

LUMEN

Literature & Fine Arts Magazine

MMXXIII

MERCYHURST  UNIVERSITY

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Bunny and Teacup
Gillian Samul

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Hidden Stairway Club

Ash Carr

Do you remember our first year?

The way we used to fear the longness
holding us down here?

In our minds, we ran away a hundred times,
but we never made it past the gates
before candlelight and holy sight
whispered caution through to spring.
But a place like this is just so goddamn hauntable.

Our little hidden stairways club
of two, and sneaking out on the roof
even when it was numbly cold
to see the stars. The only reason
to paint rocks is to leave them
out for strangers.

You can show me where to find cicada husks
still latched onto tree bark
and I'll show you every place I've ever prayed.
Palm to palm in that old confession booth
they use to store the Christmas lights,
all we ever wanted was a storm, until
we got one.

Exploring isn't just for children, pirates,
conquistadors. Sometimes it's meant
for sad college kids figuring out
they've been circling each other for centuries.
Meet me at the top of Old Main, and see
if your psychic cousin got us right.

We spoke so kindly to the ghosts
I think they must have spoken back.
I think they must have said:

Hold on to this.

But when it's time,

hold on to letting go.

I think they might have told us
how it felt to stay behind.

Buccal Bend

John Carroll

There is a crook in my face
and I hate it; with every atom
of my anatomy, I hate it. It is
a crook. A slope. A slant.
A diagon of the oral alley.
Perhaps I'm mid-croak
as every prod and poke
lends weight to the thorn
'neath my nose. Narcissus
a flower on the shore
myself a napkin- a rag
to be used up, left underfoot
crumpled on the floor.
Watch as the surgeons toil
over God's lippy freak. But this thing-
this crook in my face that I hate
it mocks me, it is of a buccal bend.
Freakish indeed, these broken lips
broken, bending, bearing a scowl. A scowl
masking my pleasure, foiling my dates.

Self Portrait

Hannah Duckett



Charcoal

Unspoken Love

Emma Kuchinski

I

I should have told you that your eyes were the most beautiful thing I had ever seen. I realized it on my first date. I was sitting across from Laney at the diner and every time I met her eyes all I could think of was that they weren't green like yours. They didn't twinkle like the sun on the waves when she laughed.

II

I should have told you that Mark wasn't good enough for you. I had seen him when I went to grab us food at the concession stand. You were upset because he said he couldn't come watch your brother at the football game. But there he was, leaning against one of the cheerleaders and laughing. By the time I got back to the bleachers he was sitting next to you. You were smiling that smile you used to give me when we were kids and I had gotten you your favorite piece of candy.

III

I should have told you I loved you. I don't know when it started – I think I had loved you since the first day we had met in kindergarten. You had walked right up to me, the corners of your mouth turned up, and told me you liked my shirt. We were inseparable after that.

IV

I should have told you that I would never leave if you asked me to stay.

V

I should have told you that I loved when you crinkled your nose. It was such a little thing. But every time you did it my insides would melt.

VI

I should have told you I couldn't remember what life was like without you. You were the sun and I was drawn to you like Icarus. When you went away to college, I felt like I had been plunged into the darkest depths of the sea.

VII

I should have told you I was sick. You called right after my appointment, and I was crumbling inside, but I told you everything was fine. I knew that you would drop everything to come take care of me. I didn't want to make you do that.

VIII

And I should have told you all these things, not written them down on paper.

I

I wish I had told you your smile made my day. When I was in a bad mood all it took to make everything better was your smile. Not the polite one you wore around other people, but the one you saved just for me. It shone like the sun in a clear blue sky, perfectly unhindered.

II

I wish I had told you that I would always prefer spending my days with you. Every time you asked if I wanted to hang out, I always said yes, even if I had plans. Your friendship was worth burning bridges.

III

I wish I had told you that I loved you. It may have saved me a lot of heartbreak. How was I supposed to fall in love with someone who wasn't you?

IV

I wish I had told you that I would do anything you asked me to.

V

I wish I had told you I loved when you laughed. Your eyes became crescent moons, glowing with joy. I swear the stars twinkled in the tears that slipped down your cheeks.

VI

I wish I had told you that going away for college was one of the hardest things I ever had to do. I was afraid that if I turned around, you'd disappear like Eurydice as Orpheus led her back to the world of the living. I felt like I was leaving half of myself behind.

VII

I wish you had told me when you found out you were sick. Your mom mentioned it in passing and my knees gave out. I left you six voicemails before packing up everything and driving eight hours, only to show up at your door unannounced.

VIII

And I'm glad you wrote all these things down, because if you'd said them I would have kissed you before you could finish.

Nothing is Worse Than...

Ryleigh Gonda

Nothing can make a day worse than noticing that the puddles on the ground have turned into
streams

And not the pretty kind of streams with fish of all colors and rocks made of wonders

No, rather the type of streams that are brown and murky and cold to the point that it makes your
skin crawl

Nothing can make a day worse than when your feet connect with the ugly stream

And your toes curl in your sneakers but that doesn't do anything to fend off the icy flow of
brown murky gunk

And your shoe is no savior, letting the cold water bask over your socks like it was always meant
to be there

You think nothing could possibly get worse than ugly puddles and wet shoes, but of course the
Gods of socks have other plans

And ever so slightly with each step you take and each passing second that ugly brown water
touches your toes

Your sock, your last line of defense, fails you worse than your supposed savior sneaker

And the cold-water brushes over your appendages, making sure to kiss every toe, especially the
pinkie

And you try to ignore the sensation of cold burning over your feet

Because you have places to be and wet socks cannot hold you back, but here you are thinking
about it

The nasty disgusting foul creature known as a wet sock that encompasses your cold toes and
there is nothing you can do about it

And your sneakers squelch and buckle and rub against your heel in a way that makes you unable to
shake the feeling of a wet sock

Nothing is worse than a wet sock that sticks to your ankles, not daring to let go and let them be
free of nasty cold

And the gunky murky stream puddle water continues to flood through your shoe and right into
your already wet sock

And just when you think nothing can be worse than this awful feeling your feet are going
through, you step right into the deepest part of the puddle

And you stop for a second and realize the damage you have done, but there is nothing you or
your shoe can do about it

And if you listen closely with each step you take, the sound of your wet sock sloshing in your
shoe starts to sound like giggles

Nothing is worse than a wet sock mocking you with each step, oh no, nothing is worse than that

The first time I saw him, he was perched on a chopped stump, almost owl-like in his stock-still swiveling. I had been playing hide and seek with friends, searching for the perfect spot to maintain my title as victor, but was perplexed at the odd behavior before me. I had never seen an adult act in such a manner, and previously thought that only other kids could look so playful. My parents had never delivered the “stranger danger” talk, not being ones to impart life lessons, so I felt no hesitation when padding over to him. My feet rustled the grass, giving my approach away, causing wide hazel eyes to lock directly on me. They were round and exaggerated, reminding me of an animal, not a human. There was a distinct vulnerability in them that prevented discomfort from bubbling up, so I continued on, for a wolf does not still at the deer’s awareness.

“Hello!” I chirped, but a sharp hiss cut me off. Rounded eyes became slits, glaring with reproach at me. A bony finger pressed itself against his lips, silencing any protest I would have made. I figured a silent translation was appropriate, so I tilted my head, raising a singular brow in question. That appeared to appease him, for he went back to his swiveling, ignoring me entirely. He, however, shifted ever so slightly over, providing room— intentional or not. Never one to pass an opportunity, I leveraged myself up, mirroring his stance. Quickly, my knees began to ache, thighs and ankles and feet screaming in protest at the strain. I glanced over, noticing the way he settled his palms against the grain. He was statue-like: his limbs did not quiver, and his body did not shift, as if he were accustomed to the position. I attempted to squirm around, copying his placements as accurately as possible. One, two, three, four: trying to relax my rigid posture, easing up as I released each breath. From my observations of him, I could see that his own eyes flickered occasionally over me, but I couldn’t ascertain if I was merely a blockade he had to skim over or a baffling mystery he sought to decipher.

“Hey!” a voice resounded. “We give up! Come out, come out, wherever you are!” The man stiffened, and I swiftly scrambled off and away, running back through the brush. I was panting and puffing by the time I reached the group, and groans echoed around once they all realized I had won the game once again, muttering following me on the trek home. Victory, supposedly a lofty, intoxicating thing, felt hollow this time around.

* * *

I had forgotten about the incident entirely, writing it off as an unclimactic encounter, until I saw him again. That day, flakes fell with turbulence from the sky, coating the earth’s floor in layers of glittering white. The roads, disturbed by tire tracks, soon transformed into muddy slushes, distorting the picturesque image that had naturally been created. They too, though, glittered beneath from ice, which was the berg that sank my school’s lesson plans for the day. With classes canceled, I found myself shoving on a coat, lacing up boots, and tugging on gloves before heading out the front door. Some kids chose to take their sleds to the nearby hills; others built snowmen and angels in their front lawns; I went for a walk in the park. It was more trudging than walking, for the journey certainly took effort and sacrifice. My pants quickly became damp, then soaked, due to the snow’s sheer height, but I persisted, not wanting to spend my time in the house.

There was no objective in my mind other than to move (to get away), the circulation warming my body despite the chill and chafe of the jeans sticking to my flesh. Friends would probably swing around my place, asking after me in pleading tones, only to find that I had already gone. For no reason I could discern, I had found myself growing increasingly distant from them, preferring to spend my days alone, content in my own mind. Their company often became oppressive after elongated periods, driving the wedge deeper. The rift, I knew, would one day widen into a chasm, and they would stop coming around entirely. It was odd that I looked forward to the separation so earnestly; however, I was always one for recognizing patterns, and my reaction was not a new one.

I blew fog from my mouth as a distraction, watching it crystalize in the air, when he appeared in the corner of my eye. In my confusion during the original sighting, I had failed to fully take his features in, but as I watched him shuffle delicately across a frozen pond, I absorbed as much as I could. He wore a thin tweed coat, a dull brown belying its age, which matched the stump rather well from what I could remember. A crinkled white shirt bulged from the sleeves and collar, weathered to the point it verged on beige. Stubble covered the entire lower half of his face, with dark eye bags completing the tired picture he made. Those eyes, though, shone with the same brightness they had before, drawing me in once again. I found myself slogging through banks of snow to reach the pond's edge, longing to join him out on the ice.

I took one step, then another, slipping, a yelp escaping my throat. He stilled, turning to face me fully, watching in silence. Luckily, I had stabilized, determined to continue moving. If he could make it all the way out in worn loafers, I figured my chances were decent in snow boots. I quietly inhaled, allowing the air to permeate my being for one, two, three, four— before releasing it alongside my next step. Then again, and again. He did not walk closer, or offer to lend a hand, but he remained rooted in place, almost as if in wait. I found myself staring at the ice, watching my own two feet move gently over the plane, but when I dared glance up from time to time, I found neither patience nor impatience settling across his features. There was this blankness that lacked judgment, but also comfort.

When I finally reached him, I could not help but grin upwards, searching for approval and congratulations. There was none, but a reprimand did not arise either. I would chalk it up to indecision, but that would imply he was thinking of a verdict at all, which I doubted considering the simplicity of his eyes. They were looking at me, yes, but recognition never began to trickle along his visage, morphing it pleased or disturbed. He merely watched as an animal would, searching, perhaps, for something they never seemed to find.

Day turned to dusk with the two of us standing there, blotted figures in the middle of the frozen water.

* * *

Muffled shouting struck my ears as I laid in bed one night, staring up at the ceiling. Shadows painted themselves along the wall, their originally peaceful shapes transforming into vicious creatures the longer I watched them for. Sharp, pointed teeth snapped at me, slithering hisses dragging themselves across the navy wallpaper, crescendoing alongside the voices. They warped and cracked, stretching out toward me, and I could no longer remain there, awaiting their attack in stillness. Inhaling shakily, I prepped— one, two, three, four— before springing up, lunging for the locks on my window. Prickles danced on my neck, tangling in the fine hairs there, not daring to look back for the blobs of black or the footsteps that stomped ever closer to my door. I shoved the pane up, crawling out, sprinting away the moment my bare feet hit the soil of our flowerbeds. My name was bellowed, but I paid it no mind, for I just knew if I looked back, I would see that the shadows were making the calls.

I ran with persistence, a goal firmly in mind. The humid summer night matted my skin, but I paid it no mind. I needed to find him, to see him. The line of trees marking the park's beginning enveloped my vision as I ran straight through them, branches scraping along exposed arms, pebbles digging into my feet.

"Go away." It rang out lacking conviction, but I could muster no more energy for the demand. My face felt swollen, dried tear tracks adding to the discomfort. He was sat beside me on the park bench, back hunched over, elbows resting on his thighs, hands clasped together. His stare was directed straight ahead, not even glancing my way. I was stung, but the feeling dissipated as swiftly as it had arisen. I could not be hurt by a tendency I knew belonged to him, ingrained as it was. He could no more help his silence and ambivalence than I could inhibit my longing for a stronger reaction: the two of us, always stuck in limbo.

His right index finger scraped itself along the top of his left, absentminded in a way I had never observed in him before. It struck a deep desire in me to reach out, to curl my own hand on top of his, or perhaps set it gently upon the sleeve of his coat. For all the times we had met, I had never sought to touch him, for— logically— one would be incredibly hesitant to touch a deer, or a fox, or a bird with a broken wing. It was taboo, an unspoken understanding, which I wanted to break that day. The peculiarities had been building: he never spoke a word, others were never present with him around, and I always departed first, leaving him behind in varying landscapes. I must have known, the truth festering like an infected wound, pulsing under my skin, itching to break free. Denial kept it under wraps, the disinfectant stinging and singeing and killing.

I had not noticed in my rumination, but my nails had dug themselves into palms, specks of blood welling under the pressure. Shocked, I unfurled them, staring down. Resolution arose, allowing me to wipe my hands along blue jeans in preparation. A singular breath— one, two, three, four— and I was ready, feeling his presence beside me. Stretching out hand and eyes, I found that he was gone. The weight of it slammed into me, something sick welling in my throat. New tears blurred vision, and vomit hit the concrete sidewalk in front of me. I was a fool, for I was the deer, and he the wolf, prowling around in my mind, driving me wild— mad, as I had been called countless times. There are moments, even long stretches of time, where I wish I had kept up the ruse, the emptiness at my side a gaping hole made for round, innocent eyes.

How Could I Ever Fathom

Ava Voelker

I have something that doesn't belong to me

and it is you.

You do not belong in my life;

you are as silver,

white and pure.

I am a stone:

without allure.

You say you love me

and I can't know why...

how could I ever fathom?



Monstrum Plantae
Samantha Montoro

Green-Eyed Monster

Elizabeth Plummer

It rises from slumber, face red, tinged with anger, frustration, disappointment: disturbed from its fitful rest in the crib

Inconsolable: the damage done. Expectation fallen flat, betrayal seared into bone, a carved scar. Each new addition a sharp bite, teeth sinking in, gnawing down

A sensation so acute, despite its regularity. Never quite accustomed; it wells with predictability, yet stings all the same

Go away. Grating, gritting; an aching, jaw clenching. Silly, really-- to demand. It replies:

Not now.

It twists and writhes, digging into flesh. Blood streaming, boiling, screaming;

Poisonous, deadly, tainting all it touches. Seeping into everything

Wailing and sobbing. Beating its fists against the ground, snot running from its nose-- lip wobbling

Craving a response, a reaction. Begging for something, anything, with dramatic antics, words unable to form through hysteric heaves,

And through broken burbles, attempts are fruitless

Longing to reach out, to touch. Refraining, unaccustomed to the concept of comfort. Not wanting it, anyhow. Not from you

Not now.

It settles, finally, into resignation: defeat splayed for you to see. Crust cracking features, lining cheeks in a stream suffering drought. Sobs softened to occasional hiccups

The outburst: over, but not solved. Quelled by inattention's apathy, yet bound to arise again, whining, pleading, wondering:

Why won't you look?

It fills in the blanks, doodling across a pad of paper, concentration furrowing brows, creasing them into crumbled, discarded drafts

Looping, round and round and round, unable to figure you out, to ease the barbs, to cease yearning

You would see it all... if only you cared to spare a glance; instead, you place rose-tinted glasses on

And hand it a matching pair

"Not now."

Invisible Visualization



Choreographer: Rebecca Jones

Music: Thomas Bergersen "Promise"

Costume design: Diana Aradine and Rebecca Jones

Lighting: Bob Steineck

Performers: Katherine Kilbourn, Anna Menarchek,
Morgan Masters, Madeleine Plourde, Meggie Peterson,
Madeline Sipos, Mia Semieraro, Nadia Stronkowsky,
Sophie Satoh, Katelyn Turner-Leftwich

Performed and filmed March 9, 2023

Your Name

Ava Voelker

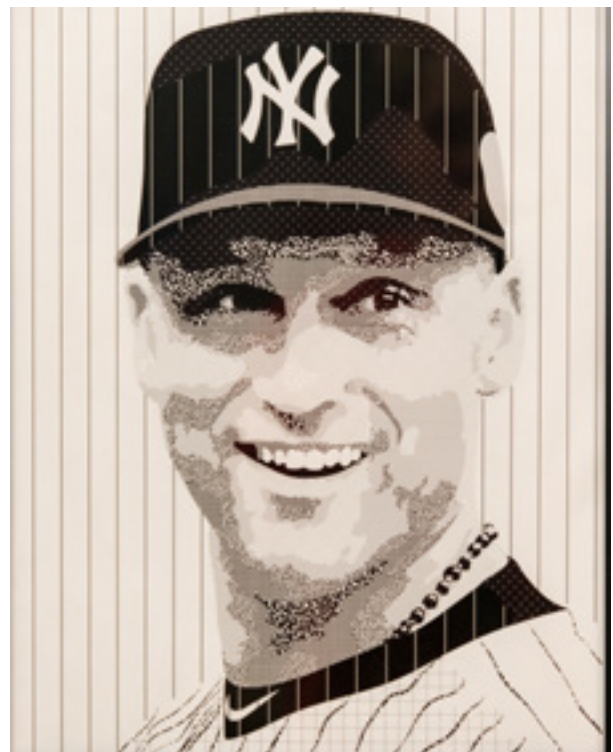
A B C D E F G H I J K L M N O P Q R S T U V W X Y Z. There are twenty-six molded statues to choose from, each intricate and unique, when choosing to form a word. Each a work of art, each bringing light into the darkness. Each, a shade of paint with which to combine with more shades with which to skillfully slather and stipple onto the canvas of life words of lively hues. Words with which to paint pictures and pictures to paint stories and stories to paint truths and truths to paint red from the pricked soft heart of us all.

When I love someone, I become infatuated with these letters, the letters that spell their name. Abby. An “A” proudly pitched like a tall tent next to two round little “b”s finished with a lovely low-lying “y” that rolls off the tongue and lifts away, is the most beautiful combination of letters to ever have become acquaintances. Who should think of such a marvelous thing? Or try a robust “C” safely encasing an “o,” an endless ring of wonder and “aha!” The harsh resonance of an “r” to strike you is softened next to the luxurious stickiness of an “i.” Close the set with a double set of gentle “n,” a soft hum of a letter. A curved sweet “e” silently sits in elegance at the finish. Corinne. What a wonder! Letters weaved together to create the sound I long to hear, a name that is special and full of life. A name that is music and laughter. One or two or three syllables that are the rhythm of joy to me, a dance. I watch the letters and recreate them in pen, in pencil, in marker, on my keyboard. Tap tap tap... tap tap taptaptatp. C o r i n n e. A b i g a i l. B r a n d o n. I swoop and loop them in cursive and pin them in my mind. Corinne Inez. Abigail Margaret. Brandon Todd.

Is it not the first thing we learn as our path as scholars starts out? Grubby hands ruthlessly suffocating a pencil, unable yet to control the weapon. How long do we take perfecting our letters before we worry about the rest of the 26? And longer yet to marry the letters together in a flavorful dish that is our favorite, our very own name, warm steam curls rising from the freshly cooked thing. Didn’t we sing songs and lose points on papers all for the sake of engraining into our minds and the fingers of our dominant hand the map to the path of our names so we may never be lost? Our names are so important, so surely the fine letters that represent the sounds that represent the feelings that represent the essence of the very person we are must be a thing of regal beauty. A v a. A v a. Ava. My letters, my name.

Like a wave lapping softly, endlessly upon a pebbled shore: M A s o n M A s o n M A s o n M A s o n. Like the creaking of a swing at the park, back and forth and back and forth: A b b y A b b y A b b y A b b y. Like the sizzling of hot bacon in a skillet: S s s s s s s s o o p p p h h h i i i i i i a a a a a a. Like the falling of acorns in the forest or the popping of popcorn over a blue flame: B r a n d o n. Like the steady pound of rain atop the warm solid roof: S a m S a m S a m S a m S a m S a m. Like the boom of thunder in the ink black night: N A T H A N. Like the angry howling of the wind when the world is cold and scared: C A l e b... c c c c A a i i l l e e e e B B B B C C c c c a a A A A l l e E E E B. Like the shimmering rustle of leaves as trees gently dance in the breeze: L L L e a h e a h e a h e a h e a h.

A name is a sweater to put on when I am cold, it is familiar and loved. Every fiber wrapped around me in comfort and warmth. I draw to my mind names when I am small and scared, when I am alone and quiet, when I am joyful and loved, when I am full and when I am empty. Letters and names. Smiles and faces. Laughs and memories. Arms and embraces. Of all twenty-six letters and umpteen combinations to create with the wily riley things, should one succeed in wrangling them up, my favorite masterpiece is made of the luxurious letters tightly knit together in an original fabric: your name.



From Top Left:
Surreal Self Portrait, Mickayla Bliley;
Warped Soul, Aliya Therrien;
Ariana Grande in Pattern,
Allison Lineman;
Captain, Jessica Clark

Mirror Image

Madison Jukkola

I see a mirrored image flash,
the girl from years ago.
I boldly meet her spiteful gaze, though
mine she cannot hold.

A never-ending sea of hope
between her love and mine.
She knows she cannot reach me.
I know she will not try.

Her heart's a cold unfeeling thing,
there's hatred in her eyes.
I sing a song of pardon while
she laughs at my demise.

Oh please, oh please, my dear old friend
don't leave me in the cold.
Just hold my hand upon your heart, and
mine shall be consoled.

Though eyes of mirth dance giddily on
my expiring frame,
I see in her a symphony
Of sorrow and of shame.

I am not your enemy,
my girl, I am your truth.
You don't yet know of life's pure joy
and all you have to lose.

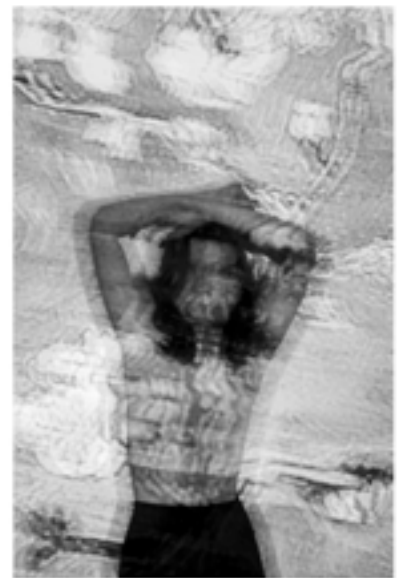
She sheds a single lifeless tear,
her hands reach out to mine.
My fingers graze the cold smooth glass,
and fail to intertwine.

I swear I'll always be right here,
I beg her not to cry,
I know I cannot reach her,
She knows I'll always try.

Jun. 6

Ashley Barletta

When someone is gone,
they are really more present than ever.
That's good news for you
because you'll never miss my graduation,
wedding day,
the day I finally give you
the grandchild you put
more energy into
than the daughter who still needed you.
I put a lot of effort into keeping you around;
pictures, memories,
a few sweaters I pulled from
your closet.
It's my thoughts, my memories, my tears
that keep you alive,
and I'll keep thinking until
all the days of my life have been
consumed with suffering
because I don't know how
to move on



EVA Black and White
Jenna Lutz

Escaping the Boars - A Prologue

Samuel Garvey

The forest was only a blur as Shad Morrigan's feet propelled him through a tortuous maze of trees, bushes, and roots. He was running and running fast from inescapable danger. The Hajren boar riders were approaching him, and they would soon feast on his blood. Shad turned his head behind him for a split second, and almost immediately regretted his decision. There were three of them, about ten feet away, riding on giant wild boars. *Damn!* The rhythmic stamping of their hooves echoed through the trees, piercing the silence of the otherwise quiet evening. Shad could hear their hot breath getting louder and louder, their innate ability to latch onto his scent making any attempt to escape irrelevant. Shad couldn't run for much longer, unsure if his legs would give out or if his three angels of death would catch up to him beforehand. What Shad *did* know is that either would result in his demise.

Suddenly, a slender object flew past Shad's head, close enough that he could feel its wind on his ear. Almost as quickly as it flew by, the object pierced into a tree in front of him with a loud *thunk*. Then another one of them whizzed by his left calf, making clumps of dirt fly up from the ground in its journey through the air. A few dozen feet behind him, Shad could hear an angered cry from one of the Hajren, and it was unmistakably their leader, Riganor. Shad knew his voice well, despite the short amount of time that he had been in his midst. The leader had been hunting him for days, and couldn't wait any longer to finish him off.

"Don't draw this out, boy!" cried the leader from afar, "We'll kill you quickly if you end this!" Although a morbidly promising statement, Shad knew that the Hajren was bluffing. He wanted to reply in disdain, but was too afraid; the terrifying imagery of his skinned husk being nailed to a tree on the outskirts of the forest quickened his pace. After all, mercilessness and barbarism were common traits among the Hajren species and were present in Riganor especially.

A third arrow whizzed through the air, this time lodging its sharp head into Shad's back, just below his shoulder. He screamed in immeasurable pain, stumbling to the ground but getting up just in time. A burning, pulsating pain shot through Shad's torso as the thin veneer of poison coated on the Hajren's arrows made its way through his system. The Hajren were right on his tail now, so close that Shad could smell the hot breath of their giant boars, as they strained themselves, craving the satisfaction of his demise. With a burst of energy, Shad quickened his pace once again, surprised at this latent ability. However, this attempt proved to be fruitless, as three arrows plunged into his right shoulder, thigh, and left heel in quick succession. Shad plummeted to the ground, landing face-first into the dirt. This time, he didn't react to the pain. He didn't even scream, finally accepting his fate.

The Hajren's boars sped straight past him, running too fast to make an abrupt stop where Shad lay. They began to slow down a few yards past him before they could make their course reversal. Seizing this opportunity, Shad stood up weakly, his muscles on fire, as he drew his sword from its sheath, staring the boar riders down.

Six Seconds... Crying out in agony, Shad removed the arrow below his shoulder to let his arm move freely.

Five Seconds... Shad threw the bloody arrow to the ground and readied his sword, breathing out shakily. He envisioned all of the things he had wished to do back home, which was then followed by regret for going on his stupid adventure.

Four Seconds... Shad did his best to regain his composure, focusing his attention on the Hajren leader, as his boar made a course reversal for him.

Three Seconds. Shad pondered why he hadn't thought to fight them before he'd lost his energy. He could feel a cool breeze through the forest now, but whether it was the result of a weather change or the sweeping hand of death, Shad knew not.

Two Seconds... Shad held out his sword in a defensive position as Riganor, the thrill of the hunt in his yellowed eyes, reached behind him for his ivory scimitar.

One Second... Shad thought of his mother, waiting for him back in Graycott, unaware that he would never return. I'm sorry, mom, he thought in solemn regret, I wish I had more time!

As the Hajren boar riders finally made their approach, Shad took in a deep breath — knowing it was probably his last — and charged forward as the predators surrounded their prey.



Rust Wall
Alec Bidwell

Home Bound

Marley Ramon

Ghosts fill my hometown to this day
But there are not enough ghosts here
No memories that seize my shoes
Or hold my spokes in trepid gloom

Still panting in the desert heat
There aren't any bodies near
No memories to reach and tug
To cradle me in blessed embrace

He does not live there anymore
And further she does not exist
Their faces follow me through town
Their hands combing the hair they catch

I see old teachers on the street
And fingerprints on every swing
Able body and able mind
But I don't have a will to read

I still look for the mountains' pink
Sandias--my forever string
I always glance before it sets
Old habits still not yet undone

Ghostly hands cradle my face to
Give grief its time to amble back
The plane ride home feels like a death
I can't find north, my way forward

Must I always grant the pardon
No one standing tells me straight

I find soft ground to fall into
And bury all these thoughts as if
The bones I hide won't haunt me yet
A body in these sentiments

To Comfort Secrecy

Elizabeth Plummer

Spat out spittle spraying with sharpness
Coagulating with a callousness akin to cud on a cow's tongue
Daunted by the danger of dastardly vulnerability
Secrets long sequestered loosening at the seams
Like treasure stowed away in a tantalizing trove

A soft, sublime thing meant solely
For you Fangs tucked away, far beneath
The superficial surface yet ready to surge forth
With dangerous zeal should one dare disclose
All that is tangled in the tirade of candor

Pressing with persistence against the palate
Writhing in restlessness no longer in repose
Its spine cracks crumbling in silence's wake
Spilling forth like blood laying out a soiled stain
Tainting all it touches with unfettered temerity

Curling around it cautiously cradling with care
Breathing softly so as to soothe and settle
Like gliding one's hands to quiet shaking quarters
The fear receding allowing respite to remain
Lingering for the length it is capable of luxuriating
The titillating sense of trust permeating the air



Dinner On The Up 'n Up
Marley Ramon

Give me Your Pearls

Ava Voelker

Give me your pearls

your eyes

So I may fix them as stars in vast sockets into the slits of darkness on my face

So I may see the beauty you behold

and ugly you linger on

Give me your rubies

your lips and your tongue

So I may press them as a kiss onto the pit of despair beneath my nose

So I may speak the words you pour, sweet as honey

So I may choke on the vile bitter black ink you spit and spurt and sputter, staining with hurt

Give me your porcelain

your teeth

So I may display them as busts upon pedestals inside a museum that curates graceless utterings and flawed narrations

So I may feel the cool breeze that rolls along them in the wide smile you give

So I may feel the force with which they gnaw at the ragged rips of your cuticles and jagged tips of your fingernails

Give me your bronze

your skin

So I may wrap it around me as a tailored coat encasing the translucent film that clings to me

So I may bask in the warmth of your embrace and the heat of the purest sun

So I may graze the scars you've been gifted and the scars you've created

Give me your gold, your onyx, your silver, and your copper

your hair

So I may place it as a crown upon the hill of flesh under which my thoughts are buried

So I may know the way you gingerly press and pin it to face the day

and how you tug and twirl and run your fingers through it, catching as a net

when darkness falls and you are anxious

when a web of stress laces and encases around you

Give me your abalone shells, iridescent with mother of pearl

your ears

So I may adorn my face, wearing them as jewels beside me

So I may hear the whispered symphony you find in a raucous cacophony of cicadas

So I may hear the silence you seek

the ceasing of rolling waves and stillness of breath

Give me your coal

your heart

So I may enclose it in my cavern of emptiness beneath prison-like ribs

So I may be drenched in the darkness of all the worst things you are

So I may buckle under the pressure of your life, the force and friction that forms you and envelops you in fear and compresses you daily until you can no longer take it and you will break

For by this I am certain of what has turned you into the rarest of diamonds

Crown of Thorns

Jessica Clark



Interactive 3D Sculpture

The Shaw Semantics

Marley Ramon

Cliff Lehvene's lunch break was as long as his will to live. Which is to say: not very. But Key and Porter and Windsor and Sviatoslavych and Baker and Associates only accepted the best.

"Big guy wants you in forty," Katie read from her planner, Bic pen punctuating her words, "what did you do?"

"Hey! Nothing. I think, at least. I got him that report he asked for. And his coffee was made right, this time, I checked. That merger with Grinly is almost sealed up, and I called the sign-men, or at least I tried, they're closed right now, and I left a—" Cliff could feel sweat forming under his skin, he refrained from tugging at his collar like a poor comedian.

"Jesus, lighten the f*ck up before you get up there. I'm kidding," Katie said. Cliff nodded. He felt like he didn't know what to do with his hands. "When's the last time you slept? Cliff don't kill yourself for a desk job. I don't wanna be a hypocrite, but you know what I mean. Anyways, upstairs at Fig Newton's, wash your face and get some coffee or something. I feel like I'm back in 101." Katie turns and scribbles something down.

"Hahha! Good-- good one Katie!" Cliff's voice peters out when she's made it clear that she's not turning around. Katie Cork, a paralegal and 2L, what Cliff would at first describe as a no-nonsense gal. Of course, he'd double back a second later. Katie Cork, a some-nonsense gal. She was dry and cutting, but Katie was cool. Cliff was getting drinks with her and some of the others in the bullpen that night, assuming he got through his meeting. He tucked his head down and got back to work.

Somehow Cliff had scraped his way into the pristine glass walls and some days he even managed to not walk into them. He'd read somewhere that birds can't see glass; as he caught sandwich crumbs in between brief pages, Cliff wondered if something had gone wrong when he was conceived. One FedEx driver got his wires crossed on his delivery route and instead of taking the genius baby DNA to his mother or his ma, Cliff was stuck craving bread and hitting walls. Still imagining a little duckling Cliff chasing his ma around, he huffed a laugh and turned another page.

None of this is to say that Cliff was stupid. Twenty-five and fresh out of grad school: Cliff worked for one of the biggest firms in the nation. It wasn't exactly what he'd aimed for, but corporate law took a baseball bat to student loans and Cliff—and his two-decade love of national parks—couldn't afford to not be a mickey mantle. So, Cliff was smart; stressed and busy and barely getting by, but smart.

Smart was just a tipping point; those who made it, did so with sweat and more hours than probably OSHA compliant. But Cliff was going to do it. He busted ass in middle school (and took seven hours to stare at a wall when he learned that didn't matter in the slightest), high school (when it took sports, dance, and a 5.0 to get out of Denton), university (president this and kappa kappa that), and again in law school (Elle Woods and a textbook take the world), and now he'd hit the next step. There was no time to settle. His parents were proud of him, he just had to make it worth their while.

He finished his sandwich.

Cliff still had two binders to clear but his scribbled notes for one brief were promising. He was sure that Windsor would be pleased. Mark Windsor wasn't actually that much older than Cliff, but his father was one of the men with his name on the building. Mark had been groomed for his spot. Where Cliff had well-loved LSAT books, Mark had lunch with the Supreme Court. Sometimes the silver spoon just made you better, Cliff supposed. When your boss was a Windsor—and the type of guy who could out argue you at every turn—it was weird to call him something normal like Mark. So, Mark became Windsor and Cliff ached for approval.

* * *

If Yahoo went through this deal, Cliff was fairly sure they'd have another Tumblr purchase on their hands. But there wasn't much he could do except ensure Adobe Flash wouldn't con them in the legal jargon of the contract. The paper he was reading could hold his tea, so Yahoo had that going for them.

The sound of something hitting the floor resounded from the front. A desk near the front meant he could chat with Katie during his rare breaks, but it also meant that he sometimes went in to deal with the crazies and the crying. A ping from his inbox, a subject less and contentless email from Katie: a crazy then. He marked his page and closed his binder.

He walks in on what looks like Ranger Smith threatening Katie. There's a sign in sheet on the floor, probably the reason Katie sent the email. The woman that Katie's dealing with is about 5'9 and has brunette hair tied in a low bun. Cliff's pretty sure he could take her if she decided to fight but she carries herself like she's seen some wild things. He's wired but that doesn't mean he's not a professional; he takes a breath.

"Hey, hey, what's going on here? Ma'am I'm going to need you to calm down." The lady is still visibly stewing, but she shuts her mouth and crosses her arms. She's still wearing her park ranger hat; Cliff almost wants to ask if he can try it on.

"Do you work here?"

"Of course." Cliff isn't sure where this is going but Katie looks less murderous, and he still has twenty minutes before his meeting. People listen to a guy in a suit, and he has a tie on and everything.

"So, you're the one suing Weinrich! How could you? Do you know how much we go through? Riley was bawling after we found the hiker and we'd spent days combing the grounds for him! I don't know where you get off, forcing a campground to go to court, but these people are clearly lying to you. I mean, I don't know how you call scaling a mountain unprepared in the winter negligence on our end! But it's clearly fraud, or libel, or, or something!" The woman looks a lot calmer after she's finished speaking. It's clear to Cliff that that isn't one of the crazies, it's just someone really passionate about their work who's been backed into a corner and lashed out. A wild animal in a uniform. Cliff tries very hard not to draw correlations between the woman and Yogi the Bear. The analogy doesn't even work that well, but he fails all the same.

"That's not how any of this works. Now, I'm sure one of our associates would love to help you but you'll need to schedule an appointment. What's the name of the person you've hired?" Key and Porter and Windsor and Sviatoslavyach and Baker and Associates only accepted the best, and they were very good. It would be fine.

"What? No, you're suing us. Some delivery guy came up to HQ and told us we'd been served by some Mr. Windsor on account of the Shaw family." It would not be fine.

Cliff's eyes darted over to Katie's. Her lips were pursed.

"Ma'am you'll need to get a lawyer, and a good one. I'll also have to ask that you leave, you legally cannot hire our firm since we're employed by your appellants." Her eyes widen at that, and Cliff has to fight not to soften his gaze. Katie is chewing on the corner of her lip off to the side; apparently, she's really broken up about this.

"What? "No, we can't afford something that would contest with" she pauses to gesture to the interior of the office, lingering on the light fixture above the waiting area, "all of this! You don't get what's at stake." Maybe it's something in the way her voice wavers despite her damndest try not to, maybe it's in the way her lips just begin to pull up, maybe it's in the way she's defending what Cliff always thought he'd be fighting for. Whatever the reason is, he gives a pointed look to Katie and lowers his voice to a harsh whisper.

"Listen, I don't know why exactly you're being sued. You gave me a little bit of info but not nearly enough to help you. You'll need to talk to someone at the Parker and Lewis building down on the 7th. Call your people and make sure you have as much documentation as possible on every way this guy ignored your warnings. Any dirt you have, you'll need. This'll be messy and you will need to be vicious. I know we will be." The entire time he's speaking, Cliff is watching the woman struggle on whether to take notes or try her luck with hitting him. Something in the middle wins out when Mark Windsor strides into the room. "Sir! I was just seeing this woman out; I deeply apologize, I wasn't watching the time!"

"Don't worry Levi, I was heading out for a quick smoke break. Join me why don't you." It wasn't a question and Windsor kept walking without seeing if Cliff was following. Katie was straightening her desk as the woman gaped. He'd worry about her later. He followed Windsor.

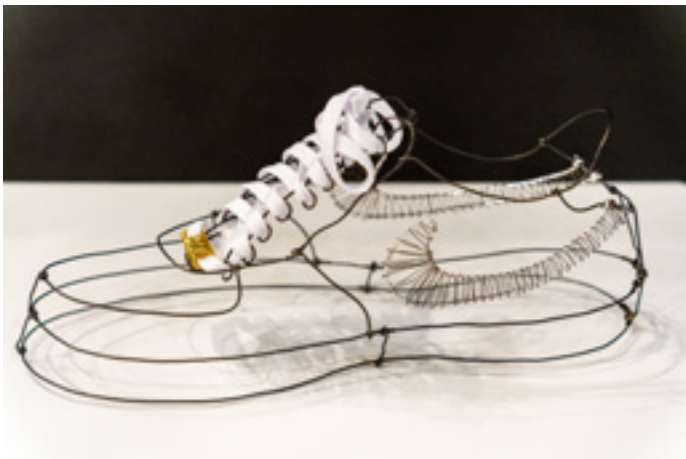
New York was busy as always, just bustling enough to warrant the cliché. Cliff caught up to him as Windsor was tapping the box of cigarettes against his palm. Treasurer Luxury Black, the gold foil was shining. Cliff pulled out a similar box: Lucky Lights Candy cigarettes. He didn't smoke but image was important.

"Need a light?" Windsor, despite the shark reputation while clad in navy blue three piece and silent watch, wasn't all that bad. Cliff liked him.

"Oh, no I'm good. Addiction runs in my family."

"You don't say?" Windsor dropped an eyebrow and smirked. "And you've decided not to partake in one of life's simple pleasures because of it?" Cliff tries his best to be disarming and scratches the back of his neck, ears burning.

"I've made it this far without ending up like the rest of my family I guess, who am I to look a gift horse in the mouth?" He doesn't have anything else to say and the men walk in silence for a stretch, a singular trail of smoke following the pair.



From Top Left:

Flow, Yelyzaveta But;
 Drawing Mannequin Study, Madison Zevallos;
 Wire Shoe, Allison Lineman;
 Desert Polyscape, Claire Millspaw

"Well, Levi, I want to cut to the chase. I think you have something. I really, really do. Put in the time and I think you could find your name amongst Key and Baker." Cliff preened under the praise. The words were so simple, but Mr. Windsor had a certain way of striking to Cliff's core and shining a light. "I have a project for you, I want you to take on a case with me." Cliff does not gasp; he is not an undergrad anymore and likes to think he has some composure in him yet. If the candy cigarette lies in two pieces in his mouth from when his jaw moved without his volition, well that's just coincidence.

"Sir! This is an honor, what case?"

"It's a new one, I've been working out a negligence suit against some small campground." Cliff's heart quickly comes down from whatever lofty roost it had found. "Should be pretty cut and dry, but there's some liability potential that I think you could get a wrap on. I really enjoyed your work on the Grinly merger." Cliff's fighting the buzzy feeling in his lungs. It's not mixing well with the non-Newtonian fluid currently being made in his stomach.

"I, I'm just not sure what to say, sir."

"You don't have to say anything, just don't look a gift horse in the mouth, eh? Grab a drink with the bullpen or something. You've done good work." They've made their round of the building and Windsor glides inside the doors. All the grace of someone whose name is on the building. Cliff passes Katie without fanfare as she looks busy rifling through drawers. Before he registers passing the water cooler, Cliff Lehvene is back at his desk, and everything is supposed to be great. He's made it, he's in the process of making it, it's being made right now. All he has to do is crush his childhood dream.

Not many were actually able to make it to drinks. Hazard of the trade, Cliff supposed. Everyone else was busy 'making it' just like he was. A few of his coworkers from the bullpen were throwing darts in the back of the bar and Katie was talking to the bartender like her life depended on it. He wouldn't be surprised if Katie went home with her number, she was good like that. A busy Katie meant that he was mostly alone, nursing a Shirley temple like someone who deserved to be sad.

He'd be meeting with Mr. Windsor again in the morning, but this time with the team, everyone else involved in the case. If he could get his sh*t together, he'd be one step closer to Lehvene and Associates. One positive of avoiding alcohol to keep from becoming a familial cautionary tale: he got to deal with all of this with a clear head. One negative: he had a clear head when dealing with all of this. He was free to stew. Except his stew wouldn't have any vodka to release the natural flavors in the seasonal vegetables.

Another positive: he got a free maraschino cherry. The positives in preserving his values won, but only barely. Cliff finishes his drink and waves goodbye to his friends. Katie grins at him and he flashes her a thumbs up. Ms. Bartender has a lavender tattoo, he likes her odds.

The sky is clear as Cliff heads for home, and the city is moving as per usual. He stands when he gets to the bus stop to leave the seat for someone who needs it more. There's only one woman sitting at the moment, so it would probably be fine to sit, but better to be safe.

He almost doesn't recognize her without the hat, but it's the same halfway crazy woman from earlier today. She's reading a dog-eared collection of papers and Cliff can guess what's running through her mind. He's not supposed to, but he'll be seeing the files in the morning anyways. He could take this time to catch up on the work he probably still has to do. Curiosity wins. Cliff readjusts so he can better read over her shoulder.

The forest is in quite the bind. This Shaw family has money. He already guessed as much by their choice of law firm, but he can tell by the brief that they are a mistake to be trifled with. Their son, some twenty something trust fund Cliff is assuming, was tenting in a field when something got him. The papers aren't clear on what got him, but it wasn't pretty. Junior p*ssed someone off it looks like. Cliff squints and rereads the last few lines, something's not right.

"Didn't you say that he died scaling a mountain edge?" The woman jumps forward about four feet. She's obviously had some form of martial arts training, but Cliff can't place it. Nothing traditional from the way she settles in her stance but taps her forward toe. Cliff realizes he probably should've been more tactful when he sees the knife that's materialized in her hands. She's holding the blade along her forearm, but Cliff doesn't have any holes yet, so he figures that everything is fine. "F*ck, sorry. I'm Cliff, you were in my, uh office earlier."

"No, no, you're fine. I'm not quite used to being back in the city, I guess. I'm Janet. What did you say just now? About my case." Cliff debates not telling her, but he won't formally sign any paperwork until tomorrow so he's not breaking the law yet. Janet is still holding the knife.

"When you came around this morning, you mentioned that someone died scaling a cliff. This says that he died camping in a field. Semantics tend to be pretty important for the law, you guys might have a case yet."

Janet's eyes widen and she starts talking at approximately a mile a minute. Cliff helps as best he can, but he truthfully doesn't have enough information. He wasn't wrong though; with this mistake they do have the beginnings of a chance. Key and Porter and Windsor and Sviatoslavyach and Baker and Associates only accept the best, but even they can't fare well with a family that's lying to save face. If the Shaw's keep this up, they'll lose their case.

"Cliff, you have to help us. I talked to those Parker and Lewis guys, and they practically laughed me out of the building. Weinrich can't fight this alone. You know we're right, show 'em you still have morals up in your shiny glass house."

"You know, I always wanted to do environmental law. Ever since I was little. I even went as a park ranger for my third grade Halloween costume," Cliff feels each syllable on his tongue. It doesn't seem like it's fully cooperating with him, "but I can't."

Cliff turns and hails a cab. He didn't feel like taking a bus with the woman he was going to screw over the next morning.

* * *

It's a long night ahead of him when he gets home and he's thirty dollars poorer for the cowardice of the cab ride. He checks his phone and there are three texts. One from Katie: it's an incomprehensible string of emojis and an 'I love you!' buried somewhere in the slew. The rest are from a random number and read: 'Don't be a coward, Cliff. You want this to follow you?' It's closely followed with: 'That came out a lot heavier than I intended, I'm not blackmailing you or anything. Don't get weird about this.' Is this Janet? The now full crazy woman from earlier? How did she get his number? Cliff sends back a hurried reply.

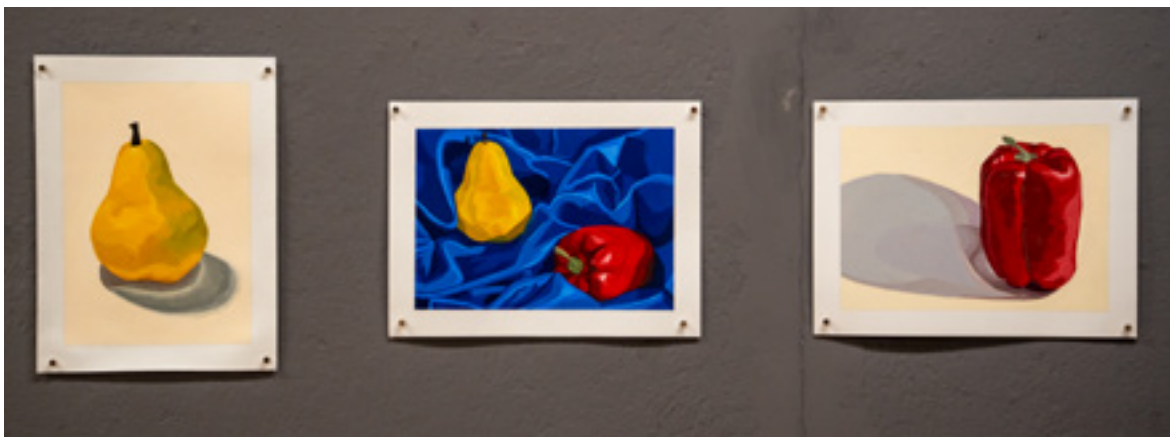
She responds way too quickly. 'This is Janet with the forest suit. I got your number off some flash drive I stole at your office. A random excel sheet had like, everyone's info on it.' Cliff blocks her. He does not need this right now. He can't even call Katie and talk it all out.

He gets ready for bed, but everything seems to be an ordeal. A glass of water and he can't stop thinking about what he'll have to do. Throwing on pajamas and brushing his teeth and the guilt is weighing in his mind. Flossing and Katie is clucking her tongue in disappointment but she's still in his daily life. Nighttime meds and the fans turned on and he can still practically hear devastated little Cliff. A proud Mr. Windsor sits in an unoccupied corner. His suit is crisp and he's smug, absolutely fine with snuffing some little patch of nature to seize a paycheck. The Windsor name is already on the building, he could've turned the case down, taken the moral highroad. He's already made it; he doesn't need this like Cliff does.

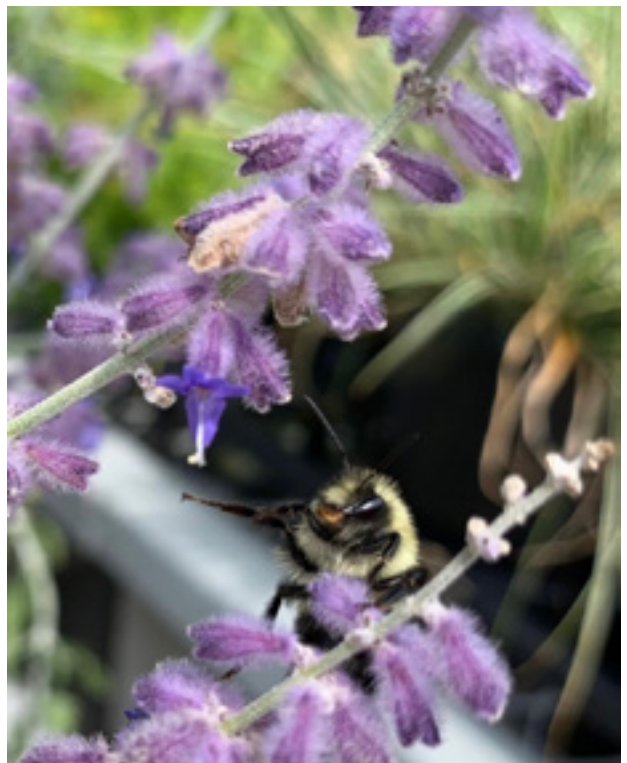
Cliff is shuffling through his memory catalogue with a mission. Mr. Windsor has never complimented him on his morals. Good jobs and late hours and work ethic and nothing of substance. Cliff wipes his hand over his face. One more night and he's one step closer to making it. Whatever that even means at this point. He has a sh*tty mattress and a sh*ttier apartment. What's he protecting?

There's a chance to do something good. Cliff will make it. And he'll do it on his terms. Cliff is sure his friends will be in his corner. He hated those glass walls anyways. Cliff unblocks Janet and something like thirty texts come through all at once. He forgoes reading them to send one message back.

'Weinrich has a sliver of a shot, we'll need to get started immediately. I'll be your lawyer.'



Pepper and Pear
Gillian Samul



From Top Left:

Found II, Samantha Montoro,
Composition 14, Jenna Lutz;
In the Forest of Bamboo, Aiyana Sherwood;
Nature Study, Aliya Therrien

I f*ckin hate coffee

Eli Louis

I hate drinking coffee, coffee tastes like sh*t, it's disgusting that's why, it is terrible and bitter and it sucks, coffee tastes like the morning news mixed with dirt, and you don't f*ckin like it either, you just think you do.

I love smelling coffee, the thick sharp body of the smell, aromatic swells so powerful they follow you into the next room.

I love seeing coffee, It needs punished, it needs to be smashed, ground, turned to dust, turned into a perfectly round, perfectly black, bitter mirror.

I can hear the blade blasting the beans apart like bricks through glass, the coffee shop whispers to me, but I scream back.

I hate the taste.

I romanticize the warm mug in my hand, almost too hot, it hurts but I f*cking earned it, deserved it, my eyes water and my ears are cold.

I separate the art from the artist, slaves to our tasteless greed, we can't see them, we don't hear them cry for help.

We don't feel their pain, they work off of steam and dreams, hope and love, but I don't see them, I can't hear them, and I can't feel them

I can't imagine celebrating my morning with poison, a superficial grasp for drive, the same as I can't imagine celebrating my night with my clandestine infatuation with p*rn; but I do.

I try to hide it behind a mask, I drown my coffee, I want it to die, I watch the color fade and I plead it will be sweet enough for me.

I choose the happy ending but the happy ending never chooses me; I will always stay the same, bitter and oxymoronically passionate.

God I f*ckin hate coffee.

Tallest Moon, Twisting Grief

Corinne Voelker

I walk along a tar-chipped road
the clouds trace shadows o'er abodes
Blue sky resembles glum Van Gogh
within his canvas soft gusts blow.

Through streets of murky hues, I traipse,
hills roll away: pose scenes of grace
Weave through wandering sloping streets
center of town: church steeple creaks

Noise dour, sudden, perturbs my thought
eyes flit around for they are fraught,
Step catches exposed root in lane
rush toward brown ground; I watch in vain
To earth I fall from one foul pace--

From city floor a gaudy sight--
Of whelming splendor, silver bright

Vision beholds a flaxen moon
a *Starry Night* marked by star runes

Heart beats crimson in cold landscape
pick myself up; become a shape
A spire twisting, tall and dark
now town below: a painter's marque

Eyes level with the sweeping sky
Look out upon heaven whereby
Artist renders distress and grief
And captures solace, sapphire relief.

Surreal Self-Portrait

Allison Lineman



Digital Collage

One Man Walking

Marley Ramon

They don't tell you

about the way gunsmoke lingers

like intrusive thought

"I can" a chant to ringing ears

I've done it before

I survived but

now everything is real

You've let loose exactly one round

one bullet crosses field and one casing crosses field of vision

Both have hit the ground

You've yet to pull the trigger again

even echoes ceased

You knew the mechanics but not the jerk

not the way force would tear through muscle

reverberate bone

Not the way you'd still feel it

They don't tell you

you'll still smell the car crash months later

No one warns you

about the plate dropping, glass shattering, dinner ruining

unfocused eyes

screech of tires

They don't help you the first time back on top of the pedal

and they don't tell you

that you'll never hear that song the same again

I want to scream

holler and drown out the slew

Why wasn't I told

My body is still, my arm steady, my finger ready

I do not shoot

I know I can but my chamber's no lighter

Actions are forever but

recoil is now and

still I hesitate

They don't tell you

how the only way is through

But I will

You have to keep going and you have to keep moving

the gun's not going to fire itself and

no one will drive you to work every morning

The sun bores down

the glint of the hammer hitting right in your eye

Both eyes open just like they taught you

They never told you

about the second time you shoot a gun

but the advice holds strong and

your resolve holds stronger

Strength of will against a barrel

against wheel, pedal, and piston

Only one wins

Bang

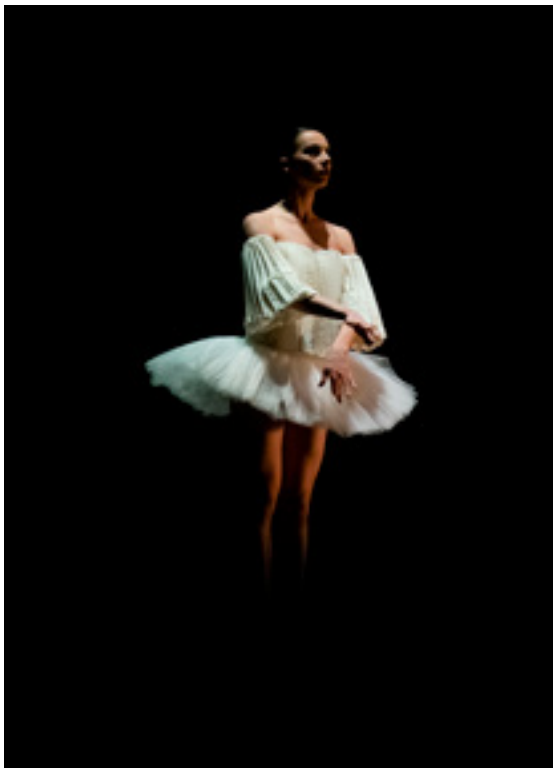
The Floor is Figure
Amanda Mcclain



Sleepover Poem

Ashley Barletta

darling,
you are a shield of stars, sending me
your light
while I sleep.
my head is a big black cloud, shedding
its dust
on your pillow.
when it is 3 a.m.
my eyes fling open
and my torso tightens
below your arm.



Dancer in the Night
Maria Hanson

I'm dizzy from exhaustion
as your hand begins moving
up my leg,
my hip,
my rib
like the bones were there
for you to dig up all along

and when morning comes
to ruin our escape
from every part of life
but each other,
fresh light seeps through your window blinds
while we try to untangle the sheets from our legs
so you can cover me again
in yourself,
a shield of stars
shining even amongst the sun

The Eden Equivocation

Marley Ramon

I haven't been human for a very long time; not for most of my lives. But for a brief period in the middle: I was. This was before the forest, before the bear, before Genesis, before everything. This story isn't about Gen, it's about my genesis. This is how it all came together.

Hearing this, you might think I'm running from something. I like to consider it running to something.

* * *

It's not a very original beginning, but it's mine all the same. I think my parents were running to something too, I'm not sure and I don't have their reasons. It led me to where I was, and Mrs. Rickan had a café that needed waiting. My height let me play up my age and I threw on an apron as soon as they stopped missing me at school. I sure as hell wasn't picking up the truancy calls. They stopped calling about the same time that Rickan found out how old I really was. CPS came sniffing around my usual haunts and Juniper Eden disappeared.

By that point I was a little better at lying and had more years to work with. Hit Bell Buckle diner sometime in '56. I had a few years of waitressing on my belt and bouncy blonde curls to back me up. The owner was a good fifties man with a wife and kids and a white picket fence. Never mind his eye for the waitresses. The job was mine when I walked in the door, and limbs a little too long kept a wandering eye a careful distance.

Chrome ridged bar seats and bright red booths, that's the backdrop to the first time I met Lottie. She wore the uniform better than I did, black and teal working with her brown hair instead of against it, and a pink inked pen tucked itself in her pocket. She was the only thing worth remembering about that day, but my thoughts can't help but freeze that picture. Everything came with it. That memory of a new girl tucked up behind the specials board—grilled cheese with bacon or chicken fried chicken—tying her apron like she was proud of this place. There was a whiff of blackberry pie in the air, but that I only remember because we squirreled some away that week. There's a lot I only remember because of Lottie, a plethora of information I have nothing to do with now.

What can I do with her favorite flavor of ice cream or the correct number of sugars in a warm mug? Where do I put it; how do I get rid of it? I don't get to unlearn any of it, so you're coming out of this with something useless too. Maybe it'll teach you not to talk to strangers. Cherry Garcia and fried catfish; something I wormed on the specials board as often as I could.

Over the months I got pretty good at waiting tables. I could memorize menu changes and every item was my favorite if you looked like you tipped well. While I was a good waitress, I was never a natural like Lottie was. I figured out what to say and how to say it. What patrons to joke with and who to come with the pot and keep pouring. I had my own regulars and my own employee of the month plaque. But where I was good, Lottie was great.

She starched her pleats and dotted her i's with hearts and the people loved her. I figured out what to say but she knew. I don't even think she was trying, but Lottie loved a crowd and they loved to watch her go. Lottie was still in high school at the time, figuring out essays and sewing and skills I'd never needed or knew to want. She was working part time to help out her brother. He was supposedly some hotshot numbers guy that worked taxes like a paddle ball. I wasn't sure I believed her, but they had a house to themselves, and I was around enough to see his late nights. Maybe the guy really was something special, the gene pool made sense.

Technically, they didn't have the house all to themselves. Their pa was serving in the military and sending money back, ma was high off her *ss with something white and prescription. But pa didn't come back often, and ma didn't come down often. Lottie and her brother were all each other needed. They were doing alright for themselves. And who am I to judge as the sap building grooves on their couch.

The Dowager household was the first real space I stayed at for any particular amount of time; I wasn't counting all those nights I stole away in the Rickan corner booth. Military money bought the house and kept the lights on, but Lottie and Tom made it a home.

Part of the reason I remember the house like I do is the parallels I could draw between it and Lottie. She was the interior decorator of the two Dowager siblings and made the house her own. Soft lighting and more color than was probably socially acceptable, I spent hours half dozing. That's how I remember her: soft and colorful. And comfortable. I'm not good with words, but you have to be able to imagine that a kid living on streets, and stowing away in cafes and bookstores wasn't able to let their guard down easy. Lottie did that to a person.

Her brother didn't like me at first. Thought I was a street rat, I think he could smell the lack of algebra on me. Numbers guy remember. Probably would've kicked me out after the first week but Lottie insisted. Big brown doe eyes and a ribbon in her hair; Lottie got what she insisted on. I stayed.

I don't think Tommy would've been as okay with me as he was if I was like her though. I was quiet, you had to be in my position. Oh, don't give me that look. This isn't self-denigrating, I was observant and quick too, but I was quiet first. Lottie was a spark. A force of nature. Nothing like thunder or Earth shakes but something like summer rain on a tin roof. A rustle through the grass that you have to stop and give the time of day. Wind chimes you pause your work to try and follow. And that was just Lottie. Performing Lottie was another story.

Gallant was small. Simple and quiet and a place to lay low and raise some kids, but Lottie wasn't any of those things, and she wanted Nashville lights. When she weaseled my story out, plying me one day after the dinner rush with grasshopper shakes and low lighting. The diner had these neon lines running through the alcoves and nights shown pink, blue, and green; something like Alaskans must see when they're lucky like me. I doubted those Alaskans had a Lottie, someone to catch reflections of like a desperate tomeat. Lottie insisted, and I think you know what happened.

I folded like a book page and told her everything from the glamorous life of Juniper Eden. And she hated some parts: cursed my parents and threatened God. But I could tell she liked some parts. I'd been to three states, seen rivers and flowers and trains and everything else. I'd seen different people and nationalities she'd only heard about in textbooks. Catching a fiddler late downtown, at that moment, Lottie knew what she wanted. I don't think she wanted to be there with me either. She wanted to be making music, living the life, whether I went with was immaterial.

I wanted to believe I'd found a home in Gallant, one with Lottie, and the diner, and even family dinners with Tommy, but I hadn't. I still felt something tug my bones. And Lottie would always choose music. She had something; I'd heard her play. A few quick strokes of a hand me down guitar and she had you like a siren. Her voice like rustling fields and thrumming rain held you. She had that bluegrass sound. I wanted to be mad. Wanted to throw wedding china and take her songbook to one of the burners that worked in Bell Buckle, but her voice got started and that was that. Sweet burn like whiskey we weren't supposed to have and a tight burn coiling in your gut that you earned by choking it down.

Maybe I was just a sad drunk, but I could see Lottie under those lights. Shining marquis reflecting like neon diner riff raff. I'd never see the Alaskan lights in those eyes, and I'd never hold her to the sound of a violinist too passionate to trade stringed wood for a hot meal.

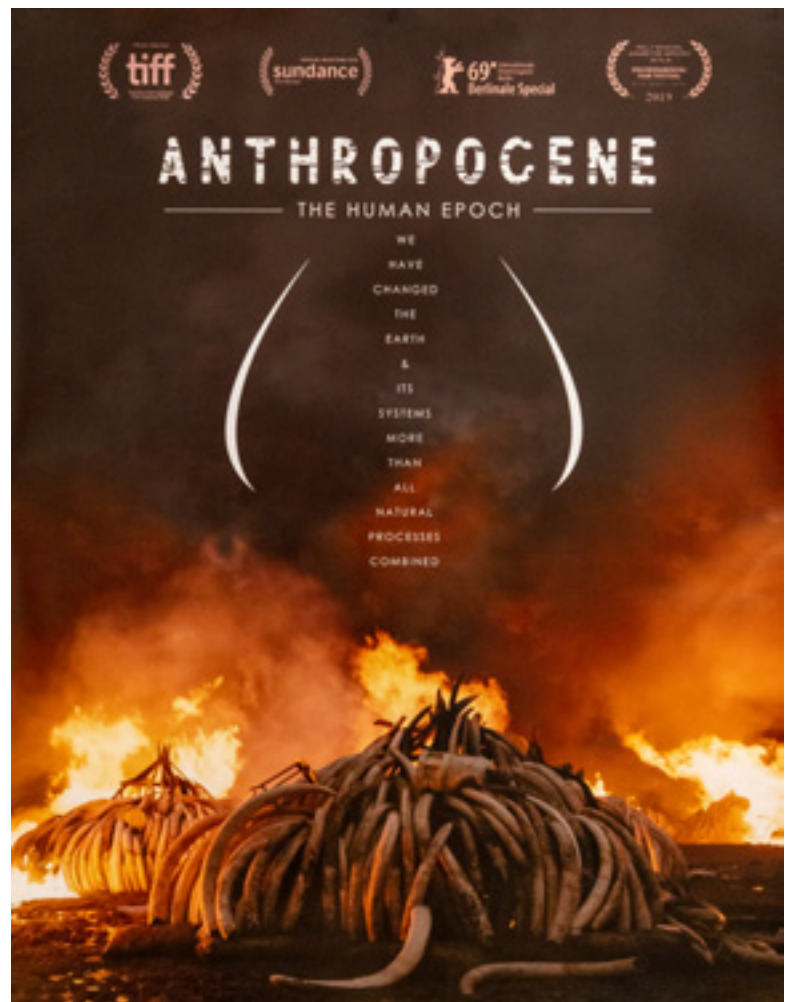
I'd always be second to Lottie's songs. So, I left, searching for someone that would choose me. In whatever direction that infernal canary pulled in my rib cage.

* * *

"You left."

Don spoke but I didn't feel like it dignified a response. I was sitting on a Greyhound bus without a ticket and spilling my life story to a prodding stranger. If he wanted me to talk, he could say something better, he was the one not content to mind his business. Don was a boy about my age, but he looked strong enough to warrant being called a man. Pressed shirt and pants with a knife in the pocket, this is probably what the Dowager old man looked like just after joining the force. Although the mustache and hair were probably out of regulation.

He seems like he's trying to get me to break the silence, it is not a fight that he's winning. Strong brow bone and that solid type strength probably gets people to listen to him wherever he's used to. But he's not from where I'm from and only those wiry skinny guys can unsettle me in any meaningful way. He'd need to un-focus his eyes a bit more, pick at more skin, but he doesn't and I'm heading towards the beach whether we speak or not.



From Top Left:

Untitled, Gabrielle Spurlock;
Double Dip, Ashleigh Merry;
Franken Ear, Hannah Wittenburg;
Anthropocene, Shane Fetzner

"What's Lottie doing now? Sounds like a chunk of time that you've been away."

"How should I know?" I give him a disinterested cop out of an answer, but his brows go up and make his eyes look even bigger. He acts all austere, but he's probably too idealistic for his own good. I can tell already.

"You've surely spoken since?"

"Nope," I pop the p, "If I get any updates, it'll be because I see her name in the marquis or because I recognize a lyric on the radio." I think he's taken this as some hope because he softens just a bit.

"You'll keep an eye out then, I'm sure you'll find each other again," Don says warmly. I don't think he's understanding. I. Left. Her. I didn't lose her, and I don't need to find her. I walked out of Dowager and turned in my apron. She probably still worked the Bell Buckle counters.

"Sure thing, Don. It'll happen by the grace of God." I tapped out a melody on the seat in front of me. Not knowing any piano but needing to do something with my hands.

"And?"

"And? And, what? My chapter with Lottie is over."

"So, what are the next chapters? What else goes on in the glamorous life of Juniper Eden, how do you end up on a bus with two bags heading from Maine to Florida?" Don asks so earnestly; I almost feel a bit rude for being so closed off. But there's more to the story, and I can give him what he wants now.

"The next house isn't all that interesting, but it's a chapter in its own right." I clear my throat and get ready to relive my apartment in Georgia.

* * *

The one perk to not having any ties is the efficiency one has in hitting brick. Before Gallant, I'd considered myself a ghost, drifting from one hidey hole to another. But I hadn't lost any of those skills to Lottie's sugar sweet drawl or Tom's cold cut calculations. I packed my bag, ditched the apron, and stole a container of flour and a loaf of bread. I took half the tips too; the remainder of the jar would make it into book for pressing and eventually Lottie's guitar case. A thick ticket outta here. If I did it again, I'd've kept the dress. You never know when notice-me-not miscreant needs to become pretty-enough-to-let-me-stay doll face.

A hop, skip, and a running grab of a train handrail and I was in Georgia. It's nothing like the pictures you know, train car running isn't glamorous. To get on you have to fully launch yourself at a moving train—the caboose so you don't die if you fail—and hope you scuff your way to a splintered floor or rusty pipe. And you won't make it the first time. Or the second. You'll doubt and slam your chin but nothing else and bust your lip and feel rail tie like braces. You'll work up the courage to try again but not find purchase and slide right back off, *ss hitting loose stones on the track. Or you'll get your hands on it, but hit a nerve in your knee so hard you let go outta shock. Now, you're dirty, and bloody, and your hands are ripped raw, and wood filled, and you're still no closer to anywhere new.

But you can't go home and what are you going to do? Walk to Connecticut? A train'll get you somewhere fast and right now you're still in f*cking Tennessee. Wait for the next train and stand like a matador facing down a bull. Some descendent of Conquistadores like in your novels that still has the need to stare at death in every red blood cell. Your lack of ticket a waving red cape, your bull approaches. Stamp your feet and bare your teeth. Trains are a lot longer than the movies too. Be patient. The last car is running rails like a roadrunner after a lizard. It's crossing your path and that's just the luck you need. Jump

Obviously, I made it on that train. Panting and dirty, I punched the train and got a bloody knuckle for my anger. All that was left was to wait until I was somewhere else. Drinking from a thermos and eating smashed bread that almost looked like the monkey bread Lottie loved. Tell yourself not to think about Lottie. Fail. Now you're train hopping like a real-life transient Don, rejoice.

Eventually, my free ride went past marshes and lakes and hit something close to a city. I hit the ground rolling to avoid any unwanted visitors. I was already dirty, so it wasn't so hard to hit the ground. Decidedly, hitting the ground at a destination doesn't sting as bad as hitting the same ground you started on. I said as bad for a reason, you look like the bus rider type. Stay that way.

'Somewhere' ended up being Atlanta, Georgia. Less bluegrass, more jazz. What it lacked in small town hospitality, it more than made up for in places to fade into the metal works. Got some other job waiting. Atlanta was a lot less white than Gallant, but I let Georgia sun kiss my skin and blended in a little better. I have to thank the parents for what little they did give me.

Got another job waiting at a small family sit-down. I don't remember the name and I don't remember the people. I wasn't there for that. What little money I scraped together earned me a hole in the wall in the projects. A tiny little thing with a scalding water pipe running through it and a couch I found on the street. Figured the fleas would be dead from the cold nights and figured I'd care less about fleas when my back didn't ache. I hauled the couch in like a grizzled sea captain hauling a crab basket on deck. I experienced the same amount of pride.

What did stick in my head was the sound my god-awful icebox would make. I was supposed to feel grateful that I got one at all, but every sound it made drove me closer to destruction of property.

Every night. It would screech and hiss. Whirring and clanking. I'd find it popped open the next morning. I'd walk past it at four am on my way to devil a hell's worth of eggs and the fridge would be open. My apartment would be freezing, and the damn thing would clank until I shut it. Multiple times a week I'd find myself readying by the cool light of a beat-up refrigerator, whatever paltry leftovers I'd scrapped together from the restaurant casting long shadows against the walls.

I'd swear my milk was going missing, but I never saw rats or anything. It would whir and clank and reset its cycle; I'd whip a shoe like a baseball bat and feel like Ruth without the pitcher. Just my couch and I silhouetted by a single bulb.

My heart still tugged for something. Something I didn't find in the Spanish moss or ghost stories. It hurt on the warm nights and ached under the warm yellow streetlamps. Georgia was known for their ghost stories and while I fit in, I couldn't lose any of mine here.

There's a lot I didn't bother to remember about my time in Atlanta, but the night I left, there wasn't any noise. I got back from a restaurant birthday party and my apartment was silent. I spent the party sipping whiskey and I've always been a sappy drunk. I waited for my windchimes, my cool rain, my rustling fields, the first few notes of a bluegrass song, but all I got was an untuned sax and my own thoughts.

Waiting didn't feel the same without my partner. I didn't know anyone here. No grasshoppers or hours spent explicitly not cleaning. I thought I wanted to be alone, but my one bedroom was too big, and my couch didn't have a space for me worn in and my coworkers all kept their heads down. Everyone was quiet. I got home and the house was silent. Just my face reflected in a glass bowl of gelatin, coldly lit from the fridge. No whirring, no guitar, no calculator clacks.

I didn't stay in Atlanta long enough to wear any grooves this time.

* * *

Don's looking at me with a little bit of a smug look. One that looks a little bit too much like I told you so, a look he hasn't earned since he hasn't said anything, and I've spoken for ninety percent of our relationship.

"I didn't go back to Tennessee if that's what you're thinking. Georgia wasn't some light bulb that told me to go back. Lottie chose her path. She chose music and I've respected that."

"If it wasn't back, where did you go?"

"On to my next chapter I suppose. I'd had enough of warm nights and whiskey. Figured I'd hit somewhere colder and try my luck in the North." Don didn't say anything, but he didn't need to. I could sense an impassioned lecture, but the past was the past and whatever our reasons: we were leaving New York together.

* * *

I left the couch in the apartment, whoever ended up in the sh*thole next could probably use it. Snuck aboard a ship with my duffle and the rations I scrounged from the apartment. The fridge was back to its rumble, and I shut my door a final time with a fisherman's satisfaction; the same way I opened it to a couch.

In some ways, stowing aboard a ship is much easier than jumping a train. I didn't get nearly as dirty, and there was zero blood. In hindsight, I got awfully close to death and food is not as easy to scrounge on a boat. I resorted to stealing from the crew and raiding the pantry and trash cans. Had I hopped on any less manned ship or even a slightly longer voyage, I'd probably have gotten scurvy. I could've ended up in a foreign country with a faulty tongue and suspicious lack of papers. Thankfully, none of those things happened.

When the crew were unloading and I finally got to stumble off the boat, I was ravenous but still alive. New York was warm in the summers, and I was initially worried that I hadn't committed to my northern attempt; but winter came early and hard. Another flaw I found only in hindsight: I was nowhere prepared for winter weather. The shirt I called a jacket was a flannel stolen from one of Tom's friends. My previous job left me with some money to rub together but nothing much. If someone saw my Dicken's book, they'd be pleased but not openly weeping. A coat was out of budget, I'd tough it out.

There's always work for a pretty face, so I tied my hair up, took a sink bath in some coffeeshop, and looked sullen while batting my eyelashes. I got by without the doe eyed help, and soon I had another apron to wear. I already waited tables and worked a register, coffee came easy. There was the matter of memorizing all the drinks but spite me enough and I can work through it.

That canary wasn't quiet yet, but I wasn't settled either, so I ignored it. Got myself a new apartment with a silent fridge, I was working on a couch or even a bed. The crisp autumn air brought fresh confidence and a blanket of security. Watching my breath in the mornings made the entire experience feel divorced from my path. A warm mug seeping warmth in my hands finally made sense and there weren't any tin roofs or fields to rub memories back through my ears. New alcohol, new music, new me.

Winter kicked autumn out the door like a one-night stand asking for breakfast. I wore two shirts and tied my apron tight around my frame like stretching canvas. This worked for about a week until there was frost on the ground and snow on my heels. This might make me sound like a silly southerner, but I had no idea you could see snowflakes. I'd seen snow but you could see the actual crystal structure, a different pattern on each one. The novelty kept me distracted enough to feel warm for another precious few days.

I staved off the cold a little longer by spiking my coffee. Vodka was a magic drink and like the cold, I liked it because it was new. It still burned going down but in a smooth medical way. Nothing like the rasp of whiskey, vodka moved like oil slick through piping. Heat didn't coil, it carried a weight; like a stone sitting on my pelvis. I carried it like a fireplace and saved for a good coat.

Buying a coat meant something mighty special to me, I think. I was staying, I was carving a space for myself, chipping away at marble instead of digging a grave. There was a difference in how I was going about this one. My huffs licked like dragon's breath. There was something humorous settling in. A canary chirping instead of calling. A coat was an investment I was making in New York, in myself.

I never actually ended up buying a coat. I was running late for work and ran to the shop after showering. Wet curls sticking to my shirt and pressing flat to my back. This late in the year meant they had frozen by the time I'd made it in. Pathetic little thing I was, hair half sticking sideways, the tiniest stalactites on my eyelashes, and shivering like a dog. I waved to Santiago, motioning that I was heading to the back. He gives me a look of disgust and gestures to the office. Another hand signal for later, working in hospitality practically made me bilingual.

I rang my hair out and threw it into a bun. My outer shirt was damp, but I peeled it off to dry for later. The heat of the room would help with the rest. At the front of shop, Santiago and I moved like a well-oiled machine, pieces grooved together for maximum efficiency. Sailfin slipping wave to wave without ever colliding, drinks flew out to patrons. He took the majority of the orders while I pressed grounds and steamed milk. I set out my milk batches next to various sizes of cups containing espresso. One constant—even in New York—I just didn't seem able to produce art. The coffee tasted great but anyone who wanted their leaf or dove was out of luck; they were lucky when the latte foam was even when I poured.



From Top Left:

Universe X, Annie Markel;
Window, Maria Hanson;
Tea Canister, Hannah Duckett;
Phantasia, Yelyzaveta But

Santiago never had such problems, I just attracted artist types I suppose. As such, I made the espresso and got everything ready, and he filled in that little bit of love. His favorites got pictures sprinkled from cinnamon on top of their foam. Sometimes he could be convinced to do the same for my favorites too. I was awfully good at convincing from the looks of our tip jar.

What we had was simple and elegant. A full-bodied friendship like French press in the proper ceramic. When the rush ended at nine and everyone had trickled out for the workday and off day errands, I finally got to see what Santiago wanted to show me in the office.

In a simple yellow bag, he'd carefully folded a black coat. I cried and threw myself at him. Not only had he given me something I'd desperately needed, but he'd freed up all the money I'd saved up for it. Buying a coat for me meant that I now had more money than I'd ever held in my life, shoved in a Dicken's book with no clear purpose. I could do whatever I wanted with it. There wasn't anything I necessarily needed at the moment, but for the first time, I had savings. I had more than just my duffle and a job I lied about my age to get. Santiago hoisted a weight off my shoulders I didn't know I had.

In the coming weeks I lived in that coat. The heating wasn't great at my place anyways, so the coat was double handy. The snowplows were able to make headway after three days completely dry and it looked like I might survive winter. See the first flowers after the thaw without pushing daisies myself.

I grew closer with Santiago, and it reminded me of Lottie at least once a day. It didn't hurt to swallow like it did in Georgia. Some days were harder than others, but I made jokes, shared Cherry Garcia with Santi, and stayed late absolutely not cleaning. I could listen to guitar again. Street performers gave me the childlike giddy feeling that they were meant to. Lottie's name was said with nostalgia instead of rue. I wasn't drifting like Atlanta me was. I wasn't in a headspace that would hop on a boat with no food packed. I was sharp again, once again seeing the world in all its colors. I knew people from my morning commute and talked to all my grocers. People knew me. I was wearing my grooves finally.

But I'm on this bus, aren't I? It had to come down eventually. Spring meant I wasn't sewn into the coat, but I still brought it out on cooler days. Wearing it made me feel loved and I wasn't afraid to show it off. When I got to work, I matched Santiago. He wore a deep black arm band, the same shade as my coat. It even looked like a similar material. I knew what this meant, Santi should've skipped the middleman and cut it straight from my left breast pocket.

I tried to make him see reason. Too many officers frequented our little shop, he could not pull these shenanigans. A Mexican American did not need the attention that draft dodgers were getting right now. Didn't he have any sense? And like someone who hadn't spent their life hopping towns, I guess he didn't. None of the dirty looks swayed him. Neither did our empty tip jar. It's not like this was a popular war, but we all knew a faux pas when we saw one.

Santi had made up his mind. Empathetic idiot with no sense of self-preservation wore the arm band every hour of every day. Inside and out, I never saw him without it. I spent weeks worrying holes through my cheeks, Santi wouldn't budge.

I came to a head when some rookie cop came in before his shift. About half past eight, the shop was slammed. He was young looking, maybe graduated the academy that year if I had to guess. I certainly hadn't seen him around. A buzz cut and a sharp grin that said he had something to prove. A Mexican and a mixed woman walk into a coffee shop and see this guy. They serve him. Happy ending. I knew how it went; I thought Santi did too.

I grabbed the register from Santi to try and pump the brakes. The officer asked me what a – like him was doing working someplace nice like this. I'd lived in Texas and Georgia and a host of other southern states. I heard my share of slurs, I read the man's total bumped up a few dollars and crossed my fingers that Santi hadn't heard. Fresh cut over here can't take a hint, pointing out the arm band and calling my friend a coward. I'm firm in my attempts to shut him up. Santi's much more effective when his closed fist slams into the officer.

His eyes widen deliciously as his lower jaw moves until it pops. It'll hurt in the morning. God, it feels nice to witness but I'm already running damage control. Santiago is an idiot. The action is called in and another car pulls up to the shop. Two more cops enter and a few of our regulars make an Irish exit: smart men. Three uniforms stood before the counter, one of their faces bruised and two others with a hand on their holster in a way that's clearly a threat. I looked to Santi, casting him a pleading look. In the silent way we'd come to read each other, I begged him to not do anything stupid.

The two officers are rude as expected. They ask him what the band is for. I know what they're looking for. Santi knows. They know their end goal. I've never been religious but I'm praying now, and I think of the tall glass candle in Santiago's windowsill. I don't know what I'm supposed to tell the Virgin Mary, but I'm asking nicely. One of the officers pushes Santi and he stumbles back a bit. There's more about the war. Not big fans of Vietnam.

Santiago's lip is curling, and I just need him to have enough wherewithal to not spit at a police officer.

He has less wherewithal than I credited him for.

When he reaches a hand behind his back and into his pocket, two of the officers go for their baton. Santi isn't reaching for a weapon. He pulls out a draft card. I remember my mouth falling open and I think I call out. Santi and I lock eyes and my glassy vision isn't enough to stop what I know he's about to do.

The door that the policemen left open has let the air in. It's freezing and I'm going to watch my best friend go to prison or worse. My shadow silhouettes itself on his skin; he's all I can see as his hands come together at just about my shadow's neck. There aren't any thoughts in my head, just whirring and clanking and something's disconnected. Santiago pulls the card into two clean pieces.

Santiago leaves with the policemen having made his choice. I stayed in the spot I was standing when it all went down and whatever customers weren't able to leave before are gone now. I don't bother to clean anything or wash any of the dishes. There's a note for the owner on the counter. Locking the doors, I don't look back.

I really did think that that was it. I tried it Don, I did. Santiago made his choice, and I made mine. I left New York that day. You never really unlearn how to put your life into a duffle.

* * *

The window view has long since changed from brown to green, tall trees climbing far above the greyhound.

"And now I'm here. You got through all the chapters, congrats." It's a fresh wound. I almost want to curl up into a ball just telling it, put myself into a duffle and get punted into the nearest mailbox. "I'm going to the beach next. A real beach, not like Savannah. Somewhere there won't be any regulars." I won't need a jacket and there won't be any bluegrass and I won't make the same damn mistake all over again. Maybe I'll just keep going until my canary gives the all clear.

"You're running again."

"What do you expect me to do? I tried! I tried a lot! I begged. I begged and my friend chose making some f*cking point over his freedom. Over the shop," 'over me' goes unsaid. Don hears it anyway.

"Juniper stop letting everything ride on you being chosen. If everyone waited for some prophecy or particular person to give their life meaning, we'd all be bones," Don looks at me like this is what he was born to do. Maybe he was. Maybe his canary made him find broken people and listen so hard they were forced to confront their issues. He places his hand on my shoulder, "you have to choose yourself. No one else can give you worth."

I don't look at him, I can't, not yet. My gaze stays fixed on the individual firs I can pick out on the branches as we speed past. My something is still out there, canary still crooning. I don't think I was running towards anything like I wanted to believe. Don sits next to me in silence, a calm contemplation coloring his features. There's a mountain with a sheer face to our left. Don clears his throat.

"I'm going to work for my uncle's campground. I've spent most of my summer's there but I'm moving to work a more permanent job." It's times like this I'm reminded of how young Don is. He's earnest, not wise. He doesn't have nearly enough of the pieces. His advice rings true anyways. "There're good people out at Weinrich. Passionate people. And at the very least, I'm sure my uncle could find work for you. If you wanted a temporary break."

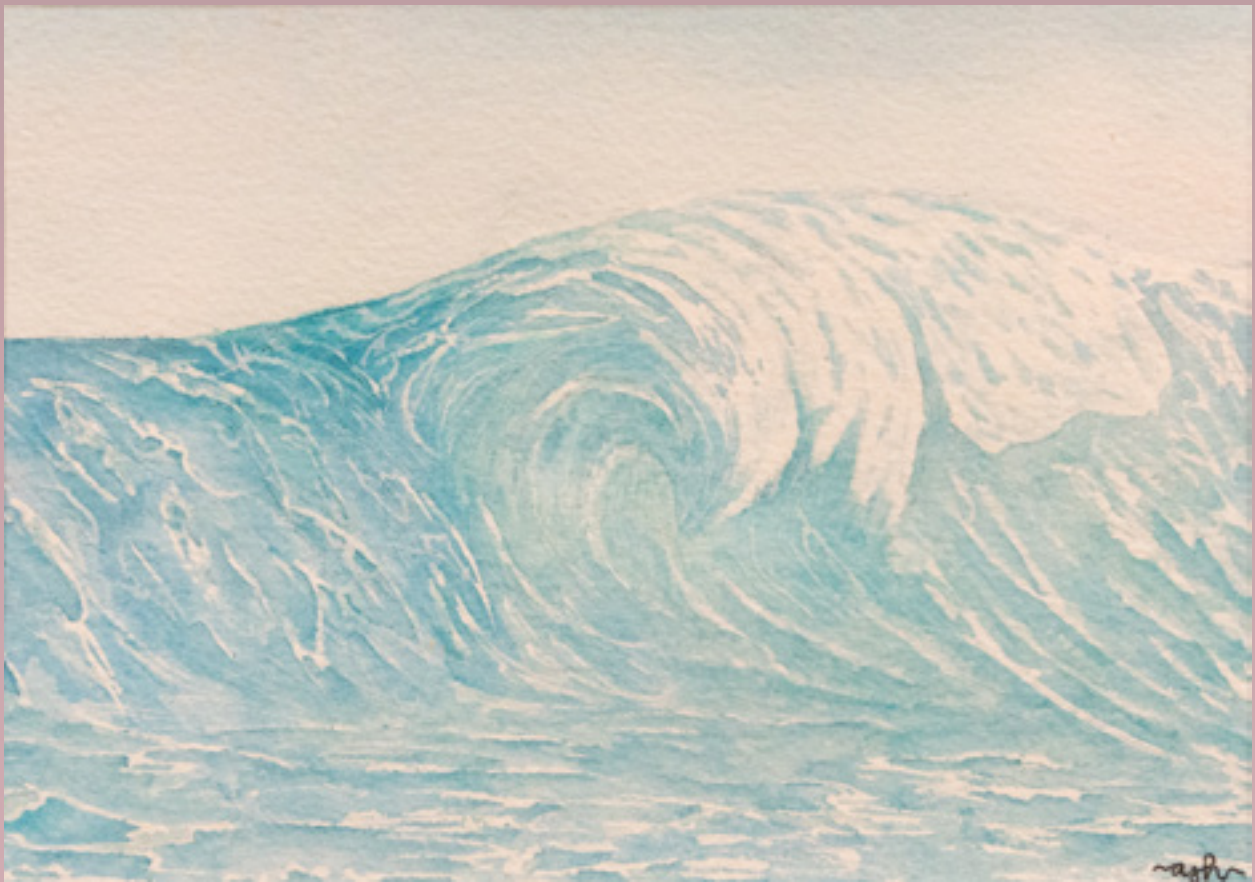
I'd imagined a beach, but mountains are new too. I cut myself loose before. This Don kid had promise. He's gathering up his things into a brown bag, light packer I suppose. He gets up to leave without giving me another look.

When the bus leaves, there's only two in its wake. I'll remember this morning as a cold one.

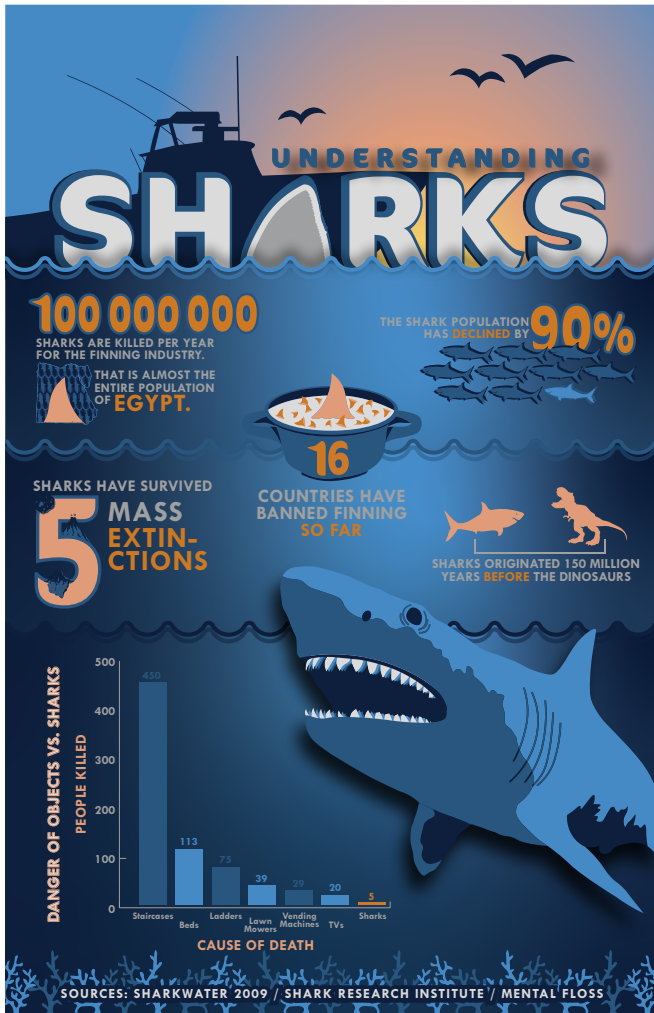
"It can easily get below freezing here, don't you have a jacket?" Taking a sec to get to the bottom of my duffle, I pull my treasured coat out, smoothing out the wrinkles and considering. When I met Santiago, I was able to hold the nostalgia for Lottie without reopening my scabs. I just had to believe that was the case here. I put on the coat and caught up to Don.

Life in Waves

Ashleigh Merry



Watercolor



From Top Left:
Understanding Sharks,
Evelyn Swanson;
Ventura, CA, Alex Simpson;
Hirt at Night, Alec Bidwell;
Self-Portrait, Claire Millspaw

Wondrous Tragedy, or Blue Collar Elegy

John Carroll

Reggie's got a hot rod
fire engine red, alabaster white
and a pair of flamingo, fuzzy dice.
Sometimes I think about his mom
working double-overtime. Poor lady
works for pennies to keep her shoelace
dream tight. At the Ritz, she scrubs
the floor and screws in the lights
holding the door for the up-and-coming thugs
and the hired knives. They'd say, "Hey'o."
She'd say, "Nice try."

In the summer, when the sun burns
Reggie's daddy's back and boils
the sweat dripping from his brow, the old man
sits in a bar, trading bucks for a lager.
He saves the change, flooding the contents
of a plexiglass jar. Then Reggie prowls
keeping the noise down there with his soul
cleaning the brim, wasting it on beer
and gelato flavored juuls. He tokes them all
setting off the fire alarms
at Saint John Neumann High School.



Trippy Triptych
Robert Celeski

Devotions

Eva Phillips

they call it sin,
but they can't see the grace in it--
your touch, the only benediction that I need
the communion of a shared glass, a shared glance
your breath against my lips, and mine on yours;
how the taste of you lingers, sweeter than any wine.
the prayerful contemplation of our sunday mornings,
sunlight painting you gold as divinity,
as reverence stills my hands to rest on you.
your joy is my absolution
your health, my holiness
your name, my prayer.
they say we won't reach heaven, yet this--
our love--is the only heaven I would seek.



The Lake of Sivash
Yelyzaveta But

Music Department



Photo by:
Jenna Lutz

For music content visit:
mercyhurst.edu/lumen

A Mother's Love

Madison Jukkola

A twisted psyche, misplaced pride –
the echoes of a childhood devolving.
I pursued the waifish image of a mother's love,
decaying in the corner of a dream.

She bears her claws and drags her
war-torn body across the concrete floor,
begging to be released, to be pardoned
by the powers above that sentenced her to this hell.

I cannot fight her off;
I cannot bear the weight of her stare
as she rips and tears the flesh from my bones
and the peace from my soul.

Her eyes hold mine in hostile gaze;
heat floods my cheeks in bloodred shame.
I should not long for the razor-sharp knife
twisting in my stomach as she retreats
back to where she came from,
back to where it all began,
but the scarlet stream running down my thighs
seals my fate and claims my soul for hers.

I have a scar of the woman
my mother raised me to be.
I am nothing like her,
but she is carved into my skin.



From Top Left:
Self-Portrait, Jessica Clark;
Betsy, Nicole Libra;
Death and Space Creation,
Arcadio Torres;
Postage Stamp, Evelyn Swanson

Countenance

Marley Ramon

We pick up the mannerisms of those we love and live with

I look like my father

and he looks like his father

and I look like my father's grandfather

There's a cyclical repetition to it all

I frown just like my mother

I don't yet know who she was copying

How far back does this all go

Do I carry all of my relatives atop the *anguli oris*

My *mentalis* taking some of the weight from my hands

I am alone in my ménage without brown eyes

It's just my grandmother and I with iris green

Two orphans in swells of honeyed view

I'm the first person my family can remember that has asthma

some long gone mother passing down her lungs

Whose fear am I reliving

How far back does it all go

An allergy is just an immune system's over reaction

the anxieties of everyone who died too early

and I'm convinced it was a gift

I am the aftermath of something

I'm just not sure anyone remembers what

I make the faces of my parents and the faces of their parents

We pick up the mannerisms of those we love and live with

I have my grandmother's eyes and I keep looking to my mother

I overheard my grandfather behind floral papered walls
Recounting how his father never hugged him
How his brother ran from his daddy
and never stopped
How far back does this all go
Some part of me needs to know
maybe my late aunt still wants her answers

When do I stop looking like and start being

Will I outgrow all my resemblances
I don't have all the pieces
Ever drifting continents down family line
The only person fully able to grasp it
birthed me bearing tectonic mantle
and refuses to look back
I want to trace family fault lines like lighting scars
count fractures like freckles
My mother can't see her mother's eyes in the mirror like I can
Does she meet her mother in my face
Is she seeing her frown or my grandmother's
Does she get one last hug every time she holds me



Self-Portrait
Nicole Libra

Hibernation

Elizabeth Plummer

The steady rocking of the grizzled man's chair was the only noise resounding throughout the room, drowning out the gentle *drip, drip* of the kitchen faucet. His eyes were glazed and dull, unblinkingly staring at the wooden floorboards where dust bunnies swirled around, seemingly dancing with one another. Sunlight flickered in through dust-covered windows, bathing certain areas in a gentle glow, which only made the particles more apparent.

The consistent sound of the chair rocking was disrupted as a woman tip-toed across the floorboards, making them creak obnoxiously despite her caution. The bunnies scattered, surging underneath dented, worn-in furniture as the air disrupted their disjointed dance. The woman's nose wrinkled, and her hand flew up in an attempt to stifle a sneeze. She had no desire to shatter the silence that permeated around them, as that felt... wrong, somehow. Grabbing a shaggy, slightly unraveled blanket from the couch, she settled it upon the man's lap. Having done so, she slid a book off of its shelf and settled down to read.

After some time had passed and the sun no longer streamed in directly through the windows, the woman was disrupted from her novel by the faucet dripping periodically. Her brow furrowed in confusion, as she couldn't fathom how it hadn't bothered her up until this point. Suddenly, it struck her: the rocking had ceased. Her eyes darted to the chair where the man had shifted to stare directly at her. Feeling her body freeze in shock, her hands trembled where they curled around the book. Her reaction didn't seem to faze him, as he just continued to keep his newly attentive eyes locked on her own. His head tilted to the side in a movement that only seemed partially intentional, but she found herself mimicking it regardless. No words would come to her, and no words would come from him. That, she knew, was assured.

Despite this certainty, or perhaps even because of it, the man's mouth began to open slightly, but the only thing that escaped was a soft gust of air. He blinked, slow and tired-like, and the glaze that had been there before began to creep around the edges of his eyes.

"Wait!" she shouted, instantly wincing at her abrupt loudness. The book clattered to the floor as she abandoned it to settle her palms against his weathered cheeks. Her rapid movements caused the slightest of flinches in him, but that wasn't enough for her. "Look at me!" she begged, shaking his face with more roughness than was probably appropriate. Her desperation, however, was in vain, as he lost the clarity that had arisen for those few moments.

Shadows draped themselves across the floor, drowning out the light that had been there earlier. The dust, although abundant, was less endearing now that it no longer skittered and flitted around. The *drip, drip* of that awful, squeaky faucet was deafening in the silence that had become so expected that the woman didn't understand how it could still be saddening. Over all of that though, the rocking of her father's chair started up again, and with that, she began to bawl.

ebb tide

Ash Carr

somehow, it's sunset

all the time, while the moon breathes in

and out the tide. soft, low,

beating to the moonrise.

you get so used to this kind

of rhythm that stillness

feels unnatural. it is. learn

to move like this, and float out

'til earth's curve eats up the shore.

the sounds you make out here

can only ever be for you. sing out

and smile as you do. strap a conch shell

to your ear, and learn to scream like liquid salt.

* * *

why resist this

when you know that nothing

means you harm? let go of that line

between you and the rest. please, rest.

there's no such thing as sin

when you're melting in the ebb

tide and each submersion

is every resurrection all at once.

this is where you learn

to breathe. sunbaked, boozed up,

bobbing in the briny lifeblood.

* * *

do you ever think

about how you are

the edge of the world?

just barely

out of the water?

just barely

into the sky?

you matter to this universe

exactly as much as everything else.

but it's hard not to wonder

if, on this, the event horizon of creation,

you just might matter a tiny bit more.



Underwater Oasis
Mackenzie Pestotnik

The Wedding Photo

Aubrey May

The black and white print
hung on my grandma's wall
from the time she lost her husband.
Its edges black and crisp from a house fire,
but the picture still stood out in its frame.
My grandmother, young and beautiful in a
flowing white dress. A bouquet of daisies
held in her hands, the reason behind
my favorite tattoo on my body. My grandfather,
the man I never got the chance to meet,
stood at her side. Tall. Slender. A smile
that would warm your heart. They were happy.
You could not question their love for one another.
Stories still come from his wife and kids.
Laughter still flows with the words they used
to describe the impact he had on them.
My mother says I would have had him
wrapped around my finger, he would have been
my best friend. The woman in the photo is strong,
braver than any person I have met. To lose your
life-long love is pain, the photo shows a bond that could
never be broken, no matter future's fate. An old
photograph that will never leave its place on that wall,
the importance of love instilled in us all.



She Smiles
Casandra Reese

Death is Not the End

Emma Kuchinski

Tears travel towards the turbulent sea
and words whisper along the wind.
Only the earth will ever know my grief.

Death is detrimental to a damaged heart
and my sorrows sequestered away in silence
thrust his memory from my mind.
Love brought laughter and limitless joy
and the loss of it leaves a silence
that one can only drown in.

But forgetting cannot be forgiven for it dismisses
the abiding beacon of hope he was in life.
The flames that tore him away cannot thwart
the safe harbor he created for all.

Spring marked our meeting, the most beautiful day
that nature could grant, her glory gracing our steps.
Our affection blossomed before our eyes, a burgeoning love.

If only nature knows of my noble knight
then we will share in the wealth of his life.
Goodbye is giving up, grieving is remembering,
and holding tight to hope and happiness.

Death does not defeat love but
strengthens the souls of the survivors.
Moonlight will mix with memory and my tears
will trace the path to the truth:
Love with a limited time is not a loss,
but a blessing.



Island Breeze
Amanda Rittenhouse

Coil Pot

Aliya Therrien



Ceramic

Reeling Memories

Corinne Voelker

As I tip the viscous globules of Coke, spiked by a grandmother's container of Thick-It, onto the surface of a plasticky tablecloth, my eyes catch the watery lines of the reflection in the clear plastic surface. I am still surprised to see hands, though fuzzy, aged by time and duress. Each swollen and stiff knuckle reminds me of my friend's resolution—a decree, as she would say—a decree to stop holding onto life.

She was the one that convinced me I couldn't sanely hold onto a lifetime and remember all the good parts. Rather, what was more important was the emotion behind it all.

It was but a week ago that she was alive and preaching this truth to me. And but a week ago, I was ignorant enough to disregard her.

*

I was turning eighty-nine (and a half, as my family so discreetly argued), when it was decided that I would be sent to live in this stuffy nursing home: to join the old farts. I'd wondered if Merle "Like Carl, but with a 'Mur'" could tell me apart from the others she'd grown up with by the reason that I now passed as 'old' but most definitely not an 'old fart.' But more importantly, I'd set my heart on a plan to escape this ridiculous fortress and she'd recognized a partner in crime from the start.

Our wheelchairs were parked next to one another's at the trivia night. The handles of hers, decorated in neon pink duct tape and strung with sparkly bicycle streamers, matched her ensemble. Though the bright pink bathrobe and hair curlers made the final look incredibly tacky.

"You've got an aid with you," or something along those lines, is what Merle whispered in a thick drawl to me. Her attention abated as she answered another correct trivia question to the volunteer. The prize was a memorial set of The Wizard of Oz DVD and the theme, naturally, was "Judy Garland Jeopardy," which Merle knew a lot about, I thought. She'd gotten every question right, but at the time I only remembered the way her enthusiasm waned with every sticker placed on her score card, because the longer the questions went on, the more I found her attention studying me.

"I've seen you before," she whispered between verbatim movie quote answers. I couldn't have been more offended, as I had been in the prison for less than a day and I already was being confused—and reduced—to some other patient this lady had seen before. A grimace came to my face in place of a smile.

"The line is 'There's no place like home,'" I declared, answering before she could.

"I'm Merle, like Carl but with a Mur," she said, turning her chair away from the table at the sudden challenge. "You went to FDR High School, didn't you?" Shock was the only thing I remembered feeling at Merle's wide grin. "You were the girl with the Coke at the movies—"

That's where Merle was right again—the ear-splitting grin was what told me so. Her sudden reveal of the unique gap between her two front teeth was something I learned to be disastrous. Because, all in a week, we had staged a successful escape, learned to tolerate one another, and to live life without holding onto it too late.

I remember the pride on her round cheeks, her curlers that bobbed wildly as she propelled herself down the empty hallway, and my thrill as I wheeled myself just barely behind her. We'd gotten as close to escaping as birds in an enclosure. We had figured out when the nurses were gone for lunch and paid out Mrs. Upright Fanny to distract the aides in an unmentionable way. Only then, we hadn't gotten out. They'd changed the code to unlock the doors the previous day, so the volunteer pass we'd swiped didn't work anyway. I was sure in the beginning that I didn't have to trust someone for them to be my escape partner and Merle was on the same page, which made our lack of necessity perfect for one another.

I also remember the tiff between the high school self-absorbed students. Merle recognized from the moment she saw me, for some terrible reason, that I was the student who embarrassed her at the movies.

* *

I'd been rolling the film for my second showing of *The Wizard of Oz* that weekend, and on a Saturday night, the theatre was packed with friends and couples and kids from uptown. It had all been going along well, as people filled out the seats until there were two left a few feet underneath my stand. Five minutes into the opening credits, two people raced in and made the entire back row stand up to get to their seats. They proceeded to chat through the credits, and while I wasn't partial to the movie, the people down below were starting to get angry.

So naturally, like the rest of the crowd, I'd had enough of the interruptions.

I remember leaning over to whisper down to the pair of people chattering away, to give them my official warning, when a Coke on the railing tipped over. The liquid, as if in slow motion, doused the chattiest girl, the girl with a fresh perm.

She was outraged.

She was Merle, though I hadn't bothered to learn her name then.

* * *

Another day, we found ourselves hacking with laughter about our meeting over dinner, a stew of beige corn and creamed chicken. All too soon, that inimitable smile became serious.

"Emmaline, that's not how it happened at all! You outright dumped the drink onto me," she said in more than a whisper. I'd foolishly become upset because I knew how the story went, not she. We'd argued for a week, our anger rising like the carbonation and bursting at the top: painful on the tongue.

I was right, and Merle was wrong; it was just that simple.

"One day you'll wake up and get your nose out of that sky," Merle had said to me in a spat that didn't matter, "and you'll realize that your memory is such a fickle thing." I'd told her that, at the least, my nose was somewhere it belonged instead of in someone else's business.

One morning an aid told me that Merle was struggling. They said that she had breakdowns sometimes, and I'd asked why but was only shown to her door. They told me to try and cheer her up. Merle was rocking herself back and forth and back and forth and back and forth on her bed, curled up in a tight ball with her eyes shut, her hair curlers strewn about the room. I thought maybe she was upset over the DVD rambling on the telly, crying about Dorothy's return home.

I tried my best to cheer her up, but it was as if I wasn't in the room. She was alone in her head and beginning to ramble, a most dangerous place for her to be.

* * * *

I discovered, with horror, that she had been here for four years. A roommate told me that Merle had a photographic memory, because when she'd tried to dupe Merle in a game of cards, she'd been found out. She said she lived a haunted life and sometimes couldn't handle it.

Two long days later, after rounds of monotonous bingo and reruns of Westerns on the television, Merle appeared from her room and wheeled herself to this very table, with the plasticky table covering, to let me know that I was wrong again.

She said only a few words.

"Firstly, Emmaline," she whispered even quieter than normal, "thank you." Then, her courage suddenly gone flat, she threw her bony arms around me.

I don't remember what else happened, as it all happened so suddenly. I remember the swell in my heart as those arms clung to me. And sudden peace as I clung to her. It was the last time that I ever saw her, when I realized that she had to be right. I had spilled that Coke on her, I was just so angry that I didn't remember it. Like so many of my memories, the film reel had warped and discolored and cut out until the truth, whatever it could have been, became lost to time.

* * * * *

The invitation to her funeral came not three days later with a weight of dread and stale heartache, too. I'd never missed somebody so badly. And with the invitation, if that's what they call it, came a gift. A leather-bound journal with my name in the margin.

"Emmaline," the first page read

"Please know that you became my home, even though you thoroughly destroyed my curls. And, for the sake of humanity, keep this journal. Write in your memory of me into it. I've done the same for you, in the back half, to keep our records safe for a while until they're lost to history.

“Merle.”

“P.S. Have a coke on me.”

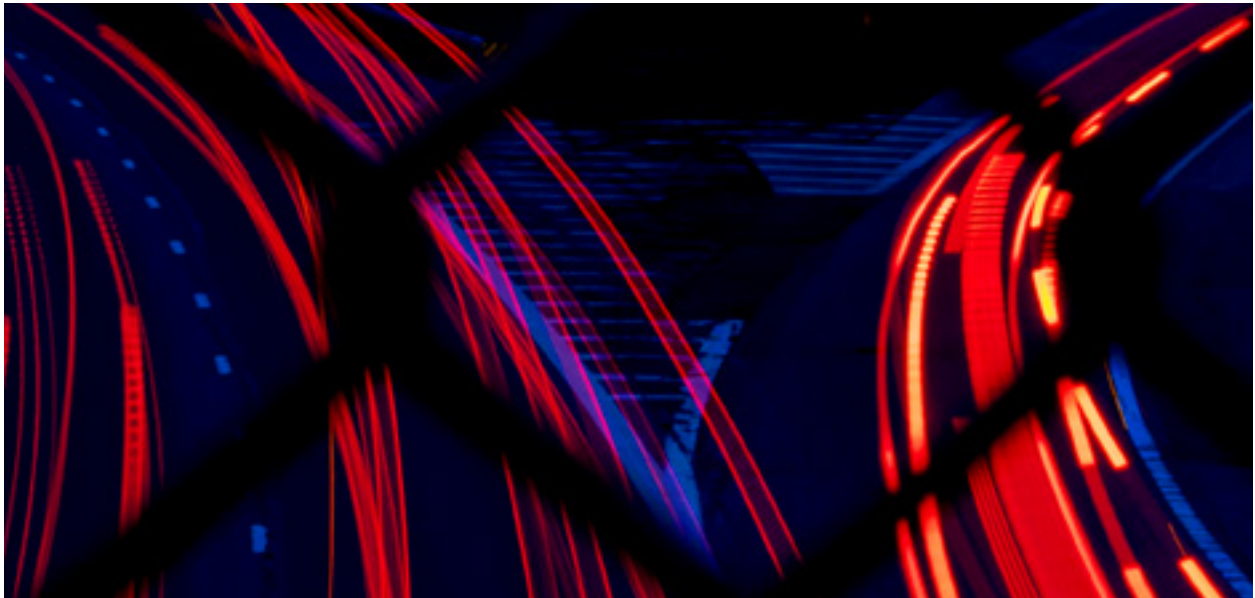
Taped inside was a five-dollar bill, crisp and perfect and pristine.

It catches me quickly in the heart: as though I’m choking on a sip, and the answer has nowhere to go except to burst from me.

Now, when I write in the journal and sip on this coke, I realize that Merle had bottled life in memories she didn’t want to keep.

“My next action was the only thing I’ve ever done for anyone but myself,” I whisper.

The tablecloth is covered in the spill, and I rip this page out of the journal. I roll it into a tight scroll and stuff it into the bottle, watching as the edges of the paper soak up the last drops and letting my tired grip on life loosen. Then, without looking at the entry Merle’s mind had written, I tear it out and add it too. And because there is no sea to throw it in, I toss it in the trash and wheel myself around the corner, keeping only the memories of Merle’s smile with me.



Exit 56
Grace Gregoire

Still Life Study

Ava Forsyth



Charcoal

a fly on your crinkled red armchair

Corinne Voelker

We sit in a showing room.

Tarnished picture frame hangs empty on a nail,

That picture frame was a gift—

Christmas of 2014—

A window reused and our portraits taped into each pane.

Below the clouded memorial window,

an antique vase relaxes in a creaky wicker rocking chair.

Adjacent, a

clicking clock ticks,

by and by, counting to here

and to nowhere.

It's second-hand cadence

splits moments, a double-edged knife.

It separates mem'ry and reality:

A once laughter-filled room pared from insufferable silence.

I look to my left

and your figure is no longer there.

But instead, a fly lands on the arm of your crinkled red vinyl chair.

I swat it away.

There is nothing left for it here.

A ceiling fan crusted in decades-old dust

circles

slowly, above the room.

It has been doing this for longer than my lifetime probably.

It's in all my memories of you.

"Sometimes,"

I whisper to the chair,
“I wonder if the blades will snap from
the weight of dust and dust will rain
down and cover us both and then I
might get to know you again.”

Your chair has no reply, of course.

I believe I simply can't hear its voice—

when a small
and stubborn drone,
a bombastic buzz

--interrupts me.

Its pesky form hovers above the armchair;

lingering, tremulous and fierce.

It must miss you more than I do.

It lands religiously in the space you occupied,
having fled the cow pastures and barn stalls and come to the seat where leather
has rested upon leather:

Your tanned skin, dark and spotted from years under the sun.

Resting my hand on your armchair, I wait for a pulse, a remnant of life, that must have drawn
the pious fly to you.

Startled, the fly zips away.

From a creeping crack in the vinyl chair, a thrumming pulse beats.

The slowly circling ceiling fan is not antiquated,
but steady and free.

And the picture frame on the wall, a reminder of the love and hope
and happiness that you gifted to me.



From Top Left:

Spring Pine, Bianca Nieves;
 2D Abstract Collage, Addie Sedelmyer;
 Surreal, Shane Fetzner;
 Mobile Homes, Samantha Montoro

Chaotically Beautiful Storms

Choreographer:

Katelyn Turner-Leftwich

Dancers: Kaitlyn Brooks,

Nadine Fox, Jakquelyn Gauker,

Rebecca Jones

Music: "Heavy Thunderstorm"

from the album Thunderstorm

Sounds for Sleep by Pure Relaxing Vibes.

Audio Excerpts (in sound order) by:

Rebecca Jones, Jakquelyn Gauker, Kaitlyn Brooks, and Nadine Fox

A piece about thunderstorms and our individual stories and thoughts behind them.

Performed and filmed October 27, 2022



Quarks

a film by Ainsley Dunning

dancer: Nicole Walters

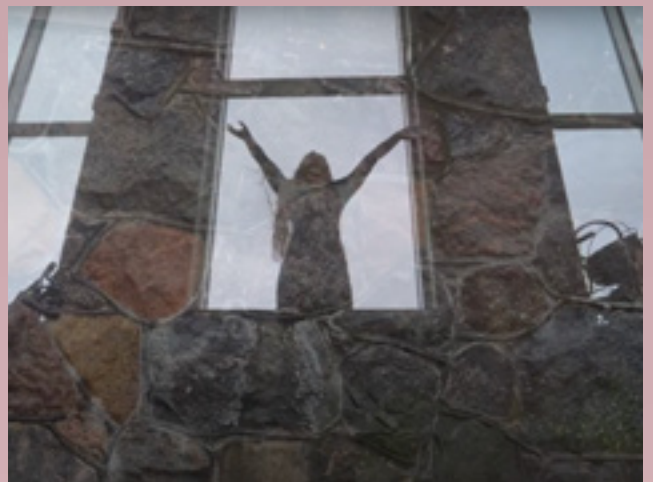
Director/Cinematographer/Editor:

Ainsley Dunning

Choreography by Ainsley Dunning

with improvisation by Nicole Walters

Music: ekki hugsa (live) by Ólafur Arnalds



P. Barry McAndrew Awards

The winner of the P. Barry McAndrew Award for Excellence in Critical Writing is Madison Jukkola for the essay "Running from Death in Pursuit of Life: James Boswell's Desperate Search for Meaning."

The winners of the P. Barry McAndrew Awards for Excellence in Creative Writing are

First place: John Carroll for the poem
"Wondrous Tragedy, or Blue Collar Elegy." (Page 59)

Second place: Ash Carr for the poem "ebb tide." (Page 67)

Third place: Marley Ramon for the short story
"The Eden Equivocation." (Page 45)

Patricia S. Yahn Juried Student Art Show Awards

The annual exhibit, made possible by a gift from fine artist and Mercyhurst art alumna Patricia S. Yahn '50, featured works in a variety of media, including charcoal, watercolor, ceramics, photography, and digital collage. All 2023 entries are featured here.

First Place: Hannah Duckett for "Self Portrait" (Page 9)

Second Place: Jessica Clark for "Crown of Thorns" (Page 30)

Third Place: Allison Lineman for "Surreal Self-Portrait" (Page 41)

Honorable Mention: Ashleigh Merry for "Life in Waves" (Page 57)

Honorable Mention: Aliya Therrien for "Coil Pot" (Page 70)

Honorable Mention: Ava Forsyth for "Still Life Study" (Page 75)