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*contributor's notes*

PARIS THOMPSON

## *room on fire*

Backstage, on the striped couch. The upholstery is worn through in several places, its fibers spliced with two decades' worth of Boise's music scene. I sit alone, crowded on all sides by empty black instrument cases, plucking passively at my electric guitar. I try to tune her, just to make it look like I'm doing something. But a thrash metal set is raging through the stage curtains, so attempting to tune by ear is pointless. The building shakes to its core, each hit of the double-kick bass ripping a shockwave strong enough to stop a heart. They are a talented group of kids, long-haired and still in high school.

Veiled by the curtains and the lanky silhouettes of performers, I observe a formless amoeba of arms and Solo cups and sweaty young faces writhing in studio lights. Leaping, flailing, casting themselves adrift into a violent storm of sound. It is surreal. Nobody has seen this many people in one place for over a year.

Behind me, concertgoers seek relief from the fervor of the venue. They mingle and smoke in the outdoor lounge. I feel like some of them are watching me; a lone man with a red guitar, perhaps too sober for the occasion, biting his nails and trying to sink behind mountains of black hardshells.

I'm on in ten minutes when the metal set ends. My bandmates, whom I haven't played with in years, are carousing somewhere in the crowd. They had stayed together after I left, doing just as well with one guitarist as two, and ran with what we had started together. I am back with them to reprise my role in the band's mythos. It is their last official show in the city before the early-twenties diaspora, and I've been invited to guest star. Thomas, our frontman, has always had a knack for that sort of poetry.

I have grown roots of anxiety into the threadbare couch. It's been too long since I've performed. Even now, in the blistering summer before my third year of college, the band scene still feels like a social puzzle box that I have yet to crack.

I gnaw at the end of a guitar pick and wipe my sweaty palms on a cushion.

---

With Cameron on drums, Hayden on bass, and I on guitar, we had maintained a fairly consistent trio through early high school, one which made the rounds of talent contests and open mics and dinner shows. Relatively tame stuff, but it gave us an outlet all the same.

We attracted Thomas, our heartthrob frontman (complete with an unbelievably handsome face and annals of tortured romantic history) sometime during sophomore year. With the advent of Thomas came a re-branding. We were to play real shows and adopt a sexier brand of garage rock, one dripping with moonlight and cigarette smoke and a British-sounding croon.

The Phets, as we were called, were Paris, Hayden, (Cameron) Elgart, and Thomas. And no, I did not take the P with me when I left.

---

The Strokes' *Reptilia*. Junior year of high school.

Our first show under The Phets was in a low-ceilinged space designed to hold far fewer people than it often did. I told my parents I was out with a girl, a thin ruse since I would not have a chance at breaking into dating until I was a senior.

I remember being struck by the audience. It was not a captive or obligated crowd; it was a crowd craving to be entertained. Regulars of the Boise venue circuit, ranging from bright-eyed sophomores in oversized leather jackets to scene veterans out to give some hopeful high school kids the light of day. They mingled and blew smoke out into the hallway as we got ready for the next tune.

I had brought my black Stratocaster. She was (and is) about as close to a childhood friend as an inanimate thing could be. Her hardware rattled and shook and sank into itself on occasion, and the fretboard was caked with the immovable grime of some nine years of use. Her body I had smothered in decorative stickers and faded marker doodles; a Magic: The Gathering card is still floating around somewhere under her pickguard, lost in her guts. Like all close friends, we knew each other well and knew which buttons not to push.

Cam's drums crashed into life before I was ready, heralding the urgent opening beats of the song, freight-like in its forward momentum. Hayden's Liverpool bass came in shortly thereafter on driving eighth notes. It became apparent very early that this would be an alarmingly up-tempo cover, amped by stage nerves and adrenaline; less New York-style cool and more the punk rock fervor of the record's ancestors.

The track was an old favorite of mine and the only thing on the setlist not thematically orbiting around Thomas's romantic exploits, but panic began to creep in. The pace was furious, and the engine had already thrummed to life, so I jumped aboard like a desperado diving for a train.

I strummed once and began gradually cranking up a worn-out volume knob, letting the feedback wail across the stage. I looked at Thomas, with his barely-buttoned shirt and low-slung guitar, and we cued each other in with an exchange of nods. The final four counts before we joined the fray, the feedback mounting to a peak.

*One... Two... Three... Four!*

We hit the ground faster than we could run. I began to sweat under the stage lights, my face flushing red as we struggled to keep up with the drums. There is often something exhilarating about the challenge of playing fast, chasing tempo like a white whale, but it seemed more panicked than sporting.

By the time the solo came, my hands were not moving smoothly and relaxed but clawing rigidly at the fretboard, attacking it. I cranked out the notes, my fingers locked up and tripping over themselves. I managed it alright in the end—but it was on the verge of rolling away from me faster than I could catch up, like most things in the world are likely to do at that age.

After the show was what I remember most vividly, a concoction of adrenaline comedown and an adolescent identity crisis ripped straight from a bildungsroman. To play felt wonderful, to provide to others the soundtrack to youth or at the very least a Friday night. But there was something else there after the stage was stripped back down to bare bones.

After the set, the others dispersed into their own crowds. My bandmates stood in the open bay doors of the squat little building, surrounded by friends whom I did not know, spilling their joy and newfound purpose into the night. It was a happy scene all told; but I did not feel warm,

through no specific fault of theirs. Simply put: I was no rockstar.

Without a guitar in hand there was nothing between myself and the scene at large, no weapon with which to prove my worth—and it soon became clear that it was about much more than what you played. It was about how you carried yourself, how you dressed, who you knew. These were people who thrived for the mythological underground and wanted performers who could lead them there. They wanted anthems to sing and icons to write them.

I did not have the makings of an underground rock icon. I was not returning to a stranger's house for alcohol and fraternization after the show. I was returning to my room for Hot Pockets and Frasier. My comfort was found within rather than without, and I wanted the music coming from my hands to speak for itself, no social appendices needed.

I was a slow, wandering presence floating among some very fast lives.

I gently loaded the black Stratocaster into the backseat of my car and then drifted wayward. I left the venue behind without announcing my departure, shuffling aimlessly away from the laughter and voices.

Hands tucked away in jacket pockets, breath lingering ghostlike in the air, I walked circles in the autumn streets until sleep pulled me toward home.

---

Unfortunately for the reader, there is no sensational band-quitting story to put here. I sort of wish I had some juicy secret to take to my grave, some account of backstage drama or creative-*differences-turned-feral*; something that people want to hear when they learned I had a chance at living a high school rock-and-roll dream, and turned it down.

But I don't. There was no antagonist to shake my fist at; no rivalry. Sometimes we humans are simply incongruent with particular moments in particular places. I parted ways with the band amicably and stayed in their periphery.

My parting contributions to The Phets: the guitar melodies in *I'm a Fool* and a Sabian crash cymbal that I accidentally left in Cam's garage during practice.

---

When I think of what these college years could have been, or what they are yet to be, two hits on a snare drum pop in my mind. They are soon accompanied by the rhythmic bounce of guitars, simple and angular but expressive nonetheless.

Even long before I had entered this stage of life, music felt full of possibility, the bittersweet limbo-state between the light-footed naivete of youth and adulthood. It made me think of campus lights at night, downtown sidewalks full of laughter, and friends I was yet to meet. Young people walking different paths but asking the same questions. In coffee shops or each other's bedrooms, we talk about the places we might occupy in this world or the places we won't. We wander the city till the wee hours of the morning discussing art and life and then sleep into the day.

That is what I feel in music, and it was this music I wanted to create. Youthful, carefree, fun, but with a sense of vulnerability. A bubble chamber wherein particles of sound collide in yellow and blue. I wanted music too honest for pretense, where the only pass to the in-crowd was an open ear and a desire to feel.

I have not figured out if I have landed in that ideal place and time, or if it will be nothing more than a vision that will one day wake me up and inform me that I've grown too old to live it.



My chance might come yet.

The day is young.

In that humid concert house of brick and concrete, swimming with life and humanity after the grayest year of our lives, I was able to taste it. The incongruencies of old are nothing in the face of a new shape.

---

Tonight's venue:

A delightfully cramped building tucked away downtown, a couple of blocks removed from the public library. It's called The Shredder. The outdoor lounge area, with guys dangling from the awning like monkeys, has a half-pipe. The sun is reluctantly sliding away, but the asphalt still whines with the afternoon heat.

Mingling outside the doors you will see concertgoers of various ages, shapes, sizes and influences. Gangly teenage drifters in fishnet stockings and Doc Martens and dark makeup; university students still awestruck by the premise of live music after a *horrible-no-good-very-bad* year of emptiness; middle-aged concert veterans with veritable galleries of patches gracing their vests, reminiscing days when they might have been carded at the bar; my dad, joyously reliving his New Englander punk roots; the sound technician on a smoke break, who I think might be wearing cowboy chaps with tassels (let's not approach him to ask); folks drifting in from around the block, curious to see what all this noise is about. You will probably see me, too, clad in a thrift Hawaiian shirt that makes me look—as my girlfriend's sister lovingly puts it—*like you're going on a fucking safari*.

There's a lineup of four bands tonight, with the grand finale of the Phets as the headliner. Corduroy Blue, Switch Full Lotus, Neocentrics, and Barn (the metalheads). A diverse cornucopia of a scene that has been cultivated through the years, bands founded while most of the members were still in high school. It's a free show, and it's filling up fast; so better find a spot.

If you thought outside was hot, I have news for you. The single-room venue is humid and alive with bodies. So much humanity. The concept of crowds has faded into something foreign to your pandemic-addled mind until now. Wall-to-wall, seeming almost to hang from the rafters, nothing but people. A band is gliding through neon lights on stage as they usher walls of sound from one end of the building to the next. It feels like a waking dream.

A bar by the entrance is manned by bearded men, their patience put to the ultimate test by small hordes of teenagers. Past them, the floor itself is already an unnavigable maelstrom, so you'll have to go up to the loft.

Once you get up to the railing, a few individuals might stand out from the crowd:

Hayden, dressed in a slick suit of gleaming white, with hair like a lion's mane. Endlessly funny, occasionally oblivious, always a killer bassist, with the most entertaining stage presence in the scene.

Cameron, powerful and shirtless and golden-haired, built like a grizzly bear. So relaxed and easygoing, and one of my most long-standing friends in Boise. An unstoppable beast behind the kit. Smiles often.

Thomas, the pinnacle of the *frontman*. All crooning good looks and tight denim, draped

in a sequined shirt that glitters in the stage lights. You can almost see his mind and guitar spilling over with lyrics and epics of romance. Say *rock and roll* like a swanky '60s star from the UK, and that is the essence of Thomas.

Needless to say, I have not the swagger to match any of them. But even if I might be a comedically statue-like presence next to these three, as musicians we are tighter than ever. And as friends, the bond of a shared stage will last a lifetime. I know that much is true, whether I find my footing in this world or not.

The night is neon lights arcing through smoky air; it's the thrum of music sailing straight into your marrow; it's the laughter and obscure joyous faces of your friends. The lethargy of a year locked-down sloughs away for a little while, and life feels young again. I'm weaving my way backstage now, braving the sweaty masses, sliding from one slight pore of space to the next like water struggling through silt. The Phets are on next.

---

I'm on for the third song in their set. I listen from the couch as they enchant the audience with their crowd-pleasers. They play robustly like it is their last night on Earth, which it is in a certain light. After this, The Phets mantle is laid down for a time. My poetic side offers a half-baked anecdote; something about the crackling blitzkrieg of distorted guitars being akin to trumpets, calling them home. A bit too dramatic of an analogy? Absolutely, but at this point, I'm still not convinced this is real.

Thomas dampens the applause after their second tune with a few easy maestro-like motions. He wipes his brow with one sleeve and leans in close to the microphone, breathless with the night's potential. He tells everyone that there is a guest for the next couple of songs, someone from the days of the band's genesis.

As I emerge from between the curtains to face the task ahead, the fabric seems almost to brush the anxiety from my shoulders, leaving it in a heap on the striped couch behind me. As if some lever was flung in the switchboard of the soul, I immediately felt a warmth and companionship permeating the stage. The crowd cheers, perhaps less for my entrance than for the sheer elation of live music. Summer seems to harbor the homecoming we've all dreamt of for months, and The Phets are here to sing the tale of it.

I patch into the amplifier and get a good look at the audience. Somewhere in there are my friends, classmates, my father. And of course, my girlfriend, who lights the uncertainties of the world as she walks. All are unified.

Then, my bandmates; not the kids we used to be, each a bit taller, chins crowded with stubble, eyes more world-weary than when we last shared the stage. There, under blazing stage lights, we are irregular and exhausted in all the wonderful ways of young adulthood. No mythological rockstars here, as it turns out—just human beings, and friends at that. They each smile at me as if I had never left, and I can feel a few tears mounting behind the levee. Suddenly my role seems clear, that which had eluded me for years: I am the steady anchor, the eye of the storm.

After a deep breath, I nod at Cam. He kicks in the opening bars of *Is This It* at a relaxed pace. Just for me. Shortly after, I ease out the gloriously simple and bittersweet intervals of the lead guitar riff, flavored with some gentle distortion. Those in the crowd who recognize the tune light up. The scene—all of this—owes a lot to that particular sound, spun in the clubs of New York

some twenty years ago.

Our music spills out of open doors and across the city; it settles over the rooms I've haunted, the streets I've walked, the places I have yet to go.

MASON WAYT

*the last four things according to  
google*

And at the end, Orpheus -

There are lilacs, wilting  
strawberry tops,  
and cuts  
on my knuckles  
from digging through gritty soil  
Hum. Drum.

Mummified moths, crayon mythology,  
I drew graves, taped them on every wall,  
chewed the mud under my nails

There she is, holding court in navy blue,  
And the rest of us, seeking holy clash, tumble  
And, of course, her bitter approval

Kingdom come in a silver tongue  
A clattering: dice or a gavel, I can't tell.

Roll on, stumbling feet and running mouth  
Don't catch her eye, don't search her words for substance

Deep green sigh, turning north  
Turning to stone and wicker  
Sub-arctic Arcadia,  
I've missed your windswept rapture

Turning pages, an afternoon held static  
In birch and pavement, in repetition, in wool,  
When you have eternity, there's no reason  
not to get stuck on the syllables  
(-llables, llables, llables)

And hell is noise, in certain doses

And hell is condescension of any make or model

And hell is empty, a hollow sort of relief:

The ghosts  
of what you could  
have become, if you had listened.

Hell is Euridice;  
The only fourth I have loved  
since the start.

MASON WAYT

*i ate every word i could see*

I carried the taste of raspberries and ink,  
The tone of my mother's voice, the gentle knife  
which cut open the new worlds,  
Reverent library card, 'Take as many as you can carry.'  
Stubborn, disobedient child: I took more.

I carried sprawling forests and incisor mountains,  
jagged lines across the map  
I carried the unspoken, the innate, the improbable,  
tumbling until we can't tell whose limbs are whose

Twinned tattoo, rising tide, lost button in the tall grasses,  
I carried running, and someone's sweaty hand clasped yours  
'I've never met anybody who wasn't important before'

I carried the tiger and the bear and the crow,  
The ceremony of the full moon, the red wagon driven to Mars  
I carried the jellyfish floating in the night sky, humming sworn adagio  
'Our capacity for love increases with each person we cross paths with'  
I carried dried petals, wolfsbane, campfire transformed into a pyre,  
The bare feet and the dented pot, tinfoil crown and cardboard sword

'I love only that which they defend'  
I carried armfuls, tiny hands desperately grasping leather-bound and paperback

The bullet and bandage, the prayer for kindness, the lie of fury  
'Am I the villain in this story?'  
The howl for home -  
'The water hears and understands. The ice does not forgive'

I carried the absolute:  
the 'never' and 'always' -

the idea of forever, oblivion,  
saturation of the universe  
I carried the incomplete mouth  
stained-red  
'Every atom of me and every atom of you'  
I carried godhood, the act of creation,  
devotion to words that taste of honey or saline,

I carried all of them, and now they carry me;  
Out to sea, soft palms, always hungry  
We all have the dead on our shoulders, the lifelong  
task of being carved out of marble and then  
figuring out what kind of shape we are

*Quotes from Steven Moffat, Griffin McElroy, J. R. R. Tolkien, Will Gold, Leigh Bardugo, and Phillip Pullman*

LOGAN RANDALL

## *sweet potato*

It is the only magical story that begins with peeing on a stick, of that I am sure. Imagine Gandalf showing up at Frodo's little cave and saying, *I think I have a quest for you but first, pee on this*. Maybe that's what would have happened if women had been inducted into the sacred hallways of storytelling. Who knows?

We brought our own seats to the table. So I think we should start with true stories. The untold ones.

---

My bathroom floors are tile. If I didn't know that before, I do now. When I finally stood up to brush my teeth, I had shallow imprints of the grout lines in my cheek and a deep hollow in my forehead from the rim of the toilet bowl. Sometimes the ruby from my wedding ring would make an appearance on my face as well. It just depended on the day.

It is hard to vomit on behalf of something you don't want. When I was younger—no, that isn't right. It wasn't a long time ago. Instead, when I was emptier, I'd vomit from last night's whiskey, which was never fun but could at least be followed with pancakes or tacos or reminiscing on the good memories made. This vomit is empty. It's bile. It burns. It's gagging more than anything, dry heaving without the sweet relief of an empty tummy. My tummy is far from empty, but I am withering.

Let me tell you about morning sickness: it is the single most egregious misnomer in the English language. Probably in all languages. Morning sickness has a maternal sweetness to it. It resembles a phrase like Sunday brunch. Or something simpler, like indigestion. Fuck the man who named it morning sickness.

Morning sickness is a merciless master consuming you from the inside out. It takes no prisoners, leaves no man behind. Your toes will ache with it and you will weep and you will only stop weeping to puke some more. You will lay on the cold, hard tiles of your bathroom floor for twenty-four hours straight and those will be the longest hours of your life, wrapped in spare blankets; every thirty minutes, every sip of water, every movement will rattle your belly and burn up through your esophagus and spill out into the toilet bowl. There will be the pink shade of blood from a body that apparently can no longer contain any of its necessary liquids. You will come to know the smell of the toilet bowl, that crisp porcelain and sharp musk that has no metaphorical partner because nothing can replicate that companion of sickness.

Your partner will begin to worry after a couple of days and call the doctor. The nurse will call you and, for the first time in your life, you will cry on the phone while talking to someone you have never even met because your words are in the toilet bowl and tears are all that are left. She will prescribe medicine and you will burn with gratitude. You take the medicine without asking what it even is, greedily like a hungry child. Because that's really who you are now, what



you have been reduced to. Your partner will tell you that it's the same medication they prescribe to chemotherapy patients and you will wonder why it is called morning sickness if its medication is available in cancer wards.

Laying on the floor with tears on your face and the taste of rancid bile and bitter medication in your mouth and the merciful, momentary pause in puking, you will think about the book you were reading just days ago about what to eat to raise a smart/kind/healthy kid. After all, a lifetime of health begins in the womb. You will chuckle and realize it has been so long since your lips have shaped themselves into a smile. Cracked lips with the taste of iron. You bought cashews four days ago because, according to whoever wrote that fucking book, a handful of cashews in the morning would better stave off bothersome nausea than saltines, as saltines spike your blood sugar and worsen the feeling. What a load of shit. After puking up everything from saltines to water to Gatorade to ginger ale to Diclegis to your will to live you can certainly say it makes no fucking difference. It all ends up in the toilet bowl.

---

It all ends up in the toilet bowl.

When you're a woman, pregnancy is a death sentence to your dreams. I've known this since I was a little girl and have deftly avoided the condition ever since. Had. Mistakes happen, though, and you're bound to have a date night end up fourteen days after a period one day or another. My husband has always wanted children and I love him. So, with his promises that he would be the primary caregiver and stay home if necessary, I agreed to do the part he couldn't and offer temporary residency to a tiny little growing embryo. Ontogeny recapitulates phylogeny. Big words to express a big concept: babies growing inside you are just a warp speed version of the history of life itself. From a single cell to a cluster of them to a glorified fish to a person: to carry the last 3.5 billion years within my body—something no man could ever do—seemed like an honor (though not quite a privilege), even if I was petrified about everything it could take from me. Women have been unwelcome in science pretty much since Adam named all the animals before Eve had the chance to contribute. The only hope for the continuation of the human species feels like, if anything, a nice fuck you to all the men who left their wives at home while they discovered things. Plus, my husband would be a great dad. He's one of the good ones.

---

Zofran can keep down the vomit but it can't do it without fucking up some other important systems, so you will barf less but you will pay for that relief. You will lose an incredible amount of weight in a shocking period and you will also lose your ability to leave the fetal position. After four weeks of sleeping, standing, and bathing hunched over with your knees as close to your chest as you can get them, your muscles begin to misunderstand you and think this is their new arrangement. They will weaken and contract and when you try to straighten yourself out, they will stretch warily from their tight coil and threaten to snap. Not just your stomach, but all of the muscles you worked so hard to attain will soften and abandon you, and even walking will leave you sore, so sore that reaching above your head to close the blinds each night rips through your abdomen like an electric current. You will ache.

But not just your muscles. Your hips will begin to feel as though they are falling in on each other from all the lying down and you will have to begin sleeping with a pillow between your

thighs, keeping open a part of you that, up until this moment, has always been reliable and strong all on its own. Now they are tired. You will joke that you are going to get bed sores but you are not joking. You will sleep with a plastic bucket beside you in case you cannot run to the toilet in time when you wake up at 2:17, 4:03, 5:36, 7:52. Zofran, a tricky bastard, will make it so that only two of those runs are real but it's like Russian Roulette and you aren't a risk taker.

You will shake. Your hands will shake and your voice will shake and, when you secretly cry because you are hungry and tired and miserable, your whole body will shake.

There will be a constant state of shock as you weigh yourself each morning and your weight continues to decline because how could you possibly be losing weight when you can no longer shit? Every nine days your body will agree to allow you to excrete something and you will wonder if this is what childbirth is like, with the pushing and the breathing through the pain and the contractions that are actual agony in a death-on-the-Oregon-Trail way. And when you're finished you won't feel better—you will feel worse. You will crawl, emaciated and dehumanized, into a tepid bath. Not too hot because, in the lilting words of the perky nurse, you don't want to cook the baby.

After four weeks of this, six weeks of this, ten weeks of this, you will mention that you don't remember what it is to feel light or beautiful or full. Your partner may mention Lord of the Rings and the way Frodo could no longer remember the taste of strawberries or the touch of grass. I'm naked in the dark. You will understand his sentiment.

---

Mothers expose their children's weaknesses. They can't help it. The stitching comes loose when they stroke the fabric of their children's lives and they—age be damned—untangle on their maternal laps.

When my mom came to visit after that first long week, I started to weep the moment she came into the room. She climbed into my bed and cried with me, her ribs heaving against my ribs. No one means to fall apart in front of their mom. It's in our genetic code. We are animals and our mothers are safe. It is basic biology.

She told me many times after that day that she thought everyone should have taken shifts with my sickness so I didn't have to carry it alone. I knew she meant it. I knew that she would be sick on my behalf, although she already had been. Thirty-two years ago I was swimming around in her womb, stealing every bit of nutrients from her. I laughed at the irony of her offer, certain that she would do it all again futilely offering her body yet again.

That was the first time that I considered that maybe this wouldn't be the end of everything. Maybe this could be the beginning.

---

You will have a headache with no beginning or end. Not lots of headaches, just one. A long, increasingly pervasive headache that you can't medicate because of risks associated with autism or ADHD or something. You won't be able to soothe with coffee or soda because you can only stomach orange Gatorade and water, the occasional plain La Croix with lemon slices, and buttered toast. The headache will make sense to you as a byproduct of the insurmountable exhaustion you will feel every single second of every single day and night, at which point the fatigue fades to alertness. You will lie awake and stare at the ceiling and try to remember what it was like to feel

healthy and strong. You will fail and you will eventually fall into a sleep full of dreams like LSD hallucinations.

When you wake, you will be too drowsy to function so you will fall behind. You will continue to fall more and more behind, eventually losing sight entirely of what needs to be done and cocooning yourself in the relentless panic of procrastination that you have never before possessed. You will joke to those close to you about needing help but you will secretly be in deep, deep need of help.

---

Everyone wants to help, they do, but how could they? Sitting alone in bed, I knew that there was nothing to be done for me and they knew it too. I couldn't eat so food wasn't an option. I couldn't focus, so no movies. Each day, at the very last moment, all I could do was figure out what deadline I was about to miss and scrape together some strength and smear it half-ass into a document or an email. My mom would do my work for me. So would my husband. If they could. Maybe that is the problem with choosing a profession in evolutionary biology; no one can help you with your work when you need it most.

One afternoon, while chatting with my mother and my husband at the foot of my bed, I did my best to laugh and smile and to never wince. But that is what gave me away. I am not a lighthearted person by nature. I do not grin at gossip or laugh at things that are not funny and all the effort going into proving that I am not dying may be achieving the opposite. They looked at me like I was a broken vessel, a leaky vase. I used to be powerful, so important. The foremost expert in a field that should be able to help me now in my time of great distress. Now I am cracking apart and they see it. Maybe this is why people choose God instead of science; there is a name to cry out to in the dark. I have only data and the data says I'm on my own.

After my mother left the room that day—to do laundry? To help with dishes? She is doing all she can—my husband looked at me and smiled. His eyes were too dry and too pink to convince me. If he was worse, I could focus on hating him. If he was like most men, I could mold all my pain into anger and focus on the fact that he made me this way, did this to me. But he is kind. He is gentle. He is sorry. And he was standing before me then, looking at me, probably thinking of some way to take the pain away from me. It would have been nice to numb myself with the pulsing rage that had been a comfort. But I couldn't be angry. He was standing there, wanting to save me, someone who has never needed saving before. I couldn't be angry, and so instead I was sad. Instead, I was sick. Instead, I smiled back weakly.

I was harboring a secret: all this misery couldn't stop the slow, steady, terrifying realization that I was starting to feel something for this something inside me. Not quite love, but the faint and feeble affection that comes just before it. Just beyond the reaches of science is the brutal fact of a mother's love; did you know that an octopus mother dies in service to its unhatched eggs? What scientific study could explain behavior like that?

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At twenty weeks, you will feel a searing pain in your abdomen and you will run to the bathroom with your barf bucket in your hands because you don't know what this pain is exactly and you don't know which part of you will be responsible for dealing with it. You'll kneel in front of the toilet, just like the thousands of times before, and you will scream. Your partner will run

into the room with terror in their eyes and you will feel heat between your legs and realize that you've wet yourself from the pain. Your underwear will be gooey, not wet. It will be blood, not urine. You will feel between your rib cage and it will rattle you in a seismic way. You black out. You wake up in the backseat of a speeding car. You will scream and scream from agony and the realization that your body has betrayed you and is performing an eviction against your will. You make it to the hospital and you will spend the rest of your life blocking out the memory of the next few hours; the nurses and doctors urging you to be strong, your partner *weeping, weeping, weeping*; holding your hand until, finally, you push.

And out comes a baby.

The What To Expect app will say that this particular week, your baby is the size of a sweet potato. But that isn't true. When they put your baby in your hands, it will be the size of a tiny little person. It must also be the size of your heart because that must have come out of you as well. And you will think your stomach has come out too because where the hell has all your courage run off to? What happened to all that trusty anger that you have always been able to lean on when other feelings got too big? When they hand you what, or who would have been your child, it won't be the size of a sweet potato or mango or any other item of food you can think of. It will be the size of a baby. Your baby. So small. Too small.

And now, finally, you are empty. Hollow. You, shrouded in tragedy and numb with disbelief, do not feel sick. And then you puke anyway because when emotions this big get lodged into your throat, there is no other place for them to go.

Time will pass but you will not notice it. Family will visit but you will not notice them. You will leave the hospital but it will be all the same for you. You will go to what was once your home and you will hold in your hand relics of a dream unrealized, souvenirs from a stolen future. You will cry without noticing it, eat without tasting it, breathe without wanting it. You will wonder how something that started as a burden has transformed itself into a relentless loss. You will once again search for all your smoldering rage but find it no match for the numbness of grief. The gratifying power of your great wells of anger will be empty reservoirs, mighty dams destroyed by the detonation of all this emotional TNT. Instead of anger, you will try to call out to some deity for help but you will be unable to find solace in a divinity to whom you have never before reached out. You will return to a callous belief in a heartless science that cannot relieve you of any pain but can mercilessly explain what went wrong.

You will feel guilty every single time you feel the semblance of joy. But eventually, in time that moves at the destructive crawling pace of a lava flow, you will start to feel joy at closer and closer intervals and thus, guilt at closer and closer intervals. One day, you will brush your hair. Later, you will leave your house. It will be too much for you and you will go back. You will leave again and you will be brave enough to stay out a little longer this time, or maybe the next time. You will start going to therapy because it has helped your partner so much. You will hate all the hours you spend in that room asking questions like how can losing something I didn't want drain me of every want I have ever had and is not wanting it why it was taken from me. You will not find the answers, but your questions will eventually change shape and color and you will begin to ask questions there are answers for. Fragile joy will come like waves and it will remind you of the earthquake you felt in your body that day but, for the first time, you will also remember the overwhelming love, the way you would rip the world to pieces for one more moment with that tiny baby, barely the size of a sweet potato.

You will remember the love and it will hurt. But it will set about thawing something in you.

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Eventually, you will pee on a stick.

MCKENNA SMITH

## *all false honey*

i met  
a woman so  
woman you won't  
believe it so woman  
i begin to believe i am  
not one. think her into some  
sort of siren song *see?* how  
her hair clings to the couch cushion  
*(static) see?* caramelized eyes  
she's ethereal and i'm  
sick to my stomach  
*see?* we're all patchworks  
of each other

beyond the death  
of summer little  
miss sunshine  
asks who i am  
*oh lonely mostly*

*i'm a second sting*  
*honey bee see? i'm scattered*

*shamefully planted seeds*  
*i'm taking seat to*  
*magic mutating*  
*see? softly lost*  
*in soil there*  
*are more*  
*stories alone*  
*all lost here*  
*all false honey*  
*all of me*  
*see?*

MCKENNA SMITH

*lawyer / woman  
(for mom)*

for a year, she worked in a highrise downtown.  
a man less experienced  
worked for a week, promoted to her boss.  
what did you expect?  
professional and masculine  
are synonymous anyways  
hands under skirts is no precedent.  
she's the only woman in the room  
and still a fraction of him?  
how many cents to his dollar?  
anyways  
he called her while she was giving birth  
'just a quick question,' he said.  
gave her ten days maternity leave.  
still bleeding in her office chair  
anyways  
don't forget to hide the woman.

DANA MCCUE

## *justice? for minidoka*

glimpse from a distance  
nothing of significance

How different a contrasting view  
changes all things

illuminating the true  
brilliance within the seemingly simplistic.

Whereby this speaks of most truths,  
right before our eyes,  
We are blinded by our unawareness.  
I am overtaken by the quiet  
complexity of inked names on discolored paper,

Silently crying out for justice!  
Humbly I sit before the lives and stories,  
contemplating who they each were and are.

My heart cries out  
Injustice!      How long must you go on?

An individual tag representing one human soul,  
with a family, a story, a purpose.

A visual representation of an atrocious violation,  
Affecting generations to come.

Incarceration, internment, detainment by your own,



Betrayal of the worst kind.

Subsequent reparations that will never pay for the question,  
'How did you allow this?'

Granted by powers that never should have existed,  
An order to justify hatred and racism.

Over 100,000 deprived of freedoms from their own government,  
10,000 not far from where I now call home.

Land of the free?  
Let's ask Minidoka.

BRIANNA ELLISON

## *poisoned*

The phone quivered slightly in Vienna's hands. She took a deep breath to steady her grip, squeezing the air from deep within her gut, the heat brushing her lips like sandpaper. Her eyes grazed the trees, the sky, the clouds. She took note of the way they moved, memorized the bits of life around her. Her tongue caressed the sensitive pink skin of her lips, chapped and rough and as swollen as the skin around her eyes, and she swallowed.

*i'm sorry*

The two little words looked weak below the glaring blue text bubbles above it, remnants of a fight she didn't want to remember. She held her breath for an endless moment as if expecting a little bubble of fading and reappearing dots to appear, or a small sliver of words to pop up below her text informing her it was *Read at 10:37 AM*. The screen remained empty of change, dimmed from inactivity, and she released her captive breath, neither relieved nor disappointed. Her trance broken, Vienna moved; her hand instinctively went to her neck, reaching for an absent silver pendant. She felt naked without it on.

The trees were very still that morning.

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Vienna was rarely called down-to-earth. Her heart pumped liquid life imbued with daydreams, pumped hope. She always woke up at a different time, but always early, always as the sky was transitioning between a sparkling black and bleak gray. She would lay in a boat made of her pillows and comforter, rocking on the waves of sleep as she desperately tried to cling to the dreams that slipped away with the darkness. Her dreams were light, strange but in a way that felt comfortable, and for a few minutes every morning she yearned to live in the colorful worlds sleep offered. This was only out of curiosity, as Vienna truly did love the waking world.

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Vienna leaned loosely across the table. The curve of her arm sliced the air, uninhibited by sobriety. She gestured to one of the boys on the far side of the room, all jostling each other good-naturedly as they tossed white ping-pong balls into red Solo cups.

'He seems sweet,' she said, smiling shyly at her friend. The girl smacked the gum she was chewing and adjusted her neon green crop top.

'Brayden? Yah. You should go for him. He's like, pretty hot? And I hear he's rich? I can totally play matchmaker if you want.' Vienna nodded absent-mindedly, her attention captured by the sparkling dust dancing in the dim light. In her peripheral vision, she saw her neon-inclined friend rise from her perch at the table, tuck her hair back, and slink up to the boys playing beer pong in the corner. Brayden glanced up, a small smirk crossing his face as he eyed Vienna. Josie

whispered something to him before turning back towards Vienna with a wink.

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‘Happy three months, babe,’ The corners of Brayden’s mouth provoked two perfect dimples, his thumb brushing the top of Vienna’s hand. Vienna’s fingers found him.

‘I’m really glad—’

The waitress appeared at the end of their table, holding two menus out towards the couple, and Brayden dropped her hand to take them.

‘Hey, to begin, can I get whatever IPA you have on tap? And a diet coke for my girlfriend. Thanks. Sorry, what were you saying, Vie?’

‘Oh. Just, I’m glad we’re going out. We haven’t really gone out lately.’ Vienna took the menu that Brayden passed her, while his eyes scanned the dinner page. The dimples vanished from his cheeks as he glanced up at her, eyebrows low, shadowing his expression.

‘Well, I can’t take you out every night, Vie,’ Brayden said, his tone edgy. Vienna rushed to correct herself.

‘Oh, I didn’t mean it like that, I like just hanging out with you of course, but I mean since it’s a special occasion and all I appreciate you making a reservation here tonight.’

‘Yeah, well, I’m not stupid. I picked up on your hints just fine. No need to be passive-aggressive about it now,’ Brayden’s eyes were back on his menu. ‘Do you want chicken? I’m gonna get a steak but if you get their special then I can try some of that...’

Vienna almost responded, almost trying to reassure him that she wasn’t being sarcastic—she was happy about the outing. But she had been looking forward to this evening for nearly two weeks now, and Brayden was stressed from school and his part-time job at the on-campus gym, and she didn’t want to push the limits tonight and end up ruining it. So instead, she mumbled her agreement to his dinner suggestion, closed her menu, and sipped her diet coke.

Two hours later, Brayden’s black Benz pulled up in front of Vienna’s apartment. The rest of the night had passed in light conversation and shared smiles, in forks that trespassed into each other’s plates for a bite of chicken or a stray green bean, in banter that made the knot in Vienna’s chest unfurl into little tendrils. Brayden was more relaxed as well; his mood had been softened by the meal. They sat in the car for a few minutes, headlights shining into the empty darkness, the two of them linked across the front seats. He cupped Vienna’s face in his hands as he kissed her, and her whole body felt like static. She wanted to stay in this moment forever.

‘Hey, I’m sorry about earlier tonight. I was a little off at first. I’m excited about all of this as well, you know, cause I like you. Like, Vie, I love you.’

Vienna’s grip on his shirt tightened. He said it first, she thought. Vienna had had her share of flings, high school romances, and a couple more serious relationships. She had always been the first to say those words, to the point where it had become a common critique from Josie, who consistently informed her very matter-of-factly that she simply needed to chill out a bit. Seeing how it was Josie who had helped set her up with Brayden in the first place, she decided to finally take her friend’s advice and bit back those three words repeatedly—even when Brayden had off-handedly made their relationship official one night with a text asking if he should introduce her as his girlfriend, after four dragging months of casual dates and hanging out at parties. But now she could finally say it.

‘I love you too.’ The words felt so right, her voice soft and filled with the sweet memory of his kiss.

‘And—’ Brayden trailed off as he reached under his seat. ‘I got you a little something.’ He pulled out a small box, wrapped in shiny silver paper. The wrapping paper was meticulously folded, but still unevenly taped, little shiny corners of paper sticking out haphazardly. She felt a little burst of warmth in her chest, thinking about Brayden bent over the gift, trying to wrap it up.

‘Well? Are you gonna open it?’

Vienna shot him a shy smile, eagerly tearing off the paper, uncovering a jewelry box. She pried open the lid to reveal a small silver heart, engraved with curling lines. She squinted at it a bit closer in the dim car light. *B+V*. Brayden and Vienna.

‘Oh, Brayden, it’s lovely, really,’ She gasped, gazing at the glinting metal. He reached across and plucked it from her palm.

‘Here, turn around. I’ll put it on for you,’ Brayden said. She brushed her hair up, out of the way, as Brayden did the little clasp. ‘Thanks for the past three months, Vie. I need you in my life. Promise the next three will be just as great?’

Vienna turned back to him, rubbing the piece of metal that now hung around her neck between her index finger and thumb. She didn’t need to pretend—to be happy, to be nonchalant, to be okay with waiting to say *I love you*. Brayden needed her, and somewhere deep down, she felt like she needed him too. She leaned towards him, her smiling lips meeting his.

‘Does that answer your question?’ She said playfully as she pulled away.

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Vienna idly doodled a little replica of the sparrow perched on a nearby tree on her napkin. She never minded when her friends were running late. It gave her time to simply be. She liked to doodle the little bits of life around her, examining each feather of a bird’s wing, or a rustling swarth of ivy on a building, or the way a little girl’s dress crumpled beneath her as she knelt to look at a beetle on a sidewalk. Sometimes when her eyes and fingers grew bored of this practice, she would lower her eyelids and dream herself into the things around her. She felt at one with the world in these moments.

‘Hey, V, sorry I’m late, got caught up in traffic and then, well, you know what parking is like around here. Awful. Did you already order coffee?’

Vienna opened her eyes to see a tall brunette settle into the seat across from her patio table. She stuffed a jumble of keys into her handbag, shoved the whole thing beneath her chair, and dropped her chin to her hands, elbows perched on the table edge, and stared at Vienna expectantly.

‘It’s good to see you, Rey,’ Vienna said, giving her friend a quick, warm smile to reassure her that the wait was not that bad. ‘I haven’t ordered, but you know me—’

‘Right, right, straight black coffee. One day your happy-go-lucky exterior is going to just melt away to reveal a drab witch underneath or something. I don’t know how you drink that stuff.’

Vienna gave a cursory half-smile and shrug, well acclimated to Rey’s little sarcastic teases. It was undeniably true that Vienna preferred her coffee and chocolate dark, a choice her friends always criticized. Sometimes one of them would forget about Vienna’s taste and take a sip from her cup. They would grimace and wash it down with their toffee-colored whip-cream-and-sprinkles iced lattes. They exchanged every offer of a bite of one of her chocolate bars with a no thank you. *How could such a light, bubbly girl like something so dark and bitter?* She didn’t tell them she liked the way the bitterness filled the corners of her mouth, how it felt like cooling ash on her tongue, like darkened magma coating her throat and leaving a thickness that replicated the

secureness of the Earth's core. It felt safe, real, and grounding.

'So, Josie mentioned you and Brayden are getting pretty serious! I know it's been a few months now, but it feels like nothing. I guess I only have myself to blame for that since I haven't been able to hang out as much. The fellowship I'm doing has got me working pretty much every daylight hour.'

'At least it's good experience, right?'

'Yeah, yeah. That's what I keep telling myself. So— Brayden—' Rey trailed off in a little sing-songy trill. Vienna felt warm pride bloom inside her, eager to share her newfound happiness with one of her oldest friends.

'It's going really well. I honestly just like hanging out with him, listening to him talk. He's such an animated guy, Rey. He makes life just feel... bigger, you know?'

'Aw, I'm happy for you, V! I mean, honestly, I've only met him once —like, at a party last year I think it was— and I never would have put the two of you together but if it works, it works, right? And how's... you know...' Rey's voice lowered and she punctuated her last half-formed question with a cheeky wink. Vienna's laughter was full, shaking her shoulders as it tumbled from her.

'It's good. We, um, celebrated our three-month anniversary a few weeks ago, and that night was the first time we actually did anything. Just because I wanted to take it slow, you know? But that night he said he loved me and, I don't know, it just felt right. But yeah, he's good. He's been, like, super needy since then,' Vienna whispered the last bit across the table to Rey in a knowing, gossipy tone.

'Welcome to the world of men, V. They're kinda like that sometimes. Which is why I prefer not to be tied down by one.'

'Well, I don't mind being tied to Brayden, but I'll keep your pessimistic outlook on the backburner in case I ever get sick of it all,' Vienna joked. She doubted that last sentiment could ever be true. 'Oh, and I know you're pretty busy with your classes and fellowship and all, but my birthday party is in a couple of weeks, did Josie tell you? Brayden was trying to make it a surprise, but you know how Josie is, she let it slip the other day. I'd love for you to be there.'

'Have Josie send me the details. I'll make the time,' Rey said, reaching across the table to give Vienna's hand a gentle squeeze.

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Vienna swung open the door to reveal Josie, dressed in a metallic tube dress and carrying a brightly wrapped box. She pushed the box into Vienna's arms, the red wrapping paper crinkling against her skin.

'Jack's on his way. I made him stop to pick up some tequila.' She brushed past Vienna. 'Oh, by the way, you have limes and salt right? We're doing some obligatory birthday shots as soon as he gets here. I'm stoked for tonight, it's gonna be a vibe for sure. You know, only one more year until we're twenty-one, and then we don't have to make Jack buy all our alcohol, can you imagine? We can really party then!'

'Well, you know me. I'm just glad you're here. I don't need all the party stuff.' Vienna deposited the gift on the table still clear of sticky alcohol and discarded red Solo cups. Josie picked up one of the cups and twisted it under the light.

'You guys already getting started? Who's all here?'

'Oh, just Noelle and some of Brayden's friends. They're playing a drinking game in the

living room.' Vienna tipped her chin towards the noise from the next room over. 'Wanna join them?'

'You know you don't have to ask me twice!'

Vienna was immune to the passing of time, the taste of fresh lime and salt, the boys' argument over what points counted and which team was ahead. Their voices were abruptly interrupted by a sharp rap at the front door. Had Vienna not been listening closely for Rey's arrival, she might not have even heard the knocking over the rising octaves of Brayden's voice insisting that he knew the proper way to play. Vienna thankfully slipped away to the front door.

'Heyyy birthday girl! Do you feel older?' Rey asked. Vienna threw her arms around her friend's neck.

'Yah, totally. Like, a grandma. At least, officially no longer a teenager!'

Rey unwrapped herself from Vienna's arms, laughing at her slurred response.

'Josie's already doing what she does best, huh? Are you gonna let her get you blacked out again?' Rey asked, setting a gift bag on the table with the other little offerings. 'By the way, here's your present. Saw it at the mall last week and thought it would look great on you. Although, those jeans and blouse you're sporting don't scream Vienna to me. Where are your iconic skirts and sundresses? Ok, ok, you don't need to shake your head at me like that.'

Rey walked over to the sink, rummaged through a cupboard for a spare cup, and filled it with water. She handed it to Vienna, who was beginning to feel a little lost in the empty kitchen, the voices in the living room filling the space with cold loneliness.

'Are they always like this?' Rey asked, gesturing towards the half-open door. Vienna shrugged, still holding the cup to her chapped lips. Rey looked at her for a moment, some unreadable expression on her face.

'Well, I have a new card game we can try. Let's go teach them. After all, it's no fun spending your birthday in a kitchen, V. Right?'

Rey wrapped her slender fingers under Vienna's elbow, guiding her to the door. Somewhere in her head, Vienna wished she could have spent the rest of the evening in the kitchen with Rey, sipping water and trading chitchat.

---

The air outside had garnered a slight chill, nipping at Vienna's skin. The car window was slightly fogged over, and as they waited in the coffee shop's drive-through lane Vienna dragged the tip of her finger against the cold glass. A little smiley face appeared in the mist, and Vienna turned to Brayden, her smile matching the one on the window. He glanced at her briefly before turning back to the menu plastered on the wall of the coffee shop.

'Twelve-ounce espresso. Hot,' he said to the barista in the window before looking back at Vienna.

'Just a small drip coffee, please. Oh, and an old-fashioned donut? If you guys carry them?' She could almost feel the warmth scraping the inside of her cheeks, the soft donut soaked in sharp warmth filling her mouth, the earthiness seeping through her body, fortifying her against the cold.

'Oh, you don't want that. Get something more fun. Black coffee is boring. My ex used to always order their specialties—'Brayden's eyes swept the menu—'You got that pumpkin spice thing going on now, yeah? Every girl is obsessed with that, you should try that. Oh, and leave off the donut, too. You don't need those calories.'



Vienna stared at the little smiley face on her window, now slowly fading into the growing fog. She gave a slight nod as Brayden paid for the order.

'Here,' he said, handing her the tall, iced coffee, golden-orange caramel swirling into the milky-tan liquid below. He pulled out his phone, tilting the screen to capture them both, coffee cups posing front and center, her necklace glinting in the light shining through the windshield. He quickly typed *treating my girl* across the picture, sent it to his Instagram story, and pulled away from the coffee shop.

---

'You never hang out with us anymore!' The girl's voice whined through the phone.

'Well... who's going to be there again?'

'Oh, you know, the usual, Betty and Noelle and Rey. Maybe Josie and her crew, but they'll probably pregame somewhere else. I think Charlie and Jack are going to bring some new guys.'

Vienna glanced in the living room as the girl droned on, where Brayden was slouched on the couch, the flickering lights of the TV dancing across his face. The muted chatter of sports commentary hid Vienna's soft reply.

'Um, I better not, Brayden doesn't want to go out tonight...'

'Well, do you want to go out? He doesn't have to come. I mean he's invited of course but if he's busy—'

'No, it's okay. Really, you guys have fun though.' Vienna consciously brightened the words. Her fingers meddled with the pendant hanging from her neck, tracing the outline of the small heart. The silver of the metal looked matte in the TV light.

'Alright. If you change your mind...'

Vienna hung up the phone, relaxing her shoulder into the living room door frame. Her arms felt thick and hot, her chest empty. She watched the bright blues and greens of the football field for a moment, hypnotized by the room's atmosphere. A point declared for the other team, a disappointed groan from Brayden, and Vienna melted from the room.

---

The apartment was dark when Vienna got home from her classes. She grabbed a make-up wipe and tried to rub off most of the mascara stuck to her eyelashes, slipped out of her day clothes and into a soft pink T-shirt, and crawled into their bed. Brayden appeared asleep under a lump of covers, so she faced out, towards the sole window in their room. She could see a sliver of the moon, stark against the sparkling night sky. The covers were cold and she kept adjusting her position, trying to find comfort in the waves of fabric. Hot breath found her neck, a heavy arm claiming her waist.

'Restless tonight, huh?' Brayden's voice came out low, raspy. It tickled her skin, leaving goosebumps in its wake. 'I know how you can put that energy to use—'

One of his hands wrapped itself in her hair, pulling it back, further exposing her throat to his rapid breathing and eager lips. Her necklace got caught in the tangle of hair and fingers, the thin metal links biting into her skin.

'N-not tonight. I'm really tired,' Vienna whispered. The pressure of his arm around her waist tightened, his skin like sandpaper against the curve of her stomach.

‘C’mon, Vie, you said that last time. I’ll be quick.’

Vienna swallowed hard against the necklace-turned-collar, her eyes fixated on the night sky. She wished for an eclipse to end the light so she could be spared the sight of the blanket’s trembling surface.

---

‘Vienna! Hey, Vienna! Did you just get out of class?’ Vienna turned to see Rey running towards her, clumsily clutching books to her chest.

‘Oh, hey. Yeah, another one of those dumb Gen Ed classes. I forgot to take Art 101 last year.’

‘Here, hold these, will ya?’ Rey slid her books to Vienna. She shrugged off her backpack and started rearranging its contents to fit the books inside.

‘What’s up with the sweats?’ Rey asked, tipping her chin up to gesture to Vienna’s outfit. ‘Are you feeling okay today? You usually dress so cutely.’

‘Oh, you know, just nothing to wear, I guess.’ Vienna answered, glancing down at her faded gray sweats and hoodie ensemble.

‘What about that skirt I got you for your birthday a couple of months ago? I thought you said you loved it, I haven’t seen you wear it yet.’

‘Oh, I do like it. It’s just—’ Vienna shuffled the books in her arms, handing each one to Rey’s outstretched hand. ‘It’s just, Brayden doesn’t like it much. It is a bit short.’

‘You know, Vienna, you used to wear stuff a lot shorter than that before you guys were dating.’ Rey frowned as she unzipped her bag. ‘And it’s winter now anyway, I assumed you would wear it with leggings or something. Does Brayden think that’s still too slutty, too?’

‘Rey, I’m—I’m happy with him. He needs me, and if I need to sacrifice some dumb little things to show him I love him—’ Vienna rushed to protest, defensive spikes rising in her chest.

‘Sorry. I’m sorry Vienna. That was uncalled for, maybe. But seriously, V, and I say this only because I care about you. Don’t you ever think that maybe Brayden is bit too—you know? I don’t mean to speak out of place. I just miss you, that’s all. The real you.’ Rey gave Vienna’s arm a little squeeze and continued down the campus sidewalk.

---

Vienna wriggled deeper into the couch, flipped through a couple of channels while absentmindedly twisting her necklace around her finger. She thought Brayden was going to be home earlier than this. She didn’t want to bug him again, after the burning words in his last text. But it was getting so late, and he had promised not to drink too much so that he could drive home.

He picked up after the first few monotone rings, his voice slow and heavy.

‘What?’

‘Um, hey, it’s me. It’s just getting late and I thought—’

‘God, Vie,’ Brayden’s voice exploded through the phone. ‘Can I have a night out every once in a while? You chose to stay home. I don’t know why you didn’t want to come out.’

‘I told you. I’m not feeling well.’

‘I mean, you could have at least made an appearance. It’s not that hard, Vienna. Don’t you care that I had to show up here without you? Everyone is asking what’s up. And besides, you know there are other girls in the world. Charlie brought along these hot chicks from that one



sorority, I don't fucking know, Delta Fucking DoReMi or something. And I show up without my own fucking girlfriend? Honestly, Vie, it's like you don't even care that I'm out with other girls? That I'm out here being faithful to you when I don't have to be. I could pull them, y'know. And you won't even come with me. I don't get why you wouldn't just come with me. I know you're not sick. You used that excuse last time too. My friends are gonna think I'm whipped or something, letting you pull this shit.'

'I—I'm sorry, I'm just—' Vienna gritted her teeth, hot tears stinging the corners of her eyes.

'I don't care, ok? I'm sick of you policing my every move, Vie. It's like you don't fucking trust me or something. But whatever, I'm coming home, ok? Will that make you happy?'

'I—Brayden, it's fine, if you need to sleep there. You sound a bit drunk.' Vienna chose her words carefully.

'Yeah? So what, I'm not allowed to drink anymore?'

'Well, drinking and driving—'

'Oh for Christ's sake, Vienna! If you weren't such a ball and chain I wouldn't be driving home now. Anyway if I get in a crash I guess it'll be your fault. I hope that makes you happy.'

He cut the line. Something bubbled deep within her and wrapped her like a flame. She typed out two little words that felt so big.

*we're done*

She didn't hit send.

---

Her necklace sat on the bedside table, no longer wrapping her in its metal links. Vienna woke slowly to the glaring sun. She checked the time on her phone. 11:34 AM. She had slept in.

Brayden wasn't in their bed, or on the couch. She hadn't bothered to wait up for him. She hadn't bothered to send the text yet, either, but she knew that conversation was coming. She walked through the kitchen, looking for a note, for his keys. Nothing. She sighed in frustration. After all that, he hadn't even bothered to come home.

The doorbell rang.

---

Vienna's keys clanked dully on the table. The apartment was dark, the curtains dusty. The funeral had been almost too much. Rey had come with her. She didn't stop reaffirming Vienna the entire week. *It wasn't your fault, V. Brayden had made his own decision. You are a victim too.* Vienna didn't feel like the victim.

Vienna opened her dresser drawer and picked the little necklace out of the jumble.

She had sent the text that morning, standing outside the church. There was a stubborn stillness in the sky. Trees were still, the sky was still, the clouds barely moving. As she stared blankly at the casket the only memories she could recall were Brayden's hot kisses, his bright voice, his bigger-than-life attitude. The soft *I love yous* after a fight, his fingers curling and catching in her hair, the security of his embrace. Rey's hand on her back brought her back to the present and she suddenly felt nauseous. She stared at the two little words she typed days ago. She hit send. She had thought this, at least, would make her feel some peace.

Vienna slid the chain around her neck, rubbing the worn silver charm between her fingers.

The engraving was almost undetectable, having been polished by her touch over the past months. The little bit of stillness she had found outside the church stayed, but something else entirely tugged at her gut. The necklace was heavy around her neck, claustrophobic even. It was acid, dripping through her veins, licking the walls of her stomach, curling over her ribs. It was poison.

KAELA FRETWELL

*eden*

Through the garden, she skips  
She picks a geranium, dances past  
White carnations. She spins  
Through fields of daisies vast  
Possibilities: choices ahead.

Pink hibiscus and green leaves  
Crown the yellow hair on her head  
Among the flowers, she sees  
An apple tree, tall and proud  
Take a crimson apple:(assured  
knowledge endowed)  
*Take just one bite to be cured*

Swayed, she bites into the fruit's flesh  
Expecting to be refreshed-

Childlike innocence disappears.  
The knowledge promised fills  
Her mind. Her body ages  
Flat flower fields now hills,  
Clouds fill the sky  
She curls on the ground,  
Resists the urge to cry  
Feeling bound-  
Body betraying-  
Filled with pain.  
She prays,  
Sees a stain:  
A blood-red rose grows.

KAELA FRETWELL

## *wading winter waterfalls*

wading through icy water  
the chill starting in my toes  
feeling like nature's daughter  
closed eyes as the water flows

over my skin, over stones

extremities numb in the depth

cold penetrating to my bones

cold slowing my breath

water taking control

decelerating my heart

filling my soul

preparing a new start

surrendered

centered

ALIEHA DRYDEN

## *the house on dearborn avenue*

The house on Dearborn Avenue sits snuggled in the back corner of Oregon's capital. One skip off the main road, neighbor to what used to be a loan shark's place and now, a weed dispensary. It is mostly unremarkable. To those without knowledge of the home's contents, it is simply a convenient place; a yard to park beside, allowing for quick access to the veterinary practice that sits kitty-corner, or maybe a place to set lawn chairs when the city parades itself down the closed-off main road.

For those who lived inside it, my family and I, it is home number five. The final stop on an exhausting divorce-prompted journey; one that bounced us unceremoniously across the capital's landscape. So, once sure that no rug was to be ripped out from beneath us, boxes were unpacked, cats released from their crates, and settling commenced. And continued to commence for a decade.

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My new apartment is on a college campus. Advertised as convenient and sustainable living for a student dropped headfirst into the unknown. I have only seen it in pictures before now. I am parked in front of it with my whole life packed neatly in the back seat.

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The house on Dearborn Avenue is longer than it is tall. The front yard is covered in long grass and thin sticks. Two trees, the givers of the sticks, stand side by side. One—on which my brother climbed when he was nine and from which he procured a fine scar—leans up and to the left. The other sways towards its brother, with branches too tall for a climbing attempt to be made. Not that we didn't give it a valiant try.

We hated those trees. Not because of their desire to remain free of small cavalier climbers but because of the sticks. Hundreds and hundreds of sticks would fall without fail every winter as if the trees had decided that they must drop everything for the coming spring and not just the easy-to-rake leaves. February would come and the little snow that had graced us would melt, leaving only sticks. My mother isn't one to leave her yard in such disarray. She also isn't one to spend hours picking up sticks. Luckily for her, she had four kids, each easily coerced into doing her bidding. So that's what we did; split up the yard into quadrants, pulled straws to see who would get the ones closest to the trees, and spent an early afternoon picking up sticks. Afterward, we were rewarded with the correlative obligation of mowing. Such a chore was met with the sort of bemoaning that would make ghouls proud, but our mother remained unswayed.

Beyond those wretched pieces of bark, dead plants dot the steps leading to the house, crowding the front porch and creating tripping hazards for all who get close. Every year my grandmother makes valiant attempts to renew her garden but none so far have produced more

than a few sprouts destined for early deaths. There is an overflow outside her basement room and trail up and along the side of the house facing the road. One year she even built herself a planter box out of sturdy scrap wood and tucked it against the side of the house. It strained under heavy Oregon rains and broke not too long later. That year's garden scapegoat was an easy pick.

---

My new apartment has no front yard. Just a stretch of grass that has been trampled down on the way to a parking lot that houses a lot of cars owned by a lot of people I do not know. The porch is one flight up and cramped between a storage closet and the front door. August heat bears down as an unrelenting observer and the few trees that offer shade have kept their sticks to themselves. Not that my mother is here to make me pick them up, anyway.

---

Looking at the house on Dearborn Avenue, it would be easy to assume that the best way to enter would be through the front door. While this may appear true, the scars and long faded bruises that grace my knees know that is not the case. The doorframe, which so loves to swell in the winter and creak in the summer, also delights in tripping any who dare to cross its threshold, hoping dearly to be the cause of some spilled treat or broken knick-knack. My family has found that a good high knee is effective at dashing these hopes. I have also found that my mother never locks the front windows.

Hidden by the thick blackout curtains our mother bought to combat her long sleepless shifts is a latch. It has never been locked and may never know what it's like to be locked. If done with precaution, the balancing act needed to go from the porch through the window onto the living room couch is an enjoyable one. It has become my preferred entry.

Said couch, and part-time landing cushion, might have come with the house or might have traveled from some far-off thrift store but after nearly a decade under the soft asses of my family and friends it is easy to say it has seen better days. Its cushions are fraying at the seams and dented to the point of *unfluffability*. Its frame sags in a sort of saddened smile and the couch's untouched underbelly is home to things that have not seen the light of day in years. The same could be said of my mother's fraying easy chair or the two-seater pushed up against the large window with a view of the backyard. The dust along the top of the piano, which is more easily recognizable as a TV stand, is thick, only disturbed by a chugging Wii and loose double-A batteries. It is a room that is worn at its edges and warm at its center. Where British crime shows are binge-watched and presents are unwrapped, where gossip is whispered and meals are eaten in comfort.

I can say with utmost certainty that there is at least one Lego or small McDonalds toy that still calls the crevices of that room home, left there during the bygone era when my mother ran a daycare. Signs of those children's small hands still exist, though now mostly in the mysterious stains that hold tight to the walls and the sheer amount of plastic children's plates in the kitchen cupboard. Back then it wasn't unusual for some neighbor or another to hear the screams of toddlers echoing from the house on Dearborn Avenue. They took their naps on the dilapidated couch, made lunchtime messes at the dining room table, and tore up the backyard with their tiny fury-filled fists. The street is quieter now. The children are gone, having grown wider and taller, placed into the care of school systems or parents who found time for them. So it returned to my siblings and me, and the toys the toddlers left behind.

---

My new apartment has a living room that is just big enough for two sitting chairs and a two-seater couch, which my roommate and I spent three hours squeezing through our narrow porch to get inside. That couch, though found free in an alley, still has the feeling of newness. Its frame is straight and has yet to conform to something familiar. So it sits in an otherwise empty room, waiting for parties and comfort and mysterious stains.

Right outside our one window, we can hear the screaming of children. The view is immediately blocked by an oak tree whose branches scrape the glass. We're right next to a children's center, and lulls in conversation allow their laughter to bounce between the panes. I wonder if they're leaving tiny handprints in places adults will never find.

---

Like the house it is attached to, the backyard on Dearborn Avenue is long and thin. The grass, rarely maintained, is tall and yellowing. On summer days, a blanket no one cared too much about was folded and a thick book was chosen with utmost care. Then slinking through the hallway from my room, through the living room, and out the dining room's side door, I'd escape. Often I'd consider the picnic table a suitable place to read. Warm but shaded, usually occupied by a cat or two with similar thoughts. But sometimes I'd walk to the far end of the yard, throw the blanket out wide and settle down. Lay on my back so the knee-high grass would creep around me and frame our patch of sky.

That small peaceful reading place would remain cushioned by the sound of birds and traffic for a time, until a sibling or toddler would find me and I'd be dragged away to some other adventure, usually in the parking lot of a restaurant that had the misfortune of being connected to us by a thin chainlink fence. To the restaurant owners' dismay, one fateful Christmas my siblings and I were given skateboards and scooters and it all went downhill from there.

A mostly empty rear parking lot made for the perfect space to practice our *sweet tricks* and *sick flips*. And some afternoons the lot would be home to five or six of us trying to outdo the others. Races were held, obstacle courses erected, cats and cars narrowly avoided. We were not kids but the next Tony Hawks on our way to stardom. Until our mother called us in for dinner; then we were simply hungry.

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There is a bike rack at my new apartment, where the same bike that performed sick tricks is now retired. It made its trek across state lines like a champ, bouncing lightly against a car going eighty. Like a racehorse put out to pasture, it leans heavily against an iron loop, looking at me longingly as I go to classes. Its spokes are broken, the handlebars lopsided. I tried to sell it but it was certified as a piece of shit. Not even its brake pads exist anymore, burned away in the years of fast-paced dreaming.

---

The dining room in the house on Dearborn Avenue was seldom used for its intended purpose. Instead, it acted as a landing for dirty clothes muddied from the yard, or an impromptu

barbershop. Meals were taken in the living room, under the watchful eye of Detective Barnaby or Mary Berry, while the dining table and chairs found themselves occupied by odds and ends rather than human counterparts. When the children who had frequented it had gone, the table found itself relieved from its constant sticky state, but also a purpose. Instead, it stood under the weight of long finished homework, boxes filled with *donatables*, and the occasional potluck Tupperware dish.

My brother, the taller one who thinks fanny packs are having a comeback and that The Office is appropriate Christmas programming, is a barber. Now he owns a license and professional schooling, but as children, he would often drag a tall red chair to that room's center and bid us with an unpracticed hand to sit and partake in his skills. Crews were cut, mohawks hacked stylishly, and so on. He'd set his tools, a gift from our aunt, atop the microwave and set to work in concentrated silence, while his victim stretched to peek into the living room to see whatever program my grandmother had chosen to binge that week.

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The new apartment doesn't have a dining room. All barbering is done in the bathroom, with hands that don't know what they're doing.

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Looking past the living room there is a hallway in the house on Dearborn Avenue with four doors, most of them unimportant. Along that thin stretch of hardwood, past the bathroom, is a set of cupboards. One filled with generations of gathered fraying towels, for both bathroom and flood cleanup, and the other stacked with half-used craft supplies. Every so often our mother, possessed by the spirit of some craft demon, would flood our home with a new set of tools. Sewing needles, spools of thread, thick patterned cardstock and stickers, paint, brushes, tape, and crochet hooks. If it could be bought and stored in the space beneath the towels, it was. The demon never stayed longer than a week or two and before we knew it the tools would be tucked away, never to be seen again.

Projects created in that period, though few and far between, decorate walls and shelves all around the house. A set of matching tie-dye shirts, an expertly made scrapbook with pictures of our faces plastered across the front, a thick fleece blanket tied together along its edges, and a picture painted with sand. More often, haphazard Frankensteinian creations find themselves waiting to be found and repurposed for a school assignment or make their way to the trash can in the kitchen.

---

There are no doors in my new apartment that are unimportant, as there are only three. My room, my roommate's, and the bathroom.

My college degree demands supplies. So one day, maybe, the rooms behind those doors will overflow with projects made by the hands of a craft demon better equipped and more motivated to finish them.



---

The first room on the left in the house on Dearborn Avenue is a bedroom. Cramped and packed with the collections of two pack rats who could not resist a shiny knick-knack or piece of sentimental paper. Most of the space is consumed by an ancient metal bunk bed standing on pieces of rotted wood in an attempt to make it taller than it already was. All it accomplished was making the descent from the top bunk more treacherous. The bar that should keep one from tumbling to a rude awakening shook with a great clanging when touched. I was never one to test fate and thus slept as far away from the edge as could be managed and climbed with great precaution.

My younger sibling, also taller, the one who owned an impressive collection of increasingly haunted-looking porcelain dolls and who left me with a pitiful amount of closet space due to their eccentric fashion tastes, was the bunkbed's other occupant. They'd stretch out long and lanky across the little bit of hardwood flooring that was not covered by bed or desk or bookshelf and make themselves comfortable. An incredible nuisance to me, who was often looking to do the same thing. It was a tight little space, but it was ours to do with as we pleased. So it was decorated in posters and flags we learned were ours, and every scrap of paper that was dear to us. It was hard then, to empty it slowly the summer after my senior year of high school, as college mail poured in and flooded every flat surface imaginable. The place that was ours would soon just be theirs as boxes packed up everything that was mine. Then those boxes moved farther still until they were packed in a car destined to go very far away indeed.

---

My new apartment is empty. Silence seeps through the cracks in the brick and plinks in soft drops against my forehead. Maybe, one day, this will be home and I will feel the sort of ease that comes with time shared in the same space. But for now, it is quiet and all I know is how to find comfort in noise.

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The house on Dearborn Avenue is full of sticks, and our cats when it's warm, and memories of stargazing and soft grass taller than my forehead and tracing clouds and good meals made with love, lost legos, and children who are no longer children, and my family at Christmas time, and crooked haircuts, and the simple satisfaction at a job well done, and British TV, and unfinished projects, and an empty top bunk who's former occupant is very far away, and everything that made it home. It is full and it is empty and it is near and it is an eight-hour drive away.

KAYLA RAI GLUBAY

*the unspoken words of the forest  
that holds the thoughts of all  
others*

Twin birds fly in the midnight sky, their feathers gleaming in the soft moonlight.  
The stars blink in the night, keeping the sky dark and only lit by moonlight.

The pond glistens like a gem, waves of obsidian lap up on shore.  
The soft surf from this pond makes creatures around the forest stirlit by moonlight.

The trees, with leaves of white, gleam opale and iridescent within them.  
Their bark as black as onyx as the roots merge with the deep grass lit by moonlight.

Glass shards glimmer like coins blinking with the stars, blazing with white.  
Though thorns on a crimson rose, they beckon the moon; asking for its moonlight.

Abandoned ruins sit in the withered forest, its stones shattered, covered in moss, as vegetation slowly eats away at it. The vines that claim reverence, shine sapphire in moonlight.

Ashes though faint, flow within the breeze like molten magma coming from a crevice on a volcano.  
The rocks and water ablaze with a flame that competes with that disappearing moonlight.

KAYLA RAI GLUBAY

## *pomegranate*

Your hair is as bright as a thousand hell fires,  
burning, raging.

Your skin is kissed by the sun, leaving the softest  
freckles like raindrops on wood.  
Your eyes are green, brightening  
the leaves that grow on trees.  
Your smile is as beautiful as a meadow  
of pure white flowers.  
You sit in the sun, bathe in its warmth,  
letting life grow from your fingers.

Trees embrace your presence, flowers bask  
in your glow and the birds sing to your tune.  
A crown of flowers sits on your head, making  
you breathtaking.  
When the moon rises, you glow and turn  
celestial as the air stands still.  
Fireflies float in the air as you lay  
in your meadow, your breathing soft, calm.

We are together for only half a year, yet  
I still come to the surface to catch a glimpse of you.

Hell is dark, gloomy and dreadful  
without your compassion.  
The spirits moan your name begging  
for your return,  
but only I can hear them.

Cerberus sits beside me, heads  
on its paws waiting for your return,  
but only I can see it.

I sit upon my throne of skulls, watching  
spirits slowly move from destination to destination.  
Feeling lonely, this place is only alive  
when you are here.  
You make this dreary place whole,  
because your presence makes everything livelier.

My love for you grows stronger  
every second we are apart.  
Growing, growing, growing.  
My heart is beating, burning,  
knowing you will return.

For you were deceived to eat six  
pomegranate seeds,  
I don't understand how you don't hold hatred.

For when you return with that lovely  
pure smile of yours,  
holding white chrysanthemums.  
We embrace, the chrysanthemums scent  
heavenly scenting the air.

You sit upon your throne,  
your head held high,  
me right beside you as we watch,  
each soul pass by.  
Cerberus lays at your feet and sleeps soundly.  
My heart finally calms as you  
hold my hand as we watch the fires burn.  
The deceased go to their respective places.

And everything comes to life again.  
Here in this dreary place.

JOE TACKE

## *clicking crop*

The first test of life happens in the first minute of birth. The Apgar test functions as a way to determine how well the baby endured the birthing process. It measures things such as breathing, heart rate, muscle tone, reflexes, and skin color on a metric of zero to two, with the higher score representing acceptable conditions. Nancy puts her ear to the baby's chest to hear the small *click* that lost the respiratory score a point. The nurse reassures her that it's likely nothing, but takes the child to respiratory therapy nevertheless. It's not mentioned again.

The baby lays on its back, pudgy and unburdened with the stress it will bear in the years to come. Its eyes, the living definition of baby blue, face the sky. It's draped in the constrictive comfort that only mothers and hospital nurses can seem to offer, swaddled no differently than other newborns in the room. Freshly harvested and ripe for the customer, the crying crops are arranged in a series of exposed rows—a treat for new parents like Nancy. She ogles the comfy crops with their tiny appendages and anticipates the years to come, the glass barrier the only distinction between her old life and new.

Though introduced to motherhood about ten years prior, this was Nancy's first child from another woman. Her niece. The child exists as her sister's inexperience at love and wine. A living endorsement of sobriety. After three children, the last born just fifteen months earlier, Nancy was well-acquainted with the needs of a newborn. Still, no amount of experience can quell the nerves intrinsic to a new mother, and given the adoption; this was uncharted territory for Nancy. Nevertheless, she was confident in one thing when it came to The Little: her love for it. Unfortunately, love cannot stop congestive heart failure.

### *Five Weeks Later*

The Little is welcomed to its new home with a medley of reactions. Lily hardly utters a word, due to the linguistic constraints of a one-year-old. Emma, seven, naturally embraces the role of a nurturer as she reaches to hold it. And Nick, the child's only brother and the oldest resigns himself to subdued curiosity—the likely result of having his once exclusive bank of attention from Nancy now rationed between four.

Nancy had experienced varying success when it came to feeding her children in their early days. She had garnered some experience with formula and the bottle when Nick was too stubborn to nurse, but unlike Nick, Lily and Emma were insatiable, welcoming any means of nourishment.

A new challenge seems apparent with this one, however, as Nancy realizes The Little exhibits a particular and complete ambivalence toward food. She worries and wonders if it is perhaps a genetic heirloom. After some initial protest, The Little eventually forfeits to the bottled nectar, quelling Nancy's nerves.

The past few days have been more turbulent than what was typical with her other children, but it was nothing Nancy couldn't handle. The Little, having become a little paler and more

obstinate towards food than usual seems to have contracted a cold. She checks on it for the fourth time that day, careful not to provoke a croak from the door when entering its room. She inches towards the baby, the crumpled blanket pushed to the wall of the crib by its sausage legs. At just six pounds and five ounces, the child could suffice for a standard-issue football, altering her opinion on the sport from boring to horrifying.

‘Are you okay honey?’

Nancy’s baby voice had been carefully cultivated over the years as a mother. Since having Nick a little over ten years ago, her high register has been curated to a nasal yet comforting pitch that embraces anyone who hears it in natural warmth. She presses the back of her hand to the baby’s wrinkled forehead. No fever. The baby squeaks and rejects some milk, and Nancy takes its tiny palm.

‘I know, I know,’ Nancy reassures The Little. Maternal love can be as painful to the mother as it is comforting to the child, leaving Nancy well-worn from her efforts. Forfeiting to her impotence, she retreats quietly from the room and leaves the baby to its slumber.

Nancy’s house has the genetics of the ’70s and the makeup of the ’90s. A green shag floor sits underneath a set of flower print upholstery and beige floor lamps, all surrounded by the pink and blue debris of early childhood: stuffed animals, coloring books, game cartridges—the forgotten residue of the other children. Nancy pictures them on their stomachs watching cartoons at their grandmother’s house. They always come home with her depression-era carpet still on their elbows.

The muffled growl of the washing machine leaks through the crack in the laundry room door. In it spins a host of baby clothes gifted by a friend. The woman had stockpiled an entire closet with baby clothes in happy anticipation of her first child, whom she had called Dominic. At three weeks old, with extra clothes and one extra chromosome, Dominic was gone. The woman had gifted Nancy the clothes in hopes that someone else would be able to use them, and perhaps to sedate her grief a bit. Nancy gathers Dominic’s freshly-cleaned wardrobe and begins her ritualistic folding. The baby is already wearing one of the gifted articles, a blue onesie with puppies. Nancy smirks as she holds up a white footie pajama with chubby cats chasing mice. Nancy knows that baby clothes are more for the amusement of parents than those that wear them, and she doesn’t fight her chuckle.

Another hour passes. A baby sleeping for too long is hardly a concern for new parents. It’s considered a blessing, even, for those that need rest. But this nap is too drawn out for Nancy’s liking, and the baby’s congestion only compounds her concern. Despite its protests, Nancy wakes The Little from its sleep and offers it another bottle. The usual fuss ensues, but after some persistence, it drinks a happy few gulps. More than usual—almost a whole bottle. A ripple of triumph drums its way into Nancy’s chest, now pressed against the baby’s cheek as she hugs it with tight protection. Parenthood is taxing in itself, but adoption comes with its troubles. Until this moment Nancy had felt something difficult to define, nebulous accountability to do right by this child and those that love it. A lot of eyes are on her, and the prospective guilt that would surely come from something happening to the child haunts Nancy with each new hurdle.

Without warning, The Little projects milk onto Nancy’s shirt and its puppy-printed onesie. Alarmed but composed, Nancy cleans the baby’s mouth with her sleeve, removes its clothes, and sets it back down into the crib. She leaves the room and adds the clothing to the laundry. It’s now late afternoon. Nancy has spent the day in between the nursery and the urge to be in the nursery. Every ten minutes or so she would go check on the baby, eventually worrying that she had become blind to changes in its condition. In between one of her visits she stands over the kitchen sink,

thinking over her options. Is she overreacting? Colds look different between little kids. She had seen cases in her children before, but they had amounted to nothing more than a runny nose and slight cough.

She returns to the scene of the last four hours—the baby, pale and quiet, lumped in the crib, the blankets and stuffed cat untouched. Nancy approaches the cradle with a tired concern, frustrated at her futility. She simply crosses her arms and looks at the numb child, her motherhood gaunt with each shallow breath it manages. Suddenly, a *click*. And another. Nancy turns her ear toward the child's chest and listens to a barely audible sound that rides the child's breath, not unlike a packaging peanut falling to the floor.

*It's probably nothing.* The nurse's voice rings a voice in Nancy's head. Nancy ventures outside the nursery to gather her thoughts. She paces along to a melody of voices, cacophonous and caroming in her head:

'It's a cold,' says one.

'That'll look good on its gravestone,' barks another.

'That was morbid, you're gross.'

'You're stalling.'

The debate tolls and girdles in Nancy's head until she catches a glimpse of Dominic's clothes. She thinks of the woman consumed with sorrow, purging her house of anything stained with affection. She thinks of Dominic, the ghost with chubby cats and unworn clothes, the reason for his mother's now curdling love. Nancy picks up the landline next to her and dials a memorized number.

'David? This is Nancy...'

The gray carpeting of Dr. Peterman's office has become familiar with Nancy's feet over the years. With each child, she scraped the shag with her heels as she entered the examination room and exited with the reassurance that her child was in good health. She was ready to be reassured again.

'What do we have here?' David asks the baby. Though filled with gravel and deep with age, his voice instills comfort in whoever has the luxury of listening, a talent nurtured from years of hysterical parents and apprehensive children.

'I doubt it's anything, but I just thought I'd bring him in before you guys close down for the weekend,' says Nancy. Her voice quakes with too much concern.

'Never a bad idea to take a look every once in a while. He just looks a little more pale than usual to me,' David reassures. The nurse rummages through one of the cupboards and takes out what looks like an electric snake. She fastens one end to the baby's foot and the other to a monitor next to the bed.

'How's Chuck doing?' David asks. His arms are crossed and his weight is concentrated on one leg. Nancy recognizes his disarming tactics but welcomes them regardless.

'He's doing well, working a lot lately. He just signed on to coach pole-vaulting.'

'That so? Is he not coaching the basketball team anymore?'

'He's doin' both. And teaching,' Nancy says through a toothy smile as she nods her head.

'He likes staying busy, huh?'

'He does,' Nancy agrees with a flare of acidity. Having known her since high school, David knew a tender subject when he saw one. The nurse furrows her brow at the monitor as she adjusts the baby's strap.



'It looks like this monitor is broken, sorry about that. I'll go fetch another,' she says as she exits the room.

'That's reassuring,' says Nancy.

'That one was old anyway, this next one we stole from one of the big guys,' David answered.

The nurse reenters with an identical-looking monitor and begins transplanting the black snakes from one port to another.

'This is really just a formality. Colds tend to go around this time of year,' says David. He rests his eyes on the baby.

'Ya, it's getting chilly quick, isn't it?'

'I know, this is the first week since March that I've started drinking my coffee inside in the morning.'

'Weird,' the nurse says, her voice a high octave. Her eyes are stuck on the monitor. 'This one is broken too.'

'What?' David walks towards the screen, uncharacteristically silent.

'Stay quiet, please,' David instructs.

'Okay.' Nancy is quiet. She has never seen David's character take on such a weight. The world forgets sound as Dr. Peterman puts his stethoscope to the child's chest.

'How fast can you drive?' He asks. Any pleasantries he showed before has vanished.

### *The Hospital*

At five o'clock on a Friday, as the bell of capitalism tolls the workday to an end, driving from Dr. Peterman's office to St. Luke's downtown takes roughly fifteen minutes. Nancy gets there in six minutes. She pulls into the emergency entrance where she's greeted by a battalion of nurses, doctors, interns, and anyone else who had received a call from Dr. Peterman just five minutes before. Nancy rushes out of the car and gives the closest worker her keys and a baby still in the car seat. Just before reaching the double doors of the pediatric ICU, she sees a familiar but long-forgotten face.

'Amy Lou!' Nancy erupts.

'Nancy! Give him to me.'

Nancy complies without further word and watches her college roommate take her child into the polished winter-esque landscape of the hospital.

It isn't long before Nancy takes advantage of the landline installed in the hospital foyer. The conversation with Chuck is short and deliberate, a token of the situation at hand. Next, she calls her mother who is currently watching her other children. Nancy leaves their questions for an unknown future. If the baby monitor from Dr. Peterman's office was a snake, the host of tubes squirming from The Little's chest is family. Nancy observes from behind a pane of glass, not unlike the one from just a few weeks ago. She embraces it like an old friend. Behind the friend, a zoo exhibit: a jungle of beeping rocks, metal trees, fluorescent sky—all maintained by zookeepers in scrubs. Against the six other doctors in the room, The Little appears even smaller than before. A voice begins to echo through Nancy's consciousness but fails to register.

'Nancy?' Amy Lou says as she touches Nancy's arm. Organic chemistry wasn't the executioner to her nursing career that it was to Nancy's.

'I need to understand what's happening,' Nancy says.

'Okay. You understand that he's going into congestive heart failure, correct?'

'Dr. Peterman used a different word I think...' Nancy looks behind Amy Lou's back as the



zookeepers continue to surround the tiny animal.

‘Supraventricular tachycardia. It means that his heart is beating at a rate so extreme it’s unable to pump blood.’

‘What are they doing now?’

‘They just attached what’s called an EKG to his chest that shows his current heart rate. After that—’

‘Where does it show?’ Nancy asks as she points to the monitor. There’s a brief pause in the room as if the nurse herself is searching for it.

‘It’s the biggest green digit at the top right of the screen,’ Amy Lou replies with veiled apprehension. Once Nancy sees it, she understands why.

Before organic chemistry switched her degree from nursing to psychology, Nancy had learned a few stray figures. An infant’s heart rate usually lies between 80-160 beats per minute, with anything approaching 200 considered high. At nearly 300, vibrating would be a more accurate description for this one. Nancy keeps her composure.

‘Okay. What are they going to do?’ She asks.

‘They’re attaching an IV right now where they’ll give him a drug called adenosine, it will lower his heart rate to a more appropriate level,’ Amy Lou replies. Her composure feeds Nancy’s own.

‘What’s an appropriate level?’

‘Anything above 55 beats per minute is what we’re looking for.’

‘And below?’ Nancy asks, knowing the answer.

‘At that point, there’s a risk of it stopping entirely, and in that case, we’ll be using small electric pads to help jumpstart the heart.’ Amy Lou had expected the question. ‘It’s very unlikely, but we all know how to do it just in case,’ she says, nodding her head. Her poise reminds Nancy of Dr. Peterman. She wonders if all doctors are trained in the same bedside manner curriculum.

‘Okay. Thank you,’ Nancy exhales. She realizes that Amy Lou’s palm has been stroking her arm the whole time. At that moment she takes refuge in the familiar face across from her.

‘Administering .1 mg Adenosine followed by a saline flush,’ exclaims a zookeeper. All motion stops.

Together the room watches the digits on the monitor trickle down.

295...

270...

220...

Nancy splits her vision between the baby and the screen, the former as pale and motionless as when she brought it in. The crowded room becomes the world. The world forgets sound as the numbers continue to dwindle.

180...

122...

Nancy hugs her shoulders, heavy with the tang of grief that makes itself home with each digit drop

101...

86...

70...

She imagines her life after this moment, the putrid stench of remorse constantly dripping from her eyes and into her daily life. She imagines it in her morning coffee, in the blurred pages of her favorite book, on Dominic’s clothes.

68...

She did her best.

62...

She could have done more.

57...

She couldn't have known.

56...

'C'mon Joe,' Nancy whispers.

57...

59...

LOGAN RANDALL

## *ouzoud*

heavy spray, thick mist,  
a waterfall in Morocco

a young girl asked  
for a picture

with me.

I wore a sleeveless black jumpsuit,  
black converse  
blonde braids  
pale skin  
full-color sleeve

and I was mysterious to her.

*Foreignness is strictly geographical.*

It's one of my favorite moments,  
the dust of the desert                      the mist of the falls  
the warmth of her smile.

In her country, I am strange.  
And my strangeness—to her—  
was worthy of kindly capturing.

Her strangeness here  
is often found worthy of capturing,  
but less kindly.

*When we fear people, it leaves no room for us to love them.*

What is her name?

I don't know.

Dear girl:

You are probably a woman now.

I wish I had that photo of us.

I hope that photo gives you hope,  
hope that some people that look

like me

are capable of loving people that look

like you.

I am not afraid of your hijab.

I am not afraid of your piercing almond eyes,  
looking at me and looking through me.

*Fear crowds out the space that love would live in.*

---

My grandma,

my grandpa,

my mother,

my father

urged me not to go because I would not be safe.

But I am safe.

They had it all backward—

it is her who would not be safe here,

here in the land of the brave,

where we protect our courage

by capturing far more than a photo

of people we are free to not understand.

*Is the price of my liberty  
her dignity?*

LOGAN RANDALL

*clean*

For weeks I've wondered  
about the black streaks  
left behind in the  
bathtub  
after me.

Today, I wondered,

*is it ink?*

Ink, leaking out of me?

Out of my arms  
and my legs  
that I pay  
To scar with the ink  
I am made to bleed?

Or from my soul?  
Its sooty black recesses of  
Bic-brand ink pumping  
through my arteries,  
    out my pores,  
        and into the bathwater?

We all wash up—  
squeaky clean—  
and open the drains  
to let the dirty water  
swirl down  
    down

down  
away from our spotless skin

and I marvel at the  
    effort  
    that goes into  
keeping our filth      away from the world.

---

Black beads  
form streaks  
down the porcelain perfection of my tub

and I scrub.

## *standing still*

Kennedy stared into his beer, sitting alone at one of the bar tables. His friend had bailed on him with some excuse about needing to go do something for his girlfriend. He couldn't understand what was so important that he needed to cancel plans last minute, especially since Kennedy had barely seen him lately.

Then, he looked up and saw her. She was laughing with her friend at another table. She tugged slightly at the hem of her short black dress, her long brown hair swaying behind her as she moved. After their laughing ceased, the friend walked away. Kennedy took a big gulp of his beer and walked over. It wasn't like he had anything else to do, besides sitting alone with his beer.

'Hi, I'm Kennedy,' he said upon reaching the table. She eyed him.

'Charlotte,' she shook his extended hand.

'Can I buy you a drink?' Kennedy didn't care if she said yes just for the free drink.

'Sure,' she responded, smiling.

Kennedy sat on the couch, staring at the pillow, remembering the night he met Charlotte. He never understood the concept of decorative pillows. This one was tiny, rectangular, and had rows of sequins on the front. It was completely useless, but Charlotte had insisted.

'Your apartment needs a woman's touch,' she told him when she brought the pillows over. Whatever that meant. To him, it just seemed like there were more useless things lying around. But it didn't bother him; he wanted Charlotte to be happy, even if it meant more floral-patterned items and things that were pink. . He fell in love with her so fast that he would have given her the world if he could.

Two years after she decorated the apartment, she decided that she would be happier without him.

'This just isn't working,' Charlotte had said to him.

'What do you mean, it isn't working?' Kennedy was the happiest he had ever been until Charlotte started packing up her things.

'I got caught up in the moment.' She piled clothes into a suitcase, not bothering to take them off the hangers.

'Caught up in the moment? We've been living together for two years.'

'I mean, at the beginning. When it was new and exciting, and then you asked me to move in with you so quickly. I thought that was what I wanted, but it was just too soon. I need to figure myself out, not settle down.'

Kennedy paced the bedroom, trying to figure out what he could say to make Charlotte stay.

'I love you.' He couldn't come up with anything else. Love was what he felt. He hoped it would be enough for her too. 'I've loved you since the moment I first saw you in that bar.'

She stopped packing for a moment, hands on her suitcase.

'You didn't even know me. You just saw a pretty girl and that was that. You saw me, and

you fell in love with the version of me that you created in your head.' Charlotte zipped up the suitcase.

'What the hell does that mean?' Kennedy's confusion was palpable.

'I mean, I've lost myself in this relationship. I want to go out and try new things and explore the world. But all we do is sit at home and you expect me to be happy with that. I've had to bend to what you want this whole time because it's always about you.'

Kennedy watched her pack. He thought that he gave her things that she wanted, did things that she wanted to do. He thought that she wanted to spend time at home with him, where they were comfortable. He couldn't remember a time when it seemed like she was unhappy.

Her stuff was all moved out a couple of days later.

Everything, of course, except for the pillows and paintings that Charlotte had found at a yard sale. Kennedy still couldn't bring himself to get rid of them six months later. There were three decorative pillows on his couch, a couple more that belonged on his bed but had taken up residence on his floor. Charlotte wasn't there anymore to make him put them back on the bed in the mornings. The paintings were in his bedroom, the hallway, and the living room. He didn't understand those either. All three of them looked like a toddler was given several bottles of paint, dumped them onto the canvas, and used their hands to spread the paint around.

'It's abstract,' she had told him when he questioned her purchase.

'Charlie, I could've done that. Would've taken me five minutes.' She rolled her eyes. Like the pillows, Kennedy let her do her thing anyway. He was planning on spending the rest of his life with this woman. He let Charlotte get away with practically anything to keep her happy, even though in the end, it didn't matter.

Charlotte let Kennedy get away with things, too. He remembered when they went to dinner and called her Charlie for the first time. She told him that no one called her Charlie, but he remembered her small smile. He couldn't remember ever calling her Charlotte after that.

He couldn't remember much before Charlie either. He had fallen for her so fast. He couldn't stop thinking about her. He would text her and get anxious waiting for her response. Once she responded, he'd feel so elated, his heart beating faster. When she didn't have cell service one day, he spent the day worrying about whether she had changed her mind about wanting to date him. When they would lay in bed, he would smell her hair. She smelled intoxicating, like roses and pears. Even now, when he'd catch a whiff of the familiar scent, he would look around to find her. He would then remember that she wasn't a part of his life anymore and want to crawl into bed and think back on what was.

Kennedy remembered the day that he asked Charlie to move in with him. They had been dating for three months. They were laying in bed, her smell filling his nostrils.

'Move in with me,' he said, breaking the peaceful silence as they lay cuddling.

It took Charlie a moment to respond. 'Well, I guess my lease is up in a month. I wouldn't have to resign or look for a new place.'

She moved her things into his apartment shortly after that. She had expressed some concern that they were moving too fast as he helped her bring boxes in, but he reassured her. He was madly in love and just wanted to be around her all the time.

Queenie barked, breaking Kennedy out of his reverie. He looked away from the pillow to his dog, waiting at the front door, looking at him and wagging her tail.

'Do you want to go for a walk?' Queenie was wagging her tail so much that her entire butt



was wiggling with it. Kennedy had specifically looked for a Doberman that still had her tail and unclipped ears. He couldn't stand the idea of people maiming animals just for aesthetic purposes.

Charlotte and Queenie had never really gotten along. They learned to coexist, but that was the extent of their relationship. *Can't she just sleep out in the living room*, Charlotte had asked one night after moving in. Kennedy had already compromised and trained Queenie to sleep on the floor, and he couldn't understand what the difference would be between the floor in the bedroom or the floor in the living room. Of course, her training ended up being short-lived; a few nights later, Queenie started sneaking onto Kennedy's side of the bed in the middle of the night.

Kennedy stood up from the couch and joined Queenie at the front door. He grabbed her leash off the hook next to the door and got her ready for her walk, grateful for the distraction.

After they stepped outside, Queenie watched him, tail still wagging as he locked the front door to his apartment. There was nothing special about the route that they always took. They followed the sidewalk that encompassed the apartment complex to the street that led into the nearby neighborhood, then followed that down to the local elementary school where Kennedy would let Queenie run around and explore off-leash if there was no one around.

It was late enough in the evening that the kids had gone home. Kennedy brought a tennis ball with him to throw for Queenie on the soccer field. She would take off running in the direction it was going before it even left his hand. They did this a few times, nothing out of the routine. Until he threw the ball, and another dog ran out from behind the buildings next to the other side of the field. Queenie was too far away for Kennedy to get her attention, too focused on catching the ball. He ran after her, hoping the other dog would be well-behaved.

A woman appeared from behind the buildings, running after the chocolate Lab that was going to reach the tennis ball before Queenie would. Kennedy nearly tripped over his own feet at the sight of the woman. He was brought back to how he had felt the first time he had seen Charlie. Electricity instantly flowed through his body as the woman's head tilted back in laughter at the situation.

Queenie arrived at the ball just after the lab picked it up. She whipped her head back and forth between the dog and Kennedy.

'Milo, drop,' Kennedy could hear the woman order as he got closer. Even though she was being stern with her dog, he could hear a softness in her voice. The dog obliged and the woman picked up the ball.

'Sorry about my dog stealing your ball,' the woman held it out to Kennedy. 'He has no manners.'

'It's no big deal,' Kennedy responded, feeling the warmth of her skin as his fingertips brushed her hand. He hoped that she couldn't hear his heart pounding in his chest. Whether it was from his jog across the field, or just from being in the presence of this woman, he wasn't sure. He glanced at the dogs, who seemed to be content sniffing each other, wagging their tails as they quickly became friends.

'I'm Willa,' the woman extended her hand to him again, this time to shake. Kennedy almost didn't notice, he was too busy looking into her blue eyes framed by short black lashes.

'Kennedy,' he responded as he shook her hand. He felt his voice threatening to crack from nervousness.

'That's Milo,' Willa gestured at her dog, now running around with Queenie on the field. 'I have no idea who taught him to steal other dogs' tennis balls because I certainly have never allowed that.' The corner of her mouth turned up in a small smile. Kennedy could have sworn that his heart skipped a beat.

‘Well, it seems like you just did,’ Kennedy joked back. Willa crossed her arms. Kennedy hoped he didn’t hit a nerve.

‘That’s Queenie,’ he waved his hand toward the dogs. ‘I’ll take credit for raising her since she’s not stealing anything.’ He ran a hand through his hair as he smiled at Willa, hoping that she would find his joke funny. She chuckled, easing his nerves slightly.

‘So, uh, are you new to the area?’ Kennedy asked, wanting to continue the conversation but unsure how to start.

‘Yeah, Milo and I just moved here for my job. How about you?’

‘I was born and raised here.’

‘Oh, a local boy, huh?’ Willa smiled at him.

‘Yeah, unfortunately. Or fortunately, I guess, depending on how you want to look at it,’ Kennedy said, hoping he wouldn’t come across as too awkward.

‘It seems like a pretty nice area so far. Some decent people. I’ve only been here for a couple of weeks though, so I could be wrong.’ Willa was still smiling, and Kennedy wasn’t sure if she was talking about him when she mentioned decent people.

‘Well, I’d like to think that I’m a decent person. I can’t say much about the other people around here though, it can be hit or miss.’

‘Is that your subtle way of saying that I should get to know you more?’ Willa had her hands behind her back. Kennedy took a step closer and smiled.

‘It would probably be a good idea. I mean, why take the risk of meeting terrible people when you can just keep talking to me?’ Willa laughed at that. Kennedy could feel his skin tingling with excitement. The air around them was starting to cool as the sunset, but Kennedy felt warm.

As the conversation continued, the lights around the field turned on automatically. The dogs had tired of playing and were laying in the grass as Kennedy and Willa got to know about each other. They had moved closer as the conversation progressed, and Kennedy could catch the faintest scent of berries. Maybe raspberries, but he wasn’t sure. He had tried to take a deep breath in when he thought he could get away with it, filling his nose with the scent. He wanted to remember it.

‘I suppose I should get Milo back home for dinner,’ Willa said, looking down at the dogs.

‘Yeah, Queenie looks pretty worn out.’ They both stood there, neither making the first move to leave.

‘So,’ Willa twirled the hair at the end of her ponytail. ‘I guess I’ll see you and Queenie around.’

‘Yeah, we’ll see you around.’ Kennedy stuck his hands in his pockets.

He watched as Willa bent over to attach Milo’s leash to his collar, debating in his head if he should ask for her number. He didn’t want to seem like a weirdo. The decision was made for him as Willa turned to leave, looking back and waving at him just before she started to walk away. He waved and started back across the field.

‘Kennedy?’ He turned around to see Willa walking over to him.

‘Yeah?’

‘Will you and Queenie be here tomorrow night?’

‘Yeah, we’re here most nights. It’s our usual spot,’ Kennedy smiled.

‘Well, then, we’ll see you here tomorrow,’ Willa turned back around and walked to the buildings, disappearing into the direction she had come from earlier. Kennedy watched her walk away for a second, before putting Queenie’s leash on her and heading back to his apartment.

Kennedy’s mind was racing on the walk back home. He could still feel his heart

pounding as he thought about Willa. He hadn't felt this way in such a long time, not since he met Charlotte. He should have asked for her number. He hoped she would be true to her word and be at the school the next night; the thought of potentially never seeing her again made him anxious.

As he got closer to his apartment, Kennedy's thoughts turned to the things that remained from his relationship with Charlotte. He had spent so many days thinking that he would never be ready to move on, that he would never fall in love again. He thought about the pillows and the paintings, the reminders of his past relationship that had helped him hold onto the memories. He still wasn't sure about getting rid of those things yet.

He paused as he reached his front door. Held his key in his hand. Looked at the door. On this side of the door, he had just met a woman that he wanted to see again. On the other side of the door, he had the reminders of the woman that he had thought he was going to spend the rest of his life with. He wasn't prepared for this moment, the moment where he might be able to move on from Charlotte. He looked down at Queenie, who was sitting patiently while Kennedy dealt with this crisis. He was at a crossroads, he was going to have to decide as soon as he walked through the door, whether Willa was at the school the next night or not.

He looked down at his key. He slowly put it in the lock and turned it, still deciding what to do next.

ANNA CUSSINS

*this is america*

I, too, want to share how America is a contradiction of itself.

Posing like a Jim Crow style cartoon,

mocking yourself and your culture,

posing a gun aiming at a brother.

Saying that guns in this country are more important than people.

Dancing with young black children,

to show that when you are not causing violence onto others you are taking care of others through  
entertainment to consume and enjoy.

It is like you are their slave.

*Dance, boy, dance.*

Slavery never ended after the Emancipation Proclamation.

It is like a cockroach—it will never die.

Choir getting shot without any remorse

like the victims of mass shootings past and present.

Flashes of protestors and police move behind the performer

like the constant news coverages of days past.

Meanwhile, Glover and the dancers keep dancing ignoring it all.

Young black children record the destruction on a ‘celly,’

showing the reality and truth instead of the babbling bullshit that covers up the world. Seventeen seconds,

even though it happened when the video was released, memorization of a national tragedy at Parkland.

Oxford. Boise. Vegas. Sandy Hook. Aurora. Killeen.

The list goes on and on.

They hope it never happens again,

but it does.

It is like deja vu, but shittier.

It won't take until the politicians realize

one of the dead is one of their children.

Press F for thoughts and prayers instead of policy change & rejecting NRA money.

Maybe the medication could be entertaining folks on top of a car, smoking a fat blunt, dancing,

Showing what your talents are,

Having them exploited to the ends of the earth,

Running from the fear of death,

like the Shrunken Place,

trapped with my oppressors.

Maybe Jordan Peele should have won that Oscar,

even though the Hollywood Elite,  
thinks a horror movie about racism  
and the violence against oppressed communities  
is considered a comedy.

ANNA CUSSINS

## *Femme's Version*

New England cold air fills my lungs,  
as I walk down the cobblestone walkway  
to the brick building up ahead. Never mind  
that I want to escape to this new reality  
where I am the future embodiment of myself.

Wanting to be the future to escape the hateful  
and resentment of the present, dead-end jobs and endless cans of energy drinks fill my days,  
waiting for the endless cycle of burnouts  
and restless sleep to end permanently.

Changing my name to something better than my actual name,  
bettering myself and separating myself from the monster who my father was,  
who people think my father is.

Women like me should be more feminine  
where I am more masculine. Marriage should be expected.

Love should be expected.

Ambition should be downplayed from the perspective of family.

Fighting my battles like the Winter Soldier,  
hoping that I am fighting the battles that are worthy to me,  
instead of fighting a war that will be never-ending.

I can escape this Red Room scenario,  
but I will never forget what this place did to me.

It made me become a survivor.





**ALIEHA DRYDEN** is a fourth-year BSU student majoring in Illustration. While from Oregon, they call Boise home and hope to start publishing comics sooner rather than later. They enjoy writing about warmth, family bonds, and undescribable arcane horrors.

**ANNA CUSSINS** (b. 2000, Idaho) believes that the truth should be set free and unfiltered. An activist for most of her life, her poetry explores the feelings of being black in America while referencing pop culture that is poignant but reflective. She uses the pseudonym *Femme Anonyme* to explore these concepts through an autobiographical lens. She will be graduating from Boise State University with a degree in Anthropology with a minor in Criminal Justice in the spring of 2022.

**BRIANNA ELLISON** is an undergraduate student at Boise State University, studying the fields of anthropology, psychology, criminal justice, and creative writing. Her interest in the world and people around her is reflected in her writing, as she explores the conflicts individuals face.

**DANA MCCUE** is a Boise State University student majoring in Pre-social Work and minoring in Creative Writing. When at school or doing homework, Dana is raising her three teenage boys with her fiance, playing with her dogs, and doing jiu-jitsu.

**JOE TACKE** is a third-year student seeking a degree in Film and Television with a minor in Creative Writing and certificate in Narrative Arts.

**KAELA FRETWELL** has enjoyed writing stories since she was a child, so much that she is attending Boise State University for Creative Writing. Her two cats often try to help with her writing in their way, by laying across her drafts.

**KAYLA RAI GLUBAY** is an Undergraduate student at Boise State University. She is majoring in a BFA (Bachelor of Fine Arts) in Creative Writing and hopes to keep writing poetry and other works for years to come.

**LOGAN RANDALL** is a BFA student at Boise State University. She enjoys writing in all genres and is currently exploring what she would like to establish as her emphasis.

**MASON WAYT** is an Elementary Education major and Creative Writing minor at Boise State University. Originally from Anchorage, Alaska, they've been featured in the Anchorage Daily

News Creative Writing Contest twice as a first-place winner in nonfiction (2019) and as an honorable mention in poetry (2021).

**MCKENNA SMITH** is an aspiring writer and poet currently studying Creative Writing at Boise State University. She explores themes of womanhood, trauma, and acceptance in her writing. When she is not writing, you can find her journaling at one of Boise's local coffee shops or cuddling with her cat, Basil, and dog, Chloe.

**PARIS THOMPSON** is a third-year Environmental Studies major with a certificate in Narrative Arts. He's currently a technician assistant at a veterinary hospital in the valley, but he's hoping for a career in conservation and environmental work. In his downtime, Paris can be found making music, exploring the national parks, and fawning over his pet tortoise.

Bitterbrush (*Purshia tridentata*) is a medium-sized branchy shrub that grows up to 8 feet tall. While the flowers are small, they are abundant! The yellow flowers look like tiny wild roses and are very fragrant. The small deciduous leaves are wedge-shaped with three lobes at the end. Its full common name is *antelope bitterbrush*, which is apt since it is a great food source for wildlife. Bitterbrush generally blooms in late spring or early summer but on warm sites may bloom as early as April or in mid-summer in higher, cooler areas.

Look for bitterbrush on warm sites in the Boise foothills,  
around Shafer Butte and on the road to High Valley.

*Source: Forest Service ([www.fs.usda.gov](http://www.fs.usda.gov))*

ALIEHA DRYDEN

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