| collision literary magazine
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Dear reader,

This year Collision was honored to receive almost double the expected amount of creative and colorful submissions. This influx initiated a few production complications, leading to its ultimate postponement. Thank you to everyone who contributed and waited for its publication.

It is a relief to know that despite these troubling times, there are artists and writers striving to create, express, and transform. Our society needs aristry more than ever. I hope you enjoy these pieces. Our staff certainly did.

Sincerely,
Tricia Caucci
Editor in Chief | Collision Literary Magazine
Collision Literary Magazine owes many thanks to:

The University of Pittsburgh for their continued support and their promotion of the arts.

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

Jennifer Lee, for her extensive knowledge and her endless enthusiasm for our experimental endeavors.
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Absorbed in Despondency

Zeppelin Dufour
School of the Art Institute of Chicago
We’re standing in a semicircle at one corner of the gym, the darker corner without all the paper lantern lights, while the girls dance at the other end. The school is small: thirty kids are here, and three chaperones who know they won’t have to do anything but stand and watch. One of them—Mr. Silveira—leers at the girls all the time. We know this because the girls have told us. Some of them joke about changing into special outfits before asking him oh-so-nicely for better grades, paper extensions, or other favors. We laugh, even though they’re not really joking. It’s actually a warning to us: their bodies hold all the power. We’re reading *The Iliad* in English class, and Helen of Troy has power, enough to move gods and men to war. We agree in our little huddle that Helen of Troy could skip school entirely, and Mr. Silveira would still give her an A. We pass our hatred for Helen around the circle like a sacrament. The power under these girls’ shirts! It was something no one had prepared us for. They talk about puberty, but they don’t talk about the power.
After twenty minutes of debate, we agree finally that there were warning signs of weakness all along. Mr. Silveira’s wandering eyes, for starters. Being assigned *The Iliad*, too, or the porn we found on Mr. Lenders’s laptop—*Naughty Babysitters*, one of us remembers—or just the way our fathers sigh and tuck a Budweiser at the sound of our mothers’ voices.

There are exceptions, of course—not all of us have fathers to observe. We apologize to Haris, who has stood in our huddle without saying a word this entire time. His father disappeared a year ago. The details are murky. There are rumors of another woman. We don’t make fun of him for being a bastard—not now, at least. Our consensus is that Haris’s mother is a bitch, and that’s probably why his dad left. We acknowledge that Haris understands the power better than any of us, having seen it overcome his father. Haris nods sagely, stroking his bare chin.

Mr. Silveira sidles up to us and clasps Haris by the shoulder. *You studs can’t get any girls if you stay here all night*, he says, smiling at us. We laugh, thinking it strange a chaperone should be encouraging sex between minors. Even after he’s gone, the smell of whiskey hangs heavy around us. We agree that he’s trying to engage in a fuck-by-proxy situation—what’s the word? *Vicarious*, says Jamie, *and where the hell did Haris go?* We swivel our heads without moving. Haris has slipped away from the protection of our circle. Gone too is Mr. Silveira. One
of us whistles as if to say Oh My. I’d rather fail English than fuck Silveira, Jamie says. Jamie’s another exception to this issue of power, we realize. We ask Jamie who he would go to war for. None of you, that’s for sure, he says, but it’s too late because we’ve already begun chanting for the fair maiden Haris of Troy. Jamie wrinkles his nose. I’m positive he’s straight, Jamie says, I’ve tried. We suggest that if he and Silveira were fucking then perhaps Jamie just wasn’t his type. Maybe, but have you seen me? and he frames his chin and lifts his eyes like a model. A chorus of yeah yeah yeahs pass around the circle, and Jamie laughs, enjoying our attention. He doesn’t know—or maybe he does—that we’re intensely jealous of him because he’s an exception to Helen’s influence. Gay Paris wouldn’t have bat an eye in Helen’s direction. But maybe he would have pissed everyone off to fuck Achilles. That’s a book, I think, says Jamie.

Before it can get too quiet between us, Haris returns, looking normal. I went to pee, he says, noticing our curiosity. We ask him: is he sure about that? Rudy grabs him by the shoulders and leans in close. You got some balls on your breath, he says. Haris pushes him hard. No, I fucking don’t, shut the fuck up, Rudy. Rudy moves to push Haris back, but Jamie holds him in place. We tell Rudy to cool it, it’s fine, and after a couple seconds, he’s calm. Sorry, he mutters, I’m glad you and Silveira aren’t fucking. We all nod. We really are relieved;
the rumors about Mr. Silviera hang over us darkly, but they hang darker still over the girls. That’s why their jokes aren’t funny. It gets quiet again. We’re all thinking about the warning signs. Rudy is the one who finally says it out loud: Think we’ll end up like Mr. Lenders? Jerking off to babysitter porn on our work computers? We all shake our heads and say fuck no, Rudy, of course not—but how can any of us be sure? No one’s prepared us for handling that power. No one had prepared our fathers or our teachers either, evidently. Maybe that’s why everything is so fucked up. There’s no delicacy, says Jamie, and we all nod in agreement even though each of us—Jamie included—only have a vague notion of what that could possibly mean.

We look over at the girls for the first time tonight. We only know them in the daylight. They are our lab partners and study partners and locker partners and friends, but now that we’re standing in the dark all dressed up in our black and brown suits it feels as though something invisible and impenetrable has wedged itself between our two little groups. Like Pride and Prejudice, says Jamie. We nod; we’ve never read Pride and Prejudice. The gym still smells like basketball, despite the janitor’s best efforts. The girls’ shoes squeak over the music, and we try not to stare at their skirted hips for too long.

It wasn’t anything you cared about until you woke up one morning and there it was: rock-hard desire. Rudy was the first among us to watch porn, way back in fifth
grade. Is that a warning sign, too? No, no, Rudy says, his face red even in the dark, lots of kids did that in my last school. Besides, I threw up the first time I watched it. We all Oh at once. This is an interesting development. Like, projectile vomit? asks Haris, and dry heaves for emphasis. Rudy laughs and says, Yeah, all over my keyboard. We each begin to dry heave in turn, attempting to outdo one another in exaggeration, until Jamie’s voice rises over us. Please fucking stop, I’m actually going to vomit, he says. We stop. Normally we wouldn’t. We stop because we respect Jamie’s immunity to Helen.

We look again at the other end of the gym, careful to appear inconspicuous and uncaring. The girls are still dancing, though some of them have broken off into pockets of three or four to sit criss-cross and cool off. Silveira’s back at it, Haris points out. We follow Mr. Silveira’s gaze to a group of girls fanning themselves with their small, delicate hands, their legs bare against the chill gym floor. By the light of the paper lanterns, we identify them as Avra, Sophia, and Marina. Their power is evident and it roots us to the spot. It certainly has rooted Mr. Silveira. These three were so plain-looking at school, but now with the help of makeup and dresses they each appeared like a miniature Helen of Troy. Anyone talks to Marina before me and I’ll kill them, says Rudy. We all murmur our assent, sympathy and understanding washing over us in great waves of heat. Still, though, there remains the issue
of the warning signs. Who would we become? We stop looking at the Helens and turn to one another. Which one of us would become the next Mr. Silveira? The next Mr. Lenders? The next runaway father?

*I’m going to go talk to them,* Rudy says, and we all encourage him. Go, go, we say. Be our Paris. He falters even as he steps forward. Someone’s gotta come with me, I’m not going alone. We laugh and there’s a collective cry of Just go, come on! But Jamie steps up and takes Rudy by the arm and says, *I’ll go with you. I mean, I don’t give a shit about girls anyway.* It didn’t seem weird for their arms to be touching, not weird like the way adults would sometimes touch you. *I’ll go too,* says Haris, and we agree that it would only be appropriate, seeing as how he’s seen the power work firsthand on his father. *Time for us to break some hearts,* says Jamie. *Well, time for me at least.* We tell Jamie that the girls already know he’s gay, but it’s fine: he can be our big gay Trojan horse. So it’s Haris of Troy, Jamie the gay Trojan horse, and Rudy, and by the time our heroes have crossed the threshold to reach the Helens, our faces are already flush from bellyaching laughter, and we’ve forgotten all about the warning signs.
Sink Kitty!
Peyton Farnum, Colorado State University
Second Prize

Stalemate

Tobias Tegrotenhuis
University of Colorado at Denver
Poetry

I still see the scene
through a grey cathode crackle, pixels
amid hair-thrumming static: she kneels
and lifts her father’s sword. The hair
feathers apart and drops
boneless to the mat, conquered. Riding to war,
she parts the night like a comb.

My mother sensed my dissent. Fearing a copycat, she
hid the Mulan VHS on the bathroom’s top shelf
next to my father’s hair clippers.
I’ve inherited so much from
my father—his hair’s thickness but not its
curls or color, his lanky Dutch skeleton but not
his politics. I’ve inherited my mother’s
mistrust of me.

That is why I ask her to do it. We
are anxious square-jawed doubles
in the mirror. Brownness gives us both a mustache
that she alone painstakingly shaves.
  *You’ll look like a boy if I do this*, she whispers at our reflections. I am scalded by her preemptive grief. She is afraid of sweeping up a daughter’s scraps on the floor after snipping me into my father’s son,

but I want to say, *Mother, that’s the point*. I want to say, *Mother, I haven’t died in battle yet*, that *this haircut is a promise to stay alive, long enough to make my body a place for me, not you, to come home to after the war.*

What I say instead: *It’ll grow out*. I’ll let her believe that I’ll grow back, someday, into the daughter she waited years to give my name.

  In the mirror, she has the closed face of a mourner. The scissors lift, and open.
Skin 2
Milla Peerutin
University of Cape Town
In the months of June to December, the grounds around PAREF Rosehill grew heavy with rain.

It was a custom of us students to watch where we stepped during this time. It was all too easy to miss them: black and yellow insects, not more than an inch long, digging their way out of the muddy ground face first. They found their way into the deepest corners of classrooms, in the depths of bags and inside cubbyholes, stinking horribly of earth and dirt when crushed underfoot. They were pests, by all means, but my classmates and I didn’t even know the meaning of the word. They were, for some reason, objects of endless fascination to us. During recess times, over snacks, we debated the exact number of their legs, their coloration, whether or not they were centipedes or millipedes. We stooped down in the playground dirt to watch them creep by, never minding our white socks or the hems of our skirts. We stared vacantly at their travels during boring class periods. The braver girls would even pick them up by their tails and fling them at...
other people.

The most fascinating of them, the ones we traded stories of like they were currency, were the ones that had been crushed, but were not dead quite yet. The ones we had seen half-dead, their tails flattened by the wheel of a roller bag or a Mary-Jane shoe, but somehow still crawling, still alive.

Eventually, we came to call this time of year centipede season.

***

The word ‘PAREF’ is an acronym. It stands for the “Parents for Education Foundation,” which was established in 1975 as an initiative for educators who wanted to operate schools that recognized parents as the primary educators of their children. The PAREF system was first developed in Europe in the 1950s, when St. Josemaría Escrivá de Balaguer y Albás, the founder of a conservative Roman Catholic sect called Opus Dei, preached for parents to take a greater responsibility and primary role in the education of their children. Although the PAREF system is being implemented in learning institutions across the world, it seems to have taken a particular foothold in the Philippines, due in no small part due to the hold Roman Catholicism has in the country.
Aside from education, PAREF’s primary focus is teaching the practices of the aforementioned Opus Dei. On the Feast of the Guardian Angels, October 2nd, 1928, St. Josemaría Escrivá experienced a vision from God while on a spiritual retreat in Madrid. This vision supposedly revealed to him his vocation, which he had been praying for for many years, and what would become his life’s work: the creation of Opus Dei, meaning “Work of God” in Latin. A young priest training in law at the time, Escriva firmly believed that secular life could be spiritually sanctifying. Hence the primary principle of Opus Dei: the pursuit of Christian holiness through day-to-day life.

In 1982, Pope John Paul II, who was a devoted supporter of Opus Dei, declared it the first and only personal prelature of the Roman Catholic Church. Its title became in full: the Prelature of the Holy Cross and Opus Dei. In return for this declaration, Opus Dei has largely accepted the Church’s teachings without question, and passed them on in all of its worldly endeavors: prayer groups, schools and colleges, and Opus Dei “centers.” Since Opus Dei is not a religious order, its members do not take formal vows upon entry to the organization, nor does their status under the Church change. Rather, in the spirit of its teachings, Opus Dei makes use of a secular instrument in initiating its members: a contract. Members agree to live according to the teachings of Opus Dei and carry out its apostolic activities, and
in return, Opus Dei promises to provide the members with spiritual formation in the form of weekly classes and annual religious retreats.

This is what Opus Dei is on paper: what I’ve gathered from what I learned in my years at Rosehill and my own research. I would not find out about the controversies that surrounded Opus Dei until much later. Years after graduating from PAREF Rosehill, I found out that Opus Dei has been called—both in jest and complete seriousness—a Catholic cult, which is, ironically, among the least of the accusations leveled against it. But at the time, growing up sheltered and naive in the boondocks of a rural city, Opus Dei was simply my day-to-day reality. I did not feel as if I was growing up in a cult. Even later on, when I was grasping the idea that perhaps my childhood was not normal, I did not feel as if I was experiencing anything but the average Filipino child’s education in Roman Catholicism. In some ways, Opus Dei provided a deceptively simple way of living, even for a child: work hard, live with integrity, and offer up any hardships you encountered up to heaven.

Despite having little to no experience with religion before Rosehill, I was a quick learner. I would wake up in the mornings and obediently ship myself to school, where I would wait patiently for the morning bell to ring. Classes began and ended with a prayer, of which we had many: one for every occasion, seemingly. We had Homeroom
every Monday, during which our class advisors would discuss with us the “Virtue of the Month”: integrity, chastity, discipline, etcetera. Religion classes took place thrice a week, along with your usual fare of Math, Science, Literature and Composition. Alongside the occasional school-wide Mass, and the frequent encouragement to go to Confession to keep our souls clean, we were required to attend vigils every first Friday of the month.

Back then, although I didn’t think they were any different from normal Roman Catholic dogma, the teachings of Opus Dei were almost all I knew. They were larger than life, the dominant force in my yet to be fully defined worldview. To me, the world was almost black and white: defined by the sharp distinction between the holy (my teachers, the members of Opus Dei, and the Church) and the yet-to-be-evangelized (everyone else, including myself most of the time).

Outside my school, however, I was much less religious—hence the fact that it didn’t even occur to me that whatever I was practicing wasn’t necessarily “normal” Roman Catholicism. For all I knew, since I didn’t go to Mass every Sunday or practice my faith outside school doors, this was what everyone did. Part of me was desperate to fit in at Rosehill for reasons I couldn’t pinpoint just yet. With a few exceptions, the small circle of friends I had amassed were among the most religious in our batch, having been acquainted with Opus
Dei before they could even speak. They carried rosaries around their wrists. They went to Mass during lunch periods while everyone else ate. They knew by heart the hymns that we sang every time we’d go to a vigil— in Latin.

As I grew older, I began overcompensating. Something in me felt inherently sinful— whether it was the fact that I didn’t go to Mass every Sunday, or that I didn’t come from an Opus Dei family, or that my teenage mind was being clouded by hormones and thoughts of sexual activity. I read books of Bible stories cover to cover. I made sure to pay extra special attention in my daily religion classes. I started and ended my school day with a visit to the chapel, wherein I would beg God to forgive me for a litany of offenses. No wrongdoing was too small, no blight on my soul capable of being overlooked. Opus Dei’s focus on holiness in day-to-day life meant that no mistake, however unrelated to religion, was off the table. Any transgressions against God, instead of being simple slipups, were instead vehement denials of my ultimate destiny of becoming a saint, and furthermore, Opus Dei’s mission of sanctifying the world.

I remember a summer in primary school, when I decided to do some advanced reading of my religion books in preparation for my grade school debut. Quickly growing bored, I decided to flip all the way to the end to see what would be tackled at the end of the semester.
I landed on the chapter about John’s Book of Revelations. In it were vivid descriptions of what the end of the world would look like: the famines, floods, and earthquakes that would ravage the world; the visions of the Serpent and Four Horsemen; the rise of the Antichrist. At the end of the world, the book said, the dead would rise and be judged by Christ in the flesh. Each and every sin of each and every person in the world would be publicly announced, for all to hear, and so we had to endeavor to live Christian lives of which we would not be ashamed. The thought perturbed me. I wept and would not admit to my mother why I was crying.

***

Sometime in the 6th grade, something began to change among my classmates. We had begun the process of puberty, and with that came the disturbing revelation of our own sexual capability. Being an all-girls school, there was no one for the students of PAREF Rosehill to experiment on but each other. Conversations about the centipedes and their curiosities soon gave way to gossip about other girls: specifically, those who were crushing on each other. For my part, I had chosen to distance myself from these conversations. Instead, I chose to focus on the last shreds of my childhood and appearing as innocent as possible. I made it a point to be seen playing with the centipedes still. I played with pens in class, pretending they were
dolls. When conversations erred towards the rumors, I steered them
towards more palatably childish topics. All the while, word on the
street was that the rumors had caused some girls to start harming
themselves, pricking themselves with the needles we used for Home
Economics or attempting to slash themselves with dull scissors.

All this came to a head when—presumably—the teachers decided to
take action on these rumors. One day, during a Religion class meant
to teach us Catholic moral theology, my batchmates and I were in-
stead taken to the faculty office, which was strangely empty. Twenty
or so of us students were instructed to crowd around a small black
laptop sitting on the teacher’s desk. Perhaps my classmates had seen
this coming. But I found myself none the wiser, blissfully unaware of
the gravity of the situation I found myself in as I stared at the laptop’s
blank screen.

Years after the incident, this is what I remember: a woman sitting
in a church tearfully admitting that she had been struggling with
“same-sex attraction” since she was a young girl. “Why me, God?”
she said, echoing what she had supposedly asked him time and time
again. For decades, she explained, she tried to deny the truth of her
sexuality: dating God-fearing men, going to Bible studies, seeking
counsel from priests who, oftentimes, simply turned her away. She
had eventually resigned herself to the fact that her existence would
be perpetually sinful.

The video faded out to reveal a priest, who explained that LGBT Catholics were no longer damned to hell, as we were taught before. (This was news to me, sitting in dawning horror of what was happening in front of me.) They were instead called to live a life of chastity and celibacy, not to seek out partnerships or marriages, but rather live as examples of God’s everlasting grace and forgiveness. Their vocation was to remain celibate for the duration of their lives: single, sexless, sanctified. The video ended with the woman from the start, coming back to exclaim that God was good for accepting her entirely as she was.

Later that day, I would find myself openly weeping in the bathroom, with what I told myself was sympathy for the girls who were clearly being targeted by that cruel act. But in truth, what I couldn’t stomach was the thought that there was something being demanded of me that I couldn’t give. For all I didn’t know about sex and its specific trappings, I knew I wanted to make love to a girl; I wanted to kiss, and touch, and do all the things “normal” couples got to do with impunity. My thought was that no matter what I did, no matter how perfect I was in the practice of my faith, there was something that God was forever going to keep from me. It hurt deeply, and I would carry the sting of betrayal with me for many years after the fact.
I suppose that I had always known, in some subconscious and abstract way, that I liked both girls and guys. But this was the first time I had encountered homophobia so obvious and apparent, and ironically, this was what crystallized my sexuality into being. The idea initially came with some level of relief–finally putting a name to the feeling of “otherness” that had chased me around in my adolescence. But that same feeling soon gave way to sheer terror. In the eyes of Roman Catholicism and Opus Dei, I was inherently wrong in some way that I couldn’t change. In a way I wasn’t sure I wanted to change. All of a sudden, I felt helpless, and more damned to hell than ever before.

It was at this point that I began to withdraw: retreating from my family, to whom I wouldn’t come out until years later, and my friends, around whom the pervasive feeling of otherness was beginning to feel choking. I began to take refuge, as many queer kids do, in my computer. In the burgeoning realms of social media, I had found spaces that not only promoted, but celebrated queerness. I discovered blogs about the LGBT experience. I read fanfiction that treated queer relationships as run-of-the-mill, just like any other. I finally found a word for what I was feeling, for my identity that
was rapidly taking shape: WLW, sapphic, bisexual. In these particular spaces, people were wholly proud of their queerness, of the things that set them apart from other people. And although I never personally interacted with them, I began to think of these people as my role models.

To this end, I made no secret of my newfound sexuality to my friends, who, rather than berate or bully me, decided to simply ignore the fact of my bisexuality. I told myself I was grateful for this. The showing of the video in Religion class did nothing to stem the tide of the rumors, and they continued to grow in number and gravity as we progressed to high school. My friends and I discussed, in hushed tones, girls who had been caught kissing in the bathrooms, girls who were dating in secret despite their families’ disapproval, girls who were exchanging lesbian porn on USBs. Like before, I endeavored to distance myself from these rumors, but now there was a sense of heightened stakes. If I wasn’t sanitized enough—if I was too apparent or obvious in my love for girls—I would surely be turned away, a subject of the same invasive and cruel rumors I took part in peddling. And I knew at my core that if I tried to force it—tried to beg, as my most primal instincts told me to do—I would simply be told that they loved me in spite of my sexuality. This, instead of what I truly desired: for both my sexuality and I to be loved.
Eventually, I would meet other actual bisexual girls in the form of new students. They, like me, spent a lot of their time on the internet, and were familiar with the queer spaces I had taken refuge in. Finally, I thought: people who could fully understand me. Even still, however, I found myself playing the part of the “good gay” around my other friends. I was the tame one, the down-to-earth one, the one who didn’t make her sexuality her whole personality. Whereas they defiantly proclaimed themselves to be atheists, I still made pathetic attempts at practicing religion, struggling to reconcile my faith with my rapidly changing identity, whilst living out my queer fantasy online. There was a new feeling taking root in the deepest pits of my stomach: jealousy, mixed with the genuine admiration I had for these girls. I longed to shed the good Christian, good friend, good student act entirely. There was an irreconcilable gap between me and my straight friends, and no matter how hard I tried, I couldn’t seem to make the jump.

Eventually, these girls would grow increasingly stifled by Rosehill’s strict religious atmosphere and leave the school entirely. I found that, despite everything, I could not follow in their footsteps. There was a part of me that knew I was unhappy at Rosehill—the queer part of me, the sane part of me, the part of me that knew the strictness with which we were being taught was unnatural. As we progressed into high school, my remaining friends and I joked endlessly about
leaving Rosehill, but none of us ever really intended to carry out our threats.

Years passed. Centipede seasons came and went, and it seemed to me that the number of centipedes I saw seemed to grow smaller each year. Perhaps it was because—my friends and I being grown women now—we didn’t pay them much mind anymore. When I graduated from PAREF Rosehill in the middle of May 2018, I wept openly at my high school graduation. Ever the ones to tease me, my classmates asked if I was crying because I would miss Rosehill. I declined tearfully, knowing in my heart that some part of me had never expected I would ever leave the place behind.
At first, it is only the raw shock of the sidewalk slick with blood
and she looks like she was just sleeping on it.

But then
it is everywhere.

In the claws of cold air around my ankles instead

of the soft nudge of wet paws and

floors doused in sunlight flickering like golden ears and

loud, gutted meowls in the yowls of ambulances and
a yawning clump of shadows in the once full dip in my bed

and green eyes boring holes into me

from mirrors and closets and glasses of water.

I keep picking whiskers out of bowls of dal. I hack up

the fur clogging my throat and jaw and tell myself that

the blood was just as warm as the spots she loved to sleep in.
It’s The Weather
Christina Sia, Johns Hopkins University
My First Semester Of College Does Not Order Black Coffee

after Joel Brouwer

Tobias Tegrotenhuis
University of Colorado at Denver
Poetry

My first semester of college knows it was invited here. It is economical with space. It gathers its mousy self into a chair at the student café, fingers denting its paper coffee cup, which swirls with cream. It stares at my bitter black brew with the brittle gaze of a puzzled owl. You’ll like this someday, I say, and grip my cup just as tight as it does. We drink, silent. We wear the same leather jacket. After a while, my first semester of college asks, are you doing anything after this? I say, I don’t know. You tell me.
Ignorance is Bliss
Sophia Polizzi
Virginia Commonwealth University
The night before I leave again for another hiatus, the tub that Claire will grow out of when I am gone is filled three-quarters of a foot high with soapy water. Half-broken bathtub crayons line the flat acrylic ring around the ovular vessel, a stark contrast to the grown-up-looking Pantene and Pert that sprout vertically up the corners of the shower. The dull, grout-stained tiles surrounding the ivory arena are the backdrop to Claire’s bag of water toys and the Paw Patrol Band-Aids she plasters around the drain. And while her bright toys and trinkets are eye-catching, Claire will be the star of her one-woman show for this and every bath night.

The tub is older than the toddler, older than me, yet gained an air of renewal when she was born. The basin had been used by all of us before her arrival, typically through the form of quick showers before my dad left to teach or to shed the germs my stepmom had picked up during her shifts at the hospital. I had a foray with the tub, attempting to utilize its moldy and hazardous jacuzzi jets and nev-
er quite getting them clean enough to not feel like I was leaving the tub dirtier than I had entered it. The leaf-looking bits and black amoebas that tub produces turned me off of it for good, and I converted to only using the bathroom in our basement, silverfish and all.

Throughout the years of rounds of IVF my parents endured and the cycles of bad news I only ever heard whispers of, the bathtub would sit in the backdrop of this bathroom I barely used. It was a set I most often saw with its curtain drawn with no other purpose than its objective utility. The small room’s neutral tones and basic layout couldn’t afford a place in my long-term memory. Only the birth of Claire would cause me to notice the cracking in the caulking connecting the plastic basin to the shower walls. It was only when she started taking baths that I noticed my parents had changed the perpetually damp bath mat in front of the tub to another taupe shag. It was only through her that my eyes had been opened to a previously dull and almost useless area of the house, which I would quickly begin to designate as hers.

I was tardy to her last bath of my winter break. I had been caught up cleaning the dishes after dinner and noticed a faint cry from down the corridor.
“Nay-nee–Oh, Nay-nee,” Claire sang to summon me. She repeated her abstraction of my name until the nays ran into the nees, an unending stream of her title for me that would only cease if she saw me walk into her bathroom.

Setting down the pot I was in the process of cleaning, I followed her call. I was greeted with a new favorite of hers, a “happy to see you” that I believe she only gave to those she was truly happy to see, despite not fully understanding the meaning of the phrase. I kneeled by the edge of the tub next to my dad, who was prepping the toys for their plunge into the tub’s suds.

“She’s going to miss you when you’re gone,” he reminded me guiltily.

“She probably won’t even realize I’m gone for a while.” I knew I was lying. She’s two. I imagined her room full of toys could fill the role of a playmate that I occupied for the few weeks I was home. He reminded me that she loves me, and I reminded him that I love her, too. She glanced up at us once in a while to feel like she was in on the conversation but got distracted by the washcloth balancing on the surface of the water.

She looked up from the water and we stared at one another. The curls she had when she was born have grown
out into waves that frame her small face. She smiled with teeth that weren’t there a year ago, she spoke to me with words that were not there six months ago.

What will change once I’m gone? She will learn to say my name with three syllables instead of her succinct two. Her bathtub crayons will break until they are no longer usable, the strings on her wind-up shark will snap, the defunct toys will be removed altogether. Her legs that are already so long for her age, which are often the cause of her being mistaken for a four-year-old, will sprout until they overfill that tub and she transitions to showers. She will look into her reflection of the tub’s drain and recognize herself for the first time as a conscious being, as a person no longer confined to the unrestricted rambling of filterless early childhood. Hardest of all, she will eventually see herself as a woman who wonders where her big sister was during this change—a wondering that I had for my older sister when the second act of my adolescence began.

For now, I allay my dread by watching her perform as a swimmer in her shallow water. As she splashes, oblivious to our dad’s frustration as he holds up the shower curtain liner to shield himself from her recklessness, I am reminded of the tide. The moon peers into the tub through the upper half of the bathroom window, showering this subset of my
family with its muted light. The toddler stops swimming, stands up in the basin, and outstretches her drenched arms to me, silently asking me to take her from the lukewarm water.

Though Claire is a small fraction of my body weight, her tiny mass exerts an undeniably large pull on my grounded body. I wrap her in a maroon towel, the only one she will not fight against and hold her horizontally in the way that I had cradled her for the first time in the hospital when I was sixteen. She makes a face that she has had success in making me laugh with in the past, and as drops of water drip from her honey-colored ringlets onto my clothes, she is unsuccessful in her entertainment. She does not know the distance that will soon be between us. She does not know that I feel like I have already left. Her smile drops and I swear, there are times when sometimes her dark, downturned eyes look back at me like they know more than I do.

We will ebb and flow into one another’s lives. I will find myself willingly drowning in her when I am home. For now and always, I am kneeling at that bathtub when she is two, drawing on the walls of her revived tub with her, waiting for her to put on a show.
Young at Heart
Simthandile Lisakhanya Witbooi
University of Cape Town
5 Pieces for Baba

Annika Heegaard
Vassar College
Poetry

Ba•ba–is an 85 year old woman. She is old and full of sleep. She shows up at your house with red hair trimmings coated across her moisturized face. Her eyebrows are pitch black, and you can see ink staining her wrinkled eyelids. Tucked under her arm, a battered music book. She sits next to you at the piano, clamping her hands onto yours and placing them on the keys. She will tell you you’re lazy, and you will try to respond: *I practiced this week.* But she is deaf, she cannot hear you.

Ba•ba–is predictable. I wear fancy socks when she comes over because she will give me $20. I know if I look skinny, she will give me $50. We went to 5 Napkin Burger once, and the moment the waitress saw her, she looked at me with worried eyes. She only eats dessert when we go out

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1 Not enough.

2 Turns out Baba Alicia (the one who Boos at the orchestra at Lincoln Center) is a 5 Napkin Burger regular.

3 She always gets upset at her pets and recently dumped Feloosh in Central Park.
to eat, but sometimes a small portion of fish. And to top it off, she always wants an espresso after dinner. Everywhere we go, Baba wears her see-through shirts that show her lace bra underneath. She wears patterned skirts and funny tailored tights. She wears snakeskin flats and carries Kabanose in her bag. She loves hand cream and bath bombs and soap. She loves pretty napkins and names her cats “Fe-loosh and Kooboosh.” Of course the waitress dreaded her.

Baba—is easily scammed. Mom called me this week because “Baba is going insane. She withdrew $2,000 from her bank account today and is now trying to withdraw $3,500 more.” Apparently Baba promised that she “will get $1,000 back.” Baba would not say anything more than: “I cannot tell you why I need this money because I will have to lie.” I assumed Baba was gambling, she loves casinos, but this was not it. Rather, she was scammed by a random lady in Poland, who lied and said she was a doctor in Yemen being forced to work without pay. Baba upfronted $5,500 for her Yemeni doctor friend who does not exist.

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4 This seemed like a bad investment to us.
Ba•ba–loves the words “thank you.” If you do not text her or call her to say thank you for the matzah ball soup she brought, she will ask you if you liked it. Saying, “I like it,” is not enough. Be prepared to write a poem of gratitude: “O Baba beloved, whose curious matzah ball soup keeps bright the last year’s leaves and flowers, with warm, glad, summer thoughts to fill the cold, dark, winter hours.” Ideally write this in a card.

Ba•ba–yells at taxi cab drivers when her credit card doesn’t work. When you go to open the door from the yellow taxi cab, you will catch her in a fierce argument with the driver. He will look at you with pleading eyes and tell you “get this crazy lady out of my cab.” You will loudly shout at Baba that she did not swipe the card properly! But she is deaf, so you will grab the card out of her hand, swipe it yourself, and then take her bags and pull her out of the cab. She will tell you “how awful!” the driver was, and you will nod and walk slowly so she isn’t far behind.

5 She will think you DO NOT like it, in fact.
6 She always swipes it too fast, or too slow.
solitude 3
Josiah Gill
Rhode Island School of Design
When I Am Asked About The Target Audience For My Creative Work

Tobias Tegrotenhuis
University of Colorado at Denver
Poetry

I hear a belief that someone else needs to get shot.

By those cold metrics, the audience is a trophy deer and I with buckshot words must mount them above my fireplace, while I warm my heels on the hearth beneath the proof of my violence. Ask me instead if a deer ever wants to shoot a deer. Some works make me ache but only because something in this world has already tried to shoot me down, and failed.
The work is winding bandages around me, pressing the blood back into me with a love I cannot express for myself, not yet. A wound is the target audience
for a hand. I will admit: hands
are made for more
than packing wounds. Rub a thumb
over my writing’s knuckles; lace
fingers with fingers. Yearning flays me open

like a half-skinned deer. I won’t pretend
that I don’t put myself here
so that when someone holds
my words, they will hold the wound of me
together, too.
The Hands of the Mountain
Pheobe Jacoby, Vassar College
The house was dark when I got home. The bed was unmade, the sheets wrinkled with my impression. Only my dishes sat in the sink, traces of the peanut butter and waffles I’d anxiously eaten a few hours before. “You better eat a real meal if you plan on driving yourself home,” the nurse had warned.

Like it was frozen in time, the house had waited for me. It had held its breath once I closed the door, and only released it when my tires crossed the driveway. I turned on a few lamps, warming the living room and letting it slowly come back to life. Glancing around, I noticed that one thing had changed: my calendar was missing a page. Where there had once been Icelandic glaciers and the cursive title card “March”, there was now a tear and the too-early “April” peaking out.

Honestly, I hadn’t even realized he’d noticed. I hadn’t written it obviously, of course, because by then I was still trying to make him stay. I’d just written “Doctor’s Appointment @3pm” in red ink, tiny enough that it only took up a third of the space under that day. I’d be lying if it wasn’t a sort of invitation, and it’s not exactly like I’d needed to write it there to remind myself. Three different timers
had already been set on my phone, and the office had sent me a text 24 hours before reminding me of pre-procedure protocol. But still, I had hope.

Easing myself into the couch, I turned on the heating pad I’d put there for myself that morning, followed by the humidifier, and clicked on the TV, which was preloaded with my DVD of *Bridget Jones’s Diary*. The opening commercials echoed slightly through the house, reminding me of how lifeless the other rooms were. I didn’t try to pretend he was up there somewhere, sluggling away on the computer or napping in the guest room. He wasn’t home, something I didn’t need a scavenger hunt to confirm.

Last night, he had tried to sleep in our bed. It was midnight, and I’d already been shamelessly snoring for two hours. His cold hands had pushed against my legs as he made room for himself. He’d slipped his feet under the covers, his toes prickling like icicles down my calf. His weight pushed down the bed, and memories of how we used to sleep flushed my cheeks. But that hadn’t been for weeks, and a few hours before he had been stowed away in his office, pretending I wasn’t alive.

“I have to wake up early,” I mumbled.

“I know. I’ll be quiet.” He laid his head on the pillow, deeper under the comforter now.

“I need to be well-rested. I can’t wake up all night because you’re moving around.”

“Okay.” He didn’t move. Maybe he’d push back. “I’ll go.” And he left, slipping out as quickly as he had in.
The bed felt even emptier then, and in the morning I woke tired and sunken in. The crust on my eyes told me I’d cried in my sleep. He wasn’t there in the morning, and it was everything I could do to keep from punching myself. *He would be here if he wanted,* I reminded myself.

Reaching into my bag, I pulled out the cellophane-cased pill and a bottle of water. They’d given me the option to take the second pill in the hospital or at home, and I’d guessed it was better to fuss over myself then be stuck in that antiseptic air. This didn’t mean I wasn’t terrified, and the abstinence-only Sex Ed of my high school was attempting to convince me I would bleed to death while my uterus fell out and my ovaries shrivelled in on themselves. My body probably wouldn’t be found for weeks.

“There will be some light bleeding, some cramping, and maybe a little bit of nausea. Just wear a pad and drink lots of water, and stay off your feet for at least the next day. I’ve had patients say it hurts less than an IUD, so you’ll be fine,” the nurse had said, her blushed cheeks and glossy lips smiling. I’m sure she could tell that I was shaking. I had just been listed enough possible complications for a season of Grey’s Anatomy by the absent-faced baby of a doctor, who I could swear wasn’t older than 25.

“Okay,” I’d murmured. Those next few minutes were the closest I got to calling my mom, convinced I would pass out if there wasn’t someone to hold me through it. But I didn’t call, and I didn’t pass out. It was probably that I couldn’t bear to explain it all to her, or probably that
she lives three states over and wouldn’t make it in time. Or
it was a stupid something like hope.

The pill felt big in my hand. When I was younger,
I’d never been able to swallow pills. I’d insisted it was just
how my body worked, my throat just too small and my
tongue too big. Of course, it was really anxiety, as I’d con-
vinced myself I’d choke on it like the cartoons on TV who’d
get suffocated by a breath mint. Pills felt big then, and this
one felt bigger still. It rolled around like a marble, seeming
to grow with every circulation of my palm. It wasn’t, and
the chalky residue began to leave a film on the top of my
skin. I placed it in my mouth, took a sip of water, and held
my nose. Down the hatch.

Some time later, I woke up, sputtering and sweaty.
The house was dark, as I had slept through the last of the
daylight. Rain was landing steadily on the roof, and outside
the window I could see the leaves of my apple tree sap-
ling: upturned, white-bellied and glutinous. My face felt
like puddy, and the impression of the pillow’s stitching ran
across my cheek. As I sat up, lightning slashed across my
window, momentarily igniting the room. At this moment
I realized the power had gone out. I also realized someone
was sitting across from me.

“Jesus!” I screeched, jumping back into the couch
and yanking the blanket over myself. I lunged for my bag,
grabbing emptily. The shadow moved.

“Wait, oh my god, I’m sorry. I just didn’t want to
wake you!” I recognized the voice.
“Toby?” I guessed. 
“...um, yes?” he whispered. 
“What do you mean “um, yes”? What they hell are you doing right now! Christ, you gave me a heart attack.” I could faintly see him, outlined by the stormy glow and streetlamps shining through the window 
“Well, you seemed mad, so I didn’t know what to say.”
“So it is better to act like you aren’t someone who lives here?” I questioned. He didn’t respond, but began puttering around the room. “What are you looking for?”
“A lighter.” A few drawers opened and shut, then a clicking sound. Finally, a small fire grew in the corner, and soon the room was speckled with the waxy flames.
“Thanks.” I relaxed my shoulders, settling back down into the sway of the couch. The cramps were setting in, so I repositioned the heating pad to my stomach. 
“Good thing you got all those candles, I guess,” he tried to joke.
“What are you doing here?”
He sighed deeply, exasperated. Like he wasn’t the one who had been sitting silently in the dark, watching me. “I live here, Amanda,” he said.
“That’s not a reason,” I replied. I held my lips tight, my teeth gritting into each other.
“I wanted to check on you.”
“Thanks, I’ve been checked on,” I spat firmly. “And you don’t need to sneak in.” Did I want to be mad?
“I didn’t, you were just asleep.” He’d lit enough candles that I could make out the shape of the room, but had strategically avoided illuminating much of his face. “And I wasn’t just sitting in the dark, the lights went out right as you woke up.”

“You still seem like a stalker,” I joked. A smile itched my lips as the adrenaline began to dissipate.

Toby had no siblings. His parents were the older, responsible type, waiting until they had real money and a partially paid-off house before getting pregnant. Inevitably, infertility struck, and Toby became a one-and-done type of deal. His parents were also the type to ban TV, only buying Toby books, puzzles, and clothes for Christmases and birthdays. One year, he’d told me, he wrote a five page evidence-based essay asking for a Harry Potter wand he’d seen on the shelves of Barnes & Noble. His eyes had sparkled at the warp of the plastic wood, and he’d dreamed about it for weeks. On Christmas Eve, he’d found the holy box tucked under the tree and, overwhelmed with excitement, opened it. They’d caught him, of course, and it lived on top of his refrigerator for the rest of his childhood, a reminder of when he “chose gluttony over satisfaction,” like a decapitated head. He hadn’t quite gotten what they were saying back then, but understood more as the years went on.

Our first Christmas together, I bought him that wand. I’d found the same one on some Disney-affiliated website, the soundbox and all. I presented it to him, a red and gold bow wrapping it tight. He opened it, went dead
silent, and I didn’t see him for three days. When I saw him next, he was on one knee, and a diamond ring sat in his palm. I’d said yes, and cried in his arms for what felt like hours.

Because he never had siblings, Toby always wanted to know what it was like. He’d ask, “Did you guys have secret jokes? Or, like, what did you guys do together?” I found it hard to tell him that in my experience, siblings were born-in bullies, meant only to inflict emotional torment fueled by the rage and disgust of puberty pains. Instead, I’d make something up about elaborate fistbumps, or plagiarize conversations I saw on Nickelodeon.

Two months ago, he admitted to me he wanted kids. I had been reading silently, my lamp casting a glow along the edge of the duvet, thinking he was asleep next to me. Turning the page, I heard him whisper.

“I want three,” he said.

“What?” I asked. He sat up straight, facing me. His eyes bore into mine, and I could feel an alien intensity.

“I want three kids.”

“Wh-”

“I want three kids. I want the house to be loud, and I want to change diapers. I want them to have everything I didn’t have. I want to have everything I didn’t have.” I’d seen this sincere ferocity only twice. The first, when I gave him that wand. The second, when he gave his father’s eulogy. Now this was the third.

“Toby, I’ve told you…” I didn’t want to say it.
“You don’t want kids. I know, I know. But I, I think that’s not how you really feel. I mean, I see the way you talk to your nieces, you love them! And you’re so good with babies, you know exactly what to do to get them to stop crying. And I think if you just worked with your therapist a little bit more on your childho-”

“Stop.”

“But I just-”

“No,” I said. “I don’t want kids. It’s not my parents fault, it’s not my brother’s fault, it’s not some undiscovered trauma that I’ve pushed out of my memory. I don’t want kids. I told you I don’t want kids.” I shut my book, and turned off the light. The bed felt like it’d stretched, a distance between us, and I slept restlessly that night. I’m not sure if Toby ever fell asleep.

Two weeks later, I realized I had missed my period. I got the test, and spent an afternoon frozen on my bathroom floor. I told him that night, and through his gleaming smile, also told him what I was going to do. I could barely look at him.

Now, he was sitting across from me, silently picking at the frayed hole on the knee of his jeans.

“How do you feel?” he asked.

“I feel fine.” I didn’t know what he wanted. If I told him how I felt, it would be evidence against me, ammunition. If I lied, it might be the cruelest thing I could do.

“I don’t believe that.” He motioned at my heating pad. “Does it hurt?”
“Only slight cramping. I have bled through three maxi pads, though,” I offered. He weakly smiled.

“Have you been drinking water?”

“Yes.”

“What about food? Have you eaten?”

“Not yet, I sort of passed out after I got home.”

“I’ll warm something up.” He went over to the kitchen, then immediately returned. “Just remembered the power is out. Want a PB&J?” I giggled, and could see a slight smile in the corner of his mouth.

“Yes, that would be great.” He was back quickly, and I devoured the sandwich in a few bites. Licking the last of the jam off my finger, the lights flickered on. The TV went back to playing Bridget Jones’s Diary, and the room suddenly felt more full.

“I should go,” Toby said.

“Okay.” Everything in me wanted to stop him. Hold his head against my chest, tell him I’ll give him everything he wants, everything he needs. Tell him it’ll all be okay.

“I love you, still,” he said.

“I love you, still, too,” I responded.

“Okay.” His feet crossed the floor, and I listened as he pulled on his coat and laced his shoes. My eyes welled with tears, and I stared at the static of the screen. The front door opened, holding for a moment. It shut, and the house stopped holding its breath.
Clean

after R.L.

Lara Zeng
Harvard College
Poetry

At noon my grandfather begins
bent and seized
over the kitchen table
stripping its layers down

of gloss finish and dirt
black in the grooves—He wields
the cruel end of a sponge
under his callus-burnt palm.

He is silent, his duty steel-wool begetting the raw wood.
How once, as a girl, I split chives
upon its face, punctuating

pale lines in the white flesh
turned bare, butter-knifed
and green with my incisions.
Under his still-soft hands,
I asked. Do you know I love you.
He was roughly, with splinters—
who told you to do that?

I do my own begetting, undoing
hands knotted and furled on skin anew.
Still scouring, my grandfather in the dark.
LAUNDERED LIFE CYCLES

Savannah Stewart
Arizona State University
Poetry

draped along the couch
the walls breathe back at me
old news clippings and developed film
form steel wool tears
that leak from my tie dye eyes
remnants of when i was a promising ball of yarn
when i was more than just a torso woven together
by loose change and threads of the dead
nearly withered away
from years of being stuffed in a box

and i’m tired of being resilient
i long to be weatherproof and water resistant
without burn holes or snagged zippers
with scents of rose and linen
instead of mothballs and cigarettes
a stench that lingers decades later
following me with every 12-month lease
like cheap lipstick stains on my teeth
and scratches and dents all over car doors
and the clanging of change against the hum of the laundromat
as I gently unravel tumbling slowly within a circle
Goddess of Limbo
Sophia Polizzi
Virginia Commonwealth University
A Picture of Graduation Day

Jonathan William Potter
Stephen F. Austin State University
Poetry

The portrait they’re shown is of the Fowler family’s first high school graduate: eighteen-years-old; circa 1952; his scalp clean-shaven for the ceremony; his eyes shut—the shutter perhaps a second too slow, his blink a second too fast; his head slumped over in that old, sleepy way it would when he’d doze off in Big Papa’s chair, when Mama would wake him, saying, “Nah, baybuh, you don’t wanna catch a crick in ya neck, do ya?” before turning him to bed; the skin ‘round his neck mottled burgundy, maroon, the splotches of color peeking out the collar of his regalia (they’re told he was a ladies’ man, a rural woman’s tar-skinned Casanova); his body long; his arms hung limply at his sides; his nails a cyanotic gray (he was good with his hands, had considered trade school after graduation); suspended in a Summer’s day, under the shade of a magnolia, those limbs like veins engorged, their petals cups to catch his last tears shed.

They’re told she was leaving for his school when the coroner came; twelve-years-old then, hearing every word of the man’s report, feeling every squeeze of her mother’s hand around her own; they’re told she never forgot the day, almost seventy years ago, that day spent planning her brother’s procession,
the ink on his diploma yet to dry.
Orange

Caleb Aguirre
Washington University in St. Louis
Fiction

Come outside with me, he said.

He took her hand and led her through the crowd-ed apartment and onto the porch that levitated over the front door. It was an ill-lit patio, absent of furniture or even a fold up lawn chair. Yet again, Danielle thought, college men without taste.

So what’s your major, he asked.

English, she said shortly, as if embarrassed to be asked the question in the first place.

Fascinating, he said with little focus on her re-

response. No real job prospects after college though, right?

That’s what they say. She leaned over the railing looking down at the empty parking garage below. It was getting cold and darker noticeably earlier. Fall rounding the bend.

He took this space of silence as an opportunity to reach into his pocket for a pack of Marlboro Reds. Do you smoke, he asked.

On occasion, she responded without hesitation.

You find them disgusting, don’t you.

No, not at all. Danielle pushed a collection of hair behind her ear in thought. There’s something romantic about a
cigarette.

Oh really, he said coquettishly, fully matched with a growing grin on the left side of his face.

Not in that way. You know what I mean, in the same way that an espresso past nine is, or a torn up hardcover.

Whatever you say, he muttered, fumbling with his lighter. He attacked the top of the blue BIC with an angry thumb, in a motion a toddler might have. On his third attempt, the flame met the white paper and made that familiar orange amber hue. After a quick inhale, he coughed startlingly loud, having to bend over and rest his hands on his knees. He raised his hand with the cigarette to her side, the universal sign for ‘want a hit?’

I’m good, she told him as she reached into her own pocket and pulled out her personal pack of American Spirits. She lit her cigarette with a scuffed white Zippo lighter, nearly black from the chipped paint, and closed the lighter with a satisfying snap.

Let me see that, he said as he reached for her lighter. He tossed it around as if to measure its value by virtue of its weight and made his way to the back of the lighter, running his fingers over the engraving on the back. Who’s B. P., he asked with feigned interest.

She took a long drag from her cigarette and breathed out the side of her mouth with an effortless stream of gray vapor.

Never mind, he scoffed. You’re much better at this
than I am. His eyes made their way down to the porch below. His tattered black Converse made for an interesting film photo, she thought.

One thing that Danielle remembered fondly was how terrible she was at taking pictures. No matter what Beatrice did, her photos developed into smeared, blurry renditions of what she tried to capture. Danielle thought that would have dissuaded her, turning film photos into another one of Beatrice’s failed hobbies, but she persisted. Week in and week out, she would take her photos to the CVS and pay more than she needed to to process her photos.

That was actually how they’d met. Danielle was sitting below the Gingko trees reading for one of her English classes—L14 355, Dante’s *Inferno* and Other Works—when Beatrice, without any invitation, snapped a photo on her Minolta X-700. This led to a smile from Danielle, then she made room for her beside her, and they talked. None of the usual introduction questions, but about movies, a shared detestment of the current state of the Senate, and a deep appreciation for black tea.

Beatrice was a business major, which Danielle thought was funny enough. She had long black hair that she often put up in a bun, which accentuated her bangs nicely. Her baggy pants and vintage rock t-shirts that matched layered necklaces only added to Danielle’s amusement, as it became harder and harder imagining Beatrice sitting in a lecture hall with a bunch of business
guys in Greek life.

Danielle asked her out on the date first. At least that’s how she remembered it. It was a walk down to the pasta restaurant that adults with money went to; it seemed like the place people were supposed to go after hitting it off so fast. The waiter gave them a second glance, she remembered. Beatrice wore a lot of rings—silver and gold, no real cohesion at all, which Danielle appreciated. One ring she got from an old thrift store back home. They joked that someone must have died with it on. For some reason, they both found that comforting.

Beatrice took Danielle out for drinks the next week, and then the next. Danielle noticed that when Beatrice got really excited about a story she was telling, she leaned into the table, bringing her elbows to the edge of her plate. Danielle liked that. When the story turned to a sensitive topic, Beatrice would start to slow down the pace of her words, lower her voice almost to a mumble, and her delicate fingers would start to twist her rings. Danielle only remembers these tics looking back, as in that moment she was distracted by Beatrice’s clear fingernails and the blue veins that went up her hands to the insides of her forearms.

Beatrice’s apartment was on the north side of town, the nicer part with the busy coffee shops that ran out of oat milk fast. She kept her books on her hardwood floors, piling them into pillars to act as a coffee table, a stand for a lamp, and her bedside table—she read an
awful lot for a business major. Before going to bed, she would take off her rings one by one and set them on the current book she was reading. Danielle would always watch her take them off impatiently, in anticipation to get under the white sheets with her. One time, in a hurried rush, Beatrice knocked over her book-pile-nightstand while trying to set her rings down. They both laughed so hard tears started running down their faces. Danielle told her she loved her. While sharing a cigarette in bed the next morning, Beatrice texted a friend that she had never been happier. Danielle, unprompted, did the same.

Danielle had begun placing herself and Beatrice in Dante’s novel; herself alliteratively to the protagonist and Beatrice as, well, Beatrice. Too uncanny of a coincidence to be taken lightly, Danielle thought. As a person who has never believed in fate and still does not believe in fate—as that had been stripped from her—she still managed to see herself as the heart-struck Dante, venturing into the lower circles of purgatory as she read the next canto. Though Dante took his trip alone to ascend toward his Beatrice, Danielle found herself astonishingly lucky to be descending through her world alongside her very own.

I’m sorry, what did you say, Danielle asked as she snapped out of her trance.

I was just explaining to you how he didn’t actually write that song. He took it from an old Young song, you know Neil Young right? Well he was—
While his words slowly turned into a constant, low hum to Danielle’s ears, she could feel his eyes turn from her lips to her waist. The pressure from his focus made Danielle take an instinctual step back and turn her gaze down.

—And I told her, I can’t believe you just said that. She knows how that makes me feel. I mean I’m a good guy, you know?

The dark always made the library seem quieter to Danielle. With the sun fully set, the blue emergency phone stations would become more visible than the campus lanterns and a dark, ocean tint would fall on the carpeted floor. Danielle often imagined being at the bottom of an aquarium tank while studying. The colors on the floor started to play with each other from the light reaching through the water.

Her phone buzzed. One more page, Danielle thought. *Love, that exempts no one beloved from loving, she read, seized me with pleasure of this man so strongly, that, as thou seest, it doth not yet desert me*—a series of buzzes from her phone. Frustrated, Danielle picked up her phone and put it to her ear.

I’m busy, can it wait, she asked.

The calm light in the library turned stormy from the words on the other end of the line. Danielle looked down at the floor and saw the reflective light from the ocean floor start to turn into rapid movements, the water
around her became thicker, denser so the light could barely pass through. She could hear the gusts of wind from the water above her as the waves became greater and greater, circling in a storm of thoughts.

It then began to rain inside. The pages of her book became spotted with water right above her. Circles of words began to seep into the ones behind them. As her eyes began to swell, the rain on the pages increased. Strange, she thought as her cheeks became streams that ran to her feet.

The rain turned to a flood. The water from the floor rose from her shoes to her knees. Her body refused to move, still sitting in her chair with her phone cemented on the side of her face. She stayed frozen as the water elevated above her neck into her mouth.

That’s alright, she thought.

Suffocating, forgetting to breathe, she barely muttered into the phone the only words that could come to a person in that moment, a faint whisper of an apology to someone who she would never be able to tell it to.

You’re right, Danielle said after a long pause. I can see that you are.

That’s exactly what I’m saying. He took only his second puff of his cigarette and smashed the end of it onto the porch railing. Much of the shaft of the cigarette was still left unsmoked.

Danielle looked at the cigarette between her
middle and ring finger inquisitively. She still had a good length of hers to go and knew too well not to cut the life of a cigarette short. She took another long inhale from her friend, and the small orange amber lit up a little more, breathing life into it once more. The hue from the cig’s butt gave Danielle’s profile a ghostly glow, reminiscent of a newly extinguished campfire.

You look really good in this dark, he said as he smiled.

She knew he could see very little of her face, even with the cigarette hanging off of her lips. Thanks, she said as her face remained unchanged and unimpressed.

Are you tired, he asked with an exaggerated exhale. Something just came over me, do you want to head back to my place?

And then the fire at the end of her fingers calmed to its final state of nonexistence, a dark enveloped her lips and the tip of her nose. She felt as if she was choking without the pull from the thinly wrapped paper in her fingers, unable to grasp even the smallest amount of air without pushing the tar filled smoke into her lungs.

Sure, she murmured.

Fantastic, he said, suddenly full of energy. I’ll pull my car around front, I’ll be back up in a minute.

Wait, she interjected. Is there any way we could walk? She took her finished cigarette from her lips and dropped it off the balcony. There was no sound as it hit the bottom. I don’t like riding in cars, I’m sorry.
In the evening’s pitch black, Danielle could only hear his impatience as the taps of his thumb against the metal railing picked up a bit quicker. Yeah sure, that’s fine or whatever.

He took a deep sigh as he extended his hand to hers. She took it and was pulled back through the party and only could give rushed goodbyes to her friends, who, after Danielle left, whispered short comments of concern for her without any intention to act on them. They had seen this before.

At the bottom of the stairs, they rounded the corner and walked in silence out the front door. Danielle, from behind, looked at the black pair of Converse ahead of her that guided her next steps. After the first few steps out the door, right below the porch of the apartment they had just left, a cigarette laid on the ground. It didn’t move or magically relight itself or regrow to its original, unused length, but it did call out to Danielle in whispers to tell her to hold still for a picture.

He then stepped on it without any acknowledgment of what was below the sole of his shoes. Danielle flinched, but did nothing more: still struggling for a breath as she counted the seconds until he was finished and could finally sleep under someone else’s white sheets.
To Hear
Donald Patten
University of Maine
Dirty-brown curls
my father twirls
and twirls my hair
into knots
as he watches Seinfeld
and drinks a Blue Moon.

In the morning
my mom douses
my head with detangler
to undo his work
and scrapes the hair
into a ponytail.
Simpson’s Paradox

Hannah Johnston
Washington University in St. Louis
Poetry

Gospel music echoes against my ears, music
I don’t believe in
God

I lost my faith when that last step
disappeared during my time of-
I Need(ed) Him to

My foot fell forward and my dream
-ing days drew to an
End -less happiness is always a-
The Lie(s)

Him in His “holy pulpit” with the lights
On -ward and out of
Feel
anymore

be there for

became too hurtful,
    and I left

this confine
my faith turn false, share my
  Surprise! the story’s shifting back
      to why I first doubted
          Him
His crowd, they kept me Quiet in a place of

I couldn’t do it any More, more, more than I had to

I sat before His teachers and learned Nothing

made any sense
To be silenced is to be Disillusioned

Now He says I love all my children, and I say I loved you
worship-

Him alone and

give

made any sense

To be silenced is to be

Disillusioned

too

But I can’t lie

beneath this darkness

Anymore.
Azania
Simthandile Lisakhanya Witbooi
University of Cape Town
Hashbrown Casserole

Macy Cecil
Truman State University
Nonfiction

Hashbrown Casserole Recipe
Yield: serves 10-12
Prep Time 15 minutes
Cook Time 1 hour

Ingredients
• 2 lb frozen hashbrowns
• 16 oz sour cream
• 3 cup shredded cheddar cheese
• 1 can cream of mushroom soup
• 1 tsp salt
• 1 tsp pepper
• 2 Tbsp minced onion
• ¾ cup melted butter
• 2 cup corn flakes (this is optional, but I always like to include it)
• Lots of love
Step 1.
Preheat the oven to 350 degrees.

The pregnancy is a shock to everyone. Your soon-to-be mother is a senior in high school, making her only a child herself. What’s even more of a surprise is the breakup of your parents a month before the due date. With the chaos dwelling upon what is traditionally expected to be a time of excitement, a baby shower is planned by your future grandma. The room is covered in all the decor that Dollar General party packs have to offer. “Bundle of joy,” “Oh Baby,” “Welcome Baby Girl!” While the party carries on, your soon-to-be mother cries in the bathroom–she’s missing her senior prom this weekend. Your grandma calls for her as she removes the last bit of foil from the hashbrown casserole, which is laying alongside the rest of the meal she prepared for the shower. “It won’t stay warm all day. Come eat!”

Step 2.
In a big bowl, mix everything together, but leave out the butter, 1 cup of cheese, and corn flakes for now.

It’s Friday afternoon, and your grandma picks your new Cecil
baby brother up from daycare and you from elementary school, like she does every weekend. Your mom is young and needs a break, plus all of her friends are going to a huge party this weekend she can’t miss. On the way to your grandma’s house, you pull through the McDonalds drive-thru for an ice cream cone. And again, just like it happens every weekend, your little brother makes a mess of half the cone in the back seat, transforming himself into a sticky catastrophe. Despite the extensive clean up the leather seats of the car and your little brother will require, your grandma doesn’t get too mad. She laughs a little, and you know she’ll take you for ice cream again next weekend.

Your mom got married to an older man with a daughter around your age a few years ago. Eventually, you adopt him as your respective father. While he is nice, they constantly fight, often ending with you receiving the blame. Your mom is quick to remind you that had you not been born, her life would be drastically better. She asks you not to tell your grandma this when you visit her.

It’s almost summer now, and summertime means every weekend at grandma’s turns into every other week. Your
grandma has a pool. It’s not like a rickety above-ground pool most people bought from Walmart after their dad got his first tax return from his new job, but an actual in-ground pool complete with a shallow and a deep end. Future ice cream cleanups quickly become solved by cannonballs. Your grandma gets mad at you when you try to get her hair wet—that’s the only real rule here. After swimming, your starvation brought on by the afternoon in the pool is cured by the warm, cheesy goodness of a hashbrown casserole fresh out of the oven. You asked her to make it last week, but this time with extra love. As you take your first bite, you can tell she remembered your request.

**Step 3.**

**Place the mixture into a baking pan.**

It’s Christmas Eve, and you’re at your grandma’s house. You spend it here every year. This year is different, though. You’ve just finished your first semester of high school in a brand new town where you know no one. It’s been six months since your parents got divorced, and you’re still re-adjusting to the subsequent move to a new town coupled with the stress of high school. Along with you and your little brother, your mom brought her new boyfriend. They’ve
only been together for two months, but since he’s already living with you all, she says he is family, and it would be wrong not to include him. It’s almost time for dinner, and you are buttering the rolls on the table while your grandma gets the last few menu items out of the oven. After the rolls are warmed and all the food is uncovered, your family helps themselves to an array of homemade food complete with your favorite hashbrown casserole. The buttered rolls soak up all the remains on the plate after everything else has been devoured.

It’s tradition to open presents after dinner. After you’ve opened all your gifts, your grandma hands you two extras and tells you to give them to your newly divorced dad and stepsister. Despite the new boyfriends and later husbands your mom will have, your grandma will continue to hand you two presents and a tub of leftover casserole to give to each of them every following Christmas.

**Step 4.**
Pour melted butter over the top of the casserole, cover evenly.
In the subsequent months, your mom gets a new boyfriend. After a few weeks, he begins living in your house. At first, you simply take note of how loud he is. You think about how he always reeks of liquor. Eventually, you start losing sleep as you’re woken up from their constant late night fights. Later, you begin to note the bruises on your mom’s body in the mornings following these fights. You decide you need to wait to go to bed till they do because if you’re awake, maybe you can help her. When they fight, you beg him to stop, to leave, while you beg her to kick him out for longer than a few hours. Eventually, she’s tired of you trying to protect her. You’re told to drive you and your brother to your grandma’s house as the fights get worse. Your grandma’s is now the designated safe house.

Nine months into dating, your mom and her boyfriend decide to get married. A week before they got married, you begged your mom not to do so. On the day of the wedding, you opted to stay home. That evening, your grandma takes you out to dinner, promising you it’ll all be okay.

One night while you’re spending the evening hanging out with your high school boyfriend, your mom texts you and Cecil
tells you not to come home but to go to your grandma’s instead before curfew. Despite the newlywed bliss, her and your now stepdad are fighting again. You ignore her texts, and turn your phone off. Your high school boyfriend tells you he can ask his mom if you can stay on their couch, but eventually, you feel guilty about leaving your mom alone to fend for herself, and you go home. As you pull into your driveway, you get a sinking feeling in your stomach that something is different this time. You get out of your car and slowly enter your house. There is broken glass, holes punched in almost every wall and door, food thrown from the fridge, and broken wall decorations with phrases such as “bless this home with love and laughter” laying on the ground. You hear yelling from your mom and stepdad’s bedroom. He has his hands on her neck. She’s covered head to toe in bruises. She’s become unrecognizable shades of black and blue. You grab him, you scream at him, you offer him all your tip money from your after-school waitressing job that week if he will please leave. Eventually, he accepts your offer. You ask your mom to call the police, but she says she is tired, so she will in the morning. However, at 8 AM the following day, she welcomes him back inside with a hug and a freshly prepared plate of breakfast. You call your
grandma.

Your grandma takes you out to breakfast–Huddle House because it’s cheap and acceptable to look distraught in one without questions being asked. After a half-eaten breakfast, you call the police station together, but they tell you only your mom can file a domestic violence report. Your grandma drives you back to her house, where she makes you a fresh hashbrown casserole because the one at Huddle House was more grease than hashbrown. Food is a comfort for the heartbreak you endure because of the report your mom will never fill.

**Step 5.**

Sprinkle 1 cup of cheese on top, then add crushed cornflakes over the top if you prefer.

You go to college as far away as money will allow. You received a full ride from a pretty good school six hours from home. A few weeks in, you get a card with a note and some money in the mail.

“We miss you. The money is for snacks and...”
water. Love you very much, Grandma”

You and your grandma become pen pals. Each month, you scribble her a quick note on a piece of paper ripped from your notebook and mail it in the plain envelopes sold by the front desk of your dorm building. In return, she sends you a fancily decorated card with some cash inside and a beautifully written note.

It’s quickly passed into the second semester of your freshman year. Your first college boyfriend breaks your heart out of nowhere. You discover he has been cheating on you the whole time. Eventually, you start to think you’re going crazy as you’re reminded of him everywhere you go on campus. You’re overwhelmed by anxiety attacks multiple times a week now. You look into transferring schools, but all the ones you could afford on transfer scholarships are less than academically ideal. You are about to make the switch regardless until your grandma texts you. She asks you not to transfer and let a boy ruin what you have worked so hard for. She offers advice on where to get anxiety medication, revealing that she and the rest of your family all started taking it around your age. She tells you she loves you and that she is so proud of you. When you come home for summer
break, you’re welcomed with a hashbrown casserole the first day you visit her. This time it has extra cheese.

You’re in the beginning of your sophomore year when your mom calls you crying. She tells you that your grandma has been diagnosed with gallbladder cancer. She had her gallbladder removed a few weeks prior, and the tests doctors ran after the surgery confirmed the cancer. It had already reached stage four by the time they found it. That same afternoon, you try to finish your homework. Instead, you spend your time in the library googling the survival rate of gallbladder cancer–this is not a recommended coping mechanism. You spend that evening drawing your grandma a flower and mailing it alongside a note telling her to get well soon. You feel like a child, but this provides you a sense of control as if, somehow, your poorly drawn flower will cure her. She writes back and tells you she will be okay. You ask her to send you the recipe for her hashbrown casserole, and it’s handwritten in the following letter she sends you.

As her cancer spreads, your family begins to plan a vacation. Your grandma wants to spend her last bit of savings...
on a tropical trip with you and your mom. You want to go over winter break, but she insists on waiting till your spring break. Despite your objections, she books a trip to Mexico for March.

Step 6.
Bake for 1 hour until golden brown. Serve hot.

Spring break is only a week away when you get another call from your mom crying. Your grandma is in the hospital, and she isn’t looking too well. Your uncle calls you a bit later to confirm the severity. You quickly pack a bag and drive six hours to the hospital back home, distracted by the pit in your stomach the entirety of the drive. When you arrive, you are quickly aware of your grandma’s expected fate. You spend the evening with your family praying for a better alternative. You sleep on a hospital couch, deciding going home is too big of a risk. The following morning your grandma is sicker than you have ever seen her. By now, her extended family has arrived from hours away, and her sister is hand feeding her broth with tea to drink. Your grandma
is in and out of consciousness, but when you tell her you are stepping out to call your brother to ask him to come to the hospital, she responds, “Alright. Love you, girlfriend. Be good.” That is the last thing she will ever say to you. She dies a few hours later, surrounded by the tears of you and the rest of your family. Afterward, you drive home with your mom. Your stepdad was expected to drive her home, but he was too drunk to do so.

Two days following her passing is your birthday. You spend the day writing her obituary. As the only member of your family to attend college, you’re expected to write one well. The next day you pack a suitcase for your vacation because she told your mom to take you still, even if she couldn’t go. At her funeral, you read the obituary before your mom and uncle read a eulogy. She’s described as the kindest woman one could ever meet; a loving wife, mother, grandmother, sister, and friend. She is said to have taught compassion to those around her. She was a survivor, a role model, a gardener, a chef of every holiday meal, and an avid churchgoer. The funeral parlor is filled. There are tears everywhere you turn, but few seem as big as your own.
After the funeral, your grandma’s church holds a dinner. They serve an array of comfort foods, enough to satisfy the overwhelming amount of people in attendance. Someone from her congregation brings a hashbrown casserole. It’s hot and golden brown, just like it’s supposed to be, but something about it doesn’t taste right. You leave knowing it never will.
Smoker’s Cough
Zeppelin Dufour
School of the Art Institute of Chicago
Las Vegas

Lara Zeng
Harvard College
Poetry

not after Eleanor Lerman

This is what oranges do. Oranges with arms and legs walking to the orange convention. They buy leaf hats with their little pulp hands. They can’t fit through the doors. So every orange dreams of burrowing its way to the center. Like where there’s a peel, there’s a navel orange sneaking in around the corner. Millions tumbling down the stairs with round bodies losing their leaves over the walls of bowls to get there. They never stop rolling, for ticket price they never stop rolling for whoever will watch, for a dollar bruising. If you stand next to them, why do you watch?

You are in town for the human convention and you wake at sunrise to catch continental breakfast at the motel
where juice is included
(the juice comes free)
Venus
Jake Riedel, Kansas State University
She Isn’t Me

Kaysha Adamo
Augusta University at Georgia
Nonfiction

She walks in darkness, her steps echoing. Skin on concrete, or something less maybe, maybe bone. The gentle slap of pacing and dancing and collapsing time and time again. She approaches the light but never touches it, bathing in cold, infinite nothingness. She watches it like a screen, commentating—a back-seat driver—or simply observing with the occasional reminder. I can hear her, she knows I can; I can feel her, she knows that, too, she revels in it. I think one day she will kill me.

A day like today maybe.

Driving lone, I rush to school knowing full well there are more cops at the end of the month. I have a little silver jeep, it’s small and struggles to accelerate sometimes, but the moment we opened the door Christmas morning and saw it sitting in our driveway, I was proud to one day call it mine. My dream was to have it, but it was never in my dreams. Not the ones she gave me. Even now, speeding on the interstate—not much, just enough—the barrier seems so close. A few feet at most, a simple sneeze could steer me, I’ll trip on the barrier, flip and tumble. It’s a crash. They say I’ll hear it, I’m sure I will. I won’t care.
sound of metal bending and glass shattering isn’t important, but the feeling is. That feeling is back; the feeling she gave me. My stomach turns, my head is light and heavy both, my dreams are far too real. Even now, as I think I could crack my skull and let her seep out through my window, I can’t see my sweet little jeep totaled. In dreaming I drive something large, something dangerous and fast, but awake, I see the danger in being small. Fragile. It’s too heartbreaking to think it dented and smashed.

_The others know what they’re doing_, she tells me, _but you don’t._

I get along to class just fine, _an essay, exam, and remember to read_, and now it’s time to go back. But never mind the endless possible wrecks and deaths cycling from her loose lips, some music can distract her enough for now.

_A day like tomorrow._

“You know, you’re more likely to be crushed by a vending machine than to be attacked by a shark,” my brother tells me, as he does every time we mention the beach.

It’s strange but true, although I’m less concerned on the daily about vending machines than about car accidents and alcohol. _Those are the real killers._

“Just stay on the beach under the umbrella,” my stepdad says. “Or stay home.” He’s the one who wants us
to go; he’ll never understand why I won’t be comfortable there. Although we don’t go to see the ocean often, his passion for being on the water shows strongly when we’re at the lake. It’s like it’s in their blood—the Californians—it’s like they’re part mermaid. I’m the furthest thing from ocean: a desert baby. *She* and I both like to keep it that way.

“I never said anything about sharks,” I told them. “You just need to go to a good beach, a clear blue one, somewhere you can see all the way to the bottom,” my mother suggests.

Sounds great, except when the shark does appear, I’ll see it. I’ll watch it approach, heart pounding like a finger on glass, while she takes over. I’ll stare it down as it circles and charges at me, or it might just graze past me as if the toothy layers of what might be called its skin could taste the goosebumps riding on my flesh. Or maybe I’ll thrash and scramble for air to hyperventilate until she screams in my heart—*It’s going to get you; this is how you die. Remember that dream? The one I gave you? The one where you scream and plea, trapped under the butt of a ship, watching the gaping endless abyss of death and teeth remove your humanity? All that’s left is an animal now, a scrambling animal that cries for help with no one to hear but me*—long enough to deafen the pressure of drowning.

“That might work,” I tell her, “but not here where
the water is too murky to see your own hands.”

“Well sharks don’t like being around people anyway, so there won’t be any there.”

“It’s not just sharks. The undercurrent is enough to take anyone out, and I’m already not that good a swimmer. Plus, the saltwater is dehydrating under a sun that will literally give me cancer, and jellyfish and stingrays are everywhere.” They just roll their eyes at this.

*You’re just ruining their good time.*

The last time we went to the beach, I was brave enough *with Mom’s push (such a baby)* to get waist-deep in the water, but after maybe five minutes, my brother saw a stingray pass by him.

“That stingray was tiny, it wouldn’t have killed you,” my brother insists.

“And those jellyfish won’t either, they’re not lethal,” my stepdad added.

“Maybe not, but they’ll hurt like a bitch. Who wants that?”

She’s not a conscience, and she’s way too upfront to be a subconscious. She’s me, but a different kind of me. She is me who only wants to stop being me. She is me who tells me life sucks I should just give up, but wait, don’t, you’re being selfish your life isn’t bad, here have this guilt. If I don’t listen to her, she just gets stronger. If I fight her, she just feeds off the agitation. She inspires my
story, the one I want to write but might never. It’s a fiction about a girl with monsters who are trapped attached to her soul. They torture her in every weird way possible—making cake smell and taste like mud and mold, whispering doubts and accusations in her ears—and in return, she is one of the strongest people in the world. Only if she can stand it. It’s fiction because pain doesn’t make you stronger, it just makes you in pain.

Another day with friends, not a birthday but a celebration. It turns night, but world is not dark. It’s a new filter over my lens, a filter that changes with heart rate. It’s only a coincidence that it’s right now, as the sun sets, but the black edges of shapes sharpen and blur the outlines of their faces. My headache doesn’t help steady the lens, neither do my actual glasses.

“Do you want a slice of cake?” someone asks.

“Hm? Oh, sure, I guess,” I say.

“Well, it’s crumbling really bad, so we’re just eating it out of the container with spoons.”

“It’s fine,” I tell them, taking a spoon and shoveling some crumbs. I’m actually quite full, but they went through all that effort…

I stand quietly leaning against the counter, spoon cycling between my mouth and the cake, making passing smiles at the embodiments of energy I call my friends. They chatter and laugh, drink and dance, challenge and
play. *It’s a little smothering.* This house is always cold, but on nights like this, I tend to take my jacket off and lay it on my purse. It’s in a pile in the corner with my shoes. *Keep it together, or you might lose it,* she says. The booming music of the game makes my head feel like a second thumping heart. *You should sit down.* I slowly pace around the kitchen island until, after enough tired smiles, I oblige and find a seat to pick, although usually it ends up being the floor or sneakily stealing someone else’s spot. *They might want it back.* They tend to be too drunk or find something else to distract them from caring about a random spot on the couch. *Fair enough.*

She seems rather tame today. Trust me, she began as slow and smooth as a ninja, as if her voice wasn’t a voice but a pill crushed and injected by syringe, *The headache numbs you from how hard I’m hitting.*

I don’t understand *her.* Why is she here? Does she think I can’t take care of myself? *Obviously.* Not everything has to be so dramatic. *It’s better to be prepared.* I’m scared to talk back. It’ll make her real, it might open the door to give her a voice louder than the tranquil rush of blood through vessels. She will no longer be trapped beneath the prison of pretending she doesn’t exist. I speak now as if she doesn’t know I’m talking about her. What’s the difference, then? The least I can do is try.

I hate you. *Then you hate yourself.*
So be it. Happiness and peace shouldn’t be so difficult to achieve, it’s your fault I’ll never find it. *It’s your fault you’ll never find it.* Whether you echo me or lead me, I know you’re not me, you’re a parasite, I’ll find a way to push you out. I don’t care if I’m poisoned in the process of killing you. *I care.* No, you don’t, you just pretend to. *I care about you, Kaysha. You don’t need to be collateral damage in the rampage to destroy me.*

…Yeah, I guess…

…*Kill yourself.*

Fuck you.

I complained maybe once or twice to my family about certain school work. A crazy amount of reading, writing, pointless math, and whatever else. Why not complain? *No one wants to hear it.* It relieves a bit of stress, I think, but they always stop me when I say something about public speaking or interacting with people in general.

“That’s just a part of life,” they say. “Learn to deal with it.”

They’re right, I know, but I have been learning and still not dealing. It’s stupid, but I just can’t stand it. Memorize a speech, make a presentation, then put it together.

Oh shit, they’re staring. Did you choose the wrong shirt? *Is it wrinkled? Should you have worn an undershirt? Is your bra showing? Your blush? Your*
face is red hot, you can feel it. It’s muggy in here, but you’re shivering. Is the screen too far away? What does it say? Oh, never mind, just bullshit it. They know you’re bullshitting. You can see it in their faces, but they don’t care. Why should they care? It’s just another shaky voice; another fidgeting hand; another hair out of place; another stutter; another repeated phrase; another nervous chuckle. Another pity grade. Drowning in air, vision is blurry. You should have researched more. You don’t know what you’re talking about.

Deep breaths.

You’re worthless. You’re weak. You’ll never make it, never get a job. You’ll fail and have to take the class again and again and again and again forever. Hell is not in flames surrounded by demons, it’s in flames surrounded by professors who judge you on how much you pace, say “uh,” and pretend to actually like people. Deep breaths.

You got lucky this time. I’ll be back next week.

A simple sandwich, oozing with just enough (too much) jelly speckled with flakes of strawberry seeds, white bread protected from the table by the thin paper plate, sits patiently in front of me. Leaning over the little meal, alone with nothing but the roar of the AC mere feet from the table, I slowly numb her away. Expired, she whispers, expired, expired… The little strange ring of mold of bread
around the edge doesn’t really exist. If my mother was home and I asked her to look, she would chuckle and say, “it’s not even a week over the sell-by date, the bread is fine.” The bread is fine, calm down and take a bite. A quick one, don’t taste it—is that what bread tastes like? I forgot—another bite, another, another, now it’s gone. Out of sight, out of mind.

Some chips will be safer, they’re more consistent. *You mean they’re highly processed. How’s that much better?* Yes, maybe that’s true. *I’m always right.* I’m just not satisfied with a sandwich, though. Maybe some fruit? I think Mom got berries and bananas. *They’re mushy and gross, a couple days old. Don’t eat those, they’ll make you sick.* Eggs, then. *You’re a shit cook, they’ll make you sick.* I guess I’ll stick with water.

With a cup of water in hand, I inch my way upstairs, ignoring *her* as she tugs at my gut like a child with its mother’s shirt, nagging my attention towards: *that cup isn’t clean, you’ll get sick.* She already knows I’m not using a dirty cup; I’m reusing the same one since there are no more in the cupboard. She stops tugging, but will yank once more every time I pick it up to drink from it. *No, don’t, that bacteria sitting on the rim may have come from your own mouth, but it’s foreign now, and tainted. Like little worms it’s squirming, screeching in delight to infect your sensitive throat.* Oh well, I guess. I’m already at the top.
My room is the warmest in the house and possibly the quietest. I think this is why Simon the cat prefers to lay in there. He’s curled at the foot of my bed, on my soft white blanket beneath the window. He lifts his head and blinks a dream away, greeting me, the room seems calmer with him there. Like a caramel prince dreaming of chasing pesky mice through cloud kingdom, the sun bathes him in a divine gold. I gently fall next to him, curled up on my bed, and watch him purr and dream the mice away. I wonder if little Simon speaks to him the way I do with her. He will wander outside sometimes, but I think I can see the moment he tells him to run back home, kitten, you’ll catch a tick. People say animals sense more than us; I wonder if Simon knows her outline like the smell of high blood pressure. A ghost you’ll never see because her shape is smaller than mine and she mirrors me perfectly.

Controls, you mean. So, you know you’re hurting me. Helping, you mean. Fuck you. Fuck you.

My stomach growls loud enough to twitch Simon’s ear. Go eat.

I sigh. “Fuck me.” I go grab some chips.

I tried once to be rid of her. I took meds, I don’t even know what they are now, and they sort of worked. She was gone; my mind silent, my heart empty. The first few weeks felt like happiness.

It wasn’t.
She brings me pain, but she also pushes me to be better, to work harder, to search for that happiness. I need her because without her, there is no me. There’s nothing. *It’s all or nothing with you and me.*

One great thing about being an adult: I get to buy my own stuff.

*One awful thing about being an adult: you have to buy your own stuff.*

On my way home from school, I have to stop and get gas. There is a grocery store nearby, and I need something from there, too. I guess I’ll run in. *Literally, if you can.* I stop my little jeep in the best parking I can find. At least it’s between the lines, *you maniac*, but now is the hard part.

I look around, make sure no one is paying attention to me, that no one is just sitting in the car next to me, waiting. *They’re going to grab you.* At last, I think it’s safe and step out, quick to get away from the parked cars. Speedily, hurry, hurry, across the road into the store. *The cars are waiting on you, stop wasting their time.* Don’t touch anyone, don’t get too close at all or they’ll think you’re trying to pick their pocket. *Or they might pick yours, might grab your purse.*

Okay, made it past the front, now to fast-walk my way down to the hygiene section. *Someone’s watching, they’re going to follow you.* Just grab it and go. But
I can’t decide. *Too bad, don’t take long.* So, I go to the snack aisle, too, to give myself more time to choose which shampoo to buy and because I need something sweet for the evening. *You’re going to get fat like that. Raise your cholesterol, you’ll have a heart attack one day.*

I keep careful watch who is around me. My parameter is never unobserved, whether it’s a creepy jerk or a family of four, I want to know. *Not like you would do anything if someone was following or staring. You’re hopeless.* I find no one pays any attention to me, not really. A strange glance or friendly smile, perhaps, but I’m unapproachable when like this because I don’t just feel frantic, I look it. Quick movements and awkward gestures make up the grout holding my brick wall painted “leave me alone, *leave us alone*, to live in peace, *to live at least*.”
the butcher’s soft gaze

Sehar Batra
Ashoka University
vivisection

Rosie Lopolito
Washington University in St. Louis

Poetry

I am a butcher. This starched white apron hangs like a ghost at the gallow's but wrinkles at the sight of blood. The cleaver laughs. If you scraped the grey film off my brain and played it with a hand-crank projector, you'd see. I cried last night when a lamb was born in a movie. The thin film of mucus clung to his legs like an embrace but had to be broken. It had to be broken. There was no other choice. No puncture came and no breath popped the skin tight seal. The movie would have ended the same whether he lived or not but still I wonder. What is one lamb? I don't envy the man who skinned the dead lamb because I am him. Do you see? I am worse. I skin the living. Warm flesh crawls away, I yank it back with my books and my hands. I am a butcher. If you could see the twin lines of scar tissue in my mouth, maybe you could diagnose why words don't fit properly against my dry tongue, under grating teeth. They splatter against my palate, flatten like drops of soft wax, emerge missapen and abused, overworked. You can see why this is a bad habit.

Nine out of ten dentists wish I would close my mouth and see a mechanic instead. I am suffocating in this poem despite the air holes. Despite the gaps in the verbal film airing out words that stink like death's imitation of life. This is why I worry my breath smells. I wear a corpse's swollen tongue. What has he left unsaid that haunts him even now? I don't care. I'm hiding. I'm afraid I'm so used to twirling with my food, I can't taste it anymore. Probably needs more salt. I wish your name fit in my mouth again. Am I the man with the knife or the dead lamb? I am a butcher. I'm sick of reminding you. If you get pricked by one of the fishhooks stored in the back of my throat, you'd be at fault. I keep my thorns to myself—who are you to watch? To pry my jaws open, to pick apart the bones of unsaid words? Sometimes they need to be hung to dry. Sometimes they need to be covered with a sheet and left in a cold room to shrivel. I will carve them when I'm ready.

I'll be the first to admit this: I don't know how long they'll last. Rotten meat rotten teeth rotten words words that spoil on contact. I can't give an estimate for their expiration date, but how can anyone predict a death? I don't know if something is too far gone until it returns as a ghost, as a lost dog who fights her way home to discover she's mist, gone. A good butcher cures the cuts with care, salts their words so that the sting lasts, distances the meat of their own flesh from those great unbreathing lumps hanging on hooks in an ice locker. The man who so tenderly took the skin from the lamb wasn't a butcher, either. He swung the doomed creature by his useless legs and kissed his unopened eyes, but gravity and God don't care. Do you see? I don't know. I am neither farmer nor butcher nor man nor God. But there is blood in my machinery. I am the lamb from another movie. This lamb lives has no name for herself.
8:46

Jonathan William Potter
Stephen F. Austin State University
Poetry

a quarter ‘til. the rightmost lane is closed/the sky a traffic orange, the air like silt/from marl and slate. a mixer churns and spills/and reeks of gasoline. beneath new roads/the pipes will lay. The pumps will stand in rows/outside a corner store, it shelves yet to be filled./tonight we ride through places that are never built/but always building—the commute long and slow—/to breathe, to get far from streets whose signs are stained/with splattered blood, far from courts and cul-de-sacs/whose pavements won’t release the stench of death./we’ll ride until our tires tire ‘long a way/that isn’t grim, a way that doesn’t take us back/to cracked cement lodged in hollowed cheeks, to country law knelt on pleading necks.
To Love And To Know

Maya Kang
University of Pittsburgh
Poetry

To laugh with you has the skies turn pink,
and years to our life fall right in our laps
Even times I know you won’t laugh,
not even smirk,
I’ll crack that joke
because you appreciate me.

Everything that is humorous is wholesome and what is wholesome is humorous
We enter a rage of candied sugar heartbeats, we grab each other’s shoulders to squeal SUGAR RUSH! I hold the door open for you . . . lady’s first
Your name written wrong: “Victoe” on valuable emails It’s all ridiculous, but it makes us feel alive.

Still the damp and weighted air comes
but passes right through you
and I
wanna take you with me everywhere I go.

Who ever knew there was someone with a heart made
from scraps of a flashlight and a compass?
Shine a light
I won’t flinch away from
and a compass to escort me
back to earth.

We play games and puzzles to train
for the ultimate contest
Monopoly could be our greatest weakness
and maybe at times
we can blame my childish heart
Not even a thoughtful massage goes by
without explosive laughs or squirmish dances.

But you hush me
and tell me to breathe,
but at no other moment in my life
have I forgotten more how to breathe.

We talk about the future like we know
the sun will rise tomorrow,
the sky will be pink,
and there will always be
at least one stain on your clothes.
(who has ideas of retirement ridden days?)

Me and you
aren’t perfect and neither is this world
But we will get better each day!
Better at fashioning cheeses and flower shaped cold cuts
on a board, then pronounce charcuterie wrong
and decorate elaborate houses
of eggsflourmolassesbutter and a dash of ginger, that is.

Thank you for always remembering me,
and praying for my good days.
To love you is a blessing,
and to know you is a gift.
Frida
Emily C. Graham, Kansas State University
Monkeys are stealing grandmother’s avocados

Deepesh Shrestha
Penn State Altoona
Nonfiction

When my grandmother first came to the United States, my mother forced me and my brother Namdu to keep our grandma occupied while both she and my father were at work. We were children at the time, and I don’t remember much of grandma, but I remember my brother being very cold at first to her. He was a hyperactive child and wanted the need for speed that only the PlayStation 2 could give him. The only reason why my mom wanted us to keep her company is that we’ve never met her before then, and she would probably never come back to the U.S. again. Our grandmother that day told us about many Bhutanese tales and her love for Bhutan, where she and my mother were born.

The dragons were cool, yes, but my favorite stories were about the people there. She told us how they owned two hotels and lived on the top floors. The fountain in the front dirt parking lot, with old koi fish still leaping at every fly. She would continue about the mountains, birds, and people until she began rambling about our uncle and mom’s childhood. I remember my brother stopping her right there in the middle of her story. “You said uncle can
fly?” her laughter grew harder and harder as she continued to describe the story of our uncle when he was younger jumping off the second floor to fly like a superhero.

Finally interested my brother asked another question, “What happens outside of the house.” My grandmother thinks for a while, pondering what stories would be interesting to young boys, and then tells us about the computer lab and the single soccer field no one used since the kids were happy with the busy street. My brother lost all interest once she started talking about the tea.

Nothing seemed to matter outside of her life at home, and it seems that everyone else felt the same. Bhutan seemed peaceful and happy, but it was strange to me that nothing bad happened there, except the fact that monkeys were stealing her avocados. Grandmother never showed rage or hate in front of us but when she started talking about those monkeys, she almost spilled her tea. The baboons would come whenever they wanted and would grab as many avocados as they could hold in their hands and mouths. Most people stay away from the monkeys, but she had plunged headfirst into the problem because her avocados were part of her massive garden about 50 feet from the hotel. Each seed from that garden; trees, vegetables, flowers were all planted by my grandmother, and she was not going to give it to them without a fight.

The baboons would be quick with their heist but attack anyone trying to stop them or walking around. The
men in the neighborhood would try to scare them away by waving brooms in the air and revving their motorcycles and scooters, but every time they would end up getting attacked, running away, and arguing that night to their wives how they will get them back someday while slowly sipping a beer away to recap episodes of *Achar!* The only person who could stop them was my grandmother. She was known as her the queen of her ten-acre garden. When she yelled, you could hear her halfway across Bhutan. Of course, I heard this from my mother and not her.

In hindsight, I guess I had misconceptions about Bhutan because it was not America. The people wanted mutual peace with one another and joined the mentality of living for happiness. My grandmother couldn’t think of many things to talk about to me and my brother other than what she loved and the peace it brings her. She never once mentioned at the time the political nonsense of the Chinese trying to invade every day, the lack of workers because everyone pushed a relaxing life, the oppressive societal push of men power over women (though both my grandmother and mom didn’t seem to mind), and the fact that Bhutan had, and still has, the top domestic happiness in the world. There was no community interest towards government, policies, or worries. They let the people sit in their homes drinking tea with sweets while watching as the monkeys steal my grandmother’s avocados.

During the early summer of 2020, I sat in my
room with tea and sweets and watched two monkeys, Namdu and my dad, attack each other over nonsense. COVID-19 put us in lockdown, which meant my dad was home and not making money, he was very stressed. He would lash out at my brother and so my brother would lash back at him. They would argue more times than I could go to the bathroom in a day. The clashes hurt us, but our home was hurt the most, for it is the one thing we could not stand to be locked in.

We all might have been able to get through it smoother if my mother was here. She decided to fly out of the country and back to Bhutan to see her relatives. Unfortunately, my grandmother had already passed but her love for Bhutan stayed with my mother. Because plane tickets were so cheap, she left in February just before it was labeled as a pandemic. The news I would hear from my college and the suspicion that we might go to remote classes, traveling was a terrible idea to me. The only thing is that my mom bought tickets five days before her flight at Spirit, to save the money for buying tea and superfoods. The day she told us this I told her to stay home and leave after the pandemic. She kept insisting ongoing. She told me the she was smarter than everyone else excuse and was disappointed in me for trying to keep her away from family and a place deep in her heart. The one regret is giving up after convincing her for only five minutes. I thought convincing her would take more effort than I should use
on the problems, and I was going to talk to friends. One of my many regrets was backing down because of my arrogance and guilt of keeping her away from Bhutan.

She got stuck there in Bhutan. Bhutan had become locked down and the government would initiate quarantine whenever they had more than ten cases. People were locked in their homes for weeks straight with only a couple of days 'til another lockdown. My mother would send me emails about what she was up to. After every email, I felt more and more guilty for not pushing her to stay. On June 14th, 2020, she sent me a video over Google Photos. A four-minute video of unfocused trees that contained six seconds of monkeys stealing grandmother’s avocados.
cottonmouth

Akshali Gugle
Ashoka University
Poetry

Her lime popsicle. Lemony lime. It is. Luring lime.
The melting lime travels. Down the popsicle stick it goes.
Drip.
Drip.
Soggy popsicle sticks. The stick is soggy from the popsicle.
Dri—Slurp. Her tongue caught it. She caught his eye.
The buzzing flies buzz.
They feast on our popsicles.
Ondansetron
Elizabeth Boccabello
West Virginia University
The Size of an Avocado

Zane Piontek
Louisiana State University
Poetry

“Don’t stare at me
While I tear the thoughts from my head!”

She would say that incessantly,
perched atop the kitchen stove,
tearing the thoughts from her head.

I was usually not one for the theatrics,
but one day boredom overtook me,
and I cocked a toothless grin and said:

“Darling, it’s not you I stare at,
but the thoughts. I like to watch them
as they scatter into the floorboards.”

She reeled at that,
dug a nail into the crown of her skull,
and pried loose a thought

the size of an avocado.
It flew up and into the light fixture, buzzed around, and then dropped dead. I looked on, grinning all the while.

“What a funny way you have!” I chuckled, “Such a charade you make of suffering!”

She did not do well after that day. The thoughts multiplied and grew restless, and her head swelled until it burst.
Dogs Go to Heaven
Zeppelin Dufour
School of the Art Institute of Chicago
Deer

Kelly Morgan
Vanderbilt University
Poetry

_Do it now. Come on, Ethan,_
my father mouths, crouched
three yards away, gun in hand.

His jerking gestures spring
from bent elbow to wrist
to blunt fingernails, saying

_Hurry, hurry._ The deer waits
like a thought experiment.
Will my hands still engage

if they’re pushed by him, not me?
The gun I hold has no intentions.
Day hasn’t yet pulled free.

I know time by quick sounds
and the shadow on my father’s face.
Footsteps patter on waking ground.

Cocked hoof, sharp ears—
in a smattering of seconds, the animal will relearn fear

and disappear into the mesh of white oak trees. Fear is the weight of a heavy hand. I could press

the gun full, and press it empty. After the metal jumped, it would shrug, return again to sleep.

Forest air grows dense with birds. I look away, narrow my sight. Dawn rips its sutures.

The deer, the sourwood leaves. I carried something home that said *Hold fast, stop, now breathe.*
solitude 1
Josiah Gill
Rhode Island School of Design
Normal People

Ingrid Marie Jensen
Louisiana State University
Poetry

I am the only person walking these streets without a boyfriend, a girlfriend or a copy of Naoise Dolan’s debut novel

I am devastated by the tears of cartoon animals
I can’t see girls looking sad in the bus queue without wanting to buy them a coffee and say, what’s wrong, are you ok?

I think in another life
I must have had a lot of sons who all died tragically
maybe I sent them off to war
waving a dishtowel in salute from the kitchen window

or maybe rats came in off a ship in the harbor when they were children and the plague consumed them like the mold eating voraciously away at the rotting fruit in the crisper of my fridge

I get upset when people on Twitter

134 Jensen
say they want to shag Paul Mescal to death because why would anyone want that nice young man to die? Jesus Christ, he’s only 24.

I need to calm down and stop thinking without the aid of pills and powders, I regret giving up my Netflix subscription for my New Year’s resolution, to save money because overall, it was the best sedative

There must be something wrong with me because I can’t relax when I’m alone

I texted my ex to ask why he was laughing in his new profile pic, I said he looked like a hyena, or a vampire, and I asked if he wanted to come over and bite my neck

That was two weeks ago, he still hasn’t read the message.
the shape of southern hands

Abigail Welch
University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill
Poetry

Mama was raised on sweet iced tea and fresh beef. Plant a sunflower for every head of cattle, but don’t grow too attached—they ain’t staying long.

Southern women learn to save themselves from grief, and save others from toothache. Bury some Jack Daniel’s in applesauce and hope inducing numb sleep doesn’t induce numb death.

The musk of mold is bittersweet ‘cause spores that grow and expand are never enough to replace the brick walls handbuilt that grow and expand with three generations of women handbuilt on home births and hardwork. But beneath Great-Grandmaw’s sunflower wallpaper and forgotten guns hidden in toilet lids, the spores are memories of

Welch
handbuilt
walls and the plaster that fell through the ceiling in ’45
that left a watermark birthmark over Baby Mamaw/Ma-
ma’s crib.

Southern women know living really means preserving—
all the memories in boiled mason jars
next to the canned tomatoes,
shelling grief with the pecans.

Mama feeds applesauce to Great-Grandmaw’s dementia
and
lemonade to her youth, and
takes up sign language
to tell her the Tar Heels won another game,

grief stored in her cellar to be opened later,
the way God is hidden behind sunrise and found all at
once in a thunderstorm,
etched between drops of rain

like sunflowers growing in the quiet between
the sweet peas and sweet potatoes.
Coexistence

Hee Yoo

Virginia Commonwealth University
Conditionals

Kyra Lisse
Franklin & Marshall College
Nonfiction

If one wishes to prevent one’s mother from learning that one is ill, or even might be, one must follow a few small but important steps. First and foremost, she must keep her palliatives—Tums, Tylenol, tongue-dissolving Zinc, cough drops, temple thermometer—out of sight and, this part’s key, all in a single location. She may opt for the dusty crevice between the mattress and bed frame, or perhaps her makeup bag, or even inside the front compartment of the suitcase she still has yet to unpack since arriving home from college. She understands that, in some ways, this is how an addict must feel: sneaking around, stashing things, behaving as if nothing is amiss, if only for someone else’s benefit. She also understands that, in most other ways, her experience is nothing like this one.

One should never keep such items in the bathroom, because 1) one’s mother will inevitably come across them while cleaning, which she does every Friday, and 2) she will most likely hear one walking to retrieve them in the middle of the night, and since one hardly ever does this, her mother will immediately suspect that something is wrong, and one will have to lie, explain that she forgot to
pee before bed, and pee, pee whatever she has in her, and then slip the thermometer under the band of her underwear.

To be clear: One’s mother is not against the use of over-the-counter medications and devices. No, definitely not; one’s mother uses these medications and devices herself. The issue, one’s mother’s and one’s own, is the composite of germaphobia and illness anxiety. If one’s mother finds out that one has, say, a sore throat, three things will happen, and usually in that order. First one’s mother will blow it up, make a big worrying fuss, in turn causing one’s condition to appear even starker in one’s own mind. Second, one’s mother will try to play detective with one’s ailment: Where did you come from? Was it from Iris? The pool? I knew the pool would do it. I hereby blame the pool, and implicitly I blame you, daughter, for being so careless as to have acquired this illness. But the satisfaction one’s mother gets out of winning this game is an empty one; because once she does, she still must contend with the thought that she might catch it from one, which is a game neither woman will ever win.

There is a framed poem on the wall of my mother’s
childhood bedroom, to the left of the closet door that now houses my grandmother’s clothes. It’s called “Children Learn What They Live,” and it’s a list of eleven items beginning with if:

   If a child lives with shame, he learns to feel guilt.

   If a child lives with tolerance, she learns to be patient.

   If a child lives with encouragement, he learns confidence.

I used to sleep beside my mom in this bedroom whenever we visited her parents. In the mornings, I would pore over the list, reading it over and over.

These sentences, my Latin education would later teach me, are called conditionals: The apodosis, or clause B, is conditional upon what happens in the protasis, or clause A. Conditional statements make for powerful rhetorical devices. They establish a rule, a cut-and-dried cause and effect. They also provide the basis for bestselling children’s books.

Conditionals are easy to interpret.

They also foreclose possibilities C through Z the second
they’re brought into existence.

There are two things I find strange about the list. The first is that fear is absent from it. There are protases for acceptance, ridicule, and security, but none for living with anxiety or fear. It strikes me as a hard one to miss: Don’t most phobias develop during childhood?

The second strange thing is that the poem refuses to assign responsibility to anyone but the child herself. “If a child lives with [x]” is a cool, unbothered euphemism for “if a child is taught [x] by her guardian(s)” — or, if we’re really being honest— “if a guardian teaches a child [x].”

If a child is made the subject of her fate, she is subjected to carry the burden of it, too.

If a child lives with fear, she learns to be fucking afraid.

My first year of preschool, I had a habit of touching my mouth. I found comfort in mindlessly stroking the side of my index finger against my lips, up and down, up and down. (That this act aligns with Freud’s phallic stage of
development is not lost on me.) Once, after my mom had picked me up from school and loaded me into my carseat, she peered into the rearview mirror and watched me do it.

“Stop touching your mouth,” she said. “You’ll get yourself sick.”

Thirteen years later, I could be found scrubbing my lips with soap and scalding water because my seatbelt had brushed against them. Children learn what they live.

I always blame my mom for creating this conditional, but very rarely do I resent her for it. She was and is just a mama trying to keep her babies healthy, after all. And since we were our own autonomous, mortal beings, she wanted to give us the tools to preserve ourselves as early as possible.

Conditionals, though, have unspoken byproducts, and it’s important to address them so as not to foreclose them. If you give a mouse a cookie, he might ask for a glass of milk, but he also might die from the raisins. If you tell a child not to touch her lips, she might remain physically healthy, but she also might need to be medicated for
crushing OCD.

My mom did not ask for the byproducts. This is part of why I have trouble resenting her. In fact, if she’d had a magic ball, and could see how her conditional would later affect me, she probably would have raised me differently.

In that magic ball, though, she also would have seen other things that she couldn’t bear to see. Like this essay.

“\You would look so much prettier if you wore your hair up,” was the line my grandmother fed my mom all through her childhood and adolescence. There was always something for her to upbraid: the shows my mom watched (awful), the toys she wanted (stupid), the clothes she wore (ugly), the problems she faced (silly). Until she went away to college, their relationship was no short of militant, a constant cycle of criticism and resentment. Love, if it existed, was repressed in the service of correction.

To this day, my mom will only wear her hair up. Says her face looks fat with it down, which kills me.
The word “conditional” is most often used with its negative prefix, as a measure of the strength of one’s love. “I will love you unconditionally,” goes the hit Katy Perry song. “There is no fear now / Let go and just be free / I will love you unconditionally.”

I know that my mom’s love for me is unconditional. That no matter what germs I bring home, that I wear on my sullied, human hands, I will be her everything. Ironically, the unconditionality of her love is evident in the conditional itself: a love so strong and deep that she would go to any lengths to prolong it, even if it prompted, inadvertently, my psychic disarray.

It’s funny, Katy Perry thinking that love precludes fear. In my experience, love is fear. It’s tautology: I love because I’m afraid of losing the one I love. It’s also torture: as if my hands are covered in blood, her blood, instead of, by way of, my bacteria.

The worst of it came the winter break of my junior year of college, when I grew convinced that the dull yet constant ache in my left arm was Covid. Vaccination was still months outside the realm of possibility; I was certain that my mom would die, that I would be the one to kill her.
In the middle of the night, I searched Youtube for “music when you’re stressed.” I don’t remember what the music sounded like, but it went on for three hours, depicted pretty mountain landscapes, and eventually coaxed me to sleep. For a while, I scrolled through some of its thousands of comments, weeping.

If you are reading this, one said, remember when you thought you would never get through some stuff? And … Look at you, you are here, you ARE ALIVE, you made it! You are so much stronger than you think you are!

I hope your day gets better if it is bad or I hope it stays good if you come here for relaxation, wrote another.

If you’ve come to this comment section depressed, and with a heavy feeling of stress, you’re not alone.

It’s a three-year-old video. Folks have left their own conditionals as recently as two weeks ago. Turns out these statements are good for more than rulemaking. Or, rather: they are capable of making really meaningful rules.
There’s a song that always makes me think of my mom. Not “Unconditionally,” but “If You Weren’t You” by Emily James.

I don’t have a fancy way to say this
But what’s the use in overcomplicating
‘Cause no amount of poetry
Or rhymes fit into melodies
Could possibly express the barest truth
Yeah, honestly there wouldn’t be a me
If you weren’t you
If you weren’t you

Maybe it is tautology. Maybe it is torture. But it is also, she is also, the great protasis of my life.

If the conditional is a feature of grammar and love, and the grammar of love, it is also a facet of probability theory, which aims to determine the likelihood of an event occurring. I myself am most interested in the likelihood that an event will recur. That is, if I do everything in my power to raise my yet-to-be children without a fear of germs or illness, what byproduct fear might I inculcate in them instead?
I mean, that’s what happened with my mom, isn’t it? She wanted me to never know the fear of criticism, which her mother had instilled in her, so she refused to repeat it, or she thought she had, but really the fear had just taken a new form, emerged as a criticism of my hands on my lips—a criticism born of love, of course, but a criticism nonetheless.

If not germs, then what? What fear will I breed from the rib of my own?

Another thing about the conditional sentence: It is still a conditional sentence, even if its ending bears a question mark.

If you are reading this, remember when you thought you would never get through some stuff? And …

This is perhaps my favorite kind of conditional. Better than a magic ball, every outcome remains possible.
Their Introspective Glance
Brooke Petrucci
Towson University
The Cat is Dead

Sheena Holt
Emory University
Nonfiction

I’m watching reruns of Bones in bed when Hannah comes in the front door. It was my favorite show in 6th grade and lately I’ve been watching it when I’m sad.

She pops her head into my room. “Wanna smoke with me and not talk about our feelings?” She makes a muscle with her right arm. “Big man style. I got beer, too.”

I haven’t been out of bed all day, and I figure if it’s gonna happen, it’s gonna be now. “Funeral time,” I say, forcing out a smile. Hannah forces out a chuckle.

I slink my body out of bed, and follow her into the kitchen. Our signature sunflower-scented candles on the windowsill are lit, giving the appearance of a home with functioning women who do things other than sit outside and drink and smoke on a Monday night.

Usually we’re doing homework now, or cooking, or watching a movie together on the projector Hannah insisted we get in place of a tv. But tonight, we get a pass.

Yesterday, while Hannah was on a first date, I walked around Druid Hills for an hour, crying and thinking about my inability to show myself. Thinking about

150 Holt
how I loved someone, and I’d rather be alone than tell them. Thinking about how the idea of saying it to their face made me want to vomit.

I only went home because a man stopped his car to see if I was okay, and I realized how good of a kidnapping target I had made myself.

My therapist said that until I learn to tell people how I feel I will continue to be alone. I said I’m alone because I’m ugly and annoying. She said we’ll unpack that next week.

I went to bed crying last night, and this morning I woke to Hannah crying.

“Aladdin’s… dead.” She got out.

I rubbed my eyes. It was 5AM.

“I woke up and I knew something was wrong. I found him… in the closet… that’s what they do when they…. I called the vet…. I gave him sugar…” I held her for a while, then we moved into her room. Aladdin had been staying in her room until he got acclimated to living in our apartment, which is also why it was harder on her.

“Do you wanna say good bye?” she asked.

I nodded, and accepted the warm bundle, sticky from the sugar she had tried to give him.

“Thank you for the time you’ve given us,” I said. I tried to cry for Hannah, but I couldn’t. I put Aladdin in the freezer to keep his body from starting to rot, and when
it seemed acceptable, I went back to bed.

Aside from the candles, there are several packs of American Spirits, a case of cider, and a massive box of Corona on the kitchen table. Hannah opens the light blue box of Spirits and offers me one. I take it, and with it dangling in my mouth I open the box of coronas and take out two. She grabs a light and we head outside. I am in my PJs—fuzzy Christmas snoopy pants, a giant Emory sweatshirt, slippers, and my hair tied into a bandana as I often do to keep my bangs back when no one is paying attention. Hannah is wearing the jeans and sweater combo she picked out last week when we went shopping in Little Five Points. Normally, we say that we always look like opposite types of bi women—she wears alien earrings and a band tee while I wear a long floral skirt and Birkenstocks; I wear a blazer and oversized jeans while she wears a Y2K top and long shorts. Tonight, she just looks passable for society and I look like I’m dead, or maybe asleep.

There’s this little creek between our apartment complex and the Panera Bread next door. On the Panera side, there are two benches right next to each other, that face right down into the trees and water below. We walk over to the benches—it’s late enough and the area is residential enough that no one will be out to bother us about open container laws. Hannah helps me light my
cigarette on the way over. I’ve never smoked aside from a few puffs of someone else’s at a party. Hannah doesn’t normally smoke sober, but she likes to chain smoke when she drinks. She knows it’s a gross habit so not many people know about it.

A lot of people in my life have died, so it’s hard for me to cry about it anymore, or say anything about death that means anything. I worry this makes me cold.

One time Hannah told me and a few of our friends this riddle, and if you get it right, you’re supposed to be a sociopath. A woman’s mother dies, and at the funeral she sees the love of her life, but they’ve never met before, and they don’t speak to each other. Two weeks later, she kills her sister. Why’d she do it?

Without even thinking, I knew it was so she’d see the man again at the funeral. I thought it was obvious, but no one else did. They looked at me like a ghost.

While I like to think I could never kill, I’d go to great lengths to get what I want without having to stop someone awkwardly in the pews and ask for their number, and maybe have them say no. So part of me can understand why a person would do something awful to avoid that.

When we sit down, both of us are looking straight ahead, alternating between sips of beer and puffs of our cigs. Hannah coughs a little bit.
“You really do lose your tolerance for this stuff, huh?” she says.
“That’s probably a good thing, though.”
“For sure, for sure.”

I want to laugh. If this were a movie, it would be the low point, where the best friends realize they have to change something around, that things are shit. But it’s not a movie, and neither of us know what to say, other than that we’re sad. And lonely. When you’re lonely next to someone, somehow that’s worse.

I am humming the words to “The Boxer” by Simon & Garfunkel in my head. If this were a movie, that would be the song that would play right now. It’s almost like we aren’t there, like I’m watching us in real time, with a soundtrack in the background.

Hannah pulls out her phone and shows me a picture of Aladdin on her shoulder. “This was literally yesterday,” she says.
“I miss him,” I say.
Suddenly, it’s Hannah who laughs. She keeps going and going, until I don’t even know what she’s laughing at and I join in.
“We had him… for one week!” She wheezes out.
“That’s fucking hilarious. You gotta admit!”
“We suck!”
“Is this what it feels like when you make dead
mom jokes?” she asks. Our laughter dies out.

I think about her question, about the times Mike and I have laughed about my dead mom and his dead dad in a group of uncomfortable strangers. That feeling of fuck everyone who isn’t laughing right now. The way that sometimes your brain stops letting you feel anything to protect yourself, or sometimes you stop showing what you do feel, also to protect yourself. In those times, all you can do is laugh. Kundera once said that laughter is “the devil’s domain,” because it is the rejection of all rational meaning in the world. I think about this often.

“Pretty much.”

Hannah tips her head forward, and something yellow drips out her mouth. I quickly pull what I can of her hair back.

“Holy shit, you had like one beer!”

“My body’s telling me to get my shit together I guess.”

We walk back to the apartment as quickly as we can, so Hannah can get to the toilet. I pull the keys out of her pocket so she doesn’t touch the door. Hannah runs to the bathroom.

I put “The Boxer” on the Google Play Hannah’s
ex-boyfriend forgot he left her at top volume. I sing along in the kitchen, using my beer bottle as a microphone. For a moment, I feel like myself again. At the chorus, I walk to the doorframe of the bathroom. Hannah yells at me but I don’t go away.

*I have squandered my resistance  
For a pocketful of mumbles  
Such are promises*

“I think I’m just gonna swear off love,” I say. Hannah pops her head toward me, still leaning over the toilet bowl. “No you’re not.” “How do you know?”

*Leading me  
Going home*

“You believe in it more than anyone I know. I know you do.”

I wave her away with my hand. “I can’t keep it though. With people, or even a goddamn cat! I can’t even have a pet for more than a week, let alone a person,” I say. I’m laughing, but I also might be crying. I’m not sure.

*And he carries the reminders  
Of every glove that laid him down*
She rinses her mouth in the sink. “I think you just need to start being honest with people.”

In his anger and his shame
“I am leaving, I am leaving”
But the fighter still remains

“I don’t lie.”
She shakes her head and starts walking out the kitchen. I follow behind. She hands me another beer. “You sure as hell don’t tell the truth.”
Overload
Hee Yoo
Virginia Commonwealth University
I turn on the cold facet
as a punishment for warm blood

Have I ever told you?
How my mother stands in the kitchen
Pouring herself out of a tea pot.

Dad watches movie trailers
Never movies.
Turned-over cranberry-juice-stained
couch cushions

Picture frame shatters
against my brother’s basketball

and my sister.
Sitting at the table
sketching a family portrait
SNOW POPPY

Kieran Jeane  
Maryland Institute College of Art  
Poetry

 Soon my consciousness will take over and erect my body from the bed.  
For now, I am dreaming of a nightingale farm & pale white wagons moving 

 Across the field of Chinese poppies opium flirting, shaking  
Like a waif without an immune system. My silver eyes  

 Are watery because the wind is powdery & my man is sitting  
Right next to me on the wagon with my scarf tied around  

 Both our necks in a knot. We are riding without a break  
To be taken to a sacred house behind the camouflage  

 Of poppies; the witch-colored pixies glowing  
With no conscience & no limit.  

 In the alizarin field of the nightingale farm,  
Towards the shelter of everlasting love,
At the time of first snow, glistening,
Through the beige of air trembling,

Landing on my hair, his head,
Like ashes of skin and bones

Of a romantic poet,
I close my eyes,

To capture
& remember.
The Politicians Pocket
Zeppelin Dufour
School of the Art Institute of Chicago
Molten lava flows through New York City,
Fish feet flop down the sidewalk dancing the cupid shuffle,
A hot air balloon rides a horse to heaven,
A little girl washes her hands, feet, and hair
in vanilla ice cream and brushes her teeth
with charcoal.
Las Vegas has turned into Lost! Vegas?
The dead all rise in the center of IKEA;
They’re playing a game of kickball
and the refrigerator aisle is home base.
White doves swim with frogs in the purple pond,
Cars park in the clouds, trees with no heads
whisper everyone’s names—
The hills mock the ocean waves,
An orange animated fox
named Bruno
is holding the axe...
The air smells
like cheddar cheese
and the rats
are not
happy.
My mother’s life is so clearly divided by my birth that sometimes I think the version of herself before me would not recognize the one that exists now. After my mother had me, she moved back to her hometown, alone. She traded in the bright streets of Philly for the stale, stagnant town she grew up in. I think it was there that she became smaller. Not through any specific event or moment, but through the slow, silent way that small town life grinds people down. She took on a new shape, one that failed to fill the room up as much.

For the first seven years of my life, I was the only child of a single mother. When my mother held me to her chest in that giant queen-sized mattress in our small apartment, listening to the sounds of crickets and birds fading in and out through the window instead of the familiar sirens of the city, I know I was the only thing keeping her from feeling completely, utterly, alone. Being the center of that new stage in my mother’s life added a gravity to our relationship. The world tunneled down to just her and I.

As I got to know the nooks and crannies of my mother’s
personhood, I shaped myself around her, paying close attention to ensure that no part of us ever overlapped. I made myself to be bigger than her, speaking to ensure my sentences were never followed by the question mark that seemed to haunt hers. I would study her—the uncertainty that rounded her small shoulders and made her eyes flitter away from others—and I would do the opposite. I would stand with my back pin straight, taking long, careful measure to look at people directly in the eyes till they looked away in discomfort. Through her refusal to make small talk, I learned how to have a conversation with anyone, the topics she refrained from—the weather, hobbies, all the meaningless babble—becoming a space of comfort for me.

I hated how emotional my mother was. My mother cried a lot. At old photos of me, at the ends of bad rom-coms, and even once at a Coca-Cola commercial with a polar bear. Her eyes would well up and flash so strikingly blue, I would turn away, half in disgust and half with overwhelming love. She would tell me that she wasn’t like this before she had me. That my birth jumbled up all her hormones, made her soft. But while she was soft, she was also prone to anger. Her anger would come out in sudden bursts and dissolve just as quickly. It was without reason or warning, a sudden, sharp thing that she never explained. As I got older, I would poke at this anger, stoking the fire till it roared. I liked to see how controlled I could be in the
face of her turmoil. I thought her show of emotion made her weak and I thought of myself as strong for not falling victim to it. I liked to see our contrast in those moments, how stark and ugly it could get.

The most obvious contrast between my mother and I are the shades that we are made of. My biological father is Vietnamese. My mother is white. All the parts of my mother that are light—her eyes, hair, skin—are several shadows darker on me. When we stand in the mirror together it looks like a painting, all the spaces of light on her, colored in with sooty ink. Once outside of a store a woman with poorly drawn on lipstick asked my mother where she had “got” me. My mother had become furious, her mouth thinning into a razor-sharp line. I had just watched in silence. I used to be angry that I looked different than my mother—at the fact that people did not recognize me as her’s when our lives were so bound up together that I wasn’t sure either of us could exist without the other—but as I got older, I reveled in it. That when I introduced my mother, people’s faces would slide into shock and a guilty discomfort as they tried to piece together our family tree. I felt like I had achieved when they did not recognize us as two halves of a whole. Like I had put on a mask and tricked them, and then tricked them again when my mother’s face appeared from behind the mask.
I resented my mother for the direction of her life—the way she held it with a too-loose grip. From my point of view, she had done it all wrong. She had done the un-thinkable: she had ended up exactly where she started. She had traded in skyscrapers and night clubs for the town where she had gotten bullied on the playground and kissed at prom by a pimple-faced teenager named Toby. The more I resented her for this decision—this crooked way of reverting back in time—the more I criticized her. I blamed her for letting go of the life she had and thought of her as a fool for doing so. I blamed her choice of major—English Literature. I blamed her refusal to stay in Philly. I blamed her for forcing herself into the corner that sent her home, never mind I was the one holding her hand the whole time.

That is where I have worked the hardest to put as much distance between my mother and me, to ensure our paths diverge oceans apart. It is through this fear of making the mistakes my mother did that I have mapped out my future, making sure to keep a firm, solid hold of where life takes me. I spend hours fretting about becoming a writer, worried that the wrong choice will set me back to a place I can’t escape. I stalk the Wikipedia pages of famous authors, trying to mimic their steps rather than my mother’s. I stress about internships and jobs and careers, all so that I never return to the doorstep of my childhood home, exhausted and alone, with nowhere else to go.
It was not 'til I got older that I came to know the version of my mother before me—the version I was a stranger to. I was a stranger to the side of her that strutted down the stale, sun-soaked streets in four-inch platforms and shades that took up half her face. I was a stranger to the woman who had people follow her home off the subway just to talk to the pretty girl they sat beside. I was a stranger to the girl that danced at late-night parties full of shiny, pretty people, half of them drunk and already in love with her.

As I would look through the photographs kept in the small, red book on our bookshelf, I came to piece together this foreign, unknown person. In all the photos, her small silhouette could be found at the center of the room with all the blurry faces turned towards her, hanging onto whatever words were about to slip from her mouth. Life was always moving around her in those photos; bright and fast with her at the middle of it. In those photos, her back was always straight, and her eyes held, solid and unrelenting.

I used to hate my mother’s clothing, wishing that she would dress in the same sweatshirts and jeans as the other volleyball moms. As time has passed, I’ve found myself stealing more and more of her clothes, shedding the t-shirts and leggings of my town for the flare jeans and platforms she wore in the city. These days, I wear whole...
outfits of hers as I walk around campus.

Two months ago I was home, showing her pictures from college. As I scrolled through the blurry images, cradled next to her on the couch with my chin pressed up against the crook of her neck, her finger lifted to pause on one. It was a photo of me in front of some red bricks of a random house, my hair up and eyes a little smudged and glassy from the night. My mother got up and reached for the red book on the shelf. She took it down and flipped to one of the last pages, holding it open for me to see. I stared at the picture for a long time. The outfit was the same with the same red bricks behind it. The posture was the same, shoulders rolled back, and head cocked slightly to the side. The same easy slide of the mouth like somebody said something amusing right before the camera flashed. In that moment, I saw how the lines of our faces mimicked each other and the curve of our nose followed the same exact path.

I found out later that the reason my mother moved back to our small town was because after I was born, she couldn’t afford to pay for my daycare while keeping the apartment we were living in. The extra stress of being a single parent made her lose her job. So, she took me, and she left, returned to the town she hated and vowed she would never come back to, wanting a better life for me. Better than her own.
When I describe my future, it looks like my mother’s past. I’ve realized I’m still trying to be the version of my mother before me, all the while being the very reason, I resent the version of her now. All the things that I dislike—her softness, her emotion, the out of place feelings she seems to always carry—have all been shaped by me. I thought I was shaping myself around her, but I’ve been shaping myself into her, and she’s been doing the same. And all those things I blamed her for—her major, her career, her love-life—were just ways to not blame myself.

The older I get, the more the lines that I carefully drew between my mother, and I start to blur. The same uncertainty that seemed to hollow her out, has found me. I question myself in the same way, worrying over the smallest detail again and again, wearing myself down. The seemingly controlled disposition I prided myself on, slips, into the same currents of sadness and anger my mother would get lost in. The same passions that I blamed her for—writing and art instead of science and math—have derailed my own expectations of my life. And when we stand in the mirror together now, and the lighting is just right, I can’t tell the difference from my mother’s face and my own, and I think how our lives rest on top of each other’s like stacked spoons, one bound to form around the other.
Alive
Hee Yoo
Virginia Commonwealth University
Mars and The Giant Chewed Up Gum

Christina Sia
Johns Hopkins University
Fiction

The dark expanse of black brushed across the sky, leaving behind shards of shining stars of all shapes and sizes, each with their own unique presence on the dark canvas. The image expands into the depths of space, reaching its black form outwards and forming planets and galaxies out of my reach and out of sight. Dots of light litter the sky, varying from blue, white, red, and yellow. But one light calls to me, the light of Mars.

A bright yellow-orange light reflects off Mars’ dusty red surface and sends me a signal on Earth. It calls to me, urging me to find it and stake my claim. Mars is mine. I knew it the moment I saw it.

I remembered when I first saw Mars. I was 7 years old, and my mother tiptoed into my room. Her hands behind her back, like a sneaky ninja trying to murder the Mob Boss. I spared her a cautious glance but quickly went back to playing with my Legos after I had assessed she wasn’t a match for me. Unbeknownst to her, I was a highly intelligent child with a dramatic imagination. I had already foreseen this ambush after talking to my fortune teller, Kiki De’Bon, a sassy wool stuffed goat with a pink tulip dress and an all-seeing button eye. Kiki wore an eye-
patch over the space where her left button was supposed to be. A tragic accident that involved a vacuum cleaner and a villainous roach. But due to such an incident, it had awakened her magical ability to see the future and thus, giving me the power to know when my enemies were about to strike.

This was the moment Kiki was talking about. I had been suspicious of my mother for a few days now. She had always possessed an uncommon character. Her whole face would smile at an unnatural consistency, and she willfully enjoyed conversing with other beings outside the realm of our home. But at this moment, she was an unsightly thing. She challenged my glare with a paper doll smile that refused to submit to one of my most powerful stares, the Judgmental Stare. No adult had ever won against me when I looked at them with the fiercest of criticism in my eyes. But my mother did not look away and worse, she did not let go of her smile. I felt the burning tingle of a ghost of poison ivy crawling up my skin and I knew instantly what had caused this defiance in my mother. Challenge Day was coming.

Every year my mother would challenge me on the day I was born to test whether I should be allowed to keep on living. She would assemble her pack of strangers and lock me in a room with them. They would stare at me with glee and nicety until I would give in to the pressure and smile back at them. But at the end of the day, I would always come out victorious. I knew that if I blew
the candles out of the cake built by God that I would be punished with death. No matter how much they chanted and sang their curses, I would not give in. I would instead offer my hand to the gods by placing it over the fire until the torturers would cry out in fear, dropping their smiles, and blowing out the candle themselves. Fools the lot of them. I had bested them all, and I had planned to do the same this year.

After recalling that Challenge Day was approaching, I had locked myself in my room. I needed to prepare and consult the generals. General Fluffulpuff III was my most skilled servant, he was a rare breed of unicorn that hailed from the great land of China. He ruled over the Southside mafia, where I knew my mother would attack. We talked in great detail under my tent, my flashlight illuminating our scary scowls and serious eyebrows, casting the shadow of secrets across the fabric of my tent. We had devised a series of traps using our limited resources of Legos, the weakness of every unsuspecting fool. I knew my basic mother would attempt to use the door rather than the window. So, I threw dark blue Lego blocks across the floor in front of the door, the Legos blending in nicely to the dark blue carpeted floor. She would not see it coming. She never did.

As I suspected, she fell for my trap. She carelessly pushed her bare foot against my superior Lego block and jumped up in pain, dropping her weapon onto the floor. It was a Book. A rare ancient artifact that may hold
the secrets I desire. I leaped forward, stealthily missing the Legos scattered on the floor. I grabbed the Book and ran back to the safety zone on top of my bed. I got on all fours and did the fiercest lesbian growl I could muster. I had learned this defensive move from Goddess Tiktok, to ward off straight women, the perfect shield against my mother. My mother was clearly alarmed. She saw the book underneath me and thought it best to leave. Smart move, mother.

I was skimming through the Book of Knowledge, hoping to find clues on how to make my dream come true. I identified pictures of the planets and I laid my eyes on the dusty red planet that is Mars. This was it. This was my answer. I had so longed for isolation and absolute domination ever since I was stolen from my fluid chamber, free loading off my mother’s nutrients. I knew I had to be the first one to get there. I had to claim it as my own and get away from civilization. I needed to be as far away as possible from anything that could speak or judge me with their stale eyes. No longer would I need to socialize. No longer would I need to think about washing dishes. No longer will I need to hear the nagging voice of my mother who would never let me stay up to play videogames. I would be free on Mars.

I needed to think carefully about my course of action. Mother would never allow me to be happy, so she can’t know of my plan to leave. I can only consult my most loyal adviser, Henvrićk Von Stüven, a glitter
pen that swore loyalty to me after I had taken him from his previous master, Karen Whitetest. A foolish girl who didn’t use Henvriíck to his full potential and demeaning him as mere nose picker. I needed Henvriíck at his best mental state, and that meant I had to confront Karen, aka Nose-Pickermegi, and take back the missing cap to the glitter pen. The cap was like the Cerebro to Professor X and I knew I needed it.

It was time for school, and I had built a fool proof plan. I sat down at my desk, waiting for my prey. She walked in just as the bell had rung, a happy smile plastered on her face — “Not for long” I thought. I proceeded to observe her as she sat down. She opened her pink fluffy bag and pulled out her hotdog pencil case. I watched as she hurriedly opened it, revealing the treasure inside. There it was, the purple glitter cap nesting amongst its lesser brothers. Now with the target in sight I had no time to lose. I crept up from my chair and stalked towards her. I channeled my past memories from my past life as Sugar Ray Robinson and punched her straight in her booger congested nose. While everyone was distracted and rebooting their brains, I swiftly picked up the cap and settled it deep into the pocket of my cargo pants. They were too consumed by my impressive right hook and villainous deed that they missed the other crime that I committed. Silly fools.

Everything was falling into place. Now with the cap in my possession and an angry mom on my heels, I
was ready to go. After listening to my mother spiel about anti-violence, I was grounded to my room. Perfect. She would be too upset with me to check up on me and that meant I had until dinner to pack.

I started packing my things, planning the next phase of my mission. Stumbling around my messy room in an excited frenzy. My dream to be the first person to go to Mars and achieve complete isolation lasted only 10 minutes. My foot had gotten stuck on a giant wad of chewed gum on the floor. I tripped, giving the harsh end of my bed post the hardest headbutt known to man and I died.
Getting Back In Your Car at the 7/11

Kelly Morgan
Vanderbilt University
Poetry

_Drive_, he says.
He’s in the passenger seat—
you don’t
know who he is

except that his teeth
are clean. His hair
folds in on itself
like a dollar bill.
His hand
is not empty.

You drive.

When he tells you to,
you park. You get out
of the screaming car.
The ribbed scars pinch
across your stomach

white as milk
you had gone to buy,
as your bare feet,
as fifty silent years

when you needed words.
Dignificar
Rosalinda Pacheco
University of New Mexico
To The Woman Behind The Cash Register At Trader Joe’s Wine Store

Vivian Holland
New York University
Poetry

Really, Deborah, what difference does it make if we are both going to die anyway? You may be midnight and I mid morning but when you were eighteen you could hold the sun in your palms, and though I am half an orbit short of dignity, I too pay taxes and fear extinction and feel wronged on occasion. You eyed me with contempt as I approached Lane Twelve holding Pino Grigio by the neck and this is true whether or not the lamination on my Vermont license bubbles. Poison will be poison whether it blossoms in grapes or under the oceans or on our tongues or between the zeros and ones and this cannot be solved with a smirk. I am sorry your daughter eloped Brett from remedial algebra and is too busy with the baby to call home; our world feels like tooth decay and this is true for every phase of the moon.
The House of Flowers

Ali Householder
West Virginia Wesleyan College
Nonfiction

My home among the fairies is made up of little blue wildflowers, forget-me-nots, their all-seeing yellow eyes staring out like sunbeams from the centers of each cluster of violet blue. Granddad loves those tiny flowers, points them out among the weeds every time we go walking Buddy, the leash click-click-clicking as Granddad feeds the dog slack: Buddy bounding ahead, us ambling along after him, both following the same old path. Take some back for your grandma, he always says, and every time, I pull them up by the fistful, their roots still grasping for the earth with desperate fingers. Take some back for your grandma, he says, and hurry. If you put them in some water quick, they won’t die.

They never die; I don’t let them. That’s why I made my home the way I did, nothing but overlapping petals and twining green. The fairies come and sip sunlight from their sugar water stems, lap at the dewdrops forming in the cup of each petal. I join them, drinking lemonade out of Mom’s champagne flutes, all crystal—a gift from her and Dad’s wedding—as I lounge on a rickety old rocking chair and let the wildflowers and the fae caress my cheeks. I have a garden outside this house of forget-me-nots, a
little plot in the backyard for mint and rosemary and other bright green things that lean into my touch when I pet them. And I make potions with the plants I grow—for lovesick maidens and snotty toddlers, for princesses under a spell, for my friends, the fairies, and for my mother who sits at the kitchen table some nights for hours and sighs and sighs and sighs, her head in her hands.

I told this all to the butterfly. This future house of mine, the fairies that had yet to reveal themselves to me. But I would find them soon, I was sure of it. I sat out on the screened-in porch of my childhood home, mixing up potions from damp, moth-chewed leaves from the summer storm, mud and brittle sticks, No Tears shampoo and Mom’s honeysuckle perfume I stole from her top drawer. The one in the glass bottle. Some apple-scented hand soap, too, foamy and pale green. I stirred it all with plastic spoon. The concoction steeped in a filthy sand-castle bucket, smelling like chemicals, and faintly, like wet earth—and maybe ozone, if I put my nose real close to it, the crackling sweetness as lightning strikes and thunder roils the horizon.

The butterfly was tucked into an old cardboard shoebox, blue and green like the peacocks that got dropped off at my great-grandparents’ house one day, still too young for proper plumage, and who now flounced about the property, puffing up feathers and chasing after the geese. One wing twitched in a heartbeat, a fluttery pitter-patter, a hum of nonstop sound as it beat against
the dish-towel lined walls of its new home. The other was just a stump.

I’d given it some banana, half-rotten and going black with bruises, mashed into a little dish of water. But it just laid there, beating away. I chattered at it, stopping every few moments to stroke its one wing with a fingertip. Thinking of nothing but a kaleidoscope of fairy wings.

The air was crisp. I remember that. Rain was coming around again. I could feel the damp clinging to my scalp. I was seven-years-old. From behind me, a throat cleared.

“Just let the thing die. Just let it go,” my father said from the doorway. He frowned—at the butterfly in its box, at my browned feet, at the mud caked between my toes. The thick scent of honeysuckle artificial on the tongue. I looked at him with wide, eight-year-old eyes.

I tossed my eyes to the side. On the patio table, sticky sweet and sharp with synthetic flowers, there was a book thrown open. Greek myth. I had been pretending it was a spell book.

The Greeks had a name for their fairies, too: nymphs, clutching their trees, twigs in their hair and sun gods following after them with hungry, hungry eyes. Greek myth had been a new love for me, then, one that would follow me into adolescence and adulthood with its gods and heroines and rosy-fingered Dawn—and Kronos, his children poised to his lips. The snap of his teeth. A need to keep close, closer. Stay just the way you are, he
said, and swallowed. But the children never died; he didn’t let them. I looked back to my father.

The butterfly struggled; its stump trembled in a flurry of forget-me-not blue.

My father said to me, “You’re not being very nice.”

**Standing in my dad’s office was like standing within his soul.** No, his gut. It was like standing in his gut. Looking at all the useless knickknacks—the cabinet lined with crystal ashtrays and accent bowls, glass brightly colored and glossy as hard candy, the random antique toy car, the splay of ripped envelops, gutless, on a foldup table, and the stacks-upon-stacks of shellac records spilling forth from both closets—I was filled with a sense of dread so strong it banded around my throat, pulled tight as a hair elastic.

His office had always been the belly of the beast, chock full of whatever he consumed and then discarded, leftover bits he hoarded but never touched, never fully digested. My father was a hungry man, a jealous man. He held everything within himself, as much as he could stomach. And there I was standing, surrounded by every remnant of every last meal.

At my shoulder, my sister offered me a cardboard box. There were little doodles of flowers all over it, my name scrawled at the top in red marker and surrounded by bubble hearts fat and misshapen. Kira’s, my niece’s, handywork.
“There’s already some stuff we put on the list for the foreclosure sale,” my sister said, “but if it’s not marked down, it’s yours.” I nodded. Out of the corner of my eye, there was an eclipse of dead moths on the windowsill. Just husks, brittle and crumbling. I kept my eyes on them a long while.

On the old wood desk, cat scratches raked down the side like open wounds, there were mounds of tissues unfolding like flowers, unfurling from tight fists.

My father’s office was a dramatic affair. Just as I remembered it, though I hadn’t walked in there for almost a decade, despite visiting the man every other weekend for seven years. All bold lines and an arched ceiling illuminated by skylights, rectangular panels carved from the ceiling and set with glass. It was September, maybe November, and the sun held a chilly glare, washing white and stark over our faces in pinpoint beams.

The whole house felt like a memory, distorted and whispery with old secrets. I grew up here—and left. My father died here—and left, too. Or part of him did. The part ground down into grey dust, nothing but a few metacarpals. Maybe a tooth or two. He still had his wisdom teeth tucked into the back of his gums when they cremated him, so maybe those. But the rest of him was here, still digesting. Still holding on.

How he died didn’t matter, not anymore. He just did. He just was.

I took some old records, knelt on the carpeted
floor reeking of cat piss, grabbing them at random at some intervals and looking for familiar names at others. They felt like wishbones in my hands, dead yet alive somehow, waiting, ready for the snap. I wanted the feel of fracturing against my hands just so I could put them back together again. Make a wish. The smudge of his fingerprints ran along the grooves of every single one, and it’d be effortless, smoothing them away with my own. *You’re not being very nice.*

I took home a box of records, one serving tray—the one with blue jays and a clubhouse, a little family setting up for a picnic, golden-haired and so pretty they were grotesque, cheeks too pink, eyes set in their faces like glass marbles, the one my mother still uses as an ashtray without knowing where it came from—and two record players, old antique Victrolas that moan like the dead when I spin their handles with too sluggish a hand. My father stared out at me from the guts of their machinery. He whispered in their songs. He still does.

I should have said, It’s you who’s not being very nice. It’s you who won’t let me go, old man. You’re eating me alive. You’ve got me in your jaws, now. Maybe you always did.

But I can’t pack the records away. I can’t shut the Victrolas’ lids. I know I’m the one who’s cruel, feasting on the dead. At least he let me struggle against the grind of teeth, the chew.
Different name, same story. Kronos, Saturn. Goya painted Saturn with bulging whites for eyes, fathomless dark pupils. Mouth hung open. Hungry. His child’s body, legs limp, maybe swaying, the red ruin and gristle of their shoulder, bright about the bone, the sinewy stretch of their arm stuffed into the cavern of their father’s mouth. Elastic as taffy. And that flash of teeth. I always look for them, squint into the dark for the cut of white bone into flesh.

When I think of that painting, its endless black space—and I think of it perhaps more than I should—I wonder: if there might be distress in his eyes, if he can stop, if he wants to, if devouring can be an act of love. The myths all say there was a prophecy, an omen of a defeat coming at the hands of his own children. That was surely true. But I wonder if it was the fear of death or the fear of change that plagued him. Could Saturn the father let go?

My house used to be the house of flowers. Or I thought it was. Like the one in my girlhood dreams, stuck in bloom, little blue weeds and fairies who touched me with their blushed fingers. But I never did find them, the fae. They never found me—they probably knew what I would do.

We were so hungry, my dad and I. We ate the flowers before they came to a head. My mother couldn’t stomach it. We just ate and ate and ate, because we couldn’t stand to let anything die. To let it go. We kept it close, packed it away in boxes.
Some of the details about that day are a lie. That day on the screened in porch, the fairies circling my mind, the butterfly in its box. There’s no way to say this. I never left the house without shoes, not ever—I despised mud between my toes. Still do. My father never said any of that to me on the porch that day, if that day happened at all. If it did happen, he hadn’t been there. And if he had, he would’ve commented on my wastefulness, maybe, or the mess I’d made of our patio table, greasy with deflated soap and stolen perfume. Besides, he wasn’t the sort of man who cared for kindness beyond a vacant smile and a belly-laugh, the empty noise of a charming man.

There was a butterfly. I rubbed off its wings with my fingertips, petting it to its death, blue flaking off into transparency, into sun-bleached stained-glass panes. I was so starved for it to love me, for it to live. Of course, it couldn’t. The forget-me-not blue flickered and died. It died; I didn’t let it, yet it went anyway. There’s no way to say this. But I devoured it out of love.

There was a butterfly; that, at least, is true. I took its colors, cupped its husk in my hands. When I think of it, I think of my father: Saturn, the father. We were devouring each other. I’m not sure if it was out of love. I don’t know if I can stop.

Householder 189
The Blues
Sophia Polizzi
Virginia Commonwealth University
Black Swan

Graham Munro-Ludders
Drew University
Nonfiction

I slowly slid the tip of my toe onto the brake and pulled over. The air between us hung heavy like a cloud desperate to maintain itself before it dissipated into thinness, into nothingness. You had been quiet for most of the ride. I guess there wasn’t much to say and nothing to do but sit with a sad, heavy anticipation. I cracked the trunk open and swung the torso-sized backpack over me. All under-50-pounds-or-it-won’t-count-as-a-carry-on of it. The car idled. It was the kind of idling that was worth all the coughed out smoke, the kind that buys the moments I’ll linger on. Maybe for years. You stepped out and walked with me to the giant rotating doors. Tears were pretty useless at this point. We’d done this song and dance so often it felt like routine: The drive to Portland. The goodbye. The hopscotch across the country. The I-got-here-safely texts in between.

Well, okay, this is it I guess. For a while anyway, you noted.

We’ll see each other before we know it, I assured you.
But I couldn’t fool myself, much less you. Deep down we knew it might be years before we saw each other again. Deep down we knew it was over for us.

*I love you*, we said. I kissed you before walking inside to catch my plane.

***

The dance was underwhelming to say the least. What was supposed to be the formal of all formals to end the year was twenty people in a room. Hands in pockets. Lemon-ade. Not quite small talk but not quite drunk conversations we’ll forget or regret the next day either. Tiny cliques forming circles all around the room like a Twister mat. But I didn’t care. Because I had my arm wrapped around you. Because it was spring and felt like it. Because campus was finally alive. We were alive. And I remember the dress you wore. Flowers and all sorts of colors and my god. I took off my tie and tightened it around your head. You were the prettiest flower ninja there.

I forget who wanted to leave first, but we agreed to slip out into the misty night. We took off our shoes and socks and walked out into the water swept field.

*I hate wearing dresses*, you confessed.
Why?

You went on to tell me that you hated being sexualized, that you hated the weight and endless list of associations with the term *girl*, and that you didn’t want to be *seen* as a girl. But it was complicated, you explained.

I nodded. I believed you.

We wandered all around but ended up atop a fire escape. We sat for a while. I wanted to tell you that I loved you, but knew I had to swallow it. *Be patient, be patient.* It was the end of the year. We still had to get through the summer, I told myself. She’ll hopscotch across the country. But she’ll come back. And when she comes back I’ll tell her.

***

As we sat on your bed flipping through your old sketchbooks, I realized how little you had changed throughout the years. You have always been an artist. While your technique and methods have evolved, whatever indescribable force carries your stroke is unquestionably innate. Your art *is* you as much as it is your gift. Your Dad and I talked about this at length. He told me how strange it is to see your art because it’s a spitting image of the kind he used to make when he was young. Surrealism. Technical choic-
es. He tells me he gave it to you. But your art is yours as much as it is his. It’s always communicating something cosmic and introspective. Bold colors. Amorphous shapes. Your Dad’s art is more externally observant, more interested in shape, less interested in color. You took his gift but made it your own.

You showed me your old diaries from when you were six up until last week. There were countless entries.

Cameron was mean to me today.

I love Olivia. She is such a good kitty.

I wish I was a boy.

Some things don’t change, we laughed. Cameron could be pretty selfish. Olivia was still such a good cat. But I didn’t quite know what to make of I wish I was a boy, even if it was written in your tiny handwriting ages ago.

***

You hadn’t texted me in a few days. This was aggravating given that you canceled our last call. We knew long distance was gonna be hard but it would work if we were both putting in the effort. I was angry you weren’t. We’d already done long distance twice over our two years to-
together. But I wasn’t expecting it to be this hard. And when you called me telling me your life had so fundamentally changed as of recently, that you’ve cut your hair barely longer than mine, that you weren’t a girl, that you love me so much, that it hurts, that you knew I wanted you to be a girl, that you just knew, that being my girlfriend wasn’t what you wanted, that I was in New Jersey and you had just transferred to the University of Oregon and geography is brutal, that the clocks are three hours apart, that you’re slammed with work and school and friends and confusion, that you’re sorry, that you’ve felt this way your whole life really, that you miss me so badly, that you love me, that you want to travel after you graduate, that I’m probably going to get that job in New York City, that our paths are diverging, that you still want to visit me, that we’ll buy a plane ticket for you soon, that your visit will be for closure, that we’ll most likely have sex when you visit, that it’ll probably be confusing but we won’t be able to help it, that you’re wearing new clothes, that you want me to start using them instead of her now, that you still haven’t really told your parents yet, that even though you sorta did they didn’t really understand, that you miss me so badly, that you love me, that we’ll be lodged into each other’s souls even after the sadness goes away, that because of the pandemic you had to cancel the flight, that secretly you didn’t want to go anyway because it would make closure too hard, that you love me so much, that you sometimes weep thinking about me and the life we
shared together, that your family loves me still, that we really thought we were gonna get married one day, that you went on a date, that she was a lesbian but that’s just as invalidating as dating someone who’s straight, that the University of Oregon is huge, that you’re on foodstamps, that you love your roommates, that your Mom got you perfume instead of cologne for Christmas like you asked and you were annoyed, that you miss me so badly, that you want to start taking testosterone, I felt the full weight of our two years together come crashing down on me.
I want to talk
and say words that translate my soul after the long day, or
don’t
I want my feelings to be my words
They won’t rust on my bones or rot in my skin
I will speak pretty from the heart or
downpour a hurricane

This immaturity that possesses me is no demon
I am free like a dog
and I will stick my head out the window as I please.
I’ll greet people as we zoom by
and laugh at their jumbled Picasso portrait expressions.

I will cry for the dead trees or the spilt milk
and there is no shame in this polarity,
My cries are not the introduction to an apology,
while words are tattooed on my tongue so
my lips have nothing to be sorry for.
I can wish want and whine all that I can
My emotions are not an earthquake,
My fury fumes no fires so sirens can silence.
Don’t fatten me with words concocted from your own desires
My skin is paper thin and I am nearly transparent
You, my love, cannot have me confront the controversies of
our community. They all cannot align with (y)our faith and
this progressive era cannot entertain traditional traditions.
all while you mumble under your own breath

I am not concrete and live in an empty shell
I will stand tall and still but
you are like the cold wind that blows my hair in
my eyes, tearful
This ambush is dry and miserable so
I must go back inside,

to hide.
If I were an oyster, I’d make a damn good one.

At this point, I’ve kept this pearl tucked beneath my tongue for years now; people catch glimpses of it whenever I part my lips, a glimmer winking at them from behind my teeth. A tease. The sheen of it tasting of blood tang and briny seawater in my mouth. How many times I’ve swallowed around the grit of salt, felt the rasp of it like some foreign tongue against my gums, the seam of my lips.

“It’s okay to be sad,” Mom says, maybe only a few days after we’ve moved into our new house, but there, in the pocket of her cheek, I catch the cruel gleam of a pearl.

It’s one of those things that moms say. It’s okay to be sad.

Very rarely are they talking to themselves. Funny thing. My mother’s name—Margaret. Derived from ancient Greek’s margarītēs. Pearl. It suits her. Her silverware clatters against the ceramic of her plate after she finishes her meal, some mess of gravy and mash, stringy remnants of half-frozen turkey breast. In the silence of our new kitchen, I let my eyes wander for familiar comforts, but there’s none—the countertops aren’t bottle green.
marbling, just peeling linoleum; there are no cat scratch-es etched into the doorframe; the ceiling is complete, smooth. No pink fluff of insulation guts peeking through where Dad never bothered finishing the drywall.

Even Mom is made a stranger by the dim light of old bulbs, her skin sallow, her eyes reflecting mother-of-pearl.

*I’m not sad*, I don’t say, and it doesn’t even feel like a lie. But the pearl sits in my mouth nonetheless. I only nod—the pearl’s gotten so heavy by now that it clinks against my bottom teeth, weighing down my jaw.

A fork scrapes against a plate. It might be mine. A cat swipes at a crumb by my feet. Two chairs creak under our weight. The other is empty.

It’s interesting. An oyster forms pearls as a natural defense—whenever some grain of sand gets stuck beneath its shell, it protects its soft parts by secreting aragonite and conchiolin until layer-after-layer of nacre, mother-of-pearl, forms, locking all harmful things away deep inside itself. Holding it there, waiting until it can spit it out. Or until someone pries open its jaws. Snatches it for themselves.

The Greeks had a different idea. Pearls were tears of the gods, dripping down from Mount Olympus to be swallowed by the sea, rainbows reflected in creams and golds and grays.

When they held a pearl, they held the grief of a god in their palm.
I look at my mother. At the divorce papers hidden beneath a faux-leather binder on the counter-top that isn’t ours, in the house that holds someone else’s haunts. In the house that we’re haunting. At the empty chair. I wonder if my father’s mouth is left vacant back at home—at what was once our home—if the only shine would be the silver of his capped cavities as he lies snoring in his king-sized bed all alone, jaw slack and drooling. If he’s better off empty.

Mom’s lips are pressed in a thin line, her fingers white-knuckling the old jam jar her water’s in. Her eyes glazed. If my mother opened her mouth wide enough, I know I’d see all the pearls there. Lining her jaw like a second row of teeth. Baroque pearls. Warped. Each a tiny, still heart. A protruding aorta here. A curve like a pulmonary artery there. All unbeating, oil slicks trapped in gemstone.

“I don’t feel sad,” I admit after a few beats too long. My throat is numb. Our dinner is cold. And I roll around the grief in my mouth where it cannot touch me. Mom and I sit at our kitchen table, dry-eyed, and each breath tastes of salt.
To See
Donald Patten
University of Maine
Wild Strawberries

Aubrey Boswell
Virginia Commonwealth University
Fiction

I.

There’s nothing divine about grief. I pored over every page of the Bible, searching for some kind of solace. I couldn’t find God at all. It left me to wonder why I believed in the first place if faith could be so easily taken from me.

In the weeks following my loss, I would call televangelist hotlines in search of an answer. The ladies of the Church called my miscarriage a test, an act of God. They told me to show a little faith, say a little prayer, and give a little donation—maybe then God would gift me with another child.

“You have to let it go sometime, Athalie.”

I looked up at my husband. I looked at him and saw all he could not be, all he would never conceive. I looked right through him then turned my attention back to the television.

II.

Two years later, and I still wondered if I was being
punished for some unspeakable crime. My inability to recycle consistently, perhaps. Or maybe my inability to love my husband’s flaws. Maybe God had decided I couldn’t love my baby if she inherited her father’s flaws. It would be different though—she’d have my flaws, too. It’s easier to forgive faults when they mirror your own.

We buried her ashes in the backyard and put a stone down to mark it. It felt strange, staring at that stone, knowing that beneath the earth my future was dusting. Coming up with the daffodils of the spring; the first little strawberries of the summer. My girl, nourishing the world around her when I should’ve been nourishing her instead. It’s cruel how the world works, how it spins on its axis and still can’t keep its promises. It’s cruel that God decided I wasn’t good enough to be her mother.

I sat on the dewy grass and touched the cold granite, tracing each letter of her name written in chalk: Esmee—French for ‘beloved one.’ That name rolled off my tongue like a miracle. It stuck, honeyed and pure, to the roof of my mouth. I could feel the light in the name, feathery and free. Even still, the ache lingered in each syllable, taunting me—ess-may.

III.

I dove into my work at the hospital, ignoring the pitiful glances of my fellow nurses, wanting the attention
to be anywhere but my empty womb. They eyed the baby weight in the pouch of my stomach, a graveyard of all the broken possibilities left behind. They noticed my swollen eyes, still as red and thick as the day before. One told me, “Athalie, all this grieving isn’t healthy for your marriage. You might want to consider how your husband is feeling.”

I searched her eyes for a glimpse of mockery, but she meant every single word and gave me a reproving look. My palm itched to land across her wrinkled face, to tear every silver hair from her head, but I smiled too wide and nodded.

Two years had passed since those deathless moments. I decided I couldn’t take their eyes on me anymore, this hive of fertile women, of martyred women, of virtuous, godly women. They stared at me like I deserved the loss. The only thing I had left of her was how carrying her changed my body. Thick, plump, soft.

I decided to try my hand at Planned Parenthood, an hour away from home and all the familiar faces that knew of my loss. There, I felt far more useful and less aware of my grief. At least, until I met Ruby.

IV.

“Ruby Sullivan?” I called from the doorway of the
waiting room.

One head perked up, jet black hair falling in her face and a small mouth that waned at the sight of me. When she stood up and walked over to me, she walked like she was dragging granite across a desert.

I smiled at her. “I’m Nurse Roark.”

She looked me up and down, unimpressed. “You’re like ten years older than me. What’s your real name?”

My smile faltered. I thought of the women at the hospital. I thought of smacking her across the face. I thought of grabbing her by the shoulders and shaking as hard as I could.

“Athalie,” I said. “It’s Athalie.” I gestured down the hallway. “Shall we?”

Ruby followed me to the room, silent. She sat down on the edge of the medical bed, paper crinkling beneath her while I looked over her paperwork. I bristled at the words: abortion consultation.

“It bothers you, doesn’t it?” Ruby asked. “I can see it on your face.”

I looked at Ruby and shook my head. “No. No,
Mrs. Sullivan, it doesn’t bother me.”

“It’s Ruby,” she corrected, shuddering. “Don’t ever call me that, please.”

“Okay… Ruby,” I said, trying to sound as gentle as I could. “You have a couple different options. You could _”

Ruby cut me off. “I know.” She sighed. “I did the research. The vacuum procedure… that’s the one I want to do. And I know you have to show me the ultrasound per the state.”

I nodded slowly, surprised. “I also have to ask… no one is making you do this?”

Ruby stared at me, and I saw the shadow of something swimming in her dim eyes. “No… no, he doesn’t even know I’m pregnant.”

“Why not?”

She flinched. “I just know he doesn’t want a baby- And neither do I. We’re too young.

“Too young?”
She hesitated. “I’m nineteen… my husband’s thirty-four.”

I wanted to kill her husband. A flash of red, sharp knife, slashing, splash. I wanted to tear his throat out and leave it at her feet so she would know it was okay to leave, that it was okay to be.

I asked her to remove all clothing from the waist down, then cover herself with the thin paper while I waited outside. My mind wandered back to the violent scene of Ruby’s nameless, faceless husband lying dead in a pool of blood at my feet. Something like the color of strawberries, those guts loose all over the floor. The guts morphed to represent my own loss, then to represent what Ruby would soon lose. Sweet little strawberries pulled before they were ripe.

I knocked and walked back into the room. Ruby looked frail and thin against the wide medical bed. Her expression fell after I explained that the ultrasound wand had to be inserted. After her consent, I tried to make it as comfortable as possible, but she winced.

“I’m sorry,” I said. “It shouldn’t have hurt.”

“He said it’s like fucking a rosebud,” Ruby said,
looking at her hands, vacant eyes. “Tight, fresh, new. He can’t get enough.”

I stared at her, mind turning, and said nothing. She looked resigned to her fate. Another vision of kicking the living shit out of her husband flashed before my eyes, disappearing as quickly as it came.

“Sometimes I feel like I have sea legs, ya know?” Ruby said, picking at her nail polish. “I’d like to believe I’m a mermaid, somewhere, in some life. It’s better than here.”

I shook my head, clicking away to pull up the ultrasound. “Anywhere is better than here.”

“What happened to you, huh?” she asked. Her gaze lingered on my wedding band. “Did… well, is he…?”

Before I could answer, the ultrasound pixelated. Nestled at the bottom of her womb, slightly to the right, was her baby. It wasn’t even the size of a strawberry. I felt the tears coming, but I pushed them down. “Do you, uh, want to see yours?”

She shook her head. “No. I’m worried if I see it, I’ll forget the reason I came here.”
I grimaced, searching Ruby’s face for even a flicker of regret. “I need you to know that no matter what you think… you’re not alone, Ruby.”
“You could’ve fooled me.”

V.

Ruby would visit me on my lunch breaks at work. We’d sit in a park nearby, Ruby nibbling crackers and slipping little gifts in my pockets: an acorn, a wilting violet, a wild strawberry. She would ask me questions. She asked what it was like to exist in a space between being a mother and not-mother.

It’s like stumbling through mazes, never knowing where you’ll be the next day. A peculiar labyrinth to find yourself in. How the heart aches until it can ache no more, then continues to anyway. How you see women slap their children silly in the supermarket and you wonder why God would let them have a baby, but not you. How your body has changed shape to make space for this little human, until it suddenly doesn’t have the space anymore, and it’s caught between waiting for rain and praying for a drought. How nothing feels holy after the blood spills on your thighs, like thick strawberry jelly and its guts and juices. How there’s only a need to wither away each day but you still stay the same, in the
same place, and you wait.

VI.

I dared to mention her to my husband once.

“You’re helping her kill her baby?” my husband asked. “What’s wrong with you?”

I stared at him until he became nothing but a blurry figure in front of me, the way one might look underwater.

VII.

Ruby’s day came.

I found a vein to take away the pain. Her vacant gaze held the water stain on the ceiling. In walked the doctor and her two interns. They explained the procedure to Ruby. I couldn’t tell if she was listening until she turned her head to look at me.

“Will you stay with me?” Ruby asked, voice small, hand gripping mine for dear life.

I couldn’t say no.
The Sun Hurts my Eyes
Zeppelin Dufour
School of the Art Institute of Chicago
They Call it Surprise

Katherine (Katie) Lawson
Washington University at St. Louis
Poetry

Suspended in hollow desert air
the town always settles back
down in-between the black highway
and the scraggily giant.

Scabbed and scarred the
man on the rocking porch
seems to
levitate amongst dust
be amongst dust
born amongst dust
die amongst dust
and when you ask
says

“They call it Surprise”

and leaves it at that.

Sparse and tired are the people
but the buildings remain
reborn every starry night.
Protruding from the red clay
reaching for that Strange Beast
the dust coats their windows
and their barren insides
coil and creak in revolt.
A dog
skin and bones
sits in the slim spotted shade of
the single Palo Verde tree.
Strange green limbs sprout
out of the giant our God.
The cracked road curves
its way from the center
of town up and over
to the otherside of His back.
When you turn away
from that lifeline you see
the sparse huts of the town
slanted and hallow
hunch over towards Him
in dutiful prayer. Scales of white
paint peel from the door frames:
pitiful offerings.