collision literary magazine

2021

| ***collision*** literary magazine

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from the ***editor***

Dear reader,

This year *Collision Literary Magazine* turns twenty, amid much joy and strife. The number is often associated with the prime of life; however, our twentieth anniversary is not happening under prime conditions. It is a milestone we celebrate six or more feet apart, through computer screens from the security of our own homes. Nevertheless, we are delighted to present the 2021 issue of *Collision Literary Magazine*.

What began as a small journal of nonfiction by students at the University of Pittsburgh has grown to feature work from emerging undergraduate writers and artists across genres and international borders. Over the past two decades, our ever-transient staff developed our experimental aesthetic and consolidated our platform behind diverse voices, especially those belonging to people who have been marginalized by the traditional publishing industry. Today, we commemorate that legacy and all the people who contributed to the proliferation of our magazine.

In a year that seemed so full of impossibility, we want to thank everyone who worked to make this magazine possible. First, we owe so much of our success to the English Department, which became our new home this year. In particular, we want to acknowledge our faculty advisor J. C. Lee, who has been with us since our inception. Thank

you for fortifying us with your grace and enthusiasm, enabling us to persevere and seek new ways to serve the literary community at Pitt and beyond.

I also want to thank our intrepid editorial staff, who showed up to the Cathedral round table and the Zoom screen alike all those Wednesday nights. We are so grateful for your sensitivity, insight, and commitment to publishing experimental works that uplift diverse voices. Additionally, I have the great pride and pleasure of recognizing my fellow graduating seniors: Ali Aijaz, Sandy Fairclough, Madelyn McAndrew, and Saylor Pascoe. This magazine would not have been possible without your continued professional expertise, moral support, and savoir faire. Thank you for giving us your prime. We are all changed for the better because our paths collided, and we wish you the best of luck in whatever journey comes next. Once a mango, always a mango.

Furthermore, we send our most profuse thanks to our contributors. Your pieces distinguish our twentieth anniversary issue as highly introspective, a quality that seems reflective of the zeitgeist. Our staff was impressed with the ways in which you re-imagined realities and experimented with form and perspective to reveal rich, inner worlds full of contradictions, complexities, and immense beauty. Thank you for trusting us with your work. We are pleased to publish your writing and art, and we hope you

enjoy the pieces that appear beside yours in the magazine.

Finally, our thanks go to you, reader. We appreciate your support of the arts and dedication to our mission. We hope that you, too, find enjoyment and inspiration in the 2021 issue.

The legacy of Collision lies in our name; our platform is a place for open-minded individuals with original ideas to converge and collaborate, creating new experiments in thought and expression. While 2021 presented many challenges, Collision has been and will remain in its prime because it evolves with the staff and our contributors. My four years with this publication have taught me that beautiful things happen when people come together. This is one of those beautiful things, and there will be many more in our future.

All the best,
Hannah Woodruff
Editor in Chief | Collision Literary Magazine

Collision Literary Magazine owes many thanks to:

The University of Pittsburgh English Department, for becoming our new home and promoting the journal.

Gayle Rogers, for his enthusiastic support and guidance in financial matters and administrative processes.

J.C. Lee, for her extensive knowledge and encouragement as well as her dedication to preserving us and our wonderful weirdness.

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Cover Art

Dream Back to Tang Dynasty

Meihua Chen
University of Massachusetts Lowell

First Prize

Like Praying Mantises

Gianna Meloni
Yale University
Fiction

Michael Preston threw a stone that just missed the back bumper of the Vedette as it drove away. A few of the younger boys laughed.

Fridays began when Sister Jeanne-Francois handed the rectory keys to Father Patrick and got in the raisin-colored 1954 Simca Vedette in a swirl of black cloth. It was always about five when she pulled away from the asphalt lot that lead down the road to the convent. The boys sat on the cement curb to watch her go, their knobby knees knocking together, hands tucked under their tailbones. It was early May. The weather was warm and the dogwood trees on the hill had begun to bloom.

There was a secret kept at St. Bernadine's Catholic Middle School. It hung between Father Patrick and the cluster of children whose parents left them late at school on Fridays. When Sister Jeanne-Francois—the Führer as the boys called her—left for the weekend, Father Patrick retired to his office. Father would not watch for the atrocities committed on the playground. And the students

would not peek in the windows to watch Father Patrick flip through the glossy pages of Paul Carson's confiscated June 1961 *Playboy*.

Michael watched the thick form of Father Patrick hobbling heavily across the lot. The old priest had bad legs because of his diabetes. They were purple and stiff like a wax statue, according to John D'Angelo. John had entrusted Michael—the oldest of the kids at Friday after-care, turning thirteen next month—with why he'd seen the Good Father pant-less. And Michael had told every-one about the afternoon in February when Father Patrick called Johnny into his office, telling him to shut the door. The boys beat him blue for it the next day, yelling "fag-got" at his crumpled form.

Michael looked different from his father and mother with his blond hair and blue eyes. Mr. Preston often made comments on the boy's hair, wrinkles knotting up on his forehead, mouth twisted. And Mrs. Preston would wave her jeweled fingers in the air and deflect that her brother had light hair as a child, that it ran in the fami-ly. Her words never smoothed out Mr. Preston's wrinkles.

"Hey, I've got something I wanna show you guys," Michael stood from the curb, wiping the tan dirt from his shorts.

"I wanna do chapel fires again," John replied.

"Trust me, this is better," Michael insisted.

"Probably isn't even that cool," James Brookwood

muttered to himself, picking at a scab on his knuckle.

That morning, Michael had pointed out that James' eyes were almond-shaped. Everyone seemed to forget that James' complexion was the same eggshell white as his classmates'. By noon, the school believed that James was a Jap spy, that his dad kamikaze-bombed Pearl Harbor, that his mom cooked cats for dinner.

"Shut your damn trap," Michael shoved at the younger boy's shoulders.

Michael led the seven past the playground where they played war at recess, past the moss-covered statues of the archangels praying over the children, and to the thick breadth of trees at the edge of the schoolyard.

The girls, five of them, sat on the hill overlooking the football field. They were clumped in the grass and not speaking to each other, legs tucked beneath them under their gray skirts, Degas ballerinas at rest. Sometimes Catherine Smithfield would braid each girl's hair in tight little woven ropes that hung down their backs, but only when she felt like it. Today wasn't a hair-braiding day.

The breeze swept through the grasses, the girls watching as the boys snuck off to the woods.

"Wanna follow them?" Lizzy Hunter asked. She was curious about the world and passionate about learning and the others resented her for it. That, and because she had gotten a training bra before anyone else because

she was overweight for twelve.

"Shut up, Lizzy," Franny said, not looking at her.

Sometimes when Franny sat too near to Lizzy, she wanted to wrap her fingers around Lizzy's plump neck and choke the life out of her to see what it was like (the doctor told Franny's parents that their little girl had the devil in her blood, as all kids her age do). Franny had an uncle who did that to her aunt and the story always made her see things in the back of her head, especially when Lizzy said stupid things like "Wanna follow them?" and looked around at the other girls with her big, moose eyes as if the whole world were really all that interesting.

In a rotting crate in the woods, the boys kept their treasures: John's slingshot, Michael's dad's jackknife, and the egg sack.

It was the girls who found the egg sack, Catherine Smithfield to be exact. Catherine had plucked it from the raspberry bush behind the chapel. She'd gifted it to John D'Angelo, her Mary Janes squeaking nervously against the linoleum floor, cheeks pink with the hopes that he'd like her more for it. John thought Catherine's nose was too big and she'd always be ugly because of it, but he thanked her for the egg sack anyway.

From the crate, Michael pulled the newest edition of *Playboy* that Paul Carson found beneath his brother's bed. The magazine was hidden between the box spring

and the mattress, next to the "marijuana," which Mrs. Carson said was the reason Paul's brother was going to hell. Michael tossed the magazine into the eager crowd of boys like a bouquet of wedding flowers. The younger boys shoved and kicked each other to the ground until one pried free, triumphant. Face smudged with dirt, eyes a bit watery and wild, the Magazine Victor sat himself down on the rotting crate and began to flip through the glossy pages nonchalantly, one leg crossed over the other. The boy sat the way Michael's father sometimes did after a few glasses of brandy, when he was warm and charming, not when he was swinging wild fists at his mother and leaving size thirty-eight belt marks on Michael's arms, yelling, "Dirty fucking bastard!"

"Hey, those look like Franny Laviolette's tits," John seized the magazine. The boys crowded over his shoulders.

"You're full of shit. The only tit you've ever seen is your own mum's," Paul Carson said. He was playing with the jackknife from the box, prying off pieces of bark with the serrated edge. Paul fought everybody and Michael knew it was because Paulie's parents thought he was a retard, that for him, the letters were all out of order on the page and that made him angry and frightened. Michael told the boys that he heard the nuns say they were going to give Paulie "an operation" to make his brains work right. Michael demanded nobody speak to him for

a month, a cool trick to make Paulie think he really was messed up in the head. Paulie spent the month's recesses crying under the dogwoods by the girls.

"Hey, rice-eater, this one's yellow just like you," Paul said, poking the knife tip into the picture of the naked woman extending her form across the two-page spread.

James stood beneath the big pine tree, hands deep in the pockets of his uniform shorts. He stepped off from the trunk. The pine needles stuck to the back of his white polo. "I don't want to look at your stupid magazine," James said. "That could be somebody's mum. How'd you like it if your mum was in one of those magazines?"

"I think he's calling your mom a whore, Johnny," Paul said excitedly.

"I don't have to take shit from someone who eats crickets, got it?" John looked around at the other boys nervously, "God knows what else your people eat."

"The only one who's got a whore for a mother," James said, "is Michael."

The pack of boys turned, animalistic, to stare at the eldest.

Michael Preston was fiddling with the egg sack from the crate, twirling the stick it was attached to between his thumb and forefinger like a sparkler. The egg sack was caramel-colored and made of a soft Styrofoam

material, like it would crunch if you pinched it, instantly killing hundreds of little lives; it was the tempting, immeasurable power of a deity.

The night before, Michael had pressed his ear to the door of his father's office to listen to the sound of thumping and his mother wailing like an injured cow. He was screaming, "Tell me, dammit! Tell me, you fucking whore!"

Michael stared at the boy with his almond eyes and the dark shocks of hair sticking out from his head. He stepped towards James, who turned and ran from the woods.

Clouds moved slowly across the sky. Dusk was coming soon. The girls sat on their hill beneath the scent of the dogwoods, the breeze playing softly at their hair. They watched the boys chase James halfway across the field before overtaking him. They could hear his cries.

"Should we do something?" Lizzy asked.

"I told you to be *quiet*, you stupid fucking pig," Franny hissed and she lunged at the other girl, hands going for the throat.

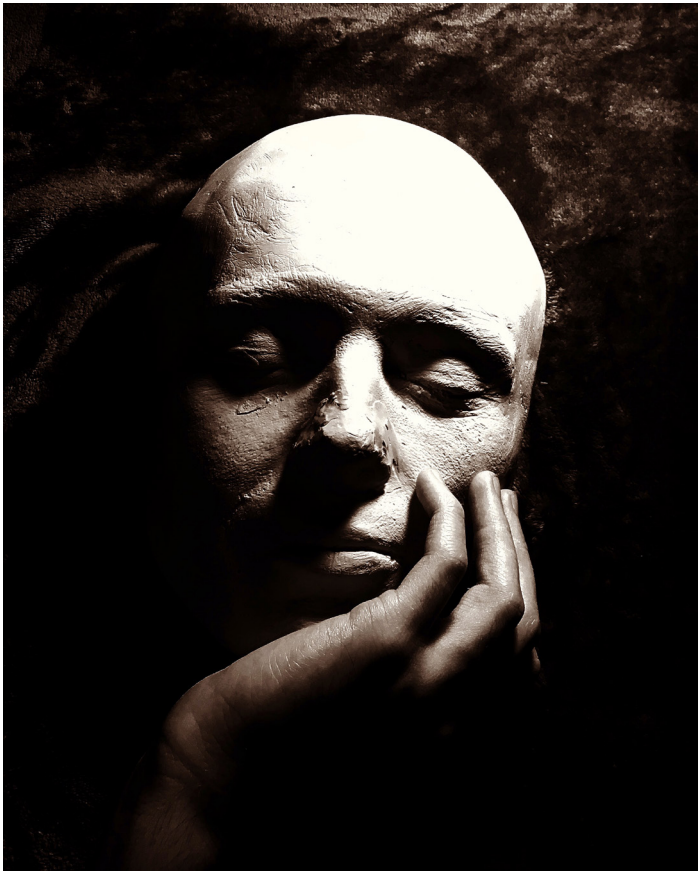
Paul had James' delicate shoulders pinned to the cool earth as the smaller boy howled for the Good Father—or the Lord himself—to come racing down the hill to set him free. But Michael was already positioned with

his knees digging into James' chest, his face level with the panicked creature. Michael held out the egg sack before him, as though examining better a penny in the sunlight, the eucharist presented to the congregation, and surged forward to shove it into James' screaming mouth, muffling his shrieks.

"Does it taste like a fortune cookie?" Michael asked. James was panicking, thrashing, his eyes wide with terror, and Michael rocked side-to-side with the undulations as though atop a carousel ride. The others laughed and leaned over the wriggling, desperate form.

James was choking and, in his panic, bit down on the egg sack, releasing, as though from the mouth of God, hundreds of almost-translucent praying mantises, the Lord's most holy, chosen insects, to grow up and one day rip each other's heads off.

Second Prize Art



No one misses the man in the moon.

Lief Liechty
Ohio Northern University

Second Prize

Holy / Place

Margaret O'Brien
The Ohio State University
Poetry

I keep receiving
emails not intended for me. I know this

from the subject line: Prayers
Needed. Still, I surveil

with a single click. It begins
I am again

the bearer of bad news. Another
flare up under his eye—Tom is ill

again. *He remains positive*
but prayers could certainly help

when the down times come. I retreat
from the desk. Is it more unholy

to reply with regret: *I am again*
the wrong recipient. Or do I

pull back the curtain. Slam kneecaps
to floorboards. Shape my heathen

body into a frame most benign
and ask favors of the sky.

Third Prize

Microtones, or our life between the dying

Leiani Brown
Brigham Young University, Hawaii
Nonfiction

My pele ele. My dad would always call my mom. Yes, my pele ele. Told on sweet evenings, the laughter ripe and the ravages of disease at bay. Oh, my sweet pele. Whispered on dark nights when you were far, far away.

c c c

Ele, of course, did not mean anything. I don't think. It was just your Palagi way of further endearing your Samoan wife to you. Just a meaningless rhyme tacked onto a sweet Samoan love-whisper.

Ele for the nights you spent caring for her. Ele for the discolored discharge you cleaned without complaint. Again and again and again. Ele for the left breast, gone. Ele for the bone marrow they took from her hip, a very long needle. Ele for the body scans, the rancid taste of chemicals

in her mouth. Ele for the biopsy of her liver. Once. Her bone twice. Ele for the doctor visits, blood draws, infusions, transfusions so frequent the milestones felt like meters running out. Ele for the life in your hands you could feel running out. Ele for the holding still, the undressing, the waiting. Ele for hunger at all the wrong times. Ele for the funeral bouquets still sitting on the piano. Ele for the thick, black hair—a remnant of the life before it.

c c c

You cannot engineer grief. You cannot orchestrate emotion. You cannot bind up or ZIP-file the pain to keep on the shelf to take out only when you decide it's time for step four. Is it time for step four?

c c c

necklace

I wore it every day. I refused to take it off. Even when my skin was raw and others begged me to stop wearing it, I wouldn't. How could I? It was the one concrete thing that still connected me to her. A constant comfort to my fingertips in stressful situations. It was a reminder that

she still lived and breathed and that she'd make it to that airport like He promised, and she did. She did and I did, and then, when the poison made it to her brain the same day she told me what the doctor had said, I could not find that necklace anywhere. As if to taunt me. As if to snap me into reality. To scream at me to wake up and start believing this is the end.

c c c

Six to twelve weeks is all they gave her. She'd had an eviction notice on that worn-out, tired body for much longer and far before then. Never stopped her from living then; why should it now?

The first time was a race. It was pink balloons at the finish line up ahead. It was cocky. It was fear. It was foreign. It was unknown and yet arrogant, adamant that it would not win. That a sea of people—uncles, aunts, neighbors who'd shaved their heads in gaudy outward signs of support—would cross that line together with t-shirts that bragged of their survival. The first time was a big C. It was formal. It was doctor visits and family meetings. The first time was Christmas presents at the front door, Casse-

roles piling up in our fridge and giddy Childish notions of what it meant. It was sitting in Mrs. Gremlich's third-grade Class, seeping into an eight year-old's fear-ridden prayer that 'mom would be okay.' It was scooping out the tumor and watching the tumor's body Collapse into bed in a tired heap its Children had never before seen. It was Cordial enough: attacked quickly, stole only hair and youthfulness, left goodbye souvenirs in the shape of half-empty bras and hideous wigs. The first time was a breeze, we'd later learn.

c c c

some lady's sobbing
in the car next to me
I don't ask her why
we just drive
block to block as red
fades to green
she's in a sphere
all her own
each car that passes
does not see the pain
blasted in uneven

holes across her chest
and those few who do
notice tears streaking, shoulder
it off as secondhand
pain or pms — anything
to keep them from worrying
+God knows they've got enough on their plate
without the girl whose face hangs
in my rearview mirror
on my daily commute

C C C

the second time was shameful. lowercase see we were
invisible c. the second time was keeping it from friends,
neighbors, even a son. he couldn't know, Mom said, he
wouldn't know. meanwhile we were alone. c, the second
time was a microtone, see—a space in between, in which
we made our life: masi and koko sāmoa, mosi mosi, mom-
ma wait, please. shuffling alone in cold dark winter fields,
knowing we'd face our friends knowing what we knew
and knowing what they could not, moments of more
of the same. the second time was limbo. was waiting for
the bus without wanting the station. it was wounded. no

casserole dinners. alone. no christmas presents no newness no surgery no destination no sought-after tomorrow. just needle after needle after pill after test after pill after ray after sickening ray like baseball bats in a gruesome murder we'd seen on one of those realistic crime dramas. the second time was tired—it was giving up on wigs, walking to work with hair clipped short, low blood counts and frequent hospital visits. the second time was anything but graceful or courteous. it had given its excitement, its shine, its run of fun. now it was disintegration.

C C C

pov: that blue couch where you did all your dying / or, where we did all your living

I held you night after night after she died. Soaked in your tears and sick of your dreams. You should have let me go years ago. My legs couldn't stretch out anymore. They stayed folded in, one protruding at an awkward angle if you didn't tie it down. The skin on my arms flayed by time and cats' claws. You should have let me go years ago. My body was tired. Blue. [microtones] Besides, I never did anything real for you. Sure, I was there when you needed a place to go, when your room was too big,

too cold, too empty. Sure, I happily joined your Sandra Bullock marathons, even chuckled when she fawned over old Tom Sellick—it always made you laugh—even danced when the two of you danced to the music of your favorite opening sequence—you only danced with her. [microtones] Sure, I let you stay in—again—when all the other kids your age were out partying and disappointing their mothers. I helped you disappoint her, time and time again. We were partners in crime, you and I. Enticing her to watch just one more episode, just one more again. [microtones] I was there in all your selfies. There to remind you of all the good times. I sat with her while you went to work, the whole time you worried, remember? You would call and in her tired voice she tried to tell you she was fine. Truth was, we'd accidentally watched the last episode of that Korean drama without you. Later I listened as you yelled at her for accidentally spoiling the ending. I knew you'd regret getting so angry.

I remember the first night. All the visitors had left. The only two others left in the house went to bed. It was barely midnight. You could barely stand the silence. You had invited them to join us. They declined. They were not her, after all. And I was no longer what you needed me to be. You hated being alone with me. You fell into my arms,

sobbing, knowing I wasn't the same for you anymore. [ ] She wasn't the same for you anymore.

I didn't do what you seemed to think I did. Years passed, and what do you have to remember? Countless episodes of *Criminal Minds* or whatever other garbage they were marathoning on the rerun channel. Vague, half-funny inside jokes that don't even make sense to anyone else. Time perhaps, I suppose. For you spent more time with me and her than you've ever dedicated to anything else, that's for sure. You've spent more time with stories on screen than you ever did trying to learn hers. Called it spending time together. Let people cite that as proof of your good relationship. And now where are you? Scrambling to learn, to understand as more of the same ravages more of the same. As one by one you watch them fade.

Still there: I was still there the night your sibling came home, stirred by the news of your mother's dear friend who'd just received the news that she, too, had a lump in her breast. The lump in your throat grew as you remembered that woman's daughter: the same age you had been when momma's own breast nurtured a similar lump. And now where are you? Still there, still. As more of the same ravages more of the same. [microtones]

C C C

Almost a year after our mother died, her older brother followed suit. It was the third of their siblings to die in less than a year. We cremated him on the anniversary of our mother's birth. He was the big older brother. Rough exterior, heart of gold. Cancer for him too.

c c c

bracelet
I am that faded beaded bracelet burst in a force of motion unintended—my insides scattered across the dirty lot each time I see you and in your eyes a tiredness that does not match the you I always knew maybe because your insides really are those beaten beads before the burst and once again I find myself in suspension, waiting for your insides to fly across my dirty lot of fears beat into me for seven short years because you gave me that bracelet, arranged my name with your numb fingers, and I felt...

How will this all play out? I've lived so long in suspension
I don't know
What is it that we're doing exactly?

We seemed to have stopped asking these questions
When did this become routine? The protocol? Normal?

C C C

"...we accept small doses of microtones in Western music when it's used for effect. But, when most people think of microtonal music, they think of pieces like this:"

[microtones]

"… and most people simply tune out" (McCormick, "Microtones: the notes between the notes").

C C C C

i like to watch the crosswalk countdown
n wager if i'll make it
an addiction to time
i think because i watched yours
run out

C C C

Ele for the port just above her chest bone that looked like

an alien unloading dock, where they unloaded all their sick, twisted experiments onto her pin-cushion body. Ele for the exhaustion. The slurred words and discolored nails. The elephant-sized feet—water retention, they told us, side effects from the pills she hated. The papery skin. Ele for her frail, skinny body. Sunken and sinking. Cold. Ele for the stranger who complained about the size of her own breasts, who laughingly said she needed breast cancer to decrease the size, and I could not laugh. I did not laugh, knowing 700 miles away a woman who was my world discarded her clothes for wigs and scarves and ugly hats and sock-stuffed bras, clinging to what little was left of her body that she could still claim as hers. Ele for that one-sided conversation, this one-sided stay: for its coming, its staying, its pretending to let you live, but knowing it will ultimately take over.

Over breakfast you noticed a numbing sloop to your face and you knew: your body would very soon belong to it. In its one-sided stay, your time belongs to it. Your every move, your groan, your death-rattle breath, your tired muscles and too-short goodbyes—all belong to it. Ele for the brain it takes. Ele for the body it devours. Ele for the hopes it dashed. For the stabbing realization, this time it

had gone too far.

c c c c c ccc cc c cc c cc cccc ccc c

MOM(1).m4a

c c c

Yes, mother, tell me the story. Tell me about grandpa and all of your siblings. Tell me how you smoked the banana leaf and squealed on your sister. Your big older brother. Tell me now how he is. He asked you to keep the light on for him. Could you hear him? Did you do it?

c c c c c c

biology teacher, freshman year
Let's not talk about the c-word
—she says in her youngest tongue
Let's not name pain
Let's not remember it exists

We all know many people
—she lets her vocals paint it mundane

We all have suffered
—she allots it generally
But let's not dwell on who,
Only how and how many

To her I ask—
Can you count this?

caged
her limbs the bars, lacking iron, perhaps, but not strength
canker
a metastasizing foreigner, making its way through her marrow
capsules
a cure as crude and foreign as the disease itself, she swore.

careworn
the look on my father's face.

can't clinging cuss cost
collateral coffin consider
can't
casserole casserole casserole

contempt cacophony can't

think about the future.

college

pretending there is life outside a looming inevitable

carnage

all it knows

cut

short.

cold

hands

cruel crying chaos chemo

new additions to our limited vocabulary.

cauliflower california chicken

(kentucky fried)

crab coconut crocs

memories of a life lived once [microtones]

courage

to die

comfort

compassion calm

flimsy hopes—fragments

commutes and cats

all that's left

cache cash

stored, lost

given, gained

clumps casket

lingering nightmares
clinging

time away apart afraid of losing

more.

And still you say,
she counts
as only one?

c

c

c

That night we all gathered around your bed and begged for you to go. You held on so long. You gave your life, accepted your fate, with all the dignity in your bones. Uncles came. Aunties. Cousins. Daughters begged parents who didn't know if they could afford it, but somehow made the trek because nieces loved aunty. Nephews loved aunty.

And Aunty was going home.

C c cc c

Dark nights, Sunday evenings, when we were kids and it was far, far away. We'd turn the light off, lie on the living room carpet, and tell scary stories till the scares turned to giggles and Dad said it was time for bed. It was these spaces in between, in the which we made our life. Mom would laugh and say "chemo brain" every time she got lost in her words. We called it the "curse of the fob": you laugh when she mixes idioms, slips in a "da kine," or simply cannot pronounce "bowl" without it always sounding like "beau"—you laugh now, but just wait, soon enough you sound the same. [microtones] playing cards till 3

a.m., ukulele songs

halfway in between
being right and being
there—

Home. Children who'd strayed, relationships on the rocks, called in with the tide. Afakasi children. Children whose mother was that body. Whose bodies came from her own, no matter how coldly it betrayed her. It came, it called, it took.

the life that gave them theirs,
and

did not stop there.

C C c c ccc cc c cCccC C C C

Are we at step five yet? Do we want to be?

c c c.

Apparently the Samoan word for "dirt" is: 'ele'ele. When

I was younger, Mom said I would grab her by the arm—a sweet, soft brown compared to my own, pale and cracking—and in my childish words, scold, "Mom, you need to shower! You're dirty!"

Pele ele he would call her. A senseless rhyme. Ele for the senseless pain caused by a senseless disease—its remains a pile of dirt and a life half smeared with the pain.

And as my sibling teaches me about microtones in some arbitrary text chain, I cannot help but think that is what is important: *half*.

Third Place Art

Acid Reflux

Olivia Springberg
Rhode Island School of Design

Honorable Mention

Strange Blessing

(For Mike)

Alexander Gallagher
Bennington College
Poetry

At first, my grandmother
always said it was hormones,
because I drank a lot of milk.
That's why I had everything early.
Like my ten year-old lesbian haircut,
childhood black belt, and wrestling
with boys in backyards.

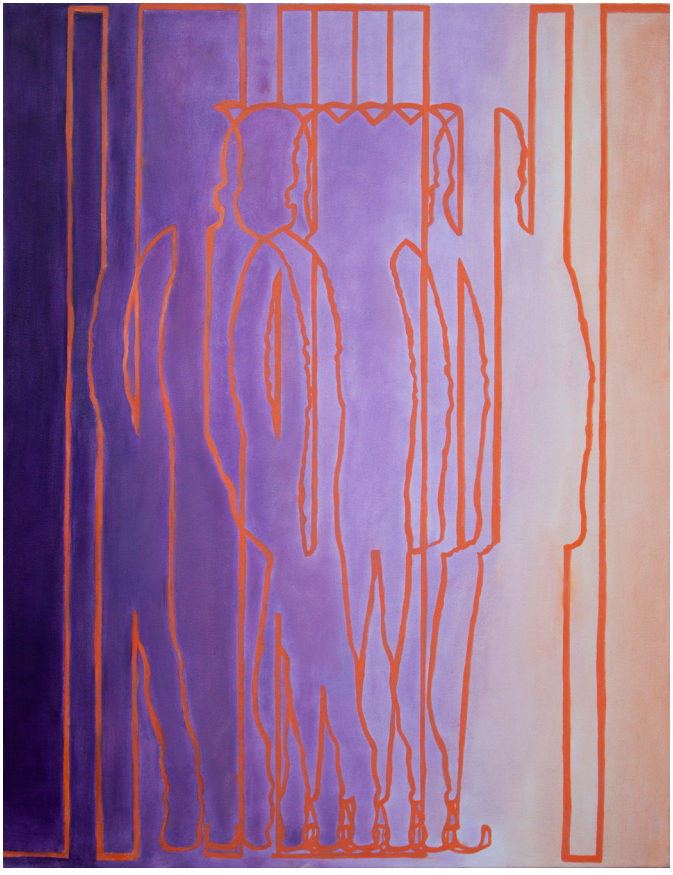
And then it became something
like angels. Like when my aunt
fluffed my hair up, a soft fuzz of
memory or convenient blessing
for the bad luck of men
born men in our family.

And it is better than when they
asked if I was sure again and
again: *you don't have to be*
feminine to be a girl. I'm
grieving my little girl. I'll
miss my two little girls.

About him, I remember very little:
Fearing his wheelchair as a child,
his face in photographs only, and
the dress I wore to his funeral.
Or somehow, his long camping fork
stretching out across Thanksgiving tables.

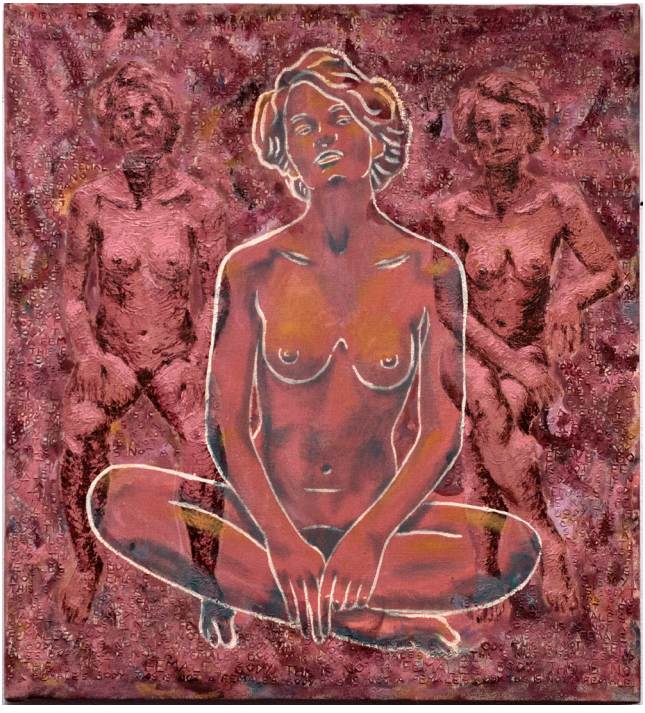
Somewhere in this I'm reaching for
universal logic, some radical queer hope
for a new man who lives past twenty-five.
I am certainly no replacement,
but maybe still, good luck.

Additional Works



Fractured Identity

Nola Mims
University of Pittsburgh



See as You Hear

Marley Wisby
Rhodes College

Oystercatcher

Anna Platt
College of William and Mary
University of St. Andrews
Poetry

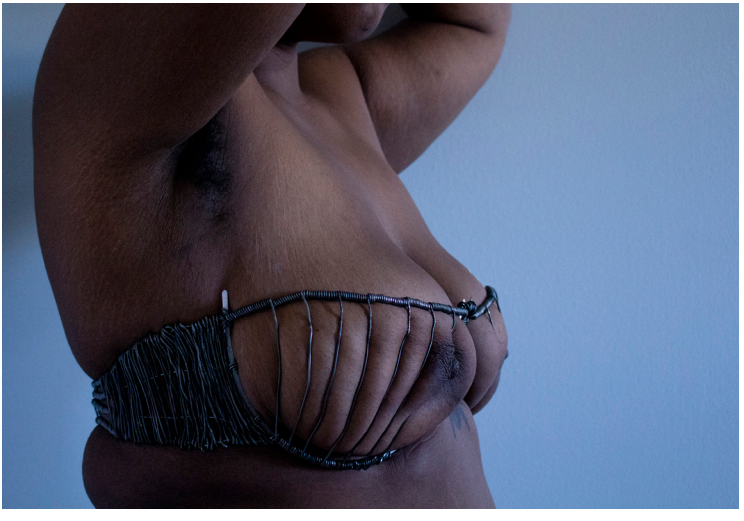
The tendons in my instep have calcified.
My ankle swollen like a beehive, the bust-open
blister on my left heel seeps through
my sock, honeycomb in cheesecloth.

The stars are baby teeth – barely there
and bleached and shining. It's easy
to see the shape of wind in the erraticism
of the waves. I exhale

and cigarette smoke stings my right eye.
An oystercatcher pecks at my shoelace and
reminds me to exhale again, again, again.
The bones in my legs buzz despite
the yards of muscle. The sun
crests the sea. The joint in my left big toe
cracks.

Comfortably Lost

Nara Njaa
Kansas State University



Wire Bra

Nola Mims
University of Pittsburgh

SELF PORTRAIT IN A CEMETERY WITH NO NAME

After Cynthia Cruz's "Self-Portrait in a Blue Séance Room"

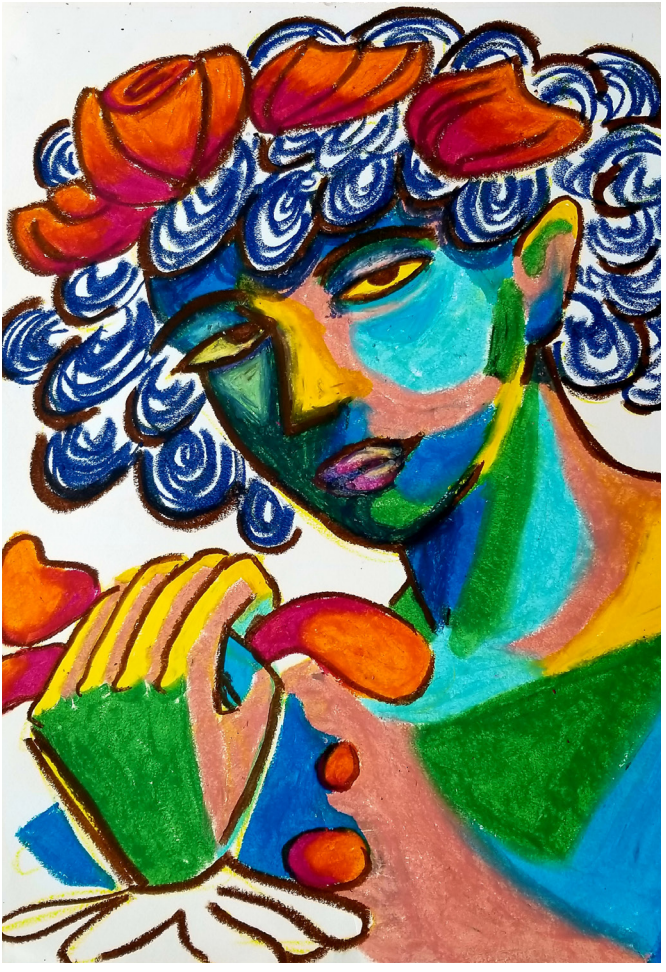
Natalie Keener
The Ohio State University
Poetry

of course, there's swaying wheat fields, the red bud tree that grew too tall, headstones sighing into the ground. a lone sassafras whispering new saplings into the sandy soil one by one. and there I am, cutting the grasses that ache to overtake the names and their dates, the last things the dead own. Cindy's mowing the adjacent field, wrapped in dust and the lawnmower's humming. a continuous fight, hers and mine—tending this cemetery like an heirloom rosebush, its quiet tenants in all their finery. there's a silence that belongs here and only here, broken by machines and throaty red-winged blackbirds. once, we buried an urn shaped like a bobber. the man inside hadn't liked to fish. there were rumors his widow poisoned him, slowly, like every husband felled before him. but what could I do. the sand I pressed on top of him was soft, cool despite the thick morning. Cindy scattered grass seed on top of the wounded earth. that scar will take years to fade—my own grandmother, three graves down, a stubborn stamp of thin grass. maybe a group of cacti—the eastern prickly pear—will cover this interrupted emptiness, their honeyed blooms dropping

after a single, simple day.

Fire in the woods. Garbage in the water.

Lief Liechty
Ohio Northern University



flower's contempt

Ciara Cross
Johns Hopkins University

Genesis 32:22-32

Jackson Ringley
University of South Carolina
Fiction

They appeared there in the parking lot, disoriented from a day's travel but energized by what would be a reunion of sorts. Jacob was the taller of the two. Broad shoulders and tousled hair, eyes that tried desperately to be green but never quite were.

"I've missed you," he whispered. Andrew stood facing him, attempting to process not only who he was seeing but how it had finally come to pass. Jacob smiled. It was the first time Andrew had seen him smile without a barrier between them. There were no phones. There was no need for them. There was no insulting green light on a laptop screen, indicating to the user that the camera was on and ready to transmit a carefully crafted image hundreds of miles away. This time, nestled on an outlook at the edge of Asheville, there were only stars.

Although they considered it a reunion, it was, in fact, a meeting. The sum of many months of technological escapades had resulted in an undeniable urge to validate any potential tension between them. The mind does not always choose to keep reality at the forefront, after all, and the only way to determine any course of action would be if they met in person. And so, after much deliberation,

they made the decision to reunite for the first time.

Still smiling, Jacob reached for his keys, fidgeting with them for a moment before opening the car door to reveal a bottle of champagne accompanied by two plastic glasses. He twisted the cork, struggling to remove it as smoothly as he would have liked, but finally achieving the impressive POP! he sought. Andrew grinned. He liked the way Jacob tried to prove his elegance, but any sort of swiftness didn't truly matter. He only cared that Jacob was there.

On what felt like the edge of the world, the two boys rested, each comforted by a cheap glass of champagne and the presence of the other. Andrew, in his attempt to execute a long-awaited fantasy, proceeded to play an Andy Williams song, asking Jacob to dance. Placing his hand on Jacob's hip, he began to sway, overcome by champagne and music and the magic of embrace. Despite the physical restraint caused by the closeness of two people, Andrew was free. He had found a space that allowed him, encouraged him, to breathe. He was soaring like Icarus, but not foolish enough to fly in the daylight, for here the night sky cooled his wings, keeping them intact a little longer.

"I missed you," Jacob repeated. These three words relied on memories that did not exist. They travelled to Andrew, held steady by the wings of a mutual fantasy. "I", of course, arrived first. It referred to Jacob, as the first-person subject of a sentence naturally does, and

Andrew clung to it. Not the word, per say, but to the boy. He held him closer as "missed" arrived, that word which created memories. Finally, Andrew received "you", and a fluttering in his chest indicated that the sentence was complete. "You", referencing Andrew, revealed the object of Jacob's missing, his desire, his affections. It was Andrew who Jacob missed, and it was Andrew who would respond.

"How could you miss me? We've only just met," he replied, fully aware that he didn't really mean it. Of course he understood, and Jacob was aware of this, but he entertained it anyway.

"Meeting hardly has anything to do with knowing," he offered.

Andrew blushed. He wasn't sure of what to say, so he made no attempt at a reply. He concluded it didn't need one. Andrew turned off the music and took Jacob's hand, beckoning him towards his car. The two boys laid together in the backseat, clinging to one another. It was crammed, but that did not matter. They would have remained this close no matter how much space was available. Andrew rested, seeing that what the boys had created was good. He was happy.

Drifting between waking and sleeping, Andrew designated the backseat a holy space. Ridiculous, he decided, but his inability to exist entirely awake nor entirely asleep served as a catalyst for evaluating the holiness of the back of a 4Runner in an unfamiliar city. It had been

a dreadfully long time since he had considered any space to be sacred, but something about this image – two boys newly acquainted, holding fast to one another so as to make up for months of physical separation – felt divine. Andrew's body fought for sleep, but his soul pleaded to stay awake a little longer. He thus resisted, longing to be conscious of Jacob's warmth as long as he possibly could, but he was unable to remain grounded, and so his dreams took flight.

No matter how weary he was, Jacob couldn't sleep. He was peering through the window, trying to find the stars. Where had they gone, he wondered. They were there before, this he knew, but something about their erasure troubled him. The radar hadn't indicated anything remotely close to overcast; he had checked twice before his drive, so he was left to ponder their absence. Andrew took a sudden, sharp breath, but he didn't wake. Jacob watched him carefully, his chest moving slightly, almost carefully, with the rhythm of his breathing, attempting a steady pattern threatened by the occasional startled inhale. He must be dreaming.

Moving his hand away from Andrew's chest, Jacob began to grow increasingly aware of the body intertwined with his own. He navigated it mentally as though it was his duty to map this discovery, a first explorer in an unconquered territory. Jacob charted Andrew's body in relation to his own. He had no other tools, for the stars had taken shelter, and an attempt at cosmic geogra-

phy would have been futile anyway. Alas, he was no real explorer. Andrew's head was nestled on Jacob's chest; his arm, holding Andrew, was growing slightly numb at the bicep, sending a subtle tingling down to his fingertips. Their legs were entangled, Andrew's right tossed over his, and Jacob knew then that he would not be moving before daylight. His hand came to rest just above Andrew's hip, having found its final destination for the night.

Though he was eager for sleep, Jacob's consciousness of the reality of their acquaintance awakened something in him. He uttered a quiet prayer aloud. To whom or what, he was not entirely sure. This wasn't unusual; he had, though he often wrestled with it at this hour, an inclination towards the spiritual. Still, he prayed. For protection, mostly. Something to guard his heart. He knew he would need stability, as the morning would not come easily. Dread overcame him. His mind often remained active at night, and a lack of stars to distract him forced him to recognize the reality of his situation. He was into Andrew, he would not deny that, but he was aware of what that feeling would mean. A single day, a meeting, had taken such a toll on both of them that they were drifting to sleep in the back of a car only to part ways in the morning. He wanted to cry, but he couldn't wake Andrew. It was better, *safer*, to let him dream. So Jacob prayed, no longer resisting the collapse of his fantasy. The thin layer of clouds separating the boys from the stars had lifted, but Jacob was already falling asleep. It's a shame he

couldn't see them.

Creeping over the horizon, the cruel illumination of the early morning awoke them in the backseat of the car. They had fallen asleep without noticing, and the subtle realization that each must return to their place of origin quietly overcame them, neither willing to say it aloud.

"I want to do this again," Andrew whispered. *We can't*, Jacob thought, but that's not what he said. Instead, he affirmed Andrew's desire. Welcomed it. This was nothing like the retreat provided to him in a text message; there is no revision in conversation. Jacob hadn't smiled in his reassurance, though, and Andrew noticed this. His eyes looked greener in the morning light. They kissed, and a slight emptiness in the two lips touching was clear to Andrew. He felt a tightness in his chest, knowing that some illusion was disintegrating before him, but he stayed his tears. They had no place here, and, as much as it hurt, he insisted this moment was good. Not because it was, per say, but because it had to be. He watched as Jacob drove away, doing what he could to keep it together. It was a futile task.

***

In Genesis, Jacob wrestles an angel. It's described as such, often known specifically by that name rather than the mundane book, chapter, and verse, but Jacob isn't the only one wrestling. The angel wrestles back. They are equally as engaged in the fight while the two quarrel

until daybreak. But the angel doesn't win. Jacob does. The angel leaves his mark, though, causing Jacob to limp where his hip had been touched. Jacob will not forget this angel. How could he? Surely, if Jacob won, then he should rejoice! Defeating the divine, what a task!

Perhaps Jacob never really wanted to fight the angel. It very well may have only been the inevitable consequence of their meeting. Had they stayed apart, kept their distance, there would never have been a need to damage one another. Unfortunately, the translation of Genesis isn't entirely clear. The angel was only later described as such; some texts consider him to be simply a man. Maybe, just maybe, the angel was like Icarus, his wings bound by the hourly instruction of the sun, for he ceases to wrestle with Jacob come morning. Perhaps it doesn't matter. Perhaps he was indeed "divine". The authors of Genesis wrote entirely in retrospect, after all, removed from the encounter by centuries. Who is to say what happened? Either way, the angel is forced to let Jacob go.

***

After recovering some strength, Andrew descended the winding road. He soon found himself hours away, both physically and temporally, from the place he had found and lost himself. There would be more boys, this he knew, but he couldn't quite understand what everything had meant. *Gay in theory, not in practice,* he had once remarked. Was it shame that overcame him? He wasn't entirely sure, but he knew it was familiar.

Pulling over for a moment in the parking lot of a rural Methodist church, he decided he was grateful. He had been made whole, more or less, by the realization that those feelings which had been lost in the clouds had at last been grounded in the body. Still, there was something missing. He wasn't entirely sure what it was. Perhaps it was his wings. Best not think on it now. Gazing up at a stained-glass window, he decided to pray, but it was different than it used to be. He didn't pray for the gay to go away, not this time, no, rather he prayed that he would meet a boy again. He approached the building, something about the dazzling windows drawing him in. Andrew jiggled the handle of the main doors, finding them unlocked. He entered the sanctuary – aptly named in this moment – allowing the sunlight, which only hours ago had been cruel to him, to filter through the glass and paint his face in the brightest array of color. This time, unlike many times before, he saw that it was good.

Altar

Marley Wisby
Rhodes College

Ruddy

Connor Harding
The Ohio State University
Poetry

You've got a face like beetroot, my folks used to tell me
Placing their aging palms on the scarlet patches of my skin.

The red, they said, was a puddle of feelings left unchecked
Manifesting right next to my mouth, searching for a way out—

Bottlenecked like hot gas expanding in a limited space.
And so I grew with a transformative face, a metamorphic face

Sun-baked in summertime, washed-out by spring,
My head bloomed like geraniums after December's first bite—

Lighting cheek to cheek like a searing fever, a seasonal hue
Regarded by my mother's side as an Irish rite of passage.

I would press ice packs into the splotches, ill-tempered,
Scrubbing the cocktail of emotions like a mustard stain,

Scraping every last drop, watching the shame mix with condensation,
Drip from my chin, and linger like sweat on the brow of the sink.

Metamorphosis

Lief Liechty
Ohio Northern University

SAi

Osama O. Omoregbe
Towson University

Relief Work

Chirodip Naha
Ashoka University
Fiction

"I think we needed this flood. Sometimes these kinds of big calamities are required. God knows better, what do we mere humans know?"remarked Anwar Saheb. Then he took a sip of the tea that was given to him by his secretary Fazlul. After the first sip, he looked at Fazlul with his fiery, red eyes. Seeing Anwar Saheb's fiery stare, Fazlul shrank in fear.

"Fazlul, did you add sugar to the tea?"

Fazlul couldn't reply. He stood still, Anwar Saheb continued, "You people can't do anything properly. Don't you know I am a diabetic?"

"Should I get another cup of tea for you?" asked Fazlul.

Anwar Saheb felt like vomiting. He suspected that Fazlul must have added sugar to his tea intentionally. He knew these people very well. They can't tolerate him at all. Fazlul should have gotten another cup of tea, but like a fool, Fazlul was standing there staring at his face and incessantly asking, "Should I get another cup of tea, sir?" It irritated him more. "Such a stupid man," he said to himself.

Then he shouted,"Did you guys load all the goods for relief?"

"Yes sir," replied a scrawny man. He was wearing a pair of dark glasses. Maybe he didn't know that it is regarded as insolent to talk to a minister while flaunting sunglasses. But even though Anwar Saheb wasn't a proper minister, he was no less. He was the deputy minister. Very close to the minister and the ruling party. So what if the TV cameras didn't follow him everywhere as they followed the Minister Saheb, yes the print media did not always publish his speeches but still, he was the deputy minister, no less than any minister. He looked carefully at the scrawny man and asked, "Why are you wearing sunglasses?"

"I have an eye disease, sir."

"What disease?" "Ophthalmia." "What?"

"Conjunctivitis, Sir. Eye conjunctivitis. It's a very bad disease." Then he suddenly removed his dark glasses and looked at Anwar Saheb, straight into his eyes. Anwar Saheb almost choked with this unexpected sudden staring. The condition of his eyes was terrible; turbid, red, and teary. Anwar Saheb immediately ordered him to put the sunglasses back on and told him not to remove them again, and looked around and asked, "What are we waiting for? Let's start the journey."

"Sir, the boatman hasn't arrived yet."

"Why not?"

"I don't know sir; he was supposed to come at 9 A.M."

Anwar Saheb glanced at his watch. It was 11:20

now. He was supposed to come at 11 A.M. He arrived exactly at 11, but his secretary was ten minutes late and came at 11:10.

"Do I as a deputy minister have to tolerate all this nonsense now?" he asked himself.

"Sir, we have kept chairs on this boat. Please have a seat. I have sent people to fetch the boatman," remarked his secretary.

With a somber face, he sat on one of the empty chairs. There were more empty chairs on this boat, but no one joined him. He looked at everyone and said in a generous voice, "Why are you all standing? Sit down. We don't know when the boat will start moving. Nothing happens on time in this country."

"But sir, the flood always comes on time."

It came from the sunglass man. This witty reply astounded him. He was astonished by the fact that this man has the audacity to make fun of the deputy minister. He looked at him and asked, "Who are you? What are you doing here?"

"Sir, I am Rejwan. I work with the local cable T.V. I am here to make a video of the relief work."

"What do you mean by you are here to make a video of the relief work? Who told you to do that?"

"I was hired for a day by Hasan sir."

"Get off this boat, we don't need any videographers."

"Sir…"

"I told you to get down."

"Sir, Hasan sir told me."

"Hasan sir doesn't matter here, do what I say, get down now."

Rejwan immediately left that place. Anwar Saheb kept on shouting, "We are going to help the people, not to attend a marriage ceremony. We do not need any videographers. What do you people think? Am I not right?"

From the group, one of them said, "You are right, sir. Nowadays, it has become a fashion to take photos while helping people, people are busier clicking pictures than helping the needy. These young generations and their obsession with Facebook…"

Anwar Saheb cut the man's sentence midway. He shouted, "Where is the boatman? When will we start the journey and when will we return? Why is there so much mismanagement?" He was very irritated then. He again shouted, "Hasan Saheb, Hasan Saheb, please do something."

Hasan Saheb couldn't do much. The boatman was missing. A piece of news came that even the boatman's house had been submerged by the flood. Maybe some of his family members had died too. Anwar Saheb was losing his patience with each passing second, he was getting angry by the mismanagement.

The boat moved around 1:10 P.M. By that time Hasan Saheb had arranged another boatman. Anwar Saheb instructed them to search thoroughly, to go into such

places where other relief goods hadn't reached yet, such a place where he would be the first one to reach with a helping hand.

It happened many times that one set of people were receiving all the help and others were not getting anything. It was like feeding the overfed. Anwar Saheb looked at Hasan Saheb and said, "I believe within a few days this mismanagement would vanish. Planned relief work will arrive soon. What do you say, Hasan Saheb?"

"I also believe in it, Sir. When the Germans attacked Russia, it was total confusion, nobody knew where to go, what to do. It is the same here as well."

Anwar Saheb didn't reply. He knew his secretary deliberately talked in big terms just to show people that he is a very learned man. But, Anwar Saheb thought, he was the stupidest of all.

"Sir, will you drink some tea? We have gotten a big flask filled with tea."

"No."

"Have it, sir, you will feel good."

Anwar Saheb wanted to have some, but he refused. He is going to help people not to have a picnic. Rather he lit a cigarette and said, "It doesn't feel like we are on a river, this feels like an ocean."

"It is an ocean only, sir, riskier than an ocean I would say. But thank God, the winds are not flowing today. I have heard that on a windy day the waves can be as big as six to seven feet."

"What are you saying!"

"Yes, sir. Even a relief boat sank that day."

"You are scaring me now. How is your new boatman? Is he skilled enough?"

"Don't worry sir, this boat is safe. It has a steel body and a strong engine."

"In which direction are we moving by the way?"

"We haven't decided yet, sir."

"Then decide that quickly, where would we go otherwise, wherever our eyes take us?"

"That won't be a bad idea, sir. There is water everywhere, we would need a compass to figure out the direction."

"But we would need a destination."

"Of course, sir, I have told the boatman to follow the river and go straight and to stop if we find any dry place. All the dry places have become a sheltered camp."

"But first we need to know if those people received help before or not. I don't want to feed the engorged."

"Of course, sir."

"Who has the list of relief goods?"

"I have it, sir."

"What all do we have now?"

Hasan Saheb opened a file and started reading from the list.

"Fifty-two tents."

"Tents? What would they do with tents in the time

of the flood?"

"Sir, what can I do? These relief goods came from Iraq. I don't think they have ever faced floods. That's a country of deserts, not rivers. Other than tents they also sent us a thousand bottles of concentrated tomato juice."

"Bottles of tomato juice? How can that be any help to them?"

"Iraq sent these all last year for flood relief. Being stored in the godown for more than a year now, I think these juices have rotten. They are smelling awful."

"What else do we have?"

"We have around five hundred distilled water bottles. Each of them is a two litres bottle."

"What would they do with distilled water?"

"I don't know, sir. It seems like these are medical supplies. We have some cotton and medicines as well."

"I think they would beat us black and blue if we approach them with these useless goods."

"I don't doubt it, sir. They have beaten many relief parties before. Not only black and blue they have made them red and yellow as well."

"Are you ridiculing me?"

"No sir, I am telling you the truth. There was a relief party, maybe the education revolutionaries who approached them with goods like books, pens, pencils, and copies. Now, you tell me what these people would do with books and pencils when they are drowning in a flood and have nothing to eat. So, they had beaten them all and

taken their clothes."

These remarks of Hasan Saheb made Anwar Saheb very tense. Hasan Saheb could figure that out, and just to cheer him and the others he said, "We don't need to be fearful of getting a beating, sir. We are taking cooked meals with us."

"What meals?"

"Khichuri sir, a mixture of rice and pulses cooked together."

"I know how khichuri is cooked. Do not give me a lecture on this. What is the quantity of this?"

"We have enough for three hundred people. Other than that, we also have clothes and some cash as well."

"How much cash?"

"Around five thousand, sir."

"What do you mean by around five thousand? Tell me the exact figure."

"We had five thousand before, but we had to spend some money. The videographer and the new boatman cost a bit."

"Who told you to get a videographer?"

"Sir, these things are essential now. We need a record."

Anwar Saheb didn't speak after that. He sat there quietly. Seeing the level of water it was tough to say whether the boat is on a river or a sea. The sky was cloudy and overcast. Mild winds were blowing, even the mild winds were creating big waves. These big waves were hit-

ting the boat and were making it unstable now and then. This made Anwar Saheb more tense.

They wandered for around two hours but even then they couldn't find a single dry place. The boatman told Hasan Saheb that it was very unlikely to find a dry place if they keep on following the same route. He suggested that they might need to change the route to find a dry place but that would be very risky.

Anwar Saheb couldn't become more angry than this. He kept on murmuring, "Mismanagement, huge mismanagement."

Hasan Saheb tried to console him and said, "We couldn't figure that out before sir. But don't worry, please have something. You hadn't had anything since the morning. Should I tell them to give you some tea and biscuits?"

"Did you guys eat anything?"

"All of them sat down to eat some khichuri, but they couldn't. The khichuri has become sour now."

"Sour, why so?"

"Sir, it was prepared around 7 A.M. Now it is almost 4 P.M. It's a humid day; in this kind of weather, a man becomes sour, khichuri is just a food item."

After some time, the boat came to a halt. With a dejected look, Anwar Saheb was having salted biscuits with tea, he couldn't figure out that they were in the middle of a river or a sea. After this tiring journey, his long face had become longer. Then he could see that the sunglass man was still on the boat, he hadn't got off it.

He was taking pictures of the water. Anwar Saheb felt like throwing him into the water. But he knew that wasn't possible then. A deputy minister can't do that kind of thing publicly under the sunlight. He just took a deep sigh.

The boat was on a halt for a long time. Hasan Saheb looked at Anwar Saheb and asked, "What should we do sir, should we leave now?" Anwar Saheb didn't reply. Hasan Saheb continued, "It wouldn't be a good idea to stay here after dusk. It can rain anytime, also I have heard that this place is notorious for gruesome dacoits."

"Who would do dacoity in the middle of this flood? And what would they take, the sour Khichuri?"

"They can't even take that sir. I have told them to throw down the khichuri into the river. There is no point carrying sour food, it would upset anyone's stomach."

"Do whatever you feel like, just don't disturb me."

"One more thing sir, I told you about the five thousand, right? That is not exactly true. We had to buy oil for the boat engine, then the boatman and his two assistants took some money, then the videographer took some more, then sir we had to spend some more on the salted biscuits, for the tea and the bananas. Sir, in total we had spent around four thousand seven hundred fifty-seven taka only. Now we are left with two hundred and forty-three taka."

"Please don't buzz like a mosquito around my ears. Leave me alone."

Along with the sunglass man, Anwar Saheb felt

like throwing Hasan Saheb into the river as well. But he just sat there quietly. Then, the boat started moving back to the place from where it started its journey. Midway, they encountered a floating family. They were floating on a boat made of a banana tree. There were five of them: three children and their parents along with two goats and three hens. Seeing the family, all the people from the boat started shouting at them. After a lot of shouting, they managed to get close to the family. The family was given the whole amount of money which was left, approximately two hundred and forty-three taka. They were also given some clothes like lungis and sarees. Now Anwar Saheb intervened and told his men generously, "Give them a tent as well."

"What would they do with tents, sir?"

"They can do whatever they feel like. You just give them a tent."

"The tents are heavy, it would drown them, sir."

The family did not accept the tents, rather they left their banana boat and moved into the boat of Anwar Saheb. One of the children was a girl of ten or eleven. She was exhausted with the stresses of the past day. Just after embarking on the boat, she started vomiting. It frightened Anwar Saheb, "Is it cholera?"- he asked Hasan Saheb anxiously. The next moment he ran back to his cabin and locked himself there. His body temperature rose by a few degrees.

The following day some newspapers printed a

piece of news on the relief work of Anwar Saheb. "In these trying circumstances, our human development administration's deputy minister Mr. Anwar Hossain did a remarkable relief work campaign. His campaign once again proved how efficient our current government is! After working tirelessly under this calamitous climate our deputy minister himself has become sick and now is admitted into the state hospital. Our beloved human development minister said we need more valiant and benevolent people like Anwar Hossain for the development of this country. Who would not fear for his life while rescuing others. Our beloved minister couldn't control his emotion and quoted some lines of Tagore to lay emphasis more on this 'He, who would die without fear for his countrymen, would never die, would never die!' said our beloved minister."

tireless soles

Sakina Sehorewala
Ashoka University

Lullaby

Alexandra Stoddard
Brigham Young University, Idaho
Fiction

It's extra quiet this morning. Like the ocean decided it's too worn-out to rush to meet the sand, and maybe it will just brush up against it. Maybe the ocean always sounds like this. Maybe it's my own tiredness making me imagine that the ocean is quiet, too.

I'm sleeping on the couch, like I always do. But unlike most mornings, I'm not looking at my momma's ocean landscapes. I'm staring at my new roommate. A baby.

A baby that is like the ocean. They have both worn themselves out, crashing their voices all night. Now, both of them are so tired that all they can do is breathe a tiny murmur.

Its tummy is going in and out. There's no blankets for the baby. Momma said that babies can't move a blanket if it gets in front of their face, and they could die like that. But it looks so out of place without a blanket, lying in the middle of that too-big crib.

I've been watching the baby for a while, trying to figure out how something so small could be a real person. But I don't trust myself to touch it, because I might do something wrong. If a little blanket could stop a baby from breathing, what could a giant like myself do?

But it seems wrong to pretend it isn't there. So, I get up from the couch. My stealthy bare feet creep across bare wood floors. There it is. Little fingers, little tummy, little knitted hat on its little baby head. I sneak my fingers onto its hat and stroke the fabric. I hope the baby will have the strength to keep moving that tummy up and down with every breath.

I stay there for a while. Until the sunlight starts to poke curious fingers into the house. Until I hear the sigh of Momma's feet on the floorboards.

#

The walk to school feels weird. It's like the world doesn't realize that right in my house, right in the front room, there's a baby lying in a too-big crib. I guess babies are born every day. But I've never had one in my house before.

The ocean air blows salt down the street. Most people just see the way the salty wind wipes all the brightness from the paint. But when I feel it hit my face, it feels like breathing. Like a strong breath that comes from something so alive, you want to shout out that you're alive, too.

The school doesn't look alive, though. It looks like a skeleton thing, lying there, leering.

The school is arranged like a capital H, with two hallways on either side, and a connecting piece in the middle. My classroom, 16A, sits right in the middle of the middle, with my desk right in the middle of the room,

which is downright uncomfortable, because I'm a lefty, and my elbow always bumps Julia Davis' elbow, because she's a righty. I always tell my teachers that I like sitting on the left side of the classroom. If I sit on the left, the only one I'm bumping into is the wall. But I always get the middle.

Miss Cather walks in, shoes making that clip-clop noise that only teacher shoes make. She teaches the "slow learners." I'm okay with being a slow learner. But being a slow learner means that people think you're a troublemaker, and I don't like people thinking that about me. Also, you're stuck with people like Bradley Lucas, who screams and hits people. And not only is it hard being near him, but you also wonder if you might be a bad person, because you're lumped with him.

Miss Cather smiles her Tuesday smile. It's not as reassuring as her Monday smile, but not as faked as her Wednesday smile. I guess she thinks Mondays are a good time to make a fresh start, but Wednesdays are hopeless. They're right smack in the middle of the week, too late for a fresh start, too early to hope for the weekend. I happen to think that, too.

The journal prompt this morning is "My Favorite Thing." It used to be easy to think about a favorite thing. But today is different. Today, there's a baby living in my house, and that baby will live there forever.

I open up my journal and think about how I'll write it. Ten fingers, ten toes. So small that each breath

reminds me of a ship that crests enormous waves. But even though I can think about it, I can't seem to hold my pencil and think at the same time. So, I just crank out all the wrong words in my best handwriting.

"My Favrite Thing: Momma had a baby has little fingers and little toes. It takes deep breath. It lets its head be floppy and they are needing to be taken care of alot."

I want my teacher to see more than that, though. I want her to know that sometimes, you're not sure if something is your favorite thing. Because sometimes, your favorite thing has made everything different. And sometimes, you feel guilty for being afraid of something that you should love. I want Miss Cather to see that the baby changes the world around it, the same way the moon changes the tides. So, I add one more sentence:

"The baby is different and maybe my favorite thing but I do not know how to write all the things."

My writing has taken up all fifteen minutes, so I pass my journal up to the front. I hope Miss Cather likes it.

#

I am in a foul mood coming home from school. Miss Cather did not give me a good grade at all on my journal. The ocean wind storms at me, and I storm back. If she had read it right, she would have seen that I meant a lot more than those stupid words on that page. But nobody ever reads my stuff right.

Momma is sitting in one of the rocking chairs on our front porch. But when she sees me coming up the

street like a storm cloud, she stops rocking.

I wonder if my momma feels strange, being a momma all over again. She doesn't look like she feels strange. She looks tired, but she looks like that a lot.

"Hop in the bath," she tells me. That's what she says whenever I'm in a bad mood, because when I'm feeling stormy, I feel prickly all over, and I have to scrub away all the bad feelings.

So, she follows me in, and that's when I see the baby, curled up in its crib.

"Why is the baby sleeping?" I ask, quietly as I can.

Momma smiles, and the little puffs under her eyes squish up. "She's a baby, babies sleep a lot. Not that you would believe that from the racket she made last night."

"I don't think I need a bath," I tell her.

"Okay," Momma says.

And like Momma isn't even there, I sit right down in front of the baby's crib. I carefully study its face, trying to figure out who it is. And even though I'm staring at it with a heat, the baby doesn't wake up or anything. And I can't see it, because I'm being very still, but I can feel Momma smiling.

#

I get up about fifteen minutes later, storm-free and ready to talk. I stretch out my stiff legs and pad-pad over to Momma's studio.

Everything in here is all shimmery. There are gauzy curtains and heavy wooden easels. And all over

are things that let you know Momma has been there, like half-empty mugs, or paint brushes sitting in paint, or bumpy seashells. But the best part is Momma's paintings.

Her canvases are scattered all over. Some are paintings of our town's weather-worn stores, looking like the wild west. Some of them are people's faces, with emotions that I don't understand. But mostly, Momma paints the ocean.

Rows of them line the walls. Some oceans are rough and unforgiving, like the god of the ocean is roaring mad. Some are foggy and uncertain, like a photograph when it starts to fade. My momma paints the ocean like it's alive.

"Momma?" I call, taking a deep breath of the way that room smells.

Momma is by the window, painting light onto an ocean sunset. But she turns and smiles at me when I call her name.

"Right here," she says, real mellow. I think what makes Momma a good artist is that she is quiet, so she can see things the way they are. Even last night, when the baby was screaming, Momma wasn't mad or loud about it.

"What's wrong, baby?" she asks.

"Miss Cather read my journal wrong," I say, even though I know Miss Cather read my journal right, and it was me writing it wrong that messed everything up.

"Hmm."

"I wrote down that my favorite thing is the baby.

But she didn't understand what I meant. I just couldn't put it down right."

"I'm sorry. Sometimes things don't come out quite right," Momma says, pointing to the wall where she stacks paintings she doesn't like. "And sometimes, other people just don't understand what you mean."

"Yeah," I say. "I just wish it could have been better."

"I wish that about everything," Momma says with a laugh, then asks, "Do you have any homework?

I shift. "Yeah."

Momma sighs, long and hard. "Okay."

Sometimes I feel like me having homework is more like Momma having homework. Every night, Momma sits down with me, and makes sure I got everything right. Sometimes I want to just tell her I don't have any homework, I don't need any food, and she doesn't need to do anything for me, because I know that having a child that is a slow learner is hard, because it's hard to be a slow learner, and sometimes, the little puffs under my momma's eyes turn all purple, especially the past few months, with the baby growing in her. So, I shuffle out and get started on homework, because it feels like the least I can do.

#

It's dinnertime, and I'm not done with my homework. It takes me a while, to get my brain to focus on the paper, then to focus on every word, then what the words

mean, and by then I'm so turned around that I need to take a break.

Momma's setting the table around me, so I put my schoolwork away.

"I'm working on it," I say.

"Hmm," she sighs, like maybe that's the problem. She uses her spoon to dip softly into her soup. We eat a lot of soup, because all you have to do is heat up the water, and you have dinner.

I take a big bite, cramming noodles onto my spoon. It's the type of bite you take when you're mad for no reason, really, but you know your momma's upset, and the fact that she's upset gets you all riled up, because you think that maybe she's upset about you.

Maybe Momma can tell I'm angry-eating, because she gives me a squishy-eyed smile. It only makes me feel stormier. I slurp up more noodles as she dips her spoon into the broth, stirring it like it's tea. It's funny how people can have a conversation where they don't say a thing. Suddenly, I feel guilty that I'm arguing with Momma, even though I'm not saying anything. Really, I'm more sad than stormy, sad because I can't do anything to wipe away the purple beneath her eyes. Those are tired-marks, not marker-marks, and I don't have a magic eraser that can make tired disappear. So, I dip my spoon real soft into my soup, just the way that Momma does. She smiles.

"Am I stupid?" I blurt out, just to keep my other questions from spilling out.

Momma tells me, "There are smarts of all kinds. You have so many smarts, I don't even know where to begin." I wish that that would be enough to tide me over, but I'm filled with a hunger to feel alright again.

"I don't feel those smarts," I tell her.

"Sometimes you can feel like that," Momma says. "Because sometimes you're looking in the wrong places for those smarts. There's people who say there's only one way of being smart, and it's our job to never believe them."

"Okay. Where should I look for my smarts at?"

"You just let them find you. I never thought about being an artist until I was nineteen years old. And even then, I couldn't believe it was something people would pay me for."

"Your art is beautiful," I tell her. But Momma doesn't hum her happy hum. She sighs, and I'm reminded I'm more worried about her than I am about me.

"Are you okay, Momma?"

"Just tired! I'm falling asleep just sitting here." And I can't think of anything to say that would make a person be less tired. So, I slurp up my noodles in silence, ignoring the prickly feeling in my eyes.

#

It's hard to wake up today, because I'm bone-tired, which means that my tired seeps through my skin and settles down in my bones, where it yawns and drags around. The baby doesn't understand that bedtime is for sleeping,

and I need to get up at exactly seven fifteen. So, when Momma comes in on her happy-humming feet, I wrap my head in my blanket.

Momma sighs. "Tired?"

I nod my blanketed head.

"Sorry, baby, but you have to get up."

I hold a hand out for five more minutes.

"I already let you sleep in. It's that time," she tells me.

I unravel my blanket from my head and drag my way through getting ready.

When I walk out of the bathroom, Momma is wrapped up in the baby. I guess it woke up screaming from all the noise I was making. Which makes the morning seem stormy already because that's not what the house sounds like, not ever. And I don't like loud noises.

Breakfast is cereal, which is fine, but I have trouble pouring the milk by myself. I can stand on tiptoe for a bowl, slide the drawer open for a spoon, shake loops of cereal into my bowl, but I can never line up the heavy gallon just right. My hands always stutter, and slip goes the milk, all over the counter. So, I get bowl, spoon, cereal, and call over to Momma.

"Momma! I need help with the milk."

Momma doesn't sigh, and she definitely doesn't hum. She groans, an ugly sound, and throws up her hands. She storms to the refrigerator, lugs out the milk, and drowns my loops in too much milk. She storms back

to the baby, who is pants-less on top of my dresser. I take my cereal in quiet hands and sit at the table.

I eat every last one of those loops without a single slurp. My quiet hands rinse out my bowl and pick up my schoolbag. I open up the fridge again, because Momma always puts my lunch in there. But no lunch. I check the entire fridge, just to be sure. Nope.

Momma is still struggling to dress the baby, who is screaming so loud I have to cover my ears, and I hate, hate, hate myself as I walk up to Momma and say, "Momma, can I have my lunch?"

Momma looks at me then, and I feel just awful. Her face looks like one of her paintings, with emotion etched deep into her eyes, and all I can focus on are her eyes, even though it's usually hard to look straight at them, because now I see how the purple coloring the skin underneath does not work well with the soft blue, and I want to tell Momma that I don't like this painting, it belongs in the stack of canvases she's going to repaint, because if I could repaint a moment, I would do it.

"Shoot," she says, and then, as if the world hadn't quite shattered enough the first time, she says it again. "Shoot." Like that. "I forgot."

She sighs past me into the kitchen, leaving me with the screaming baby. I cover my ears tightly. It is so loud.

"You need to knock that off," I tell it. "You're being a nuisance."

Even though I am using my best Miss Cather voice, the baby isn't listening.

"Hey. You see those purple marks under Momma's eyes? That's from you, not from me."

I am angry. So angry at this thing that has made everything confused. To me, the baby looks like the letters on a page, or the meaning behind someone's eyes, shifting and changing, something I am supposed to understand but never will.

I watch as the baby howls. Is it angry? Is it mad because all it can do is scream, and no one will understand what it means? Is it angry because Momma and I say words it doesn't know yet? Maybe, me and that baby are alike, in this one way: we're both storming at the world because we can't find a place for us that fits just right. Neither of us can find a person who can hear us and understand, because neither of us know what words to use.

"It's not fair," I tell it. "I understand."

For the first time, I reach out. I touch her. Hold onto her fingers, her little hands that are so mighty.

And, holding onto her good like that, I finally work up the nerve to say her name.

"Caroline." Like it's a lullaby, like I am the waves luring a person off to sleep. "Caroline." Like I'm not scared of being a sister. "Caroline," I say, trying to taste the sound of who she is.

Dragardening

Anna Welsh
Kansas State University

Boy

Katie Lundberg
Johns Hopkins University

Patchwork

Emma Carter
North Carolina State University
Poetry

My Nana made quilts.
They were taut bandages strapped over
patches of bloodied knees skinned on the pavement
out front in the arteries of North Raleigh.
She was always gentle, leather palms warm and soft
between needlepoint and patches.

Through the dandelion summers, I stretch
back and forth down NC 49 to her. She lives in the oaks:
a tender whisper through branches, guiding me. Always reliable.

Today, she makes her home under North Carolina's thumbnail,
in the cracks of Matthews. Her hands still weave with the same
worn thread, stitching my broken flesh together.
She shakes, now.

Pango Print

Peyton Farnum
Colorado State University

@

Kyra Lisse
Franklin & Marshall College
Nonfiction

My favorite person in all of Providence is Jagdish Sachdev. I didn't know his last name when I knew him; I had to look it up on the internet now. At the time he was probably in his seventies, and he owned and operated SPECTRUM-INDIA, a business then forty-nine years in the making. Google describes his corner shop on Thayer Street as a "metaphysical supply store." It is rich with aroma and color: white sage soap, pink Himalayan sea salts, orange chakra candles, Japanese incense sticks, tarot cards, jeweled bangle bracelets, meditation books, and hundreds of other items that were unfamiliar but alluring. Change, it seemed to me back then, had only happened around the store. There was a Ben & Jerry's on one side and a tiny Tex-Mex joint on the other; a sneaker store and a FedEx print shop around the corner; and of course the surrounding pavement now sweltered with necessities not known to '67: noise-making pedestrian signals; seatbelt mandates; same sex marriage; a weekly art festival called WaterFire; and Ariana Grande's *Dangerous Woman*.

I stopped in to see Jagdish a handful of times during my month-long summer program at Brown. I'd first met him after my parents had moved me into my dorm, and we'd decided to do some exploring downtown.

On that particular visit, he'd gifted me a large yellow peacock feather and invited me back anytime.

"Plenty more where that came from," he had said, as if a free feather were incentive enough for a sixteen-year-old girl from Philly.

And yet maybe it was, because I did return. I showed up at his tinkling door two weeks later, feeling lonely, displaced. Like I might cross Thayer without looking both ways.

"Kyra!" he called out, leaning forward on the counter. "How good it is to see you! How are you? How is the writing going?"

We engaged in a brief back-and-forth—I spun some yarn about having made lots of friends—and then his smiling visage aged, turned hard.

"You know, Kyra, I believe that the future of writing is Twitter."

My face must've performed some odd contortionist trick, for he continued:

"What I mean is, people today, they want short. No novels, no books. Life now is"—and here he snapped his fingers—"*quick-quick-quick*. Just like that. Do you understand?"

I nodded. He stepped out from behind the counter and approached his box of peacock feathers. I found myself hoping that, despite his mercantile generosity, and despite the growing obsolescence of livelihoods like his, Providence would continue to provide for him.

"Write short, Kyra," he said then, handpicking a tall red feather. "This is the best advice I can give."

Own the Day!

Osama O. Omoregbe
Towson University

Where am I Supposed to Put This?

Marley Wisby
Rhodes College

POEM WITH NO MIDDLE

Margaret O'Brien
The Ohio State University
Poetry

At noon I drove past
the oral surgeon who plugged up
nine cavities in my nine-year-old mouth.
It was December—he let me keep my puffy coat on
under the blue sheet—and to my mother's alarm,
the first sticky morsel I ate after waiting
the grueling three hours was a Sour
Patch Kid from the pack you bought for me.

All your clothes are in plastic tubs

in our dining room. A frequent
shopper—there must be ten of them,
all brimming—the clothes now
compressed, no longer taking
your shape. We stick to the living room
for dinner while I dream the brawn
to stack each tub atop the other
and crawl to you.

Butterflies

Katie Lundberg
Johns Hopkins University

Safe as Milk

Eleanor McDowell
University of Vermont

SWEET DEAR, WHERE HAVE YOU GONE?

Natalie Keener
The Ohio State University
Poetry

as a child I watched the world
beyond the minivan window for birds—

robins, ravens, blue jays, mourning doves,
red-headed woodpeckers—each one

translating to a tally. quivering flesh
and quick eyes condensed to a thin streak of lead.

I cannot remember when this collection
became tiresome and dissolved

but today I had no notepad or pencil
to mark you down. twenty years in Ohio failed

to introduce us before this morning moment, light
filtering through gray film around the sun. your still body

trying to tug itself off concrete, white-spotted wings
tangled in confusion at your current state. *how did I get here.*

how did you get here, little thing? forever looking west,
sunsets soaking into dark feathers. how long will it take
you

to forget the taste of blue? I return an hour later
to ask, tease your response from chilled beak,

but the sidewalk no longer tethers your small body.
I can hear the rasp between shovel and sidewalk;

hurriedly, I bury it in wing strokes.

Marcelle

Eleanor McDowell
University of Vermont

Founded in 2001, Collision Literary Magazine
publishes the work of undergraduate students
not just from the University of Pittsburgh,
but from all over the world.