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VOLUME 72 · 2024



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LOS ANGELES

*miscellany*

VOLUME 72

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2024

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Cover: Photograph by Madeleine Misner of “Christ Appearing to the Apostles After the Resurrection” by William Blake (painting c.1795)

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*m*

UTANG (MY MOTHER,  
THE DEBT COLLECTOR)

...

CHRISTIANNE TUBOLA

*Nowadays*, I find myself wearing your skin  
more often than I'd like.

Your presence, a spectral whispering

*more*

*more*

*more*

'*They Must Know How Far I've Come.*'

Self-pity and hunger  
grow within us  
like it's congenital.

Blessed be  
the short temper  
and a plot of land  
given to me,  
gift-wrapped in  
living trust.

Blessed be  
*Adam's-rib.*  
*bone brittle.*  
*pill splitter.*  
*a craving for malunggay,*  
*approval like it's necessity.*

LOVE me  
  until it gets lonely  
and we've convinced ourselves  
we can                                       *save it*  
for another  
time.  
I'll know it's over when  
my voice and frame are  
*just like yours.*

# HILARY SWANK

...

ANTONIO RADIC

*It* wasn't October, but it whispered  
cold in the oasis of marble grass  
and fabric of Massachusetts  
and Lincoln, Nebraska. The promise  
of rain: ghastly leftovers of slaughtered  
livestock and German lima beans.  
It wasn't October, but it was 2002,  
so the air was sour and the clouds  
carried a negative charge. They longed  
to be alive and bright on Beverly Drive.  
Instead, they were weapons of mass  
destruction. While en route to the Italian  
baker, my parents saw dead soldiers  
in the clean alleys, faradays of electricity  
buzzing off the bottle caps, like red  
balloons floating away from metropolitan  
girls. They saw dancing Russians, tall,  
smiling in a plastique way. The bailey  
of *Rodeo* was harmonic, supporting  
the scaling hypotenuse of LA's Golden  
Triangle. In another life, Jon Voight  
would be twiddling his thumbs

in the atrium, brandishing a silver  
platter just for me.  
The Hills were alive,  
                    throbbing,  
                    bending,  
waiting for me like an orchestra watching  
their impresario.

Then, she prances,  
high on stilts,  
like a shining  
medieval knight,  
towards me.  
I, still in my chariot.  
Hilary Swank,  
dismounting,  
calls me a cute baby, and  
only then did I know that  
this will always be my  
Rosario.



CAR GLARE • CHRISTIANNE TUBOLA

## ERROR: 0142

...

GARETT COLLINS

*“It’s totaled,* you know. Trashed.”

The technician wiped his soiled hands over his apron casually as he continued his examination, oblivious to the way Lois flinched at each callous movement. Watching the big man shake the filth from his arms appalled her, but it was preferable to the unmade thing on the table. She felt her eyes slipping downward again and dug her nail into her palm until it bled.

Slowly, her attention returned to the grubby figure beside her.

“And there’s nothing at all you can do? I’ve heard good things about cyber—”

“Cybernetics?” the technician scoffed. “Even fourth gen, fifth gen reconstructive modifications couldn’t fix this.”

The technician dug one arm back into the thing and rifled around for something solid; pulling hard until a muddy, oozing lump snapped loose. Lois felt her stomach turn, watching it drip slowly over the big man’s knuckles. He gestured with the agonized blob in his palm, spattering the floor and table with a viscous, ruddy liquid.

“I’m telling you. Couldn’t sell this wreck for parts. Everything’s smashed to shit and back.”

“What about cloning? Is there enough left for that?”

“You got a piggy bank somewhere you didn’t mention earlier?”

Lois knew she did not have the money. *Nobody* had the money for cloning. Full-body cellu-

lar replication like this was for corporate entities. Not little people.

The technician walked around the table and stopped at the other end. He produced a long pair of pliers from his apron which he used to pull small, white fragments from the waste and drop them into a little metal bowl on a rolling shelf by his right arm. When he had cleared a wide enough section for his purpose, he tossed the pliers onto the shelf and reached for an open diagnostic kit. He stuck something into the cavity, waited for it to beep, and scanned the screen.

“You won’t get any memory with cloning. Blank slate, more or less. What’d you say caused this?”

Lois blinked. After a long moment, she shook her head to clear her thoughts and reluctantly returned to the present.

“Industrial accident.”

“One hell of an accident.”

“It was an explosion.”

The technician shrugged, unimpressed. He’d grabbed a blackened rag off a toolbox and dutifully scrubbed away at his instruments. Most were still dirty when he returned them to their spaces on the walls and shelves, but Lois supposed that no one who came here could afford to mind.

“You’re family?”

“Most days.”

The technician tossed a small, white bag to her. Lifting the bag from her lap and tearing the adhesive seal open, she slid a deformed alumi-

num ring onto her palm. When her hand stopped shaking long enough to do so, she slid it onto her finger where a similar ring already rested.

“You’re liable for all debts, then. These implants are scrap.”

“Oh. Thanks.”

Lois wasn’t sure why the room was spinning until she slumped into a stiff plastic chair and realized she had stopped breathing. She thumped one hand on her heart just to make sure it was still beating and considered whether to start crying again or curl into a ball and wait for the throbbing in her head to finally stop. She sat,

unmoving, as the technician canted the slab to the side and shifted the remains into a hermetically sealed box which he flagged for cremation.

“You’ll get the bill and the ashes in a few days. We have your address.”

Lois stayed in the chair. For the first time, the technician fell silent, unsure of what to do when his customer did not move to leave. Lois kept spinning the simple aluminum ring on her finger, unwilling or unable to look up from the miscolored laminate floor.

“She’s all I ever had.”

“I know.”



## HOT LIQUOR TANK NO. 2

...

CONNER WILSON

A monument stands, one of uncounted thousands  
A little boy walks by, watching cartoons on an iPad  
There is a movie theatre on the other side of the street  
It's playing seven films at once, two of them twice  
Fathers can't keep up their energy all the time  
Little girls just eat gummy candies, and vanilla chips  
In a park far away, beer drips from a tap in a stand  
Mothers can be older than you can even imagine  
The boy bites down on a scone, far too salty  
Half of this village was killed in the War

Authors can be born anywhere, even a cramped poorhouse  
Anything can wash up from the sea, draped in fresh sewage  
Most of these buildings didn't even exist before the seventies

Whisky pulls the breath out of the wood casks  
But even distilleries must have a front desk  
Even a dead woman's house must have a gift shop  
Even the hills can be carved into novelty cups  
Even the littlest reindeer's tendons click in the snow

Walk up fifteen flights of stairs  
Look out a rounded window  
Pour the milk before the tea  
Exhale the one flash of sun

## WORSHIP WEARS NO MASK

...

GARETT COLLINS

*The first* time Luke found Gods, they were sitting in the last booth on the rightmost side of a little coffee shop on the corner of East 13th and Farthing Street. They were drinking something they called “Teas,” which Luke later came to understand meant it had a little bit of every flavor mixed in for effect. They wore a wide-brimmed white hat with a narrow black band, and spoke with two voices that swam and danced with each other through every word. Gods was, so much as Luke could tell, endlessly patient and curious in all things; listening to the pleas and stories from those on the other end of the table with a kind but marginally amused expression, as if the sum of human experience was to them a novel thing.

On the second occasion, only a few short days after Luke’s first visit to the café, he found Gods sitting in the same worn window-booth watching the city through the polished glass. Luke assumed the same seat at the countertop a short distance away and settled in to watch the great inhuman from the corner of his eye. No more than five minutes later, a gaunt woman with a face so expressionless that it seemed to have been sculpted from raw adamant assumed the seat opposite the deity. Two of Gods’ eyes flicked down to meet hers, and the strangest thing happened. Luke almost couldn’t bring himself to believe the warm smile which crept across her face as she folded away her glasses and fell into a comfortable conversation. Luke wondered how many such conversations Gods had had.

Luke returned to the café several times in the next weeks, each time finding a strange new face at the far end of Gods’ booth. The third time he went, a young woman wearing an *I Believe* t-shirt joined Gods at the table; the fourth, a logger who seemed even in the pristine atmosphere of the café to exude a fine dust whenever he moved. Sometimes Luke saw familiar faces. Mostly they were new. Gods greeted them all with the same gentle familiarity, and all left looking a little more whole than when they entered. After his fifth “coincidental” venture to the café in so many days, Luke had to acknowledge he was becoming a little obsessed. He could barely get it off his mind. Here he was, living his petty little life on a petty little planet that wouldn’t warrant an addendum at the end of the Guide to the Galaxy while the almighty master of the universe reclined on a vintage 70’s dining booth drinking tea the color of the midnight sky. It was bullshit.

Maggie, the chipper barista who manned the little café every other afternoon, eyed Luke bemusedly as she refilled his coffee.

“You know, you can’t stalk them forever.”

“No, I know, I’m just... working out how to go about it.”

“Of course. First impressions are key, after all.”

She spoke over her shoulder as she steamed milk into a mug, evidently unimpressed with the godhead sitting a few tables down. Luke thought with a little more of his raw charisma, he could entice some information out of her.

“So, I, uh. I don’t mean to be rude.” He made an odd little gesture halfway between pointing at the booth and turning up his palm questioningly, settling on something nearly the Y shape of a paper-football goal. “But you don’t seem very bothered that God himself is sitting in your booth over there!”

“Gods? Oh, don’t worry. They asked me first. They don’t seem to do much, and they tip *very* well!”

“But,” Luke scabbled for the words to make her understand, “doesn’t he make you feel small?”

Maggie snorted.

“I’m satisfied with my little room in the tower! But I can tell you aren’t. You really should talk to them.”

“I know.”

“But?”

“But I’m Afraid!” Luke gasped, slapping the counter to feel a little less powerless for one fleeting moment. “I don’t know where to begin.”

“Try ‘hello.’ They’re not expecting anyone today.” She paused, quirked her head a little to the side and squeezed his arm for a moment. “No, that’s not quite right. I think they’re expecting you.”

Luke returned the gesture with a genuine, if admittedly unsure, smile of his own. He got up. He went over. He sat down.

Gods nodded politely when Luke slid into the other side of the booth, but said nothing. Luke, unwilling to humiliate himself by speaking first, kept petulantly silent. His eyes flicked back and forth across the alien architecture of their many faces as he decided which one to settle on. For that one fleeting moment, he stared defiantly across at Gods and—

“Do you want me to apologize to you?”

Luke blinked.

“What?”

“Well, you’re clearly very angry with me.”

“You say it like I don’t have very good rea-

sons to be angry with you. Angry—” Luke threw his hands up in frustration and saw they were shaking. “Angry doesn’t begin to cover it.”

Gods set their cup down on the table, steeping the fingers on two hands and leaning forward to study him. Eyes the color of eggshells studied the lines of his face with such familiarity that Luke’s skin crawled. Worst of all was the warm and utterly benevolent expression that Gods still wore.

“Please go on, then. I promise there’ll be time to say your piece.”

“What are you even doing here? Sitting in this coffee shop, day after day, running an impromptu clinic out of a booth. What’s it all for?”

“I’m very fond of their cup of Teas, for one.” They gestured with their chipped ceramic mug. “It’s a warm, well-lighted place, and it has a goodly clientele.”

“But what about your visitors? Are they angels? Demons? Is... is this some kind of divine meeting-ground?”

Gods arched an eyebrow and made a funny sound with their voices, like a light giggle over a deep belly laugh. Without breaking eye contact, Gods reached out with two hands and picked up a clump of sugar packets from the end of the table. They meticulously opened each one and poured the contents into a little pile as they considered their response.

“They’re just people, Luke. Just like you. A little happier right now, perhaps, but just people. Usually, they need something they think only I can provide, so I try to help them.”

“So, what? You grant wishes? You’re moonlighting as a genie now?”

“Nothing so grand. Mostly, I just listen. Sometimes when they need advice, I give them that as well. What most people want, most anyone else could give.”

Luke shook his head and wondered if he was having a psychic break. He considered it for a

moment, but dismissed the idea. As inconceivably strange as the last week had been, nothing felt as acutely real as the time he'd spent at the fringes of the cafe, trying to glimpse the deity out of the corner of his eye. A dark pressure was building behind his temples, and he rubbed them to relieve the mounting strain.

"And that's really all you do? No magic for the poor little humans slumming it down here?"

"I also volunteer at the food pantry down the street."

Just for a moment, the briefest fraction of a second, Luke considered leaping across the table and burying his fist in one of the deity's faces. He wondered if he could do it before being smote.

"I'm not trying to insult you, Luke. That was my honest answer. I can't do things the way you think I can."

"What's that even supposed to mean? You are literally GOD! The creator of the universe. My creator. I'd almost given up believing you existed and then," he threw one hand up. "There you were. So now I get to ask, why the fuck did you make me this way?"

"What you really want to know, I think," Gods held some of their hands up in a don't shoot the messenger type gesture, "is why you feel powerless to change who you are."

"How could I be anything else? You made me to suffer. Why would you make a person so wrong?"

"I probably wouldn't have made you so moody!" A knowing smile curled onto Gods' face, as if they'd just remembered something very funny. Luke hated the smile. It made him feel like the child he hadn't been in many years.

"I'm sorry, is something here funny? Is my life really that funny to you?"

Luke felt his heart thundering hard in his chest and wondered if he was going to die, or wake from a dream to find himself a different person, or to learn that he was never anything at

all. He wondered if Gods might simply unmake him in rebuke for his harsh words, dismissing him as one might discard a broken toy or bland magazine. Fear threatened to creep in from the edges of his mind and overtake him, but his simple desire to be heard, to say what he'd come to say, staved it off. He wondered what Gods could possibly say to all those people to make them leave feeling so happy and gratified and not so scared at all with the world, when all he could do was sit at the counter and wonder where everything went so wrong.

He felt like the only one looking through the facade, and that bothered him so much it made his skin crawl.

Luke didn't even try to hide the tears that rolled down his cheeks, letting them spatter the countertop until his vision blurred and he had to wipe his face with one sleeve. His efforts did little more than smear dirt and crumbs onto his cheeks.

"Why don't they get that you did all this? You put them here, and whatever little games they come to you to solve, you chained them to in the first place. Why doesn't it matter that you take their dreams, and their families, and their hopes, and there will never be a single thing they can do about it?"

The world spun and the Formica floors swam in his peripheral vision, thundering against the pounding drums in Luke's head. He wanted them to stop. He wanted the tables to stop swaying and the ground to stop shaking under his trembling hands, and he wanted so badly to vomit and purge himself of the dizzying sickness that was turning his guts inside out.

"What kind of cruel joke is it to let a broken thing know how broken and unwanted it is? Did I do something wrong in a past life to deserve to be so alone?"

Gods shook their head slowly and cast all their eyes down at their hands. They sighed,

their twin voices harmonizing into a single long seraphic tone. Luke felt his ragged breathing begin to slow as the sound rolled over him. Slowly, incrementally, his vision cleared until the kaleidoscope of lights he'd seen through his tears resolved back into the familiar walls. Having nothing more to say, Luke fell silent, feeling very alone in a room full of people.

Still humming, Gods began meticulously picking grains of sugar from the little pile and spreading them about the table. The act was so surreal that Luke's exhausted mind couldn't help but settle down to watch. After an indeterminate amount of time, Gods placed the last grain of sugar on the counter and glanced up. They slipped the white felt hat from their head and leaned in conspiratorially, careful not to disturb a single grain.

"Would you like to know a secret?"

Luke nodded, his eyes never lifting from the table. Gods held the hat up beside their faces as if to hide their conversation from prying eyes.

"I'm just the catalyst."

Then, Gods pushed over their mug of Teas. Impossible waves of dark liquid the color of the midnight sky splashed out over the table in a wide arc, swallowing the sugar and cascading down onto the booth. The light dimmed around him and, as the sugar dissolved, the growing pool took on a strange depth and suddenly they were both falling, plunging downward through the floor into a vast expanse of space filled with constellations Luke had never seen before. Deeper still they went, rocketing through stellar gas clouds and spiraling past alien planets as the tiny pinprick of light that had been the café far above faded into nothing and Luke could only scream.

The scream was silent, of course, robbed of all sound by the vacuum, but when he finally closed his mouth, he realized he was not dead and that helped a little. When he had regained the slightest fraction of his nerve, he looked around to find

Gods standing (really standing on the void as if it were as solid as the café floor) beside him.

*You're an asshole*, Luke thought.

Gods shrugged noncommittally.

*You can still hear me?*

"Sure."

*I thought you didn't use magic during your meetings.*

"This is about as much as I can do. It's all in your head, really. Stagecraft."

Luke sniffed, as if that was the least strange thing he'd heard all day. With a little effort, he angled himself toward Gods and flapped his arms ineffectually, as if he could swim across the void toward his interlocutor.

"What did you mean when you said you were just a catalyst?"

"I made the rules! I got the ball rolling. Forged the sun and set the elements spinning to their work," they waved dismissively. "But that's about it. I can't just wave my hands and make all the pain go away."

For the first time, Gods' cheerful countenance softened, and Luke thought they looked very sad.

"The truth is, I'm bound entirely to my own rules. In all creation, I may actually be the one thing that can't change. I was young when I started things. I guess you'd call it youthful hubris. The things you've done, to each other and yourselves—I doubt I could have ever planned for that."

"I... see," Luke thought, although he did not.

"I don't want you to suffer. If it's any consolation at all, I really am sorry about your family, but life won't wait for you to save yourself. Even I can't make it do that."

"Who can?" Luke's eyes were pleading for an answer he'd already come to understand. "Who's in control?"

Gods just shook their head.

"Is that supposed to comfort me?"

“It’s supposed to let you know that you’re not alone. That knowledge is something I can actually offer you. I hope it’s enough.”

“It isn’t. But maybe it’s a start.”

The stars, melted away, coalesced into the familiar fluorescent lights and faux 1970’s interior of Marguille’s Café. A small puddle of tea had clumped the sugar in the center of the table together. Gods smoothed the lapels of their already immaculate jacket.

“How am I supposed to go on, knowing that there’s really no one in control. Not even you?”

“How did you get on so far?”

“Not... very well. If I’m being honest.”

“I can’t give you back what the world took from you.”

“I get that now. Enough to hate you a little less, at least.”

“I’m full of actual advice, you know. If you ever want it. I’m not as good with the whole existential thing.”

It was finally Luke’s turn to laugh, madly and without reservation. He needed to go home. Some warm food and a hot shower would be one step in the right direction, and it would give him something to do while he considered everything that had occurred. It felt like so much had changed, but nothing seemed quite different yet. He wondered when or if that sensation would ever go away. There was just one last nagging thought in the very back of his mind. Silly, probably. Irrelevant.

“One last question?”

Gods nodded, arching a few eyebrows.

“What the Hell is ‘Teas?’”



FALSE MEMORIES • THOMAS FARMER

# FALSE: MEMORIES

•••

TIFFANY OGUNSWA

*white* linen grass  
brass in its whistle.

we're on the hill-tuft,  
a trampoline glowing at its mouth,

it's here he tells me  
that dogs  
bleed in ketchup.

he's brass  
and crude  
and older  
limping everywhere  
because his hip is misaligned.

I circumvent woodwinds  
and brass  
because he spoke of  
bacteria  
growing in his mouthpiece  
and I was scared

but he tells me percussion  
is for idiots.

we're on the porch  
when he says these moments are our last because  
the plane above head,  
just there,  
carries an atomic bomb.  
I smile tightly  
and pretend not to pray.

his grass  
—and he insists it's real—  
is always green.  
so why  
are we always on my lawn?

on my hill  
he told me dogs bleed ketchup and I can see  
ketchup  
so vividly  
on green grass blades.



# SELF-PORTRAIT OF A CRAWLING WOMAN

•••

TAYLOR DAVIS CROWELL

*This* landscape is bleak and so am I:  
wooden walls and chain link fences  
do not remember the way I do.  
He said to lick his shoes, to shine them  
*(you know how dust never settles),*  
so I did.

I will let anyone do anything to me.

I tried crawling home a long, long time ago  
to hug my mother, and to hear my sister  
tell me that she loves me  
but my one gift is to trust nothing is real.

I tried crawling home, but my legs  
got scratched raw by dead yellow  
grass, and I could not find my gray paper  
house against the gray paper sky.

You cannot go home if you live inside a sheet of paper,  
or can't feel coffee's heat on your tongue.

When I was younger, I thought grass grew over spirits  
and that every blue jay was my grandfather.

I was scared of Church and the shadows in my bedroom:  
the dark shapes my sister's blanket formed across  
the room. I was scared of red ballet slippers,  
shower curtains, and grasshoppers.

I was scared of my grandmother because I knew  
she did the make-up for the dead people, and her  
basement with one light in the middle and a leather  
recliner in the corner. I was scared of spontaneous  
brain aneurysms, blood diseases, colon cancer,  
and dirty lunch benches.

Find me a home with a coat rack so that  
I can slip out of my bones like an old coat,  
and leave my body by the door.  
If the body is home, I want to put it up for sale.  
I want to crawl out of myself like an ant escapes a boot.

I will let anyone do anything to me.

I tried crawling home a long, long time ago,  
but I gave up, and so I lie here, on this rough  
earth waiting for someone to pull me up & out  
of myself, in this fake world I have sketched.  
I am erasable and so is home.



TWO SPIDERS • MADELEINE MISNER

# THE ROOMMATES

...

JOSEPHINE SPANIER

*Dear Nolan,*

Successfully moved into the new house today! I thought the vibes were a little off with my roommates, but the house itself is nice.

Let me explain:

Right away when I walked in, the first thing I could hear was someone playing The Smiths from a speaker in another room, much louder than any college girl should ever be listening to The Smiths. Then again, I'm a college girl and I love The Smiths, so maybe it's a good sign that we have something in common, even if it's a potential red flag. I hadn't met my roommates in person up until today, just exchanging messages over Facebook, so I hoped that I could use this to help me make a good, real first impression.

My room is the closest to the front door, one that would probably be a home gym or office if a family lived here instead of three students. I dropped my suitcase off just inside the room and looked around, mentally starting to make a game plan for how I would start filling the sparsely furnished space. Overwhelmed, I headed in the direction of the music to introduce myself.

I followed the sound into the kitchen, where a young woman was boiling soup on the stove. She scooped tomato paste out of a can and flung it into the pot. My immediate first thought was that it looked like a smushed up human liver. I blame this on you for showing me *Texas Chainsaw Massacre* last month.

As I entered the room, I tried to announce

my presence without startling her by purposefully shuffling my feet on the floor to make more noise. She still didn't look up, probably not hearing me from her close proximity to the speaker. If I got any closer, I'd be nearly breathing down her neck, so I finally stopped a few feet away.

"Hi," I started.

At that, she finally heard me. Just like I predicted, she jumped like she'd just seen a ghost.

"I'm the new roommate," I added quickly to make sure she didn't think I was a burglar or something. Not that I look like a traditional burglar, I hope. "Margaret."

She looked relieved. "Oh, yes. Nice to meet you. I'm Wren. Make yourself at home." She abruptly turned back to her cooking.

So, yeah, weird vibes, right? I took that as my cue to leave.

I went back to my room and spent the next several hours tediously unpacking. That's when the missing you finally kicked in the hardest, and I started to have doubts about transferring here. The distance from you is hard, and the feeling of starting over was beginning to weigh on me.

I got interrupted from going fully down that rabbit hole by a knock at my open doorway. I turned to see Cora, my other roommate, the one who originally made the posting for the open room on Facebook and the only one I'd communicated with.

"Nice to finally meet you in person!" I smiled, hoping for a better start than with Wren.

"You, as well." She has an accent that sounds uncannily British and American at once, like the Transatlantic accent I was telling you about from old movies. I remember she told me she moved around a lot growing up, but I don't think she had given any specific hometowns.

"I got this for you. A welcome gift." She held out a thin, gold chain.

"Oh, wow. Thank you so much," I said, surprised by her generosity. I reached out to take it, but she pulled back.

"Can I put it on you?" she asked.

"Sure," I hesitated. The way she'd said it made me a little uncomfortable in a way I can't really put into words, but I still agreed.

I turned around and lifted my hair off the back of my neck. Her fingers were ice-cold when they brushed my skin as she fastened the clasp. "It belonged to the girl before you. The girl who had your room," she added.

"She didn't want it?"

"She left it for you. She thought it would look nice." She turned me back around and looked at the chain. "She was right. Well, see you around the house, then."

And before I could process any of that, she had already left. Like I said, more weird vibes! But I think I'll like it here. I know you weren't super excited about my idea of writing letters every now and then, but sending you a text this long feels wrong. And I refuse to email a boyfriend, even a long distance one. Emails are for school and for people you hate at work.

Letters are better for the aesthetic.

Write back, if you can, about what your first week of classes are like. I'll do the same once I start tomorrow!

Miss you and love you always,  
Margaret

...

Dear Nolan,

I didn't sleep well last night, still getting used to the new house and full of jitters for the first day of class. I kept waking up to the sounds of heavy footsteps and slamming doors, but every time I'd peek my head outside of my room to investigate, there wouldn't be anyone out there. I finally woke up to my 8:00 A.M. alarm and wondered if I'd dreamt that everything had happened at all. I looked around for Wren and Cora in the morning to ask them about it, but they must have been either still sleeping or already off to class.

The first day on campus passed pretty uneventfully with the usual syllabus reading, then getting let out an hour early. Not complaining while I'm still getting used to it here, though.

One other weird thing happened when I was driving home at the end of the day through town. I stopped at a red light and looked up at the billboard over the intersection. And I swear to god the picture of the man on it made eye contact with me. Like, fully eyes-moving-and-looking-down-at-me eye contact. I looked away, then back up, but when I looked at it again, it was back to normal. I must be stressed out from the move. Or the lack of sleep. Or Cora's creepy thing with the necklace. I am still wearing it, though, by the way. It's growing on me. Still don't know where she and Wren are.

Looking forward to a letter from you soon!

Love you,  
Margaret

...

Dear Nolan,

Three weeks into the semester, which apparently already means midterm season to a couple of my professors. How are your classes going? I know you're busy, but I miss hearing from you often. Especially with all the photos of you with that girl on your Instagram—"Anna from chem

lab,” or whoever you mentioned she is. I know all my stories sound kind of crazy, but I promise I’m not! I thought you’d enjoy hearing them; don’t you think they’re exciting? And don’t tell me I’ve been reading too many creepy books again.

Wren and Cora are rarely home, but the three of us all finally had dinner together a couple nights ago. I came home after working with my writing partner, and the two of them were sitting at the dining room table eating the newest variation on what is apparently Wren’s soup of the week. I swear, there’s always a new bowl of leftover something in the corner of our fridge.

When I walked in, Cora greeted me enthusiastically. “Hey, girl!”

Wren glanced from Cora to me, then back to Cora, then down at her soup. She didn’t say anything.

“Is it alright if I eat with you?” I tried hesitantly, suddenly intimidated by the close friendship the two seem to have. “Your soup looks delicious, Wren. I’d love to try it, but if you don’t have enough, or you’re saving it, that’s totally fine, of course—”

As I spoke, Cora and Wren were exchanging a series of looks that were clearly communicating something but went right over my head.

“No, of course you can have some,” Cora finally cut me off. Wren was looking over at her with pleading eyes. “There’s plenty to share, and we’d love to get to know you more. Since you’re living with us now, and all.”

I looked at Wren, who still seemed dismayed by all of this. “I mean, is that okay with you, Wren? You made it, right? I don’t want to just take—”

“Take a bowl.” Cora said forcefully. “Have some, it’s fine.”

“No, yes, please have some,” Wren added. “Sorry.”

And so went the world’s worst start to a surprisingly pleasant dinner. Once I sat down and took a bite, Wren and Cora both chilled out,

and we all had some normal conversations about work and school. The soup itself was delicious as well, something with sunflower seeds and sweet potato, but Wren didn’t elaborate too much on the specifics.

Once again, signing off. I know we text sometimes, but I’d really like to hear more about what you’re up to. Miss you!

Margaret

...

Dear Nolan,

Halloween is coming up! Do you have any plans? Are you still hanging out with our old friend group? Please write to me soon. I know your math/whatever homework is very hard and important, but you’re not even texting me like you used to.

I’ve been spending more time with Cora and Wren lately. They took me on an overnight trip to the mountains, where Cora’s family has a cabin. They’re really into hunting and wanted to show me some basics, which I thought I would hate but I actually strangely enjoyed. To be honest, I want to do it again. It makes you feel powerful. And like in touch with your ancestors and the divine feminine of nature, if that makes sense. Cora can explain it better than I can; it’s very spiritual to her.

It was just a few random little animals, but Cora said that pretty soon she and Wren will take me with them to start catching bigger things. Wren likes to use them in her cooking. She said it’s much more environmentally friendly than buying meat at the store. And it has health benefits.

I didn’t know what she meant at first, but ever since that night when I first tried her soup, I’ve started feeling... more at home? Like I know who I am and where I belong, more so than I ever have. Not just with Cora and Wren, or even

at my new school, but just in my own body. I feel like I could live forever.

Signing off,

Margaret

...

Dear Nolan,

Only a few more weeks until Thanksgiving break. Maybe I'll see you then. Still no letters from you yet, I've noticed.

I spent Halloween with Cora and Wren, and we had a lovely time. They started planning another hunting trip, and I assumed we would be going back to the cabin again. But they suggested I get to try everything they've taught me on some new terrain, so instead we planned an evening out in the local woods.

I probably should not admit any of what I am about to write to you, but now that I am absolutely certain of your complete lack of interest in anything related to me, I would be surprised if you even opened this letter. So I think it's okay.

Wren and Cora are murderers. Not just of little animals in the woods, but of real humans. I just felt that something was wrong with them and with this house from the moment I walked in, but I'm sure of it now.

But they don't scare me. They trust me, and I trust them, and they are bringing me deeper into their way of life to give me the gift of eternal life that Cora's family discovered. By ritually preparing soups that incorporate the organs of their victims, they can maintain their youth. And now I can too, and no matter how awful you'll say that all of this sounds, I am positive that I am happier and stronger than I ever was when I was with you.

They were hesitant to let me in on all of this at first. They had to kill the girl before me once she started getting nervous about it. I privately suspect Cora and I will have to do the same to

Wren, ideally soon if it were up to me. She didn't like how quickly I took to the lifestyle; she said it took her way longer to get over her squeamishness and that's the natural reaction to have. I think she's envious, and scared that I'll take her job. But as soon as I took the first sip of the soup, I knew there was no going back for me.

Is all of this upsetting to you? Do you think I'm telling the truth?

But you don't read these letters, and you're cheating on me with "Anna from chem lab," so it doesn't matter what I tell you, true or not.

But I need to keep writing to someone, or maybe I'll go crazy for real.

Margaret

...

Margaret—

I went back to my apartment a couple days ago after spending Thanksgiving weekend with my family. I haven't seen Anna since I left, and she isn't answering my texts, and now you're not either. I'm writing this hoping that maybe it'll get through to you now that you're FUCKING INSANE!!!

Okay, yes, I independently decided to start testing the waters of having an open relationship with you. I know I should have brought it up to you sooner. But your letters to me, and yes I did read them, were getting increasingly fucked up and I assumed you were having a hard time adjusting or just trying to get my attention or something. I didn't want to add another thing to your plate so I figured we could just talk about it in person over break. Okay???

Is everything you were writing true? Did you do something to Anna?? I know that you're mad at me, but you don't have to take it out on her. I'm reading through everything you've written and I just don't know what to do. I'll call the police. Or your parents. I don't even know

what to do in this situation. Just tell me Anna is okay. We can figure everything out together, I promise.

—Nolan

...

Dear Nolan,

A letter from you now? The semester is almost over, you're a little late for that.

You want to know if I did something to "Anna from chem lab" when I was back in town. I met up with her, yes, but I didn't do anything to her. She drank the soup I brought her all on her own.

I'm sorry that you miss her, but now maybe you know a fraction of the loss I've felt from you all semester.

And no, she's not dead or anything. She just moved into the room closest to the front door

at my house. I recently moved my things from there into Wren's old room. I get an en suite now.

And I gave her the loveliest gold chain necklace. It was left for her from the girl before.

She said it was the nicest thing anyone's ever given her, but from what I hear of your relationship, she had a pretty low bar to compare it to.

I'm sorry you miss her. She is safe, and she'll live for a long, long time now, if all goes well.

I didn't imagine this life for myself a few months ago, either. But all I did was listen to your advice: "Just give it a few months, how weird can they be? Aren't you overreacting? Can't you just relax and go with the flow? You've got a pretty overactive imagination, can I really believe you?"

Now, I hope you can.

Margaret.

# A FRESH START

...

ERIANA MUÑOZ

*This* was before

the sky cracked and before the sun was conquered by  
rolling grays. Calloused hands are no substitute for a  
calloused mind. Thundering heavens  
and burning rubber followed me as I left behind the  
luscious land I birthed from my loins  
for churning melting pots and great steel giants.

I traded my

family for a new one made from scratch.  
My humanity was crumbling, my mind running wild  
with longing for a place I could not return to, for a time  
I could not return to.

In every direction

I turned there were horse-powered cars  
instead of the usual majestic four-legged mammals I  
became familiar with—the one friend I had  
from birth turned into a distant memory:

Tall and proud,

he stands on all fours. You'd think he was on top  
of the world. Born stark white, become muddy brown, tainted  
by the earth and my laborious love. He doesn't talk (and if he  
did, it was only in my dreams), but  
the ache was there in his dark chestnut eyes.

*I could feel it too.*

He's waiting

for me, a whistle lost in the whipping wind.



# FAIR WEATHER FAN

...

LOUIS YANUCCI

*Somewhere* at the edge of the universe  
the far  
reaches of shifting  
blue

a Los Angeles January  
glows under the trees of Mount  
Hunger,

Vermont sits  
behind New  
Hampshire  
at Boston's hearth

and the water that was  
snow catches the sun in  
its froth, the flow of a  
salmon's back.

The black bears still  
hibernate to dreams of  
weather  
that draws humanity  
from thawed maple bark,  
dandelion sparkles,

glints and  
teases green brush  
strokes and thin  
clouds  
holding their breath  
with cheeks full of  
water.

The sun beams, ray to  
ray, with the relief that comes  
at the dry morning  
of a cold, sweaty sleep.

Recovery lights the earth's muscles so  
vividly the dirt's terracotta crystals  
could be tired  
stars who fell  
once the sky  
finally opened.



THEY DON'T MAKE THEM LIKE THEY USED TO - LOUIS YANUCCI

# THEY DON'T MAKE THEM LIKE THEY USED TO

...

LOUIS YANUCCI

*I* want a Dutch Sea,  
black and white, the fighting kind,

rip the shingled belly board by  
board, suck the sails dry,  
vacuous sea monster depth, timbers  
shivered, timbers soiled,

bent over naval  
captains receiving the  
thick ropes from the  
shaft, undone

by the gaped mouth,  
green from wave to  
wave,

every soldier  
relieved of his  
rank, resigned  
to flailing, holding  
screams, drowned and filled

pruned and pounded,  
choked by the liquid moon

grabber, still star reflector,  
penetrated

by a wooden bulge,

chalice swigging,  
phallus-swinging  
swanky little  
fuckers

getting their due in gallons,  
thrifting chugs of salted  
seed.

Pasty European flakes  
of fish food, more  
delicious than mercury-  
filled micro-plastic  
shrimp.

I want my fish Dutch-fed  
and free-range, all  
organic, all erotic, non-  
GMO.

# PICK APART MY BRAIN AND YOU WILL FIND

...

MADELEINE MISNER

*All* of my first stanzas suck.  
It's the excess, the foreskin,  
I have to cut it away to get to the meat  
And how gross is that,  
Referring to my poetry as meaty foreskin,  
With the first three lines always falling short,  
The 90% orgasm,  
Satisfying to scratch an itch, sure, but not nearly  
Exploding out of the tip,  
See? Why is this a penis poem?

I only eat eggs that I make myself,  
Or that others make for me,  
But if that *other* is my *mother*,  
Then you can go to hell.

Dust and bugs and eyes keep finding me  
—All I want is to stay clean

And I read the dictionary every day because I  
Dropped some of my words right there  
On the tarmac;  
They were blown to smithereens  
By the 9 o'clock train!

I always thought my post-pubescent vagina  
Looks like the mouth of a hairy tarantula,  
Which makes sense because I'm damn sure  
She has teeth.

I'm wearing this perfume because I have a date so of course a fly is following me

And I don't know what curse Aphrodite put on me  
During the blood-letting that was  
Losing my virginity, but I'm pretty sure  
That bitch wants me to thank her.

The land of tree swings and trailer trucks,  
Deer and dogwood blossoms,  
Solace in the migraine mornings.

I'm remembering unbeatable, irresistible half-and-half cones from Fosters Freeze that melt in  
tendrils down my chin in late August, and wonder why hindsight is where I like to live.

# SHRIMP THIEF

...

THOMAS FARMER

*In* the poster he'd been dead shot full of violet light. I saw him that night. The sky was a black tarp stretched just over the length of the street, covering only half the neighbor's minivan.  
A couple stars in every frame.

The house I was going to looked like an Aztec jack-o-lantern, some bizarro space station in the black riptide. He sat on the porch and I laughed when I saw his arms were full of veiny shrimp.

*They're looking for you*, I said, *on Geary*. He asked if I had a cigarette, I told him no but I had gum. He asked me for a dollar, and I gave him a piece of gum.

*Why'd you take all that shrimp?* I asked, *Do you need to feed your family?*  
He looked at me from all the way under the cloth that wrapped up around his head.  
*This is my family*, he said. I watched the shrimp writhe in his arms.

I got sad and told him they would all die in the heat, so far from water. He asked what would happen to my family. We sat together, watching stars tear through the tarped sky while, through their gates, the neighborhood dogs drooled.



SHRIMP THIEF • THOMAS FARMER





LAWRENCE'S LIGHTHOUSE DIRGE • MACKENZIE VON PINGEL

## LAWRENCE'S LIGHTHOUSE DIRGE

...

IAN PIEXOTO

*When* night fell and the fog drifted in from the sunseting horizon, the bayside town sank into a peaceful slumber. All entered a night of naive dreaming but one man.

One man woke as the rest rested. He began his night rather than his day. He had his twilight coffee, trimmed his disorderly beard, and lit himself a cigarette to ease his aching, aging bones.

After the hustle and bustle of harbor life came to its daily end, it was time for the Fog Collector to take his turn.

Only the glistening stars in the indigo sky watched as he left the lighthouse and trekked towards the docks. Of course, he had his machine with him, the handcrafted beauty he had perfected over sixty years of careful, dedicated work.

The machine was made up of a series of piping, tubing, and scrap metals. Its main chamber was made of a thin, durable copper plating. A dial on its back denoted that the chamber was currently empty. The pipes and tubes all converged into a main nozzle that fanned out like the end of a trumpet. The Collector held it in his hand now, making a soldier's march to the end of the wooden, rickety docks.

He lowered a lever on the back of the chamber. A subtle hum reverberated through the machine's piping, vibrating against the elderly Collector's back. The end of his nozzle began to quiver as the surrounding air was sucked into the machine's tubings, circulated in the chamber, and its excess material released out a pipe on the

other end. The Collector held out the nozzle towards the fog, and his work began. The obscuring wisps that would ordinarily impair the vision of the morning sailors succumbed to his machine, circulating in the chamber only to have lighter, harmless steam emanate from its other end.

As the chamber filled, the machine began to weigh down on the Collector's shoulders. Decades of aching work had made him resilient. He was a natural, comfortable; one might say this was where the old Collector felt most at peace. The satisfying hiss of thinning fog and hum of his machinery allowed a wave of calm to settle over him.

That is, until he saw the young girl on a nearby dock.

As the fog began to dissipate, falling victim to the Collector's mechanical routine, the curtains pulled back and showed her more clearly.

She was small, probably no more than seven years old. She wore a hand-sewn nightgown, its hems and ends a bit torn and tattered. Her red-haired braids were somehow both unkempt and tidy, with their tight knots barely holding down frizzy, curly ends. They looked like a lint-trapping sweater a fisherman might wear. Her eyes—big, bold, and blue—stared right at the Collector as he worked to the rhythm of his humming machinery.

But that rhythm faltered. He noticed the girl.

She waved, and he blinked. Was she real? No one was ever up this late, much less a girl of her age.

“Helloooooo,” she called, cupping her hands to her mouth.

The Collector humored her, giving her a small smile and a nod.

“Whatcha doing?” she asked.

She began to make her way over to the Collector now, head cocked to one side. Her big, bold, blue eyes brimmed with curiosity. She was much closer, and she was very much real. “Whatcha doing with all that fog?”

Getting a better look at her, the Collector noticed she had no front teeth. Each consonant she pronounced came with a splash of spittle.

The Collector opened his mouth to speak, to tell the young girl that she’d be much better off if she went back to bed, but felt his throat get caught. His tongue felt numb. His voice felt absent. He couldn’t speak. Why would he have to? No one had ever spoken to him, much less asked him to speak in return.

So instead of words, the Collector spoke in gestures. He pointed to his machine, then to the fog ahead. He patted the horn-like nozzle and pointed as it slurped in a satisfying wisp of fog. Then, he patted his chamber, the dial now denoting it was about halfway full, and pointed up at the lighthouse. Its shining light glinted across the ocean’s churning waves, their water carrying its beacon beyond the harbor.

“You live in there?” the girl asked.

The Collector nodded.

“That’s tall.”

The Collector smiled. He didn’t do it often.

“The fog is the light?”

The Collector nodded again.

“Whoa...”

That wonder in her eyes widened the Collector’s smile.

She sat down on the edge of the dock. Her toes brushed against the water’s surface. “I’m Judy. You have a name?”

The Collector hesitated, unsure how to an-

swer. He supposed he could be called The Fog Collector, but wasn’t that more of a title? A fisherman wasn’t named Fisherman. The cobbler wasn’t named Cobbler. And if he did have a name—one of those fancy-sounding ones, rather than a boring old profession—how would he tell it to her?

For the sake of simplicity, the Collector shrugged. Judy wasn’t pleased. “No name?” she said. “Well, everyone’s got one. You should too!” The Collector shrugged.

“Well... how bout I give you one then, huh?” Judy said.

The Collector smiled. He held out his hand: *Go ahead.*

“How ’bout...” She took a second to think, her head tilted to the side again like a puppet with no hand to control it. “Lawrence!”

The Collector shook his head, his smile as bright as ever.

“Well, you look like one!” Judy crossed her arms. “That’s your name now. Lawrence.”

The Collector, or Lawrence, shrugged. There wasn’t much he could do. “How come never heard of you, Lawrence?”

The Collector shrugged. It was a simple, small gesture, but it conveyed a complicated answer.

There wasn’t anything to hear about him because there wasn’t anyone to tell of him. No one spoke of the Collector. They assumed the fog disappeared because it had to, or perhaps they didn’t bother to think about it. They assumed the lighthouse remained lit because it had to, or perhaps they didn’t care enough to consider why.

The people of the bayside town were daytime folk. Lawrence was nighttime folk. They needn’t worry what happened under the moon. Lawrence needn’t consider what occurred under the sun.

The city worked because it worked. The ships sailed because they sailed. The markets bustled because they bustled. It was as simple as that. No need to consider “why” or “how.” It just *did*.

“Don’t you need credit?” Judy asked. “Or coin? My daddy makes some of that when he does his cleaning.”

Lawrence smiled. No need for credit. No need for coin. He shook his head: *no*.

“My mommy and daddy always argue about that kind of stuff, anyway.”

Her feet dangled over the edge for a bit longer. The fog had almost dissipated, and she could see the endless waters ahead, unobscured. The moon reflected off of the sparkling water. The dark waves lightened into white splashes as they hit the docks.

“Well,” she picked herself up. “G’night.”

From her nightgown’s pocket she procured a small, silver coin. She flipped it, the moonlight glinting across its face for a fraction of a second before it spun and settled at Lawrence’s feet.

“I know you don’t need it,” Judy said. “But thank you.”

It was those last two words, a simple phrase he’d seldom heard and only imagined, that caused Lawrence to smile wider than he ever had in his long, lonely life. Happiness filled his heavy heart. Tears filled his tired eyes.

He supposed it couldn’t hurt after all.

Lawrence gave Judy a small nod as she skipped away back to wherever she called home in the bayside town. The Fog Collector finished his job, carrying his machinery back to the lighthouse. He climbed its spiral steps and attached the copper-plated chamber next to the light’s mechanism. The dial fell as the collected wisps of swirling fog emptied, and the beacon brightened.

As the sun rose that morning, our newly named Lawrence drifted off into his joyful sleep, smiling as he entered the endless world of dreams. He ended perhaps the happiest night of his life. An interaction that seems so simple to you and me was beyond monumental for a man like Lawrence.

While he would not wake at twilight, his memory would not fade; neither would the beacon of his lighthouse. For he remained locked in the heart of young Judy, the one who gave him a name, coin, and friend just before he left the docks to collect the fog amongst the stars. And his light still guides the lost to shores where they may be found.

# MY GRANDPA MADE ME HATE LA

...

TAYLOR SKORUPA

*My* grandpa spoiled me with mud, muck, and rain.  
I love it all in the forest where we would play  
'Miles' of uncharted woods where we reigned.  
We'd see wings in the tree, but we were bird-brained.  
Those acres made a fraction of a mile but my grandpa made it my whole world.

We were young, grandpa and I.  
Him at heart and me at the time.  
I jumped from logs filled with moss into the sky.  
He'd look for secret treasure and only find slime.  
"Let's call it your place in the forest. Taylor's Logs," my grandpa said to me.

We got home that night, beaming with delight.  
Grandma asks about our day. That's when grandpa couldn't stop!  
He'd chatter and I'd twitter. Suddenly, the world wasn't bright.  
Night had fallen and food was on the tabletop.  
We left grandma exhausted with our words of a world in the woods.

I grew older; our adventures became slight.  
His heart stayed the same and mine left for LA.  
I traded my leaves and green and clouds for its streets and smog and light.

the city was so big and filled with small dogs  
i basked in the glory, striding out, and taking names  
the locations i'd lose myself in, places I've never seen  
i'd look at the streets and no longer saw our trees,  
then I remembered to breathe.

la grew monotone  
even gray would shame  
toy dogs can't hold your interest  
when you are away from your childish heart.

learning stars could change  
and refrain from light  
spending my nights alone  
watching sirens  
instead of us seeing a Great Hart

grew up longing for cities and luxury.  
Discovered he presented it already—  
My grandpa that taught me to love it all

but my grandpa made me hate LA.

# ANTHOLOGY

...

ERIANA MUÑOZ

*You* taught me what it meant to be a great liability  
when we went on that fishing trip. I  
don't remember my childhood,  
only the good bits.  
Everything is all fun and games  
until you capsize the Jeep  
in a swimming pool.

*The world was flat until someone took a boat trip—*  
or so they say.

You make me feel like I'm being interrogated, patronizing  
tone and all. It doesn't go unnoticed.

When do you stop reaching for  
your mother  
and instead reach for a gun?  
It is my nature to destroy the things around  
me.  
I'm an additional casualty.  
Jesus is my mom/my mom is Jesus;  
She teaches me how to fish, how to live.

I find it hard to breathe,  
my words losing themselves in  
the waves.



LINE LIGHTS • IAN PIEXOTO



# I WENT TO PRAY IN HOLLYWOOD

...

PETA JOLLY

A fairytale book blessed by a priest can now be considered a bible. Not because it was blessed by a priest, but because I consider it so. And so I read many things, considering them to be the words of the One God. I make sure to capitalize his name when writing. When writing his name. His name. *His*. And so anyway, I met god on the train home last night, manspreading in the seat next to me. Sunken eyes, laced with veins and what looked like 40 years, undressing me beneath my clothing. Maybe if I had lingered too long, he'd have taken me to heaven. And so anyway, I met god at the steps of a church in Hollywood, she sat wrapped in third-hand sheets, quarters at her bare ankles, a shopping cart of home to her right. I wondered if she could tell me the store in which you buy a home. She could not. Pennies slithered through her protruded knuckles; the priest tells her to move.

And so I had decided I had met god enough.

But it was not until Saturday that I had begun to believe again, when I came upon biblical passages in the boy's breathing, and omens in my fingers on his palm. If man created God, then man must have the audacity to play the part. And so there is no god, a statement less powerful, given its overuse, its erosion, and many run-on sentences ignited by such a statement. And so I will make sure to never say that there is no god. I will never speak of it again, it being that there is no god. And what a foul statement it is, to believe that we are holy and yet made of holes. I thought I had seen a little scratch of nothingness under her rib cage as she undressed, but I figured it was probably nothing.

## ALL BITE

...

ANTOINE CORBANI

*It* was the strangest thing, finding the body lying on the floor as the German Shepherd proudly sat there, panting quickly but not too loud, perhaps out of respect for the dead. I was always assured by the other dog owners in the neighborhood that Boris was the most well-behaved boy there could be. “He wouldn’t hurt a fly” or “he loves his papa” and so on. Which is why you can imagine my shock when I saw his papa, Mr. Gil Whitacre, motionless and with a neck freshly ripped open by something that could only be (in my non-existent experience with forensics) the jaws of our supposedly “good boy” Boris. That was my lead, in any case, when I had walked in through the front door minutes earlier with a bag of homemade cinnamon raisin bagels in my hand.

Gil was the first person I properly met when I’d just moved into the neighborhood, about six years ago. We actually met when he was walking Boris. I was just in the middle of painting my mailbox a darker shade of blue (the previous homeowner seemed to care very little for it and left a dilapidated, ugly shell of a thing for me to fix up) when I felt something brush up against my lower right leg. Out of surprise, I ended up almost tripping over the can of paint I was using, but I managed to maintain my balance by grabbing onto my mailbox and almost ripping it right off its fragile wooden post. The downside, in turn, was having my hand covered in paint, and only then did it occur to me that it was a

rather unappealing, uninviting color to use, for my future guests, that is. I didn’t mind the color myself, but it almost seemed too dark, so much so that maybe even the mailman would refuse to deliver my things.

From a few paces behind me came a laugh. The dog was still inspecting my leg with its black muzzle as its owner approached. Maybe it was because I was new to town. Maybe it didn’t like strangers.

“You’re new here, aren’t you?” The man asked, still chuckling from his dog’s curiosity and my awkward maneuver.

“I am,” I replied, reaching out my hand to shake his, before retracting it once I remembered it was smothered in paint. This proceeded to make him laugh even harder. “Oh.”

“That’s alright,” he said. “What brings you here? And don’t tell me it’s for work.” He was right. It seemed odd to move into the suburbs like this looking for work.

“Oddly enough...” He went right back to laughing. The red and black of his heavy flannel jacket seemed to pop out more when he laughed. He was your typical country man. The jovial type. Glasses, thick but neatly cut white beard... “Well, not really. I’m a writer,” I told him. “My sister lives nearby and her husband is pretty sick, so I’m staying here for a while to...you know, help her cope.”

“I see. What kinda writer?”

“Historical fiction, mostly. I do short stories too.”

By now he could probably tell that I was uncomfortable. (After all, it's not every day that someone delves so deeply into your personal life.) He seemed genuinely curious about my occupation and my previous whereabouts, however, and I appreciated his attempt at making a warm welcome for me.

"I'll get outta your hair for now. My wife and I are right down the street," he motioned his hand towards the far end of the block. "So give us a ring if ya ever need anything."

I thanked him for the offer.  
"Name's Gil."

As the days went on, I began seeing Gil more often. His walks with Boris followed a rigid schedule. One walk in the morning at ten, then a second walk in the afternoon at three, and a final walk in the evening at eight. If you lived in the neighborhood, you were bound to see the two walk past at some point in the day. Sometimes I would join him on a walk, mostly out of boredom. I had a lot of free time. My sister rarely called; she was dealing with it well, I could tell. Occasionally, Gil would ask me a question or two, but the outings were for the most part silent. He seemed different from the man I had met on day one. I found out from a neighbor that he was stationed in Vietnam and never fully recovered, psychologically speaking. I never bothered asking him about it, as I eventually began to enjoy our daily walks and didn't want to sour anyone's mood.

The walk would always follow the same trajectory: cross the street from Gil's house, walk in a straight line for about three quarters of a mile, then cross again and make a U-turn back home. Like a rectangle. Some could say boring. This would never change. There wasn't much to be appreciated on the trail, besides a fancy willow tree in one of our neighbors' front yards, but the area was progressively becoming more and more homely.

One afternoon, as we were nearing the end of our walk, Gil invited me over for dinner.

"Come over and have something to eat tonight, will ya?"

"Sure," I replied. I had the impression that I replied faster than I could think. It felt strange.

"You're not allergic to anything, are ya?"

"Not that I know of."

"I'll see you at seven then." And then he was off. Boris followed suit.

I showed up five minutes early, dressed in an outfit that was somewhere between smart and casual. A polo layered with a sweater and a pair of khakis. I rang the doorbell and knocked at the door, just in case the doorbell didn't work (it was a surprisingly common occurrence in the neighborhood). Gil opened up.

"You're here early."

I was bewildered. Was it that big a deal? "I am?"

He began to laugh again. Old Gil was back. He invited me in.

Their entry room was nothing to get excited about. A doormat reading "HOME SWEET HOME" gave way to a similarly unpleasant oriental carpet just feet away. It seemed unnecessary with an already carpeted floor. A small table with what appeared to be framed family photos sat near the door, as if waiting for a personal greeting. Gil offered me a beer.

"No thanks. I don't drink," I told him.

"Ya don't?" It sounded like he'd never heard something of the sort before, but also like he wanted to stay respectful by concealing the level of confusion in the tone of his voice.

"I don't."

"What can I get you then?"

"Just water, thanks."

It was here that I met Gil's wife, Olivia, for the first time. She looked great for her age (mid-sixties, that is). Truth be told, she didn't look a day over forty. Smooth black hair and glaring

blue eyes that could stare through to the very fabrics of your soul. Gil had hit the jackpot, I'll tell you what.

Gil guided and walked me into the kitchen area where she stood over the counter, fixing something up for us. Steam rose into the air, emanating from a large red Dutch oven. You could tell she had a passion for cooking; the thick spines of cookbooks stood solemnly on their shelves, and she had one of those "Kiss the Cook" aprons on. Not that this implied a passion for cooking in itself, but it was this, combined with her slow, faintly cheerful humming and the manner in which her hands moved as she playfully grasped the pans, the pots, and other related paraphernalia that gave me that impression. It's a hard thing to describe, even for a writer.

She turned to face Gil and me.

"Hey there, boys. Go on and take a seat. It's almost ready."

She was obviously expecting me. I sat down at the table in the dining area facing the kitchen, while Gil was grabbing me a glass of water. The room itself was wide. Low ceiling, to the point that my head almost hit the doorframe on my way in. Boris was lying down in the corner of the room, on a cute little dog mattress too small for his size. At least he seemed comfortable. Gil quickly returned with my water and a can of Guinness.

"So how's the writing goin'?"

I'd forgotten what it was like for him to ask questions in such a short span of time. I stammered.

"What?"

"The writing. How's it goin'?"

"Oh, I'm not so sure..."

"Hmmm."

"I've been out of ideas recently. It feels like I have nothing to write about."

"Well, you write about history, don't ya?" He paused to take a sip of his beer. "Look at everything that's happened." He stretched out his arms and waved them around as if to demon-

strate the immensity of it all. I could hear Olivia chuckle in the back. To an extent, he was right.

"But couldn't that also be a problem? I have so much to choose from that I get overwhelmed. My job is to focus on the little things, the things people don't know about. That's what my readers want. Intricacies. Details."

He fell silent for a moment, then said, "I'm more of a thriller guy myself."

"Thrillers are good," I said with a false sense of enthusiasm to try and keep the conversation going. A few seconds later I realized this would fail. Olivia came over promptly, oven mitts on, holding the big red pot full of something that smelled divine.

"That smells great," I said.

"Oh, why thank you, darlin'."

The room suddenly felt a bit warmer. She slammed the pot down in the center of the wooden table with a loud thud and went back to the counter to retrieve plates and cutlery.

"Gil tells me all about you, you know."

This caught me off guard. "He does?"

"He does."

I looked at Gil and gave him a smile. He nodded and smiled back.

"Boris tells me all about you too."

"Boris?"

I looked at the dog. His ears perked up upon hearing his name, and he started panting. It looked like he was trying to smile, weakly. It was only then that I began to notice that the fur around his eyes and nose was beginning to age.

"Always. He's always out there near the front door waiting for ya. Always been a yapper, but since you started walking him with Gil it's been nonstop. Just look at him."

I did. He kept on panting. His dark brown eyes seemed like they were eager to tell me something.

"Anyway," she continued, "let's eat." She quickly set the table before opening the pot to reveal an immaculately prepared beef stew. It

was a dish my mother used to cook quite often, and one I was very fond of.

“This looks brilliant,” I said.

“Oh, darlin’.”

We ended up talking long into the evening, so much so that Boris, Gil, and I missed our nightly walk. Gil didn’t seem bothered by the matter. We discussed a plethora of subjects, but not without several occasional periods of drawn-out silence that were so typical of Gil’s and my conversations; city life versus the suburbs, our favorite game shows (Olivia especially loved trivia, I came to learn), why the weather was so gloomy recently... nothing particularly interesting or important, but it was enjoyable, nonetheless.

One particular episode that I remember vividly was when Olivia brought up Boris again. As we began to eat, the dog (whose nose was equivalent to a million of mine) also seemed to pick up on the deliciousness of the beef stew on our plates. So, as most dogs do, he eagerly stood up and approached the table, carefully, in a manner that wouldn’t alarm his owners nor his guest. Once near the table, he looked at each of us individually, first at Gil, then at me, then at Olivia, then back at me, then back at Gil, and started to whine, carefully, in a manner that wouldn’t annoy his owners nor his guest. It was a calculated move: he’d clearly done this before. And he was good at it. Unable to resist the simulated cuteness of what was basically her baby, Olivia took a tiny chunk of meat with her spoon and carried it over to Boris’ food bowl. His tail wagged back and forth with excitement; he knew that he had won.

“Enjoy it while you still can, my boy,” she said. “You’re gettin’ too old to be eatin’ all this crap.”

Gil flinched. Boris didn’t seem to care. He scoffed his treat down and returned to his mattress, aware that he probably wouldn’t get anything else.

“Would you please stop bringing that up, Liv?” Gil mumbled, avoiding my gaze. He clearly didn’t want me listening.

“All right, all right, hon. I’m sorry,” she replied, at a similar level of volume.

Gil remained quiet for the next ten minutes, by the end of which I decided it was time to see myself out. I thanked them both for their generosity and headed for the door, when I felt a hand on my shoulder. It was Gil. He grabbed my hand and placed a cold, metallic object within my palm. A key.

“It’s a spare... To the house,” he said.

I didn’t know what to say.

“Just in case you’d like to... Stop by again. See Boris or somethin’.”

I found his body a week later.

About half a year after the incident, I decided to write a short story about it. I went around discussing it with neighbors, asking for their reactions, or any related information. Of course, no one else in the neighborhood had seen the body, so the cause of death was a matter of speculation for many.

“I’d hear them arguing from time to time, Gil and Olivia,” my neighbor Sheila told me. “It could get pretty loud sometimes. Maybe it was too much for Gil to handle.”

Another theory that was frequently brought up was Gil’s trauma from the war. It seemed to be a well-known fact in the area that Gil suffered tremendously from his time in Vietnam.

“He always had a dog with him for support. But none were like Boris. Boris was special.

That boy, he sure was something to good ol’ Gil,” another neighbor named Joseph explained.

I’d lost touch with Olivia. She moved out of state immediately to stay with her sister, I think. Forever, she said. I can imagine why. She was

still sleeping when I found Gil. And needless to say, she didn't take Boris with her.

The neighborhood gossip went on for weeks. Vietnam, relationship problems, alcoholism... So much thrown around, yet none of them correct. Because I can tell you, when I opened that door to surprise Gil and Olivia with breakfast, with those embarrassingly sour and chewy cinnamon raisin bagels, I felt nothing but a pro-

found sense of understanding coming from the animal. Maybe he had gone mad, maybe he deserved to be put down for what he'd done. After all, how could an animal do such a thing to its owner? But all I could hear when I looked at Boris (whose muzzle was whiter than ever before), and when Boris looked back at me, back at everything I am and everything I would become, was: "he didn't want me to go first." And that was when I got it.

# PINK IS A SHADE OF RED

...

ANIKA BHATNAGAR

*I* write this from 40,000 feet high, my nails painted red.  
That bright and bold shade that you first saw when I said the word red.

My fingertips, stained rust with pomegranate leaves, tracing down my palm  
where a lotus heats the center with the warmth of red.

My fourth finger still tinted from the paste  
I pressed between my father's eyes, a strong red.

The stain on my cheek after my Mausi kissed me,  
the tone of raging femininity, the hue of auspiciousness, red.

Like the rose petals spread across the Arti where Lakshmi watched lovingly.  
A love deeper than what could ever be fathomed by the color itself, red.

The silver tray that had been rotated around her image, for years before, held a flame  
whose burn we swept over our heads, and its promise felt red.

When they told us "girls should like the color pink,"  
my sister asked them, "What is pink but a shade of red?"

As we lit each diya from the cotton wick that sat in a clarified pool,  
our dupattas dragged behind us, their beads singing— ignorant of the bitterness transpired.

Throughout the night, the soft lights humbly cleansed our home of the cuts  
we had spit at each other. Hurt hovered in the corners, and it still bled red.

It was splattered like a decoration every October, November, December. I tried to scrub  
it away with my washcloth, but was left soaking in a tub of watery red.

The blood didn't affect them like it did me.  
I always felt like blue in a family of red.

The pisces in my moon called me away from the flame, and they didn't understand that.  
They overlapped stories with passion, and danced with the energy of a sun blossoming red.

But when I sat with my ma and sister, and spoke about everything that existed  
between something and nothing, it fed my blue soul a warm, wine red.

Just like we did the other night on that street downtown,  
when the tea was hot and the birch leaves fell over our season of red.





SELF-PORTRAIT • JESSE-ANN TIPE

# ROOTS THAT BLEED

...

IZABEL MAH Y BUSCH

*My* fingertips were stained with the smothering  
smell of *her*—garlic, soured and worn. The root's  
pungent scent blunted by the following

morning. Sore weathered eyes watched and hung fruit-  
less behind yellow crusts—fatigue, exhaustion—  
from unsaid, unowned shadows, disputes

left out to bleed and soak. Stained threads were spun  
about the pads of oblivious fingers.  
In my unconscious gaze, the smell beckoned

me back. A new breath pulled quick to reassure,  
convince a loose lolling mind to steady.  
A practice bound in keeping, in the blur-

ring of pain, repeating distress, envy  
in its refusal. You, I couldn't refuse.  
Just as *her* silhouette whispered in yolky

light, frames about me at the crack of the plea-  
ing root, garlic, split green spent and worn in-  
to the threading of my fingers. Clammy  
and pulled, rusty frayed ends for the next of kin.

I WANT MY FRIENDS TO BE  
PURPLE FLOWERS

...

LOUIS YANUGGI

*Purple* flowers are dizzy,  
asleep on the dipped  
flat-leaf tree knocking  
quietly against the stiff  
winter stucco.

Some desert for bees to swab,  
the walls will thaw  
for bears to lick, butts to sting.

For now, a blackberry  
blooms in January  
and tastes like firewood, the  
charred remains  
of a hearth blaze

glazed in ash,  
the guarded throb  
of life persists,  
a winter coat  
of black bulbs  
clings to a  
stem, cowering  
in shivers.

The purple flower  
scratches at the wall  
like a matchbox,  
soul flame burning

on the sap end  
of a spring prayer,  
a vibrant cast  
into the vicious snap  
of insomniac cold,  
as if to cry out  
in the color of its sharp  
shaped petals,  
*to bloom*

*is to die*  
*in one swift, snarling wind,*

*but to preserve*  
*in a prison of fruit*  
*is to lose the affirming combat*

*that breathes*  
*the breadth*  
*of Humanity*  
*in the reaching pistil*

*of a courageous flower.*

# THE FALLS

...

ANTONIO RADIC

*Blue* is the neon feller on the horse, coughing up some Venusian clouds, you know, some festival of the dead who pass over to haunt the winter of the polar ice caps. This is because

Blue is only Blue, when, you know, up is down and down is up, and humans stop waging war for a peace everlasting twenty and five painterly digits. It is the girl chasing bears and dogs and

cerulean waterfalls—avatars of some billion-year-old plan depicted on a Venetian diptych that maybe a monk or priest or injured cottontail painted while in prison. I heard that girl blew up her cloistered

ambitions. She rode her own horse down to Mars. The rickrack of stars and comets, she told me, sounded like the prelude that Bach never wrote. Of course, she caught a bounty, but Blue is nothing except everything that is not

and moreover, simply mad. Blue is the bow string belonging to the solar hunter chasing after her, and she licks it because it tastes delicious. Now, I know that Blue is the blooming of the drums and the fugue of flexible dreams. But what is it

exactly that you know? Do you know! I know you know, Dumbo.

Dumbo.

Blue is the baby.

Blue is the pacifist.

Blue is the little boy  
I killed.  
Blue is me hearing  
the god you confess  
at to cry for your sins.

It is never again getting to shake off the hair you shed on me or asking if you're hungry.

It is the girl chasing polar bears, cars, and  
cerulean waterfalls, avatars that some monk in  
prison drew up, banished from a fluid home  
world that no longer exists because, you know,

Blue, when closest to the heaviest star, makes  
time shorter for people at the at the bottom. So, I can't  
ever reach you, and I scream.  
And you die.

A Blue death,  
before my first-ever breath.

# THE NACREOUS CLOUD

...

THOMAS FARMER

*The windows* of office buildings began to swell with yellow light. The sky moved steadily on toward the next day.

A young man walked out the 24hr supermarket with a green bag. Dark bottles pressed against the thin, lime-colored plastic and clinked quietly, their sounds lost under the shuffling of the city.

It was a few days off Christmas and the streets were busier than usual. Families with dogs and prams were all over. Everyone wore hats and jackets so their faces were slightly obscured.

The cold air made skin rosy and breath cloudy. The young man walked the avenue, his bag brushing his leg, swinging like a pendulum.

He looked up at the tall office buildings and imagined what it was like to work up there; to have a team of people working for him, knocking on his office with questions, complaints and ideas.

Over a cup of cold, half-drunk coffee he'd tell them they were brilliant and that the office couldn't contain their minds. They should be in Paris or Tokyo with the real future-makers but that, for now, he was grateful to have them.

He turned a corner that would make his walk home longer, unconsciously following the direction of the rolling sky pulling itself to the West. People moved past him, lost in their own days.

He made eye contact with a mannequin modelling a wool jumper in a shop window. The mannequin wore it well. He crossed the bridge and thought it was strange no one else seemed

to notice the cascade of technicoloured luminescence that chased the falling sun.

The sky wasn't usually this colorful. Maybe they'd seen it but didn't care to stare. Maybe the sky was always this colorful but chose to reveal itself to certain people on certain days. He experienced these thoughts like fleeting sprites, like tiny fruit flies barely able to live an hour but managing to reproduce their essence across infinity.

A young girl in a red jacket carrying a football bumped into the man's leg and stared at him. He stared back and gently waved the hand holding the bag. The bottles clinked again.

She ran off to her parents standing in shadow at the end of bridge. He thought of his own parents. He hadn't talked to them in a while. He thought to take a picture of the nacreous sky and send it to them, but his phone was dead.

Would the sky carry his thoughts to them? The nebulous colors lingered there as though trapped by his inaction. It felt some cosmic gesture had to be made by a man alone on a bridge before the colors could follow their own destiny.

He stared upwards. The longer he looked at the colors, the more he thought of his parents. Then slowly, all of his family. His aunts, and grandparents, and siblings, and cousins. He thought of friends he'd admired, and one's he'd secretly disliked. He thought of dogs and cats and neighbours and endless crushes. They all blended in his mind like the sky's chroma.

He thought of the city and how it had changed. Cleaning itself and growing, rounding into the green hills, roads, and farms that surrounded it. The sky colors stared back at him. He felt close to an epiphany, but also weary. He was not sure he wanted an epiphany. Things are painful as are, new labyrinths are tiring. Sometimes it is best to walk on, to dream of office buildings. The young man left the sky and walked home.



SKY BIRD • MADELEINE MISNER



# INSTRUCTIONS FOR VAN GOGH:

...

MADELEINE MISNER

*Get* out of your head and onto the street, lamplights must glimmer across your shores, distract by rubbing your thumb in the yellow, swirl the paint-dripped pad onto canvas, caressing the night like wiping an eyelash off a lover's cheek.

To get out of a room you must paint it—  
Distort the walls but keep the color pattern. Realism is the child's first introduction to art: a quaint room where the washcloth soaks in a lukewarm bowl, the side table for your dirty hands.

To love, cut off your ear.

A pig blanket wrapped around the soft spot of a child's wet head. Jammies are tight around her calves, her pinks glowing, sweating. She's a cherub sleeping, a pixie in just one of the unfurled petals of the Bulb Fields. Safe. Warm.

A skinny tree held together by two wooden dowls. No, now it flowers magenta and bees flock to the falling pollen behind the window. Always behind a window, still in the air.

It's Christmas and the tree has multi-colors for the first time, like that one movie of a real family. Red, green, blue, yellow. Glowing like cataracts at night or putting on Dad's old glasses. Maybe this isn't just one scene, maybe there's no specific reference, but the whole canon.

Along the café blue, under one of those famous awnings, the sidewalk is oil residue reflecting a dark, cellophane sky. Skin feels like the verge of mist smells, like doused cigarettes.

Listen to it, the night is calling.

It's all stained on the palm of your hand.

# A WORLD IN COLOR

...

TIFFANY OGUNSUA

*So* colorful,  
this burst of monochrome.

Bleak-cast  
I trudge through,  
trying to get through the days.

But,  
this sensate world  
only propels

pain after pain.

The world gluts  
on this polycyclic undoing,

mine,  
society's.

Later,  
I'll lie below the open window,  
human remains on my tongue

and wonder,  
is that snow that drifts in?

Or ash?

Life had flowed  
grayscale  
in slow-motion,  
time lambently touching  
the black and white hues

which glowed

on contact.

My violable chroma  
sang.

I smiled at her  
when suddenly

I was thrust  
into saturation.

*And everything's  
devastatingly  
fast paced.*

*I entreat my  
bloodlust*

*to remain  
chaste.*

*But hunger rips  
and gouges  
out wit—*

*what is this??*

*and—*

*The blasts*

*blurred vibrance  
pale in my eyes.*

*The flash*

*of exposed arteries*

*across black sky.*

*Ah,  
so this is how  
the world was drained of its hue...  
exsanguination.*

...

...

Hungover,  
from delirium,

I ride the come down,  
dissociate.

In subconscious  
I walk through  
the gray light hue

of memory,  
drifting,

and to the outposts of color  
I cling.

*Still under the window*

*the ash falls on my lips  
and teaches me  
the harlequin*

*of carnage.*

I resample  
genocide,

develop my palette,  
it's an acquired taste,  
human flesh;

I learn  
morals are better depicted  
in shades of gray.

Things are  
no longer  
black and white.

I sit,  
settle

in this colorful world.

# CIRCE SPOKE TO ME ON A BAD TRIP

...

CHRISTIANNE TUBOLA

*woke* up this morning drenched in a pool of piss  
stained floral sheets my grandma  
bought from chadwick's  
and two bruises  
two different  
colors on  
my knee.

i kept yelling out names i never  
knew i still remembered  
stuck in remnant dreams  
recurring landscapes  
still persist.

hot oil spills  
down a burrow and  
the mice are still inside  
but i *don't* want to hear another  
word of getting

better

makes me  
sick so just

leave me alone.  
but don't forget  
to feed my cat &  
flip a coin  
decide if you want  
to love me  
past tonight  
or stay again  
tomorrow.



MORI'S ROSE • ALEXANDER ELROD

# MORI'S ROSE

...

IAN PIEXOTO

- I -

I understand that this story will be considered unbelievable. I think my reputation as an author of tall tales and fantastical epics will only hinder my efforts to convince the world that what I have seen was real.

Sometimes, fact is stranger than fiction.

I have the reputation of a “bad writer.” Critics call my work an “acid reflux of words” or an “overprivileged abomination of prose.” My writing is too “unimaginative,” “off course,” or “a reminder of why writing is considered a salient artform.”

So why should you believe I would be able to conjure these claims? Could someone so “unimaginative” weave such a tale? I’ve got you there, haven’t I?

All of this is to say that this journal will serve as a record for myself more than it could ever serve as my next piece of fiction. My memory is jumbled, so I must align my thoughts in any way I can. If I ever find my way back, I hope these thoughts can be researched, studied, and analyzed.

So, no matter your interpretation, I think it’s best to start at the beginning.

I don’t know how I got here. For all I know, I slipped. I fell. I took a tumble. I don’t even know what to call “here.”

The last thing I can recall is sitting in front of my desk, the breeze blowing through the open window as I stared at my sandy green typewriter. And I had a cup of tea. I always have a cup of tea.

Next thing I remember, I spiraled through the great emptiness of the universe.

My reality and perceptions collapsed in on themselves. I saw what must have been stars, unfathomable celestial bodies, and trails of extraplanetary gases all pushing the threshold of reality. Expanding, expanding, expanding...

It never ended. The infinite spiral stretched onwards, and I was at its mercy. I was a shirt tumbling in the wash, drowning in deluges of detergent-spiked water.

Then, I found myself in a garden. The smell of sweet fruits and flowers enamored my senses. Beds of blooming flowers surrounded me in eruptions of vibrant, natural beauty.

As I looked for the source of birdsong, I realized the garden was indoors. A tiled mosaic ceiling, depicting fractured, spiraling tiles of maroon and sapphire blue, stretched above me. The room was as large as an airplane hangar and just as tall. Archways lead to a beyond.

Something more than the garden.

Pillars of the same maroon bricks divided the flora by color. The blues on one end. The reds on another. The greens, yellows, and everything else stretching out in between. In the center was a singular bed of deep violet flowers. They all shifted to a phantom breeze, a haunting dance within the eerie emptiness of the room.

The garden exudes a forbidden feeling, as if I am trespassing beyond the territory reality is meant to bind me to. I don’t belong here. I’m an

anomaly. I'm a blemish in an otherwise flourishing garden of perfection. I've been taken out of the wash, folded, and placed into a wardrobe—and quite the wardrobe it is.

I think I can call “here” Eden, the forbidden garden beckoning me with its forbidden fruit.

- II -

To understand Eden, I need to be curious. Experiment. Explore. It might entertain.

I'll have to move past asking questions of where I am and intend on discovering how and why “here” exists. One must always think beyond the shadows in the cave and begin to see the realities beyond.

I have concluded that I've found myself stuck in some sort of limbo; an in-between.

I was writing before I slipped. Eden is a part of this limbo, the forbidden and tempting perfection that surrounds me now. Perhaps I was stuck in between an idea's conception and the crippling self-doubt which is always soon to follow. I've been tucked into a pocket of imagination—my own entrancing, infinite daydream.

And perhaps daydream isn't the right word. I can safely call this limbo a reality. It is too oppressively vivid. The fact that I'm able to write tells me that I am too in control of my own thoughts and motor-functions for this to be a dream.

So, for my first experiment within the limbo, I have decided to pluck a flower.

*I take Eden's forbidden crop.*

*The garden beckons no God-fearing man. Fear only exists on exit. For knowledge spawns fear, and from Eden knowledge begins.*

- III -

*Petals of the bloom. The notes of nature's melodies. A sweet chorus makes a garden.*

I approach the violet roses within the center of the garden and break one at the stem.

I put it to my nose. It is sweet. The sweetest

flower I think I've ever smelled.

Looking at its petals, I notice the way they spiral around themselves. Spirals.

Eden has offered me its first clue.

There are spirals on the ceiling, spirals within these flowers, and I have spiraled through the ever-expanding universe to get here. The limbo must have an affinity for the shape.

I'm traveling on a spiral of my own, I suppose. My curiosity is never ending, yet I'm determined to find its center. Is there a center?

Spirals are never something I've considered to have significance, but the more I reflect on the shape, the more I begin to associate it with things. It's my writer's brain, looking for meaning where meaning might not exist. Everything must have a purpose. Every line, every word, every symbol typed onto a page must have some meaning. Right? This symbol must have a meaning. I can't seem to figure it out. Perhaps I'm traveling on this spiral. Am I trying to find the center? Are my research and my experiments somehow bringing me to the center?

I'll explore. I'll see what I can find. There are doorways, archways from this garden. The rose will travel with me. I'll see what I can find.

- V -

*Hecate's crossroads. Crossed torches tucked in sconces. Their flames don't flicker. They wait. I squint. Then they dance. Taunt.*

*Taunt.*

I am not prepared for the maze of hallways beyond my Eden. For a while, I think they might be endless. I've lost hope that there might not be something beyond the garden room where I have appeared. The spiral had no center.

But I've found something new. Another crossroad, but something far more promising.

I believe it's a train station.

The bench I'm sitting on is on a platform. Tracks, far too clean to resemble any from



the world I came from, stretch below me and through archways to my left and right.

Everything, yet again, is covered in tiles.

And more spirals.

They're taunting me now, mocking my delayed arrival to this new room. This new station. They watch me wait for a train they know will never come.

Before I began to write this passage, I took out my rose. It's started to wilt. I don't know how much time it took me to find this station, but I can tell by the dying rose that it did take some time.

Yet, I don't feel fatigue, hunger, thirst—I don't seem to be experiencing time. As I write this line, I desperately want to shiver, but I can't. I expect the itch to crawl back my back, allowing my muscles to tense and release. Eden denies me the cravings of reality, and in return, I am deprived of the relief that comes from appeasing them.

It doesn't feel right, it doesn't feel like anything I've ever experienced, and yet it's the only way I can seem to describe this sensation. However, I can stare into the spiraling petals of the rose, and I'm reassured that time is working its proper course. The rose is my anchor, my compass, Ariadne's string, as I navigate this labyrinth.

I have delved too far, my curiosity getting the best of me. I need to find the exit.

*Souls in life take strides. Their feet on the ground. Bare feet touching soil and green.*

*Souls in death float. Aimless. Lost purpose. Up or down? Left, or right? They drift. The breeze carries them. As the cords of control loosen, chaos is free to steer the ship. Down the river they go. Forever wading through waters.*

*Forever wading waters. Waking waters. Forever waking. Never waking. Waking. Wake.*

*Awake. I'm not awake.*

### - VIII -

The aimless trek continues.

The train station I've written about in my previous entry appears to be one of many.

Most of them are the same: empty, too clean, and devoid of any life or tether to time. I continue to cling to the violet rose, watching it wilt and shed its petals with an obsessed fixation. I fear if my grip loosens on its stem, I might slip and *spiral* just as I've done before. The rose remains my anchor.

This entry comes just after I've found something incredibly fascinating. Something different than the winding hallways, antechambers, and stations I have come across so far. I've found a room at the end of a particularly long hallway.

Eden has rewarded me, it seems, with this wondrous change in scenery. The room is in the shape of a square, wood paneled walls and floors giving it a cozy atmosphere. A fireplace dominates one side of the room, basking light and warmth across the several shelves lining the wood paneled walls. On these shelves sit various books and art pieces, some of which seem familiar to things I've seen; others feel birthed from another world, their scribbles and styles unlike any earthly works I've come across. In the center of the room sits a strong, sturdy desk. Its wood has a natural sheen. Its leather-backed chair looks well-worn with age. On top of it sits a cup of sweet, steaming tea.

It feels like it would be a room in a cabin, tucked away, solitarily, in a forest. Nature leaves the structure untouched yet the cabin itself is built from its Sundered trunks. From the labyrinth, the limbo, comes a sanctuary. I have not escaped the limbo, but I have found solace within it.

Eden has provided me with a gift.

But when I first enter the room, I quickly realize I am being watched.

Two hazel eyes, tucked into a shadowy flash of fur, watch as I explore my new surroundings. The cat moves towards me immediately, rubbing against my leg and purring with content.

I wonder if it has met someone else before. And how did it get here itself?

Nevertheless, the cat's presence calms my nerves. My mind no longer feels scattered. I navigate the tangle of hallways and crossroads and finally reach a safe haven—an oasis within a mindscaped desert.

The only thing here which unnerves me is the small doorway tucked between the shelves. It has a brass knob and a dark finish to its wooden frame. Various symbols are carved into its grain. Among them, of course, is a spiral. It appears that even in the sanctuary, I cannot escape its gaze. I'm afraid to open it, to shatter the safety I've found for myself, to unleash whatever might be beyond it.

Alas, I'll rest for now.

I look at my rose. Most of its petals are lost. I find a pitcher of water on one of the shelves. I gingerly place the rose in the water. Already, the flower's condition seems to improve. Its violet color retakes the browning.

I'll be staying here until I can figure out a way to escape this limbo. Perhaps the texts and artwork might provide me with clues. The cat can keep me company. I can think properly in this space. The fire, the sweet tea... it feels like I'm a step closer towards home.

*Rest.*

- XIII -

*The door.*

It taunts me now.

I have found my oasis, yet the door still tempts. I feel the wood-paneled walls trapping me within. I itch with curiosity. Perhaps whatever is beyond the door is something even more comforting. A greener pasture.

Oh, but the grass is always greener.

It would be so easy! Just a peek! Just a glimpse into whatever could be beyond that brass door-knob. Just one twist and whatever is beyond it is mine to behold.

The cat enjoys my company, at least. It seems

content. It doesn't care about the door. In fact, it might fear the door. That's a sign. I should follow that sign. Don't open it.

The violet rose still blooms brighter than ever. It's thriving in this oasis. My compass points north.

*The door is south. The door shall remain shut.*

- XXI -

I've opened the door.

I gave into all the greed, the temptation, I silenced my conscience in favor of my curiosity.

And it killed the cat.

Within the small alcove the door revealed a man. Old. Shriveled. Paranoid.

He grabbed the cat and strangled it. The quarrel knocked over the pitcher and my violet rose now sits within a puddle, its colors refracting off the broken glass.

And the man scares me. He's telling me things, telling me he knows a way out of this place.

He's confirmed my suspicions about how time works. I cannot experience time in the limbo. I was clever enough to figure that out on my own.

*But the rose could, yet now it lies forgotten on the floor of the oasis.*

He warned me the oasis was intoxicating. He called it the library. It held a collection of knowledge and research from one of the previous wanderers of the labyrinth. He had found it as well, curating some of its artifacts and adding to it whenever he could. He assumes other wanderers had added to it as well.

But he warned me we would have to leave, so we left.

I asked why the cat must die. He said it's because it follows.

And that's when I'd figured it out. Before he even had a chance to give his speech, the explanation he's likely been planning in the silence of sleep for countless days, months, years, millennia, I'd figured it out myself. I understood Eden.

Time doesn't function for me, but within the limbo, I am the harbinger of time. When I stepped into the garden, the flowers were allowed to sway. When I stepped into the library, the cat was able to exist. Like opening the box to view Schrödinger's cat. But perceiving it allowed its time to tick, it allowed it to die. Its time ran out, cut short by the man left outside of his cupboard.

My *perception* of time is what allowed for time to flow. Time started again for them. The cat waited for me. So that meant the man waited for me as well.

The man told me he was the old wanderer of the limbo. It seems to take in one person at a time, one person to perceive it and let time eat away at it.

But this man, he said he had to test his theories, his theories about how time worked in the limbo. He put himself to sleep, concocting a sedative out of flowers and plants found in the various gardens of the labyrinth. And then he slept. He slept and he waited for the next wanderer to come across him in the limbo. Because within sleep, he could no longer perceive. He could only dream. And the limbo shut down without his perception of it, without his perception of time.

Then I perceived it, and I opened his door and perceived his time.

But with two consciousnesses perceiving time and no rose to guide me—to keep me anchored to something consistent in the chaos of spiraling time—I find myself slipping.

*I'm slipping.*

*Panic crawling up the throat. A spider trapped in the windpipe. Eight legs clawing at the vocal cords, pulling them apart to escape.*

*It lays eggs, spreading its children throughout my insides. I shiver as they spin their webs and tighten their threads around my heart. I feel trapped. So very trapped.*

*Trapped trapped trapped trapped trapped trapped*  
trapped TRAPPED

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- XXXIV -

*His blood on my hands. He won't stop bleeding. He was useless to me. I killed the man. And now I am a god.*

*I take life, I bring life. I ended his spiral of time.*

*I killed but I allowed for others to exist, I allowed them to change.*

*I'm the god of this limbo. The deity it needs. The bringer of change.*

*Only what I perceive is what exists here. Existence is change. It unfolds as I command it, constructing something new with every corridor I explore.*

*I bring about the very change it needs. The change it craves, clawing to find its place on time's spiral.*

*It's all connected through me.*

*I will time and life around me, yet I am devoid of life and time itself, of experience. I experience no change. I can't call my own existence life. It is simply an existence.*

*I'm the unmoving mover.*

*The cat followed. The steam of the tea swayed towards me. The flowers—*

*The flowers.*

*My rose. I'd lost my anchor.*

*I'd slipped. I see it now. I've slipped.*

*His blood is on my rose. The sticky blood will not wash off me. It won't go away. He's stained me. He's stained my rose.*

*And he may have been my way out.*

*I thought the man was the source of my panic, his paranoia creating a concoction that*

had poisoned me. But now I know my mind has been poisoned of my own accord.

*I have no way out.*

- LV -

*Time is a spiral.*

*It's never ending, forever changing. It seems to repeat itself as it takes its turn, folding in and in and over and over itself but never repeating exactly. Instead, it continues onwards.*

*God is a spiral.*

*And perhaps there is a God. An unmoving mover. And perhaps this God's own perception of time itself is what allows for time to flow. Just as I perceive the limbo, allowing its change, so does God. Perhaps these are the rules. Rules written away in some library hidden within some room tucked away in some labyrinth.*

*God is the unmoving mover. The spiral of time. The spiral of endless change.*

*After having the spiral of time thrust upon my shoulders, I do not envy this God. I do not wish to have the weight of time thrust upon me as Atlas holds up the sky. No person should hold this responsibility.*

*So, God is not a person.*

*No. People make mistakes. People are flawed. People kill.*

*But God kills.*

*Time kills. God is time. God is change. Change kills.*

*The spiral kills.*

*"So God created man in His own image; in the image of God He created him."*

*We are a part of the spiral. Where does this end? Where is the center?*

*From the shell of a snail to the petals of a rose to the genetic makeup of our very DNA, the spiral persists.*

*We cannot escape the spiral*

*We cannot escape time.*

*We cannot escape change.*

*We cannot escape Him.*

*It's infinite. Endless. Unfathomable.*

*And yet I had fathomed it. For a short time, I had escaped change, escaped time. I became the unmoving mover.*

*And I killed.*

*Change kills. Time kills. God kills.*

*Is this how He feels?*

*Do His shoulders ache more from carrying the spiral or the guilt?*

*I suppose we could ask Atlas which shoulder aches more. I don't suppose there's a difference. It's all pain.*

*Change is pain. Time is pain.*

*Where is my rose?*

*The rose was change—it was pain—but I still craved it. Roses have thorns, yet they still smell sweet. Its change was familiar to me. As each petal shed, I could count my own seconds, minutes, hours.*

*The spiral continues. It never ends.*

*But won't humankind end? And with them gone, is there any time to perceive?*

*Won't God get lonely?*

*I'm lonely.*

*Here in this limbo.*

*The limbo.*

*Maybe I am God. Not just in the limbo.*

*Or maybe I am still Mori Green,*

*still craving the sweet scent of the spiraling rose.*

*Sweet sweetsweet sweetsweetsweet SPIRAL*

*There is no center.*

*Trapped.*

*I've trapped myself.*

*If I perceive no exit, it doesn't exist.*

# IN THE NIGHT I HEAR

...

CONNER WILSON

*All* trains are speeding, careless, to the same conclusion, so push back  
(*Life does fall*), squeezing against my spine, compressing the space  
between the seats. Nobody is here. Nobody can exist inside the borders  
of a song.

Darkness doesn't fall. It moves in waves from between the cars in the  
parking lot. All trains are mistaken, or they're right.  
(*Let me touch your shoulder*)  
Nobody knows, even us.

(*Believe my soul, slipping through teeth*)

Recklessness is starting to introduce  
himself. Idiots rush in. I am no idiot (*as  
you can see*) All trains are long gone. It's  
just me in here.  
All trains have to follow their tracks to the station.  
Your eyes aren't stars, or searchlights. They're more wondrous. They're eyes.

# THE WAYSTATION

...

THOMAS FARMER

*Bismillahi 'Rrahmani 'Rrahim*

*The* tram thread itself through concrete like a needle.  
Yesterday's tracks were the moon's tungsten, today, the color of  
a sun refracted across a lake's face. It was 9:03 and The Boy  
had no particular destination. Three had crossed  
his mind: the Consulate, the Citizens Hotel, Chinatown.  
All three. On the empty seat next to him was a newspaper  
smaller and yellower than any newspaper should be.  
The label read \$1.99. Brittle print warned of a new Ultra-Cancer  
resistant to modern medicine. More cancer.  
The car was only slightly filled: a sleeping vagabond wrapped up in a scarf,  
a neurotic mother playing with the zip of her daughters Patagonia.  
The Boy could feel an older woman's sour breath on his neck.  
At 9:13, the tram began its passage through the bay.  
The Boy lay his forehead to the plexiglass vibrations and watched  
the distant sea for whales.  
A tall man in thick black glasses and a navy jacket embarked.  
I am like you, The Boy thought, I must be like you.  
Watching the man, he considered that his love (if it was love) for the oncoming city  
was enshrined in a more subtextual love the for the tram,  
and that that love was ensnared by the dizzy romance of movement.  
He counted no whales as they cut through the grey-zone past the water.  
At 9:31, when the tram reached the stadium, a small crowd entered quietly.  
The Boy took note of their faces, one by one.  
In the blackness of the sea-tunnel, he wondered why he loved and why he hated.  
It was an assailing and constant thought making its daily rounds like the tram.  
He was outside of something. He was inside a tunnel under the sea now.  
How many polychrome utopias had he made in this damp seat and countless others.  
The Boy felt lucky he wasn't a fascist in his own head.  
Two stops from downtown he makes eye contact with her,  
catches her eyes. For the rest of the journey, they passed the gaze quietly.

# TWIN PHANTOMS IN THE NOBLE PARK LOBBY

...

THOMAS FARMER

*I* crouched in the shower like  
a Hollywood titan would crouch:  
so like a train ride in the country, the silver water logging  
my shouldered planet, beating, drilling—  
thinking of McDonald's and death,  
birthing many kinds of caustic thoughts—  
birthing the phronetic war on shower water,  
the corporeal lay of Hong Kong,  
many seafoods, the other sea,  
the eternal contradiction that cuts us all up, yes  
it's a lot

sometimes,

your mind splits. Twin phantoms in the Noble Park lobby,  
two bores at a party,  
alone on the couch,  
digging into the shared cerebrum.  
What shellac freaks nailing each other into  
a mentally ill void full of cheap beads and scrap paper.

Vampires became wormy parasites  
when culture met the computer, I says to make I feel rational.

In my stupor, it becomes clear to me...

A poem is like a drunk; so  
sure of himself,  
still a capricious mutt,  
still afraid of the march to twelve p.m.,  
the dread of checkout,  
a final glance at the seducing phantoms  
as you drag your bags through  
the vomit on your shirt,  
the lifted fountain,  
the Kowloon skyscrapers;  
*ride the storm*

*life goes on.*



BLUFF LAMPPOST • LOUIS YANUGGI



# NOW I KNOW

...

CONNER WILSON

*You* can't see fog in the dark,  
and there is no dawn beyond the far tower.  
There is just another hour of shadows,  
another hour of wet bricks,  
each after the other, lining the path  
that pushes towards your house.

Meanwhile, I am a straggle,  
stuck to the sole of a town.  
In the indivisible fog, dead urchins  
weigh their fates in imperial tons.  
Far away, I can hear the tide  
surrender to the cliff's rusty edge.

The far tower is a dead dog.  
You cannot hear its howl in the street,  
and its paw marks are faded in cement.  
Somewhere else, miles upon miles away,  
Arabian hawks pick at the bones of sparrows.  
Unlike poor us, sad us, they know what they've lost.

Finally home, you think of the ships you never saw,  
and you wonder how they have so quickly gone,  
and where they took their captains.  
No one has crests anymore.  
I live fifteen miles in the other direction.  
Your phone lets you know the road is blocked.

# EARTH — WHERE I GOT OLDER

...

PETA JOLLY

*This* past week has felt to me like it could've been a lifetime:  
Like I have felt my body be placed together piece by piece by the fingers of clouds.  
Born again, awaiting earthly arrival, thin uncreased skin, English still a foreign  
language, as if I was my own mother.  
But it was Earth where I got older.  
It was earth where time stitched itself into my side like a tumor.  
I learned that there is no difference between the sick and the healthy, that we are  
all dying, and in the meantime living towards it.

On Tuesday I was 54.  
My wife was sick, and I loved her.  
The hollows beneath my eyelashes, sockets of skin, creased like the dog-eared  
pages of her favorite books.

On Wednesday I was 12 years old, and the youth group leader told me there was candy in the  
other room.  
I swore I would never have children, but by 4 p.m. I was seeing them off to college—  
they were so grown up.

On Friday morning I led a youth group in prayer.  
35, beard of ingrown hairs, computer virus from the website I met my girlfriend  
on, mom's basement-shaped-casket—  
I told her there was candy in the other room.

Monday, Tuesday, Wednesday, I know that there are more days in a week but it has been so hard  
to remember lately.  
Like perhaps my memory has faulted with the disintegration and reconstruction  
of my body.  
I am not 17. I am much too old.  
And so this week has felt like a lifetime, or maybe several, it's been so hard to  
remember lately.  
Like perhaps my memory has faulted with the disintegration and reconstruction of my body.  
Yet I fear that has already been said.  
I put my dreams to sleep every morning when I wake up, so maybe some rest will  
do me good...  
As this week has felt like a lifetime.



CLOSE COWS • CHRISTIANNE TUBOLA

# THE GOD OF WAR: COWBOYS

...

COLETTE KANE

## *Boys*

Bulldogging  
Broncos bucking  
Babes with Babies  
Bully  
Budweiser.

Kicking to cull / Crying to kill  
Wrap me up  
with rope  
at the Rodeo.

Make me a man  
made of metal.

Bring me back to the bunny ranch  
where I won't bump into Mama.

Play with the pole  
To pick up pieces  
Of a home halfway.

Tin cans  
Take time  
To turn  
To truth

Outline the outer edges  
Of a gaping hole  
with red rust.

# THE TOWN WITH THE OLD WINDMILL AT ITS HEART

•••

BENNETT MEYER

*Everyone* in the town with the old windmill at its heart told me the Baron was invincible, but I reckoned I could kill him just the same. The Baron's fortress lay on the edge of town, cornered by jagged cliffs. Only way in was through the front door, but he liked it that way. He counted the guests. "Two in, one out, three in, four out." If there were a straggler, he'd know, and the Baron didn't take kindly to stragglers. The son of a bitch was heartless; he worked his people to the bone in the mines and chucked them over the cliff with the rest of the garbage when their bodies broke. But cruelty was a virtue in those parts, and the Baron had it in spades. People came from all over, hungry for a taste of his fortress and its treasures. *I guess I did, too.*

The town sat in the middle of a vast wasteland, its windmill a beacon for weary travelers. I had been wandering the desert's barren hills for weeks and ran low on supplies. Back then, the future seemed desolate; no one knew when the last remnants of civilization would collapse and humanity's time on this Earth would be up, so many of us packed up and searched for excitement. They called us travelers: selfish adrenaline junkies searching far and wide for a final hit to fill that hungry pit in the bottom of our souls. But, after months of coming up short, I was sure my journey was over.

Then, I crested one last hill and saw the most beautiful sight—the fabled windmill stood tall above the sandy dunes that encircled the lonely

town, its ancient frame glistening in the desert sun. The windmill seemed alien next to the rest of the town—comprised of frail wooden buildings that would surely collapse at the lightest blow. The windmill comforted me on that bleak day, but something about its presence seemed unwelcome. A steady wind flowed through the town, but the windmill's movements didn't match its pace. Its blades turned with a mechanical rhythm, clicking as they were rotated by some *unseen force*.

I made my way into town, legs aching and mouth dry. It was only in the local inn that I found some respite. I had heard stories about the town with the old windmill at its heart; some said it was just the marker on the grave of a dead city—*Sanfrinsisko*, they called it. Others claimed the town was once home to a greedy corporation that kept it alive after society collapsed through nothing but the power of its undying hunger. I reckon that's why the Baron made so much on those damn mines; machine scrap always paid well, and buried cities had more of it than anywhere else. Whatever the reason, the town was still living, beckoning me to come closer, to rest and stay for a while. So, I sat in one of the inn's worn booths sipping a pint when I overheard a conversation between the innkeeper and a man I'd never seen before.

"You mess with the Baron; you end up in the dungeon. You end up in the dungeon; you fall off the cliff. That's the way it's always been

here. Flint tried to steal from the Baron, and he got caught. One of these days, when he's feeling a little more vengeful than usual, the Baron will chuck him off his cliff just like everybody else," said the old innkeeper, who later introduced himself to me as Willy. "I'm sorry, but your brother belongs to the Baron now."

"Come on, Willy!" snapped the young man they called John, not taking no for an answer.

"There's got to be something we can do. Think, won't you!" He was desperate.

"I wish there was something I could do to help your brother. I was fond of him, too, but you can't take on the Baron! No one can! I feel for you, John. Flint was a good kid," Willy said mournfully.

At this moment, the challenge I first set off in search of—my purpose as a traveler—finally revealed itself to me. "The Baron..." I said, a hunger building inside me that I'd seldom felt before. "They say he can't die."

"Well, the old Baron's immortal, of course," Willy started. "He lived when the city buried beneath this town stood tall, and even now, his heart keeps ticking."

John exploded, "Willy! Can it! This doesn't concern him. You know how I feel about travelers." Willy sighed and shook his head. "Besides, you're right anyway. As long as the Baron breathes, my brother is as good as dead."

I had gotten my first taste of excitement, and I needed more. "I'll kill him," I said, licking my lips. "Tell me more, and I'll kill him for you."

John burst into laughter. "You? You wouldn't last a second with the Baron!" he mocked.

Willy looked down at his feet with sad eyes. "The Baron with a scrawny fool like you? He'd crush your skull to powder!"

John's laughter built until it filled the room, but when he saw I was serious, he composed himself and looked me in the eye with the utmost sincerity. "The Baron got my brother. Poor

guy snuck an old coin in his pocket from the Baron's private collection. Just a small one, but the Baron got him anyway. If you think you can get in there and see what happened to him, I'll reward you handsomely."

An enticing offer, but I hungered for more. "And what if I kill him?" I asked.

John snickered again. "Fuck it, if you kill him, I'll give you five pounds of machine scrap. The good stuff: computer chips and batteries—all in working order. You kill the Baron, and you'll be a hero in this town for the rest of your days." The deep hunger inside me looked up and smiled.

"Okay." I spat in my hand and held it out to John, who did the same. We shook, and it was a deal.

The first battle was getting into the Baron's fortress. On the first Sunday of every month, the town held a festival in the Baron's honor. He opened his doors for well-to-do guests from far and wide to come in and marvel at his collection. Then, as the evening sun set, they carried him around town in a portable throne for all to see. Those were the days that the townspeople feared most. As the Baron's servants paraded him through town, he inspected the streets for anyone or anything out of line. If a person weren't behaving right, he'd order one of his guards to shoot them in the leg, just as a warning. More than one warning, and he'd have you chucked off his cliff. Lucky for me, the Baron's next festival would be held two nights after I took up John's offer.

Now, I'm not the most put-together-looking fellow. After all, it isn't a traveler's job to sit and look pretty. But, to get into the Baron's place, I needed to clean up. I'd been carrying around this old suit in my pack that I used to use when I wanted to woo a lady, but I was past those days, and the thing was tattered. No way I'd get past the guards dressed like that, so I had to get my

suit fixed. There was no way I had enough scrap to buy a new one, and I thought it would do me good to talk to the townsfolk some more.

I thought Willy might know of someone who could fix my suit. The old man had been around a long time—he was hardened but exuded an undeniable warmth that put travelers at ease. “Well, sir, an old seamstress lives on the other end of town. Folks call her Ms. Petunia,” said Willy, happy to help. “She doesn’t work much anymore, but Petunia will do a bang-up job. Head towards the old windmill in the town center and keep going until you reach the house with pink windowsills by the river. That’s her place. You best keep an eye out, though; the festival is coming soon, and everyone’s on edge. The townsfolk don’t always take kindly to outsiders.”

I thanked Willy for his trouble and offered him a piece of scrap in return, but he turned me down. “I don’t do this for the reward—not anymore, at least. I used to be a traveler like you, but once I met this town and her people, I couldn’t leave. They needed respite—a place to get away from it all—from the Baron. If my inn can give them that, then I’ve done my job. Giving folks a nice warm bed and a cold pint to sip, that’s all the payment I need.”

I left the inn on the west side of town and started to Petunia’s place in the east. When I arrived the day before, the streets were lively, but today, they were dead. I noticed the old windmill again. It stood tall and lonely, dwarfing everything but the Baron’s fortress, which covered the whole town in its shadow. As I arrived at the foot of the windmill, I saw that its doors were chained and locked shut as if to keep everyone out—or something in. I followed the dirt road past the windmill toward the river that snaked across the town’s edge.

The east side of town was even more run-down than the west, with only a couple dozen houses on its dusty hills. Most looked shoddily

built, barely held together by rusty nails and wooden boards. Each was a different color, but the paint was chipped and faded. Folks on this end of town were farmers, but crops were scarce. The last vestiges of greenery were on life support, showered by makeshift watering machines strapped to plastic pipes that crawled onto land from the river. As I made my way to the town’s edge, I felt fearful eyes dig into me. People shifted in their homes, moving the curtains they had drawn tight ever so slightly. They did not wish to be seen, and I did not wish to bother them.

Petunia’s house was as far from the rest of town as possible, nestled against the riverbed. I immediately noticed the pink windowsills and knocked on the door, careful not to disturb the old woman. Suddenly, a small hatch in the door slid open, and a pair of beady eyes stared back at me. “What do you want?” said an old woman, alongside the click of a cocked gun.

“Willy sent me. He said you might be able to fix up my suit.” The old woman’s eyes softened at the mention of Willy’s name, and I heard her scrambling with several locks and keys before she finally opened the door.

“Come in,” she said. I stood there, letting the old seamstress do all sorts of measurements on me and my suit. When she finished, Petunia took my suit to a restored sewing machine, leaving me nothing to do but sit and wait. She was nice enough to whip up some hot coffee and bread to make the wait go by faster. “I reckon you’re trying to get into the Baron’s place. I say it’s best to stay as far away from him as possible,” Petunia warned.

“I’m going to kill him,” I said.

Petunia dropped her sewing needle to the ground in shock. “Kill him? You can’t kill the Baron—everyone knows he’s invincible. Don’t you know why the Baron wears a scarf around his neck?” I had heard the townsfolk say the Baron was immortal, but it seemed impossible.

I listened to Petunia's story with bated breath. "Many years ago, when I was a much younger woman, someone broke into the Baron's fortress to kill him. Poor fellow made it to the Baron's bedroom, too. He pulled out a knife and slit the Baron's throat in one cut, but it did nothing. The Baron erupted out of bed and strangled the man to death before he could escape. They say the scar still lies under the Baron's scarf. But it never bled, not one drop."

"How is such a thing possible?" I asked, bemused by the old woman's story.

"Well, the Baron has a lot of secrets," Petunia explained. "Of course, I don't know what they are, or they wouldn't be secrets, but this town is ancient. That old windmill has been here for as long as the Baron has, maybe longer. No one knows why, but the Baron keeps the windmill's door bolted, and he's the only person with a key. If you want to kill the Baron, you must get into the windmill. That's what I think, at least."

In a few hours, my suit was finished. I thanked Petunia and left, considering what she had said about the Baron, his immortality, and the old windmill. I knew I had to get in there, but first, I needed the key, which was surely hidden in the Baron's fortress. I returned to Willy's inn to thank him for his help and wash up for my appearance at the festival later that night. The streets weren't quiet any longer; folks walked back and forth, inspecting their homes and businesses for any imperfection that would anger the Baron enough to give them a warning—or worse.

Willy was delighted to hear that Petunia was okay. "You know, kid, Petunia and I used to be quite the couple when we were young. She was the most beautiful gal I'd ever seen, and I reckon she still would be if I made the trek to visit her, but things are different now. I've got my responsibilities, and she's got hers." I never got to check up on Willy and Petunia again, but

I left that piece of machine scrap I'd set aside on the inn counter when I left town, just in case Willy decided to get his clothes fixed again.

When the sky had its evening glow, I was waiting by the entrance to the Baron's fortress in my patched suit. Two guards stood at the front gate, carrying large machine guns made from the finest scrap parts one could find. They funneled the guests into a line, giving each of them a good look before letting them inside. I was worried about whether my looks would cut it, so I picked up a piece of shattered glass from the bushes and held it up like a mirror. I didn't truly recognize the majesty of the fortress until I saw it in the glass shard's reflection. The building was made from smooth white bricks, perfectly aligned and showing no wear. The roof was round and pointed like the top of a castle tower, and the tiles were a powerful crimson. The fortress was topped with a shiny golden flag that glowed with the sunset.

The guards gave me a close visual inspection, and just when I expected them to turn me away, I was ushered forward with the rest of the guests. The inside of the fortress was even more impressive than its exterior. The entryway opened into a long central chamber. Soft red carpeting covered the entirety of the floor, and tall glass cabinets filled up every wall, each encasing bottles of fine liquors and valuable artifacts from all over the world. At the end of the chamber sat the Baron, waving his hands and talking to the guests from his throne. He was tall and lanky with spindly limbs that mismatched a thick gut. He wore a red velvet robe and a long gold scarf that covered a neck too thin to support his bulbous face. His hair had been styled extensively, but it was a mishmash of various toupees stacked on each other, their varying colors unnatural on one head. His skin was pasty, and he had pale dead eyes that made me shudder.

As I studied the Baron from afar, a portly woman grazed one of the Baron's tables, shat-



tering a precious vase. Everyone went silent until the Baron turned his head and looked at the woman. With his nod, the guards ran from their positions and grabbed her, carrying her to the Baron's dungeon. In the chaos, I snuck into one of the halls that was blocked off before and began my search. Knowing my time would be short, I dashed through a maze of corridors, careful not to bump into any decor and alert the guards to my presence. I kept running, turning countless corners, until I reached an oversized door with gold handles that seemed particularly important.

I pushed the hulking door open only to be greeted with the Baron's bedroom. A giant bed raised several feet off the floor took up most of the room's space, and there was no ladder, which meant that the Baron's servants must have raised and lowered him into bed every day. Besides a window facing the cliffs outside, the only point of interest was a glass cabinet with an ornate wooden box inside. I ran to the cabinet, holding the shard of glass that I used as a mirror and had hidden inside my pocket before entering. In a swift motion, I wedged the glass shard into a gap in the cabinet and pulled, causing the locked door to snap open. I grabbed the box and ran to the window, knowing that there was no way I'd make it out the front door without being seen. The window opened easily, and I stepped out, carefully finding my footing on the rim of the fortress's backside.

The wind howled, chilling my ears as I tried to stay focused and steady. Slowly but surely, I reached the corner where a drainage pipe led down to a patch of tall grass. Without any time to think, I grabbed the box in one hand and the pipe in another, quickly sliding down before crawling through the bushes, careful to stay hidden from the guards. From what I could hear, they had yet to be alerted of my escapades and were preparing to bring the Baron out on his throne for the festival.

I rushed through the town toward the old windmill. People stood out in lines on both sides of the streets, holding decorated signs in the Baron's honor and smiling through their fear. Some of them broke their forward-facing stare to look at me, shocked that someone could be so reckless when the festival was about to begin. They silently warned me with their cold eyes. "Stop! What are you doing? If you don't fall in line, the Baron will punish us, too!" The townspeople's fear called to me, but the windmill was louder, and I kept running. Finally, I reached the foot of the old windmill at the town's heart and opened the box. Just as my instincts told me, I pulled out a golden key that matched the style of the lock and chains on the windmill's doors. I inserted the key, twisted it until I heard a click, and threw the doors open as the Baron's golden chains fell to the floor.

The inside of the windmill caught me entirely off guard. As soon as the doors shut behind me and the setting sun's light vanished, I heard an engine start and saw dozens of neon signs alight on the walls. They illuminated the windmill's strange chamber and the floating dust that it had accumulated over untold years. The artificial lights were everywhere, making it difficult to see where the spiral staircase that led higher into the windmill's inside ended. The signs advertised various products that I'd never heard of. Logos for "Shell Bros. Peanuts," "Ms. Watt Batteries," "Tubba Blubba Tonic," and other long-dead product names dotted the walls—each with an additional "Only from Baron Corp." sign on it.

When I approached the spiral staircase, marveling at the display around me, a giant vending machine with a "Baron Corp. Selects" logo lit up. The machine glowed as artificial speakers that hadn't made a sound in years began to play a whimsical tune. An artificial salesman's voice boomed from the device: "Welcome to the all-new Baron Corp. Selects vending apparatus,

your destination for the latest and always greatest Baron Corp. products! Today, you can buy a can of Tubba Blubba Tonic, the nutrient-rich soft drink everybody loves, for just \$15.99! Drink it in the summer to cool off, and thanks to our newly increased fat content, you'll build up the blubber you need to make it through the winter and party all summer long! What a deal!" The machine was about to continue, listing more products from a time no one remembered, but its speaker broke, turning the voice into a garbled mess.

As I ascended the spiral staircase to the top of the windmill, the sound of its clicking blades grew louder and louder. *One, two, three, click, one, two, three, click.* The windmill's rhythmic clicking grew deafening as I reached the final step and nearly collapsed in shock. At the top of the windmill, in the middle of a large metal platform, was a machine unlike any I'd ever seen. Tubes came in from the roof of the windmill, passing through the machine, and out into the roof on the other side. A viscous red liquid pumped through the tubes with each sickening click, and it was then that I saw an enlarged human heart steadily beating in the core of the machine's engine. *One, two, three, click, one, two, three, click.*

I ran to the machine, punched through the glass, and ripped the heart from the engine with bleeding fists. Its beat became weak and unsteady in my hands, quivering with fear and feeding my primal hunger. The windmill slowed to a lethargic crawl. *One . . . two . . . three . . . click . . . one . . . two . . .* I could no longer contain myself. I tore into the heart with crimson-streaked claws and lost myself. When my mind put itself together again, the hunger in the pit of

my soul was gone, and the heart beat no more. *The clicking stopped and the windmill stood still.*

•••

*Dear John,*

*I hope this letter finds you well on your travels. I am overjoyed that you finally took up the courage to leave town when I was rescued, but I must tell you that much has changed since the day the windmill stopped and the Baron fell dead from his throne.*

*Rumors tell that when they searched the Baron's body, they found dozens of cuts and bullet wounds—So many that he should have already been dead! Even stranger, they found all the bullets there intact when they cut the Baron open. But what shocked me most was that he was missing nearly a third of his organs, including his heart!*

*Within a week, the Baron's fortress was stripped of all its treasures. A few of the guards stayed loyal, but they were outnumbered. I say the bastard deserved it, especially after what he did to me. If that strange traveler in the patchy suit hadn't found me in the dungeon and given me a loaf of bread, I surely would have starved.*

*As for the traveler, it seems he skipped town the night the Baron was killed. Some say they saw him enter the windmill, but its doors were chained, and no one ever found the key. Perhaps whatever the Baron kept in there is best left locked away.*

*Since my rescue, I have regained much of my strength. I look forward to setting off on my own soon enough. Perhaps we can journey together, if only for a while. Until then, I will stay in the town with the old windmill at its heart.*

*Good luck and safe travels,*

*Flint*



JOSHUA TREE • MADELEINE MISNER

## THE LAST SENTRY DEFENDING THE CASTLE

•••

PARKER ALEXANDER

A statue could not be more stalwart than Kendra.

She stands straight and tall, a line of virtue. Though she's dwarfed by the ornate doors to the throne room behind her, she remains resolute. The gentle torchlight of the stone hallway bounces off her dented silver armor, and so she glows, even in the darkness. Her hands grip the weathered handle of a brittle sword, clearly used by many, many soldiers before it became hers. Her heavy breath and wounded leg are the only signs of her weariness from battle, yet she still maintains her stance. The blood from her thigh drips steadily, pooling into a shallow puddle by her foot.

Kendra's eyes look forward with a focused blankness, yet she's scanning for every possible danger—the open window where another one of the shadow beasts could sneak in, the doorways where invaders could break in. It's too quiet keeping watch by herself. Usually, her fellow guard Alicia is with her. On the more boring days, she entertained Kendra with snide remarks about the royals as they walked past—one had a crown that was too big for their head, another was practically tripping over their robes.

But since she ran away with the others in the heat of battle, begging Kendra to go with her—well, she's had to compensate.

Aside from that, keeping watch is automatic. She knows her superior always told her to keep her mind alert, not slipping into passive monitoring. But she can't keep from remember-

ing how the witch appeared in the training yard in a cloud of smoke, her tattered robes billowing around her. Her gnarled hands encircling a crystalline orb, showing images of her ruined village, the silver-armored soldiers pillaging amidst the flames. The screech of her voice as she shouted that the royals and all who defend them will be punished for their crimes. The echoes of the screams of soldiers fleeing as the witch disappeared and the shadow beasts took her place.

The sky outside the window is still dark, tainted by the witch's shadow magic. Kendra can no longer hear any screams—the deserters must be long gone by now. As she had fought back against the shadow beasts, remembering her oath to protect the throne at all costs, the other soldiers bolted for the gates. They must have thought, *What was an oath compared to an imminent defeat? What was their honor compared to the solace of the next day's sunrise?*

Kendra didn't see their defeat as imminent. She stood side by side with Alicia and fought back against the creatures.

Alicia shared her views at first. But when the duo got pushed back to the entrance to the throne room, she hesitated. The roar of the witch's magic emanated throughout the hall. Alicia reached into her pocket, bringing out a toy soldier, nicked at the edges but clearly her brother's handiwork. Clutching the toy in one hand, she reached out to Kendra with her other.

But Kendra remained firm. Kendra is a sentry, and as a sentry, her body is a shield for the throne.

Still, Alicia's footsteps weighed heavily on Kendra's heart as she ran away.

Kendra tests the weight of her sword now, trying a few practice swings. Her shoulder aches and her injured leg makes it hard to get a solid stance. She remembers the day her parents sent the sword to her on the day she came of age. The note, much shorter than their normal sprawling letters, simply read, "For the first of many." Those words held so much importance for her. Her little sister at home who wanted to shave her thick twin buns just like Kendra, hoping to be the second brown face to grace the ranks of the imperial army.

Even though Kendra was skilled enough to spin her sword over her head, she still felt the weight of their expectations in every swing.

She brought her sword back down, gently touching the point into the cobbled ground.

Amid the silence without the rush of her swinging sword, she could hear the chatter in the room behind her.

Before the fighting reached its apex, the royals nonchalantly entered the throne room, believing they'd be safe there as they'd always been. They all passed by her, in their long robes and gowns, talking amongst themselves. One of the youngest daughters, barely big enough to walk on her own, stole a glance at Kendra and beamed at her. But her parents brought the girl close and walked her in. Kendra heard the father say, "We don't fraternize with the help."

And now she could hear them, their lips smacking as they gorged on a feast. The sound of elderly voices, laughing and chortling. Despite the coming threat, Kendra knew they were unconcerned. Their forces were depleted. The backup would never arrive in time to stop the witch and save them. Maybe they simply didn't

care about anything outside of their so-called "safe" room.

But not Kendra. She is the sentry. She is stalwart and ready.

She just wished that Alicia was at her side. She remembered the one time they abandoned their post, snuck out on a quiet day to visit the fair in town. Sitting on top of a rooftop as the sun set and fireworks shot into the sky. Alicia told her that if she hadn't been conscripted, if Kendra hadn't chosen to join the army's ranks, they would have met somewhere else. They wouldn't have to worry about an oath to the kingdom. They would've lived a nice, peaceful life together. At that moment, Kendra grasped Alicia's hand, felt the roughness of her calluses—

And remembered the pressure of the blade in her hands. The note her parents left. The responsibility she carries every time she reports for duty. The feeling that everything she does reverberates on her younger sister's dreams, her parents' hope, her own worth.

She didn't sneak out after that.

The torch lights go out. Kendra hefts up her sword again. Something is coming.

And in a rush of darkness, it is right in front of her. The billowing robes. The stormy black clouds surrounding her. The witch lifts her cloak and stares at Kendra, an ardent gaze meeting a fiery expression. She raises her hand, a purple bolt of lightning crackling in the center of her palm.

Kendra strides forward. "You will go no further."

The witch cackles. "So bold! Your resolve is admirable, but useless."

Kendra falters. Her grip slackens.

The witch smiles. "I've killed so many like you. Foolish young soldiers who think they and the kingdom can withstand all harm."

With an impassioned grunt, Kendra swings her sword—but the witch is gone. Her voice echoes through the hall. "But look where you are now. You're the last line of defense for the

royals. The others are gone. Your rulers will not honor your sacrifice.”

Kendra turns and turns, looking for the witch. But all she can focus on are the royals laughing in the throne room, oblivious.

She grips her sword tighter. “I have my own honor.”

The witch reappears in front of her, the bolt in her hand even larger. “Why are you still here? You stand no chance against me. Is it worth dying for this?”

Kendra puffs her chest out and straightens

her stance. The witch may have powerful magic, but she has a strength of her own.

But then, Kendra sees her face in the reflection of her blade. She looks willing, reliable—and tired. She looks at the witch’s bolt, and out of the corner of her eye, it almost resembles a firework. A peaceful life.

Kendra makes her decision.

The sword clatters to the floor. The magic bolt shatters the door to the throne room. And Kendra’s footsteps echo through the hall as she runs for her life.

# BANKER

...

ANTONIO RADIC

*To* whom it may concern

(though why I should concern anyone is certainly a mystery),

I'll run bluntly. I am a banker, and I'm writing this on a dollar bill. You often trust your teller of bad news, but you shouldn't. You're bankrupt! Someone forged your signature, and there's no plan in your insurance for phishing scams. I'll tell you; you got hot and hooked in a net of boiling water. Some fixed-rate fiduciary douchebag from the Federal Reserve determines whether you're a "capitol hazard" like a capital deer in headlights. Checks upon canceled checkup appointments, dead debtors, outstanding student loans, and insufficient funds for life! You stand there, and I sit here, behind my copper and dime kiosk. I listen to ruptured tumors and erupted currency exchange, and still I shout, "Long live the queen!"

What is the color of water?

The answer is as pointless as money, but it is as blinding as the great salt lakes of the Andes. I gave you a loan, but you left me all alone in the flat vastness of the hall of this bank filled with files and flies, pens and hens, brokenhearted bonds—God save her tall majesty.

I am not just a banker. And you have no balance in the afterlife, so why are you a collateral waste of my time?

I am a concept disguised as a dollar sign.

You've made me an acolyte of Adjustable-Rate Mortgages; a yster that supplies morgues with the ARMS of serendipity and Sequoia branches, and the legs of Emily Blunt, Emily Dickinson, and Emily Brontë.

Fuck money. Fuck the Banks.

Your most obedient \$ervant,  
D. A. Banker.

# PAY FOR ME

...

SAGE ROTHBERG

*I* can't wait for my family to pay for me to die and  
pay for themselves to grieve,  
so I can be reunited with my mother  
and she can hold me  
tight and tender  
while my ornate oak box fails  
to degrade  
I am cradled  
by the highest-quality concrete.

I long to be stardust  
or warm and alone in a womb, to  
live and die in LA  
but reborn a creature  
of simpler design and pleasure, a  
grasshopper  
no bigger than an inch or two waking in  
search of a flower to perch under skies  
so blue.

A new project every day  
this life we live loves to have its way  
/  
with us  
/  
in the name of all things sacred let  
me be stardust  
a fetus  
or a sparrow  
because I hate my marrow  
which will cost too much  
for my future family to bury  
you can't even die for free so  
at least,  
/  
God  
/  
let my coffin be pretty.





FAR COWS • MADELEINE MISNER

# WAITING GAME

...

TAYLOR DAVIS GROWELL

*I* told you not to come back here.

You're ten & no one has told you yet  
that death is something tedious.

I told you not to sit here,  
the air is stale and hot—  
everything is too hot.

Nebraska heat will choke you  
if cigarettes don't first.

Black asphalt burns your feet &  
blue plastic melts onto the back  
of your thighs.  
When you walk back inside  
you'll smell like cigarette smoke  
and sweat and maybe gasoline.

What is there to look at anyway  
besides that terrible yellow corn field  
& your own two feet?

What kind of daughter  
can't watch her own mother cry?

Selfish, stupid girl.  
I tell you to leave, to go watch him die,  
but instead, you come back to this  
miserable corner of the parking lot  
with me & the smoking doctors  
on this burning plastic:  
your punishment.

God.

How boring,  
waiting for someone to die.

# BEFORE, THEN, AFTER, NOW

...

TAYLOR DAVIS GROWELL

## 1. BEFORE

When I was 10 years old and my grandfather was dying,  
my cousin and I found a dead yellow bird stuck  
on a red Ram truck and we named it Sam,  
*because all dead things should have a name.*

## 2. RIGHT BEFORE

There is a girl dead in a bed at 9:00 on a Thursday night  
for her mother to find.  
She will call an ambulance, by then it will be too late.

## 3. THEN

In religion class,  
my backpack sits where her body was,  
our tennis team has 12 and not 13  
and after, I will find myself lying awake at night,  
trying to remember her soft-lipped smile, her abrupt laugh;  
begging to a God I hated to take it back. Wishing  
with every stupid, meaningless, mortal bone in my body  
that I had told her I loved her and *maybe she could love me back?*  
We were both just scared children back then.

## 4. AFTER

Her mother still came to all our matches,  
and I don't think she knew my name, because why would she?  
Back then I wanted to peel the world back like an orange  
and press my face against the cool citrus flesh and tuck my soul  
to my chest, and let the stinging seep into my eyes.  
Like a paper cut, a quiet subtle anger sliced something inside of me  
and it set like stone, the lining of my stomach granite.  
Time is an x-ray, it shows a dormant volcano.

5 .NOW

It's been five years.

I will turn twenty soon and you will always  
stay one week from fifteen. My ribs feel sore because

I have more years of remembering than knowing.

Your family has moved out of California,

there is nothing left of you here,

but a bench and a white floral tree,

and a plaque with your name.



BALLERINA COLLAGE • EMMA WAKEFIELD

# MY CLOSET

...

TAYLOR SKORUPA

*My* closet is filled with stories of my past,  
Sweatshirts he wore and shirts she stole,  
Pants I don that remind me  
Of people who long left my life to live well,  
Leaving me lamenting and filled with lethargy.

It's hard to find room for others in that closet,  
Searching for sweaters at the mall to buy when  
I miss his comfort.  
Trying on tops that make me cry  
Too long for the scent of hers.

I still wear his sweatshirt.  
I still wear her shirt.  
I should've shredded or torn them up,  
Burned them to crisps.  
Maybe I could've walked on top of them  
As they did with me.

But they always remind me  
I don't need to let new clothes in,  
Let them wear my body, my soul,  
When I have the comfort of clothes  
I should've let go of long ago.

# WASP

...

MADELEINE MALCOLM

*It's* hot today. Hot enough that the pavement of the parking lot shimmers as the August sun beats down on it for hours. There's a wasp up in the corner by the creaky oak door, banging its head against the window. It probably came in to get away from the heat. If that's the case, it's fresh out of luck: the A.C. is out, so I've been grabbing cubes from the ice machine to press against my wrists like my mother taught me to do. She says that the blood runs right against the skin there, so it'll carry the chill of the ice all over your body. I feel bad for the wasp for a split second. It doesn't even have any ice to clutch onto, just a window to hit its head against. Then I feel bitter when I realize that at least the wasp could leave whenever it wants. It's just too stupid to do so.

The wasp is the only living thing that's come in since Tom did this morning. He got his coffee and his bagel, which meant I had to turn on our nearly-antique toaster oven, which made it even hotter behind the counter. He took his bagel and his coffee, like he does every Wednesday, and sat on the overstuffed couch across from the register to tell me stories about the time he spent living in Russia. It's the same story every time, and it's not even particularly interesting, but he seems happy to tell it. Besides, he always drops three dollars in the tip jar, so I can't complain.

Tom left when he finished his bagel and his coffee and his story about living in Russia, so now it's just me and the wasp and the ice cube running down my wrist as the hours tick by on

the obnoxious clock that hangs above the couch where Tom always has his coffee and his bagel and tells the story about Russia.

The bell above the door rings and a man walks in. The wasp is too stupid to realize the door is open so it keeps banging itself into the window. I wipe the water from my wrist and smile with my palms against the counter like I do every time the bell above the door rings.

"Welcome in. How're you doing today?"

The man doesn't answer. He paces around the empty café floor, looking at the artwork hanging on the walls. His deep-set eyes flicker over each piece for no more than a second before landing on the obnoxious clock, which he stares at for exactly twelve seconds, given that the clock is calibrated right. I'm not certain it is. Finally, he turns to face me at the register.

"It's hot today," he states simply. I don't point out the fact that he's wearing a heavy green jacket, which seems counterintuitive. His eyes continue to flit over all of the equipment behind me. "Hot in here, too," he continues. "You must be burning up."

"Yeah. A.C. is out, so," I answer with a friendly shrug, as if this man and I share some sort of camaraderie even though I'm standing behind the counter and he can leave whenever he wants. He moves his eyes over me quickly, the same way he looked at the pictures on the walls and the equipment behind me. I clear my throat. "What can I get for you?"

The man doubles over in raucous laughter. He laughs for precisely seven seconds, if the clock is calibrated correctly, before collecting himself. "Well, isn't that just the question," he muses. I don't know what to say so I laugh a bit, uncomfortable. "A coffee," he finally says.

"Which size?"

He rolls his eyes. "I dunno. Medium."

"Any cream?"

He sighs heavily, "Jeez, Louise. All these questions for just a coffee. Life can be so simple, you know, but we *always* have to ask all these questions, *all* these damn questions." He trails off, shaking his head. I take this to mean he does not want any cream in his coffee. I tell him that it costs two dollars and seventy-three cents, and he thankfully has no further comments as he passes me three one-dollar bills. "Keep the change."

I grab a paper cup. Typically we serve the coffee in mugs to encourage people to have a seat and stay awhile, possibly spend more money, but I don't think I want this man to do that. I think I would like for him to leave. As I pour the coffee into the cup, he begins to sing quietly.

"*Passing through, passing through, sometimes happy, sometimes blue,*" he hums, his fingers dancing along the counter. He stops his singing as he continues, "Just passing through, passing through. That's what I do. How about you?"

I chuckle at the rhyme, mostly to be polite, but he doesn't seem to be making a joke. I clear my throat again as I secure a lid on his coffee. "No, I grew up here," I say. He hums, flickering his eyes over me again. I realize I could have lied and regret not doing so. Then I wonder why I feel the need to. I hold off on telling him I'll actually be leaving in a week; I told Tom this morning when he finished his story about Russia and finally asked what I had been up to lately.

"I'm moving, so I've just been packing up my stuff," I had told Tom as he waited for his coffee to cool, and he shook his head in disappointment. I

hesitated, wondering what I had said wrong.

"Not *stuff*." "What?"

"Don't call it *stuff*. Those are your *belongings*. That's your life you're talking about."

I don't tell the man at the end of the counter anything more about my life as I hand him his coffee. He takes it but doesn't move away. Instead, he stares at me, his too-blue eyes steady for the first time since the bell above the door rang. I try not to look back. Making myself appear busy, I grab a rag to wipe down the spotless counter as I fish an ice cube from the machine with my other hand. I don't run it over my wrist. I just clutch it in my hand, hard enough that the sting of the cold is stronger than the piercing stare of the man across the counter. I muse over the fact that I've only served two cups of coffee today, so the pot is still quite full, which means it's quite heavy, and the handle makes it very easy to clutch onto and probably quite easy to swing should I ever find a reason to do so. I stare at the coffee pot as the man stares at me, and the ice cube stings my hand as it bleeds down my wrist, and the obnoxious clock ticks on and on, and the wasp slams itself into the window again and again and again and—

"Do you have a twin?"

"What?"

Now I turn to look at the man. He still hasn't sipped his coffee as he repeats, "Do you have a twin?" He asks casually, as though this is a run-of-the-mill question to ask a stranger.

His gaze doesn't waver as he waits for a response.

"Oh. Um, no? I don't?" I reply, somehow uncertain of my own answer. He hums pensively.

"I wouldn't be so sure," he says, "I think half of you is somewhere else. You seem like that kind of person." Now I stare at him, unsure of what to say. He sips his coffee.

"Mmm. Good coffee," he raises his cup at me before turning to leave, singing as he goes: "*I saw Adam leave the garden, with an apple in*



*his hand. I said, 'Now you're out, what are you gonna do?'"*

The bell above the door chimes as he steps out into the shimmering heat. The ice in my hand has been squeezed into nothing as it drips down my wrist. The wasp slams itself against the window one more time before finding the door just as it swings shut, flitting off into the thick August air.

I look around cautiously as I lock the door at the end of the day, making my way purposefully to my car. The inside is an oven, the sweltering air suffocating as I turn the key. I lower the windows as I begin to drive, the fresh air rushing over my skin as I drive. I don't usually listen to

the radio, but something compels me to turn the cracked knob to the first station I find. A tinny voice rings out from the speaker:

*"Passing through, passing through Sometimes happy, sometimes blue Glad that I ran into you; Tell the people that you saw me passing through."*

That night, the last of my belongings make their way into sealed-up cardboard boxes. Next week they'll be loaded into a truck and hauled across the country. Next week Tom will have his coffee and his bagel and tell someone else his story about Russia. Next week the wasp finds its way back through the creaky oak door to bang its head against the window again. The clock is off by twenty-seven seconds.

# AT THE END OF THE WORLD I GO TO A SEVENTIES-THEMED PARTY

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KIONTI SHROPSHIRE-MAINA

*and* we dance under strobing lights,  
recreating once more our ancestors and beloveds. honoring  
what we know best. doing as we've always done.  
a friend sways into me, a long-gone relative chuckling through his drunken two-step, my  
grandfather and aunts smiling through each of my twitching wrists.  
someone's mother's favorite song eases into the air and all our hands go up, ecstatic. who can  
even feel the fires burning?  
my friend laughs, blowing smoke out the corner of her mouth  
and naming herself after an uncle, lit joint on the rim of her cup, gold rings flashing.  
another name honored. libations in the form of spilled drink, a mouthful of ancestors. all of  
us, wearing many faces in our own, them peering through our eyes  
and our smiles and the curve of our mouths around our laughs. loud and hopeful. i say  
my uncles used to do a thing like this and i call out to them,  
stepping through a double-timed two-step.  
and we do like this, straight through the end of it all. keep  
muddling through the electric slide,  
kicking through a souped-up version of the wobble, calling  
out to our ancestor-mothers and to ourselves. somewhere,  
somewhere i hear a deep drum talking  
and i remember that we've been here before. will be here again.  
drunk and dancing through the apocalypse.



LOS ANGELES

*miscellany*