



| **collision** literary magazine
| spring 2023

| *collision* literary magazine

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from the *editor*

Dear Readers,

Reflecting on this past year as Collision's editor in chief, I can't help but think about structure. Something that both artists and authors need to consider—the structure in which you deliver your piece can drastically change how it is received by your audience. We talk a lot about the structure of our submissions in Collision, but rarely the structure of our magazine itself. Upon finally evaluating its structure, we found that a lot of what we had been doing in years past simply was not working. We received an exorbitant number of submissions when compared to previous years, and needed a new and innovative approach to how we reviewed them.

And so, we created just that. We implemented new editorial and managerial positions, experimented with new methods of evaluating our submissions, and, most importantly, accepted the possibility that not everything will go as planned. Fortunately, most of our implementations did work out, and we have this wonderful collection of art, poetry, and prose to show for it. Moving forward, I encourage future Collision staffs to keep in mind that although having methods and traditions are important, it is just as important to be able to identify when those methods and traditions no longer suit your situation. I hope to see Collision continue embody the same innovation and experimentation we ask our artists and authors to embody.

Thankfully, I cannot think of a better group of individuals to pass on this hope to. I want to first acknowledge our fiction, nonfiction, and poetry editors from last fall: Alexandra Ross, Kavya Singh, and Stephanie Fletcher. I cannot think of three more experienced and enthusiastic fellow editors to step into this position with. Your

dedication and commitment to this magazine has inspired not only me, but also those who will continue to lead this magazine in the future. I want to also thank all of our current genre editors and assistant editors: Margaret Balich, Tafarah Cherilus, Gracie Dallas, Tovah Elia, Foster Mardigian, Jane Schrand, Lia Sheahan, and Chloe Woodruff. I am so grateful for your patience, adaptability, and willingness to deviate from the norm. Extra thanks to Margaret for leading in the creation of this edition's layout. Additionally, I want to thank Erin Friel, our associate editor, for your decisive insight, as well as Ava Mirisola, our business manager, and Sarah Pine, our assistant editor and future editor in chief. I pass this magazine on to you two with utter confidence that you will only see it grow. Many thanks to our faculty advisor J.C. Lee for always being available for advice and much needed guidance, and to our new faculty addition to the magazine for this year, Anjali Sachdeva, for being the first author to judge our annual competition. We are so honored to work with such a successful and talented author. Congratulations to our graduating staff member this semester, Allaina Wagner. It's sad to see you go, but that's the way the cookie crumbles. Finally, thank you to the entire Collision staff. Your dedication to this magazine allows us to continue publishing such meaningful art and writing.

Speaking of which, I want to graciously thank not only our published artists and authors, but every single person who allowed us the privilege of reviewing their creations. Whether visual or literary, they inspired us to continue doing the work we do, providing a platform for undergraduate students to share their stories, perspectives, and understandings of our ever-changing world. Reading through this particular edition of Collision, I am struck by the level of introspection our artists and authors reach

from the *editor*

as they explore relationships both within themselves and with the people and environments around them. Thank you for sharing your stories.

I have always thought that Collision had the ability to capture at least a glimpse of the specific artistic, literary, and overall cultural moment in which we find ourselves. So, I invite you to take one such glimpse into this current moment, as I present the 2023 edition of Collision Literary Magazine.

Best,

Zane Troxell

Editor in Chief | Collision Literary Magazine

acknowledgments

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

J.C. Lee, for their extensive knowledge and their endless enthusiasm for our experimental endeavors.

Anjali Sachdeva, for her expertise in judging our annual competition.

Anjali Sachdeva's short story collection, All the Names They Used for God (2018), won the 2019 Chautauqua Prize and the 2022 Grand Prix de l'Imaginaire (France), and was named a Best Book of 2018 by NPR. Her fiction has been published in McSweeney's Quarterly, Lightspeed, Tor.com, and Vogue India, and featured on the LeVar Burton Reads podcast. She is the recipient of an Investing in Professional Artists Grant from the Heinz Endowments and The Pittsburgh Foundation, and a Creative Writing Fellowship from the National Endowment for the Arts.

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Cover Art

Polly Chromatic

Chantelle Chapman
Kennesaw State University

First Prize in Writing

Bread and Body

Molly Hamilton
University of Pittsburgh
Nonfiction

Remember that this child is collage
of everything before you, frangipani
and escargot, five-for-a-dollar boxes
of macaroni, and French cherries

from an old woman in Auvergne
who insisted on the gift
because it was so marvelous
to see a woman traveling alone.

- Leslie Adrienne Miller

I was born a mother, and I must have gotten it from you. The requirements of a double-X: give up parts of yourself, tear them off like hunks of bread, place them on the tongue like a watching, doting priest. Before the bread dissolves off the back of the teeth, rip off another ragged-edged scrap, keep the world fed. Body of Mother, blood of woman.

You said it was your dream, motherhood. Since before your own mother grew hard and callous like the palms of a lumberjack, chop-

ping at you from the root with a vocabulary limited to the words listed next to disgusting and fat in the cumbersome thesaurus on your living room bookshelf, before the acid breath and before your ribs started clawing at your skin in an attempt to escape.

Your mother never kept candy in the house; November 1st, you'd wrap your skinny, little fingers up under the window panes and sneak across the dewy, October-chilled yard to the neighbors across the street, into the bedroom of the neighbor girl you wanted to kiss in the shadows where your mother couldn't see you. You'd gorge on her Halloween candy until you snuck home and threw it up on the carpet in your mother's room, and she'd wrap your thieving fingers around stain remover and a rag even as you wiped your mouth on the back of your hand. Bile and pieces of yourself stuck in the raw corners of your lips, a dissolving facsimile of a smile.

Shag carpet remembers like a carving on the marrow of your visible bones.

Playing alone by the ocean's edge,
Eager and unafraid,
You are the child I used to be,
Playing the games I played.

- Medora C. Addison

I was born a mother as you cradled and swaddled and cooed, vowing to be better than your parents before you. For us, you gave them up. Gave up everything they ever said to you, ever did to you,

and I think that was the best thing you ever did.

I know you'd disagree—the four of us were the best thing you ever did. There was that picture you used to carry around, the one from my brother's high school yearbook, senior year. You've always said that you don't need pictures of us kids because you can just look at us, but you carried this picture around and showed it off to anyone with working eyes, fingers folded carefully over the top half, your pinky brushing his hairline, tender as ever. You carried that picture until it remembered your hands, your touch, your words: *who is this? No, it's not me! It's not, it's him, look!*

We said she was a negative image of me because of her
lightness.

She's light and also passage, the glory in my cortex.
Daughter, where did you get all that goddess?

- Carmen Giménez Smith

There is guilt that comes with being a mother, I think. Raging guilt,
a bull against a matador, and I am made of the color red.

This body is your body, ashes now
and roses, but alive in my eyes, my breasts,
my throat, my thighs. You run in me
a tang of salt in the creek waters of my blood,

you sing in my mind like wine. What you
did not dare in your life you dare in mine.

- Marge Piercy

—

I am ten, and everyone tells me I look so much like your sister. Exactly like her, in fact. But you never looked all that much like her, and it always made you nervous—your mother was greedy when it came to making you; she gave so little of herself away to you, hoarding her stale pieces of bread like they were gold. I think that's what makes you soft and wonderful, the lack of her. But here I am, ten years old and looking like them instead of you despite everything you've given me. My body is greedy for yours, and I am sorry for it.

I am twelve, and I am selfish. That must be one of the parts that did not come from you; you always say you get your kindness from me, but you have spent decades—millennia—being a mother, and motherness is selflessness. I hate the hair you gave me because it grows out of my head at terrible angles. It is puffy and never lays the way I want it to, widow-peaked over my acne-minefield forehead, and I hate it, so I wake up early before school so I can burn out the curls you gave me until there are blisters on the sides of my knobbly fingers from the heat, and it is straight, except for the place at the back of my head where I cannot get close enough to my scalp to straighten it. This is where I keep you when I am selfish, in the back of my skull, close to the root. I can't see it, so it doesn't exist. I am carnivorous of everything you've given me, eating it up and trying to ruin it, but you're stubborn, resilient as all hell, you don't let me chew you up or spit you out.

I am fourteen, and I find shelter from the storm of my widening-hips-budding-chest-puberty (your puberty, the same in me as it was in you) in baggy clothes. Dark clothes. Anything I can hide

in. I am a coward. That definitely doesn't come from you. You are brave, the bravest woman I've ever met. I've never seen you hide, not from anything, but here I am, wearing men's clothes, and I say it's because they're more comfortable, but they only feel like home because I am so used to drowning in them. I hoard the image of you in myself for when I am alone in my room, and I share it only with the reflection in the small, four-foot-tall, skinny mirror that hangs on the inside of my closet, but mostly, I keep the door closed, and I glance away from our reflection like I'm seeing it from across the room at a school dance, too nervous to dance with it. I make your figure mine and only mine, keeping it close so no one else can see everything you've given me.

I am sixteen, and I want you to live forever. But that's the kicker, isn't it? I'm sixteen, and I will kill you when I die as sure as if I let the guillotine drop over your soft, innocent neck, or as if I crushed your life support under my heavy boot heel, all because I will not pass on the parts of you that make me, shape me. I'm sixteen, and it's the most narcissistic thing I've ever done, being this old, because I have a crush on my best friend. I ache with wanting her to hold my hand, and I ache with knowing I am greedy for wanting to kiss girls instead of boys because it means the image of you will get old and sick and die with me. I've spent so long rejecting you that this must be karma; why should I get to like boys and want kids of my own when my whole life has been a big fuck you to every sacrifice you've ever made, everything you've ever handed me? Your parents must have been right—I am going to hell, I am going to burn, a violation of the sixth commandment: I shall not murder. You wanted to kiss the girl across the street, the one who gave you the key to her Halloween stash and maybe to her heart, and she made you afraid, made your heart pound like mine is pounding now, but

here I am, despite.

Despite, despite..

Here I am, the lucky reflection of you, and I will never get to see your face reflected in my face reflected in my own son's senior year-book picture that I carry around with me with my fingers hiding the top half. There will be none of you after me because I spent so much of my life throwing your bread and body back in your face, and that is my guilt, my regret.

I am eighteen, and I am a mother to the part of me that is you because that is the only motherness I will ever get in your likeness. I wish I could be your mother, a better mother than the one you had, this time tender, a gardener instead of a lumberjack. I would hold you close, and you would be full of kindness—maybe for the first time in your life, you would be full. I would give myself up for you, gratefully, instead of the other way around. I would be a much better mother than I am as a daughter, and I know this for sure.

You wonder aloud at how I can be kind to myself, and I don't tell you that sometimes I'm not because I know it will worry you. But when I am, the kindness is for the part of me that is pieced together from fragments of you. Motherhood is kindness, one of the pieces of bread, of sweet, chocolate Halloween candy you placed on my tongue. I let it melt, I savor the taste. You taught me motherhood is kindness; you gave me motherhood. You gave me everything, and I have hoarded so many parts of you that it will go nowhere, and I will eventually kill you.

I was born a mother; your daughter, the executioner.



Second Prize in Art

TTEEEETH

Ke-Tang Lee

Haute école des arts du Rhin

Second Prize in Writing

The Mulberry War

Rachel Shaver
Eckerd College
Fiction

When the mulberries came, the neighborhood transformed.

“Let’s pretend our ships crashed on a deserted island,” Cas said, and the pond down the street became a vast ocean, our houses debris from the wreck. “And we’re the only people for miles and miles.” Dogs on walks were ferocious native creatures, their owners suddenly nonexistent to us.

That was how it started, Cas and I, with our sticks and bike helmets, stalking through the openness of our adjacent backyards, now two sandy wastelands with only the faintest prospect for survival. We had to start our journeys alone, according to Cas. Because our ships wrecked separately, and we hadn’t found each other yet.

“You gotta build a shelter,” was Cas’ answer to my question of what I was supposed to do until I found him. He had that look on his face like I’d done something funny again. “Gather food and stuff.” He waved his hand dismissively and started to pull himself over the fence separating his yard from mine. When he disappeared over the edge, I was alone on an endless shore, left to survive until he returned.

I set up camp in a secluded corner, trimming back branches of bushes to create an area barely larger than me to live within. For food, I stripped the tiny Barbados cherry tree out

front of all its tiny, sour fruit and carried them back to base in my shirt. It seemed Cas was still busying himself; I could hear his feet crinkling all the dying grasses as he ran back and forth between front yard and back. Now and then, the sound of his running would fade to silence for minutes at a time, and I knew whatever he was constructing would beat the measly crevice between fence and bush that I'd made. But I pretended to be doing something important anyway, in case he was listening, too. Really, I was just stacking my cherries into a neat, round pyramid.

When the time came for us to begin our searches of the new land, it didn't take long for us to "find" one another. Cas approached me during a brief return to my base where the pile of cherries was now accompanied by a carefully crafted tower of sticks that would serve as my firewood. He must have seen the rustling from behind the bush, because, even shrouded by the leaves, his voice called out for me to identify myself. My knees were itchy where pebbles and mulch were stuck to them, so I pushed from the ground and revealed the upper half of my body to a feral-faced Cas. Below his eyes were identical dripping, purple lines—bloody tears, still wet where he'd painted on the mystery substance to mimic war paint.

With a resonant battle-cry, he charged forward, arms swinging one after the other as he showered my shelter with handfuls of dark, round bullets. Three came at my face, exploding in bursts of maroon and indigo. I dropped to cover, wiping furiously at my cheek. I only panicked internally for a moment at the striking resemblance to blood before another handful peppered the ground and revealed the bullets for their true identity. Mulberries, in their shined obsidian clusters, rained from above as Cas' thundering shouts carried on. A second handful assaulted the perfect pile of Barbados cherries, knocking the top fruit and taking

the rest out like dominoes beneath it. In a moment of annoyance and bravery, I stood at full height again.

“What are you doing?” I shouted over his cries in a voice that immediately denoted a pause in our game.

“We’re at war now,” he beamed, arms falling back to his sides, his posture neutral. I pulled part of a berry from my hair, crushing it between my thumb and forefinger. The juice seeped beneath my fingernails.

“Why would we be at war?” I asked. Cas came closer, but the rules of pause protected me from any further attack. His pockets were swollen with ammo, the evidence of which was leaking from the fabric and to his knees. With just the bush between us, Cas shrugged, one hand picking absentmindedly at the leaves. He ripped them from branches with quiet, rustling snaps. “That’s what people do, Jude.” It was almost sympathetic, but the way his eyebrows rose told me he was more concerned about getting me to agree to this idea. “I have to fight you for resources.”

Before I agreed, I made him show me where he’d found all the berries. So he tucked his magenta hand in mine and pulled me off toward some nearby street. Beyond the ditch that had filled with the first downpour of summer, the familiar wooded lot was unrecognizable, bordered now by the typical bright green shrubbery, but turned polka-dotted by hundreds—thousands—of tiny berries.

“That wasn’t there last week,” was all I could think to say in my awestruck state. He patted my shoulder and ushered me across our wooden plank bridge to the bounty.

“I’m counting to a hundred and then we’ll start again.” And so he did. Every handful of berries removed revealed more hidden behind them, and quickly my pockets were filled. I pulled my shirt off over my head and fashioned a bag to carry the rest,

ruining the shirt for any further use. I would have been worried about what my parents would say, but I was drunk on greed and the idea that Cas might be jealous of my shirt-bag idea.

The war began from afar, calculated steps and distant throws, but as boredom spurred us on, we took greater risks, running through the line of fire to get a close shot, or sneaking up behind one another for the chance to slap a handful of berries against unstained skin. Somewhere along the way that became the goal, to paint the opponent in violet hues. But long before we could, when—at most—we bore mottled complexions, our ammo was depleted and our chests were heaving.

Still, our war continued; we wrestled beside the mulberry bushes into the darkening hours of the evening when the streetlamps kicked on. Cas had me pinned by my arms, threatening to drip drool onto my face when I called the game for the night.

On our way back home, we waded through the cloudy ditch water, only clearing away the undried juice from our skin and clothes, while the rest remained, stubborn like a memory.

I was silent on our walk back, in no rush to return from our imagined world, but Cas was unfazed. He always was. We shared a quick goodbye before parting, pulling ourselves up over separate sides of our fences.

Inside, like clockwork, the arguing had started. It always did after dad got home from work, and it would continue on until mom went to bed. I'd come to expect it. But at the sound of the door opening and at the red-purple sight of me, the fighting paused for only a moment as they were stricken by the same panic that had overcome me earlier toward the blood-colored juice. Quickly, their expressions changed from worried to disgusted, shooing me off with commands like "get in the shower" and "scrub all that off" or "don't come out until you're clean."

Even over the running water, I could hear their shouting. I rubbed at the splotches on my arms, entranced by the way the stains bled out in deep red tendrils through the lines of my skin, refusing to let go of the pigment.

I cocooned myself in a towel and snuck past the living room dispute before they could scold me for missing any spots (I'd missed plenty).

I was in bed as soon as I was dressed, waiting for someone to come in and say goodnight to me. But as the hours passed and the yelling carried on, I realized no one was coming, and that sleep would only come when the arguing died down. In the darkness, boxed in by loud voices, I waved my hand through the sliver of light created by my slightly ajar door. Illuminated, the stains were the vibrant maroon I remembered, but in the shadow, they were the same black that drenched the room around me. I brought a hand to my face and breathed deep, desperate to smell the same sweetness that had filled the day, but there was nothing there. I'd washed it all away.

The rains came the next morning and washed away the structures Cas had built for his shelter. I had been right to expect artistic genius—he'd layered leaves and branches out from the fence to create a kind of one-half tent that was beautiful in its glory but too flimsy to survive the winds. Before the war could continue, he enlisted my help to rebuild it, effectively initiating another pause.

But something was different about the game today. I didn't want to be a part of it, but noting Cas' enthusiasm, I just followed him around in silence hoping he'd find interest in anything else. I purposely gave him no time limit for reconstructing his shelter and

it seemed unlikely that he would mention it.

But when the time inevitably came for him to send me back to my own side, I stood my ground. Arms crossed, I uttered the dreaded phrase.

“I don’t want to play this game anymore.”

Cas’ eyebrows knitted close, the area between them wrinkling with confusion.

“Why not?” It was a challenge. I met it head-on with a shrug. An impasse. Still, Cas moved onto another tactic. “It’s because you’re losing the war, isn’t it?” The blow stung all the way up to my eyes where tears threatened to form. I fought hard against them, steeling myself to send back something just as powerful.

What came out instead was, “Why is everyone always fighting?” which had the same stalling effect. Cas’ expression shifted deeper into bewilderment.

“What else are we supposed to do?” His warrior paint from yesterday was still a faint reminder of how we’d gotten here.

“Why can’t we play deserted island and be on the same team?” Missing a bike helmet and my own warrior paint, I was suddenly exposed—my back turned to the enemy holding a knife I’d handed him.

And as expected, he burst out laughing, all concern gone from his eyes. I waited in agony for the moment to pass.

“You wanna get pretend-married, too?” Cas clutched his stomach. He was doing that thing where he pretended to laugh harder than he actually was.

Cheeks red like I’d slapped them with handfuls of berries, I stomped off, taking the long way around to my backyard instead of hopping the fence as I usually did.

I tucked myself back into the crevice I’d made behind the bush, not ready to return to where my parents would be. The

ground was muddy where the rain had soaked it, but I sat on it anyway, picking at the somehow unharmed collection of Barbados cherries. I wiped the dirt from one, and bit into it, surprised after forgetting that not all fruits bleed scarlet blood. Within minutes, the pile was diminished to an abundance of triangular seeds, and it was only after they were gone that I remembered why I was sulking in the first place. I couldn't hear Cas' footsteps; I assumed he'd gone inside.

And for a long while, that was how I stayed, holding company with seeds and sticks, until a new kind of call broke out from beyond my shelter. Fearing a vicious assault, I took care peering over the top of the bush. But when I found Cas standing there on the other side, his hands were free of weaponry and instead holding a plastic cup to his mouth with both hands so his voice would echo within it.

With a sound vaguely reminiscent of a trumpet, Cas held my attention.

"The island is declaring a truce."

I hesitated to respond, uncertain if his "truce" was a ploy to attack. Noting my pause, Cas reached one hand behind his back and pulled, not a weapon, but a clean white shirt from his back pocket, waving it furiously over his head, closer to a lasso than a white flag of surrender.

"Really?"

Cas stepped closer but continued his wild waving of the t-shirt, the cup still pressed over his lips.

"To show our truce, the island is having a feast at Casimir Whittaker's shelter."

And then he was gone, running the long way back to his house, bare feet flashing stained soles in a familiar red shade.

I waited until I heard the footsteps return to his side of the

fence. Then I pulled myself over the top and jumped down to see what was waiting at the shelter. Behind the artfully reconstructed shelter, Cas was waiting to see my face. And when he did, he gestured to the ground with a drawn out *ta-da*.

Plated on elephant ear leaves, mulberries and Barbados cherries were stacked high and aplenty. The taste of my depleted stash was still tart on my tongue, so I wasted no time reaching out to take one.

We spoke no more of the war or the truce, focusing instead on how we'd survive the island *together*. Cas wanted to be the hunter. I said I would start a farm to raise the native animals and he didn't laugh at the idea.

The feast was a day-long affair. We ate until the sky went dark enough to kick the streetlights on, and only in that added light did we see in our beaming smiles that our teeth were stained a deep crimson.



Third Prize in Art

Mask Gleaners

Donald Patten
University of Maine

Third Prize in Writing

Okay? Not Okay.

Claire Fennell
New York University
Nonfiction

When I was younger, my parents took to the habit of banning books. My sister and I couldn't read *Junie B. Jones* books because they would make us bratty. We couldn't read *Diary of a Wimpy Kid* books because they would make us stupid. We couldn't read *Captain Underpants* books because they would make us think poop was funny. Most notably, we couldn't read the books my mom read because they would make us know what 'sex' meant. As voracious young readers—friendless nobodies—this was a devastating affront. As other kids crammed their summer reading logs with the comic antics of Junie B. and Greg Heffley, we were forced to read *Magic Tree House*, a series entirely devoid of brattiness, stupidity, poop being funny, and sex. As we got older, the bans went away. Ten instead of seven, we were mature enough to browse the shelves of the Upper St. Clair Public Library solo. Our egos swelled. I read *A Series of Unfortunate Events*. I read *39 Clues*. I read *Guardians of Ga'Hoole* under the covers after bedtime. My sister won the Battle of the Books competition that summer. *Viva la revolution!*

The bans stayed mostly dormant until I reached the seventh grade, although my mother—a classroom teacher—kept *Junie B.* banned from her classroom library. This was when whispers of a new book, an important book, began to creep through the red

and black tiled hallways of Fort Couch Middle School. Turquoise corners peeked out of galaxy patterned JanSport backpacks. Twin black and white clouds peered across desks during silent reading. It was a silent unifier. The girls who wore patterned training bras and Bath & Bodyworks perfume were reading it, as were the girls who loved horses and ran on all fours in gym class. In the childish way in which a school exists to its students as the entire universe, everyone on earth was reading it.

John Green's *The Fault in Our Stars* came out in the early 2010s. The title comes from a Shakespeare quote, but it is not a novel for people who like Shakespeare. *The Fault in Our Stars* is a novel about cancer. *The Fault in Our Stars* is also—perhaps more importantly—a novel about sex. It follows Hazel, who is fifteen and is depressed because she has terminal lung cancer, which seems fair. Because she is depressed, her mother forces her to go to a support group. At the support group, she meets Augustus Waters, a one-legged ex-cancer-haver who seduces Hazel until she says her full name—Hazel Grace Lancaster. Augustus—Gus—seduces Hazel by putting a cigarette between his teeth and letting her yell at him until he reveals it's a metaphor. "You put the thing with the power to do the killing between your teeth, but you don't give it the power to kill you," he says lustily. His character is seventeen. Once seduced, Hazel and Gus begin a whirlwind, cancer-tastic romance. Through the book-world version of Make-a-Wish—called "The Genies"—Hazel and Gus go to Amsterdam to meet Hazel's favorite author, but more notably have sex and later make out in the Anne Frank House. When they return, Gus's cancer does too. There is a scene where Hazel reads Gus his own eulogy and a scene where Hazel rescues a very dying Gus from a gas station. After this—because he had to—Gus dies.

At the time that I first encountered *The Fault in Our*

Stars I knew three things. The first was that it was about cancer. The second was that everyone was reading it. The third was that I wanted to read it. It had nothing to do with the cancer, really. My desire to read this book was natural consequence of being twelve. It was the same reason I wore stick-on earrings and hallucinogenically bright shirts from Justice: everyone was doing it.

When I asked my parents for the book, they refused. They refused not because of sex (I was in middle school. I knew what sex was. The boy pees in the girl—duh). They refused not because of kissing in the Anne Frank house. They refused not because of the strange boy with metaphorical cigarettes. They refused because of cancer.

When I was in the seventh grade, my body began to betray me. This is a poetic way of saying that my body began exhibiting signs of WD-40 being poured on the fire of the inevitable process of dying. At the time, we didn't know why. We didn't even know I was dying. What we did know was that I had surgeries and morphine drips and fentanyl drips and a prescription for oxycodone. We did know I had physical therapy and CT scans and MRIs and genetic testing. We did know that sometimes I could feel my pulse in my neck snapping like a rubber band. We did know that when I missed school for a month my middle school peers started a rumor that I had been hit by a truck and died. But we didn't know why.

Here's a sentence that could be a St. Jude's commercial: some of my earliest adolescent memories are long nights spend in the Children's Hospital of Pittsburgh ER—which we called Children's. On those nights, various teams of doctors and med students tried to figure out 'why.' 'Figuring out' was a process defined by performing explorative surgeries, taking most of my blood, and—on one occasion—receiving my first pelvic exam from the father of the girl who sat next to me in math class.

The Fault in Our Stars came out at a time when ‘why’ was still followed by a question mark. It came out at a time when my parents checked the search history on my iPod Touch to make sure I wasn’t going on WebMD. It came out before doctors disproved a conclusion which they thought was sure. Unbeknownst to me, the doctors believed I had leukemia. Ultimately, I did not have leukemia, but during this period of uncertainty, my parents kept *The Fault in Our Stars* away from me. When I first learned this, I thought it entirely irrational. I was livid. I deployed words I had recently learned – like Stalin and Orwell. I told my parents I hated them, which is a terribly cruel thing to say to people that are mostly just trying to keep you from worrying about whether or not you have leukemia.

Once we confirmed that I did not have leukemia, I was allowed to read *The Fault in Our Stars*. We didn’t know what was wrong, but we knew it wasn’t cancer. This was enough to permit the consumption of metaphorical cigarettes, sex, and the Anne Frank House. I was elated. When I read it for the first time, I loved it. I loved it for the reasons everyone did. *The Fault in Our Stars* creates a deliciously deceptive mythology of being young and dying. The mythology is so delicious that it encouraged a genre of YouTube videos called ‘Cancer ASMR.’ These videos—rich with peculiar white noise—promise to give you cancer if you listen to them while you sleep. People want cancer because people want to kiss in the Anne Frank House. People want cancer because they want to have sex. People want cancer because they want to hear their own eulogy.

Some years after I read *The Fault in Our Stars* for the first time, my own ‘why’ started being followed by a period. To quote *The Fault in Our Stars*—I found out I was dying, “the way you fall asleep. Slowly, and then all at once.” In 2014, I was diagnosed with ARVC—a degenerative heart condition: the ‘slowly.’ In 2021, heart

failure—the ‘all at once.’

The ‘all at once’ in *The Fault in Our Stars* is dramatic. When his cancer comes back, Augustus Waters throatily tells Hazel that he “lit up like a Christmas tree, Hazel Grace.” My ‘all at once’ was less cinematic. The day they told me my heart was failing, I thought I was fine. On a sunny April afternoon, I walked five blocks on Amsterdam Avenue from my apartment to Mount Sinai Morningside to see if I had a blood clot. I did this because my calf hurt (a little) and I was short of breath (a little). I was being cautious. I went to the Emergency Room because I had just moved to New York, and I didn’t yet have somewhere less dramatic to go. I went alone. In a room with a blue and geometric ceiling, an ultrasound confirmed I did not have a blood clot, and the doctors sent me home. A few hours later, I got a phone call. A disembodied, 212-labeled voice told me to come back because I was “really, really sick,” three words that taste like metal when I think them. I didn’t light up like a Christmas tree—it was April. I took a \$7 Lyft five blocks and told my parents to come to the city. Alone, in a folding chair by the nurse’s station, they told me I had heart failure. That some testing they had done because of my cardiac history that was rapidly becoming a cardiac present had shown that the clump of muscle in my chest had gone Judas. It was—without a doubt—one of the most sexless moments of my life. Since then, the most romantic thing which has been said to me about my disease was when a boy I was seeing, who was a writer, joked that he could ‘use it for material.’ He was kidding. It would have been more romantic if he weren’t.

Metaphor with heart failure is more complicated than cigarettes. Heart failure is inarguably the most metaphorically insulting disease. We don’t realize we think of our hearts as successful until we are told that they are not. When you are told

your heart is failing, your to-do list is long. Not only do you have to die—which is a hassle—but you also have to deal with all these broody and existential questions about whether or not you can love, if your emotional heart is as fucked as your physical one.

I was eighteen when I found out I was truly dying, and I made it into a personality, mostly because I wanted it to be something I did as opposed to something that happened to me. I added “Make-a-Wish Adult” to my Instagram bio. I cropped and bleach-dyed the blue t-shirt the organization gave me, then had a boudoir-style photoshoot in the kitchen of my first apartment. I joked that my last words should be “See you in three days!” like Jesus. In an additional step in my campaign to make dying cool (and, apparently, quicker) I organized a group of friends to get high and watch the movie version of *The Fault in Our Stars*. We took elderberry-flavored edibles and sat on the couch. They cried, and I laughed hysterically the entire time.

One of the most unrealistic parts of *The Fault in Our Stars* is that their suffering isn’t solitary. Somehow, the book imagines Hazel easily stumbling into a group of other cancer kids and hitting it off so hard that one of them becomes the love of her life. This is facilitated by a support group led by a man in remission from what Hazel calls “ball cancer,” which feels like a cheap shot. Hazel’s cancerful friend group is foreign to me—in my experience, being young and terminally ill is not something you do with your peers. In July, the year I was diagnosed, I went to a comedy show. Doing crowd work, the comedian asked if anyone had health problems. My friends pointed at me and laughed. The comedian asked me what was wrong with me. I said heart failure, which was the wrong answer because everyone got quiet. The right answer might have been asthma or scoliosis.

My best friends in the sick world are Arlene and Mr.

Smith. I met them at the Mount Sinai Hospital on 96th and Broadway, in a stay six months after the ‘all at once.’ Arlene was my roommate on floor G7C. She also had heart failure. She was around fifty and had an associate’s degree in psychology, which she told me she got so she could figure out what was wrong with her family. She bought me Snickers bars from the gift shop on days I didn’t feel up for the walk. She had a pet tortoise who she missed dearly. We took turns taking showers when the other had visitors so we could—in turn—have sexual relations with our visitors. Mr. Smith—who was really named James—was from that same stay. He had an arrhythmia while having sex in a car. He told me the whole story. He talked quickly, and I learned he was forty-something when he showed me a picture of his ‘baby boy’ (who was nine years my senior). Of his son’s inherited nose, he told me he was “African as can be. Smith is a slave name.” He wore a New York Yankees snapback for his entire stay and had a girlfriend who lived in Virginia. An IV pole stocked with Heparin trailed him constantly, like a lightweight aluminum puppy. He was the first of us to leave. We never read each other our own eulogies because the truth was it was more prudent to hold each other at arm’s length. Instead of eulogies, Arlene and I swapped goals. She wanted to go to Paris, I wanted to graduate college. We both promised the other we would, and it had a slight quality of that scene in *Of Mice and Men* where George tells Lenny there will be rabbits. I think I am going to graduate. I don’t know if I think Arlene will make it to Paris. I love Arlene and Mr. Smith dearly. I would never kiss one of them in the Anne Frank House. The youngest person I have met with heart failure is thirty. I know they’re out there, but they’re not conveniently stored in a church basement, like in *The Fault in Our Stars*. They’re not waiting to ask for my name, first middle and last. They’re not waiting to kiss me in the Anne Frank House.

I don't know why I think *The Fault in Our Stars* is funny. In general, I've begun to resent media about dying. About a month ago, when I took my friend to *Girl from the North Country* for his twenty-first birthday, an octogenarian character gave a monologue about how "nobody wants to grow old." I cried for the rest of the act. My friend held my hand and later held me entirely. He said, "I understand," and later said "Well, I don't, but you know what I mean." We ate burritos. I mostly just felt like a dick for crying on his birthday.

The Fault in Our Stars doesn't make me cry on people's birthdays. It's the exception. There is something about the pulpy, desirable dying in *The Fault in Our Stars* that brings me joy, in a perverse way. It is to death media what Mr. Monopoly is to those who desire exorbitant wealth. It's an aspirational form of dying, without the real-world trappings. It's poetic and beautiful and meaningful and totally, completely, entirely unrealistic. It's escapism within the box. Whenever I am hospitalized and placed on an oxygen cannula, I record the same video and post it to a TikTok account with forty followers. Me, looking ill, lip-synching to an audio clip from the movie—

Augustus Waters: What's your name?

Hazel Grace (Me): Hazel.

Augustus Waters: No, what's your full name?

Hazel Grace (Me): Hazel Grace Lancaster.

I get the laugh. I cope well, so I'm told.

Honorable Mention in Art

The Party

Han Marcelle

University of Delaware



Honorable Mention in Writing

mouthful

Maxwell Frasher
University of Tennessee Knoxville
Poetry

there is really only one question that matters:
if i wore a handkerchief around my neck
& a pair of cuban heels, then stood in the produce aisle,

would you call me a cowboy?

falling is a terrible way to describe it.
the truth is, i often find love
to be a lot like participating in a prison hunger strike—
the guards tell me i'm running out of time &, finally realizing i
want
to live, i end up trying to eat the clock.

but you're like a handful of marbles
or a mouthful
of orange-peel. all this &
you don't linger in front of mirrors
or above puddles.

i guess what i'm trying to say is
its hard to sing any song
with a cigarette in your mouth,

but very easy to dance with one.

& also, i think kissing is kind
of like singing. what a stupid thing
to say. i know that.

but i still like saying it very much.

i covered all the mirrors

Crystal Murr
University of North Florida
Poetry

when the reflection walked by, i did bid i ,y dællæw noitrefectioŋ wælked bɪ wɛn ðə rɛflɛkʃən wɔːkəd baɪ, i dɪd
not recognize her. looking down to ɒt nɔwɒd ɪŋlʊkɪŋ hɜː rɛt rɛcɔɡnɪzɪz hɜː lʊkɪŋ daʊn tuː
wards expanse of skin danglin nɪŋɡnɒb nɪkʃn ɒ sɛnspæns ɔf skɪn dæŋɡlɪn
g from my neck, i know th ðɪ wɔnkd i ,nɛk, i knoʊ ð
is: the body i see is not tɒn zɪ zɪ sɪz i vɔdɒd ɛɪt zɪ nɔt
(of) me. she is a stra ɪtɪz æ zɪ zɪ sɪz (ɒf) miː
nger i will not m m tɒn ɪlɪw i rɛŋn
eet. body. st tɪz vɔdɒd .sɛt
ranger. m m rɛŋnɪz
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i am foreign in a skin that should be mine.



Bathroom Selfie

Kate Hirsch
Trinity College Dublin

Cantrip for Vilomah

Jaden Lynn
SUNY Brockport
Poetry

The third-smallest Matryoshka doll from a polished ceramic
set, piece of fiberglass insulation, clear
screwdriver Lego piece (2), clipping from rainbow hair
vintage Troll doll, striped rosary,
marzipan crumbs, FIJI water, a pair of Elmo Huggies.

Let your weary bones sink into red dirt, scream until
the back of your throat is hoarse. Let
Mahadevi know your suffering, etch the days into your
left ankle joint with a Montblanc
fountain pen. Words sink into your skin, now let it
swirl on mildewed wool. Pain, and hate
and sorrow turned black, red, blue. You need to
wrap your memories tightly in folds
to feed it to the flies from the rotted boar summoned
from the Bolton Strid. Say the name.
You have to. You need to. Tell me, tell us, speak,
speak. Let the tundra roil under the
weight of the oil in its malnourished stomach.
Hunger gives birth to you barren.



Connie Converse
Han Marcelle
University of Delaware

**ode to the grown man who called me a “fvcking
cvnt” in traffic**

Anna Sedlak
University of Pittsburgh
Poetry

maybe you say cvnt but want to say woman / mother /
wife i cannot love / daughter i let fade away /
beauty i had only once / in a different life / in which the
stars glistened across the lake and i allowed for myself
to be a dandelion seed in her hands / ripe and raw
under the sweet glow of nature's christened moon.
without me, you are a tall draft of fury at the
open bar / you are an empty, new apartment /
you are the cells in your mother's stomach / forming /
plotting, until i push you into becoming / nurse you into
belonging / give you a gift you can never give back /
and a vow, as i send you on your way.

Irish Spring Soap

Paige Miller
New York University
Poetry

It's late
That's why the nightlight is on
Coating the bathroom in shadow
What a woman I am, what a woman of thirteen
Bent knees and spine curving to meet the shower's floor
Water collecting and falling down lips, nose, spine
Hands clutching a foaming bar of Irish Spring soap
I like the way it smells, sharp and green
If color had a smell, green would be this bar I hold
turning into the bubbles that coat
the small curves of hips, waist and breasts just beginning to bloom
This is not the body of a woman, though I pretend it is
Because he pretends it is
They're just jokes. He's just friendly. He is kind to me.
You're such a doll. It makes me blush.
You're only thirteen? Well, that's a long time for me to wait, serve this
one with a wink
*No boyfriend? John, can you believe that she doesn't have a boy
friend?* Give me a pat.
No, not on my shoulder.
As he wraps an arm around my waist, I laugh, my braces are teal
and violet.
And time passes
Then the hand lowers, like the minute hand on the accelerated tick

of clock he's using to count my age
The swell of my hip becomes a cup holder for the thermos of a grey
hair covered hand
A perfect for a french fry-greased palm to rest
And he laughs, head thrown back
Exposing teeth
Like the inside of a browning, moth eaten novel
He's so nice, always telling me I do such a great job
Always confiding in me his secrets. He's like my grandpa
Only, he's not really. But I don't know that yet. I only know that I
redden when he tells me
What a *pleasure* I am to work with
But it's late now, and there are shadows all around the bathroom
And so I scrub away the grease and the smiles
With Irish Spring Soap that's wearing down to a thin green shard
I hope to work with him again,
what a nice man he is



Paranoia
Maggie Christiansen
Eckerd College

I Don't Remember

Ethan Plate
Lindenwood University
Poetry

I.

Deer graze in the cornfield
outside my house, they nibble at
the crabapple tree in front of
my house, they've been tamed
by the flatlands.

Many generations ago, two madly in-
love moose had lost their way
in the pine trees. Had spent many
sleepless nights on mountain peaks and sides.
But wandered too far south
to warmer weather.

With each generation, their antlers
spread less wide, their fur less thick.
Until they found their way into my backyard
as white tail deer with no moose memories.
Like the grandfather who fought communists,
and when he got back, fought alcoholism
by the fire pit, whose son
fought neglect and winters in Florida
and had a son of his own who grew old

behind a tv screen watching soldiers
fight imaginary battles.

I wonder if deer have a concept
of ancestry. I'm sure they remember
their parents even after they've passed,
but do they wonder where they've come from
before that?

II.

Eastern Christian mystics visualize
the garden of Eden as being at the top
of a mountain, and Adam and Eve
began life at the bottom of the hillside,
my point being that humans tend
to visualize their ancestors as being
from a higher place.

A couple summers ago, when I took
my pilgrimage into the mountains, and
the Kansas flatland highways stretched
for hours and hours and miles and miles.
And when I finally got into the mountains,
I didn't find the pine trees that the moose
had left behind; there was a city there.
With bent smokestacks and wires hanging
from the sky. With brick warehouses
emerging from the concrete, not cobbled stone.
It must be easy to forget one's ancestry
crawling through the yellow fog. Crawling

through the yellow fog, I stepped into a used book store. The owner's woozy enunciations seemed to hide a mostly forgotten knowledge of something older than the concrete, hidden somewhere in the pauses between his words, or somewhere between the yellow pages of the books he sold. I could hear a vague scraping coming from an upper floor. He glanced upwards periodically, guarding a secret. Something about the musty air explained, to me, that there was an ancient moose in the attic, who had seen the building of the smokestacks and brick warehouses. Who had been a brother or a sister to the moose that had lost their way, and anxiously waited, refusing to die, for their return. I couldn't tell why the owner kept this secret, maybe others thought it was a silly thing to do to keep a moose in an attic, feeding it crackers and soup, and hot chocolate on snowy mornings, scraping the floorboards so some travelers could hear a lost Eden from the ceiling.

I think I remember seeing a door crack, and the moose peeking its withered nose into the store. But I think that might have been a dream I had a while later. I don't remember.

New Growth
Scout Purdy
Shepherd University





Learning from Audre Lorde's 1978 essay *Uses of the Erotic*

Ralph Skunkie Davis
Rhode Island School of Design
Poetry and Art

Oh to ache!

Oh that deep twisting your name has become, that forgotten contortion, evidence that this fabled organ still exists.

Oh to have a heart and feel it curl for you.

(But this isn't a poem about you.)

In many ways, mythically and literally, I am learning the power of the erotic.

Unfortunately in the early stages of learning, most desire feels like detoxing some unnamed substance, a drug you can't remember taking.

Like it could come crawling out of your pores someday soon, and you would say:

"Ah ha! Here is my plague!"

The great atrophied state of lust comes to me in dreams.

I wake up wet, feeling good & feeling god.

Audre?

Where can I keep the dreams I have of you during the day?

Where can I tuck fever?

Where can I find my secret pouch, vestigial, that all lovers have?

Despite my dislocation,

collision spring 2023

I am learning to want but not need. To feel my wholeness instead of touching the polaroid of myself I keep in my wallet.

I am learning to exist without vignette.

And tonight, as the seconds drag my body, slick, towards sunrise, I am learning to sweat and want and leak and dream.

And I can track my learning, drip by drip,

bittersweet

Angelina Kofman
Northeastern University
Poetry

the plastic net of oranges sitting atop a fridge
doled out at a party.
drunk and hungry
our greedy fingers pick at the thick skin,
tearing
digging at the
delicate membrane bursting beneath bitten nails.

you peel the pith from a wedge and hold it out to me, a
sparkling golden bounty.
i hold the strands of hair out of your face when you can't keep
the acid down.
we wake up to sticky limbs intertwined, the tang of citrus and
sweat in the air
and rinds on the bed.

how to make a pumpkin pie

Crystal Murr
University of North Florida
Poetry

you will need a grandmother
to pass you the (wrong) measuring
cups. she'll double the number of c l o v e s .
you'll both forget to pre-heat the oven
(and by both, i mean you).
when mixture spills on the crust,
she won't tell you to clean it up. no one likes
burnt crust, grandma least of all. when she calls
you by your mother's name
- time is up -
you don't correct her. it's not until
thanksgiving is ruined that you realize
she (you) forgot the sugar.

Second-Year

Astrid Bridgwood
Queens University of Charlotte
Poetry

Trees green-heavy and bubbling with flowers, I am sitting
Half-submerged in humid Spring reading another poet's
Ideas about loss. Waiting for grief's cold wet hand to clap
The back of my neck, a sting which will remind me of
My body and its fullness, the blood and saltwater. There:
Grass whispering. I am alone on this bench with my shadow
Behind me. My grandmother died when my mother was
Eighteen. She tells me I am just like her. My aunt died
When I was eighteen, while the world was swallowing itself

That summer like no other summer, a July where my friends
Looked through me, where I could feel my grief outgrowing
The life they knew me in. On my knees in a summer-storm
Running away from a home that became a house my mother
Haunted. I wish I could have shouldered her grief. We still
Don't talk about it the way we should. I don't think either of us
Have the words. On this March-frozen bench where life has
Beached around me, I realize I've never read her obituary.
I Google her name. I Google the town her cancer flowered in

Find an interview I never read and didn't know she gave.
"Listen To Your Body," she says in the header. "A Two-Time
Cancer Survivor." My teeth froth in my mouth. A survivor a
Still-life with Lillies, a house on Acorn Lane with a tree piercing
Its roof, a spear in the heaving flank of an elk. "It wasn't
Supposed to happen." I want to kill the woman that wrote
This article. I want to find her and cry into her shoulder. I want
To peel the memory of my aunt like an angel from her mind
Hold the moments when she spoke, still-breathing, between

Two fingers and swallow it. I want to thank her and apologize.
I finish the article and I am crying in under the sun into all
I have left: my hands. The world is beautiful again and you
Are not here to see it. We loved Spring. The article ends with
Hope. She wants to work again. "I'm thinking I'm gonna get
Back there." Birds are in the bushes. I find her Instagram
Comments on photos I haven't looked at in two years. Her
GoFundMe, \$4,685 raised of \$10,000 goal. "I am enthusiastic
I can stand up and chop food and make a meal." I miss you.

Extinct in the Wild
Chantelle Chapman
Kennesaw State University



**The Apocalypse Is Nigh
And Twelve-Year-Old Me Is So Scared
That I Assemble A Backpack Of Essentials
To Brave The Future Wasteland Of Lawless Atheists**

Angie Alberto
Florida Southern College
Poetry

My Bible.
Handcuffs.
A bike lock.
Four zip ties.
A used roll of duct tape.
Fishing line.
Codes, Ciphers and Secret Writing.
Ten dimes.
Eight quarters.
Ten dollars.
Bobby pins and hair ties.
Chapstick and lip tint from Claire's.
Merlot-scented hand lotion.
A blunt nail file.
A toothbrush and toothpaste.
Floss and a travel-size bottle of mouthwash.
A comb to keep my hair tidy.
Hair clippers to give myself a buzz cut.
Earrings from Hot Topic.
A mesh sleeve of fake tattoos.
A week's worth of underwear.

A bedazzled hoodie from Justice.
Four of my dad's shirts.
Two pairs of my mom's sweatpants.
Six pairs of socks.
Running shoes a size-too-small.
A single roll of toilet paper.
Medical supplies from two different first aid kits in my parents'
garage.
A water bottle with a worn label.
Instant espresso powder.
A handful of Tylenol.
Menstrual pads.
Two air-activated heatwraps.
Raspberry lozenges.
An unlabeled pack of cinnamon gum.
Twenty Sharpie markers.
Four red mechanical pencils.
Two black mechanical pencils.
A fountain pen.
A handmade notebook.
Automaton sketches.
Forty-two matches.
A tin of portable bonfire wax.
A screwdriver.
Three pocket knives.
Brass knuckles.
A pocket watch and spare gears.
A variety of batteries.
Two flashlights.
A disposable camera.
A fake passport.

A real library card.

Official Florida Driver License Handbook.

A deck of Strawberry Shortcake playing cards.

A Flame Red Nintendo 3DS.

Cooking Mama 3 and *Super Princess Peach.*

Salt and pepper packets (for seasoning).

A tablespoon of cayenne pepper (not for seasoning).

A 16 oz box of Great Value Half Cut Angel Hair Pasta.

A can of New England clam chowder.

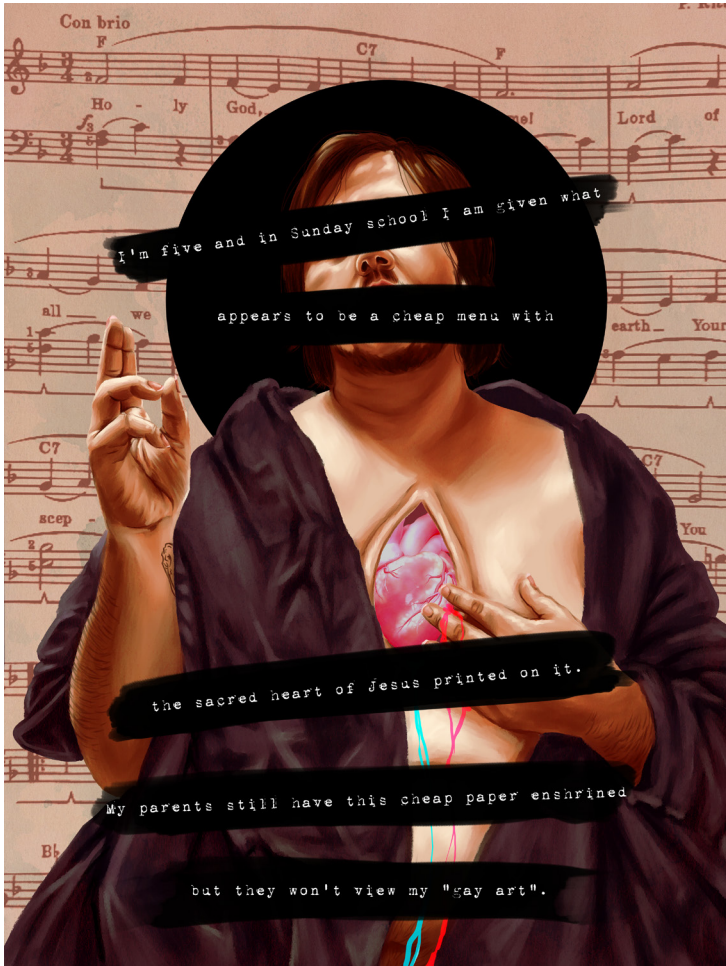
Four packages of chicken-flavored ramen.

Two boxes of Samoas.

A ziplock bag of Goldfish.

A picture of my family.

Another Bible.



I'm five and in Sunday school I am given what

appears to be a cheap menu with

the sacred heart of Jesus printed on it.

My parents still have this cheap paper enshrined

but they won't view my "gay art".

Am I Not Sacred Enough

West Jensen
Idaho State University

a portrait of grief

Maxwell Frasher
University of Tennessee Knoxville
Poetry

two men embracing
in their boxers
standing in the hallway
at 2:31 a.m.
eastern standard time
one drunk, weeping, weak
the other searching
for words
better at healing than
it's not your fault.

The Interloper

Jenna Wayland
Bowling Green State University
Fiction

Drifting, soundless, a soft geometric point in space boxed in by the blackness of an immaterial void, Virgil had just enough time to conduct a speedy damage assessment on his internal systems and conclude that he was, in no uncertain terms, a complete and utter goner.

The projectile had knocked more of Virgil's software stations loose than initially anticipated. His memory banks had decided in that critical moment to recall, not a relevant standard operating procedure, but his annotation-strewn digital copy of T.S. Eliot's poem [*The Hollow Men*]. Words flashed across his flickering screen as something caught his center, slewed it around, and sent the small probe spinning out of orbit:

*Shape without form, shade without colour,
Paralysed force, gesture without motion;*

It was impossible to discern what had hit him. Whatever it was, it had hit him hard. Hard and fast. Not even his painstakingly calibrated scan-tech instruments were fast enough to detect the rogue projectile and transmit a pulse reading to the rest of his systems before it zipped out of range again. It would be a fool's errand to attempt pinging the interloper twice.

The broadband warbled suddenly. Its shaky tenor reminded the ailing space probe of an unpracticed lutanist – plucking, uncertain, at the cosmic strings that span the distance between stars.

[Virgil?]

The subsonic rumble cycled through Virgil's wetware like an electric current, beamed within the span of nanoseconds from the antenna of the other probe's far-flung communicator device. Virgil knew without looking at the identification number of the incoming contact that the querying tone belonged to Catullus, the only other bio-mechanical probe other than Virgil still in active orbit around Jupiter's most sulfurous moon, Io.

[Virgil, are you all right?]

[Hello, Catullus.] Cracks were forming in Virgil's optic instruments. The stark space around him looked like it was draped in cobwebs. An incessant, high-pitched ringing barraged his systems, making it hard to focus on anything other than

Eyes I dare not meet in dreams

In death's dream kingdom

T.S. Eliot's blurry words. Despite these alarming developments, Virgil spoke calmly.

[Hi. My scanners are going haywire over here,] began Catullus. *[There's readouts of a chart-breaking disruption of dark matter substructure. Remnants of tidal disruption, maybe?]*

[No, I don't think so,] replied Virgil. *[I'm in a bit of a bind, orbiting mid-way above the Colchis region and accelerating towards the outermost layers of its atmosphere quite fast. I'd give you the exact coordinates and units of velocity, but I'm afraid those particular instruments and I have parted ways. Rather violently.]*

[How bad is it?] Catullus asked over the private band.

His densely packed subroutines reeling from the sudden influx of error messages crowding

Sunlight on a broken column

There, is a tree swinging

his visual space, Virgil wiped the flashing boxes from his screen and

initiated another system scan to confirm what he already knew. The bio-mechanical probe's sonar-mapper had been torn clean off its hinges, the object having taken out a sizable chunk of his main thrusters before it winked past him and was consumed by vast and impenetrable darkness. Finely-strewn flakes of aluminized fabric drifted in the small probe's wake.

[Bad,] replied Virgil.

Jagged bits of metal and wire that had once constituted a significant portion of his surface were rapidly vanishing from his field of view, spinning wildly on their own individual axes like twirling batons. Scrambling to locate and reboot what cross-connectors inside his imaging subsystem had remained intact after the sudden collision, Virgil caught a blurry glimpse of his surroundings through the cracked lens of his wide-angle camera. Starfield upon tumbling starfield hurtled past his field of vision, white pinpricks of varying intensity winking in and out of existence across his visible spectra. He wondered what would happen first: impact with Io, or a total failure of his remaining systems? Virgil fought off unconsciousness, even as the chilling sensation of complete sensory overload threatened to overwhelm his mainframe.

[Virgil?] A voice breaking through the static silence, fading in and out of coherency. *[Virgil, are you still there?]*

In the corner of Virgil's screen, Eliot's pixelated lamentations tilted diagonally, scrolling downwards at a languid pace, likely the effect of a toggle button gone defunct:

*And voices are
In the wind's singing
More distant and more solemn
Than a fading star.*



Flightless

Chantelle Chapman

Kennesaw State University

How to Write About the Postcolonial

Arshia Iqbal
Vassar College
Nonfiction

How to write about the Postcolonial when you're drenched in sweat in a gym class at a school where no one looks like you, trying to fit yourself into the BMI scale, when your brown body rejects it, holding on to the fat you've accumulated in fear of famine, poverty, and white people.

But you're not scared of white people now—you think they're your friends. You think the descendants of people who starved your ancestors, and sucked the pigment off their clothes, who watered down their tea and took their spices from them only to eat unseasoned chicken for the rest of eternity, are your friends. Now they use those spices to make smoothies to help them poop and rub them all over their pasty faces to regain color they've never had.

Spices used for rituals and practices passed down from generation to generation of your fragmented family, that you don't realize until you tweet a picture of skim milk and turmeric, trying to get the attention of a beauty blogger and remember the aunt that scoured Patel Brothers one hot Ramadan afternoon to find the right brand of turmeric to cure your indigestion. And for you, it doesn't matter, because it's old. Antiquated. It represents a version of you that never existed, a version of you that you are so scared of that you drain the skim milk and turmeric and pop a bright pink Pepto Bismol into your mouth instead.

You're here now, as whatever America will have you be.

And because of this, you speak Bangla with a broken accent, a betrayal of sorts to your ancestors, those poor overtaken ones who wouldn't recognize you. They'll wonder why the girl carrying their face speaks with the sharp tongue of their oppressors. And instead of smoothening out your tongue, you mimic the accents of white girls ordering overpriced venti caramel cocaine lattes in buns that you don't wear because they make you look too much like your mom.

The same mother whose broken English paints your face red in embarrassment. Yet, when your Bangla comes apart at the seams, she sews it back together, lovingly turning your "aaahs" into "awws" and you brush her off angrily, never seeing a future where any of that matters because you go to a PWI that makes white men fetishize you and part of you likes it but another part of you knows how to spot the hollowness of it all.

But that other pesky part of you likes the attention so much that you lean into it. Red bangles, and flowy kurtas, bindis on your forehead and kajol lining your eyes, even though you never really learned how to properly apply it, so you gingerly poke at your waterline until black tears run down your face. You speak your broken Bangla to eager ears and pass your "aaahs" as "awwws." You think you're taking something back. You think you're making a statement. You think that the woman five generations before you and a few oceans away would be proud of you, claim you as her own, make room for you on her burdened shoulders, and parade you around as her gem.

But in all honesty; she'd hate you.

She'd think you are loud and improper. She'd hate the way you awkwardly drape your dupatta and read English poetry with ease, despite finding it boring and redundant. She'd hate your short skirts and straightened hair that burns the back of your neck with its sharp heat and the fact that you butcher your name so that its tiny pieces fit comfortably into the mouths of white people who'd stomp you down in another life.

But you think you can wear her down, convince her to love you because you deserve it.

So, in an attempt to beckon her over, you decide to self medicate. Channeling all the other brown men that have failed you, you take up smoking because it reminds you of the uncles you grew up with, the sons of the woman five generations ago, whose sons raised the men who tried to love you. Men who'd lean down and give you piggyback rides on whim, sing Bangla lullabies into your tiny ears and hold you close to their chest while you smelt the burnt tobacco on them.

You sit outside of your school's makeshift masjid, where you've declared yourself an aunty of sorts. Patching up broken relationships, going over English essays before Maghrib, and making chai every other evening to a group of kids who seek God in a place where He chooses to remain hidden. You remind people about prayers and give advice on things that don't really matter. *Don't become an Econ major, it drains your soul. Have you ever thought about shutting the hell up and eating your food? Maybe salmon isn't your color, and that's okay.* You love these kids like rowdy siblings, feeling a tenderness for

them that only lost people can feel for each other.

So you smoke in secret, thinking your aunty status will get revoked, afraid the community you've built will turn on you. Then they find you and your one Muslim-ish friend outside with a cigarette hanging off of your lips and you end up sitting there, emptying out a packet of Newports you bought on whim to the very kids you had just prayed Isha with. Holding three separate cigarettes between your chapped lips, setting them aflame with your lime green lighter, passing each one across the circle, forgetting your one cigarette limit each night until you become so dizzy, a sophomore needs to drive you home. And there, in her car, as you're hunched over a half finished liter of 7up, holding in all the vomit you have accumulated through your bad habits—the dissolving Klonopin on your tongue, the four cups of chai you drank at midnight, and the three cigarettes that dangled off your lips an hour ago—she tells you she's fallen in love with some white guy in her Biochemistry class and you congratulate her, wondering how much lighter fluid you have left in your tiny green lighter.

You get sick. Nausea sick. The kind of sick where you have an empty bucket next to your bed, and a stolen liter of 7up beside your pillow. And though you know another cigarette could very much kill you, maybe not physically, but enough to crush your spirit, you know you'll smoke again. You'll cherish the warmth of tobacco smoke floating around you, the way the orange light flicks almost touching your delicate fingers, but most importantly, the faces of people you've grown to love, sitting side by side on cold autumn nights, smiling cheekily at you, chiding one another to close the back door so the smell doesn't linger in the house.

And you realize that you've been pushed to find peace in things that hurt you.

So you get angry. But what is anger for you? Not banging pots while making dinner the way your mother does or going silent over a meal like your father. Not logging off of Facebook for a week like your middle-aged cousin or taking long walks with a cigarette between your fingers like your uncle. No dramatic pleas to go back to Bangladesh like your aunt or faking amnesia to pretend you don't remember your rage like your elderly uncle. You don't have that luxury, because no one will understand your anger. This form of anger. Desi anger that starts at the root of your head and travels down to the corns of your feet in a flashy red haze that manifests in calls for God to kill you at 7 AM and the sound of the slammed door by your mother who goes over to your aunt's house next door to cool off.

So you do it the way you've been taught.

But what even is that? An Instagram story viewed by 50 people because all your selfies look the same and people are tired of seeing pictures of trees, and bowls, and the odd image of a zoomed-in face you thought was funny when your meds stopped working. A rant at the dinner table with friends who parrot your words? Friends who take the same classes, and read the same books. Friends who struggle in a different shade from you, but will burn themselves to a crisp in misplaced solidarity. A pledge to remain celibate to avert your desire to be loved by a white figure? Like your celibacy will make a difference in the vast sexual wasteland of a liberal arts college where all people do is swipe through Tinder for a dopamine rush and make eyes at each other from across the room at dimly

lit parties you go to out of boredom and self-hatred and an artistic desire to remain above it all.

Be honest with yourself. It doesn't matter. None of this matters.

So you partake in tiny protests. You fall asleep in your Shakespeare class and learn Bangla poetry instead. Bangla poetry with words you struggle to utter out of your colonized mouth, so you think of texting that hot Bengali guy that graduated a year before you, hoping to make meaningless conversation so that your ineptitude is overshadowed by horniness. You end up convincing yourself that Shakespeare is easier because life revolves around him. Romeo and Juliet have a monopoly over your mind, and you dream of a boy throwing rocks at your window and comparing you to the moon, yet you had to Google "Famous Bengali Literary Figures" to keep writing this piece. You drag your best friend to Bengali "get togethers" on campus, even though she's Indian, which she keeps reminding you as you pretend not to hear her over the loud music, and you sit in silence watching people who had the pleasure of avoiding the diaspora sing and dance and drink to lives you could never lead. Sometimes you try to chime in, other times, you watch silently, wondering if you could ever truly join a world that's oceans away. You call home more and get nostalgic for a life you've loathed for the past twenty years. Life in a tiny corner of the biggest city in the world, Bengali in its core, like you. With crowded markets your mother would force you to run to when she ran out of biryani mix on your birthday and aunties who scan you up and down at the masjid, thinking about you in a red sari next to their stoner son who once helped you light a blunt outside the local library and asked for your friend's number. You take classes on race, and class, and identity and you start to feel robbed. Tracing other people's

family trees with your fingers, feeling the bumps and ridges of a life lived, a life known, a life carried on. Jealous of Juniors, and Seniors, and Thirds, wondering if you are one too. But knowing it doesn't matter because no one cares.

People tell you to be grateful, grateful you go to a nice school and wear nice clothes and speak a nice language with no accent. They expect you to move past it; calling a Postcolonial world. Where they drink English tea, wear sensible black loafers, and feel sympathy for an old, dead, useless Monarch. But there is no Postcolony. White faces are still printed on money and people still call them our Kings and Queens. You speak like a white woman over the phone and your mother used to have a shrine of Princess Diana. There is no Postcolony. You get teased for your crooked nose and no one in your family knows how to deal with the curls you've all had rooted in your heads for an eternity. There is no Postcolony. You bleach your hair so you can stand to look at your reflection and your dad still asks you to translate the credit card bill. There is no fucking Postcolony.

You are so drenched in their evil that you absorb it like a new sponge. There is no Postcolony. There is only collateral damage in the form of you.

