

Marshall University

Marshall Digital Scholar

Et Cetera

English Student Research

2021

Et Cetera, 2019-2021

Marshall University

Follow this and additional works at: https://mds.marshall.edu/english_etc

Digital Part of the Appalachian Studies Commons, Children's and Young Adult Literature Commons, Feminist, Commons, and Sexuality Studies Commons, Fiction Commons, Nonfiction Commons, and the Poetry Network Commons

Logo

Et Cetera

Since 1953, celebrating the *artistic and creative* talent at Marshall



MARSHALL UNIVERSITY'S ART AND LITERARY MAGAZINE
2019-2021 ISSUE

Et Cetera



Editor-in-Chief	Sophie Ezzell (2019-2020) Lily Jurskis (2020-2021)
Managing Editor	David Schwartz (2019-2020) Andrew O'Callaghan (2020-2021)
Fiction Editor	Hailey Bibbee (2019-2020) Olivia Lewis (2020-2021)
Issue Designer	Hailey Bibbee (2019-2020)
Creative Nonfiction Editor	RaJon Staunton (2019-2020) Ivy Scoville (2020-2021)
Poetry Editor	Lily Jurskis (2019-2020) Elijah Bowen (2020-2021)
Art Editor:	Lily Jurskis (2019-2021)

Readers (2019-2020)

Ashley Gilman
Audrey Blue
Hibba Chaudhry
James Morris

Jennifer Ash
Madeline Merritt
Marcos Graham

Raleigh Smirl
Taylor Racer
Wade Sullivan

Cover Image Credit: Zane Pinson Art Sequence

Acknowledgements

The *Et Cetera* staff would like to thank the College of Liberal Arts for providing us with the contributions that allow this journal to give a quality home to Marshall students' best work. We would also like to especially give thanks to the Office of Student Affairs and the Student Government Association for their generous support that allowed us to print a double issue in the face of these difficult circumstances.

Et Cetera would also like to give a special thank you to Dean Robert Bookwalter and Dr. Allison Carey for their commitment to their students and their appreciation for the arts.

The journal would also like to thank Marie Manilla for her willingness to be in the 2019-2020 issue of *Et Cetera* and her open and honest candor regarding Appalachia.

Lastly, the Editor-in-Chiefs would like to personally thank Drs. Rachael and Joel Peckham for their sempiternal support—their balanced use of hand-holding and tough love, their open office doors, and their constant reassurance that everything—even this—will be okay.

Table of Contents

POETRY 2019-2020

Page 54.....	6	Delana J.Price
a list of things i ran away from.....	11	Ellie Reger
I Moved Away from the Country.....	14	Ivy Scoville
Drifting.....	18	Andrew O’Callaghan
City, Hill.....	19	s.a.s.
i saw you in that hospital mural.....	45	Elijah Bowen
Lipstick.....	56	MollyWagner
Somewhere Under the Rainbow.....	58	DestinyTomblin
The Tiniest Butler.....	70	Alex Canfield

POETRY 2020-2021

Lombardy Lake.....	71	Julia Wu
Creatio ex nihilio.....	93	Julia Wu
Daybreak Adonis.....	94	Elizabeth Fleace
When You Draw Me.....	97	Sydney Ranson
Pillows Cry.....	98	Zac Thabet
We’re Going ‘Round.....	106	Kit Porter

DRAMA 2020-2021

Little Stones.....	82	Zoë Kauffer
Lifetime Bar.....	107	Michael Crout

CREATIVE NONFICTION 2019-2020

Celebration of Life.....	9	Brittany Woods
Barn Red.....	15	Sarah Canterbury
Vérité.....	48	Zac Thabet

CREATIVE NONFICTION 2020-2021

Moon River, You Know.....	72	Julia Wu
On the Heels of Shame.....	74	Zac Thabet

FICTION 2019-2020

Hermit Crab.....	22	Cat Dennison
Beads.....	39	Rachel Venturino
Everything Good in the World.....	60	Ellie Reger

FICTION 2020-2021

Wraith on Bethesda and Newman.....	90	Kit Porter
German Cuss Words and Other Things.....	119	Molly O’Callaghan a Grandmother Might Teach You
Every Family.....	126	Julia Wu

INTERVIEW WITH MARIE MANILLA

Defining Urban Appalachia.....	33	Sophie Ezzell
--------------------------------	----	---------------

ART 2019-2020

Friends.....	8	Barbara Lavalley Benton
Slippery Slopes, Little Folks.....	13	Jules Batten
Chicken Giraffe.....	17	Chloe Murphy
Cabin View at Sunset.....	21	Katherine Wang
Expression.....	32	Chloe Murphy
Eye for Eyes.....	38	Ty Salmons
Punch Card.....	44	Sa-Rai Robinette
The Doors of Perception.....	47	Peyton Dolin
The Leader.....	55	Sophia Celdrán
Self Portrait.....	57	Lilly Dyer
The Reilly.....	59	Julia Pritt
The Prophecy.....	66	Megan Taylor
A Faerie’s Night.....	69	Brittany Woods

ART 2020-2021

Lost Soles.....	81	Barbara Lavalley Benton
CSX Overgrown.....	92	Cassandra Watson
Sunrise.....	95	Barbara Lavalley Benton
Tree & Lonely Leaves.....	96	Ethan Nestor
We’re Drowning, Harris.....	105	Cassandra Watson
Love at 80.....	125	Barbara Lavalley Benton

HYBRID 2019-2020

Where Goblin Kings Rule.....	67	Rachel Venturino
------------------------------	----	------------------

HYBRID 2020-2021

Dancing to My Final Playlist.....	99	Tyler Kennett
How to Have the Perfect Conversation.....	117	Wade Sullivan

*I felt darkness because I had been deep
in the hollers, and I knew glory because I had
stood on top of the beautiful mountaintops.
More mountaintops please.
More mountaintops.*

—Scott McClanahan

Page 54

Delana Price

They won't fit.

They get stuck and it's like they choke you with their vastness,
or minuteness and well...

Have you ever had that dream where it starts off like just putting a piece of gum in your mouth and you don't know how but that one piece turns into a mouth full and you can't really chew it but all of a sudden you have something to say, but this giant wad of unchewable gum is now stuck to the roof and to all the corners and crevices of your mouth, and to your teeth and you're just clawing at it trying to pull it's unyielding, unmalleable flesh from your mouth, and the really pretty girl you're trying to say your really cheesy pick-up line to is just standing there, waiting for you to say something, but you can't?

And suddenly you're all alone with this wad of gum,
and your mouth is no longer your mouth,
because mouths are meant to move,
to make words.

Talking is kind of like that.

Talking is a labyrinth, and every time I think I've found the center,
I find another corridor

And I'm running and stumbling and tripping over my verbs and their definitions and what sounds right,

And you're standing there watching me, waiting for me to put two sentences together

And I want to tell you! I really do but I can't, I don't know how!

We both want this sentence to be over;

We're both waiting for me to find a word that will make this fragment make sense.

Oh, how I wish I could wax poetic like those pretty people on TV,

I could pause in the right place for dramatic effect

and know how long I am supposed to wait before I say

“just kidding,”

But the people on TV are scripted and you're just standing there,
And my brain doesn't work as fast as the dimly lit back rooms of Lot 6.
And I know it's rude
And you're waiting but I'd really just like to close my eyes,
Just for a minute, can I put my head down?
Or maybe, you know,
You could just go in the next room and wait for my text.



Friends
Barbara Lavalley Benton

Celebration of Life

Brittany Woods

Maybe they didn't like the picture I put out because his nipple was showing, but he was smiling with his favorite cat. I remember the party at the restaurant next to his penthouse. I remember feeling weird around them. I don't think Pops knew where he stood with them (he always referred to himself as the black sheep) I think they found it distasteful, the grieving party, everyone publicly flaunting their grief to exchange sad pleasantries; "I'm so sorry for your loss," over finger foods and cheap perfume; "He was such a great person" with overly sad faces laden with tear stains one could have sworn were supplemented from the "water" glass she held.

Closing the glass door to the crowded rooftop restaurant was the sweetest silence I'd had in the days following the death of the man who raised me. For the record, I was always his daughter, but I lacked the necessary paperwork required to appear as such in his obituary. I was a "special friend." I should feel grateful for being mentioned at all. I tried to feel grateful, but in the end I was resentful. Not too resentful to knock on the door. I think his mom answered. The kids call her Grammy but I never qualified as a grandchild. I like to think she was a sweet shark; she was a female lawyer in the 70's who adopted two Korean orphans, so not exactly a nurse shark either. She saw the desperation in my face when I said, "I just had to get away." She let me in. I found myself taking one last look around. I learned how to jailbreak my iPhone in that corner of the kitchen, I had sneaky sex on this office floor so I could watch my face in the ceiling mirrors. It was also the last place I saw him alive as I worked on a final paper and got bratty when he wouldn't grab me a sandwich. I called him later that night to apologize and he was hanging out with friends, having a good time. Maybe too good of a time.

I heard his voice in a dream that night and was waking up from a rare nightmare when I got a call from mom. The 10-minute white-knuckled drive to mom's has faded with time. All I remember is the stop lights at the corner of Fourth Ave and Tenth St in the car he bought me and the turn signal as I waited for the red to become green. Then wailing in agony as if a part of me had ripped away. A hole I refused

to acknowledge until mom told me that Pops was dead. It hurt. It still hurts, but you learn to live with it or you die of a broken heart. Indeed, I learned through many nights like this one as I curled into a ball and cried (although I'm quite happy and content with my life 8 years later) that grief is done alone. You may lean on others, but ultimately your sorrow journey must be completed in the solace of your own company, just as we must feel the voids in our lives before we fill them to keep from being consumed by the emptiness we couldn't hope to understand otherwise.

That stain on the carpet is new. It must be blood from that night. I took a few deep breaths and then I burst into tears. Not loud, attention-seeking tears like the party-goers next door, but the true wringing of sorrow from my soul as I sat down in the floor of his bedroom wishing he was here watching ESPN with a fat cat named Chance while doing stretches to keep the blood circulating in his body. But the blood stain on the ugly green carpet was proof he existed and also proof he was gone. I stopped crying eventually and started discreetly heading for the front door to rejoin the party I didn't want to go back to, when the kindest thing happened; an angel by the name of Scott called: "You don't have to go back out there." I will forever be grateful for the kind welcome and compassion Scott always had for me. I have a picture of us together from when I was no more than 7 or 8 and it was my first holiday with the family. He wore a genuinely soft smile as he offered little me with the hunched shoulders a present wrapped in shiny paper. I don't understand why we stopped going to those, no one ever explained it to me and the mystery of it all has contributed significantly to my "leftovers" complex. I was surprised and relieved that I didn't have to go back to the Celebration of Life, as I didn't have much to celebrate. Perhaps this is where we shared personal facts about each other, but I remember the sunset. I told them how he'd come over by the window to watch it every evening and we all silently gathered around to see it. I'd like to think they felt the peace I did in that moment as I said one last goodbye to the only man who had ever loved me voluntarily.

a list of things i ran away from

Ellie Reger

i.

your teeth are a row of houses that
contain each american dream i had;
they sleep comfortably in beds
i cannot touch and pick apples from trees
i cannot climb. each apple feels full of
rotted out cores no matter how ripe and
you give me a handful of quarters for
the meter, mouthfuls of sweet clouds spitting
rain into my lungs. my wrists ache gray,
bruised by your neglect.

ii.

i think the nerves got to me that night on
the roof when we watched the clouds sputter past
us. some lonely wonderful revelation
caught our ears so jarringly, when you told
me my fingers were frantic mice running
through my hair. oh, i hadn't noticed it,
i said through the beehive caught in my throat,
low humming crawling menacingly through
my teeth. blood ran down the gutter red from
the nail you stepped on—you refused a bandage.

iii.

there's a stack of cardboard boxes in your
living room. they're packaged like they contain
criminals, duct tape wound four times over.
3 am i took my car key to the
side of one and it was empty. i chose
not to ask so not to bother you but
i couldn't help staring over breakfast.
i forgot to tape the box back so you knew
why i spilled my coffee and tripped on the

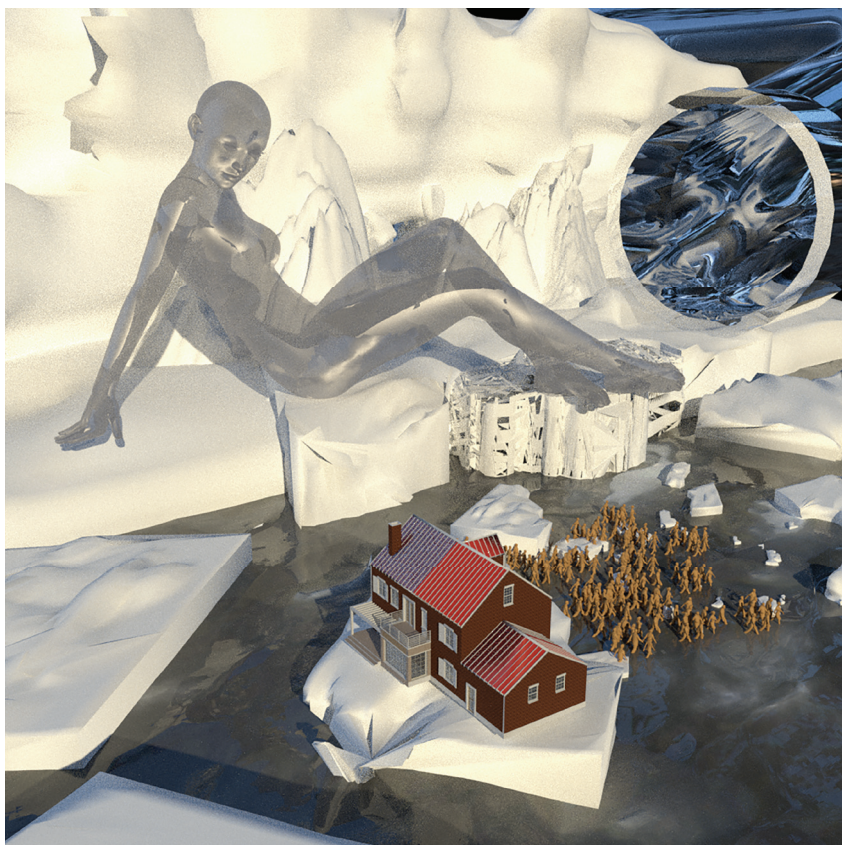
rug but you never said a word about it.

iv.

some people have fenced in burial plots
as if their bodies need security
after everything's already been taken
from them, like putting locks on empty safes.
you toss me a handful of gold teeth and
tell me this is why, that you've been robbing
graves while i sleep. you ask me to drive you
to a pawn shop and while we're there and the
greasy man behind the counter asks where
the teeth are from i see the gaps in your gums.

v.

you are blinking too quickly to focus
on your watch and you ask me to read it
for you. in exchange i keep quiet about
your sticky palms and the blood under your
fingernails. it's 9 pm. you shift in
your seat like you're looking for someone new
but all that's left is our hearts bursting through
our teeth like two trout swimming upstream, a
constant aching manifesting a table
at a midnight diner. you get up to leave.



Slippery Slopes, Little Folks
Jules Batten

I Moved Away from the Country—

Ivy Scoville

I moved away because I had to, because the silence
was so strangling, because the ivy vines that creeped and crawled
up the siding of my father's house consumed it—
because I could feel their sick green fingers slide easily around my throat,
like it was their job

and I knew there was no use in screaming, I knew
no one would hear me if I fell in the woods like some lonely rotting tree,
if the roots reached up with their captive arms and pulled me into the
ground—
if the moss grew over my limbs, my mouth to suffocate me
and hide the evidence

so I had to move away to a place where dwindling cigarette butts fly
from cracked car windows, their tips disintegrating in an orange glow
against the cold asphalt and blooming into wispy grey roses—
a place where raindrops puddle around crosswalks and clogged storm
drains,
rivers down fifth avenue

because even the bystanders milling around this place would startle at
a scream,
at a car backfiring a couple blocks to the east, clutching their bags tighter
and turning the volume of the white noise in their ears up a couple
notches—
because even they, with their innumerable eyes, would notice if my body
was swallowed by the street

Barn Red

Sarah Canterbury

You'd know if you opened oil-based paint. It's got a kind of heavy smell that almost stings the nose and has a glimmer to each stroke like oil on bread dough. I think it's hardly used now, at least not to paint inside, stored carefully and used only to protect outdoor projects like decks, sheds, and barns. When I was around seven—the clumsiest, messiest, and dorkiest period of life—my Dad built an addition onto the barn, two new stalls for the six horses we owned. And it didn't matter that I was and am a terrible painter, accidentally flicking specs of paint back on myself and others, but he let my brothers and I “help” paint the barn. I loved it.

Deep red, barn in the country red, pure and rich like a crimson flood of warmth, that was the color of the oil paint I still smell and feel: the symbol of rural Americana, a big red barn contrasted by its white trim and finished off with classic X on the doors.

Far into the summer months with the heat and flies, covered in sunscreen, sweat, and paint we stood on ladders—six to ten feet off the ground—breathing in oil fumes we shouldn't have, and we loved it. I remember the dirty ten-gallon white buckets and the measly stir stick peeking out at the top. I remember the thick and fat brushes I dipped into the paint too far to feel the color on my fingers and slop onto the layered back and side-walls. I remember slinging the paint onto the boards in an exaggerated fashion, like a sword fighter or a cartoon painter I'd seen in movies, and I remember getting more paint on myself than the barn. And I remember my brother Joshua and I inevitably painting each other.

I remember staring at my hands covered in red and rubbing them together, gumming the excess paint into balls and pushing the rest deeper into the pores of my skin. We played tag too, Joshua and I, initially tapping each other with ends of the brushes but escalating to strokes across our now-ruined clothes—laughing and running, dust mixed with paint on my shoes and the sweat in my bangs.

“Now, try not to get the trim,” Dad said, hunched down by the sides. He held his paint brush carefully and pulled away from the white.

I'd watch and copy for a while til I decided to tag Joshua with the

brush again or take more broad strokes.

“What did you do?” Mom asked us, frustrated.

We had paint on our clothes, shoes, faces, and ears.

“We painted!”

“You’ve ruined your clothes,” she said, which surprised me.

Mom never cared about dirty clothes, but somehow, I knew this was different, this was throw-away dirty. That oil paint stained our skin for weeks, eventually coming out through a formula of chlorine-soaked pool water, baths, and time.

But sometimes I could still look down at my hands and think of that. Think of those marks we left on ourselves and each other with that red oil paint and remember.



Chicken Giraffe

Chloe Murphy

Drifting

Andrew O'Callaghan

—*In Memoriam D.M., 1946-2016*

I watched through the window as you sailed
your red tractor through the field. You must
have been out since seven that morning
and the sun was now ready to rest in its western
bed. “Go on out” Mom finally said,
knowingly, whisking me out the door.
Striped blue shirt and jagged jean shorts
cut from winter pants shot through the field
to your tractor and I waved and waved
until the engine grew silent and your grin spoke
my permission to climb aboard, like a first mate
taking his post at the captain’s side. You sat me
on your left knee, your firm arm my seatbelt, guided
only by the light of your tractor. In the near-dark air
we rode silently; no words needed spoken.
The sputtering engine caused the whole tractor
to shiver ‘till I was completely numb, and the rusty
levers and bolts at my side poked me with each shake
but I did not so much mind—it seemed at the time
we were doing more than filling the air
with that summer fragrance of cut grass
and gasoline. We were tending to our kingdom.
With the barn in sight I quickly closed my eyes
and let my head fall sleepily against your arm,
concealing my grin as I waited to be carried in
as our work was completed. Cradling
me close to your chest like an infant, you rocked
toward the house and tucked me under my Spider-man blanket.
I watched through squinted eyes as you unbuttoned your blue
work shirt and knelt down beside me, kissing
my forehead, saying “Good work today, son.”
I thought *I’m glad God is like a father*
and drifted off to sleep.

City, Hill

S.a.S.

Green grass growing on this hill makes it lovely.

A maple tree crowns Green Grass Hill. With Maple Tree here, I feel safe.

Are these better than the buildings which backdrop my view?

Do men make trees?

Does God make buildings?

Well, it is hard to say.

Ah. I knew you must be near. The air moved in a new way.

The bookstore across the street holds a book which says all I wanted to say.

The book isn't free.

Or is it: "priceless?"

The thoughts others think when they speak are different than the thoughts I think when I speak.

Without money, I offer these words instead:

This is like sailing, I think.

Though I have never sailed.

Or have I?

The thoughts I think when I write are different than the thoughts they think when they read.

More like flying.

I am certain I have done that!

And...

You are like a bookstore

...

Maple tree

...

Green grass



Cabin View at Sunset
Katherine Wang

Hermit Crab

Cat Dennison

When Andy finally was in the fifth grade, his allowance each week amounted to a healthy five dollars, given to him all in quarters. The work he was doing on his family's farm was worth an hourly wage, but he was getting room and board for free, so his parents told themselves it balanced out. His friends at his church youth group boasted jeans that didn't have dark stains on the knees, shirts that didn't fall loosely at the base of their pants pockets, pencils that hadn't been taped together at the midway point.

Andy was ecstatic to have allowance money to spend at the mall. He came home that day already wearing one of his purchases: a red striped V-neck t-shirt from Abercrombie. The plastic tag still clung onto the collar. It took twenty minutes before he saw his father and twenty-three before the shirt was on a stack of firewood in the middle of the Swain family's back yard. His father folded his arms across his bloated belly, thrust a hotdog stick into Andy's hands and ordered, "Go ahead."

It sat in a pathetic pile at the base of the fire pit. Andy paused. He stared down at the shirt, so quickly losing its new-purchase stiffness. Carefully, slowly, the match fell from Andy's fingertips and on the gasoline-soaked heap.

"You won't be wearing that nonsense as long as I'm around," he said. "It's against Jesus. Are you against God?" His father paused before adding, "You're not a sinner, are you?"

The boy stared. Flames were reflected in his dampening eyes.

"You like girls, don't you?"

He nodded in response. Was he meant to like all of them?

"You're not a homosexual and if you're not a homosexual you don't dress like one." The gruff man took the baseball cap from his head and used the edge of his palm to wipe his sweating forehead. There was sweat creasing at the place where his stomach met the top of his Levi's. As he stood there, observing his son, he conjured flashes of him as a man. Skinny jeans and a decorative scarf around his neck. Baseball cap turned backward. Collared shirt and tie. There was no definitive image. His son was an anomaly and Hunt was incapable of

defining the word. He didn't often bother with the unknown.

It was summer on their farm, and after every day of replanting seeds that the crows had stolen and feeding the chickens, Andy raced through the house. He bounded up the stairs taking at least two at a time, eager to feed the animal he had begun to prioritize over the incessant pecking of the animals that didn't love him back.

His parents had gotten him a hermit crab as a birthday present in April. Andy and his brother were homeschooled by their mother, but she still abided by the calendar of the Lakowa County School System. Since he hadn't been in school for a few weeks, he had created a routine for himself that most importantly included bonding time with his crab.

The containers were crucial. Plastic, with neon-colored lids that had a clear square in the middle like a car's moonroof. The cage was important when it came to self-expression.

Andy's cage had a neon green top with a round Hulk sticker, already just barely clinging on at the center. He was proud of the coordination.

He had done heavy research on hermit crabs while he was still in the wishing and begging phase of the operation. There was a testimonial from a girl on one of the last pages of his monthly magazine. She told the readers about her crab's loving personality, how the crab enjoyed climbing all night and cuddling all day. The crab's name was Mister and Andy vowed that his name would be unique. In a soon-to-be seventh grader's sense of irony, he called his crab Fluffy. He looked forward to taking care of her every day after his chores.

Most of his research was done at the Lakowa County Public Library; he was able to walk to it, though he would reach it with distinct sweat marks across his back where his bag had hung. He told the librarian helping him conduct his research, "Did you know hermit crabs can grow like super huge? Look!" He pointed to an image of a crab crawling on a tire, half its size. He continued eagerly, "You have to keep giving them new shells as they outgrow their old ones. If you don't, they run out of room and they die."

The librarian attempted to be interested, though her eyes kept darting to the front door in case someone came in. "That's pretty sad, huh?"

By the time Andy was in high school, his father had taken interest

in his sporting career. Finally no longer homeschooled, Andy was ecstatic to be able to join teams and clubs and practice socializing after so long of neighborly ball games and youth group pow wows. When he was in high school, it was track meet after track meet with his father Hunt shoveling brown fibers into his gums in the stands. He didn't yell or shout encouragement, but if Andy didn't get first place he was sure to remind his son that there were always bigger trophies to be proud of. Andy would quietly nod in resignation and put an arm around his dad's shoulder so Pam could snap a photo of the two on her phone.

During the car ride home from the meet at the rival high school, Andy rode shotgun and listened to his parents talk about the possible storm rolling in the next day and their fears that the basement would leak for the umpteenth time. He looked out the window and thought about Ryan on another team, who he only ever saw at meets. He stopped being able to hear his parents' chatter echoing through the car when he replayed scenes from the day in repetition. That coy "Good luck" Ryan had said to him through a half-smile, the eye-contact they had made while duking out who would be able to cross the finish line first. When Hunt had told Andy he could have easily gotten first if he had pushed himself ten percent harder during practice, he thought about what he had accomplished by coming in second place. Sure, he had gained an extra dose of fatherly disappointment, but his coming in second meant Ryan had come in first.

After the meet, when Andy had told his family he needed to go grab his things and say his goodbye to his teammates, he ran into Ryan outside of the locker room, leaning against the rough brick and sweating through the clean t-shirt he had donned. Ryan's face seemed to light up when Andy approached him and he pushed his back off the wall and waited for Andy to get nearer. Andy didn't fully understand the twinge of nerves he felt jolt in his stomach. His dad had always wanted him to be pure and insisted he liked girls, and that was typically who he would feel nervous approaching. But asking Maggie to homecoming last semester made his heartbeat echo in his ears; the prospect of speaking to Ryan made his chest ache.

Breathe. Chill.

"Hey, man," said Ryan. "Good race, Andy."

Andy nodded. "Yeah. Congrats on first, you've always deserved it."

"Nah, you're way faster than me. Must have just been a fluke out

there today.”

Again with the stomach pains. Andy was embarrassed by his lack of concentration, his lack of confidence. He knew coy was attractive but found it hard to muster. “There’s no way,” Andy guffawed, “you’re probably the best in the state.”

Ryan refused to back down. He stood firm in Andy’s way and firm in his argument. “Dude, I’ve seen you run since freshman year and you’ve really improved. Honestly, I hate track these days because there’s hardly ever a race anymore. But you really make me work for it.”

The conversation seemed to settle into a discomfort for Andy. He didn’t reply, didn’t know how to reply, and somehow the nerves subsided when he felt confident that Ryan had been implying something. The excitement transitioned to action and Andy had no idea of how he wanted to carry on. His eyes lingered on Ryan for a long moment while he uncomfortably processed. Something within him wrestled between what he had always believed to be true about himself versus the feeling he got when Ryan bounced around during warmup in his loose and short athletic shorts. He couldn’t place the feelings he felt.

After a substantial amount of awkwardness, Andy cleared his throat and started moving past Ryan while saying, “I appreciate it, man. Good race.” He clapped him on the back and darted to retrieve his things and meet his parents out by the car. He felt a sense of guilt mixed with disappointment that lingered with him as he rode away from the school and along the winding country roads. He thought about the interaction that night while he tried to go to sleep, the next morning when he was supposed to be fixing breakfast, the next night while he shampooed his hair. He was unable to decide if he felt odd because the situation was new to him, or if he felt like it had been a missed opportunity.

You like girls, don’t you?

In the Swain’s house, there was always the overbearing nature of maximalism. Each wall is filled to the brim with decorations—paintings of colonial times, heads of animals that were the booty of a cold silent morning on the hill, black and white family photos where no one was smiling. There was an over-abundance of collected reclining chairs with camouflage prints and coasters from Hunt’s favorite bars,

each bearing its own symbol of nostalgia. In each room there were collections of Bic pens and childhood stuffed animals that carried too many memories to simply give away. The house was a scrapbook of families; the ones that occupied it have inherited the contents of several houses, and when each member of the family was craving a past time, even one they never lived, giving up that past became impossible. It was where old 5k t-shirts went to die in the drawers of a green dresser in the hopes of one day being reincarnated in a new quilted form. It was where young siblings pretended they were giants who could stomp on the tallest trees in the forest.

When Andy thought of his home, he thought of both the fear of forgetting it and the desire to never go back. The home always seemed to have a vintage hue for Andy, even as a child, a hue that made him squint so hard to see the image had become too blurred. He possessed a certain nostalgia for what he wanted his childhood to be, not for what it was.

Andy sat on the bottom step of his family's back porch, a beer in one hand and a cigarette in the other. The sky above him had reached the perfect hour—the sky was the dusty pale blue of the hour after sunset, just before it starts getting truly dark. Blue dusk. There was a stark contrast between the pastel fading sky and the radiant white streetlamp—the natural verses the humanity.

It was the summer after he had dropped out of college. He moved back home, got a job at the local airport, and had already begun to feel stagnant within the waters of his household. His parents told him he could move home, rent free, as long as he lived by their rules: no alcohol, church every Sunday, do your own laundry. There was almost a part of him that found contentment being back at his childhood home.

His father had actually begun to respect him, not forced to worry about how each moment would affect him as an adult—he *was* one. The two found conversation in discussing Andy's extended family that had recorded a series of religious country music on cassette tapes. That, and their shared affinity for weaponry. There were times over breakfast when the pair of them would hold a conversation until their dishes were all washed. It wasn't every day, but Andy found himself gaining a sense of connection there where he had once only felt resentment. When Hunt entered a room Andy occupied, the tenseness in the air didn't

jump from zero to 100 as it used it. Where grumblings and stomping used to exist in Andy's memory now was slowly being replaced by the early mornings spent taking turns with the lone pair of gloves as they waited in wilderness for deer to stroll by. The lack of conversation in these moments felt comfortable to Andy, contrasting greatly with the aggression he once sensed in the silence.

Andy's childhood house was located in one of those areas that could only be described as country suburbia. Where just about every house is either a split-level or a ranch, with brown shutters and mismatched bricks. Where chain-link fences separate dry grass from cracked driveways. Bikes fallen over in untidy yards. Mailboxes by the road covered in generic photos of birds and sunflowers.

The smoke from his cigarette dissipated and reminded him of blowing out candles in church as a child, the smoke filling the air around them as a symbol for God. He thought of his childhood and the summers that he lived in that back yard. There, he and his neighbors would play baseball together, littering the yard with ghosts. There once was a broken, antique, rusted playground. With frayed ropes carrying planks of wood for swings and splinters galore. There was a dogwood tree in the middle of the yard back then—second base. In the middle of the tree there was a gaping hole as it rotted from the inside out. All of it was gone by the time Andy sat there.

The beers had an effect on him and the nostalgia began to consume him. He missed the ease of ignorance, when his parents' rules seemed to him reasonable, but at the very least unrivaled. Before he knew the good days were becoming the good ole days and the tree and playground became stories he'd recall to his girlfriend after a beer and a blunt. It's funny the way nostalgia can take the form of a rotting tree or the scent of smoke deemed holy on a Sunday. The house back then was a beacon of obliviousness.

As his bare feet on the bumpy cement became as full of dents as the roads out front, he sipped his beer and remembered the times when he was consumed with an ignorance, unaware of the lack of rationality behind his parents' actions. Without warning, he watched as the door to the garage at the end of the stretch of yard opened and his mother stepped through, followed by his father. There was no use putting on a further façade; it was time.

Pam and Hunt saw Andy sitting on the stairs, beer and cigarette

in hand, and they froze. Pam took a moment to collect herself, for the image to click and settle, and then she snapped to attention and strode toward the house.

“Hi, guys,” said Andy. He was anything but relaxed.

“What are you drinking?” Pam asked, despite already knowing exactly what he was drinking.

“Uh,” he said, each word a struggle to speak, “it’s a beer.”

Without hesitation, Hunt seized the damp can from his grasp and tipped it upside down to pour the remainder into the grass. He asked, “Are you drunk?”

Andy tried not to scoff. “No, Dad, I’m not drunk.”

Hunt rested his cracked hands on the top of his worn leather belt. He chided, “Look at you, you’re drunk. You know it’s one thing to do this when you’re out with friends, but this is *my house*. That is incredibly disrespectful.”

“I’m twenty-one. I’m not drunk. It’s a couple of beers. Chill out, it’s not the end of the world. I’m not a child anymore,” he replied calmly. The urge to roll his eyes was always overwhelming with his parents.

His mother was relentless. She asked how much he typically drank, if he was an alcoholic, and then, “What did I do to deserve this? I thought we raised you to be a good, sober Christian man.”

“I’m sorry I don’t follow your insane rules to a T, but I’m *legal*. I should be able to drink responsibly. This is insane.”

“Oh, so we’re *insane*, are we?” she said, raising her eyebrows.

This time, Andy couldn’t stop himself from rolling his eyes. “No, but this is ignorant. You and Dad both can be so ignorant. Try to see my side.”

Pam retorted, “Your side is hedonism. Pure sin and disobedience—to us and Jesus. We taught you to have morals, Andy. To be a good Christian.”

Just then, Andy couldn’t seem to get Ryan out of his head, all these years later.

Hunt almost made an effort. “Pam,” he said, “it’s okay. Let’s take a breath for a second. It could be a lot worse.”

“Andrew should know better!” his mother shrieked

“I’m a good person,” he snapped. “That should be enough. After all you people have put me through the past twenty-one years, you could use a bit more empathy.”

“If I had any more empathy I’d be depressed,” said his mother tenaciously.

She assumed her typical scolding stance: leaning on one hip, arms folded beneath her chest. “If you don’t change your ways and cut this crap out, you’re not living in sin in my house.”

For a while after Andy left his parents’ house, he slept in his office at the airport. He was lucky; there he had a couch and a computer that could function as a make-shift television. There was even a shower complete with soap and shampoo branded with large letters reading simply S O A P and S H A M P O O. When he had to wash his few articles of clothing he had taken from home, he did so in the sink and hung them out to dry effectively by the runway.

At first, Andy felt the sadness of being cast aside, of not feeling the absolute love of his parents. Their love had revealed itself to be conditional, available to him only if he conformed to their oppressive opinions. There is sadness with lost romantic love; it is feeling temporary loss of a future. It is entirely different when those that raised you decide to quit; it is feeling inadequate, like a forsaken house deemed unworthy of further funding.

There came a time, about three weeks into his despondency, when his father approached him about returning. He had contacted Andy without the urging of his wife, enacted through guilt and loneliness. Expectedly, it hinged on his repentance and reformation of his hedonistic lifestyle. Andy knew that his life had entirely shifted from what he had imagined for himself as a child, and he was glad. When his father called him, told him his family missed him, Andy told him, “I’d rather be on my own.”

Andy met her at the bar one Thursday evening. Zara. He instantly became wrapped up in her, the way she insisted on standing at the waist-high table and bought him a drink after he had bought her three. She was outgoing and witty and she punched Andy on the arm several times through the evening when he dared categorize her.

Zara kissed him that night on her front porch. The kiss seemed to end prematurely. When she pulled away, she asked, “Did you smoke a cigarette?” Her voice was soaked in such bitterness, Andy felt breathless.

“I did,” he said, though the option to lie also crossed his mind. In truth, he had smoked much more than one.

Zara didn't respond immediately; she didn't need to. Her disapproving expression paired with the disdain in her voice did the trick.

Later, in Zara's bed that was still full of various throw-pillows, they talked about Christianity. She wondered, "Don't you kind of think that religion is sort of a cop out?"

"What do you mean?" Andy felt a bit attacked.

Zara spoke nonchalantly, as if a weathered veteran recounting how it feels to shoot a person—undisturbed when detailing disaster. "Well, it's a bunch of people who refuse to accept the harsh truths of this world. That when we die, we die. That there's evil despite the nonexistence of the Devil. It's like a world populated by people sticking their fingers in their ears and lying to themselves."

She took a swig of water from a bottle next to her bed and turned on a lamp covered with a red and blue bandanna. The room's new hue reminded Andy of the way the church looked on Good Friday, when they turned off the lights and the only remaining light emanated from the sun leaking through the stained glass. The church was full of actors in darkness.

The lull was cut off by Andy's long-awaited sigh. "I guess I always just took it as fact. Blindly."

"Well that's the thing about religion," said Zara, "the harder you look for truth the more lies you find."

"You're very confident in this," he noted.

Zara shrugged. "So far, I guess. Are you?"

On his drive home from Zara's house, Andy tossed his pack of cigarettes along with his favorite camo-patterned lighter out the moving window. If he were the type to wear a cross, he would have thrown that, too.

It was several months after Andy moved into his new apartment that he invited over his father. Actually, he had asked both of his parents to come, but Pam had thrown a fit over seeing her baby living as if she had had no effect on him. Hunt agreed to come over and help him fix his washing machine.

When Hunt arrived, the pair casually discussed the layout of his new place. Hunt commented on the great deal Andy had gotten, impressed. They didn't talk about their history, within the last few months or otherwise. It wasn't obtrusive for them exactly, more like

old friends silently agreeing to move past the argument. It wasn't worth it for them.

Hunt consented, "I'm happy for you, Drew. Your mother and I are both happy you're doing so well."

This time, Andy let out his natural scoff. "Mom's not really that happy, is she? I think she'd rather me die in a gutter than see me doing well on my own."

"That's not true. We love you." Hunt felt the tension. He repeated softly, almost under his breath, "We love you."

Hunt put down the screwdriver that had been lingering in his grip. He put the hand on Andy's shoulder. "I know we were suffocating you in a lot of ways. I know this is what was right for you—*necessary*. I know that, and I accept that. I really do." He removed his hand and made his way to the door. "We've both had some growing to do."

He pushed open the door leaving Andy behind, alone, in his apartment. He had plenty of room.



Expression
Chloe Murphy

Defining Urban Appalachia: An Interview with Marie Manilla

Sophie Ezzell

Huntington native Marie Manilla is a graduate of the Iowa Writers' Workshop, Marshall, and WVU. Her novel, The Patron Saint of Ugly, received The Weatherford Award. Shrapnel, set in Huntington, won the Fred Bonnie Award for Best First Novel. Stories in her collection, Still Life with Plums, first appeared in the Chicago Tribune, Prairie Schooner, Mississippi Review, and elsewhere. Her nonfiction has appeared in Word Riot, Cossack Review, Still, Solstice, and other journals. Learn more at www.mariemanilla.com

Sophie Ezzell is a senior at Marshall University pursuing a degree in creative writing and literary studies. Her work has appeared in Pidgeonholes, Still: The Journal, Under the Sun, and many others. Currently, she lives in Huntington, West Virginia where she serves as Editor-in-Chief for Et Cetera.

Sophie: First of all, thank you so much for coming and talking with me. Let's get into it: I know that you consider yourself an "Urban Appalachian"—a term that a lot of people think is contradictory. Can you elaborate on what exactly it means to be an Urban Appalachian?

Marie: Well, first of all, it took me a very long time to even consider myself an Appalachian. When I was growing up, that was not a term we heard very much. I grew up here in the 60s and 70s, and it wasn't until I moved away to Houston, Texas, that I understood just how stereotyped and derided we were by people outside of West Virginia and the region. They were asking me if I wore shoes back home and if my dad was a coal miner, which there's nothing wrong with that profession, but my dad was not a coal miner. I was kind of shocked.

So when I moved back to West Virginia, I started to look at it differently. That's around the time that I was hearing more and more that term "Appalachian." And it was usually followed by something derogatory. It hearkened back to the war on poverty—President Johnson's war on poverty in the 60s that flashed these black and white images of malnourished Appalachians all across the country. You know—because "we've got to feed our poor kin." They would always show these poor

moms with their bedraggled children on beat up front porches. And I'm seeing this and thinking, *Well, that's not the Appalachia I know, so what is it? What is Appalachia?* I actually had to look it up on a map to see just what the region is. Have you looked it up?

Sophie: I hadn't until I took an Appalachian Literature course—and I was shocked at how broad it is. It's much broader than people think it is.

Marie: It is! It's New York down to Georgia. So it's the entire Appalachian Mountain Range—but the only state completely inside Appalachia is West Virginia. So we are smack dab in the middle. But there are some pretty big cities within that chunk of Appalachia. Pittsburgh, for one.

Sophie: And Knoxville.

Marie: And Knoxville—where you're from. So I had to figure out: How do I fit inside this term “Appalachia,” because we're not one monolithic thing, but I think that the rest of the country thinks that we are. That we're very rural and downtrodden. And that's not the Appalachia that I knew. I grew up in Huntington when we had about 70,000 people. And I don't know if I would have called myself urban while I was growing up, but now that I know what Appalachia is considered—which is typically small rural towns—I feel like I should specify that I'm urban. I grew up in a town with a university, with the steel industry—we had the nickel plant, we had a bustling downtown, we had an airport that could fly you to New York or to Charlotte or wherever you wanted to go. I still don't know how to classify myself as an Appalachian. But we all have valid stories to tell, so when I write about that experience of growing up in a thriving town, having a college education, having a father who went to college—that's my Urban Appalachian experience. Even though a lot of Appalachian writers may balk at my use of the term “Urban Appalachian.”

Sophie: We talked about how in popular literature and media Appalachia is almost solely depicted as a rural place where everyone is from a holler and the only occupation is coal mining. Why do you think that is? Why do you think outsiders are so unwilling to accept the reality of an Urban Appalachia?

Marie: I feel like my explanation might be a little cynical, but I feel like outsiders want to keep us in a box. They're comfortable and familiar with Appalachians as being rural, as being the children of coal miners, as being addicts and alcoholics. And I feel like when we try to stretch the boundaries of what Appalachia is, it makes them uncomfortable. "Wait a minute! Wait a minute! You mean you might be like me? You mean there might be similarities? You mean you went to college?" I think it makes people uncomfortable. And I think it makes people feel superior to keep us inside the little Appalachian box. And I don't want to devalue the rural Appalachian experience either. I don't want to devalue the coal miners or the people that really are struggling with addiction issues. Because that's real Appalachia too. But there are other stories.

Even in the publishing industry. Early on when I was trying to get my Huntington story out there, editors didn't know what to make of my work. I remember one time I sent a short story to an Appalachian journal and the response from the editor was "I love the writing, but could you send us something more Appalachian?" And I remember thinking, *What does that mean? Am I only allowed to write about the coal mining and holler experience?* And I really felt like I had to bone up on mine wars and make that the focus of my work. And then I realized that no, I don't. There are plenty of other really fine writers that can do that—Denise Giardina, Ann Pancake—but that's not my experience.

Sophie: How do you represent Appalachia differently in your work to contradict the mainstream depiction?

Marie: Well, none of my characters are from rural West Virginia. Most of my settings are cities. My characters can be blue-collar, but I intentionally don't make any of them coal miners. I intentionally don't do that because I want to show people that there are other occupations in Appalachia. I think that my characters grapple with issues of the human condition. I think what I try to do in my fiction is show outsiders that we have the same hopes and fears and dreams and challenges that you do. We're not intellectually deficient—which is often the stereotype. I just try to present our humanity.

Sophie: What about in your nonfiction?

Marie: I have to think about that.

Sophie: I mean, I guess that your nonfiction is inherently Appalachian when you identify as an Appalachian writer.

Marie: Right. My essays are usually memoir—I often put myself in them. And because I grew up here and live here now, many of them take place here in West Virginia. I do address some of our issues. One of my essays has to do with drug addiction and prostitution in Huntington because I see it up close and personal when I drive by 6th Avenue every day. I'm not afraid to tackle our very real issues, but we're not the only city or state that has drug addiction and prostitution. When I present it, I try to present it with compassion.

In one of my essays I talk about how every Saturday my husband and I go to a community drive where anyone who wants to—churches, social organizations, med students—can bring donations—food, shoes, clean clothes—and anybody can come and get them. Often the homeless, the prostitutes, and drug addicts show up. One Saturday, my husband and I were in line, giving out food, and I saw one of my former students. It had been probably ten years since I had had her as a student and I could tell that she was a drug addict now. And I think she was with a pimp—because I had tried to talk to her about when she was in my English 101 and her eyes were downcast and she was browbeaten. And the guy beside her did not like me talking to her. It broke my heart. I remember her very well—when I met her, she was a freshman with no support, working multiple jobs, her father had booted her out. She came to class with bruises one day and I asked her what had happened—her boyfriend had beat her. We went immediately to counseling services, and she got out of that relationship. But she's just one of many people who fall through the cracks. She didn't have a safety net. And that's not an Appalachian thing. Every state in the country has people without a safety net who need a safety net. So when I'm writing about these things, I'm not writing about them as a West Virginia issue or an Appalachian issue—it's just the sad state of where we are as a country.

Sophie: It's a human issue.

Marie: Yes, it's a human condition issue. And it's heartbreaking. We

get hit pretty hard with it in the media. But the truth is, this isn't just an Appalachia issue.

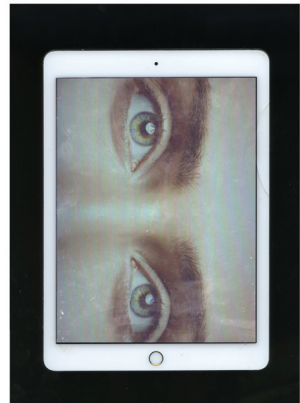
Sophie: What are you working on now?

Marie: I am working on a collection of essays, which I've never done before. I've been writing essays for about five years now.

Sophie: Is it weird transitioning from fiction to nonfiction?

Marie: It is. But I really love it because I can explore the same themes that I like to explore in my fiction, but I can approach it in a different way. In my fiction, I loved exploring issues of racism, sexism, and classism. If you read all of my work together, you would see that those three subjects are a constant theme. The classism often has to do with West Virginia and the snobbery towards us. There's also snobbery within Appalachia. I don't want to make broad generalizations, but I've noticed that the urban centers can be very snobby towards the rural areas. I think that's changing, though.

In my nonfiction, I can explore it from my experiences. I used to fictionalize some of what I witnessed, but now I can really talk about this is what I saw firsthand: this is the racism I witnessed, this is the sexism I witnessed, this is the homophobia I witnessed. And I can also explore my own growth—because there were times that I was pretty horrid too. And I have to confess my sins too. That's the thing I learned about nonfiction—you don't want to make yourself the hero of your work because nobody will believe you. And I always tried to be honest in my fiction, but I try to be brutally honest in my nonfiction. We're aiming at the truth, and I'm not afraid to expose my sins.



Eye for Eyes
Ty Salmons

Beads

Rachel Venturino

The air in Lloyd's office building was as damp as Florida summers. His coworkers believed that in that air were noxious fumes that was the source of their lightheadedness and drained energies. Lloyd thought this to be true and was more in love with the sensation than his own family. Eager to leave his wife and crying son each morning to return to the mildew tainted space of his desk. Addicted to a job that fell into his arms by chance. Like his coworkers, Lloyd received a letter in the mail years ago congratulating him on accepted employment to a company he had never applied to; that he had never heard of. But who in their right mind could say no to a job? Even if the name on the letter did not belong to Lloyd, he planned to fake it until he was caught just for the steady income.

The work was easy. He sat and stared at the piles of coffee stained papers, engulfed in the heat and hum of florescent lights. Movements from the manager's overlooking window caught his attention. The clock hanging below stopped two minutes until five some odd hours ago. A bug caught between cogs and gears, too large to be crushed or too headstrong to become mangled.

A shadow passed by the window again. It was stiff and didn't bounce when it walked—like the figure was riding a conveyor belt. Coworkers often whispered to one another in the safety of the dingy building's parking lot about what could be in that observatory room. Some believed there was no boss looking over them, that somehow the shadows were all figments of imagination they were sharing, caused by the alleged fumes. Their minds wanted so desperately to believe something was in that room, creating images of a man out of the shadows of the blinds. Many crafted government conspiracies regarding the contents of the room; centered around aliens, demons, or scientists that used the employees as rats for experiments. Everyone had their own story regarding the room. Lloyd once talked to a woman who claimed to glance up and see beady, black eyes staring back at her through the blinds.

Lloyd adjusted the thick glasses sliding down his fat nose and looked back down at his paper and pens. Whatever was behind the

window must have been enjoying the extra labor that bug was causing. Hieroglyphics scattered the pages; fish with feet, birds looking up and to the side, canes and waves, eye balls, several arrangements of lines all meaning different commands. When Lloyd was new to the company, the man who once sat in front of him helped him understand the correct responses for each symbol. No one knew what they meant; only what pictures went together.

The boy beside Lloyd leaned over and whispered, “Hey man.” He was just as young and fresh as Lloyd once was. “We all know it’s past five. Should we just go? I got places to be.” Lloyd only shook his head in response, lip hanging low and open.

“We go when the bell rings. No exceptions.” A woman behind them spoke. Her back was pen needle straight as she filed paperwork.

Hours passed and employees became more restless. Somewhere, in the corner of the room, someone was snoring. Lloyd stared at the clock one last time. Above, the shadowed figure stopped in the middle of the window, and before nodding off into a nap, Lloyd caught a glimmer of small black eyes staring at him. It seemed only a moment for him when a harsh tone echoed through the rows of desks. He jumped up and looked at the clock; finally, five. The insect in the cogs succumbed to death. The figure in the window had vanished. The clock would need reset to the appropriate time.

Lloyd felt sicker than normal during his drive home. He looked at the digital clock on his dash board; a few minutes past midnight. Was it the additional seven hours of the supposed hazardous air that caused this? He wanted to say that was the reason but could not forget the eyes that watched him sleep. They invaded his dreams. Always unable to make out the details on the rest of the figure. He gazed into the dull, purple puddles of his dreams only to find them on himself. They were smaller than any Lloyd had ever encountered on a human—they were like the black button eyes of a doll. Bulging, thoughtless. Unpredictable.

Lloyd took off his jacket and tie, gingerly closing the back door to not disturb his sleeping family. He grabbed a beer from the fridge before sitting down in the living room. Religious talk shows and infomercials were the only programming that played so late at night. The impulsive buyer with a container of cheese puffs, coating their landline in grease and dust to order cheap, plastic jewelry. The troubled

soul who was kept up at night by their own obsessive thoughts – in dire need to receive comfort and affirmation from anyone, even a scam artist. Lloyd surfed the channels, scratching the inside of his ear with his pinkie, and soon decided on a talk show. A woman over the phone sobbed as she spoke.

“I don’t know what to do anymore.” Her voice cut out in the middle of words and a buzz could be heard in the background between her cries. “I love him still, but I can’t live like this.” As she spoke, the made-for-television preacher stared into the camera—at his audience—nodding his head the entire time. His cheeks folded and sagged down until they nearly touched the collar of this shirt. “I don’t want to live in fear anymore,” the woman whispered.

“Well, Carol,” the man said. “You don’t have to. Now, you see, you just need to let Jesus into your heart and he will guide.” Before the preacher could finish his sentence, the crying woman interrupted. Her voice was strained, growing into a yell.

“But I have, Father Murphy. I have. I have. Throughout my entire damned life I’ve worshiped Christ. So why would he turn on me like this?”

Father Murphy leaned back in his chair. “Maybe you haven’t loved hard enough. There’s still something in you that draws you to the devil.” Lloyd began digging his pinkie deeper into his ear as the camera zoomed out to show a Christ Kit displayed on the table beside Father Murphy. Lloyd took his finger out of his ear. He could feel the small legs of an insect pushing against the peach fuzz inside, crawling deeper and banging on his eardrum. The sensation drove Lloyd up the wall, his finger too thick to pin down the creature.

Lloyd began searching around the coffee table for something small enough to poke the insect with; pliers, pens and pencils, the cork screw of his Swiss army knife, golf tees. None of them seemed the right tool until he found a lone, lost toothpick hiding in the corner of a drawer. Lloyd cleaned the tip of it off on his shirt before lightly poking around his ear. He swirled the stick around, coming close to catching the creature. Each time Lloyd pushed down on its body or went to give a fatal poke, it was able to squirm out of his way – slipping and sliding deeper. As the insect continued to escape his toothpick, his patience grew thin; Father Murphy sold Jesus like car insurance in the background. It moved like a contortionist, or jelly. Lloyd fumbled and

dropped the toothpick onto his lap. The peak of his frustration caused him to grab the pick and plunge it deep into his ear. Finally, he caught the squirming insect but damaged his eardrum. He removed the pick as quickly as it had entered, cursing to himself in pain and looked over what had caused him so much discomfort. He twirled the worm-like creature around on the stick. It looked wet, skin glistening against the light of the television screen. Tiny, thin legs covered the sides of it, still moving and squirming. Lloyd tossed it on the coffee table, leaned back, and took a sip of beer.

“Next caller,” Father Murphy called. “My brother, my sister. How may I help you this fine evening?” As the caller spoke, Lloyd watched a shadow move across his forearm out of the corner of his eye. He stared at it for a moment before returning to the television. It didn’t take long for the shadow to make another appearance. Lloyd knew this time that something moved across him. A third time he watched it happen and turned on the lamp beside him. Beneath his skin were small bumps, moving through his veins imitating blood cells.

Lloyd began smacking his arm like he had found an ant scurrying towards a plate of beef and links. He hit himself until his arm was red and swollen, the bumps continuing to move. He watched their patterns of movement until he was able to grab at one through his skin. He squeezed at the thing invading his body, hoping to pop it but, like the worm, the bumps were able to escape his grip at every attempt. He slid off the couch and his knees hit the floor, believing this new position could get him closer to stopping the invaders.

“And you, Lloyd Bishop.” Lloyd’s head snapped up to the television screen. Father Murphy seemed to be staring directly at him, through the camera lens and right into Lloyd’s living room. Father Murphy smiled. “Give us a call sometime, my brother. There’s plenty of sin inside of you that I believe can be fixed with one of our Christ Kits right here.” Three loud thuds were heard from Father Murphy patting the kit beside him. Lloyd’s neck and jaws were shaking, staring at Father Murphy who remained smiling, unmoving, and looking directly back. A large drop of sweat fell from the tip of his nose onto his quivering lips.

When Lloyd turned back to his arm, more bumps covered his arm, and yet in his horror Lloyd still thought of his sleeping family and did not scream. A heavy breath escaped his nostrils as the sweat clung to

this chest and armpits. A knot formed in his throat, like the oncoming of vomit and suffocation. In the heat of Lloyd's fear, he grabbed the Swiss army knife from the table and began tearing at his skin. He whimpered and moaned, cutting down to the vein. His head fell onto the couch cushion he knelt against. He covered his eyes in the cheap fabric, tossed the knife to the side and used his uneasy fingers to search for a bump. When Lloyd caught one, his shaking fingers almost set it free again. He brought it to his face. It was hard like the plastic pony beads his sister used as friendship bracelets when they were children. On each end of it were the claw-like legs it used to swiftly scurry through his insides.

Moments later, Lloyd let it fall to the floor. Heaving, he allowed himself to dive back into his arm to expel more of these living pony beads. He cut skin out of the way and searched deeper, throwing more of the creatures onto the carpet and away from him. After the first few, he did not look at them anymore. It was a pattern; *cut, search, throw*. Soon it became like knitting to him, attentively watching himself carry out the action until he fell asleep.

When he woke, the television was turned off and his arm was without a scratch, as if it had never known pain. The rich aroma of coffee filled the house. The shuffling of his wife's slippers moved from the linoleum kitchen to the carpet. She placed a coffee mug onto the table and said a faint, "Good morning."

I'D LOVE TO TAKE

NO. _____

NAME _____

PAY END. _____

OT HOURS _____

HOURS

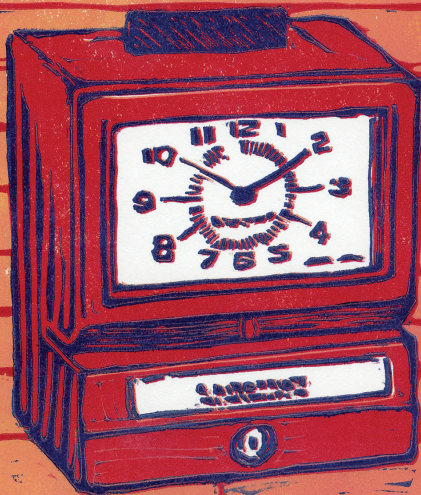
1

2

3

4

5



NUMBER OF
DEDUCTIONS

TOTAL EARNINGS

TOTAL DEDUCTIONS

BALANCE DUE

YOUR TIME

Punch Card
Sa-Rai Robinette

i saw you in that hospital mural, smiling

Elijah Bowen

childish, shattered blue pottery
rivers and a diversity of children.
to each, their broad shirts and scribbles
for heads, mouths, faces, arms.
winking at me about heaven or nirvana or both.
more.
they seem wiser.
i heard that all time is occurring at once.
looking here, i see it all as reflection.
the bright infant depictions hand everything back to me as if to say-
this was this wall. this, was where you sat
and looked into it and laughed your little laugh. see? then all the
leftovers-
so soggy, how they dripped off the cheap white plastic. so sad, how
you lived, some others died.
they hand me the truth like the homemade bread
swaddled in her mother's linen like a refugee birth
(this is my body...)
i heard that joy, like anything,
is born to fragments made more whole.
place your thumb on the ones with the silly chipped paint and buried
toddlers' finger nails,
and remember how both happen all at once.
like a cough.
like a child
(i can feel him still)
letting go of life and the pillowcase.
like rain puddles waiting to reflect the best fireworks shot into the night
that year.
exactly like all the ways how you can collect someone in your arms
and speak to them about this moment.
here and now is a construct.
make it into a home.
after all, there is so little time. so little time.

the children meet at the hands to make a circle. everything all at once.
a pacifism of crayon box hues.
they each confide that they're the end, the middle, and the beginning.
and one after another,
like green blips on the panels
like god and a pulse,
those pyrrhic, incandescent blues,
and then breakage-
I close my eyes to believe them.
(do this in remembrance of me)



The Doors of Perception
Peyton Dolin

Vérité

Zac Thabet

It was late, running somewhere between eleven and twelve at night. My thin jacket offered little protection from the cool November air, which explained why I had attached myself to Andrew. My arm locked tightly around his as I leaned my head into the crook of his neck for warmth. Neither of us were speaking, which was probably due to the lingering buzz in our ears from the concert. I wanted to look ahead to see if we were close to the parking lot. As I squinted my eyes to get a closer look, I did not see the car. Instead, I noticed a dark silhouette walking toward us.

Oh my god. It was happening. Andrew and I were about to get jumped. This was just like the story on the news when that football player jumped the gay couple for holding hands. That was at my college! What was I going to do? If I had thought in advance for something like this, perhaps I could have developed some sort of escape route. Should a gay couple walking down a city street during the night have an escape plan in place? Surely, I should be carrying a pocket-knife, or pepper spray at the very least, right? Then again, the car was roughly two blocks away, so if we run, we could probably make it in five minutes.

Thoughts had begun flying towards me as fragmented bullets. Shards of glass meant to disrupt my peace of mind and sense of self. The buzz of the concert was quickly fading as I found myself wishing I had taken my mother more seriously when she bought me a pocket-knife for self defense. I tried to gather my thoughts.

Who cared that Andrew and I were leaning together as we walked? I certainly didn't. I was not the type of person that was afraid of being gay. My sexuality was never something that I was ashamed of. In fact, I took pride in it. I had to. Throughout my childhood, I had been under threat so many times that stopped counting by the fifth grade. I had to overcome a boy who followed me down the hill of my middle school, threatening to stab my eye out with a pencil. In high school, I faced administration that did nothing when they found out their star wrestlers were saying that gay men should be gassed to death. Each time I faced hate, a dealt with it in the same way. I reminded myself their hate could

not truly be directed towards me but projected off of themselves. Just as all hate is. Then I let it go. In doing this, I never once let them rob me of anything but a precious thought. I never lost sleep over it, and I certainly never shed a tear. So why was it now, of all moments, that I found myself poisoned with fear?

I was a ten-year-old boy standing in the check-out line inside a Walmart with my father. We were having a father-son bonding day, since my older siblings were out for homecoming. While I was helping him shop for groceries, as I always did because it made me feel like an adult, Dad had made the mistake of walking past the toy section. After only a few short minutes of youthful manipulation on my part, I was walking down the various aisles to locate the perfect toy to add to my collection. My eyes eventually fell on the Barbie dolls. As I surveyed my candidates, I noticed a familiar blonde tucked towards the back, with a special guitar in hand.

The “Taylor Swift: Teardrops on My Guitar Edition” doll. No way. I had been listening to Taylor Swift since her first album came out. Oh, if only she knew the countless nights I spent watching her music videos on the television. Or how many times I had listened to her CD on the stereo in my room. Oh, my dad had to get me this doll. He just had to.

Without hesitation, I snatched up the doll, and without hesitation, my dad approved. When we got to the checkout, I was gripping the box tightly to my chest, admiring the sparkles in the spearmint green dress that she wore. I noted to myself that it was the dress from her music video reimagined in doll form. As I placed my precious Taylor on the conveyor belt, my father and I could hear a scoff behind us.

“You really lettin’ your boy buy that girl doll?” My father and I turned to see that the man standing behind us in line was now looking at us. He was heavier set, and if I had to have guessed his age, it would be between his late forties and early fifties. He wore a forest green ballcap and a dark flannel. Even though he was speaking to my father, his eyes were on me. I tried to look down, focusing on my doll.

Mom always said not to talk to strangers, but what did you do if they’re talking about you? Should something be said then? But mom also said something about putting people in feeding tubes if they were mean to me, so if he said something mean maybe I should just let her deal with it, although feeding tubes sound kind of weird to me. What

does he even mean? Girl doll? Could he have been meaning that the doll was a girl, because that was kind of a given. Although, something told me that he wasn't really talking about the doll.

Even after coming to the conclusion that I shouldn't speak to this man, I knew my dad would fail to reach the same conclusion. In fact, I could already see my dad puffing out his chest and tucking his tongue beneath his lip—a common mannerism he had adopted to keep himself from saying something he would regret.

“Yep.” I could hear my father announcing, his Appalachian roots revealing themselves through his accent. “I sure am, buddy. Is that gon' be a problem with you, pal?” The man didn't have a response for that, or if he did, I had blocked it out. It didn't matter. The damage had been done. My face was no longer glowing at the idea of a doll that sings one of my favorite songs, instead, it was burning over the fact I was now holding a girl's doll, and I was a boy. I allowed myself a short time to enjoy my new toy, trying to ignore the fact that it was apparently intended to be used by young girls. Eventually, I thought, I would forget about it. I did not. Even after I gave the doll away, I did not forget.

Adults always thought that the things they said had no impact on a young child. They thought they wouldn't remember. It would fade into the background like the beach at the end of a summer vacation. Well Redneck-From-Walmart, I remembered. A decade later, I remembered. I remembered your words. I remembered the embarrassment I felt. I remembered everything about that moment. But above all else, I remember the way it prepared me for everything that came after that; or, should I say the way it should have prepared me for everything that came after that?

I refocused my thoughts on the man. He was tall. Taller than Andrew—who was 6'2. He seemed to favor one of his legs, because he had a limp as he walked. He wore a dark coat, but that was the only physical feature I could make out through the darkness. I felt a squeeze on my arm, which meant Andrew noticed, too. He must have felt my body tense.

That was something he did sometimes. It was his unspoken, self-invented language. If we were driving and he wanted to tell me he was glad I was there, I felt a squeeze. If I looked upset and he wanted to

check in without saying anything, I felt a squeeze. If he just wanted to say hi, I felt a squeeze. If he noticed my body tense up, I felt a squeeze.

I gave his arm a weak squeeze in response, letting him know I was okay, even though I wasn't quite sure that I was. I try to relax my body with a subtle shift in my breathing patterns. This was not my first encounter with a stranger on the street. Two years later, I could still picture the moment in vivid color.

I remembered that the stranger was a man. He was dressed in a t-shirt and jeans. His hair was the color of dead grass, and it stuck to the skin on his face as if it had been glued there. I met him for just a brief moment, while I was in the downtown area of Huntington. It was where most teenagers I knew spent their Friday nights. A group of friends and I were seeing a movie. I noticed him approaching, the same way I noticed the man after the concert. I had tried to divert my friends away without drawing attention to the man, suggesting that we cross the street. We were just starting to cross when he stepped in front of me, stopping me and one of my friends behind me from joining the rest of our group.

“Are you gay?” His voice was rough and came from deep within his throat. Not that I really gave much attention to the sound of his voice. Because the moment that those three words left his mouth, I found myself wishing I had worn more neutral colors, like the flannel sitting in my closet. He wouldn't have approached me in that. Maybe this was why my mom and I argued over my fashion choices. She never wanted me to become a target. I wanted to call her and apologize for the tight jeans and the pink shirt, even more than I wanted to escape this man, because I understood now. She wanted to protect me, and right now I was in the exact situation she wanted to protect me from.

Realizing I still had not spoken, I fought to find my voice until I finally managed to sputter out a sound similar to a yes. He looked me up and down. I could smell the alcohol in his breath and felt a chill roll over me. I was unable to tell if the look I was getting is one of disgust, pity, or rage. None of which sounded terribly appealing to me in that moment. I tried to keep my eyes lowered, being careful not to provoke him. “Figures. You look it. Ah, you just haven't found the right stuff yet.” He flashed me a wink, elbowed me, and opened his mouth to keep talking when a woman approached him. “Dale! What the hell are you doin’? Leave them alone, he is a kid!” I assumed she was with

him, because she was laughing along as she dragged him off down the street. I did not hesitate or look back. I grabbed the friend beside me and rushed towards the rest of our friend group. No matter how much a quickened my pace, it still was never fast enough to escape the drunk. I apologized to my friend, knowing that this was my fault, and that she must have been just as frightened as I was. I remembered the fear that pulsed through me. I wanted to cry, but I didn't. "I'm sorry." I repeated to my friend. "I am so sorry." And I was. I was sorry the entire car ride home. And the next week at school. And every day since then.

As the silhouette grew closer to us, I had a feeling I was going to be sorry again soon. I tried to command my feet to keep moving. However, much like the approaching man, my feet ignored my telepathic instructions. How had my night turned out like this? Just moments ago, I was meeting a musician I had no idea I was going to meet, and now I was afraid for my safety. I tried to imagine I was still as excited as I was when I met her.

Vérité was the self-given title of the musician. We weren't originally supposed to meet her, but when she announced that she was holding a free meet-and-greet after the show, Andrew and I knew we had no other choice but to meet her. We stood in line for a few moments before it was finally our turn. I let Andrew go first. As I waited, I noticed for the first time how gentle her voice was when she spoke, despite its ability to travel through mountains when she sang. Freckles plagued her skin, mimicking constellations with their scattered formations. I could see some of her nail polish was beginning to chip away as she hugged him. I was in such a state of bewilderment that had I not been staring directly at her; I probably would have missed her attention turn towards me. "I love your glasses!" At first, I wasn't sure why that shocked me so much. But as she pulled me into a friendly hug, I realized that it had never occurred to me that someone that played on our radios could notice something as simple as a pair of glasses. It never occurred to me that she could be so *human*.

Despite my increasing anxiety, I fought the urge to detach from Andrew. I had given into what society wanted me to be before. But I couldn't do it this time. Releasing my grip on Andrew felt like the equivalent to denying the existence of him altogether, and he deserved better than that. So, I held on as the man stepped in front of us, and my

feet stopped moving.

“I’m sorry to bother you fellas,” the man grumbled in a weak voice. “I just need some cigarettes. I ain’t had a smoke in awhile, now. I just need some change or a dollar if you got one.” He looked at Andrew, and then at me. My head was still on his shoulder, but I managed to look at him in the eye.

“I’m sorry,” I said, “I don’t have anything.” And I was sorry, because I wanted to help the man. I desperately wanted to help the man who saw that we were two men leaning into each other and saw no reason to point it out. Andrew had no money either, and the man moved on to the next person.

A part of me wanted to out a short laugh as we were walking away from the man, and squeeze on Andrew’s arm to let him know that I was okay—that we were okay. I could just imagine his amused face, full of concern and confusion. And honestly, who wouldn’t be concerned by someone finding amusement in a man desperate enough for cash that he is begging people on the street. Except I would not have been laughing at the man. I would have been laughing at myself. How dramatic of me to assume that this was the moment of my demise, when in truth all this man wanted was some spare change.

The definition of the French term “*Vérité*” is *to tell the truth*. I’ve thought a lot about that. I thought back to every instance of homophobia that I had been exposed to. I thought back to Walmart, and the night downtown. I thought back to the death threats and the story of the Marshall football player. I thought about how in each of those moments, I was in danger to some degree. And then I thought of *vérité*. I thought of the truth.

Well, the truth is that I had every reason to be frightened by the man approaching us after the concert. I had every reason to apologize to my friend for the drunk at the movies. I had every reason to give away my doll. My entire life, I have found myself in situations where to some degree I was told that I was too gay. My choice of toys made me appear gay. My choice of wardrobe made me appear gay. My choice of everything made me appear gay. I grew so accustomed to the fear of appearing gay that it never once occurred to me that it was fear at all. It had become an emotion so commonly integrated into my everyday life that I had lost the ability to recognize it. I never wanted

to be seen with dolls, or in a pink t-shirt. I had been fighting an internal war between the person I wanted to be, and the person society wanted me to be. After almost twenty years I have finally started to realize that the war I have been fighting has wasted so much of my energy, because of those two people, only one could truly exist.

I looked up at Andrew as we reached the car. We made eye contact for a moment. I thought about his squeezes. I thought about his laugh, and how I could always count on him to snort before his laugh is over. I thought about how no plan has ever gone smoothly with him. I thought about how he was the only person I wanted to put my phone down for, and at the same time he was the one I wanted to pick my phone up for. I thought about how if I was still being the person that society wanted me to be, I would never have had the opportunity to look at him the way I was. And I didn't even mean him specifically, though maybe he did have something to do with this. I would never have these unexpected nights, with someone who squeezed my arm to make sure I'm okay. I thought of the internal struggle. I'm still not quite sure how I feel about which of those two people truly exists, but I am sure of one thing. If that person made it possible to look at someone the way I was looking at Andrew in that moment, I think I can come to terms with whoever that person is.



The Leader
Sophia Celdrán

Lipstick

Molly Wagner

Mom pulls out a slender gold tube
with a used plum peak.
The cakey texture
spreads in clumps.
She makes a long face and
sticks her chin up, her mauve eyes
squinting downward as her lips
smack together.
The sangria is shadowed
by the taupe behind her eyes.
She tries to hand me opulence.
The stench of glitter
and powder and the Macy's makeup
department tingle my nose
I could almost taste the absence of sugar.
She glares at me
and wipes the sticky excess.
Disappointment
from her botoxed lip,
she tucks the cool vial into her purse.

She says proper ladies wear makeup.
All I have is chapstick.



Self Portrait of My Middle School Notebook
Lilly Dyer

Somewhere under the Rainbow

Destiny Tomblin

I've always liked the rain.
The thick smell of dirt that always fills
the air sprouts its way
into my nostrils. Sticking to
the back of my throat.

My shoes gush and quack with each step
as the cold water seeps into each sole.
I forget my umbrella every time it rains

but I find shelter in the rubber of my raincoat.

With every move I make it crinkles,
clinging to the moisture on my skin,
repelling every plunk with a plastic remark.
Each lock of my damp hair curls and frizzes,

bouncing with every stomp.
The mumbles and groans of passing traffic don't bother me
as I splash my way home.

My reflection glitters in each puddle,
changing expression with each ripple and
disappearing with each heavy drop.

People rush by me, stumbling to unlock their cars, as if acid
were bubbling from the sky.
One lady curses under her breath,
hair as wet as my own.
She hates the rain she says, ducking into her vehicle.

Looking up, I see faint shades of color
sparkling with each glimmering ray of sunlight.
As the shower becomes a drought, each trickle softens and
the beads on my hair are all that's left.
Traffic booms in the distance.
I decide to raise my hood.



The Reilly
Julia Pritt

Everything Good in the World as a Soft and Gentle Rabbit

Ellie Reger

It is late afternoon when the package arrives.

I'm in the kitchen, stuffing an entire lobster in a boiling pot of water. He struggles with me, clawing at the metal; I slowly press the tongs onto his hard body, and he splashes into the water. The doorbell rings and I place the lid onto the pot.

I open the front door to the woman holding a medium brown box. She asks if I am Owen Scott and I nod. It's mild out but I can see perspiration gathering on her upper lip.

I sign for the package, taking it from her and closing the door before she finishes her goodbye. I set the box down on the coffee table in the living room. I feel ashamed by my excitement for a moment: my hands shake as I take a pocket knife to the side of the box, gently tearing away the tape. I look up, almost as if to see if anyone is in the room to watch me behave so childishly. No one is here, of course, and I continue opening the box with such care as to not damage the goods inside.

I can still hear scratching from the metal pot in the kitchen. It is shrill and grating. It is like a radio on a low volume, only loud enough to hear the S and T sounds. I decide this moment is too sacred to be spoiled by my dying meal, and I bring the box upstairs before I have finished opening it.

Upstairs are my aquariums. Some are freshwater, some are oceanic, one contains nothing but a single aquatic plant spilling over the top of the glass panels and into the dull sunlight from the window. There must be a dozen tanks by now, each of varying sizes and contents. I've invested nearly half each paycheck for over a year and visited a handful of trade shows to purchase exotic fish for the room. The walls are lined with them, and the room glows blue from the lights above the water.

I open the box to pull out a water filter. It is heavy and cold plastic in my hands. I take it over to one of the newly acquired tanks, one that contains nothing but 500 gallons of saltwater and sand. I spend some time attaching the filter to the tank, hooking up all the necessary wires

and tubes, and turn it on. It is a holy moment, the whir of the motor and the bubbles kicking up sand behind the glass. I watch it for a minute or so, my hands on my knees, nose almost pressing on the tank. It is beautiful. Soon it will contain several rare saltwater corals. I have spent two months procuring the specimens and perfecting the tank's pH and temperature. This filter is the last piece of the puzzle before I can safely begin growing the garden I have planned. I imagine it full of lush pink anemone and blue sea stars hiding behind the orange sun coral. Maybe I'll get a horseshoe crab if I can find a breeder close enough. The thought of the tank full and thriving makes me conscious of my heart in my chest. It beats louder in my ears when I press my hands against the glass.

I remember the lobster.

I had not raised this one myself. No, that would require what I imagine murdering my own child would feel like. This year with the aquariums has not been long enough for me to experience a death inside of them, as I have done everything to prevent it. In the beginning, I spent months on Internet forums, penning letters to professionals, visiting award winning displays. It consumed me, still consumes me.

I had fallen into the hobby some winter evening the previous year. I took a walk by myself, which was new to me; I was trying to get used to the sensation of my hands in my pockets instead of holding a dog leash or the hand of another. Miriam took the dog when she moved out, which I didn't mind much, as it was only of use to me as an excuse to go on long walks. The thing was small and skittish, and Miriam regularly took it to be groomed, its nails painted, bows put in its hair. It barked when the doorbell rang. It gave me a headache.

My head was half buried in a scarf that evening. I wasn't sure what to do with my eyes. I wanted to close them and walk blindly through the streets. I typically watched the dog tug the leash and sniff and piss on each plant, and I was fine without this, but it still left me an emptiness. It was getting dark, and a light dust of snow gathered on my eyelashes. I pulled my hand from my coat pocket and pressed my thumb and forefinger together and watched the redness of them disappear into a flesh tone for a single second, then back to red. I lost my gloves. Maybe Miriam took them. I wasn't sure. If she had taken

them, that was fine, I thought, because she deserves to have warm hands, too.

The sidewalk I was on was leading me past a church. It was small, not one of those Catholic stained glass monuments on the main street, but a little cement building with a welcome sign adorned with a cross. It was unremarkable. The lights were on and I could see people moving inside. Through the window I watched the silhouette of an apple shaped man throw back its head and laugh.

It was not a conscious decision to enter the church; it was as if I had exited my body and watched myself open the doors. I felt that way for the next hour as I watched myself sit through an entire Alcoholics Anonymous meeting I never meant to attend. Afterwards, I watched myself mingle with the attendees outside and I listened to myself fabricate stories about how my drinking made me reckless. I watched myself tell an old man I shot my pet rabbit with a sawed off shotgun while on a weekend bender.

“I didn’t know what happened until the next morning. I didn’t know whose blood was all over my pants until I saw one of its feet in an empty glass of beer,” I saw myself tell the man. I saw myself laugh. None of this had ever happened. I never owned a rabbit. I never held a gun. The taste of beer repulsed me. I didn’t think it mattered in the moment, and it didn’t. I would never see this man again, and even if I did, I didn’t care what the man thought of me. He had a gray ponytail halfway down his back. He smoked a hand rolled cigarette.

“What you need,” the man said, “is a hobby. I started gardening. It takes up more time than you’d think. You’re a young guy, I’m sure you got plenty of things you like doing.” The man smiled at me warmly and winked, and I felt like I had been punched in the face. I didn’t have any hobbies. I had a job at a small law firm. I previously owned a dog. I knew how to cook. I liked to play Solitaire, but that wasn’t much of a hobby.

I spent the rest of the night on my computer, looking for hobbies. Most of them were dull to me. I didn’t want to garden or learn the piano or get another dog. It was hours before I found a website promoting an aquarium design competition. I had never owned fish, but I figured they would be less irritating than a dog.

The lobster is surely dead by now. I prepare his body delicately,

cracking his limbs off, gently salting each section of flesh. I eat him alone at the dining room table with a small glass of wine. I wrap the leftover meat in tin foil and store it in the refrigerator. I am too nervous to eat it all now. Tomorrow I receive my corals, and I will truly begin growing my reef. It will be beautiful.

I lie awake all night, motionless in my bed, staring at my ceiling. My fingers feel like static. I tap them against my sheets to remind myself they are still attached to my body. I do the same with my toes. It is almost morning and I can see through the cracks in my blinds that the sun has begun to rise. I already called off work for the day. I have plans to meet a man named Casey at a gas station parking lot an hour north of here. I met him online. He bred the corals. My corals. He will have them on a U-Haul truck. He will meet me halfway between his home and mine and hand me the corals, and I will hand him the cash.

Four hours later I am with Casey in the parking lot. “Be careful with these,” he says, handing me the budding coral in little plastic containers filled with water. I almost feel insulted that he thinks I need to be told to “be careful,” but I look at him again. He is a grown man wearing cargo shorts. I let it go.

I stack each of the containers in a large cardboard box in the passenger seat. Casey says he has other stops to make today, so I wave him goodbye with my free hand. I put the seatbelt around the box.

The drive home presents no problem to me. I keep one hand on the steering wheel and the other hand on the box and avoid any potholes on the road. It is silent except for the sound of the water sloshing in their containers.

It takes me two days to place the dozen corals in their new home. I haven't slept. I spend an hour trying to find a good place for the button polyps and I'm still unsatisfied with their placement; their colors look much better next to the jewel anemone, but I worry that they will compete for sunlight if I place them too close together. I'm sitting on the tile floor in front of the tank. It is cold against my fingers. I lean back and picture the button polyps on the other side of the aquarium, by the moon coral. The moon coral will grow at approximately the same rate as the button polyps, so they won't compete for light as much, but their similar shape creates an eyesore.

My cell phone buzzes in the pocket of my sweatpants and I answer

without checking to see who is calling me so inconveniently.

“I’m busy,” I say.

“Mr. Scott, sir, I’m so sorry to bother you,” a young man’s voice on the phone says. It is Jason, our office’s assistant. I roll my eyes. “It’s already half past eight and you have a meeting at nine, I was just wondering when you’ll be in today.”

“I’m not coming in today.”

Jason hesitates for a moment. “Are you sure?”

“Yes, Jason, I’m sure,” I say flatly. I press my forehead against the glass of the aquarium. “Tell the boss I’m sick.”

“Don’t you think she’ll be angry with you?”

I hang up the phone without answering his question. There are much more important things to worry about. Maybe I should just move the moon coral in front of the lace coral, and free up the left side of the tank for the button polyps. No, no, that won’t work because I still have the large sea sponge in one of the little containers sitting behind me, and where would he go? By the mushroom coral? The thought is almost laughable. What a hideous arrangement. If I have any shot at being respected in the aquascaping community I absolutely cannot place a sea sponge next to mushroom coral.

I reach my hand into the tank. To reach the bottom, I have to stand on my toes and submerge my entire arm. The water is cool. I let the tiny frills of the tube anemone curl around my fingers. The cleaner shrimp scatter to avoid me. Once the sand settles, they crawl up the anemone and onto my hand. Their claws hook onto my arm hair, pinching me with each movement, but I don’t mind it. They seem like they are enjoying themselves. I wonder if they will ever be able to recognize my face.

“Your mom is worried, Owen,” Miriam says to me. We’re standing in my living room. This is the first time I’ve seen her since she moved out. If I had known she was coming over, maybe I would have changed my shirt. This one reeks of saltwater. I’ve worn it a week without washing it. I don’t feel embarrassed, though, because she is not my girlfriend. She is just a woman in my living room right now.

“I’m busy,” I tell her.

She crosses her arms. “You haven’t answered her calls in a month. She says she called the office and they haven’t seen or heard

of you, either.”

“My corals are sick.”

“So your corals are more important than your job?” She’s raising her voice. I don’t know why she’s mad. It has nothing to do with her. She has her own job. I wonder if she still works at a daycare. She is good with children.

“You don’t understand. Something’s wrong. Everything in the tank is turning gray. They’re sick.” I’m trying not to cry in front of her. I’m trying not to tell her I’ve spent a week sleeping next to the tank, or that I’ve spent hundreds of dollars on medications for them. I called Casey two days ago and I told him he sold me bad coral. He called me a moron and hung up on me.

Miriam sighs. “Let me see them,” she says. I don’t think she’s that interested. I don’t know why she wants to see them.

I lead her to the room full of aquariums. The other tanks are doing perfectly well. I watch Miriam look at the tank of eels. “Those were difficult to get my hands on,” I say. “Nobody really wanted to sell a spotted garden eel to a beginner.”

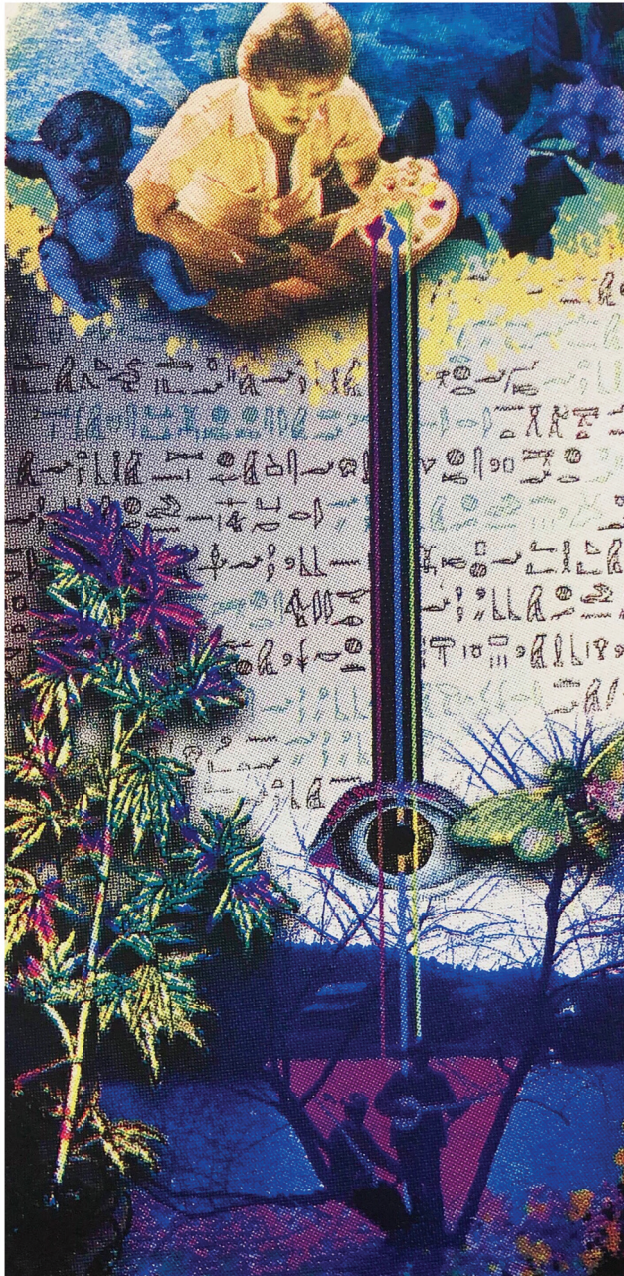
“My desk used to be over here,” she says without looking at me. My ears feel hot. She walks towards my corals. “Is this the one?”

I nod. It’s obvious that this is the one. The tube anemone have changed from a vibrant green to a dull brown. The mushroom coral looks like chapped lips in December. The lifeless body of a sea cucumber floats on the surface of the water. I feel disgusting looking at it. I feel like a failure. It makes me nauseous. I slump towards the floor. I am a pile of flesh on the tile. I hide my face in my hands so Miriam doesn’t see me cry.

“I think there might be a dead shrimp caught in the filter. You need to call your mother. I’m leaving,” she says. Her voice is cold and emotionless. I hear her footsteps getting fainter and fainter until the front door slams shut behind her.

I wonder what the old man from the Alcoholics Anonymous meeting would say to me. I don’t know what to do, so I pray to him, like a god but with a face I remember. I ask him for help, but it never comes. I think maybe he will not help me because he thinks I am a bad person for what I did to my rabbit.

I stand up and unplug the tank’s filter and heat lamp, then I go to the bathroom and vomit.



The Prophecy
Megan Taylor

Where Goblin Kings Rule

Rachel Venturino

My mother told me there are no barriers

behind our home. I had freedom to appear on a milk carton, under bold words missing. Police do not patrol the forest. They cannot protect me from the hunter's gun. The hunter who could panic and bury my small frame. Will the police enter then?

In the woods where you weren't supposed to go alone because the neighbors were avid hunters and you were a tiny ram. With how you've always seemed to tiptoe and watch your step, always watching your step. But not your mind and not thinking about who goes into the woods. You were more concerned with fairies and Goblin Kings and hairy creatures who would give you strange food. Skeletons. Unearthly creatures made of bark and moss. And when you weren't in the woods you leaned out your bedroom window, with a tiara, hoping to be swept away.

My mother told me to never put nature in my mouth. Wild berries and honeysuckle in the thin sliver woods beside my school. Where I was free of the teacher's eyes as I watched my friends steal honeysuckle from one another and exaggerate the noise of sucking the tiny flowers. The teachers hated us in those woods with snakes and tics and things that bite and nibble our sandaled toes.

If I was slung over shoulder of a Goblin King. Whisked away to chambers of glass balls and glitter. If I found my way home, would they believe me? If I stayed, would they still search? Would I be missed?

Far from the list of chores my mother left on the refrigerator on a dry summer morning on her way out the door. Nearly three in the afternoon and the salmon needed to be thawing since 11 am. Where were you? In the woods.

Where

fairies would pull loose my braids each dawn. Decorate my sleepy curls with poppies, pansies, sunflowers on my crown. Worshiped. Bathed in milk and honey, dried with moss. Dresses made of ivy vines and beetle wings. My Goblin King's cheek sparkling; dewy in morning sun and mimics the moon at night. Seeing me each new day, that beastly, brute King would place a gentle kiss, just below my closed lid, brushing my lashes.

Why shouldn't I fall too deep in the forest? If I could be held in such a way. What reason is there to return home?



A Faerie's Night
Brittany Woods

The Tiniest Butler

Alex Canfield

The tiniest butler came into my house.
Her Sketchers lit up with Mickey the mouse.
She looked and she scanned at every degree,
her eyes rife with judgment, just 2 foot 3.
Her scowl with a snap, she walked to the stair
her finger she swept and held in the air.
She stared with a fury, about to combust,
her finger was coated with a fine bed of dust.
I panicked with sweat beading up on my face
surely, I remembered to dust such a place,
but no, I'd forgotten, my neck it would be.
The butler detested the people like me.
I ran out the door with the butler behind
I needed to get somewhere she'd never find.
I hid with the Swiffers and prayed for my life,
the tension at hand could be cut with a knife.
Her footsteps approaching, I knew what I did.
My shame was not something so easily hid.
Her shadow outside with a click of the latch,
but that's when I saw it, a can and a match.
I burst out the door, gasoline on the walls!
You would never have guessed how fast a match falls.
The house was consumed, the flames upward creeping.
I had before me, quite a bit of sweeping.

Lombardy Lake

JULIA WU

Nothing new, nothing new, nothing new under the sun,
says the Preacher. In 2002 two guys from Johns Hopkins told the world
that: THE UNIVERSE IS BLUE—at last—
who knew we'd been speculating all along; that the
math of all light would equal a space between “a pale
turquoise and a medium aquamarine.”
That the color of time would be a shade of water
where once, precipices of paralyzed water pulled taut and glassy,
glissaded inward and onward, faces to the sky, fingernails tearing at
the dust to remember and unremember.

To the place where the streams flow, there they flow again,
says the Preacher. The paralysis lifts, tendrils of soft, quiet blue fall
into the chamber of memory slashed in earth,
flattening and fluttering, strewn with ridges of growth
like the plush of a woman's freshly excavated womb,
swaying with movement beneath.
Lombardy lakes on, flickering through tangles of time
beating from blue to blue.
The jaunt up, silent and viscous, milling through the hollow of gravity— a
hush—and then lakeward again.

Vanity of vanities, all is vanity,
says the Preacher. Two months after they told the world
they'd figured her out, the astronomers wrote again: THE UNIVERSE IS NOT BLUE.
Is not the pigmentation of Lombardy Lake but
due to a white a fleck too pink,
the color of the universe is actually:
BEIGE.
The color of a fingering of dust washed in a cupful of lake, the
color of white gone old, the color of fading light,
and the astronomers said “There's no error in science, the error was in perception.”

Moon River, You Know

JULIA WU

Everything I tell you is true. I never lie. Do not tell lies. Lying will make me you like Li Mei. She is a liar. She is like rotting broccoli. You don't want to be like rotting broccoli, do you?

You must be faster in math class. You must finish first. No, no, you must finish first and you must not make mistakes. You must get them all right. Do not be like the Americans.

Stop. You cannot do that. Your friend will get hurt. Her mother will sue us. The Americans love to sue. Come inside.

You may not ride your bike. You already played today. Did you play with Jessica again at school today? Do not lie to me. I told you not to play with her anymore. She is not smart. You must have smart friends.

Where did you get that blue candy? It made your tongue blue. That is cancer on your tongue. Do not ever eat that blue candy again. Do not put your water bottle in the freezer. Do not burn candles. Do not use nail polish. Do not stand in front of the microwave. Do not use that garbage the Americans put on their armpits. Do not talk on your cell phone on your right ear. Do you want to get cancer? You will get cancer and die if you do that. Americans all have cancer.

You sit too close to the TV. It is bad for your eyes. If you get glasses they will make you ugly. They told me to eat shrimp when I was pregnant with you, so I did. I ate so much shrimp even though I hated shrimp because I wanted you to be beautiful.

Do not make your dad so angry. He hits you in the head when he's angry, and that will make you stupid. You don't want to be stupid, do you? You make me angry, too, but I would never hit you because I don't want you to be stupid. Aren't you glad I don't hit you?

There are bad men everywhere. Do not marry a bad man. Marry a Chinese man. You must marry a Chinese man. A smart man so that you will have smart children. Like your dad. He is smart. I am smarter than him in math, but he is smart, too. How stupid you could've been if I had married a stupid man. You must not marry an ugly man. You must have smart, nice-looking children if you want to be happy. You want to be happy, right?

Why does Megan have a boyfriend? She is a child. Children should study. Do not think about boys. In China, the children are good. They do not have boyfriends. They work very hard. You are so lucky to live in America. Go study.

I don't know why you cry so much. I did not cry. I was so happy to help my mom. I was her favorite. Why don't you help me more? Maybe I should have had another child. I bet another child would be more helpful. Now I'm too old to have another child, but you make me wish I had another child.

In China they throw girls in dumpsters sometimes. Isn't that so sad? We could never have thrown you in a dumpster. Aren't you so glad we didn't throw you in a dumpster? It is so sad.

If your dad and I got divorced, would you stay with me or him? We aren't getting a divorce, but who would you choose? Most girls stay with their mom. He might not want you to stay with him. You would stay with me, right?

Moon River, you know that I love you. I love you like the Americans love their children, but I love you more. I want you to be best. You will never be best, but I want you to be. That's how much I love you. I want you to be smart. The Americans are more beautiful, but you can be more smart. Moon River, what is the square root of 289? Tell me.

On the Heels of Shame

ZAC THABET

1.

I told no one why I loved the boots, allowing my family's imaginations to supply the reasons. My mother attributed it to the movie *Toy Story*. My dad chalked it up to the old Westerns he loved dearly. Everyone had their reasons, and everyone was wrong.

I was okay with that. Even at five, I was willing to take that secret to the grave.

2.

On sleepovers, my cousin Brittanie let me go into her closet and try on her heels. I walked up and down the single hallway and into the kitchen, a high-strutting model during New York fashion week. With every *clink* and *clonk* against the tile, a rush of euphoria rang from my ears to my toes. It felt...natural.

Back at home, I dug through every closet in our home until I found the perfect substitute for those heels—an old, worn out pair of cowboy boots. Rising halfway to my knee, they were black in color from the tongue up. The white stitching was embroidered into wings along the shaft of the boot, looping in and out of itself the whole way up. From the tongue of the boot and down, the leather was coated in a muddy brown. The vamp beneath the tongue was complimented by its own looping embroidery. But more than their flashy appearance, what mattered was the sound they made.

Clink. Clonk.

Clink. Clonk.

I wore the boots no matter the occasion. On grocery trips with my mother. To my elementary school (when it wasn't gym day). To my grandmother's house for Sunday dinners. My favorite occasion, however, was church on Sunday mornings. Church was a weekly thing for me, and hearing the sound of my boots across the cool hardwood floors made an otherwise blasé routine feel new, exciting. With each echo bouncing off of the wall, I gained more strength. The chain wrapping itself around my lungs had been broken, and for the first time, I could breathe. The aisle between the church pews became my new runway, but this time, I wore the only acceptable heels a boy could don.

Still, there remained one small truth clouded in the back of my mind. A confession hidden just beneath the surface. One that explained why a pair of worn, beat up cowboy boots were my most prized possession. The same reason I loved my cousin's heels. *The sound of a woman's heel*. Perhaps a stiletto, or a pump. It brought me great shame and guilt to admit such a thing, because I knew that my parents believed that heels were for women, and I was no woman.

Normally, such a thought would not plague my mind. It was something that I could easily overlook and forget about. When it was time for church, however, it felt as if God had taken a magnifying glass to me. Using the sun's glare, he fried me like an ant. Over and over again. There was no place to escape from the insufferable truth. And it was during prayer that the feeling persisted the most. As my parents and siblings bowed their heads, mine rose up to look at the stain glass windows to the right. I took to studying them. As they painted various depictions of Jesus from various stories of the bible, I wondered about who he was, and not just on paper. I wondered if he was ashamed of anything. I thought of how the people hated him, and eventually crucified him for spreading the word of God. I felt bad for him because they were silencing him for speaking his mind.

I'd arrive at the same hope every time—that he *did* feel shame, because maybe then, God would be a little more forgiving.

3.

When I was ten, my dad took me to the grocery store. We had decided to have one of those cliché “father-son” days that you see in movies. Now, I understand a grocery store might seem like a weird place to do this, as opposed to more typical activities for a father to do with his son, such as watch sports or go fishing. However, had we chosen to watch sports; I would ask too many questions. Had we chosen fishing; I would have injured myself and/or lost interest. Besides, I enjoyed grocery shopping. It allowed me to imagine myself as an adult, if only for a few short hours. So, for us, it was the perfect getaway.

As I plucked through various fruits and frozen meats, my eyes happened to catch a glimpse into one of the toy aisles. This, of course, completely reversed my need to speed ahead into adulthood. My attention had now shifted off of completing my father's grocery list, and was now plotting a way to get me into the aisle of hot pink heaven. I turned to look at my dad, who was currently squinting through his glasses to read the grocery list. Almost instinctively, his eyes locked with mine. He gave me a smirk, and before I could even get the question out, we were surrounded by what felt like, at the time, every barbie doll known to man. The options were infinite. How was I ever to choose? As I surveyed my candidates, I noticed a familiar blonde tucked towards the back, with a special guitar in hand.

The “Taylor Swift: Teardrops on My Guitar Edition” doll. No way. I have been listening to Taylor Swift since her first album came out. Oh, if only she knew the countless nights I spent watching her music videos on the television. Or how many times I had listened to her CD on the stereo in my room. Oh, my dad had to get me this doll. He just had to.

Without hesitation, I snatched up the doll and my dad approved. When we got to the checkout, I was gripping the box tightly to my chest, admiring the sparkles in

the spearmint green dress that she wore. I noted to myself that it was the dress from her music video reimagined in doll form. As I placed my precious Taylor on the conveyer belt, my father and I could hear a scoff behind us.

“You really lettin’ your boy buy that girl doll?” My father and I turned to see that the man standing behind us in line was now looking at us. He was heavier set, and if I had to have guessed his age, it would be between his late forties and early fifties. He wore a forest green ballcap and a dark flannel. Even though he was speaking to my father, his eyes were on me.

I could feel my face beginning to heat up. My heartbeat seemed to be getting louder and louder, almost to the point where it was drowning out the voice of the man. My glasses were still sliding down the bridge of my nose, but I no longer could push them back up. In fact, I could no longer command my body to make any movements. I could only stand there, with one hand at my side, and the other desperately searching for something to cling to. I would later come to understand this reaction as the beginning of an anxiety attack.

Mom always said not to talk to strangers, but what did you do if they’re talking about you? Should something be said then? But mom also said something about putting people in feeding tubes if they were mean to me, so if he said something mean maybe I should just let her deal with it, although feeding tubes sound kind of weird to me. What does he even mean? Girl doll? Could he have been meaning that the doll was a girl, because that was kind of a given. Although, something told me that he wasn’t really talking about the doll.

Even after coming to the conclusion that I shouldn’t speak to this man, I knew my dad would fail to reach the same conclusion. In fact, I could already see my dad puffing out his chest and tucking his tongue beneath his lip—a common mannerism he had adopted to keep himself from saying something he would regret. Before he said a word, though, I could feel his hand squeezing onto mine, reminding me that he was there, and he had me covered. After that, though, it was all hands-on deck in the check-out lane.

“Yep.” I could hear my father announcing, his Appalachian roots revealing themselves through his accent. “I sure am, buddy. Is that gon’ be a problem with you, pal?” The man didn’t have a response for that, or if he did, I had blocked it out. It didn’t matter. The damage had been done. My face was no longer glowing at the idea of a doll that sings one of my favorite songs, instead, it was burning over the fact I was now holding a girl’s doll, and I was a boy. I allowed myself a short time to enjoy my new toy, trying to ignore the fact that it was apparently intended to be used by young girls. Eventually, I thought, I would forget about it. I did not. When the doll sang to me, I did not. Even after I gave the doll away, I did not forget.

Adults always think that the things they said had no impact on a young child. They think that we won’t remember. It will simply fade into the background like the

beach at the end of a summer vacation. Well Redneck-From-Walmart, I remember. A decade later, I remember. I remember your words. I remember the embarrassment and the shame that I felt. I remember the smell of the fruit in our shopping cart when you first spoke. I remember my first introduction to hate.

4.

When I was thirteen, I made the decision that I hated middle school. I hated it with a passion that burned so fiercely, it made a college bonfire look bleak. Every teacher is one coffee away from a meltdown, the lunchroom is a primal free-for-all, and every student is either a bully or the victim of said bully. The thing I hated most about my own middle school in particular often changed with each passing day. Most days, though, it usually came back to the wretched odor that had been plaguing the hallways since as long as I had been there. Apparently, the building had some sort of sewage problem that no one could seem to fix. Or so they claimed. If it were my guess, I think it was just another form of torture for us all.

On one particular day, as I stood in line waiting to enter the battlefield known as the lunchroom, I found something I hated about middle school more than the odor. I found it with my two closest friends at the time as we stood together, probably discussing the treacherous “sewage problem” the school had been having when I felt a tap on my shoulder. As I turned, I saw a girl smiling at me. I recognized her from a few classes we had been in together. She had one of those soft, soothing voices that instantly calmed your nerves when she spoke. “Katie told me about you being gay. I’m glad you finally are out. I support you so much!”

When I heard the statement, it did not initially register with me that she had said anything of particular importance. I simply shot her a half smile and gave a brief, “thanks!” It wasn’t until I turned to face my friends again, when I saw their bewildered expressions, that I realized what was even said.

With a hammering chest, I turned back to her. “Wait.” My words felt like they were somehow coming out slower. Or maybe time was just slowing down. None of this made any sense to me. How could this girl even know? It wasn’t like she was overly involved in my life. In fact, I probably spoke to her maybe once or twice during the school day if that, and even then, it was purely out of convenience. “What did you say?” I forced out, trying to act as natural as possible.

“Oh, I just wanted to say I’m glad you decided to come out. Good for you!” Without a second thought she was gone, bouncing off down the hall.

It’s a strange feeling. Vulnerability. A feeling that is so familiar, yet every time it hits it feels so foreign. I can’t relay the exact thoughts that went through my head as the girl walked away, blissfully unaware of the internal explosion she had just caused. What I can say is that in that moment, I was naked. My body was no longer my own.

Her words were knives, peeling back layer after layer of skin until there was nothing left but my frail bones and pounding heart. Every pair of eyes in the hallway were now clumped together, clustered into a murky mixture of blues, greens, and browns. They had become cameras, and with each blink the cameras clicked, snapping the perfect shot of my panic-stricken face.

Ignorance is also strange. I tried to imagine that I was this girl, who thought she was simply congratulating me on coming out. Or how she likely went on with the rest of her day, and all her days after that day, barely giving the encounter a second thought. Who was to blame her for that? I was sure she had no clue the damage she was causing for me. I thought it was better that way. Because had she known the distress I was in after the fact, it's possible she could begin feeling distress as well. What good could that do for anyone? It wasn't her fault that someone told her my secret. She likely had no idea that some of my classmates had parents that worked with my mother, and that information could easily make its way back to her. Or that I was in no way ready for that information to get back to her. The girl surely did not know that the bullying would intensify as information spread about my sexuality. Or that the divide between my fellow male classmates and myself would stretch further apart now, and how that would only encourage my already growing fear of men in everyday life. Just like she did not know I was a very anxious thirteen year old with difficulties opening up to others, and that because she said this I was now aware that someone had given my secret away after I trusted them with private information.

Then again, maybe that was the problem. She did not know. She had no idea any of that, and she didn't think about that. The same way that the person that told her did not think about that. Or the person that outed me in the first place. Perhaps if she, or if anyone in this situation had taken a moment to think about the things they didn't know, things might have turned out different. If someone had, maybe I wouldn't have been outed. Maybe I wouldn't question my connections with people. Maybe I wouldn't have been robbed of a moment that was supposed to be special to me. Maybe, the worst part of middle school would still be the "sewage problem".

5.

When I was sixteen, I felt my life endangered for the first time. It happened while I was in the downtown area of my hometown. A group of friends and I had just finished seeing a movie when I noticed him approaching, and immediately prepared myself for the worst. I had read enough articles and watched enough documentaries to know what happened to gay men who were stopped on the street. Quickly, I tried to divert my friends away without drawing attention to the man, suggesting that we cross the street. We were teenagers, so no one really questioned my motives. We were just starting to cross when he stepped in front of me, stopping me and one of my friends behind me from joining the rest of our group.

“Are you gay?” His voice was rough and came from deep within his throat. Not that I really gave much attention to the sound of his voice. Because the moment that those three words left his mouth, I found myself wishing I had worn more neutral colors, like the flannel sitting in my closet. He wouldn’t have approached me in that. Maybe this was why my mom and I argued over my fashion choices. She never wanted me to become a target. I wanted to call her and apologize for the tight jeans and the pink shirt, even more than I wanted to escape this man, because I understood now. She wanted to protect me, and right now I was in the exact situation she wanted to protect me from.

Realizing I still had not spoken, I remember fighting to find my voice until I finally managed to sputter out a sound similar to a *yes*. I tried to sound strong. I even deepened my voice to try to produce a more “masculine” effect. He looked me up and down. I could smell the alcohol in his breath and felt a chill roll over me. I was unable to tell if the look I was getting is one of disgust, pity, or rage. None of which sounded terribly appealing to me in that moment.

I tried to keep my eyes lowered, being careful not to provoke him. That being said, I was able to catch his hair. It was the color of dead grass, and it stuck to the skin on his face as if it had been glued there. That detail in particular made my legs turn to noodles on the sidewalk. “Figures. You look it. Ah, you just haven’t found the right stuff yet.” He flashed me a wink, elbowed me, and opened his mouth to keep talking when a woman approached him. She too had yellowing hair, with streaks of brown peeking through. It reminded me of a field of wilting cornstalk.

“Dale! What the hell are you doin’? Leave them alone, he is a kid!” I can still hear her shouting. She had the accent of a true Appalachian. That, combined with slurring of her words, made her just as terrifying to me as the man was. I assumed she was with him, because she was laughing along as she dragged him off down the street. As they staggered past me, the smell of cigarette smoke invaded my nostrils without warning. My nose began to recoil in retaliation to the odor, but I refused to let it. I was not giving either of them a reason to turn back. Once they rounded the corner, I grabbed the friend beside me and rushed towards the rest of our friend group. Without an ounce of hesitation, we rejoined our already frightened friends on the other side of the street. Though, no matter how much a quickened my pace, it still was never fast enough to escape the drunk. Sometimes, in fact, I feel like I’m still trying to escape him. I wonder if my friend feels the same way.

I apologized to my friend, knowing that this was my fault, and that she must have been just as frightened as I was. I wanted to apologize for the alcohol on his breath, even if she might not be able to smell it. I wanted to apologize for the lingering scent of cigarette smoke in the air. I wanted to apologize for admitting to being gay, and that by doing so I had put her in danger. I also wanted to cry, but I didn’t. Instead, I just told apologized. “I’m sorry.” I repeated to my friend. “I am so sorry.” And I was. I was sorry the entire car ride home. And the next week at school. And every day since then.

I realize now that I left out an important detail of my Walmart trip with my father. There was something else that I did not forget. My father said something to me, as we were walking out of the store with my doll safely tucked away between a milk carton and a box of crackers. “Zac,” his voice quivered when he spoke, as if even he was unsure of his own rage. “I want you to listen to what I am about to tell you.” My eyes, murky green in color and full of a tarnished innocence, ventured up to look at him. In the seconds before he spoke, I focused on his image. His eyes, brown like the sturdy bark of an oak tree, were focused on something. At the time I figured he was scanning the parking lot for our old minivan, but now I’m not so certain. There was something about the way his eyes were situated. They were narrowed, but they were wide open. It was as if he was focusing his vision on trying to see everything.

“I don’t ever want you to be ashamed of who you are.” He was still squeezing my hand, and his grip only tightened as he spoke. “People are going to look at you in life, and they are going to be mean. They are going to try to tear you down, make you feel small. Sometimes they are going to win. That’s okay. Even your mom and I lose the fight sometimes. Your brother and your sister, we all do. But every time they knock you down, you keep going, baby. If it’s too much to get up on your own, then you let me know, because your wins are my wins, and your losses are mine, too. Just don’t ever give up ‘cause they won’t either.”

6.

Now that I am twenty, I’ve realized that life is nothing more than these moments. The moments when we are forced to look fear in the eye and make a choice about where to go from there. Do we wear the heels, or settle for the boots? Do we keep the doll, or pass it along? Do we call out the ignorance around us, or deal with constant vulnerability? Do we hide behind a mask, or openly express who you are? Do we disguise our divergence, or become lobsters in boiling water?

These are the decisions that we are forced to confront each and every day. As much as we would like to think that we would face our fears and become what society tells us we cannot, the truth is it simply is not that simple. If you wear the heels, you have two parents now terrified for their son’s safety. If you keep the doll, you spark an outrage from a stranger in Walmart that haunts you for a decade. If you call the ignorance around you, you risk losing another person that could be in your corner. If you openly express yourself, you are stopped by an intoxicated stranger on the street and left wondering if you are ever going to make it home that night.

The truth is that nine times out of ten, we are going to choose to give into our society. We are going to disguise our divergence because it is the easiest option. It is the safest option. It saves us from worrying our parents, or feeling threatened for buying a toy, or having movie night ruined forever. There is a certain strength in knowing that. Maybe you did make the safe choice, but that was still a choice, and sometimes that is enough. It is enough to be safe, and to take comfort in knowing that we are not lobsters in boiling water.



Last Soles
BARB LAVALLEY

Little Stones

ZOË KAUFFER

INT. CHILD'S BEDROOM- NIGHT

We open on the doorway looking into MAGGIE'S room.

The camera floats around, showing us Maggie's treasures.

The room itself is fit for a queen or a least a seven-year- old girl. It is purple. Purple walls, purple bedspread, purple carpet. Her bookcases overflow with stones, trinkets, and used notebooks.

Sat in her bed, we see Maggie. She is small and her face is focused. She twiddles with a little stone in her hands. Her nightgown is white and embroidered with little purple flowers.

Her parents, TOM & BENJAMIN, are sat on opposite sides of the bed, finishing her bedtime story.

TOM

Ask yourselves: is it yes or no? Has the sheep eaten the flower? And you will see how everything changes . . .

And no grown-up will ever understand that this is a matter of so much importance!

Tom smiles as he closes the book and sets it on Maggie's nightstand.

BENJAMIN

I always forget how much I love that one. God, it's been too long since I've read it. What did you think, Mags?

Maggie straightens her posture. She sets her little stone on her bedside table. She folds her hands on her laps. Her face is twisted with concentration.

MAGGIE

Read it again.

Tom and Benjamin look at each other and smile. Their eyes narrow on Maggie.

TOM

No, not tonight. Now it's bedtime. You've gotta go to school in the morning.

BENJAMIN

Yeah, you don't wanna be tired for school, right? You have the big field trip to the science museum tomorrow!

Maggie sighs and rests back against her pillow.

MAGGIE

Yeah, I guess you're right. Can we read two stories tomorrow night?

Benjamin and Tom share a collective sigh. How did they get so lucky with a girl like Maggie?

TOM

Only if you promise to go to sleep now.

In a quick motion, Maggie gasps and throws the covers over her head.

MAGGIE

I promise. I love you. Good night.

Tom and Benjamin stand up and kiss Maggie's covered head.

TOM

Sweet dreams, honey.

Tom turns and walks to the doorway. Benjamin grabs the covers and pulls them down to his daughter's face.

BENJAMIN

I love you, sweet girl. Good night.

Maggie's eyes are different. Her happiness is replaced by worry. Her little brow furrowed.

MAGGIE

Daddy, what if the boy comes again? Do you want me to tell him that you said I shouldn't talk to him?

Benjamin slowly turns his head towards Tom. They share a worried look.

Benjamin takes a deep breath gently grabs Maggie's hand. He holds it to his forehead and sighs.

BENJAMIN

Honey, I promise you, there is nothing to worry about. That was just a dream. You don't have to talk to anyone in your dreams if you don't want to. There is no boy. It's just me, you, and your father in the house. Nothing bad is gonna happen.

Maggie takes a deep breath. Benjamin lets go of her hand.

MAGGIE

Promise?

BENJAMIN

I double-secret pinky promise.

Benjamin and Maggie use both hands to lock pinkies. Maggie giggles and Benjamin smiles.

BENJAMIN

Now, get some sleep. We love you. Good night.

Benjamin lightly shakes his head as he crosses the room to join Tom at the door.

Tom puts his arm around Benjamin and whispers something inaudible.

He nods, agreeing with what Benjamin has said. They turn towards Maggie.

She looks at them longingly.

MAGGIE

Good night.

TOM

We will be in our room if you need anything. Sweet dreams.

Tom and Benjamin turn off the light and exit the bedroom. The camera focuses on Maggie as she closes her eyes.

FADE TO BLACK.

INT. CHILD'S BEDROOM- MIDNIGHT

Maggie is resting peacefully in her bed. She is completely unbothered.

The camera pushes off of Maggie and pans towards the bottom of the door of her bedroom.

Light from the hallway illuminates the space between the door and the floor.

The yellow glow breaks up as a shadow walks in front of the door.

The house is silent.

The shadow walks back and forth, circling the bedroom like a shark.

Maggie is still asleep, unaware of the shadow. With a push, the door creaks open.

No one is there.

The light of the hallway is enough to wake up Maggie. She covers her eyes with her arm and sits up.

A worried curiosity paints her face.

MAGGIE

Dad? Daddy?

Maggie gets increasingly nervous as no one answers her. She swings her legs over to the side of her bed.

Slowly, she walks to her door. INT. HALLWAY- MIDNIGHT

MAGGIE

Hello?

Maggie leans out of the doorway and looks down the hallway.

She looks left and there is nothing. Just the long hallway leading to her parents' room. There are pictures on the wall of them on vacation and various art deco prints.

She looks right and there is a BOY. He is 5 inches from her face.

She jumps and hits her head on the doorframe with an alarming thump.

Both of them are silent as they take each other in.

The boy is similar to Maggie in age. He has dark hair that is slicked back.

Maggie looks closer at him. She thinks he almost looks like a ventriloquist's doll.

MAGGIE

Are you a dummy?

The boy says nothing.

MAGGIE

Where have you been?

Am I dreaming?

The boy says nothing. He looks at her with wide-set intense eyes like she's a tiger getting fed at the zoo.

The boy turns on his heels and walks down the stairs. Maggie is still, unsure if she is supposed to join him. After a minute, she follows the boy down the stairs.

INT. DOWNSTAIRS- MIDNIGHT

The downstairs of the house is a picturesque cabin.

The house itself is old. Beautiful dark wood covers the walls. The family has tried to make it feel warmer, covering the house is family pictures and bright colored rugs.

Maggie gets to the bottom of the stairs, peering around the banister for the boy.

She sees him walk into the kitchen.

Where is he going? We close up on the concentration on her face. No more fear, just curiosity, and a need to know the truth about him.

She stands tall and follows the boy.

INT. KITCHEN-MIDNIGHT

The dark woods flows into the kitchen. The walls are warm. In the corner by the window sits a table where the family often has breakfast. On the table sits a beautiful vase of flowers that Tom picked from their garden. He is very proud of it.

This is where the boy now sits, with his slicked-back hair pressed against the glass on the large window.

The camera follows Maggie's feet as she walks to the table. We hear her take a big breath.

She pulls out a chair and sits across from the boy.

MAGGIE

Why aren't you talking to me?

The boy sighs. He can hear her.

MAGGIE

My dad told me that I shouldn't talk to you anymore.

The boy shrugs.

MAGGIE

Do you not want me to talk to you anymore?

The boy turns his head. He looks at her, his face painted in sadness.

He shakes his head.

He lays his head back against the window, staring into the vast woods outside.

MAGGIE

Okay, well if you want to be my friend you need to talk to me. That's how friendship works.

He stands abruptly, frustrated. Pushing the tableback. This sends the vase of flowers crashing to the ground. Maggie looks out the window to see what he has seen.

MAGGIE

What's wrong?

The boy walks out the backdoor, Maggie follows him closely. The security system begins ringing loudly.

EXT. MAGGIE'S BACKYARD- MIDNIGHT

Once outside, the boy stops short.

He is staring into the woods that surround the house. Something in him shifts, Maggie feels this.

He is scared.

She puts her hand on his back.

MAGGIE

Hey, it's okay.

The boy turns slowly. He looks deep into Maggie's eyes.

Nervous about this intensity, Maggie turns her head to the woods, trying to see what the boy has seen.

The boy bends down and picks a stone up from the ground. He outstretches his hand and places it in her palm.

She sits her other hand on top of the stone and holds it tightly.

MAGGIE

Thank you.

TOM & BENJAMIN
(Off-Screen)

Maggie! Margaret!

Maggie hears her fathers running down the stairs.

The boy sighs. He turns on his heels and runs into the woods.

MAGGIE

Wait, where are you going? Stop. Don't go!

Her fathers bust out of the house and kneel beside her.

BENJAMIN

Honey, what were you doing outside?

TOM

Do you know how dangerous this is?

Maggie is dazed. She doesn't know what to say. She scans the woods trying to find him again.

MAGGIE

It was the boy again, but I don't think he's bad. He's scared of something, but I don't know what.

Maggie's eyes stay locked on the woods.

Tom and Benjamin exchange worried looks.

TOM

I think she was sleepwalking.

Benjamin nods. They guide Maggie back into the house.

INT. THROUGH KITCHEN, DOWNSTAIRS, HALLWAY, ANDMAGGIE'S
BEDROOM- MIDNIGHT

They walk her through the kitchen, up the stairs, and into her room.

This time, the camera stays back. The audience is no longer on the adventure with Maggie. We are now observing her.

We stay inside the doorway. Tom and Benjamin tuck her back into bed.

They are speaking, but it's inaudible. Music swells around them.

They leave the room and turn off her light.

We stay on Maggie as she lays still for a few seconds.

She slowly gets out of bed and walks over to her bookcase. She lays the stone down on it.

She turns and gets back into bed.

The camera pushes in on the bookcase.

The rock is surrounded by rocks. They overflow an entire shelf.

FADE TO BLACK.

THE END.

Wraith on Bethesda and Newman

KIT PORTER

Organ pipes bellow, a long, low, and laborious calamity, wailing in rhythm with the faceless mass' swaying. They press against one another, pull on each other's limbs, begging for release. Their presence crowds the already cramped church and blocks out the feeble stain-glass light. One stands rigid against the wallowing, eyes boring straight through the preacher man. Shadows swarm in her stare.

The ground surrounding Bethesda Baptist swells with sin, its roads like angry stretch marks, always ragged and raw. Local joggers steer clear of the area, insisting that the red, red dust stains everything. Not one comments on the bones jutting from the earth, the way the brothers of Christ pour animal blood from the thrusting steeple, or the crumpled remains of cars, sinking into the ground. A tour guide's brochure names the area Bethesda Triangle. He doesn't get business.

Voices yearn and reach up, up and away, away to places better than this. They cry out as though their hoarse choral of emotion could coax God himself to join them, to wrap them all up in Their many arms, where they might find absence and absolution. Air wrenches from their lungs, seemingly against their will, and They don't hear them.

The great pines bristle against the hills, desperation in the way they cling to cracked limbs. A power line sparks against their boughs and the preacher chokes on coals. He knows they watch them at night, he knows the lone wire factory plumes find their way into the congregation's dreams. More and more seem to spout prophecies as the days crawl past.

Brother Roberts turns to a young woman and seethes. "When will you bury yourself, girl?" She screws her eyes shut against it all. In the woods, a devil tramps shallow roots and etches her secrets into bark. He hoots, he hollers, and deer keep turning up at the forests' edge, rocks loaded into their bellies, skulls crushed, legs fragmented.

A man stands against his rusted old box car, observing yet another series of cryptic messages in the burnt dust. *We don't speak of what happened to the girl. He clicks his tongue. Best not to ask too many questions about the rot and sulfur.* His lips sigh around a cigarette, burnt to its filter. The town feels its strain.

Brother Roberts dares to lay his hand on her, dares to shake her from the dead. Her bones crack, the crucifix trembles against the back wall, baptism waters turn putrid. A plague rests upon her shoulders. Lost ancestors stare out her eyes, frightened in their field of poppies. Brother Roberts will join them, the Spirit assures her.

She moves to the double doors with a kind of paper body, embarrassed almost by its thinness, as one would be embarrassed to be caught communing with their plumbing. It pumps and throbs like them, why is it such a stretch to believe it could have something

worthwhile to say?

We've seen the waste, it whispers, earnest. We know what you've lost.

She tried to tell someone. She can't recall who, or what, but she did reach for refuge. They couldn't hear her, on account of her deformity. *It's something in the soul*, the piping explained.

“Whose?” The words dripped from her lips as she lay like a rag doll against her sheets, lathered in sweat like honeycombs ooze sweet. The light avoids her body—a dead thing rejects illumination.

Yours, or theirs or perhaps His. No one can say for certain.

“Oh.”

Besides, it's simply too hot for justice today.



CSX Overgrown
CASSANDRA WATSON

Creatio ex nihilo

JULIA WU

In the beginning was the Word...

—John 1:1

I ink the page—I am not God, am not
I Am. The sun: an incandescing blank
spangling the sky; spokes of hushed fire caught and
dripping onto my cheek to harangue
the remnants of night's unsunned residue.
The hairs, untensed, drop back against my skin.
I soften—fat on bones laxing into
gravity. I look: I cannot look. Skims
my irises scurrying the verge of light,
and I conceive: the sun is. I parse her
flame by flame, that I may at last indict
her by thought, by language, by picture.

No—to tell, to ink is to rapture truth from
God to men: to do and thusundo.

Daybreak Adonis

ELIZABETH FLEACE

I was always bathed in moonlight,
Making love to the shadows within me,
Always romanticizing death while despising the warmth of life all around.

But you, a young adonis bathed in sunlight,
Scared away my love for Hades and
Changed the way in which I worshipped death.

I couldn't get enough of the orange of dawn
That constantly engulfed you,
As if I was staring into daybreak

You're bathed in light.
A beacon of life for I,
that only enjoyed the omen of death.

What kind of fortune did I inherit -
From all my lives before,
To know such a soul who makes the sun jealous with its warmth?

Helios always seemed such a waste
compared to the melancholy selene,
But now I know otherwise.

For when you are near,
You alight a fire,
Where I only welcomed shadows.



Sunrise
BARB LAVALLEY



Tree & Lonely Leaves
ETHAN NESTOR

When you draw me

SYDNEY RANSON

When you draw me,
draw me with each dimple in the fat of my thighs
that crop up like milkweed buds.
Draw me with my belly that moves when I walk
like stalks of tobacco leaves by the highway.
Draw my hair that curls up
like the edges of the wild chanterelle.
Draw me on the days that I exist only in bed,
when my leaves are eaten through with holes.
(And don't forget to draw the details)
Don't forget the hair under my arms
because it blooms like bloodroot.
Don't forget to draw the rosacea on my cheeks
poking through like snakeberries in the backyard.
When you draw me,
draw the parts that weren't intentionally planted.
Draw the parts that are all mine—
the parts you can't propagate.

The Pillows Cry

ZAC THABET

It's ten in the morning. I am cold. When I wake up, greeted by only the pillows, my breath fills the room with a chill. For me, the pillows cry. Sad as they may be, they long to be free. Some of them have been here for a few weeks. Others, years. Trapped in a fifty-four by seventy-five inch frame, they are my only confidants.

Within them, my unflattering desires reveal themselves.

It's two in the afternoon. My book is open. A few of the pillows are reading along with me. The calm before the storm, they think. The pages are my lifeline. Fictional realms that give hope to the real ones. The sun burns through a naked window, and for just a moment, I am warm. A text from a boy says he will come over later. My book falls to the side. The pillows shrivel under the weight of it.

The storm will be here soon.

It's seven in the evening — A boy in my bed — Television on the laptop — He watches the laptop — I watch him — The pillows watch me. For some of them, the first time. Filled with hope they smile from the head of the bed.

Oh! To be young and in love!

Others are seasoned viewers.

Plagued with dread their arms are open, ready to catch me when I fall. They have seen this film before. Different actors in the same role. They know how this ends. Still, they lend themselves to me and the boy,

and we rest our backs on them as we long for separate things.

It's two in the morning. I am cold. Folded hands, clasped together. I beg for change. A bed to be anything but empty. A boy to watch me. A room that is clean. The realm of a book to exist. Warmth. After this, I turn on the darkness and the pillows engulf me. I embalm myself in the blankets around me. Again, the pillows cry. They send up their own prayers. They wish for this to end.

Maybe one day they will bring me the warmth I desire.

Then.

Together,

we rest.

Together,

we wait for tomorrow.

Dancing to my Final Playlist

TYLER KENNETT

I imagine that you drive. You're that person who shuts their car door carefully because you know that too much strength may scratch the paint or jam the seatbelt buckle in the rubber. You work, you go to school, or you sit in parking lots with a bag of food from McDonald's, sweeping the bottom of the bag for a forgotten straw. If you're like me, you skip through radio stations, hearing the ruffling like a hand in a bag of chips until something finally sticks. When you find your song, you'll stop the scan and go back, preparing your Grammy-winning performance as you steer with one hand.

I wonder if you were on the road during that night in January. I wonder if you tuned in to hear me, in those seconds, speaking as a DJ at our radio station.

**

"Hey, just checking our systems out while I get things going. I hope you're having a great evening. Here's a little playlist I put together. It's probably my last one for a while, so give it a listen. Peace and love, gonna get back to work."

**

During that January, I started picking through the songs that I wanted to be on the final playlist I ever made. I've worked at a radio station for years, making playlists each week, but this one was different. After going on air, I set the playlist to fade in. It would play until the next morning. It was my love letter. It was my goodbye. It was my package, delivered with no return address. I wonder about who heard me speak. Maybe you were listening to the station. I was that voice that stopped your scanner for a second as the light changed from yellow to red. Maybe you hit scan twice, leading to a shuffle in which you only heard a couple of words to a song or one from my voice. Maybe you were a friend of mine, tuning in to the radio for the off chance that you could hear my voice while I was motionless in the hospital. Maybe you're that listener who emailed the station, saying you loved my music choices. That was the first thing I saw when I got out the next day once I was out. If you were, or wanted to be, any of those listeners, here's some of the songs you may have missed while the car radio scanned:

**

1: Self Control

"You cut your hair, but you used to live a blonded life."

In high school, I was a JROTC kid. I remember being attracted to it because I heard that they would let you play basketball every now and then once the work was finished. It also took away that civics credit we all had to get before graduation. As a company, we would march up that winding hill to the weight room each day for conditioning. Most kids would sling metal bars or drop weights with a huff, but I would

normally sit on the exercise mats close to the stereo system, playing the new music since I was the kid who kept up with it.

“Wish I was there; wish we’d grown up on the same advice. Our time was right”

If we grew up together, you might have already known that I was in JROTC. You might have been one of my classmates who helped me pin those colorful ribbons on the uniform that had to be completely straight every week. We were always told we couldn’t hold a ruler if our lives depended on it. You could have been the girl in the class I played music for, sitting next to me on the mats while I was playing this song. She was the girl who told me she loved it before we talked for days about what music we listened to. If you weren’t her, maybe you were the guy who slammed the weights to the ground when you couldn’t lift them up. He was the guy who told me to turn the “gay music” off. I quit playing my songs after that.

“I came to visit, ‘cause you see me like a UFO.”

The JROTC girl was someone I never thought much about. She was the song that you place between your favorites, bridging the gap between hits. We first met through music, but she likely remembered me from years later. Once we were together, she was the beautiful hand that painted that picture I took to my first college dorm. Years together turned into keepsakes that we placed in a small black box: a collection of memories. Movie tickets, plastic rings, and small rocks from the creeks she walked barefoot in. Outside of the box, though, was a small painting of West Virginia that was split in thirds. Blues, whites, and hearts covered our hometown. When we split up, it was the first thing I took down during my plans to return her memories. Next to it, in her duffle bag, sat a coin we received in JROTC for leading our companies. I think that’s where my depression started: in the shower of my college dorm with a bottle of Hennessy that I was too young to own.

“Some nights you dance with tears in your eyes.”

Maybe you are that first girlfriend. If that was you, I don’t miss you. I just miss dancing on trampolines. I miss the way that you would erase a word twenty times because of the way that the lead would blotch up on your left hand as it dragged against the page. I miss the way that we would talk to the stars, flipping coins to decide who gets each one. Ever since, life has felt like the aftermath: a crashing down to the trampoline without someone to hear you puff from an inhaler.

“Keep a place for me, I’ll sleep between y’all, it’s nothin’.”

**

2: It’s Not the Same Anymore

“So many feelings, struggling to leave my mouth.”

I never told anyone where I was on the day that I went to be diagnosed with depression and anxiety. My family, who still loved me, typically held counseling above my head. If I were to backtalk them or say something regrettable, I was threatened with being sent away. Terrified, I stepped a foot into a barren room, fearing my departure. I was handed a small clipboard and pen, answering questions that I used to think I didn't have an answer for.

***“I should be happy, of course. But things just got much harder.
Now it's just hard to ignore.”***

If you worked with me during that summer when I was diagnosed, you probably knew something was wrong. You could see me walking up to the front door while my head hung to the ground. I might have looked to you with baggy, hungover eyes when you called my name from the porch, drawing at a cigarette. You'd always ask if I'm okay, and I'd always tell you that I am, refuting the part of my body that screams out, wanting you to tell someone.

“It's only four o'clock and still, it's been a long day.”

When I received my first prescription, I was given a sleep medication. I was told it would help me feel stronger. I took it, but it reminded of one the things that made me stop sleeping. If I fell asleep, I wanted it to be my choice. No one could take that from me. I quit taking the medicine.

“And I can't wait to hit the bed, but tomorrow makes me scared.”

Are you that emergency room nurse from my night in the hospital? I remember when you woke me up with a plate of scrambled eggs. The last thing I remembered was the EMT throwing me into a premature coffin, strapping me into a bed that I couldn't move from. Didn't you say that I had alcohol poisoning? I overheard the whispers that said I was lucky to be alive. I think you must remember me asking why I was there because when you said, “drinking,” I remember telling you that I was there because I wanted to be dead. You remember me, right? When my mom was there next week for kidney stones, she said that you asked about me. You remembered my last name. I hope that was a lie.

“I used to be so hungry. Right now, my stomach's full as hell.”

Are you the friend that I sent the voice messages to? You could hear the heart monitor slowly beeping in the background as I told you that I was okay, but that I wish I wasn't. You sat in the parking lot, waiting on the off chance that I would walk up in a hospital gown and open the car door like I was jumping in to go get McDonald's. Are you the one who came and got me? If you were, did we laugh as much as I remember, or was it more like the next time that we talked?

“I wish I didn’t need to get help, But I do.”

**

“Hey, do you guys collect records? I started collecting them about a year ago. My mom used to play Elvis for me while we cleaned the house up. She’d probably hate the stuff I play now. What’s your favorite record in your collection? Call in. Let me know.”

**

4: Minutemen

“Why is it so hard, holding out?”

I remember the first time that someone called me gay. I was in fourth grade, attending a church campout in the darkened woods. Someone asked me if I liked High School Musical. I did, very much. I had a sleeping bag with all of the characters on it, a proud honor of something we stretched our money thin for. I sat in it, squishing my fingers against the roasted scales of a darkened marshmallow until it stuck, wiping them off just above the O’s of it. The pink blanket meant that I was sinful. Evicted, I slept in my dad’s car, laying down the seats and covering my tears with the East High Wildcats.

“I’m watching you move, imitating your walk.”

If you’re the JROTC girl, maybe you understand me now. A few years ago, I lost sexual attraction. I remember when a night was stripped from me, waking up in a sweat without an apology as you ran your hands through my hair and eventually over my mouth. In most of these retellings, I’ve lied. I always said it was your friend. I need to ask you. Why did you hurt me? You were the trampoline dancer. You were the star watcher. We were the heart on the painting. We were the room of your house that eventually burned, taking my innocence with it. Why couldn’t you hear my tears when I rolled over? Why did you make me do something when I said no? Were you ever someone I could trust?

“Why is it so hard to hold your hand?”

Why did I stay?

“Where are my minutemen?”

Are you my family? Do you remember when I told you that I was asexual? I told you that I could probably love anyone, but that I only could emotionally. Why did you Google it in front of me? Did you not trust me? Did your curiosity of if I was doomed for eternal hellfire matter more than the tears that fell from my face when I told you about what changed me? Could they not extinguish these apparent flames beneath my feet better than the ink of a book? Why were you relieved when I told you that a woman raped me instead of a man? Why did you say I was “sounding like a stupid

fag” when I said people should love who they want to? That was years ago, but I never forgot. Why did you make me tell you the day before I left? I wasn’t ready for that. That’s when it ended. I started making this playlist.

“Could you fight if you had to?”

**

5: Once a Day

“Once a Day I rise.”

“Once a day, I try, but I can’t find a single word.”

**

“Hey, how are your family gatherings? I feel like I’m always eating Ham. Christmas, New Year’s Eve, Thanksgiving. Whenever we go home for breaks and all that, my grandma makes a huge dinner right before I leave to go back to campus. Do you guys have some of those family holidays? Call in, let me know.”

**

6: Violet

“Don’t cut your journey short. Not anymore. You beautiful boy.”

The last drink I bought that night was a bottle of Hennessy. It was the first thing I drank once the girl who danced on trampolines stopped jumping. It would be the last thing I drank before I stopped jumping. Stumbling, I remember making it back to my friend’s house, drinking a quarter of it before losing consciousness on his floor. He called the ambulance. He saved my life. I planned for it to be the last thing that I ever drank. I had already drunk two bottles of those vodkas that are flavored with forgetfulness. I remember when I started binge drinking. I was by myself. It was the only way that I could ever sleep. I was scared to face the dark. I blacked myself out instead. If it wasn’t for my friend, I would have died.

“Just chill, you’re made to sing. On anything, you golden child.”

You probably didn’t hear about me until the last moment. I remember watching my phone battery drain as I cried, wishing that I would have just told *you*. I was worried. I didn’t want *you* to worry. *You* wanted me to be better. I felt that I couldn’t be. *You* were right, like always. I didn’t want to disappoint *you*. I remember when I asked the nurse for a charger so that I could tell *you* what happened. They told me no. They didn’t think *you* were real. *You are*. I didn’t tell *you* first, and it’s my biggest regret. *You’ll* read this. *You* read my everything. *You’re* my biggest *you*. There is only one. She knows herself and needs no description.

“You’re my violet in the sun.”

**

7: Streetcar

“Let me know. Do I still got time to grow? Things ain’t always set in stone.”

The walls of the emergency room were bare. I remember being moved, placed on suicide watch. The nurses rotated, waking me up from time to time to make sure I was still alive. My sheets were thin, made of a paper-like material that rarely kept me warm. That nurse who brought me scrambled eggs joked with me, telling me that I drank a little too much when I asked why I was still there. She wouldn’t let me have a napkin.

“Seems like streetlights, glowing, happen to be,”

You might be that psychiatrist. I remember you asking me what was wrong. You stared intently, writing to a clipboard with a little more force when I started talking about these songs. There was a cross hanging from the wall. It was the only decoration. You probably didn’t want my fire, so why did you help me endure it? We talked for hours. When we were finished, you came back, asking me if I felt like the psych ward could help me. I ask to be let go instead. It probably helps you to know that I started therapy like you asked me to. Everything is good.

“Just like moments, passing, in front of me, so I hopped in the cab and I paid my fare.”

I am sober. I am two months free from suicidal thoughts. I am accepting of myself and who I want to be. I feel like I am doing better. Now, I wait for the months to become years. I think I’m going to buy myself another record player in the meantime.

“See I know my destination, I’m just not there.”

I’m going to make another playlist, too.



We're Drowning, Harris
CASSANDRA WATSON

We're Going 'Round: A Recurring Dream

KIT PORTER

And I'm here, again,
in a forest church we excavated,
its stoned specters smoldering,
its trampled tulips twitching.
We found no arches, no ceiling tiles—
we find the limited and limitless.
The hush just wants to have
a conversation, ask me
How to twirl in gore
and remain whole? Pause.

And begin again. Welts swelling
with jubilation, glitching woman
in concentration, a congregation
lost to their labor. I don't believe
in predestination, I believe in
sanctified repetition, in
circular reasoning and
mandala meditation, pause.

And begin again—*God,*
is this tribulation?
Terror folds inward, a shuddering
in the sheets, desperate hand groping
for stillness in the word *disorientation*,
and somewhere, I know,
somewhere I know,
a rabbit dashes over my grave.

Lifetime Bar

MICHAEL CROUT

I INT. BAR - NIGHT

Close shot of a middle-aged, scruffy, man's face resting against the bar counter, asleep. Drool is leaving his mouth and hitting the table. The sound of bar chatter gets steadily louder till the man flinches and jolts up.

Wider shot of the whole bar. There are many beings in the bar, not all humans. Some are animals speaking English and talking amongst themselves in booths and high chairs alike. All blinds are drawn closed over the windows.

Close on the man, quickly taking in his surroundings and taking a deep sigh, he accepts the situation as he leans his elbows over the bar.

DIRK

(Solemnly)

Perhaps I took a bit too much this time.

The BARTENDER, a well-dressed humanoid rooster, hears Dirk mumbling to himself. He finishes cleaning a wine glass and walks over.

BARTENDER

Drink?

Dirk looks up, slightly surprised at the talking rooster, but then he looks down at the table.

DIRK

(mumbling)

Espresso martini...please.

The bartender looks at Dirk, who won't meet his eye line, a moment longer before spinning around to make the concoction.

Dirk watches the bartender work briefly, then starts to examine the interior of the bar.

Multiple angles of the bar and bar customers. A purple haze is visible coming in from the window blinds across the room and it is giving a surreal feeling to the atmosphere.

Dirk cranes his head as if to get a better view of what might be behind the blinds of a window then -THUD- an elderly woman falls from a rather high booth a medium length behind Dirk.

The bartender immediately puts Dirk's now-finished drink in front of Dirk and gets out from behind the bar.

Dirk looks over his shoulder and watches the woman struggle on the ground, with a tad of concern on his face. He grabs and sips his drink as he watches. The bartender rushes in and helps her to her feet.

BARTENDER

(concerned)

Are you ok? You should not have been seated at our high booths.
Please forgive me for this oversight.

Dirk's eyes are still fixed on the exchange, now with a face of intrigue. The elderly woman moans lightly in response as the bartender helps her out of the bar and then returns to clean the table where she was sat.

With his face showing more contentment, Dirk spins around and sips his drink. The bartender walks back behind the counter and Dirk raises a finger to the bartender, still sipping.

Dirk puts his drink down.

DIRK

Boss, this may be the best martini I've had in my lifetime.

Dirk takes another swig.

DIRK (CONT'D)

I've been to a one a many bars in my
ime, but I ain't ever taste a martini
quite as refined as this.

The bartender continues working and doesn't meet his eye line.

BARTENDER

I'm glad you think so. You may stay and drink here as long as you like.

Dirk nods a few times in appreciation of the bartender as he gazes around once more. He sees a man asleep in a bar chair with his head cocked back, his chest rising with each breath.

Dirk nods to the man.

DIRK

Speakin' a which, how long has that fella been drinking for?

The bartender glances toward the man referenced and looks back to his work.

BARTENDER

TIMOTHY HYLLENAL - I believe he's been here for 15 years now.

DIRK

15, wow. quite the tab he's working up.

BARTENDER

Incorrect, all drinks here are paid for by donations from our patrons.

Dirk sits up wide-eyed.

DIRK

Hell of a lot of donations! I'll drink to that.

Dirk performs a cheering motion to the man asleep and sips his drink.

BARTENDER

Yes, though Tim's situation is quite grim. He is here because of the many lives he took while drunk driving.

Dirk stops and stares at the bartender with wide eyes mid-sip. The bartender turns from Timothy and points to a well-dressed young man in the corner talking to two young women in a booth.

BARTENDER (CONT'D)

Also, Samuel Tamor: engaged in sex trafficking which resulted in the kidnapping and death of several young women.

Dirk's eyebrows go up and nervously laughs, looking from Timothy to Samuel. He runs his hands through his hair as a nervous tick.

Multiple angles of different customers as the bartender is talking.

BARTENDER (CONT'D)

And it is not just them. Everyone in here has done truly awful things: adultery, kidnapping, rape, homicide, extortion, torture; your human brains are truly not limited in creativity.

We hear a loud SCRAPE as Dirk rises from his seat, eyebrows furrowed as he stares down at the table wide-eyed. His fists are clenched. The bartender eyes Dirk as one would a criminal.

BARTENDER

Dirk. What have you done?

DIRK

I ain't ever done nothing to no one that didn't deserve it.

Dirk spins and walks towards Sam, fists still clenched. The girls by Sam notice and gasp loudly. Sam is taken by surprise by Dirk grabbing the collar of his coat.

DIRK

(Angrily)

How?

SAM

Who the hell are you?

DIRK

(Yelling)

HOW?

Dirk grips Sam's collar more tightly.

DIRK (CONT'D)

The things you've done, you should be rottin' away. Miserable.
In a tiny cel-

Sam CRACKS his fist against Dirk's nose, sending him to the ground.

Dirk writhes in pain and grabs his nose, blood dripping down his chin. Customers in the background stop to look at the violent altercation.

Close on Dirk on the floor in anguish, sounds beginning to muffle. He was hit hard. We can hear Sam get out of his seat and start yelling.

Dirk's POV, looking up at Sam who is now standing. The bartender stands between Dirk and Sam. He is audibly reasoning with Sam who looks furious, they slowly come out of focus.

INT. BEDROOM - NIGHT

DISSOLVE TO:

We hear a grown man sobbing, muffled slightly. The scene gets somewhat brighter as moonlight comes through a window. It is revealed to be a younger Dirk crying to his wife. His wife is rubbing his back.

They are sitting on a bed in an apartment, you can see some clothes on the ground and general messiness.

DIRK

(In tears)

They... they deserved it. I can't- I don't know. I didn't want to. I can't do this anymore.

DIRK'S WIFE

Sweetie no no... it's ok. You're here. with me. You're not there anymore. You did only what you had to.

Dirk's sobbing continues.

DISSOLVE TO:

INT. BAR - NIGHT

Dirk wakes up in a corner of the bar with his head against the table. He grunts in pain a moment then slowly sits up and feels his nose, there is a bandage wrapped around it.

Dirk takes in his surroundings again, the bar is the same as it was, with a couple of new faces. Sam is chatting with different girls now, Dirk grits his teeth and continues to look around.

He notices a window to his right, blinds drawn. He gently pulls the blinds to the side and gasps. The music and background chatter stops.

CLOSE SHOT of Dirk's eyes reflecting stars and bright, cosmic colors of celestial bodies. We hear Dirk's breathing.

NEW ANGLE with Dirk's back to the camera. He is now pushing the blinds all the way to the side. Dirk is silhouetted looking out at the INSERT cosmos from the window.

BARTENDER

(Sternly)

Dirk.

Dirk jumps a bit and the blinds fall back down. We hear the bar chatter and music again. He looks to the rooster longingly.

DIRK

(voice shaking)

Where am I?...

BARTENDER

A bar. Now come with me, we have to talk.

The bartender walks to the other side of the room and Dirk hesitantly follows. The bartender stops 15 feet away from the opposite wall, where a dartboard hangs. There are two short stands across from each other and near the bartender, each holding darts. The bartender grabs darts from one stand and feels the point with his finger.

Dirk looks from the darts to the bar table, where he sees a humanoid ape now serving customers.

DIRK

What are you doing? Wh-what is this?

BARTENDER

Normally when customers like you have an outburst, we will immediately send you to your death. However, I wanted to offer you a choice.

DIRK

Which is...darts?

BARTENDER

Play darts with me. If you win, I will let you stay or go as you please.

DIRK

And if I lose.

BARTENDER

You will stay and work here for the rest of your life until we deem you unnecessary, and then you will die.

Dirk looks at the bartender, defeated. He drags his feet over to the other stand containing darts.

DIRK

(solemnly)

Been quite a while since I played darts... college musta been last time.

BARTENDER

So you're familiar with the rules then? Good. We'll play 301 to save some time. Are you ready?

Dirk hesitantly grabs the dart and weighs it in his hand, he then looks back to the bartender.

BARTENDER

Good. I'll start.

The bartender takes a professional dart stance and throws a dart, hitting the double 17. Dirk looks in awe. The bartender grabs the darts and continues to hit an eleven, then 4. He walks over and retrieves his darts.

BARTENDER

252. Your turn.

Dirk grabs his dart tightly. He lines up in a stance reminiscent of a baseball pitcher's stance. He throws the dart and it hits the wood beneath the dartboard.

DIRK

Oops... sorry.

Trembling, Dirk grabs another dart and throws it. This one hitting the double 4 but falling out.

DIRK

The boards... a little far don't ya think?

BARTENDER

Sorry, house rules.

Dirk gulps and grabs another dart. He takes a deep breath as the music fades out. He throws the dart.

MOVING CLOSE SHOT of the dart going in slow motion towards the dartboard. When the dart lands on the dartboard there's a gunshot noise and we are brought to:

EXT. BATTLEFIELD - DAY

A younger Dirk and MORGAN are in a trench, bullets hitting the ground around them causing them to hide deeper in the trench. Morgan is around the same age as Dirk here, and equally as terrified. Dead bodies on either side of them

DIRK

(frantic)

We have to move! I would rather take a chance cause we're dead just sittin' here!

MORGAN

Just wait! Trust close air support!

Dirk has a terrified look on his face and looks at Morgan, then peers over the trench. Multiple lines of enemies with guns, some hiding in trees or trenches, firing towards Dirk and Morgan.

DIRK

We'll die if we wait a second longer. The line of command is broken we can run!

MORGAN

Run then!

Dirk looks at Morgan then back down the battlefield, considering his options. Morgan eyes Dirk with a harsh gaze. Dirk takes a deep breath.

DIRK

Ugh... Damn it!

Dirk grabs his gun tightly and looks at Morgan, then runs down the field, zigzagging and breaking for each trench. Once in a trench he looks back and sees a grenade tossed in Morgan's, and it goes off.

Dirk's mouth opens and everything goes silent as the grenade explosions ring in Dirk's ear. A shadow covers Dirk and he looks up. Many planes litter the sky.

BARTENDER (O.S)

130. Dirk, your turn.

INT. BAR -- NIGHT

Come back to Dirk, teary-eyed. He looks to the bartender, then back to the dartboard.

Dirk takes a deep breath in through his nose and grabs his dart. He throws it and hits triple twenty.

Dirk's mouth opens and the bartender's eyes go wide. Dirk throws another and gets double 17, and then another for 20. Dirk retrieves his darts.

BARTENDER

187 for you. My turn.

The bartender throws his darts. Double bull, single bull, and then double 13.

NEW SHOT of a man crying in the bar. Dirk looks over his shoulder with lots of concern on his face, we can see the bartender retrieving his darts in the background. The crying becomes isolated as all other sounds fade out.

INT. CELL - NIGHT

The crying turns into muffled screaming from a prisoner. Dirk is now in a cell wearing his military uniform, tears rolling down his face, he's holding bloody tweezers. There are silhouettes behind him at the door and a tied up prisoner in the middle of the cell.

DIRK

(shaking)

There's nothing else to do! He won't talk!

SOLDIER 1

These are the assholes who killed your squad and Morgan. Take another.

Dirk's face is a mix of concern, anger, and sorrow. He grunts a few times as the prisoner is groaning through a gag. Dirk moves the tweezers off-screen and you hear a snap as the prisoner cries out again.

Dirk stumbles backwards and the soldiers move forward towards the prisoner. Dirk walks backward to the cell wall and slouches against it.

SIDE ANGLE of Dirk slouching on the floor against the wall.

INT. BAR - NIGHT

SIDE ANGLE of Dirk on his knees, the bartender's darts are on

the dartboard. Background chatter and music are silent to us. Dirk reaches up and grabs the bartender's sleeve.

DIRK

Do you know?... what I did.

BARTENDER

Yes.

DIRK

I didn't have a choice... he deserved it.

BARTENDER

That is a cruel reality. But in the end, I'm sure he regretted being there just like you.

Dirk pauses.

DIRK

Can I fix it?

BARTENDER

No, never. (pause) You can only keep moving and live trying to. He was human, as were you. You and he were the same, do you realize that?

DIRK

Yes.

The bartender lifts Dirk onto his feet and grabs his hand.

BARTENDER

Good. Now get the hell out of my bar.

Dirk looks at the bartender and wipes his tears as he shakes his hand.

DIRK

You may have been a cock, but thank you.

The bartender laughs and goes to collect his darts.

BARTENDER

You are not the first to say that.

Dirk looks around as the chatter slowly fades back in. No-one in the bar stopped for them, and everything was resuming as

it was. Dirk smiles and walks to the door, turns and looks the bartender in the eye, then exits.

How to Have the Perfect Conversation

WADE SULLIVAN

The first thing you're going to want to do is really worry about it. Sink your teeth into your knuckles until they bleed, and then dig them deeper. I mean really work yourself into a lather over whether you've ever even given someone a good conversation let alone a perfect one. Nobody has ever had the perfect conversation without thinking about it ahead of time. You really need to plot it out. Take notes on how you're feeling that day, what the weather is like, how the sports game went last night. Then crumple up those notes and cast them into the trash, because nobody has had the perfect conversation talking about those types of things.

Obviously, you have to talk about something real. You and the other person have to walk away having transformed in some way. The conversation has to have a journey, an arc, a story in itself. You're going to remember it for the rest of your life, and they're going to remember it for the rest of theirs. You may be thinking this sounds like a lot of pressure. You're correct. But eventually coal turns into a diamond with enough pressure, right? It only takes a few billion years of feeling the weight from the crust of the Earth bearing down on you, but just picture for a second what it will look like when you've finally done it

Imagine walking away without feeling like a fool. As if you didn't have to go back to the drawing board and start your search for true social enlightenment from scratch. No more thinking, "I should have talked about cocker spaniels before I talked about the French Revolution." You won't wonder whether you overshad about how ribs seven through nine on your right side have always felt like someone took a baseball bat to you and left a big dent. And you'll especially never wonder whether you actually made your asinine point about how you disagree with Hindu philosophy because it seems to you that shoveling a fistful of dirt into your mouth to get your nutrition from microorganisms is just as harmful to life as eating a farm animal. In fact, you won't have to worry about being wrong at all since everything said will be exactly correct in the perfect conversation. You won't feel as if you've lingered too long or rushed off too soon. Neither party will be left wanting to add just one last thing or follow up on anything later. It will be precise, compact, confined, but you'll carry it with you for the rest of your life.

You may be wondering what my credentials are to be saying all of this. Of course, I can say I've had the perfect conversation. Don't get any ideas about taking mine for yourself though. Following a script will never get you where you're going. Only years of unease about every word that's crawled its way out of your mouth can carry you there. The perfect conversation goes a little something like this,

“Sorry that I’m not very talkative tonight.”

“That’s okay.”

There is no perfect conversation, or rather you’re always having it. You can never cease the deluge of being a social creature as you opened that bottomless sinkhole when you screamed with your first lungful of air that the lights in the hospital you were just born in are far too bright and could somebody please turn them down? Nobody understood what you were saying and that’s where this all started for you. You can’t plan around someone else’s thoughts and you can’t just enter into a conversation devoid of context. You’ll always want to apologize, or lie, or bring up something you shouldn’t. Do all of those things. Do none of those things. Maybe even apologize for lying before about the time you both went fly fishing even though you aren’t actually sorry. I would say to stop worrying so much about it, but you’re reading a how to guide on the perfect conversation. So worry about it. Worry a lot.

German Cuss Words & Other Things A Grandmother Might Teach You

MOLLY O'CALLAGHAN

My grandmother left Germany to come to America when she was only twenty years old, to get away from her family and the small life they lived. Last week, she died at seventy-five years old after a bad case of pneumonia. These events are virtually unrelated except that they both happened to my grandmother and, in a way, I guess, also happened to me. My stepmother gave the eulogy even though she was thoroughly hated by the deceased, only because she once had a poem published in a local magazine and my father thought this made her more qualified to do the job than his lifetime of being my grandmother's son. The end result was a speech just as beautiful and syntactically flawless as her published poem had been, which fell just as much within the realm of fiction as her poem had. I still wish I'd tried harder to cry that day; everyone was foggy eyed after hearing the eulogy.

For some reason, they gave me her urn. My father said that me keeping her ashes had been one of the only requests she'd made in her will. I never actually saw this in writing and so assumed the real reason I was entrusted with it had to do with its gaudy-gold sheen and stout base not coinciding with my stepmother's sense of interior design. Since they'd given the urn to me, I was still trying to sort out how it would fit into mine. At first, I put it on the mantel above the gas fireplace that heated my apartment, remembering that every time I'd seen an urn on display, it had always been on the mantel. This seemed to be prime real estate for everyone's dead relatives, why should it be any different for me? Her urn sat there for only an hour before I decided having it stare me in the face while I ate in the kitchen only a few feet away was too creepy. For the next few days, I played around with different locations around my home, putting it high on my bookshelves only to take it down and set it on the ceramic end table next to my couch. Much like the urn, the table had been gifted to me without prompt by a friend of mine who thought himself an artistic visionary. They looked out of place together, more so than either looked out of place on their own. After that, I hid the urn in bedrooms and then moved it back out into the main space again and again, always avoiding the end table.

This horrible, guilty feeling kept the muscles in my upper back always tightened. I'd come to blame this chronic ache on an imaginary caricature of my grandmother who was forever sitting on my shoulders, with cartoonish devil horns sticking out on either side of her white hair. She spent all day listing the different ways in which I was an awful person and a terrible granddaughter. The only way to quiet her was to explain that I disliked the urn for its fake gold color, the same gold as one of those rings you get out of a machine for a quarter. Not to speak of the bright green strip that wrapped like a snake around its middle, starting at the lid and slithering down to the base. It was true that these features were hard to look at but what I really did not like was when I caught my own fish-eyed reflection in it, staring back in some spiteful way.

These were the moments when the guilt became most vocal, suggesting the horrible possibility that I might've looked at my grandmother with the same spite when she was alive.

Of all the things that bothered me about my grandmother's way of going about life, her aversion to animals was the thing that nagged at me the most. For her sixtieth birthday, I convinced my father to go to a shelter and picked out a sweet, yellow furred kitten as her gift. I was ten that year and had been watching a lot of movies in which hard-nosed, grouchy old people much like my grandmother were melted by the love of one perfect creature. When I presented the kitten to her, she took it from me, held it with outstretched arms so it would not touch her dress, and walked out the door. She came back a minute later without the cat and we never spoke about it again. This instance stood out starkly against the rest of my memories of her as I shoved aside the fish tank and gecko cage on my dresser, placing the urn in between them as if it were another one of my pets. It looked ridiculous there and I knew it, knew that if she could, she'd leap out of the urn in full-body and toss both of these animals wherever she'd tossed that poor cat. The only gravesite crueller than this would have been if my stepmother *had* managed to make room for her amongst her tchotchkes, where she'd spend her years of rest being dusted and polished and always listening to my stepmother humming the tune of *You are my Sunshine* as she cleaned.

She had no room for animals in her life but even less room for people she disliked, and she was not one to hide her opinions of such people behind pleasantries or other or nuanced behavior. Her world was *this or that*. You were German, or you were not. You were controllable, or you were not. She loved my father because he was both and hated my grandfather because he was neither. None of the women my father brought around were ever under her approval, though I think she hated my mother the most because she made the mistake of dying young and leaving my father and me to fend for ourselves. A weak move in the eyes of a woman who had, at the time, survived every attempt God had made at striking her down. At my mother's funeral, Grandmother remained uncaringly silent until the interment. I remember the way her blue dress stood out amongst all the black, an obnoxious, colorful interruption on the darkest day of my life.

Leaning down to meet my small, eight-year-old height, she'd whispered in her fading German accent, "Non-German genes are very weak. You will live much longer."

The year between my mother's death and my father meeting his first girlfriend was harder than all the years afterwards. Being freshly motherless made me feel like an orphan and suddenly Grandmother was around all the time under the excuse that she was now the closest thing I had to a mom. She'd always liked me in spite of myself, though she often battled with the idea of liking me for myself. When I was a baby, I had bleach blonde hair and clear blue eyes just like my father, until age and bad sight transformed me into the dusty-haired, bifocaled copy of my mother. Grandmother

would always insist upon pulling my thin, fragile hair back into two tight braids which yanked on my head so much, my forehead would stretch and turn pink around the edges. The two of us often stood in front of my bedroom mirror while she performed this torture, me trying to hold back the tears I knew she would scold as being weak as she skillfully threaded the strands of my hair over top of one another.

“Meine Liebe,” she’d say, which means my love. “You are a very smart girl, God’s grace to you after allowing you to look so much like your mother.”

Being loved by her sometimes felt like a curse. When she hated you, she expected nothing from you. You’d only have to live under the scrutiny of her silence and hope not to be cast out of her life in the same way as the cat I’d stupidly gifted her. The women my father loved had all been affected by her in different ways. My mother used to cry in the kitchen when she knew she was coming over. Only me and my father knew that her affection could be far more poisonous than her distaste. She would purposefully slice open wounds to see if we would lick them or take the pain in stride and let it heal. Her love was the kind which shoved you down before the world could, to teach you how to shrug your shoulders at it and try again. It was not the kind of love you want, but it’s the kind you never stop working for.

The urn sat on my dresser for longer than it should have. I’d been staying at work late every night trying to finish up a pile of cases, which I knew Grandmother would be willing to suffer for since my career had been the one thing I had done right in her eyes. The day I told her I was going to major in forensic science in college was one of the three or four times I saw her smile. She didn’t have a beautiful smile or much beautiful about her at all except for the eyes she gave to my father and to me. Her mouth was overcrowded with too many teeth, which were yellowish and stacked on top of each other to fit beneath her thin, hard lips. Still there was something special about her smile when it was only for me. It was stupid but it made me feel like she might be proud of me, proud just like all my friend’s grandmothers who praised them for everything and for nothing at all only because they were the child of their child. Too often she reminded me that this was not her role in my life.

She took my hand and said, “This is good. Too many women become only mothers, they work for no money and die from the stress. But you are a good girl, a smart girl.”

I’d hated her so easily for saying that, for talking about my mother without saying her name, for suggesting that being a mother was what killed her. When I repeated her words to my father sometime later, he explained to me that Grandmother’s family was very poor in Germany, that her father was not around and that her mother had not been a good provider. This was apparently supposed to make me forgive her for being so cruel, but I was too young to feel sorry for anyone but myself.

My father and stepmother invited themselves over, presuming that my radio silence since the funeral meant that I was in the throes of grief. Before they showed up, I moved the urn back to the mantle, where urns go. I did not want them to think I was too stupid or uncaring to realize that all urns sit on the mantle. In case that was not enough, I also tried to make my dad's favorite cookies from my grandmother's family cookbook, hoping it might help me pass for the mourning granddaughter I was expected to be. Hours were spent decoding the words that were scrawled messily in Grandmother's nearly illegible cursive, some of which had become obstructed by splashes of vanilla. The title read the funny name of the desert, "spitzbubens", preceded by a list of every dry ingredient which made up the crumbling pile of dough and short, very unhelpful directions. One line read, in German, "take out butter" and left it at that. Though Grandmother taught me to make most of the recipes in the book so that I knew them by heart, spitzbubens she would never let me make without the cookbook, leaving me stranded and in desperate need of her translation. She appeared beside me again, only in my imagination, standing with squared shoulders and her wooden spatula pointing at me.

"Art and other fanciful messes are made with creativity, meine liebe, but traditions are made with repetition," She said, her voice all the sudden thick with a German vibrato.

The mess was the same it had always been, counters coated with layers of flour and the smell of scorched dough hanging around in the whole apartment. But I could tell my spitzbubens were not my grandmother's by the way my father's eyes narrowed when he bit into one. His eyes had always been the voice he otherwise did not have, giving up all his secrets and speaking his mind for him. When he'd seen my grandmother's body lying in her casket, his eyes brimmed over with tears, only two of which he allowed to fall down his face before wiping the rest away with his sleeve. My stepmother and I made boring small talk about work and how we both liked the way the outdoors smelled after rain while he pretended they were the best batch of cookies he'd ever tasted.

"It's called petrichor. The smell of dirt after rain," I told her, trying to be the smart girl my grandmother was maybe proud of.

Her face scrunched up with so much suspicion for the dry, half-burnt cookie on her napkin that some of her heavy makeup cracked around her nose. She finally shoved it to the side, smiling a wide, clownish smile at me from across the table.

"I know, dear. I wrote a poem about it many years ago. About the way the earth cries when somebody dies," She said, then paused and looked at the ceiling as if a thought had escaped and floated up there. "I should have read that at mother's funeral, shouldn't I have honey?"

My father said nothing, but I knew we were thinking the same thing, because his eyes flashed over to the urn. The last time we'd all visited Grandmother in the

hospital, my stepmother had greeted her with the same familial title she'd just used, only to receive a cease and desist in return.

My grandmother, who'd been too frail to sit up for months, shot up straight as a bored in her bed and announced, "You may call me by my surname, dear." That was the only funny thing she ever said.

I moved the urn from the mantle onto the vanity in my guest bathroom, where I knew I wouldn't have to worry about it for a while. This might've been worse for her than having my gecko as a neighbor. I could not remember the last time I cleaned this bathroom, but sticky puddles of dried soap and rags stiffened by lack of use made me think it'd been too long. Seeing the urn under the fluorescent lights in that tiny room, I noticed for the first time the inscription at its base. It read, in German, "*Beloved Mother and Grandmother.*"

There were very few times I can recall Grandmother speaking unfragmented German, most of which were when she was yelling at her brother over the phone. He still lived in Germany and only knew how to say a few very unpleasant words in English, though he definitely knew plenty of unpleasant German words. One other time was on my ninth birthday, when my father clumsily announced to both of us that he was dating someone by telling me that one of my presents was from him and a woman named Sheryll. I did not know who Sheryll was or that my father could have a Sheryll of his own, some woman in his life that was not me, my mother, or my grandmother. At the sound of her name, Grandmother shoved out of her seat so aggressively that it left a permanent scuff on the floor.

"Was für eine Menge Scheisse," She said.

I recognized every word except for the last one, *scheisse*, so naturally it became my obsession. My father must have known what all the words meant because he got very angry and asked her to leave. That night, I looked it up in a German to English dictionary Grandmother had given me for some other birthday and discovered with childish delight that it meant *shit*. This wonderful word became my secret weapon for earning popularity and passing around coded messages about the teachers at my very strict, very religious school. I'd gather all my friends after class and whisper to them about how our math teacher Mr. Plume was "full of *scheisse*". When they looked at me with confused expressions, I'd roll my eyes at their lack of cultural understanding and explain it to them.

"It means *shit*."

This behavior went on for some time until I had everyone in my grade and a few kids in the lower grades saying it. It did not become a problem until a little boy in the first grade stood up on show and tell day and announced the cool new word he'd learned to his whole class. The principal easily traced the issue back to the only girl

in school with a German grandmother and called my father to inform him of my sinful behavior. My spine straightened to a perfect point when I got off the buss later that day and saw my grandmother's car in the driveway. Some children feared the paddle or a slap when they did something wrong. I knew my grandmother's words could sting worse than both. But when I walked through the door, she and my father were laughing. It was the first time I'd seen them happy together since the Sheryll incident.

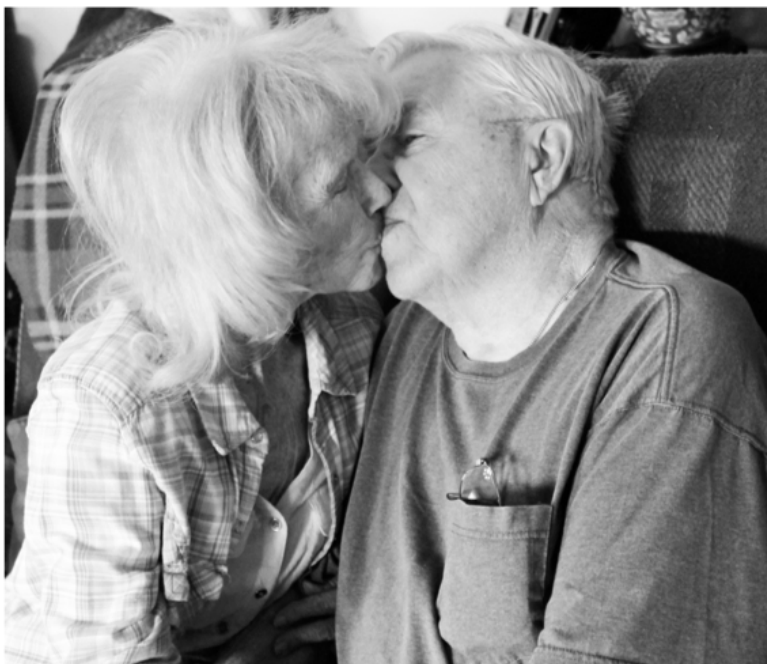
"I must either watch my temper around you or quit teaching you German. Which willit be, dear?" Said my grandmother, who could barely get the words out inbetween cackles. Then she ran her hands through my scraggly locks and told me she needed to tidy meup.

One day I woke up and realized I was a horrible person for hiding my grandmother away in a dark, unused bathroom. I ran downstairs, rescued it from its banishment, and mindlessly placed it on the windowsill by my front door. It did not strike me how stupid a place this was for a steel jar in midsummer until the next day, when I began to relocate it once again and nearly burnt the first layer of my palms off. My reflexes kicked in and the urn slipped out of my unhinged hands and popped open on the wood floor.

"Shit," I said, in pain. "*Shit*," I repeated, seeing my grandmother's ashes scattered in my living room.

For a while I just sat there and writhed in the pain of my idiocy. I got hungry and ate a leftover spitzbuben, which I chewed until it turned into a watery mush and then spit out, realizing that I could not eat at a time like this. With a dustpan in my hand, I debated the moral implications of sweeping up your own grandmother and depositing her back into the jar you spilled her out of just like any other mess. Would it be better to use my hands? Then I would have to wash the remainder of my grandmother off my hands afterwards but at least I would not have to worry about spreading her around every time I swept. I touched human remains and fluids all the time as a career, but none of them were related to me so that somehow made it feel ok. There was always the option of buying a new dustpan, but then I'd be throwing away some of my grandmother with the old one and I sometimes saw rats in the dumpsters outside my apartment. She would have hated to be so close to rats. I thought, selfishly, that I wished she'd have asked to be buried but immediately took the thought back and shoved it into a corner with all the other terrible things I allowed myself to feel about this woman who had given so much of herself to me.

It was while I was brushing the ashes back into the urn with a paper towel that I first cried for my grandmother's death, feeling finally like I had lost something when I saw the way some of what was left of her would not come out of the cracks in the wood.



Love at 80
BARB LAVALLEY

Every Family

JULIA WU

I tell Ma I have to write about an apocryphal story in our family because the assignment prompt says every family has one. I don't know how to say *apocryphal* in Chinese, so I punch it in to Google Translate, but when I flip the results back to English, the word is now *covert*. I add story to my query for context, and when I toggle the results back this time, the space for connotation is removed, and I am left simply with the term *false story*. I say to Ma, Something outlandish and probably untrue—can you tell me a story like that? Why would she tell me a story that was untrue, she wants to know.

Probably untrue, I clarify.

There's no honor in untruth, she says. Then, Why are you writing stories in school? You are studying to become a doctor.

I don't want to be a doctor, Ma.

Jobs aren't something to be wanted, she says. Just something to be done. I'm studying creative writing, I say.

What is creative writing? she asks. I tell her to Google it. She asks, Is creative writing writing stories that aren't true?

I remember once Ma told me my grandfather scared away a tiger by fluttering an umbrella *open-shut-open-shut-open-shut*. She had said, Thank goodness he had that umbrella on him because everyone knows a tiger is afraid of umbrellas. I ask Ma about it now and she says, Yes, that happened.

Where was the tiger? I ask.

In front of him, she says.

But why was there a tiger in front of him?

Why would I know why tigers go where they go, do I look like a tiger? she says, getting up to walk to the kitchen. I check on the internet to make sure a species of tiger native to China exists, and then I text a friend to ask how she would scare a tiger away. Ma is wearing her polka-dotted dress which is blue like a box of Pop-Tarts with penny-sized drops of white all over. Someone who's boss's boss is Ma told me once that Ma looks like Minnie Mouse. Ma works at the university in town, and she has since I was two, but I don't know what she does all day. Ma, what is your job? I ask.

I work in the library, Ma says. I am a professor. Are you a librarian? Do you teach classes? I ask. No.

What do you do in the library?

My answering machine says that I am the director of libraries operations, she says. When will you become a doctor? Christine is going to be a doctor. Ma slices into an onion, but the knife doesn't cut all the way through and the bottom layer won't break so she has to rock the knife back and forth for a second to sever the membrane. Then Ma is turning so quickly to drop the flecks of onion into the wok that her dress catches the air and twirls around her. She is talking to herself, a quick and quiet mumble. There is a bounce to her body, a jitter to her speech, and for a moment, I think, as much as dots can make a person look like a mouse, I can almost see it. I can almost see Ma as Minnie Mouse.

I ask, Ma, do you have any stories? My phone buzzes. It is my friend saying she would treat the tiger like a kitten. I ask if she would ever think to use an umbrella. She and Ma answer my questions at the same time, and both say, No.

CONTRIBUTORS' NOTES

Jules Batten is a senior at Marshall University. She is majoring in visual art and minoring in psychology. After graduating in the spring, she hopes to become a 3D designer and work with scientists, engineers, or companies to bring digital projects to life. Currently, she lives in Huntington, West Virginia, and enjoys time in her studio at the Art Warehouse as a home away from home.

Barbara Lavelley Benton is a senior art major in the School of Art and Design, Marshall University, minoring in psychology for a future in art therapy. She has an associates degree in American Sign Language from Mountwest Community College and works part-time as a training consultant in the transitional program for Cabell County schools. She is the author of a children's book for grieving families, *Nothing is Ever Lost*, and has a short story published in the book *God Alone*. She is a member of the National Honor Society.

Elijah Bowen is a freshman student currently enrolled in the journalism program at Marshall University. He can likely be found somewhere within 50 feet of Marshall's campus drinking black coffee and wearing at least one obnoxiously colorful clothing item. He wrote his first poem— an epic about the life of a sentient penny—at age six and hopes to be the recipient of such divine inspiration sometime again in his life.

Alex Canfield is a senior at Marshall University. He is a Yeager Scholar and will be graduating in the Spring with a degree in computer science. After graduating, he will work with the Department of Defense near Baltimore doing computer stuff. He currently lives in Huntington, West Virginia, where he spends as much time as possible with his friends..

Sarah Canterbury is a writer born and raised in Huntington, West Virginia. Her nonfiction work has been featured in *The Dead Mule School of Southern Literature*, *GNU Journal*, *The Blue Mountain Review*, and *The Storyteller Anthology*. She also has academic publications with *The James Dickey Review* and *Fiction Southeast*.

Sophia Celdrán is in her junior year as a visual arts major at Marshall University. She primarily works in oil paint and ceramics, but occasionally creates work with fine art influences out of craft materials, like glitter or felt. Her paintings are often inspired by the environment and growing up in a rural town in West Virginia. After graduating, she hopes to get a doctorate and direct or curate a major art museum, like the Met or MoMA.

Michael Crout is a junior at Marshall with a heart for filmmaking. It all began with a small stop-motion creation involving legos and poor camera quality, and now he is going to school striving to become a director. He currently lives in South Carolina after moving from West Virginia, where he now spends his days being a barista and meeting virtual deadlines.

Cat Dennison earned her bachelors degree in English education and literature from Miami University in Ohio. She now is pursuing her masters degree in English at Marshall University. Cat has been writing novels since middle school and hopes to one day be a published author as she pursues her other love of teaching high school English.

Peyton Dolin is a full-time visual arts student at Marshall University with an emphasis in 3D sculpture, where she utilizes a range of materials to create conceptual, thought-provoking work. Her construction process relies heavily on mixed media ranging from clay, wood, paint, and often times objects found in her neighborhood. The driving force behind these works lies in philosophy, the human condition, and the world around us.

Lilly Dyer is a senior at Marshall University pursuing a B.F.A. with an emphasis in photography. She is a photographer, video artist, curator, and sculptor. Her work explores themes of nostalgia, identity, and the human narrative. She is the co-founder and curator for Localization, a pop-up show that creates a space for Appalachian creatives and business owners to network and display their work.

Annalise Dylan is a junior at Marshall University studying English and Psychology. She will also have a minor in humanities as well as European history. After graduating she hopes to pursue writing as a creative nonfiction author, and she wants to obtain a master's degree in mental health counseling. Currently, she resides in West Virginia with her husband, Luke, two dogs, Ponch and Ollie, and nine chickens.

Elizabeth Fleace is currently a professional writing major at Marshall University. She is originally from Corydon, Indiana. She has enjoyed writing for as long as she can remember but has mostly kept her material to herself.

Zoë Kauffer is a wearer of many hats. Currently, she is based in Huntington, West Virginia, pursuing undergraduate degrees in English and French from Marshall University. She is a writer when she has an idea, but mostly she works various minimum wage jobs.

Tyler Kennett is a junior at Marshall University. He is currently majoring in Creative Writing and Sports Broadcast Journalism. He can often be heard on Marshall's campus radio station, WMUL, as one of the student voices for Marshall Volleyball and Softball. After graduation, he hopes to one day be a play-by-play commentator while taking his love for writing along the way. His broadcasting inspiration is Eric Collins, the current voice of the Charlotte Hornets. If his voice begins to run out, he would love to be a creative writing teacher, helping others find a love for themselves and their writing. Currently, Tyler lives in the valley of a town called Rock, West Virginia. He, quite literally, lives under a rock with his loving family and siblings who can skateboard better than him.

Chloe Murphy has received her B.F.A. in visual art and B.A. in psychology from Marshall University in the Spring of 2020. She currently resides in Huntington, West Virginia, and plans to move forward in the field of art therapy, helping others while also integrating her passion for art. She wishes to one day take a one-way trip to Italy.

Andrew O'Callaghan is a junior at Marshall working on degrees in creative writing and management. His work is predominantly nonfiction with a splash of poetry; regardless of genre, his writing is often characterized by rumination on God and our relationship to him. His favorite writer and greatest inspiration is C.S. Lewis, and he loves Huntington, hiking, and making coffee in his French press. He will soon be marrying Izzy, his best friend and fellow classmate in the MU English department.

Molly O'Callaghan is an aspiring writer based here in Huntington, West Virginia. She is in her second year at Marshall University where she is working on a degree in creative writing. She has not yet been published but has recently submitted two stories for consideration for the Maier Award upon being nominated by two of my professors in Marshall's English Department and continues to work towards other opportunities as a writer.

Zane Pinson is a junior at Marshall University, where he is majoring in fine arts. He plans on going to grad school and becoming a full-time artist. He currently lives in and is from Huntington, West Virginia.

Kathryn Porter, currently residing in Huntington, West Virginia, is an aspiring writer and avid collector of early 20th century dolls. Pursuing a degree in Creative Writing and Literary Studies, one would think she would have a few less unread books scattering her dining table.

Delana J. Price is a first-year graduate student at Marshall University. She is currently working towards her M.A. in English and plans to go on to acquire her Ph.D. in literary theory and composition pedagogy with an end goal of teaching at the university level. Delana lives in Huntington, West Virginia, and adores the family she has made here in her fellow scholars.

Julia Pritt is a Marshall University student, pursuing a B.A. in art with an emphasis in printmaking and a B.A. in psychology. After she finishes with her undergraduate, Julia plans on obtaining a masters degree in art therapy, with special interest in working with trauma survivors and the elderly. She is also an active member of print club, where she performs the tasks of club secretary. In addition to being a student, she does work study at the Visual Arts Center and has a part time job working in the Visitors Center at Heritage Station. When she isn't in class or at work, Julia likes to spend her time reading, consuming stories through books, TV, podcasts, and taking literal cat naps.

Sydney Ranson is an English major at Marshall University. After graduating, she hopes to attend graduate school and become a mental health therapist. Currently, she lives in Huntington, West Virginia and spends her time balancing a full-time work, class, and nap schedule.

Ellie Reger is a creative writing student at Marshall University. She is from Huntington, West Virginia. Her poetry has appeared in previous editions of *Et Cetera*. “Everything Good in the World as a Soft and Gentle Rabbit” is her first prose submission.

Sa-Rai Robinette is a multidisciplinary artist living in Huntington, West Virginia. She primarily focuses on printmaking, book arts, and video art. She has been featured in a number of shows and publications—*Business Casual* (2019), *Alias Inagura: A New Beginning* (2018), *Collision Literary Magazine* (2018), and many more. She is currently studying at Marshall University to obtain her B.F.A. in printmaking

Ty Salmons is a senior at Marshall University in the bachelors program for visual arts with an emphasis in photography. His work incorporates experimentation and complex methods of capture to explore different concepts.

Ivy Scoville is a sophomore at Marshall University majoring in English and linguistic anthropology. After finishing school, she hopes to travel the world, experiencing its people and cultures, and write about the adventures along the way. She is from Harrisville, West Virginia, but claims Huntington as her home away from home.

s.a.s. also goes by **Mr. Shannon A. Stephens**. He is currently a senior majoring in finance at Marshall University. He loves his wife, two daughters, and son. They were named after a beautiful island, a martyr, a precious jewel, and a philosopher. Shannon also writes sermons about Jesus. Other things he cares about: Earl Grey tea, mythology, MS Excel skills, weapons, house cats, and the color blue.

Wade Sullivan is an undergraduate at Marshall University pursuing a double major in philosophy and creative writing. He plans to apply to a variety of graduate programs in the upcoming application cycle including law, creative writing MFA, and biology MSC programs.

Megan Taylor is a senior at Marshall University. She is majoring in graphic design but also enjoys using other mediums to create artwork. She appreciates and is inspired by nature, so most of her work has themes of nature and how we connect to Mother Earth.

Zac Thabet is a West Virginia-based writer. He is currently a freshman at Marshall University. His major is social work with a minor in creative writing. He plans on using his degree to work with at-risk LGBTQ+ youth and wants to help anyone he can through both his degree and his writing. Currently he resides in Huntington, West Virginia.

Destiny LaRaine Tomblin is a sophomore at Marshall University and a member of the College of Liberal Arts. She is majoring in psychology, building a path toward her Psy.D in hopes of becoming a clinical psychologist. Growing up in the rural community of Logan, West Virginia, left an impact on her heart that has grown into a passion for art and creativity. As a future psychologist, she hopes to help those who are struggling find an inner balance and acceptance. She believes art is part of that journey, and hopes that through her writing, she can reach out to others to inspire them to express and love themselves as art has helped her to do.

Rachel Venturino has a B.A. in creative writing and is currently an English graduate student at Marshall University. Her work has won the Mary Moore Award for Best Creative Writing Major in 2019 and the opportunity to present her piece “Eggs and Old Spice” at Marshall University’s 2019 COLA Conference.

Molly Wagner is a junior at Marshall University where she studies psychology and is minoring in Spanish. In school, she plays saxophone for the Marching Thunder and the 6th Man Pepe Band. Additionally, she does work with WV Free and Herd Free, volunteers at CONTACT Rape Crisis Center, and attends regular yoga club meetings. She now lives in Huntington and is working to become a clinical psychologist.

Katherine Wang is a senior majoring in biological sciences at Marshall University. An avid artist since childhood, she draws inspiration from the colors and forms of nature. She enjoys reading, traveling, and plein air painting.

Cassandra Watson is a senior at Marshall University currently undertaking her student teaching at Huntington High to pursue a degree in English Education, with a minor in Psychology. A dreamer at her core, she is an admirer of the finer things in life—hiking, web comics, romantic poetry, and the occult.

Brittany Woods is a first-year graduate student at Marshall University. With a goal of one day becoming a high school English teacher, she is currently pursuing her masters in education through the MAT program. While writing has never been the focus of her life, it has become a therapeutic outlet for the various struggles of evolving from a neglected child into a functioning and well-adjusted adult. After living in Huntington for a decade or so, she will be moving on to greener pastures with her daughter, two dogs, and two cats in June and will continue her studies online.

Julia Wu is a recent graduate from Marshall University’s Creative Writing program. She graduated into a pandemic, and her hopes at this time include vaccines and more writerly things at some point in the eventual future. For now, she currently resides in Huntington, West Virginia, where she enjoys late-night runs to Target, ambient lighting, dead flowers, and caring for tiny humans.

ART

Barbara Lavalley Benton, Jules Batten, Chloe Murphy, Katherine Wang, Ty Salmons, Sa-Rai Robinette, Peyton Dolin, Sophia Celdrán, Lilly Dyre, Julia Pritt, Megan Taylor, Brittany Woods, Cassandra Watson, Ethan Nestor

POETRY

Delena J. Price, Ellie Reger, Ivy Scoville, Andrew O'Callaghan, s.a.s., Elijah Bowen, Molly Wagner, Destiny Tomblin, Alex Canfield, Julia Wu, Thac Thabet, Sydney Ranson, Kit Porter, Elizabeth Fleace

CREATIVE NONFICTION

Brittany Woods, Sarah Canterbury, Zac Thabet, Julia Wu, Annalise Dylan

FICTION

Cat Dennison, Rachel Venturino, Ellie Reger, Molly O'Callaghan, Kit Porter, Julia Wu

INTERVIEW WITH MARIE MANILLA

Sophie Ezzell

DRAMA

Michael Crout, Zoë Kauffer

HYBRID

Rachel Venturino, Tyler Kennett, Wade Sullivan