit, and pull the tall yellow grass from
its roots, spinning it around her fingers, and popping off the golden buds—contemplating, fuming, imagining, or thinking, sometimes, about nothing.

But that night she had been walking away from her home.

That night a blue hue had fallen over a wide hole in the earth and she had stumbled upon it with much grace and a well of curiosity.

When she looked up, the green of the trees seemed like dull, used blankets and the golden blades of grass like dried summer hair. She suddenly felt like the only thing alive within miles.

Fear wrapped around her heart and she pulled away from the expanse.

The wide breadth of the hole suddenly seemed small, so alive, so full and so deep, yet against the backdrop of deadened familiarity around her, it became slight.

Her arms and legs seemed foreign, her heart raced with a mind of its own and her body became rigid, her feet and hands clutching the rough grass and dirt, a pace away from the hole.

With her heart rushing, her thoughts moved slowly. She could think of nothing else except the expanse, but had nowhere to place it in her mind. She had never experienced what it so naturally emitted. She let it linger, pushing out all other thoughts, forcing her to make a decision.

For a moment she hoped to last forever, just a pace away, indecisiveness stalling time until she was ready.

Her mind nudged her hands foreword, breaking the tension. The decision in that first movement allowed no turning back, the rest flowed after in a long stream of flight.

Her toes felt warm against the chocolate brown earth. A warm light, warmer than the candles her mother burns at night, washed before her, illuminating the soft walls of the deep expanse. She clutched a handful of the rooted yellow grass and lowered herself down to a rock imbedded in the wall.

The easy air floated up around her again, strengthening her frightened but definite hands, assuredly coaxing her away from the walls. The scent was fuller than before, creating a well inside of her; the beginning of a solid, unyielding beam, one that sprung from her chest to her limbs, glowed from her eyes.

She looked down into the expanse and saw the whisper, felt the light, and heard the warmth.

And in Elation and Valor she boldly, and absolutely, fell.
Off the Hinges

Glen Banks

Photograph
Frying Pan
Miles McQuerrey

I remember yelling, “Fuck your beef and broccoli!” the routinely overeaten, yet favorite cuisine of his girlfriend. I stormed down the four flights of carpeted stairs with my Xbox in a duffle bag, into the frigid darkness that characterized Chicago after the sun—which I hadn’t seen in days—had set. I can’t recall exactly why I ran away—only why I came back. Tension, like the hormones in my brain, had been ballooning against us, against him. Dad: orchestrator of all of my problems, reasonably hypocritical dictator, the reason vacations ended.

Just know I had a friend, Kyle Netoli, who lived with his methadone-addicted, cookie-baking mother, just a dozen stops down the Red Line, on the outskirts of Wrigleyville. Just know I had a plan, or rather, a destination. On the train, my bench pressing, sporadic thoughts became dominated by an odor of urinal cakes, an uncomfortable seat, and a sketchy guy that I swear was staring at me. To my surprise, he exited at his stop, pretending not to notice our precipitating violence.

“This is Addison. Doors open on the right at Addison,” announced the robotic, pre-recorded conductor. I descended the crumbling cobblestone steps from the platform and briskly made my way through the frostbitten, residential streets. Shit, it must be late, I thought, dodging invisible traffic.

When I reached the doorstep of Kyle’s mid-century townhouse, I gave a stern, nervous knock. After what seemed an eternity spent at the lowest depth of Dante’s Hell, the ornate, teal door finally opened, embracing me with wafts of thawing warmth and fragrance. Yet, the person who greeted me was not my shaggy, metal-headed doppelganger. In his stead, towering before me, was Scott, Kyle’s NASCAR-loving step-dad who, judging from his cherry tomato face and acrid breath, was drunk.

“Scott! Who the hell is that?” I heard a woman yell.

Behind Scott waddled forth the toady Mrs. Netoli, equally reddened and appearing ready to defend her home, but, upon recognizing me, equipped a welcoming expression.

“Oh! Miles, dearie. What brings you by so late, sweetheart?” I opened my mouth.
“Kyle’s not here, he’s with his father tonight.” My mouth closed.

_Motherfucker,_ I thought. “Ah, shoot,” I said. “This is why I keep telling my dad I need a phone. Well, I’m really sorry I bothered you.” I manipulatively turned around, cast my eyes down the street, and took a slow step away.

Buying my disappointment, she pleaded, “Nonsense. It’s freezing out there. Come on inside and tell me what’s the matter.” I feigned reluctance as I stepped inside their upper middle-class abode and told her of my crisis.

“I understand, honey,” she said, expressing a buzzed sympathy. “I left home several times myself. My father was a… well… he’s dead now.” She untangled a smile. She kindly told me I could spend the night and situated me in their basement.

I was glad my dad was alive.

I felt immense relief to be in this comfortable familiarity, on the suede couch where I first got high, albeit the setting was slightly awkward without Kyle. After an episode of _1000 Ways to Die_ passed by on TV, I was relaxed. Scott descended into the basement and, without saying a word, went into the garage. A _pop_ later, everything went pitch black. Paralysis constricted me. “Scott!” Kyle’s mother shrieked from upstairs. “What the fuck did you do?”

_Good question._ I was utterly bewildered. She hobbled halfway down the stairs, looking even sloppier than before, and insisted that I go upstairs to Kyle’s room. I immediately accepted the opportunity and sped upward out of the darkness like a child fleeing monsters.

From my absent friend’s bed, I sought refuge in Rob Zombie’s _Halloween._ I heard yelling from below. Apparently, Scott had ripped a fuse from the wall, causing the power to fail, and his wife, like I, didn’t have the slightest indication why. _Kyle wasn’t kidding._ Silence pervaded for several minutes—Michael Myers did his thing—then I heard heavy, muffled footsteps ascending the stairs. The door burst open.

I was next.

“Do weed in my house?” He was in front of me. “Sleep with my wife?” He grabbed me. “Out of my house now, you little shit!” He threw me on the floor.

I scrambled out of the room into the hallway. A wild-eyed Scott, completely deranged, pursued. Absolutely confused and terrified, I flew down the stairs to the front door. I knew this guy owned a shotgun. Mrs. Netolli, contributing a soundtrack of screams, flailed her arms about in some pathetic attempt to either distract her husband or defend me. I was cornered in the foyer. My shaking hands were struggling to put my shoes on when I realized
my Xbox survival bag was still in their basement. For a split second, I actually considered asking for it.

This is what running away really felt like. *What now?* How could I come crawling back home, a failed runaway, after mere hours? Pathetic!

No, there was still hope. *There was still Harley.*

Harley was my other friend who I knew for a fact lived with *both* of his parents and whose parents were the kind of people who were either asleep or at least sober during the middle of the night.

My thoughts were interrupted by a nail.

It pierced the sole of my shoe and entered my foot. Darkened townhouse windows caught my cries and threw them back, hard. Everybody heard. Nobody was listening.

I must have let ten trains go by as I switched platforms, trying to make, what I felt to be, my most defining decision. Go home, to the north, or south, to Harley’s? Beef and broccoli sounded good.

At three a.m., the conductor’s welcoming voice reassured me that I was one impaled, traumatized, freezing, and utterly homesick badass.

*“This is a southbound train toward the Loop.”*
Tim Anderson

If the Rats Could Speak

If the rats could speak they would tell stories of beyond the plywood doors,
Of noxious weeds breaking through floorboards that were
Once creaked by generations of port workers, sugar-men.
If the rats could speak they would tell of front-stoop chess games,
The piles of sacrificed pawns, untouched kings,
Matches started without knowing an end.
If the rats could speak they would tell of their roommates:
Homeless mothers and fatherless children, the
Hopeless cycle of the inner city.
If the rats could speak they would tell of injected dreams,
Of aspirations melted from the heat of poverty, a city with
Spoons no longer filled with sugar.
Alex Morrison

The Wolf Pack

Brothers of war and beasts of blood,
The wolf pack scours for meat and bone.

Prowling on prey in famished haze,
Embracing the savage within.
They move as one beneath the moon,
Eyes glowing like shimmering stones.

Howls of hunger traverse the plains,
Beckoning meals in twisted tunes.
Grey coats mingle with stalks of grass,
Shifting smooth under rhythmic spells.

Tasty meat entices their tongues,
Circling their food in slowing swirls.
Fangs are eager to slash and shear;
Saliva drips from gaping jaws.

The horde awaits the Alpha’s call,
Head of the pack and king of skulls.
Power surges from his presence;
He is the lord for whom they hunt.

His eyes preach death through pale spheres,
Onyx fur rising past the spine.
A rumbling growl escapes his throat
In full approval of the prize.

The wrath of wolves contained no more,
The beasts of blood shall feast tonight.
From Oulu

James Mott

Elsi was cold. Her grandmother woke her before sunrise, if the sun rose at all that day. The house was noisy—creaky floors, boxes dropping, grandparents yelling. Her clothes and boots lay at her bed in a neat pile, her skis already propped up next to the door.

"Isoäiti, miksi herättänyt minua?" 1 Elsi asked, her eyes burning from the lack of sleep, her feet freezing from the Finnish winter.

"Aiomme käydä äitisi ja isäsi Helsingissä!" 2 Elsi knew better. The damp newspapers and loud neighbors told her the truth—war was imminent. Viipuri’s splitting cold deterred no one from migrating in either direction—families and soldiers on skis alike. She dressed herself rapidly, the frigid blouse pulled in from the clothesline outside. Her parents were safe. Mother’s soft touch and maiden blue eyes were with her father in Helsinki, where they were breaking their backs to afford a house. The little stew Elsi had left was drained of any appeal, like blood pudding left in the sink. The bread, stale, the meat, frostbitten, the greens, vanished; then so was the stew. She dressed and mounted her skis, the twin poles leathery and worn from a full summer’s thaw.

They left with little, hoping a warm house under a warm sun would be left when the war was over. Yet the frigid cold, the whistling of her city’s skis, the meticulous stomps of army marches, and the snow’s crunch all said otherwise. The closest rail station was in Imatra, a week-long ski in the snapping cold. They followed a long line of refugees, masses of bundled clothing lurching towards the interior. It was like a funeral procession, lines of stalwart Finns crushing the snow beneath their skis, poles stabbing deep into the earth. Every few hours, men would abandon the stream and return toward the border, the skis crashing tsunami-like waves upon the snow and sleet, eager to join their countrymen fighting tooth, nail, and knuckle for their home. It would not be long before the foul smell of burning petrol and rotting red carcasses littered Viipuri. Elsi continued on, eventually reaching Sundsvall, a valley city with a scent of fresh chrysanthemums and warm sunlight. Sweden would never be her home, and neither would Finland, as war waged with the thunder of endless salvos from guns, tanks, and bombs.

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1 “Grandmother, why did you wake me?”
2 “We’re going to visit your mother and father in Helsinki!”
Al Jazeera TV

José F. Diaz

We did whatever we could to distract ourselves from the idea that we could die at any moment. We used to watch soldiers get blown-up on Al Jazeera television. That was the real Al Jazeera TV, not the bullshit one we find in the U.S. and Britain. The real Al Jazeera celebrates our death. A truck would be running along a road, a guy would be filming it saying, “Allahu Akbar, Allahu Akbar,” and then boom, flames, orange and sparks, beige dust everywhere. The vehicle would stop. Cut scene. A guy would say, “Allahu Akbar, Allahu Akbar,” and there would be a guy with a rifle; he would shoot some Army guy. He would just crumple. The guy filming would say, “Allahu Akbar.” Another Army soldier would run over to help his friend. The savage with the rifle would shoot him, too.

We watched. Some of us laughed. I smiled not knowing what else to do with my mouth. Then we would go on patrol. Nothing would happen. I would take a nap before my next patrol. Or I would masturbate. Or I would watch One Tree Hill.

We didn’t watch Al Jazeera once. We watched it for about two weeks. It played the same videos over and over. Army guy holding position—sniper—“Allahu Akbar”—shot—guy crumples—buddy comes to his aid—shot—guy crumples—“Allahu Akbar.” Truck rolls down the road in convoy—“Allahu Akbar”—boom—flames—“Allahu Akbar.” Over and over, we watched our brothers blown up and shot.

It turned comical after the first couple of days. Watching how the guy would spin end-over-end through the air after the explosion. Watching how the Army soldier would fall like a sack of meat. We sometimes praised the enemy for being so stealthy and imaginative.

The second week of watching turned the short clips into fuel. We went out actively hunting someone to fight. We longed for payback. If we weren’t sure about the enemy before, there was no doubt by the second week. We were here to kill these Arabs. Not one of them had ever done anything directly to us. I felt divided. I hated them, but I didn’t mind them. It was as if not all of them were bad, just some of them.

We eventually went home on a plane. Now I get thanked for my service. I say, “You’re welcome,” but I never smile.

I should ask permission from the guys of my old unit before I write these stories, but if Tim O’Brien is any example, even if they said “no,” I would write it anyway.

Left: Ready for Action by Eleanor Leonne Bennett, Digital Photograph
This erasure poem in the voice of the man who is synonymous with betrayal is extracted from the first four paragraphs of “How do you recover from betrayal?” by Shirah Vollmer, M.D., an article in *Psychology Today*, published Jan. 13, 2010.

In *my* way of thinking, *betrayal* is one of the worst human experiences. I say this because betrayal involves shock, disappointment and re-evaluation of one’s belief system. Almost every betrayal makes the victim look back over their past to try to determine what caused it. This reflection almost inevitably *leads to* self-blame and guilt. Although my patient may express anger at not being treated well, underneath this anger is a sense that he must be unworthy of *his* mother’s *love*. This linear path between betrayal and unworthiness is how deception causes so much damage. That is, since betrayal causes the victim to feel bad about himself, the victim is hit twice. First, his social contract has been broken. Second, he thinks poorly of himself.

Betrayal leads to an utter sense of helplessness. The victim feels like there is no way they can fix the situation since the damage has already been done. Helplessness *leads to* profound and paralyzing depression. Sometimes, the desired solution is revenge, in order to restore a feeling of potency. The movie *Inglorious Basterds* demonstrates this fantasy. As Daniel Mendelsohn says, “Tarantino indulges this *taste for* vengeful violence by—well, by *turning Jews into* Nazis.” In this area, psychoanalysis does help us to understand the revenge fantasy. Being passive is so painful that we often want to turn passive into active. The *victim* becomes the perpetrator.
Generally speaking, the greater the trust that one puts in another person, the greater the impact the betrayal has. In the case of my client feeling betrayed by his mom, the impact is enormous. This impact results in anger, despair, and fear. The patient will likely fear that he cannot trust anyone. After all, if your mom lets you down, how can one believe that anyone will really be there for them. So, in addition to having low self-esteem, my patient suffers from relationship problems where it is hard for him to allow himself to become vulnerable, to trust anyone.

I imagine my patient being thrown under the bus. I imagine him screaming for help. I feel his pain. I want to help, but I am not sure he is still alive. Worse yet, I imagine that he believes his mother put him there. Then, I think that maybe, just maybe, the bus has high clearance and so rides right over him. I see a near-miss, like the story of the man who jumped into a New York subway to push a young gentleman having a seizure down into the hole so that the subway went right over the two of them, causing no damage.
The world is exploding. It has to be ending. The pieces of time are blasting off in a thousand directions. Showers of colors fill the sky. There is no surface; there is no ground to attach to. You are free-floating through the universe, strung along as a puppet, helpless in the greedy hands of time. Looking back, rotating your body through the cosmic wonders of your past, you can see where you failed. You can see clearly where you allowed yourself to be split, spread to the very edges of existence, and held together only by the thinnest strands of a life once lived, captured in the thoughts of farmers and kings who still sought to believe.

You see yourself lifting mountains and building pyramids. You see the terrors you created, from the hurricanes to the atomic bombs that sign your destruction. You see the weddings and birthdays and death and betrayal, each as meaningless as the one you see before them. You see the entirety of existence trapped in a space the size of a raindrop. You watch helplessly, wanting to do something but being unable to force yourself to move, to interfere. You see as worlds collapse, as empires rise and fall like the crashing of waves against a shore, as heroes win the spoils of war, and leaders lose their heads.

This is your doing, you know that. You made this choice back when there was a ground beneath your feet and a place that you could call home. You chose to be a god. You chose to forgo humanity in favor of omnipotence. You just don't know that this is the end. You don't stay around long enough to see a life worth living. You don't know that everyone down there, every aspect of humanity, is you. You don't know that you created life, just as you will surely destroy it in the end.

It drives you mad, drives you mad with the power you now hold. You are responsible for the theory of evolution. You are responsible for the bombings. You are responsible for the belief in God, but you are also responsible for the deviation from it. You are responsible for the goodness, just as you are responsible for the monsters that run free.
But up there, surrounded by an absolute nothingness, it all seems so worthless. There is no need for you to drive yourself mad over this. There is no need for you to be involved in the nature of the planet you left behind. You are a god now, and a god you must be.

You hear a voice, though, whispering from somewhere in wonderland, telling you there is a choice. You cannot be a god unless you make a choice. You try to call out, but your voice fades away instantly. You are a god; you do not speak.

Suddenly, it feels as if you’re suffocating. The universe is too large; you cannot keep it in your body any longer. You open your mouth and try to scream, but there is nothing there. You have morphed into the universe. Your throat is the gateway to Earth. You are a god; you do not have a body.

Slowly, your thoughts begin to fade. The very things that are keeping you from giving up are being taken. You can feel them slipping away. You have a sister, you think. But you can’t remember what she looks like, whether she has dark or light hair, what her voice sounds like, or what her favorite book is. Your mother stays with you the longest. You can see her long hair pulled back in a braid, and you can still hear her singing softly to you. You are a god; you do not have a family.

You focus on that scene, though, trying to keep a piece of your memory, refusing to let the universe swallow you completely. But looking at it, you know something is different. That isn’t your mother. The woman singing to you is you. You can see it in your face. You have no face. Instead, your eyes are replaced with mirror images of the universe, reflecting the stars and the galaxies, and the singing is the screams of a thousand lives lost. With each passing second you refuse to make a choice. You pull yourself away, petrified by what you think you have become. It is clear, though, you have lost your humanity. Everything is a piece of the universe. You are a god; you do not have a self.

The choice is clear for you now. There really is no other answer. You will do what you know you must do. Humanity cannot exist with a mad god. Humanity cannot exist with a god. You are a god; you do not have emotions.

You release the memories you have not yet lost. You release the very last traces of humanity you have left. There is little else for you to do. You are a god; you do not exist for yourself.

You do not have ground to walk on. You do not have feet to walk with. You are a god; you must leave humanity for good.
Looking at the sealed window I wonder
Intravenously,
Between sleep,
“How the fuck
Am I going to pay
For the charcoal cocktail
They made me drink?”
van gogh is a bipolar restaurant

Michael Williams

Tacos, bananas, and mullets. They are my brothers. When can the shaven face of our mothers reach into oblivion and suck from the sweet urn of justice? Why must we stand divided? I know because of pumpkin spice fish that patrol the intergalactic space between your left and right butt cheek.

Cats are turquoise in the light, the light that emanates from the pineal gland of bottom-feeding organisms named Fred. Fred, that irreparable character, never missed a game at the milky cirrus-themed pinball machine. I loved milky, but that was before the surgery, and now she has three turtles anyway.

“Goodbye, I will see you at the flute station at 57, okay?”

Later that day, we met in the station drinking coffee with mustard. The newspapers read by the nearby patrons advertised the new scandal involving the syphilitic President, now deceased. The President was a manic with a severed arm. The surprising fact is that his syphilis progressed into tumors that slowly turned his skin as yellow as highlighter. Usually, a man with his composure would have progressive autism degrade into pure insanity. Anyway, the President owed me three bucks before he died so in my book he is a bastard. The scandal involved two Cabbage Patch Kids and a vial of anthrax. In retrospect, the destruction of Norway’s tourism industry can be directly traced to the fateful disposal of an anthrax vial in the cabbage-patch population by the President. I ignored the scandal at the time, choosing to focus on tax cuts for our enraged beaver constituency in Pennsylvania.

After our severe discussion of hamster abuse in Cambodia, I decide to walk down Washington Street. The stores advertising part-time work as a barista caught my eye, until I saw a man of odd complexion. His face was covered in tattoos of famous racquetball players.

“Hoe r vous?” I asked.
He retorted with, “ur goner dye bruh.”
And that’s how I died.
Death is not that bad. Compared to a scene of Barbra Streisand choking on an overgrown Bluefin Tuna, I would say it is quite nice.
In the afterlife, I was able to take in some material pleasures: bikini waxes and champagne.
After about two years of j-chilling mad hard with my bros, I decided to return to America. Now, I stand before you asking where I can find a potato masher and a glove. Let me tell you how I got here. Wait, let me sharpen my pencil first, okay.
Anyway, I am walking down Broadway, and I see a frog on a horse dressed as a Marilyn Monroe impersonator, and to say the least, I was guiltless of this murder. I had used an ax, and it was not like they wanted to live. I put the body in a carpet and sent it to his aunt’s friend, hoping that she would start a cat-food business with his remains.
After the murder and disposal of evidence, I made it my mission to meet you again. I hitchhiked in a truck filled with ponies and began to enjoy their dung. I met an old senile gorilla, and he told me ABOUT YOUR DIVORCE, AND I WAS OUTRAGED. I DON’T REALLY WANT TO RETYPE THAT BECAUSE IT IS IN ALL CAPS SO I AM GOING TO LEAVE IT, OKAY. Dangerous, Unjust, Strange, that is what they called our love. She was never the woman for you; I knew that from the end. On your wedding night, I saw her cheating with an array of dolphins, feeding each one decaying Gouda out of her armpit. She was screaming, “van gogh is a bipolar restaurant!” To say the least, I was supremely offended, and in a fit of rage, I decked the whole Swedish hockey team. But I digress.
Once I heard of your failed marriage, I scoured the internet looking for the perfect Eastern European mail-order bride to come to your aid. It did not work out. I cannot disclose much information since the matter is still under investigation; however, I would like to say that she did it, not me.
Tim Anderson
Here’s Your Menu

Peace of mind often does not cost much, but how much would you pay for a piece of mind? If all went as planned, you paid $19.95 to read this. Caution: I make wide right turns. I do not stop at all railroad crossings. A buddy of mine took an IQ test and his state sent him a get well soon card and a twenty-dollar bill. My state gave me a certificate then taxed me on it. My father told me that being evicted is the worst thing that can happen to somebody. He has a Purple Heart and dozens of lost baseball cards. And my mother saves old bars of soap for when President Obama bans cleanliness. She heard it on the radio. I scope out the nut in each one of my classes—the guy in the trench coat, the wanderer, the easily frustrated, the guy who would be most likely to open fire. Welcome to 2015: you will be serving yourself today.
My Head is Gone

*Emma Mattson*

Gelatin Silver Print, Photograph
Brittany Abell graduated college this past May from Eastern University in Wayne, Pennsylvania. She is currently a nanny, who writes and does some photography on the side. Her dream is to write children's books.

Laurel Ranveig Abell loves words, especially exploring the various nuances of their sounds and meanings; her favorite is ‘perhaps.’ In her spare time—when she is not writing, teaching, editing, mothering, cooking, cleaning, baking, befriending—you can find her, sitting in an Italian leather chair, staring out of a window, dreaming.

Dave Algonquin is originally from Burlington, Vermont. He was an active duty Navy Seamen and then attended Columbia University. Since college, Dave has stayed in New York and used to spend his days working between Manhattan and Detroit. He has since retired, and now enjoys his time writing, reading, and taking pictures.

Joel Allegretti is the author of five collections of poetry. His second, *Father Silicon* (*The Poet’s Press*, 2006), was selected by *The Kansas City Star* as one of 100 Noteworthy Books of 2006. He is the editor of *Rabbit Ears* (*NYQ Books*, 2015), the first anthology of poetry about television.

Tim Anderson is majoring in English and mass communication at Towson University with concentrations in writing and journalism. He is an aspiring sports journalist whose work has been featured across the web. If the sports journalism gods do not call his name, Tim hopes to teach high school kids the joys that can come with writing.

Contributors

Glen Banks is from Baltimore, Maryland and is a geography and environmental planning major at Towson University. He enjoys exploring old buildings, photography, and the smell of old books.

Mollie Elizabeth-Zoë Battista, more commonly known as Mollie Elizabeth, is a sophomore at Towson University. She’s studying English secondary education. As a member of the Panhellenic Sorority, Alpha Xi Delta, Mollie’s presence here on campus is ever-radiant. Originally from Connecticut, the need to start her own life began when she decided to live and work in Ocean City, Maryland for the summer. It is there that Mollie found she can express her desire to feel fully alive and where her work is heavily influenced.

Roxanne Benach is a Towson University student, and an interviewer extraordinaire.

Eleanor Leonne Bennett is an internationally award winning photographer and artist who has won first place prizes with National Geographic, The World Photography Organization, Nature’s Best Photography, Papworth Trust, Mencap, The Woodland Trust and Postal Heritage. Her art is globally exhibited. You can check out more of her work here: www.eleanorleonnebennett.com.

Nicole Belcastro is a senior at Towson University. Her majors include English and Spanish with a minor in creative writing. She enjoys writing fiction, but poetry has her heart.

Jaso Bolay is a transfer studies major with a focus in the general art of writing. She is the editor-in-chief of her college’s newspaper, The Campus Current, as well as a contributor for the website Hello Giggles. She spends her free time editing her life away.

Liz Bonica is a graduating senior, majoring in photography and minoring in creative writing. She was born in New York and grew up in Hillsborough, New Jersey before starting college at Towson University. Fiction writing and photography have been her passions for as long as she can remember.

Gianna Brooks is an English major at Towson University. She mainly acts as Liz Bonica’s hype girl.
Sophie Brenneman is currently a senior at the University of Southern Mississippi earning her bachelor’s of fine art in drawing and painting. Fascinated by anything art-related, Sophie enjoys working with words, sounds, and lines in the process of constructing a poem just as much as she enjoys working with the elements of design in her creation of visual art. You can check out more of her work here: sophiebrenneman.weebly.com.

Stephanie Buckley is a sophomore at Towson University and she is studying film and creative writing. She’s too lazy for hobbies, but talks herself up to make it sound like she isn’t.

Graeme Carey currently lives in Angus, Ontario, Canada. He is a graduate student in the English department at McMaster University.

Rosemary Clark is an English major at Towson University.

Mike Clough pays his bills by teaching English. He has published stories in literary magazines in North America and Europe, as well as contributing articles to a national newspaper. He is currently looking for a publisher for a novel set in Nazi Germany, which he dreams will be a bestseller.

Gillian Collins’ artwork conveys a sense of her environment; portraying simple, but often overlooked, unkempt areas in commonly trafficked places. The series of paintings published in Grub Street is titled Under Concrete. These are all places found around the Shady Grove Metro station.

Chaelin Despres is a freshman at Towson University studying English and secondary education. When she is not writing, Chaelin is reading Harry Potter, sleeping, studying, or watching YouTube. Her goal in life is to become a published author … or a high school English teacher if that doesn’t work out.

José F. Diaz is currently a meat-popsicle living in Maryland where he is pursuing degrees in philosophy and English at Towson University. He plans to go to graduate school to pursue a doctorate in Philosophy and an MFA in Creative Writing. So he thinks.
Peter V. Dugan was spawned on Long Island, New York as one of the illegitimate feral offspring of the Beat Generation. Mr. Dugan lost his mind in Coney Island, and Far Rockaway broke his heart when they tore down Playland and stole the memories of his youth. He is the self-appointed poet laureate of his apartment in East Rockaway and plays golf to pass the time, when he has nothing worthwhile to write about.

Bailey Drumm is a Towson University and a Grub Street Alumni, as well as a Baltimore native. She enjoys crabs, football, black coffee, and the Oxford comma. As a hobby, she runs a Tumblr blog based on creative writing.

Kyle Hemmings lives and works in New Jersey. He has been published in Your Impossible Voice, Night Train, Toad, Matchbox, and elsewhere. His latest ebook is Father Dunne’s School for Wayward Boys at amazon.com. He blogs at http://upatberggasse19.blogspot.com/.

Amy Fant’s work has appeared—or is forthcoming—in Driftwood Press, The Cumberland River Review, Weave, Rock & Sling, Nashville Review, and Fiction Southeast, among others. She’s from South Carolina, finished her MFA at Emerson College in Boston, and is now writing and eating her way through Cape Town, South Africa.

Daniel Flannery is a student at Towson University, and a local goon. In fourth grade, Daniel began playing violin in his school strings section, but was soon asked by his teacher to stop playing due to “incompetence.” Daniel has followed his teacher’s advice, and has not played violin since.

Carrie George is a senior at Bel Air High School. A Creative Writing II student, she has been writing for a few years, and has won second place in the Harford County Reading Council writing contest, as well as a silver key in the Scholastic Art and Writing contest.

Benjamin Giuliana loves thee English language and thinks its grate because yew can right the same thing in at least too different ways and theirs know write answer and any thing is aloud as long as your weird, feisty neighbor nose its I before E accept after C.
**Jackie Hamm** is a ninth grade student who attends Rising Sun High School. She spends much of her time reading and writing. She is a member of the Tiborgs, Rising Sun High School’s robotics club, and is currently in training to be a junior docent volunteer at Plumpton Park Zoo.

**Ibrahim Harris** is a complete, and utter mystery. And he likes it that way.

**Jasmine A. Harvey** is an award winning freelance artist and counseling psychology graduate student at Towson University. Her works in portraiture have been featured in gallery shows at Bowie State University. Jasmine hopes to continue working on her art while working as a counselor for children and families.

**Brionn Kelly** is 17 years old. She is the youngest of three children, with one brother and one sister. She’s lived in Baltimore City her entire life. She is an outgoing, determined, hardworking, and independent young lady who takes pride in everything she does. In the future, she wants to be a psychologist, because she loves to help people.

**Katie LaHatte** is a senior English major with a concentration in writing at Towson University. When she isn’t spotting grammatical errors in public places, she enjoys Baltimore sports, do-it-yourself projects, and copious amounts of classic rock.

**Emma Mattson** is a 21-year-old photographer in the Baltimore area, focusing on portraiture and conceptual work. Using digital photography, film, and multi-media, she likes to explore themes of detachment, whimsy, and the human condition.

**Brennen Mayer** is a Towson graduate from the class of 2014 with a degree in English. He currently lives in Baltimore where he continues to write.

**Ella Dali Melker** is a senior English Major at Towson University. Her writing often requires several cups of Earl Grey.
Miles McQuerrey is an English undergraduate working on his Masters in Professional Writing. Like many others, he enjoys long walks on the beach. He looks forward to great things: success and failure, wealth and poverty, prestige and obscurity, variety and repetition, travel and domesticity, joy, and even tragedy.

Alana Mercante is a senior at Towson University. She is an English major and an Italian minor.

James Mott is a dual government and anthropology major at the University of Maryland. His other studies include Japanese art history and international development. His hobbies include painting, debate, experimental digital art, and photography. He also pretends to be a dog online.

Alex Morrison is currently a sophomore at Towson University. Although he writes for personal satisfaction, his main goal is to please the audience that happens to stumble upon his work. He hopes his telling of The Wolf Pack will satisfy the readers’ hunger for carefully crafted words and rhymes.

Rachel Naomi writes what she cannot express through paint.

August Napolitano is a junior at Bel Air High School. He began writing at a very young age, and now has his mind set on honing his craft. Currently, he is the co-editor for the Reverie, Bel Air High School’s literary magazine, and a frequent performer at Bel Air’s slam poetry nights. During his sophomore year, August’s poetry placed in a nationwide contest.

Richard King Perkins II is a state-sponsored advocate for residents in long-term care facilities. He lives in Crystal Lake, IL with his wife, Vickie, and daughter, Sage. He is a three-time Pushcart nominee and a Best of the Net nominee, as well. Recently, he was a finalist in The Rash Awards, Sharkpack Alchemy, Writer’s Digest, and Bacopa Literary Review poetry contests.
Brianna L. Pleasant was born and raised in Baltimore, Maryland. Her piece “Blue” symbolizes the beginning of closeness to one’s self and recognizing the underlying vulnerabilities that she may possess. Throughout times of instability and self-deprecation, her series Confronting Vulnerabilities of The Self, exploits these emotions with hand gestures.

Paige Rowley is a native Maryland girl, and recent Towson University graduate. In addition to being a former English major and Grub Street enthusiast, she loves taking photos, traveling, and drinking tea—often simultaneously.

Lauren Roberson is a graduate of Lynn University, where she received a B.S. in Graphic Design. Currently, she is pursuing her B.F.A. in Interior Design at Savannah College of Art and Design. Most importantly, she is an art lover and dog enthusiast extraordinaire.

B.A. Rutter is a graduate of Mercy College with an MA in English literature. She has always wanted to stride to the podium to thank the Academy; and one day she will, while accepting her award for Best Original Screenplay.

Laura Ryan explores questions of identity in paintings, ceramic sculptures, and photographs. Her work features the conflicting, modern expectations for women and girls, and the loss-of-self that comes with feminization. Laura studies fine arts and art history at Towson University.

Pulcher Sehen is a graduating senior from Towson University. He writes fiction and poetry in his free time and seeks to uncover a message of faith, hope, and love in an age of despondence. He intends to write more after getting his degree, along with pursuing postgraduate studies in theology.

Brandon Voelker is a senior accounting major at Towson University. He can’t say exactly how Pink Satin Mountains came to be, but it started with a workshop due date and required a bit of inspiration from “Mr. Voice” in Tin House #61. He lives in Bel Air, Maryland.
Contributors

The paint slinger known as Sherwood is an over-thinking gentle giant, raised by devout monks, wild bears, and America! Through groundbreaking art, Sherwood wrestles with the subject of masculinity and the role that it plays in contemporary society. Next, he follows his dream to become a champion at gut barging.

Michael Williams is an artist, painter, and writer from the Towson area. Michael is going to College of Charleston in the fall of 2015 and graduating from Towson High in the spring.

Mycala A. Worley has been drawing and cartooning since she was a small child. She has only recently begun working in charcoal. She has worked on a number of creative projects, including a mural, but her favorite projects are illustrated journals. Her current project is a graphic novel.

Shannon E. Wagner is a senior at Towson University and is a member of the Zeta Mu chapter of Kappa Delta. She plans to graduate in May and pursue a carrier as an essayist or a journalist on the West Coast.
“We laughed. We played. We swam. We dove. We learned. We chanted our names. We claimed this place our home, then we left.”

— “Gumper” by Bailey Drumm