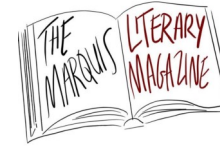


The Marquis
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Cover Image: Silent Sentinel by Cynthia Capotosto

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Some of the content in this magazine can be disturbing, triggering, or emotionally draining. We have marked some pieces in the table of contents with an asterisk (*) because they include heavy topics such as rape, sexual assault, self-harm, suicidal thoughts, racism, police brutality, graphic descriptions of violence and death, implied eating disorders, mentions of vomiting, and mentions of blood. Please be aware of these and other pieces that may be triggering to you.

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The Definition of Joy

Caitlyn Carr

My professor struck the board, turned, and asked, "What is the definition of happiness?" And Webster said, "It is the state of being happy."

"Clever," the professor replied, "What does it mean to be happy?"

And Macmillan said, "Feeling pleased or satisfied."

"Good. And what is joy?"

Collins puffed out his chest and quipped, "A synonym!"

But he was wrong.

A similarity, not quite congruence.

The meaning is not the same.

Happiness is a spoonful of ice cream,
the wagging dog's tail,

grinning when the lights come up in the cinema
after the hero has won and the villain has been vanquished.

But joy?

Joy is knowing you.

It's the way my troubles fade when I read a message from you,
knowing full well my burdens grow heavy as the clock hands
spin faster, but your every word is a blissful hour

and all punctuation provides elysian seconds.

It's the weight of the world lifting off my shoulders
at the chime of the doorbell

because I know it is you on the other side.

Joy is knowing I am known to you.

I shout into the void so often, and whisper even more.

It says nothing, but you look at me and smile,
and suddenly,

I have heard every gospel, every oration, every lullaby,
every good thing in life worth hearing.

The very thought of you is accompanied by an orchestra
composed of memories and conducted by daydreams.

"And you," the professor points to me, "You have been quiet.

Define joy." I do not wish to interrupt your performance in
my mind.

I do not hear bells, but feel your melody.

You haven't written any music, you do not sing,

and you barely hum; but

the Gloria in your tone, the Kyrie of your laugh,
and even the requiem in your silence ring in my chest. You have
all of my applause and standing ovations.

Besides, how can I define it?

He will not take a name as a response, and
the name itself isn't the answer.

It's not y-o-u but it is *you*, but it isn't "you-italicized" either. It is
not the essence of your being, but

the very essence of our being in the same room,
finishing the same sentence, kindling different candles and shar-
ing the same flame. It is the flickering

in my chest that soothes me to be content
in death and fear paradise.

How can I define my joy to him,

when I cannot even bring myself to say it to you?

You are in the credits of my every film, the citations of my every
paper, the scribbles on pages that I cannot bear to erase
and yet I am the sole viewer at screenings, the solitary reader,
and the lone art critic.

How can I tell you that my candle is a frenzied firework and
hides behind the mirror of your slow burn?

I want to, I want to so desperately.

But for your sake as well as my own, I will not.

I cannot.

I remain silent. I hear your leitmotif, a smile plays at my lips.

"Define joy."

I shrug and throw up my hands.

Doing Stupid Things to Get a Photo is Fun
Helena VanNatter



Iambic Binary

Joey Brown

Software sings an infinite stream
of flipping 0's and 1's.
A broken iamb will seed a glitch
and switch the poem awry.

The script ran through this CPU
will send the code to GPUs
found in the readers' head.

Boolean terms of ~ -
craft a poetic logic gate.
An "and" or "not"
of written transistors
guide the eyes to the end.

Quack and White
Helena VanNatter



inkless mind

Shannon Dyke

I am worried
I've run out of poems
because I have no more words
the colors in my mind are gone
each day has become gray static
like you see on old TVs

I have no more words
and all I feel is gloom
and existential dread
and nothing

I feel nothing
I am nothing
and I don't know how to write
with nothing

I don't know how to be
something again

This Poem Goes Nowhere and Does Nothing

Sarah Scally

*Golden Shovel of
"Our Good Friend, Ginger Charles"
by Hannah Kowalski*

Sometimes I think that **this**
is all there is. There is no next **poem**.
It is just me and a keyboard that **goes**
on writing and editing my last poem. **Nowhere**
does it say I am guaranteed inspiration **and**
I am beginning to think I have dried up my muses. **Does**
that mean I am no longer a poet? If that's the case I am **nothing**.

Breaking the Block

Olivia Faye Scott

The windshield shatters with a bone-shaking *crash*, scattering sharp glass across the interior of the car. I instinctively throw my hands in front of my face, momentarily letting go of the steering wheel, and the car veers dangerously to the left. The leather briefcase teetering on the edge of the passenger seat plunges onto the mud-splattered floor of the car, and the heavy *thud* it makes drags me back to the present.

I can't let them get it, I think desperately. I don't care what it takes.

I grab hold of the steering wheel again and pull a hard right, ignoring the glass shards burying themselves in my palms. The black SUV hurtling towards me narrowly avoids scraping the left side of my car as I barely make the turn, my tires screeching as they skid across the pothole-ridden pavement.

"Sorry, baby," I say, lovingly brushing glass off the dashboard and dutifully ignoring both the gunshots ringing from behind me and the sound of bullets glancing off the roof of the car. "I'll fix you up after this is over, I promise."

The SUV has followed- and multiplied. There are three of them now, and I see three pairs of arms in my rearview mirror, each holding a pair of pistols. One of them gets another lucky shot off, and the back window cracks in a perfect spiderweb pattern. Another finishes the job, and I am now the owner of a windowless car.

A low growl rises from the back of my throat. "Oh, you're gonna pay for that," I mutter, and swing another turn, this time

to the left. I clip a stop sign and hear angry honks from the other drivers on the road as two wheels pop onto the curb, forcing a lady with a million shopping bags to leap out of the way, yelping as her groceries spill onto the sidewalk.

I shout “sorry!” at her out of the place where my window should be and floor it, rolling off the curb and back into the lane. I wipe the blood out of my left eye with the sleeve of my tattered blazer and suddenly find myself grinning. *David said the banquet would be fun, I think, but I’m not sure this was what he had in mind.*

I grab for the hidden pocket on the inside of my blazer and find the pistol I stashed there this morning. I squeeze off a few answering shots out the back of the car and hear a strangled yell and screeching tires when one of the bullets hits home. Cackling with victory, I yank the wheel to the right and tear down a side street

Only to find my exit blocked by another SUV.

“Uh oh,” I mutter, and slam on the brakes just in time. The briefcase slams against the glove compartment and clatters to the floor. The three SUVs following me all stop at the entrance to the street, blocking my only exit.

Just like that, I’m trapped.

I switch my pistol to my left hand and haul the briefcase from the floor with my other hand. I pull my feet up onto the seat in a crouch and watch warily as men pour from the black vehicles, all armed and all in the signature purple-and-black of the Agency. I feel my heart drop into my stomach as I realize two things: one, they’ve finally stopped underestimating me. And two, I might be a little bit screwed.

Someone talks into a megaphone: *“You are surrounded. Surrender yourself and the mechanism and there will be no need for further violence.”*

Alarmed, I glance at the briefcase, where said mechanism is not-so-safely tucked into a zippered pouch. *Since when have they known about the mechanism?*

“Put down your weapon. Step from the car with your hands above your head.” I open the car door. I don’t have a choice. With my exits blocked, I don’t stand a chance against that many Agents- but maybe there’s a way I can still keep the mechanism from falling into their ugly purple hands.

I put the pistol back in my pocket and shove the briefcase under my seat. Slowly, I step out of the car, both hands held above my head. “Come on,” I call to the Agents in front of me, acutely aware that there are just as many at my back. I try to count them- fifteen? Twenty? “Weren’t you enjoying our little chase? How about a rematch, huh?”

They don’t respond. They stay frozen, pistols pointed at me, expressions hidden behind identical dark sunglasses. They’ve stopped moving, too, I notice, and the engines of the SUVs have turned off. And the bystanders have stopped gasping in fear, and the distant police sirens have turned off, and the wind has stopped blowing.

The shift happens gradually. The color leaks out of my surroundings, leaving everything bleak and grey, like the saturation has been turned down to zero. The world seems to release the sigh of a held breath, and then stops, the life and spirit of everything momentarily gone. I groan and drop my hands. “Oh, come *on*. Not again.”

I turn slowly on the spot, searching for any signs of life, but there's nothing here. Once again, I'm alone in a paused timeline.

Normally I'd take a seat, twiddle my thumbs, and wait for it to pass, but this has been happening too often. It's time to take matters into my own hands. Squeezing my eyes shut, I empty my mind, then fill it with thoughts of a white room, a cluttered desk, and a frazzled ginger. "Jessica," I call, eyes still closed.

I start to feel her, but only barely. She's trying to push me down into the corners of her mind- *again*. Like I'm some item on a to-do list she can wait to cross off until later while she focuses on something else in her life.

"Oh, no you don't. JESSICA!"

My eyes snap open, and suddenly I'm standing in a square-shaped, white-walled room, occupied only by a small flat-topped desk covered in loose papers and dead pens- that, and one mildly furious, bleary-eyed, robe-clad writer, her fiery hair sticking out in weird places and falling over her shoulders in matted tangles.

Jessica crosses her arms, tapping one slippered foot expectantly. "Well?" she says, her voice hoarse. "Any particular reason that you dragged me into Daydream Mode at four in the morning?"

"Oh, no, nothing specific." I use my most sarcastic, sing-songy voice. "It's just that my author just stopped me in the middle of a high-speed car chase for the *fifth time this week*." I give her a pointed glare.

Jessica groans and rubs her face with one hand.

"I know, I know. Would you stop complaining? I'm doing my best."

I take in the smudged dark circles under her eyes and notice that she seems to have lost weight. "Hang on- did you say four in the morning? I didn't notice, it's been late afternoon for weeks on my side. Why were you up writing so late, anyway?"

"I wasn't getting anything done during the day, so why not try nighttime?" She rolls her eyes. "It didn't work, though. *Nothing* is working. This writer's block is ridiculous." I walk to her desk and sweep all the papers and pens onto the floor, ignoring her indignant sounds of protest. I jump up to sit on the edge, kicking off my flats and letting my feet swing in the open air. "I'm tired of this stupid scene. I've been stuck here for *so long*. I want to move on already."

"You think I don't want that, too?" Jessica's gaze travels up and down my body, taking in the ripped blazer, the blood-stained white button down, and the wrinkled dress pants I've been wearing for way too long. She winces. "That must be uncomfortable."

"No thanks to you," I snap, and fold my arms. After a second, I feel something tickle my neck. Lifting one hand, I touch the back of my head, let my fingers trail down my neck, and found that she's traded my messy pixie cut for long waves once again.

I glare daggers at her. "Absolutely not."

The ghost of a grin flickers over her mouth, and the oppressive long hair disappears. I run my fingers gratefully through my restored tangles, and they come back smeared

with blood. "That's gonna hurt like hell as soon as the shock wears off, isn't it?"

"You bet your ass," Jessica confirms smugly. Her confidence disappears as she adds, "That is, *if* the shock wears off. You might be stuck in this chase forever." My eyes widen. "That is *not happening*. We need to get that pen moving again before I go insane."

"Going insane?" Jessica tilts her head to one side, contemplating this. "I could make that work..."

I shake my head aggressively. "You *know* that's not what I meant!"

She laughs at my outrage. "Yeah, I know. It's just..." She gives me a look of hopelessness. "I have no idea how you're going to get out of this. You're surrounded by the Agency, alone, with one pistol and no other weapons. You're a trained fighter, but not good enough to take down forty Agents at once."

I glare at her. "Rude."

She ignores me. "I cut off all your exits and raised the stakes ridiculously high in the hopes that it would give the scene intensity, but all it did was limit where I could bring the story next." She shrugs, avoiding my gaze. "Maybe I'm just not creative enough for this."

I hop off of the desk, truly concerned for the first time. She's penned an entire *world*, an entire cast of well-rounded, interesting characters, and a compelling plot line. I won't let her minimize any of those accomplishments. "Hey, that's not true," I tell her gently. "You created me, didn't you? And I'm a freaking *masterpiece*."

That gets a chuckle out of her, at least. "Come on," I continue encouragingly, "we can figure this out. Let's go over it again. What's making it hard for me to escape?" Jessica furrows her brow, tapping one finger against her freckled chin. *Writing face*. "Both entrances to the side street are blocked," she says.

"Can I get out through a building?"

She shakes her head. "No way the Agency left any exits open."

I nod. "Ok, go on."

"You're essentially unarmed. All you have is one weapon - a tiny pistol."

I think about that. "Maybe I stashed another one somewhere. Do I have any other secret pockets? Or something in the car?"

She shakes her head again. "They searched you at the banquet, remember? And even if there is something in the car, you can't attract attention to it, or they'll find the mechanism." I make a frustrated noise and say, "Fine. What else?"

"You're alone and outnumbered. I've had you defeat up to ten agents at once, but here there are at least forty- "

"Wait." I cut her off, an idea starting to grow on me. "What did you say?"

She frowns. "There are forty Agents-"

"Before that."

"You're outnumbered-"

“Oh my God. *Before that.*”

“You’re alone?”

I grin at her. “That’s the one.”

“What are you implying?” She spreads her hands. “Look, you being by yourself isn’t going to give you any advantage.”

“Maybe I’m *not* by myself,” I say, still grinning.

She stares at me for another second, and then her mouth opens into a wide O as realization dawns on her. “Oh,” she says. “Ohhhhh.”

I spread my arms wide in a *check me out!* sort of gesture.

“But isn’t that kind of a cop out?” She bites at her thumbnail. “Or is it too much when we’re this far from the climax?”

“No!” I laugh out loud, the excitement building in me. “Oh my God, no, it’s perfect. You’re introducing the idea, and besides, a little action throughout the story is good!” I pout at her. “Please, at least try it? You can’t pretend it wouldn’t be fun.”

“It would be fun,” she admits. And then a slow grin spreads across her face. “Am I a genius or am I a genius?”

“You’re a genius,” Jessica agrees. Finally, I see the light of excitement and creative energy spark in her eyes. She starts to turn blurry on the edges, the white walls of the room visible through her body as she fades. “Hang in there, I just need to get my laptop!”

I rub my hands together as she disappears, and the room starts to go dark. “*Finally,*” I say as darkness falls.

Seconds later, it rises again, and I’m back on the street, my hands over my head as the Agents approach me faster than I would like from their black SUVs. “*Surrender the mechanism,*” the megaphone voice drones again.

I try to feign surprise. “Mechanism? Look, I know I’ve done some shady things, but I haven’t heard anything about a mechanism. For once, you’ve got the wrong girl.” “She’s lying,” someone behind me shouts to his cronies. *No shit, Sherlock.* “Search her. And search the car.”

“Oh no,” I mutter under my breath. If they search the car, they’ll find the briefcase. And the weapons I have stored in the trunk. *And* they’ll take my precious baby away. I can’t let that happen. I need to think of a plan, fast.

Boom.

The ground rumbles. The Agents pause, glancing around them. After a few seconds, they continue forward, with more caution this time.

Boom.

I try my best, but my poker face sucks. My grin widens as a hulking shadow passes over me from behind.

Boom.

The agents freeze. Their gazes travel up, up, up. A few of them drop their weapons, turn tail, and head for the hills. As they should.

Boom.

I’m surrounded by metal, and suddenly my feet lift off of the ground. The street drops away from me as I travel

through the air, watching as my car follows me, grasped in another clamp of metal.

I'm rotated, and then I'm facing the head of a ten-story-tall, chrome-plated, glimmering prototype mech suit. And sitting behind its eyes in the pilot's seat, waving both hands in maniacal glee, is David.

"Smell you later, suckers!" I shout down to the Agents, and then crawl through the hatch that just opened in the mech suit's palm. I leap into the tunnel that's waiting for me and slide through, whooping and hollering, until I stick the landing in the suit's chest. I take the spiral staircase at a run and emerge, gasping, next to David in the cockpit.

"We need to get out of here," I tell him, and take the seat to his left, already firing up every blaster he's rigged in this thing.

"Hi, David. Nice to see you, David. Thanks for saving my pathetic, reckless, sorry, skinny ass, David." He mutters this to himself as he secures his headset and drives the mech suit forward in a flurry of button-pushing, crushing two black SUVs under its feet.

"I'll thank you when we're back at headquarters and my car has windows again." But I can't help shooting him a smile. He grins back, his fingers flying over the controls. *Finally, this is getting interesting*, I think to myself. And then, concentrating as hard as I can, I add, *Thank you*.

The thought fades and shimmers in my mind, disappearing in a puff of grey as Jessica backspaces. In the back of my mind, I hear the whispered return of a familiar voice: *You're welcome, jerk*.

That fades, too, and I know that neither of those sentences will be making the final cut. Of course they won't- they aren't relevant to the plot. Readers won't ever know that they existed, will never understand every late night, every frantic brainstorm, every collaborative effort between my author and the product of her creative talent- *me*- that went into her novel. But I will.

David races forward, and I fire on the Agents running on the streets below us like ants, excited to see where her story takes me next.

In the Clear
Sarah Scally



Falling
Helena VanNatter



Lingering Love

I can't tell
If seeing you every day is better,
Or worse
Because I enjoy your company
And I know you enjoy mine;
But in a different way
Because I love you
And you love her

Helena VanNatter

sleepy escape

this afternoon I took a nap on the couch
its where you slept when you were here
I used the pillow you did
the blankets too
grasping on to your being
longing to be there in your arms again
feeling the comfort and safety of you
I was lucky, because as I slept
you came back to me in my dreamscape
I saw the sunshine on your skin
the galaxies in your mind
but it made my heart ache even more
when I woke up to see
the spot next to me empty
like my soul without you

Shannon Dyke

Ghost

Helena VanNatter

When I see you, I take a step back
Remind myself of what I lack
I can't give you what you need
This love isn't guaranteed
You are a shining star
I never got that far
You're a beauty the world can't fathom
And I'll never be more than a phantom

Among Crickets and Lamp Posts

Lindsey Mauriello

Go places alone; stroll along stone sidewalks
that are rendered empty in the rising evening moon.

Listen to the lonely cricket chirps
crescendoing and decrescendoing with every passing bush;
how they are completely hidden from predators' peering eyes
but not from a mate's matching melody.

Watch the lamps flicker on
with hums from motors and generators;
how they work tirelessly without recognition
but keep cranking away anyway.

Feel the rhythmical rocking of footsteps,
heel to toe, against the reliable ground; how each foot
moves independently of and in conjunction with their friend,
willing to help and willing to be helped.

Breathe in the winds that whisper through the trees;
the trees that silently grow for centuries not only alone,
but in spite of those around them stretching to steal the sunlight
the swiftest
and swallow the soil the soonest.

Go places alone; find the things that cannot be found in the
growling of groups
and notice that no one is ever alone by themselves.

Wandering Monoliths
Cynthia Capotosto



I broke a button today

Kaitlin McNamara

I broke a button today
and learned it was something you could do
I press the pieces together, let a jagged edge reconcile with its
counterpart,

I broke a button today
and you barely looked up from your phone to say “no way”,
while I marvel at how easily it fits back together

I broke a button today
but with a little pressure from two fingers, it looks whole,
as soon as I let go it crumbles again

I look back to you, to us, dating again after a breakup
you sit at the edge of my bed
your leg casually pressed against mine
an act of passive intimacy
I write poetry as you scroll through your phone
and wonder how long I can hold this button together

sometimes

Helena VanNatter

sometimes i wonder
if i'll be someone's great love.
maybe i already have been, and i didn't know
or maybe
no one's ever loved me;
at least, not in that way.
no one's wanted to cuddle me up
and kiss me until i'm weak.
i don't know if love will ever find me.
i'm terrified to find it myself,
even though i know that's the only way.
i can't sit idle
and wait for that person to come.
i have to make a move
but that thought is in vain.

sometimes i wonder
if i missed my chance.
way back when
i had a prince.
if he was the only one
who could ever love me.
the idea of that make me sick
but so does finding anyone new.
i could have acted too rashly.
maybe we could have lasted
if i didn't run away.
i would be a lot less innocent
and i may not be alive.
but i would have been in love,
and isn't that worth it?

sometimes i wonder
if i waited too long to start again.
five years is an awful big stretch;
no wonder i was out of practice.
but talking to you was nice

and hanging out was as well.
i got used to possibly having a person again
but that was never going to be true.
should i have made a different decision that night?
stayed a bit longer and
done a bit more.
maybe that's why you didn't message me back;
you wanted more from me and
i didn't want to
Fuck you.

sometimes i wonder
if i'll always feel like this.
i don't know if i'll
ever feel That way.
i might be forever doomed to be a
hopeless romantic.

Honored

Sarah Scally

Sorry, but can I complain. Mourn the next holiday where you are a spurned lover and I'm just an old crone. While they both will sit in some bespoke crowns as my mom lauds their domestic ways and says I should get a nice man so that I can settle down. I do not want one though. I want one second to not be seen sitting lonely at the bar, a makeshift bridesmaid, who's waiting 'till she's home to start to cry, and not waiting to drink whatever someone else will buy. I'm not some desperate bitch but it sure would be nice if you spared my pride and stopped looking at the bride.

Because I know while you mope and watch your love elope, run off to the next shotgun wedding where you'll cry for shit reasons that you'll sit and think as I drink and sink down because my younger brother is the groom and we're the witnesses to something my sisters will call a sailing ship and your friends will call you whipped but those two thought we could fit an old trope where we fall in love. How sad is that? Being here without dates and there them thinking the best man and maid of honor together for this one night Isn't that the cliché after all? Buy me a drink. Let's just talk. Mourn tonight and tomorrow and next week and next year. Because lord knows we're not sleeping together but we could still have cake.

Aphrodite's Blood

Lindsey Mauriello



Zubair Ali

The fabric was itchy, it irritated her skin and put her on edge. What was supposed to be soft mesh with silk and cotton, embroidered with fine gold thread, with silver sequins embedded within, felt like absolute sandpaper to her. She picked at one loose gold thread from the portion of her *kurta* that was right near her right hand on her thigh. She kept pulling it, an imperfection that needed to be smoothed out. She kept pulling and pulling at the stubborn string, until finally it snapped. She sighed with relief.

The room was semi-lit, there were two lamps at the ends of the vanity she was sitting in. Clothes were strewn everywhere, across the floor and bed. Mishappen *ornis*, *sarees*, and *shalwar kameezes* lay tossed around as if a hurricane had come through her room. Her suitcase was wide open, like a crocodile. The wooden chair was hard and rigid, forcing her to have perfect posture in her heavy *khada dupatta*. She sat in front of a mirror, waiting. The clock just kept ticking, a soft mechanical heartbeat that kept *ticking and ticking*. The noise itself annoyed her, she would have rather had time to think to herself in peace, not with the incessant *ticking*. Then, she heard the door crack open.

“Bi Begum?” said a soft voice from the corner. Bi Begum turned to face the sudden shaft of light that beamed from the door, although it was quite a challenge. The elaborate *khada dupatta* felt like a fancy straight jacket. The *tikka* and *jhoomar*, adorning the middle parting of her hair and the right side of her head respectively, seemed to glimmer and shine. The *jhoomar*, fan shaped, kept trying to pull her head sideways. The *tikka* felt weightless, shining with its encrusted diamonds. The dupatta part, which wrapped around her body, shoulders, legs, and covered her head like a veil, weighed her down so heavily, she felt

her neck might snap. The *naath* that strung from behind her ear to her nostril made her feel elegant, but the *jadau* choker, encrusted with diamonds and rubies seemed to cut into her trachea as she turned her head. The *kanphool* earrings she had swung like little bells. She felt she was balancing trays of tea-cups, while balancing on stilts.

“Yes, Nana?” she replied. Nana walked into the room elegantly towards Bi Begum. Bi Begum heard the swishing of her green *saree*, the chinkle of Nana’s golden bangles, the light tap of her shoes against the marble floor. Bi Begum immediately noticed how clean she looked. Nana’s skin seemed to glow a deep amber color, her face shining and remarkably younger. Her green *saree* had a similar style of *zardozi* embroidery, flowers and paisley designs etched with silver thread and sequins for her. To preserve her modesty, Nana had used the *pallu* of her *saree* to cover her hair, only showing a hairline of snow-white hair. She walked up to Bi Begum and smiled down at her. She placed her hand atop Bi Begum’s on her shoulder and turned and faced the mirror in which Bi Begum was looking into.

“*Mashallah*, you are so beautiful *alhamdulillah*” said the reflection. Nana’s slightly wrinkled hands retreated from Bi Begum’s shoulder and produced a beautiful *satlada*. Nana held it with her delicate *mehndi*-covered hands and loosened the cord to put it around her neck. Bi Begum was amazed by the swiftness of her hands, being able to put the necklace under the veil and not disrupting the ensemble she had put on.

“Do you like it?” she asked. Bi Begum touched the necklace gently, brushing over the seven strands of priceless pearls that now hung from her neck, another enormous weight that pulled her down. The emeralds that were in the center of each strand complimented the shining rubies and blood red of her *khada dupatta*.

"I love it, Nana. Where did you get this from? Did Noor Sahiba give this to you?" replied Bi Begum, her right hand still guarding the necklace which she looked at herself in the reflection.

"*Chi!* Not her! This was your mother's, she wore this day your father married her in Warangal. Your father had kept it all these years for you, I was able to find it and keep it for this occasion on the day he died. I know he was planning on a lot of things for your wedding, including giving you this. *Mashallah*, you look just like her" Nana said, getting slightly emotional as she placed both her hands on her shoulder and leaned her head next Bi Begum. Bi Begum then saw her turn her head away and take the hook of her finger to keep away her tears. Bi Begum pretended not to notice.

She looked at herself in the mirror. The necklace gave a little glimmer and caught Bi Begum's eye in the mirror. Bi Begum, at the one moment, felt that maybe her mother was watching. Maybe that glint was a sign, as if trying to make up for the sixteen years that she lacked a true mother and motherly love. But it came as soon as it fled. "*This wedding is running late, these people have no sense of time since Abbajan died. Oh Abbajan...*" she thought to herself while admiring the necklace. Abbajan definitely would not have let such tardiness and idleness be tolerated. Then she felt Nana's hand on her shoulder.

"Come now, it's time now *jaan*." she said somberly. She put her arms around Bi Begum's shoulders and helped support her as she rose. Bi Begum felt so delicate in her outfit, one wrong move and she could totally crumble. As she rose up, the red and gold bangles, stacked up to the middle of her forearm, chinkled with mellifluous voices. Even the beads sewn into her *khada dupatta* chinkled as they grinding and shook while she got up.

Bi Begum walked two steps to the door, before Nana stopped before her. She motioned for her to wait. She began to close her eyes and hold out her right hand. Her fingers were pinched, like she was using it to put salt on her food. She began to move her arm in a circular motion, reciting Quranic verses. Bi Begum watched the arm go up once. Twice. Thrice. All the way to 8 times.

She finished by whispering "*Aatki saath nazare se baagh*, may all your evil eyes be gone". She then blew softly on her face and kissed her forehead. Bi Begum hated such formalities, little superstitions here and there. To her, what good could they possibly do? Superstitions like these annoyed her more than they did calm her. Plus they were running late.

Nana looked at her tearfully and took the bright red mesh *ghoonghat* on the cotton bed. She took the *ghoonghat* and as if it were a sheet from a bed she was trying to make, and flung it out in front of her. She then put it over Bi Begum and brought the front edge to Bi Begum's shoulders.

"*Chalo*, Bi Begum *beti*" said Nana. Bi Begum could definitely hear the quiet sobs, the breaths that she took in order to muffle them so Bi Begum wouldn't hear. But Bi Begum did. And she couldn't cry now. She had to be strong. Bi Begum took a big breath and began to walk. The toe rings and anklets that were adorned on her *mehndi*-stained feet chimed as she walked, along with her whole ensemble. As she walked out the door with Nana holding her shoulders, she just hoped that her outfit wouldn't be making such a din. The attention, the tears. It just frustrated her. To her, this was nothing but a union of two people. It was nothing but what her family had wanted her to do. Her feelings wouldn't count anymore.

She reached the end of the hall to where the grand staircase was. It had a slight curve to it, its red velvet carpeting was

cleaned. It was pristine red, not a single black mark bespeckled the carpets. On the top of the staircase were 4 women waiting for her. A plump woman in a yellow *saree* was holding a magenta mesh sheet, waiting for her. Bi Begum cupped her hand and raised it to her head and said

“Salaam Chunno Apa, Salaam Apa.”

Two women replied back with the same motion, the plump one in the yellow *saree* and the thinner one in the purple *saree*.

“*Chalo*, let’s go. The *nikkah* is about to happen.” said Apa, unfurling the magenta sheet. The other two women, cousins that Apa and Chunno Apa were close to reached two other ends and raised it. Badhe Apa stood holding the other end. As this happened, Apa walked towards Bi Begum. Bi Begum noticed her eyes were rimmed with tears, tears of either genuine sadness or guilt. She came from and grabbed Bi Begum’s temples and kissed lightly on her forehead, where her *tikka* rested.

“May God bless you and keep you happy. I wish you nothing but a happy married life. *Ameen*.” whispered Chunno Apa. She looked at Bi Begum and blew warm air in her face, a way of sealing this *dua* to her. Bi Begum internally rolled her eyes. She thought to herself,

““*What fakery. After all these years, after all they’ve done to me.*”

She seethed internally as Apa went back to hold the sheet, standing next to her was Apa, plump from years of luxury and spoils. And now Chunno Apa, unmarried, is still allowed to go to school for the time being. A year’s difference, but worlds apart.

Now with the women all holding the sheet, Nana led her forth and she walked underneath the sheet down the stairs,

down to the *nikkah* ceremony. She chinkled and chimed like a sweet bell as she walked down those soft velvet steps. Bi Begum heard the murmurings of other women and men and she descended the stairs and headed for the main courtyard.

As she kept walking, she just kept thinking to herself, ‘*Why is everyone looking at me like that? Like I am some sort of prize. Where was all this attention after Abbajan died. Where was all this sympathy then? Look at these people, all they care about is money. No one cares about Bhai, me and Nana. They’re all after Abbajan’s money.*’

She kept her eyes down under the *ghoonghat* and walked through the marble floor. She never noticed the slight grey shade the marble floor was. All the feet, all the dirt brought into the house. So many people used this floor, they took advantage and dirtied the floor. They used it for their own advantage. That’s how she felt about her family. They came and only used her for when they needed her. Abbajan never treated her like this.

At the end of the hall, there were arches that led to the courtyard. Bi Begum and her entourage stepped outside into the courtyard into the smooth concrete path. Lush green grass seemed to wave through the courtyard, a slight breeze inciting the several blades of grass. They seemed to try and tug at her bejeweled feet, trying to breach the unnatural concrete, but to no avail. She walked along the path and saw many people sitting on the lawn in chairs, women in *sarees*, men in *sherwanis* and Rumi tops. She walked to the center of the courtyard, a large old banyan tree. Its big roots seemed to defy time, twisting and turning into the soft brown soil. The mighty branches and trees seemed to shield the small wedding from the scrutinizing eyes of the rest of the world.

Under the tree, a small stage was erected. Made up of shabby wood, Bi Begum could hear the groans of the wood as

the weight of everybody weighed on the wood. The platform was square shaped and had two stairs leading up to it. It was big enough for the groom and his parents, and Beejan, Bhai and Chand Bhai. There was a big red curtain, suspended on a small rope, that divided the makeshift stage in two. It was mesh, like her *ghoonghat* and was the same shade of reddish pink. It had tiny stars embroidered into the curtain itself and was bordered by fine gold embroidery. The mystery groom and his family were on the left side of the platform.

When she walked into sight, a hush fell over the crowd. Bi Begum couldn't tell if it was because of her beauty- or her apparent youth. Bi Begum found it ironic, the tradition behind the bride to be under a sheet as she walked down the aisle was that it was meant to shield her from the outside world. But she couldn't help but think every single eye was looking at her. Judging her. Scrutinizing her. She kept her head down and walked to the steps. At the steps, Badhe Apa, Apa and the two cousins lowered the sheet. Badhe Apa quickly rolled the mesh sheet and tossed it aside. Bi Begum began to make her way up the stairs, delicately trying to preserve her wedding ensemble.

On the top of the stairs, Chand Bhai held out his hand and she took it. Like leading a sheep to the butcher, she held her shoulders and led her to the middle of her side of the stage, directly in front of the stage. She sat on the mahogany chair that had been laid out for her, and crossed her ankles and laid her hands on her lap, like she had been taught to. In front of her was a small mahogany table for her to write and sign on.

The *ghoonghat* still obscured her face, but she subtly lifted her eyes to observe her surroundings. Bhai was there, he was towards the back of the stage but closer to the curtain standing next to Chand Bhai. Bi Begum immediately thought “*Oh gosh, Bhai is wearing that same blue sherwani? Why*

couldn't he find something better to wear?!’ “. Chand Bhai was standing next to Bhai beaming. His white smile seemed to accentuate the pure white *sherwani* he wore, with a grey fuzzy Rumi top and solid white *juttay*. His skin was so pale, one could mistake him for a European. His accentuated light skin shown so bright, living up to his nickname “Chand Bhai” (Moon Brother). He seemed the happiest he was in months, at her own expense.

To their left, away from the curtain but still in line with them was Beejan. She wore a gorgeous black *saree*, one with beautiful *zardozi* embroidery of birds and flowers. For someone whose name meant “Light of Women” (Noor-un-nissa), her face didn't match up to her name. She, like Nana, used the *pallu* of her *saree* to cover her hair. She was sitting on a mahogany chair like Bi Begum. Her face was unmoving, she acted as if this wedding was nothing but an inconvenience for her.

She shifted her eyes from looking back left to looking to her right in the crowd. The sky was beginning to darken as it was dusk, it was a deep blue with a tinge of orange and purple in the horizon. Bi Begum could only make out shapes and silhouettes of people, until she caught the eye of Badhe Apa's bright banana yellow *saree* in the front. Next to her was Apa, who still looked emotional. “*Faker. Liar. Shedding fake tears. You never truly loved me’*.” Bi Begum thought to herself as she saw Apa's facade. Badhe Apa was stone faced. In the light, Bi Begum thought she saw her eyes welling up, but it could have been the trick of the light.

She tried to make out the man whom she was to marry, but between the *ghoonghat* and the curtain between them, it was very hard to see. Bi Begum could barely even make out the man's figure. But before she had any more time, she heard the footsteps of an old man walk up the rickety stairs. It was

time for the *nikkah*.

The local *maulvi* walked up to Bi Begum first and asked Bhai for a chair. It took everything in Bi Begum not to laugh as Bhai hurriedly rushed over to Beejan and hurriedly had her get up. With her being ruffled and glaring at him, he took her chair. Beejan looked undignified in that moment, her own stepson ordering her to move and give up her seat. But as soon as this anger arose, she quickly contained it.

The *maulvi* sat down on his chair, which was a few feet away from her but an arms length away from the mahogany table for him. Bi Begum took immediate notice of his orange beard, stained with henna to give it a youthful appearance. His hair also had patches of orange, showing the lack of wealth or lack of expertise in self-hygiene this man had. He wore a stained kurta with a grey vest. Bi Begum thought “*Why is the maulvi so dirty? He couldn't be cleaner, especially at a wedding?*”. He salaamed to her, but she dared not respond. She simply looked down and nodded her head ever so slightly.

After getting comfortable in his chair and inspecting his surroundings, he brought his hand in a fist to his mouth and cleared his throat.

“*As Salaam Wa Alaikum* my brothers and sisters. *Bismillah-ir-rahman-ir-raheem*, we begin in the name of God, the Most Merciful and Benevolent.” he began, with the proper blessings. “We are gathered here today at the *nikkah* ceremony of Mr. Murtaza Khan and Shareef-un-Nissa Begum. First off, we shall begin with the *mehr* from the family of Mr. Murtaza Khan.”

Bi Begum lifted her eyes to see what was happening. She saw some commotion on the other side of the curtain, which shifted ever so slightly with mini waves rippling through as two men walked past it. Her brothers also walked up behind

her, she could feel their presence looming over her, their *juttis* tapping against the wooden stage as they walked up behind her. She felt a protective hand squeeze her shoulder lightly, she instantly knew it was Bhai.

Chand Bhai walked up to the men, took the envelope and shook both of their hands. Both wore red Rumi tops, one wore a monocle with a cream colored sherwani, more muted and ivory-colored than Hamid Bhai's, the other wore a deep dark brown sherwani. After handing the money with the envelope, the brothers walked past the curtain, onto the groom's side and sat behind their brother.

The *maulvi* then took his briefcase and began shuffling for the *nikkah* papers. Bi Begum took note of how at first he rummaged through carefully, but eventually it seemed as if he couldn't find the papers. He thrust his hand into the briefcase and rummaged about and until he finally grunted.

“Ah, *yeh lo!* Here there are”

With his arm outstretched, he held the *nikkah* papers out, and held the papers together. He then bounced them on the table to straighten them and set them out in front of Bi Begum on the mahogany signing table.

“*That's the type of pen Abbajan used to have*” thought Bi Begum. “*In his study, I remember his pens in that basket, this is definitely the same type*”. After laying them on the table, he also brought a very clean, gently-used copy of the Holy Qur'an and held on to it. Again, he cleared his throat, and began the ceremony.

“Will the bride's *vakeel* (Advocate) and her two witnesses please step forth to the bride?”

Chand Bhai, her *vakeel*, and Bhai, one of her witnesses stepped forth from behind her on the stage. Her other

witness, Sadiq Bhai, got up from the front row chair, sitting next to his wife, Sarfaraz-un-Nissa Begum and his son, Masood. Rafeeq-un-Nissa Begum, his daughter, was not there.

“How I wish Rafeeq was here. I hope she’s alright, she’s too young to be exposed to this.”

She looked at these papers and studied them briefly. These papers would define the rest of her life. These slightly yellowed, slightly crinkled, sheets of dead tree matter would take away the freedom of being her own person. After this moment, she realized she would still have to answer up to someone else for the rest of her life.

Chand Bhai knelt before her and began the proceedings. Chand Bhai looked at her eyes while under the veil, and read:

Shareef-un-Nissa Begum, daughter of Mohammad Nawaz Jung and Mahmood-un-Nissa Begum, brother of Hasan Ali Khan, do you accept this marriage to Mr. Murtaza Khan, with a *mehr* of 1 lakh rupees?”

He looked up at her. Bi Begum could feel the pressure of all the eyes waiting for her to say the words three times. Sweat formed on her brow, her heart raced. She could feel Beejan creeping up ever so slowly, her eyes piercing her soul.

“Qubool hai, I do.” she finally said, almost spitting it out.

“Do you accept this marriage?”

“Qubool hai”

“Do you accept this marriage?”

“Qubool hai”.

Having said it thrice, Chand Bhai smiled slightly, a loving smirk. He walked up from behind her and knelt down directly

beside her. He then went through and proceeded to tell Bi Begum where to sign her name. She picked up the pen and began signing her name wherever Chand Bhai pointed his finger at on the papers, but she wasn’t listening. She just kept thinking in her head.

“My name is no longer just Shareef-un-Nissa Begum or ‘Bi Begum’, it’s Mrs. Murtaza Khan.”

Lying

The worst kind of lying
is the balled up, unfinished
letters you send to yourself,
the mailbox, a waste paper
basket in the corner of your room,
but these lies are not found
between the lines of wrinkled paper
but in the act of throwing out
just to find again when drunk

Kaitlyn McNamara

Bold and Brass *Cynthia Capotosto*



dissociate

Shannon Dyke

I spent an hour on the floor
my eyes more doughnut than body
pointed to the light on the ceiling
it blurred in and out
mostly out

my senses shut down
I couldn't taste my unsteady breath
or feel my nails dig into my ribs
or hear any of the times they called me

I finally was pulled back in
to a terrifying reality
they lifted me off my back
but I stayed on the floor a bit

I hope they didn't see the
salt roll down my cheeks
I wiped it quickly
the only sign of
my craving for nonexistence

Gaze of the Moon
Cynthia Capotosto



I Never Finished the Movie

Helena VanNatter

It wasn't even a date.
You told me you didn't think you'd wake up in time for lunch,
So I paused *Grease* and went down to your room.
We sat on your couch and talked for hours,
Starting at one end of the spectrum and ending at the other.
We talked about how us sitting on a couch together on a Friday
night was a stereotypical hookup.
Later on, you asked if we could become the stereotype.
I said yes then.
So the night continued, until we reached a point I didn't want to
pass.
I told you I didn't want to go further, and you said okay.
In that moment, you made me feel wanted.
And you were the one that I wanted.
My curves were the waves of the ocean,
And you couldn't wait to swim in them.
I felt beautiful.
And then I didn't.
I said I was tired, and I wanted to go to bed.
You said okay, but pulled me in for another kiss.
I relented, then broke away and stood up.
You grabbed my ass.
I put on my shoes.
You acted like there were worse things we could do.
I put on my sweater.
You grabbed my hips and kissed me again.
I went for the door.
You grabbed my arm.
I said goodnight
And you replied the same.
Then didn't text me again.
You wanted Sandy,
But I'm just Sandra Dee.

temporary cleanse

Shannon Dyke

It's been a year
but I feel as empty as I did then
when I cross into the tub
moisture already crowding the room
the music and shower rain combine loudly
but not enough to silence
your voice
telling me no when I ask you
to stop
the water runs down my body
scorching red into my back and chest
purple into my knuckles
burning my scalp
but not hot enough to melt
the feeling of your icy touch
that disregarded my choice
the steam thickens
I almost wish it was enough
to drown me with one inhale
but it's only enough to choke me
as I lean against the wall
grabbing, pulling, pinching my skin
praying the feeling of you leaves me
along with the self-blame
you left in your wake
with the insecurity
with the hidden pain
and the shower works
for a moment
I escape into the numbing heat
until the water is shut off
and your actions linger
just outside the curtain

my best friend is a shower

Shannon Dyke

a simple white tub, with a green and blue striped curtain outside
the clear one
it becomes my hangout spot
at the ungodly hours of three or four in the morning
when no one else is awake to interrupt
on a normal night, I let the warm water embrace me like an old
friend
and my whispered secrets rise with the steam
I allow my voice to be heard by the audience of plastic bottles,
and often,
my tears to be swept down the drain with the suds
my playlist is heard in the background, setting the mood for
these nightly dates,
but I usually don't sing along
I'm too busy unraveling the things I am afraid to say to anyone
else
the thoughts that are too scary to fathom in my own head
the thoughts that I know scare people away

the nice part of a shower is that it really can't leave.
it's a concrete structure with walls and a tub and it can't leave
when you allow your thoughts
to flow out of you like the water cascading down your back or
over your face
it remains on the good nights, where time is spent with condi-
tioner-soaked hair while the razor glides against your skin
for the days of little victories, where a slippery happy dance
comes, because you did well on an exam or got kissed by
that boy you've been daydreaming about
on the days where you don't have much to say, so you just hum
along to the playlist

it remains for the bad, too
probably because it can't leave

the days where the exhaustion means I barely can rinse the
suds from my hair and skin
or the moments of defeat that were played off as no big deal to
the world, but I allow to crush me in that small rectangle of
space
it is witness to the tears and gasps and silent sobs
it tastes the metallic blood that runs off my skin with the water
it soaks my clothes on nights where I just need to feel
so I spend ten minutes in the frigid stream, still wearing shorts
and a hoodie
and the tub embraces me when I need to curl into a space as
empty as I am
with no water running, a comfortable void

Tucked Away

Oh, don't you worry so much,
Put your anxiety here in this box.
It is nice and spacious, comfy,
warm. Wouldn't you be happier
with it tucked away, far away?
Can't you do that? Tuck away all
your worry as if it can sleep.

And then you can sleep.
Can't you do that? Can't
you sleep? Oh, you have
nightmares? Don't have them.
Oh, you can't breathe? Don't.

There's the box,
glowing green.
It's empty but,
you can put
everything
that ails you
right there.
Don't worry.

Don't.

Sarah Scally

lights on

I seem to have
more profound thoughts
the less I sleep
maybe the exhaustion
shuts off my thought filter
or just makes everything seem better

it's not better
it's not profound
the lack of rest is silent defeat
my demons are once again victorious
either running so fast I cant quite catch them
or attacking with my fears
waking me in sobs

because of this
I have the big thoughts more often
because when nightfall approaches
I'm afraid to close my eyes
and see what terror awaits

Shannon Dyke

lowtide
Shannon Dyke



Phantom

Sarah Scally

A human form that appears to the sight or other sense, but has no material substance; an apparition, a spectre, a ghost.

When I creep up the stairs with two bags of chips in my hand and a water bottle in my pocket the steps shift and creak under my weight. But that's okay. Because my roommates believe in ghosts. My habit of midnight snack consumption is only hurting myself this way. The floorboards and the crinkling wrappers and the sound of me vomiting in the downstairs bathroom can all be attributed to the imaginary past owner who died in a tragic accident. He's not mean, of course, he just doesn't know he's dead. He's just living his life.

And even though my throat still hurts in the morning I'm just living my life, too.

A Wild Sheep Chase
Cynthia Capotosto



snowprints

Joey Brown

our toes are tied in snow
and heels imprint the crust.
a track behind can show
a clip of living past.

memory is caught in static steps;
frozen proofs of where we were
trace our path from pasts
and bring us here.

looking forward into spring
reveals a melting thought;
the grass will come back green--
our toes will lose their knot.

the snow will show ephemeral proof
of our Decaying Truth.

I wish I could have sex sober

Shannon Dyke

I can't let anyone see my scars
without blurred vodka vision
I can't afford them to
feel my rolls and freckles
without dizziness in their fingertips

I am afraid of my body
I hide behind wine
each downed glass
becomes slurred speech
and shaky smiles

I only have sex in the dark
so the other person can't see
the dissociation in my eyes
or the wince when they touch me and
it reminds me of that one bad time

I only have sex when I know they'll leave after
because I need to lay in my bed after
the exhaustion mixed with
catholic school shame
and negative self esteem

I close my eyes
and pray for a hangover in the morning
hoping the headache
outweighs the empty pit
that once was my soul

A Collection of Small Disappointments That Make Me Who I Am

Devon Hallihan

No one told me it would be this way
I mean, I didn't expect it to be
Easy, but I wanted more

Than a tight lipped fake smile,
A subtle sigh and shake of the head,
A "you forgot to turn the lights off,
Didn't you
You know better than that"

The problem is
I never know better, so

No, I didn't lock the front door
I didn't feed the dog
She's probably crying with hunger by now

And the oven timer is going off
Dinner is burned, dinner is served
No one enjoys it

And when I go to the bathroom to powder my
nose
Like all the nice young ladies do
The lighting is a sickly shade of blue

My face looks wrong
Eyes too far apart, skin creased with wrinkles
It isn't my face like I remember it
Why aren't you frightened?

One day soon I might wake up and realize

I don't like myself all that much
And I'll remember to turn off the lights
As I leave this house, as I
Leave you

I can see your face now
Pretty pink lips slightly parted
As you take in the dark windows of your home

Like Water
Kaitlyn McNamara



Lions and Robins

Sarah Scally

Camille was not having a good day. She got barely any sleep, her coffee pot broke, the GPS was nowhere to be found, and (despite telling her son to *never* play with Legos in the living room) she stepped on a Lego and dropped the flat soda she was drinking in a desperate attempt to get caffeine. Oh, and her father's funeral was that day. But compared to the Lego, she was hardly bothered by Leon Beaulieu's death.

Which is exactly why she was on the road to his funeral at two in the morning. Because she didn't care. Of course, that wasn't exactly true, but Camille wanted it to be. And so, she ignored any hurt that was still lingering in her gut from twenty-two years ago when he left her mother, her sister, and her in Ohio in favor of disappearing. She pushed that emotion down as best she could, and as far as she was concerned, she was succeeding.

Camille would often think about her 4th birthday— her last birthday with Leon present in her life— quoting the exact moment she should have known her father was a dick. They had been looking at the lions in their manmade habitats; a large maned lion was jumping around with one of his little cubs in what almost looked like hide and seek. Camille, who had recently watched *The Lion King* for the first time, looked up at her father and said, “Mufasa's not dead, Daddy!”

With a toddler pointing wildly at the cage, ecstatic that one of their favorite Disney characters had not, in fact, lost his dad, Leon responded: “He'd be better off. Captivity changes lions. In the wild, male lions aren't responsible for caring for and playing with the young. Their responsibilities lie in more important places.”

Camille had looked back at the cub and frowned, wondering what Leon meant by more important places. But back then she hadn't dwelled on it, moving to drag him to the Aviation Palace so she could see all the birds.

It was when Leon left, with an almost calm resignation that he didn't belong there anymore, that Camille remembered the interaction. It was what led her to study animal psychology as an undergraduate. It had kept her from taking any jobs at the zoo despite proportionally better pay. And it had kept her worried that she, like Leon, simply wasn't cut out to be a parent.

But Camille was fine now, all she needed was coffee and after the 17th closed Starbucks she passed, she figured that even gas station coffee couldn't be that bad. She pulled off I-90 East and into a GetGo's gas station. She turned off the car and got out and started to fill up her tank. The clock on the machine said that it was four o'clock now, which meant that her sister's work commute had started.

Camille had promised Ava that she wouldn't go to the funeral, and she had no plans to tell her sister that she was breaking that promise. But Camille felt wrong going to the funeral alone. Ava knew Leon, or at the very least she had more to remember of him, and their letter had been joint. Despite the fact that both of the sisters had moved out of their mother's house, Leon had sent a single letter addressed to both of them in December saying he would be dead soon and wanted to put them in his will. Camille had a hunch that the reason he had only sent one letter was that he couldn't remember who was who, which was only further proved by the revelation that he had Alzheimer's.

The only point of interest Ava found was that the disease he was dying from was genetic, quickly taking her children with her to check if they had the genetic markers for Alzheimer's. But Camille had read the letter over and over again trying to pick apart any hint he gave them about his life without them. He said that he forgot what he's done wrong, but his *mother* told him he was a bad father to them. Her own mother had told her some small stories, but her grandmother should be well into her 90's; Camille had assumed she was dead. She hadn't realized she had a living grandparent.

Camille paid for the gas and her coffee (with cream and no sugar) and a peanut butter banana Clif bar and was back on the road.

She remembered telling her sister about Leon's letter. She had been at the hospital. Robin had been having chest pain and Camille was not one to take chances with her son's life, even if he ended up being fine. They were checking his pace-maker when Ava had finally called her back.

She had scoffed loudly at the letter's apologies and the promise of money. "How dare he? We are fine without him!" Ava yelled; Camille had had to pull the phone away from her ear, she was so loud. "What a pompous jerk! We don't need his money! The nerve."

Ava didn't need the money. Her husband and she both had jobs. Jobs that paid well and came with an insane amount of vacation time. She had three healthy kids, they were in school and had little league or dance recitals. She had a happy and stable life in Connecticut, of course she didn't need the money.

Camille needed the money. She was single, with a job just barely above entry-level with moderate pay and no time off. Robin was six. He should be in the first grade. He should be out playing baseball or dancing or finding what he wants to do; but he was often too sick to go to school. And Camille couldn't afford a babysitter which meant every time she had a shift at the aquarium, she had to drive Robin one hour out of Cleveland to her mother's house and one hour back in time for work.

It wasn't until she heard her sister so assuredly pronounce, "We don't need his money!" that Camille decided she was going to the funeral. And it wasn't long after that she lied to her sister; promising her she wouldn't go.

Now with a deep sigh, she called her sister. Camille had never been good at keeping secrets.

"Why are you up so early?" Ava said, confused by her sister's call. "Is everything okay? Robin's okay? Right?"

"Robin's at Mom's house," Camille said.

"Oh," Ava whispered. Camille could barely hear her, her thumb hovered over the end call button on the steering wheel. "You're going to Toronto."

There was no question. Camille wondered if her sister ever believed that she'd keep her promise. "I know you don't want to," she said. "But I feel like there's something I need to know. I can't explain it. There's this sinking feeling in my gut, telling me that seeing him— seeing him will mean something."

"I get what you mean," Ava said, sighing so loudly Camille could hear it over the phone. "I was driving to work this morning and suddenly I found myself getting off at Port Chester and looking at how far away I was from Toronto."

Camille tapped the wheel nervously, hoping that her sister was on her way too. "And? What did you decide?"

"I called in sick. I'm going," she sounded almost as if she was embarrassed to need closure concerning their deadbeat dad. Camille could almost say Ava was relieved they were going together. God knows that Camille was relieved.

"I'm driving by Erie, PA right now," Camille said. "Want to meet up at Niagara? Go in one car from there?"

"Yeah, we can get lunch, too!"

"Sure," Camille said. She smiled, carefully taking the first sip of her coffee, having forgotten about it entirely in the excitement of not being alone. "How far away are you?" "From Niagara Falls?" Ava asked. "About six hours. How about you?"

Camille bit her lip, half nervous half-embarrassed by the answer. "About two hours." "Seriously?" Ava laughed drily. Dry

but still genuine. "Okay, you'll get food and like take a river tour or something? The funeral isn't until two."

"I know," Camille said. "I don't know why I left so early. I'm nervous."

"You're fine, just wait for me there okay?" Ava said.

"Yeah," Camille said, rolling her eyes at her sister's mom-voice. "And I'll clean my room, too."

"Don't be sarcastic. Goodbye."

"Drive safe; see you soon," Camille said smiling and feeling much better now that she knew her sister would be there with her.

The silence after the dial tone stuck to the car as she drove. People's nine to five workday commutes had finally brought traffic to I-90 E but not enough to slow her down. Outside of the car, she could hear songbirds, but all of them were hiding in the bright green trees.

It sounded like the Aviation Palace, the last time she had been there was when she was five months pregnant with Robin. It was how he got his name actually.

She was watching the birds and they were all being good parents in their own way. It was evolutionary, they belonged there, and Camille had always wanted to belong. Maybe that was why she kept Robin.

She had been young. Barely out of college, still living with her mother, waitressing daily and trying to get a master's in Animal Behavior online, no one would have blamed her forgetting an abortion. She almost did; because of the fear that she would turn into her father, that it wasn't in her nature to be a parent.

Camille still thought that sometimes. When her mother

had to record Robin's first smile, his first laugh, the first time he sat up or stood up. Especially when she saw the video of his first word, Nana— Camille couldn't help but think her son would be better off with someone more available and that someone couldn't be her.

And then there were the times she had to be in the waiting room while he was on an operating table. Cardiac catheterization, the pediatric pacemaker, Robin still being placed on the heart transplant list. Every time the doctor told her he might die, she wondered if her heart could take the weight of his death and she thought maybe she was too weak to be his mother.

She wished that she could remove herself from all of the pressure. That she could just go away for a while and do everything she said she'd do after college. Robin might not even notice the change if she just left him with her mother.

She'd be just like Leon. Camille shook her head vehemently, without realizing it she had started to cry. For all her hatred of him was rooted in the belief that she'd turn into him. He had left like that, quietly, pulling away before finally saying goodbye. Worse than that, he hadn't even tried to say goodbye to his daughters. Ava had been at a sleepover, but Camille had watched from the top of the stairs in their house.

"Janet," he had said, a sad smile on his face as if leaving was hard for him. "We both know I can't stay. They don't need me anymore and it's not in my nature to be a father." Her mother had stared at him, her mouth a gape. Camille could see her eyes already watering from the top of the stairs. "It's not in your nature?" She asked. "You've been a father for nine years."

"I've been playing at being a father. Can't you see how bad I am? How miserable I've become?"

"What makes you think this is about *you*?"

What makes you think this is about you?

Camille took the next exit to Buffalo and pulled over into the nearest bar parking lot. She put her head down on the steering wheel and sighed. "This is not about me."

But it was. It was about her. It was about Leon. And he left, which meant she had to stay. Camille started to pull her hair out of her poorly made bun. She hadn't worn her hair down often since her job required it to be pulled back or cut off. No, even before then—Robin used to pull at it when he was young.

She pulled down the sun visor and suddenly saw herself, she was a mess. Her hair had ridges in it from her ever-present bun. The straight auburn looked browner probably because the skin around her eyes was red. That only made her light blue eyes look waterier, even after she wiped away all her tears. Still looking like garbage, she could go into that bar and someone would hit on her. Or at the very least would appreciate her advances as she hit on them.

She ran her hand through her hair and snapped the sun visor back up. This was how she got into this mess in the first place: stopping at a random bar and getting too drunk. Even with four hours to wait for her sister, Camille knew that if she walked into that bar, she wouldn't be able to drive for the next few hours and she'd be late to the funeral.

Camille went to the CVS instead. She got tissues and a Twix bar. It was the same thing she'd bought seven years ago with one very important exception. She had no need for a pregnancy test now. If she could help it, and she could help it, she would never be pregnant again.

She got back in the car and got her passport out of the glove box. Camille had gotten her passport when she was twenty-one and planning a semester abroad in Italy. But that had never happened, so this was the first time she ever needed to use it. She hoped that the picture was still recognizable as her.

Camille got back on the highway, I-90 North. She was in

the middle of traffic, waiting to cross the Peace Bridge into Canada. That's when her phone started ringing. Her mom was calling, and her heart dropped into her stomach. Camille was a terrible mother. Here she was going to Canada, going to the funeral of a man she hated and wallowing in her own self-loathing, but when the phone rang her first thought was of Robin's heart.

"Hi Mom," Camille answered the phone.

"Hi sweetie," She could hear her mom's smile through the phone. The weight on her chest lifted, Robin was okay. She was still a terrible mother; she should turn around. "Are you on the road yet?"

Camille looked at the digital clock on the dashboard, it was eight o'clock. This was when she was supposed to be leaving the apartment to get to the funeral parlor a few hours before it started, long enough for her to pick up souvenirs for Robin. He had asked for postcards. They had a collection; most of them from Cleveland but a few from New York, Pennsylvania, and New Jersey, they bought one wherever they went. Camille had promised to Facetime with him when she was picking up some in Toronto— she should get a few from Niagara Falls, too.

"I'm on my way there. I talked to Ava. You were right, she's on her way, too," Camille sighed. Her mother was psychic, at least when it came to her children. And Robin. "We're meeting up in Niagara Falls."

"I'm glad. Neither of you should have to go through this alone," her mom said solemnly. But then a small laugh escaped her lips, "Trust me. Your grandmother is a right bitch, remember try not to get stuck in a conversation with her."

"I know." Camille was not laughing.

Her mother had told her about her grandmother, Petra Beaulieu. When her mother was pregnant with Ava, at 23, Petra

had called her “a floozy, trying to trap her son.” Then proceeded to question if it was even Leon’s baby as if Leon was some catch. As if Camille’s mother would want to be tied to him for her entire life through a child’s blood.

Camille was glad she didn’t have to deal with Robin’s father. She wouldn’t know who she was dealing with; her senior year was a blur after her scholarship was revoked for the spring semester. She had fallen into a bout of depression at the end of her fall semester and her GPA dropped below 3.0, she couldn’t pay for the next semester without student loans. Student loans that she was still dealing with, sadly.

“Can you hear me, Cami? Where are you?” Her mother said over the car speaker. “I’m about to cross the border,” Camille said, cringing at her old nickname. “Oh! You must have left really early!” her mom said.

“Yeah... I couldn’t sleep and I’ve never been to Canada. Might as well go sightseeing,” Camille said. She was almost at the entry point. There was a soft, sleepy voice on the other side of the phone.

“Robin wants to say hi!” her mom said. She sounded almost performative with Robin, as if he was her audience.

“Hi Mama!” Robin said, his mouth full.

Camille let out a breath and said, “Hi, Birdy. How’d you sleep?”

“Great! And Nana made pancakes!”

Camille couldn’t help smiling a bit, she remembered her mother’s pancakes. They were her favorite food until she was nine and lunchtime trading games created an appeal for Lunchables. “That was nice of her, did we say thank you?”

He was rolling his eyes, she could tell. “I said thank you.”

“Okay, I believe you,” Camille said. “Do you want me to bring home some Canadian maple syrup?”

“Please!”

“I will,” Camille chuckled. “Mama has to go now Birdy. I’ll call when I’m looking at postcards.”

“Bye Mama,” he said followed by the dial tone.

Camille tapped her finger on the steering wheel, listening to the dial tone for a minute before hanging up herself. She was at the entry checkpoint.

“Hello, ma’am,” the man behind the desk said. “Do you have your travel documents in order?”

“Yeah, of course,” Camille said, handing over her passport.

“What brings you to Canada?” he asked.

“My father’s funeral,” she said.

“Oh, are you a Canadian citizen?” he said cheerfully, surprising Camille who was expecting misplaced condolences.

“No, I was born in Ohio,” she laughed, glad she didn’t have to accept his sympathies. “But was your father born here?”

“Yeah, I think so,” Camille said, still surprised. “I didn’t know him that well but his whole family is up here. So, I guess.”

“You should apply for a citizenship certificate!” he said. “Just saying it might be a good idea! Lord knows what America is doing with its politics.” He was chuckling as he gave back her passport.

“Thanks for the suggestion,” she said.

She started driving again and her heart felt heavier. Camille could just stay in Canada. She could stay in Canada legally.

She called Ava because that's what Camille always did when she needed to remember how to be a good mother. She had been there when Robin was born.

Ava never cried but she cried when she was in the operating room with Camille. Camille had to have a c-section; the doctors weren't sure Robin would survive a natural birth. Not after the echocardiogram revealed a possible murmur.

Ava had been crying, but Robin hadn't cried. Camille had wept silently, trying to hear her baby, trying to move her head around the partition and see the doctors. Camille could hear the heart monitors; one was steady and beeping fast. But the other heartbeat was irregular and slowing down. Slowing but still beating. "Ava, is he okay?"

Camille squeezed her hand harder making Ava look down at her. "He's going to be okay," she said, sitting down and stroking her sister's hair in the same way she had when they were children. Ava had always been a natural when it came to comfort and nurturing. She had come up for the c-section and agreed to stay for a week, even sinking vacation days into helping her little sister.

"What can I do?" Camille had asked tears streaming down her face. If Robin had died, she couldn't have lived with herself, she had been on bed rest for months making sure he was okay. Cherishing every kick as a sign he was alive, being a burden on her mother, and unable to work. She just sat in bed trying to take online classes in between constant bathroom breaks. "What do I do?" If he lived, Camille didn't know how to be his mother. She was the person who was always ten steps away from crying and sick children. The one who no one ever let babysit because they thought she would be neglectful. Camille would be a terrible mother.

"You are already doing it. You are doing everything you can do," Ava said. "Moms are superheroes. Welcome to the club."

And as if trying to prove her point, Robin started wailing.

Her sister was always there for her if she needed advice on what to do and Camille could practically hear her voice in her head, but she couldn't be sure she was doing the right thing until Ava told her she was.

"Hi!" Ava said on the other side of the phone.

"Ava, I don't know what—"

"This is Ava Bartoli. I'm sorry I can't take your call at the moment. Please leave a message after the beep." *BEEEEEP*

Camille hung up and took a deep breath. She would go park her car, walk around Niagara. Maybe, get on a Hop-on-Hop-off bus or take a cheap boat ride. That thought sunk in and she kept driving.

After passing by the third parking lot charging thirty dollars per day, Camille parked. She'd be parked for the next few hours anyway and if Ava drove the rest of the way— she'd be making the most of the money she'd wasted parking. Camille walked right to the fence and started following a tour at a distance so she wouldn't get caught on a tour she didn't pay for.

"Niagara Falls is 167 feet high and the deepest point in the Niagara River is right under the Horseshoe Falls," the tour guide, an old woman who had glitter on her face and a name tag that read Sparkle, said. Camille noticed the woman had bells in her hair when she leaned down to speak to a little girl in the front. Ava would have found her off-putting but Camille didn't. It took a lot of courage to be unapologetically yourself, especially as you got older. "The deepest point of the river is 167 feet deep. Who can tell me how far away from us that is?"

Camille saw the little girl counting on her fingers, but she was unsure if that would help with three-digit numbers. “Three hundred and thirty-four feet,” a boy next to her answered with a proud smile. “Are you going to tell us how many people barrel—”

“Adam,” his mother said, putting her hand on his shoulder to stop him from asking his question. She didn’t know what he was going to ask but he looked disappointed that he wouldn’t get an answer.

Camille noticed a sign for a twenty-two-dollar boat ride on the Maid of the Mist. She got on the boat without a second thought. She didn’t have to check how long it would be, she had time. She didn’t have to ask about the child’s prices’ or the safety precautions; she was alone.

She didn’t even have to worry about getting a tiny wine cooler from the onboard bar, she wasn’t driving.

Camille looked up at the wall of water and pulled down the hood of her bright blue poncho to mask her from the spray. It had been years since she felt that free. But when she got off, she went to a gift shop and straight to the postcard display. She pulled out her phone and took pictures of their choices and sent them to her mother’s phone, with the message: “pick two, maybe three”

Her son’s face appeared on her phone almost immediately. She snorted and answered Facetime. “Can you get the flag one and the Niagara Falls one?” he asked as soon as she answered the phone.

“What, no hello?”

He rolled his eyes. “Hi, can you get the flag one and the Niagara Falls one?” She laughed and picked up the postcard with the Canadian flag on it. “Which Niagara Falls one? All of them say Niagara Falls!”

“The one that says it in the Gravity Falls font!” It was Camille’s turn to roll her eyes, leave it to her son to pick the only postcards that didn’t have waterfalls on them. “Okay and I’m gonna get this one with the green border, too,” she said, picking it up to show him in the camera.

“Cool! Don’t forget the maple syrup!” Robin said quickly.

She picked up a maple leaf-shaped bottle and waved it in front of the camera, “Any other requests?”

“Can I have a Mountie hat?”

Camille looked at the phone. “No, I wouldn’t even know where to get one.” Robin pouted for a moment before smiling wider than before, “Okay. Then that’s it, I guess.”

“Love you,” She said but he had already hung up.

Camille sighed going up to the counter, “Hi, I’d like to buy this.”

“Of course! Will that be all?” the woman behind the counter asked.

She hesitated ready to say yes, wanting to say yes but instead, she asked, “You wouldn’t

happen to have novelty Mountie hats, would you? For kids?”

She smiled and picked one out of the returned bin, “I can give this one to you for half price because it was returned without the box!”

Camille bit her lip and nodded, forking up the thirty-seven dollars for three postcards, a bottle of maple syrup and a used Mountie hat. She put a Coffee Crisp on the pile, too, driving the price up to thirty-nine dollars.

She sat on a bench overlooking the Falls and took out all of her receipts from the day. While she hadn't been worrying all day and taking time off work, she had spent 123 dollars and 39 cents. She ate the rest of the Twix bar, the Clif bar, and the new Coffee Crisp bar while she sat crying on a bench waiting for her sister to come to get her.

She hadn't felt this aimless and hopeless in a long time. Not since before she knew she was going to have Robin.

Not since she woke up in her own bed on a Sunday morning with no memory of the night before and a cottony feeling in her mouth. She woke up on Sunday morning without underwear. Camille woke up on a Sunday morning, feeling fear and guilt coil together in her gut, and she never told anyone what happened the night before.

Camille hadn't let herself think about that moment in years. She had pushed it down, down, down until she almost believed it didn't happen. But she couldn't push it down when she was keeping everything else down with it. She couldn't forget it. It happened. Now, she had Robin.

"What's wrong?" Ava said, sitting down next to her. She had barely been able to tell Ava where she was on the phone, it was a wonder that Ava had found her.

Camille shook her head, trying to find the words she needed to say to her sister, to explain why she was crying, and settling for the mantra that had been playing through her head for seven years. "I'm a terrible mother. I'm an even worse daughter and I can't imagine I've been a good sister."

Ava grabbed her hand tightly. "Camille," she said, eyeswide in confusion. "I spent a hundred dollars today on complete nonsense. A fucking Mountie hat— He's going to wear it once and—"

"And look adorable! Please send pictures!"

"But he needs his meds and my insurance doesn't cover anything and— I need to be the one who thinks things through. Not the person who just walks around spending money. I'm terrible."

Ava shifted down so she was on her knees in front of the bench. "Sweetheart, you're human," she said. "We don't always think things through." She wiped the tears off Camille's face and gave her a soft smile. "And you're coming into some money pretty soon. Until then, consider today on me."

"Av, no."

"What have you had to eat today?"

Camille lifted up the candy and granola bar wrappers.

"I thought so," Ava said she grabbed Camille's hands pulling her up off the bench. "You're going to have lunch. A full, balanced, nutritional lunch."

Camille reluctantly let Ava lead her away. She let her bring her to an Indian restaurant and order for her. And when the time came, she let her sister pay for the meal without any attempt at a fight.

It strangely reminded her of Robin's first time at a restaurant.

Only it was at a Bonefish Grill and her mother had been paying as a celebration for Robin's first steps.

The truth was that Camille had had to work on her son's first birthday. Her mother told her that it was okay, first birthdays are for the parents anyway, he wouldn't even notice she missed his birthday. But that had only made Camille feel worse.

And that day, missing her son's first steps, had caused Camille to break down in front of her mother. She told her that

every missed first felt like the proof that Robin deserved better than her. Her mother had simply shaken her head. “What do you think his first restaurant should be?” She asked, pulling out her first-generation iPad and trying to find menus.

They brought baby food and sat hidden in the back of the restaurant hoping that he wouldn’t cry but by the end of the night Camille had seen one of Robin’s firsts.

Now, Camille looked out the window of her sister’s minivan watching the trees turned into blurred colors as they passed by them. She swallowed the lump in her throat and looked over at Ava. “What happens when we get there?”

“I don’t know. I guess his parents are alive, we finally get to meet Petra.” “And then we go to the will reading get whatever money he left us and just... go home? I don’t — I can’t just do that. I spent the last twenty years questioning everything about my life while he just moved to Canada? I need to know why.”

Ava tapped her fingers against the steering wheel, her wedding ring thudding whenever it hit the hard plastic. “Maybe, we’ll find out?”

Camille couldn’t stand her saying maybe, not when she knew that she didn’t have to come here. *I’ll change my will*. But she did need the money.

“I don’t— He was sick,” Camille said looking down at her hands.

“I know,” Ava said, not looking away from the road.

“They might not recognize the revised will.”

Ava didn’t say anything, she just tilted her head and looked at Camille out of the corner of her eyes.

Camille continued frantically, “I mean right? That’s a

thing— not recognizing a change that happened when someone wasn’t of sound mind.”

“It can be contested,” Ava said nodding. “But we’re his kids, who else could the money go to?”

“I just... I have a bad feeling,” Camille may have decided to go to the funeral for money, but she needed to go to the funeral for answers. But the funeral had felt so abstract and far off. Now she was less than an hour from her father’s funeral and she started wondering if she made a mistake. “I have a bad feeling, we should turn around.”

“Hun, we’re not turning around now,” Ava said, her mom-voice in full force. “I’ll be there. No matter what.”

Camille nodded and went back to staring out the window. She thought she should have pushed because if they didn’t go back now, she didn’t know how to go back. How do you go back?

Leon hadn’t come back.

“Daddy,” Camille had said, padding down the stairs clutching the bars on the stairs since she couldn’t reach the banister. Her mom had been crying, but Camille couldn’t find her own tears. She didn’t understand whether or not she should be crying too.

Leon ignored her in favor of putting on his denim jacket. It was November, it was too cold for him to go out in just denim, but he always refused her mom’s attempts to buy him a coat. In response he had gotten both Ava and Camille matching mini denim jackets lined with soft wool.

“Daddy,” she repeated. She thought he hadn’t heard her. Her mother was glaring at him, daring him to tell Camille that he was leaving.

He slid down to kneel in front of her. Taller than her four-year old frame even on his knees. "You know The Little Mermaid?"

"Don't do that, Leon," her mom warned, straining to prevent herself from crying. But it was too late, tears had already formed streaks down her face.

"Do what?"

"You ruin things. You always have," she said simply. "If you're leaving, you don't get to ruin The Little Mermaid for *my* daughter."

He rolled his eyes. Camille waited for him to tell her not to roll her eyes. He used to say things like that a lot: "*don't roll your eyes,*" "*don't cross your arms,*" "*elbows off the table,*" "*it's unladylike.*" Ava would listen but Camille would smile every time and repeat the action. He'd only criticize the little things like that; acting out in big ways or succeeding in small ones was expected. He was the parent you wanted to give a bad report card to, but an A- would somehow disappoint him, "*You obviously knew what you were doing. Why didn't you get an A+?*" He had asked Ava, as Camille still not in school, ooped and awed about her being in trouble.

"Cami, I am not meant to be a father. Some people," Leon said solemnly, holding her at arm's length, "we're just meant to be free. You'd want to be free right? Like the birds in the yard? They can go wherever they want, whenever they want. You get it?" Camille could remember shaking her head no, but she must have said yes; because Leon stood up, picking up his duffle bag and headed to the door. Looking back at Camille and her mother he said. "See, Janet. Cami knows I'm not a father."

Petra strode over to Ava the second she saw them, her face covered in embarrassment and her eyes shifting over to other guests. "What on earth are you doing here?" Ava, with her blonde soccer-mom haircut, blazer and jeans, resembled their

mother to a T. Camille, had she not walked in with Ava, would have easily disappeared into the crowd. She was surprised to see a crowd. Leon had never spoken to anyone in Ohio, as far as she knew, but he seemed to have a large number of friends present as well as family.

"He's our Dad," Camille said without thinking. It was the first time she called him dad since he had left.

"And-- he sent us a letter, saying to come," Ava said.

"You should have known better," Petra said trying to further usher them out of the room. "He might have put you in his will, I might have let him put you in his will, but you should have known this is for his *family* to mourn his loss."

"Whether you want to acknowledge it or not, we are family," Ava said, narrowing her eyes.

"Oh, please," Petra said. "Neither of you care about my son."

Camille blinked, confused by the statement. "Petra," she said. "If you think we didn't care about him you obviously don't understand the concept of abandonment." "He cried for you. He cared. He is -- was a good father," Petra said letting out a loud sob. A girl came over, she couldn't have been older than seventeen with light blue eyes, auburn hair and freckles hidden behind a pimply face. "Is everything okay here, Gran?" she asked before looking over at the sisters. Ava grabbed Camille's arm as the girl continued. "Are you Dad's cousins? I've been looking forward to meeting you, though of course I wish it was under better circumstances."

Camille blinked again as the new information snapped into place. "You're Leon's daughter."

"Yeah, my name is Iris," she said, a fake smile crossing her face.

Ava nodded, her mouth a gape, "And he was... he must have been a good dad."

"Well, towards the end not so much. He didn't have many lucid days. But yeah," she tilted her head looking over the room where Leon's coffin was being kept. "He was great." Camille put on a fake smile of her own. "I'm glad. It's nice to meet you Iris." "Come with me I'll introduce you to some of his friends," Iris said. Camille wondered who told her she needed to host them; she couldn't believe it was genuine. If Camille's mother had died she wouldn't be able to run around greeting people.

"I'd—" Camille started, looking at her half-sister carefully. She for a second pictured herself staying, seeing the life that Leon had built without them. "That'd be nice but we can't stay for long." But it all felt too difficult. The illusion that her father had made a mistake in leaving them was fading and Camille felt numb.

Ava looked shocked at Camille's lack of reaction. Petra looked terrified of what they might say. "Yeah, we have to go," Ava said.

"Oh, I'm sorry to hear that. Will you be back?" Iris asked.

There was something off about her behavior that Camille couldn't quite get. Before she realized: she had watched her father forget her. Camille wondered if that was worse than watching him leave.

It must have been a painful way to lose someone you love. But Camille couldn't help her. Camille didn't know her.

And numbness had limits.

"We won't be back," Camille turned to her grandmother and smiled, "Petra, you know our address."

"Of course," she said, sending a glance to Iris, she added her pleasantries. "Thanks for coming, even if you can't stay."

The sisters left and were completely silent for fifteen minutes, Ava driving only to get out of the parking lot before pulling over on the side of the road.

"Iris seemed nice," Camille said, shocked at her own words. "He was-- he was a good father to her it seems. So, it looks like being a shit parent had nothing to do with *his* nature and everything to do with—"

"Fuck that," Ava interrupted, causing her sister to stare. Ava had long since stopped

cursing for the sake of her kids. "That was bullshit. He was a dick and—and a shit father! Just because he did a decent job with his do-over baby he gets to be heralded as some saint?" Camille nodded feeling a familiar rage in her gut, but it was still overshadowed by the sadness, fear and guilt. She was consumed by hurt and she let tears roll down her face. "Ava," she said looking over at her sister again.

"I want to go home, too," Ava said resting her head on the steering wheel. "No, I want to go back," Camille said, sitting up straight in the passenger's seat. "I need to see what changed for him. Why he stayed with his new family, why he left us." Ava looked at her, still hunched over. "I'd rather not see Petra again, if I'm being entirely honest."

"We don't have to go to the service," Camille said. "They had a photo wall, I—I just want to find out who he was."

Ava nodded and drove back hesitantly.

The services had started by the time they got back, leaving the sisters at the funeral home alone. Camille looked at the guest book, at all of the names of Leon's loved ones. All the

Beauliou's had beautiful penmanship, it seemed. It would have taken Camille hours to have lines that were straight or that perfectly curved.

She looked over at all of the photos from his life, taking note of the ten-year gap in photos when he would have been in Cleveland. She saw pictures of him at forty-one, right after he'd left, parasailing. He took a salsa class apparently. He looked ridiculous in the photo, ruffled black and red sleeves and a rose clenched in his teeth. Inexplicably a tattoo appeared on his arm and his hair was dyed and full. Camille couldn't help but laugh, she put a hand over her mouth to mask the sound and tried thinking about the fact that this man was dead. And that was terrible, but she couldn't help letting out another giggle. He got a convertible. Who was this cartoon of a man?

Camille had to leave again, this time to assure that no one could see her laughing at him. "That's what he left for, salsa and parasailing," she said when Ava followed her out of the funeral parlor. "What was that? His midlife crisis?" It sounded right but no. Having a family at 32, Ava and Camille were his midlife crisis. Leaving them was back on track for him.

Leaving Robin would be back on track for her. She could go to Italy like she had planned to do in college or move to Hawaii and get a job more than two hours away from her mother's house. God, she would love to get a job in Hawaii. But she had Robin and she didn't think of him as a mistake or a crisis. Not anymore at least. She hadn't thought of him as a mistake since she had given him his name.

"I think we should go home now," Camille sighed, looking over at her sister. "Maybe I shouldn't have come. He left because of me."

"Cami," Ava said, stepping closer to her. "It's not your fault he left. It had nothing to do with you and everything to do with him. I-- I'm sorry if I never told you that. I thought you knew."

"You weren't there. He would have stayed if I had said the right thing at that moment," Camille said.

Ava shook her head, grabbing her sister's hand over the center console. "You are wrong. I don't know how you could ever think that."

"I was worried that this trip would make me want to leave. That a taste of not being a parent would make me into Leon but I don't want to be that person. I love Robin and I wouldn't actually want to leave," Camille said "I need to stop thinking I'm like him. I-- I can do better but at least I'm doing my best--"

Ava interrupted, "it's impossible to do better than your best." She turned the car on, just as eager to leave their father behind as Camille.

"Maybe," Camille said, hesitating to agree with her sister but knowing that if Ava, a perfectionist, could admit that sometimes perfect wasn't possible it was probably true. "I think I should get a job closer to mom's house. I can... I think I'll apply to work at the Aviation Palace," Camille smiled, remembering the last time she had been there.

She had been throwing in the last of the cracked corn she had for the ducks at one of the ducklings and put a hand on her protruding stomach. The little pictures said that this duckling's name was Tony. She thought that was funny considering all the other ducklings had names like Quack and Flippers.

They were all named by fifth graders who visited the Zoo and therefore the Aviation Palace at the end of every year. She had been on a similar trip when she was fourteen, her class had named their duckling Richard. The teacher regretted that choice when they all started calling him Dick the Duck. They were one of the last high school classes to name any of the ducks; Dick might have been a factor in that decision.

But that memory was not why she loved ducks. She

loved ducks because she had just written a research paper on them. Specifically, on their parental care and how harmful it was to both the parents and the duckling to be separated too young. She had gotten an A- on it and had come to feed Tony and Flipper and Quack and Finn and Beaks as a thank you for letting her observe them. Not that they had much of a choice, it was the gesture that counts.

She looked around the empty exhibit. The waterfowl exhibit was the least popular at the Palace, it was part of the reason she had decided to study the ducks, the more isolated section assured for fewer outside influences. Even though going out to Lake Erie might have been a better way to observe birds in a natural habitat, the controlled area of the Palace made it so she was always observing the same family of ducks.

Camille felt a sharp kick to her kidney and sighed. She had been advised to stop leaving the house, she would have to be bedridden or hospitalized soon but she needed a last trip to the Palace before she gave up her freedom.

She left the waterfowl area and went into the section called North American Birds and was met with the annoying sound of dull pecking made by an Acorn Woodpecker. She knocked on the glass forcing the bird to flee the faux tree in its habitat. Another painful kick, the baby hit her bladder this time. She wished she could knock on her stomach and stop the baby from kicking her.

The next bird she looked at was a Goldfinch. She had been reading a book by Donna Tartt called *The Goldfinch* recently, chronicling a boy's life after the death of his mother and following the secret that he stole a painting. The writing was dense, and Camille quickly realized she would not be finishing this book.

But the birds were gorgeous. One of them was bright yellow with black rings around its eyes and stripes on his wings. But the other one was a more muted yellow, it could almost be called gold. Its eyes were small, and one might say they were off putting but Camille didn't mind.

"Finch is a name," she had thought, before shaking her head. Finch was a boy's name, what was the point in not finding out the gender if she was still going to gender her baby before they were born.

She moved on before finding a tiny moving pile of eggs in a nest. It was the Robin habitat. But she couldn't see the bird's parents anywhere.

A tiny beak broke through the shell and an ugly featherless bird with bulging eyes and practically translucent skin became visible.

Camille gasped and somehow knew that the moment was special. No one else was looking, not even the birds. This was a moment between her and this helpless creature. Something about the interaction made her positive, her baby's name would be Robin.

When Camille got to her mother's house it was almost midnight. After getting dinner with Ava in Buffalo the sisters parted ways only for Camille to get lost. She was glad to be lost, she didn't feel like staring at Lake Erie or the tree lines along I-90 West. So, she pulled up Google maps and made sure it would take her on back roads when possible. After it got dark, she navigated back to the highway, needing the lamp posts to light the way but driving on twisty, hilly roads where the speed limit was slow was strangely calming.

Her mom was still awake, watching Stephen Colbert in the living room. She opened the door for her. "Hi sweetie, are you hungry?"

"No, Ava and I ate," Camille sighed and smiled at her mother. This woman who raised her into a somewhat functional human being, despite all the obstacles that Camille had in her way. Camille hugged her mom tightly. "Thank you for looking after Robin."

“Oh, he’s a joy to be around. I’m always glad to babysit,” she said, batting away her daughter’s unnecessary thanks. “How was the funeral?”

“It went about as well as expected,” Camille said honestly. “Petra’s a bitch.” She let out a loud yawn, the emotional exhaustion finally hitting her.

“Oh, you should sleep,” her mother said, putting a hand on her shoulder. “Robin’s in your bed but you can sleep in Ava’s old bed?”

Camille nodded. Despite coming to her mother's house daily for years she hadn't been back to her room since Robin and she moved out when he was three. She kicked off her shoes and walked up the stairs, careful not to let the steps creek too much.

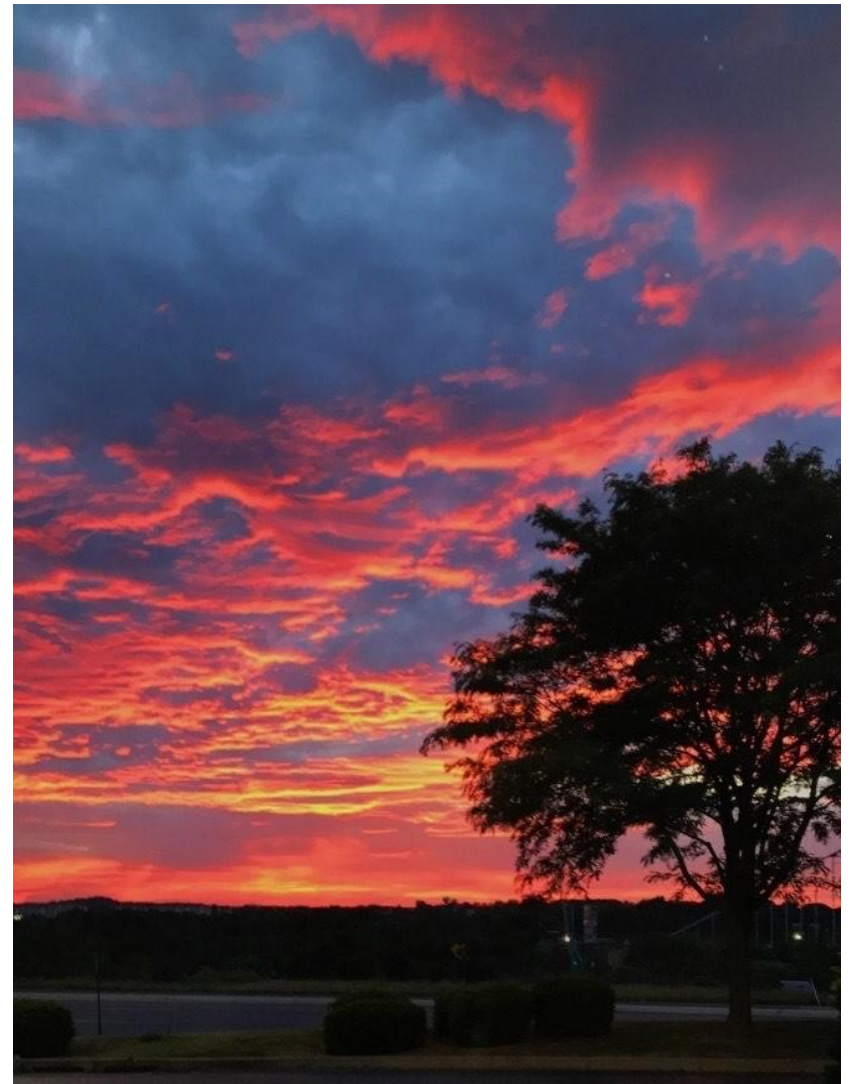
She opened the door to see the steady yellow light of Robin’s Woody night light and the flickering blue and pink light from her old Sleeping Beauty one. On the floor were a combination of her old barbies and the Legos he had brought over from the apartment.

Camille set down the novelty Mountie hat and propped up the post cards; the Niagara Falls one (in the Gravity Falls font) sitting in the front.

He looked so peaceful, swallowed by the covers of the queen-sized bed that was bought while she was bedridden. Instead of going over to Ava’s flower covered bed, Camille lifted the blanket and wrapped a protective arm around her son.

She whispered softly into his hair, hoping not to wake him. “Goodnight, Birdy”

from the mcdonalds parking lot
Shannon Dyke



if I had to say goodbyes today

you gave me everything I'd ever need
I'm sorry I couldn't in return

I lied that sunny afternoon in bed
I think you knew that

I miss when your voice was a lullaby
instead of a gunshot to the heart

I promise to never forget the immense warmth
in my soul from you

I'm sorry I didn't forgive you
but I didn't deserve the peace of getting over it

I hope your stormy days end
and the sunny ones are endless

thank you for believing in me
on the days where I couldn't stop the tears

if there is any smile brighter than the sun
it has to be yours

I let you in too many times
you took advantage of me just as many

I'm sorry for the time I almost kissed you
I know we were both drunk

I love you
I'll miss you

Shannon Dyke

As Giants Do
Sarah Scally



flying verse

wings that glide in even beat
lift this bird's lyrical feet
to skies above the other birds
whose quills could not sing a word.

Joey Brown

Enskymment

Sarah Scally

Inspired by Robinson Jeffers "The Vulture"

I went on a walk down at the cove and
saw a vulture circling above. I knew his mind;
his thoughts of sky and sea and hunger and heaven.
I'd had those thoughts, too.
Walking around in circles, finding I had nowhere to go, I
considered taking my life
into my own hands,
jumping from the hillside,
Flying next to the bird with the burgundy beak, sailing down on-
to the ocean with
its brown rocks staring up at me.
I pictured a world where I was gone, a world where I had
wings, where I had no worries
It seemed so ideal, so peaceful and undisturbed and it might
hurt
but what if this was what the poet told me about?
Enskymment.
'But no", I told the rocks, 'As my flight ends, death would take
me
and yet the vulture
would still fly.'
'Yes,' I said 'The bird circles over living bones waiting and
wanting but not killing.
Passive in his life as I should be in my death.
His feathered wings will fold and then
his flight will end,
knowing
he will fly again.'
Yes, he will reach for heaven again and I will wait.

I look at the ocean below, the spiked rocks in place of clouds,
the harsh white crash of the waves and the nearly black-blue
waters
This would not be enskymment
there would be no life
after death.

Silent Sentinel
Cynthia Capotosto



To the Photon

Madison Backes

Are you careful
when you dance
among the clusters of stars
and swirl among the galaxies?
Do you dare
step foot past the accretion disks
to toe the horizon
of the dying sun?
Because the Singularity
is always hungry
and it has already captured
Cygnus and Cassiopeia,
and pulled me apart -
It gripped my neck
and twisted my mind
until Spacetime was bent
beyond repair -
It's dark here
no Ignis Fatuus
to light the way
or aurora borealis
to guide you,
Time dilation has warped
every alarm clock -
Can you be sure you aren't dreaming?
I never woke up.

Stories

Sarah Scally

Most of the time when I think of you I think of Chemistry class in sophomore year of high school. Both of us hated it, but we'd sit in the front row you'd take notes as I doodled in my margins and we'd wait for class to be over or for the teacher to stop talking so you could catch me up on your stories. They were innocent enough then. But that's not what I think about now. I remember sitting there with you second week and watching as our teacher lit a fire. He started hovering different elements over the flame--potassium and copper turned it purple and green as the class "ooed" and "ahhed." The fire alarm went off and everyone left. We circled down the nearest staircase like water down a drain. You started telling me stories again. I remember loving your stories, thinking they made you seem grown up, but recently I've felt incredibly guilty about just listening as you told stories of grown men flirting with you, buying you things, inviting you places. I tell myself I knew you'd never go. You'd never meet with them. You were never that stupid. But I heard you call yourself jailbait and
whore
for a better part of the year. I did nothing. I should have. You were like a fire changing color before my eyes I didn't realize that I was watching you burn yourself to the
ground.
I just saw the pretty colors and never being good at chemistry I didn't understand what was dangerous and what was safe.

I saw an old friend in a bakery recently and it made me think of Chemistry class. She was measuring out baking powder and I couldn't help but see the broken paper mache volcano that we made together sitting in a junkyard somewhere. I couldn't help but wonder if you have better stories now.

"I'm not dealing with this right now."

Shannon Dyke

I cut the stitches from my lips
with surgical precision
and a rusty scalpel
you didn't seem to notice
the specks of orange in the maroon
trickling from my chin

my mouth, finally open
with a sore jaw, held enough
motion to release guttural cries
built over the months
mixed with the mold
on my tongue
left in the silence

the aged soundwaves
made their journey to you
in through the channels
to your brain, a long trek
between my cracked and bloodied teeth
through your soft complexion
you barely flinched and merely
bleached my agony from your palette

your dismissal was a weapon
that guided itself directly into my lungs,
then stomach, then heart
the dribble on my chin matched
the newfound gushing from the wounds
and when I reached to you
the mess on my hands couldn't touch you
you walked away, effortlessly, pristine
as more tears appeared in my skin
and I became ragged and dark red
I wish what you did truly killed me
but the slice to my throat
only caused silence

Fair Warning
Sarah Scally



Fears

Helena VanNatter

When I was younger, I was afraid of bugs
The thought of them crawling over my skin
With their hundreds of legs
Still makes me sick
But not as sick
As the insects running the world today

When I was younger, I was afraid ghosts
The cold feeling they bring
And little things they whisper
Were merely a premonition
To the depression
I feel today

When I was younger, I was afraid of loud noises
They startled me awake at night
And made my heart race
Now I'm just terrified
Of the noises
Being louder than me

When I was younger, I was afraid of the dark
Thinking about it now, I'm not sure why
But I think it was because I didn't want to be forgotten
I love being alone but hate being lonely
And sitting in the dark reminds me that
I am easily reduced to nothing

Free Rain

Caitlyn Carr

Fingertips slipping on travertine pages, single drips
of crimson splish. Exasperation sighs
and Humiliation goes pink.
Sprinting through green only to trip in brown, a film
screening fades from technicolor to sepia as Exasperation
sighs and Humiliation goes pink. The printer
spits image after image, but in its misery,
settles for raven though it longs
for canary. Exasperation sighs and
Humiliation goes pink. Speech cascades
from lavender lips, but the listeners leedle away and
let's-talk is scratched to indigo.
Exasperation sighs and Humiliation goes pink.
The skybulb flickers and the night wiggles her brow
to bring in the pink sighs. The cloudy couple
looks down and precipitates. They kill their civil union,
convincing the spring to take leave
and inviting the chill to make herself
at home. Winter freezes licks of rain
and sand attacks her hourglass; she spills herself to liberty.
The kiss of deliverance is pitiful and the leedlers return
to listen to the aria that will linger in
the rotten reliquary. The specter sings to impervious faux grief
and slinkingly retires to apathy.
The pink sighs are swiftly silenced, and so ends the song.
Exasperation and Humiliation, arm in arm, go for a drink.

At An Intersection of Iron and Air *Sarah Scally*



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01101001 01110110 01100101

Joey Brown

I woke up today with full 6DoF
and stereoscopic integration.
Last night I dreamt my fingers were polygons.

(Brain is hardware)

I too, like to have tea with god,
why should Euclid have any say in our matter.
I can drink through a screen door.

(Mind is software)

I meant it literally, I have dreams in virtual worlds,
with virtual bodies. I bet I could break you
into a billion triangles and you would know no difference.

(We are both)

You could be a dog too, we all have the capacity for it.
No need for Pavlov when it's operant.
You'll learn virtual means reality too.

steel grey
Shannon Dyke



Hydroflasktivism

Lucy Kade

Humans fiddle while the Earth burns
 (but the Earth is really crying quiet, tears dry quick in the
 sunshine)
diddle in our shops and homes, picky pluck flowers that sour in
 our
pretty pots and leave behind a wake of rubble, rocky stubble
 where no
flowers could ever grow again, but we pour cement over the
 Earth, seal it in its grave, shhh so we don't hear it.
You appreciate the Earth by traversing into it, you dare to trek
 through the
bowels and then leave it behind. Go back to society with lungs
 full of
stolen air You appreciate the Earth so you pave and trap and
 trample it,
 make a path through a homemade guileless garden that
 deposits
 on a clock (just in time for dinner)
 all so you can hike and harvest
You appreciate the Earth so you scooped out the insides and
 then spit tar into the carcass wait for it to dry and then
 sneer at the eyesore
You are different because you're aware,
you glare-stare at the piles of plastic and purchase reusable wa-
 ter
bottles, plaster them with stickers that will never die
the winking water droplet will shout "Save Water!" staring at the
 sun in the belching landfill until the end of us.
The high road is still a road
and you drive past pollution on the highways, sigh but keep driv-
 ing, crank
the A.C. bit by bit until you are numb to your activism, moving
 like a
mechanized arm "It's important to call attention to these issues"
"Now more than ever we must fight for change"
Recyclable words mean nothing when they are rinsed past their
use, for the climate might be changing
but we are not

Provence *Cynthia Capotosto*



Boys Will Be Boys

Helena VanNatter

I was twice your age,
But it didn't seem to matter.
I was on the ground
And you took advantage of the opportunity.
It was a simple game of tag,
Until it wasn't.
You were on top,
And I didn't have a chance to push you off.
I should've knocked you into the grass
And continued to run.
But I acted too slowly
And suddenly my chest was cold.
Your parents thought it was funny,
Because "boys will be boys"
But I wasn't laughing.

A Woman Like Me

Danielle Sanchez

I will never be clever enough to sever
that last tie to you. I cry and say bye with hope
that I cope. However no amount of soap could
wash away or unrope. You never do decay. I do say
I stand taller today and my honor's still tethered so what
power do you claim to forever gain while I still cower?

No tower is higher to climb than the sour taste left behind.
You were kind and it tricked my mind so I didn't fight
against the ripe bite of the cold site where your mold once slept.
You once told me things that you never kept despite the mood-
swings.
You pumped me with empty promises, harnesses, oblivious.
I decide on myself and place you on a shelf where you can
almost taste what you lost. A woman like me has a high cost.

educated

Helena VanNatter

when i look in the mirror, i see a mess.
i see all my scars from past mistakes.
i see my skin, burnt from the sun.
i see my stomach and my chest protruding from my torso.
i see my hands, picked raw from anxiety.
i see my shoulders, broad enough to rip shirts.
i see a woman who hates herself.

i have been taught to hate myself, because i do not look like a victoria's secret angel.
i have been taught i should not love this body.
i have been taught to be ashamed of my breasts, because of their size.
i have been taught that i will be hard to love, because of my thighs.
i have been taught that no man wants a woman he can't lift.
i have been taught that self-pleasure is dirty and wrong.
i have been taught that life is an eternal battle to lose weight.
i have been taught that makeup makes me seem like i'm trying too hard.
i have been taught that a woman has a vagina.
i have been taught that a woman's place is in the kitchen.
i have been taught not to step on the toes of authority and to keep my mouth shut.
i have been taught that i must be a princess.
i have been taught that i will never be good enough.

but even though i have been taught to hate myself, i enjoy the body i have been given.
i love my curves and my dips and my lines.
i love my freckles and my hair and my eyes.
you preach self-love, but then say i am self-absorbed.
you tell me to be proud, but then say i am attention-seeking
you focus on beauty, but then say i am shallow.
you educated me on self-loathing, but i read between the lines and made my own discoveries:

i learned that i am proportioned differently than popular media presents.
i learned that my body is resilient because every month, my uterus wreaks havoc.
i learned that i don't have to cover up if i don't want to.
i learned that my legs can kick serious ass.
i learned that if a man doesn't want me, that's his loss.
i learned that if i don't know what i want, no one else will.
i learned that i carry my weight differently, and i am strong.
i learned that wearing makeup is my choice and my choice alone.
i learned that every woman is gorgeous, no matter who she was born as.
i have learned that a woman's place is where ever the hell she wants
i learned that if i don't speak up, no one else will.
i learned that princesses are great, but i want more out of my life.
and above all, i learned that society will always change its mind.

so now when i look in a mirror, i see a woman.
i see all my scars and remember what i have pushed through.
i see my skin, covered in sun-kissed freckles.
i see my stomach and my chest, a cushion for all of the hugs i give.
i see my hands, capable of creating anything.
i see my shoulders, wide from a decade of dedication.
i finally see someone who loves herself.

Protest is Essential Work

Milena Berestko

Protest is Essential Work

Protest is essential work.

“This racial street theater against black people is an endemic, primal feature of the Republic.”¹

“WHEREAS, peaceful demonstrations began in the City in response to the death of George Floyd, a Black man in Minneapolis *who died after one or more officers knelt on his neck*, the latest in a long line of deaths of Black men and women that have spurred protests across our nation, but demonstration activities were subsequently escalated, by some persons, to include actions of assault, vandalism, property damage and/or looting;”²

“As we struggle to adjust to life in this pandemic, there remains the hard work of fighting the epidemic of racism in the United States”³

“Racism is one of the most insidious forces in this country. We want you to know that we will always stand up to reject all forms of discrimination and injustice. This is the right thing to do, and now is the time.”⁴

Protest is essential work.

“But the fact that Mr. Floyd was even arrested, let alone killed, for the inconsequential ‘crime’ of forgery amid a pandemic that has taken the life of one out of every 2,000 African Americans is a chilling affirmation that black lives still do not matter in the United States.”⁵

These protests are “a response to the failure of Mayor de Blasio and decades of previous elected officials who have sanctioned daily state violence against black people in New York. They are the manifestation of generations of black people who have struggled to breathe with the weight of America’s anti-black racism on our necks.”⁶

I demand that charges be pressed against all officers involved in this heinous racist murder, including specifically Derek Chauvin and Tou Thao. They should not be allowed to keep their jobs and should be charged and prosecuted to the fullest extent of the law for manslaughter.⁷

A state of emergency is hereby declared to exist within the City of New York.

This order should not apply to individuals performing essential work, people travelling from and to essential work.⁸

Protest is essential work.

“Attention: Black people may appear more dangerous to ignorant minds”⁹

“World renown medical examiner Dr. Michael Baden and Dr. Alicia Wilson found the manner of Mr. Floyd’s death was homicide cause by asphyxia due to neck and back compression that led to a lack of blood flow to the brain. Sustained pressure on the right side of Mr. Floyd’s carotid artery impeded blood flow to the brain, and weight on his back impeded his ability to breathe. The independent examiners found that the weight on the back, handcuffs and positioning were contributory factors because they impaired the ability of Mr. Floyd’s diaphragm to function. From all the evidence, the doctors said it now appears Mr. Floyd

died at the scene.”¹⁰

“Your country does not stand for you but has a problem when you kneel. Your country does not stand for you but has no problem kneeling on you”¹¹

“The young and the old lie in the ground in the streets... thou has killed, and not pitied”¹²

Blackness signifies an inherit and inherited state of groundlessness. Never having a place to land, to ground ourselves, to feel safe in the world.¹³

“And yet the amassing of that black political power could not stop the quotidian police brutality.”¹⁴

Protest is essential work.

“Most protest remain peaceful until cops arrive and incite violence”.

“Police officers kneeling means that you have a certain amount of time before they start to teargass protestors”

“Although Freedom Fighters DC does not condone violence, when faced with violence, we encourage our supporters to protect themselves. Our goal is that every participant is able to make it home safely without any injuries. But in order for non-violence to work, your opponent must also be non-violent, and in America, that is not the case by far”.¹⁵

“They’re gassing them babies as they did us”

Protest is essential work

“Anger, to quote Audre Lorde, is loaded with information and energy. Our anger does not allow us to pretend that these murders are exceptional or an aberration. Our anger remains us that their deaths are constitutive to the anti-black, settler logics that the United States was founded on.”¹⁶ “It’s not just the higher rates of death that fuel this anger, but also publicized cases where African-Americans have been denied health care because nurses or doctors didn’t believe their complaints about their symptoms. Just as maddening is the assumption that African Americans bear personal responsibility for dying in disproportionate numbers”¹⁷

“Society will either bend to accommodate our glory or break under the weight of its own arrogance. Either way, we will be free.”¹⁸

“You’re lucky Black people want justice and not revenge”.

This poem was created out of the numerous documents, articles, Twitter posts, memo letters, press releases and phrases I read during the week of June 5th, 2020. It presents the divisions that exist in the US and the heinous crimes against the Black people done in this country (in this poem, I focused on the brutal killing of George Floyd).

1. Charles M. Blow, "How White Women Use Themselves as Instruments of Terror, *The New York Times* (May 27, 2020).
2. Bill de Blasio, Mayor of the City of New York, Declaration of Local State of Emergence, Emergency Executive Order No. 117 (June 1, 2020).
3. Debbie Bial, the founder and the president of The Posse Foundation, "In Solidarity", Memo Letter (June 2, 2020).
4. One Love Foundation, "The Necessary Way Forward", Memo Letter (June 3, 2020).
5. Keeanga-Yamahtta Taylor, "Of Course There Are Protests. The State Is Failing Black People", *The New York Times* (May 29, 2020).
6. Kesi Foster, Youth Power Project Co-Director at Make The Road NY (May 30, 2020).
7. One of the emails I sent to demand justice for George Floyd.
8. Bill de Blasio, Mayor of the City of New York, Declaration of Local State of Emergence, Emergency Executive Order No. 117 (June 1, 2020).
9. A slogan from a NYC protest (June 2, 2020).
10. Ben Crump, Lead Attorney, "George Floyd's death was due to asphyxia from sustained pressure, independent medical examiners determine" (June 1, 2020).
11. Yara Shahidi
12. Stated the graffiti in NYC spotted en route to the protest in honor of George Floyd (June 2, 2020).
13. Yara Shahidi
14. Keeanga-Yamahtta Taylor, "Of Course There Are Protests. The State Is Failing Black People", *The New York Times* (May 29, 2020).
15. Freedom Fighters DC, Press Release (May 31, 2020).
16. Association of Black Collegians, Lafayette College (June 3, 2020).
17. Keeanga-Yamahtta Taylor, "Of Course There Are Protests. The State Is Failing Black People", *The New York Times* (May 29, 2020).
18. Janaya Future, founder of Black Lives Matter (Canada)

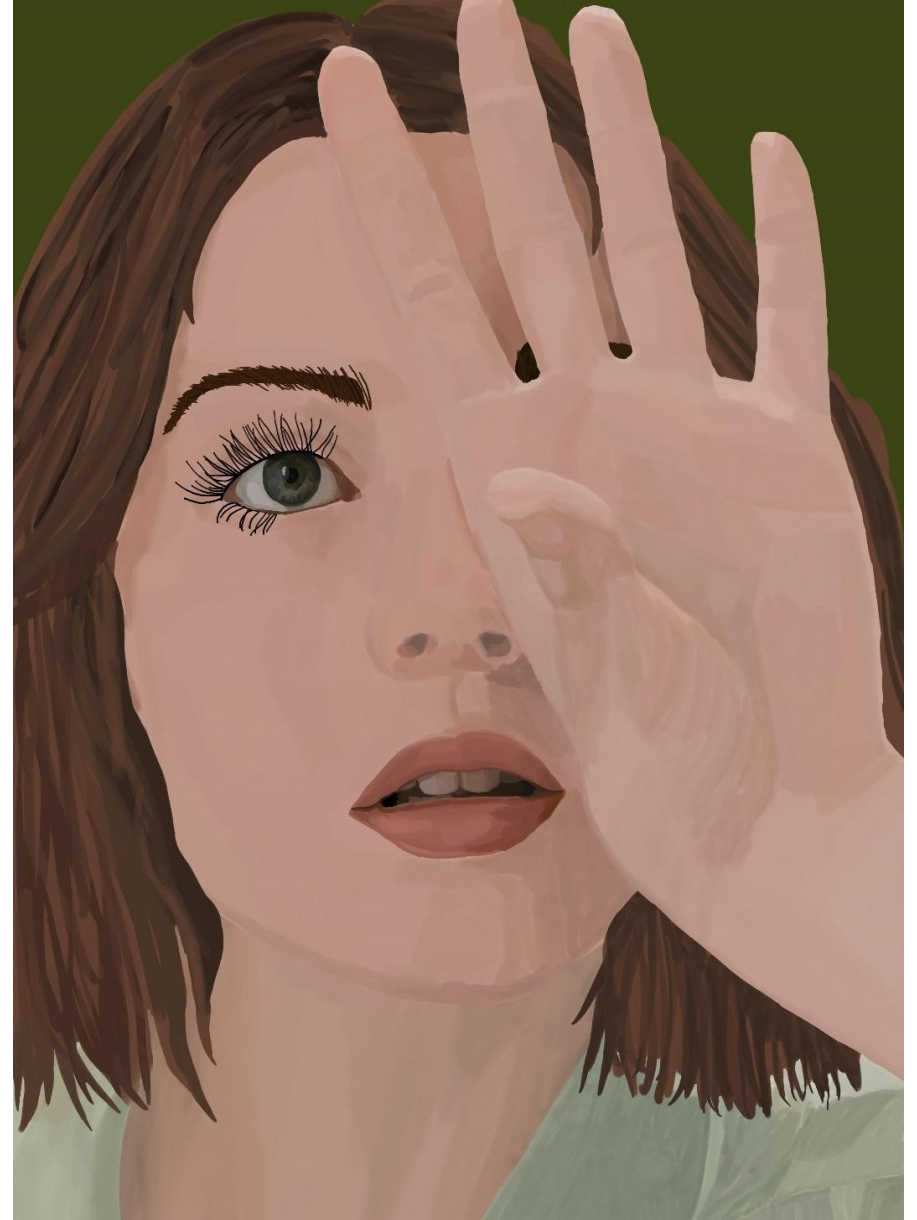
Starring
Sarah Scally



Poised
Sarah Scally



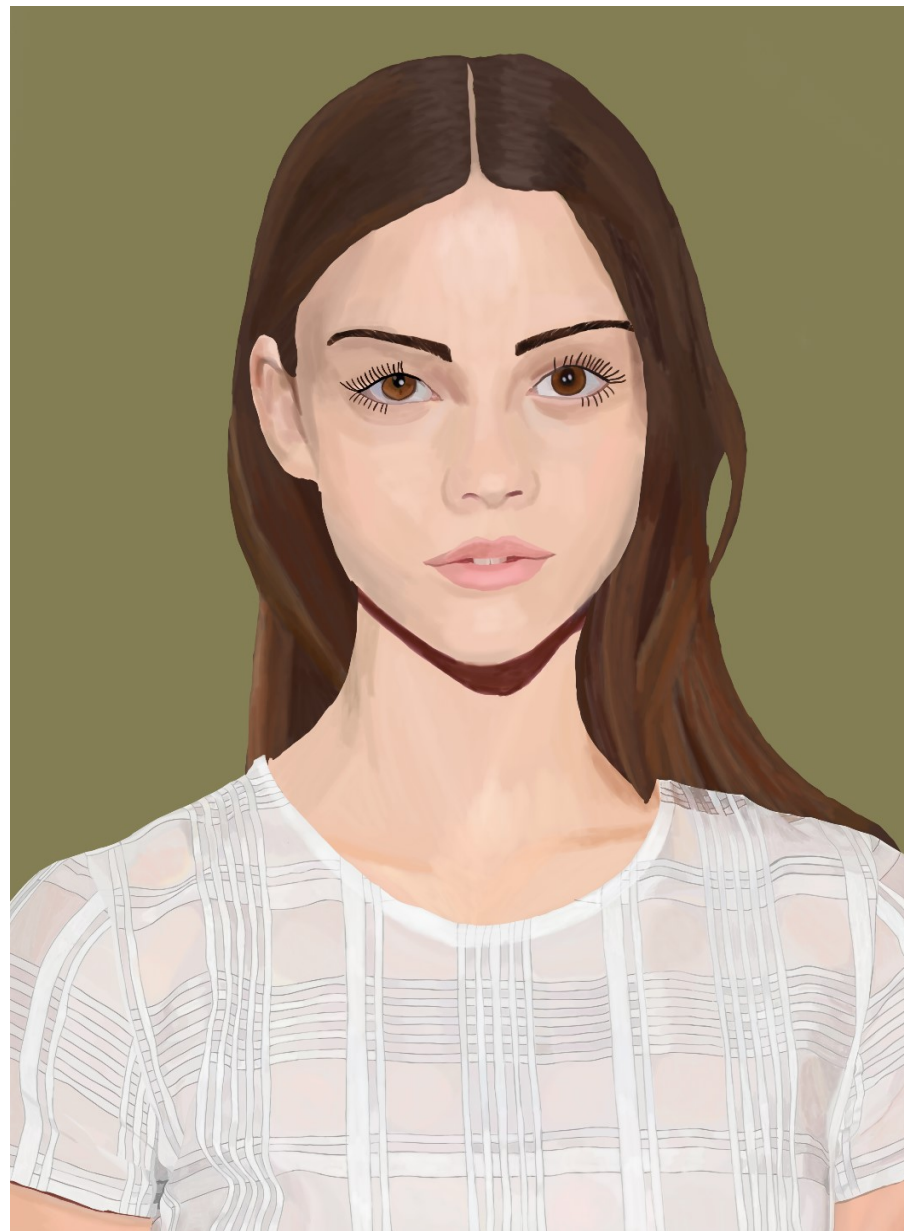
Blinded
Sarah Scally



Covered
Sarah Scally



Twitch
Sarah Scally



Sunset at Fisher Stadium
Laura Bedser



To the person who finds my black ankle socks at the top of
Fisher Stadium

Laura Bedser

I was working on an exam
trying to pull words from a brain that did not want to make them
when I saw yellow light cast across my taupe-colored walls
bathing the world in gold

I did not think to grab my sneakers
I sprinted out of my house, sock-feet slipping on damp
concrete everything smelled like rain and second chances
and I found myself at the football field

The sky was aflame with color
as if fire had risen from below and kissed the sky
lavender clouds of smoke curling through the buttery glow

I climbed to the top of the stadium
my socks cold and wet in my haste
pulling them off
I took a seat
and leaned against the banister
cold metal biting my legs through worn jeans
watching the flames burn into darkness

It was only when the sunset had been faded by time that I
rose my eyes alight with the afterimage of transitory beauty
I did not think to grab my socks
too entranced by the way the world had changed around me a
stadium that had been bathed in pink light just moments ago
the sidewalk was sharp as I walked back home

To the person who finds my black ankle socks at the top of Fish-
er
Stadium: I confess to you, though unintentionally, my secret mo-
ment
the mesmerizing minutes I spent on those bleachers
my hair frizzy from the drizzling rain
socks beside me, discarded, unaware that they'd be left

behind as I watched the sky burn

My socks an echo of a moment that was temporary
a moment that was mine
and, I suppose, a moment that is now yours, too

The Twenty-Fourth of July

Lindsey Mauriello

At 1:41 am, the night is no longer
black. The sky is slate, and
the trees are statues of iron, and
the world is in gray scale. The
streetlights are emitting a
soft orange light that is
hazy around the edges.

Silent lightning sends sparks between
the overlapping clouds, turning the sky
electric blue
for the shortest second. They
ping in quick succession, flashing
in eighth notes.

They slip through the
cracks of window blinds,
blinding even closed eyes.

They never make a sound.
No footfalls of giants to shake the
heavens, no crashes of
bowling balls and pins.
Fireworks without the gunpowder.

rain

Shannon Dyke

I heard the sky open up
as I sat in my chair
in the room with the only
remaining light in the home
it was late enough to be early
my mother would
soon rise to begin her day
before my prior one finished
the sky opened and
I felt a yearning in my soul
to go out into the night
and let my senses override
sight would be gone in the clouds
but the rain would whisper
into my ears
and leave sweet
kisses on my skin
I didn't act on the
inner pressure that
attempted to lure me out
I knew
I'd drown in the whispers
and kisses
let myself dissolve into the
existing puddles
when I went out
the pouring would
try to seduce me
and sweep me away
and a desire within me
would pull me down with it

you feel like

Shannon Dyke

highway driving in a hurricane
with the sunroof open
impulsive
exhilarating
a terrible idea
sandals in a snowstorm
toes turning purple
silly
numb
an awful idea
drunk open heart surgery
in the middle of the night
ridiculous
messy
a tragic idea
a warm blanket at sunset
perfectly sized for two
lovely
ethereal
a wonderful idea

quiet

I went with her on a walk today
full of empty conversations
commentary on the houses
and tree we strolled past

my mind was home with you
on our late night adventures
under crisp air
stars and streetlamps

unlike today
you understand comfortable quiet
the bridge from your soul to mine
has no gaps to fill with
meaningless vocabulary

I wish it was you
brushing your arm against mine
recognizing the safety in silence
not fighting to keep the bridge steady

Shannon Dyke

Left Like a Hurricane

If you had heard her
leave me in the doorway,
as the rain flooded
the basement steps
slowly consuming the house
striping away the details
that made it her home.
The closet of clothes falling
season by season, coats to camisole.
Her little notebook full of poems
soaked through and floating,
the pill cabinet overflowing
until it was empty.

If you had seen me
crying and drowning
you wouldn't tell me about hope
or search for her old laptop
with the stickers
and the scuffed corners
or the stash of weed
that was always hidden
under the lampshade
or the rain boots
covered in a floral pattern
she pretended to hate.

You'd know
she took it all with her
just like every other time
she left.
If the thunder hadn't deafened you--
If the lighting hadn't blinded you--
If the storm never came--
maybe you would have realized
she had been leaving for a long time.

She is not coming back.

Sarah Scally

delicate daybreak

I'll always cherish
that lovely morning
we rose before the sun
and greeted the quiet morning
from the comfort of each other
not quite ready to untangle our limbs
we shared whispered conversations
cotton candy kisses
equally sweet smiles
slowly waking together
then passing over
sidewalks and cool sand
climbing tall chairs
dwelling in safe proximity
the ocean and birds our only noise
we held hands without a thought
a silent reminder of companionship
then the day grew brighter around us
the rest of the world awoke
but I will forever be grateful
I felt that divine serenity
with you

Shannon Dyke

Zentangle
Helena VanNatter



laundry

my mother told me
to wash that old tshirt
she said it was time
I'd worn it a few days
but I couldn't
because that night we were together
I wore it
it held my body
as my hands traced yours
gently, because you
couldn't reach the sunburn
on your back
it was a gateway for your fingers
lightly tracing up and down my back
pulling the worry from my skin
dissolving all my fear
it was the only thing
between your arms and my skin
when you held me as we slept
and I felt safe, secure
so I tell my mother no
I can't wash the tshirt
because it is the only physical reminder
of my safe haven

Shannon Dyke

Boxed In

Running upstairs because I was late,
I had just warmed up food
and it was taking much longer to heat up than I thought it would.
This was not the day to be late.
For once
I was excited about getting on Zoom.

The bowl of pasta was hot,
burning
the flesh of my left arm.
If I wasn't balancing a laptop between
my right shoulder
and elbow,
and a glass of water
in my right palm,
I would have switched some of the pieces around.

Set things down,
connected to audio.
Only a couple minutes late.
The professor was still talking.
I gave myself a few minutes after I logged on
to turn on my video.

Right away,
he turned on his.
I smiled.

Maybe I was interpreting this wrong,
but,
it seemed like he waited for me.
Did he want me to go

Zahra Gandhi

first
before he felt safe enough?
A friendly face
in a maze of black boxes.

So now,
to make sure I wasn't hallucinating
I had to test him.
And I shouldn't have been surprised that he passed.

He ran his fingers through his hair
after I did mine.
When I smiled,
There was a delay,
but then he did too,
just a little crooked
and with his eyes peering down.

My glasses slid down my nose
because I spent too long
staring at the squares,
anticipating his next move.
I pushed them up
then looked excitedly at him,
before I realized
he didn't have any.

I shouldn't have been so deflated.
He might have done those things
anyway.
Fluffed his hair because someone else did.
Smiled because another person validated his thoughts.

I soon noticed

he was sitting somewhere different,
because this wall was a really deep blue,
the kind that would make his eyes pop
if they were blue.

Somehow,
it brought me back to that TikTok
where a girl bared in embarrassment
how she pinned this cute guy in her Zoom
but since her back was to a mirror
everyone saw him pinned.

My back is to a mirror,
should I have pinned him too?
Will that show him how I feel?
Do I want him to know how I feel?

Should I have sent him a sign instead?
Something not as incriminating,
index fingers on my mouth?

Looking back,
I don't remember if I did do that,
it's very likely I did it
unconsciously,
when I was too busy looking at his face
as he guided the camera into his usual room.

eleven inches

Shannon Dyke

I bet you didn't notice
we were less than a foot apart
after you embraced me
in the stairwell
saying goodbye

it was just before three
we were the only people not in bed
dwelling in dreams
but I was in a dream too

you were less than a foot away
and I looked into the stunning
misty sea in your eyes
you looked at me
really looked at me
and smiled

I don't know what the smile was for
if it was because you were headed off
to your own dreams
or because you were glad the night was over

but I'd like to think it was for me
that you enjoyed the time spent
in coexistence
broken conversations
between comfortable silence
laughing at dad jokes
but I don't know

I almost wish I kissed you
to get it out of my system
so that you'd know what I felt
what I feel
without me finding the words
but I don't think you'd have liked that
I don't think you like me like that

so I just smiled back

locked out

Shannon Dyke

we've changed
I know when
when I existed in gloom
and removed my doorknobs
so you couldn't get in

I know how
because I shut you out
and became only a burden
a fifty pound weight
dragging you down

I don't know why
at least I say I don't
I pretend I don't
false lack of wisdom is
better, safer
than allowing myself to know
the reason is me

I tore us apart

Beside Monet's Lake
Sarah Scally



Follow Me

Sarah Scally

There's a plot of land I own in between two rivers
full of empty dirt waiting
for me to come and plant the seeds I have stolen
from your garden.

The one outside your little blue house
where you had to loft your bed
and live on someone else's land.
I know you say it's my house too. I know

I stayed with you long enough
to call your place home. Long enough for you
to correct me when I claim my theft a crime.
So long that you have called that garden ours.

But it is not. So, I always knew I'd have to leave.
Your flowers were in bloom so I stayed
as if I had gotten lost somewhere in the valley
smelling roses.

But I was really waiting
for you to be ready to follow me.
Because my land could be yours too you know.
You don't have to stay here.

There are fields of daisies and lilies and
I'd help you plant your roses. The shrikes
would migrate with you.
You could follow me. We could be happy.

But if need be I will start a garden of my own.
If the birds don't follow I'm sure to attract bees
and there will be daisies and lilies
but I'd never plant any roses without you.

You see I'd be afraid
that they'd wilt, turn brown and
become a constant reminder of your absence.
And though I can go on without you

I've never wanted to.

An Omen of Luck on a Quarantine Hike
Lindsey Mauriello



today felt like

highschool
and teenage rebellion
and freedom with you
we kept sneaking off
stealing moments of
secret companionship
sweet closed-lip kisses
silent slow dancing
you brought fulfillment
to the mundane
and contentment
between the busy
first the kitchen
then the basement
the car then the creek
by the water was my favorite
swaying on rocks
my head on your shoulder
the canopy of trees keeping us dry
but then the sky opened
the drizzle became full wetness
yet even in the cool autumn rain
you made me warm

Shannon Dyke

It's an Old Rhyme

Lindsey Mauriello

Something old.

Like Coen's smile, the first thing I saw of him. I was curled up against the window, with my headphones on, my nose buried in a tattered copy of *Pride and Prejudice*. He sat across from me on the train; just plopped down, with a smile that stretched as long as the ride from Abington, Pennsylvania to Washington DC. The sun was illuminating his whole face, blinding me from his lopsided grin to his rich caramel brown eyes. I gave in, I had to, and put the book down.

But I cannot lie and say it was out of something as childish as love at first sight, or curiosity, or even cordiality. He obviously had something to say, and I wanted to get this conversation out of the way, so I could spend as much of the four hours it took to get to college absorbed in my book and my music. I removed only one earbud, keeping the soft sounds of a string quartet as a rolling fog in my mind. But he took my resigned acknowledgment of his presence as a warm welcome.

"You look far too enthralling to be sitting alone." Enthralling. I don't think there has ever been a time in my life where someone's first impression of me was enthralling. Something about it felt more genuine than any other adjective. It disarmed me immediately.

"I like sitting alone."

"I can tell from how comfortable you looked, taking up as little space as possible, hiding behind a book, drowning out all human existence around you. But you liking being alone does not negate my observation."

"It should."

"Clearly, we haven't met before."

He was confident, I had to give him that. However, he was also oblivious, which I concluded because while he asked me question after question, he was never fazed. Not when I only gave him an eye roll for a response. Not when I looked away from him, watching the trees pass in a blur of pine green. Not when I stopped talking entirely. He kept messing with his brunette hair, pushing it back and making it stick up, while I fiddled with the red tips of mine obsessively. I did find some things out. He was also from Abington, and we went to the same college, but he was one year ahead of me. Coincidences. I didn't think we would see each other again. Big town, big school. I preferred to blend in. No, this would be our first and last interaction.

And then, I married him.

My bridesmaids were with me in the bridal suite, in my best friend Troy's ancient family mansion in Virginia, as we started what would be a long day. I was currently in a tank-top and sweatpants, as my Maid of Honor Eliza had decreed the best place to start was hair and makeup.

"Do you have everything? Need something? Old, new, borrowed, blue?" Elle leaned over my shoulder in a loose hug, asking through the mirror I was sitting in front of. I shrugged.

"Blue I have taken care of; the rest is debatable. But I'm not superstitious, it's an old rhyme."

"Well, your dress is new," Candace chirped as she and Cait brought in the bulky garment bag.

"And you're borrowing Troy's house," Eliza said as she set up her supplies. "You just need something old."

"Can't the house also be something old?" There was immediate resistance.

"It can only count once," Stella pointed out. She walked closer to me, her hands behind her back. Her small frame stopped next to my chair, and I raised an eyebrow at her weirder than usual behavior. "I know the something old should come from your family," there was a reflexive stiffening in my back, "but we thought we would count just fine in the eyes of the universe." That's when she revealed what she was hiding. A dainty pair of pearl drop earrings, from Candace who was born in June. Identical gold bracelets embedded with green crystals from the identical, green-eyed twins Cait and Elle. A bedazzled star hairpin, from Stella the resident astrologer. And finally, a simple chain necklace with a small heart-shaped charm. I would recognize it anywhere. It was the first gift I gave to Eliza. We were roommates, randomly assigned together, and to get to know each other our RA suggested we get welcome gifts. I picked out this cheap, safe necklace from a clothing store, and Eliza gave me sweatpants from the school.

I had to close my eyes, unwilling to cry at 9:30 when the day had only begun, before I rose from my chair and hugged my true family, the family who actually loves and wants me, one by one. "Thank you," I whispered to them individually, as we let the quiet embrace us back.

Something new.

Like this new district. A new school. New friends. Well, any friends at all. I only had Eliza the first month; I was dragged behind her at social events, silent as a shadow, or a ghost haunting our room, leaving only for class and meals. Why don't you go study in the library? It's quiet, and it's at least out of the room. Eliza forced me to go at least once a week, so I sat at a table next to a large window, overlooking the crowded city. Then, plop. Right across from me, again.

"Hey Maeve, long time no see." The walking smirk was back, pulling me out of my reading for psychology.

"Funny how we always meet with you interrupting me."

"Not that hard when you're always alone. Breathing at you would be interrupting."

I capped my highlighter and rested it in the center crook of the textbook. "Yet you continue to do so."

"Breathe? Yeah, I suppose I do. Why, do you think I shouldn't? That's a little harsh, even for you."

"No, that's not-"

"You busy tomorrow night? Want to hang out?"

"What?"

"It's a pretty straight forward question, where did I lose you?"

He was being serious. Lounging in his chair, with an arm slung around the back, his legs spread wide, and nothing but an air of casualness that I didn't think a person could possess. He was somehow always teasing but never joking. My distaste for him turned into a familiar bickering friendship quickly, somewhere in the middle of that conversation.

"Sure, why not."

That night, I met his friends: Riley, Marc, Liam, David, and Riley's boyfriend Troy. We watched movies together, ordered bad pizza, and were yelled at three times by the hall's RA for noise complaints. Well, they were. I tried to watch the movie, but even with subtitles the chaos around me made it impossible to focus on the plot. Troy was next to me whispering some jokes and stories in my ear, definitely from pity, with Riley's head on his lap. Coen called him out with a laugh.

"Stop flirting with her, you're gay."

"Am I? I had no idea! Are you sure? Babe, am I gay?" Troy asked the petite Riley who was glaring at Coen from

his coddled position.

“Nah, we said ‘no homo’. Doesn’t count.” Troy kissed the back of his lover’s hand, and, just to further annoy Coen, he wrapped an arm around my shoulders and pulled me into his chest protectively for the rest of the movie. He was immediately my favorite. Coen walked me home despite it being in, what I would learn the next day, the opposite direction of his dorm. At 3 am, no less. He wasn’t too bad after all.

We became a little band of weirdos, with Eliza joining to only increase the chaotic energy. Troy was an RA of some freshman dorms, so he was the one who found Cait, Elle, and Stella the following year, and Candace the year after. Despite being at a big college in a bustling city, I was almost never allowed to disappear. I was always with friends. I started to prefer it that way.

This came in handy, quite literally, as Eliza and Elle held open the crisp white satin ballgown so I could manage to find my way in through all the tulle. I slipped my arms through the off the shoulder three-quarter length sleeves. Eliza raised the form-fitting bodice into place before Elle moved to secure the zipper and buttons, careful to not jostle my delicately styled dark ginger hair. Candace, Cait, and Stella waited to see me leave the walk-in closet that served as a changing room in the large master bedroom. By then, we were all crying. It would take me a few months to realize it was the first time we cried together. Cait was never willing to wear her emotions on her sleeve, but she couldn’t wipe that one tear away before I saw it drip from her eyelashes. Stella was quiet about it, but her sentimentality was breaking through her usually unfazed exterior. Candace and Elle could be caught crying at an especially sad commercial, them crying now is no surprise. Eliza manned the tissue box, swiping a few for herself between everyone else’s grabs for one. Thank God for waterproof mascara.

Something borrowed.

But what Eliza said wasn’t entirely accurate. I didn’t think I was borrowing Troy’s house.

What I borrowed was confidence.

It was winter break during my sophomore year of college. Coen and I took the train ride back home together, as was our habit by now. Which was lucky for me, because he could handle the quick transfer much better than I could. But after we stepped out of the train station in Abington to say our goodbyes, I started the long trek to my father’s house on foot. Of course he offered me a ride, but at the time I would never think to inconvenience him or his moms. Besides, not even I wanted to see what the house would be like, and showing Coen that could change everything. I turned out to be right.

About a week in, he called unexpectedly. The house was still a disaster area. Discarded beer cans, paper plates, half-eaten food, and an overwhelming amount of junk covered in three layers of grime cluttered the house. He never cleaned while I was away. I was elbow deep in a murky bucket of soapy water, trying to get through the caked-up dirt on the tile floors in the kitchen when my phone rang.

“Hello?”

“So formal? I usually get an ‘I’m busy Coen’ or a ‘What do you want?’ or when I’m lucky some form of ‘What’s up?’ but never just a ‘hel-’”

“Maeve!? What are you doing!?” His voice boomed from the other room. I remember feeling like the house began to shake, but it was probably just me.

“Sorry, wrong numb-” I think I couldn’t even finish my whispered excuse before hanging up on Coen. Footfalls stomped, rattling the cabinets. I went back to my scrubbing, scrubbing, scrubbing with two arms. I didn’t want to look up, I didn’t want to breathe. Eyes on the floor. Watching the soap

get caught in the grout, spreading across the floor like rivers. The thunderous movement stopped, but I could feel his eyes willing the hair on the back of my neck to stand and show him respect. Silence. Silence. Scrubbing.

A kick to my stomach. A kick to my stomach.

I fell to my side.

A kick to my stom – a kick to my sto – a kick – a –

A little spittle of blood caught in the grout. I watched it roll silently away from me.

That night he was passed out in his recliner, the classic movie channel droning on with some western playing, the faded sounds of prop guns firing and horses whinnying with a big brass band belting out a victorious tune. Walking around the house took effort, hunched over to keep my injured muscles contracted. Breathing hurt. That's when a furious fist pounded on the door. I rushed to open it, but there was no need to worry. A bomb could go off and his snores wouldn't falter. There in the night, eyes wide and panting, was Coen. Before I could even begin, he grabbed me by the arm, pulled me outside, and crushed me into a hug. My body tensed in a silent scream. He mercifully released me quickly.

"You sounded so – I was worried – I came right over." He brushed some hair from my face, tucking it gently behind my ear.

"How did you find me?"

He smiled sheepishly. "Remember last spring when you lost your phone? You put it in my tracking app after you found it and, I mean now it sounds creepy that I didn't take it out, but now I'm glad I didn't. I used that. You scared me Red."

"Sorry. I'm fine. You can go now." I could tell from how

he scanned me, my arms crossed and shoulders rounded, his eyes were piecing that together with how stiff my body was earlier. A deep sadness overtook his features. He took a moment to find the words.

"Maeve, why stay here? You can leave."

"No, I'm fine. I'm fine." I can't remember which one of us I was trying to reassure.

"No, you're not." We paused, my lungs hurting from the frigid air, as I watched the fog from our breaths intermingle. "Come with me. Please."

I didn't. Not that night. He forced me to hand over my phone to put his address in. It took me another week; another few nights washing blood down the shower drain, another morning greeted with crusty eyes and a soaked pillow, until I realized he was right. I wasn't fine. And I couldn't help but think back to him walking me home late into the morning when we barely knew each other. He went out of his way to make sure I was safe then too. I borrowed Coen's confidence, packed my things, and walked out the door.

And I had to borrow it one more time, as the soft violin began to play, as the rose petal covered aisle came into view, as I was about to take the second biggest steps of my life.

Something blue.

Like bruises, dark and angry. Littering skin and hearts alike.

Like the blue tweedia blossoms bundled with the pure white gardenia. The flowers that I hid into because having 100 pairs of eyes staring at me was never something I enjoyed. But I gave in, I had to, and I pulled the bouquet down. Because out of 100 pairs of eyes, there was one pair that was both a welcomed home and a cliff I jumped off. The backyard was

blindingly bright, and the sun was once again caught in his caramel eyes, shining at me. I could not remember who decided I needed to wear blush, but I could say with certainty it was too much. Because when Coen's awestruck expression would not stop, when transparent tears pooled in both of our eyes, my face matched the scarlet of my hair.

I could not process a single word of the ceremony. The reverend was speaking about something. It only registered as a baritone hum by my left ear while Coen mouthed a combination of declarations of love and wildly inappropriate jokes, in what was definitely an attempt to get me to relax. I love you. You look stunning. Absolutely enthralling. Like Aunt Marie's decision to wear that hat. I might need to borrow Grandpa's oxygen. You're breathtaking. Is this guy even taking a breath? How long has he been talking?

Both of us had to have said vows, I just can't recall saying them. One of us said something funny; I recall some polite laughter. A few people blotted their eyes. Or was it their foreheads? It was warm, but that might have just been me.

Well, I lied.

I can remember a single word. I can remember two.

I do.

Elle

Madison Backes

She smells
like tea misplaced
in a coffee shop
and the color blue
circling around your head
like cartoon birds-
dizzy
from the adrenaline
and one-too-many drinks
that prompt you to kiss her

She feels
like coarse sand
in some places
and like river water
in others
like a spark plug lightning strike
that glances off the edge
of your fingertips

She tastes
like honey and starlight
just on the tip of your tongue
like you can't remember
what you were going to say
senseless
and lingering,
sticky
on your lips

Her smile
glints like triumph
in finding
all the ingredients
to make cookies
in an empty kitchen
and

Her laugh
booms like a cannon
fired with its eyes
squinted shut

You imagine:
Her

perfect shade

I found a box
full of old colored pencils
I pulled out my favorite one
and smiled fondly
a light blue
delicate and beautiful
yet bold and saturated
as I sat in my memories
my thoughts turned to you
and blue
like your eyes
and your favorite hue to wear
and I think
that if you were any blue
you'd be this one
a light blue
showing gentleness
brightness
but is still blue
still can hold more dimension
than the surface shows
gives a smooth impression
with just one encounter
but each pass brings out
more of the vibrancy in your soul
but anyway
I guess that means
you are my favorite shade
you are my light blue

Shannon Dyke

In Blue-m
Shannon Dyke



longing artist

Shannon Dyke

I pulled out old watercolors
to see if I could match
the indescribable hue of your eyes

I covered a whole page
swatches, mixes, blues and greens
but none of them matched

none conveyed the glee
a side effect of
your intoxicating laugh
none could compete with
the pastel blends of teal and cobalt
that were even more prominent
with evenings full of liquor
or late nights in classrooms that
led to spilled secrets and sometimes tears

none captured the grace they held
the essence of your soul
the way I was lucky to see
after the late moments of vulnerability
when we'd walk each other home
then you'd gift me with
everything I could ever need
in just a few seconds
gazing into your eyes

but I don't have those sacred seconds anymore
I'm no longer blessed
on nights full of alcohol
or way too early mornings that came
after hours in books and those rare sorrows

I don't get to see your soul, your life
the way I used to

so I pick up my brush
and try again
to paint your flawless shade

On the Day Co-Star Told Me Not to Catch Feelings

Lindsey Mauriello

I was struck by the force of all
The lives I have yet to live
At full speed down the
Pennsylvania Turnpike.

I wanted to hop in a stranger's
Car and head for California with the
Top down and the wind in my hair and
The music rattling the speakers.

I wanted to fall in love with the
Whirlwind sitting next to me
Just to pick a fight three hours in
And get dropped off on the side of the road.

I wanted to get my heart
Broken halfway through Ohio and
Catch a flight to Florida after crying
In the airport bathroom.

I wanted to dive into the saltwater gulf wearing
All of my clothes and steal seashells in
My jean pockets and run through the
Streets dancing in a thunderstorm.

I wanted to sneak into a movie premier with
Paparazzi cameras flashing like supernovas
Or wait by the tour buses outside concerts and
Convince the band to take me cross country.

I'm never spontaneous but
I am impatient so on the day Co-Star told me
Not to catch feelings I decided
The universe wouldn't hold me back today.

I was struck by the force of
Needing to feel recklessly alive
At full speed down the
Pennsylvania Turnpike.

on a wing on a prayer

Shannon Dyke



Living Stars

Paige Mathieu

A meteor,
racing across the night sky.
A beautiful,
temporary,
sight.
Shooting into the distance,
A blink of an eye and it's gone.
A look in the wrong direction and it's gone. An attempt
to take a photo and it is...
gone.
It is fleeting,
Not forever.
A floating rock's last hurrah,
"Look at me!"
it cries,
before it disappears,
burns out,
dies.
Life is like a shooting star.
Here one minute,
Gone the next.
STOP!
LOOK!
ENJOY!
Before it turns,

into
nothingness.

Online Time (Or Failing to be a Person)

I'm sitting on my bed holed up in my room
in the same place I've been for the last eight
(months) (days)
hours attending one class or another
in one club meeting or another
talking to one boss or another.

Now I'm waiting in an empty Zoom call
I'm waiting for you all to join me
because this has been the one time every week
I can learn to be a person again. Not a
student or an employee.
I just want to be a person.

But soon the texts start streaming in
and none of you can make it. So I turn off
my laptop and pick up a book.
I pretend to read for an hour.
Then I watch an hour of Supernatural
spend another hour scrolling through Tumblr
another on YouTube
another on Pinterest
then back to Netflix.

And when my screen usage
says I have been on my computer
for 20 hours I lay down on my bed
feeling like sludge
and unable to close my eyes.

Maybe I'll feel human tomorrow
but today I feel like a bird
crashing into a window again and again
knowing that I will never reach the other side
and that the repeated attempts to use my head
as a battering ram will surely kill me.

Maybe I have to learn how to be a person again
by myself.

Sarah Scally

to all who come
Shannon Dyke



The Cracks in the Glass

I didn't see the cracks
until we fell apart.
They were
pinprick thin
but deep

any pressure
would have shattered us.

If I had known
I might have stood
on eggshells
for years.

But I didn't know then
and if I'm being honest
I chose to pick
that fight with you.

The one where
I was terrified
of losing you,

the one where
you pushed
as I pulled
and we were talking
about the future

about going
to school states away
And it was six years off
but I was scared
of leaving home
and you were already dreaming
about Florida.

Sarah Scally

I said something
about Disney World
how it shouldn't be
what you think of first
when choosing a college
and the glass

Shattered.

I picked that fight,
I applied that pressure.

I'm sorry.

You had been balancing
bricks there for years.
Ignoring me at school,
both of us ignoring
what the other wanted.

You pushing me
to go on meandering walks,
me pulling you
towards my writing
and my books
because we both
wanted to share
what we loved.

We were kids,
we didn't compromise.
We were terrible
to each other.
If I'm being honest

I'm glad the glass shattered.

We were on
such different
paths

The pushing
the pulling
the trying to trip each
other was bad;
it was holding us back.

I'm really happy now,
turns out leaving
home isn't nearly as scary
as I thought.
I really hope Florida
worked out for you
(though I know
you ended up
in South Carolina).

I hope
we can wish
each other well
with clear consciences.

Fresh Seafood
Sarah Scally



opened secrets, closed friendships

Shannon Dyke

today you felt off
so I decided you hate me
your messages were different
and less frequent
and I'd think nothing of it
think maybe you were just busy
except
the night before
I gave you my heart
in vulnerable pieces
I opened my safe
and let you peek inside
to see the shambles
that are my thoughts
you gave me support
but it felt forced
you didn't want to dwell in
the mess that I am
so you became distant today
so you hate me
and the friends I told
say I'm irrational
and that you wouldn't do that
and that you're a good friend
but they don't know
the darkness I showcased
that probably scared you off
like it does everyone else

to think

Sarah Scally

you've been states away for two years
and, of course, we text and call
but to think that if i saw you now
i couldn't hug you the way i need to
and to think that i won't see you this year
and maybe not next year or the year after
to think that we never got to be together every day
for longer than those two summers
and to think i'll spend my life missing you
as we miss each other geographically

and to think i could have loved you
if everything had worked out differently
if i had known earlier that you liked girls
if i had known earlier that i liked girls
this could have ended in heartbreak
but the ache of missing my friend,
feet apart, streets away, states away
it is a heartache that I can't bear
to think it could have been worse.

we could have no calls,
no future hugs, or possible midway meetings.
to think there could be no lingering,
no missing love at all.

I think that would be much worse

Time Capsule

I dug up
that old time
capsule
in my backyard.
The one from
your tenth birthday.

The party
where we
dressed up
in poodle skirts,
danced
with aliens
pretended
we had time
machines.

I had all but
forgotten but
those crafts we did,
stained yellow
curled up
by time and dirt,

reminded me
of when you
lived right across
the street
close enough
that your
brother's yelling
woke me up
most mornings
reminded me
there was a time
when
that the unused

Sarah Scally

swing set still sitting
in my backyard
was yours.

They reminded me
you were my first best friend.

It's been
practically
eleven years
but I think
that if I saw you
now
I'd be right back
to that girl
in the pink skirt,
blinded by you.

But I think
this time

I wouldn't let you go.

mom's favorite color

Shannon Dyke



The Damn Bug

Lindsey Mauriello

It was 12:07 am and that damn bug was still flying around her room. She had been watching it for two hours as it tried to fly into her bell-shaped lights, but the white ceiling fan was whirring too strong for it. Anytime it got close, it would get blown backward, only to try again the exact same way, to fail again. This was the only thing the ceiling fan was accomplishing, as it was surely failing at cooling down the room from the intense summer heat. And this was what she was doing. Watching this damn bug. For two hours.

She briefly wondered if God had sent this damn bug as a metaphor for her current predicament. But while that was not outside the realm of possibility, it was more so functioning as a useful distraction from completing the task at hand. God was rarely keen on sending her anything useful anyway. Like, for instance, help with sending this text that she has begun somewhere around fifty times over the past two hours.

Hello Meghan. No, that's too formal.

Hi Meghan. Too peppy.

Hey Meghan, better, *nice to hear from you.*

That period looks too passive-aggressive.

Hey Meghan, nice to hear from you! And that's too peppy again. It might not be a problem of punctuation, maybe just reword it again? "Nice." That's what's wrong. "Nice" is too inherently passive-aggressive.

Hey Meghan, so glad to hear from you.

Add a smiley face, that will lighten things up.

Hey Meghan, so glad to hear from you. :) This text would

be a lot easier to write if the last time we spoke didn't end with you throwing a plate at my head and me putting a curse on your firstborn. Please believe me when I say I'm sorry for that, and I'm glad I can't actually do it. Also understand that my environment is not suitable right now to be hearing from my sister who I haven't spoken to in three years, as there is this damn bug that keeps –

“Celia? What are you still doing up?” She nearly leaped out of her skin. Standing in her doorway was her stepmother, Emma, clad in a dark red bathrobe that miraculously didn't clash with her orange curly hair, who had apparently mastered the ability to move with ghostly silence.

Celia was frantically looking around her room for something to blame. Her pistachio green walls held barely any decorations, just a few band posters passed down from her mom: U2's *Joshua Tree*, Fleetwood Mac's *Tango in the Night*, Def Leppard's *Hysteria*, and Red Hot Chili Peppers' *The Uplift Mofo Party Plan*. Her dark cherry wood dresser and desk were covered in trinkets: from a music box that played Mozart when it was open, to a small participation trophy from her 6th grade choir concert, to a light blue lava lamp that made the room look like it was underwater.

And then her eyes fell on the picture in a thin silver heart-shaped frame, the one she got for her sixteenth birthday. The two sisters, sitting on the railing of a shore boardwalk, bright white sand and a long blue horizon behind them. Celia was clutching onto the metal bar with both hands, her lips pressed in a small smile, her wet bronze hair piled high on her head in a bun. Meghan was next to her, mouth open in the middle of a laugh caught frozen in time, one arm over Celia's shoulder, the other extended outwards happily, her long auburn hair frizzy and half dried. Both of them hid their hazel eyes behind dark sunglasses.

She could easily blame the picture, but then a small, annoying black dot interrupted her sightline. She pointed at it

accusingly and rushed out the excuse, “There's a bug in my room.” In terms of believability, it was not the worst lie she's ever told. She was terrified of bugs. This one was just tinier, and stupid, and not nearly as scary as a spontaneous text from Meghan. And while she did not know about the text, Emma certainly knew there was more than a bug bothering her stepdaughter.

But first thing's first. She got the green fly swatter from a hook inside the basement door, squashed the damn bug, and threw it down the toilet. “Thanks, that was really bothering me.” The silence that filled the room grew awkward rather quickly. “Should I say *bugging* me?” Celia weakly laughed at her own horrible pun, trying to fill the air with something besides expectant stares.

Emma did not budge from her casual lean against the door frame, much to Celia's dismay. “What's actually wrong?” It was pointless to keep it a secret now.

“Meghan texted me.” While Emma straightened, Celia slumped forward; her back barely touched her headboard, as she picked at fuzz on her dark plum blanket between her criss-crossed legs.

“Oh.” The ceiling fan made a soft, rhythmic clicking sound in the pause. “Should I get your mother?”

“No, it's fine, don't wake her. I just don't know what to say. Or, I guess I know what I want to say, I just don't know how to say it.”

“Well, what did she say?”

She held up her phone to read the same message for the 54th time tonight. “Hey Celia.”

“That's it?” A quick nod. “That's what you're worked up over? Honey,” she sat next to her stepdaughter, placing a

calming hand on her knee, “She’s just your sister. Say, *hey Meghan*.”

“What if that comes off as aggressive? Or cold? Or too forgiving? Or then she doesn’t have anything else to add so it kills the conversation and we don’t talk again for another three years?”

“But she said the same thing to you, and you didn’t take it any of those ways, right?”

“No, but – “

“And she didn’t text you hoping *you* would start a conversation; she obviously has something she wants to say.”

“I guess, but – “

“And you’re overthinking this, so it means you care about her still and *want* to talk.”

“Yeah, I do, but – “ Celia stopped, expecting to be cut off, but she wasn’t. She was just being watched as she continued picking away at fuzz no longer there. Taking a deep breath, she pushed up her glasses and sat up straight. Her words came out slowly. “What if I mess this up again?”

“If I recall the fight,” as if anyone could forget that night of screaming and crying and crashing, “both of you were at fault. You alone can’t mess it up as badly as your joint efforts did.”

Their joint effort to further split apart their family more than the divorce. More than the secret of Celia’s mother’s affair, more than the secret of her father’s gambling. Celia would rather stay with her mother and now stepmother, needing something stable and nurturing. Meghan preferred to stay with her father, unable to forgive such an act of disloyalty. They wanted to stay together; be the supporting crutch they always were to

each other through any obstacles. But stubbornness was a family trait, and things got out of hand. And then one month of silence turned into one year, then two, then three, and it seemed to be too long to reach out.

Until now.

“Nothing bad will happen.” Celia was snapped out of her thoughts.

“How can you be so sure?”

“Because you’ve spent two hours carefully crafting a reply. Something tells me Meghan didn’t text you on a whim. You two are more similar than not. So, whatever she wants to say pushed her to reach out despite all her reservations.” That was true, Celia knew it was. They were both utterly hopeless when they had to do something. Or make a decision. Wait staff hated them at restaurants. So, she borrowed a page from her sister and pushed through all her fear.

“So just, *hey Meghan*.”

“Yes.”

“Is it weird to also say ‘hey’ because she said hey – “

“It isn’t weird.”

“...I’m going to add a smiley face to make it less threatening.”

“Okay.” Celia’s thumb hovered over the blue arrow. It was so low that she could wait for a particularly deep breath to move her arm enough to hit send. But that wasn’t the point here, she had to do this. Purposefully. As the little blue message rose onto the screen, she waited for something horrible to happen. She sunk lower into her bed, her head squished against her body as the dark headboard stayed firm and

unyielding, her right hand bunching up the sheets in a shaky fist. But her phone didn't explode, and an earthquake didn't start rumbling, and cop cars with blasting sirens didn't surround the house. "Keep in mind, it is after 12:30, she might be asleep – "

Celia's phone vibrated. She bolted upright as another gray bubble popped up underneath the first two messages. *I'm sorry about the plate I threw at you...*

She bit at her cheek, looking between the keyboard and Emma, who was rubbing gentle circles on her legs and smiling encouragingly.

I'm sorry about the curse I placed on your firstborn. I didn't actually do it, because I actually can't, but I'm sorry I wanted to.

I wouldn't have been mad if you did, that would've been cool. My kid could go on an epic quest to get it lifted.

Her eyes instinctively went to the wall in front of her, with her bookshelf filled with her favorite fantasy novels, scanning for the blue spine of *Ella Enchanted*. She used to share each book with Meghan, until the fight happened. Meghan didn't want to take any, so Celia had all of them in her room even though she couldn't bring herself to read any of them again. Maybe she would pick one up tomorrow.

Yeah, and they would travel with their quirky best friends and met their soulmate. Any studio would give them a movie deal.

It took a while before her sister responded, Celia rubbing her sweaty hands against her paisley patterned pajama bottoms.

I also want to say I'm sorry for everything that happened before the plate...Celia, I'm sorry for everything.

Everything slowed. Her heartbeat, her thoughts, her ceiling fan, and her stepmother's hand.

...I'm sorry for everything too Meghan.

I miss my sister.

Celia didn't realize she needed one, but the words were getting blurry, and when Emma handed her a tissue, it cleared a lot of things up. Not only her vision, but just how much she needed this to happen. She typed with one finger, savoring each letter.

I miss you too.

I can't believe it took me three years and watching two squirrels chase each other for 47 minutes to tell you that.

It was too much, she had to laugh. She had to let out all the happiness that was bubbling in her. And after she typed out what was making her laugh, she had to show it to Emma, so she could laugh too. They sat on Celia's bed, holding stomachs, as somewhere else in the world, Meghan giggled at the text she got on her phone.

Wait until I tell you about this damn bug that was in my room...

Requiem For A Gummy Worm
Cynthia Capotosto



(Phos)Ferris Wheel
Lindsey Mauriello



wonderments

Shannon Dyke

I want to be light
like neon signs
that make faces glow
pinks and oranges and blues
illuminating smiles
the brilliance of long nights
of spirit and freedom

I want to be warmth
a favorite blanket
fresh from the dryer
on a day where everything
outside the window
is covered in powdered sugar

I want to be adventure
pick-your-own
wildflower fields and
ice cream you eat fast
or it melts on
summer evenings where
the sun never sets

what I really want
is to be like the little things
the wonderments of the everyday
to be daily serendipity
and to give the world that joy

Contest Winners

黄

Winner of
the Jean Corrie Competition in Poetry
Shirley Liu

My local hardware store offers 112 swatches in
white, chantilly and ivory and eggshell.
I choose panna cotta because I have a sweet tooth
and because it is two shades lighter than my palms.

I don't remember when the sun became
something to avoid, just that I would scrub
the dirt in my complexion with steel
wool until my skin turned raw and
bloody. There are 293 swatches in
red, heirloom tomato and cayenne and ruby port.

I am seven when I tell my mom to stop
speaking Chinese to me. I was in love with a boy and his
eggshell skin. There are 267 swatches in
yellow, straw hat and cornmeal and hollandaise.
I keep scrubbing.

I am sixteen when I start learning Chinese
again. The syllables set my tongue on fire.
What color does that look like? Yellow in
Mandarin is pronounced *huang*. I scour the
store for a swatch with the same name.
A salesperson suggests eggshell.

Hi Mr.President,

Honorable Mention in
the Jean Corrie Competition in Poetry
Fatimata Cham

I am very pleased to
My father always taught me to
Speak truth even when
Your life's on the line
So today I took pen to paper
And wrote my truth
My name is
Fellow organizer, middle class, 9-5, student loan debt, learner,
child of immigrants, south Bronx,
I know all too well
The smell of air pollution and
Old textbooks
Crammed classrooms
And the harrowing noises of
Gunshots
Know all too well
The difference a dollar makes
Know all too well
The phrases go back to your country
And take that hideous scarf off of your head
Know all too well
How happiness is a distant memory
My happiness has never stemmed from this democracy
Because only right here
Can I die while sleeping, jogging, playing in a park, in my car, in
a classroom, at a protest, in my home
We have broken the glass ceiling
But how far will that take me
I'm standing seeing my reflection
In the feeling
Congratulations Mr.President
We have gotten you to office
We
The Black women in Georgia
We the youth
We Black women across the nation

We
Congratulations Mr.President
Although this country
Seems polarized too many
I a young Black child
Know all too well
That this has always been America
America for me
Has never been split into two
Like the Dead Sea
But rather a harrowing image of reality
We learned this past summer 17 more ways
You can die while being black in America
Hands up don't shoot
We learned how complacency, and lack of accountability can
 heighten this harrowing image
Congratulations Mr.President
Will you plague us with your empty promises too
Will you fill your cabinet with diversity
To portray this image of change
Or will their be action
Because Flint still doesn't have water
And indigenous women keep going missing
The Middle East is still being disrupted
The Congo is still being exploited
People are still in detention centers
Black women are still dying
Dear Mr.President
Is the Black agenda at the top of your list
Are we dead dead last again
We speak of light and truth
But
My light was stolen long ago
As I child I found myself placing
My hand across my chest
Singing in anthem
Singing to a flag
Covered in blood
Not fully knowing
What it all meant

Dear Mr.President
It is not amiss to me
That the lawn you walk on
The halls you walk through
We're crafted by the hands
Of slaves
I don't need your words to reassure me
Because it's the community I wear on my heart
That has always gotten my back
My liberation will not come your presidency
Or the past 45
Congratulations Mr.President
I am rendered speechless
Because although it's not another 4 years
Of Mr.Ex President
I don't have much faith
The only faith and courage I rely on
Is community
So I will end by saying
Congratulations Mr.President
As we part ways
I hope you find a cure to
The malignant tumor that is growing
In America
And know that it lies not in the policies or politics
You have worked on before
It lies in the hearts of communities
Like mine.

Before I Found You Again on Tinder

Honorable Mention in
the Jean Corrie Competition in Poetry
Kaitlin McNamara

Leaving
what was honestly,
a pretty lame party,
we walk together,
talking about nothing I can remember
but interesting enough
to distract us
until we reach the place you sleep,
we stand outside
for an unreasonable amount of time,
a slight drizzle to keep us company
until you ask “do you want to come inside?”, and I do,
and I proceed to count every piece
of Yankees memorabilia that litters your room
and tell you, regrettably, genetically
I’m a Mets fan.
We stand, backs pressed
against the doorway that leads to your bedroom,
dizziness sets in, and I close my eyes,
brace myself against my soon to be
sea-sick mind, and when I look up
you’re leaning in,
exactly what I was waiting for,
just the wrong time, and as Derek Jeter watches,
I lean my head to the right,
and explain to you,
I actually
have a boyfriend tonight.

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